

Loose Id

*Bound*  
TO HIM  
AVA MARCH

# **BOUND TO HIM**

**Ava March**

**Loose Id<sup>(R)</sup>**  
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## **Dedication**

*To all the readers who fell in love with Oliver and Vincent, and asked for more. Thank you.*

## Chapter One

*October 1822*

*London, England*

Under normal circumstances, the sight of a gambling hell wouldn't put a smile on Lord Vincent Prescott's face. Especially not a somewhat questionable one in Cheapside.

But tonight he had a reason to smile and an even better reason to go inside that hell.

He leaned right, reaching for the brass lever on the carriage door, but stopped short as the movement caused a hard object to bump against his outer thigh. No way could he go into a hell with *that* in his pocket. He highly doubted the servants who tended to the guests' coats did so without thoroughly examining the garments as soon as their owners were out of sight. The thought of a footman finding the gift, and wondering why he would possess such an object, did not sit well. Odd, considering he'd had no such qualms purchasing the thing. Then again, he hadn't been with another man at the time. But he would most certainly leave the hell tonight with another man. And not just any man, but a man who had become so much more than his old childhood friend.

Only four-and-twenty and already Vincent possessed what most men strove their entire lives to attain: the respect of his peers, a thriving bank account, and incredible sex with someone who submitted to his every desire. Someone who loved him.

Chuckling in amazement at his good fortune, he removed his greatcoat, carefully folded it, and placed it on the leather bench. Then he got out of the carriage and gave his navy evening coat a sharp tug to straighten it.

"I'll be about an hour, but stay nearby," he instructed his driver.

The October night air was cool and thick, holding a heavy reminder of the rains that had made the roads from Rotherham to London a muddy mess. After three days of travel and more than three weeks of near constant work that should have only taken two weeks, he should be exhausted. And he had been exhausted, until he had left his townhouse to come here.

He sidestepped around the young bucks gesturing in drunken conversation by the streetlamp and went inside Dennett's gambling hell. The burly guard stationed inside the door barely looked at him before tipping his head, allowing Vincent to pass. As he went through the entrance hall, his upper lip curled into a sneer at the scarlet and plum-patterned rug, the equally vibrant paper covering the walls, and the worn velvet upholstery on the two armchairs in the corner. Purple and red -- what a ghastly color combination. And had they gilded every piece of exposed metal? The chandelier, the candelabras on the console table, and even the hinges on the door shone bright gold. The place was a garishly overdone imitation of a West End gentlemen's gambling hell. A greedy merchant's paradise. Definitely not up to his usual standards, but Dennett's was out of the way and, most importantly, only a five-minute drive from Lord Oliver Marsden's apartments.

He stopped just inside the main hall and, using his height to his full advantage, scanned the room. The shouts of victory, the curses of defeat, and the drone of many voices pressed against his ears. The chatter of the various games rode under the din: the flick of cards being shuffled, the click of gambling chips, and the roll of dice. In less than

a second, he found Marsden in the crowd. Slighter built and a good four inches shorter than Vincent's own six feet two, the man stood at one of the gaming tables near the center of the room, his back to Vincent. A smile curved Vincent's lips, the last lingering bit of exhaustion slipping from his body. Had it only been four weeks since he had seen him? Hell, it felt like four years. His sights on those hunched shoulders and the unruly mop of dark brown hair, Vincent wove around the other patrons.

One hand braced on the ledge of the roulette table, Marsden leaned forward to place a bet. The tails of his brown coat draped over his arse as he bent at the waist, his hips tilting at a most inviting angle. Vincent clenched and unclenched his hands, tamping down the impulse to rip off those poorly tailored clothes and expose the sleek, honed body. To lay a hard smack on that round arse and grab those slim hips, to hold them steady as he --

*Stop it!*

Gritting his teeth, he threw off the flare of lust and pacified himself with the knowledge that there would be plenty of time to fuck Marsden later tonight.

He took up a place beside him just as the man straightened. "Evening, Marsden," he said, clapping him on the shoulder.

His hand hadn't remained on his shoulder an instant longer than polite manners dictated, yet he felt Marsden's shudder. The man's responsiveness stroked Vincent's ego to no end in the bedchamber, but it wasn't such a desirable trait when they were together in public. Marsden claimed he worried overmuch, that no one would ever suspect Lord Vincent Prescott would bugger another man. Still, Vincent couldn't help but worry; sodomy was, of course, against the law, never mind that his reputation would be ruined if word got out. Hence one of the reasons Vincent had chosen to meet here instead of at White's.

Marsden shifted his weight then shoved his wire-rimmed spectacles higher on his nose before turning his attention to Vincent. His movement caused the jade pin affixed directly below his cravat to catch the light from the gaudy chandelier overhead. For the



past six months, ever since Vincent had given it to him, Marsden had worn the pin whenever he left his apartments. And every time Vincent saw it, he felt that tug on his chest. No one else but the two of them knew what that pin meant, but to Vincent, it was akin to a brand on the man's forehead, declaring to whom he belonged.

*Me.*

Though the pin didn't do a bit of good at helping to keep the man's cravat straight. No matter Vincent's efforts, Marsden couldn't quite get the hang of tying a respectable Mathematical knot. Should have gone with a Gordian knot. He could manage a passable one of those.

"Evening, Prescott. How was Rotherham?" Marsden asked, referring to the property Vincent had purchased almost a year ago.

"Good." He pulled a fold of pound notes from his coat pocket and tossed them onto the green baize.

"Only good?"

"All right. More than good." The croupier pushed three stacks of chips to Vincent. With a couple of taps of his fingertips, he straightened the stacks. Then he took five chips and placed them at the bottom of the third column of numbers on the table. "That rather large vein of coal is actually quite significant."

Marsden's full lips curved into a genuine smile, his dark brown eyes crinkling at the edges. "Well done, Prescott."

Would he ever tire of hearing those words from Marsden?

No. Not ever.

The croupier shouted to the men gathered around the table, calling for an end to the betting.

"How have you been, Marsden? Your grandmother keeping her harassments to a minimum?"

"Don't think she's capable of that. Always has some new complaint when I visit her. Though yesterday I could have sworn she was actually pleased to see me."

"Why wouldn't she be? You're her only family member who puts up with her. If not for you, she wouldn't have any callers." Marsden's only answer was an uncomfortable shrug. The man had the patience of a saint. Vincent would have found a companion for the old woman years ago and parted with whatever sum necessary to see the task done. "And how are the tables tonight? Having any luck?" he asked, as the small marble clickety-clacked around the roulette wheel.

Marsden let out a sigh. "No." Though he need not have answered. The paltry stack of chips before him was answer enough.

"Black six!"

He didn't believe it possible, but at the croupier's shout, somehow Marsden's shoulders slumped even further.

"What bet did you place?"

"Red twenty-five."

He had bet his age? Vincent picked up the ten chips the croupier pushed toward him and placed them at the bottom of the second column of numbers on the table. "Straight-up? You didn't bet the corners or a split?"

Marsden shook his head.

"Would you prefer to play vingt-et-un or faro instead? Maybe something that relies on more than blind luck to win. I'll partner you at whist if you'd like."

"No. I don't want to be responsible for your losses. In any case, the wheel seems fond of you. Might as well play it a bit longer."

Perhaps he should not have suggested they meet at Dennett's. Marsden certainly did not have a knack for gambling, and honestly, Vincent shouldn't encourage him. The last thing he wanted was for Marsden to become a degenerate gambler like his father, the Marquis of Campden, who had recently fled Town to escape his debts.

Marsden turned his attention back to the green baize. Full bottom lip caught between his teeth and brow scrunched in concentration, he contemplated his next bet. Well aware of Marsden's precarious financial situation, he covertly nudged one of his stacks of chips, moving it next to Marsden's tiny stack. Since he had been the one to choose Dennett's, the least he could do was compensate for his losses.

Clutching a full glass of wine, a man squeezed into the space beside Vincent. Determined not to get Bordeaux spilled on his coat sleeve, he moved aside, creating enough room for the man's large frame and even larger belly, and ended up pressed against Marsden. Pure heat blazed from his upper arm to his knee, one long continual line down the side of his body. They were so close a turn of his head would have his lips brushing the dark waves of Marsden's hair. Marsden let out a low grunt. Senses perpetually attuned to the other man, Vincent could scent his arousal even at a smoke-filled gambling hell. Marsden shifted his weight, his thigh rubbing against Vincent's, his hand curling into a white-knuckled fist around the chip he held.

*Please, Marsden, get yourself under control.*

Vincent chanced a quick, nervous glance around the roulette table, but the other patrons appeared blissfully ignorant of the erection he was certain now tented the placket of Marsden's trousers. It wasn't as if those across from them could see it anyway -- the table came up to Marsden's waist. Still, the man next to Marsden could happen to glance down, or --

"Prescot!" a voice called from behind him.

Thank heaven for a distraction. Suppressing a relieved sigh, he took a step back from Marsden and turned to face a slim young gentleman with blond hair.

"Good evening, Winters."

"Never expected to come across you here," Frank Winters said with a jovial smile. Judging by the low cut, red silk gown and the heavily applied rouge, what could only be a cheap whore clung to his arm. Likely picked her up off the street. Winters brought his glass to his lips and looked around Vincent's shoulder. "Ah, that answers it. You're

with Marsden. Don't know why you bother with him. Won't be long before he follows his father to the continent."

Vincent glared at him, a muscle ticking along his jaw, a fierce rush of protectiveness tightening his throat. How dare this little whelp -- by God, he was only the son of a mere baron and not a very well heeled one at that -- speak so callously about Marsden when he was but two feet behind Vincent? The urge to slam his fist into the man's smug face was almost overwhelming. Through sheer force of will, Vincent kept his arm at his side and managed to speak in a cool, bored drawl. "Have a care with the gin, Winters. Wouldn't want you to follow in *your* father's footsteps."

Winters's hazel eyes widened, a flush creeping up his neck to cover his cheeks, at the blunt reminder of his drunkard of a father who had made an arse out of himself at more than one social function. When he opened his mouth to speak, Vincent turned his back to him. And bumped shoulders with Marsden as the man turned from the gaming table.

Heat flared across his biceps, momentarily distracting him. He blinked and watched Marsden's brown-coated back weaving between the patrons. Where the hell was he going?

"Red fourteen!" the croupier shouted.

Vincent snatched up his winnings and made to pick up his other chips, but stopped, hand poised above the three stacks, one not quite as neat as the others. An annoyed grumble rumbling his chest, he pocketed the chips. Marsden and his damn pride. He'd just leave a few pounds at the man's apartments. The place was always such a disorganized mess. It would take Marsden days to come across the money, and by then, he'd likely assume he had merely misplaced it and not connect it to Vincent.

He scanned the room, spotted Marsden's dark head over at the cashier's cage, and went over to him. He stopped at Marsden's shoulder, ignoring the protests from the two men in line behind him. "Ready to leave already?" He would admit to a certain eagerness to go on to Marsden's apartments. All right, more than eager. But since he'd

been gone for weeks, he had rather looked forward to spending some time with him. Outside of his bedchamber.

"I've had enough gambling for one night." Marsden took the few shillings the cashier pushed under the gilded bars of the cage. Then he lowered his voice. "I've been here for two hours. Your note said eight, Prescott, not ten o'clock."

Vincent gave his chips to the cashier. "The rains delayed my travel. As it was, I only stopped home long enough for a change of clothes." *And to pick up your gift.*

Marsden said nothing, merely shoved his hands in his pockets and contemplated his scuffed evening shoes.

While the cashier meticulously counted a pile of gold sovereigns, Vincent tipped his head toward his friend. "My apologies, Marsden," he murmured. "I didn't know the roads would be such a mess when I wrote you. As it was, I was fortunate to make it to London tonight."

Marsden tucked an errant wavy strand behind his ear and studied him from the corner of his eye. It wasn't as if Vincent had purposefully dallied on his journey. Hell, he had no control over the weather. So why was he so worried Marsden would hold it against him?

Those long, dark lashes swept down. Ducking his chin, a little smile tugged on the corner of Marsden's mouth, and he lifted one shoulder. "I understand. I'm glad you made it back safely."

Vincent couldn't hold back the smile as the tension slipped out of him, and in its place settled the delicious hum of anticipation. He had spent the greater part of the afternoon staring out the window of his carriage as it slowly made its way to London and planning exactly what he would do to Marsden once he had the man alone. "Shall we be on our way then?"

Marsden nodded, a quick jerk of his head.

He pocketed the gold sovereigns, leaving one for the cashier. When they reached the entrance hall, he stopped near the footman stationed at the cloak room. "Your greatcoat?"

Marsden didn't pause but continued on. "Didn't bother with it. Did you take your carriage or hire a hackney?"

Three long strides had him at Marsden's shoulder once again. "My carriage." The burly guard opened the front door as they approached. "Marsden, it's October. You should not have left your greatcoat at home." Marsden walked most everywhere he went in Town. His apartments were close, but not so close that he wouldn't have risked catching a chill if it had rained.

"So where's yours?"

Marsden was getting an extra smack on the arse later for that cheeky comment. Then again, knowing his friend, it would only encourage him. "My coat is in the carriage. Unlike you, I only had to walk twenty feet to reach the hell." He stopped at the streetlamp and flicked his fingers, motioning to his driver waiting for him a few buildings down the road.

His team of four bays pulled up next to him. "Lord Oliver's apartments," he informed his driver as he stepped into the carriage.

Marsden's knees brushed his as he settled on the bench opposite him. The driver snapped the whip, and the carriage lurched forward. Only the soft light from the streetlamps they passed broke the darkness, the golden glow cutting across Marsden's profile; it illuminated the long curve of his lashes behind his spectacles, the high arch of his cheekbones, and the slightly parted full lips. How had Vincent managed to go four weeks without those lips wrapped around his cock?

"God, I missed you." The desperation in Marsden's whispered words sent a thrill through him.

Marsden shifted forward, as if to move to sit beside him. Aware of the open shade on the window, Vincent lifted one leg and pressed a foot over his groin, holding him

down, keeping him on the opposite bench. Marsden instantly submitted, settling back, yielding to the pressure, his legs falling open. Vincent rotated his foot, rubbing the sole of his evening shoe over Marsden's rapidly hardening cock. "Were you good, boy, in my absence?" he asked, voice pitched low but with a hard edge that would have Marsden panting in no time.

Marsden's tongue darted out, a quick swipe across his lower lip. "Yes."

He pressed harder, pulling a grunt from Marsden. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, milord."

"Hmm." He passed a hand over his jaw as he continued to rub Marsden's cock through the placket of his trousers, the soft wool sliding easily over silken skin. It didn't feel as though Marsden had worn drawers. One less piece of clothing for the man to remove when they reached his apartments. "Are you certain? Did you take yourself in hand?" He knew the answer, but couldn't resist the urge to voice the question. To torment Marsden. To make the man squirm with a mixture of embarrassment and pure, stark need. To ratchet up the anticipation hanging in the air between them, so heavy he could feel it.

"Ah...I..."

"Yes or no, Marsden. Did you pleasure yourself in my absence?"

He lifted his hips, seeking even more pressure, and speared Vincent with a hot stare. "Yes."

"And what did you do, exactly?"

"Stroked my cock until I came." The words rushed out of Marsden's mouth, the sharp pants of his breaths filling the closed carriage.

"That was all? Did you penetrate yourself?" At Marsden's quick nod, he asked, "With what? Your fingers or one of your toys?" Marsden possessed a collection that rivaled the quaint little shop off Bond Street that sold a nice array of paddles and

leather goods, in addition to the usual erotic offerings. A collection Vincent had taken great delight in watching Marsden sample on more than one occasion.

The faint light from a passing streetlamp gave him a glimpse of the blush staining Marsden's cheeks. "Both."

"At the same time?"

His dark eyes flared. "N-no."

Vincent *tsked*. "A shame. Perhaps we shall need to try that." He dropped his voice to a low rumbling growl. "See if you can take it." Marsden's breathy whimper shot straight to his groin. The man was so wonderfully responsive, so eager to please, so absolutely beautiful. So perfect. Warmth blossomed across his chest, a lush, comforting sensation that had nothing to do with the lust spiking his senses. Vincent tamped down the grin and instead kept his features schooled in a hard mask that approached disinterest. "Would you like that, boy?"

Even with the motion of the carriage, he could feel Marsden's body vibrate as the man fought to remain still, his hands curled in tight fists on his thighs. "Y-yes, *please*, milord."

The thought of Marsden naked on the bed, his golden skin flushed with arousal, knees drawn up to his chest, working his fingers alongside a slim dildo in his tight arse... Vincent swallowed back the grunt. *Damnation*. Yes, indeed, he would definitely need to coax Marsden into giving it a try. "But not tonight. I have other plans for you." He laid a hand on the greatcoat folded at his hip, over the hard length hidden in the pocket. The man would get stuffed full, but with only one object at a time tonight. He glanced out the window. "Almost there. Best get yourself under control." He gave Marsden's prick a light tap before moving his foot back to the floorboards.

"Already?" Groaning, Marsden tipped his head back and ran his hands through his hair, further disheveling the dark waves. "Hell. Should have brought my greatcoat. Would have hidden it." He sucked in a long controlled breath, as if he were steeling



himself for something unpleasant. Then he spread his legs wider, grabbed his ballocks through his trousers, and tugged, hissing sharply through his clenched teeth.

*Ouch.* That had to have hurt. And not in a good way. “Yes, you should have,” Vincent said with a chuckle, as he put on his own coat and did up the buttons to hide his straining erection.

The carriage slowed to a stop at a familiar three-story building that looked more like a boarding house than bachelor apartments. He turned a blind eye to the bent wrought-iron rail on the stone steps leading to the front door with its peeling black paint. Instead, he focused on the two dark windows on the top floor. In just a few moments, they would be in that apartment, and he would have Marsden all to himself without having to worry about the judging eyes of others upon them.

As Marsden reached for the brass lever on the door, Vincent laid a hand on his forearm, staying him. Questioning eyes so rich and dark they almost approached black met his. He tucked that errant wavy strand back behind Marsden’s ear and murmured, “I missed you, too.” Then he winked. “Now get your arse inside so I can fuck you.”

## Chapter Two

Panting, Oliver squeezed his eyes shut tight. Vincent's "other plans" clearly involved tormenting him until he had been reduced to a quivering pile of need. Deprived of Vincent for four long weeks, his senses soaked up each sensation, savored them like the most treasured of gifts, while simultaneously frantic for more. If Vincent kept this up much longer, he'd come before his lover worked his big prick into him.

*"Please, milord."*

Vincent chuckled, a low throaty rumble. He drew a line down the oil-slicked crease of Oliver's arse and paused once again to linger over his hole, slowly tracing the puckered flesh. His skin tingled, the ring of muscle relaxing under Vincent's touch, ready for more. Then the tip of his finger slipped inside, rewarding him with the barest hint of penetration.

Oliver let out a moan of pleasure, his body tightening greedily around that digit. After being teased for what felt like an hour, though in actuality fifteen minutes could not have passed since they had entered his bedchamber, Vincent was finally giving him the tiniest taste of what he had been promising.

Needing more, Oliver pushed back and almost lost his balance. The muscles in his thighs tensed as he fought to keep from sliding off his bed. Vincent had him naked and

kneeling on the bed, his calves dangling off the edge, his chest pressed to the mattress, his arse on full display. The precarious position restrained him far more than the leather cuffs binding his wrists behind his back.

A large hand grasped his hip, steadying him. "Don't move. You will get what I give you and thank me for it."

Oliver's breaths stuttered. He loved it when Vincent spoke to him in that hard, commanding tone. "Yes, milord."

"Good boy." Vincent went back to toying with him. Up and down, a slow, luxurious caress, just the pad of his index finger sliding along the crease, driving him to distraction. The decadent sensation kept him suspended on the knife-edge of anticipation, every fiber in his being acutely aware of the man standing behind him and what he might choose to do next. The unknown, the wait -- a heady thrill all its own. One he was absolutely addicted to.

He clenched his fists as Vincent skimmed past his entrance again. The ballocks hanging between his spread thighs tingled, tightened, begging for attention. As Vincent drew another line down his crease, he couldn't help but arch his lower back, lifting his arse, hoping for a touch, an accidental brush of Vincent's fingertip, anything.

He received a hard smack on his left cheek. The sting flared, radiating across his bum and down his groin to envelop his ballocks in a wash of heat. Biting his lip against the exquisite blend of pleasure and pain, he groaned.

"Did you like that?" Vincent demanded.

"Yes."

"Do you want more?"

"Yes."

"Of what? This?" A long finger pushed inside him. One thrust, in then out. So quick and fleeting, it only served to sharpen his appetite for more. "Or this?" Vincent smacked him again.

A strangled gasp shook his throat. A drop of fluid leaked from his aching cock.

"Or something else? Tell me what you want."

The truth rushed out of his mouth. "You. All of you. Everything."

Vincent chuckled and smoothed a palm over his arse, soothing the smarting skin.

"All in good time, boy."

Soft wool whisked past his bare foot as Vincent stepped around him, his evening shoes clicking on the floorboards. Dragging his face across the coarse woolen blanket, Oliver turned his head to the left. Through the tangled hair hanging over his eyes, he squinted, willing his eyes to focus across the room without the aid of his spectacles. Vincent stood before the straight-backed wooden chair in the corner of the bedchamber. He reached into an inside pocket of his greatcoat folded neatly over the back of the chair.

Tall, broad of shoulder, and with a powerful build, Lord Vincent Prescott defined "ruggedly handsome." Six months and Oliver still couldn't fully believe this man had chosen to be with him. Vincent had discarded his black greatcoat and navy evening coat shortly after they'd arrived at Oliver's apartments, but other than that, he was still fully dressed. He hadn't even removed his cravat yet, which meant he planned to make Oliver wait a bit longer until he fucked him.

Settling in for the wait, he shimmied slightly on the bed, pulling his knees more securely under him. The old bed creaked.

"Marsden," Vincent said, the warning clear in his tone.

*Damnation.* Handsome, intelligent, and wealthy. Did the man have to have excellent hearing as well?

Vincent turned from the chair and stopped beside the bed. With the lightest of touches, he combed the hair from Oliver's eyes and tucked it behind his ear. The gesture made Oliver's heart clench. The man possessed such great strength, but could touch him so gently, so tenderly, at times it almost felt like Vincent loved him.

Vincent held out his other hand. "A gift. For your collection."

The dildo appeared to be carved from a single piece of jade. It must have cost Vincent a small fortune and explained why the man had not worn his greatcoat into the gambling hell. The candlelight played over the highly polished green stone, highlighting the four graduated raised bands encircling the length, each one a bit larger than the next. It couldn't be more than seven inches in length and even at its widest point, less around than an average man. Oliver had noticed how Vincent preferred toys that were shorter and thinner than his substantial cock. He much preferred Vincent over a toy, and after weeks of nothing but dildos, plugs, and his own fingers to keep him company, he wanted the real man tonight. Still, those bands on the dildo were sure to feel divine.

His arse tightened in anticipation. "Thank you, Vincent."

A smile tugged the corners of his lover's firm mouth, but he kept it from fully curving his lips. Vincent moved back to his position behind him. "Up with you now."

With one hand on his shoulder, Vincent effortlessly pulled him up off the bed. For a moment, he swayed backward on his knees. Instinct had him tugging on his restraints, needing to catch himself. He felt the heat from Vincent's body a split second before his shoulder blades touched the smooth silk of his waistcoat.

"I have you," Vincent murmured, wrapping an arm around Oliver's waist, holding him securely against the wide expanse of his chest. The tip of his ring finger just barely touched the dark hair on his groin. Chin resting on his shoulder, Vincent's warm breath tickled his ear, sending shivers down his spine.

Before he could turn his head and press his mouth against Vincent's, give him the kiss the man had held back all evening, cool stone tapped his parted lips. He immediately opened his mouth, taking the dildo inside.

"That's it. Get it nice and wet. You know where that's going, don't you, boy?"

Oliver gave a short, eager nod. He hoped he knew where it was going. Just allowing him to suck on it would be cruel. Vincent might push Oliver to his limits, tie him up, spank him, and whip him, but cruel he was not.

"I'm going to bury it in that tight little arse of yours," Vincent growled.

Oliver whimpered, the sound so needy and desperate, but he didn't care in the slightest. He gathered as much saliva into his mouth as he could, then swirled it over the hard length with his tongue as Vincent slid the dildo in and out.

The large hand on his abdomen moved up his chest. Two fingers found one of his nipples and pinched. Hard. Sweet, luscious pain shot across his chest. Then Vincent twisted. Oliver shuddered, his cock arching up to brush his lower belly, his ballocks tightening even further against his body. Desperate to touch his lover, he stretched out his fingers and located the hard bulge of Vincent's erection pressing against the placket of his trousers. He feathered his fingers over the impressive length, wanting to wrap his mouth around it, to feel the hot satiny skin, to have the taste of Vincent on his tongue. Air hissed as Vincent sucked in a breath, proving he wasn't as unaffected as he pretended to be. He thrust his hips, pressing his prick into Oliver's hand. Oliver stroked him as best he could through his trousers, all the while sucking on the hard jade as Vincent tormented his nipple.

"Enough." Vincent pulled the dildo from his mouth. "Down," he commanded, carefully lowering Oliver's shoulders to the mattress.

Vincent passed a hand down his spine then pulled back one cheek. A slick, hard head pressed against his entrance. He relaxed into the pressure as Vincent pushed the dildo inside. *One, two, three...* Oliver squeezed his eyes shut and grunted against the burning stretch as the largest band eased past the ring of muscle...*four*. Vincent shoved the phallus deep, eliciting a moan from Oliver. Hell, it felt so good to be filled, to have that itch scratched.

"Hold onto it." Vincent tapped the base, and the vibrations teased Oliver's passage.

He obediently clenched his muscles around the hard length.

"So pretty." Vincent traced his stretched hole. "Do you have any idea how debauched you look with that dildo shoved up your arse? You love it, don't you? Tell me."

"Yes. Oh, God, yes." A spasm racked him as he focused on keeping his arse tight, on holding the jade in place. "Please, *please*. Fuck me with it." Need clawed at his throat so hard he could barely get the words out.

Vincent let out a muttered curse. He heard fabric rustle. Vincent was taking off his waistcoat and shirt; Oliver just knew it. And beneath the sounds of linen shifting and floorboards creaking as Vincent moved behind him were the deep pants of Vincent's breaths. The erotic sound ratcheted Oliver's lust even higher.

Vincent grabbed his hip. Those pants had turned heavy, harsh, blending with Oliver's own. He let go when Vincent pulled on the dildo. He silently counted the bands as they slipped out -- *four, three, two, one* -- and the head slipped from his body.

His eyes flew open. "No. Don't stop. More. *Please*."

Vincent gave him what he begged for. Long fingers digging into his arse cheek, holding him open, he picked up a steady rhythm. All the way in, then all the way out. The continual pattern of withdrawal and re-entry made each thrust feel like the first one of the night. Stretching him wide, stuffing him full, a delicious rush of sensation. Oliver pressed his forehead to the mattress, pleas for more falling from his lips as he fought to stay still, to simply take what Vincent gave him and not rock back into each long, plunging thrust.

His cock ached. He was so hard it hurt, in the most intense, pleasurable way. Sweat prickled the small of his back, dampened his hands clenched in fists. His nerve endings shimmered with the need to come, every muscle in his body drawn tight, poised for orgasm.

"You want more?" Vincent snarled.

"Yes, yes, please."

"More than this?" He pushed the jade inside him again. In then out.

"Yes, *please*. I want your cock. I-I need it. I need you," Oliver begged, beyond desperate.

"Then take it."

"Ah!" He screamed as the impossibly broad head of Vincent's cock stretched him to his limits. In, in, in -- he kept pushing deeper and deeper, the long length filling him in one determined stroke. Heat rolled through his body. Sweat tickled his scalp. The sharp mix of pleasure and stretching pain, of finally having what he wanted, made the climax he'd been fighting to keep at bay clutch the base of his cock.

With a feral growl, Vincent tugged him closer, pressing his arse to his groin, settling hilt deep, forcing Oliver to take it all. He struggled to catch his breath, the intense sensations almost too much. By God, it felt as if his prick were touching his throat. Then Vincent pulled back and pumped into him, again and again.

"Yes, yes," he gasped. "More."

Vincent smacked him on the arse, the sound cracking through the air, the sting flaring deliciously through his body. "That's it. Beg for my cock. Tell me what you want."

"More, more. *Please!*"

"I'll give you more." Grabbing his forearms, Vincent yanked his upper body from the bed and slammed hard, hitting that perfect spot inside him.

Pure molten pleasure overloaded his senses. Oliver threw back his head and howled. The orgasm raced down his spine; cum shot from his prick. The heavy pulses seized his nerves in rhythm to his lover's demanding thrusts.

"That's it. Come for me, boy. Grip my cock so fucking tight." Vincent's ballocks smacked against him, as he took what he needed, stroking hard and fast.

He hung his head, gasped for breath. Senses shimmering from that powerful orgasm, he couldn't stop himself from begging for more even though his arse throbbed



under the onslaught. With each thrust, the wet tip of his still-hard cock smacked his belly, sending jagged vibrations down to his drained ballocks. Yet he took it all. Savored every bit of Vincent's undivided attention. Let the man do as he pleased with him. After four long weeks without him, he didn't want to stop. Not now. Not ever.

Vincent's pants turned into short, gravelly grunts, growing louder, harsher in time to the quick snap of his hips, until Oliver felt the shudders shake Vincent's powerful body and warmth flood his passage.

With his prick still buried deep within Oliver, Vincent hauled him fully up against his sweat-slicked chest and wrapped his arms around him. The comforting embrace calmed the frantic need pounding through his veins, enveloping him in a rich, thick languor. Oliver's eyes drifted closed, his head tipping back onto Vincent's broad shoulder. He could stay like this forever. Held close to Vincent, intimately joined with him.

For many moments, the only sounds that broke the silence were their hard, labored breaths. Then soft lips nuzzled his ear. Oliver turned his head, needing Vincent's kiss. His lover's mouth met his, and with a greedy groan, Oliver slipped his tongue past those parted lips. The sweet, hot taste of Vincent saturated his senses, made his head go light, pulling that frantic need back to the surface. Tugging on his wrists, he pressed back against Vincent's chest, trying to get closer to the man he loved, to get more of him. Damn leather cuffs. He wanted to wrap his arms around Vincent, tangle his fingers in his hair, crush the man to him, and deepen the frustratingly languid kiss.

Vincent pulled back, breaking the kiss long before Oliver had his fill. His eyes were heavy-lidded, the brilliant blue depths hazy with sated lust. A hint of a smile played on his mouth. "Let's get you untied." The low rumbling words brushed across Oliver's wet lips.

Vincent's arms tightened around him before releasing him, his softened prick slipping from his body. Oliver held back the protest and did his best to balance on weak knees as Vincent unbuckled the leather cuffs. Vincent tossed the restraints aside, the

leather and metal buckles clattering to the wooden floor. Then he gently massaged Oliver's wrists and forearms, soothing the sweaty skin.

"Better?" Vincent pressed a kiss to the apple of his shoulder.

"Yes." Oliver sighed. A roll of his shoulders loosened his stiff joints. He crawled farther up the bed, past the wet spot on the woolen blanket, nudging the jade dildo Vincent had discarded to the edge of the mattress, and flopped down on his stomach. He was sweaty and sticky and should clean himself up, but he couldn't summon the effort just yet. "Come here," he mumbled with a half-hearted wave of his arm. It really was all he could muster.

The mattress dipped and shook as Vincent crawled toward him. The bed wasn't all that large, barely wide enough for the two of them. Pulling Oliver close, he lay down on his back, fitting him against his side. Letting out a contented sigh, Oliver nestled even closer, until he was draped half-over Vincent's body, his leg tangled with Vincent's, his arm slung across his broad chest. He could feel the man's heart beating against his cheek. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

His world narrowed until all that existed were the strong, steady beats of his lover's heart, the intoxicating scent of his sweat and skin, and the lulling caress of the large hand kneading his backside.

*I love you.*

He tried to get the words out, but he was so exhausted his mouth didn't want to cooperate.

A hand gripped his wrist, the hold light but enough to bring him to full consciousness and prompt him to blink open his heavy eyelids. Vincent lifted Oliver's arm off his chest, moved out from beneath him, and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He stood and, avoiding the clothing littering the floor, walked to the washstand.

The fire in the grate warmed the room enough to take the bite out of the air from Oliver's drafty window. Still, he felt the loss of Vincent's warm body acutely.

Water splashed as Vincent dunked a cloth in the white ceramic basin. The muscles in his back bunched and flexed as he wiped his chest. His buttocks tightened as he swiped lower, between his legs. The water was no doubt quite cold. Unlike Vincent, he didn't have a house full of servants to see to such small tasks, like heating wash water, dusting, or tidying up in his wake.

His eyes drifted closed again. He heard Vincent moving about. With each creak of the floorboards, tension seeped into him, dousing that perfectly blissful feeling of complete contentment.

Keeping his eyes closed wouldn't change the inevitable. He forced his eyelids to open.

The black suspenders attached to the waistband of Vincent's trousers stretched across his white-shirted back as he leaned down to grab his waistcoat from the floor near the foot of the bed.

Oliver's stomach tightened. "Where are you going?" Stupid question to ask. Of course he wouldn't stay the night. He never did.

"Home," Vincent replied matter-of-factly, slipping on the cream silk waistcoat.

Oliver pushed up to sit cross-legged and put on the spectacles he'd left on the bedside table. One hand draped over his limp cock, he twisted the rumpled sheet at his hip between his fingers. He hated sitting on the bed, watching Vincent prepare to leave. Made him feel like a pitiful, lovesick fool. "You could stay." *Bloody hell*. And now he sounded like one, too.

His pathetic offer didn't even make Vincent pause as he picked up his cravat. "My carriage is waiting."

"So send it home. Take a hackney in the morning. You were gone for almost a month, Vincent." *Don't leave me yet*.

"I can't leave your apartments in the morning. The other tenants in the building might notice and wonder why I stayed the night. In any case, I have an early appointment with my banker."

Yes, of course, how could he forget? Vincent was a busy man with many pressing responsibilities. Heaven forbid if Oliver dared to take precedence over any of them.

Using the mirror above the washstand, Vincent tied his cravat. A few deft flicks of his fingers and a couple of tugs, and he produced a perfect Mathematical knot. "By the way, you should let me manage your investments."

Oliver shook his head. "I can manage them myself."

"You could be earning a better return. Enough to move out of here." He motioned with the comb in his hand -- indicating the shabby bedchamber with its threadbare brown velvet drapes over the drafty window and its too-small, old bed -- and then went back to smoothing the short layers of his dark hair.

*My apologies you have to lower your standards to fuck me.* Oliver bit his tongue, holding back the surly retort. For all Vincent knew, he could be managing his accounts quite smartly. But of course, Vincent correctly assumed his investments yielded a paltry sum. Oliver wasn't comfortable putting his money into the Exchange, or other more risky ventures. Unlike Vincent, he didn't have the security of an obscenely wealthy father behind him. Yes, Vincent's father ignored him in favor of his elder brother, the precious heir to the Saye and Sele marquise, but the man would never let his youngest son go penniless. Even with his properties and investments, Oliver was certain Vincent's father still gave him a sizable quarterly allowance. Whereas all Oliver had was the small inheritance he'd received years ago from his mother. If he lost it, he'd have nothing. The income did not yield much, but enough for him to live on if he kept a very close eye on his expenses and didn't indulge in such luxuries like hackney fare or a maid or a stately white stucco townhouse in Mayfair.

"It's not like I live in some flash house in the stews." He couldn't keep the defensive note from his voice.

Vincent did up the last button on his navy coat. "Don't get your hackles up, Marsden. I was only offering to help." He held up a hand to stay him when Oliver opened his mouth. "But yes, I understand. You can manage it yourself."

*Good. Glad we understand each other.* Oliver swiped his unruly hair behind his ear then, letting out a breath, forced aside the irritation. He didn't want to start an argument with Vincent. Not when he only had a few minutes left with him.

Vincent crossed the room and picked up his gold pocket watch from the dented little silver tray on the bedside table. From his crisp white cravat to his polished evening shoes, he was the very image of a proper aristocrat. One would never guess by looking at him that he'd just buggered another man. Oliver soaked up his strong profile -- the slightly roman nose, the neatly combed hair, the dark brows furrowed the tiniest bit as Vincent attached the watch chain to his waistcoat. He must have shaved tonight before he went to the hell, for there wasn't even the hint of a shadow of a dark beard on his jaw.

"Love you," Oliver whispered.

Vincent's lips curved in a smile, his blue eyes softening with genuine affection. Oliver's heart leapt into his throat, pleading for the response he knew Vincent would not utter. He wanted to hear those words just once. One time. Even if Vincent didn't feel them. He could at least have the sound of them as a memory and play them over in head as he lay alone in his bed and pretend they had come from Vincent's heart.

Vincent cupped his jaw. Eyes drifting closed, Oliver leaned into his touch. A quiver of need shook his body. Soft lips brushed his, the lightest of touches, a mere whisper of skin against skin. Then that large hand slipped away.

"I'll bring supper tomorrow. Eight o'clock all right?"

Oliver pressed his lips together and nodded.

"Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

He couldn't stop himself from watching Vincent walk from the room, his greatcoat in hand, and shut the door behind him. He heard his footsteps as he crossed the parlor. Then the front door snapped shut.

"Why don't you love me?" The words he could never make himself utter in Vincent's presence echoed in the room. Mocking him, taunting him, a harsh reminder of what he did not have.

He tossed his spectacles onto the bedside table and pressed the heels of his palms to his closed eyes, pushing back the misery, the threat of tears, and then dragged his hands down his face.

"Christ. I'm fucking pathetic." He punched his pillow and flopped down on the bed. Why did he torment himself like this? Vincent cared enough to be with him. Shouldn't that be enough? A year ago, he would have given anything for a kiss from Vincent. In love with him for too many years to count, he had subsisted on mere friendship. A chance meeting on the street. A shared drink at White's. All the while hiding his true feelings for his childhood friend.

Until he discovered Vincent had secretly hired a man and not a woman during his visits to a brothel. An establishment Vincent no longer needed to frequent since he now had Oliver at his disposal.

Hell, he had been extremely lucky Vincent hadn't turned his back on him when he learned he had hired Oliver on that fateful night at the brothel. The resulting argument had not been pleasant, but in the end, it had gained him Vincent. Or whatever it was that he had of him.

Oliver let out a heavy sigh and reminded himself forcefully that it had taken a lot for Vincent to accept the fact that he preferred men. Vincent excelled at most everything he did, and he had viewed those desires as a failure. Hadn't he told Vincent six months ago that he wasn't asking for his heart? He had known better at the time to not expect more than mere lust and affection.

But it had been *six months*. Surely enough time for Vincent to become comfortable with his sexuality. To fully acknowledge to himself that he did indeed prefer men. To completely accept that part of himself and open his heart to Oliver.

But therein lay the problem.

While Oliver loved to submit to Vincent, to give himself over to the man he adored, the tight leash Vincent kept on their sexual activities screamed loud and clear that he wasn't ready to be fully intimate with another man.

*Be patient. Be patient.* How many times had he told himself that? Used those words to pacify the all-encompassing need gripping his heart? But it damn well hurt that Vincent did not love him.

All he wanted was to be with Vincent. To be near the man. To be able to take in a deep breath and soak up the scent of him.

To have Vincent need him, as Oliver needed Vincent.

The pressing question was -- could he?

"Enough," he told himself as he rolled over. He'd have one hell of a sleepless night if he kept this up. He tugged the woolen blanket up to his chest and did his best to clear his mind and allow sleep to overtake him. To not think about how Vincent had stayed in Rotherham one week longer than originally expected. How he had arrived at the gambling hell two hours late without even an apology until Oliver had reminded him of his tardiness. And about the tiny distance Vincent kept between them.

That distance that now felt like a damn chasm.

### Chapter Three

Oliver slowly closed the leather-bound book, careful to keep the pages of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* from rustling. Holding his breath, he set the book on the pedestal tea table beside his chair and moved to stand.

"If you want to leave, say so. You do yourself a disservice trying to sneak away like some sort of inept thief."

*Damnation.* Oliver slumped back into the chair. "My apologies, Grandmother. I thought you had fallen asleep. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I am not asleep."

Obviously. He kept from rolling his eyes. The doctor claimed advanced age had severely diminished her eyesight, but Oliver didn't believe him. Nothing escaped the older woman's notice. He picked up the book. "Would you like me to continue reading aloud?"

She waved a small, bony hand, the intricate lace cuff of her dressing gown fluttering with the movement. "No. You clearly have had your fill of me for one day."

He sighed. "That's not true, Grandmother."

The afternoon sunlight streamed through the window, the golden rays creating a halo effect around her gray head. Propped up against a pile of fluffy white pillows, and



with the ivory coverlet tucked about her waist, she looked so very tiny and frail, but her sharp tongue belied her appearance. The carriage accident almost a decade ago had left her an invalid, confining her to her massive four-poster bed. If not for him, she would be left with only the company of two servants. She might not be the most pleasant individual, but she was his grandmother and he did love her.

Frowning, she selected a scone from the box nestled at her hip and took a bite. Likely she only tolerated his visits because he brought her sweets.

"Would you care for another cup of tea?" he asked.

"You've already pushed three cups on me. I do not need another." She finished the scone and closed the baker's box.

He remained seated, waiting patiently as she struggled to retie the red ribbon around the box. If he offered his assistance, he'd only get snapped at.

When she finished, she set the box on top of one of the piles of books on her bedside table. *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *MacBeth*. He knew every one of those books by heart. After readjusting the coverlet about her, she turned her attention back to him. "When are you going to take a wife?"

He squirmed in the pink floral silk chair. Where had that question come from? And how could he tell her never without revealing why? He reached up and straightened the jade pin on his cravat. He belonged to Vincent, never with another.

"Radford's married and has already produced an heir," he said, referring to his elder brother, who held the courtesy title Earl of Radford. His brother's wife had written to him from Northumberland a few weeks ago informing him of the event. The countess was as bland and aloof as his brother, but at least she remembered he existed.

"What does that have to do with your future wife?"

"There's little chance the title will come to me. So there's no need to inflict myself on some innocent woman for the sake of securing the title." A title that was little more than a name and a neglected property in Wiltshire, since his father had long since bled the estate dry.

Thin lips pursed, she stared at him, her cloudy, dark brown gaze sharp and piercing. "I never did much care for Radford or your father."

No surprise there. She didn't much care for anyone.

"But you...you should take a wife."

Oliver shook his head. The woman was definitely getting on in years. She wasn't making the least bit of sense. "But I don't have anything to offer a wife. No prospects. A pittance of an income. I can't afford to pay a lady's modiste bills, much less purchase a home for her to live in."

"Nonsense," she declared, all aristocratic condescension. "You are the son of a marquis. That alone will fetch you a chit with a decent dowry, enough for you to live comfortably. She will marry you for your name, and you will marry her for her money."

How cold and impersonal. He winced.

"That is what is done." She punctuated her words with a short, determined nod. "How marriages are made, and how your mother came to marry your father, and how I came to marry your grandfather. Sentiment has no place in marriage. Do not forget that. Expecting more will only lead to disappointment."

But of course. Why ever would he expect someone to love him? A tide of misery, so fresh it felt as if Vincent had just walked out the door, tightened his throat. He tipped his chin down, letting his over-long, jaw-length hair partially obscure his face, and studied the ornate embossed leatherwork on the book's cover in his lap, as he struggled to regain his composure. "Ah...I'll...I'll keep that in mind, Grandmother."

He should have left when she had given him the opportunity. This morning he had awoken with his patience well in hand. The doubts gone, replaced with anticipation at the prospect of seeing Vincent tonight. But now --

"Oliver."

The unexpected note of compassion in her usual whip-sharp voice brought his gaze up to hers.

Her sparse gray brows were lowered, the deep lines on her forehead in stark relief. "While I still mourn your mother's death, there was a bit of relief in it for her. Your father made her miserable. I do not want that for you."

He swallowed hard. "Yes, Grandmother. I understand." In her own odd way, she was concerned for him. But he was afraid her warning had come much too late. "If you will excuse me, I must take my leave. I have an appointment, and I don't wish to be late." He had five hours until Vincent showed up at his apartments, and it wouldn't take a fifth of that time for him to walk home. But he had no other excuse to leave at the ready. No other place he needed to be. No other responsibilities that required his attention. "Is there anything you need?" He had already checked in with her housekeeper, seen to her posts, and made arrangements to have a bank draft sent from her account to the butcher to settle the latest bill.

"No, no. Be on your way." That imperious tone was back, all traces of compassion gone.

He set the book on the tea table, stood, and took hold of her proffered hand, her skin icy cold. He pressed a kiss to her weathered cheek.

Delicate, boney fingers wrapped around his, surprising in their grip, keeping him from turning from the bed. "Old age is lonely, Oliver. Find a nice lady, if for no other reason than to eventually have a grandson who will pay you calls."

He met her solemn gaze. The cloudy dark depths held far more than mere concern. She didn't explicitly say the words, but he didn't need her to. He understood, and he could not deny that it felt good to know someone loved him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent lifted his freshly shaven chin. His slim, middle-aged valet barely reached his shoulder, and the man had to lift up onto his toes to loop the cravat about his neck. Quick and efficient, Barton molded the long length of starched white linen into crisp folds and a neat knot.

The first day back in Town after a long visit to the country was always a busy one. Yet even the continual press of appointments, calls, and correspondences had not been able to keep him from pulling out his pocket watch at least a dozen times, willing the small black hands to move faster.

"The fawn waistcoat, my lord?" His valet motioned to the garment laid out on the navy coverlet of the bed.

Vincent flicked his fingers. "Yes, yes, Barton. That will do."

At half past six and not a moment later, he had stepped away from his desk. After Barton finished with him, he could go on to White's to pick up the supper he'd sent a footman ahead to order. Marsden preferred the steak there. Oh, and the Bordeaux. Couldn't forget that. He'd grab a nice bottle from his wine cellar before he left the house.

The routine so familiar, Barton's nimble fingers were doing up the buttons on his waistcoat before Vincent realized the man had put it on him. A quick glance at the brass clock on the fireplace mantel confirmed it was not yet seven. Still plenty of time. He didn't want to risk ruffling Marsden's feathers again. Vincent slipped his arms into the sleeves when his valet held out his coat. Or had there been more to it than that? Tardiness never bothered Marsden before. Yet a little nudge prodded the back of his mind, one he couldn't quite define other than to label it disconcerting.

"Perhaps the black coat tonight, my lord?"

He blinked and focused on Barton's questioning face. "Pardon?"

"Would you prefer the black instead of the bottle green?"

"No. The green will do."

There was a soft scratch on his bedchamber door. With a tip of his head, Barton went to the door. Vincent took his pocket watch from the mahogany dresser and attached it to his waistcoat. He was buttoning his coat when Barton stopped beside him, tray in hand.

"For you, my lord."

With a quick snap, he tugged his shirt cuffs out from under the sleeves of his coat. Then he took the missive from the silver tray. His hand shook just the tiniest bit when he used the silver letter opener that had also been on the tray to break the distinctive red wax seal of the Marquis of Saye and Sele.

*Prescot --*

*An audience is requested immediately.*

*-- Saye and Sele*

"My greatcoat. Now, man."

Barton dropped the discarded clothing he had been gathering. Vincent's sharp tone sent him scurrying into his master's dressing room, reappearing just as quickly with the requested garment.

Vincent put on the greatcoat, tucking the letter into his pocket. His father wished to see him. Had he heard about the success he had made of the Rotherham property? After his repeated requests for the property had been met with refusals, Vincent had purchased it outright. Did his father wish to congratulate him on turning what had once been a blight on the Saye and Sele Marquisate into a lucrative investment?

In less than a minute, he was down the stairs, out the front door of his townhouse, and in his waiting carriage.

By the time a footman clad in scarlet and gray livery was showing him to his father's study, reason had descended, replacing the surge of excitement with mere curiosity. Over six months ago, he had found that vein of coal on the property. If his father cared to acknowledge the success, he would have mentioned it well before now. Still, he couldn't help but wonder why his father wished to see him. It had been years...*years* since he had received such a missive.

The footman opened the oak door and Vincent stepped inside. With its high ceiling, dark paneled walls, somber gilt-framed portraits, and black leather wingback chairs, the room was a near duplicate of the study at the family's country estate,

reminding him vividly of the times he had walked into its twin as a youth. That need for attention so strong it had clogged his throat and sent his heart pounding in his chest. He stopped before his father's massive desk and clasped his hands behind his back, reminding himself firmly that he was a man now and not a needy eleven-year-old boy.

His father didn't acknowledge his presence, merely slipped his pen into the silver penholder. Looking at his father, with his tall, broad-shouldered frame and neatly cropped silver hair, was like looking into a mirror and seeing his sixty-year-old self reflected back at him. Vincent used to wonder if their similarity in appearance had somehow caused his father to dislike him. Silly notion. But there had been a time when his father's complete lack of interest in him had left him so confused he'd been willing to grasp at any straw to explain it.

Using a silver stamp, Vincent's father pressed his seal into the red wax, sealing the letter he had been writing. He placed the letter in the center of the tray at the edge of his desk then turned his blue eyes to Vincent. Eyes which never seemed to truly see him. "I am in need of a favor."

*From me?* Somehow he kept his jaw from dropping.

"The Duke of Halstead paid me a call today. He wishes to form an alliance with our family."

"What sort of alliance?"

"Marriage. His only daughter is set to make her come-out in the spring," his father replied, as if Vincent were a simpleton for not deducing it himself.

Yet he couldn't stop the baffled "To me?" from falling from his lips.

His father's upper lip curled. "The duke intends to marry his daughter to the heir of the Saye and Sele marquissate. Not the spare."

Vincent rolled one shoulder, trying to throw off the hurt, but to no avail. It stuck to his spine, stiffening his back. "Then what do you need of me?"

"To free your brother from Lady Juliana. He cannot toss her aside himself. You must dance attendance on her and wed her by the end of the year, before Grafton returns from the country. Don't bother with the banns. Marry her by special license. It will be put about that it is a love match, and therefore all will be forgiven, leaving Grafton free to wed his grace's daughter at the start of the Season."

Though he rarely spoke to his elder brother, the Earl of Grafton, he had the distinct impression the man was rather fond of the girl. Grafton, however, would do whatever their father wished without question. "But what about Lady Juliana? It's been understood that Grafton would marry her."

"She's an earl's daughter and will still do well to marry you." The man's off-handed tone wiped away any shadow of a compliment.

Marriage? Vincent took a deep breath, that word bouncing about in his skull. Marriage? If a bit of tardiness had ruffled Marsden's feathers last night, then how would he react to this?

Oh, God. Marsden. His stomach dropped to his feet, his knees threatening to buckle. He gripped his clasped hands tight and kept his expression free of all emotion. "But I am only four-and-twenty. I haven't yet given much consideration to marriage." Men of his station typically did not wed until they were much closer to the age of thirty, after they had established themselves and after they had their fill of all the sins London had to offer.

His father scoffed. "You must eventually marry. Lady Juliana is as good as any other chit you could find on the marriage mart."

"What of Lady Juliana's father? Will he not take this as a slight against him?" The earl was an old friend of his father's. Hence the reason his father had originally entertained the notion of Grafton marrying the girl.

"He understands the situation. If his daughter were presented the opportunity to marry into a dukedom, he would take it."

Vincent opened his mouth, but his mind refused to conjure more excuses. He snapped his jaw shut and stared blankly at the silver inkwell on the oak desk. He had no desire to change his life. None whatsoever. He didn't need to marry now, nor did he want to.

Yet that old need to please rose up, threatening to clog his throat. His father actually needed him for something, even if it was only to use him to further his own greedy ambitions. Nor were Society's expectations so easy to push aside. Men of his standing married young ladies with aristocratic blood flowing through their veins. They made alliances for the good of their families without thought to their own selfish desires. But still...

He felt as if he were being pulled apart by opposing forces. One part of him screaming no, while the other part, the part that strove to be an upstanding and well-respected gentleman, the type of man a father would be proud to call son, wanted to bow his head in agreement.

The rustle of papers broke through the riot in his head. His father was pulling a bundle of papers from a drawer. He flipped through the stack and selected a sheet. "You will pay Lady Juliana a call tomorrow. She will be expecting you. I want you married before the New Year."

The man hadn't even bothered to ask if he agreed. His father had made his wishes known and expected nothing less than strict adherence.

Vincent took the dismissal for what it was and left the study. His footsteps echoed in the spacious entrance hall, the sound smacking his ears, unnaturally loud, as he made his way out of the stately mansion.

His footman opened the door as he approached the carriage. He stepped inside and sat on the bench.

"My lord? Where to?"

"Ah." Vincent gave his head a sharp shake. Supper. Yes, he needed to pick up supper. "White's."



The door snapped shut.

“Damn. The wine.” He cursed under his breath. He had forgotten to get it before he left the house. Oh well. A bottle from White’s would have to do.

The gentlemen’s club wasn’t that far from his father’s house, and soon the carriage was winding its way to Cheapside, a wicker basket on the floor between his feet containing the supper the chef had kept warm.

Marsden would understand, he told himself over and over as he stared out the window. They were both second sons to marquises. Society and duty to one’s family held certain obligations. Marsden would grasp the complexity of the situation his father had placed him in. Christ, he *had* to understand because, by God, Vincent needed his friend’s advice on what the hell he should do.

## Chapter Four

Head tipped down and black coat soaked through, his footman opened the carriage door. Rain dripped from the tip of the man's narrow nose, his white cravat a sodden mess around his neck.

A hackney would have to suffice for the ride home later tonight. Vincent couldn't leave his carriage waiting for him in this weather. The rain had started about ten minutes earlier, and based on the steady drum against the roof, it wasn't letting up anytime soon.

He buttoned his greatcoat, grabbed the wicker basket, and stooping to fit through the door, exited the carriage. "That will be all for the night."

The driver snapped the leather lines. Harness jangled as the team of four lurched forward, their hooves splashing in the puddles on the dirt road.

Vincent hurried inside and went up the three flights of dimly lit stairs to the top floor. Stopping at the door on the right, he let out a sigh, the tension easing from his shoulders, the knot unraveling in his stomach. Just the thought of Marsden on the other side of the door settled him like nothing else could.

He couldn't define when exactly, but at some point during the past thirteen years, ever since they had become friends on his first day at boarding school, he had come to

associate Marsden with comfort. And right now, he was in sore need of that precious commodity.

"Evening, Marsden," he said, closing the door behind him. After the austere, frigid atmosphere of his father's house, with its priceless antiquities on display and everything in its proper place down to that silver inkwell perfectly centered on his father's desk, Marsden's quaint, untidy parlor was a welcome sight.

Seated on the brown leather couch, Marsden didn't lift his head from the open book in his hands. A couple of newspapers were strewn on the lumpy cushions beside him, an empty glass on the floor next to his feet. "Where have you been?"

His strides faltered as he crossed the room to set the basket on the small dining table in the corner. "I had an errand to see to."

Did Marsden just grunt?

*Brilliant.* He did not need this. Not now. Not tonight. He needed the easy, unassuming version of Marsden. The one who was always there for him. Not this prickly version whose feathers were ruffled. Again.

Passing a hand over the back of his neck, Vincent glanced to the clock on the mantel. For God's sake. Only thirty minutes late. It wasn't as if he'd left the man waiting for him for two hours.

He took off his greatcoat and folded it over the back of one of the two chairs at the table. "My apologies. I had not intended to keep you waiting."

That condescending snort made his stomach tightened anew. He held back a full explanation for his tardiness. There was no way he could tell Marsden about the meeting with his father, not when the man was behaving like this. Such an attitude did not encourage a confidence.

He took two glasses from the cupboard by the table. "Would you care for a glass of wine?" he asked, forcing a friendly tone.

*Say yes, Marsden.*

"No."

At least he got an answer that involved a word, though the man hadn't looked in his direction yet. Marsden pulled one foot up, bracing his heel on the cushion and his elbow on his knee, clearly settling in. He hadn't bothered with a coat, and Vincent could just make out his golden skin beneath the sleeves of his white shirt. His fingers itched to tuck the wavy chunk of hair hanging over one eye behind his ear.

"Marsden, come here." Perhaps a kiss would loosen those lips held in a hard, compressed line.

His friend's response was to turn a page.

Vincent gritted his teeth, suddenly frustrated beyond bearing. How dare he so blatantly ignore him?

"Now, boy." The words snapped across the distance separating them.

Marsden's fingers tightened around the book, a visible shudder racking his body. Vincent waited for what felt like an endless moment. Then Marsden finally put down that damn book.

Gaze downcast, he crossed the room and stopped before Vincent, his hands fisted at his sides, his chest rising and falling rapidly beneath the gray brocade waistcoat. The scent of his arousal poured off him, pervading Vincent's senses, until all he could think about was getting Marsden under him. Pounding him into the bed. Fucking him senseless. Dominating him completely.

"Get on your knees and suck my cock."

Without even a nudge on his shoulder, the man dropped to the wooden floor and removed his spectacles then put them in Vincent's outstretched hand. The buttons on the placket of Vincent's trousers were undone in a blink of an eye, and Marsden was pushing aside his shirttail, reaching through the opening in his drawers to pull out his semierect cock.

Those full, soft lips wrapped around the crown. Vincent had to fight to hold back the moan. Blood rushed to his groin, his cock hardening further as Marsden sank down. There was no lingering over the details. No light kisses feathered along the length, no long, luxurious sweeps of his tongue. The man sucked him with distinct purpose. One hand flat around the base, holding the placket out of the way, he bobbed up and down, his lips a hot silken drag along the length, the slightly rough texture of his tongue a delicious caress on the underside.

Reaching blindly to his left, Vincent set the spectacles on the fireplace mantel, then grabbed the edge of the table behind him and held on tight, needing something to keep from swaying on his feet against the decadent pleasure of Marsden's mouth. With his other hand, Vincent speared his fingers into those dark waves and cupped the back of his skull, urging him to take more.

Marsden didn't disappoint. He sank all the way down, until his lips touched the dark hair on Vincent's groin.

Wet heat surrounded every inch of his prick. "Oh God, Marsden," he groaned, his head tipping back. "You're damn good at sucking cock."

Hand braced on Vincent's thigh, Marsden picked up a rhythm of long plunging strokes that had an orgasm tickling the base of his spine in no time.

It would feel so good to come down Marsden's throat, to have the man suck every last drop out of him. But...he tugged on his hair. With a crude wet popping noise, those lush lips were pulled from his prick. Marsden's long lashes rested against his flushed cheekbones, his quick pants fanning across Vincent's glistening length.

"I want you on the bed. Naked. Now."

Marsden trembled, the barest of whimpers escaping him. Then he scrambled to his feet and hurried through the open door of his bedchamber.

He heard Marsden scurrying around in the next room. Vincent removed his coat and waistcoat and draped them over the back of the old upholstered armchair near the

fireplace, giving Marsden the time he needed to follow his orders. When the rustling and distinct creaks of the bed ceased, he went into the bedchamber.

Satisfaction surged through him at the sight of Marsden, naked and lying on the bed, as instructed. The man was sleek yet compact, his muscles defined beneath golden skin that looked even more inviting under the glow of the candle on the bedside table. Not a single dark hair marred his flawless chest. Legs slightly spread, he had his erection in one hand, stroking the length, and his ballocks cupped in the other. Full lower lip captured between his white teeth, his gaze tracked Vincent's every movement.

There was nothing quite like the feel of that intent dark gaze. The lust and need there. Desperate and dependent, wanting him and only him.

He stopped at the foot of the bed. "Should you be touching your prick?" he asked, as he untied his cravat.

Marsden snatched his hands to his sides. His hard cock jutted from his body, pointing straight to the ceiling.

Vincent took his time removing the rest of his clothes, allowing the anticipation to crank even higher until he couldn't keep his hands from shaking as he pushed his trousers down his legs, leaving them in a heap at his feet.

He eyed the utilitarian wooden headboard with its single plain rail spanning the width of the bed. Marsden's wrists would look quite nice tied to that rail, arms stretched overhead, his beautiful body Vincent's to do with as he pleased.

He grabbed his discarded cravat. Head lowered, he crawled onto the bed and up Marsden's body. When he reached Marsden's groin, the man lifted his hips, putting the flushed crown mere inches from his lips.

"Kiss me," Marsden murmured. Vincent watched Marsden's abdomen tighten, a tremor seizing the sleek muscles of his thighs. His prick bobbed, conveying in no uncertain terms where he wanted that kiss.

Crouched over Marsden, Vincent stared, transfixed by the drop of clear fluid beaded at the tip.

Kiss him? There? As in press his lips to another man's prick?

Gut instinct urged him to jerk back, yet the musky scent of Marsden's pretty cock was an oddly irresistible lure, begging him to discover if he tasted that sweet.

Marsden grabbed his upper arm and tugged. "Just fuck me." He twisted beneath him, his calves brushing Vincent's erection as he rolled onto his stomach. He snatched the bottle of oil from the bedside table, and reaching back, handed it to Vincent.

He gave his head a sharp shake, clearing the disorientation, and took the proffered bottle, leaving the cravat on the bed by his knee. Shoulders pressed to the mattress, Marsden arched his back and tipped his hips up. Once again on solid ground, Vincent rocked back onto his haunches and oiled his length, his gaze on that perfect round arse presented so sweetly to him. Then he quickly poured more oil onto his fingers, probed between those cheeks, searching for his entrance, and shoved two fingers inside.

Marsden sucked in a swift breath, the muscles in his back tightening and then, with a grunt, pushed back, impaling himself on Vincent's fingers. He rocked once, twice.

"Fuck me. *Now.*"

Vincent pulled his fingers free. "I'll give you now," he growled, grabbing Marsden's slim hips and pushing past the tight ring of muscle.

Marsden whimpered. Not in pleasure but in pain. The sound cut through the thick haze of passion. Vincent hesitated, not wanting to hurt his friend.

But Marsden shook his head. "More. All of it, Vincent," he said, more demand than request, shimmying closer.

The hell with it. If he wanted more, he'd get it all. On his knees and straddling Marsden's thighs, Vincent tugged up the man's hips and pushed deeper, into exquisite heat, blazing hot and *oh*, so snug.

"Damn. So fucking good," he hissed, caressing the length of Marsden's back. The lust drumming through his veins eased just a bit, enough for him to take a moment to

luxuriate in simply being joined with Marsden. This was what he needed. It was always so perfect with Marsden. And he didn't have to think about anything but the man beneath him.

Impatient, Marsden bucked back, working himself on Vincent's length. The lush, silken tug of his body sent lust thundering through him once again.

One hand holding Marsden steady, Vincent braced his weight on the other and slammed into him. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes. Yes." Biceps bulging, Marsden gripped the gray blanket with white-knuckled fists. His hair had fallen forward, hiding his face. Fine tendrils stuck to his sweat-slicked nape. He gasped, groaned, begged for more. Their bodies slapped together, hard smacks that made an orgasm tease Vincent's ballocks.

Marsden shifted, trying to work a hand under his belly. Vincent smacked his arm away. "No. Come with just my cock in your arse, boy." Only him, and nothing else, would bring Marsden to orgasm tonight. He crouched lower over the man, sank his teeth into the apple of his shoulder, and thrust harder. Sharp, rough, frantic thrusts. The bed shook under the onslaught, the old wooden joints creaking, blending with the sound of Vincent's feral grunts.

He felt Marsden tighten around him, felt the tension in every line of his body as he reached for completion. Those little gasping grunts grew louder, quicker, hitching in his throat. Vincent canted his hips, changing the angle of his thrusts, needing Marsden to come *now*.

"Ah, yes!"

Marsden's passage clutched his length so tightly Vincent couldn't hold back his own climax. It rushed upon him, a searing wave of pleasure that left him struggling to catch his breath.

Arms giving out, he slumped down, half on top of Marsden. Vincent pressed a kiss to Marsden's sweaty nape and then rested his head on his shoulder. Languor, warm and comforting and soothing, settled over him. Marsden had his head turned the



other way, his tangled hair inches from Vincent's face. Vincent blindly reached around, his fingertips whispering over Marsden's brow and tucking the damp hair behind his ear.

Rain lashed the window; the once steady drops had turned into a downpour. It would be hell to find a hackney in this weather. Perhaps...he could stay with Marsden tonight. He always woke at the first light of dawn regardless of where he slept, and well, if he left early enough, then it would reduce the likelihood of coming face-to-face with one of the other inhabitants of the building.

He knew he couldn't remain here, in this shabby apartment, forever. But for some reason, he found himself loath to leave his friend.

An elbow nudged him, hard, in the ribs.

"Off. You're damn heavy."

"Sorry." Vincent reluctantly shifted off Marsden's warm body and onto the cool, coarse blanket. He was much heavier than Marsden. Should have been more considerate.

Marsden wiggled out from under the arm Vincent had slung across his back, got out of bed, and walked to the washstand. Vincent couldn't help but feel smug. He knew exactly what caused that slight hitch in Marsden's step.

*My cock.*

Could Marsden still feel him, buried deep in his arse? He hoped he could. That every step reminded him of Vincent. A little smile on his lips, he closed his eyes and waited for Marsden to come back to bed.

A wet lump landed on his lower back. He flinched. *Damnation.* It was icy cold, too. He reached back and plucked the cloth off his back, dropping it to the floor. "What was that for?"

"You need to be on your way, don't you?" Marsden stood at the washstand, arms crossed over his chest. His prick, hanging limp between his legs, appeared damp, as if

he'd just washed away the remnants of his climax. A faint sneer twisted his full, kissable lips.

*Brilliant.* Sex had not cured Marsden of his prickly mood. Inhaling deeply though his nose, Vincent gathered his patience. "What's wrong? Are you still upset because I was a half hour late tonight?"

Marsden shrugged, a distinctly uncomfortable lift of his shoulder, and turned his back to him. He shook out the cloth that had been balled up next to the basin and folded it. What a perfect time for Marsden to decide to tidy up the washstand.

What had gotten into him? The man should be pliant and lax in his arm, not grumping about and throwing things at him.

Completely off balance, Vincent sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Without looking at him, Marsden stalked over to the dresser and yanked out a pair of white linen drawers.

"Why won't you stay?" he asked, bending over to put on the underclothes.

Vincent let out a heavy sigh. He certainly wasn't going to stay tonight, not with Marsden behaving like a surly, malcontent adolescent. "This again? I told you why last night."

There was that condescending snort again. Vincent ground his teeth together.

"No one in the building will care or even notice, Vincent." He snatched his trousers from the floor. "When will I see you again?"

"Tomorrow if you'd like." *Bloody hell.* Lady Juliana. How could he forget? She was expecting him. "I have a call to pay, but I can stop by after. Would noon be all right?"

Vincent clenched his hand. If the man snorted one more time...

"Of course I'll be here. Where else would I be?" Marsden's hair fell over his brow, hiding his face as he buttoned the placket of his trousers. "But could you be on time for once? I hate being by myself all day, alone, just waiting for you."

*For once?* He was late twice, and this was the treatment he received? "Perhaps you should seek employment. Give yourself something more productive to do *all day*."

"And what should I do?" Marsden demanded, his head snapping up. "I'm not you, Vincent. I didn't attend university."

"There are many options available to you, if you choose to expend the effort to look." Therein lay Marsden's problem. He was a capable fellow, but he had yet to take the initiative to make something of himself. "You cannot hide behind your grandmother for the rest of your life. She's close to ninety years of age. Quite frankly, I'm amazed she's held on this long. Likely only did it out of spite. Eventually you will need to settle on an occupation, unless you plan to find another old woman and serve as her companion."

"Bugger off, Vincent," he snarled.

Anger surged up his throat, tightening his jaw, his patience beyond tried. "Pardon?" he asked in a low voice.

Marsden picked up his shirt from the floor and slowly straightened, the white linen balled in his fist. Hard dark brown eyes met his. "You know, the only time I see you anymore is whenever you deign to stop by and grace me with your presence. And that's only when you can find a few moments in your busy schedule. You go out of town for weeks on end, and you never invite me along. I rarely go to White's or a ball or anywhere I know you'll be because I don't want to be ignored. Christ, Vincent, no one suspects that you're buggering me. *No one*." He tugged his shirt over his head, tucking it into the waistband of his trousers with sharp jabs. "You're goddamn Lord Vincent Prescott. You're perfect. *You* would never do such a thing and especially not with someone like me."

Vincent took a moment to try to piece together his fraying temper. "Sodomy is against the law. If word got out, we would be ruined. We could be hanged."

"I am well aware of that, Vincent. You don't have to tutor me in everything."

Unwilling to continue sitting naked while Marsden snarled at him, Vincent stood and found his trousers at the foot of the bed. This was not the way he had envisioned his evening. A pleasant meal and then sex. Not an unexpected demand to marry his brother's intended followed by a heated argument on an empty stomach five minutes after Marsden had climaxed on Vincent's cock.

He was buttoning the placket when Marsden spoke again, his voice low and unmistakably hurt.

"Contrary to what others may believe, I am not a complete idiot. I know why you insist on always being in control. On tying me up, restraining me. I will do whatever you ask of me, without question, because I want to be with you. Yet you won't even touch your precious lips to my prick."

Vincent gaped at him, alarm skittering down his spine. If he had felt off balance before, it was nothing compared to now. "Is that what this is about? I wouldn't suck you off tonight, and now you're angry with me?"

Marsden threw his hands in the air. "No." Then he shook his head and dragged his hands through his hair, a wince pulling his beautiful features. "Well, not completely. You don't understand. The way you treat me sometimes, I wonder why you even bother with me at all."

He didn't understand? That was putting it mildly. "When you behave like this, Marsden, I wonder as well."

Teeth bared, Marsden growled, his face flushed and contorted with rage, every line in his body drawn tight, poised to attack. "Stop condescending to me and stop calling me Marsden! We're not at White's. You just fucked me. You can damn well call me Oliver." He swiped something off the dresser. "And I'm not your damn whore. I don't need your money."

Vincent sidestepped, avoiding the gold sovereigns that had been aimed right at his chest. The coins hit the wall and clattered to the wooden floor.

Marsden snatched his coat and stomped from the room.

By God, the man was *not* walking away from him. Not after that fit. Vincent took up pursuit. Shoving his arms in the sleeves of his coat, Marsden was heading straight for the front door.

A strange sort of desperation leeches into his veins. Vincent quickened his pace. "If you're going to storm out the door, at least put on a coat that doesn't look like you grabbed it from a rag bin."

Marsden spun from the door. "Do you love me?"

Vincent halted in his tracks. "Pardon?" Those knots were back, twisting his stomach so tightly he was thankful they had not had that pleasant meal. His heart slammed high and hard against his ribs.

"Do you love me, Vincent?"

Stunned, he opened his mouth, but nothing would come out. All he could do was stare into his friend's eyes. Cold, hard eyes that used to look at him with such adoration and respect.

"I knew it. You still haven't fully admitted to yourself that you prefer men." A sneer pulling his lips, Marsden shook his head, all dismissive condescension. "I'm tired of waiting for you. Good-bye, Prescott."

And Vincent watched, his jaw still hanging open, as his friend walked out the door.

## Chapter Five

The door snapped shut. The rapid thumps of Marsden's footsteps faded until Vincent couldn't hear anything but the sound of his heart beating, a quick harsh staccato against his ears.

He lurched forward, grabbed the brass knob, and then glanced down at himself.

"Bloody hell!"

He couldn't leave the apartments in only his trousers. But even if he were dressed, what the hell was he thinking? That he'd chase Marsden down? And then what? They'd continue their argument on the street, for all of London to see?

Letting out a growl of pure frustration, he slammed his fist into the wall. Why couldn't Marsden be content with the way things were? Why did he have to demand so much of him?

"Goddamn it, Marsden! And why tonight?" He slammed his fist into the wall again, but all he got for his effort was smarting knuckles.

Gritting his teeth, he speared his fingers into his hair, gripped his skull tight. All the words Marsden had slung at him blended together to form a brutal riot in his head, until he couldn't distinguish one word from another. Until his knees threatened to buckle under the sheer force of it.

Then Marsden's parting words rose above the tangled, noxious mass.

*"Good-bye, Prescott."*

And all the fury and rage and frustration drained out of him, slumping his shoulders, leaving him beyond weary. His arms dropped limply to his sides.

He stood there -- for how long, he didn't know -- his breaths coming in great pulling gasps, the rain beating on the windows.

Then he numbly turned from the door and trudged across the small parlor. He pulled the bottle of mediocre Bordeaux from the wicker basket and poured a glass. After downing the contents in two long swallows, he refilled the glass and went to the couch.

He flicked aside the newspapers on the cushions and sat down heavily. Resting his elbows on his knees, he cradled the glass in his hands and hung his head. Never in his life had he felt so powerless. So at a complete loss for how to right a situation. In the space of a couple hours, his neat, orderly life had spun completely out of control.

First his father and now this. And here he had thought everything was perfect between himself and Marsden. That they understood each other. That Marsden was happy with him.

Apparently not.

*"I will do whatever you ask of me, without question, because I want to be with you."*

Had Marsden only submitted to please him? Because he had been trying to mold himself into what Vincent desired and not because he wanted to?

*No, no.* Vincent pushed aside the anxiety and forced himself to think rationally. Over the years, he had been with enough men at that brothel to know the difference. Marsden had not been acting these past six months. No one could respond the way he did and not genuinely crave the give and take of their erotic games.

Vincent rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension there. Had it been a mistake to allow their friendship to move into the bedroom? He winced, dreading the

thought of visiting a brothel again. No. Not that. Never again. The situation with Marsden had been ideal. *Had* being the operative word. Now, though... He doubted they could even go back to just being friends.

Raw pain lanced into his chest, stealing the breath from his lungs. The thought of not having Marsden in his life hurt as nothing else ever had. Not having him to turn to. Not simply being there whenever Vincent needed him. To never again hear Marsden's softly murmured "*Love you.*" He most certainly did not want to lose him, but did he even have a choice? It seemed the man had made the decision for him. But if he even had the chance, could he do what Marsden demanded?

He could not deny that there was still a small part of him that resisted his attraction to other men, that same part that strove to be an upstanding, respectable gentleman, for perfection in all things. Marsden bent himself so neatly to Vincent's whims that he had made it easy to ignore...until tonight. But that inner resistance was still there, in the pit of his stomach. And tomorrow...

*Fuck.* He had to pay a call on Lady Juliana. He didn't know what he should do. He only knew that Marsden had chosen the absolutely worst night to start a fight between them.

Christ, given their "conversation," he highly doubted Marsden would have taken kindly to his father's request anyway. Every inhabitant of the building had likely heard them shouting at each other. *Brilliant.* Just what he needed. For word to get out about his relationship with Marsden. Panic tightened his shoulders. Then he shook his head at himself. Judging by the state of the building, he highly doubted any of Marsden's neighbors moved about the *ton*.

He knew one thing for certain. One way or another, the night had been destined not to end well.

And here he had been looking forward to spending a nice evening with his friend. So much for that. His stomach grumbled. He eyed the wicker basket on the dining table, but food, cold or not, didn't hold any appeal.



He sighed and brought the glass to his lips, downing the wine. He got to his feet, put the empty glass on the table, grabbed his evening coat and waistcoat, and went into the bedchamber. He needed to get dressed sooner or later. Might as well do it now.

Purposefully averting his gaze from the rumpled bed, the one he had so recently shared with Marsden, he grabbed his wrinkled shirt from the floor and put it on, tucking the hem into his waistband. His cravat. Where had he left it? He glanced about the floor. *Fuck*. The bed. Closing his eyes, he reached to his right, swiping his hand over the woolen blanket, fingers closing over the linen.

Marsden would eventually return, he told himself as he finished dressing. He had to. He lived there after all. And then...they could have a discussion like civilized gentlemen. Yes. That was what they would do. Discuss the situation in an organized, objective fashion and come to a satisfactory resolution. Shouting never accomplished anything productive.

The thought offered some semblance of reassurance, and the tremor left his hands as he tied his cravat. Their friendship was not necessarily destroyed beyond repair. Marsden had been quite angry tonight, and Vincent had not helped matters. He had been a bit of a condescending arse and said some things he should have held back. Still, he would have appreciated it if the man had voiced his concerns before they had built to this point. Clearly, for some time now, Marsden had not been as blissfully content with Vincent as he had assumed.

He finished buttoning his coat and glanced about the room, looking for his shoes. A glint of green and gold caught his attention. Strides slow and reluctant, he went to the bedside table.

He stared down at the jade cravat pin in the dented little silver tray. Marsden never went anywhere without that pin. Even when Vincent happened upon him on the street, when he did not expect to see him, that pin was affixed to Marsden's cravat.

A band of sheer pain wrapped around his chest, searing a path up his throat and stinging his eyes. Jaw clenched, he looked up to the ceiling with its spiderweb of cracks in the plaster and blinked rapidly.

*"Good-bye, Prescott."*

Oliver had meant it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oliver stumbled into his apartments. With a swat of his hand, he closed the door, cloaking the parlor in darkness.

He took a step to his left, and his thigh bumped hard into a wooden edge. He instinctively reached out, hands fumbling around the pewter candleholder and keeping it from tumbling off the small table. Swaying on his feet, he bent over the table, pulled open the drawer, and groped around until he found the tinderbox. It took more than a few tries, but he was finally able to get his hands to cooperate. The flare of golden light illuminated his empty parlor.

"Hell," he cursed under his breath, dropping his chin to his chest.

Of course Vincent had not waited for him. He never waited for anything or anyone. Oliver had known he'd come home to an empty room -- hence why he had remained at that tavern for so long. But then, why did it hurt so much?

Damn gin. Wasn't doing its duty. He scrubbed his hands over his face and pushed his tangled, dripping wet hair out of his eyes. He was certainly foxed enough not to care that he was soaked through from the rain. But the copious amounts of gin hadn't done a bit of good to deaden the pain.

Now he wasn't just hurting like hell, but soaked to the bone, so foxed it surprised him a bit that he'd found his way home, and hurting like hell.

*"You're bloody pathetic, Marsden. No wonder Vincent doesn't love you."*

What felt like a blazing hot poker jammed into his heart, twisting violently.

"Ouch," he grumbled, rubbing his chest.

But he couldn't deny the truth. He was pathetic. Barely had two shillings to rub together, lived in a hovel, and did nothing with himself except wait for Vincent and tend to his grandmother a few times a week. Damn poor excuse for a man.

A poor excuse who still stood by the door, water dripping from his coat and forming a puddle on the floor.

He grabbed the candle, not wanting to try his hand at lighting another, and concentrating on each step, made his way into his bedchamber. With deliberate purpose, he set the candle on the bedside table and then fumbled with the buttons on his coat. He would most certainly wake up tomorrow with a pounding head, but he'd rather not add a head cold to the mix.

"Damn buttons. Ah, the hell with them." With a hard tug, he ripped open his coat, the buttons popping free and skidding across the floor. After peeling the garment off his shoulders and down his arms, he shook the sodden sleeves from his wrists and flung it to the floor. He didn't even bother to make an attempt at the buttons on his waistcoat. With another hard tug and a bit of a struggle, the waistcoat joined the coat.

"Should have kept Vincent's money," he grumbled, staring at the ruined garments and the buttons littering the floor. "Would have paid for the tailor."

Oh well. Not much he could do about it now. Or anything, for that matter. He had allowed his impatience and frustration to get the better of him and in the process ruined everything he had with Vincent.

Who was he fooling? He had done it deliberately. Poked and prodded Vincent until his final question had been answered with absolute shock and horror. The shock he expected -- he'd never outright asked Vincent if he loved him before. The horror -- now that had hurt.

It still hurt.

Hurt more, in fact, than knowing he had destroyed his friendship with Vincent.

His gaze strayed back to the bedside table, to the jade cravat pin on the silver tray. Did Vincent expect him to return it?

Not on his life. Pathetic, yes, to keep a small token of the man he loved, but he wouldn't part with the pin until Vincent showed up at his front door demanding its return.

"He told me to keep it, anyway." So what that it had been six months ago and matters were vastly different between them now. He jutted out his chin. He was keeping it.

He whispered his fingertips over the stone. His heart clenched, begging, pleading. Squeezing his eyes closed tight, he pushed back the sting of tears, refusing to allow them to fall.

"Enough," he murmured sharply. "It's over."

Then he let out a heavy sigh, his entire body slumping in resignation, and set to work removing the rest of his clothes.

He might not be able to change Vincent or replace his apartments with something more respectable, but he could change one thing. He yanked his shirt over his head. Contrary to Vincent's opinion, he wasn't a complete wastrel. He could "expend the effort" and make something of himself, or at least try. For he certainly did not want to spend his days alone in his apartments, beating himself up over how he had gone and lost Vincent. Then he might give into his broken heart and beg Vincent to take him back, even if he only wanted him as a convenient man to bugger.

No. Definitely not that. Vincent could not love him. Best he accepted it now, before he reached the point where it hurt to be with him.

He pulled back the woolen blanket and flopped down naked on his bed, the old wooden joints creaking in protest. But what to do with himself?

Not a secretary. Or a clerk. He didn't want to actually work for anyone. Elitist, but the truth. He wasn't much good at anything, either. Never attended university. Didn't know the first thing about how to manage a property. The only thing he knew was...

Books.

How many had he read to his grandmother over the years? Hell, he could open his own bookstore from the piles littering her bedchamber alone.

It could classify as an investment. Shouldn't require much of the principle from his inheritance. If he failed miserably, he wouldn't be left destitute.

He levered up onto his elbows, blew out the candle, and flopped back down again. Darkness settled over the room, the rain now a light tap against the window.

No more wallowing in his sorrows. Tomorrow he'd take a step toward making something of himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bright and crisp, early afternoon sunlight filled the drawing room. Last night's heavy rain had temporarily vanquished the clouds that perpetually hung over the city. Whereas most of London's inhabitants savored rare clear days, Vincent had greeted the sunny, cheerful sky with a scowl this morning.

If the rain had continued, he might have had a valid excuse to postpone the call. But the heavens hadn't seen fit to cooperate, and therefore, he found himself in this drawing room with pale blue-and-white-striped paper covering the walls and tasteful, yet decidedly uncomfortable furniture.

He shifted in the spindly-legged armchair and resisted the impulse to rub his temple. The bright light only made his head ache more. Exhaustion pulled at his eyes, reminding him in no uncertain terms of the night he had spent tossing and turning in his bed, after that long walk home. Damn hackneys. Where had they been last night? The walk home had provided far too much time alone with his own thoughts, Oliver's words repeating over and over in his head, each pass chipping away at that inner resistance until he had been left damning himself for a stubborn, self-centered fool.

"Would you care for another cup of tea, Lord Vincent?"

He glanced to the cup in his hand, half-filled with what was now, no doubt, lukewarm tea. "No, thank you."

Seated on the adjacent ivory silk settee, Lady Juliana tipped her head and reached for the squat, white porcelain teapot on the trolley beside her. Little spirals of steam rose from the liquid as she refilled her own cup.

Vincent had only spoken to her a handful of times before today, certainly nowhere near long enough to judge her true character, but he had the impression she was polite and biddable. Would cause him absolutely no grief. Not a striking beauty but pleasant to look upon with her light brown hair pulled back in a loose knot at her nape and her welcoming, heart-shaped face. The cut of her sage green morning dress hinted at a trim figure. At least it wouldn't be a hardship to bed her.

What an absolutely maudlin thought -- slipping into her bedchamber under the cover of darkness, having her lie still beneath him as he rutted between her legs. Aristocratic conjugal bliss.

He could see his future before him -- married to a gently bred young lady, doing what his father and Society expected of a man of his station. They'd manage to produce a couple children -- the required spares in the event his elder brother died without issue. But it would require locking away a part of himself forever. To never be with another man again. Never be with Oliver again.

Utter misery pressed heavily on his chest, threatening to tighten his brow and pull his lips into a wince. Through sheer force of will, he kept his expression schooled in a polite bland mask.

He didn't have much of a choice. If Lady Juliana had to settle for him, then the least he could do was be faithful to her. And the only man he wanted had walked out on him last night.

"Is Lord Grafton expected in Town soon?" she asked, jolting him back to the present and away from the painful memory of that door slamming shut.

He hadn't spoken to his elder brother in...months. Long before the man had returned to his estate in Devon. "I suspect he will remain in the country until after the New Year." *Until after we are wed.*

The sparkle dimmed from her hazel eyes. She brought her cup to her lips and took a small sip.

A love match? Vincent resisted the urge to shake his head. Lady Juliana possessed impeccable manners, to the point of polite distance. The two of them were little more than passing acquaintances. No matter what his father wished, no one would believe they were in love.

With a little click, she set her cup on the saucer on the low table before them and then folded her hands. "Please forgive my boldness, but if you do not have news of Lord Grafton, then what brings you here today?"

Taken aback, Vincent's spine went stiff. "Have you not spoken to your father?"

"I was told to expect your call today."

*Brilliant.* They had left it to him to explain the situation to her. Bloody cowards.

He set his cup on the table and glanced to the open door of the drawing room. He wanted to get up and close it, but being behind closed doors with an unmarried, unrelated gentleman could ruin a woman's reputation. Instead, he turned his attention to her and did his best to break the news as gently as possible. "The Duke of Halstead wishes to form an alliance with my family." He kept his voice low to prevent being overheard by any passing servants. Gossip spread quickly, and he'd rather spare her its wrath for as long as possible. "His grace's daughter is due out on the marriage mart next Season. Therefore, it is my fondest wish that you will come to accept me in Grafton's stead."

He held back the blunt details, but Lady Juliana proved herself an intelligent girl.

Desolation flashed across her face for the briefest of moments. Then she gathered her composure and nodded. "Of course. I understand, Lord Vincent."

Out in Society for three years, she could have had other proposals given her social standing. Yet she had held out for Grafton, waiting for him to come up to scratch. Poor thing deserved better than his dolt of a brother. And certainly better than himself.

Damn his father for putting him in this situation, but there were more than his wishes at stake. He now held a young woman's future in his hands.

"May I call on you again tomorrow? Perhaps, if the weather permits, you would like to take a drive in Hyde Park."

She tipped her head. "Certainly, Lord Vincent. I would welcome that."

He took his leave and made his way out to his waiting carriage.

"Where to next, my lord?" his footman asked, holding the door open.

Not his townhouse. A pile of work awaited him on his desk, but he wanted to avoid the day's post for as long as possible. He'd rather not know if Oliver had returned the jade cravat pin just yet.

"White's." He stepped into the carriage and settled on the leather bench. A glass of whisky or two or more were just the thing to help ease the adjustment to his new life as a soon-to-be-married gentleman. A new life without the man who once loved him.



## Chapter Six

A knock sounded on the back door, pulling Oliver's attention from the inventory records. He dropped his pencil onto the desk and stood. Pressing his palms to his lower back, he stretched, his joints popping and cracking as he worked out the kinks from being hunched over the desk for the past hour. Thank heaven for the interruption. He adored his new bookshop, but when it came to tasks that severely dimmed his enthusiasm for his first and only investment, minding the inventory records ranked second only to balancing the account ledger.

He would have much preferred to assist the customers, but Mr. Wallace had insisted that with him being a lord and all, he might intimidate some of the customers. He doubted he had ever intimidated anyone in his life, but since he'd purchased the bookstore from Mr. Wallace, he figured he should heed the older man's advice.

That knock sounded again, harder this time. He navigated the piles of books surrounding his desk and opened the back door.

"Got a delivery." A squat, burly man indicated the cart behind him in the alley. The large draft horse hitched to the cart turned its head to Oliver, regarding him with soft, dark eyes. Rubbing his chin, the man squinted at the piece of paper in his hand. "For a Lord Oliver Marsden. Three crates. Mighty heavy, too."

New books, which meant more books to inventory, but new books nonetheless. Well, not exactly new. An old friend of his family's had passed away, and Oliver had ventured out to the estate last week to help prune the overstuffed library. The man's widow had been willing to sell off the lot of it, but the bookshop's bank account could unfortunately only afford a few crates' worth.

He signed for the delivery and had it brought into his office. The first crate was dropped to the floor with a bang loud enough to rattle the small window on the door leading to the main part of the shop. Ignoring the man's grumbles and grunts as he fetched the other two crates, Oliver grabbed a hammer and used the end to pry open the wooden crate.

The sight of the leather bound volumes, packed not so neatly inside, produced a wonderful rush of pride and excitement. His first purchase for the shop. Each volume carefully selected based on his knowledge of the shop's existing inventory. Inventory which was in sore need of replenishment. Mr. Wallace had run a decent albeit small shop, one Oliver had frequented many times over the years, but gout and old age kept him confined to Town, unable to travel the countryside to procure more stock. New books could be easily purchased in Town, but the best finds were in the country. Hence one of the reasons why the older man had been willing to sell the shop to Oliver.

A tinkling feminine laugh seeped through the office door leading to the shop. The sound of another pleased customer. Fortunately, Mr. Wallace had been willing to stay on and help with the customers and teach Oliver the business. A business his grandmother had not been pleased to hear about. Those of the aristocracy inherited their wealth or earned it from their lands. They did not -- shudder to think it -- engage in something as common as trade. But a promise of an unlimited supply of books had done wonders to quiet her tirade. She hadn't uttered the words blasphemous, indecent, or garish since.

He settled on his knees and started pulling out the books one by one, checking for signs of damage during shipment and pausing to read a few pages every now and then.

A couple hours later, he finished with the last crate and extinguished the lamps, closing up for the night. After bidding “good evening” to Mr. Wallace as the man trudged up the street, he locked the front door and slipped the brass key into his pocket.

He glanced up and down the lamp-lit street, the cobblestones glistening from a recent light rain. The shops across from his had already closed for the night, their windows dark. Hooves thundered past him, a team of two pulling a sleek black town carriage, merry voices spilling from the open window.

He dreaded the thought of returning to his empty apartments. The constant press of matters that required his attention at the bookstore occupied his mind during the day, but the nights were an entirely different matter. Alone in his bed, missing Vincent. A lot. How many times over the past three weeks had he told himself he should have kept his damn mouth shut? Just accepted whatever Vincent had been willing to give, even though that path would have led to an even greater heartache than the one he currently carried with him.

Didn’t help that he did not have any other true friends beside Vincent. No one else to share a drink with at a tavern or meet at a gambling hell or discuss his new investment with. Acquaintances, but no one he deemed a friend.

And he was tired of going out of his way to avoid Vincent.

The hell with it.

He turned right, in the opposite direction of his apartments around the corner, and headed up the street. If Vincent was at White’s, then so be it. He refused to hide in the dark and lick his wounds anymore. They lived in the same city, would eventually cross paths again. No point purposefully prolonging the inevitable.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Lord Shelburne bets Mr. Frank Winters £15 that Lord V will steal a certain lady from his elder brother, Lord G, and ask for her hand before the month is out.*

Oliver forced air into his lungs and read the line again. Three weeks had passed since that fateful night, and he had not heard a word from Vincent. Nothing. He had not seen him either -- not much of a surprise given Oliver had been avoiding the man's usual haunts.

Now he knew why.

Betrayal, thick and hot, filled his gut, pounded swiftly through his veins, erasing all traces of shock.

"Bloody fucking --" He clenched his teeth, cutting off the rest of the curse. The last thing he needed was to be ejected from White's because of that...that...*man*.

Mouth twisted in a sneer, he turned from the betting book and left White's, not sparing a second thought to the startled glances as he rushed down the main stairs and through the hall. As he walked out the front door, he shoved his hand in his pocket, fingers closing around the coins. Enough for cab fare.

"Number Twelve, Hill Street," he said to the driver as he got into a waiting hackney. "And be quick about it."

A whip cracked and the cab lurched forward.

"Bastard! Bloody fucking bastard!"

Oliver sat and stewed, the betrayal a physical force consuming every inch of his being.

Goddamn him. If that wager was the reason Vincent had kept him at arm's length in public, all but forcing him from attending Society functions, just so he could --

The hackney jerked to a stop outside a stately white stucco townhome. Oliver jumped from the carriage and slapped a few coins into the driver's hand. "Two more shillings if you wait here."

Driven by an unholy need to discover the truth, to look Vincent in the face and hear it from his lips, he stalked up to the black door and slammed his fist against it.

The door opened, revealing a tall, slim, older man in black attire, his spine ramrod straight and his face devoid of all expression.

Oliver took a breath, trying to settle his pulse enough so he could speak in a tone that approached calm. Such a haughty butler would never allow a raving lunatic into the house. "I am here to call on Lord Vincent."

"Lord Vincent is not at home."

Not at White's. Not at home. Where then? The brothel?

*No, no, no.* Not that. Not with another man.

"Where is he?"

The butler sniffed. "Lord Vincent is not at home."

The man made to shut the door, but Oliver flattened a hand against it, holding it open. "I am Lord Oliver Marsden, an old friend of Lord Vincent's. It is imperative I speak with him tonight."

He stared hard at the butler as the man looked him up and down. He knew he must look a sight in his favorite but well-worn plain brown coat, the front dusty from unloading books from their crates, and his hair a disheveled mess from running his fingers repeatedly through it as he had struggled with the account ledger earlier that day. The last time he had been to Vincent's home was ages ago. Likely the butler didn't remember him or believe his claim that he was in fact a lord.

The butler's lips thinned. "Drury Lane." The man shut the door with a smart click, a surprising show of strength considering Oliver still leaned against it.

The theatre? Vincent didn't care for the theatre, so why...? Unless...*she* did.

Twenty minutes later, Oliver slapped the remaining coins from his pocket into the driver's hand. The doors to the theatre were closed; the space under its wide stone portico with its four sets of twin columns was vacant. A few orange sellers loitered nearby, waiting to press their wares on the patrons as they exited the building. Voices

spilled from the open windows, indicating the performance had not finished for the night.

He took up a spot along the building a good ten paces from the area in front of the theatre, leaned a shoulder against the stucco wall, and crossed his arms over his chest, settling in for the wait. Absolutely foolish to be here, lying in wait for Vincent like some sort of spurned lover, but he could not have moved if his life depended on it.

The streetlamps lining Catherine Street illuminated the light mist suspended in the cool night air. He wrapped his arms tighter around himself, the cold from the theatre's wall seeping through his coat, chilling his back.

Carriages began to line up outside the theatre. The drivers called to one another, fighting with the hackneys for the spots closest to the entrance. All the while, Oliver's eyes were glued to those front doors.

They swung open and people began to stream out of the building. Breath held, he searched the crowd.

Then his heart lurched in his chest.

Dressed in strict black evening attire complete with a black top hat, his white cravat an elaborate knot beneath his strong jaw, Vincent walked out of the theatre. Taller than the other gentlemen and ladies surrounding him, he was fairly easy to spot. But Oliver could have picked him out in a crowd of thousands.

Oliver shifted his right hand up from his crossed arms and briefly pressed his palm over the cravat pin hidden in the inside pocket of his waistcoat, directly over his heart. Wearing it was out of the question. But neither could he leave it all alone in its dented little silver tray whenever he left his apartments.

Then he noticed the young lady at Vincent's side, her hand on his arm. Oliver scowled, jealousy churning in his belly. She didn't suit Vincent one bit. Her nose in the air, her light brown hair pulled back in a priggish knot, a demure pale blue gown draping her thin form. Cold, remote, a typical lady of Quality.

Then again, perhaps she did suit Vincent perfectly.

Vincent stopped at the street, his head turning left and right, obviously looking for his carriage. Others paused near him, mingling and discussing the performance.

*Leave. Now. Before he sees you.*

Vincent looked over his shoulder. Brilliant blue eyes met Oliver's. His brow furrowed, and then he snapped his attention back to his acquaintances.

Bitter, rancid pain stabbed into him.

*He didn't even acknowledge me.*

Oliver watched, feeling as insignificant as a speck of lint on Vincent's expertly tailored black evening coat, as Vincent led the young lady and an older woman, likely the lady's chaperone, to his town carriage that waited up the street a bit. Ever the gentleman, he held out his white-gloved hand, helping first the lady and then the chaperone into the carriage.

He shut the door, turned on his heel and strode through the crowd...directly toward Oliver.

That intense blue gaze struck Oliver to the spot. Unable to take a step forward and unable to turn away.

Vincent stopped before him and clasped his hands behind his back. "Good to see you, Marsden."

Jolted from his daze, Oliver called upon the betrayal, making it pound thick and hot once more in his veins. "So it's true?" Still slouched against the wall, he flicked a glance around Vincent's broad shoulder to the man's carriage waiting exactly where he'd left it, a footman standing guard at the door.

Vincent briefly closed his eyes, his face a stoic, expressionless mask.

His silence was as good as a yes.

Cruel anger built within Oliver, his breaths coming harsh and ragged. How long had Vincent been courting the girl? Had there been others? Oliver rarely attended Society functions, but Vincent did. How the hell long had he been planning to find

himself a wife? Oliver flicked a glance to the carriage again. "Is she the reason punctuality eluded you?"

Vincent stiffened, quickly looking about them, but there wasn't anyone else within a few paces of them. In any case, the noise of the crowd and the carriages on the street probably drowned out their conversation.

"Marsden," Vincent admonished in a low hiss, concerned as always about appearances. "Keep your voice down. Please." He let out a heavy sigh, his lips pressed in a grim line. "It is my father's idea. The Duke of Halstead wishes to form an alliance with my family. But before Grafton can wed his grace's daughter, he must be freed of any obligation toward Lady Juliana. Therefore, my father asked me to marry her."

"When did this happen?"

"The evening you slammed the door on me."

Stunned, Oliver gave his head a sharp shake. That ambiguous errand, and the cause for his late arrival at Oliver's apartments, had been a visit to see his father? "Why didn't you mention it?"

Vincent lifted one shoulder in a mockery of a shrug.

"Your father's simply using you for his own gain. He'll forget about you again as soon as you are wed to that girl."

"Perhaps not."

Oliver snorted in derision. The Marquis of Saye and Sele cared nothing for his second son. Oliver had long accepted that he meant nothing to his own father -- the man hadn't even bothered to notify him when he left Town to flee his debts -- yet despite all of Vincent's successes and despite the cool, controlled facade he showed the rest of the world, he had never let go of the need for his father's respect and admiration. Never accepted that nothing he could do would ever change his father's opinion, or rather lack of opinion, of him. Now Vincent was allowing that need to lead him to the altar, tied to some woman for the rest of his life.



And hell, Oliver knew the expectations Society placed on men like himself and Vincent. As he had told his grandmother, he would never marry. But Vincent strove to be the perfect gentleman, and proper gentlemen married. Why hadn't it ever occurred to him before that Vincent would eventually choose a wife?

*Fool.* He rolled his eyes in self-disgust.

"You've made the betting book at White's. A wager that you will wed before the month is out. Should I bet on you or not?"

Vincent's silence hung heavy in the air between them.

Oliver nodded. "I understand. It's difficult to say no to someone when you desperately want their attention."

Vincent's jaw tightened. Tense lines bracketed his firm mouth and creased the space between his eyebrows. Dark shadows underscored his eyes. He looked so tired, so worn out. So very grim. Not even a hint of happiness on his handsome face.

The need rose up within him, so strong he almost gave in to it. To reach out, to help soothe Vincent's worries, to simply be there for him. To lend a willing ear and let the man unburden himself.

Instead, Oliver pushed from the wall and turned.

Long fingers curled around his upper arm, holding him back.

"Wait."

Staring at the cracks in the cement walkway, Oliver tugged his arm.

Vincent tightened his grip, fingers digging into his muscle. Then that strong hand slipped away.

"Miss you."

The soft, rumbling words brushed the back of his neck. A gentle caress he wasn't certain if he imagined or not. His heart threatened to shatter anew into a thousand tiny pieces. But he kept his chin up and walked away from Vincent for the last time.

## Chapter Seven

Vincent set his hat on his folded greatcoat on the leather bench and stared blankly out the closed window on the carriage's door. Given the heat of the theatre, he had left the coat in the carriage. Lady Juliana and her aunt, Mrs. Caldwell, sat across from him discussing the evening's performance, their feminine voices an uninterrupted lyrical drone. He barely heard them.

Christ, he missed Oliver. It had felt so good to simply lay eyes on him, to be near him again, yet at the same time it hurt like hell. With Oliver's arms crossed over his chest and a surly twist on his full lips, Vincent had known he would not receive a warm welcome. The untidy cravat with its agonizingly bare and lopsided knot had only served as another reminder that Oliver was no longer his. Still, Vincent had to speak to him, though it had been painful to have the truth thrown in his face.

Knowing he was his father's pawn and hearing it from Oliver were two vastly different things. With only a few words from him, Oliver had understood every nuance and every detail of the situation, leaving Vincent feeling stripped bare. Vulnerable and exposed. And needing his friend more than ever.

Yet there had been no compassion in Oliver's dark gaze. Only contempt and pity. Exactly what a willing pawn deserved.

Vincent passed a hand over the back of his neck. And he called himself a man. He caught the disdain-soaked harrumph before it left his throat. Men did not allow themselves to be so neatly manipulated.

Marriage. It had once been a vague notion, a concept he gave little consideration to. But he'd had ample opportunity to familiarize himself with it recently. Definitely not something he wanted or wished for.

He wanted Oliver in his bed and no one else.

Shoving those feelings deep down where they would never see the light of day again, trying his damndest to deny a part of himself... Three weeks of that torture had been the very definition of hell. How would he survive a lifetime of it?

He couldn't.

He needed Oliver. He was bound to him in a way he could not fully explain, yet would no longer question or deny.

The knowledge settled over him, infusing into his bones, bearing the calm, quiet weight of an undisputable fact. He belonged with Oliver, not with Lady Juliana.

He pulled his attention from the neat row of townhouses lining the street and looked to the young lady who was still discussing the evening with her aunt. Head tipped toward the older woman, she absently adjusted the ivory shawl about her slim shoulders. After numerous late morning calls and afternoon rides through Hyde Park, he still knew little about her. She preferred her tea without sugar, did not mind the rain, and had a decided fondness for Grafton. Anytime he mentioned his brother, her eyes sparkled, her lips tilted up at the edges, and her polite attention turned into rapt attention.

She did not belong with him, either. Nor did she deserve to be tied to him by forces beyond their control.

But what could he do about it? Everything was settled. The outcome predetermined before his father had even voiced his "request."

His mouth thinned into a determined line.

He would do what he should have done in the first place. But first, he needed her permission. After all, it involved her future as well.

The carriage stopped outside Lady Juliana's home, a neat white townhouse similar to many others that lined the streets of Mayfair. Metal clanked as the footman unfolded the step and then opened the carriage door. She and her aunt politely bade Vincent good night and thanked him for a pleasant evening.

Mrs. Caldwell departed from the carriage. Lady Juliana shifted along the bench, moving closer to the door, and made to follow her aunt, but Vincent leaned forward, his shoulders partially blocking the open door.

"Wait. Please, Lady Juliana," he added at her startled glance. "Might I have a moment of your time?"

Unlike Oliver, she heeded his request. She folded her hands neatly in her lap, her expression one of polite interest.

"I wish to ask you a question." He pitched his voice low to avoid being overheard by her aunt, who lingered along the short walkway leading to the front door. "And I request nothing less than complete honesty."

The polite interest didn't falter as she nodded, bidding him to continue.

"If the choice was yours, whom would you marry? Myself or Grafton?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent shut the study door behind him.

Seated in one of the black leather wingback chairs by the fireplace, his father was reading the newspaper. Nearly nine in the evening and he appeared as though his valet had just finished dressing him. The short layers of his silver hair neatly combed, not one unwanted wrinkle in his navy coat. Yet the glass of brandy on the table beside him indicated he would retire soon.

Ten more minutes and Vincent would've had to wait until tomorrow.

Unacceptable. One way or another, he would have ensured his father heard him out. He would not allow another night to pass and have all be right in the Marquis of Saye and Sele's tidy little world where every inhabitant eagerly bent to his will.

Resolute, he crossed the room and stopped next to the other chair angled toward the fireplace. "Father. Might I have a word with you?"

His father's attention didn't stray from the *Times*. "Do you need my assistance obtaining the special license from the archbishop?"

"No. Lady Juliana and I will not be wed."

"She rejected your offer?" Eyes still on that damn newspaper, he absently reached out, fingers closing around the glass and took a sip. "I'll have a word with her father. The man assured me the girl would accept you."

"I have not asked for her hand, nor will I."

That got his father's attention. "You must."

Vincent shook his head. "Grafton cares for her, and more importantly, she is in love with him." He knew what love looked like -- Oliver had taught him that -- and he had seen it reflected in Lady Juliana's face when she had answered his question with a shyly whispered, "*Grafton*."

His father waved his hand, dismissing the notion as insignificant. "It matters not. Grafton will wed the Duke's daughter and do his duty. And so must you. Lady Juliana cannot be tossed aside."

Vincent stared in detached horror at his father. The man truly did not care about his children's well-being. And to think Vincent had so desperately craved his attention. Spent years trying to mold himself into the perfect son, all for nothing.

Even if Oliver refused to ever speak to him again, Vincent still owed him his gratitude. If not for his friend, he could have become...*this*. Cold. Detached. Focused only on his business interests and Society's good opinion of him. He might physically look like his father's son, but that's where he wanted the resemblance to end.

"Lady Juliana will not be tossed aside. There will be no scandal. Nor will you create one in an effort to force my hand, for it would only reflect poorly on yourself and Grafton. As for my recent association with her, it will simply be put about that I was serving as her temporary escort in my brother's absence. She so enjoys the theatre. It would have been a shame to deprive her while Grafton is in the country."

A flush rose up from his father's neck, tingeing his ears red and coloring his cheeks. An ugly scowl contorted his features. Vincent had never witnessed the sight, but apparently his father did not react well to having his wishes ignored. How unfortunate for his father.

The man shot to his feet, flicking the newspaper to the floor with a sharp snap of his wrist. "You must marry eventually, so you will marry her. *Now*. It is your duty. You must secure an heir."

"Since I do not plan on being put in the ground any time in the near future, there is no reason for me to marry now. I am only four-and-twenty. Still plenty of years ahead of me to choose a wife." A small portion of his brain marveled at his ability to remain so calm and composed, so unaffected in the face of his father's anger. But he knew the encounter was a mere prelude, a warm-up exercise, so to speak, for what awaited him after he left this house. "If in ten years Grafton does not have an heir and a spare, then we can discuss marriage. Until that time, I am content to wait." He highly doubted it would come to that. If his suspicions about him were correct, Grafton would have a small brood before the decade was up.

"Grafton must honor the agreement I made with his grace."

"No. Grafton will honor his obligation to Lady Juliana." *And as soon as he returns to Town, I'll have a word with him to ensure he does.*

His father's nostrils flared, his blue eyes nearly bulging from his head. "Marry her or I will cut you off."

Vincent shrugged. As if it would be a change from his father's usual indifference, not that he cared one whit about the man's opinion of him anymore.

"I will cut off your quarterly allowance," his father snarled in a tone that brooked no threat of rebuttal. Hands fisted at his sides and jaw clamped tight, he was so beyond his usual stoic composure it was almost comical.

"I don't need it. Do you remember the Rotherham property? That dismal little property you refused to give me? I purchased it a year ago. You should have asked more for it." He paused and allowed the pride swelling his chest to curve his lips. "Best investment I ever made. Good evening, Father."

With that, he tipped his head and turned on his heel, leaving his father scarlet-faced and slack-jawed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent didn't recall there being so many stairs. Heart slamming against his ribs so hard and fast he was amazed it didn't burst from his chest, he rounded the landing and went up the next flight. Surely they hadn't added another floor to the building in his absence.

When the last step was finally behind him, he paused and closed his eyes, trying to will his pulse to slacken to something that approached normal levels.

Absolutely wasted effort.

Forcing his feet to move, he walked to the door on the right.

Sweat dripped down the back of his neck, a hot tickle under his stiff collar. He removed his gloves, stuffing them in his coat pocket, and tugged on his cravat. Should have left the greatcoat in the carriage, but he had not wanted to be without it in the event he had to walk home in the chill, damp late October night. After unbuttoning the coat, he held up his hands. By God, he was shaking.

He had never felt this way before. Never needed something so badly and, at the same time, been scared out of his wits. He knew what Oliver wanted from him. Had already damned himself for a fool countless times for not accepting himself for who he was ages ago. For even having brought them to this point. He knew the words he

needed to speak if he stood a chance in hell of convincing the man to take him back. Yet still, opening his heart to Oliver, laying himself bare at his feet, giving up that need for control and exposing himself so completely...

A decidedly frightening prospect.

But he was determined to do it. He'd take a lesson from his friend and demand the man hear him out.

But what if he wouldn't listen?

What if Oliver walked away from him again?

What if Oliver didn't love him anymore?

His hand shot out, fingers gripping the door's frame, to keep from crumpling to his knees.

*Stop it!*

It was pointless to allow the worries to consume him, to batter away at him until he couldn't stay on his feet, much less form a coherent sentence. In any case, he would never know the truth unless he knocked on that door.

*So do it.*

He gave his evening coat a sharp tug to straighten it, reached up to check the knot on his cravat to assure it was still centered, and then knocked once on the door.



## Chapter Eight

One cold hand on the wobbly rail, Oliver stopped at the top of the stairs and blinked. Yes, that really was Vincent with his back to the door of his apartments, hands clasped and legs slightly spread, as if he were standing guard. The long, dark greatcoat added width to his already broad shoulders, to the point where Oliver could barely make out the door behind him.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for twenty-five minutes.”

The accusatory tone obliterated the shock, chasing away the chill that had seeped into Oliver’s bones on the walk home and making his hackles stand on end, stiff and bristly. So the man did not like to wait. Too bad. And why was Vincent there anyway? Hadn’t he been clear enough already? He no longer wanted anything to do with the man.

If Vincent labored under the assumption that he could bend Oliver over, use him for nothing more than a convenient fuck, an anonymous vessel to slake his desires, then he was vastly mistaken.

*Goddamn arrogant bastard.*

Pulling his key from his pocket, he stalked across the distance separating them and glared up at Vincent. The man moved aside enough so Oliver could fit the brass key into the lock and open the door without brushing against him.

"Where have you been?" Vincent asked. Again.

Oliver lit the candle on the small table. The feeble golden light illuminated a not-so-empty parlor as Vincent had followed him inside. He sure as hell wouldn't answer Vincent's question. It was none of his concern, nor did he need to know that Oliver had taken a very long route home to prolong the inevitable. Three weeks and it still hurt to come home to an empty room. To know he'd have a long, lonely night ahead of him.

The door clicked shut.

Oliver ground his teeth together. By God, the man had ballocks.

Mouth twisted in a sneer, Oliver put the tinderbox back in the drawer and slammed it shut. "Have you come by to invite me to your wedding? If so, you needn't bother." Vincent was truly fit for Bedlam if he thought Oliver would happily sit in one of the benches at St. George's Church and watch as he wed that girl. And of course, Vincent would marry at St. George's, the most fashionable church in London.

Vincent slipped his greatcoat off his shoulders and draped it over his arm, fussing with it until it hung in neat folds. When the garment met with his satisfaction, he looked up and speared Oliver with a solemn stare. "No. I wanted to advise you to have a care with gambling."

Uncertain how to interrupt that statement, Oliver went to the fireplace, dropped to his haunches, and busied himself piling logs onto the grate and starting the fire. He had asked Vincent if he should bet on his impending marriage or not. Was Vincent trying to tell him that he was not going to wed the girl?

Only one way to find out.

"Are you going to marry her?" Oliver asked, using the iron poker to nudge at the burning logs. The flames flickered up, reaching toward the flue, the logs popping and cracking, offering a welcome bit of warmth. He kept the threadbare brown velvet

drapes closed tight in the autumn and winter months, but they did little to keep out the chill.

The floorboards creaked once, twice, three times. Then the room went quiet.

"No."

His hand shook ever so slightly as he carefully leaned the poker against the sooty bricks of the fireplace surround. He stood and turned to find Vincent one pace from him. The dark greatcoat covered the back of the nearby armchair. "Why not? Your father wishes it." He threw the words out there, as if doing anything other than what the marquis wished was inconceivable.

Vincent shrugged, discomfort etched in every line of his powerful body. A heavy furrow marred his brow. His hands were clasped so tightly before him that his knuckles had turned white. "She prefers my brother over me. Apparently she's in love with him."

"Silly chit."

"Well, yes, but I don't blame her. I'm not the easiest man to be with, and I would have made a very poor husband." Shifting his weight, he glanced to his polished evening shoes and then back to Oliver. "And I, well...I prefer you."

Oliver's heart leapt into his throat but somehow he managed to speak with a bored drawl. "Do you now?"

"I must. I love you."

Oliver's jaw dropped. Had he heard Vincent correctly? Or were his ears playing tricks on him, letting him hear the words he had ached to hear for so long?

"I apologize for being such a condescending arse. It's rude of me to keep you waiting. To be so presumptuous. Please forgive me for behaving so abysmally toward you when we were out and about. But whenever I'm near you, I want you, and I can't help but worry it's obvious to all." Vincent dragged a hand through his hair, disheveling the neat layers. "I remember everything you said that night. Christ, I can't

forget it. And I won't. I give you my word that I will never again be such a damn stubborn fool. And if you'll but give me another chance, Oliver, I'll --"

Oliver launched himself at Vincent, cutting off his words and shoving him roughly against the wall. He tangled his fingers in Vincent's dark hair, hauled the man's mouth down to meet his, and crushed his lips over Vincent's. Absolutely devoured his mouth. Teeth nipping, tongue delving deep, tangling with Vincent's.

Unable to get enough, he pressed himself against the hard length of Vincent's body. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, holding him so tightly he couldn't draw a full breath. But he didn't care. Vincent was kissing him back with an urgency that surpassed his own.

He gave himself over to it, his fingers unwinding from Vincent's hair, hands falling to those broad shoulders, surrendering completely to the passion in Vincent's kiss. To the love so strong he could taste it.

Then the kiss softened, a slow melding of lips gliding across each other. Vincent nipped his bottom lip and broke the kiss. Warm, panting breaths brushed across his face.

"Is that a yes? Will you give me another chance?" Vincent asked, so low and reluctant Oliver more felt the words rumbling his chest than heard them.

He blinked his eyes open. "Of course. You called me Oliver," he whispered. He had been able to keep the excitement under wraps, keep it contained as it built within him as Vincent said the most unbelievable things to him, until he had heard his name. Never in their thirteen years of friendship had Vincent called him Oliver. Yet tonight, it had fallen unbidden from his lips. The clearest sign of all that Vincent had opened his heart to him.

Vincent nodded, grim and determined, not one hint of Oliver's smile echoed on his face. With gentle hands on his shoulders, he moved Oliver a step back, putting distance between them. He worked the knot on his cravat and then tugged the linen from his neck. "I do remember everything you said that night. Everything." Oliver

watched his Adam's apple bob beneath the taut skin of his neck as he swallowed. "You can do with me as you please."

Oliver stared in utter disbelief at the long length of white linen in Vincent's outstretched hand.

"You can tie me up, take me, and do whatever you please with me. I am yours, Oliver. Forever."

It was almost too much to believe that Vincent was willing to put himself in Oliver's hands. To relinquish all control. "You really do love me."

"Yes."

His heart swelled near to bursting. Oliver held back the grin, but it was mighty difficult -- the poor man looked absolutely terrified. Determined, but terrified at the prospect of submission. Now was not the time to grin like a damn fool and let out the bark of joyous laughter building within him.

"Don't look so frightened, Vincent. I don't want to tie you up." He took the cravat and let it flutter to the floor. "But there is something I've wanted to do since I saw you take your trousers off at Delacroix's brothel."

"And what would that be?"

Suppressing a smile, Oliver raised one eyebrow and removed his coat, taking the time to undo the buttons properly. It had taken a box of scones to convince his grandmother's housekeeper to sew the buttons back onto his coat and waistcoat. He had managed to avoid her questions the first time, but didn't want to press his luck by having to ask her to repeat the chore. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the coat onto the armchair.

His spectacles. He should remove them, too. He wouldn't need them for what he had planned; Vincent would be plenty close enough to see him clearly.

He left Vincent standing against the wall by the open bedchamber door and placed his spectacles on the fireplace mantel. Perhaps they should move to the

bedchamber? No. That terror had dissipated when the cravat fell to the floor, but the man was still clearly very nervous. If he asked Vincent to move, he might bolt for the wrong door.

Not that Oliver was all that comfortable playing the dominant, either. He could count on one hand the number of times he had taken another man, and it had been years ago. He much preferred to submit, to put his pleasure in the hands of another, but he could not deny the heady thrill that sang through his veins at having Vincent at his disposal.

His to touch. His to kiss. His to do with as he pleased.

His back to Vincent, he allowed the grin to spread across his face as he lit a candle on the mantel.

"What should I do?" Vincent asked.

"Nothing. Just stand still."

He wiped the smile from his lips and went back to Vincent. Willing the tremor of anticipation from his hands, he unbuttoned Vincent's coat and then his waistcoat, working each fabric-covered button free. Vincent could see to the task much quicker, but Oliver wanted to do it. To slowly reveal all that powerful male muscle. Vincent's body was a sublime gift, one the man had never before allowed him to thoroughly explore.

He remembered to remove Vincent's pocket watch from his waistcoat before tossing the garments behind him. After slipping the watch into his own trouser pocket, he pushed the black suspenders from Vincent's shoulders and tugged the white shirt free from his trousers.

"You'll have to remove it yourself. You're much too tall."

Vincent tipped his head. "As you wish, milord."

"No, no. Please don't call me that." The address belonged to Vincent, not to him. Then he peered up at Vincent through the chunk of unruly hair that had fallen over one eye. "Well...not unless you really want to."

Vincent furrowed his brow. "Lord Oliver?"

"How about just Oliver? I haven't heard it enough yet."

Vincent tipped his head again, the barest of smiles tugging his lips. "As you wish, Oliver." He whisked the shirt over his head, revealing the hard contours of his abdomen and his broad chest. Seizing the moment when Vincent had his arms over his head, Oliver trailed a fingertip down the underside of those powerful biceps, the skin so soft and smooth, then down his side.

Vincent twitched.

Had that been a poorly suppressed giggle?

He had no idea Vincent was ticklish. The man seemed much too hard-willed to allow such an involuntary reaction. But now he knew, for he had just found the spot. Right there, under his arm, that little spot right there --

"Oliver," Vincent protested, twisting away from his touch. He yanked the sleeves from his wrists and threw the shirt to the floor.

"You're ticklish." He stored the knowledge away, savoring it like a precious treasure. He loved to know such intimate details about the man he loved.

In answer to Vincent's stern frown, he dropped to his knees and unbuttoned Vincent's trousers, his fingers quick and efficient. Then he tugged the trousers and drawers down his long legs.

Oh. Shoes. Mustn't forget those. The evening shoes seen to, he divested Vincent of the last of his clothing.

Shifting up onto his haunches, he moved to stand. But the semierect cock at eye level proved an irresistible lure. One swipe of his tongue across the broad head pulled a groan from Vincent, an encouragement Oliver couldn't resist, either. Hands braced on

those strong thighs, he crouched and tipped his chin up, captured the head with his lips and took Vincent inside, swallowing him to the root.

He looked up, caught Vincent's glittering blue gaze and pulled back, a slow hard suck, savoring the glide of his lips over silken skin, and then pressed a light kiss on the tip before shifting up to stand. Oliver coasted his hands up from Vincent's thighs, over the rippling muscles of his abdomen and to his chest, combing his fingertips through the light smattering of dark hair, reveling in the luxury of being able to touch -- his tongue slipped out to tease one copper nipple -- and to taste.

Pressing his nose to Vincent's chest, he took in a deep full breath of him. Clean male skin, the barest trace of cool night air, the slight hint of sweat and musky arousal. A quiver shook Oliver's body. God, he had missed this man so much.

Before the emotion clogged his throat and distracted him from his purpose, he took a step back. "Turn around."

Perhaps with time Vincent could gain the comfort to respond without the telltale hesitation. But as this was Vincent's first foray into unknown territory, Oliver forgave the lapse and waited patiently for the man to heed his command.

"Oh, and hands on the wall. And don't move them until I give you permission to do so."

He heard the shuddering breath expand Vincent's lungs. Bowing his head, he braced his hands on the wall, his legs shoulder-width apart.

That would never do. The man was pressed much too closely against the wall. With a tug on his hips, he moved Vincent into position, pulling him back so his arms were straight and his lower back curved invitingly.

He trailed his fingertips there, over the sleek sweep, and then moved down lower, just barely touching the crease of Vincent's arse. The firm globes clenched. Hell, Vincent's entire body tensed, from his taut calves to his bulging biceps. The refusal could not have been clearer.



Stepping closer, Oliver wrapped his arms around Vincent's waist, sliding one hand down to lightly stroke his now very limp cock. "Nervous?"

Vincent cleared his throat. "A bit."

"There's no reason to be." He dragged his lips over Vincent's shoulder blade and gave into the urge to rub his trouser-covered erection along the cleft of Vincent's arse. Vincent tensed once again. Ah, hell. He couldn't keep the man in suspense any longer. "Relax, Vincent." Nipping at his lover's skin, he smoothed his hands down his sides, slow and patient. "I'm not going to bugger you. That's not what I want. Not tonight. But maybe in the future and only if you really want it. In fact, maybe I should only fuck you if you beg for it."

What a scandalous and utterly delicious thought -- one day hearing the words *Fuck me, Oliver. Please* from Vincent's lips. And if he applied himself sufficiently, he was certain he would hear them. But not tonight. This was all much too new to Vincent. While his lover had verbally given him leave to take him, Oliver couldn't help but feel that neither of them was quite ready to stray so far beyond their usual roles.

"Then...what do you want?"

"Umm," Oliver murmured, kissing a path down the strong line of Vincent's spine. "This."

## Chapter Nine

Wet heat probed between his arse cheeks. Vincent's eyes flew open. Shock swamping his brain, he went up onto his toes, but with a firm tug on his spread cheeks, Oliver pulled him back down. Oh...God...the man was licking his arse. Long strokes, dragging the flat of his tongue from just above his ballocks and over his entrance, painting a line along the entire crease.

A hot, wet, thoroughly indecent line.

Oliver had wanted to do...*this* -- Christ, he didn't even know the name for it -- since he had removed his trousers at that brothel?

Holy hell.

His muscles were tensed, poised to jerk away, to escape the intimate intrusion. Yet he clenched his teeth and held still, determined to prove true to his word, to let the man do as he pleased with him, even though he never felt so vulnerable, so exposed in all his life.

But it was damn hard. That wet tongue swirled over his flesh, tracing his entrance, and then...

"*Oliver.*" The name came out on a strangled yelp as the man sucked hard. His spine locked, jolts of sensation seizing his nerves. His brain screamed that such a thing was beyond the pale, but his cock didn't mind in the slightest.

Arousal licked at his groin in time to the rapid flicks of Oliver's tongue. Sweet and lush, forbidden to its core, and so very different from anything he had ever experienced. It spread up over his ballocks, engulfing his prick in a wash of pure heat, suspending him between acute self-consciousness and blinding pleasure.

Humming a low, entirely too erotic purr, Oliver intensified his efforts, licking, nipping, and sucking, until Vincent couldn't hold back the groans clogging his throat.

When that amazingly skilled tongue swept up the crease to his lower back, Vincent almost, almost, *almost* begged him not to stop. The words were right there, on the tip of his tongue. But he kept his jaw clamped tight as Oliver licked a path up his spine.

Soft wool brushed his legs as Oliver moved to stand behind him. Hot, sticky pants bathed his shoulder blade. The musky scent of his arousal poured off him, so thick Vincent could taste it.

"I know you've never let another man bugger you, so I won't even ask. You already told me so once before. But..." The hand kneading his arse shifted, fingers drifting into the crease, sliding over the moisture there. "Have you ever penetrated yourself?"

"No." The word popped out of his mouth before it even formed in his head.

"Haven't you ever wondered how it would feel? Ever been curious?"

Vincent fought to drag air into his lungs as Oliver swirled the tip of his finger over his entrance. Slow and decadent, a slippery wet caress that obliterated any attempt to hold back the truth.

He squeezed his eyes closed tight. "Yes," he admitted on a low, ragged breath. God, *yes*, he had thought about it. His mind had wandered down that forbidden path

more than once before he'd yanked it back. But even under the cover of darkness, when he was alone in bed, stroking his prick to orgasm, he had never given in to the impulse.

"Well, wonder no more," Oliver replied, the grin clear in his far-too-smug voice.

A finger pushed, sliding easily inside and lighting up nerve endings Vincent didn't know he possessed. His eyes flew open, his cock jerking its approval, fluid beading at the tip.

"You're so tight. So hot, Vincent," Oliver moaned, wrapping his other arm around his waist, the linen of his shirtsleeve almost too rough against Vincent's highly sensitized skin. Oliver straddled one of his legs, grinding the hard arch of his arousal against his thigh, as he kept up those agonizingly sweet thrusts.

Another finger joined the first, filling him, stretching him wide enough to cause a slight burn, probing deep, until...

"Fuck!" Vincent slammed his fist against the wall, fighting off the white-hot surge of a sudden, impending orgasm. His ballocks lurched up closer to his body.

With each stroke, Oliver rubbed that spot inside him, pumping more pleasure into his already overloaded senses. All traces of modesty gone, he hung his head and rocked his hips, fucking himself on Oliver's fingers. No wonder Oliver begged for him to fuck him. It felt goddamn unbelievable to have his arse filled.

The notion ticked the edge of his mind, encouraged by the hard, demanding rub of Oliver's erection against his thigh. But could he throw aside his pride and beg to be taken? Bend over and plead for Oliver to ram that pretty prick of his deep in his arse --

Lust slammed into him, a startling undiluted wave, so potent he would have crumbled to his knees if not for the support of the wall before him.

He pushed back, impaling himself on Oliver's fingers. But it wasn't enough. "More." Christ, Oliver had reduced him to begging, but he no longer cared in the slightest.

Oliver let out a whimper, threadbare and breathy, and then worked another digit alongside the other two.

"Yes, yes," Vincent panted, flames licking his arse as he was stuffed full. So wonderfully, blissfully full. He rocked back, his erection bobbing between his legs with each thrust. Their heavy pants blended together until he couldn't distinguish the sounds above the pulse hammering in his ears.

Oliver abruptly yanked his fingers free; a slick, wicked rush of sensation that pulled a grunt from Vincent's throat.

"Don't stop!" he protested, glancing over his shoulder.

"I won't. But I have to taste you again," Oliver gasped, sliding down his body. "Turn around."

Vincent didn't hesitate. Kneeling at his feet, Oliver grabbed his cock and sucked it down to the root. Those nimble fingers tickled his ballocks, tugged hard, and stopped just before crossing that line into pain, and then snuck behind. One hand braced on the wall behind him, Vincent widened his stance and tilted his hips, granting Oliver access to slip his fingers back up his arse. The lush drag of Oliver's soft lips, the hard insistent penetration... The combined sensations were too much. The climax coiled down his spine, winding tighter and tighter. Then Oliver swallowed, the velvety muscles of his throat massaging the head of his cock. At the same moment, Oliver rubbed that sweet spot, and Vincent couldn't hold back the orgasm any longer.

Letting out a mighty roar, Vincent spilled himself down his lover's throat, his muscles clenching around the digits buried in his arse in rhythm to the spasms racking his entire body.

Oliver gently pulled his fingers free and then released his prick. With a swipe of his forearm, he used his shirtsleeve to wipe the trickle of creamy semen from his swollen, wet lips.

He gazed up at Vincent, the most profound adoration reflected in his dark eyes. His cheeks were flushed, his forehead glistening with sweat, his chest rising and falling

rapidly beneath the gray brocade waistcoat. Still on his knees, Oliver clasped his hands behind his back and bowed his head, dark waves tumbling over his face. His body went lax, the line of his shoulders visibly relaxing.

"I am yours, milord."

Still reeling from the orgasm, Vincent could do nothing but marvel at how easily his friend gave up control. His trust was an awesome responsibility, and Vincent would never take it for granted again.

"Love you," Vincent murmured, reaching down to tuck Oliver's tangled hair behind his ear. He glanced down Oliver's body. The erection that had rubbed so insistently against his thigh tented the placket of his trousers.

He would need to see to that, and he knew just how to do it.

"Don't move." The edge taken off his lust, Vincent left Oliver kneeling on the ground and went into the bedchamber.

Ignoring the rumpled bed and the clothing littering the floor, he lit a couple of candles and gathered the necessary supplies. With each step he took, his arse throbbed a bit. Nothing painful or uncomfortable. Rather, a pleasing burn that served to get the blood coursing through his veins once again. Hell, being the object of Oliver's undivided attention had been quite the experience. One he would definitely need to repeat.

From the top drawer of the dresser, he selected the leather cuffs that had an attached length of chain and a black leather flogger. Then he went to the bedside table. He'd forgo the plug but did need the oil. He made to pick up the glass bottle then stopped at the sight of the empty silver tray.

"Where is it?" he demanded, stalking across the bedchamber, the flogger and cuffs clutched in one hand.

Oliver snapped his head up. "Pardon?"

"The pin. Did you sell it?" He shouldn't be such an arse about it, but he couldn't help it. If Oliver had sold the pin, then that meant he had given up on Vincent. Completely. And the possibility hurt more than he could have imagined.

Oliver ducked his chin and reached inside his waistcoat. "Never, Vincent. I would never sell it," he whispered, holding out his hand.

He had carried it with him, directly over his heart.

Grabbing his chin, he tilted Oliver's face up and leaned down to give him a quick kiss. "Good," he grumbled, snatching the pin from Oliver's outstretched hand. He turned on his heel and returned to the bedchamber. "Take off your clothes and get your arse in here, Oliver."

The last lingering bit of panic left him as he placed the jade cravat pin back in its place in the dented little silver tray. He heard the sound of bare feet against floorboards and looked up. Hell, the man could get his own clothes off in a trice, but it had felt like forever when he had removed Vincent's.

"Shut the door," he instructed as he took the oil and moved it to the washstand so it would be within easy reach. He set the flogger on the foot of the bed and held out the cuffs, the chain dangling from his grip. "You know where I want you, boy."

Erect cock bobbing with each step, Oliver moved directly beneath the iron hook in the ceiling positioned one pace from the foot of the bed and two paces from the washstand. Hands fisted at his sides and a flush tingeing his bare golden chest, he bowed his head and waited patiently for Vincent's next command.

He belonged to Oliver. There was no doubt about it, but in this moment, Oliver belonged to him. A fierce surge of possessiveness gripped hold of him.

*Mine.*

He would take Oliver to dizzying heights of pleasure. Push the man to his limits, but never take him one step beyond. For Oliver trusted him to do nothing less.

"Hold out your arms."

Once Vincent had both cuffs buckled about his wrists, he lifted Oliver's arms. As he reached up to slip the end link of the chain onto the hook, sharp teeth nipped at his chest.

Vincent took a quick step back and stared at Oliver, whose head was bowed once again, the perfect image of submission with his wrists bound and arms stretched over his head.

Impudent whelp.

He kept the chuckle inside and instead spoke in a hard tone. "It appears you have forgotten your place, boy."

"My apologies, milord."

Was he smiling beneath that curtain of dark hair?

"We'll see how sorry you are." Vincent stepped behind him, grabbed the flogger, and smacked the flat end against his own hand.

Oliver started then let out a low moan. "Yes." His hips rocked back, presenting Vincent with his round arse, the perfect canvas for a few strikes of the flogger.

Arousal seeped anew into his blood, ratcheting higher and higher. His cock hardened, lifting from his body at the prospect of what was to come. But before the lust grabbed hold of him completely, he took a deep breath, settling his pulse. He needed to keep his control firmly in hand else risk actually hurting Oliver. A flogger wasn't a child's toy. It could cause serious harm if not wielded with an eye toward inciting pleasure and not true pain.

Oliver shifted his weight, rattling the chain. "Vincent, *please*."

Starting slowly, he slapped the leather against first one round cheek then the other.

"Harder, please, milord."

"Harder than this?" He drew back his arm and let the leather strike that now pink cheek again.



Oliver arched, shuddered, gasped. "Yes, yes. Harder."

And Vincent gave him what he begged for. The leather whipped through the air. Satisfying smacks filled the room as that round arse turned a most becoming shade of scarlet. He alternated the rhythm, not wanting Oliver to tense in anticipation of the blows. And his lover took it all, pleading for more, his sleek, honed body writhing in ecstasy under the onslaught. The most beautiful sight to behold.

When Oliver's gasps turned ragged, when his head tipped forward and the pleas stumbled over each other, Vincent stopped.

Sucking in great pulling breaths, he dropped the flogger and moved to stand before him. Sweat trickled down the center of Oliver's chest. His cock was arched up, the damp head brushing his flat lower belly that glistened with the proof of his arousal.

"Don't stop. More...please, Vincent. *Please.*" He shimmied, rattling the chains and thrusting his chest out.

Vincent grabbed hold of one of those flat copper nipples and twisted. "Is that what you want?"

"Ah, yes!" Oliver threw back his head, his body arching in a bow of undeniable pleasure.

Unwilling to give up his grip on that nipple, he grabbed the back of Oliver's head with his other hand and crushed his mouth over his. Kissed him fiercely, thrusting his tongue boldly inside, sweeping the hot depths of his lover's mouth, drinking in his gasping moans.

After delivering a sharp nip to his full bottom lip, he pulled back and met his lust-filled gaze. "Or perhaps you want something else?"

Before Vincent could think twice, he dropped to his knees and took hold of that pretty cock. Not pausing to even flick his tongue over the head, Vincent opened his mouth and took Oliver inside.

Oliver bucked forward, and Vincent jerked back a bit, fighting the impulse to gag. Closing his eyes, he swallowed down the gag reflex and bobbed along Oliver's length. Salt and sweat and hot silken skin blended together to form the sweetest thing Vincent had ever tasted. It lit up his tongue, urging him to take more, to suck harder, to pull every last drop from his lover's prick.

"Stop, stop, stop!"

He pulled back and glared up at Oliver. He might have never sucked a cock before, but he knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end, and that damn well should have felt good to him. "My precious lips finally touch your prick and you tell me to stop?"

"Yes," Oliver whined. There was no other word for it. The man actually whined. "You were going to make me come."

Vincent arched one eyebrow. "That's the point."

"But I want you to fuck me. Please, Vincent. I need you."

"Do you now?" he asked, fighting to keep the smug smile from his lips as he got to his feet.

"Yes, yes. *Now*. I need you. I need to feel you inside me. *Please*."

His threadbare whimper did more than crank up the lust pounding through his veins, it tugged on Vincent's heart, reminding him anew of how perfect they were together. Two halves of a whole, he had once described them. How the hell could he have been so foolish as to even consider his father's request? He wouldn't give up Oliver for the world.

The impatient rattle of chain snapped him to his senses. Vincent slicked his cock with oil then poured a generous amount in his palm and swiped it between those still red cheeks, the skin hot to the touch. He pushed one finger inside, then another.

Oliver went up onto his toes, breath hitching in his throat. "I need you. *Now*. *Now*. *Now*."

Grabbing hold of his slim hips, Vincent pushed past the tight ring of muscle and into hot, clinging, welcoming heat.

As Oliver shuddered beneath him, he wrapped his arms around him, pressed a kiss to his shoulder and growled, "And now you have me. Forever."

\* \* \* \* \*

Oliver snuggled closer to Vincent. The man generated a remarkable amount of heat, but it only warmed one side as he sprawled on top of him. He blinked open his tired eyes and turned his head, looking for the blanket.

Shafts of sunlight seeped through the gaps in the drapes. Morning? But...

He bolted upright, straddling Vincent's hips, and stared down at him. Alert and bemused brilliant blue eyes met his.

"You stayed."

Vincent's lips twisted in a grimace, all aristocratic affront. "Of course. Did you honestly believe I wouldn't?"

"Well, you never have before."

A deep sigh expanded Vincent's chest. "And I apologize for that. I should have stayed, many times. And I will stay more often than not in the future. But not every night. You do understand, don't you?" He took hold of Oliver's hand and gave it a squeeze. The amusement left his eyes, replaced with solemn gravity. "Just know that when I do return home at night, it's not because I don't want to stay with you. I do. But we still need to be very discreet, Oliver."

He feathered his fingertips over Vincent's mouth, drawn in a grim line. "It's all right. I understand." The reality of their relationship was sometimes hard to bear. It seemed wrong to have to hide his love for this man, but it was something he had learned to accept long ago.

Twisting around, Oliver snagged the edge of the blanket from the foot of the bed. He should start a fire, but he didn't want to get out of bed just yet. With the blanket draped over him, he dropped down and snuggled back up to Vincent again.

His eyes drifted closed. The soft hair on Vincent's chest lightly tickled his nose. The strong beat of Vincent's heart lulled his senses, tempting him to fall back into a blissful sleep.

"Oliver."

"Yes?" he muttered.

"I need to go to Rotherham next week, and I want you to come with me. The house is small, and therefore the staff is small. They only come up from the village when I'm in residence, and only for the day. We can get a nurse to watch over your grandmother in your absence."

He smiled against Vincent's chest. "For how long?"

"A fortnight, maybe longer."

"No longer than a fortnight. Can't leave the shop unattended for an extended period. Just purchased the thing. Don't want to be perceived as a negligent investor." He tried for an off-handed tone, but he couldn't keep the pride completely from his voice.

"You've made an investment?"

He shifted up onto his forearms. "Yes, I bought Wallace's bookshop. It's just around the corner. Not much of a shop, but I've grown quite fond of it."

"And when did this happen?"

"Two weeks, five days ago. No, make that six days. Decided to expend a bit of effort."

Vincent frowned once again. "I do apologize for that. Uncalled for and in bad form to say such a thing."

"But necessary."

"I wouldn't --"

Oliver cut off his words with a kiss. "I would." If not for Vincent, he would have never taken that step toward making something of himself.

"Well then, congratulations are in order. Well done, Oliver."

"Why thank you, Vincent," he said, flopping back down and hiding his grin against Vincent's chest.

This man was his. Forever.

What an amazing concept.

Or was he?

Oliver levered up onto his forearms again. "I most certainly am not going to marry. Not ever. But are you ever going to marry?"

Vincent raised his eyebrows, clearly taken aback by the blunt question. "Um... I-I don't want to. I truly would make a very poor husband. You're the only person who will tolerate me and who will keep me in my place. But, Oliver, I won't lie to you. I might need to someday. I sure as hell don't want to, and I honestly don't believe it will come to that, but if Grafton doesn't produce an heir within a decade or so..." He turned his head, avoiding Oliver's gaze. The truth was not pleasant to hear, but the strong arms holding him tight kept away any trace of despair. "I can't let the estate go to Adams. He's my father's brother's son. Next in line and more of a dolt than Grafton. Completely useless fellow. You understand, don't you?" He sneaked a peek at Oliver from the corner of his eye. "Please say you do."

Sharing Vincent was not a concept he was willing to explore. The man was his. No one else's. And certainly not some woman's. But he couldn't demand Vincent turn his back on his responsibilities. He loved every inch of the man's noble, honorable soul. The future might hold an unpleasant reality, but he had Vincent now and would savor every moment with him. "Yes, of course I understand." He felt the tension ease from the powerful body under him.

Nodding solemnly, Vincent cupped his jaw in both hands and brushed the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip. "I do love you," he murmured. "No matter what, I will always be yours."

"Forever?"

"Yes, Oliver. I am bound to you, forever."

 THE END 

## **Ava March**

Ava March writes Regency-set erotic romances. 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 her readers. See what she's been up to by visiting her on the web at <http://www.AvaMarch.com>