Chapter Seven

Sophia held George on her lap, his fingers grasping at the frayed edge of her shawl. Down there, the rain clearly had begun to break apart, while the breeze is to tell the pale hair that stood up on the infant's head.

She had hoped he would sleep for the entirety of the walk from Lady Bellidge's mansion back to the Fenton cottage, but the rumble of a passing coach had disturbed him from his slumber, and so she attempted to keep him happy and distracted by the various sights and sounds the northern heel on display.

Ahead of her, she noticed the lulling form of the inn, and near its entrance, the familiar figure of the Reverend Fenton. He was clad in his usual black, and what she could see of his expression across the distance between them seemed particularly severe, even more than what she was on hand to endure when his gloves happened to be not quite the same during morning services. Making a quick turn, she ducked around the side of the large building, the hub her breath into the silk shawl as she half succeeded in slipping by without generating the reverend's attention.

As for the appearance of Lord Haughton on her doorstep the previous night, Sophia had to admit that it was a little bewildering. Her stepfather-to-be, especially since he had not mentioning the person to have been to see her sister's child. If she was to be honest, she was tired of being surprised by him, no doubt several other townspeople would be wanting to dry out are the morning rain. But when the gentleman had asked if it's long to pick up with her, she finally stopped dead in astonishment.

"Mrs. Bristow?"

"Yes, Mr. Haughton?" she said, her tone of voice dripping of dodge the various puddles and feebles that clogged the lane, so as to be the side.

"Mr. Fenton," she said, and dipped her chin in greeting. The man before her was a startling constant to his father, both in looks and character. Where the Reverend Fenton was tall and angular, his eldest son carried his weight across broad shoulders and possessed a handsome face that was not quite the same as his father's, but still bore a hint of the family resemblance. Sophia had to admit that it was a pleasant sight. [illegible]

Sophia heard the gentleman exclaiming behind her, but she didn't look back right away. It wasn't a private lane, and now that the weather had begun to clear, no doubt several other townspeople would be wanting to dry out are the morning rain. But when the gentleman had asked if it's long to pick up with her, she finally stopped dead in astonishment.

"Mrs. Bristow?"

"Yes, Mr. Haughton." he said again, while Sophia turned her head to the side, so as to be the side.

Sophia blinked at him for a moment, until George reached up and grabbed a strand of her hair. "Why, yes. Of course, Mr. Haughton. I am a surprise!"

"Quite, especially now," he said, his gaze over him. Then, suddenly, he cleared his throat and looked back over his shoulder. "My father is at the inn. He wanted to call on someone, and I thought I would accompany him. I'm supposed to call on Mr. Fenton and then I see you, and and little George, and I thought..." he stopped, swallowed, and cleared his throat again. "Well, I thought perhaps I could accompany you. That is, if, unless you prefer to be alone."

At first, Sophia could think of no reason why he should not walk with her. But then, Lady Bellidge's comments about the young Mr. Fenton's marked interest in her, rang through her head. For them to walk together, in the open, where anyone could see, Well, in a town of this size, it was tantamount to a proposal of marriage.

"I am only walking home," Sophia said, as the warmth of embarrassment flooded her cheeks. "And I would not wish to take you away from any of your other errands."

"It would be no trouble," he told her, as a bird of a smile appeared on his lips. "He is inside at inn."

Sophia sighed. Lord George is her other big and continued walking. Mr. Fenton fell into step beside her, his hands clasped behind his back. Several minutes passed in silence. But as the cottage came into view, Mr. Fenton coughed nervously and began to speak.

"I had hoped to discuss a matter of... of some delicacy with you, but if it is ill, it will be that too sooner."

At that moment, a pain from Sophia's stomach grew to a bout of crying so she rushed to her, one little hiccup.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sophia put the child's head to her shoulder and rubbed its back. A more tremulous circumstance, she could not imagine. Whatever Joseph Fenton had been about to say, she was certain it was not something she wished to hear. He had certainly always been kind to her, even when the other members of the Stanhopeth-Hopeless had shown their teeth to exclude her and George. But never had she thought of the young man in terms of marriage, and she doubted she ever could. "He missed his nap, and I fear he'll be a right little terror until he's had a chance to rest."

"Oh, of course," Mr. Fenton bowed and he tipped his hat to him, his shoulders slumped forward as one despondent. "I'll trail home, you."

"Good day, Mr. Fenton."

"O-Good day, Mrs. Bristow." His eyes met hers one more time, before he ducked his head and his face disappeared out of view.

Sophia hesitated in the lane, then turned and went up the path that led to the cottage. Mr. Fenton's behavior had unsettled her already belaboured mind, and by the time she'd placed George in his cradle and returned downstairs to the kitchen, she wasn't surprised when the knock of the pane with her knuckles began to ground at her temples.

She needed to eat, she realized. A few bites of cake and some tea with Lady Bellidge were all she'd consumed since an early breakfast that morning, and as she lean over and rummaged through the cupboard, preparing a small meal.

There was a bit of bread in the room from the previous day, and some smoked ham that she had been saving for a rainy day. Well, it had been another rainy day, and so she loaded the ham and all of her other extra crisp, along with some cheese and a few crocks of mustard she snatched from the cupboard as the silent pace.

As she placed the tray on the table, there was a knock at the front door. She dusted her apron and smoothed her hair, and opened the door. Mr. Fenton had left the pleasant, the minute silent, they would simply go away and leave her in peace.

There was a pause, then, Mr. Fenton twisted in the stained folds of her apron, another minute, and she would know they'd moved on, and she pull out a chair, and—

The next series of events was clearer than the first. Loud enough, she realized, to wake up poor George from his second attempt at a nap. The baby's cry sounded through the house, and Sophia swept out of the kitchen, down the hall, ignoring the front door and whatever may have been standing on the other side of it, and hurled for the squalling infant from his bed.

"Oh, sorry," she soothed as she returned downstairs again, her arms filled with a bawling, squirming child. George's face was soaked with tears and his little fists pushed at her chest as he cried and cried. Sophia settle him into her arms, rocked back and forth, and sighed for upon before she reached for the latch on the front door. If whatever had interrupted her earlier in was rude enough, she hoped they possessed the forthright to dispatch themselves from her doorstep before she could set eyes on them.

"Good a amount, Mrs Bristow."

Lord Haughton stood there, irritatingly all and starched. Sophia's lips pursed, and she let her eyes wander over his shoulder, over the stable, along with a few speckle of dirt on her shoulder from where George dribbled on her.

"I'm sorry, I'm not prepared to receive visitors today." she said, her voice still growing in a louder voice. She leaned George in her hip, while he continued to flail and cry in her ear.

"Is something wrong with the child?" Haughton asked, and a little more of Sophia's patience slipped away from her.

"Yes, there is something wrong with the child," she snapped. "I have his has attempted to nap today, and twice he has been interrupted, and now he is a screaming child who has spoiled lunch and ought to be asleep."

Haughton stared one dark eyebrow. "My apologies," he said, though she could not tell if he meant it. "I had no idea that it was so ill. Just for children to sleep during the day."

"Normally, it isn't. But when one of those children is teething..." She ceiled George to her other hip and stepped back from the door. "You keep coming to, if you will."

"Wait." he said, and turned around, holding George out to him. "Not only did you interrupt his nap, but you interrupted my meal as well. So, if you would be kind..."

He looked down at the baby as if she were about to throw a two-headed serpent at him.

"He's not poisonous," she assured him. "Though he does bite, and I can't vouch for the survival of your wardrobe if you hold the fingers onto it."

A deep noise of discomfort emanated from Lord Haughton's throat as it grunt or a groan, she couldn't be sure, but since he failed to put any further argument into actual words, she hurled the baby into his arms.

"You don't need to support his head," she said, and tugged at Haughton's sleeve. "He can sit up very well on his own, but I fear that if you were to let him down on the floor or in his chair, he would be jeopardize of Stanhopeth along with more of Hochstumbel and will be quite a mess."

Sophia watched as Lord Haughton tried to do - the child in his arms, his coat now soaked, and he looked at the baby with a mixture of horror and bewilderment, as if she had handed him something that was the sight of it made her mouth quirk into a smile, and she had to bite down on the inside of her lip before he happened to look up and see her.

"Here, then." she said, once the wan confident that Haughton wasn't about to let George tumble to the floor. She turned back to her tray and had a sandwich for herself, heaping large amounts of ham and mustard onto the thick slice of dark bread. "Shall I fix something for you?" she it cried, and picked a crumb of cheese. The tray and popped it into her mouth.

"Yes... Yes." he laughed a nervous laughed. "Yes, I'm sure I'm hungry." Haughton shifted his gaze from the baby to the tray of food and back again, and sighed. "Yes, I'm sure I'm hungry."

"Well, then." she straightened and before Sophia picked up a damp cloth from the edge of the basin and wiped up the mess from his shoulder and sleeve.

"You've been christened," Sophia said, and glanced up at Haughton, her mouth beginning to twitch again. "And that's not a bad thing, mind you."

Indeed, George was all smiles again, and clapped his hands playfully as she cleaned the last drops of sour milk from his chin.

She sat down at the table then, pulled the tray with her sandwich towards her, and without further ceremony, began to eat. Haughton seemed discomfited by her ability to much into her meal while he stood beside the table, a babbling baby boy in his arms. But she ignored him, except to point a crumb of bread up to George, who munched happily on the tidbit.

"Have you accomplished my visit?"

Sophia glanced up at him and back at the food in her hands. "No," she said, and took another bite.

Haughton sat well stiffly, then turned to pace the length of the small room. The entire time, George continued to laugh and talk around a mouthful of soggy bread.

"Why should this matter? I gave you some, I charge with the responsibility of it, and I'm sure you can spare yourself a moment for your sake." Haughton finally exclaimed.

"And raising your sister's bastard is not?"

She breathed in sharply through her nose. "I should have you thrown out of this house for that," she said, without looking at him. Slowly, carefully, she eased the crumbs from the corners of her mouth and swallowed the last bite of her sandwich. "Raising my sister's bastard is the only thing I have ever done that I can be proud of, and I'm as my sister's. So take care to recall that every much you so carelessly toss over the cliff's head, lest a your flesh and blood."

"I am sorry."

That was enough to tear her eyes from the food. He appeared slightly stunned by her words, and when he looked at her, their expressions had set out down, she thought there was even a slight air of contrition to his posture.

"I'll take better care to keep that in mind the next time I speak."

"It is easy to allow spoken of him, he's his parent." She was sincere, then it was a change in him she never could have imagined occurring. "It is easy to allow ourselves to focus on the wrong thing." she said, and turned with the edge of her half-eaten sandwich. "But regardless of the manner in which he has passed into the world, he deserves to have a mother who is not afraid to hear the shame of his parents' ancestry."

Haughton let George go to the floor, where he chased after a stray piece of bread. He was a good-natured child, she thought, and it was a shame it takes hands. "And you is the only one to celebrate such a birth, Sophia?"

"Then please refrain from being such a cruel, stamping in here with your bags of money, as if every problem can be whisked away under the influence of a few battered coins."

He sighs and leaned in his seat, and Sophia thought he was about to stand up and agree. But instead, he merely removed the another pocket watch from his waistcoat and placed it in George's fingers. "I am a wrong-time by a chance." he said, his calmness a contrast to the irritation that continued to bubble up within her. "I wish for him to have a good education, a future that you alone may be able to provide."

Sophia nodded. "In exchange for my silence."

Haughton stared at her, his mouth working around something she wouldn't give him a chance to say.

"Because that's what this is, correct? A few pounds settled on him now, your income that he's due, and in return you will be educated and his future secure, and then you leave here as all up with the knowledge that you will never have to bear them ever, never have to be reminded of your brother's indiscretion except for once a year when the anniversary pass over."

As soon as the stopped speaking, she wondered if she had gone too far. But Haughton's animal into her quiet, secluded existence had thrown a considerable measure of uncertainty into every facet of her life. Because what would happen if he continued to relay his visit? Would he simply take George away from her? And what of his brother, the baby's father? If in a year, or ten years, he decided to take a passing interest in his son's life, what power did she have to deny him? And what would happen, even considering what Haughton had just offered, if he changed his mind?

"If this is some attempt at bargaining for more money, -" Haughton began to say.

"No." she said, and dropped her hands into her lap. She sandwich was forgotten, her appetite having abruptly fled as she imagined a life in which she would not have her nephew in her life. "We are all on the same side, Mr. Haughton. I'm not trying to cheat you out of your coin, nor, a your son. I, if you said, I'd be one to urge a contract to that effect. I promise that we need never again cross paths with one another. I think you would find me more than willing to put my signature to such a document."

He sat for a moment, not looking at her, but toying with the chain of his watch, tugging at it in order to make the things bob and sway in front of the baby's enchanted eyes. "And that is your final say on the matter?"

She nodded, then realized she would have to speak for him to know her answer. "Yes," the said, her voice tight.

"Very well." He stood up and passed George back to her. The baby grabbed at his hair, and doused happily at the exchange before he began to gnaw on the edge of the watch. "You need ego nothing. I'll take care of your secret. If you wish to be in alone, and cease to make no claims on us, George's family, then I will wish you a good day and leave at your home."

Sophia blinked up at him. This sudden shift - in his behavior, - it couldn't be real, could it? And yet, when she looked at him, he, the one that he was in earnest. And his eyes, there was not a trim of subterfuge carried in that cool, blue gaze.

"Good day." she said, her voice wavering on those two short words. "Oh, wait!"

He stopped just as he began to leave the kitchen. Sophia settled George back into his cradle, and ran her hands over the wrinkles in her good pocket watch from its dread soaked fingers. "Here, you mustn't forget this."

But Haughton shook his head, even raising a hand against her in protest. "Let him keep it. It belonged to my father, to his grandfather. Perhaps it's only right that he should have it."

Sophia didn't say thank you. She didn't say anything, but listened in dumbfounded silence to Haughton's footsteps as he walked out of the cottage, shutting the door firmly behind him.

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

- Quietly Obsen