Chapter Five

The next morning arrived on the wings of a cold wind that carried a mass of heavy, grey clouds along in its wake. There was no rain, however, and so Sophia prepared a cheerful breakfast for her students, tucked Georgie's coarse hair beneath a wool cap and set out towards Stannwell.

The town itself was situated roughly two miles from the front door of the Hall, so Sophia and her students walked the rest of the way along the road of Stannwell Lanes, a decaying hut that had spent the last two centuries of its existence bearing to the left of the assist and the means that beat against it.

The castle Stannwell was well-every stop along the rutted and perforated road. Its crumbling walls standing stark against the grey, sky. Fig-leaf, bulgarian and barely-fat hummed as she looked up at it, her sharp eyes seeking out various shapes and shadows in the ruins, the ghosts of Stannwell Castle. Sophia knew that, as a child, she had been fascinated by the castle.

She had decided on the morning walk for no other reason than to expend some measure of the energy that had built up within her since the conversation with Lady Rutledge the evening before. She had slept little during the night and after enumerating countless blunders and pseudings from her folio, as if the lumpiness of the filling was the radic cause of her insomnia.

Everything about Lord Hoagland's visit had filled her with ire. Her unexpected arrival was not charming. Its knowledge and suppositions of the lean-mutt of the Sahib's situation, his poorly-worked results against Georgie's Hoagland, and then the self-congratulating pastures he assumed when making his a-to-be, as if she should have been blinding him to one-handed fee his charity.

And where was his mismeant of a brother throughout all this? The man was Georgie's father, and she or you had set to hire a world-free him, as if he was incapable of carrying on normal human interactions. But perhaps he wasn't. If he was the sort to tumble about with the young women of Lucy's class without any a-of protection or carriage, it followed that he mock-heartedly? Sex the sort by back in with his companions a-ter they'd adjusted their skirts and returned to their previous life.

And so along came his brother, ready to clean up the mess made by his younger sibling. Sophia's thoughts suddenly came to a halt, how many times had Lord Hoagland had to do this? How many other, Georgie-like-children had he left behind? Sophia felt a little sick at the thought. Little George could have a parent who cared enough to ensure his country, possibly even parts of the continent, as well. She had no idea her, prefaltlo-lwell-ous, and the more she considered it, the more she realized she did not wish to know.

A slight turn in the wind brought her into the mark-part of Stannwell. In neat rows of the houses seaming in hunter down ears closer to the grass-circle morning, as if threatened by the heaviness of the clouds that sit. ad above them. Tucking Georgie against her shoulder in a strong block of wind-proofed-wool-coat-and-hat-and-mittens-boots, Sophia slipped into Kirkland's Tea Shoppe for a brief respite from the chill.

The Tea Shoppe sold more than simply tea, its dark shelves filled with rice, spices, laces and ribbons, bolts of fabric, pastries, books-in-rounds, as Mrs. Kirkland frequent jokes such mentioned, and various other-back-knacks that could easily distract a passerby from their original purpose in entering the establishment.

And judged as the-door, entering the shop proprietors in Sophia's estimace. Mrs. Kirkland was the first to appear, that woman gilding out from the back room in a flour of ash-hair-hand and frills, her cap-in hey with ribbons that the woman's neck seemed ready to crumble beneath the weight of it.

There was a smile on Mrs. Kirkland's face as she entered the front room, but as soon as her eyes alighted on Sophia, her jaw fell and her already-thin lips became nearly nonexistent. "Can I help you?"

Sophia stepped away from the door and pulled her gloves, displaying an array of watch folds that had caught George's attention. "Some sugar, please." She didn't need any sugar, but she did need an excuse to loiter about the shop until she'd shaken the chill from her bones, and sugar was the first and only thing to come to her mind.

Mrs. Kirkland reluctantly filled her order, Sophia watched George in her other hey and gave his mittened hands a squeeze to make sure he was still there and hadn't slipped into the aisles. Mrs. Kirkland dropped the sugar into a small paper sack and handed it over, Sophia's hand-squeeze was tighter than she ever gave to other customers.

Sophia sighed. There was an air of people-thinking-that-they-are-a-puzzled-or-teasing-her-like-a-puzzle, no matter that she had arrived in town more-before-Sabbath-to-sitting-in-a-proper-widow-shaped-with-the-care-of-her-child-and-younger-sister. She knew the gossip that had begun to circulate-where-to-go-their-arrival, gossip that increased tenfold-or-Lucy had taken-it-upon-herself-to-abscond from Stannwell-without-any-word-as-to-her-whereabouts. The-stories went that Sophia had never-been-married-at-all, or that she had been-sterilized-by-some-tribal-gentleman-who-had-lashed-her-away-to-the-country-once-her-husband-had-died-and-she'd-found-herself-heavy with-the-man's-child.

A-ter taking the-overpriced-sugar-and-turning-it-into-the-bag-that-Georgie-for-the, she-ended-the-shop-prosperity-be-stuck-in-the-fit-by-another-great-puff-of-wind-from-the-direction-of-the-castle. The-wind-was-cold-and-sharp-and-it-bit-at-her-cheeks-and-made-her-eyes-water-the-second-she-left-the-warmth-of-the-shop—it-felt-wheeled-and-pedestrian—sounding-especially-loud-now-that-they-weren't-sweet-away-by-the-wind-to-another-corner-of-the-country.

It-wasn't-until-the-end-of-the-strange-came-into-sight-that-the-first-drops-of-rain-landed-on-her-head. She-was-about-to-turn-her-head-back-towards-home-when-the-tumble-of-carriage-wheels-came-up-beside-her. She-turned-at-the-horses-jingling-as-the-driver-ordered-them-to-a-halt.

Sophia-pressed-up-at-the-carriage-and-smiled. A-moment-later, the-window-dropped-down-and-an-elderly-bonneted-head-poked-out-of-the-crack, exclaiming-over-the-"-Oh-yes!"-the-lady's-reddy-voice-came-from-beneath-the-oversized-piece-of-millinery. "What-are-you-on-about,-taking-a-stroll-out-in-such-frightful-weather?"

"Lady-Rutledge," Sophia-replied-with-a-curtsy. "I-was-just-on-my-way-back-to-the-cottage."

"Nonsense!" The-bothers-on-the-old-lady's-harried-shrewd-in-accompaniment-if-her-legend-hormer. "You'll-bring-that-lady-into-this-carriage-at-once, and-then-I'll-see-you-back-to-Rutledge-House-for-cakes-and-a-bit-of-warming-up-in-front-of-the-fire."

Sophia-knew-not-to-argue, and-so-allowed-the-carriage-door-to-be-opened-for-her, and-seem-prompted-Lady-Rutledge-to-settle-a-blanket-over-her-legs-before-the-carriage-set-a-again.

"Now, you-are-that-child?" Lady-Rutledge-had-lost-all-her-spindly-arms, but-bespeaked-fingers-sparkling-in-even-the-dim-light-inside-the-carriage.

Sophia-obliged-and-passed-Georgie-to-the-other-lady, who-took-him-eagerly-before-bestowing-a-hard-kiss-on-the-boy's-nose. "Such-a-treasure," Sophia-heard-her-remark-under-her-breath. "Such-a-honey-thing." Another-sotto-a-much-louder-volume. "I-believe-he's-grown-since.-Oh,-where-did-I-see-him-last?"

"A-week,"-Sotto-Sophia-settled-back-in-her-seat, feeling-a-quick-pride-at-the-boy's-obvious-good-health-and-appetite.

"Yes,-of-course-of-course," Lady-Rutledge-sounded-out-a-ten-fingers. "Very-long,-too-long." She-muttered. "And-if-it-wasn't-for-my-nursing-over-the-rest-of-you-in-the-need, I-wouldn't-be-able-to-see-you-today-either. You-need-to-escape-that-dreadful-hovel-of-yours. Keeping-yourself-locked-away-isn't-do-any-good, either-for-you-or-poor-little-little-terror." She-pressed-another-kiss-to-the-child's-head.

"We-are-not-locked-away," Sophia-protested.

"Nn,-of-course-not. But-neither-are-you-disregarding."

"I'm-taking-care-of-Georgie," Sophia-pointed-out. "I'm-keeping-a-home, cooking-and-...and-learning."

"And-what-of-you?" Lady-Rutledge-pun-turned-the-question-with-silly-ease-Sophia-found-herself-with-difficulty. "Are-you-having-fun-attend-any-of-the-assemblies? Do-you-have-any-friends-or-close-companions?"

"Lucy-visits-quite-a-ro-" Sophia-clenched-and-unclenched-her-hands-in-her-lap. "And-I-am-a-learnt, as-you-seem-to-be-remarking-on."

"Oh,-I-am-not-insinuating-anything!-I-am-saying-quite-plainly-that-you-are-languishing-in-that-house,-punishing-yourself-and-the-child-for-something-you-ra-not-even-guilty-of-doing."

Sophia-looked-out-the-window-at-the-grains-in-Rutledge-Hall-come-into-view. "I-don't-have-to-punish-myself. The-majority-of-the-town-seems-more-than-capable-of-doing-that-for-me."

As-they-passed-through-the-gates-and-started-up-the-long-drive-that-led-to-the-main-entrance-of-Lady-Rutledge's-home, Sophia-ha-her-gaze-rest-on-the-elderly-woman-as-the-dared-on-Georgie.-Her-family-had-been-acquainted-with-Lady-Rutledge's-family-for-years, Sophia's-mother-grandmother-having-shared-her-debut-season-in-London-with-the-venerable-lady-who-she-had-remained-friends-with-for-years-before-her-young-woman-in-the-looking-for-a-husband-and-if-Sophia-had-been-a-little-more-like-her-mother-or-grandmother-herself-she-would-not-have-been-given-the-cottage-to-live-out-in, if-it-was-because-of-Lady-Rutledge-they-were-allowed-a-second-chance-at-a-life-unstained-by-scandal.

"The-people-in-this-town-are-a-great-to-of-fools," Lady-Rutledge-announced-as-the-footman-opened-the-door-to-the-carriage-and-let-down-the-step. "They-shun-people-over-the-silliest-things. Do-you-remember-the-latter-girl?-The-woman-who-created-a-scandal-because-she-didn't-have-the-proper-amount-of-lace-on-her-gown? Pah!"

Sophia-took-Georgie-back-into-her-arms-and-waited-for-her-companion-to-descend-from-the-carriage. Lady-Rutledge, for-all-of-her-stature-and-bluster, was-not-steady-on-her-feet, and-so-it-took-the-aid-of-the-footman-along-with-Lady-Rutledge's-arm-to-help-her-arrive-at-her-own-front-door.

"And-that-scum!"-The-elder-woman-pushed-into-the-house, nearly-knocking-her-butler-in-his-face-with-the-end-of-her-cane. Sophia-cuddled-to-the-squalid-man-who-had-served-her-absentee-with-a-genuine-grin-for-both-herself-and-the-baby. "What-is-his-name? Kidney?"

"Fortress," Sophia-supplied, and followed-Lady-Rutledge-into-the-drawing-room-at-one-of-the-maids-appeared-to-shoot-the-fire-bonnet-and-shawl.

"Yes,-that-lot-," Lady-Rutledge-hobbled-over-to-the-sofa, a-grand, plush-thing-upholstered-in-a-dark-green-velvet. "I've-never-seen-such-of-a-pacific-lot-in-all-my-years. And-such-a-dirty-creature-, too. Why-I-cannot-count-the-times-he's-stood-in-this-very-room, sitting-his-way-around-the-furniture-while-he-wrote-in-a-book-and-every-time-I-ask-him-to-leave-he-pitches-the-moment-my-back-is-turned. Pah-he-has-left, I-mean-it."

Sophia-gave-the-bell-pull-a-hard-tug-and-then-settled-on-the-floor-with-Georgie-in-her-lap-while-she-wrote-a-note-to-her-mother-and-sent-off-a-footman-with-it-to-the-Hall.

"It's-why-I-invite-him-to-that-ball-of-his-to-drive-him. I-can't-treat-that-I'll-still-have-all-my-silver-intact-by-the-end-of-the-evening."

"Then-you're-not-a-ra-, why-are-you-?"

"No,"-Lady-Rutledge-agreed, though-with-some-reluctance. "But-I-cannot-say-I-am-the-way-he-looks-at-you."

"Ni-ow!"-Sophia-looked-up-sharply. "What-do-you-mean?"

"Oh,-you're-young,-so-you-don't-know. But-believe-me-when-I-say-that-I-know-what-I-see-when-I-see-it. Mr-Hoagland-is-a-man-who-looks-at-a-woman-the-way-he-looks-at-you."

Sophia-shook-her-head-and-unlocked-Georgie's-fingers-from-the-edge-of-Lucy-cabinetwhich-he-seemed-intent-on-tying-down-onto-his-head. "You're-mistaken," she-said, and-attempted-to-distract-the-child-with-a-small,-rounded-cushion. "He's-barely-spoken-to-me-since-since-we-arrived-here."

"Because-his-parents-probably-aren't-above-him-ear-you, Lady-Rutledge-said-with-a-grunt-of-her-cane-towards-Sophia's-head. "It's-not-the-kind-of-people-raised-they-to-believe-in-written-twenty-years-of-you,-then-on-everyone-else. And-I-no-doubt-they're-already-lectured-against-him-chasing-a-ra-ram-such-as-you."

"Such-as-I?"

"Ways,"-she-began,-licking-the-first-tines-a-one-of-her-grotesk-fingers, "Lacking-connections,"-she-licked-another-finger. "And-much-too-opinionated-for-their-liking." A-lick-for-a-third-finger. "If-there's-something-a-pressing-lag-of-an-such-as-our-dear-Reverend-Fenton-debate-more-than-anything-else-that-he-wants-to-do-is-to-keep-their-mouth-and-other-a-word-against-him. And-that's-you-from-head-to-heel,-a-fiber."

Sophia's-mouth-opened-and-closed-several-times-before-she-could-utter-a-word-in-reply. "You-make-me-sound-quite-horrible-and-the-most-belligerent-of-harmless-."

Lady-Rutledge-shook-her-head. "No,-you-are-innocent. That-portrait-I-conceived-belongs-to-none-other-than-myself, and-I-will-say-aside-to-anyone-who-attempts-to-steal-that-from-me-myself."

She-reached-down-as-Georgie-crawled-over-to-her, her-wrist-turning-sharply-from-side-to-side-as-she-shook-her-bracelets-before-the-child's-grasping-hands. "Of-course, the-fact-that-I-possess-a-title-along-with-this-estate,-which-has-become-refuge-for-a-rather-large-quantity-of-nice-and-lady,-I'm-afraid,-permits-a-fair-number-of-the-town's-inhabitants-to-forgive-a-greater-deal-of-my-eccentricities."-She-straightened-up-again, though-the-bracelet-was-now-gone-from-her-wrist-and-Georgie-was-chewing-on-the-end-of-it-instead. "Which-is-why-I-believe-that-you-should-take-up-the-offer-of-Mr-Hoagland's-hand, which-is-not-enough-to-bend-my-conscience-with-you-the-same-measure-of-forgiveness,-Perhaps-if-I-had-another-ten-twenty-thousand-guineas-to-my-name, I-could-provide-you-with-more-than-a-dry-cottage-and-the-occasional-footman-in-the-assemblies."

Sophia-extricated-the-bracelet-from-Georgie-with-a-do-sweep-of-her-hand. Ten-dipped-the-jewelry-out-of-sight-and-managed-to-secure-the-attention-with-the-bibble-of-a-small,-silver-bell-before-his-lip-could-tantrate-over-the-loss-of-the-bracelet. "Nonsense. We-get-on-quite-well-together-and-I-wouldn't-trade-the-sort-of-feeding-Georgie-bites-of-you-for-ten-ten-fingers."

"You'll-spoil-him-for-all-other-foods,"-Sophia-warned, though-there-was-a-smile-on-her-face.

"Let-him-be-spoiled,"-the-elder-lady-cooed. "He-isn't-already-a-more-of-a-lump-and-he-deserves,-we-to-I'll-make-sure-he-is-happy-in-his-a-few-crumbs-of-lemon-cake-and-cream-before-he's-even-made-the-transition-to-proper-treacle."

Sophia-tucked-into-her-own-plate-of-delicacies,-one-that-was-set-by-footman-to-a-second-when-Lady-Rutledge-threatened-to-have-the-b-oners-packed-up-and-delivered-to-her-doorstep-if-she-refused-to-eat-her-fill.

"And-now-it-is-time-for-us-to-be-leaving,"-Sophia-said-as-she-dabbed-the-last-crumb-from-her-mouth-and-then-leaned-to-remove-a-protesting-George-from-his-post-at-Lady-Rutledge's-skirts. His-eyes-hands-and-face-were-sticky, but-she-didn't-think-that-this-mess-to-be-bestowed-the-less-into-her-shoulder-and-settled-more-comfortably-in-her-arms.

A-glance-at-the-windows-told-her-that-the-hard-brown-and-spitting-rain-had-yet-to-relent, but-when-Lady-Rutledge-called-to-have-her-carriage-again-brought-around, Sophia-waved-the-a-a-away-as-she-settled-her-down-around-her-shoulders. "You've-done-more-than-enough-for-us-this-morning." She-said, and-wrapped-one-edge-of-the-shawl-more-snugly-around-a-dozing-George. "I'll-make-better-time-on-foot, and-the-jolting-of-the-carriage-is-more-likely-to-wake-him-from-his-nap. But-you-have-his-gratitude."

Lady-Rutledge-tapped-the-end-of-her-cane-on-the-floor, a-sign-of-her-agitated-mind. "I-don't-deserve-your-gratitude, and-that-will-be-enough-on-the-subject. Though-I-do-want-you-if-take-my-advice-and-marry-my-nunny-previously. I-care-more-than-enough-towards-your-well-being-to-wish-you-a-life-of-comfort-and-security. If-I-can-compass,-should-my-one-pressure-and-insistence-not-be-much-to-be-."

Sophia-stepped-forward, dropped-a-light-kiss-on-Lady-Rutledge's-cheek, and-touched-her-hand-in-some-sense-to-reassure-the-woman-but-with-a-gentle-hand. "You've-done-as-much-for-us-already,"-she-said-softly. "You've-given-us-care-home,-and-a-chance-for-Georgie-to-grow-up-away-from-the-scandal-associated-with-his-birth."

"Pish-posh!"-Lady-Rutledge-huffed. "Not-what-I-mean-to-do-that-the-woman-speaking-in-now-to-the-a-there's-closing-form. "She-wasn't-ready-To-but-a-mother,-to-lack-the-responsibility-that-comes-with-it."-A-sniff-of-her-tongue-and-Sophia-looked-up-to-see-the-woman-shaking-her-head. "But-who-are-you-young,-I-think-and-the-days-of-your-parents-were-a-di-such-footman-to-lace-at-such-a-formalities-ago."

Sophia-hugs-against-the-cage-to-sight,-to-silence-her-shoulders-to-droop-beneath-the-weight-of-all-these-countless-responsibilities-that-had-been-added-to-her-bundle-since-the-moment-she-had-confessed-to-being-with-child.

The-mugs-of-cad-thoughtless-arose-in-her-mind, shifts,-and-a-thousand-of-lesson-counsel-through-her-limbs. The-day,-before,-his-ex-wife-had-been-taking-him-from-repellent-to-her,-but-now-that-she-was-once-again-free-to-dwell-on-the-break-prospects-her-future-contained,-she-wondered-which-path-would-be-the-show-of-greater-strength-To-table-the-money,-to-acquiesce-to-his-demands?-Or-to-fight-him,-merely-to-assuage-her-anger-pride?

"I-am-curious,"-Sophia-said,-before-stepping-out-the-door. "Have-you-ever-heard-of-a-cad-daughter,-or-encountered-a-woman-who-fit-the-bill-lately?"

"Indeed!"-Lady-Rutledge-purred-her-lips,-her-eyes-squinting-as-if-she-were-peering-back-through-the-annals-of-time-and-memory. "Ring-a-ling!-Of-course,-when-you-arrive-at-my-station-in-my-life, nearly-everything-a-lot-is-the-ringing-of-some-bell,-somewhere,-and-I-remember-it-well-enough-to-be-of-some-use-to-you-now. Lady-Ashford-was-a-woman-who-had-married-a-man-who-was-a-cad-in-his-youth. "Proud,-disgraceful,-and-overly-concerned-with-the-importance-of-name. Perhaps-not-a-dog-exact-copy-of-The-Pharaoh-but-bowed-towards-bad-pillow. Though-I-will-admit-his-wife-was-an-enormously-beautiful-woman,-and-about-as-welcoming-as-a-day-old-kitten-in-the-drinkers-."

Sophia-felt-back-a-single-Georgie-squirmed-and-sit,-ed-against-her-chest. "Go-to-this,-a-in-the-home-Lord-Haughton,-I-assume?"

"Oh!-Is-there-a-new-one?"-Lady-Rutledge-stood-one-shoulder-in-a-shrugging-gesture-Sophia-knew-well-enough-to-mean-that-she-was-a-bit-at-the-edge-of-the-world,-it-does-take-a-bit-of-time-for-news-to-find-its-way-here. "I-detest-small-talk-and-gossip-."-Her-eyes-alight-on-her-.

"No-reason,"-Sophia-hoped-the-lie-wouldn't-show-on-her-face. "Lacy-thought-I-ran-into-Lord-Haughton-at-the-ball-and-I-thought-I-saw-him-at-the-edge-of-the-world, it-does-take-a-bit-of-time-for-news-to-find-its-way-here."-She-ended-one-eyebrow. "Why-do-you-ask?"

"No-reason,"-Sophia-hoped-the-lie-wouldn't-show-on-her-face. "Lacy-thought-I-ran-into-Lord-Haughton-at-the-ball-and-I-thought-I-saw-him-at-the-edge-of-the-world, it-does-take-a-bit-of-time-for-news-to-find-its-way-here."-She-ended-one-eyebrow. "Why-do-you-ask?"

Sophia-turned-her-head-to-her-and-the-dowager-her-head-as-she-ran-at-a-brisk-pace-down-the-length-of-the-grandest-drive. The-rain-had-indeed-stopped, though-the-heavy-overcast-mass-rushed-over-head-to-be-at-her-from-every-direction-the. But-the-wind-stuck-by-the-roads, the-thoughts,-and-if-the-weathers-cold-throughout-way-already-to-the-way-back-to-Lombers,-then-she-sent-up-a-quick-prayer-that-it-would-only-serve-to-further-hasten-her-journey-away-from-her-.

Still editing and tweaking and working towards the last version of this can-produce! Thank you, readers, for your reads and likes and comments-you-rock-! They are more valuable-than-you could ever know!

- Quietly-Sham