



The Wrath of the Wallflower (Revenge of the Wallflowers)

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Category: Historical

Description: She Fears the Ultimate Revenge

When Lady Alice Listers first season ended in gunfire, she expected to be the subject of some rather unkind remarks. And sideways glances.

And perhaps a gentleman or two tripping in their haste to flee her presence.

When her second season ended in the sort of misery that could only be created by the cruel efforts of three wealthy titled young men determined to make her the most ridiculed and least sought-after dance partner in the history of London society, the thought of revenge certainly came to mind, though the how and where were less certain when she dissolved into tears at the very thought of ever returning to London again.

However, when her third season offered her the opportunity to gain her independence and a small fortune simply by her attendance at that seasons most important events, she could not refuse. And should the opportunity to finally ensure those who made her first two seasons a misery receive their comeuppance it behooves a lady to give careful and sober thought to the idea of revenge. After all, one must have something to occupy one's time between dress fittings, carriage rides, and balls at Almack's.

To ensure success, she needed an accomplice. However, under no circumstances did she plan to choose an accomplice to whom she was even mildly attracted, especially not a criminally handsome, kind, brilliant horticulturist with big blue eyes, and where were we?

Sinjin Perriton has survived years of dealing with London society by not venturing forth into the mad whirl of the ton.

His horticultural studies and his love of reading tales of daring have kept him safe, happy, and at home in his vast orangery. His shy nature has made his years long correspondence with Lady Alice Lister the closest and most precious friendship of his life. When she asks his help in her plotted vengeance, he readily agrees, too readily. Close proximity to a lady bent on the destruction of those who have

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This one is for every girl who was ever bullied, teased or humiliated by the mean girls and arrogant boys in the world.

Always remember it is never about something lacking in you. It is always about something lacking in them

And never forget, as my very wise opera coach used to say,

“Living well, darling, is the very best revenge!”

March, 1827

Home of the Earl and Countess of Livingston

Mayfair, London

Lady Alice Lister had changed her mind.

She could not think what degree of freedom nor what amount of money might be worth the torture of another Season sitting in a tiny, decidedly uncomfortable chair listening to the whispers of She's the one and waiting for an invitation to dance that had only a slightly better chance of coming her way than her Uncle Daedalus suddenly entering the priesthood. As her uncle, Lord Daedalus Whitcombe, heir to the Duke of Chelmsford, was the most notorious pornographer in London, Alice was fairly assured her dancing slippers were in no danger of wearing out tonight. Or any other night for that matter.

Yes, she had most decidedly changed her mind. Now all she had to do was inform her other uncle, Perseus Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford, that she would not be taking him up on his offer to award her a most ridiculous amount of money and his leave to live as she wished if she would but attend the events of this Season in the hope of finding a husband.

Her first Season had ended in disaster. Her second had been a lesson in humiliation. Here she sat at the first ball of her third Season, and already she'd begun to dread the fresh hell the Fates in the form of the young gentlemen of the ton had in store for her. Enough was enough. She retrieved her fan and reticule from the empty chair next to her.

"Lady Alice?"

"Mister Perriton!" She leapt to her feet and met the intense blue grey gaze of her oldest childhood friend. "When did you come to Town?" She dropped her fan and reticule onto her chair and extended her gloved hands, which he clasped tightly in his own.

"We arrived only this morning," he replied. "I am in attendance at Frederick's insistence. Seeing you, I am happy for once I obeyed his edict." He glanced across the ballroom to where his eldest brother stood conversing with some other gentlemen of his age. "Mister Perriton?" He fixed her with his best sternly disapproving scowl.

"Lady Alice?" She mocked his expression with one of her own.

He glanced about the ballroom and sighed dramatically. "Alas, we are no longer children running about the fields of your father's estate. I suppose we must exercise a modicum of decorum, at least in public." He winked.

"If you insist." Alice squeezed his hands and indicated the vacant chair next to hers.

“The very last thing I am known for is my decorum, but I am trying for my uncle’s sake.” He removed her things from her chair and waited for her to sit before he lowered his tall, lithe frame to sit beside her. With a rare smile he returned her reticule and fan.

“They don’t quite match my attire this evening,” he said in dead earnest.

Alice threw back her head and laughed, the first time she’d laughed in quite some time. “Dear, Sinjin. I am so glad you changed your mind.”

“Changed my...about what?”

“Returning to Town this year. In your last letter you said you preferred to stay in Surrey.” The orchestra struck up the tune for a cotillion. Couples rushed onto the floor to form up for the figures for the dance. She leaned closer to hear him over the music and the din of dancing feet.

“And in your last letter you said you wished to travel, to Scotland of all places.” He shuddered.

“Ah, yes. Your aversion to the cold. I remember now. You prefer warmer climes.”

“I prefer my plants to rocks and snow. Are we really reduced to conversing about the weather?” His expression was so often serious, few knew when he was in jest. She always knew as only a friendship as long as theirs allowed.

“How fair your parents? Have they come with you and your brothers?” Alice took the time to peruse the crowded ballroom as the myriad couples moved in the complicated steps of the cotillion. Thus far she and Sinjin had not attracted any attention.

“Mother and Father are well, but they elected to remain in the country. Father’s

health..." He shrugged. She patted his hand. The Perriton patriarch's health had been in a slow decline these last three years. Sinjin often wrote of his concern and sadness, and she did her best to encourage him all would be well. He had been as a brother to her since they were children on neighboring estates. Her lonely existence as an only child, and worse a girl when her father had no son, would have been unbearable without him, and they had stayed close through letters when their lives and travels eventually prevented them visiting each other.

"You said you were not having another Season," he said, his attention now on the dancers. "You said you had no wish to find a husband." There was a curious tone to his voice, though Alice did not quite understand precisely his thinking on the subject. A singular state of affairs as he was not one to dissemble, especially with her.

"Perish the very thought. I am here at Uncle Percy's request. I am to suffer through one final Season, and he will award me an obscene competence and the right to set up my own household."

"An obscene competence from the Duke of Chelmsford? Well done, my lady. You always were the most astute of negotiators when it came to acquiring sweets and other provisions from Cook for our adventures."

She inclined her head in acknowledgement of his praise. "Thank you, kind sir." The dance ended and the couples left the dance floor or changed partners for the next set. "I had nearly forgotten our adventures. One of the true tragedies of growing older is the sad lack of adventures." She was only half in jest. Seeing Sinjin always put her in mind of the only truly happy memories of her childhood.

"Are we so old then, Alice?" Sinjin's voice, rich and rumbling like the gentle roll of thunder across the meadows and woods where they'd played, drew her to gaze at him and not look away. "Have we grown too aged and infirm for an adventure or two whilst we are here together in London?"

She leaned closer as the musicians began to play for the allemande. “What did you have in mind?”

“A picnic in Hyde Park, perhaps? Surely we are still fit enough for a ride in Reggie’s new curricule and a repast by the Serpentine. I can ask Beatty to prepare a basket.” He waggled his eyebrows, and Alice had to laugh.

“You persuaded Missus Beatty to come up from Surrey?”

“Frederick did. You didn’t expect her to allow anyone else to cook for Master Frederick, did you?” He did a perfect imitation of the Perriton’s cook, who had been with the family since before even Sinjin’s eldest brother was born. “She left her niece to cook for Mother and Father. What do you say? I shall have to call for you well before noon if we are to make off with Reggie’s curricule.”

“Stealing Reggie’s curricule and a feast prepared by dear Beatty to celebrate our theft? How can I refuse?”

He chuckled softly though he did not actually smile.

“I should love that above all things, Sinjin.” She covered his hand with hers. “Thank you. I don’t know how I would survive this season without your friendship. You will stay until July, won’t you? Uncle Percy and Aunt El will not return to the country until then.” Perseus Whitcombe, the Duke of Chelmsford and Captain El Goodrum, now the Duchess of Chelmsford, always resided in London through the Season. She’d lived with them these last few years since her estrangement from her father, the Earl of Breadmore, and was more grateful than she could say for their care.

“I am ever your friend, Alice,” he said, his voice oddly brittle. “Of course, I shall stay if you wish it.” He patted her hand and started to rise to his feet. “However, I fear my presence has frightened away your dance partners. I think I shall—”

“No!” Alice tugged him back into his seat by the back of his evening jacket so sharply he nearly fell to the floor.

“What the devil?” Several of the chaperones seated down the row of dainty chairs gasped and looked at him askance. He blushed and turned to face her. “Why did you do that? Alice?” He followed her frozen gaze across the ballroom. Three finely dressed gentlemen winded their way through the dancers, their intent and direction more than clear. Though these three gentlemen hardly warranted the name.

Viscount Weatherly, the Earl of Stanton, and Lord Octavius Earden strolled towards her with their customary indolent grins firmly fixed, lords of all they surveyed. They were the very banes of her existence. Damn them.

“They’re the ones, aren’t they?” Sinjin murmured. “The ones you wrote of in your letters last Season.”

“It is of no matter.” Alice sat up straight, her hands in her lap.

“It matters to me.” Sinjin had gone stiff and cold. She glanced down to see his hand fisted tightly resting on his silk breeches clad thigh. When she returned her gaze to his face, his attention was riveted on the trio as they came to a halt before her.

Stanton offered her a negligible bow. The other two snickered and cast about to see who of their acquaintance was watching what they no doubt intended to be a continuation of last year’s humiliations.

“Dance, Lady Alice? Unless, of course, you expect a crush of gentlemen to appear to beg your next set?” The earl did not offer his hand, merely stood there, a sly grin creasing his sharp-featured face. He reminded her of a fox, after the hounds had been at him.

“Actually,” Sinjin drawled. “I have exercised the privilege of Lady Alice’s long acquaintance with my family to provide me with company and conversation this evening. An old leg injury prevents me from doing my duty to the unmarried ladies in attendance.” He shot his left leg out so precipitously the three miscreants had to leap back to avoid being kicked. In doing so they jostled several of the couples going through the steps of the allemande.

“Oh dear!” Alice covered her mouth with her gloved hand and fought not to laugh. “Have you injured yourself, Mr. Perriton?”

“Think nothing of it, my lady.” He made a great show of rubbing his thigh. “Apologies, gentlemen. Dashed thing has a mind of its own these days.”

“How did you injure your leg?” Viscount Weatherly asked. “Did our Lady Alice shoot you, perhaps?” The three of them guffawed like loons.

“From what I understand Lady Alice only shoots vermin.” Alice had never heard such venom in Sinjin’s voice. She had to restrain herself from turning to see if someone else had taken his place in the gild chair next to hers. “Perhaps you gentlemen had better remove yourselves out of range.”

“Here now, Perriton,” Lord Octavius Earden said, his face gone scarlet and his eyes flat and cruel. “Remember your place and to whom you are speaking.”

“I will if you will,” Perriton said as he slowly rose to his full height. “Or do I need to ask the Duke of Chelmsford to stand as my second tomorrow at dawn?”

“Sinjin,” Alice warned softly. Weatherly, Stanton, and Earden stared at her friend in disbelief. She shared their shock and surprise. Where had her shy, reserved companion gone and who was this formidable gentleman in his place? Without another word her three tormenters turned and skirted the edge of the ballroom until

they disappeared out the French windows that led to the Livingtons' terrace and formal gardens. Sinjin stared after them in silence for several minutes before he finally sat back down.

"What were you thinking?" Alice demanded. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Shhh. Someone will hear you. I was never in any danger. There isn't an ounce of courage between the three of them. Men like that insult women because they lack the strength or honor to challenge real gentlemen."

"How do you know that? Are you acquainted with them? You can't be. You never go out into Society. Your sister says so, and I have never seen you in a ballroom until tonight."

"Men like that are the reason you have not seen me in Society. I may not have a title or be heir to a great fortune, but I went to Eton and Oxford, remember?"

"Sinjin." She'd wounded him, though she had not meant to. "I didn't—"

"I know you didn't. Those three didn't become arses overnight. They were raised to believe they are superior creatures merely by drawing breath. I would that I had broken my solitude last year when they were so cruel to you, but I will not allow them to abuse you further. You have my word on that, Alice."

She sighed and bumped his shoulder with hers. "You honor me with your brave offer, but I am long past the age of needing a knight in shining armor."

"A good thing too as I am a terrible rider, and I'm told armor chafes like the very devil."

She laughed. "Not to mention your bad leg. One prefers a knight who does not limp."

“You cut me to the quick, my lady.” They both leaned back in their chairs and rested their heads against the gold silk covered wall behind them. “Shall a poor limping knight be a suitable companion for a picnic tomorrow?”

“I shall endeavor to endure your escort, sir.” Alice sighed dramatically. They watched the swirl of brightly colored gowns, modest white dresses, and elegantly garbed gentlemen move about the ballroom to the lively music of the musicians. She had always found balls suffocating—the cloying perfumes and colognes, the din of voices raised in false merriment, the pulse of feet on the ballroom floor and the oppressive heat of too many bodies, too many candles and never enough open windows to let in the air.

Perhaps the unrelenting whispers and torment led by Wheatly, Earden, and Stanton had made her last Season a misery. However, tonight as she and Sinjin sat and discussed the ridiculous fashions, the various foibles of the people they knew, and the unimaginable farce that was the ton at the height of the Season she found herself looking forward to the weeks to come.

She turned her head to find Sinjin studying her quite intently. “I have missed you,” she said without thinking. He blinked a few times and smiled.

“Of course you did. I am infinitely missable, you know.”

She tapped him with her fan and shook her head. Yes, she had changed her mind. Again. This was going to be a wonderful Season. “What time will you call for me tomorrow?”

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Sinjin pulled on his brother's black leather gloves and trod down the stairs into the foyer as quietly as his Hessian boots would allow. He'd had to borrow Reginald's gloves as none of his own were suited to driving a carriage. The gloves he wore in his conservatory when handling dangerous or poisonous plants, whilst serviceable and protective, were not the sort one wore to take an earl's daughter for a drive in the park.

"Are those Reggie's best Weston gloves you are purloining to steal his new racing curricle, my hermit brother?" Sinjin tripped over the last stair and would have sprawled onto the marble floor if Frederick had not caught his arm and held him upright. He'd hoped to make his escape without encountering any of his siblings, especially his eldest brother.

"Could you please not creep up on a man like a Seven Dials cutthroat?" Sinjin asked as he pulled his arm free and took his hat and greatcoat from the footman, who suppressed a smile.

"Shall I fetch the basket from the kitchens, sir?" The servant asked once he'd helped Sinjin into his coat.

"Yes, please, Andrew. But be quick and keep it to yourself."

"Keep what to myself, sir?" Andrew tapped two fingers to his brow in salute and hurried down the corridor towards the kitchens.

"You didn't answer my question," Frederick said as he followed Sinjin out the front door of their London townhouse. They both took in the bright red color of the

curricule's wheels and traces, glanced at each other, and shook their heads. The day was sunny for March, though the wind blew with an insistent reminder spring had not quite arrived. The day was perfect for a drive and a picnic in the park.

"Is there a purpose to this inquisition?" Sinjin climbed into the curricule and took the reins from the young stableboy who scrambled onto the small seat between the back springs. "I know Missus Beatty could not wait to tell you all about this morning's excursion, so cut line and ask me what you truly wish to know before Reggie stumbles from his bed to protest my use of his precious new plaything."

"I merely asked a simple question and—"

"From you there are no simple questions. Thank you, Andrew." Sinjin reached back to help the footman secure the large basket Beatty had prepared for his picnic with Alice. Frederick was on the scent of something and Sinjin did not want his elder brother in any of his affairs, especially anything that involved his friendship with Alice. "Have you ever known Mister Perriton to ask a simple question, Andrew?"

"Don't answer that," the stable boy, Seamus, muttered from his seat at the back of the curricule.

"Wasn't about to," Andrew replied under his breath as he turned and walked back to the townhouse.

"I heard that," Frederick called after the footman. He glared at Sinjin. "They only behave this way in your presence, you know."

"Of course they do. I'm by far the least troublesome member of this family."

"Very well, don't tell me what you are about with Lady Alice. Give her my regards."

“What I’m about?” Sinjin’s stomach did a flop. He didn’t like Frederick’s inference, especially as he wasn’t certain what he was about when his feelings for Alice these days came to mind. “Don’t be ridiculous. I am merely taking an old friend for a drive. Nothing—”

“Sinjin!” A third floor-window clattered open at the front of the house. “Step down from my curricule this instant, you damned thief!” Reginald hung out the window in his nightshirt, his hair a fright and his face an unbecoming shade of red.

“Go!” Frederick commanded as he slapped the near horse on the rump. Reggie’s team of matched greys broke into a fast canter down the middle of the street. Sinjin guided them toward King Street and then turned them up Half Moon Street, down Queen Street and onto Charles Street to stop in front of the Duke of Chelmsford’s Berkeley Square town mansion.

The house was within a brisk walking distance of the one he shared with his brothers, but he preferred to call for Alice in the carriage rather than on foot to avoid drawing even more attention to their excursion together. A ridiculous notion as every widow, dowager, and servant in the square would know by sunset. The lack of privacy was one of the many things he despised when it came to London society.

He had wrapped the reins around the brake and jumped down to the pavement when the front door of the elegant mansion opened, and Alice strode out to the gate, bonnet in hand.

“For goodness’ sake, Sinjin, let us be off,” she said as she joined him next to the curricule and put her foot on the step. “If Uncle Percy asks me one more question, I will not be answerable for my actions.”

Sinjin grasped her at the waist and lifted her onto the seat. She gasped softly and looked down at him, her eyes wide with surprise. “Hold on,” he said as he came

round the curricule and joined her on the plush leather bench. With a flick of his wrist, he untied the reins and set the carriage in motion. She smashed her bonnet onto her head and held the straw confection down with one hand whilst she clutched the side rail of the curricule with the other. They had gone down Hill Street, Audley Street, and Curzon Street and were turned onto Park Lane before she spoke, and she was laughing.

“Are you so frightened of my uncle you would drive as if we are off to Gretna Green?” She let go of the rail and worked to tie the ribbons of her bonnet.

“His Grace is formidable to be sure, but I am more frightened of Reggie murdering me in my sleep. He was hanging out the front window in his nightshirt calling me a thief when I drove away.”

“I should have loved to have seen that.”

Sinjin turned to see if her smile matched the amusement in her voice. A mistake on his part as the sight of Alice smiling in the morning sun left him utterly speechless. The warm rays picked up the golden strands of her hair and made them sparkle alongside the various other shades of gold escaping the confines of her bonnet. Her bright blue eyes matched the early spring skies above them. He stared at her, dumbfounded, until the curricule hit a hole in Park Lane and tipped wildly to one side. With a muttered curse he turned his attention back to the team and steadied them as the vehicle righted itself.

“Goodness,” Alice exclaimed.

“Goodness? More like wickedness, Lady Alice Lister. Wishing to see my brother half-naked hanging from his bedchamber window. The very idea.” If he assumed the role of the stern older brother, perhaps she would not notice the heat creeping up his neck nor the lust in his eyes when he gazed at her for more than a moment.

“Half-naked? You didn’t say he was half-naked.” She flounced on the bench. “You should have driven us by your house on the way out of the square.”

“Incorrigible. Absolutely scandalous,” he teased.

“Your brother Reginald is considered quite the most handsome bachelor in London, you know. Hello, Seamus,” she said as she knelt on the bench and bent over the seat to rummage in the basket Missus Beatty had prepared. “When did you grow so tall? How is your mother?”

“She is well, milady. Lemon biscuit? Yes, please. Thank you, Lady Alice.”

Sinjin seethed at her admiration for his brother, but he nearly lost control of the greys when his eyes were drawn to her heart-shaped bottom outlined by the dark green fabric of her carriage dress. “Reginald is certainly the most rakish bachelor in London.”

“Biscuit?” Alice shoved a lemon biscuit into his mouth and took a bite of the one in her hand. “He does have a terrible reputation, but one must expect that of such a fine-looking gentleman. “Take another biscuit if you like, Seamus. Dear Missus Beatty has prepared a picnic for an army.”

“You two continue to filch my biscuits and I shall set you both down to walk back to Berkeley Square.” He’d missed Alice these last few years. He’d missed her laughter and her kindness and her ability to tease him without mercy and draw him out of his solitude.

“Says the gentlemen who filched his brother’s curricule for this little adventure.” She squeezed his hand and threaded her arm through his as he guided the team into Hyde Park. “I am so very glad you thought of this. I feared my last Season would be deadly dull.”

“Then we must do our best to entertain her ladyship, must we not, Seamus?”

“Yes, sir,” the lad replied and sounded suspiciously like he was speaking around a mouth full of lemon biscuits. Alice and Sinjin exchanged a grin as he drove the curricie through the Cumberland Gate.

The park was crowded for late morning. He’d hoped to avoid the crowds of carriages and horses usually on parade at the fashionable evening hours between five and seven. The sun was almost directly overhead thus the hour could not be much past eleven, noon at the most. They passed a number of open carriages carrying an equal number of dowagers and young ladies. Some gentlemen were on horseback either riding next to the carriages or stopped to engage the occupants in conversation.

The breeze blew gently for March and carried the scent of early spring flowers. Ever sensitive to the various botanical changes out of doors. He twisted slightly on the curricie seat in search of new blooms pushing through the earth.

“What is it?” Alice asked. “Are you looking for someone in particular?” She began to cast about herself in expectation of seeing someone they knew.

“Not someone, something. Daffodils,” he mused and then sniffed the air deeply. “And crocuses, your favorites.”

“Where?” She stood and shielded her eyes, nearly tumbling from the curricie. He tugged the back of her dress.

“Steady on. Give me a moment.” She sat down hard and fixed him with expectant eyes.

“This way.” He turned the horses toward the Serpentine. They rounded a corner in the carriageway and pulled into an open clearing along the bank of the lake. Clumps of

both flowers were dotted along the edge of the water and down the path into the open space under some cherry trees that were beginning to bloom as well.

“How did you know?” Alice clasped her hands together and looked at him as if he’d done some wondrous magical feat.

He leaned close to her and whispered. “They told me they would make an appearance just for you.” Her eyes glittered like azure jewels. Then Seamus erupted into a coughing fit and ruined the moment. Alice snorted and shoved Sinjin’s shoulder.

“Such calumny and fancy from a man of science.” She hopped down from the curricule without his help. “Some botanical trick of his, Seamus. Which he refuses to share with we mere mortals.”

Sinjin secured the reins on the brake and stepped down to take the basket from the stableboy who was struggling to wrest it from the back of the carriage. He watched Alice bend to touch the flowers. Seamus, arms loaded with a number of heavy wool blankets, joined her next to the lake. When she explained the names of the blooms to the boy, Sinjin smiled. She remembered the scientific names after all these years. He was more pleased by that than any self-respecting gentleman should be, but seeing her happy and free of care after her encounter with those three wastrels last night was reward enough for any embarrassment he might feel.

“Right here. Bring the blankets, Seamus. This is the perfect spot for our picnic.”

Shaken from his reverie by Alice’s voice, Sinjin walked to the spot just beneath one of the cherry trees where she helped Seamus to spread the blankets in several layers against the ground still cold and a bit damp from the last bite of winter.

“Do you intend to keep Missus Beatty’s feast to yourself or will you share, sir?” Alice stood hands on hips and fixed him with her mock scowl.

“If I must.” He sighed dramatically and joined her and Seamus seated on the blanket where he placed the basket and began to rummage the contents. The cook had indeed packed a veritable feast. There was a large corked jug of lemonade with three tin cups. Sinjin cut a look at Seamus who grinned. By the time the basket was empty the blanket was covered with a plate of ham and cheese sandwiches on thick fresh bread, another plate of gooseberry tarts, several boiled eggs, sliced apples, the remaining lemon biscuits, and some of the cook’s ridiculously delicious meat pasties.

“I don’t know where to start,” Alice mused as she spread one of the heavy linen serviettes Missus Beatty had included across her lap. She filled a plate with some of each item which she then handed to Seamus. Sinjin allowed her to do the same for him before she made her own selections.

He never imagined watching his closest friend tuck into a picnic luncheon might turn into an erotic experience. Alice was completely unrestrained in her enjoyment of every morsel. Unlike so many women in London society, she evinced pleasure without holding back. The food was delicious, of course, and he managed to enjoy his own as he glanced at her between bites. Their conversation consisted of praise of Missus Beatty’s culinary skills and jibes about who was eating the most.

“Seamus is a growing boy,” Alice explained. “I remember you as being constantly hungry when you were his age, Mister Perriton. I know because I helped you to sneak mince pies from the pantry on more than one occasion.”

Seamus laughed and pointed at Sinjin, his mouth too full to talk.

“I seem to recall a certain young lady removing hot strawberry tarts from a windowsill whilst I stood watch at her insistence.” Sinjin placed his now empty plate back in the basket and refilled everyone’s cup from the jug of lemonade. “That same young lady burnt her mouth eating every one of those tarts and was ill for three days, as I recall.”

“Old age has obviously stolen your memory, sir.” Alice huffed indignantly and turned to stare at the lake. “I remember no such event.” She turned back and winked at Seamus. The horses grew restless, tossing their heads and stamping their feet. The stableboy was up instantly and went to calm them speaking in a quiet sing-song voice.

“He is so good with them,” Alice said. “I am happy he is still with you.” Seamus and his mother had worked at her father’s estate until five years ago when the earl had cast them out for some minor offense. She had brought them to Sinjin in the middle of the night and his father had taken them on at once.

“Seamus has a gift with horses. He’ll make a fine stablemaster one day.” Sinjin watched her as she watched the stableboy settle the greys with a few words and touches. She sat on the blanket her legs stretched before her and her hands braced behind her. The bonnet she’d tied with such care had fallen back to rest between her shoulders. “Mama taught him to read and write. Did you know?”

“In fact, I did know. He has written to me these last few years. Your mother suggested he do so and your father franked his letters. Seamus and I correspond nearly as often as you and I do.” She turned to meet Sinjin’s gaze, her expression mischievous and teasing. “Which is how I know what scandalous things you have been up to whilst I have been in London these three years.”

“You have found me out.” Sinjin copied her pose as he moved to sit next to her. “I am an incorrigible scoundrel when you are no longer in Surrey to keep me in check. My mother despairs of me most piteously.”

Alice snorted and rolled her eyes, but then she stilled and grew serious. “You spend all of your time in your conservatory or tramping about the estate gathering specimens in all weathers. You forget to eat. You’ve had pneumonia twice these three years past, once so severely your parents feared they might lose you. Why did you

not write of that in your letters? Or have someone write to me for you when you were ill?" She clutched his arm. The concern in her tone caused his heart to race.

"It would seem there was no need as Seamus felt the need to send you a full report. With help from Mama, of course." He wasn't angry with the boy, not really. Alice understood at once as she shook him and uttered a wordless sound of exasperation. She'd never mentioned what she'd learned in her letters to him. Apparently, they'd both been keeping secrets, or at least trying to do so. He should have known she would find out somehow.

"You knew Papa would not let me come to you, as did your mother. Which is why I only learned of your illnesses after the danger was past."

He made her no answer. As often happened when they were together there was no need. "You live with your uncle now. I promise if I am ill, I will write to you if you wish it as the duke seems a far more reasonable man."

"He is the dearest of men." She bumped his shoulder. "And if he does attempt to refuse me anything, my aunt talks him 'round. Of course, I wish it, you ridiculous man. You are my dearest friend." A sudden wind rustled the leaves and cherry blossoms overhead. The scent surrounded them and Alice tilted her head back, eyes closed as she took a deep breath. Sinjin's gaze was drawn to the generous curves of her breasts as they pushed against the rounded bodice of her dress.

"Alice, I—"

"What do we have here? A picnic? How quaint," the Earl of Stanton drawled.

Sinjin was on his feet in an instant. Stanton and his two cohorts, along with several young ladies, allowed their horses to crowd the blankets. Alice clasped his offered hand and stood just behind him.

“You must take care, Lady Alice,” one of the ladies mounted side saddle on a big bay said, her voice an annoying whine. “The ground is far too cold and damp for a lady to risk her health.”

The party numbered at least half a dozen and their horses danced along the water’s edge trampling the flowers and stirring up mud. The team of greys grew restless and Seamus worked hard to keep them still.

“I’ll try to remember that, Millicent,” Alice replied, stepping in front of Sinjin. “Please don’t allow us to interrupt your ride. Good day.” She dismissed them as regally as any queen and Sinjin forced himself not to laugh.

Weatherly tried to move his horse forward onto the blanket. Sinjin placed his palm on the horse’s shoulder and pushed the animal back forcefully. “If you cannot control a horse, I suggest you confine your riding to your father’s estate, in Yorkshire, isn’t it?”

“Says the man who fell from his horse more times than I can count when we were at Eton together.” Earden deliberately swung his horse around to knock Alice down. Sinjin lunged for the animal’s reins and the stallion reared, nearly unseating Lord Earden. The ladies screamed as their horses danced in the mud and tried to break loose. Sinjin turned Earden’s horse away from the Serpentine and smacked the animal on the rump hard. Alice pushed to her feet and stumbled out of the way.

Seamus leapt into the fray shouting and waving his arms, sending the other horses charging after Earden up the path away from the lake. Sinjin bent over hands braced on his thighs. He spat the taste of mud from his mouth and glanced back at the blankets now trampled and torn. The stableboy pointed to the water’s edge and then began gathering the picnic things and placing them in the basket which had somehow escaped unharmed. Sinjin saw Alice kneeling in the mud on the banks of the lake.

“Alice, did they hurt you?” He picked up her bonnet smashed beyond repair. She

turned her head and looked up at him. Her face was streaked with mud save for lines where tears ran a course down to her chin.

“Look what they did to the flowers,” she sobbed. She had tried to straighten the daffodils and crocuses now lying flat along the side of the lake. His lungs seized. His chest hurt as if someone had plunged a knife between his ribs. He tried to put his arm around her. She batted him away and shot to her feet. “Take me home, Sinjin. I want to go home.” She stalked away and climbed into the curricule. Seamus hefted the basket and the tattered, dirty blankets into the back and climbed onto the seat between the springs.

Sinjin stared at the crumpled flowers and then gazed out over the lake. The scent of the crushed blooms wafted on the wind from the lake. When he turned back to the curricule Alice sat staring straight ahead, expressionless to anyone who did not know her. Her eyes, however, spoke of pain and humiliation and dear God he could not breathe at the sight. He strode to the carriage, handed the bonnet to Seamus and stepped up to sit on the bench next to Alice.

She didn’t say a word the entire way back to her uncle’s St. James Square mansion. He had hardly pulled the horses to a stop before she jumped to the pavement.

“Alice, I am so sorry.” He hated the weakness of the words, insufficient to convey what he truly felt.

“No, I’m sorry, Sinjin.” She swiped at her face which only smeared the dirt further. “I am sorry I decided to embark on this Season. I am sorry I involved you in this farce.” She managed a small but sincere smile. “I’ll write to you from Scotland. I fear I have had all of the London adventures I care to for a lifetime. Goodbye. Dear Sinjin.” Once she was in the house and the door closed firmly behind her, he turned the curricule around in the street.

“Where are we going, sir?” Seamus asked.

“Back to Hyde Park.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:39 am

At the quiet knock on her bedchamber door, Alice and her lady's maid, Nell, both looked up from what they were doing. Nell, seated before the fire, was scrubbing the mud stains out of Alice's green carriage dress. Alice, clad in her night dress and heavy wool dressing gown, sat up on her bed where she'd been sprawled ever since she'd returned from Hyde Park, taken her bath, and vowed not to leave her rooms until a carriage was readied to convey her to Uncle Percy's estate in Scotland never to return to London so long as she lived.

Night had fallen an hour ago and Alice had refused to join her aunt and uncle for dinner. She'd picked over the tray of food that had been sent up from the kitchens, but nothing appealed to her. Alice was not a creature prone to feeling sorry for herself. She truly was not, but she'd started the day with such high hopes. Then Lord Earden and his party of vultures had arrived and ruined everything, just as they had last year. For some reason, having Sinjin witness her humiliation made the day all the more tragic.

Nell cleared her throat and nodded towards the door where another quiet knock ensued. Alice sighed and pulled her dressing gown more tightly around her. "Come in." The door opened slowly. A hand poked around the door bearing a plate stacked with macarons and what smelled suspiciously like strawberry tarts.

"Do you have a moment for your interfering aunt?" Eleanor Whitcombe, Duchess of Chelmsford, was one of the most beautiful and extraordinary women Alice had ever met. With her flaming red hair and striking scarred face, she looked the part of the pirate queen she'd been reputed to be before she opened Goodrum's Pleasure Club. Her romance with Alice's Uncle Percy, the Duke of Chelmsford, was the stuff of legend and scandal, and Alice adored them both. They'd swept her from under the

control of her cruel vindictive father and given her the freedom to live, within reason, the life she wished. Now all she wished was to run away.

Nell stood and bobbed a curtsy to the duchess. She started to gather up the dress and her cleaning supplies, but Aunt El waved her back into her chair. “I doubt Alice and I will discuss anything you won’t eventually find out,” she said as she took the chair across from Nell and placed the plate on the low tea table between them. She patted the leather ottoman next to her chair. “I’ve heard the gossip. Now tell me what really happened.”

Alice slid off the large four-poster bed and padded across the Aubusson carpets to drop onto the ottoman and retrieve one of the macarons from the plate. She bit into the confection and savored the bright raspberry flavor. “These are Charpentier macarons,” she said once she’d swallowed that first bite. “Aren’t they? Lady Camilla likely sent them over the minute she heard about the Hyde Park disaster. And as her spies were everywhere she likely heard before the mud dried on Alice’s skirts.

Nathaniel Charpentier was considered the most accomplished chef in London. His culinary creations at Lord Livingston’s Club Ambrosio and his catering service to London’s elite placed him in high demand. However, as he lived on St. James Square with Lady Camilla and her handsome nephew, Lionel Carrington-Bowles, that venerable lady had access to his fabulous macarons at will.

“Would your uncle have anything else? Lady Camilla sent a box over an hour ago.”

Alice cringed. “She heard what happened, didn’t she?”

“Does anything happen in London that lady doesn’t hear?” Nell asked. She’d put aside her cleaning and busied herself refreshing the teapot from the kettle resting on the fireplace hob. The servants had retrieved the untouched tray of food, but they’d left the teapot, cups, and small canister of tea leaves behind.

“You’re as bad as Lady Camilla, and you know it, Nell Barker.” Alice took another bite of macaron to avoid answering her aunt’s query. The lady’s maid her father had assigned her from childhood had been his creature who reported everything Alice did back to him. Aunt El had brought Nell up from one of Uncle Percy’s country estates nearly two years ago to serve as Alice’s lady’s maid. Her closest confidant, Nell was a godsend to Alice, though she didn’t know much about the maid’s life before Captain El, as Nell called her, had rescued Nell from the streets of Portsmouth several years ago.

“No one is as bad as Lady Camilla.” Aunt El took the cup of tea Nell offered and sipped carefully.

“Amen to that, Your Grace,” Nell said as she handed Alice a cup of tea, made with milk and sugar just as she preferred. “Might as well tell her, my lady. She likely knows the better part of what happened.” The maid settled back into her chair and began to scrub the splattered dress once more.

Alice went through the sad tale as quickly as possible. Her eyes still burned from the tears she’d shed upon her return home, and she didn’t wish to revisit the memory too closely again. Aunt El listened in silence, sipping her tea from time to time until Alice brought her story to an end.

“I begged Sinjin to bring me home at once. I was afraid he would go after them. He’s already suggested he and Lord Earden make a dawn appointment.”

Eyes widened in surprise, her aunt put her teacup down on the table. “Octavius Earden? The Duke of Audley’s whelp? When did this happen?”

“Last night at the Livingston’s ball.”

“He’s naught but a second son,” Nell said with a sneer. “His mother can’t keep a

decent maid in the house because he won't leave them alone." Aunt El cut her eyes at the maid in astonishment. "Or so I've heard," Nell added.

"Do you want your uncle to speak to the whelp's father? Just say the word and you know he will." Her aunt pinned her with a level gaze, which was disconcerting to say the least. Many times, Alice sensed her uncle's fiery wife expected something of her, though she had not quite deciphered what that something might be.

"No, that will only make matters worse." Alice clasped her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. "I think it is best if I simply leave. Earden, Weatherly, and Stanton will never forgive me for shooting Ravenswood and having him banished from England."

"Should have aimed lower," Nell muttered.

"Indeed," the duchess said as she fixed Alice with that steely searching gaze once more. "If you wish to flee London you know your uncle and I will support you. Percy has given orders the travel coach is to be at your disposal."

"He is sure to be disappointed in me." Alice plucked at the belt of her dressing gown. "And you, Aunt Eleanor, Uncle Percy says you never back down from a fight." She drew in a painful breath. A few rapid blinks did nothing against the sting of tears that threatened. The warmth from the fire failed to reach her, as if the events of the day had encased her body in a cloak of icy mud and shame. "I simply don't think I can face another humiliation at their hands."

"Then don't," her fierce aunt replied. "Don't face another humiliation. Make them face one."

Alice opened her mouth to reply. Nothing came out. She pondered Aunt Eleanor's words. Make them? "Are you talking about..."

“Revenge?” Aunt El crossed her legs and relaxed back into the comfortable leather chair. “Absolutely. With everything they have put you through, how could you not want revenge, my dear?”

Nell stirred the fire and the flames sent a wave of heat across the tea table. The scent of the strawberry tarts tempted Alice. She plucked one of the little treats from the plate and bit into the light delicate crust and sweet strawberry filling. The maid and the duchess waited, eyes questioning. Alice washed the tart down with a deep, unladylike gulp of tea.

“How? I mean, what can I possibly do to humiliate an earl, a viscount, and a duke’s son? I’m nobody, an outcast earl’s daughter.” She hated the ache of defeat and anger that suffused her. She wasn’t this pitiful creature? Was she?

“Even better,” Aunt El said with an eerie smile. “Who would expect anything so heinous as revenge from sweet Lady Alice Lister? As to the how, the possibilities are endless. Daedalus says the three gentlemen who have been tormenting you are the most arrogant popinjays in England. Which means anything you can do to cause them public embarrassment, without getting caught, of course, will be nothing less than they deserve. Yes?” Alice now understood why her formidable uncle, the Duke of Chelmsford, never dared to draw his wife’s ire. Her expression in this moment was positively frightening.

“Wait, Uncle Daedalus knows about last year, how awful they were to me?” Alice’s face burned. She scrubbed her hands over her cheeks and gave a little scream.

Her aunt leaned toward her and patted Alice’s hand. “My dear girl, everyone knows. This is the London ton, remember? Daedalus and Cordelia were ready to have those three press-ganged into the Royal Navy. Percy only wanted to shoot them.”

“Bloody hell.” Alice groaned and shook her head violently. Nell and the duchess

laughed.

Percy Whitcombe and his brother, Daedalus, had only recently reconciled after Daedalus's marriage to Sinjin Perriton's sister, Cordelia. Daedalus's naughty bookstore and Cordelia's authoring scintillating books, even if they were published under the esteemed Lady Camilla's name, was scandal enough for one family. Then Uncle Percy had married Captain Eleanor Goodrum, a lady sea captain who owned London's most exclusive pleasure club.

Three years ago, Society had learned that Alice's father drove her mother to suicide. He was caught trying to blackmail Cordelia into marrying him. He'd all but sold Alice in marriage to Viscount Ravenwood, who was having women snatched from the streets of Seven Dials and Covent Garden to sell into slavery in the Orient. Then Alice had shot Ravenwood.

Alice being tormented by three young bucks was a minor on dit compared to the gossip that surrounded her family. Gossip that had settled and faded in the last three years. The very last thing she wanted was the sort of trouble that would ensue should either of her uncles or aunts do something to the men who had ruined a mere picnic. A picnic where Sinjin had seen her covered in mud and weeping over trampled flowers.

A log shifted in the fireplace and sent sparks showering up the chimney. Alice stirred from her brown study and discovered her maid and her aunt still watching her without saying a word. She pushed to her feet and began to pace from the long French windows that opened onto her balcony and back to the cozy arrangement of seats before the hearth.

"I would not want anyone else to know what I am about," she mused. "Not Uncle Percy, nor Uncle Daedalus and Aunt Cordelia. Is there any way to keep it from Lady Camilla?"

“Likely not, but she will be most staunchly in your corner, and she is as capable of keeping secrets as she is of uncovering them.” Aunt El poured herself another cup of tea. “And I don’t want to know the details. If I don’t know your plans I won’t be forced to lie to Percy.”

“Agreed.” Alice continued to pace. She tapped her forefinger against her chin. The more she paced, the stronger she grew, and the more palatable the idea of revenge became. Palatable? The idea had grown delicious as any strawberry tart or even a Charpentier macaron. “Nell will know and no one else. Though I may need at least one more accomplice.”

“God help us,” Nell said as she spread the ruined gown on her lap and sighed. “Especially whatever other poor soul she intends to drag into this little adventure.”

Alice stopped in her tracks. The duchess rose and plucked one last macaron from the plate. “I’ll go and tell Percy you will not be leaving for Scotland just yet, but I won’t tell him why. Nell, send that gown to Goodrum’s with a note for Olivia Jones. She’ll know a way to remove those stains. Half the gentlemen in London would be wearing mud-stained shirts and breeches if it were not for her skills. Her laundry business is thriving.”

“That I will, Your Grace. Should have thought of that, meself.” Nell folded the gown and went to place the garment on an inlaid table next to Alice’s chamber door.

“Thank you,” Alice said as her aunt kissed her cheek and gave her a hug.

“For what?” The duchess said with a wink. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, my dear. Good luck.” In a cloud of green silk and the scent of the sea, she quit the room, leaving Alice alone with her talented lady’s maid. Nell walked slowly back to her chair, her eyes on Alice the entire time.

“What are you thinking, my lady? You’re up to some mischief with this revenge to be sure, but there’s something else going on in that pretty head of yours. Please tell me you’re not going to shoot those three scoundrels.”

“Oh no,” Alice said as she dropped into the chair her aunt had occupied moments ago. “I’m going to do far worse than shoot them. Aunt El is correct. However, I need an accomplice.”

“And does this poor benighted soul have a name?”

“He does indeed, and his participation is all your fault. For this adventure , as you so grudgingly called it, I need someone who shares my love of adventure.” Alice smiled as she considered whether to send a note or to call in person.

“You don’t mean...” Nell began to shake her head.

“Oh yes I do.”

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:39 am

Sinjin pushed his spectacles higher onto his nose for the hundredth time and straightened up to appease the ache in his back. He reached around to press the heels of his hands into the base of his spine and worked at the muscles grown taut from hours of painstaking work over his new Lister microscope. A gift on the occasion of his last birthday from his sister, Cordelia, and her husband Lord Daedalus Whitcombe, the instrument was a wonder and had allowed Sinjin to make great progress in his botanical crossbreeding endeavors and in discovering the medicinal properties of England's plant-life.

He had been working with stinging nettles for several months now, extracting different properties and compounding them with other ingredients in the hope of creating a powder that might be mixed into a paste for the pains of arthritis, something from which his father suffered most cruelly. As he cast his gaze around his vast conservatory, he spotted the long work table across the glass wall at the far end of this room that stretched across the entire back of his family's London townhouse. The glass enclosed space ran from the back of the house to the mews as well. No elegant back gardens for the Perritons. Sinjin had commandeered every inch of open space behind their London residence years ago.

The latest additions to his plant collection were potted in a series of large, ornate Chinese porcelain bowls on the long work table next to the glass wall. Their location allowed them to receive as much sun as possible. He hoped the warmth and light would help the wounded daffodils and crocuses to overcome the shock of being uprooted from their Hyde Park home yesterday. He and Seamus had taken great care with them, but only time would tell if the plants would survive. And they had to survive.

“Sir?” Danders called from the doors that led into the townhouse. “Mister Sinjin, you have a visitor.”

“Give me a moment, Danders.” Sinjin removed his gloves and strode down the flagstone path set into the tiled floor.

“I am well aware of the length of your moments, Sinjin Perriton. I have no intention of standing about for an hour waiting for you to complete one of your experiments. Where are you?” Alice stepped around a large banana tree and met him just before he reached her and the butler.

“A-Alice,” Sinjin’s heart stuttered as he stumbled to a halt before her. “What a pleasant surprise.”

She rolled her eyes and brushed some dirt from his cheek. She turned back to the butler. “Thank you, Danders. You’re looking well in spite of trying to keep the Perriton brothers in check.”

Danders offered her a bow and a slight smile. “My cross to bear, my lady, though I do my best. Missus Beatty has prepared luncheon. Perhaps if I bring a tray, you can persuade this one to eat something?” He gave Sinjin a censoring scowl.

“As you say, I will do my best,” Alice said with a grin. “Yes, please send a tray. I thought I smelled Missus Beatty’s mutton stew on the way to Mister Perriton’s lair. That and some of her fresh bread and a pot of tea would be lovely.” She removed her gloves, placed them on a mosaic table bearing pots of violets, and set about tying Sinjin’s neckcloth which he’d draped loose around his neck. Danders quickly left to do her bidding.

Sinjin suddenly realized he’d greeted her in his shirtsleeves, buckskins, and boots, not a jacket or waistcoat in sight. She stood so close as she arranged his neckcloth in a

perfect mathematical, he could smell the lemon and verbena scent she wore and a hint of the lavender soap she used on her hair. Today she'd dressed in an elegant silver and blue striped walking dress. The bodice was cut low enough and snugly enough to cradle a generous portion of her rose-tinted ivory skin. He dragged his gaze away from that view only to be trapped in the blue of her eyes. She was dangerous no matter where he looked.

Their eyes met as she finished with his neckcloth and patted his chest. Time ticked slowly like drops of honey from a fresh honeycomb. She licked her lips and took a quick breath. His blood roared in his ears. Minutes passed, perhaps hours, he had no idea.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, my lady?" he finally managed to ask in a strong and steady voice. He tried not to swallow as her fingers brushed against his neck.

"Food first and then I will discuss the purpose of my visit. What are you working on today?" She started down the path he'd taken from the table of Hyde Park flowers. He caught her arm and drew her in the opposite direction towards his research area. For some reason he didn't want her to see the daffodils and crocuses, at least not until he was certain they had recovered from yesterday's events. She had already wept over them once.

"This way. I'm working with stinging nettles so you cannot help me, but I can show you my new microscope." He escorted to the long table covered with detritus from his various experiments with the stinging nettles, *Urtica dioica*.

"What on earth are you doing with nettles?" Alice asked as she began to study the various items on the table.

"Careful." Sinjin took a large mortar and pestle from her hand. "These are dried and

ground up nettle leaves. If you spill them on yourself, we'll have to dunk you in Mama's ornamental fish pond." He nodded in the direction of the large round pool and fountain at the center of his conservatory. He found the sound of the fountain soothing and good company as he spent most of his time in London alone in his beloved glass house.

"I cannot believe you have pots of nettles growing in the same place as your beautiful roses." She clasped her hands behind her back as she walked the length of the table peering at the items on display. When she bent over his journal, smudged with ink smears and dirt, she smiled. "I see your penmanship has not improved. Thank goodness I have been reading your letters for years or I would never be able to decipher them."

"I must endeavor to make my own notes as the person who used to keep my journals so neatly ran off to London and never returned." Sinjin had been obsessed with botany since he was a boy and Alice had followed him about carefully recording all of his observations. Those journals traveled with him everywhere. Thank goodness they were safely tucked away on a bookcase next to his desk upstairs in his bedchamber.

She leaned against him as they reached the microscope. "You are the one person I regretted leaving behind, Sinjin. Especially these last two years as things went so terribly wrong."

He glanced down at the top of her head, her golden hair arranged in coils of braids. The temptation to press his lips to her silken crown nearly undid him. He cleared his throat and indicated the glass cover onto which he'd mounted a single nettle leaf. He placed the slide onto his microscope, adjusted the lens and invited Alice to look with a nod of his head.

"Oh, my goodness," she gasped as she peered into the eyepiece. "Are those hairs on

the leaf. Nettles have hair?”

“Not exactly. Those little hairs are like barbs or thorns on other plants, and I believe they are the reason all one must do is brush against nettles and the stinging and itching is unbearable. The leaves shed those hairs, and they stick to the flesh causing that itch that used to send us running for the lake behind Perriton Grange.”

She straightened from the microscope, the bell of her laughter echoing throughout the conservatory. “I had forgotten about that. It was terrible, wasn’t it?”

“The worst. I still have nightmares about us jumping from that tree into that patch of nettles.” Sinjin’s breath caught at the sparkle in her eyes and the true joy in her face.

“You two were covered in splotches for days,” Danders said as he came around the corner bearing a small tray whilst one of the footmen followed with a larger tray. The butler led the way into the more garden-like section of the conservatory where a round mosaic table and some wrought-iron chairs with thick embroidered cushions sat next to the fish pond and fountain. He went about setting the table for them. “It was a miracle neither of you suffered a broken limb from that fall.” He tsked and shook his head. “How you two survived to reach your majority is one of life’s great mysteries.”

Sinjin and Alice didn’t say a word and tried desperately not to look at each other as they knew they would dissolve into gales of hilarity. Poor Danders had rescued them both more times than Sinjin could count. Once he and the footman had arranged the luncheon to the butler’s satisfaction Danders bowed, shook his head once more and promenaded in his customary stately fashion out of sight, trailed by the grinning footman.

For the first several minutes Sinjin and Alice tucked into the delicious mutton stew and bread right from the oven slathered in sweet, fresh butter. Neither of them spoke.

She poured their tea and added sugar and milk just as they had always liked. He was amazed at the ease and comfort conveyed by the simplicity of dining with someone who knew him so well, someone with whom he'd shared so many similar meals over the years.

"Such a pity we cannot find a way to dump that bowl of dried nettles in Lord Earden's drawers," Alice suddenly said once she'd polished off her bowl of stew. She immediately took a large bite of bread as if she regretted what she'd said.

"Alice, I must apologize for what happened yesterday. I should have chased Earden and his band of toad eaters off the minute I saw them." He cut his lemon tart into small pieces and didn't raise his head to check her expression.

"Don't you dare apologize. You had nothing to do with what happened. I shouldn't have turned into a watering pot and run away. I should have dragged those three off their horses and drawn their corks." She reached across the table and squeezed his hand then plucked one of the pieces of tart from his plate. He watched her drop the crust and lemon curd into her mouth and lick her lips to capture all of the filling. If she kept this up, he would be the one diving into the fish pond.

"I would have loved to have seen that," he replied.

"Don't tease. Thanks to you I punch as well as any man." Her indignance was endearing as the devil. "It would be no less than they deserved."

He raised his hands in surrender. "I was not casting aspersions on your ability to give those three a drubbing. However, we are in London now, not Surrey. An earl's daughter who is also a duke's niece participating in fisticuffs with three gentlemen would send the gossip rags into a frenzy. I should hate for us to appear as caricatures in print shop windows. Reggie says they never get his hair right."

She tossed a piece of bread at him which he caught and popped into his mouth. “If I cannot take my revenge publicly perhaps, I should find a way to do so without anyone knowing it is me.”

Sinjin stopped chewing. He took in her face, the tone of her voice. She was in earnest. This was no jibe or fantasy such as those they had shared lying in a field of wildflowers weaving childish revenge plots against those who teased or insulted them. “What could you possibly have in mind, Alice Lister?”

She shrugged. “I spoke in jest. What could I, a mere woman, have in mind to wreak a revenge on those three so humiliating they might never show their faces in London again? I would not know where to start. I would need someone clever, someone who thinks like a gentleman and knows what might cause another gentleman the most embarrassment.” She stared across the table and batted her eyelashes like some cow-eyed debutante at her first ball.

He snorted. “Don’t bat your eyes at me, my lady. You are up to some mischief, and you want me to join you.”

“Not at all.” She filched another piece of his tart and made short work of the delicious bit of confection. “I want you to lead the fray.”

“Me?” Sinjin’s voice went tight. “You would not allow me to meet Earden at dawn, but you will allow me to plot some sort of humiliating revenge on him, Stanton, and Weatherly?”

“You will not meet anyone at dawn for my sake, ever. Promise me.” She reached across the table and took both of his hands in hers. “Promise.”

“I promise,” he said, her fervor causing his stomach to flip and his breath to quicken. “I promise, Alice.”

“Good.” She released his hands and sat back in her chair. “Should you wish to help me in my quest, I would be most appreciative. You did say we should seek adventure whilst I am here in London for the Season.” She smiled at him, that secret little smile that always led to trouble when they were children, like falling out of trees into nettle patches or turning a piglet loose in the middle of Sunday services.

“Adventure, yes. The mayhem of delivering a well-deserved comeuppance to those three miscreants, without being caught? That is another matter entirely.” He said the last bit slowly as even now his mind was turning over possible ideas. The very notion smacked of madness and scandal and every sort of thing that might go wrong. Then he glanced back up at Alice, her expression so hopeful and so very sure of his ability to help her. His brother, Frederick, would say the lady played Sinjin like a fiddle at an assembly dance. He’d be all too correct as well.

Sinjin had been screwing up his courage to tell Alice how he felt about her since they were twelve or thereabouts. She’d never said or shown in any way that she might return his feelings or that she saw him as anything more than a brother or a dear friend. To say the words to her would change everything, and he could not bear for her to pull away from him. Perhaps...if he showed her the depth of his feelings...

“It would have to be something they would never suspect,” he mused. “Something of which we can feign complete ignorance.” He removed his spectacles and massaged the bridge of his nose. “Something public and—umpf!” He nearly fell backwards, chair and all. Alice had leapt from her chair and wrapped her arms about him before he could blink.

“Oh, thank you, dear Sinjin! I knew I could count on you.” She kissed him hard on the mouth, tasting of tea and lemon tart. He clasped her about the waist instinctually and held his breath. She froze and appeared to be equally amazed by what she’d done.

“There is nothing I would not do for you, Alice,” he said softly, before he lost his courage.

“Oh. Sinjin.” She touched her fingertips to his cheek. Her steady rapid breathing pushed her breasts against his chest, and he shifted slightly so she might not feel the very clear evidence of his arousal. Slowly she lowered her arms and stood upright. “You are such a dear friend.” She took a deep breath and a step back. With a brush at her skirts and another step back she smiled wickedly. “Now, what do you have in mind for my trio of tormenters?”

He reached for his cup of tea, nearly knocked the damned thing over, and finally gulped the entire contents at once. He retrieved his serviette from his lap in order to check the falls of his buckskins and then wiped his mouth before he stood and dropped the linen piece onto his chair. Sinjin winged his arm at her and she threaded her arm through his.

“Your idea about dumping nettles in Earden’s drawers is a good one, but as I have no intention of having my hand anywhere near his...person, especially not when he breaks out in hives, I suspect we cannot use these.” They had reached his work table and he used a thick piece of toweling to pick up the bowl of dried nettle leaves she’d nearly brushed against.

“What if we could put dried leaves on their clothes in some other way?” Alice mused as she began to study his latest notes on the properties of *Urtica dioica*.

“There’s the problem.” He brushed his hand over the top of his head and then patted the pockets of his buckskins. “But the dried leaves don’t sting.

Alice sighed and reached into the pocket on her walking dress. She placed the spectacles on his nose and pushed them into place. “You left them on the table.” She returned to reading his notes and suddenly pointed to a passage. “Is this true? You

tried rejuvenating the dried leaves with water and the little hairs were released? Did they sting?"

"Like the very devil. I made the mistake of wiping up the mess and drying my hands on the cloth I used to...Alice? What is it?"

She'd begun to walk back and forth along his work table, a habit of hers from childhood. When she had latched onto a thought and worked to spin that thought into an idea, she paced. "If," she said when she came to a stop next to him. "The dried leaves are somehow secreted into the clothes and the wearer begins to sweat, might that encourage the little hairs to awaken and begin to sting the wearer?"

Sinjin turned the notion over in his mind. "Again, we encounter the question of how we get the leaves into their clothes without the risk of them suspecting us. And where they will be when the leaves began to do their work." Once again Alice got that frighteningly brilliant look in her eyes.

"I know someone who might be able to help us. Is Seamus about?" She marched to the far back of the conservatory where a door led to the mews. Alice had only to call the boy's name and he came scurrying up the path to do her bidding. Sinjin knew exactly how the stableboy felt.

"You know Dickie Jones, do you not?" Alice asked Seamus. "And his sister, Olivia?"

"That I do, my lady." Seamus doffed his cap. "Dickie lives with Lady Camilla down the square these days. Shall I fetch him for you?" Sinjin studied the lad's face and wondered if he himself appeared so calf-eyed when he gazed at Alice.

"What I would really like is for you to find Dickie and for the two of you to take a message to his sister at Goodrum's. I'm going to ask her to come here and I should like for you two to escort her safely. Can you do that?"

“Of course, my lady.”

She bestowed a beatific smile on him and went back to Sinjin’s desk for paper, quill, and ink to write her message to Olivia Jones. Sinjin knew Miss Jones as she was the only person Frederick and Reggie would allow to touch their laundry. He never gave the condition of his clothes much thought, but he had to admit she was something of a magician when it came to removing the various stains from his own clothing.

“Seamus.” He beckoned the boy closer. “You must promise for my sake and for Lady Alice’s sake that you will not speak to anyone about us sending for Miss Jones or anything else we ask you to keep to yourself. Understood? And you must ask Dickie Jones to do the same. Yes?”

Seamus glanced up the path to Sinjin’s desk. Alice came back to them and handed Seamus a sealed missive. “You can count on me, Mister Sinjin. I won’t let you down.”

“Good lad.” Sinjin extended his hand which the stableboy shook with all of the solemnity of a gentleman giving his word. He jammed his cap onto his head, gave Alice a bow and was out the door and trotting toward the mews lane than ran around the back of St. James Square.

“Now,” Sinjin said as he took Alice by the hand. “We have some experiments to conduct if this revenge adventure is to be a success. Are you ready to act as my secretary and assistant, Lady Alice?”

“Always, sir. Always. I cannot wait to see how this turns out.” She pulled a stool over to his work table and organized quill, ink, and his journal next to the microscope.

“Neither can I,” Sinjin muttered dubiously. “Neither can I.”

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Miss Olivia Jones had a singular reputation as the most sought-after laundress in all of London. The fact she conducted her laundry business from Goodrum's Pleasure House, one of the most discreet but notorious clubs in London, spoke volumes as to her skill and the deservedness of said reputation. Such were her talents that London society chose to ignore her location in favor of the superiority of her service and the cache one might acquire having their laundry done by the young lady.

As much as Alice admired Olivia's business acumen and envied her the freedom of running her own affairs, she found she liked the young woman's confidence and character even more. She'd had a number of occasions to engage Olivia in conversation over her last two London seasons. They were friends of a sort being women of a similar age doing their best to make their way in life.

When the laundress came to the Duke of Chelmsford's Berkeley Square mansion to deliver laundry or to pick up a special commission or to consult with the duchess, Olivia made a point of meeting her in the kitchens, sharing a cup of tea with her, and discussing all manner of topics she didn't choose to discuss with her aunt. Things like ridiculous fashions, Olivia's rascal brother, Dickie, and which lords and ladies were the most terrible, difficult, and in serious need of a good drubbing.

Now, as they sat at the little table next to the fish pond in Sinjin's conservatory finishing off a fresh pot of tea and a box of Nathaniel Charpentier's famous macarons—lemon this time, Alice feared she might be overstepping the bounds of their fledgling friendship. She'd recounted the events of the last two seasons and the things Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly had done to humiliate her, ending with yesterday's tragic picnic. Sinjin sat on the short stone-stacked wall around the fish pond and said not a word. He'd heard all about Alice's life these last two years

through her letters. Although she noticed his expression hardening and his fists clenching and unclenching as she told Olivia the sad tale.

“So,” Olivia said as she placed her empty teacup onto the saucer. “What do you intend to do about it?” Alice gaped at her, stunned for a moment, and then she laughed.

“You think I should do something about it?” she finally asked. “I mean, take revenge in some way?” Alice tried to appear innocent and without any notion of revenge. Sinjin ruined her efforts when he snorted from his seat next to the pond, and Alice glanced back at him and grinned.

“I have always suspected you were no milksop miss, Lady Alice,” Olivia said plainly. “And you, Mister Perriton, the quiet ones are always the most dangerous.”

“I am simply a scholar and a hermit, Miss Jones. Ask anyone.” He inclined his head in an exaggerated bow. “In matters of revenge I always concede to the superior temperaments of ladies for such things.”

“Ballocks,” Alice said.

Sinjin went into a mock swoon, leaning back over the fish pond as much as he dared.

Olivia glanced from Alice to Sinjin and back again. “Hmm.” She smiled. “I grew up in Seven Dials. Revenge is not only a moral imperative in the Dials it is an art. Now, what is the plan and what part can I play?”

“You’ll help us?” Sinjin’s question, half surprise and half resignation struck Alice as odd, but she was too pleased with Olivia to ponder that overmuch.

“Absolutely. Those particular gentlemen are known as cruel, mean-spirited

reprobates. Their servants despise them, their families coddle them, and you are not the only young lady they have made miserable. A humiliating comeuppance is nothing less than what they deserve. What can I do to help?”

Sinjin did stand up then. He indicated the path back to his work table. Alice led Olivia to the microscope and began to explain the beginnings of an idea. She and Sinjin felt certain if they could secret dried nettle leaves into the clothes of the terrible trio, clothes they would be certain to wear in public, that once they began to sweat the nettle leaves would come back to life. If their idea worked as planned Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly would be so besieged by itching and stinging they would cause a scene no one would forget for years.

Alice took a step back as Sinjin explained the properties of nettles and how he had deduced how they could be used. She watched Olivia and Sinjin deep in discussion, asking each other questions and tossing ideas back and forth. He was never more alive than when he talked about botany. He had inspired her to pay attention to plants, to realize they were living beings. He had taught her to see the beauty in even the meanest of weeds.

She rubbed a spot beneath her ribs where a sharp pang twitched at the communion between Sinjin and Olivia. The laundress was a beautiful woman with the most striking blue eyes. Alice had grown up plain and a bit gawky. Only in the last two years, with the help of Aunt Eleanor and Aunt Cordelia, Sinjin’s sister who was married to Alice’s Uncle Daedalus, had she come into her own. Her grandmother, the Dowager Countess of Breadmore, had dressed her in frilly, frumpy dresses in colors that did not suit her. Her father’s mother was a haughty woman who resented Alice for not being a male heir.

“Where did you put my waistcoat, Alice?” Sinjin asked. He began to cast about in his usual absent-minded way. Alice sighed and went to the chair at his desk where she’d carefully draped his waistcoat and jacket earlier.

“Here it is.” She handed the simple black and gold brocade waistcoat to him. His fingers brushed over the back of her hand as he took the garment from her which caused a shivery sensation to run through her.

“What would I do without you?” he asked softly. She gazed into his eyes. Had they always been so many shades of blue at once? Now they were a dark blue-grey like the sky in the midst of a storm.

“You would no doubt be wandering about hungry, in search of your spectacles, and half-naked,” Alice replied, a catch in her voice.

Olivia laughed as she took the waistcoat from Sinjin and inspected it with care. “Sounds as if you are fortunate to have Lady Alice as your keeper, Mister Perriton.”

“I suspect you are correct. I do think since we three are conspiring to commit mayhem together we should dispense with the formalities. I am Sinjin.” He shook her hand.

“Olivia,” she replied and returned to going over the waistcoat. This is Weston, yes?”

“Yes, it is,” Alice answered when Sinjin gave them both a confused stare. “And I am simply Alice. Can we do this, Olivia? Is it possible?”

The laundress finished her careful study of the waistcoat and smiled. “Absolutely. The leaves can be ironed into the inside of the lining of the waistcoat. Once their valets dress them in a fine linen shirt, the waistcoat, and a morning coat all will be well. However, when these gentlemen are out and about in the middle of the day, say at Lady Lavinia Norton’s Venetian breakfast on Friday? They will begin to sweat like dock workers and once that happens?” Her smile turned into the most wicked of grins.

“Friday?” Alice began to pace. She tried to stop her mind from carrying her away on a wave of euphoria. That the plan might work and that she might indeed take revenge on the men who had made her weep on a nightly basis overwhelmed her. “How can we be certain they will dress in those waistcoats? How can we be certain their valets won’t find the leaves? How do we know they will even attend Lady Lavinia’s—”

“Alice.” Sinjin clasped her hand as she strode by him. He squeezed her hand and as soon as she looked into his face, her heart began to slow down. “Take a deep breath and give Olivia a chance to answer your questions. From her expression she has everything in hand.”

“Life on the streets,” Olivia explained. “You don’t survive without being several steps ahead of those who want to rob you, kill you or worse.”

Olivia was so much like herself, Alice often forgot what the young woman’s life might have been like before the duchess hired her at Goodrum’s and gave her a place from which to run her laundry. Sinjin released her hand and drew two stools over for Alice and Olivia to sit at his work table.

“Being a laundress brings a great deal of information to my ears,” Olivia said. “Not to mention having Dickie Jones as a brother.”

Alice and Sinjin laughed. They’d sent Dickie and Seamus to Missus Beatty as neither of those boys could ever refuse food.

“I happen to have the waistcoats and jackets of all three of those guttersnipes in my laundry with written orders they are to be delivered freshly laundered for Friday morning as the gentlemen will be needing them for a social occasion.” Olivia fixed Alice and Sinjin with a superior smirk as well she should. “I have several such orders from various households in Mayfair with specific mention of Lady Lavinia’s do. Which makes me think that is where Earden, Weatherly, and Stanton will be in

attendance. What about you two?"

"Us?" Sinjin sounded alarmed. Of course, he did. He despised socializing with people. "Why do we need to be there?"

"Are you in jest?" Alice asked him indignantly. "I want to see them humiliated. I believe I have earned the right."

"Agreed," Olivia said. "But it would also be good for you to be there, Sinjin, in case our plan doesn't work. You can watch them to see if it works or if it fails or anything else we need to know in case we need to try again."

"Try again?" Now Sinjin was alarmed, which would be rather endearing if Alice wasn't so determined. She patted his arm and turned back to Olivia.

"What about the valets? What if they suspect something?"

"I will make it a point to deliver the goods directly into each valet's hands and explain that they need to dress their masters in these specific clothes. Trust me, I know these three valets. Two of them grew up in Seven Dials. I won't say anything specific, but they will know." She and Alice exchanged a look. Alice extended her hand for Olivia to shake, and they sealed their bargain. Sinjin made an odd sound of distress and they both turned to him at once.

"What on earth is the matter, Sinjin?" Alice asked. "What was that sound meant to imply?"

"Terror," he said solemnly. "Sheer, abject terror and the desire never to find myself the object of you two ladies' vengeance." He shuddered dramatically. "Now, precisely how much of the dried nettle leaf mixture do we need?"

Alice flinched at the twinge of guilt she suffered as she found Sinjin across the lawn. He had ventured to the buffet table to fetch some delicacies and glasses of lemonade for the two of them. A simple enough task for most of the gentlemen strolling about Lady Lavinia's elegantly appointed gardens. However, for Sinjin any well-attended ton event was sheer torture. He had an abhorrence of crowds, and of matchmaking mamas, and of unmarried ladies who found him handsome, and of gentlemen who wished to discuss hounds, hunting, and the costs of keeping a mistress with him.

As he threaded his way through the various tables of people dining and the myriad other activities Lady Lavinia had arranged for her Venetian breakfast, Sinjin struggled to balance a large plate of food and two glasses all whilst avoiding bumping into people and throwing nervous glances Alice's way. When he finally reached her and she took the glasses of lemonade from him she fought not to laugh at his beleaguered expression.

"Sit," she ordered as she settled into one of the two chairs on either side of the little table they'd claimed just off Lady Lavinia's back terrace. He dropped into the chair across from her and picked up his glass of lemonade to drain nearly half of it in one draught. If not for her every nerve threatening to jump out of her skin, she suspected she would thoroughly enjoy being here with Sinjin.

Lady Lavinia's gardens were beautiful. The day had dawned sunny and grew warmer by the hour. The warmth of the air and the scent of so many newly blooming flowers filled the air with a heady much like the perfume of Sinjin's conservatory. Alice sipped her lemonade and tasted a few of the items Sinjin had brought her.

"The crab puffs are wonderful," she murmured as she cast a surreptitious glance about for the three men who had induced Sinjin to attend a social event.

"They're over there playing pall mall with Millicent Rutherford and her friends." Sinjin reached for the only little watercress sandwich and Alice slapped his hand

away.

“You brought that for me, and you know it, Sinjin Perriton.”

“Then eat it and stop watching those three as if you expect them to suddenly burst into flames. They haven’t been here that long and the weather is just beginning to grow warm.”

“I know.” She bit into the sandwich and washed the bite down with some lemonade. “Dickie Jones is watching them from Lady Camilla’s table. He promised to let me know if he sees them scratching.”

Sinjin followed her gaze to where the formidable maven of Mayfair held court, her nephew, Lionel Carrington-Bowles, on one side and Mister Carrington-Bowles close friend, Nathaniel Charpentier on the other. Thank God her aunt and uncle had decided not to attend. Should things go as planned, Alice wasn’t certain she could keep her expression calm enough to fool them, especially her Aunt Eleanor.

She studied Sinjin as he ate and perused the panorama of London’s elite at play. Her stomach did a little flip. Her heart fluttered in her chest. He’d grown handsome in the years they’d only seen each other a time or two. His face was somehow more dear to her now. She was not quite certain why.

“Sinjin, no matter what happens I want you to know how much I appreciate you helping me with this mad adventure.” She mustered a smile. “You are my dearest friend, you know.”

He stopped in the middle of bringing a crab puff to his mouth and put the food back onto the plate. “Alice, I know I am your friend. I mean, that is to say, I will always be your friend and...” He stopped speaking, swallowed hard, and sighed. Something in the intensity and sincerity of his gaze settled in the middle of her chest, frightening

and exciting. “I need to tell you something I should have told you long ago. You know how difficult it is for me to—”

“Don’t look now,” Dickie Jones announced as he suddenly appeared between them as if he’d sprung out of the ground. “But I think the show is about to begin.” He filched a macaron from their plate and strolled toward the center of the gardens, one hand in his pocket. Alice and Sinjin immediately began to peruse with their eyes the area where the game of pall mall was being played. Alice started to leave her chair. Sinjin clamped his hand on her arm and shook his head.

Lord Stanton had already shed his morning coat and was twisting and turning to remove his waistcoat. He danced about like a puppet on the strings of a drunken puppeteer. Weatherly dropped his mallet and began to scratch at his neckcloth. The ladies with whom they’d been playing pall mall backed away, shrieking. Alice leaned forward in her seat and tried to act as if she were merely drawn by the stir of the noise and the movement of those in attendance towards the commotion. A quick glance to her right, and she saw Sinjin attempt to watch without seeming to watch.

Suddenly Lord Earden erupted into a torrent of profanity certain to put some sailors to the blush. Several of the older ladies and even a few of the young ladies gasped and swooned. Gentlemen scampered about to prevent the ladies from falling to the ground. Alice snorted and quickly clapped her hand over her mouth. Earden ripped his jacket and waistcoat open sending buttons flying all directions. One hit Lady Lavinia in the eye. Another smacked Millicent in the face. He actually hauled his shirt over his head, which caused more swooning, and began scratching his chest and sides with both hands. By this time Weatherly was also down to his shirtsleeves. He snatched a pitcher from the tray of a passing footman and doused himself with the contents. Lemonade, perhaps?

Then it was Sinjin’s turn to snort. His shoulders shook for a moment, but he refused to even look at Alice. This was one of those moments when to look at each other

would only make matters worse. A crowd had gathered around the three men. Suggestions were being offered by some. Others were chastising the three for their behavior. A great many were simply laughing at the spectacle.

Weatherly was the first to run towards the huge fountain at the center of Lady Lavinia's gardens. He stumbled over the wall of the basin and submerged himself beneath the spray of one of the dolphins pulling Poseidon's chariot atop the towering structure. Stanton danced across the lawn contorting his body as if having a seizure as he scratched and cursed. He soon joined Weatherly in the cool water of the fountain. One of the gentlemen in attendance seized Earden by the arm to berate him for his language.

Earden punched the gentleman in the nose and fled to the refuge of the fountain. The entire company in attendance soon formed a laughing, shouting circle around the utterly mad behavior taking place in the midst of Lady Lavinia's Venetian breakfast. Fortunately, a scattering of guests chose to observe from their tables, heads together in discussion or pointing and laughing at the sight. Dickie now stood behind Lady Camilla, seated at her table. He jerked his head towards the townhouse.

"Time to go," Sinjin said tightly. He picked up a last sandwich in one hand, rose and took Alice's hand in the other. "Frederick's coach awaits." He devoured the sandwich and winged his arm at Alice. She glanced back at the spectacle. How she wanted to stay and see every moment of their humiliation. Sinjin drew her arm through his and pulled her along to the front of Lady Lavinia's expansive town home. Seamus and John Coachman saw them the moment they came into view of the street.

Seamus had the door open and the steps down in a trice. Sinjin bundled Alice inside and leapt in behind her before she could protest. The coach lurched into motion mere moments after Sinjin collapsed onto the blush leather squabs of the rear-facing seat and dissolved into deep baritone rolls of laughter. Alice lost the ability to draw in a breath as she laughed and drummed her feet against her forward-facing bench facing

Sinjin. Tears rolled down her face and into the creases of her smile. She tasted their salty bite which only made her laugh all the more.

“Can you imagine,” Sinjin gasped. “Can you imagine the prints in the print shops? The stories in the news sheets? Who knew my little experiments could do...” He waved his hand towards Lady Lavinia’s London residence, growing smaller as John Coachman made good their escape. “That. Alice!”

She’d thrown herself across the coach and into his lap without a thought. With her arms around his neck to keep from falling as the coach bumped along, she pressed kisses to his cheek, his chin and his forehead before their lips met in a kiss that shocked them both if his gasp was any indication. She should have at least stopped kissing him even if being in his arms felt too right to return to her seat.

But then he kissed her back, deeply and with a hot intensity she wanted more than her next breath. He grasped her with his long-fingered hands on pressed into her back whilst his thumbs rested just below the curve of her breasts. She ached for him to brush her nipples to have his palms against her naked skin rather than the silk of her day dress. Alice moaned and as her lips parted, he slid his tongue inside her mouth. She made a slight sound of surprise as he caressed the roof of her mouth and then teased her tongue with his own.

“Alice,” he groaned when they finally drew apart to breathe. Her chest rose and fell against the soft wool of his jacket. He slid his hands down to her waist as if he feared he might touch the sensitive, full flesh of her breasts. His entirely too long dark lashes fluttered against his cheeks and then he opened his eyes wide. “I...Alice, I don’t know what made me do...that.”

His words stung. She patted his chest and moved quickly back into her own seat. “Think nothing of it. I won’t.” She managed a wobbly smile. “I would call that adventure a complete success.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Now, what shall we

do to them next?”

“Next?” He still appeared and sounded a bit stunned from their kiss. He shifted in his seat as the coach turned the corner onto Berkeley Square. “What do you mean next?”

“Well,” she said as she twined her hands together so he might not see how they trembled. “Surely you don’t think one embarrassing episode is enough to punish them for what they did to me. I fully intend to visit several plagues upon them before my vengeance is complete.” She met his gaze and waited. “You’ll help me, won’t you?”

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Sinjin brushed the back of his hand across his brow and went back to working the mortar and pestle on the Duke of Chelmsford's kitchen table. He was surprised he could see at all between the dim light of the single candle on the table and the fact he was perspiring like a scythe-wielding yeoman harvesting wheat. Of all the things he ever considered he'd do for the love of Alice Lister, baking poisoned pasties in a duke's kitchen in the middle of the night was not one of them.

"Tell me again, sir, why we could not do this in your kitchens?" Nell Barker, Alice's lady's maid, said as she rolled out the dough for the pasties by the light of another candle.

"Ye've never met our Missus Beatty, have you, lass?" Seamus asked. He brought the bowl of meat mixture to Sinjin. "She sleeps in the room next to her kitchens and guards them like a ragman's dog guards a bone." He shuddered to emphasize his point. "Here is closer to the Golden Lion too."

"If His Grace's cook comes down here, we're all dead where we stand," Nell replied.

"If you had talked Lady Alice out of this mad plan," Sinjin said as he dumped the mixture of crushed herbs and seeds into the meat mixture. "We wouldn't be trespassing in the Duke of Chelmsford's kitchen making pasties to poison three gentlemen on their way to Almack's, would we, Miss Barker?"

Nell snatched the bowl from his hands and began to spoon the mixture onto the dough squares she'd rolled out onto a marble-top work table. "You try talking her ladyship out of something once she sets her mind to it. You'd have a better chance than me, especially these days."

“What is that supposed to mean?” Sinjin turned away so the maid didn’t have the chance to see his expression. He’d caught Nell Barker giving him knowing looks far too often over the past few weeks.

“Poison?” Seamus looked at the bit of meat mixture he’d sneaked from the bowl. Sinjin leapt to his feet and held the boy’s hand under the kitchen pump. He washed and dried Seamus’s finger with the cloth lying next to the sink.

“What’s in this, Mister Perriton?” Nell began to close up the pasties one by one. “I won’t trouble myself about killing those three, but I’d rather not hang for it if it’s all the same to you.”

“Hang?” Even in the dim light in the kitchen Seamus’s sudden pallor was unmistakable.

“Carapichea ipecacuanha is not poison. Not really. In small amounts it is medicinal. And with the amount we’re using, it...simply makes one ill.”

“Ill?” Seamus fixed him with a skeptical gaze. “Ill, how?”

“Stomach trouble,” Sinjin mumbled as he watched Nell put the pasties into one of the duke’s Rumford stoves.

“What sort of stomach trouble?” Seamus’s tone grew more suspicious by the moment.

Nell laughed, cackled really, the sort of laugh that put one in mind of a witch in the wilds of Cornwall. “Don’t you worry about what sort of trouble, lad. Just don’t try any of those pasties if you know what’s good for you. According to Lady Alice that carapi...carapi...”

“Carapichea ipecacuanha,” Sinjin said slowly as he regretted the very moment he’d mentioned the plant’s properties to Alice.

“Bless you,” Nell said with a grin. The door to the kitchen gardens burst open, and Alice bustled into the kitchens in a whirl of icy wind and green wool. Her hooded cape made her appear like a character in a play for children, especially with the large covered basket she clutched in her hands.

“Are they ready yet?” she asked as she removed her cape to reveal the rich blue silk ball gown she wore. The bodice sported a heart-shaped neckline that emphasized and lifted her bosom to great effect, if Seamus’s startled stare was any indication. Sinjin smacked the boy’s shoulder and wondered who might smack his own shoulder as he could not take his eyes off Alice.

“Not yet,” Nell said as she took the basket from her mistress. The maid pulled a pastie from under the dingy white cover and handed the treat to Seamus. “You can eat this one, lad. Old Sue never made a bad pastie.” Seamus took the pastie and began to devour the meaty confection. Sinjin fetched his leather satchel from one of the benches around the kitchen table and dropped his mortar and pestle and the box of Carapichea ipecacuanha roots and berries into it. He would not risk cleaning anything that had touched those items in the duke’s kitchens.

“So, you were able to purchase all of Old Sue’s pasties and send her on her way?” Sinjin asked and tried not to sound disappointed.

“Of course,” Alice replied as she sat next to him on the bench. “Dickie was right. She couldn’t turn down a chance to leave her corner early on a night like this with every pastie sold and at the price we paid her. She’s probably at the Lamb and Flag with a bowl of stew and a pint of gin at this very moment.”

“How fortunate for her.” Speaking of stomach trouble, Sinjin’s began to roil at the

thought of the plan they were setting in motion. “What about the rest of this mad expedition?”

Alice rolled her eyes and clasped his forearm with both hands. “Everything and everyone are in place. It has been more than a week since the Venetian breakfast. They won’t suspect a thing. Dickie is watching for Earden, Stanton, and Weatherly to leave Almack’s for their mid-assembly trip to the Golden Lion. Sally Big’uns is waiting at the Golden Lion to take Old Sue’s place on the corner with our basket of pasties. If they ask, she’ll tell them that Old Sue is ill and sent Sally in her place.” She shook Sinjin’s arm, her face alight with excitement. “Once Dickie is certain they have taken the bait he will come here so we can make our way to Almack’s in time to witness the ultimate comeuppance.”

“Ultimate comeuppance,” Sinjin muttered. He lowered his head to rest on the table with a moan. He ran every possible outcome of this evening’s plan through his head and nearly cast up his accounts. What had possibly persuaded him to participate in such a dangerous and outrageous plan?

Alice kissed the top of his head and squeezed his arm once more. “Your plan is brilliant, Sinjin. What could possibly go wrong?”

Ah! Now he remembered. Alice had gazed at him with those imploring blue eyes and he’d folded like a house of cards. Slowly, he raised his head which afforded him another excellent view of the crests of her breasts cradled in the elegant silk of her ball gown. Yes, he definitely remembered why he’d agreed to use his knowledge of plant properties to make three gentlemen of the ton violently ill at Almack’s.

“Who is this Sally woman?” Sinjin asked. “Can she be trusted?”

“Sally Big’uns,” Seamus offered, his mouth full of pastie. “She’s a right one. She won’t do us wrong.”

“Of course, she won’t,” Alice said. She jumped up from the bench and went to the stove to check on the pasties. “She is a friend of Uncle Percy’s.”

“His Grace has a friend called Sally Big’uns?”

“Sinjin, really? My uncle’s wife is a former pirate who owns a pleasure club. His brother is the largest purveyor of naughty books in London. Are you really shocked he knows someone like Sally Big’uns?”

Sinjin sighed and began to empty the other pasties from Old Sue’s basket onto a plate. “At this point, nothing about your family surprises me. I find myself straining simply to keep up.”

“Oh, Sinjin,” Alice turned and wrapped him in a hug. “I keep forgetting what a hermit you are.” He wrapped one arm around her and held her close. The heavenly scent of her lemon and verbena perfume teased and tempted him as nothing else could. She adjusted his neckcloth and when he glanced down, he saw her looking up at him, her expression soft and strange. His heart did a little skip.

“Are we ready?” Dickie asked in a loud whisper as he slipped in the kitchen door.

“Yes,” Alice cried as she spun out of Sinjin’s embrace and gathered up the basket of dosed pasties and her cloak. “Everyone into the carriage.”

Sinjin waited until the others had filed out of the kitchens. He blew out the candles and placed them carefully back on the shelf where he’d found them earlier. With a sad shake of his head, he struggled into his silk evening jacket and closed the door behind him as he made his way to Frederick’s carriage. His brother had been all too happy to lend the handsome conveyance to Sinjin.

“Mother and father will be in alt when I write them you are out and about in the

social whirl. Especially as they have such high hopes for you and Lady Alice,” he’d said this evening as Sinjin left the house.

Sinjin had stopped protesting the notion of there being something more to his escorting Alice about than friendship. Frederick refused to believe him, and for Sinjin the truth hurt too much to keep repeating. The only thing he and Alice were courting was disaster, not each other. He pulled himself into the carriage and subsided onto the seat next to Alice. Dickie and Nell sat across from them. Seamus was up with John Coachman. A thousand random thoughts careened through Sinjin’s mind. Alice threaded her fingers through his, and in spite of the silk gloves they’d both pulled on, the heat of her grasp soaked into his very bones.

He despised attending social events, especially of the Almack’s sort. Too many people, too much noise, too little air. Alice always seemed to sense when his dislike of London society got the best of him. He was certain that was why she’d taken his hand. Unfortunately, as much as he wasn’t happy about attending Almack’s that was the least of his concerns. They’d managed to pull off the great Venetian breakfast debacle without anyone being any the wiser. Had they stopped with that she would have her revenge and Sinjin might gain the courage to tell her how he felt about her. Now, however?

“There she is,” Dickie, who had been peering out the window the entire way, pointed as they pulled up in front of the Golden Lion. Sinjin leaned over Alice to take a look. And he was assaulted by the sight of the biggest pair of breasts he’d ever seen.

“Good Lord.” He dropped back into his seat. Alice and Nell both laughed.

“Told you,” Dickie said with a smirk as he opened the carriage door. The tall, large woman wandered up to the carriage, her bosom arriving a good few seconds before the rest of her.

“Here you go,” Alice said as she handed the woman the basket of pasties. “Remember, once they’ve bought their pasties and gone inside dump the rest in the Thames. You do not want to eat them.”

“I’ll remember so long as you forget I had anything to do with this, milady. Yer uncle will have me hide if he finds out, not to mention what Captain El will do.” She pulled a battered straw hat over her face and disappeared into an alley to the side of the tavern. Dickie slipped out of the carriage and squeezed into the Golden Lion where he appeared in the front window and offered them a salute. The carriage jerked into motion and headed towards Almack’s on King Street just down the way.

Once they arrived at Almack’s and paid homage to the patronesses, Sinjin immediately sought out the refreshments table and fetched himself and Alice a generous glass of punch. Nell had beat a hasty retreat to the retiring room, and Sinjin was half-inclined to join her. Instead he stood next to a slightly open French window behind Alice’s chair and made short work of the insipid beverage that was a staple of the Almack’s assemblies.

“Might I suggest when we leave here that we raid Missus Beatty’s kitchens for some decent lemonade?” he whispered as he bent to Alice’s ear.

She snorted punch up her nose and whipped her head around to give him a half-angry glare. When he gave her his best innocent smile, she had no choice but to laugh. “Give me your handkerchief. I have punch all over my face and chest.” Sinjin obliged, pulling the clean white linen square from his jacket inside pocket. He watched with heated fascination as she blotted the drops of punch from the expanse of ivory flesh bared by the low cut of her ball gown. She handed him his handkerchief which he carefully folded and tucked back into his pocket.

“Perhaps I should join the other gentlemen in the card room. My standing here may prevent anyone from asking you to dance.”

She looked up at him, the excitement and laughter gone from her face. “Sinjin, you are not the reason no one has asked me to dance. No one ever asks me to dance.”

“That is ridiculous. You are beautiful, kind, a fine dancer. If the gentlemen of London cannot see that they are all nodcocks.” His heart ached for her. Other young ladies her age strolled by arm in arm and gave her such haughty looks he wanted to drag Alice out of that chair and kiss her senseless in front of them all. He wanted to tell them no beautiful gown or oversized jewels would ever make them as enchanting and desirable as Lady Alice Lister. Sheep, that’s what they all were, mindless and heartless sheep.

“Oy!” He was snatched from his reverie by a sharp tug on the tail of his evening jacket. He sidled in front of the open French door and peered over his shoulder. “They’re here,” Dickie Jones whispered. “They et those pasties like starving men, put down a few tankards of ale, and they should be coming down those stairs any time now.”

Sinjin tapped Alice’s shoulder. She glanced back and spotted Dickie behind Sinjin. The lad grinned at her and nodded. With that he stepped back and strolled out of sight. Sinjin had no doubt he’d find a way to watch the night unfold from some window or corner of the assembly room.

“There they are,” Alice said. She moved forward to the edge of her chair. “They’re coming this way. Damn!”

Sinjin stepped in front of her and bowed. “Such language, Lady Alice. May I have this dance?” He grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet. In moments they were lined up to begin la boulangere . Like any gentleman’s son he’d been forced to participate in dance instruction. He was never so grateful for his nearly perfect memory in his life. Leading a joyful, glowing Alice through the dance, he was truly astonished at how much he enjoyed dancing with her. Perhaps he simply appreciated

any opportunity afforded him to hold her in his arms.

“You, sirrah, have been keeping secrets,” she said when the steps of the dance brought them together.

“Secrets?” He stumbled and had to add a few steps to catch up.

“When did you learn to dance so well?”

He breathed a small sigh of relief. “Frederick taught me.”

“Frederick?” she blurted out. She covered her mouth with one hand and kept dancing. “Stiff-rumped Frederick?”

Sinjin laughed. “In his defense, Mama made him teach me.”

“Then I shall thank your mother,” she said as they circled each other in the figures of la boulangere. “I am so happy to be dancing with you, Sinjin.”

His lungs seized for a moment. “I’m happy to be dancing with you too,” he said tightly. The dance ended all too soon. He bowed. She curtsied, and he escorted her back to the chair next to the French windows. Alice twisted and turned in her seat as she searched the ballroom. Couples were forming for the next set. As they began to take to the floor her ability to see those at the refreshment table and in little groups around the edge of the ballroom improved considerably.

“Where are they?” she whispered. Sinjin leaned down from his place behind her chair.

“Trust me, Alice. Once the Carapichea ipecacuanha begins to work we will most definitely—”

Shrieeeeeek!

“Know.” Sinjin snapped upright as Alice shot out of the dainty chair.

He clutched her elbow and slowly steered her into the crowd that had begun to head toward the screams that echoed over and over in the cavernous confines of Almack’s. With some careful maneuvering and a firm grip on Alice’s arm he managed to weave the two of them into the highly excited throng without actually giving them a full view of the trouble.

“What is the matter?” he asked the bejeweled dowager between them and the scene around which everyone gathered at the edge of the dance floor. The woman turned, her fan fluttering back and forth in front of her face so furiously he could hardly see her. A particularly noxious odor floated on the air stirred by her fan. Alice gasped next to him.

“Lord Earden has just cast up his accounts all over Miss Rutherford,” the dowager announced. “And there is a suspicious substance leaking from the leg of his breeches. Oh dear!” Another wave of noisesome air wafted past him. Alice pushed forward to stand next to the dowager. Sinjin remained behind her, his hand firmly around her elbow. He peered over her shoulder.

“Bloody hell,” he murmured. The dowager stared at him open-mouthed.

Millicent Rutherford, dressed in what had very likely been a lovely white gown, stood in the middle of the ballroom screaming at the top of her lungs. The front of her gown was splashed with...well, for lack of a better term what appeared to be vomit. The reddish-brown substance dripped and slid down the front of her dress and little chunks sounded like gunshots when landing on the polished wooden floor. Her mother stood next to her, but not too close, arms flapping and begging someone to do something. Earden was bent double nearly to the floor.

Stanton stumbled out onto the floor with a brass spittoon in his hand. He likely meant to offer the vessel to Earden, but just before he reached his friend he dropped to his knees and began to empty his belly into the container, the vomit producing a loud gong-like sound against the brass. Several gentlemen took a few steps forward as if to offer aid. However, when a stream of watery brown material began to slither from where Stanton knelt those gentlemen thought better of it.

“What the devil are you about, Lord Stanton? What is the meaning of this?” Lady Jersey parted the crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea. Stanton glanced up at the venerable lady, opened his mouth to speak and then returned to the spittoon, heaving like an Oxford lad after his first visit to the local tavern.

“Poison!” a loud voice cried from somewhere in the crowd. Men shouted. Ladies screamed. Viscount Weatherly staggered out onto the dance floor, his breeches around his knees and his arse covered in shite. “We’ve been poisoned.” He fell flat on his face next to the still shrieking Millicent Rutherford. As expected, that set pandemonium in motion. Some ladies began to swoon. Others were dragged out by their mamas. Gentlemen divided themselves into those desperate to get away from the rancid smell that now permeated the assembly like a morning fog and those frankly enjoying the show.

“Swoon,” Sinjin whispered into Alice’s ear.

“What?”

“Past time to go, my dear. Swoon, so we can make our escape without arousing suspicion. Now.”

To his astonishment, Alice let loose an exaggerated cry and crumpled toward the floor. Sinjin caught her and swept her up into his arms. “Please move aside,” he said as he turned and headed along the edge of the crowd towards the steps out of the

ballroom. People quickly moved out of his way, shaking their heads sympathetically. Sinjin struggled to appear the concerned hero rescuing the lady in distress because though her eyes were tightly closed, Alice's entire body shook with laughter.

Once he reached the foyer, he sent one footman in search of his and Alice's coat and cloak and another to order John Coachman to bring Frederick's carriage to the door. Fortunately, the sight of a supposedly unconscious lady in his arms sped the footmen's steps, and Sinjin soon had himself and Alice in the carriage.

"Where to, sir?" the coachman asked as he closed the door.

"Hyde Park," Alice said as she sat up and settled her cloak around her shoulders. John tapped two fingers to his hat and climbed up onto the coachman's bench.

"Hyde Park?" Sinjin asked as he pulled off his gloves and tucked them into the pocket of his greatcoat draped across his lap.

"Oh, Sinjin, I am too excited to go home just now. Do you mind?" She removed her gloves and placed them in the little silk reticule at her wrist.

"Excited? Did you hear what Weatherly said?" Sinjin wasn't truly worried about the accusation. He doubted anyone would believe three gentlemen known to appear at social events well into their cups. Especially not after the Venetian breakfast misadventure.

"Pshaw!" Alice snapped her fingers. "No one will remember what he said. They will, however, remember the smell, and the sight of Millicent Rutherford covered in..." She broke off into peals of laughter. Once she stopped, she grew serious. Her expression grew grim, made even more so by the dim light of the lamps in Frederick's carriage. "Am I an evil person to take such pleasure in their misery?" She worried her bottom lip.

“Did they enjoy making your last two seasons so unbearable every letter I received bore the stains of your tears?” Sinjin kept his expression neutral to hide the rage that enveloped him every time he thought of her alone in London dealing with the hateful ugliness of those who thought themselves superior to her.

“Oh.” She touched her fingers to her lips. “Those weren’t tears. You know how messy my writing is. I should have...”

“Alice.” He pulled her hand away from her mouth and pressed a kiss to her palm, closing her fingers over his kiss. “I wish I had been here. I wish you had stayed in Surrey.”

She cupped his cheek with her other hand. “I wish I had too. You always take such good care of me.” She leaned towards him, so close he could almost taste the punch on her lips. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“I always will, Alice. Always.” A fine madness seized him, a madness he was helpless to fight. He settled his lips on hers.

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Alice sank into the sensation of Sinjin's soft, insistent lips pressed to hers. The chill from the night air fled as if chased by hounds. She slid her arms around him and drew him against her body. No fireplace or stove had ever warmed her the way he did. Shock, astonishment, and a fiery curiosity sped through her. He clasped her face between his hands and tilted her head to deepen their kiss. He flicked the tip of his tongue along the seam of her mouth, which tickled. When laughter escaped in a little burst, he swept his tongue inside and caressed her tongue with his.

She gasped but immediately set to exploring his mouth and matching the sensuous undulating of his tongue with her own. Her breath caught, and her chest rose and fell against his, brushing her sensitive breasts against the surprising hardness of his muscled body. She'd never really thought of Sinjin as being solid and strong. He'd swept her into his arms and carried her to the carriage without breaking stride, without a change in his breathing.

He slid his hands down the sides of her neck and across her shoulders beneath her cloak. When he reached the sides of her breasts he stopped as if waiting for something. She shifted from her seat until she was practically sprawled on top of him and he lay half across the forward-facing bench. Sinjin cupped her breasts and stroked his thumbs across her silk-covered nipples. The friction of the fabric on her most sensitive flesh sent a shaft of shivery heat down her body to settle in an aching pulse between her legs.

"Sinjin," she moaned softly as she sifted her fingers through his hair. He stilled and gasped as he lifted his mouth from hers and glanced down to where his hands held her breasts. Slowly he sat up and moved her back onto her side of the seat. As an afterthought, if his startled expression was any indication, he snatched her hands back

and rested them on his thighs. His action drew her eyes to his fitted silk evening breeches where a distinct bulge appeared.

“Alice, I—” He scrubbed his hands over his face, a sign she recognized from the long years of their friendship. Friendship. In this moment she felt something very different for Sinjin Perriton, very different. She pressed her fingers to his lips.

“Hush. Don’t you dare apologize. That was the most wonderful kiss I’ve ever had.”

His eyes flashed. “How many kisses have you had?”

Was he jealous? Sinjin? How...incredibly singular.

“Ravenwood kissed me a few times,” she replied in her most innocent tone.

“Well.” He huffed as he sat back in his seat. “You shot him, so I suspect his kisses were not the best.” He glanced at her, one eyebrow raised.

She laughed. “Nothing compared to yours, you have my word.”

“Hmmm.” He continued to gaze at her. In the dim light she could not see exactly what shade of blue his eyes were. She’d learned early in their friendship to tell his mood by the color of his eyes, an incongruous, changeable blue with his rich brown hair. “Alice, we need to talk about...this.”

“This?” She felt her stomach drop suddenly. The idea of actually voicing her change in feelings for him terrified her. She wasn’t ready. She certainly didn’t want to know what his feelings were. Not now.

“This kiss. The way we feel about each other.” He’d grown so serious, like he was when he explained one of his experiments. She didn’t want to be an experiment. Did

she?

“I’d much rather discuss our next adventure.” She kept her tone light and flippant. “We have plenty of time to discuss the other. You devised three ideas to humiliate my tormenters. The first two have worked a treat. What about the third one?”

“The third what?” He looked so young and dear when he was confused.

“Plan, Sinjin. You dictated three plans of attack for Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly. I know because I recorded them in your journal. We have used the first two. Now we need to decide when to put the third plan into play.”

“Alice.” He took her hand between his and turned to face her. “It is enough. What we have done so far is enough. I doubt they will show their faces in good company for the rest of the Season. The prints in windows and the story in the news sheets alone will keep them hiding behind closed doors for weeks. You’ve done it. You’ve taken your revenge. Even got a bit on Millicent Rutherford in the bargain. She is likely packing to flee to Hampshire as we speak.” He patted her hand and raised up to knock on the roof of the carriage.

“Berkeley Square, John, if you please.”

“Yes, Mister Perriton,” the coachman called from the coachman’s bench. In a few minutes the carriage turned onto Park Lane in the direction of the Duke of Chelmsford’s Berkeley Square home.

He had made up his mind, of that Alice was certain. His open, level gaze and the way he sat back, resting against the luxurious squabs of his brother’s carriage, meant she would have to figure out a way around him. “I suppose you are correct,” she said with an exaggerated sigh. “I have had my revenge and it was quite the feat if I do say so myself.” She sat back and covered his hand with hers.

He chuckled. "As I said, I would not want to be on the wrong side of you and Miss Olivia Jones. I do not think I shall ever remove the memory from my mind's eye, of Weatherly, bare-arsed and covered in shite lying at the feet of Lady Jersey."

"Nor I to be sure. We have had quite the evening, have we not?" She turned her head to meet his gaze. He was staring at her in such a way she forgot to breathe.

"Yes," he said. "We have. Alice, I must tell you—" The carriage rocked to a halt and tilted slightly as the coachman climbed down to open the door.

"Here we are, Lady Alice," John Coachman said as he offered her his hand to help her descend from the carriage.

"Thank you, John." She fairly leapt from the conveyance to the pavement in front of her Uncle Percy's townhouse. Sinjin opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "Good evening, Mister Perriton, and thank you for a most entertaining night." She winked and hurried to the already open door where Uncle Percy's butler waited. As badly as she wanted to look back at Sinjin she did not. Her heart ached at his last bewildered expression.

Just one more, she told herself as she climbed the stairs to her chambers. One more act of revenge, and then she would be brave enough to dare to tell Sinjin her feelings for him had begun to change. His friendship was the most important of her life, and she dared not risk losing that friendship should he not feel the same way she suspected she was feeling. She'd sort everything out tomorrow.

"Well," Nell said once Alice had entered her chambers and closed the door behind her. "Tell me everything. Tell me what happened while I was hiding up here, pretending I was gone to chaperone you at Almack's."

Alice tossed her reticule onto her bed and dropped into her chair before the fire. "It

was so delicious I don't know where to begin." And she was determined the next punishment she rained down on those three gentlemen would be more spectacular still, no matter what Sinjin said.

Alice and Sinjin had taken a few days' rest from the mad whirl that was the London Season. She had many reasons for the respite. After a good night's sleep, she was even more confused by her passionate interlude with him. She made every effort to sort her feelings and had failed miserably. Once the Season ended, she'd fully intended to take the money Uncle Percy had promised and set up her own household, perhaps in Bath or Brighton.

In spite of her memorable revenges on Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly, London held no allure for her. Too many bad memories and too many people who continued to snub her or insult her behind her back. Her father was still the Outcast Earl, moldering away on his Surrey estate likely never to venture into good society ever again. He'd driven her mother to suicide and had tried to blackmail Sinjin's sister, now married to Alice's Uncle Daedalus, into marrying him. The scandal had died somewhat, but not the desire of certain people to continue to remind Alice at every opportunity.

The fact Viscount Ravenwood deserved to be shot for his crimes against women mattered very little to Society. He was a favored son, related to many of the highest-ranking families in the peerage. His exile to the Continent did not sit well with them. And Alice had been the frumpy, spotty daughter of a man who saw her as a commodity to be sold, with little value otherwise. Much of her life had changed since she'd been taken in by her uncle, the powerful Duke of Chelmsford, and his intimidating wife, Captain El Goodrum. However, her past remained like a cloud floating in and out of the sky—sometimes nearly invisible and sometimes dark and foreboding.

The most pressing reason she had eschewed the past few nights' entertainments and

Sinjin's escort was to clear her head about two vital subjects. What did the change in her feelings for him mean for her plans for the future? And what would her decision be in regard to her final act of revenge? As the first subject made her head spin, her heart ache, and everything she'd ever thought about her life and her friendship with Sinjin run together like watercolors in the rain, she'd devoted her few days away from him to consider his admonishment to let her first two acts of revenge suffice.

To that end, she'd arranged to meet Olivia Jones at Gunter's for ices and conversation. She had come to trust Dickie Jones's sister as the voice of blunt, honest, and forthright reason. In many ways they were viewed the same by society, outcasts and a bit too bold for mere women. Her uncle's barouche rocked to a halt before Gunter's. She could have walked to the tea shop at the other end of Berkeley Square, but Uncle Percy had insisted she and Nell travel in the carriage.

"What flavor ice would you like, John?" she asked the coachman as she stepped down to the pavement. A gust of wind scattered leaves at her feet. She tugged her deep blue velvet pelisse more tightly around her. The garment was new, exquisitely made in la style militaire , a gift from her Aunt Eleanor. The air was surprisingly crisp and clean London at nearly midday.

"Oh, Lady Alice, you don't have to worry about me. I'll pull the carriage beneath the trees and wait for you." The barouche was driven by one of the younger coachmen her uncle employed. He was of a similar age to Nell, no more than twenty, and Alice had noticed her maid's surreptitious glances his way.

"Nell prefers to have her ice outdoors. I will send the waiter out to you and you are to order whatever you please. I insist." Alice waved at Nell who gave her a hard questioning look but remained seated in the carriage as the young coachman maneuvered it into a position beneath the trees across the street from Gunter's.

She stepped into the luxurious confines of Gunter's and paused to savor the tempting

aromas of the various ices, cakes, and other delicacies on offer. Every aspect of the venerated tea shop spoke to the wealth and class of the clientele Gunter's served. From the rich fabrics and mahogany of the furnishings to the crystal chandeliers and fine china, anyone who entered could be in no doubt as to the quality of the food on offer and of the company one might be in when consuming said food.

All of which made the task of seeking out Olivia very simple indeed. She sat at one of the dainty tables for two in her simple day dress and plain, flat straw bonnet with the cheeky smile of someone who knew precisely what everyone seated around her thought of her presence. Not that she gave a single damn. Alice rushed over to embrace her and kiss her cheek.

"Thank you so much for coming, Olivia. It is so good to see you." Alice and her friend exchanged a look and tried not to laugh. A tall elegantly dressed waiter appeared at once.

"Good day, Lady Alice," he said. "What can I fetch for you and your friend?"

"Good day, Wallace. I see you have already brought tea. Have you been taking care of Miss Jones?"

"He has. I didn't want to order until you arrived." Olivia smiled at the waiter, and he blushed. "Perhaps a cup for Lady Alice? I should like a lemon ice, please."

"Yes, most definitely a cup for some tea and a neige de pistachio for me. And could you have two glace de épine-vinette sent out to my uncle's carriage?"

"At once, Lady Alice." He bowed to Alice and to Olivia as well and hurried away, his face still a bright red. A burst of feminine laughter and the mention of her name drew Alice's attention to a table across the tea room. Millicent Rutherford, Ophelia Hart-Smythe, and Margaret Villiers were holding court, with several other young ladies

Alice didn't recognize and a few overdressed tulips of the ton she did, unfortunately. Younger sons from so-called good families who made it a practice to stay in the sphere of heiresses like Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret.

"Ignore them," Olivia said as Wallace arrived with a fresh pot of tea and a delicate china cup and saucer for Alice. He poured their tea and presented their ices in fine crystal glasses along with a plate of lemon pastries.

"The pastries are the newest addition to our offerings," Wallace explained. "Mister Gunter sent them over with his compliments."

"They look delightful," Alice said. "Do thank him for me."

"I took the liberty of sending some out to your carriage as well."

"You, Wallace, are a treasure. I hope Mister Gunter appreciates you." Wallace bowed and made his way back behind one of the glass cases that displayed the various sweets the shop had on offer.

"There is something different about you," Olivia mused, head cocked to one side as she tasted a spoonful of her ice. "You look...happy."

"I don't know what you mean." Alice leaned across the table. "Perhaps having taken revenge on those miscreants not once, but twice, accounts for my mood." She ate a large spoonful of ice and wagged her eyebrows. Olivia laughed and snorted.

"Dickie told me what happened in great detail. How I wish I had been there to see it! Though the prints in Ackermann's window do wonders for my imagination." She bit into one of the pastries the waiter had brought and closed her eyes in reverent enjoyment.

“Aren’t the prints wonderful? Sinjin sent me the latest ones this morning.”

“He fancies you, you know.” Olivia eyed her speculatively

“He does not. Don’t be silly.” Alice set to finishing off her ice. “We have simply been friends for a very long time. I am certain he sees me as a sister.”

“I’ve never seen a brother look at a sister the way he looks at you,” Olivia observed. “And I don’t know many men like him who would come up with the tricks he came up with to put those three guttersnipes in their place.”

“Men like him?” Alice suddenly wondered how Sinjin might be seen by another woman. She’d never really thought of him as anything but her friend, a presence in her life for as long as she could remember. Were there any other men like Sinjin? Somehow, she didn’t think so.

“Quiet. Private. No need for the good opinion of others. But when they love a woman there isn’t anything they won’t do for her.” Olivia waved her dainty silver spoon at Alice. “He’s a deep one is your Sinjin. Men underestimate him at their peril, and ladies take him for granted at their loss. Best catch that one up, Alice. He’s one of the good ones. Not to mention all of that pent up passion will make him a right pleasure in the bedchamber.”

“Olivia!” Alice clapped her hand over her mouth too late. They both laughed quietly at the hush that fell over the tea room. “Speaking of revenge,” she said when Gunter’s customers went back to their own business.

“Were we?”

Alice glanced about to make certain no one was listening. “Sinjin had three superior plans to punish those guttersnipes. He had me write out three formulas or

experiments in his journal.”

“And?” Olivia stared at her for a moment. “You want to try the third one? Alice, that is quite the gamble. What does Sinjin say?”

“He wants to persuade me that enough is enough.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. They’ve gone to ground. I don’t think they’ve left London for the Season, but they haven’t been to any of the important events this week.”

“How do you know?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “How do you think?”

“My brother is a menace.”

“Only if you land on his bad side,” Alice said with a grin. “If I can get Sinjin’s journal, will you look at his idea and see if it is something we can do?” Even as she asked the question something in her screamed No! and she knew she stood on a precipice that might land her in a terrible, awful, lonely place.

Olivia studied her face, and Alice forced herself not to look away. Perhaps this was why she’d invited her to have tea with her today. She wanted someone to talk her out of this mad plan. She wanted someone to save her from the rage and hurt that yet simmered in her heart every time someone whispered or turned away from her.

“Lady Alice,” an all too familiar voice simpered. “Out and about without your hired escort?” Millicent Rutherford smiled as her two toadies in bonnets of the latest mode tittered behind her like the complete magpies they were.

“Hired escort, Millicent? My maid is in my carriage. Where is yours?” The hair on the back of Alice’s neck stood up. Olivia looked ready to draw someone’s cork though she stayed seated, her serviette in her lap.

“Not your maid, dear. Mister Perriton, the hermit of Perriton Grange. We all know he never ventures into company, so I assumed your uncle was paying him to squire you about Town.” Alice clenched her fist under the table. Her blood began to boil.

“An excellent choice for the task,” Margaret added. “Those strong, silent types are so biddable and do tend to keep the fortune hunters away.”

“Perhaps you should ask to borrow him, Margaret,” Ophelia suggested. “Your dowry is far more substantial than the rest of ours.”

“No, thank you.” Margaret turned up her nose. “I value my reputation too highly to spend time in the company of an untitled hermit with no fortune, no prospects, and no conversation to speak of no matter how good his family.” She stepped closer to Alice. “They say he is a bit of a dullard, you know, or perhaps a bit mad?”

“You disgusting cow,” Alice said in a low, cold tone she hardly recognized. She rose slowly, both hands clenched into tight fists.

“Alice, don’t.” Olivia warned.

“I suppose we should be glad you don’t have a pistol with you,” Millicent said, her lips creased into a sickening smile. She picked up Alice’s cup of tea. “Drink this, dear. It will calm your nerves. Oops!” She pretended to stumble and poured the tea down the front of Alice’s beautiful new pelisse.

“That’s done it,” Olivia muttered. She jumped up and grasped Millicent’s elbow. “Miss Rutherford,” she said in a loud voice. “I was able to remove the brown stains

from the front of your pretty white gown, however the yellow stains at the back will take more time. Piss stains are dead difficult to remove.”

Millicent’s outraged scream echoed throughout the tea shop as the entire room had gone deadly silent. Olivia rounded the table and looped her arm through Alice’s. She led her to the door of the shop and out onto the pavement. Wallace was just coming from fetching the tray and empty dishes from Uncle Percy’s barouche. Alice fumbled in her reticule and drew out a guinea.

“This is for you W-wallace,” she said and drew in a steadying breath. “Will you put the rest on His Grace’s account?”

“Of course, Lady Alice. Are you well?”

“She’s fine, Wallace. Thank you.” Olivia practically dragged Alice to the carriage and climbed inside with her.

“What happened?” Nell gasped and searched her own large bag to draw out a handkerchief. She blotted at the stain that had soaked into Alice’s pelisse. “Home, John.” The coachman set the horses in motion at once.

Alice sat there, numb without a coherent thought in her head. She’d gone after Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly and nothing had changed. She was still the butt of jokes. She still allowed others to hurt her and bring her nearly to tears. She thought of Sinjin and his quiet strength and ability not to give a fig what people thought of him.

“Get the journal,” Olivia said as she leaned across the carriage and grasped Alice’s hand. “I have an idea.”

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Sinjin should have known once he and Alice finally had the opportunity to enjoy some time in private conversation the rudely typical March weather would arrive like an overbearing chaperone. Their trip to Kew Gardens had hardly begun when the first drops of rain pelted them and forced them to sprint for Reggie's borrowed curricule and race back to St. James Square. Not that the rain bothered Alice. She clung to his arm with both hands as he raced his brother's greys back towards Mayfair. Her bedraggled bonnet did not hide her joyful, laughing face as she threw her head back to allow the icy shower to wash over her.

"This is wonderful," she cried. "When is the last time we ran in the rain?"

"We were much younger and less likely to catch an ague as I remember. Hold on!" He leaned to one side as the curricule slid across the cobblestones. Alice shrieked, not in fear but in utter exuberance. She'd been so quiet when he'd taken her up at her uncle's house. Someone had hurt her, and whilst she'd denied it when he asked, if he waited long enough, she would tell him. But now she was marvelously delighted and his heart threatened to leap from his chest at the sight.

"Are we ever too old to run in the rain, Sinjin?" She raised her voice to be heard over the clatter of the horses on the cobblestones and the thunder that rolled above them in ever closer waves. Her face was alight with the spirit he'd known when they were children. He'd seen hints of that spirit in the past few weeks in London, but only now did she seem completely Alice, completely herself.

Lightning coursed across the sky, followed by a loud crack of thunder. Alice jumped and scooted closer to him. "We shall be soaked through before we arrive," she observed. He noticed she was shivering.

“I’m sorry, Alice. This was a very bad idea.” How could he tell her that in spite of the rain and everything else going wrong, to have her sitting next to him, laughing and holding onto him as if she’d never let him go, was quite the finest sensation he’d enjoyed in his life.

“You cannot be serious. This is brilliant! I cannot think of a single thing that might be more exciting than this.”

He slowed the horses as they turned into the mews behind St. James Square. “You won’t think it is so brilliant when you spend the next week or so in bed with your maid and an entire household of servants hovering over you and reporting your every cough and sneeze back to the duke and duchess.” He halted the curricule before the stable doors and Seamus and another of the stableboys rushed out to care for the carriage and horses.

Sinjin helped Alice down and took her by the hand to run to the rear entrance into his conservatory. They were both laughing by the time they dashed into the enveloping warmth of the large glasshouse kept warm by a labyrinth of pipes beneath the floor and two large boilers that only required restoking a few times a day. He had devised the system himself and supervised the construction both here and in his conservatory in Surrey.

“Oh, Sinjin.”

He turned to find Alice gazing at him with a tenderness that felt like a caress. “I had forgotten how much you despise being ill. All of those people gathered around you, taking up the air in the room.” She removed her ruined bonnet and dropped it onto a bench by the doors that led to the mews.

“Old memories,” he said. “Long forgotten. There are some blankets and toweling back here. Let’s get warm and then go in search of food.” He led her past his work

table and through the tangle of exotic plants and trees to an area surrounded by large urns of rose bushes. The air was redolent with the heavy mixed perfume of the various species of roses he'd cultivated.

"Old memories, my arse," Alice said as she spun this way and that along the mosaic path that meandered throughout his glass house. "Oh!" She stopped in the middle of the roses and took a deep breath. "Your roses." She sighed. "You brought some of your roses with you."

He went to the old chaise longue where he slept when he was too tired or too involved in his work to manage the climb upstairs to his bedchamber. He grabbed a few of the many blankets folded and stacked at the end of the chaise, courtesy of Danvers and Missus Shaw and Missus Beatty, all of whom were certain he would freeze to death in a room that felt like the tropics at any hour of the day.

"Here." He wrapped one of the blankets around Alice who had peeled off her wet pelisse and sat in one of the wrought iron chairs to remove her walking boots and stockings. She'd hiked her skirts up to her knees and the sight of her shapely calves and ankles had him struggling to look away. He elected to take a thick piece of toweling to her disheveled hair, the braids and curls falling to her waist.

"I must look a fright." She wrapped the blanket around her and relaxed into the comfort of his rubbing hands on her hair. "Take the pins out, Sinjin. It is all about to come down anyway."

"You do realize we are a scandal in the making if we are found like this," he said as he put the toweling aside and worked to take down her elaborate coiffure.

"Not to worry. I shan't demand that you marry me. Today is Sunday. Your servants are enjoying their half day either out and about or likely napping in their chambers. We told everyone we were going for a carriage ride." She shook out her hair and the

damp golden cascade fell over her shoulders. Sinjin ran his fingers through the luxurious silk strands before he finally took up the toweling and sought to soak the last of the rain away.

“Then there is the obvious bit.” She spoke so softly he almost missed what she said.

“What obvious bit?”

“You and I are the last people anyone would suspect of untoward behavior. We are beneath their notice until they decide to insult us or make poor jests at our expense.”

His suspicions had been correct. Someone had hurt her. Recently. He shrugged out of his wet jacket and pulled another of the garden chairs around to sit in front of her. She should have looked forlorn in her bare feet and rain-stained dress with a heavy wool blanket wrapped around her like a shroud. She was beautiful, a fresh-faced angel with a gilded veil of hair in every shade of gold framing her face.

“What happened at Gunter’s?” He sat with his hands clasped between his knees and met her eyes with an expression as open and honest as he knew how.

“Dickie?” she sighed.

“Frederick, actually. By way of Lady Camilla, who undoubtedly heard the report from Dickie Jones.”

“Millicent Rutherford and her friends were there, that is all. They were rude to Olivia and me, as usual. No harm done.” She shrugged and reached to untie his limp soggy neckcloth. He waited for her to finish unwinding the long strip of fabric and drop it to the floor.

“A little harm done, I think. You’ve always told me everything. Don’t stop now.”

“She said Uncle Percy hired you to escort me because all the other men in London were afraid of me. She spilled tea on my new blue pelisse. And then Olivia announced to all of Gunter’s that the stains from Earden’s...evacuations had come out of Millicent’s gown, but the piss stains at the back would take longer.”

Sinjin blinked. Alice hiccupped a few times. Then she snorted. He threw back his head and laughed long and hard, and so did she.

“No wonder you and Olivia are such good friends. And as for the other, if your uncle is paying me, he is woefully behind in my wages,” he said with a grin.

“You sir,” she said as she pushed his hair back off his forehead. “Are no gentleman.”

“I would pay any amount of money for the privilege of being your escort. Surely you know that, Alice.” He studied her expression in search of even a hint of her understanding of what he was trying to say.

“How do you do it? How do you ignore the things they say?” She stood and wandered from rose bush to rose bush, drinking in the smell of the blooms. “I try. I truly try, but they still hurt me or worse, enrage me.”

“They don’t mean anything to me. Only a handful of people truly mean anything to me. I hope for the good opinion of those handful of people alone. The rest is simply noise that those other people make to convince themselves they are important.”

“Does my good opinion matter to you?” She looked over her shoulder at him and the blanket slipped to the floor. The light of the flickering lamps throughout the conservatory bathed her in a shimmering glow. Her silhouette shone through the damp fabric of her carriage dress.

“More than anyone else’s in the world.” He rose and went to stand behind her.

“Surely you must know that after all these years.” He brushed his knuckles down the side of her face. Slowly she turned and ran her hands up his chest. The words he wanted most to say refused to come. Could he show her that he loved her, had always loved her?

“Sinjin?” Her voice was the softest of whispers. She gazed up at him, her lips parted. With infinite care he lowered his head to touch his lips to hers. He brushed her mouth softly at first. Her kiss was like velvet. She seized his waistcoat and shirt in her fists and pulled him closer. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand pressed to her back and one pressed to her hip. Her arms slid around his neck. She ran her fingers through his hair and cupped the back of his head in her hands.

Slowly Alice backed towards the chaise longue, and Sinjin followed as he refused to let her go. When she finally sat down, he fell to his knees and deepened the kiss. A flick of his tongue along the seam of her lips granted him leave to plunder her mouth with his tongue. She slid her tongue along his and their mouths mated in a long sensuous draught. When he could no longer breathe, he drew back slowly and rested lips against her cheek.

“What are we doing?” he murmured.

“I was hoping you knew.” She kissed his chin and placed the pads of her fingers inside the open neck of his shirt, resting them over his pounding heart.

He stilled and leaned back enough to look at her carefully. “What do you want to do?” The danger of that question did not escape him. His mind was working by way of instinct alone. His cock, currently hard as stone and pushing to the front of his breeches, likely had a great deal to do with his misfiring brain.

“Alice, I have been trying to tell you something.” He shook his head. “All the letters we’ve written, and now I can’t come up with the words.” He’d never been so woolly-

headed in his life. For a man who knew every weed and flower by name when he looked into her crystal blue eyes his mouth went dry and his tongue refused to move. Then Alice was no weed or flower, she was an entire garden. “I can’t—”

“Then show me, Sinjin. Show me what you are trying to say. You asked me what I want.” She took his mouth in a deep soul-burning kiss. “I want everything. With you.”

His blood fired in a rush through his veins. His heart raced and then slowed as if not beating at all. He stood and removed his waistcoat, then pulled his shirt over his head. Alice pressed her palm to the taut hard flesh of his belly. He watched her explore the lines of his hips and the ridges of his ribs with her fingertips. Every memory he had of Alice the girl and Alice the woman kaleidoscoped into the image before him of a golden-haired siren hungry and desirous of him. He lifted her legs onto the chaise and pushed the stack of blankets to the floor.

He would show her the depth of his love. Words had escaped him, but his body wanted nothing more than to speak for him. He reached for the ties at the back of her dress.

Alice was suffused with a heat that had little to do with Sinjin’s perfectly maintained conservatory. He worked to loosen the ties, tapes, and buttons of her dress with such tenderness every brush of his fingers sent rivulets of fire dancing over her skin. Once her dress and stays were loosened, he used his palms to slide them down past her arms, across her belly as she raised her hips to help him rid her of those garments.

She shivered and he chuckled darkly. He took her mouth in a shocking open-mouthed kiss. A delicious heat ran from her mouth directly to her quim in an aching sensation that surprised and intrigued her. Her nipples chafed against the thin fabric of her chemise until he covered them with his hands and began to massage in ever more insistent pulses. Alice moaned and bit her lower lip. When he removed one hand, she

gave a little gasp of complaint that turned to a sharp cry when he took her nipple between his teeth and sucked through the muslin.

He stopped at her cry, but she clasped his head and held him in place. Sinjin tugged at the hem of her chemise and worked it up to her breasts. He released her sensitive nipple long enough to whip the last of her clothing over her head and toss it to the floor. This time he returned to her other breast and licked and suckled until she thought the ache and darts of fire would drive her mad. He sat up to gaze at her, his fingers still pinching and caressing and teasing her breasts. He cupped them both in his hands and kissed them each in turn.

“You are exquisite, Alice,” he said softly, his voice rough and rasping. “You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” She reached up to caress his face. When she ran her fingers across his lips, he drew one into his mouth. Her body took on a life of its own. Her legs moved restlessly back and forth. She tried to sit up to press her naked flesh against his bare chest. He held her to him for a moment and they both shuddered at the erotic pleasure.

He lowered her back to the chaise and began a trail of kisses between her breasts, down to her belly, lower and lower until his mouth touched her quim. She froze in a moment of utter confusion until the first stroke of his tongue between her nether lips. Her hips arched of their own accord. He placed his hands on her thighs and parted them a little to begin an exploring kiss of her cunny that had her gasping and crying out, her hands threatening to shred the blanket beneath her.

“Sinjin,” she cried. “What are you—Oh! Oh! Don’t stop! Don’t!” She fought between trying to move away from the exquisite torture and trying to get closer. The storm still raged outside. Though early afternoon the sky was black with streaks of lightning illuminating the clouds. That was how she felt, like a dark cloudy sky sparked over and over by bolts of fire. Her heart pounded, and she could not catch her breath. Her body seemed to crest as if over an ocean wave. Higher and higher she flew until she

screamed, and every nerve seized at once. Tremors continued to roll through her though she sensed Sinjin had suddenly sat up. The warmth of his body and the fire of his kiss between her legs began to fade.

Suddenly he was back, kissing his way up her body in passionate nips and searing presses of his lips that sent shivers coursing through her like the rain coursing over the glass roof of his conservatory. Braced on his hands he held his body over hers, touching in places. He'd removed his breeches and boots. His skin was hot and hard, carved into muscles she'd never realized he possessed. She caressed the powerful lines of his arms and chest.

"Tell me you want this." His voice was hoarse with an emotion she'd never sensed in him before but she loved the sound. She loved him. And she wanted him as she'd never wanted anyone or anything ever before this moment. She was a virgin, but she was no innocent. Her Uncle Daedalus's wife, Sinjin's own sister, wrote some of the most enlightening books on what happened between a man and a woman. Alice wanted those things to happen to her, with Sinjin.

"Yes," she said softly. "Please, Sinjin. I want you." She raised her hips and felt the heavy weight of his cock between her legs. He brushed against her, using each brush to wet his cock in the liquid heat he'd coaxed from her body with his wicked tongue. She sensed the blunt tip at her entrance and wrapped her legs around him. They thrust together as one. Gasp as one. After a slight sting and hesitation, her body opened to him and they were joined completely.

"Good?" he breathed.

"Hmmm. Yes." She ran her hands over his shoulders and clasped his back tightly. He withdrew slowly and slid back inside her in one lingering stroke. She began to thrust against him. They panted in unison as they reached a rhythm all their own. Alice could not get close enough to him, could not get enough as his body carried her onto

those waves once more. Their voices met in a mixture of groans and inarticulate cries, faster and harder until she dug her nails into his back, threw back her head and called his name into the storm over their heads. He thrust a few more times and moaned her name as the hot wash of his seed filled her. When he collapsed atop her he tried to roll away, but she held him fast.

He murmured her name over and over and kissed her neck and shoulders until he rested his head on her breasts. She stroked his hair and caressed him. The words she longed to say stayed stuck in her throat. An uncertainty she'd never felt about him before crept into her mind.

"Was that better than Ravenwood's kiss?" he asked sleepily.

"Worlds better."

"I should hope so." He sighed and dragged a blanket from the floor. Between the two of them they managed to spread it over their cooling bodies. "We shall have to go soon. Your uncle will send out the Runners."

"Not just yet." She was suddenly desperate to keep him in her arms, to make the moment last as long as possible. "We have time."

The skies were still dark, but the rain had lessened to a light drizzle by the time Alice dressed and made ready to return home. She'd managed to slip off the chaise and leave Sinjin sleeping. She smiled as she remembered how Danders said Sinjin seldom slept, but when he finally did, he slept like the dead. Her clothes were still damp but dry enough for the ride home. One of the Perritons' coachmen would be happy to drive her to Berkeley Square in Frederick's carriage.

She'd found Sinjin's journal on his work table. For a long number of minutes, she'd stared at the page she needed and debated what to do. In the end, she ripped the page

out and stuffed the folded piece into her reticule. If she and Olivia accomplished their plan, he might never know, but if he did...Lightning lit up the sky, and an ominous roll of thunder shook the glass panes of the conservatory.

As quietly as she could, Alice walked back to the circle of rose bushes and stood over the chaise. Sinjin looked like one of those Greek statues of a sleeping hero. She saw him through very different eyes now. He was strong, powerful, loving and far more accomplished as a lover than she'd ever considered. She'd save the questions about where he'd learned all of the delicious things he did to her for another day.

"I love you, Sinjin Perriton," she said softly. "No matter what I decide to do."

She was glad of the rain as Frederick's carriage glided smoothly through the streets between St. James Square and her uncle's home. For some reason she had begun to weep the moment the coachman pulled out of the mews away from the conservatory and the trusting man she'd left sleeping.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:39 am

A week later

Alice grabbed the basket on the seat next to her and dragged the precious cargo into her lap. The coach hit yet another rut and nearly bounced Olivia off the seat across from her. Somehow the idea to have Dickie and Seamus drive them along the narrow mews lanes between Goodrum's House of Pleasure and the Dowager Countess of Stanton's Grosvenor Square townhouse seemed a poor choice at the moment. Olivia had suggested they do so as a way to involve as few people as possible in their plot. Not to mention the laundress had threatened both lads with a painful death if they breathed a word to anyone, including Lady Camilla and especially Sinjin.

"Why do you keep going over those instructions?" she asked Olivia. "You followed every step Sinjin listed." She patted the basket where three carefully sealed earthenware crocks were nestled on a bed of wool fleece under a heavy cotton cloth. "The mixtures are correct. You don't make mistakes."

Olivia snorted and handed the page Alice had torn from Sinjin's journal back to her. Alice folded the worn wrinkled paper and slipped it into her black velvet reticule. She did her best to ignore the sharp pang in her breast every time she remembered how she'd acquired the means of this final plan of revenge. She told herself because she wasn't using the mixtures he'd formulated on Stanton, Weatherly, or Earden, she wasn't truly going against his wishes. She had yet to convince herself.

"You are certain they will attend Lady Stanton's at-home?" Olivia asked. "This is all for nothing if they don't show up."

"They'll be there. Lady Camilla mentioned that Millicent has set her cap at Lord

Stanton and Millicent never goes anywhere without her loyal acolytes to sing her praises to one and all. You're certain about the room under the stairs?"

"Absolutely. I've watched from the foyer and from the hallway to the kitchens many times. When people hand their hats and coats to the footmen or that toplofty butler of hers, those things end up on shelves and hooks in the little room under the stairs. I've delivered clothes there many times." Olivia's role as London's most sought-after laundress gave her access to parts of Mayfair's homes Alice had never had occasion to see.

"Perfect. All we have to do is wait for everyone to arrive, sneak into that room, paint Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret's bonnets with Sinjin's magical mixtures, and make good our escape." Alice sat back as the carriage slowed behind the dowager countess's mews. Lady Stanton had her own establishment as her son tended to hold notoriously debauched entertainments in the earl's residence. This information came as no surprise to either Alice or Olivia. The carriage lurched to a halt.

"We're here," Seamus announced as he opened the door and let down the steps. "Dickie says go through that gate and follow the path. There's a door that leads right into the servants' passage behind the kitchens. You won't run into anyone as they'll all be scrambling to put on the feed for the countess's guests."

"How does Dickie know this?" Alice asked as she pulled the hood of her cloak up and hung the basket on one arm and her reticule on the other.

"Don't ask," Olivia said, and pulled up the hood of her cloak as well. She stepped to the front of the battered, borrowed carriage where Dickie sat on the driver's bench. "Keep a sharp eye. You two be quiet and don't cause trouble. We'll be wanting to leave here in a hurry."

Dickie rolled his eyes at his sister. "Don't have to tell me how to make myself scarce.

You two do what you came to do and..." He narrowed his eyes and looked from Olivia to Alice. "What did you come to do?"

"Don't want to know," Seamus sang quietly.

"Precisely," Alice said, as she patted Seamus on the shoulder. "Let's go, Olivia."

They trod as softly as they could through the kitchen gardens towards the back of the townhouse. The scent of the various herbs, some already in full growth and others sprouting up through the damp earth, filled the air around them. Rain hung in the air, and London would likely see another storm before the afternoon was done.

Once they reached the door in Dickie's instructions, Olivia lifted the latch and opened the old wooden portal just enough for her and Alice to slip in one by one. Fortunately, a few small lamps lit the way down the dark, narrow corridor. Drops of moisture slid down the walls and dropped onto their cloaks from the rounded roof mere inches above their heads. Alice held the basket close to her chest so as not to jostle the crocks of the formulas Olivia had mixed that morning. Whether because of the thought of what they were about to do or the close confines of the passageway, she suddenly could not catch her breath.

"Wait here," Olivia ordered. She opened a door that let in both light and air, and Alice gulped in several breaths. Her nerves steadied, she took a few steps closer to the open door. She was at the very end of the corridor that ran alongside the front staircase and led to the kitchens. Olivia stood farther up the corridor. She glanced back and waved Alice forward. By the time Alice scurried up to join her, Olivia had the door to the little room they needed open and waiting.

"Thank goodness," Alice sighed. "I don't think anyone saw us."

"Shhh." Olivia clutched her arm and dragged her into a corner that would be hidden

when the door was opened.

“How will we know when the guests have arrived?” Alice whispered.

“Here.” Olivia turned around and pointed to a narrow gap in the wall behind them. The slit was wide enough to see out into the foyer, but not wide enough for anyone to notice. “You watch. I’ll need you to tell me which bonnets belong to those three scurrilous harpies.”

“Right.” Alice peered out into the foyer. In mere moments the guest began to arrive and the noise of the chattering women echoed off the domed ceiling of Lady Stanton’s entrance hall. She and Olivia froze when the tap of a footman’s steps grew closer. The door opened and trapped them in complete darkness. Alice held her breath. Olivia tapped her shoulder to remind her to watch the foyer. During what seemed like an eternity of footmen coming back and forth, Alice mulled over her decision to go through with this last act of revenge.

Perhaps Sinjin was right. She had so much hope for her life now because of him. He was everything she’d ever wanted or needed. She loved him, and despite his inability to say the words she suspected he loved her too. If only—

Olivia gasped. An all too familiar voice rang out in the foyer. Alice checked the gap in the wall to be certain. Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret had arrived, causing their usual stir. Other young ladies flocked around them like barnyard fowl, clucking and squawking and admiring their gowns and bonnets. Each was a perfect English rose with porcelain skin, bright blue eyes and shimmering blonde hair, perfectly styled to accent their cheekbones and foreheads. Seeing them mincing about and being personally greeted by the dowager countess set Alice’s teeth on edge.

“They say he is a bit of a dullard, you know, or perhaps a bit mad?”

Oh no, they deserved what she and Olivia had planned for them. The footman's steps sounded like thunder as he crossed the marble floor and came into the little room. He placed Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret's bonnets on the table in the middle of the room. They were the same millinery creations the three women had worn to Gunter's. After the footman hurried out and closed the door, Alice released the breath she'd been holding and pointed out the hats to Olivia. Her friend's answering smile was absolutely terrifying. They waited in silence until the foyer grew silent and the last of the footman passed by the closed door on the way to the kitchens.

Olivia peeked out the gap in the wall. "All clear. They've closed the drawing room doors. Hurry." She took the basket from Alice and set the three crocks onto the table next to the bonnets. Whilst Alice opened the crocks Olivia retrieved the paintbrushes from the bottom of the basket. They turned the bonnets upside down and stared at the insides of each.

"How should we do this?" Alice asked.

"I say we put some of each in each bonnet." Olivia grinned. "Their hair will look like a crofter's wife's quilt. Quickly. We need to finish and slip out before anyone comes back."

They worked quickly and quietly. Each mixture was used to dye hair a different color based on the ingredients added to a base mixture. Alice never would have dreamed Sinjin would know the properties of various barks and berries needed to produce hair black as night, hair red as blood, and hair a mousy brown color. Apparently, these combinations had been used since the time of the Egyptians.

As Olivia used all sorts of natural items to achieve the sort of success as a laundress that had every family in London clamoring for her services, she had contacts everywhere from Chinese apothecaries in Limehouse to French hairdressers in Spitalfields who had escaped the revolution in France. From the dried green shells of

walnuts to pomegranate seeds to myrtle leaves to red beet seeds, Olivia had gathered the necessary supplies and followed Sinjin's recipes. And now she and Alice were painting the insides of the three horrible ladies' bonnets with a combination of these formulas. The dyes would not last forever, but they would suffice to embarrass Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret for a few weeks.

"Finished?" Olivia asked. She wrapped her paintbrush in an old serviette they'd brought and placed it in the basket. Alice could only nod. The audacity of what'd they'd done began to sink in, and she knew she needed to leave before she changed her mind. She handed Olivia her brush and hurriedly fastened the lids on the three crocks. In her haste to place them in the basket she knocked her reticule off the table. Olivia froze and put her finger to her lips. Footsteps echoed down the corridor. Alice bent down and felt around for her reticule. She grabbed the little velvet bag and stuffed it into the basket. Olivia covered everything with the cotton cloth. The footsteps faded in the direction of the drawing room.

"Time to bloody go," Olivia muttered. She went to the door, opened it, and peeked up and down the corridor. "Now."

They ran on light feet down the corridor and ducked into the servants' passage. Once at the end of the passage they scampered across the kitchen guardian and all but threw themselves into the carriage behind the mews. They were thrown from their seats into the floor when Dickie sprung the horses into a quick canter. By the time they reached Grosvenor Street they were back on the carriage benches laughing helplessly.

"I wish we could be there when those three take off their bonnets the next time," Olivia said once they'd stopped laughing.

"We won't need to be there. We'll likely hear Millicent no matter where we are," Alice replied. However, once Dickie set Alice down around the corner from her

Berkeley Square home and went to take Olivia back to Goodrum's, before he returned the carriage he'd borrowed from a hack driver, Alice had a cold chill run through her that had nothing to do with the weather. The sky turned suddenly dark, and she hurried into Uncle Percy's house wondering if she'd gone too far.

Sinjin tugged at his neckcloth and straightened his waistcoat for the hundredth time since he'd wandered into the Duke of Chelmsford's library. A family dinner in the home of one of England's most powerful dukes was not something he ever imagined he'd be attending this Season. He had not seen Alice in a few days and even then, they had not been alone enough for any meaningful conversation. When the invitation arrived to dine with the duke and duchess and a few friends he'd steeled himself and accepted. He'd received a good deal of teasing from Reggie and Frederick for his trouble, but they'd let him borrow some of their clothes so that he might make a good impression.

Nothing had prepared him for the all-consuming need he had for Alice. His nights had been plagued by dreams of their joining in his conservatory. He could not concentrate. He sat at his work table and stared off into the miasma of plants and trees without a single thought in his head save Alice and the touch of her skin, the perfection of her breasts, the taste of her and the feel of her as she shuddered to completion around him. He suspected he'd run mad, but if he wasn't mad then he was in love, and he had to tell her.

"Sinjin, there you are." Alice glided into the room and his heart stuttered. She wore a gown of rich, bright, blue silk. The heart-shaped bodice bared her shoulders and a tempting expanse of her ivory skin to the crests of her breasts. Tiny pearls were sewn in swirling patterns across the skirts of the gown and seemed to warm the glow of her skin. "Everyone else is in the drawing room. We're going in to dinner now." She crossed the room and took his arm. "Will you escort me to the table?"

"I...I've missed you. Alice..." He was a grown man, an educated man, and here he

stood unable to string three words together.

“Yes?” She looked up at him, her eyes bright and so full of life and something more, something he’d never seen before this moment. He kicked the library door closed and backed her up against the dark, smooth wood. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he crashed his lips down on hers. She pushed back kissing him with the fierce feminine fire he’d always felt in her. Their tongues tangled and she gasped into his mouth. She tasted of sherry and Alice, only Alice. He kissed her until he thought they might burst into flame, until neither of them could breathe, and finally stopped to rest his forehead against hers.

“You are going to marry me, aren’t you?” He opened his eyes wide, stunned by what he’d said. She was as surprised as he if her expression was any indication.

“Sinjin, I...goodness.” His heart began to sink. He’d misread her, perhaps?

“Alice? Mister Perriton?” The Duchess of Chelmsford’s voice called from down the corridor. Alice fumbled with the door latch, opened the door, and leaned out to answer her.

“On our way, Aunt Eleanor.” She dragged Sinjin out of the library and took his arm as they made their way to the dining room. “We’ll talk about this later,” she whispered, as they went to their places at the table. Sinjin shook his head to clear himself of the sensation he’d been struck by Gentleman Jackson in the boxing ring.

Alice was seated across from him. The duke was at one end of the table and the duchess at the other. Lady Camilla was to his right and his sister, Cordelia, was to his left. His brother-in-law, Lord Daedalus Whitcombe, brother to the duke, was seated across from Lady Camilla, and Mister Lionel Carrington-Bowles was seated across from Cordelia. As this was a somewhat informal family dinner, the food was served *a la francaise*, and the conversation was lively. This allowed Sinjin to study Alice and

try to understand how she might eventually respond to his somewhat haphazard proposal. He had to stop thinking about it as he winced every time he did.

The food was delicious since Mister Carrington-Bowles's friend, Nathaniel Charpentier, had catered the meal for the duke and duchess. Sinjin was not terribly fussy or knowledgeable when it came to appropriate dinner fare. However, the roast lamb was cooked in some sort of lemon and orange sauce. The potatoes were seasoned with a variety of herbs which definitely piqued his interest.

"Do you know if Mister Charpentier grows his own herbs?" Sinjin asked during a lull in the conversation. He realized he hadn't spoken a great deal as they all stared at him for a moment, except Alice. She smiled encouragingly and winked.

"As a matter of fact, he does," Mister Carrington-Bowles said. "Aunt Camilla has an extensive glass house here in London and an even larger one at Willow Place, our country home. Why do you ask?"

"Not many households have access to the sort of herbs and spices I am tasting in these potatoes," Sinjin mused.

"Mister Perriton is an avid botanist," the duchess said. "I am not surprised at the sensitivity of your palate, sir." Alice fairly beamed at her aunt's praise of him, which lifted Sinjin's spirits considerably. A silly idea, but there it was.

"You should speak with Nathaniel," Mister Carrington-Bowles said. "He is always researching combinations of herbs, berries, and even flowers to flavor his dishes. His approach to cooking is very scientific as well as artistic."

"I think that would be wonderful," Alice said. "Sinjin is always coming up with formulas and ways to use plants."

“Perhaps Nathaniel and Mister Perriton could lend their expertise to solve the scandal that came of the Dowager Countess of Stanton’s at-home the day before yesterday,” Lady Camilla said.

“Oh! Damn! I mean...Forgive me, Uncle.” Alice picked up the wine glass she’d knocked over as one of the footmen blotted the stain spreading across the pristine white tablecloth.

“No harm done, my dear.” A slight smile played about the duke’s lips.

“What scandal?” Cordelia asked.

“Apparently Miss Millicent Rutherford and two other young ladies attended the countess’s at-home. After which they spent the afternoon at a garden party thrown by that dreadful Villiers woman. When they arrived home, they removed their bonnets and their hair was dyed three different colors—black, red, and brown.”

Sinjin’s blood ran cold. A round of laughter and exclamations made their way around the table. He glanced at Alice who immediately looked away. She couldn’t have!

“What would Sinjin and Nathaniel know about something like that?” Lord Daedalus asked. He forked a piece of lamb off Cordelia’s plate and she slapped his hand.

“Well, apparently,” Lady Camilla said eagerly, in the fashion of all grande dames imparting gossip. “A page containing some sort of formulas containing berries, roots, and such was found at Lady Stanton’s. Her lady’s maid is French and seems to think the formulas were some sort of recipes for hair dyes. She thinks the bonnets were somehow infused with these dyes, and now three young ladies are sporting very...singular hair. It is said Miss Rutherford’s screams could be heard in the street. Poor girl.”

“You would recognize something like that if you saw it, wouldn’t you, Mister Perriton?” the duchess asked Sinjin, though she had turned her attention to Alice.

“Perhaps,” Sinjin said softly. Across from him Alice closed her eyes as if in pain. “I do not study the cosmetic uses of plants as much as I do the medicinal purposes.”

“I doubt if Nathaniel would know anything about that sort of thing either,” Mister Carrington-Bowles observed as he helped himself to some more of the spring peas cooked with onions. “However, I would be interested in some of the medicinal uses of herbs and plants you have discovered, Mister Perriton.”

“You are welcome to come by my conservatory anytime you wish. I have heard of your dispensary in Seven Dials, and I would be very interested in helping you with your work.” Sinjin continued to study Alice even as he spoke with the other guests at the table. She, however, looked everywhere save at him. Which gave him his answer, of course. She’d somehow used his concoctions to perform one more act of revenge. His hope was that vengeance was now out of her system, and so long as no one discovered who had come up with those dyes the two of them might move on with their lives.

As to her going behind his back and how she acquired his formulas, that was yet another thing they would discuss later.

“Sinjin, dear,” Cordelia said and reached over to squeeze his hand. “I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you out of your conservatory. I cannot help but think Alice has been a good influence on you. Even your wardrobe has improved.”

“As I knew you and Daedalus would be here this evening, and that you would report my every move back to Mama, I had little choice. However, I will say Lady Alice has encouraged me to venture out into society more, so long as she is there to keep me safe.”

“A wise choice on your part,” the duchess said and raised her glass to him. A ripple of laughter ensued. Alice finally looked at him and smiled. A din of loud voices and running footsteps approached the dining room.

“What the devil?” the duke stood so abruptly his chair fell backwards. The doors burst open and Seamus stumbled into the room with the duke’s butler close on his heels.

Sinjin slowly pushed to his feet. “Seamus?”

“Come quick, sir,” the boy gasped, his hands on his knees. His face was smeared with dirt and he had a cut above one eye. “They’ve done summat terrible to the glass house. Missus Beatty hit one with a coal skuttle. I think she’s killed him. You have to come.”

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:39 am

One of Sinjin's favorite places to spend time at Perriton Grange was the apiary, the field where Old Jack tended the estate's dozens of beehives. As a boy he'd stand in the middle of the lines and lines of hives, close his eyes, and listen to the hum of the bees at work. The child he was had found that sound comforting. Now, standing in the ruins of his conservatory, he found no comfort at all in the hum of voices and activity around him. All he wanted was for them to go and leave him alone with the broken glass, the trampled plants, the chopped down trees, and the sad refuse of ten years of his care and work.

Seamus's precipitous interruption of the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford's dinner had resulted in a mad scramble to assemble carriages and transport everyone in attendance to the Perriton house on St. James Square. Sinjin had not been able to utter a word nor do much at all save stand amidst the carnage and think that he really should do something. The duchess and Cordelia had gone to the far end of the conservatory where Missus Beatty sat in a chair next to the fish pond. The cook had a battered coal skuttle next to her feet and a large cookpot in her lap.

"They scooped the wee fish out and left them gasping on the floor," she was saying. "Broke down the sides of the fountain to let out all the water."

"She saved them, she did," Betsy the kitchen maid said. "Scooped them up in the cookpot and had me fetch some water. Will they live, Mister Sinjin?" she called to him.

He turned slowly and took a few steps towards the pond. Halfway there he heard and felt a loud crunch beneath his feet. When he bent down, he picked up the remains of his new microscope. The one Cordelia and Daedalus had gifted him. His sister came

to him and took the broken instrument from his hands. “We’ll buy you a new one, dearest,” she said softly as she stroked his hair away from his face. “We’ll set this to rights.” He nodded wordlessly, kissed her cheek, and walked the rest of the way to the fountain and pond to kneel down next to Missus Beatty.

“Are you all right, Beatty?”

She reached out and patted his head. “It’ll take more than three milksop lordlings to get the best of me, lad.” Betsy took the pot from Beatty’s shaking hands and showed Sinjin the three large goldfish that had occupied his conservatory pond for the last ten years. They were a bit crowded in the pot but swam about quite vigorously.

“They’ll live, won’t they, sir?” the girl asked. Where was Alice? She would know best how to console Betsy. He knew she was in the conservatory. Was it his body or his soul that sensed her presence? He needed her, but feared his reaction to her trying to apologize for...this.

“I should think so,” he said, his voice hoarse and burning his throat. “You and Missus Beatty have saved their lives.” He met the maid’s eyes and forced himself to smile. “Just make certain she doesn’t cook them up.”

“Oh no, sir. I’ll keep them safe.” She nodded solemnly.

“Perriton?” Carrington-Bowles peered around the broken limbs of a lemon tree back towards Sinjin’s work table. Sinjin stood, patted Missus Beatty’s shoulder and strode to where Carrington-Bowles and a gentleman in the garb of a Bow Street Runner stood. “This is Archer Colwyn, a friend,” Lady Camilla’s nephew said. “We sent for him before we left Berkeley Square.” The Runner extended his hand and Sinjin shook it.

“Do you recognize him?” Mister Colwyn asked as he stepped aside and indicated a

prone figure on the mosaic pathway that meandered through the conservatory.

“Weatherly.” Sinjin went hot all over. He reached for the man, but Carrington-Bowles and the Runner held him back. “He attacked a defenseless woman. He destroyed my conservatory.” Now that he had started talking the fog in his mind and the hum of voices disappeared to be replaced by a blind, red fury. “I’ll kill him.” He tried his best to wrest free of their hold.

“And you would be justified,” the Duke of Chelmsford said as he came from behind the tangle of broken wisteria and weeping begonias. “However, as I have asked my wife to limit the number of bodies her men toss into the Thames these days, that would be inadvisable.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Alice has informed me that in addition to Weatherly here, the other two milksop lordlings involved in this diabolical act are the Earl of Stanton and Lord Octavius Earden.”

“No doubt,” Sinjin said between clenched teeth. Alice. She was here. She’d traveled in the carriage with her aunt and uncle and Lady Camilla whilst he had traveled with Carrington-Bowles, Daedalus, and Cordelia. He closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. Everything came rushing at him at once. The way she’d avoided his gaze at dinner immediately after Lady Camilla announced what had happened to Miss Rutherford and her friends. Somehow his involvement in Alice’s revenge had gotten back to Earden and his friends by way of this last act, the one Sinjin had advised her against. The one she’d said she would let go.

He didn’t want to blame her for the smashed microscope, the torn down vines, the exotic trees turned to kindling, his roses uprooted from their urns. The searing ache in his chest, the labored effort it took to draw breath, the very thought that Seamus or Missus Beatty or even Betsy might have been seriously hurt or killed. What had she been thinking?

“I can drag him off to Bow Street,” Mister Colwyn said quietly. “Have him brought

up on charges and have the other two arrested as well. I understand this is your family's home and that your elder brother is in charge, but I am certain once he sees all of this he will do as you wish."

"Are we certain we wish to feed the news sheets and prints artists more fuel for their fires?" Lady Camilla asked as she and the Duchess of Chelmsford joined their little group. Viscount Wheatly stirred once and subsided back onto the floor with a groan. "Not to mention it appears your Missus Beatty gave as good as she got and better." Lady Camilla gave Wheatly a little nudge with her slippered foot and smiled.

"What do you suggest, milady?" Sinjin asked. He glanced about casually which was a mistake. Not only was Alice nowhere in sight, everywhere he looked revealed new destruction which caused pangs in his body like physical blows.

"Chelmsford, you know Stanton's father. Wheatly is the Marquess of Fordice's heir, is he not?" Lady Camilla looked to the duke with a deceptively beatific expression on her elegant face.

"Indeed, and I am acquainted with Fordice as well. El, my love, will you accompany Lady Camilla to visit the Dowager Countess of Stanton? She serves on several charitable committees with you two, does she not?"

Lady Camilla patted the duke's arm. "You have always been such a clever boy, Perseus Whitcombe. Her Grace and I will pay a call on Lady Stanton and inform her of her son's activities this night. She still hasn't forgiven him for moving her out of the family townhouse."

"She'll be in a more forgiving mood when I tell her that the earl's membership at Goodrum's along with those of his friends have been revoked." The Duchess of Chelmsford owned the most desirable pleasure club in London. Memberships were exclusive and sought after by the highest-ranking peers in London. Sinjin and Mister

Carrington-Bowles exchanged a glance. Mister Colwyn chuckled and shook his head.

“One would do well never to cross our Captain El,” he said, referring to the duchess.

“Colwyn, Carrington-Bowles, and I will fetch Wheatly to his father. Earden’s father will be at White’s this time of an evening. We’ll stop there after we deal with Wheatly.” The duke looked to Sinjin. “Will that satisfy, Mister Perriton? I know your brother, Frederick, is head of the family whilst your father is ill, but I daresay he will defer to you in this.”

Sinjin studied Wheatly for a moment and then gave his conservatory a careful perusal. They were right. With everything that had happened, this was the best course. There was no need for more scandal. Not to mention his taste for revenge had been irrevocably dampened. Suddenly he was very tired. His body ached, and his mind was a maelstrom of thoughts and feelings. Any other time in his life when things became too much, he would seek out Alice in person or in a letter. What was he going to do now?

In his slow perusal of the damage done by Stanton and his miscreant friends he caught sight of the chaise longue where he and Alice had finally given in to their passions. He’d proposed tonight and he meant every word. She’d broken his trust. She’d given him no answer. She might be carrying his child. He’d chosen the wrong time to give up his hermit ways because all he wanted to do now was scream. He knew what he was honor-bound to do no matter how he and Alice now felt about each other.

“You’re right,” he said and extended his hand to the duke. “This is the best course of action for everyone concerned. Thank you...thank you all for everything. I...” He shook his head.

“Very good,” Lady Camilla said and clapped her hands. “I shall have Lord Daedalus

and Lady Cordelia escort me home. Lionel, dear, you go with the duke and Archer to dispose of this.” She kicked Wheatly and he groaned. “Lord Daedalus!” She made her way up the path toward Sinjin’s work table. Carrington-Bowles and Archer Colwyn dragged Wheatly none to gently toward the back doors out of the conservatory.

The duchess took the duke’s arm and Sinjin joined them as they walked in the opposite direction towards the doors that led from the conservatory out to the mews. They walked in silence until they came upon Alice staring at a potting bench and a row of small pots across a shelf over the bench.

“Alice.” Sinjin kept his tone soft and even, for the most part because he suddenly had no idea how he felt.

She turned to face him, tears in her eyes. At the sight of her aunt and uncle she used one gloved hand to wipe her eyes and then smiled. “You saved them,” she said to Sinjin. “The daffodils and crocuses at Hyde Park.” Surprisingly the row of repotted flowers had escaped the notice of those bent on destroying his conservatory.

“Seamus and I went back for them that day. They all survived.” He sensed the duke and duchess behind him, but he only had eyes for Alice.

“Sinjin, I never meant for any of this to happen. I should never have—”

“It doesn’t matter, Alice. What’s done is done. I don’t really want to talk about this any further.” The gravity of everything settled over him like the crush of people at a ton gathering. She’d betrayed his trust. His heart threatened to crack open at the realization. The one person he’d counted on never to lie to him, or use him, or cause him pain had taken his work and this night was the result. He could not think clearly about anything save the one thing he knew he had to do. He turned to the duke.

“Your Grace, I have proposed to Lady Alice, and I ask your permission to make her my wife.”

“Well,” the duchess murmured.

Alice gasped. “Sinjin, what are you doing? We need to talk. I need to explain. There is no reason to—” She took a step towards him. Something in his expression stopped her.

Sinjin glanced back at the chaise longue and then returned his gaze to her. She looked so hurt and confused. Doubts about his plan of action began to creep into the corners of his mind, but he plunged ahead. “There is every reason, Alice.” The silence in their little corner of the conservatory was heavy, as if all air and sound had been sucked from the room. The duke looked from him to Alice and back again.

“I see,” was all the great man said.

“I’ll send my brother to negotiate the settlements. I would prefer we marry sooner rather than later. Alice may remain in Town if she wishes. I will return to Surrey as soon as possible after the wedding.”

“Sinjin, please.” Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but she squared her shoulders and refused to allow them to fall. He’d seen her do this a thousand times, when someone hurt her. Like he was hurting her now, but he could not make himself stop.

“Good night, Alice. I’ll call on you tomorrow.” He offered her a stiff bow, bowed to the duke and duchess and strode back into his broken conservatory. Stanton, Wheatly, and Earden had destroyed much more than they ever imagined this night. Sinjin would have to figure out a way to repair what he feared he had destroyed himself.

Four days later

Sinjin moved the last monstrous new urn containing his latest hybrid rose into position and dropped onto the chaise longue with a groan. He'd finally managed to repot all of his roses and return them to their original positions thanks to Reggie's gift of new urns to replace the ones Stanton and his toadies had broken. With luck and care the roses would survive and continue to grow. He'd lost some plants, but surprisingly few thanks to the servants pitching in to clean up the conservatory and Seamus's diligent attention to repotting all of the plants and trees that were not too unwieldy for him to handle.

There was still a great deal of work to do, but staying busy kept Sinjin from dwelling on the fact that Alice had refused to see him since that horrible night. He'd called at the duke's residence twice a day every day, including that very morning. The answer was always the same.

Lady Alice is not receiving callers.

It would seem they had both gone to ground as he had not ventured anywhere save to the duke's house and home. As a last resort Sinjin had sent Frederick to speak with the duke about the marriage settlements. If nothing else, surely his high-handedness would make Alice angry enough to confront him.

"Well, brother," Frederick called as he strode into the conservatory from the French windows that led into the main house. "Congratulations. The lady has given you your congé." He tossed a sealed note at Sinjin and subsided onto the chaise next to him. "She has refused your proposal."

The last time Sinjin experienced a similar sensation he'd been thrown from his horse into a lake. He cracked the seal and read the few lines penned in Alice's neatly elegant script.

Dear Sir,

I release you from our engagement. I wish you every happiness in the future.

Lady Alice Lister

He let the single piece of parchment slip from his fingers to the floor. For a moment or two his mind went blank. She'd never actually said she loved him. She'd never actually said she'd marry him. He'd been a fool to think she would. He'd lost his best friend. The world was suddenly colder and far too big for him. What would he do without Alice in his life?

"Well?" Frederick nudged him with his shoulder.

"It is just as well. She can do much better than me." Sinjin loved his brother, but he truly wanted him to go and leave him alone. No matter how far apart they were he'd never felt alone so long as Alice was in his world. Now...

"I doubt she will ever receive another proposal." Frederick leaned back on his hands. "Word has it Stanton and his toadies intend to reveal her as the perpetrator of their humiliations and the humiliations of poor Miss Rutherford and her friends. In public. At Captain Atherton's exhibition at the Royal Academy today."

"But she wasn't responsible, not completely." Sinjin jumped to his feet and glared down at his brother. "Word has it? Where did you hear this? Let me guess Dickie Jones."

"At White's actually from Carrington-Bowles, Lady Camilla's nephew. He stopped by my table and informed me of the particulars. Asked if you would take care of the situation or if he needed to do so."

“Carrington-Bowles?”

“The man may prefer the company of other men, but he runs a dispensary in a part of Seven Dials where the Runners won’t venture. He’s personal physician to the Four Horsemen, the worst crime lords in London. I once saw the man break one villain’s nose and another’s arm in the street for stealing a dog.”

“She may not want me to take care of the situation.” She’d made her position perfectly clear. She no longer wanted him in her life.

“I never would have thought you a coward.” Frederick pinned him with his most imperious censoring stare.

“I’m not afraid of them. I’m afraid of her.” He began to pace back and forth amongst his roses. The heavy scent and delicate blooms always made him think of Alice. Even the thorns reminded him of her.

Frederick sighed. “You are the gentleman in the family, Sinjin. I am the arse, Reggie is the scoundrel, and you are the gentleman. You can no more let her take the blame for everything than you can take wing and fly. Not to mention you are madly in love with her and always have been.”

Sinjin stopped mid-step. “How long have you known?”

“We’ve all known forever. You two were the only ones who took all these years to figure it out. Let us hope your children will inherit their intelligence from their Uncle Frederick.”

Children. With Alice. All he’d ever wanted in life. All he’d ever need. What a lummoX he was, an addlepated, nodcock lummoX.

“Is Reggie still abed? I need his curricie.” Sinjin started towards the doors into the house. Frederick grabbed his arm and dragged him across the conservatory to the doors that led to the mews.

“We’ll take my carriage.”

“We?”

“If you think I am going to miss you dressing down Stanton and his friends and you finally proposing to Alice Lister, you really are the madman they say you are.”

“I already proposed. She turned me down.”

“You obviously bolloxed up the first one. Try to do better this time. For God’s sake put a jacket on. The carriage is waiting in the mews.” Sinjin stumbled along in his brother’s wake. “We’ll do something with your neckcloth on the way. Do you own anything that isn’t covered in dirt? Take my jacket. Mother will have my head if you appear in public in that.”

“What if she says no.”

Frederick rolled his eyes. “You’re her Sir Galahad. Of course, she’ll say yes. A very dirty Sir Galahad but fortunately her standards are quite low. Who the devil is Dickie Jones?”

“You’ll meet him. He is brother to Alice’s best friend, Olivia Jones. Dickie is Lady Camilla’s number one source of information on anything that happens in Mayfair.”

“Olivia Jones the laundress at Goodrum’s?”

“The same.”

Frederick shouted with laughter. “Married to Lady Alice your life is never going to be dull, is it?”

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:39 am

Alice rolled over in her commodious bed and dragged the counterpane over her head. Nell, humming the tune of a particularly bawdy song, refused to take the hint and continued to pull open the curtains over the floor to ceiling windows on either side of the bed. Alice reached around her and found a pillow which she threw in the direction of the humming.

“Missed me,” Nell sang. She snatched the counterpane and dragged it down the bed. “The time is nearly noon, Lady Alice. You promised you’d attended Captain Atherton’s exhibition at the Royal Academy with Their Graces.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m too ill to attend. Offer my apologies to—Nell!” Alice landed unceremoniously on the Aubusson carpet. “Have you run mad?”

“Offer your own apologies. Every soul in this house is tired of you wallowing in self-pity. The gentleman proposed. You turned him down. You refused to see him. Do you intend to live with your decision?” Nell began to lay out Alice’s clothes across the blanket chest at the foot of the bed.

“Of course I intend to live with my decision.” Alice stood up and went to the screen in the corner to begin her morning ablutions. The sun streaming in from the windows blinded her as it struck the mirror of her dressing table. Make that her mid-morning ablutions.

“Then be about it, milady. Living, that is. This is your last social event before you have us running off to Scotland. Their Graces will be disappointed if you miss this. Captain Atherton is a particular friend of your uncle, Lord Daedalus, is he not?”

“Yes.” Alice sighed and sat down at her dressing table. “And I do admire the captain’s work.” She worried her bottom lip. “Has the post come this morning? Or any other missives?”

“No, milady.” Nell began to brush out Alice’s hair. “Only the one caller you refused. Then Mister Frederick Perriton spoke with your uncle and took your note to...”

“Yes, I know.” She’d lain in bed and listened to the comings and goings all morning. She’d slept very little in the past four days, and she’d especially been wide awake each time Sinjin came to call and was refused. Today she’d decided to put an end to both her and his misery. The note she’d written had been cold and to the point. She could not allow herself to write as she always had to him. This last letter had to be quick and impersonal so there could be no doubt of her intentions.

Her intentions? To break her own heart and to make amends for betraying him. He’d never trust her again, and Sinjin of all men deserved a wife he could trust. He would do the correct thing and marry her, but he would never forgive her for what she’d done. She could never bear to live with him knowing how hard he would try to hide the pain she’d caused him. And he would. He’d do his utmost to hide the pain and behave as if all was well.

She’d sacrificed the most important friendship of her life and her only chance at happiness for the sake of revenge. The vengeance she’d wreaked on those who had hurt her was well-deserved. The hurt she’d caused Sinjin was not. He’d return to Surrey and his plants. She’d go to Scotland for a while and then perhaps one day find a nice cottage in the countryside around Bath or close to the sea in Brighton and live out her life as she pleased. Perhaps one day she’d convince herself that was the life she’d always wanted. Today was not that day. She blinked back her tears and took a deep breath.

“Come along then,” she said with a bravado she did not feel. “If this is to be my last

foray into London society, I shall wear my finest and hold my head high.”

“That’s my girl,” Nell replied. “The wine and gold striped gown with the black velvet pelisse. Yes?”

“Most definitely.” She would go to the exhibition as if her life was perfect. Thank goodness she need not fear Sinjin would be there. Events like this, certain to be attended by all of London’s elite, was not something with which he would ever be comfortable. The sight of his face on seeing the destruction of his conservatory would be the last image of him in her memory, which was assurance enough she had done the right thing.

Something was definitely afoot. From the moment Alice and the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford stepped into the main exhibition hall at the Royal Academy every hair on the back of her neck stood on end. People milled about in groups, and as she and her aunt and uncle passed each group went silent, only to erupt into whispered conversations the moment they were out of earshot. Aunt Eleanor was far more attuned to what was going on as she looped her arm through Alice’s and leveled various people with the glare that had made her one of the most infamous sea captains ever to set sail.

“To hell with them, my dear,” Aunt Eleanor whispered. “They’re all pale pattern cards compared to you. Never forget that.”

“Lady Alice, how kind of you to come.” Lady Honoria Atherton, daughter of the Duke of Avonlea, and now Captain Atherton’s wife, crossed the room, hands extended, and greeted Alice with a kiss to her cheek. “Leonidas is so eager to show you the landscapes he painted in Surrey. Come with me.” Alice allowed herself to be led to a series of landscapes hung above the line. They were breathtaking and made her instantly homesick for her father’s estate and for Sinjin. Captain Atherton waved to her from a group of art experts she recognized. Uncle Percy and Aunt Eleanor had

joined Lady Camilla and her nephew who were admiring some smaller canvases, portraits Captain Atherton had painted.

“Is the captain going to sell any of these?” Alice asked Lady Honoria. “I should very much like to have one.”

“I know Leo would be all too happy to make a gift of one to you. You must choose the one you like best, and we’ll have it sent round once the exhibition is over.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. That is too generous.”

“Nonsense. We insist. Now which is your favorite.”

Alice studied the paintings and marveled at how wonderful Lady Honoria’s life was to be so certain of her husband, to think of the two of them as we, rather than him and her.

“You must think yourself very clever, Lady Alice.” The entire room went still. Alice turned to find Lord Earden walking towards her. She glanced behind him to see Lord Weatherly and Lord Stanton. Next to them Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret stood like Macbeth’s three witches, their coiffures hidden entirely by elaborate bejeweled turbans.

“That’s close enough, Earden.” Uncle Percy’s quiet voice carried in the large room. He had started forward, but was stayed by Aunt Eleanor’s hand on his arm.

“Not to worry, Your Grace. I would not want to come within range of Lady Alice’s pistol.”

“A wise decision on your part,” a voice called from behind the crowd which parted immediately. “The lady is a crack shot. I taught her myself.” Sinjin strode through the

crowd and put himself between Earden and Alice. “Did you think her only wounding Ravenwood was an accident? Although if ever a man deserves death, it is him.”

“See here, Perriton.” Weatherly stepped forward to stand next to Earden.

“No, you see here. All of you. Having a title and being heir to a title does not give any man the right to kidnap and rape women and sell them into slavery. Nor does it give that man the right to try and force an honorable young lady to marry him so he can use her dowry to settle his debts. Ravenwood was a despicable human being. You have all made Lady Alice’s life a misery because she dared to do what all of you could not. You created a monster by allowing him to do as he pleased. And she is the only one of you who had the courage to rid London of that monster.”

Alice did not know when she began to cry. Once the tears began to blur her vision of Sinjin standing there defending her, she dragged her sleeve across her face over and over. She wanted to see him. She had to see him.

“Speaking of monsters,” Stanton said as he pushed people out of the way to join Earden and Weatherly. “What do you have to say about a woman who tried to poison the three of us not once but twice and played a most heinous and deceitful trick on three innocent young ladies, perhaps ruining their beautiful hair forever?”

The collective gasp of everyone in attendance was deafening. Alice should have known her secret would not remain safe once the journal page in her handwriting was discovered. The page had obviously fallen from her reticule when she dropped it at Lady Stanton’s. All it took was one person recognizing her very distinctive handwriting and reporting back to Millicent for this entire humiliation to unfold.

“I assure you the hair dye will wash out in a few weeks,” Sinjin said as he strolled closer to Millicent, Ophelia, and Margaret. Your hair will be beautiful once more, ladies, which is more than I can say for your characters.”

“How dare you!” Millicent screeched.

“How dare I? How dare you, Miss Rutherford. How dare all of you who did your utmost to make Lady Alice’s last two seasons a nightmare. And for what? For the sins of her father? For shooting Ravenwood? Simply because you could? Beautiful hair and a beautiful face are temporary.” He turned back to gaze at Alice. “Beauty of the heart, beauty of the spirit, those are eternal. That is the beauty of a woman who is kind to servants, who risked her life to save women of the streets when no one else would, who befriended an awkward, shy, lummo of a boy, and made him feel like a hero, even when his behavior wasn’t very heroic.”

Alice wanted to laugh at the sighs of several young ladies in the crowd. Sinjin walked across the exhibition hall as he spoke.

“You came here to accuse Lady Alice of enacting a very well-deserved revenge on you for humiliating and embarrassing her when she hadn’t done a damned thing to any of you. I hate to disavow you of the notion, but I am the one who soaked your clothes with extract of nettle, who dosed your pasties with a little concoction that had you casting up your accounts all over Almack’s, and painted the ladies’ bonnets with hair dye to teach them a lesson about real beauty.” Hands clasped behind his back he came to stand next to Alice. She fought not to throw her arms around him and kiss him senseless. “So, if you wish to blame someone for your comeuppance, blame me.”

“But as Lords Earden, Stanton, and Weatherly broke into my conservatory a few nights ago, assaulted my cook and destroyed ten years of my work I am willing to call all things even.” The chatter around the exhibition hall reached a fevered pitch. “Especially as I understand you three gentlemen have received a dressing down from one or more of your parents, and you have promised to be good boys from now on, likely to avoid the cessation of your quarterly allowances.” A round of hearty laughter ensued.

“You can defend her all you like,” Earden shouted above the din. “But we all know she is the mad bitch who did this to us. She has no business mingling with good society. She—”

Suddenly Lord Earden was on the floor, blood gushing from his nose. Alice had but blinked and Sinjin had crossed the room in three long strides and drawn Earden’s cork like a Seven Dials street brawler. When Wheatly and Stanton tried to attack Sinjin, he dispatched them with a single punch each.

“Say another word about Lady Alice Lister and you will be having grass for breakfast, do you understand me?” Sinjin said as he bent down and raised Earden up by the front of his shirt. “Lady Alice isn’t the only one who is a crack shot.” The duke’s son nodded wordlessly. Sinjin dropped him back to the floor, stood, dusted his hands together and walked straight to where Alice stood, her hands to her mouth in shock and surprise. She noticed Sinjin’s brother, Frederick, step around Millicent and her friends to stand over Stanton, Earden, and Weatherly, essentially daring them to move.

Sinjin gently took Alice’s hands in his and pulled them away from her lips. His eyes never leaving hers he went down on one knee. A sob escaped her before she could call the sound back. The room grew quiet and still. His hands in hers shook ever so slightly. He hated crowds and noise and public displays, yet here he was braving all three for her.

“Lady Alice Lister,” he said solemnly. “I have loved you since the day I met you. A fact my brother, Frederick, took great joy in pointing out only an hour ago. You have been my comfort and friend, my faithful correspondent and steady anchor most of my life. I have come to realize I’m not very good at life without you, so as much as I know it will be a great sacrifice, I truly need you to continue to be my comfort and friend, my love and my steady anchor so long as we both shall live. Alice, my love, will you marry me?”

“Better say yes, gel,” a dowager in a monstrous orange turban said. “If you don’t, I will.”

“Yes, Sinjin,” Alice said as the room broke into laughter and applause. “Why on earth would I marry anyone else?” He was on his feet in a thrice, took her in his arms and kissed her until she could not breathe. He lifted her off her feet and spun around three times before lowering her feet to the floor. She cupped his face in her hands, the dearest face she had ever known. She feared her heart might burst from her chest with the love she felt for him,

“I am so sorry,” Alice whispered and gave a few hiccupping sobs. “I will spend the rest of our lives making up for deceiving you. I love you so much, Sinjin.”

“My dearest friend,” he whispered. “You are my heart and soul. Between us, there will never be anything to forgive. I love you, Alice Lister, and I always will.”

And he did.

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April, 1833

Perriton Grange

Surrey

“Seamus! Seamus!”

Alice looked up from her book and smiled as she watched her five-year-old son, Oliver, run up the steps to the terrace that stretched across the back of Perriton Grange. Seamus, now head gardener at The Grange, as it was known in the county, stopped his attention to the climbing roses on either side of the conservatory doors that led out to the terrace. He and Alice exchanged a grin as the excited little boy ran up to him, nearly out of breath.

“My flowers are blooming, Seamus. The ones we planted by the fishes. My daffils are blooming!” Oliver had yet to master the word daffodils, but daffils was close enough for Alice.

“Well of course they are, Master Oliver. Those daffils come from good stock, and you are a good gardener. Let’s have a look.” Seamus took Oliver by the hand, touched a finger to his cap, and turned back towards the steps that led into the spacious formal gardens that spanned the lawn between the main house and the river.

“Grandmama!” As he and Seamus descended the steps, Oliver spotted Sinjin’s mother walking in the garden with three-year-old Eleanor. “Come with us to see my flowers.”

“I come too,” Eleanor cried. “I want to see the flowers.”

“I planted them, Ellie, and they grew,” Oliver explained as he took his sister’s hand. “I’m a good gardener. Like Papa.” Mama waved at Alice as she took Eleanor’s other hand and they all made their way down the wide gravel path into the gardens.

Once the party of daffodil lovers walked out of view, Alice picked up her book and began to read once more. However, reading Cordelia’s latest novel in her *An Insatiable Lady* series proved a singular experience in Alice’s current condition. Not to put too fine a point on things, Alice had to admit that the scandalous novels written by Lady Cordelia Whitcombe, her aunt by virtue of her marriage to Alice’s Uncle Daedalus and now her sister-in-law by virtue of Alice’s marriage to Cordelia’s brother, were the very reason she was in her current condition. She shifted on the chaise longue in an attempt to ease the pain in her back caused by the weight of her third child, who would not make his or her appearance for another six weeks, according to Mister Carrington-Bowles and the local midwife.

“The lady of the manor left quite alone by her loyal subjects? This will not do.” Sinjin strode out of his conservatory followed by Andrew, the footman who had returned to Perriton Grange from London after Alice and Sinjin’s marriage. Like Sinjin, the footman preferred the country life to the noise and hurry of Town and now served as The Grange’s butler. Frederick had complained most vociferously to no avail.

“A shame and disgrace, is what it is, sir,” Andrew said in a fair imitation of the butler, Danders, who had stayed with Missus Beatty to take care of Master Frederick. He placed the tray he’d carried out from the house on the table next to Alice. “Tea, milady. And some of Betsy’s scones and the last of Mister Charpentier’s macarons.” He bowed and left the terrace, giving Sinjin a wink.

Sinjin settled onto the end of the chaise. “Where is everyone?” he asked as she poured herself a cup of tea and then began to butter a scone. Betsy was now the cook

at Perriton Grange, and she'd brought many of the Scots recipes of her ancestors with her.

"Oliver's daffils have commanded an audience with Seamus, Mama, and Ellie so that they might admire Oliver's gardening skills. Skills he inherited from his father, no doubt."

Sinjin grinned and began to remove Alice's slippers. "No doubt. Lest you forget, however, his father has other skills." Alice sighed as he began to massage her feet and ankles.

"He does indeed." She sipped her tea and closed her eyes as he used his powerful hands to work their magic on her aching feet. "Although one of those skills landed me in this condition, if you recall."

He laughed. "I do recall, actually." He kissed the top of the foot he'd been massaging and moved on to her other foot. "I recall quite vividly."

"I should have known in marrying a botanist I would be marrying a man who is skilled at planting seeds. Sinjin, careful!" She managed to return her teacup to the table without spilling any as he slid up the side of the chaise and took her into his arms. He brushed his lips across hers twice before settling in to give her a deep, sensuous kiss. She sifted her fingers through his hair, grown long to his shoulders since they'd decamped permanently to the country. He took his time savoring her mouth, nipping at her lips until she opened for him. Their tongues danced and glided in a slow exploration of each other, taking turns in leading the dance.

"Goodness," Alice gasped when he finally raised his head and looked into her eyes. "What was that for?"

"For everything, my love." He wrapped one arm around her to support her back. His other hand he rested on her swollen belly. "For all of this." He glanced around them

and then returned his piercing gaze to her. “For our children. For our life here. For taking charge of The Grange after we lost Father and Mama nearly followed him.” A fleeting expression of pain crossed his features. “She would have, you know, had it not been for the children and for you making her such an important part of their lives.”

Sinjin’s father had finally succumbed to his illness a year ago. He’d lived to see the birth of his grandson and granddaughter, thanks to the care of Mister Carrington-Bowles and the medicines he and Sinjin had developed together. Grandpapa, as the children had called him, had taken great joy in Oliver and Eleanor. He’d taken great pride in the man Sinjin had become, and went to his reward knowing Alice and Sinjin would take perfect care of the estate and of his beloved wife.

Frederick, who preferred life in London to that in the country, managed the family’s other two estates and their business concerns in Town. And Reggie? He took care of most of London’s widows and actresses, much to Sinjin and Frederick’s consternation. Reggie was, however, the perfect uncle who spent hours playing with the children when he visited. Uncle Frederick was much loved as well because he invariably brought the contents of most of the toy shops and a trunk of new children’s picture books with him each time he returned to The Grange.

“Oh, Sinjin, your father was far more dear to me than my own. I miss him so.” She sighed and brushed away a tear. “And Mama is far better than any hired nanny, though she does tend to spoil the children when we aren’t watching. You have given me everything I have ever wanted, you dear man. What more could I ask for?” She cupped his cheek and brushed her thumb across his face.

“Fortitude,” he said, one eyebrow raised. He pulled a stack of letters from beneath the plate of macarons. “They’re coming here for Easter.” She picked up the opened missives and quickly began to scan the contents.

“They who? How many...oh good Lord! I must speak to Betsy, and Andrew, and

Missus Batholomew.” She struggled to move off the chaise, but Sinjin trapped her with his body.

“Missus Bartholomew has everything in hand. She is our housekeeper, you know. They’re our family, my love, not an invading army.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “They eat like an invading army, and you know everything must be just so for Uncle Percy. Not to mention Lady Camilla is coming.”

“Which means more macarons for me.” Sinjin broke a macaron in half, held half to her lips and popped the other into his own mouth.

“All those people, and all of their children, and only two weeks to prepare? Are you mad? Let me up at once.” She sat up and heard a thunk as her book fell to the terrace. Sinjin bent and retrieved the tome. His face creased into a lascivious grin when he saw the title page.

“Yes, two weeks to prepare, but Olivia and Will are to arrive tomorrow and Cordelia and Daedalus arrive the day after that. You will have plenty of help and plenty of time.”

Alice took a deep breath and studied his sculpted face, tanned and relaxed from hours of work in his various gardens. He was at peace here, and she realized his peace was her peace. “You wrote to them and asked them to come early.”

“I sent a note by Dickie when he stopped here last month on his way back to Town.” He glanced around the terrace. “Which gives us a little time for you to read to me from this scandalous book, Missus Perriton. Make room, my love.”

Alice shifted over on the chaise, and he stretched out on his side next to her, his head on her shoulder and his hand resting on the child they were waiting to meet. In the distance she heard the exuberant voices of her children, a music she would hear often

in the gardens of Perriton Grange where generations of trampled daffodils would grow and thrive, like the adoration she had for her husband, who taught her that real beauty might be trampled but could never be destroyed. Real beauty rested within, safe and sound, and greatly loved.