# **Chapter Seventeen**

Sophia stayed at Denton Castle for another ten days a er David's departure. Lord Haughton had taken his leave as well, returning to London only a day a er seeing his younger brother o the estate. Of course, Bess had brought out all of her best arguments for the occasion, declaring that they could send for all of Sophia's things and have them brought out to Derbyshire without her having to experience the inconvenience of traveling halfway across the country and back again. But Sophia was adamant. She would return to Stantreath. She was not yet ready to give up the independence of living alone, though a niggling voice in the back of her mind reminded her that everything about her existence—and George's—would be more free and easy once they had settled themselves at Denton Castle and she agreed to allow Haughton to help with the cost of George's upbringing.

Sophia stretched her legs out in front of her as best she could, the toes of her slippers peeking out from beneath the hem of her gown as she tried to shi into a more comfortable position. Beside her, George slipped in and out of a fussy, restless sleep. Sophia knew another tooth was about to make an appearance in his mouth, and so she had been a companion to his drooling and his cries for the entire journey back to Northumberland.

He fussed again as he shi ed, his legs tucked beneath him as his lips searched for his fingers in his sleep. She reached out and placed a gentle hand on his back, the quick thrum of his heartbeat sounding out its tattoo under her fingers.

Her George. But not her George, not really. And yet here she was, making the decision to remove him from Stantreath, to take him more than one hundred miles inland, and all with the hope that Haughton's name and resources would allow him to grow up without the stigma of "bastard" laying a shadow across his future life.

She would make no secret of her departure. In a town as small as Stantreath, it would be near impossible for her to abscond to another part of the country without nearly every inhabitant of the town discovering it before she'd completed her first leg of the journey. Even now, she knew the gossips were most likely already masticating over the gristle she'd thrown to them by accepting Haughton's initial invitation and leaving her cottage for several weeks. Only Lady Rutledge had been privy to her whereabouts, but Sophia did not doubt that the truth of George's parentage would one day become the most popular topic over Mrs. Fenton's teapot.

George let out another so cry as the carriage struck a particularly deep rut that marked their return to the outskirts of Stantreath. Sophia picked him up and cradled him against her chest, despite his e orts to squirm and escape from her embrace. The sight of Lady Rutledge's carriage trundling through the town would catch everyone's attention, she was certain. And then to see it make the turn towards her cottage...

A cloud passed in front of the sun as soon as the door was flung open and the step lowered down. A gloved hand appeared in the narrow doorway, one of Haughton's men ready to help her out of the carriage. Both Bess and Haughton had insisted on the additional help to Lady Rutledge's servants during her journey, and she knew she would have to pen a note of thnaks to them for their generosity.

She held tight to George as she maneuvered down without stumbling or tripping over the hem of her dress, and as she walked up the path to the house, a flurry of activity began behind her as her belongings were removed from the carriage with an astonishing amount of e iciency. The weeds and the grass beyond the step, she noticed, had flourished in her absence and were in desperate need of a trim. As she fumbled in her reticule for the key with which to let herself inside, the door she was about to unlock swung open on creaking hinges, and a young woman, her fair hair in ringlets, her gown of yellow muslin far too sophisticated for its backdrop of an old cottage with a step in need of repair.

"Oh, Soph! How good it is to see you at last!"

Lucy skipped down to the path, her golden beauty only enhanced as she stepped out of the shadow of the house and into the sunlight. Sophia remained where she was, her mouth working over a response that wouldn't materialize before her younger sister wrapped her arms

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around her in a tight embrace.	đ
"I cannot begin to describe how much I have missed you!" Lucy took a step back, and her blue eyes alighted on George, who had begun to squirm and fuss in Sophia's arms. "And my darling boy!" Without another word, she swept the child into her arms, ignoring his cries as she peppered his face with kisses. "Now, you must come inside at once! We'll have tea and cakes, and I'll tell you everything that is new and wondrous in Bath. Oh, my beautiful boy!" She placed another kiss on George's cheek, a moment before he squeezed his eyes shut and let out a piercing yowl. "Come along, Soph!"	45
Sophia watched her sister disappear into the cottage with George, the latter kicking and screaming his discomfort the entire way. As Haughton's men came up with her things, she found her voice long enough to direct them inside and inform them where they should deposit her trunk. Once the carriage departed, Sophia made her way into the sitting room, where she found Lucy attempting to bustle over a tea tray while George sat in the middle of the floor, making his discomfort known to all and sundry.	2
"You must tell me where you've been!" Lucy began, speaking over George's cries as if he weren't howling loud enough to shake the dust from the ra ers. "Here I return from Bath, all covered in dust and exhausted from travel, with expectations of enjoying a warm welcome from my sister and my son, and what should I find but an empty house! Locked up and cold as a grave, without a note or a single clue as to where I might begin to look for you!"	b,
Could her sister be so obtuse as to not realize how well her words applied to her own behavior? Sophia pressed her lips together as she picked up George from the rug and placed him on her hip, where he immediately began to quiet. "And whose men were those? Certainly nothing the likes old Rutledge can a ord!?" Lucy flounced onto an armchair and tossed her curls over her shoulder. "Here I thought I'd be the one living a life of some interest, and I return to the sight of you stepping down with the aid of	đ
someone dressed in enough finery to look a er a Duke!" She bit into a cake and chewed noisily. "Do, tell!" she prompted, a bit of icing still clinging to the corner of her mouth. "So you were in Bath all this time?" Sophia said, ignoring her sister's interrogation. She would not allow the girl to disappear for several months and then return again as if she had only been gone for	ď
morning calls. "A letter would have been appreciated." "Oh, really!" Lucy rolled her eyes and hu ed out a breath, as if she were still a twelve year old girl rather than a fully-grown woman. "And this is the welcome I receive? Perhaps I should not have returned at all!"	a a
No, Sophia would not bite on her sister's hook. Lucy wanted an argument, wanted people to flatter and praise her until she calmed down again, but Sophia would not fall for it this time. "If you'll excuse me, I need to feed your son. And unfortunately cakes and sweets will not su ice."	
She could not help being rude. Each word sharpened itself to a point before flying out of her mouth, but Lucy's sudden appearance on the doorstep had shaken her. Already exhausted from the journey home, her mind awhirl with thoughts of packing up and taking George to live with Haughton's sister at Denton Castle, she could not now turn her attention to her wayward sister's sudden decision to once again make an appearance in their lives.	B.
In the kitchen, she set George on the floor, handed him a wooden spoon and a cast iron pot with which to bide his time while she searched through the jars of canned fruits and vegetables for something to prepare for him. Lucy followed her, as Sophia knew she would. If there was anything her sister abhored, it was being le without an audience.	a
"So is it a gentleman?"	
Sophia spun around, the jar of peach preserves she held nearly tumbling out of her grasp. "I beg your pardon?"	
"Your journey, silly! And those lovely footmen!" Lucy laughed, and in the light that came through the kitchen windows, her beauty lacked some of the freshness that Sophia remembered. The bloom that used to color her cheeks was already beginning to fade. "Have you finally found yourself a beau a er all these years?"	n. a
The superiority in her sister's tone set Sophia's teeth on edge. "He is not—" She stopped the movement of her tongue before she could say something she would regret. Abandoning her search through the shelves for a jar of something suitable for George to eat, she turned	

"I cannot imagine who would develop a tendre for you," Lucy continued, unaware of the dark expression taking root on Sophia's face. "The only man who has ever paid you a bit of attention that I can recall is poor Josiah Fenton. Goodness, how he used to follow you around like a lovesick dog!"

her attention to the few potatoes still lingering in their wooden box

set back in the darkest corner of the kitchen.

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Lucy's laugh cut through the last of Sophia's patience. With a wrinkled potato in one hand and a paring knife in the other, she bit back the snappish retort that sprung to the edge of her lips and took a deep breath before daring to speak again. "If you must know, the carriage belonged to Lord Haughton of Derbyshire," she said in a calm, measured voice. In front of her, the peel of the potato dropped into a bucket with a so thunk. "He is also George's uncle, on his father's side." She glanced at her sister to see if she was listening. "That is, if I am not mistaken."

Lucy's pretty mouth turned down in a frown. "Oh, him? Well, that's nothing to crow about. He's such a dry stick, you know. David used to tell such awful stories about him."

"Hmm, I'm sure he did," Sophia replied. Another peel went into the bucket and she reached for a second potato. "I met his sister as well. Bess? She was all that was kind and hospitable." She chanced another look at Lucy, who did not appear to be enjoying the conversation as much as before. "Did you know he had a sister? Your David, I mean."

A hu of breath marked the beginning of Lucy pacing from one end of the kitchen to the other. "No, I did not... Well, he might have mentioned her in passing, I suppose."

Sophia said nothing more. She could practically hear the various thoughts and questions spinning around in her sister's head. All she had to do was practice a few minutes' worth of patience.

"And how..." Lucy cleared her throat and shook a few lines of displeasure from her face with a quick toss of her head. "Did Lord Haughton introduce himself to you, or...?"

"He sought me out," Sophia said as she reached for a third potato. Behind her, George squealed and kicked his heels against the floor before banging his spoon on the bottom of a cast iron pot. Lucy, she noticed, winced at the noise, but Sophia had long since failed to be bothered by the sounds of his play. "He simply arrived on the doorstep one day, searching for the mother of his brother's child."

"And he believes it's you? Oh, jolly good!"

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Again, Sophia chose to say nothing to that. Instead, she placed her peeled potatoes in a pot, stepped outside to fill it with water from the pump, and returned to build a fire in the stove. As she worked, Lucy continued her amble around the edge of the kitchen, her attention firmly fixed on anything and everything that did not pertain to her son.

"And what did he have to say?" Lucy ventured to ask as Sophia hovered in front of the stove, feeding kindling to a growing flame. "I cannot imagine he came all the way to Stantreath just to speak with you."

Sophia sni ed at the slight and picked up a small piece of firewood. "As a matter of fact, he did come all the way here to speak with me. Or to speak with you, to be more precise. But as you weren't here, he accepted me as a suitable replacement." An edge began to creep back into her words, along with a desire to rage at her sister for having abandoned them several months before. But another breath slid in and out between clenched teeth, and another chunk of wood went onto the fire. "He knows, Lucy, that you are George's mother, and not I. It would have been impossible to keep up the ruse for long, as he knows his brother's preferences better than anyone."

Lucy let out an indelicate snort. "Oh, no! I could never see David with the likes of you!"

Sophia allowed the remark to pass and continued. "He came to discuss George. His wish is to make certain that George will want for nothing. His education, the cost of his upbringing... He wants to pay for everything. In fact..." Sophia paused, her throat nearly closing around the words that were sure to provoke a volatile reaction from her sister. "He would like George and I to live at Denton Castle with his sister, Bess."

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Lucy drew in a sharp breath. "Well!" she said in a hu , but Sophia interrupted her before she could throw herself into a full tizzy.

"Of course, now that you've returned, we must discuss everything and come to a decision as to what is best for—"

"What gall the man has!" Lucy ceased her pacing and stomped her slippered foot on the hardwood of the kitchen floor. "Such a pittance of an o er. No, if he wishes to give assistance of the pecuniary kind, then he'll do the proper thing and give us a house of our very own, not shove us into a cupboard behind the servants' quarters."

Sophia tossed her last piece of firewood onto the flames and turned around. "Lucy, I don't think—"

"And servants, of course!" Lucy clapped her hands together, her eyes lighting up with avaricious glee. "A maid for each of us, and a cook, and a housekeeper, and a butler, and—Ooh! Footmen! Do you know how much I've longed to preside over a household complete with footmen? And we must tell him that we want tall, attractive ones. I will not accept a handful of short, aging men with thinning hair and pockmarked skin!"

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## "Lucy!"

Her sister's mouth closed with a snap. Sophia had not intended to speak as sharply as she did, but she resisted the urge to give in to the quiver of Lucy's bottom lip and immediately launch into an apology to placate her sister's volatile mood.

"I do not believe this is the time to discuss such matters." Wiping her hands down the front of her skirt, she turned and reached for the pot of potatoes still resting on the table. "I am weary, George and I both are in need of a hot meal, and if you could keep an eye on the potatoes while I go upstairs to change my gown, I would be much obliged."

Sophia walked out of the kitchen before her sister could protest. A glance over her shoulder showed that George still sat in the corner, banging on his pots and pans, in-between moments spent gnawing on the edge of the wooden spoon until his chin and collar were soaked with drool.

Haughton's men had been good enough to deposit her luggage in her bedroom, rather than assuming she possessed a servant who would be le to haul the battered trunk up the narrow stairs. Her things had gone through the normal tumble and shi ing during the last leg of the journey, and she snatched up a plain, grey muslin that appeared to boast the least folds and wrinkles. She would unpack the rest of everything later, once everyone had eaten and George—if the restless sleep he'd had in the carriage hadn't ruined his chance of a decent nap later in the a ernoon—was tucked into his cradle for an hour or so before dinner.

### And Lucy...

Of course, her sister would choose the one time she was away from Stantreath to make her return. She could have thought the coincidence a suspicious one, but quickly pushed the thought out of her mind. Lucy couldn't have known that Haughton had decided to show an interest in George.

#### Could she?

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Sophia shook her head and quickly slipped out of her dusty and travel-worn gown. She had other things to worry about, aside from welcoming her sister back into the household a er too many months away. And if she tarried for much longer, no doubt Lucy would allow the potatoes to burn.

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I didn't get a chance to update yesterday (apologies, but it has been one hectic week 'round these parts) so thanks to all for your patience. Also, thanks for the continued reads, adds, follows, votes, and comments! And we're closing in on 1000 reads, which is delightful! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Quenby Olson