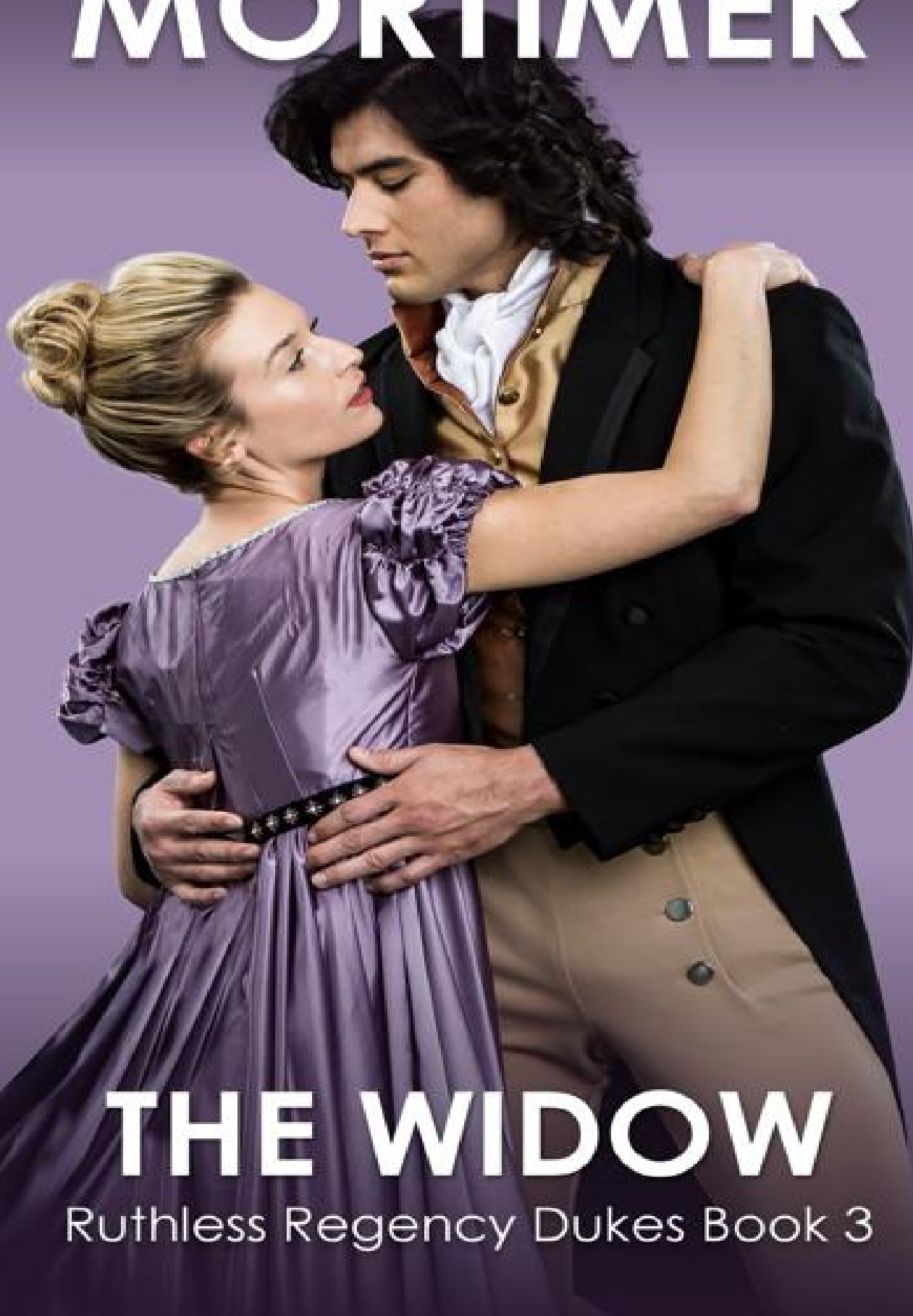




USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CAROLE MORTIMER



THE WIDOW

Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 3

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THE WIDOW
Ruthless Regency Dukes Book 3

CAROLE
MORTIMER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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DEDICATION

Peter,

Best thirty years of my life!

CHAPTER ONE

Crawtock, Cornwall

Early Summer, 1816

“Will you stop dawdling and hurry along? I do not have all day to waste waiting for you.”

Sterling Bishop, the Duke of Bristol, rarely, if ever, took note of what was occurring in other people’s lives. The omission wasn’t out of arrogance, but because he did not consider it any of his concern how other people chose to conduct themselves or their affairs.

He would rather not concern himself with it today either, after days of traveling from London to one of his smaller ducal estates in this wild and craggy part of England.

Unfortunately, it was impossible *not* to overhear the loud and querulous voice of the man currently just out of Sterling’s view around the next turn in the road in the small market town of Crawtock in Cornwall.

Sterling’s ducal estate was situated a mere mile or so away, and it had been his intention to make his way straight to the house and immediately indulge in a bath to wash away the dust and accumulated discomfort from his long journey. He’d bathed at the inns he and his valet stopped at along the

way, of course, but it was not the same as bathing in the privacy of his own home.

He had no doubt Rogers, his valet, having traveled ahead earlier this morning in the coach containing Sterling's clothes and other accessories, would already have organized the household so that it catered fully to Sterling's needs when he arrived later that day.

Unfortunately, Sterling's steed, Rufus, had lost a shoe a quarter of a mile away, forcing Sterling to walk with him into Crawtock, and then linger here awhile longer as the local blacksmith replaced the missing shoe.

Bored and in need of refreshment, Sterling had left the blacksmith's to stroll about the small and untidy settlement that hardly merited being called a town. Besides the blacksmith's, there was only a rough-looking drinking establishment and a row of thatched cottages, placed on one side of the small village green, with a butcher shop, a bakery, and a small haberdashery on the other.

The latter Sterling had quickly walked away from when the customers inside, all ladies, turned their gazes toward him as he glanced in the window, without really seeing any of the display of ribbons and lace.

He was further irritated when three young ladies, whom he would hazard were maids from the plainness of their gowns and hairstyles, had all watched him curiously as they stood beside the village well on the small green, where presumably the market was held once a month. Those young ladies had made no effort to hide the fact they were all staring at him as they whispered and giggled behind their workworn hands.

Sterling knew that by nightfall, no doubt aided by the gossip of the servants in his own household, all in the small town and surrounding area would know of the Duke of Bristol's presence.

Being the focus of unwanted curiosity was not something Sterling enjoyed, so he had done what any self-respecting gentleman would do and retired to the local drinking establishment. An hour or so within its rough-looking walls, drinking cool ale, had restored Sterling's equilibrium somewhat. The thatched roof of the inn might be sagging in places and in need of repair, there was an equally disreputable stable attached, and the inside of the inn was no better than the outside, but the beer had been of excellent quality and temperature on this early summer's day.

If it could be called such. The weather was cold and unseasonably lacking in sunshine for this time of year. Highly suitable for the long journey to

Cornwall, of course, but it was miserable weather otherwise.

All Sterling's inner feelings of goodwill, created by the beer and the jovial good wishes of the landlord of the inn as he left that establishment, vanished the moment he overheard the unfortunate beast—possibly a dog?—under very loud and very public chastisement.

“If you had not grown so fat while being here, perhaps you would walk rather than waddle, and so move along far more swiftly,” the bullying man, still just out of sight, continued to berate.

It might not be in Sterling's nature to interfere in the lives of others, but neither could he stand idly by and listen while an animal was being mistreated.

“Will you get your lazy arse into this carriage immediately, or do I have to take my whip to you?”

Sterling had heard enough.

More than enough!

“Sir, I really must protest—” Sterling, having rounded the corner to confront the bullying gentleman, instead came to an abrupt halt when he saw that it was a young *woman* being so roundly harangued, rather than the overweight and elderly dog he had imagined it to be.

A young woman, possibly aged two or three and twenty, who was very slender despite her shortness of stature. She was also delicately lovely, in a long-sleeved velvet pelisse and a silk gown of the same dark violet hue. Her eyes, when she turned a curious face in Sterling's direction, proved to be the exact same violet color. She wore lavender-colored leather gloves and ankle boots. Her hair was fair and swept up and confined beneath a bonnet of the same shade and material as her gown, although several unruly curls had escaped onto the nape of her slender neck and about the heart-shaped pallor of her face.

No doubt the bully in the waiting carriage would shortly be chastising her for that too!

Unfortunately, Sterling recognized this particular bully as being Lord Henry Marshall, the Earl of Whitlow.

A recognition which, along with the color of mourning in which she was clothed, implied the young lady, whom Whitlow had been so vilely—and incorrectly—insulting in regard to her weight, was most probably his daughter-in-law, Lady Elizabeth Marshall.

If that should prove to be the case then she was the widow of the earl's

only and deceased son, Lord Thomas Marshall, and the mother of Lord Christopher Marshall, a four-year-old boy who was now his grandfather's heir.

She was also, once Sterling learned that Lady Marshall was now spending some of her year of mourning for her husband at the Marshall estate in Cornwall, the very reason for him having made the long journey here from London.

Indeed, Sterling rarely visited this small ducal estate, and he would not have done so now if he did not wish to discover whether Lady Elizabeth's deceased husband was capable of, or in fact had been responsible for, the murder almost a year ago of one of Sterling's closest friends.

Spencer Granger, the Duke of Plymouth, had died during the noise and confusion of the battle at Waterloo. Only recently, Sterling and the other four remaining gentlemen known in Society as the Ruthless Dukes had learned that Plymouth had been murdered by a fellow officer rather than dying during that battle, as they had previously believed to be the case. They were now determined to establish which of the other five officers, also present in their part of the arena of battle that day, was responsible for the murder.

Alaric Montrose, the Duke of Melborne, and Grayson Vaughn, the Duke of Flint, had already eliminated two of those officers from suspicion.

It was now Sterling's turn to discover whether or not Lord Thomas Marshall, a man killed in a fall from his horse two months *after* the battle at Waterloo, was guilty of the heinous and unforgiveable crime of striking Plymouth down.

Sterling had rarely bothered to attend Society events, even before he had ridden off five years ago to serve as an officer in Wellington's army. Since leaving the army the previous year, he had preferred to spend his evenings either alone or occasionally in the company of the four remaining Ruthless Dukes. He would meet one or two of them, never all four nowadays, either at their club to dine and drink, or at one of London's gambling establishments. Without ever talking on the subject, Sterling knew they all missed Plymouth too keenly to all be able to meet at the same time and so make their friend's absence all the more noticeable from their number.

Until now, Sterling hadn't realized his avoidance of Society entertainments meant he had been completely unaware of Lady Elizabeth's stunning beauty.

Quite why Whitlow had dared to call her fat was beyond comprehension

when Lady Elizabeth was slender as a reed, too much so in Sterling's opinion. Her heart-shaped face was delicately lovely, with pale brows above those violet-colored eyes, a small straight nose between high cheekbones, and her full lips a perfect bow above a pointed chin.

She wore no jewelry, as was the custom during mourning, except for a pair of pearl earbobs which perfectly complemented the unblemished luster of her skin. In truth, a fragile beauty such as hers did not need even that adornment.

He frowned when he recalled she had not once attempted to verbally defend herself—which was why Sterling had believed the one being berated was a dog—against the earl's insults.

Sterling would hazard a guess on that being because Elizabeth had possibly tried to do so in the past and paid the price for it. Whatever the reason, she currently maintained a serene expression which revealed none of her inner feelings in regard to the earl's viciousness or Sterling's presence.

And he, Sterling realized, had been staring at her for far longer than could be considered polite.

Even less polite—and totally unprecedented—was the heat of his completely aroused cock inside his pantaloons, simply from being in the presence of this ethereally lovely creature. His pulse was also racing, his heart beating loudly and in the same rhythm as his cock throbbed.

This physical reaction was not only unexpected but unacceptable for a man who prided himself on never allowing his actions to be fueled by the demands of his cock.

To that end, he never dallied with the ladies of Society, young or old, married, unmarried, or widowed. He and his close friends were well aware of how the doyens of Society complained of the Ruthless Dukes' aversion to spending time at social events, let alone in the company of women of matrimonial age or fortune.

No doubt that would change when they were ready to marry and produce an heir. Indeed, Flint and Melborne had recently met and were now married to the two young women whom they both freely admitted to loving to distraction.

Sterling was pleased for his two friends, but he in no way envied them. He had a nature that was both practical and cold, and he could not imagine himself loving any woman in the dotting way that Flint and Melborne now did their respective wives. Sterling believed he was capable of feeling affection,

but nothing like the all-consuming love his two friends so obviously felt for their brides.

When Sterling felt it necessary to indulge in outside sexual stimulus, he preferred to pay for the services of a lady of the demimonde. It was far easier, once a physical need had been slaked, to walk away from such an encounter. He also made a point of never satisfying those urges with the same lady twice, having no wish to give the impression that he had a partiality for her.

An only child, and orphaned at a young age, Sterling had then been taken into the household of an elderly uncle of his mother's, Lord Edward Neville, until he was aged eight and could then be sent away to boarding school. He would come home for the holidays, but very often, his great-uncle would not be in residence at the same time, and Sterling would spend the time alone, apart from the servants. That lack of familial closeness was the reason Sterling hadn't grieved particularly after that elderly gentleman died shortly after Sterling had reached the age of two and twenty.

Another result of Sterling being brought up in such an emotionally distant way meant he did not make friends easily. Which was why he valued the friendship of the other five Ruthless Dukes, after the six of them had met at Oxford, above everything else. To learn that one of their number, specifically Plymouth, had been murdered, was unacceptable, deserving that retribution and justice be brought against the person responsible.

Miraculously, he had discovered he had a cousin, a young lady named Gwen, after his great-uncle died. She was the daughter of Edward Neville's own daughter, whom he had disowned after she had eloped with the local curate. That couple had one child together, Sterling's cousin, Gwen. Gwen had also married a parson once she was of age. The two of them were now happily married, also with a young daughter, Emily.

Sterling valued the young family, perhaps more so because until Gwen had visited him and introduced herself after her grandfather died, he had believed he had no family. He visited them as often as he was able, and often had them all to stay for several weeks at his ducal estates.

But, Sterling realized, his thoughts had digressed.

Deliberately so?

Because he was delaying thinking of, minutely dissecting as he knew that he would, this unprecedented attraction he felt toward Lady Elizabeth Marshall, who was clearly not a lady of the demimonde but of Society.

Sterling's enquiries about the lady before he traveled to Cornwall had

revealed that Miss Elizabeth Ames had been the eldest daughter of an impoverished lord, and so was considered unacceptable to be the wife of a future earl, most especially by the present earl. Something which Lord Thomas Marshall had resolved by eloping with the lady and presenting his father, and Society, with a *fait accompli*.

Having now seen the lady, Sterling could understand the deceased man's determination to claim the then Miss Elizabeth Ames for himself.

Sterling understood, because *he* was now filled with a primitive desire to physically claim Lady Elizabeth Marshall, the other man's widow.

Elizabeth barely stopped herself from openly staring at the most haughtily handsome gentleman she had ever set eyes upon. She was unable to completely turn away because his looks really were far too compelling for her to be able to do that. Instead, she glanced at him from beneath the thick sweep of her lashes.

He was possibly aged in his early to mid-thirties, and at least a foot taller than her own height of a little over five feet. His shoulders and chest were wide, tapering down to a narrow waist, and all shown to advantage in a perfectly tailored black riding jacket. His gray pantaloons molded to muscular thighs, brown-topped black Hessians doing the same to equally strong and defined calves.

His hair was very dark and fashionably overlong beneath his tall hat. Despite his striking features, his face appeared harsh and unsmiling. His eyes, beneath thick dark brows, were a pale and icy green, and revealed absolutely nothing of what he was thinking or feeling as he looked coldly down the length of his nose at the world.

The slight sneer upon his chiseled lips, when he turned to her father-in-law, appeared to be the exception. Possibly because he felt no need to disguise his obvious contempt for the older man?

"Good God, is that you, Bristol?" Whitlow spoke as if he could hardly believe his own eyes.

Elizabeth inwardly tensed at hearing the name by which her father-in-law referred to the other man.

Could the earl possibly mean the *Duke* of Bristol?

Elizabeth only knew *of* Sterling Bishop, had no idea what he looked like because the duke was rarely seen socially. Indeed, Elizabeth had not set eyes on him during the five years she had been out in Society, first as an eighteen-year-old debutante, then a little over three years as Thomas's wife, and these past ten months as his widow. But that did not mean Bristol and his close ducal friends, known collectively as the Ruthless Dukes, were not a constant source of gossip and speculation amongst the ladies.

Indeed, Elizabeth had received a letter just two days ago from one of her married friends telling her that two of the Ruthless Dukes had recently married. Elizabeth was sure Bristol had not been named as one of them.

Having now set eyes upon him, it was not at all difficult for Elizabeth to understand why. Bristol might be handsome and extremely wealthy, but a single glance at this tall and imposing gentleman, recognizing the cynical sneer of his top lip and the cold and haughty manner in which he viewed the world in general, told Elizabeth that it would take an exceptional woman to meet the no doubt severe criteria of becoming *this* man's duchess.

Or perhaps one that was completely *unexceptional*, Elizabeth mused.

Possibly a mousy little creature, and one who would never say a single word of dissent or give a look of criticism to her arrogantly toplofty husband.

As for the performance of such a cold man in the marital bedchamber...

Elizabeth instantly had a vision of a silent Bristol, wearing a long nightshirt similar to that worn by the faceless woman in the bed beneath him, briskly pushing up both those garments before he thrust his cock inside that lady's channel. That same silence would prevail as he thrust a few times before spilling his seed inside in the hope of producing an heir. Afterward, he would withdraw his softening cock and straighten his nightshirt before rising from the bed and retiring to his own bedchamber. Again, all without speaking a word.

Color heated Elizabeth's cheeks when her gaze was caught and held by Sterling Bishop as he observed her through narrowed lids. She became even more flustered when he raised a mocking dark brow in silent query as he continued to look at her with those pale and piercing green eyes.

As if, Elizabeth acknowledged with an inner wince, he knew exactly where her thoughts had taken her.

Dear God, she sincerely hoped not.

Thomas, having been taught from when he was a very young man that it was not acceptable for a woman to allow her thoughts to linger on such

intimacies, let alone enjoy the physical act of lovemaking, had refused to talk on the subject with his wife.

To that end, despite their love for each other, their own lovemaking had always been muted in restraint. Enjoyable, of course, because the two of them were in love with each other, but Elizabeth had always known there could be more, if only Thomas would allow it.

She wondered if she was being fair by assuming the autocratic gentleman she now knew as being Sterling Bishop, the Duke of Bristol, was as cold inside as he appeared on the outside. Sometimes the most outwardly controlled people were inwardly a mass of seething emotions simply waiting for the right key to turn and set them free.

Not that Elizabeth thought that she could ever be that key for this haughty man.

Besides, what would she do with a man whose heart and emotions appeared to be as frozen as ice?

CHAPTER TWO

Indeed, Bristol continued to hold her gaze for several long and piercing seconds more, after which he gave a barely perceptible inclination of his head in her direction before turning his attention to her father-in-law.

He removed his hat before speaking. “Introduce me to this lovely lady, if you please, Whitlow.” It was an order rather than a request.

One her father-in-law, surprisingly, did not take exception to, as might have been expected. Instead, the earl actually gave what looked to be a gleefully pleased smile. Not a pleasant sight at the best of times, when some of his teeth were missing and others yellowed from lack of cleaning. But the intent behind that smile was all the more disturbing when Elizabeth could think of no reason for it.

Lord Henry Marshall, the Earl of Whitlow, was not a man who was often given to showing humor of any kind. In Elizabeth’s presence, at least.

He had made no secret of his disapproval of his son’s wife when the couple returned to London a week after their elopement. Nor had that attitude changed in the years since. The disapproval had remained at a manageable level whilst Thomas was alive to act as a buffer against his father’s deliberate rudeness toward his wife. But in the ten months since her husband’s death, Elizabeth’s life as Thomas’s widow and Christopher’s mother had become unbearable.

Three months ago, she had decided she could not suffer her father-in-law's cutting remarks a moment longer and had removed herself and Christopher to the Whitlow estate in Cornwall. The two of them had lived peacefully together here for all that time, Christopher loved the freedom of his daily visits to the sandy cove a short distance from the house, where Elizabeth built sandcastles and collected shells with him.

Unfortunately, the earl had decided to join them a week ago and had immediately resumed his bullying and insults to and about her.

If she could have, after Thomas died, Elizabeth would have taken herself back to her parents' house. It might be small and overcrowded, with two of her younger sisters still unmarried and living at home, but it had always been a house full of love.

The earl, when Elizabeth told him of that wish, had been only too happy for her to leave. But he also made it clear that if she chose to do so, she would not be taking his grandson and heir with her. Unfortunately for her, her father-in-law had informed her, Thomas's will had appointed his father, the eleventh Earl of Whitlow, as Christopher's paternal guardian until he reached the age of one and twenty.

She knew Thomas would not have made the stipulation with any intention of hurting her or doubt in her ability as Christopher's mother. But Thomas had been brought up to respect the earldom and, consequently, his father—even if that father was not always respectful to Thomas or his wife. As such, Elizabeth knew Thomas would have seen naming his father as guardian to any children in their marriage as being the correct thing to do.

Elizabeth very much doubted Thomas had ever thought he would be dead at the age of five and twenty.

Sadly, the law of the time was also in the Earl of Whitlow's favor. Consequently, the only way that Elizabeth would be able to escape her father-in-law's ill treatment of her was if she departed alone and left Christopher with his grandfather.

She would never, could never, leave her beloved son. No matter how cruel her father-in-law's insults to her became.

He had increased those insults in both volume and viciousness since arriving in Cornwall a week ago. Deliberately so, Elizabeth was convinced, in a continued effort to force her into fleeing and leaving her son behind her. That would never happen.

But she believed the Duke of Bristol must have overheard some of that

viciousness a few minutes ago, from the way in which he had been protesting his disapproval of the older man as he strode around the corner.

A shiver ran the length of Elizabeth's spine when she saw the avaricious glint in the earl's cold dark eyes as he now gazed first at Bristol before that wily gaze slid over to her.

She had absolutely no idea what that look meant, only that she didn't like it. Not one bit.

"Bristol, this is the mother of Christopher, my grandson and heir. Elizabeth, the Duke of Bristol," the earl added tersely.

Sterling had always thought Whitlow to be a most unpleasant fellow, but the manner in which the other man had just made the introduction of his daughter-in-law was yet another insult to add to the ones the earl had stated so publicly mere minutes ago.

Those deliberately hurtful insults, which Sterling had overheard the older man say to his daughter-in-law before the earl became aware of his presence, were not only cruel but untruthful.

Elizabeth's beauty was such that being plump wouldn't have detracted from her allure in the least. Possibly the opposite. Sterling could envisage nothing more pleasurable than having his hands full of a plumply naked and very warm and willing Elizabeth Marshall.

Her manner and movements were graceful as she curtsied. "Your Grace."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Marshall." Sterling, unable to resist touching her for a moment longer, reached out to take one of her gloved hands in his much larger one.

His ungloved fingers and palm instantly felt the warmth of her flesh through the thin leather, his lips gifted with the same heat when he bent his head and lingered over kissing the back of her hand.

Elizabeth's softly indrawn breath had him glancing upward, their gazes clashing, hers the deepest violet, his own the palest green.

Something which was also indicative of their different natures?

Sterling knew himself to be a man of cold formality and controlled emotions.

From what he had observed of Elizabeth so far, she also knew how to control her emotions—most especially in the presence of her father-in-law—but the warm heat in the depths of her eyes told Sterling she also possessed an inner passion.

One that might, if explored, melt his own coldness?

Sterling dearly wished for the two of them to be in a position where that theory might be put to the test.

Sooner rather than later.

His fingers tightened about Elizabeth's fingers as he turned to the earl. "I am only just arrived in the area an hour or so ago, but perhaps you and Lady Elizabeth might care to join me for dinner at Bristol Manor this evening?"

If Sterling knew the capable Rogers, and he did, his valet having followed him into battle on more than one occasion during the years of fighting against Napoleon, then the other man would already have the servants at Bristol Manor rushing about preparing for Sterling's arrival. Up to and including the possible advent of dinner guests on their first evening here.

Rogers had been well acquainted with Plymouth and was just as determined to find his murderer. Indeed, Sterling's valet would do everything in his power to ensure they achieved that end, including ensuring Sterling's stay in Cornwall was as free from discomfort as possible.

Elizabeth appeared startled by the invitation. "Would you not like a day or two to rest after your long journey, before thinking of entertaining visitors?" She stilled the moment the question had left her lips, wincing as she gave a reluctant glance toward her father-in-law.

Henry Marshall looked furious, pale blue eyes glittering with anger, his cheeks flushed, lips thinned. "I believe the duke to be perfectly capable of knowing his own mind without any input from you, missy," he snapped, pausing to give Elizabeth a narrow-eyed glare before turning to bestow an ingratiating smile upon Sterling. "Silly chit still has few of the social graces, despite my efforts to instill them in her. She obviously needs a firmer hand than my own," he added suggestively.

Sterling found the earl's comments both derogatory and worrying. The former spoke for itself, but Sterling couldn't help but feel concerned as to what "efforts" the earl had already used in an attempt to correct Elizabeth's already perfect manners. She might be the daughter of an impoverished lord, but she still would, and obviously had, been taught social etiquette.

If anyone's manners could be called into question, then it was those of the

Earl of Whitlow.

Sterling disliked intensely the comment regarding Elizabeth needing a “firmer hand” than the earl’s. It implied a use of physical chastisement against her Sterling would take exception to if it should be confirmed Whitlow had ever treated Elizabeth so poorly.

“You are mistaken in your assumption, Whitlow.” Sterling smiled at Elizabeth, knowing by the way her eyes immediately widened in alarm that his smile, rusty at best, completely absent at worst, possibly appeared as more of a grimace to her than conveying any warmth of feeling. “I find Lady Elizabeth’s manners to be as charming as she is beautiful.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” The demure lowering of Elizabeth’s lashes sadly hid those magnificent violet eyes from Sterling’s gaze. He also felt the loss when Elizabeth took the opportunity to belatedly slide the warmth of her gloved hand from his.

He turned impatiently toward the earl. “Dinner at Bristol Manor this evening, then.” He made it an instruction rather than a request, unashamedly using his higher social status to coerce the other man into accepting.

“Of course.” The earl nodded graciously before shooting a sly glance in Elizabeth’s direction. “My son’s widow often finds herself...indisposed in the evenings, as she is still overwhelmed with grief. I hope you will not be too disappointed if this evening should prove to be one of those evenings and she is unable to join us?”

“On the contrary, I should be beyond disappointed if that should prove to be the case,” Sterling bit out. “To the extent that if that should occur, I should prefer to reschedule the engagement to a night when Lady Elizabeth feels able to join us.”

Elizabeth had no idea what Bristol was about, singling her out in this noticeable way. But, to her dismay, he was succeeding in increasing the avarice in her father-in-law’s gaze to a disturbing level.

Without realizing it, Elizabeth felt sure, the politeness the duke was showing toward her—so at odds with the way the Earl of Whitlow habitually addressed her—was creating a speculation inside her father-in-law concerning the duke’s possibly having an interest in her.

A speculation which the duke had unwittingly added to by his comment of canceling them joining him for dinner this evening to another night if she was indisposed. It sounded very much as if he was saying the earl need not bother attending if she could not.

Elizabeth made sure to keep her lashes lowered as the duke assisted her into the carriage, and as they took their leave of that gentleman before the carriage moved on to drive them back to Whitlow Grange.

“Well, well, well,” Whitlow drawled from the seat opposite her, and in a voice that caused Elizabeth to think of a spider about to trap an unsuspecting fly in the stickiness of its web. “I have absolutely no idea why it should be, but it would seem you have found favor with the haughty Duke of Bristol, when everyone knows that very little succeeds in pleasing him.”

Elizabeth could well believe that, having witnessed firsthand the air of coldness the duke kept about him like a cloak.

Except when talking to or looking at her, it seemed. Then, those pale green eyes seemed to burn with the inner passion and fire she had suspected might be the case beneath that gentleman’s cold facade.

To Elizabeth’s surprise, she felt a similar awareness of the duke.

Indeed, her fingers still tingled from where Bristol had maintained a grip of her hand for far longer than could be considered polite. A tingling sensation which had traveled the length of her arm and caused a feeling of fullness in her breasts and a tightening and engorging of the buds at their tips.

It was...disturbing at best, and worrying at worst.

Not only because it was the first stirring of physical arousal she had felt since Thomas died, but because the despicable man who was her father-in-law seemed to find even those small signs of the duke’s partiality of her to be of infinite interest. She couldn’t even begin to guess as to why that was.

She turned away to look at the passing countryside. “I am sure the duke was only being polite.”

Thin and bony fingers curled about her upper arm, digging painfully into her flesh. Elizabeth knew from past experience that bruises would appear on her skin later today. Ones that would require she hide those bruises by wearing a long-sleeved gown when they joined the duke for dinner the evening. Not that it would be a hardship; the weather really was unseasonably cold.

“Bristol ain’t the sort of man to be *polite* to anyone unless he wishes to be,” the earl crowed as he sat forward on his seat. “As it was, the man

couldn't take his eyes off the titties so blatantly displayed above the neckline of your gown and pelisse," he added with satisfaction.

Elizabeth glanced down at the two garments, both styled in such a way that the tops of her breasts were barely visible.

"Not that you have much there to show," the earl added scathingly. "I don't know what Thomas was about marrying a woman with the curves of a broom stick."

Elizabeth bit her tongue to prevent herself from asking him to make up his mind: either she was too fat or she was too thin, but she could not be both. But she knew better than to arouse her father-in-law's ire unnecessarily.

"Make sure you wear a gown with a very low neckline this evening," the earl added in a hard voice.

Elizabeth winced. "I do not believe any of my mourning gowns are designed in that style."

"Then send for a seamstress and have her do the appropriate alternations. Or have your maid do it," the earl dismissed. "Just make sure the gown is tight enough and low enough this evening for your titties to look as if they might burst over the top of it and your nipples be in danger of becoming visible too. I wish the duke to be able to ogle your titties, if he feels so inclined."

Elizabeth's cheeks burned at being spoken to in such a blatantly crude manner.

Nor did she have any idea what scheme the earl was currently formulating in his devious mind, but whatever it was, she wanted no part of it.

As she had wanted no part of *him* since the moment Thomas had brought her to live in his father's home, following their elopement. The earl had wasted no time in raining down vicious and derogatory comments about Elizabeth's unsuitability as his son's wife, in regard to both her and her family. Even Christopher's birth, a year later, made no difference to his animosity toward her. He had continued to use every opportunity, usually out of Thomas's hearing, to repeat those insults. No doubt, if Christopher had not looked so much like his sire, having inherited Thomas's features along with his dark hair, the earl might even have questioned whether or not he was Thomas's child at all.

Since Thomas's death, she'd had no choice but to tolerate the bitter old man for Christopher's sake. She consoled herself daily that, even then, it

would only be until such time as her son was fully grown and the earl could no longer use him as blackmail to force her into doing as he wished.

But that compliance most certainly did not include dressing herself up like a whore this evening, as the earl was so obviously requesting she do.

CHAPTER THREE

If Whitlow had thought Sterling unaware of the older man's speculation toward the warmth he had shown to the man's daughter-in-law this morning, then he was mistaken.

Sterling might choose not to interact with or join in the conversation of others, his closest friends being the exception. But what most people failed to observe about his silence was the watchfulness which allowed him to miss very little of what was going on about him.

As he had noted, that earlier today, Whitlow had been aware of Sterling's uncharacteristic warmth toward Elizabeth, and immediately begun to scheme as to how that interest might be of benefit to *him*.

James Stanley, previously the Duke of Plymouth's valet, was now acting as aid to the five remaining Ruthless Dukes in their endeavors to find the man who had murdered Plymouth. Stanley had recently, under Sterling's instruction, checked into the affairs, both personal and private, of both living adult members of the Marshall family.

Stanley had reported the earl was currently in funds, having received a large windfall the previous year. Stanley, in view of their suspicion that one of the five officers they were investigating might have been paid to carry out the murder, was still looking into exactly where that money had originated.

But Sterling would hazard a guess that the earl's obvious pleasure in his

own interest in Elizabeth grew from the fact the older man saw a way in which he might receive another monetary windfall.

God knows their endeavors so far had shown the man seemed to enter into one bad investment after another.

Two years ago, Whitlow, like many other greedy men, had believed the false rumor that Napoleon was defeated and the Bourbons back in power in France. To that end, the earl had bought heavily into government securities on the 'Change. Only to have those prices sink within the day once news of the deception became public knowledge.

Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, a group of unscrupulous men had quietly bought up government securities at a low price before releasing the rumor of Napoleon's defeat, allowing them to then sell their securities at a deceptively inflated price. As a result, many gentlemen, including the Earl of Whitlow, had lost thousands of pounds in a single day.

The men responsible, to their own shame and that of their families, had eventually been caught and prosecuted. But none of the money of the investors had been recovered. Including Whitlow's.

The timing, almost a year ago, of when Stanley reported that the earl's bank account had been in receipt of a large amount of money caused Sterling to speculate whether perhaps the father and son had acted together in regard to Plymouth's murder.

In any case, the earl still enjoyed making questionable investments, ones that usually failed, so it was reasonable to think it would not be long before the earl was once again in need of funds.

Was it possible Whitlow was considering whoring out his son's widow? No doubt with a view to requesting suitable remuneration from any gentleman seeking to share her bed.

It was disgusting behavior, if that should prove to be the case, but Sterling believed Whitlow was altogether a very unpleasant man.

Even with the knowledge of the other man's possible scheming, and despite Sterling's own inner warnings not to allow his attraction toward Elizabeth to blind him to his purpose here, he knew he had been thrumming with the anticipation of seeing Elizabeth again this evening from the moment they parted in the street earlier today.

He had tried to talk himself out of the inconvenient attraction on his ride to Bristol Manor.

Elizabeth Marshall was still in mourning for her husband, if only for two

more months.

She was the daughter of an impoverished lord and daughter-in-law to one of the most despicable men in England.

And although she had been polite to him, Sterling hadn't sensed that she was afflicted with the same burning lust for him as he felt for her.

More importantly, she was currently a part of Sterling's investigations.

All of them very good reasons why he should not attempt to pursue his attraction toward her.

Unfortunately, his libido, fully roused and centered only upon this one woman, refused to listen to him. As did his rebellious cock, which had still been hard and throbbing inside his pantaloons when he arrived at Bristol Manor and was greeted by the waiting household staff.

Sterling kept only a skeleton household staff at the Manor, a full complement of servants being unnecessary when he usually only visited the estate once every couple of years. But, as he had known would be the case, what servants there were in residence had been organized by Rogers into bustling about for several hours in anticipation of Sterling's arrival. To the extent a bath was immediately provided, and within half an hour of being informed the duke was expecting guests for dinner this evening, the cook had provided him with a suitable menu.

Not enough so that Sterling could provide Elizabeth with a taste of the delicious chocolate mousse he'd once eaten in France, but he believed she would enjoy the meringue served with fresh fruits he had requested instead just as much.

Sterling didn't give a damn whether or not the earl enjoyed the food they ate at dinner. Indeed, if he could, Sterling would not have invited the earl to join them this evening at all, but instead enjoyed Elizabeth's company to the exclusion of all others. Most especially that of her machinating father-in-law.

After hearing the man's bullying of her, Sterling could only guess at the unpleasantness Elizabeth had been forced to endure from her father-in-law since her husband's death ten months ago.

Although, from what Sterling remembered of Captain Lord Thomas Marshall, the other man had not been particularly forceful in nature at the best of times. Possibly the bravest thing the younger man had ever done was to elope with Elizabeth when she had been Miss Ames.

What Sterling now needed to know was if Marshall had been in possession of enough of that same courage a year ago, so as to make him

responsible for Plymouth's murder.

With such an aggressively domineering father, it was highly possible Marshall could have taken money to carry out the murder. Not necessarily as a way of recouping the money his father had lost through greed the previous year, but with the intention of using that money to set up a separate establishment for himself, his wife, and young son, far from the household of his unpleasant father.

Sterling now believed one of those two reasons to be a valid enough motive for Thomas Marshall to have carried out the despicable deed.

But with Marshall dead, he was going to need actual proof of the other man's guilt before he could make that accusation. His father had certainly been in receipt of a large sum of money the previous year.

Sterling knew that Marshall had returned home from Waterloo with a bullet wound to his arm, which had severely incapacitated him for several weeks after his return.

A part of Sterling sincerely hoped Plymouth had been able to inflict that wound before the other man struck him down with his sword!

Finally given leave to ride again, Marshall had unfortunately fallen from his horse and broken his neck.

All of which would have allowed him little opportunity to use his ill-gotten gains to set up a separate household for himself, his wife, and son, away from his father's influence.

Was it possible Elizabeth might even have been desperate enough to escape her father-in-law's household to have been complicit in Plymouth's murder?

Oh, not in those woods at Waterloo, but because men had been known to do much worse things than murder in order to gain favor with a conniving woman. A woman who was perhaps refusing to live under her father-in-law's roof for a moment longer than she had to?

Was Elizabeth, beneath that air of serenity and ethereal beauty, such a woman?

If so, then her husband's death had left her even more under her father-in-law's unpleasant rule, with little chance of escape.

"The Earl of Whitlow and Lady Elizabeth Marshall, Your Grace," Rogers announced. For the length of their visit, he had taken on the role of butler as well as valet.

Sterling turned to greet his guests, knowing his time for brooding

speculation must now come to an end.

He ceased thinking at all when the sight of Elizabeth, her golden hair swept up in a cluster of curls, and wearing a simple, high-necked, long-sleeved gown of dark gray silk with only those pearl earbobs as added adornment, was enough to take his breath away.

Elizabeth was very aware of the way in which her father-in-law was quivering with rage as he escorted her into the Duke of Bristol's blue salon. She also knew the reason for it.

She had spent the afternoon at the beach with Christopher, enjoying their usual entertainment of shell-seeking and building of sandcastles. She had then taken tea in the nursery with him, before assisting with his bath, reading him a story, and then sitting with him until he fell asleep. Something she did every evening.

After which, Elizabeth had deliberately contrived to be late in coming downstairs from her bedchamber, already wearing a silk cloak the same color as her gown when she joined the earl as he impatiently paced the entrance hall of Whitlow Grange. He made no effort to hide his irritation at being forced to wait for her, once again grasping her arm, the one that was already bruised, the moment she reached the bottom of the staircase, before dragging her outside to the waiting carriage.

Whether the earl believed he had browbeaten her into obeying him, or he simply believed she was too stupid to dare go against his instruction, at no time during their journey to the neighboring estate had he troubled himself to check on what gown she was wearing beneath the cloak.

His fury a few minutes ago, once Bristol's butler had taken her cloak and Whitlow had been able to see the demure style of her dark gray gown, had been palpable.

His muttered threat as the two of them followed the butler across the lit entrance hall, "You will answer to me later for your disobedience," had sent a shiver of apprehension down the length of Elizabeth's spine.

Despite having threatened to do so many times, the earl had not yet administered physical chastisement for her behavior, real or imagined. But the baleful glitter in his eyes now indicated that situation might possibly change the moment they arrived home this evening.

Elizabeth wondered, and not for the first time, how her mild-mannered and attentive husband could ever have been related to such an unpleasant

man.

She had known, of course, that the earl would be upset she had not carried out his instructions in regard to the gown she wore this evening.

But how much more upset would he have become if she had decided to wear a gown that left her arms bared, at least, and so revealed the myriad bruises on the paleness of her skin where his fingers had earlier dug so cruelly into that tender flesh?

Bruises which had no doubt been added to when he dragged her out to the carriage earlier this evening.

Bruises that, if seen, would lead to questions and no doubt open speculation from the earl as to how they so perfectly resembled the indentations of four fingers and a thumb.

In any case, Elizabeth considered her defiance well worth whatever the price she might have to pay when she saw the open admiration and approval for her appearance in the Duke of Bristol's crystalline green gaze as he lifted and bowed low over her lace-gloved hand. "You are looking ravishingly beautiful this evening, Lady Elizabeth," he murmured huskily.

"Thank you." Much as she would have liked to return the compliment—the duke looked devilishly handsome in black evening clothes and white linen—Elizabeth did not wish to add to the gleam of sly satisfaction she could see in the eyes of her watchful father-in-law.

Instead of releasing her hand, the duke tucked it securely into the crook of his arm before turning to face the older man. "Your appearance appears a little liverish tonight, Whitlow," he commented in a hard voice.

Elizabeth caught her lips between her teeth to stop herself from laughing at how the earl's expression changed to one of indignant fury at the bluntly delivered insult.

Adding to that liverish appearance.

"I assure you, I am in perfect health, Bristol," the older man bit out irritably.

The duke gave an inclination of his head. "If you say so."

"I do," the earl snapped. "No doubt, as has proven to be the case with my own son, I shall outlive many men far younger than me."

The duke's brow lowered to a scowl. "Indeed?"

"I—"

"Oh, what a beautiful piano," Elizabeth admired lightly as she deliberately cut into the increasingly tense conversation between the two

men. The earl's last comment even seemed to have been bordering on a threat of some kind. "Do you play, Your Grace?"

He turned toward her. "Unfortunately not, but I have made a point of installing a piano in each of my homes, as well as ensuring they are always tuned. I have a cousin, Gwen, whom I have only become acquainted with in recent years, but who very much enjoys playing whenever she and her husband visit me."

Elizabeth felt curious as to why Bristol had only recently met his cousin.

But the earl spoke before she was able to voice that curiosity. "Would that be the cousin who is married to a parson?" Whitlow made no effort to hide his scorn.

Bristol's gaze turned glacial. "To my knowledge, I have only the one cousin."

Elizabeth winced as the conversation once again deteriorated, and rapidly, into one of challenge, if not outright insults. Indeed, she wondered at Bristol having invited them to dine with him at all when he obviously had no liking for the earl.

She refused to believe such a haughtily toplofty gentleman as the Duke of Bristol was genuinely interested in her. No doubt he was only using that pretense of interest as another way to enjoy baiting the older man.

A supposition which must surely bring Bristol's honor into question, when his reputation said he valued honor above all else?

He certainly seemed to harbor a genuine affection for his cousin Gwen, despite her marriage rendering her as being of far lower social status than he was.

Elizabeth had also heard that the friendship between the Ruthless Dukes was of such a steadfast nature, they had withdrawn even more from Society after one of them had been killed during the battle at Waterloo the previous year.

Two things that surely confirmed Bristol valued friendship and family.

Then why did it seem, at times, as if he might be flirting with her?

A gentleman who was normally socially cold and remote and known for never flirting with any woman.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sterling knew within seconds of looking at Elizabeth again that all of his earlier self-chastisement had been a waste of his time. She really was, without a single doubt, the most beautiful and desirable woman he had ever set eyes upon.

And it was damned inconvenient that he felt that way when he was here to ascertain if Thomas Whitlow had murdered Plymouth, not to seduce and fuck the man's widow!

But his aroused cock didn't care about any of that. That, it seemed, only wanted what it wanted.

And *he*, Sterling reminded himself forcefully, was in control of his own body, including his cock.

Wasn't he?

Sterling was instantly irritated by the fact that even that little voice of doubt had dared to enter his thoughts. But how could it be any other when his cock had engorged the moment Elizabeth walked into the room?

Surely, the reason he felt this raging lust for Elizabeth Marshall had to be because it had been some months since he last found sexual relief in the willing body of a lady of the demimonde? That he was simply in need of a good fuck?

He decided to ignore the fact that he could not recall ever feeling a *raging*

lust for any woman before now.

Because no matter the intensity of his desire for her, Sterling needed to be sure of the innocence or guilt of Elizabeth's husband before he acted upon that emotion. If Marshall should prove guilty, then Sterling also wished to know what Elizabeth's role had been, if any, in that despicable deed.

But for this evening, at least, his lungs and his senses were filled with the scent and sight of her. Her unique feminine perfume. The exquisite luster to her skin. The beauty of those violet eyes. The fullness of her sensual and moist lips—

Rogers's appearance in the doorway drew Sterling's attention, putting an end to the torment of his inner thoughts.

The other man gave a slight nod as indication dinner was ready to be served.

Sterling had thought it best to instruct Rogers they would be eating in the formal dining room this evening rather than the smaller, more intimate room reserved for family. He wouldn't want to give Whitlow the wrong idea.

But as he escorted Elizabeth down the hallway to that formal room, held back the chair for her himself, and then pushed it forward as she became seated, Sterling found himself cursing the fact that she was sitting so far away from him. The two men were sitting at either end of the twelve-foot-long table, with Elizabeth placed exactly in the middle on Sterling's right side, as was fitting for a female acquaintance.

Except the very last thing Sterling wished to look at all evening was the Earl of Whitlow.

Unfortunately, good manners dictated that he must at least try to make conversation with the other man. Which he painstakingly did, on the subjects of horseflesh, the unseasonable weather, and their neighboring estates.

The fact that Whitlow slurped and smacked his lips noisily through the soup course, then spoke with his mouth full when they moved on to the fish—having belched and farted his way through both without apology—made it extremely difficult for Sterling to keep up that politeness.

In between that eating and slurping, the earl made constant comments to Elizabeth cautioning her on how much she ate as she was in danger of becoming fat.

Sterling had never heard such nonsense, and he pitied Elizabeth for having to live in the same house and eat her meals with this abominable creature. It was obvious, despite the earl's comments regarding Elizabeth's

family, she was by far the better mannered of the two.

Sterling was feeling slightly ill from being unable to completely avoid seeing Whitlow's yellowed teeth—the few that he had—masticate each mouthful of food from the huge pile he had asked to be served to him as Rogers circled the table with each of the meats and vegetables which had followed the fish.

In contrast, Elizabeth ate sparingly and never quite finished any of those tiny portions.

Sterling leaned forward slightly to gain her attention. “I believe you will enjoy the dessert I have chosen for us.”

“I don't like or eat puddings,” the earl answered before Elizabeth was able to do so.

Sterling narrowed his eyes as he looked down the table at the other man. “In that case, you are at liberty to retire to the library and partake of brandy and cigars whilst Lady Elizabeth and I enjoy ours.” He couldn't quite manage to hide the edge of impatience in his voice.

Because, quite frankly, after spending two hours in the man's obnoxious company, Sterling didn't give a damn what Whitlow did or did not *like*.

Nor did he care whether it was altogether proper for him and Elizabeth to be left alone together in the dining room.

Elizabeth held her breath as she waited for the earl to answer the duke, knowing her father-in-law would be torn between the impropriety of leaving his widowed daughter-in-law alone in the company of a single gentleman and the possibility of what might transpire, hopefully in his favor, by his doing so. Especially when that gentleman was a duke.

It seemed speculation won out over impropriety, as the earl threw his soiled napkin onto the table and rose noisily to his feet. “Do you keep any interesting picture books in your library, Bristol?” he prompted suggestively.

Elizabeth was at a loss as to know what he meant until she saw the lecherous gleam in the earl's eyes and the lascivious way in which he ran his moist tongue between fleshy lips. She immediately felt the heat of embarrassment enter her cheeks.

The duke frowned as he looked down his nose at the older man. “I am not

in the habit of keeping pornographic pictures in any of my libraries.”

“Then where do you keep them?” Whitlow prompted curiously.

The duke’s brow lowered even further. “I do not own any pornographic pictures. And neither should you,” he added in disapproval, “when you regularly have a small child residing in one of your homes.”

Elizabeth felt a warmth of gratitude that Bristol had chastised her father-in-law on this subject. She knew her own disapproval would have been met with curses and dismissal.

“Nor should you be discussing such a subject in front of a lady.” Bristol gave Elizabeth a tight and apologetic smile as he continued to criticize the older man.

The earl snorted. “Show me the lady, and I might consider not doing so.”

The duke’s nostrils flared, his pale gaze becoming flinty. The twitching of his facial muscles and thinned lips seemed to imply he was in the throes of an inner battle with himself as he decided whether or not he should upbraid the Earl of Whitlow and eject the older man from his home.

Elizabeth wondered if that dilemma might exist inside Bristol, because he knew if he asked the earl to leave, then she would have to go with him.

She immediately chastised herself for making too much of the kindness the duke had so far shown her. He did not know her, and she did not know him, and there was every reason to think the two of them would never meet socially again after this evening. As such, Bristol could have no reason to base any of his decisions upon whether or not they might affect her.

However, that warning to herself did not stop her thoughts from wandering, to imagining what it would be like to be desired by such a gentleman.

The Duke of Bristol was not only devilishly handsome, but he seemed to be romantically regal as he sat at the head of the table. The candlelight gave a midnight sheen to the darkness of his hair, the harshness of his patrician features appearing as if carved from alabaster.

Those pale green eyes now met hers in what seemed like apology before he returned his attention to the earl. “I believe, for arts’ sake, you might find an original copy of the Kama Sutra by Vatsyayana on the top shelf of the third bookcase.”

“For arts’ sake, aye?” the other man taunted knowingly.

Bristol nodded stiffly. “Lady Elizabeth and I will join you in the library when we have finished our dessert.”

“No need to rush,” the earl assured as he walked jauntily toward the door. “I’ve heard about the Kama Sutra, but never seen an original copy.”

“Rogers will show you to the library.” Bristol nodded to the butler, that gentleman having just returned with the dessert.

The earl’s humor faded as he turned to Elizabeth. “Make sure you don’t overindulge or misbehave in some other way in my absence, gel.” He didn’t wait for her to respond before exiting the room.

Because he knew, Elizabeth acknowledged heavily, having already warned her that she would answer to him later for her disobedience in regard to the gown she was wearing this evening, that she would not wish to do anything else this evening that might add to that punishment.

Sterling waited only long enough for Rogers to serve the dessert, and then shut the dining room door behind him after he and the earl had left the room, before rising agitatedly to his feet.

His hands clenched as he paced the room. “How can you even bear to be in the company of such an ill-mannered and disgusting creature, let alone share a home with him?”

“The answer to both your questions is a simple one, Your Grace,” Elizabeth said softly. “It is that I can do no other when the terms of my husband’s will leave me no choice in the matter if I wish to remain living with my son. I will withstand anything to be allowed to do that,” she added in a hard voice.

“Even live with a man as grotesquely disgusting as the Earl of Whitlow?”

She nodded. “Even that, yes.”

“Did your husband dislike you?”

She gave a start. “I beg your pardon?”

Sterling glared his impatience. “Your maternal feelings are to be commended, madam, but surely your husband could not have been blind to his father’s...coarseness and ill-treatment of you.”

Her lashes lowered to cover those magnificent violet eyes. “I do not think he was, no.”

“Then why in hell did he— I apologize.” He abruptly broke off.

Truth was, Sterling wanted to continue to curse and swear. Worse, he

wished to hit something. Someone. A *specific* someone.

It frustrated him enormously that Thomas Marshall had placed his wife in such an untenable situation after his death. She was known to have come from an impoverished family, and as such, their social situations were vastly different. But Marshall had still chosen to marry her, and not because she was expecting his child. Their son, Christopher, had not been born until a full year after their elopement.

Sterling made a mental note to send instructions to Stanley to look more closely into the matter of the contents of Lord Marshall's will.

His thoughts ceased as he glanced sharply down to where he felt the lightness of fingers on his arm through the material of his jacket. A barely felt touch—Elizabeth's touch—that nonetheless seared his flesh and caused the blood to course hotly through his veins.

"Do not concern yourself on my behalf, Your Grace," Elizabeth pleaded softly. "Until his arrival a week ago, I had managed to escape the earl's company for almost the three months of us residing in Cornwall. I am sure I shall manage it for several more months once he becomes bored and returns to London."

Sterling's nostrils flared. "And do you intend to play the same game of hide-and-seek for the next seventeen years, until your son reaches his majority?"

Her expression became bleak. "If necessary, yes."

Sterling hated even the thought that such a young, vibrant, and beautiful woman should have to live this way. "Perhaps you will remarry and escape your father-in-law's clutches that way?" Sterling realized he hated the thought of *that* even more than her continuing to live under Whitlow's roof.

Unless the gentleman Elizabeth married was him.

Surely he could not be thinking in such terms on so short an acquaintance?

Perhaps not, but the thought of Elizabeth married to another man was certainly abhorrent to him.

Dear God, how did any man survive wanting a woman as much as he now desired Elizabeth? When just her close proximity, the light touch of her warm and gloved hand through his clothing, could make his heart pound and his cock throb?

A delicate blush colored Elizabeth's cheeks as she looked at him. As if she were able to read his thoughts.

Lord, Sterling hoped not, because at this moment, he was contemplating bending Elizabeth over the dining room table, throwing up her skirts, finding the slit in her drawers, and releasing his erection. He could even imagine the deep sigh of heartfelt relief he would give as he thrust his cock into the wet heat of her pussy from behind.

His cock leaked precum into his drawers as he almost *felt* the walls of Elizabeth's channel closing about his hardness. Imagined the way her sheath would suck his cock deeper, and then deeper still, as he grasped hold of her hips and began to thrust wildly inside her until they were both gasping and groaning from the fierceness of their combined release.

Sterling had bedded many ladies of the demimonde during the past sixteen years. Those ladies were always beautiful, always gracious, their lovemaking sensual, and they always gave the *appearance* of reaching a sexual climax. But Sterling had never fooled himself into believing those responses were genuine. Or that he wouldn't be forgotten the moment the next gentleman paid the necessary price and took his place between the lady's thighs.

There was something about Elizabeth that hinted at a deep sensuality. A carefully guarded flame in the depths of those violet eyes which told him *her* response to physical pleasure would be completely genuine.

God—and the Ruthless Dukes—forgive him, but he couldn't withstand the temptation of her a moment longer!

CHAPTER FIVE

Elizabeth was taken completely by surprise when the duke, after uttering a low and pained groan, suddenly lowered his head so that his lips might take possession of hers.

She made no effort to pull away.

Not because his arms, so tight about her waist, prevented her from doing so.

Or because her knees felt so weak, she feared she might collapse completely if she attempted to move so much as an inch.

No, the reason Elizabeth remained a prisoner within Bristol's arms, her face raised as she returned the passion of his lips against hers, was because she *wanted* him to kiss her.

She had been wanting that, wanting *him*, since the moment she saw him striding to her defense in the village earlier today.

His lips left hers to travel the length of her throat. "Dear God, Elizabeth," he murmured throatily. "I have never before desired a woman with the same fierceness I now desire you." He lifted his head, his hands cradling either side of her face as he gazed down at her with that unrestrained hunger gleaming in those pale green eyes. "Tell me you want me too," he encouraged gruffly.

Elizabeth *did* want him.

It had been ten months since Thomas's death, even longer than that since

they'd had sexual congress together. Thomas had returned from Waterloo injured and, on doctor's orders, unable to withstand the rigors of lovemaking. Indeed, the day Thomas had ridden out on his favorite stallion, the doctor having now cleared him for all activities, would have been the first night the married couple had made love in an age. Instead, Thomas had been thrown from his horse and hit his head on a large rock, breaking his neck. The doctor said he would have died instantly.

Was it disrespectful to her husband's memory that Elizabeth was now aroused and wanted Sterling Bishop, the Duke of Bristol?

She looked up at the duke searchingly, easily noting the fire burning in the depths of his pale eyes, his cheeks flushed, his lips parted and slightly swollen from their previous kiss.

"Yes," she answered softly. "Yes, I want you."

"Sterling. I wish you to call me Sterling," he explained when she looked at him questioningly.

"I want you too, Sterling." She said the name cautiously, never having dreamed she would ever share a single moment of intimacy with this haughtily aloof gentleman, let alone be invited to address him with such familiarity. "Sterling, Sterling, Sterling," she repeated giddily, her hands resting on his broad shoulders as she stared up at him joyfully.

"Yes!" he grated with satisfaction before he once again claimed her lips with his own.

Sterling's lips tasted, bit, *devoured* Elizabeth's with a fierceness of heat many would never guess lay hidden behind that cold exterior. That Elizabeth had initially doubted.

But she had seen it clearly this evening in the fire in Sterling's gaze every time he so much as looked at her.

It was now pure ecstasy to be kissed and held after months of having shared no physical closeness, except hugs from Christopher. Especially so when it was with a man who was obviously experienced in the giving and taking of pleasure.

Sterling's long fingers caressed the length of her spine as the two of them continued to kiss, igniting a desire that was centered at her core before flaring hotly through the rest of her body.

Elizabeth's hands had moved up from Sterling's shoulders to touch his hair, her fingers becoming entangled in the dark locks at his nape.

His breath was hot against her lips when he broke the kiss for a second

time. “I want to make love to all of you, Elizabeth.”

She knew that, could feel the hard and pulsing heat of Sterling’s member pressing against her abdomen.

So much for her having assumed this man would be as cold in the bedchamber as he was out of it. She could see the depth of his passion for her, almost a living flame, in the depths of those pale green eyes and the flush in his hard cheeks.

But there was nothing either of them could do about that when they were standing in the middle of the formal dining room of Sterling’s home, with her father-in-law just feet away in another room within the same house.

“I want to release your breasts and suckle your nipples.” Sterling groaned his frustration with Elizabeth’s high-necked gown. “Throw up your skirts and feast on the nectar between your thighs.” He raised a hand to cup one side of her face as he gazed at her searchingly. “Would you allow me to do that, Elizabeth? Would you permit me to touch and kiss you wherever I wished? Your breasts? Your cunny? Your bottom?”

“Yes,” she breathed with a longing to know the pleasure of every intimate caress and touch those questions suggested Sterling would enjoy sharing with her.

“When?” he demanded abruptly.

Elizabeth frowned. “I...I don’t know.” Her father-in-law might not like or approve of her, but since his arrival a week ago, he had kept note of all her comings and goings to and from the house. “The only time I am allowed out alone is when I take Christopher to the beach in the afternoons.” She winced as she realized that would not do at all for the things Sterling was suggesting they do together.

And perhaps she was being a little *too* impetuous in agreeing so readily to being a part of such intimacies with a gentleman she had only met for the first time that morning.

Perhaps?

There was no *perhaps* about it!

Was she so starved for affection, for the warmth of another’s arms about her, to feel *desired*, that she was allowing herself to be seduced by the first presentable gentleman to show her the least kindness or want?

Sterling wasn’t just *any* gentleman. He was the haughty and toplofty gentleman known as the Duke of Bristol!

Dear God, for all she knew, the duke could be tempting her at the behest

of her father-in-law, to trick her into revealing how deeply she enjoyed physical pleasure so that Whitlow might later use that to take Christopher away from her—

No, Elizabeth could not and would not believe that. Not just because Sterling disliked Whitlow intensely, but because he was also too arrogant a gentleman to act under any man's instruction but his own.

Even so, and despite the inner conviction telling her she *did* know this man, that she had always known him, Elizabeth also knew she would be foolish to put too much store in whatever this was between the two of them.

She was a widow still in mourning—just.

Bristol, along with the other Ruthless Dukes, made no secret of his aversion toward the married state.

Their stations in life were so far apart as to be farcical.

All of which meant Bristol's intentions toward her were not serious, and the most there could ever be between them would be an illicit affair.

An affair that, if her father-in-law were to learn of it, would enable Whitlow to declare her an unfit mother to Christopher, before he threw her out of his home and took complete control of his grandson.

She refused to provide Whitlow with any ammunition he might use against her to enable him to do that.

Sterling had no idea what Elizabeth was thinking, but he was certain they were not happy thoughts as he watched the light of desire fade from her eyes, to be replaced by trepidation and then suspicion.

The latter he disliked intensely. "I will not allow any harm to come to you —" He broke off when she gave a skeptical snort. "You doubt my word?"

The skepticism remained in her expression as she pulled out of his arms and stepped away from him. "I would doubt the word of any man who promised such things when we have known each other for only a matter of hours."

Strange, it now seemed to Sterling as if he had always known Elizabeth. That she was, in fact, an integral part of him he hadn't known was missing for all these years.

But he could see by the coolness in her expression and the wariness in her

violet gaze that she didn't feel that same innate connection to him.

Or, even if she did, she refused to acknowledge it. Which was just as bad as her not knowing of it. Worse, perhaps, because it meant she was making a conscious decision to ignore their connection.

Sterling straightened. "I will be staying at Bristol Manor for some days yet."

She nodded abruptly. "No doubt my father-in-law will wish to invite you to dinner before you leave."

"I do not have to accept, if you would rather I did not."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, please do not refuse. If you do, he will know you did so because of me."

Sterling frowned. "Because of you?"

She nodded. "Because I have done something so unacceptable this evening, it has caused you to want to avoid my company in future."

"That is nonsense," he dismissed impatiently.

"I only wish it were." She sighed. "Unfortunately, my father-in-law takes great delight in blaming me for everything in his life which does not go as he wishes it to. I am inclined to think that at the moment that will include the continuation of his acquaintance with you."

"An acquaintance which exists only *because* of you," Sterling assured. "I have always avoided Whitlow's company in the past."

Elizabeth breathed in deeply. "That is very warming to know."

"It is the truth."

Her lips tilted into a rueful half smile. "I have a feeling you rarely speak otherwise."

Unless he was on a secret mission to discover who had killed his friend Plymouth.

Sterling scowled darkly at the thought of Elizabeth's reaction to knowing that. "Does the earl's displeasure with you ever include physical chastisement?"

She avoided meeting his gaze. "I cannot talk to you of such things, Your Grace."

"You will—" Sterling ceased speaking as, having grasped hold of one of Elizabeth's arms, she gave a pained gasp. He instantly released her before demanding, "Elizabeth?"

She kept her eyes averted. "The earl has extremely bony fingers that I am sure he has no idea leave a bruise or two on my skin after he has grabbed my

arm. As he did earlier today.”

Sterling now knew why Elizabeth had chosen to wear a long-sleeved gown even though summer fashion dictated otherwise. “Why did he have hold of you in the first place?” Whitlow didn’t strike him as a man who would ever offer physical touch as a comfort.

Her smile was dismissive. “I believe it had something to do with him insisting I wear a low-necked gown this evening so you could ‘ogle my titties’ if you ‘felt so inclined,’” she added bleakly.

“And yet you chose to do the opposite.” The gown she was wearing was buttoned up to the throat

“Yes.”

“For which you will pay the price?”

“No doubt.”

“And yet you did it anyway.”

Elizabeth lifted her head, the expression in her eyes one of resignation. “I cannot live my life in a constant state of fear that something I do or say might incur the earl’s displeasure. Not when in the past he has been known to find fault even with the way I breathe. Or possibly that I am breathing at all when his son and heir no longer is,” she added heavily.

“He has said as much to you?”

“That, and much more.”

“Elizabeth—”

“I believe it is time we joined the earl in the library,” she cut in lightly.

“We have not yet eaten dessert,” he reminded.

“Perhaps not, but I believe we have both partaken of enough forbidden delight for this evening.” A blush colored her cheeks.

Sterling’s jaw tightened. “I will be...concerned as to your welfare, until I am able to see you again.”

Her gaze became quizzical. “I have survived three and twenty years without your concern, Your Grace.”

“Barely,” he bit out. “And whilst you may continue to address me by my title when we are in the company of others, I insist you call me Sterling when we are alone.”

“You insist?” she teased.

“I do, yes—” He broke off and turned toward the door as it was thrown open noisily.

From the flush evident on the earl’s cheeks, he had imbibed far too much

of Sterling's brandy. Or—heaven forbid—the flush was of a much more carnal nature and the man was aroused after perusing the drawings in the Kama Sutra.

“Time we were leaving, daughter-in-law,” the earl stated without preamble. “You will dine with us sometime this week, Bristol?” he added as he seemed to remember his manners toward his host.

“Tomorrow evening suits me.” Sterling's deliberately autocratic tone brooked no objection.

The earl's brows rose in surprise. “So soon?”

“Too soon?” Sterling challenged.

“Not at all.” Whitlow gave Elizabeth another of those sly glances. “I am sure we will both look forward to seeing you again tomorrow evening.”

Sterling could only hope that by accepting the dinner invitation so readily, he had shown the earl enough enthusiasm for more of Elizabeth's company.

Enough, Sterling hoped, so as to save her from whatever punishment Whitlow intended inflicting upon Elizabeth for defying him in regard to the gown she wore this evening.

Sterling would much prefer she didn't have to live in constant fear of incurring that bastard's temper at all.

But, even though the desire between himself and Elizabeth was so very real, he knew she didn't trust him with all her secrets yet.

Her distrust of him would be all the deeper if she knew the only reason Sterling had come to Cornwall was to discern whether or not her husband had been a murderer.

It *had* been Sterling's only reason for being here, he inwardly corrected.

That had changed the first moment he had seen Elizabeth in the street earlier today.

“Send your maid to my bedchamber immediately,” the earl instructed Elizabeth harshly. The two of them had entered Whitlow Grange and were making their way up the stairs together.

The journey home had been made in complete silence, a relieved one on Elizabeth's part, the earl seeming to be lost in his own thoughts. The butler

had met them at the door and taken the earl's cloak and hat, but had now retreated back to the servants' quarters, having been dismissed for the night.

"Peggy...?" Elizabeth made no effort to hide her surprise at the earl's request as she came to a halt at the top of the stairs.

"I believe that is the name of your maid, yes," the earl sneered.

"What do you want with her?" she prompted sharply.

"The same as I have been taking from her this past year. The willing hole between her legs," he added when Elizabeth remained puzzled.

She felt the color drain from her cheeks. "You and Peggy?" she pressed for clarity.

"Yes." The earl snorted. "Do not look so shocked, daughter-in-law."

She shook her head. "I cannot believe Peggy can be a willing participant." The earl was neither handsome nor young, and Peggy was very pretty and not yet twenty.

"No?" Whitlow taunted. "Then you would be wrong."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "I do not believe you."

The earl's eyes glittered with fury. "I do not require that you believe or disbelieve, only that you do as you are told."

Elizabeth was trembling inside even at the thought of defying her father-in-law, a man she knew to be cold and vicious. But neither could she see Peggy being bullied or forced into a relationship with a man so much older than her.

"I need to ask Peggy if she is agreeable—"

"You will do no such thing." Whitlow's voice thundered around the cavernous entrance hall.

"I must—" Elizabeth didn't even see, let alone have time to prepare herself as the earl's fist hit the side of her head.

The force of the blow overbalanced her, and she immediately reached out in a desperate attempt to grasp hold of Whitlow's arm to stop herself from falling.

Her eyes widened in disbelief as, instead of helping her, he deliberately stepped back beyond that reach. There was an expression of deep satisfaction on his face as he watched her lose her footing and fall backward down the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

Elizabeth hurt everywhere. More than she could ever remember hurting before. Not even Christopher's birth had been this painful, and it had been a long and difficult one.

She didn't think any bones were broken, but the many bruises on her arms, torso, and legs had now turned from an initial deep red to a dark purple. Ironically, those bruises would have been so much worse if she hadn't been wearing the long-sleeved gown.

The bruises had been inflicted on her when she tumbled over and over down the long staircase, hitting many of the stairs themselves as well as the banister beside them. Her head had struck the slate floor when she landed at the bottom, and the world had turned completely black.

Sometime during the night, she'd regained consciousness to find herself still lying at the bottom of the stairs in the cold and darkness, and in the sure knowledge her father-in-law had left her there. In all probability without even checking whether she still lived or had died. She had no doubt, given a choice, he was hoping for the latter.

Tears immediately scalded her eyes before falling hotly down her cheeks, and she cried the tears of self-pity she had previously refused to shed regarding Whitlow's cruel and callous behavior toward her since Thomas died.

Except crying hurt her even more than lying still. Nor were those tears of any assistance in solving the dilemma as to how she was to remove herself from the hallway before the servants began to move about, readying the house for when the earl came downstairs for his breakfast.

It was distressing enough that her father-in-law had left her like this without having to suffer there being any witnesses to her humiliation.

Elizabeth's attempt to stand proved impossible when a sharp pain in her left ankle caused her legs to buckle beneath her. Instead, she managed to sit on her bottom and use her arms to drag herself slowly up each step.

Every inch of progress causing her excruciating pain, but she finally managed to reach the hallway above, and then crawled to her bedchamber. Once in her bedchamber, she was able to pull herself up and slide carefully beneath the covers before unconsciousness claimed her for a second time.

When she woke again, it was daylight, the bedchamber was frigidly cold, and a concerned Peggy was standing beside the bed wringing her hands in obvious indecision as to what she should do next.

Both women burst into floods of tears the moment their gazes met.

"How did this happen?" Peggy finally sniffled.

"I fell down the stairs."

Her maid gasped. "You fell, or you was pushed?" she prompted shrewdly.

Elizabeth winced, even that tiny movement of her facial muscles causing her discomfort. "It was more a case of losing my balance after the earl punched me in the face." There was no point in trying to cover up what Whitlow had done now that she knew of his despicable behavior with Peggy. "The bastard left me lying there, not caring whether I lived or died," she admitted.

The maid frowned her dismay. "However did you get back up the stairs?"

"Slowly and painfully," Elizabeth acknowledged. "I am so sorry for what you have been made to suffer." Her own physical bruises would fade, but she doubted Peggy would ever be able to forget what the earl had done to her this past year.

"He said he would hurt you or Christopher if I ever told you what he demanded of me or I dared to refuse him," Peggy revealed shakily.

"You should have told me anyway." Elizabeth tried not to sound as if she was being reproachful. "I would have at least done my best to help you find other employment."

Peggy gave a fierce shake of her head. "I couldn't bear the thought of leaving you and Christopher alone with that man. I was so worried about you last night after the earl told me you didn't need me, that you had gone to the library to collect a book but would undress yourself when you came up to bed. I said I needed to check on you anyway, but he would have none of it. I had thought I might be able to come to you once the earl was asleep, but the devil locked the bedchamber door and put the key beneath his pillow." She released an uneven breath. "He finally allowed me to leave a few minutes ago, and I came straight here." Tears glistened in her eyes. "You might have died last night and no one the wiser!"

Elizabeth gave one of Peggy's work-roughened hands a reassuring squeeze. "I am badly bruised, but I do not believe anything is broken." It would be a miracle if it wasn't. But Peggy was already distressed enough. There was no need to add to that suffering.

Elizabeth had always been grateful for Peggy's genuine affection, knowing the young girl's only family was an older brother, and he was currently in prison.

"How long...?" Elizabeth prompted huskily, devastated at now knowing the price the young girl had paid for her loyalty to her and Christopher.

A blush entered Peggy's cheeks. "The first time was about eleven months ago. I was ever so relieved when we left London to come here three months ago. Then the earl joined us here last week, and it all started again."

And Elizabeth hadn't had so much as an inkling of what was happening to her young and pretty maid during the nighttime hours. If she had thought about it at all, she had presumed Peggy to be in her own bedchamber somewhere else in the house.

Peggy swallowed. "Usually he only wants me to...to suck his cock, but last night, it seemed as if he really was possessed by the devil. But it was nothing like what you've suffered," she choked out emotionally. She looked at the bruises on Elizabeth's face and neck, which was all that was visible when she still wore her gown as she lay beneath the bedcovers. "He truly is a monster."

Elizabeth's fingers tightened. "Did he hurt you last night?" She had seen the wildness in the earl's eyes as he watched her fall down the stairs.

Peggy shook her head. "He was rougher than he's ever been, but as long as I didn't fight him, he was happy to take his own pleasure and then leave me be."

Could it have been the book the earl looked through in the duke's library that had so incited Whitlow's libido the previous evening that he hadn't even attempted to hide from Elizabeth that he was forcing himself on her young maid?

Elizabeth shook her head. "I do not believe I am capable of going anywhere for a day or two, but you must feel free to leave today, if you wish it."

"I'm not going anywhere without you," the younger woman stated firmly.

To say Elizabeth was relieved not to lose her only ally was understating the situation. But that still didn't change the unsuitable fact of her father-in-law, a man aged in his fifties, demanding sexual favors from her maid, who was only nineteen.

Peggy straightened determinedly. "We're *both* going to leave here and go back to London, taking Christopher and Mary with us, the moment you feel well enough to travel."

Traveling in a rocking and bumpy carriage with her body bruised from head to toe was the last thing Elizabeth felt like doing. But if they continued to stay here, she knew that she wasn't currently well enough to prevent Whitlow from demanding sexual satisfaction from Peggy whenever he felt like it.

That, she could not and would not accept.

Whether she was well enough or not, Elizabeth knew she had to get them all away from here as soon as possible. She refused to allow her father-in-law to continue molesting Peggy. She also knew that she was unlikely to survive another "accident" like the one she'd had the previous evening.

With that in mind, she now instructed Peggy to pack a small bag for each of them, with a quiet word to Mary to do the same for herself and Christopher. They would have the rest of their belongings sent on to them once they knew where they were going.

"One of the grooms is sweet on me," Peggy confided. "If I ask, I'm sure he'll ready a coach and drive us back to London tonight."

"He will lose his position in the earl's employ if he does that," Elizabeth cautioned worriedly, unwilling to involve any more innocent people in this dilemma.

"Jimmy wants to leave anyway," Peggy dismissed. "He doesn't like the earl, for obvious reasons, and he's been trying to persuade me to go back to London with him. His uncle owns his own stable, and he can work with him

there for a while until he finds another position.”

Elizabeth was gratified that someone had Peggy’s best interests at heart. It also sounded as if Jimmy had honorable intentions toward Peggy. If so, Elizabeth would do all in her power to encourage the alliance. She would miss having Peggy as her maid, but the young woman’s welfare must come before her own.

Elizabeth’s only regret was that she would not see Sterling again before she left.

Sterling, knowing nothing of the events of the previous night which were forcing Elizabeth into taking the drastic step of escaping in the night, would arrive at Whitlow Grange this evening, fully expecting Elizabeth to join him and the Earl of Whitlow for dinner. No doubt the disgusting man who was her father-in-law would have a perfectly believable—and untruthful—excuse as to why Elizabeth was unable to join them.

Whatever happened, by morning, Elizabeth and her small entourage had to be gone from here.

“Where is Eliz—Lady Elizabeth?” Sterling corrected when he saw the speculation in his host’s pale and shrewd eyes as the two men walked down the drafty hallway together to the formal dining room in Whitlow Grange. Elizabeth’s presence was noticeably absent.

Whitlow shrugged. “I did tell you that she is often overwhelmed with grief and feels unable to mingle socially.”

“You are referring to a lingering grief over the loss of her husband, your son?”

“Of course,” the older man confirmed. “Although I believe on this occasion, her absence is due to the arrival of her womanly courses.”

Sterling’s nostrils flared with distaste at the mere thought of this crass and disgusting man even being aware of what time of the month Elizabeth’s womanly cycle occurred.

His own feelings of disappointment were severe after spending a night and day anticipating seeing and being with Elizabeth again this evening.

But perhaps Elizabeth did not feel the same eagerness to see him again when he had been so forward in his attentions toward her the previous

evening?

There was no doubting that he had been passionate and demanding, but Elizabeth hadn't seemed overwhelmed or apprehensive at the time. But that didn't rule out the possibility she had regretted allowing that intimacy once she returned to Whitlow Grange. That she might even have felt guilty about it, once alone and able to think of her dead husband.

Whatever the reason for her absence Sterling's disappointment was so deep, he seriously considered telling Whitlow he suddenly felt indisposed himself and would not be staying for dinner after all.

He would have done so immediately if not for the fact Whitlow was sure to then realize the real reason for his hasty departure. He doubted giving the earl even that much insight into Sterling's desire to be with Elizabeth again would be wise. Not when he believed Whitlow was the sort of man who would use a man's weaknesses against him.

Elizabeth had become such a weakness for Sterling.

He could never remember wanting a woman in the way he wanted her. To now find himself denied spending even a few hours in her company had totally soured Sterling's temperament, resulting in Whitlow spending the evening trying to entertain a taciturn and autocratic dinner guest.

He failed miserably.

So much so that Sterling refused the offer of brandy and cigars and instead abruptly excused himself.

He paused before entering the carriage to turn and look back at the house. There was evidence of candles being alight in a room on the third floor, but he had no idea whether or not that was Elizabeth's bedchamber.

Wherever she was, he sincerely hoped she felt better soon.

Tears fell silently down Elizabeth's cheeks as she lay in bed and listened to Sterling's carriage departing.

In the same way those tears had fallen when she had heard his carriage arrive two hours earlier.

On neither occasion did she have the strength to actually leave her bed to cross the bedchamber so that she might look outside and see the man himself. No matter how much she might have longed to do so.

Having wrapped a bandage about her sprained ankle, she had made an effort during the day to play down her injuries for Christopher's sake. Mary, his nursemaid, had already told the little boy that Elizabeth had fallen down the stairs and hurt herself before she brought Christopher to her bedchamber. Initially he had burst into tears at the sight of the bruises on his mother's face and arms, but Elizabeth's reassurances that they only looked bad but didn't hurt had soon soothed him.

Even if those reassurances were a total fiction.

None of them had spoken a word to each other of their plan to leave the house and Cornwall during the night.

At least, Elizabeth hoped they would be able to do so.

They *had* to, she told herself determinedly.

Even if Elizabeth believed she hurt more now than she had this morning, after a day of playing games and reading to her young son. She hadn't been able to accompany him to the beach in the afternoon as she usually did, but he had seemed content to have the company of both Mary and Peggy instead.

During their absence at the beach, Elizabeth's father-in-law had let himself into her bedchamber without so much as attempting to knock first.

She had expected to feel fear when she next saw the earl, but instead, the predominant emotion was disgust. She again wondered how a man as kind and loving as Thomas could ever have been the son of such a selfish and contemptuous one.

Whitlow strolled confidently across the room until he stood beside the bed where she was once again resting. "Might I enquire how long you intend sulking in your rooms?"

"*Sulking?*" she repeated incredulously, pulling herself farther up the pillows even though it hurt to do so. "You calmly went to bed yesterday evening and left me lying unconscious at the foot of the staircase!"

He gave an unconcerned shrug. "And yet here you are, apparently none the worse for it."

"I am covered in bruises, my ankle is sprained, and I cannot stand without assistance." She knew that to be true because Peggy had been helping her to use the chamber pot all day. "I might have died."

The earl's nostrils flared. "It is a pity you did not."

"What did I ever do to you that you hate me so much?" Elizabeth choked.

"You eloped with my son and heir."

"I am also the mother of your grandson and heir!"

“More’s the pity.” He shook his head. “At the time, I had begun negotiations with the Duke of Norwich for Thomas to marry his youngest daughter.” He made no attempt to hide his contempt as his gaze raked over her. “Instead, Thomas eloped with the daughter of an impoverished lord.”

“We loved each other.”

“Love!” Whitlow scorned. “Thomas should have married Norwich’s daughter and kept you as his mistress.”

She winced. “You would not know love, for Thomas or anyone else, if it were to slap you in the face!”

“Perhaps not, but I do know lust,” he deliberately taunted.

Rage welled up inside Elizabeth, threatening to overflow like lava from a volcano. “I will not allow you to continue molesting my maid.”

Whitlow reached out to grasp hold of her wrist, his fingers squeezing tightly about the bruised flesh. “You really are an unsightly mess,” he told her disgustedly as tears of pain instantly filled her eyes. “And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, you can do to stop me from doing exactly as I please in my own household.”

He was wrong. She could leave. She *must* leave, and take Peggy with her, along with Christopher and Mary.

The earl dropped her arm back onto the bed. “I will make your excuses to Bristol this evening.”

Elizabeth was surprised by the lack of concern in his voice at that prospect. “I thought you wished me to encourage the duke’s attentions?”

A shrewd glitter appeared in Whitlow’s eyes. “It never pays to appear too eager when a man like Bristol is involved. Especially when it comes to women. All of the Ruthless Dukes are elusive in that area. No,” he added decisively. “I am more than happy to make your excuses this evening.” He smiled his satisfaction with the arrangement before the smile disappeared and he viewed her through narrowed eyes. “Do not think for a moment that I have forgotten your disobedience regarding the gown you wore yesterday evening. You will come to my study at ten o’clock tomorrow morning for your punishment.”

“I doubt I will be well enough,” she protested.

“I suggest you do everything in your power to ensure that you are. If I am forced to visit your bedchamber again, I will be bringing my whip with me.”

Leaving Elizabeth in no doubt that the earl meant to see her dead.

A warning to Elizabeth that no matter whether she felt well enough or

not, she had to go through with the plan to leave here during the night.
Or risk the true danger of her father-in-law succeeding in killing her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sterling had no idea what had roused him from his fitful slumber.

A noise outside, perhaps?

Or one inside?

He could not be certain it was either when he could no longer hear anything other than the usual unnatural quiet of what, after a quick glance at his pocket watch, he knew to be the very early hours of the morning.

But something had woken him, and with the rest of the household asleep in their beds, whatever it was needed to be investigated sooner rather than later.

As his preference was to sleep without clothing Sterling paused long enough, once out of bed, to pull on a pair of pantaloons and a loose white shirt before lighting a candle and stepping out into the shadows of the hallway.

His footsteps echoed as he held a single lit candle aloft to light his way down the wide staircase to the cavernous entrance hall below.

“—are we to do now?”

“Wait till morning, I expect.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, do I? I’m just doing as I’m told, as should you.”

Sterling didn’t recognize any of the two female and single male voices he

could hear whispering down the hallway from the direction of the kitchen. The voices all sounded young, and his housekeeper was an elderly lady. It could be two of the maids and a footman, he supposed, although he had thought the former lived in the village with their families and only came to the house to work during the day and early evening.

Whoever they were, he had no idea what they could possibly be doing in the kitchen in the middle of the night.

He was quite unprepared to stand in the doorway of that room and find a young man and not two, but three young ladies, none of whom he recognized as belonging to his household. All were seated about the table in the middle of the kitchen, illuminated only by the light of a single candle.

The youth had fair hair, one of the ladies had dark hair, the second a redhead. The third woman was slumped over the tabletop, a cascade of loose golden hair covering her features. Sterling realized there was also a small dark-haired boy present, possibly aged three or four, who appeared to be fast asleep on the lap of the red-haired woman.

Sterling might not be able to see the face of the woman slumped over the table, but as he had spent hours two nights ago admiring that particular shade of golden hair, he knew exactly who the third woman was.

Elizabeth.

“Oh my Lord,” the dark-haired young woman gasped, having glanced up to see him silhouetted in the doorway.

“Close,” Sterling drawled softly.

She rose to her feet. “I’m sorry for the intrusion, Your Grace.” Revealing she knew exactly who and what he was.

“How did you get in?” Sterling had every confidence that Rogers would have locked all the outer doors of the house before he retired to bed.

The brunette blushed. “Luckily, the back door was only locked, not bolted, and my older brother taught me how to pick locks. Just for fun, you understand,” she added hastily.

“That doesn’t explain why you chose to pick *my* lock.” He was now sure he had never seen any of these young people before.

“Lady Elizabeth obviously isn’t well enough to travel at the moment,” the brunette dismissed. “And we can’t go back there.” She shuddered.

“Not well enough to travel where?” he prompted sharply. He crossed the room to place his lit candle down on one of the wooden work surfaces.

“Back to London,” the young man supplied, with obvious eagerness to be

there.

“Lady Elizabeth fainted the moment we arrived at the stables,” the redhead explained. “Jimmy here had to help her into the carriage.”

“She passed out from the pain is what she did,” the other young lady defended. “You might have done so too if you had as many bruises as she does.”

“I meant no offense,” the redhead apologized.

Sterling was no longer listening to them after hearing the words “pain” and “hurting” used to describe Elizabeth.

He approached her slowly, his touch gentle as he reached out to carefully smooth the swath of hair back from her face. He drew in a hissing breath the moment he revealed the first of the dark bruises on her cheek. That hiss turned to the clenching of his teeth once he could see the full extent of the numerous bruises on her face and throat.

“Who did this?” he demanded hollowly, having a feeling he already knew the answer but needing to have those suspicions confirmed before he killed the wrong man.

“Lady Elizabeth fell down the stairs,” the redhead explained.

“The earl punched her in the face, she lost her balance, and *then* she fell down the stairs,” the brunette corrected indignantly. “After which he calmly went to his bedchamber and left her lying unconscious down in the entrance hall,” she added with obvious disgust for the deed. “None of us knew what had occurred until the morning.”

“When did this happen?” Sterling demanded to know.

“The evening before last,” the brunette supplied.

The same evening Elizabeth and Whitlow had joined him here for dinner.

Sterling thought back to that evening and his concern when Elizabeth had mentioned the earl’s displeasure over the gown she was wearing.

Within minutes of them leaving here and arriving home, it seemed Whitlow had struck Elizabeth hard enough to cause her to fall down the stairs.

It sickened Sterling to now think that he had slept the night through in the knowledge he was to see Elizabeth again the following evening, totally unaware she was lying at the bottom of a staircase, badly injured.

Dear God, he had spent *this* evening at Whitlow Grange, and all the time, Elizabeth had been lying upstairs. *Not* indisposed by her womanly courses, as Whitlow had told him she was, but unable to rise from her bed due to the

injuries she had received upon returning home the previous evening.

No. The brunette claimed the order of things—and Sterling had absolutely no reason to doubt her—was that Whitlow had struck her mistress prior to Elizabeth falling. Which meant the earl was totally responsible for what had happened after hitting Elizabeth.

Sterling should have known something was amiss this evening. Damn it, he should have *demand*ed to see Elizabeth.

And Whitlow would have been perfectly within his rights to refuse that demand.

Sterling was going to kill the bastard.

No, first he was going to make Whitlow *suffer*, in the way Elizabeth had suffered these many months, before he granted the older man the sweet release of death.

“Lady Elizabeth made an effort to play with Christopher today”—the brunette gave the sleeping little boy an affectionate glance before sobering—“but I could see how much it pained her when I assisted her into her clothes earlier so we could leave Whitlow Grange, and then helped her down the stairs. Luckily, Jimmy had the carriage waiting, as promised.” She gave him a grateful glance. “Unfortunately, Lady Elizabeth fainted the moment we were all inside.”

“But before she fainted, Lady Elizabeth asked that we bring her here to Bristol Manor.” The redhead sounded puzzled by her mistress’s request.

Sterling, on the other hand, felt a rise of emotions inside him, ones of both gratitude and happiness, at hearing Elizabeth had believed she could safely come to him for help.

He glanced at the groom. “Jimmy, you shall go into town for the doctor. I will carry Lady Elizabeth up the stairs, and you, young ladies...” His gaze turned to what he now realized must be a lady’s maid and a nursemaid. “You will both follow me and help to get your mistress undressed and into bed. Bring the boy with you.” No doubt Elizabeth would wish to ensure her son’s welfare the moment she became conscious.

“I don’t come from around here, so I don’t know where the doctor lives,” Jimmy explained as he stood up, obviously willing to do as he’d been asked, just clueless as to exactly where he needed to go.

“On the opposite side of the road to the church. Next to the vicarage,” Sterling supplied distractedly as he assessed the best way to move Elizabeth so as to cause her the least pain.

It was testament to how deeply unconscious Elizabeth was that she didn't stir or give so much as a groan as Sterling carefully slid his arms beneath her shoulders and knees before lifting her so that he could cradle her tenderly against his chest.

He was the one to draw in a sharp breath as Elizabeth's head dropped back, her golden hair cascading loosely over his arm and fully revealing the extent of the bruising to her face and throat.

"Go now," Sterling instructed the younger man harshly as he continued to stare at Elizabeth's battered and bruised visage. "Tell him it is urgent he come to Bristol Manor immediately. Do not take no for answer," he added firmly before striding from the room.

"Go," he heard the brunette hiss before slippers and a flickering candle followed him down the hallway.

Sterling vowed that if it was the last thing he ever did, Whitlow would suffer for what he had done to Elizabeth.

Slowly.

Excruciatingly.

And soon.

"I am sorry, young lady, but I must move you in order to be able to examine all of you."

Elizabeth heard an unfamiliar male voice apologize regretfully.

"I will not allow you to do a single thing that might cause Elizabeth a moment of unnecessary pain or discomfort," a second, now-familiar voice, warned harshly.

"My dear man—"

"I am not your *dear* anything," that arrogant voice bit out tersely. "Nor do I care to be spoken to in that patronizing tone."

Elizabeth, still caught in a fog of darkness, but becoming more aware with every second that passed, had no idea who the first man was. But she had absolutely no doubts that the second voice belonged to Sterling Bishop, and that he was extremely displeased.

"Of course not, Your Grace," the first man's voice soothed. "I was simply going to explain that the extent of the lady's injuries means that if I am to

examine her properly, there is very little movement that will not cause her discomfort.”

Ah, the second man was a doctor.

Injuries?

What injuries?

Had she been in an accident of some kind—

No, it had not been an *accident!*

Elizabeth remembered it all now.

Whitlow’s anger. His striking her. The horror and pain of the tumble down the stairs before she stilled and then lost consciousness. Waking in darkness and pain. Crawling to her bedchamber. Peggy’s shock the following morning when she saw Elizabeth and learned what had happened. The day that followed as Elizabeth tried to keep the worst of her injuries from Christopher. Whitlow’s callousness that evening, along with further threats. Peggy helping her to dress later so that they could all make their escape.

Except Elizabeth had known, after only a few steps outside on their way to the stables, that she would never be able to withstand the long and bumpy journey back to London.

She also now remembered that her last words before the blackness consumed her had been “take me to Bristol Manor.”

Was that where she now was?

If so, where were Christopher, Peggy, and Mary, and the young groom who was to drive them?

The need to know what had become of all of them was enough to pull her out of the last of the protective fog and into the realm of painful reality.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Thank God...” Sterling murmured his profound relief when Elizabeth’s eyelids began to flicker and then opened.

She turned to look at him with those beautiful violet eyes. “Where is Christopher?”

A wealth of feeling welled up in Sterling’s chest upon hearing that, as he had suspected would be the case, Elizabeth’s first thought was to know the whereabouts of the son she obviously adored. “He is asleep in a bedchamber just down the hallway from this one. Peggy and Mary are with him,” he instantly assured.

“Thank you,” she breathed gratefully.

Sterling nodded. “Jimmy has brought the doctor, as I instructed, and that young man is now outside seeing to the stabling of the horses and carriage.” He had instructed the groom to include the latter so that the carriage was not left outside to attract the attention of anyone who might feel a need to tell the Earl of Whitlow that they had seen one of his carriages at Bristol Manor.

Not because Sterling was in the least concerned about arousing the earl’s displeasure, but because Elizabeth’s continued welfare had become of paramount importance to him. That welfare might be threatened if the earl should learn that Elizabeth had fled only as far as the neighboring estate to ask for Sterling’s protection. A protection Sterling knew he would gladly

give her for as long as she wished for it.

“I am Dr. Harlow, Lady Marshall,” the older man now told her soothingly. “His Grace has asked me to examine you to see if you have suffered any serious injuries.”

Sterling had also cautioned the doctor, very firmly, in regard to revealing to anyone the name of the patient he had been called upon to visit at Bristol Manor in the middle of the night.

“He is so very kind.” Elizabeth bestowed a warm smile on Sterling before turning to the doctor. “I do not believe anything is broken. I am only very badly bruised.”

Sterling had never heard himself referred to as kind before, let alone very kind. Nor was he sure it was true of him now. Or if he would have reacted with such urgency in sending for the doctor if that woman had been anyone other than Elizabeth.

Perhaps if it had been his cousin, Gwen, or one of the new wives of two of the other Ruthless Dukes. But otherwise, Sterling believed, after sending for the doctor to attend her, he would have distanced himself from the woman and the situation.

But when it came to Elizabeth, he found it difficult to leave her side, even for a second.

He did so now, and allowed Peggy to take his place, only so that she could help remove her mistress’s clothing and then assist her into her night rail. He knew it would make it easier for the doctor to examine Elizabeth more thoroughly if she was not hampered by so much clothing.

Sterling used that time to first go to his study to write several letters, then seek out and issue further instructions to Jimmy, before he returned to his study to partake of a much-needed glass of brandy. As he sipped the fiery liquid, he considered, having sent Jimmy to deliver the necessary letters, what his next move should be.

Instinct and outrage demanded he pay Whitlow a visit at the earliest opportunity and make him suffer as Elizabeth had and still did.

It made Sterling wince to think of how afraid Elizabeth must have felt as she began to fall. The pain she would have suffered as her body came into contact again and again with the long wooden staircase as she tumbled down, before she landed on the hard tiled floor below.

Sterling took another large swallow of brandy at the realization she might have been killed.

Once Elizabeth had confirmed the sequence of the events of the past thirty-six hours, as related to him by her maid, and Sterling was assured Elizabeth had not suffered any lasting damage from her fall, he fully intended to pay Whitlow that visit.

A part of him wished it was to inflict the same bodily harm as Elizabeth had suffered, but good sense told him that would not resolve the situation, but instead possibly prolong it.

But he would make it clear to the other man that Elizabeth and her son and servants were more than welcome to remain at Bristol Manor until *she* decided otherwise.

He had no doubt Whitlow would not care for that arrangement at all, but Sterling not only outranked the other man, he also felt no qualms whatsoever about threatening any man who would dare to cause harm to a defenseless woman. Most especially if that woman was Elizabeth.

Whitlow might not have physically pushed Elizabeth down the staircase, but neither had he done anything to prevent her from falling down it. Nor, again according to Peggy, had the other man cared to so much as check on her welfare afterward, but instead retired to his bedchamber for the night as if nothing were untoward.

It appeared to Sterling that at that moment, the earl really had not cared if Elizabeth lived or died.

Sterling was not opposed to using his influence with the Prince Regent, along with that of his four close and equally powerful friends, to ensure Elizabeth's future safety.

It was not unusual for a widowed daughter-in-law to remain in the household of her in-laws after her husband's death, but it was more often the case she would have set up a household of her own. Especially when that widow was as young and beautiful as Elizabeth. Of course, there was Christopher to consider, and he was the earl's heir, but Elizabeth was obviously deeply unhappy at having to remain living with her father-in-law.

No matter what transpired in future, it would be Elizabeth's wishes that were adhered to, whether or not Whitlow was agreeable to her decision.

“You appear to have had a lucky escape, Lady Marshall,” the doctor told

Elizabeth warmly as he put his instruments back into the black leather bag he had placed on the bed beside her. “As you had thought might be the case, I do not believe there to be any broken bones, nor can I detect any internal bleeding or other injury. The bruising is severe, though”—he frowned—“and it will no doubt cause you considerable discomfort for several more days and nights to come. Taking the contents of one of these sachets four times a day will help with the pain.” He placed the medication on the small bedside cabinet.

“Thank you, Doctor.” Elizabeth allowed Peggy to assist her to sit up slightly so that she might drink down the first of those foul-tasting drafts.

“I will go and tell His Grace the good news.” Dr. Harlow straightened. “He has been very worried about you,” he added.

Elizabeth easily saw the speculation in the older man’s eyes. A curiosity she had no intention of satisfying.

Not that she would know what to say if she did.

For all that she was in Sterling’s home, and he was being so very solicitous to her, the only thing Elizabeth really knew for certain about him was that she had instinctively known that, despite the duke’s innate air of haughty disdain, he would never turn away a lady in need of his protection.

“As were we all.” The outspoken Peggy was, thankfully, the one to briskly answer the doctor, before adding, “I believe His Grace went downstairs. I’ll accompany you there.” She moved purposefully across the bedchamber to pointedly hold the door open for the doctor to leave.

Elizabeth held back her smile as she watched them go.

A smile that faded the moment the door closed behind them.

Because, yes, she was safe for now. But she had no doubt her father-in-law would demand she return, with Christopher, the moment he learned where they both were.

Apart from traveling back to London, she’d really had no idea where she was going when she left Whitlow Grange earlier, only that she had to get away from the earl before he succeeded in killing her. Her parents’ already crowded house seemed to be the most logical choice, but even that could only be a temporary arrangement. Whitlow was far more powerful than her father, and the moment the earl caught up with her, he would demand she return to his household, along with Christopher.

The Duke of Bristol was more powerful than both of them, of course, with friends who were equally so. But Elizabeth couldn’t expect him to

continue inconveniencing himself for her in the way he had tonight.

God, he had looked so rakishly handsome when she regained consciousness earlier to see him standing beside the bed on which she lay. In her slightly hazy state, his appearance, in a billowing white shirt unfastened at the throat, and tight pantaloons and Hessians that outlined his muscular thighs and legs, had seemed like that of one of the pirates of Elizabeth's youthful fantasies.

Logically, she had always known pirates weren't in the least romantic outside of the pages of books. That they were most likely dirty, with rotting teeth and foul-mouthed language, with little or nothing to recommend them.

But that hadn't stopped her, before meeting and marrying Thomas, from losing herself in daydreams of a tall, dark, and handsome pirate carrying her off to sea in his ship with him.

Tonight, a tousled-haired Sterling looked exactly like that pirate of her dreams.

Fantasies of a rakish and dark-haired lover which were, even now, as the doctor's draft began to take effect, joining her in the arms of Morpheus.

Sterling hadn't taken his gaze off Elizabeth once since the moment he returned to the bedchamber, immediately after the doctor had departed, and found she had fallen into a deep sleep beneath the bedcovers.

"Why did Whitlow do this?" he questioned the maid softly.

"Because of me."

Sterling gave her a startled glance. "You?"

She nodded abruptly. "I believe her ladyship questioned him in regard to his—his treatment of me."

Sterling's eyes narrowed. "Treatment of you...?"

The young woman lowered her gaze. "The old... He's been demanding I go to his bedchamber this past six months."

Sterling felt nauseous at the thought of Whitlow demanding physical intimacies from any woman, let alone this lovely young lady.

"I didn't want to," Peggy hurried to defend. "But he threatened to harm Lady Elizabeth and Christopher if I didn't do as he said."

Whitlow was lower than a snake. As disgusting as a pit of noxious slime.

“I am so sorry this has happened to you,” Sterling told Peggy softly. “Believe me when I tell you it will not happen again,” he assured in a hard voice.

He then dismissed Peggy, with the assurance he wouldn’t leave Elizabeth alone when she’d protested leaving her mistress. Once alone with Elizabeth, he pulled the armchair from near the window across the room and placed it as close to the bedside as he could before sitting in it.

Elizabeth muttered a few times in her sleep, but nothing Sterling was able to decipher.

Her face was pale beneath the increasingly darkening bruises on her cheek and temple, the latter a reminder of how she might have died two nights ago if she had struck her head any harder than she had.

Her hands, lying above the bedcovers, also showed signs of swelling and bruising. No doubt from where she had tried, and failed, to cushion her fall.

Sterling felt the anger boiling and roiling beneath his skin every time he thought of Elizabeth’s helplessness and fear as she felt herself falling and knew she wouldn’t be able to prevent it from happening.

Indeed, if Whitlow had been before him right now, Sterling had no doubt he would enjoy strangling the older man with his bare hands.

He still might.

However this should turn out, he would ensure Whitlow was finished.

In Society.

At his clubs.

Financially.

In every and all ways that were of importance to the earl’s comfort and station in life.

No man who could treat a woman in the way Whitlow had Elizabeth, and sexually molesting her young maid, deserved to be allowed anywhere near decent society ever again.

Sterling intended to ensure—

He turned sharply as he heard the bedchamber door open behind him, brows rising and eyes widening when he saw Peggy enter the room carrying the little dark-haired boy he knew to be Elizabeth’s son, Christopher. He was dressed in his nightshirt and looked as if he had been crying, from the mottled red of his cheeks and his sore-looking eyes.

“He woke up and wouldn’t settle again, insisting I must bring him to see his mama,” Peggy explained softly as she crossed the room.

Sterling rose to his feet, appreciating the small boy must be disturbed by all the strange happenings of the past days and night. Not least of them being going to sleep in one house and waking in another. Goodness knows what conclusion Christopher had come to in regard to his mother's bruises.

Until three years ago, small children were not something Sterling knew how to interact with, having had no previous contact with any. But three years ago, his cousin, Gwen, had given birth to a baby girl. Given the honor of being Emily's godfather, Sterling made a concerted effort to spend time with her.

He utilized that experience now. "As you can see, your mother is quite well and sleeping. As you should be," he teased lightly.

Nevertheless, a mutinous expression tightened the boy's features. "I want to stay with Mama."

"As you can see, your Mama is asleep," he reasoned.

"I want to stay with Mama," Christopher repeated stubbornly.

Sterling admired his tenacity. "I think you need your sleep more."

"No!" Violet-colored eyes, so like those of his mother, glared at Sterling. "Want Mama." Christopher's bottom lip began to tremble, the boy once again on the edge of tears.

"I'll sit with Christopher and Lady Elizabeth," Peggy offered in an obvious effort to placate the little boy.

An occurrence which would result in Sterling being expected to then leave the bedchamber. And Elizabeth.

Unacceptable.

"Will you stay here with me, Christopher, and let Peggy go back to her bed to sleep?" he cajoled instead.

The maid looked taken aback at the suggested compromise. "I don't think ___"

"Yes," Christopher announced, and at the same time reached his arms out for Sterling to take him.

Which Sterling instantly did, surprised at how little the boy weighed. Not as much as Emily, and she was a year younger. "Shall the two of us sit beside your Mama?" he suggested softly. "That way, the first thing she will see when she opens her eyes in the morning will be you."

"And you," Christopher pointed out.

And him.

Which, Sterling appreciated, might not be ideal as far as Elizabeth was

concerned. But, as he had every intention of remaining beside her for the rest of the night, perhaps Christopher's presence would help to diffuse the strangeness of that situation.

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth woke in the sure knowledge she did not recognize her surroundings. Not the huge four-poster bed upon which she lay, the blue-and-white décor and drapes revealed by the single candle alight on the dressing-table. Nor the painted fresco ceiling above her, depicting shepherdesses, nymphs, and cherubs.

However, after a slow turn of her head, she did recognize the man sleeping in the chair beside the bed, his dark hair tousled, a dark-haired child asleep upon his lap, the boy's head resting against the man's shoulder.

The duke held her son, Christopher, in his arms!

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat at the unlikelihood of seeing the haughty duke with a child in his arms. Not just any child, but Elizabeth's son, the expression of calm acceptance on Christopher's face telling her that he completely trusted the man who held him cradled securely against his chest.

However unlikely a sight this was, Elizabeth felt something move inside her. A feeling of rightness. A feeling of the same calm and trust as Christopher's expression showed. A feeling of safety such as Elizabeth had never known before. Along with the sure knowledge that while Sterling was near, no one—no one at all—would dare to threaten or harm Elizabeth or Christopher.

In that moment, she felt herself falling deeply and irrevocably in love

with Sterling Bishop, the Duke of Bristol.

“You’re awake.”

The realization of her feelings for this man was so new, Elizabeth was startled by the husky sound of Sterling’s voice.

She smiled shyly. “I am.”

Sterling glanced down at the boy resting against him. “Peggy brought him. He wanted to see you, and once he had, he wanted to stay with you.”

“If he is too much for you—”

“He isn’t,” Sterling instantly assured, and then grimaced. “Like you, he weighs nothing at all. But you are due to take your next dose of medicine, and you might prefer to have Christopher in bed beside you while I prepare it...?”

Elizabeth was torn as to how to answer that.

On the one hand, both man and boy might be more comfortable if Christopher was on the bed with her. Sterling was slumped down in the chair so as to be able to rest his head back against it, but because he was so tall, this meant his back was slouched down rather than supportive, his long legs stretched beneath the bed. She knew from experience that Christopher, if he did not have sufficient sleep, was likely to be out of sorts in the morning.

But on the other hand, Elizabeth was loath to disturb the two of them when they looked so at ease with each other.

“Mama?”

The decision was made for her by her son, Christopher obviously having been woken by their whispered conversation.

She smiled gratefully when Sterling stood holding Christopher before carefully placing the little boy beneath the bedcovers she’d pulled aside and then tucked about him. Reassured, Christopher instantly went back to sleep.

Her eyes widened when Sterling, after mixing the medicine in a glass and helping her to sit up slightly to drink it, then resumed sitting in the chair beside the bed.

“I would prefer not to leave you alone tonight,” he explained in a voice that brooked no argument to the arrangement when he saw the puzzlement in her expression.

Elizabeth didn’t have an argument to make. How could she have, when she felt safe having Sterling here with her?

“What about tomorrow?”

His eyes narrowed. “Tomorrow we will discuss what is the best course of

action for you and your little family.”

It felt as if a thousand butterflies had taken flight and were trying to escape from her chest. “No matter what, I will not go back to living with my father-in-law.”

“No, you damn well won’t!” Sterling rose agitatedly to his feet, breathing heavily through his nose, shirt billowing about his muscular frame as he paced over to the window. “I apologize,” he murmured evenly several seconds later, turning to face her. “Peggy told me what happened, and I— Please believe that I will not allow Whitlow to ever lay a hand on you again in anger.”

She gave a shake of her head. “I do not believe he has ever needed the excuse of anger to hurt me.”

Pale green eyes narrowed. “We will talk of this again tomorrow. For now, you and Christopher need to rest. But be assured, I will remain here for the rest of the night. No one and nothing shall harm you,” he promised grimly.

Elizabeth believed him. The doctor’s second draft began to take effect, and she felt herself drifting off to sleep again, secure in the knowledge Sterling would protect her.

Sterling woke to the awareness of the candle having sputtered out some time during the night and the early morning light of a new day shining in the long windows, the curtains having been left undrawn.

He also realized that, sometime during the night, he must have removed himself from the discomfort of the chair because he was now lying in the bed behind Elizabeth. Not separate and apart from her above the bedcovers, but beneath them, lying on his side, with the long length of his body pressing against the warmth of her back, his arm draped about her waist. His shirt was unfastened at the throat, his pantaloons loosened at the waist for comfort.

To his consternation, he also realized his hard and pulsing cock, covered only by the linen of his drawers and ever sensitive to Elizabeth’s proximity, was currently lodged between the cheeks of her arse.

“There is no reason for you to move,” Elizabeth murmured as he was about to do just that, informing him that she was already awake and fully aware—she had to be!—of how and where Sterling’s cock was pressing

against her.

“Christopher...?”

“Peggy collected him a half hour ago and took him to have his breakfast.”

Dear God, not only was he in bed with Elizabeth, but her maid had entered the room while he did so. “She saw me here?”

Elizabeth snorted. “You are not someone who is easy to overlook!”

“I apologize—”

“There is no need.” Elizabeth turned in his arms so that their faces were now only inches apart on the pillows as they lay side by side, the front of Elizabeth’s body pressing against Sterling’s. She looked directly into his eyes. “I have been lying here for that same half an hour waiting for you to wake up.” She lifted her hands to cup either side of his face. “You, my dear Sterling, have been keeping secrets.”

He tensed. “I— What— No! It was always my intention to tell you—”

“That you are a fraud?” Her smile negated there being any accusation in the question.

Sterling eyed her warily. He *had* always intended to tell Elizabeth the reason for his coming to Cornwall. Not immediately, because one did not approach a complete stranger, as Elizabeth had been only days ago, and demand to know if her dead husband was capable of murder.

Although Elizabeth did not seem to be angry or upset at the thought of that...

Instead, she chuckled. “To the outside world, you are every inch the cold and haughty Duke of Bristol, but beneath that, you are something else entirely. I admit to having believed Society’s opinion of you until I came to know you better. Indeed, I thought you as cold as ice the first day we met, and incapable of passion. I pitied your future duchess having to share the bed of such a cold and aloof gentleman. But now I know that you are warm. Caring. Passionate. You are also protective and kind.” She looked at him in wonder.

“I do not believe I am all, or possibly any, of those things,” he protested.

“To me you are,” she insisted huskily, tilting her head so that her lips might brush lightly over Sterling’s.

It felt as if the touch of Elizabeth’s lips was all Sterling had been waiting for as he gently pulled her bruised body against his own to return and deepen the kiss.

A kiss, despite Sterling’s inner warnings to be gentle, that quickly became

wild and passionate as their lips tasted, tongues stroked, and teeth gently bit.

Sterling was so aroused from those kisses, it felt as if he might come in his drawers. “Will you allow me to make love to you, Elizabeth? I promise I will be careful not to hurt you,” he added quickly. “I just need— I want to caress and taste all of you.”

She studied him for several seconds, her cheeks flushed, eyes fever-bright, before nodding.

Sterling sat up to untie and then carefully assist her in removing her night rail. Once he had done so, his breath caught in his throat as, bruises aside, he could not help but stare at the beauty of the pale and silky luster of Elizabeth’s completely naked body.

Her breasts were small and uptilting, tipped with pale rose nipples, her waist slender, hips curving slightly above slender thighs, her legs slim, her feet tiny.

“You’re far too thin,” he realized. “Is Whitlow responsible for this?” he demanded angrily. “Does he actually starve you?” God knows Sterling had several times witnessed the other man’s comments cautioning Elizabeth not to eat too much when she barely ate enough to keep a bird alive.

“Not quite.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “Am I too thin for you to find me desirable?”

He gave a self-derisive laugh. “My darling Elizabeth, if I found you any more desirable than I already do, I should have already released inside my drawers!” As it was, that garment was damp from the release of pre-cum from his cockhead.

She gave a husky laugh before requesting shyly, “Would you take off your shirt?”

Sterling didn’t hesitate in pulling the garment over his head and discarding it onto the floor beside her night rail.

Elizabeth’s fingertips caressed lightly across his shoulders and chest, lingering at each dip in the muscles of his abdomen. “You are very beautiful,” she complimented huskily before her gaze rose to meet his. “Will you remove your pantaloons and drawers too so that I might see all of you?”

Sterling had never been in the least self-conscious of his body, and he wasn’t now, but his breathing became erratic as he stood beside the bed to allow his pantaloons and drawers to fall to the floor before stepping out of them.

Elizabeth reached out a tentative hand to run a single fingertip along the

length of his stiffly aroused and copiously leaking cock.

“Do not overexert yourself,” Sterling cautioned when sitting up higher in the bed obviously caused her some discomfort.

Her glance was shy. “Would you step closer, then, so that I might kiss and touch you?”

The hot rush down the length of his cock, the liquid beading out of the slit at the top, told Sterling how much his body approved of that suggestion.

“I have a better idea,” he explained as he moved around the bed to once again lie beside her. But this time, he lay with his head toward the bottom of the bed, his cock now easily reachable by Elizabeth’s hands and mouth as he gently rolled her so that she was lying on top of him.

Placing the sweet and tempting nectar glistening between her parted thighs on a level with Sterling’s mouth and caressing hands.

“Are you comfortable like this?” he prompted.

“Very. You?”

“I believe I might actually be in heaven,” he admitted before giving a groan of pleasure as he felt the rasp of Elizabeth’s tongue along the length of his cock.

Elizabeth had only seen one other bare cock, and Sterling’s was both thicker and longer. The balls beneath also became taut and swollen when she cupped them in her hand as she parted her lips and took the fat cockhead into the heat of her mouth.

The taste of the leaking fluid was exquisite, a mixture of earthy spices that Elizabeth eagerly sucked and licked into her mouth before swallowing.

She gasped and lost her concentration at the first touch of the heat of Sterling’s lips against the lips of her cunny, followed by the moist rasp of his tongue against the swollen nubbin above.

A caress he repeated over and over again until Elizabeth felt a tingling heat coursing through her body.

A prickling sensation which quickly exploded in a burst of heat and pleasure so intense, Elizabeth could hear, see, and feel nothing but that pleasure for several long minutes.

When she finally recovered enough to be able to think again, it was to the

realization that Sterling's cock was still hard and throbbing in front of her, the wide top slick with more of that viscous fluid.

She parted her lips wide and took that thick cock into her mouth, sucking deeply as her tongue licked along the length and she began to bob her head up and down.

"Elizabeth...!" Sterling's groan was one of encouragement, his hands tightly gripped the cheeks of her bottom as he once again licked and sucked between her thighs.

Elizabeth felt the tensing of his cock seconds before the first of his release spurted into her mouth. She quickly swallowed it down before the next pulse of hot release hit the back of her throat, and she swallowed that down too. Again and again, until the release came to an end.

Afterward, the two of them lay on the bed together, completely satiated.

So much so, Elizabeth had no sense of how much time had passed before a knock sounded on the bedchamber door.

"Do you need my assistance to dress?" It was telling that Peggy called from the hallway rather than entering the bedchamber, as she would normally have done first thing in the morning.

It took Elizabeth several long seconds to make sense of her maid's words when her head was still so befuddled with lust and desire. "Perhaps in a little while," she dismissed Peggy. Seconds later, she heard the other woman move away down the hallway.

Her gaze remained fixed upon Sterling as he not only removed himself from her arms, but also the bed, before pulling on and straightening his clothing. He ran an agitated hand through the dark thickness of his hair.

The latter was a futile attempt at tidying his appearance when the rest of him looked thoroughly debauched.

His pale eyes were glittering and fevered.

His cheeks were flushed the same color as his slightly slick and swollen lips.

His still-unfastened shirt was slightly askew, baring one shoulder.

The long length of his thick cock was back inside his pantaloons but was once again visibly aroused. Thomas had been young and virile, but Elizabeth didn't think his libido had ever recovered quite as quickly as Sterling's obviously had.

"We can stay here awhile longer, if you wish it?" Elizabeth moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue as she thought of once again having all that

salty-tasting fatness stuffed inside her mouth.

He shook his head. "I should not have allowed this to happen the first time. Oh, not because I do not want you to the point of madness," he assured when she looked uncertain. "But I should not have made love to you when you have been so recently injured and are so bruised."

"Even if I wanted you to?" she teased.

"Even then," he insisted softly. "I apologize—"

"Please do not. Being in your arms, making love together, has been the most erotic experience of my life."

His eyes widened. "It has?"

"Please understand, I am not being disloyal when I say that Thomas and I were very young when we fell in love and married. I was barely eighteen and he only twenty. Over time, we learned how to give each other pleasure and to receive it. But it was not... It was never..."

"Do not distress yourself," Sterling comforted. "I understand. I hope I was not too forward?" He frowned.

"Goodness, no." Elizabeth laughed huskily. "I should very much like to do it again," she admitted shyly.

"So would I," he acknowledged. "But first, I should like for you to get well as quickly as possible so that you are able to travel back to London."

She smiled. "Will you be returning with me?"

"I have several business matters here to take care of first."

"Oh, but—"

"Elizabeth, much as I have enjoyed our time together, I do not at any time wish for you to feel pressured into...into giving yourself to me again."

"What do you mean?"

His lips thinned. "I will help you to get away from the earl regardless."

"Regardless of what?"

He sighed. "I am trying to say that, although I obviously enjoyed our intimacy just now, it is not necessary for you to feel you need to offer me sexual favors in exchange for my giving you and your son refuge here."

Elizabeth recoiled as if Sterling had struck her, those words hurting at least as much as Whitlow's physical assault, if not more. Because they would remain with her for far longer than the bruises on her body.

"How can you say such a thing to me so soon after...after?"

"I am trying to be reasonable—"

"While being completely insulting!" She eyed him frostily. "Perhaps you

are the cold and haughty Duke of Bristol that Society claims you to be after all.”

He stared at her for several long seconds before giving a stiff inclination of his head. “Perhaps I am.”

Elizabeth turned away. “Then please do not let me keep you a moment longer from that other business you say is in need of your attention.”

As dismissals went, it was far from a subtle one, Sterling admired with an ache in his chest. But it was wholly merited, he accepted heavily.

The problem wasn't with Elizabeth, but his having been beset with an urgent need to distance himself from her.

Because Sterling had now realized that, like his two friends before him with the ladies close to the man they were investigating, he had fallen in love with the widow of his own quarry.

He had never thought such a thing could ever happen to him.

Believed that he was immune to the emotion.

In a mere matter of days, Elizabeth had stripped him of that illusion.

Sterling now knew he loved her with a fierceness of desire and protectiveness he had not previously imagined himself ever being capable of.

A love he did not fool himself into believing was, or ever would be, reciprocated.

Despite their lovemaking just now.

Elizabeth had been in need of a refuge from the cruelties of her father-in-law, and Sterling was the only person close enough to give that to her. He truly believed that the two of them making love just now was as a result of their heightened emotions with the addition of gratitude on Elizabeth's part.

His words just now had been meant to alleviate any further obligation Elizabeth might feel toward him rather than any desire to insult her.

It was probably for the best if Sterling didn't try to right the impression Elizabeth now had of his being every inch the cold and haughty Duke of Bristol.

Especially when he had yet to confess to Elizabeth that the answers she could give him about her deceased husband were his only reason for coming to Cornwall in the first place.

No, far better to put the distance between them now rather than suffer the fires of hell later when Elizabeth decided she no longer wished to continue with their relationship.

Which did not mean Sterling could not enjoy paying a visit to the Earl of Whitlow and taking out some of his frustration on the other man.

CHAPTER TEN

“Here again already, Bristol?” Whitlow greeted him mockingly several hours later as he strode jauntily into the sitting room at Whitlow Grange, where Sterling stood looking out of one of the long windows into the garden. “Couldn’t stay away from my daughter-in-law a moment longer, hm? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you”—there was not a trace of apology in the evil bastard’s voice—“but Elizabeth is still indisposed.”

Sterling drew in several controlling breaths before answering the other man. “On the contrary, Whitlow, I came here for the sole purpose of talking to you.” His fists were clenched at his sides in an effort to stop himself from turning this conversation into a physical one.

He should perhaps not have paid Whitlow a visit quite so soon as this, but instead allowed his temper to have calmed before doing so. Unfortunately, his need to distance himself from Elizabeth, and as a consequence, Bristol Manor, had made that decision for him.

“Really?” The older man looked surprised. “What can I do for you?”

Sterling stared at the earl for several moments longer. Inwardly, he was still coming to terms with the fact that this man had been denying Elizabeth enough food for months. That two nights ago, he had allowed—as good as pushed—Elizabeth down a staircase after hitting her, and then left her lying at the bottom of the stairs while he went to bed to force himself on her young

and pretty maid, as he had been doing for the past six months.

Sterling had known such despicable men existed, of course, but he had hoped never to be in the same room and breathe the same air as one.

His top lip curled back with distaste. “You can have one of the maids—preferably one you are not forcing your sexual attentions upon—pack up any items belonging to Elizabeth and her small entourage and have them brought over to Bristol Manor at the earliest opportunity.”

Whitlow’s face had grown redder and redder with each word Sterling spoke, until it now resembled the color of a beetroot. “How dare you—”

“How dare *you* stand there behaving as if nothing untoward has happened!” Sterling thundered accusingly.

“Probably because it hasn’t.” Whitlow gave a grimace of contempt. “Cornwall has to be one of the most boring places on earth.”

Sterling eyed him coldly. “It is a pity you feel that way when it is one of the few *places on earth* you will be able to hide once I have returned to London and ensured all in Society have been informed of your behavior.”

Whitlow’s complexion had gone from the color of beetroot to a sickening gray. “Hide?” he repeated skeptically.

“Yes.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Sterling breathed heavily through his nose. “Not only have you badly treated both Elizabeth and her maid, but it is obvious from your previous smug expression that you do not have the slightest idea that neither of those two ladies, nor Elizabeth’s son and his nursemaid, are no longer resident in your household. I have taken one of your grooms into my employ too.” Young Jimmy was currently riding back to London on his way to delivering the letters Sterling had written last night.

“Elizabeth is upstairs—”

“She is with me, at Bristol Manor.” Sterling wished that were true, but he believed, after their earlier conversation, that Elizabeth would ensure they were never alone together again, let alone be intimate with each other.

The older man appeared disconcerted for several seconds before he gave a dismissive shake of his head. “Elizabeth would never dare to arouse my ire by doing such a thing.” He reached out to tug on the bell pull that would bring the butler into the room.

Sterling gave the older man a pitying glance. “I fear you are several hours too late to be able to check on the welfare of your daughter-in-law, if that is

your intention.”

The earl turned to the butler as he quietly entered the room. “Go up to Lady Marshall’s rooms and tell her I require her presence downstairs. Immediately,” he added sharply.

Sterling waited until the butler had departed before continuing. “Elizabeth and her son and servants arrived at Bristol Manor during the night. She has since been examined by the local doctor, and he believes she is only severely bruised and there are no broken bones or internal injuries from her fall.” His jaw tightened. “But that is absolutely no thanks to you.”

“God, you’re such an arrogant prick,” Whitlow sneered. “Standing there, looking down your nose at me, when you’ve been lusting after Elizabeth like she’s a bitch in heat since the moment you first sniffed her.”

“I advise you to stop now,” Sterling cut in coldly. “Before I am forced to physically make you do so.” That the older man was correct in his crude summation did not lessen the need Sterling felt to place his hands around the other man’s throat and squeeze the very life out of him.

Whitlow gave him a scornful glance. “*If* Elizabeth spent the night in your house, and I am still not convinced that is the case, then her reputation has been compromised. As a consequence, I will demand you make her an offer of marriage.” Triumph glittered briefly in the other man’s gaze.

“An offer she would refuse,” Sterling answered with certainty. “Elizabeth was forced to flee this household because of *your* cruelties to her. Abuse about which I have already written to the Prince Regent, explaining what Elizabeth suffered through. I have also informed several of my closest friends of the same. All of them dukes, all of them infinitely more powerful than you will ever be. Do not even think about intercepting my envoy,” he warned the moment he saw the calculating glitter appear in the earl’s gaze. “He left during the night and will reach London far ahead of you or anyone else you might care to send after him.” As an added precaution, Sterling had given Jimmy instructions of a route which was not usually frequented by other travelers to or from London.

“You— Yes?” Whitlow snapped at the butler as he returned to stand in the doorway.

“I have looked everywhere, my lord, but I cannot find Lady Marshall or Master Christopher, nor her maid and the nursemaid, anywhere in the house.”

“You fucking bastard!” the earl shouted fiercely.

“He is talking to me, not you,” Sterling reassured the obviously startled

butler. “But I seriously suggest that you look into seeking employment elsewhere,” he added conversationally. “I advise all the servants here look for employment elsewhere, unless they wish it to be known they are working for a rapist and an attempted murderer.”

The butler looked even more stunned. “Your Grace?” he answered Sterling while giving the earl a sideways glance.

Sterling believed it telling that the man didn’t immediately jump to the defense of his employer.

“Get out,” the earl shouted at the butler, waiting until he had reluctantly done so before turning back to Sterling. “You cannot expect to get away with making these wild accusations, Bristol,” he threatened. “If you do, I will simply tell them you have been fucking Elizabeth—”

Sterling’s fist shot out instinctively, the noise as it made contact with the earl’s nose and the gush of blood which followed as the earl staggered and then fell on his backside telling him that the appendage was broken.

Sterling stood over the older man, looking down at him. “If you are wise, you will not even attempt to get up again until after I have left.”

Whitlow held a hand up beneath his profusely bleeding nose. “Bastard!”

He gave an unconcerned shrug. “I advise you do not return to London, but instead make some sort of life for yourself down here. But be aware that even if you stay here, I intend to have your behavior monitored and watched in future.”

He had brought two of Stanley’s associates with him to Cornwall and fully intended leaving them here. He could see about hiring more permanent watchdogs, who had no problem living in Cornwall, once he was back in London.

“I shall be returning to London myself shortly, and Elizabeth will travel with me,” he continued. “But if there is the slightest indication you are sexually molesting any more unwilling young ladies, or have attempted to bully or harm Elizabeth from afar, you will suffer the consequences.”

Whitlow wisely remained on the floor, his attempts to stop the flow of blood from his nose proving futile as it dripped down his linen shirt and waistcoat. “What consequences?”

Sterling’s smile was predatory. “I have always thought it better to leave some things unsaid. That anticipation of a deed, good or bad, can bring about its own satisfaction.”

“You cannot just take my daughter-in-law and grandson into your

household without expecting some form of protest or retribution from me!” the older man blustered.

“I believe I have stated exactly why I can, and have, done exactly that,” he dismissed. “Now, if you will excuse me, Elizabeth is waiting for me to join her for luncheon at Bristol Manor.” Sterling doubted that to be true, in view of her health and the way the two of them had parted earlier, but Whitlow didn’t know that.

Besides, Sterling really couldn’t remain in the company of this disgusting man a moment longer.

Except, once he returned to Bristol Manor, it was to learn that Elizabeth, her son, and her two servants, plus one of Sterling’s own grooms—no doubt needed to drive the Whitlow carriage, which was missing from the stables—were gone.

“—never have agreed to let you travel in your condition,” Peggy muttered as she sat in the same Whitlow carriage they had originally taken from the earl’s stable the previous night.

Elizabeth gave a wince as she tried to find a comfortable position on the bench seat opposite her maid. “I do not believe I asked for permission,” she teased lightly, well aware she could not have managed without Peggy these past few days. “Anyway”—she sobered—“it was no longer agreeable for me to accept the duke’s hospitality.”

“Why not?”

Because Elizabeth had committed the folly of falling in love him!

Because she had made love with him.

Because afterward, Sterling had reduced that lovemaking to nothing more than gratitude on her part, as reparation for his giving all of them refuge at Bristol Manor.

She had felt the only response to such an unfair and untruthful accusation was to remove herself and the other members of her household from the duke’s estate.

Which she’d done the moment Peggy informed her she’d seen Bristol leaving the estate on horseback.

To go where, Elizabeth had no idea. She only knew that the duke’s

absence gave them the perfect opportunity to leave before he returned.

They had necessarily borrowed the services of one of the duke's grooms, but only until they reached London, when he would be able to return to the duke's household.

Except the doctor's medication was nowhere near strong enough to dull all the pain, and the journey was proving more troublesome to Elizabeth the more miles the carriage traveled on the often uneven and rutted roads.

But she would withstand it.

The alternatives, return to Whitlow Grange and the cruelty of her father-in-law or remain at Bristol Manor with Sterling believing she had only made love with him as payment for his kindness for offering them shelter, were unacceptable.

She *would* remain strong enough to withstand the journey back to London.

She *must*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Grace is not going to be best pleased if you wear a hole in the new rug she only recently had installed in my study,” Alaric Montrose, the Duke of Melborne, stated wryly as he sat behind his huge mahogany desk.

Sterling ignored the comment to continue his pacing on the predominantly dark green Aubusson carpet. “Whilst I respect and admire your duchess, I am afraid sitting still is currently impossible for me.” More so because he had first spent four days riding to London on horseback, then the following day instructing James Stanley to look deeper into the Earl of Whitlow’s affairs and that of his son, before commencing his search for Elizabeth.

A search that had proved futile.

It seemed that Elizabeth had either not had time to return to London as yet—traveling by carriage would take far longer than his own journey on horseback—or London had never been her destination in the first place.

Either way, Elizabeth was not at any of the obvious places Sterling had so far looked for her, such as Whitlow House or her parents’ London home.

He had thought that coming here today and telling Melborne of the events of the time he had spent in Cornwall, of confiding the things he had said to Elizabeth during their last conversation, might help to dispel some of his own feelings of helplessness. It had not. Not because Melborne had made any

disapproving remarks after the telling, but because the other man had as yet made no comment on the situation at all.

“By the way, the groom, Jimmy, is in my stables,” Melborne assured.

“Thank you.”

“I can confirm that I delivered your letter to the Prince Regent, informing him of Whitlow’s treatment of his daughter-in-law. He is most displeased.”

“Good.”

“The other Ruthless Dukes and I also received and read the letters you sent to us.”

“Excellent.”

“As a result, we have ensured that those important in Society now know of Whitlow’s deplorable behavior toward his daughter-in-law. The man is never allowed to darken any respectable person’s door or dinner table ever again.”

“That is good.”

“Last night, we all stripped naked and ran about Regent’s Park at midnight.”

“Very well.”

“Sterling.”

His head rose sharply as he looked at the other man. The five remaining Ruthless Dukes might all be close friends, but it was rare for any of the other four gentlemen to call him by his first name rather than his title.

Melborne grimaced. “I know from your lack of response to my last ridiculous comment that you are not listening to me. I also too easily recognize that look of anguish upon your face. God knows I more often than not bore that same expression before Grace put me out of my misery and assured me, despite my stupidity, she returned my love for her.”

Sterling’s throat moved as he swallowed. “Elizabeth left Bristol Manor so that she did not have to see me again.”

His shock upon discovering she had left the estate during his visit to Whitlow had been extreme. So much so that he had instantly informed his valet he was leaving, and had asked that gentleman to pack up their belongings and follow after him, before he then returned outside to leap astride his still-saddled horse. He had hoped he might catch up with Elizabeth’s carriage before too long, but that had not been the case. Whatever route she had taken back to London, it was not the same one as Sterling.

Melborne stood to pour brandy from the cut glass decanter on a side

dresser into two matching glasses before handing one to Sterling. “But you are in love with her?”

He drew in a deep breath. “I am.” He was in absolutely no doubt that was the case after the agonizing heartache of these past five days and nights of wondering where she was and if she was safe and well.

“You’ve barely been gone two weeks, must only have been in Cornwall itself for a matter of a few days,” his friend remarked speculatively.

“I fell in love with Elizabeth the first time I looked into her violet-colored eyes.” Sterling knew he spoke the absolute truth. That he had not had a thought that was not about Elizabeth since he first saw her on the street in Crawtock eight days ago.

“And yet you still spoke to her in such a hurtful manner after the two of you had made love,” Melborne chided.

He swallowed, realizing now that a gentleman would not have told Melborne of the full circumstances and details of that conversation. “I did so because I did not wish, if it should be the case, for Elizabeth to continue to feel obligated to—to satisfy my obvious desire for her. Or for her to do so out of a sense of gratitude for my having offered her and her household refuge.”

“Before you made those comments, had Lady Elizabeth said or done anything to indicate those were her feelings on the matter?”

He winced. “No.”

“Then why in God’s name—” Melborne broke off abruptly to release a long and steady breath.

“What other reason could Elizabeth have had to make love with me?” Sterling reasoned.

“Perhaps because she returned your desire? Because she had fallen in love with you too?”

“She had only known me for a few days.”

“You had only known *her* for the same amount of time, and yet you have said you are in love with her.”

“I am.” He sighed. “Deeply. Irrevocably.”

Melborne gave a shake of his head. “There is a name for men like you.”

He winced. “Bastard?”

“No.”

“Opportunist?”

“I am certain the word you are searching for is idiot,” Melborne drawled.

“What!” Sterling glared at his friend. “I have bared my soul to you in a

way I have never done before with anyone, and the only thing you can do in return is to call me an idiot?”

“Because that is what you have behaved as,” Melborne confirmed without apology. “Do not feel too bad about it. I have discovered that we men all behave in a completely idiotic manner once we have found the woman we truly care for. Look at Flint and myself.” He gave a self-derisive shake of his head. “We both behaved appallingly toward the women with whom we fell in love. Thank God Grace and Chastity saw fit to forgive us for our stupidity and married us.”

Sterling dropped into the chair in front of the desk. “There is no chance of that happening between myself and Elizabeth.”

More’s the pity.

Because Sterling had not only fallen in love with Elizabeth in the short time the two of them had been together, but another part of his heart had cracked wide open the night he held young Christopher in his arms as they sat in vigil at his mother’s bedside. Christopher had felt so small and warm as he nestled against Sterling’s chest, so innocent as he put his complete trust in Sterling to protect and take care of both him and his mother.

He had never known anything like those overwhelming feelings of protectiveness and affection brought about by Christopher’s complete trust of him.

What did Christopher think of him now?

What did *Elizabeth* think of him now?

Sterling threw the brandy in his glass to the back of his throat, welcoming the burning sensation that followed. “I have to apologize for my behavior,” he stated vehemently. “To explain to her why I behaved in that way. To tell her that I never meant to insult or hurt her. That I am in love with her.”

Melborne refilled their brandy glasses. “I believe you will need to find her first in order for you to be able to say any of that.”

“Find whom?” Grace Montrose, the Duchess of Melborne, breezed into the study, crossing the room to kiss her husband warmly on the lips. Her small dog, Finn, had followed her into the room and was now making himself comfortable on the hearth between Melborne’s two Irish wolfhounds. The duchess turned to look at Sterling. “I was told you were in Cornwall on another of these discovering-who-was-responsible-for-killing-Plymouth missions being carried out by each of the Ruthless Dukes?”

It didn’t surprise Sterling in the least that Melborne had confided in his

wife with regard to their actions. Melborne now knew better than to keep secrets from his duchess. "I was," he acknowledged morosely.

The duchess, a beautiful auburn-haired lady with warm green eyes, tilted her head in query. "Have you returned because you have found the murderer?"

"No."

"He has found something much more worrisome to any man," Melborne drawled. "Love," he added dryly as he resumed his seat behind the desk and pulled his wife down with him so that she was seated sideways upon his thighs.

"Your sarcastic sense of humor has not improved these past weeks, despite all my efforts," she admonished.

Melborne grinned. "But you love me anyway."

"I do." The couple shared a smile of deep intimacy before the duchess once again turned to Sterling. "Lord Thomas Marshall was not to blame for your friend's death?"

"He never got as far as broaching the subject with Marshall's widow." Melborne's humor, at Sterling's expense, was very obvious. "He was far too busy admiring that lady's violet-colored eyes and falling in love with her."

"You are a mocking bastard, Melborne." Sterling spoke without rancor.

"I am also a man in love, which is why I am wholeheartedly welcoming you into the group of the fallen men!" Melborne announced lightly.

"Elizabeth does not love me," he reminded.

The other man sobered. "You will not know that until you have found her and asked her why she left you so abruptly while you were out punching and threatening her father-in-law."

"Really?" the duchess gasped.

Sterling knew the reason she was so shocked was because he was usually the most even-tempered of men. Usually. When Elizabeth was not involved. Then his emotions seemed constantly in disarray.

"I told you why she left," he snapped at Melborne.

"Because you believe you had taken advantage of her."

"Yes!" Sterling could not even look at the duchess now.

Melborne shrugged. "The situation, as you described it to me, sounded to be as a result of a mutual attraction."

Elizabeth *had* only seemed to become upset after Sterling had made that comment regarding her feeling obligated to indulge in intimacy with him.

“Gossip in the shops this morning was that a bedraggled Lady Marshall was seen arriving and being helped down from the carriage and into her parents’ home late yesterday evening,” the duchess put in conversationally. “The speculation is rife as to why she looked that way. I did not, of course, see any reason why I should satisfy that curiosity by imparting any of the contents of your letter explaining her father-in-law’s treatment of her and her need to escape from him. I had no idea your...closeness to the lady was part of the reason for her appearing so distressed, Bristol.” She eyed him speculatively.

Again, it was no surprise to Sterling that Melborne had shared the contents of that letter with his wife.

Or that Melborne’s comments had now allowed her to know exactly how badly Sterling had behaved toward Elizabeth.

He rose abruptly to his feet. “When I called upon the Amesese’s home yesterday, they told me their daughter was still in Cornwall.” In the circumstances, he hadn’t liked to disabuse them of that fact, believing that Elizabeth would contact them once she was settled. Wherever that might be. It seemed she had gone to her parents’ home after all.

“No doubt at the time that is what they believed,” the duchess said softly. “They now know differently.”

“Where are you going?” Melborne enquired when Sterling marched toward the doorway.

“To speak to Elizabeth, of course,” he stated decisively.

“Do you not think it would be wiser to leave it a day or so, to give her time to recover from her long journey?” the duchess suggested.

Sterling, knowing Elizabeth was in London and that he might see her again today if he so wished, didn’t welcome the idea of having to wait a minute longer than he needed.

“I do not presume to know Lady Marshall well,” the duchess continued. “But before she went to Cornwall, we had met on several occasions at the orphanage where I also volunteer my services.”

“You had?” Sterling prompted, eager to hear any news about Elizabeth.

The duchess nodded. “She is warm and lovely, also quiet and conscientious. The children all adored her.”

Of course they did, Sterling acknowledged affectionately. How could they not love someone as warm and caring as Elizabeth?

“How shall I put this next part?” the duchess murmured as if to herself. “I

had the distinct impression that Lady Marshall is also very aware of the... circumstances of her family, in that the Ameses are not wealthy nor of the top echelon of Society.” Her mouth thinned. “A fact, from what you wrote in your letter, her father-in-law seems to have taken complete advantage of.”

“What are you trying to say, my love?” Melborne prompted gently.

The duchess’s gaze remained fixed on Sterling. “That Lady Marshall is a proud and steadfast woman. Not in an arrogant way, but in a way that, despite having been married to the heir of the Earl of Whitlow, and now being the mother of the heir to that earldom, she is fully aware of her own lack of social standing and connections. I do not have all the details of your own... friendship with her, Bristol, but from the little I have understood from your conversation with Melborne just now, having the Duke of Bristol demanding to see her the day after she has arrived at and been taken into the sanctuary of her parents’ home would, I fear, be met with a blunt refusal.”

Sterling flinched at the thought of Elizabeth turning away from seeing him again. “What do you suggest I do?”

“Wait a day or two,” she encouraged. “Give Elizabeth time to recover from the long journey and to once again feel safe and loved within the bosom of her family.”

“You think she will then agree to see me?”

The duchess smiled. “I believe by then, when she is no longer fatigued from traveling so far, Elizabeth will at least have had time to gather her thoughts together and to have examined her feelings.”

It was less than ideal, when Sterling wanted nothing more than to see Elizabeth again. To apologize. To grovel, if necessary.

But he also knew Grace Montrose, having been the adopted daughter of a village parson and that gentleman’s helpmate for several years after her mother died, probably knew far better than he did how Elizabeth was feeling.

“I will take your advice and wait before I visit Elizabeth. But only for one day,” he added decisively.

“Perfect,” the duchess approved. “And when you do see her, could you please ask her if I might be allowed to call upon her once she is feeling up to receiving more visitors?”

“After which, we shall invite both of you to dinner, along with the Prince Regent,” Melborne added briskly.

Sterling felt a warmth of emotion in his chest, knowing that a dinner invitation from the Duke and Duchess of Melborne, with Prinny also present,

would act as a social statement to all in Society of their approval of Lady Elizabeth Marshall.

“But for goodness’ sake, make sure the first thing you tell her is what you were doing in Cornwall in the first place,” the duchess cautioned.

“It will be the worse for you if you do not,” Melborne added knowingly.

Sterling nodded. He knew how much trouble Melborne’s and Flint’s initial lack of honesty on that subject had caused between them and their future duchesses.

Whether Elizabeth wished to hear it or not, Sterling intended telling her the whole truth.

Including that he loved her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It felt strange to Elizabeth to be back in her childhood home and occupying the same small bedroom for the past two nights that had been hers through childhood. A small bed for Christopher had been brought in and placed in the corner of the room. Peggy and Mary were sharing one of the servants' rooms in the attic.

So much had happened to Elizabeth since she lived here with her parents and younger sisters. Her elopement. Her years of marriage. The birth of her son. Thomas's death. This past ten months of widowhood under the roof of her begrudging and vicious father-in-law.

Even when in the company of her mother, the two of them seated together in the small family sitting room, Elizabeth still felt a shiver of apprehension and fear run the length of her spine merely thinking of Whitlow.

The five days of travel by coach had been every bit as uncomfortable as Elizabeth had suspected they might, and she had fallen exhausted into a bed at an inn every night.

And for each mile they traveled and each night they rested, Elizabeth had feared the Earl of Whitlow catching up with them and demanding she return to Whitlow Grange, where she would once again become his prisoner. Starved of both affection and sustenance.

Worse, she had feared that Sterling might feel obligated to follow her.

In the same way he believed she had felt *obligated* to make love to him, out of gratitude for his having offered her and her servants refuge from the Earl of Whitlow!

It still pierced her heart to think of Sterling saying those cruel words. In truth, it hurt far worse to think of that than it did to remember the earl's many cruelties.

The lovemaking between herself and Sterling had been...magical, so very erotic, and more arousing and satisfying than anything Elizabeth had ever experienced before.

As she had told Bristol, she did not consider that as being in the least disloyal to Thomas or their marriage bed. They had both been very young when they married, almost shy in their intimacies, and being in the army, Thomas had also been away fighting for months at a time during their short marriage. A circumstance which had not allowed them to build up that ease of intimacy that came in a marriage of longevity and a daily closeness, like that of her parents.

Sterling was neither young nor shy. He was an older and experienced gentleman who had tacitly asked for her permission to deepen their intimacies and then forged ahead with taking them, and Elizabeth, once she gave her permission.

Elizabeth still blushed to think of how Sterling had touched and kissed her so intimately, giving her unimagined pleasure—

“The Duke of Bristol is here to see Lady Marshall, my lady,” Riggs, her parents' butler, announced from the doorway of the sitting room.

As if Elizabeth's thoughts of Sterling had conjured him into being!

“Do you wish to see Bristol?” her mother prompted, aware of Elizabeth's current aversion to receiving any visitors.

Her smile was rueful. “If I do not agree to do so, I have every reason to believe that gentleman will simply demand admittance and barge his way in here.”

Her mother placed her sewing down on the stool beside her. “We are very grateful for the duke's assistance in helping you escape the abuse you suffered in your father-in-law's household, and I am sure your father will wish to thank him for it. But surely Bristol will understand if your father also explains you are not currently feeling up to receiving visitors?”

Her father had done that several times already, both yesterday and again this morning, after several society ladies had called to see her.

Because none of those ladies were close friends of hers, neither Elizabeth nor her parents were under the illusion they wanted anything more than to satisfy their curiosity as to why Elizabeth had returned to London so suddenly.

Those ladies had all, even if in a somewhat disgruntled fashion, according to her father, accepted that Elizabeth was resting and so unavailable to receive visitors.

She knew Bristol would never accept those reasons, but would see them for the dismissal they were.

“I sincerely doubt that, Mama,” Elizabeth stated ruefully. “Do not look so worried. I am sure the duke is only here to reassure himself I have arrived safely back in London.” And perhaps to rebuke her for her hurried and ungrateful departure from Cornwall a week ago.

But her mother didn’t need to hear that. Indeed, Elizabeth had decided that neither of her parents needed to know any more about the events in Cornwall other than the Duke of Bristol was responsible for making it possible for her to escape the Earl of Whitlow’s cruelties to her.

Her parents had only needed to take one look at the now-fading yellow and black bruises on Elizabeth’s face and arms to accept that explanation. They had also expressed their horror, and gently rebuked Elizabeth for not having confided in them before now of the earl’s brutality toward her.

“Please show His Grace into the pink salon.” She had no doubt that the duke would be horrified by the pink-and-cream décor in her parents’ main drawing room. With three women still in the house, her father’s preference in colors had stood little chance of being taken into consideration. “Tell him I will join him momentarily.” Once she had checked and tidied her appearance.

The last thing Elizabeth wanted was to appear less than completely calm and composed when she saw Sterling again.

Sterling was standing beside the window, looking out into the wilderness of the Amesese’s garden, when a movement of the air behind him and the tensing of every muscle in his body told him that Elizabeth had entered the room.

He turned quickly, relieved to see that most of the bruising had faded from the pale delicacy of her skin. She also appeared more composed and at

ease in her parents' home, in a gray gown of brushed silk, and with none of those disturbing shadows present in or beneath her beautiful violet eyes.

Eyes which avoided meeting his as she made a curtsey. "Your Grace."

"Elizabeth." He refused to allow her to treat him as a mere social acquaintance.

She glanced up at him and then away again. "I apologize for the décor in this room. Unfortunately, my mother allowed my two younger sisters to choose the colors," she added with that same indulgence.

Sterling glanced about him, having been too preoccupied when he arrived to notice the shocking predominance of pink in the room. "That is their prerogative."

Elizabeth smiled slightly at his guarded reply before sobering. "I hope the groom I borrowed to drive my carriage back to London has returned safely to your household?"

"He has." At which point, Sterling had quizzed the other man mercilessly for every detail of Elizabeth's journey from Cornwall.

They had indeed taken a circuitous route back to London. One Sterling assumed had been taken in case the Earl of Whitlow decided to pursue Elizabeth. And, he had also been forced to acknowledge, possibly in case *he* had followed her.

"I trust Jimmy is now back with you?" he added lightly.

"He is, thank you."

Sterling had done as the Duchess of Melborne suggested and left it another day before calling upon Elizabeth. During that time, he had arranged for Jimmy to take himself to the Ameses and made himself available as a groom to Elizabeth once again. It would serve to alert her to the fact Sterling had also returned to London.

He hadn't even been sure she would receive him when he called, but now that he was with her again, could look at her, breathe in Elizabeth's unique and alluring perfume, he desperately wanted to once again hold her in his arms. To apologize to her, on his knees, if necessary. He so desperately needed to kiss her. To tell her how much he loved her.

Except Melborne's duchess had warned he should first explain about Plymouth's murder and his own part in hunting for his friend's killer before attempting to tell Elizabeth how he felt about her.

"I have been advised, before I do anything else, that I must tell you the reason for my having gone to Cornwall in the first place," he stated.

Elizabeth eyed him warily. “Advised by whom...?”

“The Duchess of Melborne.”

She appeared shocked. “You have...discussed me, with the Duchess of Melborne?”

“No! Well. Not exactly.” Sterling winced. “I was actually in conversation with her husband when the duchess arrived home from shopping.”

Elizabeth’s eyes now widened incredulously. “You were talking to the Duke of Melborne about me when his wife arrived home and decided to join in the conversation?”

Sterling didn’t like the storm he could see brewing in those beautiful violet eyes. “I was discussing the *situation* with Melborne, and the reason for my going to Cornwall,” he hastily explained. “Have you heard of the six Ruthless Dukes?” he continued before that storm in her eyes had the chance to break and sweep aside all in its path. Including him.

“I have, yes,” she answered tightly.

“Then you also know that one of them, our friend Plymouth, did not return from the battle at Waterloo?”

She nodded. “I am sorry for your loss.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. “What most people do not know is that he was murdered. By one of five English officers also present that day. The five remaining dukes only learned of this very recently, and since then, we have each investigated one of those officers in the hope of finding the murderer.”

Elizabeth frowned. “An English officer killed the Duke of Plymouth?” she repeated slowly.

Sterling nodded. “One of five. Your deceased husband was amongst them.”

Elizabeth stared at the duke without speaking for fully a minute. Initially out of shock at learning such a thing could have happened, followed by disbelief when Bristol stated Thomas was one of the five officers suspected of carrying out the crime.

“Two of the Ruthless Dukes have already cleared two of those officers of any wrongdoing,” he continued. “I was assigned to investigate whether your

husband was responsible.”

“He was not,” Elizabeth denied without hesitation. “Thomas would never have done such a thing. Never,” she repeated for emphasis. “Do not ask me how it is possible when he had such a father, but Thomas was the kindest and gentlest man you could ever wish to meet.” She lifted her chin. “He was incapable of committing murder.”

“He was a soldier, and we all killed when we had to,” Sterling reminded softly.

She widened her eyes. “But not in cold blood. Besides, what possible reason could Thomas have had for doing such a thing?”

The duke shrugged. “The receipt of remuneration for having carried out the deed appears to be the obvious motive.”

Indignant color warmed her cheeks. “We might not possess anything like the obvious wealth of you and all your ducal friends, but neither are we paupers. Thomas would never have accepted money to kill an innocent person.” She frowned. “Do you know who this person is who paid for someone else to carry out such a heinous crime?”

Bristol shrugged. “We still do not know their identity either.”

She gave a disgusted snort. “You prefer instead to go around throwing out wild accusations about someone who is no longer alive to defend himself.”

“No—”

“Yes,” Elizabeth snapped. “Next you will be adding to your recent insults to me by accusing me of having made love with you to divert your attention away from Thomas being guilty of murdering your friend.”

The duke gasped. “I would never—”

“Or, as is more likely”—she glared as her fury increased—“the reason *you* seduced me was for the sole purpose of questioning *me*, during a moment of weakness, in regard to my husband’s possible involvement in your friend’s death.”

Bristol’s brow cleared. “*This* is why the duchess told me I must confess all to you before attempting to tell you how I feel about you.”

“I have no wish to hear another single word you have to say.” Elizabeth’s hands were clenched at her sides, nails digging into her palms. “My only wish is for you to leave and take your disgusting accusations with you.”

“Elizabeth, please, *please* listen to me.” He waited until she had given him her full attention before continuing. “If you say your husband had no involvement in Plymouth’s death, then I believe you.”

She eyed him guardedly. “You do...?”

“Of course.” Bristol nodded. “You knew him better than anyone—” He broke off as the door was thrown open and the little whirlwind that was Elizabeth’s son stormed into the room.

“Peggy, Mary, and I went to the park and fed the ducks, Mama!” Christopher told her excitedly before skidding to a halt on the pale pink carpet, eyes widening as he stared at the Duke of Bristol. “Sterling!” Without further ado, the little boy launched himself into the duke’s arms.

To say Elizabeth was stunned at her son’s ready delight in seeing Bristol again would be seriously understating her reaction. “You must address him as Your Grace, darling,” she gently rebuked her son.

Christopher turned to look at her from where he was now securely held in the Duke of Bristol’s arms. “He said I could call him Sterling. Didn’t you?” He looked at the duke for confirmation.

“I did, Christopher, and so you may.” Bristol’s glance in her direction was challenging.

Elizabeth had witnessed his gentleness with her son on the night she woke and saw him sitting beside her bed in vigil, Christopher snuggled into his arms.

How could she ever forget it, when it was the same moment she realized she had fallen in love with Sterling.

But until now, she hadn’t realized Christopher and Sterling had conversed together. To the extent they seemed to have forged some sort of rapport between them. Christopher certainly showed none of the caution or restraint most people did in regard to the cold and haughty Duke of Bristol, or the aversion Christopher invariably showed toward his paternal grandfather.

“As you wish,” she dismissed. “But I believe the duke was just leaving?” Her gaze challenged him to refuse.

He easily met that challenge. “I believe you were about to offer me refreshment so that we can finish our conversation.”

“If I might speak...?” Peggy, now standing in the doorway, broke in on the ocular battle of wills currently taking place between Elizabeth and the duke. “I chanced upon a gentleman as he approached the house. He asked, if His Grace is here, if he might speak with him. He said it’s important.”

Bristol scowled before reluctantly breaking the deadlock of their gazes to turn toward Peggy. “What did this gentleman look like?”

The maid tilted her head. “Aged fifty or perhaps a little older. Craggy,

with lots of gray in his hair. He's a bit rough-looking, but he spoke politely enough to me."

"Would you be so kind as to take Christopher and ask the butler to bring the other gentleman to us here?" Bristol requested as he bent to place the little boy gently down until he once again stood on the carpet. "We will see each other again later," he promised when the boy pouted. "For now, your mama and I need to speak with our visitor."

"You should not make promises to a child you cannot keep," Elizabeth chided sharply as soon as she and Bristol were alone together.

A part of her was deeply disturbed by his use of the word "our." Disturbed, but there was also the thrill of butterflies fluttering in her chest at the thought of there ever being an "our" between her and Sterling.

She might be angry with him, furious, in fact, and much as she might wish it were otherwise, it did not seem to have lessened her other feelings for him.

Feelings he had moments ago seemed about to admit he felt for her...

"I assure you, I never break my promises," Sterling stated firmly now.

There was no time for Elizabeth to question him further on the subject as her parents' butler showed in the second visitor of the morning. The gentleman was exactly as Peggy had described him. But, Elizabeth noted when he looked at her, he also had very kind blue eyes.

"Lady Marshall." He offered her a formal bow.

"Elizabeth, this is Mr. James Stanley," Bristol introduced briskly. "Stanley was formerly valet to my friend, the Duke of Plymouth, and he is now helping us to investigate that gentleman's murder."

She nodded acknowledgment of the introduction, even if she had absolutely no idea how this man had known to look for Bristol at her parents' home. She did not have long to wait for an explanation.

"I am very sorry to intrude in this way, my lady, but His Grace was not at home when I called at Bristol House, and the matter I have to discuss with him is urgent." He turned to Bristol. "Your household staff did not know where you were, but when I call upon the Duke of Lincoln, his valet told me that the duke was at his club, partaking of luncheon with the Duke of Melborne. The second gentleman told me that he thought I might find the Duke of Bristol here." Mr. Stanley seemed relieved to have finished his convoluted explanation.

An explanation which had, unfortunately, brought about a return of

Elizabeth's anger.

Bristol had already admitted to her that he had *discussed* her with his friends, the Duke and Duchess of Melborne. No doubt the *duke*, in turn, had now discussed her with the Duke of Lincoln too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sterling knew by the sudden glitter in Elizabeth's eyes and the tightening of her jaw that she was not pleased by Stanley's explanation for being here.

He, on the other hand, sincerely hoped that Stanley had sought him out because he had discovered something which might help to eliminate Lord Thomas Marshall as a possible suspect for Plymouth's murder.

Not that it would make the slightest difference to how Sterling felt about Elizabeth if there should prove to be no such evidence. She, after all, was not her husband, nor could she be held accountable for his deeds.

Yes, it might prove awkward in future with the other Ruthless Dukes if Elizabeth's husband was shown to be Plymouth's murderer. But the possibility of damaging those long friendships would not affect Sterling's love for Elizabeth. Or his determination to keep her and Christopher safe, whether it was at her side or otherwise.

The way in which Christopher had run to him so trustingly a few minutes ago had made it clear to Sterling that he now loved both mother and son. That nothing, not even if Marshall should prove guilty of killing Plymouth, would ever change that.

Sterling was not only a man of his word, he was also a man whose affections, once given, did not falter. He loved his cousin Gwen and her family. His affections for the other Ruthless Dukes had always been

steadfast.

But he would feel no hesitation in choosing Elizabeth and her son over all those friendships, if it became necessary.

“Tell us what it is you needed to discuss with me so urgently, Stanley,” he invited. “You may speak freely, I have no secrets from Lady Marshall in this matter,” he encouraged when Stanley glanced toward her.

“Would you care for some refreshment first, Mr. Stanley, after what appears to have been your mad dash about London?” Elizabeth offered, seeming to have remembered her manners.

Stanley grinned. “His Grace, the Duke of Melborne, was kind enough to give me a glass of brandy before I left his club to come here.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth smiled. “Then a cup of tea would only be mild fare in comparison.”

“Could we get back to the matter at hand?” Sterling snapped, annoyed—jealous?—of the pleasant tone of the conversation between Elizabeth and James Stanley.

Immediately followed by Sterling feeling utterly ridiculous for feeling jealous of the warmth Elizabeth was showing toward the older man. Elizabeth was the most gracious, the most caring woman he had ever met.

Except, and hopefully it would be for only a short time, when it came to him.

“Of course.” Stanley gave him a grimace in apology. “Before I begin my explanation, there are two things I think you should know, Your Grace. First, the young Duke of Plymouth was chatting with the dukes Melborne and Lincoln when I found them.”

It was far from ideal when Robert Granger, Plymouth’s heir to the title of duke, was one of the men who might have paid one of the English officers to attack and kill their friend Plymouth.

“I didn’t say anything out of turn,” Stanley assured. “Only that—Your Grace, despite what you advised to the contrary, the Earl of Whitlow and my men you left watching him in Cornwall all arrived back in London early this morning.”

Sterling felt the anger explode in his chest. He could also sense Elizabeth’s tension, and see how her cheeks had paled simply from knowing her father-in-law was now in the same city as she was.

Stanley nodded. “I realize that could seem less than agreeable on the face of things, but I think once I’ve imparted my other news that you will see it as

being fortuitous that he is so close by.”

The grimness of Stanley’s expression did not bode well for whatever he was about to impart.

“With the help of my nephew-in-law, who’s a law clerk,” the older man continued, “I was able to discover where the earl’s sudden windfall of money ten months ago came from.” He shot Elizabeth an apologetic glance. “According to records kept, Lord Thomas Marshall inherited a large sum of money left to him in trust by his maternal grandfather on the event of his twenty-fifth birthday.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Thomas died only days after we had celebrated that birthday.” Her lashes were lowered, preventing Sterling from seeing her eyes. But the slight tremor in her voice told him she was on the verge of tears from talk of her husband’s death.

Sterling frowned his confusion. “Why, when you had your husband’s money at your disposal for the past ten months, have you continued to live in your father-in-law’s household and suffer his verbal and physical abuse?”

She gave a quick glance toward Stanley before looking down again. “He told me I could leave any time I wished, but that he would not allow me to take Christopher with me. Besides, Thomas’s inheritance passed to the earl after his son’s death.”

Dear God.

Stanley gave a snort of disgust. “The terms of Lord Marshall’s newly written will stated otherwise.”

“The only will Thomas left was drawn up when he joined the army and before we were married. It stated that his father inherited all his possession,” Elizabeth explained.

“I assure I am telling you the truth when I state that your husband had made a new will, and had it witnessed, the same day on which he died.”

She looked less certain. “No...”

“Would I be correct in stating that Lord Marshall’s lawyer died at about the same time he did?” Stanley prompted lightly.

Dear Lord, this was worse, so much worse than Sterling could ever have imagined.

Elizabeth nodded. “The same day. In a carriage accident,” she confirmed. “He had been visiting with us at the Whitlow estate on the coast in Kent. He came to discuss the details and to transfer the funds of Thomas’s inheritance. Unfortunately, Mr. Shaeffer’s carriage crashed over a cliff on his way back to

London, killing him instantly. He had his clerk with him, and I believe he was seriously injured.”

Stanley seemed to be searching for the right words to say so as not to offend. Rightly so, because Sterling would not hear a single word of reproach said to Elizabeth for her lack of knowledge regarding legal matters.

It was a sad fact that many ladies of Society were not made privy to such knowledge, or anything to do with their husband’s or father’s business either. Sterling did not agree with the practice, he only knew it to be the case. He also knew that neither of his two newly married friends were allowed to get away with such condescending behavior toward their duchesses. And rightly so.

“You did not think the lawyer’s death on the same day as you lost your husband to be...a strange coincidence?” Stanley prompted gently.

“I am afraid I was not thinking of much at all so soon after Thomas had died,” she acknowledged heavily. “I was saddened to hear of Mr. Shaeffer’s death, of course, and I feel regret now that I did not check as to the health of his clerk after he returned to London. My only excuse is that at the time, my immediate concern was for Christopher. He was inconsolable at knowing he would not see his father again.” Her chin wobbled as she continued to hold back the tears. “As was I.”

“Understandably,” Stanley sympathized.

“But I am sure there was no mention of a copy of Thomas’s new will being found amongst the wreckage of the lawyer’s carriage.” A frown creased Elizabeth’s brow. “As a result, my father-in-law took possession of all Thomas’s funds.”

Sterling’s anger grew with each new revelation of the situation.

Because even if no will had existed, Thomas Marshall’s inheritance should have at least been put in trust for his son, Christopher. Or alternatively used to support both his widow and his son after Marshall’s death. There was no reason for it to have reverted to his father, the earl.

“I understand the signed and duly witnessed will was left in your husband’s possession,” Stanley continued.

Elizabeth frowned. “Understand from whom?”

“Mr. Shaeffer’s clerk’s recovery was a long and slow one, but he did recover,” Stanley assured. “He is now back at work and one of my nephew-by-marriage’s closest friends. Because of the circumstances of the accident and those months of nothing to do but think as he recovered, the clerk clearly

remembers the existence of your husband's will."

"Thomas did not mention..." Elizabeth swallowed, her expression becoming one of indulgence. "He had been recovering for the previous two months from a wound he received at Waterloo. I remember that the doctor had also called that morning and given Thomas permission to go out riding his horse again. Thomas was so excited that he went to the stables immediately after the lawyer's departure. He made no mention to me before he went riding of having made a new will, and I—I never saw him alive again."

Stanley shot Sterling a pointed glance, alerting him to the fact that what he was about to reveal was going to be either a shock or be deeply hurtful to Elizabeth, or both.

"The clerk also remembers the contents of the will," the older man stated softly.

"Which were?" Elizabeth prompted curiously.

It sounded more and more to Sterling as if there was a possibility Whitlow might have killed his own son and the family lawyer so that he might purloin his son's inheritance and cover up the crime. After which he had made his daughter-in-law's life a living hell for the following ten months, perhaps with the ultimate goal of killing her too. He had certainly begrudged her every morsel of food which passed her lips. Plus he had merely stood and watched a week ago as she fell down the stairs after he had hit her.

Stanley was correct in that it could indeed prove fortuitous that Whitlow was back in London if it became necessary to arrest him for the murder of Thomas Marshall and the lawyer, along with his attempted murder of the law clerk and Elizabeth.

Sterling crossed the room to stand beside her. Whether she wished for his support or not, she had it, and always would.

Elizabeth's head was awash with all the information Mr. Stanley had just imparted to her.

It did not seem possible...

But *if* these things were true, then...

She gripped her hands together in front of her to prevent anyone from

seeing how much they were trembling. "Please continue, Mr. Stanley," she invited gruffly.

After the briefest of glances in the Duke of Bristol's direction, the ex-valet duly did so. "Lord Thomas Marshall inherited one hundred thousand pounds on the event of his fifth-and-twentieth birthday. A veritable fortune," he acknowledged when Elizabeth gasped. "In his will, he left the sum of forty thousand pounds to his widow. The rest of his fortune of sixty thousand pounds was to be invested and put in trust for his son, Christopher. Mr. Shaeffer was named as trustee. Once Christopher reached the age of one and twenty, the bulk of the fortune would continue to accrue interest, and Christopher would receive five thousand pounds annually from the profit of those investments."

Sixty thousand pounds for Christopher.

Another forty thousand pounds for her.

It *was* a fortune.

More money than Elizabeth had thought existed, let alone ever thought to possess.

She reached out blindly to clasp the back of an armchair to prevent her shaking knees from buckling, even as she continued to tremble.

"Elizabeth!" Bristol voiced his concern.

"Please do not." She held up her other hand to stop him coming any closer, afraid she might shatter and break altogether if he touched her in anything remotely resembling tenderness.

She was desperately trying to come to terms with the possibility that for all these months, she had been living in misery and completely under her father-in-law's cruel thumb, when all the time, Thomas had left her the funds by which she could have set up her own household and remained completely independent of Whitlow's charity.

Those funds would have given her the means to legally fight any attempt Whitlow made to take Christopher away from her.

Christopher would have been a very wealthy young man by the time he reached his majority.

Most important was that Thomas *had* made provision for both of them after all, even if he had not taken the time to tell her as much before he went out riding that day.

The reason why Elizabeth and Christopher had not received that inheritance was perfectly clear.

The person who *had* prevented that from happening patently obvious.

She looked searchingly at Sterling, seeing only compassion and understanding in those pale green eyes. “The earl took possession of Thomas’s will and stole those funds for himself.”

“Yes,” Sterling agreed.

“Do you think he—he might have killed Thomas as well as the lawyer?” Such a thought was abhorrent to her. But she no longer believed her father-in-law incapable of performing any atrocity.

“There would have been little point in killing the lawyer and stealing Thomas’s will if he had not also...removed his son,” Sterling acknowledged.

As Elizabeth had thought. “It was because you knew of the existence of Thomas’s funds, but not their origin, that made you think Thomas might have been involved in your friend’s murder?”

“Yes.”

She released a shaky breath. “In that case, I owe you an apology.”

Sterling looked startled.

Elizabeth gave a firm nod. “What else could you have thought in the circumstances?”

His expression was pained. “I could have given your husband the benefit of the doubt.”

“I believe you did when you decided to go to Cornwall to investigate further rather than jumping to conclusions.” She smiled sadly. “I was the one who overreacted and refused to listen to you.” She turned to Mr. Stanley. “Are there any of those funds remaining?” Thomas had complained to her several times of his father’s ill luck with investments.

The older man grimaced. “Roughly half.”

In the circumstances, it was much more than Elizabeth could ever have hoped for.

She looked at Bristol once again. “Do you think my father-in-law destroyed Thomas’s will?”

“I would have in his position.”

“Ah, but you are not in the least like the calculating and heartless Earl of Whitlow,” she dismissed without hesitation. “He is the sort of man who would enjoy sitting and gloating as he read the contents of Thomas’s will, in the knowledge that I believed myself penniless and so trapped into living with him and withstanding his cruelty to me until Christopher reached his majority and we might both leave his household.”

“I believe you know the man far better than I do,” Sterling conceded.

Yes, she did, and now that she knew more of the facts, she believed Whitlow to be more than capable of killing his own son in order to make himself a wealthy man.

She nodded. “In that case, I believe the will still exists. Whitlow House is the earl’s preferred residence, and if there is a will, then it will be locked in the safe behind the picture on the wall in Whitlow’s study.”

“In that case, we must lose no more time in going to Whitlow House.” Bristol turned to the older man. “Did you impart any or all of the known facts to Melborne and Lincoln?”

The other man nodded. “I thought it best, despite the presence of young Plymouth. I hope I did right in doing so.”

“You did,” he confirmed grimly. “No doubt they will have dismissed Granger and by now have informed the Prince Regent. He, in turn, will have made arrangements to have the earl brought in for questioning,” he approved before looking at Elizabeth once again. “I trust you will excuse us? It is time for Mr. Stanley and I, no doubt with the dukes Melborne and Lincoln and the Prince Regent’s envoy, to pay the Earl of Whitlow a visit.”

“I am coming with you,” Elizabeth said without hesitation.

“No—”

“Yes,” she stated firmly. “After the way I have suffered at that man’s hands, I wish to be present when he is made aware that he will no longer escape punishment for the murder of his own son and Mr. Shaeffer.” Elizabeth was not a vindictive person, but in this matter, she would not be gainsaid.

The Earl of Whitlow must be made to pay for his crimes, and Elizabeth intended to stand as witness to that happening.

She glanced shyly at Sterling. “After—afterward, I would appreciate it if the two of us might...talk together privately for a few moments.”

Sterling looked at her searchingly for several moments before finally nodding. “Of course, if that is your wish.”

“It is.” The least Elizabeth owed Sterling was a heartfelt apology—the one she had already given him had been cursory at best.

Anything else must be decided between the two of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What do you want, Bristol—” The mocking smile disappeared from the lips of the Earl of Whitlow the moment he saw there were six people waiting for him in the sitting room of Whitlow House rather than just the Duke of Bristol, as he had been informed.

“I don’t fink so,” the earl was assured by one of the two men who had come up behind him to take a grip of the older man’s arms and prevent him as he would have turned tail and run. “In ya go.” The two of them manhandled a struggling Whitlow into the room where four dukes, Lady Elizabeth Marshall, and Mr. Stanley, all stood waiting.

As Sterling had thought might be the case, by the time he and Elizabeth, along with Mr. Stanley, had arrived by carriage at Whitlow House, Melborne and Lincoln were also there. They had been accompanied by Robert Granger, their friend Plymouth’s heir.

Sterling, like the other Ruthless Dukes, had little time for Granger, who was ten years their junior and something of a fop. The clothing he wore today, a pale blue superfine, red waistcoat, white pantaloons, and a paisley patterned neckcloth in several shades of green, was testament to that. His dark hair was also far longer than was fashionable.

Melborne had taken Sterling briefly aside and explained that he and the other Ruthless Dukes had decided Granger’s stubborn insistence in

accompanying them would give them all the perfect opportunity to observe Granger's reaction to knowing his cousin, Spencer Granger, the previous Duke of Plymouth, had been murdered.

Sterling could find no argument with that.

Those three dukes were accompanied by two other men, sent by the Prince Regent, Melborne also explained, who were instructed to arrest the Earl of Whitlow and bring him in for questioning.

"Unhand me, you oafs!" Whitlow wrenched his arms free of those men before turning to scowl. "Perhaps you might care to explain why I have three of Prinny's lackeys in my sitting room and a brightly colored peacock?" His gaze raked scathingly over Robert Granger.

"We're hardly that," Lincoln dismissed. "And you have not been granted the privilege of addressing him as Prinny."

"You are right. Popinjay is a far better name for him," the earl derided.

"I trust you two gentlemen are listening to all of this?" Melborne drawled. "That you will duly pass the comments along to your employer?"

"Their employer?" Whitlow prompted sharply.

One of the unnamed gentlemen puffed out his chest. "We 'as the *privilege* of being employed by, and on the business of, 'Is Majesty, the Prince Regent."

Whitlow swallowed audibly before turning his accusing gaze upon the only woman in the room. "I might have known you would find your way back into Bristol's bed at the earliest opportunity. I warned Thomas you were no better than a who—" The rest of the word was cut off by Sterling's fist making contact with the earl's chin, knocking the older man to the carpeted floor.

Sterling stood over him. "*You* are nothing more than a murderer and a thief and therefore unworthy of even breathing the same air as Elizabeth."

The earl wiped the blood from his lips as he rose slowly back to his feet. "I have done nothing more than try to enforce good manners and breeding into the gel."

Sterling eyed him with distaste. "You have beaten, and half-starved her. We had thought you might also have received remuneration for arranging to have our friend Plymouth murdered at Waterloo. Not now, Granger," he bit out as the younger man gasped before taking a threatening step toward Whitlow.

A shocked visceral reaction that proved his innocence in his cousin's

murder?

Hardly, but it was a start.

The younger man gave him a narrow-eyed glare which promised further conversation on this subject, but otherwise remained silent.

“We have since learned,” Sterling continued firmly, “that you committed filicide by murdering your own son. You also killed his lawyer. All so that you might steal your son’s inheritance.” It was a bold accusation to have made so soon into the conversation, but Sterling really had no stomach for bandying words with a man as despicable as Whitlow.

Whitlow’s head reared back. “You cannot prove—”

Mr. Stanley spoke up. “I assure you, *I* have gathered all the evidence necessary, including an eyewitness, for you to be charged and found guilty of all your crimes.”

“There was no eyewitness,” Whitlow dismissed triumphantly.

“Mr. Shaeffer’s clerk did not succumb to his injuries, dire as they were,” Mr. Stanley took pleasure in informing him. “He recalls recognizing a man on horseback seconds before their coach was run off the road. You were the man he saw.”

“I was told there were no survivors,” Whitlow accused.

“That is probably because, to a man like you, your informant would not have thought you would be in the least interested in whether a mere clerk had lived or died,” Mr. Stanley derided.

The earl gave them all a scathing glance. “You have no proof that any of what you are accusing me of took place.”

“We have the proof of Thomas’s will,” Elizabeth assured.

“I doubt that.”

“Because you have it locked away in the safe in your study?” Elizabeth said knowingly.

“Hold your tongue, missy—” The earl broke off the moment he realized what he had done, because Elizabeth, the woman he utterly despised, had challenge him so boldly.

Elizabeth turned to Sterling. “It is exactly as I thought, and the earl has kept Thomas’s will here in the safe in his study.”

“To which only I have the key,” the earl announced triumphantly.

“It is a long and tedious journey from Cornwall to London,” Elizabeth said evenly. “Long hours and days when there is little to do except sleep and have the occasional conversation with fellow travelers.”

“I believe you must have completely lost your mind, gel, to be talking of long journeys and conversations at such a time,” Whitlow scorned.

“Not at all.” She looked at him coldly. “During one of those conversations, Peggy told me how you always keep a key on a gold chain about your throat.” Her top lip curled back with disgust. “We are all now familiar with the circumstances under which she came to know that.”

“Gentlemen.” Sterling nodded to the two men standing in the doorway. “If you would care to retrieve the key so we can examine the contents of the earl’s safe?” The mere thought of having to touch such a noxious person as the Earl of Whitlow made Sterling feel ill.

“You have no right—” The earl’s protest fell short, and he visibly blanched when one of the Prince Regent’s men placed his arm about him to hold him still while his companion pulled the chain and key into view. He then wrenched it from about the older man’s neck. “You will pay for having these louts lay their hands upon me,” Whitlow shouted wildly when one of the men continued to hold him.

Elizabeth stepped forward. “To dislike me is one thing, but to kill you own son is beyond understanding.”

The earl snorted. “Then he should not have married a woman of such low social standing completely against my wishes.” His sly gaze moved to Sterling. “And if you think the toplofty Duke of Bristol will ever offer you marriage, then you will wait in vain. A man such as him does not marry a woman like you!”

“You—”

“Do not allow him to rile you, Sterling.” Elizabeth soothed his outburst before her gaze hardened as she once again looked at her erstwhile father-in-law. “Neither I nor anyone else in the room has the least interest in hearing anything else you have to say.” Her nostrils flared. “But I want you to know that only when the hangman places that noose about your throat will I be satisfied you are paying the price of your own life for having murdered Thomas and Mr. Shaeffer.”

Whitlow’s face had turned a sickly gray. “They wouldn’t dare hang me.”

Melborne chuckled. “On the contrary, we are all looking forward to when you piss your pants—excuse my crudeness, Lady Elizabeth—before the rope is even placed about your throat.”

“Fucking bastards, the lot of you—”

“I believe we have heard enough,” Sterling stated. “Take him outside,

please, gentlemen.” He nodded as he was handed the chain and key. “We will join you once we have collected Lord Marshall’s will from his father’s safe.”

The earl continued to shout and protest as he was dragged away.

Utterly meaningless protests once Lord Thomas Marshall’s will, dated before his death on the same day ten months ago, was found inside the Earl of Whitlow’s safe. Just as Elizabeth had suspected it might be. It had been legalized and duly signed by Mr. Shaeffer and his clerk.

“You believe my coz to have been murdered?” Granger asked once they were all gathered outside Whitlow House.

“Yes,” Melborne confirmed with his usual bluntness.

The young man nodded. “And is it possible, from some of the strange looks and remarks several of you have given and made to me these past few months, that you suspect *I* might have had something to do with his murder?”

Sterling inwardly acknowledged that although Granger might look like a fop, he obviously had an astute brain beneath the appearance which implied the contrary.

“As Plymouth’s heir, you were, still are, considered a likely candidate, yes,” Lincoln confirmed.

“Excellent.” Granger’s sarcastic tone implied the opposite, the hardness of his gaze sweeping over all of them. “I would never have killed, or arranged to have killed, a man I admired and loved as much as I did my cousin Spencer. Indeed, until this moment, I had considered you all gentlemen to be admired.” He placed his hat angrily on his head. “I wish you luck in your future endeavors to find the real culprit. In the meantime, I shall be carrying out my own investigation. Spencer was, after all, a member of *my* family not yours.”

“Granger—”

“In future, you will address me as either Plymouth or Your Grace,” the younger man told them coldly before striding off down the street.

“I still think he could have done it,” Melborne broke into the silence that ensued.

“Time will tell,” Lincoln dismissed. “In the meantime, we have the Earl of Whitlow to deliver to the authorities.”

Sterling nodded. “I have to admit, I will not feel easy until he has been safely locked away in a cage for the rest of his short life.”

“That did not feel quite as satisfying as I had thought it would,” Elizabeth admitted dully several hours later once she was again seated in the small family salon in her parents’ home.

“Possibly because even though the earl is now in custody awaiting his trial, Thomas and Mr. Shaeffer are still dead,” Sterling acknowledged gently as he stood across the room near the window looking out onto the street below. “You also suffered ten months of hell at that monster’s hands.”

She gave a shiver merely thinking of how she had been living at the complete mercy of a murderer for those same ten months. He’d been like a malicious cat playing with a defenseless mouse.

Christopher had been living with him too.

Which terrified her even more. What if—

“It will not do to dwell on it,” Sterling advised huskily when he must have seen her shiver. “The past is over. Now you must concentrate on your own and Christopher’s future happiness.”

A future Elizabeth, despite Whitlow’s taunts earlier, had absolutely no illusions would ever include Sterling.

She might now be a wealthy woman, but in London society, wealth did not represent social status or breeding.

Whitlow was right, the most she could ever be to Sterling was a mistress. If he still wanted her at all. But even if he did, Elizabeth could not allow it. Christopher must be her priority now.

Difficult enough for him that his grandfather had now been charged with murdering his son, Christopher’s own father, and another gentleman. There must never be the single whiff of a scandal attached to his mother’s name—

“A future I am hoping will include me?”

Elizabeth looked across the room at Sterling, easily noting the earnestness of his expression. “I can never repay you, and will be forever grateful to you for helping Christopher and me to escape the clutches of that monster.” A cold shiver traveled the length of her spine at their lucky escape. An instinctive reaction she hoped would lessen over time.

Sterling winced. “That did not answer my question.”

Elizabeth lowered her lashes. “I shall, of course, be grateful for any and all assistance you might wish to render us. If it is only by tacit acknowledgment of me if we should happen to be at the same social gathering.”

“Elizabeth—”

“But never think I would reproach you if you do not.” She gave the ghost of a smile. “Considering my own background”—she glanced pointedly at their cramped quarters—“along with the revelation of my father-in-law’s heinous behavior, I am sure your future duchess will want nothing to do with one such as me, nor be agreeable to her husband doing so either.”

“She will if you are that duchess.”

Elizabeth reared back, her eyes wide. “Sterling...?”

He crossed the room in three long strides before going down on his knees beside the chair in which Elizabeth sat. Her face was pale, those violet eyes dark.

He drew both her hands between his. “Elizabeth, I would deem it the greatest honor of my life if you would agree to become my wife, my duchess, mother of our future children, and allow me the privilege of becoming your husband and Christopher’s father.”

“I— But—” She shook her head. “Your family and friends, the other Ruthless Dukes, would never accept me.”

Sterling kept a tight hold of her hand. “My only family is my cousin, Gwen, and I already know the two of you will become the best of friends. The rest of the Ruthless Dukes are already aware of my feelings for you and look forward, if you will have me, to welcoming you into our small circle. Indeed, I already have an invitation for us to dine with the Duke and Duchess of Melborne. An evening when I am assured they intend for the Prince Regent to also be present.”

To be entertained socially by such illustrious members of Society as the Duke and Duchess of Melborne, with the Prince Regent also in attendance, would, Elizabeth knew, ensure she was accepted by all in Society.

“You do not have to marry me to be given that invitation,” Sterling assured quickly when she made no reply. “The duchess assures me the two of you are already acquainted and that she likes you very much.”

Elizabeth had met the duchess several times at the charitable orphanage where they both offered their services to assist with the children. Elizabeth liked the other woman too. But that acquaintance had been before Grace married the Duke of Melborne.

Before the Duke of Bristol, Sterling, learned how brutally Elizabeth had been treated by her disgraced father-in-law.

She raised her chin as she met Sterling’s gaze. “Why?”

He looked puzzled. “Why what?”

“Why do you wish to marry me?”

Sterling stared at her for several long seconds before wincing. “Damn it, I omitted to mention the most important part of my proposal.” His hands tightened about hers. “Forgive me, Elizabeth, I am unaccustomed to talking of my feelings. I love you,” he stated emotionally. “I love everything and all about you, from the top of your golden head to the soles of your pretty feet. I love Christopher too, and would deem it the greatest honor if I you would allow me to become your husband and his father,” he added so she should be left in absolutely no doubt on that matter either.

She seemed stunned speechless for several seconds, her throat moving as she swallowed, those violet eyes awash with tears. “I love you too, Sterling, but I never believed... Never thought... Are you sure you wish to marry me?” she asked, voicing her uncertainty.

“Very, very sure,” he confirmed fiercely. “I love you so very much, and I intend to tell you that every day for the rest of our lives, if you will have me,” he assured as he moved so that he was now down on only one knee. “Darling Elizabeth, will you please marry me and make me the happiest man on earth?”

“Yes,” she cried as those tears cascaded over her lashes and down her cheeks. “Yes, yes, yes!” She threw herself into his arms.

Which was exactly where Sterling intended her to remain for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One year later

“I am telling you all will be well,” Melborne assured. He sat and watched Sterling pace up and down the drawing room where they awaited news from upstairs of Elizabeth giving birth to their first child.

The Duchess of Melborne and Sterling’s cousin, Gwen, were with Elizabeth, those three ladies having become fast friends. The doctor and Peggy were also in attendance.

Sterling rounded on his friend. “You cannot possibly know that.”

“Next to Grace, Elizabeth is the strongest woman I know,” Melborne admired before sobering. “She had to be with that monster for a father-in-law.”

The eleventh Earl of Whitlow had duly met his demise at the end of a rope only weeks after being arrested.

The twelfth Earl of Whitlow, five-year-old Christopher, was currently upstairs in the nursery with Mary, his nursemaid, awaiting news of his new brother or sister.

“And if I lost Elizabeth, I should not wish to live,” Sterling admitted bleakly.

The past year of having Elizabeth as his wife and Christopher as his son had been the happiest Sterling had ever known. He could not even tolerate *thinking* of a future without her and Christopher.

“You will not lose her—” Melborne broke off, both men turning toward the door as it was flung open and a flushed, disheveled, and obviously pregnant Peggy—she and Jimmy had married only a week after Sterling and Elizabeth—stood in the doorway. The weak sound of an infant crying could be heard in the distance.

“Elizabeth...?” Sterling choked.

“Waiting to see you upstairs, Your Grace,” the young woman beamed.

“Go to her, man,” Melborne encouraged.

Sterling gave Peggy’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze as he rushed from the room and up the stairs, barely acknowledging Gwen and the duchess as they stood in the hallway outside the bedchamber, the doctor with them.

It was the same bedchamber Sterling and Elizabeth slept in together every night, neither of them wishing to be apart from the other even for a night. Their dressing rooms were on either side of that main room.

His beloved Elizabeth had insisted on giving birth in the same bedchamber in which their son or daughter had been conceived.

Elizabeth smiled at her husband as he stumbled into the bedchamber. He looked less than his usually sartorial self, his face pale, his hair in disarray, his neckcloth askew. “All is well,” she hastened to assure him. “Come and say hello to your son and daughter.” She indicated the two tiny babies she held, wrapped in a warm blanket, one in each arm.

“My—” Sterling choked, his face becoming even paler.

Elizabeth’s smile was wide with her happiness. “We have given Christopher a brother and a sister, my love. We have another son, and we also have a daughter.”

Tears cascaded unashamedly down her husband’s cheeks as he leaned over to look at the two sleeping babies. “Are they both well? Are *you* well?” He looked at her anxiously.

“We are all perfectly well and happy, my darling,” Elizabeth assured, knowing it was true.

Because they were, and always would be, with Sterling to love and protect them.

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Carole Mortimer is a USA Today Bestselling Author and recipient of the RWA Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award 2015, RT Career Achievement Award 2017, RT Pioneer for Romance Award 2014. She was also recognized by Queen Elizabeth II in 2012 for her 'outstanding service to literature'. Carole has written over 275 contemporary, Regency and paranormal romance novels.

She is happily married to Peter. They have 6 sons, and live on the beautiful Isle of Man. She also loves to hear from Readers!

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