

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**HELLION**

**Lisa Henry**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## HELLION

**By Lisa Henry**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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# HELLION

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## Photo Description

A stable. Two men in—but mostly out of—Regency-period clothing are grappling on the straw-covered floor, kissing. The younger man, one leg hooked around the older man, is naked except for his shirt. The older man is mostly clothed, although his breeches are pushed down around his thighs. The older man is on top, and he is definitely in charge of the situation.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I somehow inherited the care of a brat who either wants me or hates me—it's hard to tell which. The first is unacceptable, and inappropriate, given our age difference and my status as his guardian (and maybe our genders, depending whether Author chooses "real" historical or an AU in which same sex relationships are accepted); the second I'd gladly deal with until he comes of age and we're both free. Sending him away to school helped, except for holidays, which he'd come home for, whether I sent for him or not. He's done with school now, though, and making life difficult for everyone. He's becoming a hellion. I need to figure out what's causing him to act out and rein him in, but I'm not sure I can without making things worse. He has me so in knots I don't know if I want to kiss him, spank him, kiss him and spank him, or send him as far away as possible to save us both. Can you settle things out before we destroy each other?*

In other words, this should be an old-school, bodice ripper, guardian-ward romance (except MM of course) with an age difference of 15-20 years (so 18-20 and 33-39 would be perfect). It can be "real" historical or AU (in terms of society, not setting—earth only please), preferably set roughly in the Georgian or Regency era. No paranormal, and I'd prefer it if the characters didn't marry women or cheat once together.

Sincerely,

Jennifer

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** Regency Period-1800s England, first time, spanking, frottage, age gap, enemies to lovers

**Word Count:** 14,238

**HELLION**  
**By Lisa Henry**



## Chapter One

*Alderton, Suffolk, 1817*

Had Oliver Fitzwilliam ever been asked to give his considered opinion on the matter—and, unfortunately, he had not—he would have stated that the sooner the ton gave up the idea of a Season, the better. Not that Oliver was in any way a moralistic old bore. Quite the opposite, in fact. He loved the balls, parties, theatres, military reviews and masquerades that made up the frenzied London social calendar between late January and early July. He only hated the fact that, as with all good things, it had to come to an end, leaving the once-vibrant capital a veritable graveyard as everyone packed up and went home for the next six months.

Home, in Oliver's case, was Waverley, a more than modest estate in Suffolk that was so damned bucolic it set his teeth on edge. Even the sounds of the birds twittering in the trees drove him slowly mad. It wasn't that he hated the countryside—well, perhaps a little—it's just that he was so dreadfully *bored* by it. It wouldn't have been so bad if only he could have been left alone to perhaps read or draw, both of which he enjoyed, but he was a wealthy unmarried baronet, and the damned locals wouldn't give him a moment's peace.

There was one wittering on at him at that very moment, jowls jiggling as he talked animatedly about some upcoming ball at Major Clinton's estate, and how everyone would be *delighted* if Oliver attended. *Delighted*.

Oliver smiled and nodded as the Reverend Mr Bletchley buzzed on and on and on, as tiresome as a bluebottle trapped against a windowpane.

"Well, of course I should love to attend," he lied, pouring himself another brandy and holding the decanter up in question.

"Oh my goodness, I really oughtn't," the reverend said, but made no further protestation.

Oliver resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he poured him another drink, then looked up as a figure appeared briefly in the open library doorway. He was gone again, as fleeting as a shadow, but Oliver would know him anywhere.

Unfortunately.

Simon Cavendish.

The estate at Waverley had come with ten thousand acres of prime Suffolk farmland outside the village of Alderton, an income exceeding eight thousand pounds a year, the title of Baronet of Stockdale, and, regrettably, an unforeseen complication who went by the name of Simon Cavendish.

Complication, perhaps, was an exaggeration.

There wasn't terribly much that the boy could do to complicate Oliver's life. His duties to the estate, and to the boy, generally involved reading the correspondence that his manager sent him each month, which, for the first few years at least, had included the increasingly damning reports from the boy's schoolmasters.

Oliver had inherited the estate, and the boy, from a great-uncle. His uncle's lack of direct heir had proved extremely beneficial for Oliver, but he hadn't anticipated inheriting anything like Simon Cavendish.

Whether Oliver cared to admit it or not, the boy was another reason Oliver didn't spend more time at Waverley. He was fifteen when Oliver had first made his acquaintance. He was nineteen now. In two years he would attain his majority, and, with a more than generous settlement bestowed upon him, would be out of Oliver's hair for good. It wasn't that he detested the boy; he was just somewhat *confounded* by him.

He had been confounded the first time he'd met him, and remained confounded to this day.

Oliver had never delved into the specifics. He only knew that Simon Cavendish's father, the son of a previous manager at Waverley, had been a dear friend of Uncle William's son. They had been of an age, and had both died in the war against the French at Alexandria. A tragedy, certainly, and possibly old Uncle William had felt somewhat responsible for the orphaned boy whose mother had died in childbirth.

Oliver had the impression that Uncle William's responsibility hadn't extended far beyond the fiscal. From what he could glean, the boy had spent most of his childhood roaming the estate and eluding the string of increasingly frustrated tutors employed to educate him.

Four years ago, when Oliver had first made his acquaintance, Simon had been a dark-eyed, wild-haired, barefoot gypsy of a boy with a bottom lip that jutted out in displeasure, and a scowl he wore whenever he'd been dragged inside and forced to make conversation with his new guardian. Nothing much had changed.

Both of them, Oliver suspected, had disliked the other on sight, although Oliver was certainly more practiced at hiding it. A lifetime of negotiating the hazards and pitfalls of the ton had made Oliver an expert. The boy's obvious sullenness had been almost refreshing. Still, Oliver had very quickly run out of patience. When the boy had seen off yet another tutor, Oliver hadn't bothered to seek out a new one. He'd simply packed the brat off to school, which, in his opinion, should have been done ten years before.

Somehow, Simon had always managed to be at Waverley whenever Oliver visited. He had usually been between schools at the time. Oliver wondered if perhaps he'd had an attachment to some girl in the town, he'd been so desperate about escaping each school, but Mrs Forster had assured him that the boy rarely left the grounds of the estate. He spent most of his time in the stables, helping to look after the horses.

It was no occupation for a gentleman, even one as badly situated as Simon Cavendish. He was too poor to afford his own horses, and too well born to shovel their shit. Oliver sometimes wondered if the boy was deliberately obtuse, or if he really did think he could spend his life at Waverley living on Oliver's generosity.

Four years later, they were long finished with schools—the schools were certainly glad to see the back of the boy—and university was out of the question. How the boy expected to make himself a living as a schoolmaster or a man of the cloth with his appalling academic record—both highly suitable professions for a man of his class—Oliver didn't know. At this rate, he'd have to buy the boy a commission into the army to be properly rid of him.

Two years, and Oliver's obligation to his uncle's final wishes would be at an end, and then the boy could go and rot for all Oliver cared. He'd given him every chance to better himself, only to watch him squander those chances again and again as the doors to school after school were slammed shut behind him.

The boy was maddening.

Maddening.

"I'm so terribly sorry," Oliver said, realising that Mr Bletchley had stopped talking and, by the look of vague consternation on his face, was obviously waiting for a response to something he'd said. "Do repeat that, please."

"I was just saying, Sir Oliver, that I do hope I shall see you in church this Sunday. I don't know if you've met Mr Haywood, our new deacon. He has *four* daughters."

Oliver wasn't sure what the expected response was for a statement like that. Congratulations or commiserations? And, while Oliver was used to having daughters of marriageable ages herded toward him on all social occasions, the daughters of a church deacon? Really?

"It's my hope that you might set an example for young Mr Cavendish," Mr Bletchley continued, "now that you're back at Waverley."

Ah. So the deacon's daughters weren't for Oliver after all; they were to be dangled in front of Simon to entice him onto the straight and narrow, were they? Oliver doubted it would work. He also doubted that once Mr Haywood had been properly apprised of Simon's reputation that he would be willing to let any of his daughters within several miles of the brat.

"I shall certainly try to impress upon him the importance of attending," Oliver said, while wondering how to get out of it himself. In London, during the Season, one went to church to see and be seen. In the village of Alderton, Oliver suspected, the experience would not be quite so diverting.

"Oh, yes," Mr Bletchley said eagerly, jowls jiggling again. "Mr Cavendish is quite the... the..."

"The hellion?" Oliver suggested, trying his best to hide his amusement. He wasn't sure what passed for a hellion in these parts.

"Well, quite!" Mr Bletchley looked relieved to find his opinion confirmed, and at the same time uncomfortable to reveal himself so uncharitable. "Of course, I know you've done all that you can with the young gentleman, as did Sir William, God rest him, but what can one do when one is rebuffed at every turn? I myself have tried to speak to Mr Cavendish many times about where he might find proper guidance in the scriptures, but I fear he is the sheep that wanders heedless from the flock."

Oliver tried not to smile at that. Perhaps he and Simon had something in common after all: an utter disinterest in the Reverend Mr Bletchley's sermonising.

"I'm sure that your presence at Waverley will provide young Mr Cavendish with the proper influence, Sir Oliver," Mr Bletchley continued earnestly.

*Hardly*, Oliver thought wryly, but he nodded. "I certainly hope so."

Oliver let the reverend prattle on for a little while longer, before the man finally excused himself. Not because he'd run out of things to say—Oliver had

the impression he could have kept going for hours yet—but because he was so dreadfully busy and had other visits to make today.

Oliver couldn't see him off soon enough.

The moment he was gone, Oliver tipped the rest of his glass of brandy down his throat in one burning swallow, and wished, again, that he didn't have months of this yet to come. God. He couldn't wait for his friend Nicholas to arrive tomorrow. Tedium shared, hopefully, was tedium halved.

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The boy still hadn't shown his face by dinner, which was irksome. Oliver ate alone with Captain Durant, the manager of the estate. Durant was a long-faced fellow, a thin white scar bisecting his hollow cheek, courtesy of his military days. He spoke in clipped, short sentences, and, despite the man's advancing age, Oliver was sure he kept the servants on their toes.

At the other end of the table, Simon's plate went cold. Oliver knew that the boy customarily ate with the servants, and certainly didn't begrudge him. But was it really too much to expect that when Oliver was in residence, his recalcitrant ward could at least do him the barest courtesy of dining with him?

Not that Simon was much of a conversationalist. Since Oliver had arrived back at Waverley, the brat had hardly spoken more than two words to him.

"Welcome home," he'd said when Oliver had levered his aching body out of the carriage. Then Mrs Forster had elbowed him in the ribs, and he'd tacked on a reluctant, "Sir."

Oliver glowered at his dinner for a while, stabbing a piece of mutton around and around the plate. The problem was that Waverley had never felt like home, and not just because it wasn't London. It had never felt like home because the housekeeper had come with the place, the servants had, and Simon had, and Oliver felt absolutely no attachment to either the place or the people who lived here.

"Mrs Forster," he said when the housekeeper brought in the dish of vegetables, "did I not give express instructions that young Mr Cavendish was to dine with me tonight?"

Her mouth tightened. "You did, Sir Oliver."

"And you told him?"

"Yes, Sir Oliver." Mrs Forster was a small, round woman, with dark eyes set in a pale face like currants in dough.

“Well,” Oliver said mildly. “How disappointing.”

Mrs Forster scurried from the room.

“Damned nuisance, that boy,” Captain Durant said. “Pardon my language, Sir Oliver.”

Oliver waved the apology away.

Oliver had finished his piece of mutton and had started on his potatoes when Simon finally sidled through the dining room door.

Oliver tightened his grip on his silverware. “Good evening, Simon.”

The boy’s dark brows drew together. “Good evening, sir.”

The legs of his chair scraped across the floor as he sat.

In the candlelight, Simon was striking. Dark haired, sloe-eyed, with a stubborn pout that Oliver was certain he didn’t intend to be alluring. In the flickering glow, however, Oliver couldn’t help but imagine him with a little kohl around his eyes and a little colour painted on his lips and cheeks, like the boys, or rather the girls, from the molly houses. Not that Simon Cavendish could summon a coquettish smile if his damned life depended on it. Dour little brat.

“Are you always so late for dinner?” he asked the boy.

“Major Clinton’s man came to see the pups, sir.” Simon ground out his words like they hurt him. He smoothed the front of his ill-fitting coat. “The Major might want some for hunting dogs.”

“Surely someone else could have shown him,” Oliver said, raising his brows.

Simon frowned. “I know the dogs.”

Captain Durant snorted.

Oliver wouldn’t have been surprised to find out he rolled around in the dirt with them, given his general slovenly appearance and the fact that growling appeared to be his main form of communication. “What is it that you actually *do* here, Simon?”

The brat paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, and then laid it down on his plate. “Sir?”

Oliver waved his hand. “What do you do, Simon? Given that the estate pays for your food and your keep, and for that disastrous attempt at your schooling,

I'm interested to know. What do you *do*? And, more to the point, what do you intend to do when you turn twenty-one and no longer have my charity to live on?"

"I look after the dogs," the boy said, jutting out his chin a little.

From anyone else, Oliver might have taken the boy's pouting hostility as a challenge. There was sometimes an incredibly fine line between hate and want, but it was one Oliver had never had trouble reading before. Simon though... well, it was entirely possible that Simon just plainly hated him.

Captain Durant snorted again.

"Oh, what a fine gentleman you are," Oliver said, a smile tugging at his lips. "And what a fine ambition in life, to look after the dogs."

Simon shoved his plate away and stood. He shot Oliver a baleful glare, and fled the dining room.

Well. So much for a dinner conversation with his ward.

"High time he was brought down a peg or two, sir," Captain Durant said, and huffed approvingly.

Oliver listened to the sound of Simon's footsteps fading, and shook his head. Good Lord. The brat really was wild.

He and Captain Durant finished their meal in companionable silence.

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## Chapter Two

“Simon!” Mrs Forster called from the stable doors. “*Simon!*”

Simon Cavendish struggled awake, blinking at the roof. He thought for a moment about ignoring her, but she probably knew he was in the hayloft, and he wouldn’t have put it past her to climb up the ladder with a pitchfork to drive him out.

“You are a mess,” she clucked when he finally slid down the ladder. She reached up and picked a piece of straw out of his wild hair. “Simon, what did we say?”

Simon felt like a chastened child. He wilted a little under her worried stare. “I’m sorry, Mrs Forster.”

“You were late for dinner last night,” she sighed. “And then you ran away like the devil was at your heels!” She huffed. Behind her, through the open stable door, Simon could see the sunlight starting to chase the early morning mist away. “I thought you wanted to tell Sir Oliver about the pups.”

Simon’s stomach clenched. “I wanted to, but...” He shrugged.

But Captain Durant had been there, as ill-tempered and disapproving as always. And then there was Sir Oliver himself: “*What a fine ambition in life, to look after the dogs.*” Heat crept up the back of Simon’s neck as he thought of the man. Sir Oliver had sharp, clever features, a hawkish nose, and high cheekbones. His lips inclined a little to thinness, and were most often curled into something faintly mocking when his gaze was fixed on Simon. Angry heat flared in Simon’s belly whenever Sir Oliver looked at him, because he knew the man was laughing at him.

Mrs Forster clipped him over the ear. “Captain Durant will certainly take the credit, if you let him!”

Simon scowled.

The *credit*? There was very little credit to be had yet. Simon had eight dogs, and a new litter of six pups, all of them kept in the half of the stables he’d converted to kennels in the past year. Certainly Sir William had never been terribly interested in hunting. He’d had a few dogs for fowling, but he’d never been serious about maintaining a kennel. Neither was Sir Oliver, so far as Simon could tell. Major Clinton from neighbouring Argyle Park was a



sportsman though, and had ambitions toward establishing a local hunt. Simon had offered him his pick of the litter, at forty pounds for each pup. It was a price Major Clinton seemed willing to pay, given the pedigrees of both the sire and dam. With a little more capital, Simon knew he could set up proper kennels, and increase his breeding stock, but in order to do so, he'd have to approach Sir Oliver, and Sir Oliver clearly despised him.

The feeling was returned with fervour.

Sir William, the old baronet, hadn't had much time for his ward. Simon hadn't been raised with any guidance at all, except whatever Mrs Forster had been able to beat into him with whatever implement she'd had on hand at the time. That had lasted until Simon was about six and could outrun her. After that he'd been almost like a wild thing, roaming the grounds of the estate and easily escaping into the woods whenever his tutors were calling for him. He turned up at the kitchen door whenever he was hungry. Like a stray tom, Mrs Forster said, instead of a gentleman.

Simon had never felt much like a gentleman at all. He was happiest on his own, free of the stifling confines of dining rooms and drawing rooms and stilted conversations that made his skin itch with the need to escape. He was happiest with the dogs and the horses and the woodland animals. He even preferred to sleep in the stables, especially when Sir Oliver was in residence.

When he'd been younger, Simon had always made sure he was home from school when Sir Oliver was in residence. He hadn't even been sure why, since the man clearly didn't care for him. They butted heads whenever they were in the same room, but there was something intoxicating about it, a flare of heat that was part anger and part something else. From the moment Simon had first met his new guardian, he'd wanted *something* from the man, he just didn't know exactly what. He only knew that he wanted to crack the man's cool composure, to see him break with frustration the way he so easily broke Simon, but Sir Oliver never had, and Simon hated him for it.

"He doesn't care about the dogs," Simon said, scowling. Or about anything, or *anyone* else.

Mrs Forster clicked her tongue at him. "And how do you know that, if you don't ask him?"

"He doesn't care about the dogs because he doesn't care about anything to do with Waverley!"

“Oh, you are the most foolish, stubborn boy sometimes!” Mrs Forster huffed, folding her arms across her bosom. Then something like sympathy softened her features. “There’s bread and cheese for you in the tack room.”

“Thank you, Mrs Forster.”

Simon watched her go. Her bad temper might not have lasted, he knew, but his own would. It had settled over him like a dark cloud the moment Sir Oliver had returned to Waverley, and would no doubt remain until the man went back to London in a few months’ time.

Simon waited until Mrs Forster was swallowed up by the glow of the hazy morning light, and turned back into the stables.

The stables were Simon’s territory. They were old, and a little ramshackle. The previous head groom, Harnett, had slept in a spare tack room at the back of the stables when he’d still been alive. After he’d died, Simon had taken over the small room. He liked to be close to the horses, and now the dogs. Waverley had two grooms, but they slept in the servants’ quarters at the back of the main house. Simon most often worked late, and fell asleep in the tack room, or in the hayloft, rather than going back into the house.

He was no gentleman at all.

He moved down the length of the stalls, the horses whickering and stamping for his attention. He shushed them. The grooms would be along shortly.

The dogs were glad to see him, tails wagging and thumping against the walls of the stalls. Simon checked Lady and the pups next, cloistered in their own stall so that the pups didn’t have to fight for food. They were a few weeks old now, all of them fattening up nicely, apart from the runt. She was still half the size of the others, and Simon’s favourite. Simon sometimes tucked her into his shirt as he worked.

He fetched food and water for Lady and the pups, and then let the other dogs out to run. In the group of seven, he had three terriers and four harriers. Lady and the pups were harriers too. Simon wasn’t a hunter himself, and certainly nobody in the area would ever invite him to a hunt. It wasn’t the first time that Simon thought he would have been better off born the son of one of the stablemen, rather than a gentleman.

Outside the stables, the dogs leapt around him, eager for their morning run. Simon set out in his usual direction, heading south from the stables, where the terraced gardens gave way quickly to the fields, and the fields to the woods. His

belly growled a little, and he rubbed it. He was looking forward to breakfast as much as the dogs.

When they reached the first screen of trees, the dogs surged ahead. Simon stopped and pissed, and then yawned and stretched. The morning was hazy and warm, with a heaviness in the air that promised, perhaps, a late thunderstorm. He had planned to go into Alderton to see if the books he'd ordered from London had arrived yet, but that was a journey more suited for better weather.

He cast a look back at Waverley. In the morning light it was illuminated, the house having taken on a rosy glow. From this distance it appeared almost magical, something that if Simon reached out to touch might suddenly disappear.

He turned his back on it and headed into the woods.

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Late in the afternoon, just as the clouds were drawing in, Simon was sitting by the edge of the lake, reading, with Lady's snoring runt tucked into his shirt. The lake was man-made, and had been dug out of the estate during the baronetcy of Sir Philip, Sir William's father, who had spent most of his fortune redesigning first the house, and then the gardens. The gardens and the lake had been the work of Capability Brown, and took a team of six men to maintain. Often, people would come just to see the house and gardens, and to sign the visitor book that Mrs Forster kept diligently.

When he first heard the crunch of hooves and carriage wheels on the gravel drive, Simon assumed it was tourists. He saw his mistake when the carriages came into sight around the bend of the lake: both were piled high with luggage and servants.

Simon's lip curled.

These would be Sir Oliver's guests, then. From Town.

He rose to his feet and headed for the house. Cutting through the gardens, he arrived at the front of the house just as the carriages pulled up. The servants climbed down, and were met by Mrs Forster and two of Sir Oliver's footmen. Doors were opened, steps folded down, and Simon bit back a laugh as a man almost nosedived out of the first carriage. He was both gangly and rotund, like a frog with its legs extended in midleap, and he had straw-coloured hair that was immediately pulled into mad tufts by the wind.

Simon leaned against the statue of some wood nymph and watched as Sir Oliver appeared, striding down the steps, and laid a steadying hand on his friend's shoulder.

A woman descended from the carriage with a lot more grace.

Simon was too far away to hear what was said between Sir Oliver and his friends, but he saw the easy smile that settled over Sir Oliver's face. Something that felt almost like jealousy burned for a moment in his stomach, and then he shook it off and headed back around the house toward the stables.

Whatever friends Sir Oliver had were no business, nor any interest, of his.

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"And here we have the stables," Sir Oliver said, his voice preceding him through the doors, "and, oh, of course, my recalcitrant ward, Simon Cavendish."

Simon was caught unawares, one pup squirming in his grasp and the others grappling together around his boots. He set the pup down, flushing, and wiped his palm on his shirt before offering it.

"Simon Cavendish," Sir Oliver said, "this is my dearest friend, Sir Nicholas Hammond."

"Nicholas," the straw-haired frog said with a disarming smile, taking his hand and shaking it. "Or Nick, whichever you prefer."

Sir Oliver rolled his eyes. "And his sister, Miss Hammond."

Miss Hammond smiled. She had the same wide mouth, large eyes, and pink complexion as her brother, but they fitted together a lot more generously on her. "Oh, what delightful pups. Might I hold one?"

Simon bent down and picked up the runt, and held her out. Miss Hammond's gloved fingers touched his own, and then she was cradling the pup against her chest.

"She's quite beautiful! Does she have a name?"

Simon glanced at Sir Oliver who looked, as usual, partly bored and partly contemptuous. "Um, not exactly, Miss Hammond. She's recorded as Waverley Sextillis, because she's the sixth in the litter and—"

"Sextillis was the sixth month of the Roman calendar," Miss Hammond finished for him, her smile growing.

“Are you breeding them?” Nicholas asked, his tone curious.

Simon glanced at Sir Oliver and away again. “I, um, I hope to, sir. I’m keeping a book of their bloodlines, and Major Clinton thinks he might take some of this litter.”

“What are you charging?” Nicholas asked.

“Forty pounds.”

Sir Oliver’s brows quirked up. “*Each?*”

“My uncle paid seventy-five for a terrier last year,” Nicholas said. “If the bloodline proves good, you’ll have buyers beating a path to your door.” He clapped Sir Oliver on the shoulder. “You really ought to spend your time in the country doing more than sulking about it. You might actually learn a thing or two!”

Sir Oliver snorted and began to walk away.

Nicholas followed him, grinning.

“I think,” said Miss Hammond, lifting the pup and pressing a kiss to her head, “that I shall need to come and visit this little dear every day. If you have no objections, Mr Cavendish.”

“No, Miss Hammond.” He took the pup back.

“Good,” she said, her smile digging dimples into her cheeks. “And you are joining us for dinner, aren’t you?”

Simon opened his mouth to answer.

“Simon would rather spend his time with the dogs than in two-legged company,” Sir Oliver said over his shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Simon?”

Miss Hammond’s smile faltered.

“Yes,” Simon said before her expression turned pitying. “That’s right, sir.”

He turned his back on them and headed for the tack room.

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### Chapter Three

“Well,” said Nicholas at breakfast the next morning. “Here’s how it is. If you don’t apologise to your ward for being appallingly rude to him and uninviting him to dinner last night, Jane will hate you, and me, for the remainder of our visit. Possibly longer.” He popped a piece of carrot into his mouth. “*Probably* longer. And then I shall have to hate you as well, for making the rest of my life not worth the living.”

Oliver sighed and groaned. “Was I *that* rude? Really? I’m sure I’ve said things a hundred times worse to members of the ton.”

“Oh, but the ton thrives on spite,” Nicholas said cheerily. “Death of a thousand cuts, with us, and we love every minute of it. But what you have there, my dear friend, is a poor, sad orphan boy who was holding a puppy. I’m not sure I can sufficiently illustrate Jane’s sudden depth of feeling any more than that. It was probably the puppy that clinched it, wasn’t it, Jane?”

Jane, sitting across the other side of the table, rolled her eyes. “I’m ignoring you.”

“You’re doing a terrible job of it,” Nicholas commented.

She wrinkled her nose at him.

“So,” Nicholas continued, “be a good chap and apologise to the fellow, and all will be right with the world again.”

“He’s confounding,” Oliver said. “He *glares*.”

Nicholas stared at him narrowly for a moment, before he suddenly laughed. “Good Lord! I think you’re actually scared of your own ward!”

“Scared?” Oliver sat up straighter, offended.

Nicholas laughed again. “Is this why you hate coming to the country so much? Not because you’re bored, but because he *glares* at you?”

“I am not scared of Simon Cavendish!” Oliver objected. The idea was ludicrous! He shook his head as Nicholas laughed and clapped his hands together like a child delighted with a new discovery. “Nick!”

It was laughable. Oliver didn’t dislike Waverley just because Simon was here. He disliked Waverley because it was so damn *tedious*. And he certainly

wasn't afraid of Simon. Simon could glare and glower all he wanted, and Oliver was more than up to the challenge. It was just that lately, ever since the boy had shot up and filled out, Oliver had found himself itching to meet that defiant glower in unexpected and entirely inappropriate ways.

Entirely inappropriate.

Oliver cast a beseeching look in Jane's direction, and discovered she was not-too-successfully hiding a smile behind a piece of toast.

"*Et tu, Jane?*" he muttered, stabbing his fork into his eggs.

She flashed a smile at him—as sharp-edged as a razor—and raised her brows. "Nick does seem to have hit on a point, Oliver."

"Rubbish," Oliver scoffed. "Absolute rubbish!"

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In the afternoon, Jane commandeered Simon to guide them around the estate. Simon, Oliver couldn't help but begrudgingly notice, actually proved himself useful. He rode alongside them, pointing out little features of the estate that even Oliver didn't know. When they passed several of the tenant farmers, Simon addressed each one by name. The tenant farmers, Oliver noted, were a lot more respectful toward Simon than he would have expected. Lower standards, probably.

Oliver confided as much in Nicholas when they rode a little ahead.

Nicholas arched his brows. "Really, Oliver? That's what you took from that?"

"What else was there to take?"

"Oh, I simply can't imagine," Nicholas said. "How about the fact that he not only knew their names, but that he asked about their crops, and their livestock, and asked that one fellow if his little daughter, who he knew by name, had recovered from her fever?"

Oliver considered that for a moment. "Good Lord. He's actually capable of holding a conversation."

Nicholas rolled his eyes.

When they stopped for a picnic lunch on the hillside to the east of the estate, Simon helped Jane from the saddle and tied the horses up.

"This is a pretty view," Nicholas commented, sighing as he sat.

From this distance, the house seemed warm and welcoming. The day was too grey for the sunlight to sparkle off the waters of the lake, but it made everything appear more deeply verdant. The gardens and fields were spread out like a patchwork counterpane, green and yellow and brown.

Jane sat on the edge of the rug and reached out and plucked a dandelion. She twisted it between her thumb and forefinger, smiling as the seeds shook free and sailed away on the breeze. “You should invite Simon to sit with us, Oliver.”

Oliver glanced over at Simon. He was lurking near the horses, scratching their noses and butting his knuckles against their heads. “He seems perfectly happy where he is.”

“Mr Cavendish!” Jane called. “Come and share some sandwiches.”

“It’s going to rain,” Simon called back, looking at the clouds. Then he turned his back on them and fussed over the horses.

Nicholas’s eyebrows shot up. “Good Lord. He really is a stubborn little thing, isn’t he?”

“Apparently a real hellion,” Oliver said, snorting.

“A hellion?” Nicholas asked. “What on earth does one do to be called a hellion in *Suffolk*?”

“Runs about startling the chickens, as far as I can tell.”

Nicholas laughed. “Oh, yes. Very last days of Rome and whatnot.”

Oliver bit into a sandwich and glanced at Simon again. While not anything approaching a hellion by Town definition, he could see where Simon had built the reputation for himself in Alderton. He’d been sent down from more schools than even Oliver could remember offhand. He didn’t go to church, he roamed about like a vagabond, and he quite simply refused to behave like a gentleman. Oliver might have actually enjoyed the spectacle the boy made of himself, if it didn’t reflect so poorly upon Waverley and, by extension, himself. Like it or not, he was the boy’s guardian.

He didn’t like it. Not a whit.

“Mr Bletchley, the local reverend, wants me to try, I think, to marry him off to some poor unfortunate girl. Apparently the new deacon has a veritable brace of daughters.”



“Hmm.” Jane raised her brows. “That’s all well and good, but has he any prospects?”

Simon was head to head with Bayard, his fingers tangled in the horse’s mane as he whispered something to him.

“Prospects? Hardly. Look at him. He’s a gypsy!”

Oliver spoke more loudly than he realised, or Simon had the hearing of a bat, because he turned sharply. For a moment Oliver thought he’d actually offended the brat, but the flash of hurt he thought he read on the boy’s face was very quickly replaced by his usual glower.

“Simon,” he attempted in a conciliatory tone. “Come and have some lunch.”

“I don’t want any lunch,” the boy said.

Oliver sighed. “Simon—”

“Why don’t you just go back to London where you belong?” Simon swung himself up onto Bayard’s back, twisted the reins in his fist, and kicked the horse into a gallop.

“What in Hades brought that on?” Oliver asked, a little startled at the vehemence of the brat’s outburst.

Nicholas raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, Oliver,” Jane said. “You really are horribly rude to poor Mr Cavendish.”

“Rude?” he huffed. “And who exactly is it currently riding away in a snit?”

Jane rolled her eyes.

A few moments later it started to rain, and their plans for a picnic lunch were ruined.

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“I do hope Mr Cavendish is somewhere out of this dreadful weather,” Jane said later that afternoon, peering worriedly out the library window.

Oliver turned a page of his book. “He’ll be fine. He’s like a cat. He’ll have holed up somewhere dry.”

Speaking of cats, Nicholas had fetched one up from somewhere and was currently dangling a length of ribbon at it for its entertainment. “You really do seem determined to hate him.”

“I don’t hate him,” Oliver replied. “Hate requires much more strength of feeling than I can be bothered to harness on the brat’s account.” He set his book aside. “And where the hell did that cat even come from?”

Jane ignored his language. She knew him rather too well.

“Its name is Muffin, and it belongs to your housekeeper,” Nicholas informed him.

“Muffin,” Oliver muttered peevishly.

“You really are becoming an old curmudgeon,” Jane commented.

“I’m thirty-four!” he exclaimed. “I’m not old!”

“Notice that he doesn’t deny the charge of curmudgeon,” Nicholas told Jane with a knowing look. “Of course, he’s been this way since I’ve known him. Really, nothing much has changed.”

“If I can be an old maid at twenty-three, you can certainly be an old curmudgeon at thirty-four,” Jane said.

Nicholas laughed as the cat pounced at the dancing ribbon. “Never mind, Janey, I’m sure we’ll find you some mad old thing to marry next Season. If we don’t, Mother is certain to have a fit.”

Jane made a face. “I expect that sooner or later I’ll have to just give in and marry Oliver.”

Oliver huffed and picked up his book again. “You’re far too good for me, Jane.”

“I certainly am,” she told him. “If you’d be so kind as to let my mother know, I’d be eternally grateful.”

Oliver snorted.

At least his own family had stopped badgering him about marriage. As a woman, Jane wasn’t so fortunate. All of her sisters had been successfully married off to men with just the right sort of titles and bank balances, but Jane showed very little interest in following that path. Their mother despaired, Nicholas had confided to Oliver, but Jane was particular. She wouldn’t settle for just any dandy. She certainly wouldn’t settle for Oliver Fitzwilliam either, and good luck to her.

Oliver had no intentions of marrying. Not just because his proclivities took him in the opposite direction of feminine charms—that particular vice was

certainly no reason not to marry, as a large proportion of the ton could privately attest—but because marriage had never interested him. Oliver wasn't attracted to women, and while he could imagine himself living quite happily with a woman as sharp and fun as Jane, it certainly wasn't a situation he felt necessary to seek out. Oliver had a younger brother who already had two sons, so the baronetcy would remain in the family.

“You ought to invite Mr Cavendish for dinner tonight,” Jane said at last.

“Why are you so determined I should accommodate him in everything we do?”

Jane arched her brows. “Why are you so determined you shouldn't?”

Oliver immediately changed his mind about ever marrying a woman like her. She'd drive him mad.

At length, Jane excused herself to return to her room and write letters home, and Nicholas set off to return the cat to Mrs Forster. Oliver tried to read, but soon gave up.

He was far too annoyed to concentrate.

The storm had passed by dusk, although the rain still fell gently. Oliver, pacing the library, saw the faint glow of light coming from the stables, and realised that Simon must have returned from wherever his fit of temper had driven him. He scowled at the stables, and then poured himself a liberal amount of claret, trusting it to drown the worst of his irritation before he went and lectured the boy. Or apologised, as Jane had insisted. But no, the boy deserved a lecture more than an apology. The wilful, proud, stubborn brat of a boy who clearly had no idea of how to conduct himself like an adult, let alone a gentleman.

Oliver downed his claret, and left the house. His hair and the shoulders of his coat were wet before he'd even made it across the yard to the stables. He slipped inside the doors.

In the faint glow of low light, the horses in the stalls whickered and snuffled. Bayard was back, and Oliver was pleased to note he was wearing a blanket and nosebag. At least Simon had shown the good sense to look after the animal after riding him through a storm.

The light was coming from the old tack room. Oliver moved forward, the steady, soft patter of the rain on the roof deadening his footsteps. He opened his mouth to announce himself as he arrived at the doorway, then immediately clamped his jaw shut.

Simon was asleep on a narrow cot. His wet clothes hung on a line strung between hooks in the roof. A lamp was burning on the table beside the cot, the shadows dancing off the books and ledgers stacked there. One of Simon's arms hung over the edge of the cot, his fingers grazing the floor.

He was naked.

Not a stitch on him.

All right, so perhaps the blanket currently pooled on the floor had started off by protecting his modesty, but it had most certainly failed.

Completely naked.

And he was completely lovely.

He was sleeping on his stomach, one leg drawn up slightly, and Oliver's gaze, naturally, was drawn straight to his arse. And what a delightful arse it was. It was a study of perfection; the sort of arse that belonged on some statue of Hadrian's beloved boy Antinous, not on a rustic brat with coarser manners and less charm than a Billingsgate fishwife.

It was an utter travesty.

It was also an utter tragedy in that an arse so untouchable had to remain untouched.

Oliver let his gaze slide up the line of the boy's spine, from the narrow hips to the wider shoulders. Simon's hair was still wet, lying slick and shining against the nape of his neck. Simon's dark lashes lay against his cheeks. In the embrace of sleep, his mouth was lax. No surly pout in sight. Oliver wondered what it would feel like to run his thumb along that full bottom lip.

Simon was beautiful. What a shame the boy was so infuriating when he was awake.

Oliver stepped forward quietly, and stooped to pick up the blanket. He laid it over Simon almost regretfully. Well, if he was the sort of guardian who'd burn in hell for having lascivious thoughts about his ward, he could at least do the boy the service of making sure he didn't come down with a fever. That had to count for something, surely.

Oliver left the tack room and headed back to the house.

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## Chapter Four

Simon hated balls and parties, even though invitations rarely came his way. But this was Major Clinton's ball, and he liked Major Clinton. So, dressed in a manner that Miss Hammond declared 'handsome' and Sir Oliver declared 'tolerable', Simon was prepared to grit his teeth and attempt to be respectable for an evening.

"I hear Mr Haywood, the new deacon, and all four of his daughters will be attending," Sir Oliver said with a smirk as the carriage rattled along toward Argyle Park.

Simon straightened his cravat and stared out the window.

Jane leaned forward and smacked Sir Oliver on the knee with her fan. "Don't tease, Oliver!"

Simon felt more out of his depth than he had a moment ago. He didn't doubt that Sir Oliver was teasing him—baiting him, more like—but he didn't see *how*. He tugged his cuffs down, and resolved not to say anything. He still needed to approach Sir Oliver about capital for expanding the kennels, and he was already on a terrible footing with the man. His temper, as Mrs Forster liked to remind him, was his worst enemy.

Sir Oliver had been acting a little strangely with him since he'd ridden off into the rain a few days ago. Simon had been expecting to be yelled at for being disrespectful, but Sir Oliver hadn't even mentioned it. And whenever the man's gaze had fallen on him since, Simon had felt that for a fraction of a second there had been something new there, something questioning, something *indefinable*, before Sir Oliver affected his usual cool demeanour with an expression that landed somewhere between boredom and contempt.

Simon glanced at him now quickly. Sir Oliver was staring out the window, his gaze distant. A lock of reddish hair fell over his eye as the carriage bounced over a rut, and he lifted a lean long-fingered hand to push it back, his thin lips twitching in irritation. He had a cold, handsome face.

Simon looked away again, and worried at a button on his coat.

He listened to Sir Nicholas and Miss Hammond talking about people they knew back in London, about engagements made and broken, and friendships formed and finished over the course of the Season. The members of the ton, for

all their affectations, were just the same as the pups in the stables: bloodlines and pedigree and breeding and market value.

Argyle Park was Waverley's closest neighbour. It sat just the other side of a small wooded rise that Simon knew intimately. On clear days, the smoke from Argyle Park's chimneys was visible from Waverley. The house wasn't as large as Waverley, and the gardens certainly paled in comparison, but the stables and kennels... they were magnificent.

The curving drive from the front gates to the house was lit with lanterns, flickering and guttering in the cool wind. The front of the house was also ablaze with light. Simon could hear the faint strains of music, and of laughter and voices from inside. As soon as the carriage stopped, Simon climbed out. He tugged the step down for Miss Hammond without waiting for the approaching footman, and held out his hand to assist her down.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Mr Cavendish."

"Simon," Sir Oliver said, straightening his coat as he stepped down from the carriage. "Do try not to embarrass me, won't you?"

Simon scowled, heat rising. "Yes, sir."

"Good," said Sir Oliver.

Simon adjusted his cravat one last time and followed Sir Oliver and his friends into the house.

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Simon did not know how to dance a quadrille. He stood at the edge of the ballroom instead, and watched as the people moved through the steps, easily, gracefully, in patterns that Simon didn't understand. Sir Oliver and Miss Hammond made up one of the four couples, while Sir Nicholas was partnered with a pretty young lady Simon didn't recognise. Her face was framed with dark ringlets that bounced whenever she took a step.

Simon took a glass of port from a tray on the sideboard, and took a few sips. He looked around the ballroom, hoping to spot their host. He caught a glimpse of Major Clinton over near the musicians, and took a few steps in that direction before he realised the Reverend Mr Bletchley was already talking to the major.

Simon backed away again.

The last time Mr Bletchley had cornered him, he hadn't been able to escape for at least half an hour, and he'd first had to suffer through a rambling

impromptu lecture about keeping his spirit fortified against temptation. Simon's only temptation had been to punch him in the face and run. Fortunately he'd only succumbed to the second.

Simon resolved to do the same again right now, and speak with Major Clinton later. He was just edging around the side of the ballroom, keeping his eyes averted, when the quadrille ended, and Sir Oliver was at his side.

"Simon," he said. "Do come and meet Mr Haywood and his daughters."

Sir Oliver put a hand firmly against the small of his back and guided him toward a kind-looking gentleman with receding grey hair, wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, and a knot of girls standing behind him. One of them, Simon thought, had been Sir Nicholas's dance partner for the quadrille.

"I—"

Sir Oliver's smile was strained. "Simon, you're going to let me introduce you to Mr Haywood, you're going to tell him that you hope to get a commission in the army when you come of age—"

"The army?" Simon's stomach clenched, and the blood drained from his face.

Sir Oliver raised his brows. "Or join the church, but who's going to believe that?" He looked Simon up and down. "And then you're going to pick one of his daughters, try to remember her name, and dance with her like a proper gentleman, and possibly, just possibly, walk away from tonight without the entire district thinking you're some sort of hellion."

*A hellion?* Simon could suddenly feel every eye in the place on him, every ear tuned toward him, every gossip waiting with bated breath. He swallowed, and stepped away from Sir Oliver. He shook his head.

"Simon," Sir Oliver said in a low, warning tone.

Simon was aware that, around them, a few conversations had sunk into silence. "Leave me alone," he muttered, clenching his fingers into fists to keep them from shaking. "Just leave me alone!"

He turned his back on Sir Oliver and strode out of the ballroom.

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Simon was well known to Major Clinton's men, so had no trouble getting into the kennels. He usually paused a moment in admiration of the major's set-

up, but tonight he was too upset. He went straight for the dogs. The major had twelve dogs already, both harriers and terriers, but he wanted to build up a good hunting pack. Each dog had its own stall, its name on a brass plate on the door. The kennels were clean and well maintained. There was even a larger stall set aside for bitches to birth their litters in, although this was currently unoccupied.

Simon inspected the dogs, taking slow, deep breaths until the roar of blood in his skull had receded. The dogs were bright-eyed and healthy to an animal, tails swinging eagerly as Simon leaned over their stalls. Simon knew their names without having to read the brass plates. He'd been coming to Argyle Park for years.

He must have been thirteen or fourteen when he'd been caught out in a freezing rain one evening and realised he was closer to Argyle Park than home. He'd taken shelter in the outbuildings, and been discovered there by one of the gardeners. Major Clinton had invited him into the house, sat him in front of a fireplace to dry, and proceeded to interrogate him about the best places to find pheasant. Simon had been half-afraid the man thought he was a poacher.

“Ah, Simon, my dear boy!”

Simon turned to greet the major, flushing. “Major Clinton, sir.”

“I thought I'd find you here,” Major Clinton said. He made no mention of the scene inside the ballroom, and Simon was grateful for it. “Have you had a look at Eglantine?”

Simon nodded, glad of the distraction. “She's in heat. Are you going to breed her?”

“Had a dog lined up for her, but it fell through.” The major huffed, drawing his bushy brows together. “I'd hoped you might give me another look at your books.”

Simon leaned on the door of Eglantine's stall, looking over at the animal. She was turning in restless circles. “I haven't spoken to Sir Oliver yet.”

Major Clinton huffed again. “Good Lord, the poor girl can't wait forever!”

Simon nodded, his stomach clenching. He was dreading Sir Oliver's response to any request he might make. “I'll speak to him, sir.”

It was possible Major Clinton would pay a fee for Eglantine to be serviced by one of Waverley's dogs, but Simon hoped instead to waive the fee and convince Major Clinton to split any litter down the middle, leaving Simon with



a few pups to sell on, or to use to introduce Eglantine's bloodlines to his stock. Eglantine was a harrier. She was smart, obedient, and healthy.

Simon was afraid, though, that Sir Oliver would only sneer at him, or ignore him just like Captain Durant always did. And, of course, breeding dogs was no occupation for a gentleman. Well, it would be, perhaps, if it was just a hobby. If, like Major Clinton, Simon just supervised and left the actual work to hired men, but Simon didn't want that. He liked feeding the dogs and mucking out the kennels himself. The dogs were his, and so was the responsibility.

Well, the dogs were his until he turned twenty-one and Sir Oliver no longer had any reason to let him stay at Waverley. He didn't want a commission in the army, or to be a schoolmaster, or a minister in the church, or anything that Sir Oliver, and a long line of tutors, deemed a respectable position for a gentleman with no capital. He wished that Sir Oliver would just go back to London and forget about Waverley, and him.

Simon watched Eglantine and tried to ignore the knot of anxiety in his stomach. Waverley was the only home he'd ever known. He loved Waverley, and the thought of having to leave it was both terrifying and heartbreaking.

It was his home.

It was his *home*.

When he'd been fifteen, and Sir William had died, when Sir Oliver had arrived, Simon had hated him because of the strength of that single word: *home*. Because Sir Oliver was some blow-in from London who had never even visited Waverley before, and suddenly he was its master, and he was Simon's guardian, and he had no *right*. He didn't even *like* the countryside, and he certainly didn't like Simon. Now though, the word was wrapped in soft regret in Simon's mind, as though he'd already left Waverley far behind and was only free to return there in memories and in dreams.

It was his home.

From her stall, Eglantine looked up at him and whined.

Simon managed a smile for the major. "I'll speak to him tonight, sir."

Something like pity crossed over the major's craggy face, and he clapped Simon on the shoulder. "He wants what's best for you, I expect."

"Yes, sir," Simon said, and wished he could believe it.

How could Sir Oliver know what was best for him, when Simon didn't know himself?

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## Chapter Five

“Well,” said Oliver several hours later when they arrived back at Waverley, “that was a wasted evening.”

There had not been enough sherry in the world to make the ball enjoyable. Oliver liked a good scandal as much as the next person, but Simon’s behaviour hadn’t even been scandalous, it had just been just ill-mannered. Well, perhaps it had been scandalous for Suffolk. Really, the boy was no better than a brat. Oliver should have wrenched his breeches down in the middle of the ballroom and spanked him until he’d wailed like the child he obviously was.

It was best not to follow that thought. Oliver was sure it would lead him to entirely inappropriate places. It had been incredibly difficult to avoid thinking about Simon’s naked arse on the drive home, when Oliver’s knees had rubbed against Simon’s at every jolt.

“Nonsense,” Jane said, adjusting her shawl. “I met some charming people.”

“Oh, quite,” Nicholas said, clambering out of the carriage last. His face was flushed, and his nose was a little pinker than usual.

Oliver hadn’t noticed that Simon was keeping pace with them as they headed up the steps toward the front door, until the brat spoke, “Sir Oliver?”

Oliver turned, faintly surprised. “What?”

Simon held his gaze. “Could I speak to you, sir? About—” The brat looked like he wanted the earth to open up and swallow him. “About estate business, sir?”

“I should think Captain Durant is better versed in that than I am.”

“Yes, sir.” Simon lifted his chin. “But—”

“Talk to Captain Durant,” Oliver said. He could hardly believe Simon had the gall to approach him after he’d been so disrespectful earlier. “If he considers it worth my attention, he’ll raise it with me.”

Simon looked aggrieved. “Sir, I—”

“Four hours, Simon,” Oliver said, cutting him off before he had another chance to insult him. “Four hours we spent at Argyle Park, and you hid in the damned kennels the entire time! Did you even bother to get an introduction to

the deacon's daughters? Or to speak to people? Or did you only lurk in the outbuildings like a shiftless urchin? How the hell do you expect to ever find yourself a suitable occupation if you insist on behaving like a—like a petulant child, in front of half of Suffolk?"

Oliver was aware of Nicholas drawing Jane inside.

He jabbed a finger toward Simon. "It's not difficult, Simon. You need to find yourself a profession, and find yourself a wife, because the day you turn twenty-one, you're not my responsibility any longer, and I have thrown more than enough good money after bad in your case." Oliver really should have stopped there, but the way the brat's dark eyes widened, and his jaw dropped? Exhilarating. "There are tuppenny whores in Vauxhall Gardens, Simon, who are a better return on investment than you!"

Simon looked shocked.

Oliver jabbed his finger at him again, this time close enough to poke him in the chest. "You're a disgrace, and the entire county knows it. And tonight, when you had the chance to display something other than your typical childish behaviour, you couldn't even bring yourself to talk to Haywood's daughters, let alone dance with one!"

"I don't know how to dance!" the brat blurted suddenly.

Oliver paused for a moment, and then blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Simon scowled. "I don't know how to dance, and I don't want a wife, and I don't want to be a minister or a soldier! I just want you to go back to London and your fancy balls and your fancy friends and leave me alone! You don't care about me, or about Waverley, so why don't you just go? Just *go*, and never come back!"

Oliver felt a hot coil of anger unwind in his gut. He grabbed Simon by the wrist and pulled him up the steps and into the house. Past the started servants, past Jane and Nicholas, past a flustered Mrs Forster... all the way from the front door to the back door, and then out into the yard. Simon struggled, but he had the good sense to keep his mouth shut, because Oliver really didn't trust himself not to slam the brat head first into the ground if he started talking back again.

One of the grooms was still in the stables when Oliver dragged Simon in. "Out," he told the man shortly.

The groom scrambled away.

Oliver thrust Simon away from him. The boy stood, half hunched over like he was ready to run, his face pale, his dark eyes wide.

Oliver began to unbutton his coat. "You are the most uncouth, ill-mannered, disrespectful little brat I've ever had the misfortune to meet." Simon's gaze flicked to Oliver's hands, and then back to his face. "It's high time someone showed you your place."

The boy looked like he was frozen to the spot. Good.

Oliver tossed his coat aside, then stepped forward. He tugged the knot of Simon's cravat open, and pulled it free. Then he tugged at the buttons of Simon's coat, a part of him marvelling that the brat hadn't tried to fight back yet. Perhaps, like the Reverend Mr Bletchley believed, the boy secretly craved guidance and a firm hand. Most likely he was just in a state of shock. Oliver turned Simon around and wrenched his coat off his shoulders.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Simon managed at last.

"Teaching you some manners," Oliver said. He pulled Simon over toward a little three-legged stool by one of the stalls, and sat. He twisted Simon's arm around behind him, and applied pressure. The boy's breath left him in a startled *whumph* as he found himself lying over Oliver's lap.

Oliver kept one of the boy's arms twisted behind his back. With his free hand, he plucked Simon's shirttails out of his breeches, then tugged the breeches down.

Simon yowled and writhed like a scalded cat.

"Enough!" Oliver snapped. "If you want to act like a child, then you'll damn well be treated like one!"

He raised his hand and delivered a sharp smack to the boy's glorious arse.

Simon jerked forward, a surprised yelp escaping him.

Oliver stared down at the handprint he'd left on the smooth skin. It was red, the blood rushing to the spot. His palm tingled, throbbing slightly at the force of the blow, and Oliver resisted the urge to smooth it over the boy's arse and feel the heat rising there. God, but that arse was a thing of beauty, and Oliver wanted nothing more than to defile it in a thousand filthy ways.

He raised his hand again, and brought it down sharply. The crack of skin against skin was louder this time. Simon's legs kicked out reflexively, the toes of his boots scrabbling for purchase against the stable floor, and the muscles in

his arse twitching and jerking under Oliver's hand. He struggled, and Oliver pressed more firmly on his arm.

"Take your punishment, brat."

Simon gabbled something unintelligible.

"What's that?" Oliver asked, raising his hand again.

"Sir!" Simon exclaimed, breathless, tremulous. "I'm sorry, sir!"

Oliver responded with another resounding smack, relishing the small noise that escaped Simon as another red mark bloomed over the pale skin of his arse: humiliation, and astonishment, and distress. Yes, the boy needed to be brought down a peg or two. Really, someone should have done this years ago.

Oliver was no stranger to spanking either pretty girls or boys. For a few extra pennies, one could very easily buy the privilege of having a dainty young thing squirming in one's lap. It was a simple pleasure, as far as Oliver was concerned, although spanking an unwilling body as part of an actual punishment was certainly new to him.

He was surprised when Simon ceased struggling, but took the opportunity to land another few smacks.

"You are a gentleman, and I expect you to behave accordingly." Oliver let his hand linger for a moment on Simon's left arse cheek. Had this been a friendly transaction, he easily could have moved his palm over the curve of the boy's cheek, savouring the marks he'd left on that otherwise unblemished canvas, and perhaps even slid his thumb into the boy's crease and teased the crinkled flesh that guarded the boy's hole.

He lifted his hand again, regretfully, and a shudder ran through Simon. Oliver wasn't sure if it was because of the loss of his touch, or anticipation for the next blow.

"Five more, I think," he said, his voice a little hoarse.

Simon made a strangled noise.

Oliver brought his hand down again, and Simon grunted as the force of the blow drove him heavily against Oliver's lap. Oliver rubbed his palm over the mark, and Simon shivered.

The noises coming out of him now were tiny noises of distress and, if Oliver wasn't mistaken, a few tears as well. Unseemly, probably, in a boy

nineteen years of age, but Oliver was prepared to chalk that up to his shame at being spanked like a child.

Until a more obvious reason for his shame poked Oliver in his thigh.

Good Lord.

The brat was *hard*.

Well, never let it be said that Oliver didn't know how to rise to a challenge. He swiped his palm over Simon's burning arse, and let a finger slip into the crease. Simon jerked in his lap like a landed fish, boots scrabbling on the floor. The movement only served to grind his erection more firmly against Oliver's thigh.

What an unexpected, yet serendipitous, turn of events. Oliver adjusted his position, widening his legs so that the brat's erection could rub between them, at the same time pulling Simon more securely onto his lap so that he couldn't get any leverage.

"Three more," he said.

Simon choked out a whimper, and Oliver smiled. Yes, the real reason for the boy's distress was more than evident now. Who would have thought that he'd actually enjoy his punishment so thoroughly? And perhaps the hostility he'd always exuded hadn't been as unsophisticated as Oliver had always assumed. Perhaps there had always been the added piquancy of desire smouldering just under the surface. How unexpectedly delightful.

He slipped a hand between the boy's legs, into the tangle of his breeches, and cupped his balls. "I'm not sure you're taking this punishment in the spirit I'd intended, Simon."

Simon moaned. "Sir, please don't... sir!"

Oliver withdrew his hand again. "Three, wasn't it? Let's see how well you can take them."

Simon mumbled something, his voice strained. His legs shifted, the muscles in his arse shifting under his skin. He was as lean and long-legged as a colt, Oliver thought. And as twitchy as one. He smoothed his palm briefly over the brat's arse, feeling Simon's muscles twitch at the contact.

"Settle down," he said, his tone the exact same one he'd use for a skittish animal. He felt Simon shift again. The hand that Oliver held behind his back

had been clenched into a fist, and Oliver marvelled as it opened slightly, Simon's fingers shaking. "Good boy."

*Crack.*

Simon moaned, a shudder running through him. He arched his back slightly as Oliver rubbed his stinging arse, pushing back into the touch. His cock was hot and hard against Oliver's thigh. Oliver wasn't unaffected himself.

"Two more," Oliver said, unsure if he was reminding himself or Simon.

*Crack.*

Simon whimpered, rocking his hips, grinding himself against Oliver. Oliver doubted he even fully realised what he was doing. He raised his hand again, flexed his fingers for good measure, and landed one fast, final stinging smack to Simon's arse.

*Crack.*

Simon arched up again, his body convulsing. He was already scrambling free of Oliver's grip before Oliver realised what the hot, wet sensation spreading across his breeches was. The boy had come.

Oliver breathed heavily for a moment, as Simon slumped on his knees on the straw-covered floor of the stables, his breeches around his knees. In the stalls around them, the horses huffed and stamped, and the dogs snuffled and scabbled.

Well.

This was certainly going to be an awkward conversation, wasn't it?

"Simon," Oliver said at last, reaching out hesitantly to touch the boy's back.

Simon whirled on him suddenly, pushing himself up into a crouch and then, before Oliver even knew what was happening, the brat had launched himself at him. Oliver landed on his back on the stable floor, the stool spinning away. Simon landed on top of him. For a moment Oliver was sure Simon meant to try and strangle him—there was a dangerous light in the boy's narrow stare—but then Simon did something far more unexpected: he twisted a fist in Oliver's cravat and jerked his head up so that he could swoop in for a rough kiss.

*Oh.*

Rough, unpractised, messy, and wild. Just like the brat himself.



Oliver gripped Simon by the hips and rolled him underneath him.

Unbridled enthusiasm was one thing, but had the boy learned *nothing*?

Oliver was in charge.

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## Chapter Six

Simon twisted his fingers in Sir Oliver's hair, tugging him closer, and trying to bring him in for another kiss.

"Brat," Sir Oliver growled against his ear.

"Bastard," Simon gasped, baring his throat as Sir Oliver's mouth traced a path along his jaw.

Sir Oliver curled a hand around the back of Simon's neck. "Language like that will only earn you another spanking."

Simon groaned and fumbled with the fastening of his breeches. He needed to be naked, now, and he needed Sir Oliver to be naked as well. Sinfully, godlessly naked. He shoved his breeches down, his cock already rallying after he'd spilled when Sir Oliver had spanked him. His breeches caught at his knees, his boots thwarting him, and he put his hands against Sir Oliver's chest and shoved him backward.

"Just let me..."

Sir Oliver saw his difficulty, and leaned up to help him pull his boots off. "Impatient."

Yes. Simon felt like he'd been waiting for a moment like this his entire life. How easily hatred slid into another primal feeling: lust. But he'd always thought Sir Oliver handsome in a cruel patrician sort of way, and the knot of heat in his gut whenever the man spoke to him, or cocked a cynical eyebrow, had always wavered on the edge of something like this. Something hot and dangerous. He and Sir Oliver were like flint and steel. Whenever they crashed together, sparks burst forth.

"Bastard," he said again, tugging Sir Oliver's shirt open.

Sir Oliver grinned down at him, opening his breeches to expose his cock. It was hard and rampant, standing upright from a nest of reddish curls. "Brat."

Simon pulled him back down into a rough embrace, moaning as Sir Oliver laved his tongue over his nipple and teased it with the scrape of his teeth.

"I hate you," he managed, shuddering as Sir Oliver got a hand between them and closed his fingers around both their cocks.

“I hate you too,” Sir Oliver groaned, and began to thrust into his hand.

Simon hooked a leg around Sir Oliver’s arse.

He closed his eyes and rocked with Sir Oliver’s thrusts. His cock was hard once more, leaking hotly, and he knew it wouldn’t take long before he came again. The straw was rough against his abraded arse, but the sting only added to the waves of pleasure threatening to crash over him. The pressure built tightly inside him, coiling like a spring, and then his balls drew up, and he came, burying his cry of ecstasy in Sir Oliver’s shoulder. Sir Oliver shuddered as he came too, and then leaned down and kissed Simon properly for the first time, open-mouthed, his tongue finding Simon’s as they both shook and panted on the stable floor.

Simon closed his eyes, and lifted his hands to card his fingers through Sir Oliver’s hair. “Please, sir,” he whispered before he even knew what he was saying, “please don’t make me leave you.”

“Simon,” Sir Oliver said quietly.

Simon opened his eyes, horrified at what he’d said, and suddenly afraid of what he might see in Sir Oliver’s gaze; of what had changed between them. He pushed Sir Oliver away and rolled out from under him.

Oh God. Why had he said it? He didn’t even *like* Sir Oliver. He wanted to stay at Waverley because it was his home, not because Sir Oliver spent six months of the year here. He didn’t like Sir Oliver. He *hated* Sir Oliver. Except what had just happened between them was like no form of hate Simon was familiar with.

“Simon,” Sir Oliver said again.

Simon climbed to his feet, shaking out his breeches and stepping into them. He didn’t look back at the man. “I have to check on the dogs now, sir.”

\*\*\*\*

Simon had thought that Sir Oliver would go inside now, but he didn’t. Simon was glad to let himself into the stall with Lady and the pups, and shut the door firmly behind him. He busied himself with checking that Lady had fresh water, and patted all the pups, and scooped up Waverley Sextillis and let her burrow into his throat. When he turned around, Sir Oliver was leaning on the stall door watching.

Heat rose in Simon’s face. What had happened between them was... well, Simon had no words to describe it, and he certainly had no idea of how to

broach the subject with Sir Oliver. He hoped that he would never have to, except despite his shame, there was a part of him crying out to do it all over again.

And to do more.

He chewed his lower lip anxiously.

Sir Oliver regarded him silently for a moment, and then said, “Do you really think you can sell them for forty pounds?”

Simon was almost overcome with relief that they were talking about the dogs. Dogs, he knew. Sir Oliver, and the spanking, and the way his body had reacted to it, and that *kiss*, and that foolish plea that had spilled unbidden out of his mouth... those things were mysteries to him.

“Them, I can,” Simon answered, nodding at the rest of the litter. He dragged a shaking hand down Sextillis’s spine, making her squirm with delight. “This one, I doubt it.”

“I had no idea there was so much money in dogs.”

“People like to hunt,” Simon said cautiously.

“And what does Captain Durant think of your little enterprise?” Sir Oliver asked, arching his brows.

“The captain doesn’t think much of it at all, sir,” Simon said. “But he’s not a hunter.”

“Neither are you.”

“No,” Simon agreed. “But I know dogs.” He swallowed. “And I can... I can contribute to the estate.”

“Five pups at forty pounds each isn’t much of a contribution.”

Simon stood his ground. “Not yet, it isn’t. But if I had proper kennels, and more dogs, I could bring in more money.”

Sir Oliver held his gaze. “It’s no job for a gentleman, Simon.”

Simon jutted out his chin. He was no longer afraid of Sir Oliver. Well, mostly not. Or at least, after his shameful display of lust, he felt he had nothing left to lose. “No, sir.”

“Is this the estate business you wanted to discuss?”

Simon nodded.

Sir Oliver was silent for a long while. “Tomorrow, bring me your books on the bloodlines, and any ledgers that you’re keeping on costs. I’ll give you two years, Simon.”

“Two years, sir?”

“You have until you’re twenty-one to prove to me that this endeavour of yours is worth pursuing. If you can make a success of it, then I expect you to start working under Captain Durant.”

Simon frowned, cautious hope creeping in at his edges. “Sir?”

“The man will want to retire someday,” Sir Oliver said. “And, Simon? Mucking about with dogs isn’t a suitable position for a gentleman, but being manager of Waverley? That’s a respectable path.”

A wave of relief crashed over him. “Yes, sir. I can do that, sir!”

Waverley was his home, and he knew it easily as well as Captain Durant did, and two years was plenty of time to come to grips with the financial workings of the estate. And to live here, forever, to be here whenever Sir Oliver came back from Town... Simon wanted that too. He hadn’t known it until tonight; he hadn’t understood his own complicated feelings that had been twisted up inside him like a knotted ball of yarn for years now, that Sir Oliver had untangled in mere minutes.

Sir Oliver’s thin mouth turned up into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “And in those two years, I also expect you to learn to conduct yourself like a gentleman.”

“So no more spankings?” Simon asked, and then flushed, mortified at his own recklessness.

“Well,” Sir Oliver said, and that was definitely a smile. “Not unless you play your cards right.”

Simon couldn’t stop the burst of shocked laughter that came out of him.

Sir Oliver cocked a brow. “And do come inside when you’re finished here. Gentlemen sleep in houses, not in stables.”

“Yes, sir,” Simon said. “I can do that, sir.”

\*\*\*\*

Simon sat on the library floor with Miss Hammond, while Sir Oliver, seated on the chaise longue, went through his ledgers silently. The morning sunlight

cast the library in soft, golden light. Waverley Sextillis wriggled on her back, tangling herself up in the hem of Miss Hammond's morning gown, and showed off her belly.

"She's a darling," Miss Hammond said, tickling Sextillis's belly. Then she laughed as the pup nipped at her fingertips. "Naughty girl, Tilly!"

Simon smiled. "She likes you."

"She likes the taste of my fingers."

Simon lifted his hand and rubbed the bruise that Sir Oliver had made when he sucked on his throat sometime before dawn. Fortunately, it was covered by his shirt. *Gentlemen sleep in houses*, Sir Oliver had said last night, but it turned out what he'd meant was for Simon to sleep in his bed.

It had been revelatory.

Simon had woken in the morning with his face pressed against Sir Oliver's chest, his lips just above his clavicle, and Sir Oliver's arms around him. He could have stayed there for hours, but he'd been afraid the servants might discover him there, and of course, he'd had to feed the dogs. He'd left the bed regretfully, hoping that it wouldn't be both the first and the last time.

In the night, Sir Oliver was different. He was warmer, all his hard edges softened, all his touches both solicitous and exciting.

Simon glanced up as Sir Nicholas entered the library.

"Zounds," Sir Nicholas said, frowning down at Simon. "This is a disturbing turn of events!"

Simon almost jumped out of his skin.

Sir Nicholas wrinkled his nose. "If the pup's allowed in the house now, how will I ever convince Muffin to play in here with me again?"

"I'm sure you'll find the strength to carry on," Sir Oliver commented dryly.

"Very droll!" Sir Nicholas sat beside Sir Oliver and looked curiously at the ledgers. "What are you reading?"

"Simon's ledgers," Sir Oliver answered without looking up.

Simon caught Sir Nicholas's gaze and flushed slightly.

Sir Nicholas smiled at him, and then turned back to Sir Oliver. "It's good to see you finally getting interested in country pursuits, Oliver," he said. "Perhaps you won't be so keen to rush back to Town next January."

Simon bit his lip and scratched Sextillis's belly.

"Hmmm," said Sir Oliver thoughtfully, and glanced at Simon. "I allow there might be one or two distractions in the country that I've previously overlooked."

"One or two, hmmm?" Sir Nicholas asked in a teasing tone.

"Well," Sir Oliver said, and caught Simon's gaze. "One."

\*\*\*\*

"I hate you," Simon hissed that night, latching his teeth onto Oliver's earlobe and tugging.

"Brat," Oliver murmured, shoving him against the library wall.

The house was dark, both servants and guests abed. Or at least they should have been. Which is why, when they heard footsteps in the corridor, both Simon and Oliver froze.

"Oh, Captain Durant," came Mrs Forster's voice, her tone both gentle and chiding. "You really ought to give Simon a chance. He's a good boy!"

"Ha!" the captain huffed as they passed the doorway. "He's a blasted hellion! Good for Sir Oliver for giving him a damned good seeing to!"

Simon slapped a hand over Oliver's mouth as the man choked out a laugh. "Shh!"

They listened until they could no longer hear the captain and Mrs Forster's footsteps.

"Well," said Oliver at last, his breath hot on Simon's ear. "I'm glad to know the captain approves of my methods."

"You are the devil," Simon muttered, tugging on a lock of Oliver's hair.

"And you are a hellion," Oliver said fondly, leaning in to claim Simon's mouth in a kiss.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Lisa likes to tell stories, mostly with hot guys and happily ever afters.*

*Lisa lives in tropical North Queensland, Australia. She doesn't know why, because she hates the heat, but she suspects she's too lazy to move. She spends half her time slaving away as a government minion, and the other half plotting her escape.*

*She attended university at sixteen, not because she was a child prodigy or anything, but because of a mix-up between international school systems early in life. She studied History and English, neither of them very thoroughly.*

*She shares her house with too many cats, a green tree frog that swims in the toilet, and as many possums as can break in every night. This is not how she imagined life as a grown-up.*

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