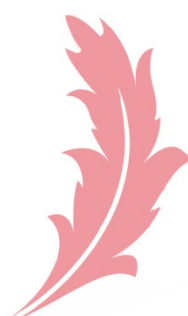




Runaways

Meg an Derr

Less Than Three Doss



Runaways
By Megan Derr

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Megan Derr

Addison sighed as he read the letter over again, though he had all the important bits

memorized. He'd known what the letter would say even before he'd foolishly opened it. Obtain an Earl indeed. He snorted softly, almost amused, except that the tacit 'or don't bother coming home' rather depressed any good humor he had not yet lost.

How, he wondered morosely, did he get himself into these situations?

Even if he pretended for a moment that a lord or even a wealthy merchant or some such would want him, there was no way he could ever dare to seek one out with the hope of a match. It was generous of his uncle to have been willing to pay for him to join them in the city, as a companion to his cousin—but everyone knew that Addison had been granted the honor only because he stood no chance whatsoever of outshining his handsome, outgoing cousin.

What was he to do? If he came all this way and simply went back, nothing gained, his family would be furious—for all the wrong reasons, of course, but furious all the same. They expected him to waltz into the city and make a good match, and bring the new wealth home.

Yet if he dared to do anything but cater to every whim of his cousin, his Uncle would send him home with ears ringing from a sound boxing. There was no possible way his Uncle would tolerate Addison doing better and succeeding where Blaine, despite his many charms, was still failing.

Once he stopped pretending that anyone would want him, the matter went from hopeless to nigh on pathetic.

Really, all he'd wanted was a chance to see the parts of the city that did not include ballrooms and tea parties. Once his uncle was finished with him, Addison would never have another chance; he would be returned home to his life at the post office, and the opportunities to see museums and the parks and the famous historic site would be lost forever.

He kicked idly at the stone path which wended its way through the park. It was nothing but small footpaths here, well away from the main thoroughfare where everyone walked to show off and make fun of those not quite up to par.

Addison was sick of it. Sick of the parties. Sick of watching his cousin charm and cozen every available

person in his vicinity. Sick of being the ugly, unfortunate cousin on whom his Uncle had been considerate enough to take pity.

Maybe Blaine would stay sick another couple of days, and Addison would be able to sneak about doing as he pleased. But he suspected he was lucky to have gotten this one day. He still had not decided quite how to spend it, though he would milk every possible second.

Breakfast, definitely. Now that it was growing light out, he could slip off to a coffee shop or something and have breakfast out for once. Then perhaps a bookstore or two, or maybe he'd just go straight on to the museums, the royal library...

The sound of boots scuffing on stone drew his attention, and he looked up just in time to see someone come through the hedges. A lord, by the look of him, but Addison barely had time to look before the man was abruptly sitting next to him.

"I apologize in advance for my forwardness," the man murmured—and then kissed him.

Addison made a choked, muffled noise, and tried to pull away, but found himself impeded. Long fingers sank into his hair, curling along the back of his head, keeping him perfectly angled as his mouth was thoroughly plundered by a perfect stranger.

"Well, I never!" said a sharp, ringing voice.

Startled, Addison again tried to pull away, but the man kissing him was having none of that.

Not really certain what else to do, Addison went along with it, hoping that if he was agreeable long enough eventually the man would unhand him.

Despite his reluctance in the venture, going along with it was not a terrible ordeal. No one had ever died from being kissed after all, and he could think of any number of worse ways for a stranger to bother him. And it was not a terrible kiss at all, though Addison conceded he had no kisses to which he compare it.

Still.

The mouth moving with his was warm and soft, and tasted of cinnamon and coffee, and Addison flushed to realize he was noticing how a man tasted but it was becoming more and more difficult to pull away from the mouth feasting upon his and when precisely had he tangled his fingers in the front of the man's jacket?

"Honestly, Jewell!"

Finally tearing away, the man—Jewell—smiled ever so fleetingly at Addison, then turned toward the woman doing the shrieking. "What, Tina?"

The mysterious Tina, well turned out in a bright red walking dress, matching feathers bobbing from a pert hat, had white-gloved hands planted on her ample hips. Blue eyes were narrowed at Jewell, mouth pinched, cheeks pink with anger. "I cannot believe you."

"Yes, you have said that several times this morning alone," Jewell said, sliding the hand in Addison's hair down his back, to curl lightly around his waist.

Addison wondered if it might not be time to make a discreet departure, but the hand resting lightly on his hip squeezed when he shifted.

"I cannot believe—and in the park! Right where anyone can see! You and this—this—this strumpet!"

Though he preferred not to get himself mired in altercations, Addison was only willing to endure so much. "I beg your pardon, but I am not a strumpet—"

"Shut it," the woman said curtly. "Anyone who would behave in so crass a manner—"

"You shut it," Jewell snapped, standing up after another squeeze. "If you want to pick a fight with me and call me names, Tina, you go ahead and do that. Do not, however, speak so rudely to strangers. The only thing that has you angry here is that you are not the one on the bench exchanging kisses with some handsome lord, preferably gullible and malleable, which I am not and that irks you. Go harangue someone else and stop making him think we are both quite mad.

"Too late," Addison muttered before he caught himself. He flushed, mortified at falling into behaving rudely—and flushed all the darker when Jewell turned and flashed him a quick, bright smile.

Tina said something foul, hands dropping from her hips to ball into little fists. "You! We are to be married—"

"No, we are most certainly not," Jewell snarled. "I do not give a buggering fuck what your mother and my father are plotting, Tina, I am not marrying you. One of us would murder the other in less than a day just attempting to plan the damned wedding. Go. Away."

For a moment, Addison really thought Tina was going to launch herself at Jewell and beat him to death with the reticule he only then saw she was clutching in one hand. But then she lobbed a few more choice words, before turning sharply on the heel of her smart white boot, and marched off as crisply as any well-trained soldier.

Jewell let out a long sigh and dropped back down on the bench, raking hands through his mass of tight gold curls. Then he turned to Addison and smiled sheepishly. "I am extremely sorry you were dragged into all that. I did not think she would linger, seeing me kissing you. My apologies also for such forwardness, good sir, and you shall have to let me thank you for being so unbelievably tolerant." His smiled widened. "Though, I understand if you want nothing more than to part ways and neither to see nor hear me ever again."

"Um—" Addison tried to figure out what to say, but he was not even certain where to put his thoughts, never mind organize them sufficiently to put thoughts into words. "What's going on?"

Laughing, Jewell raked a hand through his hair again and said, "An explanation seems more than fair. If you're willing, how about over breakfast? I know a wonderful coffeehouse not too far from here. It

seems the least I can do, and I promise not to take liberties without express permission." He smiled in sheepish apology. "Desperate times, desperate measures, you know?"

"Um—yes, I suppose?" Addison agreed, though he didn't know that he'd ever been in a situation so desperate and strange he thought kissing a complete stranger would resolve the matter. And it was stupid and pointless and he should know better, really, but he still wondered wistfully what it might be like to have Jewell kiss him because he wanted to, not because he was desperate.

"Splendid!" Jewell said, and rose, dragging Addison up with him. Only then did Addison realize his agreement sounded like it had gone with the coffee house bit. "Oh! My name is Jewell Kelley. It *is* an honor to make the acquaintance of a Saint, which you must be, not to have bloodied my nose over my behavior."

Addison's mouth twitched, amused despite himself—then he realized Jewell was waiting patiently for his reply. "Oh—uh. My name is Addison Dewhurst. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. Uh, my lord?" Of a sudden, he felt as shy and anxious and lost as ever, if not more so. Please, dear gods, please don't let him have just failed to recognize some Earl or Marquis or Duke, oh that *would* be his luck.

Jewell laughed. "I think under the circumstances, my dear, you might as well just use my given name. May I call you Addison? There, then, that is my manners for the day, my mother would be so proud." He laughed again.

His eyes crinkled at the corners, and he had a pretty mouth, and Addison really wished he had not noticed either of those things. Or that Jewell's eyes were the most beautiful shade of brown, dark gold with lighter shades of honey and a deep, almost red color at the center.

"Now, the coffee house is just this way, and I shall attempt to convince you I am not entirely mad—merely half."

Too confused and overwhelmed and curious to even think of refusing, Addison went along as Jewell all but dragged him away from the park and down the street.

The coffee house they went to was not one of the many he had eyed before, but at just a glance it seemed infinitely better. It was small, warm, and cozy—and practically deserted given the early hour.

"Now, then," Jewell said after they had settled in. "I will apologize again for my behavior, as well as Tina's. Her parents and mine are all old friends, and they have it in their heads that we are meant to be together, unite the families, so on and so forth. Tina has decided it would suit her purposes to go along with their plotting, because she likes the idea of gaining a great deal more with very little effort, and is wholly ignoring the fact we can't stand each other." He grimaced.

"I see," Addison said, though the only thing he really saw was that he probably *was* sitting with some powerful noble in a coffee house and his Uncle was going to *kill* him.

"She follows me everywhere, like some dog and me the poor fox," Jewell went on. "I didn't think she'd be up this early but not a quarter mile from my house I caught sight of her following me. I panicked and made for the park, since none of my clubs was close, more's the pity. Came upon you, and thought suddenly that maybe she'd leave me alone if she thought I had a lover. Don't know why I didn't think of

it sooner." He grinned, and winked. "I am sorry it didn't work out, but to be honest I'm not at all sorry I tried."

Addison flushed and stared at his coffee. "Um—well, no harm done?"

Jewell laughed softly, so gently that Addison found himself looking up and smiling shyly back.

"So what did I interrupt you doing, when I came upon you? You looked as though you were reading a letter or something."

"My letter!" Addison exclaimed, only then realizing he'd left it in the park.

"Should we go back for it?" Jewell asked, and made to stand.

"No-no, it's fine. Only a letter from my mother," Addison assured, not quite able to stifle a sigh as he recalled the contents of the letter.

"Ah, parents," Jewell said with sympathy. "Mine want me to marry a demon. What do yours want? A prince? A Duke?"

Addison flushed, humiliated that he was so easily pegged. "They said an Earl would do nicely; I think they would die from shock if I managed to attract a Duke. I think they'd die of shock if I caught anyone. I would," he added morosely—then winced as he realized he'd said that aloud. "Um—but I don't want anyone. I'm here for my cousin. To help him, I mean." He shut his mouth before anything else fell out of it and made a bigger fool of him. But he opened it again briefly to add a belated, "Sorry."

"Not at all," Jewell said warmly. "Sent to catch a big fish in the city, then?"

"That obvious?"

Jewell smiled. "You're too nice to be a city-bred spouse hunter. Any one of them would have used that kiss I stole to finagle an invitation to something, at the very least. Anyway, no visitor to the city finds that remote corner of the park unless he is attempting to avoid the city."

Addison could only cringe back in his seat, and hang his head in humiliation, staring at his coffee and wishing he were anywhere else.

Then a warm, gloved hand covered one of his own, and Jewell asked with what seemed to Addison a shocking amount of kindness, "So why are you here to catch an earl, my friend, when you obviously want nothing of the sort? A cousin, you said?"

Friend. That sounded nice. He had none of those here, and no real close ones back home. Even if it probably wasn't true, and Jewell was just being nice—

"You look like you want to talk," Jewell said. "You can talk to me." He winked when Addison slowly looked up. "If I do or say anything untoward, you can tell my parents how wretched I've been to you." He made a face. "If Tina has not already ratted me out, the fiend."

Addison laughed briefly at the put out expression on his face—and then the words came tumbling out, all of it; being stuck with his cousin, his odious Uncle, his too-eager parents wanting a match, his Uncle sure to beat him if he stole away any prospects from his cousin.

When he finally ran out of words, he realized he felt a lot better. "Sor—"

"Do not be sorry," Jewell cut in before he could finish the apology. "You've no reason to be. I will say my life seems a good deal more tolerable, of a sudden. I don't suppose you're interested in marrying a harpy? No? Ah, well." He grinned. "Parents and marriage: two of life's greatest trials."

Addison smiled faintly, and finally managed to take a proper sip of coffee. He set his coffee down again after a moment and tried to think of something to say, but he had never been much good at polite conversation.

"So what else are you doing today?" Jewell asked. "How long have you been in the city? Have you gotten to see any of it, or has it all been drawing rooms and dance floors?"

Though Addison said nothing, by the way Jewell snickered, his expression must have said it all. "I should be attending all those wretched affairs myself," Jewell said, "but a fox does not elude the hounds by going into the kennels, eh?"

Addison laughed before he could catch himself.

Looking decidedly pleased with himself, Jewell continued, "Anyway. Have you plans for the day? I've none myself, past 'avoid dogs' if you'd like a proper tour? I've lived here all my life; no one knows the city better, I promise. Anything you've been hoping to see? The Gardens? The playhouses?"

"Umm—the museums, actually," Addison said, brightening a bit as he thought of them, even as he braced for the inevitable sneering and dismissing.

But Jewell only continued to smile. "They've just added a mummy exhibit at the Farther Museum. It's not even public yet. I was going to go see it sometime this week. Hang on, then." Before Addison could utter so much as a syllable, he'd stood and darted off to speak with a man who had the look of an owner about him, and who brought Jewell pen, paper, and wax.

Several minutes and what looked like at least three letters later, Jewell finally returned to the table. "All set then?"

"Um-yes?" Addison said, and cried out in surprise as Jewell then all but pulled him from his seat. He stumbled from the abrupt movement, bumping into Jewell, who reached out hands to steady him. "Sorry."

Jewell only smiled, and slowly drew back the hands he'd extended to steady Addison. "Not at all."

"You don't have to take me to museums or anything else," Addison said. "Really."

"Mm," Jewell said, as they stepped outside. He settled Addison's arm in his own and only beamed, and Addison had the sudden thought that Jewell got himself into a great many scrapes, and that smile

probably got him out of them again. "But I want to; it's never any fun going to such places alone, which I all too often do, you know?"

What could Addison do, but agree? It was true. "Yes," he said quietly. "I know."

"Then off we go," Jewell said. "So where are you from?"

"Uh—Whitson," Addison replied. "My family runs the local post office there."

"I bet that's loads more interesting than what I do all day," Jewell said with a sigh. "Attend this meeting, go to that dinner party, make an appearance at this ball, take a spin about the park, and bloody on it goes. It's to the point I can't do anything I want, unless I'm dragging along some designated individual who never actually wants to do what I want and we wind up doing something I detest and what's the fun of being *made* to spend time with someone, I ask you, especially when it's only to benefit still other people and you don't matter at all." He finally drew a breath, letting it out in an aggravated sigh Addison understood all too well. "You're the only person I've chosen in longer than I care to think upon."

Addison nodded in sympathy. "I only have to put up with my cousin, for the most part. I cannot imagine being made to put up with a lot of different people all the time."

Jewell made a face, and raked a hand through his hair. He mustered a smile. "My turn to apologize."

"We seem to be taking turns," Addison said, smiling back.

Jewell laughed. "We do. How about we just leave off altogether?"

"All right."

"Splendid. Here's the museum, come on."

Addison frowned, confused. "But, it's not open."

Jewell winked, then simply pushed the door open and slipped inside, pulling Addison with him. Inside, Addison hardly dared to move or even breathe; the silence was even deeper than he was accustomed to in museums. "Um—" He cringed at the sound of his voice, quiet though he'd made it. "Are we allowed in here?"

"Of course," Jewell replied, his voice as clear and strident as ever. "I'm allowed access whenever I like. They're used to me."

"Oh," Addison said in a small voice. What sort of man, especially a young one, had free reign in a museum? If he had just told an Earl's son, or heaven forbid a Duke's son, about his parents hoping he would catch an Earl, he was going to throw himself in front of the first speeding carriage he saw.

He jumped as his nose was pinched. "Now, now," Jewell said with a smile. "You are meant to be enjoying yourself, not looking as gloomy as you did in the park. Smile or I shall have to resort to desperate measures and kiss you again."

Addison flushed hot, and he was entirely too embarrassed and stupidly hopeful and crushed all at once, to manage a proper smile.

That word again. Desperate. He wished he knew how to convince Jewell to give him a kiss *not* inspired by some form of desperation. But even as he looked at Jewell for some clue as to how to do that, Jewell's eyes seemed to spark and he took a step forward—

"There you are," a bright voice said.

Jewell looked briefly disappointed, but then his face smoothed into a cheerful smile as he turned. "Jorge. Thank you for accommodating us."

"Of course, of course, anything for you, my boy. But! You've never brought a guest along before, dear boy. Come, come, tell me who this handsome fellow is, then."

Jewell curled his hand around Addison's arm and tugged him forward. "Addison, this is Jorge Meyer, assistant curator of the Farther Museum. Jorge, this is Addison Dewhurst. He's been in the city for some time now, but has not yet had the opportunity to visit the museums. I thought to correct that, especially since I wanted to look at the new mummy exhibit."

"Most assuredly. I've been quite despondent you've never been by to see it. I shall leave you gentlemen to wander as you like. Should you require anything, you know where to find me, my boy."

"Thank you," Jewell said with a bright smile. Jorge bowed, and departed, and Jewell snagged the cuff of Addison's jacket, dragging him out of the entryway and into the museum proper.

He then looped arms with Addison, smile widening. "Anything in particular you would like to see first?"

Addison shook his head. "I'm content just to be here at all. Thank you very much."

Jewell laughed. "The pleasure is mine, I promise. I never get to do this, anymore, let alone bring with me someone who shares my interests. Come on, then, we'll go look at the new exhibit first." He dragged Addison through the halls, but along the way stopped at nearly everything, rambling and chattering, rattling off a startling amount of information—but it thrilled Addison beyond anything. Here was someone who knew what he was talking about when he mentioned the odd bit of history, made a comment about this war, that king. Better still, Jewell discussed and argued with him.

Through the museum they went, talking and laughing, and more than once he half-thought—or probably imagined—he saw that spark in Jewell's eyes he'd seen before... but he didn't dare get his hopes up. It was more than he'd ever dared think about to have this day at all, precisely as it was; anything more just seemed greedy.

Still, he would probably lie in bed that night and re-imagine the entire thing with kisses and more given *not* in desperation.

They were pouring avidly over an ancient religious text when a polite cough made him jump.

Jorge smiled apologetically. "Forgive me, but the two of you have been here for five hours, and the museum is starting to get busy. I thought you would probably like to be off to your club, my boy, to take an early lunch? I sent word ahead you'd be arriving shortly."

"Thank you," Jewell replied. "That is perfect." He took Addison's hand. "We'll go out the back way."

Chuckling, Jorge said, "A carriage is waiting for you. It was good to see you, lad, and I do hope to see you and Master Addison again sometime soon. Good day to you both."

"And you, Jorge," Jewell said, and dragged Addison off even as he tried to make his own thank you. Outside, the carriage which waited for them was definitely not one of the somewhat questionable public ones. It was too well made, too luxuriously detailed, and the horses far too fine, for something open to general use.

The inside was finer still, and more comfortable than half the parlor chairs Addison was often forced to sit in. "Um—where are we going?"

"My club," Jewell replied absently, glancing out the window at something, a slight frown on his face. But then he dropped the curtain and smiled at Addison. "Well, one of them—my favorite. The Songbird Society, it's called. My uncle owns it, though he's not been in the city for an age, more's the pity." He sighed softly, but before Addison could say anything, the smile returned and he said, "Anyway, the Songbird Society is a fine club. Very quiet, extremely mild. It's open to all walks and stations. You'd be more than welcome, should you find any interest in joining."

Addison smiled politely and nodded. As if he could afford the membership fees for such a club. Still, the thought was nice.

"We can discuss what to do the rest of the day while we eat. Oh, I suppose I should inquire as to when I must return you to your guardian." He waggled his brows playfully.

Addison laughed. "I do not think Uncle cares, so long as I am present for the appropriate parties and out of his sight otherwise."

Jewell made a face. "He sounds an... interesting... fellow, your Uncle. Who did you say he was?"

"Lord Mortimer Dewhurst, Baron of Krane."

"Mm," Jewell said thoughtfully. "I know the name. No doubt I've met him before and simply did not mark him." He winked. "You could not have been along on the occasion; you, I would have marked."

Addison flushed. "I usually try to stay out of the way."

Jewell laughed. "Me, too. I bet it's loads easier for you. Perhaps you'll tell me where you hide. I think hiding with you would be vastly more interesting than the parties."

"Hiding's not very exciting," Addison said.

In reply, Jewell smiled in a way that made Addison feel hot and fluttery, made more heat pool low in his belly. "Two hiding is vastly more interesting than one."

"Um—" But before Addison could figure out how to respond, the coach was stopping and the driver was announcing their arrival.

"Come on, then," Jewell said, and dragged him out, and Addison wondered in amusement if Jewell always dragged his guests along everywhere. Then again, with as much energy as Jewell seemed to possess, he doubted it was possible to keep up without Jewell dragging him.

And he really didn't mind being happily dragged along. It was far better than morose orders to hurry along, now.

Inside, they were met by a footman dressed in handsome, dark green livery. "Your room is ready, my lord," he said, sketching Jewell a bow.

"Splendid. Thank you. This is Addison Dewhurst. He is my guest. See that permanent arrangements are made for him on my behalf."

"Very good, my lord."

"We'll go up now," Jewell continued. "Should anyone come to bother me, send them away again or at least hold them off as long as you can."

The footman's mouth twitched ever so briefly in a smile he could not quite catch and hold back in time. "Very good, my lord." He bowed again as they walked past him.

Jewell led Addison up a flight of stairs, then down a hallway to the room all the way at the end.

It was a handsome room, decorated in dark blue with touches of lighter blues and grays all about. The corner was taken over by a massive bay window, with benches to sit and watch the streets and street corner below, at least when the drapes were drawn. At the far end of the room was a sitting area, one half of it set up with a dining table.

Tucked into the remaining corner was a modest four poster bed. Addison looked hastily away from it, and focused instead on the delectable smells coming from the table.

"Smells good, but the cook here is never less than perfect. My uncle again—he won't tolerate poor food." He rested a hand on the small of Addison's back and guided him gently toward the table. "Have a seat. Enjoy. I'll pour the wine."

"Um—" Addison felt there was something he should say or do, and he was very certain *Jewell* should not be pouring *him* wine, but in the end he could only take his seat with a soft, "All right."

Jewell beamed at him, then poured a wine the color of rubies into two crystal glasses. He handed one to Addison, then took his own seat. "So, what do you normally do day to day, back home?"

Addison took a sip of the wine, then immediately another, loving the fruitiness of it, the hints of honey and vanilla. "Nothing terribly interesting. I help my father deliver the post in the morning, I help run the office in the evening. Otherwise, my time is largely my own. I read, study, tutor some of the children. I've been trying to save money to perhaps take a few classes at the University, but..." He flushed to realize what he'd just admitted, without even thinking about it. "I'm no scholar, though."

"You seem like you could be," Jewell replied. "Your uncle won't let you attend any classes while you're here in the city?"

"No," Addison said. "He says it's a foolish waste of time."

"Is there such a thing as a sensible waste of time?" Jewell asked, rolling his eyes. He took a bite of roasted potato, chewed, swallowed, then said, "I think it's a pity. You'd love classes, and I bet you'd sit through them much better than I."

Addison laughed before he could catch himself, and drank more wine. The thought flitted through his mind that he should watch how much drank, but it drifted away again with the next sip. "You don't seem particularly skilled at holding still, it's true. Oh—I mean—"

Jewell burst out laughing. "It *is* true. People quite despair of it, but then again, I'm very good at all things requiring movement. Including talking, but you probably figured that one out."

Addison hid a smile in his wine glass, but Jewell's snicker said he hadn't hidden it very well.

"Eat up," Jewell said. "Don't want the food to go to waste, and you don't want that wine to go straight to your head, which it will if you're not careful. I should know. I had to attend the Royal Ball last autumn, and decided a glass of wine beforehand would suitably fortify me. One glass turned into a great deal more, and that Ball was a grand time until my mother got hold of me and realized I was drunk. She dragged me off and beat it right out of me." He made a face and took a generous swallow of the wine himself. "I swear I need to fortify myself every time I'm forced to endure that woman."

"I'm sorry," Addison said. "It does seem you have quite the time of it. At least in a few months, I'll return home and no longer have to hide at balls and such."

Jewell shrugged. "I make it sound worse than it is, and given all I enjoy in life, I've really no right to complain. And I'm trying to charm you, so I must stop complaining and whining."

Addison flushed at that. "Why—I mean, you don't have to charm me." He didn't need to, because Addison was already well and truly charmed. Infatuated, really. Who could fail to be so around Jewell? His name really did suit him, bright and colorful and beautiful...

And so far beyond Addison's means. He took another sip of wine to dull the sudden ache twisting in his chest.

"You're looking sad again," Jewell said. "I warned you about doing that." He stood up and moved around the table, and tugged Addison to his feet.

"What—mm—" Addison gasped, shocked beyond anything to realize Jewell was kissing him.

Jewell took it as permission and pushed the kiss deeper, consuming, claiming Addison's mouth, one hand curling around Addison's hip, gently tugging him closer. His other hand sank into Addison's hair at the nape of his neck, tilting his head just so as the kiss grew more fevered.

Addison had no idea where to put his hands, but finally rested them tentatively on Jewell's chest. But as the kiss continued, grew deeper still, hungrier, harder, his arms moved of their own volition to twine around Jewell's neck.

"Why—" he swallowed. "Why'd you do that?"

Jewell smiled, all mischief and pleased with himself. "Because I've badly wanted to since shamelessly stealing that first kiss. And you looked sad, and I don't like you looking sad. What thoughts upset you?"

"Um—" Addison flushed, embarrassed, and looked everywhere but at Jewell. But Jewell caught his jaw, forced him to look back up.

"What?" Jewell asked again.

"I shouldn't be here," Addison confessed. "I'm nowhere remotely close to you. You—you *are* a jewel, and I'm barely even—"

"I don't care," Jewell said softly, but firmly. There was so much confidence there, so much assurance, Addison couldn't remember what all his arguments had been.

Jewell kissed him again, slower, sweeter, and Addison could only go along with it. Come tomorrow, he'd have to go back to his normal life with his Uncle, and eventually he'd go home. He could not imagine ever getting to see Jewell again.

But damn it, he would take this day, and take the consequences that followed. They'd be worth it.

His head spun a bit, though from the wine, the kisses, or a combination of the two, he wasn't certain.

Jewell drew back slightly, nibbling at his mouth in a way that made Addison shiver. "Would you like to go out again, or shall we stay in?"

His implication was clear, and Addison was suddenly a nervous wreck. "Um—I've never—"

"Shh," Jewell said, kissing him softly, lips barely touching. "Whatever you want, so long as it's not the wine talking."

Addison managed a faint smile at that. "I didn't have that much wine. I—I want to stay in."

Jewell made a rough, pleased noise, but his kiss was only another of the slow, sweet ones before he dragged Addison across the room to the bed in the corner.

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Jewell woke with a jerk at the knock on the door. Three hard raps as sharp, he thought irritably, as the man doing the knocking. He sat up in bed and pushed back the bedclothes, careful not to disturb Addison.

Beautiful; Addison really was the most beautiful man. His dark blond hair held the barest hints of red, and his eyes were the darkest, deepest blue Jewell had ever seen. Soft, fair skin that flushed so charmingly at the slightest provocation, a calm, level voice that made the sweetest sounds when—

Best not to think about that again. He bent and pressed a soft kiss to the back of Addison's shoulder, breathing in their scents still mingled on Addison's unbelievably soft skin.

The knock came again, and Jewell stifled a sigh, climbing out of bed and snagging his shirt, pulling it over his head before striding to the door and yanking it open, scowling at the man who slipped inside. "Go away, Desmond."

"You may elude everyone else as you see fit, Highness, but avoiding me never works for very long and you really shouldn't do it."

Jewell scoffed at this the way he always did. "Please. My father is not even fifth in line for the throne anymore. I'm his youngest child of three. No one would bother to harm or kidnap me, or anything else." Then he added with a mutter, "Except Tina, she'd love to kill me."

Desmond, royal bodyguard to Prince Jewell Kelley, almost cracked a smile at that. "Highness. Your parents will be the ones to kill you, if you persist in this behavior. I have been ordered to bring you home, one way or another."

Jewell sighed. "They only want me home so I can dance all night with the Ambassador's nitwit daughter, then take a few turns with Tina, until I get so desperately sick of one I agree to marry the other."

Desmond started to speak, but abruptly stopped, head titling in curiosity as he looked across the room. "So it's true, you're not alone. Who are you dallying with, Highness?"

"No one," Jewell snapped. "He's no one at all and he has no idea who I am, and I want it to stay that way."

The look Desmond gave him was firm, but not without genuine sympathy and understanding. "You're a prince: that sort of thing never remains a secret."

Jewell grimaced. "Go downstairs, Desmond. I'll be down in not more than an hour, and go along home like a good little boy."

"His name, Highness."

"No—"

"His name."

"Addison Dewhurst," Jewell said tersely. "He is the son of a post worker in the village of Whitson. He's harmless, and sweet and smart—"

"And not for you to keep," Desmond said.

Jewell scowled again. "If it worked for Uncle—"

"Your uncle paid a very high price to be with his secretary," Desmond cut in. "Anyway, you've known this mysterious post worker's son for what, all of a few hours?"

Unable to refute that, Jewell said nothing.

"You are what you are, Jewell," Desmond said as gently as he was able. "That means you are handed much of the world, and entitled to it, but it also means that certain things will never be yours."

"Like happiness," Jewell said bitterly.

"Do not be petulant," Desmond said sternly. "One hour, Highness. I will wait downstairs. Do not run."

"I won't," Jewell said. "I promise." He closed the door as Desmond left, and leaned against it, sighing softly. Glancing up, he regarded Addison, still dead to the world in the bed where they had so recently...

What would Addison's parents and uncle say, he wondered, if they knew Addison had netted himself a prince?

What would Addison say? Jewell dreaded thinking about it.

He dreaded the parting he was about to initiate even more, but there was no help for it. Better he did it now, himself, than Desmond reappearing to put an end to things his way. Reluctantly he pushed away from the door and strode back to the bed.

To avoid temptation, he got dressed first, then finally climbed into bed to wake Addison. Bending over he kissed Addison softly, then shook him gently awake. Addison stared at him a moment, groggy and disoriented—but then his eyes popped open, and his face went red in that endearing way of his.

But then he frowned, staring at Jewell's clothes. "I should go, shouldn't I?"

Jewell felt like a bastard. "I have to go. Invariably, they always find me and drag me home. I am sorry. Believe me, I beg of you, when I say that I'd rather stay here with you."

Addison nodded and sat up—eyes so damned honest and earnest, like nothing Jewell had ever seen in anyone's eyes, ever. They struck him like a fist. "I do believe you."

He'd known, Jewell realized, feeling low and wretched. Addison had known, perhaps better than Jewell, that at some point he'd have to go. Jewell kissed him, hard and desperate, holding fast, wishing there was some way he wouldn't have to let go. "I'm sorry," He said miserably when he finally drew back.

"Don't be," Addison said. "I-um—I'm not."

Making a rough noise, unable to form coherent words, Jewell dragged him close and kissed him again. "I want to see you again. Even if only for a little while."

"Uh—all right. But where?" Addison asked, and Jewell could see he knew it would be better if they didn't see each other, but damn it.

Jewell smiled. "How about where we met? It would have to be even earlier than this morning, though, I'm afraid. Else they'll catch me."

Addison laughed. "Me too. I'll do my best, but, um, don't be upset if I do not show? If my cousin is feeling well again, I'll have to be there to dance attendance upon him."

"It could be hard for me to slip away, too," Jewell murmured. "Thank you for spending the day with me. I'm sorry I'm being a right bastard at the moment."

"You're not," Addison said softly. "Um—I'm happy we met. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Jewell kissed him one last time, then forced himself to get out of bed. "I'll make arrangements for you to get home, and should you want, you are always welcome here. I've taken care of your membership here—*don't* protest. It is the very least I can do. Who knows," he added, forcing a smile, "maybe we'll run into each other here sometime."

Addison nodded, but Jewell could already tell he'd never see Addison at the club. Hell, after Addison learned he was a prince...

Most would seek him out all the more, thrilled to have a prince for a paramour. But he'd given his real name and Addison hadn't known it, and Jewell believed him when Addison complained that he wanted no part of catching an earl like his parents wanted him to do.

Should Addison learn Jewell was a prince... he would definitely never see Addison again.

He smiled, and bid Addison farewell, and fled before he did something they'd all call reckless and stupid, like run away.

Oh, how he'd love to run away. Just take off and go somewhere, some place where his father wouldn't lecture to him in that condescending, disappointed tone, but stop halfway through because he had to be at the palace or his club.

Some place his mother wouldn't call him to her parlor and slap him until his face was bruised, and force him to dance attendance upon people he didn't like, didn't know.

He wandered morosely down the stairs, pausing briefly to see that someone had a carriage waiting to take Addison home, then continued on to the library where he knew Desmond would be waiting.

True to form, when he reached the library, Desmond was sitting in a chair close to the fireplace, reading a novel—and Jewell knew whose novel, but he'd save that little bit of ammo for another time.

"I'm ready," he said.

Desmond looked up, slowly closing his book, eyes as frosty and pale as ever, expression just as cool and remote as the mountains from which he hailed. Dressed in black and gray, with small touches of violet in the amethysts he wore, Desmond was beautiful and remote—and deadly. He looked the gentlemen, but he was a bodyguard who commanded what seemed to Jewell a ridiculous sum.

He was not entirely unbending, though, for all his icy demeanor. It was the one reason Jewell did not absolutely hate the man, and instead only found him frustrating. Desmond, at least, knew what it was like to constantly want something he could never have.

Though, Jewell could now better appreciate how much harder it must be, for Desmond to constantly want *someone*.

Desmond finally nodded and stood up, tucking his book away. "The footman said your man seemed a sweet fellow."

"He is," Jewell said curtly. "As I said, he did not even know who I was, and I gave him my real name."

"That is rather... impressive, if shocking," Desmond replied. "Come on, then, Highness. Let us get you home."

The trip home was a silent affair, and the knot of dread in Jewell's stomach grew and grew, until it felt as though he were going to wretch by the time they started down the long drive to the lavish townhouse his parents called home half the year. Jewell had always thought it ostentatious, and a bit ridiculous in how much space it took up.

Stifling a sigh, he ignored the footman who appeared to help him down, squared his shoulders, and strode up the marble stairs and into his parents' house.

Inside, the butler, Shawn, greeted him with a deep bow and a politely murmured, "Welcome home, Highness."

"Thank you," Jewell said, stripping off his gloves, handing them and his coat off to the footman who appeared at his elbow. "My parents?"

"Your father left just a short time ago, Highness. He is not expected to return until quite late. Your mother is in her parlor, and awaits your arrival."

Jewell hid a grimace, and only nodded. "Thank you. See tea is brought to my chambers in an hour or so. Also, send word to Riverton that I would like him here around breakfast time tomorrow."

"Yes, your Highness."

"Thank you, Shawn."

"My pleasure, your Highness."

Jewell left him there, and strode up a massive, elegant winding stair to the second floor, where his mother kept her private parlor.

Princess Alyssa, youngest daughter of the southern neighboring king; the perfect match for Jewell's own father, second youngest son of the King. It was unfortunate they were both odious. Jewell detested his parents, and all the more when people constantly assured him that would change. He truly despised being repeatedly informed that all children hated their parents, it was only natural, but that if he would just listen and do as he was told for once, and grow up, he would come to understand them and respect them properly.

He knocked on the door to his mother's parlor, innards seizing and turning cold. Gods, he really did hate conversing with his mother alone. Unsupervised, without his father to temper her, she really was evil.

She called for him to enter, but did not immediately look up from her needlepoint. He closed the door and waited. She was beautiful, and looked like nothing like her nearly fifty years. Golden and richly dressed, dripping jewels even when no one was around to admire them. He was grateful he looked more like his father's side of the family, and not hers.

There were so many things he wished he could tell her—tell anyone at all. About Addison, mostly. Even here and now, braced for pain and insults, thoughts of Addison made him smile.

He wanted to tell everyone everything about Addison—the way he smiled, the way he laughed, how much he knew of history, how he wanted to be a scholar and was so very good at it. How sweet he was, and tolerant, and forgiving. The intensity of his eyes, and how honest they were. The way he didn't mind that Jewell could not hold still or stop talking.

Though, he definitely would not tell anyone how sweetly Addison kissed, the way he smelled of licorice and honey, the impossible softness of his skin, the way he gasped and moaned and pleaded so prettily—

"Wipe that smirk off your face," Princess Alyssa said coldly, finally setting her needlework aside and gathering up her abundant silk skirts. She rose and stalked across the room toward him.

Jewell braced for it, tried to convince himself it would not hurt the same as—

But it did hurt the same as always. He made no noise, gave nothing away in his face, but it always stung when his mother struck him; it hurt in more ways than one. He could feel blood drip down his cheek. She must be extremely angry, to wear a ring that could cut and backhand him with it.

"You will stop this nonsensical running and hiding," Alyssa went on. "It inconveniences me, it upsets your father, and it wastes Desmond's time."

"So give Desmond something better—" He grunted that time, as she struck him again.

"Stop running off," she repeated. "In two months you will be turning twenty-one. A boy so close to becoming fully a man should act like a man. Never mind that you are a prince. That comes with duties and responsibilities. You are not at all conscious of your place, and I have told you time and time again you must be aware at *all* times. You are not stupid, Jewell, for all that you persist in acting like a fool."

She resumed her seat, and Jewell relaxed slightly. "Now, Lady Tina was here earlier, and relayed some distressing news. I do not want to hear your feeble excuses," she snapped when Jewell tried to speak. "Whoever, whatever, that boy was, you had better not keep company with him again. Am I clear? Appearances, Jewell. I wish you would take these things more seriously."

"I do take things seriously, mother—"

"Be silent," she said. "This is not a conversation, Jewell. This is me speaking, and you listening. The only words I want to hear out of your mother are 'yes, mother'. She paused pointedly.

"Yes, mother," Jewell repeated dully.

She nodded approvingly. "Anyway, what I really wanted to speak to you about was the Cumberly ball tonight. It is a small, very private affair, only a couple hundred people will be in attendance. Many of them will be key figures. Now, you know how Lady Melina Easton regards you."

Jewell barely kept from sneering. She regarded quite highly the fact he was a prince, and one quite young and handsome. More than once she'd made it plain she would not be opposed to spending time with Jewell in some secluded corner or empty room.

"Her mother is quite the fool," Alyssa went on. "Lady Easton has power and place, but little brain to know how to use either. She cares only for doting on her daughter, and doing whatever her daughter says she should. You will go with us to the Cumberly ball. You will dance attendance upon Melina. You will charm her, you will give her *exactly* what she wants. You will convince her to tell her mother to vote against the trade bill that is set to come up tomorrow."

Jewell stared at his mother, horrified. They'd always asked him to dance and flirt with people, take various guests and acquaintances to the park, the theatre, escort them to a salon or a ball...but this...this...

"You want me to seduce and fuck a young woman just so she'll turn around and tell her mother to vote the way you want?"

Alyssa was off the couch in a flash, and backhanded him twice, making his face throb. 'Watch your language! I cannot imagine why you thought I would tolerate such vulgarities.'

"You—you're—" Jewell gingerly wiped blood from his lips. He really thought he might cry. "You're whoring me out."

His mother slapped him again, then regarded him coldly. "Watch your tongue. I am doing no such thing. This is business, Jewell. More importantly, it is royal business. It is how these things work in our world. Honestly, you are no innocent. You've taken plenty of pretty little bits to your bed. What is one or two more? At least this way, you'll get something more useful out of it than base satiation." Her mouth twisted with distaste and disapproval.

Jewell wondered, half-hysterically, how she'd managed to have three children if she truly hated sex that much. No wonder his father kept mistresses.

He was more concerned with that 'one or two' she had said. So she was already planning where to use him next. It was pointless to protest, but he had to try. "It's not the same thing, mother—"

"I've had enough of your outbursts. I told you, this is not a conversation. Go to your room. Get cleaned up. The ball starts at nine, we will arrive just after ten."

"Yes, mother," Jewell replied, and turned sharply around, taking his leave. Outside, Desmond leaned against the opposite wall, waiting patiently. He frowned as he took in Jewell's abused face. "Highness—"

Jewell ignored him, and turned sharply to stride across the second floor, to his room at the furthest end, as far from the rest of them as he could get.

He continued to ignore Desmond, who had followed him, and went straight to the tea he'd requested. Sitting down, he poured himself a cup, added four sugars, and drank it down as quickly as he could manage.

Really, he could do with something a good deal stronger than tea, but he was going to need a clear head. He stiffened as Desmond sat down next to him, his familiar leather case in one hand. Desmond set it on the table, then pulled out a little glass bottle filled with clear liquid, and a soft white cloth.

Dabbing the liquid on the cloth, Desmond then grasped Jewell's chin gently, and angled his head just so, before meticulously wiping at his face. Jewell hissed at the sting, but otherwise said nothing. When Desmond finished, he poured another cup of tea. When he was half done with it, he finally began to help himself to the various trays of food set out.

"Your man made it home safely," Desmond said levelly. "He is precisely who he claimed. His Uncle is not a popular man, though he is not precisely unpopular either. His fortune comes by way of a silver mine."

"How do you know so much already?" Jewell demanded. "How do you always do that?"

Desmond shrugged, but the briefest of smiles cracked his face for a moment. "Servants talk. I sent a man to follow him home, and bid him make inquiries where he might."

Jewell made a face, and refilled his teacup. Silence fell again, until Desmond asked quietly, "What did your mother say that has you so upset, Highness?"

"She wants me to attend the Cumberly ball and pay a particular amount of attention to Lady Melina."

Desmond frowned. "It is hardly unusual for your parents to request you dance and flirt with various and sundry persons."

"No, but it is a change of pace that my mother request I then take the girl off somewhere and seduce her, before I convince her to tell her mother to do what my mother wants."

"I see," Desmond said.

Jewell felt more wretched than ever. "I'm not doing it—I'm not!" He stormed to his feet and took off, back to his mother's parlor, ignoring Desmond's cries to stop, and threw the door open. "I'm not doing

it, mother! I'm a price, not a whore! I'll dance and flirt and chat if I must, but—" He winced that time, as she struck him.

"That. Is. Enough."

"I'm not doing it," Jewell said again, eyes watering from the force of her latest blow.

"You will do as you are told," Alyssa said coldly. "I think with all that we put up with from you, the least you can do is help your family out from time to time."

Jewell felt sick—but his anger was not quite played out. "You—you're just using me the way you all used to use Uncle! You're trying to whore me out the same way you did him."

"You know nothing about that," his mother replied. "Go to your room. This discussion is over."

Feeling helpless, Jewell left.

He wouldn't do it. He couldn't. If he did it once, they'd make him do it again and again, and it *was* just like what they'd done to Uncle. He'd heard the stories, and he wouldn't become the next royal whore, he wouldn't.

It was time, he decided, to run away. Bugger them all.

But where could he go, that they wouldn't find him? Jewell worried his bottom lip as he pondered, walking slowly back to his room. He'd have to slip past Desmond, too. That was going to be especially tricky now.

Damn it.

What was he going to do about Addison? At the very least, he had to wait until morning, so he could tell Addison he was running away.

He thought briefly, wistfully, of how grand it would be to get Addison to run away with him. They could travel all over the world, visit museums, famous landmarks, the sight of important battles.

And spend every night together, wrapped around each other, with no fear of Desmond or anyone else showing up to tear them apart. He wouldn't have to be a stupid prince; he could be just Jewell, and have Addison—

But precious little else. If he left, he'd have to take money with him. His personal fortunes were almost obscene, but accessing them while trying not to draw his family's notice would be no easy thing. And Addison had no reason to run away, and Jewell should not drag him into the mess anyway.

Still, it was a pretty thought, just him and Addison and the world to explore.

In his room, he saw that servants had brought him a bath. Desmond was over by the bed, setting out his clothes for the evening.

Jewell ordered the servants out, then stripped and climbed into the bath. Until he figured out what to do, it would not hurt to play along and bide his time. They might all think him a fool, but that could only work to his favor.

His only dilemmas were where to go, and how to get there—and how to get away from Desmond. He sank deeper into the bath water, waiting for inspiration to strike.

Maybe he should just set out aimlessly. How could anyone find him if he did not even know where he was going?

Yes, he rather liked that idea. He could pack up all his things and slip out before leaving for the ball, and hide out in the park until Addison showed up the next morning.

He just had to get rid of Desmond long enough to make his escape.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Desmond appeared at the side of the tub. "Highness..."

"Yes?" Jewell asked sourly, not bothering to look up, bracing himself to endure another infuriating lecture about duty and responsibility.

"You recall our earlier discussion at the club?" Desmond asked. "Particularly about your Uncle, and the choices he made?"

"Yes," Jewell snapped, splashing irritably at the water, looking with a glare. "Everyone thinks he should have stayed and continued to do his duty. I'm sure you all think I should as well."

Desmond knelt, and held Jewell's head in place, dabbing at his cheek the way he had before. "Duty has its place, and you are a prince, which is greater duty still. But no one should demand the price you are now being forced to pay. It is not what your Uncle paid me—"

"What—" Jewell squawked, jerking in surprise. "My parents pay you."

Desmond for once in his life looked completely and openly amused. "Your parents pay me to protect you and fetch you home when you run off, but I was put in place by your Uncle. He did not want to happen to you what happened to him, as he always feared it would. Until now, only reasonable duties have been demanded of you. This, however, will not be tolerated. Running away is seldom the answer, Highness, but I feel it would accomplish something. I advise you only not to go too far, for you will have to return at some point."

Jewell stared at him, too shocked to form words. "This isn't like you," he finally blurted. "Is this some trap?"

Chuckling, Desmond stood and ruffled his hair. "No trap, and I am not half so evil as you like to think, Highness. I have set out all you will need to travel. Do not tell me where you are going, for it will be better for me if I can honestly say I've no idea. But, I do repeat—do not go too far. Go where you might find help."

The words seemed to have some weight, but Jewell was too busy racing ahead to what he'd do, where he'd go, to pay Desmond much attention. He would definitely have to find some way to contact Addison and tell him—

"Do not even go to see your new young man," Desmond said sharply.

Jewell kept his expression carefully blank. "I do not know what you mean."

Desmond snorted. "I can see it in your face, Jewell. Do not drag him into this mess. You've already caused him enough heartache."

"I know," Jewell said. "He knows the situation better than I, really. But—but—if you had a chance to be with Truelis, wouldn't you take it?"

"What—" Desmond looked as though he'd been slapped. "How?" he demanded.

Jewell shrugged in a way he hoped was nonchalant, but really he was pleased with himself. "It wasn't hard. You always watch him when he's in the room. You've read all his books, and you always have someone go and get them signed for you. And—"

"That's enough," Desmond bit out. "My situation with Truelis is nothing remotely like yours with Addison."

"But it could be, I think," Jewell protested. "I really do. It worked with Uncle—"

"Ask your Uncle sometime just how much he sacrificed, and what he had to endure, to be with his lover. Pretty stories distract from reality, Highness, they do not change it. Your Uncle lives alone and well away from society for good reason. If you attempt to drag Addison into your life, Highness, you will both spend the rest of your lives fighting it, facing hostility, and being ostracized, and your moments of peace will be few and far between."

"I don't care," Jewell said, lifting his chin.

"No, Highness, you wouldn't. You are comfortable in society, and outside of it. You move with confidence in whatever you do. You are educated and knowledgeable. You are wealthy and powerful in your own right, even should you turn away from your family. But that young man has little to nothing. He does not have your background, your money, your security. Should the two of you do something reckless and stupid, only to eventually go your separate ways, he will be the one left broken."

"I would never—"

"You are not even twenty-one, Jewell," Desmond said sharply, gray eyes flashing. "Boys fall in and out of love in the span of a day. I advise you to run away until your parents can be persuaded against their latest demands. Do not drag that boy into it."

Jewell nodded, feeling miserable all over again. "Fine. But I want to leave him a note, and I'll deliver it myself!" He reached angrily for the soap and began to roughly clean himself. It wasn't fair; he wanted

Addison and he'd never purposely hurt him—except he had, and he knew it, and worse still Addison knew it, because Jewell should have told Addison the truth about who he was—

Except he still didn't want to, because he wanted to be Jewell as long as possible and not Prince Jewell and—

And it was all so bloody confusing.

He stood up, water streaming and splashing everywhere, and climbed out of the tub. He took the drying cloth Desmond handed him, rubbing down roughly as he stalked to the bed, nearly succeeding in tripping himself.

Casting the cloth aside, he began to dress in the plain, sturdy clothes Desmond had set out for him. A thought occurred to him as he finished the buttons on his dark blue jacket. "What about you, Desmond? Wouldn't it make more sense for you to come with me? What will happen to you when they find I've gotten by you again?"

"It's better if I stay here, Highness," Desmond replied, and shrugged one shoulder, then produced a small vial from his jacket. "As to how you got away—you slipped something in my tea." He restored the vial to its hidden pocket.

Jewell laughed. "How clever of me."

"Best get going, Highness. Send word to me at the club, at least, when you are somewhere safe—just do not mention where, hmm?"

"Yes, Desmond," Jewell replied, and gathered up the other items Desmond had set out on the bed. He'd go to the stables a few blocks away and get a horse there. He'd be gone long before anyone realized.

But he wouldn't leave town until he'd left a letter for Addison at the park.

Looking around the room one last time, he finally looked at Desmond. "Thank you."

Desmond only shook his head. "I am sorry it's come to this, and I do not yet know how it will all play out. Good luck, Highness. Do not do anything too reckless. Farewell."

"Farewell." Jewell turned and strode to his bedroom window, slipping out onto the balcony. Climbing over the edge, he carefully lowered himself as far as he could, dangling in the air, before finally dropping the rest of the way to the ground.

He landed perfectly, briefly pleased with himself as he climbed to his feet and brushed away dirt and leaves.

Then he fled.

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Addison sat morosely on the park bench, staring at his boots, which were damp from the grass and dirty from the grimy streets.

His body ached in ways it never had before, and he flushed hot every time he thought about the reasons why. It had all happened only a few hours ago, but it still seemed even fresher than that, so vividly did he keep reliving it all.

He still could not believe he'd—and constantly thinking about it made him sad and happy and lonely and—and—

And he really wanted to do it all again, the whole day, from the kiss in the park to the museum to lunch to bed—

Oh, it really was quite hopeless. He'd be lucky to see Jewell tomorrow morning, and he really shouldn't be here now. But Uncle was sick now, and it was making him even more odious than usual, and his cousin was a perfectly wretched patient as well, and he really could not stand to be in the house one more moment.

It wasn't like him to sneak out the way he had, and part of him felt guilty about it—but most of him was happy to sit here and daydream about Jewell.

He jumped up from the bench, nearly knocking over the lantern he'd brought along, as someone else burst into the clearing—and stared at Jewell in surprise.

Jewell stared back, equally surprised. Then he set down his own lantern and surged forward, scooping Addison up and kissing him hard.

Addison sank his hands into Jewell's hair and held fast, kissing him back just as hard, only then realizing he had vastly underestimated how badly he'd missed Jewell.

Infatuation was stupid; at some point someone with real authority would order him to stay away from Jewell or else. But it was so hard to remember that or even care when Jewell was holding him, kissing him. It was harder still when he remembered what they'd been doing only hours ago that made him so comfortable with Jewell now.

He moaned at the memory, and held Jewell tighter still.

"I did not expect to see you here," Jewell said at last, guiding Addison back to the bench before going to fetch his lantern. He sat down next to Addison and smiled. In the light of their two lanterns, Addison noticed what he hadn't before—fresh scratches on Jewell's right cheek. He reached out to touch them lightly. "You're hurt. What happened?"

"My mother happened," Jewell said bitterly. "Tonight was the last straw. They want to make me a high class whore the same way they did my Uncle years ago. I'm not going to do it! My Uncle ran away and I'm going to do the same thing." All but shaking with anger, he recounted to Addison everything that had transpired since they'd parted, right up to where he'd decided to run away and snuck out, then come to the park to leave Addison a note.

Addison fought down his private dismay at the thought of Jewell going away. "I—I didn't know it was so awful for you. That's terrible, Jewell. They—they shouldn't do such things, demand such things." He bit his lip against saying anything selfish. He was lucky to have the memories he did; at least Jewell had planned on telling him goodbye. He had no right to ask for more, especially when Jewell's misery was so great.

But he couldn't resist a softly spoken, "I'll miss you."

Jewell hugged him tight, and kissed him again. But one kissed turned into two, into three, until Addison lost track of everything except the warmth and feel of Jewell.

"Desmond told me not to bother you, and that it was better to leave you, and I wrote you a letter and I know it's selfish and hopeless but I don't suppose—I mean—that is—would you run away with me?"

Addison froze, staring at him in surprise. A thousand questions filled his mind—who was Desmond?—but only one really stood out. "You—uh—you want me to go with you?"

"Yes," Jewell said fervently. "I know I shouldn't ask; it's awful of me. I was trying to do the right thing, I even wrote the letter. I have it here—" He thrust a letter clumsily into Addison's hands. "But—I didn't know you'd be here and it seems like you're meant—oh *please* won't you run away with me?"

"Um—" Addison could only stare in shock again, thoughts spinning wildly. Running away would be the height of stupidity. His Uncle would kill him, if his parents didn't do it first. He didn't have that kind of money, and if something went wrong and he was left alone, he would have nowhere to go and no way to get home again. He'd be completely at Jewell's mercy.

But Jewell looked so damned miserable, and so hopeful, and Addison bet Jewell had no idea where he was going and no plan about how to go about it.

It was a stupid thing to do, running away for no good reason. But he'd done a lot of things today that people would consider stupid. Something about Jewell made him want to do stupid things. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Jewell shrugged, impatient and restless—and disappointed. "I don't know. I thought I'd just wander, so it's harder for people to find me."

Addison bit his lip, thinking. "Um. You said your Uncle was treated like they're treating you, yes?"

"Yes," Jewell said with another impatient shrug.

"Then—" Addison drew a deep breath. "We should go see him, don't you think? He could help, and it would give us a destination. If that doesn't work out, we'll go somewhere else."

Jewell stared at him in shock—then laughed in delight and dragged him close, kissing him senseless, and it was all too easy for Addison to ignore the voices in his head calling him a thousand different kinds of stupid.

When his parents finally forced him to return home, he'd be heart-broken. But the way Jewell had smiled when he realized Addison had said 'we' made him think he'd endure a thousand heartaches just to see those smiles.

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Addison was ready to fall over from exhaustion. They hadn't traveled quickly to reach their destination, but they had not traveled slowly either.

Not to mention that if he thought Jewell had been a boundless supply of energy the day they'd met—it was more than a little impressive how much his exuberance increased when he was running away from home.

He leaned against Jewell, at least half asleep while Jewell knocked on the door. It was a pretty cottage—if a two story manor that obviously cost a fortune could still be called a cottage—from what he could see in the fading evening light.

Jewell kissed his temple, making Addison smile, but the door opened before he could say anything in reply.

"Mercy have me!" exclaimed a tidy looking little woman with curly, steel gray hair and gold rimmed spectacles. "What in the name of heaven are you doing here, Hig—"

"I need to speak with my uncle, immediately," Jewell said, and ushered them inside. "Is he here, Martha?"

Martha snorted. "Aye, but they're holed up in the library, so have a care. Though, it's early yet. I'll put on some tea for you, then."

Jewell kissed her cheek. "Thank you."

"Get on, then," Martha said, "and introduce me to your friend later." She winked at them, then vanished into the back rooms.

Moving down the hall, Jewell rapped loudly on one of the doors, then pushed it open and slipped inside.

Addison stared, sleepy and shy and painfully nervous, at the two men before the small fireplace on the far side of the room. They were both beautiful, dressed casually in clothes he could tell were costly even at a glance, ensconced in a library that cost a greater fortune still.

One was a stunning older version of Jewell, touches of gray to his wheat-gold curls, long and lean, and there was a warmth and lingering affection in his eyes as he looked away from the man who was clearly the focus of that affection.

He was leaning over a dark chair, hand braced on the arm, the fingers of his other hand curled beneath the chin of the man sitting in the chair, titling his head up just so.

The man in the chair was just as beautiful as the man standing over him, dark eyes sharp and shining behind gold spectacles, light brown hair warm in the firelight, just lightly peppered with gray. A book lay forgotten in his lap, and as they watched his hand slid away from where it had been fisted in the shirt of Jewell's uncle.

"Jewell," said his uncle, and rose to his full—and not inconsiderable—height. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Mother tried to make me sleep with someone to help that stupid trade bill fail!" Jewell burst out. "She was turning me into a whore, and Desmond said you didn't want that, and Addison said to come here—"

The man smiled and rested a calming hand on Jewell's shoulder. "Take a breath, Jewell. I'm glad Desmond is still taking care of you. I take it Addison is your handsome friend here? Why don't we start with introductions, hmm? I'm certain Martha will have tea along shortly."

Behind Benedict, the man in the chair stood, voice as sharp as his piercing eyes. "I sense there is going to be quite the tale here, and I also sense there are going to be several irate people on our doorstep very soon. What *is* it with you royals that you can never do anything without making a production of it?"

"Royals—" Addison repeated, jerking away from Jewell, staring at him in wide-eyed shock. Oh, god. Surely not.

But Jewell winced, and said. "Addy—"

"Y-y-you're a *prince*?" Addison asked, because what else could Jewell be if he was royalty? "I—what—there's—"

The man in the chair stood up and crossed the room. He grabbed Addison by the arm and guided him to the chair, pushing him down into it. Then he thrust a snifter into Addison's hands and ordered sharply, "Drink that."

Addison obeyed, eyes watering as he gulped the burning brandy, coughing and sputtering. Jewell—he couldn't—but Addison could see it, as he looked between Jewell and his Uncle, beautiful young and old versions of one another.

"Jewell," the Uncle said sternly. "Do you mean to tell me that you convinced him to run away with you and you did not tell him who you are?"

"What," Jewell said defensively. "He knows *who* I am, I just had not gotten around to telling him *what* I am."

"Honesty is crucial in *any* form of relationship, Jewell. In a situation like this, it is even more important. You will accomplish nothing by hiding and deceiving—"

He was cut off by an inelegant snort from the man still hovering over Addison. Then the man moved closer to Jewell's Uncle, hands on his hips, face tilted up in challenge. "I'm sorry, Benedict, did you *really* just say that with a straight face? Accomplish nothing by hiding and deceiving? You? Really? I am not certain, given the unique history of our relationship, that you are really fit to give such a lecture."

Benedict scowled. "We are hardly ordinary, Rae. You must admit that we were a rarity—"

"Oh, no," Rae said, cutting him off. "You don't get to lecture on deceit and honesty."

"No?" Benedict repeated softly, mouth curving in a smile that made Addison think that, for the moment at least, they'd forgotten there was anyone else in the room. "I suppose you are the more experienced at deceiving, Hunter."

"I think we are about as fit to lecture on the matter of honesty as your relatives are fit to lecture on virtue."

Benedict grimaced at that. "Now we were never as bad as all that."

Rae said nothing, only smirked briefly. "Let me handle the reprimand, Bene. You will only go soft."

"As you like, beloved," Benedict said easily, and sniggered as Jewell winced, sliding away to stand closer to Addison. "Have another sip or two," he told Addison motioning to the brandy he still held, patting his shoulder comfortingly.

Rae stepped forward, closer to Jewell, and began to speak in a voice that made Addison want to stand up and pay attention for fear of reprisal if he did not. "What in the world were you thinking!" He cuffed Jewell lightly. "To drag someone halfway across the continent and not tell him what he is truly being dragged into! You were right to run if your parents are doing to you what they all used to do to Benedict. Coming *here* is the smartest thing you could have done, though I believe I heard it was your companion who thought of it. Hopeless! But not to tell him the full weight of the decision you have made, to drag him into what will become a lifelong mess without allowing him to make his own decision fairly! Your behavior is borderline cruel, and what is worse, you probably knew that! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking he'd never see me again if he knew I was royalty, and I didn't want to say goodbye until I absolutely had to," Jewell said.

He looked so miserable, sounded so despondent, that Addison was momentarily jarred from his panic. Not even thinking about it, he stood up and moved across the room to embrace Jewell.

Jewell stiffened, clearly surprised, but then held him tightly. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, words muffled against Addison's throat.

Addison laughed shakily, panic returning. "Are you really a prince?"

"Yes," Jewell said with a tired sigh.

"I don't—I can't—I shouldn't be with a *prince*," Addison said, laughing again because he didn't know what he would do if he didn't laugh. "I can't believe I told you about my parents wanting me to catch and Earl, and no wonder you could just walk into a museum, and I should have realized but didn't. How stupid am I? It must have been amusing for everyone—"

"Stop it!" Jewell said, all but shouting the words, holding him so tightly that for a moment Addison couldn't breathe. "You aren't stupid. You're bloody perfect, Addy. Stop it, please. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but it is *my* fault, so be mad at me and call *me* stupid. I deserve that, not you."

Addison just buried his head against Jewell's chest, because in spite of everything, there was still no place he'd rather be than right there with Jewell holding him.

Oh, god. A prince. He was infatuated and possibly on his way to worse with a prince. And he'd thought it beyond absurd his parents thought he could net an Earl!

A knock at the door made him jump, and he looked up as Martha rolled in a laden teacart—reminding him suddenly they weren't alone. He flushed dark, humiliated that Benedict—Prince Benedict—and Rae had watched the entire exchange. They must think him a perfect idiot.

Martha wheeled the cart to a table in the corner, and then glanced at Benedict. Then she simply gave a quick curtsy and departed again, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Let's sit down," Rae said into the silence. "There is obviously much to be discussed." He took command of the teacart, spreading its contents across the table. Then he sat down, and poured tea for Jewell and Addison, before tending to himself and Benedict.

Addison was oddly captivated by the way Rae not only poured Benedict's tea, but prepared it. Then he filled two plates with food, obviously knowing exactly what Benedict liked.

It seemed... oddly intimate to him, and a trifle eccentric. Back home, his parents' housekeeper knew such details about his parents, but he did not think his parents knew them about each other. At least, he could never recall his mother knowing how his father liked his scones, and he knew his father did not know how his mother took her tea. Certainly his Uncle and Aunt spent most of their time ignoring each other; they definitely never fixed tea for each other. They would be the first to say that's what the servants were for.

He shook his head at himself and sipped at his own tea, feeling flushed and unsteady from the brandy and the depressing realization that Jewell was a prince. But, really, it was his own stupid fault for getting carried away with his daydreams. They'd only known each other a few days, and all but one of those had been spent running away from home. Had he really thought daydreams of spending all his days with Jewell would come to pass? Dreams of a future together, despite the odds, would come true?

Stupid, he was nothing less than stupid. There had never been a chance for them, and even if there had been, Jewell's being a prince ruined it forever.

"Now, then," Benedict said after a few minutes. "I need to know everything, Jewell. Tell me what your parents tried to do."

Jewell nodded and began to retell his story—this time, Addison noticed miserably, he added in several details he had left out before, to hide he was royalty.

Addison stared at his tea. He would have to go home, there was no help for it. It was one thing for a post office clerk to run away with an Earl's son. But to run off with a prince...

He was a peasant. Jewell was a prince. That only ever worked out in stories. There was simply no way it ever worked in real life. The harsh reality was that he would have to return home, face the consequences of his actions, and try to forget Jewell.

Or at least learned to live with the knowledge that he would *never* forget Jewell.

"So where do you come into all of this?" Benedict asked, and Addison started to realize Benedict was addressing him—and he really needed to remember it was *Prince* Benedict.

He smiled weakly, and forced himself to stop toying with his teacup. "Uh—I just happened to be in the park at the right times. Wrong times?" He tried to laugh. "That's all."

Rae regarded him, eyes still startlingly sharp behind the glinting spectacles, face expressionless. "Your name is Addison, I believe?"

"Addison Dewhurst," Addison replied. "My parents run the post office in the town of Whitson."

"That's a fair distance from here," Benedict mused. "So you met in the park?"

Addison turned red. "Um—yes. Jewell c-came across me when he was, uh, running away from a young lady."

"Tina," Jewell said, grinning shamelessly. "I was trying to get away from Tina. I saw Addison and uh—" He suddenly recalled what he'd done, and why they might not find it as amusing as he.

Addison laughed despite himself. "He thought if he pretended to be with someone else, she would leave off. So he sat down and kissed me. She called me a strumpet, and they argued, then she left. So, um, I guess his plan actually worked."

Benedict cast Jewell a look that was equal parts reprimand and amusement. Then he glanced at Rae, expression turning decidedly into mischief. "What is it with you bold, reckless types, always kissing unsuspecting strangers amongst the foliage?"

"I'm certain I do not know what you mean," Rae said haughtily.

"Mmm," Benedict murmured, and poured them more tea, fixing it as easily and casually as Rae had earlier. Then he turned his attention back to Jewell and Addison. "So how long have you two known each other?"

Jewell winced. "Uh—about four days."

Rae pinched the bridge of his nose, pushing up his spectacles. "Youth," he muttered. "It is a constant to wonder to me that any young man lives long enough to become older and wiser."

Benedict laughed. "Indeed. I do not know about the wiser; certainly *we* are considered old fools."

"You are a fool," Rae retorted.

In reply, Benedict only smiled and drank his tea. "I think I shall have to go into the city and pick a fight with my relations." He rubbed the back of one finger beneath his chin, pondering. "It's been almost two years since I've done so. I wonder if I have lost my edge."

Rae snorted. "What edge? But I've not lost my aim, and that was always more effective than any words. Though, as to that..." He sighed. "It would probably be wiser for me to stay here and safeguard the runaways."

Benedict frowned, looking genuinely unhappy. "Yes, I suppose that would be wiser. We'll discuss it later, however. For now..." He looked between Jewell and Addison. "You both look ready to fall over. I'm certain by this point Martha has prepared your bedroom." His mouth curved in amusement. "Unless I am mistaken, and we should have her prepare two rooms."

Addison flushed, but Jewell only grinned and said, "Just the one."

Really, Addison should insist on two. The sooner he cut ties, the better. But...he wanted whatever he could get, as selfish and stupid as he knew that to be. Very soon, he'd be sent home as he should, and he wanted to take all the memories with him he could possibly gather.

"Bed," Benedict ordered. "We'll discuss this further with you in the morning."

Addison obediently stood up, then felt briefly at a loss—but then Jewell took his hand and dragged him from the room, then up the stairs and into a simple, tidy, warm and inviting bedroom. He yawned and wandered over to the bed, and sat down, intending to pull his boots off. Instead, he only yawned again, and sat there blinking blearily.

He started when something touched his leg, and opened his eyes to see Jewell kneeling in front of him, pulling off his boots, Jewell's boots already discarded.

Addison tried to jerk his foot away, turning red. "Jewell—you don't—you shouldn't—"

"I shouldn't help my lover get ready for bed?" Jewell demanded hotly, eyes flashing as he looked up.

"But you're—you're a *prince*," Addison said. "I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be with you. I'm not—" He swallowed, eyes burning. "I'm not good enough for you, I never was, and I knew that. You're too important and special for a nothing like me."

Jewell threw aside Addison's boots, then surged to his feet and shoved Addison back on the bed, climbing on top of him. Then he kissed Addison hard, biting at his lips, not stopping until they were both breathing heavily and Addison's lips throbbed, bruised and sore.

Addison tried to push him off, away, but it was a half-hearted attempt at best, and he didn't resist at all when Jewell grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the bed.

"You aren't nothing," Jewell said fiercely. "I'm *not* too good for you; if anything it's probably the other way around, you bloody idiot, so stop saying things like that. You're not allowed."

"It's what everyone else—"

"Bugger everyone else!" Jewell shouted. "I don't care, and you're not allowed to care either. You're not allowed to care about anything but *me* and I'll take care of the rest."

Addison laughed, even if he really shouldn't. "Bossy."

Jewell didn't seem as amused. "I don't want you to leave me, not because I'm a stupid prince. If you lose interest, or decide you can't stand me, or fall—fall in—if you choose someone else, then fine. Leave. But don't give up just because I have a fancy title."

"But there's no way they'd allow you to be with a peasant."

"Uncle Benedict and Rae managed it," Jewell said, hands tightening on Addison's wrists. "We can do it, too. I don't care what anyone else thinks or says."

Addison frowned. "What do you mean?"

Jewell smiled. "I guess no one had the chance to tell you. Rae was—and still is—Benedict's secretary. His family owns and runs a perfume shop in Castile. They've been lovers forever. So why can't we do the same thing?"

Something in Addison's chest twisted at the words 'lovers forever' and really, how stupid was he? "Jewell, we've known each other for not even four whole days!"

"I don't care," Jewell muttered, and kissed him again, biting his bottom lip, and Addison should probably care that his lips hurt but he really didn't. He liked the reasons they hurt too much.

"We've made a lot of people angry by running away," Addison said. "My Uncle will ship me home with a sore back for this, and my parents will lock me in my room until I'm twenty-one and they can toss me out of the house. I do not even dare to think upon what is in store for you."

Jewell's mouth twisted into a mutinous frown. "No one is punishing you, not if I have anything to say about it, which I do, whether they like it or not. I turn twenty-one in two months, and then there will be very little they can make me do, or do to me. You cannot be far from twenty-one yourself, Addy."

"Umm..." Addison could feel his cheeks burning hotter than ever. "I turned nineteen last month."

"Uh—oh," Jewell said, taken aback. "Um. You certainly act much older than me."

Addison laughed with genuine amusement, and entirely too much affection. "I don't think I seem older," he said. "Just quieter, and that's not the same thing." He smiled up at Jewell.

Jewell smiled back, and said softly, "I'm glad you can still smile and laugh. I'm sorry I've upset you. I'm sorry I'm a prince; I really wish I wasn't."

"Don't be sorry," Addison said. "You're a marvelous prince, I bet. What—whatever happens, I'll never be sorry you came upon me in the park."

"You'll never be sorry I assaulted you in the park?" Jewell asked, smirking. "I did not expect to enjoy kissing a stranger so much, and yet almost immediately I was loath to stop. I'm glad you did not listen to the dictates of common sense and punch me before running off."

"Me too," Addison replied.

Jewell kissed him again, soft and easy this time, soothing Addison's sore lips. "So can I assault you again now?"

Addison laughed and tugged lightly at his pinned wrists. "I think you already are."

"Good point," Jewell replied, and continued with his assault.

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"You're going to the palace?" Jewell asked. "But you hate the city, Uncle Bene."

Benedict took a sip of tea, then said, "I hate what they are doing to you more. I do not know what, if anything, I can accomplish, but I will certainly do my best."

Rae scowled at him. "Do not cause too much trouble. Return at once if something takes a turn for the worse. Don't—" He cut off whatever else he was going to say.

"See me out?" Benedict asked softly, setting his napkin aside and standing.

"Of course," Rae replied sharply, throwing his own napkin down before following Benedict from the room.

Silence fell as the door closed behind them. Jewell sighed, feeling guilty. "Come on," he said. "I'm certain Rae will want to be left in peace after Uncle Bene is gone."

Addison nodded and rose.

"We can go upstairs for a bit, they'll be outside—" Jewell stopped short with the door only just ajar, realizing his mistake as he saw Benedict and Rae not outside as he surmised, but in the hallway. He heard Addison draw a sharp breath, but neither one of them made any move to return to their seats.

"I'll be back soon, I promise. I refuse to be gone longer than is strictly necessary," Benedict murmured, rubbing Rae's lips with a gloved thumb, before bending to kiss him for what was clearly not the first time. "I doubt my family will tolerate my presence for long, anyway."

Rae muttered something Jewell did not catch, and took another kiss, one hand fisted tightly in Benedict's hair.

Then he abruptly tore away and gave Benedict a hard shove. "Go away then, already."

Benedict smiled. "Yes, beloved. I miss you already."

Rae scoffed, but stood stiff and still until the door closed behind Benedict and he was alone in the hallway. Then he sighed softly and removed his spectacles, pulling a handkerchief from his waistcoat to polish them.

Finished, he tucked the kerchief away and shoved the spectacles back on his nose, then turned—

Jewell shut the door and lunged back to his seat, Addison just as quick beside him, and they hastily picked up teacups and forks, working hard to appear as though they'd never so much as considered leaving their seats.

Rae resumed his own seat. "Addison, I think you would be best served to write a letter to your relatives. I am certain they are quite worried about you. Benedict will certainly speak with them while he is in town, but sending a letter yourself will ideally serve to soothe their worry and displeasure."

Addison nodded. "I started writing one this morning, before I came down to breakfast."

"Good," Rae replied. "Do not be too concerned about your uncle, as I know you must be. I know his name, and he is in no position to take issue with anything Benedict tells him."

Addison nodded and stared into his tea for a moment, then looked up again. "I am sorry we are causing you so much trouble, and forcing Benedict to go into the city on our behalf."

The barest smile curved Rae's mouth over the rim of his teacup. "No one has forced Bene or I to do anything in twenty-three years. I assure you that record remains unbroken."

Twenty-three years? Jewell shook his head at that, unable to believe that after twenty-three years together, Benedict and Rae had been that upset to be apart for two weeks. His parents seldom could stand to be alone in the same room for an hour.

"Oh," Addison said. "Are you really—sorry. It's not my place."

Rae chuckled. "Am I really just his secretary? Yes, I am. Jewell, go find something to do. Addison and I need to have a conversation."

"But—"

"But nothing," Rae said sharply. "With all due respect, Highness, it is not a conversation you will understand."

Jewell wilted, but obediently rose and with a quick and pointed kiss to Addison's cheek, departed.

He wandered aimlessly about the house, poking and prodding at things, burning to know what they were saying, what Rae was telling Addison—and if Rae convinced him to go home after Jewell had worked so hard last night to finally convince Addison to give them a chance, he was truly going to lose his temper.

Sick of the confines of the house, he ventured outside to the stables, gathering up treats and then going to each horse, petting and handing over apples or carrots. Maybe he should have gone with Benedict—but he'd seen his father and Benedict argue before, and it was terrifying.

He hoped Desmond was all right.

What was Benedict going to do? Would he have to return home? Blast it, why did he have to be a stupid prince, anyway? If he didn't have the bloody title he'd never wanted, no one would care what he did or with whom he did it, or try to make him do things and people he didn't want.

Damn it all, what *was* Rae telling Addison?

Leaving the stable, Jewell stomped back outside. Picking a random direction, he started walking.

Really, he was going to go crazy and Addison had better tell him *everything* later or he really would go mad. He kicked at a stone, scowling at everything. He wasn't going home, and he wasn't letting Addison leave him, and if they had to sail far, far away—

Oh, there was an idea. Didn't he own two ships? No, three. He'd just purchased *The Crown* from Banks. They could sail away, and no one would bloody find them then, and those ships were his, not his fathers. He might not be of age yet, but all his wealth was his own, not attached to the crown or his other titles, or shared with his family. He'd had enough sense long ago to ensure his money was his own and could not be tampered with by others.

They could go anywhere, do anything. Even Uncle Bene wouldn't stop him, if coming here proved to be a mistake. And if Addison tried to leave, Jewell would kidnap him and kiss him and love him until Addison stopped worrying and fretting and—

Uncle Bene and Rae were right, he thought with sudden misery. He really *had* been somewhat cruel. Addison had looked on the verge of tears, upon hearing that Jewell was royalty. He hadn't meant for that to happen, nor all the awful things Addison had said, about being stupid and not good enough...

It really made Jewell want to punch someone, mostly himself. He wanted Addison to be happy with him, but mostly he just wanted Addison to be *happy*, even if that quite possibly meant not with him.

There was an idea. He could do his damndest to see that Addison was happy, no matter how this mess ended. He could arrange for Addison to never feel compelled to call himself stupid or unworthy again. He'd have to write to his solicitor and have him arrange it all. Yes. School. Housing. A suitable allowance, provisions that would keep Addison's family from touching it.

Excited now, eager to have something constructive to do, Jewell turned and raced back to the house, throwing the door open and bursting inside—

Only to collide with Addison and send them both crashing to the floor in a painful, tangled heap. Jewell winced as they sorted themselves out, rubbing at his elbow while Addison gingerly touched his right leg. "Sorry," Jewell said.

Addison only smiled. Jewell stared, unable to do anything else, awed and humbled and so very captivated. Whenever he did such things to other people, always accidentally because he simply got carried away, he got scowls and glares and pitying looks. They screamed at him, lectured him, reminded him of his place, repeated the definition of 'decorum' to him for the millionth time—

But Addison simply smiled at him.

Jewell opened his mouth to say something, then realized he might say something he shouldn't yet, and instead leaned forward and kissed him. He sank his fingers into Addison's hair and held fast. *Please don't leave. Please don't get sick of me.*

"You—" Addison managed to get out, but then Jewell took his mouth again, suddenly afraid of what Addison might say, what Rae had said, what they'd discussed. Addison was so much more level-headed than he, and he'd make the right decision, and Jewell was fairly certain staying with him was the wrong decision.

"Jewell—"

"No," Jewell said stubbornly, and went to kiss him again, scowling when Addison clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Stop kissing me right in the open doorway," Addison said with a laugh. "Rae will murder us."

"Rae is it now?" Jewell demanded, wholly ignoring the fact that he called Rae by his given name as well.

Addison smiled at him, and shook his head. "We weren't discussing anything bad, Jewell. There's no reason to be upset."

"I'm not upset," Jewell replied. Upset wasn't nearly the same thing as scared to death.

Laughing again, Addison stood up, pulling Jewell with him. "He said that you are very much like, if not worse than, your uncle, and therefore will never be anything but trouble—"

Jewell stiffened and tried to pull away, all his plans for Addison momentarily forgotten because of course Addison would finally see sense—

But then Addison threw arms around his neck, forcing Jewell to catch him up or risk them falling to the floor again.

"He also said you're worth every bit of trouble," Addison added, "though I sort of already knew that."

"Oh," Jewell said, sort of just staring. He rather thought he could stare at Addison forever.

Twenty-three years, Rae had said. That was how long Rae and Benedict had been together. What would it be like, he wondered, to be with one person for that long? To know someone that well? To be so accustomed to his presence, the thought of being apart for two weeks was nigh on unbearable?

He really wanted to know, and only four days ago, he'd barely known such a thing was possible.

Not daring to put his thoughts into words quite yet, Jewell simply took another kiss.

Addison smiled when they finally parted, flushed and pleased, the happiest Jewell had seen him since their hours at the museum. "Rae said you should show me around the village, or take me around the countryside. He said if we need him, he'll be in his office or the library."

Jewell grabbed his hand. "That's perfect! Come on, we'll take my favorite horses; they're both excellent mares." He dragged Addison to the stables, surprised and pleased when Addison helped him; everyone else he knew stood there and let the stablemen do the work. "Does your family have horses?"

"Yes," Addison said with a nod. "We have two; we need them to deliver mail to the outlying homes. They're not look like yours, though they're good horses."

"A good horse is a good horse," Jewell said. They led their horses from the stable, then mounted and rode off. Jewell blew Addison a kiss, then kicked his horse into a run and took off, laughing as Addison cried out and came after him.

They left their horses with the village stable when they arrived, and Jewell then wasted no time taking Addison into one of his favorite stores—the sweet shop. "Come on," he said, tugging Addison inside.

"Well, well," said the clerk behind the counter. "Here's a face I've not seen in an age. It's good to see you again, Highness. Whoever is your friend?"

Jewell introduced Addison, then said, "We're staying with Uncle indefinitely, so I'm sure you'll be seeing more than enough of me."

The clerk laughed. "Indeed, Highness. Have you anything in mind for today? We've all the usual assortments. Oh! I just finished Prince Benedicts order this morning; he was supposed to pick it up today. Would you care to take it back with you?"

"Gladly," Jewell replied. "Marzipan, I would guess?"

"Naturally," the clerk said with a smile. "For you, I would wager I'll be boxing up chocolates."

Jewell grinned. "Mm, please. Thank you."

"And what would you like, Master Addison?" the clerk asked brightly. "We have virtually everything."

"Uh—nothing," Addison said, going still and quiet in that way of his. Jewell was beginning to realize it meant he felt uncomfortable. When Addison felt more confident, he was neither still nor quiet—though he would never be as half-wild as everyone claimed Jewell to be. "I'm fine."

Jewell wanted to kick himself. He was so busy trying to show off and make Addison happy, he tended to forget it might intimidate instead. He pondered a moment, then lit on something, recalling all they'd had to eat and drink the past few days, what Addison had tended to favor. "An assortment of the candied fruit."

The clerk smiled and sketched a half bow. "Certainly. If you'll come back in an hour, I'll have all prepared for you."

"All right," Jewell said, and handed over the necessary monies. Then he took Addison's hand again and led him from the shop and on to the next. Sensing Addison would not be able to resist, and knowing he'd be comfortable, he dragged him into the bookshop.

Several books later, and after glaring heavily at the clerk who kept making eyes at an oblivious Addison, he dragged Addison off to the tavern for lunch, then back to the sweet shop, off to the stable to leave their purchases, then off to another half dozen stores.

Their final stop was the jewelry shop, because he wanted to see Addison in sapphires to bring out the deep, deep blue of his eyes. "You should get your ears pierced," he said as he dragged Addison to a counter displaying all manner of earrings, nestled on velvet beneath pristine glass.

Addison said nothing, and Jewell looked up to see if he'd been heard. A clerk drew close at the time, and Jewell waved him off, concerned with the guilt-stricken look on Addison's face. He kissed the corner of Addison's mouth. "Stop looking so upset, unless you're just trying to get me to kiss you. I'll do that anyway, you know."

Laughing weakly, Addison replied, "You...you keep buying me stuff. I don't have money. I can't buy you anything. I don't need any of this. It doesn't seem fair."

Jewell kissed him again, then lifted Addison's hand and kissed his knuckles. "Addy—I assaulted you in the park. I dragged you away from your home, your life, your family. I've put you in an awkward situation and caused you a great deal of trouble. I've dragged you three days away from anything remotely familiar, and am more or less forcing you to stay here with me indefinitely. I lied to you about who I was. I am a reckless, impulsive, spoiled brat with more money than I ought to be allowed to have. The very least I can do is spoil *you* rotten for a little bit. Please?"

Addison stared at him, and Jewell wanted to squirm, say something to distract him—kiss him to distract him. Anything but be stared at by Addison, those deep blue eyes that seemed to see way too much, and were still the most open and honest eyes he'd ever seen.

But he held still, and remained silent, and stared back until Addison finally gave a slight nod and a soft sigh. "All right. But you really shouldn't, and you don't have to, and *don't* get carried away."

"I won't," Jewell said, and grinned, then kissed the top of Addison's nose. Then he spun around, back to the counter, and rang the bell to bring the clerk back. He tapped the glass. "Sapphires; the square-cut one in the gold setting. Yes, and we'll need his ears pierced. Also the matching cravat pin and cuff links. Then a full gentlemen's set in plain silver, another in plain gold, and..." He tapped his lips thoughtfully, squeezing Addison's hand when Addison began to seem nervous and fretful again. "Diamonds, too, then. Square-cut as well, but the silver setting, please. Yes, that will do for now. But do let me know if you get anything else in pearls and sapphires, something a bit more subtle."

The clerk bowed and began to collect all the required pieces, leaving them alone for the moment.

"Jewell!" Addison said, face red. "I said don't get carried away—mph--!"

Jewell grinned as he broke the kiss. "You didn't say according to whose definition."

Addison scowled. "I don't want you buying stuff for me. It isn't necessary. I don't need sapphires and diamonds or anything else."

"I know," Jewell said, cupping his face, then pulling him close and hugging him tightly. "You're the only person I've ever met who never asked for them, though, and that makes it fun to buy them. So stop worrying upon it, Addy." He kissed Addison's cheek, then stepped back. "Now we get your ears pierced."

Shooting him one last scowl, Addison nevertheless then went along and sat quietly while the clerk pierced his ears. Jewell immediately moved forward when he was finished. "They're even more perfect than I thought they would be."

Addison shrugged, reaching up tentatively to touch them. "They're far too extravagant for me, Jewell. I'm not at all suited for *sapphires*."

"Pish posh. Your eyes outshine them easily; they're so bloody perfect if my mother saw you in them she'd turn emerald-green with jealousy. She loves sapphires but they're all wrong for her. If it makes you feel better, though," he added as he led Addison from the jewelry shop, "I do have ulterior motives for those earrings."

"What do you mean?" Addison asked.

Jewell smiled, and slid his arm across Addison's shoulders, then bent slightly to murmur in his ear, "I want to see how you look wearing nothing but the sapphires."

Addison flushed—straight to a deep rose, completely bypassing the soft pink he usually turned first. "Jewell!"

Throwing his head back and laughing, Jewell hurried them along to the stables. He could not wait to get Addison home and into bed.

Home. He wondered if someday they might actually return to a home that was *theirs*. He wondered what he'd have to do to make that possible. A pity he'd never invested in an estate of his own, but he'd never needed them; nearly all his time had always been spent in the city.

He tucked the matter away to work out later; he had more than enough to contend with at present, even he knew that.

It was full dark when they finally returned, exhausted, happy, and perhaps a trifle bit mussed from their break along the riverbank. Rae was in his office when they stumbled into the house, glasses on his nose, bent over a tidy pile of papers, a lamp with a stained-glass shade casting bright amber light across his desk.

"I see we had fun," Rae said, setting aside his pen. "Cook has a cold supper set by, should you desire it."

"The sweet shop clerk had these ready," Jewell said, moving forward and setting a box on the edge of Rae's desk. "Benedict was supposed to pick them up today; I think they're for you?"

"Yes," Rae replied, shaking his head and smiling faintly at the white box bound with green and gold ribbon that smelled faintly of amber. "Thank you." He looked at them again, chuckling softly. "Get on, then. Clean up and go to bed. I'll see you both in the morning."

"Good night," Jewell said, and slipped away, Addison keeping pace with him.

"I feel really bad," Addison said quietly as they went upstairs. "Rae's really nice, and your uncle seemed nice, too. I hate that he's going to be in the city for two weeks. Rae obviously misses him."

Jewell laughed. "Most people don't think Rae is nice, you know. He once threw someone off a balcony, just because the man dared to touch Benedict and make certain offers. He likes to throw things too; they used to say he had the nastiest temper in the country. My mother told me that he and Uncle Bene used to hate each other before they suddenly turned lovers—"

"That's what Rae said," Addison said. "That they didn't like each other. But he said all that changed in the span of three nights." His face softened as he relived the conversation. "He said sometimes circumstances are simply beyond your control, and you can either run away from them or let them sweep you up." He smiled shyly at Jewell. "He said, for those three days, he didn't know what to do. On the fourth day though, when everything came to a head, in the end he wound up with a lover whose never left his side in twenty three years."

"That doesn't sound so bad, then," Jewell replied, and pushed Addison into their room, barely closing the door before yanking him close again.

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Addison looked up from the book he was reading at the sound of the front door opening and closing. Setting the book down, he stood up and ventured into the hall—then immediately turned red and backed into the parlor, closing the door on Rae's enthusiastic welcome home to Benedict.

He resumed his seat and opened his book again, glancing briefly at the settee where Jewell had flopped down to read his own book. Addison had expected five minutes of silence before Jewell started talking, but when he'd glanced up in amusement nearly half an hour later, it had been to find Jewell fast asleep.

That had been more than an hour ago. Smiling fondly, Addison went back to his book. A soft knock at the door came a few minutes later, and he greeted Martha with a smile as she slipped inside. "Master Addy," she said quietly, seeing Jewell asleep, "I came to let you know that Prince Benedict is home, but that he probably will not see you until morning."

Addison smiled sheepishly. "I, uh, saw that, and figured as much. Thank you, though, for letting us know."

Martha chuckled. "Shall I put supper on for two, then?"

"Um—" Addison hesitated, flustered. Servants never asked *him* such questions. They barely learned his name. "I don't think Jewell will wake up any time soon, and it's not worth the trouble for just one? I'd be happy with more tea and scones, if that's not a bother?"

"Oh, Master Addy, there was never a person less a bother than you. I'll bring it straight away."

Then she was gone—but he'd just opened his book again when she returned. "Lord have mercy, and here I am forgetting the one thing Prince Benedict bid me do. A letter for you, dear." She bustled out again, leaving Addison more or less alone with a letter from his parents. He would know his mother's handwriting anywhere.

Feeling sick, already fairly certain about what his parents would have to say, he set his book down and reached for his tea. Leaving the letter in his lap, he finished his tea and refilled it. When that was half gone, he finally picked up the letter and broke the plain wax seal.

The letter was only a page long, though it would have been easier to read if his mother had spread it over two pages; that was his mother, though, never using more than was strictly necessary. The contents were precisely what he had expected and dreaded.

When he came home he would be confined. He would reimburse his uncle and his parents for all the time and money they had wasted on trying to locate him. And, his mother spent the last two paragraphs saying, when he was done being the cheap little plaything for a spoiled prince, he best see to it that when he was cast aside he held on to all the costly trinkets and baubles he could, to help repay his debts to his sorely tested family.

Addison stared miserably at the letter, and wondered what he was going to do. How did one write his parents and tell them he was at least half in love with a prince and as much as he hated to upset and anger them, Jewell mattered more? He'd tried once already, to assure them he was safe and happy and they weren't to worry, but obviously they'd paid that letter no mind.

He read and reread the letter, only setting it aside when Martha returned with tea and far more food than the scones he'd requested. She brushed aside his protests and patted his cheek, and bid him have a good night, she'd fetch the dishes in the morning so he wasn't to worry over them.

Defeated, Addison helped himself to more tea and one of the fruit tarts she'd brought.

The tarts reminded him of the candied fruits Jewell had bought him, which had been like nothing Addison had ever tasted. Of course, thinking of the fancy sweets reminded him of all the other things Jewell had bought him. It was stupid, he shouldn't let Jewell buy him anything. If his parents knew, they really would believe he was nothing more than the latest gullible fool coerced into being Jewell's plaything of the moment.

But he knew he wasn't that. He might know nothing else about this wild, unbelievable situation in which he'd put himself, but he knew Jewell thought him more important than that.

What he'd done to deserve Jewell, that was the burning question. He would probably never know the answer; it seemed surreal that someone like Jewell would want to keep him. After Rae's talk and all he and Jewell had said to each other yesterday, he was daring to believe forever just might be possible.

How remained a mystery, but Rae had said he and Benedict had struggled with the same problem for a long time. But in the end, together was together, even when they were apart, and no one but the two of them could change that.

Sipping his tea, he picked up the letter again, determined to find a way to soothe his parents and convince them that he was doing the right thing, no matter how mad a thing it seemed.

But it only depressed him again, despite his best efforts, especially those last two paragraphs. Was that really all that concerned them? That he bring back 'trinkets and baubles'? Not once did they ask if he was truly all right, if he really was happy, and he knew it was mostly that they were worried and angry—

He reached up to touch the sapphires that still felt heavy and strange in his ears. Sapphires. It was beyond anything that he was wearing sapphires, and now owned a proper jewelry case with already nearly a dozen items inside.

It was beyond depressing that his parents were more concerned with the contents of that case than with whether or not he was happy.

Letting his hand fall, he continued to stare at the leather, thoughts tangled.

He let out a yelp as a hand covered his, and the letter was snatched away. "Uh—you're awake."

"What's this?" Jewell asked, looking at the letter, raking his rumpled hair back and yawning as he started to read it.

Addison stood and tried to snatch it back. "No, Jewell, don't read that. It's just—oof—" He stared up at Jewell from the settee, completely confused. "Why are you sitting on me and how did it happen?"

"I'm very good at finding ways of getting on top of you," Jewell replied, settling more comfortably where he straddled Addison's chest, trapping his arms. "Probably because being on top of you is one of my favorite things, second only to being inside you."

"Jewell—!" Addison said, not quite shouting the words. "You—that—how can you say such things?"

"Who is going to hear them except you and me?" Jewell asked with a laugh. He bent to give Addison a quick kiss, then sat up again. "Now, about this letter making you so sad—"

"Don't," Addison pleaded. "I don't want you to read it. *Please*, Jewell, I'm beg—"

Jewell cut him off with a kiss. "Don't beg," he said. "Just don't. I'm sorry. If you don't want me to read it, I won't."

Addison relaxed, but he could see Jewell was hurt. "It's just from my parents. I don't want you to read the awful things they said, that's all."

"Ah," Jewell replied, and dropped the letter to the ground. "I can guess. I'm a prince, and young, and known to be reckless, uncouth, unorthodox, impulsive, loud, unseemly, and a whole host of other

unpleasant adjectives. No doubt everyone expects me to play with you for a short time, and then send you packing. Are your parents hoping you'll come home contrite and sorry, and with diamonds in your bag?" He shifted on the settee, freeing Addison's arms, slipping one leg between Addison's thighs, bracing his weight on one arm, using the other to comb through Addison's hair. "Is that the gist of the letter?"

Addison nodded, hating, just *hating* how bitter and cynical Jewell looked as he spoke. Jewell was always so bright and cheerful, always made it seem like things would go his way just because it never occurred to him they could go another way. He made Addison want to try and do things that he'd never have had the temerity or courage to do on his own. He made everything around him brighter; he shouldn't look that sad and jaded.

"Oh, stop looking sad," Jewell said, his smile returning. "I don't like when my playthings frown."

"You!" Addison said, attempting to buck him off, not really protesting when Jewell only more securely pinned him and demonstrated just how rested he was after his impromptu nap.

By the time they finished, Addison was ready for a nap himself—though, given the clock was chiming the twentieth hour, it made more sense simply to go to bed. "We really shouldn't be doing such thing in your Uncle's house; not outside our bedroom, anyway," he said, pushing Jewell off him and sitting up. Bundling up their ruined handkerchiefs, he shoved them into a pocket and then set about restoring his clothes to order and trying to sort out his tangled hair. "He'll murder us."

"I'm certain Uncle Bene does plenty more," Jewell said lazily, stretching out like a cat.

"Yes, but it's *his* house," Addison said, face heating as he remember what he'd glimpsed in the entryway. "Uh—he's home, by the way. He arrived a little while ago. Martha said we probably wouldn't see him 'til morning, however."

Jewell grinned. "I'm not surprised."

Addison shook his head, laughing. "Martha brought me more food than I could ever eat. Hungry?"

"Yes," Jewel replied, and dragged himself from the settee, dropped down into the chair recently vacated by Addison, and began neatly to decimate the contents of the teacart.

Smiling, Addison retrieved his own tea and a small meat pie, then returned to the settee to eat.

Paper crinkled beneath the toe of his shoe, and he glanced down to see he'd stepped on the letter from his parents. He frowned pensively at it, but felt no compulsion to pick it up. Instead he strove to ignore it, and split his attention between eating and watching Jewell.

"You look entirely too awake," he said with a yawn.

"I feel wide awake," Jewell said. "I shall have to doze off more often."

"I'm not certain I could keep up with you if you did," Addison replied.

Jewell smiled at him and licked fruit juice from his fingers. "You've kept up with me so far."

Addison laughed. "That is just because you hold tight and drag me along." He smiled when Jewell started to frown. "That isn't a complaint."

"Well, you can always tell me to stop."

Addison shrugged. "I haven't wanted to tell you to stop."

Jewell chewed on his bottom lip, then said suddenly, "Would you let me drag you onto a ship?"

"Huh?" Addison asked, almost dropping his tea in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I'm fairly certain Uncle Benedict won't be able to make my parents leave me alone," Jewell said. "He's fought for himself and Rae for a long time; he shouldn't have to start fighting all over again for us, as well. I was thinking I would really run away, take one of my ships and just travel or something." He frowned, lost in thought.

Addison hesitated, then said slowly, "I think it would only delay matters, and drag them out. I don't think travelling would be fun if the shadow of your parents was always hanging over you. How did your Uncle and Rae finally manage it?"

"I...don't know," Jewell conceded after a moment. "They live here now, and everyone mostly leaves them in peace. But they're still talked about in the city and at court, the way Uncle Bene 'used to be' before 'Rae sank his jealous claws in' and Uncle Bene suddenly stopped sleeping where his parents told him.

"Oh," Addison said. He hadn't realized Benedict had given in to the orders that Jewell was defying. No wonder he took the matter so seriously. "I don't think you'd stay in one place for very long, and you're much younger?"

Jewell nodded, looking morose. "Hence the ship and travelling. But they'd probably hunt me down or something else equally atrocious. Worse, they might use you to get to me." He sighed. "Why do I have to be a prince? I wish I could just stop being one, and be perfectly ordinary."

Personally, Addison didn't think Jewell could ever be ordinary, prince or not. He was too....Jewell. "Wait until morning," he said. "There's no point in deciding anything until we know what happened, what your Uncle has to say."

"You're right," Jewell conceded reluctantly, clearly impatient, dissatisfied, but resigned. "But, um, just on the chance I do choose to hop a ship and simply go—where would you want to go?"

"Uh—" Addison blinked at that. "Um. I'm content to follow you, Jewell."

Jewell waved the words aside, and stood up, crossing the room to sit next to him on the settee. "I know, but, just for fun. Indulge my curiosity."

"I—I don't *know*—" Addison said. "This is the furthest I've ever been from home. Until I went to the city with my Uncle and his family, I'd never left my village. I've never seen the ocean, let alone been on a ship. I really wouldn't know where to go, so it doesn't matter to me." He made a face. "Honestly, so long as I never have to attend another ball or supper party, I shall be quite content."

Jewell pouted. "You shall have to attend at least one more ball, so you can dance with me."

Addison made a face. "I'm not certain you want to do that, Jewell. I had only basic instruction and no one ever asked me to dance—" His words were cut off as Jewell pulled him to his feet, and then they were moving around the parlor, slow and awkward at first, Jewell humming some soft melody.

But they got better as they went, and Addison began to see why people actually liked dancing. Jewell was by far more pleasant than the rigid instructor his Uncle had hired. But, Jewell made *everything* better.

Addison smiled as they kept dancing, and actually wondered how different it would be with proper music—

The ominous crash and rattle of a teacart halted the dancing, as Jewell teetered between falling on the floor and practically sitting right down on the cart itself. Addison got hold of him and pulled, sending them both tumbling down hard onto the settee.

They looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

"We shall have to try that again, sometime," Jewell finally said, "with proper music and, uh, proper space."

Addison started laughing again, and could only manage a nod in reply.

Jewell kissed him, then stood up. "Come on, let's go to the library."

"What for?" Addison asked, even as he let Jewell drag him along, out of the parlor and into the Benedict and Rae's small but impressive library.

"To decide where we want to go and what we want to do," Jewell said, letting him go and moving to the nearest bookshelf of appropriate books.

Addison shook his head, amused, but went along gamely. Jewell cast a book aside, turning away before he saw that it was about to fall right off again. He reached out and grabbed it before it could fall to the floor, and glanced at it idly before shelving it—only to hesitate as he saw it was a travel journal written by a man who had spent years abroad.

The idea *was* awfully tempting, he thought wistfully. Travelling the world to see famous battlegrounds, museums, the ocean, mountains, temples, ruins...

And all with Jewell.

It sounded far too good a dream, a wish, to ever come true. Moving to the nearest chair, he pulled the lap blanket down from where it was draped over the back of the chair. Arranging it over his legs, he opened the book and began to read.

He looked up periodically to listen and respond to the various things Jewell said, smiling at him, occasionally laughing. "Rae will beat you for destroying his library."

"Usually, yes," Jewell replied, then winked. "But I bet tomorrow he'll be in too good a mood to do anything but throw a couple of books at my head."

Addison rolled his eyes, and went back to his own book while Jewell resumed muttering and decimating Rae's poor shelves.

What would his family do, he wondered, if he really *did* run away, flee the country for parts unknown, to return only the gods knew when? Though they were for now regarding his behavior as that of any inexperienced, gullible, impulsive young man, he *was* only just turned nineteen. If they wanted to drag him home via legal means, they would be fully within their rights. Until he turned twenty-one, he was under the control of his parents.

But, he thought, they would not spend that sort of money. The letter only confirmed his belief that they were content to wait for him to come crawling back home in humiliated disgrace.

As if. He had the sinking feeling it would be incredibly hard to go home again, and fall back into the life that had been his only a couple of weeks ago, but seemed so far away already. It had already seemed dull; next to Jewell, it was positively unbearable. Jewell shone, and Addison wanted so badly to accept all the brilliance and color and life Jewell was showing him.

He jumped as a hand fell on his shoulder, then looked up at Jewell with all the scowl he could muster—not much admittedly. "Yes?"

"You're frowning again," Jewell said, and knelt in front of him, leaning forward to give him a quick, sharp kiss. "I've warned you about that."

Addison smiled crookedly, and reached out with both hands to comb them through Jewell's disheveled hair, smoothing it back from his face. "Sorry. I was thinking I really wouldn't know what to do if you discarded me. I don't think I could go back to sitting alone on a bench in a deserted corner of the park." He'd always wait and wait for Jewell to return and steal kisses.

"Ha!" Jewell said. "As if I could ever do that; far more likely that you would discard me."

"That's silly," Addison said. "Who in his right mind would ever discard you?"

Jewell smiled, slow and sweet, and Addison really could not imagine not seeing that smile every day for the rest of his life. He started to say something along those lines, but the words were drowned out by a sudden yawn.

Laughing, Jewell stood up and tugged Addison to his feet. "Come on, it's bedtime I think."

"First we fix the books," Addison said around another yawn.

"But—"

"Fix them."

Jewell rolled his eyes, but then smiled and kissed his cheek, and went to restore the bookshelves to order.

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"So they will not give up?" Jewell asked, wilting a bit. Despite everything, he really *had* hoped that Uncle Bene would be able to effect some positive change. He made a face and stabbed this scrambled eggs. "Well, that is that, then. *The Crown* will be in port at the end of the month—"

"No good will come from constantly running," Benedict said.

"But—"

"No buts," Benedict said. "I did not run until there was simply no other choice, and even then I was fighting back in my own fashion, and I did it planning to return after a set period. It only worked for a little while, before I had to return to more direct methods of fighting. Trust me when I say that running away does not truly solve anything. If you are going to be a prince with a peasant lover, you have precious few choices, Jewell. One is to run your entire life, and always wonder when they will catch up to you, and what they will try next. They might give up eventually, but probably not. Twenty three years later, my family still accuses me of selfishness and betrayal, and once they almost tried for treason. They have not succeeded because I stood up to them and continue to stand up to them."

Jewell frowned. "I don't want to spend my life running *or* fighting. I just want to live my life my way. I don't want to spend it all doing what my family says. And that was even before I met Addy."

"You're a prince, Jewell—"

"Maybe I don't want to be a prince!" Jewell burst out. "I'm tired of everyone throwing that in my face. I'm a *terrible* prince. I never say the right things, I never do the right things, I have no manners, no decorum, no tact. Everyone who has ever met me can tell you how I managed to offend him on at least one occasion. I hate being a prince, and everyone else hates me being a prince, except that apparently they think I'm fit to be a royal slut."

Rae laughed, startling all of them. "You have great potential as a prince, Highness. Most of your so-called faults will smooth out with age, and the rest can be turned into strengths or at least better controlled. However, you are not in line for the throne. Even Benedict would be likelier to assume it than you."

"So I tell everyone, but no one listens," Jewell said bitterly. "Not that it really matters—I cannot simply stop being a prince."

"What would you do if you weren't a prince?" Rae asked curiously.

Jewell frowned. He'd never really thought upon it—what was the point of dwelling on the impossible? "Travel," he said finally. "Go everywhere, see everything. Addison could write books about it."

"And after you're done travelling?" Benedict asked, exchanging a look with Rae that Jewell didn't understand at all.

"Settle down?" Jewell said. "Addy could keep writing, or go to school, or whatever he likes. I could...open a shop! Or maybe flesh out my ships and have a proper merchant fleet. That would work. I could have a warehouse and everything. I could send ships all over the world, and deal in wine and books and everything—"

"All right, all right," Benedict said, laughing. "Do not get so overexcited you upend the china, Jewell. So you want to be a merchant prince instead of a proper prince. You would be good at that, I think."

Jewell's momentary excitement died. "But I'm not a merchant prince, and unfortunately I am a proper prince and there's no way my family would let me get away with involving myself in the merchant business."

"Jewell—" Addison reached out lightly to touch his shoulder. "We'll figure something out. You would be a good merchant—you're tough and clever and charming and—" He flushed, but smiled. "Well, you would be good at it."

"Thank you," Jewell said, and took Addison's hand, kissing the back of it. "Uh—you don't have to write books and all, if you don't want to."

"No—um—that sounds nice," Addison replied, flushing darker but still smiling at him.

Jewell smiled back.

Rae cleared his throat. "Benedict is a prince because he is good at it, and despite what his family claims he accomplishes a great deal by way of his title and all that it gives him. You, however, are correct—you make a poor prince, though mostly because you hate it and waste so much energy avoiding it."

Jewell nodding, stabbing at his eggs again. "So what am I to do?"

"Stop being a prince," Benedict said.

Ha. He wished. "That isn't possible."

"Yes it is," Rae said, pushing at his spectacles. "Only three times in the history of the royal family have royals surrendered their birthrights, but that does mean it has been done three times."

"What—" Jewell couldn't even bring himself to finish the question.

Rae resumed speaking. "As a royal secretary, I am authorized to draw up the necessary paperwork. As a royal prince, Benedict can sign the papers, and I can then notarize. You must be twenty-one to do it, Highness, but on your twenty-first birthday you can legally sign away your claims to the throne."

Jewell could only stare. "That—that—that's too easy. If that were true, I would have heard or read or *something*." But that wasn't true, and he knew it. There was no way anyone would have let him come by that knowledge, not as much as he spouted off about hating the face he was royalty.

"It's not easy," Benedict said. "You will not realize how used you were to the privileges of royalty until they are gone. You are accustomed to a certain degree of respect and affluence, Jewell—"

"I do not want simply to be given the same respect as my father and mother," Jewell said. "I'd rather earn my own, and I'm not going to give up just because I'll no longer be spoiled. I don't care about any of that."

Benedict smiled. "I believe you. Very well, then. I did convince your parents to let you cool your heels here with me. They think once you lose interest in Addy, and begin to grow bored trapped in the country, you will return—especially since your twenty-first birthday celebration looms."

Jewell made a face, then rolled his eyes. "What a tragedy I shall miss it."

Rae chuckled.

"Uh—you, um, don't mind us remaining here that long?" Addison suddenly asked, and it looked for a moment as though he were going to ask something else, but in the end he subsided. He seemed to droop a bit, though, and Jewell remembered the letter Addy had received and which he hadn't wanted Jewell to read.

"What about Addy?" Jewell demanded. "Are his parents going to come for him? Did they say anything other than whatever was in that stupid letter?"

Addison flinched, picking up his teaspoon and putting it down again.

"I promised they could write a letter, and I would see it delivered, on the condition that they leave you alone otherwise," Benedict said to Addison. "You are free and clear to do as you like, Addison."

Addison frowned. "That—that easily? But—" He looked at all of them, then down at his tea, fidgeting with the teaspoon again.

Jewell took his hand, removed the teaspoon, and kissed the back of his hand. "Being left alone is what you wanted, Addy. Focus on that. I'm sorry for the rest."

"I—" Addison nodded, and mustered a smile. "No doubt they'll come around when I return from our world travels a world famous writer."

"Precisely," Jewell said, and yanked him close for a sound kiss.

"Jewell!" Addison said, turning the reddest Jewell had seen yet. "Not at the table! Not in front of your Uncle and Rae!"

Snickering, Jewell refilled their tea and said, "I've warned you countless times about looking upset. Do not take issue with me when you are the one who continuously fails to heed my warnings."

Addison rolled his eyes, but he was smiling again as he sipped his tea.

Jewell decided he'd have to work extra hard to keep Addison from being upset about the way his parents were behaving—not that keeping Addison distracted was a chore. Once they started traveling, he would not even have to try to distract Addison. The trick then, he thought with fond amusement, would be getting Addison to pay attention to him.

He finally turned back to Rae and Benedict. "So I only have to remain here and avoid my parents until I turn twenty-one?"

"Precisely," Rae said. One corner of his mouth tilted up in amusement, and he drawled, "I'll make certain all is ready for your signature upon the stroke of midnight, Highness."

Jewell replied in perfect, haughty tones, "That will be just the thing, secretary, thank you." He beamed innocently as Rae scowled and Benedict and Addison started laughing.

They finished breakfast shortly thereafter, and Benedict and Rae vanished into Rae's study, leaving Jewell and Addison alone in the breakfast room.

Addison, unfortunately, was back to being fretful. "You're frowning again" Jewell admonished. "I'm beginning to think I make you unhappy no matter what I do."

"No!" Addison burst out, looking stricken. "I—Jewell, you make me the happiest I've ever been. It's, uh, just—my parents. And I can't afford to travel—"

Jewell put a finger to his lips. "Stop it. You need to believe it doesn't matter to me. Money is nothing. I have more money than I can spend, and it's never made me happy. You make me happy. I'll gladly spend my fortune away if that is what I must do to keep you. And really, Addy. You're going to be a famous writer. Then you'll have more money than me."

Addison smiled faintly. "I'll probably dump it into this crazy merchant venture I've heard rumors about."

"Oh?" Jewell asked, brushing back a strand of Addison's hair.

"Mm," Addison acknowledged softly, and clung tightly when Jewell kissed him.

When they broke part, Jewell said, "As to your parents, I *am* sorry they're being as difficult as mine, if not perhaps worse in their own fashion. I think they'll come around, for one reason or another. And as I have told you before—you're not allowed to care about anyone but me, and I'll take care of the rest."

Addison sighed and shook his head, but in the end only smiled. "All right, Jewell. I will do my very best."

"Good," Jewell replied, and punctuated the word with a kiss. "So I guess we shall spend the next few weeks planning our journey, and preparing for it, hmm? I'll have to write to the Captain of *The Crown* and of course my secretary, and we'll have to see to clothes and supplies...." He continued to rattle off

ideas and ramble about all of them, while Addison said in his quiet way, smiling and adding a word here and there, but otherwise seemingly content to let Jewell speak, and Jewell really did mean it when he said that Addison was worth everything he had, because no one had *ever* simply sat and smiled while he got carried away.

He really could not wait until his twenty-first birthday.

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"If you do not sit down or find *something* to do, I shall lock you in the linen closet," Rae said.

Jewell made a face at him, but obediently sat down in his seat. Addison smiled at him, and offered by way of distraction, "We leave in two hours, Jewell. Are you certain everything is packed and ready? Once we hoist anchor, we have it or we do not."

"We have everything," Jewell said. "I checked it all myself, and made the servants do it ten more times besides. The Captain sent a note that is all is ready and the *Crown* awaits our arrival."

"No doubt with knots of dread in their stomach," Benedict said dryly from the desk. "Or perhaps the good Captain does not know what he is in for, being trapped on a ship with you for gods know how many months."

Jewell shot him a withering look.

Benedict snickered and went back to the letter he was writing. "Rae, is it—"

"Swallow," Rae replied before Benedict could finish the question. "Dove is the one you dislike."

"Thank you," Benedict murmured, smile sheepish and fond as he bent back to his letter.

"Is that for more perfume?" Jewell asked.

"Yes," Rae replied. "If we are here in town, and renting this townhouse for the month, we may as well get as much use out of our stay as possible. You leave today, and we've still another week and a half remaining."

"Plenty of time to cause trouble," Benedict added as he sealed the letter and set it on a salver with several others, for a footman to post later. "Speaking of trouble, I do wonder if anyone will come to see either of you off."

"I think the shouting match with my father was farewell enough, don't you?" Jewell asked, making a face. "Then there was my private interview with his Majesty."

Addison reached out and squeezed his hand in sympathy. No one else had been permitted to go, when the King summoned Jewell. Four hours later, Jewell had returned and gone straight to bed, pausing only long enough to drag Addison with him. There, he'd promptly curled up around Addison and fallen asleep.

Of course, Jewell being Jewell, nothing stayed contained for long. Only a couple of hours after dozing off, he'd woken Addison up in most creative fashion, then told him all that the King had said. It had been a much more explicit conversation about what he stood to lose, who would be affected by his decision and how, all that he would be facing and enduring without the protection of the crown, and when he had still refused to back down, the King had made it clear that he would never allow Jewell to go back on his decision.

Still Jewell had not changed his mind, and had gone home to Addison.

Remembering *that* made Addison smile. "I hope the only farewells we have left to say are to Rae and Benedict when they see us off at the harbor."

He sincerely doubted his own parents would come, though he had sent them three letters in the past month detailing their plans and later, the day and hour of their departure. He had not received so much as a singly reply.

It shouldn't hurt; he was used to their old-fashioned ways. He'd known what he'd be facing the very moment he had agreed to run away with Jewell all those weeks ago.

Still, he would have thought they could come to bid him farewell.

But, he'd promised Jewell that he would only care about Jewell, and let Jewell take care of the rest. Even now, the promise made him smile.

Jewell made to stand again, no doubt to prowl the parlor once more, and Rae rolled his eyes. Addison smothered a laugh, and distracted Jewell yet again. "Did you finish all your nautical books, Jewell?"

"Yes!" Jewell said eagerly, latching on to the new topic. Addison had already known he'd finished them—he'd found two of the books in their bed, one in the cushions of the sofa in their room, one on a settee in the blue parlor, and three on various tables throughout the house. "I've all kinds of questions for the Captain. Oh! I could write them down."

Addison smiled. "If you tell them to me, I can jot them in my journal here. That will keep them from getting misplaced."

"Brilliant," Jewell replied, and immediately began to ramble, very seldom actually managing to get out one of his many questions, too busy hypothesizing the answers and sidetracking himself.

Nearly an hour had passed when they heard a knock upon the door. They all fell silent, listening to the muffled tones of the footman answering the door and conversing briefly with the visitor. Then they listened to the steady click of his shoes as he walked to the study. The footman knocked, then entered at Benedict's bidding. If he was disconcerted to find four sets of eyes intently upon him, he made no sign of it. "Highness, there is a Douglas Dewhurst requesting an audience."

Addison started. "What—my father is here?" Impossible. Home was a good three days away. There was no way his father would leave his duties for so long—there was no way his mother would permit his father to see him off.

"Put Mr. Dewhurst in the rose parlor," Benedict replied. "Addy will see him shortly."

"Yes, Highness," the footman replied, and bowed himself out.

Addison closed his journal and stood up. "Um—"

"Don't force us to fetch the brandy," Benedict said. "There's no reason to look so alarmed."

"Um—I didn't expect anyone to come." He had no idea what his father would say—what he'd do. He didn't know what to say to his father.

Then Jewell stood up and grabbed his hand, dragging him from the room as he said, "Come on, then, we'll go see what he has to say."

"Jewell—" Rae tried to stop them, but they were already across the hallway and stepping into the rose parlor, and Addison held tightly to Jewell's hand as he saw his father.

Douglas Dewhurst had given his looks to his son, along with his quiet, patient demeanor. He stood now in front of the fireplace, dressed in his Sunday best, holding his hat in his hand. His eyes widened as he looked at Addison, and Addison flushed, knowing what his father was seeing—the fancy clothes, the costly jewelry, the man holding his hand, how he must look completely unlike the young man who had left his parents' home months ago.

"Father," Addison said quietly.

"Addison," Douglas said quietly. "You're looking good, boy."

Addison flushed. "I—I didn't expect you to come. I thought mother—" He bit the words off, not wanting say something disrespectful.

"Well, as to that, your mother and I had a bit of a disagreement," Douglas said, smiling every so faintly. "But I put my foot down this time. You're my boy, and this behavior is unlike you. I wanted to see for myself if you were making a sound decision, and with a sound mind." He shifted his gaze to Jewell, then slowly moved it back to Addison. "So this is your prince?"

"Not anymore," Jewell said. "I signed the papers days ago. I'm just Jewell, no prince or anything."

"Well, just Jewell, you don't appear to be such a bad sort." His eyes fell to where Jewell and Addison were still holding hands.

Addison flushed again, but didn't relinquish his hold. "Mother will be furious with you."

"Well, as to that, she's been furious with me before, and she will be again. I let her be often enough, she'll let me have my way when I really want it. She'll get past her anger with you, too, eventually, Addy. She had a brother, you know, who ran away with a wealthier lover. They never heard from him again."

"I never knew that," Addison said.

"They do not discuss him," Douglas replied. "My advice to you, son, is to keep writing. Your mother is angry and hurt and worried about you, though she'll never say it. She reads your letters, though, and she keeps them in her old box. So if you do this, then write to her. She'll never write back, but she'll read them, and reread them when no one is around to catch her at it."

Addison blinked back the sudden stinging in his eyes. "Of course, father. I didn't want to make everyone mad, but I—I want to be with Jewell."

"I can see that," Douglas said softly. "My fears are much allayed, coming here to see you. I'd hoped they would be. You *did* always have a sound head on your shoulders. All a parent wants is to see his children do better than him. I think I can be satisfied that is what I am seeing. You write those letters home, Addison, and I'll bet your mother will be waiting when you come back."

"Yes, father," Addison replied, and let go of Jewell's hand to give his father a quick embrace.

"All right, then," Douglas gruffly, awkwardly returning the embrace. "You've got a boat to catch, and I've got to get home before your mother decides to start poisoning my food. You boys take care." He held out his hand to Jewell, solemn as they shook hands. "You be good to my boy."

"I will, sir," Jewell said. "Thank you, very much, for coming to see us off."

"Of course," Douglas replied, and with a last grip on Addison's shoulder, he put his hat on his head and departed.

Jewell laughed in delight and pulled Addison close, hugging him tightly. "Marvelous! I'm glad your parents are not as odious as mine. Maybe we can settle close to them, when we eventually return—"

The chiming of the hallway clock drowned him out, and Jewell stopped, then smiled brighter than ever. He gave Addison a quick kiss, then said, "Time to go, Addy. Ready?"

"Ready and waiting," Addison replied, and went easily as Jewell dragged him away.

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