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AN  
IMPROPER  
*Holiday*

K.A. MITCHELL

*He followed all the rules...until one man showed him a dozen ways to break them.*

As second son to an earl, Ian Stanton has always done the proper thing. Obeyed his elders, studied diligently, and dutifully accepted the commission his father purchased for him in the Fifty-Second Infantry Division. The one glaring, shameful, marvelous exception: Nicholas Chatham, heir to the Marquess of Carleigh.

Before Ian took his position in His Majesty's army, he and Nicky consummated two years of physical and emotional discovery. Their inexperience created painful consequences that led Ian to the conviction that their unnatural desires were never meant to be indulged.

Five years later, wounded in body and plagued by memories of what happened between them, Ian is sent to carry out his older brother's plans for a political alliance with Nicky's father. Their sister Charlotte is the bargaining piece.

Nicky never believed that what he and Ian felt for each other was wrong and he has a plan to make things right. Getting Ian to Carleigh is but the first step. Now Nicky has only twelve nights to convince Ian that happiness is not the price of honor and duty, but its reward.

Warning: Just thinking about reading this book in 1814 could get you hanged, so the men in this book who enjoy m/m interaction of an intimately penetrative nature are in a hell of a lot of trouble.

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# An Improper Holiday

*K.A. Mitchell*

# Dedication

For Mom and Dad,

Thanks for fostering a life-long love of books, history and Christmas traditions.

# Chapter One

The tall mahogany clock made the customary ominous tick as Ian waited in front of the equally foreboding desk. Nothing good ever came from being called into the study, even if now the man seated behind the mahogany desk was brother rather than father. Standing at parade rest had lost the comfort of familiarity, as if the empty sleeve pinned back at his elbow created some sort of asymmetrical impropriety to the stance.

Ian supposed he could have interrupted Edward's shuffling through his books, but habit held him silent. The last time Ian had been peremptorily summoned to stand before the desk in question, his father had been behind it, and it was never to Ian's advantage to interrupt the old earl in his calculations when such calculations concerned how many strokes of the switch would correct Ian's behavior.

Edward—no, he must think of his brother as Rayne now. Their father had issued his final orders while his second son's own life danced with death on the edge of a surgeon's blade. Rayne rubbed a hand over his eyes and slapped away a ledger before looking up, dark brows shooting to his hairline in surprise. "God's blood, Ian. Why did you not speak? How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. I—I suppose old habits are the hardest to break."

The corner of Rayne's mouth twitched, offering a fleeting glimpse of his younger self. "Expecting ten of the best?"

"The thought crossed my mind, God rest his soul."

Edward made a brief nod of agreement, all trace of humor vanishing from his expression.

"Your sister tells me we have received an invitation to the Carleigh Twelve Night fete."

The very instant the word Carleigh entered Ian's ears, he wished himself on the receiving end of his father's switch rather than the brother's order he sensed would follow.

"I wish to cultivate the marquess's favor. He would be an ally in the House. You and the heir are of an age, are you not?"

"We knew each other at school." *And I mean that in every sense of the word, brother.*

Edward had barely paused long enough for Ian to answer. "Your sister desires to attend. You shall act as her chaperone. And while there, you shall canvass the marquess's leanings on several items that will be coming before us. Perhaps your prior affiliation will lend itself to influencing the heir."

*I sodomized him just after Father purchased my commission, but I doubt that is the sort of influence you seek.* Pain, tears and blood, and still Nicky had whimpered, "It's all right." And Ian, prick in such a hot

grip, could no longer restrain the motion of his hips, even as Nicky's teeth sank deep into his bottom lip, cock flagging despite the attention of Ian's fist. That sort of parting might lend itself to awkwardness on a renewal of their acquaintance.

But Lord Rayne could command Ian to undertake any sort of awkwardness his lordship deemed necessary, and if Ian didn't care to accept the latest commission, he could make his own way in the world. Surely there was a yet-to-be discovered path for advancement available to a younger son with a missing limb and no familial support.

If he could face French artillery, he could face Nicky. Though he rather preferred the artillery. "When are we expected?"

"It is their usual Twelve Night gathering. I am sure you remain familiar with the customs of our country."

Of course, the twenty-fourth. Which meant he needed to get his sister Charlotte stuffed in a carriage as soon as possible. At this time of year, the journey to Carleigh Castle would take him perhaps three days on horseback. Traveling with whatever his sister would want to drag along would double or triple the time required. He had heard that females were difficult travel companions.

"Also, I wish you to encourage some sort of suitable attachment for her. Or at the very least, some respectable company. She is still a bit—"

"Hoydenish?" Ian suggested. He hadn't been home long, but the sister he remembered who was so often pleading with him to conceal that she had once again been climbing trees and riding astride did not appear to have become much more civilized. As he had dressed this morning he had seen her well past the bottom of the Italianate garden, tugging at something in the arbor and scribbling in a book.

"I think I should prefer headstrong." His brother's lips quirked again. "Damn me. Ian, I believe you may have smiled for a moment."

Stanton men were not renowned for a sanguine temperament, and Ian had found very little about which to be cheerful since his return from the Peninsular War. "I'll do my best to correct it in future, Rayne."

"See that you do. There are some papers I should like you to examine before you leave in order to familiarize yourself with the items that concern me." Rayne began digging through the books and ledgers.

Ian nodded and stepped closer to the desk. If he were busy with Lord Carleigh, perhaps he could avoid his son. A mountain of letters to rival the Alps melted into an avalanche, and he reached out with his hand to stop it, forgetting for an instant the moment when he'd awakened to find his arm a half-yard shorter. Phantom pain shot deep into his bones, a fire in flesh that had long since been tossed out to rot on a field in Spain.

"Does it pain you much still?"

"No," Ian lied. He had always lied easily. Except to himself. From what he'd been able to glean from conversations with other maimed officers both in the Second Fifty-second and others, the phantom limb would be with him until he joined it in death. His body couldn't remember what his brain knew: his left hand had been shredded by shrapnel, a tourniquet the only way a field surgeon could save his life. "I simply moved too suddenly. It will pass quickly." *Or it will throb for hours. But there is nothing to be done for that.* "I shall inform Charlotte of your decision."

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On his return from the Continent, unable to face his family or friends, Ian had immured himself with distant cousins in Norwich. He preferred that damp time staring at marshes in England's arse-end to being trapped in this warm coach with plush upholstery if such comfort came burdened with searching stares from his sister. By the fourth day, those stares had grown more frequent, almost unceasing.

"Don't you have knitting or needlework? An improving book?"

Nan, Charlotte's maid, pursed her lips and stared out the window. Ian had difficulty deciding whether the contortion of her mouth was to hide amusement or disgust.

Charlotte's laughter in no way resembled the drawing room titters Ian had heard on his brief forays in society.

"My dear brother, in my three and twenty years have you ever known me to engage in handwork or read an improving book?"

"Perhaps you should take it up."

"Perhaps you would care to share why you have 'such a February face, so full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness'."

"Ah, I see you have managed to plow through at least one work of Shakespeare. Father would be pleased to know your governess was not an utter waste of what funds he could rescue from the exchequer's clutches."

"And I see you are attempting to divert my attention."

"From the scenery?" Ian's arm ached as he fought the urge to gesture at the frozen fields with his missing hand.

"From my question. We are on our way to celebrate the most joyous time of the year with dear friends, yet from your expression, one would think you are being dragged to the hangman."

That was one possible outcome of his sinful relationship with Nicky. Or could he request the block? Was a more honorable execution possible for sodomites who were younger sons of an old and loyal house? He really ought to know the exact statute, even if he had sworn never to repeat the crime. "I am filled with a generous quantity of holiday spirit."



“Your glower is very misleading. Come now, Ian. You were not always so much like Father. Or Edward.”

“Rayne,” Ian corrected.

“Oh, of course, his lordship the Earl of Rayne. The same esteemed lord who dipped my plaits in ink.”

“That was I, Lady Charlotte. Lord Rayne would be the chap who preferred to replace the ink with a dozen small spiders.”

“Ian.”

“Still here, dear sister.”

“And you are still avoiding my question. What is this sudden dread you have of Carleigh Castle? You and Lord Amherst always seemed to be such *particular* friends.”

A chill took a tight grip on Ian’s lungs. The emphasis as she spoke trod dangerously close to an insinuation. If Charlotte had been a man, he’d have considered resorting to violence to protect his—Nicky’s?—honor. But a female, even one as hoydenish as his sister, could not be aware of the darker aspects of male desire. And she was waiting for him to speak.

“I find that a curious choice of words.”

Charlotte’s gaze was all too penetrating. “Dread?”

Ian clung desperately to the reprieve she had offered. “Yes. I am not dreading the party, merely my duty as your chaperone. With such a great beauty, I will have time for nothing but keeping your more importunate suitors at bay.”

Charlotte’s gaze had not wavered, but at last she smiled. “Are you certain there was no accompanying damage to your skull at Badajoz?”

One didn’t refer to the casualties of war in mixed company, but Charlotte was still the girl whose braids had looked best when tipped with black ink. “As I remember very little after the mine exploded, anything is possible.”

Her expression turned to sympathy and Ian looked away. This was what had kept him in Norwich long after he was fully healed. Useless sympathy when he felt consumed with anger. If he had moved more swiftly on the escalade, if he had not accepted assistance from the eager young Lieutenant Archer, the man would still be alive and Ian would be whole—or wholly dead. Either state preferable to his current existence as neither.

“Do you think it will snow?”

“I fervently pray that it will not.” It would be bad enough to be trapped at Carleigh Castle by the weather, but a snowfall would provoke Ian’s memories of the five days he and Nicky had spent penned in by man-high drifts at the marquise’s hunting cabin. It had been the first time they had dared to fully disrobe, the first time they could look their fill without fear of discovery. Five days of the same wretched

stew turning to gruel over the fire, five days of Nicky's infectious laugh, five nights of hard flesh pressed together until they were bound by spit and sweat and spilled seed.

"You have the most bizarre look on your face, Ian. Does your arm pain you very much?"

He could not even school his features around his sister. How was he to look at Nicky, perhaps even at Nicky's betrothed or—bloody hell—Nicky's wife, without some untoward emotion starting in his face? Ian's guts writhed with a dread against which he had thought himself inured since leading his company to that breach in the walls at Badajoz. He could ask Charlotte about Nicky's state of attachment, even a female as peculiar as his sister would surely be aware of the alliances among the ton, but a newly found respect for her perception held him back.

"I am merely stiff from days in this carriage."

"You are wishing you had ridden."

"Of course not. I am pleased to keep you company."

"You are a terrible liar."

"I am an excellent liar. I told Rayne how much I admired that nag he spent far too much on, leaving him none the wiser. You merely have an unbridled imagination which causes you to see pain or frustration where there is none."

"Is that what it is?"

He met her steady gaze. Though she had yet to demonstrate the decorum Ian expected from a lady, his sister's acquisition of a dangerous perspicacity and immunity to his teasing boded ill for any future peace of mind.

He chose to exercise the familial option of ignoring a pestering female relation, focusing his gaze on the passing scene, wishing he could ignore the memories provoked by the lazy spiral of snowflakes that had begun to fall.

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Amidst the deluge of inappropriate reminiscences, one item which had escaped Ian's notice was the memory of the Carleigh tradition of lavish hospitality. There were so many guests milling in the Gold Salon, with more arriving every moment, that avoiding Nicholas Chatham, Lord Amherst, was a mission at which even the most bumbling of soldiers could succeed. If the crush also ensured that no one had borne witness to Charlotte's precipitous departure from the carriage, nearly bowling over the footman who was trying to assist her, so much the better.

The last stretch of the carriage ride might have been especially designed for Ian's torment by one of Lucifer's more creative demons. The coachman seemed determined to catch the wheels in every rut, a constant reminder that he was utterly useless, as he could neither brace himself nor his sister against the sudden lurches that bounced them like India rubber within the confines of the coach. Then his gaze caught

a familiar landmark and he was flung back into the bittersweet memory of the first time he had accompanied Nicky home to Carleigh. Nicky had wagered his skill at satisfying Ian against the speed of the coach and four.

Certain he could outlast the final few furlongs, he had taunted, “I can see barns, Nicky, and yet—”

Nicky had shockingly, devastatingly put his mouth to the same use as his hand, an obscene and wonderful kiss, warm and wet around the head of Ian’s prick. A rut jolted Ian deeper into the slick suction and there was no further need to mark furlongs, or even a yard. The heat of Nicky’s mouth, the movement of his tongue, drew the sweet aching fire from Ian’s spine, brought it boiling from his stones and out his prick—and into Nicky’s mouth.

It should have been horrifying, but the notion that he had spilled between those wide, quick-to-smile lips only made his body clench again and again with pleasure. He had scarcely even cared when Nicky had wiped his face on Ian’s formerly immaculate trousers.

With that fresh in mind, he had been nearly unaware of the present-day coach coming to a stop and unable to halt his sister’s unladylike vault from the coach step. Intent on executing his chaperonage with a greater deal of success, he scanned the room, located her by dint of the towering yellow feather which graced her bonnet—easily recalled after the constant tickle against his nose as the coach jolted along—and cut a swath to her side like Major-General Picton into Ciudad Rodrigo.

Ian wished he could ply his saber for safe passage here. The manse in Norwich, the Stanton manor in Oxfordshire, even their London townhouse all were untenanted wastelands compared with the long narrow salon. Not since Badajoz had there been so many other bodies around him. And while the scents and sights of a nobleman’s salon in Derbyshire were far removed from the stench of smoke and entrails—or worse the vision of what had been men fragmented by shot and shrapnel—Ian’s ears roared as blood pumped hard and fast, heating his skin, empowering his limbs. The voices around him faded under the drumming of his pulse, vision narrowing as if through a tunnel, the only sight not blurred that of the plume nodding on Charlotte’s bonnet.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Blood full of heat, muscles warm and vigorous, he whirled, good right hand reaching for the saber he no longer wore at his waist.

“Ian.”

If there had been a trace of shock and fear on Nicky’s face, Ian’s chance to study it was lost as Nicky used the hand on his shoulder to pull Ian into a half-embrace, which though entirely appropriate to the season and their outward familiarity, left Ian rigid. The thrum of battle-ready nerves still vibrated across his skin, but for an instant the familiar scent of the flesh just above Nicky’s collar managed to penetrate the sensory blinders keeping him shuttered from the crowd.

In that instant Nicky became a bulwark, shelter and shield against the worst memories of the Peninsula. He was reaching to offer some reciprocation but Nicky had stepped back, hand sliding along Ian's arm to close on the empty sleeve.

Ah, there it was. Horror soon masked by pity. The dark blond curls that had slipped through Ian's fingers in countless caresses fell over Nicky's forehead, but the clear blue eyes still laid his feelings bare.

"Lord Amherst." Ian executed as correct a bow as possible with Nicky yet clinging to his sleeve and turned, wrenching free at last.

But although Charlotte's plume was still in sight, the path to her had closed and as he sought another, Nicky stepped around him again.

"Lord Amherst, is it? Are you not aware that in this bedlam no one would hear were you to shout, Captain Stanton?"

"I am a simple gentleman only, my lord. As I am of no further use to His Majesty, I have resigned my commission."

More sympathy, lashes lowered in grief, drawing Ian's gaze to the candlelight's sheen on Nicky's cheek, the wide curve of his lips. That mouth. The mouth that had—

Ian tore his gaze free of the fascination, a wrenching separation that shared the aching emptiness of his left arm with all of his bones. Charlotte's gold plume had moved off, nodding near a lacey cap adorning the head of a tall slender blonde.

"And at the moment, my lord, I am failing in my new commission. I beg your leave as I must see to my sister."

"Then as always, I shall stand aside and permit you to do your duty." Nicky's voice held a rough edge quite unlike any Ian had yet heard from Nicky's lips.

When Nicky turned and strode off without another word, Ian was forced to a surprising conclusion. Amherst was furious.

## Chapter Two

Stiff-necked, infuriating, whoreson bastard. Nicky allowed himself eight strides along the gallery and back to try to contain his explosion of frustration. With Ian and with himself. He had convinced himself that Ian only stopped answering their carefully worded letters because of battlefield conditions, that Ian's feelings were still as strong as when he had acceded to his father's wishes and taken up his commission. Above all, Nicky had promised himself that Ian's injury, his dreadful loss, wouldn't matter. Instead Nicky had let show the terror and pain he had felt when he had heard the details of Ian's wound. *Well-played indeed, Amherst.*

Despite that cold intonation of his title, it was clear Ian was not entirely indifferent to Nicky. In the past five years he had learned to discern when a man regarded him with a certain sort of interest. But the past five years had also taught him there was a great gulf between simple companionship and the gratification of lust and what he and Ian had shared in those two years of sweet, slow discovery.

With the way Ian's gaze had moved to Nicky's mouth...no, Ian had not renounced his desire, even if he clung ever more tightly to his restraint. In that moment just past, Ian's hunger had been a nearly palpable yoke to bind them.

Had Ian learned as much as Nicky had these years apart? The idea of another man lavishing on Ian the kind of attention that would bring the color to his cheeks, his throat, his chest, blasted Nicky with a surprising surge of arousal. He would have thought to find himself jealous. Instead, his too vigorous imagination provided a tactile and visual feast. Ian's back against Nicky's front, the prickle of hair over hard flesh as Nicky's hands stroked the broad chest, the heat between Ian's thighs as Nicky's cock slid through the tight space, pressing up against the heavy sac, driving Ian forward so that his own cock slid deeper into the throat of the faceless man kneeling before them.

There would be no returning to the salon now. A stubborn cock-stand was not at all the thing to introduce in a room full of family and guests, certainly not in trousers as close-fit as those he wore. Nicky strode down the gallery's full length to the portrait of the first marquess, wishing he dared run out into the snow to cool his face—and other overheated areas.

"Nicholas? Whatever are you doing out here? What is the matter?"

His four-years-elder sister Lady Anna had stepped into the gallery. Since their mother had passed away after giving birth to the twins who were still in the nursery, Anna had taken over running the household, maintaining her grip even after her marriage to the Bishop of Warwick several years ago.

"I am—" Hell, taking the air was something only females did. He could scarcely tell his sister he'd stomped off in a fit of pique because of a romance gone awry, and he certainly couldn't tell her he was trying to tamp down the pulse of blood in his cock. "I wanted exercise." Under the circumstance, it wasn't difficult to affect a limp.

"Exercise? Now?"

"I—it—I fell from a horse and—"

"When?"

"Last week."

"And?"

"Well, my—uh—I don't want the injury to—" *Ah, shit, don't think stiffen.* "To wither."

His sister regarded him as if he were mad, which he no doubt appeared to be, was, and would continue to be until the all-too-honorable Mr. Ian Stanton came to his senses.

"It is a most inappropriate time. Lady Rathmoore wishes you to make the acquaintance of her daughters. And Lady Susannah asked to be remembered to you. And Lady Charlotte Stanton was most insistent that you wished to renew her acquaintance." Anna's lofty brow furrowed. "She is a lovely girl, excellent lines and no small fortune, but uncomfortably forward." She gave him a pleasant smile. "Still, if your interest lies that way, I am certain we shall make the best of it."

His interest. Yes. He had just attained the quarter-century mark, but Lady Anna wanted him matched. As their father had come to realize, whatever Lady Anna desired would come to pass, another's wishes notwithstanding. The thought that if their plan failed he would find himself betrothed to a random female before the turn of the season was enough to quell his errant ardor.

He answered his sister's smile. "I would be most pleased to renew my acquaintance with Lady Charlotte."

His sister stopped him as he reached the salon doors, flicking imagined lint from his sleeves and pulling his hair farther forward onto his brow. "There, darling, better than even a plate from *The Register*. Doubtless you shall capture whatever heart you choose."

His own heart having long since been captured, he devoutly hoped her estimation would prove correct.

Anna led him to Ian's sister who was standing a great distance from the more dense clusters of guests around the fire.

He bowed over Charlotte's hand and she offered him an almost imperceptible wink. Having delivered Nicky to a marriageable female, Anna left to organize some other campaign.

"Lord Amherst, you must remember my brother, Capt—the honorable Mr. Stanton?"

Her eyes were full of laughter now. Sly minx.

“But of course, Mr. Stanton.” He and Ian exchanged bows, Ian’s handsome face more wintry than the wind battering the castle’s stones.

Charlotte turned to the tall blonde in half-mourning beside her. “And you will of course already be acquainted with Mrs. Collingswood.”

Ian’s sister had the very devil in her. Emily Collingswood was his mother’s cousin and had spent a great deal of time at Carleigh as a companion for Anna. Nicky no longer felt quite as put-upon by his meddling older sister. He would rather have Anna fuss over him than deal with someone as inwardly devious and outwardly guileless as Lady Charlotte.

The imp turned to her beleaguered brother. “You remember Mrs. Collingswood, of course. We met at another of these Twelve Night fetes. Just before my first Season?”

Just before Ian had been sent away. The Twelfth Night when Nicky had finally persuaded Ian to take full possession of his body—and damnation. He would be needing yet another stroll around the gallery if he allowed his thoughts to dally along that primrose path.

Nicky had been working so hard on that ultimate seduction, he should be surprised if Ian would have remembered if His Highness himself had been in attendance at that Twelve Night.

But Ian surprised him. “You were Miss Graves then.”

“Yes, Mr. Stanton, how kind of you to remember me.”

“Lady Charlotte could do nothing but sing your praises on our journey home. She was awed by your skills.”

How Ian missed both Charlotte and Emily nearly swallowing their tongues, Nicky could not imagine.

“Mrs. Collingwood, will you be favoring us with your long-remembered skill at the pianoforte?”

His clarification was met with a slightly audible exhalation of relief. “I should be pleased to assist my hosts in any way possible.”

Charlotte recovered her equanimity. “What would please me most at the moment is to rest before dinner.”

Emily followed Charlotte’s lead. “Goodness, Lady Charlotte, you must be greatly fatigued from your travels. If you gentlemen would excuse us, I believe I can show Lady Charlotte to her room.”

Many of the guests had already excused themselves from the reception. Supper would not be served until after the midnight service and he expected most of the assembled party would take to their rooms to rest.

“Could someone be similarly dispatched to my assistance, Lord Amherst?”

Not “Would you assist me to find my room?” If Ian were not such an utter bloody idiot, they could be enjoying hours of rediscovery before the celebrations began this evening. Instead, all Nicky could expect was assuaging his needs alone or suffering the dull ache of unfulfilled want.

“Certainly.” Nicky nodded at a footman near the door who immediately stepped toward them. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Stanton.”

The dark slashes of Ian’s brows drew into a sharp V over his eyes. Had he expected Nicky to plead with him? To throw himself at his feet?

“And to you, Lord Amherst.”

Ian had departed with the footman when Charlotte slipped back in through the doors to the hall.

Nicky held up his hand to ward off any more of her many alterations to their plan. “Please don’t delay your rest on account of my lonely despair. Why should your holiday be bleak?”

“A brief word, my lord?”

Nicky nodded.

“My brother claims to value his solitude, but I have known him all my life. If there is one thing he cannot abide, it is being ignored.”

After a glance around the nearly deserted salon, Nicky offered her a lightning-quick salute. “I yield to your superior strategy, General.”

“Keep to the plan, sir, and all will be well.”

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Ian was trapped. Pinioned as surely as if in irons.

And quite utterly mortified by having been laid low by a tight-fitting coat.

Cursing himself and his missing valet, he stomped over to the pull cord to summon a servant. With both arms held behind his back, he was reduced to yanking at the cord with his teeth. As he waited, panting, he berated himself for leaving his valet back in Oxfordshire. Ian had been on the outs with Timpet since his return and couldn’t say for sure whether the frost had ensued because Ian’s maiming destroyed the cut of his coat or because Ian had dragged the chap to Norwich for nearly a year. He could say that as unappealing as this trip to Carleigh was, it would be far more so with Timpet’s icy glare and glacial silences.

A slender man with silver hair and an elegant mien entered his room. Before Ian could even explain his predicament, the man slipped around Ian and freed his aching shoulders with a quick tug on his cuffs.

“Thank you. Thank you indeed...?” He let his intonation rise. He would definitely want to leave this fellow a generous vail.

“Simmons, sir.”

“Thank you, Simmons.”

Simmons brushed the jacket and placed it in the wardrobe with his other clothes.



Ian could manage buttons on his own, his right fingers having become astoundingly dexterous in the last eighteen months, but Simmons' quiet efficiency at finishing the small rows on Ian's waistcoat was so unlike the huffs of Timpet that Ian let his hand fall to his sides.

"There are several gentlemen enjoying whiskey and tobacco in the India Room, sir. Will you be joining that party?"

"I prefer to rest. I'll take my dressing gown for now."

"Very good, sir." Simmons turned up the left sleeve with far more ease and grace than Timpet. "While you're resting, sir, I could stitch up your shirts for you. Then you wouldn't need to risk a pin jabbing at you."

Why had Timpet never suggested such a thing? Ian couldn't count all the pinpricks he'd received, or the number of times his sleeve had fallen into the soup or the marmalade or once across the face and into the generous décolletage of the vicar's wife in Mundesley.

"That would be much appreciated, Simmons. Tell me, how was I fortunate enough to receive you as an answer to my summons?"

"As Lord Amherst was aware that you did not travel with your valet, sir, he instructed me to stand ready to offer any assistance you might need."

"How thoughtful of him."

"Yes, sir. His lordship has a very generous spirit."

In plainer speech, Ian was such an invalid Nicky felt compelled to act as maiden aunt, managing Ian's life. He thought of telling Simmons he would need no further help, but it was apparent he did and such a pointless action would no doubt make Nicky feel further compelled to discuss the matter with Ian. That was something to be avoided. An end to future pinpricks and even more so any future embarrassment caused by the impertinent actions of his sleeves made Simmons' offer impossible to refuse.

Simmons had already draped most of Ian's upper wardrobe over his arm. "I shall return these before you'll need them for the evening, sir. Please call if you have any other needs arise." He slipped out of the door as gracefully as he had managed everything else.

Simmons' innocuous comment regarding arising needs brought Ian back to painful awareness of that moment when Nicky had touched him.

After his discharge from medical care, Ian had not expected an immediate return to his previous health, but as the months passed it seemed that Badajoz had cost him more than his arm. Once he recovered from the fever of infection, his body had reclaimed its former vigor—save for one particularly vital organ. While Ian at first had enjoyed the respite from his prick trying to order him about, he grew alarmed when aside from an occasional dream, it seemed nothing sparked his particular interest.

An attack of impotence was hardly something to be discussed with peers. He could not even imagine visiting an apothecary to explain the difficulty. Apparently there was no need. His cure was at hand. That brief contact with Nicky accomplished what Ian's will had not, gifting relief and agony in equal measures.

It took only picturing Nicky's generous mouth and Ian fumbled to release the fall of his trousers. The joy he'd heard when Nicky said his name became Nicky groaning it as Ian sucked him to completion. His prick lengthened, filled, ached. He stared at the head pushing through the foreskin, almost amazed. One stroke of his hand and the sensitive shaft was bared. He took a grip, the pressure of his fist at once familiar and strange. Arousal pulsed down his legs, up his spine, blotting out sense.

Another stroke, tighter, turning his wrist. Deep rich pleasure rippled out from his belly until he had to bite his lip to contain a groan. How long? God, how long had it been? How had he gone without this delicious agony?

Those nights in Spain before Badajoz, as Ian lay awake imagining what horror or boredom the next day might bring, he had sought the lethargy release could offer. Some of his men, even some of the officers had turned to each other, and Ian himself had turned a blind eye to it all. He was scarcely in a position to reprimand them for acting on the memories that brought Ian gasping and shuddering in his fist. The grip of a man's body milking his prick, the act of domination, the exhilaration of another man's surrender.

It wasn't as if he didn't see a look in the eye of some of the other officers, or become aware of broad shoulders and narrow hips, whether the admirable physique was found beneath the pale complexion of his fellow countrymen or the swarthier cheeks of a Portuguese, and it wasn't only fear of a court martial and public humiliation or even a hanging that kept Ian from acting on the longing. It was fear that such an act would never measure up to the memories, and an equal part of fear that it would. That he would fall into such a craving for it he could never right himself again.

It was safer to live unaware and take his ease only in that best and worst memory, Nicky split wide on Ian's prick, the clench of muscles as Nicky's body shrank and tightened in pain as horribly right as it was exquisitely wrong.

Ian sped up his strokes, and just as it had those long nights on the Continent, the burn of shame in his gut somehow doubled the sweetness of pleasure filling his balls. He pressed hard with his thumbnail on the slit, the pain bringing him over the narrow edge. A moment to hope his aim at the chamber pot stayed true before his body seized and he jerked out that long, hot flood, legs wide, head flung back, mind's eye fixed on the image of his seed splattered across Nicky's face.

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Ian might have done better without that brief release, for it only intensified his awareness of Nicky as the guests gathered in the hall to don wraps for their brief walk to chapel. Although were he not so attuned, he might have scarcely seen Nicky at all. Every time he sought a glimpse, Nicky was engaged in

conversation with some gentleman or a lady, a conversation that usually ended in great merriment for both parties. On one occasion the conversation was with Charlotte, but Ian was too far away to hear what brought such a rosy hue to her cheeks. As Charlotte had taken up such respectable company as the Widow Collingswood, Ian had felt safe in leaving her side.

The lady glanced his way, and Ian averted his gaze. Collingswood. He remembered hearing about him now. Captain Collingswood had been with the Third Division, killed during the looting that followed the victory at Badajoz, killed—as Ian had heard it—by his own men. He felt her gaze upon him and offered her a bow, approaching them to offer his sister his arm as they went to the small church, but Nicky swept Charlotte away, smiling down into her face.

Quite at point non plus, Ian checked and turned the offer of his arm to Mrs. Collingswood. She accepted as graciously as if she had not noticed his faltered step, laying her gloved hand on his coat. “How very thoughtful of you, Mr. Stanton. Your sister speaks highly of you.”

Ian had gone from reading classics in his purple robes to the buff and scarlet of a second lieutenant, with no time at all to learn how to converse with a lady. What did one say in such a case?

“Oh. Ah.”

“And Lord Amherst also.”

“She has known his lordship since she was just out of the schoolroom,” Ian explained.

Lacy clumps of snow still fell, yet slowly enough that the cobblestone path was well-cleared by servants wielding stable brooms. Hundreds of candles in the chapel threw enough light to gild the small drifts with a gold luster. Such a view coupled with the light scent of horses from the brooms made Ian fancy the sight and smells recaptured the Nativity.

“Oh, no, sir, you mistake me. Lord Amherst speaks very highly of you. Though I am certain he is much in Lady Charlotte’s esteem as well,” Mrs. Collingswood said.

Ian glanced ahead. Now that Nicky was in the vestibule, he had surrendered his hat, and his hair gleamed with as bright a halo as any of the saints portrayed in the stained glass windows. But Ian knew the lie in that. He had seen Nicky with those very curls upon awakening, twisted up on his temples like a satyr’s horns. An apt resemblance as Nicky was then wont to pipe a suggestion to lure Ian back into bed. Somehow the weight of his responsibilities, whether an examination or a translation to be given that day, never felt as pressing when Nicky looked like that. Pure devilry at great odds with his cherubic features.

Nicky escorted Charlotte directly into the family pew in front. When Ian would have stopped mid-nave, Mrs. Collingswood continued forward down the aisle until it was clear her aim was the same destination. Not knowing quite how to correctly steer a lady, he would have delivered her to her relations and found a seat elsewhere, but Nicky’s father greeted him like a son, with a familial clasp of Ian’s forearm, and ushered him into their pew.

Carleigh's face bore the deep grooves of age, but Ian sensed it was more from joy than cares. Lord Carleigh had always been as ready with a laugh as his son. The marquess's handsome weathered face might well be Nicky's someday.

At the thought, a hollow regret echoed beneath Ian's breastbone in answer to the last of the joyful peals summoning the party to church. He certainly would see no such future day. Whatever had happened that Twelfth Night past, he and Nicky could only ever meet as friends. Nicky had his duties to family and title, and Ian—well, he would have to find where duty lay now that he was neither fish nor fowl, not soldier, but without use to anyone.

Ian found himself between Nicky's sister, Lady Anna, and Mrs. Collingswood. Charlotte, seated on the widow's other side, appeared to be fighting off a giggle, so Nicky on her left must be keeping her amused. As they rose for the processional, Ian tried to fix her with a stern glare, but she only fluttered her lashes at him. Short of lunging across Mrs. Collingswood and laying his hand upon her, Ian failed to see how he was supposed to correct her behavior. He wondered what Edward had been doing to try to keep the hoyden from disgracing them all.

His own behavior was hardly a sterling example, since although they had been honored by a bishop as celebrant, he could not keep his mind on the joyful service. His attention and even his gaze strayed to where Nicky sat at the end of the pew, dark gold side whiskers angled as if to deliberately accent his lean jaw and wide soft mouth. How could Ian ever endure a week of not staring at Nicky's mouth, of not recalling all the things he could do—had done—with that mouth? It would be far easier if the recipient seemed conscious of Ian's gaze, if Nicky were embarrassed, disconcerted or even amused by it. Any response and Ian knew he would be free of this childish urge to somehow regain Nicky's attention, to seek his approval or disapprobation.

During the Eucharist, Mrs. Collingswood whispered, "Is something amiss, Mr. Stanton?"

Startled, Ian looked at her. "Not at all, madam."

"It is just that you are chewing on your lower lip with great industry. I have been known to unwittingly tread on a gentleman's foot."

"Nothing of the kind, Mrs. Collingswood. I apologize if I have given you distress."

"I know what it is."

Ian gave his lower lip further abuse while shielding his sudden inhalation at her remark. "Yes?"

"It is concern for Lady Charlotte. I assure you, sir, she is in the best of company. Lord Amherst would keep her safe against all the world."

Nicky—and Charlotte? The candle flames bent and blurred as Ian tried to reorder his world. The Eucharist turned to chalk in his mouth. What level of sin was vomiting the Host?

Nicky to be his brother-in-law? Was that why Charlotte had insisted on this trip, been so eager, so full of questions about Nicky? Was this to be Ian's expiation, to give his sister in marriage to the man who had been his lover?

He gazed at the Holy Family in the crèche, considering all that they had been required to endure for the world's salvation. How disgraceful that Ian could not even let this unnatural infatuation die a normal death. Of course, Nicky had been happy to see him, the greeting reflected the warmth and affection due the season and their long acquaintance. Now Nicky desired a deeper bond, one of family. If he were planning to offer for Charlotte, it was plain Nicky had put those illicit fumbblings out of his mind.

It was past time for Ian to do the same.

## Chapter Three

After a rich supper that would have tested even a royal larder—which in turn tested the strength of many a waistcoat button—the gentlemen of the house party showed every sign of continuing their celebration of the Savior’s birth until well past dawn of that happy day. The ladies were all safely abed—Charlotte twice accounted for—and with his resolution to keep his unrequited lust locked safely in the back of his mind, Ian began to enjoy the party. During his recuperative exile in Norwich, he had mastered the ability to play whist aided by a small wooden-covered spring that held the cards for him while he drew to follow suit. With the other players deep in their cups, Ian grew tired of answering “What is trumps?” so he retired from the table and went to observe a billiards game.

In addition to his button-sized playing card holder, the clever craftsman he had met in Norwich had fashioned a wooden bridge for him so that he could aim the cue stick. Still no easy feat, play required pressure from his stump to keep the stick in the groove as he imparted momentum with his right hand. He thought himself no worse a player than he had been before. After watching the looks exchanged at the table, Ian decided he’d enjoy bugging that pitying stare out of Weatherby’s eyes. As he crossed the hall, intent on retrieving the bridge from his room, he nearly collided with someone who stepped into his path.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Captain Stanton.” The interloper bowed politely.

Ian nodded in return then froze. He hadn’t known Julian Lewes would be here. From all accounts, Lewes never left London, preferring to maintain a readier access to all avenues of debauchery.

They had never been formally introduced, but it was impossible not to hear stories of Julian Lewes, to not have seen him pointed out in loud whispers. Lewes took pleasure wherever he chose to find it and if his fortune and family were not enough to deter dangerous allegations, he was reputed a lethal duelist, though he never issued the challenge himself.

Ian would have a strong word of warning for Charlotte in the morning, though the *on dit* was that Lewes was inclined to make other men the targets of his seductions. How even having the Duke of Norfolk as his grandfather allowed Lewes to still move freely in society with such a reputation Ian could not fathom.

Ian could see how Lewes might hold a certain fascination for some. He was handsome, as classically beautiful as a statue. He put Ian in mind of a panther he had seen when his nurse had taken them to Astley’s Exhibition. There was beauty in the pacing beast’s graceful strength and clean muscle under the midnight

coat, but not even the cage bars between them could spare Ian the fear of immolation he had felt from staring into the flame-colored eyes.

“Captain Stanton?”

Ian was still frozen, though he knew his ruminations could have taken but a second.

“Rather I should say Mr. Stanton then? I see you have forsaken the uniform for that handsome coat. It is quite an improvement from when I saw you last, despite the missing arm.”

Not even the surgeon had made such bald-faced pronouncements about Ian’s injury.

Lewes’ smile brought Ian to an understanding of the allure of creatures like panthers and men such as Lewes. A desire to possess that power and grace, to revel in the illusion of control before being consumed in fire.

He tore his gaze free of Lewes’ eyes to stare at the similarly colored topaz stickpin winking in the starched folds of Lewes’ cravat.

“Merry Christmas, sir.” With a nod, Ian endeavored a polite extrication from the repellent company.

“I do hope you are enjoying the holiday as much as I am. Lord Carleigh and his son are such wonderfully accommodating hosts.”

Ian looked back at Lewes’ face. If this filthy bastard was trying to say— “Yes, the whole family take great pleasure in celebrating the season.”

“Lord Amherst in particular. I’ve been enjoying his hospitality tremendously. I came up last week, you know.”

Something tried to break free under Ian’s breastbone, prickling like fire on the inside of his skin. The animal within fought for release, the creature of pure instinct which had lent him the strength to plunge his sword forward until the resistance of cloth and skin yielded to the liquid grip of guts and blood, the strength to withstand the shock vibrating up his arm as he swung at head and neck.

No saber here, his fist would do. The clarity of battle-readiness would direct his arm to connect precisely with the mole on the side of Lewes’ mouth.

But he stopped short of planting his fist, a mere breath away from that irreversible action. Perhaps it was the amused tilt to Lewes’ black brows, the way the lip so near the mole lifted in a half-smile of success.

Dragging his animalistic rage back under lock and key, Ian forced the tendons in his hand to relax. “I am surprised you could tear yourself away from Town. You must find the country dreadfully dull.”

“Oh, the right company can enliven any setting as I am sure you are aware, Mr. Stanton. And the current company is most enervating, indeed. In fact, I am planning on some rousing cheer at this very moment, if you will excuse me.” Lewes nodded. “Again, my compliments to your valet. If I hadn’t known, I wouldn’t even have noticed the disfigurement.”

Lewes turned for the doors to the India Room, leaving Ian alone in the hall. As he wrestled his rage for control again, he was forced to admit that what had nearly earned Lewes a fist and Ian a dawn appointment had less to do with outrage at the insinuations and much more to do with the bitter twist of jealousy in his heart.

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Nicky was full to bursting with Charlotte's advice. To have Ian here, to have him close by at last and yet be unable even to look at him was nothing short of hell. Safely obscured by Ian's concentration on his whist game, Nicky had dared enter the India Room to observe Ian for a moment only to find him forced to use a device even for as simple an activity as a hand of cards. A fist of anger and pride gripped the breath in Nicky's lungs, along with a soul-deep determination to see that the fool never again felt the need to get blown to pieces just to prove himself good enough.

Charlotte could take her advice and use it to stuff a goose. Before the night was out, he would see Ian and have his reasons on why he had cut off all contact.

Intent on his cause, Nicky took up a flanking position just inside the gallery doors. The lookout provided a view of the main stairs Ian would have to take to go to bed, a venture Nicky suspected he would soon undertake as Ian had never been a candlewaster. Nicky kept ready an excuse, fiddling with the ties on his breeches in case anyone else who happened by wondered what Lord Amherst was doing lurking behind doors.

At a violent burst of noise behind him, he snapped his head up, striking it on the doorknob. Vision somewhat blurred, he turned to see Ian pop out of the salon doors like a clockwork toy. Excuses, advice and caution lost their foothold in Nicky's dazed brain. He had rehearsed a speech as eloquent as any his father had delivered to the House of Lords, but when Ian strode toward him, those words took mount and cantered off as if the last hunt of the season had just been announced. Flushed by his own quarry, he bleated, "Ian?"

Striding closer, Ian grabbed Nicky's arm and shoved him aside before swinging the gallery door shut. At first, the loss of light from the main hall left Nicky nightblind, but as his eyes adjusted to what little light filtered in through one of the gallery's narrow windows, he thought darkness might be preferable to beholding the fury on Ian's face.

"Ian—what—?"

"Lewes?" The name seemed to choke Ian. "What are you thinking? That foul abomination is no doubt poxed and if you—" Ian swallowed and ran a hand through his hair.

The condition of his hair and cravat suggested both had born the brunt of Ian's distress. Nicky was still trying to piece together Ian's complaint when his hand shot forward and grabbed Nicky by his own cravat, hauling him forward and crushing their mouths together.



The rough, angry kiss was unlike anything that had ever passed between them. Ian used Nicky's mouth, teeth and tongue, forcing his lips apart. Nicky gripped Ian's shoulders, pulled him close and let him take whatever he sought to find with his tongue sweeping deep inside. Ian's groan was barely more than a harsh breath, yet Nicky felt the change in the kiss. No less demanding, but it no longer felt like punishment. Ian drew Nicky's tongue back into his own mouth with a suction so sweet and strong the pull might have been on his cock.

It didn't matter why Ian had stopped answering his letters, why he had disappeared so soon after his return, because this thing between them was still alive, could still make Nicky willing to risk anything simply to bring a smile to Ian's lips, to hear him laugh.

This time they would do it. They'd go to Italy and live in sun and smiles. Where the wrong whisper wouldn't mean their necks.

Ian made that groan again, the sound still soft, but his hard cock jutted against Nicky's. Something brushed his hair like the touch of Ian's hand when it had so often pushed the curls from Nicky's forehead.

But such a feat was impossible. Ian's only hand still gripped Nicky's cravat.

As suddenly as he had kissed him, Ian released him—shoved him into the door.

Their breaths came heavy between them, wisps of steam visible in the unheated chill of the gallery.

Then of all things, Ian executed a perfectly formal bow. "I beg your pardon, Amherst," he said with no more feeling than if he delivered an inadvertent elbow in a crush at a soiree.

There were a million things Nicky should have said, but what came from his still-burning lips was "What for?"

"For far too much," Ian said, revealing a ghost of his old self, the unexpected humor that came up like wildflowers between cobblestones. Then he bowed again and left.

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Thirty-six guests were staying for the full party, but Father and Anna might as well have decided to host the entire *ton* because the elusive Mr. Ian Stanton confounded all of Nicky's efforts to catch him alone Christmas morning despite a bitter north wind that imprisoned everyone in the castle. Nicky had been driven to considering the extreme of hiring someone to bind and gag Ian in the hayloft just so they could have a private conversation, when Charlotte rallied round to propose a riding party as soon as the wind let up.

It was for the best. Nicky didn't know how to get in touch with any criminals, though he would daresay Simmons might be of some help.

Several other gentlemen and ladies were keen to escape the indoors and a party of ten set off in the early afternoon.

In deference to the ladies, they maintained a decorous pace. Nicky's Galen kept twitching his ears and shaking his head as if he could not believe he had been dragged from a warm stall to mince along the fields instead of flying over fences. Galen was only too eager to take up the trot that brought him side by side with Ian's mount.

Ian immediately glanced about as if he sought rescue in larger company, but Nicky had timed it well. The path narrowed through a copse, forcing them to keep to no more than two abreast, and the party spread out long ways. Charlotte and a few ladies were behind them, all of the gentlemen and the Dowager Duchess of Coventry rode ahead. Ian's gaze sent a final appeal to the impassive hemlocks and beeches before staring straight between his mount's ears, his spine as fixed and rigid as his gaze.

"You never answered my letters," Nicky said.

Ian's head didn't turn. "There was nothing more to say."

"After all you swore to me?"

Dark red stained Ian's cheeks, more than could be attributed to the frosty air. "We were boys."

"And five years later we are men who no longer feel that passion."

"As it should be. That is all in the past."

"And my best stud's an untried colt. You bloody kissed me last night."

That at least sparked something. Ian's head shot 'round, eyes wide with alarm. Although no one could possibly be in earshot, Ian's voice lowered till it was scarcely audible over the ring of hooves on frozen ground. "And I have apologized. My judgment was impaired by—"

"Don't try to tell me you were in alts. I know you, Ian. You had barely a sip of whiskey."

"Nevertheless, I express deepest regrets for my—"

"Regret? Of all the stupid, doltish, empty-headed—I wanted you to do it, you unmitigated ass."

Ian shook his head. "Nicky—Amherst. Even the Greeks knew there was a time when a man had to put aside his *eromenos* and undertake a man's obligation as a citizen and head of a family."

Nicky remembered the papers he had found behind lock and key in the college library, how he had brought them to Ian for translation, aching with joy to hear love between men not only accepted but celebrated.

"There are ways of meeting the expectations of both heart and duty. What of the lovers described by Aristophanes, the ones who forever seek to join themselves to their missing halves, whether it is man to woman, woman to woman or man to man? Are you not the same man who finished the translation and looked straight at me to whisper, 'He is so right, Nicky. That is what I have found with you'?"

Ian looked away. They approached the edge of the copse. Rejoining the others would end the conversation.

When Ian looked Nicky's way again, there was little of that remembered joy to be seen on Ian's sharp features. "But we do not live among the ancients. Such physical union risks our necks. And as I recall, you found little to enjoy in our attempt."

They had reached the field. Nicky read imminent flight in the tension of Ian's hand on the reins, the shift in his seat. He was going to urge his mount to a trot, catch the others up and vanish into the crowd where further direct speech would be impossible. Nicky reached out and gathered Ian's reins, forcing the mare to stop.

"For a man who could read Greek as easily as many do plain English, you are incredibly lacking in native intelligence. We didn't know what we were doing. Of course it was uncomfortable. But I have learned—"

Ian snatched away the reins, wheeling the mare so tightly her eyes showed white. "How?"

"I beg you will not take your idiocy out on my horses, Ian. Rowena has a soft mouth."

Ian eased his grip on the reins, but his voice was still cold enough to rival the air. "How?"

"How do you think, you bloody fool? The point is there is much we can share. The pleasure is boundless and with proper caution—God, what I will show you."

Ian dug his heels into Rowena's sides and urged her off at a canter, flying across the field, far from the riding party, headed for—oh Sweet Christ, the folly. The ditch that kept the picturesque image of grazing sheep in sight of the castle without the actual sheep shit to litter the lawn. Most of the snow had been swept from the high field by the morning's wind, but it surely filled the ditch. If Rowena and Ian took flight there unaware, the fall would break both their necks.

He heeled Galen after them, calling out a warning, but he was sure his voice would be lost under the wind and pounding hooves. Even if Ian remembered the exact location of the folly, or it was miraculously clear of snow, could he take the jump with only one limb for balance? A low try for certain, but the folly was wider than any fence Nicky had taken on a hunt. As if aware of pursuit, Ian's path veered, no longer on a trajectory to the folly but to the style in the fence farther upfield. Rowena was a good hunter and could easily clear it, but if Ian lost his seat...

Nicky's own heart and stomach parted ways, like he could sense the power gathered beneath him, as if he too made the dizzying leap into space on ninety stone of horse in flight. As Rowena cleared the style and landed in the next field, the man atop her pitched dangerously forward onto her neck, nearly dangling off to the left. Nicky's pulse echoed in his ears, loud even over the thud of Galen's hooves. He counted off the beats...one-two-three...before Ian righted himself and sped into the distance. Nicky drew a deep breath and turned Galen back to the rest of the riders. If Ian didn't come to his senses soon, Nicky might break the man's neck himself.

## Chapter Four

Ian tugged at his cravat, itching to be free of the starched cloth and the high collar of his coat. What the devil was taking Simmons? Every bit of sinew and bone—both real and phantom—ached for a chance to settle into the mattress and forget the whole blasted holiday.

He wished he could lay the fault for his pains on the ride this afternoon, but Rowena had a softer gait than he deserved, especially after his dash pell-mell for land unpeopled by the heir to Carleigh. Upon his return, he had stayed with a groom to be sure she had not suffered from his ham-fisted treatment and seen to her getting a soft warm mash as a reward for the exercise.

No amount of mash or currying could excuse either his behavior toward a creature under his care or his assault on Nicky. Whatever the provocation—and Ian should have realized a man like Lewes could scarcely be counted on to speak the truth—Nicky hadn't deserved the violence of Ian's temper any more than had the gentle bay mare.

When at last the door opened, Ian spun 'round to be relieved of his coat, sufficiently irritated by Simmons' delayed arrival to forgo his usual greeting.

Perhaps the fellow had been overindulging in whatever libations were being offered to celebrate the day in the servants' hall because the valet was clumsy rather than deft, struggling just to ease the coat from Ian's shoulders.

"And I shall be retiring, Simmons."

Instead of the expected "Very good, sir," the man left his arms pinned behind his back and brushed his fingers beneath Ian's cravat. The unanticipated contact awakened Ian's skin, his flesh alight with delightful ripples of sensation.

"What the devil?"

He would have turned to face the man, but Simmons stepped closer, hands moving to remove the starched tie while pressing his hips intimately against Ian's arse.

The shock and terror in his gut, even the pain of his confined shoulders, could not dampen the rush of arousal evoked by the touch, by the strength of another man's embrace.

"Simmons. I must ask that you remember yourself." Ian twisted free, retreating to place a wall at his vulnerable back, but his all-too-vulnerable front was exposed to—Nicky.

The identity of his assailant did little to mitigate Ian's dismay.

"Are you mad?" Ian struggled with his coat, anger lending him sufficient strength to tear one of the sleeves from the body.

Nicky locked the door and removed his own coat. "It is Boxing Day, after all. Simmons has the evening off, as do almost all of the servants. Surely you would not deprive the man of his well-earned holiday."

"It is not Boxing Day for another hour," Ian asserted as the solemn toll of the chapel bell made him a liar. He flung his torn coat to the floor.

Nicky's cravat parted company with his shirt, revealing a neck still defined with the strong tendons Ian had once traced with his tongue. Quelling thoughts of other flesh his mouth longed to revisit grew more impossible with each piece of clothing Nicky dropped onto the Aubusson rug.

"What are you doing?"

"I am preparing for bed. That bed." Nicky indicated the four-poster in the center of the room.

"Is the castle so crowded the son of the house has been turned out of his rooms?"

"If it pleases you to think so." Nicky straightened, torso bared to Ian's gaze.

Firelight gilded Nicky's skin, gleaming on the fine hairs of his breast, drawing Ian's eye to the waist of Nicky's breeches where the hair thickened and darkened. The garnet on his signet ring flashed as Nicky's hands moved to those buttons.

Ian shut his eyes. "No."

"No?" The amusement in Nicky's voice had Ian looking again, forgetting what imminent danger had prompted his action. But Nicky only bent to remove his shoes and stockings, gifting Ian with the sight of the firm curve of his backside under the tight kerseymere breeches.

Nicky brought his hands to rest above his hips, fingers disappearing under the waistband. "Is it truly no or is that what the good soldier, the dutiful second son, feels compelled to say?"

Ian's throat burned as it tightened, but he could not look away.

"Whom do you seek to save with your denial, me or you?" Nicky persisted. He stepped closer, but made no move to touch Ian. "Why are we to be denied pleasure when you must know how precious and brief life is?"

"The risk of—"

"You threw yourself against a wall of French rifles in service to your father's idea of honor. Can you not permit yourself something your own honor knows is right? How can it be wrong when we both desire it?" Nicky shoved his breeches down and stepped free, the proof of his desire standing proud and hard.

As swiftly as snow falling off a steep roof, Ian's body dropped into a pit of raw need. He made a last effort to find any handhold which might keep him from the abyss.

"I do want..." *you* "...this, but only what we did before. We cannot, I will not..." He tried making a gesture to communicate the specific deed.

“Bugger me?” Nicky grinned. “Fuck me?”

Despite Ian’s shock, the coarseness of Nicky’s words brought a faster beat of blood to Ian’s prick. That unabated grin suggested Nicky knew damned well what effect he had wrought. His next step brought Nicky close enough to try the truth with his hand. Fingers traced the outline of Ian’s prick beneath a layer of wool and linen, a light pressure that offered nothing beyond exquisite torment. A quick hard rub against the crown, dragging the linen across the damp skin until heat pulsed from the tip, the touch as unerringly accurate as Ian’s own.

Pleasure stole his breath as surely as a fist to the stomach. Sucking the air through his teeth, he reached a hand to Nicky’s shoulder, hips tipping into the caress.

Nicky leaned forward until his breath moved against Ian’s ear. “While I find your concern utterly charming, what makes you believe you could take my arse if I didn’t allow it?”

Ignoring the wail of protest from his prick and balls, Ian transferred his grasp to Nicky’s wrist to still the motion of his palm. “I am well aware that many now consider me less a man, but with all your protestations, I would have thought—”

Nicky laughed. “Christ, Ian, try not to be more of an ass than the good Lord intended you to be. You couldn’t best me even when you had four inches and two-stone advantage.”

“I’ve never had two stones on you, you country-fed beast.” The retort came unbidden to his lips, their long habit of verbal sparring impossible to amend.

“By God, how I’ve missed you.” Nicky chuckled and yanked Ian’s cravat free.

Ian felt his own lips curve in answer. There had always been so much laughter between them. For years, that absence cut as keenly as the loss of Nicky’s touch.

Shoving away bolster and counterpane, Nicky flung himself onto the bed. “Now. Kindly divest yourself of those clothes and get up here before I am forced to seek other amusements.”

Nicky arranged himself in a gloriously naked display, familiar laugh and cornflower-blue eyes at odds with the strangeness of a body more heavily muscled, more thickly pelted, but no less enthralling than the one that had filled Ian’s dreams as he slept in tents on the edges of battlefields. Longing clawed deeper hollows than all those years of denial, until again Ian was deprived of sufficient breath.

Such was the assault wrought on his senses by Nicky’s sprawl across the mattress that Ian had stripped away waistcoat and shirt and unfastened his breeches before Nicky’s last words attached themselves to a meaning. The haze of lust clouding Ian’s mind took on a red veil of anger.

“Other amusements?”

Nicky sighed and leaned forward, taking Ian by the arm. “I swear to provide you with a detailed history of the past five years in writing and affix the bloody Carleigh seal to my testimony. But if I don’t have you right now, one of us will end up dead.”

Nicky pulled him with a force too gentle to be compelling, but it was easier by far to let Nicky drag Ian onto the bed than to make the decision himself.

Nicky rolled, trapping Ian beneath, the press of hard warm skin such a shock Ian had to close his eyes against the sensation. When he opened them, there was Nicky, the aching familiar blue eyes and full lips all Ian could hope of heaven.

“Which of us?”

“Does it matter?” Nicky rocked against him.

Ian thought again of Aristophanes and Phaedrus and their tales of separated lovers. Of Achilles’ terrible grief for Patroclus. “No.”

Nicky kissed the word from his mouth in a gentle press of lips, but Ian brought his hand up to tangle at last in those curls and pinned Nicky tight, an upward thrust of hips to feel the harder, wetter kiss of Nicky’s cock on Ian’s belly.

Nicky wrenched free and reared up, hands working to finish his duty as substitute valet, shoving away Ian’s breeches and small clothes until at last their pricks slapped together. Ian thought he had exorcised it from his memory, but there was no forgetting that sensation, the silky heat of Nicky’s cock against his.

Adding his spit to slick the way, Nicky held them together, rubbing the thick ridges against each other, washing the whole shaft with heat and pressure. Sweet enough to die from but not enough. God, not enough.

Ian reached up with both arms to pull Nicky down against him, and then let his good arm drop as the left hung useless, withered stump bared to Nicky’s gaze. Nicky caught Ian’s half-arm as it fell and bent to press a kiss on the scarred folds of skin. Although the wound was ill-repaired to the point of numbness, the intimacy on his maimed flesh sent a shock of sensation up and down his arm, making his ghost fingers tingle.

Suddenly Ian was ashamed of the way he had made Nicky coax him into this, as if he were somehow unmoved by what Nicky offered.

“That part about not having you or dying. Nicky, now, please.”

Nicky dropped down, stretched out. Ian flattened his palm against Nicky’s back, urging him on. He slid forward an inch and their pricks aligned, trapped together in hard heat and driving friction. No tenderness now, Ian couldn’t have stood it. Nicky seemed to understand that only violence could tear through Ian’s hard-won restraint, meeting each thrust of hips with matching force.

Openmouthed kisses, shared breath and—as an errant tooth met an eager lip—shared blood, but Ian couldn’t make himself care whose blood had spilled. All that mattered was the rut of rigid flesh, and the sound of Nicky’s groans trapped between them as they strained together.

A plea rose in Ian's throat, though what more he would demand he could not say. Much as he wanted to ride the sharp, sweet edge of satisfaction forever, he needed the completion that would burn away what remained of the distance between them, bind them with slick seed.

"Now, Nicky." Ian's palm slid on sweat as he pressed lower, hand wide across Nicky's arse to draw him even closer. "Come to it."

Nicky gasped, a short choked sound, and spilled hot and slippery across their bellies. The first splash of warmth from inside Nicky's body on Ian's prick took him over, dropping him into long spasms of blissful relief.

Uncaring of the solid bulk sinking down on him, Ian would have surrendered consciousness in favor of heedless sleep, but Nicky lifted himself away, forcing Ian's attention to the clammy state of his belly.

He sat up, catching Nicky under the chin with his stump.

"Ow. What the hell?"

"My breeches. The linens."

Nicky rubbed his chin. "Bugger your breeches."

Ian couldn't say who broke first. The laughter came almost immediately, great gulps of it, until they were breathless and their faces wet with tears. He collapsed on his back. Nicky swiped his thumb across Ian's cheek. "I did miss you. And all this."

Ian knew what he meant. No one had ever known him better. Since they had first met Nicky had been the brighter half of Ian's heart, sharing the joy that followed in Nicky's wake. But that had never been just Ian's; Nicky shared his light with everyone.

Those thoughts linked darkly, one to the other until the twinned pleasures of laughter and sexual satisfaction were buried under a cold weight beneath Ian's ribs. Perhaps knowing would be worse, but he could no longer stand the uncertainty, could not face Lewes until Ian learned the truth to outface the man's lies.

"You swore you would tell me of the last five years."

Nicky's laughter disappeared as swiftly as the sun behind leaden clouds. "You cannot allow us even a moment to savor our reunion? You are without a doubt misery's most ardent suitor, Ian Stanton."

Ian turned his head from the hard look in Nicky's eyes, making busy with kicking away breeches, reaching down to wipe at the cloying seed with soiled smallclothes. What if there was truth to Nicky's accusations? Ian never asked for unhappiness, but avoiding it served no good purpose.

"And if I am, what does that make you?"

"An utter fool." With a long sigh, Nicky retrieved the bolster and propped himself upon it, apparently unconcerned with his nudity.

Ian longed for a nightshirt. His stump was not the only disfiguring souvenir he had brought home from the Peninsula. An ill-knitted scar the size of a fist blossomed over his ribs to mark where the shrapnel



that had taken his hand had also sought his heart. After envisioning himself trying to wrestle the shirt over his head while Nicky laughed from the bed, Ian contented himself with hunching over a pillow placed on his lap.

“What is it you feel you must know?” Nicky’s voice was still heavy from his sigh.

“Lewes.” The name rushed from Ian’s lips. “That filthy bastard told me—”

“That filthy bastard is a good friend.”

“What sort of friend could such a man possibly be?”

“I’ll tell you if you stop shrieking like a fishwife.”

Outrage drove Ian’s fist into the pillow. “Fishwife?”

“An aggrieved peacock then.” It wasn’t quite up to Nicky’s usual smile.

“Lewes,” Ian said again. He would not let Nicky bait him to a false trail, though Ian suspected he already knew the answer.

“You truly wish to know?”

“No. But I must.”

“What a quiz you are. Very well.” Nicky settled farther back against the bolster. “Julian had a younger brother who was a year ahead of us at school, do you remember?”

Ian shook his head.

“Julian came up to visit. You had been gone for more than a year.”

“I wrote you.”

“Yes. A few terse passages on the ineptitude of the quartermaster was definitely the sort of thing to keep the fires burning.” Nicky glanced away and then looked directly into Ian’s eyes. “Julian was—well, Julian. You’ve met him. He spoke to me. He was charming, older and beautiful. He said he wanted to show me his new tack, but I knew why he summoned me to the stable.”

Ian had demanded this, but with supper curdling in his belly, he couldn’t bear anymore. He turned away.

Swift as a hawk, Nicky snatched Ian’s chin, forcing his gaze up.

“I have heard enough.” Ian tried to pull away, but Nicky had a bruising grip.

“No. You wanted this. I dropped to my knees and sucked his cock in that stall. He gave me his direction in London and when I managed a visit, I learned more than you and I could ever find in those missing dialogues of Plato’s Symposium. He fucked my arse until I could barely walk and I loved it. He showed me a club—”

A hard shove freed Ian’s head at last, the force causing his head to snap on his neck. He was free for an instant then Nicky followed after, pinning Ian to the bed. “You asked. You bloody well insisted, so stop acting like you didn’t want to hear every damned word.”

Ian stopped struggling. Not because Nicky was right, but to fend off fresh humiliation. Every breath filled his senses with the mingled smell of their sex and sweat, and Ian's lust, so long mewed up, tore free again. Nicky's weight against him, the heat of skin, the rub of ballocks and prick against his own. Anger and disgust were an insufficient barrier as need came roaring back.

He tried to lock it away. "I shall never be able to look at him—or even at you—without seeing—"

"Then prepare to start a new fashion for wearing horse blinders. Half the men in London have probably had Julian's cock in them one way or another." Nicky shifted and Ian's prick made an embarrassing twitch as it filled anew.

Nicky's narrowed gaze widened abruptly. "Is it like that, then? You like to watch others at it? Get a cock-stand from watching them fuck? A man at Hylas House watched his friend buggered by half the room and said he'd pay a thousand pounds to watch again."

Shame and desire coiled like snakes in Ian's belly. Not to watch Nicky, no. But the idea that there were others, that they sought it. Wanted it. Wanted and freely took that which filled Ian with terror and need.

"Is that what you want? Shall I invite Julian to join us? Do you want to see me split wide open on his cock?"

"Stop your mouth." Ian yanked Nicky's head down again. Ian meant the kiss only to silence Nicky, but he greeted Ian's assault with open passion. The slick pass of Nicky's tongue between Ian's lips licked deeper inside than just his mouth until Ian burned with an all-consuming need to stamp Nicky with ownership, brand him until Julian Lewes and everyone else alive knew this skin, this taste, this man was for Ian alone.

Ian rolled, dragging Nicky beneath, hand holding his chin, thumb rubbing across the full wet lips. Nicky flicked the thick pad with his tongue then drew it into his mouth. An overwhelming sight and sensation, never was there anything as astonishingly lewd as Nicky's tongue and lips suckling Ian's thumb.

Blood filled his prick in a painful rush, and he drove it against Nicky's belly, Nicky returning the rough embrace thrust for thrust. Ian pulled his thumb free, scraping it across Nicky's cheek before swiping the curls back from Nicky's brow.

Pinning him flat with full settled weight between his thighs, Ian demanded, "And what now?"

Nicky blinked. "Now? Are you asking for instructions?"

"What is between you now?"

"Lord, but you are a contrary animal. Friendship. Nothing but friendship. Anything Julian had to offer me was long ago."

"Good. Because I swear, Nicky, if Lewes dares try anything with you again, I'll geld the bastard."

"I am not exactly a helpless female in this, you know."

Ian watched the bob of the apple on Nicky's throat, barely resisting the urge to set teeth to it. "Then I'll damned well geld you both."

Nicky swallowed again. "Very well." But there followed a quick flash of his smile. "But before it comes to that, suck my cock, will you?"

## Chapter Five

Nicky waited to see how Ian would react. Would there be more outraged protests? Or would he unleash the furious caresses Nicky would never have anticipated and certainly would never have expected to find so arousing?

He had forgotten how much fun there was to be had in baiting Ian, teasing him from his dark moods, challenging his painfully rigid views. That such action also brought forth a wildness in his lover that seared them both with its heat was a *bonne bouche* atop the sweetest meal.

What Nicky's demand wrought was an echoing groan before Ian bent to bruise Nicky's lips. There was so much he had dreamed of showing Ian when he finally succumbed, yet all Nicky wanted to do now was lie back and let Ian take what he would from Nicky's mouth before moving onto his jaw and throat. A moment's hesitation, the tingling scrape of teeth, and when Nicky whispered, "Yes," Ian's mouth latched onto the tight skin beneath Nicky's ear and sucked the blood to the surface until Nicky moaned and arched.

Ian had ever been a quick study and he applied the lesson down Nicky's collarbone and even to his nipples, blending teeth, tongue and lips to bring hot pressure hovering at the edge of pain. Nicky lent encouragement with a hand on Ian's head, willing his mouth lower, but as usual, hurrying Ian was pointless. He left marks across Nicky's belly, and no amount of trying to move his cock closer to Ian's mouth brought satisfaction.

For all that Nicky had gained in experience, Ian could still drive him to despair. Frustration added a harsh note to his voice as he gasped, "Whoreson bastard."

Ian's hand squeezed Nicky's hip. "My father would be grieved to hear it."

The laugh happily perished in Nicky's throat as Ian wrapped his lips around the head of Nicky's cock at last. Certainly there had been men with far more experience performing this task for him, but this was Ian, and when he set himself to something, he would have nothing less than perfection.

Perfection played out in the wet caress along the shaft, hand and mouth exciting every nerve, driving Nicky's hips to press upward, seeking more, *please* more. Instead Ian moved, dragged his tongue and then his chin across Nicky's buttocks, a scrape of rough evening whiskers tingling the sac.

Ian had audacity by the score to play the hurt faithful lover. This was practiced skill woven to drive a man insane.

Nicky's throat ached from swallowing back cries and pleas, sounds he feared would crack the oldest stones in the castle were he to free them, when Ian took the shaft in a firm grip and applied his mouth. Ebb

and flow of hard suction and comforting laps with a wet tongue, sensation alternately an agony of need and the sweetness of fulfillment.

As much as Nicky longed for the soft heat of Ian's throat, his rhythm carried Nicky swiftly to the edge. His body trembled with tension, the flood gathering in his balls, when the cursed fiend raised his hellborn head.

The blaze in Ian's dark eyes stilled the protest firmly behind Nicky's lips.

"When he took you did it feel as good as this?" Ian's breath fell hot against the head of Nicky's cock until he was sure he would weep.

He shook his head and then dared the word. "No. No. But—Christ—Ian—" How to tell Ian that he longed for that full possession, the intimacy of bodies connected, all bundled with the gift of Ian's single-minded attention?

Ian growled and dove back onto Nicky's cock, swallowing, pulling him deep into the shocking heat and slick, velvety caress of tongue, mouth, throat. Ian growled again, the vibration rippling across Nicky's cock, piercing him on that blade-sharp moment from which there was no return.

Nicky reached down, scrabbling for a hand to grasp as the spasms racked his body, forgetting in that perfect moment that there was none to spare. His hand closed around the end of Ian's arm, the struggle as Ian sought to free himself making warmth sting the backs of Nicky's eyes even as his hips pumped, shooting his seed deep into Ian's throat.

When Nicky had ridden out the last of the shudders, Ian wiped his face against Nicky's thigh, twisting out of his grasp.

"No." Nicky reasserted his grip. This was a part of Ian now and damned if he would let him hide it or be ashamed when there was already so much Ian kept from those who loved him. He tugged Ian closer. "Kiss me."

Ian dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. "But—"

"I don't care."

Ian's kiss was tentative, resisting all of Nicky's efforts to coax his lips apart. In the end, Nicky had to relinquish Ian's arm to make a grab for the hard staff jutting between them.

Ian gasped and Nicky licked into his mouth, tasting himself layered with the familiarity of Ian.

Ian pulled away, his chiding "Nicky" at once familiar and frustrating.

Nicky could feel his own grin down to his toes. "You will never change. And I am the happier for it." He licked his lips. "Climb up here and feed me your cock."

Ian shook his head, backing away and taking his shaft in hand.

Nicky looked askance, for he could not imagine how one's own hand could surpass a willing mouth, even for Ian, but as Ian's hips jerked and his lids fluttered over his eyes, Nicky decided he would not complain about this course of entertainment.

After only a few quick strokes of his hand, Ian's cock spurted, streams landing from Nicky's chin to his navel. Ian folded from the waist as he spent himself and then looked up, trailing his fingers across the creamy drops. Nicky watched in astonishment. Ian had always seen bodily emissions as something to clean away as soon as possible.

"Ian?"

Ian stroked his hand across Nicky's chest again. "Wanted to cover you with it." Ian's smile was rueful. "As if I might leave my mark."

"Noddy fool." Nicky tapped Ian's temple. "You already have done."

~ \* ~

Icy, predawn air bit at the tip of Nicky's nose, and he squinted at the fire. He hadn't been a very good valet. Unbanked, the fire had burnt itself out. Ian had ever been a heavenly bedmate in the winter, body radiating enough heat to thaw a glacier, but as soon as Nicky put his foot out on the floor he knew he'd be perished. He'd heard it was warm in Italy and Greece the year round.

Ian didn't stir, but Nicky felt the body beside him shift to wakefulness just the same. At school, the all-male environs had offered something of a shield. The masters were lax and some students even managed to smuggle in their *filles de joie*. Carleigh Castle was another matter entirely. Nicky must need to start the day from his own bedchamber.

He slipped one leg from beneath the bedclothes and held off a groan. Knowing a dilatory effort would only prolong his agony, he vaulted out and began to haul on his clothes as swiftly as his benumbed fingers could manage.

Ian remained silent, though Nicky could feel the weight of his gaze. He expected a lecture, expected recriminations, and was surprised by a deep chuckle from beneath the quilt.

"You could scare children with that head of hair, Nicky."

He brought both hands to his head and peered into the glass on the washstand. Half of his curls were flattened, but for one that twisted out like a billy goat's horn. As for the other side...who knew what he had slept in to create the resemblance to an angry badger. He reached into the washbowl and cursed as his fingers cracked through a thin film of ice.

"What?" Ian's voice was the deeper from recent sleep.

"The blasted water's frozen. I'd rather hang than coat my head in it." He cast an eye to the window, trying to gauge the time. Nothing but darkness, broken by a hissing clatter slashing the glass. Finding it too cold to snow, the heavens were hurling ice at them. "Even the pig-swiving snow is frozen. We won't be hunting this morning either. And it's Boxing Day which means cold meats and old bread. Damn it."

"I don't recall you being quite such an ill-tempered riser."

“Then there is some fault to your memory.” Nicky shivered violently, sending the icy water on his fingers flying into his face. “Shit.”

“Be grateful for the fortunes of birth. If you’d ever had to stick out a day of soldiering I think you’d be cashiered before nightfall.”

“And be glad of it. Didn’t you have a batman? I thought all officers were assigned one.”

“Father said we couldn’t afford it. Not with Charlotte’s come-out. I was treated to a lengthy letter on how her court dress alone would have kept three profligate households flush for a year.” Ian’s voice deepened another octave until it was positively sepulchral. “No one to bring your tea. Boxing Day, every day, Nicky. Imagine the horror of it.”

Perhaps it was the chill or perhaps it was the remnants of sleep still wrapping Nicky’s head with wool, but he finally latched onto the realization that Ian was not carrying a millstone of shame this morning. He’d half-expected Ian to deny what had happened and then Nicky would need to spend yet more time convincing him to resume their physical relationship. Yet with this morning’s familiar exchange, the intervening five years might have been a dream from which Nicky had just awakened in Ian’s bed as he used to do. One thing was true, when Ian committed to a course, it took a labor of Hercules to deter him from it. Nicky should know. He’d undertaken the labor twice now. With sweeter rewards than the gods could dream.

After shrugging his coat onto his shoulders, he sat on the bed and brushed a thumb across Ian’s rough cheek. “I’d kiss you, but I’m afraid our lips will freeze. Of course, I’m sure we could find a way to thaw them. It might be fun to have my mouth stuck fast to your cock.”

Ian gave him a stern look.

“In the absence of a fire, I could stand some bracing before I make my bitter journey.”

“For God’s sake, your room is just across the hall.”

“Don’t you think I arranged it so? But in this air, I could catch my death without something to warm me.”

“Your complaints are too fatiguing. Get to bed and speak to me when you are fit for company.”

“What sort of company?” Nicky offered him a leer.

“You know whose it had best not be.”

Nicky smiled. He had never received a better gift than such narrow-eyed proof of Ian’s devotion. “I’ll see you at breakfast, Mr. Stanton. And do try not to issue any challenges to my friends before then.”

~ \* ~

Nicky’s mother had begun the tradition of a Twelve Night party when she had been a young bride, and Nicky had enjoyed every one, even when he had to sneak out of the nursery to spy on the goings-on just as his twin brothers were doing when he caught the lads skulking on one of the tower’s stairs. When

they'd been in leading strings it had been impossible to tell them apart, but now at eleven, Richard had an inch on Robert and Robert's hair was showing a tendency to the wildness that had plagued Nicky just this morning.

He considered dragging them by their ears back to the nursery, but he was feeling a considerable amount of charity toward all mankind this morning, though it resulted more from how he had spent the night than from the joyful Christmas season. Besides, he was owed a respite from listening to everyone decry that it was by far the coldest winter England had ever seen, following hard on a bleak summer. If he heard one more suggestion of impending doom for all humankind, he was likely to lose his head.

Dickie, older by several hours, immediately offered up a denial. "Nurse said as long as we stayed on the upper floors—"

Robbie gave him a sharp elbow. "Shut it. Annie told us we may."

Their sister Anna had mothered them as best she could when Mother failed to recover from birthing them. Nicky supposed he felt an awkward affection for them, but they had been born when he was at school, and his first memory of them was a jumble of burial, christening, condolences and mourning. He remembered little of it except that it had been the first time he'd ever seen his father cry.

He knew less of his brothers than he did most of the guests at the party. With himself at school and then in Town, Nicky scarcely saw his brothers, would see even less of them now that they were going away to school.

Robbie's question came out in an awed whisper. "Is it true Weatherby just lost two thousand at hazard?"

"Probably." Without any outdoor pursuits, stakes were edging higher. If this weather did not let up, half the guests would be in dun territory.

"I wonder if his wife knows," Dickie said.

"I wonder what he'd pay to be sure she doesn't," Robbie added.

At first his brothers' enterprising natures were a source of pride tempered with concern over exactly what their tutor had been covering, but a sudden shock of alarm sent Nicky's bonhomie cowering. "How on earth did you hear that? Not from Anna, I'll wager."

"There's that spot on—ow!" Dickie's answer was again foreshortened, this time by a hard stomp on his instep.

But Nicky was able to finish the sentence. There was a disused medieval privy in the tower, and depending on how close one stood to the wall, it was possible to hear conversations from the north end of the gallery and the hall. Sweet Christ. If they'd been out early Christmas morning they might have heard him and Ian in the gallery.

The gallery wouldn't be used until New Year's Eve, and Nicky would remember to hold any future tête-à-têtes elsewhere. In the meantime, perhaps he could discourage the budding blackmailers. Disused or



not, it took a certain willingness to disregard the lingering odor of its prior incarnation to make use of it as a listening post.

“Ahhh.” Nicky wrinkled his nose. “That’s what I smell. Best change or Nurse will think you still need swaddling.”

They ran off, though Nicky suspected they would find their way back—or happen on another method of subterfuge. If he weren’t trying to secure his future happiness, he would have applauded their ingenuity. But when he thought of what was at stake, all he could manage was to swallow back a cold lump of dread.

~ \* ~

Nicky had good reason to be wary of his brothers’ skills at reconnoitre when Ian herded Nicky into the gallery from the Gold Salon. In deference to Ian’s temper, Nicky had avoided Julian’s company all day, and while that might have kept the peace, Nicky’s head ached from a day of feminine chatter and the attar of too many different massacred flowers.

He wished Ian’s sudden desire to converse intimately was born of passion, but it was born instead of his sister’s perverse sense of humor. Charlotte had been at her worst, simpering as she asked Nicky to fetch her a cup of rack punch, and then to engage in minute adjustments of the fire screen to suit her comfort. Each of her demands wrought darker and darker looks from her brother until Nicky thought he’d enjoy strangling the blasted chit. Couldn’t she see the way Ian was tying himself into knots of guilt because he thought Charlotte had truly set her cap at his lover?

When Charlotte asked Nicky if he would be so gracious as to retrieve her fan from the gaming table, Ian popped to his feet as if the sofa’s upholstery were afire. Nicky just had time to gift Charlotte with both fan and glare before Ian bowed. “A word, Lord Amherst?”

Nicky snatched up a candle before following Ian through the doors.

Why the hell had Nicky’s mother settled on winter as a good time for a lengthy house party? The foul weather meant that there was no sure retreat from an out-of-control game of blind man’s bluff or another guest seeking a change of scenery. Or from Nicky’s budding spymaster siblings. Nicky thought of bringing Ian up to the nursery since the twins had no doubt abandoned it in search of damaging information they could use to extort money from unsuspecting guests.

“Do you mind if we walk?” Nicky set off at a brisk pace toward the south end of the gallery. He’d only gained a few yards when Ian stayed him with his hand.

“What are your intentions toward my sister?”

“Your sister? How can you even ask that after last night?”

Ian resumed walking. “I know you will soon wish to marry.”

“Wish to?”

“Must, then. But Charlotte has no female relation to advise her save Rayne’s wife and she is unable to travel.”

“I am afraid I have lost the trail, Ian.”

“What I mean is, Charlotte is not well-versed in the way things are done. She was gently reared.”

Nicky fought back a bark of laughter until it turned to a cough. Ian’s look of concern only made him cough harder until he was forced to lean against the wall next to the painting of the third marquess.

“Perhaps you should get out of the chill,” Ian said.

“I’m fine. A little desperate for a proper meal, but well enough to sustain further conversation.”

“Very well. I simply do not wish to see Charlotte hurt.”

“I believe your sister may have depths which remain hidden even from those who know her well.”

Ian nodded as if he understood. “I only recently discovered she is quite fond of Shakespeare’s comedies.”

This time Nicky thought the effort to suppress his laughter would lead to genuine asphyxiation. He assumed a serious expression. “Let me see if I have this full. You insist that I marry, when you know that any woman will of necessity find herself neglected since I will always choose to take my affections elsewhere, yet you balk at this lucky woman being your sister.”

Ian paused, mouth slightly agape. Unassailable logic. It would always be Ian’s defeat.

“Well, yes,” Ian said at last.

“Perhaps I won’t marry.”

“But you must. You have a duty to your title and your family and—”

“I have two brothers who will no doubt be willing to leap at the chance of title and duty.”

Ian’s expression of slack-jawed horror would have been amusing if Nicky weren’t so fond of the dolt.

“Aren’t you worried your face will freeze like that? Of course, I know I must marry.”

“And will you?”

“That all depends.”

“On what?”

“On you.”

“No. There is no possible say I could have in the matter. I know—I know I was a bit off my head where Lewes was concerned but this—I will always regard you warmly, Nicky, and I will treasure what time we have here, but—no. You must do your duty to the title.”

“Warmly. It seemed far more than tepid to me last night.”

Two dark red spots appeared high on Ian’s cheeks, but he lowered his gaze.

Nicky pressed on. Charlotte had been the one to caution him against rashness, claiming Ian would bolt if they revealed too much too fast, yet her actions today had precipitated this. “And if my choice is Charlotte, do you have any say in the matter?”

“I have a brother’s say and that is to refuse the honor.”

“And what will *your* brother say?” The new Earl of Rayne wouldn’t have been more delighted with the match than if he’d learned to piss gold, and they both knew it. Nicky gripped Ian’s arm, holding tight enough to keep him from fleeing. “Ian, I swear to you, on my honor, I will not marry unless you approve my choice.”

“Then it will never be Charlotte.”

Hiding a smile felt at least as difficult as standing in for Sisyphus and taking a turn with his rock, but Nicky managed it. “Just as you say.”

## Chapter Six

Though Simmons appeared hale and hearty each morning when he brought Ian a cup of tea and helped him to dress, it was no surprise that Nicky claimed to be aiding an ailing Simmons by taking his place each night when it was time to prepare for bed. Ian accepted the pretense, though he did not know why Nicky insisted on maintaining it. Each night Nicky had barely locked the door before they were divesting each other of clothes as if their very speed would bring about the release they sought in each other's arms.

Ian tried not to think about how easily he had been converted to hedonic pursuits. Somehow he had managed to convince himself that this indulgence was only for a week's time, and if they refrained from actual sodomy no one's soul or life would be irreparably harmed. What was hardest to banish from his mind was consideration of how painful the inevitable separation would be.

Their parting would sting less if a physical release was all they shared, but after that exquisite moment, they still lay together, talking. Nicky seemed to delight in lavishing kisses and caresses on Ian's scars.

"Tell me what it's like," Nicky whispered one night, thumb rubbing gently across the folds of skin at the end of Ian's stump.

Some sensitivity had returned, an odd patchwork, so that Nicky's touch danced in and out of Ian's awareness.

"War?"

Nicky nodded.

Ian settled more firmly on his back. "The smell gets you first. And you can't see from the bloody smoke. If you aren't deafened by cannon, you'll wish you were when the screams start. Half the time you don't know where you are or where your men are or what they're shooting at."

"And this?" Nicky's warm kiss tickled across the wrinkled skin. "Tell me."

"I don't remember much." And sometimes he remembered too much. Lieutenant Archer's surprised face. A sensation of movement. The gut-wrenching separation from earth. Pain and red-tinged darkness. "We were ordered to the breach in the walls. To take out the defenders. The escalades were soaked with blood from the last company to try. I slipped. The mine went off. I woke in a field hospital."

"Thank God you slipped."

Ian doubted Lieutenant Archer's family would say the same.

Nicky shifted and looked down into Ian's face, moving the arm so the stump rested over the beat of Nicky's heart. "Did they ask you about taking it? Did you have to decide?"

There were flashes of it. Hearing the discussion. A tiny protest buried under the cowardly majority that prayed he would bleed to death and be done with it. The blessedly uncaring embrace of opium. He was far more aware when they removed the fragments imbedded in his chest.

"I never really was conscious enough. Even after, I had a fever. It was more than a week before I truly knew."

Nicky leaned down to kiss the lump of flesh over Ian's heart. As he did so often, Ian reached out with his missing hand, seeking the softness of Nicky's curls. Pain shot up Ian's arm, and he clenched an imagined fist.

So real, the memory of it, he could see it, knuckles, tendons, fingers. "I still feel it. As if it's there."

Surprise widened Nicky's eyes.

"I know it sounds mad. It's long healed. Long gone."

"No. I thought I was mad. Sometimes I swear I can feel it. I thought I was just remembering."

"That's probably it. There's no way you could feel it."

Nicky held up his own hand, fingers spread wide. "The Haunted Hand. A perfect tale for a dark December night."

"You are mad."

Despite the concern from his family, the quiet understanding of his cousins in Norwich, there was no one who simply accepted it. Who spoke of it without fear or pity. Who touched without horrified curiosity. Who even now could make Ian laugh.

"It still hurts." Nicky's tone made it statement rather than question.

Ian wanted to look away, but Nicky held his chin and kissed him.

"Then I must needs take your mind off it." Nicky licked the side of Ian's neck.

There were moments without words too.

And if in those moments Ian dared believe nothing could be more right than when they strained against each other, cocks rubbing together, mouths fused with shared heat, the truth came rushing back each morning when Nicky woke while it was still dark, dressed and slipped from the room.

The penultimate day of the year was the first that the weather deigned to permit decent hunting. They were out well past breakfast, only returning when the hounds floundered in deep drifts and lost the scent. Exhausted from the sudden increase in exercise atop little sleep, Ian dropped into oblivion that night with his hand still wrapped around Nicky's spent prick, damp forehead pressed into Nicky's neck as they lay on their sides.

He woke to Nicky's tongue lapping at him as if Ian's cock were made of sugar and cream, deep sounds of satisfaction echoing from Nicky's throat.

“Somewhat of an improvement over rising to reveille.”

Nicky made a long wet swipe up Ian’s prick with an accompanying smacking sound then looked up. “And rise you did.”

Ian groaned as Nicky chuckled and returned to his task with an eager and meticulous commitment. Lips tight around the head, tongue flicking in unpredictable rhythm. Ian threaded his hand through Nicky’s curls and dragged him forward. Something akin to shame but far more thrilling beat under Ian’s skin at this use of his friend as Nicky groaned and swallowed, the soft tissue of his throat pulsing around Ian’s prick.

Nicky took Ian to the back of his throat again and again, tongue and mouth working a magic that turned Ian’s bones to liquid. He scarcely noticed what Nicky was about until he felt the rub of Nicky’s finger—there.

Ian shuddered, and the tip of Nicky’s finger slipped inside.

“What are you doing?”

Nicky raised his head. Without the slick bob of his mouth, Ian was all the more aware of the intrusion. It didn’t hurt. It simply was. A sensation of pressure utterly neutral.

“I believe I am engaged in a practice Aristophanes called sucking the sugar stick.”

“He never said—”

Nicky sucked again, finger wiggling farther inside. The pressure was no longer indifferent. Ian’s nerves could not seem to choose a side between pleasure and discomfort, a desire to pull away and the yearning to sink deeper into sensation, to capture Nicky’s finger with his body.

Wrapping his hand in Nicky’s hair, Ian tugged. “I mean what are you doing with—” Damn. He hadn’t needed a word to refer to that particular location since he stopped needing a nurse. “—my nether eye.”

Nicky’s laugh tingled along Ian’s most sensitive flesh until at last Nicky raised his head again, blue eyes locked on Ian’s.

“Nether eye?”

It was hard to summon the tattered shreds of his dignity in a situation that transported dignity as swiftly as a ship of convicts to Botany Bay. “Well. The term is certainly as applicable as sugar stick.”

Nicky rubbed his chin across Ian’s ballocks, the unruly hair on his forehead tickling Ian’s prick. “Oh, Ian. Only you could make use of a word like *applicable* with a mouth on your cock and a finger up your arse.”

Ian thought of pointing out that there was no longer a mouth on his cock, but that would not answer the more...penetrative question. “What do you plan to do?”

Nicky looked up, his fixed gaze unnerving as his finger glided in and out as easily as if oiled. Each time he thrust it in, a sweet jolt raced along Ian’s prick.

“I plan to frig your arse with my fingers while you use my mouth with your cock.”

Almost against his will, Ian's hips moved to widen his legs. He should stop this, but he couldn't. Because there was something bewildering about the sensations coursing through him and he might be damned forever, but the trip to hell was astonishingly sweet.

As if Nicky sensed capitulation, he wedged Ian's legs farther apart with the brace of broad shoulders before returning to plunge that heavenly mouth up and down Ian's prick. Nicky's finger tapped against something inside that seemed to be the very root of Ian's cock, and he clutched at the sheets, at Nicky's hair, anything that could ground him against the pleasure spiraling outward. A flush of scalding fluid gathered in Ian's balls.

"I will—must—Sweet Jesus—"

The flood took him and his hips snapped, prick ravaging Nicky's mouth and throat. Ian knew he would need to beg for forgiveness for the way his hand held Nicky fast, permitting no quarter until Ian had spent himself between Nicky's lips.

As his heart and lungs calmed, Ian composed the apology to be uttered as soon as he freed his bottom lip from the grip of his teeth, but he was distracted by the strangest scent. Engaged in a struggle against the lethargy that sought to pin him back beneath sleep's hold, he could only manage one question. "Why do I smell lavender?"

~ \* ~

Ian awoke that morning to the sounds of Simmons stirring the fire, panic accelerating Ian's heart rate so suddenly he thought he might cast up the contents of his stomach. Had Nicky forgotten to return to his own bed? Every other morning Ian had awoken when Nicky did. He glanced around the room, but there was only Simmons, busy with a tea cup and toast rack on a tray.

"As you've missed breakfast, sir, I brought you something. His lordship suggested you might wish to sleep undisturbed."

Oh, did he? Ian shifted his body on the mattress. There were no lasting effects from their wildness last night, other than a pleasant lassitude preying on his limbs, and the strange scent of lavender lingered which had the unsettling result of making Ian's prick twitch. He prayed the odd association would not continue or he might have trouble in feminine company.

He intended to seek out Nicky and make clear the necessary boundaries to continuing their dalliance. Dalliance. That was not a word Ian had ever thought to apply to himself. He had always been so certain of the correct course, but Nicky had ever been able to lead him astray. First when they were boys, and even now with all that Ian knew of the world.

Despite what resuming physical relations cost Ian's sense of propriety, it grew harder to imagine their coming separation. To lose Nicky after having him again—it would be easier to part with another limb. The phantom pain of absence would be greater than it had with a physical amputation.

The dance on New Year's Eve was the high point of the Carleigh house party, so it made sense that Nicky would be so busy with preparations he could not be located, no matter how many of the bustling servants insisted they had "just this minute seen him, sir." Despite those assurances, Ian began to wonder if Nicky was avoiding a meeting because he knew last night had been beyond what Ian could in conscience offer.

That evening, Simmons' attentions had Ian looking fairly well-turned out in black coat, white stock and silver-embroidered waistcoat. The adjustments the valet had made to Ian's sleeves ensured that they hung better from his shoulders, drawing attention away from what was no longer there. Ian felt quite smart as he joined the other untitled bachelors waiting in the hall.

It took a single remark to cut him down as surely as a blast of grapeshot.

"Mr. Stanton, my, you look all the crack."

Lewes. Of course. Ian turned and offered a stiff bow. "Thank you, sir."

Julian Lewes wore almost the same clothes, black coat and embroidered waistcoat and formal knee breeches, but as he returned Ian's bow the polished elegance of the man's clothes and form made Ian feel about as well-turned out as if he had stopped to roll in shit on his way downstairs.

"I must say I am looking forward to this evening's entertainment."

Ian tried to stare the other fellow down. "Country dances and a child's game?"

"You do not care for Snapdragon? I find the treat sufficient compensation for the risk."

"I hardly think a few pieces of fruit are worth the cost of self-immolation."

"You mistake me. While I enjoy brandied raisins and almonds, I refer to the opportunity of becoming King of Misrule. I have several...creative ideas I look forward to acting on. The king's rule is absolute, after all."

Being able to decree what costumes were to be worn for the Twelfth Night party and making guests perform various forfeits was hardly as salacious as Lewes made it sound. After all, the Bishop of Warwick was a member of the party. Ian had been retiring early to steal more time with Nicky, leaving Charlotte under the watchful eye of Mrs. Collingswood who had assured him Charlotte's company was a joy. What if the evenings had grown licentious?

"You still have to select the golden raisin."

"I consider myself quite skilled at Snapdragon, Mr. Stanton." Lewes raised his fingers and wagged them. "Dexterity can be damned useful in tight places."

Before last night, Ian would have had no idea what prompted the leer that accompanied Lewes' words. Now they provoked a hot flush on Ian's cheeks.

Lewes reached out and plucked at something on Ian's left arm.

"A spec of lint, Stanton. I hate to think of something marring Simmons' magnificent work."

"You know him?"



“Oh yes. Recommended him to Lord Amherst myself. Of course, I knew Simmons before he took up valeting. Used to see him quite often in Betham’s apartments. You’ll have heard of Laurence Betham? Has the audiences in Drury Lane absolutely enthralled.”

There could be no doubt of what Lewes was suggesting about Simmons, and the open pronouncement left Ian speechless.

“Of course they have parted brass rags since. Some dustup over an Italian painter who caught Betham’s eye.” Lewes buffed a nail against one of his cuffs. “Despite the merry dance His Royal Highness and his brothers carry out in public, they cannot match the lower classes for the absolute theater of relationships gone awry. I understood you could hear Simmons’ reaction to finding them *in flagrante* all the way to Highgate.” Lewes seemed to run down. “Oh, sorry, dear fellow, didn’t mean to cause such consternation. Nicky said you were—ah, one of the lads, if you follow me.”

The idea of Nicky sharing their intimate connection with Lewes, who was clearly as inveterate a gossip as any matron could hope to be, had Ian clenching his phantom fist again.

“No ill will meant, Stanton. It seems Lady Anna has managed to sort out the precedence at last.” He nodded at the gallery doors. “Ready?”

## Chapter Seven

Ian took up a post against the dark wood paneling and remained safely unnoticed through the first few dances, but Charlotte and Mrs. Collingswood found him while the musicians had paused for refreshment.

Charlotte's cheeks were flushed from exercise, dark eyes alight with merriment. Nicky had not danced with her once, so if she had formed some sort of attachment or hopes in that direction, she seemed unaffected by the loss of his attention.

At their request, Ian fetched cups of the Negus punch, tucking the extra cups safely between his right arm and his torso, dodging those who had already partaken of too much cheer and would be greeting the new year with an aching head.

Charlotte was laughing as he returned, a look of such joy on her face Ian could only hope that whoever had put her in such fine spirits would be more suitable for her than Nicky.

"Oh dear, Mr. Stanton. I should have considered the difficulty before adding my request to your errand." Mrs. Collingswood stepped forward to take a cup from him, handing it off to Charlotte.

"Not at all, Em. Ian prefers when people forget."

"My sister is quite correct. Though she knows better than to employ such familiar address."

"I don't mind, Mr. Stanton. Lady Charlotte and I have had such a very long acquaintance."

"Indeed?" He studied the widow. He supposed she might have been close to Charlotte's age, though her more reserved manner had led him to think she was older, even before her marriage. Marriage did seem to have an aging effect on females.

"Yes," Charlotte added. "After we met here at that Twelfth Night before you went away, Em and I saw each other quite frequently during my first Season. Nick—Lord Amherst and Lady Anna were kind enough to take us both under their wings."

"Though I was already quite on the shelf," Mrs. Collingswood said with a laugh.

"Never." Charlotte's defense was a trifle heated for loyalty to an acquaintance.

"Well, those days are past us now." Mrs. Collingswood gave Charlotte a beseeching look.

"And good riddance to it all."

Lord, Ian hoped Charlotte did not mean to bid farewell to her own days of seeking a proper match. Rayne had charged Ian with her well-being. If she returned to announce her intention to simply molder on the family estate, Ian was certain he would bear the brunt of the blame. He was considering how he might best remind her of her obligations when Mrs. Collingswood spoke.

“Now then, Lady Charlotte. Surely not all of it.”

Charlotte softened. “No. Not all.”

Ian brought his own cup to his lips, the hot spiced wine filling him with a relaxing warmth. Seeking out Nicky was something Ian had put off until he could be certain his temper would not get the better of him. Perhaps the Negus would soften him as well to the point where he might address Nicky without bringing Lewes’ gossiping tongue into the conversation.

Ian had not noticed the opening bars from the musicians until Lord Anthony Montrose bowed to Charlotte. “Lady Charlotte, would you do me the honor?”

Some sort of glance passed between Ian’s sister and Mrs. Collingswood, and then Charlotte nodded and placed her gloved hand in Lord Anthony’s. Again the gaps in Ian’s social training came glaringly to the fore. Although Mrs. Collingswood was technically out of mourning, she might be offended if he asked her to dance, and a missing arm made some of the steps awkward. Perhaps she would prefer to be escorted to a seat.

Placing his drained cup on a nearby tray, he offered the lady his arm.

“How thoughtful of you, Mr. Stanton. I would be honored.”

Unwittingly, it seemed Ian had acquired a dance partner.

Although their form was burdened with Julian Lewes and a young lady Ian didn’t recognize, and Mrs. Collingswood did indeed demonstrate a propensity for stepping uncomfortably close to a fellow’s toes, Ian enjoyed the set. Mrs. Collingswood adjusted quickly to having a partner with one arm, both of hers gripping his one when the steps called for it, or placing her hand in an approximation of where his would be to avoid contortion. Even more satisfying, the young lady partnered with Lewes had a laugh like a bugle blown underwater. Ian hoped Lewes was saddled with it and her company for the rest of the night.

As injurious as this fortnight was to Ian’s *mens sana*, it was a boon to his *corpore sano*. His body had not seen this much activity since his return from the Peninsula. When they had finished the set, he deposited Mrs. Collingswood on one of the sofas lining the gallery and quenched his thirst with another cup of Negus, draining it just as the musicians struck a dramatic flourish from their bows.

Nicky’s father stood in the center of the room holding a single candle. Two footmen brought a scarred table and placed it in front of him while two others entered with a wide shallow bowl. As Lord Carleigh spoke, the wall sconces and chandeliers were extinguished until only his face was visible in the light of the candle.

“As the year draws to a close, we will choose our King and Queen of Misrule to guide our merriment through Twelfth Night. Her Majesty will be she who braves the dragon’s flames to find a fig. His Majesty will be he who manages to select the single golden raisin from the bowl.”

The back of one of the servants was just visible as he finished preparing the bowl. Ian had played many times as a child, the memory of scalded fingers and burnt tongue rather vivid, but those games were

never for the stakes the Chatham family held as tradition. He had no particular desire to be responsible for entertaining bored members of the party for the final five nights, but possessed a strong will to see that whoever was so charged, it was not a reprobate like Julian Lewes.

“Now.” Lord Carleigh raised his candle and began the chant. “Here he comes with flaming bowl.” He lowered the flame and ignited the bowl of brandy.

The rest of the guests took up the chant as blue flames spread across the surface. “Don’t he mean to take his toll. Snip! Snap! Dragon!”

Lord Carleigh took the privilege as host to be the first to try. His face looked demonic wreathed with eerie shadows as he reached in quickly, snatched a piece of dried fruit and popped it into his mouth to smother the flames. He held it up to show it was only an ordinary raisin and everyone clapped. A line formed on either side of the table, mostly younger guests, unwed ladies and gentlemen.

The chant went on as others risked scorched fingers and mouth to pluck out a sweet prize. “Take care you don’t take too much. Be not greedy in your clutch. Snip! Snap! Dragon!”

Ian took his place in line. Lewes had already made one pass, netting a candied almond instead of a raisin for all his boasts of dexterity. Ian saw Charlotte’s hand dart in just as he came to the table.

“The fig,” she cried.

“Our queen.” Lewes and Nicky and Lord Anthony surrounded her with deep bows.

Charlotte blew on her fingers as if to cool them. “Your queen commands you to fetch her more punch, you knaves.”

Lord Anthony scurried off. She waved her fingers at Ian as if to show she was unharmed.

His turn had come.

“With his blue and lapping tongue, many of you will be stung.”

Across the table now he could see Nicky, a fiery archangel in the blue light from the bowl. Ian reached out and plunged in his hand. Hot, but not burning, the oddest sensation of passing through fire without paying the price. He tried to examine the raisin as he brought it to his mouth, and it scalded his fingers. Black as pitch. He closed his mouth on the fiery treat, the liquor and the burn making the raisin all the sweeter, even as its juice scorched Ian’s tongue.

“Snip! Snap! Dragon!”

Many players ceased to find it worth a longer exposure to the flames to seek any remaining treats. Ian took another turn. If pressed, he could claim he did not want Charlotte spending time as Lewes’ consort, no matter how playful the circumstances; but he could not hide the true reason from himself. Ian could not bear the idea of Nicky at Lewes’ beck and call, couldn’t bear to see that arrogant bastard win.

Ian’s fingers were tingling from near burns, bristling under the skin as if he were touching nettles. Lewes and Lord Anthony also refused to miss a try at the bowl.

“Do be careful, Stanton,” Lewes remarked while biting down on another almond. “You know you’ve just the one hand left.”

“Yes, Stanton. It’s hardly sporting of you to keep Lady Charlotte’s company all to yourself. You are her brother after all,” Lord Anthony added.

Holding his back teeth together so tightly they ached, Ian ignored the idiots and plucked out a dried cherry, blowing on his fingers with burning lips as if such action could salve the sting.

“For God’s sake.” Nicky plunged his hand through the flames, rooting about for the space of a full heartbeat, during which Ian envisioned Nicky’s sleeve afire, the blue tongues leaping up to his curls.

Nicky safely pulled out a handful of burning fruit and closed his fingers around them to smother the flames licking across his palm. He opened his hand again to show the golden raisin.

“All hail His Majesty, the King of Misrule.”

Though Ian lent his voice to the acclaim, he felt far from cheered. He should have known relief that Charlotte would not be paired with such as Lewes, that she was safe from even Lord Anthony who might be inspired by the merriment to take liberties. Instead, he felt as ill as if the fruit he had ingested had been charred rather than sweetened by the brandy.

He should not have been surprised by losing, and at Nicky’s intervention. How could Ian ever hope to be recognized as even as much a man as Lewes when other men were what he was not? Whole.

The sconces were once again lit, gifting Ian with the sight of Nicky sucking the sweet taste of brandy and fruit from his fingers.

Ian turned and grabbed one of the steaming towels a footman was circulating among the guests. As soon as he had wiped his hands, he found himself face to face with Nicky who took the towel, though after such a lewdly thorough tongue washing, Ian could not imagine why he needed it.

“Better now?” Nicky asked.

“Why? Because you were forced to rescue Charlotte from that man you call friend when I could not?”

“Think of her position, Ian. If you wish to get her married—only not to me—she can hardly show her light if you keep it veiled.”

“But why you?”

“How dog-in-the-manger you are. Not Julian, not me. What was wrong with Tony? Is there a man here who could meet your ridiculous standards?”

It was fortunate Nicky had taken the towel or Ian might have flung it in his face like a gauntlet. “There is nothing wrong with seeking the best in oneself—or others.”

“Maybe. But for we lowly mortals here, it’s bloody exhausting to keep taking a fence that does nothing but grow higher with each try.”

With that, Nicky quit his company, drawing Charlotte aside for a private conference. After a few moments, Nicky’s laugh remained anything but whispered as it rang to the rafters.

“Your gracious rulers have declared a pleasant occupation for the morrow,” Nicky said. “We will have a procession around the castle in a sleigh.”

There was a murmur of approval.

“The sleigh to be drawn by our devoted subjects,” Charlotte added.

“What? You would use us as horses?” Lord Anthony demanded.

“But of course.” Charlotte favored him with a smile. “How better to serve us?”

Further refreshments were furnished for the guests, but as soon as the New Year had been dutifully sung and toasted in, Ian made for bed.

When the hair on the back of his neck prickled pleasantly, Ian knew who followed at his heels.

“Your king has a special request of you, Mr. Stanton.”

“I am fatigued, Nicky. Perhaps tomorrow.” Ian turned to face him. “And I promised your father I’d first foot.”

Nicky’s face held all the disappointment of a schoolboy seeing his favorite treat snatched away in the last instant. If there was a man who could turn a cold heart to such an expression, he was not Ian Stanton.

Ian bowed. “Very well, Your Majesty. What is it you desire of me?”

Nicky’s grin was alarming.

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Of course the royal request began with subject and king naked in bed. Ian’s again.

“And now?” Ian might be unable to master a simple child’s game, but at least he knew he could still offer pleasure to the man straddling his hips. Ian reached out and grasped Nicky’s shaft, stroking him, lavishing the attention of his thumb on the slick head as the foreskin retracted.

“Your king desires you to lie there while he takes his pleasure.”

“Oh, he does? And does his gracious majesty no longer enjoy this?” Ian favored Nicky with a faster stroke, a twist that brought a soft grunt before—

“Wait.”

Ian stopped and Nicky swung off, moving to the edge of the bed and leaning down, arse up. The lump in Ian’s throat weighed two stones as he swallowed it down. Why could he not control this desire? His fingers longed to trace the curving flesh, to seek out the entrance to Nicky’s body, to find again the hot embrace of that channel. But he had made the limits clear. And for good reasons. No matter how pleasurable Nicky’s finger had felt, there was a world of difference between finger and prick, even in the most modest of men. His reading had suggested even the Greeks disdained the practice as it turned the very idea of masculinity on its...well, on its arse. He would not ask that of either of them. Pain, history and the law all bespoke the risks.

Nicky's face returned to view, somewhat reddened from his previous position. "Here." He held a pretty little vial such as might be found on a lady's dressing table.

"What is it?"

Nicky removed the stopper and handed it off. "Oil."

This time the odor of lavender was overpowering.

"Perfumed oil," Nicky admitted a little sheepishly. "I pinched it from Anna's room. It was either lavender or roses, and I thought you would prefer the lavender."

"For what?"

Nicky put a generous drop or two on his fingers and then coated Ian's prick. "This." Nicky's hand glided, the warm and slick strokes positively maddening. "'Tis far better than spit alone."

Ian could scarcely gasp. The only thing akin was Nicky's mouth, his throat, hot and wet, but this was tighter, harder, a knowing, familiar grip.

"Trust your king." Nicky's hand moved faster, then slower. "Have you never tried something to ease the dry rub of skin? Did no one ever show you?"

Ian grunted then bit his lip. "Show me?"

"Come, Ian, you surely did not spend all your time soldiering without any release. I have confessed my sins."

"Some of them." Ian meant it to be a deep growl, but the harder Nicky stroked, the more difficult it became to contain the whimpers that sought escape on the backs of his words.

"What of you? Camp followers, a dutiful lieutenant, a fellow captain?"

Ian shook his head.

"You would lie to your king?" Nicky stopped the rhythm of his hand, fingers a tight ring over the base of Ian's prick.

"No. No one. I—" Ian closed his eyes. He could not face Nicky. Not with this between them, the truth that no one had ever touched Ian intimately but the man above him. Eyes still shut, he shook his head.

Nicky's unoled fingers were gentle on Ian's chin, then his cheek, thumb light across his still-burning lips. "I would not have minded."

"I would have." Ian opened his eyes.

Nicky's eyes glittered in the candlelight, moisture gathering in the lower lashes. Ian thought Nicky might speak again, but he brought both hands to Ian's shoulders, holding him flat as Nicky lowered his head for a long, thorough kiss. Never rough or demanding, his lips and tongue offered, worshiped, celebrated. Despite the one drop of moisture that fell to Ian's cheek, he could feel Nicky's smile against his mouth. "You stupid, ridiculous, amazing man." Nicky raised his head for an instant and then kissed harder, tongue licking inside Ian's lips until Ian strove to move away.

"My mouth is still cursed raw from Snapdragon," he explained.

“As if I needed more proof.” Nicky rolled his eyes heavenward, the lift of his head and neck driving his hips against Ian’s, demonstrating again the usefulness of that oil. Ian’s prick slid against Nicky’s hard belly, pressure bringing insistent need to the fore.

“Nicky.” Ian didn’t care if he was pleading. Desire had a painful grip on his ballocks, pounded spikes into his thighs.

“Do you trust me?”

“As king?” Ian smiled.

“As king. As a man. As the man who wishes to share the heights of passion with you.” Nicky was so rarely serious that his words acted as a rope tied to Ian’s spine, pulling him in with the promise of safe harbor.

“Yes.”

“Then simply lie there.”

In that moment, determined not to break any more commandments than necessary, Ian could admit the truth to himself. He knew well what Nicky had planned, no matter how much Ian might pretend otherwise, no matter how much he wished he had the strength to refuse.

Nicky grabbed his glass vial again, thoroughly coating Ian’s prick in the scented oil. If he spilled now from the pressure of Nicky’s hand the decision would be taken from them both—but Ian held himself in check. As he watched, Nicky reached behind his body, eyes drifting closed, mouth going slack. Then he lifted himself and the head of Ian’s prick was surrounded by wet, textured warmth. He could feel the space there, the muscles that sought to repel him even as Nicky’s downward motion forced those muscles to yield.

Nicky groaned, the sound deep and low. Although Ian’s grip on his will was as slippery as if his hands bore the coat of oil, it was strong enough to keep his hips flat against the mattress. He would not give way again. Would not surrender to the incredible force that drew his cock deeper. Would not force the issue no matter what Nicky claimed he wanted. As he sank lower, he caught his lip in his teeth, eyes twisted shut. Ian reached for Nicky’s hips, forgetting again that one arm would lack enough force to move him off.

Nicky pushed down until his arse landed on Ian’s thighs, sheathing every inch in hot, fluttering, slick sensation. His prick inside Nicky’s body. Every breath and movement Nicky made licked like the brandy’s blue flames across Ian’s cock. How could it not be a consummation to pleasure Ian’s very soul?

Nicky’s breathy complaint brought a return to mundanity. “Christ, Ian. Move.”

“But—”

“Of course it hurts, you wantwit, your fat cock is up my arse. Now do what I said and move.”

Ian held Nicky’s hips and rocked upward.

“Yes. Again.” The furrowed concentration on Nicky’s face relaxed.



Ian tried lifting him as he thrust his hips upward. Nicky's expression softened more, lips curving, eyes wide, the laughter they always held ready to burst free.

"C'mon, Ian, put your ballocks into it."

*May as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.* Ian wrapped his arm around Nicky's back and somehow kept his berth deep in Nicky's body as he rolled him to his back.

Nicky looked up with his fallen-angel smile, and Ian drove his hips forward into that amazing clench of muscle and soft skin. A shudder rolled up his spine. "Sweet Jesus."

Nothing could ever match this, Nicky's legs wrapped high on his back, the sweet groans from his throat, the incredible pressure of his body on Ian's prick.

He wanted to stay here forever, deep steady rhythm of pleasure from the drag of Nicky's arse on Ian's shaft as he lifted his hips, the tight sucking kiss as he pushed back in. He raised his upper body, bracing his weight on his good arm and stump, and pumped slowly until Nicky shoved at his chest.

"Damn." Nicky's back arched as his hand found its way to his prick. His next words came out in gasps punctuated by Ian's thrusts. "You're. Too. Quick. A. Learner. By. Half."

Pleased, Ian arched his own back and the resulting cry Nicky bit off behind his hand inspired Ian to rise to his knees. It seemed only natural to pull Nicky closer, dragging his arse onto Ian's thighs with Nicky's enthusiastic help. His hand too, seemed to know to rest on Nicky's hip to steady him against the way Ian's body demanded a harder, faster, rougher pace.

"Yes." Nicky's hand on his prick matched the increase in speed, and Ian was torn between watching Nicky's hand and his face, desiring in equal measures to see pleasure take hold on his expression and the proof of it in the explosion from his body.

The first of the spasms that rocked Nicky's body were accompanied by a hoarse cry that had Ian casting an eye for a pillow to drop over Nicky's head even as pride burst from Ian's chest that he could cause him to make such a sound.

He was unprepared for the consequences of Nicky's satisfaction. As the first creamy burst shot from his prick, the muscles in his arse clamped harder on Ian's own cock. Nicky's release pulled Ian's into that warm body, a hot rush of seed shuddering from him even as Nicky continued to fire streams onto chest and belly. The force of the contractions sapped the strength in Ian's spine until he could only fall forward onto Nicky, feeling more beastlike than human and oddly uncaring of the distinction.

Nicky shifted beneath Ian's weight until the mattress bore its fair share and then stroked a hand down Ian's sweaty spine. For once, Ian knew words were superfluous and he allowed himself to be soothed into sleep with the caress.

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When Nicky woke, it was nearly the blue of night, the sky giving a hint of warning that dawn was not far off. Sometime during the night, Ian must have gotten up to drag the quilt over them. Nicky luxuriated in their warm nest, stretching his limbs, feeling a twinge of hard use in his arse and thighs. He smiled and teased Ian's side whiskers with a finger, slipping his hand out of reach when Ian swatted at it. A light touch on his nose brought a frown, but Ian still did not wake. A kiss on his neck wrought a sigh and Ian rolling away.

With his own lips pursed in a frown, Nicky slid off the bed and pulled on his breeches and shirt then walked around the bed to face Ian.

"What?" Ian opened his eyes.

Nicky smiled. "Ha. Caught you faking."

Ian tugged the counterpane over his head. Nicky shoved it back.

"I say again, what?"

"You're rather testy. Didn't you sleep well?"

"I was enjoying a blissful rest. Until now." Ian's usual stuffy tone held a chill instead of the trace of humor Nicky often found in it.

A kernel of apprehension took root in his gut. "It's almost morning." He brazened it out. "I just wanted to wish you good morning and a Happy New Year."

"Which could not be done at breakfast."

"Well, not with a kiss."

As he suited deed to words, he found Ian's lips hard and unresponsive.

"I see. You have had your use of my body and now it's fare-thee-well. I suppose this is what one can expect of soldiers. What a libertine you are."

"I'm a libertine?" Ian sat up, face dark and hard in the dim glow from the fire. The kernel of apprehension in Nicky's belly sowed a full field of dread. He stepped back.

Ian swung his feet to the floor. "I told you how I felt about that. And yet you insisted."

A smarter man might have left his lover to boil himself in his own ill humor, but Nicky's wits were losing ground to his temper.

"And you were so very unwilling your cock could not even rise to its duty, is that it?"

"It was under orders, King of Misrule."

Ian's rigidity could be frustrating. It could and did make Nicky need to vent his feelings with a quick bout of exercise before he could manage to keep a civil tongue in his head. But this. It was as if Ian was so very bound to his own cross that he sought to blame Nicky for nailing him there.

"That was play." The heat of Nicky's anger froze under an emotion too powerful to name. "If you wish to cry rape, make your accusation plain. Say it and damn yourself."

Ian looked away.

Nicky stepped to the fire and took a deep breath, but nothing could warm the cold that ate away inside. If he stayed, if they kept this course, the emotion would have its name, the worst in the world: hate.

He turned back. "It was play," he said again. "I thought if you had the excuse, it would make it easier, just as I claimed Simmons was ill each night."

Ian pulled the quilt across his lap.

Nicky turned his lips in, but his feelings would have their bent. "God knows I've done everything I can. And I have embraced all that you are, because I would not have you any other way, but this is more than a saint could bear."

Without a single blink, Ian's dark eyes met his. Even then Nicky's heart wanted to drive him to his knees and beg Ian to understand what he was so eager to cast off like old linens. If he would only offer the smallest sign... But he merely accepted Nicky's words as if they had no meaning.

"I will not allow you to twist this thing between us into something ugly and obscene to salve your misguided conscience. If you cannot accept it, so be it. I had rather none, than to let you make me loathe myself too."

Ian's hand gripped the counterpane tight across his lap, but he offered nothing.

"A Happy New Year to you then, Mr. Stanton. I hope it brings you all you desire."

## Chapter Eight

New Year's Day brought Ian more solitary freedom than the most devout of hermits could wish. When he made his excuses to their majesties, claiming he felt unable to draw a sleigh given his injury, Nicky responded with a curt nod that offered no insight into his feelings. Charlotte was more forthcoming with a roll of her eyes, but no one in the party demonstrated any particular distress at his absence. The game went on with no abatement of joy. Even the Dowager Duchess of Coventry was taking a pass, the four-in-hand on her sleigh made up of the company's most handsome bachelors.

It appeared all the ladies were going to get a turn, as Nicky hopped down after his first ride and acted as whip to the slower teams.

Ian turned away from the windows in the study to find Mrs. Collingswood beside him.

He bowed. "I had thought you would be enjoying the sleighing party."

"Oh, I cannot. I suffered a...fall several years ago and the cold weather endangers my breath. I can only enjoy the briefest moments outdoors in the winter." Her expression grew wistful.

"I am sorry for your injury, madam."

"I am too." She smiled, but her gaze seemed distant, fixed on remembered pains.

His own chest exceedingly heavy this morning, he forgot himself enough to ask. "Do you miss him?"

Mrs. Collingswood started from her reverie. "My husband?"

"I beg your pardon for presuming on our brief acquaintance. It is certainly not my place to inquire." But he thought he would rather like to know. Did the weight ever ease? Could you draw deeply of the air in a month? A year?

For all the pain his words brought, Nicky had the right of it. What they had shared would have run its course in a matter of days. There would be no logical reason for Ian to remain at Carleigh, or for Nicky to visit Ian in Oxfordshire. Indeed, an attempt to rekindle something best left behind in youth had been doomed from the start. The sooner desire was reconciled with reason the better off they would both be.

Mrs. Collingswood searched Ian's face and appeared to come to a decision. "Would it distress you very much to hear that I do not?"

It did not, and he said so. He had heard nothing but ill of Captain Collingswood, and he was pleased to know that this good woman did not grieve unnecessarily.

"It is curious, though," she said. "Sometimes the memory is fresh and other times it is as dead as last autumn's leaves."

As it was with Badajoz. Sometimes he could recall every second, and other times he could not even remember whether the day had been cloudy or fair. Could no longer call to mind Lieutenant Archer's features or the slippery feel of blood on the escalade.

"I believe I have some experience with that," he said.

They both watched as the dowager's four floundered in a drift, Nicky railing over them and slashing a buggy whip that fell nowhere near their backs.

"Is there nothing that can be done for your complaint?" Ian asked.

She gazed at him directly, blue eyes serene. "I was told my rib pierced my lung. I consider myself fortunate to have any breath not tainted by grave dirt."

Taken aback by her frank pronouncement, Ian struggled for words. None seemed to come.

"But then I imagine we both know how precious life is." She offered him another smile, but her intent tone was at odds with her placid expression. "I for one intend to seize the second chance I have been given."

Although the lady clearly spoke from her heart, Ian felt her words like a rebuke.

*But what if you cannot? What if the act of seizing your chance requires you to set aside honor and duty?* He could not ask, even if she could answer.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Stanton. Lady Anna is abed with the headache and as I am cousin to the family, Lord Carleigh asked me to stand in her stead to be certain the riders and horses were offered proper warming when they returned."

Ian looked back through the glass. The four "horses" had overpowered the "groom", tackling him to the snow while the duchess gesticulated from her sleigh. Ian knew that no matter how cold the snow, with Nicky in the thick of it, the whole party was laughing.

~ \* ~

Nicky cursed the leather strap that was supposed to be holding his ice skate on his boot and pushed unevenly against the ice to find an out-of-the-way spot to adjust it. Charlotte was presiding over races, the losers threatened with elaborately humiliating forfeits to be meted out following dinner. A large section of the pond—which bore the generous title of Green Lake—had been swept free of snow by servants and some enthusiastic guests to permit a skating party. Nicky was about to rejoin it when the strap slipped off his heel again.

"Pig-swiving shit."

"Is that still your favorite appellation?" Julian Lewes skated up next to him, offering the brace of his arm as Nicky wrestled with the strap once more.

Julian skated the way he did everything, with the grace and beauty that had left a younger Nicky breathless with hunger. Now he was only grateful for a sympathetic ear.

Julian's voice was dry. "What has the poor piece of leather done to suffer such calumny?"

"If you're not going to be helpful, Julian, you can take your wit elsewhere."

"Oh. It's that way, is it?" Julian looked across the ice to where Ian hovered like a petulant crow at his sister's side. "The irreproachable Mr. Stanton has remained true to form. The whole family has ever been a sanctimonious lot, dear Lady Charlotte excepted, of course."

"Of course," Nicky gritted out. The trouble was not with the heel after all. The cross straps had shifted. Nicky tugged them down hard enough to nearly cut through his boot.

"Now do you see the value inherent in being an uncaring bastard?"

"Because you are a bastion of joy?"

"At least I'm not savaging my foot with a piece of leather."

"I'm not. Shit." Nicky gave up on trying to balance on one foot and dropped to his knee to work at the straps.

Julian chuckled. "Deeply conscious of the honor, Amherst, but I have sworn never to marry."

"Bugger off."

"Ahh. I should very much like to. Do you think Lord Anthony could be persuaded to sample richer tastes? I'm afraid I've run through all the qualifying members of your groomsmen."

Nicky was never sure whether he could believe everything Julian said. "You are incorrigible."

"And why not? I possess the three things guaranteed to make life pleasant: wealth, power and a big cock."

In spite of himself, Nicky laughed. Certain at last his skate would not part company with the boot and send him sprawling, he rose to his feet. They skated slowly back to the rest of the group. "There are other things to enjoy."

"Name one."

"Companionship."

"Love, you mean."

Nicky shrugged.

"If love possesses all the power with which the poets endow it, why has it not solved your dilemma with the erstwhile Captain Stanton?"

There was no answer, so Nicky offered none.

"You see? You will never witness me chase after some imagined bond that men use to justify their most ridiculous behaviors."

"And what of women?"

"As I am not one of those delicate creatures I cannot speak to their motivations, though I suspect were they permitted honesty, they would be just as guided by pleasure as men."

Nicky knew one in particular who would let nothing stand in her way. “Charlotte, damn it.” Nicky had been putting off telling her.

“Insulting his sister now?”

“No. May I beg a favor?”

“Are you going to your knees again?” Julian arched a brow.

“Would you take over the races? I need to speak with Lady Charlotte.”

“An appointment as Prince Regent? Is this some sort of insinuation about the fit of my waistcoat?”

“You are slender as a rail, as always. Will you?”

“I suppose. If you give thought to what I said.”

“I will. And you give thought to this. Someday you’re going to be twice as wretched as I and I will laugh to watch you fall headlong into the abyss.”

“I shall look to see Lucifer buying his own pair of ice skates on the self-same day.”

Nicky had scarcely expected Ian to crawl into his bed and beg for forgiveness, but rather hoped for something besides a blank look as they joined Charlotte near the start of the races.

*Feel something, damn you. Argue. Create a scandal to keep the gossips buzzing for a year.*

Ian lowered his gaze.

Nicky glared a hole right through the top of that bowed head. Ian could make love to his blasted honor and duty and much good would it do him on a cold lonely night. Nicky would take Julian’s advice. Maintain a pretense of sangfroid until his blood cooled in truth. And when the cold bothered him, he’d fuck it into another man’s body, slam it down someone’s waiting throat, and at the moment when his body flooded with ecstasy, he’d still hate Ian for destroying what could have been perfect between them.

He led Charlotte over to the far side of the pond, where a spot of shade might shield them from the blinding sunlight reflecting off ice and snow.

She tilted her chin at him, heart-shaped face nothing like the lean one belonging to her brother, but they shared the same expressive brown eyes.

Faced with such a look, he spoke in fits and starts, at last stammering out, “The plan has failed. We won’t be getting married.”

Her eyes immediately filled with tears, but their softness disappeared behind an iron will as strong as her brother’s. “You promised.”

“I know, but how could that serve us now?”

“You told me, you swore while I sobbed my heart out on Emily’s wedding day that you would make certain I never had to undergo such a fate. That you’d do everything in your power to help me.” If she had not been on skates, Nicky was certain she would have stomped her foot.

“And you in turn would get me word of Ian. I have not forgotten. But, sweet, can’t you see how impossible this would be now? Do you truly want a household where your brother will not set foot?”

“Right now I don’t care if the both of you go straight to hell where you belong.” She shoved at him, and he maintained his balance on the thin blades with wind-milling arms. She had surprising strength for a tiny creature muffled in fur scarf and bright red mantle.

There was a reason he had put off telling Charlotte. She was free with all the passion her brother held in check.

“Do you know what I believe, you foul perjurer? You think you’ll find another man with a biddable sister for your *arrangement*.” She made the word sound as licentious as an advertisement for a brothel.

“You know that’s not true. I just think perhaps with cooler heads we can find some other way to ensure your happiness. One that doesn’t involve Ian becoming my brother-in-law.”

She wiped her glove across her face. “There is none. Do you have any idea what these last years have been like? The waiting? You give up in a week when you told me that nothing would stop you from having Ian.”

“Nothing but Ian it seems.”

“You’re just a—a—”

“Pig-swiving?” he suggested. Perchance he’d have more luck appealing to Charlotte’s better humor than Ian’s.

“Wastrel.”

She turned away, but not before he saw the tears flood her eyes again, sparkling spurs to his conscience. In that moment, he wanted to lavish on her all the comfort her brother rejected, soothe and pet her as he would one of his horses.

“Very well. I will honor my promise. We will marry and Emily shall come to live as your companion.”

She tilted up her chin again. Would that appealing look work as well on Ian’s face? Nicky would have given his own right arm to see such an expression used to implore his forgiveness, though he expected he had a better chance of sprouting wings.

“Truly?” she asked.

“Yes.” He glided closer, near where she drifted into the shade of a thick stand of evergreen.

The sound of a pistol echoed across the ice. Charlotte’s head shot up looking for the source, but Nicky knew it came from under their feet. After such a bitter cold week who would think the ice could crack?

He glanced down. “Charlotte, come toward me. Slowly.”

Fear dried her tears. “Nicky?”

“Just start to skate. Come on, sweet.”

She looked down at the cracks around her feet, but she was Ian’s sister and brave and smart. She took a few careful gliding steps.



“That’s it.” There was another booming crack, rolling long and hard as thunder. Nicky dove for the bright red cloak before it vanished under the ice.

~ \* ~

Ian had thought to skip the skating party, but with Mrs. Collingswood staying behind, someone had to look after Charlotte, so he fitted the skates to his boots. Skating without the counterweight of his arm proved far more difficult than relearning to ride or walk, so there was naught to do but stand about awkwardly and try not to think of anything at all. Sometimes it almost worked.

Lord Anthony and Sir Timothy Neville had insisted on a best two out of three, racing away at the signal to start, which Lewes had supplied with exaggerated ennui.

As Lewes’ gaze remained fixed on the swing of their morning coats as they dashed away, he startled Ian with sudden speech. “Do you know why you despise me so, Stanton?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me. But it seems to matter a great deal to you.”

Ian wondered which of the two options would be most humiliating: to listen to Lewes impugn his character or to skate away, single arm flailing about for balance. There was a third choice. He could offer enough of a public insult to institute a duel, let Lewes kill him, and put an end to a miserable existence.

He took the most cowardly way out and stood there. “Nothing you could say would be of any possible interest to me.”

“You loathe my existence because you envy it.”

So be it. He would let Lewes kill him. “Why would I envy a poxy whore?”

Lwes simply laughed. “Because I enjoy nothing but pleasure as I choose to take it. And you hate having such an example when you are terrified to have the smallest bit of joy for yourself. I pity you.”

“Do not waste it on me. I am certain there are others who would—”

At the first boom, Ian’s senses took him straight back to Badajoz. Blood, smoke, screams. Screams. He searched the ice frantically for Charlotte’s bright red cloak. He found it just as the second crack reverberated across the sky. This time the scream was here, not in his mind, and the flash of red disappeared, as did a darker patch beside it.

He started for them immediately, faster than he’d thought his balance could manage.

Lwes skated beside him. “Off to drown yourself as well?”

Lwes spoke no more than the truth. Ian could not hold Charlotte and swim, and no amount of wishing in the world would make it otherwise.

“Hoi!” Lewes called back to the figures in the distance. “Bring a broom, a stick, whatever you can find.” His voice dropped back to normal speech. “Yes indeed, some fine specimens of English pluck there. Half of them have already scrambled to the bank.”

Ian didn't care. Everything he held dear in the world was somewhere under this ice, and he was going to get it back or die trying.

Squinting against the sun's glare, he saw an arm wave.

"There."

He dashed off. The ice shuddered once more, no loud crack this time, a rumbling groan. Ian calculated the distance to the dark patch on the ice and launched himself in a dive, sliding across on his belly, muttering a swift prayer that his momentum wouldn't carry him in.

There were two of them in the black water. Alive, but struggling in heavy wet clothes. Nicky held Charlotte, their faces dead white, their breath shallow and quick.

At first Ian thought Nicky refused the hand Ian thrust forward, but then realized Nicky was handing off Charlotte. Her icy hand slipped from Ian's fingers and he gripped her hood instead, hauling with every fiber in his body. His breath, his pulse, every minutiae of sound enveloped in the frosty clouds of air as he labored to pull his sister free of the water's grip.

Movement at last. Or perhaps just the ice breaking apart beneath him. Then there were hands gripping his legs, tight as shackles.

"Pull, Stanton. Pull, you blasted ox." Lewes' final word was a barely heard grunt.

Ian gathered everything inside him for another effort and Charlotte was out, sliding back with them.

He was dimly aware of Lewes wrapping her in his coat, but all Ian could see was Nicky, still struggling like a fly in treacle. Each time he put his hand on the ice to push himself out, it broke away.

Ian crawled toward him, shoving his stump against the ice for traction as he held out his hand. The ice heaved beneath him and again Lewes grabbed at his legs, hauling him back.

Nicky was closer now, but so were the cracks in the ice.

"It's breaking apart. We'll have to wait for the broom." Of course Lewes would turn caitiff now.

"We can't wait." Ian glanced about. "Charlotte. Your scarf. What is it made of?"

Shivering and almost blue, Charlotte seemed to not understand. Ian crossed over and grabbed it.

"My tippet? It's mink." Her fingers fumbled as she tried to help him unwind the scarf that was more than twice her height in length. "Please save him. He would not have gone in but for me."

Ian made no complaint as Lewes reached in and pulled the scarf free.

"Put that coat back on and crawl out of the way. Don't stand until you hit the bank. Lewes, get her safe." Ian didn't even look back to see if his orders were followed, as he wrapped the sodden fur in a coil. Pinning one end under his stump, he sent the rest spinning toward Nicky.

"Caught it," Nicky called back but his voice was weak with strain. Any longer and he'd freeze to death, even if they saved him from drowning.

Again Lewes took Ian's legs as they tried to haul Nicky out of the icy water. Ian kicked away the grip. "I have to get closer. We'll never pull him out from here."

“If you cut my face with your skates, Stanton, I’ll let the both of you drown.”

There was perhaps a yard of stretched mink between them now. Nicky’s head and shoulders became visible for an instant and then sank back. And again.

Ian had ever thought the color of desperation was red. Blood spilling from his fingers as he fought to staunch a wound. Blood pouring from the shattered end of his arm. But now he knew it was white. Cold and empty and eternal. He was not leaving Nicky here in this frozen void.

Ian pulled until it felt like the sleeve on his coat was all that held his arm in the socket.

Nicky’s torso flopped over the edge of the hole. He kept his grip on the scarf, but made no further move to save himself. And the ice still groaned beneath them.

Lewes gave a sharp tug to Ian’s legs. “Come on, you useless sodding cripple. Or do I have to do this for you too?”

Ian reached down and found a strength he never knew he had. Even his phantom arm lent its invisible power as Ian risked rising to his knees to haul them backward with all that he was. All that he would ever be. Because if he failed this, he was joining Nicky in that icy blankness.

Ian fell back onto Lewes and Nicky came with him. Aching with every beat of his pulse, Ian reached down, and between them, they dragged Nicky to safety.

At last people seemed to have been jolted into activity, running toward them, brooms and coats in hand.

“I still hate you,” Ian said.

“Thank God for that.” Lewes’ answer was as fervent as a prayer.

## Chapter Nine

The local doctor had been enjoying a cup of cheer with Lord Carleigh, so there was no need to send for him. There was no medicine for a chill but warmth. Outwardly with blankets and hot stones tucked in about them, and inwardly, with brandy and broth.

When Ian left Charlotte an hour past sunset, she was sitting up against the pillows, sipping a cup of chocolate. Mrs. Collingswood had not left Charlotte's side since she was brought into the house. Indeed, Ian wondered if the lady might not take a chill by association so closely did she affix herself to his sister. Assured that Charlotte showed no signs of catarrh or fever, not even a snuffle, Ian went again to check on the other patient, but the word was the same, his lordship was resting.

Nicky had roused briefly as they hauled him onto a farm sledge to bring him home, blinking about and coughing out some water along with the single question, "Charlotte?"

"Safe, thanks to you," Ian assured him, and Nicky sank back under the pile of coats and blankets. Ian and Lewes rode with him on the sledge. Lewes cultivated an image of insouciance, but Ian could tell it was a façade from the frequent glances directed at Nicky's too-pale face.

Ian also suspected Nicky was aware of what was happening around him, but too exhausted to do anything about it. Ian remembered that state all too well, one's body so abused it fell out of charity with one's spirit, issued the cut direct, and sank inward past conscious control. A familiarity with the state did not ease concern to see it on one so dear, however.

Heedless of Lewes' presence, Ian slipped his hand beneath the pile of coats and found Nicky's, squeezing warmth into the cold limp fingers. "Come, Nicky. Who will remind me what an unmitigated ass I am if you don't?"

"I shall be happy to perform the office at any time," Lewes said, but the words failed to cut.

The corners of Nicky's mouth twitched and the two watchers let out pent breath in perfect unison. Ian was certain it was the last time they would ever be in such agreement.

Now Ian hovered outside Nicky's room, unsure if he should knock. Lord Carleigh and Lady Anna were within. Neither had been anywhere else since Nicky had been carried upstairs, despite his reassuring though weak-voiced protests that he could walk.

Simmons came out carrying a tray.

"Still asleep, sir. But I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you were to go in."

Warmth crept into Ian's cheeks. Since Lewes told him of Simmons' affair with an actor, Ian had tried to banish the idea to a frozen wasteland in his mind, especially since such experience probably left Simmons all too aware of why Nicky visited Ian each night. Standing here now with Simmons, Ian felt the nature of his and Nicky's relationship couldn't be more plain.

Ian swallowed. "Thank you, Simmons."

"He'll pull through, sir. Lord Amherst has always enjoyed the best of health."

Ian offered his gratitude again and tried to school his face into something appropriate for Nicky's family before he tapped on the door.

Lord Carleigh's deep voice invited him in, but since he addressed Ian as Simmons, Ian simply stuck in his head. A blast of heat nearly knocked him back a pace.

"Ian, lad, come in." Lord Carleigh launched himself from his chair and strode over to grip Ian's hand and shoulder, shaking both roughly. "Thank you. They told me you and Mr. Lewes pulled him out. That no one else would risk it."

"Ni—Lord Amherst is the one deserving of praise. If he had not acted, I would have lost a sister."

"Nonetheless, you have my gratitude. I knew when he first brought you to visit you would be good for him. Just the sort of sober chap to keep him from getting in over his head."

Ian looked down at the carpet. He had made up his mind to beg forgiveness from the man so still in the middle of that big bed, to seize what they could of happiness between them, but Lord Carleigh's words brought home the audacity of such a decision. They were not beholden to only each other. The bonds of family were strong.

Lady Anna came around from the other side of the bed. Her greeting was less effusive, but still warm. "Mr. Stanton, it seems we have made an even exchange, a sister for a brother. Thank you."

"The praise is undeserved. Anyone would have done as much."

"Anyone didn't. Great lot of profligate scoundrels eating us out of house and home." Lord Carleigh stomped over to poke at the fire.

"Father..." Lady Anna turned back to Ian. "It has been a terrible strain. Father hates feeling helpless." Voice lowered to a whisper, she said, "I think he should rest. And he must have something to eat. Could we impose on you further and ask you to sit with him?" She nodded at the man under the pile of blankets. Her manner suggested she was more troubled than her father. Her hands kept twisting in front of her, and her brow remained furrowed.

"It would be no imposition at all, my lady."

"Father, Mr. Stanton will stay with Nicholas. You need to take some dinner."

"I am perfectly well as I am."

"Of course you are. But a bit of dinner will elevate our spirits."

Her managing ways, though couched with a maternal air, reminded Ian of Nicky at his most high-handed.

“If he wakes, if you need anything at all, just call,” she said as she shut the door behind them.

He had to say that Nicky’s color was much improved, skin back to its warm tones, cheeks and lips regaining their cherubic pink. After five minutes, Ian was so warm he had to remove his coat, a feat Simmons’ clever tailoring had made easier to perform for himself. He was definitely letting Timpet go. It would be too heart-wrenching to suffer such a falling off in quality.

After ten minutes, Ian unbuttoned his waistcoat. No wonder Lady Anna had been so eager to vacate the stifling heat. He swung his chair around, availing himself of the chance to study the patient. Nicky’s breathing was even, and every so often the tip of his tongue flicked between his lips, an activity Ian found so amusing and endearing it made his breath catch each time he witnessed it.

The gold curls were glued to his forehead with sweat, so Ian reached out and brushed them back. Nicky’s eyes opened. “Come to eulogize the remains?”

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Why are you half-dressed?”

Before Ian could answer, Nicky began shoving at the pile of quilts and blankets heaped on him. “Christ. Get these bloody things off me before I suffocate.”

Ian helped him but insisted on leaving the last few. “You’ll thank me when the sweat starts to cool.”

“In this room?” Nicky glared at the fire as if it offered a personal affront.

“You were rather chilled.”

“I expect so. The ice broke. And Charlotte went in with it.”

He seemed to be asking Ian for confirmation so he gave it. “Yes.”

“I went after Charlotte and you got her out and then pulled me out with some fur scarf?”

“A tippet of mink. She says it should recover.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve those two extra stones on me.”

“I think rather my arm may never be the same.”

“Stretch out a few inches, did it?”

Ian lifted both his arms out straight. “Lacking a source for comparison it’s hard to say for certain. Feels as if that might be the case.” He dropped his arms at his sides.

Nicky shivered. “Perhaps one more of the quilts.”

Ian dragged up two and Nicky tucked them around him. “Charlotte is well. She was not in the water as long as you were. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Nicky returned gravely.

Ian reached up and tugged at his cravat. He wished he dared untie it. At last he looked at Nicky. “You were right. I am an unmitigated ass.”

"I heard you. In the sledge."

"I thought you might have done." For once, Nicky's expressive features offered Ian no clue about how to proceed. "Can you forgive me?"

Nicky didn't speak, so Ian leaned down, pressing a kiss to his lips. They were both slick with sweat, but Ian didn't care. Nicky's lips were warm, alive, and sliding open to the light pressure.

When Ian raised his head, Nicky's expression was unchanged.

"Is this some wild gesture at a life and death moment? Will your behavior be once again explained away by an excuse so that on the morrow you will claim duress?"

It was appalling to hear his actions described so, but at the moment, Ian could find no grounds for disagreement. "No. You were in the right before you nearly died."

"Comforting to know."

"But as I am speaking the truth, what you ask—" At Nicky's frown, Ian clarified, "What we both want, can't you see that it fills me with fear?"

"Of course I can. But if we were to ever let fear control us, how could any of us seek happiness, to touch on the betterment you aspire to?"

"I know Phaedrus had the right of it with his army of lovers. You make me a better man, Nicky. You make me feel whole."

Nicky reached out and gripped Ian's maimed arm, pulling him forward into an embrace. Ian exhaled into Nicky's skin. If only it were as easy to bury all cares, all fears and pain. Nicky's hand fell on his head and held him tight against his neck.

Ian let out another long breath. What good did it serve, to cling to an ideal that excluded the person he most wanted to please? "I thought I had lost your regard."

Nicky's hand stroked through Ian's hair, landing heavily on his neck as a soft laugh rumbled between them. "Regard? Ian, only you could come home from war wounded in body and spirit and still sound like a classics scholar. You hold that always. And my honor and my passion and much more."

Ian swallowed and lifted his head. "I don't deserve it."

"Who could?" Nicky began with a joke and then his face became serious. "But you do, Ian. You are more deserving than most. Whose face did I see peering at me over the ice? Who was brave enough to risk his neck to save mine?"

"Julian Lewes came to your aid as well," Ian admitted with scrupulous honesty.

"God, I am sure to hear of that. Is he no longer a disgusting bastard, then?"

"He remains so. But he also saved your life. I could not have done it alone."

"You would have found a way."

There was a tap at the door and Ian pulled free, sitting upright in his chair, dragging on his coat.

"Yes," Nicky called in answer to a second tap.

Simmons stepped in, carrying a tray. “My lord! It’s good to see you looking yourself.” He set the tray on the bed, and Nicky made a face at what was clearly sickroom fare. Thin soup and something steaming and clotted, though how anything could steam against the heat of the room Ian could not say.

Simmons put the tray on the washstand. “I’ll let his lordship and Lady Anna know you are awake and see if I can find you something more hearty in the kitchen.” He nodded at Ian as he passed on his way to the door. “It will only be a minute, sir.”

Ian understood the warning. He buttoned his waistcoat, nursing a deep resentment that this interlude should not end with them embracing through the night. It was unfair and it was maddening, but the one thing it wasn’t was shameful. The notion came as such a surprise it must have shown on his face.

“What?”

Ian shook his head and looked at the door.

“Come to me tonight?” Nicky whispered.

“Your rest...?”

“I have had a sufficiency. And I assure you all parts are in working order. Besides, what could warm me more?” Nicky made a salacious waggle of his eyebrows.

~ \* ~

Ian had never been more anxious for nightfall in his life. Despite the events of the day, it seemed the house would not quiet enough for him to risk the quick trip across the hall. When at last he was certain he would not be observed, he darted into Nicky’s room and locked the door behind him.

The fire still blazed and lamps were lit on every surface. The room glowed, but for Ian all the warmth in the room was waiting in the bed.

“I thought it would be morning before you were here.” In his nightgown, Nicky looked years younger. He stripped it off, revealing the man beneath, then held the covers open for Ian.

“Are you certain you are well enough?”

“Come over here and ask again.”

Ian moved to the foot of the bed.

“I think you have mistaken this party for a masque. The invitation was to come in your finest.” Nicky crawled forward and opened Ian’s dressing gown.

“It is my best nightshirt.”

“But your finest features—” Nicky gave a sharp tug to lift the long tails of Ian’s shirt. “Ahh. There they are.”

Ian let Nicky finish pulling the nightshirt over his head. As it dropped behind him, Nicky’s palm rubbed across Ian’s cheek.

“You’re freshly shaved.”



“Simmons offered.” Ian felt the heat in his cheeks. “I think he sensed I was in great anticipation.”

“Of what, I wonder?”

“Now who’s an ass?” Ian shoved Nicky to his back and climbed on top of him.

Warm. So warm. Skin gold in the light. With Nicky spread out beneath him, Ian had never cursed his missing arm more. He wanted both hands to cover that flesh, both thumbs to rub across the dark pink nipples, wanted a double grip in those wild curls as he lifted Nicky up for a kiss.

“Don’t. Please, Ian.”

“What?”

“Glower.”

“I’m not—I just want—”

Nicky reached up and rolled him down onto the bed so they were on their sides, facing each other. “Name it.”

Ian couldn’t put a name to all his wants, and he had precious little time. This was a farewell as much as it was a celebration. In two days, he and Charlotte would be southbound in their coach. A year would scarce be long enough to sate himself on all he wanted of Nicky.

Above all, he wanted to humble himself in worship. Let mouth and hand and body speak to his regret at not recognizing the gift Nicky had offered sooner. To show he knew, even if in future all they shared were a few stolen moments, those moments could make life so much more than the passing of time in service to one ideal or another.

He ran his hand over Nicky’s hip.

“You want my arse again?” Nicky’s smile held a warmth Ian felt in his bones.

“No. I want you to take mine.”

Nicky drew back as if to afford a better point of observation.

“Don’t do that.”

Nicky cocked a brow. “Do what?” But the amusement in his face was clear to read.

“Make me any more nervous, you bastard.”

Nicky rolled overtop of him, kissing the very taste from Ian’s mouth. When it seemed they would have to part or suffer asphyxiation, Nicky dove back for more, the tingling pressure of lips and tongues making blood beat hot and thick in Ian’s prick.

Nicky’s own cock rubbed hard on Ian’s hip, and Ian bucked against him.

“This.” Nicky raised his body enough to make a deliberate thrust of his hips, prick sliding in the groove of Ian’s thigh. Drawing back, Nicky made another surge forward, so that the head of his cock rutted into the skin beneath Ian’s balls. Ian’s eyes screwed shut in anticipation.

“This,” Nicky said again, and his prick pressed into the cleft below. “This is going inside you.”

The knowledge was already sending pulses of readiness to dampen the head of Ian's prick even as it made his muscles tense. "Ah. Yes. But we will be using that oil again, yes?"

Nicky buried a chuckle in Ian's shoulder. "Yes, indeed. Allow me to worry about the details. I believe you have enough on your mind."

There was no question of trust, and Ian did not particularly fear pain on his own behalf. He worried only that an undignified arrangement of limbs would provoke the sort of feelings antithetical to passion, such as the fit of unmanly giggles building in his throat.

Nicky straightened up and dropped his weight to the side. "Roll over."

Ian complied with alacrity. Not having to see Nicky would go a long way to easing Ian's mind.

When he felt Nicky loom, Ian tensed, awaiting an intrusion of oil, but Nicky's hands merely stroked Ian's shoulders, fingers soothing the knots in the muscles under the skin, moving down each side of his spine until reaching the curve of his backside before starting at his shoulders again.

"You will send me to sleep," Ian said.

"I rather doubt that to be the case." Nicky reached beneath him and wrapped a hand around Ian's hard cock. "I believe I still have your intently focused attention."

"You do. But..." What was there he could not admit to Nicky now? "But I am starting to think that my dread is making it worse than the reality."

"Dread is it? I offer you a heaven on earth and you dread it?" But Nicky's voice held a smile. "You will sing a different song in a moment."

Again Nicky's touch began at his shoulders, but this time the comforting rub of his hands was accompanied by the flick of his tongue making its way down Ian's spine. He yearned to roll up into that light touch, to offer more flesh to be so caressed. When the tongue reached the end of his spine, the hollow at the top of the crease of his arse, Nicky gave a slow deliberate kiss, stirring the skin with lush heat before blowing his breath on the wet spot until gooseflesh dimpled Ian's skin.

When the scent of lavender filled the room, Ian's prick ached. He would have to sequester himself until he learned to disassociate the scent from the expectation of pleasure lest he go about in company with his prick acting as tent pole in his trousers. Nicky oiled the crease, thumbs kneading the skin to a slippery softening that ended as soon as Ian felt the touch at his entrance.

"Relax your arsehole. This is the part where you get to help."

"'Tis easier said than done, you know."

Nicky laughed against his shoulder. "Yes, I do know." He pressed and retreated, then again. "I want to be inside you, Ian. My cock in you as you shiver around me." His thumb worked its way in, startlingly larger than a finger.

Ian stretched his arms—arm—above his head. Nicky made slow deep nudges with his thumb until he reached the limit of flesh and bone. After an initial twinge as his body opened, Ian accepted the sensation.

A little violating, a little uncomfortable, but when Nicky moved his thumb, swirled it, drove it in and out, Ian's prick pulsed with pleasure.

In the moment when Ian thought he might learn to like it, Nicky stopped.

"Up on your knees."

Ian scrambled to get his legs beneath him.

"Ever the dutiful soldier. You like having your orders." Nicky whispered the words into Ian's ear, hot breath brushing the skin. "Orders make everything easier."

Ian shook his head.

Nicky entered him again with something, couldn't be his prick, but God, it burned. Ian wanted to fall back into the mattress, the fire in his arse sapping the strength from his legs.

"Push back on my fingers."

Fingers. "Christ, how many?"

"Two." Nicky sounded amused.

Ian groaned and pushed into Nicky's thrust. The action seemed to open up space inside him for Nicky's fingers, space that Ian wanted touched.

"Yes, you like your marching orders. Saves you from thinking."

"No." He didn't care for being ordered around any more than the next man, but somehow here, when it was Nicky, Ian's will gladly suborned to Nicky's commands.

Nicky reached around Ian's hips, fingers wrapping too damned loosely about his prick. "Then why is your cock like marble? The skin's that tight I think you shall spill before I can get my cock in you."

"Please, Nicky."

"Perhaps you should give the order."

"Do it."

"If you truly want it, give voice to it. Then you cannot say I made you."

"Nicky."

First Nicky stopped the light friction on Ian's prick, then Nicky's fingers fluttered inside, rubbing deeply before they withdrew.

In an agony of suspended sensation, Ian ground out the words. "Will you bloody fuck me?" He licked his dry lips. "Please?"

"Ever the gentleman."

Ian buried his face in his good arm, trying not to think of how Nicky had learned to push a man to the point where he was desperate to be taken. How many times he must have done this to show such patience.

Nicky's cock rubbed along the crease, nudging at the flesh that now seemed to want to capture that blunt pressure, drag it in to touch all the newly discovered places inside.

Nicky leaned down, his breath a damp kiss at Ian's ear. "I will try to be slow, but I confess the very thought of this makes me slightly mad."

"Glad I'm not the only one."

Nicky huffed a laugh against Ian's skin. "Together then."

"Yes."

Pressure, insistent steady pressure. Ian could bear this, it was—God, it was too much. No wonder Nicky had cried that first time. Even with the oil, Ian felt scraped, torn.

Nicky held still within for a moment and then withdrew, leaving Ian panting into the pillow.

"You actually reach satisfaction with *that* occurring?"

"I do. Some men can climax with naught but the stroke of a cock in their arse."

Ian took another deep breath. "I wish to give you this, but I do request you hurry matters along."

Nicky's hand made another soothing trip down Ian's back, then gripped his arse cheeks. "We'll see."

Perhaps it was because it was expected, but the pressure had eased somewhat. Still painful, yes, but if Nicky wanted to have Ian's body this way, he could manage. Nicky withdrew again and this time thrust swift and deep, seating himself so completely Ian felt the slap of ballocks against his arse.

He bit his lip. No wonder Nicky had demanded movement. The sooner Nicky took his satisfaction the better. Taking as deep a breath as he could, Ian said, "Please take your pleasure, but I beg you to recall I undertake a long carriage ride in a few days."

Nicky's laugh made the oddest sensation inside Ian, but before he could decide if he wished a repetition, Nicky gripped Ian's shoulder, shifting them. The prick lancing his guts shifted as well, and Ian remembered how enjoyable Nicky's fingers had felt. Sparks of pleasure intermingled with the pain. Nicky began to thrust, holding Ian with a hand on his shoulder, hauling him onto that thick slam of a prick inside.

Ian groaned and pushed back, almost disbelieving his body should crave more.

"Yes." Nicky dropped a kiss on the back of Ian's neck. "With me." Nicky's hand gripped Ian's cock, dragging him toward completion.

He slapped at Nicky's hand. "Can we wait?"

"If you wish." Nicky's arms wrapped around Ian's chest, hands stroked his back, his sides, his jaw. Nicky gave his fingers for Ian to kiss.

This was right. Nothing could be more so. Sharing pleasure, bodies climbing together. Why would God have created bodies capable of scaling such heights if they were not meant to experience this?

His fingers twisted in the sheet. "Now."

"No." Nicky shook his head on Ian's back and withdrew, leaving Ian aching. Punishment for all his doubt, all his fears?

Nicky grabbed Ian's leg and urged him onto his back, lifting Ian's legs high. "Like this." Nicky drove back in, a swift tearing burn that subsided as he began his thrusts. "Couldn't at first." He smiled down. "Thought if I watched your face, I would be off before the race."

Like a lodestone, Nicky's cock seemed drawn to the spot inside that spilled forth exquisite sensation, almost the very paroxysm of climax, but drawn out until Ian was drowning in it.

"Now." It was Nicky demanding it this time.

Ian wrapped his fist around his cock. One stroke had him gasping, ballocks primed, prick ready to fire.

"God, Ian, please. Come."

He did, body launched through that fiery space, where all he knew was the heat bathing both of them with each jerk of his cock.

Splash of warmth inside as well, Nicky shuddering, pouring his seed into Ian, the thought making his prick twitch again.

Nicky's breath crooned softly in his ear as he folded them together.

Ian's head settled on his maimed arm, and Nicky tried to wedge his head into the same spot.

Ian tucked in closer to his own shoulder.

"Do you often sleep like this? I mean to say, pillowed on this arm?"

"What an odd question."

"I was just thinking. Sometimes my own arm is twisted beneath me and goes to pins and needles. I thought in that at least, you might be fortunate."

"Yes, Nicky. You are mad indeed."

"Truth told, I didn't want you thinking too much."

"Fear me not." Ian leaned in and kissed him. He suffered neither guilt nor doubt for what they had done. "Can I take you like that? I mean, on your knees?"

Nicky smiled. "What, now?"

"Well not precisely now," Ian said with a rueful chuckle.

"Mr. Stanton, you may take me on my knees, against a wall, over a table, on my back, on my side, on the sofa—"

Ian had lost himself in imagery somewhere around "over a table" as he thought of Nicky reaching out to hold the edge as Ian slammed deep into his arse. "Well, perhaps not all that tonight."

## Chapter Ten

To Nicky's delight as well as his despair, once committed, Ian could not be turned from his path. At the moment, his devotion to his chosen course gave Nicky blinding pleasure and what was sure to be a sore arse in the morning.

He buggered Nicky on his knees for what felt like an hour, arm around his waist with a hand stretched to his shoulder, bracing him for every hard thrust.

Nicky rose to his own knees, clutching Ian's foreshortened arm for balance, riding the cock that drove him to madness.

Ian lifted him slightly and withdrew.

Nicky released his grip. "What happened? Did you spend? Is it your arm?"

Ian's chin rubbed the top of Nicky's spine as he shook his head. "No." His voice was hoarse. "I know, I know there will be long stretches when we are apart."

Ian had interrupted coitus for conversation? Of course he had done. With that iron will, he had kept to a lonely bed for years.

Nicky sought to concentrate on Ian's words instead of the demands of a body which ached with the sudden severance of completion.

Ian continued, "I would never ask that you not seek pleasure elsewhere, but could this—" his hand squeezed Nicky's hip, meaning plain, "—be mine alone?"

Nicky ached now with more than just pent-up seed. How could Ian have come to believe himself unworthy of fidelity that he should couch his request with such diffidence? Nicky would rather Ian's jealous passion, his threats and fierce kisses. He twisted to pull Ian down onto the bed beside him.

"I would swear any oath to you, Ian. There is no part of me I would not keep for you alone."

"An oath is unnecessary. Your promise will serve."

Ian looked so grave, the V between his brows as deep as a valley. Nicky wanted nothing more than to erase those lines. "You have it. Besides, didn't you threaten to geld me?"

"I did." Ian spoke with solemnity, but Nicky could see the smile start in Ian's eyes. He reached down and stroked Nicky's cock back to full attention. "And what a shame should it come to pass, but I would keep my word."

Nicky gasped as Ian's fingers lifted the sac beneath, the touch a teasing brush of feathers on skin drawn tight with need. "Fuck me, Ian."

“With deep and abiding pleasure.”

~ \* ~

Nicky woke to a rush of cold air as Ian eased out from under the covers. A shiver rolled down Nicky’s spine. He wanted Ian back in bed, wanted warmth and then heat all over again, proof that Ian’s surrender was unconditional.

“Are you going to issue another retraction?”

Ian had his nightshirt on when he turned around. “No. Not at all.”

“So come back to bed. I’m cold.”

Ian bent to build up the fire.

“It’s hours till dawn.” Nicky knew he sounded petulant but he had faced death a few hours earlier. Didn’t that entitle a fellow to a little comfort? “I know Julian spoke to you. Simmons would not bat an eyelash were he to find us together.”

Ian sat on the bed with his back to Nicky and pulled on his dressing gown. “And are we to live with one servant? Constantly fearing for our necks?”

“I thought you had come to an understanding.”

“I have done. But there are practical matters to consider.”

“Well, as you say, I must marry.”

Ian turned to face him. “And that will make matters easier?”

“There is always the Continent. We could live in Italy. Like Byron.” Nicky shivered again. “I think it will be sometime before I regain my fondness for winter sports.”

“But how will we live? On my half-pay? My fortune amounts to scarcely eight hundred pounds, Nicky. Will your father support you if you turn your back on your responsibilities?”

“He may.”

“Even if there was some way, what you said would hold more truth. If you abandon your family, you would come to hate yourself and me as the cause.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that there is a simple solution to our problem? One that will bring much happiness to all concerned?”

“I am ever at your service, Nicky. But I’m afraid your reign as King of Misrule has gone to your head.”

Now that Nicky came to it, the bald pronouncement was bloody difficult to make to a man’s face. He and Charlotte had never quite covered this part of their plan. Nicky ran a tongue along his teeth in contemplation. Perhaps something like this was best said without words. That Charlotte would be furious would only serve the minx right for the way she had tormented Ian. Nicky only wished he could be there to witness it firsthand.

“Off to your cold bed then. But I warrant you’ll sing a different tune before Twelfth Night.”

~ \* ~

Stammering concerns about the weather, Lord Anthony and some of his friends departed into a clear blue sky the next morning. Ian thought the storm they feared was the one presaged by Lord Carleigh’s icy glare as he contemplated their reluctantly rendered aid on the ice. With the party in smaller numbers it was difficult to avoid Lewes’ company, but the man’s mere presence no longer chafed. Ian would never like him, but he no longer could hold him up as an antithesis of decency. Not when his own soul seemed wedded to those same desires.

Charlotte and Nicky were forbidden to leave their rooms for breakfast, though both professed perfect health. Ian’s private knowledge of Nicky’s capacity for exercise was nothing which could be offered in Nicky’s public defense, so in their rooms the pair of misadventurers remained. Ian’s treacherous prick thought Nicky confined to bed was an excellent way to spend a day, but a lengthy disappearance would no doubt be marked. And if someone went in search of him... He shuddered in consideration of the potential disaster. Yes, it would take more than a simple decree from the King of Misrule to ensure a merry Twelfth Night.

When Lady Anna declared that dinner would be the final formal entertainment of the evening, Ian looked forward to the opportunity to be abed—Nicky’s—early. He escaped the post-dinner rituals as quickly as possible and was surprised to find Simmons waiting for him in his rooms.

“Ah. I’ll have my dressing gown, Simmons. I may...wish to do some reading before I retire.”

“Very good, sir.” Simmons made quick work of Ian’s coat and cravat and then hesitated.

“Yes, Simmons?”

“I don’t like to repeat gossip, sir. But as it may be of particular concern to you, sir, I thought I must.”

At the word gossip, ice filled Ian’s veins, a rapid freeze to shattering, one shard lodging just under his heart so that a breath ached. How great a disaster? Would it be the Continent or gaol?

Surprised he could still speak, Ian said, “Go on.”

“Or rather it concerns Lady Charlotte, sir.”

The shock of relief offered a cushion against initial understanding. Charlotte? The ice roared away under a spring thaw, bubbles of rage erupting in his blood.

“Tell me.”

“It seems that she has been, to put it delicately, entertaining one of the guests in her room.”

Despite his missing arm, there would be no need for seconds or a dawn appointment. He would kill the man with his one hand. Heedless of his state of undress, he walked past Simmons and into the hall, heading for the south tower.



Had she asked for a room so far away from others to carry out this dalliance or had some vile rake taken advantage of the distance to seduce her? He took the steps two at a time. There would be no pause at the door, no warning, no quarter. He flung open the door to Charlotte's room.

At first, his brain could not discern what his eyes reported.

A woman's bare shoulders, nightdress down to her waist, but the hair was blonde, blonde as—yes, with the face turning toward the door it was Mrs. Collingswood. The figure recumbent on the bed was female as well and even as he placed his hand over his eyes he saw his sister, her own nightdress open to the waist.

"Ian," Charlotte shrieked. "What made you—? I'm going to kill him."

"I—I beg your pardon." Still covering his eyes, he backed out of the room.

~ \* ~

Signaled by Simmons, Nicky made it to Charlotte's room in time to intercept her as she barreled onto the tower stairs in her dressing gown. "You! Why on earth would you send him here?"

"Were you going to tell him?"

"I thought you would."

"Ah yes, just blurt it out. Your sweet innocent sister has taken a lover," Nicky said. "Leave the worst of it to me again."

A quieter voice broke in. "Lord, anyone would think you were already married. Perhaps we could continue the discussion in tones that don't carry to the stables?" Emily stood between them. Nicky recognized a militant eye when he saw one and subsided. "Now. However misguided my cousin has been, someone has to speak to Mr. Stanton."

Simmons glided up the tower stairs like a ghost. "Mr. Stanton has sequestered himself in your father's study, my lord. From the sounds of it, he means to make the acquaintance of a great deal of your father's cognac."

Nicky started past him and then came back up. "Is the door locked?"

"No, my lord, but I do have the key." As he held it up, three hands reached for it, and Emily's slender fingers proved the most deft.

"I am the most sensible choice as I am bound to him neither by blood nor affection. Indeed, I may be the only one he will speak with. You'll see that they don't disturb us, Simmons."

"You have the only key, madam."

After Emily had gone out of sight around a corner, Charlotte turned on Nicky. "I can't believe you would do something like this. I'm going with her."

Nicky stopped her. "You just want to listen at the door. I have a better idea. Though you may want to go back to your room to secure a scented kerchief or something to cover your nose."

~ \* ~

Ian welcomed the fiery cognac into his throat and poured a fresh glassful from the decanter. Such abuse was no doubt shameful given the expense of procuring the stuff during the war, but he needed something to blot the image in his mind. Another man might have been able to dismiss what he had seen in Charlotte's room as girlish curiosity, but not a man with Ian's experiences.

He had not known women felt that way too.

Another half decanter of cognac and Ian wouldn't care. This was why Charlotte hadn't married. Could a proclivity for one's own sex be something they had inherited from their mother? Though Lord Carleigh's library was well-stocked, Ian doubted he would find the answer on its shelves. He might however find something less costly in which to submerge his thoughts.

Intent on his search, he ignored the first three taps on the door.

"Mr. Stanton? It is I, Emily Collingswood."

Maybe she had come to ask for Charlotte's hand. As long as she hadn't come to remove the strong spirits, they could exist in harmony. He stalked over and yanked open the door.

He had kept the room dark to match his mood, but after she closed the doors again, she slipped over to a wall sconce and lit it with her candle. Ha! A bottle of single malt was next to some political tract. He grabbed it.

"Mr. Stanton, I am sure you have suffered something of a shock."

A shock. Yes. Finding his sister engaged in...he didn't know what she had been engaged in and he didn't particularly wish to examine it with any scrutiny. He opened the bottle and started to raise it to his lips, but despite what he had seen, there was a lady present and Ian was still a gentleman. He poured a generous amount into his glass.

"I love Charlotte very much, Mr. Stanton."

Maybe she was asking for her hand. "Are you pleading her case or yours?"

"Neither. I believe you are entitled to an explanation."

"An explanation. That would be rather an accomplishment. Would said explanation cover the ease with which the three of you have subscribed me for the fool in your little bit of theater?"

"You are a proud man, Mr. Stanton, if you will not take my saying so amiss."

"And you are a direct speaker, Mrs. Collingswood."

"Then we know where we are. May I?" She nodded at the decanter.

He shrugged. He had the whiskey. He was content. Not nearly foxed enough yet, but content.

She poured out a measure for herself and took a sip. "My husband preferred gin. But then again he was a beastly man." She took another sip. "Very well. To begin, Charlotte and I became well-acquainted after we met here. We—"

“I believe that fact has been duly noted, madam.”

“Then I will tell you what you do not know. I did not wish to marry. And Charlotte was adamant about it, as you might expect. But my family was intent on the match. No funds, four girls, a man willing to forgo a dowry, I’m certain my tale is in no way original. Charlotte begged me to reconsider, but I did not have her courage. I yielded to the will of my family. I believe you may have some understanding of that?”

Ian refilled his glass.

“Arthur was a dreadful man. Or perhaps all husbands are. I had only the experience with the one. He drank too much, and when he did he was violent.”

“Your fall?”

“Yes. He pushed me down the stairs over some imagined insult. The wrong kind of tea or something. I suppose he might have finished me off, but his regiment was sent to Spain. And I lived. I do not know what you thought of when your body ached with mending until death seemed preferable, but I thought of Charlotte. And then she was there. She nursed me through it. Led me back to the land of the living.”

Her words were soft and measured, but held the force of her feelings. Ian could not have interrupted her even if he could think of something to say.

“When I was finally able to leave my bed, I was determined not to suffer without her company again. By now, I’m sure you have suspected that we had hoped that by finding yourself similarly bound by affection, you would see that a marriage between Lord Amherst and Charlotte would enable either of us to frequent the household without exciting comment.

“I am sorry for any deception, but as I have said before, you are a proud man, Mr. Stanton, and not one who is easily swayed. You must follow the dictates of your conscience, but I do not intend to be parted from Charlotte again.”

“You speak as if such an end were simple.”

“It is. As simple as love itself.”

“I assure you, madam, love is neither easy nor simple.”

“But it is. Love is a very simple thing. I pity anyone unable to see that.” She nodded at his glass. “But perhaps you will find that sufficient companionship for the rest of your days.” She left him in the study.

~ \* ~

Nicky sucked in his breath, nearly choking on the redolence of the former privy. The one at the south tower provided excellent hearing for the study and summer salon. “Of all the blasted stupid things to say. Christ. I never should have let her be the one to speak to him.”

“But she’s right,” Charlotte objected. “It is all so simple, if only Ian would see that.”

Nicky shook his head. “You have never understood your brother. I must get to him.”

~ \* ~

Ian drank off the glass's contents and set it down with great care. Not care enough, however, for he knocked it sharply against the edge of the desk, and it separated into three pieces, sharp and thick as the icicles on the eaves. As he picked one up, it sliced deep into his palm, cold at first, but then the blood met the whiskey and it burned. Since he was reeling from the injudiciously applied alcohol and the implications of the tale from his sister's...lover, the pain was negligible. He held it up to examine the wound on the hand he had left. In his typically imperfect fashion, he had not made a clean slice, a notch made a V at the bottom in the deepest point. Blood ran down into his cuffs, a dark trail across the white. He flexed his fingers, found them still functioning, and the blood came faster.

It smelled like battle. Smoke and cries and cannons. He remembered the stillness of cold white as he pulled Nicky free of the ice. His blood felt warm where it ran over the back of his hand, cool as it flowed down his wrist. Hot or cold. Happy or sad. Honor or love. No. Such decisions were as far from simple as this study was from the Pyramids of Egypt.

"Sweet Christ, Ian, your hand." Nicky rushed forward, tearing off his cravat and wrapping it around Ian's palm before Ian could drag his thoughts back from wherever they had ventured on their river of whiskey.

"I don't want to be cold."

"Of course you don't. What the hell is wrong with you, letting it bleed like that? What happened?"

"I think you already know. You were the engineer behind the entire deceit."

"Actually, Charlotte was the one with the plan." Nicky tied off the cravat.

Ian pulled away. "Was it truly necessary to inflict the sight on me? I may never recover."

"That was my idea, I'm afraid."

"Mrs. Collingswood has the mien of Lord Wellesley. Perhaps we should send her to make short work of the Emperor."

"You will have to be the one to explain that to Charlotte."

"Marriage? You would marry Charlotte and—"

"Haven't you been urging me to undertake the blessed state?"

"It cannot be that simple."

"God, Ian, why on earth would you think it simple? Look at you. Has anything about this been simple?"

"No."

"Love is neither simple nor easy, but for such a man as you, I consider all the effort most worthwhile."

Ian felt he might have swallowed a candle. Nicky's earnest devotion radiated from him like the light and heat of a midwinter bonfire. But his words were curiously familiar.

“You devious bastard. Where were you hiding?”

Nicky grinned. “I don’t think you want to know.”

Ian took a step toward him and stopped, brought up short by the odor emanating from Nicky’s coat. “What is that smell?”

“You prefer lavender?”

“By far.” Ignoring the old stable floor smell of him, Ian took him by the shoulders, with both real and phantom hand, then leaned in until their foreheads touched. “But above all else in this world, I have come to prefer you.”

~ \* ~

The King and Queen of Misrule had declared Ancient Greece as the theme of the Twelfth Night celebration, placing the bedding supply of the household in grave jeopardy as everyone sought to drape themselves in sheets.

As they headed for the musicians’ platform in the gallery, Nicky leaned in to whisper in Ian’s ear. “I can’t wait to see Father go out and pour Negus on the trees dressed like that.”

Lord Carleigh had wrapped himself in what looked like gold velvet bed curtains. Ian suspected Simmons had no part of Lord Carleigh’s costume, though Simmons had aided both Ian and Nicky by providing passable chitons cut from nightshirts, cloaks pinned to their shoulders. In Nicky’s case, the cloak was a blue woolen blanket, since Lady Anna felt he was still susceptible to chill.

Charlotte and Emily met them at the platform, Emily nodding as Charlotte placed her hand in Nicky’s.

Lord Carleigh and Lady Anna had been told ahead of time and waited to lend their support. Nicky raised his cup as they stood on the dais, and the party fell silent. “I wish our friends to be the first to hear that Lady Charlotte Stanton has consented to be my wife.”

“A toast to the future marchioness.” Lord Carleigh raised his own cup.

Nicky turned to offer his cup to Ian who drank and then passed it to Charlotte.

As they accepted toast after toast, Ian felt something brush his hand where he stood at Charlotte’s side. He looked down to see Nicky’s fingers reaching out from the arm he had around Charlotte. Ian put his own arm behind Charlotte and they locked hands. At first the touch was simple reassurance, and then Ian had to pinch his lips closed against a gasp as Nicky’s fingertip teased the inside of Ian’s wrist. In such a public moment, there was no way to stop him without creating undue attention. As he caught sight of Nicky’s grin, Ian suspected he would spend much of his life in similar straits. The thought had him smiling.

After the toasts, Nicky led Charlotte in the first dance, and Ian watched from his spot near the dais.

"I wish you many months of happiness before Nicky's better sense asserts itself." Julian Lewes had managed to find something dark red to use as a tunic. With a gold belt and a coronet of evergreen, he looked impossibly fashionable for a man wearing a blanket.

Ian smiled. "And I wish you many months of happiness before it rots completely and falls off."

Lewes laughed. "I must say, Stanton, you surprised me. I would have laid steep odds against such an amiable arrangement."

"Then I am sorry I did not lay a bet on the other side."

"And what of all your protestations of honor and duty?"

Nicky strode toward them, cloak swinging with the force of his hurried movement. "Please tell me I am not too late to prevent a dawn appointment."

"Not at all." Ian forestalled another spur of Lewes' wit. "I think I will leave such matters to those who feel they need to prove their honor, as it is not apparent to an outward gaze."

"You wound me to the heart, Stanton. If you are still looking to lose some of your hard-won earnings, stop by Hylas House. There will be a book on those months we spoke of."

"I look forward to collecting my winnings." Ian held the other man's gaze.

With a slight twist to his lips that might have been disgust or approval, Lewes nodded and quit the field of engagement, pausing briefly at the spot where Charlotte was surrounded by excited feminine company.

Whatever Lewes offered as he bowed over Charlotte's hand brought a sharp laugh from Charlotte and a deep blush to Mrs. Collingswood's cheeks. She stepped closer to Charlotte, and Lewes bowed over the widow's hand as well, sending Charlotte into peals of laughter.

As delighted as Ian was in his sister's happiness, he did wish she would make less of a show about it. He could see Lady Anna bearing down on her at that moment, as swift as light cavalry. Mrs. Collingswood took up a flanking position and Ian thought Charlotte might be able to stand her ground. He knew just having Nicky beside him was as reassuring as the backing of the best of His Majesty's artillery.

"I thought to rescue you, but it appears there was no need," Nicky said.

Scoring one off Lewes had been surpassing fine. Ian smiled in triumph. "No. You will have to redeem your obligation at another time."

"Then perhaps we could retire someplace private to work out the particulars of the marriage contract?"

"If you think you can be spared." Ian had already started for the side doors.

"Somehow I don't think I'll be missed." Nicky looked back at the group buzzing about Charlotte. "The hunting cabin is in good repair and very well-provisioned. I think the first thing we should do is plan a proper holiday."

The thought of having Nicky to himself for several days had Ian fervently wishing for the foulest of weather. “Well-provisioned, is it? Even down to a dependable stock of that lavender oil?”

“You’ll have to take that up with the quartermaster.”

“And where would I find him?”

“I’ll show you.”

Ian paused briefly to look back at the party.

Nicky beckoned him on with his smile. “All will be well. Can you trust that?”

Ian could trust the man before him to hell and back. Indeed, Nicky had already led him back the once. “I believe your sovereignty has a few hours left. Does the King of Misrule have any final edicts?”

The hall Nicky had led them to was damp, dark and chill. “I hope I have already secured the future of my kingdom.”

After a quick glance about, Ian pushed Nicky against the wall. “Then might I crave a boon, sire?”

“Crave away, Mr. Stanton.”

## About the Author

K.A. Mitchell discovered the magic of writing at an early age when she learned that a carefully crayoned note of apology sent to the kitchen in a toy truck would earn her a reprieve from banishment to her room. Her career as a spin control artist was cut short when her family moved to a two-story house, and her trucks would not roll safely down the stairs. Around the same time, she decided that Chip and Ken made a much cuter couple than Ken and Barbie and was perplexed when invitations to play Barbie dropped off. An unnamed number of years later, she's happy to find other readers and writers who like to play in her world.

To learn more about K.A. Mitchell, please visit [www.kamitchell.com](http://www.kamitchell.com). Send an email to K.A. Mitchell at [authorKAMitchell@gmail.com](mailto:authorKAMitchell@gmail.com).



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Regularly Scheduled Life  
Collision Course  
Chasing Smoke

*A quirky holiday romance about Faith, Hope, and...er...glow-in-the-dark condoms!*

## The Dickens With Love

© 2009 Josh Lanyon

Three years ago, a scandal cost antiquarian “book hunter” James Winter everything that mattered to him: his job, his lover and his self-respect. But now the rich and unscrupulous Mr. Stephanopoulos has a proposition. A previously unpublished Christmas book by Charles Dickens has turned up in the hands of an English chemistry professor by the name of Sedgwick Crisparkle. Mr. S. wants that book at any price, and he needs James to get it for him. There’s just one catch. James can’t tell the nutty professor who the buyer is.

Actually, two catches. The nutty Professor Crisparkle turns out to be totally gorgeous—and on the prowl. Faster than you can say, “Old Saint Nick,” James is mixing business with pleasure...and in real danger of forgetting that this is just a holiday romance.

Just as they’re well on the way to having their peppermint sticks and eating them too, Sedgwick discovers the truth. James has been a very bad boy. And any chance Santa will bring him what he wants most is disappearing quicker than the Jolly Old Elf’s sleigh.

*Warning: This book contains an ocelot, songs by America, Stardust martinis, tinsel, long-lost manuscripts, Faith, Hope and...Love.*

*In this world, love can put you on the wrong end of a stake...*

## Blood and Roses

© 2009 Aislinn Kerry

The last thing Arjen wants is a vampire in his bed. The rest of the world may be enamored of the creatures, but he doesn't share the obsession. When local vampire Maikel van Triet pays a visit to the brothel, Arjen tries to slip away—drawing the one thing he doesn't want: Maikel's attention. Arjen's too pragmatic to refuse a paying customer, but Maikel doesn't want his services. All he asks for is a bed, shelter, and a meal before bedtime.

Arjen's reticence and open dislike intrigue Maikel, who's delighted by the jaded young prostitute's attitude, so different from the adoration he's accustomed to. He's never been a regular patron at any brothel, but now he can't keep himself away. He still refuses Arjen's services though, instead demanding Arjen tuck him in with tales of the daytime Amsterdam he hasn't known for nearly two centuries. But when Arjen tries to seduce him into leaving, he realizes they're forging something completely unfamiliar to him: emotional bonds.

It's equally obvious to Arjen that their arrangement is becoming more than either of them expected, and the thought terrifies him. Vampires are shallow, fickle creatures, and Maikel could never truly love another—could he?

*Warning: Contains blood, vampire bites, unapologetic prostitution, and lots of gay vampire lovin'.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood and Roses:*

He leaned back against my wall, watching me from beneath a hooded gaze, and his grin turned to a smirk. "They whisper about us, you know."

I raised my head. "The girls?"

"Perhaps they started it." He shrugged, but there was a glint in his eye, and I knew he enjoyed the speculation. "And told their patrons, and their patrons told their wives, and their wives told their neighbors. The city herself echoes with rumor."

I sat back, hands braced behind me on the mattress. He had not even offered to buy my time yet, and I was humoring him. What on earth was happening to me? "Rumor? About us?"

"Because I ask for you, again and again. You and no other. They imagine a great, torrid affair between us, and I swear I've heard no less than half a dozen variations of the tale." His face was bright with mirth. "Some say you are aloof, and I return to you because I cannot bear to be denied. Others say that I was charmed by your skill, that you have done what no one else in all of Amsterdam has managed and captured my heart. Can you imagine?"

He laughed at the idea of it as I rose and crossed the room. His laughter broke off abruptly when I dropped to my knees before him. The smile melted from his face. "What are you doing?"

"And what is the truth of the story?" I demanded, curling my hands around his calves. "Have I done what no other has managed and captured your heart?"

"Don't flatter yourself." He rocked back, but the wall was behind him and he could not go far.

"Is it the challenge, then? The lure of the forbidden?" I slid my palms up his thighs. "Would you leave me be if I took you to bed?"

"Stop that." He knocked my hands away. "The forbidden? I have never even asked it of you!"

"No. You haven't." I sat back on my haunches, staring up at him, lips pressed tight. "So why do you return to me, again and again, when there are plenty of beds out there available to you? Why leave a lover's token if all I am to you is a quiet bed to sleep in?"

"A what?" Every expression slid from his face, leaving it blank with incomprehension. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play the fool with me." I strode across the room and tore my bureau drawer open, snatched out the rose that he had left and I had hung to dry at Elise's behest. Its leaves were fragile now, its petals turned dark and brittle. A thorn pricked my finger and Maikel's gaze dragged toward it, but only for a moment. He stared at the rose, his gaze transfixed with horror.

"What is that?" he demanded unsteadily.

"You should know. You left it for me."

"Oh God..." He crossed the distance between us with faltering steps. "What have you done to it?"

I frowned and let him take the rose from me. I tried to bring my finger to my mouth, to suck at the small wound the thorn had given me. But Maikel's hand stopped me, and he drew it instead to his own mouth. I shuddered at the warmth of it, at the feel of his tongue gently laving over my skin. "I let it dry, is all. The girls about killed me when I mentioned throwing it out." Of course, knowing what I now did about the tales they'd been spreading, I was less inclined to think their romanticism as harmless as I had moments before.

Maikel continued to stare at the flower with a gaze that grew darker by the moment. "This... You should not have done this. What is the point? It is only a skeleton now." Gingerly, he touched the edge of one desiccated petal. "Some things are not meant to be kept forever."

"Take it, then, if you want," I said, bewildered. "Or throw it out. Maikel, you haven't answered me." I knelt again and spread my hands over his thighs. When he tried to retreat, I grabbed fistfuls of his clothes and held him where he was. "Tell me!"

He set the rose aside with great care, as though afraid of damaging it. "It is not a lover's token. You said you liked roses. I thought you would like it, that's all."

“I did,” I admitted. He was hard despite his protests, straining against his trousers. I ran my hand over him through the fabric. He closed his eyes and reached behind him, groping for the wall. “It made me laugh, and it made me smile, with the simple pleasure of it.”

“Arjen,” he said unsteadily and opened his eyes. He gently slid his fingers through my hair. I watched the transformation as his gaze hardened, cooled, as the smirk that hid the warmth of his true smile tugged at his lips. “Perhaps the gossips only got it backwards,” he murmured in an entirely different tone of voice. “Perhaps it is you who cannot help but rise to the challenge of being denied. We have not even broached the subject of payment, and here you are on your knees before me—”

I rose swiftly and struck him across the cheek, hard enough to make my palm sting. He gaped at me. “I do not want your damned money. I want you to answer me.”

Carefully, he fingered his jaw. There was something new and strange in his gaze, sharp, intent enough to make me wary. “I do believe I’ve forgotten the question.”

I dropped to my knees once more. When he tried to move, I shoved him back against the wall. “One small pleasure in exchange for another,” I snarled. My fingers worked deftly to unfasten his trousers. “I’ll not be beholden to you, Maikel van Triet.”

He started to speak, but stopped abruptly when I drew him out and held his phallus in my hand. I waited, but he did not protest again.

I slid forward, bracing my hands on his hipbones to hold him against the wall. My breath washed over him. He made a sound in the back of his throat and moved against me, hips flexing. I leaned forward, bearing him back with my weight, and took the tip of him into my mouth.

He stopped moving, stopped *breathing*. His hands fisted in my hair, tugging, not enough to really hurt. I stroked him with my tongue, long, slow sweeps that laved the salt from his skin. On my knees, eyes closed, his hands in my hair like a demand, he might have been any patron. But even that was a lie. No one strained like this to keep me *away*.

My strength was no match to his. I couldn’t have forced anything on him if he truly wished to pull me away. But even the pretense of resistance fueled my determination. I drew him deeper, letting him fill my mouth. My tongue played over him, drawing strangled sounds and muffled cries. His hips bucked against my restraint. I tore his trousers down around his knees and dug my fingers into skin, forcing him still.

“Arjen.” His voice was rough, raw.

“Be quiet,” I said and took him deeper.

His head fell back against the wall. His hands slipped from my hair to my neck, my shoulders. He grabbed at me as I stroked my tongue over the sensitive underbelly of his erection, fingers pressing hard against bone. He gave a single, sharp cry when I dragged a hand down between his thighs and cradled his sac, feeling the weight of it in my palm. He spoke again but I didn’t reprimand him, didn’t even notice the words. I recognized the tone, though. Hungry. Pleading.

*Orlando's broken memory may break his lover's heart*

## Lessons in Discovery

© 2009 Charlie Cochrane

*A Cambridge Fellows Mystery*

*Cambridge, 1906*

On the very day Jonty Stewart proposes that he and Orlando Coppersmith move in together, Fate trips them up. Rather, it trips Orlando, sending him down a flight of stairs and leaving him with an injury that erases his memory. Instead of taking the next step in their relationship, they're back to square one. It's bad enough that Orlando doesn't remember being intimate with Jonty—he doesn't remember Jonty at all.

Back inside the introverted, sexually innocent shell he inhabited before he met Jonty, Orlando is faced with two puzzles. Not only does he need to recover the lost pieces of his past, he's also been tasked by the Master to solve a four-hundred-year-old murder before the end of term. The college's reputation is riding on it.

Crushed that his lover doesn't remember him, Jonty puts aside his grief to help decode old documents for clues to the murder. But a greater mystery remains—one involving the human heart.

To solve it, Orlando must hear the truth about himself—even if it means he may not fall in love with Jonty the second time around...

*Warning: carries a three handkerchief rating. Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and men in kilts.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Lessons in Discovery:*

Jonty finished shaving and looked at himself in the mirror. There was still a trace of redness around his eyes and some bags under them. The doctor had promised that Orlando would be all right, although doctors had a habit of saying any old rot if you weren't watchful, so it wasn't just a matter of worrying himself sick about the condition of his friend's skull. He'd also spent the hours wondering about Orlando's mental state.

The best possible outcome would be returning to the sick bay to find that all Orlando's memories had come back, and being greeted with a huge smile and a "Jonty, what kept you?"

He wouldn't let himself seriously contemplate this possibility. That would be to tempt fate.

The worst case would see his lover still without recall of the last year and not wanting to have any more to do with this friend who had been foisted upon him unasked. Orlando had survived for many years without a close companion, so why should he opt to choose the same route as he had done a year previously, risking everything by letting himself become close to another person? Jonty wouldn't contemplate this eventuality either. Self-fulfilling prophesy and all that.

He stiffened his upper lip and put on his most dazzling suit of clothes. If he was to begin wooing all

over again then he might as well show himself to the best advantage, so he added a little flower to his buttonhole before he set off for Nurse Hatfield's den.

He was greeted by a pinny starched to almost ramrod straightness that seemed to enter the hallway hours before its owner, pushed forward by a bosom of such magnificence that, if he hadn't been immune to feminine charms, would have made him breathless. There was many a poor undergraduate who had been treated unnecessarily for laboured breathing when all he had visited Nurse Hatfield for was to have his ears syringed. She was a widow, with much speculation among the students about the reason for her husband's demise, suffocation being the favourite.

Jonty was rather crestfallen when Nurse H informed him the doctor had insisted Dr. Coppersmith have no visitors for the next few days.

"Now, I don't count you as a visitor really, more like one of the family. You can see him as often as you like if you promise not to tire him." She ushered him into the little private room where his friend had been ensconced, although not without first checking that he wasn't bringing in anything unsuitable that might be detrimental to her patient's condition.

Jonty was puzzled at this, as he wasn't sure what she could have been looking for. A bottle of whisky? A catapult? He was pleased that he'd hidden a packet of sweets away in his inside pocket, being certain that she would have disapproved had she found them, whisking them off with much shaking of both head and bosom. He was hopeful that they would remain secure in their little sanctuary, unless she were to insist on a body search.

Orlando was sitting up surrounded by plump pillows, browsing through the day's newspaper, no doubt trying to come to terms with what had happened to 1906. He looked up as Jonty entered, producing something like a smile of recognition, if not yet one of love.

*At least, Jonty reflected, I've been remembered since yesterday.*

Orlando looked pale in the meagre light which was trying to penetrate the small leaded window, but he didn't appear to be on the brink of pegging out. His eyes seemed bright and there was no dullness in his speech or other worrying sign.

"Dr. Stewart, good morning."

"And to you, Dr. Coppersmith." Jonty perched on the chair by the bed, relieved to find Orlando much perkier today. "Nurse Hatfield, may we have a cup of tea, please?"

The nurse beamed at them. She loved well-behaved and well-mannered little boys, which is exactly how she regarded these two. "Of course, and I'll rustle up a biscuit or three. You both look like you need nourishment."

Once she had gone, Jonty couldn't resist a laugh. "What is it about ladies of a certain age? How does their eyesight change that they can look at a muscular frame and see only the sort of stick men that children draw? You may need building up after your mishap but no one could accuse me of being thin." Jonty patted

his muscular stomach and Orlando smiled wanly. "And before the sergeant major gets back I thought you could hide these somewhere." He produced a packet of bullseyes from his jacket. "Put them where she won't find them or else we'll both be in trouble."

"My favourites! How did you—sorry." Orlando stopped short. "You would have known, wouldn't you? If we were friends. If we *are* friends, I mean."

Jonty tried to provide reassurance. "That's perfectly all right. It's going to take a bit of time to get the old status quo back, while we wait for that brain of yours to get itself organised." He thought about the surprises that would be in store for his friend—his lover—and felt a sudden qualm.

"I feel at such a disadvantage, Dr. Stewart. You must know so much about me, yet I know nothing of you." Orlando managed another constrained smile.

*Indeed, the location of every mole on your body, the taste of your hair, the words you use in darkest despair or deepest ecstasy.* Jonty shook himself, trying to set aside such thoughts. "Well, I'll bore you to death about all of that if you wish me to. There's a fair amount to catch up on, I guess."

The arrival through the doorway of tea and a plate of biscuits, followed shortly after by a pinafore and lastly by Nurse Hatfield herself, gave them a chance to gather their thoughts. Although it was, on the surface, a lighthearted conversation between two old friends, this was starting to feel rather strained.

When they were left alone again, Orlando continued. "I'd very much like to be brought up to date with events over the last year. The college, the university, the world at large. Anything of significance."

So Jonty began. He didn't present a very orderly account, switching from place to place, now talking about summer, then referring back to the previous winter, as thoughts occurred to him. Orlando would chip in with the odd question but it soon became obvious that he was finding the process tiring and Jonty decided that they would need to take their time over this. Bullseyes would be fine, but no bulls in the china shop.

The discussion ended up stretching over the next few days, Jonty visiting for a short while each morning and afternoon as his commitments allowed, gradually helping Orlando to build up a picture of a twelve months full of events. Jonty was pleased to find that, although the mental store of proceedings had disappeared, the last year hadn't been totally lost and the benefit it had on Orlando was still in evidence. The man chatted with more ease than he had a twelvemonth ago and there was little sign of the barrier that he'd put between himself and the world. He could even be positively forthright with Nurse Hatfield when the occasion required.

Jonty was still reluctant to divulge all that had gone on in 1906. He skirted around the matter of the St. Bride's murders, just saying there had been a series of killings in the college during the late winter, that the whole affair had been rather sordid and that he didn't think it was wise to discuss this sort of thing until Dr. Coppersmith was feeling a bit stronger. While he was perfectly honest about their having taken a holiday



together—you were a great one for swimming in the sea, Dr. Coppersmith—and even mentioned that there had been another murder, *at our very hotel*, he hadn't explained the exact sleeping arrangements.

Any hint of intimacy, of something other than a simple friendship, he passed over. He hadn't even explained about their adjacent chairs in the Senior Common Room—it would be too painful. While his companion still showed every sign of wanting to carry on the acquaintance, Jonty had no guarantee that they would ever achieve their previous state of intimacy. To mention it now, at this delicate stage, would probably scupper all chances of it happening.

*An old mystery brought them together. Solving it could tear them apart.*

## Chasing Smoke

© 2009 K.A. Mitchell

In the best of times, Daniel Gardner hates visiting his family. With his boyfriend pressuring him for a mortgage-serious commitment, Christmas in Easton, PA sounds, for once, like a welcome escape. His old house holds more than memories of a miserable adolescence, though. It has Trey Eriksson.

At seventeen, Trey was taken in by the wealthy Gardner family after his father was jailed for his mother's murder. Until he left for the Army, he fought a double-edged battle—for proof of his father's innocence and against his attraction to Daniel.

Fifteen years later, things haven't changed. Trey is still looking for the real killer. And Daniel has never forgotten how Trey used to sneak into his room at night.

Now new clues to the murder are resurfacing—and so is Trey and Daniel's sexual chemistry. Except this time, Trey has come to terms with his orientation.

But their connection may not be enough to overcome the mistakes of the past. Not while a murderer still walks free...

*Warning: Anyone who would rather not read about hooking back up with someone who broke your heart, minor suspense, hot guys who can handle guns and each other, and lots of steamy gay sex probably isn't reading this warning anyway, but if you are, back away slowly and keep your hands where I can see them.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Chasing Smoke:*

Daniel concentrated on unwrapping his sandwich. Fuck if Trey didn't make him feel like that idiotic teenager, hopeful and desperate at the same time, the exact feeling he tried to avoid by spending as little time in Easton with his family. He could feel the moment Trey's attention shifted from him to the TV.

"What's this shit?"

"I think it's *Seraphim Falls*. Post Civil War revenge thing."

The word revenge seemed kind of loud.

"Well, that sounds thrilling." Trey's voice was dry. Hooking the desk chair with his ankle, he tugged the chair forward and sat down to eat his own sandwich. "Did you want turkey instead?" He offered a half to Daniel.

"Split." Daniel passed over half of his ham and cheese. Letting the blanket fall to his waist, Daniel sat on the edge of the bed, the bag of chips between them.

On the screen Pierce Brosnan dodged a bullet by rolling in the snow.

“He’s lucky the guy has to keep reloading.” Trey passed Daniel the beer and dug out a handful of chips.

They ate in a companionable silence, broken only by Trey’s occasional comments about the movie.

“You don’t go to the movies a lot, do you?” Daniel asked.

“Why?”

“Because you’re not supposed to talk.”

“No one complains in my living room.”

Daniel couldn’t stop a grin. “Remind me not to go to a movie theater with you.”

“Why, you wanna date?”

Daniel took a swallow of beer before he realized Trey was teasing, not mocking.

“Depends on whether or not you expect me to put out.” Daniel chased away the last of his sandwich with another swallow of beer.

Trey stood up and kicked the chair back. Digging in one of the bags he’d brought in, he came out with a small bottle of lube and a box of condoms. Tossing them onto Daniel’s lap, Trey said, “Sheetz really does have everything for your convenience.”

“You’ve got big expectations.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” Trey pulled off his shirt and unbuttoned his jeans.

Daniel tossed the lube and condoms backward onto the bed and shoved the blanket onto the floor. “I didn’t eat dessert yet.”

“You didn’t used to play hard to get.” Trey took the beer bottle from Daniel’s hand.

“As I recall, being easy didn’t get me far.”

Trey picked up the remote and switched the TV over to a football game.

“I was watching that.”

“It was distracting.”

“And you get turned on hearing the announcers talk about defensive line penetration?”

Trey shoved down his jeans and pushed Daniel backward. It wasn’t exactly a tackle, but it was close to offensive holding. “Watching your mouth turns me on. Wanting to see what you’ve got under that T-shirt turns me on. Thinking about putting my dick in you turns me on.”

Daniel supposed this wasn’t the time to bring up how he’d begged Trey to fuck him. Back when adolescent stupidity created Daniel’s conviction that actual penetration would mean something.

Would make Trey want to come to New York. Instead his pleading had sent Trey sprinting for basic training.

“Who said you were putting your dick in me?” Daniel asked.

“I did.”

Trey's weight settled over him, into him, muscle on muscle. With all the lights in the room on, Daniel could see every detail of the light irises of Trey's wide-open eyes. The dark silver edge, the bronze striations around the pupil, and the smoky blue in between. He could hypnotize people without even trying. No wonder he was good at interrogations. Trey didn't try to kiss him, didn't even rock his hips. "So? Are we doing this or what?"

"That's romantic."

"Your dick thinks so."

"Our dicks don't lie? Could be our song."

Trey looked at him in confusion.

"It's a pop song, 'Hips Don't Lie'? Never mind." Daniel reached up and yanked Trey's mouth down to his. Trey slid his hands down to get under Daniel's shirt, sending a groan vibrating into his mouth. The silky hair around Trey's lips tickled until Trey pushed their mouths wider. The yeasty taste of the beer melted into the taste of Trey's mouth, still heated with that hint of the cinnamon gum he always chewed.

Tightening the grip in Trey's hair, Daniel thrust his tongue deeper, grinding his hips up as his cock got desperate for friction. Fuck. He should have taken the edge off in the shower.

Trey didn't pull away, just eased back from the kiss, slowing Daniel's urgency with a soft response, until they were barely tasting each other's mouths, breaths quick and shallow.

When Trey lifted his head, his eyes were darker. "This time there's no rush."

He sat back, pulling Daniel's shirt over his head, leaving his arms tangled, pinning his hands in a tight grip of cotton. With a quick glance up at Daniel's face, Trey started licking and kissing all over Daniel's chest. A warm wet suck on his nipple made Daniel's breath catch, but the second Trey used his teeth, Daniel gasped and arched closer.

Trey looked up and smiled. "Oh really?"

He sucked tingling bites all over Daniel's pecs, back up to his shoulders, before scraping his nipples with teeth and beard and nails until Daniel was panting. When Trey put a line of dark red bites on Daniel's stomach, he groaned and started rubbing his cock along Trey's neck, getting just enough warm pressure through the cotton of his briefs to ease the ache.

Finally freeing his hands from the shirt, Daniel reached down to thread his fingers through the soft spikes of Trey's hair, trying to get his mouth to move lower. But Trey just nipped and licked his way back up, leaving a wet circle around Daniel's navel and a hard hot bite just under his left pec that turned cold when Trey raised his head, dragging shivers onto Daniel's skin.

He laid another lick on Daniel's neck on the way to his ear. "I'm gonna make you come so many times there won't be room in that busy head of yours for anything but how bad you want it. Need it."

"Need what?" Daniel ran his hands up along the hard lines of Trey's back, sliding back into his hair.

"My cock in you."

Trey kissed him, hard, but not rough or messy, just with the kind of thorough possession that made Daniel think maybe coming “so many times” was not going to be an exaggeration.

Trey rolled over onto his side. “Get naked.” He pulled down his own bright blue boxer briefs.

“Squash my Butterscotch Krimpets and I will kick your ass.” Daniel threw his briefs in the direction of the chair where his pants were.

Trey rescued the package and lofted it onto the other bed. “Good idea. Gonna need the energy.”

“A lot of talk, but not a lot of— Jesus Christ.”

Trey’s mouth closed over the head of Daniel’s dick. He let himself think about that for a second. Trey Eriksson’s mouth on him, a million adolescent jerk-off fantasies come true. And then reality got lots better. Trey took him in deep and then backed off to lick the head, hand stroking down.

Daniel hadn’t been fully hard, but hadn’t was now the operative word. As soon as Trey groaned around his mouthful of cock, Daniel’s skin got so hot and tight he had to pin his hips flat to keep from fucking straight down Trey’s throat.

Trey shifted his grip, hand pulling hard on the head while his mouth sucked hot wet kisses down the shaft, an alternating prickle and then glide from the hair of his beard. He licked the inside of Daniel’s thighs, sucked on the sensitive line of his groin and then dipped to run a flat tongue all over his balls.

Daniel was trying to think of something clever to say that would get Trey’s mouth back on his cock without coming out like a pathetic adolescent whine. All he managed was to tug on Trey’s head, trying to guide him. Trey pushed Daniel’s hand off and then wrapped warm lips tight around the head of his dick, sliding down until a hard tongue flicked steadily on the bundle of nerves right under the head.

Trey’s hand slid up and down his shaft, moving where his mouth wasn’t so that everything was hot and tight and oh-shit-I’m-going-to-explode good. His tongue flattened on the shaft and then he pulled up with that hint of teeth he’d already figured out made Daniel nuts, and Daniel reached out, trying to find something to hold onto, to slow his slide into orgasm, because he wanted Trey’s mouth on his cock forever. Christ, Daniel had been waiting for this forever. He should be able to last longer than two minutes.



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