



A
TOUCH
OF STEELE

THE
PERDITION
CLUB



ANNABELLE
GREENE

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Keep Exploring the Perdition Club:

Chapter One

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a pleasure club with its owners on holiday is in a somewhat precarious position. Even if excellent staff have been hired, the finest wines uncorked and only the better sort of guest allowed to enter, a faint air of anarchy prevails—and those left nominally in charge would have their hands very full indeed.

The Perdition Club was no different, standing in gleaming splendour on a cool September night. Business had to continue with or without the owners, and so the evening rolled onward—albeit with certain idiosyncrasies—until it came to a sudden stop.

‘I won’t do it, Mr. Barnes.’ Elsie quietly but forcefully stamped her foot on the creaky floorboards. ‘I won’t.’

‘You will. Look—they’re waiting.’

Two men stood by the closed door of one of the uppermost rooms. One short, the other tall, one dark-haired while the other had a shock of hair so light it was almost white. At the other end of the corridor, peering anxiously out of the shadows at the waiting gentlemen, Patrick Barnes looked helplessly at the maid in front of him.

‘Don’t make me, Mr. Barnes,’ said Elsie, a recently hired addition to the Perdition Club but already bearing the world-weary expression of someone forced to spend a lot of time with the public. ‘I’ve already had to welcome all those gentlemen from Crick Street, and they wouldn’t give me a single coin. These two don’t look like tippers either.’

‘Elsie.’ Patrick fought the urge to rub his brow. James normally dealt with recalcitrant staff, but the man had run off

mid-sentence—no doubt some small crisis had emerged, which they tended to do as soon as one began to think of other things. ‘Just welcome them. They’re waiting.’

‘Send Sarah to do it.’

‘Sarah’s occupied with something else.’ Sarah was smoking a cigar in the alley outside, but Elsie didn’t need to know that. ‘Go.’

‘Why don’t you do it yourself?’

‘Because I’m not going to do your job for you!’

‘I’ll have your guts for garters, Mr. Barnes. I really will.’

‘Elsie.’ Patrick tried to look stern, but knew he was failing terribly at it. Elsie was fiery at the best of times, and he was far more of a peacemaker among servants than he was a dictator. ‘Please.’

With a roll of her eyes and a bob that couldn’t even be generously termed a curtsy, Elsie swept off after the guests. Patrick watched her go, his gaze lingering on the couple waiting to be allowed entrance to the rooms.

The short one didn’t look as if he knew how to tip a maid, and the tall one looked as if he’d rather stab someone than tip them. Elsie was completely right to be irritated. Patrick softly shook his head as he ran down the stairs, glad to walk into the comparative safety of the storeroom.

Though storeroom was an ambitious word for it. It was a glorified cupboard stuffed to the gills with linens, candles and various erotic accoutrements which Patrick had learned not to look at too closely. It also, at this time of the day, usually contained James—and if James was there, looking over his meticulously written lists and tutting quietly about how many guests treated the Perdition Club with familiarity rather than

deference, then the night would go well in the end. It always did.

‘What do we need?’ James spoke to Patrick as he entered. Newly hired and incredibly aware of the responsibilities of his position, he had the air of a sergeant major mixed with the haunted look of a soothsayer constantly predicting disaster. ‘I had to run halfway through the list.’

‘I’d got to butter, I think. Butter and capers.’ Patrick looked down at James’ tiny desk, strewn with papers and with candle wax beginning to dribble on it. ‘Why did you have to run?’

‘A whip emergency.’

‘Do I want to know?’

‘No.’

‘Fine. The swells we were looking at were a bit odd, weren’t they?’

‘Do we normally discuss clients, Patrick? Have we suddenly become two old maids cackling over knitting in the absence of our master?’

‘As lovely a life as that sounds, no. It was just an observation.’

‘Observing will get you killed. Especially if you observe those two—or rather, one of them.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You should recognise the yellow-haired one if you know what’s good for you.’ James leaned forward. ‘That’s Arthur Steele.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Good. Keep it that way. If Arthur Steele is in your life, it means something’s either gone wrong or is about to.’

‘He’s in our lives now, isn’t he?’

‘No, he damn well isn’t.’ James shook his head, clearly horrified at the thought. ‘We didn’t even see him here, let alone recognise him.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Because if Arthur Steele even suspects you’ve having thoughts concerning him, he’ll reach into your brain and smash those thoughts to pieces with a hammer. And then he’ll smash up everything else, just to be on the safe side.’ James gave a short, pained sigh and picked up his pencil again. ‘Now. You said we needed butter?’

‘Yes.’ Patrick paused. ‘But if I could just know why Mr. Steele is so dangerous—’

‘That man’s involved in just about every nasty enterprise I can think of. Even worse, he works alone while he does it. Every gang is too frightened of him to kill him, and everyone else is certainly too scared of him to be friends with him. So please, for the love of God, stop thinking about the man—I’m doing my very best to not think about him myself.’

‘He has at least one friend.’

‘What?’

‘He came here with someone.’ Patrick shrugged, trying to remain oblivious to James’ growing horror. ‘A gentleman. So I’d say he has at least one friend, or—’

‘Don’t *say* it!’

‘Or something more than a friend.’

‘No. No, he doesn’t.’ James’s face slowly drained of colour. He lowered his voice still further, leaning towards

Patrick as if he were an adult trying to teach a recalcitrant child his letters. ‘Because Arthur Steele wasn’t here, he certainly didn’t come with anyone else, and if you don’t get that into your thick head right now you’re going to end up in the Thames. Or worse still, *pieces* of you are.’

Patrick thought about replying, but eventually decided against it. He’d never seen James quite so unsettled—really, the man was calm in just about every situation—and in any case, there were plenty of other things that needed to be done.

But as he made lists, made sure the maids and footmen were behaving and added to the scrupulous records the Perdition Club kept, his mind kept drifting back to Arthur Steele. To the tall, scowling man with hair that was almost white, and his smiling, blushing companion.

I suppose they could be here for something else. To hide, to talk business—to be somewhere completely private.

But then again, maybe not.

Chapter Two

I've probably had more embarrassing experiences. Hugh Wycliffe smiled apologetically as the maid closed the door, her expression still one of bewildered annoyance. *It's just a pity that I can't remember any of them.*

He tended to attract chaos. Something about his sunny, open nature attracted high winds and storms, and over time Hugh had learned to simply weather them with a smile. But being ushered into a room dedicated to—well, to pleasure—and not knowing any of the rules associated with such a place? That was a whole new level of embarrassment.

Of course he should have given the maid a coin. After giving such a cheerfully hair-raising explanation of how the Perdition Club worked with nary a blush or lowering of her voice, she deserved a good deal more. And what made the whole thing *horribly* embarrassing was that he'd done it all in front of Arthur, who no doubt knew how every rookery in London functioned from top to bottom.

Oh, well. A grin could usually reset the balance. Hugh turned to Arthur and gave him a dazzling smile, one that could stop tides and turn night to day.

Arthur, standing in the centre of the room as if waiting to be attacked, glared at him in response.

Fine. Hugh turned away before the hostility in Arthur's face could depress him. *I have time to make you laugh.*

'What a beautiful room.' He rarely found a room so devoid of beauty that he couldn't compliment it, but this room deserved poetry dedicated to it. Large and high-ceilinged, exposed wooden beams giving the space an airy feel, the impression was both harmonious and somehow respectable; far different from the opulent decorations Hugh had glimpsed

in the other rooms on the way up to this one, including a large porcelain tiger. ‘This wallpaper is just lovely. I wonder who made it.’

‘Mm.’

‘And this little table is quite charming. Just large enough to balance a book and a pair of spectacles atop it, which is what one needs next to a bed.’

‘Mm.’

‘And as for the bed...’

No. He wasn’t going to compliment the bed in front of Arthur, because that would make everything much worse. Not least because this bed, an enormous four-poster affair with an abundance of blankets and what looked like too many pillows, was clearly meant for one thing only.

One thing that the Perdition Club, despite Hugh’s scant knowledge of the place, seemed to specialise in. One thing that he and Arthur were not, under any circumstances, going to do.

Which didn’t mean he hadn’t thought about it. Thought about it quite a lot, in fact.

‘And there are pictures on the walls.’ A very stupid observation, but he couldn’t leave the word *bed* hanging in the air like an invitation. Not least because Arthur, despite Hugh’s instinct saying differently, could be the sort of man who found invitations of that sort very offensive indeed. ‘I like them.’

He didn’t like them or dislike them. He was barely looking at them. He was looking at Arthur, who was still standing in the centre of the room, and wondering just how his shoulder-length hair managed to stay such a shining ash-blond hue despite the dirty environments the man seemed to spend all his time in.

You’re here to work, not think about the man’s hair. ‘Do you think it’s going to rain today?’

Arthur shrugged, a movement that managed to be both hostile and indifferent. Hugh, briefly giving up, looked around the room again as the maid's words echoed in his mind.

Of course he'd never been anywhere like this before. A place like the Perdition Club was for spending money that couldn't be put aside for any better use than pleasure, and for Hugh there was always something more important than pleasure to sink his hard-earned funds into.

Like his coffee house. That building had been a rat-filled monstrosity before Hugh had purchased it, miring himself in debt for the foreseeable future and ensuring a life almost entirely devoid of comfort while he'd stripped the walls, set down poison and drenched every inch of the place in soap and water. That place had taken every penny he had, but the resulting effect was so beautiful that Hugh would gladly give thousands more. Small, yes, ramshackle, yes, but there was a warm magic to the space that felt like a lit candle in a dark world.

Well. It had felt like that, before Hugh had blearily walked down Fetter Lane in the dawn light two weeks ago to discover three men smashing the windows of *Wycliffe's Coffee and Sweets*. Afterwards, surveying the devastation—the broken chairs, stolen equipment, pastries smeared into the gaps between the floorboards and already attracting flies—it had been difficult to recall the enchantment that had once existed there. Not impossible, but difficult.

It's because of who I am. That had been Hugh's first thought, however irrational. He walked slowly around the perimeter of the Perdition Club's room, breathing in the scent of musk and freshly laundered silk, taking refuge in memory rather than confronting the strange reality of the moment.

What had hurt him just as much as the ruined furnishings was the uncanny feeling of his dreams being stamped upon; not killed, but wounded. His ambition, his cosy fantasy of creating a place where others would feel well-fed and happy, was a small dream—goodness knows he had never dreamed of

more, of having anyone to share it with—and yet it had still been damaged.

Despite Hugh's first thought upon discovering the theft, it was clear that the coffee house had been plundered because of the new furniture and equipment inside it, not for anything more dangerous than that. Hugh had always been discreet, mainly due to lack of money rather than lack of desire. Forget the Perdition Club, he'd never been to any sort of club—even the molly houses three streets away from the coffee house, which Hugh had wandered by at least a dozen times without ever summoning up the courage to inquire within. Desiring other men was one thing, acting on said desire was quite another; for Hugh, despite infatuations and the very occasional anonymous encounter, the risk of being with a gentleman had never been worth the reward.

The choice hadn't caused any real misery. Very little caused real misery for Hugh; he had always been able to glide over the cracks and sharp protuberances of life, leaving all the small hurts by the wayside. But that choice to pursue a steady independent income rather than find a companion had made the destruction of *Wycliffe's* all the more painful; there had been nothing else, no-one else, to turn to.

No parents. Many friends, but Hugh would have rather died than ask any of them for help; they all had their own struggles, able to offer sympathy and some time with a broom but nothing more material. So eventually, with his debts growing all the greater and the coffee house standing empty, Hugh had been forced to grow realistic.

You have to open again. He'd counselled himself by the light of a tallow candle in the empty coffee house, the sharp fragments of broken glass in the window casting an eerie light onto the floor. *No money to force an investigation, no money for protection either.*

At most, have the men you saw identified. What could possibly happen after that, Hugh didn't know; he was hardly

capable of intimidating anyone, especially men who destroyed coffee houses for fun. But perhaps, if he knew the names of those three smug faces he'd seen laughing as *Wycliffe's* windows shattered into pieces, he'd feel a little less like the entirety of London was waiting to snuff out the only slice of real contentment he'd ever found.

'Window.'

'Beg pardon?'

'The King's Head is outside the window on that wall.' Arthur pointed; his hands were large, roughened through work Hugh couldn't imagine the nature of. 'Go and look out of it.'

'There's hardly any point yet, is there?'

Arthur's near-permanent frown deepened. 'What?'

'Well—it'll be closed.' Saying this fact felt, somehow, like disagreeing with Arthur. 'All of the public houses are closed at this hour.'

Arthur's short, deep silence suggested that he had miscalculated. Hugh, despite being absolutely sure that it was a bad idea to tease the man, couldn't resist. 'Admit it. You wanted an hour or two more in a warm room with pretty curtains.'

'Shut up.'

'I never took you for a lover of fine furnishings.'

Arthur's voice lowered. 'Shut up.'

Hugh opened his mouth, acting as if he were about to speak again, then closed his lips just as Arthur began to bristle. He wasn't meant to enjoy Arthur's angry look—the man was the size of a bull and had the equivalent amount of temper—but something in him found it rather enchanting.

Arthur Steele and enchantment weren't supposed to exist in the same world, let alone the same sentence. Everyone who spoke about the man acquired the same guarded tone, as if he

could somehow hear them. One old gentleman had actually run away as soon as Hugh had mentioned Arthur's name.

But Arthur had accepted Hugh's pathetic story and even more pathetic stipend. He had taken Hugh, admittedly with a complete lack of patience, through several of London's more disreputable districts in search of the men who had ransacked the coffee house. And now that Arthur had heard whispers—whispers that Hugh hadn't heard and didn't know if he wanted to hear—he had brought Hugh here to the Perdition Club, placed him in this room like a straw doll and commanded him to look down on the King's Head and see if he recognised any of the men known to congregate outside it.

And Hugh would do his best to do that. Really, he would. But he would need the pub open in order to do it.

'There's no need to waste time being annoyed.' He shrugged, not quite daring to look directly into Arthur's eyes. 'We could play cards.'

'No.'

'We could write an amusing play based on our adventures so far.'

Arthur looked as if he'd swallowed a lemon. 'No.'

'Oh, go on. We could make a most diverting sketch of our experiences.'

'Experiences?'

'Oh, rattling about the filthiest parts of London. Trying to spy on disreputable people while drinking the worst beer I've ever had the bad fortune to drink.' He'd stopped trying to wash the smell of cheap alcohol and smoke out of his shirt and trousers; London had streets that in any other city would be considered sewers. 'My various witticisms.'

'Witticisms?'

‘Yes.’ It was an insult, but at least Arthur was continuing the conversation. ‘And don’t try to pretend that there haven’t been any. I’ve been enormously diverting.’

Arthur raised an eyebrow. Hugh blinked, caught off guard by the change in expression, but rallied.

‘You didn’t immediately say no to that.’ He smiled, trying to pretend that Arthur’s raised eyebrow hadn’t sent a shiver of pleasure through him. ‘So I can only assume that I’ve been even more diverting than planned.’

‘No.’

‘I’ll start writing the play now. Or perhaps a comic opera.’

‘A what?’

‘A lyric opera sung for the purposes of comedy. Come now. My Italian’s almost non-existent, but...’

‘Stop.’

It didn’t sound like a command. Arthur’s commands rarely sounded like commands, at least not in Hugh’s opinion. Arthur wasn’t the sort of man who had to raise his voice for people to listen to him; he was so physically imposing, not to mention grave-faced, that people tended to do what he said before he even had to ask for it.

But with Hugh, he always sounded more irritated than entirely necessary. At least, Hugh thought so. As if he’d been so thoroughly irritating that Arthur had been forced to resort to extreme methods.

And I’m probably not supposed to like that.

Arthur’s attention, whether it was negative or otherwise, always felt so much more important than the attention of anyone else. So much more intense. Which was why, even when it was clearly unwise, Hugh found himself pushing the man just a tiny bit harder.

‘Fine, then.’ He brushed an imaginary speck of dust from the shoulder of his shirt so he wouldn’t have to look in Arthur’s eyes. ‘French. But I warn you—mine’s pretty poor. I hope yours is better.’

Arthur’s nostrils flared as if Hugh had insulted him. Hugh, relishing the thrill of having brought the man to the breaking point, turned back to the window with a happy sigh.

Arthur was a hulk of a human being. A man who looked normal enough from a distance, but as one grew closer it became more and more evident that the man was mostly hard, uncompromising muscle. One had to wonder what he looked like beneath his clothes—well, it wasn’t that one *had* to wonder, there was certainly no law that made it obligatory. But Hugh, in his quieter moments over the past fortnight, had devoted a good deal of his time and energy to imagining just what Arthur looked like beneath the rough shirt, much-darned waistcoat and old-fashioned breeches that the man seemed to wear almost every day.

God knew where Arthur had his clothes laundered. His garments were heavily mended, but always smelled beautifully of soap tempered with starch. Hugh tended to imagine those very clothes in a pile on the floor, barely visible in his mind’s eye compared to the chiselled glory of Arthur without a stitch of clothing on.

‘You’re not saying anything.’

Hugh turned back to Arthur. ‘I—I beg your pardon?’

‘You’re not...talking.’ Arthur frowned as if Hugh had personally displeased him. Hugh blinked; it was difficult to go from imagining a man naked to being interrogated by him.

‘You always talk.’

‘I do?’

‘Yes.’ There was no need for Arthur to say *It’s bloody annoying*, his eyes said so very eloquently indeed. ‘And now you’re staring at nothing. Why are you staring at nothing?’

‘I’m not.’ He’d been considering what Arthur’s bare arms looked like beneath his shirt. About a week ago, as Arthur had opened a door for him into some smoky gaming hell, he’d seen a glimpse of inked blue on the man’s forearm; was the man tattooed, like sailors were? ‘I’m not staring at anything.’

‘That’s the same as staring at nothing.’ Arthur always seemed irritated by habits that Hugh hadn’t even known he possessed. ‘You get cow eyes when you stare.’

‘Cow eyes?’

‘Yes. Soft. Like cows have.’

If Hugh didn’t know better, that would almost have sounded like a compliment. ‘I didn’t know you had such vast experience with cows.’

‘What? Because a poor bastard like me has only seen cows skinned in the tannery?’

‘No.’ By now Hugh was used to Arthur’s snapping. He was almost sure that the man snapped to avoid showing other sentiments, like a bulldog growling to hide how much he enjoyed being caressed. ‘Because you don’t seem like the type who has enough time on his hands to study bovines.’

Arthur paused, then turned away with what sounded like a snarl of disgust. But Hugh saw the shadow of a smile at the corner of the man’s hard mouth just before he turned, and the resulting shiver of pleasure made him catch his breath.

Making Arthur smile shouldn’t mean this much. It shouldn’t mean anything at all. But something about Arthur’s reputation, his infamously grumpy demeanour and lack of tolerance for gentleness, made teasing him irresistible. It was as if he were a stack of fireworks, capable of unimaginable power, and Hugh was in possession of a lit match...

But he wasn’t capable of handling the resulting explosion, was he? All that passion, all at once? He was no-one at all, a

bumbling almost-virgin with a ransacked coffee house and barely any money or power to call his own. Arthur's attention would be like lightning in a bottle, incandescent, all but impossible to keep.

He kept comparing the man to fireworks and bulldogs and lightning because deep down, in the shameful recesses of Hugh's brain that he tried not to visit very often, viewing Arthur as he really was—a handsome, harsh man who didn't seem to like him very much—was too hurtful. It was better to imagine him with hidden depths of emotion rather than view him objectively: someone doing a job.

But he did smile at my silly comment. He hadn't been imagining that. And neither had he invented the thousand other small points of awkward connection, of *something*, that had sprung up between Arthur and himself over their brief association. They existed, no matter what they meant.

Hugh, at heart, was an optimist. Underneath the fear and shame and innumerable small humiliations that came with being Hugh Wycliff, lay a small but radiant sun that shone no matter what storm clouds threatened to arrive. And Arthur, despite his grimness, somehow made that sun shine all the brighter.

He'll laugh at my next joke. Hugh smiled, resting his chin on his hand as he looked down over the still-closed King's Head. *I'll make sure of that.*

Chapter Three

If only the fucking pub would open. Then Hugh could point out whichever fool had made a mess of his coffee house, said fool would get the stuffing kicked out of him, and this mess would end. Arthur glanced over at Hugh staring out of the window, the golden evening light making a picture of his face and hair, and turned away with a barely concealed growl.

It had been like this for an hour. Ever since the cow comment, the one he'd been stupid enough to laugh at. This seemingly one-sided awkwardness on his part, this boiling tension emanating from his body that melted away to nothing as soon as it came within five feet of Hugh.

The man always managed to seem relaxed, fundamentally content, even when he had no business being so. A thoroughly annoying character trait, and one that made every feeling Arthur had—every flash of anger, incomprehension, sympathy—seem utterly oversized, capable of swallowing the room whole.

If he were honest with himself, which Arthur didn't particularly enjoy, he'd have to admit that it had been like this ever since he'd met Hugh. Ever since he'd been quietly drinking in the Four Corners, a pub where the clientele were just as unpleasant and hungry for drink as he was, and saw the man walk in with a smile on his face and a spring in his step as if he were walking into church on Sunday morning.

He'd asked for a cup of tea! A cup of tea in the Four Corners—they didn't have *water* in the Four Corners! And once Jim the publican had finished laughing at him, Hugh had smiled as if he were in on the joke.

And then he'd walked up to Arthur, for all the world as if Arthur were a person ladies and gentlemen just walked up to

rather than approached with extreme care, and asked him if he could have a moment of his time.

Why hadn't he just knocked him out and turned back to his gin? That kind of behaviour was perfectly acceptable in the pubs Arthur frequented. But Hugh had been so clearly out of his depth, a little rabbit hopping into a den of wolves, and Arthur still felt flashes of pity for people like that no matter how severely he'd tried to stamp that sentiment out.

And...and it hadn't just been pity. What he'd felt. There had been loneliness mixed in there somewhere, a raw, aching feeling that had become a daily feature of Arthur's life long ago. And beneath that, something deeper still had raised its head and sniffed the air.

So he hadn't hit Hugh. Instead, he'd shot Jim a warning look, making it clear without words that this one was to be left alone until further notice, and had taken Hugh to the quietest corner of the pub. There, at a wobbling wooden table surrounded by the smell of stale beer, Hugh had told Arthur exactly what had happened to him and asked for his services, his protection, when it came to locating the culprit.

And then, to Arthur's irritation and growing astonishment, the man simply hadn't stopped talking. He'd talked all about his damned coffee house, how much he'd saved and scraped for it, how he'd come to purchase the place and what dreams he'd put aside in order to devote his time to this one goal. He'd talked about the friends who had helped him, the people who had as much of a stake in the coffee house's success as he had—and he'd spoken so indiscreetly, mentioning names so infamous in certain London circles, that Arthur had immediately understood that Hugh belonged to the small but diffuse group of men who shared the same deeply inconvenient desires as he himself did.

That had been shocking enough. But more shocking still was the fact that Hugh didn't seem to realise that even mentioning the names he'd mentioned in the Four Corners could get him dragged out into the street and beaten. It was as if, for some unfathomable reason, the man expected to be both treated with respect and made welcome wherever he went.

Calm yourself. This job was an objectively relaxing one by any measure, if he could only start being objective. He wasn't having to beat some wretched scum of the earth to a bloody pulp on someone else's orders, or act as muscle in some piddling gang warfare he didn't give a damn about.

But he wasn't calm in the slightest. If anything, the sheer tranquility involved over large stretches of this particular job made Arthur more nervous than he'd ever been before.

Hugh cleared his throat. Arthur looked back up at him, already glaring as he waited for some inane comment, but none came. Hugh was looking out of the window obediently, just as he'd told him to, a small smile on his face.

God, this was almost more irritating than the talking. The man had kept talking that day in the Four Corners as well, filling the air with easy, positively bubbly conversation until Arthur, exhausted by the sheer amount of words, had agreed to help Hugh find the people responsible for destroying the coffee house.

But it wasn't just exhaustion. Was it?

Fuck his inner voice. Arthur bit back an oath, pulling his battered notebook out of his pocket along with a stub of pencil. He wasn't capable of reading the figures written there with any great attention—and really, there was no need to read the names of horses tipped to win or lose certain races or just how much opium was being smuggled into Limehouse—but it meant that he had an excuse to not look at Hugh.

He didn't look at Hugh very much. He actively tried to avoid doing so. Not just because looking at people openly

wasn't a wise choice for someone of his reputation—a casual glance at the wrong person could lead to a nasty fight—but there was something about Hugh's face, his manner, that made Arthur want to keep looking at him. Something about the way the light fell on his face, as if it came from a kinder sun than the one that had shone on Arthur every day of his life.

It was deeply irritating. One shouldn't be able to simply look at a person and see the care taken with them, see love and concern and very probably a good mother and father, in the way their broad smile came so easily or the expression in their soft blue eyes. But Arthur could with Hugh, could see all of it, and it made him want to hit something.

Not Hugh, though. That was the bigger problem. All Arthur wanted to do, when he succumbed to those brief, rare glances at Hugh, was to keep staring at all the goodness he could see.

And move closer to it. And perhaps, just perhaps, touch Hugh's face, to see if being loved made someone feel different as well as look different.

Enough. Arthur scowled at himself in the mirror on the wall behind him, then turned—only to find Hugh looking at him with a pleasant, curious smile on his face.

'Were you practising your scowl?' Hugh paused. 'I thought it came naturally to you.'

Fuck. He couldn't very well not look at Hugh now. Arthur spoke as gruffly as he could, the curve of Hugh's mouth taking up entirely too much of his attention. 'Keep your eye on the pub. It'll open any minute.'

'It'll open in sixty minutes, I imagine. How do you know you've done a successful scowl? Do you feel menaced by your own face?'

'Shut up.'

‘Oh, you.’ Hugh laughed, for all the world as if Arthur had said something arch and silly rather than give an order. ‘You are funny.’

Arthur fought the warm glow that came from such an easy compliment. Hugh seemed to scatter them around like sweets, finding positives where none were meant to exist. ‘I’m not funny.’

‘You are. Even if you try to hide it.’ Hugh paused for a little longer. ‘And you’re...’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What am I?’

‘Really—nothing.’

‘Tell me what you were going to bloody say.’

‘Well. I was going to say you were nice.’ Hugh smiled as he shook his head. ‘But that’s a more dangerous word than funny.’

A lot of things felt dangerous with Hugh. Arthur had been in too much peril to remember every instance, but he recognised how his body reacted to it. His heart beating more rapidly, the base of his stomach suddenly a tight, expectant knot...but this was no fight. This was a kind man with a stupid, beautiful smile telling him that he was *nice*.

He sent a stern, silent message to his cock. *Now is not the time to get ideas.*

‘Do you know why I know you’re nice?’

‘You don’t.’

‘I saw you doing something.’ Hugh lay back in his chair by the window, sighing as he placed an arm around his head. Arthur tried not to look at him, tried not to let that small, instinctive sound of contentment play again and again in his

mind like a maddening tune. ‘Last week, just before we arrived at the Marston Inn.’

‘Saw me doing something? What did you see me do?’

‘With the sparrow.’

Oh, fuck.

The sparrow. That pathetic little bundle of bedraggled feathers in the middle of the road last week, about to be trampled by a carriage wheel. Arthur had scooped it up into his hand without even thinking about it, trying to disguise it from Hugh by wiping an imaginary smear of mud off his boot.

‘I saw you put it in your coat pocket.’

‘You didn’t see a damned thing.’

‘You gave it a little piece of your pie at the inn.’

‘I did no such thing.’ He’d given the little creature several pieces of pie, along with a tiny nip of beer when Hugh had gone to relieve himself. ‘The nonsense you talk.’

‘Did it survive? What did you do with the poor thing?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ The sparrow, which turned out to have been suffering from heat exhaustion and a damaged foot, now lived happily in the drawer of Arthur’s ancient desk. Arthur left the drawer constantly half-open in case the little chap wanted to hop about the room in his absence, complete with a dish of water and a little plate of oats in the shadiest part of the room. ‘And maybe, rather than spend the next hour talking complete bollocks, you could choose to do something more productive. Like shutting up until the pub opens.’

Hugh didn’t respond. Arthur glanced at him, doing his best to not let his gaze linger, but the hurt in Hugh’s eyes struck him.

He turned away. If Hugh was going to be so... so *soft*, so liable to be wounded by harsh speech, it wasn't as if anything could be done about it. A spade was a spade, idle chatter was idle chatter, and Arthur had never been the type to stand for it.

Even if Hugh was right about the sparrow. Even if all he'd done was ask about the creature's welfare, because the man cared so bloody much for every bird, beast and weed growing between the cracks in the cobblestones that kindness practically spilled out of him like gold from a leather pouch. And when Arthur responded to him in his usual way—brusque and bored—Hugh had a tremendous if unconscious talent for making Arthur feel like an absolute bastard.

And he was an absolute bastard. He needed to remember that. Because the alternative was being hurt by the world, knocked down again and again into the dirt until you couldn't remember what being upright felt like.

But Hugh...he wasn't the type to knock anyone down. A rare quality, and one that Arthur had never bothered to appreciate before.

Not that he was appreciating it now. Neither was he thinking about the pain in Hugh's warm blue eyes, as if a cloud had passed over the sun, and how Hugh's pain gave him pain in turn.

'I...' He turned back to the window. If he was going to say this, he wasn't going to look at Hugh while he said it. 'I can't think of a name for him.'

'What?'

'The bird.' Christ, this was humiliating. 'I didn't give it a name at first because I didn't think it was going to live. But the little bastard survived, and—well. Now it needs a name.'

'How *lovely*.'

'It isn't.'

‘I’m afraid you’ll find it is.’

Arthur opened his mouth, ready with a cutting reply. But something about the joy in Hugh’s voice, the easy happiness, made him stop.

Was something this small really enough to give the man pleasure? The desire to name a bird? Or was it the fact that he, Arthur, had shown that he was capable of being soft as well?

Danger. Don’t show weakness.

But for some reason, some tug of feeling that Arthur didn’t want to name, showing his soft side with Hugh didn’t feel like being weak at all.

Hugh’s voice was very gentle. ‘Have you had any ideas about a name?’

‘No.’

‘Not even one?’

God, did the man want everything from him? Arthur repressed a snarl. ‘I...’

‘Yes?’

‘Scrap. Because he looked like an old scrap of grocer’s paper in the road.’ God, how embarrassing. ‘But Scrap isn’t a proper name.’

‘I think it’s a lovely name for a little bird. I can imagine you saying it.’

‘It’s not as if I’m going to be...’ Arthur sighed. His best, hardest front hadn’t deceived Hugh; this half-hearted denial wasn’t going to convince the man for a moment. ‘Yes. I could probably call him Scrap.’

‘Names of one syllable work well for a variety of animals, if you think about it.’ Another happy sigh came from Hugh. Arthur turned to look at the man, still unsure as to how

someone could possibly get so much contentment from a conversation of this nature. ‘Little wiry-haired dogs, for example. They can’t exactly be called Fitzwilliam. Better something like Chop or Tim.’

‘Tim?’

‘An excellent name for a dog.’

‘No it isn’t. A dog called Tim is going to get bitten by every dog on the street.’

‘Not my Tim.’ Hugh gave a martyred sniff; Arthur fought a smile. ‘He’d never walk anywhere so common as a street. I’d steal a key to Throckmorton Square and walk him where the duchesses go with their lapdogs.’

‘Dogs need as much red meat as they can eat and plenty of other dogs to fight with. Not little walks alongside fat lapdogs. Even dogs named Tim.’

‘Ugh.’ Hugh rolled his eyes, the shadow of a smile at the corners of his mouth. ‘The arguments we’ll have, when I finally get my little dog.’

There wouldn’t be any arguments, not a single one, because he and Hugh wouldn’t have any association after this job was done. But as much as Arthur tried to open his mouth and remind Hugh of that simple fact, he couldn’t.

He couldn’t tell Hugh things that he didn’t want to hear, just as he couldn’t look at Hugh for too long or speak to him too roughly. Because if he started telling the man unpleasant things, he’d feel the urge to soften the blow. If he looked at Hugh for too long he’d want to stroke his damned face, and if he spoke too roughly to him he’d start telling the truth. Saying things that he couldn’t predict.

He’d dreamed of a different, better life when he was much younger. On occasion, before he knew better, he’d even dared to dream of someone who could share that life with him. He’d

torn those dreams to shreds as soon as he'd realised they weren't meant for people like himself, of course...but now, for reasons he was trying his best to ignore, the long-discarded remnants of his fantasies fluttered and stirred.

'The pub will be opening up any minute.' His certainty was a lie—all he knew was that the bloody place wasn't closed tonight, although the owners were evidently taking the day in a relaxed fashion. 'See if there's anyone waiting for the place to open.'

Hugh smiled. His gentle nod, as if Arthur had said the words with a bow rather than using the bare minimum of civility, filled Arthur with a mixture of happiness and shame.

He turned away. He closed his eyes for a moment, screwing them up tight, forcing his body and mind back under his control.

Stop being good to me. Stop treating me as if I'm worthy of kindness. Because a part of me is already on my knees for you, Hugh Wycliff—and as hard as I try, I can't stop.

Chapter Four

Scrap. Hugh turned the name of the little bird over and over in his head as the light outside the window dimmed. It was a small piece of knowledge, tiny really, but he couldn't help treasuring it. Couldn't help imagining the little bird hopping about Arthur's living quarters, a space Hugh had often tried to envision but hadn't succeeded in conjuring up.

He'd tried to imagine almost everything about Arthur's daily life. What he ate with his breakfast coffee—or was it tea?—and what he whistled to himself as he made his bed, or sang if he couldn't whistle. Hugh had heard Arthur singing under his breath once, an old folk song from the sound of it, and had tried to hum the tune for some days afterwards without success.

Now he knew the man had a bird as a pet. More than that, Arthur had admitted it. And rather than simply being happy with the information he had managed to gather, enjoying the closeness that was slowly building between them, Hugh had managed to say something silly and bring back the awkward, tense silence that seemed to be the natural state between himself and Arthur.

What had he said? Oh, it was useless trying to think about it. Better to do as Arthur had said several times now and look out of the window at the pub, even though the men watering the hanging baskets and sweeping the road outside the door of the place didn't look at all ready to open it up.

He stole a glance at Arthur. The man was scribbling something in the little notebook he always carried with him; Hugh had tried to peer into it once, fascinated at the delicacy of the man's handwriting compared to the roughness of his hands, but Arthur's glare had been powerful enough to stop him from doing it again.

Oh, bollocks to it. The pub was still closed, he was in a good mood thanks to learning about the bird, and Arthur

hadn't actually told him that he hated him yet. Smiling to himself, Hugh turned back to Arthur. 'If you were an animal, what type of animal would you be?'

Arthur slowly looked up from his notebook. His face showed a weariness that Hugh almost found amusing. 'What?'

'You heard me. If you were an animal, what type of animal would you be? I think I'd be a dog. Amiable, not too exciting, indiscriminate when it comes to food. Which animal would you be?'

Arthur looked at Hugh for a long moment. When he eventually spoke, his voice was a strangled combination of irritation and curiosity. 'What kind of a fucking question is that?'

'A question to pass the time until the pub opens. I promise I've looked at everyone outside the place.'

'There isn't anyone outside the place, is there.'

'No. I looked intently at all the no-one outside the place.'

Arthur paused for a moment before speaking, almost as if he had been about to laugh and stopped himself at the last minute. Hugh fought a burst of triumph. 'We've already talked.'

'Talking isn't something that's done once and then stopped.'

'It is for me. Bear.'

'What?'

'Bear. I'd be a bear.' Arthur looked back down at his notebook. 'There. Done.'

'Hmm.'

'What?'

'Oh, nothing—as you said. Done.'

'No. You made a little sound.' Arthur shut his notebook with a sigh. Hugh tried not to laugh; it was so easy to hook the

man that one could almost believe Arthur wanted this conversation to continue. ‘Why is bear not a good answer?’

‘It’s not that it isn’t good.’

‘Well then.’

‘Just incorrect, in my opinion.’

‘What the bloody hell makes you think—’

‘Bears are quite sweet, indolent creatures. They like sleeping and eating large amounts of honey, if the man who rescued the fighting bears from the pit near Haymarket is telling the truth. And I don’t know why he’d lie.’ The thought of Arthur sleeping peacefully in the heart of a forest, perhaps with a drop of honey on his nose, was an idea as adorable as it was silly. ‘You’re definitely not a bear.’

‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’

‘Then what am I?’

There’s no creature powerful enough. Beautiful enough.
‘I...’

‘You see? You don’t have any idea.’

‘A pike.’

Arthur slapped the notebook down on the table. ‘A fish? A fucking fish?’

‘You should be proud to be a pike!’ If it was easy to draw Arthur into conversation, it was even easier to make him angry. Hugh shrugged, trying his best not to collapse into giggles. ‘They’re so menacing. All the other fish must be terribly afraid of them.’

‘It’s still a fish!’

‘What’s wrong with a fish? They’re fascinating.’

‘Pike aren’t.’

‘Their teeth are so sharp. Don’t you want to be a sharp-toothed animal that actually deserves its reputation?’

‘Pike are ugly creatures. Horrible-looking.’

‘Oh, is that the problem?’ Hugh’s inner voice was telling him to stop, to change the subject, but something deeper still made him continue. ‘The pike isn’t handsome enough?’

Arthur’s eyes hardened. ‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘I think that might be what you meant. A little bit.’ There was no going back now. ‘And...and you’re not wrong.’

Well, now he’d done it. He’d let just a little bit of his regard for Arthur come out—and really, *regard* was the incorrect word—and now it was curling in the air like smoke, refusing to fade away. He may as well have stood up and screamed in Arthur’s face about how handsome he was.

Arthur was, predictably, silent. Hugh turned back to the window, staring hard at the men walking by the pub, and wondered how long it would take for things to feel remotely normal again.

But then, had things ever felt remotely normal between him and Arthur? No, not really—there had always been a comment like the one he’d made just waiting to slip out, waiting to change things.

‘Well. As it happens, I don’t think you’d be a dog.’

A conversational overture from Arthur? Wonders would never cease today. There was no reference to Hugh’s somewhat clumsy compliment, but there wasn’t a snarl in his voice either. Hugh did his best to speak lightly. ‘No?’

‘No.’

‘And why not? I like sleeping in the afternoons, and I’ve been known to stare at a butcher’s window.’

‘Dogs roll around in muck. They’ll roll around in a carcass and they’ll be proud of how they smell afterwards.’ Arthur was still staring intently at his notebook, pencil in hand, but he wasn’t writing anything. ‘You’re not a dog.’

‘I’ve been quite comfortable in filthy places this week.’

‘No, you haven’t. You’re the only person I’ve ever seen who could walk through a tannery and come out cleaner than when you went in. You can take a greasy beer mug and somehow clean the bloody thing by using it. Dogs can’t do that.’

It was one of the longest sentences Hugh had ever heard Arthur say. More than that, it was a compliment. Hugh swallowed, briefly wordless.

‘A cat, maybe.’ Arthur put his pencil down. ‘A cat might work.’

‘Hmm. I’ve never thought of myself as a cat. They seem quite stand-offish.’

‘My brother had a cat when we were young. The thing was a hissing, spitting bastard to almost everyone, but with my brother it would roll over and purr. It wouldn’t leave him alone—annoyed the hell out of him.’ Arthur raised an eyebrow. ‘You might be a cat.’

Now that certainly wasn’t a compliment. Still, it didn’t feel like an insult; Arthur had said it in almost a soft way, inviting an answer.

‘Perhaps.’ The temptation to be funny was too strong. ‘Goodness knows when I’ll find someone to show affection to. I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with me being so beastly.’

Arthur smiled. A quick, shocked smile, as if Hugh’s comment had taken him completely by surprise. The expression was so unexpected that Hugh blinked; when he opened his eyes again, Arthur’s face was as grim as ever.

But he *had* smiled. Unmistakably. And perhaps even more importantly, he wasn’t growling something unpleasant as a way of overcompensating for that brief moment of sweetness.

I didn't know you had a brother. That would be the next thing to say to a normal person, but Arthur would require a gentler approach. 'I didn't have a cat as a child, but I was drowned in every other sort of pet. Fish, little canaries, a tortoise—oh, that tortoise hated me. It bit my fingers constantly.'

'A menagerie.'

'Yes. But then, I didn't have any siblings. My parents had to keep me occupied somehow.'

'You weren't put to work?'

'No. My mother was determined to treat me like a little princeling, which did nothing but make me constitutionally unfit for most sorts of work. Owning a coffee house takes as much effort for me as going down a mine does for someone raised a little more roughly.'

'That explains a lot.'

'I suppose it does. And...and you?'

Arthur was silent for a long moment. Just as Hugh was about to apologise for having asked, he began to speak.

'My brother, Edward, and I were put to work as soon as we could walk. There wasn't enough money coming into the house to do much else—my mother took in washing, darned, but my father only had his military pension.'

'Your father was a soldier?'

'For about a year. He spent the rest of his life as a drunkard.' Arthur's voice had a note of sadness to it, a melancholy surprisingly free of anger. 'They don't bring a lot of money in. The opposite.'

'That must have been difficult.'

‘People had worse in our street. Much worse. And Edward and I spent so much time working, doing all the jobs that no-one else wanted to do—picking up horse shit, dipping skins in the tanneries, stripping carcasses—that we didn’t see the worst of him.’ Arthur shrugged, as if physically shaking off unpleasant memories. ‘Better that way.’

He wanted to know more about Arthur, but not if it meant making the man recall things he’d rather forget. Hugh spoke softly, watching Arthur’s face intently. ‘But Edward had enough time for a cat, at least.’

‘Only because no-one else wanted it. It was one of those old toms you see that live out on the pavement whether it’s boiling or snowing, one ear missing, a limp. Ugly as sin, that creature, and treated none too kindly, but as soon as it saw my brother it chose him. Followed him home one night and never left—it went under Edward’s bed and clawed the living daylights out of anyone who tried to make him move.’

‘Did he have a name?’

‘General. Edward called him that to annoy Father, and it worked.’ Arthur smiled again, shaking his head; Hugh stared, almost feeling guilty for how happy the smile made him. ‘Old General, blind in one eye by the end, but still ready to kill anything that crossed his path.’

‘He sounds like he would have made very short work of me.’

‘No. I’ve seen you with beer mugs, remember. You’d have had General eating out of your hand before an hour had passed.’ Arthur paused. ‘And he probably would have followed you home at the end of it.’

Every time they came to one of these conversational eddies, it was growing harder and harder to know what to do.

Because what Arthur just said definitely counted as a compliment, a particularly fine one, and Hugh couldn't think of anything to do but blush.

Alas, blushing didn't count as an effective answer to anything. He would have to say something. 'Thank you.'

It wasn't a compliment. He could almost hear Arthur saying it. But Arthur did nothing apart from pick up his pencil again and start scribbling in his notebook, behaving as if Hugh wasn't in the room.

Was this progress? And if so, progress towards what? It wasn't right that every conversation with Arthur flustered him so, left him in a state that could politely be called heightened.

'Ohhh...'

What was *that*?

A sigh. A sensual one. No, not sensual—filthy.

Hugh coughed, just about managing to speak as Arthur looked up. 'Did you—'

'Did I what?'

Did you just sigh erotically while writing in your notebook? He'd never make it out of this room alive if he asked Arthur that. 'Nothing.'

Arthur raised an eyebrow, his gaze as darkly resentful as ever, and went back to his notebook.

Was he going completely mad? Now was possibly the worst time to lose his grip on sanity. But just as Hugh was about to find a surreptitious way of sticking his fingers in his ears, it happened again.

'Ohhhh...'

A lingering, romantic sigh. More than romantic. This time, as it filled the air, Hugh looked hard at Arthur. Arthur's mouth was closed; the sound clearly wasn't coming from him.

It was coming from the next room. Hugh turned his head; yes, that was it. The edge of the sound was practically curling against the wallpaper.

Oh, Lord. Just what they needed. Hugh turned back and found himself looking straight into Arthur's eyes.

Chapter Five

The sounds coming from the room next door were unmistakable. More to the point, they were unmistakably pleasurable. Soft sighs, the kind that came when one had surrendered to something ill-advised but tempting—and then the rustling of clothes, the gentle thud of discarded boots dropping onto the floor.

Four thuds. Two men.

Oh, crumbs.

Hugh immediately looked away from Arthur. He would start blushing, he just knew it—there it was, that prickly boiling feeling at the base of his neck—and Arthur had probably never blushed in his life. The man could probably stop a blush happening if he glared at himself in the mirror for long enough.

A moan came from the other room. A quiet but powerful one, as if one of the men was finally feeling what he'd yearned to feel for a very long time. Not that Hugh knew exactly what was happening in that room, not that he knew who the two men were or what had brought them to the Perdition Club, but...he could imagine.

He was imagining. Very unwise, but he couldn't help it. Not just what was happening in that room in terms of carnality, bodies finally meeting in a frenzy of illicit lust, but what those two unseen men were feeling in their hearts. If they had come to the Perdition Club together with this encounter already decided, or if it had sprung up out of the charged, sensual air of the place and taken both of them by surprise.

Or perhaps they'd both been waiting for it, longing for it with every bone in their bodies and breath in their lungs, but

had each been waiting for the other to make the first move.

He glanced at Arthur. Just a quick look; staring for a moment longer would bring his blushes out in full force. To his surprise, the man wasn't glaring angrily out of the window or pacing around with his arms folded.

He was staring intently at a picture on the left-hand wall. Hugh turned to look at the picture as well, wondering if he'd missed a painting of some erotic entanglement.

It was a cow. An enormous speckled cow, handsome in his way, but Hugh couldn't quite understand the connection between what Arthur was staring at so intensely and what was happening in the room next door.

He cleared his throat, attempting a normal tone of voice. 'A cow? Really?'

Arthur's tone was similarly offhand. Still, there was the usual hint of steel beneath his quiet words as he stood and walked over to the wall. 'I'm not looking at the picture.'

'Forgive me, but I think you'll find you are.'

'I'm trying to work out why the sound of those two shagging is so loud in this room.'

Hugh almost bit his own tongue in his effort to respond casually. 'Yes, I—I was rather wondering about that.'

'Because the walls aren't thin in this place. It shouldn't be this loud.'

'I see.'

'And it's very loud indeed here.' Arthur tapped the picture. 'Which means...maybe...'

Moving with a silent grace that Hugh couldn't help but notice, he slipped the painting off its hook. He placed it gently on the floor, the cow turned to face the wall, and straightened up.

‘There.’ Arthur pointed at a small hole in the wall. His voice lowered; Hugh stood and moved towards him to catch what he was saying. ‘This must be a room where you can pay more to look.’

‘Ah.’ There was no possible combination of words that felt suitable for this moment. Hugh nodded, hoping his expression was matter-of-fact, as if he was the sort of man that found voyeurism an everyday occurrence rather than something he’d barely conceived of before. ‘Well, then.’

‘Those poor bastards are putting on a show without an audience. They might ask for their money back.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll take one of the curtain ties and plug the hole up. That’ll muffle the sound.’

Don’t.

The thought came so quickly and powerfully to Hugh’s mind that it shocked him. He quickly nodded in the same brisk manner as he had before, hoping that it would cover up his moment of hesitation. ‘Of course.’

‘That’ll do it.’

‘I imagine it will.’

‘No more sounds.’

‘Yes.’

But Arthur wasn’t moving. Hugh glanced at him, wondering what on Earth he was supposed to say.

Arthur was staring into the middle distance with what looked like intense determination. His arms were tightly folded, his shoulders straight as if prepared for battle, his mouth a grim, taut line as he leaned against the wall.

He knows I want to look. The thought filled Hugh with such intense humiliation that the feeling danced between

pleasure and pain. *He knows, and he isn't teasing me.*

Perhaps he doesn't know what to say.

Perhaps...he wants me to look.

No. That was too risky a thought to fully countenance. But Arthur still wasn't moving, and the hole was right there between them both, and—and oh, there was another sigh filling the room, as if one of the men in the next room had never felt quite as much bliss as he was feeling now.

And he, Hugh Wycliff, was going to look through the hole. He was going to watch. And he was going to do it in front of Arthur, who was so still Hugh could barely see the rise and fall of his chest as the man breathed.

He took one step forward, then another. Arthur still didn't move. Eventually he stood before the hole in the wall; Arthur would have had to bend to look at it, but for Hugh it was at perfect eye-level.

'But then, I...I wouldn't want them to waste their money.' God, there was no point trying to sound business-like. He was scared, he was excited, and Arthur would know it whatever he did. 'If one doesn't know the value of money, what does one know?'

Arthur didn't answer. Hugh didn't dare to look at him; the man's eyes were probably burning bright, hot enough to burn through paper, and right now he couldn't withstand it.

Just look. You know you want to. And you're almost sure that he wants you to as well.

Almost was a dangerous word. But as Hugh slowly leaned down to look through the hole in the wall, the peril brought more excitement than it did terror.

At first all he could see was darkness. Perhaps there was an identical picture of a cow hanging on the wall of the room next door, and the hole was a workman's error rather than anything

more salacious. But just as Hugh was about to step away from the wall and smooth over the awkwardness with whatever foolish joke first came to mind, his eye adjusted to the dim light.

Four lit candles. Exotic wallpaper on the opposite wall; Hugh could just about glimpse a spray of verdant leaves, the dramatic striped limb of some wild beast. And on the large bed, with blankets and garments scattered around it as if a localised storm had left everything in devastation, two figures lay together.

Two men were on the bed. One, broad-chested and with a dark thatch of hair, lay back against the pillows. The other, lithe and red-headed, lay atop him. Hugh held his breath as he took in the sight of the man's bare back, his buttocks and thighs as he ground against his lover.

They looked so content. Lost in a private world where nothing mattered except skin on skin, heartbeat against heartbeat. The red-haired man smiled down at the dark-haired one; the hunger on their faces, the way each movement of their hips made them gasp, sent a tremble through Hugh that left a deep, longing emptiness in its wake.

He bit back a gasp as Arthur moved behind him.

Was this some sort of trap? No, Arthur wouldn't do that. But he was moving closer, standing behind Hugh as the men in the next room pleased one another, and something about the heat of Arthur's body behind him made the sight in front of Hugh all the more thrilling.

'Do...' Damn it, why wouldn't his mouth work properly? Probably because what felt like all the blood in his body had rushed to his cock, stiffening in his breeches as if it had a mind of its own. 'Do you want to look?'

'No.' Arthur's answer was immediate. But it wasn't shocked or mocking, not in the slightest; it was grave, as if he

and Hugh were doing something of the utmost seriousness.

In a way, they were. Something shocking, entirely unexpected—but it was happening, happening here and now, and some deeply stubborn part of Hugh wasn't going to let it go to waste.

‘One of them...he looks like a soldier.’ He spoke very low indeed, sure that Arthur was close enough to hear him. ‘Very dark, very tall and broad. The other one is different—more slender, red hair. And...and he’s atop the dark-haired man, and—and they are unclothed.’ *Naked* felt like too brazen a word to say, even though what they were doing was far more brazen than any words could be. ‘And...and they are kissing one another.’

He waited for Arthur to swear, to bluntly insult him and finish this. But instead, Arthur moved still closer. Hugh could practically feel the man’s attention, the subtle but electric change in the air that meant Arthur was listening intently.

Was Arthur as inflamed as he was? Was the man’s cock as hard and ready, his body as intimately awake as Hugh’s?

‘The red-haired man...he’s kissing the soldier’s neck. Now he’s moving lower, and—and kissing his nipples. Playing with them.’ The soldier moaned loudly. Hugh swallowed, hoping against hope that his boiling blush wasn’t visible on the back of his neck. To be played with like that, to have someone’s mouth on your nipples; that had to feel like someone lighting a wicked flame on every point of pleasure in your body. ‘And...and the soldier likes it very much.’

Arthur was still silent. Hugh, so compelled by what was happening in front of him that his embarrassment was beginning to fade, went on.

‘Now the soldier has his hands in the other man’s hair, and is pushing him downwards. The red-haired man’s resisting, but only a little—he’s kissing the soldier’s stomach, now his hips...and now...now his cock.’

In the silence that followed, he was almost sure he could hear Arthur's quickened breathing.

'Now he's...sucking the soldier's cock. Taking it right to the hilt, it looks like—and he's stroking the soldier's hips like he's encouraging him. And the soldier...it's like he can't believe how good it feels, or he's never had it done to him before. He keeps looking at the other man like this all has to be a dream, somehow. Like he'll blink and everything will be gone.'

This time he needed the following silence as much as Arthur did. His cock was so hard it was almost painful; Hugh slowly, shyly pressed himself against the wall, needing something against his aching body that wasn't empty air.

Oh, God, that was better. Not as good as a touch would be, as Arthur's touch, but better than nothing. Perhaps Arthur hadn't noticed—but no, he had, he was moving even closer.

They were so close to touching now. So close to the base of Arthur's neck against the back of his head, the man's broad chest against his back. Arthur's cock brushing against the curve of his buttocks, so close, so *damned* close to that.

'And...the soldier has lifted the red-haired man's head away from his cock. He has him by the hair, but lightly.' How good it would feel to have his own hair pulled at the roots by a strong hand. 'And he's pulling him up to kiss him, and...and now...'

How could he put into words what was happening in front of him? The sudden change from playfulness to urgency, the tangle of limbs that looked clumsy one minute and indescribably elegant the next? The breathless gasp and long moan that meant lovemaking had truly begun, the way the soldier placed the red-haired man atop him and thrust as if he wanted to punish and pleasure him at the same time, his moans so thick with bliss that his voice was like wild honey...and the

ecstasy on the other man's face, the kind that had to come from being fucked by someone who knew what they were doing.

And Arthur was so close to him now. So close that it was almost impossible—no, *actually* impossible—that the man didn't know how his presence made Hugh feel.

Arthur's voice was so low that Hugh was half sure he imagined it. 'Well?'

He was asking. He wanted to know what was going on—or maybe he wanted Hugh to keep telling him what was happening, just to hear his voice.

That had to mean something. And given the way that Hugh felt, taut and tense as a coiled spring, fathoming just what it meant finally felt easier than ignoring it.

'Well, nothing.' He forced the words out, wishing he didn't sound quite so frightened. 'If you want to know, ask me. And I want to know *why* you want to know.'

There was a sudden silence. Even the men in the next room were quiet as they caressed one another; a coincidence, but one that felt immensely meaningful to Hugh.

Arthur moved away as Hugh turned. The sounds in the next room continued, but they didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was the space between himself and Arthur, the charged air all but crackling.

For the first time, Arthur didn't look remotely comfortable. He never looked entirely at ease anywhere he was, but now it was as if he was undergoing torture. Hugh stared at the man's clenched fists, the tightness to his breeches that mean arousal, and fought a mixture of triumph and raw frustration.

'Well?' Now it was his turn to question Arthur. 'Why do you—'

'I don't. Be quiet.'

‘But you asked me to—’

‘I didn’t. And if you keep doing this, our agreement is over and you’re back where you started.’

‘Arthur.’

‘*What?*’

He’d said the man’s Christian name without thinking.
‘With all due respect...’

‘What?’

‘If you keep interrupting me, how will I ever say what needs saying?’

It was the first time he had ever spoken to Arthur with even a hint of frustration. Arthur’s eyes narrowed, his stare hot enough to melt rock.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Hugh gulped, then carried on.

‘It’s just that—that this isn’t the first time you’ve said something like that. That our agreement would end.’ The room suddenly felt very small indeed. ‘And the first few times you said it, you were far more frightening about it. I almost believed you. But after another three times or so, it... it started to lose efficacy. The threat, I mean.’

The silence that followed felt leagues beyond mere awkwardness. Arthur didn’t blink; Hugh took a step backward, knotting his hands together.

He should let the silence rest, even if the air now felt as if it were curdling. But now that he’d said something unwise, cast the first stone, more and more words wanted to follow.

‘It would have made more sense to stop after the Fox and Hound. Almost all of London’s criminal element was there, from what you told me, and I still didn’t see anyone who even vaguely resembled one of the people who looted my coffee

house. And yes, you were very angry when I told you it was yet another dead end, and you made all sorts of noises about me having wasted your time, how if you had any damn sense you'd stop dragging me around the arse end of London and leave me to pick through all the bastards myself...but you didn't. And you're still here now.'

Still nothing from Arthur. But Hugh's mouth had a mind of its own; the words kept coming, faster and faster still.

'We went to another pub the next night. The one with the lovely pink flowers in the baskets outside—I know you noticed them, even though you'll deny it to the end. I saw you sniff the air to see if they were perfumed—they weren't, which is always a shame with flowers, but I can understand why you'd check—'

'Shut up.'

'And you bought me that pint. You said the owner owed you a favour, but I saw you giving him some coins after I put my mug back on the bar. And when that fiddle-player came in and started doing 'Rose of Ketterick', you grumbled and glared daggers at him and made fun of me for wanting to stay and listen to him, but we sat and listened to him all the same, and...and...'

And suddenly it all made sense. All of it at once, scribbles in the air forming a message as clear as day, and Hugh gasped.

He gasped again for more pedestrian reasons as Arthur gripped his shoulders, pushing him so harshly against the wall that the pictures rattled in their frames.

'Shut up. All right?' Arthur didn't sound in control anymore; if anything he sounded desperate. 'Right now.'

'I mean, why would you pay for my drink? It's not as if you pity me for my lack of funds, as much as you joke about that—and then that's a different question entirely, isn't it, just

how little I'm paying you for what's turned out to be quite a complex job. People must pay you enormous amounts to do things I can barely even imagine, so why on earth have you taken on a task that pays so abominably little?

'I told you to—'

'Shut up? I know. But I'm not going to.' Was this what it felt like to have power over someone who normally had so much power over you? 'Not until you tell me why you're still here. Still with me.'

Chapter Six

Time passed. A moment, an eternity, Hugh couldn't tell. Nothing mattered with Arthur staring at him so fiercely, his eyes full of suppressed violence.

Was he going to kill him? Or was he going to...do something else?

Hugh's chest felt horribly tight as Arthur reached out, gripping his shirt. Then the breath left his lungs as Arthur's mouth covered his—swift, powerful, devastating.

It was a desperate kiss. A harsh, complete possession, full of a yearning that Hugh felt mirrored in his own soul. As Arthur grazed his teeth against Hugh's bottom lip, the sensation dancing between pleasure and pain, Hugh shivered and moaned in response.

The feeling was brazen. Even though only their mouths were touching, it was as if Arthur's hands were moving all over Hugh's body, making his skin tingle, making his cock twitch in his breeches. The sheer heat of the man, the rise and fall of his broad chest; it was like they were making love without even having to touch, right down to the slight, rhythmic movement of Arthur's hips as if he couldn't bear to keep from thrusting.

Hugh brought his hands to Arthur's face. He couldn't help it; he needed the man's stubbled jawline against his fingertips more than he needed to breathe. Arthur flinched; Hugh stiffened, ready to pull away, but before he could do so Arthur pressed his palm tightly to the back of one of Hugh's hands.

He wanted his touch. Needed it. Hugh stroked the man's roughened skin, the feel of him thrilling through every nerve in his body, and was rewarded with a growl from Arthur that

made him burn. Burn for more, burn for everything. Hugh arched his back, gasping as Arthur wrapped his other hand around his waist.

‘Oh, God Almighty.’ Hugh couldn’t help but blaspheme; the feel of Arthur’s body pressed tightly to his was too pleasurable to bear in silence. Every inch of him felt hard, uncompromising, right down to the rigid line of his cock straining against his clothes. Arthur tightened his arm around Hugh’s waist, crushing him in a way that tempered pain with pleasure as he hungrily claimed Hugh’s mouth, his lips and tongue setting Hugh alight by sweet, excruciating degrees.

Suddenly, mouths weren’t enough. Not with the blaze now burning in him, a fire he’d ignored for long enough. Hugh ran his hands along Arthur’s broad shoulders, gripping the linen of the man’s shirt, then moved to stroke over his back.

Caressing the small of Arthur’s back felt astonishingly intimate. Now their cocks were pressed together; the feel of that, of his desire so close to Hugh’s own, made Hugh whimper gently as he deepened the kiss. Arthur’s hands left Hugh’s cheekbones. Hugh’s whimper became a cry as Arthur brought his fingers to Hugh’s chest, rubbing his nipples through his shirt in a rough, intensely pleasurable approximation of what had happened in the next room.

‘Oh, Christ.’ Arthur’s touch was just as uncompromising as his kiss. He stroked and played with Hugh’s stiff nipples as if they had been made for him, belonged to him. Hugh cried out as the sensation ripped through him, a lightning bolt of wicked, sensuous discomfort. ‘More.’

As soon as he said it, he knew it had been a mistake. Arthur would want to keep as much power as he could, not give it all away to the man who’d made him succumb. Arthur immediately took his fingers away from Hugh’s nipples, a look of near-feral triumph in his eyes.

‘Oh, you *beast*.’ Hugh knew he wasn’t helping himself, but he could hardly say nothing. ‘You absolute monster.’

He wasn’t expecting an answer from Arthur, and he didn’t get one. But he also wasn’t expecting the man to move his hands to Hugh’s breeches, his strength formidably present as he gripped the buckskin.

With a single, brutal gesture, Arthur pulled Hugh’s breeches down to his knees. Hugh gasped as the cool bedroom air hit his rigid cock, the sensation so vivid it was almost uncomfortable.

He held his breath as Arthur looked down at his cock. The man’s expression, a kind of fierce, covetous pride, sent even more desire flooding through Hugh’s body.

Arthur reached forward. He took hold of Hugh’s shaft, his grip as strong as the look in his eyes, and Hugh thought he’d die from the pleasure of it.

Arthur’s hand felt so right on his cock. So harsh, yet so perfectly judged to how much Hugh could take. How much he wanted to curl his toes and whimper with unabashed pleasure as Arthur slid his hand from root to tip again and again, his other hand playing oh-so-gently with Hugh’s balls. Hugh took in a rough breath, the sound laced with both excitement and pain as Arthur gripped his cockhead.

Arthur kissed him again. The taste of the man’s lips and the strength of his touch had Hugh shivering, his cock slick and wet as his desire covered Arthur’s fingers. He would come in Arthur’s hand right now if the man asked him to—Christ, even if the man moved his fingers more than an inch.

And Arthur knew it. That was why his habitually grim expression had such teasing life to it; a warm, sensual glint in his eyes that made Hugh lean closer to him for yet another long, breathless kiss.

‘Your mouth on my cock.’ Arthur’s rough growl was as pleasurable as his touch. ‘Now.’

Hugh nodded so quickly that he almost cracked his skull against Arthur’s forehead. Arthur released Hugh’s cock, reaching for his breeches; Hugh quickly sank to his knees, the hard floorboards sending shockwaves through his bones.

He wanted Arthur’s cock in his mouth even more than Arthur wanted it, he was sure. He’d wanted it for so damned long that it had barely been a conscious thought, more of a base desire that influenced an astonishing amount of his behaviour. As Arthur pushed down his breeches, his cock springing free, Hugh couldn’t resist a heartfelt sigh of pure admiration.

‘Your cock is as beautiful as the rest of you.’

‘Shut up.’ But there was a caressing note to Arthur’s instruction, a tenderness that Hugh was sure he wasn’t imagining, and so all he did in response was laugh.

As soon as Arthur had pushed aside his waistcoat and stepped out of his breeches, Hugh reached for the base of the man’s cock. He held it gently, but Arthur still stood stock-still as if he’d gripped it; he growled harshly, the sound prickling the back of Hugh’s neck.

‘There, there.’ Hugh marvelled at the thickness of the man as he stroked the man’s shaft. Like steel in silk, a great quantity of it; no wonder Arthur carried himself with great security. ‘I’ve got you.’

He didn’t know if he was skilled or not at what he was about to do. No doubt there were gentlemen at the Perdition Club who had made an art of cock-sucking, or at least a very lucrative profession out of it. Fortunately, as with most things in life, eagerness counted for a lot—and Christ, was he eager.

He kissed the tip of Arthur's cock, holding him steady. Then, with a deep breath and a flood of delirious pleasure at the mere thought of what he was about to do, he licked his lips and drew the man's cock deep into his mouth.

'*Fuck.*' Arthur's moan was as rough as sandpaper. He thrust his hips and Hugh swallowed reflexively, torn between breathing and taking even more of the man's cock. 'Fucking hell.'

You're even more handsome when you swear. God knows why. Hugh stroked along Arthur's hipbones with trembling fingers, whimpering against the man's shaft as he slowly but surely took even more of him. Another inch, then another—and then Hugh's throat closed, then he coughed and spluttered, but Arthur softly caressed the borders of his face until he could breathe again.

At first he was clumsy. He knew it, he couldn't help it; once or twice Arthur sucked in his breath through his teeth, letting Hugh know in no uncertain terms that his attentions were more uncomfortable than pleasurable. But dash it, he wanted this—wanted more of those harsh sighs and growls from Arthur's lips, wanted them desperately—and Arthur, from the way he kept thrusting, wanted more of his mouth as well.

It took time, but Hugh had time. Time enough to learn, to try, to be rewarded with more of the raw, sweet sounds of pleasure that came from Arthur's lips. And when he finally took Arthur deeper still, letting the head of the man's cock nudge the base of his throat without balking at the size of it, Arthur's soft whimper was even better than a growl.

'Like that.' His palm was soft as he caressed Hugh's cheek. 'Just like that.'

It was better than a thousand words of praise from anyone else. Hugh nodded, staring into Arthur's deeply satisfied eyes,

and felt his heart skip a beat.

Now he'd got the hang of it. Now he could breathe and pleasure Arthur at the same time, making a deep, constant rhythm with his lips and tongue as Arthur's thrusts grew more aggressive, less controlled. Hugh pressed his hands to the small of Arthur's back, encouraging him, humming with pleasure against the man's shaft as Arthur thrust harder still.

Choke me. He'd never felt that specific shade of desire before, let alone silently begged for it. Something about Arthur's tenderness beneath his brute strength made it a safe thing to want from him, to crave. *Take my breath.*

Arthur seemed to sense his wish. One of his hands was suddenly in Hugh's hair, tugging at the roots. Hugh quivered, a new and previously undiscovered part of himself melting with pleasure as Arthur guided his head. Once, twice, thrice; a quick succession of fierce thrusts, each one more overwhelming than the last.

When Arthur finally pulled his cock from Hugh's mouth, still holding him by the hair, it felt like the perfect time to speak again. 'Come in my throat.'

'No.'

'Please.'

Arthur's expression was torn between lust and bemusement. 'How are you...nothing.'

'What?'

'How are you still fucking *talking* so much?'

'I don't know.' This was probably one of the occasions when he was supposed to stay silent, but Hugh had never let that stop him before. 'I like talking to you.'

Arthur didn't respond. He simply stared down at Hugh, lips slightly parted, as if he'd never heard anything similar

before. Then, with a sound so soft and needy that Hugh barely heard it, he pulled Hugh by his hair to his feet.

He turned Hugh around and pressed him against the wall. At first Hugh moaned with frustration; he had no desire to watch the two men in the other room again, not now he was engaged in something infinitely more interesting.

But Arthur evidently had something different planned for him. As Hugh tried to turn his head to glance behind him, Arthur slid two fingers between his parted lips. Hugh sucked instinctively; Arthur's dark eyes burned, the moment of visual connection almost as electric as the act itself.

Hugh licked the pads of Arthur's fingers, revelling in how the salt of the man's skin tasted. As Arthur withdrew his fingers, Hugh saw him smile.

Well. Almost smile. It was the faintest shadow of a grin, barely anything by the standards of a normal person. But Hugh found himself grinning back, smiling like a moonstruck calf, and the near-grin on Arthur's face brightened.

It only lasted an instant. The blink of an eye. But when Arthur lowered his gaze, it was as if they had shared an entire conversation. Hugh turned back to face the wall, glowing.

'Ohhh.' The base of his neck burned with a blush as Arthur, his lips brushing gently against Hugh's shoulder, pressed two slick fingers to his entrance.

He shouldn't be embarrassed. He'd practically swallowed Arthur's cock and had tremendous fun doing it. But there was something about this particular act, something profound, and—and oh, *God*, the man's fingers felt so good as they slid inside.

So *fucking* good. Hugh privately forgave himself for the blasphemy, the rest of his mind vibrating with shocked pleasure as Arthur invaded him.

He'd never imagined Arthur to be capable of such delicacy. Such intimate, caring touches. As Arthur moved his fingers deeper inside him, testing and probing, Hugh gave a deep, shivering sigh of something like relief.

'Like that.' He murmured as Arthur curled his fingers inside him, laughter caught in his throat at just how good such a simple movement felt. 'Oh, God—yes.'

'If you're going to talk all the fucking time, say please.' Arthur curled his fingers again, deeper this time, and Hugh's toes curled of their own accord. 'All right?'

More than all right. If Arthur told him he needed to speak Japanese at this precise point in time, Hugh would learn. 'More, please. Please, please, *please*.'

It didn't seem to appease Arthur. He growled behind Hugh, pushing him harder against the wall—but his fingers moved deeper, just as Hugh wanted, and the motion they made sent a wave of pleasure through him strong enough to capsize any lingering fears he had.

'Oh, Christ.' He'd never had anyone inside him with such confidence before. Every man he'd ever been with had been hesitant, as shy as Hugh himself was—and while that certainly hadn't been repellent, it hadn't been what Hugh wanted.

He'd wanted this. Thick, knowledgeable fingers at his very core, stretching him wide with the kind of brazen mastery that one saw in dancers or prize-fighters.

He'd needed Arthur Steele finger-fucking him against the wall of a notorious pleasure house, damn it. There should have been a pamphlet explaining it; he could have avoided wasting time with other people.

No. He cried out in pure annoyance as Arthur withdrew his fingers. 'Why?'

‘Why do you think, you idiot?’ The insult sounded like a caress in Arthur’s voice. ‘Why do you think?’

Oh.

Hugh held very still indeed, anticipation hot and singing in his veins, as Arthur kicked away his breeches. Then came the man’s cock, sliding between his inner thighs. Hugh moaned, squeezing around his shaft.

Arthur withdrew. The lack of him had Hugh ready to say words he usually avoided thinking, let alone speaking aloud. But then the head of his cock brushed against Hugh’s buttocks in slow, teasing circles, and Hugh gasped in shuddering relief.

Oh, please. Arthur slid his cock up and down Hugh’s cleft, teasing him, until Hugh was so desperate to have to man inside him that it was all he could do not to scream. *Please, please, please.*

Eventually, on the point of either prayer or punching the man, he reached behind him and pulled Arthur closer. Arthur’s chest pressed against his back, his cock now tight to Hugh’s entrance, his breath hot against Hugh’s neck.

Hugh pushed his hips backward. It was all he could do apart from beg, and he was already closer to begging than he’d ever been before.

He held his breath as Arthur spoke.

‘Let me?’

It was the most vulnerable Arthur had ever sounded. A soft, begging question that tempered the strength of his hands, the heat of his cock as it pressed against Hugh’s entrance. Hugh, shivering at the feel of Arthur’s lips brushing the back of his neck, half turned his head.

‘I’m not letting you.’ It was terribly important that Arthur understood this. ‘I *want* you to.’

Arthur paused. He nodded in a faintly dazed way, as if he'd just understood something complex that had previously escaped him. Then, just as Hugh was about to open his mouth and clarify what he had meant, he thrust his hips.

Just a little. Just enough. Enough for his cock to enter, inch by slow, delicious inch; enough for stars to explode behind Hugh's eyes, pain colliding with pleasure and transforming into something entirely new.

He'd been taken by men before. Of course he had. But something about the feel of Arthur's cock remorselessly opening him wide, the way the man held him so tightly as he did so, made Hugh feel like a virgin all over again.

I'm glad you weren't my first. Hugh cried out as Arthur filled him completely. *You would have ruined me for everyone else.*

'Finally.' Arthur's mutter under his breath was almost inaudible. 'Fucking, *fucking* finally.'

He withdrew slightly. Hugh moaned, bucking his hips backwards. Arthur couldn't stop now, couldn't leave him. But then Arthur thrust again, thrust deeper, and Hugh's next moan was one of helpless pleasure.

Arthur moaned with him. A low, harsh sound, raw somehow, as if he were as unused to this pleasure as Hugh was. His hand tightened on Hugh's hip, bringing them still closer together, while his other hand came to rest against Hugh's chest.

He can feel my heartbeat. A deep jolt of desire shot through Hugh's core, weakening his knees as Arthur stroked his chest with his thumb.

'So.' It was hard to speak, but Hugh couldn't resist. 'You don't...hate me.'

Arthur stilled inside him. 'Are you serious?'

‘Maybe.’ Hugh arched his back, squeezing Arthur’s cock. Arthur growled, gripping his hip tightly. ‘Or maybe I just like to hear you talk.’

‘Oh, yes?’ Arthur’s next thrust was a little quicker. More filthy, somehow, shot through with a hunger that made Hugh gasp. ‘Is that what you want? More talk?’

‘The right kind of talk.’

‘I don’t hate you.’ Another thrust, another growl that practically had Hugh panting. ‘All right?’

‘No. Not nearly enough,’ Hugh sighed.

‘Go to hell.’

‘Already a foregone conclusion, given what we’re doing.’

‘I have wanted you every fucking day since I met you,’ Arthur admitted.

‘You have?’

‘Yes.’ Arthur’s low, filthy murmur made Hugh whimper with helpless pleasure. ‘All right? Every morning, every afternoon, every night, it’s you, you, you.’ He thrust deeper; Hugh cried out at the feel of being so thoroughly possessed. ‘That sound—that’s what I keep conjuring up when I’m alone. You being slowly, thoroughly fucked, spread wide, my cock so deep in you that you can’t tell where I end and you begin. Is that what you want to hear?’

‘Yes.’ He wasn’t going to keep playing games now. Not with so much bliss flooding his body that it was hard to form a thought, let alone assess what Arthur’s reaction would be to the truth. Arthur talking so much, being so verbal—it was almost as good as the feel of his cock inside him. ‘I’ve dreamed about this too.’

‘I don’t dream of anything.’

‘I have. You have. Tell me what else you’ve dreamed of.’

Arthur turned Hugh's face towards his own. Hugh shivered as the man's rough fingertips caressed the outline of his mouth, as if Arthur couldn't believe the words he'd just heard.

Then he began to thrust again. A deep, hard rhythm that had Hugh gasping in mute, dizzying pleasure as Arthur spoke to him again.

'I've—I've dreamed about fucking you in public. Do you know what it takes for me to dream about someone in that way?' His voice was soft, incredulous in Hugh's ear even as his thrusts grew faster. 'Whenever you're being nice to a greengrocer, or picking a newspaper up off the damned road, or complimenting someone on their—on their *bonnet*, all I want to do is drag you into the nearest alley and get your cock in my mouth or my cock in your arse. In daylight, in a crowd, in front of a Bow Street Runner. That's what you've done to me.'

'Yes.' He'd let Arthur do anything to him anywhere. If it meant this, meant the man gripping him at the nape of the neck and practically splitting him in two, he'd pray for it as he prayed for peace on earth. 'Say more.'

'Oh, that's not enough for you? That you've turned me into a fucking dog whenever I'm around you?' The frustration in Arthur's voice only heightened the pleasure of his thrusts, the rhythm so perfect that Hugh could barely stand it. 'Of course it bloody isn't. You bastard, I want to do things with you that you can't imagine. I want you bound, panting like you are now—I want you binding me, both, all of it. I want you chained to my bed. I—I want...'

'What?'

'I've...I've even dreamed of you fucking other men in front of me after I'm too tired to fuck you anymore. All right?' The shame in Arthur's voice was tempered by the strength of his thrusts, stronger still now that he'd said something he found so clearly unacceptable. 'I want to watch you get all the

pleasure in the world. I don't care where from. Because seeing you happy, it's...it's like being inside you.'

He said it so gently. With such vulnerability. Hugh trembled as a fierce jolt of pleasure shot through him, so much more powerful now that Arthur had offered him such unfettered access to his desires.

He's wanted me all along. The knowledge made every sensation all the sweeter. *He's wanted me from the first.*

Now he could give himself over wholeheartedly to what was happening. He could moan and buck his hips backward as Arthur quickened his thrusts. Arthur's words lived inside him—God, who knew the man could be so loquacious if given the right stimulus?—and Hugh could go over them again and again, each syllable like another caress as he pressed his hands hard against the wall.

Not that he was in a reflective mood. It was hard to keep any thoughts in his head at all. Despite wanting to stay in this exact moment for as long as possible, his body was jumping ahead. Hugh whimpered, pressing his forehead to the wall as a ripple of ecstasy ran through him.

'I'm close.' He murmured the words almost to himself, unable to believe it. 'I...oh, God, don't stop.'

'Don't tell me what to do.' Arthur's rough voice sounded strangely tender, as if he knew his order meant nothing. 'I'll stop if I want.'

'Do you want to?'

'What do you fucking think?'

'If you don't want to stop, let me stay here like this. Keep me like this.' It was impossible, he knew it, but the idea of all this pleasure vanishing was intolerable. 'Please.'

Arthur's laughter as he wrapped his slick palm around Hugh's cock was a threat and a promise at the same time. 'I

don't think so.'

Arthur's hand on his cock made everything more electric. Hugh bowed his head, trembling in surrender as his knees buckled.

All was happening at once, all the pleasure, all the anticipation suddenly reaching a peak. Arthur's thrusts were deep, merciless; his touch on Hugh's cock was easy, expert, as if he were handling himself. But what pushed Hugh over the precipice, what had him moaning and bucking back against Arthur like a mad thing, was the way Arthur whispered in his ear.

'That's right. Just like that.' His voice was full of lustful awe, a sweetness hanging on the edges of it that Hugh was tempted to call happiness. 'I'll get you there. Don't worry.'

How could he worry? Every part of him was safe with Arthur; his safety, his body, his pleasure. Even, Hugh was almost sure, his heart.

'I...'

A violent wave of ecstasy threatened to overwhelm him. 'I'm going to...'

'I've got you.'

He had him. All of him. Hugh hung his head, letting Arthur take the weight of him as his climax tore him asunder.

The world was a fresh page, blank and featureless. As if from far away, filtered through a pleasure so strong it reshaped all it touched, Hugh heard Arthur's moan as he came.

He was complete. They both were. But as Hugh brought his hand to his chest, resting his palm on Arthur's hand, he couldn't help but wonder what would happen next.

No. Stay here. His exhausted mind made every effort to control itself. *Don't leave this moment before Arthur does.*

Arthur stilled. He rested his lips against the back of Hugh's neck. As the kiss flowed through Hugh like cool water, quenching a thirst he hadn't known existed, he found himself praying—praying with the fragile hope of a man who had just found a place of safety—that this would never end.

Chapter Seven

Well. Arthur's reasoning mind reappeared little by little. *Now you've gone and done it.*

He'd fucked Hugh. Fucked him from top to bottom, start to finish and practically inside out. And even though he was still inside the man, even though he was sweating and panting as if he'd run a marathon, all he wanted was more.

Not even more fucking, although he wouldn't say no to that as soon as he and Hugh had recovered. More of everything, that was it; more of Hugh talking, laughing, flirting, bickering, *everything*.

All of Hugh, forever.

It was a dream far more ambitious than any Arthur had dared to have before. And for some reason, even though the usual voices in his head were busily telling him that it was the most stupid thing they'd ever heard, the dream still persisted.

Enough. Hugh would be getting uncomfortable, pressed against the wall like this. Arthur loosened his grip on Hugh's chest and hip, gritting his teeth as he withdrew.

This part normally felt sordid, almost sad. But this time, with Hugh, it simply felt new, as if it had been the very first time, with all its attendant fears and embarrassments, and now came the silly, human part where he and Hugh were just two people rather than one being, having to remember who each of them were without the other.

I don't want to remember who I am without you. Arthur glared at the man's back for a moment, irrationally annoyed that he had to be one person again. *Even if it's only for a moment.*

Hugh didn't appear to be battling the same internal storm. If anything, he seemed as tranquil as he usually did—bar a

certain satisfaction on his face that Arthur sincerely hoped he'd caused. He smiled at Arthur as he turned around, a brief but sunny moment, then immediately leaned down to pick up his discarded clothes.

Fine. Arthur turned and walked to the opposite corner of the room, sweeping his clothes up off the floor as he moved.
Damn it.

It wasn't as if he'd expected Hugh to immediately pull him back for another kiss. He'd hoped for that, but he'd begun to hope for stupid things without any encouragement. Arthur shook his head to himself with a harsh smile as he made a pile of his clothes, putting them on one by one.

Perhaps Hugh usually wanted to be left alone when doing this sort of thing. Every man had his own routine after a certain number of encounters, after all. Arthur kept his back turned for a little while, listening to Hugh pick up his shirt and rearrange his other garments, before giving in and glancing at the man.

Hugh looked back at him. He gave a slight, embarrassed smile, his cravat hanging loosely in his hands, then turned to the mirror and began to wrap the cravat around his neck.

Arthur put down his waistcoat. He walked quickly and silently over the floorboards, gave Hugh a quick but definite kiss on the back of his neck before any more layers of cravat could be wrapped around it, then walked back to his own corner of the room.

He put on his waistcoat, deliberately not looking at Hugh. He himself had always felt an urge to be solitary after the act, desperate to put a bit of distance between himself and whoever had forced him to feel something. It was exactly the same in this case—for about six seconds, after which he had to kiss Hugh again.

You're still a lone wolf. He crossed the room once more, kissed Hugh's cheek before the man could react, then went back to his own corner and began to adjust his shirtsleeves. *Well. A wolf with responsibilities—which yes, is technically a dog, but I'll kill anyone who says it aloud.*

It seemed a little exaggerated to put on his boots. It wasn't as if he and Hugh were about to go outside—but then, maybe Hugh would want to leave. Maybe this had all been too much for him.

Perhaps he should kiss him again. That would make him feel a little more certain. But as Arthur turned, Hugh was climbing into bed.

He hadn't got fully dressed. His cravat was loosely tied, his shirt rolled up to the elbows. His stockings still lay on the floor. Arthur's gaze lingered on the lengths of white silk as Hugh settled beneath the blankets.

'I think...I think we may have lost the best of the light.' Hugh sat primly against the pillows, hands folded on the bedspread.

'Yes.'

'I probably won't be able to identify anyone with any certainty outside that pub now.' Hugh paused. 'In fact, I definitely won't. But I can try again tomorrow.'

Was the man still thinking about that? Thinking about anything other than what they'd just done, how it had felt? Arthur bit his lip, suppressing a burst of disbelieving laughter.

That was Hugh. Upright, determined to do the correct thing. Kind enough to give life the benefit of the doubt again and again, sure that everything would come right sooner or later.

I am a dog. Arthur left the rest of his clothes where they were. He walked over to the other side of the bed and dove under the blankets without a word, resurfacing to sit as close

to Hugh as possible without actually sitting on top of him. *I'm your dog.*

He put his arm behind Hugh. Hugh nestled into the crook of Arthur's shoulder without a word, gently kissing Arthur's cheek. Arthur drew up the blankets over Hugh's shoulders, making sure that no bare inch of the man's skin had any chance of getting cold, and rested his chin on the man's tousled hair.

They lay in silence for some time. No sounds came from the room on the other side of the wall. The men had left, perhaps, or were sleeping. Every noise that drifted in from the window, whether it was the excited laughter of a child or the bray of a horse treated too roughly by its groom, seemed to fade into nothingness by the time it arrived at the border of the bed.

Everything felt...different. Thoroughly, powerfully different. Arthur tried to trace the contours of the new feeling, the way the entire world seemed to have shifted to one side when his head was turned, but soon gave up.

He hadn't survived so long by questioning the world. He'd accepted every bad hand he'd ever been dealt, kept his head down, learned to survive suffering. If he kept doing what he'd always done, he'd learn to accept this incredibly good hand too.

'I...I can't hear a tremendous amount of public-house related activity.' Hugh yawned. 'Almost none, in fact.'

'You don't know that.'

'In fact, I'd be tempted to say that the pub isn't actually open.'

'Shut up.'

'Maybe it's closed forever. Which would mean that you got something wrong.'

‘I...’

‘Goodnight.’ With a smile that made Arthur’s heart feel like molten glass, Hugh closed his eyes and pulled the blankets more securely around them both.

Was the man actually going to sleep?

He was. The man was going to sleep right in front of Arthur, as if he trusted him so completely that he could throw off consciousness like someone throwing off a pair of gloves. Arthur stared at him for some minutes, astonished, until Hugh gave a faint snore.

Who trusted someone else enough to fall asleep next to them? It was barely understandable when a wife slept around her husband, let alone a man sleeping next to a man he’d only known for a short time. Arthur hadn’t done it since childhood, and up until this precise moment hadn’t believed it was anything to write home about.

But it was...nice, Hugh sleeping next to him. Very nice. And although he wasn’t quite ready to do the same as Hugh, residual tension in his body still making it seem like the worst thing in the world to fall asleep in an unfamiliar environment, Arthur realised with a jolt of surprise that he was more than happy to stay awake.

He could make sure Hugh was sleeping peacefully. Wake him if it looked as if he was having a bad dream. He’d guarded the door of any number of truly shite establishments, sending bastards twice his size tumbling into the gutter. Guarding Hugh would be like guarding a kitten by comparison.

He looked intently at Hugh’s sleeping face. All of the qualities that were evident in the man when he was awake—gentleness, good humour, optimism—were inexplicably still present in Hugh’s features as he slept.

Time passed. Arthur had suffered a fair few long, dark nights of the soul, before his soul had stopped being something he paid attention to. But he'd never had a long, *light* night of the soul; a seemingly endless stretch of time in which the world, for all its tragedies, suddenly seemed beautiful.

He stroked Hugh's hair, paying attention to the way the colours shifted in the candlelight. He covered Hugh's forehead in kisses as soft and light as he could muster, waiting to see if there was any change in the man's expression—a hint that he had felt the kiss in the middle of whatever dream he was having.

It was only when he pulled away that Hugh opened his eyes. He stared at Arthur for a moment, clearly bewildered. 'Did...did you wake me? Are you all right?'

'Edward died.' Arthur didn't know why these words came now. All he knew was that something had softened inside him, some twisted, scarred part of him had changed shape and begun to bleed again. 'Cholera.'

Hugh blinked. The complex array of emotions on his face, sympathy and care and caution as to how best express both, nipped any regret at having told the man in the bud. 'I'm so sorry.'

'We were always together. Neither of us ever had to finish a sentence, the other would always do it. So when he—well, the day after he was buried...it was like a part of me was in the ground with him.'

These were words he'd never imagined saying. Words that had dug like rusty hooks into a small, raw spot on his heart; removing them felt painful but freeing.

'It was—the silly part of me that I left with him.' It was important to make it clear, both to himself and also to Hugh. 'The happy part. That's why I'm such a grumpy bastard.'

‘Wherever you’ve left yourself, whatever parts lie buried, you are enough.’ Hugh spoke softly. ‘No part of you is missing to me.’

‘You don’t...you don’t know all of me.’

‘I’m an open book. You’re a closed one. Both are perfectly correct.’ Hugh rested his head in the crook of Arthur’s shoulder again. ‘I can read you as and when you become available.’

‘Why are you so...all right, with me?’

‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

‘Because I’ve picked away at you. I’ve been relentless with it.’

‘Only because you’ve been absolutely obsessed with me. Completely unable to remove me from your mind.’ Hugh gently blew against Arthur’s neck. ‘I imagine you’ll settle down now.’

‘Shut up.’ Arthur smiled, kissing the top of Hugh’s head. But Hugh’s last sentence had a touch of awkwardness to it; it lingered in the air.

Now could mean a lot of things. In this moment, in this room, in this life and the life thereafter. Arthur wrapped his arm more tightly around Hugh, waiting for the question hanging in the air to fade away.

‘I...I wish you could have met Edward.’ Perhaps a little more honesty would break the tension. ‘You would have made him laugh.’

‘Deliberately, I hope.’

‘Of course.’

‘I wish I could have met Edward too.’ Hugh nodded, his voice thick with sleep again. ‘And I’m glad you were silly with him. I’m glad you were happy.’

He kissed Arthur's neck, his lips light and sweet, then fell into silence. Arthur listened as his breathing became slower, more regular. The man had fallen asleep in his arms again.

He yawned. He was so relaxed now, so light after unburdening himself, that he was actually drifting on the edges of sleep.

You stupid bastard. Arthur blearily reprimanded himself as he snuggled closer to Hugh, breathing in the scent of the man's hair. *Five minutes. No more.*

Chapter Eight

When he woke again, a good few hours later if the faint light from the window was any indication, he wanted Hugh. Wanted to be close to him, wanted to be inside him, wanted whatever the man could give him so he could offer him pleasure in return. Hugh was still sleeping; Arthur watched him for a moment, trying to wake him through the power of his stare alone.

Damn it. He could normally make people do anything by staring at them. But Hugh kept sleeping in what looked like complete tranquility, one eyelid twitching slightly in a way that made Arthur want to reach out and gently caress it with his fingertip.

Hugh. He wasn't going to do anything as undignified as actually calling out the man's name, but he'd shout it in his head and hope the man caught the message. Reading thoughts was for charlatans and idiots, but this was somehow different.

Hugh. Wake up. I don't need anything or anyone, but I need you.

Not want. Need.

Hugh stirred. Arthur held his breath, sure that it had worked, but the man dreamily rubbed his twitching eye and then fell into what looked like an even deeper sleep.

Fuck it. Arthur gently shook Hugh's shoulder, stopping as soon as Hugh opened his eyes.

'You...you woke me this time.' Hugh looked at him sleepily, a bewildered smile on his face. 'I'm sure of it.'

'I didn't.'

‘You did. Unless a ghost decided to shake me awake, and this place has far too much earthly activity in it to be haunted.’

‘Fine.’ For some reason, this felt like far more of a confession than when he’d admitted how much he desired Hugh. ‘I did.’

‘Ha! I knew it. Why?’

‘Because...I don’t know.’

‘Are you sure you don’t know?’

‘How are you this talkative when you’ve just woken up?’

‘Fine.’ Hugh reached up to stroke Arthur’s face. His touch was as light as a sunbeam and made Arthur feel just as warm. ‘I’ll wait until you tell me why you woke me.’

Don’t tell him you need him. Don’t, under any circumstances, tell this smug beautiful fucking man that you need him.

‘Because I need you.’ He swallowed. ‘All right?’

‘Of course that’s all right.’ Hugh’s voice was very soft indeed. ‘I need you too.’

He said it as if it was the easiest thing in the world to say. But at the same time, despite the lightness of the man’s tone, Arthur felt just how consequential the words were to Hugh.

Hugh could say meaningful things without worrying that he would be hurt. And now, rather than anger or jealousy, all Arthur could feel in response was overwhelming gratitude.

‘Come here.’ He drew Hugh into his arms. ‘Please.’

Hugh’s smile widened at the word *please*. Arthur kissed him before he could say anything else, fighting the reflexive fear that he had given too much of himself away.

This was different than last time. Slower, softer, quieter. All the tension had ebbed away between him and Hugh,

replaced with a bone deep need to be as close to the man as he possibly could. Surrounding him, covering him with his body until they felt like one being.

Hugh tightened his arms around him as he deepened the kiss. Arthur gasped, unable to help himself, and Hugh's sleepy smile of contentment as he withdrew was its own reward. Arthur leaned down, kissing Hugh's forehead, lingering against the man's skin as he explored.

There was no aggression anymore. No desire to mark the man, claim him indisputably as his; that was a mountain he had already climbed. Hugh didn't need to be grasped tightly in his fist. The man had opened all of himself to Arthur, body and soul, and required nothing but the same openness in return.

Hard, but not impossible. He could show his openness without words, kissing Hugh's forehead and cheeks as he looked into his eyes. Taking note of every movement Hugh made, each tremble and sigh, using every clue the man gave him to heighten his pleasure.

Hugh wrapped his arms tightly around Arthur's back, his touch full of delicate yearning as he caressed Arthur's bare skin. Another layer of connection, of comfort, that only made Arthur all the more grateful that this man had found him. Had plucked him free of the life he'd been living, that dark, rough path to nowhere, and taught him a new way.

There was so much of Hugh to kiss, to stroke. So much of him to touch. Arthur kissed his way along the line of Hugh's neck, tracing his tongue over his collarbone, then stopped at the man's smooth chest.

'I was cruel to you here before.' He gently pinched Hugh's nipples, suppressing a smile as the man moaned. 'At least, I tried to be.'

'You were. Very.'

‘Should I be cruel to you again?’

‘No. You should be very, very kind indeed.’ Hugh reached out, stroking one of Arthur’s fingers with a look so piteous Arthur almost laughed. ‘Please.’

‘I’m not that kind.’ Arthur bent his head to Hugh’s chest. He blew on one of Hugh’s erect nipples and Hugh’s answering whimper was delicious. ‘But I’ll try.’

He’d never played with someone before. He’d never played in general before; life was a hard thing that needed combat, not play. But licking at Hugh, teasing his nipples with strokes and pinches and sucks and the gentlest grazing of his teeth, was *fun*. Fun because he could be playful, fun because Hugh welcomed every caress with such ardency—and fun above all because he was with Hugh, touching Hugh, and the man brought fun with him on his coattails wherever he went.

He needed fun. He needed it almost as much as he needed Hugh. So when Arthur finally left Hugh’s reddened nipples and kissed along the line of downy hair that led to his cock, he resolved to have as much fun as possible between now and taking Hugh’s cock deep in his throat.

‘Now.’ He blew on the tip of Hugh’s stiff cock, triumphant as a deep shiver ran over the surface of Hugh’s skin. ‘You did this before.’

‘Don’t say it in such a questioning way, as if you’ve forgotten it happened.’

‘Oh, did it? You were so delicate. Almost disdainful.’

‘You—stop it.’

‘And it’s not as if I enjoyed it at all.’

‘If you think I’m going to lie here and listen to such lies, you’re quite mistaken.’ Hugh shifted as if he were going to get up. Arthur pressed the man’s wrists to the bed, suddenly worried that he’d gone too far.

‘I didn’t mean it.’ He paused. ‘I’m not very good at jokes.’

‘I—I know you were joking.’ Hugh’s laughter sent a spear of embarrassed relief through Arthur. ‘You were doing very well.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘No. I’m afraid I’m not going anywhere.’

Never go anywhere again. Another thought that Arthur hoped Hugh could pluck out of the air without ever having to hear it said aloud. He settled for an intense stare, one that Hugh smiled dreamily at, then turned his attention back to Hugh’s cock.

He kissed the tip of Hugh’s cock. Hugh moaned, thrusting his hips upwards; Arthur moved his hands to the man’s hipbones, keeping him pinned to the bed.

Hugh had tormented him with his wit, his handsomeness, his sunny optimism. The man could suffer a little here and now as recompense. Arthur blew on the tip of Hugh’s cock, deeply enjoying the man’s broken cry of frustration, before gently kissing the head of his shaft again.

‘Oh, please stop playing with me.’

‘No.’

‘Please?’

‘No.’ Another kiss, another brush of air against Hugh’s cockhead—then a sudden long lick that made Hugh thrust his hips again. ‘I don’t just follow orders.’

‘I’m not ordering you—oh, yes, put your tongue just there.’

‘Now that sounded like an order.’

‘Oh, God.’ Hugh laughed softly. ‘Is this punishment for calling you a pike?’

No. It's punishment for you being incredibly fucking... lovely. But Arthur certainly wasn't going to say that, not with Hugh still managing to run things so completely despite being physically at Arthur's mercy, and so he settled for running his tongue over the head of Hugh's cock again and again until the man was moaning too continuously to make any more jovial little comments.

It was only when he himself was too lustful to continue teasing that Arthur finally gave in. Looking into Hugh's heavy-lidded eyes, making sure that the man understood quite how much he loved the taste of him, he sank down onto Hugh's cock until it was deep in his throat.

Oh, this was everything. The taste of Hugh, the feel of him, the way Hugh's dizzy gasp made everything feel a thousand times better still. Arthur went deep, deep enough to feel slightly overwhelmed—how good it felt, being overwhelmed by Hugh—then came up for air, playing with Hugh, a breathless moan escaping him.

He bent his head again. Hugh had taken all of him, every inch—it was only polite to return the favour, pressing the head of Hugh's cock to the back of his throat until he was on the point of coughing. Drawing the man in as deep as he could, testing himself, knowing somewhere inside that Hugh would never go beyond what was comfortable.

Again, again, again. Deeper each time, faster, sucking Hugh's cock with all the eagerness Hugh had shown with him. Bringing Hugh to the edge once, then twice, then thrice—and then Hugh was suddenly shivering, his hips bucking upward as he cried out.

'No.' Arthur immediately raised his head. 'You don't get to come like this.'

'Oh please, let me come like that, please please please—'

'No.' Arthur moved up Hugh's body. He kissed him deeply, slowly, relishing Hugh's moan against his lips. 'You're

going to come with me in you. And I'm going to look into your eyes while you do it.'

It was as much a question as it was an order. If Hugh really wanted to come deep into Arthur's throat, he would give it to him without question. But Hugh nodded eagerly, wrapping his arms around Arthur as he snuggled close, and Arthur bit back a growl of desire.

He moved Hugh's hips upward, spreading the man's thighs. Hugh moved eagerly in response to his gestures; he was so ready to be vulnerable with Arthur, to be splayed beneath him in the most brazen way possible, that Arthur almost couldn't believe it.

Don't trust anyone like you trust me. He positioned his cock at Hugh's entrance, staring into the man's eyes in a way he hoped didn't look too grumpy. *I'll treat your trust better than anyone else would.*

He slowly, carefully pushed his cock forward. Just the tip first, then an inch as Hugh moaned with pleasure—but then Hugh tightened around him, the sensation shockingly good, and Arthur couldn't resist thrusting deep.

'Oh, fuck.' His brow was slick with sweat, a deep tremble running through his extremities as he kissed Hugh. 'Forgive me.'

'Nonsense.' Hugh's wicked smile warmed Arthur's heart. 'Now, if you'd gone slower...then I wouldn't have been able to forgive you for at least thirty minutes.'

The man could talk his way through literally every situation. Perhaps Hugh was even capable of talking in complete sentences as he came; Arthur put that thought aside for future examination. Right now, in this moment, he would focus on making Hugh lose the power of speech entirely.

He began to thrust. Not the primal claiming of their first encounter; this was as gentle as he knew how to be, as

sensuous yet insistent as the sea lapping a shore. Hugh responded immediately, making a home for Arthur with his body as he welcomed his cock, and Arthur gasped at the feel of the man's tight inner walls against his shaft.

He wasn't used to this rhythm, much as he wasn't used to play. This deep, slow exploration was as much about the journey as it was the destination, about every tiny expression that flitted over Hugh's face—about the sentiments rising in his own breast, so new and overwhelming that he was almost embarrassed to look Hugh in the eye.

But he couldn't stop looking at him. Couldn't stop kissing Hugh as he thrust, drinking in every little sound the man made. Couldn't stop everything else around him, inside him—worry, suspicion, fear—from slipping away.

I need nothing else. He could bury himself in this man again and again and be born anew each time.

Arthur kissed the crook of Hugh's shoulder, brushing the tip of his nose against the man's skin. Hugh cried out, a soft exclamation of pure delight, and the wonder in it only made Arthur thrust all the harder.

Hugh was already losing control. Slowly, little by little, but Arthur could feel it. He was bucking back against Arthur's thrusts, his body asking for more, his moans becoming increasingly breathless. It was sorely tempting to keep Hugh here on the verge, bringing him to the edge of coming and denying him release at the last moment—but fuck, that would be pretending that he himself still had control, and he certainly didn't.

'Arthur.' Hugh murmured in his ear, his teeth painfully pleasurable against Arthur's earlobe. 'Arthur, I'm going to—'

'I know.'

'But I don't—ah!—want to. I want to stay like this.'

‘You wanted that last time, and it didn’t work.’

‘Then...’

‘Then?’

Hugh’s jaw was set, even if his eyes were wide with feeling. ‘Then I want to stay like this *next* time. Please.’

He was trying to stake a claim to Arthur at the same time as being damn near split in half by him. Trying to prove devotion in mind as well as body. And although Arthur knew he should be at least faintly irritated by the man’s fearless presumption, he found himself nodding as if Hugh had said the most natural thing in the world.

There’s allowed to be a next time. How thrilling that certainty felt. *A next time, then another next time—and a time after that, and that...*

He quickened his thrusts. Hugh gasped, the sound like silk to Arthur’s ears, and shivered so deeply that Arthur felt it in his cock.

‘That’s right, my sweet.’ He’d never used a term of endearment for anyone before, not once, but Hugh invited endearment. All the pet names in the world, all the kisses, strokes, caresses; Hugh could keep the soft part of Arthur Steele safe. ‘That’s right. Let it come.’

Hugh whimpered in response, a broken cry of pleasure that made Arthur shiver. He dug his fingers into Arthur’s back, hugging him closer; Arthur buried his head into the crook of Hugh’s shoulder, kissing him again and again as he coaxed him to his peak.

‘Oh, God.’ Hugh’s whisper was fervent as he held Arthur closer still, his tone full of awe. ‘Oh, I—oh, God.’

‘I’ve got you.’ Arthur held Hugh tightly as the man trembled, aching for his own release but determined to let Hugh finish first. This need for closeness, these sweet,

breathless cries of pleasure, all he wanted in the world was this. 'I've got you. I promise.'

It was as if that last promise was what Hugh needed to let go. He bucked against Arthur, his long moan of pleasure filling the room as he spurted against the base of Arthur's stomach. The feel of the man's hot seed splashing against Arthur's skin took away what small amount of self-control he had left. He growled, emptying himself into Hugh, thrusting deep again and again until he was completely spent.

Even as his breathing slowed, his body cooled, he didn't want to move. His cock could stay exactly where it was, inside Hugh; Hugh could stay exactly where he was beneath him, his arms still tight around him, nuzzling his neck and chest as if Arthur needed still more care.

And he did. Now that he'd learned what care could look like, feel like, he was as hungry for it as he was for pleasure. Arthur relaxed fully against Hugh, letting the man kiss away knots of worry he hadn't known he possessed.

There was no need for worry here. No need for any of the walls he'd so painstakingly built over many years to protect himself from the cruelty of the world, because Hugh couldn't be cruel if he tried.

I love you. The thought was more powerful than anything he'd ever felt. *Oh, Hugh Wycliffe, I love you.*

Chapter Nine

The darkness outside the window was like velvet, soft and infinite. Hugh gazed at it, breathing in the still air of the bedroom, the sounds of merriment from surrounding rooms barely entering into the quiet cocoon that he and Arthur had made.

He'd never been so content before. If anything, *content* barely seemed to describe the sensation that had flooded every nerve and bone in Hugh's body as soon as Arthur, still panting from their exertions, kissed the top of his head and pulled him close. It had been so powerful, so complete, that Hugh had fallen asleep in the space of a few breaths.

And then they'd woken again, and Arthur had spoken to him about Edward. And Hugh, his heart inexpressibly full, had spoken to him, and then they'd slept again...and then there had been that last bout of lovemaking, full of meaning, and a final surrender to sleep. Even to list it in his head, name what had occurred, felt to Hugh as if he were making up a story.

How long had they been lying here? Maybe minutes, maybe hours. Time didn't seem consequential in the slightest, not now; it was only the time wasted that weighed on Hugh, made him grieve what he and Arthur had missed.

He snuggled closer to Arthur, kissing the curve between his neck and shoulder. Arthur, apparently still asleep, pulled Hugh closer still.

He could wake up and say this will never happen again. Hugh's mind, normally fixed upon the brighter side of things, had found something to worry about. *He could say this was a mistake.*

Or not.

I hope not.

Hope. That was the necessary thing, the spark that kept the world aflame. Hope had got him this far, after all.

Perhaps it would take him further still.

Arthur stirred. Hugh shifted, suddenly sure that his proximity was disturbing the man's sleep, but Arthur growled as he tried to move away. 'No.'

'No, what?'

'Don't move.'

He was still capable of giving orders even when unconscious. Hugh smiled giddily to himself as he relaxed into Arthur's embrace, tingling as he felt the beating of the man's heart. 'I'm sorry if I woke you.'

'Don't be sorry either.'

'I can stop talking.'

'Don't lie.'

Hugh laughed. Arthur sighed, a smile briefly illuminating his face before vanishing as he yawned. Hugh nestled in the crook of Arthur's shoulder, idly stroking two fingers across the man's broad chest. 'I'm sorry I woke you.'

'You didn't.'

'I did. I moved.'

'Fine. Don't move away from me again.'

'And I really can stop talking if it vexes you.'

'What's wrong?'

'What?'

'You're...strange.' Arthur frowned. 'Anxious.'

‘I—I suppose I am. I’m very rarely anxious.’

‘Why?’

‘Why am I rarely anxious? I think it’s my nature. But this anxiety, this current anxiety, well...it’s probably the sheer newness of it all, of this, and uncertainty regarding—’

‘Regarding what?’

‘Me, and...and you.’ Hugh swallowed. Even saying the words aloud made the atmosphere a little less sacred. ‘But it certainly wasn’t worth mentioning. I won’t mention it again.’

He bit back a gasp as Arthur gently drew his head upward. Hugh blinked; Arthur stared up at him from the pillow, his expression still sleep-clouded but definite all the same.

‘I’m not going anywhere.’ Arthur said it as a statement of fact. *The sky is blue, the world is round, I’m not going anywhere.* ‘I’m never leaving your side unless you wish it. Do you wish it?’

‘No.’

‘Then stop being anxious.’

‘Arthur?’

‘Yes?’

‘I love you.’

Arthur stared at him for a long moment. Then he smiled, a real, slow smile that made the candlelit darkness sing, and Hugh’s heart sang with it. ‘I love you too. All right?’

‘All right.’

No words seemed capable of following such a statement. For the first time in his life, Hugh relaxed fully into the silence. He bent down, kissed the very tip of Arthur’s nose, then laid back on his pillow with a sigh.

He lay still, dozing, until the darkness of the room had turned a faint grey. Arthur shifted beside him; Hugh turned, half-sure that he had dreamed their conversation, but as soon as he saw his own contentment twinned in Arthur's face, he knew that it had happened. 'It's dawn.'

'Yes.'

'What shall we do?'

'This is what we're going to do.' Arthur sighed, as if Hugh had given him a list of tasks to complete rather than simply lying beside him. 'We're going to spend the day in bed, eating when we aren't sleeping or shagging, and then I'm going to leave you here in the afternoon with a book while I go and beat the shit out of anyone I think could have ransacked your coffee house, if you'll allow it. It's a long list, but I'll get to the bottom of it.'

'That sounds partially wonderful and then absolutely dreadful.'

'You won't be there for the dreadful part.' Arthur paused. 'In fact, you're never going to see anything dreadful again. I hope you didn't develop a taste for it after all those pubs we visited.'

'Are you going to wrap me in gauze?'

'I don't know what gauze is, so no. But I am going to stop anything unpleasant from ever getting within spitting distance of you again. Even if I have to learn how to make...buns, or something, so I can stay close while you work.' Arthur idly stroked Hugh's hair as he continued. 'So will you allow me?'

'To stay close and make buns? Yes, a thousand times yes. To be violent? No. Absolutely not.'

'I don't see how the hell we're going to find out who the culprits are.'

‘We can continue searching for them as we’ve already done.’

‘It hasn’t worked so far.’

‘Because, I think, we were both a little distracted. Now that certain things have been clarified, I imagine I’ll make a successful identification before the week is out.’

Arthur frowned. ‘I may not know what gauze is, but I feel like I’m being wrapped in it as well.’

‘Just a little. I can’t bear the thought of you being hurt.’ Now that he’d told Arthur that he loved him, it was easier to give voice to every other sentiment. ‘Truly.’

‘Fine.’

‘And as it happens, I have an idea of how today should progress.’

‘You do?’

‘We’ll wake up late, I think, after this little interlude. You seem to rise late naturally, while it’ll take a little more work for me—but then, I am exhausted, so who knows. And I sometimes have the strangest dreams, very complicated ones that wake me dreadfully early, so that could have me awake goodness knows when...’

‘You’ve managed to spend three sentences on the act of waking.’

‘Words aren’t money. You can spend them frivolously. Once we’re awake—well, I wish I could make you coffee and cake, but that’ll need a little time.’

The thought of Arthur having coffee and cake in a fully restored *Wycliffe’s Coffee and Sweets* breathed life into Hugh’s old, small dream, making it bigger and brighter.

‘It won’t take too long.’ Arthur paused. ‘I’ll make whoever smashed the place up put everything back where it was.’

‘That’ll work splendidly for furniture, but the pastries may be a bit past their best by now. I’ll take you to Mr. Dewitt’s coffee house, where we’ll eat a very fine breakfast because Mr. Dewitt is a friend—’

‘Oh is he, now? What sort of friend?’

‘A friend who has given me nothing but marzipan and good advice, you bear. And we’ll eat, and talk, and I’ll make you laugh even if you don’t want to, and...and then...’

‘And then?’

‘And then we can go and find a dog.’

‘Ah.’ Arthur stroked Hugh’s cheek. ‘I see.’

‘If that’s...’

‘No being anxious. No being uncertain. Remember?’

‘Then—then yes. A dog.’

‘A huge, frightening dog. One that’ll defend the coffee house when we’re asleep.’

‘No.’

‘He has to be at least medium-sized.’

‘He’s going to be the smallest, weakest dog of whatever litter’s going, shivering under a little tartan blanket, and as soon as you see him you’re going to fall desperately in love despite yourself. You’ll scoop him up in the palm of your hand and give him little kisses, sing him little songs about how he’ll never be cold and hungry again...are you really not going to interrupt me at all?’

‘No.’

‘It’ll only get more embarrassing.’

‘I know.’ Arthur kissed the top of Hugh’s head. ‘But it’s true.’

‘And we’ll call him—’

‘Tim.’

‘You see?’ Hugh laughed softly. The world was falling into place, smile by smile, kiss by kiss. ‘I knew you’d interrupt me.’

THE END

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Keep Exploring the Perdition Club:

Enjoy the first chapter of Book One of the Perdition Club, 'The Sinner's Gamble' by Merry Farmer!

The Sinner's Gamble

Chapter One

London – May 1815

“Sir, he’s back again.”

Caesar sighed and set down the quill he’d been using to reconcile the books for Perdition, the gaming hell he owned and operated with his partners. He scrubbed his hands over his stubbly chin for a moment before staring at the young and eager figure of Stewart, one of the club’s—for lack of a better word—footmen in the doorway.

“Can you not just tell him to go away?” Caesar asked, leaning back in his chair. He had other problems to deal with at the moment. Balancing accounts and coming up with new ways to draw in London’s finest so that he and his business partners could relieve them of their wealth while entertaining them to the fullest were the least of them.

Stewart continued to stand in the doorway, squirming. “I would, but you know, Mulgrew is...he is a man of the cloth, sir.”

“So?” Caesar shrugged one shoulder, his insides buzzing with irritation. And it was irritation, not something else. Certainly not interest or fascination or...or hope. The

handsome, irrepressible Rev. George Mulgrew had been a thorn in his side for months now, but it had nothing to do with the fact that he liked to be poked.

Stewart clearly viewed the persistent curate with different eyes. "I...I wouldn't feel right, sir, just going up to a holy man and telling him to bugger off."

Caesar suppressed the warm shudder that passed through him at the image of Mulgrew bugging that came to mind. He sighed, genuinely put out that he was being called away from his work for such a thing, and stood.

"I will see to things myself," he said striding across the room.

He didn't bother to grab his finely-tailored jacket as he pushed past Stewart and out the door. It wasn't as though he was on his way to Almack's, or his father's house, for that matter. The linen shirt and silk waistcoat he wore were good enough for the likes of Rev. Mulgrew.

Despite the onerous task ahead of him, Caesar smiled as he left his office at the back of the ground floor and headed into the heart of the club.

Perdition was his pride and joy, and that of his partners: Jasper Black and Simon Beaumont. They'd purchased the entire building on Jermyn Street, thanks to a discreet transfer of funds from Caesar's father and sources belonging to some of the other partners, and transformed the place from its dull and uninteresting past as a residence into a thriving scene of nightly financial chaos and debauchery.

It continued to look as boring as possible on the outside, but once a man with enough bluntness to pass through its doorway entered, he was met with vibrant color, sumptuous furnishings and decorations, and every sort of vice he could possibly wish for. Perdition's card tables were quickly gaining a reputation for excitement throughout London, but there were other gambling pursuits to be had as well, not to mention every sort of company a man of any sort of taste could ask for.

The upper floors were still set up as a residence, though one wing of the house was used by the men and women who provided company for the gamblers. As Caesar passed the grand staircase that led up to his own quarters and those of his partners who resided in the house with him, Jasper was coming down.

“It’s early for you to emerge from the office,” Jasper said with a smirk as he momentarily fell into step with Caesar. “Do not tell me that our situation is so dire that you’ve already calculated our demise.”

Caesar laughed and shook his head. Jasper knew full well that the Perdition Club was thriving and making them all wealthy men. His suggestion that they were in trouble was a jest only, and a silly one at that.

“I’ve just been informed Mulgrew is back,” he said, sending his partner a flat look.

Jasper swore and lost his merriment. “That’s every day this week,” he sighed. “Does he think he might actually save souls with his babbling and pleading?”

Caesar’s mouth twitched momentarily at the idea of Mulgrew pleading. “I have no idea what the man’s intent in pestering us is. He obviously wants something, since he’s back again.”

Evidently, Caesar had done a poor job of hiding his fascination with the pesky cleric. Jasper smirked at him and said, “I trust you plan to give it to him.”

Caesar was a good enough sport to grin and wink at his friend. “That would chase him off for good,” he said.

Whether he truly wanted Mulgrew to go away for good was an entirely different matter. Having a curate buzzing around their door like a black fly was bad for business. Even if Caesar and his partners failed to care a whit about their immortal souls or what some unseen god wanted to do with them, the men of substance who patronized the club were made uneasy by the reminder of their own mortality. Enough

of them believed the censure of the church—or at least believed their reputations would be damaged if they were discovered to have partaken in half of the activities at Perdition—that Mulgrew’s holy admonishments frightened them away.

They’d reached the front hall and paused. It was early in the day, but someone was always patronizing the club, risking their fortunes and their livelihoods at the card tables, or enjoying the company of the beautiful and barely dressed women and men Caesar and his partners employed. Caesar glanced quickly into the closest parlor and spotted a particularly prominent Member of Parliament sitting cozily on a settee in one corner, an angelic-looking young man wearing barely more than a loin cloth on his lap. The lad, Giles, had his hand down the front of the MP’s breeches while the man whispered something in Giles’s ear that had him blushing.

Caesar’s smirk deepened, and he winked at Giles, congratulating him for a job well done. Caesar knew for a fact that the MP in question had just come into a great deal of money by illegally speculating on a matter that had been discussed confidentially in Parliament, and if the man wanted to spend a portion of that on sin and vice in Perdition, then so be it.

It was men like that who Mulgrew and his sermonizing tended to chase away. Sure enough, as Caesar stood close to the club’s front door, he could hear the impassioned drone of Mulgrew’s voice on the steps outside.

“Sounds like he’s made himself a pulpit on our doorstep,” Jasper sighed, frowning at the door.

“I’ll take care of it,” Caesar growled, heading for the door.

London was awash in sunlight and all the colors of May as Caesar opened the door and stepped outside. As dark and sinful as the goings on inside the club were, he and his partners had gone to great lengths to make the façade of the house appear as fresh and beautiful as any of the other homes and clubs in the area. St. James’s was a popular spot for

gentleman's clubs, not to mention other gaming hells, like Perdition. The area had a patina of wealth and respectability to it, though, which was probably why establishments like his were left alone, for the most part, as long as they kept up appearances. The building itself was kept clean and polished, the gardens around it were regularly tended, and Caesar even paid a few enterprising boys to keep the street in front of the club swept and clear of refuse.

And there, in the midst of all that care and consideration, looking like a broken angel fallen from the heavens, was Rev. George Mulgrew.

“The wages of sin are death,” Mulgrew pleaded with the tiny handful of people who had stopped in front of the club to listen to his ranting. “Turn away from this darkness now, while you still can.”

Caesar wasn't even certain Mulgrew had heard him come out of the building. He inched to one side and leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms and grinning at his thorn.

“Gambling is only the beginning of the dark and deadly road this club will set you on,” Mulgrew continued. “You will not only lose all of your hard-earned wages, you will lose your morality, your connection to the Almighty. You will lose your very soul.”

Caesar tried and failed to hide his grin. It was quaint that Mulgrew believed the street sweepers and working men who had stopped to listen to his piffle were the ones who patronized the club. It was almost sweet that he thought the money being won and lost—usually lost—inside of Perdition's walls came from honest labor and not inheritance or market speculation—which was just another kind of gambling. Caesar wondered what the irritating man would think if he knew where the gold that flowed through Perdition's veins came from...or where much of it ended up.

“It is never too late to repent,” Mulgrew went on, still not realizing Caesar was right behind him—which suited Caesar just fine. It gave him a perfect view of the man's outstanding

arse and shapely legs, his broad shoulders, and just a hint of skin above the man's collar. He rather thought he'd like to nibble on that skin until Mulgrew sighed his name and begged for more.

Caesar chuckled at himself, wondering how Mulgrew would feel about being the object of his lusts. The poor thing would probably expire in horror at the idea. Which, of course, only made Caesar want the man more.

"It is never too late to turn away from the Devil's path and to return to God's grace," Mulgrew went on. "It is never—"

He must have noticed the way his meager audience was no longer looking at him, but rather, past him. Mulgrew stiffened and turned sharply to Caesar. For a moment, his eyes went wide, and a deep flush painted his cheeks.

The man had a beautiful face. His jaw was square and masculine, his lips were full and ripe for kissing, and his eyes were a rich brown and filled with fire. A part of Caesar hoped that fire was for him and not God. It was a sin of its own kind to waste such passion on a creator that Caesar wasn't even certain existed.

"You," Mulgrew said, his moment of shock giving way to a deep frown. "You, more than anyone, should repent and set out on a new path before it is too late."

Caesar pushed away from the doorframe and sauntered closer to Mulgrew, staying one step above him.

"Too late for what?" he shrugged, keeping his posture easy and arrogant.

Mulgrew scowled at him. "Too late for your immortal soul. Too late to enjoy the fruits of Paradise that our Lord guarantees those of us who walk the narrow path."

Caesar shrugged. "Why wait for the fruits of Paradise later when I can enjoy the wine of Perdition now?" he asked, sending a glance to his club.

One of the sweepers who had stopped to listen to Mulgrew chuckled, then went on with his work. Once he left, the others who had lingered to watch moved on as well.

Caesar was surprised when Mulgrew let out a sigh of regret and watched them retreat. The man seemed far more distressed to lose his audience than Caesar thought he should be. That raised all sorts of curious feelings in him. Mulgrew didn't actually *care*, did he? Men like him never really cared, they just liked to hear the sound of their own voices.

"Soon it will be too late," Mulgrew said, fretting. Caesar wouldn't have been surprised if the man had started wringing his hands like an old fishwife. "Soon we will all be damned."

"Damned?" Caesar laughed. He would never understand the dramatics of good people.

Mulgrew narrowed his eyes, likely over being laughed at. "You do not take your salvation seriously enough, sir," he insisted. "The Bible is very clear on the fate of sinners."

"So what if I am a sinner?" Caesar shrugged again. "I am happy, I am amused, and I have my fill of every sort of pleasure whenever I want it."

He couldn't help but sweep Mulgrew's form with a covetous look as he spoke. He had *almost* every pleasure he wanted.

Mulgrew's face went red and his eyes blazed with fire, but it was difficult to tell precisely what sort of fire the man had within him.

"The pleasures of the flesh are hollow indeed," Mulgrew insisted. "It is the eternal pleasures of God's kingdom that we should strive for."

"How do you know?" Caesar said with a grin. "Have you ever enjoyed them?"

"I fully intend to live eternally in the pleasures of God's kingdom when I pass on from this life," Mulgrew said.

“No, I mean the pleasures of the flesh,” Caesar said, one eyebrow raised. “Have you ever enjoyed them?”

Mulgrew flushed such a dark shade of red that Caesar’s cock twitched in notice. The man was wasting himself on trifling matters of religion, that much was certain.

Mulgrew was saved from answering Caesar’s impertinent question as a gentleman Caesar knew to be a freshly-minted viscount approached the club.

“Turn back from your sins,” Mulgrew shouted at the man so suddenly that the viscount stumbled backward and nearly toppled over. “Turn away from this den of iniquity. Your eternal life depends on it.”

The viscount’s jaw dropped, and he stood there, flapping uselessly for a moment, before turning and running.

Caesar was no longer amused by his banter with the handsome curate, not when he cost the club business.

“Enough from you,” he snapped, scowling at Mulgrew. “I didn’t come out here to play children’s games. You have darkened our doorstep long enough. It is costing us business, and I will not have it anymore. Get gone, and stay away.”

Instead of cowering and doing as Caesar said, like most men did, Mulgrew seemed encouraged by his telling off.

“My work here has had positive effect, then?” he asked. “Is that what you are saying? I have saved souls by turning potential sinners away from the grandest sinner of all?”

Caesar sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. Mulgrew wasn’t just a thorn in his side, he was a canker that would eat through to the heart of his business if he was left alone.

And Caesar most certainly did not want to leave the man alone.

“Very well,” he said, making an instant decision, though perhaps a rash one. It was a gamble he had to take, though. For Perdition and for himself. “If you are so certain you know what takes place within these walls, if you are so confident

you are saving souls by meddling in business that does not concern you, then come inside and see what you are railing against for yourself.”

Once Caesar had Mulgrew inside the club’s walls, where no one on the street could see or hear what might befall him, he could deal with the meddlesome man in his own way.

Mulgrew flinched away from him at first, but the unmistakable sparkle of curiosity lit his eyes. “I could not,” he said, though Caesar had the feeling those words were meant to be an admonition for himself.

“Certainly, you could,” Caesar said with a warm smile. “You would be my guest. You must have been curious about the sort of sin and vice you’ve been railing against all this time. Wouldn’t it confirm everything you’ve been preaching for God only knows how long now to peek inside the Devil’s den and to catch him at his handiwork? You would certainly have much more to shout about.”

Madly, that argument seemed to sway Mulgrew. Caesar stepped back and opened the door, then turned to offer Mulgrew his hand. It was like a scene out of an opera, right before the hero sold his soul to the devil and followed him through the gates of hell to his damnation. Caesar intended to make the whole voyage worth Mulgrew’s time, though.

Mulgrew cleared his throat, then stepped forward, following Caesar. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” he recited to himself in a low hum.

Something sizzled in Caesar at the tone of Mulgrew’s voice. He wouldn’t mind the man whispering filthy things to him in that tone, particularly if the two of them were naked and sweaty. He laughed at that thought, shook his head, and stepped deeper into the front hall, holding the door open for Mulgrew.

Perdition did not disappoint. From the moment Mulgrew stepped inside and Caesar shut the door behind him, the club played its role perfectly. Mulgrew’s eyes went wide and his

whispered prayers stopped as he glanced around at the dark opulence of the place. He took in the furnishings and the lurid artwork, the gaming tables in the parlor off to the right, and Giles and the MP—who had advanced from mere whispering to Giles sitting astride the man’s lap, naked, with his head tilted back as the MP enjoyed him—in the parlor to the left.

Caesar noted with mild surprise that one of the female whores was similarly entertaining a man who he believed was a baron deeper into that same parlor. He also noted the way Mulgrew’s gaze lingered on Giles and the MP, not the woman. That small detail made Caesar’s blood pump harder and his breeches feel tighter than a vise. Perhaps it was his lucky day if Mulgrew was inclined that way.

“Ah, Caesar, who is your charming friend?” Simon asked as he walked up from the long hall that led to the back, where the office and the stairs leading down to the servants’ hall—and a collection of rooms for patrons with more extreme interests—were located.

“Simon, I’d like you to meet Rev. George Mulgrew,” Caesar said, grinning at Mulgrew like a cat who had caught the church mouse. “He’s just agreed to stop his doorstep sermonizing and to leave Perdition alone.”

Mulgrew blinked, still a bit stunned. Then Caesar’s words sunk in, and he scowled. “I have agreed to no such thing,” he said, inching away from Caesar. “You have lured me into this den of sin under false pretenses. I am here to do the Lord’s work, not to wallow in wickedness.”

Although, as Caesar noted, his eyes snapped quickly to the particular sort of wickedness Giles and the MP were getting up to, and the blush on Mulgrew’s face had slipped tantalizingly down his neck.

“You invited me into your house of damnation to see these evils for myself,” Mulgrew went on, “and I have seen them. I could alert the authorities to these evils, these crimes. Surely, none of this is legal.” He threw out his arm to Giles and the MP in the parlor.

That was all the signal Caesar needed to know that his niggling little problem had turned into a far more serious one. Mulgrew was right—a great many activities in Perdition were *not* legal. They'd been protected from the law so far—thanks to the connections that both he and his partners had—but even the most secure protection could not help them evade detection forever, particularly if someone like Mulgrew got it into his head to call them out publicly for it all.

“I was right to rail against this place,” Mulgrew said, moving as if he would bolt for the door.

Caesar did his best to keep calm. He couldn't let Mulgrew go now. He hadn't intended to let the man go until he'd changed his mind in the first place, but now his plan had to be more than a lark.

He cleared his throat and gestured for Simon to bring him the bottle and one of the linen handkerchiefs that sat on a small table beside the doorway to one of the parlors as Mulgrew started spouting Bible verses.

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them,” Mulgrew quoted, moving closer to the door.

Caesar rolled his eyes and shifted to block Mulgrew's way as Simon uncorked the bottle and poured a generous amount onto one of the handkerchiefs, holding it at arm's length.

“Calm down, man,” Caesar told Mulgrew. “I'm not letting you go out there in this state. You've hardly seen anything, and you've drawn the wrong conclusions from what you have seen.”

“I have eyes, sir,” Mulgrew fired back indignantly. “I can see what this place is all about.”

Simon moved carefully toward Caesar, who extended his arm to take the soaked cloth from him.

“And what is it about?” Caesar asked. “What do you see around you?”

“Vice and...and sodomy,” Mulgrew said. “Right before my eyes.”

Indeed, Giles was now bouncing on the MP’s lap in a particular way.

Caesar shrugged. “There’s nothing wrong with a little sodomy. I quite enjoy it myself. I’d wager you would too, if you’d give it a try. I think you’d enjoy it quite a bit.”

Mulgrew’s eyes went wide. “How dare you suggest such sin to me? I would never—”

That was as far as the gorgeous, pitiable, misinformed man got. Caesar swept Mulgrew into his arms with an iron grip and clapped the soaked handkerchief over his mouth. Within moments, Mulgrew gave up his struggling and groaned as he passed out. It was unfortunate that he had to resort to ether to subdue the man—they kept ether on hand for when patrons of the club became particularly distressed by their financial losses and threatened to turn violent—but Caesar couldn’t risk his livelihood, that of his partners, or the lives and reputations of Perdition’s patrons by letting Mulgrew run away and reveal what he’d seen.

Quite the contrary. The only way Perdition would be safe to continue on and provide what was necessary for all was if Caesar could convince Mulgrew that he actually craved what he said he despised. And the only way to do that was to give him everything he never knew he wanted and more.

