

Loose Id

BOUND

*Forever*

AVA MARCH

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**Bound Forever**

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## Dedication

*To G.G.—for making this series possible.*

# Chapter One

*December 1823*

*Rotherham, England*

The familiar press of hot, silken skin against his thigh roused Vincent from sleep. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed and soaked up the feel of the soft breaths tickling the hair on his chest, the weight of the sleek yet honed body sprawled half over him, and the arm slung across his waist. A combined sensation that had not gone the least bit stale after a year and a half with this man, and one he knew for certain he would never grow tired of.

With the barely audible grunt of one in a deep sleep, his lover shifted, pressing closer. A smile stole across Vincent's mouth. That was most definitely an erection, hard and insistent, the heat of it practically branding his thigh.

Desire flared under his skin, rousing his sleep-fogged senses. Blood rushed to his groin. What had once been the beginnings of a pleasant morning erection now pushed against the blankets covering him and Oliver. He blinked his eyes open. Light cut through the breaks in the forest green drapes but didn't fully penetrate the night shadows clinging to the corners of the bedchamber. Judging by the crisp yet weak golden quality of the sunlight, dawn had just arrived. Plenty of time before his housekeeper arrived to cook breakfast and tidy the bedchambers.

A gentle nudge to Oliver's shoulder and, taking the coverlet and sheet with him, Oliver rolled onto his back. Beautifully compliant, even in sleep. The chill December air hit Vincent's skin, but he didn't bother getting out of bed to light the fire in the hearth. Within a handful of minutes, the heat quickly building within him would make the warmth of a fire feel like a hot summer day.

Shifting onto his side, he levered up onto a bent elbow. Oliver's chest rose and fell in a relaxed, rhythmic pattern. A whisper-light flick of Vincent's fingers pushed the tousled waves of his overlong hair from his eyes. At the sight of Oliver's hard cock jutting from the dark thatch of hair on his groin, Vincent smiled. They hadn't played last night, merely crawled into bed together. One of the benefits of visits to his Rotherham estate—with so many nights at their disposal where they had the luxury of sharing a bed, they could take one or two or more to simply sleep together. But judging from the state of his pretty cock, Oliver definitely appeared up for some play.

Far be it from Vincent not to indulge him.

His gaze traced the length of Oliver's body, as various options fluttered through his head. He wasn't of a mind to fetch anything from the locked trunk beside the dresser. That would require getting out of bed. However...

Leaning over the side of the mattress, he snatched the wrinkled white cravat from the floorboards. Carefully and slowly, he moved Oliver's arms over his head. The long, black fan of his lashes resting against his high cheekbones did not even flutter at the change in position. The man slept as soundly as he had as an adolescent. Back when they had shared a dormitory at Eton, even a full-blown thunderstorm wouldn't wake him.

A few deft flicks of the cravat and Oliver's wrists were secured to the mahogany headboard, the knot loose enough so one quick tug would release it. When Vincent had purchased the estate from his father over two years ago, he hadn't given much thought to the furnishings. His only interest had been the unwavering belief that he could turn the property into a thriving investment. The bed, though, with its four sturdy posts and intricately turned spindles spanning the width of the headboard and footboard, had proved as valuable to him as the vein of coal he had found in the northwest end of the property. And Oliver's reaction when Vincent restrained him between those four posts indicated the man had far more fondness for the bed than anything that generated income.

Sitting back on his heels at his lover's side, he took in the results of his handiwork. A corner of the sheet had tangled around one of Oliver's calves, the rest of him bared to Vincent's view. His legs were casually spread, one knee slightly bent. His arms stretched over his head put his flawless chest on full display. The white linen around his wrists presented an enticing contrast to his golden skin. Vincent let out a low grunt of satisfaction. The man had a body made to be bound and a soul that craved it almost as much as he craved Vincent himself.

He reached out, slowly whispered a hand down Oliver's sleep-warmed chest, the skin soft and smooth beneath his palm. With effort, he resisted the impulse to pinch those copper nipples. To twist a hardened tip. To make Oliver shudder and gasp with pleasure. To make him beg for more. But it wouldn't do to wake him just yet.

His attention slid back up to Oliver's face. On anyone else, his features would almost approach average, but somehow he simultaneously embodied both beautiful *and* handsome. A hint of a morning beard darkened his jaw, his full lips slightly parted...

Vincent leaned down, brushed his lips across Oliver's in the barest brush of a kiss, their breaths mingling ever so briefly. Then he moved along the bed to settle on his knees between Oliver's legs. With one hand braced on the mattress, he bent down, wrapped a gentle hand around the base of that pretty prick, and lowered his head. Light and soft, he dragged his tongue across the crown, waiting, every sense attuned to his lover.

Oliver let out a breathy moan, more sigh than sound, and lifted his hips slightly. Vincent opened, let the slick head slide past his lips. The short, little, lazy nudges of Oliver's hips as he fucked Vincent's mouth indicated the man hadn't awoken yet. Vincent kept his mouth languid and yielding, only occasionally sucking on a downstroke, allowing the flames of desire to build within Oliver, within himself.

It didn't take long for a salty tang to tease his tongue. Vincent's cock, hanging hard and heavy between his thighs, jerked in response. Another moan, this one more sound than sigh, and Oliver spread his legs wider. Vincent released his hold on the base of Oliver's prick, cupped his ballocks, drawn up tight to his body, and rolled the weight of them in his palm. Then he drifted his fingertips down, past

the smooth expanse of skin to Vincent. Pressed but didn't penetrate.

Oliver's thrusts stuttered. Glancing up, Vincent caught his gaze. His eyes were heavily-lidded, mere slits, the dark depths glittering with lust. Hollowing his cheeks, Vincent sucked hard as he dragged his lips up the length. Oliver arched with a moan, tugged at his bonds, and moaned again. His cock hardened even further in Vincent's mouth. Vincent kept sucking as he began bobbing along the length. Increasing the pace, urging him onward.

Oliver had the edge of his full bottom lip captured between his teeth, desperate need pulling his beautiful features. Vincent swiped his fingers at the base of Oliver's cock, gathering the moisture that had slid down the length. The moment Vincent brushed his entrance, Oliver pulled his knees to his chest, hips canting up, the request clearer than if he shouted.

"Please, Vincent." Thick with need, his whispered words trembled on the air.

Lust slammed into Vincent. His muscles coiled, ready to spring forward to cover the man, to shove his hard cock into Oliver and give him exactly what he begged for, but Vincent held back and instead lifted his head, letting the crown slip from his lips with a crude *pop*.

"Good morning," he said, smiling, as he pushed a finger inside.

Oliver's body greedily clamped around the digit and made Vincent's cock ache with jealousy. Dropping his head once more, he dragged his tongue up and down the underside of Oliver's length as he slowly stretched him with first one finger and then a second, forcing Oliver to wait. Letting the anticipation continue to build, needing to take him past the point of sheer desperate want to where the only thing that existed in his world was Vincent.

Pleas for more tumbled from Oliver's mouth, mixing with his gasping breaths. A heady thrill sang through Vincent's veins, briefly rising above the lust saturating his senses. It felt incredibly good to give Oliver pleasure. To know those pleas were because of *him*.

When the tight ring of muscle began to relax, Vincent crawled up Oliver's body. Oliver's legs wrapped around his waist in welcome as Vincent captured those full lips with his own. With a muffled grunt, Oliver dove into the kiss. Urgent and greedy. His tongue tangling with Vincent's, heavy breaths scorching his cheek. His need so strong Vincent could taste it.

So tempting to lose himself in the blistering heat and need of Oliver's kiss, to let it completely overwhelm him.

But he pulled back, broke the kiss before the force of it wiped away all semblance of control.

Those heavily-lidded dark eyes, the ones that could see into his very soul, stared up at him. "Fuck me." Oliver's whisper held no trace of command, only pure unadulterated desperation.

All thoughts of resisting, of keeping his lover poised on the knife-edge of anticipation, flew out of Vincent's head.

Leaning right, he quickly reached into the bedside table and grabbed the glass bottle of oil. His hand shook the slightest bit as he slicked his cock. Gaze locked with Oliver's, he positioned the head at his entrance and pushed inside. Hot, clinging heat engulfed his prick, almost pulling the orgasm out of him, as he sank to the hilt. Clenching his teeth, he fought off the climax. He planted his hands on either side of Oliver's raised arms and picked up a rhythm of slow, purposeful strokes, his ballocks pressing against the smooth skin of Oliver's arse with each downward thrust.

Oliver's head tipped back, his eyes drifting closed. Indecipherable moans of pleasure escaped his lips, wet from their kisses. The man was so goddamn beautiful, all flushed with desire, his body still relaxed from sleep, compliant and lax beneath him as he gave himself up to Vincent.

Crouching over his lover, he rubbed his jaw against Oliver's, against the stubble of his morning beard, then dropped his head to Oliver's neck. He sucked hard enough on the hot, delicate skin of his throat to leave a mark, one easily hidden by a cravat. Then he dragged his mouth over Oliver's chest, captured one hard nipple, and sucked.

"Ah yes, *please*." Oliver gasped, arched, pushing his chest upward, wanting more.

Vincent gave it to him. Rolled the tip between his teeth, tugged, and then released it to blow across the wet surface before shifting to the other nipple.

With each thrust of Vincent's hips, Oliver's erect prick bumped his lower belly, leaving a smear of wetness on his skin. The urge to taste him once again rose up—an urge too strong to deny. Abruptly he pulled out. Broke free of Oliver's legs wrapped around his waist, scooted down, and took Oliver's cock in his mouth, turning the man's groan of protest into one of absolute gratitude.

Sucking hard, he brought Oliver right to the cusp of release. To the point where he was squirming beneath him, tugging on his bonds, breaths hitching sharp and fast. Then he quickly shifted up to slide back into his arse.

Oliver shuddered, moaned. His bound hands were clenched in white-knuckled fists, every line in his body drawn tight, sleek muscles pronounced beneath golden skin dampened with sweat. Vincent pulled all the way out simply to hear that moan rip from his lover's throat again, and couldn't help but watch his cock disappear as he glided back in. A damn erotic sight—the glistening crown stretching Oliver obscenely wide, his body yielding so sweetly against the intrusion as Vincent sank to the hilt, the oil-slicked hole constricting in greedy need when he pulled free. He repeated the motion. Once, twice, the tension visibly coiling within Oliver, and on the third plunging stroke, a hoarse shout shook Oliver's chest. Pearly white seed shot from his cock, painting his abdomen. His muscles gripped Vincent's prick so tightly it took considerable effort to thrust through the man's climax. The heat, the tightness, the slick tug of Oliver's body along his length...

The orgasm ripped through him. He pounded into Oliver, the sound of flesh slapping flesh filling the room as he poured deep within his lover.

With the last tremor from the release shaking his body, he slumped down to rest his forehead against Oliver's chest, which rose and fell as quickly as his own.

Panting for breath, he gathered his sated muscles, levered up, and tugged on the end of the cravat, releasing Oliver. His lover let out a low, lazy purr as Vincent gently massaged his sweaty wrists. The cravat hadn't left any marks—he hadn't tied him too tightly. Just secure enough so he would not slip free when he tugged on his bonds. Something Oliver had a fondness for. Each tug akin to a shout for more.

The moment he flopped down next to Oliver, the man rolled into him, nestling against his side, arms wrapping around him and holding him close. They were both slightly sticky with sweat and needed to clean up—with Oliver plastered to his side, the remnants of the climax on his abdomen was now smeared on Vincent's skin as well—but it mattered not to him. He pressed a kiss to the top of Oliver's head and let out a sigh of complete and utter contentment.

What a bloody fantastic way to start the day. A chuckle tickled in his throat, but he felt too sated to give it voice.

By the time his breathing returned to normal, the chill morning air had begun to nip against his rapidly cooling skin, a reminder he shouldn't dally overlong.

"I should get dressed."

"Already?" Oliver asked, his voice a low, slow rumble that vibrated Vincent's chest.

"Yes. It's getting late."

With effort, he pulled himself away from Oliver and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He crossed to the washstand, stepping over the clothing Oliver had discarded before climbing into bed last night. He had long given up hope his tidy habits would have any influence on Oliver. His lover was distinctly his own man, and Vincent preferred him just that way—clothing littering the floor and all.

After pouring water from the pitcher into the basin, he grabbed a couple of cloths from the shelf below, dropped both into the water, and wrung one out. Stealing himself against the cold, he swiped the cloth over his face, down his side, and between his legs. Quick and hasty, but it would suffice for now.

He tossed the cloth into the bin beside the washstand and grabbed the other from the basin. The wrung-out cloth clutched in one hand, he returned to the bed. Oliver was sprawled on his belly, arms holding the white pillow beneath his head, one leg drawn slightly up toward his side, exposing delicate skin that still faintly glistened with the sheen of oil.

With a light touch, he brushed the stray strands of Oliver's hair from his closed eyes. "This will be cold," he murmured before reaching down to wipe the oil from his backside.

The man twitched, the muscles of his back contracting, as he let out a grunt in protest.

"My apologies." Not much to be done for it. He didn't have a live-in servant to deliver warm wash water in the morning. A small price to pay to awaken in bed with Oliver.

The task seen to, he dropped the cloth into the bin. He had just finished lighting the fire when the faint sound of a door shutting reached his ears, announcing they no longer had the house to themselves. Vincent grabbed the clothes he had left folded on the chair last night, but before leaving the room, he stopped by the bed again to nudge Oliver. "Mrs. Hollister has arrived. Breakfast will soon be waiting."

Oliver's response was a sleepy grumble.

Likely the man would sleep a bit longer. Vincent coasted his hand down the sleek lines of Oliver's back and pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Love you."

"Love you too." Oliver's mouth barely moved, the words a mere thin, raspy whisper, but Vincent heard them nonetheless.

A smile on his lips, he snagged the rumpled coverlet from the other side of Oliver and draped it over his back, and then crossed to the narrow door next to the washstand. As he passed through the small dressing room, he dropped the clothes into another bin so his housekeeper, Mrs. Hollister, would see to them. He selected a fresh shirt and a pair of trousers from a shelf, grabbed a waistcoat and coat from the hooks on the wall, and went through the other door and into his bedchamber.

He tugged open the draperies, letting the full force of the morning sun stream into the room. A beautiful day, but judging by the chill seeping through the windowpanes, a decidedly cold one. Fortunately he had no plans to leave the house. The stack of paperwork on his desk needed his attention.

The water in the basin on the washstand proved just as cold as in Oliver's room, but he used it nonetheless to wash up and shave and did not bother Mrs. Hollister with a request for warm water. As he dressed, he paused to pull back the navy coverlet and rumple the white pillows on his bed. A simple enough task, and all it took to keep his housekeeper unaware of the fact ages had passed since he'd laid his head on one of those pillows. Leaving his valet behind when he traveled helped as well. Vincent found keeping the full extent of his relationship with Oliver hidden surprisingly easy while at the country estate. They rarely went into the nearby village and did not mix with the local society, preferring to keep to the house. The last thing he needed was for any marriage-minded young misses in the area to brand him an eligible bachelor. London posed a bit more of a challenge, so much so the worry of discovery still resided, lurking in the back of his mind. Still, he had to admit Oliver had been correct. He was "*goddamn Lord Vincent Prescott*." A man no one would ever suspect would bugger another man.

A self-deprecating chuckle rumbled his chest as he lifted his chin to form the long length of white linen into a neat Mathematical knot. God forbid if anyone knew just how...unique his preferences ran.

The cravat seen to, he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his bottle green coat. A few nights had passed since he and Oliver had indulged in more exotic play, and Oliver needed to return to London soon. Though the companion they had hired for his grandmother would not protest if they remained in Rotherham for an additional week, as a business owner, Oliver should not be absent from his bookshop for much longer than a fortnight. And in Rotherham, under the cover of darkness and surrounded by acres of grassy fields, he needn't worry Oliver's shouts of pleasure would rouse the suspicions of any neighbors.

With that tantalizing thought fresh in his head, he made his way downstairs. First breakfast and a hot cup of coffee, followed by the post and the stack of paperwork on his desk, and then perhaps later he'd have the pleasure of hearing the full force of Oliver's need.

## Chapter Two

Eyes closed, Lord Oliver Marsden reached out a hand, palm coasting over rumpled sheets. Cool, without a trace of warmth from Vincent's body. It seemed like just a second ago when he heard the faint creaks of the floorboards as Vincent left the room, but he must have fallen back to sleep.

He should get up. Not laze away any more of the morning. But his bed at Vincent's country house felt so much more comfortable than his old bed at his bachelor apartments in Town. Even the sheets were softer, and though no longer as warm, they still carried Vincent's scent.

He took a deep, full breath, letting the air slowly fill his lungs. The distinct scents of Vincent's skin and male sweat and...sex. He let out a low grunt. By God, Vincent excelled at sucking cock. Not a surprise—Vincent excelled at everything he put his mind to. And he had clearly put his mind to mastering all the options he could have at his disposal to render Oliver senseless. Unbelievable to think a time had existed when Vincent refused to even consider touching his lips to Oliver's prick. The once hard, remote man, the one who insisted on keeping Oliver at arm's length the moment they stepped into the bedchamber, was long gone. Vincent still held the reins of control—never let them slip completely through his fingers—though Oliver had yet to attempt to tug them free. Even when he was sucking Oliver off, the man held him in the palm of his hand. But now, even when they played their more extreme games, an undeniable current of true intimacy rode behind every touch, every command, every kiss from Vincent's whip. An intimacy that said louder than words that Vincent loved him.

Hearing the words felt quite nice as well.

Smiling, he tugged the coverlet higher to cover his shoulders, seeking its warmth. Perhaps if he drifted back to sleep, he'd awaken again with Vincent's mouth on his prick. Lovely thought, though highly improbable. Unless he remained in bed until nightfall, after the housekeeper left.

Still, a very nice thought. Sleep began to tug heavily at his mind. Vincent would be tucked behind his desk until at least midafternoon. And today was... He scrunched his brow, trying to orient his sleep-fogged brain to the correct day of the week...Wednesday. Nowhere he needed to be—

*Hell.*

He flung off the covers and forced himself to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bed. Hanging his head, he scrubbed his hands over his face, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

The Widow Middleton. He was due at her home that afternoon. He should get up now to avoid running the risk of falling back to sleep and missing the appointment altogether.

Shielding his eyes as he passed through the rays of sunlight cutting through the breaks in the drapes, he padded over to the washstand. He splashed water on his face and grabbed his straight razor. Chin tilted up, razor poised over his jaw, he paused. Leaned closer to the mirror. Brushed a fingertip over the bruise on his throat, over Vincent's mark.

Chuckling to himself, he set the razor to his jaw. After seeing to the shave, he dragged his fingers through his hair, doing his best to tame the unruly waves.

He pulled trousers, drawers, cravat, and a white shirt from the dresser drawers, tugged them on, and then went into the small dressing room. He snagged a cream waistcoat from a hook along the wall and slipped it on. The brown coat? Definitely his favorite but, well, a bit worn about the edges. His gaze fell on the black coat hanging on a peg beside the brown one. For an appointment, the black would be the better choice. Better fit and never worn, so no chance of frayed cuffs. It would make him appear more creditable. Like he actually had cause to own a bookshop.

He reached out, then paused, hand hovering an inch from the fine black wool. A frown pulled his lips. Vincent had purchased the coat for him two months ago. What was to have been a simple outing on St. James Street to pick up Vincent's repaired pocket watch had ended at a tailor's shop. Caught unaware, he had allowed Vincent to herd him into that shop, and once there, he could only silently relent to Vincent's whims lest he give the tailor reason to wonder about the source of his protests.

But however much Oliver did not agree with it, the deed was done. Past time he got over his reluctance to wear the thing. He had brought the coat with him, hadn't he? Yet he could not forget that uncomfortable feeling as he had stood for Vincent's tailor, never mind the fact that Vincent had never once asked if he even wanted a new coat. The man had simply taken the matter into his own hands and expected Oliver to bow his head and do as he bid. Expectations Oliver relished behind closed doors. Outside of a bedchamber though...

With a shake of his head, he pushed the mix of bruised pride and impotent frustration aside and grabbed the brown coat. The day had started wonderfully. No need to ruin it for himself.

The coat buttoned, he picked up the jade pin from the bedside table and went back over to the washstand. Lifting his chin, he affixed the pin to the simple knot on his cravat. Then he studied his reflection in the oval mirror above the washstand. *Not straight.* He removed the pin, tugged the knot, and reaffixed the pin. Not perfect, but better.

On his way out of the room, he grabbed his wire-rimmed spectacles from the top of the dresser and slipped them on.

The runner in the short corridor muffled his footsteps as he made his way downstairs. It wasn't a plush Aubusson rug like those in Vincent's stately white stucco town house. Rather it was simple and functional, fitting the quaint country house. Oliver spent a fair amount of time at both of Vincent's homes, and he felt much more at his ease in Rotherham, where a footman didn't lurk about every



corner.

And he knew for certain Vincent felt more comfortable being with him here. Vincent even shared a bed with him in the country. In London, that only happened at Oliver's bachelor apartments. But at least more often than not he stayed until dawn.

"Good morning, Lord Oliver." Mrs. Hollister turned from the sideboard, an ivory coffeepot in hand, as Oliver entered the dining room. Short and plump, with a ready smile crinkling the edges of her hazel eyes, the housekeeper was the most pleasant servant Oliver had ever encountered. The cleaning, the laundry, the cooking... She saw to it all and never appeared the least put out by even the most mundane of requests. A stark contrast to the formal versions at the town house or the surly ones that had inhabited his childhood home.

"Good morning to you, Mrs. Hollister. And a wonderfully fine morning it is." He indicated the windows lining one wall, the drapes open, revealing the expanse of sun-warmed grass on the side of the house.

"Mighty fine indeed." She lifted the ivory pot. "The coffee's gone cold. If you'd like, I will deliver your cup to the study."

"Thank you." He picked up a small plate from the sideboard, ignored the two silver covered dishes, and selected a tart from the neat pile of pastries on the oval platter.

She bobbed a short curtsy before turning on her heel and disappearing through the narrow door that led to the kitchen, her dark brown skirts swooshing about her ankles.

Oliver found Vincent tucked behind his large desk in the study, dark head tipped down and silver pen in hand. The simple yet elegantly tailored bottle green coat accentuated the broad width of his shoulders; the stark white cravat framed his strong jaw. Vincent fit perfectly in the room with its heavy, masculine furniture and rich, mahogany wood, as if it had been made for him.

"Good morning, Oliver." Vincent made a notation on the paper before him, then looked up. A trace of disapproval flickered across his face. "You are aware Mrs. Hollister is quite adept at cooking a proper breakfast?"

Oliver took an unabashed bite of the raspberry tart. "Indeed, but her skill with pastries knows no rival."

Ignoring Vincent's arched brow, he set the plate on the small table beside the leather couch and, taking another bite of the tart, crossed to the mahogany shelves flanking the gray marble fireplace. Though not a large room, every inch of available space along the walls of the study was given over to books. All lined up like neat little soldiers, as if they knew their master would not tolerate otherwise.

Oliver finished the tart, wiped his hands on his trousers, and, unable to resist the lure, reached out. "Are you certain you don't want to part with any of your books?" He pulled a volume from a shelf, traced a finger lovingly over the embossed leather-bound cover. It would make a perfect addition to his bookshop.

"Yes, I'm certain." Another scratch of pen on paper.

Oliver frowned. "I'll pay you a fair price."

"I don't need the money."

He carefully opened the cover. An attempt to flip the first page revealed the pages had not been cut. Physical proof no one, least of all Vincent, had yet to read this particular book. A shame, really, to allow it to linger on the shelf for no other purpose than appearance's sake. "But you don't read them."

"You do."

His fingertip paused on the edges of the uncut pages. The man kept all those books for *him*. It shouldn't mean so much. Vincent certainly did not need the funds a sale could bring; still... He slipped the book back into its place on the shelf and looked to Vincent. As if sensing his stare, Vincent glanced up.

"Thank you, Vincent."

A crisp tip of his head and Vincent turned his attention back to his work, but he couldn't hide the faint hint of a blush tinging his cheeks.

Aware he had left the study door open, Oliver kept from voicing the *love you* on the tip of his tongue and instead grabbed Shakespeare's *Othello* from the mantle and settled on the couch to pick up where he had left off yesterday evening.

The patter of slippers on floorboards announced the housekeeper's arrival. "The post has arrived, Lord Vincent." She handed Oliver his cup of coffee, then placed the small silver tray on the corner of Vincent's desk. She received the same crisp tip of the head for her efforts. "Is there anything I can get for you, my lord?"

"No, thank you." Vincent took a letter from the top of the stack and, using the silver letter opener he had pulled from a desk drawer, broke the wax seal.

At her questioning glance, Oliver shook his head. He had everything he needed at the moment in the study with him—coffee, a book, and Vincent. After taking his empty plate, she left the room.

Oliver brought his cup to his lips and took a sip, savoring the hot, rich liquid as it flowed down his throat. With a little *clink*, he set down the cup and flipped to the appropriate page in *Othello*. Within no time at all, the book pulled him in. Even the crinkle of paper as Vincent went through the pile of letters seemed to fade to nothingness.

"Oliver."

The hint of a reprimand behind Vincent's voice had Oliver's head snapping up. "Yes?" Vincent's stare indicated he expected a response other than a yes. Clearly Oliver had missed something. "My apologies. I was not"—he lifted the book from his lap, showing Vincent his excuse—"listening."

Fortunately Vincent didn't appear at all put out. Rather than an imperiously raised eyebrow, Oliver found a smile lurking on his mouth.

"Congratulations are in order. I am now an uncle."

"Lady Grafton already had the baby?" Oliver asked, referring to Vincent's older brother's wife. To his knowledge, the doctor had not anticipated the arrival for another fortnight.

"Yes. Four days ago, and Grafton reports the child is in good health."

His pulse sped up. His grip tightened on the book. It was Grafton's first child, he told himself in an effort to prepare for the very real possibility of disappointment. The man had married less than a year ago—it had not taken Vincent long at all to convince his elder brother to honor his unspoken commitment to Lady Juliana and to follow Vincent's lead. However, unlike Vincent, the treasured heir had not been cut off for refusing to serve as a pawn to further their father's greedy ambitions by marrying a duke's daughter. Fortunately Vincent's bank account was large enough so the loss of his quarterly allowance had not proved a hardship. The loss of his father's notice... rather hard to miss something one never had to begin with.

It was much too early to worry overmuch about the gender of the baby. Juliana, Lady Grafton, was a young woman, and with Grafton only a few years older than Vincent's twenty-six, plenty of years lay ahead of them. But if the baby was a boy...

Oliver briefly closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and asked as casually as he could, "Do you have a new niece or nephew?"

A smile that held a distinct note of relief spread across Vincent's mouth. "A nephew. The honorable Christopher David Prescott, the new second in line to the Saye and Sele marquisate."

A tremor of excitement racked his body. It was all he could do not to jump to his feet and let out a shout of pure joy. He did, however, grin like a damn fool. "Congratulations, Vincent."

"Thank you for the congratulations, Oliver. Though in this instance, I believe Grafton deserves them more than I." Vincent reached across his desk to grab the silver pen in the holder beside the inkwell. "In fact, I should pen him a note this moment."

As Vincent took out a sheet of paper from a desk drawer and began writing, Oliver tried to turn his attention back to his book, but *Othello* no longer held his interest.

His attention was drawn back to Vincent. The end of his pen caught the sunlight streaming through the windows as he wrote the note. His dark head was tipped down, a hint of a smile still tugging at the edges of his mouth. His broad shoulders square and straight, as always.

*He's now truly mine.*

Warmth filled Oliver's chest. Hell, it filled his entire being as a sense of—he could only describe it as *calm*—settled over him. It wasn't as if he had worried about losing Vincent on a daily basis. But that lingering threat, the one that hung in the distance with more menace than the most ominous of thunderclouds, had vanished.

Grafton had produced the next heir to secure the future of the marquisate. No more worries his lover would feel compelled to do his duty and take a wife, or that Oliver would be forced to someday walk away from the man he loved.

Vincent was his.

Forever.

"Love you," he said, barely a whisper, unable to keep it inside.

The pen stilled. Vincent didn't lift his head, didn't pull his gaze from the letter. His lashes still kissed his cheekbones, but his mouth moved. Oliver couldn't hear the words, but he didn't need to. He'd watched Vincent's lips form those words enough times to know exactly what he had said.

Smiling, he adjusted the book on his lap and gave Shakespeare another chance to draw him in. The familiar sounds of Vincent working drifted around him. The faint creak of leather as he shifted his weight in his chair. The scratch of a pen on paper. The shuffle of paper. The little noises did not annoy him, did not scrub across his nerves. Rather they kept his focus firmly on the man he loved.

He closed the book, giving it up as a lost cause, at least for today. "Do you mind if I borrow your carriage this afternoon?"

"Not at all. It's at your disposal. Any particular reason?"

"I have an early afternoon appointment with the Widow Middleton. Going to have a look at her library. Unlike you, she is willing to part with her books."

Vincent looked up from his desk. His gaze traced Oliver's chest. "Are you going to wear that coat to a business appointment?"

"Yes."

Vincent's lips briefly thinned. Oliver's grip tightened on the book as he waited for Vincent to question his response, but the man instead asked, "Will you be back for supper?"

"Of course. The widow resides outside of Maltby, not even an hour's ride east." An easy enough distance. Hence why he had scheduled the appointment during one of his Rotherham visits.

Vincent set down his pen and pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket. "Then you need to ring for the carriage now."

"But it's only ten. I needn't leave until noon."

Vincent arched a brow. "You will be in that library for hours, Oliver, and you are well aware of it."

All right, the man had a point. Oliver lifted a shoulder in a half shrug of agreement. In any case, he couldn't work up the effort to take issue with Vincent's attitude, which bordered much too close to domineering. Not today. Not when Vincent was finally his forever.

"I'd rather not dine alone tonight. The earlier you leave, the greater the probability I will not be the only individual seated at the table."

"You will miss me if I dally overlong at the widow's?" He didn't know why, but he wanted Vincent to admit it. Vincent would miss him, even if only for a handful of hours.

His face a stoic mask, Vincent tipped his head.

With effort, Oliver kept the smile from curving his mouth. "But she's not expecting me until early this afternoon."

"If she's a widow, then she likely lives alone. She will welcome your charming company, no matter the hour."

Oliver let out a snort. As if his company could truly be classified as charming. "All right then. I'll find Mrs. Hollister, ask her to alert

the stables that I have need of the carriage.”

“And have her warm a couple of bricks for the carriage. It’s downright chilly today.”

Setting the book on the couch cushion, Oliver got to his feet and crossed to stand before Vincent’s desk. “*You* could always keep me warm.” He spoke for Vincent’s ears only.

His lover’s gaze darted around his shoulder, likely to the open study door, then met his. For a brief moment, desire banked the brilliant blue depths. “I’ll warm you plenty...later tonight, after you return home.”

The low, intimate rumble wrapped around him, a potent temptation to send the widow his regrets and stay right here, with Vincent.

Knowing Vincent would resist any efforts to indulge now, much less in the study, Oliver tamped down the lust that had started to wind its way into his veins. He grabbed the letter on the silver tray. “If you’d like, I can drop this at the post office as I pass through the village.”

A nod of thanks from Vincent and Oliver turned on his heel. Mrs. Hollister would likely be in the kitchen about now. The sooner the groom readied the carriage, the sooner he could leave, and the sooner he could return so Vincent could make good on his promise.

## Chapter Three

A slightly stale, musty scent hit Oliver's nose as he walked through the door. He stopped in his tracks. A few books? Good Lord, they were everywhere. Not just the random discarded book, but stacks upon stacks of them. The end table next to the wingback chair before the hearth, the large oak desk, and the short cabinet by the windows. The bookshelves lining the walls from floor to ceiling were crammed full near to bursting. Books turned on their sides and nestled in the small spaces between the tops of rows and the shelves above, with stacks on the floor blocking the bottommost shelves. An open volume lay on the cushion of the chair, as though someone had merely set down the book to return any moment.

A twinge of melancholy pulled at his heart. The book's owner would never return.

Light streamed into the library as Mrs. Middleton tugged back the partially open curtains on one of the two windows. "My apologies for the state of the room, Lord Oliver. I had to let the maid go, and the study was Mr. Middleton's..." The uncomfortable, restrained lift of her slim shoulders spoke volumes. With her light brown head bowed in concentration, she made a little project of tying back the heavy damask curtains.

Oliver waited patiently. He was not well acquainted with the young widow. Had only met her on one other occasion months ago when he and Vincent had stopped at the inn's restaurant in Rotherham for a bite to eat. The Middletons had sat at the table next to theirs. But he had heard she recently lost her husband, and quite unexpectedly at that. A misfired gun while shooting in the surrounding woods. Clearly the loss still weighed heavily on her, a blanket of grief surrounding her like a cloak.

He had assumed she merely intended to thin the library. A common enough desire of a widow. Rather morbid of him to follow behind death so closely, but it was the primary means by which he procured new stock for his bookstore. Usually the widow's request was not driven by an urgent need for funds, but more as a method to tidy a library. Given she had let her maid go, he had a strong suspicion the young widow needed more than a bit of extra pin money. Judging by the state of the room, Mr. Middleton had spent every shilling on his collection.

She moved to the other window and repeated the procedure, tugging open the curtains and tying them back. Her slight frame strongly lent the impression of youth. At first glance, one might easily mistake her for an adolescent. Yet her refined manners, the rich timbre of her voice, and that air about her that she had seen and experienced far more than a mere girl indicated she was many years older. Likely just below his own seven and twenty. Still, a young woman. If he recalled correctly, Mr. Middleton had been a young man as well. The thought of saving to provide for his wife had likely been far from his mind. With death came tragedy, but it was especially hard when it took someone so young, snatching a loved one well before his or her time.

It made him acutely aware of how fortunate he was. He could leave this house and return to Vincent. Hold the man close, feel the strong beats of his heart, the warmth of his breath. Sensations that were now mere treasured memories for Mrs. Middleton. Hopefully he and Vincent would have the long years together that had been denied the young widow. And now that the threat of marriage was gone, the hope was solidly within his grasp.

Another little tug on the ties and then she turned from the window. The polite hint of a smile could not hide the sadness lurking in the depths of her brown eyes. She flicked her wrist, the motion encompassing the entire room. "You needn't stand by the door. Please, have a look around. There aren't any I particularly wish to keep, so the entire lot is available if you so desire."

If the bookshop's account could manage it, and if the shop had the space, he would readily buy them all, if for no other reason than to help her. "Thank you." He tipped his head. "The collection is quite impressive, to the point where the shop could not hold it all. A few crates will likely need to be the limit, though it will require some self-restraint to narrow the selection."

She nodded in understanding. The skirts of her somber black day dress rustled softly as she crossed the room. When she made to drop down before the fireplace, he held up a hand and stepped from the door.

"You needn't bother with that. I can see to it."

Crouched before the dark hearth, she looked up at him askance, her eyes wide with uncertainty. He might be the son of a marquis, but that did not mean he'd ever had the opportunity to grow accustomed to others waiting on him.

"Truly. I'm well versed in starting a fire. Please, leave it to me." He shifted his leather bag to his left hand and held out his right to help her to her feet.

A brief hesitation and then with a barely audible murmur of thanks, she laid her small, pale hand in his and stood. "Would you care for a cup of tea?"

"Thank you for the offer but no. I would not want to risk an accidental spill. Tea does not rub along well with Shakespeare."

The edges of her lips lifted, this time in a hint of a genuine smile. She clasped her hands before her. "Well then, I shall leave you to it. If you have need of anything, please do not hesitate to ask." With that, she left the room.

Shrugging out of his greatcoat, Oliver glanced about. Where to start? He could spend days perusing so many books. A part of him did not want to miss even one, for the one he missed could be the ultimate treasure. But he had been on such appointments enough times to know he needed to push aside the urge to set up a pallet in the corner and not leave until he'd laid his hands on every volume. In any case, he would much rather spend his nights with Vincent than alone on the floor.

Especially tonight.

"*I'll warm you plenty...*" Vincent's voice sounded in his head. The low, intimate rumble pushed Oliver into action.

Another glance about the room. Best to start where he stood. Turning, he moved the book on the wingback chair to the end table and set his leather bag on the cushion. He pulled a pencil and a ledger from the bag and flipped to a blank page. Then he set to work going through the stack of books on the end table.

\* \* \*

Oliver looked out the carriage window. The sun must have just dipped out of sight, for a last lingering wash of deep honey gold light warmed the edge of the horizon. Plenty of time remained for him to make it back to Vincent's. No worries the man would be left to his own company for supper. Still, Oliver's foot tapped against the floorboards in rhythm to the team of four's brisk trot. It was all he could do not to push the driver for more speed. A handy gallop would cover the distance in no time, but since the team was not his own, he left the pace to the driver.

In any case, a few hours stretched ahead of him before he would have Vincent all to himself.

He curled his gloved hand into a fist at his side, his body fairly vibrating with eagerness, effectively keeping the chill in the air from seeping into his bones. He knew he should not allow himself to get overexcited. Not yet. He needed to judge Vincent's mood first. Gauge his frame of mind. But if his lover did not appear as if he would shove aside the possibility...

A jolt of heady anticipation shot through him. His cock twitched, bumping against the placket of his trousers. The brief, wicked flare of desire in Vincent's blue eyes had spoken loud and clear the man had his own plans for the evening ahead. Plans that would leave Oliver panting for breath and begging for more. Plans he certainly would thoroughly enjoy and wholeheartedly approve...on any other night. But at some point during the past few hours, as he cataloged selected titles into his ledger, a different idea for their evening seized hold.

Not that he had been perusing books of an erotic nature. Mr. Middleton's library focused on philosophy, poetry, history, and animal husbandry. Perhaps he could lay the blame on the books piled on the floor. Every time he stooped to grab one had made him acutely aware of the faint lingering ache in his arse...and how he got that pleasurable ache.

Nor could he identify the moment when the image from that morning of Vincent looming above him had changed. The moment when he no longer looked up at Vincent but down into his face, absolute bliss pulling his rugged features, the gasping pleas tumbling from Vincent's lips and not his own.

That image had stayed with him all afternoon. Hell, it had grabbed hold and refused to be pushed aside. And for the first time, he wanted it. Absolutely and completely, with every fiber of his being.

Briefly closing his eyes, he took a moment to savor that image. Of Vincent laid out on the bed and desperate with need for *him*. A grunt issued from his throat. Shifting on the bench, he reached down, moved aside the length of his greatcoat, and adjusted his hard cock, trying to find what room could be had in the confines of his trousers.

It wasn't as if he had never entertained the notion. But it had been a fleeting thought. Erotic and wickedly tempting, but a fleeting one nonetheless. Yet now...

All the worries had gone and with them that last bit of restraint. Of course, Grafton had yet to produce the required spare to go with the heir. But the probability that the chore of producing the next Marquis of Saye and Sele would fall onto Vincent's broad shoulders had diminished to almost nothingness. So insignificant Oliver would not even bother to worry about it.

He understood now why he had never attempted to tug the reins of control from Vincent. At first he had told himself Vincent was not ready. Regardless of the fact Vincent once gave him verbal leave to do with him as Oliver pleased, the man's unease at the time had been more than obvious—breaths short and shallow and muscles drawn tight in trepidation, never mind the limp cock dangling between his legs. Neither had Oliver felt comfortable with such a sudden reversal of their usual roles. Sometimes one needed time to acclimate oneself to a new idea, and it had definitely been one of those circumstances. But many months had passed since Vincent even flinched in hesitation when Oliver trailed his fingertips along the crease of his arse. Hell, the man now had no qualms at all bending over and ordering Oliver to lick his arse.

And it wasn't that Oliver did not believe himself capable of taking Vincent to the necessary point. He held no illusions Vincent would ever walk into the bedchamber and surprise him with another offer to put himself in Oliver's hands—the notion was too foreign, too new for him to feel comfortable voicing on his own with no prompt at all. But if Oliver sufficiently applied himself, he felt confident he could strip away every one of Vincent's inhibitions and pull those four words from his lips. The words he had once promised himself he would wait for.

The opportunity had presented itself many times. He adored lavishing Vincent with pleasure, trailing his lips over every inch of his body, feeling those powerful muscles tighten to the point of trembling with need, hearing those deep, low groans of pure lust. Yet he always held back, just enough, and had long ago stopped questioning his reasons. But now he knew the true cause. He could not ask it of Vincent, could not accept that gift from him when the possibility of being forced to part still hung over them.

But with the direct threat now gone...

A broad smile curved his lips, one he knew had to appear downright wicked. Anticipation nipped at every nerve in his body. Tonight, if Vincent was amenable, the man would be well and truly his, in every sense of the word.

The carriage turned right, onto the road that led to Vincent's estate. A few large oak trees lined the long dirt road. All hints of the day's sun were gone from the sky. The light from the full moon cast the trees' bare branches in spidery shadows across the sparse winter grass. Oliver settled back against the black leather bench and turned his mind to how best to get Vincent to abandon his own plan for the evening and put himself in Oliver's hands.

An outright request was out of the question. A shrewd businessman, Vincent tended to analyze a situation. Best if he did not have time to think on it, else his nerves would seize hold and destroy any hope for an enjoyable evening, regardless of the man's willingness. He would need a strategic assault. Slow and careful yet deliberate. Building the tension, the want. Nurturing the need he knew lay buried deep within Vincent. Until his lover could not stop those words from tumbling past his lips.

*Please, Oliver. Fuck me.*

## Chapter Four

Vincent reached for the silver bowl of carrots and spooned more onto his plate. “Was the appointment a success?” Oliver had returned to the house before Vincent even started to worry he had been left to his own company for supper, prompting Vincent to wonder if the appointment had been worth the effort. Present Oliver with a stack of books and the man tended to lose track of all sense of time.

“Oh yes.” Oliver took another bite of the pork. “Middleton’s library...” He let out a blissful little sigh that Vincent knew had nothing to do with the quality of the pork tenderloin. “Books everywhere and most were in pristine condition. Well, at least those I was able to sort through. Mr. Wallace will certainly be pleased when the books I selected arrive,” he said, referring to the shop’s prior owner who had remained on to assist Oliver with the day-to-day running of the small bookshop. Oliver paused, his fork suspended a couple of inches from his open mouth. He looked to Vincent, who sat at his left at the head of the table. “I need to arrange for someone to crate them and deliver them to the shop.”

Likely that detail had just occurred to him. Oliver was not the most organized of individuals. Vincent reached for his glass of wine and took a sip. “Inquire with the blacksmith, Mr. Young. You can find him at the inn’s livery, and his son should be able to transport the crates to London.”

The line of Oliver’s shoulders went lax with relief. He popped the piece of pork into his mouth. His jaw worked as he chewed, and then he swallowed the food down with a sip of wine. A sheen of Bordeaux clung to his full lips, reminding Vincent of how those lips looked slicked with spit after sucking him off. A memory he could verify just as soon as they finished supper and Mrs. Hollister left the house. And after Oliver put his beautiful mouth to good use, then Vincent would strip him of his clothes, restrain him, and redden his arse with the flogger. Or perhaps the bullwhip? It had been some time since he’d heard the erotic snap of leather cracking through the air, followed by Oliver’s shuddered moan of pleasure. An entirely different moan than when he applied the flogger. One breathy and broken, thin and delicate, like the sleek, long length of a bullwhip. The other low and guttural, thicker and more substantial, like the smack of a flogger.

His hand curled around his fork. He could almost feel the leather handle warming in his palm, could almost hear those thin, breathy moans slipping past Oliver’s lips.

“I’ll call on him tomorrow,” Oliver said, jolting Vincent’s thoughts away from the bedchamber and back to the dining room. “It will cost considerably less to hire someone in Rotherham than to have someone travel from London to see to the task. As it is, I wish the shop’s bank account could afford more. Had to limit it to four crates, and it definitely took some doing to narrow the selection. That library was a true find, though I had the distinct impression Mr. Middleton did not leave his wife well provided for.”

“What led you to believe that?”

“She mentioned how she had to let her maid go. I don’t believe she has any servants helping her at the house. Didn’t spot a one while I was there. And she offered up the entire contents of the library. I’d hazard a guess Middleton spent the majority of his income building that library. The books did not appear old or well used, as if they had been inherited from another. Most were newer editions.”

Vincent frowned. Completely irresponsible of Middleton to leave his wife beggared. The first concern upon his marriage should have been to ensure her security. A young woman from a good family would have no means of providing for herself in the event of her husband’s death. “Surely she has family who can assist her.”

Oliver shrugged. “Haven’t a clue. I would like to hope so, but Middleton passed away almost a month ago. If she had family, one would think they would have offered their assistance by now.”

Vincent took the last bite of his supper and set his fork down. “How substantial is the library?”

Brow furrowed, Oliver pursed his lips. “I’d say at least another dozen crates worth, likely more.”

He made a mental note to send a letter to the widow on the morrow and a note to Mr. Young. His son was a strapping young man, well able to pack and transport more than four crates to London.

“Prime stock,” Oliver added. “Really wish I could have purchased the lot of them, but at the very least, she should have no trouble finding a buyer for the remainder.”

No, she would have no trouble at all.

With a soft tap of footsteps, Mrs. Hollister entered the dining room. “There’s more pork in the kitchen if you’d like, Lord Vincent.”

“No, thank you.” He pushed from the table and stood, giving his bottle green coat a tug to straighten it.

She looked to Oliver, who shook his head. “I could not eat another bite. You have outdone yourself yet again, Mrs. Hollister. The tenderloin was perfectly cooked.”

“You are too kind, Lord Oliver.” She beamed at Oliver, as if the man had just presented her with a trunk full of jewels. She never bestowed that look on Vincent, and he employed her.

With an easy smile, Oliver got to his feet. “It’s not kindness, but the truth.”

“There’s brandy in the study, if you gentlemen would care for it. And a plate of raspberry tarts as well.”

Nor were those tarts intended for him. She clearly adored his lover. Well...he couldn’t much blame her.

Oliver’s smile widened. “Ah, now that *is* kindness.”

Mrs. Hollister giggled. The older woman actually giggled as she began clearing the table of the remnants of their supper.

Somehow Vincent kept from rolling his eyes. He walked to Oliver’s side and clasped a hand on his shoulder. “Shall we retire to the

study?" If he allowed it, Oliver would remain in the dining room and chat with the housekeeper, keeping the woman at the house precious minutes longer than needed.

Oliver must have picked up on the hint, for he didn't glance at Vincent in question when he nudged him—all right, the nudge bordered on a shove—toward the door. When they reached the study, he found Mrs. Hollister had already stoked the fire in the hearth. The strong flames warmed the room.

Rather than head straight for the small plate of tarts, Oliver stopped before the console table situated in front of one of the windows. With the candles lighting the room and the dark sky backing the window, Oliver's reflection was visible in the glass as he picked up the crystal decanter from the silver tray. He bowed his head, a chunk of his wavy hair falling forward, and focused on pouring brandy into first one tumbler and then another.

Vincent settled in the armchair angled toward the couch. Glass clinked faintly as Oliver set the decanter back on the tray.

"For you," Oliver murmured, offering a tumbler to Vincent.

"Thank you." He brought the glass to his lips. The well-aged brandy flowed smoothly down his throat.

Oliver sat down in his usual spot on the couch, conveniently enough within arm's reach of the tarts on the end table. After taking a sip of brandy, he reached for a tart. "Care for one?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you certain? They're delicious."

"I'm certain they are. However, I'll leave them to you." Unlike his lover, he had never had a taste for sweets. After a satisfying meal, a nice glass of brandy and good company were all he needed.

A little smile played on Oliver's lips as he chewed. Then he popped the last bit of the tart into his mouth, swallowing it down with a long sip of brandy. He brushed a fingertip to the edge of his mouth, swiping up a droplet of liquor. The motion quick and without thought, unlike when he wiped the trickle of pearly white seed from the corners of his mouth.

The decadent image played in Vincent's mind—of Oliver, his heavily-lidded gaze locked with Vincent's as he slipped his fingers back into his mouth to suck on the tips as if savoring every drop.

Vincent shifted, stretching out his legs and settling more comfortably in the chair. Oliver was damn brilliant at sucking cock. But a good half hour remained before the housekeeper finished tidying the kitchen and left for the night. A good half hour before he could give Oliver the order to drop to his knees. Rather than let impatience build, he simply savored the low hum of anticipation and the smooth glide of the brandy down his throat.

Heat rolled off the fire in the hearth behind him, warming him from the outside while the brandy heated him from within. Resting his head on the back of the armchair, he let his eyes drift shut.

The only sounds that broke the companionable silence were the very faint clinks of china and glassware as the housekeeper worked in the kitchen, the crackle of the logs in the hearth, and the creak of leather whenever Oliver shifted on the couch.

He sensed Oliver's presence a second before he heard the splash of liquid. He opened his eyes to find Oliver refilling the tumbler resting on the arm of the chair, Vincent's loose grip just enough to keep the glass from falling to the floor. Lashes at half-mast, Oliver looked down at him, that little smile playing once again on his mouth.

"Thank you." Though one more splash and Oliver would have been in danger of overfilling the glass. Vincent carefully brought the tumbler to his lips and took a long sip. No reason to allow perfectly good brandy to go to waste.

After replacing the decanter on the tray, Oliver settled back on the couch. "Did you enjoy supper?"

"Most assuredly, and especially the company."

Oliver tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Mrs. Hollister should be finished soon."

"Indeed."

Vincent's gaze swept over his lover. He had one leg drawn up, elbow resting on his bent knee and his heel braced on the edge of the couch cushion. At first glance, he appeared fully at his ease. Yet the little smile that seemed fixed to his full lips, the faint glint lurking in the depths of his dark eyes...

He swore he could detect a new layer of...confidence radiating from his lover. Not blatant but subtle and definitely there.

Interesting. Perhaps it was merely a by-product of his afternoon appointment. Oliver adored books, and the purchase of a few new crates' worth surely pleased him.

"Is there anything else you gentlemen need before I leave?"

Vincent pulled his attention from Oliver. The housekeeper stood in the open doorway of the study, her brown woolen coat buttoned to her chin and her gloved hands clasped before her.

He opened his mouth, but before he could reply, Oliver spoke.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Hollister. I hope you have a good evening."

She tipped her head and turned. Vincent gathered his wits just in time to bid her good evening before she disappeared down the corridor.

His attention snapped back to Oliver, who regarded him with that same little smile. The *click* as the back door shut seemed to fill the study, fairly echoing off the walls. His lover's gaze remained locked with his over the rim of his glass as the man drained the last splash of brandy. Oliver set the empty tumbler on the end table and, in one fluid motion, stood from the couch.

He did not know what to make of this new version of Oliver. Not that he held any qualms with it, yet he could do nothing but stare at Oliver as he crossed the distance separating them. Of their own accord, his legs opened wider, just enough for Oliver to step between them. Bracing a hand on the back of the chair, he leaned down. Vincent expected a light brush of his lips. Instead Oliver's mouth slanted over his. Hot and quick, his agile tongue sweeping into Vincent's mouth.

Lust washed over him. A startlingly thick, heavy wave that clung to his senses.

Oliver pulled back just enough to break the kiss. "Are you ready to retire to my bedchamber?"

Struck mute by the combination of anticipation and need and determination blazing in the dark brown depths of his lover's eyes, Vincent could only nod.



## Chapter Five

Oliver set the single candle he'd brought up from the study on the mahogany dresser. The soft golden glow provided enough light for him to see clearly, while leaving the corners of the bedchamber darkened with shadows. The fire in the hearth was already lit and the drapes closed tight courtesy of the housekeeper. The room felt warm and comfortable and was very familiar to Vincent. The perfect setting for tonight.

The door snapped shut. A tremor of anticipation rocked through him. Oliver took a deep breath and focused on keeping the exhale smooth and even. When he felt he could proceed without pouncing on Vincent, he turned from the dresser.

Unbuttoning his coat, Vincent stepped farther into the room. "You seem rather pleased with yourself this evening."

"I am," he admitted, somehow keeping the predatory grin from his mouth. The second glass of brandy appeared to have done its duty, lulling Vincent's senses just enough so the tiniest bit of languid ease lurked behind his movements. He did not want the man foxed. He wanted Vincent to remember every detail from tonight. But the large glass of spirits would hopefully aid him in stripping away every one of Vincent's inhibitions.

Vincent folded his coat and put it on the chair by the narrow door to the dressing room. "Any particular reason?"

Oliver shrugged in an attempt at nonchalance. At the slight narrowing of Vincent's eyes, he added, "I had a productive day and shared a wonderful meal with you."

To his relief, the hint of suspicion left Vincent's eyes, yet his gaze lingered on Oliver's face, as though searching for something. He was giving his lover too much time to think. That wouldn't do at all.

Oliver crossed to the bedside table, removed his spectacles and the jade cravat pin, and placed them in the small silver dish. He unbuttoned his coat and flung it toward the washstand. Then he turned to face Vincent. "I missed you today." Letting every bit of desire and need rush to the surface, he gazed at his lover.

As if drawn by an invisible cord, Vincent breeched the distance between them. "As I you." Vincent cupped his jaw, brushed the pad of his thumb across Oliver's bottom lip. "Now why don't you put that beautiful mouth to good use?"

"It would be my pleasure." Not wanting Vincent to settle into the role of dominant, he deliberately left off the *milord* address. He wanted the man focused on him and on the pleasures he offered, not on the locked trunk beside the dresser that his gaze had already found once since entering the room.

No restraints and no floggers. No crossbars or toys. Tonight it would be just him and Vincent. His breath hitched in his chest. He took a moment, a very short moment, to calm his pulse. Then he dropped to his knees.

Slow and deliberate, he unbuttoned the placket of Vincent's trousers. A light tug and the string of his drawers released. Reaching inside, he carefully pulled Vincent's semierect cock free. The sight alone of that gorgeous prick, the length thick and heavy in his hand, made his arse tighten in anticipation. As he flicked his tongue over the crown, he could almost feel the flared head breach his entrance, stretch him wide. A low moan shook his throat. But he ignored the demands of his own body and focused on Vincent—on slowly building the tension, on nurturing the want, the need he knew was within him.

Leisurely glides of his mouth along the rapidly hardening shaft. Teasing swirls of his tongue across the head. Soft presses of his lips to the satiny smooth skin. He adored the man's cock. Could worship it for hours. Had done so on more than one occasion, the resulting ache in his jaw nothing compared to the pure pleasure of pleasing Vincent.

A large hand threaded into his hair to cup the back of his skull. Oliver yielded to the pressure as Vincent guided him up his length to the crown.

"Take me inside."

The tiniest bit of impatience behind Vincent's words threatened to bring a smile to Oliver's lips. Instead, he opened his mouth and eagerly followed Vincent's command.

He suckled the head, flicked his tongue to the sensitive spot beneath, and slowly slid down the length until Vincent's cock nudged the back of his throat. Then he picked up a rhythm of long strokes, keeping the suction more gentle than hard, not wanting the lust to build too swiftly.

Vincent's grip flexed against his skull like a cat kneading a blanket. His groans even resembled the purrs of a content lion, low and gravelly, the sounds rumbling around Oliver.

If the man had even an ounce of tension in his body when he walked into the room, it had now gone. Oliver glanced up. Vincent's head was tipped back, lips slightly parted. From his vantage point, he could not make out Vincent's features, but he'd bet his shop the man's eyes were closed, every sense fully focused on what Oliver did to his prick.

He took a moment to luxuriate in the taste of Vincent and on the decadent feel of his lover's cock sliding in and out of his mouth, gliding over his tongue, nudging his throat. But only a moment lest he get lost in those sensations. Ignoring the twinge of regret, he pulled back. A soft kiss to the crown and he got to his feet.

Vincent's lashes slowly swept up as Oliver began to unbutton the other man's waistcoat. To Oliver's delight, Vincent let Oliver undress him, his large hands roving up and down Oliver's back, pausing to grip his arse, but not making a move to stop him or to take back control of the evening. He dragged his lips along Vincent's jaw, nipped lightly against the skin, occasionally brushed his trouser-covered erection against Vincent's, keeping the man focused on him. Yet as he worked his way down the tan waistcoat, awareness seeped

into his veins. His fingers began to shake just the slightest bit, just enough so the small fabric-covered buttons would not slide easily from their moorings.

The confidence that had seized hold in the carriage on the drive to Vincent's country house began to slip away. What if he did something wrong? What if Vincent didn't enjoy it? Oliver pushed the waistcoat off Vincent's shoulders and reached for the stark white cravat. It had been ages since Oliver had taken a man, and to his knowledge, never a virgin. It wasn't as if he didn't know how it was done. But...

Another tug on Vincent's cravat. He did his best to hide the sigh of relief when the elaborate knot finally gave way to his struggles. He stepped back just enough to pull the white shirt up Vincent's chest.

His lover finished the task for him, whisking the shirt over his head. By God the man was gorgeous, bared to the waist with his erection jutting stiff and hard from the open placket of his trousers. A thin moan slid past Oliver's lips.

Unwilling and unable to resist the lure, Oliver reached out to touch his bare skin. The heat radiating from Vincent's body almost scorched his palms as he swept his hands up to those impossibly broad shoulders. This man was his and only his. Forever.

"Love you," he whispered against Vincent's neck.

"Love you too."

A tremble shook Oliver's body, breath catching in his chest.

The hell with it.

Oliver grabbed the back of Vincent's neck and pulled him down for a kiss—slanted his lips harshly over Vincent's. With his hands on Oliver's arse, Vincent jerked him closer, pressing their bodies tightly together, and thrust his tongue into Oliver's mouth. Oliver let go and gave in to Vincent's kiss, to the power and the strength of the man in his arms. No more trying to gauge Vincent's reactions. No more trying to keep the man on a predetermined path for the evening. If it happened, it happened. If not, it wasn't meant to be.

Threading his fingers into Vincent's hair, he dived into the kiss. He rubbed against Vincent, reveling in the complete lack of give in the man's hard, strong body. The scent of his lover filled his every breath—clean male skin, not a hint of cologne, and undeniably Vincent. His head went light under the onslaught of sensations. The last drop of the tension he hadn't even realized existed slid out of his body, and his senses focused absolutely and completely on pleasuring Vincent.

The lust built within him with each brush of Vincent's tongue. With each groan that rumbled his broad chest. More. He wanted more.

He kissed his way down Vincent's chest, pausing to flick his tongue over one copper nipple, then over the hard abdomen, following the thin line of dark hair to that beautiful cock. But before he wrapped his lips around it again, he pulled Vincent's dark trousers down his legs.

Vincent nudged his hips forward so his erection brushed Oliver's parted lips. But the silent request wasn't necessary.

Bracing his hands on Vincent's thighs, Oliver opened his mouth and worshipped Vincent's cock in earnest. Long, plunging strokes coupled with hard suction. Relaxing his throat, he took him all the way down and swallowed, massaging the sensitive head. When the powerful muscles beneath his palms began to draw tight, he shifted down, ducked beneath, and pressed openmouthed kisses on his ballocks. Vincent widened his stance, granting him greater access. Oliver took it and more. He drew one testicle into his mouth, sucking and tugging lightly before moving to the other. All the while, he pumped Vincent's length, his grip firm, his hand sliding easily over the spit-slicked skin.

Vincent's hard pants filled the air around him, mixing with the distinct scent of male sweat. They pushed him onward, demanding more.

"Turn." He nudged Vincent hip. "Let me lick your arse."

A low growl rumbled from Vincent's chest.

Oliver shifted back, giving Vincent room to comply, and glanced down. Damnation. His clothes. He tugged at his waistcoat, not caring in the slightest when a few buttons popped loose and skidded across the floorboards. He yanked on his cravat and whipped his shirt over his head. Very briefly got to his feet to push off his trousers. His erection sprang free, so rigid it slapped against his belly. Need drumming through his veins, he drew his hands down the strong lines of Vincent's back to his hips and nudged him to better face the bed.

Vincent bent at the waist and braced his hands on the mattress. Oliver dropped to his knees and parted those muscular cheeks, baring Vincent fully to his view. He painted a line down that forbidden crease with his tongue and pressed a kiss to his entrance.

"Ah hell." Vincent pushed back, pushing against Oliver's mouth.

He eagerly gave Vincent what he needed. Licked and kissed the perimeter until the tight ring of muscle began to relax. Pulled his cheeks more firmly apart and slipped his tongue inside, teasing the highly sensitive nerves. Then he slid a finger alongside his tongue, gently stretching him.

He heard a muffled *thump*—likely Vincent punching the mattress—accompanied by another curse.

A wave of lust washed over him. Thick and potent, soaking his senses. His cock jerked, demanding attention. His ballocks were drawn up so tightly they ached. Rather than give in, he savored the heady thrum of anticipation, savored the need so strong a twinge of pain rode hard and heavy behind it.

Finger thrusting and mouth working, he lavished Vincent with pleasure until Vincent's curses filled his ears. Gasping for breath, he pulled back.

Vincent growled. "Damnation, don't stop."

"I'm not." Hell no, he wouldn't stop. He pushed on Vincent's arse. "Get on the bed."

Vincent didn't pause, didn't hesitate, didn't even glance back at Oliver in question. His muscles bunched and flexed beneath pale golden skin as he shifted onto the bed to lie on his side. Oliver quickly joined him, pausing only to snatch the bottle of oil from the bedside

table drawer before nestling behind him.

He poured a generous amount onto his fingers, pressed a kiss to Vincent's shoulder, and pushed two digits inside. Tight muscles clamped around his fingers. Slick and hot and soft as the finest silk. His cock jerked again, bumping against Vincent's thigh. Careful and slow, he pushed deeper to rub Vincent's gland and was rewarded with another muffled *thump* of Vincent's fist against the mattress.

Of their own accord, his hips thrust in short compact nudges in rhythm to the strokes of his fingers fucking Vincent's arse. His hard cock rubbed against Vincent's thigh, greedy for any sort of friction. The heat pouring off Vincent's back scorched his chest. Sweat pricked Oliver's skin, slicked the hollows behind his knees, and threatened to drip down his temples. Every fiber of his body screamed for release. He could feel the frustration seep into Vincent, hear it in the hard pants of his breaths and the grunts reverberating through his back.

The pleas started tumbling from Vincent's mouth. "More, Oliver. Need...*hell*, harder."

With each thrust, he grazed Vincent's gland, yet he stayed right on the edge of complete satisfaction. That need grabbed hold, the same one that had seized him in the carriage. His own release suddenly lost all importance.

He wanted Vincent. Wanted to mark the man as his own. Needed to bring him to climax while buried deep within him. Wanted to feel the orgasm rack his lover's body. Wanted to be the one to make him scream from the sheer force of it.

He intensified his efforts. Slid another digit inside Vincent, stretching him wider, boldly pushing the pleasure past the point where he normally would stop and beg Vincent to fuck him.

They moved together yet in counterpoint, bodies straining, indecipherable moans mixing together. And then Vincent spoke the words Oliver had waited over a year to hear.

"Oliver...*please*." Vincent groaned, pushed back against him. "Fuck me."

He didn't stop to ask if Vincent was certain, though he did pull free to grab the oil. The touch of his own oil-slicked palm to his prick almost triggered an orgasm. He bit the inside of his cheek, hard enough to taste the metallic tang of blood, then took a deep breath and rode the surge of pure need until it ebbed to a manageable level. Then he poured more oil on his fingers. Vincent was already quite slick, but he wanted nothing left to chance. Reaching down, he swiped his fingers over Vincent's entrance.

Vincent shifted his leg forward and tipped back his hips, granting Oliver access.

For a moment, the sight of Vincent laid out on the bed struck Oliver mute. The golden glow of the candle caressed every line of his powerful body, his most intimate flesh slick and ready, chest heaving with each heavy breath, and wanting *him*.

Emotion clogged his throat. Somehow he was able to give voice to the "love you" that filled his entire being.

Then he positioned his cock at Vincent's entrance and, slowly pushing forward, made Vincent his in the most intimate way possible.

Vincent's broken gasp cut through the silence. His body clamped around the head of Oliver's prick. So damn tight and hot and perfect. Unwilling to break the spell, Oliver resisted the urge to ask if he was all right. Instead, he cupped Vincent's hip, pressed his mouth to the apple of Vincent's shoulder, and began to gently rock his hips.

Pressure filled him as Oliver nudged inside. A pressure that satisfied the overwhelming need that had built to unprecedented proportions. Oliver's cock certainly did not rival his own in size, but hell if he didn't feel goddamn huge. Stretching Vincent wide, pushing in so damn deep, stuffing him wonderfully, blissfully full. A tiny bit of pain threaded under the pleasure. But strangely, he welcomed it. Wanted more.

Even as the word "more" tumbled from his lips, a portion of his brain reeled in shock. Stunned that Oliver's prick was in his arse. And doubly stunned it felt so unbelievably amazing.

Completely drunk on the all-encompassing sensations, Vincent slung his leg up, shifting so that he was partially on his back, and draped his arm around Oliver's neck. Oliver palmed Vincent's thigh, pushing his leg up higher, and dropped his head to brush his lips across Vincent's nipple. Pulling the tip into his mouth, he thrust even deeper—slow, plunging strokes that had Vincent's head lolling back.

Oliver's grip on his thigh tightened, but he kept his thrusts lusciously slow. A chunk of his untidy hair had fallen forward to obscure one eye. Vincent's fingers itched with the need to tuck it behind his ear, to fully expose those beautiful features he knew so well. Yet every muscle in his body felt completely lax, so consumed by pleasure he could not have lifted his other arm if he tried.

And then Oliver shifted behind him, and on the next downward thrust, he hit that spot inside him. The one that made a white-hot surge of lust shoot through him.

Again and again, the head of Oliver's prick massaged that spot. Ratcheting the ecstasy drenching his senses. Building it stronger and stronger. Coiling tighter and tighter, past anything he had ever experienced before.

Vincent struggled to catch his breath, but the effort was in vain. His breaths hitched, high and sharp, in his chest. His cock ached. Goddamn it, it hurt. He wanted to grab his prick, but he was...afraid to move. To even shift enough to bring his hand to his groin. One move and he could lose that absolutely perfect angle of Oliver's prick. The one that brought the orgasm so close he could taste it.

As if reading Vincent's mind, Oliver's hand slid down his thigh to close around Vincent's cock.

"*Yes*." The word ripped from Vincent's throat.

Oliver's grip was almost too rough but at the same time exactly what he needed. His thrusts turned harder, longer, more demanding. The strokes so deep his ballocks slapped against him.

Shameless and needing even more, Vincent bumped back. He was right there, on the very edge, senses poised on the brink, but...  
*Damnation!*

Beyond desperate for the climax that frustratingly eluded him, Vincent gazed up at Oliver.

"Come for me, Vincent," Oliver whispered, those dark eyes boring straight into his soul.

The orgasm slammed into him, harder and more powerful than a runaway stagecoach. His hoarse shout echoed in his ears. Seed shot

from his cock, splattering his stomach, as Oliver continued to drive into him, prolonging the climax until Vincent could only gasp in awe.

As the remnants of that powerful release still thrummed through Vincent's body, Oliver's hips snapped forward. It felt as though his cock somehow grew thicker, longer, harder, stretching Vincent's body to its limit. Teeth bared, Oliver let out a growl, deep and low and unlike anything Vincent had ever heard from him. Then warmth filled Vincent's passage.

Oliver slumped, his forehead dropping to Vincent's chest. Hot, sticky pants fanned Vincent's chest, clinging to his sweat-slicked skin. Lazy and slow, and almost unconsciously, Oliver slid his hand, still wrapped around Vincent's cock, up to massage the crown. A spasm racked his entire body, abrading his overwrought nerves, muscles clenching around Oliver's prick, still buried deep.

"Hell!" The curse burst from his throat, though the word sounded embarrassingly much closer to a yelp.

"Sorry," Oliver murmured as he released his hold. He didn't sound the least bit apologetic. If anything, he sounded smug. Oliver was a man. He damn well knew how sensitive one was after an orgasm.

For a long moment, the only sounds that broke the silence were their heavy breaths. He could feel Oliver softening within him, and then the man's spent prick slipped from his body. The protest, the need to keep Oliver with him, rose within. So strong it took all his willpower to keep the plea inside.

The strength of it jolted him harshly to the present. His arse burned, throbbed, yet it was strangely pleasurable. Hell, his entire body felt sore. He was suddenly aware he was practically lying in Oliver's arms. And it felt good. So good, he never wanted to leave.

His gut tightened.

Oliver levered up to lean over Vincent. His dark hair stuck to his temples, damped with sweat. His cheeks were flushed, his heavily-lidded eyes reduced to mere slits. The most content smile curved his mouth. "Love you."

The words were whispered against his lips an instant before Oliver's mouth found his. But the kiss did nothing to vanquish the leaden feeling building in the pit of his stomach.

## Chapter Six

Sprawled on his belly, Oliver kept his eyes closed as the sensations from last night drifted from his dreams to fill his sleep-logged, barely conscious mind. The press of Vincent's hard body along his. The sounds of Vincent's hoarse, desperate moans for more. The urgent thrusts of Vincent's arse against his pelvis as the orgasm built within his lover. He flexed his hand tucked under his pillow, the memory of his grip on Vincent's thigh still fresh on his palm.

He had watched Vincent climax countless times, but never like that. Every line in his powerful body lax yet thrumming with undeniable need. And the look on Vincent's face when the man's release claimed him—absolute bliss, undeniable awe, and unwavering trust. A look Oliver would never forget. Vincent had completely given himself over to him, placed his pleasure fully in Oliver's hands. And judging by the pearly white seed that had coated the man's rock-hard abdomen, Vincent thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

The smile teasing the edges of Oliver's lips broadened into a sleepy, triumphant grin.

He felt like a damn god.

He shifted his hips, pulling one knee up toward his side, in an effort to relieve some of the pressure on his erection trapped between his belly and the mattress. An erection that just last night had been buried hilt-deep in Vincent's no-longer-virgin arse.

His own arse tingled with awareness. Need threaded under his skin, seeped into his veins, building stronger with each passing second. Perhaps he could convince Vincent to repay the favor.

He reached out his senses, searching for the heat radiating from Vincent's body, yet...

Oliver opened his eyes and found the place next to him empty. He levered up onto his forearms. The white pillow still held the impression from Vincent's head, and the coverlet was rumpled as though someone—Vincent—had hastily flung it back into place after vacating the bed.

He could not recall Vincent getting up. Granted, Oliver had a tendency to sleep soundly, but Vincent always at least nudged him before he left the room, be it this room or his bedchamber at his bachelor apartments.

Perhaps the man had simply gone to relieve himself. But... He passed a hand over the sheets under the coverlet. Not a trace of warmth from Vincent's body. A glance over his shoulder toward the marble fireplace confirmed his suspicions.

Vincent had been gone for some time—so long, the fire he usually lit before leaving the bedchamber had burned down to faintly glowing embers.

Brow furrowed, he looked to the forest green drapes covering the window beside his bed. The gray daylight seeping through the breaks in the heavy damask made it virtually impossible to discern the time of day. He snatched his spectacles from the bedside table, slipped them on, and focused on the brass clock on the fireplace mantle.

A few minutes before nine.

He had not significantly overslept, which meant Vincent had left before dawn.

Unease nipped at his stomach. Flinging back the coverlet, he threw his legs over the side of the mattress. He grabbed his clothes from the floor and dressed. He did not bother to shave. He could see to the task later, after he located Vincent.

A check in Vincent's bedchamber and in the study did not turn up the man.

“Good morning, Lord Oliver.”

Oliver turned from the open study door to find the housekeeper walking down the corridor toward him. “A good morning to you as well. Have you seen Lord Vincent this morning?”

“No, I have not.” As she usually arrived at the house around eight, that meant Vincent had left well over an hour ago. “There's breakfast in the dining room. Kippers and eggs. And I just put out a fresh pot of coffee.” She smiled as though nothing made her happier than to prepare breakfast for him and Vincent.

But breakfast was the farthest thing from his mind at the moment. “Thank you, Mrs. Hollister. Would you be so kind as to keep it warm? Lord Vincent and I will be taking a late breakfast this morning.”

After grabbing his greatcoat from the closet off the entrance hall, he stepped out of the house. The morning air felt brisk and cold and held the threat of snow. Thick clouds hung heavy in the sky, blocking any attempts by the sun to provide even a hint of warmth. He buttoned his coat and tugged on his black leather gloves as he made his way around the side of the house toward the stables.

He found the stall belonging to Vincent's preferred mount—a big-boned black hunter—empty except for about half an armload of hay in the corner. The tall stallion had not even had a chance to finish his breakfast. The grooms who tended to the horses arrived quite early from the village, usually around dawn, if he remembered correctly.

Oliver wracked his brain, but he could not recall Vincent mentioning an errand or any obligation that would require him to leave the house so early. To his knowledge, he did not have any plans for the day save working in his study.

The unease nipping at his belly turned into a tight fist of worry. On any other morning, Vincent's absence would not rouse much more than mere curiosity. But last night had not been any other night.

“Good morning, Lord Oliver.”

Oliver turned from the empty stall. One of the grooms, a wiry young man with an unruly shock of pale blond hair, stood in the partially open door of a stall on the other side of the aisle. He had a pitchfork in one hand, as though he had been tidying the horse's stall.

“Morning,” Oliver said, with a tip of his head. He resisted to ask the groom if he had seen Vincent that morning, and if so, if he knew in what direction the man had gone. He had already asked Mrs. Hollister with no success. If he inquired with any more of the staff, he’d only end up inciting their curiosity as to why Oliver was so concerned about their master’s whereabouts so early in the day. In any case, it wasn’t as if Vincent was in the habit of keeping his servants abreast of his comings and goings.

“Do you have need of the carriage, my lord?”

“No, but could you saddle a horse for me?”

In no time at all, Vincent’s efficient groom saw to the task and brought the horse out into the stable yard. Oliver swung his leg over the chestnut gelding’s back, and with a nudge of his heels, the horse obediently slipped into an easy canter.

He took the dirt lane leading from the stables. The cold wind bit at his cheeks, yet Oliver did not tuck his chin into the collar of his greatcoat. He sat tall, his gaze sweeping the surrounding grounds, looking for any sign of the black hunter.

At the fork in the lane, he pulled the horse to a stop. Should he turn left or right? Where would Vincent have gone? About six months ago, Vincent had purchased the property adjoining his, making the Rotherham estate more than sizeable. The man could be anywhere. Perhaps he had been called to the coal mine? No, too early in the morning for that. Vincent would have nudged him awake if someone had called at the house before dawn.

The forest on the east side of the property? Hadn’t Vincent once mentioned a gamekeeper’s cottage? But as neither of them hunted, he hadn’t given the comment much notice. Perhaps the pond?

He turned the horse left and headed across the expanse of grass toward the west end of the property. During the summer months, he and Vincent occasionally indulged in a swim on hot afternoons. Highly doubtful he’d find Vincent swimming laps in the ice-cold pond, but he would check along the bank before going across to the forest and then on to the village.

When he had awoken that morning, nothing but the pleasures of the prior night had filled his mind. Yet now he could not forget that look in Vincent’s eyes when Oliver had leaned over him to kiss him. That moment after his spent cock had slipped from Vincent’s body. The dark brows furrowed the tiniest bit, a trace of hesitation in the brilliant blue depths of his eyes. His senses drenched with the heady sensation of having had Vincent, he had not given it any thought. Had simply snuggled up to Vincent’s side and promptly fallen asleep. Now though...

Did Vincent harbor regrets? For all Vincent’s physical strength and for all his successes in his business dealings, the man had a fragile sense of self. He did not have Oliver’s rock-solid acceptance of who and what he was. He could have sworn Vincent seemed ready to fully relinquish control and take their relationship to the next step. But had Oliver pushed him too soon? Should he have continued to hold back? Should he have waited until Vincent broached the subject of his own accord?

His lover had a tendency to analyze every situation. To turn a matter over and over in his mind. But intimacy wasn’t a business deal. He truly feared if he allowed Vincent to overthink last night, Vincent would quickly turn even the tiniest smidge of a doubt into a full-blown regret. Given what hour Oliver could discern Vincent had left the house, the man already had far too much time with nothing but his thoughts.

He nudged the horse for more speed. The chestnut’s easy stride lengthened to a ground-covering gallop. The worries tumbled about in his head, growing stronger and stronger as he traveled across the property, every sense attuned for any sign of Vincent.

A sigh of relief expanded his chest at the sight of the black horse tied to a low branch of a tall tree near the pond. The stallion turned his head to look over his hip as Oliver slowed his horse to a walk. Ears pricked in attention, the animal nickered softly.

Oliver dismounted and tied his horse’s reins to a branch on the other side of the tree. Sitting on the bank of the pond, Vincent did not look over his shoulder as Oliver approached. A breeze ruffled a few strands of his neatly cropped, dark hair. Even with the greatcoat broadening his frame, Oliver could detect the slump hunching his usually straight shoulders.

All traces of the relief at finding Vincent vanished.

Hell, he *had* pushed Vincent for more than he’d been ready to give.

But he couldn’t take back last night. It had happened, and he could not change it. The best he could do was help Vincent to accept it. Hopefully—damnation, he hoped with all his heart—Vincent loved him enough not to allow his insecurities to come between them again. He could not go back to how it had once been—Vincent keeping him at arm’s distance, holding his heart back, far from Oliver. Vincent giving his body but not his love. He could not survive that sense of...isolation again.

Without a word, Oliver settled next to him. Vincent’s gaze was fixed straight ahead on the pale blue surface of the pond, yet Oliver had no doubt the man knew exactly who sat beside him.

His heart heavy in his chest, he waited a long moment. Waited patiently for Vincent to speak or at least acknowledge him in some fashion.

Vincent dropped his attention to his bent knee, which was drawn up, the other leg stretched out before him. The furrow pulling his brows deepened. Still though, not a word passed the tight line of his lips.

Dark smudges underscored his eyes, and stubble darkened his usually clean-shaven jaw. Instead of a crisp, neat Mathematical, he had tied his cravat in a simple knot. If Oliver wasn’t mistaken, Vincent had donned the same deep brown trousers Oliver had pulled down his strong legs less than twelve hours ago. He’d hazard a guess the coat, waistcoat, and shirt hidden beneath the black greatcoat were also the same ones the man had worn yesterday evening.

“Did you get much sleep last night?” he asked.

A long pause, and then Vincent shook his head, slow and reluctant. “Don’t believe I got any.”

The knot clutching his stomach tightened to a viselike hold. “You do know I love you?” At Vincent’s single nod, he asked, doing his best to keep the all-consuming worry from showing itself, “Did you at least enjoy last night?”

Vincent looked up from his study of his knee. “You doubt it? I climaxed with your cock in my arse.” And his arse was still a bit sore.

the ache a constant reminder of exactly where Oliver's pretty cock had been.

Intent and probing, Oliver swept his dark gaze over Vincent's face. "So why does that bother you?"

He focused on a spot over Oliver's shoulder and dragged a hand across the back of his neck. Trust Oliver to go directly to the heart of the matter. "It shouldn't." He heaved a sigh. "But it does for some reason."

How could he explain that sense of utter vulnerability? Giving responsibility for his pleasure so completely to another was definitely a new experience. Last night he had felt connected to Oliver in a whole new way. And it frightened him.

"I will not deny I had a very good evening." The long black fan of Oliver's lashes drifted down. A smile pulled the edges of his lips. But when he looked back to Vincent, his gaze was once again somber, begging Vincent to confide in him. "But if you weren't comfortable with it, then we don't have to do it again. Honestly, Vincent. My love for you is not contingent on you bending over for me." He laid a comforting hand over Vincent's, which was braced at his side in the grass. "I know you love me. You don't need to prove it that way."

Vincent's lips curved in a weary half smile. "I know." Ridiculous to even have this discussion. Oliver gave himself up to him on a regular basis—his lover's more than obvious enjoyment shouted loud and clear he had no issues with it. So why did Vincent?

Not because he was still in denial. Over a year ago, he had finally stopped fighting himself and fully accepted that he preferred men. And above all, that he loved Oliver. He trusted the man implicitly. So much so he had given himself over to his lover, let the man have his way with him. Something, not that long ago, he would have never allowed. Yet just last night, he had done so without a second thought.

It wasn't that the experience totally put him off the idea. Not something he wanted to become a habit or even a somewhat frequent activity. He enjoyed dominating Oliver far too much. Nor did he worry Oliver now wanted to completely flip their dynamic in the bedchamber. The man's soul truly craved submitting to him. But every once in a long while, he could now see himself wanting more than Oliver's eager submission. Yet...

His gaze dropped to the jade cravat pin affixed to the untidy knot of Oliver's cravat, and the answer that had eluded him since Oliver had fallen asleep beside him last night hit him.

Last night had made him realize how much he truly loved Oliver. How much he needed him, and not just for evenings together to share a supper or as a more than eager bed partner willing to submit to Vincent's every whim.

He needed Oliver in his life. Needed the man at his side, and not only as he was now, but until the end of his days.

Now that the marquisate had a new heir, the threat of having to marry had disappeared. His lover could remain at his side forever, yet the knowledge did not offer the comfort it should. In fact, it had become the source of the fear that had settled in the pit of his stomach, building stronger as the night had given way to the dawn. It made him acutely aware of how lucky they were Grafton had a son. What if it had been a daughter? What if his brother's wife could not have children? What if some unknown force tore them apart? Their relationship was against the law, after all. What if something happened to Oliver? Would he end up like the Widow Middleton, the man he loved ripped from his life far too soon? Accidents did happen. For all he knew, today could be their last day together.

The fear flared from his belly, an ice-cold, prickly rush that encompassed his entire being. His heartbeat stumbled, his breath hitching in his chest.

"What would you have done if I had been forced to find a wife?" The question tumbled from his lips before it formed in his head.

Oliver frowned. "What does it matter now? Grafton has his heir."

"Please, Oliver. Answer me. Would you have stayed with me?" He needed to know. Needed the comfort of the knowledge that Oliver would have stayed with him, though he had a very strong suspicion Oliver's answer would offer no comfort.

His lover's gaze, heavy with regret, remained locked with his. "No. I could not have shared you. I could not have welcomed you with open arms when you came to me smelling of her."

"But I would have married out of duty and nothing more. I would not have loved her. I love you." *My heart belongs to you.*

Oliver shook his head. "I know. Still, I could not have been the secret you kept from your wife."

"But we already are each other's secrets."

"Yes. Though it would have been different, and you know that. You would have gone to balls with her, went to the theater, discussed your day with her, gone home to her, laid between her legs. Had children with her. I could never share you like that, Vincent. It would have destroyed me."

And it would have destroyed Vincent in the process. He looked down, avoiding Oliver's gaze, and adjusted the length of his greatcoat, draped over his leg. "I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you," he admitted. He had a brief taste of it once before, and it had been *agony* not to have Oliver in his life.

With a gloved hand, Oliver cupped his cheek and brought his chin up, refusing to allow him to hide. He cursed the chill temperature, needing to feel the comforting warmth of Oliver's palm.

"You would have been all right, Vincent. You would have succeeded in marriage, just as you succeed in everything you do."

Oliver's confidence in him was staggering at times but, in this instance, entirely misplaced. Vincent made to shake his head, but Oliver held him still. "Would you have been all right?"

That gloved hand slipped off his jaw. "No. You are the only man I have ever loved. I could never love another. But as you no longer need to marry, we do not need to discuss this. So let's not speak of it."

"If you insist." Vincent let out a heavy sigh. "But I would not have been 'all right,' not if I didn't have you," he grumbled.

A little indulgent smile tipped the edges of Oliver's lips. A smile that indicated Oliver's confidence was still misplaced. But he knew he would not convince the man otherwise right now.

Oliver's gloved hand came back up to cup his jaw. Leaning close, he pulled Vincent down for a kiss. Just one brush of his lips provided the comfort Vincent sorely needed, vanquishing almost every trace of the fear, but not all of it. A tiny tendril remained, but he pushed it aside, focused on kissing the man beside him.

He reached up and threaded his fingers into the wind-tousled waves of Oliver's hair. With a firm tug on the strands, he slanted his lips over Oliver's and pushed his tongue inside, demanding entry. Oliver moaned into his mouth and shifted closer, pressing full against Vincent's side.

Lust shot straight to his groin. His cock hardened, pushing at the falls of his trousers. But before the lust grabbed hold of all his senses, he pulled back just enough to whisper against Oliver's lips, "I never said never again."

Oliver's eyes flared, and a moan, this one thin and threadbare yet thick with excitement, shook his throat.

Lest the man misunderstood his intentions, Vincent gave Oliver's hair another tug. "But not now, boy," he said, as firm as that tug.

His lover instantly yielded. The dark fan of his lashes fluttered behind his spectacles, brushing the curve of his high cheekbones. A whimper slid past his parted lips.

The man was so beautiful. So perfect. The other half of his soul.

His heart clenched, the fear flaring to grip him anew. Needing the lust to mask it again, he slanted his lips harshly over Oliver's. Let the silken depths of his mouth, the sweet sounds of his sighs, and the hot pants of his breaths clinging to Vincent's cheek command all his attention.

Rubbing against Vincent's side, Oliver shifted closer. He let out a little grunt of frustration, then pushed up onto his knees. Vincent felt the man's hands move between them.

A shrug of his shoulders and Oliver's greatcoat slipped from his arms. He dragged his lips along Vincent's jaw. "Now, Vincent. I need you now." Desperation soaked his plea.

Vincent glanced down. The waistband of Oliver's trousers was bunched just above his knees, exposing the golden skin of his compact yet sleek thighs. The flushed head of his cock poked out from under the hem of his white shirt. No doubt at all what Oliver wanted, and Vincent was more than willing to give it to him. Hell, he *needed* to give it to him. Needed to have the man beneath him, compliant and desperate, wanting only him. Yet...

Vincent pulled his gaze from Oliver to scan the surrounding grounds. Nothing but grassy fields and the two horses tied to the tree. The pond's slight downward sloping bank offered some measure of concealment, but he could still see if someone approached. Not that anyone was apt to. They were on his property, and the servants had no cause to travel so far as the pond, especially on such a cold day.

Reassured, Vincent nodded. "Get down on your stomach, but don't remove any more clothes." The lust and need drumming through his veins provided its own brand of warmth, but doubtful enough to ward off the frigid morning air. The last thing he wanted was for Oliver to catch a chill.

Oliver quickly moved onto his belly, his discarded greatcoat a rumpled heap beneath him. Upper body braced on a bent elbow, he reached back with his other hand and tugged at Vincent's wrist. "Now. *Please*, Vincent."

"You want me? Then prepare yourself."

Without a trace of hesitation, Oliver bit the end of one fingertip and hastily pulled his hand free of the black leather glove. He stuck his fingers into his mouth, sucking on them. Canting his hips up, he reached back to push two digits between his cheeks. A wince flickered across his brow. Then he let out a sigh of undeniable pleasure.

Vincent pushed the tails of Oliver's coat to his waist and tucked the end of his shirt under the hem of his waistcoat, baring the man more fully to his view. He shifted onto his knees, his gaze never leaving the sight of Oliver working another finger beside the other two and thrusting between the round globes of his arse. He flicked the length of his greatcoat behind him, unbuttoned the placket of his trousers, and pulled out his erection. After removing his gloves, he flung them aside and spit on his palm. He slicked his prick, then spit once more onto his palm and took care to liberally coat the head of his cock. Oil would serve them better, but he had none with him. The thought of fucking Oliver had not entered his mind when he left the house, but it sure as hell did fill it at the moment.

He straddled Oliver's thighs, tugged his hips up to the necessary angle, and swatted at Oliver's hand. On the next thrust, Oliver slipped his fingers free to pull back his cheek, exposing that perfect, tight hole, the skin glistening with moisture.

Vincent positioned the spit-slicked head of his cock at his entrance and pushed inside on one long stroke, settling hilt-deep.

"Ah, *yes*." Oliver arched beneath him, pushing his arse back against Vincent, wanting more.

Vincent gave it to him. Not even allowing a moment for Oliver's body to adjust to the invasion, he pulled back and snapped his hips forward, slamming hard and fast into Oliver. Tight muscles gripped his length in the most decadent of caresses, pulling the climax down his spine with surprising speed.

Head bowed, Oliver clutched at the grass, fingers digging into the soil. Braced over his lover, Vincent pounded into him—rough, hard, and frantic. He could feel the tension building within Oliver, hear it in his gasping pleas for more.

The orgasm clutched his ballocks in a fist. "Stroke your cock. Come for me," he urged, needing Oliver to come *now*.

With a nod of his bowed head, Oliver worked a hand beneath his belly to stroke his prick in rhythm to Vincent's thrusts. Those pleas hitched in his throat. "More, Vincent. *Please*. I...I—"

Oliver let out a shout. The climax gripping him sparked Vincent's. On a low growl, he slammed his cock into Oliver with all the force of his lower body, spilling deep within him.

Panting for breath, he dropped his forehead to Oliver's shoulder. His pulse pounded through his veins, echoed in his ears. He took a moment to simply bask in the bliss drenching his senses, his muscles finally lax from the tension that had gripped him for seemingly endless hours. Then he gathered his tired muscles and shifted off Oliver to tuck his spent prick back into his trousers.

Oliver rolled onto his back and gifted him with the most beautiful smile, happy and content and full of love for him. Vincent could not have stopped the smile from curving his own lips even if he tried.

"Love you," Oliver said, voice scratchy, as though he'd just woken from a deep slumber.

"Love you too. Now up with you. It's damn cold, and I don't want you to catch a chill."



Oliver rolled his eyes but did as Vincent bid. As they made their way back to the horses, Oliver asked, "Any other plans for the day?"

After the last few hours alone by the pond and a sleepless night, it felt as though it was midevening and not midmorning. The thought of crawling into bed with Oliver, holding the man close, and sleeping the day away held much appeal. But he could not ignore the press of obligations. In any case, lazing the day away in bed with Oliver would certainly draw Mrs. Hollister's attention. He wished he did not have to hide his love for the man. It just didn't seem...right.

Pushing aside the flare of irritation, he said, "I need to see to the post."

Oliver swung up onto his horse. Gathering the reins, he speared Vincent with a frown. "Can't it wait until tomorrow? You should relax, get some rest. Perhaps read one of the books lining your study walls."

The mention of books reminded him he had a couple of letters to write as well. "I won't be at my desk all day. And yes, I need to see to the post today, as we need to depart for London tomorrow."

Oliver's frown deepened.

"You need to get back to your shop."

"Well, yes," he conceded. "It's just...I like being with you here."

Vincent swung up into the saddle and turned his horse from the tree. "As I you." He didn't relish the thought of returning to London, to early mornings spent slipping out of Oliver's bachelor apartments versus simply walking a few steps to his own bedchamber. But given Oliver's bookshop and his grandmother, and Vincent's business obligations, spending all their time in Rotherham wasn't an option.

He held back the sigh and nudged his black hunter into a canter. As they traveled back to the house, he could not help but think about those two letters he needed to write and why they were even necessary.

His gaze went to Oliver riding beside him. Even at their pace, Vincent could make out the frayed cuffs of his sleeves and the tattered hem of his greatcoat resting on the chestnut's back. To Vincent's knowledge, Oliver had owned that same coat since he was seventeen.

Unwilling to endure another round of questions from Oliver, he kept the frown from his lips and turned his attention back to the grassy field in front of him. But Oliver's tattered coat did not leave his mind.

## Chapter Seven

“Are you certain, Lord Vincent? This is a significant change and one which should not be taken lightly.”

“Yes, I am quite certain.” Vincent glared at his solicitor. He had given the matter more than considerable thought over the past week, since he and Oliver had left Rotherham. Nor was he a simpleton who did not understand the ramifications of the changes he had requested.

Efficient and trustworthy, Mr. Barrington had proven himself more than competent at managing the various legal matters that arose from Vincent’s investments. The man usually did exactly as Vincent asked. But if the solicitor questioned him again, he would have no qualm taking his business elsewhere. The solicitor had no place concerning himself with why Vincent wished the changes made. The man need only to see them done.

Mr. Barrington’s attention dropped to the instructions Vincent had provided. A notched V pulled his brows. Then he looked back up at him. His eyes flared the tiniest bit before he tipped his head. “As you wish, my lord.” He reached for his pen and dipped the tip in the pewter inkwell on the edge of his desk. “The main Rotherham property was purchased from and not gifted from your father. I need to review the deed, but there should not be any issue with a transfer of the property.”

“I’ll have a footman deliver the deed later today.”

Another crisp nod. With a quick scratch of his pen, Barrington made a notation on Vincent’s instructions. “Then I’ll have everything I need to make the changes.” His gaze swept over the paper once more. “No, I do have a question. Would you like a one shilling clause added for Lord Grafton?”

“Why ever would I add that? Seems rather rude and deliberate.”

“Exactly the reason to add it. One shilling clauses are commonly used to ensure a family member is aware they were not forgotten but deliberately omitted, thus removing grounds that the writer was not of sound mind and simply forgot the individual.”

“Then yes, add the clause, but make it one thousand pounds.” He wanted no slight against Grafton. Though not close to him, the man *was* his brother. “If there are any other possible grounds for contention, please make me aware of them. I want them all removed.”

Another scratch of Barrington’s pen. “If anything else arises, I will send one of my secretaries with a note. But please understand that while I will do my best, the only way to remove all possible grounds for contention is to have a blank document. A disgruntled party may go so far as to fabricate claims. The grounds may ultimately be judged without merit, but they could prove costly to defend against, never mind the resulting delay in the execution of your wishes.”

Vincent frowned. Highly doubtful Grafton would go to such lengths, especially when Vincent had made a point to include an annuity for the man’s son, but the unknown held far more risk than he was willing to blindly accept. He might be comfortable with risk when it came to investments, but definitely not when it involved the well-being of the man he loved. He pulled out his pocket watch. Not yet eleven o’clock. If he left Barrington’s office shortly, he would have time to stop at the bank before his next appointment.

“Understood. I simply ask you do your best,” he said, slipping his watch back into his waistcoat pocket.

“Of course, my lord.” Barrington tipped his head. Vincent knew the man would do no less, yet he wanted nothing left to chance. “When do you need this completed?”

“By tomorrow afternoon.” He wanted it done and in hand before Oliver arrived for supper tomorrow.

“Then you can expect it by three in the afternoon.”

A tiny bit of the tension that had gripped him for days eased. Satisfied Barrington would complete the task to his satisfaction, Vincent stood from the chair, gave his coat a tug to straighten it, and bid his solicitor good day.

\* \* \*

Oliver crossed out the figure at the bottom of the account ledger. After studying the column of numbers for a moment, he identified the cause of his error. He’d forgotten to carry the one. He had just squeezed the correct sum in the small space beside the incorrect one when a knock sounded on the back door.

Setting down his pencil, he rolled his shoulders, the joints popping and cracking. He was sorely in need of an interruption, but he’d nearly finished with the pile of the prior day’s receipts. If he did not record them all that evening, then they would be waiting for him tomorrow, along with a new pile from today. Not something to look forward to. So the sooner he could get through them, the sooner he could meet Vincent for supper.

He pushed from his desk and made his way across the small back office of his bookshop. A chill gust of evening air blew in as he opened the door, revealing the blacksmith’s son.

“Good evening, Lord Oliver,” Joseph Young said, with a deferential tug on the brim of his hat. Oliver had briefly met the strapping young man when he had gone to the Rotherham inn’s livery to arrange for the books he’d purchased from Mrs. Middleton to be delivered to London. “I’ve got your crates. Where would you like them?”

“Over there will do.” Oliver motioned in the direction of a barren spot along the wall. “Any trouble on the journey?”

“No. None at all. Took a bit of time, though. Couldn’t push the horses too fast, considering the weight and all. But the weather was decent, so the roads were in as good of shape as can be expected this time of year.” He shifted his weight and shoved his gloved hands in the pockets of his overcoat. “I’ll see to those crates then.” With another tip of his head, he turned on his heel.

Oliver left the door open and settled at the desk once again. Picking up his pencil, he went back to work as Joseph Young trudged back into the office, setting a crate down with a *thump*. In the four days Oliver and Vincent had been back in London, he had only seen Vincent on one occasion. His lover had shown up at his apartments late in the evening. Had not stayed long. Barely made it onto his bed. Well, Oliver made it onto the bed; Vincent had not. But no bother. He'd take a quick tumble from Vincent over none at all. And before Vincent departed, he had extended an invitation to supper at his town house for that evening.

After a long absence from Town, it wasn't uncommon for business affairs to occupy Vincent. But four days had passed, and Oliver was quite looking forward to spending some time with him tonight. Time that included conversations and good food, and not merely a few moments—albeit scorching hot and very pleasurable moments—in the bedchamber. Though if the evening ended with both of them on Oliver's old wooden bed, then all the better.

A little smile of anticipation flittered on his lips as he recorded the receipts into the ledger. The shuffle of footsteps behind him was broken by a *thump* as Joseph deposited each crate on the floor. A draft of cold air slid around him, slowly seeping through his coat and negating the effects of the meager fire in the small hearth. With a scratch of his pencil, Oliver made another correction and then flipped to the last receipt. He had just recorded the sum when another *thump* caused his pencil to pause.

He glanced over his shoulder to the crates along the wall. Five? Hadn't Joseph only packed four? Had he selected more books than he realized?

With a shuffle of footsteps, Joseph reappeared. He had discarded his overcoat at some point, and his muscles bulged beneath the sleeves of his white shirt as he carried another crate into the office.

Six?

No, that wasn't correct. He pushed from the desk. Cold air snapped against his cheeks as he went outside. Twilight was full upon the city, casting the narrow alley in dark, heavy shadows. The golden light streaming from the open door illuminated the team of two large draft horses hitched to a wagon. Crossing his arms over his chest to ward off the cold, Oliver went around to the back of the wagon and counted the crates as Joseph grabbed another to haul into the office.

Twelve crates. Nineteen total? No possible way he had accidentally selected that many books. Oliver dragged a hand through his hair. Clearly Joseph had made a mistake. Damnation. He had been very specific with Mr. Young, even left him with written instructions.

What must Mrs. Middleton think? Joseph had cleared out her library, and Oliver had not even paid for a quarter of it. Now he would have to sort through it all, find the books he did purchase, and have the remainder returned. And he could not leave them crated. They needed to be returned to the library's shelves. Oliver shook his head. He'd have to take the books back himself and try to explain the mishap. Another long journey to Rotherham lay ahead of him. He let out a heavy sigh. Highly doubtful Vincent would go with him. They had just come back to Town.

What a bloody mess.

A now familiar shuffle sounded behind him. Oliver tamped down the frustration and turned from the wagon. "Joseph, there has been a misunderstanding. You were only to deliver the books I left stacked on Mr. Middleton's desk."

A look of puzzlement twisted Joseph's face, flushed with exertion. "I was to deliver them all here." He reached for his overcoat on the side rail of the wagon, pulled a fold of crumpled papers from a pocket, and handed it to Oliver.

He smoothed the papers flat and angled them toward the light streaming from the back door. The first contained his own instructions. The second... He recognized the tidy yet masculine script before he reached the signature.

*Dear Mr. Young—*

*In addition to the crates arranged by Lord Oliver Marsden, please have the balance of the books in Mrs. Middleton's library crated and delivered to the same address. A sum has been enclosed to cover the additional expense.*

*—Lord Vincent Prescott*

Annoyance surged within him. Paper crinkled as he balled the letters in his fist. Significantly more than presumptuous of Vincent to make such arrangements and not inform him. It wasn't as if Vincent did not know where to find him, and they had seen each other a couple of days ago, never mind the fact they had traveled together in the same carriage for three days on the journey from Rotherham to London. Many opportunities for Vincent to discuss the books with him. Yet he chose not to.

Typical of Vincent. Arranging things as *he* saw fit, without bothering to consult others. Hell, it likely did not even occur to Vincent that he should consult Oliver. And where the hell would Oliver store all these books? They all could not fit in the shop.

Letting out a frustrated grunt, he dragged his hand through his hair.

"Lord Oliver, did I read the instructions incorrectly? Father said to simply deliver the lot of them here," Joseph said, and not without a good measure of hesitation.

Briefly closing his eyes, Oliver took a moment to gather his composure. Wouldn't do to vent his frustration on the wrong target. Joseph had done nothing wrong, save follow Vincent's instructions. Instructions the man had no right to give.

"No, the fault does not lie with you. It is I who misunderstood." Never should have even mentioned the library to Vincent. With another shake of his head, he motioned to the crates stacked in the back of the wagon. "You can bring the rest inside."

As Joseph hauled the crates from the wagon, Oliver went through the office to the front section of the shop to help Mr. Wallace close for the evening. After he bid good night to the elderly man, he returned to the office to find it near overrun with crates. At the sight of Joseph standing by the door with more than a hint of worry pulling his brow, Oliver kept the curse from making its way past his lips.

"That's all of them. Is there anything else you need, my lord?"

"No. That will be all." Oliver reached behind a stack of crates and grabbed his greatcoat from the hook on the wall. "Thank you, Joseph. And my apologies for the misunderstanding."

He followed the young man out the back door and bid him good night. Joseph settled on the driver's bench, and with a soft click to the horses, he guided the team down the alley, the rattle of the empty wagon echoing off the brick walls of the surrounding buildings.

“Damn you, Vincent,” Oliver muttered as he locked the door. In the back of his mind, behind the ever-mounting frustration, resided the knowledge he should not feel so annoyed with Vincent. The man was simply being generous. Those fifteen unexpected crates had not come from a desire to shove his wealth in Oliver’s face or to make him feel inadequate because his little bookshop could not afford more. But...

Bloody hell. Why couldn’t Vincent at least mention such matters to him?

Tugging on his gloves, he went down the alley. Those not-so-subtle pieces of advice that screamed Vincent’s doubts in his abilities, the condescending arched brow of silent disagreement, the way Vincent assumed more often than he asked, the damn black coat Vincent had felt compelled to purchase for him, and now the books...

*Enough.*

This time Vincent had gone too far.

\* \* \*

“His lordship is in the study.”

Oliver handed his greatcoat to Vincent’s butler.

The butler’s thin lips curled just the tiniest bit as he took Oliver’s coat. Tall and slim and with his spine ramrod straight, the older man appeared as though he only reluctantly allowed Oliver and his old coat, the hem frayed and mud flecked, into his master’s stately town house. After countless visits over the past year, Oliver had decided it was simply the man’s way.

Yet tonight it rankled. The cold, haughty stare abraded the nerves already bristling with affront. So much so that Oliver turned on his heel, dismissing the butler without a word.

His footsteps clicked, quick and determined, on the pristine gray marble floor as he made his way across the entrance hall. Taking a familiar path, he went up the stairs to Vincent’s study. Without bothering to knock, he opened the first door on the right and flicked it shut behind him.

“Good evening, Oliver.” Tucked behind his massive desk, Vincent made a notation on the paper before him.

“It would have been much appreciated if you had informed me you purchased the remainder of Middleton’s library before the crates arrived.”

“They arrived. Good,” Vincent said, looking up from the paper.

Oliver stopped before Vincent’s desk. “Good? That is all you have to say?”

A furrow of confusion briefly pulled Vincent’s brow. A furrow that only served as fodder for the frustration churning in Oliver’s belly.

“Did the shipment arrive intact?”

Oliver ignored Vincent’s question. “How much did you pay for them?” Vincent likely would not have known the true value of the books. The man had not even laid eyes on them—Oliver knew it as fact, for after that morning by the pond, Vincent had not left the country house until they had departed for London. Hopefully he had not underpaid, though more than likely he overpaid in a blatant show of the size of his bank account.

“A more than generous price.”

He clenched his hands at his sides. “How generous, Vincent?” It should not irritate him so much. Not as if the money had gone to him. Still...

“The price matters not, Oliver,” Vincent replied, crisp and succinct, as if they discussed some business transaction.

“Yes. It does.”

Vincent held up a hand. “Please, don’t protest. While it was obvious you wanted the books, I purchased them to assist Mrs. Middleton.”

Completely altruistic reason, Oliver couldn’t help but concede. He himself had wished he had the means to offer the poor widow assistance. Yet it did not excuse Vincent for completely neglecting to mention the purchase to him, let alone ask if he wanted the books for the shop.

“My lack of funds wasn’t the only reason I limited the purchase.” Leave it to Vincent to assume money was his only impediment. “The shop could not hold all the books even if I had the means. Hell, I have so many crates stacked in the office I can barely make my way to my desk.”

“Then keep them here if you are in need of space. My attic is more than sufficient to accommodate them.”

Oliver scowled. The man had a bloody answer for everything. “Should not have to keep them in crates. They deserve to be shelved.”

Vincent arched a brow, displaying a hint of incredulous exasperation and making Oliver feel like an irrational, demanding child, grasping at anything to sustain his protests. But damnation, he wasn’t a child, and he would damn well tell Vincent where he could take his condescending attitude if he did not put a stop to it very soon.

“If that is your primary concern, then I suggest you invest in enlarging the shop.”

“I wouldn’t need to enlarge the shop if you hadn’t purchased the books without my consent.” He slammed his hands on the desk. “It’s *my* shop, Vincent. Not yours!”

Flicking his pen down, Vincent got to his feet. “Enough, Oliver.” The words snapped between them.

*Enough?* A growl rumbled his throat. “Don’t you bloody condescend to me.”

Briefly closing his eyes, Vincent took a deep breath, his broad chest expanding and contracting. A clear attempt to gather his temper. “I am doing nothing of the sort,” he said with forced calm. “My apologies if it appears as such. Now please, stop your protests. The books are yours to do with as you see fit. Sell them, store them, give them away. It matters not to me. They are simply the by-product of my desire to help a widowed young woman who, for all appearances, had no one else able to offer her assistance.”

Oliver's hands clenched at his sides again. Obviously Vincent didn't understand the source of his anger. And in typical Vincent fashion, he felt himself justified in his actions, and that was enough for him. Discussion over.

Hell no. Not tonight. But before Oliver could press his point again, Vincent continued.

"However there is something I do need to discuss with you. Likely should discuss it later, since you are not pleased with me at the moment, but I will not have it delayed."

Vincent picked up a neat fold of papers from his desk and speared Oliver with a stare, so pensive and solemn, so very grave, it took him aback. The ever-mounting frustration stuttered to a halt.

"Mrs. Middleton's situation has been weighing heavily on my mind," Vincent said, his gaze boring into Oliver's. "It was inexcusably irresponsible of Middleton to have not made arrangements for his wife. While he certainly did not expect to meet with an accident at such a young age, accidents do happen. They are beyond our control. But by making her his wife, he made a lifetime commitment to her. If he had cared for her in the least bit, he should have chosen her security over something as frivolous as books."

Frivolous? His livelihood was now frivolous? Oliver opened his mouth, the protest on his tongue, but Vincent held up a hand to stay him.

"They were not the man's business. They were an indulgence. Not as irresponsible as gambling one's fortune away—he at least left her with assets—but a selfish indulgence nonetheless." Vincent dropped his attention to the papers in his hand. He ran a contemplative fingertip along the crease. "I have been busier than usual these past few days, but with good cause. When I returned to Town, I met with my solicitor and banker. I have revised my will." He held out the fold of papers to Oliver. "Copies for you. Do you have a safe?"

Stunned by Vincent's gravity and not quite certain how the man's will related to him, Oliver shook his head and took the proffered papers.

"Then have the bank keep them for you. You should read them before you lock them up. If you have any questions, simply ask, but it is relatively straightforward. There's an annuity for Grafton's son once he reaches his majority, a bit for Grafton as well, and pensions for my staff, but the bulk of my estate will go to you. I have also set up an account in your name. The papers are there, as well."

Oliver's mind seized with shock. He flipped through the papers, found the ones from the bank. His eyes flared. "Thirty thousand pounds?" The sheer enormity of the sum left him reeling.

"You can do with it as you please. Enlarge the shop, if you so desire, or purchase an apartment in a better area of town. But I would hope you don't spend it all in a great rush. In the event something would happen to me, I want you at the very least to have the account. I want to make certain you are provided for. I would have done nothing less for a wife, and therefore I will see to it and more for you."

Oliver's bruised pride reared its head, demanding to be heard. "I'm *not* your wife, Vincent." The size of his bank account might be beyond paltry in comparison to Vincent's, but he wasn't some helpless woman, unable to fend for herself. Hell, if nothing else, Oliver had shoved the proof up Vincent's no-longer-virgin arse a week ago. If the man needed a reminder, he was more than happy to bend him over the desk and oblige him.

"I'm aware of that, Oliver." His gaze darted over Oliver's shoulder. "And please, keep your voice down," he admonished.

Paper crinkled harshly as his fist closed around Vincent's will and the damn papers from the bank. He'd bloody well shout if that was what it would take to get through Vincent's thick skull. The will was one thing, but the account?

Impotent frustration pounded through his veins, but when he next spoke, his voice was low, determined, backed by iron. "I have told you before, I don't want your money. I don't want new apartments, and I prefer my shop just the way it is. I don't need you to take care of me. I'm quite capable of doing it on my own."

"I'm aware of that as well," Vincent replied, resolute and unbending. "But I want you to have the account."

Oliver shook his head. "No, I refuse to accept it."

"Please, don't argue with me. It's done. Just accept it. You needn't even thank me."

"Exactly! It's done. You made the decision for me. Yet again."

There was that flicker of confusion across Vincent's brow again.

"You don't understand, do you? Just because I submit to you in the bedchamber does not mean I submit to you outside of it. You have no right to make decisions that impact me without discussing them with me beforehand. I saw you two nights ago, and you mentioned not a word of your meetings with your solicitor or banker or the damn books." He lifted the papers in his hand. "Yet another glaring example of the fact you don't see me as an equal."

There it was—the crux of the problem.

He had thought Vincent had finally abandoned his attempts to push money on him. It had been a year since he last found not-so-random coins on his dresser or stray pound notes in a coat pocket. Vincent no longer outright offered to manage Oliver's investments or made comments about the state of his lodgings. The man had grown more subtle, making it easy for Oliver to brush the instances aside as minor annoyances that came part and parcel with a strong man like Vincent. Yet behind all those condescending arched brows and Vincent's penchant for assumption lurked the hard truth of their relationship.

Vincent did not see him as an equal.

Tonight's events illustrated the fact so loud and clear, Oliver could no longer turn a blind eye.

To be faced with the truth, to actually hold proof of it in his hand, hurt more than he could have imagined.

And he'd actually rendered Vincent mute and slack-jawed from confusion. *Bloody hell*. Not a good sign at all.

Oliver dragged a hand through his hair, then shook his head. "I truly wonder if you can ever understand." He tossed the papers onto Vincent's desk and turned on his heel. He needed to leave before he said something he would truly regret. And he needed time to think, to answer the question that now filled his head.

Knowing the truth of how his lover viewed him, could he stay with Vincent?

## Chapter Eight

Heart heavy with pain and crushing disappointment and more than a lingering trace of frustration, Oliver reached for the brass doorknob of Vincent's study. A large hand closed around his upper arm. The grip hard and harsh, long fingers digging into his muscles.

"No."

The hoarse, desperate urgency stopped Oliver short. He looked over his shoulder.

All the color had drained from Vincent's face, his eyes wide with absolute shock and horror. For a long moment, he moved not a muscle. Oliver swore even his chest had gone still.

"Vincent?"

The man's gaze dropped to his hold on Oliver's arm. He blinked, then released him. Vincent brought his arm slowly to his side and flexed his shaking hand. His lashes swept down. "Please don't leave me again."

Oliver turned from the door. "I'm not leaving you. Just leaving your house for a bit. I'm frustrated and hurt and..." That look of utter fear had not lessened one bit, so he reiterated, "I'm *not* leaving you, Vincent." He hoped to God he had not just lied. With all his heart, he prayed it would not come to that, but he had a sinking feeling it just might. He let out a weary sigh. "You truly don't understand why I'm upset, do you?"

"Of course I do," Vincent grumbled. "The books. The account. You don't like it when I help you."

"But do you understand why?" Perhaps he could explain it a different way. "Success comes easy to you. You always earned the best marks in school. Anything you touch turns to gold or coal. You have always been well respected with a strong family name behind you. Whereas I'm...I'm the opposite of you. I had to work hard just so I wouldn't get sent down from school. Nothing has ever come easy for me."

"You let me help you at school. Why won't you allow me to help you now?"

"Because I'm a man now, and I want to do things on my own. Because I need to do things on my own."

"But you accept help from Mr. Wallace," Vincent countered. "You've had the bookshop a year and never once expressed anything but appreciation for the fact he's remained on to assist you."

"He's not you, Vincent. You're the man I love. Your opinion means a great deal to me, and I need to feel you believe I'll succeed. I can't help but feel every time you offer assistance that it's your way of telling me I'm failing. That I'm not capable. That you *believe* I'm not capable."

Vincent scowled. "I have never said you were not capable."

"You have not said it explicitly, but it's how you make me feel." Hell, did he want too much? Vincent loved him. Spent time with him outside of a bedchamber. Didn't make him feel as though mere association with him was a dirty secret he needed to hide. Shouldn't that be enough?

There had been a time when it would have been more than enough. But that time had long passed. Deep down, he knew it would eventually ruin their relationship. And damnation, after all they had been through together, he deserved Vincent's respect. He needed the man he loved to see him as an equal, yet could he?

Above all, above the differences in their bank accounts and their status in society, Oliver truly feared the sheer fact he submitted to him in the bedchamber made it impossible for Vincent to see him as anything but someone who needed a strong, steady hand to guide him.

Oliver sagged against the door and shook his head.

"Don't do that."

He looked askance at Vincent looming above him.

"Don't shake your head. It makes me worry you're going to leave me."

Oliver let out another weary sigh. "Do you respect me, Vincent?"

"Of course I do. I love you," he added in barely a whisper.

He nodded. Vincent was not the type of man who could give his heart to someone he did not at least marginally respect. "But do you respect me as an equal? Because the way you treat me sometimes makes me truly doubt it."

Suddenly aware he leaned against a door servants were apt to pass by on the other side, he pushed up and crossed the room. Vincent followed on his heels, so close his breaths practically scorched Oliver's neck.

Stopping at the chair facing Vincent's desk, he turned to Vincent. The man's concerned gaze tracked his every movement, as though fearing he'd run from the room at any moment.

"How would you feel if I told you how to manage your properties?"

Vincent's lips twisted in affront. "I don't believe you consider yourself an expert in property management."

"I wasn't aware you had ever owned a bookshop."

"But it's a business."

"And therefore it is something you excel at, whereas I do not? I will grant you are more astute with business matters than I am, but I don't meddle in your affairs. I don't prod you to buy more properties or offer an opinion beyond encouragement and support."

"You cannot claim I am not supportive of your endeavors."

"That's not what I'm saying, Vincent. You are supportive. But it's so much more than how you show your support." He briefly closed his eyes, struggling to find the right words. "By not consulting me on matters that affect me, you are making decisions for me. I doubt it even occurred to you that maybe you should have consulted me in regard to Middleton's books, the changes to your will, or the account. Can you see how that would make me feel like you look on me as someone who isn't as capable as you? I don't need your guidance, Vincent. Just because I put myself in your hands in the bedchamber does not mean I want nor need that outside of the bedchamber."

Brow furrowed, Vincent's gaze swept over his face, then drifted somewhere over Oliver's shoulder. Vincent possessed an agile mind. Hopefully he understood, because Oliver did not know how else he could explain it.

For a long moment, the man remained silent and still. Just when all hope began to drain from Oliver's heart, when that horrible, numbing sense that this was truly the end began to settle over him, those brilliant blue eyes met his.

"I do respect you as an equal, Oliver," he said, voice low yet filled with conviction. "Please don't doubt it. If anything, I envy you."

"You envy me?" Vincent, who succeeded at everything he put his mind to, envied *him*?

"You have a strength, a confidence in yourself I wish I possessed. Regardless of others' opinions, you remain true to yourself. You have been, and I hope will always remain, the one person in my life I can rely upon. And contrary to what you may believe I think, your willingness to submit so completely to me in the bedchamber, to put your trust in my hands, holds me in awe."

Oliver took a breath, a counterargument on his tongue, but snapped his jaw shut as Vincent's words turned about in his head. He considered himself an average individual. A hard fact he had long ago accepted. The proof lay before him every time he walked into his shabby apartments. Yet it was becoming clear to him that Vincent judged him on an entirely different scale. One that had nothing at all to do with Oliver's bank account or the marks he had received at school—physical evidence he had long believed Vincent held in the utmost regard. But a scale where everything had to do with the intangible.

Definitely a major shift to wrap his mind around, but he couldn't dispute the strength of Vincent's sincerity.

His lover truly did respect him as an equal and even envied him a bit.

*Amazing.*

"I apologize for making you feel otherwise, Oliver. It was not my intention." Vincent squared his shoulders. "But I also won't deny I feel protective of you. Feel a need to help you and take care of you. I know you don't want my assistance, and it's not that I believe you necessarily need my assistance, but I want to help you in any way I can. It's because I love you and I don't want anything bad to come to you. I want you to be happy. I wish you could understand that and not see it as a slight against you."

When put that way, it made Oliver feel like an ungrateful brat for even questioning his lover's motives. The man's hurt was unmistakable. The thought of willingly accepting help from Vincent still caused his hackles to rise, but his shortcomings weren't Vincent's fault. He couldn't continue to punish the man for them.

"I do understand, Vincent. At least now I do." He had thrown Vincent's penchant for assumption in his face, and here Oliver had been just as guilty. Not a comfortable feeling at all.

A bit of the tension gripping his broad shoulders eased from Vincent's frame. "I know I can be overbearing at times, and for that I apologize. I should have consulted you, and I did not. It will not happen again. You have my word. But know I did not neglect to consult you out of some belief you were unworthy of such consideration. Based on your own information, Mrs. Middleton clearly needed assistance. Purchasing the remainder of the library and giving it to you seemed the logical solution. I certainly have no use for so many books, yet you own a bookshop. I never predicted it would upset you. You love books. You're always after me for mine. I thought the delivery would make you happy."

"I can see how you would believe that, and I never did mention the lack of space in the shop," Oliver conceded. "I don't doubt the goodness of your intentions, but I still can't accept the books. Fifteen crates are just too...much." Vincent opened his mouth, but before he could get a word out, Oliver said, "I will sell them for you though, and I'll charge you a fee for the service." He'd have to work with Mr. Wallace to shuffle some inventory and take Vincent up on his offer to utilize his attic for storage, but the arrangement would not leave his pride bruised.

Vincent pursed his mouth, then gave a crisp nod. "We can negotiate the fee later."

"No more than thirty percent."

That earned him a frown. Likely Vincent had hoped to negotiate a heftier fee. "Thirty it is, then."

Oliver tipped his head in agreement.

Vincent's gaze dropped to his polished evening shoes, then met Oliver's again. Worry weighed heavily on his face. Dark brows lowered and mouth drawn in a straight line. "I thought you were happy with me, but obviously you have not been blissfully content for some time. I wish you would have voiced your concerns before they built to this point. The last thing I want is to risk losing you again."

"I have been happy with you, Vincent. I just don't like fighting with you."

"Nor I you. But it doesn't have to be an argument. I simply ask that you not burden me with the worry at the end of the day that I might have said something to ruffle your feathers. You may have the ability to see right through me, but it's one I have yet to fully acquire when it comes to you."

Vincent made him sound so complicated and...prickly. All he wanted was the man's love and for him to respect him. Two things he now felt certain he possessed. "All right. I will let you know whenever my *feathers get ruffled*." Least he could do, considering Vincent had more than met him halfway.

"Thank you." Vincent stepped around him and picked up the papers on his desk, the once-neat folds now crumpled. "I need you to accept this." That grave, solemn stare had returned. Tension once again gripped every line of Vincent's strong body. "Please, it's important to me. Since there's no longer a need for me to take a wife, I will never take one. I only want you. Hell, if I could take you to wife, I would—"

"I'm not a woman, Vincent." His stomach sank, as that perfect sense of complete and absolute happiness began to drain out of him.

Letting out a sigh, Vincent rubbed the back of his neck. "I am quite aware of your masculinity. That's not the point I am trying to make. While I accept as fact that our relationship is against the law, it can be more than frustrating at times and not only because of the constant need for discretion. If I took a wife tomorrow, pledged myself to her, no one would bat an eye or question my commitment to her. Yet because you are a man, the law and the church have decreed what I feel for you is somehow wrong. It doesn't seem at all...*fair*," Vincent said with a threatening scowl that would have sent any clergyman scurrying toward the closest door. "But I will not allow the law or the church to completely tie my hands. I cannot predict what the future holds. If something were to happen to me, I want to ensure you are provided for. You are...the only person in my life who has ever truly cared about me. I want my estate to go to you. But if for some reason the will is contested, then at least you have the account."

"Why would anyone contest it?"

"Because I have changed my will so the bulk of my fortune will no longer go to Grafton or to any family member. He could contest it either on his behalf or the behalf of his son. He has the means to engage in a lengthy legal battle, if he so desires. I don't believe he would go to such extremes, but it is not a risk I am willing to take. Hence the account. It is in your name and your name only. No one can take it from you."

Well, that explained the thirty thousand pounds, but it seemed all so complex. He appreciated Vincent's sentiment far more than he could ever express, and quite strangely Vincent's desire to take him to wife made perfect sense. A connection he'd have never made on his own. The whole point of marriage was to produce children, a desire Oliver did not have in the slightest. Yet to Vincent, a man who valued his standing in society and needed the esteem of his peers, above all marriage stood for the physical proof of commitment. Though if Vincent started calling him wife, he'd definitely have issues with it. But...

His attention was drawn to the papers in Vincent's hand. The weight of the fortune they held more than intimidated him, never mind the possibility of engaging in a lengthy legal battle with Grafton, the current heir to the powerful Saye and Sele marquissate.

No, Vincent did not need to go to such lengths for him. It wasn't necessary. "Vincent, you don't need—"

"Oliver, please. I know you can't depend on your father or your brother. Your grandmother is not a wealthy woman, either. While I am alive, it is not a concern. I am here if ever you have need. I don't know what would become of me if you were taken from me. If I didn't have you in my life. I certainly would not be anywhere near all right. But if something ever happened to me, I...I just need to know you would want for nothing. Please say you understand."

The same fragile vulnerability he had glimpsed a week ago now filled Vincent's gaze.

The pieces clicked together.

The way Vincent had left him after their night together in Rotherham. Their resulting conversation by the pond. He had thought he had eased Vincent's mind—the man hadn't seemed out of sorts since then. But he now saw the true source of Vincent's unease. It had not been the act of giving up control that left Vincent shaken, but the fact Vincent had done so with *him*. Vincent loved him, and he certainly told Oliver enough for him to believe it. But giving himself over to Oliver must have somehow driven it home to him. Combine that with their conversations about the Widow Middleton's situation... Vincent had not been merely shaken. He had been scared.

Financial security was something Vincent knew well. Something solid and tangible. Something he could control. And changing his will and creating the account for Oliver was his solution. It had nothing at all to do with Vincent trying to find a new way to give Oliver money he had not earned on his own. And everything to do with how much Vincent needed him.

"Yes." Oliver nodded, more than a bit awed at the depth of Vincent's love. "I understand."

"Then don't argue with me over this matter. Take it and ease my mind."

"All right." He took the papers from Vincent's outstretched hand. "But you are all that matters to me. You're all I want." All the money in the world could not take Vincent's place in his heart. He wanted to wrap his arms around him, hold him close, but they were at Vincent's town house. Even behind the closed door of his study, Vincent had never allowed such an intimacy. The servants were a continual presence his lover could not ignore.

"You're all I want as well, Oliver." Slow and tentative, Vincent reached out, took hold of Oliver's other hand, and gave it a squeeze. A shuddering breath expanded his broad chest. "Forever."

Oliver's heart clenched. The hell with the servants. The damn door was shut.

Tugging Vincent by the hand, he pulled him close and wrapped his arms around him. Buried his face in his chest. It took not even a moment for those familiar, strong arms to wrap around him. Vincent held him so tightly it made it hard to breathe, but Oliver did not mind in the slightest. Vincent's breaths fanned the top of his head, and then warm lips pressed against his temple in the lightest of kisses. Chaste and pure. Oliver tipped his face up, seeking more. Vincent's mouth found his, the deep kiss sealing forever more solidly than a mere fold of papers.

Vincent pulled back just enough to break the kiss. "I want you to stay with me tonight."

"Of course. We'll go to my apartments after supper."

"No. Not there. Here."

He looked up at Vincent in question. "Are you giving your staff the night off?"

Vincent shook his head. "But you can still stay the night. I have plenty of guest rooms. One's next to mine, though they're not connected like at the country house." His hands drifted down to palm Oliver's arse. "I want you in *my* bed."

Oliver blinked in shock. They had spent countless hours in the old bed at his apartments, and always shared the bed in what had become his room at Vincent's country house. But never had Oliver so much as laid his head on Vincent's own bed. Hadn't even stepped foot in Vincent's bedchamber at the town house. Sex anywhere there had never been an option.

Yet it was now.

A smile curved his lips. "I would like that very much." He would need to leave before dawn, steal into the guest room without gaining



the servants' notice. Play Vincent's role. But it meant more than he could express that Vincent wanted him to stay.

"It won't be every night, but tonight I want..."

"Of course. I understand. A change of scenery every now and then doesn't do any harm. Though...what type of bed do you have? Four posters? Sturdy headboard? Do you believe it's up to the task?" He tipped his hips forward and rubbed against Vincent.

Vincent went stiff. "Oliver." Dear Lord, the man looked positively scandalized. "I don't intend to..." His gaze darted to the closed door. "I am not going to tie you up *here*."

Oliver could not help it. He chuckled. One would think he had asked Vincent to bugger him under his father's roof. "You do intend for us to do more than sleep, correct?"

"Most assuredly, but you'll need to be quiet." He dropped his voice to a low, commanding rumble. "Think you can do that, boy? Can you hold back your shouts when I finally allow you to have your release?"

Oliver's lashes fluttered. His spine went lax even as anticipation began to wind its way into his veins. "Yes, milord. I can be quiet. I promise." He would do anything for Vincent, and staying quiet was a small price to pay to share his lover's bed.

Vincent's eyes darkened to a lust-banked deep blue. One edge of his mouth curled in distinct challenge. "We shall see about that."

## Chapter Nine

After prodding the fire in the hearth, Vincent leaned the iron poker against the marble surround and stood. He took the small brass clock from the mantle and angled the face so it caught the light from the fire. Ten minutes until midnight.

He scowled at the black hands. Perhaps he should have told Oliver eleven o'clock. His valet always retired shortly after himself. The servant would have been abed by eleven tonight. His other staff as well, at least those who would have cause to be on the second floor of the house.

Were the hands even moving at all? He stared hard at the clock, and after what felt like an exceedingly long moment, the larger black hand moved forward.

Letting out a short, frustrated grunt, he replaced the clock on the mantle.

Next time, definitely eleven. Well, perhaps half past eleven. The kitchen staff had a tendency to linger overlong in their duties. And the footman stationed in the entrance hall would not retire until midnight.

No, no. Midnight was the most prudent time.

He glanced over his shoulder to his bed, the coverlet already turned back courtesy of his valet. Only the fire lit the room. He had extinguished the bedside candle a good half hour ago lest any servants travel by his door and wonder if he'd fallen asleep with it lit. Everything was at the ready, down to the bottle of oil he had stowed in the bedside table drawer.

Nothing at all for him to do but wait.

He grabbed the glass of brandy from the mantle and downed the last splash within. Did he really need a footman to watch the front door after his butler retired for the night? He couldn't recall the last time he'd had a late-night caller.

Nope, no need for the footman to remain on duty so late. Tomorrow he'd have a word with his housekeeper and have the man's schedule adjusted.

He shifted his weight. The floorboards creaked faintly beneath his bare feet, the sound filling the quiet surrounding him. He reached for the decanter of brandy on the mantle, but stopped before his hand closed around the bottle. The last instance he had partaken more than he should before bed, the night had ended with Oliver's prick in his arse. Not that there was any worry of a repeat tonight. Definitely not. He needed the man under him.

An ice-cold prickly sensation tightened his gut, threatened to flare up his chest. With effort, he tamped it down. *Oliver didn't leave me.* The knowledge offered considerable comfort, but if his lover scared him like that again, Vincent would not be responsible for his actions. He swore his heart had stopped when Oliver had made to leave the study. A trace of that all-encompassing panic still lingered in his veins.

Yes, that was it. Not nervous at all. He just still hadn't fully recovered from watching Oliver walk away from him in an eerily similar manner as he had done a good year ago...when his lover had actually left him. He tugged on the fabric belt of his navy dressing gown, righting the tie at his waist. In any case, there was no logical reason to be on edge. He had shared a bed with Oliver countless nights.

Tonight was just one more night to add to a long list of many, many more to come. No need to worry Oliver would keep his concerns bottled up until they exploded in a repeat of their argument in the study. And above all, the man had accepted the will and the account.

Vincent nodded. Yes, indeed. Everything was in order. Or would be, if the clock would just hurry the hell up.

A hand settled on his lower back. Vincent started, then relaxed as the heat from that hand seeped through his dressing gown. He knew who he would find behind him before he turned around.

Oliver gave him a sheepish smile. "Didn't mean to startle you, but you did say to be quiet," he said in an undertone. "Four times, I might add."

He tipped his head in acknowledgment. No use denying the truth. Once in the study before supper, and by the time they had departed the study after their meal, he had managed to work three more reminders into their conversation.

Oliver's lips quirked. "I like your bedchamber."

"I like you in it." He swept his gaze over Oliver's body. He had come to Vincent's bedchamber dressed in only brown trousers and a white shirt, the collar open and exposing his throat. No shoes, no waistcoat, not even his spectacles. The untidy waves of his dark hair framed his face. An erection tented the placket of his trousers. Oliver flexed his hands at his sides but otherwise stood perfectly still, his full attention fixed on Vincent and his eyes filled with undeniable love.

The most beautiful sight Vincent had ever beheld.

He took a moment to savor it; then the impatience that had built over the past hour got the better of him.

His arms shot out to tug the shirt from Oliver's trousers and whisk it over his head, not caring in the slightest where it landed. A quick tug on the placket and he shoved the man's trousers down his slim hips. His erection sprung free, jutting from his body.

A shiver racked Oliver. A shiver that Vincent knew had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

Oliver's agile tongue darted out to swipe across his full bottom lip. Unable to resist, Vincent gripped the back of Oliver's skull and drew him in for a kiss. Slanted his lips over Oliver's, swept his tongue into his mouth, drank up his sigh. Oliver sagged against him, his body pliant and willing in his arms.

He pulled back, breaking the kiss. With his fingers still gripping Oliver's hair, he stared down at his lover. The quick pants of the

man's breaths fanned Vincent's lips. "But I would like you better in my bed."

A moan shook Oliver's throat. "Yes. *Please.*"

Need shot through him. Without giving it a moment's thought, Vincent grabbed Oliver by the waist and tossed him on the bed. With a faint little sound of surprise, Oliver landed in the center of the mattress, his prick slapping his stomach, the ropes beneath creaking in protest of the abrupt movement. Oliver pushed his hair from his eyes, then went still, his dark, fathomless gaze pinned on Vincent.

Vincent unclenched his hands at his sides and took a moment to rein in the almost unstoppable impulse to leap onto the bed. To cover Oliver. To have the man beneath him.

But that wouldn't do at all. At least not yet.

He had, in essence, issued a challenge to Oliver in the study. Far be it for him to not see it through, and he was quite looking forward to testing the limits of Oliver's ability to remain quiet.

When he felt somewhat in control, he crossed to the side of the bed. The fire from the hearth just reached the mattress. The soft golden light played happily across Oliver's bare skin, highlighting sleek, compact muscles and the glistening drop of fluid beaded on the head of his hard cock.

His lover was exactly where he belonged. In his bed.

The last lingering thread of fear finally vanished, leaving only lust and need and pure, true love.

Oliver was his. Would remain his always. Just as Vincent would always remain Oliver's.

"Love you," he whispered, forcing the words past his suddenly constricted throat.

"Love you too."

His heart swelled, nearly filling his entire chest. He couldn't stop a mirror of Oliver's content smile from curving his lips. Then he let the haughty mask fall over his features. "Now be a good boy and raise your arms over your head."

A full-body tremor shook Oliver. Another swipe of his tongue over his bottom lip, then he did as Vincent bid, lifting his arms over his head without a trace of hesitation. With one hand clasped around his other wrist, he laid his body out for Vincent in a silent offering.

Intent on giving Oliver everything he desired, Vincent remained where he stood. Let the anticipation build. The fire behind him warmed his back, but it had nothing on the lust drumming through his veins, heating his skin. Oliver's nipples had hardened into tight buds that seemed to scream for Vincent's attention. He watched as a bead of fluid dropped from the tip of Oliver's prick, landing on his flat abdomen. He would get to that soon enough, but first...

He tugged on the belt of his dressing gown, shrugged his shoulders, and let the garment slip from his arms. Leaving the dressing gown pooled on the floorboards, he placed a knee on the bed.

The creak of the ropes beneath the mattress cut through the silence, unnaturally loud. He fought to keep the wince from crossing his features. He swore his bed wasn't normally so noisy, but it wasn't as if he had ever shared it with another or had reason before to be concerned about the creak of ropes. So much for any plans to pound Oliver into the bed tonight. Fortunately he didn't need brute strength to keep Oliver on the cusp of a climax for hours.

Moving slowly, he made his way up Oliver's body. The man immediately spread his legs, knees coming up to bracket Vincent's hips in undeniable welcome. His eyes drifted shut as his chin tipped up, exposing the lines of his throat and the rapid beat of his pulse, in a glorious display of willing submission.

Crouched over Oliver, Vincent bent his head and pressed a reverent kiss to his lover's throat. Then worked his way down: the delicate hollow at the base of his throat, the curve of his collar bone, and directly over his heart. Each press of lips to skin light and delicate, containing not a trace of the desire clamoring within him to be set free.

"Remember. Quiet," he whispered against Oliver's flawless chest. Head bowed, he felt Oliver's nod in the trace movement of the mattress. "And don't move. Nor are you allowed to climax until my cock's buried in your arse."

The absolute lack of movement of the man beneath him, down to the chest that had gone momentarily still, was akin to a sweetly sighed *yes, milord*.

Reassured Oliver would try his best to do exactly as Vincent bid, he captured one nipple between his teeth and began to torment Oliver. He tugged on the sensitive tip, sucked hard, plied it with his tongue, then shifted to the other and lavished it with attention.

Oliver's quickening pants filled his ears, the slight hiss behind each breath a telltale sign his lover had clenched his teeth in his fight to hold back his pleas for more. Vincent pushed harder, determined to take him right to the edge and hold him there. To make it a night the man would never forget.

He dragged his lips down Oliver's chest. Deftly avoiding the man's prick, he lapped up the proof of Oliver's desire from his lower abdomen, felt the taut muscles quiver beneath his tongue. Then Vincent rocked back onto his knees, splayed his hands over Oliver's inner thighs, and pushed.

Oliver instantly yielded, bringing his knees up to his chest and putting his ballocks on display. An invitation Vincent could not refuse.

He dropped down, drew one testicle into his mouth, and gently sucked. Oliver's breaths hitched, the muscles beneath Vincent's hands tight as an archer's bow. The musky scent of Oliver's arousal poured off him. Yet still, not one threadbare whimper passed his lover's obedient lips.

Pulling free with a crude, wet sound that seemed to smack against Vincent's aching erection, he cupped the round globes of Oliver's arse and lifted his hips from the bed, fully exposing that tight, perfect hole. The muscles there briefly contracted, as if Oliver could feel the force of Vincent's gaze. Vincent's cock instinctively jumped at the memory of his lover's body wrapped around his length, eager and needy to experience it again. Yet he held back and stayed focused on Oliver. On cranking the pleasure to unbelievable heights. He knew just how amazingly good it felt to have a man lick his arse—Oliver had introduced him to that particular pleasure. Beyond time he repaid the

favor.

He bowed his head. A jolt shot through Oliver, briefly shaking his limbs, at the first touch of the tip of Vincent's tongue to the smooth expanse of skin behind his lover's buttocks. Vincent fought back the smug grin and traced a path down to Oliver's entrance.

With each flick of his tongue over the puckered skin, he could hear the force of his lover's need. Each pant hitching sharper. Each hiss of air between his teeth harsher, louder.

The moment Oliver's body opened for him, he stabbed his tongue inside.

Absolute silence suddenly pressed against his ears. He lifted his head.

Oliver's eyes were clamped shut, bottom lip held tight between his teeth. Pure, unadulterated need was written all over his face. Obvious proof Oliver was doing his damndest to hold back a climax.

While behind closed doors, his lover would do anything for him, expend every bit of effort within himself to follow Vincent's orders. Oliver's willingness to please him humbled him like nothing else could.

He shifted up his lover's body. Pressed a light kiss to that poor abused lower lip.

"So good. So perfect." Consumed with awe, it was all Vincent could do to give voice to the praise, the admiration, filling his entire being.

The sweat-slicked chest beneath his own expanded on a greedy gasp of air. Oliver blinked his eyes open.

The plea, the shout for more, the sheer desperation in the man's gaze, struck Vincent square in the chest, the force more potent than a prizefighter's blow. It radiated throughout his body, ratcheting the lust to a fever pitch.

He leaned back, broke the contact of their bodies, and reaching into the bedside table drawer, grabbed the bottle of oil.

Oliver's desperate gaze tracked his movements, the weight of his need a physical force prodding Vincent to quickly slick his cock. Urgency pressed against him. He could feel the man teetering on the brink—one touch, one kiss could push him over the edge. And by God, he did not want Oliver going over that edge without him. He needed to be there with him, joined with him. Needed to experience that exact moment when the ecstasy claimed him.

He closed the bottle, let it drop to the rumpled sheet, and shifted back between Oliver's still-spread legs. Holding his prick steady in one hand, he braced his weight on the other and crouched over Oliver.

"It's yours," he murmured as he pushed inside his lover. "All of it, all of me, is yours."

Oliver's arms shot out, fingers tangling in Vincent's hair and hauling him down for a passionate kiss that threatened to pull the orgasm out of Vincent.

Buried only halfway inside Oliver, he stilled his hips. Instinct screamed to break out of Oliver's hold, to pull back from Oliver's delicious mouth, to give himself a moment to regain control so he could keep each thrust slow and quiet.

But the heat and exquisite tightness gripping his cock, the feel of the man beneath him, the blistering need in Oliver's kiss...

He met Oliver's kiss and then some as he slammed deep within his lover. Oliver arched beneath him, taking everything Vincent gave him and greedy for more. The lines between them blurred. He swore he could feel everything Oliver felt. The desire saturating his lover's senses, the way the lust coiled tighter and tighter, stringing his nerves taut, the fight to hold off and savor, the silent pleas for even more, the all-encompassing depth of his love.

That blistering kiss still unbroken, Vincent thrust harder, faster, desperate to get even closer to him. Deep, demanding strokes that soon had him drinking up Oliver's shout of completion and following his lover over the edge.

\* \* \*

The last flicker of flame from the fire in the hearth joined the glowing embers. Oliver did not need his spectacles to see the clock on the mantle to know dawn soon approached. He took a few more moments to simply soak up being with Vincent: the man's strong arms wrapped around him, the rhythmic rise and fall of the broad chest beneath his cheek.

Sleep tugged heavily on his eyes, yet he refused to bow to it. Before Vincent had—well, passed out described it best—what had to have been a good couple of hours ago, Oliver had given him his word he would depart before dawn, before any servants started their day. If he followed his lover and succumbed to sleep, he highly doubted his ability to hold true to his word. No bother, though. He could sleep the morning away in his bed in the guest bedchamber.

A smile curved his mouth. A year and a half ago, he would have never dared to dream of being here with Vincent, in the man's bed. Never even allowed himself to hope for a night like tonight where Vincent's every touch, his every kiss, the way he had looked at Oliver had made him feel...*worshiped*. Yet tonight was the first of many to come with a man who loved him as deeply and truly as Oliver loved him in return. A man who would love him forever.

A man who would have his hide, and rightly so, if his valet found his master's guest snuggled up close to the man's side.

He pressed a kiss to Vincent's chest and reluctantly began to ease out of Vincent's hold. The man's arms tightened, stopping Oliver's progress.

"It's all right, Vincent," Oliver whispered, braced above him. He couldn't make out his features in the darkness, but he would bet the man's eyes were open. "It will be dawn soon. I need to return to the guest bedchamber."

Vincent let out a sleepy sigh. "All right." He coasted his large hands down Oliver's bare back, leaving a path of tingling skin in his wake, and briefly palmed Oliver's arse before dropping his hands to the mattress.

Halfway across the room, Oliver remembered his clothes. Wouldn't do at all to leave them behind. Shaking his head at himself, he turned back, snagged his trousers and shirt from the floor, and quickly tugged them on. The guest bedchamber was but a few paces from Vincent's door; still, prudence and all.

Keeping his steps light and quiet, he crossed to the door and reached for the knob.

“Love you.” The murmured words brushed the back of his neck.

“I’m yours too.” With a smile on his lips, Oliver slipped out of the room.

THE END

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## Ava March

Ava March writes Regency-set erotic romances. She has a daughter and is married to a wonderful man who doesn't mind in the slightest that she spends her evenings writing naughty books.

Ava loves to hear from her readers. See what she's been up to by visiting her on the Web at <http://www.AvaMarch.com>.