Chapter Twenty

Sophia opened her eyes, only to find herself gazing up at a shadowed ceiling she did not recognize. London, she reminded herself, as her eyes fluttered closed again. Her fingers found their way to her forehead, kneading above her le eye where a headache throbbed with enough strength to make her feel as if she were still being bounced around in Lady Rutledge's carriage. Her hands gripped the edge of the bed as she sat up, her breath hissing between her teeth as the pain in her head shi ed and brought a surge of bile to the back of her throat. A deep breath, followed swilly by another, and she dared to open her eyes again. a Someone had banked the fire during the night, though the candle she'd le burning in its holder on the nightstand had drowned in its own wax some hours before. The room was not cold, but as she swung her legs over the side of the bed, her bare feet sought out her knitted slippers and she took up her wrapper from the back of a chair where she'd abandoned it before falling asleep. She shu led towards one of the tall windows and pulled back the curtains. A faint green cast to the sky told her that dawn would soon be on its way, and also informed her that she must not have rested for more than a few hours since burrowing her head into the overstu ed pillows on Bess's bed. The sill pressed into her hips as she leaned forward, until her forehead pressed against the cool glass and the throbbing in her head subsided. She needed to eat, having only picked over the tray of cold meats and sandwiches sent up to her room a er Haughton had wished her a good night. For a moment, she considered slipping down to the kitchen and searching for a snack, but then reminded herself that not only was it not her home, but with a new day on the verge of beginning, no doubt the lowest of the servants had already risen from their beds, cleaning out the previous day's ashes in preparation for another round of cooking for an entire household. a The maid had put her things away in the wardrobe, though her luggage had only amounted to a few gowns and accessories, everything that could be fit into one bag. She took down a plain gown, washed her face and neck and under her arms with the cold water and cake of soap beside the basin, and dressed before the sky had taken on a more pinkish hue. Her hairbrush was still in her hand when the bedroom door opened, and a maid—not the same girl as the previous evening, and not the girl Lady Rutledge had provided to her for propriety's sake—poked her head into the room. a Before a minute had passed, the maid had introduced herself— Maggie, her name was—taken over the task of brushing and pinning up Sophia's hair, and informed her that she could break her fast there in her bedroom, the morning room, or the dining room. That was, if she didn't mind sitting down to enjoy a repast in a large room without anyone to accompany her. "Has Lord Haughton risen?" Sophia asked, as Maggie pushed a pin into the fashionable knot at the back of her head. "Oh, I don't believe he went to bed, Miss," the young girl admitted, another half dozen pins clutched between her teeth. "If I'm not mistaken, he's kept to his study all night." a "Thank you," Sophia said, and once the girl had finished with her hair and fussing over the folds of her gown, she le the bedroom and attempted to retrace her steps to Haughton's study. She knocked lightly when she reached the door, one hand already on the knob as she pressed her ear against the wood, listening for a reply. When a second knock elicited no response, she dared to open the door and step inside the dimly lit room. She found Haughton immediately, though not in any stance or pose she had anticipated. He sat at the desk. Or, more accurately, he sat slumped over the desk, his head resting on his right arm, while his le had at some point knocked over a bottle of ink, staining the cu of his sleeve and several documents scattered about beneath him. She glanced up at the nearest window, which stood wide open, letting in a pale light along with a chill to the air that made her shiver slightly as the fire had been allowed to die down to dead coals and ash. å "My lord?" Sophia whispered, and placed her hand on his shoulder, giving him a gentle shake. Haughton responded with a sort of snu ling sound, and then a snore, and then he turned his head so that she could see his face. Dark, untidy strands of hair fell across his forehead, while his beard had grown in even more since when she'd last seen him only a few hours before. But what caught her attention was the lack of lines and strain on the skin around his eyes and mouth, the smooth, almost boyish expression that graced his slumbering face, an expression she wondered if he was even capable of achieving during his waking hours. a But she felt sorry for him... No, not sorry. Strangely, it seemed to be more of a kinship that she experienced with him, despite the di erences in their sex and station. This man who strove to do what was right, even when he sometimes went about it in the most highhanded of ways. a Her hand still resting on his shoulder, she leaned forward until her mouth was quite close to his ear. "My lord," she said again, and did not back away until his eyelids flickered and he raised his head from his arm. He blinked at her, his eyes bleary and unfocused, as if he could not see her. And then he passed his hand over his face, scratched his knuckles against his unshaven jaw, and looked up at her again. "Sophia." It was not the first time he had neglected his manners and failed to address her by her surname. Last night, she had heard her Christian name on his lips several times, though her own exhaustion and the urgency of the situation had deemed it one of the least of her concerns. He looked at her this morning as he had the previous night. Gone was the disdain she remembered him exhibiting on their first meeting, several months ago in her cottage in Stantreath. It had been during her stay in Derbyshire, she realized, that the tension between them had begun to relent, and for the first time in their acquaintance, they had begun to work together towards making the best future for their a nephew. Another blink, and some of the shadows of tiredness returned to his face. The lines returned as well, and she thought he looked older than his years, though the state of his hair and his clothes were not helping him in that regard. "It is morning," she pointed out, even though he was perfectly capable of looking over his shoulder at the light coming through the windows into the study. "I wondered if you had heard anything during the night..." Haughton rubbed his eyes and swept his hair back from his forehead, unwittingly setting it standing up in several directions at once. "If I had received any news, I would not have hesitated to wake you at once. I sent o a dozen messages, have garnered only a single reply as of yet, and did little more than twirl my thumbs until I... Well, until you found me here." a He sat up in his chair, only to then notice the mess the spilled ink bottle had made of his shirt and the contents of his desk. "Damn it all," he muttered, and attempted to organize the mess while Sophia gathered up the papers he had knocked to the floor as he slept. "There's no need for you to..." he said, but stopped himself when she stood before him, a stack of crumpled papers in her hands. "Thank you," he amended, contrite, and took the stack from her. "Did you get any rest?" he asked without looking over at her. She had given him her handkerchief to help sop up the ink, and she watched as he continued to fumble over the mess until she put a hand on his elbow to stop him. "More than you, I gather." Her fingers tightened on his arm until he abandoned his cluttered desk and turned around to face her. He looked broken, she thought. Tired and disheveled and only halfdressed, and bearing the strain of a problem she had brought to his doorstep. "Is there anything that can be done right now? Anything we can accomplish beyond... twirling our thumbs over tea and buns?" He shook his head. "Not unless you want to ride about London, scouring every inch of pavement and questioning every bystander to discover if they've recently seen a tow-headed infant in the vicinity." "And that's if Lucy or George are even anywhere near London." Sophia shut her eyes and tried not to allow panic to overwhelm her. They could be anywhere in the country, she realized. And that was if they had even le Northumberland and hadn't simply sat back while she ran o to London in search of Haughton's aid. "The one reply I mentioned receiving?" Sophia opened her eyes and found Haughton gazing down at her, closer than she remembered him being only a moment before. "It was from Mr. Winstone, the man I keep on my payroll for incidents just such as this. He said David is in London. He returned to town yesterday, from somewhere in the north," he said, placing a heavy accent on that final word. Sophia drew in a breath. "Do you think...?" "At this point, I won't allow myself to think anything without more facts. But if my brother is indeed involved with this..." He raised her chin with a crooked finger when she started to look away. "We will get him back. Do you understand?" a "Are we going about this the wrong way? I mean, we could be attempting to rescue George from his own parents." ð "Can you honestly tell me that you haven't met men and women and thought that they should never be in the care of children? I wouldn't entrust David to the care of a flea-infested cat, let alone a healthy young boy." a⁴ "But Lucy..." á "I do not know your sister. Only you do, so I cannot make any decisions for you on that score." They stood there for a moment, her fingers still clutching the loose fabric of his sleeve, her head still throbbing in time with the beating of her heart. "If you'll excuse me for a few minutes," Haughton said, and took her hand in order to remove it from his shirt. "I'll retire to my room in order to make myself more presentable." He raised his arm, the one with the ink-stained sleeve. "I'll have breakfast sent in to you, and I'll join you in here. That is, if you don't mind eating among the detritus of my work." a The tray arrived a few minutes a er Haughton le her. Sophia helped herself to a piece of toast and was spreading a thin layer of butter on the crusty bread as he returned to the study, his clothes changed, his hair combed, and his face cleanly shaven. He still looked tired however, and a bit paler than usual as he took the seat across from her and helped himself to a cup of co ee from the pot. a "I doubt either of us is in possession of anything resembling an appetite this morning," Haughton began, between swallows of co ee. "But we should do our best to eat our fill and fortify ourselves for whatever the day may bring." a Sophia could not argue with the wisdom of his words. She could not imagine where she may be by the time night fell, and a er too many days of travelling and poor fare at poorer inns, she should do everything in her power to sustain herself. a A er the toast, they each helped themselves to eggs and sausage and ham. They ate with perfunctory movements, neither of them seeming to take much enjoyment from the meal. But they both cleared their plates, and as Sophia wiped the last of the crumbs from her lips with the corner of her napkin, a knock sounded on the study door. Sophia looked at Haughton, and neither of them breathed for a moment. Then Haughton pushed himself out of his seat and crossed quickly to the door. She had expected to see the butler or one of the maids come to retrieve the breakfast tray, but instead a small, undistinguished man with short brown hair and grey eyes that seemed to carry a touch of resignation. đ "Winston," Haughton said, and Sophia watched as his shoulders rounded forward slightly before he stepped back and allowed the newcomer into the room. The man called Winston walked towards the tight grouping of chairs where she and Haughton had just finished partaking their breakfast. He nodded his head towards Sophia, and o ered his hand to her, as if she were a male business associate with which he was about to make his acquaintance. a "Mrs. Brixton, I take it?" A er a brief bout of hesitation, she placed her hand in his. He pumped it firmly and released her arm back to her care. "Mister...?" "Winston. John Winston," Haughton provided a er he'd closed the door and joined them around the tray. "An old friend of mine, and a man possessed of the incredible talent of discovering things that other people would rather remain well and truly hidden." a Sophia studied the man, this John Winston. At first sight, she'd thought him to be of a middling build. But standing between beside Haughton, she realized he was nearly of a height with him. Her gaze darted back and forth between the two men, Haughton dressed in the finest clothing that London's tailors had to o er, while Mr. Winston appeared to favor nondescript colors and lines, somehow managing with the basic cut of his coat and trousers to render himself as immemorable as possible. a "You have news?" Haughton said, preempting any tedious conversation about the state of their health or the weather. "I do." Mr. Winston reached into an inside pocket of his coat. Sophia couldn't help but wonder, considering the man's profession, how many secrets he currently had concealed inside those pockets. "But it is news for which I am unable to take credit. I intercepted a messenger on your doorstep, come to deliver this." He held out a small letter, lacking a seal of any kind, and the paper bearing multiple creases and splotches of ink. "I asked the boy—because the creature didn't look to be more than nine years old if he was a day—who had hired him to deliver the note, but either he knew nothing, or was more skilled than anyone I'd met before at speaking falsehoods from behind an innocent face." Haughton took the letter, unfolded it, and tilted it towards Sophia, his way—she assumed—of inviting her to have a look as well. She stepped up to his side, her shoulder pressed against his upper arm, and read the spidery scrawl that slanted across the stained sheet of paper. Her eyes welled up with tears as she scanned the words, then swi ly transformed to anger as she read them again. The letter, signed by her sister, declared a wish to meet with Haughton—and Haughton alone—in order that they might discuss terms pertaining to the George's upbringing. "It is signed with your sister's name," Haughton pointed out, though he had to have known she'd already seen the blotchy signature at the bottom of the missive. "Yes," she admitted, her teeth clenched in an attempt to hold in the maelstrom of emotions threatening to tumble out of her at this turn in events. "But the letter itself is not written in her hand, at least not all of it. The beginning is, and this part in the middle, here." She gestured towards a line that crossed the middle of the missive. "I noticed that, as well." Haughton passed the letter over to Winston for his perusal. "And though he's attempted to disguise it, I have no doubt those parts that are unrecognizable to you were penned by none other than my dearest brother." a Sophia looked up at him. She wished that she could summon more surprise than she felt at such a revelation. Instead, she shook her head slowly. "So they are together." ã "So it would seem," Haughton said, his shoulders sagging slightly.

She caught herself almost reaching out to touch him, to place a hand

arms over her own chest, her fingers biting into the flesh of her upper

arms until her knuckles turned from pink to white. "What now?" she

asked, and when he turned to face her fully, she wondered that she

had ever thought him to be a cold and unfeeling man. She saw the

lines around his eyes and mouth, the distress so clearly writ across

troubles in which they were currently mired, just as she had taken to

"We will fix this." His mouth returned to a firm line, his lips tight as if

he wished to say more but refrained from giving the words a voice. "I

his brow. And she realized that he must blame himself for the

holding herself responsible for the very same di iculties.

Four chapters to go! We are getting there, and I am already getting

ready for the next story I will be posting here on Wattpad when this

for now, and as always, accept my tremendous thanks for your

support while I've posted this one.

one is finished. I'll have more about that one in the next few days, but

a

promise."

Quenby Olson

on his arm, to o er him some comfort. But instead she crossed her