Chapter Ten He arrived at Denton Castle, his country estate in southern Derbyshire, quite late in the a ernoon. He'd sent word to his sister notifying her of his imminent arrival, but considering the state of the roads and the weather over the course of the journey from London, he would not be surprised to find that his arrival had preceded any message sent from his own desk. á As the coach turned through the gates, he leaned back in his seat, his gaze directed heavenwards, though he saw nothing more than the red satin interior of the roof. It had initially been a relief to leave London and his brother behind, his townhouse having rapidly been usurped by David and all of his cronies, but as soon as he'd le Watford behind him, a new set of worries had begun to take hold. He'd le his brother in his home, where all sorts of silver and paintings and various family valuables were kept. Of course, he'd given word to the servants to lock up the costliest items and keep a close eye on the rest, but still the unease settled over him, as if he'd le a child home alone with a cricket bat and a cabinet full of the finest porcelain for practice. a³ The coach came to a stop outside a grand, stone building, complete with crenelated walls over tall windows that seemed to take up more space than the stones used to fashion the place. It was nothing more than a showpiece, built in the early seventeenth century by its first owners as a grossly conspicuous demonstration of their wealth. Today, the building was in need of a great deal of repairs, and though he was o en tempted to sell it and place the burden of remodelling on someone else's shoulders, his sister would not allow it, and he suspected she had decamped for the castle four years earlier especially so he would not sell it out from under her. a He waited for the coachman to descend and for the door to be opened and the steps to be lowered. By the time he stepped down onto the gravel drive that curved around the outer walls of the house, his sister had already come out through the front entrance to meet him. "I received your letter this morning," she began without preamble, and tilted her cheek up to him to be kissed. "And I knew you would not be far behind. You are terrible about giving one proper notice of your comings and goings, Finn. It is a habit that no woman of any sense will tolerate in a husband." a "You are tolerant enough of it," he replied gru ly, and reached up to rub a kink out of his neck with his hand as they walked into the house. "But I am not your wife," she pointed out, her pert mouth curving upwards in a smile as they passed through the entrance and into the foyer. "A fact for which I am forever grateful. I may love you both dearly, but I think I would rather abscond to a convent before setting up house with either you or David. Which brings me to another point," she said, plowing over any attempt he may have made to insert a word into the conversation. "What did you wish to speak to me about concerning our prodigal brother? Your letter was incredibly vague and contained a frustrating lack of details, and I could only solace my curiosity with the fact that I knew you would be arriving before the day was out." They wandered into the drawing room, a er Haughton had divested himself of his coat and hat. His sister rang for tea, while he proceeded to pace about the room, his limbs restless a er so many hours spent folded inside a coach bouncing over roads rutted and pock-marked with puddles from the recent rains. Bess settled on a chair and picked up a bit of embroidery that he would have sworn she had been working on since the last time he'd paid her a visit, three months before, and yet she didn't appear to have made any progress. a "Are you going to stomp about the rooms all a ernoon, or are you going to speak in something resembling a civilized manner?" Haughton stopped his pacing and glanced over at her. She still had that infernal smile teasing her mouth, and her eyes glimmered in a vexatious way he suspected only a younger sister could master. "David is in London. He's taken up residence at Haughton House." "Well, I gathered that much." Bess picked at a few of her stitches, her nose wrinkled at the botched job she'd made of a rose. Or perhaps it was a bird. "And that is enough to chase you all the way up to Derbyshire? Are you going to become like father, simply turning a blind eye to his less savory activities? I never would have thought as much from you." a "The last thing I'm doing is ignoring his behavior," Haughton grumbled, and paused in front of the window, one that looked out on a fine expanse of the garden. The grass was lush and green a er the recent rains, and he knew that he men would be out with their scythes and trimmers, attempting to tame the wild greenery. "In fact, I was just in Northumberland a few weeks ago, trying to attend to one of his... messes." a "Oh, dear." Bess looked up from a tangle of red thread. "What has he done now? Surely not more gaming debts, is it? Or has he gone and purchased another passel of horses that he cannot a ord? I remember the last time—" Haughton held up a hand, silencing his sister before she could disappear on one of her tangents. "It is neither," he said, turning his attention away from the window, back to the muted blues and creams of the drawing room. "He's gone and sired a son." a "Of course he has," Bess said on a sigh, while the embroidery returned to her lap, the rose or bird having acquired an extra petal... or perhaps a third wing, in the last several minutes. "And who is the poor girl, hmm? Some little thing he no doubt charmed and flirted with until she could not resist him or anything he said to her." She sighed again, and tossed the embroidery onto the ottoman beside her. "You know, I always knew he would be too handsome for his own good. He's well aware of how others see him, all goodness and charm etched in every line of his face. A wink and a smile and he thinks all will be forgiven." "Because it was any dierent when he was a child?" Haughton pointed out. "We gave him everything, and now he expects things to continue that way despite the fact that he's grown." a "Father spoiled him," Bess said with a slight shake of her head. "Can you blame him? David was his youngest child. And with Mother gone..." Bess spread her hands out in her lap, her gaze directed at the rug until she cleared her throat and raised her chin again. "But you said David has a son? Have you seen the child? And what of the mother? What sort of woman is she? Will you help her?" a Haughton sorted through the plethora of questions and did his best to tackle them in their order of having been asked. "Yes, he has a son. I have seen the boy. His name is George, and he is... Well, there is a strong resemblance, so I cannot imagine David making any attempt at denying paternity. The mother... Unfortunately, I have not yet had the pleasure of making her acquaintance." Bess's blue eyes narrowed, while her dark brows knitted tightly together. "Ah, there is a tone underlying those words. I cannot imagine that anything you are about to say is going to be pleasant." "The mother is gone," Haughton said. But before he could elaborate, and while Bess's eyes widened in distress, the tea arrived, and so they waited in tense silence while the maid brought in the tray and set it on the table beside Bess's chair. "What do you mean "gone"?" The question burst out of her the moment the door clicked shut behind the maid. "Do you mean to say that she's dead?" "No, that is not what I mean." He strode over to the tray and poured himself a cup of tea, then poured enough cream in it to nearly turn it white. "The mother is gone. She le, and no one knows where she is. Apparently, she's a flighty thing, and very much like someone who would fall under David's spell." a Bess eyes Haughton's cup with obvious distaste as she fixed her own tea. "And so where is the child now?" "As I said, he is in Northumberland, in a small coastal village, living in a damp, crumbling little cottage with his aunt, the mother's sister." "Well, I do hope she is not a flighty thing." Bess stirred her tea, tapped the spoon against the rim of the cup, and then took to stirring it again. "I assume you've met her, or at least seen her. Is she like her sister? Does she take good care of the child? Oh!" She suddenly straightened up in her seat, the teaspoon dripping on the edge of the lace doily that lined the tray. "How old is the child? I cannot believe I didn't think to ask it before. Is he still quite a small thing?" Haughton gulped down a large swallow of tea, cooled to near room temperature with the amount of cream he'd dumped into it, and watched the change of expressions on his sister's face over the edge of his cup. Bess had been married, once. At the age of nineteen, she'd fallen in love with a gentleman twice her age, a bachelor who shared the wishes of his new, young wife to settle down and raise a family. And then the man had died less than a year a er they'd exchanged vows, his heart having given out during a hunting excursion in Scotland. And so at the age of twenty, Bess had donned her widow's wardrobe, declared that she had no intention of ever marrying again, and had le London to set up house at Denton Castle. But Haughton knew that she still harboured a keen desire to have children. If ever there was an announcement of a birth, or if she happened upon a nanny pushing her charge in a pram through the park, her face always took on the same wistful glow. She would deny it, of course, and brush away his comments with a torrent of conversation meant to distract and divert him, but he knew his sister. Ever since she'd been a child herself, she'd wanted to be a mother. So no wonder she was demonstrating such a marked interest in this particular foundling. ð "He is not yet a year old," Haughton said carefully, and watched Bess's smile broaden. "But he is old enough to crawl and to play and to create quite a racket when le to his own devices." a "How wonderful!" She set down her cup, it seemed, for the sole purpose of clapping her hands together in excitement. "So he is healthy? What wonderful news! But, Finn! You still haven't told me about the sister, the one who is caring for the boy. Tell me that she is good, that she is kind and that she loves the child most sincerely." He swallowed the last of his tea and returned the cup to the tray. Bess was still gazing up at him with that unnerving look in her eye, and he suddenly began to fear that he'd ventured into dangerous territory. "She is the older sister," he said, keeping to the barest of facts as well as he could. "Their father was a gentleman, a solicitor, I believe, but when their parents both died, they were le with a pittance of a living." "How awful," she whispered under her breath. "But again, you're avoiding the point. What is she like? Is there something terrible about her? You seem to be going out of your way to avoid speaking of her, when I'm sure you must have spoken to her at some time. Did you take her into dislike for any reason? Oh, please tell me that she is not uncommonly cruel or neglectful!" "Mrs. Brixton is a fine and competent guardian," he ground out, before taking to another circuit around the edges of the room. "I saw no signs of neglect, and I must admit, she did appear to care for the child." It was an understatement, he knew. Should anything threaten the health or welfare of that boy, he had no doubt that Sophia Brixton would gird herself in armor and, like a modern Boadicea, cut down any enemy to cross her path. a "Mrs. Brixton?" Leave it to Bess not to miss a thing. "Is she married, then?" "Well..." Haughton cleared his throat. How much of Mrs. Brixton's true

perpetuating a lie that might later prove detrimental to one or all of the parties involved. "She... She puts herself forward as a widow, in order to raise the child and care for her younger sister without fear of creating a scandal." "Oh, goodness." Bess placed a hand to the base of her throat. "What a thing to do! Can you imagine? What sacrifice on her part!" Her gaze wandered to some far corner of the room, while her head shook slowly back and forth. "And you say she is the daughter of a gentleman?" She spoke again, her gaze snapping back to his face. "Well, she must be tolerably educated then. Was she well-spoken, do you recall?" He recalled all too well the things Miss Brixton had spoken to him. "I could find no fault with her mind or manner of speech." Aside from the fact that nearly everything she had said had seemed designed to infuriate him beyond anything his little brother had been able to achieve. "Then I cannot see why we should not invite her and the child here," Bess said, her hands clasping and unclasping before her as if the matter were already as good as settled. "In fact, I will say that you

must! The house is so dreadfully quiet this time of year, and to be

goodness knows, I'm not about to hear a gurgle of mirth from your

He should have known, he realized, that Bess would so smoothly

steer the conversation towards this, its ultimate destination. He

wondered for a moment if, perhaps, this had been his intention in

sharing the news of David's folly with her, that she would then set

shook his head at such a foolish notion. Of course, he didn't want

anything more to do with Mrs. Sophia Brixton of Stantreath or her

"I will not entertain David's illegitimate o spring along with their

said, but before he'd even finished speaking, he saw a spark, the

beginning of a fight he had already lost, illuminating the depths of

"Because you are busy providing the family with so many children

yourself, hmm? Heaven knows, the mantle has already fallen from my

shoulders to produce another generation, so if David is the only one

to sire a child, illegitimate or no, then I will acquaint myself with this

infant and dote upon him to my heart's content."

families on some heartfelt whim of yours to play the part of aunt," he

him on a path that would prove impossible to turn away from. But he

quite honest, I think the halls are in need of some laughter, for

quarter."

her eyes.

provided."

well-sharpened tongue.

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history did he have a right to tell his sister? Of course, without

thinking he'd already revealed that Mrs. Brixton was not the mother

of the child. And if they were going to do this right, he couldn't see

Exasperated, he spun on his heel and returned to the window, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. "She will not accept your invitation, you know."

He heard the clatter of dishes behind him. Bess must be pouring herself a second cup of tea. "Tell me, Finn. When you approached her for the first time, in Stantreath, what did you say to her? Because if I'm familiar with your tactics when it comes to dealing with your fellow members of the human race, then I suspect you have gone and o ended her in some way. Am I incorrect in thinking so?"

Ah, leave it to his little sister to leap with all haste to the conclusion that he had been the one to o end, and not the other way around. "I did nor said anything that should have caused o ense. I simply—"

"Oh, dear," Bess interjected with a slight shake of her head.

"—made a quite generous o er of a suitable annuity and also assured

Haughton spread his hands apart, his palms turned upwards. "And

"Hmm." She toyed with the edge of a jam tart on the tea tray,

breaking o a corner of it before popping it into her mouth. "No

her that all expenses towards the boy's education would be

"And?" Her dark eyebrows rose significantly.

she turned me down. Most vehemently, I might add."

doubt your presentation le something to be desired. So!" She dusted the crumbs o her fingers and once again allowed a brilliant smile to grace the lower half of her face. "You will write to her, and you will apologize for your prior conduct, and you will invite her and the infant to come and stay here."

"I will not—"

"And if you do not," she spoke smoothly over him, as if he hadn't begun to splutter out an argument at all. "Then I will. So I suggest you proceed with some haste, for I would very much like to meet the child before he has been introduced to trousers."

Between David and Bess, though the both of them were opposite in

nearly every conceivable way, he wondered that he had any sanity

le to him. He pushed one hand through his hair, the only overt sign

"I will write to the infernal woman," he muttered, and turned back

towards the window. "I will write, and she will refuse, and then this

entire matter of visits and becoming better acquainted will be at an

"Of course, Finn," Bess said from her place on the chair, her smile

of irritation he'd displayed since his arrival.

even audible in her words. "Whatever you say."

end."

As always, thank you to all the reads, likes, adds, and comments!

We're not quite to the halfway point of the story, so thanks for staying with me on this journey!

Quenby Olson