



# *Wicked Game*

*By  
Jade Falconer*

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*by Jade Falconer*

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Wicked Game

a novel of homoerotic romance by

JADE FALCONER

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## Chapter One

Niels Eriksson strolled down the cobblestone path of the park, alongside the manicured landscaping, and pretended for a little while that he belonged there. The trips served a dual purpose. Besides indulging his taste for the finer things in life on the cheap, Niels cased the mansions that surrounded the park. If he could just keep his eyes open, follow the society column in the papers, figure out when which house would be empty, he could break in and come away with a lovely haul of goodies.

Stealing from the rich was far riskier than stealing from the poor, but the benefits outweighed that danger. No one he knew was willing to go into it with him. It was probably just as well. More people meant a greater chance of being caught.

There was one house he'd had his eye on for some time. He hadn't actually seen the master of the house, but he knew who he was. He enjoyed being able to converse with high society during his Sunday outings, making them believe he was simply a foreigner conducting business in London, and he'd learned quite a lot about the house and its occupant. The man lived alone. He was some sort of aristocrat, and it had been implied that he was something of a rakehell. Niels respected that. With that much money, Niels was sure he'd break every heart in England given half a chance. He'd drink and gamble and spend money frivolously and sleep with a different beauty every night and never fall asleep before daybreak.

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He sighed and took a seat on a wrought iron bench facing the house in question. Tonight. There was a huge ball that surely this man was invited to. Midnight. No respectable rake would be whiling away the hours in front of his own hearth at midnight, anyway.

\* \* \* \*

Richard Essex drained yet another crystal tumbler full of imported cognac, resisting the urge to fling the glass across the room. Not that he didn't have a score of them, but he stopped himself at the last moment. He could hear his mother's voice in his mind, chiding him on being wasteful. That was one of the nicest things she'd ever called him. His lips twisted into a sneer at the thought of his late mother. When she'd died, half the city and all the house servants had breathed a sigh of relief.

He sighed and set the glass down gently, and rubbed his hands over his face. He glanced at the clock. If he went over to the ball now, he'd arrive fashionably late. The women would flock over him, giggling idiotically, daring each other to approach him, knowing their mothers would disapprove strongly. As well they should.

Or he could just stay in and get even drunker on liquor that was older than he was. No wonder his father had built up such a selection of alcohol. He'd needed it to live with his mother. Except he'd drunk himself to an early death. Richard barely remembered him.

He stood up unsteadily, and decided to go down to the cellar to find something new to drink. He wasn't drunk

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enough that anyone would notice, but he wasn't going out. He was in too foul a mood to deal with the overprotected, spoiled idiots that passed for the cream of society. He'd stay in tonight. The party would go on without him.

\* \* \* \*

When the time came, Niels made his way back to the neighborhood via the backstreets and alleyways. No longer dressed in his somewhat shabby finery, he wore all black to blend in with the night. He'd chosen the night of the new moon. His eyesight was excellent and it meant less chance of being seen.

He made his way into the side garden easily. A few low lights were still on in the house, but there was no sign of anyone inside. The servants were likely already asleep, and the master of the house was out. Around the back, doors overlooked a small garden. He stole his way up to a stone balcony to the doors and tried each silently, but to no avail.

Then he noticed a small ajar window just past the edge of the balcony. Along the outer wall of the house was a decorative ledge, just a foot's width. He made his way to the window with some difficulty, for though he was exceptionally agile the task was tricky. Once he could grasp the window frame, he pushed the window open more and hoisted himself inside a darkened room.

From there it was simple. He peered out the door before slithering out into the hall and then into the large unoccupied room. He imagined it was possibly the library or a study of

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some sort. His first order of business was to ransack the desk.

\* \* \* \*

The servants were indeed asleep, in a separate wing of the house. Richard often wandered the house at night; sleep didn't come easily to him and tonight the cognac hadn't helped. Lately it was taking more and more alcohol to bring the oblivion of sleep.

He made his way to his study. He berated himself for not going to the ball; at least it would have distracted him for a while. He clutched a bottle in one hand, and stopped still in the hallway when he saw a narrow strip of candlelight coming from under the door of his study. He crept closer. No one else should be here. It had to be an intruder. He silently closed the distance and eased open the door without a sound.

Niels rummaged through a drawer, crouched down behind the desk. He'd found what appeared to be a solid silver letter opener, which he'd pocketed, and a rather lovely old watch. He preferred cash, but he'd take what he could get. He didn't hear the door open.

Richard stilled when he saw an unfamiliar figure bent over his desk. The intruder was slender and male, silhouetted by the lamp. He couldn't make out any more detail. He closed the door just as silently as he'd opened it, and the man still didn't know he wasn't alone. Clearly the intruder thought Richard was out, and was ransacking at will. A display of ceremonial, but wickedly sharp swords hung to the left of the door, and Richard reached over to pull one out. The sword

made a metallic hiss as it was pulled from its scabbard. He'd been trained in swordplay nearly since birth, and despite his inebriation he held the sword in a ready stance as he waited for the intruder to realize his blunder.

Niels' head snapped up at the sound and his eyes went wide. He held up his hands. "I'm unarmed," he said, backing away. "Surely ... you wouldn't run an unarmed man through, would you?" He started inching back towards the doors. The man could be none other than the owner of the house as was obvious from his clothing and his stance. He was older than Niels, but not by so many years. The man had close-cropped hair, an angular face, and piercing blue eyes. He looked fit and slim, and rather menacing. Still, he thought that if he could make it outside he could get away.

"Don't move," Richard said lazily, stepping closer. "I have every right to run you through. I caught you red-handed." Now he could see the man more clearly. He was young, and his features were delicate enough to be a woman's. His hair was light brown, with soft curls just brushing his shoulders, an obvious vanity. But his body was lithe and most definitely male. "Keep your hands up." He could kill this man, and there would be no questions asked.

Niels didn't lower his hands, but he continued moving back towards the door. "It's a messy business, killing a man," he said. "I'd rather not die if it's all the same to you. Won't you show a little mercy for those less fortunate? I could just slip out those doors and you'd never be bothered by me again." Despite the fact that he was facing a length of sharp blade,

Niels' eyes were bright and alert, and his full lips were curved upwards in a smirk.

Richard snorted. "You expect me to believe that?" He watched the man move toward the door, and snapped, "Move once again and I'll cut off a couple of fingers. You won't be able to rob so easily without them." He wasn't about to let the thief just run off.

Niels stopped in his tracks. "All right. Are you going to turn me in then?" he asked. He was still convinced he could get away. He just had to lull the other man into a false sense of security. With his hands still raised, he turned his palms up and shrugged his shoulders with a little smile.

Richard smiled again. He lowered the sword but kept it at hand. "Was there anything in particular you were looking for?" he asked. The thief had the fullest lips he'd ever seen on a man, and huge blue-green eyes.

"Well, money preferably, but really anything valuable I could carry." He gave the aristocrat a wink. "It wasn't personal, mate." He lowered his hands a little. If he got within arm's distance of this man, things would get significantly more complicated. Niels relied mostly on being quick, rather than strong, although he wasn't weak.

"This is what you do for a living?" Richard asked, head tilted slightly to the side as he studied his would-be thief. Between his delicate features and slender stature, the thief could easily pass as upper class. He had some sort of accent as well. Fascinating.

Niels arched an eyebrow. "Well, I wouldn't really think of it as ... a profession, per se, but it is mostly what puts food on

the table." Niels frowned. "What difference does it make to you, if I may ask? You'll be shipping me off to the constable in a few minutes, anyway, won't you?"

Richard shrugged. "I don't have much faith in the authorities, to be perfectly honest," he said, letting his gaze stray down the thief's lithe body. No doubt he looked lovely under those clothes. This man was just perfect, just his type. He knew the rumors that flew about him, but none knew the real truth: women didn't hold his interest.

Niels looked genuinely surprised. "Oh? Well ... I'll just get out of your way then. I'm sure you had more exciting things planned for the evening than this." He took a hesitant step backwards. "I promise not to bother you again, my lord." He sketched a brief bow and reached behind him blindly for the door handle, eyes still on the sword.

The sword rose again, and Richard closed the distance quickly. "I don't recall telling you that you could go," he purred, mouth twisted into a smirk. He knew suddenly what he was going to do with his intruder.

Niels stopped again. "Well, if you're not going to turn me in, and I can only assume that if you meant to kill me you would have already done so, what purpose would you have for keeping me here?" he asked, his accent thickening slightly as he started to get agitated. He frowned, then folded his arms over his chest a little defiantly. Lecture or beating, he could weather either.

"What other purpose indeed?" smirked Richard, thoroughly enjoying himself. Not as much as he would enjoy what he planned to do next, however. He knew he had the thief just

where he wanted him. "Perhaps I want something else from you."

Niels' eyes narrowed, and his head tilted a little to one side. He thought about it for a moment, then laughed mirthlessly. He held his arms out to the side. "Look around you. What could you possibly want from me?"

Richard laughed, too, but for a different reason. Was he truly that innocent? This was even better than he'd imagined. "Perhaps I want your body," he said, raising an eyebrow and waiting for the response.

Niels' eyes went wide, and slowly his hands fell to his sides. For a long moment he was silent, gaping at the other man. "Pardon me, but ... did I mishear you?" he asked, his voice dropping even lower than normal. Suddenly, his heart seemed to pound in his chest. He was not completely innocent of the world. He'd heard of such things. He just didn't believe them. He licked his lips. "To do what with?" he asked, still grappling with the concept.

Richard moved closer still. This man truly didn't know. "To do with what I please," he said, his voice lowering. "To use as I see fit. To touch as I want." He was only a foot away now, and he looked into the man's wide eyes. He added, enunciating clearly, "To fuck."

Niels' breath hitched. A half-dozen things to say paraded across his mind, each one dismissed as horrifically ignorant. Despite his shock, he found that his body was not nearly so uncomfortable with the idea. He could already feel himself responding to the nobleman's voice and closeness. "For how



long?" he croaked. As if he had a choice. Still, he wanted to know exactly what he was getting himself into.

Interesting. No flat denial. Perhaps this would be even more fun than he'd thought. "Seventy-two hours," he said evenly. "During which you will surrender your body to me. I promise there will be no ... lasting damage. After that you are free to go."

"No lasting damage? What the hell are you going to do to me? Last I checked, fucking wasn't particularly damaging." He felt panic rise, and he fought to control it. This man had him. Unless he could get away right now, there was no chance he was going to get out of this.

Richard laughed. "Have you ever been fucked, pretty boy?" he purred, setting the sword aside. He knew the answer already, of course. But he relished saying it, and hearing the man's response.

Niels scowled. "I've been the one doing the fucking, thank you very much. And only with girls..." He wouldn't have seemed so unsophisticated if he hadn't had to recover from the shock of it. "And pretty is not something I'm normally accused of being. It shares the bottom of the list with honorable, honest, hard-working. Girls are pretty, not men."

"Ah, but you're wrong there," Richard said, taking a lock of the man's hair and twirling it between his fingers. His own hair was quite short, but he preferred his lovers to have long hair. "You are quite pretty. And if you've never been taken ... well, how can you propose to know what it's like?"

Niels felt like a caged animal. "I've no idea what it's like," he whispered. His face felt like it was on fire, and he couldn't

deny his body's response to the mere suggestion. On top of that, this man was, essentially, all that Niels aspired to be. He knew the rich were full of exotic vices. If he ever hoped to wriggle into their world, it would be best that he knew about them. "Seventy-two hours and then I'm free to go? Do I get to keep the things I took?" he asked.

Richard laughed at the thief's audacity. "I cannot answer that until I know what you've managed to pilfer so far," he said. "Perhaps we shall call that a negotiable point depending on your performance."

Niels raised his eyebrows again. "My performance? I didn't know I had to perform. That might cost you extra." He folded his arms over his chest, smirking.

Quick as a flash, Richard had a handful of the man's hair in a tight grip. He brought his face to within an inch of his. He was only a bit taller, but it made a difference. He snarled, "Don't presume to play games with me, you little thief. You'll be put away for ten years hard labor if I turn you in, on my word alone. You won't be so pretty after that."

Niels blinked and his expression went blank. "So what do you want me to do?" he asked quietly. He knew what the other man said was true, and there was no getting away now.

Richard's expression turned smoothly back to a smile, his voice back to a purr as he released his hold on the man's hair. "I think I'd like to look at you," he said softly, stepping back. "Strip." He watched dispassionately, knowing how out of his depth the man must feel.

Niels swallowed hard and started to unbutton his shirt. He stared into the aristocrat's eyes as he let the rough linen slide

off his shoulders. "Might I know your name?" he asked as he started to unbutton his trousers.

"My name is Richard," he answered, realizing he hadn't even asked the name of the man he was going to use and abuse for three days. He admired the body that was slowly coming into view, not disguising his lascivious looks. It had been ages since he'd indulged himself with a pretty boy, and he was sure he'd never had one this lovely. And so innocent of what he was going to do to him. "What shall I call you?"

"Niels," he said simply. He toed off his worn boots and let his trousers fall to the floor, stepping out of them. It wasn't that he was afraid, really. He just hated being in such a position of weakness.

"Niels," Richard tried the name, gaze raking over the man's exposed body. "Lovely name. Scandinavian?" he asked idly, taking in the smooth, pale, hairless skin, and the long slender line of Niels' body. He couldn't even imagine how the man must feel, being ogled like this.

"Finland," he said shortly. He was doing his best not to glare, but even thieves had some principles, and he was about to compromise his. It wasn't a happy feeling.

"Finland," Richard repeated, as if they were having polite conversation. "I've never been there, but I hear it's very scenic." The position of power he was in now was exactly what he craved. He could feel the tightening in his lower stomach that signaled the beginning of arousal, and he smiled. "Turn around."

Niels turned to face the doors without a word. A shiver ran through him. He could see out into the back garden, so close

and yet so far. He wanted to beg for mercy, but he couldn't let himself do that.

Richard made an appreciative sound. Niels had the most perfect ass he'd ever seen, firm and rounded, and he couldn't wait to slam into it. But the anticipation was too good to rush. "Bend over and put your hands on the desk," he ordered. The desk he'd so recently been robbing; Richard liked the irony. It was one of the many things he got off on.

Niels braced his hands on the desk and bent over at the waist. He couldn't remember ever being in such a humiliating position. He started to glance back over his shoulder, but stopped himself.

Richard took a moment just to admire the view, and his cock slowly hardened in his pants. "Very nice," he said, and moved closer. He stopped just behind Niels, saying, "Spread your legs. I want to see everything."

Niels felt his stomach twist. There was very little imagination necessary to realize how this was going to go. He spread his legs apart, his knuckles turning white where he gripped the desk.

If Richard had had less control, he would have moaned then. Niels' perfect, yet unwilling submission was exquisite. He had no intention of rape, though. He knew how to make a man enjoy what was being done to him. That was almost the best part. He placed his hand on Niels' back and ran it down slowly.

Niels drew in a sharp breath at the gentle touch. It wasn't what he'd been expecting. He was already partially aroused,

and he cursed his own traitorous body. It took all his control to remain perfectly still.

Richard traced his fingers lightly down Niels' back, noting a faint crisscrossing of old scars marring the otherwise perfect skin. He moved his hand lower, over one firm buttock, and down to the upper thigh.

Niels squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to enjoy this. He wanted to fight against it, but he couldn't. It was either this or jail. He felt his throat tighten and his arm muscles started to burn from being tensed.

Slowly, Richard moved his hand to slide up Niels' inner thigh. He could see the faint tremble that meant that the other man really disliked this, or was trying not to like it. He hoped it was the latter. "Relax," he whispered, leaning close to Niels' ear.

He wasn't expecting Richard's voice so close and he started. "Relax? You are joking," he said, his accent distinctly English for a moment. He was about as far from calm as he could imagine being. Another man was stroking his body in a decidedly intimate way.

Richard's lips quirked into a genuine smile. "All right then, don't relax," he agreed, moving his hand around to the front and running it down Niels' flat stomach. He dropped his hand lower and was surprised to find Niels partially aroused.

Niels gasped when Richard touched his cock. "Clearly parts of me don't hate it," he said, gritting his teeth. He was becoming fully hard in Richard's warm hand, and he breathed fast. Maybe it would feel nice.

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Richard had become rock hard when he felt Niels responding to him. The game suddenly changed, and he found himself even more intrigued. He stroked slowly, bringing Niels to full arousal, and he pressed his body against him from behind. "I can make you feel good," he whispered.

"I thought I was supposed to make you feel good," he whispered back, biting back a moan. He wanted to rut into the fist enclosing his cock, but he didn't dare.

"You will," Richard replied, stroking a little faster. But suddenly he wanted more than a one-sided exercise in sexual dominance. He wanted to show Niels everything, make him scream his name. He wasn't quite sure why; was it Niels' full mouth, his wide eyes, or the fact that he was a virgin to what was going to happen? Richard wasn't sure, or perhaps he'd drunk too much cognac. Either way, he was going to thoroughly enjoy the next few days.

Niels let out a half-strangled whimper. It felt far too lovely, and it had been nearly a month since he'd had female company. "Fuck," he hissed between his teeth. His hips pressed forward almost of their own volition, and he arched his back.

Richard ached to take him now, but he knew he wanted to go slowly. Niels liked it, and perhaps had inclinations that he hadn't even known he had. It would be delicious to show him all the pleasures men could share. Show him that it could be just as good, if not better, than with a woman. Lead him down the path of decadence. Richard knew it was just another form of manipulation on his part. But that was what

he enjoyed. He stroked faster, more firmly, knowing just what touches would drive a man insane.

Niels moaned out loud, letting go. He lowered his head to the desk, bending over farther, pressing his forehead against the cool, smooth wood. Wittiness escaped him, which was just as well, as it would probably only get him into worse trouble.

Richard whimpered almost noiselessly. The way Niels gave himself over was pure sensuality. He wanted nothing more than to ram himself into him right now. He would have, if the other man hadn't been enjoying it so much. It made Richard want to drive him crazy, make him beg for everything Richard wanted to do. "Let go," he whispered, stroking faster, wanting to give Niels a taste of the ecstasy he could provide.

Niels moaned again. It didn't take a scholar to understand Richard's meaning, and he was already so close. He thrust once into Richard's fist and then spilled over the agile fingers, his body shaking from the climax as well as the effort to remain upright.

Richard was breathing hard just from watching this pretty man come in his hand. Whatever it was about Niels that turned him on, it was like nothing he'd ever felt before. He was so hard it hurt, his cock pulsing inside his expensive trousers, and he stroked him through it. He rubbed Niels' back gently, letting him lean on him.

Niels leaned, but only for a moment. "There'll be some raised eyebrows downstairs after they clean that up," he whispered, straightening a little, holding himself up by his

arms again. He knew there was far more to it. He doubted Richard was just going to wank him off for three days.

Richard snorted softly. "They've seen worse," he commented, getting himself under control just a bit. Then he smirked. "There, now that you've had a taste, you can see that the rest of your penance won't be as horrible as you thought." He handed Niels a handkerchief and used another one on his hand.

Niels cleaned himself off. "That remains to be seen," he muttered. But it wasn't like he had a choice. "I suspect there's a big difference between that and ... other things." He wondered if it would hurt, if Richard would be rough or gentle. If he was free while Richard was sleeping, maybe he could slip out. He'd certainly done worse things than sprint through the streets of London naked.

Grinning, Richard leaned back against the desk and let his gaze eyes roam over Niels. "It can be even better," he promised. He knew Niels would want to get away as quickly as possible. But he'd never forget Richard, he'd make sure of that. He was almost salivating at the prospect of using the pretty man to satisfy all his urges.

It was difficult for Niels to be ill-tempered after what had just happened. "Look, could I ... sit down or something?" he asked. "Until you're ... ready."

Richard couldn't keep the smirk from his face. "I think we should move up to my bedroom. You're going to want to lie down for what comes next." He was more than ready to take Niels, but he wanted to take his time. He had three days. "Follow me. Leave the clothes, I'll buy you more." He opened



the door, waiting for Niels to follow. He had no assurance the man wouldn't just make a run for it, of course. But if he ever wanted to live in this town, he'd better not break their deal. Richard had a lot of influence.

Niels straightened up and followed after him, the enticement of new clothes was more than enough to stop him from running. He needed new clothes, and he imagined Richard could afford nice ones. He padded across the marble-tiled entry hall. He followed Richard up a wide curving staircase to the second floor and down a corridor. The entirety of the boarding house he kept his belongings in could easily have fit in the interior of the room they entered and Niels just stood in the doorway and gaped at it.

Richard glanced back over his shoulder at Niels and grinned. "Yes, it's a bit much, but no doubt the servants would be scandalized if the master of the house slept in anything but the most luxurious rooms. I assure you, though, the bed is quite comfortable." He glanced around at the hand-woven tapestries that dated back for hundreds of years and the imported crystal fittings. He could see that it might be a bit overwhelming. The bed was huge, carved of the finest of hardwoods in an intricate pattern. Yards and yards of silk draped over it. Everywhere one looked there were more precious items. Richard had stopped noticing them long ago. No doubt Niels was estimating their worth even as they spoke.

Suddenly, Niels felt very small. "No doubt," he said dryly. "So where do you want me? On the bed?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe and folding his arms over his chest.

"That will do for now," Richard said, closing the door behind them. The candlelight reflected off of Niels' skin, making him look almost luminous, and Richard was struck again by the man's beauty. He was sure he hadn't been with anyone quite this captivating. That was why he'd asked for seventy-two hours instead of less; he suspected that even his fickle attention span would stretch to three days with Niels. Especially since he was a virgin ... in a certain sense. As he watched Niels, he kicked off his boots and started to unbutton his vest.

Niels sauntered over to the bed, putting on an air of casualness. He lay back on the bed, feeling like the oversized mattress was going to swallow him whole. He watched Richard undress, and managed not to betray his interest. The man was stunning. Slender but muscular. He practically radiated vigor. There was a hard edge to his looks, though, suggesting that he hadn't necessarily lived a life free of trouble, despite the grandeur of his surroundings. Perhaps he'd never wanted for anything financially, but no one appeared that sharp without having suffered privation in some quarter.

Richard felt Niels' eyes on him, but he was quite comfortable in his body. He knew he was in top physical condition. He worked hard to stay that way, when most of his peers were content to enjoy the comforts they were blessed with. Richard's past had left him unable to ever completely relax, and he always had a current of restlessness running through him. Right now, though, he was almost completely focused on the night of pleasure that lay ahead of him. He

dropped the rest of his clothes on the floor and advanced toward the bed completely naked. He was fully aroused, and he didn't try to hide it.

Niels watched him every step of the way. He didn't dare look at Richard's cock. He knew from what he'd seen of the bulge in Richard's trousers that it was significant. A little shiver of fear ran through him. He couldn't imagine that what they were going to do would be pleasurable for anyone but Richard. But he was in it now. There was no backing out. He would take it with as much dignity as he could muster. If he'd just get it over with, though, Niels would feel better about the whole thing. The slow progression was unnerving.

Richard, on the other hand, enjoyed the pace immensely. He had no illusions why Niels was here, but he rather liked that the pretty man was going to have to take whatever he gave him. He went to a cabinet and withdrew a small vial of oil, then climbed onto the bed. He set the vial aside and kneeled on the bed next to Niels. "Roll over onto your stomach," he purred with relish.

Niels set his jaw and rolled over, settling his head on the overstuffed pillow. His heart was pounding. He felt so vulnerable, and it wasn't a feeling he usually enjoyed.

Richard just regarded the man on his bed. Niels looked like he was meant to be there, his creamy skin contrasting with the dark silk of the sheets. Richard reached out slowly and ran his hand down the curve of Niels' back. "Spread your legs," he whispered.

Between the voice and the touch, Niels' body started to react again. He squeezed his eyes shut and moved his legs

apart. He was angry at himself for growing aroused by this man who was essentially forcing him to do this, but he couldn't help it. There was something undeniably sexy about it all, and the decadent lifestyle of a man such as Richard was what he aspired to. Maybe this was commonplace among the high society types.

"Perfect," whispered Richard, moving so he knelt between Niels' spread legs. This way the other man was completely exposed to him, and he knew how vulnerable he'd feel right now. But he also knew that Niels wasn't completely averse to his touches. He just needed to be brought along slowly. Richard uncapped the oil and drizzled some of the liquid over Niels' lovely buttocks, making sure to get some in his cleft. He began to work the oil into his skin, moving ever closer to his entrance.

He was trembling, caught between desire and some kind of perverse mortification. He'd never been touched so intimately. He felt invaded before they'd even really begun. He swallowed hard and tried to think of prison. He'd never been there, thankfully, but there was an old man down the pub who had and told stories about it all the time. Rats, damp, the awful stench of a hundred unwashed men, the darkness. This was better than that, no matter how much he felt like he was giving up a part of himself.

Richard could tell by the flush of Niels' skin and the way he breathed that his body didn't find this unwelcome. His mind, though, was another matter. Richard loved psychological games almost as much as sexual ones. No matter if Niels fled tonight, he'd never forget Richard and the way his body had

betrayed him. Finally, he traced a slick finger over Niels' untouched entrance, savoring the fact that no one had ever done this before.

Niels winced, not because it felt bad. On the contrary. His cock throbbed at the touch. He waited for what he knew was coming. He hugged the pillow tighter and tried to make himself relax, even though his stomach churned and his face felt like it was on fire.

Richard could have just fucked Niels and been done with it. But it was far better to make the other man enjoy it despite himself. He eased his finger into him as gently as possible, caressing his back soothingly as he did so. "Try to relax, I'm not going to hurt you," he said softly.

"I'm trying," Niels whispered hoarsely. Somehow he knew instinctively that being tensed up would only make it more difficult and painful. It was a strange sensation, not at all what he'd thought it would be. Somehow it felt like ... not enough, and that thought disturbed him.

Richard eased his finger in and out, going a little deeper each time. Niels was still very nervous, though, and instead of waiting for another finger, Richard decided to find the man's prostate now. Niels wouldn't know what had hit him. He twisted his finger, hooking it as he looked for the right spot.

From his stance of stony, tight-jawed silence, Niels involuntarily let out a yelp which dissolved into a moan when Richard touched that spot. "Fuck," he hissed. He just managed not to lift his hips and strain back towards him, craving more.

Richard smirked and brushed Niels' prostate again, purring, "You like that?" Niels was a stubborn one, but he'd have him begging eventually.

Niels didn't even have the wits to be annoyed about it. "God, yes," he moaned. It happened again and he did lift his hips off the bed. He couldn't help himself. He wondered how Richard would feel about him humping the mattress. He was so hard he ached.

Niels moaned for him. He added another finger carefully while he was distracted with the pleasure, and made sure he hit the same spot again. "It can feel even better," he promised.

Niels was practically gasping for breath now. All ethical dilemmas fled his brain in the face of the pounding need in his body. He moaned again, his hips moving restlessly. It felt amazing, and he couldn't imagine anything better.

Richard was panting now just from watching the way Niels reacted. He forced himself to keep an even pace, though, adding a third finger to stretch the other man even more. He didn't want Niels to feel any pain at all. He wanted Niels to like this. Wanted him to want it.

It occurred to him that everything Richard had done to him up to that point had been solely for Niels' pleasure, not Richard's. He didn't know what to make of that. Was he more generous than he seemed? Or was something horrible right around the corner? But even though he could feel his body being stretched open, he couldn't manage to dread what was coming. He could almost see why men did this. It was

certainly more convenient than trying to find a woman who wasn't scheming to entrap him into marriage.

Finally Richard withdrew his fingers. He covered his aching cock with plenty of oil, then positioned himself behind Niels. He gripped Niels' hips, pulling him up onto his hands and knees. "Try to relax," he whispered, and pressed the head of his cock against Niels' entrance.

Niels whimpered. The way Richard just took control of him completely made him feel liquid inside. He could feel him pressing against him, knew what was about to happen. "I'll try," he rasped.

Richard closed his eyes as he slid inside Niels. He was very tight, so Richard went slowly, his mouth falling open at the incredible friction. He moaned, gripping Niels' hips as he tried to keep control. There was nothing quite like the first slide into a body, claiming it and marking it. Richard fucked both men and women, but he couldn't deny that he much preferred men. So tight, so hot, so illicit ... he kept a tight rein on his body as he sheathed himself inside Niels.

Niels drew in a long, shaky breath. He felt so full, so stretched open, but strangely, so complete. Instinctively, he bore down and it was easier, although still very tight. He felt like he was someone else, or maybe another part of himself that he'd repressed. When he just let go of his fear and his worries, it felt perfect.

Richard carefully pulled back and then pushed back in again. He had to concentrate on being careful; it helped him focus. Niels was the tightest he'd ever felt, and the way he was taking his cock was nothing short of amazing. He let

himself fantasize for a moment that the pretty man really wanted this. He moaned, then caught himself. It had never mattered to him before. In fact, he loved manipulating people into doing his bidding. He pushed any sentiment out of his mind and tried to drown in the feeling. Niels was a tight body, nothing more, and would be gone as soon as he thought he could get away with it. Richard would take it all at face value, and enjoy the moment. He thrust a little harder, gripping Niels' hipbones tightly.

Each thrust made it easier, and each thrust brushed against that spot again. Niels couldn't hold back the moans. It felt like a jolt of pure sweet pleasure ricocheting through his body each time. It wasn't long before he was near the edge again, He gasped, feeling his body tremble on the brink of release.

"You like this?" Richard whispered, driving deeper and faster. "Talk, Niels. I want to hear your voice..." He could tell the other man enjoyed it. He just wanted him to admit it. Wanted control. He reached down to encircle Niels' cock with his hand, stroking him as he took him.

In the midst of passion, Niels' voice was even deeper, more resonant than usual, almost a growl. "Yes. Feels ... so fucking good." When Richard started stroking him it was all over and he started to come. He cried out, arching his back and howling.

Richard gasped as Niels started to come, tightening even more around him. He thrust even harder, loosening his control as he felt Niels' seed cover his hand. Three more



thrusts were all he could manage before he was coming, too, spilling himself inside Niels' tight body.

Niels shook from the power of it as he came down. He wanted nothing more than to collapse against the soft mattress. Gradually, his breathing slowed and he turned his head, glancing back at the man on top of him. "I can't call you a liar," he breathed softly.

Richard pulled out carefully, gasping from the friction on his now oversensitive cock. He put his hand gently on Niels' back, urging him to stretch out and relax. "A liar about what?" he murmured. He just wanted to sleep now.

Niels took the invitation without hesitation. He stretched out his body with a contented sigh. "About it ... being better," he whispered, coloring slightly. He didn't really want to discuss it, but he felt that some words needed to be said. He'd let another man fuck him, and it felt unbelievably satisfying. Clearly he was meant for the decadent lifestyle of the aristocracy.

Richard lay on his side, head propped up on his hand as he regarded Niels. The other man really did look at home here, as if he belonged in Richard's bed. "I know what I'm talking about," he agreed. "I do hope it's something you want to try again." If Niels had really hated it, he probably would have let him out of his seventy-two hours. But that didn't appear to be the case.

He half-smiled, half-smirked at Richard. "Not right away, I hope. I was hoping you'd take pity on your temporarily indentured servant and let me pass out for a few hours.

Assuming my 'performance' was satisfactory." Richard seemed decidedly less dictatorial in the afterglow.

"Of course you can sleep," Richard said. He just hoped the other man didn't run off during the night, but he rather suspected the promise of new clothes would keep him around a bit longer. That, and Niels seemed to enjoy being fucked. "I trust this bed meets with your approval? Or you could have one of the guest rooms." Richard hoped Niels wanted to sleep here. He fancied waking up to that lithe body.

Niels cleaned himself off. He wondered if Richard suggested a guest room because he wanted the bed to himself. "That's up to you, really, isn't it?" he said neutrally. He didn't want to move. He wanted to know everything about this man, too. "You could tell me to sleep on the floor and there wouldn't be a damn thing I could do about it." But it was said without rancor, just a simple statement of fact.

"Or you could just slink off into the night while I sleep," he said. "I'd like you to sleep here. But I'm giving you the choice." He was already calculating how many hours he had left of this gorgeous man. No doubt Niels would be off like a shot the second the time was up.

"Not to worry. I'll be waiting around for those clothes you promised and a few good meals at least. Obviously I'm going to need my strength for a little while." In truth, he'd stopped thinking about sneaking off almost from the moment he'd climbed onto the bed. He certainly wasn't thinking of it now. Richard didn't seem cruel, and the lure of a decent night's sleep in luxury was enough to satisfy Niels for the moment.

Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

Richard chuckled. "Oh yes, you'll need your strength, all right. I'll make sure to let the cook know to make extra food." He stretched, and reached down to pull the covers up over them both. "But sleep now." He turned to blow out the lamp.

The feel of the thick covers lying atop his naked body was downright sinful. Niels sighed heavily, cuddling into the pillow as his eyes drifted closed. He drifted into a peaceful slumber a moment later.

Richard's eyes adjusted to the room's darkness, and the moonlight streaming into the room was sufficient to study Niels' delicate features as he slept. He drifted off to sleep a bit later, lulled by the crickets outside and Niels' untroubled breathing.

## Chapter Two

When the first rays of sunshine spilled across Niels' face, his eyelids fluttered open. He was disoriented for a moment. Then he moved and the ache in his body reminded him of the night before. He propped himself up on his elbows just in time to see Richard sauntering into the room, looking refreshed and ... well ... heartbreakingly handsome. Niels blinked a few times, his eyes adjusting to the light. The silk robe Richard wore clung to his slender but powerful frame. He looked like a prince as he approached the bed. Niels felt every inch the pauper. "Morning," he rasped.

Richard couldn't help the smile that sprung to his face when he saw Niels was awake. "Good morning," he purred. "I trust you slept well?" Richard himself could never seem to sleep much past sunrise, and instead of disturbing Niels he'd gotten up and washed. Then he'd gone to the kitchen to instruct the cook to make plenty of her best recipes for the next few days.

Niels scratched his head and ran his hand through his hair, sure he looked like a proper ragamuffin. "It was a little more comfortable than the jagged brick I'm used to kipping on," he quipped. "I didn't keep you awake, did I?" He was almost certain Richard would kick him out soon. What could a man like that really want with an overgrown street urchin?

"No, you were perfectly quiet," Richard responded, coming to sit on the edge of the rumpled bed. "I'm an early riser." He couldn't keep his eyes off the smooth pale skin that showed

above the sheets. "I've had the maid run a hot bath for you if you'd like to get cleaned up. There's also a robe for you in the bathroom. We'll see about getting you some clothes later today, after you've eaten."

"Oh yes. A bath would be lovely." He sat up more, the covers sliding down to his waist. "Could you point me in the right direction? I don't have any breadcrumbs to make a trail in case I get lost." His stomach growled at the mention of food.

Richard's eyes followed the fall of the sheets. The sight of that sleek skin inflamed him again, and it was clear that his desire hadn't been slaked by last night's activities. He felt his cock harden again, and he stood and held his hand out for Niels to take. "I'll show you," he said.

There was no mistaking the look in Richard's eyes. It was downright predatory. Niels took his hand and swung his legs over the side of the bed. As he stood, all covering slid away. He followed Richard, inexplicably nervous. He felt like he was walking on eggshells, even though Richard had been nothing but kind and solicitous to him ever since he'd agreed to stay.

Richard led Niels to the sumptuous bathroom. Dominating the room was a huge clawfoot tub on a raised platform. Steam rose from it, as well as the subtle scent of expensive oils. Richard hadn't had this house built, but he'd had this bathtub installed at great expense. He didn't often use the wealth he'd inherited, but hot baths were a luxury he couldn't give up.

Niels' eyes widened and a shy grin broke across his face. When he was lucky enough to get a bath it was in a tiny

wooden tub with just enough room to sit down in with his knees at his chest. He walked towards the tub reverently, and slowly stepped in. He lowered his body into it and stretched out his legs. "You said ninety-six hours, right? Or was it a hundred forty-eight? I can't remember now." He closed his eyes and slid beneath the water completely, popping back up a moment later, pushing wet strands of hair off his face.

Richard grinned as he watched Niels enjoy himself. He wanted to tell him he could stay as long as he liked, but he stopped himself. They no doubt would be sick of each other soon. "Enjoy it," he said instead, watching for a moment before turning to leave the room.

Niels saw Richard turning to go, and suddenly felt like he wanted him to stay. "Wait," he said. "Would you ... wash my back for me?" Well, that sounded imbecilic, he thought after the words had left his lips. Of course it could sound cheeky, which was better. In either case, he was certain Richard would refuse.

Richard stopped in his tracks, wondering if he'd heard that correctly. He turned to face the man in the tub. He walked back slowly and said, "If you want me to, of course." He didn't know why he'd said that. He detested restating the obvious. His cock stirred fully to life as he gazed down at Niels.

Niels smiled up at him. "Well, unless you've got more important things to do. You know ... I'd understand, of course." He shrugged a little, although it seemed like he'd genuinely surprised Richard. He gave him an impish smile and

held out the sponge, leaning forward to expose his back to him.

Richard bit back a moan as he looked at Niels. The man was captivating; he couldn't get enough of just looking at him. He kneeled beside the tub and took the sponge, shoving his sleeve up. Then he trailed the sponge over Niels' sleek back, moving in gentle circles, covering all the skin with lather.

Niels' shoulders visibly relaxed and he sighed at the luxurious feeling. He made a soft humming sound of contentment. "That's lovely," he purred. Really, since he'd agreed to this arrangement he hadn't actually done anything but enjoy himself. He would be sad when this little journey into the land of milk and honey was at an end, but he knew he'd never forget it.

Richard continued to run the sponge over Niels, leaning closer so he could reach more of him. He pressed him back so he could wash his front, moving the sponge in lazy circles lower and lower. Richard was hard as a rock now, and he was sorely tempted to just climb in the bath with Niels and take him again.

Niels lay back in the tub. He was completely exposed, but he didn't care. He raised drowsy eyes to Richard's face. "You're good at this," he said softly. "Although shouldn't it be me bathing you?" He had the sudden impulse to kiss him, but he held himself back. It seemed such a normal thing to do, but the situation was far from normal. Niels was already getting hard again, and he felt compelled to seduction.

"Maybe later," Richard whispered, eyes locked to Niels' as he let the sponge float away. He could see Niels' rapidly rising cock, and he wrapped his fingers around it.

He had to ask. Their faces were so close and Richard's fingers closing around his cock were too arousing. "Can I ask you a question?" he asked in a hush, his gaze dropping from Richard's eyes to his lips and back again. "Do men ... kiss?" He licked his lips unconsciously, hungry for it.

The question took him completely by surprise. That was the last thing he'd been expecting. "Yes," he replied. "Men kiss." Personally, Richard didn't much care for kissing. It seemed a waste of time in his usual liaisons. But with Niels.... they had lots of time.

Niels leaned up closer, sliding one wet hand around the back of Richard's neck, and tilted his head a little. He pressed his lips against Richard's without hesitation. He parted his lips, knowing Richard wouldn't care for an innocent kiss, and stroked his tongue over those warm lips, silently requesting entrance.

With a moan Richard granted Niels access, and their tongues came together. He stroked Niels a little faster now, and his eyes closed as he gave himself over to the kiss. Niels was an excellent kisser, there was no arguing that point, and it was no hardship to be this intimate. Less than twelve hours ago he'd had this man at swordpoint in his office, and now they were kissing like lovers.

Niels explored Richard's mouth. It didn't disgust him or make him feel odd to be kissing a man. It was as wonderful as everything they'd done together so far. Of course the firm



hand on his cock wasn't hurting anything, either. He stroked at Richard's tongue, tasting him deeply. He did love kissing and Richard's mouth, like every other part of him, was delicious.

Niels' obvious enthusiasm for kissing made Richard enjoy it more. He slid his free hand into Niels' damp hair, pulling him closer. This was quite unlike any assignation Richard had ever experienced.

Niels whimpered. He pressed his hips up in the gradually cooling water, aching for more. Sex with a woman was nothing like this. It was brilliant not constantly being the aggressor. It was hot and urgent and above board. Practically gentlemanly. They both wanted it and there was no coyness or denial.

Richard felt the same way; with a man there were no unnecessary niceties, no pretending they were there for anything but pleasure. He much preferred men, but not for that reason alone. He knew just what another man liked. "Come to the bed," he growled, releasing Niels' cock and standing up. He untied his robe and let it slide off his shoulders.

Niels didn't question it. He stood up, grabbing a towel. He wrapped it around himself just to dry off the excess moisture as he followed Richard back into the bedroom. He panted, waiting for Richard's next command.

This kind of urgency was something Richard had never felt before. "On your back," he ordered, grabbing for the bottle of oil as he climbed onto the bed. "Want you."

Niels let the towel drop to the floor and climbed on the bed again, lying on his back. Richard's words sent a shiver through him that terminated in his cock. He spread his legs far apart. "Want you, too," he whispered, hardly able to draw breath.

Richard took a moment to look at Niels, spread out for him, and his desire rose even higher. He didn't usually take this position; it was too intimate. But he wanted to look at Niels' pretty face when he took him. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten so desperate so quickly. But his hands were trembling as he uncapped the oil. He got some on his fingers, and moved forward between Niels' spread legs. He was soon thrusting three fingers inside Niels. He stared into the other man's eyes, breathing hard, his cock aching painfully. "Need to be inside you," he moaned, twisting his fingers inside him.

"Take me," Niels gasped. Right at that moment, he needed Richard, too, although he wasn't going to frame it in quite those terms. Not without a sword pointed at him again, in any case.

Richard quickly removed his fingers and oiled his cock, moaning from his own touches. He positioned himself and leaned forward over Niels. He thrust in as gently as he could, and slid inside Niels much more easily than the last time, and he groaned.

It was so different this time, staring into Richard's eyes as it happened. He felt even more exposed than he had the first time. He wound his arms around Richard's neck and leaned up to meet his mouth again, kissing him suddenly and deeply. His legs seemed to have a will of their own, wrapping around

Richard's body. It was so intense he felt like he was drowning in the other man. Completely lost.

Richard thrust a little raggedly; the way the other man was reacting was enough to rob him of his control. Never had he been with a man like this, especially one so inexperienced. It made every other encounter he'd had seem cold and distant. He wasn't going to last any longer than the first time.

Niels moaned as well, no longer concerned with holding anything back. There was no point. All his irritation over being caught and being forced into this bargain had long since dissolved. Now all he wanted was whatever Richard was willing to give. His fingers twined through Richard's hair, gripping at him tightly as their mouths and bodies locked together.

Thrusting deep and fast, Richard was on the edge faster than he could ever remember. He finally had to break the kiss because he was panting for air. He couldn't think of anything else but how good it felt, and how much he never wanted it to end. He slipped his hand between them to stroke Niels' cock.

Niels whimpered. He felt like every inch of his skin was on fire. All too soon he was coming, with hardly any warning, moaning as a shudder ran through his slender body.

When Niels started to come, Richard thrust harder than ever. He'd never been able to be this rough with anyone, let alone someone who was new to this kind of activity. But Niels seemed to be made for it, made for him. That thought drove him into release, and he froze as he filled Niels once again, whimpering his name.

Niels stared up at him, still panting for some time afterwards. Eventually, the corner of his mouth tugged up and he licked his lips slowly. He slid his hands down around Richard's neck to his chest, resting them there lightly. "Now I'm really starving," he said softly.

Richard rolled off Niels, breathing hard. He didn't roll far, though; for some reason he craved Niels' nearness. He wasn't quite cuddling, but it was closer than he usually got. "Well, if I know my cook, there will be enough food down there to feed an army." He just wasn't quite ready to get up yet.

"Mm, brilliant," he said, turning towards Richard. "Have you got something I can wear? Until you buy me clothes?" He rested his hand on Richard's chest again, also not quite cuddling. If things were different he would have already pulled Richard into his arms, but Richard wasn't a girl, and he wasn't sure if he'd welcome such touches.

Richard nodded. "I'm sure we can find something." They looked to be roughly the same size, though he was taller and slightly broader across the shoulders. He stretched slowly, getting his strength back. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked.

"Well ... I may be walking oddly for a couple of hours," he said with a lazy smile. "But no, you didn't really hurt me." It was rather charming that Richard sounded concerned about it. Niels could think of a few people who'd hurt him on purpose and not give a damn.

Richard smiled and whispered, "Good." He stared into Niels' eyes for a long moment before he realized what he was doing. He shook his head as if to clear it. "Let's find you some

clothes, then." He sat up and swung his legs off the side of the bed.

Richard opened the wardrobe so Niels could see inside. He'd never fussed much over clothing, but his mother had always insisted on the best. Not because she cared about her son, but because of what other people would think. The wardrobe was filled with trousers of various materials, but nearly all black. Crisp white linen shirts, silk vests, and various accessories were arranged neatly. "You can choose whatever you like," he said, pulling out a pair of soft, rather informal trousers for himself. There were no undergarments. Richard didn't like them.

Niels gaped. It was more than he'd even imagined. He took out a pair of soft, black velvet trousers and a white shirt with a moderate amount of lace. It was still far finer than his finest. He chose a simple deep blue vest and smiled. "These will do nicely." He pulled on the clothes and adjusted them, then stood back and held out his arms. "Well?" he asked.

The transformation was unbelievable. Niels wouldn't have looked out of place at any society function. "Quite acceptable," Richard grinned, looking Niels over. He looked more than acceptable, actually. Something about Niels in his clothes was strangely appealing. He'd enjoy getting him out of them again.

Niels' smirk grew into a full grin. "I've got to get my boots from downstairs. They'll look horribly shabby in comparison, but old boots are better than new in most cases."

"I doubt my shoes will fit you, but you are welcome to try," Richard said as he buttoned his shirt. He extended his

arms and said, smiling, "Am I acceptable?" This was a strangely domestic scene, unlike anything Richard had ever experienced.

Niels laughed aloud at that. "You'll do," he said. Even dressed to perfection, Richard was an imposing figure. His stomach chose that moment to grumble again, rather loudly, and he put his hand on his flat belly. "If I pass out from weakness you can just roll me down the staircase towards the food. No need to trouble the footmen."

"Then we'd best get you down to the dining room, lest you accuse me of cruel and unusual punishment," Richard replied smoothly, closing the wardrobe and leading the way down the marble stairs. They walked through halls paved with tile, rich rugs softening their footsteps. He usually ignored the ostentation around him, but today he was seeing it through another's eyes. It really was overdone, though that had been due to Richard's mother.

Finally they arrived in a long, dark-paneled room that contained a table big enough for two dozen people to dine. The table was only set for two, however, and a fire crackled warmly in the hearth. Richard waved at the chairs, inviting Niels to sit. The table was already piled high with fruit and bread, and as they sat, a plump woman bustled in with trays of steaming food.

Niels took his seat. The meal was beyond his wildest dreams. And he was starving. He looked to Richard. "Um ... are there any sort of ... rules or something? Down the pub we just, you know, dig in, but I don't want to overstep." He really wanted to know all the social etiquette, and he wasn't afraid

to ask. Richard knew where he was from, and so far he hadn't really treated him poorly for it. Now clean and in the fine clothing, Niels felt like he could nearly pass for one of 'them' if he just knew what was and wasn't acceptable.

Richard looked at Niels, and decided he wasn't being mocked. Niels seemed genuinely curious. "When it's just the two of us, it doesn't matter. But..." He went on to explain the purpose of each utensil and the proper way to serve oneself from each dish. "Please. Eat. If you break a 'rule' I'll let you know, all right?"

Niels gave him a genuine, grateful smile. "Thank you," he said. He reached for a serving spoon and started to fill his plate, keeping in mind the things Richard had said. He wanted to do it right.

Richard watched Niels out of the corner of his eye as they ate. Niels was such an enigma. He professed to be a smooth criminal, but if he were just that he would have been long gone last night after Richard had fallen asleep, laden with as much as he could carry. Yes, Niels had enjoyed the sex, but Richard didn't kid himself that was what was keeping him here. Niels surely didn't lack for sexual company. It was almost as if he wanted to learn how to behave. He watched Niels eat, smiling a little.

Although he was making an effort to follow the proper etiquette for everything, Niels couldn't conceal his enjoyment of the fare. He knew it was the province of the wealthy to appear bored with everything, but he couldn't quite manage that. Everything delighted him. Beautiful clothes, beautiful people, delicious food, sparkling jewelry. It was all fascinating

to him. He was just a creature of sensation, and he wanted it all.

When he was sure he couldn't manage another bite, he took a sip of tea and sat back. "Bloody hell," he said. "That was a meal fit for a king." He wiped his mouth daintily with the linen napkin and grinned at Richard. "That'll hold me for a good few hours." He patted his still flat stomach. "I hope I don't burst your lovely trousers."

Richard had eaten barely a tenth of what Niels had, and he still felt full. He eyed Niels' slender body and smirked. "Perhaps we'll have to work off some of that excess later," he suggested with a raised eyebrow. "I don't have any appointments today, thankfully. I've made an appointment with my clothier for later today, once you've digested a bit. I'd like to take a walk around the gardens if you'd care to join me?" The only thing of his mother's that Richard had cared for was the gardens. Not that she'd done more than order the gardeners around. He'd loved to play and hide in the maze and pretend he was someone else.

"Yes, I think a walk might be a good idea. It's either that or a nap, and I've spent quite a lot of time in bed here so far." He grinned and pushed back his chair. "Please, lead on, my lord," he said as he stood. It looked to be a beautiful day outside.

Richard led Niels out into the house again, and this time out a set of glass doors. There was a path that led them into the rose garden first. The path narrowed and meandered through every color of rose that could be grown in this climate. It was early in the season and they were just



beginning to bloom, giving off various sweet scents as they walked.

They came out of the rose garden and were at the top of a small rise. From there they could see the whole of the maze and the rest of the grounds.

Niels blinked at the sight. "Good lord! You'd never know you were in the middle of the city, would you? Is that a maze?" he asked, transformed again into the boy who was amazed at every new sight. "Is it difficult? Have you gotten lost in it?" He stopped himself and blushed a little for seeming so eager. "I'd never make it as an aristocrat, would I? I'd give myself away the moment I saw a particularly fancy pastry or a ladies hat with a sparrow on it."

Richard smiled, charmed unexpectedly. He put his hand on Niels' arm and said, "Anyone would forgive you for your enthusiasm," he soothed. "I used to get lost all the time when I was small. Would you like to try it?"

"Will you come find me if I get horribly lost?" he asked, looking into Richard's eyes. "Well, I suppose you'd have to, wouldn't you? You've got nearly sixty hours left." He wondered if that sounded harsh. He wanted to remind himself of it. He was essentially a slave to this man for another two days. This was not some lifelong chum who was welcoming him into his home. Richard was an aristocrat who Niels had attempted to steal from.

Richard sobered instantly, removing his hand and reminding himself that this was indeed a business arrangement. "Yes," he said softly, forcing his voice into coldness. "I have to keep an eye on my investment now,

don't I? I won't let you get lost." His mood had soured a bit now, but he led the way to the entrance of the maze.

"Are we going in together? That would hardly be a challenge, since you know the way." Niels lingered by the entrance. "Should I go in first? Or should I close my eyes while you go in first, and try to meet you at the exit?" He had no idea how mazes worked or if they had rules.

"You go in first," suggested Richard. "I'll follow, and perhaps we'll run into each other somewhere inside." He knew there were multiple ways through the maze, and he could intercept the other man at several points.

"All right. See you inside," he said. He walked through the opening in the tall hedgerow, and was immediately confronted with choices. He started wending his way through, making good progress until he ran afoul of his first dead end. He frowned and started backtracking until he could make a different choice. He hoped that he didn't end up back at the entrance.

Richard waited a few moments, then walked in. He noted that Niels had already taken a wrong turn; he could hear a rustling a couple of rows over. He worked his way through until he was parallel to where he thought Niels would be. Then he guessed where he might come out next, and stationed himself there to wait. He could find his way around this maze in his sleep, though he hadn't been in here for a while. He leaned against the thick underbrush and waited quietly.

Niels followed along a few green corridors. He turned a corner and nearly ran straight into Richard. "Was I in danger

of being hopelessly lost already?" he asked. The way the other man was leaning so negligently was unexpectedly attractive. Niels had never thought of men in those terms before, but he thought of Richard that way. Sexy. He wanted to kiss him again. And more.

Richard let his eyes flick down the length of Niels' body obviously. Niels was still his to do with what he pleased. And it pleased him to contemplate what they could do out here. "Yes, and I'd promised to make sure you didn't get lost," he answered, his voice lowering as his cock took an interest. "Come here."

Niels stepped closer to Richard. He was already getting used to this. It no longer seemed wrong or foreign. Two men. Together. It seemed perfectly natural. Except, of course, for the fact that he was compelled to be there. If he wasn't a prisoner ... well, Richard probably wouldn't want him if he didn't feel like he was the 'master' of him. If they were equals ... but they would never be equals, even after the arrangement was over with. "I thought I might still make it," he said softly, standing very close.

"You might," Richard agreed. He pulled the other man tight against him, hardening in response. "And after I've had my way with you, you can try again." He slid his hand down to Niels' ass and squeezed.

Niels gasped a little, his own cock starting to harden from the sudden move. "Right here?" he whispered. "On the ground?" It was secluded enough, of course. No one would see them. No one would know. But it was still outside, and that held a seductive power all its own. The proprietary way

Richard grabbed him wasn't upsetting. It made his heart beat faster and the blood pump through his veins like fire.

"Right here," agreed Richard, speaking loudly and deliberately. No one could hear them, of course, but he wanted Niels to realize how exposed they really were. Or, rather, how exposed Niels was going to be. "Strip," he commanded.

Birds were chirping in the sunshine. There was the soft rustle of a breeze through the leaves. There was no mistaking that they were outside. Niels started unbuttoning the vest. He toed off his soft, worn leather boots as he tugged the shirt off. A moment later the trousers joined the other garments and he was standing in the soft grass, in the bright sunshine, completely naked. His cock was at full attention now, and he was sure Richard could hear his heart beating. But he didn't lower his eyes. He stared directly at Richard, unashamed.

Richard took his time looking over Niels, admiring. It was too perfect. "Kneel in front of me," he ordered. He took off his jacket and laid it down so Niels wouldn't hurt his knees.

Niels barely managed not to smirk at the small kindness. He slid gracefully to his knees in front of the aristocrat, and looked up at him.

"Take my cock out," Richard ordered. "You're going to suck me." He knew Niels wouldn't be very good at it, but that wasn't the point.

Niels had only ever been on the receiving end of this. He licked his lips, still looking up, and unbuttoned his trousers. *This or jail, this or jail*, he thought silently, but he found that part of him wanted to please Richard.

More than anything, Richard liked seeing Niels like this, unsure of himself, all pretense dropped. He watched his face, looking at that gorgeous mouth, knowing it would be wrapped around his cock very soon. "Keep going," he urged. "You know what I want."

He frowned a little and tugged Richard's cock out of his trousers. It was the first time he'd ever touched a cock other than his own. But he did know how it was done, even if he'd never personally done it. He parted his lips and pressed them against the already slick head. His tongue connected with the slit and for the first time he tasted another man. It wasn't that much different from the taste of a woman, actually. He could do this. He had to keep telling himself that as he slowly sucked Richard into his mouth.

Richard gasped as Niels took him in. He'd half-expected the man to refuse despite their agreement. But he was doing it, sucking his cock. What Niels lacked in experience was made up for by the knowledge that he'd never done this before. He moaned softly as the wet heat enveloped him. "Good," he whispered, hand in Niels' hair.

Niels concentrated on trying to recreate what he liked best about having his own cock sucked. He took Richard deeper into his mouth, drawing suction on the hard, hot flesh and stroking him with his tongue as he moved up and down the length of him. He rather liked the feeling of Richard's hand in his hair. He was hard, too, and he wanted ... something. What, he wasn't sure.

Groaning, Richard watched his cock move in and out of Niels' gorgeous mouth. "Yes, that's it, feels good," he gasped,

feeling as if he was on top of the situation again. Niels unsettled him, and he had to get over that. He'd be gone soon, and he'd never see him again. He had to take what he wanted now. And he wanted to come in Niels' mouth. His hand tightened in Niels' long hair and he thrust just a little into his mouth.

Niels stiffened a little when Richard thrust. He felt the hardness hit him in the back of the throat. He suspected any resistance wouldn't be taken well, so he forced himself to relax. He sucked hard, moving his head faster, reaching up to grip Richard's hips for support. He moaned involuntarily, and it reminded him of just how that felt, making his own cock twitch in sympathy. Did he really find this sexy? Sucking another man's cock? Servicing this aristocrat who was holding him there against his will, fucking his body and now his mouth? He had to admit that he did, if only to himself.

Richard was close already. The vibration of the moan felt incredible, and the way Niels was taking it was what made it even better. Niels was trying hard, and he was still aroused. That thought was what pushed Richard over the edge, and just before he started to pulse, he warned, "Pull back now." He didn't want Niels to choke.

Niels knew what was about to happen, and he pulled back, although it was just as Richard pulled back a little and the stiff, pulsing cock slid completely out of his mouth. He gasped, sure that wasn't what Richard had meant, but it was too late. Richard was coming, and Niels felt the warm, sticky wetness cover his lips and chin, sliding partway down his throat.

Richard moaned as he came, eyes fixed on Niels, more aroused than ever when he saw his seed dripping down the man's face. Niels looked as erotic as hell like that, debased and debauched and Richard's climax got even better. He sagged back against the hedge, panting, staring at Niels.

Niels sucked on his bottom lip, looking up at Richard for direction. "Was that all right?" he asked. The salty substance lingered on his tongue and he wasn't sure if he was allowed to wipe himself off yet or not.

"God, yes," moaned Richard, still panting. He reached down and wiped Niels' face off somewhat, aching from the intense climax. "You did very well. I didn't mean for you to pull that far back, but you look really good that way, too."

Niels wiped at his chin. His face burned with humiliation, and he cast his eyes down. He felt ... strange. But he was still completely aroused. And he was acutely aware of their location again. He'd been distracted from it for a few minutes, but now he felt the gentle breeze against the backs of his thighs and his ass. "Should I ... get dressed?" he asked softly, still not meeting Richard's eyes.

Richard shook his head and held out his hand to Niels after he'd fastened his trousers. "Not yet," he said, pulling him to his feet. "You don't think I'd leave you this way, do you?" He slid his hand down Niels' chest until he got to his rock hard cock, and he wrapped his fingers around it. He pulled Niels closer until he was pressed against his side.

Niels swallowed hard, and drew in a sharp breath when Richard touched him. "I wasn't sure," he whispered, leaning against Richard. He wiped at his face some more with his

hand. He felt strangely fragile, and a little lost. Sex had always been reasonably straightforward. He wasn't used to these mental machinations.

Richard began to stroke Niels, slowly and expertly. He knew how to keep a man on the edge for a very long time, but he didn't intend to tease Niels. He leaned closer and bit gently at Niels' neck as he stroked him.

Niels whimpered. His neck was sensitive. He tipped his head away from Richard, exposing his neck more, drawing a deep, shuddering breath. In this position, leaning against Richard, and turned sideways, he felt completely exposed and vulnerable.

Richard noticed Niels' reaction, and lavished more attention on his neck. He licked, bit and sucked, while he sped up his hand. He loved the way Niels reacted to everything. He was so new to being controlled. It was intoxicating.

Niels slid his arm around Richard's back for support, moaning a little. He started to thrust into Richard's fist. He assumed if Richard could thrust into his mouth, surely he could thrust into his hand. When he started, his hips seemed to have a will of their own, and soon he was rocking forward rhythmically, straining to moan as quietly as he could manage.

Richard gazed at Niels' face as he gave himself over to it. "Don't try to be quiet," he urged. "I want to hear you." Niels was completely under his control now. His pleasure depended wholly on Richard. He nuzzled at Niels' neck, biting harder.



Like a puppet on a string, Niels obeyed. He moaned Richard's name, gasping for breath. "Oh god ... I'm..." And that was all the warning he was able to give before he spilled hot seed over Richard's firm grip.

Richard held Niels as he came, drinking in the sounds he made. "You're so sexy, Niels," he murmured as he stroked him through it. He gave into the urge to kiss Niels, pressing his lips to the other man's, tasting himself on them.

Niels slid both arms around Richard's neck, turning towards him, sighing into the kiss. He needed it like air just at that moment and he didn't hold back. It wasn't violent or urgent, however. It was slow and sultry and thorough, gentle lapping gradually progressing to deep probing and stroking.

Richard groaned into it, pressing himself closer as he released Niels' spent cock. He wrapped his arms around him, caressing his naked skin. Niels felt so perfect in his arms.

Niels leaned against him. He was unsettled, confused. He had to snap himself out of it. He pulled back from the kiss, gasping, summoning up a vision of life before he'd come to this place. It was less than twenty-four hours ago, and already it seemed so far away. He blinked a few times, staring into Richard's eyes. "Shall I try to figure out the maze now?" he whispered.

"If you want," Richard murmured, not releasing Niels just yet. "You can get dressed," he added after a moment. Though he really wouldn't mind keeping the man around, naked all the time.

Niels put on the fancy clothes and his old boots again. He felt less disoriented with clothing on. "Unless you'd rather go

back inside. Whatever you prefer," he said, noncommittal. Because that was his purpose for the next couple of days. To do whatever Richard wanted.

Richard could sense the change in Niels once again. And it reminded him of their real situation. "I'd like you to try," he said softly, stepping further away.

"Right," he said, nodding, although he didn't have quite the same enthusiasm for it that he'd had earlier. He looked around, trying to get his bearings again, and then started off in the only direction he hadn't been in yet, glancing over his shoulder at Richard once before he disappeared around a bend.

Richard waited; it seemed Niels was going in the right direction this time. There were still a few tricky bits, however, and he knew the way around them. He made it to the exit of the maze, and waited. He suspected it wouldn't be very long.

Niels made one wrong turn, but he backtracked and repaired his misstep. A few minutes later he made it to the exit. He saw Richard waiting there for him. "Your investment is safe at last," he said with a sad smile.

"As I knew you would be," responded Richard. "Congratulations." He glanced out at the rest of the grounds. "We have to go to meet the clothier now, but if you want we can continue the tour later." He smiled. "There won't be time to have them custom made, but we can certainly have some ready-made clothes altered to fit you."

"I'm sure they'll be more than sufficient," he said, trying to contain his enthusiasm.

Turning to walk back to the house, Richard said, "Perhaps we should clean up a bit before we go." He smiled over his

shoulder at Niels. He knew his tailor wouldn't bat an eye when he brought Niels in; he paid the man enough, after all.

Niels agreed and in surprisingly short order he was enjoying another bath. He'd certainly never had two in one day. He doubted he'd ever been so clean in his life. He put on the same clothes and let Richard lead him to a small salon where the tailor was waiting for them. He had a young lady with him, whom Niels assumed was a seamstress, as well as two trunks filled with clothing of all sorts.

"Hello, Edward," Richard addressed the tailor easily, putting on the mantle of aristocracy. "This is Niels, a business associate visiting from Finland. His trunk was misplaced by the shipping company and he finds himself bereft of clothes at the moment. I'd like you to fit him with at least three proper outfits as quickly as possible, as well as whatever else he deems necessary. We'll need them by tomorrow at the latest. The sooner the better." He slipped the man an extra gold piece, thereby assuring there would be no protests.

The tailor bowed obsequiously. "Of course, my lord." He looked Niels over briefly. "I believe I have a number of things that will need minimal alteration. If you have a small room where my seamstress could work, they could be done in two hours at the most." He looked back at Niels. "Might I ask what sort of fabrics you prefer for the trousers? The weather is still chill in the evening. Perhaps two pair of something warm and one lighter for daytime use? Wool or velvet and one broadcloth or linen?" He started pulling out several pairs and holding them up for inspection.

After the trousers were chosen, shirts and vests were presented. It was clear that Niels' style was somewhat more outlandish than Richard's. Finally, coats to match each pair of trousers were presented, and a screen was erected in one corner of the room. Niels tried each outfit on in turn, and the tailor and seamstress fussed over him as he stood on a small box with his arms outstretched.

When the fittings were done, Niels changed back into his borrowed clothing. The fittings had taken longer than they'd thought, and the seamstress was going to finish the clothes right there on the spot. He mentally assessed how much longer he "had" Niels for; over two days yet. He waited until Niels was dressed again, and they left the tailor and seamstress in a spare room, sewing the clothes. "I hope they meet with your approval," Richard said, leading Niels back to his bedroom.

Niels followed along with him. "They'll do," he said, smirking. The clothes were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen, and they were going to be his. He wondered about that for a moment. "Do I get to take them with me?" he asked. Richard had really only promised one outfit, to replace the one he'd discarded in the study.

Richard stopped still and turned to look at Niels, surprised. "Of course you do," he said a bit sadly. It reminded him that he'd probably never see Niels again after the time was up. He'd better get his money's worth, he supposed. "Of course I hope that you'll put them to use in something other than a continued life of crime." He tried to keep his tone neutral, light. It was just sex.

"Yes, of course. Old Willie the Bruiser down the pub is always having social events such as tea parties and the like. It's so tedious to be under-dressed at such things." He realized that his only purpose for having such clothes was potentially criminal in nature. Except ... "Although ... I do walk in the park sometimes," he said quietly. "And just ... you know ... act like someone else for a little while."

Again, Richard wondered about Niels' past. Perhaps they could have some wine with dinner, and he could ask the other man a few questions. Just for curiosity's sake, of course. "I do hope you've worked up an appetite for dinner," Richard said finally, changing the subject. "After the cook saw how much you enjoyed breakfast, she said she was determined to outdo herself for dinner."

Niels smiled. "Mmm, I'm getting a little peckish, actually. I'm sure I'll be ravenous by then." He felt strangely fond of Richard just then. Really, the man had been nothing but kind to him. His emotions seemed to be running hot and cold by the hour. He stepped closer to him. "Thank you for the clothes." He leaned in close and kissed him, just lightly, to underscore the sentiment.

Richard's eyes widened at the kiss, then he kissed back, not demandingly. They'd had sex three times already, and though he knew he could easily be ready for more, he didn't want to make Niels too sore. "It's my pleasure," he said after he drew back. His hands were on Niels' slim hips and they felt at home there. "If you'd like to rest until dinner, you're welcome to," he added softly.

"Is this what the life of luxury is like? Eat until you feel like you're going to burst, fuck, buy new clothes and then sleep until your next huge meal?" he asked. "I could definitely get used to that sort of schedule." He was feeling a little sleepy, though, and that gorgeous big bed across the room seemed to be singing a siren song directly to him.

Richard smirked. "No, not often. I actually have some business to attend to with my steward. But you can rest if you wish." For a moment, Richard pictured having Niels here as his companion all the time. The younger man could do what he wanted, whenever he wanted. It sounded nice, but he doubted Niels would enjoy being a kept man.

"All right. I could do with a little more sleep." He stretched his neck to one side and then the other. He smirked a little. "I need to enjoy that bed while I have the chance." He stepped back and walked towards it, unbuttoning the vest again, starting to undress.

Richard watched Niels for a moment, then forced himself to turn away. If he watched that smooth pale body being revealed, he wouldn't be able to resist touching again, and taking him. The man was just all of his fantasies rolled into one. He left without another word, making his way downstairs. His steward was waiting in the drawing room to go over the monthly accounts. Just outside the door, he paused, a thought nagging him.

Niels had his clothes now. There was nothing keeping him from walking away from the house, before their agreement was up. The thought of Niels leaving bothered him greatly. He told himself it was because they'd had a deal, and Niels

Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

leaving earlier would be, in effect, cheating him. And he refused to believe there was any more to it.

He rang for his footman, giving him some chores to do upstairs, but telling him that his real task was to keep an eye on his houseguest. He wasn't to keep him from doing what he wanted, but he was to inform Richard if Niels left the house.

Satisfied, Richard went into the drawing room to greet his steward, and deal with business.

## Chapter Three

Niels stripped and slid between the covers. He'd never been in so comfortable a bed before, and he drifted off to sleep in a matter of minutes. When he awoke, he was disoriented for a moment, then he smiled as he remembered, cuddling into the thick feather pillow for a moment longer.

It was growing dark outside, however, and he knew dinner would be soon. He lit a candle next to the bed, and noticed that someone had brought in his new clothes and left them on the chair. He dressed himself, and decided to go in search of Richard.

When he slid out into the upstairs hallway, he noticed a footman lingering nearby. The man looked at him suspiciously, and Niels instantly knew that he'd been assigned to watch him. He frowned at that. Well, the only thing for it was to give the man the slip. He headed down the stairs at a brisk pace, and right out the front door. He quickly ducked around the hedges and the tall iron fence at the side of the house, and let himself back in to the side garden. He could hear the beginnings of commotion near the front door. He strolled around to the back, right up to the same glass doors of Richard's study. He could see the footman talking quickly, looking flustered, and Richard starting to appear less than pleased.

Richard had been nearly finished with his business when the footman entered, and when he did he knew exactly why. His heart sank as the man told him that Niels had seen him,



and then promptly disappeared. He knew he should have been angry that Niels had breached their agreement, but what he felt most was sad. He finished up quickly with his steward and then sat at his desk alone for a few moments, wondering just what to do. He felt empty.

Niels was watching through the window. He wondered if Richard had sent people after him. He'd expected him to go out looking himself, but perhaps that was just a foolish thought on his part. The longer he waited, the less funny the trick was going to be, so he leaned on the doorframe and knocked loudly, watching to see what Richard's reaction would be.

Richard looked up, startled at Niels' knock. That was the last place he'd expected someone, even Niels to be. He was sure the man was long gone, and his joy at seeing him again was almost instantly replaced by irritation.

He stood, walking over to the doors, and threw them open. "Forget something?" he asked mildly, trying not to give away how upset he'd been.

"No. Just proving a point. May I come in?" he asked mildly. He pushed past Richard and sat in one of the leather wing chairs near the fireplace. "I may be a thief, but if I agree to something I can be depended upon to see it through." He was still a little annoyed that Richard hadn't rushed right out to look for him. "Unless you'd rather I leave. You didn't seem particularly concerned about my absence." What the hell was he saying? Did he want to stay? His brow furrowed. He felt dangerously out of his depth.

Richard followed Niels over to the chairs, but continued standing, leaning against the chair opposite him. He crossed his arms and tried to stay neutral. "Is that what you intended? To have me rush out and search for you like a lost dog?" He was annoyed, and relieved.

"Not at all. Why should you? My intention was to show that you can assign any of your lackeys to keep an eye on me and it won't matter. You either have to trust my word or shackle me to the bed." He was feeling increasingly angry, and he wasn't completely sure why. "And for the record, I never actually left the grounds of your home, so I didn't break our agreement."

Suddenly Richard felt reprehensible for not trusting Niels. He hadn't given any indication that he might run off, after all, and he'd been nothing but polite and grateful while essentially being treated like a slave. Perhaps he should call the whole thing off, release Niels from the agreement and let him go. He was behaving far too much like the kind of people he despised. But another look at that mouth and that lean body, and he knew he couldn't. He would take every moment with Niels he could, because surely the man wouldn't be here if he wasn't compelled to.

"I'm sorry I didn't trust you," Richard said quietly, his anger draining away as quickly as it came. He walked back to his desk and seated himself behind it, pretending to look at papers.

Niels looked over at him. The man was an enigma. Clearly he was angry a moment ago, and now ... he wasn't. Or was he? He was annoyingly difficult to read, and Niels was

normally quite good at that. He stood slowly and behind the desk and leaned back next to Richard's chair. "Only a fool would trust a thief, and you're clearly no fool. Do you think dinner will be soon?"

Richard glanced at the clock on the wall, then back to his papers. "Dinner will be ready at seven. Approximately fifteen minutes from now. Is that all right with you?" His tone was completely neutral now, and he glanced up at Niels. For the first time he realized that he was wearing some of the new clothes. He reached out and ran a hand lightly down Niels' shirt front, and down his thigh. "They suit you," he said, looking into Niels' eyes.

Niels smiled softly. He was grateful for the clothes. They were fine without being ostentatious, and comfortable. "Thank you. Seven will be wonderful. Shall I leave you to your work?" he asked. Even the light touch made his body react. Richard simply affected him that way.

For a moment, all Richard wanted to do was pull Niels into his lap and kiss him thoroughly. He really was done with his work. And Niels was his to do with as he pleased. That thought sent a pang of guilt through him, though, and reminded him he was being sentimental. If there was one thing his mother had despised, it was sentimentality. She'd certainly drilled that into him while she was alive, and apparently now as well. He looked up at Niels and said, "I'm finished here. I'd like to go freshen up for dinner." He rested his hand on Niels' thigh, because he liked the feel of the man's lean muscled leg under the fine fabric.

Impulsively Niels leaned down and pressed his lips against Richard's. He lingered for a little while, his eyes drifting closed, until he pulled back. "Shall I wait here for you?" he asked. He wasn't sure what the etiquette of the situation was. He'd always imagined aristocrats sat around sipping sherry and smoking cigars before dinner.

"If you like," Richard said, a little surprised but not unhappy at the kiss. He nodded toward the sideboard. "There's all sorts of liqueurs in there if you'd like," he added, standing up. "I'll be right back." He left the room reluctantly.

Niels didn't have to be asked twice. When Richard disappeared through the door, he wandered over to inspect the contents of the sideboard. There was indeed an impressive collection of liquor. Of course, Niels had rarely tasted anything stronger than ale. He poured himself a glass of cognac. It looked expensive. It glittered a rich molasses color in the cut crystal glass. He took a sip and resumed his seat by the fire, and for a moment he almost felt like he belonged.

Exactly fifteen minutes later, Richard descended the stairs and walked back into the room to find Niels by the fire, his chestnut hair shining over the shoulders of his tailored suit. Richard himself had changed into a black linen shirt, tucked into snug black trousers, forgoing a coat. He smiled at Niels and said, "Famished again?"

Niels put his glass down and stood. He couldn't help the fact that his gaze roamed over Richard for one good long look. He was an impressive figure, and dressed all in black he was doubly so. "I'm always famished," he said. He followed

Richard into the dining room and took his seat. "Did your business go smoothly? I felt a little guilty sleeping the day away while you were hard at work."

Richard sat across from Niels, and indicated that dinner could begin. "It went well, just a load of things for my approval, a few decisions. Nothing too tiring." Niels was even more gorgeous in the candlelight. "I've had a few bottles brought up from the cellar. I trust you like red wine?" He watched as the wine was poured into two goblets.

"A regular connoisseur," he quipped. He held his glass up, suggesting a toast. "May I? To my host. Perhaps I accepted your invitation under duress, but I certainly can't say I haven't enjoyed myself." He grinned across the table at Richard.

Richard raised his glass, and a smile spread across his face. Niels' words made him feel good, but he didn't really want to examine that too closely. He nodded graciously and touched his glass to Niels'. "To my 'guest'," he answered. "I do want you to enjoy yourself. In many ways." He smirked just a little, anticipating the night ahead.

The meal was phenomenal. Niels had certainly never tasted anything so delicious. There were a number of dishes he didn't even recognize, although he was pleased to see a couple of Finnish delicacies, which he could only assume were in his honor. "Do you eat like this every night?" he asked, still a little awestruck.

Richard laughed. "No, not even close. The cook is beside herself with happiness, getting to prepare dishes like this." He'd mentioned Niels' homeland to the older woman and

she'd insisted on including a few things. "Usually I hardly eat much at all." They'd finished off one bottle of wine and had started on another. "Shall we retire to the drawing room to continue drinking?" He felt a burning urge to know more about Niels, and he intended to get some information out of him tonight.

"Oh, by all means. I can always be persuaded to drink free alcohol," he said, chuckling. He pushed his chair back and stood, following Richard. He hadn't actually been in the drawing room yet, although he knew it was normally the main room for entertaining guests. As such, it was resplendent. It was at least twice the size of Richard's bedroom, with a high ceiling, and windows twenty feet tall. Niels stopped in the middle of the room for a moment to look up at the complicated plaster work on the ceiling. The floors were covered nearly right up to the walls with thick Persian carpets, and several intimate seating areas, as well as a pianoforte, were arranged throughout the room. "This is cozy," he said.

"We can go elsewhere if you like," Richard offered. He knew the room was intimidating, but it was also one of the warmest rooms on the ground floor, and there was a small couch near the big hearth that he liked. He'd grabbed a bottle of port and two small glasses as he walked in, and set them on a table.

Niels smiled. "This is fine." He took a seat on the surprisingly comfortable sofa. "It's lovely, of course. Just like everything in this house. I'm just ... not used to all this." He

settled himself back, and waited for Richard to pour the sweet wine.

Nodding, Richard sat down, then leaned forward and kissed Niels gently. Then he pulled back and poured them each a glass full of the dark red liquid. "Why do they make port glasses so small?" he wondered out loud, handing one to Niels.

Niels laughed at that, and clinked his glass against Richard's. He took a deep sip of the wine. "They really are small glasses, aren't they? Is this one of those things to get you to drink it slowly?" he asked, slurring just a little.

"I'm not sure," answered Richard, sipping more slowly at his own. "But feel free to drink as much as you want. I'll carry you upstairs if necessary." He smiled and settled close to him. They stared at the fire in comfortable silence for a few moments, and finally Richard said, "How did you come to be here, Niels? In England?"

Niels turned to look into Richard's eyes, realizing suddenly that he was quite close. He wondered why Richard cared, but he didn't particularly mind telling him. He took another sip of wine. "My mother's sister was married to an Englishman. When I was about ten she took ill with a fever. My mother came here to take care of her, and she brought me with her, as there was no one else at home to look after me. A little while later, they both died. I was forbidden from the sick room, so I was spared." He shrugged a little. "Of course, there was no money to ship me back to Finland, even though my uncle wasn't happy about supporting a child that was no

blood relation to him. Eventually I ran away from home, when I was about twelve."

Richard listened raptly, wondering how Niels must have felt. "Is that how ... you came to be doing what you do? Stealing?" He hated to ask, but he was curious about everything. He'd grown up never wanting for money, but he knew personally that wealth alone didn't guarantee happiness. He'd often thought of running away as well.

"Well, I had to eat, you know," he said, smirking. "I became friends with a group of boys who lived on the street as well. One of them had stolen this posh little outfit off a clothesline, but I was the only one who could fit into it. They used to dress me up and leave me at Victoria Station. I would pretend I'd gotten separated from my parents until some old lady took pity on me and took me home to give me a good meal. The moment her back was turned I'd take everything I could grab and run off." He chuckled about it. All in all, he had fond memories of his reckless childhood. "When I didn't fit the suit anymore, they taught me how to pickpocket, and then eventually I graduated to full-fledged burglary."

"Lovely," Richard said. He tried to imagine Niels dressed up as a little boy. He must have been small for his age. He shook his head. "And you've never been caught?" He poured Niels another glass, and topped up his own.

Niels grinned at Richard. "Only twice. Last night, and about the second time I tried to pick someone's pocket when I was about fourteen. Do you remember?" he asked, tipping his head to one side with an evil smile. He took another sip of his port, watching Richard's face.



Richard frowned, confused by the turn of conversation. "What do you mean? I've never been pick-pocketed..." But then he remembered. It was probably eight years ago, he'd been on his way home for the holidays from university and in the bustling train station, he'd caught a little ragamuffin with his hand in his coat pocket. The child had wriggled free, then run off before he could do much more than yell. The brat hadn't gotten anything, after all. He'd assumed the child was no more than ten...

"That was you?" he finally said incredulously.

"Yes. That was me. I think you must be particularly sensitive to robbery," he said, laughing again. "No one else has ever had a clue. Of course, I wasn't as good at it then. I'll bet you'd never notice now." He gave Richard a cheeky wink.

Richard just stared at Niels. "Did you know this all along?" he asked, still amazed.

Niels felt a little funny about explaining. "I didn't realize it until I really saw you up close. Last night. And then it occurred to me that perhaps I was drawn to you because ... I remembered you. You scared the hell out of me the first time, by the way."

He smiled. "So you've been caught only twice, and I caught you both times? How very interesting." If Richard believed in it, he might have blamed fate.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread that around. I like to tell people I've never been caught. At least I've never been to prison, so that's almost the same thing." When Richard didn't pour him another glass, he helped himself, too inebriated to worry about standing on ceremony. When he leaned in, he

inadvertently put his hand on Richard's thigh to steady himself. He picked up the full glass and looked up at Richard, still listing a little close to him. "You probably think I'm no good at the whole burglary thing, but I can assure you I am," he slurred.

Richard's breath caught when Niels touched him. "I'm sure you are. But not with me," he answered, smirking. He knew it was just chance. But he sort of liked the fact that he'd been the only one to ever catch Niels. Just like he'd been the only one to ever fuck him.

The moment seemed to stretch out for a long time as he gazed at Richard's face. He felt drawn in, and he leaned in closer, pressing his lips against Richard's. He couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried. He put the glass down on the table without breaking the kiss and slid his arms around Richard's neck. There was something magnetic about the other man.

Richard moaned softly, kissing back and slipping his tongue into Niels' mouth. This was the first time the other man had really initiated anything. It felt incredible. Almost as if ... he really wanted this. He leaned back, pulling Niels on top of him. He was half drunk and every slow movement was full of promise and desire.

Niels was quite drunk, but not so drunk that he wasn't also extremely aroused. Everything felt sweeter, the soft heat of Richard's mouth, the strong hands on his back. He pushed Richard back until he was lying down on the sofa, with Niels sprawled on top of him, rocking his hips restlessly against him.

Richard was fully hard in seconds, arching up against Niels greedily. Niels' weight on top of him felt perfect, warm and hard and arousing. He slid his hands down, touching everything he could reach. Niels' body felt so good. He moaned into the kiss, almost breathless from it.

Niels broke the kiss and looked down into Richard's eyes, panting. "Should we go to bed?" he whispered. He was aching hard, too. He nuzzled against Richard's jaw. "Want you," he murmured.

Richard nodded, moaning at the lips on his sensitive skin. It was almost as if they were really lovers, like Niels was as eager for this as he was. Richard could almost fool himself into believing it, if only for a little while. He'd never felt this sort of slow, anticipatory passion before.

Slowly, Niels raised himself off of Richard and held out his hand, offering to help him up. The look in his eyes was smoldering. "Come along," he whispered. "Take me."

Taking Niels' hand, Richard stood slowly, eyes locked to the other man's. "I will," he promised. He pulled Niels into his arms and whispered, "One kiss to last me until we get upstairs." He dipped his head and captured Niels' soft lips once again.

Niels whimpered into Richard's mouth, and melted into his embrace. Standing was difficult enough. Being pulled forward only made him stumble. His arms slid around Richard's neck again, clinging to him.

Richard kissed him thoroughly, taking his time, ravishing his mouth deeply. Then he pulled back and said softly, "Now I

can make it upstairs." He slid his hand down to take Niels', and led him to his bedroom.

Niels was relieved when they reached the bedroom. He unbuttoned his vest. All he wanted was to be naked on the bed. He turned to Richard and started slowly peeling the new clothes off his body one at a time with a sultry smile.

Richard leaned against the bedframe, eyes glued to Niels' body. He loved to watch the other man; he was sleek and sexy and he ached to touch him. "You look even better out of the clothes than in them," he murmured.

When he was naked he walked slowly towards Richard. "Do you want me?" he asked. He pressed his palms against Richard's chest, smiling at him drunkenly.

Instead of answering, Richard smiled and took Niels' hand and placed it on his aching erection. "I want you this much," he whispered, pressing against Niels' hand.

Niels leaned in and kissed him again, one hand fumbling with the buttons of Richard's shirt, the other rubbing at the hard length of his cock through his trousers. "Want you, too," he whispered against Richard's lips. His fingers brushed against the skin of his chest as he exposed each new inch.

Richard moaned, reveling in the feeling of Niels' fingers on him. "Undress me..."

Niels pushed Richard's shirt off his shoulders and moved his hands down to his pants. He bent his head, pressing his mouth against Richard's neck, sucking gently at the firm flesh. He unbuttoned the trousers and pushed them down, freeing Richard's cock as the fabric slid to the floor.

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Richard kept his hands out of the way as Niels took his clothes off, but it wasn't easy. He loved to touch Niels. He knew it was possessive but he couldn't help it. He kicked away his trousers, and now that they were both naked he pulled Niels over to the bed.

Niels tumbled back onto the thick mattress, pulling Richard down beside him with a lazy smile. He rolled towards him and kissed him again, pressing the full length of his body up against Richard. He tangled his legs with Richard's. His lips traveled down Richard's neck again, over his collar bone and up the length of his throat.

Richard moaned, his hands roaming everywhere. He was aching hard but somehow it wasn't as urgent. They had all night, and he wanted to drive Niels insane with need before he took him. He pulled Niels on top of him and arched up, rubbing their erections together as he ran his hands down Niels' back.

Niels wriggled on top of Richard, craving the friction of their bodies. He breathed hotly against Richard's ear, tracing the tip of his tongue along the edge. "Want you so much. Want you to fuck me again," he murmured.

Richard gasped. Niels was asking for it, asking to be fucked ... it was better than he could have imagined. "You really want it?" he breathed, not too far gone to forget that Niels was here under duress.

Niels leaned back a little and looked into Richard's eyes. His expression was a little confused. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't," he whispered. It wasn't like he really had any reason to lie. All that was required of him was to agree to it. "Yes. I

really want you." The uncertainty in Richard's voice, his surprise, made Niels want to reassure him, and it did something to him that he couldn't quite identify.

Richard whimpered, and he leaned up to kiss him again. Niels' reassurance made him want him even more. He'd kissed more in the past day than he had his entire life. He was getting addicted to it. He kissed Niels, slowly rolling them over until he was on top. He wouldn't rush things tonight. He'd make sure that Niels enjoyed every moment.

Niels shifted beneath him, spreading his knees apart until he was cradling Richard's hips. He slid his fingers through Richard's hair and down, stroking the nape of his neck. He moaned quietly, and his hands drifted lower, kneading his shoulders firmly. He'd had just enough alcohol to slow the rushing of his blood and the desperate need in his body to this languid pace. He wasn't thinking about the fact that he was compelled to be there. At that moment, he wanted to be in Richard's bed, beneath him.

Slowly, Richard rubbed against Niels, kissing and touching him everywhere. Everything else faded into the background: their pasts, their positions in life, the reason Niels was even here. Nothing mattered but their bodies. Richard prepared Niels so slowly that he thought they would both go mad from waiting. Finally, Richard lay atop Niels, ready to enter him, panting from sheer need.

Niels wrapped his legs around Richard's waist, gasping for breath. "Please," he whispered. He couldn't remember a sexual encounter that came anywhere near this. He was sure he'd never been so aroused, so ready. The experiences he'd

had had been quick, fumbling, sometimes even sweet, but never this radiating, scalding heat.

Richard couldn't even speak right now, couldn't think of any words that would encompass the need he felt. So instead he pushed forward, entering Niels at long last. His mouth fell open from the absolute perfection of it, and he knew he'd never fit inside anyone this seamlessly. He thrust forward, entering inch by inch, small thrusts taking him closer to heaven.

Niels gasped and arched up. It was easier than the first time, and he felt that jolt of pure pleasure that robbed him of every last wit. His slim body was already trembling with the sensations assaulting him. He stared up at Richard's face, twisted in passion, and he knew he would never feel this with anyone else.

Slowly, Richard moved inside Niels. Steady, deep strokes that threatened to drive him insane. The slow pace let him keep some semblance of control. The pleasure was incredible, though, seemingly heightened by the anticipation. He never took his eyes from Niels', and the eye contact made it all the more intimate.

It seemed to go on forever. Each time Richard's cock slid along that particular spot, Niels gasped, and tensed almost imperceptibly. He found that tightening his body only increased the feeling, and he started doing it purposefully on each thrust. But he couldn't hold on much longer. His whimpers became more desperate, his eyes barely focused on Richard's face as he felt the climax start to overwhelm him.

"Oh ... I'm..." He clamped down hard around Richard's cock, choking back a scream.

His thrusts sped up just a bit, and as Niels' desperation increased, so did Richard's. When he felt him start to climax, Richard quickly reached down to stroke him. He wanted to make this as good as possible, to overwhelm him with sensation. He thrust faster, deeper, only a hairsbreadth from release himself.

Niels cried out Richard's name as his body bucked up involuntarily, meeting Richard's thrusts. He came hard, pulsing over Richard's hand, his fingers digging into Richard's shoulders sharply. His body was wracked with shudders for long moments as his cries slowly died down to moans.

As soon as Richard felt the other man start to come, he let go himself. He nearly growled with the wave of pleasure that crashed over him, and he forgot to breathe for long moments. He'd never felt anything this good, and he thought if it got any better he might die from it.

Niels had no idea how much time had passed, if he'd blacked out or just lost track, but he found himself staring up at Richard, still breathing deeply, but more slowly and evenly. It felt somewhat like the bed was holding him down. A slow smile tugged at the corner of his lips, though, and a quiet hum issued from his throat. "Good lord," he whispered.

Richard stretched out on the bed next to Niels, muscles trembling. He looked over at Niels, and said, a little more shakily than he liked, "I think I nearly died." He smiled, though, and there was no point in pretending that hadn't



been monumental. He had the urge to stay close, and he pressed his body against the other man.

Without forethought, without artifice, without shame, Niels turned towards Richard and curled around his body with arms and legs, seeking out his warmth. He rested his cheek on Richard's shoulder, his eyes drifting closed. He couldn't think of anything to say. He felt shaken.

Richard whimpered, arms wrapping around Niels. He held him like he'd never held another human being before. Like he'd fall apart if he didn't have that slender body as close as possible to him. He felt everything so intensely it frightened him. But he didn't let go.

Somehow, Richard's embrace seemed to set the world right again. Niels sighed softly, feeling a warm contentment settle in his body, the likes of which he'd never experienced. He didn't think about how unlike him it was to cling to someone like that, he just enjoyed it.

Nothing needed to be said, so Richard stayed silent. Niels was warm and soft in his arms, and he never wanted to let go of him. He moved just enough to pull the covers up over their rapidly cooling skin, and then moved as close as possible once again. His body felt sated and content, every inch of him suffused with wellbeing.

Eventually, Niels drifted off to sleep like that, cradled in Richard's arms. He slept through the night, unmoving, breath deep and even.

Richard took longer to fall asleep, but he didn't feel restless. He was soothed by Niels' even breathing, and he watched him sleep for a while. He'd never met anyone like

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Niels. He'd met people he'd lusted after, of course, but once he'd slaked his lust he'd lost interest. He'd had Niels at least three times in just over a day, and his need for him burned just as hotly. Just to look at him was to want him, and Richard suspected this kind of need wasn't going to fade. He hoped it would, but only after their time together was up. A twinge of regret ran through him. If they'd met under different circumstances then perhaps there would be hope of something more. He didn't quite know what more he wanted, and he was frightened to examine it too closely. He'd never wanted more than sex from any of his lovers. In fact, he'd never even used that term, unless it was to get someone into bed. But now ... he sighed. No matter how good the sex, Richard had no illusions about Niels staying around any longer than he had to. He'd better enjoy Niels while he could.

Richard drifted off to sleep, still holding Niels close. He slept deeply and dreamlessly for once.

## Chapter Four

The next morning, after they breakfasted, Richard excused himself to his office, and Niels used the time to walk about the gardens and enjoy the sunshine. It seemed like no time at all before a servant came to inform him that lunch was ready, and Lord Essex would be joining him.

After the meal, Niels leaned back from the table and stretched. "I was wondering if I could have a nap for a little while. All this eating is making me sluggish." He looked at Richard hopefully.

"Of course," Richard said immediately. He was a little tired himself, perhaps from the alcohol last night. He probably wouldn't sleep, though. He looked over at Niels, and suddenly made a decision. He was going to let him out of the rest of their agreement. He couldn't in good faith keep the other man here against his will any more. He was beginning to *like* Niels. It would only make it harder when he did leave. He stood up and said, "Shall we go upstairs?"

Niels was relieved when Richard indicated that he was going with him. If he hadn't, Niels intended to ask him to, anyway, but it was better this way. He smiled and pushed back his chair, making his way upstairs with Richard. He entered the bedroom and started stripping off his clothes, watching Richard out of the corner of his eye.

Richard tried not to watch Niels, to give him some privacy. But he couldn't help himself. Niels was his fantasy; a fantasy he could touch and caress. He wanted to, badly. But he held

himself back. He didn't remove his clothes, just his shoes. He sat on the edge of the bed.

Niels didn't understand why Richard wasn't getting undressed, unless he wanted Niels to undress him again. He turned to face him, standing before him naked. He stepped closer, and slid slowly to his knees, looking up at Richard. "You're not going to sleep in your clothes, are you?" he asked softly. He brought his hands up, starting to unbutton Richard's shirt.

Richard whimpered softly as Niels undressed him. "You don't have to do that," he whispered, covering Niels' hands with his own. "Anymore," he added, feeling wretched now, that he'd ever forced himself on Niels.

Niels frowned a little. "You don't want me to?" he asked, confused. Last night had been like a dream. He only wanted to make love and sleep in Richard's arms for a couple of hours.

Of course he wanted Niels to. He wanted Niels in every way. But ... "I mean, you don't have to have sex with me. I won't force you to, anymore." Saying the words was difficult. He wanted Niels so much. Even now he was completely aroused.

"You didn't force me last night," he said quietly, sliding his hands free of Richard's and continuing on his buttons. "You're not forcing me now." He kneeled up and wriggled his way between Richard's knees. He pressed his lips against the side of his neck. "But I'll stop if you want me to," he breathed.

Richard moaned, breath hitching. "I never want you to stop." He let his head fall back so Niels could get to his neck.

He traced his fingers over his smooth skin. He was lost. Perhaps he could have Niels one last time.

Niels' heart was thumping loudly in his chest. *I never want you to stop* ... Did he really say that? But never was a long time, and he knew this was just a temporary arrangement. He pulled Richard's shirt open, and stood up again, pushing him back on the bed to get to the buttons on his trousers. He smiled as he tugged the fabric off of his legs, then he climbed up onto the bed next to him. He leaned in close, as if he was going to kiss him again, but instead he stopped short, whispering against Richard's lips. "Fuck me. I want you to."

That was more than Richard could resist. He moaned and rolled, pinning Niels to the bed with his body. He pressed his rock hard cock against Niels' thigh, and looked down at him. "Want you so much," he panted, fumbling for the oil. This had none of the grace and anticipation of last night, but he ached for Niels just the same. The thought that this might very well be the last time he got to take Niels was heavy in Richard's mind, and made him almost desperate for it.

Niels whimpered, leaning up to kiss him deeply. Each time seemed better than the last. Last night was slow and sensual. This was hot and needy. He probed into Richard's mouth as if he would steal his breath away, shifting to spread his legs apart and offer himself.

Conscious thought was surrendering to lust now, and Richard gave himself over to it. He slicked his cock with a generous amount of oil, then pushed two fingers inside Niels. The way the other man opened to him was enough to make his cock pulse. He needed this.

Niels groaned and arched up when Richard's fingers penetrated him so abruptly. It almost hurt, but it was a feeling quite unlike pain. The other man's urgency only increased Niels' desire for him. "God ... yess..." he gasped. "Take me." His own cock was lying flat on his belly, hard and hot and aching.

No one had ever made Richard feel this way, so wholly undone. His grace and competence fled him, and he was nothing but a fumbling, needy teenager again. He knew he should prep Niels more, but they both needed it so very badly. He wanted that gorgeous body clamped down around his cock, and he withdrew his fingers shakily. He looked at Niels' pretty face as he pressed the head of his cock against the other man's entrance for a moment, then pushed in as slowly as he could manage. "Oh, Niels, so good," he moaned.

Niels bore down instinctively, trying to ease Richard's way, but he still felt stretched open until he thought he might break. Not that he was complaining. He felt thoroughly claimed, branded by Richard's hot flesh impaling him. He pulled his legs up, wrapping them around Richard's waist.

Richard panted as he started to thrust. This position was so intimate that Richard had never liked it much; but it had been his first instinct this time. He told himself it was because the other man was so lovely to look at. Whatever it was, Richard was lost, and he started to pound into Niels, gripping his slim hips for balance. "You feel perfect," he moaned, barely able to speak.

Niels moaned. He couldn't imagine how Richard was still able to produce coherent words when he could barely

summon a thought. Every flicker of sensation that jolted through his body was evident in his eyes as he looked at Richard. When his body started to adjust, he tightened himself around Richard again, whimpering.

Richard prided himself on his control, but he had none when it came to Niels. He was so close already. He leaned forward, supporting himself on his hands, so that he could thrust deeper and faster. He could also kiss Niels in this position, and he did.

Niels moaned loudly into Richard's mouth, teetering on the brink of climax. His body started to tremble and he held on to Richard for some sort of support, whimpering over and over into the kiss.

Richard kept kissing Niels, because if his mouth wasn't occupied he was afraid he might say something in the heat of passion. Something he shouldn't. He kept driving into Niels relentlessly, driving them both higher, with all the strength he possessed.

Finally, Niels couldn't hold back another moment. His body was wracked with tremors as he found his release, tightening uncontrollably. He felt light-headed and weak, suddenly, still clinging to the man on top of him like a lifeline.

Niels tightened around him like a vise, and Richard cried out as he broke the kiss. He followed Niels into release. He thought he might black out from the intense pleasure as he pulsed deep inside the other man. He found himself staring at Niels, entranced, as his slim body shuddered with the aftereffects.

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Niels felt overwhelmed with emotions that he could barely even put a name to. In this bed they were equals. In this bed there was no prince and pauper, no lord and thief. There was only Richard and Niels and the beautiful things they did to bring each other to heights Niels had never known before.

Niels was preternaturally beautiful, so much so that Richard could barely stand to look at him. He rolled off of him, lying next to him carefully, and gave in to the urge to pull him close.

Niels turned into the embrace, slumping against Richard's body, wrapping his arm around him. "Bloody hell," he whispered. He never wanted to move again. He nuzzled into Richard's neck. "Thank you," he whispered.

"No, thank you," Richard sighed, running his hands down Niels' back. He'd never felt more contented, and that scared him. Niels would be gone soon, and he'd be alone. He couldn't have feelings for this man who'd tried to rob him.

"Oh, you're more than welcome," he purred. "Anytime." He closed his eyes, feeling sleepiness start to overtake him.

Anytime. Richard wished that was true. At that moment, he knew he would be satisfied with this beautiful man forever. If he could just have him in his bed every night, but that was a foolish thought. Niels would be gone soon, and perhaps it would be better if he left as soon as possible. Before he got even more attached to something he couldn't have. His eyes drifted closed, awash in the afterglow. When they woke from their nap, it would be over. He'd tell Niels he could go. And he'd be alone again.



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Niels cuddled closer and soon dozed off. Sleeping seemed much easier with Richard. It wasn't that he'd ever lacked for a warm body to sleep next to, but in Richard's arms, it was different.

\* \* \* \*

It was only a few hours later when Richard stirred. He almost never slept during the day, but with their exertions he was getting used to it. He came fully awake, and the good feeling faded. It was over. Niels would be gone soon. There would be no more need for naps.

Niels awoke when he felt Richard move and he stretched like a cat before looking at him with a sleepy smile. "Have I slept the whole day away?" he asked groggily. He felt lazy and decadent and wonderful yet again.

Richard smiled down at Niels, brushing an errant lock of hair out of his face. He liked waking next to Niels. But it wasn't fair. "You can sleep all you like," he whispered, knowing it was time. His smile faltered.

Niels' brows drew together. "Everything all right?" he asked, sensing that Richard's mood wasn't particularly happy. He reached up and brushed his fingers over Richard's jaw. "What is it?"

Richard put his hand over Niels', softly. "Niels, I..." He didn't want to do this. But he couldn't keep the other man here. He wasn't that cruel. "How much time do you have left, here?"

"Until around midnight tomorrow night," he said quietly. He wondered what Richard was getting at. Surely he knew precisely how long Niels had left.

Richard thought of all those glorious hours he could have left, availing himself of the pleasures of Niels' body. But he just couldn't do it. "No," he said finally. "I'm not going to hold you to it."

"What? Why not?" he blurted out. Then he stopped himself. Maybe Richard was tired of him. Maybe he wanted him to leave. He felt completely crushed. Niels was under the impression that it seemed like Richard perhaps valued him as slightly more than just an attractive body to fuck. "Do you want me to go?" he asked more quietly.

Richard's chest ached. He wanted to ask Niels to stay. All the more reason to end this now. Before it began to hurt more. "It's up to you," he whispered. "I won't report you. You can have the clothes. You can take what you want." He wanted to give Niels more, but then he would just seem pathetic. Niels was only here because he'd extorted his company.

"Oh." For a long moment he didn't say anything else, or move. He just stared into Richard's eyes, waiting for the situation to sink in. Richard was asking him to leave. He felt cold all over, and eventually he pulled away. "I guess I'll get out of your way, then." He ran his hands through his hair, and sat up, slipping out from under the covers.

It was true then. Niels couldn't wait to get away from him. Richard forced his emotions down. He deserved no better, for forcing himself on the other man. He couldn't think of a thing

to say, though, that didn't involve pleading with Niels to stay. So he didn't say a word.

Niels got dressed silently. He wasn't sure what to say, either. He couldn't look at Richard or he was sure he'd beg to stay. "Thank you for everything you've done for me, I mean," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I broke into your home. Well no, I'm not actually sorry, but it seemed like the right thing to say." He sat on a chair by the bed to pull on his boots.

"I would say I hope you'd change your ways, but..." Richard trailed off. He just wanted Niels to stay. Forever. What was wrong with him? "Good luck," he added. He knew he'd never see Niels again. He felt completely empty inside.

As usual, Niels managed a charming smile even though he felt ill inside. "Not very much chance of that, but I appreciate the sentiment." He gave Richard a wink as he stood, gathering up the other clothes. It was killing him to pretend that everything was fine. "I hope you had a good time, too," he said softly, his voice faltering. "See you around." With that he bit his lip and headed for the door, not looking back.

"I did," Richard said softly, but Niels was well out of earshot. A good time. That was all it was. He had to believe that, or he wouldn't be able to go on.

He sat there on the side of the bed, unmoving, for how long he didn't know. On the bed where they'd lay together, and where Richard had felt the most incredible passion and pleasure of his entire life. Niels was gone. The other man hadn't wasted any time clearing out when given a chance, had he? It was all for the best, then.

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So why did he feel like part of his body had been ripped out?

\* \* \* \*

Niels felt a little disoriented as he left the house. He lingered on the walkway, glancing back at it. Now he had to go home. He'd been dismissed, and almost right after some of the best sex he'd ever had in his life. Maybe it wasn't as good for Richard. Maybe ... well, there was no point in crying over spilt milk. Obviously it wasn't that good if he didn't want him to even stay for the full three days.

He started to wander back down the street, back towards the tiny room he called home. The sun was shining and there was a gentle breeze, but it brought him no pleasure. His mind drifted aimlessly as he went, not really paying much attention to his steps. Everything was different now. His entire life had been turned upside down in a day and a half.

With each step farther from Richard he felt sadder. With a heavy heart, he reached the pub just as dusk was falling. He nodded to the publican as he passed through the front of the building. The long bar was already crowded with patrons.

He slipped through the back, to his room, and laid out his new clothes on the narrow bed. They were the only evidence that he hadn't imagined the entire thing. He folded the clothes lovingly and put them in a drawer in the rickety dresser, then flopped back on his hard, creaky bed.

He should have asked to stay.

## Chapter Five

For days, Richard didn't leave the house. He told himself it was because he had too much work to catch up on, that he'd neglected while he'd been distracted by Niels. But the truth was, he really just didn't want to deal with anyone. His staff steered a wide berth around him, sensitive to their lord's moods, and he ate too little and drank far too much. One morning, when he'd been up the entire night previous, he staggered out into the garden to watch the sun rise. But now even that held no comfort for him. It only reminded him of Niels, and how much of a fool he was to confuse lust with something deeper.

There was no doubt that Niels had enjoyed the sex at least. Richard could take comfort in that, that he wasn't truly a rapist. But somewhere along the line he'd started to care for Niels. There was no other explanation for the way he felt right now. If it was just sex, he could go out and find a dozen willing bodies right now.

But he only wanted one.

\* \* \* \*

Niels didn't have the money to get good and drunk as he might have liked. His landlord bought him a few pints, but not really enough to blot out the thoughts that were his constant companion now. Thoughts of the elegant gentleman who had shown him things he'd never imagined, things he could never forget now.

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*by Jade Falconer*

After a couple of days, he stopped hiding in his room. The little money he had wasn't going to be enough for long, and it was high time he got back to work. He didn't have the heart to wander back up to that neighborhood, yet, so he stuck to pick-pocketing in some of the more crowded areas in town. He made enough to feed himself, and enough to pay his room and board.

And enough to buy the newspaper every day. He became obsessed with scanning the society pages, looking for any mention of Richard. There was nothing, short of a veiled reference to a lord matching his description being unusually absent from the regular activities around town. He couldn't even run into him if he tried, apparently, as Richard was not going out. It occurred to Niels that he might be with someone else. It was sudden, but then it was probably just sex, anyway. Even so, it made his heart ache, and he wondered if the mystery person was more to Richard's liking.

\* \* \* \*

With a large staff and plenty of money, there was no real reason to go out. Richard knew he could stay in his mansion for the rest of his life, a complete recluse, the subject of all sorts of speculating gossip. It was tempting. It was also ironic, because he could well remember the years when he wanted nothing more than to spend every possible moment away from this house. That was when his mother was still alive, and it was partly the need to avoid her that had driven him to become what his reputation would have him be: a regular at any party, a raiser of various types of hell, a

dashing seducer, a very well-bred drunkard. What he'd really been doing was escaping his life, and the oppressive guilt and shame his mother tried to heap upon him at every opportunity.

But his mother had been gone many years, and he'd finally managed to exorcise her malevolent presence enough that he was comfortable here. So comfortable, in fact, that he didn't want to face the world any more. It was as if his short time with Niels had served to point out everything he was missing in his life. Passion, exuberance, and love. He'd never believed in it. And he refused to now. He pushed the thought out of his mind and had another drink.

He was sitting in the drawing room in front of the fire one evening, in the same place that he and Niels had gotten drunk and kissed. He was unshaven but his clothes were perfectly presentable. He knew he was wallowing, and he couldn't stop himself.

His butler chose that moment to shuffle in, clearly reluctant to disturb his master. "Excuse me, sir, but there's someone to see you."

Richard looked up sharply. "I said I wanted to see no one," he rasped.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the gentleman insisted you'd like to see him. It's Lord Fortesque, sir."

Richard straightened, smiling despite himself. Julian was one of his oldest friends from school, and he hadn't seen him in ages. "All right, then, show him in. If he hasn't already snuck in."

"Essex, what the hell are you doing here? I didn't believe the rumors that you refused to leave your house," Julian said, striding across the room. He was tall and rangy, the same age as Richard but with a perpetually boyish air. His dark hair was always too long and fell into his eyes; eyes that were dark and full of mischief. He took a seat across from Richard. "You look bloody awful, mate. Have you got a brandy for an old friend?"

Richard's grin widened. Julian had been his first roommate, and they'd got along instantly. The other man never took anything seriously, and never failed to cheer Richard up. "Piss off, Jules. Your mummy cut you off and you can't afford your own?" But he was rising, going to fetch another bottle and a glass from the sideboard. He brought them back and poured Julian a tumbler full.

"I'm here on a mission of mercy. The least you could do is slake my thirst, old man." He accepted the drink and relaxed back against the cushions. "I've been set upon by your admirers at every bloody turn wanting to know where you've been for the last week. I'm getting rather weary of it." He sighed dramatically and took a sip of his drink.

Richard snorted, staring down into his own drink, as if its amber depths could give him an answer. "You always were given to exaggeration," he said. "I seriously doubt if anyone at all missed me." The only person he wanted to miss him no doubt had already forgotten all about him. And he certainly wasn't about to explain his absence from the social circles. Even to him, it sounded depraved now. Blackmailing a pretty



young man into becoming his sex slave in turn for not sending him to prison. A new low even for him.

"You think I'm joking? Your absence was even mentioned in the *Times*. Didn't you see it? Apparently, Lady Babcock was extremely put out at your lack of appearance at her soiree on Sunday night. Where have you been, anyway?" he asked, taking another sip. "Been a little worried, myself, actually."

Richard raised an eyebrow. "You know I don't read that rag," he commented mildly. He hoped Julian wouldn't press the issue of where he'd been. His old friend didn't know of many of Richard's predilections. He refilled Julian's glass, hoping the subject would be changed.

"Come to the club with me. You look like you could use some fresh stale air. Some pomposity, some gambling, some cigars, and plenty of hard liquor would do you good."

Richard suppressed a groan. He should have known Julian was going to try to drag him out. "I'd be horrible company," he demurred. "Plus, I'd have to shave." He rubbed at several days' growth of stubble.

Julian scowled at him. "You really have turned into an old homebody, haven't you? Well, then I'm inviting myself for the evening. I hope you don't mind. We can skip the pomposity and just have the cigars and the drinking and gambling. I thought at the very least I'd find you here with some rare beauty that you'd charmed into throwing away her virtue."

Richard almost choked on his cognac then. He had indeed charmed a beauty. But not quite as Julian was assuming. He sighed. Julian was not to be put off, clearly. "All right. You win. Give me twenty minutes to make myself presentable,

and we'll go out." He thought if they went out, chances were that he could distract Julian from asking too many questions.

Julian grinned. "There's a good lad. I'll just help myself to your reserves until then." He poured himself another glass.

Richard rolled his eyes and stood. "I'll have to hurry, else I'll have no brandy left," he said, and went upstairs. He shaved quickly, and dressed.

He finally came downstairs, dressed all in black. He did feel slightly better already for being dragged out of the doldrums, but he'd never admit that to Julian. "Shall we?" he grinned, walking back in to find Julian finishing off a crystal decanter.

"We'd better go while I can still walk, mate." He'd already ordered a carriage and it was waiting out front to take them to their exclusive gentleman's club.

Richard and Julian climbed into the carriage, and Richard glanced out at the streets as they passed. Niels was out there somewhere. Perhaps robbing someone, perhaps sleeping with them. Both thoughts gave him pain. He hoped he'd get over this little obsession soon. He'd have to make an effort to raise even more hell than usual, just to convince everyone that he was fine.

They arrived within half an hour, making their way into the elegant home that had been converted into a club. It was a purely male space, with dark paneled walls and polished marble. The room to their right off the foyer contained several intimate seating areas of cozy leather wing chairs, every wall covered with reference books or fine artwork. To the left was a room filled with tables covered with red felt for cards. Up the stairs were private rooms for smaller parties, as well as a

number of bedrooms for the use of members who found themselves in need of a place to rest away from home.

"Care for a game, mate?" Julian asked, shoving his hands down in his coat pockets. "I see Jacob in there, and a few others. Shall I see if they'll deal us in?"

Richard hid a sigh as he looked around. He'd spent many an hour in this place, winning and losing money, and drinking hard. It didn't seem the same any more. "Why not?" he said. He could lose himself for an hour or two in gambling. They walked in the room, and all heads turned to look at the newcomers.

Almost immediately, a tall man with dark hair and an intense look in his eyes came over to the two of them. "Richard. I see the rumors of your demise are indeed exaggerated. Good to see you again."

"Jacob," nodded Richard. "You're looking well." He'd known Jacob almost as long as he had known Julian, and he considered the man a friend, but not the same as Julian. Jacob always put Richard a little on the defensive, as if he had to be careful of everything he did.

"Of course, I always do," the taller man smirked, patting Richard on the back. "You, on the other hand, look like hell. You must have been having far too good a time while you've been absent." He glanced at Richard's companion. "Hello, Julian."

"Jacob," Julian said, nodding. "It's fallen on me to rehabilitate our fine friend here from his frightening turn towards domesticity. Can you clear us a space at your table?" An attendant came over with Julian's usual drink on a tray.

"Lord Essex?" he said deferentially. "May I get you something?"

Richard ordered a whisky as Jacob said, "Consider it done. Even if I have to evict a couple of the players. You two have more money to lose." He led them over to the table and supervised as they got set up to play.

Richard tried his best to concentrate on the game being played. He could sense Julian watching him like a hawk. He knew his friend could tell something was wrong with him; they'd known each other too long. The best thing was to hope Julian very drunk, and put him off his questions.

Jacob was also watching him, he knew, and that made him more nervous. Unfortunately, they knew a little too much about one another's secrets for Richard to be comfortable. He and Jacob shared a common interest, one that Julian had no clue about. They both preferred the company of men, though Jacob had long ago married just for propriety's sake, and to produce an heir. Richard had resisted so far, unwilling to subject himself to such a loveless union. He lived the life of a playboy, though, and so far hadn't raised too many eyebrows. He was discreet.

Julian spoke up. "So, Jacob! Have you heard any news of this thief who seems to be making his way into some of the finest houses undetected? My aunt is in fear for her life, and attempts to persuade me to take up residence at her house for the sake of protection." At that he snorted a little, smirking as he took another sip. "As if I could offer any."

Richard suddenly became interested in the conversation. He wondered if they could possibly be referring to Niels. He didn't say a word, though, just listened intently for news.

"Ah, yes, I've heard of him," agreed Jacob. "He slips in and out, has excellent taste. He's hit at least four houses in the past week." Jacob threw back his drink and signaled for another. "I'd like for him to try my manor. It will be the last house he robs, I can guarantee that."

Julian chuckled good-naturedly, used to Jacob's hubris. "Well, I'm sure Norris and Markham thought the same thing, and they never heard or saw hide nor hair of him." With that, he threw down a winning hand for once, and collected the sizeable pile of chips in the center of the table with a grin.

Richard smiled to himself, but he didn't trust his voice. He was strangely proud of Niels. At least he was robbing from people who had more than enough money to spare.

"Norris and Markham are fools," snorted Jacob, clearly annoyed at losing the hand. "Bleeding hearts who'd hire anyone off the street. Their own staff probably let the thief in."

Julian turned to Richard. "You've been awfully silent about the subject, Essex. What do you think of this stealthy personage divesting us of our spare change and antique picture frames?" he asked.

Richard shrugged, affecting indifference. "I suspect that if I were to be robbed, I would have a strong opinion on the subject," he said. "As I haven't been, I cannot say. Obviously, I would hope to be spared." He hoped that answer would satisfy Julian.

Julian laughed out loud. "Well, that's a pearl of wisdom if ever I've heard one." He raised his glass, patting Richard on the back. "Here's to being spared." He gave Jacob another smirk, and a silent salute. But then he leaned close to Richard, speaking in his ear. "Shall we call it a night, friend? Before we stumble into the gutter on the journey homeward?"

Richard drained his glass. "Maybe that's a good idea at that," he agreed, putting the glass down a bit unsteadily. He stood up, and fancied he could feel Jacob's eyes on him before he spoke.

"The night is young, gentlemen. Surely you're not leaving yet." Somehow, Jacob's voice always sounded like he was insinuating something with the most banal of statements. Or perhaps it was just Richard's guilty conscience.

"You'll have to be the one to uphold the banner of excess for us tonight, Jacob. We two old men have overindulged enough for the moment. Tomorrow night, perhaps." He gave him a wink as he put his hand fraternally on Richard's shoulder, steering him out.

The carriage was readied, and soon they were on their way back again. "Well, I feel better. How about you?" he asked as they pulled up to Richard's palatial house.

"I feel completely drunk, and that's all I feel," Richard lied. Even though he could barely feel his toes, he still couldn't stop thinking of Niels. "You're coming in for a nightcap?" he asked, nearly stumbling as he got out of the carriage.

"Of course. Although if I pass out, I pray you'll have your excellent servants carry me to a spare room, rather than the street." Julian followed him inside, right into the study. He

collapsed on the settee in front of the fire. "I think Jacob drinks much slower than we do, tricky bugger," he commented.

Richard slumped in a nearby chair, completely forgetting to get another drink. "Jacob never gets drunk," he stated. "And of course, you can stay any time. As long as you promise not to be sick on the Turkish rugs."

"I've given up vomiting for Lent," he quipped. "You really should tell me what's wrong, you know. If you can't tell me, whom can you tell? You know I would never betray a confidence." He loosened his tie, already planning on staying the night.

Richard looked over at Julian, wishing he really could confide in his friend. He'd never really had a confidante, though, so he was hardly used to it. And as close as the two men were, Julian would never guess that Richard wasn't as "normal" as he was. He doubted their friendship would survive the news that Richard was pining after a man. "Nothing's wrong, mate."

Julian snorted loudly. "And I'm the bloody Queen of England. Look, either tell me the truth or tell me it's none of my business. But you're acting like a lovesick boy, fresh from his first heartbreak. Did some lovely lady make off with your heart last week?" he asked.

Richard winced. It was too close to the truth, and he was in no shape to censor his reactions. Besides, what would it hurt to pretend? To let Julian assume the person haunting him was a woman? The other man clearly wasn't going to let

up until he got confirmation. "Something like that," he finally admitted, looking into the fire.

Julian was taken aback. "Oh my. I didn't really expect you to say that. I didn't think I'd live to see the day, actually. Anyone I know? No, don't answer that." He leaned forward and reached the decanter and the glasses on a side table, pouring one for each of them. "I take it the lady doesn't return the feelings? Does she even know?"

Richard laughed bitterly. "Definitely no one you know. And no to the other two questions." It was a bit of a relief to talk about it, actually. Even if he wasn't really being honest. He sipped at his drink, a much better whisky than he'd had at the club.

"So why didn't you tell her?" he asked, tossing back his drink.

Richard cursed himself for the lie, but it was all he could do, "It wouldn't work. It's over." He knew it sounded weak, but then again they'd never discussed this sort of thing before.

"It doesn't look over, mate. Not even close. What is it? Is she a servant? A tavern keeper's daughter? You're not the type to bow to propriety, Richard. If you want her, why don't you do something about it? Your mother's long dead. Who is there to tell you that you can't?" He leaned towards him, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You don't understand. If it were just that ... but she doesn't want me." It was so difficult to say it; not that it hurt his masculine pride. It hurt more deeply than that, and the



simple act of discussing it made Richard suspect he really had fallen in love with Niels. "She's gone. Forever."

Julian frowned. "How do you know she doesn't if you never told her how you feel? Honestly, what woman could resist you? I can just imagine how it all went, you stubborn bastard." He shook his head. "Doctor Julian prescribes a good night's rest, a few nights on the town to improve your mood, and then having a word with the lady in question. I doubt very highly that things are as bleak as you think they are."

Richard doubted very highly that Julian had a bloody clue about how bad things were. But he kept the words inside him, and said, "The rest part sounds rather good at the moment. Shall I have the butler show you to your room or can you stagger there yourself?" Julian would surely have forgotten about all of it by morning.

"I'll let you off the hook for the moment, but don't think I'm giving up." He pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. "Sleep well, friend. Don't give up hope." And then he ambled out of the room and up the stairs to his usual room.

Richard sat and stared at the hypnotizing flames for a while after Julian had left. If only it really was that easy. Find Niels, tell him how he felt. Right. And watch the man laugh in his face.

Sighing, he stood up a bit unsteadily and made his way to his bedroom. The huge bed mocked him with its emptiness, and he didn't even bother to undress. He just kicked off his shoes and collapsed on the bed. He squeezed his eyes shut as he tried not to think of the time they'd spent in this bed, the cries of passion Niels had made as Richard took him. He tried

Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

to push Niels' pretty face out of his mind. Niels was gone, and he needed to get over him.

Eventually he fell asleep on top of the covers, and he dreamed of Niels.

## Chapter Six

Niels kept himself busy, returning to his life of crime, but selectively. Robbing the very rich was lucrative enough that he could afford to be careful.

When he noticed a mention of Richard in the *Times* it made his heart race. Richard had been seen at his club, losing a tidy sum, and there were rumors that he might be hosting a relative's coming out party. They were just rumors. Still, it got him thinking.

\* \* \* \*

"Felicity. Calm down. Everything will be just fine." Richard's sister-in-law was beside herself, pacing up and down in the drawing room. Richard sat behind his desk, watching her. It had been weeks since he'd seen Niels, and it was almost impossible for him to get through an afternoon without thinking of him multiple times.

"But ... but we haven't even begun on the flower arrangements, and they have to match the dress, and...." She looked up at Richard, and managed a rueful smile. "Have I mentioned lately how much I appreciate this, Richard? Ann's been over the moon about it since your letter arrived."

Richard smiled genuinely. His brother Samuel had died in a hunting accident, just after his daughter, Richard's niece, had been born. He'd left them well-set for money, but his widow steadfastly refused to remarry. So Richard had become a

surrogate father of sorts to the little girl, visiting as often as time allowed. Now she was of an age for her debut, and as their home was far out of town, he'd offered to host the party here. Everyone who was anyone would be there. It would be the talk of the social circuit. "It's the least I can do."

"Hardly. It's excessively generous. Her debut will be a success on the weight of the venue alone." She smiled kindly at him. "I know that Samuel would be so proud of you," she said, choking up. She pulled a small square of lace from the cuff of her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes.

Richard's eyes widened. He got up and hastened to Felicity's side. He had absolutely no idea what to do with a crying woman. He held out a handkerchief, and said, "Samuel would be proud of you, for being so strong all these years," he offered.

She chuckled a little, although she was sniffing. "Richard, you are such a bachelor. I'm not going to collapse, dear. I'm fine. Just when I think of how much this all would have meant to him. The way you look after his only child..." She sighed, clearly trying to control her emotions for Richard's benefit. "Well, I should let you get back to work. There's so much to be done, and you shouldn't have to listen to an old woman's blubbering." She gave him a watery smile.

\* \* \* \*

The time seemed to fly, and suddenly it was time for the party. Everything had been planned down to the last detail, and still Felicity fussed. Richard could understand, though. Ann was her only daughter. They were staying over, in the

unused east wing. Richard found he quite liked having people in the house. It had become oppressively empty lately.

At this point, there was little for Richard to do but greet the guests and their parents. The staff was taking care of everything, and he was able to fade into the background and watch. Most all the guests had arrived by now. They were just awaiting a few stragglers.

\* \* \* \*

To look at him, one never would have guessed, but Niels was so nervous he felt ill. He didn't even know why he was doing it. It would serve him right if Richard called the police on him. But Niels just had to see him again, and this was a golden opportunity. The only social event he had a chance in hell of being admitted to.

He'd added to his wardrobe somewhat with the funds from his recent activities. He had a fancy silk cravat and top hat, and his long hair was tied neatly back. Mary had trimmed and buffed his fingernails so he looked like a proper dandy. Every detail was perfect. He could only guess if he really looked the part.

He made his way up the front steps, and came face to face with one of the footmen that he didn't know at the door. He had his story all ready. "Oh dear, are you having a party? My profuse apologies. I was hoping to catch Lord Essex, but perhaps I've come at a bad time. I'd no idea ... but ... still, perhaps you could just tell him that his business associate from Finland is here..." The speech was delivered with far more confidence than he felt.

The man looked slightly confused, but he waved him in, telling Niels to see the butler because he couldn't leave his post.

Richard was hovering in the hall, just about to flee to the kitchen because there were far too many people about. He didn't regret hosting the party, but he hoped he could just sort of disappear for most of it. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone familiar. He turned toward the front door.

Before Niels even reached the butler, he saw him. Even in the thick crowd milling around to get into the ballroom, there was no overlooking Richard. For a moment, he felt butterflies in his stomach and he thought about bolting, but then their eyes locked, and his heart lurched in his chest. The other man was walking towards him, and Niels took off his hat deferentially. "My lord, it's a pleasure to see you again. I was just in town on business and stopped to pay my respects, but I seem to have come at an awkward time. Please forgive my intrusion." He played up the accent for the benefit of anyone listening.

Richard stopped a few feet from Niels. He waved the butler aside, and his upbringing kicked in. "It's no trouble, really. You're quite welcome to come in and join the party," he said smoothly, but inside he was a mess. He wondered what the hell the other man was doing here. All he wanted to do was push Niels against the wall and kiss that full mouth.

Niels smiled. That was precisely what he'd been hoping for. "You're really far too kind, my lord. Perhaps I might have a moment alone, though? But if you are occupied with your

guests, I quite understand." He hoped he wasn't imagining it, but he was sure there was something between them still. Something in the way Richard was looking at him gave him reason to hope.

"Of course," Richard said, hoping he didn't sound too eager. He glanced around; things seemed well in hand, and he had no reason not to go for a few moments. "I can spare a bit of time. Would you like to come to my office?" He couldn't take his eyes off Niels; the man looked so good. Better than in his dreams, or his memories. He'd thought the ache had subsided, but it returned full force when he saw Niels.

"Please," he said, bowing slightly. He followed Richard as if he had no idea where his office was, although of course he knew the room quite intimately. He'd practiced what he was going to say to get inside so many times, but what he would say to Richard when they were alone was still a mystery. They passed through the door. He heard it shut, heard the latch click into place. The sounds of the party beyond were instantly muffled. "I ... Thank you for not tossing me back into the street," he began, watching Richard for his reaction.

Richard walked slowly over to his desk, leaning back against it. "You look like you could fit in here nicely," he commented. "What can I do for you?" he said, his voice soft. He'd thought he was over Niels. But one look and he knew he wasn't.

"I was hoping, perhaps, you could just go along with the whole 'business associate from Finland' story, and introduce me to a few of your friends." He arched an eyebrow in question, tilting his head a little. "Nothing too elaborate." He

strolled over to the desk, although not too close to Richard, still holding his hat in his hand.

Of course. Niels wouldn't be here for anything but business. Richard still felt too warm, though, as Niels got closer. He kept telling himself that Niels wasn't here for sex. But his body wasn't listening. "Why do you want to be introduced?" he asked softly. "So you can rob them as well?"

Niels' eyes widened. "What? No, that's not why." He frowned a little. "I only wanted to see what it was like. To be a part of all of this. Just for a little while." To feel like your equal, he added silently. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come." He started slowly towards the door. Any hopes that he might have been harboring that Richard didn't look down at him for being a thief were effectively squashed.

Richard's mouth dropped open. That wasn't what he'd been expecting. Niels looked hurt. "Wait," he blurted, starting to lose what little control he had. "I didn't say no." He crossed his arms to keep from reaching out to the other man.

Niels stopped and turned back to face him, looking at him a little skeptically. "So you'll do it? You'll introduce me as someone you know?" he asked carefully.

Niels looked so sexy in his fine clothes, and Richard felt breathless. He wanted to agree to anything just to get Niels to stay a little longer. But then he realized how very pathetic he was. "I might," he said, trying to sound neutral. "But what do I get out of it?" he asked, the practical part of him winning out for the moment.

Niels' lips twitched a little at that question, and he cocked his head to one side. "What do you want?" he asked, smiling



innocently. Again his heartbeat thudded in his chest. He knew what he hoped Richard wanted, but he couldn't get his hopes up. If Richard had still wanted him he wouldn't have made him leave before.

Richard couldn't stop himself if he'd wanted to. Niels had given him the opening, and he was going to take it. He wanted Niels, more than anything he'd ever wanted. And if he could only have another short period of sex with him, so be it. He'd worry about the consequences later. So he threw caution to the wind, and said, "You. In my bed."

"Is that all?" he asked with a smile. "I think that could be arranged, my lord." His voice was breathy and he hoped he didn't sound too eager. He took another step towards him. "I thought you were tired of me."

"Not likely," Richard said, his own voice deeper than usual. "I thought you wanted to leave. That you were tired of being kept here against your will." He was holding back, but just barely.

"Clearly a breakdown in communication," Niels whispered. "Your charming attack of conscience and my uncharacteristic desire not to overstay my welcome." Richard still wanted him, and they were going to be together again. He was quickly becoming aroused at the prospect, as he moved as gracefully as a cat until he was mere inches in front of the other man.

"You can stay as long as you like," Richard breathed, longing to get his hands all over Niels. "But I want to make it clear. You don't have to sleep with me. I want you to want to." He was aching now, but for a different reason.

"Except for the first time, I always have." The first time had been a little strange, but only because it was nothing he was used to. Once Richard had introduced him to a new world, he'd never once felt forced. "And I do now," he added.

Richard moaned softly. It was too good to be true. Niels wanted him. Had come back here of his own free will. "Right now?" he whispered, reaching out slowly to run one finger down the side of Niels' face.

Niels drew in a sharp breath. "You're the one in the middle of a party," he whispered. "But I'm sure we could be ... quick." He bit his lip, staring at him questioningly. "And then take our time later?"

Richard trailed his finger lower, down Niels' neck, finally hooking it into the man's cravat and using it to pull him closer. His cock throbbed, trapped in his trousers. He put his free hand into Niels' hair, breaking the tie that held it back, grabbing a handful of the silky locks and using it to pull him flush against his body. He moaned when he felt Niels' hardness, and instead of answering he crushed his mouth to his with nearly bruising force.

Niels moaned, opening to him instantly, his hands braced on Richard's narrow hips. He felt light-headed, like the world was spinning out from under his feet. But Richard was solid, and he clung to him. He'd hardly realized how much he'd missed it until that moment. He drank the other man in, his scent, the feel of him, and met his tongue with equal desperation.

Richard kissed Niels like he'd die without it; and indeed he'd been dead inside until this very moment. He moved one

hand down to cup Niels' buttocks through his fine trousers, and he rocked his arousal against him. He wanted this, wanted Niels so badly he could taste it, more than he would have ever believed.

Niels whimpered, breaking the kiss to gasp for breath. "Have you got what we need down here? Or do we need to go upstairs?" he whispered. His cock throbbed at the pressure of Richard's, so hard and ready for him. The words "Missed you," tumbled off his lips before he could think to stop them.

Richard stared back at Niels, panting. "Missed you, too," he groaned, amazed at what was happening. Suddenly his life was turned upside down again, and all he could think of was claiming Niels. He thought hard, and said, "There should be some oil in one of the drawers." He hoped there was. He didn't think he could wait long enough to get upstairs.

Niels pulled away from him and walked around to the back of the desk, pulling drawers open. Finally, he found what they were looking for and placed the small crystal decanter atop the desk with a loud 'thunk'. He came back quickly, fingers were already fumbling with the buttons of his own trousers.

Niels' eagerness made Richard even harder. "Niels," he moaned, reaching for the oil as he unfastened his own trousers. "Tell me ... tell me you want it..." For some reason he needed to hear it in his own voice, not just have Niels submit to him.

"I want you," he breathed as his trousers slid down his legs, pooling around his ankles. "I want you to fuck me, Richard. I want to feel you inside me." He was kissing him all

the time he spoke, brief, wet bites at his lips. "Over the desk?" he asked, panting hard.

"God, yes," groaned Richard, almost mad with need. "Bend over the desk and spread for me, need your sweet body..." Part of him wanted to ask how long he'd have him for this time. But most of him just *wanted*. He unfastened his trousers just enough to free his cock, and applied a generous amount of oil.

Niels leaned over the desk, spreading his legs as far as possible, and bracing himself on his elbows. He hung his head down, his long hair trailing over the desk. "Please," he whimpered.

This was what Richard wanted and craved; it was like a dream. He couldn't wait any more. He positioned himself, trembling, and took a deep breath and slid inside, gasping from the tight heat he'd been denied. He hadn't so much as thought of anyone else since Niels had left, and he knew why. Because no one compared. He moaned Niels' name, more intelligent words eluding him.

Niels whimpered again. It was like the first time, tight, making him feel almost uncomfortably full. But he knew what to do now, and he knew his body would adjust quickly.

As much as Richard wanted this ecstasy to last, he knew it would be quick. He had to get back to the party, and he was so aroused that he barely had any control. He pulled out and thrust deep again, holding onto Niels' slender hips. "So ... good..." he managed to growl, building up speed and force. "Are ... you ... all right?"

"M'fine," he managed. He was trembling already, though. It was so hot and fast and desperate. "I'm ... I'm going to..." He groaned, tipping his head back and biting his lip, trying not to make too much noise as his body started to tense.

"Oh, fuck," moaned Richard, as he felt Niels tighten around him. He kept thrusting, faster, raggedly, all finesse gone. He was a creature of need. "You can scream," he panted. "No one will hear." They were far away from the party, and these old walls were thick.

Niels did scream as he came. He had to close his eyes to steady himself as the climax rocked through him.

Niels' cries were music to his ears, and Richard thrust all the faster, reaching for his own climax. Niels' body gripped him, and wrung from him the most intense pleasure he'd ever felt. Finally, he collapsed onto the smaller man's back, breathing hard, pulsing inside him.

Niels slumped onto the desk. The weight of Richard's body on his back felt like a warm, solid embrace, and he smiled. He hoped they had a few minutes to recover at least. He hardly knew how he was going to keep up his act of being some powerful and mysterious foreigner when his brain had all but turned to mush.

Finally Richard pulled together the strength to pull out of Niels. He handed Niels a handkerchief, and cleaned himself up as best he could. He wanted a bath but there was no time. "I'm glad you came back," he said softly. He wanted to pull him into his arms. But it was all too new yet. He didn't know the rules this time.

Niels cleaned himself up and refastened his trousers. Richard's words were almost sweet, and he gave him a grin. He leaned close and kissed him on the cheek. "I promise I won't steal from any of your friends," he said softly.

Richard smiled, and turned Niels' face to his. He kissed him again, more deeply this time, lingeringly. Then he pulled back and gazed into Niels' eyes. He was in a decidedly better mood than he had been, and he couldn't stop smiling. "I don't really care," he said. Most of the people there weren't his friends anyway. "Just don't get caught."

Niels chuckled. "You're the only one who's ever caught me, remember?" He was feeling equally light-hearted. "Now, this party is for your niece? Is that right?" He wanted to have some idea of what he was walking into.

"That's right, it's her debut," Richard replied, adjusting his coat. "Her father, my brother, passed away long ago. So I'm hosting the party. She's a bit shy." In fact, the poor girl had almost been in tears this morning.

Niels smoothed down his own coat and held out his arms. "Do I look like I've just been fucked?" he asked with a naughty smirk. "Shall I dance with your shy niece?"

Richard laughed. "I can tell you've just been fucked, but if you can walk properly I think no one else would be able to tell." Then the rest of what Niels had said sunk in. "You would do that? Dance with Ann? She'd love it, I'm sure."

"Certainly. Why shouldn't I dance with her? I think I'm rather a good dancer. I won't tread on her feet, at least." He sketched a formal bow worthy of any drawing room.

Richard smiled. "Perhaps we should rejoin the party, then, and make your introductions."

"Please, lead the way, my lord. And let's hope the night goes by quickly." He'd been looking forward to the party, but now that he was here he just wanted to spend time with Richard. He followed him back out into the ballroom.

Richard couldn't stop smiling. He'd have to tone it down if he didn't want to attract suspicion. They rejoined the party, and the murmur of voices and the delicate clink of glasses started to reach their ears. "We should be able to duck out after a bit," he whispered, for Niels' ears only. "After all, we have business to discuss."

"Patience, my lord. Anticipation will only increase the value of our business," he said softly as they reached the ballroom. He glanced around the room. "Which is the guest of honor this evening?" he asked surveying the crowd.

Richard led him over to his niece, who was looking uncomfortable. He smiled at her and said, "Ann, I'd like you to meet Niels Eriksson. He's a business associate from Finland who happened to stop by. He wanted to pay his respects."

The girl smiled nervously at Niels, and belatedly remembered to curtsy. "Nice to meet you, Lord Eriksson." Richard could see she was erring on the side of formality since he hadn't introduced Niels with a title. He could also see she was staring at him surreptitiously. As were many of the girls in attendance. Niels looked dashing, of course, and his custom-tailored clothes didn't hurt.

"My lady," Niels said politely. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Your uncle has told me of your beauty, but his

description pales in comparison to reality." He smiled brilliantly at her.

Ann's eyes widened even more, and she had to try twice to speak. "Th-thank you, my lord."

Richard could see that Ann was about to pass out, and he said, "You'll have to excuse Niels. He does love to flatter the pretty ladies." He could see that Niels would have no problem picking up any of the young ladies in this room, but strangely he didn't feel jealous. He knew Niels had come back here for him.

"But please, you must not call me Lord, for I am a simple businessman. Please call me Niels. Would you do me the very great honor of this dance?" he asked, smiling.

Ann blushed pink to match her dress, and she looked at Richard. He nodded and smiled, and she smiled as well. "Yes, I'd like that, N-Niels," she said softly.

Niels bowed and took her hand, leading her out onto the floor. He danced elegantly, and didn't miss a step. The entire room was watching them as he twirled Ann effortlessly from one side of the room to another. He spared one glance at Richard, and gave him a wink.

Slowly, couples started to join them until the parquet floor was filled with bright colors and twirling dancers.

The dance came to an end and Niels returned Ann to her companions. Her popularity seemed to increase, and some of the other young men seemed more inclined to seek her attention afterwards. Niels waited for more introductions, and invited more lovely young society ladies to dance. He was an



instant success, and soon everyone wanted to know who the charming Finnish gentleman was.

Richard watched Niels work the crowd, smiling to himself. He hoped the younger man was enjoying himself, because he seemed to take to this naturally. The fact that he was foreign seemed to cast a spell of mystery about him, because though Richard's guests were well off, most didn't travel much outside England. And of course he was gorgeous, and had an accent, that Richard noted had gotten heavier.

Niels was having a fabulous time. He'd never spent any amount of time dancing, but a friend who worked as a ladies maid in a fine house had taught him all the steps, and he was a natural. When he finally returned to Richard's side his cheeks were flushed with exertion. He'd barely even stopped for a drink in two hours time. "Lovely party, my lord," he said breathlessly.

"You do look as if you're enjoying yourself," commented Richard dryly. He'd danced a few, but not half as many as Niels had. Richard wasn't much for dancing, though he was fairly good at it. He handed Niels a glass of chilled wine, and dropped his voice. "I do hope you aren't tiring yourself out too much."

Niels stopped in mid sip and looked up at Richard over the rim of his glass. "Oh, I've energy to spare, my lord. I usually keep far later hours than this, and I'm certainly no stranger to exercise."

The party started to wind down at long last, and Niels began to get a little tired. "Do you think we might retire soon?" he asked quietly, so only Richard could hear. He

wanted to be close to him, to take things slowly, to remember what it was like to fall asleep in Richard's arms.

Richard's heart beat a little faster as he looked into Niels' eyes. He felt a keen sense of anticipation; they had all night together, and his initial lust had been slaked. He could spend hours enjoying Niels. He said quietly, "Why don't you go up and have a nice hot bath? I'll be up in a few moments." It wouldn't do to leave together, of course, even if Niels was a guest of Richard's.

Niels nodded, and then gave Richard a formal bow. "My lord," he said politely before he turned and headed back up the stairs. He made his way to Richard's room and closed the door firmly behind him. Most of the upstairs servants recognized him, and no one dared stop him. He drew a hot bath and peeled off his clothing, then climbed in. The hot water felt decadently wonderful, and he was nearly dozing off in it.

Richard extricated himself from the party as soon as he could, and with every step closer to his room, his arousal grew. Niels was in there waiting for him, and he couldn't wait. He loved the idea of the pretty man, naked and willing, taking a bath because he'd told him to. It was intoxicating, and he made his way into the bathroom. He'd already shed his jacket, and now he unbuttoned the first few buttons of his crisp white shirt. He sat on the side of the tub and looked down at Niels. "Hello."

Niels' eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Richard with a smile. "Hello. Are you excused from the festivities for the evening?" he asked. He couldn't help feeling that they had all

the time in the world now. Richard seemed pleased that he was there, and Niels had all but strolled right into the very center of aristocratic society and fooled every one of them. It had been a stellar evening.

"I am indeed," Richard murmured, unbuttoning his shirt the rest of the way and letting it fall off his shoulders. "Is the water still warm?" he asked, trailing a hand down Niels' slick chest. "I thought I might join you." He was fully aroused, but he could go slowly this time.

"Yes," he murmured. "Quite warm." He moved to one side in the large tub, making room for Richard. He reached up with wet fingers and tugged open the top button of Richard's trousers, looking up into his eyes. "You can wash my back for me."

Richard grinned, standing up and shedding the rest of his clothes. His cock sprang out, ready and waiting, and he stepped into the bathtub. It was quite big enough for the two slim men. "And you can wash my front for me," he replied, settling into the water and immediately pulled Niels in for a kiss.

Niels hummed quietly into the kiss. He slid his arms around Richard's neck and tangled their legs together beneath the warm water. They had time and Richard wanted him and he could come and go as he pleased, even though he felt like he never wanted to leave. He'd worry about that later.

They kissed and touched in the bath until the water went cold, then they moved to the bed. Richard couldn't get enough of touching Niels, and feeling his body underneath

Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

him. Everything seemed sweeter for their separation, and by the time Richard finally took Niels, both men were delirious with desire. Richard took his time, though, not rushing, and it seemed like they moved together for hours before they surrendered to sweet release.

They slept in each other's arms, sticky but sated at last.

\* \* \* \*

The newspapers the next day reported Ann's debut as the social event of the season, and prominently mentioned a certain very handsome and charming Finnish gentleman who'd swept the ladies off their feet. It seemed it was Niels' debut into society as well as Ann's.

They spent the next few days having sex, walking around the grounds and generally enjoying each other.

## Chapter Seven

Niels couldn't remember ever being so content. But underlying it was a certain restlessness. At dinner, he broached the topic of leaving the house some time. "You know, if you never go out, people will start to talk again. I doubt you want them curious about why you've been avoiding all the things you usually do. And while I'm on that, what do you usually do? Or am I just one of a series of devastatingly handsome companions you typically tempt into your home for days on end of debauchery?" he asked with a grin.

Richard laughed. "I go to the club, gamble, go to the theatre," he said. "And I used to indulge in a fair amount of debauchery, but I generally never brought them home." And if he did, he never took them in his own bed.

"Am I holding you back, then? Or are you getting too old for all that carousing about?" he smirked. Perhaps Richard was older than Niels, but no one would think him old by any stretch of the imagination. "If you want to go out, certainly I can understand that you have social obligations. Not that I mind keeping you all to myself."

"Perhaps I don't want to let you out of my sight," teased Richard, pouring them both another glass of wine. But he considered. Niels had proven himself quite able to blend into high society. Why not give him a bit more practice? "Actually," he mused, "There's a new play opening tomorrow night, and naturally I have a private box. Would you like to

go?" It wasn't at all unusual for a businessman to entertain associates in that manner.

Niels' eyes widened. "I ... I would adore going to the theater, more than anything!" he said, unable to contain his excitement. "Honestly? Are you sure it's all right? I mean, for us to be seen together like that?" Suddenly his heart was pounding at the very idea of such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Richard smiled at Niels' enthusiasm. "It will be fine. You are, after all, my close business associate," he replied. "No one will question it, and you'll see many of the people you charmed at the party, after all." He thought about Niels' wardrobe. "We'll have to see about getting you a formal suit, then, rather quickly. My tailor still has your measurements. I'll have him send something over."

"You've already given me so much. As well as letting me stay here and feeding me every day. There has to be a way I can repay you," he said. He was starting to feel a little uncomfortable about it all, even though he wanted to be with Richard. Still, he was a thief, not a beggar.

Richard frowned. He stood, and pulled Niels to his feet, and into his arms. "Never say that again," he whispered, staring into his eyes. "I choose to take care of you. I want to. I can afford it." He really didn't want the other man to feel obligated. He wanted those days behind them.

Niels steadied himself with his hands on Richard's hips, still looking troubled. "I know you can afford it. But I feel like ... I shouldn't let you just ... support me. I feel that I'm taking advantage of you." He hadn't thought about it much because

they'd been lost in days on end of sexual bliss, but now that the subject was broached it weighed heavily on his mind.

"If anything, I'm taking advantage of you," Richard said softly. "Leading you down the path of debauchery and all that." He'd felt guilty before, and that was why he'd let Niels go early.

Niels laughed a little. "I'm sure I was already quite a ways down that path already. Or do you imagine I'm an innocent? I've had my fair share of debauchery, Richard. Perhaps of a slightly different flavor, but sin is sin."

"I don't believe in sin," whispered Richard, dropping his hand lower to the curve of Niels' ass. "Just pleasure. And I'm greedy. I want to keep you near me so we can have lots of it."

Niels melted into Richard's embrace. No matter what else happened, he knew he would never have his fill of this man. The way Richard held him and kissed him and touched him was intoxicating. Niels' fingers slid into Richard's hair and he rocked slowly against him, letting Richard feel how aroused he was.

They barely made it upstairs before their clothes were shed, and another night melted away into fiery passion and sated bodies.

## Chapter Eight

"It looks fine," Richard said, looking at Niels in the reflection of the mirror as he adjusted his own tie. Better than fine, actually; the formal suit fit Niels like a glove and made Richard wish they had a little more time before the carriage arrived to take them to the theatre. He made a mental note to give his tailor a bonus.

Niels had worn fine clothes before, but nothing as formal as what he was wearing now. He straightened the stiff collar for the hundredth time, and tugged nervously on the black coat. "Are you sure? I feel like a fraud, actually." He was sure everyone would know with one look that he was a simple man from the vicinity of the docks. "Maybe the hat will make me feel better." He picked up the tall silk top hat and put it on his head, then grinned in the mirror. "Honestly, you don't deserve me, do you," he teased.

Richard smirked at Niels. "No, I definitely don't," he agreed. He walked around Niels, and patted him on his ass. "Now let's go before we are more than fashionably late." He liked seeing Niels dressed up like this, almost as much as he liked him undressed. He led Niels down to where the carriage awaited them. They slipped inside, into the plush interior, and the horses set off.

As soon as they were away, Niels started to get excited. He never dreamed he'd actually get to attend a performance. Well, he'd dreamed of it, certainly. He watched expectantly out the small window as they got closer to the theatre. The



streets were clogged with fine carriages bringing the cream of London's society hither and yon. The city seemed to glitter. "Can people see inside your box?" he asked with an impish grin.

Richard was busy watching Niels' face. He loved to see him so excited. "I don't think so, unless you lean over the edge." He raised an eyebrow as he realized why Niels had asked. "Having naughty thoughts, are we?" he purred into his ear.

Niels arched an eyebrow. "I may be. Although I doubt I could shock you." The carriage pulled up in front of the theater at and Niels waited for Richard to alight, and then followed him out. He straightened his coat one last time and looked around. He did, indeed, see a number of people he recognized from Ann's debut, and he smiled in greeting. He took a steadying breath, reminding himself that charm was one of his weapons. "Crowded," he commented as he followed Richard inside. "Is it always like this?"

"Yes, on opening night," Richard replied, nodding to various people but hurrying along so they wouldn't get caught up in conversation. "Everyone is here to be seen, not see the play," he added. He led the way to the stairs that would take them to Richard's box. The box had belonged to his family for generations, in fact since the theatre had been built.

They climbed flight after flight, seeing fewer people as they went, until finally they emerged on the top level where the most exclusive boxes were. He led Niels to a velvet curtain, which a staff member pulled aside to reveal a wooden door. That door opened onto a room that could hold up to a dozen people. But tonight there was only one red velvet

couch, and a table set with chilled champagne and two glasses.

Niels gasped a little when he saw it, and then smiled at Richard. If there was a way to make something special, Richard was sure to find it, it seemed. Every little detail ... and it wasn't just about wealth. It was about forethought, planning, and the desire to make another person happy. The gesture went straight to Niels' heart. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Richard loved to do things for Niels, because he genuinely appreciated them. He closed the door firmly behind them, and walked over to the champagne. He poured them each a glass and handed one to Niels. Below, he could hear the shuffle of people finding their seats and the orchestra tuning up. But up here it was their own little world. In public, yet not.

Niels accepted the glass and held it up in toast. He hesitated a moment, not sure exactly how to refer to Richard. "To you, for everything you've done for me," he said finally. He clinked glasses with Richard, smiling warmly.

Richard smiled back, and replied, "To you as well. For coming back." He looked down, feeling his emotions were a little too raw right now for intimate eye contact. Niels made him feel things no one else ever had, and most of the time he liked it. Occasionally it frightened him, though.

Niels took a sip of champagne then went to the edge of the box, looking down at the crowd below, and almost losing his hat. "That's a long way down. Are you sure this thing is secure?" He grinned back at Richard, then flopped down on the sofa, patting the spot beside him.

Richard sat beside Niels and shrugged. "It hasn't fallen yet," he said, smiling. "And I've never fallen, though I've gotten very, very drunk in here on occasion." He sat back against the plush cushions and looked at Niels. The other man looked lovely in the low light.

Niels leaned towards him, slouched down enough to rest his head on Richard's shoulder. "And you're sure no one can see us?" he asked. He didn't want to get Richard in trouble, but he was feeling exceptionally affectionate in the light of such an amazing evening. "Tell me what sorts of debauchery you've gotten up to in here," he whispered.

"I've had a bit of fun," he acknowledged, wondering why he felt guilty for it. Niels had asked after all. "No actual sex, but I've had a boy or girl or three on their knees during the intermissions."

Niels felt the sickening and completely unexpected dagger of jealousy, and he bit his lip to try to disguise his expression. That was all before. It didn't matter. "Have you ever been married? You could be married now for all I know about you."

Richard sensed something odd in Niels' reaction, but he wasn't sure. "Never been married," he answered, draining his glass of champagne. "My mother used to harp on it all the time, so I refused. Now she's gone..." he shrugged. "I never met anyone who could hold my attention for very long."

Niels' brow furrowed. "I'm sorry about your mum. Were you close?" He didn't want to address the second statement. It made him sad, and he wondered what would hold Richard's attention.

That made Richard snort. "She was the single most unpleasant person I have ever met," he said definitively. "She was bitter and greedy and snobby and cold and any number of other words I could think of." That was putting it nicely, actually. "You would have hated her. I know I did."

Niels' eyes widened. "Oh. Sorry to hear it." He thought of his own mother, and he couldn't imagine how awful it would be not to adore your mum. It gave him some insight into the man sitting next to him. Although he had everything, there was a lot about Richard that didn't seem very happy.

Richard didn't really like to talk about the past. "Were you close to your mother?" he asked. He realized he still knew very little about Niels. He wanted to know more. He reached over and grabbed the bottle of champagne, refilling both their glasses.

Niels took another sip of the expensive champagne. "Yes," he said simply. He looked into Richard's eyes. "I still miss her sometimes, actually. Rather sentimental of me, but..." He shrugged his shoulders. He leaned closer and kissed Richard on the cheek. "You would have adored her. And she would have adored you."

The audience quieted, and it was clear the play was about to begin. They sat up so they could see the stage, and the lights went down.

Niels sat forward in the box, transfixed by every line. He got completely caught up in the plot, and couldn't tear his gaze off the stage. Intermission came around, and he was startled to find that it was all actually fake. He sat back again, looking a little sheepish, and smiled at Richard. "I thought it

was quite good so far," he said, trying to temper his enthusiasm.

Richard had been watching Niels more than the play, and he'd seen how absorbed he'd been in the performance. He was very happy that he could give this experience to him. Niels seemed to thoroughly enjoy everything. He handed Niels a fresh glass of champagne and lifted his own in a toast. "To the theatre," he said. "We'll come here as often as you like."

Niels grinned and raised his glass. "To the theatre. Wasn't it amazing? It was like seeing a book come to life," he said, sounding awestruck. "Do you come to the theatre often?"

"Not often enough," Richard said. Niels' good cheer was infectious. They were sitting back, out of view, and he pulled Niels into a kiss because he couldn't hold back any more.

Niels put his glass down on the table blindly and leaned into the kiss with a soft hum. It felt like it had been hours since they'd kissed and suddenly he was ravenous for it. He curled his fingers around Richard's neck and stroked at his tongue.

Niels' reaction made Richard instantly aroused, and he moaned into his mouth as he set his own glass down. Then he wrapped his arms around Niels and pulled him into his lap.

He drew a trembling breath and kissed Richard back, twining his arms around his neck. He wriggled closer, knowing full well how it would affect him. He loved how easily Richard got aroused for him. No one had ever made him feel as desirable.

Richard really couldn't get enough of Niels. His need for the other man scared him a bit, but right now he was too aroused to worry about it. He ran one hand up Niels' thigh, higher and higher. Niels was pressed against his hard cock, and Richard was being driven mad with desire.

Niels whimpered and parted his knees a little, encouragingly. He ached for Richard's touch. Finally, he broke the kiss, gasping for breath. "Shall I make it four boys and/or ladies?" he whispered.

Since being with Niels, he hadn't thought about any of the people he'd had sex with in the past. They all paled in comparison. He didn't want to treat Niels like just another conquest, but he also couldn't resist the idea of the pretty man sucking his cock right here. "Only if you want to," he moaned.

Niels licked his lips and nuzzled at Richard's ear. "I want to," he breathed. He slid off Richard's lap onto the floor on his knees and looked up at him. "Were they better than me?" he asked quietly.

Richard could only gaze down at Niels, breathing hard. He was so very hard for him. "No one is better than you," he moaned, eyes on those sensual lips.

He gently pulled Richard's cock out, curling his fingers around the base. "No one?" he asked, quirking a brow. He leaned over Richard's lap and sucked gently, tasting him to remind himself. He'd only done it once so far, but he thought he might have an idea of how to improve this time.

"No one is as beautiful as you," Richard moaned, gripping the side of the couch to keep from being loud. "You feel so

good ... Want you all the time..." He had to stop talking, or he'd say something embarrassing. He couldn't help that Niels was exactly what he desired.

That made him feel good. Made him feel special, like he was more to Richard than the others. Although he doubted he actually was. He wanted to be, though. Little things made him think, made him hope that maybe he was. Richard had said he'd rarely taken anyone home. He slowly sucked him down, taking Richard's thick hard cock as deeply into his mouth as he could.

No one had ever held Richard's attention like this. Usually he got tired of his conquests after a night or two. But not Niels. Though the man was inexperienced, his genuine desire to please made the difference. That, and he was wickedly sexy. He tried not to thrust up into Niels' mouth, but the very public nature of where they were made it all the better. "Niels..." he moaned. "Oh God, suck me.... use that pretty mouth..."

The way Richard spoke to him was so illicit, so sexy. Niels moaned and he knew Richard would feel it. He moved faster, sucking harder and deeper, craving every sound of pleasure.

"Fuck," Richard groaned in a strangled voice. He slid one hand into Niels' long hair. The moan made it even better, and he was on the edge already. Niels was sucking his cock in a box at the theatre, and Richard was about to come violently.

Niels moaned again, so hard himself that his cock ached for Richard's touch. He realized then that no one else would ever satisfy him like Richard. He tried to take more of him, swallowing around him, relaxing his throat.

"Yes," rasped Richard, head falling back. He was gone now, undone by Niels, oblivious to anything but the hot mouth on him, and the sexy man giving him this pleasure. "Oh, Niels," he moaned. "Want you ... want this.... want you to be ... mine.... always...." Then he was coming, not even able to warn Niels, hoping he wouldn't choke him, completely unaware of what he'd said.

Niels thought his heart had stopped right then and there, but he continued to suck Richard through his climax until he was certain he was done. He licked him clean and then carefully started to button up his trousers. Finally, he slid up onto the couch next to him. "Did you really mean that?" he whispered.

Richard was panting, mind nearly gone from the intense climax. He didn't know what Niels was asking, and he pulled him close, trying to regain the power of speech. "Mean what?" he asked, trying to remember what he'd just said. Then it hit him, and his eyes widened. He'd meant every word. But he hadn't meant to say it out loud. "Oh. Yes," he admitted, looking down. Surely now Niels would be scared away.

Niels relaxed against him, resting his head on Richard's shoulder and sliding his arm around his waist. The situation was strange. Women were possessions, not men. Unless they were servants. But there was something about it that comforted him, and scared him. He wasn't pulling away, but he wasn't sure how to respond. "I'm not going anywhere," he said finally.

Richard felt like every muscle in his body had turned to jelly, but he managed to wrap one arm around Niels and pull



him closer. He was annoyed with himself. Why had he said that? He'd have to keep a better rein on his tongue from now on.

Niels nuzzled into the side of Richard's neck, and let out a sigh. He'd never felt so close to another person, but he worried that Richard didn't think of him as an equal. In many ways, he wasn't, but he didn't want to be just like a pet to him. He didn't want to be kept. He was grappling with feelings he couldn't even identify, but it was as if he felt himself cast in a role, as in the play, and he was playing the mistress.

After a moment, Richard reached over with his other hand and pressed gently on the bulge he could see in Niels' trousers. "I think you need some help with this," he purred. He loved making Niels come. He loved how he called out Richard's name.

"Yes," he whispered. His lips were suffused with color from his recent activities, and he wet them anxiously as he let Richard touch him. He ran his hand up Richard's chest and around his neck. *I need you* he thought silently, too careful and too paranoid to say it aloud.

Richard couldn't help his dominant nature, and Niels brought it out in him even more. He captured his mouth in a deep kiss as he unbuttoned Niels' trousers. He reached in to find the hard cock that awaited him, and wrapped his fingers around it. He decided that one night he'd fuck Niels right here. The idea made him moan into the kiss as he began to stroke.

Niels opened to Richard easily. It felt familiar, yet still amazingly erotic; comforting, but not dull by any means.

Niels pressed closer to him, sliding his other arm around Richard's neck, almost clinging to him. His hips bucked up involuntarily at the feeling of Richard's grip on his cock. All concern for the elusive, unspoken elements of their association fled his mind in the haze of passion.

Richard drew back from the kiss. He stroked faster, varying the rhythm to keep Niels on the edge. Every few strokes he brushed his thumb over the slick head. "You like this, Niels?" he breathed, watching him closely. "You like to take chances like this in public? The door has no lock. Anyone could walk in." They most likely wouldn't, of course. But there was always a chance.

Niels' eyes widened and his breath hitched. He hadn't even been thinking that someone could walk in, but now that he was, a shiver ran through him. The danger was exhilarating, and not that different from breaking into someone's house. "Yes. I like it," he said, panting. "Do you want someone to see me like this? At your mercy?" He felt that he was starting to understand Richard better, at least as far as his sexual preferences went.

Richard gasped softly, his cock twitching to life even though he'd just come. "God, yes," he moaned, stroking faster. "I want everyone to know you'd do anything I told you to do." He slid his free hand into Niels' hair, holding his head immobile. "I can do anything I want to you, Niels." Of course he didn't want them to get caught. But the idea was incredibly arousing.

Rather than being overbearing or demanding or controlling, Richard's statement was just arousing. There

were things passing between them that Niels instinctively understood. It was like a game he hadn't played before, but he knew all the rules. It made sense to him. He moaned softly. "And what if I resisted? Would you just take what you want anyway?" he croaked. He trusted Richard. He knew Richard wouldn't force him to do something he didn't want to do. He hoped Richard would understand what he was implying, the subtle line between reality and fantasy that he meant to draw.

Richard was panting once again. "Yes, I would," he agreed, hand tightening as he stroked faster. This was all his secret fantasies come true. "I could bend you over this couch right now and fuck you, whether you wanted it or not. You can't stop me." Not that he would rape Niels. But the very idea of Niels submitting to him, of him forcing the other man to take it, pushed every button he had.

Niels whimpered loudly, arching his slender body up. And then, he couldn't stop it. His body shuddered violently as the raw lust in Richard's voice combined with his touch, and the illicit things they were suggesting overwhelmed him. His cock pulsed over Richard's fingers, and he gripped at his shoulders tightly, gasping his name.

Richard stroked him through it, unmindful of the mess they were making of their clothes. Nothing mattered but the heat they shared. Something had changed, some understanding had been reached.

Niels could only stare at him as his breathing gradually slowed. Richard held him still by the hair. He licked his lips. "Somehow, I think the second half of this play is going to

seem tediously long," he whispered. He raised his eyebrows a little in question. It had been a night of revelations, indeed.

Richard nodded as the lights went down and the second act began. They cleaned themselves up as best they could and Richard poured Niels more champagne. He never stopped touching him, though; he was still aroused, and feeling very possessive.

Even though his mind was racing, the champagne calmed him somewhat, and Niels was fascinated by the play. Still, every lull in the action caused his thoughts to turn to what might happen when they returned to Richard's home. He couldn't even begin to imagine the delicious wickedness they might explore. His own sexual history was relatively straightforward. He was a creature of pleasure, but shagging some pretty young thing had always seemed like a simple fulfillment of a physical need. Other things had slaked his lust for life, including thievery. Now he was beginning to think there was a reason for that, one that he never would have guessed if it weren't for Richard.

Richard's mind wandered to just what he wanted. Sometimes when he was very aroused he got the urge to be rough, and hurt his partner. For the most part, he'd suppressed that urge. He didn't need that sort of trouble. But Niels seemed to like the idea. The thought of Niels playing at saying no, and Richard pinning him to the bed, forcing his legs apart, and taking him anyway ... it made his cock pulse.

Finally, the play ended, and Richard was more than ready to leave. They made their way through the milling crowds, all intent on discussing every aspect of the play they'd just

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enjoyed. Richard only cared about one thing: getting Niels home.

## Chapter Nine

The moment the bedroom door was shut behind them, Niels could feel his heart racing. "Tell me what you want," he said softly. He stepped closer and rested his hands on Richard's chest. "Whatever you want." He wasn't even completely sure what he was offering, but the prospect was beyond titillating.

Richard was breathless. "Anything I want?" he whispered. The idea was intimidating, a feeling Richard wasn't familiar with. This was unknown. But he wanted to know. He'd thought Niels was sexy before. But this was another level entirely.

Niels' lips twitched. "I think so. If it's too much, I'll let you know. But ... I want to..." He chewed on his bottom lip.

"I want..." Richard wasn't used to voicing what he wanted. It was usually all formless wants and needs, but he wanted this. "I want to tell you what to do. I want you to do whatever I say. But sometimes..." he hesitated, hoping this came out right, "I want to have to force you. Push you around. Pin you down. Take you. Quite roughly."

Niels' mouth went dry and somehow his body seemed to forget it had just been sated a little while before. "I want to ... fight back. Feel you overpower me and make me helpless while you ... take me. Roughly." He could feel his pulse in his throat. He couldn't believe they were discussing this.

Richard was panting once again. "Sometimes I want to hurt you," he went on. "Not a lot. But ... perhaps ... a slap....

"Richard's voice was as uncertain as it had ever been, as he tried to enunciate his deepest desires. But Niels was a man. He could take rough treatment. He wanted this so badly he could taste it.

Yes," he rasped. "You can ... hurt me." His cock was aching now. Just discussing it was making him half-crazed with need, but he held back as Richard was. He could tell the other man was just as affected.

How was it possible, that Niels wanted exactly the same thing he did? Richard couldn't wait any longer. He let his lust take over, and his voice dropped as he grabbed Niels by the hair. He jerked him close and growled, "Get your clothes off. Want to fuck you. Now."

Niels gasped and looked at Richard, wide-eyed. He pulled off his coat, letting it fall to the floor. With trembling fingers he pulled loose the lace at his throat, and unbuttoned his shirt. It was awkward, because Richard still had a vise-like grip on his hair, but he managed to pull his shirt off and kick off his boots, whimpering.

"Good," Richard purred, releasing Niels' hair and giving him a little push back. "Now the pants. Show me that body. You're mine. Act like it." This night was going to be unforgettable.

Niels stumbled a little. He was trembling, apprehensive and nervous, but at the same time he felt like fire was pulsing through his veins. He unbuttoned his trousers and slid them down his long, slim legs until he was standing there naked in front of him. "I'm ... I'm not a possession," he said, testing

out his will to resist, although he was feeling quite anxious to do whatever Richard wanted of him.

Richard laughed sharply, getting into his role. "Yes, you are," he answered, letting his gaze roam over Niels' exposed body. "You're mine and I can do anything I want to you. Anything," he repeated, emphasizing the word. He stepped closer, letting Niels feel how vulnerable he was, naked while Richard was dressed. Niels was as hard as he was.

Niels took a step back, glaring at Richard. "N-not if I don't let you, you can't." Of course he would let him, but that wasn't the point. This was all a game now, and they both wanted to play it. Niels had never tried his hand at acting, although he supposed much of his livelihood required it. And he wanted this to be good for Richard. The more convincingly he could resist, the more amazing it would be when Richard "forced" him.

"You're here in my house and you're mine for the night. You'll take what I want to do to you, or you'll be sorry." He felt freed, and so powerful.

From somewhere deep inside, Niels managed to pull up anger and defiance, but he did not explore those depths. "Oh, I'll be sorry, will I? You arrogant son of a bitch. You don't own me. You can't just do whatever you bloody well like just because you think you're entitled to it!" he spat, standing his ground.

"That's where you're wrong," Richard said softly, and drew his hand back. He slapped Niels, not very hard, but hard enough to sting and leave a red mark on Niels' pretty face.



The very action nearly made him come by itself, and he hoped he hadn't gone too far.

Niels winced, his head snapping to the side. He kept his eyes averted down for a moment, breathing hard. Then slowly he looked up at Richard. His face throbbed where Richard had slapped him. "How dare you?" he hissed. He took another step back, his own hand touching his face gently where it stung. It wasn't bad. He'd certainly had worse. But then ... it was just a prop like any other in their game.

"I dare," Richard hissed, advancing on Niels, following him, "Because I *can*. You'd better accept that I can, and will, do whatever I want to you." He noted that Niels was close to the bed now, and he wondered if that was by design. He moved fast, putting his hands on Niels' chest and pushing him as hard as he dared.

Niels fell backwards onto the mattress with a gasp. He wasn't sure how much he should try to get away, but he thought perhaps that would make it seem all the more genuine. He set his jaw and scrambled back onto the bed, crawling across it on his hands and knees to get away.

Richard was on him in a second, putting all his weight on Niels' back and forcing him flat onto the bed. He reached out and grabbed a handful of Niels' hair and wrenched his head back. He leaned down and whispered in the other man's ear, "Just where do you think you're going? You're just going to make it harder on yourself."

"Let go of me," he said through clenched teeth. His scalp ached where Richard was pulling his hair, but the pressure of

his body on top of him, pressing him into the bed, felt wonderful. "Please," he whimpered.

Richard laughed, rocking his cloth-covered erection against Niels' naked ass. "It's too late to say please," he growled. "I want your sweet ass and you're just going to take it."

Niels' answer was a choked sob. He went still, squeezing his eyes shut. "I ... I won't ... struggle anymore," he said quietly. In truth, he wasn't sure he could wait much longer. He pressed his hips down more firmly into the mattress just to feel the pressure, although he knew it would seem like he was trying to get away from Richard, which was just fine for their purposes.

Richard was panting now, and with one hand he started to unbutton his shirt. He got it off and flung it away from him. "Good," he whispered, leaning over to grab the bottle of oil that was always near the bed. He set it aside and shifted, prying Niels' legs apart with his own, shoving them apart roughly. God, he was so ready for this; all the buildup made him nearly frantic to sheath himself inside Niels. When they'd first met, and Richard had forced Niels to be his plaything, this was clearly what he'd wanted subconsciously. But it was even better now that he knew Niels loved this, too. His conscience was clear and he could enjoy this to the fullest. He shifted his grip on Niels' hair to the other hand, and freed his trapped cock with the other. "You're mine," he promised, slicking his cock with the oil.

"Oh, God," he choked. "Please don't hurt me," he pleaded. He didn't mind, but he thought the begging would be

a nice touch. He kept his muscles stiff, resisting still, although not really trying to get away.

"I'm not going to hurt you, pretty boy," purred Richard. He was so hard he didn't dare touch himself very much. "I'm just going to fuck you." He spread Niels open, taking his time, letting the other man feel how exposed he was.

Niels pressed his face into the pillow and sobbed. "You ... you make me ... feel so ... dirty," he rasped. "The w-way you ... your fingers ... are inside me ... stretching me ... 'tis surely ... s-sinful to ... let someone ... touch you like that." He drew in a deep, trembling breath.

"Of course it is," Richard said, voice deep with need. "That's why it feels so good. And that's why you feel dirty, isn't it? Because you like it? Because you want me to shove my cock inside you?" With his last words, Richard withdrew his fingers and pressed the head of his cock at Niels' entrance.

Niels sobbed again. "Yes," he moaned, and it was like an admission dragged from the depths of his soul. "Oh God, forgive me..." He bore down, lifting his hips slightly, offering himself up. He knew he was going to come in about two seconds.

Richard growled, and shoved into Niels as hard as he dared. The other man was still so very tight, but he'd prepped him and he needed to go hard and fast. They were both going to explode soon. He couldn't even speak any more as he entered Niels. The hot friction robbed him of his mind. He just thrust in and out, and gasped for air, and gripped Niels' hips.

Niels very nearly screamed as Richard pounded into him relentlessly. It was the perfect culmination of what they'd been playing at, and his reactions were completely real. He grabbed hold of the pillow under his head and held onto it tightly as his body was jostled by the impact over and over, completely beyond his control.

Richard had lost track of the game as well, as his world dissolved into ecstasy. He kept driving in and out, amazed he'd lasted this long, striving for a few more seconds of pleasure.

Niels' entire body tensed when it happened, and he cried out Richard's name. He could feel the pain of fingers digging into his hips, leaving bruises. For a moment, it was as if their bodies were completely joined as one, moving together, Richard controlling Niels in every possible way. A deep shudder ran through him as he came hard, gasping for breath.

Richard felt Niels' release, and there was no way he could keep from following. Niels tightened even more around him, and he pulsed deep inside, filling the other man with a cry. It really was like nothing else he'd ever felt. He came down slowly, still trembling.

Niels practically collapsed into the mattress. He felt completely drained of every last drop of energy, but so perfectly sated. When his breathing slowed, a smile curved his lips, and his eyes fluttered open, looking back at Richard over his shoulder.

Richard pulled out slowly and lay next to Niels, and without thinking pulled him into his arms. There were no words that

could describe what they had just shared so he didn't try. He just held Niels close.

Niels settled himself against Richard and slid his arms around him. He felt like he never wanted to move again. "Mmm," was all the intelligence he could manage. He pressed his lips against the crook of Richard's neck, wanting to speak, but afraid of what he might say. It was almost a shattering experience, leaving him feeling more exposed than ever, but also leaving him trusting the man next to him even more.

Richard had never understood monogamy, or true love, or any urge to stay with one person forever. He'd never met anyone who could hold his interest, or inspire him to feel anything more than lust or fondness. Now, finally, he was beginning to understand. But it was too soon. He and Niels were sexually compatible, that was more than obvious, but was it more than that for Niels? He'd slipped already today, and given away his feelings. He had to keep his mouth shut. He pulled the covers up over the two of them and blew out the lamp. "Sleep," he whispered to Niels.

"Yes, my lord," he whispered, a smile in his voice. In his young life, Niels hadn't enjoyed a lot of security. He'd ended up on the streets before his thirteenth birthday; he'd slept in alleyways, in brothels, on kitchen floors. He'd abandoned belongings for the sake of safety. He'd lost friends and family, too many to count. But for the moment, in this bed, in this man's arms, he felt safe. He had a solid roof overhead, and no one was going to wake him in the middle of the night to kick him out. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was in a place where he could truly relax, not

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worry about starving or being caught. And with that kind of security, he drifted off into a blissfully deep sleep.

## Chapter Ten

Richard couldn't remember ever being this happy, or feeling this content. They spent their days walking, or riding, or just talking. When Richard had business matters to attend to, Niels spent time in the library, reading, or he napped.

After a few days, Richard decided they should go out again. "Do you think you're up to a visit to the club?" he asked as they finished lunch. It worried him a bit, as people that knew him fairly well might be there. But Niels deserved a chance to extend his new identity.

"You know..." Niels started as he took a sip of tea, "I've always wondered what your sort did in those places. It all seems so very secretive. Do you have wild orgies or something like that? Drink yourselves into a stupor? Or is it all boring business dealings and whatnot?" he asked.

Richard laughed. "It's mostly business dealings, cigar smoke, and whisky," he answered. "Though we do have a back room where we attempt to lose money at various card games." He considered. "I've never seen any orgies, but there are rooms upstairs. It's all fairly boring."

"Cards?" he said, raising his eyebrows. His expression was practically devilish. "Well ... it all makes sense now." Niels had a mind for cards. He'd rarely been beaten, in fact, although he'd steered clear of games where the stakes were too high. He didn't cheat but one bad loser making an accusation could be far more trouble than it was worth.

"Ah," Richard grinned. "Am I bringing in a wolf among the lambs?"

Niels shrugged. "I haven't got anything to bet with, anyway. Although I'm sure I could take any coin your lordly friends laid out on the table if I did." He gave Richard a wink.

Richard raised an eyebrow. "Oh you could, could you? Perhaps an investment, then, in your abilities? You can pay me back if you win." He didn't mind giving money to Niels, but he suspected the man would like it to be a loan rather than a gift.

"Oh, I'll win. I'll only take it if you allow me to pay you ten percent interest. I'll just keep what's left over." Niels was grinning. It had been too long since he'd had the opportunity to really fleece someone, and he was sure Richard's friends would be a lucrative crowd. But that gave him pause for a moment. "None of your friends would wager more than they could afford to lose, would they? I should hate to make enemies."

Richard shook his head. "The bets are limited, to keep people from losing everything," he answered. "Anyway, most of the people there are old money. More than they know what to do with."

"Oh well, that's all right then. I need it more than they do, clearly," he said, laughing. "When do we leave?"

Richard glanced at the clock. "We can go over about seven, have dinner, then see what sort of games are afoot," he answered. "Shall I arrange it, then?" He looked forward to seeing Niels in action.



"I'd love to go. Won't they be a little hesitant to invite someone they don't know into their midst, though?" he asked. He figured most of the members were surely titled, as Richard was, although he was incredibly curious to meet some of Richard's companions.

"You'll be my guest, no one will question you," Richard replied. He hoped that Jacob wasn't there, though. He might be able to guess at his and Niels' relationship. The other man had always had a gift for that sort of thing. Not to mention he knew that Richard liked boys. No one else would even think of it. But Jacob would.

"So tell me what sort of people you call friend. I can hardly wait to meet them." Any insight into Richard was welcome. In the short time they'd been together, Niels liked to think he knew him well, but obviously others knew him better just from knowing him longer.

Richard considered. "Julian will almost certainly be there; he practically lives at the club. I've known him since university. He's a nice man, but he hardly ever takes anything seriously. I'd trust him with my life." He went on to describe a few of the other regulars, relating anecdotes about each of them. He wanted to mention Jacob, to warn Niels about him, but he wasn't sure what to say. It was only a feeling. But, he suspected Jacob would be quite interested in Niels.

Niels listened with rapt attention, absorbing every detail. He was glad Richard had people he could rely on, but it made him a little sad, too. The few friends he had were rather transient. No one made any connections for too long where he was from. The closest thing he really had to friends were

his landlord and his landlord's daughter. "I'll try not to embarrass you, then."

"You won't," Richard assured him. "I don't care much what these people think. Only Julian do I count as a real friend, and he doesn't even know ... everything about me," he finished, figuring Niels could tell what he meant. He didn't mention Jacob. Chances were, the man wouldn't even be there anyway.

Niels arched an eyebrow. "Oh. So ... we're not likely to run into anyone you've...?" he left the rest hanging.

Richard's eyes widened. "No, of course not." Well, unless Jacob was there, and he was hoping he wasn't. But ... "I'm a little more discreet than that. Usually." He smiled, and said teasingly, "Would you be jealous if we did?"

His smile faded a little. "I think I would, actually. It'd be odd, anyway, thinking of you with someone else. But then, I guess you've had quite a few lovers." After everything they'd been through it was strange to find a topic uncomfortable, but he did.

Richard looked at Niels, touched once again. "I have had quite a few partners, yes. But I wouldn't call them lovers."

Niels assumed that applied to himself as well. "Oh," he said softly. He took another sip of tea. "Well, I hope I never meet any, in any case." He wanted to talk about all the girls he'd had, so Richard would be jealous, but it would just sound like that was precisely what he was after. And he really hadn't been with that many, anyway.

"I hope I never meet any of your conquests," Richard said, only half joking. "I can be very possessive." He smiled and

moved his hand higher on Niels' thigh. He really didn't think he could stand the thought of Niels with anyone else. Though he had no right to ask Niels not to sleep with anyone else. Richard certainly didn't want anyone else.

Niels laughed at that. "I highly doubt you will. They don't exactly frequent this neighborhood." It was strange the way Richard seemed to know what he was thinking.

"Good," Richard replied, pulling Niels in for a kiss. It started slow and lingering, but Richard couldn't resist deepening it. He couldn't get enough of Niels. He knew they didn't have time for sex, but that didn't mean they couldn't kiss for a while.

Too soon, Richard pulled back. "I'd better go let the club know we'll be there for dinner," he said, standing. He wished they had time to finish what they'd begun, but it would just mean more passion when they got back from the club.

Niels sighed, but released him. He went upstairs and looked over his clothes, trying to determine what to wear to finally meet Richard's friends. He changed into a dark blue wool suit, and tied his hair back neatly. Soon enough it was time to leave and they summoned the carriage. Niels decided it was best not to think about it too much, lest he be intimidated by what he was about to face.

He wondered if any of them would guess.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived; the smoke filled, dark-paneled room contrasted with the bright, vibrant man. He hoped Niels liked it here. He wanted to make him happy. They were greeted as

obsequiously as ever, and shown into the dining room. No one that Richard knew well was evident yet, but the night was young. He couldn't help but feel on edge.

Niels did his best to be a charming dinner companion. He'd been reading the newspaper every day to keep up with things, and he was well versed in current events. The meal was excellent, as he expected it to be. Occasionally he missed a simple portion of steak and kidney pie from the pub, but he was quickly developing a palate for the things the rich folk ate. He'd even memorized all the details of which piece of silverware to use when. He was determined not to let Richard down. For all appearances he was just what he claimed to be, a wealthy foreigner visiting a business associate.

Richard could tell that Niels was trying hard. He wished he could tell him he'd noticed, but it would have to wait until later, when they were alone.

They finished their meal, and Richard smiled at Niels. It was hell not to be able to touch him whenever he wanted, but he doubted that would go over well here. "Are you ready to go win some money?" he said. He'd already given Niels a tidy sum before they'd left, more than Niels had wanted to accept, but he'd insisted.

"That sounds like a delightful idea." He gave Richard a grin and a wink as he rose from his seat, then followed him towards another area of the club. The interior of the place seemed a little grim to him, all dark and serious with the persistent odor of cigar smoke clinging to everything, but it was certainly upper class.

Julian was already seated at a table with two other gentlemen, slowly nursing a brandy. He glanced up when he noticed Richard. He gave him a broad smile. "Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!" he said, pushing back his chair to stand. "I see you managed to leave the house without being compelled to for a change, Essex. Does this mean you're on the mend from what ails you?" He waved his friend over. There were still a few chairs empty at the table.

Richard grinned at his old friend. "I'm just the same as always, Jules. I just don't live here like you do." He waved Niels forward, who was looking apprehensive. "I'd like you to meet a business associate of mine, from Finland. This is Niels Eriksson, and he's expressed much interest in what goes on in the back rooms of gentleman's clubs." He glanced reassuringly at Niels, and went on, "Niels, this is Lord Julian Fortesque. He is nowhere near as impressive as his name."

Niels stepped forward and offered his hand to the other man. "A great pleasure, my lord," he said with a warm smile. He instantly had a good feeling about him.

Julian shook Niels' hand with a grin. "Mr. Eriksson. Anxious to lose some money, are we?"

"On the contrary, my lord. Businessmen are never anxious to lose money, only make it," he said, chuckling a little.

"Oh well, that remains to be seen now, doesn't it! I doubt you'll find us such easy marks here." He glanced at Richard. "Except for Essex, here. He's just a babe in the woods when it comes to cards." He gave Richard a wink.

Richard snorted, but he was secretly pleased that Niels seemed at ease with Julian. "But the secret to parting Lord

Fortesque with his hard-inherited money is to keep buying him drinks. Mind he doesn't vomit on your shoes, though. Can't hold his liquor." Richard was sure Niels would be able to tell it was all good natured teasing.

"Well, drinks all round then, certainly," Niels said, smirking. They were offered chairs and a servant came around to inquire about their choices of refreshment. The other two gentlemen at the table good-naturedly excused themselves to partake of their own dinner, and so it was just the three of them for the first hand.

Julian dealt the cards. Clearly he was no amateur, but Niels wasn't concerned. He'd always had a natural understanding of odds and probabilities. However, he also understood human nature, and the importance of losing a few hands to encourage his opponent to bet more. After a few minutes they were all talking and laughing like old friends.

Richard sipped at his drink, betting lightly and watching Niels out of the corner of his eye. The other man was clearly more relaxed now, and he knew what he was doing when he played. Julian didn't seem to suspect anything out of the ordinary, and that was fine with him. He was just enjoying watching Niels in action.

Under the table, Niels moved his knee towards Richard, until it was just touching. He didn't flinch or even glance at Richard to give himself away. It was his turn to deal and he did it just a little clumsily, on purpose. The bets were still relatively small, at least in comparison to the enormous sum Richard had advanced him to play with. Niels had never seen that much coin in one place in his life.

Richard didn't react outwardly either, but inside he was grinning. This was more fun than he'd had, non-sexually, for a long time. Niels was happy, they were out in public, and even though they couldn't advertise the fact that they were together, they'd go home together tonight.

After a few more hands, Richard heard the door open. He glanced up to see who had come in, and an unease swept over him. It was Jacob. The man scanned the room perfunctorily, then his eyes came back to rest on Richard. He made his way across the room toward them.

Perhaps it was Richard's guilty conscience, but he thought Jacob looked more malevolent than usual tonight. Richard moved his leg away from Niels'; Jacob would notice something like that. The man stopped next to Richard's chair and put a hand on his shoulder. "Well, this seems to be the liveliest table in the room. Mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for an answer, Jacob walked over and took the chair next to Julian, on the other side of Niels.

"Hello, Jacob," Richard said as neutrally as he could. He was one of the very few people in the world who made him nervous. "Niels, may I present Lord Jacob Hardcastle."

Niels turned to greet the newcomer. Clearly if Richard was on a first name basis with him, he must consider him a friend. He smiled brilliantly at him and extended his hand. "My lord, a great pleasure to make your acquaintance." He wondered vaguely about why Richard had pulled away, but he assumed he had some valid reason. When Niels looked into Jacob's eyes, however, he had the unsettling feeling that the man was trying to look straight down into his very soul.

Jacob took Niels' hand, holding it just a bit too long, and Richard most definitely didn't like the way he looked at Niels. He should have known this would happen.

"What a charming accent," purred Jacob, settling into his seat but not taking his eyes off Niels. "I'm so glad Richard chose to bring you around tonight." His eyes flicked to Richard, and said, "We've missed you, Richard. I trust you've been well?" Another glance at Niels, and Richard fought to keep his expression blank.

"Well, you know, business is brisk this time of year," Richard said, pressing his leg briefly against Niels' again, but then pulling away. He signaled for the servant to bring Jacob a drink.

"How kind of you to say, my lord," Niels answered. "Do you wish to be dealt in to the next hand?" He spared Richard a glance. He sensed that he was slightly ill at ease, and he wondered about the cause. Was he worried about this newcomer's opinion of Niels? Had he done something inappropriate by mistake?

"You really need to start calling us by first names, Niels," Julian said, taking another sip of his drink. "If we're going to win all your money, 'twould be a shame to be so formal about it." He snorted a little at his own joke, already seeming well on his way to inebriation.

Richard smiled, relieved that Julian was here to break the tension. Jacob was dealt into the next hand, and won it easily. Richard suspected that Niels was going to make his move soon; he was acting altogether too innocent. Not that anyone would notice, though; he was fairly certain of that. He



was still nervous, though, and barely sipped at his drink. He wanted to stay alert.

As soon as the stakes started to go up, Niels started to win. He would still lose a hand here and there, just to keep it all believable. Soon he'd recouped and doubled the money Richard had given him. He called for another drink, and passed the deck to Jacob to deal.

Julian was still in a festive mood, despite losing a small fortune. He pinned Niels with a mock-glare. "Are you just toying with us here, Eriksson? I think you need substantially more to drink, man."

Niels laughed. "No, no. Just luck I'm afraid. But I'll be more than happy to drink more if you feel it would level the odds." He downed the rest of his scotch in one gulp and signaled for another. "My good Lord Fortesque feels I'm not nearly intoxicated enough," he explained to the servant. He pressed his knee against Richard's again under the table, just briefly, and gave him a brief, sideways smile.

Richard tried his best not to react to the touch, but Niels was just so gorgeous. Unfortunately, he suspected Jacob was thinking the same thing. Jacob insisted on paying for the drinks, and it seemed he wasn't taking his eyes off Niels, either.

The game went on, and the stakes got higher. Nothing they couldn't afford, of course, but Richard admired the way Niels seemed unfazed by it. The man really was an excellent actor. He lost enough to be believable, but he was most definitely winning more than anyone else. He didn't care, of course. But he knew Jacob would take it more seriously.

Richard looked at Niels, and he thought about what they would do when they got back to the house. Maybe some more games ... he realized he had a smile on his face at the same time he shifted his gaze to Jacob. This time, however, Jacob was looking directly at him. Watching Richard watch Niels. An unpleasant lurch ran through him as Jacob raised an eyebrow, an obvious question in his gaze. Richard just stared blankly back, then turned his attention to his drink. Perhaps it was time to take their leave.

Niels was completely oblivious to the exchange of glances. He and Julian were joking about something or other, and he had a large stack of coin in front of him. When the drinks arrived, he turned to Jacob with a guileless smile, toasting him silently for paying. "Thank you, my lord."

Jacob raised his glass to Niels in response, and sipped his drink before stretching slightly. "I need to stretch my legs," Jacob said softly. He looked intently at Niels, and added, "Has Richard given you the full tour of the club? I need a bit of a walk."

Niels smiled and turned to look at Richard for a moment. "Why, no. He hasn't. You mean there's more than this and the dining room?" he asked, turning back to Jacob with an innocent look on his face. He assumed that Jacob wanted to question him, perhaps because of his luck at cards, but whatever the reason, he was sure he could handle it.

Richard's eyes widened at that. He really didn't like the idea of Niels alone with Jacob. He straightened up and said, "Why don't I go with you as well, I could use a walk." He wished now he'd warned Niels about Jacob beforehand.

"What? And leave me here to drink by myself? That's very unsporting of you, Essex," Julian said with an exaggerated frown.

"I'm sure we won't be gone long," Niels said, pushing back his chair. He gave Richard a brief reassuring smile. "And someone must guard my winnings for me." He winked.

Richard's stomach churned. There was no easy way out of this. He had to bow out of it gracefully, lest he make even more of an issue of it. He pretended to be nonchalant about it, and shrugged. "I suppose I'll stay then." He tried to shoot a warning look at Niels, but felt Jacob's eyes on him instead. He met Jacob's eyes and could have sworn he saw a malicious glint in them.

"It's all decided then," Jacob announced, standing up without a trace of inebriation. "Mr. Eriksson, your tour awaits."

Niels unfolded himself gracefully from the chair and waited for Jacob to precede him, and then followed close behind. "The club really is lovely. To be honest, I knew there was more to it, though," he said with a grin as they left the gaming room.

Richard watched them go, eyes narrowed. He didn't like it at all. He drained his drink in one gulp, and tried to focus on what Julian was saying.

Jacob led Niels through the labyrinth of rooms, pointing out various bits of art. The house was quite old, and had just in the last thirty years or so been given over entirely to the club. He led him out on a balcony that overlooked the city. It

was a lovely view. "This is one of my favorite places," Jacob said softly, closing the door behind them.

Niels rested his hands lightly on the railing and looked out across the exacting little garden in the back, and then the stately homes beyond. He could just make out the houses of Parliament at the edge of the river from where they were. "I can see why," he said quietly. "I'd no idea there was this much to this building." He glanced at Jacob over his shoulder. "I suppose there must be many members for such a large place."

"Quite a few, yes, but most of them are too old to get out any longer," Jacob agreed. "We need more young, active members to take up where the old guard has left off." He moved closer to stand alongside Niels at the railing. "I would be more than happy to sponsor your membership if you wished it," he added. "If Richard hasn't already offered." He stood just a little too close to Niels, but not obviously. He wasn't much taller than Niels, but he was much broader across the shoulders, and was quite obviously solidly muscled under the suit.

"I'm afraid my business keeps me in Finland, but I do appreciate the offer, my lord," he said quietly. He turned to lean back against the railing and folded his arms over his chest.

"But you're here now," Jacob purred, dropping his voice. "How much longer will you be gracing us with your presence, Mr. Eriksson? Is there any chance I could steal you away from Richard to show you the town?" He moved imperceptibly closer.

Niels started to get the message loud and clear at long last. His eyes widened for a moment. "How kind, really, my lord, but I'm afraid I've been occupied with work since I've been here. I really don't imagine I'll have time. But I do thank you." He smiled, shifting back just a little. "I was told that your people were unwelcoming, but I've been so pleasantly surprised. Between yourself and Lord Essex I really feel quite at home. Shall we move on to another room?"

A frown crossed Jacob's face, but it quickly disappeared. He stepped back and said, "Of course, Mr. Eriksson. My apologies. Right this way." He led the way through the rest of the club, relating various stories about the things that had happened there, but never getting too close.

Niels relaxed when Jacob backed off, and even managed to be charming and friendly, although he was careful not to be too friendly. Jacob had clearly been making an overture towards him. There was no mistaking it. He resolved to be more careful around the other man in the future, should their paths cross again.

He was even more relieved when their tour came to an end back at the card room. Niels was more than ready to call it a night. When they rejoined Richard and Julian, he started to put his coins away. "I'm afraid it's growing quite late, gentlemen, but I have had a lovely time taking your money. We'll have to do it again some time."

Richard sat up straighter. He could sense a bit of unease in the other man, and said, "An excellent idea. I'm a bit tired myself." He turned to Julian. "At least you have much less coin to carry home in your drunken stupor," he grinned.

Julian smirked. "I'm at least a full bottle short of a stupor, old friend. But yes, Mr. Eriksson will have to give us all another chance to win it back some time."

Niels smiled at Julian. "Didn't you chastise me about titles earlier ... Julian?" he said, chuckling a little. "I shall do my best to make time for you all to win your money back, soon. Until then, many thanks for a lovely evening." He made a brief bow to the gentlemen seated at the table, not quite meeting Jacob's piercing gaze.

Jacob bowed back, and said, "'Tis a pity you must leave so soon, but I shall await the chance to..." he hesitated briefly, eyes flicking over Niels, "To win back my money." He turned to Richard. "Enjoy the rest of the evening, Richard."

Richard stared back at Jacob. That was a veiled threat if he'd ever heard one. Jacob knew, he was sure of it. And he wanted Richard to know he knew. "I shall," he said, and just then the servant arrived with their cloaks.

They made their way out to the carriage in silence.

Once they were away from the club, Niels promptly dismissed Jacob from his mind completely. He doubted anything would come of it, anyway. He didn't imagine his appeal was so great as to cause a complete stranger to go to even the slightest amount of bother to try again. Instead, once they were ensconced in the quiet interior of the carriage, Niels smiled at Richard. "I told you I would win," he said with a grin.

"I never doubted you in the slightest," Richard answered, smiling back. Niels seemed at ease; if Jacob had tried anything, he would surely tell him. So Richard put it out of his

mind as well. He placed his hand discreetly on Niels' thigh, and said softly, "I do hope you're not *too* tired." He was a bit fatigued, but he always wanted Niels.

"I'm afraid I'll need to lie down straight away when we get back," he said, arching an eyebrow. Then he thought of something. "Oh, do you ... would it be all right if I ... went off and did something tomorrow? I'd just like to pay my rent and whatnot, now that I've got a little cash."

"Of course," Richard replied immediately. "I hope you don't think I'm forcing you to stay. Though of course I want you to." They clattered through the darkened streets, nearly empty at this hour. A light rain had begun to fall. "You can have full use of the carriage."

"No, I know. I just wanted to tell you so you wouldn't think I'd run off or something. But I don't need the carriage. I can walk. It's only about an hour's walk." Niels wasn't used to taking carriages, and it would certainly seem odd taking one alone. Not only that, it would mean giving orders to the coach driver, and that seemed even stranger.

"Nonsense. I won't be using the carriage tomorrow, and it will probably be raining. I insist," Richard said firmly. He hated the thought of Niels walking all alone.

Well, it was possibly dangerous to be walking the streets with all that cash. "All right. If you're certain you won't need it. I'll return home that much quicker, then." The carriage pulled to a stop in front of Richard's house and they alighted. Niels followed Richard upstairs after a servant took their cloaks, and a moment later they were alone at long last.

"Thank you for everything. I had a wonderful time this evening. Thank you for ... letting me meet your friends."

"You mean you had a wonderful time taking their money," smiled Richard, pulling Niels into his arms. He'd missed being able to touch him whenever he wanted. "You were amazing." He'd been proud of Niels, and happy that Niels seemed to get on with his friends.

"Well, I have to admit I didn't mind that part at all." He slid his arms around Richard's neck. "It really seemed like that considered me one of them, didn't it?" he asked. Fitting in with Richard's friends was so much more than fantasizing about being an aristocrat for some reason.

"Absolutely," Richard answered. "I don't think they thought anything else, even for a moment." Niels had been perfectly charming, even when he was taking everyone's money. "They'd have no reason to think otherwise." It still bothered him, the way that Jacob was looking at Niels, but now that they were home he was beginning to think that maybe he'd imagined it all.

Niels' eyes widened. "Do you really think so?" He felt amazingly gratified at that. "I missed this though." He rested his head on Richard's shoulder, sliding his fingers into his hair. "I enjoyed it, but ... I kept wishing we were alone, too."

"As did I," Richard sighed. "I want you all the time, Niels. No one has ever made me feel this way." He started to push Niels' vest off. He wanted to touch his perfect porcelain skin.

Niels assisted him, pulling his vest off and letting it fall carelessly to the floor. "Tell me what you want, Richard. Tell me what you want to do," he purred, unbuttoning his shirt.



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*by Jade Falconer*

Soon they were both naked, the firelight reflecting off of their lithe bodies. They soon forgot about anything outside of their room as their passion rose.

## Chapter Eleven

The next morning, they had just finished breakfast and were sitting on the terrace enjoying the unseasonable warmth. Last night's rain was but a memory, but Richard still insisted that Niels take the carriage. He'd let the coachman know to be ready for Niels' directions.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come with you?" Richard asked. He had a strong curiosity about how Niels had lived, but he wouldn't force the issue.

Niels was apprehensive about just that, Richard seeing where he lived. He didn't think of it as being in the past. That one tiny room at the back of the pub was where he kept his things, where he paid the rent. It was his alone, and although it was almost smaller than Richard's dressing room it was still Niels' domain. He didn't want Richard to see it. It would only emphasize the differences between them. Even thinking about it made Niels feel like an intruder in the oversized, luxurious world he was enjoying with its deep feather mattresses and fine silks and velvets. He could pull it off. He could look like he belonged for a while. But he didn't. Not really.

"No," he said quietly. "You shouldn't be in a place like that. I won't be gone long." He pulled himself to his feet, wanting to get it over with. He'd intentionally dressed down for the occasion, choosing the simplest of his new clothes for the trip. "I'd best get going." He lingered, though, standing near Richard's chair.

Richard looked up at him and said, simply, "I understand." He hoped someday Niels would share that with him. He smiled and reached up to put his hands on Niels' hips, pulling him down into his lap for a lingering kiss. Then he released him and said, "I will await your return." He didn't want to say how much he'd miss him.

Niels gave him a warm smile. "I'll hurry back," he purred.

Niels gave directions to the carriage driver. He was used to shortcuts that he'd taken on foot, so it took a while to puzzle out exactly how to get there, but soon enough they were heading down the cobbled streets, east and towards the river. When they got near the pub, Niels stuck his head out the window and called up to get the driver to stop.

He stepped down and walked across the street and into the Boot and Barrel.

He was greeted warmly, but he only lingered long enough to pay his rent and ensure his books and things were safe. It seemed like another world now, one he didn't know if he would ever fit in again.

\* \* \* \*

Richard tried to pretend he wasn't anxious about Niels. But he found it very difficult to concentrate on anything, all day. He ended up pacing around his office by mid-afternoon, having dismissed his steward for the day. He was concerned by how quickly he'd gotten used to Niels' presence. He'd never been emotionally dependent on anyone, and he wasn't sure he liked how it felt. When Niels was nearby, it was fine, but when he was away from him ... he ached. Not sexually,

but something deeper. It made him feel unsettled, something he wasn't accustomed to. What if Niels got tired of whatever it was they were doing? He'd be gone and Richard would never be able to find him if he chose not to be found. He sighed to himself. He needed to stop acting like a lovesick fool.

\* \* \* \*

Niels was glad to be back. Much as he wanted to see his friends, that life was so depressing now, he could hardly stand to be surrounded by it. The carriage pulled up to the front of the house and he got out. He gave the carriage driver a couple of coins for his trouble, even though he knew the man was probably well paid. A few moments later he was knocking on Richard's office door.

Richard was standing at the window now, gazing out at the maze. He'd given up on work, and called over his shoulder, "Come in," without looking. He wasn't expecting Niels yet.

Niels stepped inside silently and closed the door behind him. He could tell that Richard didn't realize it was him from the way he didn't turn around. He made his way swiftly across the room and slid his arms around Richard's waist, leaning against his back. "Miss me?" he asked, resting his chin on Richard's shoulder.

He could smell Niels just before he felt his arms go around him, and Richard smiled. "Desperately," he answered, putting his hands over Niels'. He leaned into him and asked, "How did it go?" He was happy, too happy that Niels was back, but he wasn't sure of the other man's mood.

"Fine." There really wasn't anything to it. He just wanted to pay off his debts and spread his momentary wealth around a little. "I paid my rent for a couple of months. I'm usually behind so I thought it might be a nice change to be ahead." He nuzzled the back of Richard's ear with a soft sigh.

Richard wanted to know more. He was consumed with curiosity about Niels' life. But he decided that Niels would tell him when he was ready to tell him. He wanted to tell Niels there was no need to pay the rent, that he could stay with Richard for as long as he wanted, but he kept that to himself. He turned slowly and pulled Niels into his arms. "I've finished my work for the day," he murmured. "What would you like to do?"

Niels looked into his eyes and smiled. "Whatever you'd like to do. We could play chess again or go riding. It's a beautiful day outside." He was too content to decide. His hands rested lightly on Richard's chest. "Or we could hide in here and snog for a while."

"Hmm," Richard pretended to think. "I think let's start with the snogging and go from there, shall we?" He pressed his lips gently to Niels', settling his hands on the other man's hips. His body was already starting to react to Niels' proximity.

They made love eventually, then had a quiet dinner together. After a bath, they retired to the huge bed once again.

Niels wrapped his arms around Richard and cuddled up to him. "I'm sorry about leaving today. I just had to take care of a few things," he said softly.

Richard nodded, wondering just when he'd gotten so attached to this man that a day away from him had been painful. "I understand," he said. "Niels ... I ... I know nothing about your life," he said finally. "Where do you live? What do you do when you're not ... stealing?" He felt like an idiot for asking, but he was so curious.

Niels turned his eyes up to Richard's face. "Well, I rent a room at the Boot and Barrel. I'm not there too often. I basically just keep my things there and sleep there sometimes. Other than that, I don't do very much." He smiled. "I spend some time walking in the park, pretending to be one of the fancy people there." He chuckled softly.

Richard knew there must be far more to it than just that, and he looked into Niels' eyes. "But, a man as handsome as you ... there must be someone," he bit back unaccustomed jealousy as he finished, "Someone special."

Niels laughed out loud at that. "What, you mean a girlfriend? No, love. Honestly, who'd want a thief? Not that I haven't..." He blushed a little. "Once in a while, but never the same girl twice."

Richard relaxed a little, ashamed at himself for being relieved. "What about your friends? Surely they've been wondering where you've been."

"Not really. Most of my friends ... they probably thought my luck ran out and I was in jail somewhere. But John knows I'm safe, and he won't give my room away now, at least." He shrugged. "When I was younger, you know, I used to have a closer group. When you're a teenager living on the streets you have to protect each other. But ... not really anymore."

To think that Niels had led such a lonely life made Richard sad. Not that there weren't countless other people who were even worse off. But he gave to charity organizations often, and he employed many people. Short of giving away his fortune, he couldn't do much more, and he wasn't that stupid. "You are safe here," he said softly. "For as long as you want to be." He didn't want to keep Niels here against his will, but he did hope he stayed.

Niels smiled. "Thank you. I've done all right, though, all things considered." He kissed him softly on the lips. "You don't have to worry about me," he whispered. He wasn't quite sure why such a fine, important gentleman would show such concern for him. Other than the sex, of course.

But he did worry about Niels, because he loved him. Richard was sure of that now, and not just in post-coital bliss. He was in love, for the first time in his life, and he had no idea what to do about it. Other than try to take care of Niels. If he'd let him. "Rest, Niels," he said softly, stroking his hair.

Niels closed his eyes. "Mmm," he said hummed in agreement. He nuzzled into the crook of Richard's neck and drifted off to sleep.

Richard hadn't intended to sleep, but he dozed off, lulled by Niels' soft breathing and the satisfied ache of his body.

## Chapter Twelve

Niels was still curious about Richard's past, and he broached it again after dinner. The huge house seemed cozy tonight, just the two of them in front of the fire. "Did you grow up in this house?" he asked. He wanted to know about Richard's childhood, especially since he apparently had such an awful opinion of his mother.

Richard nodded. "For part of the year, anyway. During the summers we'd go to the country estate. Then, of course, I was shipped off to various schools."

"Was it awful to leave home like that? Seems silly when you have a perfectly nice home. Did you learn lots of important things? I've heard all the boys at boarding schools are poufs." He smirked a little as he said the last, but he did wonder if Richard's first experience had been then.

Richard laughed. "There was a bit of experimentation, yes. What I learned, though, was how not to get caught breaking the rules." He sighed. "Most of the time I was happy to get away from my mother, actually. That was the main benefit."

"What was so awful about her?" he asked. He wanted to understand. He couldn't imagine a young boy wanting to leave his mum, or such a grand palace of a house.

Richard sighed. "Nothing I ever did was good enough," he said softly. He hated to talk about her. "I can never remember her telling me I did well on anything. She was the same way with my father; he drank himself to an early death because of her nagging. My brother left the house as soon as



he could. The servants had to be paid twice the going salary to put up with her." Worst of all, he could never remember her even giving him a hug. "I always felt that I wasn't wanted. She loved my brother best. She told me that quite often. And after he died ... she told me she wished it had been me." He looked into the fire, embarrassed to have said that much.

Niels gasped a little. "That's perfectly horrid," he said softly. "How did your brother die?" One question led to another, the endless string of Richard's life, and Niels wanted to unravel the whole of it an inch at a time. He leaned closer and took another sip of his drink. "You can tell me any of this is none of my business, of course. I won't take offense."

"I don't mind telling you," Richard said. He felt he wanted to share everything with Niels. "He was killed in a fall from a horse, just after his daughter was born," Richard said. "He was six years older than me. I looked up to him, so much." He sighed. "At least he got to see his daughter. He would have been a great father." Sometimes he'd thought his mother was right, and it should have been him. His brother was so much better at everything.

"I'm so sorry." It seemed the thing to say, and he could relate to losing someone so close. "Are you planning on fulfilling your familial responsibilities and fathering an heir some day? Or will you leave everything to your niece?" He knew that was probably overstepping, but he couldn't help asking.

"I don't want to," Richard said. "I wouldn't want to subject anyone to an unhappy, loveless marriage like my parents

had. Because, though I've had many women, I think you can probably tell where my true interests lie." He smiled ruefully. "Besides, I wouldn't make a very good father, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I think you probably would." Niels grinned a little. The way Richard had obviously enjoyed exposing Niels to every possible amusement he could offer seemed like an important skill in a father. But his mind stuck on the comment about having many women. "I suppose a man in your position must have had many of both sexes." He couldn't help but feel a little insecure about that.

"I have," acknowledged Richard. "It's amazing how many people will throw themselves at you when they think they can get something out of you. And of course why should I say no?" He laughed bitterly. "It's fine as long as you don't start to believe they really want to be with you."

Niels felt sad at that. Was that what Richard thought of him? He had no reason to think otherwise. Niels had nothing of his own. He'd been living under Richard's roof for nearly a fortnight, being fed and clothed like a prince. He didn't even know what to say to it. Surely a simple affirmation that he truly wanted to be with Richard would be pale reassurance. But Niels would be content with Richard with or without the title and the fortune, though there was no way to prove it. "Do you not think some were only seeking the pleasure of your company and the fire of your touch?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

Richard's eyes widened just a bit as he looked at Niels. He only belatedly realized what he'd said and how Niels might take it. He wanted to believe Niels was with him because he

wanted to be. Wanted it more than he could ever say. "I wasn't speaking of you, Niels," he said softly. "What we have is different. Unlike anything I've ever..." He trailed off, hoping he hadn't ruined what they had.

"Still, you might think that of me, for all the advantage is on my side. I have nothing to offer you," he said, looking into Richard's eyes, his brows drawn together slightly. "How am I so different? I let you buy me fine clothes and show me wondrous things that only people of privilege ever experience. All I can do is say that I am not here for what part of your wealth I can share in. Words are cheap, though."

Richard shrugged. "I let you go, and you came back. If you just wanted material things, well, you would not have come back." He looked away, thinking it was time to change the subject. "What of you, then? No doubt you've had the women begging for your affection from when you were old enough to be interested."

"I'm sure if I'd had such riches as you I would have, but no. Not really," he said, blushing a little. "And I haven't devoted much time to seeking that sort of distraction. I suppose I might have been looking in the wrong place, myself."

Richard nodded, then thought of something he'd wanted to ask Niels for a while. He'd noticed the scars on his back when they had sex, but never asked. Perhaps it was the time now. "How did you get those scars on your back?" he asked softly. They looked quite old.

"My uncle," he said quietly. He didn't like to think of it, but he wanted to be as forthcoming as Richard had been with

him. "After my aunt and mother passed, he took to drinking to excess. He wasn't pleased to have a child to care for, particularly when I was no real kin to him. And I barely spoke English at the time, as well. Even now I can't remember what it was that angered him so about me, because I didn't understand what he was saying. But there was no money to ship me back to Finland. I got those scars the night I ran away. I remember thinking if I was to die, there were better ways."

Richard's fists tightened in anger, though the events had taken place many years ago. Being angry now was completely ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. "Have you ever seen the bastard again?" Richard asked. He wanted to kill the man himself. He didn't know what his problem was.

"No. I never went back and he never came looking for me." He shrugged. "But as you can see, I survived it all, so I don't think about it much. I ran into some other lads, older than me, that took me under their wing and it all worked out."

Slowly, a picture of Niels' life was coming into focus for Richard. He felt compelled to know everything about him. "Do you ever feel guilty for stealing?" he asked, hoping it wouldn't upset the other man. Not that he was so principled, but he wanted to know how Niels' mind worked.

Niels' lips twitched. "Should I? I don't think I've ever taken more than someone could stand to lose. Let me put it to you this way. I don't lie. I don't threaten. I don't frighten little old women or children. I don't kick dogs in the street. I steal a little money sometimes. By and large it goes for food, either

for myself or occasionally someone hungrier. I rather think it's just another means of redistributing the wealth." He looked down into his glass, smirking. "Not a very penitent answer, hm?"

Laughing, Richard answered, "No, but it's a very good answer nonetheless." He wanted to ask more, but perhaps this was enough for one night. It was clear that neither of them had particularly happy childhoods, and though Richard never wanted for material things, he had been just as miserable in a different way. "You're practically Robin Hood."

Niels blushed. "I believe that worthy gentleman thought far less of personal gain than I do. Have you suddenly turned into a romantic, my lord?" Richard had always seemed eminently practical, although recently he'd been more and more ... something else. Niels couldn't quite put a finger on what it was. Of course, this time was different. The first time Niels had sojourned in Lord Essex's hall he'd been essentially less than a servant. Now he was nearly a guest.

"Far from it," Richard replied. Though the longer he was with Niels, the more attached to him he was becoming. "But there's another thing I meant to ask you. Soon I'll be moving the household to the country estate. I very much hope you will join me there." He stopped just short of saying 'please.' He really wanted to show Niels what a home really was like.

Niels' eyes widened. "Oh," he said noncommittally. Relocating to the country was a very different thing. In town, he could, in theory, come and go as he pleased. Not that he'd exercised that right, but in the country he would indeed be

wholly dependant on Richard's kindness. "How far is it, and for how long?" he asked.

Richard was a little disappointed in Niels' lack of enthusiasm. "It's about three hours by carriage," he replied. "And I generally stay there for about four months. Sometimes I must return for business, of course." He hesitated. "You'd be free to leave whenever you wanted, if that's what you're worried about," he added softly.

After their earlier discussion, Niels felt he should proceed cautiously. "It's only that I wouldn't wish to overstay my welcome or take advantage of your hospitality." He nibbled on his bottom lip. "If I agree to join you, would you make me a promise?"

Richard looked into Niels' eyes. "I cannot say that until I hear what I am to promise," he said honestly. He felt an unaccustomed flutter in his stomach.

Niels nodded. "That if you tire of my company, you will tell me honestly, and only provide me transport back to town." He looked into Richard's eyes. He would prove that he was not only looking for what he could get, by whatever means he could think of.

"I promise," Richard said seriously, holding Niels' gaze. "And can I ask that if you tire of me, you will tell me honestly as well?" It wouldn't be easy to hear, but he'd rather know for sure. Not just guess after Niels was gone.

Niels doubted very much that he was capable of growing weary of Richard's embrace, but he nodded. "A gentleman's agreement, then," he said. "Let there be no falsehood or discomfort between us while we have means to prevent it."

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"Agreed," Richard nodded, and reached for Niels' hand. But instead of shaking it, he brought it to his lips and kissed the back of his hand gently, never taking his eyes from Niels'. He felt like they'd reached some kind of accord, and though his feelings ran deeper than he'd like, he felt reassured.

## Chapter Thirteen

Soon it was time to begin the move to the country house. For once, Richard was really looking forward to it. He couldn't wait to show Niels the woods and the lake, and possibly make love to him outdoors.

Carriages were already going on ahead to prepare the house, and make sure everything was stocked for their arrival. The house was hours by carriage from anything at all, so they had to be prepared.

Then the house was ready, and it was time for Richard and Niels to go. Their trunks had been packed, and all that remained was to get in the carriage. It was a three hour ride, and that was a long time to sit in a carriage, even a plush one.

Niels was interested to see Richard's country home. Since he'd been to England he'd never been out of London. The weather was getting progressively warmer, and he dressed in his lightest clothes. He climbed up into the carriage, settling in for the long drive. Richard had thoughtfully arranged for a hamper of food to be placed inside with them, and Niels couldn't help looking inside to see what there was. Bread and cheese, of course, sliced salmon, grapes and oranges, and two large jugs, one of ale, one of fresh water. There was also a tin of ginger cookies, sent along by cook, specifically for Niels, and he smiled. It was very much like he was a part of their little family.



"We haven't even got out of London and you're already at the food," teased Richard amiably. Niels' appetite hadn't seemed to get smaller even after all this time. "I do hope the cook planned accordingly for the summer." He sat back, dressed as casually as he ever did, in shirtsleeves and black trousers.

"Well ... perhaps there will be other things to distract me when we're out of traffic," he said with a grin. He pulled off a sprig of grapes and popped one into his mouth. It wasn't too long before they were rolling through the old city gates and onto the main north road. As minutes passed, the landscape got increasingly rural, and Niels leaned close, resting his head on Richard's shoulders. "What do you usually do on long drives?" he asked.

"Read," Richard replied, indicating the newspaper he didn't feel at all interested in at the moment. "Or just enjoy the scenery." He looked down, almost afraid to admit this. "Other than parties, I've never brought anyone out here with me before," he whispered. He wanted Niels to know he was special.

Niels looked up into Richard's eyes. There was no one to see them but the occasional cow. The outriders kept well ahead and well behind the carriage, and the driver was atop the box. All the other servants had been sent ahead. Niels shifted in his seat, wriggling up into Richard's lap, one arm around his shoulders. He slid his fingers through Richard's hair, smiling down at him. "I'm honored," he said softly.

Richard sighed happily, his hand coming to settle on Niels' hip. "I can't wait to show you everything," he said. His only

happy childhood memories were of the country estate. He wanted to share this with Niels. "In Finland, did you live out in the country, or in a city?" he asked. He wondered what the countryside looked like that far north.

Niels shrugged. "We lived in a town on the outskirts of the city. It wasn't like this. It was still more like the city than the country. The only time I've seen anything like this was on the trip." He pressed a kiss against Richard's temple. "Thank you so much for bring me with you." He wouldn't have wanted to miss it for anything.

Richard smiled at Niels. It was seldom that they were this tender. They usually gave in to the lust that seemed to enflame them, but they'd made love that morning and Richard wasn't quite as frantic for Niels. He still felt the stirring low in his belly, though, because the beautiful man was sitting on his lap. But he knew they had hours, and he didn't feel rushed. He kissed Niels again, gently sliding his tongue in Niels' mouth.

The kiss seemed to go on for a long time. It was unhurried and meandering. Niels' fingers stroked at the back of Richard's neck and he leaned against his chest, not escalating, but not stopping either. The carriage rocked slowly along the well tended road, and no one was about to bother them.

Niels had no idea where the time went, but suddenly they were pulling off the road, onto a long, twisting drive. He raised his head and glanced out the window to see a gate with regal looking gatehouse straddling it in the distance. "Are

we here already?" he asked, sliding off Richard's lap, but still sitting right up against him.

"Nearly," Richard replied, leaning over to look out the window. Tall trees lined the drive, so old they arched up over the road, creating a lovely sun-dappled effect that Richard had always loved. It was several minutes before the house even came into view; the grounds were that large.

Niels watched out the window, wide-eyed. "All this is yours?" he asked breathlessly. It seemed more like an entire country to itself, rather than just an estate. As they came around a sweeping curve in the drive, the manor house revealed itself. Two broad cut stone staircases curved upwards to a front entrance framed by Greek columns. "It looks like the bloody houses of Parliament, or a palace or something," he said, completely overwhelmed.

Richard was accustomed to the sight of the place, and it filled him with warm memories, not awe. He tried to look at it objectively, though, and had to admit it was rather impressive. "Yes," he said simply. "It's been in the family for generations. I really had nothing to do with it." Richard was being modest; he had nearly doubled the wealth his father had built up since he'd had control of the business. But the estate had always been there. He smiled at Niels, who looked awed.

The carriage rambled up to the front of the stairs where a line of servants waited to greet their master, each one of them dressed in Essex livery. Niels' awe changed to a feeling of being daunted. He wondered if these country servants would be as silently accepting of their master's strange

foreign traveling companion as the city ones had. The door was opened and a velvet covered step was placed on the ground for Richard to step down upon. Niels waited and followed him out, wondering if some sort of speech was in order or if he would just walk on past them all.

Richard hated speeches, so he briefly introduced Niels as a friend from Finland who'd be staying with them, and then said a quiet word to each of the servants as he passed. He'd known most of them all his life, and they were more like family. Finally they walked through the doors and Richard paused so Niels could take it all in. He smiled, knowing Niels would be amazed by it, and he tried to see the house as a newcomer would.

The entrance hall soared three stories high in gleaming white marble. Two matching staircases curved up each side of the entrance hall, both thickly carpeted in dark blue. A crystal chandelier roughly the size of a small phaeton hung above their heads. Before them was another double door. Under each stair were smaller doors, that presumably led to the first floor corridors and eventually to the belowstairs areas.

Niels turned to Richard. "Nice place," he said softly, deliberately understating things, because there weren't words enough to describe such grandeur.

Richard laughed softly. "Yes, I like it," he said, smiling. "Would you like the grand tour now or would you like to freshen up first?" He felt a little dusty from the road, but it could wait if Niels wanted to look around. He leaned close and whispered in the other man's ear, "My bed here is even larger than the one in London." He couldn't wait to see Niels in it.

"I think the grand tour might take the better part of a day. Perhaps freshening up would be a better plan. The tour could wait until tomorrow, couldn't it?" He didn't want Richard to think he wasn't interested, but after the long drive, he thought a bath and some food and a quiet evening would be welcome by both of them.

"Of course," Richard said smoothly, taking Niels' arm and guiding him up the steps. "Let me show you to our bedroom," he said softly, barely restraining himself from nuzzling Niels' ear. He was ready to be completely alone with Niels, even if they didn't have sex.

Niels followed beside him. "My lord. If you are to have guests here, perhaps it would be wise for me to have my own room, for appearances." He looked at Richard's face as they reached the second floor. "Even if I'm almost never within it."

"Already arranged," Richard replied, glad that Niels understood. "I'll show you later, and anyway we won't be having guests for a while." The room was just down the hall, nearly as sumptuous as his own. He guided him to a set of heavy, dark wood doors that were so well balanced they swung open at a touch. "Welcome home," he said softly.

Niels' reaction was little more than a sharp intake of breath at Richard's words, but he felt them like an embrace. Home? Was he really home? But then the grandeur of the room distracted him from such thoughts. If he'd thought the London townhouse was beyond belief, this one made it look like a hovel. The bed was indeed larger than the other, and he was sure it must have been assembled within the room. The ceiling was nearly two stories and the bed canopy rose

nearly to the top, draped with heavy deep blue velvet curtains and matching coverlet. "Dear God," he said softly.

Richard smirked, pulling Niels into the room and closing the doors behind them. "It's a bit much, I know, but my grandfather had the bed made especially for the room. It's quite comfortable, I assure you." He walked over to the bay windows. The curtains had been drawn open because the staff knew that Richard liked the sunshine, and the view. He looked out wistfully. Everything looked the same as he remembered it.

Niels joined him at the window, only momentarily distracted by the sight of a pot of hot chocolate and buttered toast on a silver tray next to the bed. He looked out across the grounds. "This is like heaven," he breathed. "I've never seen anyplace as beautiful."

Richard looked over at Niels, and smiled. He'd never thought he'd want to share this with anyone, but watching Niels take it all in was making him realize how amazing it was as well. Niels had an open, almost childlike expression of wonder on his delicate features and it was very becoming on him. "I'm glad you like it," he said softly, meaning every word.

He smiled at Richard. "I probably sound very unworldly, don't I?" he asked. But he could tell Richard didn't think badly of him for it, and he leaned against his shoulder, resting his head there with a quiet sigh.

"It doesn't matter," Richard reassured him, wrapped his arm around Niels' slim waist. "I want you to enjoy everything." He glanced over at the tray. "Every time I came

here as a child, all alone in a carriage from school, the cook would make sure I had hot chocolate and toast waiting for me. It was my favorite thing." He steered Niels over to the tray. "Would you like some?" The familiarity of it all was comforting.

"I suppose you could convince me," he said, laughing a little. There were a pair of chairs beside the bed and Niels sat in one of them. "It smells delicious." Such a simple thing, but after the journey it was comforting. "Sounds like the cook was nicer than your mum," he commented, and then instantly wished the words back.

Richard faltered for just a moment as he poured two cups of the thick hot liquid. "She was," he said quietly, handing Niels a cup and sitting in the other chair. "I'm sure she felt sorry for me and was trying her best to make up for my mother." He often thought that if it hadn't been for some of the servants, and the fact that he spent most of his time away, he might not have turned out as stable as he had. Of course, how stable was he really? He'd spent his adult life running from responsibility, preferred men, and had never let anyone get close to him, and...

He stopped that line of thought. He didn't want to put a damper on the day.

Niels accepted the cup and reached over to put his hand on Richard's sleeve. "Sorry. I spoke out of turn. I'm just weary from the traveling. Everything's so lovely. I'm a little overwhelmed. I thought only kings lived like this." He wasn't sure if he was subconsciously looking for a chink in the

elegant armor that surrounded him, perhaps to make his own lot seem less deprived.

Richard looked up at Niels. "It's all right. Please don't worry about it. It's all in the past." He'd actually preferred the isolation of his room at school to the tension whenever his mother was near, even if the surroundings weren't as sumptuous. He sipped at his drink, letting the flavor take him back.

"Is there a bath here like the one in London?" he asked, trying to change the subject. A nice long soak in warm water sounded wonderful, and he suspected that, if anything, the facilities would be even finer than in town.

"Of course," Richard grinned. "Though that was my doing. I have a penchant for hot baths, as you might have noticed." He'd had two of the enormous clawfoot tubs made, one for the London townhouse and one for here. "Can I interest you in a bath?" he asked, knowing what the answer would likely be.

"Only if you'll join me in it," he purred.

When the bath was ready, Niels put down his delicate china cup and followed Richard into the other room. He shed his clothes slowly, already a little sleepy from the hot chocolate and the relaxed mood. The air in the room with the tub was warmed by the water, and in a moment he stood naked, ready to climb in.

Richard couldn't get enough of just looking at Niels' lithe body. He stepped into the tub, taking Niels' hand to pull him in as well. He sighed at the hot water, almost scalding. He loved it that way.



Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

They christened the bathtub, nearly flooding the bathroom as the water splashed over the edge.

## Chapter Fourteen

The next two weeks were a blur of activity. Niels did get the grand tour the following day, and the day after that Richard took him out riding. He found he had a natural aptitude for it, almost as if he could charm the horse as well as he could charm most people.

The grounds were lovely, and once Niels felt secure on horseback, riding out to the homewoods became a daily activity. He could see why Richard enjoyed it so, and the slender aristocrat looked robust after a good ride, his face glowing with health. He didn't think Richard could appear more attractive to him, but with sunshine and fresh air, he practically radiated vitality.

They had sex in a different room of the house every night. It became somewhat of a game to them. Niels' favorite was on the floor in the very center of the gapingly huge entrance hall after the servants had gone to bed. Any one of them might have been up and about for any reason. The risk was enormous. But he found that only heightened the experience for both of them.

Richard also showed him a path through the woods that lead to a fresh water stream, completely undisturbed by man. The water was still a little brisk, but that didn't stop them from having a swim. They ended up laughing like children before they made love on a blanket they'd spread out on the bank.

It was an idyllic existence, but finally their activities were curtailed. It was tradition that brought a house party to Richard's country home. At tea time one afternoon Richard's friend Lord Fortesque arrived, and by dinnertime four more carriages had pulled up the winding drive. Niels was still interested in maintaining an acceptable appearance in front of Richard's friends. After such a long sojourn in his world, Niels felt like he could manage it fairly well. He dressed impeccably, and said all the right things, and knew when not to say anything. There were a few ladies in the party, and they were instantly drawn to him. Niels flattered them, but kept a certain distance.

Because of the long distances involved, the party usually ended up lasting nearly a week, as people came and went, and certainly the house was large enough for everyone to sleep over. Richard usually looked forward to the party, as it was a chance to get together with old friends and generally act like idiots for a few days. But now that Niels was part of his life, he was a little reticent. It certainly would be impossible for them to make love wherever they wanted, though Richard didn't intend to stay celibate. He knew he would ache for Niels even more now that he couldn't have him at a moment's notice.

They lazed about on the huge terrace, drinking coffee and things stronger, when the butler announced the arrival of Lord Hardcastle. Richard felt his stomach twist just a bit when he realized who had arrived. He had a vague feeling of unease about Jacob; the way he'd looked at Niels, and the fact that he knew Richard's secrets was certainly the cause.

He pushed away those thoughts; after all, he'd known Jacob half his life and counted him as a friend. He stood and greeted the dark-haired man.

"About time you showed up!" There was a general chorus of agreement.

Jacob walked out into the sunshine and looked around. "All the usual suspects, I see." His eyes paused on Niels, his smile widening, but he made no comment. "I see you've begun without me. I shall try to catch up."

Niels was having a conversation with one of the married ladies while most of the others played a game of croquet on the lawn. He'd quickly become the darling of every female in the house, including the staff. He glanced up when Jacob joined their party. He remembered distinctly how the intimidating lord had made subtle overtures to him at Richard's club. The look he gave Niels confirmed in his own mind that he hadn't imagined it.

After a moment his companion went to join her sisters at the lawn games, and Niels sipped his drink, hoping her recently vacated seat would not immediately be filled.

Richard watched though narrowed eyes as Jacob made a beeline for the vacant seat next to Niels. He'd have to have a word with Niels later.. He never moved, though, just stayed lounging back in his chair.

Jacob settled into the chair beside Niels, sipping a glass of chilled wine. He turned to the smaller man and said, "I must say I am pleasantly surprised to find you here, Niels. I see the lure of England is strong enough to keep you." He flicked

his gaze at Richard, as if to signify he suspected that what was keeping Niels here was not the weather.

"My lord Essex has been exceptionally generous with his hospitality, and I've been keeping an eye on a few investments in London." He hoped that would satisfy. More explanation he wasn't prepared to give, although he had a feeling Jacob suspected the real reason he was still there. But of course acting was something he was quite familiar with, so he glanced off at the ladies in the field. "And who could deprive themselves of such amusements when they are offered," he said with a leer towards the occasional flash of delicate ankle. Perhaps if Jacob thought he was only interested in women it would throw him off the scent.

Jacob laughed, following Niels' gaze. "Of course not, who could resist," he agreed, taking a large drink. He raised his eyes to Richard. "Our Lord Essex certainly knows how to throw a party."

Richard raised his glass to Jacob, and said, as neutrally as he could manage, "Thank you, Lord Hardcastle. I do hope you enjoy the festivities." *All except Niels*, he warned silently, hoping he wouldn't have to be more explicit in his instructions.

Niels took another sip, then Julian came over and engaged Jacob in conversation, much to Niels' relief. An hour before tea time the ladies went inside to freshen up, and the gentlemen wandered into the cavernous drawing room. Niels stayed slightly apart from the group. He took a chair near Lord Fortesque, and the two were soon engrossed in a conversation about horse racing. Niels stole a glance at

Richard, not wanting to look to him too often, but when he did their eyes met. Niels couldn't help but smirk a little.

Richard relaxed fractionally when Jacob seemed to be keeping his distance from Niels. He got into a conversation about banking with a couple of the men. He did keep glancing at Niels, though, and when their eyes met it made him feel warm inside. He found himself trying to think of an excuse to get Niels alone, if only for a few moments. He wanted to touch the other man, kiss him. Pin him against a wall.

When the ladies rejoined the group for tea, Niels felt slightly more at ease. Jacob made him uncomfortable, and although he was reasonably sure he could handle him, he knew for a fact that he would do nothing untoward with ladies present. Besides, the ladies tended to form a protective barrier around Niels, at least the ones who believed they had no chance with Richard.

The party was going in full swing by dinner, and Richard had the servants lay out the food in a buffet sort of arrangement, so people could come and go when they chose. The liquor was flowing and the food was sumptuous, and Richard hadn't gotten the reputation for the best parties for nothing. The party was starting to slide toward bacchanalian by the time dinner was finished, and people were already starting to sneak off or pass out. Richard began to have some hope that he might sneak off himself for a bit soon, with Niels of course.

Niels had ensconced himself with a couple of wealthy gentlemen in the study, playing Hazard. He wasn't quite as good with dice games as with cards, but he still had

uncommon luck. He felt like quite the gentleman of leisure, sipping fine scotch and enjoying a cigar with a couple of lords, one of whom he was reasonably certain had been the victim of one of his daring late night escapades. But that was another life. He could now steal from the man right out in the open. He knew Richard was busy with his guests, and to some extent he felt like he was responsible for entertaining everyone as well, where he could.

Richard had sent the staff off to bed, and given many of them the next day off. They could all fend for themselves, and he didn't want to trouble them more than he had to. So it was that the brandy was running low, and he decided to go and fetch a couple more bottles from the cellar himself. He glanced at Niels as he left, glad the younger man was enjoying himself.

Niels glanced up just to see Richard disappear out of the door. They hadn't spent more than a moment together all day, but he knew they'd be together soon, and it would be that much more exciting for the deprivation of touch they'd suffered for hours. His attention was drawn back to the game, and he placed his bet, but then, out of the corner of his eye he noticed Jacob exiting from the same door. He felt a moment's concern. He didn't trust the darkly handsome aristocrat, although he knew he was probably overreacting. Richard had known the man for years. Surely he was in no danger.

Richard was on his way back from the cellar with two bottles of brandy in his hands. He looked up to see Jacob emerging into the hallway. He assumed that the man was on

his way to the kitchen, or to relieve himself, but when Jacob spotted him, he headed straight for Richard.

"Excellent party, Essex. I'm glad to catch you alone for a moment," the taller man drawled, leaning against the wall. He gave the impression of inebriation but Richard knew Jacob never allowed himself to get that drunk.

"I'm happy you're enjoying it," Richard replied warily. "But I really should get back to my guests..." He tried to slip past Jacob, but he moved back into his path.

"Now, now, Richard, I'm sure you can spare a few moments for an old friend," Jacob purred, leaning close and looking closely at Richard, insinuating with his voice. Richard stopped in his tracks as Jacob went on, "Even Mr. Eriksson can do without you for a few minutes."

Richard looked at Jacob, a chill passing over him. "Are you insinuating something sordid?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

Jacob snorted. "I don't have to insinuate anything. It's rather obvious, Richard. To me, anyway. Not that I blame you. He's lovely." He raised an eyebrow, clearly challenging Richard to deny it.

Richard sighed. He had been fairly sure that Jacob could tell, but he really didn't care to discuss it. "Did you have a point, then?"

Jacob shook his head. "Oh, a sore subject. You're smitten, aren't you? I've never seen you this way. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Piss off, Hardcastle," Richard responded automatically. He couldn't very well deny that he was sleeping with Niels. But



he wouldn't admit to having any feelings for him. He didn't want to admit weakness in front of Jacob. He was like a predator; he could sense it.

Jacob grinned more widely. "So he's no one special, is he? Just another fuck? Up to the highest bidder?"

Richard felt rage begin to well up inside him. "Think what you want. You think you've got it all figured out, after all." He couldn't admit that Niels was more than a casual fuck, because he hadn't even admitted it to Niels. To tell Jacob something that intimate, he couldn't do it. He'd seen the other man's absolutely vicious nature in action many times, and as far as he was concerned, it was better to keep him as a friend than an enemy. His father had taught him that; always keep your enemies in plain sight; that way you know what they're up to.

That made Jacob laugh, and Richard suddenly realized the other man wasn't one bit drunk. "Come on, Richard. I know what you like, and he's just the type. Pretty, delicate, obedient, slutty. It's just charming how he tries to fit in. He must be very good at his job if you've kept him around this long."

Richard's jaw clenched, and he stepped forward. He was tired of Niels being discussed like meat.

Jacob must have sensed Richard's rage, because he stepped back and put his hands up, placating. "Relax, Richard, I'm just joking with you. I'm happy you're happy. Can't old friends be concerned about one another?"

Richard looked into Jacob's dark eyes for a long moment, then relaxed. "My apologies for overreacting, Jacob." He tried

a smile, though it was forced. Jacob wouldn't try anything with Niels, and even if he did, surely Niels would rebuff him. Perhaps he should mention it to Niels, but no. No sense worrying the other man. "Let's go back to the party, shall we?"

They made their way back into the drawing room, where everyone was still sitting around enjoying themselves. Richard's pleasant level of drunkenness was gone, however, and when he caught Niels' eye he felt an unpleasant twist in his stomach. Was he smitten? Was he in love with Niels? Quite likely. And having feelings meant they were going to get hurt eventually. Nothing lasted forever, especially a relationship as tenuous, and technically illegal, as theirs. Surely Niels felt nothing for him, not like Richard felt for Niels. He leaned against the fireplace, feeling weary suddenly.

Niels felt acutely aware of Richard, even though he was across the room. He let the gentlemen he was with recoup enough of their losses that they wouldn't feel cheated, and then suppressed a yawn. "I fear I'm already on country hours, my lords. Perhaps we could have another game before you leave, but for now I must retire." He bid them both good night and extricated himself gracefully. The ladies of the party had all retired already, and he nodded meaningfully at Richard as he slipped out of the room.

Richard watched Niels go, hoping he could get away soon, too. He felt Niels' absence acutely, and it only confirmed his fears. He felt far too much for the other man. When it did end, as it inevitably would, he was going to be hurt. But still, all he could think of with each passing moment was how soon

he could get upstairs. He didn't know if Niels was truly tired, or if he'd be in Richard's room or the one adjacent. He just needed to get out.

Finally, the party began to break up and he felt comfortable retiring as well. He avoided Jacob's knowing gaze as he said his goodnights, and then he slipped upstairs as quickly as possible. His heart was pounding and his cock was hardening even as he approached the master bedroom, and he was disgusted with himself. Niels probably wasn't even there. But God, he wanted to hold Niels in his arms.

The massive doors swung open, and he let his eyes adjust as he closed them again. The lights were low, and as he looked at the bed, the candlelight flickered off pale skin on the bed. Niels was there, naked and waiting for him, like an erotic dream.

When Richard entered the room, Niels felt himself relax, felt a certain anxiety ease, and he sat up slowly. He just wanted to touch the other man, to please him. He stood and walked slowly towards him, stopping just before him. He knew what Richard liked by now, and he wanted to show him how much he'd missed being near him all day. He slid to his knees in front of the other man, looking up at his face, and deftly unfastened his trousers. Richard was hard and ready for him and Niels wasted no time. He curled his fingers around Richard's cock, drawing it gently out, and pressed a wet, open kiss against the thick head before sucking him into his mouth with almost agonizing slowness.

Richard gasped; but as good as it felt to have Niels' mouth on him, he'd wanted something more. Something more

personal. Jacob's words echoed in his head. Was Niels just a whore after all? Here to service Richard, and weasel his way into polite society? Certainly he could never have pulled it off without Richard's help. Would Niels only be here until he established himself, then move on? Undoubtedly he missed the ladies; he'd noticed how they flocked around Niels. Niels had had no inclination toward men before Richard had forced himself on him the first time. He liked it, there was no disputing that, but Richard couldn't fool himself that Niels would be content being Richard's boy forever. His mind was already in turmoil because of Jacob, and he'd wanted some reassurance that what he had with Niels was more, somehow.

He stepped back and pushed Niels away from him. "What are you doing? You don't have to do that," he said, more roughly than he'd intended. He wanted to hold Niels. Not be sucked off by him.

Niels tumbled back a little and caught himself. Was this some sort of game? He looked confused. "I know I don't have to. I thought..." He pulled himself to his feet, frowning a little. He'd meant to make Richard happy. "What do you want, then?" he asked. He took a hesitant step forward.

Richard wanted to tell Niels that he wanted everything. All of Niels. Including his heart. But he couldn't. Niels clearly only thought of himself as here to service Richard. He'd come in here wanting to make tender love to Niels, but he could see that was just a silly, romantic thing to want. He looked down at Niels' naked body; he did burn for him, intensely. But he'd thought that maybe ... it was more than that. He hardened his heart and said, "Get on the bed, then." If sex was all it

was, he'd best take what he could get. He just wished he knew why he felt so hurt.

There was something about the way Richard said it that was so much colder than usual. "Are you all right?" he asked, stepping closer. He put his hand lightly on Richard's face. "Drink too much, did you?" His first impulse was concern. This wasn't like Richard. There must be something wrong. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

Richard wanted to pull Niels into his arms and kiss him deeply, but he held back. "Yes, I drank too much," he agreed, his voice softening just a bit. "My head hurts. I need to make the pain go away." He'd almost said he needed Niels to make the pain go away, but he'd stopped himself just in time. He was just starting to realize how ridiculous he was acting.

Niels smiled a little. "Mmm, I think that can be arranged," he purred. He took Richard's hand and tugged him towards the bed. When he felt it hit the backs of his legs, he pulled Richard's cravat loose and started to unbutton his shirt. Each act was, to Niels, illustrative of how he felt about Richard. He wanted to tell him without words. It never occurred to him that it might appear more as seduction than affection.

Richard couldn't help but respond to Niels' touches. He wanted him so very much it hurt. And it hurt even more to know that Niels didn't return those feelings. It made him feel empty, but that didn't lessen his desire. Niels was good at what he did. Very good. Soon Richard was as naked as Niels, and pressing him to the bed. Mercifully, he didn't have to think any more, just feel, and it felt incredible. He took Niels more roughly than usual, but he was desperate for him.

Niels collapsed on the bed when it was done, spent and weak from yet another amazing climax. Every time with Richard was amazing. Every time left him feeling as if he could die happy right then and there. When Richard spread his perfect body out on the bed next to Niels, he instinctively turned towards him, curled around him, holding on, sighing with contentment, a soft smile curving his full lips.

It was so cruel that Richard had finally found the perfect partner, one who could take everything he could dish out, and loved it as much as he did. It was cruel because Richard had fallen in love for the first time. It made it so much more impossible. He held Niels for a long moment, just reveling in his warmth, wishing it was real and not just post-coital afterglow. Then he heard soft footsteps in the corridor outside, and he stiffened. No doubt it was only one of the staff, or a lost guest, but it made him think of Jacob. He hated it, because he loved the feeling of Niels in his arms, in his bed, but he whispered. "Perhaps, since we have guests, you should sleep in your room. Just until they're gone." He regretted the words the instant they came out of his mouth.

Niels was nearly asleep when Richard spoke, and he looked up at him, not sure for a moment if he'd heard him right. He leaned back and looked into his eyes. "Of course," he said softly, pulling away. The moment he was out of the bed he felt the chill of the room on his skin. Too many things were going through his head as he found his clothes draped over a chair and started to put them on again. Was Richard tired of him? For the third time he wondered if he'd made some sort of awful blunder and embarrassed Richard in front of his

friends. Maybe Richard was ashamed of him. Maybe being surrounded by so many elegant people was a reminder of how common Niels really was, despite his pretensions.

Or maybe Richard wanted to sleep with someone else.

Whatever the reason, it wasn't simply the risk of discovery, of that Niels was sure. They'd taken too many risks and found them that much more thrilling for the danger. When he finally pulled his boots back on, he turned and nodded to Richard. "Good night, my lord," he said, barely more than a whisper. Then he walked stiffly towards the adjoining door and went through to his room. There was no fire in the grate. No candle was lit. He shed his clothes quickly and slid between the covers. The bed was so cold.

The moment Niels was gone, Richard wanted to call him back. Beg him to stay. Forever. But he couldn't. It was best this way. Sooner or later he was going to have to get used to sleeping alone again.

But sleep was a very long time in coming.

## Chapter Fifteen

The following morning, Niels felt like he hadn't slept at all. He washed in the basin in his room rather than asking if he could take a proper bath, and got dressed. He thought about leaving. But he'd made Richard promise to tell him if he wanted him to go. That was the only thing that held him back. He put extra care into what he wore, doing his best to fit in with the guests. When he looked in the mirror, though, all he saw was a dirty little pickpocket who had no business being in such a fine place.

He went out early, helping himself to his usual horse, because Richard had said that he could. He'd gotten used to riding in the morning, and he craved the fresh air and sunshine to clear his head. He urged the gentle mare to a gallop when they got far enough from the house, and she seemed to enjoy stretching her legs, although Niels felt a little like he was biting off more than he could chew. He didn't fall, though, and eventually they cantered back to the stables.

When he returned to the house, the guests were just wandering in to break their fast. The meal was informal, so Niels took a seat near the far end of the table, leaving room in case anyone of higher rank came late. Richard was at the head of the table, but he could barely look at him. He concentrated, instead, on having a frivolous conversation with one of the young ladies about the London season, and on choosing the correct silverware for each course that was brought to him.



Almost every morning since they'd been together, Richard and Niels had made love. Richard loved morning sex, and he was always aroused in the morning. Even more so since he'd gotten used to having Niels with him. But it wasn't just the sex. He missed their conversations, and the sweet kisses, and their baths together. He couldn't wait for this party to be over. If things would even be the same then ... Niels wouldn't even look at him now. Perhaps he really was getting tired of him, and wishing he could make off with one of the attentive ladies. That hurt more than Richard could imagine. He couldn't lose Niels.

Niels went out of his way to be charming and polite to everyone he encountered over the course of the day. He said nothing especially flirtatious or provocative. When a lady required an escort for a tour of the gardens he graciously offered his services. When Lord Fortesque needed someone to play cards with, Niels obliged him. He was bending over backwards to be agreeable to everyone in the party, hoping that whatever he'd done the previous day would be forgiven.

Richard tried his best to get a moment alone with Niels, but it seemed fate was conspiring against them. Either that, or Niels was deliberately avoiding him. He'd never gone this long without touching or kissing Niels since the other man had come back, and Richard was miserable. Finally, just as everyone was filing into the dining room, Richard hung back and intercepted Niels. He pulled him into a small room across the hall and closed the door quickly. He just looked at Niels for a long moment, then pressed him hard against the closed

door with his body. He couldn't wait, just pressed his lips to Niels', hungrily.

Niels whimpered into the kiss. His body responded automatically, and his hands came up to grip at Richard's shoulders. He hadn't realized how badly he'd been aching for this all day. Perhaps he'd redeemed himself. Or, perhaps this was all he was good for to Richard. For a moment he pushed the thought aside. The kiss was too amazing to let sad thoughts taint it.

Richard kissed Niels as long as he dared, then pulled back panting. "I missed you," he whispered, meaning last night, today, everything. He wondered for a brief moment if he was making a fool of himself, if Niels was laughing at him behind his back. He shoved that thought out of his mind, and decided that tonight, no matter what, he'd keep Niels with him.

Niels' eyes widened. "I missed you, too," he whispered. He was almost embarrassed at how badly he had missed Richard. "Won't ... won't your guests become curious?" he asked. It wasn't that he wanted to leave, but he didn't want to bring any censure on Richard.

Richard closed his eyes. He'd had enough. He no longer cared what his guests thought. He couldn't just flaunt his relationship with Niels in front of them, though. It would be suicide. "Yes, we must get back," he admitted, stepping back. Maybe Niels didn't need this as much as he did after all.

Niels nodded and in a moment they were back in the dining room. The atmosphere was relatively informal, so they weren't missed for the short time that they were gone.

The meal itself, though, seemed to drag interminably. The conversation was superficial, and Niels was hard-pressed to be entertaining when all he wanted was to be back in Richard's arms for a few moments. Niels found himself drinking more wine than usual in an attempt to pass the time. He made a mental note not to gamble after dinner. In fact, he was feeling weary from the stress of trying to conform to the restrictive rules of polite society. When the ladies finally adjourned themselves, and the gentlemen retired to the drawing room, Niels stayed at the edges of the group, considering going up to bed early.

Richard, too, was planning to leave as soon as it was politely possible. He watched Niels out of the corner of his eye, aching to touch him and kiss him and make it all up to him. It wasn't fair, and last night he'd made a mistake by sending Niels away to the other room. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Unfortunately, he was soon cornered by Lord Quigley, who was most likely going to be a member of Parliament soon, and Richard couldn't afford to be impolite.

Niels saw that Richard was well and truly stuck. He slipped out of the room and went upstairs alone.

Richard watched Niels go helplessly. He hoped the other man was going to wait for him. Unfortunately, he was looking away when Jacob slipped out of the room after Niels.

\* \* \* \*

Niels retired to his own room. He was reasonably certain that Richard would wake him if he drifted off to sleep. He sat in the chair by the bed and pulled off his boots.

Jacob waited a moment to be sure that no one was following him, then walked up to the door that he'd just seen the slender young man go through. He hesitated, then turned the doorknob. It was unlocked. He pushed it open and strode through confidently.

Niels looked up, sitting up straight in the chair. "Lord Hardcastle? Have you lost your way? I think your room is at the other end of the corridor," he said innocently, standing up.

Jacob smirked and closed the door firmly behind him. "I know where my room is, Mr. Eriksson. I was looking for you. Lord Essex told me where I might find you," he lied. He leaned back against the closed door, looking utterly confident.

Niels raised his eyebrows. He didn't like the way this was starting to sound. "Is there something I can do for you?" he asked.

Jacob laughed, low and soft and menacing. "Oh yes, there are many things you can do for me." He pushed off the door and walked closer.

Niels took an unconscious step backwards. "My lord, I fear you may have gotten the wrong idea."

Jacob advanced another step. "Oh, I think not. Richard and I had a nice chat today." He raised an eyebrow, looking Niels up and down.

"W ... what about?" he asked, still playing dumb. Could Richard have done that? Discuss their relationship with another person?

"Richard told me all about you," Jacob lied smoothly.

"What an amazing fuck you are. How you have the mouth of an angel." He moved closer, looming over Niels.

Niels felt like a trapped animal. "I suggest you stop where you are, my lord."

Jacob raised an eyebrow. "Did you know that Richard and I have known each other since University?" he said conversationally. "We have a longstanding tradition of sharing things."

Niels frowned. "I'm sure that's lovely for you, but you can consider the line drawn right here." He took another step backwards and suddenly he ran into a wall. He'd miscalculated the room.

Jacob laughed harshly. "You speak as if you have some sort of choice in the matter, whore." The word was a verbal slap, and it was delivered as such.

"Bloody well right I have a choice," he spat. "I doubt all your friends down there would be so understanding to hear what sort of activities you prefer. Now, bugger off." He glared at Jacob, pulling himself up to his full height. It was a bluff, of course, because if Jacob was exposed he could very well turn around and expose Richard. He just hoped Jacob didn't realize that Niels cared about that.

"Richard told me you were a feisty one," Jacob sneered with sincerity. In a flash, he had a firm handful of Niels' hair, and pulled the other man's slender body against his own. He let Niels feel his strength, and said, "You like it rough? That's good. So do I."

Niels felt panicked and he ground his teeth together. His hands pressed against Jacob's chest. "Let GO of me," he snarled, trying desperately to push the other man away. Had Richard really told him those things? How would Jacob possibly guess that sort of thing? Little by little his will was starting to wear away with the doubts.

Jacob laughed and shoved Niels hard against the wall with his body. "Make me," he challenged, letting Niels feel his arousal. "It will make it all the sweeter when I finally take you, you little whore."

Niels' eyes narrowed. "I'm NOT a WHORE," he growled. He grabbed hold of Jacob's hair and yanked it back, trying to get a little space between them. He got just enough room to stamp his heel down on Jacob's instep, although not as hard as he might have liked.

The pain didn't seem to faze Jacob at all, and his face twisted into an evil grin. He smirked, drawing his hand back, and he backhanded Niels right across the face. "Whore."

Niels' head snapped to the side and he could taste the metallic tang of blood in his mouth. But Niels was no lightweight. He'd grown up on the streets. This was nothing like the games he and Richard played. Richard, for instance, had made completely sure that Niels was consenting to such violence. That was play. This was something dark and hateful. He turned his eyes slowly back to Jacob's, blazing with anger. "Is it so difficult to find someone who would willingly be with you, *my lord*?" He spat in Jacob's face to emphasize his disgust with the other man.

Jacob's smirk widened, and he seemed amused. "Of course not. But I prefer things to be a challenge. A struggle. And after Richard told me how incredible you were ... well, I had to have you." He paused, as if to assess the effect of his lies. He used his free hand to slide down Niels' body, groping him roughly.

"He'll kill you when he finds out about this," he hissed. He doubted Richard would go quite that far, but he'd certainly be angry. One thing Niels was reasonably sure about was that Richard was possessive of him. He grunted a little when Jacob touched him, and squirmed, trying desperately to get away.

Jacob snorted then, and leaned forward to whisper right in Niels' ear, "Who do you think told me where to find you? Do you really think he cares that much about a little whore he picked up off the street?"

"You're lying!" But he felt like Jacob had punched him in the stomach. He felt helpless tears well up and he shoved at Jacob with all his strength, managing to dislodge him enough to break free and make a run for the door.

Jacob grunted as he stumbled back, then lunged at Niels, knocking him to the floor just before he reached the door. He moved quickly and ended up on top of Niels, face to face. "I was going to take you on the bed, but if you prefer the floor, I don't mind that either. Richard told me you liked it rough and dirty."

"Stop it," he sobbed. All thoughts of how tenderly Richard had held him through the night and his delicious touch in the bath when they'd first arrived in the country were replaced by only the roughest memories. But he still wasn't ready to give

in. He got one knee between Jacob's legs and drove it up as forcefully as he could manage, then shoved again, trying to roll the other man off of him.

This time Jacob hissed with pain, but he didn't move off of Niels. He moved so he was straddling Niels' waist, and he hit him with his fist this time. "Fucking piece of scum, how dare you?" He reached down and ripped Niels' shirt open. The fine buttons gave way, scattering across the floor with a small clatter.

Niels grunted, seeing stars. The pain in his eye was intense, but he bucked up beneath Jacob still. "Please," he rasped. "Fuck. Please, leave me be. I won't tell anyone about this if you go now." Hot tears streamed down his face and he clawed at Jacob's arms, still trying to push him off.

Jacob leaned close, putting all his weight on Niels' thin shoulders, and whispered, "How about you lie there and take it, and I won't mess up your pretty face? Richard won't want you anymore if you're not pretty. I know what he's like. Do you see anything damaged in this house? Richard has no patience for ugly things."

Niels squeezed his eyes shut, although one of them seemed to be that way permanently now. It didn't matter. When Jacob was finished with him, he would leave. He'd been horribly mistaken about what was actually going on, anyway. He swallowed hard and nodded once, a shiver running through him. Perhaps it would be over with quickly. Then he could go back to where he belonged, away from all these people.



"Ah, you've come to your senses, have you? Good boy." Jacob eased back a little. "You're going to get up and take off those clothes that no doubt Richard bought you. Then you're going to go get on the bed and wait for me. On your stomach."

Niels pulled himself a little unsteadily to his feet when Jacob climbed off of him. Facing away from the other man, he pulled his now buttonless shirt off his slim shoulders and let it fall to the floor. He blocked everything out of his mind except the pub, and his little room, and the few people that honestly cared about him. He unbuttoned his trousers and let them fall to the floor as well, stepping out of them, and then he climbed up on the bed, lying down on his stomach. Thoughts of Richard intruded, but he pushed them away. Richard was lost to him now. Nothing would ever come of that. He was just a plaything to Richard, despite the fact that Niels had lost his heart to the other man. But he'd been so wrong.

Jacob stood and watched Niels impassively, then walked to the side of the bed. "Very pretty," he said, tracing his hand lightly down Niels' back. "But then Richard always did have impeccable taste." He reached into the bedside drawer and pulled out a vial of oil, as if he'd known it would be there. "Very thoughtful," he said softly as he climbed up on the bed behind Niels. He pushed the smaller man's legs apart roughly, and then he unfastened his trousers.

Niels felt dirty now, truly dirty. He knew as soon as Jacob took him it would be obvious that he'd been well used. The thought made him feel nauseated. What he'd thought had been passion was nothing more than physical need. He'd

mistaken fucking for making love, and now he was about to reap the rewards of his blunder. There was no point in asking Jacob to be gentle. The man wouldn't even understand the term. He prayed silently that it would at least be quick. How had he come to this? How had he come to letting another man rape him, use him like a worthless whore? Was that what he really was after all this? Had he stayed with Richard for the fine clothes and the parties? No. Perhaps that was what had drawn him in, but he'd spent too many days and nights with Richard alone, blissfully happy just to be near him. If Richard had been as penniless as Niels it would have made no difference. How could he have been so blind? Hot tears spilled down his cheeks as he thought of Richard. His handsome, proud lover. It was all an illusion.

Jacob took a moment to oil his thick cock, before he leaned forward and pulled Niels' hips up into a better position. "I hope you're ready," he purred, then thrust deep and hard. His head fell back as he grunted, "Oh, it was well worth the wait." Then he snapped his hips and began pounding hard. "I can see why Richard keeps you around."

Niels moaned, pressing his forehead into the pillow. The contrast was startling. The way Jacob was using him hurt. No preparation, barely any warning. Richard had never hurt him unless they'd tacitly agreed on it. He gritted his teeth and tried not to make any noise. All he could do was take it.

Jacob laughed, and it was clear he didn't really care if Niels liked what was happening at all. He was using him as a toy, nothing more. He scratched down Niels' back, leaving several

angry red trails, then grabbed a handful of his hair. He pulled Niels' head back as he pounded in.

Niels felt like his entire body hurt. His lip throbbed, one eye was swollen shut, and his neck was craned back at an awkward angle. He wondered vaguely if Jacob meant to kill him. It felt like he was being torn apart from the pounding thrusts, and all he could do was grunt with each one.

Jacob's thrusts sped up and got more savage, then he suddenly stiffened. The only indication that he was coming was a small grunt of satisfaction as he filled Niels' body with hot seed. He didn't move for a long moment, then he pulled out and refastened his pants. He patted Niels on the ass and said, "Not bad." Then he was off the bed, straightening his clothes as he looked down at Niels.

Niels sunk down onto the mattress with a heavy sigh. At least it was over. He peered at him out of his good eye, wishing he would just go. He lowered his gaze to Jacob's feet, not wanting to look him in the eye.

Jacob bent to look at Niels. He smiled nastily and said, "I know what you really are, Mr. Eriksson. As does Richard, of course. But don't worry. I won't tell anyone. Your little secret is safe with me. If Richard doesn't mind buying you things so you can pretend to fit into polite society, that's his choice." He stood and turned to go, then as an afterthought, said, "Oh, I almost forgot." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold coin, tossing it onto the bed so it came to a rest right in front of Niels' face. "Your payment. Thank you." Then he walked out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Niels threw the coin as hard as he could at the door, and it clattered to the floor. Then he dragged himself up and promptly vomited in the washbasin. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, falling to his hands and knees on the floor, panting hard. He leaned forward, resting his head on the highly polished floorboards for a moment, and sobbed.

Then the urgency was upon him. He had to leave. He had to get out as quickly as possible, before Richard came upstairs. Would he want to fuck him, also? Niels would be gone before he found out. He stumbled a little as he stood, pulling on the first pair of trousers he came across, the pair on the floor. He grabbed a fresh shirt, but the plainest of them, and the wool cloak Richard had bought him. He would have left in the clothes he came in, but they were long gone now. Finally, he pulled on his boots. He slipped out into the corridor. He had a moment's anxiety that Jacob or Richard would be there, but it was deserted.

He somehow found the energy to propel himself down the stairs and across to the door to the service wing of the house. He made it to the kitchen, and was almost stopped there. The cook and a few of the other servants he'd become reasonably friendly with crowded around him, but he shrugged them off.

"But ... you'll catch your death out there, Mr. Eriksson! It's raining cats and dogs! Surely his lordship wouldn't want you going out in this," Cook warned.

Niels just looked blankly at her, unable to move his mouth without pain. "You may tell his lordship that my services are no longer for hire," he slurred. And then he was out the door, closing it behind them to stifle their protests.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as he could possibly extricate himself, Richard excused himself from the conversation with Lord Quigley. He needed to see Niels. He felt it with an urgency he couldn't describe. He walked out of the drawing room and almost ran into a very self-satisfied-looking Jacob.

Richard stopped still. He had suddenly realized he hadn't seen Jacob since Niels had left the room. He knew he shouldn't be jumping to such conclusions, but he couldn't help himself. He looked at Jacob, and put his head to the side. "Any reason you're looking so smug, Hardcastle?" he asked as calmly as he could manage.

The smirk that spread over Jacob's face chilled Richard's blood. "Not particularly," he said, slowly. Then he disappeared into the drawing room.

Richard stared at the closed door for a long moment, then all but ran upstairs to his room.

His heart was pounding by the time he reached the large doors, but he swung them open. Niels wasn't there, but that wasn't anything to worry about yet. Perhaps he was in the adjacent room. He went through the adjoining door, pushing it open so forcefully it banged off the far wall.

The room was empty, but the bed was mussed as if ... Richard shook his head. As if someone had had sex there. He walked closer, heart pounding but his body felt cold as ice. There were clothes on the floor, and Richard almost slipped on a button. He looked more closely, and found more discarded buttons. Someone had been in a hurry. A white

shirt lay discarded, and Richard picked it up. It was the source of the buttons, and it was most definitely Niels'. He looked around. Nothing else seemed amiss. Except he saw something on the floor beside the bed.

A vial of oil.

The oil he and Niels used when they made love. Richard closed his eyes against the sight. It hurt too badly. Had Jacob and Niels ... he couldn't even think of it. He couldn't doubt Niels in that way. The very thought of someone else touching the man he loved ... who had no idea he loved him. He dropped the vial to the floor where it shattered into a dozen pieces. Richard felt as if his heart was doing the same.

He looked over at the bed once again, and noticed something. Blood on the pristine white coverlet. He moved closer. It was most definitely blood, and fresh. He turned, and without another thought rushed into the hallway. He ran up and down the corridors, looking for Niels. He was hurt, he was sure of it. Nothing else mattered.

He questioned several of the staff, who seemed to have no idea where Mr. Eriksson had gone. He avoided the rest of his guests and went to the kitchen. At this hour, any of the staff who might be awake would pass through here at some point.

Immediately he walked into the kitchen, and the cook came hurrying forward. "Oh, my Lord, I'd just sent a girl to find you, we tried to stop him..."

Richard tried not to panic. "Tell me what happened, quickly."

The cook related what the maid had seen, how Mr. Eriksson had come staggering out of his room, looking hurt.

Then he'd come though the kitchen, and spoke briefly, then he was gone.

"Did he say where he went?" demanded Richard, almost frantically. "It's pissing down out there."

"I know, my Lord, but he wouldn't listen! He just went on about..." The older woman frowned. "Somthin' about his services not bein' required any more."

Richard cursed under his breath. Now he wished he'd followed when Niels had gone back to his rooms. Surely he'd gone back there. "Did he say how he'd been hurt?" he asked softly

"No, but he was surely banged up somethin' awful," the cook said, wringing her hands.

He had a sudden thought. "Is the coachman awake? I must talk to him immediately."

The cook promised to rouse him, and Richard said, "I'll be in the drawing room. Have him get the carriage ready and then come find me." He had unfinished business.

\* \* \* \*

From his mornings riding, Niels had found a path through the woods that was a shortcut to the closest town. He stumbled over roots and stones on the way, but eventually made it to the road. By the time he reached the inn he was soaked through and shivering, but there was a mail coach just stopping to change horses on its way to London. He had a few coins in his pocket from the other night when he was wagering with some of the gentlemen. He'd left Jacob's offensive coin behind. He paid for passage to London, and

took the only available seat on the box next to the driver, exposed to the elements. He pulled his cloak tightly around him and held on tight.

\* \* \* \*

Richard walked stiffly back to the drawing room, hands clenched at his sides. He didn't know what was going on, but he knew a few things. Most importantly, Niels was gone, and he was hurt. Second, Jacob had had something to do with it. To what extent, he didn't know yet. But he was going to find out.

He paused outside the drawing room, then took a deep breath. He opened the door, hoping Jacob was still there. He was, sitting at a table looking insufferably arrogant, sipping Richard's thirty-year-old whisky. He walked closer, and looked down at Jacob. "I'd like a word with you outside, please," he said softly, trying not to make a scene. But every cell in his body screamed out to throttle the man.

Jacob looked up at him, smirking. "I'm quite comfortable, Essex. Must we?"

"We must," Richard said, a clear warning in his eyes. "Now."

Jacob raised an eyebrow and stood slowly. "Very well. Lead on."

Richard stalked out of the room, avoiding Julian's questioning gaze and he led Jacob a little distance down the hall. He whirled and looked into Jacob's eyes. "What did you do to Niels?" he said, keeping his voice low.



Jacob laughed delightedly. "He told you, did he? I'm surprised."

Richard stared at the taller man, stunned. "You don't deny what you did?" he said, voice steady.

Jacob shrugged. "Why should I? He's just a whore, you said so yourself. I paid him. Well worth it, by the way. I'm impressed."

Richard's breath caught, and if he'd thought he was angry before, it was nothing compared to what he felt now. Jacob was admitting he'd fucked Niels. "He's hurt. Quite badly. Did you know?" He had to stay calm, to get as much information as possible.

Jacob shrugged. "He needed a bit of convincing," he said calmly.

"So you raped him," Richard said, nearly choking on the word. He was barely keeping himself in check.

"Can't rape a whore," Jacob said offhandedly. "Ask him. He was paid."

That was it. Richard couldn't take any more, and with an inarticulate cry he launched himself at Jacob. Jacob was bigger but Richard was fueled by rage. He hit Jacob squarely in the face, and Jacob sagged back against the wall.

Julian was just coming out of the drawing room when he heard the scuffle in the hall. His eyes widened and he closed the door securely behind him. He found his two friends fighting. Or rather Richard attacking Jacob. "Richard!" he said firmly, grabbing an arm and pulling him back. "What's this about?"

Richard tried to break free from Julian's grasp, but he wasn't far gone enough to risk anyone else getting involved. "Leave us, Julian. This is nothing you need be concerned with."

Jacob was sagged against the wall, rubbing at his face. "Ashamed, are you, Richard? Julian doesn't know, does he?"

"Know what? Ashamed? What has Essex to be ashamed of?" he asked. He looked from Richard to Jacob and back again, still not letting go of Richard's arm. "Come now, man. It can't be as bad as all that, surely."

"Oh, it's worse," Jacob assured him, laughing. He wiped a trace of blood away from his mouth.

Richard was trembling with need to hurt Jacob. "I'm going to kill you," he promised quietly. He knew it with a certainty he felt deep in his bones.

"For playing with your little whore?" snorted Jacob. "You've changed, Essex. You're getting old and emotional."

"Whore? What whore? Richard, why the devil do you want to kill Hardcastle? What has he done?" He didn't like Jacob's tone. Or Richard's for that matter.

Jacob looked over at Richard, his smirk only slightly marred by his swelling lip. "You want to tell him, or should I?"

Richard finally shook off Julian's arm. He rubbed his knuckles; they hurt from hitting Jacob but he wanted to do more. "He's talking about Niels," he said quietly. "But he's no whore." He waited for Julian to react. He'd be losing two friends tonight, that was clear. But he had no choice. Jacob would tell him regardless.

Julian's eyes widened. For a moment he just stood there, looking from one to another. "Niels ... you mean, the both of you ... prefer the same sex?" he asked, blinking.

Jacob smirked but stayed silent, and Richard said, looking away, "Sometimes, yes. I'm sorry you had to find out this way." Julian had been his friend for as long as he could remember. He was saddened to lose that, but surely the other man would be repulsed now.

"So ... what's this all about, then? You and Niels are together and Jacob seduced him?" he asked. He didn't back away or look repulsed. Just surprised.

"He raped him," Richard spat. "Beat him and raped him, and now he's gone." He wondered why Niels hadn't come to him for help. What had Jacob told him?

Jacob shrugged. "He really didn't struggle all that much."

"You fucking bastard," Richard hissed. "You made him believe I let you do it, didn't you? You made him believe I gave you to him?" He was gratified that Julian didn't seem too upset. But most of all, he was furious.

"Did you force him, Hardcastle?" Julian asked, looking completely appalled, although hesitant to use the word *rape*. "Speak up, man. Is what Richard's saying the truth? Or have you something to say in your defense?"

Jacob raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "He's just Richard's little whore. What does it matter if he said no? I paid him."

It took all of Richard's self-control to keep from lunging at Jacob once more.

Julian looked at Richard and released his arm. "Well. How would you care to handle this, Essex? It would appear that you are the one offended here, as well as Mr. Eriksson who is regrettably absent."

"I wish to kill him," said Richard tightly, eyes boring into Jacob's. "I wish you hadn't stopped me." Niels was out there somewhere, thinking that Richard gave him to Jacob to use. He knew Niels wouldn't have given in unless he really Richard had abandoned him. He had to find him. But first he wanted to hurt Jacob.

"If you murder him here in your hall, you will go to prison and your friend will never know the truth," Julian said logically. "However, if you call in the constabulary, then it will be on the front page of the Times and it's unlikely he'll truly suffer the way he probably ought to."

Richard considered. Julian had a point. He didn't want this to get out, but damn if he was going to let Jacob get away with it. "So what do you suggest?"

"The only option available to a gentleman," Julian said, giving Richard a look. "Still illegal, but rarely prosecuted."

Richard looked over at Julian. "You don't mean what I think you mean."

"And why not? That's certainly what I would do if I were in your position. Are you any good with a pistol?"

"Of course I am, you know that," Richard replied.

Jacob chose that moment to interrupt. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Jacob, old friend, I suggest you put your affairs in order," Julian said calmly.

Richard laughed, then turned to Jacob. He walked up to him, and smirked. "You don't understand? I'm calling you out, Hardcastle. A duel."

"You're insane," Jacob replied, a little nervously.

"To refuse would mean the worst kind of cowardice, Hardcastle. And that would get out. Have you no honor, sir?" Julian asked, although he was beginning to see that the other man certainly didn't.

"He doesn't know the meaning of the word, clearly," hissed Richard, crossing his arms.

"I'm not refusing," Jacob retorted. "I just want to be clear on the terms."

Julian looked at Richard. "Am I to assume the honor of being your second?" he asked.

Richard grinned for the first time. "I wouldn't have anyone else."

Julian seemed to puff up with the responsibility of his newly appointed office. "Very well, then. Pistols at dawn, say ... two days from now? My estate. It's closer to London, and I can only assume you are to be ejected from here post haste. You may send me the name of your second tomorrow if you wish. There is a clearing in the far corner of my land that is sufficiently large, but also discreet. If you fail to make an appearance, Hardcastle, your reputation will be in ruins and no member of polite society will have anything to do with you henceforth." He glanced at Richard again. "Do those terms sound reasonable to you?"

Richard glanced at Jacob, who seemed shaken.

"I don't seem to have a choice, do I?" Jacob snapped.  
"Fine. I will be there."

Richard smirked. "I'll be waiting." He wanted revenge, and this was the only way he could get it. If he killed Jacob in a duel, there would likely be no charges brought. He doubted Jacob would show, though. "By the way, get the fuck out of my house. I'm leaving to find Niels, and you will be gone by the time I get back."

Jacob whirled and stalked away without another word.

"Good luck, Richard. And Godspeed. I hope you find him," Julian said.

Richard turned to face Julian. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way. I don't blame you if you're disgusted."

"Surprised, friend. Not disgusted. I've known you a long time. However you conduct your private life is up to you. I'm certainly in no position to judge you."

"That never stopped anyone," smiled Richard. He held out his hand. "You're a good man, Fortesque. Don't tell anyone I said that, though."

The coachman rushed in from the servants' wing, clearly not expecting to be needed for the night, and a little hastily put together. "My lord?" he said, breathlessly.

Richard turned to the man. "You must tell me where you took Mr. Eriksson when he went into London. Quickly. Time is of the essence."

The man hesitated only a moment. "To a pub, my lord. Down by the river. The Bull and Barrel, I think it was. About a dozen blocks down from the houses of Parliament. Not a very nice area, mind you."

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Richard nodded, saying, "I think I know it. Thank you. Now please. Go back to bed. I'm sorry I bothered you."

Julian had already gone, so all there was left to do was go down to the stables. He saddled up his fastest horse and set off. He was going to find Niels.

## Chapter Sixteen

The rain made early summer seem so cold. Niels was glad of it. The discomfort of the wet and the cold distracted him from other thoughts. Carriages transporting the post were designed for speed, and in just over two hours they were pulling through the gates of London. Niels climbed down from the box at the first stop, and staggered along the cobbled streets. How he found his way back, he didn't know, but eventually he spotted the sign for the Bull and Barrel. He tripped on the curb and found himself momentarily sprawled on hands and knees again in the street. He thought perhaps it would be a mercy for a carriage to run him down, but the streets were deserted at such a late hour.

He picked himself up, not even attempting to brush himself off. He was too wet and cold and stiff and sore. He made it to the threshold, leaning heavily on the door handle, praying it wasn't already locked up for the night. But it gave and he saw a glimpse of John and a few customers still, sitting at the bar. The room was warm and filled with the familiar tang of cheap pipe smoke. He distantly heard John calling his name before he crumbled to the floor and everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

Richard's horse was in top physical condition, and the moon was full. The journey took just over two hours, and soon Richard was trotting down the road, peering at the signs. He'd concentrated on the journey, and he had no idea



what he was going to say to Niels. All he knew was he had to find him.

And there it was. The Bull and Barrel. It looked like a typical pub for the area. A dive. Richard dismounted and left his horse with the attendant. He was stiff from the long ride but he wasn't going to wait a moment longer. He walked up to the door and was surprised to find it locked. He knocked on the door, and waited impatiently. When there was no answer forthcoming, he knocked harder.

The battered door creaked open. "'Old yer horses!" a gruff voice said. Standing in the doorway was a haggard-looking man, half a day's growth of grey beard barely concealing the roundness of his face. He clearly hadn't been roused from sleep, however, as he was still fully dressed. "Lookin' for a room, guvnor?" he asked.

"Actually, I'm looking for a person. I believe he lives here. Niels Eriksson." Richard tried to keep the urgency from his voice, or the impatience. "My apologies for the lateness of the hour, but I'm afraid it's quite urgent. Is he here, please?"

The publican gave Richard a long appraising look. "'E moight. You the bloke wot beat 'im up?" he asked with a surly frown.

Richard's mouth fell open. He hadn't even thought of that, that the man might think that. "No! Of course not! Is he all right? Does he need medical attention? I can summon a physician..." It was all he could do not to demand entry, but he suspected the man wouldn't take kindly to that.

"'E's well enough. We took care of 'im all roight. 'E's resting," he said, the tone of dismissal in his voice obvious.

"I need to see him," Richard said urgently, trying not to make it sound like a command. He had no power here, no influence, and he knew it. "Please, sir. It's very important." He considered offering the man money, but he doubted it would be accepted.

"E's not receiving at the moment," he said, putting on a posh accent to mock Richard. "I'll tell 'im you was 'ere."

Richard felt a flash of anger, but buried it as best he could. "You don't understand. I've ridden three hours to see him. I'm ... a friend. I know who hurt him and I'm going to make sure he's dealt with. Please, I need to see him." He wasn't leaving until he was allowed in, or he'd break in. He didn't care. He would see Niels.

The man stepped back with a frown and let Richard into the pub, closing the door behind him. "I'll tell 'im you're 'ere, but if 'e don't wanna see yeh, you ain't gettin' in, is that clear?" he said gruffly. "Wot's yer name?"

"Richard," he replied, leaving off the last name. He glanced around, curious despite his worry. The place looked like a typical lower-middle-class pub, though it was cleaner than he'd imagined. It was warm and almost inviting.

"Wait 'ere," he grumbled. The portly man headed towards the back of the building and turned down what must have been a very short corridor.

"Tell him to bugger off," Niels' voice came from the back, strong but slurred.

Richard couldn't help himself. He followed the proprietor down the corridor, and he heard Niels' voice. A shiver of regret ran through him, and something else. Anger. Thirst for

revenge. And love. He was sure now he was in love with Niels. He came up behind the man in the open door, and said quietly, "I'm not leaving until I talk to you for a moment, Niels." He couldn't quite see beyond the man's wide body.

"Oi, you 'eard 'im," the publican growled, starting to turn to physically eject Richard.

Niels sighed. "Fuck, just let him in. It's all right, John."

John hesitated. "I'll just be outside, then." He stepped aside to allow Richard to enter the room, glaring at him as he closed the door behind him.

The room was small and sparse, but clean. Niels was lying in a narrow bed, as white as the sheet he was lying on, except for the violently purple, pink and vaguely greenish bruise over one eye that was completely swollen shut. His lower lip was also swollen and cut, but cleaned of blood. He squinted up at Richard with his good eye. "What do you want?" he asked, sounding defeated.

Richard could only stand and gape at Niels for a long moment. He looked far worse than he'd guessed. His heart ached and he crossed the room in an instant. Without thinking, he fell to his knees beside the bed, but didn't touch Niels. "Niels," he whispered. "I'm so sorry." He wanted to pull the man into his arms but he didn't dare. If Jacob had walked in at that instant, nothing would have stopped Richard from killing him.

Niels' brows furrowed and he turned his head stiffly to look at Richard. "Sorry? You think that's enough, do you?" he croaked. It was all he could do to stop himself from forgiving

him right there and begging him to deny the things that Jacob had said about him.

"No," Richard said, forcing himself to look at Niels' face though it made him feel even more wretched. "It's not even close. I can only imagine what he said to you. I had no idea. I didn't tell him he could see you. I would never do that." He paused, wondering if Niels would ever believe him again. "He confronted me. He could tell we were together. And he got the wrong idea. Or he just wanted to." For the first time in twenty years, Richard found himself close to tears. If Niels didn't believe him, he didn't know what he'd do.

"So ... you didn't tell him I was your whore? You didn't tell him where to find me so he could have his little fun?" Even thinking about the things Jacob had said made it hurt all over again.

"God, no!" Richard said forcefully. "How could you think that?" He took a chance and put his hand on Niels'. "Jacob knows what I'm like. He assumed. I told him as little as I could. I never thought he would..." He choked back a sob and tears stung the back of his eyes. "He must have followed you. I had no idea. I went to look for you and ... you were gone..." He looked away. "I wanted to kill him. Julian stopped me."

"Do you know what he did to me?" Niels could see that Richard was suffering, but he had to know the truth. "He held me down and beat me, then he fucked me. He held me by the hair and ... and then as he was going he threw a coin at me. As if that could justify it. As if I would allow him to USE me like that, like a piece of meat ... for MONEY," he said the last word with revulsion. "Is that what you think, Richard? Do you

think that's why I was at your house? For the clothes and the parties and..." He swallowed past a lump in his throat. "If that's what you think of me, then maybe I am no better than a whore."

He'd known what Jacob did. Jacob had told him himself. But to hear it from Niels' mouth made it so much worse. And his words ... "How could you think that?" He wanted to shout, but likely the proprietor was listening, and he didn't want to be ejected. "I never treated you like a whore. I never thought that. I let you leave, and you came back. I thought you wanted to be there, like I wanted you there." To see his proud lover broken and bruised, and to know that he blamed Richard, and thought the whole time that Richard had authorized it. "Do you really think that of me?" he all but whispered, one tear rolling down his face, unheeded. "I love you," he finally added.

Niels gasped a little at Richard's words. "Love? How could someone like you love someone like me? I'm nobody. I'm a criminal. You're ... you're a nobleman. I don't belong in your world, and ... and I certainly don't belong in your heart." But even as he said it, he knew that he loved Richard as well. He knew that his life would be meaningless without him. He also knew that he could be nothing but trouble for the man he loved.

Niels' words were like a physical slap to his face. He'd bared his soul, and clearly the other man didn't feel the same. One more tear slid down his face and he whispered, "I don't know. I've never felt this way about anyone ever before. It doesn't matter who you are, or who I am. I don't think it

works that way." He looked down. "In two days time I'm going to duel with Hardcastle. I'm going to kill him."

"What?" Niels said, sitting part-way up before wincing and leaning back on his elbows. "Are you mad? You could be killed!" Suddenly, he was filled with fear for Richard. "For God's sake, Richard, don't be a bloody fool!"

Richard could see the pain that Niels' movements caused, and he was back at his side in a flash. "Lie back, don't try to get up," he instructed. "Let me call a doctor for you, please, Niels."

Niels sunk back into the bed. "I'm fine," he said tightly. "Except for the fact that in a couple of days your life could be on my conscience. He's not worth it. I'm not worth it. Bloody hell, even if you win, have you thought about what society will be saying about the fact that you fought a duel over me?"

"I don't care what anyone thinks," Richard said firmly. "I won't let him get away with it. And I won't lose." He spoke quietly and confidently. He'd been trained in all sorts of firearms.

"Oh, I see. It's has nothing to do with me, really, it's some sort of retribution for taking what's yours, is that it?" Fear gripped him like a fist of ice in his gut. All he could imagine was Richard lying on his back, a pool of blood spreading around him as that demon bastard stood over him, laughing. And quite against his wishes, tears started to cloud Niels' vision as well. "Please don't do this. Please," he said softly.

"It's not like that," Richard replied, gazing at Niels. "You're not my property, Niels. You're much more. Or I want you to be."

"Justice is for those who can afford it," he said. "What exactly do you want, anyway? It's not as if we could have any sort of life together, a cast-off orphan turned criminal and a lord of the realm. Not to mention we're both men. You're better off just forgetting you ever met me. It'll only bring you trouble."

"I can't forget you, Niels," Richard said. "If you truly don't want me anymore, I will leave you alone. But I want you. In whatever way we can manage." He knelt at the side of Niels' bed again. "Please. Come back to the house with me. Everyone will be gone by now. I can have the doctor waiting."

Every part of Niels ached to go with Richard, back to the safety of his protection. Back to the warmth of his embrace. "Call off the duel and I'll come with you," he said, barely above a whisper. He had to feel that he wasn't going to cause Richard's death, that he wasn't going to cause him harm. Because Niels loved Richard, too, with all his heart.

"I cannot. It's impossible," Richard said, shaking his head. "I would do anything for you. But the duel has been called, and I cannot back out. You know that as well as I." He paused. "The duel is on Wednesday at the Fortesque estate. I want you safely at home when it happens."

Niels' heart sank and he turned his head away, not looking at Richard. "I am home," he whispered. His lip trembled and he squeezed his eyes shut. He felt sick with dread. "I won't see you endanger yourself over pride."

Richard was silent for a long moment. This was it. Niels wouldn't come home with him. He wanted nothing to do with him. "I see," he said softly, his heart sinking. "I hope

someday you will forgive me, Niels. I'll always love you. Always." He turned to leave, glancing back once more at the man on the bed.

Niels turned to look at Richard once more before he left. He wanted to tell him, the words were beating a thundering rhythm in his throat. *I love you, too. More than anything.* But they wouldn't come out. He knew if he admitted it, Richard would never give up. Instead, he just looked at him, regret and aching sadness in his eyes.

Richard looked at Niels, but it was obvious the other man had nothing more to say to him. He drew a shaky breath and said, "Goodbye." He opened the door and slipped through it. At least he knew where Niels was, and he seemed as if he would recover. The fact that he'd lost him, there was nothing he could do about it any longer. He'd duel with Jacob, and hopefully kill him. And if he lost, at least he had nothing more to lose.

He slipped through the pub without running into the proprietor again, reclaimed his horse and started to ride.

Niels covered his face with his hands gingerly, and started to sob after he heard the front door of the pub close. Richard was gone. It was for the best, but it hurt far worse than his injuries. He had to believe he'd done the right thing, but lying alone in his tiny bed, thinking about Richard meeting Jacob in a cold field in a couple of days made it hard to be sure of himself. "Love you," he whispered to the empty room, sobbing still.

Richard stopped in at an inn that night, then made his way back to the estate the next morning. All the guests were



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gone, and there was a note from Julian telling him he'd arrange everything for the duel.

## Chapter Seventeen

The town nearest the Fortesque estate had already gotten word of the duel. Niels had made his way there the night before. He was still traveling rather slowly, and he knew he couldn't risk missing it, or risk being on the road in the small hours when he could barely fight off a child. He inquired about it at the inn, and after buying the barmaid a few pints she came across with the information.

He barely slept, and left a couple of hours before dawn. It was a long walk, from what he'd been told. He found the spot. Already several servants were there, as well as the black physician's coach looking like a hearse at the ready. He lingered in the woods, waiting for a glimpse of Richard.

\* \* \* \*

The day of the duel dawned bright and clear, but Richard arrived while it was still dark. Richard had spent many happy days here at his friend's estate, but this was no cheerful occasion. Julian was waiting outside when he arrived. Richard slid off his horse and walked up to his old friend. "I would say good morning, but I'd be lying," Richard said, attempting a smile. He wasn't nervous about the duel, as such. He had nothing to lose any more. He just didn't want to be reminded of the reason for this duel.

Julian patted Richard on the shoulder. "There's really no winner in this sort of situation, but at least honor will be satisfied, one way or another. Shall we?" Julian's horse

brought to the front, a servant behind it on another, carrying a fine wooden case containing the dueling pistols.

Richard walked with Julian to the appointed place, peering about in the half-light. "Is Hardcastle here?" he asked. It would almost be a relief if the man wasn't going to show, but now he wanted an end to all of this.

When Niels saw Richard and Julian arrive, his stomach lurched. He started walking towards the field where they were waiting for Jacob to arrive. Richard wasn't looking in his direction, which was fine with him, as he was limping along slowly. "I don't suppose you've changed your mind about calling it off, have you," he said softly when he got close.

Richard was on a knife-edge anyway, and at Niels' voice he whirled. "Niels!" he said. "What are you doing here? I asked you to stay away!" His heart ached at the sight of his former lover. He looked thin and battered and it was all his fault.

Niels took a hesitant step closer. "How could I stay away?" he asked helplessly. "Richard..." So many things he wanted to say were constricting his throat. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked softly.

"No!" Richard said instantly. He wanted to pull Niels into his arms, but he couldn't. He stepped closer, leading Niels away so they could talk. "I didn't want you to have to see this," he said softly. Not that he intended to lose.

"Am I going to distract you? Will my being here hinder you in any way? Because if it will, I'll go. But if not, I must stay." His resolve was steady and he looked into Richard's eyes intently.

Richard took a deep breath. "No, it will not hinder me. I want you to be here." If nothing else, at least he got to see Niels once more. They only had a few moments, and Richard asked, "How are you? Have you seen a doctor? How did you get here?" He had a thousand questions, a hundred things he wanted to say. But there was no time.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," he said reassuringly. "I came by mail coach to town last night and I walked here from the pub. Now..." He gave Richard a serious look. "If you get yourself killed, you should know that I'll never forgive you."

Richard almost smiled at that ludicrous statement. "And if I don't?" he asked, looking into Niels' pale eyes. "Will you forgive me then?"

"I haven't much choice, it seems. I can't quite imagine going on without you," he said quietly. He knew that if they were alone, he would already be in Richard's arms, and the thought of it had to sustain him.

Richard's eyes widened. He almost couldn't believe his ears. "Do you mean..."

Niels glanced up at the sound of another pair of horses approaching. Jacob and his second. "Yes. I love you," he whispered. "Now go kill that bastard for me, and try not to get yourself hurt, right?"

Richard smiled genuinely for the first time in days. Niels loved him. He wouldn't lose now that he had something to live for. "I love you, Niels," he said, then bowed slightly before walking back to Julian's side.

Niels went to stand by the physician's coach, to stay out of the way to watch the duel.

"Everything go all right?" Julian asked quietly as they watched Jacob climb down from his horse. "From the look on your face I'd guess so."

Richard nodded quickly, keeping his eyes on Jacob. The enemy. "Everything is going to be fine. As soon as this is over." He looked over at Julian. "If ... If it goes badly," he began, "make sure Niels is taken care of, will you?" He couldn't exactly change his will now.

"You have my word as a gentleman, but if he's half as stubborn as you, that's going to be quite a task. Make sure it doesn't come to that, eh?" He patted Richard on the back and started to walk towards Jacob, the servant carrying the pistol box scurrying after him.

When they were all standing in the center of the clearing, Julian signaled for the box to be opened. "Since these are my personal pistols, Hardcastle gets his choice to ensure there's no unfair advantage. You'll choose your weapons and then stand back to back here, count off ten paces, turn, and fire. Do you both understand the rules?" he asked.

Jacob looked at Richard, then spared a sneering glance over at Niels. "I'm surprised you brought him. Aren't you afraid of being distracted?"

Richard refused to be baited. He needed his full concentration. "Enjoy your last moments, Hardcastle." He turned to Julian. "I understand."

Jacob shrugged, and traded smirks with his second, a short, weasely looking man. "I understand."

Julian indicated for the box to be presented to Jacob first, and he took one of the pistols. Then it was brought to

Richard, who took the remaining one. Julian stepped back, and waited for them to stand in their places. "I shall tell you when to begin counting," he said, glancing at the horizon for the first sign of the sun peeking over it.

Niels rubbed his arms nervously, watching Richard. He prayed silently that he would be all right, and vowed that if Richard died he'd kill Jacob himself and damn the consequences.

Richard waited. He'd expected to be nervous, but as he stood, waiting for the signal, he felt a calm, cool focus. He was an expert with firearms. He'd been a champion marksman in school.

Niels' stomach clenched as he watched them start to take their paces. Richard looked so resolute. He was beautiful. Fate couldn't be so cruel as to tear them apart now, after all they'd been through, could it? He ached to run out there and take his place, but he knew he couldn't. Each number made him more and more anxious. His heart was pounding in his chest and he had to lean back against the carriage to stop himself from falling down.

Each number, each pace took him closer to avenging Niels' honor. That was all he thought of. He couldn't think of anything else. No emotions, no worries. Time seemed to move in slow motion. The count of ten came and he turned, bringing up his pistol, getting into the proper stance and aiming. He could see Jacob facing him, but he felt no nervousness or need to rush. He had all the time in the world. He couldn't think about the fact that the other man was aiming at him as well. He aimed, and exhaled as he pulled the

trigger. He heard the sound of the pistol discharging, and felt the kickback.

At almost the same instant, he felt a searing, blazing pain erupt in his left shoulder. He fell to his knees, dropping the pistol. He looked up to see Jacob fall as well. If this was it, at least he'd taken Jacob with him.

Jacob slumped to the ground, and Richard tried to look around to see Niels one last time, and he realized the pain was fading just a little. He struggled to his feet once again. Jacob didn't.

Niels didn't think of his own aches and pains. From somewhere he got a burst of energy, and he sprinted over to Richard, just as he stood up. "Oh God, you're all right," he sobbed. He covered his mouth with his hand to stop himself from making a scene. The doctor had rushed to Jacob, since he wasn't getting up, and Niels slid his arm around Richard's back to help him over to the carriage.

His shoulder hurt like fire under his skin, but he could tell now it was only a flesh wound. It was bleeding, but not profusely, and Niels was there. That made it all worthwhile. Despite the pain, he'd never felt happier. "I love you," he whispered in Niels' ear, having an excuse to lean on him as they waited.

Niels smiled despite the fact that he was worried. When it was clear that the doctor could do nothing for Jacob, he turned to Julian. "Tell him to bloody well get over here, then, would you? What's he waiting for, two corpses?" he snapped.

Richard sighed with relief. Jacob was dead. Not that he'd wanted to kill him, but he'd sealed his fate when he'd raped

Niels. "I'm all right," he assured them both. He looked at Julian. "Thank you," he said softly.

Julian shrugged. "You'd have done the same for me, Essex. No need for thanks," he said, sending a servant off to fetch the doctor. Then he smiled at Niels. "He'll survive. Don't worry."

Niels swallowed hard. "Thank you, my lord," he said quietly, feeling bad for having snapped at him. "Pardon my sharpness."

Julian smiled again. "Perfectly understandable, dear boy."

Niels looked at Richard. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

Richard shrugged, then winced with pain. "I've felt better." He realized he was leaning on Niels, and straightened up. Finally the physician came over and helped Richard into the carriage to be treated. Niels followed them inside.

"Young man, are you a relative of Lord Essex?" he asked, scowling at Niels.

"He can stay," snapped Richard, preempting any more questions. He glared at the doctor. He didn't want to let Niels out of his sight.

The doctor grumbled but didn't question Richard. He opened his bag and handed Richard a bottle of whisky. "Drink up. You're undoubtedly going to need stitches." And then he ripped the sleeve off of Richard's shirt to examine the wound.

Richard winced but tried not to show how much it hurt. The blood had already started to dry but now flowed anew. He took a large swig of the whisky and looked at Niels.

Niels moved to sit on the other side of the seat from the doctor, next to Richard. "Hurts like a bugger, no?" he asked,



smirking at Richard. "That's your punishment for dueling to begin with."

Richard decided to hell with the doctor and what he thought. He took Niels' hand in his own and said, "It was all your fault to begin with, after all." His voice was tight from the pain, but he was clearly joking. He took another drink of the whisky for good measure.

"Oh yes. My fault, of course. Bad form of me to be attacked by one of your chums, hm?" he teased, giving Richard's hand a squeeze.

"He's not..." Richard paused as the needle went in, starting to sew up his damaged flesh. "Not my chum any more," he finished through clenched teeth. He focused on Niels now. He could get through this. "You'll come back to the estate with me now?" he asked, voice strained.

"Yes. I'll go wherever you want me to go," he said quietly. He looked at Richard's face and gave him a little smile. He knew Richard had to be in excruciating pain. But then, Niels had been a few days ago, too. "Did it go right through?" he asked.

Richard winced, then nodded. "I think so. Or this would be even more painful, I imagine." He tried to smile at Niels but it came out as more of a grimace. "Jacob always had bad aim. Lucky for me."

"God rest his soul," Niels added, although if there was a heaven, he doubted very much that Jacob was going there. He glanced at what the doctor was doing curiously. "Probably have to rest for a few days, I'll bet," he said.

"So do you," Richard replied, squeezing Niels' hand. "We'll sit in the sun and drink and rest. How does that sound? A life of leisure?"

"It sounds idle and decadent. Surely it falls to me to take care of you, my lord. I am mostly recovered." But Niels was still quite pale himself, and had gotten little rest in two days, most of it spent traveling.

The physician moved to the back of Richard's shoulder, cleaning the wound and starting to stitch it. If he found their behavior odd, he didn't comment upon it.

By the time the doctor was finished, Richard was a bit shaky and all he wanted was to lie down. But he kept his voice even for Niels' sake. "Ready to go home?" he asked as he emerged into the early morning sunshine.

"Home? Nonsense. You're staying here to rest until tomorrow," Julian said. "Can't travel like that."

"It's not far," Richard protested. He just wanted to be alone with Niels, but he couldn't say that in public.

"Over an hour on rough road after taking a bullet? I think not. And I've got that room on the ground floor that was converted to a bedroom suite when mother was ill. No, you're both staying here overnight. I insist." Clearly Julian wasn't taking no for an answer.

Niels smirked. "You probably shouldn't travel more than you have to. It might start bleeding again."

Richard sighed. "Yes, Mother," he said. Then he frowned. "I suppose if you insist ... I could be convinced to lie down for a bit." He felt a little shaky.

Julian summoned a coach up from the house and in a few minutes they were riding back across the expansive grounds very, very slowly, towards the house. Since it was only Richard, Julian and himself inside, Niels felt emboldened to ask a question. "Would it be all right if I stay nearby Richard? I can sleep on a cot or something. I don't mind."

Julian smirked. "Dear boy, I know all about it. You may stay as close to Richard as you like. I've no visitors to raise any eyebrows at it."

Richard smiled at Julian. "Lord Fortesque is a good man, I told you that before, Niels." All he wanted was to hold Niels in his arms once again. He'd almost lost him. He was in pain, but it would fade. He had Niels back.

They reached the house and Niels helped Richard down from the carriage and up the front steps. Julian showed him to the first floor bedroom suite, and then discreetly left them alone. Niels guided Richard over to the bed and made him sit down, then he kneeled in front of him, carefully removing Richard's boots. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"For what?" Richard said, looking down at Niels. "It was my fault. I invited Jacob. I let it happen. I'm so sorry, Niels." He never wanted the other man to hurt. He didn't know just when things had changed, so that he couldn't live without Niels.

"Thank you for dueling for me, and getting hurt for me, and loving me," he said softly. When he had the boots off he rose to his feet and shrugged out of his coat, and sat down to take off his own boots, wincing a little.

Richard watched the man he loved in pain, and knew that he would duel with Jacob all over again. He'd done the right thing for once. He slid to his knees in front of Niels and started to help him take his boots off with his good hand. "I'd do anything for you," he whispered, looking up at him.

Niels gasped a little, looking down at Richard. "You don't have to do that. You're hurt." It seemed wrong, somehow to see Richard on his knees, but it also seemed so amazingly precious, Niels almost felt swamped with tears again.

"I want to. You're hurt, too." He got the boots off Niels, and climbed back onto the bed next to Niels. "Lie back, my love. I missed you so much. I want to feel you next to me."

Niels lay back on the bed, careful to stay on the side of Richard's uninjured arm, and moved close to him. "I was so frightened that you'd be killed," he whispered. "It was worse than thinking you didn't care for me."

Richard pulled Niels as close as possible. The pain from his shoulder faded, replaced by bliss at having the other man so close once again. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you how I really felt. I thought ... it would scare you away. I could barely admit it to myself."

Niels leaned up on an elbow and pressed his lips lightly against Richard's. "It's not going to be easy," he whispered. "You're fortunate our host is so open-minded." Niels was immensely grateful for everything that Julian had done, but particularly for letting them share a bed under his roof.

"I know," sighed Richard. "We'll have to hide what we are. But I won't live without you. I can't." He kissed Niels again,

more deeply. He knew they couldn't do anything right now, but he still wanted some intimacy.

The kiss robbed him of breath and sense, and eventually he pulled back, panting. "Even a few days apart from you was agony," he whispered.

"Never again," promised Richard. "No one will come between us." If he had to flee the country, with Niels, he wouldn't be apart from him again.

Niels rested his head on Richard's chest, sliding his arm around him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you how I felt the other day. I wanted to, but when you told me about the duel I was so frightened, I thought perhaps I could talk you out of it some way, that if you thought I didn't care about you, you would give it up as a lost cause. I hated sending you away. But I don't care if you have to live down the pub with me and we have nothing. All I want is to be with you. As long as we're together, nothing else matters."

Those were the words Richard had wanted to hear from Niels, and he closed his eyes happily. "You'll never have to worry about anything again. I'll take care of you." He smiled, as he felt drowsiness overtake him despite the pain. But he knew now that he could face anything, with Niels at his side.

Wicked Game  
*by Jade Falconer*

About the Author

Inspired by the important things in life: beauty, love, and passion, Jade Falconer has spent several years writing erotic fiction. The forbidden nature of homoeroticism has been the basis for many megabytes of fiction that has delighted a wide circle of online readers. Please feel free to visit Jade on MySpace at [www.myspace.com/jadefalconer](http://www.myspace.com/jadefalconer).

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