

The German was enormous, and his right hook was deadly, but he'd been hit in the head one too many times. He was as dim as the stars shining in the London fog. That didn't mean Rowden wasn't dancing in the ring. He didn't want a ham-sized fist plowing into his face. But the German had no strategy. Rowden had lasted four rounds with the brute, and he could see the man was tiring. If Rowden could survive one round more, the German would be tired enough that Rowden could get in a few jabs and take him down.

Rowden danced back, twisted, felt the swipe of the German's fist a fraction from his ear. The crowd yelled and cheered, and Rowden flashed them a grin. Some of them had bet against him of course, but most of them were smart enough to bet against the German. Rowden wasn't known as The Royal Payne for nothing. He glanced at his manager, standing with arms crossed on one side of the ring. Chibale narrowed his eyes, reminding Rowden to focus. They'd be called to their corners soon.

Then he'd get a drink, take a breath, and start his attack. In another quarter hour, the prize money would be his. Fifty pounds wasn't a fortune, but it was nothing to scoff at. Once Rowden would have considered fifty pounds nominal. But that was before his father had disavowed him.

Younger sons of dukes didn't have many useful, practical skills. Rowden had tried the army, but he hadn't liked taking orders. Now he made his way in the fashion he preferred—with his fists.

He ducked as the German swung at him, then skipped behind the man and jabbed him in the lower back. The German grunted and swung around. That punch was easy to evade as the German hadn't even aimed it. Sweat poured from the giant's forehead, and his blue eyes were red-rimmed. Rowden could feel the fifty quid in his pocket already. Well, thirty-five quid. He'd have to pay Chibale fifteen pounds.

Rowden glanced at Chibale who nodded and raised a hand level to the ground. Hold steady.

Suddenly a loud bell rang out and a voice shouted above the men lining the ring. "Woe to ye, sinners! Repent and God will forgive thy sins!"

It was a woman's voice, and Rowden tried to ignore it, but the bell had been loud and unexpected and thrown him off balance.

"Flee this den of iniquity!"

Den of iniquity? It was a tavern with an area roped off for boxing in the back. A bit of drink and sport was hardly wicked.

"Flee now afore the fires of hell descend!" The bell rang again, and a burst of fire seemed to leap into the crowd. The men on the side of the ring closest to the fire moved

aside, and Rowden couldn't stop himself from looking. Even as his mind screamed, *No!*, his head turned to glance at the spectacle.

It only took an instant for him to see the woman's companion held a torch. No one was in any real danger. Except for Rowden, in the ring with the German. That was the instant he should have turned back to his opponent. He should have ducked. He should have done anything other than lock eyes with the woman dressed in black. Her gown was severe with its high neck and coarse cloth. Her hair was covered by a white cap.

But her eyes.

Her eyes were the most beautiful shade of hazel he'd ever seen. Truly, they were remarkable. He stared at her, and she stared at him, and then she winced.

Like an idiot he turned to look at what had caught her attention, and pain struck the side of his head like a boulder smashing down on it.

And then he was down, and for a moment the world was gray and all but silent. Rowden felt as though he had fallen into a lake and was struggling to swim to the top of the water. Everything was murky and muted, but finally he broke through to the surface and a dark brown face was right above him.

"You lost," Chibale said.

Rowden shook his head. "No. I can still fight. Give me a minute." He tried to sit, but his head felt too heavy.

Chibale shook his head. "You've been lying on the ground for two minutes. It's over."

Rowden growled. He was suddenly hungry and thirsty, and his pockets were not fifty pounds fuller. "Goddamn it."

"I think that is exactly what happened, my friend." He offered a hand, and Rowden took it, allowing Chibale to pull him to his feet. "Those zealots came in and ruined everything."

"I shouldn't have let myself become distracted."

Chibale put an arm around Rowden, led him to a table, and signaled to a server to bring him a drink. "It's not like you to lose focus."

Rowden closed his eyes. He opened them again when he heard a cheer from the other room, then scowled when he saw the German and his friends raising their pints in celebration.

"Get me another match with him," Rowden said.

"And how am I supposed to do that? He knocked you on your unfocused, white arse. No one is interested in a rematch."

"Make them interested. That's what I pay you for."

Chibale sat back, crossed his arms, and looked up at the ceiling. "Neither of us made any blunt tonight. And we could have used it after your holiday a few months ago."

Rowden blew out a breath. "I was helping a friend, not on holiday." He'd spent most of October in the countryside at the home of his friend Nash Pope. Pope's father, the Earl of Beaufort, had offered to pay Rowden for his time, but Rowden hadn't felt right about taking the money. Now that Nash was planning a wedding and threatening to invite Rowden, he wondered if he should have accepted the money.

"I was hoping to buy a new waistcoat," Chibale complained.

Rowden rolled his eyes and then winced. His head was still ringing. "You're already the best-dressed man east of Mayfair. The last thing you need is another waistcoat."

Chibale nodded at the server who brought his ale and drank. "You could use a new waistcoat." He handed Rowden his shirt so he could pull it over his head and bare chest. "And a few new shirts, come to think of it."

Rowden drank his ale down. "Only get blood on them," he said. Rowden stared at his empty glass. "Besides I have no one to impress." He glanced at Chibale. "How is your sister's gown coming along?"

"It's finished," Chibale said, looking annoyed.

"And the modiste still hasn't succumbed to your charms?"

A few months ago, Chibale had drunk a bit too much wine when they'd been celebrating one of Rowden's wins, and he'd confessed he was half in love with a French modiste named Madame Renauld. But the dressmaker refused all of Chibale's efforts to court her, so he'd finally brought his sister to her to have a dress made. Apparently, that effort had not gone as planned.

"How's your head?"

Rowden turned to see where the voice had come from and immediately regretted the quick movement. Aiden Sterling grabbed a chair and sat, laughing. "That bad?" He signaled to the server to bring another tray of drinks. "That German knocked you flat. I haven't seen you lose that badly since you fought that Spaniard in Portugal."

"Spaniard in Portugal?" Chibale asked.

"When we were in the army," Aiden said. "Before you started calling Rowden The Royal Payne and charging to watch him fight."

"Ah." Chibale nodded. "When you fought for free." His tone held a trace of contempt.

"It was those goddamn Methodists or Puritans or whatever the hell they were this time," Rowden said. "They threw my concentration." That wasn't exactly true. It was the woman who had distracted him. Those eyes. He'd never seen eyes like that before. Nothing else about her was remarkable. He couldn't even remember her face. She had seemed a black, shapeless thing yelling about sin and hell. Usually, the religious zealots stood on the street corners by the whores and harangued the men soliciting the prostitutes. Lately, they'd become bolder, entering taverns to preach about the evils of drink and sport. This was the second time they'd interrupted one of his mills, though he'd heard of other fights that had been disrupted by them. Last time he'd considered it a nuisance. This time he was angry. And bruised.

"A sect of Methodists, I think," Chibale said.

"You cost me five pounds," Aidan said.

"Only five pounds?" Rowden asked. "That's all you wagered on me?"

"No, I wagered ten."

"Then how did you lose only five?" Chibale asked, passing out drinks from the server.

Rowden glared at his friend. "Because he wagered five on the German."

Aidan smiled and lifted his ale. "You know me too well."

Rowden brought the ale to his lips then set it down again. His belly roiled and his head hurt like the dickens. "I'm done for tonight." He stood, wobbling a bit.

Chibale stood too. "I'll go with you."

Rowden waved him off. "Your rooms are nearby. It would be out of your way." Rowden caught the look Chibale and Aidan exchanged.

"I'll go," Aidan said. "I haven't eaten yet. I'll stop in at the Draven Club and see what Porter is serving tonight."

"I don't need a chaperone," Rowden said. But he didn't argue very forcefully. He'd rather Aidan go with him, hail the hackney, and haul him up to his flat. Rowden's head hurt too much to think about anything practical.

"Tomorrow at Mostyn's," Chibale said as the two men started away. "I made notes for improvement."

Rowden blew out a breath and leaned on Aidan as they stepped out into the frigid February night. Aidan raised a hand, and a jarvey just down the street called to his horse and started their way.

"I thought you didn't like taking orders," Aidan said.

"He works for me."

Aidan raised his brows but didn't speak. Rowden didn't like taking orders, but he also wasn't an idiot. That's why he'd hired Chibale. The man knew boxing, and he knew what Rowden needed to do to win. It was Chibale who had come up with the name The Royal Payne, and it was largely due to Chibale that the name was becoming known not only within London but throughout England.

So Rowden might not like having to go to the boxing studio tomorrow, but he'd do it.

And next time, no goddamn zealot would throw off his concentration.

* * *

Modesty Brown stood on the corner and watched as the fighter—they called themselves milling coves—climbed into a hackney with his friend. She heaved a sigh of relief. He had been hit so hard, and when he'd fallen it seemed the entire floor shook. She'd known it was her fault. He'd been looking at her when the other man hit him. She'd wanted to warn him, but she was supposed to be there to disrupt the sinful activities, not take part in them.

Beside her, her father called out Bible verses to men and women passing by. No one seemed to pay him any attention. She held her wooden sign higher. It read, REPENT! THE END IS NEAR!

The torch one of the other congregants held lit the words on the sign. The older woman with the torch would take over preaching when her father's voice tired. It was only half past ten, and they would probably be here until midnight at least. She did not like staying out that late. The later it became, the more intoxicated the people. The Fancy—what the men who liked to watch fights called themselves—were especially rude. Men and women alike yelled foul things and made vulgar gestures. Modesty always tried to look away. When she'd been younger, her father had covered her eyes. But now that she was almost four and twenty, she had seen just about everything the underground of London had to offer. A boxing match between two grown men seemed relatively tame to her, but she had not argued when her father instructed the small group of parishioners to follow him and disrupt the match.

Modesty never argued. Her mother had not argued. She had been an example of perfect womanhood—obedient, submissive, soft-spoken, and pious. Modesty wanted to be everything her mother had been. She wanted her father to love her the way he'd loved her mother.

And her mother would not have countenanced her staring at the pugilist as she was. Modesty averted her eyes from the hackney and tried not to think about the man. She'd seen bare-chested men before on other occasions when she had been in the party that

disrupted a boxing match. She saw bare buttocks even more frequently. All she had to do was look down the alley to her right to see prostitutes pushed up against a wall and men with their breeches about their knees. She did not concern herself with matters of the flesh. It was the spirit inside the flesh that mattered.

But she had been sorely tempted tonight because the flesh encasing the pugilist's spirit was rather enticing. She'd have to ask for forgiveness later because she had looked far too long at his bare chest. And then she'd looked even longer at his almost-handsome face and his green eyes.

"Beware the serpent!" her father called out, and Modesty nodded in agreement. She did need to be wary.

"Beware the fires of—" Her father broke off and the other parishioners looked at him with alarm. He cleared his throat and continued. "The fires of hell!"

Modesty frowned. Something was not right. Her father did not sound like himself.

"Excuse me. Brother John, please take my place for a moment."

"Father!" Modesty grabbed his arm. "Are you well?"

"The Lord is my shepherd," Brother John began.

Her father gave her a tight smile and wiped a bead of sweat from his cheek. Like the rest of the party, he was dressed in all black. His black hat obscured his face in the dim light, and she could not see his eyes.

"Yes, child. All is well. I see someone I must speak with. I will return in a moment."

He walked away, and Modesty rose on tiptoes to watch where he went. He passed several buildings then stopped in front of a younger man dressed in plain brown trousers and the sort of coat farmers wore. He removed his hat, and the two men stepped around the corner and out of sight.

Modesty felt her belly tighten with unease. Her father had never done such a thing before. He never left his preaching like this. The only time he left off was when someone passing by asked for a blessing or to pray with him. But if that man had wanted a blessing, then why had he not asked in front of all of them? Why had her father gone off with him in private? London was dangerous, and it made her nervous to think of her father alone and undefended.

But presently, he returned. She waited for him to explain himself, but he said nothing, just took over for Brother John. Modesty glanced down the street where her father had gone to meet the man and noted he was still standing on the corner. He still held his hat and he seemed to be watching her. Modesty looked away, feeling self-conscious. And when she looked back, he was gone.

