



**WHEN ONCE UPON A TIME
BECOMES TWICE UPON A MIDNIGHT...**

Enjoy this special sneak peek!

Spenser Rhodes forges an invitation to the Duke of Durham's ball because he's tired of being excluded from society. But when he's found out, he has no choice but to leave—quickly—through the rear gardens, where he runs—literally—into the most alluring woman he's ever met, one whose soul is as poetic as his and whose identity is just as unknown...

“You *are* beautiful, Ella,” Spenser murmured and smoothed both his hands over her cheeks until he cupped her face between his palms. “So very special.” He lowered his mouth and murmured against her lips, “You have no idea how much.”

This time when he kissed her, there was no teasing, no hesitation. He captured her mouth possessively beneath his, and when she opened to him, he slid his tongue wickedly inside to claim all of her kiss. Her slender arms snaked up to encircle his neck, and her soft body pressed into his in a silent plea to increase the intimacy of their embrace. He did exactly that by sliding his tongue over hers in wanton encouragement to do the same to him, and when she did, his heart nearly soared out of his chest.

Until it came crashing down when she whispered, “Spenser...”

The name she thought was as false as his mask. But he could never tell her his true identity. She would have laughed, and the sound would have simply killed him.

With his eyes screwed shut, he broke the embrace. He rested his forehead against hers while he caught back the breath she'd stolen, while he tamped down his attraction for her which had him wanting to do anything but stop kissing her.

“You need to go back inside now,” he said quietly. And *he* needed to find his way back to his normal life, one that didn't include intelligent, beautiful women like Ella.

She stepped back. “I don't want to.”

“I'm sure you're being missed.”

At that dismissal, the wounded look on her face nearly undid him. “Do you regret spending time with me?”

“No.” *God no.*

“Kissing me, then?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then why—”

A loud boom reverberated through the park beyond the stone wall beside them, followed by a bright burst of red. Around them, the garden suddenly came to life with

showers of sparks arching up in fountains of red and blue flames. Cheers went up from the guests who spilled out onto the terrace and down onto the lawn to watch the display.

“It’s midnight,” she explained, looking high into the sky as rockets roared overhead to strains of “Rule Britannia” played by the orchestra. Then she gave him a look somewhere between uncertainty and anticipation. “Time to remove our masks.”

Time to pay the piper... He drew a deep breath. “Ella, I need to ex—”

“There! There he is!”

The light of the bursting fireworks had lit the shadows around them and revealed them to the butler and a footman. The angry butler pointed at Spenser, and the footman charged toward him across the garden.

“My lord!” the butler shouted. “I must speak with you regarding your invitation!”

Spenser blew out a low curse. He gave her a last, longing look, then said sadly, “Goodbye, Ella.”

“Don’t go,” she protested, reaching for his arm. “You can—”

He placed a quick kiss to her lips, then turned and leapt over the wall into the park. He had to leave. *Now*. The last way he wanted her to remember him was as an uninvited trespasser being dragged out of the party. A fraud. A man led away in disgrace. Or worse—the unwanted stepson of the Duke of Pensworth.

As he dropped into the darkness beyond the garden wall, he caught a last glimpse of her bending down to pick up his dropped glove.