

Chapter Three

She was not at all what he expected.

He had encountered a fair number of his brother's... women over the years, and so he had sketched what he assumed would be a fairly accurate portrait before he had even raised a hand to knock on the door. She would be silly, he had assumed. Silly but with a light of avarice in her eyes, eyes that he hoped would gleam the brighter as soon as he explained what had brought him all the way up to this godforsaken place.

And godforsaken it surely was. All the way at the edge of the country—at the edge of the world, it seemed—in a tumbledown stone cottage, with the smell of the ocean carried in on a breeze that felt as if it would not quit until it had bent every stalk and tree to its will...

And the trip had been long, and there had been nothing but rain and mud and bad roads and worse inns between here and London. His body ached, and he wished for nothing more than to shut his eyes and find himself back in his own home, preferably facing the prospect of sleeping in his own bed for the night. But a er he le here, he knew it would be another night in some vermin-infested inn, picking at food that he wouldn't dump into a trough for the pigs, and all before climbing back into his coach to travel over roads that were as comforting to his joints as being tossed about on the waves during a storm.

A er he dealt with this woman, he reminded himself. This woman who had turned his thoughts upside down from the moment she'd met him at the door.

He watched her as she set down the tea tray, her hands careful but every movement driven by purpose. There were no wasted flutters, nothing of a performance in her ministrations. And then she passed a cup to him, smoothed her hands down the flour-covered apron she still wore, and took a seat in a high-backed wooden chair across from him.

"Your brother..." she began, and picked up her own cup before taking a tentative sip.

Haughton watched her. He had never seen the likes of her on his brother's arm. Her build was wrong, too broad across the shoulders and wider in the hips than David preferred. And the hair...

No, David detested redheads. And here was this woman, her strawberry hair bound back from her face in a braid that was decorated with myriad wisps and curls that had worked their way out of it. And aside from all of this, there was something else, a boldness that David would not have cared for, would in truth have most likely been repulsed by.

Because David wanted to be flattered. He wanted a woman who would gaze up at him with adoration in her eyes and tell him in the most irritatingly coquettish voice possible that he was her moon and her stars, more o en than not while the creature pressed her ample bosom against his arm in an e ort to better pick his wallet straight from his pocket.

Haughton closed his eyes as a rather loud curse slipped out of his mouth. Of course. He was surprised at himself for not realizing it earlier. This woman, the elder sister, must have claimed the babe as her own in order to save her sister from the scandal of raising a child out of wedlock. What remained to be seen was whether or not Mrs. Brixton had ever been married at all, or if that too was also a deceit.

But he should have known. From the moment he saw Sophia, he knew there had been some trickery at play. David would never have gone for such a woman, and Haughton was strangely relieved to know that his younger brother had not suddenly altered his preferences. At least that was one thing on which he could still depend.

"Mrs. Brixton," he said, smiling at her over the rim of his own cup—a chipped thing, decorated with rows of poorly rendered periwinkles. "Perhaps we should start again, don't you think?"

"Start again?" Her fine eyebrows drew together. "How so?"

"I am afraid I have arrived here under some misapprehension."

The woman drew in a deep breath, her chest rising beneath the ghostly, high-collared frock she wore. And it was grey, a faded color that clashed horribly with her own vibrant complexion. "I do not understand what you mean."

For a moment, he said nothing. He would watch her fidget, watch her attempt to play whatever game she had most likely used upon his brother, and then he would tear apart her poorly constructed facade.

"Allow me to be blunt, Mrs. Brixton, as I do not believe we will get on well together with any amount of prevarication. Now, tell me the truth. Are you or are you not the mother of my brother's child?"

He expected her to squirm. Aside from a slight tightening in her jaw, he witnessed no other change in her composure. "I am not," she said, her voice irritatingly calm and clear.

"And would you know who is?"

She took another sip of tea, returned the cup to the tray, and pointedly ignored him as she aligned the handle of the of the cup with the spoon beside it. "Perhaps you should provide the answer to your own question," she said without looking up. "Seeing as how you already know so much about my family."

He set down his own cup and shi ed forward in his chair. The thing creaked beneath him, likely its death throes as the spindly piece of furniture appeared ready to collapse into a pile of tinder should he dare to relax too fully against its frame. "Where is your sister?"

"Ah, so you know I have a sister. I thought as much."

"And she would be Miss Lucy Penrose, correct?"

Her pointed chin tilted at what he took to be a defiant angle. "She would, yes."

"And your sister? Miss Penrose? Is she currently at home? I believe I'd like to speak to her."

Sophia's mouth moved as her teeth sought out the corner of her bottom lip. "She is not at home," she admitted finally.

"She is out?"

Another hesitation, this one lasting one beat longer than the first. "Y-Yes."

"Well," Haughton again reached for his cup and downed one long swallow. "Then I shall simply wait for her to return. If, that is, you do not mind my prowling around your parlour for the next hour or so."

Her lips thinned for a moment, and then he watched as she smoothed her hands down her apron a second time. She was nervous, he realized. Something was wrong. "I'm afraid you'll have a longer wait than that, my lord."

"How long of a wait, Mrs. Brixton?"

Her eyes met his. The light from the curtainless window fell across her face, illuminating the flecks of gold and green that twined together in her irises. "She's been gone these last three months. I don't... I don't know when she'll take it upon herself to return."

Haughton replaced his cup on the tray, careful not to slosh any of the remaining liquid before he stood up and walked towards the window. So the silly chit was gone. Yes, he'd bet every bank note in his pocket that she was the mother, and not this infernal redhead in front of him. But the child...

He had seen the boy for an instant, when the girl who had answered the door had carried him back into the kitchen. A glimpse of chubby arms and legs beneath a blond head, and that was all. He sighed. "Where is she now, your sister?"

He heard the clatter of the tea things behind him, but he did not turn round. He would let her fidget away her discomfort without his eyes glaring down at her every movement.

"I do not know," came the quiet reply.

"You've received no letter, no communication whatsoever?"

"There was a note," she began to explain, and then she fell into silence. He turned around then and saw her still seated in her chair, her hands in her lap, her thumbs picking at the flour that was embedded beneath her nails. When she noticed his gaze upon her, she sat straighter, her shoulders pushing back again as her chin li ed an inch. "Aside from that... No, I've heard nothing."

She stood then, without another glance in his direction and began to gather the tea things. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've much to do. Should my sister return, whenever that may be, I'll be sure to inform her of your visit."

She was sending him on his way, he realized. And quite rudely, as she simply he d the tray o the table and walked out of the parlour, leaving him to gawk a er her.

It was an insult, and an unmistakable one, at that. He wanted to account it to nothing more than pure ignorance as to the matter of proper etiquette and manners, but she was no crude farmer's daughter, cut o from polite society. This woman, Sophia... There was a gentleness to her movements, along with a carriage that spoke of having been well instructed in her youth. And she had simply glided out of the room, without a care as to what he should do with himself now that he was out of her sight.

No, he thought. This would not do.

Haughton followed her through the low-ceilinged doorway and into the small kitchen. She had her back to him and so was unaware of his presence. But the other girl, the one who had answered the door was seated at the table, helping the infant to sip from a cup of milk while his short legs kicked out from the seat of a battered high chair.

The girl looked up at him, her hands going still in the act of raising the cup to the infant's mouth, eyes widening at Haughton's appearance in the kitchen. The baby, however, seemed unconcerned about the visitor, and took this opportunity to make a grab for the poorly attended cup. A moment later, there was a squeal of delight from the boy as the cup, and all of its contents, spilled across the table and onto the floor.

Sophia spun around at the noise, her attention caught between the baby currently slapping his hands down into a milky puddle and the uninvited gentleman standing at the far end of the table.

"Here, Lissy." Sophia passed a dry cloth to the girl and together they began to wipe up the mess before it could spread any farther.

Haughton noticed her gaze flicking towards him as she worked, the muscles in her neck and jaw growing more tense as she scrubbed the squirming boy's face and attempted to sop some of the spilled milk from the front of his clothes.

"Would you be so good as to take him upstairs and change him?" Sophia asked, and Lissy scooped the squealing boy into her arms and moved towards the door, careful to cut a wide path around Haughton as she sidled out of the room.

"I see you've decided to be tenacious," Sophia said without pausing in her work. She leaned across the table, wiping from corner to corner before returning to the wash basin to wring out her dripping cloth. "All right, then." She slapped the cloth over the edge of the basin and spun around, her arms crossed over her chest, her mouth set. "What brings you here? And no attempts to ba le me or to evade the truth, if you please. Tell me... what do you want?"

Haughton sti ened against a flicker of uneasiness. Up to this point, nothing had transpired in the way he'd imagined it would. And as for Sophia, she was too blunt, and too intelligent. And that was what worried him most.

He gestured towards the recently vacated table. "Will you be seated?"

The slightest sti ening of her spine. "I'll stand, thank you."

He cleared his throat. She was not going to make this easy for him. A hint for her, since he doubted she had any idea what had brought him all this way. "The child—"

"George," she said, interrupting him. "His name is George, a er our father."

"Of course."

"No," she sighed again, while his next words still danced on the tip of his tongue. "Not 'of course'. Such a phrase denotes your being aware that our father's name was George, or knowing what type of a man he was and why we would choose to honor him in such a way. But here you are, darkening my doorstep nine months a er his birth. A fact which proves to me that either you didn't know about him before now, or you simply didn't care."

He inclined his head, yet dared not take his eyes o of her, not for a second. "My apologies. I assure you it was the former, and as soon as I discovered that my brother had a son—"

"And where is your brother? And why are you here in his stead?"

Haughton could feel his temper beginning to rise. Never before had he ever allowed himself to show anger in front of a woman, and yet she seemed to be the most infuriating creature he'd ever encountered, almost as if she'd been designed to say precisely the right things that would most irritate him. "He is... in London. I assume."

"You assume?" To his surprise, her mouth broke into a smile and a so laugh emanated from the back of her throat. "In other words, you have about as much sway over the life of your brother as I have over my sister."

"I'm not here to discuss my family," he said, his voice taking on a note of warning he hadn't even intended to be there.

"Oh, but I'm sure you're here with the sole purpose of discussing mine. Or am I wrong?" A flash in her eyes countered the steel in his voice. "The mere fact that you've arrived today with a prior knowledge of not only both our names, our location, George's existence, and no doubt a myriad other trivial items concerning our past and present life tells me that you've gone to great lengths to find out everything you could before traveling all the way here from..."

She waved her right hand in a vague circle. "... wherever you call home. Which means, no doubt, that you will most likely not care in this discussion. Which also means that I want most likely not care for whatever it is you've come to tell me."

Haughton fumed in silence. If the baby's mother was even half as maddening as the woman standing before him, he wondered how David had survived with his manhood and his sanity intact. "I had come here with the intention of speaking to the mother of my brother's child," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"But she is not here," she said, delivering the confession as if it were a weapon. "And she is not like to be anytime soon. And since your appearance here is most likely connected with George, then you will have to make do with speaking to me."

"Very well," he sighed. But it seemed as if all of his confidence had been drained away from him, and the surety he'd felt upon arriving here that the matter of the child's welfare would be swi ly dealt with—and in his favor—had been skillfully chipped away by every word to come out of Sophia's mouth. "Shall we?" He inclined his head towards the chairs that flanked the table.

"Of course," she said, and slipped gracefully into the seat that he pulled out for her.

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Still editing and tweaking and working towards the best 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! - Quenby Olson