Chapter Eight

The ballroom was a press of too many bodies and too little air. Candles burned in every sconce, dripped from chandeliers above the heads of dancers who moved through patterns Haughton suspected had been specially choreographed to drive a man mad. Even the music reflected the repetitive nature of the steps, the quartet carefully secreted behind a painted screen, lest anyone's delicate senses be o ended by a vision of the working class—sawing away at their instruments in a manner that would have sent the original composers back to their graves, should any of them have been gi ed with a chance at resurrection. a

It was late in the evening, or perhaps early in the morning. Haughton reached into the pocket of his waistcoat, his fingers ready to grasp the smooth circle of his watch, but then he recalled that particular item's current location, approximately three hundred miles north, no doubt already well crusted over from grubby fingers and bearing numerous a teeth marks from a chubby, nine-month-old boy.

He passed from one room into the next, the ballroom holding the majority of the overheated, over-perfumed guests. There were the remains of that evening's supper in one chamber, and in another several guests—many of them more advanced in years, and so had no need to parade themselves up and down the length of the ballroom in search of a marriageable partner—played at various games of cards. He lingered there for a few minutes, enjoying the mu led quality of the music this lack of proximity lent to it, but he chose not to take place at any of the assembled tables.

The truth of the matter was, Haughton had experienced some di iculty with paying attention to any single matter since his return from Northumberland six days earlier. He had attended to his business matters with some small amount of success, but when le to carry along with the remainder of his day's routine, to leave himself to his own thoughts and musings...

No, that was when it all went to hell.

At first, he wanted nothing more than to blame it on having been away from his London home for several days. It had unsettled his mind, all those hours of damp, miserable travel. The truth of it, though, and something he had no wish to fully admit to himself, was a bit more corporeal.

Sophia Brixton had got into his head. He wasn't certain how she had managed it. Never before had he permitted anyone, of either sex, to distract him to such an extent. Even his brother's libertine behaviors were best treated as another business matter, merely one of which he didn't wish for the public to obtain more than a cursory knowledge. A But Mrs. Brixton...

She had succeeded in unnerving him. He liked to believe that he was capable of forming an accurate portrait of a person's character within the first few minutes of conversing with them. But Mrs. Brixton had surprised him at nearly every turn, from the first moment he'd set foot across her threshold.

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He'd recognized anger in her, in the flash of her hazel eyes and the bloom of color in her cheeks, highlighting the sprinkling of freckles that decorated her skin. But he'd also seen fear, and strength, and humor. And far more intelligence than he was used to facing against in most others of his acquaintance.

He returned to the ballroom, skirting the main area of the floor where dozens of couples moved through a simple country dance. The wallflowers and matrons kept to chairs tucked beside potted plants or near tables set with crystal bowls filled with what Haughton could only imagine was a ghastly sort of punch or lemonade. A whiskey would have suited him quite well, but he doubted he would find any such refreshment in a room full of gimlet-eyed mothers and cosseted daughters.

The women—both generations—kept an eye on his progress around the edges of the room. He felt their attention, like the buzzing of an unwelcome insect. He shouldn't have come here, but he had wanted a distraction, any distraction, and a ball had seemed like a good enough idea. Well, at least it had at the time.

Before him, there stood a wall of white. White lace, white flounces, white satin gloves and white strings of pearls around white, slender necks. Sisters, he realized. And all of them unmarried, he also realized, but a moment too late. Their mother, a most stalwart woman dressed in a vibrant orange silk creation that drained the last vestiges of color from her daughters' complexions in her proximity to them.

"Why, Lord Haughton!" she cried, and snapped her painted fan shut with a flick of her wrist. "How long it's been since you've graced our humble home with your presence!"

Ourhome? His mind leapt back to the invitation on his desk, the one on top of a stack of hundred others.

"Mrs. Carruthers," he said, recalling the name a mere second before he bent over her pro ered hand. "How kind of you to invite me."

"Oh, well!" She waved an arm in a broad, sweeping gesture that nearly boxed the ear of her eldest daughter. "You can be a bit of a recluse, you know. I take it you're like my Richard, always poring over his ledgers and cantering about the countryside, measuring canals and pastures and—oh!—I don't know what it is that some of you men get up to in your own time. But I'm always sure to send a card your way, though it's a rare thing to see you in a ballroom, I must say!" a

She laughed, high and loud, and his glance swept across the faces of her assembled daughters—four, in all—as their tired smiles became a little more pained at the edges.

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"Quite rare," Haughton agreed, but without humor. Already, his gaze had traveled beyond the ring of women before him, towards the doors, and in his mind's imaginings, a straight path that would lead him back to his own dark, quiet townhouse.

"Oh, but you must have a dance!" Mrs. Carruthers said, her hand wrapping like a vise around his forearm. Though her eyes remained bright and her speech overflowing with exclamation points, he felt the strength in her fingers as she steered him toward one of her daughters, a small thing with pretty blonde curls and an unfortunate tendency to cringe every time her mother opened her mouth. "Brigitte? Stand up straight, girl! No one likes to see a slumping set of shoulders in a brand new gown!" a

Brigitte mended her posture admirably, though her chin remained tucked against her chest as her cheeks burned with spots of red and pink.

"Here, you'll do for each other!" Mrs. Carruthers slapped her daughter's hand onto Haughton's arm and began waving towards the screen where the musicians were tucked away. "Ah, there we are!" she trilled as they struck up another song. "A shame dear Briggy cannot waltz yet, but a gavotte will have to su ice!"

Haughton led the poor girl out onto the floor. She was a shy thing, barely capable of making eye contact with him as moved through the patterns of the dance. Not a surprise, Haughton mused, considering both Brigitte's mother and her place in the line-up of sisters. Being neither the oldest nor the youngest, she seemed to have settled into an existence of doing as little to be seen as was necessary. a

He attempted to make conversation with her, to draw her out in some way, but her gaze continually flicked back to where her mother stood, and when Haughton glanced over his shoulder, it was to see that woman miming directions to her second youngest child.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, as the dance wound to a close.

"Oh, no," she said in a faint whisper. "You are a fine dancer, my lord."

"No, I mean that I'm sorry I must return you to your mother."

She raised her chin at that, and a touch of a smile graced the corners of her mouth. She was a lovely girl, he realized. Too quiet and reticent by half, but perhaps she would improve if she ever found her way out from beneath her mother's wing.

"Are any of your sisters married?" he asked as he walked her around the circumference of the ballroom, taking as long a route as possible before he relinquished her to her parent.

Brigitte shook her head. "Not yet," she said, still in that breathy whisper he was beginning to believe was not an a ectation, but rather her true voice. "I think Mother... Oh, I don't think she realizes how she drives them away!"

"Beaus, you mean?"

A sharp nod, which sent her fair curls bobbing around her head.

"It will get easier," Haughton said, though he had no idea what drove him to o er some words of comfort to this slip of a girl. Most likely, they would never cross paths again. "Once one of your sisters is safely wed and your mother feels her burden begin to lessen, it will become easier for the rest of you."

"Oh, I do hope so!" Brigitte gazed up at him, a fresh spark of hope lighting up her brown eyes. That she didn't look up to him as her savior, ready to sweep her o her feet and carry her posthaste to the nearest church told him that there were some brains in the girl's head. She understood that their dance had been nothing more than a small gi , both a respite from her mother's incessant attentions, and also a signal towards other eligible young men in the room that the Carruthers Sisters were worthy of their notice. a

As he finished depositing young Brigitte at her mother's side, he caught a glimpse of a dark head moving through the crowd. At first, he considered that his eyes had taken to playing tricks on him, especially considering the assault his head was currently enduring from the combination of noise and lights and the miasma of odors all around him. But when he blinked and looked again, he was sure that he recognized the profile of his brother, David. å

"Excuse me," he blurted out to Mrs. Carruthers, while that lady was in the middle of an attempt at extracting a promise from Haughton that he should call on Brigitte and take her for a drive in the park the next day. He abandoned them without another glance and moved at a swi pace through the wall of bodies that seemed to have sprung up before him.

"You," Haughton hissed in his brother's ear as he came up beside him. He placed a hand on his arm, gentle but persuasive. "I would like a word, if you please."

David turned around, his face lighting up with an almost beatific glow at his elder sibling's sudden appearance at his side. "Finn! Is this some sort of joke, eh? Seeing you at a ball? Never thought I'd live to witness the day!" a

Haughton's fingers tightened on David's sleeve. "Outside. Now."

David put up no resistance and allowed his brother to guide him toward the pair of doors that opened onto a well-lit terrace. There were a few other people strolling through the gardens, couples mostly, a few of them more than likely seeking out the less illuminated regions among the mazes of shrubbery, which would a ord them a bit more in the way of privacy.

David leaned against the balustrade, one leg crossed over the other, his shoulder cocked as he gazed back in the direction of the ballroom. There was a smirk on his face, an expression Haughton had learned was a near permanent fixture of his brother's features.

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"What are you doing here?" he asked his little brother, and was rewarded with a dazzling grin in return. At least, it was an attempt at dazzling. Haughton had long found himself immune to his sibling's charms.

"What, here? Merely sampling the delights of town life," David remarked, before his mouth stretched open in a yawn. "Mrs. Carruthers and her passel of daughters are insu erable, but I did hear of her fondness for cards. She always takes to setting a few rooms aside for those who would prefer to actually derive some enjoyment from their evening, which I doubt anyone would find while galloping about the floor with some mewling virgin." He directed a pointed look at his brother. "What about you, eh? Come here in search of your future bride?"

Haughton ignored the question. "I suggest you avoid all games of cards, or any sort of recreation in which betting plays a rather large part, even if your wager entails little more than a handful of matchsticks."

David tipped his head back, showing o the overwrought and meticulous folds of his neckcloth. Most likely the very height of fashion, but Haughton thought the neckcloth—along with the ridiculously high points on his collar, and the violet lining of his coat made him look like a fool. A fool who also undoubtedly had in his possession an innumerable collection of bills from his tailor. "Is that the whi of an order I catch in your words, Finn? I wasn't aware the crown had gi ed you with the power to lay down any sort of ultimatum concerning your brother's recreational habits."

"I have the power to cut o the rest of your allowance," Haughton said, the words spoken in a clear and direct voice. "At least, what little there is le of it." a

David straightened up to his full height, which was still several inches shorter than his brother. "Which wouldn't satisfy a pauper. How am I supposed to live when I cannot even keep up with daily expenses?"

"Perhaps if your expenditures didn't include losing a thousand pounds at the faro table in a single evening—"

"Still having me followed, then?" David interrupted, his voice rising along with his anger. "Interesting that along with all of your various pontifications about how I should behave, you send one of your nursemaids a er me to tattle on all of my doings. If you insist on treating me as a child, I don't understand how I'm able to continually fall below your expectations." a

Haughton closed his eyes for a moment of the strains of a waltz floated out from behind them. "This has nothing to do with what I wanted to speak to you about." He sighed. "Do you happen to recall any and all encounters with a young woman from Yorkshire?" Another meeting with Winston a er his return from Northumberland had gi ed him with the knowledge of Mrs. Brixton's and her sister's whereabouts before their departure for Stantreath. "One by the name of Miss Lucy Penrose?"

David's anger deflated immediately as he tapped his chin, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Penrose... Penrose... And did you say Yorkshire? Damn, that must have been well over a year ago."

"Eighteen months," Haughton provided, a er a moment's rapid calculation.

"That long?" he said, seeming to be unconcerned by Haughton's ability to conjure such a specific number out of the air. "Well, it would have to be. It was two seasons back that Jaunty and I had our little trip along the coast. But Yorkshire? Did we go that far north?" Another minute passed, and David's eyes flickered. At that moment, Haughton knew he remembered.

"Ah, Lucy." His brother heaved a wistful sigh. "Oh, she was a beauty, and wonderfully round in all the right places. Not like all the tall, willowy things they're parading about as the current fashion." He sighed again. Then, his blue eyes, a more muted shade than his

brother's, narrowed again. "Why do you ask? If you're looking for a tumble, I can't imagine you'd need to travel all the way to that godforsaken place for one."

Haughton resisted the urge to grind his own teeth down to powder. "I want to know if she's made any attempt to contact you since you last saw her."

David sco ed. "Good God, man! Do you think I'm a fool? I never use my real name. At least not when I'm sober enough to remember. But a fine coat, clean fingernails, and that's usually more than enough for them. They can imagine I'm some wayward Duke, traveling in disguise. Or even—"

Haughton held up a hand. "Enough." Behind them, the waltz wound its way to a conclusion. "So you're certain you've heard nothing from her?"

His brother shrugged. "Not a whisper."

"All right." He rapped his knuckles against the balustrade and turned his back on the garden. "Where are you staying?"

David grinned again, wide enough to display a dimple in his le cheek. "Why bother asking? Shouldn't your hired nursemaid already know?"

"I'd prefer to hear it directly from you."

"Well, I could tell you now, or I could wait until you arrive back at your house, ready to settle down in your study for a few hours of tedious bookkeeping, and find yourself with a new houseguest." đ

Haughton drew in a sharp breath. "When did you arrive?"

Another shrug. "About an hour or so ago. My valet should still be sorting out all of my clothes."

"I'm surprised you can a ord a proper valet," Haughton muttered.

"All right, yourvalet. That is, if you'll be good enough to lend him to me every evening once he's finished with you."

The smile was still a ixed to David's face as he strolled away from his brother, across the terrace and through the open glass doors that led back to the ballroom. Haughton remained outside, needing the chill of the midnight air to temper his irritation. He would have to alert the servants to lock up every valuable that wasn't nailed down, or risk his every piece of silver disappearing in order to settle one of his brother's blasted debts of honor.

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He glanced towards the ballroom, at the shi ing silhouettes of couples dancing on the floor. Perhaps his brother would find himself an heiress, someone who... But, no. That wouldn't do. As much as Haughton wished to be rid of David's prodigal ways, he couldn't find it within himself to curse some poor woman with such a shi less, selfish burden.

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Still editing and tweaking and working towards the best version of this I can produce! Thank you, readers, for your reads and likes and comments so far. They are more valuable than you could ever know! -Quenby Olson