

The background of the cover is a photograph of a weathered, greyish-blue wooden door with an arched top. A green wreath with white flowers is hanging on the door. A gold banner with a ribbon-like border is positioned across the lower half of the door. The entire scene is set against a dark green background with white snowflake-like speckles.

Samantha SoRelle

**HIS LORDSHIP'S
GIFT**

A His Lordship's Mysteries Short Story

His Lordship's Gift

A His Lordship's Mysteries Short Story

Samantha SoRelle

Balcarres Books LLC

Copyright © 2021 Balcarres Books LLC All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-952789-07-6

ISBN-10: 1-952789-07-9

Cover design by Samantha SoRelle

Original cover image licensed by Jessica Spengler and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. Cover image adapted by Samantha SoRelle.

Printed in the United States of America

A Note:

This short story contains spoilers for the first two books in the His Lordship's Mysteries series, *His Lordship's Secret* and *His Lordship's Master*. If you haven't read those two first, I'd strongly recommend it. [You can find both books here](#), and this short story will still be waiting when you return!

His Lordship's Gift

December 21st, 1818

Balcarres House, Scotland

Dominick gave Alfie's bare shoulder a kiss before tucking the blankets in firmly around him. His efforts earned him no response other than a sleepy grumble as Alfie worked himself further down under the covers until only his auburn curls remained visible, spread out on the pillow in untamed glory. Unable to resist tousling those curls just a little more, Dominick did so, then placed a dressing gown on the bed for Alfie when he awoke—no reason for Jarrett to get a show he didn't deserve when he came in to light the fire.

As he disappeared back through the secret passage to his own chambers, Dominick couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. The little weasel had been noticeably less weasel-ish since their talk, but that didn't mean Dominick was inclined to do him any favours, especially if those favours included ogling a naked Alfie while he was still deliciously rumpled from sleep and... previous activities.

Thoughts of particular activities were enough to get Dominick to break the thin layer of ice that had formed in the pitcher and splash some water on his face, panting at the cold. That was better. He contemplated a shave in the silver mirror that hung above the basin, still not used to such finery.

"I guess I'd better." He sighed. "Don't want to go around frightening the staff."

There'd been plenty of that already. The household was slowly recovering; the nights he was awoken by Alfie's nightmares were becoming fewer and fewer, and his love's injuries were healing, even if he still wasn't exercising his blasted leg as much as he should. That Dominick himself was still suffering from nightmares was completely beside the point. He dreamt he was trapped in some terrible maze, hearing Alfie screaming and screaming but no matter how hard Dominick ran, he couldn't find him.

Spectres of what might have been troubled him through shaving and dressing, shadowing him all the way down the stairs to breakfast. When he reached the main landing however, he was startled out of his dark thoughts by something unexpected in the middle of the great hall.

There was a large pile there, nearly waist high, where only empty space and few dusty rugs should have been. Taking a few steps closer, he realised it was a pile

of tree branches, mostly fir and holly, with clusters of white berries mixed in with the lot. The scent of tree resin and crushed needles wafted off the pile, filling Dominick's lungs with the sharp bite of winter and chasing the last of the fears from his mind. Off to the side, a section of tree trunk of a frankly staggering girth lay rolled against the feet of a suit of armor.

Mrs. Finley and Mr. Howe stood over the pile, both with their hands on their hips, clearly in the midst of a serious conversation.

"Was there a storm?" Dominick asked. The pair startled, Mr. Howe recovering first and offering a crisp bow.

"Good morning, sir." The butler said, the ever-present twinkle in his eyes brighter than it had been in weeks. "Something much more destructive, I'm afraid. The Christmas season is upon us."

Christmas? Surely not. Dominick racked his brain, trying to count the days.

Perhaps seeing his distress, the housekeeper leapt in. "I know 'tis only the Twenty-First, sir, and there are some that say bringing in the greens before Christmas Eve is bad luck, but Old Tanner down in the village says a storm's on its way, and he's never wrong. I figured it was better to have the village boys bring us some boughs today, rather than risk them freezing to death, or worse, us having no decorations at all on Christmas Day!"

Dominick assumed she was joking, but was too overwhelmed to care much. He hadn't had time to think of anything as trivial as upcoming holidays in between all the murders—and dealing with the aftermath of all the murders—but she was right. Somehow Christmas was only four days away and this was the first he'd thought about it. Alfie had mentioned something about having Gil turn down the obligatory invitations to parties and balls and such on his behalf on account of his leg, but Dominick had assumed he'd meant only the usual social nonsense Alfie got invited to for being an earl, not *Christmas* parties.

Christmas had never meant much to Dominick. In the workhouse it'd signified only an extra portion at dinner and maybe a sweet bun if they were lucky. After, it'd just been a day where he couldn't find work. The hot meals given out by various benevolent societies hadn't been bad, even if the sermons he'd been forced to listen to while he ate were. After a few years, he'd figured out which ones handed out pennies along with their soup and preaching. He'd toast their health at the few pubs that remained open and that was it, back to scrounging by Boxing Day.

But this was his first Christmas with Alfie since finding him again. Their first Christmas together as lovers, and certainly the first they had any money to spend on gifts.

Oh, Christ. Gifts.

“Something on your mind?” Alfie asked.

“No,” Dominick answered too quickly. He pushed a half-eaten kipper around his breakfast plate. With Janie now manning the kitchen, it was probably safest to eat as little as possible. The few bites he’d tried had the consistency of charcoal, but at least it was still recognisably fish-shaped this time.

Alfie’s brow wrinkled in concern. “Are you sure? You’ve barely said two words all morning.”

“It’s nothing,” Dominick replied, pushing his plate away and reaching for a boiled egg instead. He couldn’t tell Alfie he’d forgotten about Christmas. Knowing Alfie, he’d had Dominick’s gift planned for months and was quite pleased with himself for keeping it a secret. Not that he needed to give Dominick anything. He had a roof over his head, food in his belly—even if it was overcooked fish—and the man he loved sitting across the table. There was nothing else he needed.

Besides, Alfie had already given him half his bloody fortune. That was gift enough to cover every Christmas until Judgment Day.

And that was just one more reason he couldn’t bear to admit he’d forgotten. Alfie had given him so much, and what did Dominick have to give him in return? His unending love and a phenomenal fuck, obviously, but that wasn’t anything new, and it wasn’t like he could give that to Alfie on Christmas Day.

Well, he probably would, but that wasn’t the point.

The point was that he didn’t have anything *special* to give Alfie. Worse, he had no idea where to start or how he could get a gift to Balcarres House in less than four days even if he did think of something.

Alfie was still watching him pensively.

“Mrs. Finley says a storm is coming,” Dominick said as he tapped the top of his egg with a spoon the way Alfie taught him was proper. “That’s why they had all the greenery brought in today.”

“I was wondering about that,” Alfie said. “Still, a storm’s nothing to worry about, although I hope it holds off a while longer, Gil is coming by this afternoon and I’d hate for him to get caught in it.”

Now there was an idea. Gil, for all Dominick disliked that he was too handsome and charming by half, was a clever man and knew the area well. No doubt he’d know where Dominick could get a last-minute Christmas gift that didn’t seem last-minute. He grinned and raised a spoonful of egg to his mouth.

“I’m not sure I’d eat that if I was you.”

Dominick looked down at his spoon. The entire yolk of his egg, completely raw, wobbled up at him before falling onto the table with a wet plop.

No matter what he got Alfie for Christmas, he was definitely buying Janie a cookbook.

Dominick grabbed Gil’s sleeve the moment he left Alfie’s office and dragged him into a spare room.

“Hello to you too, Dominick. Is there anything I can help you with? I admit, the buyer interested in that property of yours by the coast is exclusive, but I’m not sure the deal requires this level of secrecy.”

“What?” Dominick said, checking the lock on the door to make sure no one could spy through the keyhole. “No, I told you, I don’t care who buys it as long as his money’s good.”

“A pity. It really is a juicy bit of gossip. What is it then? From another man, I’d assume your behaviour meant you were looking for an assignation.”

Dominick looked up from the locked door to where his hand still gripped Gil’s arm, horrified.

Gil sighed. “Yes, I thought not.”

“God no! I mean... no, nothing like that,” stammered Dominick. He dropped Gil’s arm forcefully, nearly flinging it away. With a glance back at the keyhole he lowered his voice. “I’d never! Not that you’re not... I mean, you’re a very... But you know I’m...”

“Hopelessly devoted?” Gil teased, voice soft. “Completely smitten? Yes, I picked up on that the moment I met the two of you. Not that it’s obvious, don’t worry. Just if you know what to look for.”

He sank down onto a chair by the dark fireplace, heedless of the sheet that covered the unused furniture, and fixed Dominick with a look of rapt attention.

“Now, if you haven’t designs on either my virtue or my business secrets, what can I do for you?”

“I need a gift. For Alfie.”

Gil burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a minute. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make light of your predicament, but from the look on your face I was bracing myself to hear you’d found another body, or committed a murder yourself.”

“Nothing like that,” Dominick grumbled. “And as long as Jarrett keeps on keeping his hands to himself there won’t need to be.”

For just a moment, Gil’s grin went stiff. He looked away, tucking a lock of long black hair behind his ear. “A gift, you said? I would’ve assumed you already had something.”

Dominick rubbed the back of his neck. “Been a bit busy. Forgot.”

“Ah.”

A horrible thought occurred to Dominick. “You know what Alfie’s getting me, don’t you?”

Gil removed his gold-rimmed spectacles, inspecting them for non-existent smudges. “He may have requested my assistance in procuring some items.”

Dominick groaned.

“Some weeks ago.”

Dominick groaned again and collapsed into the chair opposite Gil. A cloud of dust rose up from the sheet beneath him. “Christ.”

“Indeed. You don’t have *anything*?”

The look on Dominick’s face must have been answer enough as Gil donned his spectacles with a flourish and with them the role of professional overseer and problem-solver.

“Right. Well, a short list of items, possibly similar in value to those you’re going to be receiving yourself in a few days time and that have already been entrusted to His Lordship’s possession, comes to mind. Unfortunately, many of them are unavailable in the village on such short notice, and even those that are, Old Tanner says—”

“—that there’s a storm coming.” Dominick finished miserably. “I know. There may be no way for anything to get up here for several days and by then it’ll be too late.”

“I could arrange to have them ready to go as soon as deliveries can come through,” Gil offered. “You could make up a story about shipping delays and unforeseen setbacks. It would at least be partially true.”

“I think I’d feel worse for lying to Alfie than I would for having nothing at all.”

“A lovely sentiment.” A gentle smile stole over Gil’s face. “But unfortunately not one that gets you a present for your beloved. I suppose you’ve searched the house already?”

Dominick wasn’t sure he followed. “Why would I have searched the house? I haven’t misplaced his present, Gil. I never had one.”

Gil shook his head. "Look around," he said, raising an arm to indicate the entirely disused room around them. "The manor has been collecting odds and ends for centuries. There must be something that could make a good present. Pluck any painting off any wall, wrap it in a bit of cloth, and you're set!"

Dominick skimmed the room until his eyes rested on the far wall. A portrait of an ugly dog held by an even uglier child sneered back at him.

"Perhaps not *any* painting," Gil conceded.

"Wouldn't that be dishonest though?" asked Dominick, tearing his gaze away from the nasty creature and the animal he held. "All these things are his anyway. Seems a bit shabby to give Alfie something he's already got."

Gil waved his hand again. "It would be new to *him* though. Besides, just between the two of us, most nobles have more possessions than a dozen of them would ever need. As a matter of fact, there is a certain lady of my acquaintance, no names mentioned, not a baroness, and certainly not my uncle's wife, who has been gifting her husband the same hunting dog for the last three Christmases running! The man enjoys the prestige of having a collection of the animals, you see, but has very little interest in anything as undignified as chasing after them on horseback or experiencing any emotion so base as 'affection for a living thing other than himself'. So he rather forgets he has kennels at all until the yuletide rolls around again and her annual gift with it!"

Dominick couldn't help but laugh. "All right, I'll have a look, thank you. I better let you get on your way before that storm comes in."

"Old Tanner's never wrong," Gil said, in the tone of a man reciting gospel. "As much as I enjoy the company of you both, I do have family obligations to attend. Hazard of the season, I'm afraid."

He rose, brushing dust from the seat of his trousers. "I'll have a look in the village for you, just in case. Send a note as soon as you can if you need a belated delivery."

"Thank you," Dominick said again. "Oh, is there a bookshop in the village?"

"Not an overly well-stocked one, but yes. Do you have a particular tome in mind?"

"Anything with adventure for Alfie if you can find it, but I wanted to get Janie a cookbook."

Gil gave him a long look, then spoke hesitatingly. "While I *completely* understand your motivations, on Boxing Day, Alfie will be gifting each member of staff with a small sum as part of his duties to his household. *You*, however, have no

such obligations, and for an unmarried man to single out a young woman in his employ for a personal gift..."

"Oh," said Dominick, crestfallen. An unending table of inedible dishes stretched out ahead of him.

"What if I don't single her out though?" he asked with just a bit of desperation. "Then would it be all right? I could get something for Mrs. Finley too and have it sent up with the book. No one could find anything improper in that."

"There is a shop with some very fine shawls," Gil admitted. "Just the thing for a woman of a certain age."

"Woman of a... Oh Christ, get two, I need to have one sent to London. There's a Mrs. Hirkins... Never mind, I'll have to write out a letter groveling for its lateness too. Hold onto the second shawl for me until I get that done? And what about yourself?"

"Me?" Gil blinked, looking for a moment like a particularly well-turned out owl.

Dominick shrugged. "You've been a good friend to Alfie and me, even when I was an arse to you. It may be wrong to ask a man to choose his own gift, but you already know I don't have a bloody thing on hand, so you might as well pick something you like."

"Socks."

Dominick couldn't help but worry. "You've a better idea how much I'm worth than I do. If you think socks is all I can afford..."

Gil laughed. "Dominick, you can afford new silk stockings every day of the year if you want them. As it turns out, Alfie already asked first and is paying for an excellent pair of boots I've been wanting. Some nice, warm socks to pair with them would be just the thing."

"Socks it is then," Dominick agreed, rising to unlock the door. "Merry Christmas, Gil. Let me know what your aunt ends up getting for your uncle."

Gil winked. "I'm sure it will be a surprise for us all."

"What're y'doin'?"

Dominick was out in the barn, examining a rack of horse... items when a small voice drifted down from above. Looking up, he saw a child's face peeking out from the edge of the loft, curious eyes haloed by a snarl of yellow hair nearly identical to the bits of straw tangled in its strands. It was the stable lad, Davey, although how a boy of his size was able to get such large beasts to obey him was still a mystery to

Dominick. He was a man full-grown—and then some—and still only had middling success with the animals. Riding was about the most fun he'd ever had without Alfie involved, but he still couldn't get over the suspicion that the horses were merely humoring him when he gave them commands.

"I'm looking for Graham," he said, craning his neck back uncomfortably to look up at Davey.

"He's out with Lik'rish, exercisin' her before the storm. Old Tanner—"

"Yes, yes, I know."

Dominick sighed. Perhaps it was just as well the stable master wasn't around. Even if he had the perfect suggestion for Alfie's gift, Dominick wouldn't have understood it. The man had a Scottish brogue so thick you could stand a spoon up in it. In fairness though, he seemed to have equal trouble with Dominick's Spitalfield accent, so the two had settled on a system of nods, pointing, and the occasional clarification from whoever else was around. Davey's accent was slightly more manageable than his father's, so he was often the one to fill the role of translator.

"Need me to send 'im a message?" Davey asked.

Dominick shook his head. "No, I was just looking for a present for His Lordship, and I thought he might be able to tell me if there was a nice one of... *these* hidden away that would suit."

He gave a lost gesture to the various pieces of horse equipment which made perfect sense when he saw Graham or Davey fit them to the animals, but were completely incomprehensible mounted on a wall. The stables were probably a foolish place to look for a Christmas gift anyway. The doctor said it would be weeks before Alfie's injured leg, weakened further by his harrowing experience in the tunnels, would allow him to safely ride. Perhaps *months* even, since the damned little fool remained so against doing his exercises, then turned around and traipsed all over the manor until he nearly collapsed!

Davey's face lit up with joy before disappearing from sight as he raced to clamber down from the hayloft with the speed and wild disregard of danger so common in children.

"I can help!" he beamed, now the one having to crane his head back to look up at Dominick. "Y'don't want to get him any of that, too boring. Y'should buy him a horse!"

The boy's eyes looked a little glazed. "A great big chestnut horse with a white blaze and white fetlocks."

Dominick couldn't help but smile. He'd have to keep an eye out for any neighbours with similarly marked animals. And just to be safe, have someone give the boy a lecture on the dangers of horse stealing.

"I was looking for something a little smaller and closer to home, considering the storm. Do you know if—" He stopped mid-sentence as Davey's jacket began to wriggle. The boy crossed his arms unconvincingly over his stomach, then gave Dominick another grin.

"I know just the thing, but y'can't tell my pa."

The jumble of kittens barely paused in their playing as Dominick knelt down to inspect them.

"Late litter," Davey explained solemnly. "Their ma gets mice in the barn, but they're too small to hunt on their own. Pa said it'd be kinder to drown 'em so they don't starve in the winter, but they've been doing fine with scraps from my plate and what their ma brings back!"

"What about the one in your jacket?" Dominick asked, twitching his fingers over a curious tabby.

Davey's face fell. "Please, sir, it's not her fault." He reluctantly unbuttoned and reached inside his shirt. The moment he pulled out the kitten, Dominick saw the reason for his worry. The little thing was noticeably smaller than her siblings and a quick count revealed her to be short a leg as well. Dominick couldn't tell if it was from injury or accident of birth. She didn't seem to be in any distress, happily trotting over to join her brothers and sisters in play when Davey set her down.

"She gets around fine, y'see? It's only she gets cold easy so I keep her with me, but I know..."

He knew that a three-legged cat—and the runt of the litter at that—would never make it on her own. Dominick also knew that table scraps wouldn't be enough to keep them all fed much longer. He looked around the shed. It was larger than he'd expected when Davey showed him the break in the brambles. It might have even been a small cottage at one point, or a tea room for the garden. Either way, it was wide enough for him to pace in—if he could do so without being attacked at the ankles or tripping over the pile of horse blankets Davey had acquired for the tiny terrors—and high enough he could reach his hands above his head without touching the ceiling.

Alfie would only spoil a cat to the point of rottenness if Dominick gave him one, but a space like this, private and away from knowing eyes and ears might be useful.

He looked back at Davey, who'd picked up the littlest kitten again and was clutching her to his chest.

"All right, pick out the strongest one and give it to Janie, tell her it's a new mouser for the kitchen. The rest of them are apprentice mousers, and she's to keep them in meat and milk until they're strong enough to take on the job in other parts of the manor, or be given to those in need."

"What about her?" The three-legged kitten was now licking Davey's fingers, unaware that her fate was being decided.

"I imagine her mother will need help keeping the stables in check. Meat and milk for her, same as the others, but I'm entrusting her raising to you, Davey, to make sure she grows up strong. You're to keep an eye on her, and anything she needs, just be sure to tell me or His Lordship."

Davey sniffed, smiling once more, but Dominick was aghast to see the boy was also on the verge of tears. He then nodded at Dominick solemnly and tucked the kitten back into his shirt. Even across the room, Dominick could hear her purr.

Panic rose in Dominick's chest as he strode back towards the manor. He'd spent most of the day searching, but was still no closer to finding a gift for Alfie. At this rate, Gil's suggestion of just grabbing something off the wall and hoping for the best was starting to appeal. He sighed in relief to see the fire in the front hall lit—he'd spent more time than was good for him out in the shed playing with the kittens—but the boughs of greenery now festively draped across the mantle only served to mock him further.

He turned away from the fireplace, both to avert his eyes from the display and to warm his backside, only to come face-to-face with a figure standing behind him, an axe clutched in his hand.

"Christ!" Dominick shouted, nearly leaping back into the fire.

"Sorry, sir," Jarrett said, looking anything but. "I was just out cutting down a few smaller firs for decoration and saw you coming in. Thought I'd see if you needed anything."

"I need you to learn to stop sneaking up on me with weapons!"

"Sorry, sir," said Jarrett again, this time clearly amused.

“Never mind,” Dominick said, long experience with Alfie teaching him when he’d lost the battle. “Do you need help bringing in the firs?”

Jarrett looked surprised. “I wouldn’t say no, but it’s not the proper thing for a gentleman to be helping a footman like that.”

“If it makes a difference, you’re not a footman, you’re a valet now. And I’ll be asking you for a favour after. Consider it payment in advance.”

Jarrett perked up with pleased interest at this, and Dominick couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Not a favour like that, I mean a service... Oh Christ, just show me where the damned trees are.”

With the trees dragged back to the manor and stacked in the hall for Mrs. Finley and Mr. Howe to argue over later, Dominick explained his problem to Jarrett while they walked back from the tool shed, *after* Dominick made sure the damned axe was put back where it belonged.

“The thing is,” he said. “I don’t know what he wants.”

Jarrett shrugged. “Well, what do you want to give him?”

That stopped Dominick in his tracks. “What?”

Jarrett continued on. “If you could give him anything in the world, what would it be? See, if I had all your money, I might pick a good walking stick, but he already has that, or a bit of gold jewelry, or a nice place to meet now that the chapel’s too damned cold, or a fine ribbon for his hair or—” Jarrett seemed to catch himself, “or something like that. The sort of thing rich knobs too good for the rest of us like.”

Dominick was kind enough to point out that Alfie’s hair wasn’t long enough for ribbons, although gold jewelry would certainly match the spectacles worn by someone else with long hair he knew.

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “that if I could give him anything, it’d be freedom. No longer needing his cane, instead of just a new one. The ability to go out and do whatever he wants without injuring himself further, or me chasing after him like a hen, worried he’s going to over-do things. Health, happiness, and freedom.”

Dominick shook his head. He hadn’t meant to be quite so maudlin. Or so honest with Jarrett for that matter. They’d reached the front door of the manor and Jarrett opened it for them to both pass inside. “I suppose none of those are things I can buy, though.”

“Follow me,” said Jarrett, closing the door firmly behind them. “You might not be able to *buy* any of that before Christmas, but I know where you can find some of it.”

“You’ve been busy,” murmured Alfie sleepily.

“Oh?” said Dominick, pushing a sweat-damp curl back from his lover’s face.

“Mmm,” Alfie hummed without moving, sprawled as he was over Dominick. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were planning a surprise. And with the help of Jarrett of all people.”

“A surprise? Now why would I do a thing like that?”

“No idea, there aren’t any large holidays or festivities tomorrow that I can think of.”

Dominick chuckled. The last few days had been tricky, doing everything that needed to be done without Alfie seeing. But here it was, Christmas Eve and his gift perfectly in place. It’d been hard work, and Dominick was pretty sure he had dust in places he didn’t know he had, but Jarrett had been a surprising help. He’d grumbled and made passes at Dominick at every opportunity of course, but they were half-hearted at best. Dominick had been surprised to find himself even enjoying the little weasel’s company. Sometimes. Rarely. On occasion.

He ran his hand down Alfie’s bare back. He’d never grow tired of the feel of Alfie in his arms, the warm, long planes of him, the little shivers when Dominick’s fingers grazed the sensitive spots he knew by heart, the complete trust and willingness written into every line of him.

“You’ve caught me,” he said, squeezing lightly at Alfie’s nape just to hear him gasp. “I’m running away with Jarrett. He’s helped me pack up all the manor silver and we’re setting off tomorrow to start a new life as wandering players. Do you think a harpsichord will be too large to carry around?”

Alfie bit him.

Sometime later, when Dominick had *finally* worn him out for the night, Alfie said, “You’d better not run off tomorrow.”

“Oh really?”

“Really.” Alfie’s eyes sparkled. “Old Tanner says there’s a storm coming and he’s never wrong.”

Christmas morning dawned, grey and gloomy and earlier than Dominick was expecting. It was also miserably, miserably cold. Old Tanner’s storm had finally arrived. It was so dark, he could swear his eyelashes had frozen together in the night. That, or Alfie really was prying him out of bed so early the sun hadn’t had time to rise. Possibly both.

“Up, up, up,” Alfie said from beside the bed, breath frosting with every word. He was already partially dressed, wrapped snugly in his robe and cruelly out of Dominick’s reach. “I’ve been patient enough. I want my surprise now.”

Dominick groaned and pried himself out of the warm covers. Clearly, Alfie had gotten them both up before the servants; there was neither a fire in the grate nor tea to be had. How had he ever come to love such a tyrant? The villain helped him dress and rewarded him with a quick kiss, but it hardly made up for his hellish torments. Thoughts of Alfie’s wickedness the night before were enough to rouse Dominick in more ways than one, and wrapping his robe more tightly around himself, he fetched the key he’d hidden under a small ornament on the mantle, then led Alfie down the hall to his surprise.

Alfie clearly knew where they were going, and it was only the bitter cold that had him leaning heavily on his cane that kept him from bounding ahead. With only mild concern that his gift wouldn’t live up to Alfie’s expectations, Dominick unlocked the door and led him inside.

What little morning light there was drifted through the windows, revealing an orderly array of mats, bars, ropes tied to weights, and a few oddly-shaped bits of furniture. It also illuminated the confusion that was beginning to replace the joyful anticipation on Alfie’s face.

“It’s a gymnasium,” Dominick said as he locked the door behind them. No reason for anyone else to witness if this failed. “So you can do your exercises. I know you hate them but I thought it might be better if you had a place where you didn’t have to worry about being interrupted. The door locks, and I think the mats were meant to practice tumbling and acrobatics, so they’ll be more comfortable than the bare floor for your stretches. And we found some dumb bells and the like too, so I could practice if you wanted the company.”

Dominick patted his stomach, which he might be forced to admit, was slightly softer than it had been when he’d met Alfie again all those months ago. “Got to keep fighting fit if I’m going to keep dragging you out of trouble. I tell you, it was no fun fetching those from the attic. Jarrett nearly quit on the spot. Though my God, there’s all sorts of things hidden away up there. You could have a whole other earl and all his servants tucked away between the eaves and never know it!”

Alfie still looked confused, and it began to dawn on Dominick that this might not have been the amazing gift he thought it was. Alfie hated to do his exercises, and Dominick had just removed all excuses he had for not doing them.

“Christ, I basically built you your own torture chamber didn’t I?”

Alfie laughed. "A bit. But your heart was in the right place. And you gave me a place to shamelessly watch you exert yourself, which I will thoroughly enjoy."

Dominick felt a blush rise, knowing it must be especially bad when Alfie kissed him on one warm cheek. "There is something I think you'll like though, for its own sake."

He took Alfie's hand and led him over to a corner of the room. There sat a most peculiar looking chair. It was over-sized, coming up nearly to Dominick's waist, and while it had arms, there was no back. A small attached footrest could be pulled out to allow a person to seat themselves comfortably, but the seat cushion was the chair's strangest feature. It attached to the very base of the chair, stretching up like an accordion to the height of the armrest.

"Jarrett said it's called a chamber horse. There was one at the last house he worked in too. Apparently they were quite popular a generation or two ago."

The furrow in Alfie's brow deepened. "But what does it do?"

"Go on. Sit on it," said Dominick.

Alfie handed him his cane and sat down. Dominick laughed at the surprise on his face when the cushion let out a bellows-like wheeze and sank several inches.

"It's on springs," he said. "Push yourself up."

Alfie did, and let himself sink again.

"It's rather like riding a horse," he said with wonder.

"But a lot easier, because the springs help you push back up. And if you do get tired, you don't have to worry about ending up miles from home or being thrown. I thought you could practice with this over the winter, and when the weather turns warm again, or as warm as it ever gets, we could go riding together. I can tell how much you miss it, and it truly is wonderful, Alfie. Like flying."

Alfie's eyes were bright and the look on his face was far sweeter than Dominick deserved.

"Dominick, this is wonderful. All I got you was cufflinks!"

"I'm sure they're lovely cufflinks. I'll cherish them."

"They are and you will! I've been planning them for months and corresponding with a jeweler in London to make sure they're perfect!" Alfie collapsed down onto the chamber horse again, earning another wheeze. "I got you a bottle of the local *highly illegal* scotch as well. Gil helped me acquire it. But this is much better."

Dominick couldn't help but lean over and kiss the petulant look off Alfie's face. After, he didn't go far, leaning his weight on the armrests on either side of Alfie.

"Gil told me to give you an ugly painting."

“He did what?”

“Not quite in those words, I suppose. Which reminds me, he’ll be bringing up a few things after the storm has come and gone. I know it’ll be a bit late for Janie and Mrs. Finley, but he said it would be all right.”

Alfie’s confused look was back. “Whatever are you talking about?”

Dominick sighed. “Well, I wanted to give Janie a cookbook, on account of she’s really horrible at it and I fear I’m going to need all that scotch to forget whatever she’s cooked up for Christmas dinner. But Gil said I couldn’t get *just* her a gift or it would look wrong, so I asked him to buy Mrs. Finley a shawl as well. And to get some socks for himself to go with your boots. It’s not much, of course, but warm socks are worth their weight in gold in the winter. And Mr. Howe deserves something too, so I’ll need your help picking out a bottle for him from the cellar.

“I have no idea what Graham would like,” Dominick continued. “But I’m sure a bottle for himself wouldn’t go amiss. Oh, and Davey has a kitten now. Which is your fault really, you’ve got me trained to be weak when urchins look like they’re about to cry. Janie gets kittens too, because I suppose a cookbook isn’t really a gift for her as much as it is for the rest of us. And Jarrett helped me with all this, so I’m going to help him move some spare furniture we found in the attic out to the shed Davey showed me and give him the only key so if he needs a place to be alone or *not* alone he won’t freeze his stupid arse off.”

When Dominick finished, Alfie looked a little dazed.

“I’ll send Mrs. Hirkins a shawl too,” he added.

“I love you,” whispered Alfie.

Dominick wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything, but he wasn’t going to argue.

“I love you too,” he said, leaning in for another kiss.

“Hold on,” Alfie said. He squirmed interestingly, making the chamber horse emit some truly comical sounds. Laughing, he did it again, bouncing more firmly and raising an eyebrow.

“Well now, if that motion doesn’t suggest some very interesting ideas. All this was purely for my benefit, you said? For *exercise*?”

“Well, I might have had one or two other thoughts, purely coincidentally.”

Alfie bounced again, but before Dominick could share any of those thoughts in person, Alfie pulled a sprig of mistletoe from the pocket of his robe and held it over their heads. “There, now we can do things properly.”

Dominick looked at him in disbelief.

“Love, I have you in a locked room with all sorts of interestingly padded surfaces from which people *expect* us to emerge sweaty and disheveled.” His grin turned wicked. “I’ll show *you* proper.”

Alfie laughed into the kiss as Dominick proceeded to do just what he’d promised.

Inside their locked room, they had everything they ever needed—not cufflinks or kittens or chamber horses, but each other, together and happy. Outside, Old Tanner’s storm picked up, sending the first snowflakes of the season swirling around the manor.

Happy Holidays.

Author's Note

I've tweaked a few Regency holiday traditions here because as a December baby myself, I wanted actual Christmas day to have more gift-giving weight than it would've at the time. (Most gifts back then were given on Epiphany.)

However, all exercise equipment described, including chamber horses, were very real. I highly recommend googling them as they are even more ridiculous-looking than I've described. Unfortunately, I can't find any video of someone actually using one—most likely because they haven't been made for about 200 years—but please let me know if you do, because I'd love to see one in action! Thank you to Claire for telling me about these in the first place!

I also just wanted to say a quick thank you to each and every one of you lovely readers, especially those of you who've reached out via email or social media. Your kind, thoughtful messages never fail to bring a smile to my face and really kept me going through a whirlwind year. And to those of you asking when Alfie and Dominick's next novel would be released...

His Lordship's Return
Book Three of His Lordship's Mysteries
Will be released in May 2022

As an extra holiday treat, I've included the blurb on the next page. I think y'all will really enjoy this one and not only because it features the return of the boys to London, but also the return of our favorite wielder of rolling pins, Mrs. Hirkins!

Wishing all of you the happiest of holiday seasons, and a wonderful new year!

Best,
Sam

His Lordship's Return

Book Three of His Lordship's Mysteries

For Dominick and Alfie, it feels like they've only just settled into life at Balcarres House when an urgent letter from an old friend has them racing back to London. But they're not returning to Alfie's swirling ton of money and nobility, but to the dark underside of the city that Dominick knows all too well.

In a desperate race against time, they'll have to walk streets that Alfie barely remembers and Dominick hoped to never see again. But their return brings up terrors better left in the past and for one of them, the strain may be too much to bear.

Under the shadow of the workhouse, they'll have to act quickly to stop a killer or the lives lost may be their own.

Available May 2022

Books By Samantha SoRelle

His Lordship's Mysteries

His Lordship's Secret

His Lordship's Master

His Lordship's Return

Lord Alfie of the Mud (Short Story)

His Lordship's Gift (Short Story)

Cairo Malachi and the Adventure of the Silver Whistle

[All Books Available Here](#)