



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CAROLE MORTIMER



THE GHOST

Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 6

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THE GHOST

Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 6

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DEDICATION

*My Family,
As always.*

PROLOGUE

His prison was both dark and damp.

Because, he had quickly surmised after using what light he had to search the room, there was only one window, and it was set high in the wall above him.

Which told him the large and empty space was below ground for the most part, which accounted for both the dark and the damp.

A cellar, then.

One which he had walked the length and breadth of several thousand times during his weeks, months—years?—of captivity. He no longer knew how long he had been imprisoned here.

Only the thin light of day or night filtered through the dirty window above.

He had tried, at first, to keep track of the ascent and descent of that light, but it soon became impossible to tell if it was daylight or moonlight. They very quickly melded into being both and neither.

Another consequence of being held prisoner so deep beneath the ground was that it gave him no view of the outside. Consequently, he had no point of familiarity with which to know where the house was with this large cellar beneath it.

Nor did he have any idea why, how, or who could have wanted to incarcerate him here.

There might be other people living in the house above him, but he had only ever seen a single jailer. An obese and balding man he knew he had never set eyes on before he woke in this damp and dark cellar so long ago. At the time, he had been dressed in his shirt and pantaloons, with only socks upon his feet. It felt as if the dampness and cold had managed to seep into his very bones.

Demanding to be told why he had been brought here was every time met with a blank expression from his jailer.

Which meant the other man was either deaf, uninterested, or did not have the intelligence to answer the question. Spencer had a feeling it was the latter, because several times, the other man had talked to himself after he had opened the door to place the food inside. Amongst those mutterings, he had heard the name Jacob, along with “nag, nag, nag.” As the man was talking to himself, it seemed accurate to conclude that his jailer’s name was Jacob.

Either way, the result was always an unhelpful silence whenever he asked for answers to his questions.

He knew who *he* was and where he had been previously, but not how he came to be in this dismal place.

When he checked his body for where he recalled being run through with the sword, it was to see recently healed-over flesh rather than a gaping or infected wound. He knew then he must have been somewhere else prior to being locked in this cellar and attended to by a doctor because such a terrible injury would never have healed so well or so cleanly if it had been left to heal by itself.

He had been here so long now that the scar had faded to a thin silver line, and his life, such as it was, had fallen into a haphazard routine. His memories of the privileged life he had led before this one proved too painful to dwell upon.

His jailer brought down a single slab of dry bread and a jug of water once a day. If he remembered.

If he did not, his prisoner went hungry.

The bread had to be eaten immediately, no matter how dry or maggot-infested it was, or the rats would come out and take it, and he would go hungry anyway.

The rats had tried to eat *him* a few times at the beginning of his imprisonment, but each time they attacked, he had managed to fight them off.

Eventually, he believed he had been rendered so disgusting, his hair and beard both long and unkempt and no doubt infested with lice, his clothes as ragged and odorous as he was, that even the rats no longer had any interest in him.

Perhaps they were also repulsed, as he was, by the stench coming from the bucket he kept in the farthest corner from where he slept on a bed of filthy straw with only a thin blanket to pull over himself. A bucket his jailer emptied only when he thought of it. Which was usually when the smell became so disgusting, it was strong enough to make their eyes water.

The window above was possibly ten inches square, far too small for him to break the glass and then climb out of, even if he could have climbed the sheer wall within which it was set. This was in spite of the fact he was now reduced to no more than skin and bone. He knew from the attempts he had made that this wall could not be scaled when there were no foot or handholds to aid him.

Every minute, every hour, every day, week, month was filled with interminable sameness.

He had wondered, as time passed, if this depravation would make him ill and eventually kill him. Which was possibly the intent of whoever had made him their prisoner. But it seemed his physical body was so robust, it refused to give in to such weakness.

He was not so confident of his mental faculties.

He would not be surprised if he had gone mad from a lack of mental stimulation of any kind. That, lost in that madness, he no longer had the grasp of enough of his own intelligence to realize how insane he now was.

The fear of that being the case was what spurred him on to find a way to escape.

When he was first brought here, his jailer had taken every precaution to avert that happening. Primarily by standing outside in the hallway and issuing the order for the prisoner to move to the back of the large room before the other man would unlock the door and open it only wide enough to push the bread and water inside. He would then hastily close and lock it again.

With the passing of time and only that meager fare to sustain him, the prisoner had become thinner, weaker, and less of a physical threat.

As a consequence, his jailer had grown less vigilant in those precautions. To the extent the other man no longer bothered ordering him to remain at the back of the room, and he now opened the door wide enough to step fully inside before placing the bread and water on the filthy floor.

For the past week, he had been fostering his jailer's relaxed attitude by not stirring from beneath his thin blanket when the other man brought his bread and water. Yesterday and the day before that, he had forced himself not to eat the bread. Not an easy feat when he believed he was slowly starving to death.

But he needed to fool his jailer into believing he was now so weak, he could no longer walk across the room to claim and eat the bread, let alone attempt to escape.

He had been leaning for some time against the wall behind where the door would open. He had to, with no way of gauging time or when his jailer would stir himself to see to his prisoner.

He sincerely hoped that the bulking up of the filthy straw beneath the thin blanket looked enough like a body to his jailer for the other man to enter with even less caution than he usually did.

The bucket, which was the only item in the room that could be used as a weapon, had been emptied of its contents—an occurrence that had caused him to gag and then heave up the

meager contents of his stomach, mainly an acidic bile—and he now awaited the arrival of the jailer.

He prayed he did not succumb to the dizzy weakness before that happened. Or that this would be one of the days when the jailer forgot to feed him at all.

His heart leapt, his hands clenching about the bucket, the moment he heard the other man's lumbering steps as he made his way down a staircase, and then the scuffing of his shoes along the length of the hallway to the locked wooden door.

This, he knew, would be his only chance.

If he didn't make good his escape today, he knew he would not have the energy to try again and would, in all probability, be left here to die.

His heart faltered as the door began to swing open, the hinges creaking in protest.

Wider.

Then wider still.

"Wake up yer lazy arse," the jailer scorned as he set down the bread and water before straightening. "I don't have all day ter waste—" His complaint was cut short as the metal bucket landed forcefully against the side of his head, and he fell heavily to the ground, unconscious.

For a second or two, the prisoner didn't move, couldn't move. The single action of swinging the bucket hard enough to render the jailer unconscious had taken all of his strength.

It was the urgency to leave the oppression of his prison, along with the fact he had no idea if there was someone in the house above waiting for his jailer to return, which finally spurred him into grabbing up the jug of water and slab of bread.

He drank the former before his teeth hungrily ripped into the bread, not stopping until all the water and food had been consumed. It was nowhere near enough to restore the strength he had lost, but hopefully, it would be enough for him to withstand the assault of any other inhabitants of the house.

But before he did that, after first removing the other man's boots, he pushed his jailer the rest of the way inside the cellar and closed and locked the door behind him. The door was so thick, he doubted that if the jailer recovered consciousness, anyone would hear the other man's cries for help in time to alert his associates to the escape of their prisoner.

Even with the help of the lit candle the jailer had left outside, obviously to light his way down and then back along the dark hallway, it took longer than the prisoner would have wished to reach the stairs.

He carried the appropriated boots beneath his other arm, intending to wait until he was outside the house before pulling them on. If he managed to get that far, he wished for his escape to be as silent as possible.

When he reached the top of the stairs, there was another closed door.

Most cellars had entry and egress through the kitchen. More often than not, they were used to store wine, giving the butler easy access to whichever wine his employer wished to accompany his dinner on any particular evening.

Logically, that would mean when the door was opened, he would step directly into the kitchen and therefore be within eyesight of anyone working there. He doubted his jailer had been living on bread and water for all this time.

Thankfully, the hinges of this door did not creak as he opened it an inch before bending his head to look through that gap and, at the same time, listen to the noises of the room behind the door.

There was no banging of pots to indicate the preparation of a meal.

No chatter to allow him to gauge how many people there were in the room.

There was, however, the sound of snoring.

Deep and sonorous snoring.

After pushing the door open another inch and accustoming his eyes to the sudden brightness of light after being in darkness for so long, he was able to look farther into the room beyond.

An old crone sat in a rocking chair set beside the fire, her eyes closed, her mouth hanging open to create that loud snore. Her mobcap was tilted askew over escaping tendrils of gray hair. She looked to be of a similar age to his jailer and might possibly be his wife.

There was a jug sitting on the table beside her and an empty mug beside that.

No doubt they had both once contained a cheap ale of some kind, but the deepness of the woman's sleep implied that was no longer the case. Hopefully, her deep sleep would continue long enough for her not to become aware of her husband's prolonged absence.

The delicious smell of food cooking came from a large pot hanging over the flames of the fire. At a guess, it was a stew of some kind.

His stomach gurgled so loudly upon breathing in the tempting smell, he froze in place in the doorway to the cellar, fearing it might wake the old woman from her drunken stupor.

She remained unconscious, allowing him to place the candle on the table before making his way silently to the back door.

On his way across the room, he spotted a block of wood in which an assortment of knives were kept. Choosing one of middle size, he wrapped it in a scrap of cloth and pushed it into the waistband of his ragged pantaloons. It would either help him defend himself or provide a way of killing and preparing any small game he came across so that he might eat and regain the strength he was so sorely lacking.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the back door opened without a sound. He turned to cast one last cautious glance about the kitchen before slipping outside.

As he drew in his first breath of fresh air in far too long, he vowed that whoever had done this to him would pay, and pay dearly.

Possibly with their life.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Winter, 1816

Lincoln House, London

“Care to tell us what this meeting is about, Lincoln, so that I can return as soon as possible to the warm embrace of my beautiful wife?” Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford, drawled as he entered the study where the other four remaining Ruthless Dukes were already gathered.

“I second that,” Grayson Vaughn, the Duke of Flint, muttered from where he sat in the chair beside the window. “But to my own wife’s warm embrace, of course.”

“Third it.” Alaric Montrose, the Duke of Melborne nodded his agreement with the sentiment as he leaned against the wall beside the lit fireplace.

“Fourth it.” The Duke of Bristol’s nostrils flared impatiently as he flung himself down into the vacant chair in front of the desk.

“I ain’t got a wife, and I would still rather not be here,” Robert Granger muttered. He was now the heir to the title of the Duke of Plymouth.

Their host, Hunter St. John, the Duke of Lincoln, scowled at them all darkly from where he sat behind that imposing desk. “If any of you think for a single moment I would not rather be in the company of my own wife, engaged in far more pleasurable pursuits, then you are all sadly mistaken.”

“Then why have you brought us here?” Oxford demanded to know.

Flint nodded. “I thought we had agreed last week when we returned from the Continent after spending two months there, unsuccessful in our endeavors to discover what had become of Plymouth’s body, that we would not meet again for several weeks?”

“That is because we had all grown heartily sick of each other’s company.” Robert Granger grimaced.

“Speak for yourself, young man.” Bristol looked down the haughty length of his nose at him.

But they all knew, to a man, that Robert Granger was correct in his statement.

They had all been so despondent at their lack of success in locating the body of their dear friend, the previous Duke of Plymouth, that in the end, even to look at each other had become a stark reminder of that failure.

Having learned several months ago that the body in the Plymouth family crypt was not, as they had thought, their close friend and the sixth Ruthless Duke, Spencer Granger, the previous Duke of Plymouth, the five of them, accompanied by their wives and Robert Granger, had traveled to Waterloo to question the local people.

All in an effort to try to ascertain what had become of Plymouth after his body was seen being loaded aboard a cart and driven away to God knows where.

The answers to their inquiries had proven to be less than helpful. No one, it seemed, had seen a cart going into or out of the woods that day. Nor did they have any idea where it might have gone after it left the woods, carrying Plymouth along with it.

As a consequence, upon their return to London, the five remaining Ruthless Dukes and Robert Granger had decided they would not meet again for several weeks in the hope this would allow them all time and distance from each other to recover from their disappointment.

Indeed, they had agreed they would meet again before that time only if fresh evidence were presented for them to investigate. Or if one of them had come up with an idea of how to approach the problem of locating Plymouth's body in a manner that would prove successful this time.

It was obvious from all their comments just now that none of them had any new evidence, nor did any of them appear to have formed a new plan in which they might continue their inquiries.

Indeed, the look of despondency on each of their faces implied they were all still downhearted regarding their friend's death and the subsequent disappearance of his corpse.

Lincoln narrowed his gaze on each of them before stating firmly, "I did not call this meeting."

"I received a letter from you this morning requesting my presence here this evening," Bristol insisted.

"As did I," Oxford stated.

Melborne nodded. "And I."

Robert Granger also nodded. "The same."

Flint pursed his lips before speaking. "Admittedly, the letter was not written in your own hand, Lincoln," he mused. "But I had assumed you must have taken on a secretary to carry out the more tedious of your ducal duties now that you are otherwise...occupied in spending time with your wife."

Lincoln's mouth twisted without humor at the taunt. "I have not employed a secretary. Nor did I write the missives you each received this morning. Indeed, I received one myself, telling me to prepare for the arrival of seven visitors this evening." He nodded toward the silver tray on his desktop, upon which a decanter of brandy and eight glasses stood.

"Seven visitors?" Melborne glanced pointedly about the room. "There are only five of us. Six counting yourself, of course, but you cannot be classed as a visitor in your own home."

Lincoln snorted. "I am starting to feel like one when some unknown person has dared to issue invitations to all of you on

my behalf.”

“It is vexing, to be sure.” Oxford frowned.

“I wonder—” Lincoln broke off as his butler appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Stokes?”

“Mr. Stanley is here asking to see you, Your Grace.”

James Stanley had been valet to the previous Duke of Plymouth. He had returned to England some months ago and was now employed in helping the remaining Ruthless Dukes and Plymouth’s heir in their efforts to discover the truth of how Plymouth died and where his body now rested.

The arrival of Mr. Stanley now, at the same meeting the five dukes and Granger had been invited to attend, perhaps meant the other man had fresh information on that subject.

“Well, show him in, man,” Lincoln said testily.

The butler hesitated. “There is another gentleman with him, Your Grace.”

“And?”

Stokes looked uncomfortable. “The second gentleman refuses to give me his name or remove his hat and cloak.”

“Odd behavior,” Bristol muttered.

“Very,” Oxford agreed.

“Some of Stanley’s informants can be less than...presentable,” Flint reminded.

“But the arrival of Stanley and his cohort does bring the number of visitors to seven,” Melborne pointed out.

“So it does.” Robert Granger nodded.

Lincoln turned to his butler. “Show both gentlemen in, Stokes.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure, Your Grace?”

Lincoln gave a reassuring smile. “What I am very sure of is that Mr. Stanley would not bring anyone into my home who meant to do any of us harm.”

“He might if he was being made to do so,” the butler reasoned.

Lincoln’s brows rose. “Does Mr. Stanley look as if he is acting under duress?”

“Not exactly, Your Grace,” Stokes allowed.

“In what way ‘not exactly’?” Bristol prompted.

“I have always found Mr. Stanley to be a quiet and serious gentleman, Your Grace.”

“He is not quiet and serious this evening?” Lincoln frowned.

“Oh, he is, but there is also an underlying...excitement to his manner.”

“Excitement?” Oxford echoed.

Melborne straightened. “I suggest we stop discussing the subject and have Stokes show both gentlemen in. We can then decide Mr. Stanley’s mood for ourselves,” he bit out impatiently. “There will also be six of us against one if Mr. Stanley’s guest should prove to be more than he seems.”

“And what do I *seem* to be to you, gentlemen?”

Every head in the room turned sharply in the direction of the cloaked and hatted man currently standing in the open doorway behind Stokes.

The man stepped farther into the room, revealing himself as being several inches over six feet tall. Short, tousled dark curls were visible beneath his hat, and while they could not yet see his face clearly, there was a glitter of intense blue beneath the brim of that hat.

“Your voice...” Robert Granger openly stared at the man.

“Illusion,” Melborne muttered.

“It has to be...” Bristol agreed as he rose slowly to his feet.

“I assure you, my friends, I am very real.” The man removed his hat so that his face was now fully revealed to them.

Six shocked gasps sounded loudly in the room, and the face of each of those men had turned white as chalk.

The man removed his cloak and handed both it and his hat to Stokes with the comment. "I apologize for any concern I might have caused you."

"That is perfectly... There is no need... It is so very good to see you again, Your Grace," the butler managed before hurrying from the room.

The visitor stepped forward to look about the room at the six men staring at him as if they still feared he was an apparition. "I assure you I am not a ghost, gentlemen."

No one moved nor spoke as they all attempted to digest the knowledge that the sixth Ruthless Duke, Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth, was now standing before them.

His face was gaunter than any of them had ever seen it. His jaw was sharp. His eyes were a hard and glittering blue, with none of the laughter lines beside them they all remembered.

His frame was also much thinner than previously, made to appear more so in the tailored black superfine and waistcoat.

Despite those changes, there was not a single doubt in any of their minds that the haughty and cold gentleman standing before them was truly their missing friend, Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth.

And he was not, as they had believed, dead and buried in a nameless grave somewhere, but still very much alive.

Spencer wondered, as he took in the shocked white faces of his five closest friends and that of his cousin Robert, if he should perhaps have chosen a less dramatic manner in which to alert them all to his being alive. Rather than, as he now knew from Mr. Stanley, them having all believed he was dead after being struck down at Waterloo.

He also knew from Mr. Stanley how long and arduously his friends and his cousin had searched for news of him once it had been revealed that his body had been loaded into a cart and transported from the battle.

Spencer wished he could tell them what had happened to him directly after that, but he had no memory of being loaded aboard the cart nor where he had been taken and kept until his wound had healed.

He truly had not been aware of anything until he woke in the dark, damp cellar that had become his prison.

At the time, he'd had no idea how long he had been kept there either. But he knew now, again from Mr. Stanley, that when he arrived in London a month ago, a full sixteen months had passed since everyone believed the Duke of Plymouth had met his end at the Battle of Waterloo.

His cousin quickly crossed the room to pull him into a fierce hug. "Good Lord, coz, you have no idea how pleased I am to have you return to us alive, after all!" He gave Spencer a delighted smile as he stepped back, his face alight with the same happiness his words expressed.

Spencer looked at him quizzically. "Even if my return means you will no longer be the Duke of Plymouth?"

Robert's grin widened. "And a happier circumstance I cannot imagine." He grimaced when Spencer arched a questioning brow. "Your being alive means that your friends will no longer believe me responsible for your demise."

"You are not cleared of that suspicion yet," Melborne taunted. "We have yet to hear the details of Plymouth's disappearance."

Robert gave a disgusted shake of his head. "I have also discovered these past months that being a duke ain't at all the privilege it appears to be, coz."

Spencer eyed him ruefully. "In what way?" He had been a duke for so long that he had only learned this past year and a half what it meant not to be known and treated as the recipient of that title.

His cousin straightened the cuff of his white shirt beneath his black superfine. "For one thing, I ain't been allowed to wear the clothes I prefer. These surly buggers, and even their wives on occasion, have lectured me on what clothing they think is suitable for a duke to wear."

Spencer smiled. "I have always rather liked your penchant for wearing brightly colored apparel."

"As have I." Robert turned to give the other men in the room a triumphant look. "Which is why, tomorrow morning, I intend to visit my tailor and be measured for several new jackets and waistcoats in the gaudiest materials I can find. I shall then demand that they be made as quickly as possible so that I can go back to being the fashionable peacock known only as Lord Robert Granger."

"Then do not expect an invitation to dine at my table," Bristol informed him haughtily.

Spencer turned to look at all the other dukes in the room. They looked slightly less shocked than they had a few minutes ago but they all still stared at him as if they could not quite believe their eyes.

Something Spencer had felt himself when he first caught sight of his own reflection after escaping from the house in which he had been held prisoner. He had not recognized the thin and bedraggled man reflected back at him in the river as being himself. His matted, long dark curls hung greasily down his back, and a beard covered the lower half of a face gaunt from deprivation. Only his eyes, a clear and piercing blue, had looked familiar to him.

He had cut his dark locks and shaved since arriving back in London and now also wore tailored clothes.

But still, he was changed, and God knows how his five closest friends must feel upon seeing him risen from the dead. Still obviously their friend Plymouth, but changed, he believed, inwardly as well as outwardly.

"Good God, Plymouth, I still cannot believe it really is you!" The words burst out of Melborne as he crossed the room in two long strides to pull Spencer into a hug before pulling back slightly to look at him closely. "My God, man, you look absolutely dreadful!"

Spencer laughed for what felt like the first time in years. Definitely, the first since he had fallen at Waterloo, run

through with a sword. Trust Melborne to be the one to speak with such blunt but good-natured honesty.

“You might look the same as I do if you were recently risen from the dead!” he mocked before sobering. “You should have seen me two months ago when I escaped my prison and jailer.” He gave a shake of his head. “Or even a month ago, when I arrived in London and was able to locate and ask Mr. Stanley to help me return to at least some of my former robustness.”

Five pairs of accusing eyes turned and leveled on James Stanley.

“You was all on the Continent when he appeared like a bloody ghost on my doorstep,” his valet defended. “Once I had recovered from me faint”—his ruddy cheeks reddened slightly—“’is Grace swore me to secrecy regarding telling anyone as to ’is being alive and in London.”

Spencer grimaced. “I wished to be a little more like my previous self before facing you all again.”

“You are here now. That is all that matters.” Lincoln walked toward Spencer as if in a trance before hugging him as tightly as Melborne had done. “Indeed, I believe we should put aside any and all recriminations and instead celebrate the fact that our dear friend Plymouth is very much alive.” He stepped back to begin pouring brandy into the eight glasses.

The remaining Ruthless Dukes each hugged and slapped Spencer on the back in turn.

All remained standing close to him once their embraces were at an end, their happy smiles accompanied by the glitter of tears in their eyes. Even Bristol, not known for showing his emotions, seemed overcome with joy by Spencer’s return from the dead.

“Gentlemen.” Lincoln handed out the brandy glasses himself. “A toast to give thanks for the safe return of our dearest and very much missed friend.”

All made the toast enthusiastically.

“I believe Robert mentioned something about each of you now having a wife...?” Spencer teased once they had all partaken

of the brandy.

His friends all looked suitably abashed, Oxford's stern cheeks going so far as to redden slightly. "To a man, we all met our wives on our search for who had struck you down," he explained.

"And you are all happy with your choice?"

"Very," they all confirmed in unison.

"And what of your sister Lady Rowena?" he prompted Flint.

"She is well, I hope?"

"Very well, and now also my mother-in-law, having married my wife's father, Lord Nicholas Hall." He narrowed his gaze on Spencer. "And do not think I am unaware of the ruse the two of you practiced upon the rest of us the year before we went off to war in regard to having pretended you were fond of each other."

"We are fond of each other," Spencer insisted.

"But not in a romantic way," Flint insisted.

"Well...no," he conceded. "But Rowena was exhausted by being courted for her money, and I..." He broke off. "At the time, my affections were engaged by a young lady who was betrothed to another man. A betrothal I had believed she was about to bring to an end so that the two of us could be together. I have learned since my return that she married him after all. That she did so within weeks of learning of my death," he added bitterly before frowning darkly. "But Stanley informs me she has since been widowed."

"I can think of only one young lady who has been all of those things in the past sixteen months," Bristol said slowly.

Spencer's mouth tightened. "Then I advise that you keep her identity to yourself."

One of the first things he had asked of Mr. Stanley was that the other man seek out news of Olivia. His valet had regretfully informed him that Olivia had married the Comte de Fontbleau over a year ago, but that she had been the comte's widow for the past six months.

Finding himself enamored before having gone off to war with a young woman who was betrothed to another had been difficult enough. But to now learn that she had, after all, chosen to marry the man she was betrothed to was beyond bearing.

The fact that Olivia had since been widowed did not detract from Spencer's sense of betrayal that she had chosen not only to continue her betrothal, but marry the other man.

As if the love she and Spencer had once professed to feel for each other had never existed.

And perhaps it had not.

Which meant he must now put all thought of the woman he had once loved firmly from his mind.

Not an easy thing to do when he was sure Olivia had been the only reason he had managed to maintain his sanity during his long months of imprisonment.

It had been the hope of seeing her again, being with her again, telling and showing her how much he still loved and wished to be with her, that had kept his lungs breathing and his heart beating.

He had felt utterly foolish for having harbored such hopes and dreams once Stanley told him she had married another man.

Those initial feelings of foolishness had now turned to anger. Toward himself as well as Olivia.

Her for the lack of any depth or longevity of her proclaimed feelings for him.

Himself for ever having thought himself in love with such a shallow young woman.

He knew well enough what his reputation had been a year and a half ago. That his wealth and title rendered him and his equally wealthy and titled friends as being very eligible bachelors.

An eligibility which Spencer acknowledged he had taken full advantage of over the years, with no real interest or intent of ever marrying any of the widows with whom he dallied.

He had thought Olivia was different to those other women, that her feelings for him were genuine rather than her having her eyes on the Plymouth fortune.

But he realized now he should have taken into account she was only the daughter of a baron. An impoverished one, at that, with a son and three daughters to see make an advantageous marriage.

The Miller family was in need of a fortune, and no doubt de Fontbleau had provided them with that when Olivia became his wife. That she was now the other man's widow and only living relative would have meant Olivia had inherited all of the Frenchman's fortune.

A comte was nowhere near as wealthy as a duke, but Spencer knew that the de Fontbleau fortune had been extensive in property and money.

Added to which, Spencer knew from remarks Olivia had made to him the previous year, that her parents believed Spencer to only be playing with her affections rather than having any serious intentions toward her. Olivia had told him her mother had been very vocal on the subject of his dissolute and flirtatious behavior and how foolish Olivia was to believe Spencer's lies.

Both the baron and his wife had cautioned Olivia that a rich comte who wished to marry her was worth far more than a very wealthy duke who had only ever flirted with and then discarded the widows he usually became involved with.

Usually—because Spencer had never before been attracted to a single young woman like Olivia.

Spencer had tried to resist her beauty at first, aware that the fourteen-year difference in their ages and her betrothed state made one of the brief liaisons Spencer usually indulged in impossible.

But Olivia's distinctive beauty—her golden hair, amber eyes, and full and desirable figure—was such that it became impossible for him not to notice her. Not to spend time with her at every society event the two of them found themselves

attending. Spencer admitted that after their first meeting, he had deliberately arranged to be at those same society events.

As he came to know Olivia better, he had fallen in love with not only her beauty, but also her ready intelligence and gentle wit.

She had led him to believe she returned those feelings.

Only for him to have now learned that once she was informed of his death, she had wasted absolutely no time in marrying the man to whom she was betrothed.

That Olivia was now a widow was ironic when his previous taste had always been toward such ladies. But he had been burned by Olivia once. He would not be so again.

It was doubly ironic that he had returned to London to be told all five of his friends were now happily married.

Spencer looked forward to meeting all their wives and knew from Mr. Stanley the part those ladies had played in helping to search for their husbands' missing friend.

"I, for one, should like to know where the hell you have been all this time?" Lincoln voiced the question, which was no doubt of interest to all the other gentlemen in the room.

Except for Mr. Stanley, of course. Spencer had already told his valet all that he remembered of that horrific time.

"Hell perfectly describes the place of my imprisonment," Spencer acknowledged bleakly.

"Which was where?" Bristol prompted.

"I do not know exactly," Spencer admitted. "I only know I woke up in a dark and damp cellar, that I spent many months there, slowly starving to death. That once I managed to escape, I staggered as far from my prison as possible for fear of being recaptured and once again incarcerated. Once I felt sure I was not being followed, I stopped to wash myself and my ragged clothing in a river. I was disgusting to both sight and smell." He grimaced. "I believe I must have fallen unconscious on the riverbank after that exertion, because when I woke, I was lying

beside the warmth of a fire within the confines of a gypsy encampment.”

His thoughts turned inward to that time of deep uncertainty, knowing the gypsies were just as likely to kill him as save him.

“I petitioned the leader of that tribe, a lady of sixty or so, to grant me permission to remain with them as they traversed the countryside on their way to London, with the promise they would be reimbursed for their trouble once we reached the capital. A request she granted.” Once they reached London, Spencer had duly given her the several thousand pounds agreed upon, acquired for him by Stanley through his lawyer.

“So you were being held captive in England this whole time?” Robert frowned.

“I do not think at first, no,” he answered slowly. “All I know is that by the time I regained my senses, the wound in my belly was healed, and I was already imprisoned in the cellar, with only a single jailer to attend me. When he was not too drunk to remember my existence, that is,” he added bitterly. “He was probably aged in his sixties, and I once heard him refer to himself as Jacob,” he added helpfully.

“Where was this house in which you were incarcerated?” Oxford frowned darkly.

Spencer grimaced. “I wish I could tell you. All I know for certain is that it was in the north of England.”

He had not been completely aware of his surroundings during that first week of freedom, too weak from starvation to be able to keep his wits about him for long to take note of where he was. Nor when he questioned the gypsies before they parted in London had they been able to tell him of any large houses in the area where they had found him. Leading him to realize he must have walked farther than he thought after escaping, making finding the location of that prison impossible.

“Any idea who was responsible for instructing the man, Jacob, to hold you captive?” Melborne demanded to know.

Spencer's mouth twisted wryly. "I do not know the answer to that either. Or why," he added abruptly. "But now that I am returned, I do intend, with your assistance, to discover the answer to both those questions." And to make whoever was responsible pay for his months of suffering.

CHAPTER TWO

“I assure you he is back!”

“No!”

“Yes, yes!”

“But we were told he had died.”

“Then he has returned from the grave!”

“Who has said so?”

“He has been *seen*, my dear.”

“Where and by whom?”

“Departing the home of one of the other Ruthless Dukes.”

Olivia maintained her usual outward calm and smiled in the right places as she listened to her three married friends chatter over their afternoon tea. One of those ladies was their hostess, Lady Mary Corrigan.

The mothers of all four young ladies were also in the green-and-white decorated salon, but sitting slightly apart from them, the older ladies preferring their own company and conversation.

Her own mother, Baroness Daphne Miller, enjoyed the higher level of company being the mother of a comtesse now afforded her. The money Gerard had given her parents upon their marriage helped to sustain that appearance of social elevation.

Immediately after Olivia was made a widow, the baroness had asked her to pay her family a monthly stipend. Which Olivia

had duly done.

But no amount of money could change the fact that her mother's taste in clothes was garish, to say the least, nor did it do anything to dampen her shrill and forceful manner.

It made Olivia cringe now to hear how her mother was currently making her opinions known to the other older ladies on everything from the weather to fashions in that overbearing and forthright manner.

However, mention of the Ruthless Dukes had now brought Olivia's attention fully back to the content of her own friends' conversation.

She leaned forward to carefully place her cup and saucer down on the coffee table in front of the chaise on which she was sitting.

There were six men in society known as the Ruthless Dukes. Five of them were still very much alive and present in society. In fact, they had all married during the past year.

The sixth member of their exclusive group, the Duke of Plymouth, was known to have been killed during the battle at Waterloo the previous year.

"Who has seen him?" Lady Rebecca Thorne demanded to know.

"Yes, Jane, do tell," Lady Mary Corrigan encouraged.

Olivia clenched her hands together to prevent any of her friends seeing how badly they were shaking. "Ladies." She raised her voice enough to be heard over their excited speculation. "Would you please tell me whom you are talking about?"

"The Duke of Plymouth, of course," Lady Jane Palmer, the Countess of Ryle, dismissed.

Olivia frowned. "Robert Granger?"

"*Spencer* Granger," Rebecca corrected her.

Olivia felt a sharp pain in her chest. "But he died at Waterloo."

“Apparently not.” Mary could hardly contain her excitement at having this conversation take place in her marital home. “Jane says he has been *seen*, my dear. As tall and handsome as the devil, and larger than life, as he ever was.”

Olivia’s throat moved as she swallowed. “Then where has he been all this time?”

“No one knows,” Jane answered her gleefully. “Is it not the most exciting thing you have heard in an age?”

Olivia was grateful that the question required no answer because she could not have spoken at that moment if someone had offered her the crown jewels to do so.

Thankfully, her mother did not seem to have overheard any of their conversation. Otherwise, once they left here today, Olivia knew she would never hear the end of it.

“Lucy Grant told me she saw Robert Granger emerge from his tailor’s wearing a yellow waistcoat, green pantaloons, and a red superfine.” Jane giggled. “He is happily returned to looking every bit the peacock he was before he inherited the Plymouth title.”

The speculation continued, but luckily Olivia’s friends were too busy chattering about Spencer Granger’s return from the dead to notice that she added very little to their conversation.

How could she possibly join in their excited speculation when it was taking all her self-control to remain seated rather than rushing out of the house and finding some way in which to confirm for herself that Spencer really was alive after all.

It took great effort to make herself sit for an hour or so more in an effort not to draw unwanted attention to herself. Something she knew her mother would immediately question.

But inwardly, she could not help but wonder what Spencer must think of her if he had returned to learn she had married so soon after being informed of his death.

The two of them had last spoken the previous May, shortly before Spencer left London to rejoin his regiment in the continuing war against the newly escaped Napoleon and his army as they fought their way toward Paris.

At the time, they had not known Spencer would be returning to take part in what would be the final battle against the Corsican, Napoleon and his men having surrendered thereafter.

Just as they had not known it would be the last time the two of them would be with each other.

The memory of their last evening together, along with the words they had spoken to each other, had remained with Olivia, sustained her during the weeks and months that followed being told Spencer had died in the battle at Waterloo.

No one else was aware of their reciprocal feelings. Therefore, there was no one with whom she could talk of the heartbreak she had suffered upon being informed of his death.

Certainly not her mother, who, having noticed the time they spent talking together at different society events, had warned Olivia she was making a fool of herself. Over a gentleman who would not give her a second thought once he and his friends returned from the excitement of fighting Napoleon.

Olivia fiercely disagreed with that opinion and continued to see and speak with Spencer as often as she could.

They had met at Vauxhall Gardens that last evening before Spencer left England, as so many couples often did when they were not betrothed or married to each other.

Olivia had attended the pleasure gardens with a group of female friends, chaperoned by Lord and Lady Abbot, the parents of one of the girls. There were ten girls in all, far too many for the Abbots to keep an eye on all at once, which had been the girls' intention all along.

The main part of the gardens was illuminated every few yards by torches to light the way. But the paths and arbors away from the general entertainments were not so brightly lit nor so populated, resulting in many shadowed arbors where forbidden couples might meet and enjoy each other's company.

On that final late May evening together, Olivia and Spencer had been one of those couples.

“You are so very beautiful.” The warmth of Spencer’s hand cradled one of her cheeks as his lips moved hotly down the length of her throat. The moist rasp of his tongue explored the hollows at its base before Spencer lifted his head to look at her. His eyes glittered sapphire blue in the moonlight, his hair the blue-black of a raven’s wing. “How long do we have to enjoy each other before you will be missed?”

Olivia felt a delicious thrill down the length of her spine. “As long as we wish. My friends have agreed to cover for me if any questions are asked.”

She did not add that those friends believed her to be secretly meeting with the man her parents had announced her betrothal to just a week previously. The Comte de Fontbleau was very wealthy, his family and their fortune having escaped the butchery of the French Revolution twenty years earlier before being welcomed to and settling in England. Gerard de Fontbleau had been aged only twenty at the time, but in the twenty years since, his mother and father had both died, and Gerard, as their only child, had inherited both the title and all the wealth of the de Fontbleau family.

Her parents, Baron and Baroness Miller, had been thrilled when the forty-year-old Comte Gerard de Fontbleau offered for Olivia toward the end of her second Season.

So thrilled they had accepted the offer on her behalf and only informed her of the betrothal after it had already been announced in the newspaper.

Olivia had immediately told them she could not marry the comte because she was in love with another man. Not just any other man, but Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth.

Her mother had laughed, long and loudly, after she had told her parents the name of the man with whom she had fallen in love.

Olivia knew the reason for her amusement. She was fully aware that Spencer, aged two and thirty, had a reputation for flirtations and affairs with widowed ladies. She was aged only eighteen, and not married or widowed, and not the duke’s known type of paramour at all.

“Have your parents ended your betrothal yet?” Spencer had pressed.

Her heart felt heavy. “I have asked them to do so. Several times since it was announced a week ago. But my parents are adamant you are only playing with my emotions and that I shall marry the comte.”

“And I, my darling Olivia, am equally as adamant you shall not,” Spencer informed her huskily.

Olivia felt bereft when he removed the warmth of his hand from her cheek, but she breathed more easily again when he first removed his superfine before laying it down on top of the grass.

“Come, lay down your cloak, and we shall sit here together and discuss this predicament further.” He held his hand out in invitation to her after dropping down to sit on his jacket.

“We shall sit and discuss this predicament?” Olivia repeated flirtatiously as she placed her cloak next to his jacket before sitting beside him, the skirt of her gown arranged decorously about her. “You really wish to waste our last evening together before you rejoin your regiment in conversation?”

She had been flattered beyond belief when, two weeks earlier, the Duke of Plymouth had invited her to dance at the Brittons’ Ball. Almost too much so for her to be able to answer him when he engaged her in conversation. But as that first dance became two, then three, and then four, her shyness had dissipated, and she had begun to enjoy his company.

They had separately attended three other social events that same week. At both balls, Spencer Granger had invited her to dance. He had even sat beside her at the musical recital, offering words of appreciation or wincing in despair at some of the more amateur offerings they were given.

Olivia had at first refused her hostess’s invitation for her to play the piano for them, but she had been unable to deny Spencer Granger when he requested the same.

He told her the following evening, when the two of them were enjoying refreshments together at the Hopton’s ball, that when

she began to play the piano the previous evening, that was the moment he had known himself to be in love with her. That she had looked like an angel as her delicate fingers moved swiftly over the piano keys, her hair gleaming golden in the candlelight, and her amber eyes glowing with happiness.

Olivia had been flattered, but equally shocked by his announcement.

After all, the duke was more than a decade older than her, very handsome, and it was known by all in Society that none of the Ruthless Dukes had ever been interested in marrying. Why should they when they were all handsome as the devil and rich as Croesus!

That same evening, she and Spencer had escaped to the Hoptons' conservatory to spend time alone together.

To the Cliftons' long gallery two evenings after that.

To the Helliers' garden the following evening.

And they were both aware each time they stole those moments alone together that Spencer had orders to return to his regiment to join in the battle that was currently brewing at a place on the Continent called Waterloo.

"I wish," Spencer now answered her, "as I have requested on numerous occasions, for you to tell me your betrothal is over. So that I might return to fighting against Napoleon's tyranny, knowing that you will be waiting for me, and I might freely ask your father for your hand in marriage when I return."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she stared at him with wide eyes. "You wish to marry me?"

Her mother, at least, had been so sure that Plymouth was only dallying with her during those evenings when he had singled her out for his attentions. The older woman had gone so far as to point out that the duke's obvious "friendship" with the widowed Lady Rowena Summers was widely known by members of the ton.

Olivia's certainty had wavered when she was reminded of that friendship.

But not so much that she could persuade herself to stay away from Spencer.

He now eyed her tenderly. "Why else do you think I have petitioned you so ardently to go to your father and have him put an end to your betrothal to de Fontbleau?"

"I thought... I imagined... " Her cheeks bloomed with heat. "I believed you only intended to make me another of your conquests."

"Damnation, no!" A frown creased his brow. "I regret my reputation more than I can say." He took both her hands in his, his expression ardent. "I love you, Olivia. I swear I will always love you. But I cannot approach your father to ask for your hand in marriage while your betrothal to de Fontbleau still stands."

A sob caught in her throat. "My mother insists that you are trifling with me and that my own feelings for you are merely those of a young girl's infatuation for a man I cannot have."

"Utter nonsense. You already have me, my love," Spencer assured her fervently.

Another sob escaped her. "She says that once I am married to the comte, and my first child is born, I shall have no time for daydreams and will forget all about you. But I will never forget you, Spencer, or the love I feel for you. Never!"

"Do not cry, darling." His thumbs gently wiped away the tears that had begun to fall down her cheeks. "I cannot bear it when you cry." His voice was raw with that same agony of emotion as he lowered his head and fiercely claimed her lips.

It was as if a tempest of emotions had burst and now overwhelmed both of them. Their kisses became more frantic. The caress of their hands more intimate. As if their parting tomorrow made them all the more desperate to physically confirm their love for each other.

Olivia gasped when, seconds later, she felt Spencer's fingers parting the slit in her drawers, followed by the most exquisite pleasure she had ever known as those fingers stroked and pressed against the swollen flesh there.

Spencer's fingers stilled at the sound of her gasp. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No!" She pressed his hand firmly against her. "Please!" She looked up at him with tear-wet eyes. She felt as if she were poised on the precipice of falling into a vast ocean of pleasure and only needed to take that plunge to feel a hitherto unknown ecstasy. "Please," she groaned again.

"Do you trust me?"

"Always," she vowed.

Spencer's hands shook slightly as he unfastened the buttons on her gown and then pulled the bodice down enough to release the fullness of her breasts, the tips rose-colored and engorged. He held her gaze briefly before his head lowered, and he captured one of those ripe berries in his mouth. He groaned his own pleasure as he began to suckle and rasp his tongue across that sensitive tip in the same rhythm as his fingers were once again stroking and pressing against that swollen flesh between her thighs.

Olivia's back arched, pressing her breast deeper into the heat of Spencer's mouth, her body beginning to quiver and shake as she was overwhelmed by an ecstasy of pleasure she could never have imagined.

She had barely regained her senses when Spencer's mouth moved to claim the tip of her other breast, and his fingers once again caressed her aching flesh. Pleasure rose inside Olivia again under the relentless ministrations of that deep suckling and moist heat. The flesh between her thighs had become slick, hot, and responsive to every caress of Spencer's fingers.

Olivia tumbled over that tsunami of pleasure for a second time, deeper and longer than the first. Her whole body was trembling and shaking once that unrelenting swell had lessened to a gentle quiver.

"I want to be completely yours," she encouraged when Spencer raised his head to look at her with dark and fathomless eyes. "Please, Spencer, make me yours!"

He gave a regretful shake of his head. "You are a virgin."

She nodded quickly. "And I want to give that to you. For you to take the memory back with you, so that you never forget me."

His hands cupped either side of her face. "I will never forget you, Olivia," he promised.

"Then make love to me. Please!" She stood to allow her gown to fall down to her feet. She didn't hesitate to remove her chemise before unfastening and pushing her drawers down and then stepping out of them and her gown at the same time. "Let me be yours completely," she pleaded.

Spencer's eyes had darkened to a midnight blue, the pupils deep wells of desire. "We should wait," he cautioned.

Olivia was elated that he didn't sound very convinced by his own words. "Undress and make love to me, Spencer."

His smile was rueful as he rose to his feet and began to remove his clothes. "You are become brave, my little darling."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "I am yours."

He nodded as he sobered. "And I am yours."

"Then make me so," she encouraged.

Within minutes, Spencer was as naked as she was. As tall and perfect as a Michelangelo statue, with a distinctive brown birthmark on his left thigh. She was pleased to see, unlike those statues, that his shaft stood tall, with dark veins throbbing along its length, the bulbous and slick top so deep a red, it appeared purple.

Olivia stepped forward to touch his pulsing flesh. "Will it fit inside me, do you think?" she prompted huskily, watching as pearls of viscous juice bubbled from the tip.

Spencer chuckled softly. "It will fit perfectly inside you," he assured.

She glanced up at him. "Then do it. Now." She took his hand and pulled him down until they were both lying on her cloak. "Let me be one with you, Spencer."

He gave an aching groan as he levered himself up until he was lying between her parted thighs, his elbows taking the majority of the burden of his weight above her.

His gaze held hers captive. "I love you," he told her fiercely as one of his hands moved between the two of them to probe her still slick and pliant flesh. "I love you." He pressed one finger inside the heat of her channel. "I love you." A second finger joined the first, thrusting inside her. "I love you." A third finger entered and then stretched the walls of her channel until they were wide, and the juices were leaking out into the crease of her bottom.

There was no warning, no respite from the feeling of unfamiliar fullness before Olivia felt those fingers removed to be replaced by the probe and push of Spencer's shaft. She felt a pinch of discomfort as that hard and yet velvet flesh entered her and then thrust forward until it was seated to the hilt.

Then, there was only pleasure as Spencer began to gently undulate his hips. Allowing her to become accustomed to his intrusion before he began to thrust harder and deeper.

Minutes later, the pleasure Olivia had felt from the caress of his fingers was intensified a dozen times over as the walls of her channel contracted and spasmed in yet another wave of bliss.

It seemed to be all Spencer had been waiting for as the thrusting of his hips stuttered, the rhythm disjointed, before Olivia felt the warm rush of his release flooding inside her.

"I will love you always, Olivia," Spencer told her forcefully. "This is my promise to you." He removed the Plymouth family ring from his little finger and slid it onto the middle finger of her left hand. It was still too big, but the significance of it now being on her finger was even bigger. "That I will come back to you, and we will be married and spend the rest of our lives together," he vowed.

And now Olivia had learned from her gossiping friends rather than the man himself that Spencer was back.

Returned from the dead.

Would he still love her, as he had promised he would?

Or would he hate her for having betrayed their love by marrying another man so quickly after being told Spencer had died at Waterloo?

CHAPTER THREE

Three weeks later.

The Duke and Duchess of Lincoln's Pre-Christmas Ball.

“Good God, it really is Plymouth back amongst us!”

“I can hardly believe it.”

“Seeing him again is worth every second of the inconvenience of traveling back from the country to attend this unseasonal ball.”

“But how very austere he looks.”

“Positively grim, darling.”

“I see a certain edge of...cruelty to his mouth, which was not there previously.”

“It makes him even more attractive in my eyes.”

“Do you think so?”

“I believe I do, yes.”

“I rather...enjoyed him as he was.”

“He was never as toplofty as the other Ruthless Dukes.”

“Well, he certainly appears to be every inch the cold and unapproachable duke this evening.”

Spencer was aware of every comment being made about him as he entered Lincoln's ballroom with his hostess on his arm.

The moment they stepped into the room, the musicians ceased playing, and the people gathered there became completely silent and still. Apart from those muttered comments behind ladies' fans. Some of whom were widows Spencer had enjoyed brief liaisons with.

He had spent the past weeks continuing his efforts to resume his previous weight and fitness by eating well and sparring in the ring, often with the other Ruthless Dukes.

He had met all of the Ruthless Dukes' wives during that time and liked every single one of them. He approved even more of the happiness their mere presence obviously gave his close friends.

Thank God, he recognized none of the duchesses as having been Olivia's friends from the time they'd secretly courted, making it easier for him to accept and relax in their company during these past weeks.

Grace Montrose, the Duchess of Melborne, was perhaps more perceptive of other people's emotions than the others, having been brought up as a widowed vicar's daughter and so assisted that gentleman with his parishioners.

Grace, every bit living up to her name, had never questioned him regarding the bleakness he knew must often be visible in his eyes. But behind that reticence, he nevertheless sensed her feelings of sympathy for whatever heartache he was suffering.

Suffering did not even begin to describe Spencer's emotions the first time he had forced himself to look at Olivia again. But he had deemed having arranged that occasion as being preferable to having that first encounter witnessed by others.

He had watched her as she was leaving the home of Lord and Lady Corrigan three weeks ago. She was in the company of two other young ladies and her mother, Baroness Miller. Spencer knew those ladies had enjoyed afternoon tea together.

Spencer had engaged Mr. Stanley to ask some of his associates, men who had helped to look for evidence of who had murdered Spencer, to watch and follow the young and

beautiful widow, the Comtesse Olivia de Fontbleau. They were instructed to report her movements directly to him.

Knowing where she was on that given afternoon, Spencer had made his way to the small park opposite Lord Corrigan's house and waited amongst the trees there to watch Olivia as she left.

When she finally did, seeing her again had been like a punch to his chest. It had robbed Spencer of his breath and, in that moment, rendered him blind to everything and everyone except Olivia.

It had been a year and a half since their evening together at Vauxhall Gardens, but it was nevertheless easy to see that Olivia was no longer that naive and charming young girl who had stolen his heart.

Oh, she was still beautiful.

But the smile she bestowed upon her friends as they parted and she walked away from Corrigan House with her mother was not the happy and shy one whose memory had sustained Spencer as he dreamed of seeing and being with her again during his months of captivity.

Her unusual, amber-colored eyes, were still as mesmerizing.

But they also seemed guarded, as if they now hid secrets in their depths.

Her figure was more slender.

Despite that, her beauty now was altogether more brittle than Spencer could ever remember seeing it.

He was ashamed to say, as he gazed upon her for the first time in almost a year and a half, that realization filled him with a grim sense of satisfaction.

Because it implied she was unhappy.

Spencer had no idea whether that unhappiness had existed before Olivia's husband died or if it had only occurred since de Fontbleau's death. He could only see that she was not happy now. That she had learned, perhaps, as Spencer had known all along, that wealth and a title did not ensure happiness.

“You are the last to arrive,” Evelyn, the Duchess of Lincoln, informed him as they paused at the edge of the dance floor. “All the guests you requested we invite to be present this evening are already in attendance. My husband and the other dukes and duchesses are all alert to any reaction being shown at your sudden reappearance among us.”

It was true Spencer had been the one to request Lincoln and his wife arrange to give a ball several weeks before Christmas. And that he had also made certain requests concerning which guests should be invited.

“Would you care to dance?” his hostess invited at the same time as she indicated to the quartet of musicians to resume playing the waltz. The couples still on the dance floor immediately began to swirl about the room. “Or is there someone in particular you wish to see or speak with?” she added shrewdly. “Oh, do not look so alarmed, my dear,” she soothed when his eyes widened. “Our husbands are not so astute as we are and are still so pleased to have you returned to their midst that they are not yet aware of the heartache that daily tears apart your very soul.”

The duchess had very accurately described Spencer’s emotions since he had returned to London and learned of Olivia’s betrayal. He knew if the roles had been reversed and she had died that he would have mourned Olivia for the rest of his life.

“There is no one,” he dismissed hollowly. “Did you say husbands, plural?” he added astutely.

She nodded. “All the duchesses agree that our husbands are blind to the fact you are not the same man you once were.”

“None of you knew the man I once was.”

“But we all knew *of* you as being a charming rogue with the ladies,” she teased.

His smile lacked humor. “Is it so surprising I am different when I was kept captive in a hellhole for over a year?”

“Of course not,” the duchess acknowledged. “But I believe you are changed from the dangerous flirt of a man into one

who has replaced any love in his heart with a hunger for vengeance toward anyone he believed has wronged him.”

That was exactly what Spencer had done!

The need he felt was twofold.

First, he wished to see Olivia’s face when the two of them met again for the first time since she had so easily forgotten their promises to each other and married another man.

Secondly, he was still very much intent upon learning any information that might lead to the discovery of who had instructed he be attacked and removed from the battlefield at Waterloo and then kept a prisoner in hell for so many months afterward.

The latter was something that no amount of discreet inquiries had yet revealed, despite extensive efforts to do so.

Spencer now knew the other five Ruthless Dukes had searched extensively for information on his death and, when they learned of it, what they had initially believed to be the disappearance of his body from the battlefield.

All to no avail.

Spencer was no help in that endeavor either, having no idea who had kept him prisoner, except to know that the house in which he had been held captive was somewhere in the north of England, and his jailer might or might not be called Jacob.

None of Mr. Stanley’s associates who had been sent to locate and name that house had proved successful. The north of England was too vast an area, and it seemed Spencer’s knowledge of his incarceration was too vague.

Instead, he had come up with the idea of holding a ball to which any and all who might hold a grudge against him had been invited. He had hoped that the person responsible might somehow reveal themselves when presented with the irrefutable evidence of Spencer standing in their midst.

The rest of the Ruthless Dukes and their wives had strategically placed themselves about the ballroom in the hope

of witnessing that reaction after Spencer had explained his reasoning.

They had all agreed he probably had made many a rival or provoked disgruntled gentlemen when he had behaved that “charming rogue” Evelyn had called him minutes ago.

Spencer had never dallied with married ladies, but he had flirted and seduced many a widow in the ten years before his “demise.”

Some of whom would have brothers and fathers who might not have approved of their brief friendship with the perennial bachelor Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth, had been known to be.

Spencer had made a list of those ladies, and Lincoln and his duchess had invited both them and their male relatives to the ball this evening.

Olivia, her parents, and the rest of her family were also amongst that number.

He looked the same, and yet different, Olivia realized as she stared hungrily at the man whom she knew she had once loved beyond reason and who had then broken her heart when she was informed of his death.

A man who was now, it seemed, resurrected from the grave.

Olivia had waited in trepidation after learning Spencer was still alive, expecting him to contact her. To call or send her a letter of explanation for his disappearance, if nothing else.

He had not called.

Nor had any such letter been delivered.

It was as if there had never been any intimacy between them. As if he had never told her he loved her. Never given her his family ring as a promise of his intention to ask her father’s permission to marry her upon his return.

Looking at him now, she was able to see his hair was still as black as a raven's wing, but there were strands of gray amongst that darkness which had not been there previous to his disappearance.

His eyes were still as blue as the sapphires they resembled, but they no longer glowed with mischief or good humor.

His face was still handsome, but his cheekbones were more pronounced, and his beautiful lips unsmiling. The arrogant tilt of his jaw was both stern and formidable.

He looked every inch the haughty duke in the perfectly tailored black evening clothes and snowy white linen that stretched across his wide shoulders and chest before tapering to his slender waist.

Magnificent, yes. But he now moved with the stealth and grace of a predator stalking its prey rather than the arrogant confidence of the eligible gentleman he had once been.

Yes, Spencer looked the same, and yet there was no doubting he was not the same man in appearance or nature.

Olivia hadn't initially wanted to attend the Lincolns' ball this evening. She had intended using the excuse of still mourning Gerard to send that refusal. It was, after all, only six months since her husband died.

Her mother had called upon Olivia the moment she and the baron had received their own invitation to the Lincolns' ball. Indeed, it was her mother who had insisted it was time for Olivia to cease wearing black and instead don gray and violet colored gowns so that she might rejoin Society.

She had completely dismissed all of Olivia's protests, even going so far as to invade Olivia's bedchamber and go through the gowns in her wardrobe until she found a violet-colored gown she considered suitable.

"If the rumors of Plymouth's return are true, then he is sure to be there," her mother said waspishly. "Surely you do not wish to continue looking pale and older than your years when the duke sees you again," she challenged when Olivia had refused to even try the gown on.

Her mother was quite correct, as she often and annoyingly could be, in that Olivia had not wished to appear less than her best when she saw Spencer again. It would also be easier, she had thought, to have that meeting be as much in her control as she could make it, rather than a surprise that might catch her completely off guard.

She now realized, as her breath caught in her throat as that sapphire gaze now looked directly toward where she stood at the back of the ballroom with the rest of her family, that nothing could have prepared her for seeing Spencer again.

It was made worse by the fact there was no recognition of her in Spencer's cold blue eyes.

Not an ounce of the love she had once been led to believe he felt for her.

Not a glimmer of the desire she had so eagerly surrendered to.

It was as if, as those unemotional blue eyes gazed at her briefly before moving on, Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth, did not even remember her existence. Let alone the intimacies they had shared when they were last together.

"So, the rumors of Plymouth's return really were true," her mother voiced speculatively.

"Yes," was all Olivia could manage in reply.

"I must say, you are looking remarkably cool about it," her mother snapped. "When once you declared yourself to be in love with the rogue. He would never have married you, you know," she continued scathingly. "Men like Plymouth do not marry impoverished young women who have nothing to give them but the burden of their impoverished family."

Olivia drew in a controlling breath before turning to face the older woman. "Gerard did not begrudge it." She was well aware that her husband had given her parents a large sum of money upon their marriage. "Nor do I," she added pointedly, knowing that it was the allowance paid to her family monthly from the de Fontbleau fortune which had paid for the fuchsia-colored gown her mother was wearing this evening.

The baroness's eyes narrowed. "You should be thanking your father and me for ensuring you married well and are now a wealthy young widow who can have her pick of any gentleman you choose. Rather than being known as yet one more woman who fell victim to the Plymouth charm." She snorted.

The two women, mother and daughter, had never been close.

Olivia was the eldest child and not the boy her mother would have preferred. Her brother Edmund, his father's heir, had been born only a year after her own birth. The pregnancy and labor that followed had not been easy, and Edmund had been a very sickly baby. That her mother then became pregnant again just two years later, this time giving birth to twin girls, had been a time when the house was perpetually in uproar and filled with arguments and shouting between her parents. After the twins' birth, her mother moved into a suite of rooms on the other side of the house, the bedchamber door forever closed against her husband.

The result of her younger siblings being so close in age to her had meant Olivia was cared for mainly by a nursemaid for the first five years of her life and then by a governess until she was seventeen and presented into Society. Her father and brother occasionally played a part in her life, but for the main part, Olivia had remained a solitary and mainly self-governed member of her family.

Her mother, in sharp contrast to Olivia's calm and collected demeanor, had complained constantly and loudly to any who would listen regarding having four children, all born within four years of each other.

Now, all these years later, it was far too late for the two of them to ever establish any familial warmth.

Which was why Olivia had never even considered confiding in her mother regarding the depth of the intimacy which had taken place between herself and Spencer.

Olivia had not utilized that same reticence when it came to Gerard, knowing she must tell him the truth before the

wedding took place. She had felt that she owed him that much, at least.

To her surprise, Gerard had assured her it was only the future that mattered. Nor had he ever given her reason during the year of their marriage, either by word or deed, to cause her to regret having confided in him.

Her brother, Edmund, just a year younger than her, now moved to stand in front of her, shielding her from the rest of the people in the room. He took both her gloved hands in his as he lowered his head to look at her with compassion. “Has seeing him again brought back memories of the past?”

Poor Edmund, along with the rest of the Miller family, had a year and a half ago been treated to hours of their mother berating Olivia for endangering her betrothal to Gerard de Fontbleau by stubbornly refusing to end this new friendship with the Duke of Plymouth.

Olivia smiled ruefully at her brother. “If it has, they are not good ones.”

Edmund did not look convinced. “You are no longer in love with him?”

Was she?

She loved *Spencer* still and knew that she always would.

But the man standing across the ballroom looking coldly down his nose at all present, including her, was not that man.

She now realized she loved the dream not this reality.

Loved the man, Spencer, rather than the Duke of Plymouth.

“No,” she answered her brother truthfully. “I was a child then. Now I am a woman.”

“It was only a year and a half ago,” Edmund reminded wryly.

“A lot happened in that time,” she acknowledged ruefully.

Olivia knew she had changed irrevocably. Far too much for her to ever again be that naïve young girl Spencer Granger had once seduced and then never thought of again.

Olivia did her best not to think of *him* during the next hour.

She was aware of him, of course, as he first danced with the recently married Lady Rowena Hall and then with each of the wives of his five closest friends. But Olivia did not look at him directly again.

Now that she no longer felt herself the focus of those cold and piercing blue eyes, Olivia was able to relax a little as she conversed with her brother and two younger sisters.

Her parents, as was too often the case, were arguing in hissed back-and-forth comments to each other.

“Might I be permitted this dance, Comtesse de Fontbleau?”

Every part of Olivia stilled, and her heart ceased to beat at the sound of that cold and yet familiar voice.

She kept her back toward him. But she knew from the shocked expression on her parents’ faces as they abruptly ceased their argument, and the awed ones on her brothers’ and sisters’ faces, that the man standing behind her was indeed the one she had thought never to see again, let alone speak to.

“Comtesse?” Spencer Granger prompted coolly when he received no reply.

Olivia lifted her pleading gaze toward her brother, willing him to come to her aid.

“Unfortunately not,” Edmund smoothly declined on her behalf, tucking her trembling hand into the crook of his arm as she turned to stand at his side. “I was just about to make our excuses and escort my sister to her home.”

Mockery was visible in Spencer’s gaze as he looked at her. “You are not unwell, I hope?”

“No,” she managed to choke out. “Now that I am here, I have realized it is far too soon for me to mingle socially after losing my husband only six months ago,” she added challengingly.

A single glance at Spencer’s cold and arrogant face, his icy blue eyes, had forced her to finally accept that the love she had once felt for him had never been returned. That it could not have been if he could now look at her with such disdain.

“Then perhaps your mother or one of your beautiful younger sisters might care to dance with me instead?” His mocking gaze remained on Olivia as he made the suggestion.

“I am sure my wife or one of my other daughters would be only too happy to oblige you, Your Grace.” Her father, Baron Miller, gave his wife and twin daughters a beaming smile of encouragement.

“We would be honored, Your Grace.” Her mother gave a deep curtsy.

Olivia could only stare in disgust at her fawning parents. The same parents who, a year and a half ago, had dismissed the feelings Olivia had claimed to have for the duke as being nothing more than a childish whimsy.

Her mother was aged only eight and thirty and so was only four years older than Spencer Granger. But her twin sisters, Chloe and Camille, had earlier in the year celebrated their seventeenth birthday. If their parents had considered Olivia too young the previous year for the sophisticated Plymouth to have any serious interest in, then her sisters must appear like babies to the cold and stern-faced man standing before them.

“If you will excuse us?” Olivia couldn’t bear to wait and see whether it was her mother or which of her sisters who accepted Plymouth’s invitation.

Instead, her fingers tightly gripped Edmund’s arm as he forged a way across the ballroom toward the doorway leading out into the hallway and then outside to their waiting carriage.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What did you expect to happen yesterday evening?” Lady Rowena Hall rebuked the following afternoon as she and Spencer rode their horses side by side. Her groom rode a suitable distance behind them along the otherwise deserted bridleway in fashionable Hyde Park. “I thought the poor girl was going to faint away when you requested a dance with her. It was not good form when she was widowed only a little over six months ago,” she chastised.

Spencer had resumed his easy friendship with Lady Rowena these past few weeks, able to relax in her company in a way he could not now do with anyone else.

In the year before he’d been presumed dead in battle, the two of them had pretended to be attracted to each other in an effort to ward off any other romantic interests. As a consequence, Spencer had confided in Rowena when he became so enamored of Olivia.

Perhaps he had not shared *all* the details of their friendship with Rowena. But a gentleman did not discuss the minutiae of his relationship with another woman. Even one who was as good a friend as Rowena.

He had also met and now enjoyed the company of her amiable husband, Lord Nicholas Hall, these past few weeks. Sir Nicholas was the father of Chastity, now married to one of the other Ruthless Dukes, Grayson Vaughn, the Duke of Flint.

Spencer knew that, having invited a widow to dance who was still mourning her husband, Rowena’s criticism of his manners

was merited. “Why was she there at all if she did not wish to be invited to dance?”

Rowena shot him a knowing glance. “The same reason you were, I suspect.”

“Which was?”

“Curiosity to see you again, at the very least, on the comtesse’s part.”

“And on my own?” Spencer knew the reason he had been looking forward to attending the ball once he knew Olivia had accepted her invitation. He merely wondered if Rowena knew it too.

“Because you again wished to see the woman you are still in love with,” she added patiently.

Was what Spencer felt toward Olivia still love?

There was no doubting that thoughts of her and their professed love for each other had been what had sustained him through his months of imprisonment.

It had also been a shock to his senses when he saw her again for the first time that afternoon three weeks ago as she left the house of Lord and Lady Corrigan, accompanied by her mother.

But even more of one the previous evening, when he had been so close to Olivia he could have reached out and touched the softness of the lips he had once kissed with such passion. To caress the creamy expanse of her throat and breasts he had once explored and worshipped.

Spencer had also been able to breathe in her perfume of lavender and vanilla, along with a female musk that was uniquely her own and, in the past, had always made his cock instantly hard.

He was also totally aware the reminder of her mourning gown was all that had prevented Spencer’s cock from doing exactly that again the night before, the moment he was once again in her presence.

Olivia, after an initial glance at him, had not looked at him again before her brother escorted her from the ballroom and

outside to her waiting carriage.

In her absence, the rest of the evening, as far as Spencer was concerned, had been an agony of hours that had to be endured rather than enjoyed.

He had especially disliked that, following Olivia's departure, good manners dictated he had to dance with not only her mother, Baroness Millborne, but also with *both* of Olivia's silly younger sisters.

The older woman's coquettish flirting had been as irritating yesterday evening as he had found it in the past, as she fluttered her eyelashes at him for the whole of the time they danced together. Her conversation had been even less acceptable.

"It is so good to have you back amongst us, Your Grace," she purred. "I trust you are now recovered from the silliness of flirting with young and impressionable girls and will now be returning to your...liaisons with us more experienced ladies?"

Spencer searched his memories to see if he recalled ever flirting with this experienced lady, let alone ever having a liaison with her.

He did not.

Indeed, he recalled having always found Lady Daphne Miller rather tiresome in her efforts to flirt with him in the past. Not only was she a married lady rather than a widow, but she was also several years his senior. Spencer believed he would only have been a youth when this woman married Baron Miller.

Oh, there were hints of Olivia's beauty in the gold of Lady Daphne's hair. Although Spencer suspected the mother used some sort of home remedy to ensure the color remained that deep gold.

Lady Daphne's eyes were more hazel than Olivia's vibrant amber, and there were also lines of age or dissatisfaction etched beside the older woman's eyes and painted lips.

She was not, Spencer suspected, a happy woman, either in motherhood or in her marriage to Baron Miller, or possibly both.

Obviously, she was not, or she would not be stating so overtly how available she was to the possibility of receiving Spencer's attentions!

Besides, Spencer had not forgotten that a year and a half ago, this woman had tried to influence Olivia's opinion of him as being nothing more than a flirt and a libertine.

"Speaking of impressionable and silly young ladies..." Spencer released the baroness and stepped back as the dance thankfully, came to an end. "I believe it is now time for me to dance with your twin daughters. Separately, of course." He held out his arm to escort the baroness back to her family.

Those hazel eyes narrowed with displeasure. "I will not allow you to attempt to seduce either of them in the way you once did Olivia," Lady Daphne warned.

Spencer's brows rose at her vehemence. "You will not allow...?"

"No, I will not." There were spots of angry color in her cheeks as she placed her hand on his proffered arm before they crossed the room to where her husband waited.

Her twin daughters had been as tiresome to dance with as Spencer had suspected they might be. Both of them had flirted with him outrageously, and they had giggled constantly, like the two barely out-of-the-schoolroom young women they were. How Olivia could have grown into such a beautiful and accomplished young lady in such a household was a mystery to him.

The evening had been rendered all the more intolerable at its conclusion when none of the Ruthless Dukes or their wives had been able to report any strange reactions to his resurrection from the dead in any of the guests.

But returning to Rowena's question, which had set off this train of thought. Did any of those things mean he was still in love with Olivia?

The Olivia he had thought he knew, perhaps. But the woman she was now bore little resemblance to the beautiful, shy, and yet daring young lady he had initially felt so drawn to. The

same one who had completely stolen his heart as he watched her play the piano that evening so long ago. The woman who, just days later, had given herself to him with a passionate intensity he had never encountered before.

Spencer had not been able to even look at another woman and feel desire since his return to London.

Just as the thought of the Comte de Fontbleau having enjoyed and reveled in Olivia's passion during their marriage was beyond bearing.

"Do not think I am unaware of the reason you have invited me to ride with you in the park this afternoon," Rowena continued dryly.

"And what reason do you suppose that to be?"

She frowned at him. "I *know* it is because you have discovered the Comtesse de Fontbleau prefers to ride in the afternoon when the park is quieter, rather than during the morning, when all the other fashionable ladies and gentlemen are out and about on horseback and in their carriages. Their only desire to see and be seen."

Spencer *had* known of Olivia's preference for riding in the afternoons. He had made note of it in the daily reports of Olivia's movements given to him by Mr. Stanley.

After a glance at Rowena's mockingly raised brows, he saw no reason to deny it. "She was feeling unwell when she left yesterday evening, so perhaps she will not ride today."

"And if she does?"

"Then I shall make a point of speaking to her."

"About?"

His mouth twisted. "Perhaps I wish to commiserate with her on the death of her husband."

Rowena's expression softened. "The gentleman I knew as Spencer Granger was incapable of such petty and hurtful behavior," she chided, having once been a widow herself.

His jaw tightened. "I apologize if I have offended you. But I am sure we are all now aware I am no longer the man I was." God knew he felt ten years older than he had sixteen months ago, and since learning of Olivia's marriage in his absence, his heart had turned to stone. "Besides," he added in a hard voice, "she has something of mine I should like returned to me."

Rowena eyed him speculatively. "I am afraid to inquire what that something might be."

It was not, as Rowena no doubt suspected, Spencer's heart.

No, the item he wished returned was his family ring with the Granger wolf etched upon its surface.

The ring he had given Olivia on the night they parted as a token of his love and his promise to return and marry her.

It had only been since his return and learning she had been married to the Comte de Fontbleau that Spencer had realized Olivia had not promised him the same fidelity.

It would have been too much to have expected Olivia to be wearing his ring at the ball the previous evening. Not only was it too large for her, but her jewelry had been of such a minimum, she had not even worn the de Fontbleau diamond and emerald necklace and earrings, which were, no doubt, along with de Fontbleau's fortune, now Olivia's possessions.

But Spencer had no doubt that she had also maintained possession of the Plymouth ring.

Mainly because if Olivia had tried to pawn or sell it, its distinctive crest would have alerted anyone in London as to it being the property of the Duke of Plymouth. His cousin Robert, as the then duke, would have been notified of the sale.

Spencer smiled at the thought of Robert. As his cousin had claimed was the case, he really was elated both at Spencer's return and at having Spencer resume his duties as the Duke of Plymouth.

But Spencer was sure that if his cousin had received any hint of someone trying to sell the Plymouth family ring this past year, he would have informed Spencer of it by now.

No, Spencer was sure Olivia still had his ring, and he wished it to be returned to him.

He bared his teeth as he smiled at Rowena. “It is perhaps as well that Sir Nicholas persuaded you to marry him in my absence; otherwise, I might have been tempted to capture your intelligence and beauty for myself.”

He had always deeply admired Rowena and the resilience she had shown after being widowed so young. Unfortunately, they both knew there had never been even a spark of attraction between the two of them.

“You are far too domineering for me to ever have considered you a serious contender for winning my heart,” she dismissed.

He chuckled. “What does that say about Sir Nicholas?”

She smiled warmly. “That he is the dearest and kindest man in the whole world. That he does not have any desire to confine me or inhibit my freedom to do and say as I please. I love him dearly.”

Which, Spencer could appreciate, was exactly what a woman of Rowena’s excellent caliber deserved in her husband.

“I am pleased that you have found such a worthy gentleman to spend the rest of your life with.” He reached out to squeeze her arm in emphasis of the point.

She frowned. “I do believe your timing needs improving, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Spencer shot her a quizzical glance. “In what way?”

Rowena gave a rueful shake of her head. “Because the moment you reached out and touched my arm with such familiarity, the Comtesse de Fontbleau, seated upon her horse and accompanied by her groom, entered the bridleway.” She glanced pointedly at something—someone!—behind him.

Spencer tensed as he slowly turned to follow the direction of Rowena’s gaze.

Olivia had hoped that a ride in the park, where she would be able to breathe in the fresh air, would help rid her of the headache she had been suffering with for hours. No doubt caused by the tension of the previous evening and the almost completely sleepless night that followed.

How could she possibly sleep when all she could think about, all she could see, was Spencer Granger. Returned, yes, but not the man she had once known.

He was changed in both appearance and manner.

Nor did he look at her with the same lustful appreciation or love in his eyes.

But her own reaction to seeing him again had been as it always was.

Her cheeks became flushed.

A nerve pulsed in her throat.

Her breath stuttered in her lungs.

Her body filled with warmth.

Her nipples engorged.

Between her thighs became hot and damp.

Her legs trembled.

None of those reactions should have been present in a woman who had been married to another man and still mourned his death.

Except, Gerard had never claimed his right as her husband to share her bed or her body.

Gerard had not known how ill he was when he first approached Olivia's father and asked for his permission to marry her. No, the Frenchman had only learned of the dire circumstances that were the result of the life of debauchery he had lived in France during his youth, just days before Olivia had felt compelled to confess her own scandalous behavior to him.

Both of them, it seemed, had felt the need to be completely truthful with the other. No doubt so that, after they had confessed all, they might end their betrothal, if that was their wish.

Neither of them had chosen that path, and their marriage had taken place just weeks later.

But Gerard's illness was such that there had never been any intention of consummating their marriage. Instead, they had lived together like brother and sister, respecting and caring for each other, appearing as a couple in public together, but with no physical relationship between them in the privacy of the home they shared.

It was not a perfect arrangement, and as Gerard had warned her might be the case, he had become very ill indeed before he died. Olivia's decision to be at Gerard's side when that end occurred had remained unwavering.

Nothing had swayed her in her determination to be as supportive of Gerard as he had been toward her.

The previous year, circumstances had been such that Olivia had needed to mature quickly. But Gerard's kindness toward her had made that so much easier for her to do during those few short months they were married. And the fortune Gerard had insisted on leaving her upon his death had made her life so much more bearable.

She knew that had Gerard been alive, he would have accompanied her to the Lincolns' ball the previous evening. That he would have made it his mission to ensure she was able to arrive and depart with her head held high.

Luckily, her brother Edmund had stepped up into the role of protector. Nor had he asked her any questions regarding the pallor of her cheeks and her agitated demeanor after he insisted upon accompanying her home in the carriage.

Olivia had never discussed the past with her brother, and he had never questioned her about her sudden marriage to the Frenchman after she had been so insistent she did not intend to marry the comte.

But Edmund's protective behavior the previous evening, after the Duke of Plymouth had approached and spoken to her, indicated her brother had been fully aware of their past friendship.

How could he be otherwise when her mother had berated Olivia so vocally in front of the whole family for her foolish behavior. Diatribes the baroness had insisted would ruin all of them!

Those remonstrations had been enough to bring about Edmund's need to feel protective of her the previous evening.

Olivia thanked him warmly for his kindness once they reached her home. In return, her brother had confided that, as well as his natural brotherly affection for her, Gerard had requested upon his deathbed that Edmund must now stand as her protector.

Even in death, Gerard had been her savior.

So no, Olivia had not been in love with Gerard, but she had grown to love and appreciate him very much during their marriage. She—

“What a coincidence we should meet again so soon, Comtesse de Fontbleau.”

No!

It could not be.

Not here and not now, when she was already feeling so vulnerable from seeing Spencer again the previous evening and the headache caused by that tension had still to dissipate.

Her chin rose so that she could look the duke directly in the eye. She easily noted the mockery there as she answered him scornfully. “Is it a coincidence, Your Grace?”

This man did not have the right to mock her. Did not even have the right to *speak* to her. Not when he had allowed her to believe he was dead, to mourn him, only to have him return over a year later and not even attempt to see or speak with her to give her some sort of an explanation as to where he had been during all that time.

A year and a half when her heart had broken into a thousand pieces for the love and utter despair of believing him dead.

Nor had Spencer given any outward sign the previous evening of them ever having been more than nodding acquaintances.

She remembered their intimacies, even if Spencer did not.

She remembered the two of them professing their love for each other, even if he did not.

Olivia remembered every second of their last evening together.

Every single second!

If he did not.

And now Spencer *dared* to use that taunting tone to her while in the company of Lady Rowena Hall. The same woman who had been his companion on many a social evening before he'd gone to war, but whom Spencer had assured Olivia was only a friend and the sister of one of the other Ruthless Dukes.

Lady Rowena had remarried this past summer, but that did not seem to have prevented her and the duke from resuming their *friendship*. The sort of friendship where Spencer did not hesitate to place his hand familiarly upon the woman's arm.

"If the two of you will excuse me?" Lady Rowena now spoke smoothly into the rising tension. "I have a previous engagement to attend."

Olivia looked at the other woman in alarm, having no wish to be left alone in the park with Spencer. "In that case, I believe I must also leave." She pulled on the reins to turn her horse toward where they could exit.

"I think not." Spencer reached out to grasp hold of the black leather reins closest to him. "You have the presence of your groom for proprieties' sake," he taunted. "And we have unfinished business to discuss."

Olivia stared at him.

The two of them had unfinished *business* to discuss?

As if the two of them had once been involved in some sort of monetary transaction which had not been successfully

completed!

How dare he?

How *dare* he!

CHAPTER FIVE

It was impossible for Spencer to miss the fire that now burned brightly in Olivia's amber eyes as she glared at him, causing them to glow the color of molten gold.

Meeting that furious gaze put him in mind of how Icarus must have felt as he flew too close to the sun.

Spencer could only hope that he did not meet the same fate!

"I see it will be no hardship for either of you to excuse me," Lady Rowena remarked dryly before urging her horse into a trot, her groom following behind her.

Spencer felt a jolt in his chest at the realization he was now alone with Olivia for the first time in a year and a half. That knowledge made his heart feel as if it had only just begun to beat again after being dead and cold for that same amount of time.

A feeling he did not intend to indulge.

This woman had never loved him, he reminded himself. She could not have done so and then married another man within weeks of learning of Spencer's death.

"You are looking well," he told her dismissively.

Olivia did indeed look very beautiful in the fitted brown riding habit and matching hat. Her anger had also brought color to her previously pale cheeks.

But her eyes—which Shakespeare had written were the windows to a person's soul and which Spencer believed he had

once lost his own soul in—were hard and unyielding. As such, they revealed none of what Olivia was feeling inside.

That amber gaze swept over him in critical assessment before Olivia answered him. “I am sure I will not be the first to point out that the same cannot be said of you.”

Spencer would be lying if he denied that her dismissive criticism of him hurt his pride, if nothing else. Not because he was still in love with her—he refused to believe he could be, no matter that the renewed beating of his heart seconds ago might indicate to the contrary—but because he was still trying to acclimatize himself to both the inner and outer changes to himself.

Riding with Rowena this morning had been the first time Spencer had felt even remotely like the man he had been a year and a half ago. He knew the reason for that was because the outspoken Rowena refused to allow him to be in the least cold and distant when in her company.

He had not been expecting to hear that same outspokenness from the young woman who had once looked at him as if she adored him.

He huffed out a humorless laugh. “No, you are not,” he acknowledged. “But then, I have always been able to rely on the other Ruthless Dukes to be completely honest with me,” he added in a hard voice.

“How nice,” she returned with obvious disinterest.

Spencer’s eyes narrowed. “You are more beautiful than you were last May,” he observed. “But in becoming so, you seem to have lost the ability to be the warm and affectionate young woman you once were.”

“The naive and gullible young woman I once was, you mean,” she derided.

“No, I—”

“Where have you been all this time, Spencer?” she scorned. “Traveling the world?” She supplied a mocking answer before he was able to give one. “Seducing willing women wherever you went?” She gave a huff of disdain for such pursuits. “I am

sure the female population of London must be absolutely delighted to have the rakish Duke of Plymouth back in their midst. After all, there must be one or two of them you have not yet lied to in order to seduce them.”

A nerve pulsed in his tightly clenched jaw. “I never lied to you.”

She looked at him coolly. “A selective memory is, I believe, a necessary trait for liars. No doubt that is because if you cannot recall it, then it must not have happened.”

“I am not a liar—”

“I beg to differ,” she said in a hard voice.

“I should like to make you beg,” he bit out fiercely. “To see you on your knees begging for me to—”

“Release my horse’s reins,” she instructed.

“I—” He broke off and reared back in the saddle when she raised her riding crop.

“I will not ask you again,” she warned furiously. “You will release my horse’s reins now so that I might be on my way.”

If Spencer had thought Olivia intriguing the previous year, then she was even more so now.

Her cheeks were ablaze with angry color. Her eyes glowed like molten gold. Her pouting lips were moist and parted. Every inch of her body was tense as if poised for battle.

And, he realized as Olivia’s riding crop swung toward him, he would be better served keeping his wits about him rather than becoming lost in how desirable she still was.

“I think not.” He lifted his gloved hand, the one not holding the reins, to grasp the riding crop before it could make contact with his face. “As I said,” he bit out coldly. “We have unfinished business to discuss.”

“I cannot imagine what that might be.”

“Can you not?”

“No!”

“You have something of mine I wish returned to me.”

Olivia stilled. “I have no idea what you are referring to.” The sudden pallor of her cheeks and the long lashes guarding the secrets in the shadows of her amber eyes gave lie to the claim.

“My ring,” Spencer felt no hesitation in stating. “It is still in your possession, I hope?”

Olivia stared at Spencer.

He wished her to return the Plymouth ring to him.

Of *course*, Olivia still had it in her possession. Why would she not when she had believed it to be a symbol of Spencer one day returning to her, and the two of them would be married?

Even after learning of his death—which she now knew to be yet another lie—she had kept it in her bedside drawer wrapped in tissue paper. She would take it out and draw comfort from it whenever her life had seemed too painful or complicated for her to bear.

At least she had, until she’d learned Spencer was alive and back in London but had made no effort to see or speak privately with her.

She hadn’t been able to look at his ring since then. Indeed, its very presence now seemed to mock her from inside both the drawer and the tissue paper.

“Of course, you may have your ring back,” she informed him coldly. “The only reason I still have it is because I had no idea what to do with it after I was informed you had been killed during the battle at Waterloo.”

“News of my death, which was, as you can clearly see, wildly exaggerated,” he said dryly.

Olivia wasn’t sure she would go so far as to say that when she could see little of the warm and passionate Spencer she had once known and loved in this cold and haughty man.

She eyed him coolly. “The only member of your family I could have returned the ring to was your cousin and heir, Robert Granger. I was reluctant to arouse his curiosity by attempting to approach him so that I might give the Plymouth ring back to him.”

“In case he asked the question as to how it came to be in your possession in the first place,” Spencer taunted.

“He would most assuredly have asked that question.” And all in Society knew that the foppish Robert Granger was every bit as much of a gossip as any of the ladies ever were.

Spencer snorted. “One you obviously had no desire or inclination to answer.”

Olivia forced herself to meet his mocking gaze. “I will see that your property is returned to you before I and the rest of my household depart to spend the winter months in the country.” Her lips twisted. “After all, I should not like to prevent you from bestowing the ring upon the next young girl who is gullible enough to fall for your lies and seduction.”

He scowled darkly. “I have no idea why you are so angry with me—”

“I am not angry with you!”

“You most assuredly are,” he snapped. “Something I find ridiculous when you are the one who married another man only weeks after you believed me to have been killed. The very same man you had previously refused to end your betrothal to.”

“That is because—” She broke off abruptly.

“Yes?” he prompted coldly.

Olivia’s spine straightened. “My reasons for marrying Gerard are none of your concern. But I will ensure your ring is returned to you as soon as I reach my home.”

“The home you once shared with your husband.”

She eyed him quizzically. “Yes.”

He frowned darkly. “Were you happy with him?”

Had Olivia been *happy* with Gerard?

Gerard had been kind and considerate. During the year of their marriage, he had also become her closest friend and confidant. So yes, of course, she liked him and enjoyed spending time with him. She had mourned him deeply when he succumbed to his illness, and still did.

But she knew Spencer wasn't asking if Gerard had been kind and considerate or her closest friend.

She raised her chin. "I was very happy with him."

"How did he die?"

"He developed an infection," she stated truthfully, if vaguely. "It was all very quick. In the end," she added bleakly.

Tears now pricked Olivia's eyes as she thought of those months before Gerard's death. They had been painful for him, but also a torment. He tired easily and had lost so much weight that his clothes, when he had the energy to dress at all, hung loosely on his reduced frame. The headaches had been crippling, almost driving him insane with their intensity.

It had been a happy release for him when he finally took leave of that cruel illness.

"You loved him," Plymouth now accused.

"Yes," Olivia answered without hesitation. She knew a part of her heart would always belong to Gerard. That he was, without a doubt, one of the most gallant and kind gentlemen she had ever known.

Plymouth recoiled as if she had struck him. "I apologize for having delayed your departure from the park, Comtesse." He released his grip on her horse's reins. "I wish you a good day." He touched the brim of his hat with his own riding crop as Olivia pulled sharply on the reins and urged her horse toward the exit.

Olivia felt the sting of tears in her eyes as her horse cantered away from the man she had once loved with such intensity it had almost destroyed her when he did not return from that battle at Waterloo.

Spencer had seemed somehow...different just now when they talked of the brief time she, at least, had believed they were in love with each other. He had looked and sounded almost nostalgic.

Then he had become coldly furious when she had confirmed that she had been happy with and loved Gerard. The fact that it had not been a romantic love was none of Spencer's concern when he was treating her with such—

“Wait!”

Olivia pulled her horse to a halt before she turned in her saddle to look with concern toward the man cantering toward her.

Spencer always had looked magnificent seated upon a horse, and today was no exception. His horse's coat was as black as the duke's hair, upon which currently sat a tall and fashionable hat. Spencer's riding clothes, a black superfine and gray riding breeches, were tailored to perfection to his muscular frame.

He pulled his horse to a stop mere feet away from Olivia before lifting one of his legs over to the other side and sliding down to the ground.

Olivia's eyes widened as he walked toward her, his harsh features set in lines of a determination he dared anyone to challenge.

“Stay exactly where you are,” Spencer instructed Olivia's groom when that gentleman looked as if he might protest when Spencer reached out to place his hands about the slenderness of Olivia's waist to lift her from the saddle. Her riding crop fell to the ground as he did so. “Take care of the horses,” he dismissed the other man as he grasped Olivia's wrist to pull her along with him as he marched over to a high grove of hydrangea bushes.

“Spencer, what are you doing?” Much as Olivia tried, she could not free her wrist. Inwardly, she was relieved the park was relatively empty and no one had observed Spencer's strange behavior.

He turned to her abruptly once they were alone together and hidden in the relative privacy of the hydrangeas. His gloved

hands moved to cup either side of her face as he stared at her intently before lowering his head and claiming her lips in a hot and possessive kiss.

Olivia was too stunned by this unexpected turn of events to even think of resisting. Instead, she was engulfed by a wave of happiness so intense, it took her breath away. A happiness she had believed she would never experience again after she had been informed of Spencer's death the previous year.

Her arms moved up instinctively to grasp his shoulders before her fingers became entwined in the silky hair at his nape, and she returned the kiss with equal passion.

They were hungry for each other. Lips devouring. Teeth biting. Tongues dueling. All while their hands roamed possessively over the landscape of what had once belonged to each other.

Spencer was breathing deeply, his cheeks flushed, lips red and swollen, when he broke the kiss to rest his forehead against hers. "I did not lie to you. I would have come to you the moment I returned from battle. I would have formally asked your father for your hand in marriage. We would have been married, I swear it, and I would have ensured we lived happily together ever after."

Olivia looked at him searchingly, seeing the sincerity of his claim in his stormy blue eyes. "Then why didn't you?" she choked. "Where have you *been*, Spencer?"

"That, I cannot tell you—"

"Cannot or will not?" Olivia scorned as she pulled out of his arms, uncaring that she was, in all likelihood, bruising her own flesh by doing so. "Do not bother even trying to think of a plausible explanation to my question. For whatever reason, you did not come back to me. I married another man. I was happy with that other man. I *mourn* the loss of that other man." She glared into the pallor of Spencer's face. "I shall continue to mourn Gerard far more than I could ever grieve for such a man as you have become!"

She turned on her heel and walked away, unsure, when Spencer made no attempt to stop her, whether she was relieved

or once again heartbroken that he did not care enough.

That he had *never* cared enough to explain where he had been since they parted a year and a half ago.

Olivia did not feel quite herself again until she had reached her home and entered the room that adjoined her own bedchamber.

The nursery.

Where her daughter sat on the rug in front of the guarded fire with her nursemaid, playing with some wooden bricks.

Mariah Lisette de Fontbleau immediately looked up to give her mother a gappy smile, only her bottom two teeth at the front having made an appearance as yet.

She was named Mariah in honor of Olivia's maternal French grandmother, and Lisette, in memory of Gerard's mother.

Olivia knew that she was utterly biased, but to her eyes Mariah was gloriously beautiful, with her abundance of curls that glistened as darkly as a raven's wing and blue eyes the deep color of a summer sky.

Hair and eyes that were an exact replica of her father's.

The illustrious, the arrogant, the *ruthless* Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth.

CHAPTER SIX

“Yes?” Spencer prompted his butler.

The other man stood hovering in the doorway of Spencer’s study, where he had chosen to sit behind his desk drinking brandy. He had been seated there since his return from riding in the park and having that disturbing conversation with and then kissing Olivia.

It might be a little early in the day for most people to imbibe, but Spencer had felt sorely in need of the alcohol in order to settle his nerves.

After spending time with Olivia again.

Being able to fill his gaze of her.

To hear her soft, melodious voice again.

To look into those enticing amber eyes, and having done so known he *was* still enticed.

Enough to have kissed her.

Passionately.

Possessively.

It hadn’t mattered to Spencer’s heart that so much time had passed and now separated the two of them.

One look into Olivia’s eyes, one indrawn breath of her unique perfume, and Spencer knew that, rather than allowing her to just ride away from him, he had needed to touch and kiss her again.

He had wanted to do more than kiss her. Had ached to caress her creamy skin. To suckle her breasts. To taste the nectar between her thighs. To thrust his cock inside her heat and once again be joined completely with her.

He had tried to relay to her the depth of his desire and need for her in his kiss. Had believed she had heard him when she kissed him with that same passion. Only for her to pull away and revile him again before praising the virtues of her deceased husband.

Was it any wonder that he had felt the need to pour himself a glass of brandy immediately after slamming the door to his study to shut out the rest of the world? That he had then poured himself another. Then another.

“There is a footman, who says he works in the de Fontbleau household, asking to speak with you privately, Your Grace.”

The butler’s words immediately dissipated any barrier the brandy might have put between Spencer and the ache for Olivia, which now seemed to have taken up residence in his chest.

That now-familiar nerve began to pulse in Spencer’s jaw. “Did this footman tell you the purpose of his visit?”

Groves’s brows lifted in haughty disdain. “When I inquired, the young gentleman informed me he had been instructed to return something that belongs to Your Grace. That he was told he must place it in your hand himself.”

The Plymouth ring. It had to be.

Because Spencer knew from the conclusion of their encounter in the park earlier that there was absolutely nothing else Olivia would ever willingly give to him.

Instead she had sent a *footman* to give the Plymouth ring back into Spencer’s possession?

No doubt a footman who had no idea what item he was returning or why.

But Spencer had absolutely no doubt Olivia had deliberately chosen this distant manner in which to return the ring she had

accused him of giving to her only so that she would continue to believe his seductive lies.

“You may tell the footman— No.” Spencer changed his mind as he stood. “I shall give the footman a message to relate to... to his employer.” He might be angry with Olivia, furiously so, but he had no intention of besmirching or bringing her reputation into question.

He strode purposefully out to the entrance hall where the footman waited. “You may tell your employer that I require my property be returned to me by them personally.” It sounded less shocking than if he had said, *Tell your mistress*.

Even though it truly was not.

Olivia was a widow, and for her to be seen calling upon the household of a single gentleman so soon after her husband’s death would be scandalous.

“But I have it here in my hand, Your Grace.” The footman looked nonplussed as he held up the small parcel in his palm.

Spencer gave an inclination of his head. “Nevertheless, you will see that it is returned to your employer along with my message.”

Olivia might wish to forget she had ever had the ring in her possession. Might wish she could forget Spencer’s existence as easily. But he knew that he never would or could forget her. Even the thought of not seeing her again before she and the rest of the de Fontbleau household departed to spend the winter months in the country, was unacceptable to him.

But before that happened, if propriety dictated Spencer could not go to the home of a widow, then Olivia must be made to come to him. An occurrence he knew was just as socially unacceptable, but which filled him with a certain painful satisfaction.

Rowena had been right to say Spencer was not the man he had once been.

He was different in so many ways.

But the most noticeable of all was that he was now a cold and unforgiving man.

“Would you care to repeat that?” Olivia’s eyes were wide with disbelief as she stared at the footman as he fidgeted nervously from one foot to the other as he stood just inside her private parlor.

The young man kept his gaze lowered. “His Grace, the Duke of Plymouth, told me to tell you he would not accept this from me.” He held up the parcel Olivia had so painstakingly wrapped in brown paper and tied with string just a short time ago and given into the footman’s keeping to be delivered to the duke. “He said that it must be you, and no one else who returned it to him.”

Olivia absently cradled her sleepy daughter upon her knee. Mariah had been fretting for the past two hours, and Olivia suspected that her daughter was about to produce the two missing teeth from her upper gums. The arrival of Mariah’s bottom two teeth, which she proudly displayed every time she smiled, had caused the poor darling to suffer days and nights of fretful discomfort. Olivia suspected it was about to happen again, and it was no hardship to cuddle and murmur words of reassurance to Mariah to keep her calm.

Mariah’s nursemaid was currently clearing away from where Mariah had been bathed before bedtime. She was a young, happy girl with several young siblings still living in Wales. She cared for Mariah with the same love as she no doubt did her brothers and sisters.

For the most part, Olivia preferred to tend to her daughter herself. She had done so since the moment her dark-haired, blue-eyed daughter was placed in her arms shortly after her birth.

Olivia had decorated and furnished the room adjoining her own suite of rooms into the nursery, even though she knew it was not the way things were usually done. She wanted her

baby close to her. After Mariah's birth, Olivia had dismissed the very idea of her baby having a wetnurse, preferring to feed her daughter herself.

Indeed, Olivia had grown to cherish those times before Mariah began to sleep through until morning, when the two of them were alone together in the middle of the night as the rest of the household slept. There was something surreal about the early hours of the morning, when the darkness outside the windows revealed the new day was not yet broken, but neither had the previous night completely departed.

Olivia's heart ached now to recall how, during those times, she had talked to Mariah about her real father. How she had told her how wonderful Spencer had been. How he had died a hero's death. And how much Olivia still loved him.

She had not known then that Spencer was still very much alive. Or that he would return and treat Olivia as if the two of them had never said "I love you" to each other, let alone made love together.

She still had no idea what devil had prompted Spencer this afternoon in the park as he lifted her down from her horse before kissing her.

Or more disturbing, why *she* had kissed him back when he refused to tell her where he had been for the past year and a half.

Not that any of that mattered now. She had married Gerard. She was now his widow, and she appreciated more than she could ever say that he had saved her from the scandal that would have ruined not only her life but Mariah's.

A sacrifice such as that could never be repaid.

She certainly had no intention of Spencer ever learning he had a daughter. He might have been present at Mariah's conception, but he had not been at Olivia's side during her pregnancy or Mariah's birth. In every way that mattered, Gerard was Mariah's father.

Olivia's arms tightened instinctively about her daughter as she once again looked at the footman. "You may leave the parcel

there.” She nodded in the direction of the small table beside the door. “Thank you for trying, at least.” She gave the young man a warm smile.

“’Appy to oblige, my lady.” A blush crept into his cheeks. “If I might say... If I could be permitted...”

“Yes?” Olivia eyed him curiously for this break in protocol.

“’Is Grace, the duke, he seems to be somewhat in ’is cups this evening, my lady.”

Her brows rose. “You mean he was drunk?”

The footman looked uncomfortable. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say drunk, my lady, but ’e’d certainly ’ad a glass or two of brandy, because I could smell it on ’im.” He winced before his expression became anxious. “I’m only telling you this because it might be more...prudent to wait until tomorrow, if you intend doing as the duke said and decide to visit him yourself.”

“When he might once again be sober,” Olivia acknowledged dryly.

“Yes.”

Olivia had no intention of visiting Spencer this evening. Not only would it be completely improper for her to do so, but she refused to comply with anything that particularly arrogant duke might suggest.

“Thank you, Andrew.” She smiled at the footman. “I will do as you say.”

She almost chuckled, once the footman had departed, to think of what Spencer’s reaction might be to knowing she had willingly accepted the suggestion of a footman, but would not listen to one made by a duke. Specifically *him*.

The Spencer Granger who had returned from France was far too haughty and fond of having his own way, Olivia decided a short time later as she sat beside Mariah’s cot and read her daughter a bedtime story.

Only the light from a single candle illuminated the room, and that single candlestick was safely placed within the confines of

a large bowl of water every evening so as to prevent a fire if it should accidentally fall over during the night.

Olivia knew that, if anything, she was overcautious in regard to her daughter's safety. But she would never recover from the heartache if anything should ever happen to her beloved daughter.

The same could be said if Spencer should learn of his daughter's existence, and he then demanded to be a part of her life. Something Olivia did not intend to allow to happen.

As far as Olivia was concerned, Gerard had been Mariah's father.

He had been the one to insist the two of them marry even after Olivia had felt compelled to explain that she was expecting another man's child.

It had been a bleak and unhappy time for her, knowing Spencer was dead and then learning the scandalous news she was to have his child.

For several weeks, Olivia had been so shocked by the realization of the latter, she hadn't known what to do.

She certainly couldn't confide her scandalous predicament to her parents.

If her mother had somehow learned Olivia was expecting Spencer Granger's child, then she would never have forgiven her. The scandal of having a daughter who was unmarried and expecting a baby was enough to ruin not only Olivia, but also the rest of her family. Her younger sisters, in particular, would have suffered socially and on the marriage mart.

But still, Olivia had known that telling Gerard the truth had been the least she owed him.

In turn, Gerard had explained why he could never have a child of his own and how honored he would be if Olivia allowed him to be her husband and the father of her baby for however long he had left to live.

They had decided, together, that they would present the united front of husband and wife to both her family and the *ton*.

Gerard had been at her side during the months of her pregnancy. Had been the one to ransack the kitchen and provide for her when Olivia requested something outlandish to eat. He had remained at home with her in the evenings when her condition became too noticeable for her to appear in Society any longer. Had been the one to hold her hand when she suffered through the long and painful hours of labor, with the result that his own hand had been quite bruised by the time Mariah was born.

Olivia could still see the wonder on Gerard's face when the bathed and blanket-wrapped baby girl was placed in his arms. Mariah had been so tiny, so serious, but she had looked up at Gerard with complete trust. As if she knew and appreciated what he had done for both her mother and her.

So it had been easy when Spencer had asked her earlier today if she had loved Gerard to tell him the only answer she could give.

She loved Gerard for the truly honorable gentleman he had been and would always be in her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Any chance you are going to pull yourself out from the bottom of that decanter sometime in the near future?” the fair-haired Alaric Montrose, the Duke of Melborne, derided as he entered Spencer’s library unannounced. “You seem to have been constantly foxed, or at the point of being so, for the past few weeks.”

Spencer barely glanced up from where he had moved to sit in a chair beside the lit fire in his library. There was a nearly empty decanter on the table beside him, a full glass of the fiery liquid cradled in both his hands as he stared morosely at the flames in the hearth.

“Do you have news of who was paid to run me through with a sword before I was then held prisoner in a hellhole for over a year?” He didn’t even attempt to ask why Groves, his butler, hadn’t announced Melborne’s presence. He already knew that this man was a law unto himself and always did exactly as he pleased. Marriage had not changed that.

“No,” Melborne dismissed as he dropped into the chair on the other side of the fireplace.

“Then why are you here?”

Melborne chuckled. “You really have become a surly bugger.”

“Your point being?”

Melborne shrugged. “You were altogether too easy and charming before your incarceration. Behaved as if you had not a single bloody care in the world.”

Spencer stared at him for several long seconds before he burst into laughter. “Only you could say someone was *too* easy and charming!”

Melborne grinned. “It’s good to see you smile again, Spencer.”

An emotional lump immediately caught in Spencer’s throat. In adulthood, the Ruthless Dukes always referred to each other by their titles, never their first name. That Melborne did so now was testament to how sincere he was in his observation.

Spencer straightened in the chair to pour brandy into a second glass before handing it to Melborne. “There really has not been any progress made?” He was aware that he had added little to that progress. His concentration had been splintered since seeing Olivia again and realizing how deeply attracted to her he still was. Kissing her this afternoon had not helped to dispel that desire.

Because he was still in love with her?

The truth was, whenever his thoughts turned to that subject, it was also the moment when he turned to drinking the contents of the brandy decanter in order to try to numb his emotions.

“Well, I would not go so far as to say that.” The other man took a welcome sip from his glass. “We arranged for Mr. Stanley and the Earl of Whitlow to meet and talk a few days ago to see if together they could tell us something more about the men who took you away in the cart.”

“And did they?”

Melborne pursed his lips. “They are now agreed that the English officer Mr. Stanley thought he saw attacking you was, in fact, Whitlow attempting to come to your aid as you were being attacked by the French soldier.”

“So, there never was an English officer attacking me, only a French one?”

“It would seem so,” Melborne confirmed. “As Whitlow and Stanley sat and talked of that day, the earl also recalled hearing the two men who arrived in the cart conversing in French.”

“How does any of this help in the search for who had me transported to England before imprisoning me?”

“I am not sure that it does, but this whole affair has been nothing but confusion from the onset.” Melborne gave a shake of his head. “Why make us all believe you were dead, even going so far as to replace your still-living body with a dead one disguised to be mistaken for you?”

“Because they never intended for me to be found alive,” Spencer said evenly. “Ever.”

He had thought long and hard on this question since returning to London. The answer he had just given Melborne was the only one that made any sense. Which meant that whoever had carried out this convoluted plot had meant for him to die in that damp, dark cellar. Slowly starved to death. But possibly not before he had gone mad first.

Spencer believed it was not an unemotional and calculated plan, but one forged from strong feelings of hatred.

A cold shiver ran the length of his spine merely thinking of spending the rest of his life, of dying, in that dark hell.

“Someone must hate me very much to have devised such a cruel end for me,” Spencer muttered.

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

He released a heavy sigh. “None who I can think hate me that much, no.”

As Melborne had already said, Spencer had lived a charmed and easy life before being injured and imprisoned. He had perhaps acquired some disgruntled gentlemen along the way, either because he had stolen their love interest from under their nose or because the family of that widowed lady had taken umbrage at the affair.

Even so, he could not think of anyone who would have hated him enough to have formulated, let alone carried out, the heinous plan that was meant to result in his death, alone and possibly insane, in darkness.

Melborne gave him a sympathetic glance. "The rest of the Ruthless Dukes and I have come to the same conclusion. You were a fickle lover, but never in a way that would have deliberately hurt any of the women who found favor in your eyes."

"I would hope not."

Melborne nodded. "Which is why we now believe the only way forward is to intensify the search for the house in which you were kept a prisoner for so long."

"To what purpose?"

"Because someone must own that house, which means their family name will surely be on the deed. We can make progress if we at least have a name."

Spencer could see the logic of that assumption.

"Using the description of where and how long after your escape you met and were transported to London by the gypsies, we believe we have now narrowed the search to an area of Yorkshire, near the moors," Melborne explained briskly. "I have come to ask if I might borrow Mr. Stanley so that he, along with a dozen of his men, can travel to Yorkshire and go door to door of any houses in that area. All houses. Even those that look uninhabited or are no more than ruins."

"I am sure Mr. Stanley will be only too happy to oblige." Spencer smiled ruefully. "I believe he now finds being a valet too restricting after the life of adventure he had necessarily to lead after my supposed demise." He rang for Groves and instructed the butler to ask Mr. Stanley to join him in his study.

The two dukes stared companionably at the flames of the fire as they waited for Spencer's valet to join them.

James Stanley's appearance was now once again the smartly dressed servant in black clothing and white linen. But he had left his hair overlong and pulled back and confined at his nape. His face was still weathered by the months he had spent at sea as a prisoner of the French. It was his eyes that gave away his inner restlessness, like those of a tiger pacing the cage in which it was imprisoned.

Spencer remained silent as Melborne related the situation to Mr. Stanley. As he had expected, the older man's eyes were now glowing with excitement at the idea of the renewed hunt.

Mr. Stanley managed to harness some of that excitement when he turned to Spencer. "With your permission, Your Grace, I'll go an' get my men together and leave straight away?"

He smiled indulgently. "Of course."

"Report back as soon as you know anything," Melborne called out to the man's retreating back, receiving a wave of Mr. Stanley's hand in acknowledgment. "I'll wager he and his men will have arrived in Yorkshire by tomorrow evening." He chuckled.

"No doubt," Spencer agreed.

Melborne sobered. "There is one more thing of import I wished to discuss with you."

Spencer eyed him warily. "Yes?"

"It has come to my notice that you have feelings for—"

"The Comtesse de Fontbleau is here and asking to see you, Your Grace," Groves announced from the doorway.

"Exactly the name I was about to say," Melborne murmured softly.

Spencer had risen to his feet the second Groves announced that Olivia was here, in his home.

When he had sent his ring back to her earlier today, along with the message he wished the footman to relate to the comtesse, he had thought Olivia might somehow manage to return the Plymouth ring to him at the next social event that they both attended. He had not expected that Olivia would actually visit him at his home this evening under the cloak of darkness.

If he had been slightly foxed when Melborne arrived, then he was no longer. How could he be when Olivia was just a few short feet away and asking to see him?

"I believe my business here is concluded, and I shall now take my leave," Melborne murmured. "But I wish to say one more

thing before I go.” He waited until Spencer glanced at him before continuing. “Remember in your dealings with the comtesse that things are not always as they seem.”

Spencer scowled. “Could you be any more enigmatic?”

“Probably not,” Melborne dismissed in an unconcerned voice.

“You really do not intend to enlarge on the subject further?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“Why not?”

“Because if the comtesse wishes to confide in you in regard to her private business, then I would prefer she be given the opportunity to do so.”

“And if she never does?”

“That is her prerogative.”

“Which is not in the least helpful for me.”

“I am sorry I cannot say more.” Melborne grimaced. “I will collect my own hat and cloak on the way out,” he added to Groves before striding from the room.

“Your Grace?” The butler looked at Spencer expectantly as he waited for his answer.

Spencer was still lost in thought, deeply troubled by Melborne’s refusal to explain himself fully.

How could “things not be as they seemed” when Olivia had told him that very afternoon that she had loved her husband and been happy with him?

The questions Melborne’s comment presented needed to be answered.

But for now, Spencer was still arrested by the knowledge that Olivia was *here*, in his home. He had once dreamed she would live in this house with him. As his wife. He had never imagined her being here under these circumstances or for this purpose.

If he could have done so, then Spencer would have told her to keep the ring. If only for the satisfaction of knowing she had in

her possession something that would always remind her of him. But the ring did not belong to him personally. It was a symbol passed down and worn by every Duke of Plymouth.

“Your Grace?” Groves prompted politely as the silence lengthened.

Spencer focused on his butler. “Take the comtesse’s bonnet and cloak, and then show her into this room.”

“Not the blue salon?” It was where Spencer usually welcomed guests.

“This room, if you please, Groves,” Spencer reiterated firmly.

If Olivia wished to see him, then she would do so under his terms, not her own. She had already surprised him enough by coming here at all. Spencer had no intention of being wrongfooted for a second time this evening.

Olivia had not meant to come to Plymouth House. Had told herself she would not do so.

But the longer Olivia sat alone in her parlor, after ensuring the fretful Mariah had fallen asleep and then eaten her own dinner and seen the tray returned to the kitchen, the more Olivia’s thoughts had turned toward Spencer and the more her anger toward him had grown.

How dare he treat her in that arrogant way?

Daring to steal kisses from her, as if she had never meant any more to him than one of those other women in society who had so briefly held his attention!

The more Olivia thought on the subject, the more furious she had become. Until she eventually became so incensed, she had ordered her carriage be brought round for her. She had also instructed her maid to dress warmly, as she would be accompanying her on an errand.

Once they arrived at Plymouth House, she intended to instruct Mary to remain in the carriage, preferring there not be any

witnesses to the conversation she intended to have with Spencer Granger.

That anger had carried her out of the house and into the carriage, and for the whole of the drive across London.

That anger was fading, to be replaced by trepidation as she now stood alone in the cavernous and candlelit entrance hall of Plymouth House. Waiting for Spencer's butler to return after informing his employer of her arrival and request to speak with him.

During none of her earlier angry musings, of how the two of them would face each other again after those kisses in the park, had Olivia envisaged seeing the Duke of Melborne striding into that candlelit entrance hall from the same direction in which the butler had disappeared just minutes earlier.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Melborne came to a halt in front of her. “My dear Comtesse,” he greeted warmly before grasping and lifting one of her gloved hands so that he might bend slightly and graze his lips across the lace. “It is a great pleasure to see you again,” he added as he released her hand.

“We met only yesterday evening at the Duke and Duchess of Lincoln’s ball, Your Grace,” Olivia reminded dryly.

“An age ago and far too briefly,” he dismissed cheerfully before his expression became serious. “Might I offer a few words of advice?”

Olivia’s cheeks warmed under the intense scrutiny of the duke’s dark gaze. “Would you desist doing so if I were to say no?”

“No,” he acknowledged wryly.

She grimaced. “As I thought.”

He nodded. “Spencer ain’t the same man he was a year and a half ago.”

The indulgent humor fled her demeanor. “I am already fully aware of that fact.”

“I happen to think he’s a better man. But that is just my opinion.” Melborne shrugged. “What I wish to say to you is this: do not attempt to deceive Spencer. He has already suffered enough, and the man he is now will not react well when he learns you have lied to him.”

Olivia literally felt all the color drain from her cheeks. “What do you mean?”

As much as Olivia loved her daughter, doted on her, in fact, she had adopted the same habits as other ladies of Society regarding their children. Which meant Olivia had never personally taken her daughter out in public. Mariah’s nursemaid was the one to take the baby on her walks in the fresh air.

Not because Olivia did not wish to do so but because she did not want Mariah’s existence or age, or her unmistakable likeness to the deceased Duke of Plymouth, to be seen and speculated upon.

Anyone looking at Mariah would see how healthy she was rather than showing any signs of having been born two months prematurely, as had been claimed. Knowing of the gossip the previous year regarding Olivia’s brief friendship with Plymouth, she believed those people would easily be able to make the necessary deduction that Mariah was the deceased duke’s daughter and not Gerard’s.

“I had known and liked de Fontbleau for many years before his death,” Melborne interrupted her turbulent thoughts. “But I had also noted certain...changes in his usually pleasant demeanor during the months before he died. Lapses of memory. The occasional lack of coordination when he walked. Outbursts of uncharacteristic temper.”

Relief washed over Olivia upon learning that the duke was referring to Gerard’s health rather than Mariah’s existence. For Mariah’s sake, and not because Olivia, in the least, enjoyed having a third party notice how Gerard’s symptoms had worsened before he died.

“My husband was very ill,” she conceded.

“He had also taken to wearing gloves at all times,” Melborne continued unabashed. “I assume this was so that it lessened the possibility of passing his disease on to others. Most especially to you and your daughter?”

“I really cannot discuss—”

“Would I be wrong in thinking he ended his own life?” the duke prompted softly. “Again, so as to lessen the burden to you and your daughter?”

Olivia’s face paled. No one had questioned the suddenness of Gerard’s death before now. No one had ever suspected... “My husband died of heart failure,” she insisted.

“Of course he did.” Melborne’s expression was warm with sympathy. “I believe that is what usually occurs when one has taken enough barbiturates to stop the lungs from breathing and the heart from beating.”

And there lay the truth of it.

A truth Olivia had not shared with anyone before now. Even the doctor who had been attending Gerard had not realized her husband had not succumbed to his illness but instead chosen to bring it and his life to an abrupt end.

Olivia had tried to talk Gerard out of doing such a wicked thing, but he had been adamant he did not wish to suffer through the horrific latter stages of his illness. That he did not want to put Olivia and Mariah through that ordeal either.

In the end, Olivia had accepted it was Gerard’s decision to make, and she had been honored to hold his hand as the pills he had taken took effect. It had been a profound and emotional experience to share those last moments with such an honorable man.

“You—”

Melborne lifted a hand to halt Olivia’s reply as he glanced past her to where Plymouth’s butler could be heard walking down the hallway. “Have no fear, Comtesse. Your deceased husband’s secret shall remain safe with me. But if you are ever in need of someone to talk to, myself or my wife would willingly—indeed, we would be honored—to sit with you and listen to your concerns. To help you if we possibly can.”

Hot tears stung Olivia’s eyes at this unexpected kindness from a man who was another of the Ruthless Dukes and one of Spencer’s closest friends.

Olivia was starting to suspect that sobriquet might have been true of these six gentlemen once upon a time but was now, in Melborne's case at least, no longer applicable. Possibly not in regard to the other four recently married Ruthless Dukes either.

To make up for his friends' more easygoing demeanors Spencer had become ruthless enough for all six of them combined!

A fact Olivia would do well to remember when she was about to face Spencer again.

She smiled tremulously at the Duke of Melborne. "Thank you." She deliberately omitted to say whether or not she was accepting his offer. Because she truthfully did not know whether that would ever be the case.

Lord knows she occasionally felt in need of a little kindness being shown to her from someone, knowing it never would be from her mother.

The baroness had even kept her distance during Olivia's marriage to Gerard, and the months of her pregnancy, interested only in the prestige she now garnered as the mother-in-law of a comte. Her mother had certainly never visited Mariah in her nursery, having declared that she'd spent quite enough time with her own children without troubling herself with a granddaughter.

Olivia had suspected, from the way that comment had been worded, that her mother heartily disliked the fact that Olivia had made her a grandmother at the age of seven and thirty.

Whatever the reason, Olivia had always been somewhat relieved by her mother's disinterest in Mariah. She and Gerard had discussed the subject as the predicted correct time approached for her baby's birth. They had agreed that it would be for the best if no one, and that included Olivia's mother, knew that Olivia's baby was not premature as they intended to claim it had been.

Her mother really was the last person whom Olivia would ever confide in or expect to show her any understanding or

compassion. Indeed, the baroness's reaction to Gerard's death, rather than grief or sympathy for Olivia, had been excitement that Olivia was now a very wealthy widow and so in a position to help her family. By giving them that requested allowance that would help in presenting her younger sisters in Society this past Season.

Which Olivia had duly done and received very little thanks from either them or her mother for doing so.

And yet Melborne, who was a virtual stranger to her, had without reservation just offered her his own friendship and also that of his wife. "It is so very kind of you—"

"What is the delay in showing the comtesse— What the hell is going on here?" Spencer demanded, having come to an abrupt halt as he stared at Olivia and the Duke of Melborne. "Am I interrupting something?" he accused.

Olivia briefly closed her eyes in an effort to draw on her inner strength not to react as she wished to by telling this overbearing man exactly what she thought of him.

Not because of what his accusation said about her—she already knew what Spencer thought of her—but because of what his words implied about the recently married Duke of Melborne.

"Leave us, please, Groves," Melborne instructed tightly, waiting until the butler had disappeared toward the back of the house and the warmth of the kitchen before continuing. "I am willing to allow you some leeway, Plymouth, quite a lot, in fact," he told his friend slowly and evenly. "But only because I am aware of all you have suffered,"

Spencer snorted. "I am not in need of anyone's understanding or pity."

"I beg to differ," Melborne snapped. "I consider you to be more in need of both those things at this moment than you have ever been before."

"How so?" Spencer demanded.

"Your insulting words just now threw into question not only the comtesse's feelings for her dead husband, but they were

also an insult to my wife when they implied our marriage is less than happy. Which, I assure you, is a blatant untruth. We are ecstatically happy together.” He glared his annoyance.

Spencer had the grace to look uncomfortable. “I never meant to imply—”

“On the basis of your having already stated your distaste to receiving anyone’s understanding or sympathy, I will offer none,” Melborne continued in a hard and uncompromising voice. “But I do believe, in fact, I insist, that you owe both the Comtesse and myself an apology. I will save you the trouble of having to extend that apology to my wife,” he continued when Plymouth would have spoken. “And I will do so by not relating any of this conversation to my darling Grace and so causing her unnecessary unhappiness at the insult given to her by a man whom she considers to be her own friend as much as mine.” His eyes glittered in challenge at this latter statement.

CHAPTER NINE

Spencer knew, beyond any doubt, that he had overstepped a line with his accusing behavior. That by doing so, he had insulted Olivia and infuriated Melborne, usually the most amiable of men.

Just as he also knew the excuse that he had done so because the sight of Olivia and Melborne talking quietly, almost conspiratorially together, had caused an instant and jealous rage inside him, was not a good enough excuse for the insult.

He released a heavy sigh. “You are right, as always.” He gave Melborne an acknowledging nod of his head. “I apologize to both you and your lovely wife for anything untoward I might have said regarding your happiness— That I *did* say,” he amended when Melborne continued to glare at him.

“And the comtesse...?”

Spencer swallowed, his gaze not quite able to meet Olivia’s as he addressed her in a stilted voice. “I apologize for any rudeness you might have detected in any of my words.”

“That is the extent of your apology?” Melborne snorted.

“I am *very* sorry for my rudeness,” Spencer amended between clenched teeth.

Melborne gave a shake of his head. “How you were ever thought to be the most charming of all of us is beyond understanding.” He sighed. “I apologize for my friend’s crass behavior, Comtesse.” He bowed to Olivia. “I can only think that Plymouth’s months of captivity must have addled—” Melborne broke off abruptly, wincing as he turned to look at

Spencer. “Now it is my turn to apologize for having spoken out of turn.”

“His months of captivity...?” Olivia predictably repeated before looking at Spencer with wide eyes. “Is the duke saying you were a prisoner of the French for all the time we thought you were dead?”

Spencer had no idea how to answer such a question. He had been a prisoner, yes, but the fact his captivity had been mainly in England would seem to imply his jailor was not French.

Unless...

Dear God, why had it not occurred to him before now? The Comte de Fontbleau was a *Frenchman* who, at the time of Spencer’s imprisonment, would have been the person who most wanted the Duke of Plymouth to disappear. So that his betrothal and marriage to Olivia could take place after all.

“Plymouth?” Melborne’s brow was creased into a frown when Spencer turned to look at him. “As you know, the rest of us remained away fighting at the time you returned to England for several weeks. So that neither I nor any of the other Ruthless Dukes knew the interest you had shown in Miss Miller during that time,” he reasoned. “Because of that, we did not even consider the Comte de Fontbleau as a possibility for being involved in the circumstances of your death. But I realized the truth of it once you were returned to us, and I assure you I thoroughly explored the suspicion now uppermost in your mind. I can say, without hesitation, that de Fontbleau was not responsible for your abduction and imprisonment. The proof of that statement must surely be obvious in the fact that de Fontbleau has been dead this past six months, but your imprisonment continued for another three months after his death.”

“Perhaps my jailers were not informed their employer was dead,” Spencer bit out harshly.

He admitted to finding it difficult to let go of the idea now that he had considered the possibility of it being de Fontbleau who had wanted him removed, at least for as long as it would take to make Olivia his wife.

“It would have been hard for de Fontbleau to inform them of such from inside his coffin,” Spencer added angrily.

Melborne gave a pained wince. “I believe you are currently digging your *own* grave with your current method of speculation.” He placed a steadying hand beneath Olivia’s elbow as she appeared to sway slightly.

A touch, albeit light, which infuriated Spencer further. “I am simply seeking the truth.”

“You are seeking someone to blame.” Melborne glowered at him. “And I have assured you de Fontbleau was not the one responsible.”

“You cannot be sure of that when he is, as you say, very much dead, and so unable to say one way or the other for himself?” Spencer continued to challenge.

His friend gave a disgusted shake of his head. “Whatever you suffered during your imprisonment is no excuse for how callously you are now behaving toward the comtesse.”

“I—” Spencer broke off at the sound of Olivia’s sob, followed by another, and then another as Melborne gathered her into his arms and she was able to muffle those sobs by burying her face against the other man’s waistcoat-covered chest.

Her obvious distress acted as a release for Spencer from the red tide of rage that had governed his manner and tempered his words this past few minutes. Allowing him to see that a white-faced Olivia was now crying as if her heart was broken.

And perhaps it was?

Dear God, what had he done?

Olivia was so confused by the two dukes’ conversation, then so shocked at hearing Spencer speak so callously of Gerard’s death and accusing him of God knows what, that she didn’t seem able to stop herself from crying.

Perhaps because those tears were long overdue?

She'd had to be so strong for so long. The tears she should have shed when she believed Spencer to have been killed at Waterloo. Learning she was expecting his child. Then losing Gerard only a year after they were married. All had meant her tears had necessarily to remain locked inside her.

Oh, she had cried in private. But in public she now had responsibilities to her daughter and to her deceased husband's estate, which did not allow her to indulge her grief for any length of time.

Spencer's cruelty and the Duke of Melborne's kindness had succeeded in breaking down all of those defenses. Until Olivia was once again reduced to being that young and inexperienced girl in need of understanding.

Olivia considered it truly pitiful that the only warmth being shown toward her was being freely given by a gentleman she had barely spoken two words to before this evening.

She had no idea what the two friends meant when they talked of Spencer's captivity and imprisonment. When Spencer accused Gerard of possibly being responsible for both those things. An accusation the Duke of Melborne had firmly denied as being true.

None of their conversation made sense except that last part. Not only because Gerard had been too ill to imprison anyone but because she knew he would never have deliberately hurt anyone. He simply had not been capable of doing so.

More importantly, Gerard had loved Spencer's daughter as if she was his own from the moment of her birth.

That last thought allowed Olivia to draw in a deep and controlling breath as she gathered her scattered thoughts together before lifting her head and stepping back from the Duke of Melborne. He released her reluctantly, his gaze still one of concern.

Olivia gave him a tremulous but reassuring smile before turning to address Spencer. "Your apology is sadly lacking in sincerity and substance. As I now know to also be true of the man you have become or perhaps always were." Her gaze on

Spencer remained cold even as she noted the color drain from the hardness of his cheeks. “How I could ever have believed I had feelings for you, why I ever so deeply mourned your death, is beyond understanding when I see the man you are now.” She gave a shake of her head. “The Duke of Melborne is quite correct in saying there is no excuse for the callous way in which you spoke of the demise of a man who you should be thanking rather than reviling with accusations you cannot substantiate because there is absolutely no truth to them.”

Olivia’s breath caught in her throat when she realized the enormity of what she had just revealed. Thankfully, Spencer gave no indication he had noticed her slip. But Melborne’s eyes had narrowed in speculation.

Olivia reached into the pocket of her cloak and took out the small box still wrapped and tied in brown paper, which was the reason for her being here at all this evening. “Your ring.” She turned and placed it on the seat beside the front door, having no wish to touch Spencer again. “I never want, nor do I ever wish to see or speak with you again.” She threw open the door and departed with a flurry of her skirts, hearing the door slam closed behind her with the same finality she now felt toward Spencer.

“Magnificent,” Spencer murmured his admiration as he watched Olivia leave. “I thought her beautiful before, but I now see she is a woman of great substance and deep self-conviction.”

“A woman you loved so deeply you went so far as to give her the Plymouth ring?” Melborne murmured softly.

A nerve pulsed in his clenched jaw. “Yes.”

“Then you are even more of a fool than I thought you to be,” Melborne bit out harshly. “For having just now spouted such utter nonsense about the comte in her presence,” he explained impatiently when Spencer raised a questioning brow. “She will not easily forgive you.”

Spencer frowned. "I have no intention of asking for her forgiveness."

Melborne reached out to briefly squeeze Spencer's shoulder. "I have a feeling that before this is over, you will be down on your knees begging for her to do so."

Spencer snorted. "That will never happen."

Melborne gave a pitying shake of his head. "It will, my friend," he stated with certainty. "And when that time comes, I advise you to listen to what she has to say and accept your deserved rebuke gracefully."

Spencer grimaced. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"No, I am fully aware of that," the other man drawled. "Perhaps if you had listened more closely to the comtesse this evening, your misery would be over sooner rather than later."

"You are talking in riddles!"

"Only to you," Melborne acknowledged. "But, my wife and the other Ruthless Wives excepted, I believe Olivia de Fontbleau to be a woman of such deep integrity, I would trust her with my own life and that of my wife. She is a woman, moreover, who deserves only praise and admiration for what *she* has endured."

"The moment she thought me dead, she married another man for his fortune!"

"Did she?" Melborne dismissed. "Or did she marry him for another reason entirely? And did he, being a true gentleman, marry her for that same reason? The love and devotion she showed him during and at the end of his life was immeasurable. So much so, I have nothing but admiration for both her and de Fontbleau," he added quietly.

Spencer flung up his arms. "I have no interest in listening to more of your riddles."

"No, of course you don't," the other man taunted. "No doubt the bottom of the decanter is reaching out to you once again."

"Fuck off!"

“I intend to.” Melborne gave his shoulder another squeeze. “The man I saw in you just now when you spoke to the comtesse is not a likable one.”

Spencer glared. “Did I ask you to like me?”

“Your friends, including myself, will not desert the man of strength and honor we know you still to be beneath your anger.” Melborne’s jaw tensed. “But we might, singly or collectively, give you the thrashing you deserve in order to bring you to your senses.”

“You might try.”

Melborne sighed deeply. “At the moment, you are allowing yourself to be blinded by rage and jealousy toward a dead man. Perhaps when you are completely sober—if you ever are—try looking inside your heart for the woman you loved so deeply, you gave her the Plymouth ring as a pledge of your devotion and intention of returning to her.”

“A ring you just saw her return to me!”

“From what I gathered, that is because you had asked for its return.”

His nostrils flared. “Of what possible interest would keeping my ring be to an independently wealthy woman who never loved me in the first place?”

“Listen to yourself, Spencer.” Melborne sighed his impatience. “And consider if you are angrier at her because her marriage to another man must prove she never loved you, or because that man’s death left her such a wealthy widow, she now has no needs of a man in her life, least of all you, to complete or support her.” He grimaced. “You are behaving like a child who, on Christmas morning, did not receive the gift he asked for. I happen to think the gift that could be yours now, if only you would see beyond your rage, to be far superior to what you originally thought you wanted.”

“You are once again talking in riddles!”

“So I am,” Melborne said mildly. “I hope once you are less angry and the brandy is no longer clouding your judgment that you will consider all that I have said and perhaps consider

giving the Comtesse a sincere apology for your cruelty to her.” He gave a nod before leaving abruptly.

Spencer waited only long enough to be sure Melborne had truly gone before he snatched up the parcel Olivia had left and returned to the library. As Melborne had accurately surmised might be the case, he intended to drink the rest of the contents of the brandy decanter.

It was late the following morning, and Spencer’s head was pounding as if an army of elves had taken up residence inside it and were banging hammers against his skull, when he was at last capable of considering all that had been said the previous evening.

Once he had finished recalling those conversations, he was left with far more questions than answers.

CHAPTER TEN

“Your mother, Baroness Miller, is downstairs in the blue salon waiting to see you,” Olivia’s butler stiffly informed her several days after that unpleasant confrontation with Spencer when the Duke of Melborne had shown nothing but kindness toward her.

She stood and handed the sleeping but still fretful Mariah to her nursemaid. Those two top teeth were proving very stubborn indeed regarding making their appearance. Olivia was exhausted from nursing and comforting Mariah these past two days and nights.

Olivia gave her butler a reassuring smile, knowing the reason for his disapproval was that he did not like her mother’s habit of taking herself to the blue salon rather than waiting in the hallway to be granted entry, as a visitor should.

Her mother, as Olivia knew, did not believe she should be made to wait when she visited the home of the daughter whom she had never particularly liked, even if she was now a comtesse. Olivia had no doubt her mother was currently inspecting and cataloging the price of every item in the room as she waited for her to appear.

As she walked down the wide staircase, Olivia steeled herself for what she expected would be her mother’s next wheedling attempt to appropriate money from her. The money Gerard had given her parents before Papa gave his permission for them to marry had been long spent, and her mother had hinted several times that the allowance Olivia now gave them was insufficient for their needs.

Perhaps Chloe was in need of a new pair of slippers.

Or Camille a new gown.

Or, and this was the most effective ploy of all because Olivia loved her father dearly, it was the baron who was this time in need of funds.

Not that he would be made aware of his wife's machinations in procuring the money from his daughter. Money which this time would no doubt go toward buying Christmas gifts for the twins and Edmund before they all left London and traveled to the family home in Bedfordshire, where they would enjoy the winter revelries.

Her mother would not extend an invitation for Olivia to join them, of course.

The previous Christmas, Olivia had been so far along in her pregnancy that neither she nor Gerard had considered it safe for her to travel. Instead, she and Gerard had spent a happy Christmas together in London. Olivia had been reluctant, in any case, to remove an already unwell Gerard from the vicinity of the doctor who was helping to manage the worst of his discomfort.

"I cannot imagine why you would ever want to keep such an unattractive earthen urn in your sitting room, where all your visitors might see it," was her mother's greeting comment when Olivia entered the room, the urn she'd referred to held carelessly in the older woman's lace-gloved hand.

"Gerard was particularly fond of it." Olivia knew that was because Gerard had been present at the archaeological dig where the urn was discovered. "I believe it is worth several thousand pounds," she added for her mother's benefit, knowing that the monetary value of an object or person was all the baroness cared to know about.

"This is?" The baroness still looked at the urn disparagingly.

Olivia nodded. "It is Greek and over two thousand years old," she assured dryly as she took possession of the urn and replaced it on its pedestal. "As I said, it was a favorite of

Gerard's," she added wistfully as she sat on one of the couches.

Her mother sniffed. "Proving he was as lacking in the practicalities of the world as you are."

"Indeed," Olivia remarked noncommittally, the warmth of her smile reserved for acknowledging her butler as he placed the tea tray on the low table in front of her before straightening and leaving the room.

Her mother sat on the couch opposite. "I have not seen nor heard from you since the Lincolns' ball a week ago."

Olivia stiffened warily. "No."

"An event at which you were extremely impolite to the Duke of Plymouth." Her mother raised disapproving brows even as she took the cup and saucer Olivia held out to her. "Luckily, I was able to atone for your rudeness by dancing with the duke myself." She gave a smile that would have rivaled a cat's when a bowl of cream was placed before it.

"How wonderful for you," Olivia dismissed, knowing from experience she could keep giving these bland answers forevermore and her mother would never realize that Olivia simply wasn't interested in her Society gossip.

"Oh yes." Her mother preened, her appearance in a pale green gown as fashionable as it had ever been. "I do believe Plymouth is even more charming than he ever was."

"Really?" Olivia somehow doubted that to be true when all of her own recent encounters with Spencer had left her feeling either furious with him or quivering with physical awareness.

The latter had occurred after Spencer had kissed her so thoroughly in the park a week ago.

The former after he had spoken to her so scathingly in his home that same evening.

Olivia had not seen Spen—she really must stop thinking of him as Spencer—the Duke of Plymouth since that time.

A part of her was relieved by that reprieve.

Another part of her, awakened when Spencer had kissed her so deeply, ached to once again experience the passion and desire that had existed between them from the moment they first spoke to each other.

Her marriage to Gerard had been a companionable and pleasant one. Despite the fact they had lived together like brother and sister, Olivia would never have so much as thought of being unfaithful to him. But as a consequence, she knew she was starved for the physical touch and warmth of another adult rather than her darling daughter, whom she adored unconditionally.

She was starved for *Spencer's* touch and warmth.

At least, the Spencer who had once longed to feel her touch and warmth in return.

And therein lay the problem, because the Spencer who had returned to them after a year and a half absence was not the man with whom Olivia had once fallen in love.

Perhaps because, as the Duke of Melborne had inadvertently revealed, Spencer had spent that time being “abducted, imprisoned, and kept in captivity”?

Olivia still had absolutely no idea what he had meant by that.

She had wanted, several times, to call upon the Duke and Duchess of Melborne during this past week so that she might ask him to explain further. She had not done so because it would not be fair to ask the duke to betray a confidence which should only be shared by Spencer himself. He gave no sign of wishing to do so.

Which did not mean Olivia was not still burning to know the answer, only that she liked the Duke of Melborne enough not to put him in such a difficult position.

“—are you even listening to me?”

The shrill sound of her mother's demanding voice brought Olivia out of her reverie. She must have omitted to make a bland comment or two in response to whatever inanity currently held her mother's attention.

“Of course,” Olivia soothed.

She received a scathing glance for her effort. “You are becoming positively provincial with only Marie for company.”

It took Olivia several seconds to realize her mother was referring to her baby daughter. “Mariah,” she corrected tautly. “Your granddaughter’s name is Mariah.”

“Marie or Mariah.” Her mother’s mouth curved in a curl of distaste. “This family seems to be plagued with an abundance of girls.”

“You—”

“You have a visitor, madame,” her butler announced loudly as he entered the room and presented a silver tray toward Olivia with a calling card upon it.

Olivia picked up the card and instantly felt the blood drain from her cheeks as she read the name the Duke of Plymouth.

Spencer was *here!*

Now!

The fact that he was calling upon her at all was shocking. That he had done so when her mother was here was so much worse than unfortunate when the older woman knew of their history together. Not all, of course, but enough.

“Well, who is it?” the baroness demanded.

Olivia ignored her mother’s strident command and instead answered Davis. “Would you please show my guest into the library and inform him I will be with him shortly. Perhaps offer him some tea.” Not brandy, because she believed Spencer had been imbibing far too much of that since his return to London.

“Very good, madame.” Davis bowed before departing to relay her message.

“You have a gentleman caller?” The baroness looked horrified. “Must I be the one to remind you that you are still in mourning?”

Olivia needed no lessons in propriety from a woman whose flirtatious behavior with any young or wealthy gentleman proved she barely knew the meaning of the word. “No, you need not,” Olivia answered her briskly as she stood and crossed the room to stand in front of one of the two bay windows looking out onto the street. She easily recognized the ducal seal on the black lacquered carriage outside. As would her mother, on her way out. “Now, if you will excuse me, Mother, I have some business to discuss with my visitor.” She turned her back on the evidence of that carriage.

Her mother gave a disapproving sniff. “A lady does not *discuss business*, let alone with a gentleman in her own home.”

“I am the head of this household now,” Olivia snapped, totally unnerved by now knowing it was definitely Spencer waiting for her in the library. That he had come here, when the last time they met she had told him she never wanted to see him again. “As such, I shall discuss whatever I please with whomever I please.”

“Then tell me who is this mysterious male visitor you have lurking in your library?” Her mother eyed her speculatively.

Olivia met that gaze unflinchingly. “If I had wished you to know that, I would already have said his name.”

The baroness shook her head. “You have always been too headstrong for your own good. Thank God I am here to assist you whenever you appear to be in danger of causing a public scandal.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed. “I have no idea what scandal you are referring to.”

“That is because you are still too stupid and trusting to even *know* when you are in danger of your reputation being ruined.” Her mother stood before straightening her spine, the scowl she gave Olivia one of deep disapproval. “You know where to find me when your behavior results in yet another scandal, this time threatening the respectability of not just you, but also your daughter.”

Olivia's shoulders tensed at her mother having stooped so low as to bring Mariah into this conversation. The granddaughter she had chosen to ignore since Mariah's birth. The granddaughter whose name she did not even remember correctly. "I should like you to leave now."

Her mother looked completely unperturbed by Olivia's obvious hostility. "Do not forget it is your father's birthday in four days' time."

"I have not forgotten it previous years. I have no reason to believe I shall do so this year either."

Her mother's gaze was scathing. "You might become so engrossed in the company of your visitor, you forget everything else."

"I might," Olivia provoked.

She and her mother engaged in a staring match for several more long seconds before the older woman gave a huff of impatience and finally took her leave.

Olivia had no doubt that once her mother was outside, she would see and recognize the ducal seal on the waiting carriage and instantly know who Olivia's visitor was.

She walked briskly out into the entrance hall. "Do not allow my mother to come back into the house," she instructed Davis, sure that once her mother recognized that ducal seal, she would attempt to come back inside. "I suggest you lock the door to prevent it."

"Yes, madame." Davis moved quickly to comply with the instruction, pushing the bolts across at the top and bottom of the door before turning the key in the lock.

His gaze was lowered when he turned back. Olivia had no doubt that was so that she did not see the triumph shining there. Her butler had never made any secret of the fact he liked her father, Baron Miller, but heartily disapproved of the overbearing baroness and Olivia's two flighty younger sisters.

Olivia nodded her approval even as she drew in a deep and fortifying breath for the ordeal she knew any encounter with Spencer was sure to be. "Please ensure I and my guest are not

disturbed.” The last thing she wanted was for any of her household staff to overhear her conversation with Spencer.

Spencer turned from studying the painting of the English countryside situated over the fireplace when he heard the library door open, followed by the soft swish of Olivia’s skirts as she entered the room.

Her eyes were the color of gold against the pallor of her cheeks, her appearance regal in the gown of deep gray silk she wore, as befitted her widowed and still mourning state. To Spencer, she had never appeared more beautiful.

She curtsied. “I apologize for keeping you waiting, Your Grace.”

He gave a formal bow. “I am the one who should apologize for calling on you without notice.”

Her smile was rueful. “I have learned to accept that you no longer choose to do what you might once have considered polite.”

“No,” he acknowledged wryly before sobering. “I am here today because it has preyed on my mind since the last time we spoke that I still owe you the heartfelt apology I failed to give you then.”

Her eyes widened. “That was a week ago, and it is also unnecessary when I am sure you believed in the truth of what you said.”

His jaw tightened. “I was foxed when I insulted both you and Melborne. I have not touched another drop of brandy since that evening.” And his head had been clearer for it.

Clear enough to know that he needed to speak with Olivia again and at least try to explain the reason for his unpleasantness since his return to London.

She nodded. “Now that you are here, there is a question I wish to ask you.”

Spencer tensed warily. “Yes?”

“What did the Duke of Melborne mean when he described you as having been ‘abducted, imprisoned, and in captivity’ a year and a half ago until very recently?”

Exactly what Spencer had come here to explain.

It was time he did so.

Past time!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You will need to sit down while I tell you this.” Spencer encouraged Olivia to occupy one of the seats either side of the lit fireplace. “It is a long and unpleasant story.”

Once he had made the decision to speak with Olivia again, Spencer had thought long and hard as to how truthful he should be regarding the past. He had finally decided he should tell her all, that his unpleasant behavior since he’d returned meant he owed her the whole truth.

He waited for Olivia to be seated and her skirts arranged about her before continuing. He made no effort to sit himself, knowing he felt too restless, his memories of captivity still too vivid, to have his movements restrained in any way. “During the battle at Waterloo, I was struck down by the sword of a French soldier— I have no memory of it,” he hastened to assure at her gasp of dismay. “Nor do I have any memory of the events that followed, but I am assured by Mr. Stanley and Lord Henry Church, the Earl of Dunhill, that they did.”

“Your valet and the Earl of Dunhill...?”

“An unlikely pairing, I grant you,” Spencer confirmed wryly. “But they have both assured me these events did happen in exactly the way they have separately described to me.” He then related how Mr. Stanley had thought he saw him struck down by an English sword, but the Earl of Dunhill had now confirmed that it was his sword, and he had raised it only in order to defend Spencer from being run through a second time by the Frenchman. “He stabbed the Frenchman attacking me, but was then struck on the back of the head and rendered

unconscious.” He grimaced. “It is after this that the tale becomes more difficult to believe, in both concept and deed.”

From Spencer’s vivid description of the battle, Olivia already felt as if she had actually been present that day. That she could smell the gunpowder. Hear the gunshots, the neighing of horses, and the men giving a battle cry or calling out in pain.

She felt Spencer’s suffering as if it were her own.

Saw the sword as it breached his abdomen.

Felt the agony as the blade was thrust deeper still.

She could smell the blood as it flowed freely from what she knew should have been a fatal wound.

She did not see how this tale could become any more “difficult to believe, in concept or deed.”

She was made fully aware of how wrong she was as she listened to Spencer describe how the Earl of Dunhill had regained consciousness long enough to see a horse-drawn cart with two men seated upon it appearing through the trees. How those men had brought the cart to a halt a short distance away before jumping down to lift a body from the back of the vehicle. They had then removed Spencer’s English officer’s uniform jacket and dressed the body in it before leaving it on the ground. They had then hauled Spencer up onto his feet, along with the Frenchman who had run him through with a sword, placing both of them in the back of the cart before the two men climbed aboard again and drove away.

Olivia stared at Spencer as she absorbed all he had just told her.

It was some minutes before she finally felt able to speak again. “It was to be assumed that you were the man in the English officer’s jacket who had died in battle,” she realized.

He nodded. “I am told the man’s face had the benefit of having been trampled by a horse’s hooves and so rendered

unrecognizable.”

“But because he wore your jacket, everyone believed it was you.”

“Yes.”

“Everyone who loved you would believe you to be dead, and so would not bother searching for you.”

“Yes.”

She frowned. “The unconscious Earl of Dunhill was obviously found and returned to England to recover from his ordeal.”

“But he did not remember the things he had seen until the remaining five Ruthless Dukes began their search for the English officer Mr. Stanley believed he had seen strike me down.”

“Where had Mr. Stanley been all this time?” Olivia asked the question to give her more time to ponder the relevance, if any, of this strange sequence of events.

“He was gathered up by deserting French soldiers and sold into slavery aboard a French ship. He escaped several months ago and returned to tell the other Ruthless Dukes what *he* believed he had seen that day. Once the earl was able to recall his own memories of that day, my five friends visited the family crypt. Despite being there for over a year, the body in the coffin had remained somewhat intact. Enough that they were able to ascertain that there was no birthmark on its left thigh.”

A birthmark which, because of their own past intimacy, Olivia knew Spencer to have.

She gave a shake of her head. “You were quite right to describe these events as being difficult to believe.”

“I have not reached the most incredulous part of it yet,” Spencer assured her.

Olivia's brows rose. "Were you also sold into slavery to serve aboard a French ship?"

He shook his head. "I have no memory of the weeks I must have spent in France after I was stabbed, probably because the wound had become infected. By the time I recovered my wits enough to be aware of my surroundings, the wound was partially healed, and I was locked in a dark and damp cellar well below ground of what I later came to realize was a house in the north of England."

Olivia eyed him quizzically. "You traveled from France to England without having any knowledge of it?"

"Yes."

"Then how can you be sure that the house you were a prisoner in was in England?"

"My jailer, the only person I saw during all the months I was kept incarcerated, had a strong Yorkshire accent."

She swallowed. "Even so..."

"I also heard him muttering to himself one day, referring to himself as Jacob. 'Do this, Jacob.' Do that, Jacob.' 'Nag, nag, nag, all bloody day and all bloody night.'" Spencer shrugged when this time, Olivia made no comment. Her face was also becoming paler the longer he described his life for those months of his imprisonment. "When I finally managed to escape my prison, after what I later learned had been a period of fifteen months, I took refuge in the safety of the wildness of the forests as soon as I was able to do so. I walked and kept walking until I found a stream in which to wash myself and my clothes. The exertion of that proved too much, and I collapsed beside that stream. I was found what I believe to be the following day, but could have been longer, by a troop of gypsies. They informed me I was in the north of England and then agreed to take me to London with them."

"Did you kill your jailer when you escaped?"

"No. Nor his wife. Although I believe they deserved it for the crime they committed against a man they did not even know," he added darkly. "I waited for the opportune moment and hit

the man on the back of the head with the bucket in my prison.” He saw how Olivia’s face became even paler as she realized which bucket he was referring to. “His wife, when I reached the top of the stairs from the cellar, was unconscious in front of the range in the kitchen. No doubt from over-imbibing from the jug of cheap wine that had been knocked over on the floor beside her. I was able to leave the house unmolested by either of them. Well...” Spencer grimaced. “I call it a house, but once I was outside, I could see it was almost a ruin, with half the walls having fallen down and the garden unrecognizable. Only the kitchen appeared to be intact above ground.”

“Have you managed to find this house again?”

He sighed. “We are hampered by the fact I do not recall the exact location of it. But Mr. Stanley and the half dozen men who accompanied him are in Yorkshire at this very moment going house to house in search of it and the man named Jacob who kept me a prisoner there.”

Olivia didn’t know what to say.

Or do.

Incredulous as it all sounded, she believed every word Spencer had just said. As well as the description of what had happened to prevent him coming home to her, as he had promised he would.

She felt nauseous at the realization that Spencer’s inability to return to her had resulted in her accepting Gerard’s offer of marriage. Rather than, as she had hoped, being able to share with Spencer, upon his return, the happy news she was expecting their child.

His conversation with Melborne a week ago regarding Gerard being involved in the plan to prevent Spencer from returning to her made sense to her now that it was put into context.

Melborne had immediately dismissed such a suggestion.

As Olivia now also dismissed it.

She had known Gerard to be a kind and caring man. He would never have thought of, let alone carried out, the diabolical subterfuge that had resulted in Spencer's imprisonment for all those months.

She had absolutely no reason to doubt Spencer's description of what had happened to prevent him returning to her the previous year.

The other Ruthless Dukes obviously believed him too; otherwise, they would not have been trying to determine who had tried to kill him.

Or what had become of their friend's body when they discovered it was not Spencer lying in the Plymouth crypt.

Or now sent Mr. Stanley into Yorkshire to search for the ruined house in which a drunken sot named Jacob and his equally drunken wife resided.

A journey which would, no doubt, result in Mr. Stanley discovering exactly who was responsible for making Spencer disappear at the battle of Waterloo and all the cruelties heaped upon him afterward.

Unfortunately, Olivia knew of someone who would not have hesitated to arrange to carry out those things if they thought it would be beneficial to them.

The more Spencer had revealed about his incarceration, the more convinced Olivia became that Spencer's imprisonment had come about because of his involvement with her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Olivia appeared pale and distracted, Spencer noted with a frown.

By something more than just the shocking events Spencer had just related to her?

Her face was now a sickly gray color. Her eyes were dark and haunted, her thoughts all seeming inward. Her cheeks were hollow. Her lips thinned. The sharpness of her jaw tense. Her lace-gloved hands were tightly clenched together in front of her.

Spencer suspected that they would be visibly trembling if not for that. “Olivia?” he prompted gently.

She seemed to pull herself back to the present with great difficulty. “I am so sorry to hear of someone having treated you so dreadfully.” Her gaze did not meet his. “It must have been a tremendous ordeal for you. I am sure your friends were greatly relieved to see you again after you had managed to escape and return to London.”

Your friends were greatly relieved to see you again.

Not Olivia, only his *friends* were pleased to see him.

Spencer had no idea what he had hoped would happen once he told Olivia the truth of what had prevented him from returning to her the previous year. But it was most assuredly not this polite and distant response.

Perhaps she really had loved Gerard de Fontbleau, and the love she had once claimed to feel for Spencer had only been

the reaction of a young lady who had felt flattered by the attentions of the gentleman known in Society as having an aversion to falling in love? Certainly, Spencer had never offered any woman marriage before Olivia.

“What are your own feelings now that you know the reason why I did not return from Waterloo?” Spencer’s tone was harsher than he might have wished.

But his disappointment over Olivia’s less than delighted reaction to his explanation had hurt him deeply.

Perhaps he had been expecting too much from her. She was, despite now being a widow, still very young. The group of friends with whom she now surrounded herself were just as young and, in some cases, very silly.

The stark reality of what Spencer had just related to Olivia, of the deprivations he had endured for so many months, had no place in that world of gossipy afternoons, teas, and evenings of dancing.

The startled glance Olivia gave him seemed to confirm those thoughts. “Me?” She gave a shake of her head. “I am very sorry to hear how you suffered, of course. It is truly abominable that someone could have treated you so inhumanely. But I fail to see why you would think I should have any other *feelings* about it?”

Spencer reached out to grasp her shoulders and shake her a little. “We were in love with each other a year and a half ago. We made love together. I gave you my ring. I would have asked your father for your hand in marriage upon my return.”

“Would you really?” She gave a knowing smile. “Or were your declarations of love and promises of a future together merely a tested and proven way of persuading women—in this case, me—into engaging in sexual congress with you?”

“No!” he rasped in protest, his fingers tightening on her slender shoulders as he glared at her. “Absolutely not. I loved you, Olivia.” He loved her still, but the skepticism in her gaze as she looked at him held him back from saying those words. “You loved me in return,” he insisted harshly.

“Did I?” she taunted. “Or was I merely a young girl charmed and flattered by the attentions of the elusive and worldly Duke of Plymouth?”

It was so close to Spencer’s thoughts of a moment ago that he again cried out in protest. “I do not believe that! You are mine, Olivia. Mine!” His mouth crashed down onto hers.

For now, Olivia pushed any other thoughts from her mind except the one demanding she return Spencer’s kisses. Once he learned the truth, as he surely must, he would never wish to see her again, let alone kiss her.

Their kisses were just as heavenly as they had been a year and a half ago, just as demanding, and they quickly flared out of their control.

Olivia welcomed it when Spencer pushed up her gown, parting the slit in her drawers, before burying his face against the heated flesh to lick and taste her there.

This intimacy alone was enough to send Olivia’s body crashing into ecstasy.

She did so again and again, Spencer relentless in his need to claim and own every last bit of her pleasure.

“I want—need, to feel you inside me as I did once before,” she admitted huskily. “Please, Spencer!”

He didn’t speak as he stood before removing his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt. “It no longer hurts,” he assured gruffly when Olivia gasped at seeing the long and completely healed scar on his abdomen.

His gaze remained transfixed on her parted and glistening thighs as he unfastened his pantaloons and pushed them and his drawers down far enough to release the long length of his engorged and throbbing shaft.

There was only a little discomfort as that girth stretched and then filled her, the walls of her channel quick to accommodate

the hard and familiar flesh.

Then there was only pleasure as Spencer began to thrust his cock inside her before withdrawing it almost to the tip and then thrusting in again as deep as it would go.

As if he were once again claiming that which had once been his.

Olivia ceased to think after that, reaching the pinnacle of pleasure twice before she felt that familiar faltering in Spencer's thrusts and then joined him in that release as his cock pulsed hotly inside her.

"Why are you crying?"

Olivia stiffened, having no idea she was crying until Spencer mentioned it. Now, she could feel the tears cascading hotly down her cheeks.

Why was she crying?

Because her heart was breaking. For a second time. Over the same man.

Their lovemaking just now had been as magical and perfect as the night they made love together in Vauxhall Gardens.

Olivia was now crying because she knew this would never happen between them again once she had confirmed the truth of the past and then shared it with Spencer.

As she surely must.

Not to do so would, for his peace of mind as well as her own, do them both a great disservice.

The truth needed to be told.

Preferably before Mr. Stanley returned from Yorkshire, possibly also in possession of that truth.

A truth Olivia needed to confirm, sooner rather than later, before she dared talk to Spencer about it.

She carefully extricated herself from his arms, her resolve almost wavering once she was standing looking down at the broad expanse of his bare chest and the scar upon his abdomen

from the wound that could have, but thankfully had not, killed him.

She blinked back more hot tears as they stung her eyes. “I am crying because we should not have done that.”

“Yes, we should!” Spencer protested as he sat up to pull up and refasten his drawers and pantaloons before standing. “Olivia, I must tell you how very much I still—”

“No.” She held up a silencing hand. “We will not make the same impulsive declarations as we did in the past. I am sure today happened because of...a feeling of nostalgia for that past,” she dismissed. “There was no love involved on either side. It was the same as the lingering memories I believe couples sometimes have from their failed relationship. Memories that stoke the fires of those physical embers to see if any feelings for each other remain. But once that fire has abated, they are invariably able to realize those feelings are not strong enough, on either side, to resume the relationship.”

A nerve pulsed in Spencer’s tightly clenched jaw. “You are saying we are such a couple?”

What Olivia really wanted to say was that she loved Spencer. That she had always loved him. That she had never stopped loving him. That she knew now she never would.

But she also believed there was now a secret between them that was too big, once revealed, to ever be forgiven.

Two secrets, because she had yet to confess to Spencer that Mariah was his daughter, not Gerard’s!

She looked down to fasten her gown and then straighten her skirts rather than look at Spencer, knowing his expression would be one of hurt and confusion. “If you will excuse me? I have an urgent errand to run before it becomes dark. The evenings drop in so early nowadays,” she dismissed distractedly.

Spencer could not believe that the coolly detached young lady now standing in front of him, discussing how early night fell, was the same one who had ignited into a woman of fiery passion only minutes ago as they kissed and caressed each other.

The same woman who, those same minutes ago, had taken him inside her and cried out as they reached the pinnacle of their pleasure together.

The woman Spencer now knew he loved with the same deep intensity and fidelity as he had a year and a half ago.

He wanted no other woman.

Only Olivia.

And she had just told him she did not, had never, had those same feelings for him.

He wanted to shout, to demand Olivia stop denying the love between them. To insist that he *knew* she loved him as much as he loved her. That she would not have given herself to him if she did not love him.

But the coolness of her gaze and her composed expression told him it would be the equivalent of hitting his head against a brick wall if he were to do so. In other words, painful but ineffectual and ultimately humiliating.

After his months of inhuman captivity, the latter was something Spencer refused to allow himself to ever feel again. Three times now, Olivia had told him she did not love or want him. He would not give her a fourth occasion in which to do so.

Which did not prevent Spencer's chest from aching as he pulled on his shirt, waistcoat, and superfine. He was straightening the cuffs of his shirt beneath the latter when he spoke again. "I apologize. I believed the depths of our feelings for each other to be mutual, but obviously, they are not. I will not intrude upon your privacy again." He gave a stiff bow before turning on his booted heel and striding from the room.

The duke's departure was followed by the sound of the front door being unlocked and opened, and seconds later, carriage wheels rolled across the cobbled street until all was quiet outside as well as in.

Which was when Olivia at last felt free to give in to the pain of her heart shattering into pieces so small, she knew she would never be able to put it back together again.

She allowed herself only a few minutes to give in to those feelings of utter despair, in the knowledge that once the truth was revealed, she would have lost Spencer forever anyway.

Minutes after Mariah was once again fed and settled, Olivia was seated in her carriage on her way to confront the person she believed was responsible for all that Spencer especially had suffered, herself less so, this past year and a half.

Her expression was determined, her heart beating so fast and so loudly, it felt as if it might leap out of her chest.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Good God, man, what has occurred to make you look so grim and white-faced?” Grayson Vaughn, the Duke of Flint, prompted the moment Spencer entered their club and demanded a decanter of brandy and a glass be brought post-haste to the leather chair where he intended to sit beside the fireplace.

Spencer had balked at going home after leaving Olivia, hating the very idea of being so alone with his thoughts. Instead, he had chosen to come to the club he was once again frequenting after his long absence.

He had not expected to see any of the other Ruthless Dukes there. “Should you not be at home with your wife?” he mocked Flint.

“Chastity is with her seamstress, having some winter gowns made for when we retire to our country estate at the end of the month,” the other man dismissed.

Spencer would normally have traveled to one of his own estates at this time of year. But the thought of being alone with his heartache at any of his country homes no more appealed to him than returning to his house in London had earlier this afternoon.

“Chastity has told me that the next time I see you, I am to extend an invitation for you to join us in the country,” Flint drawled as he dropped into the wingback chair opposite.

Spencer chuckled at the manner in which his friend proffered the invitation. “I take it you would rather the two of you

remained alone there together?”

Flint grinned. “There is certainly something to be said for being able to bed your wife, morning, noon, and night, without fear of offending or having to entertain a guest.”

Spencer nodded. “Please thank Chastity for me, but tell her I plan to spend Christmas at my estate in Gloucestershire.”

“And do you?” he prompted when Spencer added nothing more.

Flint always had been a perceptive bugger! “No,” he confirmed. “But telling Chastity that will prevent her, and any of the other wives, from being concerned as to my welfare over the holiday period.”

“And what of myself and the other Ruthless Dukes?” Flint chided. “Should we not be concerned about you either?”

“No.” Spencer nodded his appreciation to the server as the other man placed the glasses and decanter on the small table beside his chair. “I am a grown man and more than capable of providing my own entertainment.”

“Really?” Flint drawled as he accepted a glass of brandy before cradling it in the palms of his hands to warm it. “Rumor has it that you have not shown attention to any woman since your return.”

“I have no inclination to do so at the moment,” Spencer dismissed.

Flint nodded. “I do know that you have paid more than one visit to the widowed Comtesse de Fontbleau. Were they in the name of *entertainment*?”

He stiffened. “Do you have someone watching me?”

“No,” Flint humored. “But I believe you have someone watching the comtesse. Men who are loyal to Mr. Stanley, but gossip amongst themselves.”

He did, yes. Or, at least, he had.

Spencer was no longer sure it was necessary to continue that protection now that Olivia had made it clear to him that she

harbored no intention of bringing their past relationship into the present.

But, if that was true, Spencer had no idea what their lovemaking this afternoon had been about...

Perhaps, as Olivia had described, it had merely been a nostalgic coupling brought on by feelings of affection for the past?

He looked up as Mr. Perkins, the majordomo of the club, crossed the room and came to a halt in front of Spencer's chair. "There is a...gentleman asking to speak with you, Your Grace. He seems a trifle...upset and looks very disheveled, but insists he must speak to you at once," the man added with a disapproving twitch of his superior eyebrows.

That level of forcefulness did not sound like Mr. Stanley, but Spencer could think of no other gentleman who might have so alarmed Mr. Perkins with just his presence. "I don't suppose you feel inclined to bring this gentleman to me here?"

"It is against club rules, Your Grace," the majordomo seemed relieved to be able to claim.

"Of course." Spencer rose to his feet. "If you will excuse me, Flint—"

"Absolutely not." Flint also stood. "I wish to see this very disheveled gentleman for myself," he added mockingly when Spencer glanced at him.

It was not, as Spencer had assumed, Mr. Stanley waiting for him. Freshly returned from Yorkshire, hopefully with news of the house and its owner, where Spencer had been kept imprisoned.

Instead, it was one of the men Spencer had instructed to follow and protect Olivia, if necessary.

A reminder to Spencer that he needed to issue the instruction for those men to desist in that task. He doubted, as he intended to stay away from her in future, that she would be in any danger merely from associating with him.

The man waiting for him was indeed a very white-faced and shaking gentleman. Also, obviously upset and very disheveled, as Mr. Perkins had so accurately described him. The man had clean but ragged clothing, his long hair pulled back in an untidy queue.

The majordomo had at least had the foresight to put the man in one of the small, private sitting rooms close to the entrance of the club. Not, Spencer was sure, for the man's comfort, but so that none of the patrons entering or exiting the club would chance to see him.

"I went back to ya 'ouse, but ya butler said as ya 'ad gone owt, but to try findin' ya at ya club first," the man said the moment Spencer and Flint entered the room.

"Where did you come back from?" Spencer prompted as abruptly.

The man drew in a deep breath. "Well, as instructed, I followed the comtesse when she went out only 'alf an hour or so after you 'ad left 'er 'ouse."

"Ah, you paid a visit to the comtesse this afternoon," Flint stated, as if that answered all his earlier questions.

It certainly answered the one as to why Spencer had looked so white and grim-faced when he arrived at the club. But it did not reveal the reason he had been in that state.

"The comtesse seemed agitated as she got into 'er carriage," the rough-looking man continued. "I followed 'er, as you'd instructed we should—"

"Get to the crux of the matter, man," Flint now encouraged testily.

"The crux of it?" His voice rose almost to being shrill. "Well, the reason I'm standin' 'ere is because within minutes of the comtesse enterin' the 'ouse, I 'eard a shout followed by the sound of a gun bein' fired."

"What house?" Spencer demanded as he moved to grasp the man's arms. "Who screamed? More important, who has been shot?"

All of Spencer's earlier resolve to stay away from Olivia in future crumbled to dust at the thought of her having possibly been the one who was shot, perhaps fatally.

It was only a short carriage ride from Olivia's house to the one her parents rented in a less fashionable part of London, much to her mother's chagrin. Her complaints on that subject had become more fractious since Gerard died and left Olivia a rich widow. The baroness had even, at one point, suggested that she and the rest of Olivia's family should move in with Olivia in her much grander home.

A suggestion Olivia had very firmly refused!

She felt a shiver run the length of her spine just from thinking of sharing a home with a woman who might not actively hate her but had certainly never made any effort to hide her dislike.

Her parents' house was in its usual state of hysteria when Olivia arrived and was admitted inside the entrance hall by the man who acted as both the household butler and valet to Olivia's father.

Her sisters could be heard arguing upstairs, her mother's occasional and bored comment for them to desist having no effect whatsoever.

Olivia could hear her brother and father talking about hunting in the latter's study.

All while several maids bustled to and fro, one with an ironed gown in her arms, the other a pair of clean satin slippers. No doubt in an effort to try to bring to an end whatever had brought about the twins' argument in the first place.

Olivia drew in several calming breaths as the butler first went to her father's study to inform him of her arrival, before going up the stairs to inform her mother of the same thing.

Edmund and her father appeared from the study to greet her first, the new pistol her brother carried obviously the subject of their discussion. It was no doubt the reason her mother had

hinted she was in need of extra funds during her visit to Olivia earlier.

As soon as she saw the two men, Olivia realized she should have delayed the butler from going up the stairs and instead talked to her father and brother alone before the women of the household joined them.

Too late for that now. “Father, I need—”

“*I* need to greet my eldest daughter properly,” he interrupted jovially. “Or are you too grand, now you are a comtesse, to kiss your father when we meet?”

“Of course, I am not.” She gave his cheek a hasty kiss. “But there is something of great seriousness I need to discuss with you,” she insisted urgently as he stepped back from returning the affection.

“Whatever this matter of great urgency is, it can be discussed with all of us, surely,” the baroness announced as she came down the stairs, the still-bickering twins following behind her.

Olivia turned to look at her mother. The baroness was still a beautiful woman, with her hair fashionably styled and wearing the same fashionable gown she had worn when she visited Olivia earlier today.

Except, Olivia, at least, knew that if what she suspected was true, then she would never again see the baroness as merely being that disagreeable but harmless harridan whom Olivia had never been able to please or find favor with, despite her many efforts to do so.

The baroness, who had been left, and still owned, a derelict house in Yorkshire. A house that had belonged to Olivia’s maternal grandparents when they were alive, but which had been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair since because of a lack of funds to maintain its upkeep.

Olivia also knew that Jacob and Mary Blenkin, the couple who had been her grandparents’ gardener and housekeeper, had been allowed to live in the part of the house that still remained standing.

Taking all those factors into account, when Spencer described his place of imprisonment earlier and the name of his jailer, they had seemed far too much of a coincidence for it not to have been Appleton House and Jacob Blenkin.

Her mother, through her French grandmother, Mariah Dusette, also had relatives on the Continent whom she might have persuaded into removing Spencer from the battlefield and then making him all but disappear.

If all this should turn out to be true, then her own mother was the person responsible for everything else that had happened to Spencer this past year and a half.

As Olivia had listened to Spencer earlier as he explained those events, it had all sounded too...incredulous to be the truth. Incredulous, and yet too much of a coincidence for her fears not to be aroused.

She had no idea why her mother would have done such a thing.

Unless she really had believed that Spencer was merely playing with Olivia's affections and that by allowing it to continue, he would eventually have brought about her ruin and that of her whole family?

Olivia had turned those thoughts over and over again in her mind earlier, along with her mother's recent cryptic comments regarding having saved her from a past scandal. The more Olivia considered the situation, along with when these things had happened to Spencer, the more she became convinced that she alone now knew who was responsible for all the cruelties that had been inflicted upon him.

Her mother's eyes had narrowed to blue slits by the time she stepped down into the entrance hall. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she demanded.

"I think you already know the answer to that question, madam," she answered accusingly.

"Leave us," the baroness instructed the butler/valet before turning her glacial gaze back to Olivia. "Does your less than

polite attitude to me have something to do with the fact your visitor earlier today was the Duke of Plymouth?"

"Plymouth called upon you?" Her father looked taken aback by the possibility of the duke calling upon the home of his widowed daughter.

Olivia's gaze remained unwaveringly on her mother. "It has everything to do with Spencer's visit. And the fact that I now know exactly what happened to prevent him from returning to me."

"He was never going to return to you, foolish child," the baroness scorned. "And while you waited for him to do so, you would have caused a scandal by breaking your engagement to de Fontbleau rather than now being his very wealthy widow."

"I was in love with Spencer, and he was in love with me!" Olivia told her emotionally.

"What?" her father gasped before turning to his wife. "Daphne, you told me that situation was nothing more than a young girl's infatuation with a lofty duke."

"Because it was," she dismissed.

"You know it was not." Olivia trembled at the enormity of the baroness's deception.

The older woman's eyes glittered. "What I know is that someone had to act so that you did not bring shame down upon this family."

Olivia flinched. "You are not even going to try to defend your actions?"

The older woman gave a disinterested shrug. "I do not have a single regret about doing what needed to be done to ensure you married the comte and so prevented this family from ruin."

"Daphne...?" The baron appeared dazed.

Confirming what Olivia already knew: her father had not been involved in the subterfuge and trickery which had almost

resulted in Spencer's death. From starvation or sickness, if nothing else, brought about by neglect.

"Be quiet, Leo," his wife snapped. "You have always been a weak man," she added scornfully. "Too weak to do what had to be done to save this family."

Olivia looked at her through narrowed lids. "I have never hated anyone in my life before, but I now believe I hate you."

The older woman gave a snort. "Is that supposed to bother me? I assure you—"

"No, I assure *you*, Baroness," Olivia cut in forcefully, having no intention of ever referring to this woman as her mother ever again. "Your crimes against the Duke of Plymouth shall be made public. After which, you will be subject to the law of the land regarding his kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment."

"You would ruin yourself and your precious daughter in the process," the older woman reminded confidently.

"I would rather that than for you to get away with your crimes."

"You always were a foolish, romantic girl," the baroness spat the words accusingly. "Look where romance got *me*! I was pregnant before my eighteenth birthday, forced to marry your father, and live a life of economy and want. I will not have the same happen to my two darling girls." She bestowed an adoring glance toward the twins.

Olivia wasn't surprised that she had no place in her mother's thinking except as a wealthy widow until Edmund or the twins were able to marry, hopefully equally as well. "To achieve that end, you arranged for the Duke of Plymouth to be removed from the battlefield at Waterloo and had his body replaced with another man's. You then had him brought to England and wrongfully imprisoned him in Yorkshire for over a year. He could have died there!"

"I fully intended that he would," her mother mused. "I am glad he did not, of course. Because he has returned more handsome and intriguing than ever."

“He shall know, before anyone else, what you did to him,” Olivia vowed.

“I do not think so,” her mother grated.

“Yes,” Olivia stated firmly. “And you will be imprisoned for it.”

“Never.” Her mother gave a hard laugh as she removed a small pistol from the pocket in her gown before lifting it and aiming it at Olivia. “I began to carry this with me when I learned of Plymouth’s return. I had a feeling I might one day have to deal with him, or you, possibly both. The duke’s visit to you earlier today alerted me to the possibility that day would happen sooner rather than later.” She sighed. “I admit to hoping that your sniveling brat would have been old enough that you did not leave us with a mewling baby to care for after your death.”

Olivia gave her a startled glance. “I will never allow my beloved daughter to be brought up by such a cruel and selfish woman as you.”

The baroness gave a pitying shake of her head. “We are your only family,” she reminded. “And I doubt you have thought to make other provision for Marie—”

“Her name is Mariah!”

The older woman shrugged. “And after you are dead in an unfortunate accident of some kind, your daughter, along with your fortune, will be given into your beloved parents’ care.”

“Never,” Olivia insisted vehemently. “I will not allow it.” She strode determinedly toward the woman who had given birth to her, but who had never been a mother to her.

But before Olivia was able to reach the baroness, the deafening sound of a shot being fired echoed in the hallway.

Spencer could never remember being in such a state of worry and panic as when he and Flint traveled in his carriage to the home of Olivia’s parents.

He would not be answerable for his actions if a single hair upon Olivia's head had been harmed...

"You are in love with the comtesse."

"Yes." Spencer could see no point in denying it when his every action proved that his feelings for Olivia were as deep as they had ever been.

"Have you always been so?"

"Since last May, yes."

"And she is in love with you."

"I thought so, but she says not—"

"Then she is lying," Flint stated evenly. "Do you know the cause of de Fontbleau's death?"

Spencer flinched at the mere mention of the man who had been Olivia's husband. "Olivia said he had developed an infection."

"A novel way of describing syphilis," Flint drawled.

Spencer stilled, his eyes wide as he stared at his friend. "De Fontbleau had the French disease?"

His friend nodded. "It is a terrible and lingering way in which to die, no?"

"But Olivia... She does not have the disease." The symptoms would already have started to manifest if she did.

"No," Flint agreed. "What does that tell you?"

Spencer was still too surprised at learning the cause of de Fontbleau's death to be able to think clearly.

Besides which, his carriage had now arrived outside the home of Olivia's parents. Spencer didn't wait for one of the grooms to open the door, but threw it open himself before stepping out onto the cobbled road. Flint followed closely behind him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Olivia sat on the bottom step of the stairs, too numb, in body and spirit, to be able to recover as yet from the scene laid out before her.

Her mother lay on the floor of the hallway, a bloom of red visible on the bust of her gown.

Her father knelt beside her.

Her twin sisters sat on the step behind Olivia, too stunned to argue for once in their lives.

Edmund was white-faced, the pistol he had fired still held in his hand.

The same pistol he had used to shoot his mother before the baroness was able to shoot Olivia.

Olivia needed to go to him. To comfort him. To assure him he was not to blame for what had happened.

But before she could do so, the front door of the house was suddenly thrown open.

Olivia's eyes widened when Spencer and the Duke of Flint stepped into the house, the latter closing the door firmly behind him.

"I shot my mother." Edmund stared at the body as if he could not quite believe his eyes. Or that he was responsible.

Because he wasn't!

"You shot her before she could shoot me." Olivia felt galvanized into action, rising to her feet to run to her brother's

side. She placed a soothing hand upon his trembling forearm. “You saved my life, Edmund.”

His gaze remained fixated on where their mother lay. She was unmoving, her face white, eyes closed, her chest no longer rising and falling. “And I have killed my mother.”

“In defense of your sister.” Flint stepped forward to take the gun from Edmund’s unresisting fingers. “No one here believes any differently,” he assured.

“Dear God, Liv,” Edmund choked as the removal of the gun from his hand seemed to jolt him out of his stupor. “What sort of monster had our mother become that she could have done such a thing to the Duke of Plymouth? Or now tried to shoot you so that she could inherit your fortune?”

As far as Olivia was concerned, their mother had always been a monster. But never to the degree that she had become once the baroness saw the possibility of having a comte as a son-in-law might be taken from her by Olivia’s feelings for Spencer Granger. A man, a duke, who was known for his disinterest in marriage.

Except Olivia now knew that Spencer’s feelings for her in the past had been genuine. He had told her so when he vowed he would have come back to her if he had been able. That he would also have asked her to marry him upon his return.

“Your mother is responsible for the things done to me...?” Spencer now prompted softly.

Olivia glanced at him, knowing by the grimness of his expression that he had picked up on Edmund’s reference to those actions. “She has—had—many relatives in France and other parts of the Continent. She also owns a house in Yorkshire. A ruin. The caretakers of that house are Jacob and Mary Blenkin.”

He turned to look at the obviously deceased baroness. “But why?”

“She believed you were all that stood in the way of my marrying the very wealthy Comte de Fontbleau.”

His wince was pained. “She was obviously right.”

“No, she was not,” Olivia stated firmly.

“But you married him in my absence.”

Olivia drew in a sharp breath at the accusation. “There is a reason that I did so.”

“He was already betrothed to you and very wealthy—”

“That is not the reason.”

“But—”

“I believe you should take the comtesse home, Plymouth,” Flint cut in firmly. “I shall summon the other Ruthless Dukes to help me deal with this situation. Do not fear, Comtesse,” he assured Olivia softly. “Your brother will not see the inside of a prison, let alone the gallows. I will ensure all will be explained in such a way no one will be to blame for what happened here except the baroness herself.” He turned to Plymouth. “Take the comtesse home, Spencer.” He squeezed his friend’s arm. “And this time, do as Melborne advised and *listen* to what she is saying to you. Do not just hear, but actually *listen*,” he emphasized again.

Spencer had no idea what Flint was trying to tell him. Probably because he was still in a daze from learning the woman he had thought of as being nothing more than a shrew and a harridan was, in fact, the person responsible for everything that had happened to him during and since the battle at Waterloo.

All because she had not wanted, through what she had considered to be only a flirtation on his part, for Olivia to bring to an end her betrothal to de Fontbleau.

“You must now be very brave, Madame Comtesse, and tell Plymouth the truth.” Flint lifted Olivia’s hand and kissed the back of it. “All of it,” he added pointedly. “He deserves that, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” she acknowledged huskily.

Flint nodded. "Take her home, Spencer," he repeated decisively.

Olivia turned to where her father still knelt on the floor beside the baroness. "Papa...?"

Her father rose shakily to his feet after giving one last lingering glance at his dead wife.

His eyes, when he raised his head to look at her, were full of pain. "Please go with the duke. But know that I do not hold you or Edmund in the least responsible for what has happened here today. Edmund was only defending you. No doubt I am guiltier than either of you for not checking your mother's behavior before this. For not seeing that her actions had become mentally unstable." He turned to Spencer. "I do not know all you have suffered at my wife's hands, but I am truly sorry for it." He turned to Flint. "We shall claim that my wife accidentally shot herself with my son's gun. None here shall gainsay that claim." He frowned fiercely at his twin daughters and his son.

"No, Papa," they all answered together.

Olivia ran to her father and gave him a fierce hug. "I am so sorry, Papa."

He released a slow and measured breath. "Perhaps your mother is at peace now. She certainly lost no opportunity to make her unhappiness with me and our marriage known these past twenty years," he added bitterly before rallying. "Go with Plymouth now," he instructed firmly. "The fewer people here to be questioned by the authorities, the better. But all will be well with the Duke of Flint's help."

Olivia gave her father one last hug before walking to Spencer's side. She had not given a single glance toward her dead mother. "I am ready to leave now, if you are." She looked nervous as she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "There is something at my home I wish to show you."

Spencer's brows rose. He had no idea what Olivia might wish to show him, but he had no intention of being apart from her again any time in the near future. When he and Flint had been

driven here so swiftly, he had thought Olivia to already be dead, shot by a member of her own family. Indeed, she might have been if not for her brother, Edmund. That Olivia was now standing beside Spencer, the living, breathing woman whom he loved beyond reason, was nothing short of a miracle.

He nodded. "I am ready."

Olivia sat nervously across the carriage from Spencer on the drive to her house.

She had no idea how he was going to react to seeing Mariah, but she had no doubt that a single glance would be enough to reveal she was Spencer's daughter, not Gerard's.

It was the reason she had decided to do it this way. No words could explain the miracle that Mariah was to her. How their daughter was the living proof of their love. Spencer deserved to see that for himself. He deserved so much more than that, but Olivia first needed him to meet his daughter.

Hopefully, many other things would fall into place once he had.

"You do not seem saddened by your mother's death."

She glanced across at Spencer before lowering her lashes. "She was cold and cruel to me all my life, blamed me for having to marry my father once she discovered she was carrying his child."

Spencer gave a disgusted snort. "A child is not to blame for the actions of the adult."

"I am relieved you think so." Some of the heaviness eased from her chest. "Spencer—" She broke off when he moved from the other side of the carriage to kneel in front of her. "What are you doing?" she gasped.

He took both her gloved hands in his. "I swear I am going to listen to everything you have to say to me. I promise to look at whatever it is you need to show me. But before I do either of

those things, I need you to know that I fell deeply in love with you the May before last, and that I have never stopped loving you. Not for a moment.” He lowered his head to kiss the backs of both her hands with warm lips.

Olivia gave a choked sob as she turned her hands so that her fingers could tightly grip his. “I fell in love with you then, too, and I have never stopped loving you. Not even for a moment.” She made that same vow, her eyes hot with unshed tears.

His gaze was puzzled. “I do not understand.”

“You will,” she promised as the carriage came to a halt in front of her house. The groom quickly hopped down to open the door. “Come with me.” She kept hold of Spencer’s hand and pulled him with her as she stepped down from the carriage before almost running down the pathway to the front door of her home.

She didn’t linger in the hallway to discard their outer clothing, but ran straight past her butler and up the wide staircase to the floor above.

Spencer had no idea where they were going. But he hoped they were going to Olivia’s bedchamber so they could be alone together and once again vow and express their love for each other.

If that was the case... “Olivia.” He pulled her to a halt halfway down the hallway. He dropped to one knee again. “Will you marry me?”

Her tears began to flow freely. “In an instant,” she assured fiercely.

The heavy weight that had been pressing down on Spencer’s chest ever since he learned Olivia had been married and widowed in his absence now lifted and allowed him to breathe easily for the first time since his return to London. “Olivia—” He broke off as she rose on her tiptoes and kissed him.

“I love you,” she choked. “I love you. I love you!”

“God knows how much I love you!” Spencer vowed before he lowered his head and claimed her lips with his.

He knew they still had much to talk about, but knowing they loved each other, that Olivia had agreed to marry him, was more than enough for now.

He was surprised, therefore, when seconds later, Olivia ended the kiss to place her hands on his cheeks and ask. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life,” he vowed.

Fresh tears began to fall down her cheeks. “Then please believe that I did what I thought was best. For—for everyone.” She swallowed. “It was not selfish. Never that. I wanted—I needed—” Her words were interrupted by a sound from inside the room they were standing outside of.

It sounded suspiciously like—

“She can hear my voice,” Olivia murmured indulgently as she reached out to turn the handle and push open the door. “Listen and look, Spencer,” she reminded emotionally as she waited for him to precede her into the room.

To Spencer’s surprise, he stepped into what was obviously a nursery. There was a cot to one side of the room, with a rocking chair beside it. A collection of toys were stacked neatly on shelves across the room. A young nursemaid knelt on the rug beside the guarded fire. Crawling across the rug toward them was a baby—

“Mama!” The baby gave a beaming smile, proudly showing off the teeth at the front of her mouth as she crawled even faster toward Olivia. “Mama!” She plopped back on her bottom to hold up her arms with an obvious demand to be picked up.

Which Olivia promptly did before she turned to look at him with wary eyes. “Look and listen, Spencer,” she reminded huskily.

Spencer only needed to do the first of those things to recognize the familiar dark curls and the same sky-blue eyes as he saw whenever he glanced at himself in a mirror.

Every question he had left to ask Olivia was answered as those blue eyes so like his own gazed back at him trustingly.

“Her name is Mariah,” Olivia supplied.

Her. The baby was a girl.

A daughter.

His daughter.

Spencer knew this without a single doubt.

Something shifted inside him as he stared at the baby. A making of room for the overwhelming rush of love that suddenly filled his heart alongside the deep and enduring love he felt for Olivia.

“Would you like to hold her?” Olivia asked gently.

Would he...? “Please.” He held out his arms, having never so much as held a baby before, but needing to hold this one. His daughter. Mariah.

She felt such a light weight in his arms, and yet, at the same time was a solid presence of the love he and Olivia had vowed to each other the previous year.

“You may go, Mary,” Olivia dismissed as she settled their daughter in Spencer’s arms. The baby seemed transfixed by him. “By the time I learned I was with child, I had already been told you had been killed at Waterloo,” Olivia told him softly after the nursemaid had left the room. “I had to tell Gerard the truth, of course, but he insisted on marrying me anyway.”

“I owe him a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid,” Spencer acknowledged gruffly.

He had spent so long hating the very thought of the Frenchman being married to Olivia that he had been unable to look beyond that.

To *listen*, as Melborne and Flint had both advised him to do. To question rather than accuse. Olivia herself had told him that he should be thanking de Fontbleau rather than maligning him.

“We lived as brother and sister,” Olivia now told him.

Flint had told him to consider the reason the comte had not passed his disease on to Olivia. Spencer realized now it had been because they had not had a physical relationship.

“But I cannot allow you to ever believe I did not love Gerard,” Olivia added firmly. “Despite already being ill, he was a kind and caring man. He took care of me and my unborn baby. Gave us his name. He loved Mariah from the moment she was born,” she added emotionally.

Who could not love the little imp who was now playing with the shiny diamond pin in Spencer’s neckcloth? Or the brave and steadfast woman who was her mother?

Spencer loved them both beyond reason.

The life of the woman who had wronged him had been taken today. But Spencer had also been *given* a life, that of his daughter, which nullified all those months he had been kept a prisoner and far away from his beloved Olivia.

He reached out to gently cup his hand about one of Olivia’s cheeks. “I am so sorry for what you must have suffered once you realized you were carrying my child. The heartache you must have endured, believing I was dead, and then feeling so very lost and alone before de Fontbleau insisted on marrying you and giving you both his name.”

A flush brightened Olivia’s cheeks. “Mariah’s full name is Mariah Lisette de Fontbleau.”

“And it shall remain so, in honor of the man who loved you both when I could not. But I believe Mariah Lisette de Fontbleau Granger sounds even more impressive, no?”

Olivia gave a tearful chuckle. “I believe that sounds perfect.”

He quirked one dark brow. “As does Olivia de Fontbleau Granger?”

“Even more perfect,” Olivia accepted softly as she cuddled against his side.

None of the past mattered to Spencer. It was forgotten completely, here in this moment, with his daughter and future wife in his arms.

EPILOGUE

The following summer

The gardens at Plymouth Park, Gloucestershire

“How do you think your father is now?” Spencer prompted as he sat beside Olivia on a blanket spread beneath an ancient oak tree.

Olivia glanced across the lawn to where her father was currently down on his hands and knees giving a gleefully giggling Mariah a ride on his back as she shouted, “Faster, Grandpa. Faster!”

Olivia turned back to Spencer. “I believe he is getting better.”

It had been a difficult time for her father, once he learned the full extent of his wife’s perfidy. But with help from Olivia and Spencer, along with Edmund and the twins, he was starting to socialize again. The unreserved love he felt for his granddaughter was certainly helping him to heal.

Edmund was across the lawn playing croquet with several of the Ruthless Dukes and their wives. The dukes had taken her brother under their wing after helping to smooth over the death of the baroness. Edmund was flourishing under their attention.

He and Lord Robert Granger, that gentleman also playing croquet, had become good friends, and they often went about town together. He had not, thank goodness, taken up any of Cousin Robert’s fashion choices!

The two young ladies to whom they were betrothed looked on indulgently.

Olivia could easily imagine how, in the years to come, there would be more children born who would play in the gardens at Plymouth Park. Indeed, two of the duchesses were expecting a child before Christmas.

The twins were also present, with the two wealthy young gentlemen they had become betrothed to during this past Season.

There seemed to be something to be said for having a duke and duchess as brother-in-law and sister-in-law!

Olivia and Spencer had married the previous December, neither wanting to wait any longer than that to finally marry and live together as husband and wife.

“Papa! Papa, I am falling!” Mariah called out.

Spencer rose quickly and rushed across to where his daughter was indeed starting to slip sideways on her grandfather’s back. He easily swept Mariah up in his arms and began to tickle her in order to make her forget the near catastrophe.

Olivia smiled contentedly as she sat and watched them. The two people she loved most in the world.

It had been a very happy eight months since their wedding.

With a glance down at the slight bulge of her pregnancy visible against her gown, Olivia knew that they would continue to be happy and together for many more years to come.

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Carole Mortimer is a USA Today Bestselling Author and recipient of the RWA Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award 2015, RT Career Achievement Award 2017, RT Pioneer for Romance Award 2014. She was also recognized by Queen Elizabeth II in 2012 for her 'outstanding service to literature'. Carole has written over 280 contemporary, Regency and paranormal romance novels.

She is happily married to Peter. They have 6 sons, and live on the beautiful Isle of Man. She also loves to hear from Readers!

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