Chapter Sixteen Haughton resisted the temptation to hoist his brother up by his ridiculously sharp collar points and toss him into the lake. His hand curled into a fist at his side, but he beat his knuckles against his thigh rather than David's face as he waylaid his brother's progress across the lawn. "Goodness gracious, a picnic?" David smirked, though beneath the brim of his beaver, his eyes looked tired and rimmed with red. "Tell me you've not gone rustic on us? I thought not even a call from the Heavenly Host would be enough to tempt you from your study." "What are you doing here?" Haughton looked directly at his brother. If he glanced back at Sophia and Bess to see if either of them had returned to the house, he knew it would only succeed in drawing more attention the ladies—and the child, David's child—behind him. David's easy grin faded a little. "And such a welcome as that? I doubt our father would care to hear you use such a tone on our ancestral lands. But nevermind all that!" He stepped around his brother and made for the blanket and the abandoned picnic. "I see our sister, but who is this other young lady? Don't tell me you've been entertaining prospective wives while I've been away!" "David." Haughton snagged the edge of his brother's sleeve between his fingers. "Are you drunk?" "This early in the day? What do you take me for?" He yanked his arm from Haughton's grasp. "Hungover, I may be. But drunk? I do have some scruples, my good man." Haughton swore under his breath as he followed David towards the blanket. Sophia had packed up the food, and Bess, seemingly unaware of the danger of the situation, returned from the lakeside with George still balanced on her hip. "Good a ernoon, ladies!" David tipped his hat to each woman in turn. Haughton noticed that his gaze lingered on Sophia, and he had to tamp down the rage that threatened to curl his fingers into his palms again. "Bess, m'dear!" He stepped forward and kissed his sister once on each cheek. A glance at George was all the attention he gave to the infant before his eyes turned once more towards Sophia. "But I'm afraid I've not yet been introduced to this young lady." Sophia glanced at Haughton, her brow furrowed. How much should they reveal? As little as possible, Haughton thought, and cleared his throat before beginning the introductions. "This is... Mrs. Brixton. A friend of Bess's, come to stay with us for a little while." "Mrs. Brixton." David dipped his chin and held out his hand. Sophia, having no other recourse, placed her hand in his. Haughton watched as his brother placed a kiss on the tops of her fingers, before he slid his thumb across her knuckles in a way that made Sophia's mouth tighten. "Mr. Haughton," she said between gritted teeth. "I don't recall seeing you in town, Mrs.... Brixton, was it?" For a terrible moment, David's eyes narrowed, as if he were trying to connect something about her face to a faint memory in the farthest recesses of his mind. But whether because he was still fighting the e ects of a recently inebriated state, or if he simply couldn't remember having seen anyone who resembled her before, the thoughtful expression faded. A crooked smile took its place, and he leaned in towards Sophia once more. "Of course, if I had ever been given the pleasure of making your acquaintance, I doubt I would forget." Sophia did not smile. But while his brother's attention was fixed on her, Haughton nodded to Bess and indicated with a gesture that she should return to the house with George. Once their sister was halfway across the lawn, Haughton stepped forward to interrupt David's attempted flirtation. "Come along, David. There's a matter I wish to discuss with you." He could not think of anything he needed to speak about with his brother, but all he could think about was getting him away from Sophia. David easily sidestepped Haughton and graced Sophia with a wink. She did not appear to be amused. "And I will see you at dinner tonight, hmm? Perhaps I can even convince Bess to play some music and you will grace me with your hand for a gavotte!" Another smile, and David finally turned away as Haughton steered him towards the Haughton breathed a bit easier once they were inside and both Sophia and George were out of sight, but the fact that they were altogether under the same roof did little to calm his nerves. "So who's the woman?" David said the moment they were both ensconced in Haughton's study. His brother proceeded to flop into a chair, swinging one leg over the arm while he sucked at his teeth. "You say she's a friend of Bess's?" Haughton made a noncommittal sound and did a quick inventory of the various items scattered about the room. It wouldn't be unlike his brother to pocket something of value when he thought no one was looking. "Has Bess taken on charitable work in her spare time? I can't imagine her meeting someone like that among her usual circle of acquaintances. Did you see her gown? I've seen back-alley lightskirts dressed in greater finery. Where on earth did she find her?" Haughton counted backwards from ten while wondering if his sister would forgive him for throwing their little brother through a window. "I will not have you speak so disparagingly of a guest in this house," he said, his voice so taut he thought it might snap. "Bess approves of her, and that is enough for me. And it will be enough for you as well if you care to spend another minute under this roof." David swung his other leg over the arm of the chair and leaned back against the opposite side, making a sort of bed for himself. He bounced one booted leg idly as he reached above his head and toyed with a brass gyroscope on the table behind him. "Leaping to quite a defense of the fair maiden, aren't we?" He chuckled and tossed the gyroscope from one hand to the other, as if it were a mere toy. "And here I thought I'd be seeing an announcement in the papers about your forthcoming marriage to that soppy chit you paid such attention to in London." "Miss Carruthers," Haughton corrected him, his eyes squeezed shut as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Miss Brigitte Carruthers." David rolled his eyes. "Well, as long as you're not planning to chain the dreadful girl to me..." Haughton sco ed. "Why would I force such a punishment on the young lady? You're undeserving of nearly every well-bred woman to have passed through town in the last twenty years." "Perhaps Bess's new companion will have to do, hmm?" David sat upright again and carelessly dropped the gyroscope onto the table. "I've never been partial to redheads myself, but in a pinch, she might prove entertaining. And you said Mrs.Brixton, eh? Married or widowed, that lessens the chance she'll sink her hooks into me." Haughton moved faster than he would've given himself credit for. His fist connected hard with David's jaw, sending his brother backwards with such force that he, along with the armchair in which he was seated, toppled onto the floor. "What the devil...?" David struggled to his feet, stumbling once over the chair and then again because of his own lack of balance. "You... You hit me! You son of a bitch! I can't believe you hit me!" Haughton slowly flexed the fingers of his right hand and wondered if their cook had any ice down in the kitchens. "I will allow you to stay here for one night. Eat, bathe, get some rest, and then I want you gone in the morning." "You're a brute." David worked his jaw for a minute before running his tongue over his teeth to ensure they were all still attached. He looked at Haughton from the other side of the fallen chair, deep lines etched into the skin around his red-rimmed eyes. "This is about that woman, isn't it? Your Mrs. Brixton. She's not merely a friend of Bess's, is she?" 🧃 Haughton cursed himself. If he'd been able to hold his temper in check, David's interest in Sophia would've soon faded the moment something more enticing came along. But now because of how he'd reacted to his brother's comments, he'd done nothing more than shine the brightest of lights on Mrs. Brixton and her presence at Mowbray Hall. "One night," Haughton repeated. "If you've not le the premises by breakfast, I'll drag you to the edge of the property myself." David rubbed his face and spat on the floor. "Bastard. You know you're nothing at all like our father." "Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment," Haughton said. He bent forward in a mock bow, and turning on his heel, walked out of the study. *** Haughton stood inside his sister's sitting room, one hand still on the doorknob as he took in the scene before him. He hadn't thought to knock or announce his presence in any way, his recent interview with David still buzzing like a swarm of irritated insects inside his head. And so he'd stomped upstairs, down the hall, ready to complain to Bess about the behavior of their infernal sibling. But instead of Bess, he found Sophia. She sat on a delicate settee, surrounded by pink upholstery and pink cushions and more lace and fringe than should have been permitted to exist in a single space. She held George against her chest, the infant's head resting on her shoulder, a small bead of drool soaking the muslin sleeve of her gown as a small snore escaped from the child. Why such a tableau should arrest his progress into the room, he couldn't fathom. She sat with her cheek on top of the boy's head, her eyes closed and lips slightly parted. He might have almost thought her asleep as well if he hadn't noticed the gentle movement of her hand, slowly stroking the child's back, the rhythm of her caress matched by the so song, as quiet as a whisper, that slipped from her mouth. He was struck then by the privacy of the moment, between this woman and the child in her care, and he had a terrible desire to both retreat without interrupting them and to better place himself where he could observe them without being seen. Because he knew if Sophia noticed his presence, the delicate song would cease, and her demeanor would change, and the lines of tension and weariness would fan out around her eyes. But in this moment, he could see her. Not the facade she put in place for him and for others, but only her, and how she truly looked and behaved when she thought no one was watching. His hand tightened around the doorknob as he took a step back, pulling the door nearly closed before he scu ed the heel of his boot on the floor and cleared his throat, loud enough that she would be certain to hear him and so adjust her posture in preparation of his entry. He knocked lightly, and waited for Sophia's voice to draw him into the room. "Mrs. Brixton." He bowed his head as he strode into the sitting room. But before he'd dipped his chin, he noticed the rigidity already funneling into her shoulders and arms, and the hand on the infant's back was still. "Where is my sister?" "In the kitchens, I believe. Something to do with sorting out dinner preparations now that your brother has arrived." Haughton's jaw clenched. "He will not be dining with us, I assure you." Sophia drew her bottom lip into her mouth and glanced towards the windows. "Does he know?" Her arms tightened around George's slumbering form. "Does your brother know he is residing beneath the same roof as his son?" "I don't believe so. He was much too focused on..." You he almost said. "... other matters," he finished haltingly, and took another step into the room. "He'll be leaving in the morning. Until then, I pray he'll remain in his rooms, hopefully to sleep o the rest of the drink he undoubtedly imbibed before he arrived." "Will you tell him?" She turned the full force of her gaze on him, and he saw the worry etched in the faint lines that fanned out from the corners of her eyes. "No." He shook his head. He could not stop watching her, the way the light came in through the lace of the curtains, how it illuminated the gold in her hair and accentuated the shadows beneath her cheekbones, the slight smudge of grey beneath her eyes. Had he noticed her tiredness before and simply disregarded it, too worried about his own troubles to spare a moment of thought for someone else's trials and tribulations? "Not without your permission, at least." She nodded and lowered her eyes again. Her chin brushed the top of George's head and the tips of her fingers teased the fair hair at the nape of the boy's neck. "You doubt his capabilities as a father?" Haughton sco ed. "I doubt his capabilities as a grown man." He took a few more steps into the room and settled in an overstu ed armchair, the upholstery reeking of something that might have been lavender. "He is not the sort who does well when faced with responsibility." "Not many of us do," Sophia said, low enough that Haughton wondered if he'd been meant to hear. She straightened up, arching her lower back slightly as a grimace tightened her mouth. When he shi ed forward as if to o er her aid, she waved him away without disturbing the sleeping figure on her chest. "He'll soon be too heavy

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to use me in place of his cradle," she said, her expression taking on a bittersweet edge. "And to think that one day he'll stand taller than me." He looked down at the boy, this child for whom she had sacrificed everything. Something twisted in his abdomen, a sensation that made him uneasy. Jealousy, perhaps? No, that couldn't possibly be it. But as Sophia's hand moved to straighten a bit of the infant's clothing, Haughton found himself tracing the line of her fingers, then her wrist, up to the curve of her shoulder and the arch of her neck. It was a sudden need to protect her, this woman who had stood before the censure of society, giving up her her chance to marry well, to be anything more than an outcast with a gentleman's bastard on her hip and no other family to come to her aid. The sudden appearance of his brother, he realized, must have exacted this change in him, awakened his protective nature towards Mrs. Brixton. Mrs. Brixton: He passed his hand over his face, as if he could wipe away any expression that might give away his current thoughts. He

hadn't referred to her as Mrs. Brixton—at least not within the confines

of his own mind—since the night before, when he'd become aware of

his attraction to her. And there she sat, oblivious to the turmoil inside

his head, holding a child who would not have an easy life if he did not

But it would have to be on her terms. He understood this now. All his

passed down to him from his father had trained him well in matters of

business, but the woman before him and the babe in her arms... They

were not business. They were not things to be bought and sold, or to

"Mrs. Brixton." He slid forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees,

his posture taking on an air of supplication. "Whatever you may want

be silenced with the promise of a generous annuity.

years of conducting the business of the various houses and estates

step in to help.

from my sister and me, whatever you may need... it is yours. You have only to ask, and I will make sure my nephew and you" he added quickly. "are always provided for." She did not tense, as he had expected. Instead, her shoulders sagged, her eyes closing as she released a sigh. "I have no wish to become an object of charity." "And nor would you be," he said, injecting some of his former sternness into his words. But when her gaze flicked towards him, he dared a wry grin. "You are family. Should you even wish to one day

make Denton Castle your home—" He paused when her eyes widened

a fraction. "—I've no doubt Bess would welcome your company with

open arms. And should you find my presence intolerable, I assure you

If the glint in her eyes was from tears, Sophia blinked them away too

quickly for him to be certain. "Thank you," she said, a er a full minute

"Please do." He stood up from his chair and began to move towards

had slipped away. "Now, do not take my gratitude as a firm

acceptance of your o er, but I will... I will consider it."

that I spend the majority of my time in town or elsewhere. I've le

Denton for my sister, to run as she sees fit."

her. A part of him wanted to take her hand, to brush his lips across her knuckles, as if he were a practiced rake and the woman in front of him was simply another conquest. Fear, however, held him back. She did not trust him. He knew this. And no doubt she would scorn such an overture from him, as if he had lowered himself to the level of his brother, seeking to win her friendship and a ection through an a ectation of charm and honeyed words. "I will leave you, and George, to your rest. Please inform my sister, should you come upon her before I do, that I was seeking an audience with her."

"I will, of course." Her smile was a fleeting thing, but it lasted long

enough to illuminate the flecks of gold amid the green in her eyes.

A nod of farewell, and he turned on his heel and strode towards the

door. Again, the sensation of unease a licted him. He wanted to stay

"And again, thank you."

Quenby Olson

there with her, and yet he knew that to spend more time with her, to give in to the nascent desire he had for her was nothing more than the most utter foolishness. She was the last woman who would welcome his advances, and he would do well to regard her as nothing more than the guardian of his nephew. It would do well for all parties involved, he told himself, and for a moment, he almost believed it. ************ Only seven more chapters to go! Thank you for reading, voting, adding this story to your lists, and your comments. And now... back to editing.