

Chapter Twenty-Two

There was nothing for it. Sophia had made an attempt at seeking out every possible distraction to fill up the minutes that slowly ticked away her morning, but it was all to no avail. Books had been perused and tossed aside, newspapers and gossip sheets ignored, breakfast and nuncheon both toyed with and finally pushed away in disgust.

Haughton and Mr. Winston had left from St. James's street after taking their own breakfast in Haughton's study. At first, Sophia had considered demanding that they allow her to accompany them to their meeting with Lucy, but her sister was more likely to give in to hysterics and absurd demands if Sophia were present. Haughton, she hoped, with his firm demeanor and stoic attitude would not allow a few tears on Lucy's part to sway him from his purpose: to find George and bring him—and hopefully Lucy, as well—home.

Home.

Sophia looked around her, at the walls and furnishings of the drawing room in which she sat. This was certainly not her home. She thought of her cottage in Stantreath, a gift from Lady Rutledge. But that had never truly felt like home, either, only a place to stay, to lay her head and cook her meals until... until...

Well, Haughton and his sister had already ordered Denton Castle as a home to her and George, but would it ever really be a place in which she could be comfortable? Would she merely feel like a guest for the entirety of her stay there, even if such a stay stretched into a span of years?

And Haughton... Lord Haughton, she reminded herself, though she knew he was known as Finn to his sister and the enigmatic Mr. Winston. He had presented himself as such a formidable personage upon their first meeting, all stone and ice, an impenetrable wall without compassion or feeling. And now, months later, he had opened his home to her—both his homes, if she wished to be specific—had ordered whatever she needed for the care and rearing of George, and was currently dealing with her sister's absurd demands and reckless, thoughtless behavior in wrenching her son from Stantreath only to use him as a means to acquiring what she wanted.

Sophia blew out a breath, tossed aside the piece of mending she'd borrowed from Lady Rutledge's maid in order to occupy her restless hands, and rose from her chair near the window. She began to pace, again, her footfalls quiet on the fine carpets that covered the floors. She had paced enough to have worn grooves in those fine carpets and holes in her slippers, but she could not bring herself to sit still for another minute.

Haughton and Mr. Winston should have been back by now. She knew little of London geography, but she couldn't imagine that their errand to see Lucy should take so many hours. Unless heavy traffic had waylaid them, or Lucy was being particularly truculent, or perhaps they were even having to wait as Lucy packed up her and George's things before returning to Haughton's townhouse. Or perhaps...

With a small huff of impatience, she left the drawing room behind her and made her way towards Haughton's study. She had seen some writing paper and quills in there, and she thought that writing a letter to Lady Rutledge, even a letter that might never be sent, might work towards settling her anxious mind.

She had her hand on the doorknob when something made her pause. A sound from inside the room caught her attention. Not the sound of a servant tidying or of even Haughton himself moving about the room. It seemed to her ears that there was something... surreptitious about the noise. It was a shuffle, and then a brief clatter, and then silence. Someone, she thought, didn't wish to be heard.

Or perhaps that was only what her anxious mind imagined it to be. The last few days of travel and worry and little rest had no doubt led her wits in an addled state. Shaking her head, she grasped the doorknob with renewed strength, gave it a turn, and opened the door.

One step forward was all she took before her progress was arrested by the sight of David rifling through the papers stacked on Haughton's cluttered desk.

"Oh." The small sound slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it. David turned with a start, like a child caught in the act of committing a misdeed. Several expressions crossed his features in the span of a few seconds, from surprise, to embarrassment, and then settling on a furrowed brow that seemed to indicate frustration.

"What are you doing here?" The accusation lacked all of his usual charm. Gone was his grin, the rakish tilt to his eyebrows. There was no kindness in his tone, nor any of the overdone charm he had exhibited towards her at Denton Castle.

Sophia's mind worked at a rapid pace. David must be here without Haughton's knowledge. She glanced at the desk behind him, as if she were looking around for the whereabouts of a tea tray or a missing glove, rather than at the small stack of papers and what appeared to be bank notes sticking out of a plain, brown satchel, one that David seemed to be taking pains to keep from her sight. "Lord Haughton is out this morning," she said, ignoring his question. Though of course he already knew his brother was absent. Why else would he be here now, searching through Haughton's belongings?

"You're supposed to be in Stantreath." David took a step towards her. "Your sister said you were in Stantreath."

Sophia did not leave the doorway, neither did she close the door behind her. Haughton may not be there, but at least there was a household full of servants stalking the floors above and below her. Should she need their assistance for any reason, all she would have to do is call out for one of them.

"So you have seen Lucy," she said. Her fingers were still on the doorknob, her knuckles swiftly turning from red to white as she gripped the cool metal. "And George, I assume? He is well? He has not been harmed in any way?"

"Geo—?" David regarded her strangely for a moment, before his eyes widened in recognition. "Oh, you mean the child? Yes, he's well, I suppose. Noisy, sticky thing, but he seems to be all right. For an infant, that is."

His callous remarks angered her, but she drew in a slow breath and tamped down any vitriol before it could spill out of her mouth and make the situation more precarious than it had already become. "So how did my sister so neatly effect her flight from Stantreath? With your help?"

"Of course," David shrugged, a return of his more familiar rakish attitude lending a tilt to his eyebrows. "We made good time, for the most part, though traveling with a woman and a child in tow does tend to slow one down what with all those damned stops for new horses or a wheel stuck in the mud."

She again glanced at the satchel. The bag appeared to be filled with a fair number of items, if it's lumps and stretched seams were any indication. And was that a piece of silver she saw peeking out from one corner? "And so, what now? You'll demand money from your brother in exchange for George's return? Or do you plan on keeping him? Tucking him into your pocket so you can bring him out again whenever you're again low on funds?"

David crossed the room towards her. Nothing in his movements appeared threatening. To be honest, he looked too tired and drawn to do more than push his hand through his hair and send out a string of curses from under his breath. "Your sister says you want the child. Well, you can have him. And Finn..." His expression soured at mention of his older brother. "He's taken with you, for whatever godforsaken reason I cannot fathom." He took another step forward, placing himself near enough to touch her should he only stretch out his arm. "But then, Finn always did have peculiar tastes. Red hair," he said, almost more to himself than for her benefit. His mouth curled in disgust as he eyed her hair, braided and pinned into a simple coronet around her head. "That would be like him."

Sophia pulled herself up to her full height, taller than what was fashionable, she knew, and so she wondered if he would have any derogatory comments to make about that as well. Instead he seemed to deflate a little before he turned away and walked back to the desk. "No, you and my brother can have the brat, for all I care. Hell, the two of you can marry, raise him as your son, mold him into a miniature of my big brother. God help us if the next generation isn't complete with its own array of pompous asses throwing their unsolicited opinions at every poor sap to cross their path." He picked up the satchel and slung it over his shoulder. A tinkling sound from inside it confirmed her suspicion that it wasn't merely filled with bits of paper. "But if you want your nephew back in your arms, then Finn will find he has to agree to my terms. And if he doesn't..." David returned to the doorway, standing close enough to Sophia that she pressed her back against the door in order to put more space between them. "I'm sure you can convince my brother to see sense. If he truly is smitten with you, and you're already here beneath his roof... Well, what's a night or two in his bed in exchange for the return of your beloved nephew?"

She did not pause long enough to ponder whether or not she should strike him. The sound of her hand splashing the lower half of his face rang through the hall. She had never struck anyone before, and the pain that reverberated through her own fingers at the harsh contact drew a gasp from her own lips.

David winced and raised a hand to rub the part of his jaw she'd injured. "Yes, you and Finn do make a pair, don't you?" He stepped back, gave her a mocking bow and even clicked his heels together as he did so. As he straightened up again, Sophia saw the outline of her hand showing up as a vivid red splotch on his cheek. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I'd rather not be here when my brother returns from his little meeting with your sister. She may not be his type, but perhaps she's already managed to loosen the strings of his purse. I've found her to be rather persuasive when she puts her mind and, well, other parts to the task."

The leering grin on his face almost drew Sophia's hand to his cheek a second time, but before she could pull back her arm for another strike, a sound from behind David caught her attention. She leaned to one side and looked out to see Haughton standing there in the hall, still wearing his coat and hat. But it was the small half inside in his arms that made her catch her breath. Her George, tucked half-inside his coat, his chubby, red cheek pressed to Haughton's breast as he napped against him.

"Oh, heavens." She raced across the hall, her encounter with David forgotten as she reached out to take the infant from him.

"He is unharmed," Haughton assured her, as he passed the sleeping child into her arms. George let out a soft snore, smacked his drooling lips, and wiggled his bottom peacefully into Sophia's embrace. "And your sister... Well, we'll discuss everything at a more appropriate time."

Sophia pressed her cheek to the top of George's head and inhaled deeply. "Thank you," she said, her voice trembling with an entire catalog of emotions. She glanced up into Haughton's face, at the tired blue eyes she had once thought to be so cold, so devoid of feeling. But there was something there now, something she was too exhausted, too overwhelmed with the events of the last few days to identify. "Thank you."

He nodded, nothing more. When he finally tore his gaze away from her face and glanced at the man still hovering behind them, he placed a hand on her shoulder and directed her towards the stairs. "Take him upstairs. Rest, eat, whatever you need. I have a few small matters to attend to, and then we can sort things out."

She glanced back over her shoulder at David, huddling in the doorway of the study, his shoulders hunched forward and his feet shuffling on the tile floor as if he were a recalcitrant schoolboy rather than a grown man. At the stairs, she met Mr. Winston, who gave her a nod and a "Good day, Mrs. Brixton," before she began the climb up to her room.

Once inside the bright, spacious bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed, holding George to her chest. He was a sound enough sleeper that she could've put him down without disturbing him, but she had no desire to let him out of her arms until she could convince herself that he wouldn't be snatched away from her again. After a few minutes, she laid down on her side, tucking George against her as she drew her knees up and tucked her feet beneath the edge of her skirt. She touched his cheek, the tip of his nose, traced the delicate shell of his ear with fingers that still trembled with the remnants of the morning's excitement.

"I do love you so," she whispered, before she closed her eyes, draped an arm over the sleeping infant, and followed him into slumber.

After a weekend filled with gorgeous weather and sick children (and a sick Mommy) it feels great to get back to posting this again. As always, thanks to all who keep reading and sharing and liking and commenting and so on. And it's only two more chapters to go!

Quenby Olson