

Chapter Eighteen

Sophia stepped into Lady Rutledge's drawing room and shivered as the warmth from the fire brushed the last of the evening chill from her shoulders. Lady Rutledge sat in her favorite chair, her walking stick resting against the outer arm of it. The elderly gentleman reached out towards a dish of sweets at the center of the table beside her, but her movement was arrested when she gave her guest a look that reached from head to toe.

"And where is George this evening?"

"At home," Sophia said. "In the care of my sister."

Lady Rutledge's fingers pulled back from the silver dish filled with marzipan and fondant. "Really?"

Sophia grimaced at her tone, but could not find it in herself to blame Lady Rutledge for her reaction. "Yes, really. Lucy complained of a slight headache this a ernoon, bading me to send her regrets for not joining us this evening. And then, before George rose from his a ernoon nap, she o ered to remain home with him in order that she might acquaint herself better with her son, as she put it."

"Hmm." Lady Rutledge's mouth drew into a thin line. "Are you certain this headache of hers has not addled her wits?"

"No, though she did complain about our lack of wine, as she claims it to be the only remedy of any use when her head pains her."

"Of course it is," Lady Rutledge murmured beneath her breath. A er clearing her throat, she gestured towards the sofa on the other side of her chair. "Now, sit here and give solace to an old woman who has been bere of your company for far too long. I read your letters, but ink and paper can be so confining. I much prefer to watch the change of expression on a person's face as they speak. It is o en much more entertaining than the words that come out of their mouth."

Sophia pressed her lips together against the urge to smile. She took the o ered seat, adjusted her skirts, and clasped her hands in her lap. "And what is it you could wish to know?" The question was superfluous, as she could already guess at the topic at the forefront of Lady Rutledge's mind.

"I gathered from your missives that your stay in Derbyshire with Lord Haughton and his sister went tolerably well. But what was it you mentioned about their o er for you to go and live with them?" Lady Rutledge's grey eyebrows pinched the dry skin of her forehead into several deep lines. "Surely you cannot mean to move there permanently!"

"We have not gone over all the details," Sophia began, weighing each word carefully. "But... Mrs. SISTER made it quite clear that I was welcome to make Denton Castle my home, even into the years when George goes away to school."

Lady Rutledge narrowed her eyes. "And Lord Haughton? Does he share this generosity of spirit?"

Sophia's mouth quirked. Now they were to the point of it. From what little she had been able to ascertain from Lady Rutledge's letters to herself, the gentlewoman's curiosity about Lord Haughton was not going to be satisfied by the few descriptions of her interactions with him Sophia had dared to put into her own letters. "I believe he wants what is best for his nephew," she said with utmost sincerity. "And, to tell the truth, it was his idea that George and I make our home in Derbyshire."

"Was it?" Lady Rutledge's eyes gleamed as she reached over to the silver dish, picked out a particularly large piece of marzipan, and began munching on the corner of it. "How good of him to take such an interest in George's upbringing, and your life as well," she added, the light in her eyes only shining brighter. "But from what I understood, he proved to be rather... di icult at the beginning of your acquaintance. Were you wrong then, in the unflattering portrait you sketched of him?"

"Oh, no!" Sophia assured her. "No, he was di icult, to say the least. We were always at odds with one another, and there was a time when the mere thought of him made me uncommonly angry. But now... Now, he..." She paused to lick her lips. Her mouth had gone dry, and she wondered how much longer until the bell for dinner when she could moisten her tongue with a spoonful of soup or a sip of wine.

An awkward minute of silence passed during which Sophia could not think of what to say. Lady Rutledge, however, finished her last bite of marzipan and brushed the crumbs from her fingers as she leaned back in her chair. "Remarkable that the man is not married yet, don't you think?"

Sophia looked up sharply from her hands, still clasped in her lap. Lady Rutledge's eyes still gleamed, and she made no attempt to hide her smile. "I do not know what you were insinuating," Sophia said, though she knew what she was insinuating with her comment. "Any interest he has in me is due only to the fact that George has been in my care for some time, that he even supposed me to be his mother upon our first meeting. He does not... I am not..." She cleared her throat and raised the back of one hand to her cheek, which she feared was warm with a blush. "He does not like, I am sure. At least not... in that way. And besides, he already said he does not spend much time in Derbyshire, that it is primarily his sister's domain, so I doubt we will but rarely see one another. And... and..."

"What is Lucy's opinion of this scheme?" Lady Rutledge asked suddenly, changing the subject before Sophia could become more flustered or even have a moment to discover why the conversation had made such a tumble of her thoughts.

A sigh slipped out of Sophia's mouth as her shoulders sagged. "Should my sister have her way, she would demand a large annuity, a house, a carriage, a butler, multiple footmen, all other manner of servants, and most likely a new wardrobe for every season. And that is not to mention any funds put towards George's future education and his own wants and needs."

"And what of your wants and needs?" Lady Rutledge reached out for her walking stick, her gnarled hand grasping the silver handle as she began to shi towards the edge of her chair. "Who is to Lucy will not flit o again the moment another shiny bauble draws her a hundred miles away? You are the child's mother, the only mother he truly knows." She leaned forward. "What do you want?"

Sophia drew her bottom lip into her mouth, her teeth worrying the tender flesh. What did she want? Her glance darted from one corner of the room to the other, to painted screens and ivory figures and silver boxes collecting layers of dust. Trinkets and things... No, she wanted none of that. Nor did she desire a large home, or a passel of servants to wait at her beck and call. And fine clothes? A carriage? Jewels to string around her neck?

"I want to be safe."

Lady Rutledge let out a so ound, not quite a sigh, as her head nodded twice.

"And George, of course. I want nothing more than to be able to keep him safe, as well."

"Just so." Lady Rutledge rose from her chair, shakily at first, until she straightened to her full height and pushed her shoulders back beneath the delicate lace of her shawl. "You will make the right choice. I'm sure of it."

The door opened then and dinner was announced. Sophia took Lady Rutledge's arm, the older gentlewoman leaning on her more than she would've liked. As they passed into the dining room—an absurd tradition to eat in there though it was only the two of them, yet Lady Rutledge would not have in any other way—Sophia thought of her sister and hoped that this nascent interest in caring for her son would signal a change in her behavior. A change for the better, she hoped, and helped Lady Rutledge into her seat.

Of course, Lady Rutledge insisted that Sophia take the carriage home. Clouds earlier in the day were enough to convince Lady Rutledge that a deluge could begin at any moment, and Sophia was too exhausted to argue with her. It was a brief journey through Stantreat to where the cottage lay, tucked back from the road as it was. Sophia waited for the step to be lowered, the hand of one of Lady Rutledge's servants to appear in the open door, and she stepped down onto the rough stones of the path that led to her front gate.

A drop of rain struck the edge of her bonnet as she closed the gate behind her. Two more spattered on her arm as she neared the front step. As she reached for the door, something struck her as wrong. Terribly wrong. Behind her, Lady Rutledge's carriage still stood in the road, the horses stamping their hooves in the dirt. Sophia tugged at the hem of her skirt as she turned around, raced back down the path, and waved her hand to catch the driver's attention.

"Would you be so kind as to wait a moment? Only a moment?" She glanced back at the house, at the darkened upstairs. A horrible chill swept down the length of her spine. She could not account for why she should feel so uneasy, when everything about the outside of the cottage appeared just as she had le it a few hours before. "I need to check something. Will you please wait until I return?"

Before the driver had finished giving his assurance that he'd wait as long as she needed, she ran back into the cottage, the front door slamming open against the wall as she moved hurriedly from one room to the next, her throat threatening to close in panic as she noticed various items that had been moved or were missing entirely. In the sitting room, their last few pieces of silver—a candlestick, a dish their mother used to keep her rings in—were gone. In the kitchen, the wooden box in which she kept a few spare coins for emergencies was also nowhere to be found.

The noise she made as she rushed through the downstairs would have woken the dead, she knew. So it was with a heart pounding fast enough to burst out of her chest that she went upstairs, first to Lucy's room, and then to her own, where George's cradle stood beside her bed, cold and empty.

"Oh, Lucy. No."

She returned to Lucy's room for no longer than it took to search through a wardrobe and beneath her bed for clothes and bags that were no longer there. At the doorway, she paused, thinking she might be sick on the floor at her feet, but she swallowed down the fear and the illness and walked downstairs again, her hand gripping the rail so tightly she thought her fingernails might leave scratches in the paint.

Another search through the house uncovered no sign of a note, or anything that would indicate Lucy had meant to tell her where she had gone with George. For a minute, she stood in the kitchen doorway, her hand braced against the frame as she lowered her head and drew in as many deep breaths as she could manage.

"I-I need to return to Lady R-Rutledge's, please," she managed to say once outside again, the dampness of the evening air and the drizzling rain seeping into her bones and making her teeth chatter. "With as much haste as you can manage," she added, before stepping up into the carriage and swiping furiously at the tears that threatened to fall.

A shorter chapter today, that might end up being combined with the previous chapter once all the final edits are applied. But tomorrow will be a much meatier update!

And, as always, thanks to all who are keeping up with this story!

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