



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CAROLE MORTIMER



THE HERO

Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 5

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Newsletter and Social Media Links](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other books by Carole Mortimer](#)

THE HERO

Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 5

CAROLE

MORTIMER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 Carole Mortimer

Cover Design Copyright © Glass Slipper WebDesign

Formatter: Glass Slipper WebDesign

ISBN: 978-1-914336-12-6

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved.

DEDICATION

Jo,

Thank you so much for those amazing new covers.

CHAPTER ONE

Whiting Manor, Bedfordshire,

September 1816

“Good grief, you will have frightened all the fish away now!”

To say Gideon was startled by the accusation, especially as the voice making it was female in origin, would be an understatement. It was so surprising, in fact, that he jerked too hard on his horse’s reins. Soldier, always temperamental, reared up in surprise at this unexpected rough handling.

Having been lost in unpleasant thoughts for the weekend ahead to be spent at Lord and Lady Whiting’s country estate, where Gideon might actually have to be polite to other members of Society, he had not been paying his usual meticulous attention to his surroundings. As a consequence, he had relaxed his grip on his horse’s reins after urging Soldier to ford the stream in front of them, rather than ride the half a mile or so to the nearest bridge, only to then pull too hard upon them and cause Soldier to react accordingly.

Later, Gideon would tell himself it was as a direct result of that shouted distraction that he, reputed to have one of the finest seats in England—and after having tried, and not succeeded, in grasping hold of Soldier’s mane—suddenly found himself flying backward through the air.

A rapid heartbeat or two later, he let out a shocked gasp as he landed in the icy-cold water of the stream.

“Now you have ensured there will definitely be no more fish for supper this evening!”

Gideon sat upright in the slow-flowing water, soaking wet from head to toe, to turn and glare in the direction of that irritated female voice.

A girl not a woman, possibly aged eighteen or nineteen, sat on the riverbank. Her dark and curling hair fell loose about her shoulders and down her back. Her unfashionable brown gown had been pulled up above her knees as she dangled her shapely bare feet and calves in the stream. The golden complexion of her face, hands, and legs below the knees all showed evidence of having been regularly exposed to the effect of the sun. She held a makeshift fishing rod, comprised of a pole and a piece of string, in those tanned and ungloved hands.

Indeed, she gave every appearance of being from the village a mile away, come to poach fish from the stream of the local landowner. The same Lord Whiting who was to be Gideon’s host for the coming weekend.

And yet...

Her voice had sounded educated rather than the dialect of the area Gideon had heard spoken at the inn, when he had halted in his journey an hour or so ago to partake of luncheon and a tankard of their coldest ale. He was in no particular hurry to arrive at his destination.

The amusement displayed in the girl’s sparkling blue eyes as she watched a soaking wet Gideon rise to his feet in the middle of the stream did not show the least deference, neither toward his age of possibly a dozen or more years her senior or to the wealth of his stylish appearance, which was added to by Soldier’s obvious pedigree.

She was, Gideon realized, one of the most startlingly beautiful females he had ever set eyes upon. Her hair was thick and shining, those sparkling blue eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes, her nose small and straight, her cheekbones defined, and her lips a full and perfect bow.

Her alluring appearance immediately gave Gideon the intimate image of him threading his fingers in that glossy mane whilst his mouth thoroughly devoured hers.

What on earth...!

“Need a hand up?”

Gideon refocused his full attention on the now-standing girl. She had moved nearer to him down the riverbank and was holding out one of those bare golden-brown hands toward him, a cheeky grin curving her lips.

Soldier, the traitor, had wandered into the adjacent field and was now happily chewing on the corn stubble left after the harvest, but not yet plowed back into the ground in preparation for the next crop rotation.

Gideon considered his situation. Pride dictated he exit the stream under his own power. Against the possibility that if he chose to do that, his boots might slide on the wet mud, and he would fall back into the water.

He gave a defeated sigh as he decided common sense was more important than his already dented male ego.

He reached out a gloved hand to grasp the girl’s fingers, using that slight leverage to ensure he scaled the bank without mishap. He released her and straightened the moment he stood on solid ground. He even leveled the cuff of his shirt beneath his superfine, but knew the effect was ruined by the fact there was nothing he could do about the dripping wetness of every part of his clothing. Every part, his drawers uncomfortably wet against his skin, informed him.

The girl’s next statement only added to that discomfort. “I am afraid, as it has now floated off downstream, your hat is completely lost. But no doubt you will find your riding crop is somewhere at the bottom of the stream.”

Harry did her absolute best not to laugh at the appearance of the tall disgruntled gentleman standing in front of her with the

water dripping steadily off his obviously perfectly tailored clothing. There was also a streak of mud down one of his chiseled cheeks, but she deemed it best not to bring attention to that.

He had looked absolutely magnificent seated on the back of the beautiful black gelding as horse and rider approached the stream. His dark hair was fashionably long beneath a tall top hat. His tailored riding jacket fitted him perfectly, as did the buff-colored leather breeches and the brown-topped black Hessians. His face could have been chiseled from marble: high cheekbones beneath piercing steely gray eyes, a long straight nose, unsmiling lips above a square and determined jaw.

Harry had been so enamored with his appearance that she had not thought to call out and stop him entering the stream until it was too late.

If she had done so, the fish would not have been startled away and the man on horseback would not have become unseated from his saddle.

His head was now bare, but there were a few green pieces of reeds tangled in his hair. That mud streaked his cheek. His clothing was thoroughly wet. His expression had become an angry scowl rather than his previous one of arrogant disdain.

“I could wade in and get it for you if you like.” She began to lift her gown again so it wouldn’t get wet.

“Stop!” His expression was one deep of irritation. “It is not seemly for a lady to reveal her bare feet and calves in the way that you were doing and appear to be about to do again.”

Harry’s grin grew. “Then it’s just as well I’ve never claimed to be a lady.” She laughed her enjoyment as she slid and slithered down the riverbank before stepping into the cold water to search for the missing riding crop. The mud felt glorious between her toes.

She spotted the leather stick almost immediately, helped by its round silver top glinting in the sunlight through the clear water.

“Eureka!” She held the riding crop up in triumph as she waded back out of the water. “There.” She held it out to the man, who was now staring at her with complete incredulity.

“Who are you?” he demanded as he accepted the leather crop.

“Harry.” She thrust out her bare hand. “You?”

His gaze dropped to that appendage. “Ladies curtsy in greeting. They do not shake hands.”

She chuckled. “I believe we have already had the part of the conversation in which we established I do not possess ladylike traits.”

“But I, thankfully, have those of a gentleman.” He continued to ignore her hand as he gave a formal bow which, although Harry did not intend commenting on it—she did know what good manners were, despite what her appearance might indicate to the contrary—looked slightly ridiculous given his otherwise disheveled state. “Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford.”

Ah.

That certainly explained his haughty countenance, expertly tailored clothing, and the beautiful black gelding lazily grazing on the nearby corn stalks.

“Harry is a man’s name,” the duke continued before she could comment.

“Which I am sure you realize I am not,” she allowed cheerfully. “Are you one of Lord and Lady Whiting’s weekend visitors?”

His frown darkened. “How do you know they have visitors this weekend?”

Because *she* obviously couldn’t be one of them: Harry mentally added the insult he hadn’t. This man, although exceedingly handsome, really was far too full of his own importance. Too much so for her not to enjoy herself a little at his expense.

“Perhaps I know because I am employed in their household?” She made it a question rather than a statement. She had no

intention of giving him a reason to accuse her of lying once he learned the truth.

Predictably, he gave disbelieving snort. "I somehow doubt that, when you are poaching salmon on their land."

"Trout, actually," she corrected good-naturedly as she indicated the bucket where she had placed the half dozen fish she had caught. "I should not like to interfere with any salmon that might be spawning early."

He made a low grumbling sound. "Are you not concerned that I might mention your poaching to Lord Whiting?"

She gave a shrug. "Mention away. I sincerely doubt Lord Whiting will be concerned about my having landed half a dozen of his trout for dinner."

The duke's nostrils flared. "You seem very confident of that fact."

Harry eyes widened when she saw the cynical speculation in that dark gaze. "I trust you are not implying anything untoward, Your Grace?"

Was he?

Gideon had no idea what he was implying. Except to know this young lady was exceptionally appealing, despite her sun-kissed skin and outspoken manner. She also seemed certain she would not receive reprimand for her behavior from the middle-aged gentleman Gideon knew Walter Whiting to be.

Exceptionally *appealing*?

This girl must be at least a dozen years younger, if not more, than Gideon's own age of three and thirty. She also behaved and looked like a hoyden, with her golden skin, unconfined dark hair, and bare feet and legs. Nor, knowing he was a duke, did she possess any of the manner of deference toward him he was accustomed to receiving from the ladies in Society. From all in Society.

“I meant no such thing,” he bit out tersely. “Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I must leave you to enjoy your ill-gotten gains whilst I continue the rest of my journey to Whiting Manor. I wish to change out of these wet clothes sooner rather than later.” His nose wrinkled with distaste.

The sooner he removed himself from his uncharacteristic attraction to this unsuitable young lady, the better it would be.

For both of them.

Gideon had not indulged in many intimate liaisons in his life, but that had been through choice rather than a lack of willing ladies. Because he knew his own nature well. Knew that beneath his outward demeanor of icy coolness, he possessed a passionate nature many women would find too intense and demanding.

He doubted a woman aged eighteen or nineteen could meet the passion of those intense physical demands.

“Of course I excuse you, Your Grace.” Her gaze was lowered as she gave a slow and perfect curtsy. “I trust you will not suffer any ill effects from your unexpected swim,” she added evenly before turning nimbly on her heel to pick up the bucket containing the trout and collect her makeshift fishing rod and discarded shoes and stockings. She then went merrily on her way without further ado.

Gideon watched her leave through narrowed lids. He could not be certain, of course, but he believed—yes, he truly believed—that young hellion’s eyes had been laughing at him beneath those lowered lids.

Later that evening he was sure of it.

CHAPTER TWO

“Your Grace, may I present my niece, Lady Henrietta Church,” Gideon’s hostess, Lady Amelia Whiting, said, having already taken Gideon about the room to reacquaint him with the half dozen couples he knew already gathered in the salon before dinner. She had also introduced him to the four single young ladies who were now engaged in a whispered conversation behind their fans in a corner of the room. “She is the daughter of my dear departed sister, Grace, and my brother-in-law, Henry, the Earl of Dunhill,” she added proudly.

“Indeed,” he murmured noncommittally as he gave a formal bow toward that young lady.

Gideon’s research into Henry Church, the man he was here to investigate in connection with the death of one of Gideon’s closest friends, had revealed that Lady Henrietta Church was the earl’s only daughter. She had an older brother, Edward, Viscount Henlow, Dunhill’s heir, whom Gideon had been informed would also be present this weekend.

Henrietta Church, despite bearing little resemblance to the hoyden of a female Gideon had met this afternoon was, nevertheless, the very same young lady who had been sitting bare-legged beside the Whitings’ stream fishing for trout, with her hair loose and windblown and her clothes in disarray.

She looked every inch the young lady of Society this evening, however. Her hair was curled and swept up and secured at her crown, with several loose curls beside her ears and at her temples. Her fashionable gown was the color of a fuchsia in bloom, perfectly complementing the golden flesh of her face,

arms, and the swell of her breasts visible above the curved neckline. Gideon could not see her feet beneath the long gown, but he very much doubted they were scandalously bare this evening as they had been earlier today.

She also smelled delicious. A combination of the musk of roses and the more subtle perfume of the lady herself. A heady scent which now invaded all of Gideon's senses.

Telling Gideon that her appearance might be different, but his visceral reaction to her was still the same: he wished to thread his fingers into her hair as he devoured her sensuous lips and caressed her slender body to match the intensity of his passions.

"Darling, may I present Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford," Lady Whiting informed her niece.

That young lady looked at him with a challenge in her blue eyes, an emotion that had been nowhere in sight when they met this afternoon. As if she were now daring him to reveal the circumstances of that earlier meeting.

Gideon remained silent on the subject.

Lady Church's expression turned to one of relief "My aunt is quite correct in that I was christened for my father, Henry, but I prefer to be called—"

"Harry," he finished huskily.

Lady Whiting's eyes widened. "How on earth did you know that?"

Gideon gave her a reassuring smile before returning his gaze to meet the blue eyes of Henrietta Church's. Eyes that were a little less confident than they had been a few seconds ago, and they no longer sparkled. "A lucky guess." He raised a challenging brow at Harry as he answered the older lady. "I met your brother when I arrived earlier today, but I have not seen your father so far this evening." The older and usually disheveled-looking man was obviously not amongst the guests already gathered in the Whitings' salon.

Causing Gideon to wonder if Dunhill was here at all. He would not be best pleased if Henry Church had decided not to

attend the house party at his sister-in-law's home this weekend after all. But the man was eccentric enough to have changed his mind at the last minute and sent his daughter to stay at her aunt and uncle's house without him. Especially when her brother was here to act as chaperone. Although the disreputable things he had heard about Henlow did not represent him as being suitable for the role.

"I am afraid you will not meet him this evening either," Harry answered him cheerfully. "I last saw him as he was going up to the roof with his telescope," she confided to her aunt.

"I shall have Watkins remove his place at the dinner table," Amelia Whiting said without concern. As if she were used to, and indulged, her brother-in-law's strange behavior.

Which she probably was, Gideon inwardly derided. Henry Church was a man whom Gideon now recalled had often wandered off into the mountains of Spain or France in the evenings with his telescope before they were called into battle the following day. He would also disappear bird-watching for hours during the day when they were not engaged in or due to go to battle.

Harry nodded. "Before my father ascended the stairs to the roof, I heard him muttering something under his breath about having 'no wish to spend the evening making polite and pleasant conversation with that pompous ass.' That he'd 'put up with enough of him and his friends' damned arrogance during their months of serving together in the same regiment."

This last comment, with the addition of the challenging smirk currently curving Henrietta Church's pink and full lips, left Gideon in no doubt that *he* was the pompous ass Dunhill had been referring to.

It was true, he and Dunhill had been in the same regiment for several months after Napoleon's escape from Elba. But they had never progressed beyond nodding acquaintances. Gideon had preferred to be in the company of his closest friends, those other five gentlemen known in Society as the Ruthless Dukes.

Until Plymouth had been struck down and they were no longer numbered six but five.

Gideon had believed at the time that Dunhill should never have become a soldier when his nature was obviously one of absentminded gentleness.

Events since then had caused Gideon to question that opinion. They had learned just months ago, from a totally reliable witness, that Plymouth had not perished in battle at all, but had been struck down by the sword of an English officer.

Since learning of this, the five Ruthless Dukes remaining had been on a mission to find Plymouth's murderer. Henry Church was one of five other officers in their regiment who could have been responsible.

Indeed, he was the last of them, the other four having already been proven innocent.

The older man's presence this weekend, when he rarely left the Dunhill estate in Gloucester, was Gideon's only reason for subjecting himself to the coming four days of socializing with people he had no wish to spend so much as an hour with.

With the exception, now that he had met her, of Harry Church...

Did that make him a pompous and arrogant ass?

Probably, Gideon acknowledged ruefully.

The mocking sparkle in Harry's eyes said she certainly believed that to be the case. "Please see to your other guests, Aunt," she encouraged lightly. "I am sure His Grace and I are perfectly capable of entertaining each other until it is time for us to go through to the dining room. Where you have already informed me the two of us are to be seated next to each other," she added with what Gideon knew to be her belief there would be a lack of enthusiasm on his part for that seating arrangement.

A lack he did not feel in the slightest. "Yes, please do not feel obliged to remain at my side a moment longer, Lady Whiting," he encouraged smoothly as two more couples entered the room dressed for dinner. "Now that we have been introduced, I

believe Lady...Harry's company to be more than sufficiently diverting for any discerning gentleman." Although the thought of sitting next to this vibrantly beautiful woman during dinner, when he was suffering from this unexpected desire for her and breathing in her unique and arousing perfume for hours, was less than ideal.

Despite the incongruousness of their first meeting, Gideon had been unable to stop thinking about the unusual young woman he had previously known only as Harry. So much so that, once he was soaking in the bath in his suite of rooms—having already irritably removed the reeds from his hair and the mud upon his cheek—his cock had hardened and risen beneath the soapy water. He'd had to send his valet, Billings, from the room until the evidence of his arousal subsided. The other man had arrived at the Whiting estate that morning, along with carriage containing the clothes Gideon would need for this weekend in the country.

As he refused to take himself in hand like some callow youth, Gideon's arousal had been so persistent that it had been a considerable amount of time before he was able to ring for Billings to return.

Harry was not only hauntingly beautiful, but her forthright nature was completely unlike that of any other woman Gideon had ever met. She was a puzzle of innocence and outspokenness. Of bare and shapely legs and sun-tanned hands he could so easily imagine caressing *his* body.

Until now, Gideon had believed her to be a lass from the village, perhaps someone he might seek out and see again once his business at Whiting Manor was completed.

He had never thought of taking a mistress before, but if, as he hoped, he was able to entice Harry into feeling an attraction toward him, he had even considered the possibility of persuading her into coming back to London with him when he departed in four days' time.

His intention, once there, had been to see her settled in a little house of her own for the duration of their liaison. He knew from observing other such relationships that he would be

expected to pay for servants and a carriage, along with a weekly or monthly stipend which would allow her to purchase items from London's fashionable shops. There would also be the expectation of presents of jewelry.

Knowing Harry was the unmarried and no doubt virginal daughter of Henry Church, a man who might be responsible for the slaying of one of Gideon's closest friends, must surely put an end to any and all of those intentions?

"I am beginning to suspect *you* are not a gentleman at all," Harry accused once her aunt had departed, leaving her alone with the duke.

"Why is that?" Oxford returned mildly.

"Because you deliberately dangled a carrot of curiosity in front of my aunt by your already knowing my preferred name."

He shrugged broad shoulders. "As you have already told me you are not always a lady, it would seem we are well met," he returned evenly. "What?" He mocked her surprised expression. "Were you under the misapprehension I would allow you to continue to play your word games with me without retaliation? Especially when you did so in front of someone who is unaware of our previous...acquaintance."

Harry didn't know what she'd thought would happen when she and the duke met again this evening and her identity as Lady Henrietta Church was revealed.

She had expected to be rendered breathless by the duke's elegant appearance in evening clothes.

She had been correct.

She had also believed he might be the handsomest gentleman in the room.

Again, she was proven correct.

She had *not* thought to encounter something that looked suspiciously like heat in those steely gray eyes as the duke

continued to look at her from between narrowed lids.

That Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford, was here at all after accepting her aunt and uncle's weekend invitation was surprise enough. Her aunt had confided that the duke had deliberately sought out the invitation, making his presence here even more intriguing.

He did not appear to be a gentleman who enjoyed weekends in the country, where the daytime entertainment was to be walking about the gardens and beside the lake for the ladies and shooting for the gentlemen.

Not that Harry's father would join in the latter part of those plans. No, he was far more likely to go off on his own to watch his beloved birds than harm a single feather on one.

Harry wished she might join him!

Bird-watching would be preferable to spending the morning with the ladies and then meeting up with the gentlemen for a picnic luncheon. After which they would part again and not meet again until dinner in the evening, followed by the playing of cards or parlor games.

She could envisage the Duke of Oxford playing cards out of politeness to his host and hostess, but no amount of her imagination could see him participating in any after-dinner parlor games.

"You find something amusing?"

Harry continued to smile as she refocused her gaze on the arrogantly toplofty gentleman beside her. "I was trying to envision you joining in the parlor games after diner. And failing," she derided.

"Rightly so," he murmured. "Such entertainments are for the young and frivolous. Of which I am neither." His whole demeanor tensed, shoulders becoming rigid, expression losing all teasing as his attention was caught and held by the loud chatter of several gentlemen entering the room. "What in hell is *he* doing here?"

Harry was a little taken aback, both by the swearing and the harshness of Oxford's tone. "I do not know which *he* you are

referring to.” How could she when four young and single gentlemen had entered the room? One of those men was her older brother, their father’s heir, Edward, Viscount Henlow.

“The usurper,” he grated.

“I do not...” Her brow cleared. “Can you be referring to Robert Granger, the Duke of Plymouth?”

Oxford’s nostrils flared. “I will never be able to think of or accept him as such.”

“Understandably.” She knew the previous Duke of Plymouth had been a close friend of Oxford’s. “Except you cannot change the fact he has now become the recipient of his cousin’s, and your friend’s, title,” she added gently.

Oxford continued to stare at the young duke through narrowed lids. “What is he doing here?” he demanded harshly.

She shrugged. “Well, for one, Robert Granger is the son of my uncle’s closest friend. Secondly, he is also a friend of my brother’s from when they were at school together. I also believe it to be a distinct feather in my aunt’s social bonnet that she has not one but two single and eligible dukes as guests at her weekend party. My aunt sees herself as something of a matchmaker,” she explained affectionately.

“Single and eligible...?” Oxford glanced about the room before looking down at her from his superior height. “There are four single gentlemen present and five single young ladies.”

“Five gentlemen,” Harry corrected softly. “You forgot to include yourself,” she added when he continued to frown.

He recoiled in obvious horror. “I am not young, nor did I come here in search of a wife.”

“I believe I had already guessed as much from your scowling countenance,” she derided. “Unfortunately, it is my aunt you will have to convince of your disinterest, not me.” She grimaced. “But at least let me assure you *I* do not have any designs on becoming your duchess. I am sure our meeting earlier today will have provided you with more than enough

evidence of my complete lack of feminine wiles and machinations with which to entice you.”

His top lip curled back. “There is nothing in the least enticing about a woman using wiles and machinations to ensnare a husband.”

Her eyes widened at the thought this stern gentleman might find *her* lack of those things attractive. “There isn’t?”

He shook his head. “I have absolutely no interest in a woman who does not behave as her true self.”

“Really?” She chuckled. “Then you must love me!” She winced the moment the words left her lips. “What I meant to say...”

“I also prefer for a woman to say exactly what she means,” Oxford murmured. “It saves wasting time on empty conversations which ultimately have no substance or meaning.”

Harry felt color warm her cheeks. “You would prefer *me* to speak the truth?”

“Yes,” he bit out softly between even white teeth.

She leaned forward confidently. “In that case, I think I should tell you...”

“Yes?”

“That I find your appearance far more ducal this evening now there is no tangle of reeds in your hair and streaks of mud down your cheek!”

Gideon should have expected this young lady’s irrepressible humor at his expense to continue. She didn’t seem capable of wishing to maintain a serious conversation for longer than a few minutes at a time. Although he was sure that was through choice rather than any lack of intelligence.

A subterfuge that made his palm twitch to administer the spanking such behavior deserved.

He wondered if the Whitings had an orangery or another private room on the ground floor of the house to which he might take Harry and thoroughly demonstrate his reaction to her continued levity toward him.

Unfortunately, the Whitings' butler chose that moment to announce that dinner was served.

Fortunately, knowing they were seated next to each other, Gideon was able to present his arm and escort Harry through to the dining room.

He was less pleased at having to nod acknowledgment of Robert Granger as they passed by the other man. The last thing he had expected this weekend was to find himself face-to-face with the man who now held the Plymouth title.

To make matters worse, the younger man was a fop of the highest order. To a degree the ridiculous height of the collar of his evening shirt even managed to make the traditional plain black-and-white evening clothes look outlandish.

This young gentleman had also, Gideon knew, recently become aware of the Ruthless Dukes' search for the English officer who had been seen to strike down his cousin.

Was that what Granger was doing here?

Had he also realized there was only one officer of their regiment left to investigate? Had Granger come here to carry out that investigation himself?

If so, Gideon would be having words with him tomorrow.

"I hope you will take special note to enjoy the fish course." Harry drew Gideon's attention back to her as he pulled her chair back from the table.

He waited until she was seated before taking his place in the chair beside her. "Trout?"

The feigned widening of her eyes lacked all sincerity. "How clever of you to guess."

Gideon stared at her for several seconds before startling himself with a burst of laughter that had spontaneously erupted from his chest.

Which, considering the darkness of his thoughts seconds earlier, was completely unexpected.

He could tell by the curious glances being cast in his direction that several other people at the table were just as surprised by his unprecedented behavior. The Duke of Oxford was not known for his public displays of humor.

He had no intention of explaining to anyone, including Harry, that her unfiltered teasing was like a breath of fresh air in his otherwise stifling life.

His days were spent at The House and the evenings either at his club or with his close-knit group of male friends. That all four of those friends were now married had changed that dynamic to include their wives.

Which brought Gideon neatly back to the reason he was here at all and why he should not be enjoying the company of Henry Church's unmarried daughter.

He sobered. "How old are you?"

She looked taken aback by the sudden change of subject. "I am nineteen."

"And unmarried."

"Yes."

"With not even a betrothal in sight?"

She visibly bristled. "I have no wish to be molded into some man's perfect and obedient wife."

Gideon gave another chuckle. "The first you might manage, depending on the gentleman's requirements. But I very much doubt you are capable of the second."

Her eyes glittered with an intent Gideon already knew to be wary of. "How old are you?"

"Three and thirty."

“Unmarried?”

He had been right to expect she might retaliate. “Yes.”

“There is no betrothal on *your* horizon either?”

His mouth quirked. “None.”

“Then it would seem neither of us enamored with the idea of marriage,” she dismissed.

“I am not against the idea.” To Gideon’s surprise, he realized he was no longer as averse to that possibility as he had been. “It is only that I have not yet met the lady I would wish to make my wife.”

“Or one who might wish to *become* your wife,” Harry scorned predictably.

Perhaps.

But Henry Church had left out certain vital ingredients earlier when he described Gideon’s character to his daughter. Because Gideon was also stubborn and decisive, and once his mind was set upon a course of action, it would not be altered.

It was currently set on ensuring the beautiful, unpredictable, and highly entertaining Harry Church would one day become his.

CHAPTER THREE

“In lofty company this evening, eh, Monkey?”

Harry closed her eyes briefly before opening them again to glare across at the young man who was now seated opposite her at the dining table. “I trust you are not referring to yourself, Bobby Black? Especially in that hideous shirt!” At the sound of stifled laughter, she turned to look at the man seated beside her. “Did I say something to amuse you, Your Grace?”

He bowed slightly. “Invariably.”

“How unexpected it is to see you here, Oxford.” The drawled words of Robert Granger, the Duke of Plymouth, implied the opposite.

“Monkey?” Oxford repeated the name without making verbal acknowledgment of the younger man’s comment.

“She climbed trees like one when we were children together,” Granger dismissed.

“You were a tomboy,” the man at her side stated dryly.

Harry frowned at his lack of surprise. “There were no girls of my age living near our estate in Gloucestershire where I was brought up. There was only my older brother when he came home for the school holidays. He occasionally invited some of his friends to stay with us.”

Dark brows rose over pale gray eyes. “Which included the young man you still refer to as Bobby Black, despite his recent elevation in social status?”

“It is not so very recent to most,” Plymouth muttered.

“Bobby is short for Robert. Obviously,” Harry explained to the duke beside her. “Black because during one of his visits, he swallowed some ink as a dare and turned his tongue that color for a whole week. He was also exceedingly sick,” she added with relish.

“And who was responsible for making the dare?” Oxford prompted dryly.

“Monkey, of course,” Robert drawled.

“You always were a tattletale,” she accused.

“And you were always impetuous and headstrong. Have a care those traits do not get you into more trouble than you can escape this time around, Monkey,” he advised with a glance in Oxford’s direction.

Gideon was under no illusion whom Granger was warning Harry against.

He also believed, by Granger’s slightly mocking tone, that he had known it was Gideon’s intention to be at Whiting Manor this weekend.

Implying Granger had come here for the same purpose?

It now seemed more likely than not.

The other man’s warning to Harry was perhaps merited considering Gideon’s plans regarding Harry before he learned exactly who and what she was.

Which did not prevent Gideon from resenting being the reason for the younger man feeling he needed to act so protectively toward the sister of his childhood friend.

Admittedly, it was known that the Duke of Oxford did not fraternize with Society ladies beyond being polite. Nor did he single any of them out for his particular attention.

This evening, he had spent fifteen enjoyable minutes or more alone in Harry's company. He had even laughed aloud at one of her comments. Some might see that unusual behavior on his part tantamount to a declaration of intent.

With that in mind, Gideon spent the majority of dinner talking to the lady seated on his right side. She was the wife of the local squire. Her conversation was parochial at best, and she tended to gush with enthusiasm over the accomplishments of her unmarried daughter, one of the single young ladies seated farther down the table. But at least it ensured he and Harry had ceased being the speculative focus of the other diners.

Which was not to say he did not mentally mull over the fact of Robert Granger having known all the members of the Church family for several years.

When previously questioned, Granger had denied any involvement in his cousin's murder. But this new information, of Granger's friendship with the family of one of the officers under suspicion, must at least open up the possibility that the younger man could have either paid Henry Church to carry out the deed or possibly used some other form of inducement to persuade the older man.

As far as Gideon was aware, Henry Church was not in financial difficulties. Nor, despite his eccentricity, was there any indication he had ever done anything for which he might be blackmailed.

But could the same be said for his son, the Viscount Henlow?

Edward Church was part of the same circle of reckless young gentlemen as Granger. Which put Granger in a position to know the viscount's secrets, and so leave him open to blackmail. It was an avenue of investigation which would require looking into further.

Neither those thoughts, nor the conversation with the squire's wife, prevented Gideon from being completely aware of every movement and remark made by the young woman seated on his other side.

Harry was both beautiful and vivacious, a combination which easily succeeded in attracting the attention of the young and single gentlemen seated on her other side. She also continued to exchange banter across the table with Robert Granger.

Dunhill's absence this evening was irritating, removing at least one opportunity where Gideon might have questioned the other man without alerting anyone else to the fact he was doing so.

Although he knew there was every possibility Harry wouldn't want to talk to *him* again after he had spoken to her father on the subject of the previous Duke of Plymouth's murder.

If innocent, Dunhill would no doubt forbid any further acquaintance between his daughter and the man who had accused him of such a heinous deed.

If Dunhill was guilty, chances were he would hang for his crime. Having heard the warm indulgence and affection with which Harry spoke of her father earlier, Gideon doubted she would ever forgive him for his part in sending her father to the gallows, if it should occur.

Neither prospect was particularly palatable.

“Where are you going?”

Harry was surprised to realize Oxford had followed her from the dining room. She came to a halt in the cavernous hallway to turn and face him. “The ladies have withdrawn after dinner to enjoy tea and gossip in my aunt's blue salon until the gentlemen join them for the entertainments.”

He nodded. “And when the ladies left the dining room, you turned left as they turned right.”

Her top lip curled. “I do not care for tea or gossip. And why were you watching me rather than enjoying brandy and cigars with the other gentlemen?”

He shrugged broad shoulders. "I have already drunk sufficient wine with dinner. Nor do I feel like smoking a cigar," the duke dismissed. "I also predicted you would not enjoy the inane chatter of the ladies." A slight smile curved his lips.

Harry frowned at him. "I am no longer surprised at your unmarried state when you obviously hold females in such contempt."

"On the contrary," he drawled. "I have a great respect for women."

"Name one."

"You."

Her cheeks warmed at the unexpected compliment. "Any others?"

He gave the question thought for several seconds before answering. "Four of my friends have recently married, and I do not find the company of their wives overly tedious."

Harry was completely unable to repress the laughter that burst from her throat. "*I do not find the company of their wives overly tedious.*" She deepened her voice to echo.

Oxford looked alarmed. "I trust that was not an attempt to impersonate me? If so, you have made my voice several octaves higher than I believe it to be."

She considered him for several long seconds. "You are not quite what you appear to be, are you?"

His brows rose. "What do you mean?"

Harry wasn't sure. There was just something about this man, glimpses of him she had seen during their conversation before dinner and now, that hinted at him not being entirely that pompous and arrogant ass her father had said he was.

The fact Oxford was amused by her, as evidenced by his laughter earlier, rather than decrying her lack of manners and avoiding her company, was also interesting.

So no, she did not believe Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford, to be quite as toplofty and contemptuous of others as

he wished people to believe he was.

“Where were you going?” he repeated.

She smiled. “To check that my father has not become so engrossed in his stargazing that he has fallen over a parapet.”

“I shall come with you,” Oxford instantly offered.

Harry doubted that was a good idea, considering the opinion her father had expressed earlier regarding the other man.

An opinion Harry only partly agreed with.

Oxford could be pompous, yes, but his arrogance appeared to be inborn rather than deliberately affected. Nor did it prevent him from being considerate of the feelings of others, as demonstrated by his considerable patience with the twittering of Mrs. Pierce, the squire’s wife, during dinner.

No, so far in their acquaintance, she continued to disagree with her father’s assessment of the Duke of Oxford’s character.

Even so, she suspected, as her father had foregone one of the sumptuous dinners always provided by her aunt’s cook in order to avoid this man’s company, that he might choose to *throw* himself from the parapet in order to continue avoiding a man who reminded him of the four months of turmoil and death that had followed Napoleon’s escape. Especially the final battle, which had resulted in her father being shipped home with a head injury that had left a deep scar upon his left temple.

The escape of the Corsican meant her brother and several of his friends, not previously having served, had immediately joined one of the Regent’s regiments. With the ignorance of youth, they had considered the whole thing to be a grand adventure they might tell their grandchildren one day.

Harry’s father, more of a scholar and a romantic than a fighter, had nevertheless decided he must also join a regiment.

Harry had tried to dissuade him from doing so, knowing that his gentle nature was more suited to bird-watching and stargazing.

She has been proved correct when her father had returned home, injured from that blow on the head during the final battle, with whatever horrors he had seen locked tightly inside a mind that refused to relinquish them.

“Best not,” she answered Oxford.

“Because your father disapproves of me?”

“He did not name you specifically...”

“Was anyone else seated at the table this evening in the same regiment as your father?”

“No.” Harry saw no point in avoiding telling the truth.

Oxford stared at her for several seconds before smiling. “Perhaps before you go to check on your father, we might take a stroll about the garden together?” He offered her his arm. “I saw from the window of my bedchamber earlier that several lamps have been lit along the pathways, presumably so that guests might enjoy a walk outside in the balmy evening air.”

Harry raised her brows. “If we go outside together, the gossips will have us betrothed before morning.”

“Then they will be disappointed,” he rasped.

“I think I might like you, after all, Your Grace.” Harry chuckled as she placed her gloved hand on his forearm. The two of them escaped into the garden through a side door rather than returning to the dining room to leave through the open French doors.

She immediately became aware of the stillness of the late summer evening and the heady perfume of the flowers.

Oxford’s mouth quirked at her statement. “You only *think* that you might like me?” he drawled. “And after I have been so charming and obliging to you too!”

She spluttered with laughter. “Goodness, if this is you being charming and obliging, then I hate to think how cold and difficult you must normally be.”

Gideon knew he had a reputation in Society for being cold and haughty as one of the Ruthless Dukes and in his own right as well. But he found he did not care for having Harry think of him in such an unattractive light.

“I should like you to call me Gideon when we are alone,” he invited huskily as he escorted her down the steps into the garden.

She snorted. “And we both know that it is not acceptable for me to address a duke with such familiarity, when we are alone or otherwise.”

“It is acceptable to me,” he rasped.

She eyed him from beneath lowered dark lashes. “And is everyone always to agree with what the Duke of Oxford decides is acceptable?”

“It would be exceedingly arrogant of me to think that should be the case.”

“Really?” Her shock was obviously feigned as she came to a halt beneath a bower of perfumed flowers. “I cannot imagine why anyone might think that.”

The light from the lamp hanging in the bower allowed Gideon to see the laughter shining in Harry’s deep blue eyes. “You really do enjoy playing these word games with me,” he observed mildly.

Small and even white teeth gleamed briefly as she grinned. “I admit, it is fast becoming one of my favorite pastimes.”

“Indeed.” Gideon looked at her from beneath hooded lids. “Would you be surprised to learn that I wish for my own new favorite pastime to become kissing you?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Harry's shock was very real this time. Enough so that, for once, she could find no words to say in answer to such an outrageous statement.

Unless...

Had Oxford decided to play her at her own word game?

Of course he had. He had said as much earlier.

But it appeared he did not know how to play this game as well as she did!

Because a man as sophisticated and worldly as Gideon Harrington would not be in the least interested in kissing a young miss from the country who, because her father had been away in the army the previous year and not inclined to travel to London this year, had not yet been given a Season.

In truth, Harry had been the one to persuade her father against having her presented this year. She could imagine no worse torture than having to travel to London, followed by a Season of always dressing and behaving as a polite and accomplished young lady. Especially when the only reason for doing so was to find herself a suitable husband.

Harry did not wish for a husband, suitable or otherwise.

Luckily, her father harbored no such ambitions on her behalf either. He was no more eager to see her depart their home than she was to leave it.

Her mother had died when Harry was aged only twelve and on the brink of becoming a woman. In the physical sense, at least.

It had been an emotionally difficult time for all the family. Even Edward had come home from school for the funeral and stayed for several weeks after. But eventually, he had returned to Eton, leaving Harry and her father alone together at Dunhill Park.

Her father had not remarried in the seven years since, nor had he sent Harry away to finishing school or to attend a London Season with her aunt. As a consequence, Harry was now closer to her father emotionally than many other girls of her age and circumstances.

She knew from talking to some of other young ladies at the local assemblies they occasionally attended that most fathers did not visit the nursery nor otherwise spend time with their daughters. That they only took an interest in them when it came time for them to make an advantageous marriage.

Her father, thankfully, was not of that ilk, and the two of them often spent their evenings together once she was old enough to discuss such things as books and politics with him. This past year, after Harry's governess, Miss Pettigrew, had retired to the coast to live with her widowed sister now that Harry no longer needed her services, she had also become her father's hostess at his Gloucestershire estate for the occasions when it was necessary for him to entertain the local gentry.

In truth, there were not many such occasions, because her father no more enjoyed dinner parties, or really any sort of social event, than she did.

But if Oxford thought he could toy with her because of her lack of experience in those social skills, he was going to be sadly disappointed.

She looked up at him unflinchingly in the moonlight. "Then what is stopping you?" she challenged.

Gideon frowned, unsure of the reason for the anger he discerned in Harry's beautiful blue eyes. Her lips were inviting

him to kiss her. The sparkle in her eyes was daring him to do so.

His own gaze became riveted on the sensuous softness of her lips.

He noted that rather than the top lip being bigger than the bottom as many peoples were, Harry's were of equal fullness. Causing Gideon to ache with a need to thoroughly kiss and then suck on the perfect cupid's bow of her top lip, before licking and tasting the sweetness behind those lips.

Another glance at the challenge in her eyes warned him against attempting to do so. "Which part of what I said upset you?" he prompted instead.

Her brows rose. "Saying you wished to kiss me is not outrageous enough?"

He shrugged. "I do not believe I have ever known a woman to react in that way to that suggestion before now, no."

She huffed. "Perhaps those other women were all so overwhelmed by the thought of being singled out that way by the distinguished Duke of Oxford that they were simply too in awe of you to do anything other than submit."

Gideon was well aware that he had just been complimented and insulted all in the same breath. He refused to accept either. "Then I shall wait until you grant your permission before I take the suggestion any further."

Harry looked chagrined by the comment. As if *she* did not know whether to be relieved at the reprieve or upset by Gideon's restraint.

Her next comment answered that question. "You are nothing at all like the forceful but romantic heroes in the novels I have read."

"Thank God!" Gideon held back his smile at her disgruntled expression. "But, to be fair, I am sure none of the heroines in those books were quite like you either."

She frowned. "Did you just insult me?"

“Not in the least.” Gideon found himself once again chuckling in this young lady’s presence. “Indeed, I meant to compliment you on not being anything remotely like one of the empty-headed misses usually depicted between those pages.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

“You are not toying with me?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You really wish to kiss me?”

“More than anything,” he acknowledged huskily.

Her expression brightened. “In that case, you may do so.”

His mouth quirked at this sudden about-face. “I may?”

“Yes.” Her gaze was again challenging.

He was tempted, oh so tempted, but first... “Only if you will first call me Gideon.”

“Gideon,” she obeyed in a husky tone that curled around and then invaded Gideon’s senses.

Making him totally aware of everything about her. Her softness, her perfume, the pulsing of the blood through her veins visible at the base of her throat, her breasts a creamy swell over the scooped neckline of her gown.

His gaze held hers as he slowly lowered his head to press his lips against her slightly parted ones.

The heat of desire raged through his body at the first taste of the softness of her lips, causing his heart to leap and his cock to engorge.

Physical reactions that were all the more surprising because he was not touching Harry in any other way. Not with his hands, nor his body. There was just the meeting of two pairs of lips that merged easily together before slowly moving in a dance of discovery. Testing, tasting, *devouring*.

Gideon’s body felt on fire with that last emotion, and he groaned softly as he kissed and licked those pillowy lips. His

arms moved about the slenderness of Harry's waist to pull her in tightly against the hardness of his body as he continued to kiss and lick and bite those responsive lips.

"You, down there! What do you think you are about with my daughter, you young scoundrel?"

Gideon staggered slightly at the abruptness with which Harry wrenched her lips from beneath his to turn her head and look up at the roof of the house.

A large and shadowy figure could be seen standing at the edge of the parapet.

A man Gideon knew without a doubt to be Henry Church, the Earl of Dunhill, and Harry's father.

Gideon scowled his displeasure when Harry gave a dismayed gasp and pulled out of his arms. She then turned quickly on her heels and ran across the garden to enter the house through the door from which the two of them had left a short time earlier.

He glanced up at the parapet.

"Good God," the man above gasped incredulously. "Is that you, Oxford?"

"It is." Gideon closed his eyes, knowing that the next conversation he had with Dunhill would certainly not be about the murder of the Duke of Plymouth, but instead a demand to know what Gideon was about kissing Harry in the garden.

A conversation which could prove awkward when both men knew Gideon was far from being a young scoundrel stealing a kiss from the other man's daughter.

Harry felt utterly stricken as she quickly ran through the cavernous hallway of her aunt's house, up the stairs and along the hallway to her bedchamber. Once inside, she instantly shut the door and leaned back against it. As if by doing so she

could shut out her father, Gideon, and the events leading up to her needing to hide herself away.

Because she knew they would have to discuss what had happened this evening. That, despite her father's easygoing nature, the events were too shocking for them not to.

Her poor father would probably feel forced into talking to Gideon about it too, when he would have preferred to ignore or avoid any confrontation.

At the time, she had thought she was being daring and adventurous. But now, away from Gideon's sensual allure, she realized she had allowed herself to be goaded into behaving scandalously.

It really was too humiliating that her father had been a witness to that weakness.

Allowing a man like the Duke of Oxford to kiss her was shocking enough—allowing any man to kiss her was scandalous!—but to have her father witness it was so much worse.

Harry didn't feel in the least reassured by the fact that neither her father nor her aunt, having been persuaded to speak to her on his behalf, came to her bedchamber during the next hour to discuss the matter with her. Instead, Harry fell asleep on her bed, still fully clothed.

How she was ever going to face Gideon again was impossible to imagine.

But as it turned out after all her fretting on the subject, it wasn't something she needed to worry about the following morning either.

By the time Harry went downstairs for breakfast, the gentlemen had already set off to shoot grouse and other game on the Whitings' estate. Excluding her father, of course, she discovered during a general conversation with her aunt as the two of them ate together. It seemed that her father hadn't discussed last night's kiss with her aunt before going for a walk in the grounds rather than join the other gentlemen shooting.

After so many hours of tension and fitful sleep, it was something of an anticlimax for Harry to realize she was not going to be immediately taken to task by anyone for being seen kissing the Duke of Oxford.

She still had to face Gideon again, of course, but the absence of all the gentlemen this morning meant she had hours before she need find a solution to that dilemma.

Consequently, those hours of strolling about the lake with the other ladies were not the chore she had predicted them to be. But when it came time to meet the gentlemen for luncheon, she claimed to have a headache from the brightness of the sun and returned to the house.

Perhaps, if she was lucky, she might manage to avoid Gideon for the rest of the weekend.

A wish she knew was not about to come true when, hours later, she heard a commotion downstairs.

Rushing out onto the landing, she saw her father being assisted into the house by her brother on one side and Gideon on the other. Her father's face was ashen, his jacket removed to reveal bright red blood soaking the side of his shirt and waistcoat.

CHAPTER FIVE

“That someone should have been shot at *my* weekend party,” Harry’s Aunt Amelia wailed, and not for the first time, as she paced the length of her private parlor. Tears fell unchecked down the pallor of her powdered cheeks. “Oh my goodness...” She came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the room. “What if your father should die from his injuries? If he succumbs, we shall be ruined in Society. Ruined!” She sobbed in earnest.

If Harry’s father should *die* of his wounds...?

Having followed the three men to her father’s bedchamber, Harry had stood aside while the two men helped the earl to lie on the bed, before she’d then rushed to her father’s bedside.

He looked dreadful, his face pale, including his lips, as he concentrated on dealing with the pain he was obviously in.

Too much so for Harry to bother him by demanding information on what had happened to him.

Her brother, having safely delivered her father to his room, had departed for his own bedchamber to remove his soiled clothing.

Gideon stood in front of the window, his back to the room. He did not so much as glance at her, although his profile was enough for her to see the coldness of his expression.

A coldness that, after last night, Harry knew to be nothing more than a veneer.

She doubted it had been Gideon’s intention, but when he kissed her, he had revealed an intensity and depth of passion

she would not have thought him capable of. And when he had held her tightly in his arms, the curves of her body pressed against his, she had *felt* the evidence of his desire pressing against her.

Neither Harry's father, nor Miss Pettigrew during her years as her governess, had been comfortable talking to her about men and desire. The former because he simply hadn't thought about it, and Harry was too embarrassed to ask. The latter because she had no knowledge of such things herself. But Edward had felt no such qualms, declaring on Harry's sixteenth birthday that she needed to know about men's desires for her own protection. After which, her brother talked to her at length on the subject.

As a consequence of that conversation, Harry knew that a man experienced desire in different ways, and that at least one of them could be physically seen and felt. When a man was sexually aroused, his cock became engorged, possibly to twice or three times the size it was normally.

Having never seen the size of a normal cock, Harry could only imagine what an engorged one looked like. She had decided then and there that this must be the reason ladies, including Aunt Amelia, did not discuss sexual relations in her presence. If they had, Harry would then have wanted to know how anything so large could possibly fit inside the channel between her legs.

Some conversations should remain private, she had decided.

Or felt.

As she had felt the evidence of Gideon's desire the previous evening as it pressed against the softness of her abdomen. Their obvious difference in height had brought about a whole new set of questions. The most obvious being, with Gideon being so much taller than her, how would their bodies align if they were to engage in the sexual act together?

None of which was of the least relevance now, with her father barely conscious and obviously in a lot of pain. All Harry could do was hold his hand and murmur reassurances until the doctor arrived, brought to the bedchamber by her Uncle

Walter. Her uncle had then dismissed her from the room, declaring it was unseemly for her to see her father being bared to the waist, as the doctor had instantly requested.

Harry had joined her aunt in her parlor. Uncle Walter had come to them briefly a short time ago to tell his wife their brother-in-law appeared to have been accidentally shot in his side.

Which would explain all the blood on his clothing.

But not how he came to be “accidentally” shot. Or by whom.

Harry had always thought shooting grouse and game to be a carefully controlled and coordinated sport. Although, like her father, she questioned whether it could be called sport at all when the birds, rabbits, and deer rarely escaped the barrage of pellets that were often aimed at them from several hunters shooting at the same target.

She winced at the thought of *why* her father might have decided to venture into the area where the other men were shooting, aware that the conversation he expected to have with Oxford must still be weighing heavily on his mind.

According to her uncle, none of the gentlemen had come forward to admit to the deed.

“Once news of this gets out, no one in Society will want to attend one of my house parties ever again!”

Her aunt’s continued lament brought Harry out of her own disturbing thoughts. “Or it might make them more popular,” she countered lightly. “Just think of the anticipation that might be felt at the prospect of being shot at one of the Whitings’ weekend house parties.”

Amelia looked at her aghast for several stunned moments until she obviously recognized the humor in Harry’s gaze for exactly what it was. She sighed heavily. “I am well aware I am being overly dramatic.”

“Uncle Walter said the doctor has declared my father’s injuries not to be serious. Think of the positive,” Harry teased. “It is a certainty there will be no lack of conversation to be had over dinner this evening.”

Her aunt mopped up the last of her tears with a lace handkerchief before stowing it away in the concealed pocket of her gown. "How Walter could have allowed such a thing to happen is beyond understanding."

Harry grimaced. "I am sure if my uncle could have prevented it, then he would have done so."

"I cannot think what could have possessed your father to venture into the area of the woods where he could hear the other gentlemen shooting."

Harry could.

Her father wouldn't have thought of the danger he was putting himself in by seeking out Gideon to discuss with him what he had seen the previous evening.

Luckily, she was prevented from having to answer her aunt's questions by Watkins's arrival in the doorway of the private parlor. He informed them the doctor had finished attending his patient and was now downstairs with Lord Whiting, about to make his departure. Her aunt gave a distressed squeak before hurrying from the room.

Harry had not been invited to join them, but she followed anyway, eager to hear news of her father's condition.

She arrived in time to hear the doctor speaking over her aunt's rising hysteria. "Calm yourself, madam. I assure you, only a half dozen of the pellets penetrated the earl's side. I have removed them. The bleeding has stopped and a bandage applied. The earl is now taking my advice to rest in his bedchamber for the rest of the day."

Her aunt's gloved hand fluttered about her throat. "You are sure he will make a complete recovery?"

The doctor's eyes narrowed. "I trust, Lady Whiting, that my medical capability is such the earl will not perish from having a few pellets of shot penetrate an inch of the skin at his side," he reproved irritably. "The amount of blood made the injury appear far worse than it is," he added in a gentler voice.

Harry didn't linger in the hallway to listen to any more of their conversation, but instead made her way back to the wide

staircase before hurrying up to the first floor and her father's bedchamber.

She came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the hallway when she saw Gideon shutting the bedchamber door quietly behind him as he left the room. Harry was very much aware it was the first time they had been alone together since they kissed the previous evening.

There was nothing in the coldness of his expression as he looked down his haughty nose at her to indicate he even remembered that kiss.

Harry moistened the dryness of her lips. "My father...?"

"Has fallen asleep," he bit out dismissively.

She nodded. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Your father was shot."

"I am aware of that part," she snapped impatiently.

Gideon shrugged. "Your father told the doctor that he believes one of the hunters must have inadvertently mistaken him for a grouse or a deer."

Harry's eyes narrowed at the manner in which Gideon voiced the explanation. "You sound...less than convinced by that explanation?"

"Your father believes it," he dismissed.

"And yet my uncle says no one has come forward to claim shooting him by mistake."

"No," Gideon conceded before bowing. "If you will excuse me..." He moved to walk past her.

Harry reached out to grasp his forearm. "Is that all you have to say to me?"

A frown creased his brow. "I have told you what I know of the situation."

She glared. "Have you?"

He stilled. "Would you care to explain that remark?"

She removed her hand. "Is it not obvious?"

“Not to me, no.”

She sighed. “My father saw us kissing yesterday evening. He obviously wished to talk to you this morning, and he now he appears to have been shot while attempting to seek you out.” That explanation had sounded better when it was made inside her head!

She wished she had kept it there as she watched Gideon’s expression turn stony, his eyes becoming a narrowed and flinty gray.

“I trust you are not insinuating that *I* shot your father because he had dared to question me regarding my having kissed you?” His voice was as cold as his gaze.

“Of course not,” she answered instantly. “At least, I do not believe you left the house this morning with the deliberate intention of shooting him,” she added lamely.

“I did not shoot him, deliberately, or otherwise.” There would be no point in Gideon doing that when he still needed to question the earl about his actions and whereabouts in the woods at Waterloo the previous year.

Not that Harry knew about any of that.

Gideon hadn’t even seen Dunhill earlier this morning. Much as he might have expected Dunhill would wish to talk to him about the previous evening, the older man had not been present at breakfast, nor when the gentlemen gathered in preparation for leaving the house for a morning’s shoot.

Gideon hadn’t known Dunhill was even in the woods. He had only heard a cry of pain before he ran, along with everyone else, to where they discovered Dunhill lying on the ground, his shirt and waistcoat covered in blood.

Truth was, Gideon’s thoughts had been so distracted that he hadn’t even fired his gun yet this morning when the hue and cry began deeper in the woods.

The reason for those distracting thoughts had just voiced the possibility he might be the one to have shot her father!

The conclusion of those earlier thoughts, away from the allure of Harry's perfume, her beauty, and the fascination of her outspoken nature, had been that he must put all further idea of kissing Harry again aside and instead concentrate on the reason for his being in Bedfordshire at all. Namely, his search for Plymouth's killer.

A decision that had been swept aside the moment Harry entered her father's bedchamber a short time ago when Gideon had wanted nothing more than to sweep Harry up in his arms, before carrying her off to his bedchamber and kissing her until neither of them had breath left to breathe.

Having her accuse him of shooting her father had certainly put a damper on that desire.

Yet someone *had* shot Dunhill. Someone, as it seemed Whiting had already stated, who had yet to come forward and admit to having done so.

Gideon could think of only two reasons for that oversight.

Firstly, that the culprit was too embarrassed to admit what they had done.

Secondly, and far more likely to Gideon's way of thinking, that Dunhill was the one responsible for killing Plymouth.

If that were the case, then Gideon did not doubt the other man had likely been blackmailed into it. But that did not make him any less guilty.

Whatever the reason, Gideon's presence here this weekend seemed to have alarmed the blackmailer, to the degree he had decided to remove Dunhill from the chain of events altogether.

The biggest factor against that being the case was Dunhill himself.

During those months of fighting the previous year, it had been obvious the man was not naturally a fighting man. So much so that even the possibility of him killing another English soldier in cold blood now seemed untenable.

Gideon could see the worry and concern bracketing Harry's eyes. "You may ask to check my gun, if you wish. It has not

been fired this morning.”

“Why hasn’t it?”

“I accompanied the other gentlemen, but was not in the mood for the sport of shooting today.”

“Oh.”

He nodded. “We will perhaps learn more about this unfortunate event when your father is not in so much pain and is able to converse coherently. He is too uncomfortable at the moment to concentrate on anything else. He will feel much better in the morning for having rested in his bedchamber.”

She eyed him curiously. “You sound as if you speak from experience?”

“Because I do.”

Her gaze sharpened. “You have been shot?”

He nodded. “During the battle at Waterloo.”

At the time, they had all assumed it was a French soldier who shot him. The events which followed, and having recently learned Plymouth had been murdered rather than died in battle, had since caused the Ruthless Dukes to question the attack which had incapacitated the member of their exclusive group who also happened to be the best shot.

“Where were you shot?” Harry frowned in concern.

“In the back.” Gideon dismissed the cowardly action.

“High, in the shoulder? Or...” She broke off as he shook his head. “Then where?”

“Level with my heart, but luckily, it glanced off one of my ribs and embedded itself in my lung.”

“Luckily?” She drew in a harsh breath. “You might have died!”

Gideon couldn’t mistake the distress he heard in her voice for anything else. “That would have upset you?”

She glared. “Of course.”

He nodded. “I too would have considered it a tragedy.”

“I should think anyone would regret being dead before their allotted three score and ten.”

“Not for that reason,” he said gruffly, knowing, no matter what he might have decided in the clear light of day and far from Harry’s disturbing presence, that the moment he was in her company again, he instantly wanted to make love to her. As he did now. “You—” He broke off when he heard someone coming up the stairs in the direction of the hallway. “I believe we are about to be joined by your uncle.” He easily recognized the heavy tread and equally heavy breathing of his overweight host.

“Oh dear Lord!” Harry’s eyes were wide, an expression of absolute panic on her suddenly pale face as she turned to look down the hallway. “He must not see the two of us alone here together,” she hissed in warning.

“We are only talking—”

“And yesterday evening, my father saw us kissing each other,” she reminded fiercely as she reached for and opened the door to what appeared to be a linen cupboard before stepping inside and closing the door behind her.

Leaving a slightly dazed Gideon alone in the hallway to greet his host.

CHAPTER SIX

“Step aside!” Harry instructed as she brushed past Oxford so that she might enter his bedchamber.

He frowned. “Earlier today, you hid in a linen cupboard so that we were not caught talking together outside your father’s sickroom, but now you have decided it is agreeable for you to invade *my* bedchamber instead?” He closed the door with a decisive click before turning to face her. “I was about to change for dinner.”

Which was when Harry realized—and became very aware—that he had been in the process of undressing when she knocked on his bedchamber door. He had already discarded his jacket, waistcoat and neckcloth. His shirt was unfastened at the throat, revealing an expanse of golden flesh and the dark hair which no doubt covered his chest.

Harry looked away, determined not to allow herself to become distracted by his disheveled appearance.

And yes, earlier she *had* hidden in the linen cupboard until the two men had strolled off together to speak with her aunt, at which time she had hurried to her own bedchamber. During the time since then, she’d had ample opportunity to think long and hard about all the events of this weekend.

The fact Oxford was here at all.

The obvious tension between him and Robert Granger.

Gideon having kissed her in the garden the evening before.

Her father having been shot this morning.

Facts which didn't seem to make any sense. "Why are you here?" she prompted shrewdly.

"I was invited," Gideon instantly dismissed.

She snorted. "An invitation my aunt says you instigated."

His eyebrows rose. "Did she?"

Harry drew in a controlling breath. "You know she did. Besides, all in Society know—even those of us who have not yet been presented and entered London Society, but were instead told this snippet of gossip by their aunt—that the Duke of Oxford rarely if ever attends private house parties."

"Yet here I am."

Yes, here Gideon was, and to Harry's mind, he no longer appeared as relaxed as he'd been before she questioned his reason for being so. "And so I ask again, *why* are you here?"

He shrugged "I had no prior engagement, and rumor had it, and this has been proven since my arrival here, that your aunt is a very gracious hostess."

"And my uncle is a generous and congenial host." She nodded. "But neither of those things are reason enough for you to have traveled into Bedfordshire in order to spend several days with a group of people you have nothing in common with and would not normally associate with."

"In your opinion."

"You know I speak the truth."

He threw up his hands. "You are as stubbornly relentless in your demand for answers as the terrier dog I had as a child when in search of a bone he had buried in the garden," he muttered. "And equally as annoying."

She ignored the insult to remind him, "I am still waiting for you to answer my question."

Gideon truly had no idea how to answer her. The last thing he wanted to do was lie to this young woman to whom he found himself so attracted. She might never forgive him if he did. But to tell Harry the truth would be to implicate her father in a murder, as well as betray the trust of the four men who had long been his closest friends.

The same four gentlemen, he reminded himself, who had found themselves in similar difficult situations with other young ladies during their search for the English officer who had slain Plymouth.

For the main part, they had remained true to the oath they had made long ago—to remain loyal to the Ruthless Dukes.

Gideon braced his shoulders, intending to do the same—

“If you are about to do anything other than tell me the truth, then I advise you to rethink that decision,” Harry told him coolly. “A lie, once it is told, cannot be unspoken.”

Gideon’s mouth closed, his shoulders falling slightly. “It is not my secret alone to tell.”

She eyed him quizzically. “Your reason for being here has something to do with the other four remaining Ruthless Dukes?”

He tensed. “What makes you say that?”

She snorted. “As far as I am aware, they are the only people to whom you have given your unconditional allegiance.”

“My mother also has it.”

Her brows rose. “Your mother is still alive?”

“I am not so old for you to have assumed my parents must be dead!”

“Your father is deceased; otherwise, you would not have inherited the Oxford title,” she pointed out practically. “Besides, my own mother died when she was only one and thirty.”

Gideon could kick himself for having introduced a subject which so obviously still caused Harry emotional distress. He

missed his own father still, of course, and he had been gone for a dozen or so years now.

“My mother is alive and well, and chooses to reside at her house in Brighton all year round,” Gideon confirmed. “I visit her there once a month.”

Harry nodded. “I have no doubt you are a good and dutiful son.” Her eyes narrowed. “But I do not believe your being here this weekend has anything to do with your mother.”

“It does not,” he conceded.

“Then we are back to your friendship with the other Ruthless Dukes being the likely reason for your uncharacteristic actions. Although I cannot for the life of me understand what they have to do with your acceptance of what is nothing more than a few days spent at a small country estate, many of the guests local and so parochial. We have already established it is not for the after-dinner entertainments,” she derided.

“No,” he conceded dryly. “What if I were to offer some information, but reserve the right not to reveal all?” he prompted grudgingly.

She appeared to wrestle with that suggestion for several moments before giving a terse nod. “Very well.”

“We will remain friends?” Gideon prompted.

She looked taken back. “I had no idea that’s what we are.”

Gideon thrust out his hand. “We shall remain friends,” he insisted.

Harry placed a gloved hand into the warmth of his palm. “Friends.”

“Very well.” He released her. “It has come to the attention of myself and the other Ruthless Dukes that Plymouth did not die, as we had always believed, under the sword of a French soldier in the woods near Waterloo.”

She studied his expression for several minutes. “How did you come to this conclusion?”

As Gideon had expected, Harry instantly went straight to the heart of his statement. “Someone recently came forward who saw Plymouth being run through with a sword held by an English soldier rather than a French one.”

Harry frowned. “But Waterloo happened over a year ago.”

“This...person had been press-ganged into serving aboard a French ship. They were only able to make their escape a few months ago and return to London.”

Gideon felt his chest tighten, and remain so, as he watched Harry pace for several long minutes as she considered this information.

She came to a halt in the middle of the room. “Only officers are allowed to carry swords.”

“Yes.”

“An English sword, you said?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps a French soldier disarmed the duke before running him through with his own sword?”

“Plymouth’s sword was recovered after the battle. There was no blood on it to show it had killed anyone.”

“How many officers, apart from Plymouth, were present in that part of the woods that day?”

“Ten, excluding myself.”

She frowned in thought. “Leaving only five. You said you were shot during the battle, and none of the remaining four Ruthless Dukes would have ever struck Plymouth down.”

Gideon felt briefly warmed by her confidence in their unquestionable affection and loyalty for Plymouth. He also knew it was only a brief respite, because Harry was too intelligent not to add two and two together and reach the correct conclusion.

Her chin rose abruptly. “My father was one of those five officers.” Her eyes widened. “My God, are you here because you think my father might have killed Plymouth?” She stared

at him incredulously for several long seconds before bursting into unrestrained laughter.

Which was not at all the response Gideon had been expecting.

It took Harry several long minutes to attempt to bring her humor under control. At which time, she glanced at Gideon's regretful expression before laughing louder and longer than before.

Because the very idea of her father killing a fellow officer was ludicrous.

Yes, he had been present that day, as had the rest of his regiment. But he had also received a wound to the head during the battle and been rendered unconscious. Even after he had recovered enough to return home, he had remained muddle-headed about the events of that day. Harry had ceased questioning him about it once she realized how distressed it made him.

But she would never believe her father's reluctance to discuss that day was because he was guilty of attempting to kill a fellow officer.

She would have found it far easier to believe if Gideon had suspected *Edward* of killing someone. Her brother was also a romantic, but in a way that called for him to perform outlandish heroics and knightly deeds.

But she knew from talking with her brother that Edward and his regiment had been under the direct command of the Prince of Orange at Waterloo.

She now gave a shake of her head. "You could have saved yourself the journey here and the excruciating company you have been forced to keep, myself included, if you had called upon my father in Gloucestershire before this and simply *asked* him if he had killed the Duke of Plymouth."

"I do not find your company in the least excruciating," Gideon refuted huskily.

“This is not about me.” She impatiently dismissed that he had chosen to linger on that part of her statement. “The relevant part of what I said was that you should have visited my father privately and asked if he had slain Plymouth. His memory has been a little...amiss since he was wounded at Waterloo, but I am quite sure, if you had asked, he would have tried to answer your questions.”

“I had not realized your father was injured during that battle?”

She nodded. “He received a blow to the head. Once he recovered, it was discovered that some of his memories of that day were either completely lost or temporarily mislaid.” She smiled slightly. “Edward was most put out when our father’s initial attitude toward him revealed that he had completely forgotten Edward even existed.”

“That is...worrisome.”

“Oh, he remembered his son eventually, but not soon enough to soothe Edward’s ruffled feelings.” She sobered. “I do not believe my father capable of killing anyone in cold blood, so one of the other four officers must be responsible for Plymouth’s death. No?” she queried when Gideon slowly shook his head.

“No,” he confirmed grimly. “The other four Ruthless Dukes have already established it was not one of those officers.”

“Beyond a doubt?”

“Beyond the shadow of a doubt,” he assured firmly.

“Leaving my father as the only officer yet to be investigated?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“My attraction to you was wholly unexpected,” he added with a frown.

Harry could imagine that it was. She had known Gideon for such a little time, but she already knew he was not a flirtatious or promiscuous gentleman. Nor did she believe him to be in the habit of indulging in sexual dalliances with women he had just met.

Not that she considered herself to be a sexual dalliance. They had only kissed once, after all. But she believed even that had been against Gideon's usual sensible judgment in regard to how he should behave toward single ladies.

Unless... "Did you kiss me in the belief you could get closer to my father through that connection?"

"Certainly not," Gideon dismissed instantly.

"You did not know he was up on the roof? Or kiss me so as to deliberately provoke my father into speaking with you?" Harry continued to probe.

"Except he did not have the opportunity to do so before he was shot. I also consider my attraction to you to be an inconvenience rather than deliberate a ploy." He gave a pained grimace. "I did not mean that remark to be as insulting as it sounded."

It *was* insulting, and Harry would be lying if she claimed otherwise. But she had no intention of allowing Gideon to see how much his words had hurt her.

"Please do not apologize." Though he hadn't actually done so. "I assure you, I consider my own attraction toward you to be equally as nonsensical." She gave a deliberately dismissive laugh, rewarded for her effort by the deepening scowl on Gideon's handsome face. "You are the haughty Duke of Oxford, and I am the country hoyden Lady Henrietta Church." She chuckled. "No one in their right mind would ever think of putting the two of us together."

Then Gideon must not be in his right mind, because he found the idea of being coupled with Harry, in any capacity, to be entirely satisfactory. Indeed, his obsession with thoughts of her no longer allowed him to imagine being with any other woman.

But the spectre of her father's possible involvement in Plymouth's death stood between them as an invisible barrier to

any suggestion Gideon might make for them to be together in future. He had no doubt Harry would laugh in his face if he were to even approach the subject.

In the same way she had laughed at the possibility of her father being guilty of slaying Plymouth.

An opinion Gideon was becoming more and more convinced into also believing.

Except there was no one else left who could be to blame for Plymouth's death!

He frowned. "Could your father have been blackmailed into killing Plymouth?"

Harry gave him a disdainful glance. "Blackmailed about what and by whom?"

"Gambling debts. A mistress. Possibly a threat to one of his children. Desperation has been known to drive even a man as mild-mannered as your father to behave in a way he would not have done under normal circumstances." Gideon knew he was grasping at straws, and Lord knows, if he really wanted to pursue a relationship with Harry, then he didn't want Dunhill to be guilty of murder. Harry was likely to spit in his face if her father was sent to the gallows.

By the same token, if Gideon cleared Dunhill as a possible suspect, then he was left with nothing and no one to take back to the other four Ruthless Dukes.

Either way, Gideon believed his perseverance in investigating Dunhill was already well on the way to destroying any hope of his ever being with Harry. In any capacity.

"My father does not gamble. My mother did not approve," Harry added softly before her chin rose. "My father does not have a mistress." Her gaze had hardened. "Indeed, I believe he is counting the days until he can be with my mother, his beloved Grace, again. As for there being a threat to either myself or Edward... I am not yet out in Society. And Edward would not stand for there being a threat toward him. He would simply challenge the one threatening him to a duel, even though the Prince Regent has declared them to be illegal."

Gideon grimaced. "Perhaps your father wished to protect your brother from behaving so rashly?"

"By killing someone himself?" she scorned. "Do not be ridiculous." Her eyes narrowed. "Who is it you suspect of carrying out this blackmail?"

He slowly released his breath. "Since coming here, I have learned your family has long had an association with Robert Granger I was not previously aware of. The very same gentleman who has inherited Plymouth's title."

"You think *Robert* might have blackmailed my father into slaying his cousin for him?" Harry stared at him incredulously.

"It is a possibility, yes." The only one Gideon had left if he were to accept Dunhill was otherwise innocent.

She gave a snort. "Robert is a nincompoop and his choice of clothing suspect, but I do not believe him to be capable of arranging the murder of the cousin he has never made any secret of always admiring."

"Greed and social standing have always been great influencers."

"Not in this case," she insisted. "No, Your Grace the Duke of Oxford, I am afraid you will have to look for your murderer elsewhere than any of the guests currently staying in my aunt and uncle's home."

Gideon, still inwardly smarting at Harry's defense of Robert Granger, now felt a warmth in his cheeks at Harry's deliberately use, in that obviously scathing tone, of the formal address befitting his title. Informing him more clearly than any other words could have, and despite their shake of hands earlier to the contrary, that, as he had suspected, Harry now considered their brief friendship to be at an end.

"Instead of continuing to remain in my aunt and uncle's home under false pretenses," Harry added scornfully, "I would suggest that you sit down with my father, once he is well enough, as two gentleman ought, and simply explain that someone killed your friend. I guarantee you will find it was not my father."

Gideon might perhaps have taken her advice, *and* received the answer she predicted, if Dunhill had not taken a turn for the worse that evening and the doctor recalled so that he might treat the fever racking the earl's body.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Do I need to ask the Duke of Oxford his intentions?”

Harry glanced at her brother as she entered the breakfast room. He was already seated at the table as she crossed to help herself from the array of dishes being kept warm on the side table.

The two of them had last seen each other briefly yesterday evening, when Edward was on his way downstairs to dinner and Harry was going to sit with their very ill father overnight.

So much for the doctor’s assertion that his skills were such the earl would not suffer any ill effects from his injury.

Their aunt had been seated beside the earl’s bed when Harry entered the room. Her aunt, after a night’s sleep, was once again upstairs seated beside her brother-in-law’s bed. Allowing Harry, once she had eaten, to go to her bedchamber and take a much-needed nap. Edward, obviously refreshed after having spent the night sleeping in his own bed, was dressed to join the other gentlemen this morning on another shoot.

Harry would like to claim his young age as the reason for his selfishness, but she was very much afraid her brother had only ever thought of himself.

Harry placed her plate of food on the table and then seated herself opposite Edward. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Everyone here has noticed Oxford has shown a particular interest in you.”

“Then they are *particularly* mistaken.”

Blue eyes so like her own met hers mockingly. “Our illustrious duke was all over you on our first evening here. He was most unhappy yesterday evening when he realized our father’s turn for the worse meant you would not be joining us for dinner.”

“Really?” her tone was deliberately offhand as she turned to thank the footman after he had placed the white napkin across her thighs.

“Oh yes.” Edward lounged back in his seat. “He was very dismissive of the other young ladies who vied for his attention during the evening.”

A fact which pleased Harry very much. “Oxford is always dismissive, and rarely desirous of anyone’s company, but most especially that of any of the single ladies.” She easily recalled his scathing opinion of those ladies.

“He seemed to be very desirous of *your* company two evenings ago,” Edward baited.

“The duke was merely being polite.”

Her brother looked at her from beneath an increasingly dark brow. “Do not play coy with me, Harry.”

“I am not sure I would even know *how* to behave coyly.” She took a bite of the triangle of toast she had liberally buttered before adding an orange preserve. Her aunt’s cook really did make the most delicious marmalade from the fruit grown in the orangery at the back of the house.

“Oxford is one of the richest men in England,” Edward reminded.

“I am sure that is very nice for him,” she dismissed mildly.

“You could be his duchess if you took the trouble to behave in a more...ladylike manner.” He winced as Harry removed her glove so that she might pick up a piece of crispy bacon from the side of her plate, take an enjoyable bite before groaning her pleasure as she chewed the greasy delight.

She slowly licked her fingers clean before replacing her glove. “Any future Duchess of Oxford would, by definition, have to

be married to and live with the duke. Who, I am sure you must agree, is a most unpleasant gentleman?”

“A man’s nature can be overlooked if he is rich enough,” her brother insisted.

“Not by me.”

“What of the rest of your family?”

A frown creased her brow. “What do you mean?”

“Papa’s social standing, and my own, would certainly benefit from having Oxford as son-in-law and brother-in-law.”

Harry snorted. “Papa has never cared a fig for his social standing.”

“I care for mine!”

“How would you possibly bene— Please tell me you have not incurred any more debts?” she pleaded. “You know how upset Papa was the last time he had to pay your gambling debts.”

Edward’s eyes glittered with resentment. “So upset he halved my allowance until I had paid him back the amount in full.”

“And threatened to cut you off completely if it should ever happen again,” she reminded. “Edward, please tell me you have not incurred more debts?” she persisted.

He huffed. “Do not ‘Edward, please’ me when you are too stupid to encourage the interest of a man as wealthy as the Duke of Oxford.”

“And if his intentions are dishonorable?” Harry could not see them being anything else, considering who Gideon was and her own lack of social graces.

“What does that matter when, I am sure, for the few months you held his interest, Oxford would shower you with expensive gifts, such as jewelry, which you might sell once the affair is over?”

“After which my reputation would be in tatters,” she scoffed.

“You are unruly, ill-mannered, and too outspoken by far, so let us not fool ourselves into believing your marriage prospects

were very high to begin with.” He scowled as he threw his napkin onto the tabletop. “And do not think for a single moment that I will be inviting my spinster sister to reside with me and my wife after Papa is gone.”

Harry’s eyes were wide at the sudden onslaught of this unprovoked personal attack. “Papa has a fever. He is not on death’s door. Nor, as far as I am aware, have you as yet found a woman willing put up with your disreputable self. Have you?” she added uncertainly when she saw how her brother’s jaw had tightened.

“I have...possibilities in mind.”

“Who?”

“Margaret Layton, for one.” He named the daughter of a local landowner close to the Dunhill estate in Gloucestershire, the family’s wealth having been accrued in the Indies.

“She is barely out of the schoolroom,” Harry rebuked.

“Which means she will be completely malleable and won’t interfere with my...other interests. Especially if she were to begin breeding immediately.”

Harry wrinkled her nose. “That is a disgusting attitude to take toward your future wife.” Despite being three years older than Margaret, Harry was acquainted with her and knew her to be a very shy young lady. Taking a man as selfish and bombastic as Edward as her husband would utterly destroy her.

Edward grinned. “No one in Society marries for love, Harry.”

“Is there no one else who has taken your interest?” The thought of him offering for Margaret was completely unacceptable.

“Lady Clara Faulks—”

“According to our aunt, Lady Faulks is ten years your senior and has already buried two husbands in the past five years.” Lady Whiting was always full of the gossip of the *ton* when she returned from the London Season.

“But she is rich, my dear sister.” Edward smirked. “Very rich.”

“Are you that desperate for money you would marry a woman only for her fortune?” Could Gideon be right after all in his assertion that a desperate man could be pushed into taking desperate measures if his way of life was threatened?

Oh, she did not for a moment think that could be true of her father.

But she suspected Edward could be, in the right circumstances.

Their father might be mild-mannered, but he was also a man who never said what he did not mean. He had meant it when he told Edward that he had paid off his debts for the last time.

This conversation with Edward seemed to imply he had no scruples when it came to the way in which he acquired the money needed to continue with his habit of gambling and losing.

Admittedly, Edward had not been in the same regiment as Plymouth at Waterloo, but he had been present on the battlefield that day. Harry knew little about battlefields, but she imagined during the height of the fighting that it would be easy to seek out and slay another soldier with no one being the wiser. Indeed, she had heard that enlisted men had been known to do that to the officers they disliked.

The very thought of Edward involved in something so nefarious made Harry feel ill.

He shrugged. “If you made yourself more pleasant to Oxford, I would not need to do so.”

“Do not put solving the problem of paying your debts onto me,” she warned. “When I marry, *if* I marry, it will be for love.”

“Which is why you will never marry at all,” Edward sneered before striding from the room.

Harry had never been able to understand how she and Edward, brought up by the same two loving parents, were so totally unlike.

He had been her protector when she was very young, before he went off to school and came home for each holiday colder and

harder, with no patience at all for the sister who was four years younger than him.

Was it possible, with their father refusing to pay Edward's debts again, that her brother could be guilty of accepting money to murder another man?

Gideon, having come to a halt in the hallway outside the breakfast room the moment he heard his name mentioned, now only just managed to step aside as Edward Church strode toward him.

The younger man gave him a scathing glance. "I give you leave to beat some sense into my sister if you truly desire her."

Gideon's nostrils flared as he looked down the length of his nose at the other man. "What if, as Harry suggested, my intentions toward her are dishonorable?"

"Beat some sense into her anyway," Henlow invited. "I blame this independence of spirit on my father for having been too soft with her when she was younger. I shall not be so lenient with her once I am earl," he added grimly.

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "If you ever lay a single finger upon your sister, in anger or for any other reason, then you will answer to me for having done so."

"She was not so quick to defend you a few minutes ago," the younger man taunted.

Gideon knew that, having heard only too clearly when Harry proclaimed him as being a "most unpleasant gentleman." "That is...regrettable, but it does not, and will not, change my good opinion of her."

The other man's eyes widened. "Dear God, you really do desire my hellion of a sister!"

Gideon resented having revealed as much to this selfish young rake. But neither did he intend to allow Henlow to hurt or

belittle his sister. “I hope I would defend any woman being threatened with physical violence.”

“Of course you would,” Henlow derided. “You and the rest of your holier-than-thou group of arrogant dukes!”

“I believe we are known as the Ruthless Dukes,” Gideon bit out mildly. “I advise you to remember that in any future actions you might decide to take,” he added as a warning.

Henlow gave another disdainful sniff before striding off down the hallway.

Gideon released a slow and measured breath as he watched the other man leave.

Harry’s words from the previous evening, that she could imagine her brother as being guilty of committing murder, but not her father, were very much at the forefront of his mind.

He had heard the rumors about Viscount Henlow. Of his gambling. Drinking. His excessive womanizing. There were even stories of him having fought several duels since leaving the army a year ago, even though the Regent had declared them illegal.

There was no doubting Edward Church was a hothead and a rake of the first order. He was also a friend of Robert Granger’s.

But was he also a murderer?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Harry's thoughts were distracted as she slowly sipped her cup of breakfast tea. In truth, she was more than a little stunned by the heated conversation she'd just had with her brother.

Until now, she had always believed their verbal sparring to be sibling in nature and not to be taken seriously. Edward had sounded very serious indeed just now.

"Might I join you? Or is my company really too unpleasant for you to tolerate this early in the morning?"

Harry winced, her cheeks burning with a sudden influx of color as she raised her head to look at Gideon. "Of course, you may join me. And you were not meant to hear my comment."

"Obviously."

She placed her cup carefully back on the saucer, relieved to see her hand wasn't shaking. "I did not mean it. My brother was just being..."

"Unpleasant?" Gideon supplied as he sat in the chair beside her before nodding to the footman to pour him some tea.

"Insulting and rude," she said instead. "If I had admitted to liking you, I would never have heard an end to his pushing me to encourage your interest. For his own benefit, not mine," she added with a grimace.

Gideon dismissed both footmen from the room, waiting silently until they had left, and closed the door behind them before answering her. "You like me?"

“When have I ever given you the impression I felt otherwise?” Especially now, when Gideon’s proximity was causing her heart to pound and her pulse to race.

He looked every inch the handsome and powerful duke this morning. His dark hair was perfectly styled, gray eyes warm as he gazed at her, his angular jaw clean-shaven. His clothes were expertly tailored over wide shoulders, powerful chest, narrow waist, and long and powerfully muscular legs. He was also wearing some sort of cologne with a woody citrus smell that added to rather than detracted from his already alluring male musk.

It made Harry’s mouth dry, both to look at him and breathe him in.

She was also very aware her own appearance was far from being elegant. She had not returned to her bedchamber to tidy herself before coming down to breakfast. Consequently, several curls had escaped their pins during the night and now rested against her nape, from where her head had lolled back when she occasionally dozed in the chair drawn up to her father’s bedside. Her gown, the same pale peach day gown from yesterday, was very creased from all that sitting.

“I like you too.” Gideon’s smile was rueful.

“You do?” Despite her denials to Edward, she had hoped Gideon returned her liking. Even looking as disheveled as she did.

He nodded. “But I certainly felt, despite our previous agreement to it being otherwise, more than a little anger being generated toward me from you when we parted yesterday.”

“You had just told me you suspected my father of murdering your friend!”

“A statement which I seem to recall you found highly amusing.”

“Because it is.” She chuckled again before sobering. “My brother, on the other hand...” She shook her head. “Edward has always been selfish, but recently, he seems changed in

ways that are most disagreeable. He has certainly never spoken to me so scathingly as he did just now.”

“*Does* he have more gambling debts, do you think?”

“I am certain of it.” She sighed. “And Papa told Edward the last time this happened that he would not be responsible for paying them again. That he would also stop Edward’s allowance altogether.”

“Creating a desperate man.”

“Yes,” she confirmed heavily.

“How is your father this morning?”

Harry smiled her gratitude for the change of subject. “I believe he is a little better. Not well enough to answer your questions as yet but improving slowly.”

“That was not my reason for asking about his health.”

“Then I believe his fever is not as high as it was.”

“Did you sit with him all night?”

Her smile was rueful. “My appearance gave me away, hmm?”

Gideon eyed her teasingly. “Have you forgotten my first sight of you was of you sitting on the bank of a river, your skirt drawn up to your thighs, your legs and feet bare as you dangled them in the water?”

Harry felt another blush warm her cheeks. “And almost my first of you is of you sitting in the middle of that river, wet from head to toe, after being thrown from your horse!”

Gideon chuckled, causing Harry’s eyes to widen at how much younger he looked with his austere features softened. The gray of his eyes was no longer as steely, those chiseled lips curved into a warm smile.

She had brought about this change in him, Harry acknowledged happily. Not only Gideon’s laughter, but hearing him laugh at himself, something she would not have believed possible when they first met.

Gideon sobered. “*Did* you sit with your father all night?”

She nodded. “My aunt has offered to sit with him again this morning so that I might have a few hours’ sleep once I have had something to eat and drunk some of this delicious tea. Which I have now done.” She placed her cup in the saucer and her used napkin on the tabletop.

He frowned. “Your brother is not going to take a turn sitting with your father today?”

“Edward believes such things to be a woman’s duty. In any case, he is far too busy to trouble himself with such things as sitting beside our Papa’s sickbed,” she dismissed.

“Doing what?”

“I believe there is to be another shoot this morning,” Harry revealed dryly.

“Your brother is...”

“Completely unable to think of anyone but himself,” she finished heavily. “I wish I could claim it were otherwise but...” She turned fully in her seat to face Gideon, her fingers tightly grasped together. “Do you think he might have been stupid enough to accept money to...to kill the Duke of Plymouth?”

Gideon wished he could say no to that question, but this morning he had seen a completely different side to the rakish but affable young gentleman Henlow chose to present in Society.

Gideon was currently so angry at the cruel way Henlow had spoken to his sister that he hoped the rich and widowed Lady Clara Faulks *did* return his interest. It might serve to bring that young man’s selfish ego down a peg or two.

Having once, several years ago, foolishly plowed that field himself—it was between Clara’s first husband and her second—Gideon knew that she would sexually devour young Henlow until she had sucked the very marrow from his bones. After

which she would move on to another man foolish enough to have his eyes on her fortune.

Gideon had no interest in her fortune and, thank God, had had the presence of mind to refuse to meet privately with the woman again after that first time. The sex had been adequate, but certainly nothing Gideon wished to repeat.

But none of those thoughts answered Harry's question. "I believe your brother is capable of killing, yes. He was a soldier, after all," he added cautiously. "But cold-blooded murder is something else. Especially against a swordsman of Plymouth's caliber."

"Then it seems we will have to wait to know more until my father is well enough to answer your questions." Harry pushed her plate away before standing. "I believe I shall go upstairs and rest now before I am needed to take over from my aunt again."

Gideon also stood. "I will escort you."

Her cheeks colored as she lowered her gaze. "Is that wise when we have already kissed once and have now admitted to liking each other?"

Gideon believed he had behaved the equivalent of wise—that is, cautious and aloof—all his adult life. It was time for him to behave with more spontaneity and purpose. Indeed, he ached to behave in that manner toward Harry.

To that end he offered his arm for her to take. "To hell with being wise," he dismissed.

She gave him a glance from beneath lowered lashes before placing her lace-gloved hand on his forearm. "I agree." She allowed him to escort her out of the room and toward the wide staircase.

Harry's heart pounded all the way up the stairs and down the hallway to where her bedchamber was situated. Her palms also felt damp inside her gloves.

What was she *doing*?

Gideon was fourteen years her senior. Sophisticated. Self-contained. Most of all, sexually experienced.

She was the opposite of all those things.

Especially the latter. The kiss she and Gideon had shared had been her first.

“Please do not be alarmed.” Gideon turned to face her, taking both her hands in his as they came to a halt outside her bedchamber. “I have no wish to do anything which will alarm you into not liking me.”

Harry looked up at him, her frown betraying her uncertainty. “Are you playing with me?”

His expression darkened. “I believe that anyone who knows me well would tell you that I do not have the facility to *play* at anything with anyone.”

“Mocking me, then?”

Gideon released her to lift his hands so that his palms now cupped either side of her face. “You are the purest diamond amongst lesser bejeweled dross. A beautiful young woman who has held me in her thrall since the moment we first met.”

Harry’s gaze moved searchingly over each of his harsh features. The gray of his eyes was soft and warm. His cheekbones appeared less like razor blades. His slightly curving lips were full and sensuous rather than thinned in displeasure.

“You truly *do* like me,” she said wondrously.

He chuckled. “I truly do.”

Harry continued to look at him uncertainly for several minutes before coming to a decision. “Would you like to come into my bedchamber with me? Just for a few minutes. So that we might continue our conversation.”

Gideon stilled. “Are *you* playing a game with me?”

“To what purpose?”

“I say yes—as any man in his right mind would—and the moment we are alone together in your bedchamber, you call for assistance. At which time a male member of your family rushes into the room and demands I offer you marriage in order to avert a scandal.”

Harry frowned. “You speak as if something like that has happened to you before?”

“Once. In my youth.” His mouth twisted. “It was not a pleasant experience.”

“Yet, you are not married.”

“No, I am most certainly not married.”

Nor did he have any intention of being so in the near future, Harry heard in his tone. Which was perfectly fine with her, because she did not wish to marry soon either. If she married at all.

Her gaze was teasing. “Unless you have forgotten, of the two male members of my family in residence, one is incapacitated in his bed, and the other is so unconcerned about that situation, and me, he has gone off for the morning shooting with his friends. My maid is downstairs ironing several of my gowns, as my father’s indisposition means we will have to remain here for some time after the other guests have left. In fact, as you claim to know and like me, I am a little insulted that you could even suspect me of plotting such subterfuge.”

“Please forgive me.” Gideon released a heavy sigh. “I have been too long in Society, and I am still acclimatizing myself to your refreshing honesty of nature.”

Harry grinned up at him. “Is that your way of saying yes?”

He continued to stare at her for several long seconds with eyes that were dark with swirling emotions too fleeting to be read correctly, before he gave an abrupt nod. “It is my way of saying yes,” he huskily accepted her invitation.

CHAPTER NINE

Gideon could sense Harry's increasing nervousness once the two of them were alone in her bedchamber together, the door closed and locked against the rest of the household.

He maintained a distance of two or three steps away from her. "We do not have to do any more than sit and talk together, if that is your wish?" He indicated the two armchairs placed either side of the bay window looking out over the parkland.

She swallowed before lifting her chin and looking at him. "I believe what I wish is to have you to kiss me again."

Gideon's heart stuttered before beating faster and louder. A totally unprecedented reaction to receiving an invitation to kiss a woman. "I believe I too would like that very much," he accepted gruffly.

Harry's smile became rueful when he made no move to do so. "You will have to stand a little closer if that is truly your intention."

He gave an appreciative smile at the return of some of her usual outspokenness. "I am a little nervous," he admitted softly.

Her eyes widened. "*You are?*"

He gave a shrug at her obvious surprise. "It has never mattered to me this much before now whether or not a woman enjoyed my...attentions. There have not been many others," he assured when her eyes widened. "It has never felt...right with the few there have been."

“Gideon?” She voiced her uncertainty.

He gave a half smile. “I believe I am the sort of man who can only truly make love to someone whom I...care for.”

“You care for me?”

“Very much.” He stepped forward to clasp both her hands in his. “You are a unique and beautiful young lady—very young—which is why I do not want to alarm you with the depth of my passion.” Something he knew he was seriously in danger of doing once he had kissed and tasted her lips again. “Do you trust me?”

“Implicitly,” Harry answered without hesitation. “I...I have glimpsed the passion you are referring to.” A blush colored her cheeks. “It burns in the depths of your eyes whenever you look at me.”

Gideon was not surprised to hear that. His desire for Harry had existed from their very first, unorthodox meeting. “I will try to go slowly,” he promised. “But my need for you is fast slipping out of my control.”

Gideon no longer questioned why it should be only Harry who affected him in this way. He only knew it to be a fact.

An indisputable one.

Resulting in an irresistible desire to consume every inch of her.

“If I frighten or overwhelm you—” He broke off as Harry’s fingers pressed against his lips.

“I am not frightened, nor am I overwhelmed,” she assured. “I want you too. Very much”

“Thank God,” he vowed. “Even so—”

“Please stop talking and kiss me.”

Harry trembled at the fierceness of the desire she could once again see burning in Gideon’s eyes. It burned only for her, if

she was to believe him, and she knew him well enough to know he wasn't a man to say something he didn't mean.

Euphoria exploded inside her the moment Gideon's lips claimed hers. It wasn't like their other kiss. This time, Gideon held nothing back, his tongue exploring her mouth, igniting sparks of pleasure with each slow thrusting exploration.

Her heart was beating erratically as Gideon continued to kiss, his arms holding her tightly against him, allowing Harry to feel his hard cock throbbing against her abdomen. She felt herself swelling between her thighs in anticipation when one of Gideon's hands lifted her gown to slide beneath the skirt. He continued to kiss her as his fingers stroked her heated flesh in a slow but deliberate pattern which led inevitably to the slit in her drawers. Those same fingers slid inside to stroke and explore the swollen flesh no other man had ever touched.

Gideon raised his head to look at her. "Have you ever had a sexual orgasm?"

Harry frowned. "I have never allowed any other man to touch me in this intimate way."

"Have *you* touched yourself in this way?"

She gasped at the feel of the soft pad of his thumb pressing against and stroking the nubbin of flesh she knew was between her folds, if not what its purpose was. "Never," she groaned, a tide of pleasure rising quickly inside her when Gideon pressed harder and stroked faster. Her hands moved up to grasp his shoulders as the pleasure intensified.

He continued the caresses between her legs as he buried his face against her throat, his breath hot against her skin as his lips explored and his teeth gently bit.

"Gideon...?" she managed to gasp as the pleasure rose higher and higher and she felt as she was about to burst.

"Come for me," Gideon instructed gruffly. "Come for me, love."

The endearment, accompanied by Gideon biting more painfully against the tender flesh between her shoulder and

throat, was enough to send Harry over the plateau of uncertainty on which she'd been balanced.

She imploded.

Juices gushed between her thighs as pleasure fractured out from that nubbin Gideon continued to stroke. It coursed through her abdomen to each of her limbs and then to the very tips of her fingers and toes.

It was unlike anything Harry had ever experienced or felt before.

“Do you still trust me, love?” Gideon asked her long minutes later as she stood within the possessive circle of his arms, her heated cheeks pressed against the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

Her heart melted at being called that for a second time. “I trust you,” she assured.

“Then I should dearly like to remove your clothes now and have you lie on the bed so that I can lap up the juices from between your thighs before making love to all of your beautiful body.” It was a question as well as a statement.

Harry's cheeks burned at the thought of Gideon tasting the juices that had gushed from her channel. But she still balked at being naked in front of anyone but herself and her maid. Other than that, since Miss Pettigrew left her father's employ, Harry always wore the covering of a robe.

“Please,” Gideon encouraged achingly.

How could she resist such an entreaty from a gentleman whom she was sure did not normally ask anyone for anything?

She turned so that Gideon could unfasten the buttons on the back of her gown rather than trusting herself to answer without the trembling of her voice giving away nervousness.

Gideon's fingers shook as he slipped open each button on Harry's gown before allowing it to slip down her arms and

then drop to the rug at her feet.

He turned her slowly, his breath hitching as he greedily drank in the sight of her rose-colored nipples and the dark curls at the apex of her thighs visible through the thin material of her chemise and drawers.

“Take them off too,” Harry invited softly.

Gideon didn't hesitate, Harry lifting her arms to help facilitate the removal of her chemise. Her bared breasts were perfect, uptilting globes, tipped with those engorged nipples.

Gideon bent to suck first one nipple, then the other into his mouth, drawing harder on the sensitive flesh when Harry's groans of pleasure became increasingly louder.

“Is it normal for that pulsing need between my thighs to occur again?” she gasped, her fingers tightly gripping Gideon's shoulders.

“As many times as you wish,” he confirmed as he unfastened Harry's drawers and allowed them to fall to the floor with her gown and chemise. He was filled with satisfaction at knowing how quickly he had aroused her passion for a second time.

A naked Harry was a beauty to behold and treasure.

Her shoulders and arms were slender. Her breasts would fit perfectly in his hands. Her waist was so narrow, Gideon believed his fingers might meet about it. Her hips flared out enticingly, with silky dark curls at the apex of her thighs. Her legs were long and coltish, her feet slender.

In Gideon's eyes, Harry was perfect, from the top of her glossy dark hair to the tips of her tiny toes.

He reached up to remove the pins from her hair and allow those dark curls to cascade loosely about her shoulders and down her back.

“You are pure perfection,” he told her gruffly.

A blush brightened her cheeks. “Are you going to remain fully clothed while I am completely naked?”

“Of course not.” Gideon didn’t take his gaze from her for the whole of the time it took him to remove his boots, jacket, waistcoat, and shirt.

Harry believed if she was perfection, then Gideon possessed the lithe and muscular body of one of the Bernini sculptures she had once seen in a book in her aunt’s library. Unlike those marble figures, Gideon was all smooth burnished skin across his wide shoulders and chest and the muscular contours of his abdomen.

Her gaze moved questioningly up to his face when he made no move to remove his pantaloons.

His smile was self-derisive. “They will serve to remind me I must not, under any circumstances, attempt to put my cock inside your sweet virgin pussy.”

Harry’s cheeks burned at his graphic language. “But how shall I be able to touch you?”

“When that time comes, I will unfasten my pantaloons and drawers to allow you access to my cock, but I will not remove them completely.”

“You doubt I will want to touch you intimately?”

He ran the soft pad of his thumb along her bottom lip. “I do not doubt that you are a very brave and determined lady.”

“But not brave enough for you to be naked so that I might... touch you...there whenever I wish?” The fact she had stuttered at using the word cock implied he might be correct, Harry realized self-disgustedly.

The warmth of Gideon’s hand cradled the side of her face. “We will go only as far and do exactly as much as the two of us wish for and are happy to explore. No more, no less.” He dropped his hand and lifted her in his arms and carried her over to lie her on the bed before joining her.

Harry looked up at him as having him kneel either side of her thighs trapped her deliciously in place beneath him.

Her breath caught in her throat as he linked his fingers with hers and lifted her arms so that her hands were on the pillow above her head. He then slowly lowered his head until his lips could claim hers in an act of complete possession.

Harry had no idea for how long they kissed, only that by the time Gideon lifted his head to look down at her, every part of her body was either hot or throbbing with the need for more.

“Keep your arms raised,” he instructed softly as he released her hands to slide down her body.

First his lips and hands explored her throat and shoulders.

Then her breasts, until Harry was arching off the bed as she pleaded for more.

Instead of giving it to her, Gideon’s mouth and fingers explored her abdomen and hips, before moving lower.

Harry gasped at the feel of his lips and tongue first lapping up her juices and then exploring every pulsing and heated fold of her sex as he took her to that pinnacle of passion again and again until she lost count and could only lose herself as the greedy supplicant she had become.

She was too lost to that pleasure when Gideon placed her legs over his shoulders, giving him access to all of her, from her swollen sex and the sensitive flesh behind it. She stiffened when she felt his lips and tongue against the forbidden rosette between her bottom cheeks.

“Just feel, love,” Gideon cajoled. “I am told that there are nerves here.” He swiped his tongue over that sensitive flesh. “Which will only add to your pleasure. Trust me, love,” he encouraged.

Nothing Gideon had done so far today had caused her to so much as question that trust for a single moment. “Yes,” she agreed breathily.

She was completely robbed of breath over the next few minutes as Gideon’s tongue stroked and softened the tight

rosette enough so that he could push first a single finger inside her before replacing it with the hot moisture of his tongue.

Harry's senses fragmented, pleasure coursing hotly through her veins, the moment he did the latter. His hold on her hips was not enough to hurt her, but strong enough it managed to hold her in place as she rode out the maelstrom of release ignited by the thrusting of Gideon's tongue deep inside that rosette.

Gideon moved to lie beside Harry, his caressing hands bringing her down slowly from the orgasm that had coursed through her still shaking and shuddering body.

The pleasure of making love with her was more intense than anything he had ever experienced before.

A pleasure that ignited anew when Harry, no longer trembling as badly, rose onto her knees to kneel between his parted thighs. "I am going to make love to you now." It was *her* hands that moved to unfasten his pantaloons and drawers before moving them aside and releasing his cock.

Gideon knew what she would see as her gaze feasted hotly on his shaft. It was eight inches in length, and her fingers didn't reach all the way round when she curled them about the girth. The top was a deep and glistening blood red, pre-cum escaping from the slit at the top.

"Can I...lick it?" she faltered shyly.

"Lick it. Suck it. Stroke the length up and down. Hold and squeeze my balls while you suck," he told her without hesitation. "Push a finger inside my anus and seek out the gland there, if you wish to really intensify my pleasure." Or, at least, so he had been told. He did not usually allow such intrusive intimacies to take place with any woman.

Until Harry.

She proceeded to carry out every one of those invitations, the last, as she pressed her finger against the spongy gland inside

him, caused rope after rope of cum to shoot from the top of his cock and into her mouth.

Even then she didn't balk, swallowing down every pulse of that hot seed until he was completely drained.

Gideon gathered her tightly to his side as she came to lie beside him, her head against his shoulder as they both drifted in the sea of pleasure the two of them had created together.

CHAPTER TEN

Gideon realized, the moment he opened his eyes and became aware of his surroundings, that he had fallen asleep beside Harry, in her bed, after the two of them had made love.

He also realized that the reason he had woken at all was because someone was knocking on the bedchamber door.

“Harry?” Lady Whiting called softly through the wooden door. “Harry, darling, I thought you would like to know your father is awake and asking for you.”

Gideon’s heart became heavy. Not because of any wish on his part for Dunhill not to survive his injury, but because he might now be able to ask the other man if he had run Plymouth through with a sword and killed him.

Possibly putting an end to any chance there might be any sort of future for himself and Harry.

Harry startled awake at the sound of her aunt’s voice, the proximity telling her the older woman was just on the other side of her bedchamber door. Along with the knowledge that the half-naked body pressed closely against her back, along with the arm draped about her waist and the half-hard cock pressing against her bottom, all belonged to Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford.

Which instantly brought back images of the two of them making love earlier this morning before they had obviously

fallen asleep in each other's arm. She had seen flashes of the deeply erotic emotions beneath Gideon's veneer of haughty coldness, and earlier today, that fierceness had driven Harry's desires as well as his.

Even so, Harry began to panic at the realizing *her aunt was standing just on the other side of that door*. A glance toward the window, revealing the direction of the sun, told her it was now late in the afternoon.

"Steady," Gideon murmured softly beside her ear.

"My father could have taken a turn for the worse," she hissed before raising her voice to ask that very question. "Has Papa's fever worsened, Aunt?"

"Is it... No, no," the older woman instantly assured. "It is much less than it was. He is awake, and I have managed to persuade him of the benefit of taking sips of water. Which he has done successfully."

But something was wrong, Harry could hear it in her aunt's tone of voice.

"Stay calm," Gideon soothed again beside her. "At least it sounds as if your father is recovering."

"And my aunt is outside in the hallway!"

"Exactly. There is a door between her and us. As such, she cannot possibly know we are lying here in bed together."

"I know we are, and I have never been very good at lying, either to my father or my aunt," Harry hissed, keeping hold of the sheet to cover her bare breasts as she sat on the side of the bed. She turned toward Gideon. "You must go into the dressing room at once so that I can open the door to her and ascertain what is wrong."

She was instantly struck dumb by how debauched he looked, with his hair in disarray, his eyes dark and unfathomable, and his lips slightly swollen from both kissing and making love to her.

Were her own lips as red and full?

She could certainly feel the soreness on her breasts and between her thighs, caused, no doubt, by the stubble on Gideon's chin. Bringing back vivid memories of how that slight burn came to be on her skin.

"Send your aunt away," Gideon advised in a low voice. "Tell her you will join her in your father's room once you have washed and dressed."

Harry frowned. "My aunt often sits and chats with me when I am in my robe or bath."

His jaw tightened. "For obvious reasons, she cannot do so today."

"Harry...?"

She wrenched her gaze away from Gideon's compelling one before once again answering her aunt. "I am using the chamber pot," she excused and then winced at the indelicacy of making such a statement in front of Gideon.

"Oh. *Oh.*" Her aunt sounded equally as disconcerted. "It is only that... Oxford has disappeared." Her voice had risen dramatically.

Harry glanced at the man lying beside her. "Disappeared?"

"No one has seen him since this morning. He did not join the other gentlemen at the shoot, and his valet has not seen him since he left his bedchamber to go down to breakfast."

"Perhaps he has gone for a walk and forgotten the time," Harry replied distractedly. "There are some beautiful trails through the woods and down to the lake."

"I will send a footman to check, but I do not think Oxford is the type to go wandering off enjoying scenic walks. I will also have inquiries made as to whether his horse is still in the stables." Nevertheless, the older woman sounded grateful for the suggestion. "I will be waiting in your father's bedchamber once you are dressed."

"Very well, Aunt." Harry's gaze was currently fixated on Gideon as he threw back the bedcovers and rose from the bed.

Revealing that he still wore only his unfastened pantaloons.

Gideon displayed none of her own modesty as he rose to his feet to collect the clothes he had discarded so haphazardly earlier.

Harry could barely breathe as she took in the strength of his muscular body and the golden hue to his skin revealed in the afternoon sunlight.

Gideon had wide shoulders and a muscular back, tapering to a narrow waist. The scar from when he had been shot was visible halfway down his back and on the left side. The musculature of his buttocks was not lessened by perfectly fitting pantaloons, his legs equally so above his bare feet.

He turned as he pulled his shirt on over his head, revealing the tantalizing trail of dark hair across and between his pectoral muscles. That trail narrowed over the defined muscles of his abdomen, before disappearing beneath his drawers. Harry remembered every inch of him, and the way the hair surrounding his cock was just as dark and silky.

Harry's breathing became choppy as she recalled Gideon teaching her how to touch him earlier. How to lick and taste him. How to wrap her fingers about his cock and take that silky hardness into the heat of her mouth before bobbing her head up and down to the symphony of Gideon's groans of pleasure.

Her body warmed and her gaze heated merely thinking about those intimacies.

She almost sighed her disappointment when Gideon fastened his pantaloons, effectively hiding that delicious cock within their folds.

Only for her heart to catch again when he straightened and she saw how disheveled he still looked, his hair in even more disarray, his shirt unfastened at the throat.

She had fallen, it seemed, deeply and immediately in love with the passionate and sensually attractive Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford.

“What is it?” Gideon prompted when he saw the way Harry’s cheeks suddenly seemed to have paled.

“Nothing,” she dismissed with what looked to be an overbright smile. “Except I believe it is time you went somewhere where you can be ‘found’ by either one of the other guests or a member of my aunt’s household. Otherwise, I fear my Aunt Amelia might decide to send out a full search party for the missing Duke of Oxford.”

Gideon wasn’t fooled for a moment by her teasing, nor did he believe for a minute that was the true reason Harry’s gaze would no longer meet his. Unfortunately, they didn’t have the time right now for him to pursue the real reason.

He stepped forward to cup her chin in one of his hands. “We will talk again later.”

Her gaze became knowing. “Talk, or *talk?*”

“The former,” Gideon bit out. Not that he was averse to making love to Harry again. In fact, he craved it, and his cock pulsed with that same clamoring need. But he believed he and Harry needed to discuss what had happened between them today more than they needed to immediately repeat the heady experience.

Gideon couldn’t remember ever being as aroused in his life before as he had been when he touched Harry’s silky flesh and tasted her on his tongue.

As he had known from the moment he met her, Harry was unique and special. To a degree Gideon couldn’t seem to stop thinking about her for longer than a few seconds at a time.

Lying beside her in her bed, the two of them giving each other pleasure, had been the singular most intimate experience of his life. To be that close to her. To hold her. To fall asleep with her in his arms but wake with that same knowledge of intimacy. It had been life changing.

He believed—no, he knew—he was falling deeply in love with her.

Was perhaps already in love with her?

If so, that knowledge meant, now more than ever, that he needed to settle the problem of her father or brother's possible involvement in Plymouth's death. Until he had done so, he couldn't, in all conscience, even hope to voice his feelings for Harry.

She was aware of my reason for being here earlier today and still the two of us shared intimacies I know with certainty Harry never shared with any other man.

Yes, perhaps.

But Gideon would still prefer to solve the mystery before telling Harry of the depth of his feelings for her.

To that end, he kissed her lingeringly on the lips before straightening. "I must go and be 'found,' as you say, and you must visit your father. We will talk again after dinner," he promised before releasing her to pick up the rest of his clothes and quickly make his way to his own bedchamber.

Half an hour later, his appearance once again as sartorial as it usually was, the last person he wished to "find" him was that young peacock, Robert Granger, the usurper to the Plymouth title, along with several of his friends, which included Harry's brother.

Granger was still one of the people suspected of paying someone to assassinate his cousin, despite having announced previously that he was carrying out his own investigation.

"We missed you at the shoot this morning," the younger man greeted him jovially.

"I am sure you had plenty of others to keep you amused," Gideon dismissed.

One of Granger's brows rose. "And did you find something to amuse you this morning?"

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "I find I am usually less bored in my own company than when in others'."

"Indeed?"

Gideon glanced at the other young gentlemen. Henlow, in particular, gave him a searching glance. As if he might see

evidence on Gideon's face of his having spent the morning making love with his sister.

His gaze returned to Granger. "If I might have a word in private...?" Perhaps, if Granger was serious in his investigation, he had managed to learn something Gideon hadn't.

Such as Dunhill's indisputable innocence.

If so, it would be one step closer to Gideon successfully claiming Harry as his own.

"Of course," Granger accepted smoothly. "If you will excuse us, gentlemen." He didn't wait for the permission of his friends but instead strode down the hallway to what turned out to be the Whitings' library. "What ludicrous bee do you have in your bonnet now?" he demanded as soon as Gideon had closed and locked the door behind them.

"When we all talked in London a few weeks ago, you omitted to inform us that Henlow is one of your closest friends." He went straight to the point of his continued issue with Robert Granger's claim of innocence in his cousin's murder. "That his whole family are more than casual acquaintances." To a degree this man called Harry by the affectionate name of Monkey.

Something which rankled with Gideon more than it ought. Harry had a life and friends before the two of them met, and he was glad of it. But he would not tolerate such liberties being taken when Harry was his...

When she was his what?

They had yet to establish what they would be to each other after this weekend. Which was why Gideon needed this business settled as soon as possible.

"Eddie? What does he have to do with anything?"

"He was present at the battle the day Plymouth was killed. I have since learned that he drinks too much and has gambling debts—"

"Are you accusing me of paying Eddie's debts, and in return, he agreed to murder my cousin on my behalf?"

“No. Yes.” Gideon grimace his uncertainty. “I am at a loss to know what to think,” he finally acknowledged heavily.

Granger strolled over to where a decanter of brandy and glasses sat upon the table near the unlit fireplace. He poured a generous amount into two glasses before handing one to Gideon. “Perhaps if you were not so enamored of Harry Church, you might be able to see the situation in a clearer light.”

Gideon stiffened. “I am not—”

“Careful you do not perjure yourself in a way that might come back to haunt you, Oxford,” the other man drawled knowingly as he made himself comfortable in one of the fireside chairs, the bulbous brandy glass cradled in both his hands. “Not that I blame you in that regard. Harry is one of the most genuine and beautiful young women it has ever been my pleasure to know.”

“She is *mine!*” Gideon’s hand was clenched so tightly about his own brandy glass, he feared for its safety. Nor did he care if he sounded like a madman. He would not tolerate any other man trying to claim Harry.

The other man nodded. “If she decides you are what she wants, then I will wish the two of you every happiness together.”

He scowled. “You sound as if you have doubts on the subject?”

Granger shrugged. “The earl has always allowed Harry to choose her own path.”

“Then I will have to ensure she chooses me.”

“I wish you luck with that,” Granger taunted before taking a sip of his brandy.

“I wish to know more about your friendship with Henlow.”

“First, let me assure you, my being here this weekend had nothing to do with Eddie. I received my invitation because my father is friends with the Whitings.”

Gideon nodded at this confirmation of Harry’s explanation of the connection. “Dunhill and Harry are their brother-in-law

and niece by marriage, respectively. Also making Edward Church their nephew.”

“Exactly,” Granger confirmed before sighing. “I admit that my reason for being here is the same as yours, which is to speak with the last officer present the day my cousin Spencer was killed. I do not believe Dunhill to be guilty of the crime, but I wished to ask him if he saw anything that day which might help us to identify who did commit the murder.”

“Harry tells me that the earl received a blow to the head that day and has little recollection of events after that.”

Granger’s eyes narrowed. “You sound as if you do not believe her?”

“I believe that *she* believes it to be the truth,” Gideon answered cautiously. “Have you had chance to speak with Dunhill?”

“Not before his...accident, no.”

Gideon’s eyes narrowed. “You sound skeptical of it having been one?”

Granger grimaced. “You must admit, the timing of it was very inconvenient for anyone wishing to speak privately with the earl. And no, I did not shoot him as a way of keeping him quiet regarding my having *paid* him to commit the murder for me,” he dismissed scathingly. “I am a much better shot than that. If I was guilty of having my cousin murdered, then I would have shot to kill the man I paid to do it rather than only injuring him.”

A good point. “What of Edward Church?”

Granger released a heavy sigh. “I freely admit Eddie was a childhood friend of mine, but people and circumstances change. I still see Eddie occasionally socially, but as you said, he drinks too much and is too fond of illegal duels for my liking.”

“Do his other friends feel the same way?”

Granger frowned. “Until this past year or so, we had, I believe, all been happy to help him by giving him money to settle his

debts. Even knowing it would never be paid back.”

“What happened to change that opinion?”

“His indulgence in other...substances, which has strained my own friendship with him to breaking point. I believe most of his other friends feel the same way.”

Gideon winced. “He is an opium eater?” Unfortunately, it was a drug which currently held many in its thrall, both high- and low-born, male and female.

The younger man nodded. “I believe he took it initially to ease the pain after he was shot during a duel. He has since become addicted to it.”

Which possibly explained why Harry had said the man Edward Church had become was not the same brother she had once known. Addiction to anything could destroy a person. If allowed, Gideon would be happy to help the much-younger man to break himself of that harmful habit.

If allowed...

Until Gideon had managed to secure Harry as his own, he doubted Henlow would welcome his interference in his addiction. Dunhill would no doubt find him showing an interest in his son’s behavior questionable too.

Whatever the outcome of that endeavor, Gideon had no intention of being gainsaid in his pursuit of Harry.

But first, he still had to establish the innocence of both Harry’s father and her brother.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Aunt Amelia says you are feeling better, Papa?” Harry prompted anxiously after entering her father’s bedchamber before sitting at his side and taking one of his hands in hers.

Her aunt had spoken to her briefly outside in the hallway, but it was obvious she was still distracted by Oxford’s absence.

Until Harry informed her that her maid, on her way upstairs with the hot water for Harry to wash with, had seen the duke in the entrance hall talking to the Duke of Plymouth and several other young gentlemen. It was only a little white lie, and the longer she could divert attention from her own increasing closeness to Gideon, the better for everyone.

Her father was propped up against half a dozen pillows, his face white rather than flushed, and his eyes looking less feverish. “Much better, thank you.” He turned his hand so that his fingers might squeeze hers reassuringly. “Such a stupid thing to have happened.”

“Did you see who fired the shot?”

“I...” Her father gaze shifted toward the window, and he swallowed before continuing. “I did not.”

Harry’s chest tightened at the realization her father had just lied to her. But why would he do such a thing? Unless...? Oh dear God! “Papa, was it Edward who shot you?”

“No!” he instantly denied, his glare defensive. “Of course not!” The fierceness of his expression wavered slightly, despite the heat of his denial. “Even if he did, I am sure it was an accident.”

Harry's breath left her lungs in a loud whoosh as she dropped back against the chair.

Was it really possible Edward was responsible for shooting their father? If so, why had he? What possible reason...

The answer to that was all too obvious when Harry recalled her brother had earlier today admitted he had once again incurred gambling debts he couldn't pay. Despite knowing their father had threatened to cut him off if it should occur again.

What Harry wanted to know was whether Edward had shot their father with the intention of killing him, and so enabling Edward to inherit the Dunhill title and fortune? Or had her brother meant only to disable their father for few weeks while he tried to recoup his gambling losses by some other means?

Either way, their father could have died if she and her aunt hadn't tended to him to ensure the fever dissipated rather than worsened and proved fatal.

But if Edward was capable of shooting their father, was it possible he had also run the Duke of Plymouth through with his sword in return for a payment to settle his debts?

"Gideon!"

Gideon was about to enter his bedchamber after his conversation with Robert Granger, followed by another with Amelia Whiting in which he'd had to assure that lady of his wellbeing. He had intended to spend his time before making an appearance at dinner thinking over Granger's revelations regarding Henlow.

The sound of his name being called, by the voice that had become like beautiful music to his ears, was enough to cause him to pause and turn. He smiled at Harry as she hurried down the hallway toward him.

It took only one look at her face and the tears clearly tracking down her pale cheeks for Gideon's smile to fade. "What is it?"

He reached out to grasp both her hands in his.

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Edward shot my father.”

Gideon’s hands tightened on hers. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “My father saw him do it.”

He winced. “Does Edward know he saw him?”

“I am not sure,” Harry answered shakily. “Although it would explain his reluctance to sit with or be alone with our father since the shooting. He must have feared my father might confront him with the truth of his ‘accident.’”

“Possibly.” Until they were certain, ergo heard the confession from Edward Church’s own lips, Gideon continued to prefer to err on the side of caution.

“The moment my father told me of his suspicions, I knew I had to seek you out and tell you,” Harry continued unhappily.

“Your father should not be left alone.”

She frowned. “Do you think he might still be in danger?”

He grimaced. “A desperate man is capable of desperate actions.”

Her expression was pained. “My aunt kindly came to sit with Papa again before I left.”

Gideon looked at her searchingly, seeing Harry’s distress in the anxiety of her gaze and the lines bracketing her nose and mouth. “The fact your brother shot your father does not mean he also killed Plymouth.”

“It shows that if he is capable of shooting his own father, he is more than capable of harming others for his own gain,” Harry insisted dully.

Yes, it did. But having now met and spent time with Henlow—and having heard the dismissive manner in which the younger man spoke to his sister—Gideon had already suspected that might be the case.

“My father wishes to speak with you.”

Gideon refocused his attention on Harry. “Did he say why?”

Her smile was humorless. “I think he considers you to be the only levelheaded and wholly impartial gentleman staying here this weekend.”

“I thought he considered me to be a pompous ass and damned arrogant?”

“I am sure that opinion has not changed,” Harry dismissed affectionately. “But he also knows that Edward’s friends would be reluctant to involve themselves in this matter. My aunt and uncle, having no children of their own, have always adored and indulged both of us. My aunt is especially fond of her niece and nephew, and as my uncle adores my aunt, he will do anything he can to ensure her happiness.”

“Which means I am to be presented as the ogre in this scenario,” Gideon drawled.

Harry gazed at him with appeal in her tear-wet eyes. “Edward cannot be allowed to simply walk away from his crimes.”

“And you?” Gideon looked at her searchingly. “How will you feel toward me after—*if* I am involved in proving your brother guilty of attempting to murder two people, one successfully?”

She gave a shake of her head. “You would only have proven he committed those crimes. You are not responsible for his committing them.”

“That did not answer my question.”

In truth, Harry had no idea how she was going to feel about any of this situation if it should transpire Edward had not only shot their father, but was also responsible for killing the Duke of Plymouth. All for monetary gain.

If the latter was proven, her brother would be sent to the gallows.

Brother and sister might no longer share the closeness they once had but the thought of Edward being hanged for murder was unimaginable.

She blinked back tears as she gazed up at Gideon. “I think you are asking the wrong question.”

“I am?”

Harry gave a nod. “My family will be ruined if Edward is found guilty.” Making fact of her aunt’s wailing on the subject the previous day.

“That was not a question.”

She gave a sob as she pulled her hands free of Gideon’s to step away from him. “I shall be ruined, and therefore unable to ever join Society.”

“That is still not a question.”

Tears fell unchecked down her cheeks, her hands clenched tightly together in front of her. “If that should happen we—we would no longer be allowed to be... friends.”

A frown darkened Gideon’s brow. “I shall decide who my friends are,” he announced imperiously. “In any case,” he continued, “you and I are not friends.”

“Oh.” Harry lowered her lashes. “I had thought— I apologize if I was being presumptuous. You said— I had thought you liked me.” What a fool she was.

By mutual consent, she and Gideon had indulged in several intense encounters that had resulted in hitherto unknown pleasure for Harry. But a friendship could not be based on those *shared intimacies* alone.

“Harry, I not only *like* you, I adore you!” Gideon cut in on her racing thoughts. “I have no intention of anyone or anything detracting from that.”

She eyed him cautiously. “You adore me?”

He inclined his head. “I do.”

What did that *mean*?

Harry loved her father and brother. But she had adored her pet rabbit when she was a child, that affection passing to the puppy her father bought her after the rabbit’s demise a few years later. More recently, that adoration had been reserved for

the beautiful brown mare her father had bought for her a year ago.

But Harry was not a rabbit, a puppy, or a horse. Nor did she have any idea what Gideon's claim of adoring her meant.

She lowered her lashes again, reluctant to let Gideon see the tentative hope that must surely be visible in her eyes. "Will you come and talk to my father?" The earlier the situation of her brother's actions was resolved, the sooner she and Gideon could resume this conversation.

Could *perhaps* resume this conversation.

If her brother really had killed one of Gideon's closest friends, Harry could not see how the two of them could continue to have even a friendship.

Gideon's chest tightened with the knowledge Harry had not returned his claim of adoring her.

Because she didn't return that affection?

It was highly possible, Gideon acknowledged. Just because the two of them had been intimate together did not mean their feelings for each other were of the same intensity. Gideon, more physically experienced, was totally aware of how unusual their pleasure in each other was. Harry, having nothing to compare that pleasure to, could have no idea how rare such an instantaneous physical connection was.

How ironic it would be if, having at last found the woman he wished to spend his life with, she did not feel the same way about him!

No doubt all those ladies in Society whom Gideon had rebuffed over the years would find his dilemma highly amusing.

But he would not give up hope.

How could he when Harry was everything, and more, than he could ever have wished or hoped for?

Gideon straightened. "I believe your brother, uncle, and Robert Granger should also be present during my conversation with your father."

Harry recoiled. "What if my brother refuses or becomes violent?"

"If that should be the case, then I am sure Granger and your uncle and I are more than capable of restraining him." He reached out to once again grasp her hands in his. "If your brother is guilty, I shall do everything in my power to ensure he does not hang."

Except Gideon knew his power might not be enough, that if Henlow had killed Plymouth, the other Ruthless Dukes might insist the full letter of the law was adhered to.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I hope you have good reason for summoning me from my game of billiards.” Edward scowled as he entered the bedchamber where Harry, Gideon, and their uncle had already gathered. Robert Granger entered the room behind him and closed the door with a decisive click. “I was about to win a hundred pounds off Bradshaw!” Her brother threw himself down petulantly into the chair in one of the bay windows in the room, one of his legs draped over the arm. Robert Granger crossed the room to lean against the wall beside him.

“An amount I am sure would not even begin to touch your outstanding debts,” her father murmured morosely.

“Not this again.” Edward gave a roll of his eyes. “I have told you I do not have any debts.”

“Telling me something does not make it the truth.”

“You—”

“Edward!” Harry rebuked sharply.

He eyed her disparagingly. “Do not take that tone with me just because you have briefly caught the interest of a gentleman of Oxford’s wealth and caliber.” He snorted. “He’ll eat you up and spit you out again, quick as you like.”

Harry felt a humiliated blush warm her cheeks as she felt her father and Robert’s gaze upon her.

“You are a presumptuous young pup,” Gideon bit out harshly.

“I am only stating the truth,” Edward dismissed before giving Harry another scathing glance. “A girl as naïve as my sister

could not possibly hope to hold the Duke of Oxford's interest as anything more than a fleeting fancy."

Their father spoke up before Harry was able to think of a suitable set-down. "Which reminds me... I have been meaning to talk to you about your familiar behavior two nights ago in the garden, Oxford."

"Please don't," Harry begged him. "Gid— The Duke of Oxford's only reason for being here this weekend is to see that justice is served for a very great wrong done to his friend." The blush had deepened in her cheeks after almost referring to Gideon with the familiarity of his first name.

"I saw him kissing you."

"What?" Her uncle sounded scandalized.

"You saw us walking together in the garden," Harry corrected her father. "Then the duke assisted me after...after a night bug had flown into my eye." That explanation sounded lame even to her own ears. "As I have said," she continued briskly. "The duke's only reason for accepting my aunt and uncle's invitation for this weekend was to further the search he and his friends have been making these past months for the person responsible for killing their friend Plymouth."

"I was told a Frenchie did it." Her uncle sounded puzzled.

Edward swung his foot off the arm of the chair and sat up abruptly. "I really do not see that it matters who killed him. He's still dead."

"Edward!" Harry snapped at his complete lack of empathy for another man's death, and the sorrow felt by both the dead man's friend and relative in the room. Thankfully, neither Gideon nor Robert reacted to the heartless comment.

"Nor do I see why I have to be here for this conversation," Edward bit out in impatience.

"You are here because the Duke of Oxford requested your presence," Harry informed him.

"I do not give a damn what the Duke of Oxford requests." Edward scowled as he rose to his feet. "And I have warned

you before, sister, do not address me in that disrespectful tone.”

Robert Granger straightened from his relaxed pose of leaning against the wall at the same time as Gideon moved to stand at Harry’s side. “Your father has already told your sister that you were the one responsible for shooting him yesterday.”

“What?” Uncle Walter gasped. “Surely not?”

“I am afraid so,” her father confirmed.

“Then it was an accident,” her uncle decided with affection. “Although you should have come forward and admitted as much,” he chided Edward. “Your aunt has been frantic with worry over this whole business.”

Gideon’s gaze remained fixed on Edward. “It was not an accident.”

“Of course, it was,” their host dismissed. “It must have been. Edward would not have meant to shoot his father.”

“Henlow?” Gideon prompted harshly.

Edward gave an impatient huff. “It is only a surface wound.”

“That did not answer my question.”

Edward glared his resentment. “It was only meant to incapacitate, not kill.”

“For what purpose?” Gideon demanded.

“I needed time to—to recoup some of the money I owe about town,” Henlow revealed impatiently. “Before the Pater got to hear of it and cut off what’s left of my allowance.”

“Edward!” their uncle reproved.

“He could have died!” Harry accused.

“Cease the dramatics, little sister. He’s still here, ain’t he?” Edward scorned.

She gave a shake of her head. “No thanks to you.”

“What I wish to know,” Gideon cut in on the siblings’ conversation, “is did you kill Plymouth for the same reason?”

Her brother frowned. “What?”

“Did you also kill the Duke of Plymouth for monetary gain?” Gideon repeated succinctly.

Harry’s breath caught in her throat as she, along with everyone else in the room, waited for Edward to answer.

Gideon’s gaze remained narrowed on the younger man as Henlow reacted to the accusation. Initially with surprise. Then dawning realization of the ramifications of what Gideon was asking.

Followed by a fury that made his eyes widen and his cheeks redden. “How dare you accuse me of such a thing?” he stormed indignantly.

“Careful, old chap,” Granger warned softly.

“Do not *old chap* me.” His friend glared at him. “You ain’t the one being wrongly accused of murdering someone.”

“You did admit to shooting your own father,” Granger reminded.

“With pellet shot,” Henlow dismissed.

Granger shrugged. “It succeeds in killing the grouse.”

“But barely penetrates human flesh,” the viscount snapped.

A reaction, Gideon admitted grudgingly, which seemed to imply Henlow was not responsible for killing Plymouth.

He was unprepared, however, for Dunhill to be the one who spoke up next.

“What nonsense is this about Edward killing Plymouth?” the earl demanded to know. “He was nowhere near Plymouth when the duke was struck down.”

Gideon looked at the older man. “Do you know that for a fact, or are you merely attempting to protect your son, as seems to be your behavior toward him so far?”

“I know it for a fact.” Dunhill pulled himself farther up the pillows.

“How?”

“Because I saw Plymouth being attacked that day, and I went to his aid.”

“Papa...?” Harry looked at her father uncertainly.

He gave her a reassuring smile. “The fever seems to have shaken loose some of the memories I had forgotten after being hit on the head that day.” He turned back to Gideon. “I can now clearly remember Plymouth being set upon by a French soldier. The duke was already on the ground, having received a stab wound to the stomach, by the time I had fought my way to his side. I had no choice but to kill the French soldier when he turned on me too,” he admitted with obvious distaste for the deed.

Gideon and his friends had been informed of what happened that day as seen by James Stanley, Plymouth’s valet. A man who had been taken prisoner and forced to serve aboard a French ship before managing to make his escape a few months ago and return to England. The first thing that gentleman had done was to seek out the Ruthless Dukes and tell them what he had seen.

Gideon now wondered if James Stanley could have been mistaken. If the other man had not, in fact, seen the English officer—Dunhill—*defending* Plymouth from being stabbed again by the French soldier as the other man lay wounded and helpless on the ground.

Dunhill was something of an oddity, and he should never have become a soldier, but Gideon had no reason to think that the man was lying to conceal his or his son’s part in Plymouth’s death.

Or was Gideon being swayed by his feelings for Harry into *hoping* Dunhill wouldn’t lie about the events of that day?

“Papa, you’re a hero!” Harry ran lightly across the room to sit on the side of the bed. She gave her father a careful hug, obviously being mindful of his injured side.

Dunhill gave a self-derisive grimace. “I can hardly be called as much when I was struck on the head immediately after defending Plymouth and have not been able to remember the details of the incident until now.” He glanced at the Gideon. “I am sorry I was not able to come forward with this information sooner.”

“Your daughter is quite correct, sir, in that you are a hero for having attempted to save Plymouth’s life. A heroism for which I and my friends thank you.” He gave an acknowledging bow of respect.

“I am the last person to ever be thought a hero.” The earl grimaced. “I hate everything about war, from the sound of the clashing of swords to the screaming of the horses to the groans of the dying.”

“And yet you served your country anyway,” Gideon said.

“I should have remembered that day sooner.” The other man continued to berate himself. “I should have— Dear God...” His face paled.

“Papa, what is it?” Harry stared at him, her expression anxious. “Papa?”

He was staring across the bedchamber at Gideon. “I have told you I was hit on the head, and for some reason that blow caused my brain not to remember the events of that day. Until now,” he said. “It is because of that lapse in memory that I have no idea if this happened or if it is the result of my befuddled brain.”

“Tell me anyway,” Gideon encouraged.

Dunhill drew in a deep breath before continuing. “I believe I regained consciousness for several minutes. I am not sure how much later it was, but I woke in time to see a cart pulled by two heavy horses entering the woods. Two roughly dressed men jumped down before dragging a body from the back of it.”

Gideon eyed him incredulously. “They took a body *from* the cart?”

The other man nodded. “Dressed in the uniform of an English officer. I heard the two men from the cart talking in French as they collected the bodies of Plymouth and the French soldier I had killed, before throwing them in the back of the wagon and then driving off.”

“Plymouth’s body was found in the wood that day.” Gideon frowned. “Not by me, because I had been injured, but his body was identified as being amongst the dead.”

Dunhill pursed his lips in thought. “Then perhaps the men in the wagon were collecting the dead bodies after the battle that were ready for burial or burning?”

“From both sides?”

The earl winced. “It does seem a little unlikely, especially as I could still hear the battle raging. But if that was not the case, what did they do with the two bodies?”

“I think there is another question I should like to ask before any more speculation is attempted,” Granger spoke up.

Gideon eyed him curiously. “Which is?”

The younger man turned to the Earl of Dunhill. “Was my cousin still alive or already dead when he was loaded aboard the cart?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harry burst into Gideon's bedchamber without knocking. "Do you believe what my father told you?"

She stood as tall as her few inches over five feet would allow, with her shoulders back, and her chin raised in challenge when Gideon looked down the length of his nose at her from beneath one arrogantly raised brow.

"Leave us," he instructed his valet, waiting until the other man had departed before answering Harry. "You really cannot keep bursting into a gentleman's bedchamber in this way. It is not seemly."

"You did not *seem* to mind the last time I did so," she challenged.

"Circumstances have changed."

Yes, they had, Harry acknowledged heavily. Gideon had changed along with them. He was no longer that warm and intense lover who adored her, but once again the aloof Duke of Oxford.

One look now at his distant and autocratic expression and she knew there was no point in upbraiding him further on the subject. Whatever had been between them was over as far as Gideon was concerned.

Unfortunately, Harry was now certain she was deeply in love with him.

How else could she explain the aching disappointment which had overwhelmed her when Gideon had announced it was his

intention to return to London the moment the conversation with her father came to an end?

“Did you believe my father?” she pressed again.

Gideon shrugged. “I have always found Dunhill to be an honest man in the past. As such, I have no reason to disbelieve him now. His head injury might mean he remembers the events out of context or order, but what he told us still bears investigation.”

Harry could understand that. “I am still finding it difficult to believe that Edward could have shot our papa to prevent him from discovering he was once again in debt.”

“You heard your brother’s confession with your own ears.”

“Yes.” Harry looked searchingly at Gideon, wishing she could see just an inkling of the man who had made love to her so intensely and thoroughly rather than the aloof stranger he had now become. “Do you intend to report my brother’s behavior to the authorities?”

“As it appears he was not responsible for harming Plymouth, I think his fate for the crime of shooting his own father is for the earl to decide,” he replied coolly. “Granger has informed me your brother is an opium eater, and that many of his friends have distanced themselves from the man he has become because of it,” he added in a softer voice. “Perhaps, if he can be weaned away from that, he might once again become a decent human being.”

Edward was an opium eater? Dear Lord, his situation was so much worse than Harry had even imagined it to be. “He has always been self-serving, I am afraid.”

“Still, I believe the best thing would be for your father to arrange for your brother to be removed from the situation here. For Edward to perhaps travel to and stay on the Continent for the winter. He should be accompanied by men your father trusts to ensure Edward is not able to access the opium.” He grimaced. “Those men will need to be strong in both mind and body, because I have heard that the withdrawal symptoms when someone stops taking that drug can be most unpleasant.”

Perhaps they were, but they surely could not be as character changing as the drug itself. As Harry said, Edward had always been self-centred, but his behavior now had become criminal and leaned toward him hurting someone else. Possibly more seriously than their father, if he was not stopped.

“I will talk to my father on the subject,” Harry assured Gideon. “Do you really have to return to London today?” she asked as Gideon began to lay items out on the bed next to the saddlebags that would later be thrown over the back of his horse.

Her heart had sunk and continued to ache after Gideon had made the announcement of his plans immediately after hearing her father’s reply to Robert Granger’s question. She simply did not see the reason for his urgency to return to London when the Duke of Plymouth had died over a year ago.

“Initially, yes, so that I can discuss this new development with the other Ruthless Dukes,” Gideon confirmed evenly. “Then we shall perhaps have need to travel to the Plymouth estate,” he added distantly.

“Why?”

“Plymouth is buried in the family crypt there.”

“I do not see... Do you have doubts that it is his body in the crypt?”

He released a heavy sigh. “I am sure it is, but we must leave no stone unturned in our efforts to discover the truth.”

“Surely he must be dead?” Harry eyed him incredulously. “If not, where could he have been all this time?”

Gideon’s jaw tightened. “That is a question for after we have looked at the body in the crypt.”

“I— Do— Will it still be recognizable?” She wrinkled her nose in distaste for the task of looking at the dead body of a close friend so long after it had been buried.

Gideon’s expression was grim. “I hope so, yes.”

She gave a knowing nod. “Which is why Robert Granger needs to accompany you.”

“I do not *need* that young gentleman’s permission to continue investigating my friend’s murder.” He grimaced. “I agreed to his accompanying me only because I do not think I would be able to prevent him from doing so, and it is better to accept such stubbornness graciously rather than attempt to fight it.”

Robert had been adamant earlier in his decision to leave with Gideon, citing that he wished to find his cousin’s murderer more than anyone else. There had been none of the usual foppish manner in his announcement of returning to London with Gideon.

The way her father described the events of that day at Waterloo made little sense, Harry acknowledged. So much so that they merited further investigation by Gideon and his friends.

Why would some mysterious cart have suddenly appeared in the woods? Or the two men upon it deposit the body of an English officer on the ground? Before then taking away the bodies of the Duke of Plymouth and the Frenchman her father had fought off and killed when trying to save the duke?

Whatever the reason, Harry was proud of her gentle and mild-mannered father. He might not have succeeded in saving Plymouth, but he had tried to do so before being rendered unconscious himself, which made her father a hero in her eyes.

“I shall remain here until my father is well enough to travel. Possibly another week or so. Will you be returning to Bedfordshire once you have spoken with your friends?” Harry really wished her voice did not sound quite so forlorn at the prospect of Gideon remaining in London and her never seeing him again.

Except it was how she felt.

Gideon had come to mean so much to her in just a few short days.

Gideon was still in shock following Dunhill's revelations regarding what he had done and seen during the battle at Waterloo.

This information posed so many new questions, Gideon knew he must ride to London and share that knowledge with the other Ruthless Dukes as quickly as possible.

Which was not to say he was not heartsore at the thought of leaving Harry so soon after meeting her.

Or that a part of him did not wish to beg her to come with him to London rather than be without her for however long it took him and the other dukes to ascertain what had really happened at Waterloo that day.

At the same time as he knew he could not do that.

For one thing, it simply would not do for a young single lady to travel with him to London, even if her maid were to accompany her. Also, the need to reach there as soon as possible was urgent. Something which would be hindered enormously by having to pace his progress to that of a carriage rather than riding alone on horseback.

Secondly, he would need all his wits about him to deal with how complicated the situation of Plymouth's death had now become, and Harry's presence had a way of wiping away any thoughts that were not of her.

Lastly, Gideon believe her father and brother needed her steadying presence to remain with them at present. To act as arbiter, if nothing else, in their discussions as to what must become of the feckless Edward Church.

As stated, Gideon was more than happy to leave that last difficult decision to the earl.

"I do not have plans to do so, no," he answered Harry's query evenly.

"Oh."

Gideon disliked intensely the fact that Harry's gorgeous blue eyes were looking down at the rug rather than at him. "There is only one more day left of the house party after this one, and

I doubt very much that I shall have concluded my business in London in that short amount of time.”

“But I have said I shall be here for another week, at least.”

“I have no idea how long this business will take.”

Her lashes remained lowered. “Of course not.”

“Harry...”

“I am disappointed on my aunt’s behalf, not my own,” she assured as she at last raised her head to reveal a defiant expression and angrily glittering eyes. “This weekend, rather than being a social coup for her, has been one disaster followed by another.” She gave a hard and tinkling laugh of dismissal.

An overenthusiastic display of humor which did not convince Gideon in the slightest that Harry felt any real mirth at the shocking happenings of this weekend.

Gideon hated seeing her normally free spirit so inwardly deflated. “I will visit you in Gloucestershire once my business with the other Ruthless Dukes is satisfactorily concluded.”

Pleasure flared briefly in Harry’s eyes before it was quickly subdued and replaced with another of those insincere smiles. “Of course, you will.”

He scowled. “You doubt my word?”

“Not in the least,” she said lightly. “I have no doubt at this moment you mean exactly what you are saying.”

“But...?”

“But you will forget about the silly girl you met in Bedfordshire once you are back amongst your fashionable friends and the beautiful ladies of the...” The rest of her words were swallowed by Gideon’s mouth taking firm possession of hers in a kiss meant to punish as much as give pleasure for her doubting him.

He devoured and tasted, *punished*.

He raised his head several long and pleasurable minutes later to look down at Harry’s flushed cheeks and feverish gaze. Her

lips were red and puffy from the intensity of their shared kisses. "I will not forget you," he vowed huskily. "But perhaps you will forget me?"

"Believe me when I say you are impossible to forget," she dryly assured with a return of her usual spirit.

Feigned or real, Gideon was grateful for it. "As are you." He released her to step back. "I really do have to go," he said regretfully.

"I know you do." Harry smiled.

Again, Gideon was unsure if that smile was genuine, but he didn't have the time right now to pursue the subject. "You will see." He raised one of his hands to cradle the side of her face, his thumb a soft caress against her swollen bottom lip. "I will visit you in Gloucestershire long before you have had time to miss me."

"I already miss you," she admitted softly.

Gideon loved Harry's honesty. He loved *her*. But they both had duties which had to be dealt with before he could think of settling matters between them.

He bent to kiss her again, briefly but with hard possession. "Keep a lookout for me in Gloucestershire, because I *will* come to visit you there soon."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gideon Harrington was a liar, Harry decided.

It was a full three weeks since Gideon and Robert had left her aunt and uncle's home to ride to London with the intention of discussing the new developments regarding the death of the previous Duke of Plymouth with his friends.

Or so he had claimed was his purpose.

Harry was now inclined, more than ever, to believe that, although Gideon obviously did need to speak with the other Ruthless Dukes, he had never had any serious intention of seeking her out after he had done so.

And, oh how her heart ached at that realization.

Despite how busy the past three weeks had been.

As Harry had said would be the case, she had remained at her aunt and uncle's home for another week, caring for her father until he was well enough to travel back to into Gloucestershire.

There was also the more immediate problem of what was to be done with Edward.

On her father's instruction, he had also remained in Bedfordshire with them before accompanying them back to the Dunhill estate.

Harry had told her father of Gideon's recommendations, and after careful thought, the earl had agreed it appeared to be the only way to cure Edward of his addiction.

Predictably, Edward did not see it as a way of helping him at all, and he had fought most strongly and very loudly against being dispatched to the Continent, accompanied by the two burly men her father had hired to ensure Edward did not have access to opium again.

In the end, the two men had kept Edward secured in one of the cottages on the estate until the worst of his violence and ranting had passed. A week ago, they had deemed her brother well enough to travel. The two of them had left the following day and taken a very subdued Edward with them.

Harry sincerely hoped that by the time they returned, Edward would be cured of his craving.

In the meantime, as she had done many times these past three weeks, Harry was once again sitting beside one of the windows in the main salon at the front of Dunhill Manor. Her purpose, as always, was to gaze down the long driveway as she waited for a man whom she no longer believed was ever going to appear.

She was a fool to have ever hoped otherwise, she berated herself. A naïve and impetuous fool who had been taken in by a man who was not only older and more experienced than her, but who had also reached the age of three and thirty without losing his heart to any woman.

Harry had hoped, oh, how she had hoped, that she would be the exception.

But it was not to be.

They were not to be.

She gave a humorless laugh at how ridiculous it had been of her to ever have thought Gideon would want someone like her. A woman who was lacking in societal manners. Who could be abrasive. Who was too forward by half in both her comments and behavior.

Harry's cheeks heated as she all too easily recalled the intimacies she and Gideon had shared that afternoon at Whiting Manor.

Her behavior that day, she was now forced to realize and accept, had been beyond scandalous. So how could she possibly have hoped Gideon would wish to see her again?

She had been an amusement to him. A silly little girl who had been stupid enough to ever believe the haughty Duke of Oxford might fall in love with her.

As she continued to be with him.

Out of sight, out of mind did *not* do anything to lessen the love Harry felt for Gideon in her sore and aching heart.

Absence *did* make the heart grow fonder.

Harry had decided that both those proverbs must have been said by someone who had never felt as if their heart was breaking apart at the thought of never seeing the person they loved again.

Worse, if Harry did ever have a London Season, which her father now seemed to think she should, then she would one day be forced to see Gideon again. Perhaps by then, he would even be accompanied by his wife. Harry had no doubt she would be a tall and elegant lady, with fine and beautiful features and a polite and gracious manner.

None of which Harry—

“I have received a letter.”

Harry gave one last lingering glance down the empty driveway before making herself smile warmly as she turned to face her father.

He had entered the blue salon and now waved the aforementioned letter in his hand at her. His movements were as sure and lithe as they had ever been, her father having now made a complete recovery.

“What letter, Papa?” she prompted with forced interest.

“It is from...”

“The Duke of Oxford?” Harry brightened.

“It is from Charlie, one of the two men who accompanied Edward to Spain,” her father corrected.

“Oh.” She deflated. “Is Edward well?”

“According to his minder, they have arrived safely at the villa I rented for them, and Edward is settled and doing very well.” Her father looked at her over his half-moon glasses for several seconds before glancing down at the contents of the letter he held. “Is there a reason why you assumed the Duke of Oxford might be writing to me?” he mused wryly.

Her lashes lowered. “I had assumed, now that he is aware of your own actions that day, he would send news to you of what he and his friends intended doing regarding the mysterious happenings surrounding the Duke of Plymouth’s death.”

“He already did so,” her father informed her lightly.

“He did?” It was the first she had heard of it.

He nodded. “A week ago now.”

It made her heart race to think her father had received word from Gideon a week ago and not told her.

She stared. “Papa, why did you not tell me you had received this letter?”

His brows rose. “I had no idea of your interest in either the matter or the Duke of Oxford was quite so...fierce.”

Harry avoided his speculative gaze. “I am, of course, eager to learn if there has been any further development regarding the previous Duke of Plymouth’s death.”

“*Only* that?”

“Of course.”

“Hm.”

Harry had always thought her father to be somewhat dreamy in his manner, someone who preferred the company of birds and animals than bothering himself with the complication of people’s emotions.

But as she looked into his frowning gaze, she realized her father was now speculating as to her interest in Gideon Harrington, the Duke of Oxford.

“Is there anything you wish to tell me, my dear?” His gentle prompting confirmed that speculation.

“No,” she instantly dismissed. “Nothing at all,” she added for good measure.

“I see,” he said slowly. “Then you will not be in the least interested to hear that in his letter, the Duke of Oxford stated it is his intention to arrive here later today.”

Harry stood abruptly. “Papa...?” she gasped, once again feeling the warmth of a blush in her cheeks. “Why did you not tell me that?”

“You have been so despondent these past few weeks, and we have so few visitors, that I had thought to keep his visit as a surprise for you,” he explained. “But I see now that I should have shared it with you earlier so you might fully enjoy the anticipation of his visit.”

Anticipation?

She was absolutely thrilled to learn Gideon was coming to Dunhill Manor.

Today!

“Only because I need to inform the housekeeper to prepare a bedchamber for him.” She glanced at her father from beneath thick lashes. “I presume the duke will be staying the night?”

Her father nodded. “I believe it is his intention to remain here for several nights.”

Harry’s heart stuttered. “For what purpose?”

Her father shrugged. “I presumed he was taking the time and trouble to come here in person so that he might tell us what more, if anything, they have discovered concerning the mystery surrounding the death of the previous Duke of Plymouth. I assumed that was the reason, because one really does not question too deeply the actions of a man as toplofty as Oxford,” he added ruefully.

Harry intended doing so.

At the first opportunity.

Gideon had deliberately chosen to travel by carriage to Dunhill Manor. Not to delay his arrival there, although there was no denying it had done that, with him having had to stay overnight at a coaching inn rather than ride directly into Gloucestershire.

No, he had chosen to travel in his most prestigious ducal carriage because he had wished to arrive with all the pomp and splendor of the Oxford title on display. Literally, because the Oxford coat of arms was painted on the black lacquered doors of the carriage.

The display was for Henry Church, not his daughter, because Gideon knew Harry well enough to know she would not be impressed by the opulence of a carriage, even a ducal one.

As she had never been impressed by anything to do with him being a duke, he recalled with an affectionate smile.

From the first, Harry had teased and mocked him in a way no one else ever had.

It was both refreshing and unique.

It was, he acknowledged, Harry.

Gideon's chest tightened at the thought of seeing her again, these past three weeks having passed with the speed of a snail. Moreover, a snail that had stopped to examine every leaf and blade of grass along its way.

But he would very shortly see her again. Be with her again. Hopefully hold her and kiss her.

His anticipation grew when, an hour later, his carriage turned onto the long driveway leading to Dunhill Manor.

That anticipation dimmed somewhat when, having been admitted to Dunhill Manor by the butler, a virago rushed down the wide staircase without a care for her own safety.

“Where have you been?” Harry demanded once she stood in front of him, without a care for the presence of the butler who

had just taken Gideon's hat and cane.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes fierce with accusation, her breasts quickly rising and falling above the curved neckline of her pretty peach-colored gown.

It was not the greeting Gideon had been hoping for or imagined during these long weeks they had been apart. "Could we perhaps take this conversation somewhere more... private?"

Her eyes narrowed to sparkling blue slits, her hands resting on her hips as she continued to glare at him. "I have no intention of being 'somewhere more private' with you ever again!"

"I am sorry to hear that." He reached out to grasp her arm. "Because I have every intention of the two of us talking together without an audience," he added in warning.

"I will inform the earl of your arrival, Your Grace," the butler told him smoothly before leaving Gideon and Harry alone in the vast entrance hall.

"A good fellow, that," Gideon admired. "Your father should give him a raise in his wages."

"You... He..." Harry spluttered with obvious outrage. "I have not seen nor heard from you for a full three weeks, and all you have to say to me is my father should increase Kilby's wages!"

"I have much more to say to you than that," Gideon assured her mildly. "But I would prefer to say it as I spank your bottom in the privacy of either your private parlor or bedchamber."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Spank my bottom?” Harry repeated, outraged. “How dare you even suggest such a thing? I will not allow...” The rest of what she would “not allow” was replaced by a squeak of surprise as she found herself thrown over one of Gideon’s wide shoulders.

“Direct me to your bedchamber,” he instructed. He held her in place as he walked up the stairs.

“I will not—”

“It is the third bedchamber on the left along the hallway at the top of the stairs,” her father called from down below.

“My compliments, Dunhill,” Gideon acknowledged grimly.

“Papa!” Harry raised her head to glare at him as Gideon reached the top of the staircase.

Her father shrugged. “I will see you both for dinner this evening. And, Oxford...”

Harry found herself turned in a circle as Gideon swung round to look down at her father. “Yes?” he prompted.

“It seems I was mistaken in the reason for your visit.” There was a question in his voice.

“I am sorry for that. Do I have your permission to proceed, sir?”

Amusement twinkled in her father’s eyes. “You do.”

“Papa—” Her words came to an abrupt halt as a hand landed on her bottom. Not because the smack was painful, the skirts

of her gown and her drawers acting as a buffer. It was more of a shock. “You are a barbarian.” She hit her fists against Gideon’s back. “A monster. A savage—”

“We will discuss my shortcomings after we have dealt with yours,” Gideon told her grimly as he pushed open the door to her bedchamber and stepped inside before firmly closing and locking the door behind him.

“I do not have any short—” Harry was robbed of words again as Gideon sat on the side of her bed and she found herself thrown over his thighs. She let out an indignant scream as Gideon, as he had said he would, began to spank her.

“I have been looking forward to seeing you again for weeks,” he gritted after landing the first smack. “I did not expect to be verbally attacked by you the moment I entered your father’s house.” He gave her another painful smack. “You are an undisciplined hellion.” Another. “A hoyden, sent to try me.” And another. “All I want to do is hold you and kiss you, and instead, I am berated and upbraided the moment—”

“You want to hold me and kiss me?” Harry arched her back as she turned to look at him over her shoulder.

He nodded. “I have thought of doing little else since I last saw you.”

Harry studied him properly for the first time since his arrival, easily noting there were more lines bracketing his eyes and mouth, and that he had dark shadows under those same eyes. His face also looked thinner, as if he had been too busy in recent weeks to have ensured he ate regularly.

She swallowed. “I have wanted that too,” she admitted huskily.

Gideon stilled. “You have?”

She nodded. “More than anything.”

Gideon helped her to first stand and then pulled her to sit on his thighs. “I love you, Henrietta Church.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders as she stared at him in awe. “You do?”

He nodded. “I do. Very much. Would you please grant me the honor of agreeing to become my wife?”

Harry was shocked into silence, unable to believe Gideon wished to *marry* her.

“Are you sure you wish to take me on as your duchess?” she prompted shyly once she was able to speak. “I am nothing like the other ladies of Society.”

“Thank God,” he murmured his relief.

“But won’t your friends be disappointed in your choice?”

He chuckled. “Ask me that again when you have met *their* wives.”

Implying, Harry hoped, that those other ladies could occasionally behave as scandalously as she often did. If so, the future promised to be—

“Is it too much to expect that you might...return my feelings?” Gideon prompted hopefully.

“Well, of course I return them,” she chided. “Why else would I have been so angry with you when you arrived all these weeks later without sending me a single word of your health or whereabouts since we were last together?” she reproved. “I have been—”

“Harry.”

“—worried constantly—”

“Harry.”

“—as to how you—”

“Harry!”

She startled at the sharpness of his tone. “Yes?”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I do. Very much,” she assured fiercely.

“Enough to marry me.”

“Oh yes.”

“Now kiss me,” Gideon groaned. “Just kiss me, and we will take care of any other of your admonishments later.”

“Gladly,” she assured before lowering her head to press her lips softly against Gideon’s.

A softness that quickly became harder and hotter as the two of them kissed away the frustration of being apart for the last three weeks.

“Now I am finally able to breathe again,” Gideon murmured with satisfaction a long time later as he lay on the bed, Harry beside him. His arm was about her waist as she lay with her head on his shoulder and one of her arms draped across his chest. “These three weeks without you have seemed endless,” he owned.

“For me too.” She raised her head. “I do love you, Gideon. So very much.”

His heart was filled with the emotion. “I have never loved before, nor will I ever love again. You are my forever, Harry. The one and only woman I shall ever love.”

Tears of happiness glistened in her eyes even as she smiled at him. “I know for certain that I feel, and shall continue to feel, exactly the same devotion to you.”

“Then you really will marry me?”

“I will,” she vowed.

They kissed for several more long and pleasurable minutes before Harry realized she had not asked him about the reason he had traveled to London three weeks ago.

“Did you learn anything more about the demise of the Duke of Plymouth?” she prompted gently.

Gideon gave a pained grimace. “What we have learned has posed more questions than answers.”

Harry resettled her head on his shoulder. “Tell me.”

Gideon did not know how to tell her of the deep shock all the Ruthless Dukes and Robert Granger had felt once they had

entered the Plymouth family crypt.

In truth, Gideon was still having trouble absorbing the full import of that discovery for himself.

He drew in a deep breath before releasing it as he spoke. “The body in the crypt is not Plymouth’s.”

Harry gave a start, glancing up at him. “Then who is it?”

“We have no idea.”

“Then perhaps it *is* him. He has been dead for over a year—”

“Suffice it to say, without going into too much detail, an embalmed human body when sealed inside a vault does not decay as quickly as one that isn’t.” He swallowed. “The body, which was supposed to be Plymouth’s, although it had been in the crypt for over a year as you have pointed out, was still viable enough to reveal it did not have a birthmark on its left thigh to identify it as being Plymouth.”

He could still clearly recall the stunned silence in the crypt once the body was revealed to them. It had the same glossy dark curls as Plymouth, and the height and build of the body had also been similar. But there was no birthmark on the left thigh. Which all six men standing in the crypt knew Plymouth to possess.

“Surely someone identified the body after the battle?” Harry prompted gently.

“Bristol did. As best he could under the circumstances,” he added heavily. “As I have said, the hair and structure of the body were similar to Plymouth’s, but the face— It was caved in, damaged beyond recognition.”

Harry frowned. “I thought you said he died from a sword being thrust into his chest?”

“He did,” Gideon confirmed. “But there was a charge of horse through those woods before the battle ended, and Bristol assumed the damage to Plymouth’s face was caused by his having been trampled on by a horse’s hoof.”

“You no longer think that?”

“There is no denying that the birthmark is not there.”

“Then where is Plymouth’s body?”

That, Gideon knew, was the question they all wished to find an answer to. “We have spent the past three weeks questioning any of the other members of our regiment who are still alive. All deny having seen anything untoward that day.”

Harry frowned. “You doubt my father saw those two men and the cart?”

“Not for a moment,” he stated unequivocally. “Nor do any of the other Ruthless Dukes or Robert Granger—I still refuse to call him Plymouth,” he acknowledged in a hard voice. “They, along with Granger, have now all traveled to the Continent with their wives to speak to the people living near Waterloo, and see if they remember the events of that day.”

Harry snorted, sure that all the people in the area of that momentous battle would remember how it laid waste to their homes and livelihood.

Even so, she felt sure such a journey would more than likely turn out to be nothing more than a wild-goose chase for those gentlemen and their duchesses. If no one else in the regiment saw anything untoward that day, then she doubted the local people, possibly having chosen to stay as far away from the fighting as possible, would have done so either.

A thought occurred to her. “Should you not have gone with them?”

Some of the tension eased from Gideon’s body. “Possibly, and I will do so. But I could not stay away from you for a day longer,” he admitted huskily. “It has felt as if I were missing an integral part of me these past three weeks. One that is necessary for me to be able to breathe.”

Harry’s heart swelled. “I have been absolutely desolate without you.”

Gideon lifted her chin as he turned to face her, the two of them now gazing into each other’s eyes. “With your permission, I

will go downstairs and ask your father for your hand in marriage.”

“We will go down and ask him together,” she decided softly.

One of Gideon’s hands cupped the side of her face. “Do you wish for a big wedding?”

“I wish to accompany you to France.” She had every intention of being at Gideon’s side when he traveled to the Continent to help the other gentlemen and the duchesses search for what had become of their beloved friend and cousin, Plymouth.

Gideon chuckled. “I had thought if you accepted my proposal, that might be the case. Which is why I paid Prinny a visit before leaving London—the Prince Regent,” he explained at her puzzled expression.

“I know who he is,” she teased. “I am merely curious as to why you felt the need to see him before coming here.”

“To ask for a special license so that we can be married immediately and afterward travel to France together.”

“That sounds perfect.” Harry raised her head to kiss Gideon lingeringly on the lips. “*You* are perfect.”

“I somehow doubt that,” he drawled. “But once you are my wife, I will endeavor to be so.”

“I love you, Gideon.”

“I love you, my darling Harry.”

Harry had no idea what she had done to deserve having a man such as Gideon fall in love with her, but whatever it was she would cherish him, and their marriage, and any children they might have together, for the rest of their lives.

NEWSLETTER AND SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS

For news on upcoming releases in the Ruthless Regency Dukes, Kingston Security, Regency Scandal, Russian Dragon Heat, Regency Club Venus, Regency Men in Love, Regency Lovers, Steele Protectors, Regency Sinners, Dragon Hearts, Regency Unlaced, Knight Security, and Alpha Series please sign up to my mailing list/newsletter: <http://www.eepurl.com/2rfzz>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/CaroleMortimerAuthor>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/carole_mortimer

Visit my website: www.carolemortimer.co.uk

Or email me at: contact@carolemortimer.co.uk

If you have enjoyed reading this book, please consider leaving a review of this book with your ebook retailer. Your reviews matter so much! Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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!

OTHER BOOKS BY CAROLE MORTIMER

NEW Regency Series

The Wager (Ruthless Regency Dukes 1)

The Mistress (Ruthless Regency Dukes 2)

The Widow (Ruthless Regency Dukes 3)

The Guardian (Ruthless Regency Dukes 4)

The Hero (Ruthless Regency Dukes 5)

The Ghost (Ruthless Regency Dukes 6)

Kingston Security:

Kingston's Ransom (Kingston Security 1)

Kingston's Captive (Kingston Security 2)

Kingston's Redemption (Kingston Security 3) my 275th Book

Kingston's Enigma (Kingston Security 4)

Kingston's Salvation (Kingston Security 5)

Kingston's Obsession (Kingston Security 6)

Regency Scandal:

WANTON (Regency Scandal 1)

WILD (Regency Scandal 2)

WAYWARD (Regency Scandal 3)

SINFUL (Regency Scandal 4)

Series in now complete

Russian Dragon Heat:

VLADIMIR (Russian Dragon Heat 1)

VAUGHN (Russian Dragon Heat 2)

VIKTOR (Russian Dragon Heat 3)

More books to come in this series.

Regency Club Venus:

Bastian's Surrender (Regency Club Venus 1)

Gabriel's Torment (Regency Club Venus 2)

Benedict's Challenge (Regency Club Venus 3)

Julius's Passion (Regency Club Venus 4)

James's Lady (Regency Club Venus 5)

Series now complete.

Dance with the Devil Series:

MATTEO (Dance with the Devil 1)

LEON (Dance with the Devil 2)

KILLIAN (Dance with the Devil 3)

JERICO (Dance with the Devil 4)

KIERAN (Dance with the Devil 5)

Series now complete

Regency Men in Love M/M (Written as C A Mortimer)

Hidden Lover (Regency Men in Love 1)

Hidden Desire (Regency Men in Love 2)

More books to come in this series.

Regency Lovers Series:

INDECENT (Regency Lovers 1)

OBSESSION (Regency Lovers 2)

CRAVING (Regency Lovers 3)

FORBIDDEN (Regency Lovers 4)

SURRENDER (Regency Lovers 5)

SCANDAL (Regency Lovers 6)

Series complete

Steele Protectors Series:

LOGAN (Steele Protectors 1)

ATTICUS (Steele Protectors 2)

BRYCE (Steele Protectors 3)

ROURKE (Steele Protectors 4)

HAYDN (Steele Protectors 5) Author's 250th book

LUCAN (Steele Protectors 6)

Series Complete

Dragon Hearts – Contemporary paranormal

Nathaniel (Dragon Hearts 1)

Deryk (Dragon Hearts 2)

Bryn (Dragon Hearts 3)

Dylan (Dragon Hearts 4)

Grigor (Dragon Hearts 5)

Garrett (Dragon Hearts 6)

Aeran & Rhys (Dragon Hearts 7)

Dragon Reunion (Dragon Hearts 8)

Series Complete

Regency Sinners Series:

Wicked Torment (Regency Sinners 1)

Wicked Surrender (Regency Sinners 2)

Wicked Scandal (Regency Sinners 3)
Wicked Deception (Regency Sinners 4)
Wicked Captive (Regency Sinners 5)
Wicked Temptation (Regency Sinners 6)
Wicked Sinner (Regency Sinners 7)
Wicked Christmas (Regency Sinners 8)
Series now complete.

Regency Unlaced Series:

The Duke's Mistress (Book 1)
Claimed by the Marquis (Book 2)
Taken by the Earl (Book 3)
Pursued by the Viscount (Book 4)
Desired by a Lord (Book 5)
Captured by a Gentleman (Book 6)
Pleased by a Duke (Book 7)
Seduced by a Marquis (Book 8)
Tamed by the Earl (Book 9)
Series now complete

Knight Security Series: Spin-off to ALPHA series

Resisting Alexandre (Knight Security 0.5)
Defying Asher (Knight Security 1)
Challenging Gabriel (Knight Security 2)
Capturing Caleb (Knight Security 3)
Tempting Zander (Knight Security 4)
Enticing Ian (Knight Security 5)
Seducing Ethan (Knight Security 6)
Series now complete

ALPHA Series:

Christmas Alpha (Alpha 1)
Dark Alpha (Alpha 2)
Shadow Alpha (Alpha 3) Author's 200th Book
Midnight Alpha (Alpha 4)
Renegade Alpha (Alpha 5)
Warrior Alpha (Alpha 6)
Rogue Alpha (Alpha 7)
Savage Alpha (Alpha 8)
Series is now complete