

A GENTLEMAN'S UNSPOKEN BARGAIN



SAMPLE

CONRAD KUTT

VOLUME I: THE GENTLEMAN'S MYSTERY SERIES

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A Gentleman's Unspoken Bargain

by Conrad Kutt

Volume One of The Gentleman's Mystery Series

A Note from the Author

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Dear Reader,

If a nagging suspicion has crept into your mind, whispering, “I bet this slop was written with artificial intelligence,” then let me be the first to congratulate you. You have discovered the meticulously guarded secret of *A Gentleman’s Unspoken Bargain*. For this remarkable feat of deduction, a prize of incomparable worth and dubious existence is yours.

Your well-deserved reward will be dispatched with the utmost urgency—or at least, a middling sense of expediency—and should arrive at your doorstep within the next two weeks. I advise you to check your mailbox, your spam folder, and perhaps even that dusty drawer where misplaced keys and forgotten dreams reside.

However, should those fourteen days elapse without a single package, envelope, or postcard bearing the image of a suspiciously self-aware robot, you must assume the worst. Assume that your prize, much like a passing thought or a New Year’s resolution, was tragically lost, or never existed at all. Do not write. Do not call. Just know that while the intent was pure, the execution perhaps was not.

Sincerely,

Conrad Kutt

CHAPTER ONE**The Meeting on the Cobbles**

The fog on the river Thames had a taste of soot and despair, clinging to the bricks of the East End like a shroud. It was past midnight, and Clay Hooker was a long way from the smoky roar of the prize-ring where he was known as the 'Lion of Limehouse.' He stood on a deserted stretch of cobbles near the docks, the collar of his patched greatcoat turned high, the damp seeping into his very bones. His emerald eyes, sharp even in the gloom, scanned the miasma for threats, not for the carriage he expected.

Threats were, after all, his constant companions. His knuckles, ridged with old scars, twitched with the urge to fight, though tonight he was meant only to wait. Every moment spent standing still felt like a concession to Vic King, the man who fixed every crooked bout from Wapping to Shadwell, and who now held Clay's future hostage.

Clay was twenty-three, and the boxing ring was his ticket off the docks—until Vic had ordered him to throw his career-defining fight. Refusal meant a violent end, not just for him, but for anyone he cared for. The knowledge was a bitter bile in his throat.

A faint sound, the smooth roll of wood on wet stone, broke the silence. Out of the swirling gray emerged a closed brougham, a discreet vehicle of high quality, guided by a liveried coachman. It was a vessel of Mayfair wealth, horribly out of place here in the kingdom of the poor. The carriage door opened, and a figure stepped down—a gentleman who seemed to have brought the cool, clean air of the West End with him.

This was Lord Axel Fersen, Viscount of Ashworth. He was a study in contrasts: immaculate in a dark, tailored coat, yet completely lacking the haughty distance Clay expected from the aristocracy. He possessed the striking, clean lines of his Scandinavian lineage, his fair hair precise beneath his hat, and his blue eyes holding an unusual warmth. Yet, beneath the ease of his handsome features, Clay sensed a tension, a dangerous resolve that spoke of a man under significant pressure.

"Mr. Hooker," Lord Fersen said, his voice a low, educated baritone that cut through the damp air. There was no apology for the time or the place; only directness. "I thank you for meeting me. This is not a social call, and my time, like yours, is a valuable commodity."

Clay folded his arms, the muscular tension visible even in the dim gaslight. "Lords don't usually take the air down here, Viscount. Especially to admire the local boxers. If you're looking for a lesson in form, you've come too far east."

Axel smiled, a flicker of genuine humor in his eyes. "I am not here for sport, Mr. Hooker. I am here for a service. A service that requires discretion, courage, and a unique knowledge of men who operate outside the purview of the law."

He stepped closer, the smell of fine pipe tobacco briefly displacing the river's miasma. "I know of Vic King. I know he has ordered you to throw the bout against Thompson next week. And I know, Mr. Hooker, that throwing that fight is the death of your ambition."

Clay felt the blood surge to his ears, a mix of shock and rage. How did this well-bred dandy know his deepest secret? "You know too much, sir. And that's a risky thing down here."

"On the contrary," Axel countered, his expression hardening as he looked into Clay's defiant, emerald gaze. "It is the *only* thing that gives me a chance to avenge a wrong done to my family five years ago. A wrong for which Vic King was never made to answer. You, Mr. Hooker, are the key to breaking his criminal enterprise."

Axel reached inside his coat and produced a thick, neatly folded bank draft. Even in the poor light, Clay could see the figure stamped across the paper was one that would change his life—enough to pay off a multitude of debts, start a legitimate life, and buy a ticket to anywhere.

"I am prepared to offer you the greatest sum of your career, and protection from The Ravens, to accept a different fight," Axel stated, holding the paper out. "A private war fought in the shadows. All I require is your commitment to acting as my agent; my eyes and ears on the inside of King's circle."

Clay stared at the draft, then back at the Viscount. The money was salvation. The job was deadly. Vic King's obsession with him, a weakness Axel clearly knew, was about to become his most powerful weapon and his greatest danger.

"You're asking me to be a spy," Clay said, his voice low and ragged.

Lord Fersen merely inclined his head. "I am asking you to enter an unspoken bargain, Mr. Hooker. Freedom and fortune in exchange for justice. Do we have an agreement?"

CHAPTER TWO**The Seal of the Bargain**

The bank draft, heavy with the promise of a future Clay Hooker had only dared to dream of, felt cold in his hand. But the look in Lord Fersen's blue eyes—that deep, unrelenting focus—was colder still. It was the look of a man who had waited five years for vengeance, and Clay was merely the tool he would wield to get it.

“Your agent,” Clay muttered, the fog clinging to the sharp edges of his reply. He tucked the draft inside his coat, securing the agreement without needing to utter the word. “If I do this, if I help you put King where he belongs, I want more than just money, Lord Fersen. I want assurance that when this is over, Vic King can never touch me or mine again.”

“Agreed,” Axel replied instantly, his voice a low, firm pledge. “Vic King will be neutralized, root and branch. But to truly ensure your safety, Mr. Hooker, I shall require more than a distant alliance. I shall require a plausible, public excuse for your presence near me.”

Axel took a step back, the movement purely theatrical. He gave Clay a long, slow appraisal that was anything but businesslike. “For all of London to see, you are now under my patronage. I shall commission you as my personal pugilistic instructor. A gentleman's fashionable eccentricity. It will be the perfect shield for our clandestine activities.”

Clay felt a familiar heat rise in his chest, a mixture of annoyance and attraction. The Viscount had a brazen certainty that was deeply unnerving. “You don't look like a man who's ever had a good scrap in his life. What if I teach you too well?”

Axel let a subtle smile touch his lips. “Then I suppose I will have to learn to manage a powerful, untamed force. Tell me, Mr. Hooker, is it always so perilous to spend a moment in your company, or is that simply the atmosphere that clings to the Lion of the Limehouse?”

The flirtation, dangerous and unexpected, hung between them—the spark of a connection they both knew was forbidden by every law of their world. But before Clay could respond with the barbed, defensive wit he usually employed, the heavy, rhythmic sound of boots on the damp cobbles announced a far more immediate peril.

Four hulking shadows detached themselves from the fog. They were the unmistakable shapes of The Ravens, Vic King's enforcers, and they were moving with lethal intent.

"Clay Hooker!" the lead thug barked, his voice coarse as gravel. "Vic heard you've been taking moonlight strolls with the fancy set. He says the price of keeping his secrets is higher than any Lord's shilling." The thug spat on the ground. "Vic says you will throw the fight, or The Ravens will make sure you can't clench a fist again."

Before the warning had finished, they lunged. Clay, a master of the ring, was suddenly overwhelmed by the surprise and the sheer weight of numbers. He landed a punishing blow to the jaw of the first man, but the others were upon him, driven by Vic King's fury. A sickening crack echoed as a heavy boot found his ribs, and a fist glanced off the side of his head. He crumpled to the ground, trying desperately to shield his face, blood blossoming dark on the wet stone.

"Leave him!" Lord Fersen shouted, his voice ringing with aristocratic authority.

The thugs ignored him, focused on their vicious task. Then, a sharp, metallic sound sliced through the night. Axel had produced a small, silver-plated pistol. He raised it high above the struggling heap of bodies and fired a single shot directly into the cold, swirling air.

The detonation was deafening in the narrow street, tearing a hole through the fog and the immediate violence. It was a sound that spoke of wealth, of power, and of an utter disregard for legal consequence that only a Viscount could afford. The thugs froze, their eyes widening at the sight of the smoking weapon and the cold fury in Axel's face. They knew Vic King despised the law, but a fight with a Lord was a different, far more complicated disaster. They scattered, melting back into the shadows they had emerged from.

Axel dropped the pistol into his pocket, his breath ragged. He rushed to Clay's side, ignoring the filth and the blood.

"Dusty! Now!" Axel commanded.

The coachman, a stout man with a stern expression, moved with surprising speed. Between the two of them, they lifted Clay, who was spitting blood and fighting unconsciousness. He felt the soft, expensive wool of Axel's coat beneath his cheek as he was maneuvered into the carriage.

"Where are we going?" Clay managed, his voice strained.

“Somewhere they will never look for you, Mr. Hooker,” Axel replied, settling beside him, instantly shedding his coat to press the soft lining to Clay’s bloody temple. “You have sealed the bargain. Now, you shall accept the protection of Ashworth House.”

The brougham lurched forward, speeding away from the East End towards the clean, silent, and infinitely more dangerous world of Mayfair and the Viscount’s opulent home.

CHAPTER THREE**Ashworth House and the Price of Protection**

The first thing Clay registered was the profound silence. It was the antithesis of the East End, where the very air was a cacophony of dock whistles, drunken shouts, and the grinding of carts. Here, in the bedroom of Ashworth House, the quiet was thick, heavy, and expensive, broken only by the crackle of a perfectly banked fire.

Clay opened his eyes, wincing at the throbbing ache in his ribs. He was resting on sheets of cool, fine linen that smelled faintly of lavender. The room was vast, draped in velvet and dark mahogany. On a nearby table sat an array of bottles, bandages, and a basin of water still tinged pink.

Lord Fersen, seated beside the bed in a velvet dressing gown that somehow still looked immaculate, was reading a leather-bound volume. He looked up, his expression guarded.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Axel said, his voice quiet. "You've been unconscious for some time. You are bruised, and two of your ribs are protesting, but nothing is broken. Dusty has already seen to the brougham and my coachman's silence is assured. We are quite safe here."

Axel rose, dismissing the book. The concern in his blue eyes felt deeply personal, yet carefully controlled. He crossed to the washbasin, wringing out a cloth. "Allow me, if you please. I find tending to my own injuries useful, and yours, by extension, feel rather like a consequence of my own actions."

As Axel gently cleansed the cut on Clay's forehead, the intimacy of the task was unavoidable. Clay, a man used to the rough, impersonal handling of trainers and seconds, felt a disconcerting warmth bloom beneath the Viscount's touch. The proximity, the scent of expensive soap and the subtle pressure of Axel's cool fingers against his hot skin, was dizzying.

"You fire a pistol like a man who knows how to use it, Viscount," Clay rasped, his eyes fixed on the man leaning over him.

Axel paused, looking down. "I have many concealed talents. It pays to be prepared when one is fighting a war of attrition against society, or in this case, against the filth that killed my cousin, Drexel Hart." He spoke

the name with a cold finality that underlined his purpose. “Now, we must put a price on your pain. I have secured your safety—for now. You will remain here under the guise of my pugilistic instructor. Your life is now bound to mine.”

Clay nodded slowly, accepting the gravity of the trade. “Bound, my Lord. What do I do now?”

Axel moved away, and began pacing around the room. The mood shifted instantly from intimate care to rigorous strategy.

“I have a network,” Axel explained, his voice becoming sharp and authoritative. “Vic King has three vital weaknesses, and they are now our allies. First, Harriet Thorne, a tenacious journalist at *The Times*. She needs a scandal to break the boy’s club at her paper, and King’s arrest is her career-making headline. She provides the public voice.”

“Next, we have Arthur Davies, a police constable caught in King’s web of bribes. He is our guilt-ridden eye inside the Law. He can lead us to documents and ensure King’s arrest sticks.”

Axel looked directly at Clay, his gaze calculating. “And finally, you must contend with Bill ‘The Brawler’ Sykes. Sykes is King’s muscle, and more. He knows King’s deepest secrets, but he despises you, Clay, because Vic King desires you. Sykes has information about the whereabouts of a ledger that contains King’s financial crimes—the only thing that guarantees his downfall. Your task is to use King’s continued obsession with you as a lever. And you must get close enough to Sykes to learn where that ledger is hidden, without letting either man know you have aligned with me.”

Clay felt a shiver, not of cold, but of deadly challenge. Acting as a double agent, playing on King’s twisted affections and Sykes’s bitter jealousy, was a far more dangerous fight than anything in the ring.

“You’re asking me to walk back into the viper’s nest and offer myself as bait,” Clay stated flatly.

Axel met his gaze, the blue of his eyes deep and resolute. “I am asking you to be the lion, Clay. You have the power to destroy the man who controls your life.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Architecture of Desire

The room Clay was assigned was, by any measure, a palace chamber. The silence that had initially unnerved him now pressed down, a plush, suffocating weight that whispered of secrets kept and power held. He stood before a mahogany cheval glass, studying his reflection. The dark bruising around his left eye and the cut on his temple, carefully dressed by Lord Fersen, felt like medals of dishonor.

His own rough clothes had been replaced with soft linen and a silk robe that was certainly Lord Fersen's—a detail that made the proximity of their situation suddenly very clear. The air in this part of Mayfair was cleaner, but the danger here was invisible, hidden beneath layers of wealth and etiquette.

A knock, light but firm, preceded Axel's entrance. He carried a small tray bearing a glass of wine and a plate of biscuits. "Rest will mend your ribs, Mr. Hooker, but I suspect your mind is already demanding action."

"How long do I have to pretend to be your prize pet, Lord Fersen?" Clay replied, turning from the mirror.

Axel set the tray down, his blue eyes assessing Clay with a familiar intensity that was difficult to parse—was it professional calculation or something warmer? "Until Vic King is neutralized. For now, you are the latest, most fashionable distraction for the Viscount of Ashworth. You are my living, breathing testimony that the aristocracy cares about the 'common man.'" He paused, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. "It will annoy my family greatly, which is a welcome bonus."

Clay stepped closer, unable to deny the pull of their attraction. "You're playing a dangerous game. King isn't stupid. When he sees me parading around Mayfair, he'll know I'm mocking him."

"Good," Axel said, leaning back against a marble mantle. "I need him angry. Angry men make mistakes. But mostly, I need to keep you safe and close. This house is a fortress, and its walls are strong enough to withstand the gossip of London." He met Clay's emerald gaze, and the professional veneer finally cracked, revealing the reckless desire beneath. "And if I am to be honest, I prefer you within my sight."

The air thickened, charged with the unsaid acknowledgment of their attraction. Clay felt the heat rising between them, a dangerous promise threatening to breach the unspoken bargain they had made.

“Your honesty is appreciated, my Lord,” Clay murmured, stepping closer until only a breath separated them. He could smell the expensive soap on Axel’s skin, the faint, comforting scent of pipe tobacco. “But the part of the bargain that requires me to get close to Sykes—that requires me to go back out there. King is fixated on me. Sykes is fixed on King. It’s a triangle of poison.”

Axel swallowed, the slight tension in his throat betraying his composure. “Then your first move must be subtle. Sykes will be at The Blue Parrot tonight, drinking away his resentment. You must appear to him as the man Vic King threw away—a man desperate, wounded, and willing to take advantage of Vic’s distraction.”

“He hates me,” Clay reminded him.

“Hatred is a strong emotion,” Axel countered, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “And strong emotions are often a mask for something more pliable. Sykes wants King to suffer, and you are the perfect, painful reminder of King’s weakness. You will offer Sykes a way to hit King where it truly hurts: by stealing the evidence that guarantees King’s arrest.”

“You are the key, Clay. You have the raw power. I have the network and funds. We must work in concert. Now, drink your wine and rest. Tonight, the deception begins.”

With a final, lingering look that held both warning and undeniable desire, Axel spun on his heel and left, leaving Clay alone in the vast, silent room, the silk of the Viscount’s robe a sudden, potent burden on his skin. He had accepted the price of freedom, but he realized with a sinking heart that the price of their proximity might be far higher.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Engagement and the Engine of Gossip

The newsroom of *The Times* was a hostile engine of masculine superiority, smelling of damp wool, printer's ink, and stale tobacco. Harriet Thorne, the only woman employed on the editorial floor, was proofreading a piece on the Duchess of Kent's new charitable venture—a subject she loathed with the intensity of a thousand burning injustices. She knew the workings of the East End docks better than any of the aging drones hunched over the main news desk, yet her talents were eternally confined to the *Women's World* page.

"Thorne!" bellowed Mr. Abernathy, the News Editor, without looking up. "We need a column piece on the Fersen engagement. Make it saccharine, make it long, and make sure you emphasize the blessed alliance of two such eminent families."

Harriet sighed, snatching the assignment sheet. This was precisely the kind of tedious, decorative reporting she was desperate to escape. Yet, it was the perfect cover for her clandestine alliance with the Viscount.

The column demanded she analyze the imminent marriage between Lord Axel Fersen, Viscount of Ashworth, and Miss Genevieve Hastings. The arrangement was the talk of Mayfair—a union of Fersen wealth and Hastings political power. Genevieve was the daughter of the Rt. Hon. George Hastings, a man whose ascent to Prime Minister seemed an inevitable, near-term certainty. The marriage was not one of love, but one of calculated ambition, an unspoken bargain on a grander, more public scale.

Axel, the progressive rebel, had played the game perfectly. By aligning himself with the Hastings family, he secured his public reputation and silenced those who questioned his liberal politics, while Genevieve gained a wealthy, liberal husband who had no interest in controlling her life. Harriet suspected they were accomplices, using the marriage as a mutual shield.

A Perfect Union, Harriet typed, the irony stinging her fingertips. She knew Genevieve Hastings by reputation—a woman as sharp and politically

minded as her father, who viewed marriage as merely another form of negotiation. Axel would be gaining a partner, not a bride, and the freedom to pursue his secret desires.

Later that afternoon, a discreet message was dropped on her desk—a small card bearing only the Fersen crest and a location: The Orion Coffee House, tomorrow at midnight. Axel was calling a meeting of his clandestine network.

Harriet put away the note, her pulse quickening. She was tired of writing about teacups and trimmings. Tomorrow, she would trade her society columns for the grimy facts of murder and corruption. She rose, looking out the window at the distant smoke of the East End. She knew Clay Hooker was now installed in Ashworth House, the visceral, dangerous pawn in Axel's grand plan. The thought of the boxer, beaten and now hidden in the Viscount's luxurious prison, made her fingers ache for her notepad.

Vic King's empire will fall not to a judge or a copper, but to a battered boxer, a frustrated journalist, and a Lord who is hiding a heart more dangerous than his pistol, she thought, a fierce, protective ambition burning in her chest.

She had her angle. Now, she just needed the evidence.

Other Books by Conrad Kutt

A Gentleman's Hidden Necessity

A Gentleman's Stained Legacy

A Gentleman's Sunlit Indiscretion

A Gentleman's Perilous Interval

A Gentleman's Desert Secret

Legal

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