

## Chapter Eleven

"A letter," Sophia cried triumphantly. "Six weeks of silence. And now, he's sent a letter."

Lady Rutledge dismissed her butler with a wave of her hand as he'd divested Sophia of her bonnet and shawl. "A letter, from Lord Haughton?" she asked once the door had snapped shut behind the butler and they were alone in the drawing room of Rutledge Hall.

"Just this morning," Sophia declared, and set George down on the floor before reaching into her reticule and retrieving the missive in question. She unfolded the letter, scanned the first few lines, and began to read. "Mrs. Brixton...dum dum dum... apologize for the circumstances of our last meeting in Stantrath...Va da da... Ah! Here we are: 'I am issuing an invitation for yourself and George to visit Denton Castle, my country estate in Derbyshire. My sister currently resides there, and looks forward with great anticipation to a visit from both yourself and our young nephew. Sophia raised her chin and flicked the edge of the paper with her free hand. "Now, what do you think of that?"

Lady Rutledge looked up from George, who sat dutifully at her feet, munching on a bit of marzipan she had slipped to him from beneath her handkerchief. "It sounds like a kind and well-worded invitation. Does he mention how long your stay will be?"

"How long my...?" Sophia exhaled heavily and lowered herself onto the settee across from Lady Rutledge. "You don't actually expect me to accept, do you?"

"And why wouldn't you?" Lady Rutledge wiped a smudge of marzipan-laced drool from George's chin. "He apologized for his previous behavior, and perhaps he now wishes to make amends. He did make mention of his sister. Maybe she's worked some redeeming influence on him over the last few weeks."

Sophia bit back the urge to scoot such a suggestion, and instead allowed her gaze to drift over the letter for no less than the seventeenth time since it had been delivered into her hands. "Were you ever acquainted with his sister?"

Lady Rutledge shook her head. "As I said, I knew their parents, but I've been cloistered for too long between these four walls for any of the younger generation to have made an impression on me. I do believe she is a widow, if memory serves. But beyond that, I could not tell you anything else about her."

From another portion of the house, there was a bustle of sound, a clatter of some sort, and Sophia wondered if Lady Rutledge had already made the call for tea before she'd even been admitted into the drawing room.

Six weeks earlier, she'd sat in this same spot and told Lady Rutledge everything. About George's parentage, about the reason for Lord Haughton's visit to Stantrath, and Sophia had even laid out—with remarkable clarity—the tone of every comment to pass between the two of them.

And she had also confessed to receiving a proposal of marriage from Josiah Fenton. Lady Rutledge had heartily agreed with Sophia's decision to turn him down—while also disapproving of the young man's fate of being punished with such interminable parents—but Sophia realized concerning this matter, Lady Rutledge's opinion was not going to be in agreement with her own.

"It does not make a whit of sense," Sophia said, as she began to crumple the edge of the letter between her fingers. "Six weeks ago, he came here ready to settle a large sum of money on us in exchange for our silence, ensuring that no one would ever discover George's connection to his great and illustrious family. And now he's inviting us to his home, to mingle with his sister and make banal conversation about the weather over tea and light refreshments?" She shook her head. "I simply cannot fathom what has worked this supposed alteration in his behavior."

Lady Rutledge slipped a bracelet from her wrist and held it out to George, who crawled quickly over to her side and babbled excitedly as she dropped the bauble into his grasp. "You suspect all is not as it seems?"

"Well, I certainly don't believe he was visited by angels on the road to Damascus. I simply..." She exhaled heavily as her shoulders slumped forward in a most unladylike manner. "George has been in my care for his entire life. Even when Lucy was still here, she never... She always treated him as a burden. And I do understand how she could think such a thing. Children are not easy creatures to care for. They are maddening and exhausting and consume your entire life in a frightening amount of time. But even so..." She closed eyes that had suddenly become watery. "I don't want to lose him."

For a moment, there was nothing but the jangle of Lady Rutledge's bracelet and the satisfied babble as George attempted to shove the sapphire concoction—along with a great deal of his fist—into his mouth.

"And you believe Lord Haughton will take him from you?"

Sophia blinked several times and looked across at Lady Rutledge. "I don't know. A part of me wants to think he'll spirit George away forever the moment I set foot across his threshold. But another part of me—a much smaller part, I must admit—hopes that he is truly penitent and wishes to... I don't know, create some sort of compromise that will benefit George."

"One in which you don't lose access to him," Lady Rutledge pointed out.

As George crawled his way towards her part of the drawing room, Sophia reached down and removed the bracelet from between his teeth. When he began to fuss, she merely tickled him under his arm until his cries turned to damp-cheeked giggles. "Or that involves him lordling his control over me with a few coins," she said, her fingers lightly teasing George's plump chin.

"More than a few coins, if your description of his orer was accurate."

"Quite accurate," Sophia said, her eyebrows raised at the memory. "Perhaps it was foolish of me to turn him down, but I could not like the idea that I was somehow being purchased, like a horse or a bolt of silk."

A moment of silence passed between them, apart from the steady thump of George's knees and hands as he crawled across the floor.

"So you will accept his invitation?" Lady Rutledge asked, though the question seemed to have already begun to resemble something more of a statement of fact.

Sophia watched George as he reached for the edge of the settee and slowly, shakily, pulled himself up into a standing position. He turned his head and grinned at her, as if fully aware of the level of his accomplishment, then let out a high-pitched squeal of delight before he released the furniture and dropped back down into his bottom with a thump. "I suppose I will. A er all, if I decline, I risk enduring Lord Haughton's return to Stantrath. And as you suggested, perhaps his sister has worked some change in him."

"Perhaps," Lady Rutledge inclined her head.

"But it will be strange, I think," Sophia continued. "To travel all the way to Cheshire, when I've never gone five miles beyond the furthest reaches of the village. And I'm to stay in some great house, a castle, where no doubt the servants will be more finely attired than George and myself."

Lady Rutledge waved a dismissive hand. "You will be fine, and the state of your dress is no matter. You are going all that way to procure a connection with George's family, and nothing more. And if they are ready to turn their noses up at you simply because your dress is a few months—"

"Years," Sophia muttered under her breath.

"—out of fashion, then you'll know once and for all if these are the sort of people you want exercising their influence over your deary beloved nephew."

A connection with George's family. A connection with Lord Haughton, to be more precise. It was not something she particularly cared to think about, the prospect of sitting at a vast dining table and endure the glowering of those ice-blue eyes of his over a tureen of turtle soup.

"So it's to Cheshire, then?" she announced, as she shifted forward in her seat and stood up. "Then I hope you will excuse me. I do believe I need to return home in order to compose a letter to a certain Lord Haughton, who is awaiting my reply."

"Why, there's no need for you to walk all the way back to your cottage simply for a letter. I've a surplus of paper and ink, due to the fact that I loathe the correspondence and fingers protest the moment I wrap them around the tip of a pen."

Sophia went to the desk indicated by Lady Rutledge and found the professed surplus of writing materials stacked neatly inside a wide drawer. "And you'll keep an eye on George as I write? It should only take a minute or two, not more than that."

"Of course," Lady Rutledge said, and reached for the dish of marzipan at her side as she beckoned to a gleeful George.

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Sophia disliked travel. It wasn't due to a disinterest in seeing new places or experiencing a bit more of the world beyond the confines of her own home. No, her aversion stemmed from the hours spent trundling over pockmarked roads in a creaking coach, its cushioned seats providing no additional comfort from the bumps beneath her as the first ten miles of her journey slipped away.

And it was a great deal more than a mere ten miles before she arrived at Lord Haughton's estate in Derbyshire. Over 200 miles rocked and bounced beneath the wheels of the carriage Lady Rutledge had insisted on hiring for the trip.

Sophia thought she might lose count of the number of inns at which they stopped, in order to change the horses, in order that she could stretch her legs and have a hot meal with George before a fire, though the meals were often disappointing and the beds provided for her at night had to be thoroughly checked for both damp and fleas.

The final leg of her journey could not come soon enough, and yet as the edges of Lord Haughton's property came into view, a feeling of trepidation took over from the aches and jostlings that had plagued her for the last several days.

For the first time, she would be encountering Lord Haughton on his territory, in his home, his place of strength. She couldn't help but worry how much of an advantage it would give him over her. And what sort of woman would his sister be? Would she be as stern and imposing as her brother? Would Sophia take her first step down from the coach and find herself immediately outnumbered?

She pressed her head back against the seat, but as the carriage creaked and turned onto a gravel drive, Sophia pushed the curtain back and peered out the window. A few more trees, a small rise as they traveled over a stone bridge that crossed a winding brook, and there stood Denton Castle.

Sophia knew little of architecture, though she could tell that the house was not of new construction, as so many of the great residences were as their owners tore down the former halls and mansions, centuries-old and riddled with various drafts and leaks, to build new ones in their place.

The long drive that curved slowly from the gates led the coach to the front of the house, its face bearing a mixture of long, large windows flanked by various statuary perched on the cornices, and the lot of it all nearly hidden by a building of ivy that had begun to creep around from the side of the building. The house's entrance stood at the top of an imposing staircase, and before the coach had even drawn to a complete halt, Sophia looked out to see both doors flung open before Lord Haughton himself stepped out onto the landing.

There was a flurry of activity as the door to the coach was opened and the step unfolded for her descent. She tore her eyes away from the window long enough to make certain that her bonnet was still in place, and she quickly tugged on her gloves before gathering George into her arms and rising from her seat.

She intended to step down on her own, George clutched securely at her side, but a hand appeared in the narrow doorway, long-fingered and masculine, and she knew without a doubt that Haughton had already reached the side of the coach.

She placed her fingers in his. His grip was immediately firm, and as she set her foot down onto the fine white stone that comprised the drive, his other hand came to rest on her elbow before he guided her towards the stairs.

Her gaze remained fixed on the doors, outside of which now stood another person, this one a woman, and so like Lord Haughton in both looks and carriage that there could be no question that she was his sister. Sophia ascended the stairs carefully, fully aware of how bedraggled and threadbare she looked in comparison to this beautiful creature standing poised and ready to welcome her.

Sophia shielded George to her other hip, freeing her right hand, which she assumed was all that would be necessary when greeted by Haughton's sister. But before Haughton had made any sort of introduction, indeed before Sophia had hardly cleared the last step, the woman rushed forward and pulled her into an embrace that succeeded in squeezing the breath from her lungs.

"Bess," Lord Haughton warned gently from behind Sophia, and the woman suddenly stepped back, her eyes bright, an expression between a smile and a grimace on her face.

"Oh! I do apologize! And here I've nearly crushed you and this darling child!" The woman ducked her head, peering through her eyes on a level with George's. "Goodness, he does look like David, doesn't he? All but for the hair. Not a single one of us ever had anything but dark hair since the day we were born. But I assume he gets this fairer coloring from your family?"

Sophia didn't know what to say. Still stiff and sore from her journey, still in awe of the grand house before her, her mouth did nothing more than open and close several times before she managed a small, "Um."

"Bess," Lord Haughton spoke again, this time stepping halfway between the two women, as if to prevent his sister from leaping forward and smothering Sophia in another embrace. "This is Mrs. Sophia Brixton, the sister of Lucy penrose, George's mother. Mrs. Brixton," he turned towards her, his blue eyes hooded. "Allow me to introduce you to my sister, Mrs. Finchley."

Sophia's breath caught at the realization that Lord Haughton had already revealed the truth of George's parentage to his sister. Had he also disclosed the fact that she was not even a widow, but had only paraded as such in order to claim George as her own, legitimatize son? She swallowed hard and raised her chin an inch. At this point, she could not see how hearing more lies onto an already d scult situation would be of any use to anyone. And Bess, it seemed, did not care a whit that Sophia cradled a baseborn child in her arms.

"H-How do you do?" Sophia managed, before Bess threw a withering glance at her brother and neatly stepped around him to take Sophia's arm.

"Enough with all these dull formalities," Bess said, a fresh smile creating a dimple in her cheek. "You're already acquainted with Finn, so I'm sure you know how dry a stick he tends to be when he's to his own devices."

Finn Sophia wanted to glance over her shoulder and look at this man referred to as "Finn" and a "dry stick" by his own family, but between Bess's pressure on her arm, and George beginning to fuss at not being set down as so many hours in carriage, she could do little more than allow herself to be tugged along through the doors and into the foyer of Denton Castle.

She was immediately struck by the utter vastness of the place, of high ceilings painted with dark scenes from mythology and a wide staircase that split into two hallway up, which then created a gallery that wound all around them. The floor beneath her feet was marble, a checkerboard of grey and white, and when Bess began to speak, her voice rung out and echoed through the enormous space.

"I'm sure you'll want a tour of the place at some point. Heaven knows I feel as if I'll lose my way without a map, and I've lived here for over a year now." She stopped at an open door that appeared to lead into a brightly lit sitting room of some kind. "Now, don't permit me to overwhelm you when I'm certain you're about to faint with exhaustion. Finn tells me I can be quite too much at times, so you must let me know when you want nothing more than to sit and nibble at cakes and sandwiches in front of the fire."

Sophia blinked, feeling stupid and gauche before this elegant woman in her fine blue silk and delicate seed pearls adorning her ears and throat. Again, she was momentarily disconcerted by Bess's resemblance to Lord Haughton, though his sister seemed always to have a smile on her face and a glint of laughter in her eyes. "Um, tea," she managed to say right as George let out a terrific wail. "Though I'm sure George is in need of a change." She gave his full bottom a affectionate pat, so that Bess would understand.

"Ah! Silly mel!" She took Sophia's arm a second time and instead steered her towards the staircase. "A bit of rest in your room, some time to change and make yourself more comfortable, and then perhaps to a small meal in the drawing room? Nothing formal, of course. And then it will be to bed with you, before Finn gives me another of his look's hmm?"

She allowed herself to be led up the stairs, Bess chattering the entire time about the house, about the paintings that graced the walls, about the weather and the gardens and how much George would enjoy a stroll to the stables in the morning. Sophia was then propelled into a large bedroom, the walls and trim done in pale shades of green and yellow, and the furnishings—all in white and of the most current fashion—were more than enough to fill the entirety of her cottage back in Stantrath.

"I thought to put you in here," Bess began, as she swept forward into the room, the air she le behind filled with the lingering scent of her perfume. "Of course, if you don't like it, please don't hesitate to speak up. But I've always loved the light in this room, and it's quite near to my own rooms should you need me at any time."

The room was indeed awash with a brilliant amount of light, despite the clouds that had lingered in the sky for the final leg of Sophia's journey. She walked towards the center of the room and set George down in the middle of a rug woven in pale colors that matched the other hues of the bedroom. She glanced at the bed, an enormous thing that looked as if it needed a small ladder in order to climb into it. But it was what stood beside the bed that caught her attention once her wonder at the excellence of the furnishings had begun to wane.

"Is that a cradle?" It was a silly question, as the small bed was no doubt made for anyone else than a child. Sophia had assumed that George would be put in a nursery, under the care of an old nurse who would know nothing of his wants and needs.

"Unless you want to bring him into the bed with you," Bess said, oblivious to the note of astonishment in Sophia's voice. "But Finn did tell me how you dote on the child, and I knew you would not wish him to be banished to the nursery his first time away from home."

"That is very thoughtful of you," Sophia drew in a deep breath, wishing to say something more, but at that moment, George found a porcelain figurine of a shepherdess on a low shelf. He was about to smack it against the floor before she swept in and rescued the lovely—and most likely incredibly expensive—figurine and placed it on a higher shelf, one that was hopefully well out of his reach.

Bess smiled down at George, her expression suddenly wistful. "Oh, how much he reminds me of David. There's something in his eyes, a glint of some mischievousness that makes me wonder how much of a hand he'll be as he gets older." She looked up at Sophia. "Did you ever meet our David?"

"No, I never had that..." She bit her lip. Pleasurhad been the word about to spill from her lips, but she knew there was little that was pleasant about the repercussions of David's activities on her family. Aside from George, she missed. But even the shadow of his illegitimacy would always follow him.

"I am sorry," Bess said, for the first time, her expression devoid of its usual mirth and excitement. "I cannot even begin to fathom what you must think of us, what you must think of our family. David is... Well, he's always been a bit careless. The curse of the younger sons, most likely. Raised with everything he ever wanted at his fingertips, and without any of the responsibility that Finn bears. It is partly my own fault, I'm sure. We all coddled him, praised him over every little thing. We never wanted him to think that we blamed him."

Sophia's eyebrows lifted in question. "Blamed him? For what?"

"Our mother, she died while giving birth to David. The last thing we wished was for him to bear any guilt or to think he was in any way responsible for taking her away from us. And so..." She tilted her head to one side, her shoulder lifting in an unladylike shrug. "Here we are."

It was a great deal of information to take in. Sophia gave herself a moment to think over everything Bess had told her by tugging at the hem of her skirt and kneeling down on the rug beside George. The babe immediately crawled over to her, nuzzling her shoulder before he attempted to bite her sleeve. "As easy as it would be to do so, I would not have you place all of the blame for my sister's predicament on your brother's shoulders. My sister is not... She is young," she amended quickly. "And not always one to think before she acts."

While seated on the floor, Sophia removed her bonnet and gloves, both of which became playthings for George before she then tackled the small buttons of her pelisse. As she shrugged out of the snug jacket, she looked up to find Bess regarding her in a curious manner.

"My apologies," Bess said, lowering her gaze as another grin gazed at the corners of her bow-shaped mouth. "It is only that you remind me very much of Finn."

Sophia raised her head so quickly she almost gave herself a crick in her neck. "I beg your pardon?"

Bess laughed, a lovely tinkling sound that Sophia suspected no one but the female members of the aristocracy could master. "See? Now I've offended you. It is, I think, why Finn claims he cannot take me anywhere. My tongue moves faster than my thoughts on most occasions. It is one of the duties of marrying young, you see. Why adhere to proper etiquette when one is courted and wed before the age of seventeen? A full season in London, and perhaps I would've learned to play the blushing coquette, all shy smiles and fluttered eyelashes while allowing a prospective husband to drone endlessly about a fine bit of horseflesh." She sighed, and while the smile remained on her face, her eyes took on a brighter, more watery light.

"Unfortunately, my Mr. Finchley loved to hear me prattle about anything and everything, and now I find it is most difficult to break myself of the habit."

Sophia found herself blinking at the end of this speech, delivered at such a rapid pace that she was forced to review portions of it in her head before the full of it made sense to her exhausted mind. She wanted then to return to the subject of Lord Haughton—or Finn, as his sister insisted on calling him—and how she could believe the two of them had anything in common. But Bess had already moved on to other subjects, talking about Sophia's trunks and whether she would prefer to have tea in her room before joining them below for dinner.

"And remember," Bess said as she walked towards the door, her dark curls bouncing around her ears. "Anything you need, don't hesitate to ask. I've been waiting to meet you and little George since Finn first informed me of your existence, and now, I find I cannot wait to become better acquainted with you, Miss Brixton."

"A-And you," Sophia said, her voice sincere. "Mrs. Finchley."

"Oh, call me Bess! Mrs. Finchley makes me sound like an old dowd, and I'm still several months from my twenty-third birthday."

"Well, then, Bess," Sophia tried out the name. "And you must call me Sophia."

Bess's lovely face lit up with a renewed grin. "Splendid! Now, a bit of a rest, and I'll see the two of you at dinner, hmm?"

Sophia nodded. It was the only reply she could make before Bess stepped out of the room, a whirl of blue silk and dark hair and long, elegant limbs. She, however, remained on the rug, George half-crawling, half-climbing his way around the edges of the room, exploring every inch of this new world before him.

"Oh, darling," Sophia released a sigh she felt as if she'd been holding since setting foot in Lord Haughton's carriage three days before.

"Dinner, with a viscount and his sister. And here I thought the only thing to worry about was how to change your linens over a stretch of bad road."

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Again and again, thank you for reading, rating, commenting, and so on. I'm still tweaking this story, still fine-tuning it (which probably will be until it floats its way o towards publication) so as always, apologies for any mistakes, typos, or inconsistencies that have yet to be slashed away by the Red Pen of Doom.

And happy reading!

Quenby Olson