

*From Chapter Three*

The knocking woke him. It started far enough away that King could ignore it. But then it grew closer and louder, and he tried to pull the pillow over his head to drown it out. But he had no pillow, he discovered when he opened one eye, because he was lying on the rug before the cold hearth.

“My lord?” came a voice he knew, followed by more knocking.

“Go away,” King croaked, and put his throbbing head back on the rug.

“My lord! I must speak with you urgently.” The voice was that of his butler, Churchwood.

King groaned and rolled over, immediately regretting the movement. The room spun and his brain seemed to lurch violently inside his skull. Churchwood was saying something else, but King had to take several enormous breaths to keep from tossing up his accounts. Finally, he called out, “Come in, then, Churchwood. And stop knocking.”

Where the devil was Danby? Why hadn't Danby kept Churchwood from waking him?

Then King spied a stockinged foot and followed it to a pantalooned leg and up to the shirted torso of his valet, who was snoring softly on the rug not far away. King shoved the foot, but Danby grunted and kept snoring.

“I cannot come in, my lord. The door is locked, and I cannot find Mr. Danby.”

King had a vague memory of making Danby lock the door last night. He didn't want to risk the witch finding a way in, though considering that she had stepped out of the fire in the hearth, he didn't know why he'd thought a locked door would stop her. But, of course, she hadn't

really stepped out of the fire in the hearth. She'd been a hallucination brought on by bad rum. A nightmare formed out of his drunken delirium.

King made a valiant effort to sit, but the room spun so wildly that he knew he would never make it to the chamber door. Instead, he elbowed Danby's foot again. "Wake up, Danby."

Danby grunted.

"Door, Danby." King jabbed at the valet's foot harder, and this time Danby seemed to start awake and look about him in confusion. Churchwood's knocking began again, and King felt like growling. Instead, he put his head in his hands. "Make him stop, Danby, or I'll sack you both."

Danby scrambled to his feet, straightened his coat, and stumbled to the door. The knocking stopped, and King closed his eyes and lay back down again. The rug was a plush Aubusson, and he congratulated himself on the wise purchase. He had slept on it many a night when climbing into bed seemed too much effort. He was almost asleep again when something shook him. He swatted it away, but the shaking continued.

King opened his eyes and scowled at Danby. "Go away."

"My lord, you must rise immediately. There is a crisis."

"Deal with it." King tried to roll over, but Danby just scurried to his other side.

"I cannot, my lord. I tried to tell you last night. It's about the duke."

"The duke..." King muttered. He was vaguely aware that his father was in some sort of trouble. He and the duke were estranged, which was to say that they hadn't exchanged more than a handful of words in the last ten years. Still, he heard news of the Duke of Avebury from time to time. It was inevitable, no matter how hard he tried to avoid his sire's name. Someone had even mentioned His Grace last night. In fact, that might have been what started King's heavy drinking.

And now Danby was mentioning the duke as well, and Danby knew he was strictly forbidden from ever bringing up Avebury's name.

Gradually, King became aware that though the knocking on his door had ceased, there was still a sound of not knocking, but banging and clanking and heavy thudding. What the holy hell was happening in his house at barely—he squinted at the clock on the mantel—half past nine in the morning? His staff knew he did not like to be disturbed until afternoon.

“Help me up, Danby.” King began to feel he might need to rise from the floor for whatever was coming. Danby offered an arm. King tried to stand, found that too ambitious, and sank into a chair. Danby began to speak, but King lifted a hand. “I don't know what you are about to say.” He heard more concerning noises coming from below. Men speaking as they seemed to be passing in and out of his town house. “I think whatever it is, I shall need a drink first.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Danby fetched him a brandy, and King drank it down. Thus fortified, he nodded to the valet.

“I have concerning news, my lord. The duke has been found guilty.”

“Guilty.” King stared at the valet, whose face was white as the cravats he starched. “What do you mean?”

Danby folded his hands before him. “My lord, I know you do not wish to speak of your father—”

“He's the duke. Not my father.”

“Yes, my lord. I know you do not wish to speak of the Duke of Avebury, but surely even you are aware of the accusations made against him.”

When King didn't answer, Danby swallowed.

"The charges of treason, my lord?"

King had heard, of course. He even knew that the duke was on trial. It wasn't often the entire House of Lords was summoned by the lord high steward to act as triers. It was in all the papers. Everyone knew Kingston and Avebury were estranged, which was the only reason he had not been vilified by the press as well. A charge of treason was a serious matter, but then, Avebury had serious enemies. They would have to concoct quite the story to have any hope of ruining the duke.

"Is the trial concluded?" King asked, putting the snifter to his lips again, even though it was empty.

"It is, my lord."

"That's done, then." And yet the sounds coming from below concerned him.

"Unfortunately, my lord, as I said, the verdict did not go as we had hoped."

The room spun again, and this time it had nothing to do with the amount of alcohol he had imbibed. "Guilty," King said, the word making sense now.

"Yes, my lord, the duke was found guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy. He sold secrets to France and has been placed in prison, awaiting his sentencing."

King stared at Danby. His mind was slow to comprehend what he was being told, but as realization sank in, his body went cold. "It will be death. Execution, no doubt."

Danby pressed his hands together tightly. King watched the skin turn white where Danby's fingers met. "The duke has been stripped of his titles and privileges, my lord."

King found it difficult to draw in his next breath. His throat was tight, and his skin covered with chill bumps. He did not love his father—he did not even like the man—but the duke was his only close relative, and he would prefer the duke lived.

“That’s not all, my lord.”

King stared at the valet. Of course that wasn’t all. When one’s life was being smashed to rubble, best to smash it into oblivion. “There will be an attainder by verdict,” King said, his lips saying what his mind would not allow him to contemplate.

“Yes, my lord. The matter will come before the lords and commons later this week.”

“It will pass,” King said.

“Most likely, my lord.”

“And then I will be stripped of my title and properties.”

“Yes, my lord.”

King looked up at Danby. “I suppose you can stop calling me *my lord*.”

Danby opened his mouth but didn’t seem to know what to say. He closed it again. A crash filled the silence.

“What is happening below?” King asked.

“Er—” Danby shifted from foot to foot.

But King already knew. His creditors had descended like sharks when there was blood in the water. Who could blame them? He had accounts at every merchant on Bond Street and then some. He owed drapers and haberdashers, bootmakers and jewelers. Those merchants had no hope of being paid when the duke’s offspring—King—was stripped of his wealth and titles. They had to reclaim what they could now.

Feeling strangely calm, King stood and walked to the bedchamber door. It was open, and Churchwood stood just outside, eyes wide and lips pressed together. As soon as he saw King, he pounced. "What shall I do, my lord?"

"I suppose you ought to grab some candlesticks or silver," King said, voice hard. "I won't be able to pay you. I'll give you a reference, though a fat lot of good that will do you." He walked to the winding stairway and looked down at the chaos below. He could feel Danby and Churchwood right behind him. He stared at the large foyer, now crowded with men moving couches and tables and longcase clocks through the open front door. Just outside, wagons lined the street before the town house and people stood across the way, gaping at the spectacle.

King started down the stairway just as several men started up. They'd begin to pilfer from the bedchambers and the drawing room now. Nothing to be done about it. Soon his landlord would arrive and want to be paid the money owing for the lease. Then King would be out on the street.

His legs gave out then, and he sank down on the steps about a quarter of the distance from the bottom. A few of the movers gave him curious glances, but they didn't cease their work. There was a line of them waiting to move through the door with whatever booty they could take.

King watched the men file out the door then file back in again like an industrious ant colony. He used to enjoy observing ant colonies on the rare occasion he was at the Avebury country estate. He supposed he would never see that again. Were there creditors in those ancient halls now, stripping the walls of the portraits of the previous dukes of Avebury?

One of the men passing him gave him a pitiable look, and King had to urge to trip the bastard. Let them look at him with pity. He would find a way to fix this. He would find a way to reclaim what was his. He had friends and connections. He had never been in a situation he

couldn't find a way out of, and this was no different. He just needed time and a bit of sobering up.

King's gaze sharpened as a figure seemed to separate itself from the crowd of men. Or perhaps they moved apart to reveal her. A woman in a shabby blue coat with a ragged bonnet hanging by the ribbons down her back stood under his chandelier and looked about. She wasn't one of his servants, and yet she looked familiar for some reason. She was pretty, with her dark hair in a neat bun at the nape of her neck and her large blue eyes in a face that seemed too thin. King never forgot a pretty face.

Her dark eyes settled on him, and he felt something inside him shift under her gaze. Judging by her clothing, she was of absolutely no consequence to him or the world, and yet he felt as though he'd just been noticed by the queen.

"You," she said, stepping forward.

With some amusement, King noted that the burly men moving his belongings scrambled to step out of her way as she started for him. She pointed an ungloved finger at him, and King had the ridiculous notion to put a hand to his chest, as though saying, *Me?*

"It was you. I knew it!" She started up the marble stairs, pausing two steps below him. She was even prettier now that she was closer. Her skin was surprisingly smooth and clear for someone of her class. Not a pockmark in sight. He looked down at her, and her cheeks colored under his direct gaze. Belatedly, he realized she was holding something out to him. His gaze lowered, and he spotted the sheet of paper. He looked up again, and she nodded down at it.

He took the paper, feeling vaguely uneasy that he was still seated and she standing. He did not need to rise in her presence. She wasn't a lady. King unfolded the paper and stared at a

list of items with numbers beside them. “What is your name?” he asked, looking up from the odd paper.

“Miss Baker. Violet Baker.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I am the proprietress of The Silver Unicorn.” She raised her brows meaningfully, as though her words should hold some import.

“Good day, Miss Baker. I certainly hope your day is better than mine thus far.”

“It is not, sir—I mean, my lord. Thanks to you, my day has begun very poorly indeed. You may remedy that by paying the sum indicated.”

He stared at her until she nudged the paper he still held gingerly between two fingers. As she leaned forward, he caught the scent of her—the smell of yeast and lye and perhaps something lightly floral. King looked at the paper again. His thoughts were a complete jumble. Not only was he still foxed, he felt as though an entire shelf of books had crashed down over his head. The Duke of Avebury was a traitor. Was he in the Tower even now? Would he be executed today? And King, who had always known he would one day be duke, now knew nothing of his future. That future lay like a fathomless maw before him. He scrambled to hold on to the familiar, but he was being pushed into that bottomless blackness whether he wanted to go or not.

The words and letters on the paper swam before his eyes until he blinked and made a valiant attempt to concentrate. And then he frowned and looked up. “You want me to pay you ten pounds?”

“That’s right. That’s what you owe for the riot you caused last night.”

“Riot?” King stood, holding on to the newel post for support.



“Yes, my lord.” She looked up at him and squared her shoulders as though refusing to be intimidated. “You and your friends came into the Silver Unicorn last night, caused a riot, and destroyed my tavern.”

King gaped at her then realized who she must be. “Are you speaking of that grimy den we stopped in last night? The place with the rum like horse piss?” The rum that had caused him to imagine witches in his chambers.

Her pointed chin jerked up sharply. “I have never tasted horse piss, my lord, but I do believe my publican served you rum.” She shifted her gaze away thoughtfully. “In fact, I don’t believe you paid for that either. Let me have that paper. I’ll add the cost of the rum.” She held out her small hand. It was decidedly not the hand of a lady. Her nails were short, her knuckles red, and her skin chafed.

“You may add whatever you like to this...receipt. I can’t give you ten pounds.” Yesterday he would have ordered Churchwood to pay her, finding the whole exchange amusing. He had a vague memory of tables overturning and chairs smashing last night. He didn’t think he was wholly responsible for the damage to her dirty slum tavern, but he would pay it just to make her go away. Today, he didn’t think he even had a pound to his name. Really, for the damage the rum had done to his brain, *she* should pay *him*.

“Eight pounds, then,” she said, moving to block him even as he moved down a step. “And no less. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“No,” he said. When she wouldn’t move out of his way, he took her thin shoulders in his hands and moved her out of his path. King didn’t know where he would go, but he did not want to sit on the steps and watch his life carried away.

Miss Baker was not done with him, though. She was right on his heels. “My lord, if you do not pay me, I will be forced to involve the authorities.”

King found this threat wholly amusing. The Parliament would vote to attain the duke and his offspring tonight, no doubt with the full support of the prince regent. Prinny had never liked King, not since King and Rory had played that little joke on him. The prince would be more than pleased to see King stripped of land and titles. And this little chit from Seven Dials thought to threaten him with...what? A constable? A magistrate?

“Go ahead,” he said, dismissing her with a wave.

But before King could move away from the stairs, another man approached, holding a sheet of parchment. “My lord, I beg you to take a moment to look at the charges on your account from Schweitzer and Davidson.”

King turned to the other side, where another man waited. “Your account from Stultz, my lord. If you would be so kind as to settle it.”

Every tailor, hatmaker, bootmaker, and costermonger would be on him in a moment. And he with only—King reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a coin—a crown to his name. “This is all I have, gentlemen. Have at it.” And he flipped it into the air. The men lunged for it, but a hand reached out and caught it neatly before any of the men could snatch it. King turned and saw the petite tavern owner secure the coin in a flash.

“You still owe me seven pound, fifteen shillings,” she said. This began a general outcry of men calling out the sums he owed their various employers. King pushed through them, shouldered past the movers carrying his dining room table out, and stood in the yellow light of morning. How could the day have dawned so sunny when he felt as though he was being swallowed into a dark pit?

Ah, but the vipers in the pit had followed him, and the bill collectors crowded about him even on his own stoop. The sound of them was enough to make King's head pound even worse. He tried to move away and bumped into Miss Baker, but instead of reiterating her demand for payment, she waited until he righted himself then shoved through his creditors and started away. For a moment, King was rather jealous that she could escape so easily. She could disappear into Seven Dials, and no one would find her. God knew he didn't think he could ever again find that little shack of a tavern she claimed to own.

And if he couldn't find it, no creditors would think to look for him there.

"Miss Baker!" King called.

She jerked to a surprised halt and looked at him over her shoulder. "Hold a moment."

Now she raised her brows as he fought through the men surrounding him to reach her.

"You said I owe you seven pounds?"

Her hands went to her hips. "Seven pounds and fifteen shillings."

"Right. Well, I'd like to see the damage and verify it myself."

Her gaze slid past him to the men still calling out to him. "You want a place to hide," she said.

He could have denied it, but why the hell should he? He did want a place to hide. Even a wolf needed a den to lick his wounds and recover for the fight ahead. "Just for a day or so," he said. "Until I can put my affairs in order." Until he could rally his friends and reclaim what was his.

"And then you'll pay me?"

A small voice taunted him, saying, *You'll never pay her or any of them. You'll be lucky to convince a friend to loan you enough so that you don't starve.*

King silenced the voice. He had many friends—rich friends. He might be down for the moment, but he could still turn things around. He always did. “Of course,” he told her. “I’ll pay.”

Her brows came together in a skeptical expression. She was not like the ladies of his acquaintance. She wasn’t innocent and naïve. She had her doubts that he’d pay. And then something like cunning flashed in her clear blue eyes, and King had half a mind to reconsider his plan. He’d always thought he was the wolf, playing with all the sheep for entertainment. But in that moment, her eyes were every bit the predator’s.

King shifted away from her, his instincts telling him to walk the other way, but before he could act on those reflexes, she grasped the sleeve of his coat and yanked him back into her orbit. The shrewdness was gone from her eyes, and she blinked at him sweetly as she pulled him along with her.

But King didn’t believe it for a moment. As he glanced over his shoulder at his town house, the doors open and his furnishings on the street outside, he wondered if he hadn’t just jumped out of the fire and into a raging inferno.