

Chapter Twenty-One

Haughton sat in the carriage, while Winston occupied the seat across from him. Haughton pulled at the shade that covered the window and glanced out at the city. They were well into the East End, judging by the quality of the streets beneath them and the sounds that reached them through the walls of the carriage. It was no surprise to him that David would choose such a disreputable neighborhood for his supposed meeting with Lucy, Sophia's sister. Though Haughton was already wary of even finding the younger Miss Brixton there. He doubted his expression would register even a modicum of shock should he walk into the inn and find his brother waiting with a careless demand for several thousand pounds in return for the child.

"I believe we've nearly arrived," Winston announced, matching Haughton's glance beyond the shade of the opposite window.

As the carriage rumbled to a stop, Haughton gripped the edge of the seat while a round of curses sounded from somewhere outside the vehicle. He didn't wait for the door to open for them but instead stepped down on his own before anyone had even jumped down to lower the step. He realized as the two of them departed the carriage that he'd made the right choice in opting for a more plain, conservative mode of dress for this particular errand. Together, they blended in neatly with the dull colors and ochreous layers of smoke and fog that seemed to cling to every corner and cobblestone.

"We shall meet back here in one hour," Winston said, glancing at the watch he'd tugged from the pocket of his waistcoat. "I'll proceed to the Calf's Head Inn on foot, while you meet with Miss Penrose at the Rose and Thorn."

Haughton tore his glance away from an altercation between a crossing sweeper and a tradesman to look at Winston. "And you're certain that my brother and Miss Penrose were spotted together at the Calf's Head?"

Winston nodded, his right hand going to the outside of his coat, where no doubt his notebook was concealed inside. "Several witnesses report their comings and goings from there, and the innkeeper himself confessed to there being an infant on the premises. No doubt that's why they've arranged this meeting in another building entirely, to keep you o the scent. But if the child is indeed at the Calf's Head, I'll do my best to collect him while you're otherwise occupied with the sister. If all goes well, I'll return directly to the carriage and wait for you."

Haughton bristled. "All better go well," he muttered beneath his breath before checking his own watch. "Best be o now, rather than risk keeping anyone waiting."

They parted ways at the edge of the pavement, Haughton's destination only two blocks away while Winston set o with the silhouette of St. Matthew's behind him.

A ripple of guilt passed through Haughton as he made his way towards the Rose and Thorn. Sophia had initially insisted on accompanying them, but he had insisted she remain in St. James's Street, to rest and to help prepare the house for George's arrival, an arrival he did not allow himself to doubt would be occurring before the day was out.

A er a few words with the innkeeper, a tall, reedy man with yellow fingernails and yellower teeth—what he still had of them—Haughton was led into a private room in the back of the building. The place was small, furnished with scraps that looked to have been rescued from a previous century and propped up against papered walls that were stained and warped along every corner.

Lucy Brixton sat in a decrepit armchair, her dress and manner attempting to put forward the notion that she was of a higher quality than the room in which she currently resided. Her gown was some ghastly concoction of pale green silk and so many flounces and layers of fussiness that she resembled a petits four more than a young woman.

"Lord Haughton!" She extended her hand to him, fully expecting him no doubt to traipse across the cluttered room and plant a kiss to her fingers. Instead, Haughton remained at his post just inside the door and tugged at the cuffs of his gloves.

"I've little time for pleasantries and tedious bon mots, Miss Penrose. I've come to discuss your son, George, and the care and upbringing you wish for him." He took care not to reveal that he knew of Lucy taking George from Stantreath and absconding with him—and possibly David, as well—down to London. Neither did he have any wish to tell her that her sister had already arrived in London and was currently helping to prepare his household for the temporary addition of an infant guest.

"Well, of course," Lucy said, her face brightening with a sweet smile and a flutter of her eyelashes. "I would not wish to waste your precious time, my lord. I'm sure you've much more pressing matters to attend to, so I thank you for coming out of your way to see me this morning."

In coloring, Haughton realized, she did not resemble her sister at all. But their faces were remarkably similar, though Sophia's cheeks and nose bore a dusting of freckles to match the Auburn in her hair. Lucy, on the other hand, possessed a clear complexion, though her cheeks bore enough rouge to make him doubt whether the paleness of her skin was a gi from nature or a bit of cleverly applied cosmetics.

"Will you sit?" Lucy gestured towards another armchair that nearly matched her own. It looked to have been created in the same decade, at least.

"I'd rather not," Haughton replied, and watched as the skin at the corners of Lucy's mouth tightened. "What I would prefer is to move immediately and succinctly to the point of this little meeting you've arranged for us." When her response was raised eyebrow, he continued. "In plainer terms, what do you want?"

Though her smile lost some of its brilliancy, the gleam in her eyes failed to dim. She shied forward in her seat, the rustle of silk somehow loud despite the sounds of the noisy inn around them. "Three thousand pounds," she said, and paused long enough to purse her lips. "And a house. Not here in London, but neither do I want to be shoved o to some bucolic backwater like Stantreath. And do not attempt to o er me a room or two in a house you already own." She sni ed, and raised her chin. "An o er such as that may be enough to tempt my sister, but I assure you that my tastes lean more towards the refined, and I will not be bought with little more than you would o er to the daughter of a country squire."

"And that is all you would request? Or should I fetch a piece of paper and some ink in order to make a list?"

"You may, if you wish. I'm sure you have a passel of solicitors in your employ, all of them more than equipped to hammer out the details of our bargain. But there will be a carriage, and horses, and a fine array of servants. Male servants as well as female. I will not have anyone think I cannot a ord to hire a footman or two."

"And we shouldn't forget pin money," Haughton added, not bothering to remove the disdain from his voice. "And perhaps a new wardrobe for you, fitted and sewn by the finest dressmakers in London, hmm?"

"Of course!" Lucy said, and clapped her hands together in excitement as the sarcasm in Haughton's words dissipated into the air above her head. "I shall wish to entertain, and I certainly cannot do that in these..." She plucked at the skirt of her gown, her nose wrinkled in disgust. "...these rags."

"Of course not," Haughton agreed mockingly. "And a er I've purchased all of these things for you and set you up in your own little house, perhaps you'll be able to spare a thought as to what should be done for your sister or even—dare I say—your son."

"Oh," Lucy sat back in her chair, her expression taking on a veneer of petulance that made her look more like the nineteen year old young woman hiding beneath the layers of rouge and face paint intended to add a maturity to her appearance she did not possess. "I see. You have spent some time with my sister, haven't you? No doubt she's fooled you into thinking she's such a saint for all the supposed sacrifices she's made for me. Poor Sophia!" She rolled her eyes and blew out her breath in a hu. "Saint Sophia!"

Haughton ignored her comments and finally took one of the pro ered chairs near to the fire. He crossed one leg over the other, his ankle resting on top of his knee as he leaned back and drummed his thumbs against the shining buttons of his waistcoat. "I am prepared to agree to your request of three thousand pounds, and even increase it to five thousand. But on one condition: That single payment is all you will ever receive from me. Five thousand pounds, and you will leave your son to your sister to raise. You will relinquish all claims to him, and you will cease to use him as a bargaining chip in a pathetic scheme to extract more money from me at some future date."

When she opened her mouth to protest, he held up his right hand. Her mouth snapped shut again, and she narrowed her eyes at him but did not make another attempt to interrupt him.

"Or," he began, drawing out that single syllable with painstaking clarity, "You may continue to live with your sister, lend a measurable hand in the task of raising your son—my nephew—and agree to a modest income that will not leave any of you wanting for any of life's necessities, including new gowns and a few extra servants. But you will not fly o to Bath, or Portsmouth, or London, or any other place contained on a map that is not also inhabited by your sister and your son. You will take on the responsibility of rearing your only child, and I will make certain that you and your sister are regarded as not only respectable, but marriageable, as I will also settle no less than a thousand pounds on you and Mrs. Brixton, in the event of your accepting a suitable o er, of course."

"How dare you!" Lucy straightened up in her chair, her hands gripping the armrests at her sides. She attempted to put on an appearance of being o ended, but Haughton was not impressed. "Do you think you can put a price on my child's head? That I will be so easily bought by the promise of your... your modest income?"

He had already heard similar words from her sister upon their first meeting. But the di erence between the two performances was that Sophia's reaction had not been a performance at all. With every part of her, she loved the infant le in her care. But Lucy, on the other hand...

"I presume you believe you have the upper hand," Haughton continued. "That we'll continue on with this pathetic little farce of bargaining until you achieve what you desire and I'll finally be given the whereabouts of young George, correct?"

She shied in her seat. "I don't know what you—"

"Or perhaps you'll attempt a di erent tactic. Perhaps you'll threaten to reveal that your sister is not really a widow, that she only pretended to lose a husband in order to lend your son a touch of legitimacy. I'm sure that consideration has already crossed your mind, has it not?"

She shied again, her skirts rustling as the toes of her slippered feet poked out from beneath the hem of her gown. He watched as a half dozen di erent expressions slid across her face, until one that made him particularly uneasy settled into place on her brow.

"You like my sister, don't you?"

Haughton pulled in a breath. No, this was not a tactic he had been expecting.

"Oh, don't attempt to deny it!" She smiled sweetly, sickeningly sweet, with eyelashes fluttering over gleaming eyes. "You invited her to stay at your estate in Derbyshire, and from what your brother has told me, you became quite angered when he dared to suggest that there was anything... untoward between the two of you." Again, the eyelashes fluttered. "You might even love her, for all I know. I can't imagine why. All those freckles, you know." Her nose wrinkled in disgust. "But marriage? Oh, that might be a tricky one, considering her own past and the potential scandal of less than savory familial connections." She gestured towards herself, the sickly smile never leaving her face. "Of course, you could always o er her a di erent sort of existence, though I'm not sure my sister is the type to accept carte blanche from anyone."

"Enough!" Haughton breathed again and reigned in as much of his anger as he could. "If your sister would have me, I would consider myself the most blessed of men to call her my wife. No amount of threats or blackmail or pitiful attempts to sully her character would change my mind, if indeed I ever choose to make an o er of marriage to her. Now," he said, and pulled his watch from his pocket. Nearly an hour had passed since he'd parted ways with Winston outside his carriage. "If you'll excuse me."

He rose from his chair and strode towards the door. Lucy leapt to her feet and made to follow him.

"Where are you going?" she cried, her voice a desperate screech behind him.

He turned to face her in the open doorway. Behind him, the cacophony of the busy inn sought to enter the quiet haven of their private room. "I need to return home, Miss Penrose. It might surprise you to learn that your sister arrived here from Stantreath last evening, and if all has gone well—" He gave his watch another glance. "—my associate should now have George in his care. It was the Calf's Head, if I'm not mistaken? Where you were hiding him? A er spiriting him away from your sister's cottage without her knowledge, I might add."

Lucy's face crumpled. "B-But David said—"

"Ah, yes. My brother. I assure you he says quite a number of things, though not even half of them would I count as trustworthy."

"But..." Lucy repeated, her mouth opening and closing like that of a fish.

"Now, I will not simply take your child away from you," he interrupted while she continued to gape at him. "No matter that you've already proven yourself unable to show the same consideration towards your own family. But the boy needs to be properly cared for, and using him to filch funds from my pocket will not be tolerated, do you understand?"

Chastened, she clasped her hands before her and nodded.

"I have already told you what I am willing to do for you and your family, Miss Penrose. You have a choice. Either I give you five thousand pounds, and you leave your son in your sister's care, or you can return with me to St. James's Street and we'll continue to discuss things in greater detail." He raised his eyebrows. "Which will it be?"

Her bottom lip disappeared into her mouth as she pondered the options he set before her. He had to admit, he hoped she would choose the latter. Though he would not agree to her absurd list of demands, he wanted to believe that love for her son would push her towards choosing a more modest existence with her family. But the renewed gleam in her eye as she leaned towards him erased any and all such hope. She smiled then, the powder on her face cracking slightly around the lines that creased the corners of her eyes.

"I'll take the five thousand," she said, and tilted her chin upwards in triumph.

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A little late today, but that's Friday for you!

Thanks to all you readers who have stayed with me so far. Only a few more chapters, which means we should be finishing up this story some time next week!

Quenby Olson