Chapter Nineteen

The rain finally ceased some time before midnight. Haughton looked up from his desk, surprised to find that the steady patter of drops against the window had stopped, and the room quickly taking on a stagnant kind of warmth, though the fire was in dire need of attention.

His chair scraped loudly on the floor as he pushed it back and stood up. He undid the complicated knot of his neckcloth in a few swi tugs, the o ending fabric ending up in a crumpled heap on a nearby bookshelf as he walked towards the window nearest his desk. A click, a so whine from the wet hinges, and he looked out on the narrow stretch of garden lit by the glow of various candles and lamps from behind him.

With both hands gripping the windowsill, he leaned forward, stretching the muscles of his back and upper shoulders while he breathed in the mingled scents of rain and lavender and greenery. Only a fortnight back in town and already he was tired of the smoke and stench of the place. For these few brief moments, a er the rain had washed the air clean, he could imagine that he was back at Denton Castle, with the windows of his bedroom flung open every night and the buzz of insects and the chirp of birds announcing the start of every day.

Two weeks, he thought. He ran a hand across his forehead, sweeping his hair back from his brow. An entire fortnight in London, attending to business and meetings and Parliament and more business should have been enough to sweep all thoughts of Sophia from his mind. Bess had said she would write to her, would make all the arrangements with Sophia about future visits, about the possibility of her and George eventually making Denton Castle their home. He had le the matter in his sister's capable hands, and that should have been the end of it. At least until the time came to sort out such things as the child's education and the purchase of the boy's first horse.

Haughton tilted his head back and listened to the sounds of the house around him, a house already gone to bed for the night. Should he need anyone, he could ring and someone would rush to do his bidding at a moment's notice. But for now, he heard the ticking of various clocks, the scuttle of mice behind the moulding, and the so creak of the building as it settled into its foundation.

What he needed...

He pushed himself away from the window and strode to the other side of the room. What he needed was to stop thinking about Sophia Brixton. There would be no happy ending there. She didn't care much for him as a person, that much was clear, though they had at least managed to arrive at a point in their acquaintance where every conversation didn't eventually dissolve into an argument. But she would never accept him as a suitor, and that was even if the notion of presenting himself as one would develop beyond the point of mere fantasy.

He picked up the brandy decanter, hesitated for a moment, and then set in down in favor of the whiskey instead. He pulled out the stopper and was about to pour himself a rather large portion when the distinct sound of a carriage pulling up to the front of the house—unusually loud against the silence around him—caught his attention. Only a few seconds later, a loud, insistent pounding began on the door, and he sent a sharp, brief curse up towards the ceiling before he le his study and walked towards the door. The pounding began again, even louder than before, as he put his hand on the knob and started to unlock the door.

"Give me a minute!" he said, his words coming out on a tired growl. He wrenched open the door to find a slender, shadowed figure standing on his doorstep. A woman, most definitely, judging by the silhouette of bonnet and gown. Behind him, the sound of his butler's steps shu ling through the foyer met his ears, and Haughton raised a hand to stay the man until he was certain whether or not he would be in need of a servant's assistance.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Haughton glanced down at the carriage in the street. Not a hired vehicle, he could tell, even in the faint shreds of moonlight shining through the dissipating clouds.

The figure raised her head an inch, enough to allow the light from inside his foyer to illuminate her face. "Lord Haughton?"

"Dear God, Sophia!" His heart lurched at the sight of her, damp and disheveled as she was, her eyes red and strained from some obvious and recent upset. "What the devil...? Come in, come in!" He amended, as soon as some semblance of his manners returned to him.

As Sophia stepped indoors, an equally bedraggled maid following in her wake. Haughton turned around and issued a series of orders to his butler. "We'll need something hot to drink, and food as well, I should think. Have you eaten?" He looked back over his shoulder at Sophia, but she made no reply, only her mouth moving soundlessly as wide eyes blinked rapidly above the shadows on her cheeks. "Come along," he said, once he'd sent his butler on his way to wake the rest of the servants. "In here. You look as if you need to sit before you fall o your feet."

He led her into his study, the nearest room that still boasted some light and warmth. He walked across the room, shut the window to keep out any chill, and turned around to find her still standing in the doorway, her gloved fingers tugging on one another with such fierceness he thought she might do an injury to her hands if he didn't do something to distract her.

"Mrs. Brix—" he began, but before he could utter another syllable, she interrupted him.

"It's George," she said, her voice an anguished croak. "He's gone."

Haughton shook his head. Did she mean...?

"Lucy's taken him," she said slowly, as if in reply to the look of question in his eyes. He noticed the quiver of her chin on the last word.

Lucy? It took a moment for his ba led mind to remember what role she had to play in the child's life. "His mother? But I thought she disappeared some time ago, that you hadn't heard from her."

"Well, she..." She spread her hands, her finger trembling violently.

"Right." He returned to her side, took her arm, and guided her into the chair nearest the fire. She was still in some sort of shock, and without saying another word, he returned to the drinks tray, filled a glass halfway with whiskey, and pushed it into her shaking hands.

Sophia looked at the beverage suspiciously and moved to give it back to him. "I don't want—"

"It will calm your nerves," he said, and nudged the rim of the glass back towards her.

She nodded once, then licked her lips. One small sip disappeared inside her mouth, and the reaction was instantaneous. "Dear heavens!" She coughed and spluttered, her eyes watering as she gripped the glass in one hand and smacked her chest with the other. "Oh, it's vile!" She coughed again and glared up at him from beneath the brim of her bonnet. "How do you drink something so awful?"

"One sip at a time," he told her, and tipped the glass up to her mouth again. "Simply pretend it's medicine. It will do you good, I promise."

Another sip followed, this one without the same spate of coughing, but not without a severe grimace distorting her features as she swallowed. When she'd imbibed nearly half of what he'd given her, he finally drew up a chair in front of her and sat down, his elbows balanced on his knees as he leaned forward. "Now, do you feel better?"

"Yes," she said, her voice hoarse. "Thank you."

"Then start from the beginning, if you please."

Sophia set the glass down on the table beside her and clasped her hands in her lap. Her posture at that moment was such a study in anguish that Haughton wished for nothing more than to gather her up in his arms and hold her against him, to let her cry into his shoulder while he pushed her bonnet back from her head and kissed her hair, but he held himself still, waiting for her to speak when she felt ready and willing to do so.

"When I returned home from Derbyshire, Lucy was there. She'd arrived from Bath only a few hours before me." Her gaze darted over to the glass of whiskey beside her, but her lips tightened and she looked away again. "At first, she attempted to dote on George, o en attempting to hold him, to play with him, to give him kisses and draw him into her embrace. But..." She looked up at him, the gold in her eyes catching the dying light of the fire. "He doesn't know her any longer, and I think he knew... I think anyone would have witnessed her behavior towards him and known... known it was insincere. I should have known. But it is such an easy thing, to harbor a hope in your heart that someone can change."

This time, she did reach for the glass. She took another sip, her eyes squeezing shut as the alcohol slid down her throat. "I know how cruel that sounds, and coming from her own sister, but..."

"No, no. I understand. You forget I have someone like David for a brother." Haughton's hand twitched, wanting to reach out and touch her, to o er her some form of comfort, but instead he leaned back, his arms crossing over his chest as he gave her time to continue.

"Well, three nights ago—or was it four? Oh, dear. What day is it today?"

"Friday," he supplied, and watched as her face fell.

"Four nights, then." She took a deep breath, and a quick flutter of her eyelashes betrayed the tears she fought to hold at bay. "Lady Rutledge invited George and I over for dinner, but Lucy—oh! I should have known better than to believe her! But fool that I was, I wished with all my heart to believe in the goodness of her intentions!"

She gave in to her tears then. Not a dainty cry like women of his experience had been trained to utilize, with only a slight sni or a reluctant tear making a show of the emotions used to pull on the heartstrings of the men before them. No, this was an ugly display, raw with fear and anguish. Her heart was breaking, perhaps had already been rent to pieces, and Haughton tossed aside every reason he could invent against touching her, against o ering her comfort in her pain. He slid forward in his chair until his knees knocked into hers, both of his hands held out to her, his palms upturned, his fingers unfurled.

"Sophia," he said, and her voice broke with another sob. But her hands found their way into his, her gloved fingers tightening around his bare ones.

"Lucy told me she wanted to keep an eye on him for the evening, so that he would begin to remember her again." She sni ed loudly, and without a handkerchief at hand, turned her head and indelicately wiped her cheek across the sleeve of her gown. "It was dark when I returned. I knew... I knew the moment I stepped into the house that something was amiss. I searched, but they were gone. Lucy had packed up all their things and disappeared, just as before. And this time, she took George with her."

Haughton released one of her hands long enough to reach for her glass and give it to her. She took a long sip, nearly choking again, before cradling it in her lap while her grip on his other hand only tightened.

"I told her you'd come to see me, about George," she added, and licked a drop of whiskey from the corner of her mouth. "I told her of your various o ers, and how I was considering leaving Stantreath to make a home at Denton Castle with your sister, but she did not at all care for that plan. She wanted..." Another pause, another sip. "... something more significant from you."

Haughton lowered his head, his shoulders sagging as he exhaled slowly. He wanted to be angry on her behalf, to siphon away some of her hurt and disappointment in her sister's behavior so that she could be free of the painful emotions. But he was not certain he had the power to do so. Instead, he ran his thumb across the back of her hand, while chiding himself for not remembering to relieve her of her bonnet and shawl the moment she'd entered the house.

"Do you know where she is now?" he asked, but Sophia shook her head before he'd even finished putting the question into words.

"It's why I came here. Lady Rutledge allowed me the use of her carriage and her servants so that I might discover if Lucy had attempted to contact you in any way, perhaps... for money." Her face took on a sour expression at the mention of that last word, and her lips disappeared between her teeth as she seemed to pause long enough to once again gather her thoughts. "I fear she does not have any interest in George unless she has something to gain from him."

"And you're certain it is money she wants?"

Sophia's jaw tightened. "Along with a house, servants, a carriage, horses, a new wardrobe... Oh, and she did mention something about a private box at the theater."

"Good Lord." Haughton eyed the remains of Sophia's drink and wondered if it would be bad manners to take it and finish it himself. "I am sorry."

"She was not always like this," she hurried to say, her gaze seeking out his, pleading for him to believe her. "But when our parents died, she did not take it well. I think it hurt her more than I originally thought. And I didn't..." She sni ed. "I fear I missed it, her own di iculties, so wrapped up as I was in trying to make certain we would survive on our own."

"You are not to blame," Haughton assured her as he leaned forward, near enough to see the tracks of dried tears on her cheeks. Tracks that he wanted to sweep away with a brush of his hand, but he resisted the urge to move any closer than he already had.

Sophia smiled at that, a sad smile that highlighted the shadows and lines of exhaustion on her face. "Not fully, no. But a little bit, just as I'm sure you blame yourself for some of David's indiscretions, and as no doubt your father did before you." Her expression changed then, her eyes widening as she straightened in her seat. "Does this mean you've not heard from Lucy? She's not attempted to contact you in any way?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," Haughton said, sitting back again but without relinquishing his grip on her hand.

"So I take it you've not received any message from your brother, either?"

"David? Do you think...?"

Sophia raised one shoulder and let it fall on a sigh. "I've had several days in a carriage to think over a great deal, and I cannot help but find it to be more than a tremendous coincidence that my sister should take it upon herself to return to Stantreath within hours of my return from Derbyshire. I would not be at all surprised to discover that there is someone else guiding her hand."

"Neither would I," Haughton said, and let slip a curse from under his breath. "Forgive me." He released her hand, reluctantly, and le her to return to his desk.

"What are you doing?" she piped up from behind him, while he searched through the clutter for a clean sheet of paper and a quill that would not need to be trimmed.

"I'm sending for assistance," he told her without looking up. "I will admit to keeping a private investigator in my employ. He has been quite useful whenever my brother has decided to get himself mired in... certain situations."

"And you think he can help us? To find George and my sister?"

He looked up from his uneven handwriting. "Without him, I wouldn't have found you." His words, he thought, held more import than he had intended, but whether or not she caught the deeper meaning behind them, he couldn't be certain. His message written and sanded down, he rang the bell and then returned to Sophia, where he held out his hand to her. "There's little more that can be done tonight. I suggest you eat and rest, and keep as clear a head as possible for whatever may lie ahead."

"But—"

"I doubt we'll find anyone tonight, and you'll be no use to George when we do discover him if you're dead on your feet with exhaustion."

She nodded, finally, and placed her hand on his arm. Despite her obvious tiredness from her journey and the stress of the last few days, he felt the strength that still radiated out from her touch, a fierceness that he had already well learned not to defy.

"I'll have a meal sent up to your room," he said as he walked her out of the study and across the foyer. "You can have Bess's suite while you're here. I doubt she'll mind," he added, making an attempt at lightheartedness that seemed to die in the air between them.

Sophia stopped at the bottom of the staircase, her grip tightened on his arm as she turned to face him. "Thank you," she said so ly. "For all your help."

In the light of the foyer, her beauty was almost ethereal. The red of her hair shone like gold around her head, and her eyes... How he wished he could eliminate the sadness that currently darkened their normally gleaming depths. "I feel like I should be asking for your forgiveness rather than accepting your gratitude."

"I know. Which is why I'm making certain to o er it."

He could have kissed her then. If the circumstances were di erent, if she were not about to droop with tiredness, if he did not feel as if he would be a disappointment to her...

"Here," he said instead, as the butler returned from the back of the house, with one of the maids— bearing a tray—at his heels. "Mary can show you to your room and see to your every need. And should I hear anything before morning..."

"I know," she said, and took a step away from him, her hand sliding o his arm and falling to her side. "And again, thank you."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Brixton."

"Goodnight, my lord."

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My apologies for not updating yesterday, but debilitating sinus headaches can wreck a person's schedule with just a bit of pressure behind the eyes.

And as always, thank you all for your reads, adds, likes, follows, comments, and everything else. And less than a half dozen chapters to go!

Quenby Olson