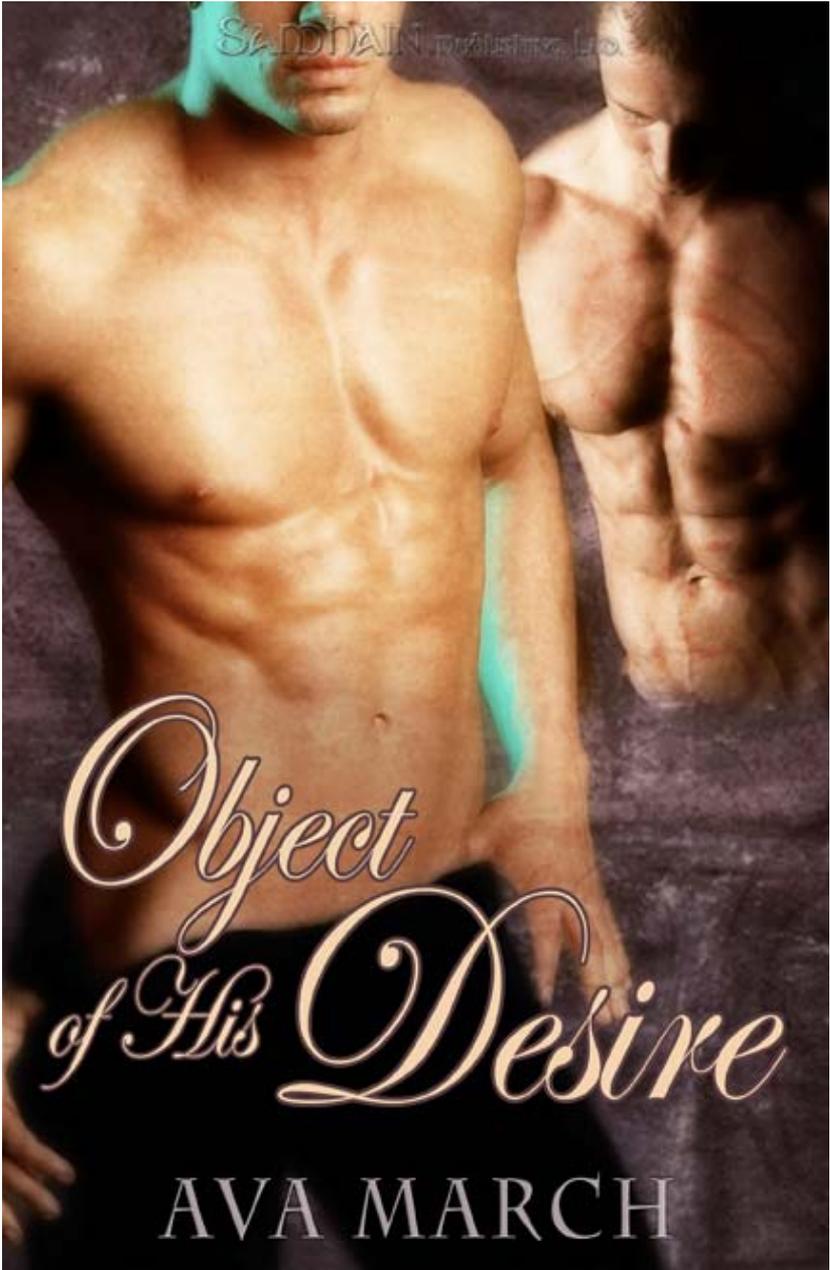


SANDRAN PUBLISHING LTD.



*Object
of His Desire*

AVA MARCH

**eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the
copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Object of His Desire
Copyright © 2009 by Ava March
ISBN: 978-1-60504-468-2
Edited by Angela James
Cover by Natalie Winters

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2009
www.samhainpublishing.com

Object of His Desire

Ava March

Dedication

To Chris

Chapter One

*August 1821
Durham, England*

Don't touch him. Don't you dare touch—

The woman leaned close to Arsen Grey, Marquis of Somerville, and laid a small hand on the lord's broad chest.

Sharp and fierce, jealousy twisted Henry Shaw's gut. Held his insides in a vise-like grip. Henry didn't know her, yet he hated her. Hated the pale blonde hair pulled back into a deliberately tousled knot, the soft curves of her hips draped by the violet muslin gown, and the swells of her breasts spilling from the dangerously low cut bodice. Breasts which had captured Arsen's full attention.

Lush. Voluptuous. The feminine ideal. Arsen would be a fool to refuse this one.

Unable to look away, Henry watched her hand slide down the black evening coat and past the trouser waistband. He grunted under his breath. What he wouldn't give to be in her place. To have Arsen's ballocks in the palm of his hand.

One corner of Arsen's mouth pulled into a smile. A smile that held a distinctly bored edge. But Henry took no comfort in it. Arsen had perfected the art of boredom. Clad entirely in black except for the flash of white of his shirt above his waistcoat and the

meticulously tied cravat, the man exuded an effortless elegance that put other men to shame.

A chunk of antique-gold hair fell over one eye as Arsen tipped his head down toward the woman. Fluttering her lashes, she leaned even closer. Pressed those breasts against Arsen's chest. Capturing the jade's wayward hand, he brought it up to grace her palm with a light kiss. Staring intently into her eyes, his lips moved.

Breath held, Henry strained to hear but couldn't make out the words. At a good fifteen paces, they were too far away. The next instant the question pressing heavily on his mind was answered. Arsen turned and, navigating through the clusters of guests, led the blonde hand in hand through a narrow door hidden along the white paneled wall of the ballroom.

Closing his eyes, Henry winced against the pain tearing at his chest. At least Arsen was discrete. For that, Henry should thank him. It was hard enough to be in proximity to the handsome marquis. To be able to look and never touch. But to be forced to stand alone, to watch Arsen intimately touch another... Henry's heart would fracture for certain.

He let out a sigh of defeat and brought his champagne glass to his lips only to find it empty. He glanced right and left then scowled. Not a drink within easy distance. He wasn't surprised. Only one footman had chanced to travel to Henry's corner of the ballroom all evening. Well, it wasn't a corner. Those were inhabited. The least traveled space was at the marble columns directly inside the double doors, for once Arsen's guests entered the ballroom they had little reason to leave.

The soft strains of a waltz drifted from a curtained alcove and blended with the grunts, moans and occasional squeals of delight. The musky scents of arousal and sweat hung heavy in the air. Jewel-toned silk gowns along with black coats and trousers littered the gleaming parquet floor. The partially lit chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling cast a veil of burgeoning twilight over the tangles of naked and partially clothed bodies on the black velvet divans scattered about the room.

It wasn't even midnight and already the guests had given in to the urges of the flesh. Henry's lips twisted in distaste. If he had a scrawny arse like Bellingham, he sure as hell wouldn't put it on display. Trousers around his knees, the man swived a woman against the wall not more than ten paces from where Henry stood.

Bellingham's complete lack of decorum would have gotten him exiled from one of London's *haute ton* affairs. But at Somerville Park such licentious behavior was not only permitted, it was encouraged. For the week-long house party, Arsen had stocked his remote Durham estate with the best whores (both female and male) that could be found in London, providing ample entertainment for the debauched lords and ladies of the *ton*. And the prospect of becoming the next mistress to Lord Somerville had drawn the choicest specimens of the demimonde. Beautiful creatures designed solely for pleasure. They had been competing with each other for the past week to gain the coveted *carte blanche*. It appeared the pale blonde had succeeded where the others had failed.

Henry tipped his head back against the marble column.

Why the hell am I here?

Because Arsen extended the invitation and you can't say no to the man.

He let out a harrumph. *Brilliant.* He was arguing with himself. Dropping his chin to his chest, he closed his eyes. He should go to his room. No reason to stay here. He'd put in his appearance and no longer had to worry about appearing rude by shunning the obviously carefully planned climax to the house party—an orgy. An event all the guests had eagerly looked forward to, except him.

Only two-and-twenty and already an old prude. *You're a damn prime catch, Shaw.*

“Mr. Shaw!”

Suppressing a grimace, Henry reluctantly lifted his head.

Elly. Dressed in a thin shift and plain white stockings. He definitely should have left already.

The girl's long guinea-gold curls bounced as she darted toward him. And pulled along, her hand clasped securely in his, was a young man clad in nothing but a pair of black trousers. Obviously after yesterday's failed attempt with another girl as a third, tonight she was upping her offer. Bringing him a young man.

Elly and her new accomplice stopped in front of Henry. She tossed her hair behind her slim shoulders and grinned. “I have someone who wishes to make your acquaintance.” Apple-cheeked and lush lipped, she was the picture of country innocence. Except for her eyes. The honey brown depths glinted with wicked intent and a bit of triumph as well. “Mr. Shaw, may I introduce you to Patrick?”

“Good evening,” Henry said to the man.

Patrick gave him a deferential tip of the head. “Good evening, sir.”

The man didn’t need to open his mouth to identify himself as an Irishman. Midnight black hair and eyes of deepest blue. The width of his shoulders and the bulk of his biceps indicated he was at least eighteen years of age. But judging by the way his trousers hung loosely on his lean hips, exposing the smooth jut of his pelvic bone, Patrick wasn’t much older.

She slanted a mischievous glance to Patrick. “Didn’t I tell you Mr. Shaw was handsome?”

The young man looked Henry up and down. Slowly. Taking his time. When his gaze met Henry’s, he winked. “Very handsome. And very large.”

Uncomfortably aware of his size, Henry shifted his weight. He didn’t need yet another reminder that he did not belong at Somerville Park. At well over six-foot-two, he had the build of a farm laborer, not that of a gentleman of the *ton*.

Elly took a small step forward. “You’ve been standing by yourself all evening. Won’t you come play with us? We have been most lonely.” She gave Henry a convincing pout.

He might have believed she had been “most lonely” if he hadn’t seen her bent over the arm of a divan less than thirty minutes ago. The hem of her plain white shift gathered at her waist. Her round bottom reddened by a spanking. Those curls clenched tight in a man’s fist as he rammed her from behind. Her squeals of “more, more, more” spoke for themselves.

Yet he couldn't fault her for trying. If nothing else, the girl was determined. And he admired her for it. Without shame, without pride, without fear of rejection, she had approached him at least once a day since he arrived. Definitely braver than he.

"Thank you, my dear, but I shall have to decline."

Her pout turned sincere. "Are you certain?" She stepped closer and tipped her face up to his. The petite little thing barely reached his chest. "We'll do anything you'd like. And you can do anything you wish to us."

"Anything," Patrick emphasized, giving Henry an unmistakable "come fuck me" look.

"I'm certain, Elly."

Her lashes swept down, but not before he caught the utter disappointment in the honey brown depths. Not contrived, but true genuine hurt.

Bloody hell. Guilt descended, dropping heavily into his stomach.

Lowering his head, he tucked a stray golden curl behind her ear. She smelled of lilacs and green fields on a summer's day...and sex. "You are lovely, my dear. Truly. And I am a fool," he murmured.

With the tip of her finger, she traced a fabric-covered button on his cream silk waistcoat. Her lashes swept up. She searched his face. "You want to be with *him*," she said, only loud enough to reach Henry's ears.

His breaths stilled. His heart skipped a beat.

An understanding smile curved her lush lips. She reached up, her fingertips whispering along his jaw. “Never fear. Your secret is safe.” The compassion vanished in a blink of an eye. She pulled herself up straight and pushed out her breasts. The tips of her nipples strained against the thin shift. “Very well then.” With a toss of her head, she turned on her heel. “Come with me, Patrick. We shall tempt someone else.”

Holding Henry’s gaze, the young man hesitated. “Later?”

The answer should have been yes. The tousled black hair, the open invitation in the deep blue eyes, the perfectly honed lean body... But nothing. He could appreciate the masculine beauty but nothing more. Not even a twitch of desire.

Henry shook his head. “No.”

Patrick shrugged and followed Elly toward the tangle of bodies on a nearby divan.

He passed a tired eye over the ballroom, feeling distinctly separate from the erotic tableau before him. If someone had told him one year ago when he’d left his childhood home in Devon that he’d end up here, he would not have believed them. At the age of twenty-one, all he had wanted was to embark on his own. As the third son of a country gentleman, his means and his prospects were limited, but that had not stopped him. Shortly after his arrival in London, he had met Markus Drummond at a gambling hell. In no time at all, he had drawn Henry into his glittering, jaded social circle where Arsen reigned as king. If he had known then what he knew now, he would have put a stop to his naïve infatuation with Markus before it could begin.

Hell. He wouldn't have refused Markus then. Men like himself, men who preferred other men, were difficult to find and the thought of frequenting a Molly house turned his stomach. Desperate for something more stable than the couple of hasty encounters he'd had with the butcher's fickle son back in Devon, he had been eager to say yes to Markus. Given how that relationship had turned out, one would have thought he had learned his lesson. Still, hadn't he been more than eager to say yes to Arsen? He had hoped, perhaps, just maybe the invitation had meant something. Arsen *had* been seeking his company more often than not of late, even choosing to sit beside him at the card tables and spar with him at Angelo's Fencing Academy. But deep down, Henry had known exactly what the house party would hold for him.

One week. One torturous week of being surrounded by sex. Of being offered every sensual delight known to man but the one he wanted.

This infatuation with Arsen needed to end.

Who was he fooling? He was in love with Arsen. In love with *Lord Somerville*. Even if he had tried, there was no way he could have chosen someone more unsuitable.

It was absolutely hopeless.

Feeling strangely hollow and beyond weary, he scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Evening, Shaw."

Henry nearly jumped out of his skin. His champagne glass slipped from his fingers. A crash rent the air. He fought the urge to

cringe. One would think with hands as large as his, he would be able to hold on to a damn glass.

Slowly looking to his left, he found the object of his infatuation standing at his shoulder. The man had to spend a fortune at his tailor. Only an expert could cut a coat so it simultaneously draped and hugged a form.

Arsen raised one dark blond eyebrow. “If you didn’t care for the champagne, a simple request for something else would have been sufficient.”

He couldn’t tell from Arsen’s bland expression if the man was irritated or not. Hell, he had never been able to read Arsen. “Somerville, I-I—”

Arsen let out a sardonic snort. “No need to stutter, Shaw.”

The light scent of Arsen’s cologne made its way to Henry’s nose. Sandalwood with a hint of citrus. An intense wave of arousal mixed with the acute embarrassment, restricting his breath, heating his skin.

Desperate for a distraction, he glanced over Arsen’s broad shoulder. Armed with brooms and dustpans, a veritable army of servants stood a few paces behind their employer. All right, so it wasn’t actually the size of an army. But there were more servants in Henry’s end of the ballroom than he had seen all evening. Where the hell had they come from? Where had Arsen come from? Hadn’t he just left with his new mistress?

“Shaw.”

Henry’s gaze snapped to Arsen. And why did the man have to have green eyes? Deliciously handsome and obscenely wealthy

weren't enough. God just had to gift Lord Somerville with rich, deep emerald green eyes lined with lashes long enough to make a woman howl with jealousy.

The edges of Arsen's lips quirked. The moment so quick and so out of character Henry had to have imagined it.

Arsen turned and strode toward the double doors. "Come along."

Chapter Two

Henry stared at the spot where Arsen had stood, and blinked. “*Come along.*” The bored drawl of Arsen’s cultured voice echoed in his head.

Move, you fool!

Avoiding the litter on the once pristine floor, he jumped to do Arsen’s bidding. As he passed the pack of waiting servants, he ducked his head and mumbled, “My apologies for the mess.”

He stopped abruptly, the double doors swinging shut behind him, and searched the empty receiving room. His gaze skipped past the marble statues situated along the mirrored walls. Clearly confident Henry would follow, Arsen walked toward the corridor on the left. Henry caught up with him and followed two paces behind. Feeling distinctly like a besotted lap dog, he kept his mouth shut and tamped down the surge of excitement.

Arsen’s request meant nothing. Nothing at all. Likely had some errand he wished Henry to run. It wasn’t as if he’d been occupied back in the ballroom.

His strides long and limber, Arsen didn’t say a word. Didn’t give one hint as to where he was leading him. The sounds of their footsteps echoed in the corridor. The intoxicating scent of his cologne continued to fill Henry’s every breath. The neatly trimmed

ends of his hair skimmed the starched white collar of his shirt. All of the men Henry had previously been attracted to had brown hair. Ranging the full spectrum from light brown, like himself, to deepest sable. And the one man he was in love with—true love and not shallow infatuation—was a blond. Interesting.

At approximately six feet in height and thirty-three years of age, Arsen possessed the ideal build of a man in his prime. His broad shoulders narrowed fluidly to a lean waist. Henry cursed the tails of Arsen's evening coat for hiding what he was certain was a sublime arse. He'd sparred with Arsen at Gentleman Jackson's and knew there wasn't an extra ounce of fat on his frame. Muscular. Fit. Strong. Yet lacking the excessive bulk of Henry's frame. With Arsen, Henry wouldn't need to temper his strength. Wouldn't need to worry about hurting him.

Arsen would be able to take him.

Lust flared. A surge of raw heat. Tightening his ballocks. Threatening to pull a grunt from his throat.

He gave his head a sharp shake and rolled his shoulders, attempting to throw off the desire. Reaching down, he repositioned his cock in his trousers, trying but failing to hide the swollen length. Staring at Arsen wasn't helping matters, so he reluctantly pulled his gaze from the man's elegantly clothed body.

At least it was dark. The cover would hide his erection until he got himself under control. The light from the ballroom's receiving room barely made its way down the corridor. They passed closed door after closed door. Gilt-framed paintings graced the walls but it was too dark for Henry to make out the subjects. He couldn't recall

being in this end of the house before. Then again, the estate was massive. Sprawling. Many-roomed. Even after a week, he hadn't explored half the place.

Arsen opened a door. "Come along," he repeated as he stepped inside the room. "And shut the door."

He did as instructed. The click of the door closing seemed unnaturally loud. His fingers brushed the brass key in the lock below the knob. So tempting to turn it, to lock Arsen inside. With him. A shiver raced up his spine. He bit the inside of his cheek, reining in the lust. If he pounced on his host, Arsen would eject him from the house for certain.

Forcing his hand to his side, he turned from the door and glanced about. Shelves upon shelves of books. A large mahogany desk. A comfortable brown leather couch and a few armchairs. The furniture substantial, built for a man. He hated those spindly-legged things that dominated drawing rooms.

The study was large, but not oversized. It didn't have that museum quality of the formal rooms of the house but appeared lived in. A few papers and a deck of playing cards were on the desk. An open book graced the squat table in front of the couch. This must be Arsen's private study. And at least one servant had known Arsen's destination this evening, for a recently stoked fire burned in the fireplace opposite the couch and the candles in the three-armed silver candelabra on the corner of the desk were lit.

The clink of glass on glass pulled his attention to the far corner of the room. Holding a cut crystal glass in each hand, Arsen stepped from the shadows.

“Have a seat,” he said, indicating the armchairs in front of the desk.

His expertly tailored coat hung open, exposing the embroidered black silk waistcoat. The gold chain of his pocket watch glistened in the candlelight. Arsen had unbuttoned his coat. *It meant nothing. Nothing.* Henry swallowed hard and crossed the room. His fingers brushed Arsen’s as he took the proffered glass. A rush of sensation traveled up his arm and radiated across his chest. “Thank you,” he said gruffly as he settled into the chair.

Arsen took a sip then set down his glass and leaned a hip against the desk. He was so close Henry need only lean forward to place a hand on his knee. Arsen shrugged off his coat and tossed it onto the chair next to Henry’s.

Henry could just make out the golden hue of Arsen’s skin beneath the white linen shirtsleeves. Trying not to stare, he brought his glass to his lips.

“More to your liking?” Arsen asked.

Henry sucked in a startled breath then coughed, whisky burning his throat, his lungs.

“I take it you don’t care for whisky?”

Mortified, Henry struggled to stop coughing. Once the fit abated, he held up a hand. “Sorry, Somerville. I do. Care for whisky, that is. Good stuff.” He took a long swallow to emphasize his point.

Arsen tipped his head. “Thought you could use a real drink.” His golden forelock fell over his brow, skimming his long lashes, as

he glanced down. His elegant fingers brushed the neat stack of cards at his hip. “Care to play a hand of cards?”

Henry smirked. “No, I don’t need your money tonight.”

Arsen’s head snapped up. “Pardon?”

“Do you honestly believe I haven’t noticed? Anytime there’s more than twenty-five quid on the table, you let me win.”

“Are you accusing me of cheating? Saying I lack honor?” Arsen said, bristling with affront.

“Well, yes, you do manipulate the game in my favor. But don’t misunderstand. I don’t believe you lack honor. Rather the opposite.”

A renowned gambler, Arsen almost always came out the victor when he played against his peers. Or more specifically, against those who could afford to lose or those who needed a lesson in what it felt like to lose. But against those less fortunate, those like Henry who counted every farthing, Arsen conveniently lost. It was just one of many traits that endeared him to Henry.

A scowl marred Arsen’s brow. He appeared ready to argue then he shrugged.

Henry let out a relieved breath. “In any case, you needn’t spend the evening entertaining me. I don’t want to keep you from your guests.”

Arsen rolled his eyes. “My *guests* are sufficiently occupied. They won’t miss me. And I certainly don’t miss them. All I can say is thank God they are leaving on the morrow.”

Henry took a sip of whisky. While this was the first time he had been invited to Somerville Park, one couldn’t move about the *ton* without hearing the whispered tales of the numerous gatherings

Arsen had hosted over the years. So why did Arsen sound as if playing host was an unwanted chore? “But you invited them here.”

“Yes. However, they have served their purpose and can now leave. And none of them better think of lingering. If need be, I will haul them into their carriages myself in the morning.”

Arsen needn’t worry about hauling him into his carriage. At the first light of dawn, he would be on his way, traveling toward London and away from Somerville Park—the site of the most tortuous week of his life.

His pose one of casual nonchalance, Arsen crossed his white shirted arms over his broad chest. It took all of Henry’s willpower not to squirm in his chair under the force of Arsen’s probing deep green stare.

“Elly wasn’t to your liking?”

“No,” Henry answered automatically. Then suspicion formed. He leaned forward and glared at Arsen. “*You* arranged for her to follow me around all week?”

Arsen dismissed Henry’s indignation with a wave of his hand. “Don’t get offended, Shaw. She thinks highly of you. Has a weakness for big strapping men, hence why she didn’t protest when I nudged her in your direction.”

Frowning, Henry settled back in the chair and took a long sip of his whisky. It did not sit well, not well at all, that Arsen had pushed a woman at him. Clearly, Arsen had no idea the direction of Henry’s interest. He should take comfort in it—it meant he’d been successful in hiding his preference for men from the gentlemen of the *ton*. But it also meant Arsen didn’t know he was the object of

Henry's deepest desires. That hollow feeling invaded his stomach. Ate its way into his chest. Gnawed viciously at his heart. Damn, did unrequited love hurt.

"Are you a virgin, Shaw?"

Henry went utterly still. He felt the color leach from his face then flare across his cheeks in a rush of prickling heat. "N-N-No. No! Certainly not." Virgins didn't want to do to Lord Somerville what Henry wanted to do.

"Huh." Arsen rubbed his hand across his jaw. "Yet you've been quite the monk this past week. If I'm not mistaken, you are my only guest who did not partake. Your devotion is admirable."

"My-my what?"

"Devotion," Arsen replied with a casual lift of one shoulder. "Your loyalty. Unlike every other guest at Somerville Park, you alone have remained true to..." He paused.

Henry's heart leapt into his throat. *You. I have remained true to you.*

"...whoever it is you are involved with."

He fought back the wince. "I'm not involved with anyone," he admitted. "I was, at one point, but that relationship is fortunately over."

Markus. If that man hadn't been a lesson in how quickly infatuation could turn sour, nothing was. Yet here Henry sat, besotted once again. But it was different this time, he assured himself. Arsen had honor and would never take advantage of another. Arsen was also different from Markus in another very important area. Henry was now certain Arsen's interests did not

extend to other men. Not once in the entire week had he seen Arsen spare more than a casual glance at another man. At least he needn't worry the relationship would end badly, for it could never begin. Arsen only wanted relationships with women. Hell, everyone knew he had recently split with his last mistress and that the true purpose of this house party was for him to find a new one.

Henry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Have you made a decision yet?"

"Regarding what?"

"The next resident of Telford House," he clarified, referring to the immense townhouse on the edge of Mayfair and notable for the fact it housed every one of Arsen's past mistresses.

Arsen flicked a piece of lint off his black waistcoat. "Possibly."

"The pale blonde?"

"Cassandra?" Arsen grimaced. "No."

"Why not? She's beautiful." *Keep your damn mouth shut.*

Arsen hesitated. "That she is. But she's a spoiled creature. Greedy. Self-centered. She hasn't got a loyal bone in her body. All she wants is to live in my house and have unlimited access to my bank accounts. I wouldn't trust her with either. And she would leave me as soon as someone wealthier came along. Doubt she'd even offer to give me a parting thank you fuck."

That crude word from Arsen's lips made Henry's cock jump to attention. Eager. Ready. Henry eyed the large mahogany desk. All he needed was that word in the right context and he'd bend over the desk without hesitation, offer Arsen what the beautiful Cassandra

would not. The image slammed into his head. So vivid, so powerful, he could feel Arsen's cock pounding his arse.

The muscles in his thighs and buttocks tightened. He dragged his attention from the desk before he did something inexcusable like...beg. Beg for Arsen's touch, for his kiss, beg to be taken. He dropped his free hand to his lap to cover his erection and hastily brought his glass to his lips but found it empty.

"Here," Arsen said, holding out his glass.

Henry set his empty glass on the desk and took Arsen's, downing the contents in one swallow.

"Apparently you needed two drinks."

His lips pulled into a smile he knew had to appear pained. "Apparently." Henry forced his mind back to the prior conversation—Arsen's new mistress. Not his favorite topic but he had this perverse need to find out who had captured Arsen's fancy. The question had plagued him no end and there was no way he could leave the house party tomorrow morning without learning the answer. He struggled to recall the various women who had approached Arsen over the past week. There had been so many they all blurred together to form one perfect female. One person *he* could never be. "If not Cassandra, then who?"

Arsen held his gaze. His lips quirked.

A scratch sounded at the door. The knob clicked open.

"Lord Somerville?"

Henry glanced over his shoulder. A young maid with mousey brown hair poked her head around the door.

"Yes, Tess?"

At Arsen's use of the maid's name, Henry's attention snapped to him. Most lords only cared to remember the names of their butler, housekeeper and valet, if that. All other servants were too insignificant for their lofty notice.

"My apologies for intruding, your lordship."

Arsen flicked his fingers, beckoning the maid. "You're not intruding."

Yes, you are. Henry gritted his teeth to keep the words inside.

She didn't scurry or appear intimidated as she crossed the room. Rather, she walked with purpose as though she had no fear of incurring her employer's wrath. Claspng her hands before her, she stopped next to Arsen. "It's Lord Milton, my lord. He's taken up in Miss Cassandra's room."

Arsen lifted one dark blond eyebrow. "He is foxed, I presume?"

"Very much so and none of the footman will approach him, not with what he did to Timothy the other day. Poor man still can't open his eye."

Arsen dragged a hand through his hair, disheveling the neat layers. "Very well then. I will see to it."

Not sparing a glance for Henry, the maid bobbed a curtsey and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Heaving a sigh, Arsen pushed from the desk and strode toward the door. "Come along, Shaw."

Chapter Three

Henry slammed the empty glass on the desk and jumped to his feet. Then paused as a hint of irritation seeped into the eagerness. Pushing the unwelcome feeling aside, he tugged on the end of his black coat—one that didn't fit nearly as well as the one Arsen had discarded—and took up pursuit.

As before, he trailed two paces behind Arsen. But he didn't mind. Not much. The view was quite nice. He'd been right—Arsen did have a sublime arse. Henry flexed his hand, his fingers tingling with a need to reach out and grab it. To test the firmness of the muscular cheeks bunching and flexing beneath the black wool trousers with each step.

Neither said a word as they made their way down the corridor, up a flight of stairs and to the second floor. Plush rugs silenced their footsteps. Lamps on small tables spaced at regular intervals along the wall lit the hallway. Also stationed along the wall at similar intervals were footmen clad in the black and gold livery of the Somerville marquisate. Still as statues and with their hands clasped behind their backs, the men stared straight ahead, waiting to be called into service.

One of the doors opened as Henry neared it. Flushed faced and clothing askew, a man staggered out.

“I’ve got one in my trunk,” the man called over his shoulder. He grinned broadly as Arsen passed him. “Fabulous party, Somerville. Great whores.”

Arsen didn’t spare him even a tip of his head. Dually chastised, the man scurried down the corridor.

A rapturous moan pulled Henry’s attention to the open door. Standing behind a naked woman, another man drew the handled end of a leather bullwhip down the crease of her lush bottom. Arms stretched overhead and wrists bound together by thick leather cuffs, the woman writhed in obvious delight.

Henry rubbed his wrists. The bruises had faded over a month ago, yet they suddenly ached as though fresh. A chill began to seep into his bones. Shaking it off, he glanced ahead and lengthened his stride to catch up with Arsen. They turned left and stopped in front of a closed door.

“Milton’s a damn mean drunk. Stay clear of his fists or you’ll end up like my footman,” Arsen said.

There it was again. That twinge of irritation. Squaring his shoulders, Henry looked down on the slightly shorter man. Just because he had gone easy on Arsen that one time he had sparred with him at Gentleman Jackson’s didn’t mean he couldn’t handle himself. He had, after all, still come out the victor. “I don’t believe I’m the one who needs to worry.”

Arsen’s deep green gaze traced the width of Henry’s chest. “Perhaps not.”

Perhaps? He opened his mouth then paused, reason descending. *Take what you can get, Shaw.* “But if you’re so

concerned, why not let Milton sleep here for the night? Doesn't seem to be bothering anyone." He could detect no sounds from within the room.

Distaste flickered across Arsen's aristocratic features. "Because Cassandra would use it as an excuse to try to spend the night in *my* bedchamber."

Arsen opened the door. A large man was sprawled on the bed, as if he'd wandered up to it and simply passed out. One arm and one booted foot hung off the mattress. His face was pressed into a pillow. He appeared completely out of place in the overly feminine bedchamber. Almost everything was a noxious shade of pink, from the drapes covering the windows to the silk coverlet adorning the four poster bed.

Henry followed Arsen inside. He paused when Arsen held up a hand.

"Shut the door and wait here." Arsen continued to the side of the bed without a backward glance.

Henry flicked the door closed. Like hell he was going to cower like some callow youth! Ignoring Arsen, he crossed the room.

"Milton." Arsen shoved the man's massive shoulder.

The rhythmic pattern of the lord's snores went undisturbed.

Arsen's features hardened. "Milton. Get your arse up." He grabbed a fistful of dark hair and tugged.

Without warning, Milton bolted up, swinging one long arm, fist clenched and aimed at Arsen's handsome face. Henry lunged forward, hand closing around the thick wrist, stopping the blow in mid-arc.

Rage flashed across Milton's bloated face. Displaying far more strength than a drunk should possess, Milton jerked hard, pulling Henry forward. Using the momentum to his advantage, Henry landed with his knee on the small of Milton's back, pressing the man flat on the bed. Twisting Milton's arm behind his back, Henry held him down.

"Get the fuck off me!" Milton thrashed, pushing the pillows off the bed and knocking a wine glass off the bedside table.

Settling all his weight onto his knee, Henry tightened his hold and wrenched the man's arm higher up his back.

Milton let out a pained grunt and tried to throw him off. "You bastard!"

"Cease!"

At the authority in Arsen's voice, both men stilled.

Henry glanced up.

Arsen stood next to the bed, a look of severe displeasure on his face. What appeared to be Bordeaux stained the sleeve of his white shirt and dripped from the tips of his long fingers. "Quit behaving like an arse, Milton. You're in the wrong room, you damn fool."

Milton turned his head left and right as much as he could in his current position. His low rumbling growl vibrated Henry's knee. "I hate the color pink."

"As do I. Now will you behave yourself?" Eyes narrowed and green depths glinting with an undisguised threat, Arsen stared down at him.

"Yes," Milton grumbled.

"All right then." Arsen glanced to Henry. "Let him up."

Suppressing a few choice words, he gave the man's arm one last twist before releasing him. He got off the bed and tugged on the end of his coat to straighten it.

Raising one eyebrow, Arsen glanced to him and let out a barely audible harrumph.

Henry lifted his chin, not caring if Arsen was annoyed at him for interceding. He may not be fond of his own size, but it did prove useful at times.

Milton slowly pushed up. Swaying slightly from side to side, he sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his hands over his face. His bloodshot gaze swept the room, stopping on Henry. His fleshy lips curled. "Shaw. Always toadying up to Somerville. Kissing his arse." Milton let out a snort of contempt. "You'd like to, wouldn't you, Shaw?" He looked to Arsen. "You should let him, Somerville. Bet he's good."

For a moment, the only sound that could be heard was the faint squeal of a woman from down the corridor.

"Shaw. Call for a footman," Arsen said, his tone one of patent boredom. His attention never wavering from Milton, he flicked his fingers to the burgundy stain on the cream patterned rug. "This needs to be cleaned before Miss Cassandra retires for the night."

But Henry's feet wouldn't move. His pulse pounded in his ears. Deafeningly loud. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

"Now, Shaw. Before the stain sets in."

He turned and forced his legs to take him across the room. His hand shook as he grasped the knob and opened the door. Stopping

next to the nearest footman, he cleared his constricted throat. “Lord Somerville needs your assistance.”

The burly footman gave him a deferential tip of the head and walked to the room.

Closing his eyes, Henry clenched his fists.

Enough. He would not be made the brunt of an arse like Milton’s jokes.

This infatuation was over.

Finished.

Shoulders slumping, he dropped his chin to his chest and let out a heavy exhale. The tension slipped from his body. His fists unclenched. His arms hung limply at his sides. Oddly, he felt no pain. The vicious beast that had once gnawed at his chest was gone. He felt...nothing. Only emptiness. Vast, hollow, endless emptiness.

He heard the sound of footsteps approaching yet he didn’t move. He just stood there wanting only to be left alone.

A soft bundle hit his chest. Reflexively he caught it and opened his eyes. In his hands was a black silk embroidered waistcoat, the fabric still warm. He looked up to see Arsen’s white shirted back striding down the corridor.

Henry quickly glanced over his shoulder. Dark hair disheveled, Milton staggered in the opposite direction.

“Shaw.”

His head snapped around at the sound of Arsen’s voice. *What, no “come along”?*

Continuing down the corridor, Arsen flexed his right hand by his side then disappeared into a room at the end.

Henry meant to stay where he was, but his legs moved. “Just need to return his waistcoat,” he mumbled. He had no use for it—certainly wouldn’t fit him and he sure as hell wasn’t going to keep some token of Arsen like a lovelorn fool. The garment clenched in one fist, he followed for the last time.

After closing the door behind him, he passed through a darkened room and went into the next. As the knob clicked shut on that door, he paused. His lips pulled in a smirk devoid of all humor. *He trained you well, Shaw.*

He turned from the door. “Somerville—” The words stopped in his throat.

His back to Henry, Arsen pulled his shirt over his head. “Ruined,” he grumbled, tossing the shirt to the floor.

The man’s back was...*Christ*. Perfect. The light from a nearby candle illuminated every detail. The hard muscular contours. The deep line of his spine. The sleek sweep of the small of his back. Arsen dragged his left hand through his hair, his shoulder blades working with the motion. Fluid. Graceful. Yet powerful.

“Leave the waistcoat on the table next to the door. My valet will take care of it in the morning.”

Henry lifted his arm but found his hand empty. Perplexed, he glanced down. A bundle of black silk was on the floor by his feet. Hastily, he picked it up, turned and set it on the narrow console table. A glint of green and gold caught his attention. Also on the table was a small black marble dish, and inside were two emerald studded cufflinks and a gold pocket watch.

He knew exactly where Arsen had led him.

To Arsen's bedchamber.

It meant nothing. *Nothing!* Likely Arsen just wanted to change his shirt.

Yet still, excitement roared through his veins. A tremble of anticipation wracked his spine. He took a swift breath. Sandalwood and a hint of citrus. His cock reacted instantly to the scent.

Damn it! He gritted his teeth. He could feel the swollen length pressing against his linen drawers, demanding to be set free. Like the rest of him, his cock was oversized. A damn club between his legs. A very hard club Arsen wouldn't be able to mistake for anything but a raging erection.

"You needn't linger by the door, Shaw." Arsen paused and the haughty boredom vanished from his voice. "Milton's an arse. Don't spare him a second thought."

Henry let out a low, mirthless chuckle. He was tired. Tired of fighting himself. Tired of hiding how he felt. He'd be leaving tomorrow and he'd do his best to never lay eyes on Arsen again. Might as well be honest now. He had nothing to lose. No reason to preserve a valued friendship when he was willingly giving it up. "He may be an arse, but he's right, you know."

"Really?"

Henry could well imagine the arrogantly arched eyebrow, the condescension on Arsen's face. On a weary sigh, he turned from the door. Arsen stood at the foot of the bed, that damn eyebrow raised. Henry's gaze skimmed down Arsen's bare chest, down the flat abdomen, down—

His eyes flared.

Arsen's cock strained against his black wool trousers.

Hell. The man was hard.

Henry's heart slammed against his ribs.

The edges of Arsen's lips quirked. "You have entirely too many clothes on, Shaw. Why don't you remove them?"

Chapter Four

Henry's cock screamed at him to obey without hesitation, yet that troublesome organ in his chest warned to hold back. To proceed with caution. For false hope was the cruelest joke of all.

His reservation must have shown itself, for Arsen asked, "Something the matter, Shaw?"

"But you don't like men." There it was. The truth. Lord Somerville had mistresses, frequented the best brothels in London and had a keen appreciation for breasts. Not once had Henry picked up a hint Arsen was open to male partners. And God help him, Henry had looked for that hint. Desperately.

Resting his hands on his hips, Arsen tilted his head. His brow furrowed. "I don't?"

"No." Feeling distinctly uneasy, Henry glanced about the luxurious yet at the same time understated bedchamber. He could not believe he was arguing with Arsen, over this of all things. The man stood before him, the embodiment of all his fantasies, and fool that Henry was, he questioned him.

"Then I wonder why I went to such lengths to ensure that *whore* did not seek me out tonight?"

Henry's attention snapped to the other man.

Arsen ran a hand over the bulge in his trousers, fingers tightening around the prominent head. “And I wonder why I have this pressing desire to fuck *you*?”

A moan escaped Henry’s lips. He squeezed his eyes closed tight against a bolt of purest lust. It ripped through his body. Lit every nerve. Wracked his muscles.

“Come here, Shaw.” Thick and rich, Arsen’s voice dripped with sexual promise.

The hell with it. Arsen’s motives didn’t matter. Tomorrow didn’t matter. The reasons why a relationship with Lord Somerville could not work didn’t matter. All that mattered was the man was here, and he wanted Henry. One night with Arsen was more than he dreamed he could ever have.

He crossed the room in four quick strides, reached out and grabbed Arsen by the back of the neck. Pulling him close, he slanted his mouth over Arsen’s. Swept his tongue boldly inside. He groaned, deep and low in absolute gratitude, as Arsen’s tongue met his. Frantic, Henry caressed every inch of Arsen’s body he could reach. His hands everywhere, soaking up every detail. The velvety texture of the man’s skin. The hardness of his muscles. Heat radiated from his body, searing Henry’s palms.

Arsen’s hands slipped between their bodies to work the buttons on Henry’s coat and waistcoat. All the while Henry devoured Arsen’s mouth.

Arsen shoved Henry’s coat and waistcoat off his shoulders, momentarily trapping his arms at his sides. With a hard tug, he jerked his arms from the sleeves and reached for Arsen again.

Twisting his head, Arsen broke the kiss and took a step back. “Wait.”

“No.” Henry leaned forward, intent on capturing Arsen’s mouth.

Arsen laid his fingers over Henry’s lips, effortlessly holding him back. His green eyes blazed with desire. “Your shirt. Cravat.”

Drawing Arsen’s fingers into his mouth, Henry sucked on the tips. Arsen shuddered. Christ, *he* could make Arsen shudder.

Henry tore at the knot on his cravat. Tugged the long length of linen from his neck. Yanked at his shirt collar. Buttons popped. Fabric ripped. Flicking the ruined shirt to the floor, he glared at Arsen. “Done. Now kiss me.”

A slow smile spread across Arsen’s wet lips. “Maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe I should make you wait.”

“Arrogant bastard,” Henry shot back the instant before he kissed Arsen full on the mouth.

The chuckle rumbling Arsen’s chest turned into a groan as Henry dragged his lips down the man’s neck. The scent of Arsen’s cologne saturated his skin, teasing Henry’s tongue. And Arsen’s touch...God, the feel of Arsen’s hands on his bare skin made his cock throb painfully. Fluid leaked from the tip, wetting his drawers. Grabbing Arsen’s hips, he jerked his lover closer, pressing bare chest to bare chest. The light smattering of hair on Arsen’s chest teased his nipples. Henry ground his hips as he mouthed Arsen’s neck, rubbing their hard pricks together.

Henry didn't know if the hoarse moan echoing in his ears was his or Arsen's, for need raged out of control. Swamped his senses. Left him gasping for air.

More. He needed more of Arsen.

Kissing and nipping the warm velvety skin, he worked his way down Arsen's broad chest. Dropped to his knees. Paid homage to the sculpted abdomen. Flicked his tongue over the crease of Arsen's navel. Followed the thin trail of fair hair until he encountered soft wool. Then he quickly undid the buttons on Arsen's falls and pushed his trousers and drawers down his long legs, freeing his cock. The hard length jutted eagerly from a thatch of dark blond hair. For a moment, Henry was struck motionless. It was a sight he only dreamed of beholding. Arsen's cock was perfect, just like the rest of him. Golden skin stretched taut over the thick length. The shaft straight and true. The head flushed with need and only inches from his mouth.

"Kiss it," Arsen said, his voice hoarsened with passion.

Henry pressed his lips to the head, pulling a groan from Arsen. He opened his mouth, but instead of taking the man's cock inside, he dragged his lips along the length, flicking his tongue over the hot skin. Massaging Arsen's thighs, he nuzzled the base then rubbed his cheek against the satiny smooth skin of his hip. Damn, Arsen smelled good. Male arousal with a hint of sweat. And something else. Something that was distinctly Arsen. The combined scent was an amazingly potent source of lust.

He sprinkled light kisses over Arsen's groin. Light kisses that quickly turned greedy. Urgent. Open mouthed kisses with teeth and

tongue. He tried to draw out the moment, to savor the anticipation, but it was no use.

Grabbing hold of the base, Henry opened his mouth and took Arsen's cock inside.

Arsen's fist pressed against the nape of Henry's neck, urging him to take more. Relaxing his throat, he grabbed Arsen's firm buttocks with both hands and sank all the way down. Silken skin slid over his tongue, leaving behind the salty tang of pre-come. The thick length filled his mouth. Determined to shatter Arsen's control, he bobbed up and down, tickling the sensitive underside with the tip of his tongue with each stroke.

Arsen tilted his hips forward. "Suck it, Shaw."

On the next upward glide, Henry sucked hard, his cheeks hollowing. Then he slid down, all the way down, and swallowed, using the muscles of his throat to stroke the head.

Arsen let out a grunt and clasped Henry's shoulder, long fingers digging into the tendons, as if he needed to hold on to stay on his feet. "Hell, that feels good. Do it again."

Henry happily complied.

Arsen's buttocks tightened beneath Henry's hands. He felt a tremor shake the man's body. Arsen's breaths turned ragged. Hard heavy pants filled Henry's ears.

"Enough," Arsen gasped, tugging on Henry's hair.

He shook his head as much as he could in his current position. Intense arousal permeated his senses, had him on the brink of orgasm. Yet he wanted to suck Arsen's cock all night long. Make the man come over and over.

“Enough, Shaw.” Arsen tugged again, this time with both hands. “Stop.” Desperation laced his tone.

That word, the one Henry could never ignore, penetrated the fog of lust. He pulled his mouth from Arsen’s prick.

Eyes heavy-lidded, Arsen stared down at him. His golden forelock hung over his brow, a slight flush staining his cheekbones. Cupping Henry’s jaw, he rubbed the pad of his thumb over Henry’s wet lips. “Such a pretty mouth,” he murmured huskily. “But I don’t want to come down your throat. I want to come in your arse.”

“Yes.” Henry hung his head, his pose one of abject submission and not caring in the slightest.

Warm fingertips brushed the back of his neck, toyed with the hair dampened from sweat. “Then get up. And take those damn trousers off so I can fuck you.”

Hands shaking, he tore at the placket of his trousers and scrambled to his feet as Arsen kicked his own trousers free of his legs.

Grasping Henry’s upper arm, Arsen turned him toward the bed. He laid a hand between his shoulder blades and pushed. Bracing his hands on the edge of the bed, Henry bent at the waist and widened his stance to accommodate the differences in their respective heights. Shameless and needy, he trembled as Arsen drew his palms down his back, the gesture gentle and possessive at the same time. Then he grunted as Arsen spread his cheeks, delivering a tug on his hole. The muscles in his thighs and buttocks tightened in anticipation.

Warm air bathed the exposed crack of his arse. Startled, he glanced around his shoulder. Arsen was crouched on his haunches behind him, thighs splayed and glistening wet cock arched toward his navel. Henry's eyes widened. His breath caught. *Oh my God.* Arsen was going to—

Wet heat lapped at his hole.

“Oh yes.” The words came out on a throat-scraping groan of approval. Henry sagged under the onslaught. His arms shook. Hell, his whole body shook as Arsen teased his arse, alternating between rubbing the pads of his thumbs and flicking his tongue over the puckered flesh.

The proficiency of that agile tongue told Henry just how good Arsen was at hiding his preference for men. No man could lick arse like this without having done it many times. And he did it so well Henry suspected Arsen enjoyed it. Wasn't doing it simply to ease the way for his cock, but because he wanted to.

The knowledge tightened his ballocks. Unbearably tight. Painfully tight. An orgasm gripped the base of his spine. Intent on preventing the impending climax, he reached down then let out a startled yelp at the hard smack on his bum.

“Hands on the bed,” Arsen commanded, his voice vibrating against the sensitive ring of muscle.

He could feel exactly where Arsen's hand had struck. The skin tingled, fierce and hot. Much to his shock, it did absolutely nothing to aid his efforts to keep from coming. “But—” Embarrassment clogged his throat. Arsen hadn't touched his cock. *He* hadn't touched his own cock. Not even one stroke. If he came now, if he

displayed such a lack of control, then Arsen would know how desperately he wanted him. How desperately he needed him. “Ar—” Henry clenched his jaw, catching the name. “Somerville. Please. I’m going to come.”

“Then come for me.” Arsen stabbed his tongue into Henry’s arse.

An orgasm slammed through him. Too hard, too powerful to stop. Henry threw back his head on a strangled scream and came.

A large hand grasped his hip. The climax washing his senses, the aftershocks shaking his body, he felt Arsen’s cock press against him, demanding entry. Henry arched his back then groaned as the head made the breach. Instinctively, he relaxed into the pressure. The sting blended with the pleasure. Took it to the next level. “Yes, yes,” he chanted, past the point where he cared if he begged.

The way Arsen eased inside of him. Careful. Considerate. It was all Henry could do not to sob in gratitude. The length filled him slowly. Stretching. Invading. Setting off every nerve ending in his arse.

Settling hilt-deep, Arsen paused. He kneaded Henry’s hips. “Damn, Shaw. You’re so tight.”

Henry struggled to catch his breath, the all-encompassing pleasure almost too much for his mind to process. Sweat pricked between his shoulder blades. Dripped from his jaw.

Arsen eased back and thrust sharply home. “You have the most fuckable arse. Round. Firm. Made to take a cock. *My cock*,” Arsen growled, slamming into him.

“Yes. Yours, yours. Only yours.” Past the point of coherent thought, the truth tumbled from his mouth. Arsen Grey was fucking him and it felt spectacular. Beyond anything he had ever experienced. The deep hard thrusts possessed him completely.

His cock ached. Burned. A heavy rod of pure, blazing-hot need bobbing helplessly with each determined thrust. His ballocks were so tight they hurt. Yet he gripped the dark blue coverlet with white knuckled fists. Let Arsen have him. Take him.

One of the hands on his hips curved inward, slid down. Grasped Henry’s straining arousal at the same instant Arsen changed the angle of his thrusts. The head of his prick hit the most sublime spot inside of Henry. Sharp. Hard. Setting off another orgasm hovering just out of reach.

Fire burned a path down his cock, erupted from the head. Henry roared Arsen’s name as he came, shooting seed onto the rug beneath his feet.

“Yes. Give it to me. Give it all.” Arsen stroked Henry’s cock, milked the length, as he pounded into him. “Goddamn-it. Gonna come. *Now.*”

Ramming ballocks-deep, Arsen poured into him. The spasms wracking Arsen’s cock prolonged Henry’s climax. Drained his ballocks, sapping his strength, leaving him weak.

Legs giving out, Henry crumbled to his knees. He rested his forehead against the footboard and gasped for breath. The heavy beat of his pulse echoed in his ears. Dazed, he scrubbed a hand over his face, smearing wetness across his cheeks. Then he twisted around and tipped his head back.

Arsen loomed above him, his heavy-lidded eyes mere slits. His sweat-slicked chest rose and fell with each labored breath. The prick that had moments ago taken Henry to ecstasy hung semi-erect between his thighs. A crooked smile curved Arsen's lips. A smile Henry had never before seen grace the mouth of Lord Somerville.

He held out a hand to Henry. "Come along, Shaw. You needn't sleep at the foot of the bed."

Chapter Five

Arsen studied the man sprawled beside him in his bed. Mister Henry Shaw did not snore. Considerate, even in sleep. Arsen wasn't surprised. It fit Shaw—loyal, dependable, considerate, devoted...to *him*. Grinning in amazement, Arsen shook his head.

Shaw had passed out the second his head touched the pillow. Arsen couldn't help but envy him. Hell, he never slept well. Four straight hours a night, well, morning since he rarely retired until dawn, were considered a raging success. But he had a feeling his future nights would not be so restless. The soft sounds of Shaw's sleeping breaths could lull even a man like Arsen to relax and let sleep overtake him.

But not tonight. Not now. He couldn't take his eyes off Shaw.

Impossibly broad shoulders. Heavily muscled. Rugged. Masculine. Henry Shaw was one hundred percent a man. Sprawled on his back, one arm bent over his head, the other resting on his abdomen and with the white sheet twisted about his strong calves, Shaw took up over half of Arsen's bed. He was only a couple inches taller than Arsen, yet the sheer overwhelming substance of his frame gave the impression of great height.

Arsen had brought such a powerful man to his knees. Unbelievable. And the way Shaw responded to his touch. Never had

a lover made him feel as if his touch was the most treasured of gifts. No amount of money could buy that feeling. And by God, Arsen had parted with enough pound notes over the years to know genuine affection could not be bought.

He gently smoothed Shaw's rumpled light brown hair. Hair that was almost too short in his opinion. But that was Shaw—conservative. Dressed in somber colors. Favored drab brown though tonight he'd worn black. Rarely did anything to draw attention to himself. Yet the man's presence was a solid, strong force Arsen hadn't been able to ignore for the past three months.

He'd known of Shaw for about a year, when the man first came to London fresh from the Devon countryside. He had seen him at White's and a few gambling hells, but other than a passing appreciation for Shaw's rugged good looks, Arsen had paid him little notice. Shaw had simply been another addition to the various hangers-on that inhabited his social circle.

Until three months ago. He had caught Shaw staring at him and the heat in the soulful deep blue eyes had gone straight to his groin. Few were aware of it, but he'd known Shaw was involved with Drummond at the time, so he knew Shaw was capable of discretion when it came to his interest in other men. An interest Arsen shared, and one he kept well hidden. But rather than immediately act on the attraction in Shaw's hungry stare, he had held back. Why exactly, he couldn't quite say. It hadn't been that he'd had a mistress at the time—a sufficiently large stack of pound notes would have solved that problem. Perhaps, on some level, he had known even then that Shaw was different. That perhaps Shaw could see beyond his wealth

and his title, and actually want to be with him, the man, and not the sought-after marquis. But whatever the reason, he had begun paying more attention to Shaw, got to know him, and in the process discovered he wasn't at all like his other acquaintances in London. His patience, and his planning, had paid off.

By God, how they had paid off. Shaw was now in his bed.

Face relaxed with sleep, Arsen could see the boy Shaw had once been. A boy Shaw had been not long ago. Arsen's lips pulled in a frown. Made him feel a bit like an old man. At slightly more than a decade older than Shaw's twenty-two years, Shaw likely considered him an old man.

Arsen let out a heavy sigh. Pushing the unpleasant thought aside, he focused his attention on Shaw's full mouth, lips tinged red. A mouth made to wrap around a man's cock. A mouth that was unbelievably good at sucking a man off. A frisson of lust raced down Arsen's spine. He shifted his hips, his prick swelling.

The pressure in his groin drew his gaze down to Shaw's. Even flaccid, Shaw's cock was impressive to behold. But erect...the thick long length inspired awe. A sight Arsen had not had much time to behold, since Shaw's large hands, luscious mouth and delectable gorgeous arse had been too distracting by far.

Arsen flexed his right hand at the memory of his fingers wrapped around that heavy cock. Then he grimaced. Damn, Milton had a hard head. His knuckles were still sore, but the ache was worth it. Milton would never dare speak so cruelly to Shaw again. And Arsen owed the man a bit of thanks, for the incident ultimately led Shaw into Arsen's bed. Of course, he had planned to end the

week right here with Shaw all along. If his maid hadn't interrupted him, he and Shaw would have started in the study then progressed to his room. But it was always better, and easier, to simply start in the bedchamber. Though Shaw would have presented a mighty nice image bent over the arm of the leather couch, his trousers shoved down to his knees, the black tails of his evening coat framing his gorgeous bare arse.

His greedy gaze skimmed the length of Shaw's naked body. A wicked thought seized hold. Levering up, Arsen glanced about the room, pausing on a rumpled white cravat on the floor by the tall dresser. The one he had hastily discarded when he earlier entered the room.

Careful not to shake the mattress too much, he scooted to the edge of the bed and got off. Pressing the heels of his palms to his lower back, he arched, stretching his stiff spine. Cool air chilled his bare skin. He hadn't realized how cold it was in the room—Shaw generated more heat than a roaring fire. It might be August, but Durham was significantly closer to Scotland than to London. The nights could get damn chilly. And his staff hadn't expected him to retire until dawn, which explained why his seconds-ago erect cock was now approaching embarrassing proportions.

Tomorrow he'd instruct his valet to have the fire lit well before midnight. If all went as planned in the morning, he would be remaining at Somerville Park for the foreseeable future with a very good reason to retire before dawn. Until then, he could manage the fire himself.

He padded to the dark fireplace on bare feet. Wood was already piled on the iron grate so all he needed to do was light it. The task seen to, he grabbed his cravat then found Shaw's under the man's torn shirt. A chuckle rumbled his chest. Shaw hadn't even taken the time to whip his shirt over his head. Simply employed those bulging biceps to rip it effortlessly down the center. If that wasn't eagerness, nothing was.

On the way back to the bed, he lit a couple more candles for good measure. He didn't want anything shrouded by shadows. And he also needed... He opened the top drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a small glass bottle. The viscous oil within glinted in the candlelight. His cock hardened, lifting from his body, at the thought of Shaw's arse slicked and ready for him.

Suppressing a grunt, he closed his eyes and forced the need in check. He could fuck Shaw till dawn, gorge himself on the man, after he satisfied this pressing need to touch. To run his hands over the powerful body. To taste the warm skin. And to do so without the distraction of Shaw's large hands on him.

The cravats clutched in one fist, Arsen surveyed the four-poster bed and the hulking giant fast asleep. Shaw's right arm was still bent over his head, the other flung out at his side exactly in the place where Arsen had lain. He tilted his head, debating the best course of action. Then he smirked as the solution came to him.

He tied an end of a cravat securely to the poster nearest him and laid the long wide length on the sheet. He rounded the bed and tied the other cravat in the same fashion. Leaning over the mattress, he twisted the cravat into a rope then carefully lifted Shaw's heavy

right arm just enough to wrap the cloth around his wrist. A wince flickered across Shaw's brow as Arsen tied the knot.

Breath held, he paused.

The logs in the fireplace crackled. Concern nudged the back of his mind. He studied the broad chest. It rose and fell in the rhythmic pattern of one in a deep sleep. Perhaps he should wake Shaw first? No. It would be much more...interesting this way.

Reassured, he went back to the other side of the bed and slowly climbed onto the mattress. Crouched on his knees, he whispered his fingertips down the long length of Shaw's arm, closed his hand around the thick wrist and drew Shaw's arm up.

That wince flickered across Shaw's brow, but this time stronger. Heart pounding, Arsen made quick work of the knot.

He didn't even have a full moment to soak up the decadent sight of Shaw, arms stretched up and out toward the corners of the bed, that muscular body on display, when Shaw's eyes snapped open.

"What the—?" He jerked his arms. Eyes wide, his gaze skittered about the room, landing on Arsen. "Untie me."

Arsen laid a soothing palm on Shaw's chest. "Relax, Shaw. It's just a game."

"Like hell it is," Shaw snarled, twisting as much as his bonds would allow and dislodging Arsen's hand.

Damn. This was not the "interesting" he had been hoping for. "Calm down." The man continued to struggle. "Shaw. *Henry*, it's all right. If you don't want—"

“Untie me. *Now!*” Back arching, he jerked his arms again, stretching the rope of white cloth taut. The massive biceps bulged. The muscles of his chest and abdomen rippled and flexed.

Wood creaked. Arsen glanced quickly to the thick posters of the bed, fearing Henry would snap the mahogany in two.

The sound of fabric tearing rent the air. Henry bolted upright. The torn ends of the cravats dangled from his wrists as he ran both hands through his light brown hair.

Stunned into silence, Arsen sat motionless.

Tension poured off Henry. His movements were quick and jerky as he tugged at the cravats around his wrists, the knots having seized from his struggles. “I’m already in your bed. You needn’t tie me up to have your way with me,” he said gruffly, with a faint tremor behind the words.

Guilt stabbed at Arsen’s gut. He leaned over and reached into the top drawer of the bedside table, producing a pocket knife. Knife in one hand, he held out the other. “Here. Let me help you.”

Henry glanced to Arsen before extending one arm. The wariness in the usually trusting deep blue eyes cut to the quick.

Arsen carefully slipped the blade between Henry’s skin and the taut white linen. Cut the binding, then did the same to the other wrist.

Refusing to meet Arsen’s gaze, Henry rubbed his wrists. He rolled his massive shoulders. The joints popped and creaked, an audible sign of the tension still invading the man.

Arsen dropped the knife back into the drawer. He hadn’t merely startled Henry. He’d made him panic, a panic born of fear.

“Who hurt you?” He suspected he knew the answer, but needed to be certain.

Henry continued to rub the reddened skin of his wrists. “My...my last lover,” he said, low and reluctant. “He had a penchant for bondage. I didn’t mind. Didn’t care for it, but didn’t mind. It pleased him. But he turned out to be far from the ideal beau. When I tried to end the relationship he tied me up and...” Henry lifted one shoulder in a mockery of a casual shrug, “...wouldn’t release me until I agreed to stay with him. I agreed.”

His pause had said nothing yet everything at the same time. “When?” Arsen demanded then winced at the accusation in his tone.

“June. But as I mentioned earlier, that’s over now. He left Town three weeks ago. Went to Canada of all places to seek his fortune.”

No, he conveniently hightailed it to Canada because he owed me close to ten thousand pounds. Arsen waved a hand to the shredded linen still knotted tight to the bed. “But you had no problem getting free tonight?”

“He was a true aficionado of bondage. Used leather. Thick black leather straps, to be specific. I could never break them.”

Henry spoke as if he had tried, and more than once. On many occasions. Arsen closed his eyes and the images slammed unbidden into his mind. Henry walking into White’s sporting an ugly bruise on his jaw. “Gentleman Jackson’s” had been Henry’s explanation. The broken nose back in the spring. The cut on his brow in May.

He looked to Henry who sat across from him, gaze downcast. The muscles in his forearm flexed as Henry nervously twisted the

white sheet at his hip. Arsen knew without asking that Henry would never use those massive muscles against a man he cared for.

Anger, hot scalding anger, filled Arsen's gut. He closed his eyes again, briefly, in an attempt to keep the rage under control and out of sight. Then he said as casually as he could, "You speak of Markus Drummond."

Henry's hand stilled but he didn't look at Arsen. "Yes."

"How long exactly were you with him?"

"About a year."

That guilt did more than stab, it knifed into him, twisting viciously. Once Arsen had set his sights on Henry, it hadn't taken him long to realize the man wasn't the type to be unfaithful, and as such, had deliberately indebted Drummond to himself out of petty jealousy. Out of a need to get Henry into *his* bed. One night at a gambling hell was all it had taken to ensure Drummond's prompt departure from London, without Henry Shaw. But if Arsen had spent less time staring at Henry's gorgeous arse, maybe he would have noticed something wasn't quite right between the two men. Maybe he could have acted earlier, saved Henry what he was now certain had been a lot of pain, and not just the physical kind of pain.

It hadn't escaped Arsen's notice that Henry said precious little against his former lover. A lover who had abused him. Arsen was tempted to offer a few choice comments of his own regarding Markus Drummond, yet he bit his tongue. To malign the man would be akin to a slap across Henry's face, for no matter how the relationship had ended, Henry obviously had strong feelings for

Drummond at some point. But Arsen couldn't stay completely silent. "He took advantage of your devotion," he stated.

"That's putting it mildly."

He didn't like Henry's tone. The heavy, flippant sarcasm. It made Henry sound too much like himself. Jaded. Aged beyond his years. "But at least he was handsome. That's something," Arsen said off-handily, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Henry let out a humorless chuckle. "Yes, that he was." Then his expression turned somber. He pierced Arsen with those fathomless deep blue eyes. "But you're much more so. And you have something he lacked completely. You have honor."

Arsen's chest suddenly felt tight, restricting his breathing. Humbled by the conviction in Henry's unwavering gaze, he slowly reached out and cupped Henry's jaw, the day-old beard bristly against his palm. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to Henry's.

He intended it to be a soft kiss. Quiet. Comforting. The instant Henry's hot tongue found his, that intention dissolved. Vanished. Gone. As if it had never been there.

Arsen treaded his fingers into Henry's soft hair, grasped his skull and held him tight as he slanted his mouth harshly over Henry's. Muscled arms wrapped around Arsen. Large hands, the palms slightly roughened with calluses, caressed his back. The reverent touch ignited his blood. The flare of raw lust reminded him why he had wanted to restrain Henry in the first place.

He leaned into Henry until the two were laid out on the bed, Arsen sprawled on top. Henry flexed his hips, rubbing the hot satiny skin of his cock against Arsen's. Arsen groaned into Henry's mouth.

He needed to move straight to his target, postpone a more thorough perusal of Henry's body, if he had any hope of holding out long enough to fuck Henry. Arsen broke the kiss and scooted down, dragging his mouth down the impossibly broad chest as he went.

Henry reached for him. His grip gentle, Arsen took hold Henry's hands and moved them to his sides. "Leave them here. Please."

"I want to touch you."

"But if you touch me, this will end a lot sooner than I intend it to."

Henry lifted his head and shoulders from the bed. Comprehension dawned on his face. "That's why you tied me up? So you could touch me at will?"

"I'm sorry about that, Henry. It won't happen again," he said, grave, serious and determined never to make such a mistake, never to be so presumptuous again.

"I know," Henry said, as if stating a common fact.

Arsen's shoulders sagged with relief. He hadn't lost Henry's trust after all. Then he glanced down. "Actually, I tied you up so I could do this."

Taking hold of the thick length, he lowered his head and took Henry's cock into his mouth.

"Yes," Henry moaned, arching off the bed, pressing his cock deeper.

He fought back the impulse to gag and relaxed his throat. Took in as much as he was able, which wasn't all that much considering

his fist was still clutched tight at the base. The width stretched Arsen's mouth to its limits, and the stretch felt damn good.

He lifted his head. "You've got one big cock, Henry Shaw," he said, stroking the length. With his other hand, he palmed Henry's ballocks. "And big ballocks." He rolled the egg-shaped testicles in his hand, lightly rubbing them together. Henry shuddered, gasped for breath. "Like that, do you?"

"Yes, yes." Henry reached for him.

Arsen stilled his hands. "No, Henry," he said, gentling the command. "Arms at your sides. Hands at your sides."

Eyes closed, Henry nodded. "All right. Just, just do that again. *Please.*"

Increasing the pressure, he massaged Henry's ballocks as he stroked his cock, his hand sliding easily up and down the length slicked by his mouth. Every line in Henry's body drew tight, muscles flexed, chest heaving. A guttural groan, one of deepest pleasure, escaped Henry's parted lips.

Arsen arched one eyebrow. If Henry liked this, he was sure to like— He dropped down, took Henry's ballocks into his mouth and applied suction.

"Ah, yes!" Henry's shout rattled Arsen's eardrums.

Henry shifted beneath him. Not wanting to accidentally hurt him—for teeth on that part of a man's body was most unpleasant indeed—he lifted his head, releasing Henry's ballocks.

The next instant Arsen found himself flat on his back. Damn, Henry was strong. Arsen hadn't been flipped about so effortlessly by another since he had been a mere lad.

The glass bottle in one hand, Henry straddled one of Arsen's thighs. His short light brown hair stuck up at odd angles, his cheeks flushed. Trepidation coiled low in Arsen's belly as Henry poured a generous amount of golden oil onto his palm. He eyed Henry's fully hard cock; the thick glistening length, the flushed needy head. His arse tingled, tightened. Maybe now would be a good time to mention—

Henry reached down. Arsen opened his mouth, the refusal on his tongue, when a large oil-slicked hand wrapped around his prick.

“Found this,” Henry said, wagging the glass bottle in one hand while he stroked Arsen's cock with the other. “For some reason, I think you intended to do more than merely suck me off.”

“Perhaps.” He sucked in a breath as Henry massaged the head of his cock. Henry's oiled fingers slipped luxuriously over his skin.

“‘Perhaps’ my arse.” Henry let out a bark of laughter. “Perhaps my arse, indeed.”

Henry flashed him a grin that made his heart leap. Arsen couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Henry smile. A true genuine smile. Carefree. Happy. Could being with him possibly make Henry happy?

But Henry didn't give him the opportunity to ponder such deep thoughts, for the man straddled his hips and guided Arsen's cock to his entrance.

“Oh, yes,” Henry moaned, eyes drifting closed, hand still wrapped around the base of Arsen's cock, holding it steady as he slowly lowered.

Arsen grabbed Henry's hips. His fingers dug into the smooth skin as he fought the almost unstoppable impulse to slam Henry down onto his prick. Instead, he held still, let Henry take him at his own pace.

"That's it. Take me, Henry. Take—" The words turned into a groan, deep and guttural, as Henry's damp ballocks pressed against Arsen's groin, the weight of his heavy cock resting on Arsen's pelvis. Pre-come leaked from the tip, wetting Arsen's skin. He squeezed his eyes shut. Scorching hot heat surrounded his cock. And tight, so goddamn tight. An impending orgasm gripped his ballocks in a vise-like hold. "Fuck me. Fuck me, Henry," Arsen gasped.

Warm puffs of air fanned his face. Arsen opened his eyes.

Braced on his arms, Henry loomed above him, his full lips parted and glistening wet from their kisses. "Say please."

Teeth bared, Arsen growled.

"Say it. I won't move until I hear the words from your lips." Henry smirked, full of confidence and sexy as hell.

"Oh!" Arsen yelled, startled, as Henry tightened his arse around Arsen's length. "Please, goddamn-it. Please, please fuck me," he said in a great rush, beyond desperate. The orgasm raced up his cock. His legs shook against the strain of trying to hold off.

Henry kissed him, hot and quick on the mouth. "Gladly." He sat up and ground his hips in a mind-shattering circle.

Arsen's eyes rolled back in his head. *Not going to last. Not going to last.*

“Your cock feels so good.” Henry sighed, thrusting up and down. He grabbed his erection, stroked it. Used the pre-come dribbling out of the head to lubricate the length. “Perfect, perfect,” he muttered, eyes drifting close, clearly drunk on the pleasure.

Grabbing Henry’s buttocks, Arsen tugged the firm round cheeks apart, pulling a grunt from Henry. He needed to make Henry come *now*. Reaching further down, he touched the base of his own cock, slicking the tip of his finger with oil. Then he slid his oiled finger along Henry’s stretched hole, and worked it inside next to his prick on Henry’s next downward glide.

Henry let out a screaming groan. “Yes! The stretch...so...ah...good,” he moaned, pounding hard on Arsen’s cock and finger, as he furiously jerked his own erection, the head flushed plum-red.

The alluring sight was too much, not to mention the exquisite strangling tightness of Henry’s arse. Arsen threw back his head and came, pouring deep inside Henry’s passage, just as Henry came, shooting hot seed onto Arsen’s abdomen and chest.

Henry sagged forward, catching his weight on his elbows. Arsen carefully pulled his finger free then lifted Henry’s hips, pulling his spent cock from the man’s body. He could barely catch his breath. “Christ, you can tire a man out. Twice in one night.”

Henry chuckled lazily and ruffled Arsen’s hair with his left hand, not his oil-slicked right. Considerate, as always. “Rest then. I’ll clean us up.” He drew a finger through the milky semen on Arsen’s chest. “You don’t have to move a muscle.”

Sleep tugged hard-on Arsen's mind. "Thanks," he grumbled, as his eyes drifted closed.

Chapter Six

Why did it have to be morning already? Henry didn't have to open his eyes to know the dreaded time had arrived. If he was awake then it was dawn. Over a year in London and he still hadn't adjusted to *ton* hours. The nights that extended to early morning. The mornings that didn't begin until afternoon. Twenty-one years of country living were difficult to erase.

Eyes closed, he soaked up just being in Arsen's bed. The memory needed to last forever and he didn't want to miss one tiny detail. The sheet soft beneath his skin. The light scent of sandalwood and citrus. The comforting weight of Arsen's hair-dusted calf hooked over his own. The faint sound of Arsen's sleeping breaths.

The weight of dawn pressed heavily on Henry's heart. Last night he had refused to think about it. Refused to ponder the consequences. But even if he had taken hours, there was no way he could have predicted how much the dawn would hurt.

He had thought he was in love with Arsen yesterday. But that had been nothing, mere affection, compared to this morning. Arsen had imprinted himself on Henry's soul. He knew he would never love another as he loved Arsen Grey.

Letting out a long shaky sigh, he turned his mind to other matters. Like getting up before he grew too fond of being in bed with Arsen. Before he crumbled beneath the rapidly growing need to stay. To do anything, say anything, sacrifice everything, accept everything without complaint. To throw himself at Arsen's handsome feet and vow his unending, unquestioning devotion.

But—*No*. He wouldn't do that. Couldn't do that. Never again would he put himself in such an unequal relationship. He would never look the other way again. Never blindly accept. Never live on the promise tomorrow would be better. Never turn himself over to a man who couldn't love him.

His resolve in place, Henry rubbed a hand over his face then scowled. He needed a shave. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. Crisp and bright, the sun's rays cut through the gaps in the navy drapes. Arsen was sprawled on his stomach beside him. His golden skin molded smoothly over loose shoulder blades that were currently splayed, as both arms were bent up to hug his fluffy white pillow under his head. His tousled forelock brushed the long length of his lashes. Every line of his body was sublime perfection. The sweep of his lower back. The firm curve of his arse. The sleek muscles of his thighs.

An irresistible impulse seized hold. To press his lips against Arsen's sleeping mouth. To wrap his arms around him. To press skin against skin. To be with him one more time.

Before he was aware of it, Henry leaned closer. Arsen's breaths mingled with his. His hand hovered over Arsen's back, the heat of

the man's skin warming his palm. A powerful lure. His heart pounded in his chest, begging for one last touch, one last taste.

"...none of them better think of lingering."

The bored drawl, with a hint of annoyance, echoed harshly in Henry's head. He pulled back, put distance between himself and Arsen lest he be tempted again.

Careful not to disturb the mattress, he slowly sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He leaned over, elbows on his knees, and he pressed the heels of his palms to his closed eyes. No matter how much he wished it otherwise, he knew there was no place for him in Arsen's life. Arsen had mistresses, and very soon a new one would move into Tellford House. Arsen was a man fully immersed in London society, a place Henry never felt comfortable. This past week had been a clear reminder of that fact. And at thirty-three years of age, soon Arsen would select a wife. An innocent beauty with aristocratic blood. A lady who could give Arsen the heir who would become the next Marquis of Somerville.

A wince tightened Henry's brow, compressing his lips. It didn't matter if it was a man or a woman. Just the thought of Arsen with another, Arsen giving to someone else what he gave to Henry last night—No, Henry shouldn't think about that. And he certainly shouldn't give any consideration to the persistent thought nudging at the back of his mind. To just compromise. To take whatever, if anything, Arsen was willing to give. To be content with a casual affair. But it would hurt too much. Slowly destroy him until he didn't recognize himself.

He dragged his palms down his face and got out of bed. The house was silent. Likely he was the only guest awake. It would be ideal to leave before Arsen and the others awoke. He certainly didn't want to risk a run in with Lord Milton. The man was an arse, and a remarkably astute one at that. One look at Henry and likely the man would know who fucked him last night. Henry couldn't risk that—Arsen's reputation would be ruined, never mind the fact sodomy was against the law.

Rolling his shoulders, Henry walked to the foot of the bed. His trousers, along with his shirt, coat and waistcoat, and Arsen's trousers were strewn across the floor. His drawers were still inside his trousers—he'd been too eager by half to get them off. His clothes were a wrinkled mess, not to mention the state of his shirt, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

He quickly pulled on his drawers then his trousers. Henry was buttoning the placket when a rustle caught his attention.

“Up already?”

One more minute and he would have been gone. Wouldn't have to face Arsen. Suppressing a groan, Henry looked up.

Propped on his elbow, hair tousled and looking too deliciously drowsy by far, Arsen held Henry's gaze. “Going somewhere?”

“Yes. Leaving before you haul me into my carriage,” Henry replied, attempting a light, teasing tone. Trying to show he was like all of Arsen's other guests—casual and unaffected after a scorching hot, unbelievable night.

Arsen smirked. “I couldn't haul you into your carriage if I tried.”

Henry could feel the heat of Arsen's gaze on his bare chest. It seared his skin, went straight to his groin. With a force of will he hadn't known he possessed, he resisted the temptation. Resisted the open invitation in Arsen's deep green eyes. "No, you couldn't."

A suffocating need to express his gratitude pressed in on him. Henry opened his mouth, but try as he might, he could not find the words to describe last night. A simple "thank you" would be far from adequate.

Pulling his gaze from Arsen, Henry finished buttoning his trousers then glanced around for his black evening shoes. Bending, he picked up his coat and waistcoat. Damnation. He had kicked off his shoes at some point last night. They had to be here. Stooping, he looked under the dresser.

"What are you doing?"

Nope. Not there. "Trying to find my shoes." Turning on his haunches, he checked under the bed.

"Forget the damn shoes, Henry. You don't need to leave."

Finally. He grabbed his shoes half-hidden under the navy coverlet pooled at the foot of the bed. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he stood. "Yes, I do."

Indignation hardened Arsen's features. Likely the haughty lord wasn't accustomed to having his wishes ignored. "No, you don't."

"You never answered my question." The words came out of his mouth before he could stop them. It shouldn't matter, but Henry needed to know her name. Needed to know who, above all the beauties at Somerville Park, had captured Arsen's interest. Who would take his place in Arsen's bed.

In one fluid motion, Arsen got out of bed. “Which question?”

“Have you made your decision?”

Letting out what sounded suspiciously like a relieved sigh, Arsen grabbed a black silk dressing gown from the back of a nearby chair. “Yes.”

“Who did you choose?” Henry asked, unable to keep the jealousy out of the curt demand.

Arsen slipped on the luxurious garment. It hung from his shoulders, framing the hard planes of his chest and abdomen. A wicked, confident smirk pulled his lips. “You.”

Elation washed over Henry. Arsen wanted *him*. Had chosen him...to be his next mistress. Henry’s stomach dropped. He felt the color leech from his face. Now he knew why Arsen had invited him to Somerville Park. This past week had been nothing but a test of his loyalty. Arsen even admitted he’d arranged for that whore, Elly, to repeatedly throw herself at Henry. And last night... Oh, that had been the final test. Betrayal cut thick and deep, lancing his heart. Not trusting himself to speak, he dropped his shoes and slipped his bare feet into them.

Must have been a great fuck for Arsen to choose you, Shaw.

How many others had Arsen been with the past week, how many had failed his tests? Hell, *he* had almost failed last night.

The smirk vanished from Arsen’s lips. The bored tone returned in full force. “My apologies for not extending the offer properly. The letter of *carte blanche* is, of course, included.”

For the briefest of seconds, shock seized Henry’s mind. Then fury descended. Swift and fierce, it rushed unchecked through his

veins. Arsen thought to purchase his affection, like he was some sort of common whore? By God, Henry would never stoop that low. His love was *not* for sale. And he hated the way the offer made him feel so...dirty. "You can't pay me enough to be your whore," he said through clenched teeth.

"Holding out for a better offer, Shaw? Not a wise choice. Not many lords are as generous as I," Arsen said, his drawling voice belying the tension gripping his shoulders.

Henry's arm shook. He never felt such a need to hit someone in all his life. To pummel Arsen with his fists. To vent this rage, this terrible gruesome pain tearing at his chest. And to think he had actually thought Arsen an honorable man. "You arrogant arse. Fuck you, Somerville! I'd rather go back to Drummond than take your money."

Arsen's eyes narrowed into dangerously thin slits. His chest heaved under the force of his heavy breaths. "Leave!" he bellowed. The black robe swirled about his calves as he turned his back to Henry.

Coat and waistcoat clutched in one tight fist, Henry made to leave the room. Hand on the door knob, he paused. The hurt beneath Arsen's angry demand reverberated in the room, penetrated Henry's fury. Tugged at his heart.

He didn't want it to end this way, not after last night.

Head bowed, he stared unseeing at the shiny brass door knob. The emptiness he'd felt right before entering this room returned in full force. "I want to be with you, but I can't." He took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "I won't pace the corridors of Tellford

House, waiting for you to pay a call. I won't stand idly by while you give yourself to another. I won't be looked upon as lesser of two. And I won't share you. Not now. Not in the future."

Silence. Far worse than a no.

It had been too much to ask for. Henry had known it, but he couldn't leave without speaking the truth. He turned the knob, the metallic click resounding with harsh finality.

"There won't be another resident of Telford House. I'm selling it. I have no intention of returning to London. I have had enough of that town."

The flat quality of Arsen's voice, the absolute lack of emotion, caused Henry to turn from the door.

Arsen stood at the window next to the bed, his back to Henry. The morning sun glinted off his tousled golden hair. "I intend to remain indefinitely at Somerville Park."

"Until you need a wife. Then you'll shop for one in London. And there is the small matter of your seat in the House of Lords," Henry pointed out.

Arsen let out a sardonic snort. "I certainly don't need a wife. My mistresses could leave, and did, whenever they chose. A wife—poor thing would be stuck with me. No amount of money could make up for that. No, definitely no wife. I have four brothers, all better suited for the title than I. They are well aware of my abhorrence of the marital state. The eldest of the four already has an heir. The lad will likely be the next Marquis of Somerville. As for the House of Lords, I don't need to be present to fulfill my obligations. Proxy votes travel quite nicely via the post."

His heart pounding with a mixture of uncertainty and hope, Henry dropped his coat and waistcoat.

“Yes, I have had mistresses. They were...expected of a man of my station. I lavished them with gifts and installed each one at Telford House. I will not apologize for them,” Arsen added, all lordly condescension. “But I *was* faithful to every one. Least I could do.”

As if in a trance, Henry crossed the room, his strides slow and hesitant, and stopped one pace behind Arsen.

“All I want is you, Henry. No one else.”

Henry reached toward Arsen then stopped. His smarting pride reared its head. “Don’t ever test me again, Somerville. I won’t stand for it,” he said firmly. “Do you have any idea the hell you put me through? You didn’t spare me a glance yet you couldn’t keep your eyes off those whores. You threw women at me when all I wanted was to be with you. It was torture.”

Arsen flinched. “I-I had to be certain you wanted me, not my wealth and not my title. Only me and no one else. Please understand. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I had to play the part I cast for myself. The only reason I tolerated those people in my home was to get you here. This past week. Everything. It was all done for you.” He dropped his head, exposing the taut cords of his neck. “I don’t want you to leave. Will you stay here, at Somerville Park, with me?”

Chapter Seven

The most profound euphoria washed Henry's senses. Arsen Grey was *his*, and only his. The knowledge so unexpected it was almost too much for his mind to wrap around. Henry's hand trembled as he pulled the dressing gown from Arsen's broad shoulders. The black silk fluttered to the floor. The sunlight streaming through the window outlined Arsen's gloriously nude body. A sight that would hold Henry in awe no matter how many times he beheld it.

"Yes. I would be honored to stay with you," he whispered hoarsely. They would still need to be discrete, but here at Arsen's remote Durham estate staffed with his loyal servants, they'd have far more freedom than Town could ever afford.

Arsen let out a moan, relief clear in the low raw tone. The tension slipped from of his body, his shoulders sagging. "Thank you." The words so soft Henry felt them rather than heard them.

Henry kicked off his shoes and quickly tugged off his trousers. He wrapped his arms around his lover's waist, rested his chin on Arsen's shoulder and simply held him. His chest pressed against the smooth expanse of Arsen's back, his legs bracketing Arsen's. Arsen crossed his arms over Henry's forearms and held him tight.

Henry's eyes drifted closed as his heart swelled. The words rose from within, yet he held back. The events of this morning clearly demonstrated Arsen felt more than mere affection for him. How much more, he wasn't certain. Until that time, he would be quite content showing Arsen how much he loved him.

He took a deep breath and the unique scent of Arsen's skin, the lingering traces of his cologne and the unmistakable hint of male arousal went straight to Henry's groin. Lust flared, igniting his senses. His cock swelled, the arched length brushing the firm globes of Arsen's backside.

Hand splayed, he blindly followed the thin line of hair from Arsen's navel down to his cock. Henry's fingers encountered silken skin stretched taut over the rigid length. Nipping Arsen's ear, he drew his other hand up his chest, past the strong cords of his neck, over the bristly jaw and slipped his finger between Arsen's parted lips. Wet heat surrounded the tip of his finger. Arsen suckled, pulling half the length inside. Henry's ballocks tightened in envy, recalling the lavish sensation of Arsen's mouth on that part of his body.

Henry stroked Arsen's cock as he pressed his arousal into the cleft of his lover's backside. The need to be inside of Arsen, to make love to him, gripped hold. To make Arsen his in every way. Trepidation threatened to infiltrate his desire, yet he pushed it aside, focused on the hope, the possibility. "Want to fuck you," he breathed against Arsen's neck.

Arsen stilled. Suffocating disappointment began its harsh descent. Henry had feared it had been too much to ask, but he couldn't have held back the request if he tried. Now he knew—

Arsen captured the tip of Henry's finger between his teeth. "Yes," he moaned, pushing back against him.

Thank you, God! It was all Henry could do to keep from shouting the words. He was infinitely glad Arsen couldn't see his face, for he was grinning like a damn fool. Too eager to wait another moment, he pulled his finger from Arsen's mouth and worked the wet tip into Arsen's hole. "Damn, you're tight. When was the last time you were fucked?"

Grunting, Arsen arched his lower back as Henry slid in deeper. "I fuck. I don't get fucked."

Henry stopped mid-stroke. He blinked. "Never?"

Arsen looked over his shoulder, held Henry's shocked gaze. "Never."

He held his breath as he processed the significance of Arsen's response. "But you've had male lovers?"

Arsen nodded once. "A few. Yes."

"And you've never been penetrated?"

"No."

He pulled his finger from Arsen's virgin arse. The vulnerability in the man's deep green eyes made Henry's heart clench. Suddenly feeling like the elder of the two, he smoothed his other hand over Arsen's lean hip. "Are you certain you want to do this? We don't have to."

Arsen let out a snort of contempt. “Yes, I’m certain. And yes, we have to.”

He nodded, understanding Arsen was trying to prove he looked on him as an equal. “All right.” He glanced about the room. “On the bed.”

Arsen half-turned from the window and arched one eyebrow.

“I can’t take you up against the wall for your first time.” He shrugged uncomfortably and tipped his head toward the bed. “Please.”

“How do you want me?”

The open question made Henry’s prick jump. “On the edge of the bed. On your back.”

He got another arrogant raise of a dark blond eyebrow.

“I want to be able to see your face. Just—” Henry let out an exasperated sigh. “Get on the damn bed.”

A smirk pulled the edges of Arsen’s mouth. “Since you asked so nicely.”

Henry was tempted to smack Arsen on the bum when the man stepped past him. Instead he contented himself with watching Arsen sit on the edge of the bed. Reclining onto his elbows, he leaned back, long legs casually spread. The sunlight picked up the smattering of golden hair on his broad chest and played over the hard contours of his abdomen. His posture was one of easy nonchalance, but the once fully hard cock had lost some rigidity. It no longer jutted eagerly from the thatch of dark blond hair but arched over his ballocks. A clear sign Lord Somerville was a bit nervous at the prospect of getting fucked.

Take it slow, Shaw. Clenching his fists, he took a second to rein in the lust. When he felt he could proceed without pouncing on Arsen, he picked up the bottle of oil on the bedside table. He was about to pour a generous amount onto his palm when a thought occurred to him. Glancing down, he winced. “Would you happen to have a dildo? Something not too large.”

Arsen let out a startled cough. “I thought *you* were going to fuck me?”

“I am, but this,” he gestured to his rampant erection, “won’t go in easily. At least not the first time and not without some serious preparation.”

Arsen’s gaze settled on Henry’s arousal. The muscles in his thighs flexed and tightened, as if he was resisting the impulse to close his legs, keep Henry out. He dragged a hand over his face. “Bedside table. Bottom drawer. Before you ask, the staff put them there. And no, I didn’t tell them to.”

Resting a hand on Arsen’s thigh, he dropped to his haunches and opened the drawer. Inside were a few black velvet bags similar to the ones he had found in his own room. Gifts for the guests, a servant had explained. Based on the annoyance in Arsen’s tone, his staff had gifted their lord without his consent. Stifling a chuckle, Henry sorted through the bags and selected a white marble phallus complete with realistic ballocks and a convenient round knob at the bottom which served as a handle. The dildo was thicker than two of his fingers yet much thinner than his cock. The width around of a less than average man.

Rising, he set the phallus on the table and stepped between Arsen's thighs. Instead of lifting Arsen's legs, he dropped to his knees. At the look of puzzlement on his lover's face, he rubbed Arsen's thighs. "You need to relax, Somerville."

Arsen scowled. "Since you're intent on fucking me, you might as well call me Arsen. I believe we've crossed the line of formality."

"Well then, let me help you to relax, Arsen," he said, grinning, loving the way the name flowed from his lips. He took hold of Arsen's semi-erect cock, lowered his head and sucked his cock. Fingers tangled in Henry's hair, urging him to take more. The length hardened in his mouth, the tang of pre-come teased his tongue. Using the saliva dripping onto the large ballocks, he lubricated one finger. Slid it in Arsen's arse as Henry continued to suck his prick.

When Arsen began to rock his hips in counterpoint, Henry slid in another digit and went back to work—sucking cock and finger-fucking Arsen's arse. All the while refusing to think of how perfect Arsen would feel wrapped around his cock, for if he did, he'd come all over the floor again. He worked the tight hole, scissoring his fingers, stretching gently, until he was certain Arsen was ready for more. Then he lifted his head and reached for the dildo. He had to let go of Arsen's hard prick in order to coat the marble length with the rich viscous oil. Using two fingers, he spread Arsen's firm cheeks, fully exposing the slick hole.

Arsen flinched when Henry rubbed the head of the phallus over the puckered skin of his entrance.

"Relax," he said softly. He needed to keep his gaze on Arsen's face and therefore couldn't use his mouth to distract Arsen like he

had before. “Take a deep breath then exhale as I push it in. And don’t worry, I won’t ram you to the hilt on the first stroke.”

Eyes closed, the beginnings of a sardonic chuckle rumbled from Arsen’s chest. “So considerate.”

“I try.” The moment Henry heard him exhale, he pushed gently. It took some doing to work the length in. Each time a wince flickered over Arsen’s brow, Henry stopped and pulled out a bit. He had a hell of a time keeping his gaze on Arsen’s handsome face and not on the white marble as it slowly disappeared into the well-oiled hole.

Eyes flaring, Arsen let out a grunt of surprise, his back arching. “Oh, fuck!”

Henry smirked. He’d reached that sweet spot inside of Arsen. “Feel good?” he asked, knowing he sounded smug and not caring in the slightest. He rotated the dildo in a small circle.

Gasping for breath, Arsen reached for his prick and stroked the length with a shaking hand. He lifted his legs, pulling his knees up close to his chest, and threw back his head. “Hell yes!”

Henry flicked his tongue over Arsen’s ballocks, which were drawn up tight.

Arsen shuddered. “Do that again,” he said on a raspy moan.

Happy to oblige, Henry licked his ballocks as he carefully thrust the dildo into Arsen. Starting with short little nudges, he gradually lengthened to long deep strokes. Arsen’s gasps and grunts filled his ears. They were the most erotic sounds Henry had ever heard. Shivers raced down his spine. An orgasm gripped the base of his cock. Henry reached down with his free hand, grabbed his own

ballocks and pulled hard. He grimaced against the discomfort but the tug had been necessary. There was no way he was coming anywhere but inside his lover.

He thrust the phallus deep, making Arsen shudder again. Then he pulled it all the way out.

“No. Don’t stop,” Arsen begged.

“Oh, I’m not even close to done with you yet.” Henry slid the dildo in to the hilt, eliciting a deep sigh from Arsen, and then pulled completely out again. Repeated the motion. Taught Arsen’s body how to take a man and glean the most pleasure from it.

Rising to his feet, he leaned down to press his mouth to one of Arsen’s nipples. Grazed his teeth across the hard bud and picked up a steady rhythm of thrust and withdrawal. “Ready for more?”

The room was suddenly quiet. Henry held his breath.

“Yes.”

He let out the breath in a relieved exhale. “Thank you, God,” he muttered.

Carefully, he withdrew the dildo and set it on the bedside table. He quickly coated his cock with a generous amount of oil. The length glistened. The head flushed and plum-red. Arsen’s eyes were closed, his legs still drawn up, but his hands were fisted in the coverlet.

Bracing one hand on the bed, Henry leaned over him. Arsen’s tense breaths mingled with his own ragged ones. Taking his prick in his other hand, he guided the head to the entrance of Arsen’s body. “If you want me to stop, I will. At any time. Just give the word.”

Arsen nodded once.

“I’ll go slowly. Now take a deep breath.” For a moment, Henry was transfixed by the long sweep of Arsen’s light brown lashes resting against his cheekbones. The man was beautiful, inside and out, and he was his. “Thank you for this,” Henry added, almost unable to get the words out for the emotion clogging his throat.

He slanted his mouth over Arsen’s. As his tongue invaded his lover, so did his cock.

The head made the breach. Arsen tensed beneath him. Henry continued to kiss him, devouring his mouth. Every fiber of his being focused on making this good for Arsen. He had to like it. No, he had to love it. To want it again and again. To barely be able to go a day without it, for Henry had every intention of making love to Arsen many, many times in the future.

Arsen laid a hand on Henry’s hip, fully prepared to stop him. He flexed his hand, his spine locked. *Goddamn-it*. He was barely aware Henry was kissing him. All he could think about was the pain as Henry nudged forward, slowly filling him. Slowly tearing him apart. There was a reason why he had shied away from doing this before. Some men liked it and some didn’t. He truly feared he would end up in the latter group.

He was a coward. A bloody fucking coward. He couldn’t do this. To his utter humiliation, tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. The pain swamped his senses. A loud buzz filled his ears. The dildo had been divine, but taking a man, taking Henry—Unable to keep silent, he whimpered into Henry’s mouth.

Breaking the kiss, Henry immediately pulled back a bit. “You need to relax. Trust me, it will help. Tremendously.” He sprinkled light kisses across Arsen’s brow, at the corners of his eyes, across his cheeks.

How could one not trust a man like Henry Shaw? Arsen let his trust in Henry flow over him. The panicked beats of his heart began to slacken. The tension left his spine.

Henry stared down at him, his gaze troubled, his full lips compressed into a thin line. “Do you want me to stop?”

He took a quick mental inventory. It wasn’t as bad now. The pressure had eased to a more manageable level. Not exactly comfortable, nothing close to pleasurable, but not excruciatingly painful either. This he could endure. “No.”

“Are you—?”

“Yes,” Arsen snapped, his nerves frayed. “Just do it.”

Hurt clouded Henry’s deep blue eyes.

“I’m sorry.” He rubbed Henry’s hip. “I didn’t mean...just kiss me, Henry.”

Henry slanted his mouth over Arsen’s. After a moment, Henry nudged forward. Arsen wrapped his arms around Henry’s neck, threaded his fingers into the soft hair and focused on plundering the hot depths of Henry’s mouth.

Pleasure nipped at the ragged edges of the pain. Arsen arched, wanting more of that pleasure. Dark and wicked, it lured him. Called to him.

Henry picked up a rhythm of short, careful thrusts, easing in a bit further with each stroke. The sensations were

suddenly...*incredible*. The fullness. The stretch. The way every nerve ending in his arse was simultaneously on fire and begging for more.

Arsen twisted his head, breaking the kiss. “You have one big cock, Henry Shaw.”

Henry’s cheeks were flushed, his full lips plumped and glistening. “Sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize.” He levered up and nipped Henry’s bottom lip. “Give me more.”

Henry shook his head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. Just please, give me more. I want it all.”

Mouth set in a grim line, Henry hooked his arms under Arsen’s knees and moved forward as he lifted Arsen’s hips off the bed, sliding in those last couple inches.

The firm weight of Henry’s ballocks pressed against him. The entire length of Henry’s huge cock was in his arse. Arsen tipped back his head and moaned. “Incredible,” he muttered, kneading Henry’s biceps.

Henry groaned. “That’s an understatement. Christ, Arsen, you’re perfect.”

He pulled halfway out then thrust home, hitting that spot inside Arsen he had hit earlier. The one that made sparks dance before his eyes. “Fuck, yes!” Arsen grabbed his prick and stroked furiously.

The muscles in Henry’s arms shook. Sweat trickled over his bulging biceps. “Come for me, Arsen. Come with my cock in your arse.” He gasped for breath. He quickened the pace, his ballocks slapping against Arsen. “Please. I need to feel you come.”

The hard deep thrusts pushed Arsen over the edge. The pleasure coiled unbelievably tight and then exploded. On a roar, he came, shooting onto Henry's chest.

Henry let out a shout. "Arsen!" Baring his teeth, he slammed hilt deep, pouring into Arsen, filling him with hot seed. Then Henry collapsed to his knees, catching his weight on his elbows. He dropped his head on Arsen's chest, the hot puffs of his labored breaths teasing Arsen's nipple.

Arsen lowered his legs, slung an arm across Henry's broad back and smoothed the rumped, light brown hair. The sound of their pants as they struggled to catch their breaths was the only thing that broke the silence. He was exhausted, wrung dry, yet a sense of tranquility stole over him. Henry Shaw was the most remarkable man. He had never been in love before, never felt this peace, this insatiable need for another, yet he instinctively knew he was in love. The knowledge should startle him, shock him, something. Yet it didn't. On some level, he had always known a man would capture his heart. As a young man, back when he had been exceedingly arrogant and blindly stubborn, he had tried to deny it. He'd bought that house outside of Mayfair, began buying himself the diamonds of the demimonde. He had even been fond of a couple of them, but nothing close to what he felt for Henry.

This was real.

This was love.

He was still arrogant, still stubborn, and it had almost cost him Henry. But his lover was braver than he. He knew without a doubt

Henry would keep him in line, and keep him from acting so foolishly again.

He ruffled Henry's hair then went back to smoothing it. The soft strands were warm silk between his fingers - the sensation a calming balm that would forever sooth his soul. "I love you."

Those labored breaths stilled. "Did you really say that or did I imagine it?" Henry whispered hesitantly.

He tugged on Henry's hair. "Look at me."

Henry lifted his head. His brows were lowered, his mouth set. The hope and uncertainty warring in his deep blue eyes pierced Arsen's heart.

"I love you, Henry Shaw," he said fiercely.

Henry's lashes swept down. The most beautiful smile curved his lips. "I love you, too, Arsen Grey. Marquis of Somerville," he added, his lips twitching.

Absolute bliss filled Arsen's heart, and with it joy and laughter. He held back the laugh and tugged Henry's hair again. He let the old haughty mask fall into place. "I let you fuck me once and look how cocky you've gotten already."

Henry leaned closer, his eyes glinting devilishly. "And just think of how cocky I'll be a week from now, after I've had you seven times."

The number echoed in Arsen's head, made his arse tingle in anticipation. *Oh yes*, Henry could quickly become a daily addiction. He couldn't comprehend how he had lived without Henry, or how he had managed to earn such an amazing man's devotion, but he didn't have to worry about that now. The lonely future he had

dreaded was gone. In its place were blissful days with the man who held his heart.

“Let’s get an early start on tomorrow, shall we?”

About the Author

Ava March is an author of historical erotic romances. She loves writing in the Regency time period, where proper decorum is of the utmost importance, but where anything can happen behind closed doors. She has a daughter and is married to a wonderful man who doesn't mind in the slightest that she spends her evenings writing naughty books.

Ava loves to hear from readers. You can visit her on the web at www.AvaMarch.com or send her an e-mail at Ava@AvaMarch.com.

An attraction fated to go down in history...if they survive.

Ship of Dreams

© 2009 Reilly Ryan

Liar. Thief. Con man. James Hyde keeps these labels well hidden under the veneer of a high-class gambler. He knows how to charm his way to where the money is, and right now it's aboard the world's most luxurious ship, ripe for the taking. From the moment he locks eyes with Will Woods, though, James is tempted. Tempted, for once, to be the kind of man that another can trust with his heart.

Will is sailing toward everything he's ever wanted: marriage and family. His instant attraction to James is a complete surprise—and too powerful to ignore. In his arms, Will rediscovers passion he's kept long buried. And it tempts him to abandon the safety of wealth and position. Perhaps even his family's good graces. All for James—a man who is only now beginning to understand the meaning of honor.

Then there's the last obstacle standing in their way. Their ship of dreams...is the Titanic.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Ship of Dreams:

“I was exploring the ship. Would you like to come along?” There was hesitation in his voice, but something hopeful in his eyes. Will wanted him to accept the invitation. To come along with him.

James pretended to give it a moment's thought. There was no question that if Will wanted him, he'd be there. “Sure.”

Plenty of other people had the same idea. They swarmed on deck. He ran his hands back through his hair again, keeping them busy as he tried to divert his thoughts. He felt a yearning to touch and be touched, one that he suspected might be returned. It quickened his breath and set him slightly off balance, his arm brushing against the warmth of Will's arm.

What was he supposed to say to someone he'd only just met and didn't know, yet wanted all the same? Whenever something accidentally touched his tender emotions, it tended to make him angry. He wasn't used to such feelings, and he didn't like them. He could feel Will's eyes on him. Maybe this was different.

Not far from the lounge was an unobtrusive door marked *Darkroom*. He put his hand on the handle and pushed it open, pulling Will inside.

"Interested in photography?" Will's hands skimmed the counter, and he had to look away, filled with thoughts of what those fingers would feel like ghosting across his skin.

"Are you?" The walls surrounding them were black. Bizarre machinery lined the counters, along with shallow trays.

"I've taken the odd snap with my Kodak. It's very modern—"

"Will." Desperate, he turned to face him. He hoped he would see the same darkness burning in Will's eyes that he felt consuming himself from within. It was there. Inviting him.

"Yes." Will clearly knew they weren't really talking about hobbies. James brushed at the light switch. Red lights glowed overhead for a moment, crazy and off-kilter and ghoulish. He found the switch for them and plunged the small space into darkness.

He and Will were two bodies in the eternal blackness. It was like a dream; it was like falling into the sea and drowning. Will's hands smoothly rose to cup his face, his thumbs brushing over the spots where his dimples would be if he were smiling, as though it was something he'd longed to do since they saw each other on the deck. He let himself be held. The deep breaths filling his chest closed the space between their bodies. He felt the heat radiating from Will's skin. He wondered if Will's eyes were closed, needlessly, in the darkness. The heat possessed him.

Will kissed him, although it was he who had willed it, arranged it. Will's mouth pressed against his with a silenced groan almost hinting at exertion, if not of body but of desire.

Once Will kissed him, expressed that desire, he allowed himself to move into his more usual position of aggressor. His tongue moved to brush at Will's lips and gain entrance, plunging deeply into the heat of Will's mouth, playing along the flat edges of his teeth, toying tantalizingly with his tongue. Their bodies pressed together, undulating with the waves of the kiss, but the kiss was the culmination of the act. Yes, Will's heat and scent would have permeated his clothing, and yes, the angles and hardness of his body were immovable against his in a way that he knew he would be able to feel hours later, like a sucker punch, the unexpectedness and the power of the blow.

Will dragged his mouth away, gasping and breathing hard. His hands slid down James's jaw, against the hot pulse in his throat, and came to rest heavily against his shoulders. Though they were in complete darkness, his eyes were open and for a moment James

thought he could see Will's face. It was the expression he expected Will to wear. The horror, the realization and perhaps the smallest bit of curiosity regarding what he'd done. That was why James had shut off the lights. It wasn't a look he was fond of. For a weak second he considered turning the lights on, to look at Will's face, to see if he'd been wrong.

"I'm engaged."

"You said." He sighed. While James hated not getting his way, he admired the man's honesty. He knew he should pull away, but he didn't want to. He didn't deal well with facing his own true desires. He dragged his tongue across his lips and found he could taste Will there. He leaned in, tasting Will again. Tempting him away from the realities that existed beyond these black walls.

They breathed hard for a long moment. Each man trying to decide what to do next.

James placed his scalding lips against Will's cheek. He had to let Will know, give him some sign, that this had been mutual. Then he opened the door and walked into the bright sunshine without looking back.

In hiding who he was, Payton found himself...and the man he would grow to love.

The Englor Affair

© 2008 J.L. Langley

After his brother is kidnapped, Prince Payton Townsend masquerades as an Admiral's assistant in order to track the culprits through the tangled mysteries of the planet Englor. He finds way more than he bargained for in the form of Marine Colonel Simon Hollister.

Simon is no ordinary soldier. He's heir to Englor and his life is mapped out for him: throne, bride, and eventually an heir. He never expected a dalliance with Payton to blossom into love, or that the organization that taught him to lead would threaten that love—and their lives.

Danger and intrigue abound as they learn more about their shared enemy, and about each other. What they learn could help them rise above to an enduring love—or pull them apart.

Warning: Hot sweaty manlove of the interplanetary kind.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Englor Affair:

Six. Payton grunted and hefted the bar up again. He hadn't worked out his upper body yesterday and now he knew why. *Seven.* His upper body strength was next to none. After hoisting the bar back onto the stand, he left his hands on it. "Eight." At least no one was here to witness him struggling with such miniscule weight. Pulling his feet up onto the bench, he lay there staring at the

staggered white tile and fluorescent light ceiling. It was ugly. The gym looked like a gym, not the pristine workout room at home.

Good grief, he was becoming a whiner. He huffed out a breath, making the hair on his forehead flutter, and closed his eyes. First, he was melancholy over not having a consort. Which was stupid, he didn't *want* a consort. It was just from watching Nate talk to Aiden, and witnessing how happy they both were. Second, he didn't want to work, which he really needed to do. The guilt was gnawing at him. That was also stupid because as soon as he figured out why Benson was on Regelence, he was going to go home and back to being under constant surveillance. He actually had a bit of freedom here...and he was using it to lift weights. Yeah, he was whining, most unbecoming, but he couldn't seem to help it.

“Lifting free weights by yourself is a very bad idea.”

Payton sucked in a breath, dropped his feet back to the floor and opened his eyes.

Si stood at the end of the bench, his hands on the bar. How had Payton not heard him come in? He loomed over Payton with his brow furrowed over crystal blue eyes. “No more lifting weights on your own. It's dangerous.” A couple strands of auburn hair fell onto his forehead.

Payton let go of the bar and suppressed a shiver. His mood was suddenly looking up. This was the reason he'd come here in the first place. To hear that voice again and see if the man was as handsome as he remembered. Last night, he'd dreamed of that smooth sexy voice whispering unspeakable things in his ear while they did unspeakable things to each other. Good grief, he was getting

aroused. He was obsessed. How pathetic. All it took was a perfect body, a handsome face and someone to be nice to him for no particular reason.

Si crossed his arms on the bar, leaned over toward Payton and grinned. “How many are you doing?”

Galaxy, the man was every bit as gorgeous as Payton remembered. The clothes emphasized his masculinity. Red hair peeked out from under his arms, not concealed at all by the white sleeveless shirt he wore. His gray shorts were practically threadbare and very short, the hair on his legs visible right up to his upper thighs. There was almost nothing covering him. Unlike Payton, Si didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed by wearing so little. He seemed quite secure and sure of himself.

That confidence made Payton’s cock even harder. He swallowed the lump in his throat and hurried to sit up. He barely noticed his aching thigh muscles as he turned toward Si, hoping he hadn’t spotted Payton’s growing erection. “I— You—you don’t have to help me. I’ll slow you down. You— I—” He groaned and bit his bottom lip. There was just no way to get around it. “I’m not up to your”—he waved his hand, searching his brain for the right word—“standards.”

Chuckling, Si darted a gaze down Payton’s body then back up. “You are definitely up to my standards.” The gleam in his eyes made it clear he wasn’t talking about working out and weight limits. “Besides, I need a workout partner, my friends abandoned me tonight.” Si pushed himself upright and grabbed the bar, ready to spot him. “Now lay back down and finish your set. How many?”

After hesitating for only a second, Payton decided the hell with it and lay back down. Si hadn't even tried to hide his erection yesterday in the shower. Either he'd ignore Payton's or— Payton didn't know what, but he was willing to take the chance. He knew he wasn't reading Si wrong. The man was definitely interested in him and Payton had nothing to lose. After all, wasn't this what he'd come here hoping for? It wasn't like anyone would find out. What was a little flirtation? "Three sets of eight, I've done one set." He got his hands on the bar on the outsides of Si's and pushed up.

Si didn't let go of the bar until Payton held it steady above him. Payton brought the bar down then back up easily.

"One." Si's hands hovered above the bar. His legs were so muscular and—*dust, his shorts are short.*

Doing another rep fairly easily, Payton let his attention stray upward.

"Two."

Si's prick was right there, in his face. Payton couldn't *not* look.

"Three." Si stepped closer, his legs against the edge of the bench. He wore something white under the loose gray shorts. Underclothes, but none like Payton had ever seen. It only covered the genitals, with bands around the waist and each leg, leaving the arse bare. "Four." The garment cupped Si's testicles and outlined his prick.

Payton's cock twitched.

"Five." Si dipped toward Payton, his hands ready to catch the bar. His groin was scandalously close to Payton's face. "Come on, Payton. Three more." Was his voice more raspy than before?

Shoving the bar up, Payton ignored the burn in his arms. That was really not the way to get him to do three more. He had the insane urge to nuzzle his face into Si and see if he smelled as good as he looked. Whoa, where had that come from? Thankfully, his face was already heated from the strain of moving the weights, because after that thought he was surely blushing. He shouldn't think things like that, but dust if his cock wasn't throbbing and straining against his shorts.

“Six. Two more.”

The weights were getting really heavy. His heart was thrumming in his ear.

Si scooted forward, his legs now straddling the edge of the bench. Payton could feel the heat of Si's thighs on his ears as Si took some of the weight of the bar, making it easier on Payton. Sweat and a musky warm scent teased Payton's nose as Si dipped again, following the barbell.

“Seven. Come on, do one more.” His blue eyes glittered down at Payton, and his voice was definitely lower and huskier than before.

Gulping in a breath, Payton steeled himself for one last rep. He was not going to notice the thick cock outlined in those strange underclothes. He wanted to bury his nose there and—oh galaxy, he wanted to know how Si tasted. Payton gasped, shocked at the admission. He wanted to taste and touch and do whatever Si would— *Oh*. Payton's arms buckled.

The bar never touched him.

Si hauled the bar up like it weighed nothing, making the veins on his forearms obvious, and set it on the stand. He leaned his forearms on the bar and looked down at Payton.

At least Payton thought he did. His attention stayed focused on Si's erection, outlined through the thin gray shorts. Payton made a noise halfway between a gasp and a growl. He reached up, his hand hovering in front of Si's groin, before he came to himself and stopped.

Groaning, Si caught Payton's wrist and pressed his palm against the hard length of Si's cock.

Payton curled his fingers, and Si's cock jerked under his hand. It was so odd touching someone else like this. He squeezed.

Making a strangled noise, Si tugged upward on Payton's wrist. "Sit up."

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com