

THE BROTHERHOOD

*Brigens*

*What a Duke Desires*

MERRY FARMER

# *What a Duke Desires*

THE BROTHERHOOD: ORIGINS

MERRY FARMER

## WHAT A DUKE DESIRES

Copyright ©2022 by Merry Farmer

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your digital retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Erin Dameron-Hill (who is completely fabulous)

ASIN: B0BHL4XMP4

Paperback: 9798366054614

[Click here for a complete list of other works by Merry Farmer.](#)

If you'd like to be the first to learn about when the next books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/RQ-KX>

✿ Created with Vellum

# *Contents*

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

*Prologue*

*L*

## LONDON – MAY, 1832

It was political chaos of the highest order, and Wentworth Rawley, Duke of Burville, was right at the heart of it.

“It’s a disgrace, I tell you,” Wentworth overheard Lord Camden grumble to Lord Kimbolton as the assembly in the House of Lords broke up. “Mark my words, this egregious act will bring terror down on us all.”

“Our heads will roll, just like those poor bastard Frenchmen during the Terror,” Lord Kimbolton hissed, glancing around as though revolutionaries were waiting with the guillotine primed and ready outside of the Lords’ chamber.

“Our heads would have rolled had we not passed the bill,” Wentworth commented, against his better judgement, as the men moved closer to him.

Camden and Kimbolton stopped to glare at him. Their looks of absolute derision were not unfamiliar to Wentworth—looks like that had been as common as pennies since he had become the fifth Duke of Burville the year before. He was a passionate Whig and had always been in favor of reform, unlike his father, a determined Tory. His inheritance of the title had meant one more vote for Lord Grey’s efforts to pass the reform bill and one less for the Tories.

Wentworth had also been subjected to loathing looks and lips curled in disgust ever since he had been caught sucking Lord Wilmore’s cock in a room that was supposed to be discreet at Lady Cowper’s ball last June, but that was a different matter entirely.

Or so Wentworth thought.

“I suppose you are gloating over this travesty, *Your Grace*,” Camden said, sounding as though he might choke on the honorific, as if Wentworth didn’t deserve the loftiness of his title. “*Your sort* thrives on thumbing your noses at decent people.”

Wentworth frowned and grasped his hands behind his back in an effort to conceal his agitation at Lord Camden's harsh words and harsher treatment. "Surely, you must admit that the previous system had grown inadequate for the needs of our growing country, my lords. At the very least, the franchise should have been extended years ago, and the rotten boroughs should have been eradicated or folded into a more representative system long before now."

Camden and Kimbolton looked as though Wentworth had suggested the nobility, or even the monarchy, should be completely extinguished—which many members of the public had been calling for as Parliament continued to drag its feet with reform for the past two years.

"The aristocracy is the cornerstone of the kingdom, Your Grace," Kimbolton snapped, as though Wentworth were an unruly child who needed to be schooled in the ways of the world. "This despicable act which has been foisted upon us all, and which you have glibly supported, though it will damage your own prestige, I am certain—"

"As if it could be damaged any further after what has been brought to light," Camden muttered, looking vaguely sick.

"And it could lead to the destruction of us all," Kimbolton finished with a huff.

Wentworth had grown accustomed to being sneered at for his sins—though the exclusion he faced in some circles because of it still chafed—but he could not countenance backward thinking when he was face to face with it.

"Passage of the Representation of the People Act was necessary, not only to stop the majority of the population of England from doing as their brethren on the continent are doing and calling for the abolition of the monarchy, but because the world we live in has changed, and we must change with it."

"Nonsense," Camden sniffed. "God created a natural order to man. Those of us in this chamber were meant to rule and guide, not to bow and scrape to common laborers and street-sweepers."



“They will vote us out of our hereditary right soon enough, mark my words,” Kimbolton said, sounding rather like a fainting dowager who had spotted a young woman, freshly debuted, whose décolletage was too much on view.

Wentworth frowned harder and pressed his lips together for a moment before answering with, “The franchise has been extended to freeholders and those with a steady yearly income, not street-sweepers or common laborers.”

“Any extension is bad enough,” Camden said.

Wentworth opened his mouth to argue further for the extension of the franchise, but Kimbolton cut him off.

“You have done your damage, Your Grace, so you can be proud,” he snapped. “Next, I’m certain, you will be arguing in favor of striking down our anti-buggery laws so that your sort might flaunt their depravities in the streets.” He turned to Camden and snorted, as though the two of them shared a joke—as if Wentworth were nothing more than a joke.

Camden laughed in return. “You should be grateful that your title protects you from prosecution, *Your Grace*,” he said, once more making the honorific sound like an insult. “I, for one, would be more than happy to vote in favor of the harshest of penalties, should the case come before Lords.”

“As would I,” Kimbolton agreed.

Wentworth debated arguing that there was no proof of his transgressions. The trouble was, there had been ample proof. He was a known sodomite, and true to Camden’s word, the only thing protecting him from prosecution was his status as a duke. Noblemen were never prosecuted for things that caused working-class men to hang.

There was worse to come on top of that, though.

“You were disreputable and distasteful before, Your Grace,” Kimbolton said, sweeping him with a disgusted look. “Now you will be outright untouchable.”

“My wife would never lower herself to invite you to any of her gatherings again,” Camden added. “And I dare say her friends will shun you as well.”

“I predict that all of London, all of England, will exclude you from their presence,” Kimbolton went on. “I would not be surprised if you never saw another invitation to a ball or soiree again, for all you are a duke.”

“You, sir, are finished,” Camden agreed with a nod.

That was the end. Camden and Kimbolton turned and marched away, leaving Wentworth to feel a sense of dread pressing down on him that eclipsed even what he’d felt the night of his discovery with Lord Wilmore. He took the threat of ostracization seriously. Lady Camden and Lady Kimbolton most certainly had it within their power to shut Wentworth out from society, and without society, what was there?

“That was painful to watch.”

Wentworth startled at the sound of the all-too familiar voice, then turned to find none other than Lord Wilmore himself striding easily down the aisle toward him. Wentworth couldn’t help himself. George was still one of the handsomest and most alluring men he’d ever met, despite his advanced years. It had been something of a dream come true when the fascinating and scintillating older man had taken a shine to him years before. Wentworth had been young and still unsure of himself where matters of sensuality were concerned, but George had taken him under his wing and taught him, well, *everything*.

That night at Lady Cowper’s ball was far from a singular event. Wentworth had found himself on his knees for the gorgeous, silver-haired marquess on many occasions, staring up into those impish, blue eyes with hope and adoration... while choking on the man’s prick.

“I merely voted with my conscience,” Wentworth said. He had to clear his throat when his voice came out in a croak.

Heat infused him. It didn’t matter that he’d broken things off with George within days of their discovery together—and there had been no hard feelings from George, who understood the pressures Wentworth had faced over the incident—the fire of lust and the memory of the way it had felt to let go of propriety and indulge his darker side was still there,

simmering under the surface. He didn't want George specifically, but he desperately wanted to be encompassed in the flame of desire again.

George smiled at him as he came to stand near Wentworth—but not too near, not anymore. There was as much sadness in his eyes as there was pride in Wentworth for standing his ground.

“You were right to say that the world has changed and we must change with it,” George said. “And there will be more change to come, I'd wager. The world turns, whether it offends the Tories or not. They can no more stop it than they can prevent the sun from rising.” He paused, then said precisely what Wentworth hoped he would. “I'm proud of you, boy.”

A shiver shot down Wentworth's back. He was five-and-twenty, so being called “boy” should embarrass him. Instead, it reminded him of the things he and George had shared, and how desperately he had needed that particular sort of guidance at the time.

But all that was over, and Wentworth had the feeling other things were over now as well.

“I cannot take the threat of exclusion that was made against me just now lightly,” he said, blowing out a breath and rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

George shrugged. “You will be fine, Your Grace.”

Wentworth snapped his gaze up to George. Not once, in all their dalliance, had George ever called him by his title. Coming so hard on the heels of being called “boy”, it was as disconcerting as it was flattering.

“I'm afraid I am not like you, sir,” he said quietly, falling back on the protocol that had been established between the two of them during their association. “I care what people think of me. I care about society and...and having a sense of...of brotherhood. And now I fear all of that will be withheld from me.”

Again, George shrugged. “Who gives a rat's prick what their society thinks of you?” he said all too casually. “If they

shun you, create your own society.”

“I would not know where to begin that endeavor,” Wentworth sighed.

He might have been a duke and a wealthy man, but when it came to interacting with others, he preferred to let others take the lead. Which was another reason his fellow peers held him in contempt. If he had been a commanding, warrior-like man, he was certain they would have overlooked his sexual proclivities, as they did with any number of peers who carried on behind closed doors.

But Wentworth was a thinker, not a fighter. He would have been more at home with the likes of the industrialists who created the innovations that had changed the world. He would rather spend his time in useful pursuits than in bullying the vast majority of the population into obeying his will, like Camden and Kimbolton seemed to think it was a duke’s duty to do.

He had been born into the wrong class, and everyone around him knew it.

George pulled him out of his distressing thoughts by clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Go home, Wenty,” he said with a kind smile. “Have yourself a hearty meal. Find a handsome lad to take to your bed and enjoy him to the fullest.” Wentworth sucked in a breath of fear and glanced anxiously around to make certain no one had overheard them. “Have a good night’s sleep. In the morning, this will all have blown over and things will be back to their usual rhythm.”

“I suppose,” Wentworth said, shuffling uneasily.

“Go on now, boy,” George told him with a wink, nudging him toward the chambers’ door.

Wentworth relaxed by a hair and returned his old friend’s smile before taking a step in the direction George had pushed him.

“All will be well,” George reassured him as Wentworth walked away. “And I will be watching your progress and championing you from afar.”

Wentworth desperately hoped so.

But things weren't all well. He stepped out into the hall, only to have the peers waiting there, discussing the day's events, turn their backs on him. They weren't well when even members of his own political party stepped aside to let him pass without drawing him into conversation, or seeming to care that he had risked everything by voting in favor of reform.

They weren't well when he made it out to the street and had to push his way through men who should have stepped aside at his status so that he could reach his carriage. He was a duke, for heaven's sake, not a groom. He deserved respect.

He should have stepped up and demanded that respect, but something within him hesitated, afraid to reach for it. The dread he'd felt the night of his discovery at Lady Cowper's ball had never really left him, and he was loath to draw any further attention to himself lest somehow the invisible shield that protected the wealthy and titled from prosecution and damnation dissolve and leave him vulnerable.

It was worse than just that, though. He made it to his carriage, but noted well the barely-concealed rage in the eyes of his driver. And all along the short way home to Mayfair, he was certain Harrold hit every rut in the pavement he could so that Wentworth was jostled to within an inch of his life.

They made it home in one piece, but there was still worse to come.

"Your Grace, I must speak with you," Benning, his butler, announced as he met Wentworth in the front hall, before Wentworth had barely had time to do more than remove his hat.

"Is something amiss, Benning?" Wentworth asked with as kind a demeanor as he could manage. He knew full well everything was amiss. If Benning's stiff posture and solemn expression weren't enough of a clue, the fact that Mrs. Hayworth, his housekeeper, stood right behind Benning, already wearing her coat and hat and carrying a valise, and

that nearly all of the servants he employed stood in an anxious line behind her, would have been proof enough of that.

“Your Grace,” Benning said, as though delivering a speech he had prepared. “Mrs. Hayworth and the rest of the staff—well, most of the rest of the staff—have endured far too much in this last year. We were employed by your father—a fine man and a *true* duke—and our loyalty was and always has been to him. The incident of last spring was bad enough, but, with all due respect, Your Grace, your current political actions are the very last straw.”

“I beg your pardon?” Wentworth blinked rapidly at the declaration he faced. It was well known that servants were often even more conservative than their masters, but he never would have dreamed his own staff would take such a firm stance on a simple reform bill.

Then again, that bill had already led to riots in the street, a change in Prime Minister, and mayhem of an order that hadn’t been seen in England in years.

“We are sorry it has come to this, Your Grace,” Benning went on, “but on behalf of myself, Mrs. Hayworth, and the rest of the staff, we resign, effective immediately.”

“We will just be on our way,” Mrs. Hayworth said, fury making her voice shake. She gripped her valise tightly and marched right past Wentworth and out the front door.

The rest of the servants followed her, Benning bringing up the rear. Even Galveston, Wentworth’s valet, left. Galveston didn’t so much as look at Wentworth as he stepped out into the street.

“Best of luck finding a new staff, Your Grace,” Benning said as he left the house, slamming the door behind him. Wentworth was under no illusion about whether Benning meant those words kindly or whether they were a final stab to his pride.

The house felt somehow bigger and emptier without even servants to care for it. Wentworth stood stock still in the

hallway for a moment. He still held his hat and gloves in his hands, and he hadn't begun to remove his coat.

He glanced around at the walls he had known since he was a small boy. His father's portrait and that of several of his esteemed ancestors, former Dukes and Duchesses of Burville, looked down at him as if shaking their heads over Wentworth's foolishness. Not even his own painted ancestors approved of what he had done, or, he wagered, who he was.

He was completely alone in the world. He had stood up for what he believed, and he had paid the price for it. The satisfaction of voting his conscience was nowhere near enough to compensate for the utter loneliness that threatened to consume him. As likely as not, the men he'd fought so hard for in his pursuit of reform would still see him as the enemy, as a duke who didn't care for them, or for anyone else.

But he did care. He cared so much that it threatened to unman him with tears. He was a man and a duke, dammit, but loneliness was a whip that smarted and left its mark on even the most stalwart of souls. His eyes stung, his throat squeezed, and a sense of complete hopelessness pressed down on him, threatening to swallow him with despair. He didn't know what he would do about—

“Your Grace?”

Wentworth gasped and turned sharply to the end of the hall. The kitchen maid and one of the junior footmen, peeked out from around the corner that led to the stairs to the servants' hall.

Wentworth had never been so happy to see anyone in his life. He was not alone after all.

Hurriedly, he removed his coat and lay it over a chair near the door, along with his hat and gloves, then strode down the hall, hope beating furiously in his heart.

“Jack Cotton, isn't it?” he asked the footman. “And Dolly Smith?”

The footman and the maid smiled uncertainly as Wentworth reached them.

“Yes, Your Grace,” young Jack said, nodding respectfully, and with a hint of...something as he glanced up at Wentworth.

Wentworth broke into a smile at the handsome young man. But a moment later, he checked himself and schooled his expression.

“Are you still here because you were not swift enough to leave with the others?” he asked. “I will not stand in your way if you wish to go as well. And I will provide you with references, which I will do for the others as well, if they care to receive them.” He made that decision in the moment. His servants might have abandoned him, but they still deserved references for the years they’d been in his family’s employ.

“I ain’t leavin’, Your Grace,” Dolly said with a nervous curtsy. “Not when you been so good to me.”

“I have no intention of going either,” Jack said, nodding and squaring his shoulders in a show of pride and strength... that Wentworth wished he had himself. “This is a fine house, Your Grace, and it is an honor to serve you.”

Wentworth’s heart filled with gratitude to the point where he was near tears for an entirely different reason. “It’s just you two, then?” he asked.

Jack and Dolly glanced to each other, then nodded.

“Mr. Benning tried to get us to leave,” Jack said. “He told everyone they should leave or they’d never find a suitable position in London again.”

A faint pulse of anger went through Wentworth, but he let it go without nurturing it. For all he knew, any servant who took a position in his house truly would be blackening their names with the same brush that had been used to paint him.

But at least he wasn’t alone.

“Well, then,” he sighed, glancing between Jack and Dolly. “I suppose we must make do.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Jack said with a fetching smile.

Wentworth did a double-take. Jack truly was handsome. If he recalled correctly, the man was near twenty, he’d joined the



household after Christmas, and he was a foundling who had been raised and trained for service in an orphanage near Slough. He was beautifully built, with strong arms and a pleasing face. His eyes were a warm shade of hazel, and his mouth was expressive. Wentworth had noticed him in a particular way on more than one occasion, but he'd never allowed his imagination to go where it had been inclined to go where the young man was concerned.

George had said he should find someone to warm his bed to take his mind off things....

But no, Wentworth didn't have the first idea whether Jack Cotton was even inclined that way, and the thought of losing one of the last people to remain loyal to him through that sort of misunderstanding was horrific.

He swore to himself then and there that he would never do anything to make Jack or Dolly leave him, no matter how hard he had to bite his tongue or keep his desires in check.

He cleared his throat and assumed what he hoped was a posture of authority. "Very well, then," he said. "Mr. Cotton, you are now my butler and valet. Miss Smith, you are housekeeper and cook."

"Lordy!" Dolly exclaimed, her eyes going wide. "And me only nineteen!"

Wentworth tried not to laugh, but he couldn't help it. "Yes, I know," he said, shaking his head. "It is a sorry state of affairs. But together, the three of us will survive. Tomorrow, we shall begin the search for a new staff, and we will return Burville House to its usual state. But for now...." He relaxed his posture a bit and smiled meekly at Dolly. "Is there anything to eat downstairs? Anything at all? I am famished after an exceedingly difficult day and want nothing more than to eat, then sleep and bid adieu to this day."

"There's stew and bread downstairs," Dolly said, blinking. "It were supposed to be servants' fare."

"I'm certain it will be good enough for me for now," Wentworth said.

“You could...you could eat downstairs with us,” Jack said, staring intently at Wentworth, his cheeks pink with a fetching blush. “If you don’t want to be alone, that is, Your Grace. We would be glad of your company, as it’s been an...unusual day for us all.”

Wentworth could have kissed the man right then and there...for a variety of reasons. Jack Cotton might have been as far from his equal as it was possible to get, but the kindness that the man showed him and the earnestness of his offer won Wentworth over in every way.

“I would be grateful,” he admitted, smiling at Jack. “You have no idea how grateful. I...I do not wish to be alone.”

He met Jack’s eyes, and if he wasn’t mistaken, a spark of understanding passed between them. It was foolish of him to be so open to a man so far beneath him, but he needed it. He needed that openness, that camaraderie.

He needed Jack.

*One*

*2*

## *HAMPSHIRE – SEPTEMBER, 1835*

It was difficult to believe that George was dead. Word had reached Wentworth of his old friend and mentor's demise just a fortnight ago, and it had wounded him as if he and George had still been involved in that particular way. For three long, trying years, ever since that horrible day in the House of Lords, George had continued to look out for Wentworth from afar, as he'd promised to.

Well, Wentworth couldn't be entirely certain about that, but he had a feeling deep inside whenever a situation that should have turned sour ended up with a tinge of sweetness instead—when he was shunted aside over and over by his fellow peers, but still managed to have his voice heard in Parliament, when he had his membership at White's revoked and was denied entrance at Boodle's and Brooks's both, even though Brooks's was a Whig club, but was offered a chair on the board of a philanthropical organization instead, and when he and Jack had exhausted their options for hiring new servants through all of the reputable agencies, but ended up with highly-trained and discreet men and women showing up on the doorstep of Burville House, inquiring after positions—George had been behind it.

George was gone now, and though Wentworth could hardly believe it, he owed the level of confidence he had now to his old friend and lover.

All the same, he had been surprised when the invitation to George's country estate in Hampshire, Swanmore Glen, had arrived, stating that Wentworth had been named in George's will and that his presence was required at a particular gathering for the revelation of the will's contents.

“Is it usual to have house parties like this for the reading of wills?” Jack asked as the carriage he and Wentworth had taken from London jostled up the long front drive to the house at Swanmore Glen.

“Not at all,” Wentworth said with a small frown.

His frown was not for the way Jack addressed him informally. They had long since given up the use of proper titles and forms of address with each other. After all they had been through together in the last three years, Wentworth couldn't even imagine there being the usual sort of formality between them that existed with most noblemen and their valets.

“George was eccentric in life,” he went on. “I suppose we all should have known he would be eccentric in death as well.”

“If you say so,” Jack said, then leaned closer to the window to look out at the sprawling estate.

Wentworth glanced out the window after him for a moment, admiring the verdant, harvest greenery and the well-kept lands of Swanmore Glen, but they were not the natural beauty that held his attention.

Quickly, his gaze slipped back to admire the line of Jack's neck as he leaned toward the carriage's window. Jack had filled out and grown into his body in the last three years, which had transformed him from a lithe youth to a man of exceptional physique. He wore his livery well. The way his coat hugged his arms and gathered snugly around his torso hinted at Jack's powerful muscles. His breeches did little to hide the firm outline of his thigh, or the impressive bulge under the falls. The exposed flesh above Jack's collar was pink and warm with life, and not for the first time, Wentworth was seized by the desire to rest his lips against Jack's pulse and to breathe in his fresh, clean scent.

“Have you been to Swanmore Glen before?” Jack asked, turning away from the window.

Wentworth jumped slightly, heating as if he'd been caught in Lady Cowper's parlor all over again.

“Once,” he said, his voice coming out in such a croak that he needed to clear his throat before going on with, “Lord Wilmore invited me for a fortnight just after I'd finished at Oxford.”

He heated even more at his memories of that fortnight. George had taught him quite a bit about the pleasures of the flesh. Wentworth had done things that he never would have dreamed of before—some of which he'd liked and some he hadn't. It had all been new and exciting, though, and had helped him to form an idea of who he was and what he desired in his own mind.

Jack smiled cautiously at Wentworth's words. "I can imagine you had a magnificent time," he said.

A shiver passed through Wentworth. He couldn't tell from Jack's sly look alone whether his valet and friend guessed at what the fortnight with George had entailed. Truth be told, after three years with Jack's nearly constant company, Wentworth still couldn't tell whether Jack knew all there was to know about him...or if he shared those inclinations.

No, that was not true. Everyone in Wentworth's household knew of his reputation as a sodomite. It had been impossible to avoid the accusations that had flown around London in the last few years. Jack was clever and world-wise. He would have both heard the rumors and pieced them together with the fact that not once in the three years of their acquaintance had Wentworth so much as spoken about a woman.

But as much of an open book as Wentworth was, Jack had remained a beautiful mystery that Wentworth was too afraid to delve into, lest he end up offending his friend and driving him away. Wentworth had remained true to the promise he'd made himself that fateful day and swallowed every urge to speak out to Jack. He could accept exclusion by all of society, but he felt he would wither and die, should Jack decide to turn his back on him.

"I like the look of the place," Jack said in a comfortable voice. He turned back to the window and smiled as they drove off the main drive and onto the path that would take them up to the house's front door. "It has a jolly sort of countenance about it, as if a great deal of fun is to be had here." He turned back to Wentworth, his smile still in place. "I can see you frolicking here with your friend, Lord Wilmore."

Wentworth's heart slammed against his ribs. Jack's smile had him feeling restless and overheated. He would have liked to frolic with Jack in about a dozen ways, each of them wickeder than the last. At the same time, he dreaded what Jack must think of him for having been the lover of a man so many years older than him and so...commanding, like George.

"Swanmore Glen has all the charms of the country," Wentworth said, feeling as though it was a hopelessly lame response to Jack's statement.

Jack's smile deepened before he set about gathering the few things they'd brought with them inside the carriage as the conveyance lurched to a stop. "I've hardly spent any time in the country before, as you know," he said, scooting forward in his seat and preparing to exit the carriage. "This should be an interesting journey."

"Indeed," Wentworth said, attempting to pull himself together so that he could be a proper duke. It was so damnably hard at times to carry himself with the gravity that he was meant to have in his position.

The driver hopped down to open the carriage door, and as soon as he did, Jack stepped out and marched immediately around to the back of the carriage to see to their things. Wentworth descended from the carriage a moment later, trying to stand tall and not feel as though Jack had abandoned him to the wolves of the rest of the aristocracy. He could already see a few titled gentlemen and others whom he'd known at university loitering around the house's front terrace, and he caught a glimpse of a familiar face peeking out one of the parlor windows to see who the new arrival was.

"Greetings, Your Grace," an august butler in impeccable black mourning livery met Wentworth as he strode from the carriage to the terrace steps. "Welcome to Swanmore Glen."

"Thank you," Wentworth said, deepening his voice by a few degrees and nodding curtly to the butler.

"I trust your journey was uneventful?" the butler asked.

“It was, thank you.” Wentworth glanced over his shoulder to Jack, who, with the help of two of Swanmore’s footmen, was seeing to their baggage.

Jack noticed him watching and turned to give Wentworth a quick smile of reassurance. That smile sent a blossom of confidence through Wentworth. Jack always made him feel more confident.

Wentworth turned back to the butler. “I was surprised by this summons,” he admitted, “and to be honest, I am uncertain what to make of it or what to do.”

“Do not worry, Your Grace,” the butler said with a slight bow. “Lord Wilmore and the rest of us at Swanmore Glen will see to your every need.”

A rush of hot and cold spilled down Wentworth’s back at the mention of Lord Wilmore. Wentworth almost searched for George before realizing that someone else must have inherited the title. He vaguely remembered George having a young nephew who was in line for the marquisate. All the same, George’s presence was everywhere around Swanmore Glen, from the gardens to the front hall that he stepped into as the butler led him on.

“Burville! I thought that was you.”

Wentworth turned in time to see his old college chum, Cecil Mackworth, Viscount Thurleigh, stepping out from the parlor to the right. He’d recognized Cecil through the window, but seeing the man up close brought back a wealth of feeling about the time they’d spent together all those years ago. George wasn’t the only man who had contributed to Wentworth’s early education, and Wentworth wasn’t George’s only young pupil.

“Thurleigh, it’s good to see you again,” Wentworth said, stepping over to take Cecil’s hand when it was offered. “It’s been too long.”

“It has indeed,” Cecil said, his face coloring a little. “I’ve been away on the continent these last few years.”



Which, of course, meant that someone at some point had found Cecil out, and he'd sought refuge from waging tongues and probing questions from authorities in friendlier climes, like Italy or Spain, where their inclinations were not a crime.

"I was deeply sorry to hear of George's demise," Cecil went on, extending an arm and inviting Wentworth into the parlor he'd come out of earlier. "What a wily old bugger that man was," Cecil laughed.

Wentworth laughed along with him, but he heated at the literal meaning of the comment. "He was that. I suppose you were named in his will as well?" he asked.

"We all were," Cecil said, looking a bit surprised at Wentworth's lack of knowledge.

"We?" Wentworth asked, hating how much on the back foot he felt already.

"George's entire harem of young bucks and dandies have been summoned to Swanmore Glen," Cecil said with a wry twinkle in his eyes. "That man was a hedonist of the highest order. You know he had a whole stable of us at his beck and call to play with whenever the need niggled at him."

Wentworth hadn't thought it was possible for him to blush harder than he already was—and truly, it was unbecoming for a duke to blush in the first place—but the very idea of George having his pick of eager young men to play with and debauch was as amusing as it was embarrassing.

He was spared from having to come up with some sort of clever reply to entertain Cecil as a thump from the hallway made him turn. Jack had stepped into the house, along with the two footmen that carried Wentworth's trunk. Jack's arms were filled with smaller valises and cases, which he carried as though they weighed nothing.

Pride filled Wentworth, and when Jack glanced into the parlor and met his eyes with another of his reassuring smiles, Wentworth was tempted to wiggle his fingers coquettishly at his friend. He only nodded at him, smiling in return, and he considered that a victory for his dignity.

“Well, well,” Cecil said as Jack and the footmen moved on. “Who was that?”

“That?” Wentworth said with a shrug, pretending disinterest. “That is my valet, Mr. Cotton.”

“Valet indeed,” Cecil said, the mischief in his eyes showing that he knew there was more. “He’s quite well-formed.”

Wentworth fixed his old friend with a flat look. “Cotton has been in my employ these three and a half years now,” he said. “He was one of only two servants who stayed with me when my vote for the Reform Act was made public, the other being my housekeeper, Mrs. Smith.”

Dolly had laughed for hours when Wentworth informed the young woman that, as housekeeper, she should be called “Mrs. Smith” and not “Miss Smith”, regardless of her married state.

“You are lucky to have such a fine and loyal attendant,” Cecil said. His tone and expression said far more than his words. “I assume he takes *particular* care of your person?” Cecil arched one eyebrow playfully.

Wentworth returned the look with a lopsided smile, then sighed. He ventured one last look to the hallway, but Jack had already moved on. Since there was nothing left there to turn his attention to, he started across the parlor to a much larger, adjacent room with Cecil.

“He does not,” he admitted, keeping his voice low. Cecil was one of the few people he could speak to about such things, but he preferred to do so in a quiet voice.

“Truly?” Cecil huffed a laugh. “If I had a valet like that, I would take full advantage of it.”

“That is just the thing,” Wentworth said as they crossed into a larger conservatory, where several other men he vaguely recognized were lounging about, drinking tea and chatting as though they hadn’t seen each other in years. “I’ve no wish to take advantage of anyone, particularly the one man who has stayed by my side through my darkest days and upon whom I rely for nearly everything.”

Cecil's teasing grin dropped to a look of soft seriousness. "It is worse than I thought, then," he said.

"Worse?" Wentworth was terrified of what Cecil must think of him.

Cecil's grin returned, but it was kinder now. "You're in love with the man, aren't you?"

Wentworth's chest tightened. "Whatever makes you say that? You've only just had a glimpse of the man, and you and I haven't seen each other for years."

Cecil laughed, shook his head, and placed a hand on Wentworth's shoulder. "You forget," he said. "We were close at Oxford. I came to know your character well. You are a sentimental soul, Wentworth Rawley. You're a poet and a bleeding heart."

Wentworth was tempted to protest that he was not, but the fact of the matter was that Cecil was right about him.

"I shouldn't be," he said. "I'm the Duke of Burville now. I've a reputation and a family name to uphold."

Cecil surprised him by barking a laugh. "If that's how you feel about things, then you shouldn't have voted with Grey three years ago and infuriated all those pesky Tories."

Wentworth's brow shot up. "You're not a Tory?"

"God, no!" Cecil said.

"Then why didn't you vote for reform along with me?" It would have saved Wentworth a great deal of strife if someone like Cecil had stood up along with him all those years ago.

Cecil grew serious again. "Did I not just tell you that I was away on the continent after...some troubles?"

Wentworth let go of his anger and the tension that had bunched his shoulders. "You are right," he said, shaking his head and rubbing his brow. "Men like us should support and protect each other, no matter what the circumstances, rather than blaming each other for the wrongs and injustices that are thrown at us."

“Well said.” Cecil clapped Wentworth’s shoulder once more before taking a step to Wentworth’s side so that they could survey the room together. “I’m sure Fulbright would agree with you as well,” he said, pointing out a tall, blond man who stood near the fireplace, in conversation with a stunningly attractive red-head. “Moreland as well.” He nodded to a patrician-looking man loitering by one of the windows...who appeared to be glaring daggers at the red-head. “In fact, I’m sure we all would.”

“Perhaps that is why George called us all together to hear his last will and testament?” Wentworth suggested.

“It probably is,” Cecil said with a shrug. “Leave it to George to continue to master us all, even after his death.”

Cecil laughed gently and shook his head, as if lost in his memories for a moment. Then he turned to Wentworth again.

“This valet of yours, though,” he went on, grinning. His expression and the way he lifted his eyebrows asked the question that his lips did not.

Wentworth glanced warily at his old friend for a moment, then sighed in defeat.

“Alright, yes,” he admitted. “I’m in love with Jack. Madly and hopelessly so.”

“I knew it,” Cecil said, beaming with victory.

“But I cannot do a damned thing about it,” Wentworth went on.

Cecil looked shocked. “Whyever not? He’s a fine specimen, and the way he looked at you makes it seem like he’s keen.”

“That’s just the thing,” Wentworth sighed. “I have no idea where his interests lie.”

“You haven’t broached the subject with the man?” Cecil blinked at him. “And he’s been with you for three and a half years?”

“How could I?” Wentworth argued. “If I am wrong about his character, then I would offend him. He might leave me,

which I could not bear. You have no idea what these last three years have been like. It would ruin me to have the one man who has stood by me through it all abandon me because I declared feelings for him that he could never return. And even if he did not leave my employ outright, it would change things between us irrevocably.”

Cecil still didn't seem convinced. “But what if he shares those feelings? What if he wants to care for your person more intimately than a valet usually does.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Wentworth stared flatly at him. “I cannot be sure that is what would happen,” he said. “And I cannot risk the loss I would suffer if I am wrong.”

Cecil made a snorting sound and shook his head. He crossed his arms and pretended he was more interested in observing the others in the room as he said, “I always knew you to be a careful and circumspect man, Burville, but I never would have painted you as a coward.”

“I am not a coward,” Wentworth said, loud enough to draw the attention of a few of the other men in the room. He lowered his voice and repeated, “I am not a coward, I can assure you. And you can deride me all you'd like for not showing more of a backbone and facing the world with aggression and command, but you have not lived through what I have experienced. You have not been exposed as a sodomite in a public setting and instantly gained notoriety of a sort that would end with a hanging, were it not for your title. You have not been vilified for standing up for the rights of those beneath you and had your entire household and every friend in London desert you. One can only fight back and stay strong for so long before it is time to retreat and form ranks again so a new attack can begin.”

Wentworth was convinced he'd embarrassed himself with his defense, but surprisingly, Cecil smiled and thumped his back.

“Well said, my friend,” he said. “It is too easy to forget that sticking one's neck out too far at the wrong time can end

with one's head lopped off.”

Wentworth relaxed a bit at Cecil's understanding.

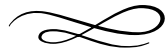
“And I have, in fact, been exposed as a sodomite in public, you know,” he added. “So I understand your caution going forward completely.”

Relief washed through Wentworth. He was tempted to thank Cecil for his honesty and to perhaps even make a further overture of friendship or a suggestion that they meet up again in London, after the business of George's will was settled, but he was prevented by the appearance of a gruff, businesslike young man with spectacles who marched into the room holding a small stack of official-looking papers.

“Gentlemen, my lords,” the man said without preamble. “I am Mr. Austin Haythorne, the late Marquess of Wilmore's solicitor, and I thank you for coming here today. If you would be so kind as to gather round, we can proceed with the fulfillment of the late marquess's last wishes.”

Wentworth glanced to Cecil as they both stepped forward to join the rest of the group. This was it. They were about to discover why George had called them all here. He only wished that Jack was by his side for the revelation of the mystery so that they could share it together.

*Two*



The world that Jack had stepped into when he'd chosen to stay with Wentworth instead of abandoning him, like everyone else but Dolly had, was as different to the world he'd been raised in as it was possible to get. Instead of having to scrape and fight for every morsel of day-old bread and every stitch of clothing on his back, Jack had eaten well and never had to worry about being warm and having a roof over his head. And instead of living as though it were every man for himself, he'd had someone to work for and tune his life to. Someone he admired and adored.

Perhaps a little too much.

"Careful there," he told the Swanmore footmen as they bumped Wentworth's trunk a little too hard against the doorframe of the room the butler, Mr. Pickering, had designated as Wentworth's. "His Grace's things should be treated with utmost respect."

"Yes, sir," the smaller of the two footmen, Abbott, nodded deferentially to Jack.

"That's it," Jack said, tempering his voice with kindness as the footmen set the trunk on the floor at the foot of the grand bed, just to show that there were no hard feelings. "Many thanks, lads," he finished.

He set the cases that he'd been carrying on top of the trunk, then straightened to survey the room for a moment, nodding to the footmen as they departed to see to the other

guests. The two men returned his nod respectfully before slipping into the hall.

Jack smiled in satisfaction at the empty doorway. He was good with people and he knew it. The staff he'd helped Wentworth to hire when Benning and the rest of those ungrateful sods buggered off respected and liked him. Wentworth had given him the option of choosing between being his butler or his valet—just as he'd given Dolly the choice between being the housekeeper or the cook—but despite Jack's ease with people, he'd chosen to continue on as Wentworth's valet instead of taking the more prestigious position, like Dolly had.

Because being a valet meant Jack could remain that much closer to Wentworth.

He flushed a little at that thought and distracted himself from the inevitable, uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that always came with it by setting to work unpacking Wentworth's things. It was shocking enough that he and Wentworth had fallen into a degree of informality that would scandalize Wentworth's entire household—and all of England along with it—but for Jack to entertain the fantasies that had followed him to bed for the past three years and that were never very far from his mind was tantamount to sacrilege.

It wasn't that Jack was ignorant of Wentworth's proclivities. All of London knew Wentworth's reputation. It was that Jack could not in any way bring himself to presume that those particular attentions would be directed at him. He and Wentworth were closer than a master and servant usually were, but they were still master and servant.

And Jack valued what he had with Wentworth far too much to risk it by demanding more.

Besides which, despite his inclinations and desires, he'd never truly been with another man before, and he didn't quite know where to begin.

He concentrated on the task directly in front of him, as he always did, not allowing his thoughts or his emotions to run away with him, as he began sorting through the various valises



and cases he'd brought up from the carriage, putting away Wentworth's shaving supplies, his cravats and underthings, and doing his best to avoid thinking about the places that the various garments had been.

And he smiled as he worked, because he could not help but think about those places. He couldn't help but think about how charming Wentworth had been during the drive that morning, as he'd fretted about coming face to face with his past, then as he'd pulled himself up and put on a brave face once he'd descended from the carriage. Wentworth was a sheep in wolf's clothing most of the time, doing his utmost to live up to the image of his class and his title, while really being a homebody, who enjoyed strong tea and a thrilling novel in front of a warm fire on a rainy afternoon more than he could ever enjoy the strife and ceremony of Parliament. It hadn't taken Jack three years to discern that about his master and friend either. He'd come to his conclusions about Wentworth's character within weeks of assuming the role of his right-hand man.

His smiling turned into whistling, and his contemplation of Wentworth's character and hidden strengths verged entirely too close to the inappropriate, when he heard a scuffle and something drop in the hallway. The door was still open, so he rested the waistcoat he'd just taken out of one of the valises on the bed, then went to search out the source of the sound.

He found a young nobleman attempting to carry a portable desk of some sort in the hallway.

"My lord, might I help you?" he asked, assuming the posture that the valet of the Duke of Burville should have.

The young nobleman glanced over his shoulder from where he stood, balancing the writing desk against the wall so that he didn't drop it.

"Yes, please," he said, relief thick in his voice.

Jack jumped into action, rushing to take the desk from the nobleman entirely. "Allow me," he said, nodding to the man once he had the desk.

The young nobleman let go and straightened, laughing at himself and rubbing a hand over his forehead. “I should have waited, like Haythorne told me to,” he said, gesturing for Jack to accompany him down the hallway. “The desk belonged to my uncle, you see, and the old fox’s will stipulates that it be given to Lord Thurleigh after the will is read. Since both Haythorne and Pickering are busy at the moment, I thought I’d bring it down myself.”

Jack’s eyes widened for a moment before he schooled his expression to neutrality. The young nobleman had to have been the new Marquess of Wilmore, the master of Swanmore Glen.

It went against everything Jack knew about his place as a servant to speak, but years of familiarity with a duke made him bold. “You must find your uncle’s request that so many of his...friends be present at the reading of his will a bit odd, my lord,” he said.

Lord Wilmore laughed. “Clearly, you did not know Uncle George,” he said as they started down the main stairs. “Oddness was the air he breathed, and unconventionality the food he ate. I am quite certain that whatever the man’s will contains and whatever his reasons for bringing all his past paramours to Swanmore, it will provide us all with endless entertainment.”

Jack’s eyes widened again. So the new Lord Wilmore knew about the sort of men the late Lord Wilmore kept company with? He knew what sort of guests now filled his house? Jack didn’t doubt for a moment that every one of the noble—and not so noble—men that he’d seen since arriving at Swanmore were of his and Wentworth’s type.

Which filled Jack with a sudden worry that reached deep into his gut. Wentworth could have his pick of likeminded paramours at Swanmore. He’d fallen immediately into conversation with a proud and handsome man as soon as they’d stepped into the house. What would Jack do if he was forced to attend to his friend once Wentworth took a lover?

The thought was too terrible to contemplate, and again, Jack forced his thoughts to stay directly in front of him, on the task at hand, instead of dragging him down darkened paths that he might never need to traverse.

“Wilmore! There you are,” a red-headed man met them at the bottom of the stairs, a deep scowl on his face and fire in his eyes to match his hair. “What is the meaning of this?”

Lord Wilmore glanced worriedly at the red-haired man and stepped to the side with him once they were at the bottom of the stairs. Since Jack had no idea where to take the writing desk, he stood slightly apart from the two men, pretending not to pay attention.

“Ah, Mr. Creighton,” Lord Wilmore said with an uneasy smile. “How can I help you?”

The red-head, Mr. Creighton, scowled more deeply. “Why has *that man* been invited to Lord Wilmore’s estate?” he demanded.

Jack’s mouth twitched. If the members of this party got into the habit of referring to both the late Lord Wilmore and the new Lord Wilmore by the same name, he wasn’t sure he would ever keep things straight.

“Lord Moreland is a bastard and a cheat, and I refuse to stay under the same roof with the blackguard,” Mr. Creighton snapped.

“I’m very sorry about that,” Lord Wilmore—the living one—said, wringing his hands. “My uncle’s will was explicit in his wish that you both attend this reading. I am merely attempting to fulfill his last wishes. I believe it will be worth your while to suffer through Lord Moreland’s presence until the entire matter can be—”

Lord Wilmore didn’t have a chance to finish. Mr. Creighton huffed in disgust, then stormed off toward one of the doorways off the main hall. Once he was gone, Lord Wilmore turned to Jack.

“I honestly do not know what my uncle was thinking with this mad will business,” he said with a sigh, gesturing for Jack

to follow him. “Fortunately, we are about to find out.”

As it turned out, Lord Wilmore meant that somewhat literally. Jack followed him down the hall, but as soon as they reached what appeared to be a study, they were met by a short, frowning man with spectacles as he marched out of the room, papers in hand.

“Is that the desk?” the man asked, glancing from Lord Wilmore to Jack and back again.

“It is,” Lord Wilmore answered.

The spectacled man nodded. “You might as well bring it,” he said, then stormed on, down the hall and into the room the red-headed man had disappeared into.

Jack followed, though he was delayed a fraction as Lord Wilmore tried to take the desk back from him so that Jack could continue with his valet duties.

“It’s no trouble, my lord,” he said. “I can hold it until you’re ready to take it from me.”

“Thank you,” Lord Wilmore said. “That’s one less mad-capped thing for me and Mr. Haythorne to worry about.”

They proceeded on to what turned out to be a conservatory. The spectacled man, who Jack assumed was Mr. Haythorne, was already in the middle of gathering the gentlemen who had come to Swanmore Glen around him. Jack’s heart throbbed against his ribs at the sight of Wentworth drawing in close with the others, the proud nobleman by his side.

He scolded himself for worrying what the connection between Wentworth and the other nobleman was. He refused to let himself think the worst, absolutely refused.

But it was so easy to imagine a man as wonderful as Wentworth giving his heart away to someone of his own class and significance. So easy that Jack was in danger of fumbling the writing desk.

Until Wentworth saw him and lit up like the sun had risen.

Wentworth’s smile made everything well again. Jack returned the affectionate look, then both he and Wentworth

gave their attention to Mr. Haythorne.

“My lords and gentlemen,” Mr. Haythorne said, adjusting his spectacles, “I will not occupy too much of your time with formalities. Each of your presences has been requested at this particular gathering by the late Lord Wilmore himself. On behalf of the new Lord Wilmore and the old, I thank you for taking the time to be here.”

Mr. Hawthorne took a moment to survey the gentlemen who had gathered in front of him. There were about a dozen of them, which Jack found particularly amusing. He hadn’t realized a man could have so many lovers in one lifetime.

He was even more startled when Mr. Haythorne went on with, “You are the select few whom the late Lord Wilmore remembered with particular fondness.”

Jack’s brow went up. The select *few*? How many lovers had the late Lord Wilmore had anyhow?

“As you may know,” Mr. Haythorne continued, “the late Lord Wilmore was aware of his impending demise. As such, knowing he would soon breathe his last on this earth, he set to work putting in place certain provisions for the men he felt particularly responsible for, or for whom he had a unique attachment.”

“I’ll say it was unique,” one of the gentlemen said with a smirk.

Several of the others laughed.

Mr. Haythorne waited for them to finish, looking annoyed at being interrupted, before clearing his throat and going on.

“The late Lord Wilmore understood that each of you had particular needs or interests.” He began circulating among the gentlemen, handing out pieces of parchment from the pile he held as he did. As each of the men accepted the pages they were handed, they looked over them with frowns and confusion. “You have each been given precisely what the late Lord Wilmore believes you most needed.”

“But this isn’t a deed of ownership or a statement of account at all,” a tall, blond gentleman said holding up his

parchment. “This sounds more like instructions.”

“Or like a game or jest of some sort,” another, darker man added.

Jack kept his gaze intently on Wentworth as soon as Mr. Haythorne handed him a parchment. He would have given anything to be standing by Wentworth’s side, reading over his shoulder, to see what his parchment said. Judging by the confused frown as Wentworth read it, it was puzzling.

“We all know that Uncle George was a bit of a trickster,” Lord Wilmore said, looking anxious and apologetic. “I am certain this is merely his way of having a last bit of fun with us all.”

“Did you receive one of these?” the gentleman standing next to Wentworth asked, holding up his parchment.

“I did, my lord,” Lord Wilmore said with a nod.

“I still don’t understand,” Wentworth spoke up. “What is the point of this? I’m not certain what George—er, that is, the late Lord Wilmore is even getting at with this.”

“What does yours say?” the handsome lord beside Wentworth asked, mischief in his eyes.

It took every ounce of will Jack had not to fly to his friend and master to protect him from the other man’s interest. He stayed where he was, practically quivering with the need to be next to Wentworth.

“It sounds to me like a wild goose chase,” Wentworth said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Jack leaned toward Wentworth, even though he was at the other side of the room.

He was startled when the handsome lord beside Wentworth stared right at him and furrowed his brow.

Jack flinched back, and when the handsome lord strode across the room to him, Jack was certain he was about to be taken to task for harboring too much fondness for a duke.

Instead, the man said, “According to this, that belongs to me now.” He reached Jack and plucked the writing desk out of his arms.

Jack was relieved to give up the desk, but that didn’t ease the need to know what was going on so that he could help Wentworth. All of the gentlemen in the room had descended into confusion and chaos when they received their parchments.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Mr. Haythorne said, trying to calm them all. “As I explained, the late Lord Wilmore knew he was not long for this world, and he put things in place that will lead you each to your particular inheritance. Each one of you has been given instructions on how to find the thing Lord Wilmore believed you most needed. And yes, there are stipulations about what you must do in order to obtain those things.”

“Bloody hell,” the red-headed man barked so suddenly Jack flinched. “I am not banding together with *that* steaming pile of shite for the sake of a couple of coins.” He glared across the room to a slender, aching aristocratic man...who sneered back at him with equal intensity.

“You will follow the instructions that the late Lord Wilmore laid out for you or you will receive nothing from him,” Mr. Haythorne said. “And believe me, Mr. Creighton, you are in desperate need of what Lord Wilmore has left to you.”

Mr. Creighton snapped his loathing gaze away from the other man and stared anxiously at Mr. Haythorne. Jack could see as plain as day that Mr. Creighton knew Mr. Haythorne was right about desperately needing whatever it was Lord Wilmore had left him.

“As you will find when you complete the tasks the late Lord Wilmore has set for you,” Mr. Haythorne went on, “there is an additional bequest of exceptional value for you all.”

A moment of pause followed.

“Do you mean that there is an additional bequest for each of us or that there is something more that only one of us gets?”

one of the gentlemen asked.

“Does it go to the first of us who completes the task George set for us?” the blond gentleman asked.

“I honestly do not know,” Mr. Haythorne said with a shrug. “All I know is that once you complete the missions set for you by the late Lord Wilmore, there will be further instructions about this additional bequest.”

“But this makes no sense,” Wentworth said. “This says that my position in society will be restored and I will earn the respect that was due to me all along, but it does not say how, only that I must travel to a specific address in a particular manner. It reads as nonsense to me.”

Jack was more curious than ever about Wentworth’s parchment, and he could not contain his curiosity for another moment. The rest of the gentleman and lords in the room were so perplexed with their own parchments—and several of them had wandered to the corners of the room or out of the conservatory entirely—that he felt only a little conspicuous striding across the room so that he could be at Wentworth’s side.

Fortunately for him, Wentworth glanced to Jack as he approached as though he both needed and wanted Jack there with him.

“What does it say?” Jack asked quietly, highly aware of anyone who might be looking at the two of them and disapproving.

“As I said, it gives an address—in Derbyshire, of all places—and states that I must make my way there without availing myself of either my name, my title, or my fortune to do so.”

Jack frowned and took the parchment from Wentworth without thinking. Wentworth gave it over easily, then waited patiently as Jack read through it.

*“My dear Wentworth,” it read. “As I told you on that fateful day in May of eighteen thirty-two, I have been watching out for you every step of your way. I was and continue to be so very proud of you for standing up for what you believe, even*



*though it has cost you so much. I can assure you that you have gained a thousand times more than what you have lost, and it is my sincerest hope that you will recognize what you have someday soon.*

*“To speed you on your way, I have devised a way for you to take the place that you deserve in the society that you so long for. I have left a particular gift for you at Flagg Hall in Derbyshire. In order to claim this prize, you must make your way to Flagg Hall as yourself only. You may not use your title or rank to gain favor or advantage. You must not reveal to anyone at any point that you are a duke, or indeed a nobleman of any ilk. You may not avail yourself of your personal carriage, nor any other vehicle or conveyance to reach Derbyshire. You may not use your inheritance nor any bit of money left to you by your father or mother or any other relative, nor any financial means associated with the dukedom. You must make this journey as yourself only, as Wentworth Rawley, not as the Duke of Burville. But by all means, rely on the friendships you have to take you to where you must go to find what you need.”*

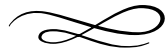
The letter was signed affectionately by the late Lord Wilmore. Jack handed the parchment back to Wentworth.

The two of them stared at each other.

“I think it’s quite clear, Your Grace,” Jack said, careful to use Wentworth’s title while they were in company. “We must go to this Flagg Hall place in Derbyshire to claim your inheritance.”

And if Jack’s instinct regarding the last sentence of the charge was correct, they needed to go together.

## Three



Wentworth blinked at Jack, took another look at George's final words to him, then studied Jack again. The mission that had been set for him was clear, but also as foggy as a London morning. Apparently, George believed that whatever he'd left for him at this Flagg Hall place in Derbyshire would restore him to the good graces of the *ton*.

But why hide something like that so far away in the countryside? And what the devil did it mean to go retrieve it as himself, not as the Duke of Burville? He was the Duke of Burville. There was no escaping that. He'd been born to the position and he would die in it.

"What does yours say?" Cecil asked, stepping back over to Wentworth after depositing a rather large writing desk on an end table with spindly legs that looked like it might collapse under the weight of the desk. He held a piece of parchment like Wentworth's, but craned his neck as though he would read Wentworth's instead.

Instinctively, Wentworth pulled his letter close to his chest. It was a private matter between him and George—and Jack, he supposed—and until he made sense of it, he was loath to share with someone as gregarious and outspoken as Cecil.

"George wishes me to travel to Derbyshire to retrieve something he's left at a place called Flagg Hall," Wentworth said, a frown etched between his brows. "And he says I must do it as myself, not as the Duke of Burville."

Cecil frowned in a similar manner to Wentworth. “But you *are* the Duke of Burville,” he said, then shrugged.

Wentworth noticed Jack’s face pinch ever so slightly, as though he disagreed with the statement. Curiosity over what could cause a look like that and what Jack might be thinking ran rampant in Wentworth. He wanted to take Jack aside, possibly have tea with something savory sent up to whatever room he’d been assigned for the duration of his stay at Swanmore Glen, and discuss the matter with his friend until the two of them figured it out.

If he were honest with himself, he would have enjoyed tea with Jack alone, without the added puzzle of his old lover’s confusing last words. Or perhaps a ramble across the magnificent grounds of Swanmore Glen with just the two of them as they discussed possible improvements to Wentworth’s own country estate in Shropshire. Telford Lodge had been abandoned for too long, and if he was any sort of duke worth his salt, he would build the place up, and perhaps investigate the industry in the area which was—

“Hello, and who are you?” Cecil asked Jack, a saucy note to his voice that immediately had Wentworth’s full attention.

Perhaps a little too much. Wentworth’s back stiffened, and his eyes went wide in indignation at Cecil’s forwardness where Jack was concerned. Had he not just confessed his affection for Jack to Cecil not half an hour before? It was unbelievable that Cecil should speak to Jack in such a tone when he knew full well that—

One impish glance from Cecil, as Jack answered, “I am Jack Cotton, my lord. His Grace’s valet,” with a polite bow was enough to tell Wentworth that Cecil was having a go at him by flirting with Jack.

The bastard.

“Jack Cotton,” Cecil said, his smile growing. He grasped his hands behind his back and looked from Jack to Wentworth and back again. “And what do you think of this quest old George has set for your master?”

To his credit, Jack stood straighter and held himself with an air of respect and readiness. Which only made him look more fetching and desirable than ever.

“It is not for me to say, my lord,” Jack said with a slight incline of his head to Cecil. “If you would be so good as to excuse me, I was drawn into the room incidentally, and I must continue to see to His Grace’s things.”

“Carry on, Cotton,” Wentworth said with a smile and a nod, trying desperately not to let his embarrassment and his adoration show.

He wasn’t as successful as he’d hoped. The moment Jack turned to stride out of the room—leaving Wentworth feeling bereft without him—Cecil snorted softly and said, “Smitten. Absolutely smitten.”

Wentworth whipped to him, glaring. “I would thank you not to tease me when I am at a disadvantage, Thurleigh.”

Cecil held up his hands in defense. “I was not teasing,” he protested. He then dropped his hands and grinned like the devil himself. “Alright, I was teasing. But how could I not? The two of you were practically making eyes at each other. A blind man could see that you want him and, I might add, that he wants you, too.”

“Nonsense,” Wentworth said, flustered and flushed. “Jack has no such interests in that direction.”

Cecil scoffed and shook his head. “No wonder George adored you so much.”

“He did—I beg your pardon?” Wentworth fiddled with the parchment from George, more agitated than ever. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Cecil laughed. “George loved taking shy, innocent boys with fire inside them and drawing that fire out. If he knew about your Mr. Cotton, it is likely he would have locked you two in a room furnished with nothing but a bed and erotic artwork, without your clothing, and waited until the two of you were rutting like goats before unlocking the doors.”

Wentworth scowled at Cecil, but his heart beat faster at the idea of such a room and such a situation. It was precisely the sort of thing George would have dreamed up for his own amusement.

His uncomfortable thoughts about how much he would have enjoyed the scenario were cut short by a shout at the other side of the room.

“I do not care how much money is involved, I will not debase myself by spending a single moment with this man,” the red-headed man—whom Wentworth was certain he remembered from some past encounter—shouted, sneering at the Earl of Moreland as he did.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Mr. Haythorne said, moving to stand between the two men and holding up his hands as though to stop a fistfight. He adjusted his glasses, then went on with, “The conditions of the late Lord Wilmore’s will are explicit where the two of you are concerned. You must seek out your prize together or neither of you will win it at all.”

“But this man ruined me,” the red-haired man growled.

“You were ruined enough when I found you,” Lord Moreland argued, raking the red-haired man with a look that was both dismissive and lascivious.

“I was ruined because of you,” the red-haired man spat. “You have no idea what I was forced to become because of your underhandedness.”

“Billy, I think we all know what you’ve become,” Lord Moreland said with an arch look.

The red-head, Billy, hissed at Lord Moreland. Wentworth braced himself for the inevitable fight, but instead of throwing a punch, Billy turned and stormed out of the room.

He nearly ran into Swanmore’s butler as he left. Pickering glanced at Billy with mild alarm before clearing his throat and announcing to the room, “My lords and gentlemen, supper is served.”

Those who were still in the conservatory made their way to the doorway. Wentworth was still reeling from the upset of the

odd afternoon, but he walked down the hall with Cecil, feeling as though he could do with a bit of supper to settle his nerves.

“What was that all about?” he asked Cecil as they followed the others to the dining room.

It wasn't Cecil who answered, but rather Lord Fulbright, the tall blond man whom Cecil had pointed out to him earlier. “Billy and Ash—that is, Mr. William Creighton and Ashton Cockburn, Earl of Moreland—were rivals for George's affections about five years ago.”

“I remember the story well,” Cecil said, excitement sparking in his eyes.

“I don't think I've ever heard it,” Wentworth said, slowing his steps a little so that Lord Fulbright could continue the story before they reached the dining room.

Lord Fulbright sighed. “It's a bit sad, actually. Billy was a poor groom working in the household near Brighton where George was staying at the time. Ash hadn't inherited the earldom yet. George took a fancy to both of them, but Ash was determined to win the upper hand. Unfortunately, he did.”

“Unfortunately?” Wentworth asked.

Cecil made a sad sound and paused just outside of the dining room door. He lowered his voice to say, “Ash wedged Billy out, but Billy's association with George had already been discovered. He lost his position without references, and due to a chain of events that I am not entirely certain of, Billy was forced to become a courtesan to make ends meet.”

Wentworth's eyes went wide. “He's a—” He couldn't bring himself to speak the word “whore” aloud.

Cecil laughed and clapped a hand on Wentworth's shoulder, steering him on into the dining room. “See what I mean?” he said, speaking to Fulbright as though they'd been conversing about the matter all afternoon. “Innocent as a babe, despite his title and fortune.”

“The best ones always are,” Fulbright said, winking at Wentworth as though he were interested.

They'd approached the table, where the current Lord Wilmore was helping with seating arrangements. The new lord saw the wink and blanched a little.

"I trust their will be no inappropriate behavior while details of my uncle's will are dealt with, gentlemen," he said, blushing a bit.

"No, no, of course not," Cecil said, then sent Wentworth and Fulbright a look that seemed to say *of course* there would be inappropriate behavior, and wasn't Lord Wilmore adorable?

Wentworth had nothing to say to that. He had nothing to say to any of the small dramas that were clearly happening around the table. George certainly had known how to create tempests, even if they were in teapots. Wentworth couldn't bring himself to become involved in them with half the vigor that Cecil seemed to have when it came to gossip. And so what if that marked him as innocent or backward in some way? He might have been a duke, but he was a simple man with ordinary tastes who did not, perhaps, spend as much time in the company of his fellow invert as he should.

Though it was rather entertaining to sit at a table of almost entirely men like him.

After the meal finished and Wentworth excused himself to retire to his room for the night, he mused about how satisfying it would be to have such company available on a more frequent basis. He was not inclined to jump into bed with whomever crooked their finger at him, as Fulbright and some of the others seemed to be, but it was a sort of respite to know that everyone in the room shared the same secret he fought so desperately to keep hidden—and that he'd failed to hide when it truly mattered—and that they could simply be together.

"How was supper?" Jack asked as soon as Wentworth crossed into the room one of the footmen had directed him to.

Wentworth was mildly surprised to find Jack sitting in one of the chairs by the fire, his feet propped up on an ottoman, reading a book. The image was beautifully domestic and sent warmth and longing spilling through Wentworth's insides.

“Agreeable for the most part,” he said, shutting the door behind him and crossing to join Jack. He slumped into the second chair by the fire, feeling cozier than he had all day. “You know I’m not particularly inclined toward conversation with strangers.”

Jack closed his book and sat a little straighter, studying Wentworth with mild surprise. “I thought you knew most of the men in attendance today through...through various means.”

Prickles raced down Wentworth’s back. Jack didn’t think he’d had affairs with the other men visiting Swanmore Glen just because they had all been George’s lovers, did he? Wentworth still wasn’t clear on how much Jack might have guessed about his affair with George.

“No!” he protested, perhaps with a bit too much vehemence. “I...I mean, I knew Lord Thurleigh at university, along with a few of the others, but I have never...just because we are all similarly built...it isn’t as though I throw myself about like....”

Jack’s faint, amused grin stopped Wentworth cold. Jack wasn’t actually laughing at him, was he?

“I would never imply such a thing, sir,” he said, pushing himself to stand. “I know you better than that.”

Emotion like warm honey oozed through Wentworth’s insides. He should not have melted so readily at Jack’s assertion that he knew him well. And he most definitely should not have gone hard at the sight of Jack towering over him. Playing the receiving role with George had been one thing, but he was a duke, dammit, and Jack was in his employ. If anything, he should take the upper hand where the two of them were concerned.

But there was nothing of even remotely that nature between the two of them, Wentworth reminded himself, and he could not risk making the suggestion.

He sighed and stood as well. Jack stepped immediately forward to help him remove his jacket and prepare for bed.



“I must confess, a part of me would enjoy spending more time in the company of like-minded men,” Wentworth said as Jack’s deft hands took his jacket from him.

Those hands paused briefly on his shoulders. “Oh?” Jack’s touch was tense.

“But I cannot imagine when I will find the time,” Wentworth rushed on, worried he’d offended Jack. If Jack thought he would rather be with his own sort than...than him, he might pull away and ruin the rapport between them that Wentworth so longed for. “We have the matter of George’s bequest to consider,” he went on.

“Do you intend to pursue the late Lord Wilmore’s gift immediately?” Jack asked, removing Wentworth’s jacket entirely, then taking it over to the wardrobe to hang it.

Wentworth shrugged as he worked on the buttons of his waistcoat. “I don’t see why not. The sooner I win my way back into the good graces of the *ton* the better.”

Jack frowned slightly as he returned to Wentworth to help with his waistcoat. “Are you entirely certain that is what the late Lord Wilmore meant by his words?”

Wentworth blinked. He and Jack were suddenly close, and Jack gazed directly into his eyes.

The well of desire that sprung up within Wentworth was nearly impossible to resist. Jack’s lips were so close to his that all he had to do was lean in and he could kiss the man.

And potentially destroy the only bit of happiness left in his life.

He took a breath and rocked back so that he could remove his waistcoat and hand it over to Jack.

“I cannot imagine what else he could mean,” he said, moving to sit on the side of the bed so that he could remove his boots next, with Jack’s help. “As George said, he was watching me. He knew how wounded I was when the *ton* cut me. He knew how much I value friendly society.”

Jack frowned slightly as he knelt to help with Wentworth's boots. "I am not certain I would call that particular society friendly," he said.

Wentworth caught his breath when Jack glanced up to him. Not only was Jack limned perfectly in the orange glow of the fire flickering off to one side, making his strong, handsome features look good enough to eat, there was always something exciting about having a man on his knees in front of him.

And about being on his knees in front of a man.

He shook his head to banish the inappropriate fantasy. "The *ton* is friendly to their own. If I could regain a place among them, they would embrace me as they did my father. I might not be inclined to venture out every day of the week for parties and revels, but I do like to be thought well of."

Jack smiled up at him as he pulled Wentworth's second boot off, and Wentworth nearly swooned at the affection in his eyes. "I do not see how anyone could think ill of you," he said.

Wentworth huffed ironically. "You would be surprised," he said.

Jack stood to take his boots away, and Wentworth lifted his leg to remove one stocking himself. Their nighttime routine was well-established, and as soon as Jack set Wentworth's boots aside, he returned with Wentworth's nightshirt.

"One thing about George's quest puzzles me, though," he said as he stood to remove his shirt.

"What is that?" Jack asked, his voice just a bit thick for some reason.

When Wentworth emerged from his shirt and handed it over to Jack in exchange for the nightshirt, he could have sworn he caught Jack staring at his chest and the flat plane of his belly. It had to have been his imagination—although he did hear Cecil's voice scolding him for being obtuse and ignoring the obvious.

"I cannot imagine what George means by telling me to pursue his prize as myself and not as the duke," he said,

slipping into his nightshirt. Once it was in place, he removed his breeches.

Jack waited patiently for Wentworth to hand over the rest of his clothing. He shrugged and said, "It seemed fairly obvious to me."

"Oh?" Wentworth straightened from removing his breeches and handed them over.

Jack took them and said, "We have to get to Derbyshire as regular folk would."

"I am regular folk," Wentworth insisted.

"No, you are not," Jack laughed.

The rich, melodious sound had Wentworth's prick standing up to take notice. He was glad he wore a nightshirt now and not tight breeches.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked with exaggerated offense.

Jack grinned at him, mirth and camaraderie sparkling in his eyes. "You wouldn't know how to behave like a common man if your life depended on it. And to be honest, in this particular situation, it might."

"Blasphemy," Wentworth said, returning Jack's grin with one of his own. "I will have you know that I can behave as commonly as you, when called to it."

"Are you saying I'm common?" It was Jack's turn to feign offense.

"Terribly so," Wentworth teased him with a straight face.

Jack tried to look startled and affronted, but within seconds, he burst into laughter. It was too much, and Wentworth laughed as well.

All at once, everything was back to how it should be. He and Jack were friends. The suggestions that Cecil had made, urging Wentworth to do something more about it, were forgotten, and Wentworth was able to pull the bedcovers back and slip into bed without worry that he was on the verge of

changing everything where his connection to Jack was concerned.

Only when he was nearly completely settled against the pillows and Jack had finished setting his clothes aside and began undressing himself did Wentworth realize something was off.

“What are you doing?” he asked Jack, eyes wide.

Jack paused after removing his jacket. “Preparing for bed?”

“Here?” It was a ridiculous comment, but watching Jack remove his clothing had Wentworth’s mind racing with lust.

Jack seemed to grasp Wentworth’s concerns immediately. “I was told there aren’t enough rooms in the house for everyone’s servants to have their own,” he said. “There’s a cot just over here that I was about to set up for the night.”

“Oh,” Wentworth said as Jack resumed undressing. “If that is all there is.”

Jack sent him a saucy look as he set his jacket and waistcoat aside and moved to the chair so he could remove his boots. “I thought you might rather like the idea of me sleeping at the foot of your bed.”

Wentworth caught his breath so fast he went dizzy. “Perhaps I might,” he said, his voice a bit too thin.

Jack laughed and shook his head. “It’s only for one night. Tomorrow we can resume the rules of propriety that I know you love so much.”

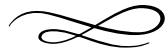
Something about those words felt like an arrow in Wentworth’s heart. Did Jack truly think he was a sticker for protocol? Was that why nothing had ever developed between the two of them?

Perhaps Cecil was right and Jack actually did want him in that way after all. He would feel prodigiously stupid if he’d let all this time pass between him and Jack without either of them acting on their feelings.

But no, he'd been humiliated once before by letting his lusts guide him, and Jack was far more important to him than his reputation with the *ton*. It would be a far greater loss to have Jack pull away than any rescinded ball invitation or cut direct in Parliament.

Wentworth sighed and settled against his pillow, deliberately closing his eyes on the tempting sight of Jack removing his shirt. It wasn't as though he had to come to terms with his feelings for his valet immediately. They would have years together to sort out whatever was between them. He could rest easy, knowing that nothing was in danger of taking Jack from him for the time being.

## *Four*



It wasn't the first time Jack had slept in the room with Wentworth. He usually slept in the room on the other side of Wentworth's dressing chamber, and occasionally they'd kept the doors between the three rooms open, particularly during nights when Wentworth had been sick or otherwise indisposed. Jack had barely slept through those nights as he listened to make certain his friend would have his needs taken care of as soon as they arose.

He didn't sleep particularly well on the cot at the foot of Wentworth's bed at Swanmore Glen either. Not only was the cot damnably uncomfortable, every breath that Wentworth took as he slumbered away, every involuntary sniff and snort, and every toss or turn his friend made had Jack's heart beating harder.

What had Wentworth meant by suggesting that he craved the society of men like him? After all these years, had Wentworth finally realized that it was ridiculous for his closest friend to be his valet? If this was the beginning of the end for the casual rapport that had developed between him and Wentworth, Jack wasn't certain what he would do.

He could live without Wentworth, but he wasn't certain he wanted to.

And then there were the undeniable sparks that had sizzled between the two of them as Jack had helped Wentworth undress for bed. It was a task he'd done a thousand times before, but if he were honest, it was the thousandth time his mind and heart had rushed off to places it shouldn't have gone.

He twisted on his cot, facing away from Wentworth, as if his sleeping master-friend could see through the layers of bedcovers and nightclothes to watch Jack's cock doing its level best to spring to life at the memory of Wentworth's naked torso. Wentworth was beautiful in every way. He wasn't as muscular or used to hard work as Jack himself was, but his body was defined and masculine enough to send Jack's senses reeling.

And damn him if he didn't have the first clue what to do about it.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He knew in theory how a man could lie with another man for the pleasure of both, he'd just never done it before. Not really. There'd been the occasional frigging among the boys at the orphanage, and he'd even had the pleasure of Davy Morse sucking him off one winter's night. But then he'd gone straight into service, where he'd been too afraid to reveal himself to the rest of Wentworth's former staff to so much as look at the other footmen, and from there he'd dedicated himself to Wentworth.

In the last three years, he hadn't had the nerve, the heart, nor the desire to do anything other than bring himself off while imagining Wentworth doing what Davy had done, in moments when he was absolutely certain Wentworth wouldn't find him out.

He tossed back to face the bed again, but neither his thoughts nor his body would settle. He fully intended to stay with Wentworth until they were both old and grey, whether anything more than an overfamiliar friendship developed between the two of them or not. But he wasn't certain he could bear it if Wentworth struck up a particular friendship with any of the late Lord Wilmore's other former paramours. And why shouldn't Wentworth take a noble lover? He was a duke, after all, and he deserved the best.

Jack twisted again, then gave up entirely and slipped out of his cot as silently as he could. He stood, his prick tenting his nightshirt in front of him, and watched Wentworth sleeping for a moment to make certain he hadn't awakened his friend.

When he was confident Wentworth was at peace, Jack slipped behind the screen that hid the chamber pot from the rest of the room. He leaned his back against the wall behind the concealment, then tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

The tension between him and Wentworth had gone on long enough. He should have known the quiet, peaceful life the two of them had made out of the ruins of Wentworth's old life wouldn't last. It was foolish to think that a duke would rely on a foundling servant for emotional and physical comfort forever. Jack had caught Wentworth when he fell, but he'd always known their special bond was temporary.

Or was that simply exhaustion and the shock of seeing Wentworth around his peers for the first time speaking? Wentworth hadn't chased him away when he'd remained in the conservatory after the contents of the late Lord Wilmore's will had been revealed. He'd spoken to Jack like an equal in front of all the other noblemen, seemingly heedless of what those men might think. Surely, that had to count for something.

And then there was the way Wentworth had smiled and bantered with him just before bed.

Jack smiled and drew in a long breath. He reached for the hem of his nightshirt and slipped a hand up along his thigh to his balls as well. Wentworth had the most charming smile of any man he'd ever seen. It was so bright and so genuine. He saw the way Wentworth struggled to behave as he believed a duke should, but that sort of duke was not who Wentworth was.

Jack handled his balls, rolling them and squeezing them a bit as an appetizer, then sliding his hand along his hardening length to tease his already damp tip. There were few things on this earth that gave Jack as much joy as Wentworth's smile. His laugh was one of them. Jack sighed, widening his stance a little, and let the sound of Wentworth's laugh ring in his memory. He stroked himself with slowly increasing urgency, feeling the pulse of his desire as his cock went as stiff as iron.



Once, when Wentworth was completely unaware of it, Jack had overheard him making sounds that were better than laughter. It had been late at night, and the doors between their rooms had been cracked open. Jack couldn't even remember why. He'd heard Wentworth making sounds of pleasure, and when he'd tiptoed into the dressing chamber to make certain Wentworth's sounds weren't distress, he'd caught sight of his friend doing exactly what Jack was doing now.

A rush of increased desire made Jack stroke himself faster. He took a moment to spit on his hand as well as spreading the liquid that seeped from his tip to ease the sensation, then leaned heavily against the wall and let the need grow within him. That night hadn't been the first night he'd caught a glimpse of Wentworth's cock. It was hard to be a man's valet without seeing everything now and then. It had been the first time he'd seen it hard, though, and it was a sight he'd never forget.

Jack closed his eyes and feasted on the memory of Wentworth pleasuring himself. He imagined the sounds Wentworth might make if Jack had his mouth around that beautiful prick of his. Better than that, he let himself fall into the fantasy of Wentworth with his full, pink lips wrapped around his own cock, of Wentworth's throat squeezing around him as he swallowed. He imagined the sounds he'd once heard, only muffled with Wentworth's mouth filled.

Even better than that, his fantasy switched to Wentworth splayed and moaning beneath him, his hips tilted up and his hole on offer so that Jack could fill him and claim him.

A groan escaped Jack's parted lips before he could stop it, but he was too far into his fantasy to worry much about it. He tightened his grip around his cock, imagining it was the ring of muscle he needed to penetrate for Wentworth to let him in. How glorious it would feel when he felt that sensation for the very first time, how special it would be to have Wentworth be his first, his last, his only.

Pleasure enveloped him, and Jack had to move quickly to catch his spend in the folds of his nightshirt. It would be far easier to hide the evidence of his fantasies in his nightshirt

than in the chamber pot. As heady as his fantasies were, and as relaxed as his relationship with Wentworth was, he still carried with him the shame of being one of those servants who lusted after his master. And if Wentworth found out what he brought himself off to and was embarrassed by it—well, Jack wasn't willing to take the risk.

It was easier to sleep once his body was spent. He settled back into his uncomfortable cot and dozed for a few more hours, until it was time to get up and prepare Wentworth's clothing for the new day.

“Morning, Jack,” Wentworth mumbled from under the covers as Jack moved around the room, brushing Wentworth's jacket for the day, then setting it aside to make certain the pitcher sitting on the table had enough water for Wentworth to bathe and shave. Wentworth yawned as he sat up—and Jack's heart twinged in his chest at the adorable action that made Wentworth seem younger than his years—then asked, “Did you sleep well?”

“Well enough,” Jack lied. “What about you?”

Wentworth hummed and shrugged. “Better than I thought I would.”

He threw back the bedcovers and stood, then shuffled behind the screen to use the chamber pot.

When he emerged and headed to the washbasin, he asked, “Was there some sort of animal in the room last night? A rat or some such?”

Jack froze as he smoothed the bedcovers, keeping his back discreetly to Wentworth so that he could strip out of his nightshirt and bathe in relative privacy. It didn't help that Jack was able to see just enough of him in the mirror that stood in one corner to ignite his imagination all over again.

“I don't think so,” he said, moving to fuss with the buttons of the waistcoat he'd selected for Wentworth to wear.

Wentworth hummed as he scrubbed himself quickly with a sponge. "I could have sworn I heard an animal of some sort in the room last night." He hummed again, then let out a quick breath. "It must have been a dream."

It most certainly had been a dream, Jack thought to himself, willing the heat to drain from his face as he circled around the bed, keeping his gaze averted from Wentworth, and tucked a few things into one of the traveling bags they'd brought with them.

The two of them remained silent as Jack worked and Wentworth bathed, shaved, then dressed. It was as if the silence between them served as a wall that gave the illusion of being alone and safe from uncomfortable gazes. And if it wasn't for that damned mirror, Jack might have believed they could maintain the sense of privacy between them.

Wentworth didn't seem any the wiser about what Jack had seen—or what he had done the night before. When he was dressed, he turned to Jack, as if opening the door, and said, "I think we should set out at once for Derbyshire."

Jack turned to him as if they hadn't just spent the last ten minutes pretending the other wasn't in the room. "You wish to leave the company of your friends so soon?"

Wentworth looked startled at the question. "They aren't truly my friends," he said. "They are acquaintances, I'll give you that, and perhaps if the circumstances were different, I would wish to pass a few days with them."

"But you don't wish to?" It was almost too good for Jack to believe.

Wentworth tugged at his jacket before fastening the buttons, then said, "I've more of a wish to discover what George has left for me at Flagg Hall. If it is something truly useful for rebuilding my favor with the *ton*, then we should make haste towards it."

"If that is what you wish," Jack said.

He paused for a moment, glancing at the things he had just shuffled around from one valise to another.

“Is something the matter?” Wentworth asked.

“No,” Jack answered hesitantly. He ventured a sideways glance to Wentworth, trying to gauge just what it was his friend truly wanted. “Are you certain you wouldn’t like to stay at Swanmore Glen for a few more days to enjoy the country air and...and to renew old acquaintances?”

Surprisingly, Wentworth looked alarmed by the question. “Do you...do you think I should renew those acquaintances?”

Jack had the niggling feeling that Wentworth was asking him whether he should reacquaint himself with his old friends in a particular way.

It was maddening. Things had never been difficult between the two of them. Why should this awkwardness exist between them now?

Because he had never had competition for Wentworth’s attention before, Jack answered himself. Because the two of them had been able to skate along for years without laying their cards on the table, one way or another. He didn’t know if Wentworth wanted him, but at least he hadn’t known definitively that Wentworth didn’t want him.

He cleared his throat and faced Wentworth squarely, hands clasped behind his back in a gesture that was half valet and half friend. “Whatever you desire, Wentworth,” he said.

Wentworth was stock still for a moment, staring at Jack with something deep and smoldering in his eyes. Then he drew in a slow, deep breath and squared his shoulders, assuming his ducal posture.

“We should make haste for Derbyshire at once,” he said with a nod. “There’s no point in waiting for the future. One must grab at it while the iron is hot.”

Jack grinned slyly at the mixed metaphor and moved toward the wardrobe to begin packing everything that he’d unpacked the day before.

“You realize,” he said in a teasing voice, “that if you grab a hot iron, you will be burned.”

Wentworth blinked in surprise, then burst into laughter. "Then I suppose I should be very careful about my grabbing," he said, stepping around to move Jack's cot aside and open the lid of his traveling trunk.

Jack grinned at Wentworth and shook his head, fondness bubbling away in his gut. He wondered what the rest of Wentworth's noble friends would think if they saw a duke working side by side with his valet to pack away all his things. Wentworth wasn't particularly good at packing, but the fact that he tried never failed to warm Jack's heart.

They parted ways when Wentworth left to attend breakfast with the rest of the noblemen. Jack finished up with packing, then headed belowstairs to grab a bite for himself, and to enlist Swanmore's footmen to help him carry Wentworth's things down to the front hall. It was ridiculous for Jack to feel so happy when the quick switch from one journey to another only really made more work for him, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction that Wentworth hadn't chosen to stay and fraternize with the late Lord Wilmore's other lovers.

He and Wentworth met again in the hall a little over an hour later, just as Wentworth was instructing Mr. Pickering to fetch his carriage.

"As near as I can figure, it will only take a day or two to reach Derbyshire," Wentworth said as Jack walked up to his side, as bold as you please. "We can worry about the exact location of Flagg Hall once we get there."

"Very good," Jack said with a half bow.

He organized the footmen as soon as the carriage came around, but moments before he and Wentworth were about to climb in, Mr. Haythorne came racing out to the terrace.

"No, no, Your Grace, what are you doing?" Mr. Haythorne asked, a perturbed frown creasing his forehead.

Wentworth turned to Jack for a moment, then blinked at Mr. Haythorne. "We are departing for Derbyshire so that we might fulfill the quest the late Lord Wilmore set for me."

Mr. Haythorne made a sound of impatience as he came to a stop in front of Jack and Wentworth. "Did you not understand the conditions of the bequest, Your Grace?" When Wentworth didn't immediately answer, he went on with, "You must make your way to Flagg Hall without any of the trappings of your title, Your Grace. That includes your carriage."

Wentworth's eyes went wide, and he glanced from the carriage to Jack to Mr. Haythorne. "I cannot take my carriage?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Am I supposed to walk to Derbyshire, then?"

Jack couldn't help it. He grinned and nearly laughed. The idea of Wentworth walking to Derbyshire was beyond amusing.

"You can take a public conveyance, Your Grace, provided you do not use any part of your title or estate to do so," Mr. Haythorne said.

Wentworth shook his head as he came to grips with the idea.

Jack was one step ahead of him. He glanced around at their luggage as the footmen paused the process of loading it onto the carriage. They would need to consolidate the things they had. One or two bags at most. The trunk was an outright impossibility.

"Would His Grace be permitted to send the majority of his belongings back to London in his carriage?" Jack asked.

Mr. Haythorne thought for a moment, then said, "I believe so, since that will play no part in your quest."

"Send my things back to London?" Wentworth asked, astounded.

Jack wanted so badly to maintain the illusion that they were nothing more than master and servant in front of Mr. Haythorne, but Wentworth's baffled expression made that impossible.

“You want to carry your trunk to Derbyshire on your own, then?” he asked, fighting not to wink.

Wentworth let out a breath as if he’d winked anyhow, then smiled sheepishly. “I did not think the conditions of this quest would be so stringent.”

Jack laughed and shook his head, walking around to where their things were spread out over the drive. “Very well, then. What do you consider essential to carry with us, since we will be doing the carrying on our own?”

The next twenty minutes were spent shifting items from one traveling case to another. In the end, Jack didn’t want to burden Wentworth with too much weight, so he gave the man the smaller of the two cases to carry, the one with their shaving supplies, underthings, and a few other sundries. Jack himself carried the larger case, which contained a few shirts for each of them, a selection of waistcoats, and one spare jacket each. Wentworth insisted on keeping his magnificent greatcoat, which he’d only just bought a few weeks before, and of which he was already exceedingly fond.

It would also prove useful since, by the time they had their baggage sorted, it was beginning to rain.

“What do we do now?” Wentworth asked. “Walk to the nearest village and find a public coach?”

“Yes,” Mr. Haythorne said with a shrug. He had watched the repacking with a curious eye, but had not interfered. “And I must warn you,” he added, “agents have been set to follow you to make certain you fulfill the terms the late Lord Wilmore laid out. Should you violate those terms, word will be sent to Flagg Hall that you have failed, and your prize will be rescinded.”

“That isn’t very sporting,” Jack said, glancing to Wentworth to see what he thought.

Wentworth shrugged and sighed lightly. “That was George.”

Jack couldn’t argue with that. He hadn’t known the late Lord Wilmore at all, but he had a feeling he would have liked

the man. He seemed like something of a character—not just in terms of the conditions of his will, but in the fact that he'd had such a large number of lovers who were so much younger than him. If he had a chance on the journey, Jack was inclined to ask Wentworth what he'd seen in the old bugger.

They walked down the lane and away from Swanmore Glen in companionable conversation. The rain didn't seem to bother Wentworth much, which could have been the excitement of beginning an unusual journey.

All the same, Jack was beyond grateful when they reached the nearest village after only an hour, and when they saw that it had a coaching inn. Better still, they were just in the nick of time to catch a public coach heading north.

“Only seats left are on top,” the swarthy man selling tickets at the inn told them as the rain picked up outside.

“On top?” Wentworth asked, glancing to Jack. “What does that mean?”

Jack laughed. “It means what he said. The seats are on top of the carriage, not inside.”

“People actually ride like that?” Wentworth looked scandalized.

“They do,” Jack said. The journey was already proving to be an entertaining one.

“We'll take two seats, then,” Wentworth said with a sigh, reaching into the pocket of his greatcoat to bring out his wallet.

“Begging your pardon,” A thick, balding man said, stepping suddenly forward. “You cannot use that, Your Grace.”

“Your Grace?” The eyes of the man selling ticket's eye widened.

“Cannot use what?” Wentworth asked.

“You cannot use your own funds or anything gained through your title, Your Grace,” the bald man said.



“But if I cannot use my own money, how will I pay for the seats on top?” Wentworth asked.

“Coach is here!” someone called from the yard outside. “Five minutes to departure.”

“Five minutes.” Wentworth gaped out the door, then looked to Jack. “Do they really stop for so little time?”

“They do,” Jack said, thinking fast. He reached into his own pocket and pulled out a small purse with the few coins he had on him. “Can we use my money?” he asked the bald man.

“You can,” the bald man said.

“Very well,” Jack took out the fare for the tickets and plunked it on the counter. “Two seats on the coach, up top.”

“Here you go, sir,” the ticket seller said. He eyed Wentworth warily and slid two small slips of paper across the counter.

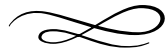
“We’d better hurry,” Jack said, tightening his grip on his bag and pushing away from the counter. “When they say five minutes, sometimes they mean three.”

“Good Lord,” Wentworth said, following Jack out into the rainy yard.

There were already a few people atop the carriage, but they shoved over to make way for Jack and Wentworth. It wasn’t as much of a chore to get Wentworth to climb up onto the carriage as it could have been. Jack half wished Wentworth wasn’t wearing his greatcoat so that he could get an eyeful of Wentworth’s bum as he shoved to help him up. Who knew? Perhaps there would be time for that later.

Four and a half minutes later, with Jack and Wentworth clutching the wet seat, the drenched carriage lurched into motion, whisking the two of them off on what Jack was certain would be the quest of a lifetime.

## Five



Jack watched the countryside of Hampshire roll by in a grey veil of rain and wind. What had started out as a light drizzle quickly turned into a sodden deluge that had Jack, Wentworth, and their fellow passengers traveling atop the coach gripping the edges of the seat and whatever else they could to keep from being flung to the muddy roadside every time the carriage made a turn.

Despite his low birth, Jack was a city boy. He could count on his hands the number of nights he'd spent in the countryside and had fingers left over. Wentworth had a country estate, probably more than one, as dukes most commonly did, but in the years since their acquaintance had begun, Wentworth had been so occupied attempting to win his way back into the good graces of the nobs of London—men who didn't deserve a single moment of Wentworth's consideration, in Jack's opinion—that he'd stayed in London year-round, hoping for invitations to other noblemen's estates for the summers, and receiving none.

Jack scowled and hugged his sodden coat closer, though it was long past providing any sort of warmth. Wentworth deserved so much more than he'd been given. If this quest they were on proved to be yet another disappointment, Jack would march back down to Hampshire, dig up the late Lord Wilmore's corpse, and punch the old bastard in his dead face for causing Wentworth more pain.

"When does it end?" Wentworth called by Jack's side, his voice nearly drowned out by the battering rain, even though he

sat mere inches from Jack.

“When we die,” Jack replied quietly, scowling.

“What?” Wentworth, twisted to squint at him.

His hat had become a misshapen mess, and his hair was plastered to the sides of his face in damp tendrils. But there was a pinkness to Wentworth’s cheeks and lips that warmed Jack despite the cold rain, so he smiled.

“Not much longer,” he said, speaking loud enough to be heard. “I heard someone say at that last inn that the coach would be stopping for the night in Abingdon. We cannot be far from there now.”

Wentworth nodded tightly, shivering a little against the weather, though Jack could see he was trying to hide it.

It was a disgrace that Wentworth should be so cold, that he should be forced to ride atop a coach instead of inside it. Jack pretended to stretch, then reached behind Wentworth, feigning a need to find a different handhold on the coach seat so that he could shift his body closer to his friend’s and draw Wentworth into his warmth as much as possible.

Whether Wentworth was consciously aware of what Jack was doing or not, he leaned subtly closer to him, hunching just enough to all but burrow against Jack. If Jack wasn’t mistaken, Wentworth used a pretend interest in the landscape on Jack’s side of the coach to crane his neck in such a way that he could almost rest his cheek against Jack’s shoulder.

Powerful feelings of protectiveness welled within Jack, and he feigned a similar interest in the surrounding countryside to bring his face closer to Wentworth’s. Wentworth relied on him for shelter from the storm—and not just the wind and rain, and occasional thunder, that surrounded them now. His friend needed him as a shield from the disappointments life had tossed into his path, perhaps even more now than three years ago.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack caught a fleeting frown from one of their fellow passengers. The man was in his middle years and looked rough from hard living. He also

seemed to know precisely the nature of the devotion Jack and Wentworth had for each other. Jack glared right back at the man, though, daring him to say or do something. In that moment, Jack would have relished an excuse to vent his frustrations with the course of events using his fists.

Fisticuffs proved unnecessary. After another hour of jostling about in the rain—and a few incidents where Wentworth nearly slid off the coach seat entirely, but ended up squashed tighter against Jack instead—they pulled into the small, drab town of Abingdon, just as night began to fall.

“Abingdon!” the coachman shouted, pulling his team of exhausted horses to a stop. “We stop here. Service will resume in the morning at seven o’clock.”

That seemed to be the end of that. The coach expelled its passengers as though springs had been loaded into every seat. The mass exodus from the soaked conveyance was so abrupt that the whole thing bounced and swayed, and Jack was forced to grab hold of Wentworth to keep him from falling to the street.

He waited until the other passengers had disembarked to climb down himself, then to take the small bag from Wentworth with one hand so that he could help Wentworth down with the other.

“I can climb down from a carriage myself, you know,” Wentworth protested, peevish with exhaustion.

“Can you?” Jack asked, taking his hand away.

“No, don’t!” Wentworth’s eyes went wide as he stumbled halfway through scrambling down. His feet slipped off of the board in place that was meant to help him, and he spilled forward.

Jack reacted reflexively, dropping the case and reaching out to catch Wentworth. He managed to do it just in time to keep Wentworth from splashing to the muddy ground. The momentum of Wentworth’s weight pushed him back a bit, and the result was that Wentworth spilled into him, clasping him in

an embrace that brought the two of them far closer together than they should have been.

Wentworth glanced up, meeting Jack's eyes from mere inches away. His pink lips were parted in what Jack fought not to see as an invitation for a kiss. Wentworth's dark eyes were wide and startled, but perhaps not from the near fall.

"What was this about not needing help climbing down from the carriage?" Jack asked, his mouth twitching into a sly grin...mostly to stop him from kissing Wentworth in public.

Wentworth straightened and returned Jack's look with one of feigned imperiousness. "I was managing perfectly well on my own until the board slipped beneath my foot."

"Oh, the board slipped, did it?" Jack set Wentworth on his feet and let go of him...with regret.

"Apparently, they do not construct public coaches with adequate foot boards," Wentworth said, brushing rainwater from the arms of his greatcoat, still pretending he could have managed the whole thing without trouble, if not for outside inconveniences.

Jack smirked and bent to pick up both of their bags. "I suppose you'll be blaming the soles of your boots next," he said, darting a sideways look to Wentworth as he picked one of the surrounding inns at random and headed toward it.

"Yes, precisely," Wentworth said. "Under ordinary circumstances, I am quite graceful."

"Is that so?" Jack was so close to laughing that he was certain everyone in the entire town of Abingdon could see it. "Is this because of your former career on the stage, perhaps?"

Wentworth sent him an arch look. "People came from miles around to see me twirl."

Jack burst with laughter, swaying to the side so that he bumped Wentworth with his arm. Never mind the rain and the day spent jostling atop a carriage. He was happier than he'd been in ages.

“I’d wager you can twirl with the best of them,” he said, sending Wentworth a decidedly lascivious look.

It might have been the wrong thing to do. Wentworth blinked in surprise and flushed at the flirting. It wasn’t as though they hadn’t flirted before, but there was something about the informality of the situation they were in, being away from home and all, that added spark to the moment.

Wentworth cleared his throat as they stepped into the inn, Wentworth taking the lead, and said, “You keep my twirling out of this.”

Jack’s smile ostensibly remained in place, but it became strained. Was Wentworth continuing to joke with that comment or did he mean it seriously? Was he scolding Jack for getting above himself and daring to dream that there could be more between the two of them?

He was given no time to think about it. Wentworth marched into the common room of the inn, spotted a man who appeared to work there, and immediately said, “A table for myself and my man, and two pints of your finest ale. We’ll be needing supper as well, and someone to brush out my coat and see to our things. And a room for the night.”

Jack winced before Wentworth was finished issuing his string of demands.

The innkeeper stared at Wentworth with assessment and irritation in his eyes. “And who are you when you’re at home?”

Wentworth opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a thing, one of the other passengers from the coach inched forward and cleared his throat rather loudly.

Wentworth snapped his mouth shut, just as Jack moved closer to his side, glaring at their fellow passenger. It was clear to him that the man had been sent by Mr. Haythorne to make certain Wentworth obeyed the rules of the damnable quest they were on. Jack watched to see if Wentworth understood that as well, and if he would stick to the rules they’d been given.

Wentworth hesitated for a moment, peeking at Jack, then told the innkeeper, “We are just two gentlemen on our way north who have had a cold and trying day, and who would like a bit of warmth and comfort to take us through the night.”

Jack’s mouth twitched, but whether in a grin or a wince, even he wasn’t certain. “Whatever fare you’re serving tonight will be good enough for us,” he told the innkeeper. He then nudged Wentworth with his elbow and directed him toward one of the old, worn tables close to the room’s large fireplace. He would have dragged Wentworth across the room entirely if he wasn’t carrying a bag in both hands.

“That was a bit rude, don’t you think?” Wentworth asked in a whisper as they reached the table. He removed his coat and shook it, sending a spray of raindrops everywhere and annoying the men seated at the next table.

Jack set down their bags and shook his head. “Yes,” he said. “I thought you were terribly rude.”

Wentworth froze in the middle of shaking his coat, then let out a breath and frowned. “Not me, you ninny, them.”

Jack grinned. He stepped around the table to take Wentworth’s precious coat and draped it over the back of the chair that faced the fireplace. “You’re not a duke at the moment, remember?” he whispered, leaning close enough to Wentworth’s ear so that he could breathe in the salty scent of his skin.

He almost forgot what they were talking about, until Wentworth said, “Just because I am sans title at the moment does not mean I cannot continue to conduct myself like a gentleman.”

“And does conducting yourself as a gentleman mean barging into someone else’s inn and throwing orders around as if they should be obeyed at once?”

“You obey my orders at once,” Wentworth fired back, fire in his eyes to match the crackle in the fireplace beside them.

A pulse of desire shot through Jack that should have been hot enough to dry him completely, and tighten his breeches to

boot. "Perhaps I should put an end to that for the duration of our quest."

"You wouldn't dare," Wentworth said in a hush, trying and failing to hide a smile.

"There are a great many things I might dare that you wouldn't like," Jack said, tugging out one of the chairs so that Wentworth could sit. "Or perhaps you would," he said, winked, then walked around to the other side of the table.

What the bloody hell was wrong with him? It was disastrous to poke at the ambiguous nature of their relationship. He was mad to risk three years of domestic happiness simply because he and Wentworth had been separated from the normality of their usual life.

But perhaps that was the point. For all they had been removed from their usual life and positions in relation to themselves and the world, they were still men, and they were still friends.

Wentworth sniffed and took his seat. "I'm not certain I would be willing to dare anything until I have dried off and have good food and drink in me."

A twist of compassion gripped Jack as he removed his own coat and sat in the chair opposite Wentworth. "All will be well, you'll see," he said reassuringly.

He was desperately tempted to reach across the table to take Wentworth's hand. For all his joking and brave face, it was clear that Wentworth was at a loss. Jack might have no experience with the countryside, but Wentworth had never been anything but a nobleman before. There were bound to be a few bumps as he strove to fulfill the conditions of the late Lord Wilmore's wishes.

Fortunately, a maid was sent to them with food and drink before things could turn awkward. Jack hadn't realized how hungry he was until he dug into the meat pie he'd been brought. He nearly groaned with the pleasure of the food, even though he might have found it only passingly good if he hadn't been famished.



Wentworth seemed to find the fare agreeable as well.

“Bring me another of these,” he told the maid—perhaps a bit too demandingly—when she passed by their table again. “And one for my friend as well. You finished that in no more than five bites, I swear, Jack.”

Jack swallowed the gulp of ale he’d taken, but the maid nodded and marched off before he could tell her they might not have enough money for second helpings.

“Have a care with my purse, Wentworth,” Jack said. He frowned when he realized he’d spoken his master’s given name aloud in public.

“Why?” Wentworth asked, worry creasing his brow, as if he thought Jack’s frown was for him. “You do have money, don’t you?”

Jack reached into his pocket to take out his slim purse and put it on the table. “That’s all the money I have with me.”

Wentworth took up the purse and opened it, upending its contents into his palm. His expression pinched. “That’s it? Surely, I pay you more than this.”

“You pay me what you pay me,” Jack said, suddenly annoyed at the conversation. He hated the idea that Wentworth paid him at all. “I never truly concern myself with cash, seeing as you provide me with everything I could possibly need outside of my wages.”

Wentworth’s face went soft for a moment before turning alarmed again. “This is not enough to get us all the way to Derbyshire,” he said, stating the obvious.

“It will have to be,” Jack said. “It’s all we have.”

Wentworth counted the coins in his palm. “How much was the coach fare again, and how far will it take us?”

Jack looked at the coins, then up to Wentworth’s eyes. “We may have a problem,” he said. Not least of which was that the coach fare he’d paid was only for the one day. They would have to purchase new tickets in the morning to continue on,

and if they did that, they wouldn't have enough for a room at the inn.

And that was without considering that their journey could take up to a week.

"I believe frugality is in order for the rest of the journey," Jack said, smiling wistfully at the maid as she returned with more food and drink. Food and drink that would cost more than they could afford.

"Well," Wentworth sighed, taking up his fork, "at least we won't have to make decisions on an empty stomach. You know I tend to make rash decisions on an empty stomach."

"Such as haring off on a mad quest to Derbyshire without forethought or planning, perhaps?" Jack asked, cutting into his fresh pie with the corner of his fork.

Wentworth sent him a sheepish grin. "Perhaps," he said.

They finished their meal in companionable silence, if a conversation of looks across the table could be considered silence. Jack was struck by how much traveling actually suited Wentworth. He had a glow about him that was not usually there when they were at home. Or perhaps the difference was that Wentworth had something to concern himself with aside from the lack of invitations to balls and insipid musical evenings that the upper class so enjoyed.

When they finished their meal and gathered up their things, Jack took the lead in approaching the innkeeper for the second time.

"What is your cheapest room for the night?" he asked, giving the gruff man more respect than he thought he deserved.

"You can sleep in the attic room for a penny each," the innkeeper answered.

"The attic?" Wentworth balked despite Jack warning him to be nice earlier.

The innkeeper narrowed his eyes. "Not good enough for you, m'lord?" he asked sarcastically.

Wentworth opened his mouth, but Jack stopped him by saying, "It's more than good enough, thank you. If you would be so kind as to show us where to go?"

"This way," the innkeeper huffed.

They followed the man up a flight of narrow stairs, and then up another that creaked as if the boards would crumble apart. The room they were let into at the top of those stairs was about what Jack would have expected for a penny, but clearly not what Wentworth had anticipated at all.

"Hang on," Wentworth said, blinking as he peered around the cramped and vaguely smoky room. "There are other occupants in this room."

"Yeah," the innkeeper said. "It's the attic room."

Of course, Jack knew that inns such as that one had public rooms, where they crammed as many guests as they could into a few beds for the night. A trio of men were already snoring in the largest bed, which took up most of the room. Two others seemed to be settling in on a second bed under the eaves, though Jack could tell the two of them didn't know each other from the way they slept feet to head instead of side by side. A third cot was taken up by a single man, but he was so fat there wouldn't have been room for anyone else.

That left a single, rather grimy-looking mattress on the floor in the far corner of the room for Jack and Wentworth.

"But where will we sleep?" Wentworth asked, just as Jack had figured that much out.

"Mattress," the innkeeper said, pointing to the corner.

He nodded once, then turned to leave Jack and Wentworth to their accommodations.

"This is intolerable," Wentworth huffed, glancing around the room. "We cannot expect to share a room with six other men."

"We can and we will," Jack said, nudging Wentworth toward the mattress. He was a little too aware of the two men

sharing the bed frowning at them. The fat man rolled over and gave Wentworth an evil look as well.

“But there is no privacy,” Wentworth hissed. “How can we be expected to take care of our persons for the night, let alone sleep, in a room full of strangers?”

“This is how poor folk do things,” Jack told him in return, setting down their bags on the far side of the mattress. He wasn’t certain he trusted their companions for the evening not to nick things out of the bags while they were sleeping.

“Certainly, we have not sunk this far this fast,” Wentworth said, a little too loudly.

Jack twisted to face him sternly. “Indeed, we have,” he whispered, not enjoying the scent of Wentworth’s skin nearly as much this time. “And if you keep talking like that, you’ll annoy our companions, and they might just slit your throat in the night and steal your precious greatcoat.”

“Never!” Wentworth gasped, clutching his still-wet coat tightly. Fortunately, he was exaggerating and likely teasing Jack.

Jack’s shoulders dropped, and he chuckled despite himself before taking the coat in question. “You’ll survive it for one night,” he said. Although, with the limited funds they had, they could very well be facing more than one night in such accommodations. “Besides,” he added as he set both his and Wentworth’s coats aside and sank to sit on the mattress so that he could remove his boots, “you have me to protect you from the rabble.”

He winked at Wentworth, which proved to be a necessary gesture, as the men watching them were poised to take offense. Jack sent them all looks to say he was just teasing and he had no hard feelings toward them.

It was enough to turn the other men’s attention away from him and Wentworth, but Jack was under no illusion about how long that might last. They would have to be exceedingly careful.

Wentworth sighed and sat on the mattress beside Jack, reaching to remove his boots as well. "I suppose I can endure anything to win the prize George left for me," he said. "And I can think of worse things than sharing a bed with you."

Both Jack and Wentworth froze. They turned to look at each other. Lightning seemed to jump between them. Jack's chest constricted to the point where he couldn't take a breath. Wentworth couldn't possibly share his feelings, could he?

The moment was broken by a tremendous snore from one of the sleeping men, followed quickly by a loud fart from one of the others.

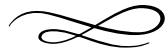
It was too much. Jack burst into laughter, then finished pulling off his boots, then the rest of his sodden clothes, as much as he dared. Wentworth followed suit, giggling the whole time and shaking his head, likely at the ridiculousness of the situation. They both used the fragrant chamber pot in the corner of the room, laid out their things so that they might dry in the night, then settled under the thin blanket provided with the mattress.

"I don't think I will ever be able to sleep in conditions such as this," Wentworth said with a mighty yawn.

"It reminds me of the orphanage," Jack murmured, accidentally brushing his hand against Wentworth's side as he found a comfortable way to lie.

Wentworth mumbled something, but it was indistinguishable. He'd already fallen asleep.

## *Six*



Wentworth was absolutely certain he couldn't possibly sleep a wink in a strange room filled with unknown men far from home in a place he'd never been to before. Which was why he was baffled when he opened his eyes mere moments after laying his head on the shabby pillow beside Jack to find hints of dawn peeking through the curtainless window above them.

That wasn't the only surprise that met him.

The mattress was small and lumpy, but that did not explain why the surface underneath him was warm and solid, and why it rose and fell rhythmically. Wentworth was wrapped nearly completely around the object under him, one arm and one leg entangled with the warmth and the scent of musk and linen, comfort and home.

Of course, he knew what had happened even before sleep completely left him. He wasn't truly surprised when he shifted his bleary gaze from the wall beside him to Jack's chest, then neck, then lips, then closed eyes as he tilted his head slowly up to assess the situation. Jack had a night's worth of beard growth, and a smudge crossed part of his forehead, but none of that stopped Wentworth from smiling.

He closed his eyes again and snuggled tightly against Jack. We wasn't truly sprawled all over his friend, but he had rolled into him at some point during the night and embraced him as though he were one of the long pillows he sometimes slept with to position his body comfortably. Jack was a thousand times more comfortable than mere pillows though.

Jack was many things, and comfortable was only one of them. It was the first time Wentworth had been granted the opportunity to be so close to the man who had taken up so much of his thoughts and emotions for the last three years, and Wentworth's heart sang at the contact.

Jack was more solid than he'd imagined, for one. Wentworth splayed his hand across Jack's chest, feeling the firmness of his pectoral muscle beneath Jack's linen shirt. When he had hired him, Jack had just been growing out of his adolescent form. He was all man now, with thick arms that Wentworth could feel against his thudding chest and under his palm as he moved his hand to discover more. He felt Jack's powerful thigh under his own... and thanked God that Jack was asleep so that he couldn't feel something else hard and powerful that was starting to protrude from him in an all too noticeable way.

Thinking of his own budding erection brought all sorts of wicked and mischievous thoughts to Wentworth. Perhaps it was the haze of sleep lowering his inhibitions, but he failed to stop his hand from sweeping down across Jack's chest, feeling his steady heartbeat for a moment, and lower across his belly to the promising bulge in his—

A cough and a grunt from one of the other occupants of the room reminded Wentworth with a shock that he and Jack were not alone, and that he definitely was not at liberty to explore his friend's body the way he wanted to. He pulled back with such a sharp jerk that he elbowed Jack in the gut and woke him as he did.

"Wha-fr-grn," Jack mumbled as he thrashed a little, dislodging Wentworth entirely.

Wentworth flushed hot with guilt and wriggled away from Jack so quickly that he would have fallen off the edge of the mattress, had he not been positioned on the side against the wall. His rebellious cock seemed more excited at the prospect of being caught in a compromising embrace with Jack than the rest of him, which prompted Wentworth to curl into a protective stance that he hoped would stop Jack from guessing where his thoughts had gone.

Jack blinked as he came fully awake, frowned, then snapped to the side, as if anxious and searching for Wentworth.

“Good morning,” Wentworth greeted him with a smile... that he was certain held far too much guilt for his own good.

Only, Jack burst into a wide smile in return. “Good morning,” he said in a thick, rough voice that did nothing to help the state of Wentworth’s breeches, then stretched.

It took a monumental effort of will not to unman himself as Jack maneuvered his beautiful body to chase sleep away. Wentworth was seized by the sudden desire to throw back the bedclothes—and divest Jack of his clothing—so that he could watch that body unfurl in all its glory.

It took a few moments for Wentworth to realize that Jack had asked him how he’d slept while he’d ogled what he couldn’t have.

“Hmm?” Wentworth sucked in a breath, then said, “Oh. Surprisingly well.”

He was suddenly aware that the men around them were rising and rolling out of bed as well, and that the fat man had already disappeared.

Jack sat up, as though he, too, had just realized the room around them was filled with activity. “Blimey, we’d better get a wiggle on if we’ve any hope of catching today’s coach,” he said, throwing back the bedcovers.

Wentworth had a momentary glimpse of Jack’s breeches before he stood and his shirt dropped to cover them. The breeches in question were *not* lying flat.

“Er, yes, about that,” Wentworth said, rising carefully and making absolutely certain his own shirt hid the evidence of his earlier thoughts until his prick could get itself under control. “Are you certain we have the funds for further coach travel today?”

Jack rubbed his hair and tried to comb it—the silken, chestnut mess would not be tamed—then moved to fetch the larger of their traveling bags from the corner of the bed.



“It depends on how far you’d like to travel today and what sort of conveyance you wish to take,” he said. “We probably have enough for another day riding on the outside of the carriage. If you don’t mind going without food for a while.”

Wentworth’s eyes went wide with horror. His stomach growled in protest to the idea of choosing transportation over victuals.

“What other options do we have?” he asked as he set to work, helping Jack remove fresh shirts from the traveling bag.

The trouble was, after spending an entire day exposed to the wind and the rain the day before, then sitting in a corner all night, everything within the valise was soaked through. Wentworth sighed in dismay.

“Clean wet shirts or day-old dry shirts?” Jack asked with a wry grin, holding up the damp options. “Life is filled with difficult choices.”

Wentworth couldn’t help but laugh at his friend’s version of humor.

“I think, given the nip in the air today, I would rather opt for dry clothing and risk a certain degree of ripeness than freeze,” he said.

“Good choice,” Jack said, refolding the shirts and returning them to the valise. “Perhaps we can convince the coachman to let us string a washing line from the back of the conveyance so that everything will dry out.”

Wentworth laughed. “Or perhaps this is an argument in favor of finding some other way to move forward besides a coach.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at Wentworth as he straightened. “Already coming up with ingenious solutions to our problems, are you?”

Wentworth gave him a feigned modest shrug. “One must make allowances wherever one can.”

Jack laughed and shoved his arm playfully.

Wentworth blushed, feeling more pleased than he ever had over his silliness.

He felt pleased about a lot of things as they gathered up their belongings and headed downstairs to the inn's common room. They'd slept later than they'd thought, and the coach they'd ridden on the day before had already departed, so at least they didn't have to worry about that option. Wentworth had other things to worry about, though.

"Is this all they're offering for breakfast?" he asked, pulling his spoon out of a watery bowl of porridge and watching the substance glob back into the bowl.

"Here," Jack said, sucking his spoon clean, then scooping it into a small bowl of honey in the middle of the table. "This will improve it considerably."

Wentworth gaped at him. "Did you just put that spoon directly from your mouth into the honey?"

"I did," Jack admitted with a twinkle in his eyes. "And right into your bowl as well."

"You didn't—"

Before he finished the sentence, Jack reached over and stirred his spoon of honey into Wentworth's porridge.

"Jack!" Wentworth exclaimed, shocked but laughing. "One does not insert one's freshly licked spoon into another man's bowl."

Jack pulled his spoon back and licked it clean—in a decidedly impish manner—then wiggled his eyebrows and said, "I bet you say that to all the lads."

Wentworth was stunned speechless, and more aroused than perhaps he'd ever been in his life. He was tempted to adjust the way he was sitting, but he suspected Jack would know exactly what the movement was all about.

More importantly than that, was Jack Cotton flirting with him? It certainly felt like it. And if it was true, did that mean that Jack...*liked* him? And if *that* were true as well, had he wasted the last three years in fear that he would change things

for the worse, when even the smallest acknowledgement on his part would have changed things for the better?

It was too much to contemplate, so Wentworth did the only thing he could think to do in the moment. He dipped his spoon back into his porridge, then ate a mouthful.

“Mmm,” he said, brightening as the taste of honey tickled his tongue. “Your mouth tastes delicious.”

He nearly choked as soon as the words were past his lips. That wasn't what he'd meant to say at all, but it was too late now. Jack laughed and continued with his own breakfast, so Wentworth chose to ignore the slip and hurry through the rest of his porridge.

Wentworth couldn't remember a more delicious, and awkward, breakfast in his life. He'd always taken his meals in his dining room alone, but there was something rather wonderful about sharing food with a trusted companion. He and Jack discussed the fact that the weather had cleared up and speculated about how far they might be able to journey that day, as well as how long the entire quest might take.

An hour after paying the innkeeper—which caused more of a pinch to Jack's face than Wentworth wanted to see—and donning their coats in the hope that the sunshine would finish drying them, they were walking along the north road out of Abingdon.

“I cannot think of any other way to say this,” Jack began when their light conversation reached a lull—Wentworth's heart skipped a beat, and it was suddenly hard to breathe as he panicked about what Jack might say—and Jack turned to wince at him, “but we might want to consider a bit of day labor to earn enough money to purchase coach fare again.”

Wentworth let out an audible breath of relief. Jack wasn't on the verge of leaving him, or of pressing the matter of the intimacy between him. Both prospects were more than Wentworth thought he could handle at the moment.

“Contrary to what you might think of the station in life that I am, apparently, forbidden from mentioning at the moment, I

am not averse to a bit of labor,” Wentworth said.

Jack’s brow flew up. “Truly?”

Wentworth reacted just as strongly. “Why are you surprised?” he demanded.

“Well, because you’re...you,” Jack said.

Wentworth laughed. “And what does that mean, pray tell? What am I?”

“You’re....” Jack looked ahead of them, down the road, his brow furrowing for a moment. He seemed to decide on something, then faced Wentworth again. “You’re refined and intelligent,” he said. “Your advantages lie in your mind, and in your kindness and sentiment.”

Wentworth blinked, his eyes going wide. “Is that what you think of me?”

“I do not mean it as a bad thing,” Jack rushed to explain, his face going red. “You are uncommonly brave and have the courage of your convictions,” he said. “You do not follow the herd of your class. Indeed, I admire you for sticking so stalwartly to the things you believe in, no matter the consequences.”

Wentworth’s mouth dropped open. He knew that Jack liked him, and he’d known from the start that Jack approved of his vote for the Reform Act, as the Representation of the People Act was now commonly called. But he hadn’t known about the other things.

“I have always admired you as well,” he blurted without thinking, feeling as though he should return the compliments in kind.

“You do?” Jack seemed suddenly and uncharacteristically bashful.

“Yes,” Wentworth admitted openly. “You are competent and organized.”

Jack laughed. “Fine traits indeed.”

Wentworth laughed along with him. “No, I mean it, they are! And you’re strong of character.” And body, he added for himself, involuntarily dropping his eyes to Jack’s form as they walked. He was a bit unnerved when Jack seemed to catch him at it. “You command the household even better than Merchant,” he said, referring to Rawley House’s butler, whom Jack had helped find and hire three years ago. “In fact,” Wentworth went on with a note of wistfulness, “Sometimes I think that you would have made a far better duke than me.”

“I would not,” Jack laughed, though he also seemed surprised by Wentworth’s assertion. “I’m not nearly grand and snobbish enough to be a duke.”

Wentworth sent him a flat, sideways stare, but he felt bubbles of delight welling up in him that he was certain could be seen in his eyes and that belied his attempt to be stern. “You are so much more decisive than I am,” he said. He sighed, then added, “You would never let the *ton* shunt you aside and treat you like refuse simply because of a vote and an indiscretion.”

His cheer dropped so suddenly he was surprised he didn’t drop his valise with it. It still hurt. Years later, even though it shouldn’t, even though he was proud of himself for voting for reform, it hurt to be cast out by his peers.

When he realized their conversation had withered, Wentworth glanced to Jack.

Jack was staring at him with a puzzled—and irritated—look. “They don’t deserve you, you know,” he said when he saw he had Wentworth’s attention.

“Who doesn’t deserve me?” Wentworth asked.

“The nobs,” Jack said, seeming to bite the word.

Wentworth smiled wryly. “You realize that I *am* a nob.”

Jack’s grin returned. “You could have fooled me.”

Wentworth laughed. “Yes, well, these are unusual circumstances,” he said as they walked on. “I promise that I will return to my usual nobbish ways as soon as we have completed the quest and collected George’s prize.”

Jack's smile vanished for the briefest of moments before he seemed to force it back into place and walk on. Even though Jack said nothing, Wentworth could have sworn he heard the man say, "That's what I am afraid of."

He put the thought out of his head. Things between him and Jack were good. They were comfortable. The last twenty-four hours aside, they knew how to be with each other in a particular way. Nothing would impede their friendship, he was certain.

Not even mucking out a stable on the outskirts of the next town they came to for the coins they would need to proceed with their journey.

"Are you certain you're up to the task?" Jack asked as he handed Wentworth one of the rakes that the man in charge of the mews had pointed out to the two of them when he agreed to let them do the job.

"Yes, Jack," Wentworth said, a note of irritation in his voice as he peeled out of his still slightly damp greatcoat and laid it over the partition between two stalls. "I can rake a horse's stall."

Jack's mouth twitched in that alluring way that made Wentworth want to taste it. "You know that horses shit in their stalls, don't you."

Wentworth sighed and narrowed his eyes playfully at Jack. "I know that horses shit."

"Alright," Jack said, as though issuing a warning. "Incidentally, it's best to start at the back and move your way to the front. But mind you don't step in anything steaming. You're not a you-know-what anymore, which means I don't have to scrape it off your boots and set them to right again."

"Blasphemy!" Wentworth gasped as he moved into the first stall, making his way to the back as Jack set to work in the stall beside him. "You'll always scrape my boots."

Jack snorted with laughter. "That's what you think. As things stand now, I'll have you on your knees polishing my boots once we're done with all this."

A shiver passed down Wentworth's spine at the idea of being on his knees for Jack. And that was another reason that Jack would have made a better duke than he ever could. He wanted to bow to Jack that way, and he had a feeling Jack would be perfectly comfortable lording it over him in the way George had.

The thought was so delicious, and so uncomfortable, that Wentworth scrambled for the first thing to take his mind off it. "Is horse shite supposed to be green?" he asked, curling his nose at the pile he'd discovered beside some less than desirable hay.

As he'd hoped, Jack burst into laughter on the other side of the partition. "It depends on what they've been fed," he said seriously, then turned teasing. "Feeling squeamish already?"

"Not at all," Wentworth said, lying a bit, and raking up the shite and hay a little too vigorously. He made a disgusted sound, laying it on thick to amuse Jack, and asked, "What do we do with all the shite when we're done?"

He could hear the smile in Jack's voice as he said, "I believe we gather it into a wheelbarrow, and they use it to fertilize gardens or some such."

"You *believe*?" Wentworth straightened and glanced across the partition at him.

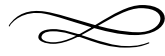
Jack stopped his work to stare back. "I'm as much a Londoner as you are," he said. "I've no idea what country folk do with shite to amuse themselves."

Wentworth laughed. "The ways of the country are strange and mysterious," he said with mock sagacity.

"Indeed," Jack said, equally grave.

Wentworth chuckled to himself as he continued working, even though the stall stank and his hands grew sore in no time. He had Jack with him, suffering the same indignities and tedium of work that he was suffering, and no one could feel truly unhappy when they had such a precious friend with them.

## *Seven*



There was a reason Jack had sought a position in service instead of trying for manual labor in the country when he reached the end of his time at the orphanage in Slough. He was perfectly capable of the sort of backbreaking labor the stable owner made him and Wentworth do to earn their daily bread, but if given a choice between spending all day sweating and forming blisters on his hands or caring for Wentworth's clothing and doing a bit of business for Wentworth on the side, there was no choice.

"Once you've taken that load over to the kitchen garden, you can come back and haul hay bales up from the yard to store in the loft," the stable's owner directed him and Wentworth in a gruff voice, without giving them so much as a moment to breathe and wipe their grimy brows.

"Yes, sir," Jack told the man with a nod, then sagged against the side of the stall to catch his breath.

Wentworth's earlier joviality had vanished under hours of hard work. "Why are you showing that bully deference by calling him 'sir'?" he asked, rubbing at the blisters that had formed on his hands with a scowl.

"Because he's the one who will be paying us," Jack told him.

Wentworth glanced up from his hands with a start and blinked. "Is the only reason you show me any respect because I pay you?" he asked with a touch of alarm.



Jack's mouth twitched into a wry grin that he attempted to hide. "Who says I show you any respect?"

As he'd hoped, that was enough to make Wentworth smile again. "Well, you don't," he said, pushing away from the stall where they leaned. "You're a terrible, impertinent valet, you know."

"Yes, but you like it when I'm impertinent," Jack said, following Wentworth out into the crisp air of the yard.

Wentworth twisted to grin at Jack over his shoulder. His grin faltered a bit, though the intensity of feeling remained in Wentworth's eyes.

Jack held his breath, deeply worried that he'd said something to interrupt the easiness between himself and Wentworth. He'd done enough damage to their usual rapport in the past two days as it was, and now he felt very much like he was wandering through the fog along the edge of a cliff.

"Where are the hay bales you need us to carry?" Wentworth asked the stablemaster—who had taken up a position in a chair along the edge of the mews, his feet up on a barrel, a mug of something in his hand.

"Out by the edge of the meadow," he said, gesturing vaguely through the archway separating the mews from the street. "Down the hill a way. You'll see when you see."

Jack scowled at the man, then exchanged a look with Wentworth. He had an uneasy feeling about all the work they had done and the work they continued to do. They needed the money to pay for coach fare, but with every hour that passed and every new labor they were asked to do, Jack's instinct to protect Wentworth from the rougher side of life and human nature increased.

The bales weren't difficult to find, just as the stablemaster had suggested, but it was a chore hauling them all the way up a hill without any sort of cart or wagon. By the time they'd made their third trip, both he and Wentworth were panting, sweaty, and covered in dirt.

“How many more of these do we need to carry?” Wentworth asked breathlessly, his face red with exertion, as they set down their latest burden in a corner of the stable.

“The stablemaster wasn’t specific,” Jack said.

“Yes, well, it seems to me that the stablemaster isn’t specific about many things,” Wentworth said, brushing bits of hay from his sleeves.

Jack frowned, worried that Wentworth was right and that it was a bad omen. He stepped closer to Wentworth and plucked a bit of hay from his hair, then dusted off his own sleeves.

“I think, perhaps, it is time we move on,” he said.

Wentworth sent him a wary look of agreement and nodded.

Wentworth crossed to the stall where he’d left his greatcoat, picking it up and brushing it with loving attention. He moved as if he would don the coat, then seemed to change his mind and gave it a few more brushes instead. He then checked the buttons, then laid the beloved garment over his arm and walked with Jack out to the center of the mews.

Jack found himself grinning at the entire operation, his heart beating heavily in his chest.

“Is there a problem of some sort?” Wentworth asked him with an arch of one eyebrow.

Jack laughed outright. “Only that you love that coat more than most people you know.”

Wentworth stiffened into mock indignation. “It is a very fine coat,” he insisted.

Jack laughed harder, then steered them over to where the stablemaster was just coming out of an outbuilding.

“We’ve done as much as we can do for one day,” he told the stablemaster. “We’d like our promised pay now, and we’ll take our leave.”

“You’d like your pay, would you?” the stablemaster said with a sniff, immediately filling Jack with a sense of foreboding.

“Yes, please,” Wentworth said with a clumsy combination of deference and aloofness.

The stablemaster sniffed again, then reached into the pocket of his waistcoat. He came out with two small coins, studied them for a moment, then handed them over to Jack. “There you go,” he said.

Jack clenched his jaw hard and glared at the two shillings in his palm. “This is hardly adequate for the amount of labor we’ve done for you today,” he said.

The stablemaster seemed to be laughing at him as he said, “Then you should have negotiated your price before doing all the work, shouldn’t you.”

Jack clenched his fist around the coins, ready to punch the man. “So this is what kind of highway robbery exists in Oxfordshire?”

The stableman laughed as if Jack were joking with him. “A fool is born every moment.”

Jack smoldered, but it was clear to him there was nothing to be done.

“I say.” Wentworth took a half step forward, looking as irate as Jack felt. “What kind of dishonesty is this?”

“It’s your bloody fault, mate,” the stablemaster said.

That only set Wentworth off more. His back went rigid, and his eyes wide. “Do you have any idea who I am?” he demanded.

Sharp prickles shot down Jack’s back, and he turned to stare pointedly at Wentworth. He wouldn’t stop his friend from revealing all, if that was what he was inclined to do, but surely Wentworth remembered the rules of their quest and the consequences for breaking those rules.

Wentworth peeked at Jack, and in a moment, he seemed to remember the parameters of their journey as well. He sucked in a small breath, then glanced over his shoulder, searching the mews for any sign of the man who had spoken to them just before they’d climbed aboard the carriage near Swanmore

Glen. He was nowhere in sight, the mews were empty but for the three of them, but there was no telling who might be watching.

“No,” the stablemaster laughed. “And I don’t care who you are either, you great ninny.”

Wentworth visibly bristled. He balled his hands into fists at his sides. Jack was certain he would throw caution to the wind and reveal all, but instead he blurted, “I am your fellow man. Do we not all deserve respect from our earthly brethren?”

That only set the stablemaster off even more. “Get out of here,” he ordered Jack and Wentworth as he nearly doubled over laughing. “Bless me, but the lads at the pub will enjoy this.”

Jack sighed in irritation, then tugged at Wentworth’s sleeve. “Come on,” he said. “We’ve been bested this time, but we’ll be wiser tomorrow.”

Wentworth looked like he would argue for a moment, but he eventually gave up and followed Jack out of the yard.

“That man is just as much of a bully as any peer in Parliament,” Wentworth grumbled as they headed down the street outside the mews. “And to think, I diminished my reputation in the peerage by voting for the rights of such men.”

Jack’s brow went up at that statement. He would have expected the comparison to be made in the other direction, that peers were no better than country stablemasters. It just went to show how wrong and painful Wentworth’s life experience had been that his mind worked in that direction.

It didn’t solve the problem in front of them, though.

“Two shillings, plus the one and three pennies I have left, is not enough to purchase coach fare to Derbyshire,” he said as they stopped near a well in the center of the small town.

“What do we do, then?” Wentworth asked, playing with one of the buttons of his greatcoat and biting his lip a bit.

Jack fought against the rush of desire that hit him at Wentworth’s lip-nibbling, and the vulnerability in his eyes. He

shrugged to dispel the inconvenient emotion, then growled a bit and said, “We can either use it to take us as far as possible by coach, which I doubt will be very far, or we can continue walking and hopefully find an inn that will give us a room for three shillings tonight.”

“Is that likely?” Wentworth asked.

Jack raked a hand through his grubby hair, then rubbed his hand over his face. “Not very,” he said. “We might be lucky enough to find something on the outskirts of Oxford that we could afford.”

Wentworth blanched a bit. “I attended Oxford,” he said. “There’s a chance I might be recognized if we stay too close to the city itself.”

That was a whole other problem, but one that made Jack smile a bit. Wentworth was still concerned about completing their quest without revealing he was a duke. Even without their spy anywhere in sight, he’d been unwilling to reveal the truth to a country bully. There was something earnest and heartwarming in that.

“Oh!” Wentworth exclaimed, his entire countenance brightening. “I’ve had an idea.”

“Tell me,” Jack said, crossing his arms and resting his weight on one leg.

With a smile, Wentworth said, “I might not be allowed to use my ready cash or title to our advantage, but what if I sold some part of my belongings? I have a pocket watch with me that might fetch enough of a price to take us all the way to Derbyshire by tomorrow.”

Jack smiled despite his misgivings. “And why did you not think of that this morning?”

“You seemed so intent on finding labor and earning money,” Wentworth replied with a teasing look. “I couldn’t deny you the chance to play the hero.”

That statement sent every sort of warm and inconvenient feeling rocketing through Jack. He had enjoyed being

Wentworth's hero a little too much. It was a feeling he rather thought he could get used to, but knew he shouldn't.

"Alright, then," he said, swaying into motion and gesturing for Wentworth to walk with him. "Where did you leave our baggage this morning? We'll fetch the watch and see if we can't sell it."

"I left the valises with a sweet young miss near that bakery beside the mews," Wentworth said. "She was more than willing to keep them for the day."

Jack's steps faltered. He didn't like the naïveté in Wentworth's statement. "What sweet young miss was this?" he asked. "I thought you entrusted the bags to the innkeeper near the mews."

"That man wanted to charge two pennies for the bags to sit in a back room," Wentworth said, picking up his pace as they neared the bakery. "The girl said she would watch them for free."

Jack knew what had happened even before they reached the bakery and discovered there was no such girl. They searched the alley beside the bakery, and they even went back to the inn to see if the innkeeper had any knowledge of the bags. They asked a few people on the street as well, but whether they were truly ignorant or if, like the stablemaster, they were too entertained by city fools, they said nothing.

"I cannot believe you left our bags in the care of a strange girl," Jack hissed over an hour later, as the sun was setting, once he'd given up all hope of finding the bags.

"She seemed nice," Wentworth snapped in return. "What was I supposed to do, check her references to make certain she was from a good family and had a strong sense of responsibility?"

In all the years they had been together, Wentworth had never snapped at Jack quite like that. It ignited a heated sort of indignation that Jack couldn't help but feed.

"You were supposed to be discerning and not trust strangers," he fired back, resting his hands on his hips. "You

were supposed to show a little sense.”

“What, sense like you showed in setting us to backbreaking labor all day without negotiating our wages?” Wentworth fired back, stiff with irritation.

“My foolishness cost us one day of work that we likely could have done with in the first place,” he argued. “Yours cost us our clothing, personal items, and something we could have sold to speed this entire journey to its end.”

“Are you suggesting that this is my fault?” Wentworth took a step closer to him.

“I am suggesting that you’ve been a lump-headed nincompoop,” Jack growled.

“I beg your pardon!” Wentworth’s eyes went wide, and he practically quivered.

Jack was suddenly possessed with the desire to grab Wentworth by his shirt and to throw him up against the wall of the inn they stood beside so that he could ravish the man’s mouth until they were both breathless. It was an exciting feeling and one that filled him with sparks and light.

Because it wasn’t just a moment of fleeting lust. It was a culmination of the dance he and Wentworth had been stepping through for three years now. They were bickering like schoolchildren, like equals. Kindness was one thing, but when two men could argue and fuss at each other without either feeling their class or the rift that was supposed to divide them, that chasm no longer existed.

And Jack loved it.

“You are you, Wentworth,” he said, trying to maintain his anger, but fearing that he sounded far too tender, despite his scowl. “And I’d wager that you will only continue to be you going forward.”

He moved around Wentworth and stepped into the inn.

“What in blazes is that supposed to mean?” Wentworth demanded.

Jack ignored him. They had a more important matter at hand just then.

“We’ve got three shillings,” Jack told the innkeeper as he approached the man behind the bar in the common room. “Will that get us a room and supper?”

The innkeeper was familiar with their circumstances, as he had helped make inquiries about the purloined baggage. Fortunately for them, he gave Jack and Wentworth sympathetic looks, then said, “For three shillings, I can give you a small room and a simple meal.”

“Good.” Jack nodded. “Can you send up some hot water for us to bathe as well?”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.” The innkeeper nodded at him.

It was a small bit of satisfaction that the man barely glanced at Wentworth. He treated Jack as the superior one as he showed the two of them upstairs to the tiniest of rooms at the very end of the hall. For all Jack knew, the room had once been a cupboard that had a bed shoved into it so that the inn could house more guests.

Half an hour later, a maid brought up a pitcher of warm water and a tray with stew, bread, and ale.

“I do not want to hear you complain that this is somehow not enough,” Jack said in a scolding tone as he set the tray on the single bed, since the washbasin and pitcher took up all the space on the single, tiny table.

Wentworth had begun untying his stained neckcloth and unbuttoning his waistcoat the moment the maid brought the pitcher into the room, but his hands froze and he gaped at Jack. “I am not some spoiled prince who demands to be fed beef and wine all the time,” he snapped.

Jack knew baiting his friend was wrong, but the sparks between them were too irresistible. “You are as fond of your victuals as you are of that coat of yours.”

“You seem unusually fixated on my coat,” Wentworth said as he tugged through the buttons of his waistcoat, then shrugged out of it and tossed it over the room’s single chair.



“Perhaps you wish to be the one wearing it on the morrow, since you seem to feel you’d make a better duke than I do.”

Jack sucked in a breath, heating all over...for several reasons. One was the idea of wrapping himself in Wentworth’s clothing. As valet, he felt as much ownership over Wentworth’s clothing as Wentworth himself did. And perhaps there had been a time or two when he had buried his face in Wentworth’s shirts to breathe in the scent of him when his emotions were running particularly high.

Another was that he was, in fact, rather enjoying taking the lead in their quest. Wentworth had already suggested he would make a better duke, and at a time when he was not feeling sorry for himself. Parts of Jack ignited at the thought of taking the lead in other areas of their lives as well. Parts that he had to turn away to hide.

And still another, perhaps the most dangerous reason of all, was that Wentworth punctuated his sharp comment by grabbing the hem of his shirt and tugging it off over his head, exposing his sculptured chest, still a bit sweaty, his dark hair matted just a bit, to Jack’s view. In the low, flickering candlelight and the necessary proximity between them, it was all Jack could do to rein himself in and keep his hands at his sides instead of letting them fly to Wentworth’s body.

Wentworth tossed his shirt angrily onto the chair, then shoved past Jack to the wash table. “At least let me tidy up a bit before consuming our simple meal, for which I am most grateful, and which I am certain I will enjoy as much as anything Cook would make.”

Wentworth bumped into him as he passed, and in his instinctive move to steady his friend, Jack’s hands brushed over Wentworth’s side and hip. That caused a sharp intake of breath from Wentworth, but not one of anger or defensiveness.

Jack felt himself balanced on a knife’s edge. The day had been so wild, with both humor and camaraderie, and with loss and frustration, and it would take hardly anything at all for him to step all the way over the necessary boundaries between

him and Wentworth to do something he couldn't take back and that he would surely regret.

He salvaged the moment in the only way he knew how, by sidestepping to the chair and picking up Wentworth's shirt to brush and fold it. Duty was the very best antidote for desire.

"Things will appear better in the morning, I am certain," he said, his voice as calm as he could make it. "We are both exhausted this evening, and frustrated with the day's events."

"We are," Wentworth agreed with a sigh that dropped his shoulders as he poured warm water from the pitcher into the washbasin. He glanced over his shoulder as he soaked the sponge that came with the room and said, "I do apologize for being short with you, Jack. It was never my intention to be mean. And I do feel like a fool for trusting the wrong people."

Jack's heart melted at the depth of feeling in Wentworth's eyes as he spoke. It felt as though Wentworth were admitting to trusting the wrong people in all of his life instead of just that day.

"Don't trouble yourself about it," he said, managing a smile as he set the folded shirt aside and folded the waistcoat on top of it. "We've been through worse spats than this."

He wasn't entirely certain that was true, but the words were a platitude for now.

The fact of the matter was, their friendship had never been through anything before like they were experiencing now. So very much was at stake that it boggled Jack's mind. He vowed that he would do better and protect his friend more effectively on the morrow.

He just wasn't certain what that might look like or what it would lead to.

## *Eight*



Wentworth was certain he had things backwards. On the first night of their quest, he hadn't thought he would be able to sleep, but he'd slept like a baby. On the second night, after an exhausting and fraught day, all he wanted was to slip into oblivion and let his cares go until morning. But no matter what he did, sleep wouldn't take him.

It helped nothing that he couldn't even toss and turn either. Once again, he had to share a bed with Jack, and even though the bed in question was so narrow that he couldn't help but lie wedged against Jack, he was loath to make any move that would make it seem like he was attempting to snuggle with his friend.

One did not snuggle with the man one had spent a good portion of the evening bickering with.

Although the bickering had actually made Wentworth want to wriggle closer to Jack once they had settled under the bedcovers, not pull away from him. They'd both feigned falling asleep almost immediately after blowing the candle out, but it was clear from Jack's breathing and the tension in his body that he had spent too much of the night as awake as Wentworth.

Not only that, the urge to touch and explore, with his hands and his lips, was so acute that Wentworth had finally forced himself to turn so that he had his back to Jack. Jack rolled to his side as well...which only served to land them in a position where their arses touched any time they made slight movements.

The implications of the heat that flared within Wentworth at that contact was almost more than he could bear.

By the time morning peeked through the threadbare curtain that covered the single window in their cramped room, Wentworth had managed to doze a bit, but not nearly enough. He'd had plenty of time to think as well.

"I think we should do whatever we can to find further employment today," he said once both he and Jack were up, dressed, and sitting in the inn's common room, enjoying the tea and toast that the innkeeper had deigned to serve them out of a sense of charity.

Charity. For a duke.

Jack nodded as he swallowed the last of his tea and set his chipped cup down. "I think that would be best," he agreed solemnly. "But let's spend the morning walking first to see how far we can make it."

Wentworth heard more than a suggestion of travel in Jack's words. Jack wanted to get as far away from this town as they could get so that they could leave any potential teasing or derision behind. Wentworth was willing to work for his food and lodging again if he had to, but not in that town.

They set out before most of the inn's guests, and most of the town, were out and about. The road heading north was straight and solid, and the weather promised to be fine—although Wentworth was grateful for his coat, and that Jack had a sturdy coat as well—so they were able to make good time as they strode through the Oxfordshire countryside.

There was little conversation between them to start, which left Wentworth feeling vaguely unsettled. He'd never had trouble conversing with Jack before. In fact, the only person in his life whom Wentworth had ever felt completely at liberty to share his thoughts with was Jack. The silence between them as they made their way through sunny fields filled with birdsong and late-season insects was worrying.

He didn't want things to change. That had been his stance on Jack and this quest from the very start. He liked the life he

had with Jack. It was comfortable, and it meant he wasn't alone. Those months between being discovered at Lady Cowper's ball and his final shunning after the Reform Act had been some of the most horrible and lonely of his entire life. He didn't think he could endure that degree of isolation again.

At the same time, with every step he took and every exchange of banter he and Jack had, Wentworth knew there could be more between them. It was well past time he faced up to the facts that had inspired him with fear and anxiety for the last three years. He and Jack were closer than master and servant. They were more intimate than just friends. Their lives were twined together in the same way that lovers' were. All that was lacking was a declaration and consummation.

"You know I am not truly angry with you, don't you?" Jack asked after they had passed an hour in brittle silence.

Wentworth let out a breath and unclenched his fists—which he hadn't truly been aware of clenching in the first place. "I know," he said. "And you know how sorry I am for not thinking before entrusting our belongings to a stranger."

Jack sent him a warm, forgiving look. "You've a good heart, Wen," he said. "Of course you would believe that a slip of a girl would have only the best intentions."

Heat flooded Wentworth's entire body, swirling in his heart, at the use of the new pet name. "Yes, well, one would think that after the travails I've been through in the last several years, I should know not to trust anyone at all."

Jack's smile widened, and he swayed closer to Wentworth as he walked. "That is precisely my point," Jack said. "You've been betrayed by your fellow man more times than I can count, and yet you still have enough faith in humanity to trust a stranger."

"Is it that?" Wentworth asked, brightening at the direction their conversation was taking them. "Or is it just that I know so little of women that I misread even the youngest woman's character?"

Jack laughed, turning his face up to the sunlight. The sight was so beautiful that it took Wentworth's breath, even though Jack hadn't been able to shave that morning. He looked rather dashing and roguish with a day's growth of beard. It made Wentworth want to follow him like a puppy, if he was honest.

"Come now," Jack said. "You have to have some experience with women. Aren't all dukes required by law to dance with half the debutantes in attendance at any given ball so that their fortune-hunting mamas can attempt to trap you into making them the mother of a duchess?"

It was Wentworth's turn to laugh aloud. "I never could stomach those mamas," he admitted. "And I always felt terribly sorry for every one of those young ladies who looked to me with so much hope, and, I might add, avarice, in their eyes. I've always known I have a certain duty, but I never could bear the thought of disappointing a lady by marrying her."

Jack looked at Wentworth in surprise, but Wentworth continued before he could say anything.

"Then came my exposure at Lady Cowper's ball. After that, the truth was out. At least, it was out in the circles I would have chosen a bride from."

"I believe that a great many of those young ladies and their mamas would be willing to take you regardless," Jack said carefully.

Wentworth hummed, then sighed. "They would, but I resolved then and there never to marry. I went so far as to write to my younger brother, Edward, to explain the situation and to let him know that he would remain my heir and that it would serve him well to marry a woman suitable for producing the future Duke of Burville."

Jack's brow shot up. "What did he say to that?"

Wentworth gave him a dry, humorless smile. "He said that he always knew I was an unrepentant nancy, and that I should do our family and the world a favor by bugging off to the

continent, or better still, expiring with all due haste so that the title could pass to him with enough time for him to enjoy it.”

Jack stopped dead, his mouth dropping. “The bastard!”

Wentworth shrugged, fighting tooth and nail not to feel sorry for himself or to wallow in his misfortune. “I’ve no intention of giving him the satisfaction,” he said, walking on so that Jack was forced to walk with him. “He will just have to put up with my continued existence for another few decades. And I refuse to be miserable in the meantime.”

“Good for you,” Jack said, his posture straightening. He nodded, and a look of determination came into his eyes. It was almost as if he were taking that oath to live and be happy right along with Wentworth, indeed, in intimate connection with him.

“Hopefully,” Wentworth went on, “whatever George has left for me at Flagg Hall will allow me to resume my place in society so that I can show the *ton* that a duke need not take a wife to be perfectly happy and at peace with himself.”

He expected Jack’s hearty agreement with that statement as well. To his surprise, Jack’s bravado faded, and his posture slumped.

Wentworth waited for Jack to explain his change in attitude, but the explanation never came. He tried not to stare too openly at Jack, not wishing to intimidate him into giving some sort of false declaration of agreement. Jack was free to have his own mind about life and how it should be lived.

But as the minutes ticked by and the two of them fell into uneasiness again, Wentworth wondered if he’d made a horrible mistake by speaking so openly about his proclivities. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he and Jack had never spoken outright about such things. It had been implicit in everything from the moment of their first acquaintance, but never stated.

Wentworth was just beginning to wish he could take back the entire conversation when Jack said, “I’ve known since I was twelve.”

Wentworth swallowed, glancing to Jack, then out to the empty road ahead of them, then back to Jack. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat to stop them from shaking. It felt like he'd waited a lifetime for Jack's confession.

Jack glanced to him with an apologetic smile, which made Wentworth snap his gaze back to the road to hide from the intensity of the topic.

"It was always boys for me," Jack admitted. "Never girls. And there were plenty of boys around to give me those feelings in the orphanage."

"Did you—" Wentworth stopped and bit his lip. "With them?"

Jack scrunched up his face. "You'd think we all would, but no," he said. "Well, not truly. There was a bit of a touch and tickle here and there, but we were always supervised. And I know that orphanages and workhouses are rife with the worst sort of abuses, but the place I was at in Slough was highly respectable. Which was why I could never whisper a word of how I felt to another soul, either before leaving the orphanage or after. No one would have hired a filthy invert to work in an aristocratic household."

Wentworth risked another look at Jack—who was now studying the road ahead of them. His lips worked for a moment as he tried to summon the will to say what was in his heart, but it took him a bit before he said, "You could have told me."

Jack glanced to him with wide eyes. "I did tell you."

Wentworth shook his head. "No, you never did. Never outright."

Jack slowed his steps for a moment. Wentworth paused and turned back to him, meeting Jack's eyes.

A pinched sort of regret had entered Jack's expression, making him look younger than Wentworth usually perceived him to be. In fact, the look reminded Wentworth that Jack was a full five years younger than him, which was strange. He



usually felt as though Jack took care of him. Now, it occurred to him that, in some regards, he was far more experienced and could take great care of Jack.

A moment later, Jack's expression shifted back to determination. He increased his stride until he was walking by Wentworth's side again and clasped his hands behind his back. He squared his shoulders, cleared his throat, and said, "Your Grace, I regret to inform you, but I am a shameless sodomite."

Wentworth laughed out loud, joy spilling through him that seemed almost ridiculous, given the circumstances.

"Well, I suppose we cannot all be perfect," he said with an off-hand gesture and a sober tilt of his head.

Jack fell into a grin, sending Wentworth a cheeky look.

They continued in silence again, but it was a different sort of silence. Wentworth couldn't stop smiling, for some reason, particularly when Jack inched closer to him as they walked. A few times, he felt Jack's fingers brush against his, and the temptation to throw caution to the wind and clasp his hand with Jack's was almost too strong to resist.

It was perhaps a good thing that a wagon appeared somewhat ahead of them, traveling in their direction. It was a much-needed reminder that they were not alone on the road and that any passing traveler could call their friendship into question. It was also a reminder that they needed to find some kind of work before too long, or else their bellies would remain unfilled and they would have to sleep out in the open that night.

They didn't have much luck finding work, unfortunately. They were traveling through a stretch of countryside without many towns, and no one in the hamlets they came across had labor for them. They did manage to prevail upon a young farmwife to give them a bit of bread with butter and fresh water at midday, but the idea that he had been reduced to begging for his dinner made it so that the bread didn't sit right in Wentworth's stomach.

“We could always reveal the truth,” Jack said late into the afternoon, as they took a slight turn that meant they followed the sun toward the west. “We clearly aren’t being followed, which means that if you just happened to mention at one of the inns we’ve passed that you’re the Duke of Burville and you will send them ten times the amount for a meal and room for the night, no one would be the wiser.”

Wentworth sent Jack a flat look. “That would be cheating,” he said.

“Yes, but no one would know,” Jack insisted.

Wentworth smiled. “Feeling a bit peckish, are we?” he asked. “Does it take just one day of not having good food to point your moral compass in the wrong direction?”

“It is not a matter of morality,” Jack argued. “I am simply looking out for your best interests.”

“So this is a selfless matter of protecting me and nothing more?” Wentworth laughed.

“I live to serve you, Your Grace,” Jack bowed as best he could while walking.

Shivers of joy and longing swirled in Wentworth, but he pretended as though they were still joking. “Me, and not your stomach,” he said, sending Jack a look as though he didn’t believe it for a moment.

“By serving one, I serve the other,” Jack said.

“I see how it is.” Wentworth shot him a sly look.

Jack laughed, giving in to the joke.

They were prevented from making more of it or continuing the banter as a party of field workers emerged from the field to one side of the road up ahead of them. Wentworth was already flushed pink from walking and from his good feelings about Jack, and he couldn’t stop himself from smiling over the way the day had ended up, even though it had begun difficultly. Jack seemed to be in jolly spirits as well.

Which was, perhaps, part of the reason that the party of field workers greeted them in such a friendly manner as they

met up on the road.

“Greetings,” a middle-aged man who looked to be the leader of the party said, touching his hat to Wentworth and Jack. “Fine night for a stroll, isn’t it?”

“Indubitably,” Wentworth answered with a broad smile.

The lead worker blinked at his use of the impressive word, then seemed to think nothing more of it. “You gentlemen heading to The Lamb for supper?”

Wentworth and Jack exchanged a look, and Jack laughed ironically. “We might be,” he said. “If we had two pennies to rub together for supper and a room for the night.”

The field workers immediately looked concerned for them, and perhaps a bit more.

“What brings you to Oxfordshire?” the lead worker asked.

“We’re passing through,” Wentworth said, “on our way to Derbyshire.” On a whim he added, “We were hoping to find work today so that we might earn enough to take a coach for part of the way, but we’ve had no luck.”

That started something of a stir among the workers.

The lead worker seemed excited. “You wouldn’t be interested in a bit of harvesting work by any chance, would you?”

Wentworth stood straighter and glanced to Jack, feeling as though a golden opportunity had just been handed to them.

“We might,” Jack answered for them both. “As long as you don’t mind two men with little skill.”

“We have muscle, though,” Wentworth added. “And we are not averse to hard work.”

The lead worker laughed. “I’m so desperate for hands to bring the harvest in that I’ll take anyone right now. Mr. Cavendish made a deal for the harvest that means we’ll be paid an extra percentage, but only if we can bring it all in before the end of the week.”

“We can teach you what you need to do,” another of the workers—who might have been the lead man’s son, judging by appearance—said. “We need all the help we can get.”

“We’d be glad to help,” Wentworth said, smiling. “As long as we could set the price for our employment in advance.” He shot Jack a look.

Jack returned that look with one that was both cheeky and grateful. “We’ll need food and a place to rest tonight as well,” he said. “Since we’re just passing through.”

“You can sleep in my barn tonight, if you’d like,” the lead worker said. “My wife won’t mind. It’s clean and all, and I’m sure there’s enough supper to go around.” He reached out his hand to Jack, who stood closer to him. “Morris is the name.”

“Thank you, Mr. Morris,” Jack said, taking the man’s hand. “I’m Jack Cotton, and this is Wen Rawley.”

Wentworth sent a questioning look to Jack as he shook Mr. Morris’s hand.

“Why did you tell Mr. Morris my name is Wen?” he asked a good time later, once they’d made it to Mr. Morris’s humble house, after they’d enjoyed a simple meal with the family, then been shown out to the barn for the night.

Jack gave him a sly grin as they shook out the rough blanket Mrs. Morris had provided for them to drape over a stack of clean, fresh-smelling hay in the loft of the barn. “I couldn’t very well go calling you Wentworth without raising Morris’s suspicions about who you are,” he said. “And you cannot reveal that you’re a duke.”

“I suppose not,” Wentworth said, kneeling to spread the blanket neater.

“I do have a moral compass, after all,” Jack added from the other side of the blanket as he sat to pull off his boots.

Wentworth laughed so loudly and suddenly he was tempted to slap a hand over his mouth. The smile Jack gave him at the undignified sound didn’t help him to maintain his composure. He rolled to sit so that he could remove his boots

as well, then followed that by peeling out of everything but his shirt and underclothes.

Jack prepared for bed in a similar manner. Mrs. Morris had provided them with water for washing—which they both did—and soap and a razor for shaving in the morning. They were the simplest and most rudimentary of accommodations, but as Wentworth settled into the makeshift bed by Jack’s side, arranging layers of old, warm quilts over them to ward off the night’s chill, Wentworth couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so happy.

“All in all,” Jack said as they wriggled down into the hay, making a place for themselves, “I’d say this was a successful day of journeying.”

“It was,” Wentworth agreed with a smile for the patch of stary sky he could see through a hole in the roof above them.

He breathed in the rich, honest scents of the barn, then turned his face to Jack with a contented smile.

“Thank you,” he said, feeling close and cozy.

Jack turned to him. “For what?” he asked.

“For telling me,” he said.

Jack blinked once in confusion, then remembered. He smiled so bashfully that it took Wentworth’s breath away. “Should have told you sooner,” he mumbled sweetly.

Wentworth didn’t really care whether the words had been spoken or not. He’d known. He’d always known. He’d known from the light in Jack’s eyes on the day that he’d stayed when everyone else but Dolly had gone.

Without letting himself dwell on it too deeply, he surged to the side and touched his lips against Jack’s. It was feeble, as far as kisses went, and it was completely inadequate to express the feelings Wentworth had, but it was a first step. It was an act of faith, a risk that could unravel everything that had kept him sane for the past three years.

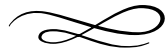
It was necessary.

“Good night, Jack,” he said breathlessly when he pulled away. Pretending that the kiss was nothing.

“Good night, Wen,” Jack said, his voice more than a little hoarse.

Wentworth tried not to think about the implication of Jack’s tone, or the tension he felt pouring off his friend. He settled on his back again and closed his eyes, sending up a quick prayer to the stars above. *Please, let this be the beginning and not the end.*

## Nine



Jack lay awake for what felt like hours, his heart pounding and his lips tingling with the ghost of Wentworth's kiss. He wanted to raise a hand to his lips to test whether they were on fire—because they certainly felt as though they could be—but he was afraid to move, lest he do something he would regret.

Wentworth had kissed him. Sweetly. Earnestly. He had kissed him goodnight, as though they were two lovers whose lives had been twined together, and as if a goodnight kiss were a matter of course when going to bed.

Nothing had ever excited Jack so much. One feather-light kiss proved more of a temptation than any lewd display or stolen glimpse of Wentworth's backside while he was dressing.

One little kiss might just be the end of him.

Jack fell asleep eventually, and in the morning, he awoke to Wentworth nestled against his side, as if stealing warmth and comfort from him. But then, Wentworth didn't have to steal anything from him. He would give it freely and with his whole heart...if he could just figure out how to do so without causing any further trouble for himself or for Wen.

He shifted to his side, careful not to wake Wentworth as he did, and drew his friend—more than friend, perhaps—into a sheltering embrace. It felt so right to hold Wentworth that way and to rest his lips on Wentworth's mussed and dirty head. He breathed in the scent of him—salt and sweat, hay and a touch

of damp—and smiled. It was nearly impossible to remember Wen was a duke when he'd gone days without a proper bath or shave, and when he had his body curled into Jack's like he was a lost boy searching for his home.

But no, Wen wasn't searching. He *was* home. No matter where they were, they were home in each other's arms.

Jack laughed softly at his sentimental musings and rolled his eyes at himself. That didn't stop him from pulling Wen closer, or from contemplating the idea of kissing his friend awake.

He had just about made up his mind to do it when shuffling from below and the creak of the barn door opening made him let go of Wen and pull back.

"Hello, there," Morris called up from below. "Fancy a bit of breakfast before we head out to the fields?"

The call woke Wen, and Jack managed to sit up and crawl to the edge of the hayloft to peer down at their kind host. "Yes, thank you," he said, then added, "Sorry we slept so late. We're not used to country hours."

Morris laughed, still good-humored, which meant he wasn't suspicious about the sleeping arrangements. "I suppose we can forgive you this once," he said with a wink. He turned to go, but added, "We've wash water in the house. Or, if you'd like, you can use the pump out back and the things my wife brought you last night."

"Thank you, sir," Jack said with a smile.

Morris left, and Jack turned back to where Wen was stretching and looking around him in confusion, as if his memory hadn't quite caught up to where they were and how they'd gotten there.

When he met Jack's eyes, though, a flush painted his smudged face that had Jack's heart beating faster. He knew without asking that Wen was remembering their kiss from the night before.

Panic warred with his desire to repeat the kiss. Jack figured there was a fair chance Wen would embrace him and kiss him



back with as much ardor as he felt, but since there was still a tiny possibility another kiss might burst the fantasy, he opted to refrain.

“I can fetch fresh water from the pump, if you’d like to bathe,” he sputtered instead, turning his eyes away from Wen to look at the ladder leading down from the hay loft.

“I’m not sure there’s much point in bathing this morning,” Wen said with another yawn. “We’re about to spend the day laboring in the fields, are we not?”

“True,” Jack said. “But would you like a shave, at least?”

Wen hummed happily and climbed out of the cocoon of quilts and hay they’d slept in. “That would be lovely.”

Jack smiled. Even in the roughest of circumstances, Wen managed to be neat and domestic. He was also charming and gracious, once he’d bathed and shaved and dressed, and they’d made their way down to the farmhouse for Mrs. Morris’s breakfast. Wen complimented the woman in the highest terms and ate everything he was given without asking for more, much to Mrs. Morris’s delight. She gave him second helpings anyhow.

“We should send Cook out here to take a few lessons from our hostess,” Jack said, leaning close to Wen’s ear as they followed Morris and his son to the field, where they met the other day laborers.

Wen laughed. “Cook was trained in Paris,” he reminded Jack.

“Or so she said,” Jack whispered with a shrug.

Wen twisted to stare at him with wide eyes. “You disbelieve her?”

Jack feigned suspicion. “I always did think there was something a bit too British about her escargot.”

Wentworth snorted into a laugh. “I *knew* you sampled those snails after I finished with them.”

“Those were good English snails, I tell you,” Jack went on defensively.

“And how could you tell?” Wen asked, his face alight with mirth and morning sunshine.

Jack hummed and sniffed. “They had the taste of those who gave their life for king and country.”

Wen laughed out loud, which earned the two of them looks from their fellow laborers. They weren't looks of disapproval or censure, though. They were smiles and the acceptance of brothers for the moment, set on accomplishing a challenging task together. Jack liked the feeling. He liked the idea that he and Wen were not alone in the world, that they were a part of the brotherhood of man.

“We're to harvest the west field today,” Morris announced to the assembly of about two dozen men, once they all made it to the waving fields of ripe grain. “With any luck, we'll be able to bring the whole thing in. Biles, Silman, you take the north portion. Ryland, Gadney, you begin to the south. Dan and I will lead the crew in the center.”

As the laborers split off to where they apparently knew they needed to go, Morris approached Jack and Wen.

“I'll pay you eight shillings each for the day's work, provided you stay to the end,” he said.

Jack's eyes went wide, and he turned to Wen, who was staring back at him in as much surprise. Jack had no sense of what were fair wages in the country or for such labor, but he calculated it was enough for them to purchase coach fare that would take them the rest of the way to Derbyshire.

“We agree,” Wen said, facing Morris with a smile. “All we need is instruction in what to do.”

Morris nodded, looking satisfied. “I'll start you with gathering and binding,” he said. “If you were staying, I'd teach you to use a scythe, but perhaps it would be best to save that for the more experienced hands.”

“Indeed,” Wen said, his eyes round, as if he were imagining himself slicing off his own foot with the wicked blades of the scythes that some of the other men carried.

“Right,” Morris said, clapping his hands together. “This way. I’ll show you how to gather the sheaves, and if you need help, any of the others will be willing to show you the way.”

Gathering in sheaves after they’d been cut and bundling them turned out not to be complicated labor, but it was backbreaking. Jack thought himself to be strong and used to hard work, but as he followed behind the mowers, and as he watched the experienced laborers at their tasks, he felt weak and clumsy.

“I thought it would be harder,” Wen commented from a few feet away, breathless after about an hour of work.

Jack finished bundling the wheat in his arms, then straightened and turned incredulously to Wen. He melted into a smile when he saw how red Wen’s face was and his shirt drenched in sweat. Thank God Wen had left his greatcoat by the edge of the field, or Jack knew he’d have a devil of a time getting the garment clean.

“It’s as easy as whistling,” Jack said with a teasing grin and a shrug. That shrug only served to emphasize how sore his shoulders were already. “I’m surprised we’ve never done this before.”

“It is rather vigorous and enjoyable exercise,” Wen said, lifting the bundle he’d just tied and setting it to the side, where the men in the wagon that traversed the field could come collect it. He then bent to gather up more stalks to bundle together.

“It’s just a matter of putting your back into it,” Jack agreed, bending over and attempting to gather stalks faster than Wen.

“Yes,” Wen said. “One simply needs to keep a wide stance and brace oneself in order to take in a particularly large bundle.”

Jack froze in the middle of pulling stalks together. He glanced to Wen, a cheeky grin pulling at his lips. Wen wasn’t speaking in euphemisms, was he?

“Yes, well, I’ve a particularly fat bundle, which might require a bit of something to ease it along before it stands up,” he said, testing the theory.

If he wasn’t mistaken, Wen grinned from ear to ear, even though he remained intent on his work. “Do let me know if you need assistance with your bundle,” he said. “I’m certain with a bit of muscle, I could have it standing straight in no time.”

Heat shot through Jack, and it took everything he had to keep moving and working. With words alone, Wen had his bundle well on the way to standing up.

“I’ve half a mind to shove it in the wagon myself,” he said, not caring that he was being crude. “A few strong pushes and I could have that wagon groaning with it.”

Wen made a sound that was something between a snort and a cough as he lifted his bundle to tie it. “Careful that you don’t spill that load all over the wagon before the job is finished.”

“I’ve never had any complaints before,” Jack said, tying off the bundle he’d gathered and setting it straight.

Wen righted his bundle at the same time and looked right at him like a minx. “I thought you’d never done this before.”

Jack’s mouth dropped open. His insides fluttered madly. He’d never told Wen he was something of a virgin. Not completely, of course, but in the ways they were teasing each other about, yes.

Wen hummed, his eyes glittering with mirth. “I thought so,” he said, bending to gather up another bundle. Bending with his arse pointed square at Jack.

For a moment, all Jack could do was stand there, gaping and stammering as he tried and failed to come up with a witty reply. Flirting was one thing, but outright crude suggestion was another entirely.

“Need a rest, Cotton?” Morris called from several yards ahead of them, where the experienced laborers were hard at work.

“No, sir, not at all,” Jack called back to him and dove back into work.

Beside him, Wen was fighting to hide his laughter.

It was the most strenuous day of Jack’s life, but as he worked on, baking under the sun, sweating a river, only half an idea of what he was doing, his heart was happier than it ever had been. He had Wen by his side, firing rude jokes between them as though they were street urchins playing about without a care in the world. At midday, the wives and daughters of the laborers brought food and drink for the men, and they all sat in the shade of a few trees at the edge of the field, Jack and Wen wedged against each other for support. Then they were back at it for the rest of the afternoon.

“Hold up!” Morris finally called, as the afternoon sun sank toward the horizon, turning the field of wheat golden. “That’s enough for now, lads. Let’s head to The Lamb to celebrate a job well done.”

The men cheered, and Jack and Wen cheered with them.

“It isn’t what I would have expected to do with myself on a September afternoon,” Wen panted as they fetched their coats, then fell into the group that made their way across the field to the road and into town, “but the sense of satisfaction I feel is enough to make me believe I’d do it again.”

“Truly?” Jack asked, walking so close to Wen’s side that their arms bumped now and then. “You, a...you know what, would spend the day bringing in the harvest again?”

Wen grinned at him. “It was enjoyable to have something productive to do.”

Jack blinked, then laughed out loud. “You do beat all, Wen,” he said, taking a massive risk and throwing his arm over Wen’s shoulders. “You were born to the wrong people.”

“Perhaps I was,” Wen said quietly, resting a hand on Jack’s back.

The moment turned charged. Jack felt the world contract to just the two of them as they walked in the cool, fragrant breeze of the countryside, the sun setting behind them, and the

companionable sound of friends laughing and bantering with each other about the day's work. No one questioned why he and Wen were so close—physically or as friends—and no one so much as looked strangely at them.

They could have this sort of life, he mused. They could live together as equals, provided they did it out of public scrutiny. Jack had always considered himself a city man, but if this was the promise that the country held, he might be willing to change things.

They reached The Lamb after half an hour or so of walking. It was a busy country pub at the edge of the prosperous village where many of the men lived. There was a barrel of rainwater out back which the laborers used to clean up just enough that they didn't fill the cozy pub with the rank smell of bodies that had been used all day, though the scent was strong enough even after a quick wash.

"Here you go, gentlemen," Morris said, approaching Jack and Wen with two handfuls of coins shortly after they'd washed and entered the pub. "Your wages, as promised."

Jack nearly laughed at the way Wen held out his cupped hands like a waif asking for a bit of bread on the streets, and at the way his eyes went round when the coins were given to him. From the look of things, one would think he was a pauper and not a duke.

"First round is on me!" Morris declared, heading to the bar and leaving Jack and Wen to revel in their wages.

The workers who had crowded into the pub cheered, and Jack and Wen cheered with them.

"Is this enough to get us all the way to Derbyshire?" Wen asked, forced to raise his voice as the laborers laughed and chattered, filling the pub with noise and merriment.

"I'm sure it is, if we're frugal," Jack said, counting up his coins, then depositing them in the pocket of his coat. "We might need to make our own accommodations under the stars for the next day or two in order to stretch our wages, but I've no doubt we'll be at Flagg Hall before the end of the week."

Wen smiled—then nodded to the man who thrust a pint in his hand—but his smile was a bit tight. “Are you certain that’s what you want?” he asked. “We could use a bit of this to get a room for the night, and we could find more labor when this money runs out.”

Jack shook his head and clapped a hand on Wen’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t think of it. We need to get you to Derbyshire as quickly as possible so you can collect your prize.”

Wen smiled, but there was a degree of thought and wistfulness in his eyes as he studied Jack.

Jack didn’t have a chance to inquire what that was all about, though. The pub was rowdy, and while two of the laborers pulled Wen aside to congratulate him on a job well done, Jack was enlisted to help pass pints around.

That job turned into more, and within minutes, Jack found himself behind the bar, assisting the pub’s owner in pulling pints and serving them. He even helped the two serious young women who were working in the pub’s kitchen to bring out meat pies and other treats to serve to the laborers.

Jack didn’t mind that work one bit. It was more in line with the sort of work he’d done before. If he could manage Wen’s household—which he had before they’d hired Merchant—then he could easily manage a pub. Besides, working with the pub’s owner and moving about the room, serving food and drinks, allowed him to keep an eye on Wen.

He was well aware that Wen was keeping an eye on him as well. Even though Wen had been drawn into more than one conversation with the laborers, and other men who had been at the pub before them or who came in after, his gaze was always on Jack as he worked.

At one point, Jack noticed Wen apparently haggling with a particularly well-dressed man as they sat at a table near the bar. Wen’s greatcoat was on the table, and Wen and the other man seemed to be discussing it somehow. Jack didn’t give it much thought, though. He had work to do.

“You’re quite the efficient barkeep,” the pub’s owner told Jack once the crowded pub had settled down a bit as every man had what they needed to keep them busy.

“Thank you, sir.” Jack nodded to the man.

The pub owner’s smile turned calculating. “I could use a good set of hands like yours.”

“I beg your pardon?” Jack asked.

“How would you like a job?” the pub owner asked in return.

“I...er...I already have a job,” he said.

The pub owner waved that away as though it were nothing. “I need someone like you to run this pub for me. I’ve a mind to open another one closer to Oxford, but I can’t just go swanning off without making certain this one is in good hands.”

“I’m not sure that I could—”

“I’ll pay you thirty pounds a year, and I’ll let you keep a percentage of the profits,” the pub owner said.

Jack gaped at him. “You barely know me, sir.”

“I know you’re clever and competent,” the pub owner said. “You’re organized and efficient. And you’re a city man. These country folk wouldn’t be able to get the better of you.”

“I...I don’t know what to say,” Jack said. “I need to continue on to Derbyshire with my friend tomorrow.”

The pub owner shrugged. “Think about it. If you fancy the idea of working for me, come back to The Lamb. Ask for Mr. Fairchild, and you’ll find me.”

“I...thank you, sir.”

The pub owner, Fairchild, thumped Jack’s arm, then winked, then turned to walk off.

A strange feeling filled Jack, like hope and promise, but like he’d done something wrong. He would never consider leaving Wen, never, but the idea that someone else had seen

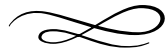


worth and value in him, that someone else could want him, even if it was merely as an employee, was an entirely new feeling to him. And it wasn't a bad feeling.

At least, it wasn't until he turned around and found Wen standing right behind him.

“What was that all about?” Wen asked, a light in his eyes that left Jack feeling deeply unsettled.

## Ten



It occurred to Wentworth right around the time Tommy Miller was regaling the small group he was standing with near the fireplace with the story of the time he and Jeremy Bode had snuck into the church in their youth to ring the bell in the middle of the night, that not a single soul in The Lamb had turned up their nose at him all night. No one had sniffed and turned away from him, or called him nasty names under their breath, then smiled obsequiously at him.

In fact, Georgie Wilson had handed him a second pint when he'd finished the first, and Nate Miller had taken it away again when he'd determined Wentworth was giggling a bit too much and was not used to the effects of ale. Wentworth had insisted it wasn't the ale that had made him high-spirited—although he stopped at two pints, not wanting to be in his cups later, when it was just him and Jack—and they had all had a laugh and continued on.

It was uncanny. It was delightful. Wentworth could just imagine the derision he would receive from the members of the *ton*, who would have seen the country men and farm laborers as so far beneath a duke's notice that it was disgusting, but for once, Wentworth didn't give a fig what the *ton* thought.

“Sure you won't stay around and give us another day's work?” Tommy asked once his story was done and the group broke up to pursue other conversations.

Wentworth peeked at Jack out of the corner of his eye, where he was hard at work behind the bar, pulling pints and

making conversation with the pub's patrons. "I would," he said, deciding Jack was happy where he was, then turning his full attention to Tommy, "but my friend and I have a destination we must reach soon."

"In Derbyshire," Tommy said, repeating what Wentworth had told him and the others earlier.

"Yes, Derbyshire." He hadn't specified that they were headed to what sounded very much like a nobleman's country estate in Derbyshire. He'd stayed true to the terms of the quest and kept mum about his true identity all day.

Though if he were honest, Wentworth felt very much as though his true identity was that of a jovial man enjoying a pint with his fellow laborers at the pub and not the lonely duke sitting by himself in his London house.

"Jack and I should be on our way in the morning," he went on, watching as Tommy finished the rest of his pint in one go. "Do you happen to know where the nearest town with a coach stop is?"

Tommy lowered his pint glass, nodded, then swallowed. He gestured for Wentworth to sit with him at the table that had just been vacated. "It's up the way a bit, in Woodstock."

Wentworth smiled and slid into the seat across from Tommy. He'd been carrying his beloved greatcoat all evening, but he rested it on the table now. Once he was seated, he turned to make certain he knew where Jack was. Jack was still behind the bar with the pub's owner, but they were only a few feet from Wentworth's table, and he could just barely make out the sound of Jack's voice, though he couldn't discern his words.

"Is that walking distance?" Wentworth asked, setting his half-full pint glass on the table. "How long do you think it would take for us to reach the place?"

Tommy shrugged, eyeing Wentworth's coat. "Couple hours, I suppose." Tommy flicked his glance up to meet Wentworth's. "Depends on where you're staying the night."

Wentworth sighed. “Wherever we can find a soft thicket of grass, I’d wager,” he said, glancing back to Jack for a moment.

“What, not in an inn along the way?” Tommy seemed scandalized. “Not here?”

Wentworth winced a bit. “How much are rooms here?”

Tommy shrugged. “I’ve never needed one myself, but my brother from Bicester stayed here last year for three shillings a night.”

Wentworth’s heart sank a little. “Three shillings is too dear,” he said, thinking aloud. “We need every penny we’ve got for coach fare or else we’ll never reach Derbyshire.”

Though with every second that passed, Wentworth felt less urgency to reach their destination and more of a desire to spend further companionable days voyaging with Jack. He’d had a devilishly good time that day, practically breaking his body with honest labor while teasing and flirting with Jack in ways that were scandalous and fun. He barely recognized himself when he looked back on the day. The Duke of Burville was not a happy man—Jack’s Wen was.

“How is it that a day laborer from London with barely a shilling to his name came into possession of such a fine coat?” Tommy asked, running his hand along the wool of Wentworth’s greatcoat’s collar.

Wentworth sucked in a breath. The answer to a great many questions lay right there, in front of him.

“I purchased it in London,” he said, his heart racing with the idea that had just struck him. “Do you like it?”

“Aye, it’s fine,” Tommy said, a spark of understanding coming to his eyes as he glanced from the greatcoat to Wentworth.

Panic seized Wentworth’s throat, making it impossible for him to speak for a moment. He loved his coat. It had been a lucky find when he’d seen it hanging on a dummy at his tailor’s shop. It had been constructed for another man, but for unknown reasons, the sale had fallen through. Wentworth had inquired about the garment, and his tailor hinted it had been

made for a member of the royal family, but abandoned. He'd paid a small fortune for the garment on the spot, and had walked out of the tailor's shop feeling as though wearing the king's coat would surely make the rest of the *ton* see he was worthy of their company.

Of course, he did not know for certain the coat had been intended for the king. He rather doubted it. And it was silliness to believe wearing the right coat could pave the way to acceptance by the *ton*. He had hoped, though.

"How much would you be willing to pay for it?" he asked Tommy, his voice shaking a bit. A voice within him screamed that he could not part with something he loved so much and that he'd had such high hopes for.

A louder voice within him said that, with the money the coat might fetch, he could keep Jack in style for the rest of their journey. Jack could lay his body on a thick, soft bed tonight and sleep long and hard in peace. When they reached Woodstock on the morrow, they could afford to ride inside the coach instead of clinging to the top. Jack wouldn't have to work or worry for another moment. He could take care of him, all for the price of a coat.

Tommy tilted his head to the side, humming as he considered the greatcoat. "I'll give you fifteen shillings for it." He glanced up at Wentworth with mischief in his eyes.

Wentworth might not have known much about country ways, but he knew he was supposed to haggle when a price like that was named.

"Nonsense," he said, brightening at the idea of doing battle for the price of a coat. "It's worth three pounds at least."

"Three pounds!" Tommy's brow flew up in shock. "Never mind highwaymen and cutpurses on the road, I'm looking at one right now."

Wentworth laughed. "Alright, two pounds then."

Tommy shook his head, grinning. "A pound and no more."

"One pound, six shillings," Wentworth said. "That is my final offer."

Tommy winced and ran his fingertips over the wool again. He picked up the edge to look at the lining—which was silk—and his brow rose all over again. “Alright, done. One pound, six shillings it is.”

He reached directly into his pocket and withdrew enough coins to make up the price, sliding them across the table to Wentworth. Wentworth could see that he had more, but the deal was already done, and he had no hard feelings for Tommy. His coat would rest on the shoulders of a good man, and Jack’s head would rest on a soft pillow that night.

He thanked Tommy for the deal, handed over the coat, then got up to move around the table so that he could apprise Jack of their new situation.

As he did, he heard the pub owner say, “I’ll pay you thirty pounds a year, and I’ll let you keep a percentage of the profits.”

Wentworth froze. It took his mind a moment to comprehend, as the conversation went on, that the pub owner wasn’t talking about accommodations for the night—which was what he’d been about to inquire about—he wanted to hire Jack.

Jack seemed surprised by the offer, but he hadn’t turned the pub owner down outright.

“Think about it,” the pub owner said. “If you fancy the idea of working for me, come back to The Lamb. Ask for Mr. Fairchild, and you’ll find me.”

Panic flooded Wentworth. Jack wouldn’t actually consider leaving him for a position running a country pub in the middle of Oxfordshire, would he? The idea was preposterous. He paid Jack well more than thirty pounds a year—at least, he thought he did; he wasn’t honestly certain, as Jack was more like a member of his household—but it wasn’t the money that concerned him. Jack wouldn’t leave him...would he?

“What was that all about?” Wentworth asked, feigning only mild curiosity when Jack turned around and saw him standing there.

Jack started, a guilty look sweeping over him. “Nothing,” he said. “I didn’t ask for the offer, Mr. Fairchild just made it.”

“Oh, I see.” Wentworth shifted anxiously for a moment, battling the fear of Jack leaving him. Everyone else seemed to leave him, so why not the one man who had become so much a part of him that to lose him would be like tearing off a limb?

Then Jack smiled, and everything was on its way to being well again.

“Are you ready to shove off?” Jack asked, stepping out from behind the bar and standing close to Wentworth’s side.

“Actually,” Wentworth said with a smile, “I thought we might take a room in the pub for the night.”

“In the pub?” Jack looked surprised, then deflated. “Are you certain you want to spend money on a pub rather than a coach?”

Wentworth didn’t say anything. He merely opened his hand and showed Jack the proliferation of coins there.

Jack’s eyes went wide. “Where did you get this?” he asked. “And how? You’ve been in the pub all night. Have you been gambling?”

“No!” Wentworth laughed, enjoying the idea of Jack scolding him for that sort of pursuit. “I sold my greatcoat to Tommy Miller.”

If possible, Jack looked even more scandalized. And a bit in awe. “But you love that coat,” he said. As Wentworth’s valet and confidante, he knew the story of how Wentworth had acquired the coat and what it represented as well.

Wentworth shrugged. “I love you more.”

A moment after the words were spoken, he realized how they could be taken. He sucked in a breath, heating from head to toe, and stared in alarm at Jack.

“That is, I care for your comfort and wellbeing,” he stumbled on, flustered. “I sold the coat so that we might stay the night in a room here, and so that we can travel inside the coach, once we find one.”

“Wen, I...” Jack seemed at a loss for words. He touched the coins in Wentworth’s still-outstretched hand, then brushed his fingertips over the skin of Wentworth’s palm. When he glanced up at Wentworth again, there was fire in his eyes.

Wentworth swallowed hard, and his cock twitched to life in his breeches. That was it. He wasn’t certain when exactly it had happened—whether it was their banter that morning or their smiles in the afternoon, whether it was the sale of the coat or that touch in the moment—but they’d crossed the divide.

They were not master and servant anymore. They were not even friends. They were something much greater.

“Would you like to get a room for the night?” Wentworth asked, his voice coming out rough and tinged with desire.

“Yes,” Jack said, staring right at him. “Yes, I would.”

Wentworth cleared his throat, feeling suddenly nervous. “We’d, er, better get on with it, then.”

An impish grin replaced the stunned look in Jack’s eyes. He turned to where the pub’s owner was talking to one of the other customers and asked, “Fairchild, do you have a room for the night? We can pay.”

“And do you, by any chance, have any salve for sore, blistered hands?” Wentworth added, blushing hot as he asked. “We have those as well.”

It was true, but that wasn’t why they would need salve. The properties of mixtures like that made them useful for a variety of things, and if Wentworth was as determined to get on with things with Jack, he would be prepared.

“As it happens, I do have a room,” Fairchild said. “And salve too, I’m certain. Jenny!” He turned to one of the two maids rushing back and forth between the kitchen and the common room. “Take Mr. Cotton and his friend up to the west room, then fetch them wash water and some of Old Myra’s salve.”

Things seemed to move too quickly, and yet not quickly enough from that point. Fairchild showed Wentworth and Jack



to a room on the first floor of the pub, at the end of the hall. It was three times the size of the room at the coaching inn where they'd stayed the other night, and the bed was actually big enough for two.

They had no bags to sort or things to unpack. Indeed, the only item they owned between them that was not on their persons at that point was Jack's coat. Jack draped it over one of the room's chairs as Fairchild stepped between them to poke the embers in the fireplace and to add a few logs to bring it back to life. Wentworth set to work lighting the handful of candles in the room, and Jack took their combined earnings for the day and counted them one last time before slipping them into his purse and setting it on the small table by the bed.

Jenny arrived with a tray containing a pitcher of steaming water, a cake of soap, a sponge and towel, a razor, and a small jar. Wentworth thanked her profusely, and Jack fetched a penny from their purse as extra thanks. Fairchild had the fire blazing by that point, and after he straightened and gave the room one final look of approval, he nodded and took his leave for the night. The door clicked shut behind him.

“We should be quite comfortable—”

Wentworth barely got the words out of his mouth before Jack rounded on him, grasping him by the lapels of his jacket, and all but throwing him up against the wall. Wentworth gasped as the breath left him, but wasn't given a chance to draw another breath before Jack's mouth slammed over his.

Wentworth moaned with longing, flailing for a moment as Jack kissed him hard enough to grind him into the wall, then clutching at Jack's jacket with both hands, doing whatever he could to move the two of them closer together. Jack might not have had the level of experience Wentworth had, but he knew how to kiss.

“I've wanted you for so long I cannot remember a time when I didn't want you,” Jack growled breathlessly, practically tearing at the buttons of Wentworth's waistcoat.

Wentworth could only sigh and whimper slightly, certain he looked like a lovesick ninny, but not caring, as he fumbled

with Jack's buttons as well.

Jack made it through all but the last button before giving up and yanking at Wentworth's waistcoat so that the final button popped off. He then surged into Wentworth, kissing him into oblivion again while tugging his shirt up from the waist of his breeches.

Wentworth's hands shook as he did the same, not bothering to remove Jack's waistcoat. He wanted his hands on skin, and it didn't much matter to him whether Jack was completely undressed or not.

He had just enough presence of mind to joke, "For a valet, you are rather careless with my clothing," between desperate kisses.

"I'll just have to get you out of your clothing, then," Jack said, the flame in his eyes hot enough to consume Wentworth entirely.

Wentworth was only vaguely aware of how it happened, but within seconds, Jack had peeled his shirt off and tossed it to the floor, then scrambled out of his own waistcoat and shirt. He plastered Wentworth against the wall again, kissing him like a fury and sliding his hands up and down the planes of Wentworth's torso.

Even that wasn't enough for him. With his mouth still invading and claiming Wentworth's, Jack undid the falls of his breeches and shoved them over Wentworth's hips. Wentworth's cock leapt free, and Jack encouraged it with a few demanding strokes that left Wentworth panting and nearly weeping with pleasure.

He had wanted this for so long. He had dreamed of the moment when he and Jack could finally be together. He'd denied himself even the acknowledgement that this was what he wanted for so long that accepting it now brought him to tears and left his head spinning.

And that was before Jack sank to his knees in front of him.

At first, Wentworth thought Jack had only knelt so that he could remove Wentworth's boots. Wentworth tried to grip the

wall to stay upright as Jack pulled first one boot, then the other off, then as he tugged furiously at Wentworth's breeches and stockings, helping him step out of them all. He leaned back against the wall when it was all done, completely exposed to Jack's hungry gaze and his wandering hands. It was like Jack was drinking in the sight that he'd only glimpsed before, and loving every moment of it.

Then Jack leaned in, his hand held around the base of Wentworth's cock, and closed his mouth around the tip. Wentworth let out a sound that he was certain even the noisy revelers downstairs could hear as a blast of sensation overwhelmed him. And that was only the tip. Jack was merciless, though. He pulled back Wentworth's foreskin and stroked his tongue over his leaking, sensitive tip, making sounds of enjoyment that had Wentworth's knees weak with lust.

"I'm not going to last," Wentworth panted, already feeling his body coiled and ready to explode.

"Then don't," Jack said, gazing up at him with devilry in his eyes.

The sight of Jack's wicked look from that particular angle, his hands caressing his balls and the base of his cock, was the stuff of dreams. It was as if Jack could see straight into Wentworth's most forbidden thoughts to know what he wanted. He closed his mouth around Wentworth's cock again—the sight of his reddened lips stretching around his member almost made Wentworth come on the spot—and bore down.

Wentworth fleetingly wondered how much experience Jack had with such things, but his thoughts couldn't stay focused on the question. Not when Jack grew over ambitious and choked on him. He pulled out and tried again, but he could only accomplish so much. Wentworth absolutely did not care one whit. Especially not when Jack made up the difference in sensation with his hand, using his spit to slick the way so that pleasure flooded Wentworth like a dam had broken.

He couldn't even give Jack fair warning when his orgasm started. It hit him with so much force that he could only jerk

into it and groan as he spilled into Jack's throat. Jack made corresponding sounds of pleasure as Wentworth's life spurted out, and he reached down to grasp the bulge in his breeches as though stopping himself from coming as well.

The fuzzy afterglow of orgasm rendered Wentworth momentarily insensible. He reveled in the pleasure that radiated through him, like warm rays of the sun. Jack stood and hurriedly removed his clothes. At the sight of his thick cock standing eagerly out from his body, Wentworth snapped fully back into the moment.

"I didn't ask for that salve because of my hands," he gasped, lurching clumsily from the wall and leaning to the side to retrieve the jar.

"I know," Jack panted.

As soon as he was done with his clothes, he hooked Wentworth around the waist and pulled him toward the bed. Wentworth nearly fumbled the jar, the movement came so suddenly, but he liked the way Jack manhandled him. He liked it very much indeed.

"You don't have to be soft with me," he gasped as Jack tore at the bedcovers so that they could settle between them. "I like to be pushed around a little."

Jack rolled him to his back and wedged between Wentworth's thighs. "I know that too," he said, grinning naughtily down at Wentworth. "You've got it written all over you, despite being a duke," he said.

Wentworth was tempted to say, "That's what George always said," but he had no desire whatsoever to think of any man other than Jack just then.

Instead, he said, "Do you know what you're doing? Do you need...instructions?"

Jack chuckled low in his throat in a way that had the hair standing up on the back of Wentworth's neck, and his cock already filling again. "I think I can work it out on my own," he said.

Despite his bravado, Jack hesitated for a moment before shifting back so that he could nudge Wentworth to roll to his stomach. As much as Wentworth craved Jack making love to him while they embraced face to face, he was aware it might have been easier for him to work things out if they proceeded in that manner.

A few seconds later, when he felt Jack's lips on his raised arse as he wedged a pillow under his hips, Wentworth realized the positioning could mean something entirely different.

"You have the most beautiful arse I've ever seen," Jack purred, kissing each cheek before sliding his fingers between them.

"Have you seen a lo—ah!"

Wentworth was rendered speechless as Jack pulled his arsecheeks apart and brought his face to Wentworth's hole. Jack must have dreamed of doing precisely what he proceeded to do for some time, because the certainty and command with which he nuzzled and licked and probed Wentworth's hole was enough to have Wentworth hard and panting and spreading his legs wider so that Jack could have more.

When Jack jerked back, gasping, "I can't. I can't wait anymore. It's too much. I want you," Wentworth was left in one of the most obscene positions he'd ever been in. He was arse up, legs spread, head down, arms wide, whimpering and begging without words for Jack to fuck him. So much for being the grand and dignified duke. But honestly, he couldn't have cared less what class he'd been born into. He loved Jack more than he'd ever loved another person, and if the two of them were not one soon, he would—

All thoughts exploded as Jack pressed the head of his cock to Wentworth's hole, then tentatively pushed in. Wentworth practically howled with need, his cock leaking onto the pillowcase beneath him.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked in a panic, pulling back.

"For God's sake, fuck me, man!" Wentworth growled at him over his shoulder.

That immediately lit the fire in Jack. Experience or not, he gave Wentworth everything he wanted as he pushed in again, then gripped Wentworth's hips so that he could work past the ring of muscle and sink himself deeply.

Wentworth made sounds he was certain no duke had ever made. He moaned and growled into the pillow under him as Jack gripped his hips harder and found a slow, hesitant rhythm, then a stronger, more forceful one. Jack gasped and groaned as well as his enjoyment of the moment mounted, and within a minute, he'd become comfortable enough with what they were doing to thrust with abandon.

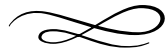
It was crude and basic, the two of them were acting on instinct alone, but the way Jack left nothing behind and just pounded into him had Wentworth teetering on the edge of orgasm all over again. He held onto it as long as he could, but when the sounds Jack was making turned feral and the pressure within him hit its peak, he couldn't hold out any longer.

He let everything go, crying out as another orgasm took him, then giving up everything and letting Jack have him completely. The moment of freedom as pleasure soared within him and Jack used him to bring about his own release was filled with the deepest happiness Wentworth had ever known.

It felt somehow sacred when Jack spilled inside him, leaving a piece of himself within Wentworth's body even after he pulled out and collapsed atop Wentworth's back. Wentworth didn't even mind the weight or the heat of Jack's body. He just wanted to be with him.

Eventually, while they were still catching their breaths, Jack moved so that they could lie side by side in an embrace. His eyelids were drooped and his damp hair was plastered to his head, but as the two of them shared one tender kiss after another, Wentworth was certain Jack was the most beautiful thing in the entire world. Jack was his, and he was Jack's.

## *Eleven*



Part of Jack felt silly for waiting so long. It wasn't as though he'd been squeamish about buggering or shy of the things he might feel, both physically and emotionally. He'd just always told himself there wasn't time for any of that, and now he regretted the wait just a bit.

Another part of him was exceedingly glad he'd waited for Wentworth, that the first body he'd been one with had been Wen's, and that the overwhelming pleasure and sense of awe that he'd felt when he used his own body to please another man's had been with someone his heart held and could never let go of.

They slept soundly all through the night in each other's arms, despite the noise that continued in the pub below, and then the prickling silence of an unfamiliar place where they might be discovered. No one entered the room or bothered them through the night, and in the morning, even the sounds of people moving about downstairs in the pub didn't feel threatening or worrying.

Nothing could break past the cocoon of happiness that had formed around Jack and Wen. Jack awoke on his side with Wen's back nestled against his chest, Wen's shoulder and neck just under his mouth and nose so that he breathed in Wen's scent and could all but taste the salt of his skin. The curve of Wen's perfect backside—which he fully intended to explore and worship more at his earliest convenience—was snug against his groin and his morning-hard prick.

It was enough to spread a lazy smile across Jack's lips, but he took care to move as little as possible, lest he wake Wen up and spoil the perfect moment. He wanted to hold Wen a little longer, to replay their fervor and desperation of the night before, and to think of all the times going forward when they would be able to repeat the passion and the communion.

It all seemed surprisingly clear and simple. Jack already slept in a room adjacent to Wen's, so none of the other servants in Wen's household would bat an eyelash if they moved to the same bed. In fact, he suspected Merchant already assumed there was something deeper between him and Wen. The upstairs maids knew exactly which way the wind blew, but that only meant they would be the first ones to know a change had occurred once he and Wen returned. Lucy and Minnie had been hired specifically for their discretion, though, and he didn't think—

"I know you're awake, Jack," Wen murmured in a teasing tone, interrupting the line of Jack's thoughts. "You've been clutching me as tight as a child with her doll for the last five minutes at least." He wriggled around in Jack's arms until they were facing, then smiled. "What has your thoughts bound as tightly as we tied up those sheaves of wheat yesterday?"

Wen brushed his blistered hand over the side of Jack's face, combing his fingers through his hair. It was the sweetest and softest gesture, and it filled Jack with the need to love and protect this enigmatic man in his arms for the rest of eternity.

"We didn't bind those sheaves particularly well, you know," he said, returning Wen's tender touches by stroking his fingertips along the firm plane of Wen's side.

Wen drew in a breath at the touch, his body responding in a dozen different ways. Jack wanted to explore each one of them in depth. Wen's lazy laughter told him that there was no rush and that there would be time aplenty for the two of them to revel in intimacy.

"You did a far better job of it than most inexperienced men would have done," Wen said, mischief flashing in his eyes.



A wave of lust spilled through Jack, and he shifted the way he held Wen, wedging his knee between Wen's thighs, and stroking his hand down Wen's back to his arse. "Are we still talking about the harvest?" he asked.

Wen made a noncommittal sound, then said, "You did well enough with that too."

The wicked grin Wen gave him was too much for Jack to resist. Morning breath be damned, he surged into Wen, kissing him deeply while squeezing a handful of his arse hard enough to leave bruises.

His guess about whether Wen would like such rough handling was proven right when Wen made the most inviting sound of approval and thrust his already hard cock against Jack's groin.

No words were needed from there. Jack rolled Wen to his back and stretched over him, grinding against him in a way that trapped and stimulated their cocks together. It was heady and pleasurable, but not nearly enough. He wanted to reach for the jar of salve and find a way to bugger Wen silly, but there was no din in the pub downstairs to cover the sounds of their pleasure, and even though they'd been lucky so far, neither of them had locked the door last night, and the danger of discovery was very real.

"Like this," Wen panted, seeming to share Jack's thoughts.

He reached between them, grasping their cocks together and stroking. Jack would have joined him, but he needed both arms to balance above Wen. And he rather liked the idea that Wen was the one doing all the work to bring them both off while he towered above him, stealing kisses until the pleasure was too much.

It was the sort of thing he'd done with the older boys in the orphanage in his final years. They were clumsy and rudimentary, but Wen's stroking got the job done. Driven as much by Wen's pinched expression and swallowed whimpers of pleasure, Jack came after a few minutes, spilling over Wen's belly. That seemed to do the trick for Wen—a quirk that Jack took note of and immediately imagined different ways he

could spill his seed over Wen to excite him—and he spent with a satisfied moan that was almost too loud for their circumstances.

They tangled together afterwards, but as much as Jack would have liked to spend another hour curled up with his beloved, sounds of either fellow guests or the pub's staff in the hall just outside their room was enough to prompt him and Wen into immediate action.

They dragged themselves out of bed, then were careful to clean off the evidence of what they'd done as they washed with the now cold water that Jenny had brought up the night before. Thankfully, nothing more than sweat and a bit of the salve had made it to the sheets, and both of those could be explained away by their labors the day before.

It was amazing to Jack that by the time he and Wen were washed, shaved, and dressed, and by the time they headed down to the pub's common room for a bit of breakfast, they'd gotten away with their nighttime activities entirely. Proof of that came when Fairchild took Jack aside as Wen was sorting out a gift of yesterday's bread and butter to take with them on the road.

“My offer stands,” Fairchild told him. “If you reach whatever destination you and your friend are headed toward and you decide that life is not for you, The Lamb will be waiting.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fairchild,” Jack said, shaking hands with the man. He didn't have the words or the courage to tell him that his future was with Wen and that he would follow his beloved to the ends of the earth rather than abandoning him to run a pub, no matter how good the offer.

He and Wen set out into the overcast morning shortly after, bringing enough cheer and sunshine with them to make the grey landscape seem alive with light and possibility.

“Who would have imagined that this journey would turn out to be as agreeable as it has been?” Wen asked as they walked briskly along the road that would take them to the next town with a coach stop.

Jack laughed. “Who would have imagined that a duke would be so content after a day of hard labor and—”

“A night of hard fucking?” Wen finished for him.

Jack’s eyes went wide at Wen’s use of such a vulgar word, and his body heated at the memory of everything Wen was referring to.

Both were enough to send Wen into peals of laughter. “I never would have pegged you for a shy man,” he said.

“Yes, well, I fully intend to peg you on a regular basis now, Your Grace,” Jack fired right back.

“Yes, please,” Wen giggled, blushing like a bride before her wedding day. “For an amateur, you were exceptionally good at it.”

Jack barked a laugh. “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Oh, a compliment, to be sure,” Wen said. “My bum is delightfully sore and happy this morning.”

“Well then,” Jack said, puffing up with pride a bit. “There’s more where that came from.”

“I certainly hope so.”

There *was* more where that came from. Jack and Wen reached the next town by mid-morning and caught a coach that traveled on through the day, stopping in a small town within sight of Coventry that night. They had enough money to get a room at a coaching inn, and as soon as their door was closed and locked, they peeled each other’s clothes off and fell into bed, exploring as many ways as the two of them could to join together until they were too exhausted for more.

“Is it considered polite for me to offer my arse for your enjoyment?” Jack asked deep into the night, as he combed his fingers through Wen’s damp hair as his sweetheart lay sprawled over his chest.

Wen had surprised him by riding Jack like he was a thoroughbred while Jack lay back, so aroused by the sight of his lover’s glistening, flexing body in the candlelight that he could have gotten off on that alone.

“Only if you want to,” Wen laughed sleepily. He struggled to hold himself above Jack, grinning down at him. “You truly don’t know the way of these things?”

Jack shrugged, wondering if perhaps he should feel self-conscious. It was impossible for him to feel anything but loved and accepted with Wen in his arms, though. “You’re the one with a trail of past lovers behind you,” he teased.

Wen made a dismissive sound that was almost prissy. “I’ve not had *that* many lovers,” he said. “A few lads at Oxford, George, and, well, I’m ashamed to say it, but that fetching lad from Hyde Park I had a flirtation with, who turned out to be a professional, and who was exceedingly skilled at his profession.”

Wen blushed so deeply that Jack burned to ask for the entire story...while feeling woefully jealous.

Wen shook his head and went on with, “The point is that some men naturally gravitate toward one role or another, while others have no preference and switch as the mood takes them.” He paused, looking a bit sheepish, and admitted, “I greatly prefer the receiving role, but if that is a problem for you, I suppose I could—”

“No, no,” Jack interrupted, brushing a hand across Wen’s face to soothe him. “I am quite content to exclusively be your buggerer. That is what my fantasies have always been regardless.”

Wen’s countenance lit up. “You’ve fantasized about me?”

Jack laughed. “Could you not hear me all those nights when I lay in that small, cold bed across the dressing room from you, rubbing my cock until it was raw and imagining you at my feet as I did so?”

Any worry Jack might have had that his imaginings had been impertinent and that Wen would take objection to them vanished as a fire like nothing Jack had ever seen entered Wen’s eyes.

“You should have told me,” he said in a rough, aroused voice. “I would have been at your feet in an instant. I will

kneel before you and accept whatever you wish to give me at any time going forward.”

There was so very much behind those words that Jack’s body immediately sprung to life again, even though he didn’t think he had anything left in him. There were things Wen knew and was sure of that Jack had only just begun to imagine. It would be scintillating to discover what they all were.

But for the moment, in that tiny coaching inn in the middle of nowhere, Jack merely flipped Wen to his back and proceeded to spend the next half hour becoming intimately familiar with his beloved’s body and its reactions to different stimuli.

They continued on with their quest in the morning, just barely catching the next coach that would take them all the way to Derby. They hadn’t been as careful with their excretions at the coaching inn as they had at The Lamb, so it was perhaps a good thing they’d been forced to leap into the coach without breakfast and to speed away into the early morning. Wen’s status as a duke wouldn’t protect them from the consequences of discovery in the countryside.

They were able to purchase hand pies around midday, when the coach stopped to change horses, but they weren’t able to enjoy a full meal before they reached Derby itself.

“Do we find another inn and something to eat right away or do we attempt to discover where precisely Flagg Hall is located and go straight there?” Wen asked as they stepped down from the coach in the late afternoon.

The answer to the question came right away. One of the grooms who had stepped forward from the yard near where the coach stopped lit up and asked, “Are you looking for Flagg Hall?”

Jack and Wen exchanged looks of surprise, then Jack turned to the young man and said, “Yes. Do you know where it is?”

“Aye, of course I know where it is.” He headed toward them instead of helping the coachman with the horses. “That’s the Earl of Brailsford’s estate, it is.”

Twin feelings of triumph and uneasiness hit Jack. They were close to their destination and Wen’s prize.

Which meant they were close to the end.

“Do you know how we can get there?” Wen asked the young man eagerly.

“Aye,” the man nodded. “You could hire a carriage to take you. It’s only an hour’s drive from here, and many a man would be willing to be hired out for the drive.”

Wen turned to Jack with an excited smile. “We’ve done it,” he said. “We’re inches away from completing our mission.”

“Congratulations,” Jack told him, though the wariness that overtook him made it difficult for his smile to grow to what it should be.

Wen turned back to the young man. “Where can we go to find someone to drive us?”

The young man gave them the name of a man, and after a short walk in search of him, they came across a Mr. Dennison, who was more than happy to convey them to Flagg Hall...for half the remaining shillings they’d earned working the fields and selling Wen’s greatcoat. At least he fed them a small bit of stew and some ale before he took their money and bundled them into the carriage.

The sun was setting and a light rain had set in as they jostled across the countryside and out to Flagg Hall. As far as Jack was concerned, Derbyshire wasn’t nearly as picturesque and welcoming as Oxfordshire. The carriage was second-rate at best, and if he was perfectly honest with himself, he found Wen’s restless enthusiasm for the end of their journey a bit annoying.

“I wonder how much farther it is,” Wen said for the sixth time, just as Jack’s nerves were about to fray.

“It cannot be much longer now,” Jack said with a sigh.

He was right. Within minutes, they'd turned off the road and rumbled up a long lane to a rather dour-looking country estate. It was grand enough, as estates went, but there was something almost musty about its stoic appearance.

The carriage driver let them out at the front door, then rattled off without waiting to see whether Jack and Wen would be received in the house. Wen seemed certain they would be as he bounded up the front stairs and knocked enthusiastically on the door.

Jack reached his side just as the huge door creaked open and an elderly, dry butler asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Wen said, then hesitated, glancing to Jack. "I suppose it's alright now," he told Jack, "since the quest is nearly finished." Jack barely had time to nod in approval before Wen turned back to the butler and said, "I am the Duke of Burville, and I've been sent here per the wishes of the late Lord Wilmore."

That was all it took. The butler's face immediately lit with recognition...and understanding. "Your Grace," he said with a deep, respectful bow, stepping back and opening the door wide. "We have been expecting you. Please, do come in."

"Thank you," Wen said, taking a step forward.

The transformation was so sudden and so thorough that Jack wondered if there were some sort of invisible force that Wentworth walked through that changed him. The moment he stepped into the vast, pristine hall, his posture stiffened and the old lines of tension that never quite left Wentworth's face in London returned. He moved with grace, but not with ease as he looked around the hall. To Jack's eyes, he almost cowered before the grand and imposing portraits that decorated the walls.

That wasn't the only change. Jack stepped into the house to follow Wentworth, but was arrested nearly immediately by the butler's snapped question, "And who are you?" The man glanced up and down his person with an unconcealed sneer.

“Oh, not to worry,” Wentworth said, striding back to Jack’s side. “This is Mr. Jack Cotton, my—” Wen froze on the word, staring at Jack as though he could suddenly sense a great chasm between them again, and he didn’t know how to cross it. “My most trusted valet,” he said at last, clumsily.

“I see,” the butler said, still sneering at Jack, then looking over Wentworth, as though Wentworth’s mussed appearance was Jack’s fault entirely. He then cleared his throat and said, “If you would be so good as to wait here, Your Grace. I will inform his lordship of your arrival.”

The butler bowed respectfully to Wentworth, gave Jack one final dismissive look, then walked off at a stately pace.

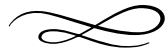
“We’ve made it,” Wentworth said with a sigh. He smiled, but Jack knew enough to see how forced that smile was. “George’s quest has been fulfilled. All we need to do now is wait to discover the precise nature of the prize.”

“Indeed,” Jack said, nodding and clasping his hands behind his back in a manner that would have been expected for a servant. “I’m curious to know what this prize is now.”

And he dreaded its consequences.



## Twelve



It all happened so fast that Wentworth was barely able to catch his breath.

“I’ll be glad for a long, hot bath,” he told Jack as the two of them waited in the opulent front hall of Flagg Hall. “Hopefully, they’ll be able to provide us with a tub big enough for two,” he added in a whisper, sending Jack a lascivious wink.

Jack only managed a tight half-smile in return.

Wentworth’s heart beat heavily in his chest and his stomach twisted. Jack, his rock, his comfort, and his love, was anxious. He didn’t need to be the man’s lover to see that. And he didn’t need brains to guess why.

“I’m eager to see what this prize is that George has left for me,” Wentworth said, his voice too high and thready. It was a silly comment anyhow. He was only trying to make conversation to fill the suddenly fraught space between him and Jack.

Panic began to set in where only anticipation had been moments before. Wentworth wanted desperately to inch closer to Jack, to brush his fingertips against the back of Jack’s hand and to stand with their arms pressed together. He wanted to take Jack’s hand and reassure him that all was well, that nothing had changed.

The trouble was, nothing had changed. The room around them, the way the earl’s butler had looked at him and at Jack, the very particles in the air that seemed to scold him for

arriving in a state of dishabille.... It was all exactly as his life had been since the moment he was born as the heir to a duke's title.

And Jack was an anomaly in that world.

"It all seems so strange and unnecessary," Wentworth commented nervously, glancing around at the portraits glaring down at him, the gilded tables around the hall with great, gaudy bursts of hothouse flowers spilling from them, the shining, echoing marble. "It isn't half as inviting as The Lamb," he stumbled on. "I daresay I felt more at home in that pub than I ever could here."

"Indeed," Jack said.

"Your Grace" hung in the air after the word, unspoken and unwanted.

Wentworth couldn't let things continue like that.

"Nothing has changed," he insisted, turning to face Jack with a serious look. He felt the contradiction in those words again, more acutely. He started to reach for Jack, but pulled back. "You are still my light and my heart, Jack," he whispered, darting a fearful glance around to be certain they weren't overheard. "I still want you."

"And I still want you," Jack said in stiff, stilted tones as footsteps were heard on the marble, heading in their direction.

It was wrong. Everything around them was terribly wrong. This wasn't how he and Jack were supposed to be. They were supposed to be teasing each other in a field as blisters formed on their hands and the sun beat down on them. They were supposed to be sweaty and tangled with each other, their bodies straining to give each other pleasure as they both made sounds that would make the angels blush.

"Your Grace, if you would come with me," the earl's butler said with a brief nod, hands clasped behind his back.

"Thank you," Wentworth said, gesturing to Jack, then starting across the hall.

“Mr. Cotton can see himself downstairs, Your Grace,” the butler said with a sniff.

There it was. The moment Wentworth had been dreading. He paused and turned back to Jack, sending him a pleading look. He absolutely did not want to be left alone in this strange, forbidding house to speak to another member of the aristocracy—who would probably curl his lip and glare down his nose at him, like all the others did. He did not want to be parted from the one man his whole life revolved around.

Because he knew if they were parted now, they might not be able to bridge the divide again.

“This way, Your Grace,” the butler prompted him.

Wentworth feared his eyes were filled with unmanly emotion as he looked back at Jack, who hadn’t taken a single step to follow him. He felt too much like he had when he’d been a young boy, pried away from his nanny to be carted off to the impersonal halls of Eton at the tender age of eight.

Then Jack said, “I will see about your bath, Your Grace,” with kindness and affection in his eyes, and everything was well again.

Well, not entirely, but good enough.

Wentworth let out a breath and nodded, but was too overwhelmed by his feelings for Jack and his wariness about what was to come to form his gratitude into words. He held Jack’s gaze for a moment longer, then turned to follow the butler.

He had less than a minute to compose himself into the presentation a duke was supposed to have as he was led down an overly fussy hall to a stuffy parlor. As he took in the sight of walls crowded with paintings, ugly furniture that was packed too tightly into rooms that looked seldom used, and as they passed a maid in a constricting uniform who bowed her head and curtsied as though at church, Wentworth found himself wondering what it was all for.

Why were these sorts of displays of wealth and position needed? They certainly weren’t wanted. Not by him, at least.

He would have done quite well in a cottage, like the Morrises had, in a quiet section of the country, where he and Jack could live together, unnoted and undisturbed.

“Your Grace.” Wentworth was greeted by a wizened old man who seemed tiny, tucked away in an overstuffed chair near a too-warm fireplace as the butler showed him into the room. “Forgive me for not rising to greet you, but I fear I am unable.”

Wentworth deduced that the man was the Earl of Brailsford, and that he must have been eighty or more, if he was a day.

“My lord,” he said, leaving the butler and striding across the room with the sort of posture that had always been expected of his title. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Lord Brailsford lifted his shaking hand, and Wentworth took it as if he were meeting the old man in the halls of Parliament.

“You’re younger than I expected,” Lord Brailsford said in a gravely voice. “But then, Wilmore always did enjoy championing young men.”

Wentworth flushed with embarrassment and let go of Brailsford’s hand to straighten. He wondered how much this old man, tucked into his chair with cozy quilts, a tray with tea and biscuits sitting on a small table beside him, knew of the sort of acquaintance he and George had had.

“Yes, his guidance was invaluable,” Wentworth said, speaking too quickly so that he could go on with, “I’ve no idea what he’s left for me, though, or why he would hide it with you.”

Brailsford gestured for Wentworth to sit in the chair across the fire from him. At least, that was what Wentworth assumed the gesture was. Brailsford’s papery hands shook so much it was hard to tell, and as Wentworth sat across from him, he was clenched and uncomfortable with anxiety.

And it didn’t help one bit that his arse was still tingling from all he and Jack had done.

“I understand you’ve been cut by the *ton* for your vote in favor of the Reform Act,” Brailsford began, wincing as he shifted and tried to make himself more comfortable.

“Allow me, my lord,” the butler said, coming forward to adjust the old man’s pillows.

Wentworth swallowed while the other two men were occupied, wishing Jack were there with him. He had no idea whether the earl was a friend or a foe, and he was terrified of saying the wrong thing.

He shouldn’t have been, of course. He was a duke, for heaven’s sake. But a man’s title did not necessarily imbue him with confidence and command, and Brailsford was both older than him, and therefore worthy of respect, and very possibly in a position to make or break him, depending on what George had left with him.

When Brailsford was settled, he gestured to the butler. “Bring His Grace the letter Wilmore left in the spring.”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler bowed, then took a step back before turning and crossing the room to a small writing desk perched on a table.

“Geo—er—the late Lord Wilmore was here in the spring?” Wentworth asked.

“Yes,” Brailsford said. “I knew his father, you see. And it was Wilmore who suggested that Caruthers seek employment with me after deciding to leave London several years ago.”

Wentworth frowned, glancing to the butler and wondering if he was Caruthers. “I see,” he said, even though he didn’t.

“Wilmore knew he was dying by then,” Brailsford went on, snagging Wentworth’s attention completely. “He asked a favor of me, a favor on your behalf.”

“He...he did?” Wentworth was thoroughly confused.

Brailsford nodded weakly, then gestured to the butler again. “Send for Caruthers,” he said. “I am certain he can take care of this mess as well.” He waved his shaky hand at Wentworth.

Deep foreboding filled Wentworth as the butler returned with an envelope. “Yes, my lord,” he said, handing Wentworth the letter with a bow. “I am certain Caruthers can set everything to rights.”

“Indeed,” Brailsford said. He gestured to Wentworth and said, “Go on, lad. Read the letter.”

Wentworth flinched. He’d been sitting there like a lump, no idea what was going on around him. At Brailsford’s command, he fumbled to open the letter and take out its contents.

Damn, but he wished Jack were there with him.

He cleared his throat as he took the single sheet of paper from the envelope, as if he would read it aloud to Brailsford, out of politeness, if nothing else. Within the first few words, he knew he would have to keep the letter’s contents a secret.

*“My dearest, sweet boy,”* George had written. *“It is with greatest sadness that I write this, my final words to you. You were among my very favorite toys, so obedient and so submissive. Every moment with you was filled with the sweetest honey, not just because of the lengths you were willing to go to in order to please me, but because I knew how desperately you needed the imbalance we shared. I understand, my dear. Nature forms us each according to her whims, and we can only ever be happy when we embrace the foibles for which we were intended.”*

Wentworth blushed and glanced up to see if Brailsford could read his thoughts or somehow hear George’s words as if they had been spoken aloud.

The old man was busy arranging his quilt and reaching for his tea, though, so Wentworth read on.

*“I know it is your sincerest wish to regain the place in society that you feel you lost by remaining faithful to your political principles. I have seen the pain that being cast out of that society has given you. I have seen you in happier moments as well, though, and I daresay that I know what you truly need to thrive and be happy.”*

*“To speed the culmination of your wishes and longing to their natural conclusion, I have left you a particular tool that will accomplish the task ahead of you.”* Wentworth bit his lip as he read. George’s other letter, the one that came with the will, had said something similar. He read on. *“In Lord Brailsford’s employ, you will find a man by the name of Caruthers. He has been languishing in the country for these many years now, after being wrongfully dismissed without references by Lord Patmore. I believe you will find that Caruthers is as eager to regain the place in society that he feels entitled to as you are. He knows things, and I trust that by bringing him into your inner circle, he will show you the way forward that you were destined for all along.”*

The letter was signed with every sort of affection and a few more cheeky words that left Wentworth inclined to burn the letter out of fear that someone who shouldn’t might see it and know the full scope of his predilections. There was also a postscript that made his brow fly up.

*“There is more to my bequest than the prize I have left for you here in Derbyshire,”* it read. *“To complete my wishes for you, and for my other boys, you must return to London. My final gift to you all waits for you there. I trust you will be contacted at the appropriate time and by the proper people when all has been consummated.”*

Wentworth frowned, reading the postscript a second time. It made no sense to him. Another gift? Was it another quest? But no, George was clear that he needed to be back in London, but it seemed all he could do there was wait to be contacted.

Before he could scan the letter again for clues to the mystery, Brailsford said, “Ah, Caruthers,” and Wentworth snapped to attention, nearly crushing the letter in his haste to conceal it.

“My lord.” The man who entered the room was in his middle years, with sallow skin and balding hair. He was dressed impeccably, though, and carried himself as though not even the king was worthy of shining his boots. “You called for me?”

“Yes,” Brailsford said, coughing a bit. “This is His Grace, the Duke of Burville.”

Wentworth stood to face the man. As he did, Caruthers’s eyes widened. The man took in the sight of Wentworth with great alarm before schooling his expression to cold neutrality.

“Apparently, he is in need of a valet,” Brailsford went on.

“Oh,” Wentworth said, flushing again and turning to Lord Brailsford. “I already have a valet, sir. One I am quite happy with.”

“Evidently not, if you look like that,” Brailsford said with a smirk.

“Yes, well, current condition notwithstanding, I am quite pleased with Mr. Cotton’s services,” Wentworth said, fighting with everything he had not to let the nature of those services show on his face.

Brailsford sighed impatiently. “Then why the bloody hell did Wilmore say you would snatch Caruthers up and employ him eagerly the moment you were introduced?”

Because of the letter, Wentworth thought to himself. Because Caruthers was the key to winning back his place in society. Somehow.

“Well,” Wentworth said, pinching his face in uncertainty. “I did send Mr. Cotton off to see about a bath. Perhaps Mr. Caruthers could assist in that endeavor?”

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Caruthers said with a slight bow. His eyes were alight with ambition when he glanced back at Wentworth, “but do you have more suitable clothing I could help you dress in after your bath?”

Wentworth figured that was a veiled attempt to ask exactly what sort of valet tasks needed doing.

He gave Caruthers a sheepish look. “Our things were stolen on the journey here. I’m afraid I have nothing with me but what you see before you.”

The light of opportunity in Caruthers’s eyes burned brighter. “Then, by your leave, Your Grace, if you would care



to follow me to the room that has been appointed for you, I will see to your bath and gather more suitable clothing for you.”

“Thank you, Caruthers,” Wentworth said, nodded to Brailsford—who seemed perfectly fine with Wentworth suddenly taking his leave—and moved toward the door. “But Mr. Cotton is already seeing to my bath.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The words were filled with doubt and derision, and the look Wentworth caught from Caruthers said he didn’t think much of Jack.

Or perhaps he didn’t think much of Wentworth himself, for all he was a duke that might hire him and take him back to London. Caruthers felt very much like Benning and the other servants who had abandoned him because of his vote. And other things.

The room Caruthers showed him to was grander than anything Wentworth had seen in the last few days. It had a high ceiling and a large, fireplace that crackled cheerfully with a newly laid fire. It was furnished with pieces made of dark wood that was polished to an almost liquid softness. The bed was massive and piled with pillows and quilts. A tall mirror stood in one corner that gave Wentworth more than enough of a view of himself to make him feel as though he were the shabbiest thing in the room.

The one thing that the impressive bedchamber lacked, however, was Jack. And when two bored-looking footmen arrived with a large, brass tub, a few maids carrying buckets of water behind them, Wentworth was more interested in craning his neck and looking into the hall than in standing still so that Caruthers could gauge his size to aid in the search for clean clothing.

“Is my valet with you?” Wentworth asked one of the footmen as the entire team of servants returned with more buckets of steaming water.

“Isn’t Caruthers your valet now, Your Grace?” the footman asked.

Wentworth blinked and flinched. Word traveled like lightning downstairs.

“Arrangements have not been settled yet,” he said, sending Caruthers a careful, sideways glance. He was not inclined to replace Jack in any way whatsoever, but if Caruthers truly could get him back into the good graces of the *ton*, he didn’t want to offend the man. “Mr. Cotton is my man for now. Do you know where he is?”

“Mr. Cotton was lazing about in the servants’ hall when I met him earlier,” Caruthers said.

Wentworth’s brow flew up to his hairline. Caruthers had met Jack already? The man must have been downstairs when Jack had gone down to see about the bath. Wentworth didn’t believe for a moment that Jack was capable of lazing in any capacity, and the fact that Caruthers would suggest as much had the hair standing up on the back of Wentworth’s neck.

Caruthers was a snake. It didn’t take a long acquaintance to glean that much. The man had known Wentworth would arrive, and he likely knew the reason why. He was already angling to take Jack’s position, and it seemed he had no qualms about how he did that.

Which made Wentworth all the more wary of offending the man. If he pursued something as simple as a job with such cunning, surely, he would know exactly how to position Wentworth in society again.

“Your bath is ready, Your Grace,” Caruthers said, shooing the footmen out of the room once the tub was filled. “Will you require assistance bathing?”

There was more to the offer than the words suggested, which sent a shiver of horror down Wentworth’s back. He couldn’t imagine that Caruthers was offering the unspeakable, but Wentworth had already sketched the man’s character as ruthless, so perhaps he had no scruples about precious things as well.

“No,” Wentworth said, pretending he hadn’t grasped the deeper meaning of Caruthers’s words at all. “I will do quite

well on my own. But if you could locate Mr. Cotton and send him up to me, I would be most appreciative.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Caruthers said, backing toward the door. “I will go in search of a suitable wardrobe for you now.”

“And Mr. Cotton,” Wentworth said, moving closer to the bath.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

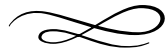
Caruthers bowed one last time, then left, shutting the door behind him with an ominous *snick*.

Wentworth swallowed hard and looked around the room. The bath was inviting, but everything else made him feel small and out of place.

It made him feel alone.

He gingerly removed his soiled and ruffled clothing, hating how being naked in such a place without Jack made him feel, then carefully stepped into the bath. He usually enjoyed baths, enjoyed nice things as a whole, but he had the anxious feeling that he wouldn't enjoy anything at all until he was back in Jack's arms again.

## *Thirteen*



It was a lesson in madness from the start, and Jack was just about ready to curse the late Lord Wilmore's name. Wentworth was whisked off by the aged butler to meet the Earl of Brailsford, and Jack was left to find his way down to the servants' hall entirely on his own. The only way he was able to do so was by stumbling across a confused and sullen maid who was blacking the fireplace in a room that looked like it hadn't had a fire lit in it for years.

"Pardon me," Jack asked her, using his city manners. "But I've just arrived with the Duke of Burville, and I need to make my way downstairs so that I might see to his needs."

The maid started so violently that it left Jack wondering if anyone oversaw the Earl of Brailsford's servants at all when they went about their daily tasks.

He had something of an answer to that question after the maid took him downstairs. Flagg Hall was a fine, sturdy structure. It had been well-designed about a hundred years ago, by Jack's estimation. It had a vast and functional kitchen, a long hallway with many closets and rooms for everything from wine to silver, and a servants' hall that would have been the envy of any household in London.

It also appeared to be occupied by a cook with stains on her apron and mountains of refuse on every surface in the kitchen, footmen who were playing cards in the waning hours of the afternoon, and maids who were laughing and flirting with said footmen instead of seeing to their duties. In fact, the only servant who appeared to be doing any serious work was a

thin, pale hall boy, who nearly rammed into Jack as he carried a bucket of water that was too heavy for him in from some sort of garden outside the kitchen.

“Is there someone who could assist me?” Jack asked, stopping in a convenient area where he could see into both the kitchen and the servants’ hall.

The maids and footmen glanced at him with mild curiosity, but didn’t seem inclined to move from their spots. The only person who took notice of him was a balding man in a pristine suit sat at the other end of the servants’ hall from the young people, sewing something. Jack recognized the man as a fellow valet.

“Who are you and how did you end up down here?” the valet asked. He set aside his sewing and marched down the length of the room as Jack stepped into it.

The valet’s nose flared and his eyes registered disgust at the state Jack was in. Jack usually wouldn’t have cared one way or another what someone else thought of his appearance, but Flagg Hall made him uneasy, and he had a strong feeling that whatever people thought of him was a reflection on Wentworth.

And in that moment, he felt particularly protective of Wentworth.

“I am valet to His Grace, the Duke of Burville,” Jack said, standing tall and clasping his hands behind his back as the shorter, older man came to stand in front of him. “We’ve only just arrived, and I have come to seek out a bath for His Grace. I assume he is to be given accommodations at Flagg Hall until he has concluded his business here.”

There was a brief pause as the valet finished judging him before he said, “The Duke of Burville?”

It took a great effort of will on Jack’s part not to squirm or bristle under the man’s scrutiny. He might have expected the valet to call him out for being a liar, but the man did no such thing. In fact, his eyes lit with excitement and greed, as if he had been waiting for Wentworth to arrive for a long time.

More than that, he seemed to react as though his ship had just come in.

“I am His Grace’s valet, Mr. Cotton,” Jack said, not caring that his tone reeked of possession. “We’ve come a long way under peculiar circumstances and at the wishes of the late Lord Wilmore as laid out in his will.”

“I see,” the valet said, rubbing his chin, a spark of calculation in his eyes.

The man knew about the will, Jack was almost certain of it. *How* he knew about the will remained to be seen, and it worried him.

He wasn’t able to ask further questions before the old butler appeared at the opposite end of the room to say, “Caruthers. You’re needed upstairs at once. His lordship wishes you to see to the Duke of Burville.”

Jack frowned, deep wariness churning his stomach. “I can see to His Grace,” he said. “Seeing to His Grace has been my duty for the last three years.”

A tiny part of him felt foolish for his bravado. He might as well whip his cock out and piss over Wentworth for all the ownership he was trying to claim. But a much bigger part of him sensed it was absolutely vital that he not let down his guard or give up his claim for one moment.

He didn’t have the chance to do much, though. The valet, Caruthers, launched into motion, saying, “Right away,” and leaving Jack to go with the butler.

Jack was forgotten in an instant, as if he played no part in the events that he knew were transpiring with Wentworth upstairs. To be abandoned as he was felt both painful and concerning, as if some malevolent force was working hard to keep him and Wentworth apart.

Well, he simply wasn’t going to have it. Wentworth was his in every way now. If he had to fight to maintain his place in the eyes of these people, then he would.

He cleared his throat, addressing the footmen and maids, who had gone back to their cards. “I need to be told which

room His Grace has been given for the duration of his stay here,” he said. “And I need assistance bringing a bath to that room. Supper and a change of clothing are necessary as well.”

It was almost as though there was a wall of glass between him and the other servants preventing them from hearing what he said.

The only answer to his demands came from a woman past her middle years who stepped into the room behind him. “What are you pestering the young people for?” she demanded.

Jack turned to her, his patience quickly running thin. The woman was obviously a housekeeper. Her posture was stiff despite the slight stoop to her shoulders brought on by age. She was dressed neatly but dully, and a chatelaine hung from a clip at her waist.

Jack tried again. “I need to know which rooms have been given to His Grace, the Duke of Burville,” he said. “And I need assistance providing a bath for him, as we have traveled a long way under difficult circumstances.”

The housekeeper scanned him, her lip curling in distaste. “I’ve not heard anything about any dukes visiting his lordship. His lordship does not see guests. He wishes to spend his twilight years in peace and solitude.” She shifted her weight and narrowed her eyes before going on with, “Who are you at any rate, and who let you into the house?”

Jack hissed an impatient sigh and said, “I am Mr. Cotton, His Grace’s valet. We’ve only just arrived, and your butler let us in.” He didn’t wait for the woman’s reaction before saying, “Now could you please tell me where my master will be staying while he is here, and for God’s sake, could you instruct your staff to assist me in bringing a bath up to his room?”

The housekeeper merely stared at him and sniffed. “You do not have the appearance of a duke’s valet,” she said, crossing her arms. “You look more like a vagabond come to steal our silver and importune our maids.”

Jack clenched his jaw so tightly he feared his teeth might shatter. “I can assure you, madam—”

“That’s Mrs. Croft to the likes of you.”

Jack was tempted to growl at the woman. “I can assure you, Mrs. Croft, I am His Grace’s valet, and my appearance is a result of the unusual circumstances of His Grace’s journey here and his arrival.”

“Is this supposed duke in as pitiful a condition as you are?” Mrs. Croft asked, scandalized.

“He is, madam,” Jack said, bristling with impatience. “Which is why I am attempting to have a bath taken up to his room and fresh clothing procured for him so that he might—”

“You aren’t a very good valet if you allow your master to become as filthy and slovenly as you are,” Mrs. Croft cut him off.

Jack’s patience had never been tested so grievously. Dolly would never have treated strangers of any sort so meanly back home at Rawley House. However low Mrs. Croft and the rest of Flagg Hall’s servants thought of him, Jack thought even less of them all. It was clear to him that the household had gone to seed, like a garden that hadn’t been tended for so long the weeds had taken over. He wouldn’t have been at all surprised to find out these servants were fleecing their master blind as well.

“Please,” he said, his voice brittle with aggravation. “Just show me where His Grace will be staying and have the footmen help me take a bath up to his room.”

“I’ll thank you not to take that tone with me, young man,” Mrs. Croft snapped. “And I will not be ordered about by a common—”

“Mrs. Croft,” the valet from earlier called out as he reappeared at the far end of the room. “His lordship has ordered a bath and fresh clothing to be taken to the west room for His Grace, the Duke of Burville.”

Without pause or hesitation, Mrs. Croft nodded and said, “Yes, Mr. Caruthers. Toby, Glenn, you heard the man. Take the



tub up to the west room and prepare it for a bath at once.”

The footmen didn't exactly leap into action. It was more like they oozed. They put down their cards, huffing and sighing as they did, and stood from the table, making their apologies to the maids.

“Rebecca, Iris, you can help as well,” Mrs. Croft added, stepping toward the table and clapping her hands to get the two girls to move. “Heat the water and help the lads carry it up.”

Jack practically shook with rage as he was abandoned and ignored once more. He forced himself to breathe steadily and reminded himself that Wentworth would have his bath one way or another, and all would be well. He would make his way up to the west room—wherever that was—as soon as he was able, and once he and Wentworth had a chance to speak, to sort out the odd mess that their arrival had become, all would be well. Perhaps Wentworth had already received his prize from the late Lord Wilmore and was eager to tell him all about it.

Jack let that thought calm him and fill him with expectation as he left the now empty servants' hall and made his way into the kitchen.

“His Grace will require supper,” he told the harried cook as he stepped into the vast room. The scent of boiling cabbage filled his nose and made him grimace. “Do you know if he will be dining with his lordship or will he be expected to take his supper in his room?”

The cook glance away from the stove and her work, then reeled back at the sight of Jack coming toward her. “Stay away!” she shouted. “Oh! Help! Help! There's a vagabond in the house!”

Jack sighed impatiently. It was a sign of how lax the discipline of the household was that not a soul came to rescue the cook as she shouted, but she need not have shouted to begin with.

“I am Mr. Cotton, valet to His Grace, the Duke of Burville. We’ve only just arrived, and yes, I am aware that my appearance is not what it ought to be. But I am inquiring after supper, not asking to be attacked with a wooden spoon.” The cook continued to wield her weapon, as though it could protect her from Jack’s villainy. “Will His Grace be taking supper in his room or dining with Lord Brailsford this evening?”

It took the cook a few more seconds to work through her panic enough to answer, “His lordship dines in his room.”

Jack stood there, waiting for more, but it didn’t come. He gave up and let out a breath, rubbing his forehead. He could only assume Wentworth would be served in his room, which would be good for him as well. He could take the food up himself, and he and Wentworth could discuss the mad situation they now found themselves in over...cabbage soup?

“Is that what you will be serving His Grace this evening?” he nodded to the bubbling pot.

“No, this is for the servants’ supper,” Cook answered.

Jack looked around the untidy kitchen, searching for more. “Have you prepared the servants’ meal before that of your master?”

Cook gaped at him as if she didn’t know what he was talking about.

He gave that up too and shook his head. At Rawley House, Mrs. Evans took pride in preparing a veritable feast for Wentworth every night while Olivia, the kitchen maid and cook in training, prepared everything for the servants. Jack couldn’t even tell if there was a kitchen maid in this house.

“Never mind that for now,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Do you have clean clothes that I might borrow or purchase from the household?”

“Clean clothes?” Cook continued to stare at him.

Jack would have had an easier time conversing with the cabbage soup.

“Do not trouble yourself,” he said, roaring with frustration on the inside. “I will find something.”

He never would have trespassed on another household’s territory by rummaging through their cupboards and peeking into all of their rooms under other circumstances, but the staff of Flagg Hall was among the least competent and least friendly he’d ever encountered. He had no qualms about taking a clean pair of breeches and a fresh shirt from a musty closet filled with old livery that the poor hall boy showed to him. The lad, Gil, helped him find soap and a razor as well so that he could bathe and change clothes—which he was forced to do in the kitchen courtyard, since there didn’t seem to be a designated area for it in the house.

Jack only felt marginally better once he was clean, shaved and dressed in fresh clothing. He kept his boots and his coat, and he took his soiled things to what he thought might be a laundry, but he had no real hope of ever seeing them again.

Once all that was done, he returned to the kitchen, only to find most of the staff returned and enjoying an unappetizing meal in the servants’ hall.

“Has His Grace been given his supper?” Jack asked, singling out Caruthers with the question specifically.

Caruthers leapt up from the table and charged toward Jack as though they were knights at the tilt and he would run Jack through. “His Grace is being cared for, yes,” the man said.

Jack nodded curtly. “Good. But that does not answer my question. Has he been fed?”

Caruthers tilted his chin up and stared down his nose at Jack, even though he was a few inches shorter. “I will take him his supper as soon as I have finished mine.”

“A duke should be served before a servant,” Jack all but growled, crossing his arms. “And I will take a tray up to him now, since I must see where he is lodged for the night so that I might tend to his needs.”

“That will not be necessary,” Caruthers said with an obsequious sniff, victory in his eyes. “I shall be taking over as

His Grace's valet from here."

Alarm rang through Jack so fiercely that it left him breathless for a moment. He dropped his arms to his sides, his eyes going wide. "I have heard nothing of this from His Grace," he said.

Wentworth would not dismiss him out of hand, without even speaking to him. He believed that as he believed the sun would rise in the morning and this whole mad day would be over. Caruthers didn't know what he was talking about.

"I think you will find," Caruthers said, grinning at Jack as though he were a fool, "that His Grace has made a change. I am the object which he has gone through all the trouble to seek out, you see. The late Lord Wilmore intended for His Grace to discover me here and to employ me."

Jack frowned. It didn't make any sense. Surely, the late Lord Wilmore knew that Wentworth had a valet already. The blasted man had claimed to be watching out for Wentworth. If he truly had, and if the things Jack had begun to suspect about the man were true, he would know that Wentworth was perfectly content to have him by his side.

Something most definitely was not right.

"I have heard none of this from His Grace himself," he said, pulling himself up to his full height again. "Until I am told by His Grace that I am dismissed, I intend to carry on as though nothing has changed."

Jack tried to step around Caruthers with the intention of going upstairs to find Wentworth himself, even if he had to check every room in the grand place to do so.

Caruthers stepped into his path, though, preventing him from taking another step. "I think you will find," he said, "that if you attempt to circumvent the wishes of the late marquess, and if you trespass in this house where you have not been permitted to go, Mr. Waldrip and I will be forced to call for the constable to remove you from the estate."

Jack glared at him. "His Grace would never allow it."

“Yes, well,” Caruthers laughed dismissively, “I think you will find that our local constable takes accusations of buggery quite seriously.”

Hot and cold prickles raced all over Jack’s skin. The man couldn’t possibly know. He and Wentworth had barely spent five minutes together since arriving at Flagg Hall. Caruthers hadn’t even seen the two of them together. The man had to be bluffing.

“Does your constable believe in lies and fairy stories then?” he asked, pretending more certainty than he felt.

Because accusations of buggery might genuinely stick where he and Wentworth were concerned, despite Wentworth’s title. Wentworth had already had his reputation laid low once by the truth. For another accusation to surface now would mean ruination that even the late Lord Wilmore’s cunning plan couldn’t fix.

Caruthers seemed to know who had the upper hand. “Are you saying you wish to test what our constable will believe?” he asked.

Jack had lost. The fight had barely begun, but he’d been foiled. He couldn’t risk any action that would hurt Wentworth, even if it meant leaving his love in the hands of a man whom he despised and whose motives were highly questionable. The best thing he could do to protect Wentworth was to concede this round to Caruthers, let Wentworth have a night of ease and luxury where he was fed well and slept in a soft bed, then seek him out in the morning so that they might plan what to do next.

And if Jack had his way, what they would do next would be to leave Flagg Hall and its madness behind forever to return to the life they knew.

“Just make certain you feed His Grace enough,” Jack said, sneering at Caruthers and doing nothing to hide his dislike. “He hasn’t had a proper meal all day.”

“And whose fault is that?” Caruthers asked with a sniff.

He could stay and fight and make things worse, or Jack could admit defeat for now and regroup for another battle later.

“Just see to it,” he said, seething.

He turned and stormed out of the room. It rankled him even more that he heard the sound of laughter behind him.

As soon as he stepped into the hall, his shoulders sagged and a deep gloom pulsed in him. These were the sort of servants the people Wentworth wanted to surround himself with had. This was the sort of life his beloved claimed to want. And if he actually managed to regain that life, what would Jack’s place in it be?

He shook his head to fight off those thoughts. Wentworth would not abandon him. Even though the words remained unspoken, they loved each other. He was certain of it. He was Wentworth’s and Wentworth was his, regardless of class or position. And as soon as they could sort out the muddle of this terrible bequest the late Lord Wilmore had thrust upon them, they would be happy together.

All Jack had to do now was believe that. Because for the moment, that dream seemed as distant as the moon.

## Fourteen



Wentworth rushed through his bath, desperate to complete his ablutions before Caruthers returned. He scrubbed himself all over, flushing at the tenderness that remained in his backside. He climbed out of the tub and dried off, then quickly bundled himself into the robe Caruthers had brought along with the bath. He knew his title would protect him from any accusations Caruthers might make if he spotted the condition of his arse, but there could be other consequences besides penalization under the law. Caruthers might refuse to enter his employ.

That thought filled Wentworth with a strange sense of relief.

But no, that was wrong. George had directed him to the worrisome man deliberately. He'd believed Caruthers could restore Wentworth's reputation with the *ton*. The man wouldn't seek to destroy that reputation because of a sore bum. George had implied Caruthers had a stake in Wentworth returning to favor as well. Caruthers was after a return to his former glory, one Wentworth would be able to give him.

Rushing through his bath might not have been as necessary as Wentworth believed it would be. As soon as he was dry and wrapped in the robe, he stood back near the fireplace, waiting as if Caruthers would burst into the room unannounced at any moment.

He waited.

And waited.

Caruthers didn't come.

Wentworth squirmed a bit, feeling awkward for just standing there, like a schoolboy awaiting the visit of a headmaster who was intent on punishing him.

That thought instantly caused images of Jack dressed in a don's uniform, wielding a cane, to flood his mind. In that fantasy, he had been a very naughty boy, and Headmaster Jack was gravely displeased. Wentworth had earned himself a few strikes of the cane against his bare backside, and as penance, gruff, cruel Headmaster Jack would require him to sink to his knees and—

Wentworth shook his head and launched into pacing around the room in the hope that it would clear his head...and cause his half-hard cock to settle into a state that was acceptable in a strange earl's house.

Of course, that fantasy of Jack left him wondering where his beloved had gone. Wentworth didn't believe for a moment that Jack was as indigent as Caruthers had tried to claim he was, and he wasn't fool enough to think that Jack would deliberately stay away from him. Something else must have been the matter.

He started for the door, but realized after just two steps that he couldn't very well go wandering in Flagg Hall wearing nothing but a robe.

Which, perhaps, was Caruthers's aim from the start.

The thought chilled him, and he shook his head again to dispel it. Caruthers most certainly had some sort of ulterior motive in wanting to serve Wentworth, but surely the man wasn't conniving enough to hold him prisoner.

An hour later, as Wentworth was beginning to worry that was precisely Caruthers's aim, and that walking the halls of a strange house in a robe wouldn't be so bad if it meant he could locate Jack, there came a knock at the door.

"Jack?" he called out, dashing for the door.

The door opened before he reached it, and Caruthers appeared in the frame, clothing draped over his arm. A maid



stood behind him with a tray that could only hold his supper.

Wentworth was both relieved and wary.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Caruthers said, stepping into the room and instantly directing the maid to put the tray on the room’s small table, then to leave. “I trust you enjoyed your bath?”

Wentworth cleared his throat and glanced out into the hall. His deepest hope was that Jack was right behind Caruthers, but that hope was dashed.

He faced Caruthers, standing straighter when he realized that he was on his own and that it was solely up to him to deport himself as a duke would.

“I did enjoy the bath. Thank you, Caruthers,” he said as if he were the king himself and Caruthers was a hall boy. “Are those the clothes I asked for?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. He walked to the bed and laid out the items in question. “I’ve found a nightshirt for you from among his lordship’s things, and I trust this ensemble will be to your liking for tomorrow’s wear.”

Wentworth clasped his hands behind him and moved closer to the bed, keeping his distance from Caruthers. The idea of the man touching him—deliberately or involuntarily—filled him with revulsion, but if he planned to maintain the upper hand and behave as a duke should, he had to pretend he was completely at ease.

He hummed at the slightly out of style clothing. “They will do,” he said, then took a step back. “I should like to return to London as swiftly as possible, tomorrow even,” he went on. The sooner he got away from Flagg Hall and the eerie feeling the place gave him, the better. “The letter the late Lord Wilmore left for me specified not only your willingness to be of service to me, it suggested that I need to be in London for the second half of whatever bequest he has left to several of his old friends.”

Caruthers grinned at him in a way that made Wentworth’s skin crawl. If he didn’t know better, he would think Caruthers

knew everything—about George, about him, and about the nature of the bequest.

“Certainly, Your Grace,” he said, bowing slightly. “I am quite certain Lord Brailsford would not take offense to your swift departure, nor will he feel a great loss in my leaving with you. He has not required a valet for some time, and Mr. Hunt is adept at assisting him to and from his bedchamber.”

Wentworth frowned. He hadn’t explicitly invited Caruthers to return to London with him. Then again, that had been George’s wish. A wish Caruthers knew about.

A dozen assumptions had already been made, and as disinclined as Wentworth was to hire Caruthers as his valet—that was Jack’s position and it always would be, without question or argument—he was equally as hesitant to put the man off entirely. George believed he was a valuable tool, and until he discovered why and how, he had to trust his old friend.

But he wished Jack were there to help sort things.

He wouldn’t be able to rest until he’d discussed the whole thing with Jack.

“Here is how we shall proceed,” Wentworth said, trying to imagine what Jack would do and feigning all the authority that he should feel as a duke for the time being. “If you would be so kind as to make arrangements for our travel, departing tomorrow, I would be greatly appreciative.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Caruthers said with a bow.

“And in the meantime, I need to speak to my valet, Mr. Cotton.”

Before Wentworth could do more than open his mouth to ask where Jack had gone, Caruthers interrupted with, “I do not believe Mr. Cotton is in any state to speak with you, Your Grace.”

Wentworth frowned. “How do you mean?”

Caruthers stared him straight in the eye and said, “There was a bit of trouble downstairs, Your Grace. Mr. Cotton helped himself to certain items from the estate’s stores. Doing so has

left him indisposed and unavailable to assist even himself, much less you.”

The man was lying. Or, at least, he was trying to get Wentworth to believe something wicked about Jack. Likely that he was drunk. But Jack didn't have much of a taste for alcohol—other than a nice, cool ale from a country pub at the end of a long day of labor—and he would never drink to a point of incapacitation in someone else's house, while things were so fraught.

Caruthers was, yet again, trying to make Jack seem incompetent so that he might swoop in and steal the position of valet.

And yet, Wentworth wasn't certain any good would come of calling the man out directly. It seemed like a wiser plan overall for Caruthers to believe him to be ignorant and gullible rather than to alert him that Wentworth knew what he was doing.

“Very well,” he said with a sigh, turning back to study the clothing Caruthers had brought. “If you see him again and if his state has improved, please do send him up.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “Will that be all this evening, Your Grace?”

“Yes, that will be all,” Wentworth said dismissively.

He had never been so relieved in his life as he was when Caruthers left the room, shutting the door behind him with a satisfying snap. Wentworth's relief was so palpable that he blew out a breath and leaned against the bed for a moment.

What had George been thinking, saddling him with such a snake?

But that was precisely the point. What *had* George been thinking? He must have been thinking *something*, otherwise he would not have made it his dying wish that Wentworth travel all the way to Derbyshire to meet Caruthers, and as a commoner. The whole mad business had a point, and he had to trust in his ability to discover that.

He shrugged out of the robe and quickly donned the nightshirt Caruthers had brought, then put on the robe again to pace the room. It felt as though all the pieces of the puzzle were there, he had but to assemble them. Caruthers was ambitious and longed to return to London as a duke's valet. George believed the man had the key to reestablishing his place in the *ton*. Was it because Caruthers knew how he should dress and behave around the aristocracy?

Wentworth already knew those things. The problem was not his manners or mannerisms, it was that a few central members of high society had deemed him unfit company, and the rest of the *ton* had followed their lead.

Perhaps Caruthers knew something about those men, something Wentworth could use to charm and ingratiate himself to them. Though the thought of bowing and scraping to men whose politics and principles he despised left a sour taste in his mouth that even the supper he'd been brought couldn't take away. Then again, Flagg Hall's cook didn't have anything close to the skills of his own Mrs. Evans. Wentworth was eternally grateful to Jack for finding Rawley House's cook.

As soon as Wentworth's thoughts turned back to Jack, he got up from the table and the remains of his mediocre supper and began pacing again. It was futile to think Caruthers would actually find Jack and send him up. If he wanted to speak to Jack—and he did, desperately—he would have to go in search of his love himself.

With his mind made up, Wentworth changed out of his borrowed nightshirt and into the clothes Caruthers had brought him. He put on the breeches, shirt, and stockings only, not bothering with the rest of it, and pulled on his dusty, half-ruined boots.

He waited a bit, listening at the door, to make certain no one was out and about in the hall who might catch him and ask why he was wandering the halls instead of tucked into bed for a good night's sleep. Once he was certain he could proceed unaccosted, he slipped into the hall and searched for a way downstairs.

Wentworth's fears that he might be found and questioned once he journeyed belowstairs proved unfounded. He discovered the right staircase to take him down to the kitchen, and he even waited at the foot of those stairs, listening in concealment to discern whether Flagg Hall's servants had gone to bed. It was only a bit past ten, but the silence throughout the servants' area seemed to indicate they had.

Indeed, when Wentworth stepped out into the hall and searched for Jack more openly, he found no one at all up and about anywhere downstairs, except for the hall boy. He found that poor lad hard at work in the kitchen, sweeping what looked like a week's worth of refuse from the countertops and into slop buckets.

"Excuse me," Wentworth addressed the boy as if he were an equal.

The hall boy jumped and flinched so hard he dropped his bucket, sending scraps all over the floor.

Wentworth abandoned the question he'd been about to ask for another. "Shouldn't the scullery maid be doing that job?"

The hall boy dropped to his knees and scrambled to pick up his bucket and to gather the rubbish he'd spilled. "Ain't no scullery maid, sir," the boy said, not looking at Wentworth. "Only me."

"And what's your name?" Wentworth asked.

"Gil," the boy said, still working furiously to clean up the mess.

Wentworth made a note right then and there to come back to Flagg Hall and fetch Gil for future employment in a nicer situation. But at that moment, he had more important things to consider.

"Gil, do you know where a Mr. Cotton has gone?" Wentworth asked.

Gil glanced up, looking worse than most of the street urchins Wentworth routinely saw in London. "Mrs. Croft wouldn't let him have a room upstairs, sir," the boy said. "So

he took himself out to the stables.” He pointed with one filthy hand to the kitchen door.

Wentworth was both relieved to know where Jack was—and that he wasn’t in the house—and indignant over the way Gil was being treated.

“Thank you, Gil,” he said as he walked toward the kitchen door. He paused before leaving and said, “Do you have any reason to stay in this position or would you consider working elsewhere?”

Gil shrugged looking miserable. “Got nowhere else to go, sir.”

Wentworth smiled at him. Forget coming back for the boy, he would help the lad while the opportunity presented itself. “Well, you do now.” It was, perhaps, dangerous of him, but he grinned at Gil and said, “Go upstairs to the room I’ve been given, the west room. There’s ten shillings in a pouch on the mantel. Take it and get yourself to London. Go to Rawley House in Mayfair, and tell Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, that she’s to employ you as hall boy there. If she asks why, tell her Wentworth and Jack say so.”

Gil’s eyes were as wide as moons. “Who’s Wentworth and Jack?”

“They’re two men who care about lads like you,” Wentworth said. “Now, run along and do as I’ve told you before Mrs. Croft or any of the other nasty people find out.”

Gil fumbled to stand, still gaping at Wentworth, then dashed off as if it were a race.

Wentworth smiled and laughed to himself as he headed out to the kitchen yard, then across to the stable. He spotted a flicker of light through a small window high up in the stable, in what must have been a hay loft. His heart nearly burst with relief at the sight.

“Jack!” he called as quietly as he could once he was in the stable.

A scrambling came from above, and moments later, Jack’s tired face appeared at the edge of the loft.

“Wentworth, what are you doing here?” he called back.

Wentworth waited to answer until he'd located the ladder and scrambled up to join Jack in the loft. “Are you not calling me Wen anymore?” he asked, so happy to be close to Jack again that his throat closed up and his eyes stung.

Jack shifted to give him more room to climb into the loft, frowning as he did. “I did not think it appropriate, under the circumstances.”

Wentworth scowled at him and huffed as he moved to sit as close to Jack as he could without upsetting the battered lantern that filled the loft with weak light. “Oh, no,” he said, shaking his head. “Do not take that formal tone with me now, Jack. We've been through too much in these last few days and shared too much between us for you to suddenly play the servant to my duke now.”

“But isn't that the way of things?” Jack grumbled. “We had a charming interlude, but it has been made abundantly clear to me since arriving here that you are the master and I the servant, and the gap between us is large enough to fit an ocean.”

Wentworth clicked his tongue and shook his head, too overjoyed at being with Jack again to let his annoyance with him have the upper hand. He scooted all the way across to Jack, until he was almost sitting in his sweetheart's lap, then grabbed the back of Jack's head. With a surprisingly aggressive gesture, he pulled Jack toward him and slanted his mouth over his, stealing a kiss that filled him with confidence again.

“That's what I think of your ocean,” he said, nearly purring as he rested his free hand on the side of Jack's face. He kissed him again, brushing his tongue across Jack's lips in a bid to get him to open to him. When Jack did, he thrust his tongue against his and moaned with relief at the physical and emotional sensations that filled him. “And that's what I think of your foul mood,” he added before resting his forehead against Jack's.

“Wen,” Jack said, cradling Wentworth's face and smiling.

“I’ve had an absolutely rubbish time since the two of us were parted this afternoon,” Wentworth said. “And everything has been horrifically muddled by a second letter from George.”

“A second letter?” Jack asked, his brow going up as the two of them moved apart to sit more comfortably.

“Yes,” Wentworth said. He had no interest in wasting time, so he spilled out the situation they were now in with as few words as possible. “For some barmy reason, Caruthers is the prize George sent me here to retrieve. In his letter, George said he thinks Caruthers can help me get back into the good graces of the *ton*. Caruthers is also keen to retake a place in society, working in the household of a duke, I’d imagine.”

Jack’s face suddenly filled with horror. “So he wasn’t lying when he said he’s your new valet?”

“What?” Wentworth balked. “God, no! You cannot think for a moment that I would let anyone else in this entire world take the position that is, and will always be, yours.”

It was a testament to how fraught the day had been and how exhausted Jack probably was that Jack’s eyes suddenly went glassy, and he reached for Wentworth, drawing him in for another kiss.

Wentworth was sorely tempted to stay and indulge in that kiss, but there was too much at stake for the moment.

He broke away and said, “Now, come along. Come up to bed, and we’ll discuss the whole thing deep into the night.”

He shifted as if to head for the ladder, but Jack said, “No.”

Wentworth turned back to him. “No?”

Jack huffed. “I couldn’t possibly sleep with you tonight, Wen. This isn’t some wayside inn where the cost of an extra bed is prohibitive so men share. This is a country house. Dukes do not share beds with their valets. If we were discovered together, the consequences would be dire.”

Wentworth sat heavily, letting out a breath. Jack had a point.



“Alright, then I’ll stay here and sleep in the hayloft with you tonight.” He scooted closer to Jack again.

“No!” Jack laughed this time. “That’s even more preposterous. What if we were discovered here? What if the servants discover you missing in the morning?”

“To be honest,” Wentworth said, shoving a hand through his still-damp hair and coming away with a piece of straw between his fingers, “I don’t think the diligence of Lord Brailsford’s staff is anything near to what it should be.”

“It most certainly is not,” Jack said, as fussy and priggish about the matter as Wentworth was being.

Wentworth grinned at that, then casually said, “I’ve just poached the hall boy, Gil.”

“You’ve what?” Jack asked.

Wentworth shrugged. “He’s been left to do too much work on his own. Work he shouldn’t have to do. I told him to go up to my room, take our money, and hie his way down to London poste haste, to go to Rawley House and tell Dolly I’ve said we’d hire him.”

“We?” Jack arched one eyebrow at him. “And that boy couldn’t be more than eight years old, Wen.”

“I headed off to Eton on my own when I was eight,” Wentworth argued.

That argument brought other thoughts to mind.

“I suppose that was a naughty thing for me to do.” He lowered his head and glanced up at Jack with wanton eyes. “You’ll have to punish me for it.”

Jack burst into laughter, which was precisely what Wentworth wanted to hear. “You’re mad, you know that?” He shook his head.

“Mad for you,” Wentworth said, sliding all the way back across the hayloft so that he could tangle his body with Jack’s. “And to be honest, I’ve no wish to do any of this without you. I don’t think I could continue with whatever scheme George had in mind for me without you. I detest Caruthers, and yet, I

don't see a way around not bringing him back to London with us."

Jack growled. Wentworth didn't need words from him to know what Jack thought of the situation.

"George obviously intended something from Caruthers," he said, stroking the side of Jack's face and reveling in the heat that increased between them. "Until I discover what it is, as much as I might want to, I cannot reject Caruthers out of hand and abandon the whole thing."

"The man is a snake," Jack said.

Wentworth lit with a smile, fluttering on the inside. "I thought the exact same thing," he said.

It felt so good to be in accord with Jack that Wentworth leaned in and kissed him again.

That felt so wonderful that he dove back in for another, deeper kiss. It spun his head and had his body reacting like they could get away with rutting like goats in springtime, even though he knew that was out of the question at the moment. He wouldn't be able to indulge in his fantasies with Jack until they were safe and secure in their own home, in the bed he had previously called his but fully intended to be theirs going forward.

Better still, as he broke their kiss and leaned back to take a breath, gazing into Jack's lust-hazed eyes as he did, Wentworth came up with the perfect, albeit underhanded, way to win Jack over to his side.

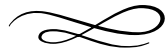
"Please, Jack," he said throwing whatever ducal pride he had right out the window. "I need someone to protect me from Caruthers and to keep me safe in these stormy seas."

His wicked manipulation worked precisely the way he knew it would. Jack growled possessively and threw Wentworth to his back in the straw, covering him with his body and kissing him hard enough to draw the life from his body. And even though it made him a conniving villain to toy with Jack's emotions like a cat with a mouse, he didn't care. He had Jack's warm, strong body to wrap his arms and legs

around and Jack's mouth to ravish his. And he did his fair share of ravishing in return.

It was the way the two of them were meant to be together—wicked, sinful, and shameless. As long as they stayed together like this, not even Caruthers and his machinations could come between them.

## *Fifteen*



Jack was startled awake by the sound of something shifting in the stable below. It was enough to have him immediately on the alert, even though a few moments of holding still and listening reassured him that the sound had come from one of the horses and not someone from the house. Someone like Caruthers.

He let out a breath and sank back into the straw, closing his arms tighter around Wen. Wen had insisted several times that he would return to the house in a moment, or when Jack had fallen asleep, or after sleeping for an hour or two himself. He'd insisted that the two of them were merely talking to sort their puzzling situation, even though talking had turned to kissing and kissing had led to touching, and the two of them had been forced to use a tremendous effort of will not to reach under layers of clothing to cause more of a mess than was good for either of them.

Jack had loved those moments. Whatever had caused Wen's momentarily impish mood, Jack was ready to set up a shrine so he could formally give thanks to it. Wen had been a manipulative bastard when he'd suggested he needed Jack to protect him from Caruthers, but the deep, powerful need that sentiment had caused in Jack clarified just how he felt about Wen. As did pinning Wen to his back in the straw and feeling his body go supple and accepting as he'd kissed him into obedience.

Jack drew in another breath and rubbed a hand over his face. He wanted Wen like that always—mischievous and

tempting, full of himself to the point where he could let his guard down and be who he wanted to be, not who he thought he should be. He *did* want to protect and cherish Wen, more than anything. But to get to that point, they had to climb the mountain of social expectation. Or rather, they had to cross the snake pit that was Caruthers.

“Wen.” Jack shook his beloved, speaking as loudly as he could without alerting anyone who might be within earshot to their presence. “Wen, wake up.”

“Hmm?” Wen moved slowly, stretching like a cat as he came out of sleep. His movements were enough to light Jack on fire.

“Wake up, love,” he said, shaking Wen a bit more. “It’s just now dawn, and you need to steal back up to your room so you aren’t discovered missing.”

Wen growled like a dissatisfied kitten and snuggled against Jack. “I don’t care. I want to stay here.”

Jack laughed, shoving him a bit. “You do care,” he reminded him. “You care because you want to discern why your friend George left you a nasty man in his will.”

Wen grunted and dragged himself to sit. “It seems rather fitting, George willing men to people.”

Jack sat with him, grinning at Wen in the darkness despite the wealth of misgivings inside him. Wen looked a mess—rumpled, smudged, and with bits of straw poking out of his hair.

“Fitting or not,” Jack said, pushing himself to stand and bringing Wen with him so he could brush the straw from his body, “you’re still determined to retake your place in the *ton*. And if you want to do that, as you suggested, you need to know what Caruthers knows.”

Though if Jack were honest, he didn’t see why Wentworth still wanted a place amongst all those stiff, backstabbing nobles. Hadn’t they been perfectly happy in their own society for the last few years? Hadn’t the last few days shown him another way?

No. Jack was forced to admit it. Wentworth hadn't been entirely happy keeping to himself and the small, loyal circle of friends they had—most of whom were not of the same class as Wentworth. And bless him, Wen thrived in society. The Lamb was proof of what he needed, not an argument against it.

Jack just wished Wen had a choice other than no society or a society he didn't belong in.

“Off you go,” he said, turning Wen toward the loft's ladder and smacking his backside once he'd removed all the straw he could see from Wen's person. “Hurry along and climb back in bed. Don't let anyone see you along the way.”

Wentworth sighed and rubbed his face. When he lowered his hands, it was as if he'd wiped away the sweet, comfortable Wen whom Jack wanted to hold and kiss and coddle and became the wary duke who knew he had a role to play and would play it well, whether he wanted to or not. He moved to the ladder and started down.

Jack followed him, crouching by the top of the ladder. When Wentworth's face was level with his, Wen paused, made eyes at him and smiled, then leaned in for a quick goodbye kiss.

“All will be well, Jack. You'll see,” he said. He winked, then continued down the ladder.

Jack's heart ran riot in his chest. He wanted things to be well, but he had no confidence that they would be. He moved to the edge of the loft and watched Jack in the dark space as he hurried to the stable door, then out into the kitchen yard. Then he rocked back and sat with a sigh.

To say that something was off in the situation he and Wen found themselves in was obvious. Wentworth had told him his friend George had left a second letter, explaining that Caruthers was the prize that could restore him to the good graces of the *ton*. Jack wanted a good, long look at that letter. It wasn't that he doubted Wen's word as to the letter's contents, but he was beginning to consider that perhaps Wen was reading what he wanted to read in the words of his late friend, not what the man had actually intended. The letter that

he saw in the parlor of Swanmore Glen could have meant several things, not just what Wen interpreted it to mean.

And then there was the conundrum of Caruthers. Jack frowned and puzzled over the man as he gathered up the things he'd taken into the hay loft with him and headed down and into the yard to wash up for the morning. Caruthers was clearly ambitious and eager to return to London—as a duke's valet, not independently. Jack was deeply curious as to why he had left London in the first place, though if he had to venture a guess, it would be that he'd taken the position with the Earl of Brailsford while the man resided in London and was then forced to decamp to the country when the earl left or be without a position entirely. Caruthers had the feel of a man who would do anything to claw his way into a position he thought was his due, even if it meant destroying people along the way.

People like Wentworth.

Jack scrubbed cold water from the pump in the yard over his face, but it was Caruthers that made him shiver. It was as likely as not that Caruthers would cut Wentworth down the moment he was no longer useful to him. Whatever the man's ultimate aims were, Jack was certain he only saw Wentworth as a means to an end and not as a man who deserved love and care, or even respect.

Which meant it truly was up to Jack to protect his beloved from the beast.

He finished washing and headed into the house, prepared for a fight of some sort. It came nearly right away.

“You!” The cook pointed at him the moment he stepped through into the kitchen. “Where is he? What did you do with him?”

Jack blinked several times, afraid Wentworth had been found out, and asked, “I beg your pardon?”

“The boy,” Cook huffed. “Where is he? You've *interfered* with him, haven't you.”

Jack bristled with indignation. "I did not," he growled. "It's far more likely that he grew fed up with your abuse and high tailed it out of here for sunnier climes."

As soon as Jack said that, he remembered Wen's story from the night before of instructing the hall boy to take all of their remaining money and to go to London, to Rawley House.

It took everything he had not to grin in satisfaction at that thought.

"You'd better hope we *don't* find him," Cook went on. "Because if we do and the lad tells a story of midnight buggery, you'll hang, you will."

Jack scowled and crossed his arms. He intensely hated the small-minded opinion that all men who were inclined toward their same sex were pederasts, and he was about to give Cook a piece of his mind on the subject when he thought better of it.

"I'll help you search for the lad," he said, launching into motion.

Searching Flagg Hall, downstairs and up, might provide further insight into the state of things in Lord Brailsford's realm, and possibly hint at what Caruthers had to offer Wentworth.

But an hour of searching only uncovered the fact that the downstairs area was an unorganized shambles, most of the rooms on the ground floor were coated in a layer of dust, Lord Brailsford's study looked as though it hadn't been cleaned in years, and none of the servants of Flagg Hall had the least bit of interest in doing their jobs.

The only half-light of hope came when Caruthers made his way into the servants' hall right about the time Cook finally deigned to start breakfast for Lord Brailsford and Wentworth and said, "Tell Toby to have his lordship's carriage prepared for the trip to London. His Grace and I will leave before luncheon."

It was not lost on Jack that Caruthers made no mention of him. That was an oversight he wouldn't stand for.



“I’ll just go up and see to His Grace’s morning ablutions,” he said, sending Caruthers a scathing look and starting for the hall.

“There is no need,” Caruthers said in an icy voice, stepping into Jack’s path. “I’ve already gotten His Grace up.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at Caruthers. “His Grace does not like to wake until after nine at the very earliest. It’s barely half seven now.”

“Nevertheless,” Caruthers said, “I have already gotten him out of bed, helped him to wash, and dressed him.”

Aside from the fact that Caruthers made it sound as though Wentworth were a child, the very idea of another man laying hands on his beloved put Jack into the sourest mood possible.

“It is a poor valet who ignores the wishes of his master,” he growled, staring daggers at Caruthers.

“And it is a poor servant who allows his master’s clothing to become miraculously soiled in the middle of the night when he is abed.” Caruthers reached out and plucked a small piece of straw from Jack’s sleeve.

Caruthers met his eyes with a threatening look. He knew. Strangely, Jack didn’t mind the man’s knowledge nearly as much as he should have. Caruthers knew that Wentworth had been with him during the night. Whatever interpretation the man put onto the facts, they showed that Wentworth trusted Jack and wanted to be with him. That gave Jack the power in the situation.

He stared right back at Caruthers, daring him to deny it.

Caruthers dropped the piece of straw and brushed his hands, as though he’d handled something foul. “Do not think I am ignorant of the *attachment* you might think you have with His Grace,” he said in a low, irritable voice. “Such familiarities are often formed between noblemen and their *servants*.” He emphasized the word servant as if to dismiss Jack entirely.

It was a calculated risk, but Jack crossed his arms and said as though it were nothing, “Actually, I do not think you have

the slightest notion of the sort of attachment Wentworth and I have.”

He waited with baited breath to see how Caruthers would react to his declaration.

Caruthers seemed to have a moment of pause. He frowned as if mulling over the complication to his plans, but recovered all too quickly.

“You are a fool if you believe I cannot provide the sort of *services* to His Grace that you purport to provide,” he said in a voice so low that Jack almost couldn’t hear it. And he’d be damned if he leaned closer to the man to hear him better. Caruthers sniffed, rolled his shoulders, and tilted his head back before saying, “How do you think I became so closely associated with the late Lord Wilmore?”

Jack hated the man. Not so much because he was a stubborn little shit who thought he could rule over his betters, but because Jack had the strong feeling that Caruthers wasn’t particularly inclined to love men—or anyone else for that matter—but that he would engage in behavior that he deemed debasing if it advanced his cause. Men like that turned Jack’s stomach.

“What time do we depart for London?” he asked instead of wasting his time debating the matter with the man.

“As soon as the carriage can be prepared and His Grace has properly said goodbye to his lordship, I would imagine,” Caruthers said.

Jack nodded and started past the man. “I’ll be ready,” he said.

He didn’t know where he was going or what he would do, but it felt right to march away from Caruthers instead of giving the man the upper hand by letting him do the walking away.

He headed straight to the servants’ stairs and up to the ground floor, but once he was there, he had no idea where to go. It wasn’t as though he and Wentworth had any baggage to be seen to in advance of departure. They had nothing but the

clothing on their backs, which was borrowed at that. He didn't even know where Wentworth's room was.

It was a stroke of luck that he encountered Wentworth coming down the main stairs, looking just as confused as Jack felt.

"Has no one made breakfast yet?" Wentworth asked, his stance loosening a bit when he spotted Jack.

"Cook was just starting it when I left a moment ago," Jack said, quickly closing the distance between them.

There wasn't anyone around to censure him for moving too close to Wentworth or speaking too informally to him, so Jack took advantage of the moment.

"Caruthers has ordered a carriage to be prepared, and by the sound of it, that conveyance will take us all the way back to London," he said.

"Oh, thank God," Wentworth said, letting out a breath. "My patience for this quest has reached its end, and I want nothing more than to go home."

Jack smiled weakly, reaching out to subtly take Wentworth's hand. "I want to go home too," he said.

For a moment, Wentworth glanced to him with a warm smile. That smile faltered, though. "You must help me discover what talent or magic Caruthers has to restore me to the *ton* as quickly as possible so that I might dismiss him sooner rather than later."

The ache of disappointment that squeezed Jack's insides was a bit unexpected. He didn't care for Wentworth's obsession with the *ton* at all, but it was something Wentworth cared about, so he would help him.

He nodded. "I'll do what I can."

It didn't feel like there was much he could do, though. He had no authority at Flagg Hall, so there were few ways he could be of use as Lord Brailsford's carriage was brought out and prepared for the journey. He chatted with the driver, discussing the route they would take and the necessity they

would have of spending a night at a coaching in, most likely near Oxford. Jack thought about suggesting they stay at The Lamb again, but that was a sacred place in his heart now. Allowing Caruthers to set foot on that hallowed ground would be like allowing him to spit on an altar.

They were as ready as they could be just before eleven o'clock, and the carriage was taken around to the front of the house. Jack managed to meet up with Wentworth in the front hall after Wen had said his goodbyes to Lord Brailsford, and to accompany him down the steps toward the carriage. As soon as they reached the vehicle, though, Caruthers bolted in with an offer to assist Wentworth into the carriage.

"I think you will find, Mr. Caruthers," Wentworth said with a great deal of dignity, "that, unlike your previous master, I am hale and fit, and I can ascend into a carriage without assistance."

"Yes, Your Grace," Caruthers said, snapping his hands behind his back and stepping away from Wentworth.

Jack smirked at the set-down, but Caruthers had more tricks to try.

As soon as Wentworth was inside the carriage, Caruthers moved into the doorway, blocking Jack's attempt to climb in behind him.

"I think you will find, Mr. Cotton, that it is more usual for lower servants to ride on the seat with the driver," Caruthers said.

Jack fought to keep his temper in check. "And I think *you* will find, Mr. Caruthers, that I am still His Grace's valet, and that your status has yet to be determined."

Caruthers laughed, his lips twisting into a sneer. "Again, I think you will find, Mr. Cotton—"

"Bloody hell, will the two of you cease this at once and get into the carriage?" Wentworth snapped from inside the conveyance. "We'll be here all day if you continue thusly, and I wish to return home as swiftly as possible."

Jack sent Caruthers a look as though he'd won. Caruthers's expression dropped for only a moment, though, before he scrambled into the carriage, as if beating Jack inside was any sort of victory.

Jack huffed a sigh and rolled his eyes at the driver—who he'd determined earlier had no love lost for Caruthers, and who had mentioned he might attempt to find a new position once they'd reached London rather than returning to Derbyshire—then stepped into the carriage himself.

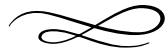
Wentworth was seated in the forward-facing seat, as was his right as a duke, but Jack was surprised that Caruthers had taken a spot on the rear-facing seat rather than sitting beside Wentworth. Or perhaps in his lap. At least the man observed some boundaries.

That being said, Jack was used to sitting by Wentworth's side on carriage drives. He knew he could not get away with it now, though. He sent Wentworth a careful look, then took a seat beside Caruthers and crossed his arms.

Caruthers sniffed and made a face, as though Jack were filthy. He attempted to draw Wentworth in with the expression, but Wentworth was already staring out the window, his arms crossed and his jaw hard, as if he wanted nothing to do with any of the drama in the carriage.

Jack was certain it was all for Caruthers's benefit and if it had been just the two of them, his demeanor would have been different. All the same, he had the horrible feeling they were in for a rough ride before they made it home.

## *Sixteen*



It was the most uncomfortable journey of Wentworth's life, and it seemed like it would never end.

At first, Wentworth thought he could ignore Caruthers by feigning interest in the countryside. That meant he was forced to ignore Jack as well, though, and he hated ignoring Jack. Everything within him burned for Jack and wanted to tell his beloved to move to the seat beside him where he belonged. But he couldn't do that with Caruthers sitting right there.

He tried sending Jack a few significant looks now and then to communicate that all was not lost and that the journey they were on was temporary. But every time he so much as blinked in Jack's direction, Caruthers seemed to take notice and bristle with indignation. For a portion of the early afternoon, it became a game of Wentworth trying to look at Jack when Caruthers was otherwise engaged, but Caruthers was never otherwise engaged. He was always staring at Wentworth, as though plotting how he could use Wentworth to further his own designs.

As soon as Wentworth recognized that, he could barely sit still. Every bump in the road and ever rut that the carriage wheels fell into was a form of torture as he squirmed under the constant scrutiny. Worse still, judging by the flat looks Jack sent Caruthers and the way the two men tried desperately not to touch each other by even a hair, Jack knew things about Caruthers that Wentworth had yet to find out.

Unfortunately, if the occasional disgusted glances Caruthers sent Jack now and then were any indication,

Caruthers had discovered quite a bit about Jack as well. Which meant he'd likely discovered things about Wentworth himself.

It was enough to drive Wentworth to distraction. Once again, as he squirmed and fussed and failed to find a comfortable way to sit as the silent journey went on and on, Wentworth wondered what the devil George had been thinking to leave him with a snake like Caruthers.

By the time the sun spread its last rays over the chilly countryside, dimming the light in the carriage a bit, Wentworth had reached the end of his patience.

"The late Lord Wilmore seems to think you could be of great use in restoring my fortunes in society," he blurted, too aggravated with everything to find a cleverer way to discover what he needed to know. "How do you plan to accomplish this?"

Jack's brow flew up in surprise, and perhaps a bit of censure. It was the first time Jack had changed his expression since they'd set out from Flagg Hall.

Caruthers merely cleared his throat, sat a bit straighter, and grinned at Wentworth as though he'd been waiting all day for him to ask. "It is a simple matter, really, Your Grace," he said, leaning forward with a conspiratorial flush.

"Is it?" Wentworth leaned back, disliking the way the man sought to invade his space.

Jack looked downright livid, but there was little he could do about it.

"Indeed," Caruthers said. "Any man can be made to do something he does not want to do if given the right incentive."

Wentworth blinked at him and swallowed, desperately uneasy with the direction of the conversation. "I do not wish for them to do something they do not want to do in my regard," he said. "I would like for them to *want* to accept me back into their circles."

Wentworth caught a twitch of Jack's mouth out of the corner of his eye, and when he peeked at Jack, his beloved was frowning. As if he doubted what Wentworth had said.

“They will never *want* to accept you at all, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “But they will welcome you with open arms all the same.”

A deep gloominess washed through Wentworth at that statement. It wasn't what he wanted to hear, but at the same time, it was what he'd expected.

Again, he peeked at Jack. This time, a sympathetic softness had filled his lover's eyes. Jack knew what he wanted.

But whatever cozy feeling Jack gave him was blasted away before it could take hold when Caruthers said, “Power comes from convincing others to do what they are loath to do. The *ton* are a close group. They will all have agreed to shun you, Your Grace, and when a few of them crack and allow you back in, they will know that you have power over them. Once that balance is established, you will have your pick of invitations and will be the most celebrated figure of the coming season.”

Wentworth let out a breath and sagged a bit. “I do not wish to be feared,” he said.

Another faint twitch of Jack's mouth seemed to indicate that Jack had heard the second, unspoken half of his thought—that he wished to be loved.

“Fear is the only way to crack through the thick skulls of those people, Your Grace,” Caruthers said with a shrug. “They respond to nothing else. Every aspect of their lives is ruled by fear—fear of being excluded from the inner circle, fear of embarrassment after their fall, fear of loss of reputation and financial gain, and especially fear that their offspring will be shunned from the central core as well. I think you will find that the people whose favor you wish to win would do just about anything if you motivated them with fear.”

Wentworth writhed inwardly, though he managed to only shift a bit outwardly. “Would it not be more genuine for me to win the *ton* over with kindness and generosity of spirit?”

Caruthers barked a laugh. “Heavens, no, Your Grace,” he said. “Kindness is seen as a weakness with this lot. And as a



duke, if you show kindness, it will only enforce the, shall we say, less than manly opinion they all have of you.”

Shame and a prickling sense of wrongness shot through Wentworth, making him want to sink into the seat. He fought that by stiffening his back and tilting his chin up in the image of what most people felt a duke should look like.

“Kindness shows magnanimity,” he said in lofty tones.

Caruthers shook his head. “Kindness shows that you have the sentiment of a woman. And if what I have been given to understand is correct, half of the reason the *ton* has rejected you is because of certain *soft* traits.”

Wentworth heated with sudden anger. Damn him if he knew why coldness and cruelty were considered masculine traits and compassion and kindness were considered feminine ones. And damn the rest of society for believing that a man was not manly unless he was aggressive, brazen, and ruthless.

“What do you suggest, then?” he asked, staring hard at Caruthers, as if to remind him who in the carriage actually had the upper hand.

Unfortunately, doing so seemed only to prove all the things he hated about the roles everyone was meant to play.

Caruthers either didn’t notice or had been waiting so long to speak his plans aloud that he did not care. “You must strike key members of the *ton* to the quick,” he said. “You must threaten to expose their darkest secrets and to bring everything they’ve sought to hide into the light.”

“I’m not certain that is particularly sporting,” Wentworth said, sending Jack a quick look.

Jack’s expression was full of alarm and revulsion as he watched Caruthers. He’d scooted far to the side, as if to get away from Caruthers as much as possible.

It was almost as though Jack had already heard the words Caruthers said next.

“Whether it is sporting or not is irrelevant, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “It is a matter of striking strategically to

cripple your enemy before they can do more damage to you.

“Take Lord Kimbolton,” he went on, leaning forward and making Wentworth want to flee. “The man is a prominent Tory and holds quite a bit of sway in Parliament. Lady Kimbolton is a leader in her circles. If you were to win an invitation to a ball or other event hosted by Lady Kimbolton or her friends, it would force the other members of the *ton* to take notice of you.”

“And how would I convince Lady Kimbolton to issue any sort of invitation to me?” Wentworth asked. He hadn’t received so much as a scrap from any of that crowd in three years.

“Simple,” Caruthers said, leaning back—thank God—and spreading his hands. “You simply need to send Lord Kimbolton a letter stating that you know all about his holiday in Naples last autumn and the company he kept there.”

Wentworth frowned. Jack frowned as well.

“I do not understand your meaning,” Wentworth said.

“But Kimbolton will,” Caruthers said. Wentworth wasn’t certain he wanted to know, but Caruthers didn’t seem able to resist adding, “He spent the entire fortnight surrounded by girls of a delicate age, enjoying their favors. He paid additional amounts for untouched maidens that he could debauch at his leisure.”

Both Wentworth and Jack recoiled.

“That is abhorrent,” Jack hissed.

“Precisely,” Caruthers smiled. “And Kimbolton would go to great lengths to have the whole thing forgotten.”

Wentworth opened his mouth to say he could not possibly speak of such things and that he would do better to alert the authorities than use the criminal holiday as blackmail, but Caruthers wasn’t finished.

“You should then send a letter to Lady Bathurst to inquire whether her colonial investments have been profitable as of late,” he said.

“I am not certain I wish to know,” Wentworth said, his voice hoarse.

Regardless, Caruthers said, “She has a stake in a slave trading enterprise in the American state of Alabama. It has made her a small fortune, but as you might imagine, she has kept this enterprise a secret from her friends. And from Lord Bathurst.”

“Slavery has all but been abolished, thank God,” Wentworth said.

Caruthers shrugged. “Not in America. Lady Bathurst enjoys the profits immeasurably. She uses them to fund her balls, and the summer house parties she has become famous for. One whisper of her financial dealings and you would receive an invitation to said house parties.”

“Why would I want that?” Wentworth asked.

Caruthers gaped at him. “Because if you are accepted by a handful of key people, you will be accepted by all.”

Wentworth winced. He hated it, but Caruthers had a point. An invitation to Lady Kimbolton’s musical events would mean he could be seen as in favor. He wouldn’t have to so much as look at Lord Kimbolton, let alone spend time in the man’s company. If he attended a house party thrown by Lady Bathurst, he could use the opportunity to discuss the evils of slavery with her. Or he could spend time with her other guests.

What Caruthers was suggesting was manipulation and treachery, but hadn’t he done the same the night before when he hinted to Jack that he was in need of protection to get what he wanted from the man?

That thought had Wentworth looking at Jack to see what he thought. Unsurprisingly, Jack seemed horrified by everything Caruthers said. Worse than that, Wentworth could tell the moment Jack’s gaze flickered to him that Jack knew he was considering what Caruthers had to say instead of rejecting it outright. And he did not approve.

“And the things I could tell you about Lord Melbourne himself would turn your hair white,” Caruthers went on, much

to Wentworth's chagrin. "That man has a taste for inflicting pain that would—"

"I believe the carriage is stopping," Wentworth interrupted, more glad for their arrival at a coaching inn than he could say.

Alighting at the inn proved to be another sort of trial. Caruthers leapt to the fore, attempting to arrange everything, as he called it, without consulting Wentworth or accounting for Jack. He seemed intent on keeping Wentworth and Jack separate, to the point of securing a room for Wentworth by himself and arranging for Jack to spend the night in a public room, not unlike the one he and Jack had spent the first night of their journey in, along with the carriage driver.

The silver lining of that arrangement was that Wentworth was able to tell Caruthers he did not require his help going to bed that night and that after spending all day in a carriage, he merely wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Caruthers dithered when it came to leaving, but he eventually did. The second the man stepped out of Wentworth's room, Wentworth locked the door. Half an hour later, when Caruthers knocked and requested entrance, Wentworth feigned sleep until he gave up and went away.

The downside to that ploy was that Wentworth was unable to speak to Jack. Caruthers had successfully kept them apart before Wentworth closeted himself in his room, and Wentworth was too anxious of Caruthers keeping an eye on him and interfering to attempt to sneak out of his room in the night to find Jack.

It was a miserable situation, but Wentworth trusted that Jack would know his heart and mind, and would know that there was nothing he could do to gain them the time they needed together before they reached home.

In the morning, even though it was the very last thing Wentworth wanted to do, he urged the driver to prepare the carriage for the remainder of the journey as early as possible, then hurried everyone through their breakfasts so that they could be on the road a mere hour after dawn.

“I just wish to get home,” Wentworth whispered to Jack in the few seconds they had without Caruthers breathing down their necks, just before climbing into the carriage. “That man will not leave us alone until he has something else to occupy his time and until we are back in our own territory.”

“I’m just afraid he will continue to impose himself on you the way he has done these last two days,” Jack whispered in return. He met Wentworth’s eyes and murmured, “I do not like it.”

“Neither do I,” Wentworth whispered in return, brushing his fingers subtly against Jack’s as a sign of where his loyalty lay. “But some of his suggestions might actually work.”

Jack’s eyes flared with indignation, but Caruthers rounded the back of the carriage at that moment, preventing further conversation. The man brightened into a smile at the confrontational way Jack stared at Wentworth, which depressed Wentworth’s spirits.

That was only the beginning of the defeat of Wentworth’s spirits. Caruthers had much more to say as they made their way closer to London that day.

“Of course, the surest way to secure a place in society once more, Your Grace, would be to marry well,” Caruthers said after they’d stopped briefly for luncheon and to rest the horses.

“I beg your pardon?” Wentworth asked, fearing he sounded too appalled by the suggestion.

Caruthers shrugged. “You would not be the first man of your nature to marry.”

That snapped Wentworth’s mouth shut entirely and had him burning with indignant embarrassment.

“There are plenty of well-bred young ladies in London who are set to make their debut this season, Your Grace,” Caruthers went on. “Why I could list three or four off the top of my head whose mamas would salivate at the chance to have a duchess in the family. Two or three of those would pave the way for you to receive more social invitations than any peer, not only this season, but in years to come. Nothing and no one

is as effective at establishing a man's reputation than the desperate mother of a debutante."

"I am not inclined to marry," Wentworth snapped, then added. "It would be horrifically unfair to the lady."

Caruthers snorted. "What do they care? Your bride would have a title that would make her the envy of all, and, if I am not mistaken, a fortune to match it."

Wentworth could only gape at the man's callousness.

"The easiest way to catch a duchess," Caruthers went on, heedless of Wentworth's shock, "is to compromise them. And to do that, you need only lure the young lady in question into a seldom-used salon during whatever event you've arranged to meet her."

"I do not think—"

"Get her alone, lift her skirt a little, tear her bodice a bit, then, when she cries out, arrange to have one of the servants discover you," Caruthers went on. "The young woman's mother would bless you for forcing the girl into a spot where she could not back out of the marriage, no matter what she discovers about your true character."

Wentworth went hot and cold at the horrific suggestion, sweat breaking out on his back. It reminded him all too much of the indignity of being discovered with George at Lady Cowper's ball.

"I could never, ever dream of ruining a lady that way," he said, his voice tight and breathless with offense.

"You would not actually have to do anything," Caruthers said. He blinked then smiled, "And what better way to accomplish everything that we have discussed than by hosting a ball yourself once we return to London."

Despite his horror at everything else Caruthers had said, the idea of a ball perked Wentworth's interest.

"A ball?" he asked.

He had fond memories of the balls his mother had hosted when he was a boy, before she'd passed. The excitement in the

house had been scintillating. Watching the guests arrive from the stairs with his brother and sister was one of his favorite childhood memories. Several of the guests had cooed and fussed over the three of them as well, and even though they'd been too young to attend any of the balls, Wentworth had loved meeting and talking with the guests that had noticed them watching and bothered to introduce themselves. Before Nanny had whisked them up to the nursery, that was.

"I would not mind hosting a ball," Wentworth said with a faint smile.

"You wouldn't?" Jack snapped, seemingly still in a state of revulsion at everything Caruthers was and said.

Caruthers apparently took Wentworth's simple statement as a declaration of victory. "I shall begin planning and make a list of very special guests as soon as we arrive home, Your Grace."

Wentworth suddenly saw a way forward. He still abhorred the idea of Caruthers being anywhere near his person or tending to him as a valet, but there was nothing to say that he couldn't hire Caruthers as his man of business. That way, he would reap whatever benefit George intended for him to have, but he wouldn't have to remain in close quarters with Caruthers. In fact, he could let a flat somewhere for Caruthers to live in so that the two of them need not meet more than once a week at most.

Conversation lulled once more as Wentworth contemplated that course of action. It was enough to make him smile vaguely, but after a while, he noticed Jack staring at him with a look of disapproving incredulity. Wentworth's smile vanished, mostly because there was no way for him to explain what it had been about.

Jack continued to watch him the way someone might watch a child who had been exposed to a pox to see if they were developing spots. Perhaps it was the strain and exhaustion of the last few days, but Wentworth decided he didn't like it. But again, there was nothing he could say about

it and nothing he could do with Caruthers sitting right there with them.

He didn't have an opportunity to say anything to Jack until they'd made it all the way to London late that night. It was a monumental relief to be home, but the contentiousness of the last two days did not evaporate, as Wentworth had hoped it would, once they were safely back at Rawley House.

"Your services are no longer required, Mr. Cotton," Caruthers said as he strode ahead of Jack to follow behind Wentworth as he made his way up the stairs.

They'd already greeted Mr. Merchant, and Dolly had promised to send one of the maids up with warm wash water right away. Jack had stayed behind for the briefest of moments to thank Dolly and to assure Merchant that they were well and the journey had been strange but interesting. Caruthers had seized that moment to assert his place.

Wentworth wasn't having it.

"I beg your pardon," he said, eyes flaring as he stood two steps above Caruthers. "You are presumptuous, sir. Mr. Cotton is my valet, not you, regardless of what promises the late Lord Wilmore made to you."

"But, Your Grace," Caruthers began. He lost some of his color, and the cockiness that had been evident in his expression for the last two days drained away as he realized, perhaps, that he was no longer on his own turf.

"There is no argument about anything in this case," Wentworth went on. "Mr. Cotton is and will remain my valet. But you will be pleased to know that I have given it some thought, and if you will accept the position, I would be willing to hire you as my man of business."

"Your Grace," Caruthers said, lowering his head and backing down.

Wentworth caught a sly smile from the man that Caruthers might have been trying to hide. It sent a chill down his back.

Just as bad as that, Jack glared at him as he made his way up the stairs. Not mildly, like he had been in the carriage. The



frustration and disapproval in Jack's expression now was like nothing Wentworth had ever seen from the man. He supposed it was an unexpected result of the two of them crossing the Rubicon where their relationship was concerned and deepening the nature of their attachment, but he wasn't certain he would like the things that came along with removing all barriers between them.

"Merchant, see to it that Mr. Caruthers is given a place to stay tonight," Wentworth said as Jack stomped up the stairs to his side. "We will discuss more permanent arrangements in the morning."

"Yes, Your Grace," Merchant said with a bow, sending Jack a wary look.

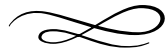
"Good night, Mr. Caruthers," Wentworth said, maintaining a slightly frosty air, mostly for Jack's sake. He didn't want Jack's anger to be because he felt Wentworth had any truly kind feelings toward George's prize.

He turned with a sigh, continuing up the stairs with Jack a half step behind him...until they were out of sight of the rest of the staff.

"I can explain my reasonings behind that," he said under his breath as he and Jack headed down the hall to their rooms.

"Yes," Jack said in clipped, hurt tones, glaring at Wentworth. "You'd better."

## *Seventeen*



Jack had spent most of the irritatingly long journey home cursing the late Lord Wilmore's name and debating whether he could get away with opening the carriage door and shoving Caruthers out as they sped across the countryside. With any luck, the man would be dashed to bits in one of the carriage's rear wheels.

But the moment the tide turned and Wentworth seemed to be listening to the man's evil, a whole different set of emotions flooded him.

Wentworth couldn't actually be considering following Caruthers's vile advice, could he? True, Caruthers had an accurate assessment of the characters of a great deal of the nobility. Lord Kimbolton was a villain, and if Lady Bathurst truly had made a fortune on the slave trade, she hadn't passed those benefits along to her servants. Servants talked from household to household, and because of that gossip, he knew the rumors about Lord Melbourne and his dark tastes in abusing maids was accurate. Any one of those nobs, and many more besides, would fall at Wentworth's feet to get him to keep quiet about their indiscretions.

But acceptance into society by blackmail was not suitable for Wentworth. Jack knew his love more than well enough to know that was not what Wentworth truly wanted. That sort of trickery was not who Wentworth was, and Wen wouldn't truly be happy in the society of those people at any rate.

So to give Caruthers the delicate position of Wentworth's man of business came not only as a shock to Jack, it was a

bitter disappointment in the man he regarded so highly.

“What the devil would possess you to employ that man in any position at all, let alone one where he will be privy to sensitive information about you?” he demanded as soon as Wentworth’s bedroom door was shut behind them.

Wentworth sighed and crossed to his bed, rubbing his face as he went. “I don’t see as I have any other choice,” he said, sitting with a huff. The action somehow diminished him and made him look like a recalcitrant child who had been sent to his room.

Jack strode over to him, feeling no compunctions at all about trapping Wentworth against the bed and towering over him. “You cannot be so desperate for company that you would embrace a viper to have it,” he said.

To his surprise, Wentworth’s eyes went wide with offence. He moved as if he would stand, but he couldn’t with Jack blocking him.

“Yes, in fact, I *am* that desperate for company,” he fired up at Jack. Jack snorted a laugh, but Wentworth went on with a surprising amount of seriousness. “You do not know what it has been like these past several years, Jack. You do not know what it is like to be excluded from all society by the people you went to Eton and Oxford with, by your childhood playmates and the children of your parents’ dearest friends. You do not know the agony of having every door slammed in your face and the people who once said they cared for you curl their lips and turn away from you when they discover who you are and what you believe.”

Jack wanted to argue the point, but all he could do was cross his arms and take a half step back. “I am sorry you have been hurt, but that is no excuse to stoop to villainy in order to return to grace.”

“I’ve no wish to be a villain,” Wentworth insisted, standing so he could face Jack, their eyes level. “But I have no wish to be alone either.”

Jack tried, he truly tried, not to feel hurt by those words. “You are not alone,” he said, his voice coming out gruff and tight with emotion.

Wentworth’s eyes went soft and regretful. He laid a hand on Jack’s arm. “I will never be completely lonely as long as I have you, Jack,” he said, moving his hand to cup Jack’s face. “You have saved me from utter despair these last few years. You have made my life feel cozy and bright. You are a gift in ways that Caruthers and his machinations could never be.”

Wentworth almost had him, up until the moment he mentioned Caruthers.

Jack pulled away. He didn’t step back or walk away from Wen, but he shook off Wentworth’s touch in order to keep his head clear.

“I am not enough for you,” he said. To a degree, Jack’s words sounded like a complaint, like he was brooding and hurt. But really, they were a mere statement of fact.

Wentworth sighed, dropping his hand to his side. “No one should be anyone’s sole means of comfort and company,” he said, confirming Jack’s assessment. “If I only ever looked to you to be my society, you would come to resent me. Quickly, I’d wager. You know that I care for you on a level so deep that our souls are entwined...but I need friends as well. I need invitations and other pursuits. As do you.”

“I am not denying any of that,” Jack said, wishing he could.

Part of him wanted to wrap Wen in his arms and keep him all to himself. But Wen was right. That would be a disaster for both of them.

He frowned and went on with, “You are correct, but do you have to trust yourself and something so important to you to *Caruthers*?” He spoke the man’s name as if it left a sour taste in his mouth. “If you follow that man’s plans, then you could end up even more hated than you already are.”

Wentworth jerked back in offense. “The *ton* does not hate me,” he insisted. “They just...don’t care for me.”

Jack pressed his lips together and stared hard at Wentworth. The man was fighting so hard for a prize that did not deserve him at all. More than anything, Jack wished there were another way for the man he loved. He wished there was some other society, another avenue for Wentworth to find the company and camaraderie he craved.

“I do like Caruthers’s idea of hosting a ball,” Wentworth said carefully. “That is a simple enough endeavor. Surely, we could host a ball, invite most of the *ton*, and once they are here, whatever means we use to bait them into coming, they will see that I am actually a lovely fellow and worthy of acquaintance.”

It took everything Jack had not to smile at Wentworth’s rosy view of the situation, particularly as Wen smiled himself in that fetching, cajoling way he had. Jack was helpless against that smile.

He forced himself to disapproval again and said, “A ball might not do any harm, but I absolutely draw the line at allowing you to compromise some poor girl in order to make her a duchess.”

“God, no!” Wentworth said, recoiling. “I am certain there are many lovely girls in London, but there is only one person I wish to share a bed with.” He reached up and stroked Jack’s cheek, making eyes at him.

Jack growled, refusing to uncross his arms and return the affectionate gesture. “I am not your duchess,” he said.

“No,” Wen laughed. “There will be no duchesses here.”

The issue wasn’t resolved, Jack knew. Caruthers was still in the house, no doubt terrorizing Dolly and the rest of the servants. Things between him and Wentworth had only been patched. He could feel a great deal more still needed to be said, and nothing was truly resolved.

“Come to bed,” Wentworth said, stooping so low as to bat his eyelashes at Jack.

Jack stepped backwards, despite the fact that his cock was eager to obey Wen’s command. “No,” he said. “You need a

bath, which I will see to. And I've no doubt Caruthers is causing mayhem downstairs. I need to come to Dolly's aid and make certain Caruthers understands that his place in this household is not what he thinks it is."

Wentworth sighed and let his shoulders drop. "I suppose you're right. Dolly will be livid once Caruthers shows his true colors. You'd best go and rescue her. And find out if that hall boy, Gil, made it here safely while you're at it."

The disappointment and hints of exactly the loneliness Wentworth had been trying to convince Jack he felt peeked through in Wen's expression. It was enough to prompt Jack to sigh, roll his eyes at the futility of the situation they were in, and lean in to buss Wen's mouth before turning and marching toward the door.

"Behave yourself, Wen," he charged his love as he walked away. "You mentioned something about punishment before. Don't make me go out and find a cane for your backside."

As he'd expected, Wentworth made a whimpering sound and flushed bright scarlet, his eyes lighting with lust. Jack shook his head and exited the room, smiling as he did. Lord, but Wen was wild and ridiculous...and so dear that Jack would fight until he was a bloody mess to keep him safe from the likes of Caruthers. And the unworthy *ton*.

His smile lasted until he was downstairs. He could hear the din before he stepped into the servants' hall and found Caruthers face to face and toe to toe with Dolly.

"This is *my* house, sir," Dolly snapped at Caruthers in her cockney accent. "I don't give a fuck who you used to serve or whose arse you were up before, you'll do things my way, an' you'll sleep in the scullery if I say so."

"I am His Grace's man of business, *miss*," Caruthers threw back at her, biting his words as if he were biting his thumb at her. "I am accustomed to finer accommodations than an attic room."

"You'll not be given a fuckin' guest room, that's for certs," Dolly said, her nostrils flaring with anger. She spotted Jack

and pulled him into the fray. “Jack! Tell this pillock he’s to do as I say, he is!”

Jack sighed, wishing he could grab Caruthers by the collar and toss him out of the house entirely, as he approached the arguing pair. The only bright spot in the situation was that he spotted young Gil peering around a corner to watch the confrontation along with Calvin, Rawley House’s hall boy.

“You’ll take the room Mrs. Smith tells you to take or you’ll have no room at all,” Jack said, hoping he could end things before they started.

“And is this what His Grace wishes?” Caruthers asked, puffing himself up.

“Yes,” Jack said with full confidence.

Whether Caruthers believed him or not, the man gaped and flapped his mouth at Jack for a second, no words coming out. When he finally had the power of speech, he growled, “We’ll just see about this.”

He tried to walk off, but Jack shifted to block his path. “You’ll not disturb His Grace now,” he said. He glanced past Caruthers to a righteous-looking Dolly and said, “He’d like a bath, then supper and bed. We’ve all had a long and trying few days.”

“Yes, sir,” Dolly said, grinning smugly at Caruthers as she rushed to do Jack’s bidding, as if rubbing in the point of who was truly in charge at Rawley House. It was exactly the opposite of how things had been at Flagg Hall.

Caruthers evidently had those same thoughts. “Why is the butler not being consulted in this matter?” he snapped. “In what sort of house are a cheap, low-born housekeeper and a mere valet the ultimate authority?”

“In *this* house,” Jack said, raising his voice. “And you were keen to be a *mere* valet just hours ago. You’re no better than the rest of us, Caruthers, and the sooner you learn that, the easier things will be for you.”

It felt uncommonly good to be on his own turf again and to feel the rush of authority that being home gave him. But he

was sorely disappointed when Caruthers refused to back down and slink off.

“We shall see about this,” Caruthers seethed instead, narrowing his eyes at Jack.

There was peace for the rest of the night, but Jack didn’t think for one moment that the peace would last.

He was right. Caruthers consented to sleep in one of the attic rooms usually reserved for servants that night, but the very next day, as soon as Wentworth was up and had breakfasted, then shifted to his study to meet with the man, Caruthers began his campaign to wheedle his way into Wentworth’s inner circle.

“Although the attic room is perfectly serviceable, Your Grace,” he made his case, eyeing Jack viciously as Jack pretended to have work to do at the other side of the study, “if I am to be your man of business, then I am not technically a servant in your household. I should not sleep with the servants, I should be given a guest room.”

Wentworth frowned and rubbed his temples as though he had a headache. “I suppose you are right,” he said with a sigh, as if the matter of where Caruthers slept was too much of a bother for him to fight it.

Jack sat straighter, gaping indignantly at Wentworth.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “If you will set your housekeeper straight on this matter, we can move on to designing our strategy for your ball. That is what is truly important here.”

Caruthers sent Jack a smug look of gloating.

“Yes, the ball,” Wentworth said, sitting forward at his desk. “When do you think we should have it?”

“No more than a fortnight from now, Your Grace,” Caruthers said.

Jack’s eyes went wide in a mirror of Wentworth’s expression of surprise.



“So soon?” Wentworth said. “That leaves hardly any time for arrangements.”

“And it leaves hardly any time for your intended guests to think of an excuse not to attend,” Caruthers said.

“But won’t they already have invitations for an event so soon?” Wentworth asked.

“That is part of the plan, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “If they are seen to cancel previous engagements in order to attend yours, it will give your event greater significance.”

“I suppose so,” Wentworth said, looking uncertain.

He *looked* uncertain, but he allowed Caruthers to continue without protesting a single word he said. The way Wentworth acquiesced to the man drove Jack to distraction.

And it wasn’t just the way Wentworth listened to Caruthers on one occasion and implemented the man’s conniving suggestions. Throughout the week that followed, Wentworth bowed to Caruthers’s wishes more and more. Caruthers ended up in a guest room that shared a wall with Wentworth’s room, which made any sort of activity that could create loud, telling noises utterly impossible. Caruthers was given a seat at Wentworth’s supper table so that he could continue to pour his poison into Wen’s ears.

Caruthers was allowed to tell the footmen how to do their jobs because the arse had convinced Wentworth that his experience in the households of other peers meant he knew how footmen should truly behave. He convinced Wentworth that the *ton* would notice these things when they attended his ball. It didn’t matter how loudly Dolly or Merchant protested, Wentworth allowed Caruthers to have his way.

“You’re causing chaos downstairs, Wen,” Jack scolded Wentworth one night before bed, a week before the ball was to be held. “Caruthers is brutish and arrogant with everyone that you have gathered to you, everyone who has been loyal to you all these years. It is not good.”

“I know,” Wentworth snapped peevishly as Jack helped him out of his boots. “I can barely tolerate the man myself.”

Jack huffed and let the boot he'd just tugged off Wentworth's leg drop with a clatter. "Then why the devil are you allowing the man to continue here as though he is some sort of deity?"

Wentworth's eyes went wide. "I am doing no such thing," he hissed.

"You are!" Jack argued. He tugged off Wentworth's other boot with enough force to jostle the man, which only made Wen glare at him. "You do not spend time belowstairs, where the ill effects of that man are most keenly felt."

"You think I am not feeling the ill effects?" Wentworth nearly shouted. When Jack glanced up at him with a flat look, he said, "My house was once a haven of peace and tranquility. It has become a hornet's nest of strife and disagreement since Caruthers has arrived."

"At least you recognize it," Jack said, throwing the other boot aside and standing to tower over Wentworth instead of kneeling before him.

"I most certainly do," Wentworth said, standing so that Jack could undo the buttons of his waistcoat while he untied his neckcloth. "I hate what has become of us." He met Jack's eyes with particular intensity. "We haven't been able to do more than sleep in the same bed since coming home. As pleasant as that is, I want to do more than sleep."

"So do I," Jack said, beyond frustrated. "So send Caruthers on his way. I can assure you that the moment the viper is out of the house, everything will return to as it should be."

"No," Wentworth protested, "everything will go back to the way it was. Which includes me being a social pariah. Caruthers can change my life and restore what I need."

"To be honest, Wen," Jack said with a heavy sigh, stepping back to rub his face once he had Wentworth unbuttoned and untucked, "I think you are deeply mistaken about what you need."

"That is easy for you to say," Wentworth huffed. "You discount my feelings and my fears by suggesting that I just

ignore and cast off the gift George has given me.”

“I never—”

“This is not about your opinions or your views of society,” Wentworth cut him off. “I have been lonely.” He tapped his chest, staring at Jack with a combination of anger and desperation. “I have been raised to be part of a society that has rejected me. You can judge and call me ridiculous and unmanly, you can say that a duke should have more command of the world around him, but if you do, you are being unfair.”

“Wentworth.”

“Caruthers has given me a way to get back what I lost,” Wentworth went on, louder still. “I do not like him. I disagree with his methods. I have grave reservations about keeping him in my employ. But he swears he can get results.”

Jack didn’t know what to say, particularly when Wen let out a heavy breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he were holding back tears.

“I cannot live in isolation anymore,” Wen said, sad and defeated. “I am not designed that way. I crave acceptance, Jack. I desire the company of others, of friends.” He dropped his hand and appealed to Jack with his eyes. “Please let me have that, whatever means I must use to get it, and please, do not judge me for things I need but cannot control.”

Jack swallowed hard and took a step back. Suddenly, it was as though a veil had dropped and he could see his beloved more clearly.

Wentworth was right. He’d been saying it all along, multiple times, but Jack hadn’t truly listened. He needed society. He needed friends. He had only been content in the past three years, with just the two of them and the other servants to be his society, he hadn’t been happy.

Jack remembered the way Wen had been at The Lamb. He’d laughed and caroused with the other field hands. He’d swapped stories and congratulated the others on their triumphs and sighed with them at their defeats. He’d toasted to a day’s

work well done and bartered with that farmer to sell his greatcoat.

*That* was the Wen Jack had fallen in love with. That was who Wen truly was. Jack had never seen him so happy, and he had the horrible feeling that if he didn't let Wen find another society like that—one made up of his social equals, without having to pretend he was someone he wasn't—then he would never see the Wen he loved again.

"I'm sorry," he said, his shoulders dropping. "I didn't realize how much this all means to you."

Wentworth stared at him. "You didn't realize?" He laughed impatiently. "I consented to travel halfway across the country without money to reach the estate of a man I did not know, and I hired another man whom I dislike intensely to run my affairs in a way I find highly questionable and uncomfortable, and you did not realize the possible results of it all were important to me?"

"I'm sorry," Jack said, lowering his head. He felt like shite—not just because he hadn't grasped the depth of Wentworth's desperation, but because he hadn't been able to do anything about it.

And now Wentworth was angry with him. He didn't honestly think that anger was fully justified, but he did understand it. He understood more than that as well, much though it pained him. He could love Wentworth with everything he had, until the end of time, but he couldn't give the man what he truly desired.

"I need to think about things," he said, raising his head and looking Wen in the eyes. It hurt, but he had to be honest. "You are right. I have not managed the situation as I should have. I have not given you the understanding and consideration you deserve. I've thought too much about what I want and assumed it was what you wanted as well."

"It is what I want," Wen said, a touch of fear in his eyes as he stepped closer to Jack. "I want you."

Jack took his hand when Wen reached out and rested his other hand against Wen's cheek. "My love, you want two things that are not compatible with each other."

Wen frowned in confusion. "No, I don't."

"I think you do," Jack said.

It would never do for a duke who was the darling of the *ton* to have a valet for a lover, or even a friend. That was not the way the world worked, and the sooner Wen understood that, the sooner he could find someone who suited him better. One of his friends who had also been at Swanmore Glen, perhaps. There were nobs aplenty with their tastes who would be more than happy to warm Wen's bed, and his heart.

If he loved Wen, he had to let him go so that he could find the right sort of life for him, the life of a duke.

"I need to go," he said, trying not to sound as devastated as he felt. "I have...things to think about."

He stepped away from Wen, letting go of him, mortally afraid that he would never touch his beloved again.

"Well, don't think too long," Wen said, oblivious to the change that had just happened between them. He stepped to the side, shrugging out of his waistcoat and tugging his shirt over his head. "This bloody ball is in a week. I've a bad feeling Caruthers penned personal notes to each of the invitees, detailing everything he has to hold over their heads but signing my name, and that I am about to have a household of snarling wolves to contend with. I need you to advise me on the best way to befriend the right nobles while making apologies to the wrong ones, since Caruthers assures me that all sorts will attend."

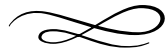
"Yes, Your Grace," Jack said, backing away with a half bow.

Wentworth turned to him and laughed, as if he thought Jack were joking by referring to him by his title. "I think I'll read for a bit. If I've fallen asleep without putting the lantern out when you return from thinking, turn it down for me and tuck me in. But don't lose my place in the book, mind you."

He smiled at Jack and winked before disappearing around the screen where his chamber pot and nightshirt were kept.

Jack smiled sadly in return...until Wentworth ducked out of view. Then his face fell into misery. He had to turn and flee the room before his grief got the better of him and he unmanned himself with tears.

## *Eighteen*



Wentworth stripped out of his things, donned his nightshirt, and climbed into bed with a book, just like he'd told Jack he would. But from the moment he reclined against the pillows and arranged the bedcovers around him, he couldn't do anything but ponder the confrontation he and Jack had just had.

Something was wrong. Well, more wrong than usual. He and Jack had bickered before. Anyone who had been with someone for years did, even if the full recognition of the sort of relationship he and Jack had was a new occurrence. Wentworth and Jack had disagreed about things in the past, and they'd gone off to bed angry with each other, only to have everything clearer in the light of day the next morning.

But somehow Wentworth knew that the morning would not bring sheepish apologies and handshakes as all was forgiven. There had been something more to Jack's demeanor just before he left to see to whatever business was underway downstairs. When they bickered, Jack was usually peevish and haughty—far more than a valet had any right to be. Secretly, Wentworth liked it when Jack was insolent with him, but that evening, there had been something more.

Wentworth tried to read, but he ended up staring blankly at the words on the same page for more than an hour. What had he said that had changed Jack's entire countenance?

The answer to that was obvious, really. He'd told Jack how lonely he'd been. For once, he'd been fully honest, both with himself and with Jack. Part of him hated the fact that he

needed more than just Jack to make his life feel full. That wasn't to say he didn't treasure Jack's company and his place in his life more than anyone else in the entire world, but neither did it mean he was unjustified in desiring friendships and society.

But he could have come up with a softer way to convey those emotions to Jack. He should have begun with sweet words and kisses, telling Jack that nothing came anywhere close to giving him the feelings of happiness and comfort that simply being in Jack's company gave him.

He should have told Jack he loved him.

The startling realization that Wentworth had yet to blatantly tell Jack that he loved him sent Wentworth into a panic. How could he forget something so basic and so vital?

Because his life had been a whirlwind for the last fortnight, that was how. Because every spare moment of his time had been taken up by Caruthers and plans for the blackmail ball. Those moments when Wentworth hadn't explicitly been planning the ball with Caruthers—viewing guest lists, listening to the sins of those guests and Caruthers's opinions on how to use those sins, auditioning orchestras, consulting with Mrs. Evans about refreshments, choosing flowers, and other nonsensical things—were spent fretting over how he could make apologies to the members of the *ton* whose acquaintance he might actually desire once the ball was over.

It was a stunning realization to think that he didn't want the specific company of nearly everyone Caruthers had added to the guest list, he only wanted to be thought well of and invited to things, whether he decided to attend or not.

He needed to discuss the whole thing with Jack, that much was certain. He settled deeper into the pillows, frowning at his book and telling himself he would concentrate on reading until Jack came to bed, then he would spill his heart to his beloved, apologize for his insufficiencies, and discuss the situation with him so that they could devise a solution that would please everyone.



He fell asleep before Jack came to bed. When he rolled over several hours later, Jack still hadn't come to bed, but Wentworth fell asleep again before he could do anything about it.

In the morning, Jack's side of the bed—it was telling how quickly Wentworth had adjusted his thinking to feel as though the left-hand side of the bed was Jack's—was still empty. Wentworth was not alone, however.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Caruthers said, moving to the side of Wentworth's bed.

The odious man held his dressing gown, and as Wentworth pushed himself to sit, Caruthers held it out.

“Where is Jack?” Wentworth mumbled, not entirely certain he was awake yet.

He reached his hand to the cold sheets on Jack's side, but quickly recoiled. He suspected—no, he was certain—that Caruthers knew which way the wind blew between him and Jack, but there was no need to antagonize the man or give him fuel for a conflagration if he didn't have to.

“Mr. Cotton is gone, Your Grace,” Caruthers said with far too much glee in his voice.

Wentworth tensed and rubbed a hand over his face. “Where has he gone?” he asked, a dire feeling spreading quickly through him.

“I do not know, Your Grace,” Caruthers said. “If you would care to rise, I've taken the liberty of having Cook prepare your favorites for breakfast.”

Wentworth's skin prickled as he threw back the covers and swung his legs around to sit on the edge of the bed. A tray sat on the table near the fireplace. It contained a plate piled with eggs, bacon, and mushrooms. They were not Wentworth's favorite anything.

“When will Jack return?” he asked, needing to use the chamber pot, but loath to do so with Caruthers in the room, as silly as that was.

Caruthers frowned in irritation. “It is my understanding that Mr. Cotton will not be returning,” he said. “Now, if you would care to rise, I have your dressing gown and slippers here, and I will pour your coffee for you.”

Wentworth stood and snatched his robe from Caruthers, growing more agitated by the moment. “I do not like coffee,” he said. “I prefer tea in the morning.”

“I think you will find, Your Grace, that coffee is the proper beverage for gentlemen of your standing in the morning,” Caruthers said. “I’ve taken the liberty of ordering a quantity of finest coffee from Africa for your—”

“You have taken too many liberties, sir,” Wentworth snapped at Caruthers, throwing his robe around his shoulders and clutching it close. He didn’t like the idea of Caruthers looking at him in a state of undress. “Jack is my valet. I will wait for his return before dressing. You may go.”

Caruthers cleared his throat. “Mr. Cotton is not returning,” he repeated, sounding as strict as a headmaster this time. “He has left your employ, Your Grace.” He paused, stared Wentworth right in the eyes, then said, “He has left you.”

Cold fingers of dread stretched down Wentworth’s back. He had said the wrong thing the night before. He’d offended Jack to the point where he’d left. Wentworth cursed himself as he crossed to the screen that hid his chamber pot. He never should have let Jack walk out the night before. He’d known something was wrong, something out of the ordinary. He should have stopped Jack and talked things through.

“Get out,” he snapped at Caruthers.

“Your Grace, allow me to assist you with your morning ablutions,” Caruthers said.

“No,” Wentworth said from the edge of the screen. “You are not my valet. I would rather manage on my own.”

Caruthers’s face flushed, and he bowed stiffly. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

“Get out,” Wentworth repeated.

“When you have completed your morning routine,” Caruthers said, seemingly heedless of Wentworth’s orders, “I shall be downstairs in your study, continuing with preparations for the ball.”

“Fine,” Wentworth said, then pointed to the door.

Caruthers bowed one final time, then left, though Wentworth had the impression that the man was fuming.

Caruthers wasn’t the only one. Along with Wentworth’s panic, anger pulsed through him. How dare Caruthers be so heavy-handed with him? And how dare Jack walk out on him without talking things through, or saying goodbye?

Wentworth rushed through bathing and dressing. He tied his neckcloth all wrong and was unable to fasten the cuffs of his shirt properly. It aggravated him more than he already was to know that he could not even dress himself without help. He shoveled a few forks of eggs and bacon into his mouth, but they tasted like ash to him, and he could barely swallow them down. The coffee only served to make him jumpy on top of his other irritations.

Once that was done, instead of going down to his study to meet with Caruthers, he headed straight down to the servants’ hall in search of Jack.

“Caruthers says he’s gone,” he told Dolly when she was called out of her office to deal with him, “but I cannot believe that snake for a moment. Where is he?”

Dolly let out a heavy sigh and stepped back into her office. When she came out, she presented Wentworth with an envelope.

“He were right annoyed, he were,” Dolly said, wringing her hands as Wentworth took the envelope and tore into it. “But sad-like too. Never seen him like that. I assumed you two had a row, a lovers’ spat, because of that arse, Caruthers.”

Wentworth jerked up to stare at Dolly with round eyes. “What do you mean, lovers’ spat?”

Dolly gaped back at him with as much disbelief as he showed her. “You didn’t fight?”

“We did,” Wentworth swallowed and squirmed where he stood. “It’s that other part.”

“What, that you and he are lovers?”

Wentworth blushed hot.

Dolly shrugged. “We’ve all known it from the start.”

Wentworth gaped at her. “I didn’t,” he said. And then, because that sounded ridiculous, he snapped his mouth shut and straightened. “That is, Jack and I only just...had it out...in that regard.”

“Lawd!” Dolly exclaimed, then laughed. “You mean to tell me that all these many years you ain’t done nothin’ about the smolderin’ between you?”

Wentworth sighed. “I’ve recently come to see that I am not as astute where people and relations are concerned as I should be.”

Dolly continued to laugh. “I should say not.” She snorted, then continued with, “And here, all this time, we assumed the two of you were bugging each other senseless on the regular.”

Wentworth stiffened, his face so hot he was surprised he hadn’t caught fire. “There is a great social divide between Jack and I, Dolly.”

“And when has that stopped anyone from having their fancy tickled?” Dolly continued to giggle. When she saw how distressed Wentworth was, she shook her head and sighed. “Now, now. I’ve watched you through thick and thin, I have,” she said, stepping closer to Wentworth so she could fasten his cuffs for him, like a true mother hen. “Both of you. Never have I seen two souls more suited for each other or more alike.”

“But he’s gone,” Wentworth said, suddenly sad and panicked again.

Dolly nodded to the letter. “See what he has to say afore you go wearin’ widow’s weeds.”

Wentworth frowned at her analogy, but he was grateful for Dolly's friendship. She was right; she'd been there with him and Jack from the day it all started.

He stepped aside and finished opening Jack's envelope and took his letter out.

*"My dearest,"* the letter began, sentimental, but also vague so as to protect Wentworth. *"Your words tonight struck me to the quick. All this time, I have known without truly knowing. You are lonely. You have been hurt by the rejection of your peers. Our friendship is a bright, shining lantern in the dark, but I see now that a thousand candles can give more light than one lantern, no matter how beautiful the lantern is."*

*"So I must leave you to the candles. I wish nothing more than for you to be happy, but to do that, I must get out of your way and allow you to pursue what you have been telling me these three years now that you need above all else. I desperately wish that I alone could be enough for you, but I cannot. Too great a difference in class exists between us. I want you to be happy, but it is your class and your society that will make you so, not one illicit relationship with a man beneath your station."*

*"I wish you the best for the ball. May it fulfill all your expectations. And, Wen, I love you."*

Wentworth made a sound of grief as he read Jack's signature, which seemed so small against the power of the words above it. "No," he said, scanning back over the letter again. "No, I cannot allow this."

None of what he'd been trying to pursue meant anything if it came at the cost of Jack.

He turned around, looking for Dolly.

"Where did he go? Did he say where he was going?" he demanded when he found her back in her room.

Dolly didn't look at all surprised by Wentworth's distress. "He did not, Your Grace," she said, a wealth of sympathy in her eyes. "He didn't want you rushin' after him when you

have a ball to plan. But he said if you thought about it, you would know where he is.”

“What kind of bloody riddle is that?” Wentworth yelped, furious with Jack for shutting him out.

It wasn’t fair to vent his emotion to Dolly, but she wasn’t given a chance to answer anyhow.

“Your Grace, a Lord Thurleigh is here to see you,” Merchant announced as he stepped into the doorway of Dolly’s room.

Wentworth blinked at the man. “Cecil? What is he doing here?”

“He did not say, Your Grace,” Merchant said. “I would assume he has come to pay a social call, or perhaps to inquire after the upcoming ball?”

“Oh.” Wentworth knew he sounded ridiculous. It wasn’t as though he was ignorant as to what a social call was. Except he hadn’t had one in years. “Where is he?” he asked, heading out of Dolly’s room.

“His lordship awaits you in the rose parlor, Your Grace,” Merchant said as Wentworth strode past him.

Wentworth was overheated with emotion and dizzy with the confusion of everything swirling around him as he made his way upstairs to the rose parlor. He couldn’t imagine what Cecil wanted from him, but his old friend felt like a lighthouse amidst a storm at that moment.

“Burville, there you are,” Cecil greeted him with a smile as Wentworth stumbled into the room. “We were all so disappointed when you hurried away from Swanmore Glen. You missed all the fun. George’s nephew, the new marquess, has been thoroughly debauched, thanks to Fulbright, and Creighton and Cockburn were at each other’s throats the whole time, when they weren’t pining for each other. And then no one heard anything from you until invitations for a ball were—good God, Burville, are you quite alright?”

It was unmanly of him, and shocking behavior beyond that, but Wentworth went straight to Cecil and hugged him in

greeting instead of merely shaking his hand or exchanging nods.

“Jack has gone,” he said, leaning back after his hug to look at Cecil forlornly.

Cecil had gone stiff with surprise at the hug, but to his credit, he grasped the nature of the situation quickly. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said, gesturing for Wentworth to move and sit on one of the sofas with him. In a low voice, he said, “I take it you and Mr. Cotton advanced your association and that he became more than just your valet?”

“He is my everything,” Wentworth confessed on a rush of breath.

Cecil hummed and frowned, but both gestures held understanding. “Did something transpire to make him leave?”

Wentworth rubbed his hands over his face. Doing so made him aware he still held Jack’s letter. He lowered his hands and stared at it for a moment. “I think,” he said, then paused and bit his lip before trying again. “I have failed to appreciate him as much as he deserved.”

To Wentworth’s surprise, Cecil laughed. “When do we ever appreciate our lovers as much as they deserve?” he asked. “I’d wager they feel the same way about us too. We are all rubbish at expressing how we feel. They educate those things out of us at Eton and Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge, you know. That simply isn’t what our sort do.”

Cecil was joking, but his words hit Wentworth hard. “He said that there is too great a class divide between us. He believes I will only be happy with my peers.”

“You mean the ones who cut you from their society?” Cecil asked with a sneer.

Wentworth found it curious that Cecil apparently didn’t think much of the *ton* either. “Yes?” He blinked, then frowned. “It is the society we were born into, the society we were designated for by generations of dukes and viscounts before us.” He gestured to Cecil with the word viscount, as if to prove they were the same.

Cecil made a face. "It strikes me that there is a stronger designation than birth and blood that marks some of us as each other's best society." His expression took on a somewhat distant look as he added, "But perhaps that was what George intended all along."

Those words sparked something in Wentworth, but part of that something was anger.

"George!" He spat the name. "That man has caused more damage to me in the last fortnight than any of the marks he left on my body after toying with me."

It was Cecil's turn to look surprised, though by the spark in his eyes, he knew precisely the sort of play George had preferred where his toys were concerned. "What has George done to you?" he asked. "Or should I say, what was the grail at the end of your quest?"

"A snake named Caruthers," Wentworth growled. "George has saddled me with the villain, and all with the promise that Caruthers can restore me to the place I should have in the *ton*."

Cecil frowned. "That doesn't sound like the sort of thing George would do at all. The man liked to inflict pain, to be sure, but not *that* sort of pain. He much preferred the sweet, cathartic sort."

"I have found no catharsis in Caruthers's meddling and bullying," Wentworth said. "He has disrupted my house, and I know he played a part in Jack leaving."

Cecil looked at him strangely. "Does he, perhaps, have anything to do with this ball of yours that has become the talk of London?"

Wentworth's brow flew up. "Is it the talk of London?"

"Yes," Cecil laughed. "People are terrified of it. No one wants to attend, but everyone is too fearful of the consequences if they do not."

That shocked Wentworth even more. "Then Caruthers's plan has actually worked." He had never been more disappointed in a victory in his life.



Caruthers frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

Wentworth took a deep breath, then proceeded to outline Caruthers’s entire plan to him. Not only that, he backtracked to tell the story of his and Jack’s journey, their arrival at Flag Hall, and the assumptions that Caruthers made right from the start.

Cecil listened to the entire story in awe. “Damn George,” he breathed at the end. “That man was devilishly clever. But I still do not understand why he would saddle you with Caruthers, or why you would continue to allow such a man to rule your life.”

“Because Caruthers has produced a result,” Wentworth sighed, irritated that Cecil hadn’t put the pieces together.

“Has he?” Cecil frowned. “He’s provoked you into hosting a ball, to be sure, and he’s terrified the *ton* into coming, but has Caruthers actually restored you to the sort of jovial company we all used to enjoy when George brought us together for his wicked house parties?”

Something within Wentworth stopped as if snagged on memories he hadn’t thought about for years. He blinked, gazing at nothing for a moment, then focused on Cecil. “We did have fun at those parties, didn’t we.”

“They were decadent, debauched, and such a good time that nothing since has ever matched them,” Cecil laughed. “Far more enjoyable than London balls and pretending to be men we are not for the benefit of people who do not care.”

Wentworth felt exceedingly foolish, and the sensation slammed into him so fast and hard that it left him unable to think. Had he gotten George’s wishes wrong from the very start?

But if George hadn’t wished him to find and employ Caruthers, why send him all the way to Derbyshire? George had never done anything without reason.

Unless Caruthers was not the sole prize, but rather one possible option amongst multiple prizes. Unless it was not the destination and the prize George wished him to have, but

rather the journey that was important, and perhaps Wentworth was supposed to make some sort of choice between the prizes?

Wentworth gasped, blinking at nothing. It was all about Jack. George had been watching him for three years. He'd watched Jack come into Wentworth's life and change everything. Which meant he'd also seen how ridiculously he and Jack had dragged their feet in declaring themselves.

Just like that, Wentworth knew what the true purpose of George's quest was, why he'd insisted he and Jack travel as commoners, as equals. George would have known how they'd be thrown together, how everything would come to a head.

Jack was the prize, not Caruthers.

Suddenly, he knew where Jack was.

"I need to—"

Before he could get more than those words out or do more than scoot forward as if to stand, Caruthers appeared in the doorway.

"Your Grace, we have a great deal of work to do this morning," Caruthers said, scowling. He nodded to Cecil, but either he was ignorant of Cecil's title or he didn't think Cecil was the right sort of nobleman to advance his cause. "Several replies have come in to your invitations, and we must address their contents and plan accordingly."

Wentworth sat frozen on the edge of the sofa. He didn't know what to do. Not a single bit of him wished to continue with the ball, or to keep Caruthers in his employ for another second. At the same time, he feared he'd already taken things too far and given Caruthers too much fuel with which to light a pyre under him that would ruin him permanently. The time to choose one of George's potential prizes over another and to simply dismiss Caruthers and wash his hands of the man had passed. He had to tread carefully from then on.

Slowly, Wentworth stood. It was a bit of a comfort that Cecil stood with him.

"Yes," he told Caruthers carefully. "Let's proceed with the plans for the ball."

Caruthers grinned, far too satisfied for anyone's good. "Yes, Your Grace. I will await you in your study."

Without truly being given leave, Caruthers bowed, then left.

"George would never thrust a man like that on you," Cecil said. His face was deadly serious, otherwise Wentworth would have made a joke about men being thrust upon him.

"It has just occurred to me that when a viper has been dropped into one's home, one must extract it *very* carefully so as not to be bitten," Wentworth said in a tense voice.

Cecil nodded as if he understood. "Be careful, Wentworth." The fact that he used Wentworth's given name both intensified the emotion of his warning and made Wentworth feel that perhaps he had more friends than he had accounted for. "I don't like where this seems to be headed."

"Neither do I," Wentworth said. "But I've already made my bed, and if I'm going to lie in it, I need to make certain it is safe."

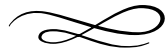
Cecil frowned at him. "If you need any help..."

Wentworth smiled gratefully at him. "I might," he said. "Consider yourself officially invited to the ball. And if you know of any of the others of George's old *friends* who happen to be in London, you might extend the invitation to them as well."

Cecil nodded. "I will."

Wentworth was relieved. But not as relieved as he would be once he got Jack back.

## Nineteen



What Wentworth wanted to do in the intervening days between his conversation with Cecil and the ball was to sack Caruthers, cancel the ball entirely and head straight back to Oxfordshire, to The Lamb, where he was certain beyond a doubt Jack had gone. The Lamb's owner had offered Jack employment, and since the pub had been the sight of a unique and beautiful moment between the two of them, Wentworth knew that was where Jack had gone.

What Wentworth actually ended up doing with those days was smiling and donning his best blithely ignorant look every time Caruthers discussed plans for the ball and the Machiavellian return to grace with the *ton* that Caruthers had planned...all while quietly sending inquiries to Caruthers's former employers to learn the nature of why the man had been forced to flee London before.

Caruthers was perfectly correct when he hinted that he had worked for some of the finest men in London, which was how he was privy to so many secrets. What he had failed to mention was that the source of a great deal of his information was a less than legal connection to figures in London's underworld. Wentworth was shocked and worried when he discovered the truth...and it had led him to invite a certain high-ranking officer from the Metropolitan Police to the ball, along with the terrified peers and their wives who would reluctantly be coming.

If Jack had been there, Wentworth would have found the whole thing to be a delightful lark, something the two of them

could plot and whisper about, rubbing their hands together and exchanging significant looks, as though they were children playing tricks on Nanny.

Without him, the whole thing felt entirely too dangerous and far too exhausting.

At least no one could accuse him of not playing his part well.

“Burville, you look stunning,” Lord Fulbright said as he approached Wentworth in the very earliest minutes of the ball, as the first guests began to arrive. “Have you visited Wilkes? That looks to be his work.”

Wentworth glanced down at his attire for a moment, then back at Fulbright. “Yes, I was a bit surprised when Wilkes agreed to make this on such short notice. The man is in exceedingly high demand with the *ton*.”

Wentworth noted that the new Lord Wilmore had arrived with Fulbright, and while there was a degree of adoration in the young man’s eyes that Wentworth knew well, he also seemed wary around the older, more self-possessed Fulbright.

“Yes, well,” Fulbright said, glancing to Wilmore, then to Wentworth with a sly look. “Wilkes might be the chosen tailor of the *ton*, but he maintains a fierce loyalty toward his own kind.”

Wentworth’s brow went up. He didn’t think Fulbright was referring to other tailors, or even Londoners. Taken with what Cecil had said about enjoying the company of their own kind above men who had been born into the same class when he had visited the week before, Wentworth wondered if there weren’t a whole different, silent society men like him and Jack, Cecil, Fulbright, and Wilkes the tailor, could enjoy.

He shook his head. There would be time to contemplate those things later. “Caruthers believes that by wearing Wilkes’s latest creation, combined with the quality of the tailoring, I will be sending a message to the *ton* that I am one of them,” he told Fulbright and Wilmore.

Fulbright laughed. The sound was loud and rich, and made Wilmore jump and blush. “As long as you are clear about the message you wish to send to the *ton*,” he said. “If it were me, I would tell them all to go hang themselves.”

Wentworth’s eyes went wide at Fulbright’s boldness—and Wilmore’s did as well—but a part of him wished that he had Fulbright’s bravado, and that he could simply thumb his nose at the peers who had rejected him and look elsewhere for his society and entertainment.

Of course, nothing was stopping him from doing just that. Nothing but his own short-sightedness in believing that the only prize worth having was the one that was given the most public attention. Fulbright seemed ready enough to speak to him and include him in his acquaintance. The man was only a baron, but he was jolly and confident. And as Jack had taught him in the last fortnight, the last three years, really, a man’s class did not define whether he was good company, or whether he was worthy of love.

Blast. He’d gotten the whole thing wrong, and now here he was, without Jack, trapped into a ball that no one wanted to attend, including himself, with Caruthers looming over him, potentially threatening everything he truly cared about.

“Is something the matter?” Fulbright asked, one eyebrow raised.

Wentworth sighed and let his stiff posture slip as he rubbed a hand over his forehead. “It has suddenly occurred to me that I have absolutely no wish whatsoever to host or even attend a ball this evening.”

Fulbright laughed out loud again, slapping a hand on Wentworth’s shoulder that made him jump. “It’s a bit too late for that now, don’t you think?”

Wentworth sent the man a wobbly smile, then glanced to Wilmore.

Wilmore looked as though he were in over his head as he peeked at Fulbright. Wentworth would have given just about anything to know the nature of the relationship between those

two men, but it would have to wait for another time. Lord Kimbolton had just walked into his ballroom.

Fulbright evidently saw what was coming and whisked Wilmore away toward the refreshment room as Lord Kimbolton hurried toward Wentworth. Kimbolton's expression was flushed and mottled, and panic filled the older man's eyes, despite the smile plastered on his face.

"Burville, what a pleasure it is to see you again," Kimbolton said, his voice strained and gruff.

"Lord Kimbolton," Wentworth said with a polite nod and a bow. His skin crawled with the knowledge of what the man had done that had allowed him to be blackmailed into attending the ball. "Thank you for attending this evening. And you as well, Lady Kimbolton." He bowed to Lady Kimbolton, who looked as though she had been served kippers in lemon sauce right before arriving at Burville House.

"Your Grace," Lady Kimbolton said in tight tones, then glanced off across the room.

Wentworth couldn't help his disappointment. Clearly, the woman had been dragged to his house that evening to fulfill an obligation, but her feelings toward Wentworth had not changed.

"I hope you will enjoy everything that I have had prepared for you this evening, my lady," Wentworth continued, hoping kindness would improve the woman's opinion of him. "The orchestra I've engaged for the dancing is reported to be the finest in London."

"Yes," Lady Kimbolton said, only barely looking at Wentworth. "They were meant to play for Lady Alvenly's ball this evening."

A swooping feeling twisted Wentworth's stomach. So much for winning Lady Kimbolton over. Perhaps he should have inquired about where the musicians were supposed to have played and what enemies he would have been making by poaching them.

It was too late for that now, and within seconds, Lord and Lady Kimbolton were walking away. Kimbolton did pause long enough to turn back to Wentworth to quietly say, "I trust my appearance will prevent any untoward revelations in the future. My lady wife has been instructed to include you on the list for our ball this winter."

"Thank you, sir," Wentworth said with what he hoped was a magnanimous bow.

He would rather have served as a street-sweeper outside Kimbolton's house than attend that ball.

Wentworth blinked at the thought, uneasy with its implications. He was already half-convinced that this entire scheme was a monumental waste of his time, and the execution of it only proved as much.

"Well done, Your Grace," Caruthers said, causing Wentworth to jump again. He was far too much on edge that evening, but the way Caruthers had slithered up behind him without forewarning did not help Wentworth's nerves. "You've captured Lord Kimbolton for certain. I am quite confident you will snare the rest this evening as well."

"Caruthers," Wentworth hissed, turning to stare at the man. "What are you doing here?"

"I am here to assist, Your Grace," Caruthers said with an obsequious bow.

"Valets do not attend their masters' balls," Wentworth went on.

"Oh, but Your Grace, I think you will find my presence is quite useful," Caruthers said, then smiled bitterly at Lord Althorp as he and his wife entered.

Althorp seemed anxious as he glanced around at the finely decorated ballroom and its other nervous occupants. It was obvious the man didn't want to be there. But when he spotted Caruthers grinning at him from behind Wentworth's shoulder, all color left the man's face, and he sped to the far end of the ballroom without greeting Wentworth.



It was not even close to what Wentworth had wanted from the evening.

“All the same,” Wentworth said tightly, “it isn’t proper for you to wait on me while I am in company.

“If you will allow me to contradict you, Your Grace—”

Caruthers stopped suddenly, a similar sort of look to the kind Wentworth’s anxious guests had been sending him came into his eyes.

Wentworth turned to see what had startled the man. He was deeply pleased by the sight of Mr. Talboys, the Inspector from the Metropolitan Police he’d arranged to have attend the ball, and possibly to take Caruthers away with him when he departed.

“Caruthers, are you well?” Wentworth asked, trying desperately to keep the glee out of his voice, knowing he might just have gotten the better of Caruthers at last.

“I...er...”

“Do you know Lord Peel’s friend?” Wentworth asked, still feigning innocence.

“Perhaps it would be best if I left you to your guests, Your Grace,” Caruthers said, his voice cracking, then turned and fled the ballroom.

Wentworth would have laughed, particularly when Talboys glanced to him and raised his eyebrows in question, but he spotted Cecil entering the ballroom at that moment. He nodded to Talboys and jerked his head after Caruthers. Talboys moved toward the doorway as if to pursue Caruthers, but he did it as slowly and subtly as if he were taking a stroll in Hyde Park on a summer’s day.

“Well, this looks to be a triumph, Your Grace,” Cecil said with a teasing smile as he reached Wentworth’s side.

Wentworth sent him a wary, sideways look. “I’ve never seen a more miserable group of people in my life,” he said, glancing around the ballroom. “And I include myself in those numbers.”

Cecil laughed. “Is it everything your Caruthers dreamed of?”

Wentworth sighed. “I’m afraid it is,” he said. “The darlings of the *ton* are all here, or trickling in, as if someone were draining the Thames and left the spigot loose.” He paused, smiling and nodding at an anxious Lady Bathurst, who had arrived a few moments before, then turned fully to Cecil. “I wouldn’t wish to spend more than five minutes in the company of any of these people.”

“Then why did you invite them all, man?” Cecil asked, his overfamiliarity actually serving to calm Wentworth and help him to see the ridiculousness of the mess he’d made.

“Because I was lonely,” he admitted. “Because, like the fool I am, I thought the solution to all my woes was to curry favor with the same people who rejected me and to win them back rather than finding new friends whom I would not have to wage war to win over.”

Cecil shook his head with a lopsided grin. “We never truly see our faults and foibles until they are staring us in the face, do we.”

“No, we do not,” Wentworth sighed. He went further than that, rubbing a hand over his face and growling with frustration. “I have wasted time, money, and effort on this scheme, and I have lost the one person that means the most to me in the process.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” Cecil said with a shrug.

Wentworth was about to argue with him, but in that moment, the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland stepped into the room, and everyone’s heads turned, including Wentworth’s. Even more surprising, the duchess directed a kind smile to Wentworth as she and Sutherland walked directly toward him.

“Burville,” Sutherland greeted Wentworth with a bare nod.

“Your Grace,” Wentworth nodded in return. “Your Grace,” he repeated for the duchess, returning her smile with one just as kind. “Welcome to my home. I must confess, I did not

expect you to receive, let alone accept my last-minute invitation.”

Indeed, Wentworth never would have dreamed of sending an invitation to the duke and duchess had his father not been friends with Sutherland. He hadn't consulted Caruthers on the move first, and based on the entirely different nature of the greeting that the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland gave him from that of his other guests, he was glad he hadn't.

“What an odd assembly,” Sutherland commented as he glanced around the room. “It reminds me of the sort of thing we enjoyed in my youth where the candles were all snuffed at once and someone pretending to be the Black Death would go around tapping guests on the shoulder to indicate their death until the perpetrator was found out and unmasked.”

Wentworth wasn't certain if he should laugh or not, but he wanted to. “That sounds like a delightful sort of party,” he said.

Sutherland smiled at him. “Those were exciting times.”

“Perhaps you could revive some of the old traditions,” the duchess said, an impish glint in her eyes.

Wentworth laughed. “Perhaps I shall, if you would show me how, Your Grace.”

The duchess laughed, the sound drawing people's attention all over again. And with that attention, the mood changed. It was as if half the assembly let out the breaths they'd been holding and finally relaxed into the night's entertainment.

Caruthers's plan had worked. It had drawn half of London society to Wentworth's ballroom. But Wentworth had the feeling it was not the threats and the fear that would change his fortunes with the *ton*, it was the Duchess of Sutherland's laughter and the look of approval Sutherland sent him.

“Your father would be proud,” Sutherland said as he and the duchess moved on. “I look forward to the evening, and to future invitations.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Wentworth stood where he was for a moment, feeling both elated by the unexpected show of approval and disappointed by his own foolishness in bringing the evening about in the first place. On the one hand, the music somehow seemed sweeter as the musicians began to play. The decorations sparkled more than they had before. The way Fulbright raised a glass to him from across the room, sending a clear and public salute of approval his way, warmed him. His fortunes had been restored. Perhaps not with the people he'd originally hoped to restore them with, but with the right sort of people, the sort he would actually want to spend time with.

But all he could think about was that Jack was missing it. Jack should be there for his moment of triumph—not the triumph of convincing the *ton* to do his will, but that of realizing what he truly wished for, what he truly desired.

What he desired was Jack. Without him, the rest of it was pointless.

He turned to go, but Cecil stopped him with a laugh, “Where are you going? The ball has just begun, and it seems things will end in your favor tonight.”

“I don’t want it,” Wentworth said with a shrug. “I don’t want any of it.”

Cecil sent him a flat look. “I could have told you that much.”

Wentworth was tempted to ask why Cecil hadn’t told him that much before, but doing so would only delay his efforts to find Jack.

“I need to make a trip to Oxfordshire,” he said instead. “Could you see to all of this and make certain everyone enjoys themselves?”

Cecil’s brow flew up. “You’re leaving me in charge of a ball consisting of the dregs of the *ton*?”

“Yes, I am,” Wentworth said, then fled the ballroom.

He made it down the hall and upstairs, where he intended to pack a small bag and set off at once for The Lamb, when he nearly ran headlong into Caruthers. The man had been hiding

in one of the unused bedrooms close to Wentworth's. He must have been peeking through the door and waiting for Wentworth to go to bed—which seemed to indicate he believed he would be waiting for hours—and when he leapt out into the hall to stop Wentworth's progress, his eyes were wide with fear.

“Why would you betray me in such a manner?” he demanded.

“I beg your pardon?” Wentworth feigned innocence as he stared at the man.

“Lord Peel's friend?” Caruthers seemed barely able to contain his fury. “Why was I not informed he would be here this evening?”

Wentworth couldn't be bothered to answer that question. He merely huffed out a breath and frowned at Caruthers. “You have insinuated yourself into my household by force and become a menace,” he said. “I will not tolerate your sort of treachery. I would ask why on earth the late Lord Wilmore thought I needed you in my life, but I believe I now see that it wasn't you he intended me to embrace at all. You were an example of what I thought I wanted that George put forth so that I could see clearly what I truly want.”

Caruthers snapped his mouth shut and stood straighter. “It's that Mr. Cotton, isn't it.”

Wentworth saw no point in denying it. “Of course,” he said, then tried to stride on so that he could ready himself to find Jack.

Caruthers stopped him by clamping a hand on his upper arm. “I can give you the things he does, you know,” he said in a voice that was perhaps intended to be seductive, but sounded raw and distasteful instead. “I am well-skilled in the arts of pleasure and seduction.”

Wentworth didn't know whether to laugh or shout at the man for his insolence. He shook out of Caruthers's grasp. “Do not ever touch me again,” he hissed.

Caruthers opened his mouth to protest, but at that moment, Mr. Talboys appeared at the end of the hall, glancing around as though he were searching for something. Of course, it was Caruthers he was searching for, and now he had found the man.

“He is yours to do with as you please,” Wentworth called to the man.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Talboys said in return, marching down the hall with a menacing look for Caruthers.

Caruthers whimpered and tried to bolt, but he didn’t make it past Talboys.

“Please ensure that my guests—” Wentworth was about to ask that Caruthers be taken out quietly, but inspiration struck and he changed his mind. “Please see to it that my guests witness Mr. Caruthers being taken into custody,” he said, raising his voice and standing taller. “For he has wronged many of them, and it believe it would comfort them to know that the reign of terror has ended.”

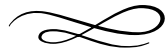
“Yes, Your Grace,” Talboys said, grinning at Wentworth perhaps more than was strictly professional.

“No, you cannot do this!” Caruthers protested as Talboys dragged him away and Wentworth continued on to his room. “I will destroy you for this. I know things. That man is an unrepentant sodomite,” he appealed to Talboys.

“Yeah?” Talboys said. “Well, so am I.”

Caruthers yelped, but that was the last Wentworth saw of the exchange. He dashed into his room, intent on changing into something more suitable for travel. If his driver prepared the carriage right away and they set off as soon as possible, it would be early morning when he reached Jack, but Wentworth didn’t care. Tomorrow would be the dawn of a new day, and he intended to start the rest of his life the way he intended to live it henceforth.

## *Twenty*



Jack would have been lying if he'd said he thought the countryside would solve all his problems. He'd known fleeing London because his feelings had been hurt was a coward's move, but he'd also known that he needed to take a step back from the intensity of Wentworth's need for the society of his own class so that he might reassess whether there was any possibility the two of them could come together again.

He'd hoped that being at The Lamb, taking Fairchild up on his offer to run the place, and surrounding himself with the same scenery and faces that had been around him and Wen during those happy days the month before would help him come to some sort of decision about how to move forward. He'd hoped that the reminders of the cozy time he'd spent with Wen would prompt him to decide that even Caruthers's poison was bearable, if it meant he could be with his beloved.

But as he woke early in the morning, less than a fortnight after leaving Wen, not even the comfort of the same bed they'd slept in on their first night as lovers, nor the sweet song of the birds as they greeted the dawn, was enough to dispel the cloud of gloom that hung over Jack.

He stretched awake and rolled to face the empty side of the bed. It was ridiculous of him to sleep only on half of the bed, as if leaving a place for Wen, should he miraculously appear in the middle of the night and wish to climb in with him. He extended a hand to feel the cool sheets where Wen should have been all the same, his heart aching in his chest.

With a huff, he pulled his hand back and shifted to lie on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He was a fool to think that he had any place with Wentworth, that a valet who had been born and raised an orphan should reach so high above himself as to think a duke was the mate of his soul. The chasm between him and Wentworth was far too wide for even love to cross.

And yet, the two of them were already flouting nearly every rule of polite society by longing for each other, as men like them had done from time immemorial. Though it was not spoken of openly by the likes of the *ton*, in their own circles, stories abounded of men of different classes quietly making their home together for centuries.

The thought cheered him for only as long as it took to throw back the bedcovers and swing his legs around to stand. As soon as he was on his feet, the futility of it all and the great, gaping loneliness of being without Wentworth descended on him again.

Jack shuffled to the wash basin, poured water from the pitcher, then splashed it over his face. He had work to do, and allowing himself to wallow in sadness as he inventoried the pub's stock of beer and ale, and counted out the wages for Doris and Jenny, the sisters whom Fairchild employed to do the pub's cooking and serving, would be of no use to him or anyone else.

But as he washed, dressed, and shaved using the small mirror he'd added to the room's furnishings when he'd taken up residence there, the sense of loneliness Jack had now only continued to spread. Somehow, he missed Wen even more than he'd thought he would.

Jack finished shaving, wiped his face, and cleaned up his things. The irony of leaving Wentworth to take up the offered position at the pub and the way it had filled his soul with loneliness instead of solving his problems was that it had helped him to better understand the emotional predicament Wentworth was in. It was a terrible thing to be lonely, to be without the one you loved. If Wentworth truly loved the *ton*



and the sort of society they could give him, then who was Jack to hold that against him?

He headed straight into the kitchen to make certain the girls had left it in a tidy state the night before, to bring the fire in the pub's stove back to life, and to make coffee. Wentworth's ball had been planned for the night before. There was no way for Jack to have any word of how the event had unfolded, but he imagined that between Wentworth and Caruthers—even thinking the man's name made his skin crawl with loathing, and all the coffee in the world could not chase the bad taste of the man from his mouth—the event had been a tremendous success.

He was happy for Wentworth. Truly, he was. The next best thing to getting his own heart's desire was for Wentworth to have his. And if Jack spent the rest of his life a little sadder than he would have been otherwise, as long as Wen was happy, it was a sacrifice he was satisfied with.

It would be hours still before the pub opened, but with his coffee and a leftover heel of bread, toasted, buttered, and slathered with jam, Jack headed into the pub's common room to begin taking chairs down from the tables, where they'd been put the night before so the girls could mop before heading home to bed. For a change, there were no guests staying at the pub—which Faircloth would probably be upset with, since he'd charged Jack with increasing the overnight guests at the pub so as to increase its income—and Jack found that he enjoyed the silence.

Quiet times reminded him of long winter days at Burville House, when he and Wentworth sat in Wen's study reading, a cozy fire snapping away in the fireplace, tea with scones provided by Mrs. Evans, and no one to interfere with the companionable time the two of them had spent together as friends. Even then, though neither of them had declared their feelings for each other, Jack knew that—

His thoughts stopped, and he was immediately on the alert when he saw a shadow looming by one of the pub's front windows. His pulse pounded even harder when a pair of hands

touched the glass, and a face appeared between them, peering into the pub.

Not just any face, Wen's face.

"What in God's name...." Despite Jack's gruff tone, elation filled him—and doubt that what he'd seen was real and not just a figment of his desires—as he marched across the room to unlock the pub's door and throw it open.

There, standing a few feet back from the door, his new coat damp with dew, shivering a bit in the early light, stood Wentworth.

"Jack," Wen said, his face bursting into a smile that would rival the dawn sun just peeking over the horizon behind him. "I knew you would be here."

Jack was so overcome with joy that for a moment he could only stand there, stunned into silence.

"I had Caruthers arrested," Wen said with a shrug and a pleased grin. "Last night. During the ball. At least, I assume he was formally arrested during the ball. I left, you see."

"You left," Jack said, blinking at him.

"Yes." Wentworth nodded tightly. "Turns out I had no interest in being a darling of the *ton* after all. They're all a bunch of frightfully horrid people. Well, not all of them, but enough of them. I don't feel as though I have much in common with them after all. And it occurred to me that there are other people I would much rather form a society with. After all, there is no divine law that says one must only keep company with the members of one's own class and social circle."

"There isn't?" Jack asked, arching one eyebrow. "I thought there was."

He sounded stern, but in fact, his heart was beating so wildly and he was so close to either laughing or crying that it was unmanly. Wentworth had found him. He'd left the ball Caruthers had schemed to put together for him, and by the early hour of his appearance, had likely traveled all through the night to reach Oxfordshire.

“I suppose someone might think there was,” Wentworth rambled on, rubbing his hands and hunching a bit, which indicated to Jack that his beloved was cold. “But if those are the same laws that deem two men cannot love each other, then I want nothing to do with them.”

He paused.

Jack stared at him, dizzy with expectation.

“Because I do, Jack,” Wen went on, gazing intently at Jack. “I love you. And I do not care one bit whether or not I am supposed to. I don’t care about class or position or birth. I don’t care about having a pile of invitations on my front table every day, or being acknowledged on dull carriage rides through Hyde Park, or recognized at the theater. All I care about is beginning and ending my days in the arms of someone I genuinely love, someone who turned the darkest and most miserable hour of my life into the very best thing that has ever happened to me.”

He paused again, staring intently at Jack as if to gauge his reaction to everything he said.

Every word from Wen’s lips was beautiful, but Jack was so overwhelmed by it all that he was slow to react.

“You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, Jack,” Wen said, seemingly repeating himself in case Jack hadn’t heard the first time. “I love you, and I have done you a great disservice by believing I could use Caruthers to achieve my aims when you are the only one I should have—”

Jack let him go no further than that. He closed the distance between them, hooked a hand behind Wen’s neck, and pulled him inside the pub. Wen yelped and nearly lost his balance and spilled over in the process, but Jack didn’t care. He shut the door once he had Wen inside, then slammed his beloved up against it.

Without another word, Jack surged against him, kissing Wen with all the pent-up passion and relief that blasted through him. He wanted Wen. He needed him like he’d never needed anyone before. He didn’t want to hear another word of

self-deprecation or apology from Wen. It was his fault for leaving Wen in Caruthers's hands as he had, and he intended to make up for it.

Wen's lips were cold from his journey—Jack had vaguely registered Wen's carriage and Harry, his driver, in the background outside while Wen had been talking—and Jack was determined to warm them. For his part, Wen moaned and melted, gripping the door handle with one hand and the jamb with the other to keep himself upright under Jack's passionate assault.

That only lasted for a moment before Wen threw his arms around Jack and kissed him in return. He plied himself against Jack, threading his fingers through Jack's hair and thrusting his tongue into Jack's mouth with a surprising amount of force. Wen wasn't usually the forceful one in these things, but Jack could get used to it.

"I shouldn't have left," Jack panted when he pulled away to give himself a few moments to think. "It was a horrible thing to do, and I am so sorry."

"No." Wentworth shook his head, clasping his hands around Jack's face and smiling giddily at him. "I was an arse, and you were right to walk out on me. It was the only thing that could have been done to make me see how rotten I was being."

"Caruthers is evil," Jack protested, working through the buttons of Wen's coat, then pushing it off his shoulders. "It was irresponsible of me to leave you to that man's devices."

Wen wriggled out of his coat and let it fall to the floor, then pressed his body against Jack's. "I propose we say that we both made mistakes in this matter and that we put it behind us and move forward."

"Yes, I like that," Jack said.

He surged into Wen again, spreading his hands across Wen's back and digging his fingertips in, as though he needed to cling to Wen to make certain he was truly there and that this wasn't just some beautiful dream.

Kissing wasn't enough, though, and neither was grasping at Wen through his worn and rumpled clothing. Jack indulged in a few more long kisses, then broke away to lock the pub's door.

"Are you allowed to do that?" Wen asked, his face pink with pleasure and his lips bright red from kisses. "Aren't there guests upstairs who might need to get in or out?"

"No," Jack said with a triumphant grin. He took Wen's hand and marched toward the stairs. "As it happens, you and I are the only souls in the pub this morning."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Wen asked with a laugh.

Jack's marching turned into running, and he and Wen practically raced upstairs, unbuttoning along the way.

"You kept the same room?" Wen asked, breathless with surprise and desire and delight as he entered the room, tugging his shirt out of his breeches as he did.

"It's our room," Jack answered. He didn't need more words than that to tell Wen why he had chosen it out of all the rooms in the pub.

Wen didn't need further explanation either. He tore through removing his clothes. He stumbled and fell onto the bed as he lifted one leg in an attempt to yank a boot off and, somehow, he actually managed to get the thing off his leg. Jack burst into laughter, eternally glad that he only wore shoes and simple clothing and could throw them off without a fuss. Wen had evidently dressed down for the occasion of their reunion, but even a duke's plain clothes were finer than anything a man who ran a pub might wear.

Which was why it was a better idea entirely for the two of them to be naked.

They rolled into Jack's unmade bed together, kissing and pawing at each other, neither able to get enough.

"I'm sorry," Wen panted as he landed on his back and spread his legs so that Jack could nestle perfectly between them.

Jack had a hand on his backside and pinched it hard enough to earn a yelp from Wen. “I thought we agreed that we were going to let bygones be bygones and only think of the future,” he said while shifting his hips so that his quickly hardening cock rubbed against Wen’s. It felt so good that he nearly rolled his eyes back in his head and sighed with relief.

“We are,” Wen said, sliding his hands down Jack’s lower back to grip his arse with both hands. “I was merely getting a start on the next time I will need to apologize, which is sure to be soon.”

Jack laughed out loud, then turned that laugh into joyful ardor as he kissed Wen. He wanted Wen so desperately right then that he was likely going to need to apologize himself when he spent after three minutes instead of drawing out their lovemaking the way it should have been.

“I’m not certain apologies themselves will do,” he said, kissing Wen’s lips quickly and bringing one hand between the two of them so that he could stroke their cocks together. “If you vex me in the future, I believe I will need to bring out the switch and make you earn your apology with a reddened backside.”

Wen made a sound of deep desire and thrust into Jack’s hand. “Please, sir, could you provide me with a list of infractions so that I might earn my punishment sooner?”

Jack laughed again and let go of his and Wen’s cocks long enough to stretch to the side, where the jar of salve they had borrowed nearly three weeks ago still sat.

“Impertinence is one thing,” he said, moving back between Wen’s legs and kneeling so that he could remove the cork from the jar. “Arguing with me is another.”

“That’s not fair, you great pillock,” Wen protested, a gleam in his eyes.

Jack arched one eyebrow and stared down at Wen with mock fury. “Right, you, that’s enough of that,” he said, smacking Wen’s hip before digging his fingers into the salve. “I think you deserve a right good pounding for that one.”

“Yes, I do,” Wen said, his voice going deep.

He then grasped his legs under his knees and folded himself nearly in two, spreading himself wide open and offering himself to Jack as he did.

Jack caught his breath at the obscene gesture and how willingly Wen offered himself. Inexperience be damned, there was only one thing he could do when his lover presented himself like that.

He raced through slathering his cock with the salve and spreading a generous amount over Wen’s hole as well. He was probably using too much, but time would smooth out everything between him and Wen. They would learn how to navigate life and society together, they would work out the best way to talk and come to decisions together, and they would unlock the mysteries of how to pleasure each other in a way that left them both satisfied.

Jack was convinced he was doing something wrong as he lined up, then pushed hard to breach Wen’s initial resistance. Wen pinched his face like Jack was hurting him a bit, but that look dissolved into moans and sighs of pleasure as Jack worked himself in to the depth he desired.

“I love you, Wen,” Jack panted as he held himself firmly inside his lover, then adjusted to lean over him and bend down to steal a kiss.

“And I love you,” Wen gasped. His words turned into a sound of ecstasy as Jack worked his hips to find the most comfortable way to thrust.

Jack took his cues from Wen, adjusting and moving as he thrust until he found an angle that had Wen all but howling with pleasure and begging him for more. Jack gave him more with enthusiasm, and as he’d predicted, within moments of grasping his own cock as Jack drilled into him, Wen spent with a sound that Jack would keep in his wickedest fantasies for the rest of his life.

Wen’s release sent Jack flying over the edge as well. He thrust a few more times as his life spilled out of him and a

deeply satisfying aura of warmth and love and completeness encircled him.

Basking in the afterglow, Jack collapsed to his side, drawing Wen into his arms. “I love you, my darling duke,” he said breathlessly, kissing Wen.

“I love you, Jack,” Wen panted, receiving and giving kisses until the two of them were too exhausted to go on. “We’ll be each other’s company, and whatever it takes, we will be happy.”

“We will,” Jack agreed with a smile. Whatever it took, they would be together.



*Epilogue*

*ℒ*

## *SIX MONTHS LATER...*

Wentworth had never truly appreciated springtime in Shropshire until he was able to spend it at Telford Lodge with Jack.

“What do you think?” he asked Jack, straightening from the garden plot the two of them had just finished tilling. “The coral roses here, the yellow ones in the bed across the way, and the wisteria around the trellis at the end of the path?”

Jack jammed his shovel into the freshly turned dirt and leaned against it. He surveyed the area Wentworth pointed to, then wiped the sweat and stray tendril of hair away from his forehead with the back of his hand. “I think that would be lovely,” Jack said with a nod, then turned to Wentworth. His considering expression softened into a smile. “A lovely garden for a lovely man.”

“Sentimental sod,” Wentworth said, sending Jack a flirtatious look, then leaning toward him to steal a kiss.

Jack laughed, then hooked Wentworth around the waist and tugged him close just as Wentworth went to step away. Wen gasped in protest, then melted as Jack tossed his shovel aside and focused on kissing Wen thoroughly.

They never could have gotten away with such behavior in London. Not just the kissing and the informality. If they had stayed in London, Wentworth and Jack never could have gotten away with pretending to be ordinary country gentlemen, working together, sometimes with their hands in the dirt, to remake the house and gardens of Telford Lodge. But since their arrival in Shropshire before Christmas, after vetting the Lodge’s staff, finding new positions for some and hiring others who would be discreet, the two of them had been able to build a sheltered and cozy life together.

It was, in some ways, the opposite of what Wentworth had thought he’d wanted for the past three, going on four, years.

He'd craved society and the company of his peers to the point where he'd nearly ruined himself and Jack as well. But the disastrous ball in October—which now had the reputation of being the shortest ball the city had seen in decades, since the majority of those in attendance left within half an hour of discovering that a certain Mr. Caruthers had been taken in by the Metropolitan Police and the host had left for the country—Wentworth had spent more time renewing his acquaintances with the other men who had been a part of George's will than pursuing the approval of those who would never give it.

“Shropshire isn't a suitable climate for lemon trees, is it?” Jack asked as he stopped kissing Wentworth and let him go.

“Lemon trees?” Wentworth asked, indignant. “*That* was what you were thinking of as you kissed me just now?”

“Lemon trees would look quite lovely in amongst the roses,” Jack argued with a feigned look of disinterest.

Wentworth made a dismissive sound. “Not only would lemon trees never survive the winter here, they would look dreadful planted along with the roses we've picked out.”

Jack shrugged. “Alas, it was worth a suggestion.”

Wentworth rolled his eyes and shook his head. “It was *not* worth a suggestion. It was an incredibly silly thing to say, and you should know better.”

Jack turned to Wen, his eyes going wide. “Is that impertinence I hear?” he asked, then schooled his face into a scolding look that had Wentworth shivering, even before he went on with, “You know how I feel about impertinence.”

“Oh, dear,” Wentworth said with pretend fear. “You aren't thinking of punishing me, are you?” He bit his bottom lip and sent Jack a coy look.

It was ridiculous, of course. Some might argue that it was beneath his dignity as a duke to behave like a coquette at an illicit ball. But the freedom of the country and the license it gave him to play and pretend, at least for the moment, left Wentworth feeling light and young.

Jack tugged off his work gloves, looking at Wentworth with fire in his eyes. "Perhaps we should build a wall around the garden so that no one will see when I catch you and tan your backside," he said.

"If you can catch me," Wentworth replied, already laughing.

Jack lunged at him, and Wentworth leapt into a run, laughing with pure joy as Jack chased him through the half-finished garden and toward the house.

Jack almost caught him, but right before they reached the doorway to the conservatory, which stood open to let the fresh air into the house, which had been shut up for too long, young Gil stepped out, a letter of some sort in his hand.

Wentworth stopped so suddenly that Jack thumped into him from behind. Jack had to grab Wentworth around the middle to keep both of them from falling over. That left the two of them breathless and pink with embarrassment and happiness as Gil narrowed his eyes at them.

"A letter's come for you, Your Grace," young Gil said, glancing between Wentworth and Jack.

"Now, Gil, you know Telford Lodge is free from the usual rules of the world," Wentworth told the boy, smiling and only feeling a little self-conscious about the way Jack continued to hold him around the waist. "You can call me Wentworth here, not Your Grace."

"You sure that ain't some trick you're playing, Your Grace?" Gil asked suspiciously. "Only, I keep waitin' to wake up back at Flagg Hall, with Cook banging a frying pan on me head and Mr. Hunt boxing me ears."

"It isn't a dream," Jack laughed, letting go of Wentworth long enough to pluck the letter from Gil's hand. "Although sometimes it feels like it," he went on, grinning fondly at Wen.

"That it does," Gil said with a happy smile.

Wentworth and Jack weren't the only ones to benefit from decamping to the country, so far from London that no one could see or care what they got up to. After spending his early

years being treated abominably by the staff of Flagg Hall, young Gil was so pleased to be in a place where he was treated kindly, given good food, and allowed to sleep in a cozy bed, that he'd quickly learned to ignore the strange and inexplicable ways of the adults in the house and to appreciate what he had.

“Go on,” Wentworth told Gil, taking the letter from Jack and puzzling over the post mark for a moment. “I’m certain Mrs. Riley has saved aside one of the tarts she was making just for you.”

“I hope so, sir,” Gil said, scurrying back into the house with a smile.

It warmed Wentworth’s heart to see the boy so happy with his new life. He’d enjoyed working at Rawley House, but when Wentworth and Jack had departed for Shropshire, Wentworth insisted on bringing Gil, and a few of the other London servants, with them.

“Who is it from?” Jack asked, closing his arms around Wen’s waist and resting his chin on Wen’s shoulder as he opened the letter to read its contents.

From the first line, Wen frowned in confusion, even as his heartrate increased with excitement. “I’m not certain who it’s from,” he said. “It’s an invitation.”

“An invitation to what?” Jack asked. He moved to the side and took the letter from Wen.

“It doesn’t specify,” he said, smiling as Jack puzzled over the letter.

“Who signs an invitation to an unknown event in London with a drawing of a chameleon?” Jack asked.

That was the most puzzling part of the letter. It wasn’t signed. Instead, it ended with an address on Park Lane in London, a date in June, and an etching of a chameleon.

“I suppose,” Wentworth said, “that we will only discover who the chameleon is if we go to London next month, to that address, and find out.”



I hope you have enjoyed Wentworth and Jack's story! The eighteen thirties in England was a time of immense change. It wasn't truly the Regency anymore, but it wasn't yet the Victorian era either. The Reform Act of 1832 was the beginning of the end of the power of the House of Lords, and the British nobility in general. The next eight or so decades would see a long, slow decline of the influence of the upper class.

The eighteen thirties also saw the destruction of the old Palace of Westminster (the buildings that we know as the iconic Palace of Westminster now were not fully completed until 1852), the very earliest beginnings of rail travel in England, the end of slavery in the British Empire, the extension of the franchise to even more men in 1838, and the deaths of James Pratt and John Smith, the last two men to be executed for sodomy in England, in 1835.

It is interesting to note that, in the sodomy trial, as part of his argument that the sentence of Pratt and Smith should be commuted, Magistrate Wedgewood argued about the unfairness of the fact that the upper classes could get away with homosexual acts and relationships behind closed doors, but those from the middle and lower classes weren't as lucky. The fact that gentlemen—like George and his boy toys—could do whatever they wanted without fear of the law—but with very real fear of censure from their peers, as Wentworth found out the hard way—is one of those things about history that aggravates me. The law didn't apply to the wealthy and titled the way it did to the poor. But that also strongly implies that sexual relationships between men were far more prevalent than we've all been led to believe. History isn't impartial, after all. It's written by the victors...then rewritten when hearts and minds change.

There's more about the founding of the Brotherhood yet to come! What about the new Lord Wilmore and brash,

overbearing Lord Fulbright? As it turns out, Ellis has admired Maximillian Young, Lord Fulbright, from afar since he was a young man. But Ellis has never dared to do anything about his feelings, nor has he ever acknowledged and pursued his interests. And yes, George knew. That's why he left a particular quest in his will that would bring Ellis and Max together. But will Max get in his own way and ruin things? Find out next in [What a Nobleman Needs!](#)

If you enjoyed this book and would like to hear more from me —as Merry Farmer or my other identities, MM Farmer (omegaverse) or Em Farmer (MF Contemporary Romance) please sign up for my newsletter! When you sign up, you'll get your choice of a free, full-length novella. One choice is *A Passionate Deception*. It is an MF romance, but it has a strong MM secondary character, who gets his own book in my May Flowers series. Part of my West Meets East series, *A Passionate Deception* can be read as a stand-alone. Your other choice is *Rendezvous in Paris*. It is an MM Victorian story that is part of my *Tales from the Grand Tour* series, but can also be read as a standalone. Pick up your free copy today by signing up to receive my newsletter (which I only send out when I have a new release)!

Sign up here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH>

Are you on social media? I am! Come and join the fun on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/merryfarmerreaders>

I'm also a huge fan of Instagram and post lots of original content there: <https://www.instagram.com/merryfarmer/>

And, oh gosh, I signed up for TikTok too! They never should have let me on there, but if you want to watch me embarrassing myself in videos, you can follow me here: <https://www.tiktok.com/@merryfarmer>

## *About the Author*

I hope you have enjoyed *What a Duke Desires*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

USA Today Bestselling author Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.





## *Acknowledgments*

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my awesome beta-readers, Erica Montrose and Jolene Stewart, for their suggestions and advice. And double thanks to Julie Tague, for being a truly excellent editor and to Cindy Jackson for being an awesome assistant!

[Click here for a complete list of other works by Merry Farmer.](#)