

Chapter Twelve

Haughton stood by the fireplace, keeping well out of the way while his sister fussed and fretted over the table and the placement of the napkins and whether or not the glasses displayed any evidence of not having been used to a brilliant enough shine.

They were to eat in the morning room, which had been cleared of most of its furniture so that a dining table—one much smaller than what currently stood in the actual dining room—could be brought in for their evening meal. Bess had claimed it was all to make Mrs. Brixton feel at ease. Haughton wondered why all the work necessary to make a guest feel at ease was doing nothing but making him feel decidedly ill-at-ease in his own home.

"What do you think?" Bess came up beside him, the jewels at her ears and throat glittering in the firelight. "Is it too much? Oh, I do believe I am overthinking this! And my gown!" She brushed her hands down the sapphire blue and silver of her dress. "The brown silk would've been a more suitable choice, but I do wish to make a good impression on her. Will she bring the child down to dine, do you think?"

"I think," Haughton began, before his sister could begin another litany of spoken questions and worries. "That we should have employed a nurse of some kind for the boy. I do not think I am being callous when I admit to not looking forward to the prospect of dining with a creature who has not yet learned that food goes in his mouth and not on the floor."

"And how would you have presented such a situation to Mrs. Brixton?" Bess said, looking appalled. "The moment she arrives, you snatch the babe out of her arms and hand him to a complete stranger?" She rolled her eyes heavenward. "Really, Finn. No wonder you have yet to find a woman who will agree to take you on as a husband. Now," she said, and gestured towards the table. "Will it do?"

Haughton ran a finger beneath his neckcloth and glanced back towards the fire instead. "I do not understand why you feel the need to go to all this trouble to impress a woman who isn't even the mother of David's child."

"Because I want her to like us," Bess stressed. "I like her already. She carries herself well, it is readily apparent that she loves the boy, and from the little I conversed with her, I can already sense that she has a good, steady head on her shoulders. And she really is quite lovely," she added, with a brief look in Haughton's direction. "Have you noticed?"

A noise issued from his throat that was neither an assent nor a denial. What did it matter if Mrs. Brixton was lovely? And what, especially, did his sister care what his thoughts were on the matter of the woman's beauty?

But before she could attempt to interrogate him further, the door to the room opened, and in stepped Mrs. Brixton herself, and only Mrs. Brixton, Haughton noticed, marking the absence of any infant on her hip.

She hovered near the door for a moment, her gloved fingers pulling at one another in an apparent state of anxiety. Her hair had been braided and neatly pinned about her head like a crown, and her dun travelling gown of earlier had been exchanged for a pale green frock, trimmed with white ribbon in what Haughton assumed had been an attempt to infuse some new life into the tired gown.

Her gaze found him first, then darted quickly away and instead settled on the fireplace behind him. He wondered what she had seen about his person that brought such a brief look of disapproval to her face, but before he could muse further about why her disapproval should bother him, Bess stepped forward and reached out to their guest with open arms.

"Oh, Sophial!" she began, instantly diverting Mrs. Brixton's attention from the fireplace and Haughton himself. "You look much improved now that you've had a chance to settle in, and that color is quite becoming on you! Now, you must forgive me for not telling you earlier, but I decided on a smaller, more informal setting for this evening. A er so much travel, and with the care of little George so much on your mind, I hope you will forgive my presumption in thinking this would be a more comfortable atmosphere in which to dine."

Haughton watched as her gaze swept over the table, the green of her eyes seeming to pick out the light reflected by the china and silver displayed there. He entertained a discourteous thought that she had most likely never dined at such an elegant table, then brushed it away before he could feel thoroughly guilty for it.

"But where is George?" Bess exclaimed before Mrs. Brixton could provide an opinion on the settings, one way or another. "I take it the poor thing has already been tucked into his bed for the night?"

"I doubt I will hear a peep out of him before sunrise," Mrs. Brixton commented, as Bess took her arm and led her nearer to the fireplace, and nearer to Haughton.

"Is he an early riser?" Bess asked.

Mrs. Brixton nodded. "If he sleeps past six in the morning, then I should consider myself extremely grateful."

Bess tilted her head back and laughed. "I'm afraid I cannot drag myself from my bed before nine, and not until I've had a cup of chocolate and at least four slices of toast. But Finn is always up with the sun," she said, turning towards her brother in order to include him in the conversation. "Perhaps he can be the first to take you and George on a tour of the house tomorrow!"

There was no chance for Haughton to protest. The door to the sitting room was opened, signalling the beginning of dinner. The three of them—himself, Bess, and Mrs. Brixton—made their way towards the table, Haughton pulling out the chairs and seeing to it that both women were seated before he took his own place at the round table.

As the first course was laid before them, Haughton chanced a glance in Mrs. Brixton's direction. She sat directly across from him, and with the diminished size of the table and only three people dining together, he knew there would be no way to avoid conversation with her. And if all of their previous meetings were any indication, he could not imagine that anything good would come from the two of them speaking with one another, especially before such an avid audience as his sister.

He watched her for another moment, taking in the rich shades of auburn that the fire brought out in her hair, set off by the pale green and white of her gown.

Her eyes, though, were what held his attention. He had forgotten the brilliancy of their color, the way the green seemed to change beneath the light reflected into them. She looked towards his sister, who had said something that demanded her attention, and his gaze traced the lines of her cheekbone and jaw, before settling on her mouth, her full lips moving as she spoke something in reply.

She was a beautiful woman, he realized. No, that was not quite correct. He had realized it the first moment he'd set eyes on her, at her cottage in Stantreath nearly two months before. He wanted to tell himself that her contrary nature only diminished her looks, but instead, he recalled the flush in her cheeks when she'd stood against him in her small, humble kitchen, the glint of fire in her hair and the change of color in her eyes when she'd ordered him from her home.

It was while he continued to study her features that she suddenly turned to look at him. Haughton did not allow himself to quail. He could have looked away, pretended not to have been staring at her at all, but instead he held her gaze, and even tipped his head in her direction as a slight furrow carved a line between those changeable eyes.

"I trust your journey here was not unpleasant?" he asked, during a brief lull in the conversation.

She looked away from him long enough to pick up her fork and stab at the fish that sat on her plate. "As pleasant or unpleasant as such journeys can be," she said, and again raised her eyes to meet his. "There were both good roads and bad, poor food and hearty, damp beds and dry. In my experience, it was what was to be expected."

"It was very kind of Lady Rutledge to provide a carriage for you for the trip!" Bess said between bites of fish. "If she had not, then Finn would have insisted on sending his own carriage for you. "He would not hear of you travelling by post, as if you were sure to be set upon by ruffians should you have passed your journey in anything but a conveyance that bore a crest."

"I thank you for your consideration," Mrs. Brixton said, her gaze again lifting from her plate to meet his own eyes. Her words, he noticed, had come out with a sharpened edge, as if she wished to insult him but could not find a more adequate way to do it in front of their present company.

"You are most welcome," he told her, and watched her mouth tighten. His gaze, he realized, remained on her mouth for much too long, and it was with a low grunt of irritation that he returned his attention to the food before him. "This... Lady Rutledge," he began, eager to change the subject. "Does she make her home in Stantreath?"

"She does," Mrs. Brixton said. At first, Haughton thought she would say nothing more on the matter, but another bite, another sip of wine, and their guest continued. "She was a great friend of my grandmother's, while they were in London together years ago. She remained a close acquaintance of our family, and after the loss of our parents and the... the difficulties surrounding George's birth, she invited us to come to the Stantreath, and ordered us the use of her cottage."

"How kind of her!" Bess chimed in. "What a great lady she must be! I must say, isn't it always those who come to your aid in the most trying of times who prove themselves the greatest of friends?"

"Yes," Mrs. Brixton agreed, and smiled his sister with a small smile. "I am beginning to believe that as well."

Haughton sat back and let Bess carry the bulk of the remaining dinner conversation, most of it consisting of mundane tidbits about people with whom Haughton did not share an acquaintance, nor likely would in the future, if his ability to avoid the various balls and routs of the ton continued. He sank into silence as he pondered what Mrs. Brixton's arrival here would do to his future.

Yes, his intention had been to allow her to come here so that Bess could meet her nephew, and nothing more. No comment had yet been made about how long Mrs. Brixton was expected to be a guest at Denton Castle, but he could not imagine her staying for more than a week, perhaps two. As much as Bess cooed over their two new visitors, it did not alter the fact that he still needed to settle the child's future. Mrs. Brixton had refused his offer before, but could there be another option, perhaps one more palatable to her, that would finally convince her to fall into agreement about what was best for George's future?

And that brought him to another question: What was best for the child? To remain in Stantreath, raised by his aunt, subjected to the sidelong glances and ridicule of the townspeople because of the rumors of his illegitimacy, no doubt fueled by a certain oily reverend? What would happen if he were to remove the infant from that tiny backwater, perhaps even acknowledge his existence as David's son?

Illegitimacy children were not a rare occurrence among members of the aristocracy. Of course, they could not inherit titles or carry on the family name, but more and more often they were raised along with the other children of the family, sent to school, even had fine fortunes settled on them and were even accepted into society—depending on who had sired them in the first place, more often than not.

Haughton looked towards his sister. She was only twenty-two years old, but since her husband's death, she'd shunned London society and taken up what looked to be a permanent residence in the country. Would the appearance of this new family member, this child, be enough to draw her out of her self-imposed cloistered existence? She certainly had already shown an inordinate amount of interest in both the babe and his aunt, so perhaps...

A er dinner, Bess ordered to take tea with Mrs. Brixton in the drawing room. Haughton, eager to find himself some solitude while his mind worked through the tangle of what to do with David's offspring, excused himself and retired to his study. He would work, he told himself, as he always did when the rest of the household went to bed for the night. He would sit at his desk, he would take up his quill and his bottle of ink, and he would attend to business.

Because what else was there for him to do?

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Just about halfway through the story! And still tweaking and fine-tuning and catching little errors in the story. Thanks to all who are have read and are still reading!

Quenby Olson