



The Duke of Spice (The Kembal Family #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: She's the strong heroine. He's the villain. They've just got married.

Robert Tolley, the Duke of Saffron Walden doesn't much care for the rule book. He will do whatever it takes, legal or otherwise, to get what he wants. Everything of course, except get caught.

With her family's reputation for creating outrageous scandals, Lady Victoria Kembal is doing her best to maintain her slim chances of securing a respectable marriage. She spends her days quietly reading cookbooks and cutting restaurant reviews out of the newspaper.

When the Duke of Spice and Lady Victoria lock horns over the quality of restaurants in London, the feisty daughter of the Duke of Mowbray is determined that she won't be the one to back down.

But Lady Victoria's ill-conceived plans to get even with the Duke of Spice quickly unravel when he catches her stealing from his garden in the dead of night.

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August 1818

It may well have been the height of summer, and the weather more mild than usual, but Robert Tolley, the Duke of Saffron Walden, could think of a dozen other places he would rather be than lurking on the side of a dark, dusty road six miles out of London. Tucked up in his warm comfortable bed at home would have been top of that list.

But there were wicked deeds afoot tonight, and the Duke of Spice would never let his men deal with any danger that he himself wasn't prepared to face.

He glanced over at his senior man of business, and casually enquired, "How much gunshot do you have on your person, George?"

His second in charge slowly shook his head. He knew this was a trick question. It wasn't so much a case of the amount of ammunition he had with him, but more one of whether he was prepared to use it.

"Your Grace, I have enough to put down any man who fancies himself as a hero. Hopefully we don't encounter that sort of fool tonight."

Robert gruffly chuckled. There were few men willing to put themselves in real danger for a wagon load of spice, but experience had taught him that it always paid to be prepared. Regrets were something he'd decided that only dead highwaymen could afford to have. If it meant the choice between his own death or living to see another day, his pistol would make that decision.

“What’s meant to be onboard this shipment tonight?”

Another test.

“The usual. Opium, which we won’t steal. Mace, black pepper, and some ginger. Oh, and of course the obligatory tins of saffron,” replied George.

He’d never taken a fancy to opium, deciding it was something that any sensible man should do his utmost to avoid. Robert drew back on his cheroot; he could handle tobacco. Truth be told, his main interest in tonight’s haul lay in the tins of saffron and making sure that none of them made it onto the London culinary market. If the restaurateurs of the English capital couldn’t source their spices from the Honorable East India Company, they would have to get them from him.

A low whistle split the night, stirring Robert from his thoughts of his latest moneymaking endeavor.

George raised his arm, holding his lit lantern high. He waved it from left to right. Across the other side of the narrow dark roadway, another light appeared, mirroring his action. Message received and understood.

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes, Your Grace. The rock is in place on the road just past the bend, and our crew has moved into position.”

No mistakes. No stupid risks. Get the spices, then go home.

Robert put his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a pistol. Lifting a cloth bandana to cover the lower half of his face, he cocked the weapon, and stood listening. The sound of heavy wheels on the road along with the whining of a team of

horses soon reached his ears.

“Bloody hell. Who put that there?” swore the driver of the wagon as he drew his team up sharp. The large rock had done its job. The road ahead was blocked.

Taking a deep calming breath, Robert stepped out of the darkness and into the middle of the road. He aimed the pistol straight at the man’s head. “Now be a good chap and climb down from the wagon. If you go stand with my crew, this will all be over very soon, and you can be on your way.”

His wagon would be a touch lighter, but if the driver did as told, he would be left uninjured. The Duke of Saffron Walden was an unrepentant thief, but he had no taste for violence.

The man held up his hands. “I must protest and inform you that these goods belong to the Honorable East India Company. That what you are doing is a crime, punishable by death.”

Still holding the pistol, Robert gave a brief nod. “Yes. Yes, of course. Protest heard and noted. If we are caught, I shall make certain that your superiors are informed of your valiant refusal to simply hand over their property.” He waved the pistol in the air, motioning in the direction of where the man should go. “Now climb down, and let’s get this over and done with. The sooner you do, the quicker we can all go home to bed.”

Robbing people in the middle of the night was a dangerous and illegal endeavor, but it still paid to be polite. Even a highwayman should never leave his manners at home.

The driver did as he was bade. The moment his feet touched the ground, he was joined by two of Robert’s men who ushered him to a spot out of the way, where they silently stood guard over him.

Robert, in turn, kept a close watch on the road while the rest of his men began to unload the spice barrels and sacks, carrying them over to another waiting wagon.

He constantly looked and listened for any other approaching horses. At the first sign of trouble, George would blow his whistle, and they would all immediately flee. Saffron might well be an expensive commodity, but it wasn't worth the price of the hangman's noose.

When the spices had finally been transferred to his own wagon and the men in his employ had melted into the night, Robert tipped his hat to the wagon driver. "A good evening to you, sir. Thank you for your kind cooperation. It was nice doing business with you."

He then followed his crew and disappeared into the cover of the trees which lined the side of the road. The driver of the East India wagon, along with his few remaining barrels and crates, was left to begin the unhappy journey onward to London to report the theft to his masters.

But by the time the directors of the East India had been informed that yet another of their cargos had been seized, the spices would have been transferred into new barrels and readied for sale on the black market.

A few miles further west of London, along a narrow laneway, Robert caught up with the wagon. He and George examined the haul.

It looked to be a good one, and yet another strike against the corrupt monopoly of the East India Company. He took great pleasure in knowing that every single grain of spice he stole from his arch nemesis would eventually form the path which led to its destruction.

The Duke of Spice had been stealing spice from under the EIC's nose for close to

three years, but he wasn't a fool. He knew his luck would have to eventually run out.

And when it did, and his enemy decided to put real effort into dealing with the pesky problem of shrinkage, the East India would come at him with unrestrained violent force.

But they'll have to find me first.

Robert finished checking the stolen spices and got back on his horse. "I'll see you at Tolley House in the morning, George. I've got some more work to get completed tonight."

Leaving George and a couple of his other trusted collaborators with the task of bringing the wagon secretly into London, the Duke of Saffron Walden headed for the main road. He had a stack of parliamentary papers to wade through before midday. But it was the opening line for his restaurant review in the Morning Herald newspaper which concentrated his mind.

"Dear valued reader..."

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Chapter One

September 1818

Lady Victoria Kembal loved Thursdays. From the moment she opened her eyes, washed, and dressed, the Duke of Mowbray's second eldest daughter was a bundle of excitement.

At this hour, on most Thursday mornings, she would already be in the breakfast room, nose deep in the newspaper scanning the columns of the back page. But not this particular morning.

Instead she was seated before the mirror of her dresser, gritting her teeth with barely restrained frustration. Her mother had promised to take her shopping in central London this morning, but only if she agreed to have her long brown hair curled by her maid.

This is insufferable. I need the newspaper, not curling papers. The Morning Herald is waiting for me.

The longer she sat here while Mary worked the papillote iron with care, the greater the number of members of the Kembal household who would have now had the opportunity to read the newspaper. Her father. All three of her brothers. Even a nosey footman or two would have snuck a peek. And not one of them would have been gentle with the precious pages of the Morning Herald .

She'd had enough.

“Mary, could you please go and check to see who is reading the Morning Herald ? And if no one is, would you please bring it back with you.”

Anything to rescue the prized newspaper. Her newspaper.

“Just as soon as I have finished with your hair, Lady Victoria,” replied her maid, picking up another curling paper.

Victoria gritted her teeth once more. What with the papers, and the constant reheating of the curling iron, the whole process had become a long and all too fiddly endeavor. A simple chignon would have seen her out of here well over an hour ago.

She shifted in her seat and got a sharp pinch on the arm for her troubles.

“Ouch, that hurt.”

“Yes, well if I burn you, it will hurt a good deal more. And then Her Grace will be angry with the both of us. So please, Lady Victoria, do sit still. I won’t be much longer.”

Victoria huffed out a breath.

Mama is angry at everyone at the moment. One only has to breathe, and her ire stirs.

She doubted there was a soul in Mowbray House who hadn’t been on the receiving end of the duchess’s temper these past weeks. And everyone in the Kembal family knew why.

Following her return from a lengthy stay in Rome, the duchess was finding it difficult to reenter London society. Her absence hadn’t been the cause of her social censure, rather it had been the rumors of her demanding a formal separation from her husband

which had seen the matrons of the haut ton turn their backs on Victoria's mother.

During the scandal, the eldest of the Kembal offspring, Gideon, had undertaken the long sea journey to Italy and by some miracle had managed to convince the duchess to return home. All these months later, the duke and duchess were reunited, but it was clear society was yet to forgive Lady Anne for her disgraceful transgression. Any and all manner of unfounded gossip regarding the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray continued to spread quickly among London's elite.

Resigned to her fate, Victoria rested her hands in her lap. Her Thursday newspaper would have to wait. The last thing she needed was for her mother to be in another foul mood when they left the house.

A long while later, with her hair finally set in beautiful ringlets, Victoria finished dressing and headed at a fast clip for the breakfast room. As she stepped through the door, she noted the usual family members were in attendance this morning.

Her brother Gideon and his wife Serafina were seated together at one end of the long table. Gideon's arduous journey to Rome to retrieve his mother and sister Augusta hadn't all been self-sacrificing—he'd also managed to capture the heart of a nobleman's daughter and make her his wife. The Marquis of Holwell was whispering sweet nothings into the Italian beauty's ear and Serafina's face was flushed with pink.

I do not wish to know what he is saying to her.

Victoria's bedroom happened to be right next door to the room occupied by the newlyweds, and from the noises which reached her ears each night, she had a very good idea what put the color in her sister-in-law's cheeks. Unwed young misses like herself were not meant to know about such things, but anyone who spent any length of time in the ladies retiring room at parties quickly learned a good deal about the secrets of the marriage bed.

She cleared her throat. “Not at the breakfast table, please.”

A grinning Gideon shifted barely an inch away from his wife. “Good morning, Victoria. How are you this bright sunny day?”

“Your hair looks...” Serafina paused. Her brows furrowed. Victoria knew that look all too well. Serafina’s English was improving at a rapid rate, but some words still failed her.

Serafina glanced at her husband, smiled sweetly at him, then looked back to Victoria. “Divine.”

Victoria nodded her approval. “I would say your English is now officially better than Gideon’s Italian.”

Not that it would take much.

From what Serafina had confided to her, the Marquis of Holwell’s use of the Italian language was mostly confined to the topics of food and romance. Less of the former, and more of the latter if the look on Gideon’s face was anything to go by. Her brother was the epitome of a man who had suddenly found himself head over heels in love and was more than happy to remain in that blissful state.

She wondered how long it would be before the young couple shared some happy news about the Kembal family blood line being continued. As the future duke, it was Gideon’s role to ensure that he and Serafina produced an heir.

They have certainly got the practicing bit down to a fine art.

Taking a seat at the breakfast table, Victoria caught the eye of a footman, and gave him her usual morning request. “A small cup of coffee please, no food.”

She never ate at home. As soon as she had finished her drink and secured this morning's copy of the newspaper, she'd be headed out the door and to the nearby German bakery. English eggs and toast couldn't compare to hot sourdough bread covered with a generous lashing of salted butter. Only after she'd downed her breakfast, would she be able to face her mother.

Victoria's gaze landed on the Morning Herald , and her heart sank. Its less than pristine condition was sad confirmation that several other family members had already carelessly thumbed their way through it. She leaned across the table and picked it up.

“ The Graceful Swan is the review for today,” said Gideon.

Victoria offered up her usual Thursday morning silent prayer, hoping that the restaurant reviewer had found a good place to eat. One he recommended. Her life revolved around food, especially the establishments which the cultured palates of the London press saw fit to feature in print. The reviewer for the Morning Herald was someone she had come to place her faith in.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“Apparently, he found it quite decent. Worth the visit,” replied Gideon. No one knew the identity of the reviewer for the Morning Herald , but everyone in Mowbray House knew that when Victoria mentioned he , she was referring to the mysterious gentleman who penned the weekly food review.

Decent. Not a glowing report. But if he says it's worth visiting, that's good enough for me.

The door of the breakfast room opened, and the remains of Lord Richard Kembal wandered in. Victoria took one look at his unkempt attire and her hopes for a peaceful

morning enjoying her coffee instantly evaporated.

The state of Richard's light brown mop was in stark contrast to that of Gideon's. While they shared almost the exact same shade of hair, the locks of the middle Kembal son had not had the benefit of a comb or brush.

He was still in his crumpled evening clothes, and a definite miasma of alcohol lingered all around him. Victoria grimaced as she caught a glimpse of her brother's bloodshot eyes.

He looks awful. Even worse than usual.

"Morning all. Food. Brilliant. I'm starving," announced Richard in a rough voice that spoke of one who had not seen his bed. Sauntering around to the other side of the table, he gently lowered himself into the chair situated directly across from Victoria.

She noted that he made a point of not looking in the direction of either Gideon or Serafina, who both wore horrified expressions on their faces. And while Gideon simply muttered something under his breath, the Marchioness of Holwell wasn't so easily deterred.

"Good morning, brother. I trust you are well," said Lady Serafina.

Have you seen his eyes? He can barely focus.

Richard's throat bobbed as he swallowed deep. From where Victoria sat, it was obvious the middle Kembal brother was still half drunk. She waited. If things went according to the usual way they did, he'd shovel the contents of a plateful of breakfast into his mouth, then quickly disappear up to his room for the rest of the morning.

Later in the day, when he was well enough to engage with the other members of the family, Richard would finally resurface. He would spend the obligatory amount of time with his parents and siblings, then head back out into the night to ruin himself all over again.

Hiding from our parents might be the best thing you can do today, Richard.

He looked most unwell. Victoria took comfort in knowing that Gideon wouldn't dare say anything untoward to his brother; he'd also lived the reckless life of a young buck before travelling to Rome and winning Serafina's heart. No doubt Richard would have plenty of dirty secrets to offer up to their parents if Gideon was foolish enough to open his mouth.

Opening the newspaper, she casually turned the pages until she reached the social columns. To the right of the theatre reviews was this week's restaurant feature. Her gaze ran over the piece.

The Graceful Swan

Situated on Eagle Street, this establishment offers the finest of meats and delicacies. Dear valued reader, your humble servant of a reviewer dined recently at the Graceful Swan and found the food to be of a respectable, dare I say, decent quality. Of particular note was the roast lamb which came with a generous lashing of rich gravy and spiced potatoes. Worth visiting if you are passing through this part of London.

Victoria's mouth watered at the mere mention of spiced potatoes. If there was one thing Lady Victoria Kembal loved, it was food which lifted the senses. She would worship at the shrine of the god of curry if she were able.

Lifting her gaze, she once more met the bloodshot eyes of her brother. She winced, imagining the world of pain he must be in right now, then politely enquired, "How

did the gaming tables go last night? Are your pockets a little light this morning?"

"Victoria," admonished Gideon. Serafina snorted a laugh.

Along with sex, young women weren't meant to know about the gambling habits of the male of the species. Only the willfully ignorant would have failed to note that when it came to cards, Lord Richard Kembal had more than his fair share of bad luck. There were always plenty of days left in the month after his allowance had slipped through his fingers.

"If you have a problem with me mentioning his gambling losses, then perhaps you should ask Papa to bellow a little lower when he is discussing Richard's finances," replied Victoria.

The table fell silent as two footmen bearing trays appeared in the breakfast room. A small cup of hot coffee was set in front of Victoria, while Richard was presented with a large plate piled high with bacon, kippers, and roast potatoes.

Gideon instantly dismissed the servants, with a 'thank you, that will be all'. As soon as the door closed, he rounded on Richard. "How much did you lose?"

Richard picked up his fork and pointed it at the mountain of food on his plate. "About that much, and then some."

It didn't take a genius to figure out that all of his monthly allowance would have been spent last night, and he was more than likely in debt to a close friend for a good deal more.

"Così tanto?" muttered Serafina.

Gideon nodded. "Yes, that much my love."

Serafina's eyes grew wide, and she softly tutted her disapproval.

From what Victoria had gathered, in the past, her eldest brother had often bailed Richard out of his financial predicaments, but since his marriage, Gideon had stopped. He now had a wife to spend his money on. And she was far prettier than Richard.

"Yes, well that is the lot of the gentleman, you win some you lose some," said Richard, not looking up from his plate.

Victoria went back to reading the newspaper.

"Any decent reviews in the Morning Herald, Victoria?"

Lifting her head, she found Richard smiling at her. "Perhaps you and I could go out for dinner this evening. If he has found a good place to eat, I could act as your chaperone."

She wasn't stupid—any offer for them to dine together this evening would no doubt come with a private request for her to hand over a sizeable portion of her pin money to him. If their parents had any idea as to how much money Richard owed his sister, they would have a conniption.

But she was keeping that secret to herself. Saving it for the day when she might need to call upon Richard to help her out with something important.

It's not as if I am spending my money on anything else at present.

Victoria kept her focus fully on Richard, refusing to look in Gideon and Serafina's direction, all the while praying that the Marquis of Holwell wouldn't finally put two and two together and figure out why their sibling was offering to take her out to

dinner. A gentleman should never stoop to taking money from a lady, even if she was his younger sister.

The scandal over the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray's recent marital issues had presented the younger females of the Kembal family with their own particular set of problems. While Lady Anne had lingered in Rome, Victoria and Coco had been sent to the family's country estate, Mowbray Park, for their protection and had missed most of the formal balls and parties of the summer. When they and the duchess finally did return to London, their mother's ongoing estrangement from society meant Victoria had only her regular trips to cafes and restaurants to look forward to for social engagement.

The youngest of the Kembal offspring, Lady Coco Kembal, was a different matter. She didn't care a jot about the matrons of the ton and had taken to sneaking out of the house late at night to go rambling through the rough streets of London with her friends. While Richard regularly made his appearance at the breakfast table half foxed, Coco remained hidden under the bedclothes in her room, not stirring until well after midday. Anyone who did attempt to rouse her was greeted with a locked door.

The offer of being escorted out on the town was too much for Victoria to resist. Clearing her throat, she turned to her new sister-in-law. "Would you and Gideon like to join Richard and me for dinner this evening? We could make a fun foursome of it."

Serafina smiled sweetly at her husband. "It would be lovely, but Gideon and I are leaving town today. We are off to the country. To Mowbray Park. London is lovely, but we are looking forward to spending some time alone. Just the two of us. Gideon is going to show me some of his favorite places around the estate."

Richard coughed into the sleeve of his jacket, but Victoria was sure she caught the muffled words, "I bet he is."

She quickly tore her gaze from the gathering and focused on her coffee cup, praying that Gideon hadn't overheard his brother's scandalous remark.

Gideon pressed a kiss to his wife's cheek. "Considering Serafina spent the first six weeks of our marriage nursing me through the agony of seasickness onboard the ship back to England, it seems only fair to take my wonderful bride on a proper honeymoon. And upon our return, we plan to move to a more private part of this house. Papa is having some rooms on the fourth floor redecorated while we are away."

While she was relieved to hear she would regain her nighttime peace, a pang of jealousy still nudged at Victoria. Gideon was happily settled with the Italian beauty. Their other sister, Augusta, had also married while she was in Rome, and she and her husband, Earl Bramshaw, were now expecting their first child.

I have only my books, the Thursday restaurant reviews, and the occasional evening out to look forward to. It's not fair.

Everyone else was getting on with their lives, while she was stuck waiting for her mother to step back fully into society. Until the duchess made a move, Victoria was resigned to having to bribe her siblings to take her out to cafes and restaurants.

Richard stabbed at a piece of salmon with his fork, then added some potato, and finally a spear of asparagus to the growing pile. Her brother never let an empty fork go to waste. "I think my social diary is free this evening if you wish to go to the Graceful Swan."

I expect your purse is also free of funds.

He shoved the large stack of food into his mouth, then sat chewing. Victoria glanced furtively at Serafina, whose eyes had gone wide.

“That would be lovely. Of course it will be my treat,” said Victoria.

Richard swallowed down his food in one gulp, and replied, “Of course.”

Seated at the table in his kitchen in Pye Street, Robert stared at the article in the newspaper and frowned. His review of the Graceful Swan hadn’t exactly been a ringing endorsement. He’d hurriedly penned the piece one night last week, in between moving stolen crates of spice, and had barely made the publishing deadline. The timetables for pilfering spice and writing restaurant reviews were not always compatible.

But he’d promised the review in exchange for the owner of the tavern moving their spice and herb purchases from the East India Company to him. A favorable piece in a major London newspaper had been the sweetener to seal the deal.

He glanced out the window. The sun had just peeked over the horizon. Any moment now his retinue of daytime servants would be arriving at Tolley House to begin their work.

When he’d first gone into the theft and smuggling business, he had quickly come to appreciate the risk that having full-time staff in his home presented to his illicit operations. He couldn’t very well handle stolen goods while also having a house full of servants. Something had to give.

But the lack of servants during the evening had soon become a benefit, one he greatly enjoyed. It left Robert free to cook in his own kitchen and write his newspaper column without running the risk of anyone discovering that the lofty Duke of Saffron Walden was in fact the restaurant reviewer for the Morning Herald .

Robert Tolley was a born and bred English nobleman to his boots, but he also knew a great deal about food. Knew his spices. His curries. He possessed an enviable

collection of cookbooks, and a near encyclopedic knowledge of what herbs and spices could do to elevate any sort of dish.

Folding up the newspaper and setting it aside, he considered his plans for the day. Moving the barrels of cloves and peppers he and George had stored in the locked cellar would have to wait until later tonight. There were too many prying eyes about town during the daytime, not to mention the staff who would soon be wandering the halls of his London townhouse.

Once his valet arrived and had given him a close shave, he'd dress properly and venture into the city center. He had a list of potential clients he intended to visit today.

A loud rap at the back door of the house roused Robert from his thoughts. His lower back protested as he rose slowly from the long wooden kitchen bench. Lugging crates and barrels was a labor-intensive task.

Glancing out the kitchen window, he gave George who stood outside in the garden a friendly wave. Moving to the door, he unlocked it and ushered his servant inside. "Morning, George."

George, who was wearing a plain brown suit topped with a long black coat, looked the very picture of a London man of business.

"Good Morning, Your Grace. Thought I'd drop by before the household staff arrives to let you know that we might have a new customer looking to place a regular and sizeable order for spices with us. Unfortunately, he won't negotiate with me."

Robert raised an eyebrow at his words. George had full authority to negotiate deals on their behalf. But there were some people who wouldn't consider a vicar's son worthy of their time.

This new client must think themselves too important to talk to someone they consider a lackey.

Some customers were irredeemable snobs; they simply couldn't find it within themselves to talk business with men from lower social ranks. The structure of English society had them bound from birth. And that was where Robert came in. His job was to deal with the self-important assholes.

"Is this potential customer someone who would think themselves a person of rank?" asked Robert. He phrased the question carefully. Was this person a noble whom he might possibly know and trust, or was this someone whom they should thoroughly investigate before deciding whether they were worth the risk? The future of their entire spice business hinged on making smart choices.

The East India had its own people who moved within the upper echelons of London society. It would be the greatest of follies for him to begin business negotiations with someone who may turn out to be connected to the company whose spice they had stolen.

George cleared his throat. "They have a title, and thus don't wish to speak to me. But I am still undertaking a little more research about their background. Perhaps you could meet them at a party, and then let me know your thoughts, Your Grace."

It paid to be overly cautious. And then some.

"Alright. Give me their name, and I will see what I think. But in the meantime, I would suggest you keep digging into their background."

As a duke, Robert went to enough social gatherings to be able to form a reasonable opinion of most people within a matter of minutes. The way nobles behaved in public usually told him all he needed to know. The loud boastful ones weren't the sort he

was keen to do business with, but then again, neither were the quiet ones who only asked calculated questions. His continued activities against the East India had to be hurting them, and it was only a matter of time before they decided that whoever was stealing from them had to be stopped.

“I will check my social diary and make enquiries as to when and where I might cross paths with this potential new customer,” said Robert.

George gave a brief nod, and Robert, fully expecting him to make his farewells, went to turn away. But his man of business lingered.

“How much longer do you think we will be able to keep this up, Your Grace? My wife is worried that this is all going to end badly, and I have to admit I’m beginning to feel the same way.”

Robert had his own crop of spices and herbs growing at his country estate in Essex. His plans were that in time the yield from Tolley Manor would be enough to supply a solid portion of the London market. But until then, any demand still had to be filled with the goods he’d stolen from his competitor.

That could take a few years.

“You have my word, we will be out of the thieving business within the next twelve months. Hopefully sooner,” he lied.

The expression on George’s face was enough to inform Robert that if he didn’t keep his word, he’d be looking for another man of business.

He didn’t have the heart to tell George that this whole thieving business was more than just a way for him to get a leg up on his enemy.

Nor did he want to make mention that he fully intended to keep stealing from the Honorable East India Company for as long as he could get away with it. That he wouldn't consider the job done until he had effectively broken the monopoly the East India held over the supply of spices in the English capital.

If it came down to it, and George left him, the Duke of Spice would go it alone.

Chapter Two

The first sign that something might be amiss with the Graceful Swan was the distinct lack of customers. Victoria was a dedicated follower of the reviews from the Morning Herald and had made it her business to dine at the featured restaurants as close to publication day of the review as possible. After she had attended the establishment, she would pen her own review in her journal. It would sit alongside the one she'd cut and pasted from the newspaper.

Arriving at the restaurant that evening, she and Richard were shown to a small table situated along one side of what should have been a busy restaurant. The Graceful Swan was located just off Oxford Street, in a busy part of central London. By anyone's estimation this place should have been packed with customers. A favorable review in such a major newspaper would normally have had people lining up in the street all begging to secure a table.

But apart from themselves, there were only four other tables occupied by diners. And from the way they casually engaged with the waiters, those other people were regulars of the Graceful Swan. Victoria did a quick tally and came up with ten empty tables.

This does not bode well for a good dining experience.

"I thought the review for this place was quite favorable, so why is there no one here?" asked Richard, surveying the room.

Victoria glanced over at the nearest table of diners and took in the sight of half-eaten

plates of food. Her heart instantly sank. Even from this distance, the food didn't look particularly appetizing. None of the other guests were tucking gleefully into their meals; most just picked at their plates. It was apparent that people ate because they were hungry, not because they enjoyed the food.

She turned back to her brother and forced a smile to her lips. "Perhaps people are waiting until later in the week. Come Saturday evening this place could be packed to the gunnels," she replied. The hope in her voice betrayed her worsening fears about the Graceful Swan.

They ordered their meals. By the third bite of her dish, all of Victoria's hopes for an evening of delicious dining had withered away.

Richard had gone with the safe option of roast beef and vegetables. Her brother was always keen for a free meal, but he didn't have much of an adventurous palate. Victoria's baked fish served on creamed cauliflower, with a side plate of fried oysters, looked appealing, but as soon as she had put the first forkful into her mouth, she'd resigned herself to an evening of disappointment.

Where is the flavor? The fish should have an essence of lemon and a hint of asparagus. If this sole ever had a soul, it has long departed.

She met her brother's eyes. "How is your beef?" Perhaps the cook had a better hand with simple fare. Her expectations of dining on delicately handled dishes in a small restaurant might well be too high. The reviewer for the Morning Herald had gone with the roast lamb and sung its praises, he might have been the clever one.

Richard shook his head. "Two words. Bland. Tasteless. Which is odd considering that the scrapings from the roast should have at least provided the base for a rich gravy. Then again, the meat itself is sadly lacking. I'm beginning to wonder if the owner of this place wiggled that the guest was a restaurant reviewer and gave him a special

dish.”

Heresy. In the world of culinary reviews, getting special treatment amounted to nothing short of an act of sacrilege. The only thing that would be worse than receiving a special meal, would be accepting bribes. Victoria had stopped following the reviewer for *The Star* for that very reason. She had been gutted to discover he had been engaging in such unscrupulous, underhanded maneuvers. Shameless, self-serving food writers had no place in her world.

Victoria set down her fork and sighed. “Every kitchen has an off night. Perhaps the cook was too busy resting on his laurels to capitalize on the chance to shine tonight. Pity.” She picked up one of the fried oysters and stuffed it into her mouth. It was delicious.

But it’s hard to make a mess of fried oysters. Flour, salt and pepper, and some oil. The oyster stands on its own merits.

She was certain that even she could manage to fry oysters. But since her mother refused to let her anywhere near the kitchen at Mowbray House, Victoria was resigned to a fate of only ever being a singularly excellent cook in her private imagination.

Robert left the Cock Inn on Fleet Street a little before midnight. He was quietly pleased with himself. Another restaurant owner was prepared to buy their spices from him. Along with the Graceful Swan, he could now count fifteen establishments in central London who had changed from buying their supplies from the East India Company to his enterprise. His review for the Graceful Swan had appeared in today’s *Morning Herald*, and with this latest success, he was starting to feel he was making real inroads against his enemy.

Once his first harvest from his country estate was ready, he would start to mix his

own spices in with the ones he had stolen. Over time, his reliance on stealing the East India's goods would taper off, and he could begin to compete purely on quality, service and price.

He kept telling himself that, but at the same time, Robert had to admit he got quite the thrill out of stealing from the East India. His own set of morals might well lean toward the gray, but as far as he was concerned, the East India had none whatsoever. His business rival was fair game.

Sorry George, I am going to keep stealing from those swines as long as I can.

But even the Duke of Spice knew that bringing down the mighty East India Company was going to involve more than just a spot of good old thievery. The only way to ensure that the spice trade became a fair one was to see a bill stripping the East India of more of its power successfully passed through the English parliament. And that could take years. Until such a piece of legislation could muster enough support, Robert would continue with his dirty little enterprise. His one man war.

Oh, speaking of dirty.

A blast of foul wind from the nearby Fleet Ditch had him burying his nose in the sleeve of his coat. The vile reek which filled his senses made his eyes water.

The River Fleet had long ago stopped being a functioning waterway and was now little more than a stench-filled sewer. Robert pulled up the lapels of his greatcoat and did his best to stifle the smell. Hurrying his steps, he broke into a trot and headed further down the Strand.

Not the spice I was looking for.

George was standing hands in pockets on the corner of the Strand and Surry Street.

He greeted Robert with a nod. “Evening, Your Grace. I’ve just finished with the proprietor of the Jamaica Winds . He will take as much pepper as we can supply. And if we can offer them a regular barrel of cumin, he’ll take that as well.”

Robert broke into a smile. “See, this is all coming together rather nicely. That makes sixteen customers on our list and also calls for a celebratory drink. Come on, let’s go grab a pint of ale, then you can head home to your wife and tell her she has absolutely nothing to worry about.”

His man of business took a step back. “The drink will have to wait for another time, Your Grace. I’m already in enough trouble for being out this late. If I come home smelling of ale, she’ll be in tears. I will see you tomorrow.”

As Robert’s gaze followed George’s hurried steps down Surry Street and toward the River Thames, he wondered what it would be like to have someone waiting for him at home. Someone who loved him so much that she sat up and worried until the moment he set foot through the front door.

He couldn’t ever imagine finding a woman who cared that much about him.

Chapter Three

Victoria wasn't one for giving up on an eating establishment simply because it had experienced a bad night of service. Cooks took ill. Supplies ran low. There could be any number of perfectly acceptable reasons as to why the Graceful Swan had failed to live up to its positive newspaper review. In the interest of fairness, she pressganged her other brother Matthew into accompanying her to the restaurant the following Thursday. He would be her impartial food taster.

She pretended not to notice the empty tables as she and Matthew were shown to the same one that she'd shared with Richard the previous week. Her review methodology was as scientific as she could manage. Same night of the week. Same table. Same menu. Just a different sibling.

As soon as they were seated, she smiled up at the waiter. He gave her an odd look, to which Victoria nodded. "Yes, I am back. And hoping your establishment has recovered from its little misstep and can now live up to its reputation."

The waiter went to hand her the menu, but Victoria waved it away. "No need, thank you. We shall have the sole, a plate of fried oysters, and the roast beef."

"Don't I get to choose my own meal?" protested Matthew.

She shook her head, and tutted. This wasn't just a meal—it was a controlled test. Neither her brother nor the service staff at the Graceful Swan could possibly understand the intricacies of restaurant reviews, and how vital it was for diners to be able to rely upon them, so it was all down to her.

Without reliable culinary reviews, the alternative was anarchy.

“No, you don’t get to choose. I must have consistency. These are the exact same items Richard, and I ordered when we dined here last week. I need to be sure that our disappointing and rather tasteless meals were simply an aberration.”

I need to know I can rely on this place.

The waiter bit down on his bottom lip. “I wouldn’t hold out much hope for the food, miss. We’ve been having supply problems.” He bent and whispered, “The owner mentioned something about us getting caught in the middle of a spice war. But you didn’t hear it from my lips.”

He wandered off in the direction of the kitchen to place Victoria and Matthew’s order, leaving his customers sitting and scratching their heads.

“What on earth is a spice war?” asked Matthew.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea, but it sounds thoroughly intriguing.”

The food might still be a problem, but if there was something happening in the world of fine dining, Victoria was all ears. She was well aware that the spice trade in England had been controlled by the East India Company for hundreds of years. The thought of someone else thinking to take them on piqued her interest.

But if restaurants like the Graceful Swan found themselves caught up in the middle of a turf war, the only people who would lose out were them and their valuable customers.

I wonder if the reviewer for the Morning Herald knows anything about this?

If he did, he owed it to his readers to bring it to their attention. But if he didn't, then who else would protect the diners of London?

Victoria pondered that important question as she rested her hands in her lap and waited for her food. Perhaps there was something she could do.

I owe it to everyone who has a cultured palate to take up the cause.

Chapter Four

The following morning Victoria was seated at her writing desk, still mulling over the great spice war and what role she could possibly play in it, when a knock came on her bedroom door. She narrowed her brows. Who would be coming to see her at this early hour?

Her maid, Mary, was already here, quietly tidying up a few things on the dresser. And if Lady Coco Kembal had successfully managed to sneak back into the house sometime before dawn, she would still be tucked up in bed, so it couldn't possibly be Victoria's sister.

Victoria and Mary exchanged a look of unease as the door opened and the Duchess of Mowbray swept into the room. Victoria caught sight of the gold colored gown which her mother had draped over her left arm.

She is up to something.

"Good morning, Victoria darling, lovely to see you. How was last night's dinner with Matthew?" said Lady Anne. She glanced momentarily at Victoria's maid and coolly announced, "You may leave us. Thank you."

Crossing the floor, she carefully lay the gown on Victoria's bed, fussed with it for a moment, then turned to face her daughter. The second the click of Mary closing the door behind her echoed in the room, the duchess let out a happy sigh and smiled. "Well now."

Worry had Victoria clenching her teeth. Lady Anne rarely grinned at anyone without there being something on her agenda. It was even more rare for her to sigh with joy.

Why did she bring me that gown, and why did she dismiss Mary?

“I think it’s high time you and I had a little talk,” announced the duchess.

Ice formed in Victoria’s veins. Her mother had given her the talk long ago when her courses had first arrived, so it couldn’t be that talk. Victoria shuddered recalling what had been one of the most awkward moments of her life. She couldn’t think of any other great mystery of the universe which her mother should feel the need to impart.

“Yes, Mama?”

Her mother held out her hands and as soon as Victoria had taken them, the duchess pulled her daughter to her feet. Lady Anne’s gaze took in Victoria’s pale blue dress.

“Is that one of your new gowns?”

Victoria nodded. She wasn’t in any sort of mood to explain to the duchess that she knew full well it was, and that she’d been the one who had instructed Mary to select it for today. As soon as the gowns had arrived from the modiste, Lady Anne had insisted Victoria tried them all on. From the moment they’d left the shop, she hadn’t stopped mentioning the new clothes to Victoria, telling her she had to wear them. She’d also offered plenty of not-so-subtle hints about her daughter making more of an effort with her appearance and deportment.

Mama is up to something. She is never like this with me any other time.

The duchess ushered her over to the nearby cheval mirror. Victoria’s mind was working at a feverish rate while the duchess gave her new blue and white floral gown

a thorough looking over. She could think of a dozen reasons why her mother wanted this private tête à tête, and none of them were good.

Had Lady Anne discovered the truth of her daily custard bun habit? Or perhaps Richard had let slip that his sister's pin money was keeping his wallet flush.

Oh god, please don't let her have read my private restaurant reviews.

"It's a lovely gown, but I'm not sure if it's what we need," said Lady Anne, after a long moment of silence.

Need? Need for what?

"What do you mean?" replied Victoria. She took a slow, deep breath, readying herself for whatever was about to come out of her mother's mouth.

"Why for getting you back into society. It's time we set to the task of finding you a suitable husband."

Husband?

"Is there any particular reason for this sudden haste? I mean, it's well past the formal season. And if the rumors about Queen Charlotte's health are indeed true, then might it appear somewhat impolite for us to push ahead with a marriage campaign at this time," stammered Victoria.

She'd thought that with Gideon and Augusta's recent marriages, the duchess might wish to take a break from family weddings. Now it seemed that her mother was just beginning to hit her stride and was looking for the next of her children to throw into the arms of wedded bliss.

Why not one of the boys? Richard could certainly benefit from the steady hand of a wife. Or at least his long-suffering purse would. And what about Matthew? He was a year older than her.

Lady Anne met her gaze in the mirror's reflection. "I know I have been a poor example of a mother to both you and Coco over the past year. I should have been here and made certain of your success while out in society. It was wrong of me to stay in Rome. Since my return to England, I've come to understand that you and your sister endured some small hardships while I was away, and I'm..."

The duchess didn't finish her sentence. Victoria wished she would. Wished that her mother would finally offer up a long-awaited apology.

Small hardships—she has to be in jest. The truth was that pretty much the entire haut ton had turned their backs on the Kembal family. Social invitations had shriveled away to nothing. The other matrons of the extended family, including the Duchess of Strathmore, had done their best to protect both her and Coco. But, in the end, the two young women were forced to leave London and retreat to the Mowbray family estate in the Leicestershire countryside.

Victoria couldn't find the words to tell her mother just how horrible things had been for the family once news of her having left the duke had broken in the London press. While the duchess had been enjoying herself in Rome, the rest of the Kembal family had been made to suffer.

But her mother hadn't been told of what had happened in London during that dreadful time. She didn't know that the grief-stricken duke had been in agony and had refused to leave his bedroom for weeks. Before he'd departed for Rome, Gideon had made his brothers and sisters swear an oath to keep as much of what happened during that awful period a secret. Even from the duchess.

She met Lady Anne's tear-filled gaze in the mirror and forced herself to say, "What is done is done, Mama. You came home. You and Papa are reconciled. Time will heal everything else."

Her words of comfort were empty. There had been a time when her resentment toward her mother had run fierce. She was slowly moving toward forgiving her mother, but it wasn't easy.

"I am so sorry, sweetheart."

Victoria sighed, slowly shaking her head. She stepped away from the mirror, not wanting to hear any more. This apology should have been offered to all the Kembal offspring, not just her. But she knew her mother only too well, the words of sorrow were not just a spontaneous outpouring of emotion. Everything pointed to Lady Anne having her own agenda.

She is planning something.

"Why are you here, Mama? And don't bother trying to tell me this is some sort of feeble attempt at an apology."

A gasp of shock escaped Lady Anne's lips as the blow landed, but Victoria calmly held her gaze. The events of the past year had hardened her.

"I have much to atone for, especially with you girls. The boys. Well they are men, and things are different for them. Gideon came home from Italy with a wife. Richard and Matthew will find their own way in life. But it's a mother's responsibility to see her daughters well settled."

But you didn't think about that when you left us.

“So what do you have in mind, Mama? I assume from this little chat that you have already hatched some sort of plan to secure me a husband,” snapped Victoria.

The duchess flinched. “That’s an unkind remark, Victoria dear. I am simply trying to do what is right for you.”

“Right for me or for you?” She was tired of her mother’s machinations, but even more hurt by the fact that the duchess didn’t seem to comprehend how much she had hurt her children. How Victoria had felt abandoned.

This conversation couldn’t have come at a worse time. After the disappointing evening she’d endured last night, Victoria wasn’t in a charitable mood this morning. The food at the restaurant had been tasteless. Even her interest in the spice war couldn’t spark her into a better frame of mind.

Victoria nodded in the direction of the gown which lay on the bed. “New gowns won’t fix all ills, Mama. Nor will they secure me love.”

The duchess moved toward the bed. She picked up the gold colored dress and returned to Victoria’s side.

“You are right, new gowns won’t undo the pain and scandal that my behavior wrought upon this family, but they will help to get you back into society. And to find you a suitable husband.”

Her heart stung as she noted that her mother didn’t mention the word love. Unlike the love-filled unions of her older brother and sister, it seemed that her marriage was going to be one born of necessity, not affection.

“And of course this search for a suitable husband will no doubt benefit you.”

“I will admit that what works for you, will assist this family,” replied Lady Anne.

I knew it. She’s using me as a means to get back in circulation.

Her hands balled into fists. The weight of her mother’s expectations now settled heavily on her shoulders.

How dare she place me in this unenviable position.

Hot tears stung Victoria’s eyes. The temptation to say something even more hurtful, to strike out at her mother, was almost too much to bear.

But then the thought of her father, of what he’d been through, drew her up sharp. Only yesterday, her heart had caught at hearing his laughter once more. The light and spark had returned to the duke’s eyes. She couldn’t take that away from him.

If she took her place in society and secured a respectable husband, the rest of the Kembals would be able to move more freely about the ton . People would have her wedding to talk about rather than her parents’ scandal.

I can’t say no. Our family has been through such a torrid time this past year. And poor Augusta, her husband has only just been cleared of a murder charge. And she’s pregnant.

She had a duty to uphold. Resigned to her fate, Victoria glanced at the golden gown in her mother’s hands. “What is that for? It’s not one of mine.”

The duchess offered a gentle but knowing smile. “Your other pretty new pieces are fine for walks in Hyde Park and tea parties, but if we are to attract the attention of London’s bachelors it will take something more. Something like this gown.”

Victoria took the evening gown from the duchess's hands, letting the soft, luxurious fabric run through her fingers. It was silk. The delicate embroidery on the bodice, a work of utter perfection. It was not the sort of thing a young unmarried woman normally wore in public. This dress had not been made with any timid miss in mind. It had a sensual feel to it.

"It's one of Serafina's—I think it will suit you. I would love for you to try it on."

She wondered if the Marchioness of Holwell had fully understood why she'd been co-opted into this scheme. Knowing Serafina, she wouldn't have seen anything wrong in her lending a gown to her sister-in-law. Gideon's bride was generous to a fault.

I would bet a bag of silver coins Mama didn't tell her why she wanted the gown.

After removing her new blue gown, Victoria stepped into the silken dress, standing quietly while Lady Anne helped to lace her into it. She moved back to the mirror and took in her reflection.

The gown did wonderful things to her appearance. It hugged her waist and hips perfectly. If she'd gone to the modiste and had the gown made, it couldn't have fitted her any better.

Her hand went to her décolletage as she attempted to cover the generous amount of her bust which the low-cut gown afforded. "I'm not sure this is the sort of thing an unwed miss should be wearing. It feels a little risqué. Perhaps I should wear a shawl over it."

Lady Anne brushed a kiss on her cheek. "No, it's perfect as it is. It speaks of a young, sophisticated woman, whose thoughts have moved beyond girlish things. Any nobleman in search of a wife will immediately come to view you as a potential

bride.”

Why not just hang a sign around my neck?

“And I know of a number of titled gentlemen who are indeed in need of a wife.”

Victoria fought back rising panic. “Please tell me you haven’t already chosen someone for me. That would be too bold, even for you, Mama.”

If the duchess had already been in discussions with a potential husband for her, Victoria had to know. If her courtship was going to be some sort of charade for the benefit of the matrons of the ton, she would die.

What if her father was already in the throes of conducting dowry discussions with some stranger? Her future husband. A man she didn’t know.

“Well?” The question was poised with more force than she would have ever considered using with her mother before the Rome scandal. Many things had changed.

Lady Anne’s fingers stilled on the ribbons of the golden gown, and Victoria’s heart began to race. Please no. The humiliation would be the end of her.

“I did suggest to your father that I could go ahead and speak to some friends of ours, but he said no, absolutely not. He was most adamant that you should have a say in the matter.”

Thank you, Papa.

The gown she was wearing had to have been selected for a purpose. For an event. The duchess rarely did anything without a well-thought-out plan.

“And he is right. I have made too many missteps this past year, we can’t afford another,” added Lady Anne.

The mix of pain and shame in the duchess’s voice tugged at Victoria’s heart. Her absence from London society had cost her mother dearly. Lady Anne was no longer at the top of the social pile. Victoria had borne witness to a number of her mother’s former fair-weather friends crossing the street in order to avoid having to speak to her.

But if there was one woman in London who could come back from both private and public failure, it was the Duchess of Mowbray.

Victoria took a hold of her mother’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Tell me about your plans, Mama. This is my future, and if I am to make a successful entry onto the marriage mart, then let’s agree to make those plans together.”

She was a duke’s daughter, and as such, it was her duty to make a suitable marriage. If in doing so, she helped repair her family’s name in London society, then that was for the greater good.

I owe it to Papa. And yes, even Mama. I owe it to my entire family to help put this scandal behind us.

Straightening her back, she let her hand drop from the bodice of the gown. Victoria met her own gaze once more in the mirror and made a fateful decision.

It was time for her to set aside her anger and resentment. Time that she got serious about finding a husband.

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Chapter Five

Victoria took her brother's hand as Matthew helped her alight from the Mowbray town carriage and onto the pavement out front of an elegant mansion in Silver Street the following evening. She smiled as she noticed that her slippers perfectly matched the golden trim of the rich blue carpet which ran from the street all the way to the front door. Hopefully it was a good omen.

Tonight's social gathering was no quiet friends and family dinner party—it was a major ball which would be attended by most of London's elite. This evening the Kembal family were making their first official foray back into the haut ton .

On either side of the path stood a virtual legion of footmen, all clad in blue and gold. As Victoria and Matthew made their way along the carpet, each member of the honor guard bowed in turn.

Her grip on her brother's arm tightened, a sudden bout of nerves threatening to get the better of her. She wasn't sure if she was ready to launch herself onto the marriage mart with such short notice. Or in such a grand style.

I should have asked Mama for more time; insisted she wait.

But the only thing the Duchess of Mowbray was delaying tonight was her arrival. She and the duke were going to make their entrance a little later in the evening. Victoria was still trying to understand her mother's reasoning but had decided to put it down to yet another of Lady Anne's schemes to draw attention to herself. The duchess wanted to send a clear message to the matrons of the ton . She was back and ready to

reclaim her rightful place at the top of the pecking order.

Speaking of drawing attention. I'm not entirely sure I can carry this gown off.

The bustline revealed far more skin than she had ever shown in public before tonight. As she and Matthew stepped into the main ballroom, and Victoria took in the crowd of guests, all she wanted to do was go home.

Being strong while standing in front of her bedroom mirror wasn't quite the same as venturing out into society. The added pressure of being an unwed miss on the hunt for a husband only served to make things worse.

Even if she was the daughter of a duke, this felt too much. Too desperate.

"Smile and nod. You are the definition of grace under pressure," whispered Matthew. "Just don't squeeze my arm so tight, I'm beginning to lose feeling in it."

She let her fingers loosen their vice-like hold on her brother's arm. "Sorry, I'm just so nervous. I'm not used to being seen."

Or so much of me being seen.

Serafina's golden gown, and the way it hugged Victoria's curves, captured many sly glances. The male gaze was mostly one of approval, but from the women at the party the responses to Victoria's appearance was more mixed. She could sense the different types of looks. There was some admiration, even a spot of jealousy. The occasional whispered, "That's a beautiful gown," had her smiling.

But the older matrons of the haut ton, typical to form, were somewhat less kind. "What on earth is she wearing?" "Her mother has clearly lost her mind." "A scandalous amount of cleavage." "Where is the Duchess of Mowbray's good sense,

did she leave it behind in Rome?”

Victoria took all of it in. Before the family’s scandal had broken, she’d never realized how caustic polite society could be, how judgmental. She and Coco had protested when the Duke of Mowbray had decided to send his two younger daughters for an extended stay at the Kembal family country estate in Leicestershire, but now she had a better understanding as to the reasons behind her father’s decision. He’d done it in order to spare both her and her sister from the knives of London’s elite.

She swallowed deep. There were some people who reveled in this sort of attention, of having all eyes on them. Lady Victoria Kembal was not one of them.

If this is what it feels like to be noticed, then I don’t think I want to be seen.

The only thing stopping her from turning around and heading straight out the front door were the comforting words of her brother. “What you are seeing on their faces is not disdain Victoria, it’s fear. They know that through you, Mama is going to reclaim her position. And from the expressions on some of those women’s faces, I suspect they might just have put two and two together and come to the realization that you’ve decided to make a late season move to find yourself a husband.”

She offered him a tight smile. Brothers were a pain in the proverbial, but they were also the best in these situations. Matthew had become her rock during the long months that their mother had been gone. And while she and Richard had done their utmost to keep their father from going mad after the duchess had announced she wasn’t coming home, it had been cheeky Matthew Kembal whom she’d been able to rely upon during the worst of those days.

And now he was helping her to navigate through the dangerous shoals of London society. She’d miss him terribly once she had secured a husband and moved out of the family home.

Victoria sighed. “Why does all of this remind me of a game of chess?” She pointed at the other guests, most of whom were moving slowly around the ballroom, sizing one another up. They looked for all the world like they were contemplating their next strategic move.

Her hopes for eventually marrying hadn’t been built on such an open battle plan, rather she’d imagined that one day she would meet some nice man at a private dinner party, and they would fall in love over a shared passion for recipes, spices, and the very best places to dine in London. Their marriage would be one based on enjoying good food and the unspoken understanding that everything tasted better with lashings of salted butter.

This public statement of intent was nothing like her heart’s desire. Victoria dampened down her sadness. She’d agreed to this endeavor, knowing full well how much it meant to her parents. A spotless match for their second eldest daughter would do wonders for the Kembal family’s reputation and standing. She had to think of her three other siblings who would all eventually look to find their future spouses.

Matthew hummed his agreement. “It feels like chess, because that’s exactly what it is. Consider Mama as the queen. She will be looking for check mate.”

And we are just pawns?

“Though I’m still at a loss as to why you caved when she decided to press you into this hunt for a husband. She should have focused her attention on regaining her rightful place in society and left your marriage plans until next year. I know that if Gideon were still in town, he would have argued strongly against it.”

The Marquis of Holwell would have been firmly in the ‘no’ camp, but as he was many miles away at the family estate, there wasn’t anything he could do.

Lady Anne was champing at the bit to regain her rightful position. While she'd been away, someone else had taken the Duchess of Mowbray's place in the rankings. And with rank came power. Their mother wanted her power back. A smart match for her daughter would be the perfect solution.

And as much as she resented feeling like her future happiness was being overlooked in the grand scheme of things, Victoria could still see her mother's point of view. She understood just how important it was to the duchess to see both her unwed daughters settled into good marriages.

"I think our mother is afraid that if she waits too long to put one of us back out into society, both Coco and I will end up as old spinsters left on the shelf. And if that happens, it would be nothing short of a disaster. A resounding condemnation of her as a mother."

Things had changed—she couldn't believe she was actually defending the duchess.

"Yes, well there are those of us who might be inclined to agree on that last sentiment about her skills as a mother," said a grim-faced Matthew, shooting her a brief sideways glance.

Matthew was one of the Kembal siblings who was yet to find it in their hearts to forgive their mother for having put them all through such pain. His easygoing, carefree nature didn't currently extend to Lady Anne.

Offering a polite smile to a passing guest, Victoria decided it was time to let it all go. She had other things to worry about tonight. Some of the men on her mother's suitable husband list were expected to attend this evening's ball.

In the hour or so before their parents were due to arrive, she and Matthew had been given the task of locating each of the eligible gentlemen and deciding whether they

might be someone whom Victoria would wish to be formally introduced to by the duke and duchess.

“So who are we looking for in this swirling mass of bodies?” asked Matthew, peering at the gathering.

The list was mercifully a short one. Victoria sucked in a breath. “The Earl of Surfleet. The Marquis of Guiseley. And the Duke of Saffron Walden,” she said, rattling off the names her mother had given her earlier that morning.

Matthew groaned, then guided her in the direction of an alcove, away from the crowd. When they were out of earshot of everyone, he let go of Victoria’s arm, and turned to face her. Her brother wore an expression of barely restrained disgust on his face.

“The Marquis of Guiseley can come straight off your list. He is a rake of the worst kind. The cad has sired several children with various servants in his household, the most recent one being only two months ago. You don’t deserve to be married to a man like that, and I’m surprised Mama put him on her list. Though since she’s been away, she might not be up-to-date with the latest on-dit.”

The siring of bastards with household maids was yet another thing unwed young ladies were not meant to know about, but with three brothers who cared about her future, Victoria had learned much about the sordid underbelly of London’s so-called elegant society. Of the dangers that men unwilling to keep their hands off their female servants posed. The marquis was struck from her list.

“What about the Earl of Surfleet?”

She’d met the earl on one or two previous occasions, and she hadn’t been completely nauseated with either his appearance or his calm demeanor.

I can imagine marrying someone like him. A nice kind man.

“Boring,” huffed Matthew. “Though his estate is only thirty odd miles from our family seat at Mowbray Park. He does have that in his favor. But again the man is as dull as a piece of plain bread with no butter. I can guarantee there won’t be a pinch of spice in your life with him.”

That didn’t augur well for a life of wedded bliss. Victoria wanted safe, but not dull. She ached for the passion of their parents’ marriage, but preferably without all the drama. Without the fighting.

“So, he is also off the list?”

“Hmm.” A pensive Matthew put a finger to his lips. “Let’s keep him as an option. Worst case you have him court you for a time, and then you can discover if a warm soul lives under that pallid face of his, though I do doubt it.”

A footman approached bearing a tray of drinks. Matthew reached for a glass of orgeat, but Victoria gave him a tut of disapproval. “If I am going to go through with this marriage thing, I am not going to drink another glass of sickly sweet orgeat.”

She selected a glass of champagne from the tray and smiled at her brother, adding, “I am dressed as a sophisticated young woman, not an insipid miss, remember.”

He chose a glass of brandy for himself, then once the footman had moved away, said to her, “Go easy on the champagne, you don’t want to...”

Victoria sighed. “Yes. I know. I need to appear interesting but not too forward. Be memorable, but not—too memorable. Show that I can sip a real drink like an adult, but not get tipsy. This isn’t my first time out in society.”

Lady Anne had carefully set out the manner in which Victoria was to behave at functions, making it clear that a man in need of a wife didn't want a simpering miss, but nor did he want a potential spouse who flouted the rules.

"Alright, but you'd better nurse that glass of champagne, take small sips while we see if we can locate the last bachelor candidate for your hand. The Duke of Saffron Walden."

"Do you know him?"

Matthew shook his head. "No. He's a bit older than me. Older than Gideon in fact. I might have to ask other people to point him out."

A rogue. A bore. And an unknown. That was an ominous sign if there ever was one.

The duchess hadn't had much to say about the Duke of Saffron Walden, other than he possessed a sizeable estate some fifty odd miles north of London. He was aged somewhere in his thirties. Had never been married. He didn't make a habit of mingling too much in society. But he had a spotless reputation, which would make him perfect in Lady Anne's eyes.

As Victoria stared at her champagne, a sudden thought struck. She'd been so focused on getting ready for this evening, she hadn't had time to eat. Alcohol and an empty stomach was never a smart combination. "What do you think about us going and finding the supper room? I need food."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "We've just got here. I haven't even had a chance to catch up with any of my friends. And now you want to go and eat."

He was doing her a favor in coming tonight. Unlike Richard who owed her a lifetime of good deeds, Matthew wasn't in Victoria's debt.

“Sorry, that was rude of me. I tell you what, sister dearest. How about you head to the supper room and grab a bite to eat. In the meantime, I’ll go and conduct a quick sortie mission and see if I can find this mysterious duke. We can meet back here in half an hour.”

What an excellent brother. They worked well as a team. “You are full of good ideas, Matthew. I promise to recommend you to all my friends when they start looking for a future spouse.”

He gave her an odd look, then headed off in search of the Duke of Saffron Walden.

As Victoria made her way across the other side of the room in search of the supper room, she pondered the duke’s name. Saffron was a spice. An expensive one. Wouldn’t it be amusing if she ended up marrying a man who had food in his title?

Victoria stopped and asked a footman for the location of the supper room. At this stage of the evening, a little after eight, few guests would be partaking of the food. An early visit to the supper table was always on her list at parties. She’d found it paid to look over the offerings before deciding whether it was worth returning when the official suppertime of eleven o’clock was announced.

I just need a small plate of sandwiches, that should keep the wolves at bay.

Making her way through the door of the supper room, Victoria’s steps slowed as she took in the tall, well-dressed gentleman who was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, closely examining the offerings at the largest of the tables. He raised his head and looked at her.

All thoughts of food disappeared from her mind as she found herself staring into a pair of blue gray eyes that took her breath away. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Victoria let out a strange noise that was half sigh, half groan.

Please god, don't let him be the Marquis of Guiseley.

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Chapter Six

With his hands gently held behind his back, Robert slowly scrutinized the heavily laden supper table. His critical mind offered up its sharp opinion of the display.

The usual sort of cakes were on show.

Too sweet, and I expect several days old .

Bread puddings.

Popular but unimaginative.

Roasts.

Yes, but why do they all look so dry and overcooked? How hard can it be to cook a bloody roast?

Thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches.

I see we gave up caring at that point.

Reaching the end of the table, he stopped and looked back. When it came to this evening's catering, the hostess had clearly chosen the safest, dullest route possible. Nothing appealed to Robert's well-developed palate. The only remedy for this bland selection would be a spiced fish pie from the bakery near the Old Bailey. He'd stop by there after he had left tonight's event.

Robert Tolley wasn't normally one for attending these sorts of social evenings, but he'd heard on the grapevine that his potential new business client might be here tonight. The lure of a profitable contract was all he needed to put on his best evening suit and hail a hack. From what he'd been able to ascertain, the gentleman in question was yet to arrive.

He'd passed by the open door of the supper room a little while earlier and Robert's interest in what lay inside had been roused. But after making his way around the room, his arousal had died within minutes.

He sighed under his breath. "Speaking of arousal, I really need to get a warm woman under me and soon. Food can't be the only thing which stirs my blood."

Not that he could recall the last time he'd held a woman in his arms. Certainly not this calendar year, and possibly not even last year. The Duke of Saffron Walden was in the middle of a long self-imposed sexual drought. He was far too busy stalking the darkened roads on the outskirts of London and stealing spice to find the time to indulge in the other sort of riding.

His mother, god rest her soul, would be stirring in her grave. He was one and thirty, unwed, and with not an heir in sight. Before he got too much longer in the tooth, he was going to have to do something about securing the future of the Tolley family bloodline.

Disillusioned with the food, Robert took a step back from the table. The quicker he could make a discreet exit from the supper room, the better.

A young woman now appeared in the doorway. She took one look at the food. Then at him. Then let out what he took to be a loud sigh of disappointment.

Well good evening to you too.

She stood staring at him for a long moment before finally setting her half-finished glass of champagne on the end of the table. She picked up a small plate and glanced at the platters of food once more.

Another sigh quickly followed. Robert got the distinct impression that this particular young woman would rather be anywhere else other than in the supper room of this particular London party. Her odd behavior had him immediately intrigued. He halted his progress, and moving away from the table, began to observe her every move.

She was wearing a gold colored gown which hugged her hips and waist with understated skill. Whomever she employed as her modiste certainly knew their way with fabric. Robert's gaze lingered over the young woman's generous bustline. The gown had been cleverly constructed, but it barely contained her plump breasts. He licked his lips and indulged his imagination.

I wonder what color her nipples are—blushed cherry or coffee brown.

Whatever their shade, he imagined they would taste utterly divine in his mouth. His breathing grew more shallow.

He knew his own body, how it reacted to this woman. It took all his willpower to shift his hungry gaze higher. Her deep brown hair was set in a carefully curated chignon. The look was softened by the light ringlets which framed the pale skin of her face.

She reminded him of butter cake with chocolate icing. Delicious . Something to nibble on, then slowly lick the cream off his fingers. One by one.

He was spellbound.

It was rare for a female to capture his notice in such a way. He was a red-blooded

male who appreciated women and their generous gifts. But even as he silently ogled the young woman, he sensed she wasn't an experienced matron. No man had ever touched her. No man had ever lain with her. She was as pure as the driven snow.

She tempted his every wicked desire. But she was an innocent, and only a man with marriage in mind would go anywhere near such a woman.

Your lust is ruling your head. Get a hold of yourself.

His enduring state of bachelorhood was one of the reasons why he avoided these kinds of social gatherings. In the main ballroom, there would be far too many mothers all with doe-eyed daughters who saw him as a means to secure their family fortunes. He also hated the obligatory small talk that meeting these people involved. But most of all, he loathed terrible supper offerings.

Robert stood transfixed, watching as the young woman slowly made her way along the long supper table, stopping every so often to examine a dish, then move on. She picked up the occasional plate or bowl, bent and inhaled its aroma before returning it to its rightful place. But by the time she'd reached the center display, her plate was still empty.

Fussy little creature. Then again, I haven't touched any of the food either.

Nothing appealed to him. Nothing except her. Robert swallowed deep, fighting down his rapidly rising lust.

She lifted her head and met his gaze once more. The withering look she gave him was both haughty and disapproving. It went straight to his cock.

"You do know that it's rude to stare," she snapped.

He'd give anything for her to punish him for his lustful thoughts. He'd gladly take five hard strokes of a switch on his bare backside if she felt the need to take him firmly in hand.

For heaven's sake, get a grip on yourself.

Robert broke out of his sensual dream. "My apologies," he said, as his heated blood still coursed through his body. "I." He stopped and swallowed. "I was just interested to see if you were going to select any of the food. It all looks so delicious, I can understand why you might be spoilt for choice."

Her brows furrowed in confusion. "Is it? I mean delicious. To be honest, it seems to be the same tasteless offerings that one finds at every other party in London." She set down her plate and muttered, "Why is it so hard to find good food in London? No one appears the least bit interested in satisfying my needs."

Given half a chance, he would love to satisfy her... everything.

Food. She was talking about food. Robert bit down hard on his bottom lip, anything to force his thoughts from where they currently lurked behind the falls of his trousers.

"Now who's being rude," he playfully chided her.

Yes, that was a much better idea—take the chit to task over her opinion of the supper dishes. Even if her thoughts mirrored his own.

For a moment, he was tempted to reveal his secret. To tell this stuck-up, but rather delicious-looking creature that he was in fact the restaurant reviewer for one of London's foremost newspapers and could furnish her with a long list of places that would indeed offer wonderful food which left her satisfied.

Please let me satisfy you.

She glared at him, almost as if she could read his lecherous mind.

Then again, maybe I should say nothing. This busty wench looks ready to take a bite out of me.

Whoever he was, he could go to the devil. Victoria took in the gentleman and his well-cut attire. He might well be a condescending prig, but she had to admit, he was rather gorgeous.

A step beyond plain old handsome. His slightly ruffled chocolate brown hair, with its silver flecks, had her licking her lips. And when she met his bluish gray eyes, her pulse skipped a beat.

The touch of crow's-feet around those alluring eyes hinted of him being a few years older than her. From the way he spoke, he more than likely viewed her as just another young miss. One whose manners were in need of correction.

“Alright. You tell me what food is good to eat on this table, and then we will see who is being impolite.” She waved a hand over the supper plates in open challenge.

A sly grin formed on his mouth. Victoria's gaze settled on his lips. They were a pale red and reminded her of strawberries a few days before they reached their peak ripeness. When they were perfect for sinking ones teeth into and enjoying every sweet bite.

Victoria caught herself and stifled the grin which threatened. She was always comparing things to food. Color. Scent. Taste. How it felt in her mouth.

I wonder what his lips would taste like.

There was something intriguing about men who were a few years older than herself. They had an air of confidence in their manner, something which she'd always found sadly lacking in the younger regency bucks.

He took a step forward and the sudden movement startled her. She took a half step back and banged her hip into the side of the table. "Ow," she gasped.

The handsome brute was at her side in a moment. "Are you alright?"

Victoria blushed, heat burning her cheeks. "I am fine thank you, just a little bump."

A deep wicked chuckle escaped him. "Actually I was asking the dishes. You gave them a quite a solid rattle when you hit the table."

Their gazes locked. As she was drawn into those silvery blue eyes of his, an unbidden thought of lying on the grass under a summer sky eating blueberries popped into her mind.

I must really be starving.

"You sir are no gentleman." She'd meant it as a rebuke, but it came out as a sultry tease. He moved closer and the air between them grew heavy with promise. Victoria's mouth went dry. Her pulse quickened.

"I guess not, but then again, manners are often sorely overrated," he replied in a voice which sent heat racing to her core. Everything about this man was wrong. But his very essence whispered that she'd love to find out just how many ways he could be wrong. How delightful she would find him as he meticulously and thoroughly corrupted her.

Oh...this is dangerous. I shouldn't be flirting with this stranger.

Her first night on the husband hunt, and she was already in well over her head. The Kembal family had had more than its fair share of scandals. She didn't need to be adding to the count.

Instead of toying with this beautiful man, she was meant to be getting some food and going to meet up with her brother. Hopefully Matthew had located the Duke of Saffron Walden, and they could study him from a distance before deciding whether to approach and offer their greetings.

Her family was relying on her to make a good match. To settle with a respectable and titled husband. Playing foolish games with a stranger in the supper room wouldn't further her cause.

It was time to go.

"I shall leave you to the plates, and the hope that your palate isn't offended by the bland food. Good evening, sir."

She bobbed a brief curtesy and fled the room.

Robert stood smiling, watching as the young woman left. He was sorely tempted to hurry after her and get her name. The absence of a wedding ring on her left hand hadn't escaped his notice. She really was an untouched miss. Which meant, she was available.

He'd just decided to do exactly that, and go find her, when his man of business suddenly appeared in the doorway of the supper room. George gave one look at the food and shook his head. "I knew I would find you in here, Your Grace."

"What's going on?" asked Robert.

George glanced back over his shoulder. “Sorry to interrupt your evening, but I have an update on our potential business acquaintance. Apparently, he has connections with the East India Company. His wife is the daughter of one of its directors.”

“Damn. I was relying on securing that deal,” muttered Robert.

But George as always had come through for him and saved Robert from what might have been a very awkward conversation. It gave him a moment for reflection.

“I know we want to secure new arrangements, but perhaps we might want to rethink our plans,” he said. This was the second potential new customer who’d turned out to be linked to their rival. “Let’s stick to the existing buyers for the next little while, George. Work on storing the spices, then taking them to Tolley Manor. Something tells me we should stay quiet and safe for a bit.”

George nodded his agreement. “Yes. Some of the restaurant owners are getting nervous about agents of the East India darkening their doorsteps and asking probing questions.”

There was always a risk that if they tried to grow too big too fast, the eagle eyes of the EIC might turn in their direction.

Robert glanced at his immaculate shirt and suit. “That was a waste of a well-tied cravat.”

With his potential customer no longer an option, there was little point in him staying at the party. He was a duke, and once the match making mamas got wind of his presence, he’d have them sidling up to make introductions to their sweet young daughters. The last thing he needed right now was to be fending them off with vague offers of walks in Hyde Park and sharing supper boxes at the theatre.

George's gaze slipped back to the table, and Robert pointed to the empty plate that the young woman had left. "Help yourself. No one is going to stop you."

His servant wasn't an invited guest, and had no right to supper, but as George picked up the plate and began heaping food onto it, Robert simply smiled. Society's rules were all a lie anyway. If no one in the haut ton was prepared to forcibly break up long-held monopolies which destroyed free trade, then in his book they had no right to take issue with him offering food to a hungry man.

But just to be sure, I won't leave George to eat on his own.

Robert snatched up a cucumber sandwich and popped it into his mouth. Quickly chewing down the day-old bread, he pointed toward the door. "I just challenged a young woman over what she'd said about the quality of the food. Turns out she was right. It is bland and tasteless. And the bread is stale. Come on, let's get out of here and go find a tasty fish pie."

George's brows furrowed. "You mean the dark-haired miss in the golden silk gown who just marched out of here with a look on her face that said she would give anything to be kissed, but the second you did, she'd slap your face?"

I might have said something to offend her. I have a habit of doing that with people.

He wasn't going to admit that he'd been looking at more than just her face while they spoke. Her opinion about the supper table hadn't been the only firm thing in the room during their encounter.

Robert sucked in a deep, calming breath. "Yes, the dark-haired woman. I didn't notice what she was wearing."

Liar.

His man of business snorted, not buying the lie for one single minute. “That was Lady Victoria Kembal. Apparently, she has a thing about what constitutes good food. Fancies herself as a bit of an expert on the subject. The two of you would make a good pair.”

“Perhaps not such a good pair. I told her she was being rude about the food, so I can’t see her wanting to share any more of her opinions with me.”

What he’d clearly viewed as simple arrogance now made sense as something else. Apparently, he’d been the one in the wrong. He’d treated Lady Victoria as if she wouldn’t know much beyond thinly sliced cucumbers and baked salmon. From what George had said, it looked like he’d missed a golden opportunity to discuss food with someone who appreciated it.

Damn. She was feisty, but she was right on the money about the supper.

A female who understood the subtle nuances of food, now that was a woman he could find room for in his life. Something to consider when he finally got serious about looking for a wife. A shared love of fine food and wine would make a solid foundation for a happy marriage. That and a lust-filled bed.

He picked up a small beef pie and took a bite. The gravy and meat was surprisingly rich. For a half-moment, Robert was tempted to grab another one and go find Lady Victoria Kembal. Tell her that he had discovered something worthy of her fine palate.

Somehow, I think I might have already done my dash with her. More’s the pity.

Grabbing another of the pies, he motioned to the door. “Forget about the fish pie—take the rest of the evening off. Go home, George. Give my regards to your sweet lady wife.”

Robert followed George out the door and into the night. He quickly hailed a hackney cab and gave the driver his address in Pye Street. He was still hungry, but he'd rather go home. Back at Tolley House, he fried up a bacon and mushroom omelet, then headed up to bed.

Lying naked beneath the sheets, Robert took himself in hand, reaching his completion within a matter of minutes. The Duke of Spice drifted off to a deep, sated sleep. In his slumber, he dreamt of being in bed with a woman whose long chocolate brown hair splayed out under her naked body. He fed her tasty bites of cheese, then kissed her raspberry stained lips.

And she tasted of perfection.

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Chapter Seven

The following morning.

The morning after the first round of balls and parties, an exhausted and somewhat disappointed Victoria was still trying to make sense of it all. According to Matthew, who seemed to have an opinion on everyone, the men their mother had so far selected were either cads, rakes, bores, or all of the above. Not one of them would be good enough for his sister.

Thank god for Matthew, and his brutally honest opinions.

Last night, she'd been paraded around in front of London's elite like a prized mare. The three separate gala balls were just the beginning. From what her mother had confided in her after they'd returned home, Victoria's social diary was close to full for the foreseeable future. The husband hunt was on in full earnest.

In the face of all those impending parties, a frustrated Victoria did the only thing a sensible young woman could do. She fled Mowbray House at first light and sought refuge at her sister's home. She didn't even bother to stop at her usual German bakery for her daily sourdough bread and salted butter.

Fortunately Augusta, Countess Bramshaw, was at home, and after Victoria had been shown into the upstairs drawing room at Bramshaw House, her sister welcomed her with open arms. And plenty of questions.

"It's lovely to see you, Victoria. But it is barely eight o'clock. Don't you think that's

a little early for a social visit?”

Victoria’s gaze settled on the swell of her sister’s belly, and she winced. “Sorry. I forget ladies in your condition need their sleep. I can go and sit quietly in the library if you like. Let you go back to bed.”

Augusta shook her head. “I’m up now, besides if you are here at this ungodly hour, then it can only mean that Mama is up to something, and you are trying to hide from her. Have you eaten?”

“No.”

The countess’s eyes went wide. “Is it that bad?” Augusta picked up a bell and rang it.

“Yes. She’s decided that after all the scandals which have involved our family in the past year, finding me a nice, respectable, noble husband is the panacea for all her ills. Last night we went to three...three balls.” She held up three fingers for added effect. “Mama spent the entire evening on the hunt for any and all suitable dukes, marquises, and earls. Anything lower like a viscount is apparently not good enough for her purposes. She’s working her way through a list of potential candidates and intends to thrust me in front of all of them over the next few weeks so that our wedding can be arranged before the various landed nobles retreat to their estates for the winter period.”

She dropped onto a sofa. Her poor feet were sore and aching after all that dancing last night. “Can you believe it?”

Augusta nodded. “I can. This is Mama. She never does anything by halves. Did you happen to meet anyone who stirred your interest?”

“Lord no. Matthew, god bless him, was vetting most of them. He is a veritable

treasure trove of gossip and hidden secrets about the ton . He knows everything about London society and its hidden scandals.”

A footman appeared in the doorway of the drawing room. Augusta beckoned him in. “Lady Victoria and I will be taking an early breakfast this morning. Would you please ask cook to make us two large cheese and vegetable frittatas. And could you please bring us some of the Italian black coffee. Thank you.”

As soon as the footman had gone, Victoria let out a sigh of relief. “I can’t imagine how wonderful it must be to have a cook on hand who can make authentic Italian food. I am so jealous. Can I please come and live with you and Flynn?”

Augusta had accompanied their mother to Italy a year or so earlier and spent a lengthy period in Rome staying at Serafina’s family home in central Rome. She’d returned to England with a taste for the rich foods of the Mediterranean, along with the handsome earl who was her husband.

“You are welcome to dine here anytime, but I doubt whether Mama would let you completely escape her clutches. Not until you have a wedding ring on your finger. Flynn loves having family members come visit at Bramshaw House. Considering that he grew up far from London and is really only getting established in town since his father’s death, he is delighted anytime we have guests. When you are married, you will have to bring your husband here to dine with us at least once a week.”

The subject of the late Earl Bramshaw was quickly and quietly dropped. Food was a much better topic. It always was where Victoria was concerned.

They settled into a pair of comfortable chairs positioned by the expansive windows. The sofas were both decorated in a pale blue fabric which looked new.

The room overlooked the green lawns and trees of Cavendish Square. Victoria peered

out through the glass. “It really is a lovely spot up here. And you have done so much with this house in such a short time.”

Augusta, who shared almost the exact same shade of hair as her younger sister, was resting her swollen feet on a footstool, with her back against the sofa. “I wanted to get as much of the refurbishments done before I got too rounded to be able to follow the tradesmen around the house and check on their work. And the sooner we get rid of as many memories of Flynn’s father as possible, the better. My husband hated this house, but I think with the changes it’s beginning to grow on him.”

Flynn had suffered terribly at the hands of his father, and neither he nor Augusta tended to speak of him unless it was absolutely necessary.

The previous earl had inflicted a dull palette of grays and browns on the house, but in the short months that Augusta and Flynn had been in residence, much of this had been swept away. In its place were pale greens, blues, and light summer creams. Bramshaw House, along with the new earl, was coming back to life.

My sister is making this a warm and welcoming home.

Victoria was happy for Augusta, but she still missed sharing a bedroom with her older sibling. Missed all those late-night chats they used to share over glasses of liquor they had stolen from their father’s supposedly secure drinks cabinet.

“Tell me more about Mama’s plans to marry you off,” said Augusta.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Urgh. I think she is looking for a way to get back into society. Ever since her return from Rome, she’s found the other matrons of the haut ton to be less than welcoming.”

“And you are the means to her end. That’s a little unfair.”

“Perhaps, but she is right in one regard. It is time I started looking for a spouse. Or at least showed an interest in the eligible males of the ton . And I do owe it to her as our mother to help smooth her way back into society. It will also help Serafina to establish herself as the Marchioness of Holwell.”

“I feel sorry for Mama, I really do. But she created this situation by throwing a tantrum and leaving for Rome. She could have talked to Papa and done something to sort it out. Flitting off to the continent wasn’t the way to handle things. If she had laid her troubles at our father’s feet, it could have saved us all a great deal of trouble. Not just her, but me as well,” replied Augusta.

Augusta had accompanied their mother, and from all accounts had been none too pleased when she’d finally discovered that the duchess had no plans to return to England, and Augusta was going to be staying with her in exile. The arrival of Gideon in Rome had fortunately scuppered those plans, and everyone had returned to England.

Victoria continued to stare out the window, watching as various people and carriages passed by the house. Her mother’s machinations aside, she was still chafing over the two disappointing experiences she’d had at the well-reviewed Graceful Swan. If there was one thing in her life, she’d always been able to rely upon, it was the restaurant reviews in the Morning Herald , but now they were failing her.

What was the world coming to, when a reader couldn’t rely on the words of a trusted column in the newspaper? Next came revolution and the fall of an empire.

She turned as a footman entered the room. The sight of the tray of small cups and the small coffeepot he was carrying quickly shifted her mood. If Italian coffee couldn’t repair her humor, nothing would.

“Coffee, just what I need.”

Victoria waited with barely restrained patience as the footman poured them both a cup and set the pot back on the tray. He bowed and left the room.

“So what do you plan to do about this marriage lark?” asked Augusta.

A soft smile crept to Victoria’s lips. Her sister knew her well enough to know she wasn’t going to go meekly along with the duchess’s plans. Each of the Kembal girls had been raised to stand up for themselves. The world was about to be on the receiving end of Lady Anne’s teachings.

“Well I do have to eventually marry. I suppose. But before I do that, I want to do something for myself. I might well be the instrument of Mama’s return to society, but I want more. I need to breathe.”

As soon as she was wed, she’d have to take on the role of managing a house, possibly an estate. And then children. All of it was a role designed to serve the needs of other people.

Victoria tapped her fingers on the arm of the sofa, as a plan formed in her mind. “She won’t let me within ten feet of the kitchen at home. Said it is beneath a woman of gentle birth to understand how food is prepared. But...”

She let that last word linger.

“But what?”

Victoria bent and picked up her cup of coffee. She’d been mulling over that particular question since waking. Wondering if she would dare to offer up her heart’s deepest desire and press her current position.

“I want to write to the Morning Herald’s food reviewer.”

“Mama, and Papa for that matter, would never agree to it. Could you imagine how tongues would wag if news that one of the Duke of Mowbray’s daughters had penned a letter to a newspaper became public knowledge?” replied Augusta, her voice edged with caution. She shifted in her seat and turned to face Victoria. “Why is this so important? I know you love your food. A cookbook was the obvious choice for my gift to you from Rome. Even if it was in Italian.”

Serafina had kindly translated each and every recipe, and Victoria now had her own English version of the book.

“But why would you risk such a thing, especially when you know that Mama is desperate to see you settled into a respectable union.”

Victoria sipped her hot drink, letting the black coffee fill her with its bitter joy. “Because if I don’t do it now, I doubt my husband will allow me to sully his family name by seeing it printed in the newspaper.”

She loathed to give voice to her deepest fear—that her future husband wouldn’t understand how important food was to her. That he would think her opinions about it were foolish, and that she would be better served to worry about other matters.

This might seem trivial to others, but it meant a great deal to her. It was one thing which would be truly hers. Not her parents’, nor her future spouse’s—hers.

No one understands my passion or what it means to me. No one.

“Hmm. Yes, I can see that you have a problem.” Augusta’s hum was not one of approval. “What if you wrote in as a gentleman reader, without mentioning your name or family connections?”

She stared at her sister, momentarily lost for words.

Why hadn't I already come up with that idea? Of course. An anonymous reader.

She could devise a nom de plume. And her parents would never know it was her.

"Could I ask a small favor?" said Victoria. She was keen to capitalize on her sister's suggestion.

Augusta raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I need some plain paper. All the paper at home has the Mowbray ducal crest on it. The rest of my cards are pretty floral ones. As you say, if I am to write to the newspaper, the note needs to look like it came from a gentleman. They won't even consider printing it if they think it's from a woman."

Her sister's eyes glinted with mischief. "You are in luck. Flynn still hasn't commissioned a new letterhead for the Bramshaw title, so all our current writing paper is plain. I shall make sure you have a full box of it before you leave this morning."

A short time later, as she dug into her hearty Rome-inspired frittata, Victoria began to mentally formulate her first letter to the editor of the Morning Herald . They may well never print it, but just the thought of being able to put her opinion down on paper and actually send it to the newspaper was enough to have her half giddy with delight.

She'd wait until after she had visited the next restaurant featured in the Morning Herald , then send her carefully considered note to the editor.

Imagine if they read it and decide it's good enough to print?

Now that would be something worth clipping out of the newspaper and pasting in her culinary journal.

“If I get one of the Mowbray House footmen to hand deliver it, there won’t be any post markings on it, so no one will ever know where it came from.”

Victoria’s morning was on the up. Her belly was full of delicious Italian food, while her mind was a whirl of possibilities.

The only thing still left empty was her heart.

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Chapter Eight

Matthew had other plans and so wasn't able to join Victoria and Richard for a late supper the following Thursday, but true to form, he had managed to dig up one useful piece of gossip from the various balls which he'd chaperoned Victoria to over the past week. According to the hostess of the first party at which they'd made an appearance, the Duke of Saffron Walden had indeed attended the function, but he hadn't stayed long.

She couldn't blame him. The clever but rather elusive Duke of Spice had done himself a service and been spared the long, slow death of the supper table.

"Lady Victoria, could you please lean a little closer," said her maid.

Victoria blinked back to the now. It was close to nine o'clock and she was standing in the foyer of Mowbray House, her gaze half focused on her warm evening gloves while Mary fastened her woolen cloak. At two and twenty she was more than capable of putting on a cloak and gloves herself, but the duchess insisted on having the servants do it.

If he is in the spice trade, I don't expect the food at the duke's table is boring.

Her imagination filled with thoughts of spicy curries, and rich hot dishes flavored with lashings of herb-based gravy. Every last drop of food would be sopped up with freshly-baked crusty bread.

Bliss.

Tonight she was going to visit the restaurant whose review had appeared in the Morning Herald earlier that day. All her hopes were pinned on enjoying an evening of culinary excellence. If things went according to plan, she'd write to the newspaper and share her own considered opinion of her dining experience. It may well be the beginning of a long and beautiful correspondence.

Please let all the dishes be a delight. I just want to eat food worthy of my desires.

This was London, a major city of the world. It shouldn't be that hard to find an excellent eating establishment, but her recent efforts had mostly been in vain. The usual dining haunts of the upper class did little for her imaginative palate. Roast beef was roast beef, and most cooks were content with a pinch of salt and some dried herbs to finish what was in truth a rather plain dish.

Her expectations for joy had now become firmly fixed on the writings of the weekly restaurant reviewer. He had to come through for her tonight.

"Ready to leave, Victoria?"

She turned as her brother Richard appeared at the bottom of the grand staircase which led down from the upper floors of the elegant Georgian mansion. His gaze went to her reticule and Victoria's heart sank. That look could only mean one thing.

He's gambled away all the money I gave him just a matter of days ago.

With Gideon no longer supporting his habit, and Coco and Matthew both tight with their own coins, Victoria had become Lord Richard Kembal's de facto bank.

Her maid finished with the cloak and bobbed a quick curtsy. "Have a good evening, Lady Victoria."

The second Mary had disappeared down the servants' staircase, Richard cleared his throat. "I'm happy to chaperone you this evening sister dearest, but..." A tight smile formed on his lips. "The cards are just not running my way this week. So I'm afraid I am at your mercy for the bill."

I can't recall the last time the cards did run his way. Not last month. Not this year.

It had occurred to Victoria that while she was being asked to play her role in the family, no one seemed willing to take Richard to task over his reckless spendthrift ways. She dreaded to think just how much money he had lost at the card tables, but suspected it was close to a small fortune.

The sound of their parents' raised voices reached her ears. At the top of the stairs, the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray were having an argument. A domestic tiff. Victoria and Richard exchanged a knowing look.

This wasn't a real fight between Anne and Clifford—their children knew the signs of one of those all too well. No, this was one of those...

She didn't want to think about her parents in that sort of way. The mere notion of them being naked and doing 'things' made her stomach churn.

"I think it's time we left, don't you?" suggested Richard.

Victoria nodded her approval. If things went as they usually did with the duke and duchess, they would disappear into their private apartment and not be seen for several days.

The Duke and Duchess of Mowbray had made spousal fighting a gladiatorial sport, one only bested by their long sessions of making up in private. Victoria shuddered.

“Well past time we were gone. I do not want to be thinking of what our parents are getting up to as I put my food in my mouth.”

She moved past him, signaling for one of the footmen to open the front door. Richard fell in behind, muttering. “Yes, perish the thought.”

If the Rose and Thorns lived up to its review, the food should be top-notch. The reviewer for the Morning Herald had used the word ‘sublime’ in his piece. Any reviewer worth his salt wouldn’t throw that word around too lightly. It was something to be used rarely, like finely shaved truffles. Just a taste, and nothing more was needed.

The Mowbray town carriage drew up out the front of an address in Oxford Street. As the coach slowed, Victoria peered out the window. “Hmm.” She opened her reticule and took out a piece of paper. “Well this is the right place, but I can’t see anyone inside. Nor are there any lights showing.”

Richard shifted to the door and opened it. “Wait here. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

He was good to his word. Within a minute of stepping out of the carriage and making his way to the door of the restaurant, her brother had returned.

“The Rose and Thorns is closed. There is a small note pinned to the front door which read: ‘Due to supply issues, we are closed until further notice.’ Isn’t that the same thing the waiter at the Graceful Swan said they were experiencing?” said Richard.

“Yes, he mentioned a spice war, though I didn’t take it all that seriously at the time because it sounds utterly ridiculous.”

How hard could it be to buy spice in London?

“Don’t you think it odd that both restaurants have experienced supply problems after they have been featured in the Morning Herald ?” he replied.

She wasn’t by nature a suspicious person, but Victoria smelled a rat. Had the newspaper reviewer been trying to get people to come to his friends’ restaurants not because their food was good, but because they were in trouble?

Had he been taking liberties with his loyal readers? If he had, that was an outrage. A scandal. And Lady Victoria Kembal knew a thing or two about scandals.

Food was a serious business and anyone publishing an opinion in the papers had to be beyond reproach. Favors could not be sought nor given.

Or am I just being a naïve young miss?

“There is no point in us lingering here in the street,” she said. They could turn the carriage around and simply go home, but the risk of them finding their parents still engaged in an amorous argument was too great. Richard gave her a look which reflected her own thoughts. They were not going home.

“How about we head over to Leicester Square and see if we can find a table at one of the supper clubs that welcomes ladies,” he said. “Worst case we end up at a fish shop down by the river.”

Her brother’s suggestion was a solid one. They were both hungry, and Victoria knew more about the eating establishments in that part of town than most people.

“Alright. We shall try the Café Lyon and see if they can seat us. If that fails, then we head to the river.”

Richard climbed out and instructed their driver where to take them. He climbed back

on board, and after closing the door of their carriage, slumped back against the seat. Victoria could just imagine what was going through his head. If they did end up eating fish and oysters by the river, it was going to be difficult for him to ask her for money. Usually when they went out to a restaurant, she'd hand him the coins to pay for their meals, along with a little extra. A subtle move that meant he didn't actually have to beg his younger sister for a handout.

She was sure they would find a way to sort out the food arrangements along with Richard's money, but it still left the matter of the restaurant reviewer unresolved. Twice he had failed her. She wasn't in the mood for giving him another chance.

Sitting and staring out the window of the carriage as it rattled through the dark, cobbled streets of London, Victoria pondered her next move. It was time to take action.

I shouldn't be subjected to restaurant review fraud.

Tomorrow morning she would write her first letter to the editor of the Morning Herald, but instead of it being about the restaurant she was meant to have just visited, it would be a strongly worded missive noting her displeasure at the behavior of the restaurant critic.

She'd decided to make it her business to ensure that the reviewer came to regret toying with the sensibilities of the newspaper's readership. Of taking so little care with the serious subject of food. He'd failed her for the last time.

Perhaps this gentleman, whoever he was, might take her words to heart and graciously put his pen and ink away, allowing someone who truly appreciated fine dining to take up the lofty mantle of restaurant reviewer. Someone who could be relied upon to write honest and critical reviews.

And she knew exactly the right person for the job.

Me.

Victoria chuckled softly to herself. It was an impossible dream. The owner of the newspaper would never knowingly permit an unmarried woman to write for the Morning Herald .

But if a gentleman reader who regularly followed the column showed his depth of knowledge, the editor might take him more seriously. She had a whole journal full of her personal reviews which she could draw upon. Extensive notes which would add weight to her argument.

It would take a little effort on her part to copy some of those reviews, but it would be worth it. They would help to establish her credentials. The reviewer would then understand that this particular reader was not going to go quietly into the night.

With her heavy piece of correspondence, the editor of the Morning Herald was sure to sit up and take notice.

Chapter Nine

A letter to the editor

My good man, I wish to take issue with your choice of food critic. As displayed in his weekly column, the fool is clearly lacking when it comes to the fundamentals of the culinary arts. This reader has been unfairly forced to endure his bumbling words of praise for both the Graceful Swan and the Rose and Thorns. One would think that in a city the size of London, you would be able to find someone with a better understanding of what consistency in food offerings truly means.

Your continually dissatisfied reader.

Robert tossed the newspaper onto the kitchen table and swore. "Bumbling words, who the bloody hell does this reader think he is? The cheek of the man."

This was the second of these missives in as many days. The Morning Herald had only printed a salient few lines of the first one, but this morning, they'd clearly had spare inches in the paper and had run the whole of a second letter.

He might not be the one cooking in the kitchens of the places he reviewed, but he still viewed this as a personal attack. Against him. Against his expertise.

He'd now received word that within days of his reviews for the Graceful Swan and the Rose and Thorns, appearing in the newspaper, agents for the East India had paid both establishments a visit, and after making threats, had seized their spice supplies. The Graceful Swan had now cancelled their new arrangement with him, and gone

back to the EIC, while the proprietor of the Rose and Thorns had been so frightened by the men who'd arrived on his doorstep late at night that he'd up and sold the restaurant.

Robert thrummed his fingers on the oak wood surface of the kitchen table and pondered his next move. If he took these attacks quietly, let them run roughshod over him, he might as well give up the fight. No. By all means necessary. That had been his personal mantra since the day he'd decided to take on the East India and bring them down.

He'd been able to lure new customers to his spice supply business with the promise of them receiving a favorable review in the Morning Herald . His reviews were not always glowing—Robert did have some standards to uphold—but they were good enough that the restaurant owner should expect to see new diners trekking through their doors as a result.

Now he had one former customer who was too scared to work with him, and one who'd been forced out of business. Word would soon get around town that those who got a good review in the Morning Herald did so at their own peril.

And now this pompous upstart is calling my reviews into question.

A knock at the back door of the kitchen stirred him from his thoughts. Robert rose from his stool and picked up his pistol. It was already loaded. Cocking it, he moved toward the door. "Yes."

"Crocus calling," said a voice from outside.

He sighed with relief and unlocked the door. George stepped into the narrow entrance, and carefully closed the door behind him, turning the key once more. "I've spoken to the owner of a tavern over on Grub Street, and he says he will take a

month's supply of pepper, mustard, and cumin if you will write him a review."

When Robert didn't instantly leap with joy, his man of business scowled. "What's got you in such a sour mood, Your Grace? Not that you are ever in a happy one."

Robert ignored that last quip. The past months had seen him constantly on edge. Worrying that at any moment a knock on the door could see several heavily armed, black-suited agents from the East India Company offering to have more than a quiet word with him.

They don't know who I am, but it only takes one loose pair of lips.

He ushered George into the kitchen and pointed at the pot which sat on the brand new iron stove. "Help yourself to some fresh coffee. I'm just about to put some scones in the oven."

George gave him a quizzical look but said nothing. His servant had long ago given up trying to get him to understand that a duke wasn't meant to work in his own kitchen. The rest of the nobility had households full of people to do that, but then again, Robert Tolley wasn't like the rest of England's elite. As far as either of them knew, Robert was the only highwayman come smuggler come restaurant reviewing duke.

"I'm in a mood as you so insolently put it, because some chap has decided I need to step down as the reviewer for the Morning Herald."

"Why?" asked George, helping himself to a cup of morning brew before setting it on the end of the long wooden kitchen table. Bending, he retrieved a large tin cannister from under the table and opened it. He peered inside. "Oh good. I was hoping you'd left me some."

Perched on a chair at the end of the table, George quickly made himself at home. He

had a cup of coffee in one hand and two of Robert's oatcakes in the other. Robert held out a hand and caught the oatcake his servant tossed his way.

"Why does some self-important reader think I should step down? Well apparently, they're none too pleased with my last couple of reviews. They seem to think I'm leading people on a merry dance. And I could ignore that if not for two very important reasons. One if the newspaper didn't print their letters, and two if they weren't dead wrong."

George finished chewing his oatcake. "What are you going to do? At the moment it seems as if we are chasing our tails with reviews and the East India."

Grabbing a long-bladed knife from off the table, Robert began cutting up the scone dough, slicing it into small squares. While he worked, he considered George's question. Ignoring the letters wasn't an option. Threatening the editor of the Morning Herald wouldn't be a smart move. But if the newspaper was going to continue publishing these sorts of letters, he owed it to his other loyal readers to defend himself.

Actually that's a sterling idea.

The best way to get people on his side, and that of the restaurants he was looking to do business with, was to defend himself. But do so in an entertaining manner.

"I'm going to take this outraged reader on at his own game. See how he likes being openly mocked in public."

He slapped the first of the scones down on a tray, then went for the next one. By the time he'd filled the baking tray and was ready to place it in his state-of-the-art stove, a plan had formed in Robert's mind.

He'd challenge the reader to see who knew the most about food. It wouldn't take long for him to put the man in his place. And once he had done that, the letters would no doubt cease, and he could go back to dealing with the problem of stealing business from his enemy.

"As soon as I have finished baking these scones, I'm going to go and pay the Morning Herald a visit. The editor is one of only three people, yourself included, who know I write for the paper. If he thinks a battle between me and a disgruntled reader will sell more copies of the Morning Herald, he will be on board with my plan."

George snorted. "I almost pity the poor reader. Then again, he did bring it on himself."

Robert dusted the flour from his fingers. His next column in the newspaper would be a declaration of war. After he was done, this self-important reader would rue the day he took on the Duke of Spice.

Chapter Ten

Victoria was seated at the breakfast table at Mowbray House several days later, quietly reading the morning paper, when a letter in the social pages caught her eye.

By the time she'd finished reading the piece, her hands were shaking. Rage simmered in her blood. It took all her willpower to slowly lower the newspaper and rest it gently on the table. She'd much rather have thrown it into the fireplace and let it burn.

The reviewer for the Morning Herald had struck back. He had taken umbrage at her second letter, the one where she had said he should resign.

A response from our esteemed restaurant reviewer

A better man would admit that he doesn't know enough about the culinary arts and retire from the field of battle. Though from your rather feeble attempts at tackling the important issue of what constitutes good food, I can only surmise that you are not that sort of man. One hopes that your close friends are able to talk sense into you.

"Are you quite well?" asked Richard from his place further along the table. The expression on his face was one of guarded disquiet. He'd been paying court to his sister all morning. No doubt he had already burned through the money Victoria had given him on Thursday and was softening her up to ask for more.

Was she well? No, she was bloody furious.

I've a good mind to go down to Fleet Street and tell them...

She let out a slow, calming breath. What would she tell them? That she was the unwed daughter of a duke and thought she knew more about food than the gentleman the newspaper employed to write their culinary column. They'd laugh her straight out the front door.

And then someone would tell her parents.

But I can't sit here and expect to keep my temper at bay.

Richard, along with the rest of the Kembal family members residing at Mowbray House, didn't have a clue that Victoria was the mysterious gentleman who'd been sending letters to the Morning Herald . She'd entrusted her missives to various household footmen who had then delivered them to the offices of the paper. With an extra coin in his hand, a footman had no reason to think anything more about the task other than where he was going to spend his sudden and unexpected windfall.

"Victoria?"

"No. I am not quite myself, thank you for asking, brother dearest. I think I should go back to bed."

She rose from the table and snatched up the newspaper. Once her ire had calmed, she'd undertake her usual morning trip to the nearby German bakery and purchase her breakfast.

But first she was going to go back to her bedroom and pen a response to the dunderhead of a reviewer who thought he could bully his way into forcing her to stay silent.

No my good man. I am more than the better man. I am a woman, and I've only just got started. Whereas you are finished.

An educated reader defends himself.

I am disappointed but not entirely surprised that the restaurant reviewer for this esteemed newspaper has seen fit to attack me personally. One would think that a better man would address the issue of the review rather than casting aspersions on the character of a reader whose money pays his wages. Again I say it is time for the Morning Herald to look for a new restaurant reviewer.

A reader who will not be cowered.

Robert closed his eyes and sighed. Damn. This was not the sort of start to the day he needed.

He'd barely slept. A shipment of stolen East India spices had arrived at Tolley House just after four this morning, and he'd been up all night waiting by the back door, a loaded pistol in his hand, watching just in case any trouble might have followed the wagon to his home. The sun was already peeking over the horizon by the time he and George finished unloading the illicit goods and hiding them in the cellar.

A public slanging match with some ill-informed half-wit was not on his to-do-list for the day.

But if I don't nip this thing in the bud, it will gain momentum.

And he would be out of his reviewer job before he could stop things. The weekly coin he got from the Morning Herald was nice. It kept him in quality brandy and the occasional cigar. But it was the publicity which his column gained for his clients that was the most important aspect of his newspaper career. Convincing tavern and restaurant owners to take a chance on his spice contracts was hard, but the lure of a review in a major London newspaper was an added sweetener to any deal he could offer them.

His coffee had gone cold by the time he had come up with a plan to deal with the problem of the letter writer. This person had clearly decided to take the bit between his teeth and was not going to let up.

“Right, if it’s a fight you want, then I’ll gladly give you one,” muttered Robert. He glanced at the half drunken coffee and decided against finishing it. He was in a bad enough mood and cold beverages would only set him in a worse one.

He headed upstairs to his study. The creak of his boots on the stairs was a reminder of how empty Tolley House was without any servants at this hour of the day. Having to do things for himself was the price he’d been forced to pay for running a smuggling operation out of his family’s elegant townhouse.

Seated at his desk, Robert pulled out a piece of paper and began to write. The only way he was going to get somewhere with this letter-writing pest was to challenge them. Make them come out from behind their pen and ink and expose themselves.

A dual. But not just any old dual, those things were illegal, rather he would face off with his nemesis across the table of London’s finest dining establishment Rules . Get the measure of the man who sought to take him down, and then teach him that when it came to the matter of knowing what good food was and what it was not, few men could match the Duke of Spice.

The letter took several attempts. His temper and lack of sleep kept getting the better of him.

I doubt the editor of the Morning Herald would appreciate me using the words know-it-all sod in my column.

When he had finally put together a more civilized missive, Robert carefully folded it, added a plain wax seal, and walked the letter over to the offices of the newspaper in

Catherine Street, just off the Strand.

As he walked through the front door of number eighteen, he spied the clerk at the reception desk. The man took one look at Robert's noble demeanor and well-cut attire and immediately got to his feet. "Good morning, sir, how may I help you?"

Robert paused for a moment. It wouldn't do for him to publicly announce himself as being the Duke of Saffron Walden. Dukes didn't tend to visit newspapers. His presence here might raise all manner of questions. And gossip.

He hated gossip. Especially when his name was involved.

Clearing his throat, he approached the clerk. "Is the editor in this morning?" He gave the man a look which dared him to ask for a name or a calling card.

The newspaper clerk worried his bottom lip. "Will he know what this is about?"

Reaching into his coat pocket, Robert pulled out the letter. He hesitated before handing it over. "I will ask him if the seal has been broken."

The man nodded, the implied threat understood. "If you would please wait here for a moment, I shall go and deliver him your letter."

Robert pointed to the chair behind the clerk's desk. "You don't mind if I sit there and wait for your return? I don't particularly wish to be standing in the foyer for any longer than necessary."

If he remained where he was, he risked people passing by on the busy street and catching sight of him through the glass-fronted door.

The folly of coming here in person was beginning to pester at him. Sleep deprived

brains didn't always make good judgements.

He'd barely touched the clerk's chair before the door leading into the main office of the newspaper opened. The wiry-haired editor of the Morning Herald appeared. He took one look at Robert, then at his clerk, and quickly announced, "That will be all Gerald, I shall deal with this gentleman."

He headed toward the staircase on the other side of the foyer, motioning for Robert to follow.

Once upstairs on the first floor, the editor hurried along a narrow hallway. A little way down, he stopped and turned left. The room the editor had entered was barely the size of a cupboard. Robert halted at the door. He wasn't one for confined spaces. Even the cellar in his kitchen made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, but this is the only place in the building where you and I can talk without my staff overhearing. If I'd known you were coming, I would have made more suitable arrangements."

"It was a bit of a spur of the moment thing," replied Robert.

More like a rush of blood to the head, which I am now regretting.

He shuddered as the man closed the door behind them. The only light in the room was a small window up high. It reminded Robert a little too uncomfortably of the cells in the Marshalsea Prison, where he had been forced to spend the night under a false name on the odd occasion. His bribes to the marshal of the prison had cost him a small fortune, but he wasn't about to complain. He was a free man. Greasing palms in order to keep on the right side of the law was an occupational hazard in his line of work.

The editor, whose name Robert was busily racking his brain to recall, waved the letter at him. “Are you sure about this, Your Grace? I mean, if you sit down to dine with this reader, it will unmask you as our restaurant reviewer.”

Damn. I hadn’t thought about that. Fool.

He really ought to stop making rash decisions without the benefit of a good night’s sleep. “Well I can’t allow him to call me names and demand my resignation, now, can I?”

William. I think his name is William.

“What would you suggest, William?”

The editor ran his fingers through his gray mess of hair. “Perhaps keep the challenge going in the newspaper. Hold off on calling this chap out. I’m sure our readers are lapping up every word of this exchange over their tea and kippers and would be keen to hear more.”

He hasn’t corrected me on his name, so it must be William. I’ve finally gotten something right this morning.

“Yes, and I expect it helps to sell more newspapers. What would you suggest?” Remembering the man’s name had pretty much used up the rest of his brain’s good ideas.

“What about another personal attack? Something that calls his honor into question.”

Robert shook his head. He didn’t like this sort of thing. His business dealings might well be a bit shady. On the darker side of gray. Many would suggest outright illegal. But he was still a duke, and nobles with ancient bloodlines didn’t normally stoop to

that sort of behavior.

They don't normally hold up supply wagons at gunpoint either. But I digress.

He had just talked himself out of turning up the heat on the public battle, when a thought popped into his head.

What if I engage in a private battle with this chap, away from the pages of the newspaper?

Now that was something he could see himself readily doing. Intimidating his opponent from the shadows.

"Do you have the letters that our esteemed reader has sent to you? I mean it would be good for me to read them. It might serve to better inform me as to how I should proceed."

William gave him a considering look. Even in this poor light, Robert could tell that the newspaper man wasn't buying this story for one single minute.

"I will give you the letters, but on the proviso that you don't embark on a personal vendetta against him. I have a newspaper to run, and owners who expect me to make them a profit."

Robert held back a huff of disappointment. What was the point of seeking to identify his enemy if he couldn't attack him?

"You clearly don't have a military background, do you?" he mused. The moment he spied his foe on the battlefield, he was going to fire off a volley of shots.

"No, I don't. Why do you ask?"

“No reason,” replied Robert, making a mental note to keep his nefarious plans to himself. “Now may I have the letters?”

“Wait here, Your Grace.”

William disappeared. When he returned, he was carrying a bundle of letters in his hand. “I have assumed that these have all come from the one person, as the handwriting is the same in each.”

How many letters has this idiot penned?

Robert took the letters and stuffed them into the folds of his greatcoat. “Thank you. Now if you would be so kind as to release me from this tiny prison, I shall be on my way.”

The editor cleared his throat. “About the reviews. Is there a chance that the one you intend to submit this week will be for an establishment that our readers would be happy to visit? I mean, I wouldn’t want to impose, but the idea of these reviews is to inform people as to places where they may actually want to dine.”

Touché.

The man had a valid point, one Robert couldn’t deny. “I shall make it my personal business to ensure that this week’s review is for a restaurant which is open and serves delicious fare. I apologize for the recent problems that I might have caused both you and your valuable readers.”

He made his hasty escape and headed back to Tolley House. Shrugging out of his clothes, Robert climbed into bed, snuggling under the warmth of the blankets. Lack of sleep tugged at him, and he was embarrassed over the matter of offering reviews for dining establishments that couldn’t deliver, but as he drifted off a soft smile sat on

his lips. He had the letters which his review rival had sent the Morning Herald .

Come tomorrow, his campaign to bring his newspaper nemesis to his knees would begin. And while his eventual victory would be a private one, he would still savor the taste of sweet revenge.

Chapter Eleven

The Duchess of Mowbray had turned the hunt for her daughter's future husband into a full military campaign. Victoria was certain that if the British army had employed her mother, Lady Anne could have won the battle of Waterloo in half the time it had taken the Duke of Wellington to secure his triumph.

This morning's trip to the modiste was their third in as many weeks, and Victoria was beginning to wonder if she should just move in with the dressmaker in order to save herself the worry of traveling across town from Mowbray House.

I dread to think how much money this is all costing. So many clothes.

She wasn't sure if she could stand this shopping torture much longer. Lady Anne had never been one for doing things by half measure. Gideon and Serafina's bedroom had been commandeered for Victoria's new wardrobe. Boxes of slippers were stacked in neat piles. Hats. Ribbons. Pretty silk reticles. In the family safe sat every priceless earring and necklace set which the duke had retrieved from the custody vaults of the bank.

The price her parents were prepared to pay to successfully land Victoria a noble husband and restore their standing in London society bordered on the obscene.

Standing on the dais while the modiste fussed with the hem of her gown, the future bride-to-be studied herself in the mirror. Dark green did suit her complexion, but it also aged her. "Are you sure about this fabric, Mama? I mean I don't want to be lamb dressed as mutton," observed Victoria.

From what Victoria had gathered, part of the duchess's battle plans included making Victoria wear gowns designed for a woman who was a few years older than her actual age. She was not to be seen out in society dressed in the usual virginal whites and pale pastels that an unmarried woman of barely twenty-two would normally wear. Victoria's success would lay in projecting a ready for marriage look rather than an untouched innocent one.

Rising from her seat on the plush velvet sofa, the Duchess of Mowbray came to stand alongside her. "I think elegant sophistication is what this gown says. With one of my diamond chokers at your throat and your hair set with a silver tiara you will look nothing short of radiant."

The modiste finished pinning up the hem of the gown and got to her feet. She met Victoria's gaze in the mirror and offered her a gentle smile. "The formal season is many months away, and since you are already out in society, Lady Victoria, this gown is the perfect solution. It makes a statement. It says I am a confident young woman who is ready for my destiny as a nobleman's wife."

Lady Anne nodded her approval at these words.

How much did my mother pay you to say that?

She'd considered marriage as an inevitability. Few women of her social class escaped its clutches. But unlike her sister, Augusta, Victoria hadn't set her sights on any one particular male. Her sister's husband, the Earl of Bramshaw, was a rarity. A nobleman who could conduct a conversation with a lady that involved more than polite chitchat.

And Augusta has been in love with Flynn forever, whereas I've never felt the first stirring of my heart for anyone.

“Victoria dearest, would you please grant us the grace of your attention. This is your future we are trying to create,” said the duchess.

She bit back the sharp retort which sat on the edge of her tongue. Her mother wasn’t completely self-centered, but Victoria was no fool. It would make more of an impact on the matrons of the ton if the Duchess of Mowbray managed to marry off one of her eligible daughters out of season than if she had found a bride for one of her bachelor sons. Richard with his gambling habit, and Matthew with his...

“Ouch!”

A dressmaking pin pricked her skin. Victoria glared at her mother. “Did you just stab me?”

Lady Anne gave her a look of shocked outrage that was pure theatre. “I can’t believe you would accuse me of such a thing. Why would I do that to my own daughter? You must have moved too close to my hand.”

The hand that was holding a dressmaker’s pin pointed directly at her. Victoria gritted her teeth. She understood the message. The modiste had ears and Victoria should pay close attention to what she said. “I do beg your pardon, Mama. Yes, it must have been my fault.”

She was hungry and becoming more irritable by the second. Lady Anne had dragged her out of the house at first light and the morning had been spent going from one shop to another. An endless procession of assistants had eagerly helped the duchess to invest in the future success of her daughter’s happiness.

I need food.

She’d barely gotten a cup of lukewarm coffee down her throat before Lady Anne had

appeared in the breakfast room and announced they were going shopping. Her protests to at least be allowed to go visit the nearby German bakery had fallen on deaf ears.

“I am famished. Are we going home soon?” asked Victoria.

The tut of disgust from her mother told her what the duchess thought of her question. “Young ladies who are embarking on the marriage mart do not speak in such an uncouth way.” She pinched Victoria’s waist. “Besides, it might do you some good to adopt a smaller appetite for the next while. Think of yourself as a little bird.”

Stepping down from the dais, she whined, “I am tired and hungry.” Turning to the modiste she pleaded, “Could you please remove this gown?”

The dressmaker and the duchess exchanged a look, then Lady Anne painted a smile to her face and spoke. “Give us a moment.”

As soon as the modiste had scurried away, heading to one of the dressing rooms, her mother rounded on Victoria. “I am doing this for you. Making sure that you are not still on the shelf come Christmas. I would appreciate a little gratitude.”

Victoria sucked in a deep breath. She was not going to apologize to her mother for a second time. After slipping her arms out of the gown, she reached for the clasp at the back.

She had held her tongue since the duchess’s return to England. Been relieved to see her mother alight from the coach the morning that Gideon, Serafina, and Augusta had arrived home. But anger over the scandal which had swept London during the Duchess of Mowbray’s long absence had left deep scars.

“If you are going to dress me as a fully formed woman, then it’s high time that you

and I come to an agreement as to how this mother-daughter relationship is to continue.”

Lady Anne’s face was guarded when she answered, “What do you mean?”

Victoria finished unhooking the gown, then let it drop to the floor. The soft green silk let out a hush as it gathered in a pile. Stepping out of the dress, she turned to face her mother.

“You are using me to help smooth your way back into the upper echelons of the ton .” She held up a hand up to stop any protest. “As the wife of a duke, and a noblewoman in your own right, that makes perfect sense. But can we at least agree that this husband hunt is more for your benefit than mine. Which means I don’t want to hear the continued fiction about you thinking purely of my happiness.”

The duchess closed her eyes. “I had no idea you thought that way about things.”

Oh god, have I gone a step too far?

Victoria let out a tired sigh. “I know why Augusta didn’t invite you to her and Flynn’s wedding when they were married in Rome. It’s because you put yourself ahead of her. You lied.”

“You don’t know what any of this has been like for me. And as an unmarried young lady, I don’t expect you possibly can,” replied Lady Anne.

Her mother was right. She didn’t know what any of this had been like for the duchess, nor did she have a solid grasp of the reasons as to why Lady Anne had thought to initiate a formal separation from the duke. But her sympathies could only go so far.

“No. No I can’t. But then again, you don’t have an appreciation for what those long

months were like for those of us left here in London when you didn't return home. When poor Gideon had to go and sail all the way to Italy to bring you back."

The flood gates had been opened.

"The rumors. The spiteful things which were said to both me and Coco when it became apparent you were not coming back. And don't think for one minute that they haven't continued since we embarked on this search for a husband."

She hadn't been able to figure out which was the worst. The expressions of disgust and scorn, or the ones that were sad and full of pity.

"Now can we please go home before I say anything else?"

Lady Anne took a hold of Victoria's hand. Tears shone in her eyes. "I made a mistake. Augusta punished me for it by not inviting me to her wedding. I don't want that to be the case for you and me. Get dressed. We will go home. And when you are ready to talk, let's sit down and discuss what has been said to you."

There was a gentleness in her mother's voice, a genuine request for them to make amends, but as Victoria headed back into the dressing room, leaving her mother to finalize matters with the modiste, she was under no illusion as to one of the things the duchess would be keen to discuss. The names of the women who had treated her daughters with such open disdain.

The Duchess of Mowbray would be making certain that every one of those ladies was on the guest list for Victoria's wedding. And as her daughter walked down the aisle, Lady Anne would be watching as she rubbed Victoria's excellent match of a marriage in their faces.

Chapter Twelve

A lone in his study at Tolley House, Robert reached for his second glass of whisky. After a long nap, he'd risen and set to reading the letters from the gentleman who wished to see him removed from the position of restaurant reviewer at the Morning Herald . They told the tale of a relationship that had truly soured.

There were several letters addressing his shortfalls as a critic, along with other individually curated reviews of various restaurants. He noted with interest that only the ones which had attacked him personally had been made public. The other missives which were thorough in their discussions of the various worthy and not-so-worthy points of various establishments he'd reviewed over time were well written, but even he had to admit, they didn't make good newspaper copy.

He took a long sip of his drink, then got to his feet. Standing and warming himself in front of the fire, he read aloud from one of the reviews.

“The delicate balance of cream and spice was handled particularly well, and I must agree with your original argument that the recipe should never be challenged.”

Robert smiled. The note was for a delightful tavern he'd uncovered in one of the back streets near Westminster. He was proud of his discovery and could confess to being rather chuffed that a Morning Herald reader had gone to the effort to dine there at his recommendation.

The rest of the letters followed a similar pattern. Each week he had written a review, and each week this devoted reader had taken him at his word and ventured to

whichever restaurant or tavern Robert had featured.

Whoever this chap was, his devotion to Robert's column couldn't be faulted. And while the letters had all been recently penned, the reviews they covered went back many months, some even years.

The notes covering the earlier pieces had been favorable, but the latter ones which included the more recent reviews, had seen the tone of the correspondence turn dark. Unfettered loyalty had transformed into bitter disappointment. Disappointment now replaced with open contempt. His former faithful follower had decided that Robert was no longer worthy of his time and that he wouldn't be dining at any of the eating establishments the Morning Herald food critic recommended.

He was still mulling over the contents of the most recent notes, when George appeared in the doorway of his study. His man of business rapped on the doorframe. "Your Grace."

"Come in. I'm just reading the letters from the chap who keeps writing to the Morning Herald demanding my resignation." He waved the letter in his hand, before making his way over to his desk, where he dropped the note on top of the rest of the papers.

George poured himself a generous glass of whisky, then sat in the overstuffed leather chair on the opposite side to where Robert now resumed his seat at the desk. The tall, thin Welshman picked up the letter and quickly read it.

"Where did you get these?"

"Paid a visit to the editor of the Morning Herald yesterday morning. He gave them to me, but on the clear understanding that I'm not to call the chap out and demand a duel on Hampstead Heath. Something about me shooting dead readers not being good for

business.”

George chuckled as his gaze ran over the note. He finished reading it, then picked up another piece of paper. He’d finished a half dozen of the missives, before he sat back in his chair and grinned at Robert. “It’s a good thing you didn’t go after him.”

“Why?” He wasn’t afraid of the bloodthirsty agents who worked for the East India Company, so a disgruntled reader shouldn’t pose him any sort of danger.

“Because I think your ticked-off correspondent might well be a woman.”

Robert’s mouth dropped open. “What?!”

Flipping the letter onto the desk, George placed his forefinger over the word Gratin , then leaned forward. “Look at the elegant handwriting. What male writes as neatly as that? None I happen to know. The swoop of the G is a dead giveaway—that’s exactly how my wife writes.”

A ripple of surprise shot through Robert. Could his restaurant rival actually be a female? No. That would be ludicrous. Then again...

He picked up another of the notes, skimming his gaze over it. It wasn’t just the handwriting, it was the tone. There’d been something about the letters he’d not been able to put his finger on. George’s words made perfect, horrible sense.

“A woman. A female. Someone of the opposite sex,” he muttered.

“Yes, all those things,” snorted George. His man of business had more leeway with his employer than most others did and wasn’t afraid to call a spade a spade.

Brushing the paper between his fingers, Robert could tell it was of a particularly good

quality. The sort of stationery that could only be purchased in one of London's more refined paper shops.

He set the letter down. "Bloody hell. Why would a woman want to get me fired from the job?"

George sipped from his glass. "You can't seriously have assumed that all your readers would be men, did you? My wife reads your column with great interest. Though she doesn't know that it's you. If she did, that might make a difference."

He caught the hint of an insult in George's words but had to laugh. "Let's not start a conversation about your good lady's taste in the finer things in life. She did happen to marry you. The poor thing."

"Touché, Your Grace."

The thought of the letter writer possibly being a female held Robert's interest. Stirred something in his blood. More than likely she was some ancient crone who felt it was her right to put him in his place. The sort of woman who had dined out more times than he could ever hope to do, and who wanted to show him that she knew what she was talking about. And if she wanted to take him on, who was he to refuse a lady's demands?

He glanced at the topmost letter and picked it up once more. There was no post mark.

My dear lady reader, I think I have you.

"None of the letters are post marked. So someone has to make the effort to hand deliver them to the Morning Herald each day," said Robert. If the author of the notes was a lady of quality, they wouldn't do the job themselves. They would have a servant. Or even better, a liveried footman.

And if there was one thing he knew beyond a doubt, it was that a coin or two pressed into the right palm always got him the answers he sought.

“If our correspondent is indeed a female, I need to find out who this woman is. Only then can I decide on the best way to take the battle to her doorstep.”

George downed the last of his drink and rose from his chair. He slowly shook his head. “I’m at a loss as to what to think of you taking any action against a lady of quality. Either you are a brave man or a very foolish one.”

Chapter Thirteen

“That cheeky, rotten swine,” huffed Victoria. Other readers of the Morning Herald might not have noticed the sleight of hand, but she had caught it straight away. The sly dog had run an updated piece for an establishment he’d already reviewed last year.

Seated at her writing desk, which overlooked the green space of Berkely Square, Victoria steamed with rage. Her efforts to get people to see reason had included sending the editor some of her own reviews covering older places the newspaper had featured. Something she considered to be more than fair. But the restaurant reviewer’s response had been nothing short of an outrage.

Victoria slowly shook her head. “Did he just look at one of the letters I sent and decide that since I liked that particular restaurant, he could just repurpose old material? This fraud of a reviewer has to resign.”

It was beyond her comprehension that anyone could think to stoop so low. The last of her good regard for the restaurant critic was gone.

But in dusting off his old review, he’d now left her with the thorny issue of what to do with it. Victoria’s beloved scrapbook sat on the desk, full of all the clippings she’d carefully pasted into it. If she went ahead and put today’s review piece in, it would sully the book. She would have two reviews for the same restaurant. But if she didn’t, today would forever be missing from her collection.

He has no regard for the feelings of others.

While her thoughts were torn as to what to do about this latest review, her mind was firmly made up as to her next course of action. Pushing the book aside, Victoria reached for a fresh piece of paper and began to pen her response to this monstrous outrage.

Robert lingered on the corner of Catherine and Tavistock Streets, casually munching on an apple, watching with interest as to who came and went through the front doors of the Morning Herald. He'd deliberately rerun an old review in yesterday's newspaper, dressing it up as a new piece. The deadline-focused editor hadn't noticed his underhanded move.

If there was one thing which he presumed would get a hot rise from his vexatious, letter-writing enemy, it would be this dishonorable, disgraceful act of wickedness.

Robert chuckled under his breath.

I wish I could have seen her face when she opened the newspaper yesterday.

He'd been standing out here without success for several hours. So far, only clerks and delivery boys had passed in and out the door. But he had learned long ago to trust his gut. That quiet perseverance was always rewarded.

After taking the last bite of his apple, Robert waved the remains of it under the nose of the nearest carriage horse, who quickly nipped the apple between its teeth.

"Here you go, girl, enjoy."

As the chestnut mare happily chewed on the unexpected gift, Robert moved back into position. Anyone passing by would see a man in a plain brown suit, reading The Times and minding his own business. His manner of dress was not that of a nobleman. Even his closest friends would have to take a second look in order to

check that the man leaning against the Portland stone wall was not a merely an office clerk but rather the Duke of Saffron Walden.

Movement at the end of the street caught his eye, and Robert shifted the newspaper in order to get a better look.

Hello my little precious. What do we have here?

Striding down Catherine Street with all the importance of someone who worked in a grand house was a liveried servant. His colored vest and fine black suit marked him out from the rest of the London crowd.

Robert's gaze tracked the man's progress as he marched up the steps and into the offices of the Morning Herald . When the footman reappeared a few minutes later, Robert pushed off from the wall and silently followed.

Half an hour later, he'd trailed his quarry across London and all the way to Berkeley Square, where to his stunned disbelief, the footman disappeared down the steps of the servants' entrance to Mowbray House. His brows furrowed in confusion.

Why the devil is someone from the Duke of Mowbray's family writing to the newspaper?

Later that afternoon, after notes had been exchanged between him and the editor of the Morning Herald , Robert had all the confirmation he needed. A letter of barely restrained indignation had indeed been received from the same gentleman regarding the dining reviewer of the newspaper. Today's missive had apparently branded him an outright fraud.

William intended to print the letter in tomorrow's edition of the Morning Herald , after which Robert's tenure as food critic would surely be untenable.

Back at Tolley House, Robert paced the floor of his study, his hands clenched into tight fists. A better man might take his medicine quietly, accept that the letter was in direct response to his own dishonorable conduct, offer his resignation, and move on. The Duke of Spice was not that man.

Reaching the window, he glanced out at Pye Street, then turned and headed back toward the door. Back and forth he marched across the room. “The nerve of this female.”

He was in half a mind to go back to the newspaper and demand the editor hand him over the letter. After which he would go to Mowbray House and bash loudly on the duke’s front door and demand an answer.

This was in dangerous territory. His blood was up, and he was ready for a knock down, no-holds-barred punch-up with someone.

But that someone was a woman. And he’d have firm words with any man who sought to cause physical harm to a female.

Robert’s steps came to a halt. He sighed and let his head drop back.

Fool. You brought this upon yourself. You baited her and she bit.

He’d started a war, and unless he could find a way to end it outside of the pages of the newspaper, he was going to have to battle it out. But if he lost, it would mean having to resign.

A member of the Duke of Mowbray’s family was writing to the Morning Herald , but exactly who that was, still remained a mystery.

From the bookcase he selected the latest copy of Debrett’s Peerage , the book which

listed all the noble families of England, and their respective members. He thumbed through the pages, stopping when he reached the entry for the Kembal family. Robert dropped into a comfy fireside chair and began to read.

Clifford Kembal, Duke of Mowbray. Duchess, Lady Anne (nee Radley) sister of Ewan Radley, the Duke of Strathmore.

He pursed his lips. Hadn't there been some sort of scandal between the duke and duchess? Something about her tripping off to Rome and being away for far too long. Making a mental note to follow up on that juicy little titbit, he continued reading.

Daughters. Lady Augusta (nee Kembal), Countess Bramshaw. Wife of Flynn Cadnam, Earl Bramshaw .

He paused again. "Now I know this one. He's the chap who was tried for murdering his father." Robert had sat in the House of Lords as a member of the jury during the recent trial. He'd been mightily relieved when the poor mistreated earl had been found not guilty and released from the Tower of London.

But if Lady Augusta was now the Countess Bramshaw, then she wouldn't be in residence at Mowbray House. He mentally crossed her off his list.

Daughters. Lady Victoria Kembal. Lady Coco Kembal.

A niggling worry settled in his mind as he took in the name Lady Victoria Kembal. There was something about that name, something which... hmm .

Memories of an unpleasant encounter in the supper room at a recent party slipped into his mind. He'd been rude. She'd been rude. And it had all been over the state of the food.

He didn't bother worrying about the other sister. He doubted there would be two of them writing caustic letters to the newspaper.

"Lady Victoria Kembal." Her name lingered enticingly on his tongue. The memory of her in that golden gown had his cock twitching with anticipation, but he pushed his lust down. She might well be a tasty morsel, but she was also his enemy.

The well-endowed chit might currently be lingering under the false impression that her anonymity and sex would protect her from incurring his wrath, but she was about to discover that his gentlemanly manners only went so far.

"Lady Victoria Kembal, consider yourself at war."

Chapter Fourteen

Victoria wrung her hands tightly in her lap. She could admit to being more than a little nervous. But she only had herself to blame. She'd refused to attend any more grand balls and be paraded in front of London's bachelors, instead insisting that she was far more suited to small private events. The Duchess of Mowbray had somewhat reluctantly agreed, and so here she was, attending a formal dinner party.

Seated beside her in the Mowbray town carriage, her mother reached out and placed a hand over hers. "You will be fine. Just remember, keep any conversations light. The weather. Any good plays you have recently seen. And of course poetry. Just don't be too critical about the food, this is a social event."

I loathe poetry. I haven't seen a play in two years. And who really cares about the weather. And if the food is terrible...

Victoria clamped her lips shut. It was one thing to think such thoughts, giving voice to them quite another. She was going to have to learn to be patient and endure.

"Yes Mama."

On the opposite side of the carriage sat her father. The Duke of Mowbray offered her an encouraging smile. His hopeful glances reminding Victoria that tonight wasn't just about her—her parents were still trying to make their way back into society. A party at the home of one of the few friends who had stood by them during the scandal would be yet another step in the right direction.

Over wine and a selected eight-course menu, the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray planned to further charm their way onto the social invitation lists of London's elite.

While her parents worked their own agenda, she was meant to be occupied in achieving the ends of hers. Securing a husband. The Duke of Saffron Walden was to be among the guests tonight, and Lady Anne had made it clear that Victoria's sole reason for being at the dinner was to meet and charm the bachelor noble.

With no sordid history to speak of, and an apparent pleasant demeanor, he was considered somewhat of a catch. Matthew had heard no salacious gossip about the duke and had given his sister his tentative blessing.

"Now I want you to spend the first two courses just listening, taking in the ebb and flow of the conversation. A successful society matron is one who learns to read the room. To help smooth over any issues at the first sign of them," instructed the duchess.

Victoria's gaze settled on her evening gown. It was dark blue with matching ribbons fluttering down from the bodice. Another new piece. She wondered how much of her dowry would be left if her mother kept spending money at this rate.

She actually liked the gown, and now that she and her mother were working hand in hand with one another, Victoria felt more confident about her manner of dress. The darker shades worked well with her long brown hair. Hair, which was currently set in a high, tight chignon with two whispers of curls either side of her face to soften and gentle the look.

Tonight was the first time she had a real sense of being in control of her search for a suitable husband. She could only hope that the Duke of Spice lived up to his spotless reputation.

“Victoria?”

Her mother’s loud use of her name stirred her from her thoughts. “Yes Mama,” she answered without thinking.

“I want you to eat and drink sparingly this evening. Sample as little of each course as is polite. If you are still hungry when we get home, you can ask cook to find you something in the kitchen.”

Her father hummed his disapproval. “Is that really necessary?”

“Yes. Victoria is here tonight to capture the attention of a duke, and she won’t be able to do that if she is focused on her plate.”

She was to eat like a sparrow and leave the rest on her plate for miss manners . But if the means justified the end, she would stick to the plan.

Outside the window of the carriage, the early evening of London drifted by, and Victoria watched the sight with interest. A whisper of rain had fallen a little while earlier, and the light from the gas lamps now glinted in the puddles along the road and pavement. It made for a pretty tableau.

Hope sparked in her heart. Maybe tonight was her night. The duke might be all she hoped for, her future soulmate, or at least a man who would come to understand her. She wasn’t naïve, knew that these things often took time. The marriages of her two older siblings had survived rocky starts, perilous beginnings that had seen love forged in the fires of danger.

All I have to do is go to a dinner party or two. Poor Gideon was facing a duel to the death in Rome. Augusta almost lost Flynn to the hangman’s noose.

The carriage slowed and came to a halt. Victoria glanced out the window, shifting back in her seat as a footman opened the door. Her father climbed out first, then turned and offered his hand to his wife. “Enchanting,” he whispered.

The duchess sighed. “My love.”

Victoria blinked back a tear at this unexpected tender moment between her parents. Their marriage had always been a battlefield, but passion had long kept them together. She still didn’t fully understand what had happened between them for her mother to give up the fight for their love, but now seeing the smile on her father’s face and the break in his voice, all she could do was send a prayer of thanks that her mother had changed her mind. Had come home.

She was still gathering her thoughts when her father reached out a hand to her. “Victoria, will you please join us?”

Formal dinner parties were not Robert’s forte. Not unless he could corner some business acquaintance and talk the spice trade to them. An evening where he couldn’t secure a new contract or agreement was, in his opinion, an evening wasted.

This evening’s hostess had fortuitously sent him a copy of the guest list. Mrs. Stevenson had been clever in inviting a number of people whom he knew were good company. From what he’d heard, getting the Duke of Spice to accept a private invitation to dine was considered quite the coup amongst the matrons of the haut ton .

Personally I would be the last noble I would ever want to sit at my table.

Unbeknownst to his hostess, Mrs. Stevenson had presented Robert with an even better reason to attend her home tonight. He’d been delighted to see Lady Victoria Kembal’s name on the guest list and had quickly sent Mrs. Stevenson his note of acceptance.

The need for revenge was a familiar one, and he was powerless against its temptation.

The chit has it coming to her.

Robert was wearing his most enchanting smile as he stepped into the foyer of the elegant Mount Street townhouse that evening. He bowed to the hostess, then shook the hand of her husband, thanking them for their gracious invitation. He pretended not to see the excited grins Mister and Mrs. Stevenson exchanged with one another upon his arrival.

Yes, I am a duke, and I am at your home.

After a few minutes of small talk about the weather and the price of stocks on the London exchange, Robert moved further into the receiving room. Whisky glass in hand, he slyly searched for his prey.

A thrill of anticipation shot down his spine as his gaze finally landed on Lady Victoria Kembal. She was standing to one side of the room, a middle-aged couple situated either side of her. He immediately recognized the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray. The tall Clifford Kembal, with his shock of salt and pepper hair, was paying close attention to his wife. Lady Anne, whom Robert had met a few times over the years, seemed a little ill at ease.

I wonder if this is one of her first times back in society since her return.

He found it odd that despite all the gossip about her own family, much of which had featured in the Morning Herald, Lady Victoria still saw fit to pen numerous letters to the newspaper.

Tonight he intended to permanently change her mind about sending unsolicited correspondence. By the end of the dinner, the stuck up little miss would know exactly

the price that not minding her own business had cost her.

“S and W, how are you?”

Robert turned at the voice. He accepted the bow of his fellow guest with good grace. “Good evening.”

He was determined that his manners tonight would be utterly spotless, right up to and including the moment he tore Lady Victoria Kembal to pieces. He would leave her dignity in shreds, while at the same time giving her nothing to pin her hat on for complaint against him.

“I haven’t seen you at a social gathering in some time. Thought you’d retired permanently to your estate,” said the other gentleman.

Robert gave a light laugh in response. “No. Not retired, just busy. But all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, so I thought I’d venture out this evening.” He nodded in the direction of his quarry. “I’m glad I did, there are some pretty young ladies here this evening.”

The other man nodded. “Not thinking of finally taking on a duchess are we, S and W?”

Robert waved his words away. “One day I must, but right now I’m still enjoying my bachelor years.”

Victoria recognized him the moment she set eyes on that face. The gentleman over the other side of the room, the one who was stealing the occasional glance her way, was the same man she had run into in the supper room at the ball the other night. The rude one.

She glared at him.

He smiled back.

“Victoria?”

Her mother’s voice roused her from the silent battle she was conducting with the stranger across the way.

“Yes Mama.”

Lady Anne moved closer, and while she brushed an invisible piece of lint from her daughter’s shawl, leaned in and whispered, “A young lady does not make faces at other people in polite company, especially not when that other person happens to be a bachelor duke.”

Her heart stilled at the words ‘bachelor duke’. Please no. He can’t be.

The duchess continued with her ministrations, touching Victoria’s pearl choker to make it perfectly straight. “That is the Duke of Saffron Walden. You were meant to be introduced to him at the first of the balls we went to the other week, but your paths unfortunately did not cross. If there is one person whom I would like you to make a favorable impression on this evening, it is His Grace.”

Her heart began pumping at a fast rate as the Duke of Spice approached. Victoria swallowed deep. Lady Anne might well be pinning her hopes on a union between her daughter and this man, but she didn’t know they had already crossed swords.

He made a beeline straight for where Victoria and her parents stood. “Your Graces.” As he bowed to her mother, Victoria did a mental calculation. Lady Anne was a duchess and a duke’s daughter, so somewhere in the mess of social graces, she might

actually outrank him. “Mowbray,” he said to her father, who replied with a droll. “S and W. Long time.”

Victoria held her breath.

“And who would this delightful creature be?” He bowed low to Victoria, who dipped into a perfect curtsy.

Lady Anne was all smiles. “This is our second eldest daughter, Lady Victoria.”

The smile Victoria painted on her lips was painful. It was hard to smile when you were gritting your teeth.

“And what a lovely young lady you are. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lady Victoria.” When he bowed once more, she could have sworn she heard her mother sigh with relief. If the duchess got her way, she’d be booking the reading of the church banns by the end of the night.

All this left Victoria wondering if the Duke of Saffron Walden had indeed forgotten their first meeting. Or perhaps he did remember her but was simply being polite. For all she knew, he might not have thought too much of their earlier encounter. Had simply brushed it off as an unfortunate incident.

Her senses were on edge. Instinct whispered for her to take great care with this man.

A dinner gong startled Victoria from her thoughts of ducal motivation. “My lords, ladies, and gentlemen would you please make your way into the dining room,” announced the head butler.

She moved toward her father in the full expectation that he would accompany her into this evening’s proceedings, but a strong male hand touched her upper arm, halting her

progress. “Lady Victoria, would you please grant me the honor of walking you into dinner?”

Lady Anne didn’t give her daughter the opportunity to say no—she took a hold of her husband’s arm and batted her eyelashes at him. “Clifford, you promised you wouldn’t leave my side this evening.”

The love smitten Duke of Mowbray bent and kissed his wife on the cheek. “And I intend to keep that promise, my love.”

Victoria’s cheeks burned with deep embarrassment. Her parents had just shown one another real affection in public. Those things were not done in polite society.

Of course this was all part of a ploy, a way to have the ton talking about the duke and duchess and how love had conquered all, but she still didn’t know where to look.

It was with a growing sense of trepidation that Lady Victoria Kembal took the Duke of Spice’s arm and allowed him to escort her into dinner.

Chapter Fifteen

During their brief encounter in the supper room he hadn't had enough time to make a thorough study of Lady Victoria Kembal, but as he walked arm in arm with her into the elegant dining room Robert glanced over at his secret nemesis. His gaze drifted down, and he suddenly recalled seeing those magnificent breasts and the delightful way they had filled the bodice of her gown. They were on display again tonight.

Heavens that's an inviting pair of full breasts. I wonder what sound she would make if I gently mouthed them.

Would she moan? Or softly sigh? Or would she be the kind of woman who hadn't a clue about her sexual needs, a female who required a long and thorough education in the art of seduction and desire. Whatever her needs, he'd be more than happy to oblige.

"I understand you are known as the Duke of Spice. Why is that?" she asked.

His gaze lifted from staring at the delicious mounds bobbing up and down, and straight into a pair of perfect blue eyes. When she blinked, he felt himself start to go hard.

Robert cleared his throat. "It's because I come from the town of Saffron. We grow crocus plants, which when they flower provide the stem for the saffron spice. It's a spice..."

"Yes, I know what saffron is," she snapped, cutting him off.

Feisty little thing. I bet she would be a screamer if I had her under me. She'd be clawing at my back as she climaxed.

They reached the doorway of the dining room, and a footman motioned for them to follow the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray. Robert ignored him and guided his dinner companion to the other end of the long oak table. When Victoria shot a look in the direction of her parents, he leaned in and murmured, "You don't want to spend the whole evening with Mama and Papa while they make doe eyes at one another, now do you?"

With his prey out of earshot of her family, he would be free to indulge in a spot of teasing. And if his plans went as well as he hoped, he would have put her firmly in her place by the end of the third course. Then he could spend the rest of the evening thoroughly ignoring her, forgetting she ever existed.

Though those fantastic tits might not be so easy for me to forget.

He'd already figured that tonight was important for her mother, and the duchess would be horrified if her daughter made a scene. Lady Victoria's gaze flittered to the guests around her, and Robert quietly guessed what she must be thinking. There were close to thirty guests seated at the table—there would be people all around her for the duration of the meal. What harm could possibly befall her?

"If you are happy to indulge a young lady for this evening, then yes we could sit here," replied Victoria. He caught the hesitation in her voice and quietly chided himself.

Let's not take this too far. As long as she knows I'm onto her, and that I'm prepared to fight, this needn't come to an all-out public war.

He waited while Lady Victoria took her seat, then sat beside her. Picking up a nearby

bottle of champagne, he poured a long drink into her glass, then handed it to her. The smile he offered to Lady Victoria Kembal said it all.

Welcome to my web, little spider.

She was trapped. Her plans for an evening spent showing some of the most influential matrons of the haut ton that she was a young woman who took life seriously and was ready for marriage had been stolen away by the Duke of Spice. Victoria glanced down the table to where her parents sat, sending out a silent plea for help. She caught her mother's eye, but the duchess simply smiled at her, then turned away to resume the conversation she was having with this evening's hostess.

Victoria swallowed down a lump of dread. When Lady Anne had said she was to show society just how sophisticated she was, she'd assumed it would be under her mother's watchful eye. Ten place settings away on the other side of the table did not meet that criterion.

"Is there something wrong, Lady Victoria?"

Screwing her courage to the sticking place, she turned and gave the duke a confident smile. "No, absolutely nothing. Now you were telling me about the spices you grow on your estate, please do go on."

He'd give Lady Victoria her dues, she had a spine. Robert caught the challenge in her words. If she thought to take him on at his own game, she was making a grave mistake. Then again, this was the same woman who thought so highly of herself that she had written to the newspaper and demanded his dismissal. He couldn't wait to see her fall flat on her face.

"Yes, we grow saffron amongst other herbs and spices. They are then harvested and sold at the Cambridge and London markets. But I'm sure a young lady such as

yourself wouldn't be interested in the mundane matters of crops and food."

Her fingers tightened around the stem of her glass. She raised it to her lips and took a long sip, before setting it down once more. "I can assure you I am most intrigued by your husbandry efforts. What sort of price do you fetch per ounce for the saffron? I hear it is an expensive spice. As I enjoy it in various curries, risottos, and stews, I've always been interested to know just how much it costs."

Curries and risottos? He hadn't ever heard of a young noblewoman who knew what those were, let alone ate them.

He paused for a moment, unsure of how he should answer her question. The market rates were something he carried around in his head, but much of his current cash flow was due to the spices he had liberated from the hands of the East India Company. Apart from the cost of his men and the bribes which he regularly handed over, those goods were effectively cost free.

If he didn't watch his words, he might say something he later came to regret.

"A gentleman never talks monetary matters with a lady, especially not at a private party. Let's just say money and fair words, Lady Victoria."

Patronizing swine. Victoria was about to take the duke to task over his manners when a bowl of soup appeared at her right shoulder. She sat back as a footman placed it in front of her, gritting her teeth as she took in the tasteless glop that was the infamous 'white soup'. This was one dish she had made her life's ambition to avoid at all costs.

"This looks delicious," observed the duke.

The moment everyone's bowl had arrived, her dinner companion had tucked into his soup. Victoria sat spoon in hand and watched him as he ate.

Her mother had said he was a bachelor. Taking in the specks of gray in his hair, she pondered his age. How old was he, forty?

What had Matthew said about Robert Tolley? Older than Gideon by several years, so that would make him closer to thirty. Perhaps even older. And why wasn't he already married? It was rare for a nobleman to escape the clutches of wedded bliss, what with the need for an heir or two to be sired and the bloodline secured.

Maybe he was married, and he patronized and bored his poor wife to death.

She set down her spoon. The hostess of this evening was at the other end of the table. She would never know that Victoria hadn't touched her soup.

"Don't you like white soup?" he enquired.

Victoria pushed the bowl slightly away and to one side. The footman standing a few feet behind the table moved forward and collected it. She gave him a polite, "Thank you."

To the duke, she simply said, "I'm not particularly hungry, so it makes sense to keep my appetite for the main courses."

The guest on the opposite side of the table from her glanced down the table at this evening's hostess, then whispered, "If it's not good enough for Lady Victoria, then I am not eating it either."

Her concern at this remark quickly turned to one of abject horror as the other soup declining guest turned to the person seated next to them and remarked, "Lady Victoria Kembal is known to have a perfect palate. She is the one whom we all look to for guidance in the supper room at parties." They offered her an encouraging smile. "We missed you all those long months while you were in the country."

Her blood ran to ice. This was not the reputation she wanted to cultivate in polite society. That of being a food snob. If she didn't put a stop to this and quick smart, she'd never be invited to dine at any private homes ever again. And her chances of landing a suitable husband would be as cold as the soup which had just left the table.

Victoria reached for a small bread roll and the butter, her hopes for the evening rapidly sinking as the rest of the guests seated around her followed suit and abandoned their bowls of soup.

The duke turned to her. "Does the soup not meet with your high expectations, Lady Victoria?"

Chapter Sixteen

This was absolutely bloody marvelous. It took all his willpower not to smile. His avowed enemy was digging her own grave. Robert picked up his bread roll, broke it open and spread a generous helping of butter over the top. He sat chewing, waiting to see how Lady Victoria was going to try and salvage her evening.

“No, I am just not very hungry. The soup looked delicious,” stammered Victoria.

Robert moved in for the kill. “I must say I thoroughly enjoyed my bowl of soup. I’m glad for the bread roll so I can sop up every last drop. As someone who does understand fine food and good manners, may I suggest that Lady Victoria has made a small misstep here. We shouldn’t all follow her lead.”

A perfect palate, my ass. She turns her nose up at the odd dish at a party and that makes her an expert? These people are nothing but sheep.

He turned the knife in slowly. “Tell me, do you prepare any dishes at home? I mean what with your cultured mouth, I would expect you know the ins and outs of your Papa’s kitchen. Since all the best cooks in London know their way around a stove, I expect you give regular guidance to the chef at Mowbray House. Do you offer them little tips?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the other guests were taking a keen interest in the conversation. A duke’s daughter wouldn’t be allowed within ten feet of the kitchens. Women like Lady Victoria were raised to focus their minds on securing a respectable marriage and then breeding heirs. She wouldn’t know one end of a

wooden spoon from the other.

Victoria nervously cleared her throat. “No, I don’t cook. But that doesn’t mean I don’t know food.”

Robert held up a hand silencing her protest. “I am sorry, but I am going to have to disagree with you on that point, Lady Victoria. Too many folk think they know food. Take for instance the fool who keeps writing to the Morning Herald demanding they sack their restaurant reviewer. I happen to think the chap who writes for the column knows his eating establishments rather well.”

To his utter delight, the other guests now weighed in. The support for the incumbent at the newspaper was overwhelming. Robert wasn’t the least bit surprised. He knew the kind of people who read his column, and the people seated at this table were not the sort to actually venture out to any of the places he recommended. They read his column, so they had something to talk about when they were at a dinner party.

You might think that you sound clever by repeating some of the things I’ve written, but you haven’t the foggiest clue when it comes to food and good taste.

He ventured a look in Lady Victoria’s direction. Her hands were in her lap, but they were tightly fisted. Anger radiated from her.

That will teach you to come after me.

To her credit, she didn’t quietly back down. Most other females would have sought to change the subject, but not Lady Victoria Kembal. She waded into the fight, fists swinging.

“I do happen to read the Morning Herald, and I think the reader who is calling for the reviewer to be replaced has some very valid points. From what I hear, one of the

more recent reviews was of a restaurant that wasn't even open. How can you possibly defend that, Your Grace?"

Damn. She had him on that point. Robert was still scrambling for something clever to say when the second course appeared in front of him. It was glazed ham with an Espagnole sauce. Ham with brown gravy was a safe dish, but with thirty guests, he couldn't fault the logic.

He picked up his fork. "Well I don't know how the London culinary scene works, and I would suggest neither do you Lady Victoria, but this ham looks delicious. Shall we eat?"

Victoria excused herself from the table. It was either that or committing murder. The pompous ass of a duke was doing his best to keep her in her place. And the other guests were loving the sparring between them.

The second she closed the door of the ladies retiring room behind her, she headed for a sofa and dropped onto it, all the while muttering foul oaths under her breath. Not a minute later, her mother appeared in the doorway. The duchess closed and locked the door behind her. "What the devil are you playing at with the Duke of Saffron Walden?" she whispered.

The exchange between her and the duke hadn't gone unnoticed at the other end of the table.

"Nothing. We were just talking about food."

Lady Anne took a seat next to her. "From where I was sitting, it looked quite heated. Victoria darling, you won't secure a husband if you conduct yourself like that at parties. Men want quiet, agreeable wives. Or at least affable brides."

She shot her mother a look of disbelief. This was rich, coming from the woman who had turned martial disagreements into a blood sport.

“The Duke of Saffron Walden seems to think he knows more about food than I do. But the truth is the man is a crashing bore who doesn’t know what he is talking about,” huffed Victoria.

The duchess rested her hand on Victoria’s and let out a slow breath. “Remember that you and I are working together, and your part includes you holding both your temper and your tongue at bay. Think what you like about his grace, but there are people here tonight whose opinions of your behavior will have a major bearing on your ability to find a husband.” As she sucked in a tight breath, Victoria caught the tension which lined her mother’s face. “And for my chances of making a successful return to society.”

She’d let her pride get the better of her. Let him get the better of her.

I am a fool. I know how much tonight means to Mama.

“I’m sorry. You are right, I should hold back my words.”

He had been baiting her, and she the naïve miss had bitten at everything the duke had offered her. This was a war she was not going to be able to win. The rules of society dictated that a man like the Duke of Saffron Walden would always be the victor.

“Thank you. Now freshen up and go back to the table. Remember your place as a young unwed lady and mind your manners,” replied Lady Anne.

She rose from the sofa, then bent and brushed a kiss on her daughter’s cheek. “When you are a married matron of the ton, things will be different. I promise. You will have a husband to help fight your battles. Once you are wed, you will be allowed to

have an opinion.”

Robert noticed the change in Lady Victoria’s disposition the moment she returned to the table. She was quiet and said little to any one for the next few courses. Someone must have had a word with her and pulled her into line. And while she was keeping her own counsel, he sensed she was still bristling with rage. It would only take a carefully placed word or two on his part and she would show her claws once more.

“What do you think of the salmon pie and potato pudding, Lady Victoria?” he ventured a little while later. She had barely touched the potato, and he had caught her muttering something about the lack of taste after she had eaten her second mouthful of the pie.

Robert’s personal thoughts on the food this evening was that Mrs. Stevenson had gone with a safe, bland selection of dishes. Whomever was running the kitchen wasn’t well acquainted with spices, or if they were, they had thought that salt and pepper was enough.

I have some fresh dill at home that would go nicely with this pie.

The nutmeg he had lifted from the East India Company last month would have paired well with the potato pudding. But he wasn’t in the habit of trying to supply private residences with his ill-gotten goods. Servants tended to gossip, and he didn’t want to raise the suspicions of the East India.

“The pie is pleasant, and the potatoes well cooked,” she replied.

She really had retreated into her shell. He almost felt sorry for her. Almost. But then he reminded himself that this was the person who had embarked on a campaign to see him removed from the Morning Herald .

“Come. Come now. I would have thought that a person with your esteemed palate would have more than that to say about the food. You do the rest of us a disservice if that is all you are going to contribute, Lady Victoria.”

He waved a hand in the direction of the other guests seated close by, who all nodded their agreement with his sentiments. Silence was not going to win her any points in this game.

She cast a glance in his direction, and he caught the expression of pain on her face. Good. That would teach her not to meddle in his affairs.

“The potato could do with some more spice, but that is only my humble opinion. Others may have found it suited their taste.”

Robert’s teeth grazed his bottom lip. This was getting him nowhere. He could spend the rest of the evening trying to get a rise out of her, but from the way she spoke it was clear Lady Victoria Kembal had retreated behind her walls.

And then a wicked thought struck him. He had read all her letters, including the ones which the newspaper hadn’t printed.

“I personally would say that the delicate balance of cream and spice was handled particularly well. That the recipe isn’t something that should be challenged at any time.”

I think I quoted that pretty much word for word.

Her eyes grew wide at his words. When he met her gaze, he gifted her a sly knowing grin. A challenge. This fox owned the hen house. Any little chickens who thought themselves brave enough would soon learn the bloody truth of just who had the sharpest teeth.

Oh, I know who you are and what you wrote in those letters. If you want to take me on, I'm more than willing to see you leave this table in tears.

He'd read her letters. Had quoted verbatim what she had written in one of her latest missives to the Morning Herald . The newspaper hadn't printed that note, so the only way the Duke of Saffron Walden could have known about it was if...

Oh dear god.

The dirty rotten scoundrel had been toying with her all evening. Any wonder he wanted to sit next to her. Had been all smiles and charm with her parents. This had been some cunning plan on his part all along. A way to publicly humiliate her while knowing full well that she wouldn't be able to strike back.

Victoria pushed another piece of the salmon pie onto her fork and lifted it to her mouth. He had her right where he wanted. They both knew it.

Fighting back tears, she slowly chewed her food. Every morsel was ground down to nothing by the time she finally swallowed. When she looked up at him one last time, it was through a sheen of tears. She blinked them away but there was nothing she could do. Nothing she could say to him. He had won.

I will not make a scene. Not let him savor his victory in front of everyone else.

She was the picture of calm elegance as she turned to the guest on her other side and made a polite remark about the woman's gown. "I have been meaning to tell you how much I adore that color. I would love for the name of your modiste."

A snort of male disgust reached her ears, but she didn't so much as bat an eyelid as she gave her female companion her full attention for the rest of the evening.

But if the Duke of Saffron Walden, the secret reviewer for the Morning Herald , thought she would let this insult lie, he was sadly mistaken. She'd grown up in a family with three brothers, and if anyone knew how to bide their time and exact sweet revenge it was Lady Victoria Kembal.

He'd made a point of letting her know about their secret connection. And in doing so had shown he considered himself invincible. Now, all that remained was for her show him how badly he was mistaken.

Let this prideful duke enjoy this evening—his fall was soon to come.

Chapter Seventeen

Her simmering rage heated Victoria's blood, making sleep impossible. Lying awake staring up at the darkened ceiling of her bedroom for hours on end had given Victoria an appreciation of why men fought duels at the hour of dawn. Any later and their fury would see them go mad.

Rude. Impossibly rude man. How dare he speak to her like she was a foolish child? He'd read all her letters and thought so little of her that he didn't care that she now knew he was the culinary critic for the newspaper.

Arrogant ass of a man. I really ought to shoot him.

Once she found out where the odious duke lived, she'd call him out. And while the handsome brute would no doubt stand and mock her for being a silly miss with a gun, she'd show him just how much she had learned during those hunts on her family's estate. That she might be a duke's daughter, but she knew how to handle a weapon.

She threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. Slipping into a thick woolen dressing gown, Victoria padded barefoot over to her large oak armoire and opened the door. Kneeling she pulled out the bottom drawer and set it on the floor.

She stretched her arm and reached for the back of the now empty shelf. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as her fingers touched cold glass. The maids hadn't found it. Wrapping her hand around the neck of the bottle, she dragged the whisky out of the wardrobe and got to her feet.

Victoria shook the bottle. There wasn't a lot left. She'd pilfered it from her father's personal cellar some six months ago, and from the sound of the whisky sloshing against the glass, another raid would soon be on the cards.

She didn't bother with a glass, swigging straight from the bottle. A whisky glass was only one more thing for her maid to possibly find. Mary not only had the nose of a bloodhound, but she was particularly skilled in extorting money from her mistress in exchange for her silence.

As the whisky hit the back of her throat, Victoria shuddered. The liquor was sharp, but it was better than the brandy she and Augusta used to steal when they shared this room. Her sister now had her own home, and she was welcome to imbibe all the brandy she wished.

What was she going to do about the Duke of Spice?

That's a stupid, foolish name. I pity the poor girl who winds up marrying him.

She'd become the Duchess of Spice. And she'd be wedded to that pompous fool.

Setting the bottle on the floor, Victoria drew her knees up and rested her arms on them. He'd humiliated her this evening. She was going to make it her business to make sure she got even.

"The Duchess of Spice," she breathed, wishing that the title didn't sound so inviting. She was the lady of spice. But a duchess?

No. The man deserves to be punished, not win my hand.

Besides, he was far too old for her. Far too old. Robert Tolley had to be at least thirty.

She set the bottle to her lips once more and pondered that thought. A man who'd reached such an age would be mature. Know himself. Many young bucks were nice, pleasant boys, but they were not men.

Not handsomely rugged rogues like the duke. She could hate him. But there was an unmistakable allure about him. Something that set her core pulsing.

"No, this is about getting even with him, not lusting after his body."

Victoria downed the rest of the bottle and went back to bed.

He was a cad. A shameless cad. What sort of man sets his temper on a young woman like that? "Your Grace, you are a scoundrel," Robert grumbled to himself.

The memory of the tears shining in Victoria's eyes just before she turned away would haunt him for the rest of his days. He'd fired the last shot in a war he no longer wished to fight. But how could he come back from this? Was there a way for him to make amends?

Deuce, he shouldn't care what the chit thought of him. She was just some duke's daughter on the hunt for a husband. Who knows, he might have even done her a service this evening. Shown her that London society was more than pretty gowns and come-hither smiles.

Staring out into the cold darkness of the garden, Robert drew back on his cheroot. The light from the cigar the only sign that he was out here resting on his haunches between the rows of mint and rosemary. The sound of horses hooves on the cobbled stones at the rear of the townhouse had his senses on alert. He picked up his pistol and cocked it.

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop. He listened as a horse and wagon passed his home, continuing

to listen long after the sound had drifted into silence. London in the wee hours was a strange place. Deceptively quiet and peaceful, but always on the edge. The criminal gangs owned the streets at this hour. Gangs and smugglers.

Rising from where he lurked in the dark, Robert made his way to the end of the garden path. When he reached the gate, he bent and took hold of the lock, rattling the chain.

“Damn and bollocks,” he huffed, as the chain came away in his hand. Some criminal mastermind he was, he couldn’t even keep his own garden secure. Robert gritted his teeth, recalling how he’d hit the rear fence with a spice barrel the day before yesterday.

As soon as he got a moment, he’d have the gate repaired. Only a reckless fool would leave his home unsecured. The next time a horse and wagon trotted past his house it might not be a night cart, but rather agents of the East India come to take back what he had stolen from them.

Taking one last draw on his cheroot, Robert dropped it to the stone path. He crushed it with his boot and headed back into the house.

But as he made his way upstairs to his bedroom, his thoughts were not of the spices or his enemy. It was of the look on Lady Victoria Kembal’s face. The heartbreaking expression of shattered pride and crumpled dreams.

He’d been the one who’d created her pain. Brought her to tears. Humiliated her in front of the other guests. His victory earlier this evening now began to feel hollow.

And for the first time in a long time, the Duke of Spice felt a sharp sting in his heart. The stirrings of guilt. Of bitter regret.

It was bad enough being a villain and a thief, but even he drew the line at crushing the souls of others.

Chapter Eighteen

Victoria woke ready to do battle and seek her revenge. But her mother had other ideas. Instead of setting off to hunt down the man who had shamed her last night, she was instructed to go walking in Hyde Park with her brothers and younger sister. Her protests to the duchess fell on unsympathetic ears.

“There were some missteps last night, but a lady does not sit at home and lick her wounds. She gets back into society and makes the best of things. One has to learn to rise above the setbacks in life,” said Lady Anne from the doorway of the breakfast room.

I’m more than happy to rise above everything, but would it be too much to ask to wait until after I’ve had my revenge?

From the expression on her mother’s face, it was clear the Duchess of Mowbray was determined to move forward with the husband hunting campaign. No doubt she would have a list of the eligible males likely to be at one of London’s foremost social spots at this hour of the morning. Lady Anne rarely did anything without a plan.

“And I want you to take your sister with you. Coco needs to start showing her face in public earlier in the day,” added the duchess.

Victoria pinched her tongue between her teeth. She was dreading having to go up to her sister’s room and wake her.

I hope she has made it home, or there will be the devil to pay.

Lady Coco Kembal's nighttime escapades were an open secret amongst some of her siblings, but Victoria doubted the duke and duchess had the slightest inkling as to what their youngest child got up to when she was meant to be home safely tucked up in her bed.

"I shall go and see if Coco is awake," replied Victoria.

She rose from her seat at the table and hurried out of the room. Reaching Coco's door, she tapped quickly on the wood, then tried the handle. To her surprise, the door swung opened.

Her sister's bedroom was as black as night. The heavy drapes still closed against the bright morning sun. "Coco?" whispered Victoria as she closed and locked the door behind her, making sure not to call out too loudly. If her sister was still out roaming the streets of London, the last thing she wanted to do was to draw attention to that fact.

A body stirred in the bed, and Victoria let out a sigh of relief. After the drama of the previous evening, she didn't have it in her to go telling lies to Lady Anne.

"What?" hissed Coco.

Victoria's relief was cut short by the painfully gruff edge in Coco's voice. That one word sounded like she was talking from the bottom of a stone well. One from which she had drank deeply.

"Are you decent?" asked Victoria. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Coco rose slowly from under the blankets. In the dim light she appeared more like an apparition than a real person. "I don't feel decent, but I am dressed."

This was going to be painful no matter how she handled things. Victoria made her way over to the window and tugged on the edge of one of the curtains. "I'm sorry but I have to do this."

"Sweet lord, why?" moaned Coco, as light filled the room.

Victoria turned to face the bed. "Because Mama has asked that you accompany the rest of us to Hyde Park this morning. I can ask for some tea and toast to be brought up if that helps."

Coco held a hand up to her face, protecting her eyes from the light. "No. Only death will cure me of my ills this morning. Gin is a wicked mistress."

Victoria bit down on her bottom lip. It wasn't so much the liquor which was her sister's problem, but rather the quantity and alacrity that she imbibed it. Coco was running wild. Someday soon, her younger sibling was going to pay for her reckless behavior. She could only hope it wasn't going to be a heavy price.

"You need to get washed and changed," said Victoria, reaching for the other curtain. As she drew it fully open, the room was bathed in the warm glow of the morning sun. She ignored the string of foul curses which came from the bed. Lady Coco might well be a duke's daughter, but she had the sharp tongue of a fishwife.

"Can't you just tell Mama I am indisposed?" moaned Coco.

It was a tempting proposition, and one they had used to success on previous occasions. But this morning, Victoria wasn't in the mood for playing games.

If I continue to let her get away with this madness, it's only going to be worse when I do find a husband and leave this house. There will be no hiding from our mother once that happens.

It was time for Coco to finally face up to her choices. To stop relying upon the goodwill of others. When Victoria was gone, Richard and Matthew wouldn't be able to help her, and Gideon was only keeping silent because he was still unaware of what was going on.

"I am sorry Coco, but I'm not going to lie to Mama. You might think me cruel, but it's for your own good. You left the door unlocked this morning, anyone could have walked in and found you in this disgraceful state."

Coco slumped back in the bed. "Oh, not you as well. I'm so sick of people telling me how I should behave. Viscount Askett nagged me all last night. Told me I would be ruined if anyone ever discovered the truth of what we get up to when we are out."

"He's right. You will be ruined."

"I don't care. What life awaits me, what awaits you? It's all so meaningless. Parties. Balls. And rules."

Ignoring her sister's self-pity, Victoria crossed to the wardrobe and flung it open. "Come and help me choose a gown for you to wear. You have less than an hour to make yourself presentable. If you are not ready by then, I shall come back and drag you downstairs myself."

She would leave it up to Coco as to whether she would risk walking in Hyde Park in a state of anything less than perfect dress.

The blankets were mercifully tossed back, and Coco swung her legs over the side of the bed. "You are just like everyone else, beastly to me," she huffed.

The only person who is horrible to you, is yourself.

How many times had she wished to say that to Coco. To confront her with the truth that she was indeed her own worst enemy. That this was all going to end in tears. Only sibling loyalty kept Victoria from telling their parents. But the longer this went on, the more the worry that she might also be contributing to the problem was growing on her.

Coco now stood beside the bed, head lowered. Misery and the miasma of alcohol seeped from her pores. Victoria's pity stirred. She came to her sister's side and took a gentle hold of her hand. "Let me fetch you some tea and a dry biscuit. You need to get something in your stomach. Get out of your street clothes, then ring the bell for your maid. I shall let Mama know you will ready to leave at eleven."

She got a nod and a soft, "Yes, thank you," before she let go of Coco's hand and headed for the door.

Coco had rallied by the time they alighted from the Mowbray town carriage at Hyde Park little over an hour later. It was only a fifteen minute stroll from Berkley Square to the gates of Hyde Park, but Victoria convinced Richard to speak to the stablemaster and have the carriage brought round. Her brother had initially protested, but when his gaze landed on the ashen-faced Lady Coco, he had immediately caved.

"Lord help us, if Mama or Papa catch sight of her. There will be an immediate inquisition, and we will all be dragged in front of it," he grumbled.

Lord Richard wasn't a fool. If Coco received a grilling by their parents, there was every chance she'd throw one of her siblings into the mix in order to save herself. Richard's gambling habit would be the perfect foil for her own misdeeds.

At the park, the two brothers walked a little way ahead of their sisters. Close enough to stamp their authority as chaperones, but at a distance where their own conversations couldn't be overhead by Victoria or Coco. It suited everyone.

The sisters walked slowly arm in arm. Coco was clearly struggling, but to her credit was making an effort. “How did your dinner party go last night?” asked Coco.

Getting her sibling into a presentable enough condition to leave the house had concentrated Victoria’s mind for the past while. Her sister’s question brought the painful humiliation rushing back.

“The food was fine. Though it could have done with more seasoning.”

Coco gave her a sideways glance. “I might be a little hungover, but even I know you were meant to be concentrating on more than just the table offerings last night. Did you meet the Duke of Saffron Walden?”

Victoria slowed her steps, letting a little more distance grow between them and their brothers who continued along the path. She leaned in close and whispered, “Yes, I met the duke. To say that the man was a rude pig would be an understatement.”

Coco’s red-rimmed eyes grew wide. “Do tell. I’d heard he was rather handsome. Well turned out thighs and a pleasant physique.”

She sincerely wished his grace wasn’t as ruggedly good-looking as he was—it would make hating him all that much easier. Memories of the moment he’d bowed his head and moved close to her, took hold in her mind. His scent, the spice of his cologne. Those lips.

Damn it, why did he have to be so...

Her brain was still scrambling to finish that thought as Victoria shoved against it with all her might. She was not going to let herself think of him that way.

“Well, what happened?”

Coco wasn't going to let the subject go. Her sister was a great one for finding out secrets, for knowing the power they held.

Victoria sighed. "When I offered my opinion on the subject of a dish, he didn't engage me in conversation, rather he spoke down to me. Like I was a child. Then he mocked me in front of the other guests."

Coco let out a low whistle. "I'm surprised you didn't stab him with a fish knife. Or a blunt spoon. Tell me you didn't let him get away with such an outrage."

"I can't understand why some men think that we females don't have an appreciation of good food. That somehow being a woman renders my palate mute."

The fingers of her left hand tightened on the strings of her reticule. Frustrating self-important males were the bane of her life.

"Go on."

"He was just horrible to me, and it took all my strength not to burst into tears at the table."

He had read her letters to the newspaper and thrown them back in her face. Victoria's steps slowed and she came to a halt.

"Coco darling, if a man crossed you and you had in mind to exact a spot of vengeance, how would you go about it?"

Her sister let out a hiss of delighted surprise. "Yesss. Now, let me think. So many possibilities. In the meantime, we had better keep walking, lest our brothers turn round and wonder what we are up to."

They resumed playing the part of sweet young ladies as they followed after their brothers, offering smiles and gentle ‘good mornings’ to everyone of their acquaintance whom they encountered. Little was said between them, but Victoria could just imagine Coco was busy coming up with one of her devious plans.

I hope she is, I need something brilliant in order to strike back at the duke.

“Before the scandal of our parents, I would have suggested an open challenge. Tear the cad down in public. But now that Mama is working so hard to reenter society along with securing you a suitable husband, I would think you’d need to tread more carefully.”

The prospect of giving the hard-hearted matrons of the ton something new to gossip about their family had Victoria’s breakfast churning in her stomach.

I can’t do anything that would hurt my family.

She worried what another scandal might do to their father. The duke had run close to madness when his wife had refused to come home from Rome.

“Yes, no scandals. So, what would you suggest?”

A sly smile crept to her sister’s face. “Lord knows rumors have caused enough damage to our family, so why not do the same to him. Everyone has skeletons in their closet. The Duke of Saffron Walden must have something he wants kept from public knowledge. You just need to find out what that thing is and use it to hurt him.”

“Coco you are a treasure. Evil, but brilliant. The Duke of Spice does have a secret I expect he would want kept from the world, at any price.”

Robert Tolley might think he had the measure of her, but she was not without her

own weapons against him. If she publicly unmasked him as the restaurant reviewer, it would cause him no end of trouble. And public embarrassment. The ton discovering that a duke of high rank was writing articles for a daily newspaper would be nothing short of scandalous.

“Extortion is such a vulgar word, but if revenge is what you seek, I can highly recommend it,” replied Coco.

A shudder raced through Victoria. She really didn’t want to know what Coco knew of the dark art of blackmail. Something told her that her sweet sister had already ventured down that road more than once.

Coco lay her hand over Victoria’s arm. “A word of caution. Be sure of the outcome which you seek. I’ve seen these things not only fail but come back to bite with fierce vengeance. Be very careful what you wish for,” said her sister.

What do I wish for? I want him to feel as low as he made me feel last night.

When she was finished with him, the Duke of Spice would think long and hard about ever trying to embarrass a young lady in public ever again.

Victoria beamed at her sister. “Let’s catch up with our brothers, I’m in the mood to celebrate. As soon as we are done promenading this morning, we should head to the cake shop on Oxford Street, the one you love so much. My treat.”

She was going to find a way to unmask the Duke of Saffron Walden. Reveal his secret role as London’s worst restaurant reviewer and then ensure that he was sacked from the newspaper. His public ignominy would be sweeter than anything Victoria had ever tasted.

Chapter Nineteen

It was close to midnight when Victoria lightly tapped on her sister's bedroom door. She flinched as Coco suddenly opened it and dragged her inside. "I..."

Coco's hand pressed over her mouth. "Shh. Do you want to wake the entire household?" Victoria shook her head, and her sister released her. "The first rule you have to learn about sneaking out of here is to be silent as a wraith. If you make a noise, one of the servants will hear, and then we will never go anywhere."

Victoria wasn't accustomed to stealing out into the night. At this hour, she'd much prefer to be in the warmth and comfort of her bed, preferably with a good book. Coco on the other hand was the mistress of mischief and midnight wanderings.

"Did you find out where he lives?" asked Coco.

"Yes, Pye Street. But I can hardly go knocking on his front door in the middle of the night," replied Victoria. What would she do if he answered? Shove a pistol in his face and go through with her mad plan of challenging him to a duel?

This is a mistake. I haven't a clue what I'm doing.

She had managed to find out where the Duke of Saffron Walden lived through Richard, who had attended a party next door to his house some time last year. Her brother had fortunately not asked why she wanted to know—he had been more interested in the state of her purse. A handful of coins had bought his silence.

A sly smile appeared on Lady Coco Kembal's lips. Was that a wicked glint in her eye?

"The first thing you need to do is what we night ramblers call a sneaky sortie. You walk to the rear of his home and slip in through the garden gate. I find you can discover plenty of things about people from their gardens."

"Such as?"

Victoria had only ever thought about flowers and potting sheds. What other secrets could be found among the weeds and stones?

Coco picked up a long woolen gentleman's coat and slipped her arms into it. When Victoria scowled at her, she simply shrugged. "Coats are far more practical than cloaks or capes. Especially when you have to climb over walls. I've been known to get about town in men's trousers, but I ripped the ass out of the last pair when we had to flee from the Bow Street runners. Couldn't risk getting caught."

Hearing about her sister's exploits had Victoria having serious second thoughts about spying on the Duke of Spice. Who was to say he didn't have weapons? This was London, and anyone caught skulking about in a private garden late at night wasn't likely to be there simply to admire the roses.

But if she didn't go this evening, she mightn't get another chance. Having successfully navigated the dinner party three nights ago, Lady Anne had apparently found her courage. Despite their earlier agreement, Victoria's social diary was now bulging with every party, ball, and at-home imaginable.

Her mother's list would most certainly not include her daughter skulking through a duke's garden, but Victoria wanted to do something. Even if it amounted to nothing more than her standing outside his house and silently raining down all the curses and

taunts, she could think of to say to him. If she got brave, she might even throw a small stone at his window on her way out.

He was a duke. She was an unwed young miss. Her best laid plans had revealed themselves to be nothing more than foolish flights of fancy.

Publicly unmasking him as the reviewer for the Morning Herald would only leave her open to further attack. This was a war she couldn't win. Not without risking serious damage to her marital prospects.

She would go with Coco tonight, do her worst, and at least feel some sense of satisfaction. Come tomorrow, she would put all thoughts of the Duke of Saffron Walden out of her mind and get on with the business at hand. Securing a husband, and helping her family reestablish themselves back into London society. It was the only sensible way forward.

Coco dropped to her knees. She rummaged around under the bed for a moment, before getting to her feet. Victoria's mouth went dry at the sight of the pistol in her sister's hand. Her fear rose with every moment as her sibling casually loaded the weapon and tucked it inside her coat.

What on earth is she doing?

When Coco was done, she gave Victoria a tight smile. "London is a bloody dangerous place at night. It's a good thing we were all taught how to shoot straight."

Their father had insisted that all his children knew how to handle a weapon, but she doubted the Duke of Mowbray had been thinking about the ruffians of London when he'd instructed the girls. The occasional wild boar at their uncle, the Duke of Strathmore's Scotland estate was more likely to have been his main concern.

“Please tell me you haven’t had the need to use that pistol.”

Coco shrugged. “What is the very first rule of handling a loaded weapon? The one they taught us at the start of every shooting lesson.”

“Don’t point a pistol at someone unless you are fully prepared to fire it.”

Oh god.

That thought sent a chill running down Victoria’s spine. Her sister really had run wild. Here she was trying her best to restore the family’s reputation while at the same time her younger sibling was roaming the streets armed with a loaded weapon. The Kembal women had always skirted the rules of society, but this bordered on insanity.

She was still pondering her own state of mind as she followed her sister downstairs and out into the night. From Berkely Square, they crossed over into Bruton Street. She spied a darkened carriage and slowed her steps. Her senses tingled. This was dangerous.

As they neared the carriage, Coco put her fingers to her lips and let out a sharp whistle. The door of the coach opened, and a tall figure climbed out. Victoria stopped, ready to turn and run home, but her sister merely kept going. When she reached the stranger, Coco threw herself into the man’s arms, and cried, “I’ve missed you,” before the two of them embarked on a long lingering kiss.

In the street. In public.

“She’s determined to ruin both herself, and any chance of either of us making a smart match,” muttered Victoria.

Coco and the stranger finally broke the kiss. Her sister was still in the man’s arms as

they turned to face Victoria. “A, this is my sister, Lady Victoria.”

When the man moved closer and bowed, Victoria was certain her heart had stopped beating. Coco was running wild with Viscount Askett. She wasn’t sure whether this was good news or not. On the one hand, she was with a nobleman who had to have an appreciation of the risk that all this posed to a duke’s daughter, while on the other, this was a man whose own scandalous reputation put that of the Kembal family to shame.

“Lady Victoria. Coco sent word that you might be coming with us tonight. I must say I’m surprised to see that both unwed Kembal girls are on the wild side.” He bent and kissed Coco. “This one has always been naughty, but you not so much.”

If she had a lick of sense, she’d turn on her heel and head straight home. At Mowbray House, she would knock on the door of her parents’ apartment and confess all. It was the only way to save Coco.

But if she did, her sister would never forgive her.

“I...I just want to stop past a house in Pye Street and see where someone lives, not...nothing else,” she stammered. As soon as she had sent her silent insults to the duke, she would ask them to bring her back home.

Coco climbed onboard the carriage, and a reluctant Victoria followed. Dropping onto the leather bench seat, she made a vow. This would be her first and last time stealing out of the house and wandering the midnight streets of London.

What would my future husband say if he discovered this was the sort of mischief I have been up to? No man would want to marry me.

One time. One time only. She would never again do anything so reckless.

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Chapter Twenty

The carriage ride to the Duke of Saffron Walden's home was mercifully a short one, but while Victoria considered her life's choices, her sister and the viscount were more concerned with the contents of a hipflask and kissing one another. Victoria had bitten one of her fingernails close to the quick by the time the coach slowed and came to a halt.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," she suggested, hoping that her companions would agree and take her home. But to her horror, the viscount simply leant across the carriage and swung the door open. "Go on, hop out. Do your worst," he encouraged.

Coco simply grinned.

Victoria peered into the darkened laneway. The high brick walls on either side created a gloomy tunnel between the houses. No light shone from the coach. Heart thumping hard in her chest, she climbed down. "I will be just a moment, let me catch my breath first."

The viscount rose from his seat with a huff and joined her on the roadway. "The Duke of S and W lives in that house," he said, pointing to a nearby gate. "If he has insulted you, the least you can do is to go into his garden and crush a few of his pretty flowers under foot."

Vandalism hadn't been in her plans, just some silent hurling of abuse. Or at worst, whispered in his general direction.

Viscount Askett grabbed her by the arm and towed her toward the gate. In the still of the night, Victoria dared not give voice to her protestations. Even the crunch of their footsteps on the stone laneway seemed to echo through the air. The best she could manage was a hard glare, which he pointedly ignored.

Her heart was in her mouth as his hand landed on the snib of the gate, and he pushed at it. “What fool doesn’t maintain his garden gate? This is London, the man is begging to be robbed.” The way he spoke had Victoria wondering if the viscount knew more about stealing than a nobleman rightly should.

The gate swung silently open. The lock might be broken, but the rest of the structure appeared intact.

She stood in the gateway and glanced furtively at the house. No light shone in any of the upper windows. Either the duke was in bed fast asleep, or he was still out on the town.

No doubt he’s busy making some other poor woman’s evening an abject misery.

Victoria gathered her courage. The man was a bully, and she owed it to herself to at least offer an insult or two in the grounds of his private residence.

One step. Two steps. She’d crossed the threshold. Three steps. She was inside the garden. Her heart was pounding as she struggled to recall the first of the razor sharp things she’d intended saying to the towering wall of the townhouse. Victoria’s wit had fled.

The gate slammed behind her. She whirled round, just in time to see the viscount give her a friendly wave goodbye as he raced back to the carriage. He gave a cheery, “Get on with it, we will back for you later!”

Victoria's hopes that Viscount Askett was only in jest disappeared into the night along with the coach. Her only means of escape was gone.

She'd been abandoned deep inside enemy territory, with no way home.

Robert wasn't in bed asleep. Nor was he out on the town ruining anyone's night. No, he was downstairs in the kitchen baking scones. The sound of the gate being slammed shut stirred him from his thoughts of hot salted butter.

"Damn. I knew I should have got that bloody gate fixed," he muttered.

But minor household repairs would have to wait. If some fool was in his garden, they were going to discover that the price of trespassing on private property, his private property, was a steep one.

Rising quietly from his seat at the wooden table, he made his way over to the fireplace. He took a pistol down from the small shelf which sat on one side of the mantelpiece. After checking that it was loaded, he cocked the weapon then headed for the back door.

It was a good eight yards from the rear of the house to the laneway. The spacious garden was filled with all manner of herbs and vegetables. Other houses in the street had lovely green lawns edged with pretty flowers and rose bushes. To his way of thinking it was a waste of good land. The Duke of Spice's London garden helped keep his belly full.

The brass key turned silently in the lock. He bent and gently lifted the lower night bolt, then reaching up, pulled down the top one. The door was solid, but Robert knew it took strong locks to keep robbers at bay.

He waited for a long moment, listening. Only silence reached his ears. Fuck.

Whoever was creeping about the rear of his home was light of foot. Perhaps it had been the wind, and the gate had simply swung open. He could only hope that was the case. But he dared not risk it.

His fingers gripped the edge of the door as he slowly opened it. For a moment he lingered on the threshold, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

The first quarter moon bathed the night in a pale glow. The trees lining the edge of the garden threw dark shadows. But even in the darkness, he could still make out the form of a silhouette. Someone was standing just inside the garden gate.

Robert was about to step out and challenge them, when that someone moved forward, toward one of his large pots which contained garden herbs. The figure then stopped and bent. The snap of a leaf being plucked reached his ears. Whoever this brigand was, they were taking a terrible risk in wasting time sampling his herbs.

What sort of fool does that?

What sort of fool am I?

She should have suspected Coco, and her so-called friend were up to something when her sister remained in the carriage while he came with Victoria to the duke's gate.

Fancy falling for that old trick.

And now she was stranded in a moonlit garden in the middle of the night with nowhere to go. She would have to wait for them to come back for her.

She hoped they came back for her. If they didn't, she was going to kill her sister.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and Victoria's fear slowly subsided. Even in

the middle of the night, she could tell this garden was a veritable food lovers' heaven. The heady scent of herbs filled the air. And was that a strawberry patch?

She carefully considered her situation. If the duke was tucked up in bed fast asleep, or even better out on the town, he wouldn't be coming to disturb this moment. And he'd hardly notice if she took one or two small souvenirs of her visit to his garden. Trophies to remind her of this private victory.

Coco might well have abandoned her, but she'd been right about the coat, it would have been far more practical for this sort of endeavor. Cloaks didn't have pockets. The best she would be able to manage would be to make a small posy of the herbs she was stealing.

Oh god, are Coco and her wicked friends rubbing off on me?

Dill. Rosemary. Mint. She had just snapped off a large sprig of aromatic basil and was arranging it with the rest of the herbs when a gruff voice spoke. "You do know that sneaking into someone's garden in the middle of the night is trespassing. And as the owner of this house, I would be well within my rights to shoot you."

Clutching her bunch of herbs tightly in her hand, Victoria slowly rose. She turned to see the Duke of Saffron Walden standing a few feet away, pistol in his hand. It was pointed directly at her.

There wasn't anything she could say which would explain this away. Hello, I was passing by your garden in the dead of night and saw you had some herbs, didn't quite roll smoothly off the tongue.

"This was a mistake," she feebly offered.

He moved closer, and she could just make out the glint of pure mischievous delight in

his eyes. “Yes, it was a mistake, Lady Thief. And one you are going to regret for a very long time to come.”

Chapter Twenty-One

If Robert had been asked to put together a list of people whom he would suspect of breaking into his garden and stealing from him, the list would be long. Over the years he had accumulated a few enemies. But Lady Victoria Kembal's name wouldn't have been on that list. Hence his surprise at discovering the identity of the shadow which lurked amongst his herbs and vegetables.

What the devil am I going to do with her?

For a moment, he thought of simply letting her go. He'd give her a stern lecture about venturing into people's gardens and thieving herbs, then send her on her way. But this was the middle of the night. And she was alone.

"Stay there," he ordered.

Stepping past her, he cleared the gateway and moved into the lane. He glanced left and right. No horse. No carriage. Nothing. Had the chit walked all the way here from Berkely Square? That had to be well over a mile and a half.

Her accomplices must have dropped her off at the end of the laneway and...

He turned and came back to her side. "Who and where are the people you are working with?" She couldn't possibly be here simply to snatch up sprigs.

"I'm not working with anyone. I made a mistake. I. Oh, this is so embarrassing. I am sorry. It was foolish of me to come here." She offered him her ill-gotten haul, but

Robert shook his head.

“What am I going to do with them? I can’t exactly glue them back onto the plants now, can I? The damage has been done, Lady Thief.”

He liked the way that name sounded, and he especially liked the look of surprise on her face. “Thieves get sent to the colonies. I’m wondering if you will be the first duke’s daughter to get transported to Sydney Cove. Once I have alerted the authorities to your heinous crime, we shall know.”

Her mother was going to kill her, so a perilous journey of ten thousand miles to the colony in New South Wales didn’t seem such a bad idea. Though knowing the duchess, she might well be angry enough to follow, just to make certain that Victoria understood the depth of her displeasure.

The Duke of Spice had caught her in his garden. Stealing his herbs. Her concerns about Coco getting into serious trouble now paled against her own predicament. At least her sister was smart enough not to get caught.

She offered him the bouquet once more, and this time he took it. With the herbs in one hand, cocked pistol in the other, he slowly shook his head. If she was in his boots, she would also be shaking her head.

Victoria took a step back, in the direction of the garden gate. If she moved, he might decide to let her go. The sly grin on his face, along with his censorious ‘tut tut’ quickly informed her that he had no intention of letting her get off so easily.

I had to try.

They stood staring one another down for a long minute, before his expression suddenly changed. “My scones,” he muttered.

“If you are baking, then I shouldn’t keep you,” she politely suggested.

“No you shouldn’t. But as I said, here we are. Now, get inside.”

He marched her into the house at gun point.

As soon as they were inside, he closed and locked the door. While he slid the night bolts into place, she had a fleeting thought of running upstairs and attempting to dash out the front door.

“I wouldn’t try anything rash, Lady Thief. Pistols have a tendency to go off, and I’m sure your dear Mama and Papa wouldn’t want to have to explain the circumstances of your demise.” A deep rumbling laugh rose up in his chest. “Could you just imagine what the matrons of the haut ton would make of it? They would be besides themselves with glee.”

She hated him, but that laugh did something to her body. Sent heat racing down her spine. Victoria chided herself. No. This was the horrible duke who had humiliated her and now held her captive—she did not find him the least bit attractive. But the gentle way his powerful hands held the delicate herbs had her swallowing deep.

I must be hallucinating in my fear.

There could be no other explanation for the mad thoughts which now ran freely through her head.

He ushered her into the kitchen, where to her relief she found a warm and inviting scene of domesticity. It was all rather cozy. The Duke of Spice might be a brute, but he kept a welcoming hearth.

Less welcoming was the length of rope he produced from under the kitchen bench

and promptly used to tie her firmly to a chair. Her hands were secured behind her back so she could not escape. He knelt in front of her and used the free end of the rope to tie her ankles together.

“Pardon me laying hands on your person. But I would suggest that we are already well outside the bounds of social propriety,” he said, as he touched her skin. She would have taken him to task, but her gaze was fixed on his strong, muscular thighs. The way his breeches clung to them had her fully convinced that she had indeed let go of her sanity.

He got to his feet. “Now let’s see how those scones are coming along.”

The duke opened the oven and taking out a tray, set it on the table. He pressed his fingers to the top of a scone. “Hmm, a little while longer, I think. The top isn’t quite cooked through.”

His nonchalant tone was one of a man well acquainted with baking in the middle of the night, while also holding someone captive in his house. He put the tray back into the oven. “Do you bake, Lady Victoria?”

It was the first time he had used her proper name. She’d been getting rather used to him calling her Lady Thief. It had a teasing ring to it.

“No. My mother won’t let me near the kitchens at Mowbray House. Says a young lady of my standing shouldn’t be the least bit interested in such matters.”

He scoffed a laugh. “But running around and breaking into people’s homes to rob them is acceptable?”

Victoria sighed. “No. But I didn’t break into your home, I was merely strolling in your garden. And the gate was unlocked. One could almost say you invited me in.”

He came closer, pulling up another chair to sit in front of her. Her gaze took in the rough stubble on his chin. The small food stain on the front of his shirt caught her eye.

She had a sudden compulsion to want to lick that spot clean.

“I have many questions—how you go about answering them depends on you. My suggestion would be to tell me the truth, as I don’t make a habit of torturing women.” He screwed up his face. “Actually, I haven’t ever had a female prisoner before. Congratulations, you are my first.”

The aroma of the scones reached her nose. She couldn’t help herself. “What do you put in your scones? They smell delicious.”

His face lit up in what could only be described as pure delight. “Really? They smell good to you. Well that’s high praise. What with your excellent palate.”

He was mocking her. She really ought to take offence. But trussed to a chair and at his mercy didn’t leave her with such options.

“I’m serious. In fact, if you were to ever get to know me, you would understand that I take food very seriously indeed. Your Grace.”

His brows furrowed. “Your Grace? I think we can dispense with the formalities don’t you, sweet Victoria. My name is Robert, and as my private captive, you may feel free to use my first name. In fact, I insist.”

She glanced down at her bound feet and softly sighed. “I don’t think that would be appropriate. As you say I am your captive. Familiarity and all that.”

He shifted the chair closer, and leaned in, taking her by the chin and lifting her face.

She caught the scent of his cologne. But it was his gray blue eyes which held her attention. There were flecks of green in them. And a kindness that took her breath away.

“Victoria, what are we going to do about all this?” She understood the meaning in his words—he wasn’t just talking about their current predicament. He meant their fight over the newspaper articles.

She cleared her throat. “You could always resign from the Morning Herald . There is no shame in admitting that you are no longer up to the task.”

His roar of laughter echoed off the whitewashed bricks which lined the kitchen walls.

“Oh, you are priceless. Worth your weight in saffron. Which is actually far more valuable than gold, so you can take that as a compliment.”

He rose from the chair and headed back to the oven, where he picked up a cloth and opened the metal door. “I know your beloved mama won’t let you downstairs into the kitchen, so I’m afraid that my fancy new stove is rather wasted on you. But rest assured, if your family cook could see what I am using to bake my food, she would be green with envy.”

The tray of now fully baked scones was placed on the table. Victoria’s stomach rumbled.

“You see Victoria, this is a brand-new, built-in stove. All the way from Philadelphia in the United States of America. Cost me a small fortune. But worth every penny.”

Realization hit her. If Robert, as she had been instructed by her captor to call him, wasn’t such a villain, she could imagine the two of them being friends. Kindred spirits with a common enjoyment of good food.

“I’ve never been allowed to touch anything in the kitchens at home. That’s why I have followed your newspaper reviews with such avid fervor. I cut them out of the paper each Thursday, and glue them into a large book I keep just for that express purpose. Later I add my own notes.”

His brows furrowed. “What do you mean add your own notes?”

She shifted as best as she could on the hard wooden chair. “I have visited all the establishments that you’ve reviewed. Well, occasionally you review ones that a young lady cannot visit, but then I send one of my brothers to dine and report back to me.”

Robert couldn’t believe what he was hearing. This annoying chit not only followed his reviews but made a point of visiting every place he featured in the Morning Herald . For a moment he was lost for words. That was dedication.

Lady Victoria Kembal truly was a lover of fine food.

“So all those letters which you sent to the Morning Herald were really based on your own dining experiences?”

She nodded.

And I mocked her at the dinner party. Told her she was...oh lord.

He broke open one of the steaming scones, then added a large dollop of butter. Carrying it over to where she sat, he offered it to her. She raised an eyebrow, and he snorted at his own stupidity. Her hands were still tied.

Setting the scone down on the table, he returned to where she sat. “The back door is locked. The front door is also locked and bolted. There is no means of escape open to

you. But. And I mean this in all sincerity. If you behave, I will untie you and let you play in my kitchen.”

Play? What on earth does that mean, you dolt. She’s not going want to play.

If she was anything like he assumed she was, she would find the nearest heavy object and brain him with it, then make good her escape.

“You mean I can cook? Would you show me how to make something simple? I’d love to bake.”

The hope in her voice tugged at his heart. Here was a woman who wanted to learn to create, but whose station in life precluded her from such enjoyment.

Robert reached for the knot he had tied behind Victoria’s ankles and loosened it. He then freed her hands and helped her to her feet. She was a little unsteady, but soon stood without his aid.

“You might want to hide that pistol before we get any cooking underway. Just to make sure I don’t succumb to temptation and try to shoot you,” she said.

Her eyes held a sparkle. A hint of mischief that sent a bolt of lust racing to his cock. It gave a twitch of delighted expectation. He’d been so busy taking on his enemy, he’d let his libido go fallow like a barren field. Robert couldn’t recall the last time he had sown his wild oats.

The luscious Lady Victoria Kembal, his Lady Thief, had his long dormant body stirring once more to life.

She had talked of resisting temptation, yet the longer he gazed into those blue eyes of hers, the less sense resisting anything made.

“Robert?”

Heavens above, even the way she said his name had his balls throbbing, demanding he do something for them.

He tore his gaze from hers, and picking up the rope and pistol moved them out of harm’s way. If he didn’t get his lust under control, he might have to tie himself up.

Clearing his throat, Robert pointed to the still warm scone. “Please. I would be interested in what you have to say about my bacon and chive scones.”

Victoria picked up the scone and took a generous bite. She hummed while she chewed, and it was all Robert could do not to drop to his knees and beg for her forgiveness. When she wiped a stray spot of butter from the corner of her mouth, he wanted nothing more than to feel the heat of her tongue on his naked flesh.

She was alone with him in his house. His prisoner. He could do with her as he pleased.

An honorable man would show Victoria out the front door, and hail a hack, sending her safely home to her family. But as Robert loosened his hold on his inner villain, he decided that Lady Victoria Kembal wasn’t going anywhere.

She was a delicious creature caught in his wicked web.

I might toy with her for a little longer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Duke of Spice could cook. Victoria had never tasted a scone so rich, so full of bacony goodness. So tasty. The man was a culinary genius. If this was the level of his home baking, he should forget about writing reviews and open his own restaurant. She would dine there every night.

Her rational self, told her she should be looking for a way out of here. Viscount Askett had promised they would come back for her. The carriage could be waiting in the laneway. Coco would be worried.

Though she didn't seem all that worried when she let the coach drive off and leave me here.

Victoria turned her thoughts from that of her sister back to the food. It wasn't every day, or any day for that matter, that she was given the opportunity to actually try her hand at cooking. This was a real kitchen. With a fancy American crafted stove. This might be the only chance she got to make something.

"Your scones are excellent. That was delicious. Tell me, what was the secret ingredient?"

His smile lit up his entire face. And for the first time since she'd met him, it dawned on her that the duke wasn't as old as she had thought. The little wrinkles at his eyes were laugh lines. They only served to make him more handsome.

"How old are you? If that's not too impertinent," she asked.

Robert's grin grew wider as he chuckled. "You broke into my garden. Stole my herbs. I think we can agree that you, Lady Victoria, are an impertinent young miss."

"Victoria, please."

He moved closer. Mirth still shone on his countenance. "I prefer your other moniker, Lady Thief." He sighed. "But Victoria it is. And in answer to your question, I am thirty-one-years-old. Which I expect by your standards makes me positively ancient."

And far more interesting. A younger man likely wouldn't have the sort of knowledge that Robert had. Few men in her social circle who were around her age would know the first thing about what constituted good food. Or the value of saffron.

"And in answer to your other question, my secret ingredient is just that, a secret," he said, tapping a finger to the side of his nose.

His teasing words and playful manner had her heart beating faster. He did things to her. Things which threatened to go well beyond making her throb between her legs.

"You said we could play in the kitchen. What did you have in mind?" she asked.

That smile. Every time she looked at him, she forgot that he was meant to be her enemy. That he was holding her against her will.

Is he?

She had a funny feeling that if she offered him her hand and asked him to take her home, he would do just that, and no one would ever know what had happened here tonight.

I don't want to go home. I want to cook. With him.

Robert moved away, and the air between them cooled. There had been magic in the air when he was close. Victoria pushed down her disappointment.

“Well, the scones are done and dusted. I can only eat so many in one go. How about we make something simple like an omelet? If this is your first time in the kitchen, we want to make sure that it is a success.”

Victoria followed Robert, eager to get started. She didn't want him suddenly having second thoughts and deciding that the best thing to do with her was to put her in a carriage and send her home.

“Do you have a recipe I can follow?”

She had eaten plenty of omelets over the years and knew most only had a few ingredients. How hard could it be to make an omelet? But the last thing she wanted was for him to think she was some sort of simpleton.

Robert ushered her over to a nearby cupboard. He pointed at a bowl of eggs. “No need for a recipe, I will show you. We'll use three eggs, some butter, and a pinch of salt and pepper. And if you are feeling adventurous, we could add some herbs.”

Victoria loosened the ties of her cloak and slipped it from her shoulders. Robert took it and with casual grace set it on the bench under the window. She was staying.

His words were music to her ears. They were actually going to cook. But she was still a little ill at ease. “You must think me ridiculous. I expect just about every other person in the entire city of London could make an omelet and not require a recipe.”

He counted out three eggs and carefully handed them to her. “Everyone had a first time. Even me.”

Victoria stood clutching the eggs to her chest as Robert grabbed a heavy pan from beside the stove and put it onto the hot plate. He pointed at the pan. “This new stove contraption is brilliant. I can cook so many things and all at the one time.”

She watched with keen interest as he cut a large pat of butter off a block and dropped it into the pan. “What do you want me to do with the eggs?”

“Grab a bowl from under the bench, then crack the eggs into it. Can you do that?”

Collecting a bowl was achievable. The cracking of eggs might well be beyond her nonexistent skills. “You may need to show me what to do with the eggs.”

He left the pan and butter heating on the stove top and hurried over to the bench. After placing a large ceramic dish in front of Victoria, Robert took one of the eggs from her hands and tapped it on the side of the bowl. His fingers did something magical and the egg yolk and white dropped into the bowl, leaving the shell in his hand.

“That’s incredible, how did you do that?”

He took the other two eggs from her hands and placed them on the table. “Come and stand in front of the bowl,” he instructed. Victoria did as asked, sucking in a sudden sharp breath as her captor-come-tutor came and stood behind her. With his arms encircling her body, he picked up the next egg and with one hand cracked it on the side of the dish. As with the first egg, the contents dropped into the bowl, and Robert was left holding the shell.

Magic. Nothing short of magic.

“Third time is the charm, but since this is your first attempt at cracking an egg, perhaps we should try the simpler way of doing it.”

He handed her the last egg. “Now tap it hard against the edge. When it cracks, use both your thumbs to pull the shell apart.”

Victoria wasn't sure which made her more nervous. Breaking an egg or having this man stand so close to her. With every breath she took in his manly scent. She swallowed deep, forcing down the primal urges which continued to stir.

“Don't worry if you drop a little bit of the shell into the bowl, I can use my fingers to take it out,” he breathed into her ear.

She bit down on her bottom lip. The thought of him and his fingers sent her mind running to wicked places. To nights of lying in bed and her own hand...

Her breathing was ragged as she raised her hand and struck the side of the bowl. The egg gave a satisfying crack, and with shaking hands, Victoria pulled the sides of the shell cleanly apart. She was still silently congratulating herself at her efforts, when Robert scooped up the dish and headed over to the stove.

In a matter of seconds he had grabbed a fork, whisked the eggs, and after adding some salt and pepper, poured the mixture into the now sizzling pan. “Grab some of the chives from the pot,” he called over his shoulder.

Victoria spun on her heel and quickly searched the nearby bench. Her gaze landed on a large pot containing all manner of herbs. A veritable cook's garden in the kitchen. What a clever idea. She reached for the chives, then stopped.

How do you harvest herbs?

He must have read her mind. “There is a pair of scissors next to your cloak. Just trim off a couple of inches of the chives and bring them over here.”

She found the scissors, then with great care cut a few stems and brought them over to where Robert was standing at the stove. He took them and the scissors, and proceeded to snip the chives into tiny pieces, dropping them over the eggs which were cooking in the pan.

“The omelet will be ready very soon, so we probably don’t have time to chop up anything else,” he said.

Victoria nodded her understanding, smiling when he added, “Timing is essential in the kitchen. Preparation is everything. If you have all your ingredients washed and cut up ready for the pot or the pan, then you can focus on the cooking part.”

He was actually giving her a cooking lesson. She felt close to tears. This was beyond her wildest dreams.

Apart from the being his prisoner part.

Her mother would be in the midst the world’s biggest temper tantrum if she had the slightest idea as to what Victoria was doing right now. Instead of being tucked up in bed with a good book, she was alone with an unwed nobleman. While being held captive in his home.

Did I mention we were making an omelet?

And if Victoria was honest about it, the duchess would be well within her rights to be losing her mind. Her middle daughter was flagrantly ignoring the part where she’d agreed to do her best to marry sensibly, while also avoiding getting her family involved in any more scandals.

Then again, it would only be a scandal if I got caught.

She doubted very much that the Duke of Spice would be looking to tell anyone about the events that were transpiring in his kitchen this evening, least of all the Duchess of Mowbray.

Robert picked up a wooden spatula and handed it to Victoria. He then motioned for her to stand at the stove and take hold of the pan's handle. "Now the trick is to flip part of the egg mix over, so that it seals properly."

She screwed up her face. "I haven't the foggiest idea what that means." Her skill set revolved around eating food, rather than preparing it.

He shifted behind her once more and laying his hand over hers, helped to guide the spatula under the edge of the omelet and fold it over at the middle.

"Oh, I see what you mean. That's very clever."

Victoria was still mentally flipping the edge of the egg mix over in her mind as Robert removed the pan from the heat, then carried it over to the table and set it on a wooden board. "The board helps to protect the table," he noted. He really did know his way around a kitchen.

"What else can I do?" she asked, feeling less than useful.

He nodded in the direction of a nearby shelf. "If you would like to collect some plates and a couple of forks for us, we can eat while our creation is still hot."

She really liked the way he said our creation, as if she had actually played a part in making the omelet. He was being kind. A wave of regret washed over Victoria. She'd been foolish and petulant in writing all those letters to the newspaper and then arguing with him at the dinner party.

I have no right to be telling this man anything about food. My experience is nothing compared to his. I am just a fraud.

Forcing her thoughts of self-rebuke away, she gathered the plates and forks and set them on the table, watching with barely restrained excitement as Robert dished up the food. Her hands were shaking at he passed her a plate, and in a warm voice which sent shivers down her spine, he said, "Take a seat and I shall join you in a moment."

He served up the other part of the omelet, then after picking up the pan, he disappeared through a doorway on the other side of the fireplace. When he returned a few seconds later, he gave her an easy smile. "Since your Mama has never let you into the kitchen at Mowbray House, I doubt you have ever seen a scullery either. That's the room next door where I wash and store the dishes and pots."

She had to ask.

"Why don't you have any servants to prepare your food? I mean you are a duke. I would have expected a house full of people, yet you appear to live alone."

He pointed his fork at her plate. "Eat your omelet while it's still warm."

Victoria forced her disappointment down at his misdirection and took her first bite of the food. It was hot and tasty. For something which had only a few ingredients in it, the eggs and chives made for a delicious late-night snack.

They ate in silence for a time, Victoria keeping her gaze on her plate. All the while she chided herself for not holding back her inquisitive mind.

Foolish girl, you crossed a line asking him such a personal question.

When her omelet was all gone, she rested her hands in her lap and waited for Robert

to speak. A moment later, he picked up her plate and rose from the table. She watched him head into the scullery once more, before he quickly returned.

Their eyes met, and to her relief, there was only a gentle warmth on his face. He didn't seem angry.

Thank heavens.

She really didn't want him to tie her up again.

Robert moved from the other side of the table and came to where Victoria sat. He bent his knees, resting on his haunches before her. He took a hold of her hand. "Thank you for the omelet, Victoria, it was the best I've ever had."

Her cheeks burned. He was being nice. He brushed his hand over her hot cheek and smiled. "You are a most unusual female, Lady Victoria Kembal. It's a rare thing to meet a woman who knows her food."

She blinked long and slow as a thrum of need began to pulse low in her body once more. At that private spot between her legs that she touched when she was alone in bed.

"You have a little bit of egg in the corner of your mouth," she murmured, pointing to a speck of omelet. He idly brushed at his lips but missed the mark.

"Here let me," whispered Victoria, her pulse beating hard in her throat. She reached out and brushed at the spot with her fingers. Robert opened his lips, and the tip of her thumb slipped with ease into his mouth. She was still in two minds as to what to do, when she sensed the pressure on her hand. He was sucking her thumb, ever so gently.

If this was wrong, she didn't ever want it to be right.

The thousand reasons why she shouldn't be here with this man fell away, yielding to the one reason that truly mattered. Because she wanted to be here, with him. For this quiet moment to become a memory she would always treasure.

Victoria leaned forward, cupping Robert's chin with her free hand. The soft hair of his five o'clock shadow settled against her skin, and she sighed.

His eyes flashed to hers and she felt herself falling into their blue gray expanse. She went willingly.

They drew closer. The hitch in his breath was unmistakable. Whatever she was sensing in this moment, he was feeling it too. "Victoria," he whispered, as he claimed her mouth in a soft, gentle kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Three

He knew this was wrong, that he was taking liberties, but Robert was powerless to fight the need to touch her. As he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, Victoria let out a groan. His entire body went rigid as she speared her fingers into his hair.

A small voice in the back of his mind tried to cry out a warning, but the rush of lust coursing through him drowned it out. No woman had ever affected him this way. Made him think of throwing caution to the wind and claiming her, making her utterly his and be damned with the consequences.

Lips and tongues worked over one another. He sensed Victoria was new to the experience, but she was a quick learner.

If this is the way she kisses, lord knows what the marriage bed will reveal.

Lust ruled his head. He broke the kiss, taking in the heat of her panting breaths. At the base of her throat, her pulse raced. Her eyes were glassy; the glaze of unsated need shone in them.

He was no longer in control, and just to prove it, Robert flicked open the top button of Victoria's gown. She didn't stop him. Thank heavens. They were in this moment of madness together.

A second button. A third.

His cock throbbed as his brain screamed for him to lay her on the table and claim her here and now. To sink into her wet heat and thrust hard until she shattered. The only thing he wanted to hear was her cry his name as he reached his climax.

Drawing open the front of her bodice, he was met with smooth porcelain skin. No stays or undergarments. Robert sent a prayer to heaven. Victoria was naked under her gown. When had the younger women of the ton started dressing like the French with *pas de sous-vêtements* ? He honestly didn't care, but someone should have warned him.

"I was meant to be at home wearing my nightgown," she explained.

"Thank god you are not," he growled, as he pushed the top of her gown fully open. He cupped one of her breasts and bent his head. Taking it into his mouth, he ran his tongue around the hardened nipple, then gently bit.

Victoria saw stars. The exquisite sensation of a man mouthing her breasts was more than she had ever imagined it could be, even the nip of his teeth sent heat racing to her core. Her head dropped back, and her knees fell open. Her hand settled on the nape of his neck as he feasted.

"Robert, please," she murmured, hoping he understood what she wanted.

She sighed as he lifted her skirts. Her grip on his neck tightened a fraction as his thumb pressed into her wet heat. He turned his head and released her nipple, chuckling as a 'pop' echoed in the quiet of the kitchen.

"Are you going to take your punishment like a good little thief and moan for me when you climax?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

She clung to him as he stroked her hard and deep. He took her nipple into his mouth once more and drew back. The stories she had heard in the ladies retiring rooms at parties were nothing compared to this, to the heady delight of a man's strong thumb brushing over her sensitive bud. Of him suckling her hardened nipple.

But she needed more. Would take more, if he was prepared to give it to her. Victoria touched Robert's hand, and in a voice that was barely above a whisper, pleaded, "Make me take two fingers, please. I need to be punished."

He moved and came closer, nipping at her earlobe with his teeth. "I don't want to hurt you. Not if this is your first time," he murmured.

Victoria swallowed deep. "I promise I'll tell you if it becomes too much." Raw, unsated need coursed through her veins. She had to have more. Have him take command of her body.

When he did as she asked, thrusting two fingers into her sex, he used his thumb to tease her swollen bud. She whimpered. If this was the sort of punishment the Duke of Spice meted out to lady thieves, she was going to steal from his garden every single night.

He took her lips once more in a searing kiss. Victoria was liquid light in his hands, any moment now she would shatter into a thousand bright stars.

"Oh god," she sobbed, breaking the kiss. Her breath was coming in short sharp bursts. So close. So close.

Robert sat back, and when she lifted her gaze, she met a pair of fierce, demanding eyes. "I'm going to stroke you hard now, Victoria, and I want to hear you scream my name when you come," he commanded.

From the back of her throat a guttural noise rose, and by the time it had reached her lips, it was loud sob. “Oh!”

“Say my name.”

She could barely remember her own. “Rob...” Victoria swallowed deep, and as her world exploded into a galaxy of shooting stars, she cried out, “Robert!”

Her breath whooshed out of her lungs and as her whole body went limp, she sagged against him. He continued to stroke her, gently bringing Victoria down from her mind-blowing climax. She’d never known pleasure like this, hadn’t imagined that a man could do more than her own hand, but he’d left her utterly destroyed.

When her head finally cleared, she caught him smiling up at her. The expression of pure male satisfaction on his face was utterly sublime. She might well have been the one who had just reached her crisis, but he had been with her every step of the way.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Victoria racked what was left of her scattered brain, searching for answers. What was she to do? Offer to help him with his own release? She understood the basic mechanics of how these things worked, but her experience was purely theoretical.

“What do you want me to do to you?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, not for tonight. Fix your clothes and then I will take you home,” said Robert, getting to his feet. The bulge in his trousers was unmistakable. He glanced at himself and hummed. “While you dress, I shall go find a coat.”

After he’d left the kitchen, Victoria set her things to right. She picked up the cloak and fastened it at her throat. When he still hadn’t returned a few minutes later, she took a stroll around the room. The kitchen was nothing like she had ever envisaged such a place would look. It certainly didn’t appear as if he entertained on any sort of scale. Instead, it was all rather homely. And lovely.

She could just picture Robert sitting and eating his breakfast at the table each morning. He wouldn’t use the formal dining room upstairs, rather he’d enjoy the warmth of the fireplace and the morning sun as it filtered in through the windows.

Passing the windows, she reached the end of the kitchen and found a small door. It wasn’t locked. Opening it, she poked her head inside, catching sight of a set of stairs leading down to what she imagined would be a storage cellar. One which must be full to overflowing if the crates and barrels which were stacked on each step was anything

to go by. Victoria bent and read the markings on the side of the nearest barrel.

East India Company was printed in an arc at the top, and underneath it was the familiar trident marking comprised of E - I - Co.

There were dozens of barrels and crates. More than a lifetime's supply of spices for one person. The sound of footsteps on the stone flagging of the kitchen had her moving quickly away from the door.

As Robert strode back into the room, his gaze went immediately from her to the open door, and she caught the unmistakable flash of shock which appeared on his face. The door to the cellar was closed and bolted within seconds. Robert stood with his back to her for a long moment, but when he finally turned to face her, a gentle smile had returned to his lips.

"Are you ready to leave?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you."

And with that, he towed her to the back door and out into the night. At the end of the laneway, he hailed a hack and gave the driver the address of her home in Berkeley Square, then helped her climb on board.

Robert sat on the other side of the carriage from Victoria. He was friendly, but she sensed a wall had gone up between them. She was tempted to ask about the crates of spices, but the look she had seen on his face when he'd returned to the kitchen had her holding her silence.

When they eventually reached Mowbray House, he asked the driver to go to the end of the row of houses, then pull the carriage over to the side. As the hack came to a halt, he reached over and took hold of Victoria's hand. "I must say that was the most

eventful evening I've had in some time, but as much as I enjoyed your company, I want you to promise that you will never do it again."

Her heart sank, but Victoria nodded her agreement. What she had done was beyond stupid, beyond reckless. She should be grateful that he wasn't knocking on the front door of her parents' house, rousing the staff, and demanding to speak to her father.

If Robert regretted any of what had happened between them tonight, he was keeping it to himself. As for herself, Victoria held no regrets. Rising from her seat, she bent and stole a kiss. "Thank you. I shall never again take omelets for granted."

He went to help her down from the carriage, but she waved him away and opened the door herself. "Good night, Your Grace."

Quiet as a mouse, she made her way down the side of the house and headed toward the rear garden. She waited until the sounds of the hack had disappeared into the night, before retrieving a hidden key from a plant pot close to the back door. Once inside, Victoria headed upstairs to her room.

She was tempted to go to Coco's room to see if her sister had returned, but footsteps on the central staircase had her closing her bedroom door and hurriedly undressing. Climbing into bed, she threw the blankets over her and rolled onto her side. If anyone did happen to look into her room, they would find Lady Victoria Kembal exactly where she had been all night. In bed, fast asleep.

As she lay in the dark pondering all that had transpired this evening, her mind kept coming back to one thing. She couldn't stop thinking about it. Her hand slipped under her nightgown and between her legs. Closing her eyes, Victoria gave in to her thoughts, to the growl of unsated primal need which had edged the Duke of Spice's voice. To the one word he'd commanded she cry when she climaxed.

Reaching her peak once more, Victoria sobbed into the night, “Robert.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

She would never again sneak out of the house with Coco. Never again steal into a man's garden at midnight. Never again. Never again.

All morning Victoria had repeatedly made that promise to herself, but every time she thought the vow had stuck, the memory of the Duke of Spice and what he'd done to her in his kitchen slipped back into her mind. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

By the early afternoon, she had retreated to a small sitting room which overlooked the garden at the rear of Mowbray House, seeking refuge in a cookbook. Food had always been her safe place, but even the mere mention of spices had her body whispering wicked desires.

"Ah, there you are."

Startled, Victoria lifted her gaze from the book, and took in the sight of her mother standing in the doorway. Her fear turned to outright suspicion as she noted the expression on the duchess's face. Lady Anne was positively beaming.

This doesn't look good. Please tell me she hasn't found some other odd noble whom she thinks will make me a good husband.

"Your father wishes to see you," said her mother.

Closing the cookbook, Victoria rose from her chair. When she reached her mother's side, the duchess took the book from her hands, saying, "You won't be needing this,

my clever girl.”

With growing trepidation, she followed Lady Anne out of the sitting room and downstairs to the Duke of Mowbray’s study. When they reached the door of her father’s private room, Victoria caught the sound of male voices. The tone of the conversation was light and friendly. Her father had a guest; that was nothing unusual.

The door opened and Victoria stepped back, making way for her father’s visitor whom she expected must be about to leave. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied the male figure exiting her father’s study.

It was Robert Tolley, the Duke of Saffron Walden. Heart racing, she immediately lowered her gaze.

Oh, god why is he here?

“Your Grace.”

“Your Grace.”

Victoria’s afternoon tea churned in her stomach as she was forced to endure listening to her mother and the Duke of Saffron Walden greet one another. It was all so polite, so formal.

If Mama had the foggiest about what he and I got up to last night, she’d have her hands at his throat. Then she’d come for me.

“You remember my daughter Lady Victoria, Your Grace. The two of you met at the dinner party the other night.”

Teeth gritted, Victoria raised her head and looked once more into those eyes. The

glint of something dark and dangerous stared back at her.

Robert bowed. "Lady Victoria. What a delight to see you again. And I trust I shall see you again very soon."

She bobbed a brief curtsey, fearing that if she dropped into a full dip, she would faint. "Your Grace," whispered Victoria.

From out of his study, the Duke of Mowbray appeared. He nodded to his wife. "Dearest, would you please see His Grace to the front door. I need a private moment alone with Victoria. Then you and I shall talk. We have many plans to discuss."

Robert gave Victoria a low bow, then taking Lady Anne by the arm, the two of them headed for the stairs.

She turned her gaze from them to her father, who held out a hand and ushered her into his study. "Victoria."

The Duke of Mowbray's study was a small, warm space with dark oak bookshelves lining all the walls, right to the ceiling. It was rare for any of the Kembal offspring to enter this place willingly. If one was summoned to Clifford's study, a paternal lecture was usually in the offing. The only other time Victoria made it her business to be in this room was when she was busy stealing one of her father's bottles of whisky.

Hands clasped gently in front of her, Victoria stood just inside the doorway. It was a fool's notion to think she could flee, but if Robert had been here to see her father, she didn't want to make herself too comfortable.

"Make yourself comfortable." Her father motioned for her to take a seat in one of the overstuffed black leather couches which sat in the middle of the room. She'd always found it odd that every man's study she'd ever been in was set out exactly like this

one, a desk and a pair of low sofas in the center.

Hands fisted tightly into nervous balls, Victoria sat perched on the edge of the couch cushion. Her father crossed the floor and went to his liquor tray. “Whisky?” he asked.

She was about to make mention that she didn’t drink strong liquor, but the look the duke gave her was enough to tell her that he knew full well who the whisky thief was in their household.

“Just a sniff, please Papa.”

He handed her a drink, before taking up a seat on the couch opposite to hers. He raised his glass. “Congratulations. The Duchess of Saffron Walden. That’s a solid title. Well done, Victoria. Your Mama is thrilled beyond words.”

She set the glass on the nearest low table, fearing that her trembling hands might not be able to hold it. “What did he say?”

The duke sighed. “He offered for your hand, and after he had explained a few of the things which took place between the two of you last night, I felt it only right to accept on your behalf.”

Heat burned on her cheeks. Just what exactly had Robert told her father? She’d die if it was everything. Victoria swallowed deep, quietly praying that a large chasm would open up in the floor and take her.

Her father sat forward on the couch. “I know that he found you in his garden in the middle of the night. That you and he spent time alone together in his house. He vaguely alluded to something else having happened but didn’t say what. But you having been alone with him is more than enough reason for His Grace to come here today and offer for your hand in marriage.”

Robert had succumbed to an attack of noble urges and decided to offer for her. The man who had tied her to a chair last night was now about to become her fiancé.

This wasn't the first time in their extended family that a marriage had occurred after such an incident. Her cousin Lucy, the daughter of the Duke of Strathmore, had faced a similar situation only a year ago. She and her now husband had been caught red-handed, in flagrante, in the garden at a party. And they had only been kissing. But Lucy and Avery had been in love, they just hadn't realized it.

She and Robert. Well they were barely past the point of being strangers. Barely knew one another. Last night had been a mistake, but a marriage between them would be an utter disaster.

Victoria had just reached for her whisky with the intent of swigging it down when the door of the study opened again, and the duchess returned. She stepped into the room and stood for a moment at the end of the two couches, her gaze shifting from her husband to her daughter. Lady Anne came and sat beside her husband.

"I am surprised and delighted that you managed to smooth things over with the duke. When you and he had that disagreement the other evening, I was worried that you had blown any chance you might have had with him, but I see I was mistaken. My wonderful girl is about to become a duchess."

The smile on her mother's face had Victoria on the verge of tears. The duchess was so happy, so relieved that her daughter had secured the hand of one of London's most eligible bachelors.

"I promised you I would do my best to ensure that our family was welcomed back into the haut ton. Marrying a duke seemed the best way to do it," replied Victoria.

Her mother rose from her seat and embraced Victoria. She hugged her daughter tight,

whispering over and over, “Well done, my clever, clever girl.”

There was nothing else she could do. Victoria wrapped her arms around her mother and hugged her back. Her father was smiling. Both her parents were thrilled that their middle daughter was about to become a duchess.

Victoria closed her eyes and held on tight. Like it or not, she was going to have to marry Robert Tolley. Her feeble jest now came back to bite her firmly on the ass.

She was soon to become the Duchess of Spice.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tolley House, London

Robert leaned over the washbasin and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the water. A soon to be wedded man stared back at him.

His valet would be here within the hour to give him a close shave and trim his hair, making him perfect and ready for church, but first he wanted to wash. To scrub away the traces of the spices which coated his skin. He and George had been moving crates until the early hours, hiding the evidence of their latest highway haul.

He was getting married.

This was a complication Robert hadn't seen coming, but one he knew he had to handle. Tying Lady Victoria up had been a mistake. Kissing her had been a mistake. Everything about that night had been a mistake, right up until the moment she had fractured in his arms. His name, torn from her lips as she climaxed, was the sort of thing a man could only dream of experiencing with a woman.

While Victoria had waited for him in the kitchen, Robert had dealt with his own sexual needs in the privacy of his bedroom. Only then had his lust-fueled mind finally cleared.

He'd been ready to take her home, put it all down to a moment of temporary insanity, but the second he'd seen Victoria standing next to the open cellar door, he knew his fate was sealed. The only way he could protect himself from this inquisitive young

woman was to make her his wife. His duchess.

The conversation he'd had the following afternoon with her father was one he never wished to repeat. Explaining to the duke that he had ruined the man's daughter while at the same time not revealing too many details had taken some carefully chosen words on his part. The Duke of Mowbray wasn't a fool, but he hadn't pressed for more information, instead he had quickly agreed that a marriage between Victoria and the Duke of Saffron Walden was the only way to resolve the matter.

I had to marry at some point; the title must have an heir. Making her my wife solves that problem and in doing so will ensure she keeps quiet.

His bride-to-be was opinionated, dare he say annoying, but there was something about her that had him wanting. Wanting her in his bed, beneath him, sighing with pleasure as he sank his cock deep in her glorious wet heat.

Robert splashed the cold water onto his face. When that wasn't enough, he slapped his cheek hard and muttered, "For heaven's sake man, pull yourself together. It's only your wedding day."

"Oh god, it's my wedding day," whispered Victoria to her reflection in the mirror. By late this morning, she would be the Duchess of Saffron Walden. The Duchess of Spice.

She glanced at the ruby ring on her finger. Robert had arrived at Mowbray House the morning after he had been to see her father and presented Victoria with the ring. It had been his mother's, a beloved family heirloom. And now it was hers.

Their wedding was to be at St. Georges, with a common license. A special license would have afforded a wedding at home, but her mother was insistent on the nuptials taking place in front of a church full of guests, with the wedding breakfast held here

at Mowbray House.

Her maternal uncle Ewan Radley, the Duke of Strathmore, had offered them the use of one of the grand ballrooms at Strathmore House, but after Clifford and Anne had fought loudly over that, the duchess had uncharacteristically yielded and agreed to host the reception at home.

In the months since her return from Rome, Lady Anne seemed at pains to not turn every disagreement with her husband into an all-out war. After many years where the family home was often a battleground, peace and quiet was finally settling in.

And now I am leaving. Going to my new home. With my new husband.

“But not yet,” whispered Victoria.

She turned to Coco, who was seated on the end of Victoria’s bed, and smiled. Along with their mother, her younger sister seemed to be treading carefully these days. In the two weeks since she’d abandoned Victoria at the rear of the Duke of Spice’s home, Lady Coco Kembal had been every inch the doting sibling.

Victoria could only hope that the panic Coco had said she’d experienced when she and the viscount returned to the laneway and found her sister gone had been enough to shock some sense into her.

“I’m getting married in a few hours, which means today is my last day of being able to amble across the square to the German bakery. How about we celebrate my last day of freedom with some freshly baked sourdough bread? We can be back before Mama and the modiste arrive to start dressing me,” said Victoria.

She was still undecided as to how she felt about this whole marriage business. Everything had happened so quickly, but there was one thing she was certain of—if

she was going to face a church full of the haut ton's stony-faced matrons, followed by a three-hour wedding breakfast and an evening ball, she was going to do it with a belly full of hot bread and salted butter.

George was in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea when Robert made his way downstairs a short time later. He held up his hand in greeting. "Morning, Your Grace. Happy wedding day."

Robert furrowed his brows. He'd seen his man of business only a few hours ago and George, along with his wife, was coming to the wedding.

Why is he here?

"Did we have business to conduct this morning?" he asked, racking his brains trying to recall if there was a spice shipment coming.

George pointed at the loaf of bread and pat of butter which sat in front of him on the wooden kitchen table. "We have a problem with the German bakery in Berkeley Square."

He was getting married in a matter of hours—what could be so important about a bloody bakery? Robert sucked in a deep, calming breath. He had been practicing them regularly ever since the afternoon he'd been to see the Duke of Mowbray to ask for Victoria's hand in marriage.

Fortunately George was an intelligent man and could read his master's mood. He cleared his throat. "The German bakery that we have been supplying spices to for well over two years has undergone a sudden change of ownership. Some well-heeled chap recently returned from serving the East India Company in Surat has apparently bought it. Which means we have made our last spice delivery to that shop."

Damn. That's one of our biggest customers.

With the loss of the bakery, he'd have to find somewhere else to offload several barrels of cinnamon and other spices each week. It would also mean the East India had regained their stronghold in what had become his part of the London market.

"We have to make the customers want to go elsewhere."

Robert nodded. "Yes, we can't just sit by and let them take our slice of the market." He thought for a moment. While it was too late to stop the sale, they could still mess with the new owners and rob them of the existing loyal clientele.

What's the best way to get loyal customers to stop buying from the new owner?

In his long efforts to thwart the East India, he'd adopted a simple motto. By all means necessary, legal or otherwise. And if his underhanded competitor thought it could start buying up businesses, that's exactly how he was going to fight.

Dirty.

"George, this is what I want you to do."

When Victoria and Coco arrived at the bakery later that morning, there was an unusually large and surprisingly raucous crowd gathered outside. The sisters exchanged worried glances.

"Is it always like this?" asked Coco.

"No, never. Most mornings there are one or two people in the shop ahead of me, but never people waiting outside," replied Victoria.

A well-dressed, middle-aged couple moved away from the door of the bakery and headed in their direction. From the expressions on their faces and the way they walked, they didn't seem the least bit happy.

When the couple got to where Victoria and Coco were standing, Victoria waved them down. "Pardon me, but what's going on?"

The gentleman motioned toward the bakery. "They are closed. Rumor has it that several customers found pieces of rat in their pies this morning. And a bone in a bun. Can you believe it? The new owners only took over the place this morning, but it seems that things have already gone seriously downhill."

"Yes, we will have to find a new place for our morning sourdough. Such a pity the old owners have left," added his wife.

The disappointed couple continued on their way, leaving Victoria staring after them. There went her hopes for a final sourdough and butter breakfast before she became a duchess.

Was nothing going to remain steadfast in her life?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Victoria was doing her best not to grip too firmly to her father's arm, but it was a struggle. The rest of her body was wound tight like a spring. She feared what might happen if she let loose the hold on her suppressed emotions.

As she and the duke made their way down the aisle of St. Georges Church, Hanover Square, her gaze darted left and right. So many people. The pews were close to overflowing.

Breathe in. Count to four, then breathe out. Slowly. Maintain calm.

This was her wedding day; she was meant to be the blushing happy bride. But it was all a lie. None of what happened today was her choice. She felt trapped.

I made one foolish mistake and now I am going to pay for it for the rest of my life.

She glanced up at her father, and the duke gave her an encouraging grin. Of course he was happy, this was a smart match. His daughter was marrying another senior noble. The only other person in the church who would be smiling more broadly right now would be her mother. The Duchess of Mowbray was beside herself with joy.

All week the invitations and RSVPs for the wedding ball had been flowing in and out of Mowbray House. At last count, the guest numbers for the ball alone were close to four hundred. Victoria didn't know that many people, but she was certain the duchess did.

Day after day, the members of the extended Kembal family, Augusta, Flynn, Coco, Serafina, Gideon, Richard, and Matthew had been pressed into service by Lady Anne. Made to mingle in one of the drawing rooms and pretend to be guests of importance while Victoria did her best to remember their names and titles.

But as she made her way toward the front of the church and her impending fate, she couldn't recall a single name amongst the faces which turned her way.

“Don't worry about anything, leave it all up to your mother. All you have to do is smile,” her father had reassured her as she stepped down from the Mowbray town carriage. His words gave Victoria cold comfort. In a matter of minutes, she was going to be a married woman—a duchess. And with that came a great deal of responsibility.

And a wedding night.

Breathe. Slowly in and out.

She took one final glance at the crowded box pews on either side, and decided she'd looked at enough people. Eyes focused forward, her attention settled on the man standing in front of the bishop. The man who was about to become her husband.

Robert turned from making small talk with Hugh Radley, the Bishop of London, who also happened to be the uncle of the bride and looked back down the long nave. Victoria and her father were slowly making their way toward him. As they drew closer, he caught the tight smile on her face.

She'd probably been hoping to marry for love, and now she was about to be saddled with him. A wave of guilt washed through Robert's mind. He wasn't exactly an ogre, but he could imagine that he wasn't the sort of man Victoria had ever thought to marry.

I'm quite a few years older than her. I'm socially awkward. And I have few friends.

All marks against his name, but they were perfectly acceptable faults for a man to exhibit. His other shortcomings were however less agreeable.

I am a highwayman. A liar. An unashamed thief. A smuggler.

Heavens above, even he wouldn't marry himself.

As his future bride approached, Robert Tolley made a silent promise to the world. He would try and be the best husband he could be for Victoria. He would keep his illegal activities as far away from their marriage, and her, as was possible.

He would protect his wife. Victoria.

Their gazes met and he held out his hand to her. But as her father placed his daughter into his care, Robert was gripped with a moment of doubt. He had no right to be marrying this young woman, no right to be bringing her into his dangerous world.

She was meant to be marrying the handsome prince like in the fairytales, but somewhere along the way things had changed and now the fair maiden was about to wed the black-hearted villain.

He couldn't guarantee Victoria the happily ever after that she deserved, and in that moment, Robert truly hated himself.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Robert slipped his hand into his waistcoat pocket and snuck a glance at his watch. It was nine o'clock. The wedding celebrations had been going since eleven, and the grand ball was just getting warmed up.

Thank heavens one only goes through with a lavish wedding once in a lifetime.

He couldn't imagine someone willingly going through this sort of imposing event ever again. All these people.

With a smile on his face, which didn't quite reach his eyes, Robert stood alongside Victoria as they greeted their multitude of guests. All four hundred of them.

There were a few familiar faces amongst the crowd, some he even knew their names. But the rest were a blur. Lord This. Lady That. The Grand Duchess of Something. Along with a sprinkling of minor European royalty and a handful of foreign diplomats.

He was a duke but in comparison to the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray's lofty connections, his family was little more than a group of country bumpkins. Not all dukes were created equal.

But Victoria, his newly minted duchess, greeted every person by name and title. She even managed to offer up little titbits that were of interest to each guest as they stopped in front of her in the receiving line.

While he'd spent the past week or so of their brief betrothal busily handling stolen goods and removing all traces of his illegal activities from Tolley House, Victoria had been hard at work, mastering the guest list. Robert was impressed with her social skills.

As the next guest moved on from him and went to greet the Duchess of Mowbray, Robert turned and gave his new bride a smile. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

Victoria nodded. "Fine. Mama says the trick is to focus on being as present as possible. The night will eventually come to an end, and I shall forget my tired feet. But the guest who feels slighted by the hostess's lack of interest in them will always remember."

He wasn't sure if she intended her last comment as a gentle rebuke, but Robert took it as such. She was carrying the load for them, while he was more concerned with the time and how much longer he would have to endure all these people.

Just get through the next few hours, then it will all be over.

Tonight wasn't about her. It wasn't even about Robert. As Victoria greeted guest after guest, there was one thing in the forefront of her mind. This wedding ball was all about her family. Of making sure that the Duke and Duchess of Mowbray were securely back amongst the upper echelons of London society.

When a familiar face stopped in front of her, Victoria's social smile broadened into a happy grin. "Cousin!"

Alex Radley, the Marquis of Brooke, held out his arms and drew her into his embrace. "Congratulations Victoria, what a happy day," he exclaimed. As she accepted his generous hug, Victoria caught the eye of Alex's wife. Millie, the Marchioness of Brooke, waved at her.

When her cousin finally released her from his hug, he took a step back and sketched an elegant bow. “Your Grace.” As he righted himself, Alex chuckled. “I can’t believe you outrank me now. How did that happen?”

Millie moved forward and gave Victoria a kiss on the cheek. “Congratulations, Your Grace. He’s been complaining about your new rank ever since your betrothal was announced.”

One day, when Alex eventually became the Duke of Strathmore, he would outrank her once again, but until then Victoria intended to enjoy every single occasion when her cousin would have to bow to her.

As her cousin and his wife moved on to greet Robert, Victoria turned to her new husband. Many of the other guests were mere acquaintances or connections of her parents, but these people were some of her closest friends.

“Robert, may I introduce my cousin Alex and his wife Millie?”

Robert knew the gentleman who bowed before him. There were few people in London society who didn’t know the fair-haired Marquis of Brooke. And his reputation. Before his marriage, Alex Radley had been known as Alexander the Great. An unashamed rake and unrepentant party animal who had put the high in hi-jinks.

But from the gentle way he held his wife’s hand, and the sweet smiles he offered her, it seemed that Lord Brooke’s wild days were well and truly over. It had often been said that it would take an unusual woman to tame the future duke, and from the manner of Lady Brooke’s attire, it appeared that sentiment had been spot on.

Instead of wearing the latest fashion from Paris, the dark-haired Millie Radley was dressed in a deep pink and gold silk sari. The heavily detailed gown matched the ruby

stud she wore in her nose.

“Lady Brooke was born in India. Her father, James Ashton, is a senior member of the Honorable East India Company and worked in their Calcutta office for some twenty years before the Ashton family returned to England,” explained Victoria.

His duchess was a wealth of information, and in this case, bone-deep dread. Robert’s new bride was related to someone who was high up in the East India.

Damn.

He nervously cleared his throat, fearing that at any moment, James Ashton might drop a hand on his shoulder and ask to have a quiet word.

“And is your father here tonight?”

Millie shook her head. “Unfortunately not. Papa is busy working on an assignment for the London directors of the East India and couldn’t make it this evening. But I am certain you and he will cross paths at some point soon. We are always having family get togethers these days, especially now that so many members of our generation have gotten married and started families.”

“Millie and Alex had a little boy earlier this year,” explained Victoria.

“Congratulations. Well it was lovely to meet you both, and yes, I look forward to meeting the rest of your family,” said Robert.

Victoria exchanged another hug with her cousin, and then with his wife. From the happy look on her face, it was clear these people meant a great deal to her. While all he felt was sick to his stomach.

Robert bit his bottom lip and pondered the future. In the years ahead, he'd be having a lot to do with this part of the extended Radley-Kembal family. And also their relatives.

As the Marquis and Marchioness of Brooke moved on down the receiving line, Robert's gaze searched the gathering. The second this greeting business was over with, he'd be having his own quiet word with George. Warning his man of business of the potential danger which now lurked within their midst.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

His wife's favorite cousin's father-in-law was a senior East India man.

That could make Christmas and family gatherings rather awkward.

And dangerous.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Before today, Robert hadn't put much thought into his wedding day, or how it might pan out. In all honesty, he'd simply expected to turn up at the church, say his vows, and then leave with his bride. It had never once crossed his mind that his wedding day would also involve endless speeches at the wedding breakfast, and then forcing a smile to his face while playing the happy groom at a lavish society ball which seemed to have no end.

It was two in the morning before he and Victoria were finally able to make their escape from Mowbray House, and into his waiting carriage. They had been husband and wife since eleven o'clock the previous day, but this was the first time since the wedding service that they had actually been alone.

Seated next to him on the hard leather seat, his new wife was silent. The distance between them, while a matter of inches, felt like a yawning chasm. He couldn't imagine how today had been for Victoria. How disappointing.

This is my fault. I should have paid her more attention over the past week.

But this sudden, unexpected wedding had caused him to make some hasty changes to his well laid out plans. He couldn't very well bring his wife into Tolley House while the kitchen and scullery were near full to the ceiling with stolen crates of spice.

Robert reached out and took a hold of Victoria's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "You did well today. I don't know how you remembered all those people's names and titles."

She shifted in her seat and released her hand from his hold. “Practice. My mother made me learn the guest list. It was important to her that I be word perfect for everyone who was attending both the wedding and the ball.”

He caught the truth in Victoria’s words. For her. For the duchess. This had been her mother’s wedding, her way to make a grand reentry to London society. Her daughter had merely been the conduit for such.

And it wasn’t as if Victoria was marrying someone she loved. If she had, then at least she would have that to comfort her.

No, she has me.

“Have you managed to arrange more servants for Tolley House?” she asked.

Robert shook his head. He hadn’t. And he didn’t intend to do so, not until he could come up with an alternative place to hide his future stores of stolen spice. The cellar might be empty at the moment, but unless he could find a secure storage space, that wouldn’t last.

“Not as yet. The usual daytime servant cohort will be here at nine each morning, then they will leave promptly at five. I can cook us supper each evening. If you like, we could continue with our cooking lessons. Move beyond omelets.”

Her gentle sigh, or was that a sniff of tears, had him quickly glancing at her. Lord help him if he made her cry on their wedding night.

“I suppose I shall manage. It’s now my role in life to make the best of this union.”

This was killing him.

He had no qualms about being ruthless with the rogues at the East India, but when it came to his new wife, Robert was lost. Guilt oozed from his every pore.

I should have found another way to woo her.

An apology for having married her was ready on his lips, but he held it back. The last thing she needed to know on her wedding night was that her husband was sorry for making her his, for having stolen her future happiness. For not having given her the time to fall in love.

But I couldn't bear the thought of her belonging to another.

"It's been a long day, let's go home and get some sleep. We can talk in the morning."

"Yes of course."

He was trying to be kind. Victoria couldn't fault him for that, for acknowledging how hard she had worked today. The wedding and its later celebrations had been a success. She had been able to hand her mother the grand reentry into London society the duchess had craved so badly. Her duty as a daughter had been fulfilled.

Seated next to her husband in the carriage as it snaked its way through the quiet night streets, she pondered the next part of her life. She was now the Duchess of Saffron Walden. Her Grace, the Duchess of Saffron Walden. The words sounded so empty.

And I have no idea how he expects me to conduct myself.

Her new title sat heavy on her shoulders. She'd be expected to run a household. Take her place amongst the ton. Bear him an heir.

Victoria's thoughts turned to what lay ahead. Robert would want to do it tonight. She

understood how it was supposed to happen, of what went where, but without a drop of romance she wasn't sure how pleasant the experience was going to be for her. A man might find his pleasure through the physical act, but while her head was such a mess, she couldn't imagine feeling anything.

When the carriage drew up out the front of Tolley House, Robert took a hold of her hand once more. He raised it to his lips and kissed her gloved hand. "We are home. Let's go inside."

The thought of what was about to happen had her suddenly blurting out. "I want some toast please. I haven't eaten."

He gave her a look, and her rising panic seemed to register with him. "Alright, toast it is."

Chapter Thirty

Victoria was as skittish as a young colt, and Robert didn't have the foggiest idea how to handle her. How to reassure her that things were not that bad. That he wasn't a complete villain.

He closed the front door of Tolley House behind him and locked it. In the stillness of the foyer, he noticed the lack of servants. The silence. Most other nights, he came in via the kitchen, often with George or one of the other members of his little band of thieves trailing behind him. There would boxes and crates. Pistols and work to be done. The empty house was a blessing.

For the first time in his wedded life, Robert saw things through Victoria's eyes. A duchess returning home from a social event would normally have a butler to open the door. She would have maids at her disposal. Right now a warm bath would be waiting for her, along with a neatly pressed nightgown.

And all I can offer her is some burnt bread.

He really ought to have given more thought to this marriage thing.

Victoria raised her fingers to her throat and unclasped her cloak. She glanced around for a moment, then slung the garment over her arm, and asked. "Which way to the kitchen?"

He went to take the cloak from her hands, but she shook her head. "You promised me toast."

All her life Victoria had found comfort in warm bread and butter. If there was some matured cheese at hand, that was even better. But everything here was strange. Her life was forever altered. If she could seek refuge in the simple familiar things, she might be able to keep her emotions together.

When they reached the kitchen, Robert hurried over to the stove and stoked the fire. He added a couple more logs, promising her that the room would soon be as toasty as the bread they were about to cook.

Victoria dropped her cloak onto the table, then slipped off her gloves, one by one. “Do you have any wine? I could do with a glass or two.”

She’d snatched a bite of a sandwich at the wedding breakfast and a piece of cake from the supper table at the ball but had not had time to savor anything else. The menu her parents had arranged was everything she had ever hoped for in a wedding ball buffet. But she’d barely had time to eat all day. Adrenaline and fear were the only things keeping her upright. That and a sense of disappointment. Of a life about to be wasted on a man who would never care for her.

Her hands went to her face and the tears quickly followed. She couldn’t hold them back. Stupid, stupid girl.

A warm body pressed against her, strong arms wrapping her up in their embrace. Robert lay a hand on Victoria’s silken hair, smoothing it with every stroke. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I am not what you want. That your dreams of a love match have been shattered.”

She clung to him, then began to sob. “And I’m sorry for making this all so impossible, that you felt you had no choice but to offer for me.”

This was not the wedding night anyone would ever want, full of disappointment and

regret.

“Shh, it’s alright. None of this is your fault. It’s been a long hard day, and we are both exhausted. Let’s get some sleep and hopefully things will look better in the morning.”

He brushed a kiss on her forehead, then traced his thumb down her cheek. “Food. It is the cure for so much of our ills. Toast and red wine.”

She felt wretched, but they had both given voice to their worries. To their inner fears. Her tears still fell, but Victoria sensed a lightening of her load. Robert at least had an inkling of how she viewed this marriage, of the guilt she carried at knowing he had only made her his duchess because society demanded it of him.

Robert retrieved a bottle of French wine from the scullery, along with two glasses. “This is a Cabernet franc, and it pairs well with toast and a thick piece of Wensleydale cheese. I also like to add some thinly sliced apple, to give it some bite.”

While he went back into the next room to fetch some plates, Victoria located a corkscrew and set about opening the wine bottle. She had just removed the cork when Robert reappeared, carrying a tray. He took one look at the bottle and raised his eyebrows.

She shrugged. “My sister, Augusta, and I used to help ourselves to Papa’s wine cellar. We also stole bottles of whisky from his study whenever we were able.”

He gave a deep chuckle, and for the first time all day, she sensed a lighter shift in the mood. “Naughty minx. So you really are Lady Thief, or should I say the Duchess of Thieves.”

Victoria poured them both a generous glass of wine, then handed one to her husband.

My husband.

Robert was still very much a stranger. But as he took the glass from her hand, and their fingers touched, she couldn't help but smile at him.

He bent and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "My duchess. I promise you will never need to steal from me."

She took in his gorgeous blue gray eyes and those soft plump lips. Robert might not ever worry that she would take from him, but if he kept looking at her like that, he was going to steal more than just kisses.

Chapter Thirty-One

The gentle click of glasses was the only sound in the room. But Victoria's ears were full of the heavy beating of her heart. Robert drank his wine, then set the glass on the table. His gaze went to the base of her throat where her quickening pulse was on display.

He took the glass from her hands and moved both it and his own out of the way. She watched his eyes as his focus remained on the table. A wicked glint appeared in them, and she recalled the last time she'd been in this kitchen. What they had done; what she had let him do to her.

A strong hand settled on her back, and he drew her to him. "We could go upstairs, but this is the warmest room in the house." He lowered his gaze momentarily, then looked up again. "I have a confession to make."

Victoria swallowed deep. "Yes?"

"I have always wanted to make love to my wife on this table. Would you be willing to grant me this boon? I know I don't deserve it."

He took a step forward, and as she took one backward, her lower back bumped against the edge of the table. Victoria's brows furrowed. Her mind was working hard trying to figure out how this was actually going to work. She had an idea about it being in a bed, man on top, but if this was what he wanted.

Her fingers came to rest on the surface of the table. "You. You want to do it here and

now?” she stammered.

Robert prowled closer. There was nothing but their clothes between them now. A hard something pressed against her stomach, and Victoria’s gaze dropped. He was aroused. Yes, that was the word her mother had used when she described what happened to the male body when a husband wanted marital relations.

Warm lips settled on her cheek, then slowly kiss by kiss made their way across to her ear. He nibbled on her earlobe, sending a shiver down her spine. Her knees went weak as he murmured, “I can’t stop thinking of the night you climaxed in my arms. Of your sighs. And when you cried out my name, I almost reached my own crisis.”

She hadn’t been able to stop thinking of that night either, of how he had touched her. But she knew enough stories of how a man’s desires might cool once he was married. Of wives promised much before the wedding but left unfulfilled from their wedding night onward.

“Robert.”

Words utterly failed her. She wanted to ask for everything but didn’t know what she wanted. The only thing she did understand was that she needed his touch.

“Look at me,” he whispered. Her gaze met his, her heart catching as she beheld the warmth and tenderness in his eyes. “Every time you and I are together as man and wife, I want to make it wonderful for you. Getting used to being married is going to take us both some time, but this—this thing between you and me, it’s the perfect place for us to create that connection.”

Victoria swallowed. He’d caught her off guard with this sudden request—her thoughts had been on the toast and the wine. “What do you want me to do?”

“Let me strip you bare,” he growled. “Taking you naked on this table would be the greatest wedding gift you could give me.”

She had bought him a lovely and rather expensive whisky flask for his wedding present, with the intention of gifting it to him in the morning, but at hearing Robert’s need for her to submit to his desires, Victoria sensed this would mean a good deal more to him.

A nod was her answer.

Buttons, laces, and gown, he slowly stripped her clothes from her body. As the cool night air kissed her naked skin, Victoria shivered. “Now I understand why you wanted us to be together in the warmth of this room.”

“I have blankets in the scullery for after we are done. We can wrap ourselves up in them while we feast on wine and bread. But first, this...”

His lips settled over her breast, and he took her peaked nipple into his mouth, drawing back hard. It sent a bolt of lightning racing down her spine. Her core clenched. Who would have thought that a man touching her this way could make her entire body come to life?

But it did.

In Robert’s embrace, she was liquid fire. He lifted her onto the table and settled her near to the edge. His hands went to the falls of his trousers, and he freed his erection. She watched with wonder as his firm cock brushed against her knee, asking in a small but determined voice, “May I touch you?”

“I would like nothing better than your hands on me,” he growled.

When she touched the end of him with her fingertips, he shuddered. “Maybe with a little more force, and the rest of your hand.”

She caught the begging in his words, and bit down on her lip. Wrapping her fingers around his shaft, she gave it a gentle squeeze. This was definitely a tip she had picked up from the ladies rooms at a ball. Something about men liking it when a woman stroked them.

“Just tell me if I am hurting you,” she said, moving her hand back and forth.

He pushed her knees open further then parted the folds of her sex with his thumb. His strokes were deep and magnificent. The room was filled with soft sighs, and heated groans as they worked one another to a higher plane of pleasure. As her own desires rose, Victoria struggled to keep a hold of his erection—all she wanted was to collapse against her husband and let Robert bring her to a shattering climax.

He must have sensed her state and withdrew his hand from her body. Victoria let out a small mewl of disappointment, which Robert captured in a deep kiss. His tongue speared into her mouth, and she found herself rising to the occasion, meeting him thrust for thrust in a heady tangle of lips and tongue.

“I’m going to make you mine now,” he said, breaking the kiss. “Hook your heels behind my knees.” She did as he asked, quickly understanding how this opened her fully to him. “Now take my cock in your hand and guide it to the entrance of your sex.”

Victoria stilled. All the stories she’d heard about this moment crashed into her mind. Tales of searing pain. Of fear. “I, ah. You might need to help me.”

He brushed his lips over hers. “We will make this as good as we can for your first time. There might be a slight pinch of pain, but after that, only pleasure.”

They worked together and to her surprise, she felt no discomfort as he slid himself inside her body, sensing only the fullness of him. “Was that it?” she whispered. There had been no sting, no tearing of her world.

Robert nodded. “You are so slick and hot, so ready for me.” His words were strained. She sensed that while he was holding everything back, he was also desperate to let go of his tightly held leash.

Victoria kissed him, then breathed into his mouth. “Take me. Show me the pleasure you did that night when you held me as your prisoner.”

His hips moved and he withdrew, then he flexed them again and pushed back in. With every stroke, he brushed his cock over her sensitive bud. It was heavenly. Victoria became his captive once more, willingly held in his arms. He gripped her hips and thrust deep, seating himself fully. “Oh god,” they both moaned.

“Is that good?”

“Yes, but I want it harder. Faster. Please Robert.”

He took her at her word. His strokes became rapid, deep thrusts. Victoria clung to him, whimpering when Robert shifted his stance, and the new position had him grinding against her pleasure bud at the most heavenly angle. She wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take; her whole body was screaming with the need for release.

When it came, she crashed through her climax, her world becoming a blaze of exploding stars. She slumped boneless against Robert, as he continued to pound into her sex. The gruff anger of lust in his every groan was music to her ears. When he finally thrust one last time, then stilled, she heard him whisper, “Thank god, I didn’t turn you over to the authorities that night. Marrying you was the smartest thing I’ve

ever done.”

Victoria lifted her gaze. They were still joined, and she liked that he was in no particular hurry to release her from his embrace.

She nodded slowly. “I think you might be right.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

The next morning, Robert filled a hipbath with warm water for Victoria, and while she bathed in front of the hearth, he cooked them breakfast. Victoria still missed her sourdough bread, but Robert had his own way of making up for any other disappointments.

After he had taken her on the table last night, he'd wrapped her up in a large woolen blanket and made them toast. The wine and cheese had been cleverly paired. When sleep had finally beckoned, her husband had led her upstairs and to their huge bed. The moment they had snuggled under the blankets, she'd reached for him, and he'd claimed her once more.

Dressed and with her hair pinned up, Victoria sat in a chair at the kitchen table, and offered Robert a soft, sated smile. It felt odd not having servants in the house first thing in the morning, but when he'd stroked her to an orgasm in front of the warm stove a little while earlier, she'd understood the benefits of the two of them being alone in the house.

When things were a little more settled, she would raise the issue of bringing Mary, her maid, over from Mowbray House. But not today.

A plate of fried eggs and bacon was set in front of her. "I usually have a better selection of breakfast offerings, but I've been busy this week. I promise once we get to Tolley Manor, the morning food will be of a better standard."

Her eyebrows raised at the mention of his ducal estate, and she asked, "When do you

plan for us to visit the country?”

Setting his own plate of food on the table, Robert took the seat next to hers. “I was thinking we could leave today. I mean all your things are still in their travel trunks from when they were moved here yesterday. I have a full wardrobe waiting for me at the manor house. It would be good for us to get out of London. Get some fresh air.”

Victoria nodded. “Let me finish reading the newspaper, then I shall go get ready. It’s one morning habit I’d like to keep now that we are married. I used to read the paper, then go to the local German bakery every day for my breakfast, but even that’s now changed. New people have taken it over and apparently the food standards have slipped.”

“Really? What happened with the food?” he asked.

She hoped the look she gave him conveyed her utter disgust at the events of yesterday morning. “From what I understand, customers found bits of rats in the buns. They had to close. If they don’t fix things quickly, they will soon be out of business.”

Robert gave a huff of agreement. “That will definitely see them out of the bakery trade.” He handed her the newspaper. “Here you are, take your time. I’ve got a couple of things to get sorted this morning, after which we can leave.”

Victoria lay the Morning Herald on the table in front of her. She was thinking how funny it was that she’d just married their restaurant critic, when a headline caught her eye.

Investigations continue into spice theft.

The London Port authorities are continuing their efforts to thwart a bloodthirsty gang of spice pirates who have been responsible for the theft of several large shipments of

spices from ships owned by the Honorable East India Company. Directors of the EIC are reported to have lodged a significant claim with Lloyds insurers.

“Have you heard about these spice thefts from the ships of the East India?” she asked. Two of the restaurants Robert had recently reviewed had been dealing with supply issues due to a so-called spice war, and she wondered if he might know anything about them.

Cold dread gripped Robert. Victoria’s remark about the German bakery had been cause enough for concern, now she was asking about stolen spices. His new world and his old one were sitting staring at one another, and he wondered how long it would be before they eventually recognized each other. And when they did, he feared that any chance of a calm start to this marriage would be lost.

He had to hand it to them, the East India were cunning opportunistic bastards. They’d clearly decided to capitalize on the small amount of spices he had stolen from them and turn it into a much larger insurance claim. Lloyds insurers would have underwritten a maritime policy and be paying out on a sizeable claim.

Well I know why they haven’t come looking for me, they just wanted the money.

Robert hadn’t been able to understand why news of his highway heists had never been made public, but now it all made sense. His enemy was making someone else pay for its losses. And it also saved the East India the embarrassment of having to admit that it wasn’t protecting its cargos once they reached England.

“I did hear rumors of some establishments having supply issues, but this news of spice pirates sounds terrible. I hope the East India can get to the bottom of it and soon,” he replied.

If they were putting in claims for the lost shipments via their insurers, then perhaps

they would leave him alone. But it would also mean they were not losing money.

I can't break their monopoly if they are not feeling any pain.

Robert bit his bottom lip. It sounded all too easy. He had dealt with the East India Company long enough to know that it did the dirtiest parts of its business in the shadows. Something told him, the sooner he and Victoria left town the better.

Things were too quiet and that was never a good sign.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tolley Manor was a delightful, Elizabethan-era estate, set on over two thousand acres just outside the market town of Saffron Walden, in Essex. From what Victoria could see as she peered out the travel coach, most of the land surrounding the manor house was under crops.

Robert shifted closer to her and pointed out the window. “We have several dozen types of herbs planted here, and various seasonal vegetable and fruit crops. A lot of the produce is harvested and sold in Cambridge, but some of the dried herbs make it all the way to London.”

“And you grow saffron too?”

She gave him a cheeky smile and he nodded. They both remembered that night at the dinner party, when he’d been condescending about her knowledge of spices.

“I’m sorry I was so horrid to you that evening. I meant to hurt you.” He sighed. “I behaved terribly. I am still ashamed of it.”

“Well, one day you might find a way to make it up to me. Then I might forgive you.”

Victoria turned back to the window.

Part way down the long road which led to the manor house, Robert rapped on the roof. “Pull over.”

As soon as the coach came to a halt, he swung the door open and jumped down, landing on the roadway with sure feet. He held out his arms to Victoria. "Come on, let me show you the kitchen garden, then we can walk the rest of the way home."

Home. She liked how that sounded. This was her new home. And she would do her best to make it as warm and friendly a home as possible.

Maybe once I am settled, I can invite some family members to come and stay. It would be good to get Coco out of town, and away from bad influences. Give her some perspective.

The travel coach continued on its way up the long drive, Victoria watching until it passed through a brick archway which sat to the left of the main house, then disappeared from sight. Robert took a hold of her hand. "Do you like strawberries? I think we might have some in the greenhouse which are ripe enough to eat."

She found herself smiling at him once more. "You have a greenhouse, that sounds intriguing. And yes, I love all manner of berries, especially strawberries."

As her new husband showed her around parts of the estate, a warmth settled over Victoria's heart. Robert was attentive and generous. Though on the odd occasion he would stop what he was saying mid-sentence and suddenly change the subject. She hoped it was all just a part of him getting used to finding himself unexpectedly married. That in time Robert would feel comfortable enough to share everything with her.

"I'm glad we left town and came here. I think if we had stayed in London, people would be knocking on the front door and wishing to pay us calls. And without servants, that might have been a little difficult," she said.

Escaping the city also meant that she wouldn't have to spend her honeymoon being

on social display for her mother. She was in no doubt that the duchess would have loved nothing more than to drag the new Duchess of Saffron Walden to every social gathering with the express intent of making sure that all her rivals knew about her daughter's excellent marriage.

Tolley Manor was exactly where Victoria wished to be, far from London. She wanted time to get to know her husband, to forge their relationship outside the bedroom.

Not that I am complaining about what happens when he and I are naked.

At the end of the drive they headed toward a large building, which revealed itself to be a well fitted out stables along with a blacksmiths. As they drew near, she caught a glimpse of another building at the rear of the big red brick one. It was topped with a glass frame.

“Is that the greenhouse?” she asked, failing to hide her excitement.

He squeezed her hand. “Yes, it is. Technically it's an orangery, but we grow much more than just fruit in it. Come on, I can't wait to show you inside.”

Most people tended to offer him a polite, disinterested smile whenever he mentioned his crops and gardens, but Victoria seemed genuinely interested. Robert was sure his heart gave a little pitter-patter of delight when his wife let out a squeal as they rounded the corner and reached the greenhouse.

“Oh, it's magnificent!” she exclaimed.

He didn't know what to do with himself. This woman...their connection was so unexpected. His initial thoughts had been to marry Victoria, and in doing so, ensure her silence about what she might have seen that night. But every moment he spent with her, he found more reasons to want to keep her by his side.

A less stubborn man might have admitted the truth by now, that he was falling for her. Robert foolishly clung to his ways. To the notion that this was just a passing flight of fancy, brought on by the early lust filled days of marriage, and it would soon pass.

The only thing he didn't try to fool himself about was what would happen if those feelings continued to grow. If they did, he was going to find himself facing a world of trouble.

Inside the greenhouse, Victoria was as giddy as a child on Christmas morning. She let go of Robert's hand and skipped along the stone path which wound its way between the flowerbeds.

"Look at all these herbs." She bent and put her nose against some basil growing in a small pot. When she breathed in deep and then sighed, he wanted to drop to his knees and offer her the world.

Robert selected a ripe strawberry and trailed after her. When he reached her, Victoria was studying a miniature pear tree. An expression of unbridled fascination sat on her face.

"Here, try this," he said, handing her the bright red berry.

She took it and bit into the soft flesh of the fruit. "Mmm."

Her hum of pleasure went straight to his cock. Victoria was nothing like most women he'd met amongst the elite of London society. She didn't make any effort to hide her enjoyment of food and life. He was fast losing the battle to keep his emotional distance from her.

And would that be such a bad thing? To care for my wife.

That thought pulled him up sharp. He was running a dangerous and illegal spice smuggling business—he couldn't afford to get emotionally involved with her.

Victoria finished her strawberry. Robert's gaze settled on the small spot of red on her lips. Before he could stop himself, he'd reached out and brushed it away with his thumb, which he then licked.

“Would.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Would you like to see the crocus flowers?” The only thing croaky in the greenhouse was his voice.

She beamed at him. “I heard from a reliable source that the threads are worth more than their weight in gold.”

Victoria had remembered his words from that night when he'd taken her prisoner.

She had snuck into his garden and stolen more than just a handful of herbs.

“Your Grace?”

Robert turned. A familiar figure stood in the doorway of the greenhouse and waved at them. He beckoned the man over.

“Victoria, may I introduce my estate steward, Jasper. Jasper, this is Victoria, the Duchess of Saffron Walden. My wife.”

He loved how that sounded. My wife.

Jasper dipped his head. “Your Grace, welcome to Tolley Manor. If there is anything you need, you only have to ask. The head butler has the household servants assembled and awaiting your inspection at your leisure.”

He gave a quick glance in Robert's direction. The message clear: the sooner they got the new lady of the house in the hands of the staff, the quicker he and his employer could talk.

When Victoria didn't make a move to immediately depart, Jasper cleared his throat, and said, "Your Grace, the wagon with the timbers from the lower woods has arrived. I have asked the hands to move the wood to the driest part of the main barn."

"Excellent, thank you. Is that the last of the timber?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Though you may need to come and inspect the cut of the wood a little later."

"Very good."

Robert offered Victoria his arm. "Would you like to go up to the manor house and meet the servants? After the long journey of the past two days, I'm sure you'd love to get some things unpacked and settled in."

She softly smiled up at him and nodded. "Yes, that would be lovely."

Jasper followed them out of the greenhouse. Robert glanced back over his shoulder at his estate steward. There wasn't any timber from the lower wood. Jasper had used code to explain that the last of the smuggled spices had arrived at the estate, and later tonight they would commence transferring all of it from the East India Company crates and barrels to their own. By week's end they would have all the evidence either burned or hidden, after which Robert and some of the workers would take the new Tolley Estate spices to Cambridge market and sell them for a tidy profit.

Things were coming together nicely. He had a pretty and intelligent new duchess in his bed. Hidden within his secret storage cellar was thousands of pounds worth of

stolen spices which the Honorable East India didn't appear to be losing any sleep over recovering. All in all, the Duke of Spice had it made.

So why then, do I have this constant fear that my world is about to fall apart?

Chapter Thirty-Four

“N ow carefully pull the saffron stigmas and separate them from the flowers. Once you have done that, lay the stigmas on the drying tray.”

Holding the purple flower in her left hand, Victoria did as Robert instructed and gently teased the red stigma free. It was thrilling to be harvesting the saffron. For a woman born into privilege and an elegant life, she was surprised to discover she was enjoying getting her hands dirty.

“I can see why it would take a long time and a large harvest to make any sort of commercial quantity,” she observed. Each crocus flower only produced two to three stigmas.

They were alone in the potting shed the following morning. After a delicious breakfast prepared by the estate cook, Robert had led Victoria out of the manor house and to the small wooden hut located at the bottom of the kitchen garden. He was showing her how saffron was harvested.

Warm hands brushed over her cheek, followed by a tender kiss. “You do make a wonderful Duchess of Saffron Walden,” he murmured.

Heat burned on her cheeks. She was powerless to resist the wicked thoughts which danced in her mind whenever he was near. “Who would have thought it? Me, the Duchess of Spice,” she laughed.

He came and stood behind her, wrapping his arms about her waist. She felt the

hardness of his growing erection as it dug into her back. “I know you like a little spice in your life. And a little heat. How about I warm you up in here?”

Strong hands took a hold of Victoria’s skirts and raised them. The cool morning air kissed her thighs. They weren’t going to do it in the daylight, were they? That would be beyond scandalous.

“What about the servants?”

His teeth nipped at her earlobe. “They will know not to knock on the door. Besides I locked it the second we got here.”

He’d planned this all along, the wicked devil.

Robert took the crocus flower from her hands and pushed the tray and flowers out of the way. He spun her round to face him. Catching the glint of lust in his eyes, she let out a gasp. “Robert.”

“We are married, and married people are allowed to do this whenever they wish.”

Memories of the night he had ruined her flashed into Victoria’s mind, and it was all she could do not to whimper with need as Robert bunched her skirts around her hips and exposed her sex fully to him.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

She bit on her bottom lip as he slowly went to his knees on the stone flagging. He blew a soft breath over her sensitive bud. “I must say you have such a sweet cunny, my dear. And I am the lucky man who gets to kiss it.”

His language was filthy. Positively outrageous. And she would take him to task over

it, just as soon as... Oh my good lord.

Victoria's eyes fluttered closed as her wicked husband parted her soft folds with his tongue. All thoughts of proper conduct fled her mind as he took her clit between his teeth and bit gently on it. Sense and reason dictated she shouldn't be enjoying what he was doing, but as lust coursed through her body, she was powerless to protest. When had pain and pleasure ever been such a heady, delightful mix?

He thrust his thumb deep into her heat and Victoria groaned. "Oh. Oh." She was incapable of any form of real speech. Her scattered mind went completely to pieces as he got to his feet, and pressing her legs apart, pushed two large fingers into her sex. The feeling of fullness was nothing short of exquisite.

As he stroked her, the thumb of his other hand gently circled her sensitive nib. "I have a long list of locations all around the estate where I intend to lift your skirts, and then fuck you. While the privacy of the potting shed is a nice place to start, I also want you on your knees, bent before me while we are out in the open. Just the thought of seeing your bare ass in the sunshine makes my cock go rock hard. You and I are going to rut like wild beasts for the rest of the summer, my darling Lady Thief, so you'd better get used to having dirt on your hands and knees," he said in a rough voice, which only added to her pleasure.

"Robert," she sobbed.

"Robert what?" he teased.

"Please."

"Hmm. I do like a lady with manners, especially when she is begging for my cock. That's what you want, isn't it, Your Grace? Me thrusting inside you."

Every stroke of his hands was driving her closer to the edge. Any moment now she was going to shatter. “Yes. Please. Oh god.”

His evil, knowing laugh went straight to her sex. She lowered her gaze, watching with hunger as he flicked open the buttons on the folds of his trousers. Victoria licked her lips as Robert’s erection sprang free. In a matter of days, she’d gone from timid unwed miss to wanton married woman. To reveling at the sight of his manhood and the thought of what he was going to do to her.

He shifted between her legs and positioned himself at her entrance. As he slowly pushed in, Victoria hooked her feet around the back of Robert’s knees, locking him into place. She pushed away all thoughts of where they were and the worry that one of the servants might happen to pass by the window. All she cared about was satiating her desire for this man.

His hands gripped her hips, and the tiny room was soon filled with the heady sound of skin on skin, slap slap, as he slowly, thoroughly fucked her.

Victoria lay her head against Robert’s chest, her fingers twisted into the folds of his jacket. Before marriage, she’d never understood why sane women would let rogues seduce them, but these intimate moments with her husband had given her blinding clarity. Because any sane woman who didn’t allow a man to love her body the way Robert did was a damn fool.

“Tell me you like this, that I make it good for you,” he whispered.

Good. Was he in jest? The man was a master at the art of making love. “Yes.”

He wrapped his arms around her and thrust up hard. As his cock brushed against her sensitive bud, Victoria drew ever closer to coming apart.

His long, deep strokes gentled and slowed. He'd already learned her body well enough that when she was this close to her climax, he could read the signals. Every fiber of her being was hardwired to him, to receiving pleasure from this man.

She lifted her gaze and met his pale blue gray eyes. They shone with the promise of forever. "Tell me, Victoria, how close are you? I want to be with you at the exact moment you reach your crisis."

Close. So close she didn't know how to put what she felt into words. Victoria swallowed deep. "I...I..."

He let out a low groan. "That close? Good, because I'm not sure how much longer I can keep my passion at bay. I need to have you."

His words and one last delicious stroke sent her plummeting over the edge. Their gazes remained locked as Victoria cried out and her whole body shook with pleasure.

"Keep looking at me," he commanded, stroking her through her orgasm. "Take everything you need. Let me give you it all."

It took a long minute for her head to slowly clear, for the haze of her desire to release its hold. Victoria blinked. "I am yours. Claim everything that is yours. Everything I can give you Robert, even my soul."

He stole her lips in a fiery kiss, plundering her mouth as he thrust hard and deep into her body. His hands dug into her hips, gripping tight. She would have bruises tomorrow, but today she wanted to give Robert what he craved. For him to have and hold.

"And to think I thought you were such a straight-laced little miss when we first met. When in truth underneath all that haughty manner was a fiery minx."

His thrusts grew harder, stronger. The pots on the bench rattled. One tipped to the floor, smashing to pieces as it hit the ground. A second quickly followed.

“Robert,” she moaned.

He slammed in deep one last time then stilled. His chest rose and fell as he sucked in a hard breath, then another.

“Remind me to clear things out of the way next time I have you in here.”

Robert’s sex-ruffled voice was full of promise. This would not be the last time her husband would claim his marital rights in the garden shed.

She snorted. “Yes, saffron is far too expensive to waste.”

But every moment with him was fast becoming priceless.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Victoria woke in the middle of the night and reached for Robert. Her fingers touched empty sheets. She waited for a few minutes, thinking perhaps he had gone into the washroom, but when he didn't return, she sat up and lit the bedside candle.

They had been at Tolley Manor for four, almost five days, and every night it had been the same. She'd stirred from deep slumber in the early hours and found him gone. The first couple of nights, she'd been too tired to do anything about it, and had fallen back to sleep. Robert was a devil in the bedroom and when he was done with her, she was left sated and utterly exhausted.

He always returned before the dawn, often waking her with his kisses and demanding male needs, but she still wondered where he went.

Tonight, when she had woken, Victoria couldn't go back to sleep. Where on earth did Robert go in the middle of the night? Victoria glanced at the door, as a sense of unease grew in her mind.

Was he having sex with one of the servants? He wouldn't be the first nobleman to keep a wife and a mistress under his roof. Maybe that's why he hadn't bothered to seek out a wife until now.

Her instincts told her she was wrong, that he wasn't the sort of man to do that. Then again, they hadn't been wed all that long. It would be the ultimate irony if she had passed up all those other nobles only to find herself married to a serial adulterer.

But Victoria was her mother's daughter. She wasn't going to lay here in willful ignorance. She placed her hand flat on his side of the bed—the sheets were still warm.

He can't have gone too far.

Throwing back the bedclothes, Victoria hurried to the armoire and pulled out some clothes. Quickly dressing, she grabbed one of Robert's coats from his wardrobe and put it on. It swam on her, but with the belt secured tightly at the waist she was able to lift the coat up and avoid standing on the hem.

Her gaze settled on her travel trunk. Heading out into the night was a dangerous endeavor. This might not be London, but she didn't know the area, or what wild beasts might lurk outside in the dark.

She considered her options for a moment, then crossed the floor to the trunk and threw the lid open. From the bottom of the case, she took out a small solid weapons box. Within minutes she had her pistol loaded, and a shot purse in her hands.

What had Coco said? If you load a weapon and point it at someone, make sure you are prepared to fire it.

If I find him in bed with one of the servants, what will I do?

Shooting her new husband might not be the best course of action. Victoria blinked back tears. Maybe she should put the weapon away.

“But if he is playing me false, this might give him just enough of a fright,” she muttered. Victoria dropped the loaded pistol into her right pocket, and the shot purse into her left. Reaching for the doorknob, she gave a prayer. “Please lord, don't let it be that.”

The house was eerily quiet. No light, no sound. Victoria stood at the top of the stairs and listened. The thump of her heart was the only thing she could hear. Slowly making her way downstairs, she stopped every few steps and listened once more.

Nothing. No one moved about the house.

She had just got to the bottom of the staircase and was considering whether it was wise or ridiculously foolish to head down to the servants quarters, when she caught sight of a flash of light from outside the window. Victoria hurried over and pressed her face to the glass, peering out into the night.

At the top of the laneway which snaked through the estate all the way from the stables through to the main road, a group of laborers was hauling a wagon laden with what appeared to be crates. Behind them walked Jasper the steward. Beside him strode Robert. Both men were carrying rifles.

What the devil are they doing?

Tolley Manor grew fruit, vegetables, and herbs. And from what she understood, there were no crops which required harvesting in the middle of the night.

A well-bred noblewoman would decide it wasn't her place to get involved in such matters. That she had a household and servants to deal with, and that what happened outside wasn't her concern. Victoria had never been one for resisting the lure of curiosity.

"Care 'll kill a cat, but I won't remain ignorant of what is going on at my home," she muttered.

Slipping quietly out the rear entrance of the main house, Victoria followed the small procession of estate workers, steward, and duke as they continued down the lane.

The men were all silent; no one spoke. From the way they all walked, continually checking from left to right, it soon became clear to her that this was not the first time any of them had undertaken this kind of work.

What are they doing?

Her heart raced as she trailed them, silent as a wraith. Whenever one of the group turned to look back down the lane, Victoria would dash behind a tree and hide. And when she reached the stretch of the road where there was no cover, she simply crouched and remained as still as she could, hoping that no one saw her.

A half mile down the road, the little group came to a halt. The wagon was dragged off to one side, and Robert moved forward. From her vantage point, Victoria caught sight of a large ring of keys in his hand. The jangle of them was loud enough to split the night.

The Tolley Manor workers moved out of the way as their master disappeared from the road and into the undergrowth. Victoria quickly moved, taking up a spot behind a nearby tree.

Robert eventually reappeared, after which both he and Jasper stepped aside, as the workers began unloading the wagon. What appeared to be crates and barrels were lifted down and carried off into the trees. Each time the men returned, their hands were empty. Somewhere out of sight of the road they were storing the load.

Victoria pursed her lips. She couldn't understand why they would have to move barrels and crates in the dead of night. The only logical reason would be that they didn't want to be seen.

At least he isn't warming the bed of another woman.

While she consoled herself with that thought, she wasn't entirely sure if what she was witnessing was any better. Her hopeful heart told her it was, but fear and nagging doubt whispered it was something else. Something much worse.

Robert took a swig of whisky from his hipflask. It was close to five in the morning and the air was chilly. He smiled at the thoughtful gift his new bride had given him. Victoria's wedding present was both stylish and functional. The thought of his wife, still sleeping soundly in their bed, pricked sharply at his guilt.

Victoria was under the impression that he was a sweet-hearted farmer who wrote reviews for the newspaper in his spare time. What she would make of things if she were to ever discover that her husband was in fact a highwayman, a smuggler, and an unashamed thief.

Would she hate me?

Could he possibly make her understand his reasons for stealing from the East India, his need to break their vice-like monopoly, or would she see him as nothing more than an outright villain? A scoundrel who had no business in marrying a woman of noble birth.

In the past that might not have bothered him, but it certainly did now. He couldn't imagine looking at Victoria and knowing that she saw him as less of a man. That she was married to someone who had broken the rules of honor in order to do what he thought was right. His mantra of by all means necessary now sounded so empty.

If George and his wife could hear him now, they'd laugh themselves hoarse. Robert had always brushed away their concerns about these illegal endeavors. But finding himself in this strange position, wondering if it was all worthwhile, made him finally see their side of things.

If I don't steal any more spices, I could walk away.

He didn't need the money. With Victoria's sizeable dowry at his disposal, he could focus on his crops and in time take on the East India Company without the fear of them coming after him.

Robert was still pondering his next move when Jasper appeared from out of the trees and gave him a nod. That was the last of the crates which had left Tolley House in London the day after he and Victoria had departed.

Tomorrow, two wagon loads of those now rebranded spices would be on their way to Cambridge to be sold at market. That would then leave the secret cache, which only he and Jasper knew about, as the final remaining haul of stolen spices on the Tolley Manor estate.

Robert and Jasper, guns still at the ready, brought up the rear as the Tolley estate workers made their way back toward the manor. Slowing his steps, Robert turned to his loyal steward and asked, "What would you say if I told you I was thinking of us calling a temporary halt to this line of work?"

His steward cleared his throat. "I would say that your recent marriage has given you room for thought, Your Grace. You fear losing the good favor of your duchess. Lady Victoria is a rare woman indeed, and I wouldn't want to be the man who disappoints her."

Jasper gave him a knowing grin, and Robert chuckled. "Wise words indeed. Let's make tomorrow our final run for the time being. It will give me the opportunity to reconsider any future plans for stealing from the Honorable East India."

As he spoke those words, Robert felt the weight lift from his shoulders. For Victoria he wanted to be a good husband, not a fraud. He wanted to be able to look his wife in

the eye and know that she was proud of him.

But even he couldn't deny the formidable hold his burning desire to fight the East India held over him. The thought of giving up and walking away was one thing, but actually doing it, was something else.

Victoria crept back to the house and upstairs to the ducal suite. She carefully hung Robert's spare coat back into the wardrobe and put her own clothes away. Clad once more in her nightgown, she slipped into bed, doing her best to quickly warm the sheets. But sleep eluded her.

She was still awake when she heard the sound of footsteps outside in the hall, followed by the squeak of the bedroom door being opened. Victoria closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep as Robert moved quietly about the room, undressing. He opened the wardrobe and put his clothes carefully away.

There was a clang of something metallic hitting the floor, and Robert cursed. "Damn keys."

She'd seen the key ring in his hand as Robert headed away from the house. He must have dropped it. The jangle as he picked up the keys and put them back into the wardrobe had Victoria wondering what exactly it was that he and his men were keeping so securely under lock and key.

The bed dipped as Robert climbed back in and pulled the blankets over himself. Victoria pretended to rouse from sleep. "Oh, where have you been?" she asked, in her best croaky voice.

He pressed himself against her, and even through her nightgown, she could feel the night chill on his skin. "Nowhere my love. I've been here the whole time. You must have been dreaming."

His cold hands and feet bore witness to his lie. The only part of Robert which was warm were his lips. He put them to good use and kissed her. "Go back to sleep."

She rolled over in the bed, and he cuddled up against her back, the bed trembling as he shivered under the blankets.

He just lied to me. But why?

Lessons from her parents' marriage had taught her not to start a fight in the middle of the night. To choose her battles wisely. If Robert felt the need to tell her mistruths, then he must have his reasons. She'd let him get his sleep, then wait for the right moment to ask about his nocturnal habits.

Teeth gritted, she stared at the wall. Her mother, the one person whose counsel she so badly needed, was many miles away in London. While Robert slept soundly beside her, Victoria pondered her future. Her greatest fear was that her marriage was already over before it had really begun. That she would never be able to fully trust him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A pensive Victoria waved Robert, along with the two wagons laden with produce, a fond farewell as he set out for the market in Cambridge a day later. Before leaving, he'd proudly shown her the contents of the first of the wagons: various fruits and vegetables, along with some small jars of saffron. But when it came to the second wagon, Robert had merely waved his hand at it in a wordless gesture which said it contained pretty much the same as the first wagon and she needn't bother examining its contents.

Both wagons were covered, and their loads tied down. At first glance they did indeed appear to be the same, but as the small convoy of wagons, accompanied by Robert on horseback, slowly made its way down the drive Victoria noted that the second wagon sat lower on the road. The wheels groaned as they turned. Whatever was on board was heavy.

Her husband was keeping things from her, and she had a horrid suspicion it had something to do with what she had seen the other night in the laneway.

I don't know what is going on. I shouldn't go making dangerous assumptions.

She tried to talk sense to herself. Tried to calm her racing heart. There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for Robert being absent from their bed late at night. For him and some of the estate workers to be moving crates and barrels in the dark. And for her husband and his steward to both be toting loaded weapons. What did she know, perhaps the lead up to market day was always like this, late nights and early mornings.

Victoria stood watching until the last wagon had dipped below the rise in the road and disappeared from sight.

“I could simply ask him when he gets home,” she whispered to herself. By raising the subject along with her concerns, Robert could be able to understand her worries and no doubt help set her mind at ease.

But she couldn't think of any plausible reason for the need for such secrecy. Or for him to so blatantly lie to her.

Walking back into the house, Victoria considered her next move. Robert would be gone all day and was not expected home until late tonight. If she was going to succumb to temptation and go snooping about the estate, this would be her best chance.

She gave it an hour after she had eaten supper to finally make her move. By that time, the household servants had finished their work for the day and gone downstairs.

Alone in her and Robert's bedroom, Victoria opened her husband's wardrobe and took out his spare greatcoat. Locating the keys proved a much harder task.

Her efforts at hiding the whisky bottle at the back of her chest of drawers in London paled against the clever way Robert had managed to hide the elusive key ring. A good half hour of rummaging through the bottom of the wardrobe and her search had yielded nothing.

Standing back from the cupboard, hands on hips, Victoria glanced up at the higher shelves and muttered a few unladylike words. It didn't help that Robert was well over six foot tall, while she only managed a respectable five foot five.

Grabbing a chair from the nearby sitting room, Victoria hauled it into the bedroom.

Hiking her skirts up, she climbed onto it, and began searching the lower of the two main shelves. Her search yielded an interesting array of pieces. Various tins filled with old, and likely valuable, coins. Some odd pieces of jewelry, including a rather lovely silver and ruby bracelet. Victoria made a mental note to let Robert know how much she loved rubies and that her birthday wasn't all that far away.

But no key ring.

"Damn, where did he hide it?" she muttered.

He'd only taken a moment to hide the keys, so she must be close to finding them. Then a horrid thought stuck her. What if he had moved them before he left this morning? She could be looking in the wrong place entirely.

Victoria shook her head. No. Robert had actually remained in their bed all of last night. Early this morning, he had got up, washed, and dressed, then headed straight downstairs. She was convinced he wouldn't have had time to move the keys.

They had to be in the wardrobe.

Please lord they must be in here.

She climbed down from the chair, accidentally knocking the door of the wardrobe as she set a foot on the floor. Turning she went to move the chair out of the way, but instead found herself staring at a half open panel on the inside of the door. Heart thumping, she pulled the panel back and there, hanging on a secret little hook, was the key ring.

What a clever, sneaky idea.

If she'd had something like this in her bedroom in London, she would have been able

to steal a good deal more of her father's liquor.

Key ring in hand, and dressed against the cold of the night, Victoria considered her next move. The choice was to either go ahead with her plan or get ready for bed and talk to Robert in the morning. But her sister Coco would be bitterly disappointed if she discovered her sister had turned chicken hearted and hadn't gone through with it.

"Speaking of Coco." Victoria hurried over to her travel trunk, retrieved her pistol, and the pouch of gunshot.

It was now or never. Robert was expected home sometime around midnight, and she had no idea how much time she would need before then in order to satisfy her curiosity. She had to get to the bottom of whatever it was that he and the estate workers had been up to other night, then make good her escape.

The laneway was dark; the quarter moon hidden behind thin whispers of clouds gave only a hint of light. On her way back to the manor the other night, Victoria had counted the number of steps in between where she had hidden behind the tree all the way to the main front lawn of the house. Five hundred and twenty three steps, give or take a few miscounted ones.

At the end of the lawn, she began her trek, silently counting as she walked. If her family and friends in London could see her now, they would think she had gone mad. She was all alone, dressed in a gentleman's greatcoat, while sneaking down a country lane in search of heaven knew what sort of dark mystery. A bubble of excitement bounced around in her belly.

If there was a sensible and rational explanation for Robert's nightly endeavors, she was going to be more than a little disappointed.

Counting to step number five hundred, Victoria spied the tree she had hidden behind.

She had to be close.

On the other side of the road, she found an empty spice barrel. Someone must have dropped it, and in the dark not seen it fall. She produced a small lantern from out of her coat pocket and set it on the ground. Lifting the glass cover, Victoria struck a flint and lit the candle. It gave off the barest of light, but enough for her to be able to see her way.

She moved forward, searching for a path through the undergrowth. Her lantern revealed a narrow trail which she carefully followed. A little further on into the trees, she came to a sudden stop. Ahead of her was a brick wall, and in the middle of it sat a heavy iron door.

“Open Sesame,” she whispered, pretending she was one of Ali Baba’s forty thieves. Unfortunately the door didn’t respond to her magical charms and remained firmly locked. Retrieving the key ring, she tried several keys before the third one slipped easily in the lock and gave a satisfying click as it turned.

It took both hands pulling hard on the heavy door for her to open it. Victoria lingered on the threshold for a minute. If she went inside, there would be no going back. She’d have violated Robert’s trust. Stolen his keys and broken into something he wanted kept secret.

But I am his wife. We are one person under the laws of god and country. Where he goes, I go.

It took a little more convincing but by the time she did step through the doorway, Victoria was ready to deal with any anger Robert might send her way when she told him where she had been.

Or perhaps she wouldn’t tell him. Maybe keep this as her own little secret. A secret

within a secret.

On the other side of the door was a room. Brick walls rose on either side, then continued overhead. Whoever had built this bunker had intended for it to be strong and secure.

It was filled with barrels and crates. All marked with the trident insignia of the East India Company. They looked the same as the ones she had seen in the kitchen cellar at Tolley House.

Victoria's brows furrowed. Robert was known as the Duke of Spice, but this was ridiculous. There had to be hundreds of them.

She picked one up. It was empty. She picked up another. Empty. Why was he hiding all these empty spice crates? And if they were all empty, then where was the spice?

Her gaze landed on a newish-looking barrel, one which was marked differently to the others. Cold dread slid down her spine as she picked it up and read the name on the side. This one was marked Tolley Estate.

Oh god. All these barrels of spice. Were they the ones which had been stolen from the East India Company? And if they were, that would make her husband...

"A spice smuggler."

Is that why he came here in the dead of night, to take the spices he'd stolen from the EIC and put them into his own barrels, and then on sell them at market?

No. No. No.

A strangled laugh escaped her lips. If this was indeed the truth, her mother would

have a conniption. This wonderful, smart marriage to a duke was meant to secure the Duchess of Mowbray's position at the head of the haut ton . Her daughter was a duchess, with a spotless reputation, free from scandal.

What am I going to tell Mama?

She could just imagine the conversation with Lady Anne. "By the way Mama, did I happen to mention that I married the pirate Blackbeard? No? But there is nothing to worry about, he's only stealing huge amounts of spices from the East India."

Victoria dropped to her knees amongst the empty spice crates and put her head in her hands.

"This is a disaster. What on earth am I going to do?"

The click of a pistol being cocked split the empty silence of the night. "What you are going to do is put your hands up and get slowly to your feet."

She lifted her head and took in the masked stranger who walked into the bunker. He was dressed in a black suit, black coat, and a black bandana covered the lower half of his face. Even his hair was sable. The only thing about his person which was not that particular shade was the silver pistol he held in his hand.

A pistol which was aimed straight at Victoria's head.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

He couldn't wait to get home, to climb into bed and cuddle up with his wife. Robert was quietly hoping Victoria might still be awake, and they would come together and make love. Her touch was something he had become addicted to in the short time since they'd been wed.

It was close to midnight, and he was utterly exhausted. He'd had little sleep over the past two days, and the journey to Cambridge and back again had sapped the last of his reserves of energy. Robert drew comfort in the knowledge that taking a temporary step back from all the stealing, smuggling, and lying would give him the time to ponder his future. To hopefully seek and find the answers which still lay somewhere out of his reach.

The steady clip clop of the horses, combined with the soft jangle of the wagon chains, lulled Robert into a waking stupor. His grip on the reins was light; he trusted his horse to know the way home. They were close to the laneway, and soon they would turn off the main Saffron Walden road, and head toward Tolley Manor.

Soon he would be home.

A shrill whistle stirred Robert from his half slumber. Lifting his head, he caught sight of the lead wagon as it came to a halt. Both the driver and his assistant held up their left arms, fists clenched. A signal. The men in the second wagon followed suit.

Robert spurred his horse forward but kept his mount to a walk. If there was danger ahead, they had to move as quietly as possible.

Reaching the front wagon, he dismounted and made his way over to the driver. “What’s happening?” he asked.

The man pointed in the direction of the nearby laneway. “There is a horse in the lane. And I think I just heard voices.”

Holy hell.

He was about to ask another question when the sound of a wagon being moved reached his ears. Robert and the driver exchanged a nod. The other man had heard it too.

“Right, now remember our back-up plan. I want you to continue on this road, and circle back to Saffron Walden. When you reach the Cross Key Inn, put the horses and wagons in their stables. Take rooms for the night. I’ll send word in the morning when it’s safe to come back to Tolley Manor.”

He motioned to the estate worker in the second wagon. “Stanley, head over the fields and make your way back to the manor. Rouse Mister Jasper and tell him that something is amiss in the laneway and for him to bring his rifle. Go quickly and quietly.”

Robert reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, enough to cover any expenses, and handed them to the driver. “Take care when you pass the end of the laneway, and at the first sign of trouble, don’t hesitate to shoot.”

He would do his all to protect his men, but they also understood what would happen to them if the authorities came looking. A man facing a long prison sentence or transportation to the colonies didn’t have time to think twice about firing his weapon. Stanley climbed down from the second wagon and bolted for the fields, heading across country toward the manor house.

Robert mounted his horse once more, then sat and waited until the wagons had disappeared over the hill, heading back toward the nearby town. He checked his pistol then took a long deep breath.

It might well be nothing. Instincts told him otherwise. No one had any sort of reason to be in the laneway at this hour. The two wagons which had just left were the only ones that belonged to Tolley Manor.

His horse moved forward, and Robert peered into the darkness. The moon which was hidden behind a cloud barely lighted the way ahead.

At the top of the lane, he steered his horse toward a nearby stonecutter's cottage, taking cover in the trees. He'd been sloppy tonight, any other time he would've had two armed men posted here as lookout. But over the past day, his thoughts had been elsewhere.

Robert dismounted, then after tethering the horse to a post, went ahead on foot. Voices reached his ears once more as he neared the bend in the laneway just shy of where the brick and stone bunker stood. Robert stopped and listened.

There was a man and—he craned his neck, trying to better hear. Yes, a woman. His brows furrowed. What the devil were they doing?

Please let this be a lover's tiff.

Rounding the turn, he came upon a scene which turned his blood to ice.

There in the middle of the road was a wagon, one he didn't recognize. It had been loaded up with all the empty East India spice barrels and crates. The ones he'd planned to burn tomorrow morning.

Had Jasper gone ahead and—no, he couldn't have. The only two wagons on the estate had gone to Cambridge with him.

So whose horse and wagon is that? And why have they taken all the barrels?

Heart racing, Robert stopped and cocked his pistol, wincing as the click echoed in the night. Damn.

A figure emerged from the shadows at the side of the lane and moved toward the wagon. In his hand he carried a lit lantern. It gave Robert his first real glimpse of the stranger. He was a tall, well-dressed man clad all in black. Robert took in the black cloth which covered his nose and mouth.

Whoever he was, if he'd come to rob the spice stores, he was a day too late. Robert took another tentative step forward then stopped. A second figure emerged from the dark, and in that moment, Robert's heart ceased beating in his chest.

Carrying an armful of the empty barrels was his wife.

"That's the last of them, now can I please leave? I have done all your dirty work for you," she said.

The stranger turned on his heel and pointed a pistol at her. Robert's stomach dropped at the sight.

"I think we will wait here until your husband returns. I have no beef with you, Your Grace, nor does my employer. But my instructions from the Honorable East India were clear. I am to take His Grace the Duke of Saffron Walden into custody and deliver him to London."

Robert swayed on his feet. Emotions and anger clashed with one another, leaving him

feeling lightheaded. The agent for the East India Company had taken Victoria prisoner.

My wife.

“Well we could be in for a long night. I have no idea where my husband is, or if he intends to come back to the manor tonight.”

The agent gruffly laughed. “Don’t bother trying to play mind games with me. I know how His Grace works. I’ve been following him for several months now. The evidence we have against him will see him ruined.”

Victoria wrapped her arms about herself and stamped her feet. She bent and picked up the lantern. “It’s cold out here, so if it’s all the same to you, I might just take my lantern and go back inside and stay out of the wind.”

She turned to leave, but the agent grabbed a hold of her arm. He dragged her back to the wagon and shoved her hard against it. The lantern fell to the ground.

Victoria’s cry of pain went straight to Robert’s heart. The agent for the East India was going to pay dearly for having manhandled his wife.

This is all my fault. I brought this danger to our doorstep. I’m the one who put my wife in deadly peril.

My wife. The words sat heavy in his soul. Poor Victoria, she’d been forced into this marriage, and now she was being held at gunpoint. And it was all his damn fault.

He watched with rising fury as the agent leaned close to Victoria and ground himself against her. “You’re a pretty little thing, Lady Victoria. I read your wedding notice in the Gazette . Has His Grace broken you in yet, or would you like a real man to do the

deed?”

She reached out and grabbed at the mask, tearing it away. “I’ve seen your face now, so if you plan to do anything vile, I will be able to give the authorities a good description.”

He slapped her hard across the face. “That was a stupid thing to do, Your Grace.”

Robert sensed they had reached a point of no return. Victoria could identify the agent who held her captive. Who knew what the blackguard would now do in order to protect himself?

Robert moved forward, pistol raised. “Let go of her!” he bellowed.

It all happened so quickly. One minute she was in fear of this cad taking liberties with her body, the next the night had exploded in shouts and violence.

Robert’s loud cry was enough to startle the agent for the East India and the man turned his head and looked in the direction from which the sound had come. A horrid grin spread across his face. “Ah, now we get to the good part,” he said.

He pushed off from Victoria and took a step back. But instead of pointing his weapon at Robert, he aimed it at her. She stilled. This man was no fool, he knew full well that her husband wouldn’t do anything rash while his wife had a pistol pointed at her head. The easiest way to get the Duke of Spice to cave would be to threaten his duchess.

Her hands dropped to her side. It was now or never. Victoria’s fingers brushed against the pocket of her coat. Her hand slipped inside and took a hold of the loaded pistol.

Don't carry a weapon unless you are prepared to use it.

Robert moved forward another step, and the agent whirled round, and fired a shot at him. It hit him in the shoulder, and he immediately dropped his weapon. While the agent's attention remained focused on the injured Robert, Victoria withdrew the pistol and cocked it. He didn't see the pistol in her hand as she aimed it at him and fired.

His shoulder was aflame with searing agony. The shot had torn into his muscle. Robert's grip on his pistol slackened and it fell to the ground. The East India agent was serious, he wasn't leaving here without taking Robert as his prisoner.

Through the haze of his pain, he spied the small movement of Victoria's arm. His breath caught in his throat as she raised her pistol and shot the agent for the East India Company at point blank range. The bullet hit him in the head, and he dropped to the ground like a stone. The agent lay motionless, face down on the roadway, his black coat covering him in a makeshift shroud.

Victoria stepped away from the body but didn't look at Robert. Instead his wife's gaze fell, and she stared at the smoking pistol which remained in her hand. He waited, expecting her to break down; to collapse in tears.

But his duchess simply stared at the weapon.

And then her entire body began to tremble.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Victoria shook from head to toe. The night air was chilly, but she had enough presence of mind to recognize that she was going into shock. Cold didn't make your heart race like hers was right now. It was pumping at a furious rate. Adrenaline coursed through her.

She'd killed a man. Shot him dead. To the moment when she eventually took her own last breath, she would remember that look of surprise on his face. The shocking realization that his life was over.

"Victoria."

Robert staggered toward her, holding his injured left arm. When he reached her, he let go and held out his right hand. He was breathing heavy as he sought to prize the pistol from her fingers. She refused to let go. "No."

"Sweetheart. Let me take the weapon."

She shook her head, rejecting his command. If he thought to be a hero, it was too bloody late. His villainy had put her in this position, but she had saved herself. And while he'd been badly wounded, he was still alive.

The Tolley Manor steward, accompanied by Stanley, appeared from out of the darkness. Jasper took one look at the dead East India agent, then at Robert, and swore. Victoria tore her gaze from the man she'd just killed and met her husband's eyes. "Yes, bloody hell is exactly what this is."

She took in the blood which now seeped from the wound in his shoulder and pulled away. Robert groaned and released his hold. The look she gave him was one of warning. If he pushed, she was more than prepared to put a bullet in him.

Jasper now cautiously approached. His steps were slow, his hands raised in surrender. This was a man who knew how to handle angry estate livestock, and not get gored. “Your Grace,” he said, in a low calm voice.

Victoria remained silent. She wanted nothing more than for him to take the weapon as she didn’t trust herself not to throw it hard at Robert’s head.

When the steward held out his hand, she numbly handed him the pistol. “You might want to summon the local magistrate. I expect he will wish to take me into custody. Oh, and His Grace will need a physician.”

She followed Jasper’s gaze as it shifted from her to Robert. “His Grace is the local magistrate so that won’t be necessary, Your Grace. I’ll take the wagon and go make a pile with the empty barrels.” He nodded toward the body. “Once that’s done, I’ll get a fire started.”

Victoria’s hand went to her mouth. The mere notion of burning a body had her stomach churning. She’d just killed a man and now they were going to cover up the crime.

Jasper turned to the estate worker who had roused him from his bed. “Stanley, take the best horse from the stables and go fetch Doctor Gibb. Tell him there has been an accident at Tolley Manor and to come quick.”

Stanley gave a nod, then raced back down the laneway toward the manor house. Victoria let out a sigh of relief. The last thing she needed was for her husband to bleed to death on account of his spice smuggling.

Robert stepped closer. The expression of deep concern mixed with pain which sat on his face only served to further inflame her anger.

Stupid. Stupid fool. You could have got yourself killed.

From her coat pocket, Victoria took out the ring of keys and tossed them at his feet. “You might want to keep those in a more secure place from now on, Your Grace.”

He went to bend and pick them up but halted mid move and let out a pained gasp.

Jasper bent and snatched up the keys. “I’d suggest the two of you head back to the manor house and find somewhere comfortable for His Grace to sit and await the arrival of the physician.”

Leaving Jasper to deal with the sordid task of disposing of the East India agent’s body, Robert and Victoria began the painful walk back home. Victoria didn’t want anything to do with him. She merely shook her head and set off down the laneway, leaving him to trail behind her.

“Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?” he asked.

“No. The only one of us stupid enough to get themselves shot was you. And from what the East India agent told me as he sat and watched me lug all the empty crates and barrels, I would say you thoroughly deserved it.”

There would be no way he could talk himself out of this disastrous situation. No fancy sleight of hand that would hide the truth. Victoria likely already knew everything.

She wouldn’t even look at him. He couldn’t blame her. He’d failed her in every way possible. Every day he had spent with her, he’d been lying. And his web of lies had

now put her in deadly peril. Forced her to do the unthinkable.

I am the worst husband ever.

To have and to hold.

He'd got the to have part of the wedding vow somewhat right, but when it came to protecting her, he was an abject failure. Holding his wounded arm, he staggered after her. "Victoria, please, let me explain."

He had just settled in beside her, when she suddenly stopped and whirled round. Her hand landed on his face at high speed, slapping him so hard that it rattled his teeth. She got a second blow in before he managed to grab her arm to defend himself.

"That's why you married me, isn't it? Not because you felt obliged after you'd touched me, but because I'd seen the stolen spices. You bloody bastard. You selfish, wretch of a man! I hate you!" she cried.

His face, his arm and shoulder, all hurt like the devil. But the words she spat at him cut deeper, right to Robert's soul. Victoria hated him. And it was all his fault.

"No." She looked ready to strike out at him once more. "It might have been that way at the start, but no. Even if you hadn't seen the spice barrels, we would have ended up together," he pleaded.

"Ended up together— and they say romance is dead," she muttered.

He'd been gifted a golden opportunity to win her love, and he'd frittered it away. Too focused on making sure he got every last victory over his enemy rather than stopping to see the amazing woman he'd made his wife.

“I’m sorry, Victoria. I’m sorry.”

She met his gaze, and in the pale moonlight, he caught the sheen of tears in her eyes. As he did, a cold certainty settled in his heart. There would be no coming back from this for them. Victoria might remain his duchess, but it would be in name only.

Reaching the manor house, Victoria headed straight upstairs. She passed their bedroom. Passed the library. She went straight to Robert’s study, to his private liquor cabinet. The lock provided no challenge. Picking up a fire poker, she held it by the sharp end and smashed the iron handle against the center of the door.

Wood shattered.

“What are you doing?” said Robert, leaning against the doorframe. She swung the poker again, and it broke through the wood panel. Victoria glared at him. “You would be wise to stay out of my way. I’ve killed one man tonight, and I have the taste for blood. You are not the only one who is in need of strong liquor.”

He stood back while she continued to attack the door. Her blows only ceased when she caught sight of the key, he held out to her. She snatched it out of his hand and slid it into the lock.

Victoria dropped the poker onto the floor, then stood hands on hips, sucking in great gulps of air as she decided on her poison. Brandy. Whisky. Rum.

Who on earth outside of the British Royal Navy drinks rum, for heaven’s sake?

She chose a bottle of whisky. Brandy was too sharp, and she knew it was going to take more than a glass for her to feel what she needed to feel...absolutely nothing.

The sound of glasses clinking reached her ears, and as she righted herself, Victoria

turned to see Robert place two large whisky tumblers on a nearby table. He stepped back, giving her space. It was the first sensible thing he'd done since everything had gone to hell on the roadside.

Pulling the stopper from the decanter with her teeth, she proceeded to fill one of the glasses. Her hand trembled as she lifted the drink to her lips and took a long sip. Then another. All those hours of illicit sampling of her father's liquor held her in good stead. As soon as she had emptied the glass, she set it down, then poured more whisky into it.

“Vi—”

“No,” she cut him off. There would be no talking. There was nothing he could say that would make any of this right. Whisky-addled oblivion was the only thing she cared about. Robert bloody Tolley. The bloody Duke of Saffron Walden. The bloody Duke of Spice. The bloody Spice Pirate. Every single one of them could go to the devil.

She set the decanter down on the table, then picked up a bottle of brandy. She filled the other glass with it and handed it to Robert. “I’ve seen enough bullet wounds from hunting trips in Scotland to know that Doctor Gibb is going to have to dig deep to get the shot out. You might want to start drinking now.”

She made for the door, whisky bottle in hand. Her destination, the tiny sitting room off the library. A private sanctuary with a large sofa, cushions, and blankets. If the housekeeper had kept to her usual routine, the fire would’ve been banked, and it would only take a little work to have it roaring again.

He followed her to the doorway of the library, then stopped. “Are you going to help get me settled in our bedroom for when the doctor arrives? I don’t think I can get my coat or shirt off by myself.”

Victoria pushed open the door of the sitting room with her foot. She shook her head, then stepped inside. Placing the glass and the bottle of whisky on the small occasional table, she went to close the door behind her.

When it was still barely a foot open, she met his gaze. “Just pretend you don’t have a wife and do it yourself. You don’t seem to have an issue with letting me deal without servants in town, so quid pro quo. Oh, and here’s a bit of advice—you might want to get used the idea of not being married, Your Grace. Because if you think that I’m going to stand by your side while you continue to live this way, you have another think coming.”

She shut the door and locked it.

It was a long time before the sound of a muffled voice and then retreating footsteps reached her ears. What he could have possibly been thinking while he stood and stared at the sitting room door, she didn’t want to consider. Tonight had broken them. And only he could put the tiny, shattered pieces back together.

Victoria’s gaze fell on the whisky bottle as the awful moment she’d shot the East India Company agent dead replayed in her mind. She raised the glass to her lips and downed its contents in one go.

Any hopes she’d began to hold for a happy, settled life with Robert now lay dead, along with that poor man on the roadside.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

He was tempted to take a leaf out of Victoria's book and find solace in the bottom of a bottle, but Robert knew it was best if he were sober when the doctor arrived. He needed a clear mind to be able to deal with the pain of having a bullet removed.

For a long time, he'd stood in the library staring at the door behind which his wife had sought refuge. Refuge from him.

He'd been so close to turning the page and starting a new chapter of his life. If he had found the courage to actually do it, Victoria might never have known anything about any of this, but now she knew it all.

When it became apparent that she wasn't going to open the door and talk to him, he'd loudly grumbled, "We will have to talk about this at some point. Neither of us can avoid it."

And then he'd left, making his way to his study where he somehow managed to get out of his coat. Dropping it to the floor, he attempted to unbutton his vest. Every movement was agony. Blood was soaked into the front of his vest, and it stuck to his shirt.

Robert gave up and huffed. "If they have to cut it off me, then so be it."

A tap at the door announced Jasper's arrival. His steward took one look at the state of Robert's clothes and quickly closed the door behind him. Between them, they managed to get the vest off, with Jasper apologizing every time Robert moaned or

sucked in a sharp, painful breath. A tear rolled down Robert's cheek as his steward gently teased the shirt away from his skin.

"It looks like the bullet is still in there, but I think he might have only got flesh," observed Jasper.

"It damn well doesn't feel like just flesh. More like he put some shot through my soul. Are you sure he didn't hit bone?"

Jasper lay a hand on Robert's arm. "Take a deep breath and hold it, Your Grace."

More tears streamed down Robert's face as Jasper poked around inside his broken skin. He clenched his teeth, but nothing could dull the agony as fingers pressed against his wounded flesh.

"By some miracle it appears to have missed your collarbone. Once the shot is out and the skin stitched, you should have full use of that arm. But it will take time."

He stepped back, and for the first time, Robert noticed the leather satchel Jasper had placed on the desk. "What's that?" he asked.

Jasper nodded at the bag. "I retrieved that from the wagon our friend had brought with him. To no one's surprise, it seems he was an agent of the East India Company. There are several letters in his bag, all addressed to the directors of the EIC. I opened them, and while he didn't specifically mention you by name, rather he called you 'our noble friend,' it's clear he believed he had found his man."

Robert closed his eyes. The Honorable East India were on to him. Hiding the evidence, and even burning the agent's body, wouldn't save him.

When he opened his eyes once more, he lifted his gaze and stared up at the ceiling.

The ornate plasterwork was a thing of beauty.

This is my home. Her home. If they bring war to my doorstep, I might lose it all.

Things that had been mere notions in his mind were now going to have to become hard decisions, and quickly. Where there was one agent of the company, others would surely follow. Who was to say others weren't already circling?

And when news of this particular agent's mysterious disappearance eventually reached London, the outraged directors of the East India would no doubt shift to a full war footing. This was an organization so powerful that they had brought entire countries to their knees, so a troublesome English nobleman wouldn't pose too much of a problem for them.

"Alright. Let's get the immediate issues dealt with tonight, burn the body, and bury it in the woods. I'll suffer whatever Doctor Gibb has to do in order to remove the bullet. At first light, I'll need you to send your most trusted man to London, along with a letter I'll have drafted tonight. If the East India think they have enough evidence to pursue me, then they'll also be after George and his people too. They must be warned as soon as possible."

Doctor Gibb finally left the manor house a little after seven in the morning. Robert was exhausted, and despite the dose of laudanum he'd drank, he was still in a great deal of pain. It had taken the local physician some time to locate and remove the bullet, then the wound had to be stitched. While the doctor worked, Robert kept reminding himself that this was the last time he would put himself in a position where someone might wish to fire a weapon at him.

After thanking Doctor Gibb, Robert went to his bedroom, but instead of putting his arm in a sling and taking to his bed, he got dressed and went downstairs. Despite the constant pain, Robert couldn't afford to take the time to recuperate. There was far too

much dirty work still to be done, and he couldn't leave it all up to Jasper.

The agent of the East India had been looking for stolen spices, and while the man had missed the main cache by mere hours, Robert wasn't foolish enough to think that the danger was over. He'd read the rest of the notes which the leather satchel contained and had been shocked to discover just how much his enemy knew.

If the East India decided to involve the authorities, it's agents would come with warrants and weapons to raid his estate. And they wouldn't leave until they had found what they sought. Ducal privilege only went so far.

Which meant he had to move quickly in order to shift his other secret haul, the one he had stored for a rainy day. He had to hide it as far away from the manor house as was possible. Only Jasper knew about the other brick lined powder store, a hidden remnant of the Tolley family's involvement in the English civil war.

Generations of the Dukes of Saffron Walden had made certain to keep its existence off all survey maps for well over one hundred and fifty years. But the store of spices he'd safely hidden away in the bunker now posed a serious threat. He couldn't risk the East India arriving on his doorstep and finding the cache.

I have to do everything to keep Victoria and the people of this estate safe.

A haggard-looking Jasper met him outside the front door. "Our unwelcome visitor has been dealt with, and your letter is on its way to London, Your Grace. Assuming that we would need to deal with the other store as soon as possible, I also took the liberty of hitching a fresh horse to one of the wagons which returned from the village at first light."

Through the haze of his pain, Robert nodded his agreement. The sooner this was done, the quicker he could go back upstairs get down on his knees and beg for

Victoria's forgiveness. The way they'd left things last night, he knew she wouldn't settle for anything less than his full capitulation.

He trudged across the lawn toward the stables; the pain in his injured shoulder had him stopping every few steps to suck in a deep breath before carrying on.

I must get this job done, then I can fall apart.

It was early afternoon by the time Robert finally made it back to the manor house. It had taken all day for him and Jasper to clear the hidden cache of spice barrels. While they'd worked, Robert had silently chided himself for not having kept his inventory records up to date. He'd stolen a lot more from the East India Company than he'd realized.

Any wonder they came looking. I must have thousands upon thousands of pounds worth of their spice hidden away in here.

He was utterly exhausted, and in so much agony, that at times during the day he had found himself wiping away tears. But the job was done. The secret haul was now hidden at a location several miles from the borders of the Tolley estate. If the East India came looking, they would find nothing.

Jasper took the wagon back to the stables with the sworn promise that the events of the past day would remain a secret, one he would take to his grave. His steward was beyond loyal, but Robert hated himself for having put a good man in such an awful position.

They were both covered from head to toe in dust and filth. And Robert reeked of cardamon. One of the boxes had split open in his hands and the ground spice had coated his clothes. If things weren't so dire, he'd have found it funny to be the literal Duke of Spice. But nothing in his life was a laughing matter. Least of all the

relationship with his duchess.

And now I have to go and find my wife.

He hated that he had been absent from the house all day. That he'd left her alone after what she had endured the previous night. He should have been there for Victoria, but he had failed her.

An eerie silence greeted Robert as he pushed open the door of his and Victoria's bedroom. His wife was nowhere to be seen.

Is this still our bedroom?

Pushing past the thoughts of last night as best he could, Robert slowly stripped off his clothes and toed out of his boots. Every movement was agony. As soon as he could clean himself up, he was going to put his arm up in the sling and take a double dose of laudanum.

Then I will go and find Victoria. I shall tell her just how sorry I am for all of this and beg her forgiveness.

Cleaning himself one-handed was a difficult task. Robert scrubbed as much of the spice from his skin as he could manage. By the time he was finished, the water in the washbowl was stained a dark cardamon green. It would take a hot bath to clean himself properly.

But first I need to talk to Victoria. Find a way to sort through this bloody mess.

He dropped onto the edge of the bed with a tired sigh and slowly let his head and injured shoulder drop. Every muscle in his body ached, and his skull pounded with a splitting headache.

Sleep. He hadn't slept a wink in two days. He'd been shot. And his life still teetered on the edge of collapse. His business. His estate. His marriage. Everything was in peril.

Fatigue saw him lying back on the mattress, with a whispered promise to himself. "Just five minutes, then I'll get up and go find her. She can't hide from me forever." His eyes grew heavy, and he was still muttering about only taking a few minutes to recover when they gently closed.

When he opened them again, the room was dark. He stared up at the ceiling for a while, pondering the first words he should say to Victoria. It was only when the cool evening air made him shiver that Robert finally sat up.

A jolt of hot pain ripped through his injured shoulder, and he swore. "Damn and bloody blast!" It took a minute for his agony-addled eyes to focus in the darkness. When he managed to finally climb off the bed, he staggered out into the hallway, startling a passing maid who was carrying an armful of clean linens.

"What time is it?" he asked.

Her gaze lowered to the carpet, and there it remained. "It was a little after five o'clock when I came upstairs, so it must be past six o'clock, Your Grace."

He'd slept the entire afternoon away.

I knew I shouldn't have been so heavy-handed with the laudanum.

Robert frowned for a moment, wondering why the maid wouldn't look at him. When he glanced down, he realized why. He was buck naked. He dashed back into the bedroom and shut the door.

When he returned fully dressed to the hallway a short time later, the maid was nowhere to be seen. Robert made a mental note to seek out the housekeeper and ask her to apologize to the poor young miss. Seeing a naked duke was not the sort of thing she should ever have to endure.

Speaking of women who should be seeing me naked, where the hell is Victoria?

He searched the library and its adjoining sitting room without success. His further hunt for his wife revealed no sign of her on the entire second and third floors of the house. Down on the first floor, he encountered the butler. “Ah, Mister Ross. I am trying to locate Her Grace. Have you seen her?”

The butler did much the same as the maid had done and lowered his gaze to the floor. Robert made a quick check of his own attire. Not naked. Fully dressed. Still smelling of cardamon but no inappropriate parts of his anatomy on show.

So why is Mister Ross not wanting to meet my eyes?

The butler cleared his throat. “Her Grace left the estate earlier this afternoon. She was going to meet the London bound coach at Bishop’s Stortford later tonight.”

Robert bit on his lip, hard enough to draw blood. He didn’t care; it was just more pain. What truly hurt was the knowledge that Victoria had made good on her promise and had left him.

His bride was going back to London, and their marriage was all but over.

Chapter Forty

The royal mail coach was crowded and uncomfortable. While the people themselves were quite polite and well-mannered, their sharp elbows and knees were somewhat less civilized.

Victoria had never had to travel by public coach before. Her family's private carriage had always been the comfortable way to journey between London and the Duke of Mowbray's country estate. She could only pray this was her first and last trip in a cramped mail coach.

Her plan, which she could admit had been hatched whilst she was in a furious rage, involved several parts. First there was the journey of some twelve miles from the Tolley estate to the Boar's Head Inn at Bishop's Stortford, a trip undertaken in the comfort of Robert's private carriage.

After arriving at the coaching inn, she had purchased a ticket for the London bound mail coach using the name Mrs. Brown for the passenger manifest. Upon reaching the capital, she intended taking up residence once more at Tolley House, and employing a small retinue of servants. Once she was settled in, she'd bury her nose in all of her husband's cookbooks and wait for Robert to make his next move.

While her injured pride at her husband's duplicity had played its part, it was the shocking events in the laneway which had been the eventual catalyst for Victoria's decision to leave the estate. Robert had been wounded and a wife really should have stayed, but she couldn't stomach the idea of putting on a brave face and pretending that she hadn't killed a man.

But by the time the fully laden coach was ready to pull out of the mounting yard of the Boar's Head a little after nine o'clock, Victoria was beginning to have second thoughts. She was alone, and her life was crumbling all around her. It was only her stubborn Kembal blood which saw her press on.

Once I get to London, then I shall have time and space to think.

The other passengers in the coach were a rather jolly bunch, laughing and sharing various tins filled with homemade food amongst themselves as the mail coach made its way south. Victoria sat quietly staring at her hands, doing her best to forget that less than a day ago she had held a loaded pistol in them. She couldn't imagine what her fellow travellers would say if they knew that a killer was seated in their midst.

Resigned to her fate, she had just settled in for the long, uncomfortable night ahead when the driver of the coach let out a loud cry. "Villainy is afoot!"

The coach came to a sudden, shuddering halt, tossing the passengers about in their seats. The gentleman seated nearest to the door swung it open and jumped out. He returned seconds later, closing the door firmly behind him. He whispered a hurried, "We are being bailed up by a highwayman. Hide your jewels and coins."

Victoria glanced at her travel bag. She had a small purse with some coins in it, but no other valuables. If they wanted her wedding ring, they were more than welcome to it.

A loud rap on the side of the coach had heads turning. The lady seated next to her, muttered, "Lord save us."

When the door swung open once more, she caught sight of the driver standing on the side of the road, holding a lantern. The man, who wore an expression on his face which said he was used to being held up at gun point, calmly announced, "I'm terribly sorry about this folks, but the highwayman who is currently holding a pistol

to my head insists that you all climb out.”

In the dark someone else spoke, and the driver looked away. He nodded, then turned back to the passengers. “And he suggests that you all make haste.”

The first of the passengers did as they were asked, followed by the rest of the group who also shifted along on the bench before stepping down from the coach. Clutching her small travel bag, Victoria joined her fellow travellers on the roadside.

They were ordered to stand in a long line. The group, which totaled fifteen people, included the passengers who’d been seated on top of the coach, the driver, and the man in charge of the royal mail box who had been seated at the back.

Victoria hugged her bag to her chest, silently chiding herself for not having packed a warmer cloak.

Along with her regret over the cloak, she was also annoyed with herself for not having had the presence of mind to marry the dull Earl of Surfleet. The man might well be boring, but at least a life with him wouldn’t have involved stealing, killing, and then being held up by an armed highwayman in the middle of the night.

No, if I’d become the Countess Surfleet, I’d be home and safely tucked up in my bed. With my dull as dishwater husband.

She was still pondering her life’s choices when a tall figure appeared from out of the darkness. The light from the lantern he held glinted in the barrel of the pistol which the highwayman held in his other hand. He wore a hat pulled down over his head, the lower half of his face covered in a black cloth. Only his eyes were visible.

Hard eyes which bore straight into hers.

She looked away, doing her best to focus on the wheel of the coach. Her gaze traced the spokes, then settled on the hub in the center. Anything not to have to look at him.

The highwayman cleared his throat. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Now for most of you this will be your first robbery, so I shall explain how these things work. The main things you should bear in mind are one, keep your mouth shut, and two do not attempt to be a hero.”

One of the passengers, who was clearly not listening, asked. “So what do you want from us? I will give you anything as long as you leave my wife alone.”

The masked robber tutted his disgust to the man who couldn’t understand basic instructions. “Sir, I’m not in the business of ravishing defenseless women.” He moved closer to the group, making his way slowly down the line of frightened and freezing passengers. When he got to where Victoria stood, he stopped.

“Then again, I don’t mind a tumble with a female who can look after herself.”

Victoria’s head whipped up and she met his gaze once more. She could have sworn mischief danced in those villainous blue gray eyes.

Only Robert Tolley would think that robbing a fully laden mail coach was something to jest about. But this female was going to give him more than a tumble when she got him alone.

I’m going to give him a serious piece of my mind.

He pointed his pistol at her travel bag. “Open it.”

The cheek. Fancy demanding she open her private travel bag in front of all these strangers.

“I’d do as he says, ma’am,” instructed the man standing next to her. Victoria stifled a snort at the angry look the highwayman flashed at the other gentleman. She could just imagine how well another man telling his wife what to do would go down with her rebellious husband.

She dropped the bag to the ground, and after opening it, proceeded to pull out a couple of plain gowns, a scarf, and a pair of boots. When her gaze landed on her lace edged stays, she snatched them up and waved them in Robert’s face.

“I shall tell my husband what a rogue you were. That you had a thing about women’s private undergarments. You vile cad.”

She swore she could hear his teeth grinding with barely suppressed rage. He sucked in a deep breath, and grabbing the stays out of her hands, quickly stuffed them back into the bag. He let out a loud wince as he righted himself. “Damn it.”

Her gaze went to his left shoulder, where the agent for the East India had shot him. Victoria shook her head in disbelief. A mere twenty four hours ago her fool of a husband had taken a bullet, and now he was attempting to hold up a royal mail coach. She had surely wed a mad man.

“Is that all you have? What about money? Jewels?” he snorted.

Victoria had a small amount of coins on her person, but no jewels. The notion of taking any of the Tolley family treasures simply hadn’t crossed her mind.

“No, I don’t have any jewels. If I did, do you think I’d be taking the public coach? My husband is not made of money.”

Robert leaned in. “And just who is your husband, madam? I do feel sorry for the chap.”

Her brows furrowed. She couldn't say who she really was; the notion of the Duchess of Saffron Walden riding in the mail coach was beyond preposterous. Victoria's gaze caught the edge of Robert's chocolate-colored vest peeking out from under his coat, and she recalled the name she'd given the coaching company. "Mrs. Brown." She cleared her throat. "I am Mrs. Brown."

He laughed. The swine actually laughed at her. "You didn't put a lot of thought into this, did you? Tell me, Mrs. Brown, did you just throw a few things into a bag, and then hightail it from your home? You look the sort of female who absconds in a hurried huff."

She glared at him. He was digging himself into a deep hole.

The driver of the coach cautiously approached. "I hate to be a nuisance, but could we possibly get this robbery over and done with? If you take what you want, we could still make up the time before we are due in London."

Victoria took the opportunity to get in a little dig at her husband. "Yes, what is it that you want, Mister Highwayman? So far all you've given us is puff and wind. I wonder if that pistol of yours is even loaded," she snorted.

He was losing ground and fast. If he didn't get Victoria spirited away from here and soon, there was a good chance someone would actually decide to be a hero. With his injured arm, he wouldn't stand a chance. Robert glanced back down the line of passengers. None of them were particularly well dressed. He doubted any of them had much money or valuables worth taking.

Stealing spices was a much easier and more lucrative business. You waved a pistol at the driver, he stepped down and out of the way, and you pinched his stuff. Everyone knew their place and how it all worked.

Everything had been working beautifully, right up until yesterday when the East India had decided it was done with being an easy target, and Robert's whole business model had collapsed all around him.

Now all he wanted was to take his wife by the hand and get the hell out of here.

She is not going to make it easy for me.

Robert let out a resigned sigh. "Right, who has money? I need at least ten pounds to make this heist worth my while."

"Don't you bloody dare," hissed Victoria.

The gentleman standing next to her, who had somehow decided he was her protector, put his hand on Victoria's arm. "Now, my dear remember what he said, no heroes."

She turned to the man. "Firstly, I am a woman, and if I decided to take on this brute, I would therefore be classed as a heroine. And secondly, I would thank you to remove your hand from my person before I turn rabid and bite you."

He quickly snatched his hand away and mumbled something about ungrateful damsels in distress.

Robert considered Victoria, and it was all he could do to stop a sly grin creeping across his lips. She was well and truly riled, and there was something about Victoria and her heightened state of emotion that sent a ripple of lust shooting down Robert's spine. His cock twitched at the mere prospect of the two of them tangled in bedsheets while engaged in a bout of hot, angry sex.

Victoria bent and stuffed her clothes back into her travel bag. Righting herself, she reached into her cloak and pulled out a coin purse. She took out a coin and handed it

to him. “Here’s a sovereign to get things started.”

He had no other choice than to set down his lantern and take the money from her. Within a matter of minutes, the Duke of Saffron Walden had some eight pounds and fifteen shillings in his possession. When one of the poorer-looking passengers tried to press a few farthings into his hand, Robert shook his head. “You need that more than me but thank you.”

He’d got most of the money he had demanded, but not what he had come for—his duchess. Robert worried his bottom lip. He walked back to where Victoria stood, and when their eyes met, he could have sworn she was on the verge of giving him a serious piece of her mind.

Leaning in close, he whispered in her ear, “Help me. I am in absolute agony, and I just want us to go home. Please.”

She really ought to leave him to his fate, but the thought of her mother and what this scandal would do to her had Victoria racking her brains. She had to help come up with an escape plan. One which would see both her and Robert leave the coach while at the same time making sure that her wayward husband didn’t get shot for a second time.

She forced down her anger and focused on the problem at hand. Making good their escape.

“So do you still have a shortfall on your expected haul from this robbery?” she mused.

He nodded. “Yes, but I’ve come up with a solution for that little problem.”

“Really, and what would that be?”

Robert pointed the pistol at her head. “You are the solution to my problem. Your clothes are well cut. You speak with a fine accent. I would say that your family has money, so I’ve decided that you are coming with me. I’ve heard that kidnapping can be quite lucrative.”

The gentleman standing next to Victoria mumbled something else, but she noted he didn’t offer to go in her stead. She’d clearly done her dash with him.

Coward. So much for being a gentleman.

“Alright, if you agree to let these people back on the coach and send them on their way, I will come with you. I’m sure my husband will pay handsomely for my safe return. And if he doesn’t, then you might just gain yourself a well-bred mistress. Considering how much of a clod my husband is in bed, I could be up for a spot of ravishing. What do you say?”

Victoria held out her hand, smiling sweetly as Robert was forced to shift the pistol to his left hand in order to shake. The move had him wincing with pain. She could see the bead of sweat on his brow as she squeezed his hand tightly when they sealed their deal.

You’d better get used to the pain, because there is more where that comes from.

Chapter Forty-One

The driver of the coach argued long and hard for Victoria's release, but in the end, he had little choice but to get back into his seat and continue the journey on to London. Robert pointed the pistol in the direction of anyone who tried to talk him out of kidnapping poor Mrs. Brown. As the rest of the passengers all climbed on board the mail coach, they wished her the best of luck. Some offered prayers, others just gave the masked highwayman filthy looks. Everyone promised to send a search party to look for her.

The Duke and Duchess of Saffron Walden were left standing side by side on the road watching as the mail coach disappeared into the night. Eventually the sound of the horses and the crack of the driver's whip dimmed to silence.

For a long time neither one spoke. Robert pulled his hat from his head and removed his face covering. He picked up his lantern. Victoria retrieved her scarf from her travel bag and wrapped it around her neck. She was still trying to find the right words to break the impasse when her husband finally spoke.

"If it's any consolation, I do feel bad about taking their money. I will make sure that we get a copy of the passenger list from the coaching company, and everyone is fully reimbursed."

"I find your remorse somewhat hard to believe. Or have you suddenly grown a conscience in the last five minutes," she huffed. "But if you do pay them all back, it will be at least double what you stole. And that includes me."

When his shuddering breath was his only reply, she turned on her heel and began walking back toward the nearby village. If she kept up a steady pace, she'd reach the coaching inn just before daylight.

Robert quickly caught up with her. He made a motion to take Victoria by the arm, but then appeared to think twice about it, and moved out of striking distance. She recalled giving him a sound slap the last time he'd attempted to take her arm. Her husband was many things, but he wasn't a fool. And he was wounded.

"Victoria, please."

She stopped walking. Going back to the village was pointless. She could wait and buy another coach ticket to London, but knowing Robert, he would simply kidnap her a second time. Eventually the authorities would send the local militia to deal with the problem of the masked highwayman. And that was a piece of trouble neither of them wanted.

"What do you want, Robert? What could I possibly give you that you couldn't just take from someone else at gun point?"

They had made their escape, but they were still prisoners of the web of lies he had created. Of what his stealing from the East India Company had cost them.

"You can at least give me some of your time. I need to explain what I have done, and why."

Standing in the middle of the road, miles from anywhere, wasn't the best place to be, especially not after her husband had just held up a royal mail coach and apparently kidnapped one of its passengers.

And to think I married him to avoid further scandals.

She was tired. Bone weary of trying to navigate her way through his half-truths. Of looking for the good in this marriage. Her husband was a villain, and no matter what else he said or did, there was nothing beyond that simple fact for her. For them.

The one thing of which she was certain was that they had to get out of here. “I assume you brought a horse with you. That you didn’t run all the way from Tolley Manor to here.”

“Yes, I have a horse. It’s tethered a little way off the road. I couldn’t risk anyone on the coach seeing it and trying to make off with my only means of escape.”

Victoria snorted. “Oh, yes, you have to watch out for thieves around these parts. People will steal anything.”

He went to take her travel bag from out of her hands, but she pulled away. “You are injured, you fool. Jasper told me the doctor came and removed the bullet, and you should be at home resting, not wandering the roads of England in the dark.”

“I would be at home resting if you hadn’t run away. I might well be the biggest fool in all of this, but you shot and killed a man last night. Forgive me if I am concerned about your welfare. Hate me all you want, but I am still your legally wedded husband. Your lord and master.”

For the first time in his life, Robert Tolley had felt genuine fear. Not tonight, not with this foolish masquerade of kidnapping his own wife, but last night in the laneway. He would have sworn his heart had stopped beating as he beheld the terrifying sight of the agent for the East India holding Victoria at gun point. Then he’d been wounded, and as his body screamed in agony, Robert had watched as his wife raised her pistol and shot a man dead.

Even now he still felt nauseous at the thought of what she’d been forced to do in

order to save his worthless life.

They moved off the road and began to make their way across a flat field. Robert opened the lantern and pinched the candle, forcing it to go out. They were left with only the pale moonlight by which to navigate their way. He couldn't risk even a small light, knowing there was a good chance that the mail coach driver would raise the alarm with the authorities at the next major town.

Robert let out a sigh of relief when he reached for her hand a second time and Victoria didn't pull away. He gave it a reassuring squeeze, but knew it was more for his own sake than hers.

"How far are we from Tolley Manor?" asked Victoria, her voice splitting the still night.

"We are a little ways past Bishops Stortford, so I would say probably fifteen or so miles as the crow flies. But we will need to stay off the road for as long as possible."

She slowed her steps and as she came to a halt, withdrew her hand from his. "I have to say this, otherwise my brain is going to explode. You really didn't think through the whole holding up the royal mail coach thing all that well, did you? I mean it was all rather dangerous and dramatic. Or is that your usual *modus operandi*?"

Robert pursed his lips, silently chiding himself for once having thought Lady Victoria Kembal was a light-minded chit. Since their marriage, she had proven time and time again just who had the brains in the family.

"You were gone. I was worried."

"You mean you panicked."

In the middle of a field in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night was not where he wanted to have this conversation. He'd much rather they talked once they got home. A place where he felt he had some control over the situation.

And where I can get some whisky and dull the pain in my shoulder.

“How about we agree to discuss this in a calm and rational manner once we return to Tolley Manor? I'm sure you would much rather we had a chat while you sat beside the fire and warmed yourself in comfort,” he offered.

He caught her sharp intake of breath, followed by the words, “Patronizing bastard.”

In the dark he could barely make out her face, but he was sure that her simmering rage actually made her body glow. It was going to be a long painful journey home from here.

“I am calm, and I am rational. And that's exactly what I was when I caught the coach earlier this evening. It made perfect sense for me to go to London and for you to stay here at the estate. I planned to lie low for a time, then when the East India finally caught up with you, I would don my widows weeds and graciously mourn your death in public.”

Her voice cracked and broke as she choked on the last words. “Because that's what is going to happen, Robert. They have to know that you have been stealing from them, and they are going to keep coming for you until they get what they want. That agent. The man I killed. He knew who was responsible for the spice heists, and where you lived.”

He pulled her to him, forcing down his pain. She tried to push him away, but Robert wasn't having any of it. Victoria was angry. She was upset. And it was all his damn fault.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I never meant any of this to happen,” he said, holding her in his embrace. Victoria’s body shuddered, and her sobs tore at his heart. Her life was being destroyed by him, by his burning need to get even with the East India Company.

When she finally drew out of his hold, she wiped her tears away with the heel of her hand. “It doesn’t matter how sorry you are, Robert. We will go back to Tolley Manor tonight, and in a day or two, I will take our travel coach and head back to London. If anyone asks why I have returned, I will simply tell them that you are busy with the crops. It’s the only solution.”

She continued walking, and Robert was left with no other option than to follow his wife and curse himself for having put her in such danger.

Everything was a mess, and he still couldn’t see a way out.

Chapter Forty-Two

They eventually found the horse. Victoria fashioned a makeshift sling for Robert out of her scarf and with her seated in the saddle, and him walking beside the horse, they began the long, slow journey across country toward home. When he suggested that they would need to skirt the town of Bishops Stortford and make for the other road which led to Saffron Walden, she didn't protest. He tried to engage her in conversation, but Victoria didn't want to talk. Nothing he could say would fix any of this.

The sun was a pale glow on the horizon by the time they finally made it to the laneway which led up to the manor house. When they reached the small cottage at the start of the lane, Victoria leaned forward and pulled on the reins. The horse came to a halt.

"We are but a half mile from home, why are we stopping?" asked Robert.

Victoria swung her leg over the side of the horse—Robert's gentleman's saddle had forced her to ride astride. It was a different way of being on a horse, but she actually found it more comfortable and easier to balance than the traditional lady's saddle. And it was easier to dismount. She waved him away when he went to help.

"Let me find my own way down, the last thing we need is for you to injure your shoulder again."

He did as asked, standing back as she landed nimbly on her feet. "Did you want to walk the rest of the way?" he asked.

Victoria pointed toward the cottage. “I will, but first we need to talk. And for what I have to say, I don’t want any of the estate staff to be within earshot.”

Without further ado, she tethered the horse to a nearby post then walked over to the tiny cottage and pushed the door open.

The cottage was small inside, but it had a table and a bed. And while it was clean, the air inside still held the strong aroma of various spices. No doubt Robert and his men had used the stonecutter’s cottage for their smuggling operations. Victoria swallowed deep, forcing down her rising anger.

As Robert filled the doorway behind her, blocking out the morning sun, the room turned dark. “Are you sure you want to talk in here?”

There was a definite hint of pleading in his voice. She could understand his need for them to return to the manor house and in doing so allow him to regain some control. But she’d decided that since neither of them was going to be comfortable with the topic of conversation, this place was as good as any.

“Yes, I am certain, Robert. Would you please close the door.”

She moved over to the table and pulled out the small wooden chair and sat down. When he went to follow suit, Victoria pointed at the bed. “I think it best if we maintain some sort of distance from one another while we talk. You can lie down, or if you’d be more comfortable, you could stand.”

He took a step back, situating himself against the wall, close to the door. She closed her eyes and took a deep sigh. “I want to hear it all. From when and how it all began, through every dirty deed you have committed. Right up to, and including, this week. Leave nothing out.”

She was asking the impossible. He was so deep into this whole stealing and smuggling caper, he was no longer certain where Robert Tolley the villain ended and Robert Tolley, the Duke of Saffron Walden, began. He had crossed so many lines they had all become a blur.

But for her, for Victoria, he would try and find that truth.

“Forgive me for this hopefully brief but educational introductory history lesson,” he offered.

Victoria simply lay her hands in her lap and nodded.

“The East India Company has been around for hundreds of years. At one point their private army was bigger than the entire British armed forces. They have effectively stolen from and then ruled entire countries, all in the name of furthering the interests of the EIC and lining the pockets of its owners.”

“Yes, they have quite the reputation, which is why their powers are being stripped by parliament. My father has been on several committees to oversee the changes. I’m not completely ignorant of English history and current politics.”

Yet again his wife was showing him just how well-read and intelligent she was, and how much he had underestimated her.

“The bill which went through parliament in 1813 abolishing the company’s trade monopoly with India, has only been moderately successful. What has happened is that many of their nabobs have returned from India with vast amounts of wealth. They have been buying up seats in parliament, and doing their best to stymie any further changes that might hurt the East India.”

He pushed off the wall. It was important that she understood what he had to say next,

why he had been so driven to take up the battle against the East India. That what he had done went beyond an ongoing tussle over spices.

Victoria moved to the edge of her chair and sat with hands held in front of her. “I read the newspaper every day, not just the social pages, so I am well aware of what you have said. But what I can’t comprehend is why you, a duke from Essex, decided to take on such a powerful enemy, and in such an outrageous manner. You should be here at your estate growing herbs and vegetables, not robbing people at gunpoint.”

Robert scrubbed his good hand over his face and pressed on. “The East India still has a stranglehold on the spice market, both overseas and here at home. I’ve been fighting them for almost three years now, doing everything in my power to open up the trade. To allow local farmers like me to be able to compete in a fair market.”

“And yet you haven’t played fair yourself. You have held people up at gunpoint. Stolen lord knows how much bloody spice from your business rival.” She got to her feet. “Not to mention the fact that you wrote numerous favorable reviews for dining establishments who purchased your illicit goods. You might think what you have been doing is all in a good cause, but in truth, it makes you no better than them. At some point I think you crossed the line from hero to villain, but you didn’t notice.”

Now I understand why she wanted to have this out away from the servants and estate workers. We could be here for hours. And I am not going to win.

Robert took in his wife’s face. The expression on her countenance crushed his heart. She didn’t see his war against the East India Company as an honorable one.

“You think me a villain?” he whispered. It tore at him to ask her such an awful question, but he had to know. Did she really see him that way? Did the woman he’d been falling in love with actually hate him?

Victoria met his gaze, and there was no mistaking the heartbreaking pain which dulled her eyes. “Yes, I do. You think you are not a villain, but I expect all villains imagine themselves as heroes of their own stories. Your end game might be an honorable outcome, but the way you have gone about things...” She threw up her hands. “You’ve just caused pain in a different way.”

His wife’s words of rebuke hit him like a punch to the gut. He’d long ago resigned himself to accepting that some things he did crossed the line of legality, perhaps even morality. But he’d never thought he would ever hear someone accuse him of being as bad as the vile East India. Of having lost his moral compass.

Victoria took a step away from the chair, her gaze moving briefly to the door, then back to him.

“As I see it, you have a choice. You either give this insane battle against the company up, and I don’t mean just for me. I mean, for our children. For the people who rely upon you for their living.” She swept a hand through the air, then motioned toward him. “Or you and I are done.”

Her ultimatum was clear. He just didn’t know if he could meet it.

Robert shook his head. He’d thought to hold off on things for a time, wait until the heat had died down. Then he would reassess the situation. But Victoria was clear in her demand for him to put an immediate end to his smuggling operations.

If he gave up the fight, everything he’d done over the past few years would have amounted to nothing. “I... I don’t know if I can just stop,” he stammered.

He so very badly wanted to kiss away the tears that streamed down his wife’s cheeks. When Victoria got to the door, she stopped and looked back at him. The expression of heartbroken sorrow on her face almost brought him to his knees.

“If you can’t, then we are finished. I shall remove myself back to my family home at Mowbray Park. I will do it quietly, and without any fuss.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. But what I do know for certain is that you are living on borrowed time. The only consolation I have is that someday I may find another man who wants my love. Not that it will matter a jot to you, since you’ll be long dead.”

She went to take hold of the door handle, but Robert seized her wrist. He couldn’t let her go, not with this bitter, heartbreaking farewell. He would never let her love another.

“You are my wife, and no other man will ever touch you. Or hold your heart. Alive or dead, you belong to me. Do you hear?”

He pulled her roughly to him and smashed his lips to hers in a fiery, passionate kiss.

Chapter Forty-Three

She could taste his anger, his jealousy. The mere thought of her being with another man had let loose the wild beast in Robert. Victoria clung for dear life to the front of his coat as her husband kissed her senseless.

He broke the kiss and growled. “No other man,” then captured her lips once more. His tongue delved deep, touching. Claiming. Refusing to let go.

“You are mine. You hear me. Now and forever.”

It was all she could do to remain standing upright as he plundered her mouth.

“I’ll kill any other man who dares to touch you.”

A little voice in the back of her brain was telling Victoria that they had crossed the line from romantic declarations to borderline insanity. But she couldn’t hold back.

She broke the kiss. “But if you are dead, there is nothing you can do to stop it.”

“I’ll rise from the dead and kill them. Then I’ll fight them in hell for eternity. You are mine.”

Victoria pulled out of Robert’s embrace and shook her head. His words were just grandly insane and empty gestures. She held up her hands and pleaded, “You say you can’t call a halt to this war, but that means I can’t stay. What if their agents come to our home again? If you don’t stop, this war will go on. It will never end. And more

innocent people will get hurt.”

She had to make him see how impossible this situation was; that capitulation was the only answer. The only way to save their lives, their marriage.

“Robert, I shot and killed a man. I took a life. And I know if it ever came before the courts, I could argue it was in self-defense. But I wouldn’t have been in that position if you hadn’t kept things from me. I can’t.” She slowly shook her head, struggling to hold back the tears. “I won’t live that life. I know you don’t love me. That you didn’t want this marriage, but this is where we are, here and now. If you can’t sacrifice your war for me, then you have to let me go.”

Her words cut through his heart like a sharpened blade. She thought he didn’t care for her? That he didn’t love her. How wrong could she be? She was his everything.

I’ve never said the words.

He had just assumed that from all those nights they had spent in one another’s arms, sharing their bodies, making passionate love, that she’d figure it out. That his wife would have known how he felt.

I adore this woman, and yet I’ve never told her. How much more of a villain can a man be than to withhold his love from his wife.

She moved once more toward the door, but he again blocked her path. If she left, he knew it would all be over between them. He would never get her back. This was his final chance. One last desperate throw of the dice.

Hot tears pricked at Robert’s eyes. His woman, the feisty brilliant girl he’d been compelled to marry...he could have lost her the other night. He could well be planning her funeral rather than standing here fighting with her.

And he was fighting. Fighting for them. For their future.

Robert mustered his courage for one last push for victory. Here and now he had to tell her how he felt. How he had always felt about her. From that first night when they'd fought with one another over the supper table at the ball, he had been hers.

"You are wrong, Victoria. So very wrong." He drew in a shaky breath, fighting to hold onto his composure.

His fingers settled on the edge of Victoria's cloak, and he pulled her to him. "I knew we would marry from the moment I found you creeping about my garden late at night. Only a foolish chit who was in love with me would do such a thing. There could be no other reason for you to have been skulking amongst the parsley and tomatoes."

"I was coming to throw pebbles at your window. It's not my fault you have a stunning selection of herbs and vegetables."

A small smile found its way to his lips. "See. It was impossible for you to stop thinking about me. I already had your heart."

She lowered her gaze, all the while he silently challenged her to deny it. To pretend it had never been the truth. He knew she wouldn't. She couldn't.

You can't say no, because that would make you a liar.

Another step closer and to his relief, their bodies were once more touching. Robert brushed a hand over Victoria's cheek, sighing as his fingers felt the wetness of her tears. Tears he had made her cry.

Damn. He really was a villain.

“I love you, Victoria. I don’t want you to leave. Not ever. For better or worse, we are in this mess together. United we might be able to find a way out, but apart, we will fail.”

She lay her hand over his. “I love you too. Which means we have to find a way Robert. There is no other option.”

Chapter Forty-Four

How so very typical of him. They were in the middle of the worst crisis of their short marriage, and he had to go throwing ‘I love you’ at her. Victoria’s heart had caught those words and held on to them for dear life.

His declaration only served to make this so much harder. But she owed him the truth, her truth. So she said it again. “I love you, Robert. I honestly wish I didn’t. It was so much easier when I thought I hated you.”

Every time he had done something awful, she had managed to half convince herself that she could live without him. When she’d realized that part of his reasons for marrying her had been because she’d seen his stolen spices, Victoria had been ready to hide her heart away from Robert forever. But as soon as she had firmed her resolve, he went and did something like this; something so lovely that her plans to stop loving him had all fallen apart.

But I do love him. I can’t stop loving him.

Somewhere between that night at his house, and the many nights they had spent together, Robert had stolen her heart. And if the beautiful expression of joy on his face was anything to go by, he didn’t plan to ever give it back.

“You love me?”

His question was edged with pain and hope. With a deep need for reassurance.

“Yes, I love you. But I’ll be damned if I am going to live the life of a widow at two and twenty, so we have to come up with a solution to keep the murderous hordes at bay. And if the East India are on to you, then we had better be quick about it.”

His head dropped, and he nodded. Robert was still nodding when Victoria slipped her hand into his and whispered, “I’m exhausted. Let’s go home, get some sleep, then when we are rested, we should sit and talk about things. I know this all sounds like an impossible situation, but we can’t lose hope. If we do, then they will have won.”

He bent and brushed a kiss on her lips. And then another. When he pulled her hard against him, Victoria felt the firmness of his erection. “I want you,” he murmured.

Her gaze shifted to the bed. She was tempted to ask him to wait until they got to the manor house, but with the way he breathed into her ear and nipped at her earlobe, she sensed he wouldn’t be listening even if she did. Robert needed this, needed her. And she couldn’t deny him.

“What about your shoulder?”

“I’ll manage.”

Untying the clasp which sat at her throat, Victoria let the cloak fall to the floor. Robert worked feverishly at her garments with his good hand, while her hands went to the falls of his trousers. He moaned as she took a hold of his erection. With her fingers wrapped around it, she stroked him long and hard. Just the way he liked it. “Wicked girl,” he ground out.

She dropped to her knees. Robert let out a snarl of pleasure as she worked his cock with her mouth. His hand settled lightly on her shoulder. Victoria’s tongue traced a long line up and down his shaft, sucking the tip between her lips as she reached the end.

When his grip tightened, and he growled, “Come to me, wife,” she took that as her signal to let him go and got to her feet.

Robert wasn’t adverse to spilling in her mouth, and she always enjoyed those moments, but for this encounter she sensed he wanted to be closer to her, to see her face as he reached his climax.

Her skirts were lifted over her hips, and in a quick role reversal, he sunk to his knees on the hard, stone floor. Victoria closed her eyes as Robert pressed two fingers deep into her sex. They were both fully invested in the moment. Sure of their need to be one.

She whimpered as his thumb brushed over her sensitive bud, loving how he spread her wetness across her parted folds. “Robert,” she gasped.

He slowly got to his feet, and with his finger and thumb still buried deep in her sex, kissed her. Each stroke took her higher, brought her closer to her crisis. When he finally broke the kiss, she caught the lust which blazed in his eyes.

Without a word, he led her over to the bed and lay her down. Victoria parted her legs and welcomed him into her body. Robert buried his face in the crook of her neck and thrust his cock in hard and deep.

She cried out. “Yes. Oh god yes.”

She hooked her ankles against the back of his knees, opening herself fully to him, exalting as his firm erection now brushed against the entrance to her sex. Every stroke was right over that magic spot which had her sobbing with need.

The bed creaked and groaned as Robert took Victoria in a heated encounter of pure, driving claim. Thrust after thrust he demanded everything her body could yield. The

sound of the wooden frame protesting at the veracity of their coupling sent her pulse racing.

She clung to him, her fingers digging into his skin, marking him as hers. When she finally crashed into her orgasm, Victoria's cries echoed off the walls. But he didn't let her rest; he continued to pump deep and hard into her, drawing out every last moment of her sobbing climax.

Only when Victoria had finally fallen silent did he shift in the bed and pull her legs up to his hips. She smiled up at him. This position had its own distinct advantages. It allowed him all the room to plunder.

And there was nothing better than being plundered by this man.

He claimed her mouth, biting her bottom lip each time he broke the kiss. "No other man will ever have you, this body is mine. To have and to hold. To fuck and to love."

How on earth had she ever thought she could survive without these frenzied moments with him? Victoria laughed. "I would have lasted a week at best, then gone mad without you. Please Robert, don't be gentle."

He held her gaze as he pumped long, deep strokes into her sex. His fingers gripped her ass, and she didn't care that there would be bruises later. She just wanted him.

"I can't last a day without you. Without us. I would have died if anything had happened to you," he growled.

The tears which shone in his eyes had her heart on the verge of breaking. He was a misguided fool, but he was her fool, and no one and nothing would tear them apart.

Chapter Forty-Five

They made it back to the manor house an hour later and headed straight up to their bedroom. Robert gave strict instructions that unless the authorities came knocking on the front door, he and Victoria were not to be disturbed. Even then, if anyone did call, they could damn well wait.

Victoria barely had time to kick off her boots and slip out of her gown, before Robert had her bent over the bed and his cock buried deep in her sex once more. This moment was hard and fast, born of the need to confirm what they had sealed in the stonecutter's cottage—that no matter what happened, they were in this together.

She woke him midafternoon. As a sleep-and- Laudanum-ruffled Robert stirred from under the blankets, a now fully dressed Victoria perched on the end of the bed. While he had slept, she had lain awake and searched for answers. By the time she nudged him from his slumber, she had the beginnings of a plan.

“Why are you out of bed and dressed, Your Grace? I don't recall giving you permission to leave my side,” he teasingly chided.

Victoria rested her arms on her knees and smiled at him. “You can punish me for my transgressions later, Your Grace, but first I want to set my proposal before you.”

He slowly sat up in the bed, catching the shirt she tossed his way, before letting her help him put it on. Robert looked tired, wrung out.

I just hope he sees the sanity in my plan.

“I’d kill for a cup of tea. I didn’t exactly have much to eat all of yesterday,” he croaked.

She pointed to the tray which sat on the nearby bedside table. “There is a fresh pot of tea and some rosemary biscuits. Under the cloth are some fresh egg and watercress sandwiches. I know you love them, and I figured they would be useful to soften your resolve. I can fix you another pain tonic as well, if that helps.”

Robert poured them both a cup of tea and handed Victoria the plate of biscuits. She waved away the offered sandwiches. “I ate a round of them while you were sleeping. The eggs were freshly boiled and peeled, so they are particularly good.”

While he got himself sorted with sustenance, she moved to the other side of the bed and composed herself. It was vital that she got this right. Got him to understand that her plan not only had merit, but that it could actually work.

He sipped his tea, washing down the last of the sandwiches, then focused his gaze on her. “Alright, I am listening.”

Victoria cleared her throat. “This fight against the company isn’t something you can win. I’m not saying your war against them wasn’t a righteous thing, but I would argue that how you went about things certainly wasn’t. You can’t steal from people like the East India Company and not expect repercussions.”

For an opening statement, it was a good one. She was quietly proud of herself. As she’d worked to put this plan together in her head, Victoria had been clear with her intended purpose. No matter what Robert said, she was not going to lose her temper.

If there was one lesson she had learned from her parents, it was that letting emotions rule the day did no one any good.

“I don’t necessarily agree with everything, but yes, there are consequences to my actions,” he replied.

She let the remark about his illegal activities slide. Let him win that small skirmish. Her sights were set on the bigger prize—getting out of this war with their future intact.

“Go on,” he said.

“The East India have clearly figured out who has been stealing from them.” She held her hand up when he went to protest. This wasn’t up for debate. It was fact. “The agent who came here didn’t do so on a mere whim. He knew . He told me they were coming for you, and your people.”

That held his attention. “Yes. I am aware. And my people in London have been warned.”

Thank heavens he is starting to see the truth.

“My family has power and influence, but I doubt that even they would be able to save us, if push came to shove. Some of the things you have done are indefensible, Robert. I love you, but even you have to admit that you are a bit of a villain. Dukes don’t normally go in for thievery and highway robbery. And while your motives might have been somewhat honorable, your means have been...” Her voiced tapered off.

She didn’t want to condemn him. This wasn’t a trial. It was an honest attempt to salvage what they could and set up their lives forever.

“You have a choice, Robert. We can have a real marriage, one with affection and...” She swallowed deep. “Love. Or you can have nothing.”

Victoria waved her hand in the air, then lay it over her heart. A solemn promise of what would come if he didn't agree to her plan. "You won't have me. If you try to stop me leaving, I'll raise merry hell. And when I do, the resulting scandal will be so earth-shattering that my mother will come after you. The duchess will have you soon begging for a swift death."

As much as it irked him, Robert had to concede Victoria was right. His goal had been to break the East India's monopoly over the London spice market by all means necessary, but somewhere in the past he had lost sight of who the villain was in the story. He'd crossed the line between right and wrong a long time ago. Had become so used to working in the gray areas between those lines, that he no longer knew the way back.

As the sun's dying rays streamed in through the window, bathing their bedroom with its golden light, Robert finally came to an understanding with himself. He'd lost the war against the East India Company.

The risk to his family was too great. The risk to the people of his estate was also one he could no longer afford. His loyal steward had spent the night before last burning then hiding the body of a company agent. A man, Robert's beautiful bride had been forced to kill in order to save him.

My wife.

His marriage vows had included protecting her, but instead he'd placed the woman he loved right in the front of the battle. In the firing line.

Victoria had now taken a stand. She was prepared to fight for them, for a real future. But not this life. And only a damn fool would risk losing such a woman in order to prove he was also a stubborn ass.

Robert Tolley, His Grace, the Duke of Saffron Walden, had stolen his last barrel of spice. Now he just had to figure out how to get the East India Company off his back.

“I take it you have come up with a plan, my love?”

She had, and it was a simple one, but not without risk. “Do you remember meeting my cousin, Alex Radley, at our wedding? The Marquis of Brooke. His wife, Millie, was the woman dressed in a pink and gold sari. She had a ruby stud in her nose.”

“Yes, the girl who grew up in India?”

“That’s her. And do you recall them talking about her father, James, who was a senior man at the East India Company in Calcutta? He’s one of those wealthy nabobs who made their fortune with the company before returning to England.”

Robert nodded. “Yes, I remember them mentioning him. And I was quite unsettled to discover the family connection. Please tell me he has retired.”

She shook her head. “Not fully. James Ashton is still working on the odd project for the East India here in England. Which places him in a perfect position to help us. If we are going to attempt peace talks with the East India, we need someone who could mediate those discussions.”

Someone who might be willing to straddle both sides of the argument and help come up with a solution. James Ashton could just be that man. Hope stirred in Robert’s heart.

“Do you think James Ashton is someone who could be trusted to act for us in negotiations with the East India?” asked Robert. He may well just turn the enemy of his employer into the authorities and be done with it.

Victoria's face lit with an encouraging smile. "Mister Ashton is the brother of Viscount Ashton. Viscount Ashton and his wife have not been blessed with children, so James's son, Charles, is the current heir to the title. When he becomes the next viscount, you could help make his entry into the House of Lords a success."

She was going to call in as many family favors as possible. He might not like owing personal debts to other people, but it was a lot better than having the agents of the company continuing to come after them. Robert was quiet for a moment. "How would we go about talking to James Ashton without putting ourselves in danger?"

"What I propose is that we ask my uncle, Ewan Radley, to talk to Mister Ashton. With the Duke of Strathmore being both Alex's father and Millie's father-in-law, his words will carry a great deal of weight."

Robert's face tightened, and she could just imagine what he was thinking.

I'm also a bloody duke.

"And while my father is also a duke, he doesn't have the same amount of influence that my uncle Ewan has in this matter. If I need to bring Papa or any other members of the Radley and Kembal family into this, we can discuss that if and when it occurs. In the meantime, I would think it makes sense to keep this as closely held a secret as possible."

Victoria held her breath. Robert could be stubborn, and he wasn't beyond making stupid decisions. His lack of thought had been what had got them into this situation in the first place.

Setting the food tray to one side, he rose from the bed. It took a good deal of self-control for her not to say anything else. Not to pressure him.

While Robert retrieved some clean clothes from the tallboy, she sat waiting quietly. With his injured arm in a sling, he dressed slowly, but she sensed he didn't want any further assistance. This was something he had to do for himself.

When he finally finished putting on his clothes, Robert turned to her. "Alright, we leave for London later in the week. In the meantime, I will check with Jasper and make certain that all traces of our spice operations are completely covered up. George was given instructions to leave town, so hopefully that will tie up any loose ends for the time being."

He came to her and stood at the end of the bed, his good hand clenched into a tight fist. "I know this isn't the most honorable thing a man should ever ask of his wife, but you and I need to be in fierce agreement about what happened to the East India agent."

Victoria let out a breath. She had pondered what to do about that prickly problem and had come up with the only solution that made any sort of sense. She steeled herself for the price her soul would eventually have to pay in order to save her husband, and their future.

In a calm, clear voice she said. "If anyone asks, we don't know anything about any missing company agent."

There was no body. No wagon. No leather satchel containing incriminating papers. Everything had been burned, and the agent's horse sent to greener pastures in Scotland.

Robert gave a small nod, an acknowledgment that sealed their bargain. Both he and Victoria would take their dark secret to the grave.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:12 am

Two weeks later.

Robert Tolley, Duke of Saffron Walden, would rather he was anywhere else other than sitting in the receiving room at East India House, Leadenhall Street, London.

I feel like Daniel in the lion's den. God, I hope I make it out of here alive.

He glanced nervously around the room, slowly taking it all in. It was elegantly furnished. There were ornate tapestries on the wall, and he was certain that the gold trim on the arm of the chair where he sat was real. For a company which had shamelessly robbed the east for centuries, it was clear that the East India Company had no qualms about showing off its wealth and power.

But while the room would not have looked out of place at any royal palace, it had a dank, close air about it. The sun, barely filtering through the small window up high, bathed the room in a weak beige light. On a nearby table, a cluster of fat candles added some light, but the smoke they gave off only served to make the air stifling. It was hard to breathe.

Beside him on the hard, overstuffed sofa sat James Ashton. His back was ramrod straight and his gaze was focused on a spot somewhere on the far wall. The father of Victoria's cousin-in-law barely moved. The man looked for all the world like he'd been turned into a statue.

"Did they give any indication as to how long they expected me to wait out here?" ventured Robert. He'd guessed that the Honorable East India Company would take its sweet time in meeting with them. Making him wait outside the main boardroom was

a less than subtle way of putting him in his place. Of letting him know who was calling the shots.

“No, they didn’t. But the fact that they even agreed to meet with us is a major victory,” replied James, turning to face Robert. “The East India is not known for sitting down and talking to their enemies. They have a long and bloody history of letting their armies speak for them.”

Robert nodded. As much as it pained him to admit it, James Ashton was right. This meeting today was a victory of sorts. Hollow, but a victory, nonetheless.

The door of the boardroom opened and a clerk, clad in the company uniform of all black, appeared. He took one look at Robert and James and bowed his head. “Mister Ashton, Your Grace, they are ready for you now.”

Ignoring the obvious insult of having been addressed after a mere mister, Robert rose from the uncomfortable seat. He took a moment to let the blood flow back to his ass and legs, then bent and picked up his leather satchel.

The bag was empty, but Victoria had insisted on him bringing it. She’d said it added a certain gravitas to his look. After all he had put his wife through, he wasn’t in a position to argue.

As he followed James Ashton into the boardroom, Robert’s thoughts turned briefly to the woman who had captured his heart. He owed it to her and to their combined future to make certain he settled matters today. The memory of Victoria firing her pistol at that man, and then seeing him drop to the ground dead, would haunt Robert for the rest of his days.

Letting out a slow, calming breath, he took the seat offered to him by the clerk. He politely waved away the offer of tea. Coming here in order to make a deal with the

devil was bad enough, but he drew the line at breaking bread with them.

At the head of the table, seated on ornately-carved, crimson-velvet-covered chairs, the three directors of the Honorable East India Company didn't bother to acknowledge his arrival. Robert took one look at the stacks of papers which sat in front of them and stifled an indignant huff. These people were no better than well-dressed pirates hiding behind laws which they'd helped parliament to write and enact.

At least pirates had a code of honor. These men represent a company which has built its immense fortune on stealing the wealth of other countries, and still enslaves people.

He was nauseous. Angry with himself for having been so reckless and finding himself in this situation.

More papers were shuffled around the table. The message was clear: he was just another item on their agenda for the morning.

But they wouldn't be talking to me if I didn't represent a clear and present threat to their business.

The black-suited clerk was handed a piece of paper by one of his superiors. The man then walked with measured steps to where Robert sat and dropped the paper in front of him with little to no ceremony. "If Your Grace would be so kind as to read the terms of our settlement."

Robert's gaze took in the wording which he and James had come up with to put to the East India Company. The terms were simple. He was to immediately cease stealing from them, and to hand back any and all spice remaining in his possession which belonged to the company. In return the East India would no longer pursue any action against him. The original submitted letter had been transformed with flowery

legalese, but he understood it well enough. Nothing of any substance had changed.

“Very well, I agree to the terms of the letter. Your goods are to be returned to you, and in return, you will call off the dogs,” said Robert.

James leaned in close. “Remember what I told you. Don’t sign anything. Just offer them your handshake.” Even James Ashton, long-time career man of the East India didn’t trust his employer.

Hopefully there would come a day when the British government finally put this gang of villains out of business. Robert could only hope he lived that long.

The director seated at the head of the table cleared his throat. “A vulgar way of putting it, but yes. Your Grace has overstepped the mark and now we are siding with the umpire and calling it a no-ball.”

Robert pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth. He hated it when people used cricketing analogies. There was nothing sporting about the way these criminals did business.

Get this over with, and then go home to Victoria. That’s all that matters.

Before he’d met his wife, he would never have even considered talking to the members of the East India Company, let alone agreeing to a cessation of hostilities. But Victoria, as she often did, had the right of it.

If she hadn’t met him and attempted to make an honest... ish man out of him, then at some point, matters would have eventually come to a head. On a dark road far from London, a brave company man would have stood his ground and put a bullet in Robert’s head. As it was, only Victoria’s firm intervention had saved him from that fate.

It was odd that the East India hadn't made mention of their own missing man. Robert suspected they knew he'd met a dark end, but they had decided their agent was expendable and not worth the bother.

And they probably thought the same about my wife.

Under the table, Robert clenched his fists. He'd love to punch someone. Preferably one of the smug-faced asses who were looking down their noses at him from the other end of the table. His temper began to rise.

James's thumb dug sharply into Robert's hip. "What you are feeling now is the battle between your rational self and your pride," whispered James. "Don't let your pride win."

Those words of caution had the desired effect. Robert took in a deep breath and let his fingers relax.

I will do this for Victoria, for my wife and her love.

He picked up the piece of paper and rose slowly from his chair. Taking care not to show any emotion, he made his way to the top of the boardroom table. When he reached the directors, Robert bent and slid the piece of paper across the highly polished oak surface, stopping it in front of the chairman. "Gentlemen, we have an accord." He righted himself and held out his hand.

The chairman looked down his nose at Robert's outstretched hand then rose to his feet. From the glint in his eye and sly smile on his lips, it was clear he considered that he and the company could now claim victory. The Honorable East India Company had beaten the Duke of Spice.

The merest of handshakes followed. "So you will return what is ours and vow never

to steal from us again?”

Robert knitted his brows in feigned confusion. They couldn't possibly be referring to him, could they? He was a duke; dukes didn't steal. And they most certainly didn't go around holding up wagons and royal mail coaches in the dead of the night.

He cleared his throat. “I shall inform the gentleman responsible for your missing property to cease and desist from liberating any more of it, and to return what goods he still has in his possession.”

They might have won the war, but he wasn't about to go down on bended knee and lick their boots. There would be no admission of guilt. A man could only take so many blows to his pride.

He nodded to the two other directors. “Good day, gentlemen.”

Making sure that his walk was one of a man who hadn't a care in the world, Robert headed for the door. A minute later James Ashton met him outside in the anteroom and handed him back his empty satchel. “Let's get out of here and go find the nearest tavern. It goes without saying that Your Grace is paying.”

Robert's heart was still racing by the time they made it downstairs and out into Leadenhall Street. His cool, calm facade was close to cracking. He dared not tell James Ashton that he'd lain awake all last night on the verge of being utterly consumed by his fear. By the dread that once he set foot inside East India House, he may never make it out alive again.

He'd only finally and somewhat reluctantly agreed to attend today's meeting after Victoria had sent word to every titled male relative in her wide family circle, informing them that her husband was visiting at Leadenhall Street today, and that if he didn't return home by three o'clock, they were to march en masse and demand his

immediate release.

Robert walked to the end of the block, then stopped. He sucked in a deep breath. It was over. His part in the secret war against the East India's monopoly was done.

Now I really am just a spice farmer.

He was surprised to discover that he wasn't angry. Granted a touch disappointed, but also relieved. It really was over.

And if Victoria was at his side, and they could now look forward to sharing a life of love together, that was more than enough for him. Robert turned to James and offered him a grateful smile.

"Thank you. I owe you a lifelong debt, which I don't know how I can ever repay."

James shook his head. "Just stay out of trouble, that's all the payment I require. I've spent twenty odd years with the Honorable East India, and they are not the sort of people to ever forget when they have been crossed. The EIC has a long memory."

He got the message implied by James Ashton's words. The war between the Duke of Spice and his archenemy might be officially over, but he should always take care to watch his back.

Robert gave a grim smile. "I understand." For the rest of his life he would do his best to steer clear of the East India. His only thoughts now were to create a future with Victoria. To keep her safe, and never again know the fear he'd felt that night in the laneway.

Seven months later

Victoria wiped away her tears. The first official wagonload of Tolley Foods had just headed down the long, tree-lined drive bound for London. The new shop in Oxford Street, offering discerning customers all manner of estate-grown spices, preserves, and specialty cured meats, was due to open at the end of the month.

Her sister-in-law, Serafina Kembal, had been generous with her suggestions for the cured meats, promising she would be their best customer if they continued to stock Italian-inspired pork salami. The Duke of Strathmore was going to supply wild boar from his Scottish estate, and Robert intended on mastering the art of curing wild boar meats over the next few months.

“Is the driver and his companion well-armed?” asked Victoria, nodding in the direction of the heavily laden wagon.

Robert slipped an arm about his wife’s waist. He didn’t yet know that in a matter of months he wouldn’t be able to do that, but Victoria was keeping their piece of happy news to herself. Waiting until the time was right.

“They are carrying plenty of weapons. Though apparently there hasn’t been any spice robberies in the past six months. Nor any highwaymen. The blackguard who used to hold up the coaches appears to have gone to ground, but one can’t take any chances,” he replied. The grin on his face was delightful.

Thank god, that is all over.

The deal with the East India Company seemed to be holding. The remaining spices had been returned to them, and there had been no repeat of the incident with the agent. George had even been able to return to London and had taken over management of the new Tolley Foods enterprise. From all reports, his wife was delighted with the news of his change in career. George's first task had been to visit the Boar's Head Inn at Bishop's Stortford and retrieve the passenger manifest for the mail coach which had been robbed a few months earlier. Payments and an apology had been sent to all the victims of the masked highwayman, along with the solemn promise that Mrs. Brown had been safely returned to her husband.

As for Robert, Victoria sensed it would take him a long while to fully come to terms with having lost his personal war against the East India, but she kept those thoughts to herself. If and when he wanted to talk about what had happened, she would be here for him.

And he was here for her. Robert's warm kiss on her cheek had Victoria stirring from her daydream. "Well?"

"Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"I was asking if you had finished writing that piece on the need for restaurants to change the oil in their pots on a more regular basis."

Victoria rested her head against Robert's chest and gently sighed. "Yes, I have, it's ready to go into the book. I think it's important that people understand how tainted oil impacts the taste of the food."

She had been writing a piece about the careful treatment of condiments and oils which would go into their new travel guide for London food. Her scrapbook of Robert's newspaper reviews along with her own notes, had formed the basis of their soon to be published first book.

In the time since they had come to terms with the East India Company, Robert had put all his energy into planning and developing the crops which now formed the basis of the spices and herbs at Tolley Manor. He'd also been working on a new Saffron Gin, which he planned to sell once he had it perfected. The estate workers were enjoying their role of taste testers.

Meanwhile Victoria had spent her time writing the book and working with George on the plans for the new shop. She'd also undertaken a deep study in plant husbandry. The Duchess of Saffron Walden could now hold her own with anyone who wished to discuss the effects of an early spring on the yield of a strawberry crop.

She was yet to find anyone who actually wanted to have that conversation, but when she did, she would be ready.

“Are you planning on heading back to the fields this afternoon, Your Grace,” she asked, doing her best to stifle a knowing grin. Her gorgeous husband had a habit of liaising with his estate workers in the morning, then demanding that he and Victoria conduct ‘other estate business’ in the afternoons.

He slipped his hand over hers and gave a gentle squeeze. “Perhaps not. I think it is important that you and I conduct a meeting in private after we have taken lunch. There is but one matter on the agenda.” It was the same agenda every day, with variations just to keep things interesting.

Victoria grinned up at her husband. There were so many new beginnings happening in their lives—a family and a future to look forward to. While Robert was doing his utmost to become a good man, there were times when his duchess had to take him firmly in hand and show him the error of his ways.

“Actually I would like to add something to the agenda. You ate the last of my omelet at breakfast this morning, and I think you might need to show me how sorry you are for taking something that belongs to someone else,” she replied.

His bedroom eyes met with hers, and a sly knowing smile formed on his lips. “And who would you like to offer up this apology? His Grace, the very polite Duke of Saffron Walden? Or perhaps a masked highwayman with a penchant for kidnapping duchesses?”

Victoria briefly shook her head. She loved this game. Her core was already clenching with unsated desire. As Robert leaned in close and whispered in her ear, Victoria’s blood turned to fire.

“Ah, then that only leaves one name on the list. The wicked Duke of Spice. But I hear he has never repented for any of the things he has done. Are you sure you wish to be alone and naked with such a villain?”

Almost breathless with need, Victoria bit down on her bottom lip. “I’ll be the judge of how much of a villain the Duke of Spice is, though it might take me some time to form a proper opinion.”

Robert chuckled deep. “Excellent, because I hear he has all the time in the world this afternoon to show you just how pleasurable his villainous touch can be. And if you’re not fully convinced by the end of today’s encounter, I would suggest you keep coming back to his establishment every night to sample his extensive menu.”

As he bent to kiss her, Victoria knew she would always come back for more.