

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Sophia awoke when George did, his so fussing drawing her from a deep, dreamless slumber. She glanced at the clock on the mantel. Only an hour had passed since she'd fallen asleep, and yet it seemed as if she'd slept the entire day away. Her head was foggy, and when George rubbed his eyes with his fists and crawled into her lap, she could summon no more thought or energy necessary than what it took to place her arms around him.

Oh, but he was filthy, she realized as she looked down at him, surveying him properly for the first time since Haughton had placed him in her arms. Dried food clung to the ends of his fine hair, making it stand up in tangled tufts. His clothes, if she was not mistaken, were the same as the ones she had dressed him in the day Lucy had spirited him away from Stantreath. And his bottom...

There was a large damp spot on his clothes, one that had spread to the coverlet on the bed where he'd taken his nap. And on her skirt, she noticed as she picked him up and gave him a sni

"Pah!" she said. "When were you last changed?" She hoisted him onto her hip, regardless of the wetness he was continuing to spread to her own clothing, and gave the bell a hard pull. When the maid arrived only a few moments later, she ordered a bath, fresh clothing for George, and food for the both of them. Heaven only knew how well he'd been fed over the last few days, though if he was capable of soiling himself as well as he had, at least she was assured that he hadn't starved.

Another hour slipped away in caring for George, washing and combing the bits of food and miscellaneous debris from his hair, and changing her own gown for one not bearing damp patches all around it. As they ate, George devouring his bread soaked in milk with a particular avaricious glee, Sophia finally found the courage to inquire if Haughton was still at home, or if anyone—she would not mention David's name—was still with him.

"He's in with Mr. Thompkins now," the maid informed her, as she changed the coverlet on the bed. "That's his solicitor, ma'am. They've been in there with their heads together for a good hour or more."

"And..." Sophia cleared her throat. "There is no one else... with him?"

"Not that I know of, ma'am. That Mr. Watson fellow departed only a few minutes after he arrived, him and his lordship's brother both in the same carriage."

"Oh." Sophia didn't know what to think of that. But it was a relief, to be sure, knowing that David was no longer beneath the same roof. "Well, thank you."

The maid finished her task, bobbed a curtsy as if Sophia were actually someone of importance, and left her and George alone again.

So David was sent on his way already, and in Mr. Watson's custody, for lack of a better term. And what of Lucy? Had Haughton seen her? What had her sister said? And more importantly, what did Haughton say that enabled him to return to the house with George sleeping so peacefully in his arms? Her sister would not have given up the boy without a fight, or a rather large sum of money.

She sat down in the middle of the bedroom floor with George, one of the maids having searched through the attics and found a few old, wooden toys that must have been left over from when Haughton and his siblings were children. The paint was worn on most of them, but George was delighted to have new blocks to stack and knock over, and an army of wooden soldiers to wave about until Sophia finally had to pry one from each of his hands before he poked himself in the eye with the dull end of a wooden musket.

Yet another hour slipped away, Sophia spending all of that time chasing George about the room as he attempted to toddle forward a few steps on wobbling legs before he dropped into a crawl that shot him from one end of the rug to the other faster than she could keep pace with him. She had just snatched him into her arms as he following him around on all fours, growling like a bear, and had rolled onto her side with him, the both of them giggling as she tickled him beneath his arms, when she suddenly glanced up and saw Haughton standing in the doorway.

"I did knock," he said, by way of apology, though his dark eyebrows were raised in amusement at the scene before him.

And what a scene it must be to him, Sophia realized, as a flush of color warmed her cheeks. Rolling about on the floor, her hair falling out of its simple twist, and her skirt...

She yanked at the hem, which had worked its way up to her knees during her game with George. "I am sorry," she muttered, her gaze fixed firmly on anything that wasn't Haughton's face as she attempted to surreptitiously fix one of her stockings that had worked itself free of its garter. "I didn't mean to... I didn't realize you had knocked. I didn't hear..." Her hands fluttered uselessly, her fingers glancing over her sleeves, her bodice, any and every other part of her gown that might have twisted itself around.

"Please, Sophia. Don't apologize." His voice was nearer, she realized. He was nearer. "Never before have I interrupted a more beautiful scene."

Her gaze flicked up towards his face. The amusement was gone from his expression, replaced by... what, she could not tell. She swallowed, hard, and raised a hand to her hair. Too many strands had already fallen out of their pins, and there was nothing to be done unless she started over from scratch. "Your brother..." she began. It was the first thing she could think of to say, and the best subject to divert him from his enigmatic expressions and the husky timbre to his voice. She was not sure she knew what to do with him if he wasn't going to be cold and distant with her.

"He is gone," Haughton assured her, and held out a hand to help her to her feet when she began to stand up on her own. "I sent him away with Winston. I'll deal with him later, when I'm not so angry that violence seems like a sensible solution."

She hesitated for a moment, then slipped her hand into his. His fingers were warm, or hers were cool, she could not tell. There were callouses on the pads of his fingertips, on his palms, and she wondered what work or hobby it took to put them there. His thumb slid over the tops of her knuckles, then the back of her hand, before he touched the inside of her wrist. An accidental touch, she assumed. But there was that mysterious expression again. Thinking back, she recalled him looking at her in a similar manner once or twice during her stay at Denton Castle, but at the time she had been too wrapped up in her own dislike of him to consider what thoughts might lie behind that expression.

At their feet, George continued to tumble about, knocking over soldiers and blocks indiscriminately before setting them up again. Haughton did not release her hand, but led her over to one of the chairs near the window.

"I have spoken with my solicitor," he began, and settled himself in the chair adjacent to her own. "She's accepted the sum of five thousand pounds in exchange for giving full care of her son over to you. What she does with it, whether she buys her house and fills it with servants, or spends it all on befeathered hats is entirely up to her."

Sophia gazed at him in astonishment for several seconds. "Five thousand? How...? I can never repay so much. You should not have—"

He held up his hand. "He is my nephew as well, remember?"

She nodded, then swallowed over the rapidly forming lump in her throat. There would be tears soon, if she was not careful. "So she did not show any interest in raising George? In seeing him again?"

Haughton hesitated. Unfortunately, that was all the reply she needed. "Perhaps... perhaps she will settle down when she is older, when she has matured." She could hope, though Haughton's younger brother was several years Lucy's senior and was not exactly proof that a few additional years were enough to bring wisdom. "Much older," she added, and cleared her throat of the tremble that might have been either the beginning of a laugh or a sob.

They sat together in silence as the mantel clock ticked away another five minutes. Before them, George alternated between attempts to walk and quick bouts of crawling accompanied by shrieking laughter as he pushed through rows of blocks and sent them scattering in all directions.

"And what of your brother?" Sophia ventured to ask when she was certain she could trust her voice again.

There was that hesitation again. "To tell the truth," he began, and rested his elbows on the arms of the chair before steeping his fingers in front of his chest. "I have yet to decide what course of action to take with him. I could force him into the army, though I fear his ability to wreak as much havoc while wearing a uniform as he does without one. But he is my brother. Bess would wish me to be lenient, or at least not so harsh that we cut him out of our lives forever. It is fine line, I think, and it's difficult to see on which side lies the proper choice."

Sophia held out her arms to George as he crawled over to her and began to clamber up into her lap. Without delay, he started plucking at the buttons of her dress, grunting in frustration when they wouldn't immediately pop into his chubby fingers. "I will see Lucy again," she said, and smoothed down a patch of George's hair that was determined to stick straight out from his head.

She had spoken the words without giving them a thought, but as soon as she heard them with her own ears, she trusted in the truth of them. She would see her sister again, be it a matter of a few days or a few years, but she would see her again. Though the two of them were often at odds with one another, they did care about each other. They loved each other. And Sophia hoped that Lucy loved George. No, she knew that her sister loved her son. She simply... She simply wasn't ready to be a mother, or if that was ever going to be a role she was meant to fulfill.

"And what of you?" Haughton's question broke through the fog of her thoughts. "Will you return to Stantreath now?"

"Yes," she replied, and looked up quickly enough to see a shadow of despondency darken his brow. "But," she continued, her gaze still on his face. "If the offer still stands, I think I would like to then make my way to Denton Castle. If not permanently, at least for an extended stay."

His shoulders visibly relaxed. "Of course, I will write to my sister at once, let her know of your plans."

"Thank you." She kissed George's head before he squirmed out of her lap and took three steps away from her before dropping again to all fours. "I will, of course, need time to pack up my things, to give my farewell to Lady Rutledge, but... I cannot imagine that should take up more than a few days. The cottage is small and there is not a lot in it, as I'm sure you remember."

She tried to smile, but failed miserably in the attempt. Now that George had been returned to her, that Lucy had been given what she wanted, that David was currently under the watchful eye of Mr. Winston, and the decision finally voiced aloud that she would be returning to Denton Castle, it seemed that all of the former impediments of their acquaintance had been cleared away. He was no longer the cold, haughty member of the peerage come to impose his rule on her. She was welcome in his home—homes, she amended to herself—and even sat with her now, quietly, companionably, as if their first meeting had not been heated enough that she had been sorely tempted to strike him.

"I will leave you now, as I'm sure you're still exhausted, and will need your rest if your intention is to leave tomorrow." Haughton rose from his chair as she did and bowed towards her. "Sleep well, and I will see you in the morning, if not before."

She stood there as he left the room, only a step forward from her chair while George continued to scatter toys and crawl in and out from beneath the hem of her skirt. Haughton was only being courteous in coming to speak to her in her room, she told herself, only wanting her to feel welcome and wanted as she had in the past few days. But she couldn't help feeling that something had shifted in their acquaintance. That enigmatic expression on his face... the light in his eyes that she had so much difficulty trying to identify... He's taken with you...

David's words flickered through her mind. She tried to assure herself that he had said such things solely to unnerve her. There couldn't be any truth to it, surely not. But still she played those words over and over in her mind, even as she knelt down onto the rug and began lining up the wooden soldiers for George.

He's taken with you...

She thought of Haughton's eyes, how cold they had always seemed to be, so many weeks ago. She realized she hadn't seen that same chill in them for quite some time. And when she'd slipped her hand into his only a few moments ago, she'd had the distinct feeling that Haughton hadn't really wanted to let go.

"No," Sophia said aloud, and tried to shake such thoughts out of her head. Her exhaustion was getting to her. That must be it, nothing more. Once all of the preparations for her return to Stantreath were made, and she was once again on the road with George tucked in beside her, well... everything would be so much clearer, she was sure. No more muddled thoughts or idle fancies that Haughton—Haughton, of all people!—was falling in love with her.

"No, certainly not," she said, and bit at the soles of her feet under her bottom lip. And she definitely wouldn't pause to wonder why that repeated assurance should bring out such a dismal feeling from within her.

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Goodness! Only one more chapter to go (and it is a good, long one)! That should go up tomorrow, and then the story will be finished! Well, until it undergoes a good, final edit and attack from the Red Pen of Doom.

Thanks, again, to all of you wonderful readers. You have made these last few weeks incredibly enjoyable!

Quenby Olson