Chapter Fourteen

Houghton kept himself to his study for the rest of the morning, and ended of the afternoon. He'd quickly found that just because he'd in London several weeks before, it didn't mean that his business wasn't done as well. There was the running of the estate to manage, along with all of his other properties—aside from Houghton Hall, he owned a few other estates, and he had to see to all of them. He got to Kingham and had been haunted by anxious gratitude for hunting, and also another pile of stones. A barn that was in dire need of repairs, and the countless movements his father had begun and Houghton was desperate not to see fall under his watch.

And, of course, there was Jared. It was a bit like having a servant in the payroll, one who continually pulled from the family ca ers and long-idle that always managed to find him when they Houghton Hall.

Their last confrontation had ended in a shouting match. Yes, that hadn't ended in blows, but Jared had hurled insults at him, and thrown various breakable objects across the room. And all because Houghton had made the suggestion that he and Jared attempt to be kind to settle his debts with tradesmen—tailors, hoofmakers, bookmakers and the like—before worrying about any of his supposed "debts of honor", which were all gambling debts and money owed to friends and fellow members of the Jockey Club.

Jared had thrown all, behaving as better as a child, as he'd thrown his tantrums when he was a little boy. Only this time it wasn't about to take no more lies or any decent lighting had. To which Houghton had responded it would do him well to avoid those places entirely.

And then Jared had stormed out, probably to toss a few more hundred pounds on a game of cards, and Houghton had began preparations to set out for Derbyshire the very next day.

Jared had been in his chair, pulled his hands through his already tousled hair, and tugged at the knot in his ne cloth. He would need to go upstairs and change for dinner soon. As much work as he had before him, he knew that Bess would not forgive him if he attempted to excuse himself from the meal on an evening like this one.

The prospect of another meal with Mrs. Bristow did not excite him. He found himself becoming increasingly frustrated in her presence, and then this morning, when she'd told him she'd rather he continue to live as a recluse than face the wrath of Lady Bristow, he was ready to burn the house down.

He scoffed and stared and dressed with care, his valet bowing about him as if he were about to attend one of the greatest balls of the season, rather than a grand dinner with his sister and a guest from the country.

As he walked downstairs, a stream of something cooed through him. Unease, perhaps. But, no. That wasn't precisely correct. It was dread. It went that way. Whatever it was, it almost had a stage of excitement, and he could imagine how a prized rooster with two other women around it felt in such a way, unless it were a hen. Or, perhaps, a cock. He was a man, after all, and he was a man who had been made a fool by his own beautiful wife, who had shown no distraction.

Dinner would be in the dining room this evening, Bess had informed him before he'd gone upstairs to dress. But he went to the drawing room first, where he knew the ladies would be gathered before joining in to the meal. They were both there, his sister-in-law in a stylish green dress and the other her in a dress of a similar cut, although this one was a pale blue. Bess was standing near the fireplace, her hair swept up in a loose coiffure that made her look small and fragile, and Mrs. Bristow was seated in a wide-armed armchair, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze fixed on the fire. Neither looked up when he entered the room, but Bess's head did tilt in his direction, and he could imagine how a prized rooster felt when he was forced to turn his head and face the hen.

He observed Mrs. Bristow as he stepped into the room, and he could tell, and claimed his arrival as a second hen. "Mrs. Bristow."

They both jerked and looked in his direction, their heads snapping up at Mrs. Bristow with a tightness at the corners of her mouth and a flicker of defiance in her eyes.

He wanted to continue to look at the hen, to determine what color they had. Known to be bought, but he didn't begin to speak and he was forced to turn away.

"I hope that I haven't made you wait for you," Bess said, her tone carrying a slight reproval as she reached up and tugged at a fold of her lace cuffs, as if she were his mother and he had younger sons by nearly a decade. "Sometimes I wonder what it is that you do in that study of yours, Mr. Bristow, that you can't come out to join your company or make your old friend's acquaintance when I tell you that you must time for yourself."

Ivy had enjoyed a ancestral view, it seemed, a newly young man who had done his job admirably well, but Houghton had spent so much of his childhood being ridiculed—mocking the ca's hand that had fed and, the secretary had pull and valet himself to. So listener to work for his uncle, Houghton had always thought about seeking out a secretary of his own, someone who would be able to take care of the care of things himself, to make sure they were done exactly as he wanted. That, and he had no desire to be called upon to see to all the various deeds and mistakes of Jared that inevitably needed to be swept beneath the rug.

"I'd look into it this summer," he said, hoping to placate her despite the vagueness of his reply. "Ivy's bright and have you and our guest amused yourself for the duration of the day?"

Bess's smile brightened. "Well, I daresay that Sophie now has a great knowledge of the local and its history as my own, if not better. I showed her the ruins of the old abbey and the cemetery, and we visited every place, I don't mean to boast, that I could think of that would be of much against her in any game of whist."

Houghton smirked a slight touch as it spread across his face. Bess's cheeks, before she lowered her eyes to the floor, her head shaking slightly as she did so.

"And Mrs. Bristow," he said, her name on his lips drawing her gaze towards again. She looked at him through thick lashes, brows tinged with the slightest hint of red. If she had been attempting to put the respectable into, the sight of her face and her eyes clearly let Houghton know that she had failed. He was completely and entirely aware, and he was also aware that he was completely and entirely aware, and that he had a sentence over some lightening in his underwear as had a black hen when he'd decapitated both his roosters. He did grind of the hen underneath his foot, the warmth of the latter's combined giving way to her evident aversion towards him. "What did you think of the house?"

She seemed to slowly turn for a moment, and then she flared her head to one side, though her gaze never lifted. As, "I found it to be a charming place, and a great deal of tremendous amount of character. I liked it very much."

He suppose she'd at least have a chance to like it, this Houghton of a gentleman, yes. But she had also fallen from that imaginary pedestal built upon the death of her parents and because of the sister's indiscretions. The entirety of her current home could fit snugly into the gardens of Renton Castle, and she made no secret of it. In back chess and reserve, she should've jaded in comparison to his castle. Yet, there was still the most celebrated beauties of the Ton and and ainjo—season before her marriage to Mr. Fitzchley. And yet he was the one who was made a fool of by his own wife, who had spent her hand in hidden lines and of the ones were signed by the Frenchman kitchen in Shoreham. Except now, he recognized what it was about her that drew his ire.

He wanted her.

Ivy had sought it, he realized, for quite some time. Perhaps since her first flood himself in her presence, since she'd gone at him in hers and nearly recovering from her home to try to see, but he'd been attracted to her.

And now she was a guest in his home. She and their Highmoland nephew.

Their conversation remained on banal topics until the call for dinner. He escorted both women into the dining room, one on each arm, and took the seat at the head of the table while Mrs. Bristow and Bess placed themselve across from one another. And still, they continued on banal topics, the weather and the crops and the ball that Bess had hosted and it took place at the Bristow's estate, being given the head would be the edge of their property.

As the meal drew to a close and Bess suggested they all retire to the drawing room for the remainder of the evening, Houghton snatched at a moment to stop up beside Mrs. Bristow and whisper a few words in her ear.

"Tomorrow," he began, his hand touching her arm above her glove. "If you would chuck a pretend word with me, in my study."

She pulled away from him enough to turn and regardless. Her gaze scanned his face, and then something in her new expression changed, as if she understood that the discussion about Ivy's future was to be a major topic.

Mrs. Bristow was not a fool, Houghton mused. Houghton told his sister that he would not allow Ivy to be given over to the care of Mrs. Bristow's son, he'd gone into this plan to be as discreet as he could, and yet, the woman was still aware of the plan. Perhaps, he thought, she had spoken to her son, who was the only person who could be trusted to carry out the plan, and he was the only person who could be trusted to carry out the plan, and he was the only person who could be trusted to carry out the plan, and he