Chapter One

There were too many letters. An inordinate amount of them, spilling	
out of crevices and sliding out of their well-organized stacks. Most	
were invitations, a fact that irritated Lord Finnian Haughton to no	
end. Invitations to balls, to routs, to garden parties and a ernoon	
teas, where he would be expected to deal with the attentions of no	
small number of simpering females. And all of them with their	
eyelashes fluttering while a mere turn and snap of their fans spoke a	
language he would never be able to decipher.	4
This morning's stack of cards sat on his desk, the light spilling in through the window, sending a solitary beam across the topmost	

letter. A glance at the direction told him more than he needed to know. The lettering was too fine and flowery, a woman's hand, and a noticeable aroma emanated from the paper, as if it had been glazed with rose water before being sent round to his townhouse.

He understood their interest in him, and his position in polite society. He was a man. A gentleman. A titled gentleman with a rather large fortune. And, most bothersome of all, a titled gentleman, possessed of a large fortune, who—according to that polite society which insisted on tossing flowery cards and invitations at him as if they were tossing bread crumbs to a duck in a pond—had decided to remain stubbornly ensconced in his current life as a bachelor. a

He gave the corner of his newspaper a shake and reached out for his cup of tea. From another part of the house, he heard a knock on the front door, followed by the measured step of Gleeson showing no haste in his e ort to answer it. Haughton waited, his eyes gazing at a vague point beyond the edge of the newspaper as the butler's steps made their way towards his study. Another knock, this one on his own door, and a grey, tonsured head bowed itself into the room. a⁴ "It's Mr. Winston, my lord. Shall I...?" đ

Haughton nodded in reply to the unfinished query. Gleeson disappeared, the steps receded, and Haughton folded his newspaper into a sti rectangle that landed with an audible smack on top of the pile of invitations. a

Haughton glanced up at the door as another man, this one dressed in a coat and trousers of a dull, forgettable color, entered the sunlit đ room.

"Finn?"

"Winston." Haughton sat up in his own chair and indicated the one opposite him with a wave of his hand. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

Winston strolled forward, his hands clasped around both hat and gloves, neither of which had managed to be relinquished to the butler upon his arrival. He let out a sigh as he lowered himself into his seat, scratched his chin, and ran a bare hand over his neatly trimmed brown hair.

"Have you breakfasted?" Haughton asked, his eyes taking in the obvious wear on the man's suit and the scu s on his boots.

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"Yes, early." Those two words revealed an accent that held no connection to any town or borough within fi y miles of London. Haughton had never inquired a er Winston's origins, and Winston had never made any move to volunteer the information.

"So." Haughton cleared his throat. "Since you're not here to dine with me, I take it you've..."

"I've found her."	3
Haughton looked up from his cup. The dregs of his tea slid down his	
throat, leaving a bitter a ertaste that threatened to linger on his	
tongue for some time. "And the child?"	8
Winston nodded, his chin dipping down to touch the simple folds of	
his neckcloth. "A bouncing, blustering specimen of childhood. Quite a	a
healthy thing, he looks to be."	2

A breath slid out of Haughton's lungs as he allowed his own head to tip back. He found himself staring up at a ceiling painted with all manner of cherubs and pudgy, angelic creatures, their grotesque smiles having beamed down on his own head, and his father's before him, since his mother had commissioned the ghastly artwork some three decades before. a

"The woman." Haughton shut his eyes. He would have to paint over that damned ceiling one of these days, perhaps once this latest mess was cleared away. "What was her name? Susan?"

"Sophia," Winston provided. "Sophia Brixton."

"Sophia..." An image of a young woman appeared in his mind: short and curved, with dark hair and fair skin beneath rouged cheeks and rouged nipples and anything else that it was fashion to have rouged. It was a type, he realized. His brother's type, and never had David dared to deviate from the original template. "What have you learned a about her?"

"Currently lives in Stantreath," Winston said, as he sat up in the chair and reached inside his coat for a small pad of paper. A brush of his thumb across his tongue and he began to flick through the pages. "Up in Northumberland, right near to the coast. She's got herself a tidy little cottage that she shares with one sister." He licked his thumb again and turned another page. "Parents are gone. Father was a tradesman, ran a rag and bottle shop of some sort. The younger sister, that would be one Lucy Penrose, has no fortune of her own. Mrs. Brixton possesses an annuity of a mere fi y pounds per annum."

"Wait." Haughton held up one hand as one of the details finally wriggled its way to the forefront of his thoughts. "Mrs. Brixton? She is married?"

"A widow, as far as the gossip travels. But I was unable to discover any proof a previous marriage or of the prior existence of a Mr. Brixton."

Haughton raised one eyebrow. "You believe she's lying?"

Winston tilted his head to one side. "You know I'm not one for guesses and conjecture. But I would not rule out a false marriage in order to pass o the child as legitimate."

"Of course." Haughton grumbled under his breath and pushed himself out of his chair. He shook his head, pushed his fingers through his own dark hair, and moved to stand in front of the window. "Go on," he prompted a er a moment. "I want to know everything."

"Well..." Another lick of the thumb, another turn of the page. "There's Stantreath... cottage... Ah, yes, here we are. There's no maid in the household, but there is a hired girl who helps out several times a week. Ah... She attends services regularly, rarely leaves the child at home, um... dresses modestly, above average height, red hair..."

"What was that?" Haughton spun on his heel as he turned away from the window. "That last bit? What did you say?"

"Erm... red hair?"

"No." Haughton shook his head. "That cannot be right. My brother abhors red hair, especially when it comes to the fairer sex."

Winston raised one shoulder as he tipped his head to one side. "Perhaps the boy has had a change of heart."

"Or perhaps he succumbed to a moment of uncharacteristic desperation."

Winston's eyebrows pushed upwards into his forehead. "Or... perhaps this Mrs. Brixton possesses some other charm, something beyond a mere head of hair."

Haughton sni ed. "You know as well as I, my brother is incapable of looking beyond anything but the most superficial of charms."

"Which means...?"

"Which means that he was probably so inebriated at the time that he wouldn't have known whether he was making love to a real, warmblooded woman or a freshly plumped cushion." aª

Haughton abandoned the window and began to pace around the circumference of the study. He had not bothered to make many changes since taking over the room from his father's reign as Marquess. The furniture was the same, all of it le over from the previous century and all of it showing the signs of wear and the many batterings of brooms over the previous four decades. The color of the room was too dark, too rich to adhere to the current fashion of light and brightness that had begun to invade every London household. And then there were those damned cherubs... đ

"I take it my brother is currently ignorant of the fact that he has a son? This woman, this Sophia... She's made no move to contact him?"

Winston gave his little notebook a final glance before he closed it and returned it to its home inside his coat. "As far as I can tell, she's done nothing but keep mostly to herself and spend her days in the rearing of the child."

"An uncommon woman." đ "Finn?"

Haughton winced at the use of his nickname, but he didn't bother to reproach the man. He'd known him too long for that. "Uncommon that such a woman as the one you've described would ever find herself in the company of one such as my little brother."

"The birth of a child can do a great deal towards reforming a person's

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character." Winston shrugged. "Or so I've heard." a

"Or so you've heard," Haughton echoed, and continued his progress around the edges of the room.

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The notebook now out of sight, Winston again leaned back in his seat. The muted shade of his hair, of his clothes, indeed of his entire person blended in with the worn leather of the armchair. "And now that you know," he began, his fingers lacing and unlacing themselves across his chest while his hat bounced on his knee. "And David does not know, what do you plan to do with this information? A little, light blackmail? Bribery of some sort?"

Haughton waved his hand as if clearing the air of Winston's suggestions. "No, no. In fact, that's precisely what I wish to avoid. All I need is some forgotten conquest of my brother's to storm into my parlour, a baby dangling from her hip as she demands some absurd amount of money in exchange for her silence about the bastard." a

"But is silence even something that needs to be bought in this day and age?" Winston tapped his fingers against his sternum as Haughton paused in his pacing. "Who doesn't have a bastard? It could almost be counted as a symbol of status among some. And as I've seen, the woman seems to be doing everything within her power to pass o the child as legitimate."

But despite Winston's assurances, Haughton could not ignore the threat that this woman posed to his family, to his nascent status as the ninth Marquess of Haughton, and how blithely determined his brother seemed to be to see the lot of them swept into scandal and bankruptcy. "If there is a child, which we know there is, and she decides to go to the press... Or if there are letters, private correspondence between the two of them? And do you remember Regina? The actress who nearly absconded across the channel with half of my mother's jewels in her keeping? Jewels that my brother gave to her a er having spent a mere three hours in her company?'

Winston's fingers continued to tap out their quiet melody on his chest. "From what I've seen, this one doesn't seem like to make trouble for anyone."

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"For the moment," Haughton said. "But what about when the child grows larger, when he becomes a handful? And what of new clothes, and food? You tell me this woman and her sister and this child are all to survive on a scant fi y pounds a year? No, you mark my words. As soon as that child is large enough to ride a horse, she'll be down here clutching a list of demands." ď

Winston blew out a loud breath that sounded as a hiss from between his teeth. "So how do you propose to avoid such an intrusion?"

Haughton moved towards his desk, the neat stacks of invitations, of previous days' newspapers, of filed and folded documents pertaining to the care of his family's estates proving only a minor impediment as he shi ed a few things aside and produced a sheet of vellum. "A simple thing, really. I merely o er her the money she would certainly come to claim at a time when it would be more inconvenient for me. A fixed sum, enough to ensure the child will receive the proper care and guidance he deserves as my brother's o spring."

"And in return?"

"In return," Haughton brandished the document. "She does not interfere. She does not leave her tiny cottage. She does not set foot in London. Nor does she attempt to contact myself, my brother, or any other member of our family, except within the terms laid out for her."

Winston let out a long, low whistle. "And do you think she'll agree to that?"

"I've found that most people will agree to anything, if the proper incentive is o ered." Haughton glanced down at the document in his hand. He felt a mercenary twinge in his bones that did not agree with him, but the fact of the matter remained: he could not allow this woman to gallivant about the country with his brother's illegitimate o spring in tow, no matter her attempts to keep up appearances to the contrary. Their father, the previous marquess, was barely cold in his grave, and now such a scandal threatened to destroy the family's a name.

Haughton looked down at the desk, his gaze flicking towards the rear panel that hid a secret compartment. It was a small nook where he hid all the other documents and notes connected with his brother David's dissolute ways. There were numerous gambling debts that needed to be paid, reports of a duel that Haughton bribed no less than three people to keep out of the papers, public displays of drunkenness, along with various items connected with the family's history — apart from their departed mother's jewels — that had to be recovered anytime David saw fit to use them as currency when his own pockets were empty.

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It wasn't until the week a er their father's death that Haughton discovered precisely how much the late marquess had done to keep his younger son out of both financial and social di iculties. Thousands of pounds spent to either rectify or erase David's various mistakes. And now with the appearance of this child, it seemed that those mistakes were no where near to finding an end.

A so creaking noise preceded Winston sliding forward in his seat. "How do you plan on informing this young woman of your most generous intentions?"

Haughton sighed. There were too many things that called for his attention, too many matters le to languish during the final weeks of his father's illness. He shouldn't leave London, however... "I'll go, as soon as I can arrange it."

"All the way to Northumberland? That's not exactly a day's jaunt, you know. Send Briggs, or one of your other solicitors to take care of the matter for you."

"I'm well aware of the journey's length," Haughton admitted. "And I don't trust an intermediary in such a matter." He glanced at Winston and bowed his head. "No o ense intended towards present company."

Winston returned the gesture. "None taken."

There was the sound of another knock on the front door, the familiar shu le of the butler's steps through the foyer to answer the call. More visitors, Haughton realized. More demands on his time, on his family's slowly dwindling fortune—no thanks to his brother and the young man's extravagance. They were still supposed to be in a state of mourning for their departed father, but something would have to be done about David's spending. Their father had been stringent with a meager allowance, but when the debts piled up, there was little to do but pay them o in order to prevent the appearance of any collectors on their doorstep.

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"I will let you know when I depart," Haughton said, his eyes glancing over the document once more. He had drawn it up with his solicitor only the day before. It would be a nuisance, he thought, settling a pension on this woman and her child, but he was not a monster. He would make sure that any blood o spring—whether legitimate or not -should not lack for care or education. And as for the rearing of the

boy...

Well, Haughton had another reason for wishing to make the journey to Northumberland in person. If this woman was to be in charge of his nephew's health and well-being, at least until the boy went o to school, then he wanted to see for himself what manner of influence she would have on the child. Would she instill him with bad habits? Was she a negligent creature, the type to drink away any of the money that he planned to settle on herself and the baby?

"And when you return?"

Haughton looked up at Winston's voice. "Yes, when I return as well. I'm sure you'll want to know how I fared. And I don't plan to be gone for any longer than the entire matter should require. Once I've arrived, I can't see it requiring more than a few hours of my time. I simply have to gain her word that she will keep quiet about the boy's true parentage should the question ever arise. And for as much as I'm willing to o er, I have no fear of being rejected." a

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

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