

## Chapter Four

Sophia's heart hammered inside her chest. She would not allow him to see how afraid she was, though the panic that had begun to rise within her at the mention of his identity was now nearing a pitch that caused her ears to ring and her hands to tremble.

She laid her hands, one on top of the other, on the scrubbed wooden tabletop, the better to prevent any traitorous shaking from giving away the current state of her nerves. That he had come to take away her George, she did not doubt. But then, George wasn't hers, not really. Though she had spent the last nine months caring for him, including the time her sister had been in residence, she knew that the child didn't belong to her. At least, not in a way that any court or legal document would acknowledge.

And she, stupid creature that she was, had allowed her anger to get the better of her and confessed that George was not her child. But then, she didn't doubt this Lord Houghton already knew as much. In fact, she wouldn't be shocked if the man also knew that her life here in Stantreath as the widow of the late Richard Brixton was nothing more than a bit of playacting to save her family from the taint of scandal.

Her breath stalled in her lungs as she waited for him to begin. I have come for the boyThose were the words that played over and over again inside her mind, and so she shut her eyes, only for a moment, as she attempted to push them out of her head.

"I have a legal matter, of sorts, to discuss with you."

She swallowed, an action that sounded so loud to her own ears that she thought Lissy must have been able to hear it from the floor above.

"I had wished to broach the subject with George's mother, who I assume is your sister," Lord Houghton continued when she made no move to contribute to the conversation. "But as you've pointed out, she's not here, and since you appear to have taken over care of young George since her departure..."

Taken overTwo simple words, and yet they were so painfully deceptive. For there had never been any exchange of caregiving from Lucy to herself. There had been a few weeks, at the beginning, when Lucy had relished being a new mother. But as the novelty had worn off, and as the difficult work of raising a child set in, Lucy had become more churlish, her complaints growing in variety and frequency.

Sophia remembered those days. She recalled late nights and too-early mornings when Lucy would take the time to nurse George, but then immediately set him back into his cradle where he would kick and fuss, the cries growing louder, his face becoming more red, his eyes leaking tears until Sophia would come in and scoop the tiny thing into her arms. During those trying months, she had learned to burp him and to change his nappies, she had discovered which songs he loved and which ones set his bottom lip to quivering. It had taken her only days to learn that he loved to be carried facing forward, so that he could look around with ease. And when he laughed for the first time, it was because she had found the perfect spot beneath his arm that when tickled, brought out the most gleeful series of hiccupping giggles.

A small shake of her head and Sophia forced herself to return to the present. Seated in front of her was a man who threatened to take all of that away from her, and she would be a fool if she allowed her mind to wander while she spoke to him.

"... five hundred pounds per annum." Houghton finished speaking, and Sophia blinked up at him, cursing her nomadic thoughts for having let her miss the beginning of his speech.

"F-Five hundred pounds?" she echoed, and struggled to understand what he was saying.

Houghton nodded. "That should be more than enough to cover any expenses accrued by yourself and a small child."

Something clicked into place inside her head. "You're offering to give me five hundred pounds a year? Every year?"

"The cost of his education will also have to be discussed," he continued, as if he didn't wish to stop now that he had her full attention. "And, of course, once he is finished with his schooling and finds himself an occupation, there will be an annuity settled on... Well, I had planned for it to go to the boy's mother, but I'm sure we'll be able to work out something that will satisfy all the various parties involved."

Sophia leaned back in her chair, until the high, wooden back pressed hard against her shoulder blades. She looked at this Lord Houghton, at his dark hair and his eyes, so much like ice it unnerved her to stare at them for too long. And so she let her gaze dip lower, to the strong line of his jaw, touched by the faint shadow of a beard he must have neglected to shave before coming to see her. He looked tired, worn down by travel, and yet there was still a rigidity within him that seemed unwilling to bend under any conditions.

Her gaze flicked down to his hand, his left hand, fingers drumming out a steady rhythm on the tabletop. She wondered if he, too, was nervous, if he had to struggle to hide any and every sign of weakness from her.

But, no. This was a man who would not waver from his purpose. Unfortunately, she still could not discern exactly what that purpose entailed.

She moved her own hands towards her, and clasped her fingers together. The contrast between the condition of her hands was almost laughable. Whereas his were smooth, his nails neatly trimmed and displaying the obvious signs of a regular manicure, the skin on hers was red and dry, her knuckles cracked and flaking while her nails had been bitten down to the quick.

He had never worked, she realized. Not physical labor, at least. And here he was, offering her more money than her family had seen in decades, and for what? Her gaze returned to his eyes, those cold, blue shards of color that watched her, waiting for her reply.

He wanted something. This wasn't merely a gift, given out of the goodness of his heart. This was a man who most likely lived by the way of business and transactions. This was a man who would not give unless he expected something in return.

"Five hundred pounds," she said again, even the words sounding like an extravagance on her lips. "That is..." Inconceivable"... most generous."

And still, she watched him. One corner of his mouth lifted with a hint of a smile. He thought he had won.

"Most generous," she repeated, her knuckles tightening as she squeezed her hands together, the red, chapped skin growing paler before her eyes.

"The boy is my brother's child," Houghton pointed out, while Sophia struggled to keep her breathing even. "No matter any ignominy accompanying the facts of his birth, he is still a member of our family, and I would not see him deprived of his due as such."

No matter any ignominy accompanying the facts of his birth...

Never before had she heard the word "bastard" stated in such florid terms. "Again, that is... more than generous. However," she said, and noticed at once the muscle that jumped in Houghton's jaw. "I cannot help but wonder... what is expected of me, or my sister, in return?"

She saw his nostrils flare as he drew in a sharp breath, but everything else about his expression seemed carefully drawn to show that she had not caught him off guard. "I don't know what you mean. I simply want what is best for the child—... for George," he amended.

"No," she said, and exhaled slowly. "No more prevarication, if you please. I've had enough of that from too many people over the years, so I would prefer that in any matters pertaining to the care and well-being of my nephew, we both remain completely and utterly honest with one another."

"So you admit he is your nephew?" He did not crow over the fact, she would give him that much.

"Yes. Lucy is his mother."

Houghton nodded. "But she is not here, nor has she been for some time."

She watched as what seemed like a battle waged itself behind his eyes. A minute passed, or perhaps longer, and Sophia heard the rippling laughter of George and Lissy float down to her ears from the rooms above.

"Very well," Houghton shifted forward in his chair, until both of his elbows rested on the tabletop and the position of his hands matched her own. "I would prefer that you agree to several conditions before this matter goes forward to my solicitor. First, that the boy never takes his father's surname."

"I see," Sophia licked her lips, her mouth having gone uncommonly dry at the sudden change in the tone of the conversation. "Pray, continue."

Houghton drew in another deep breath. "You are to make no claim, public or otherwise, on the boy's parentage. No one is to know the identity of his father, and should word arrive to me that you have done so, then any and all payments towards you will immediately cease."

"Hmm." Her gaze drifted down towards the table, her focus concentrated on a knot in the wood. She suspected that if she dared to look into the man's face while he continued to speak, she might be tempted to do him physical harm. "Anything else?"

"You are never to come to London, or to any of my family's estates throughout the country, unless first issued an invitation to do so. Failure to comply with these conditions will mean—"

"—an end to the promised annuity," she finished for him. "Yes, yes, I understand."

She continued to breathe, measured breaths that required her to count three seconds for each inhalation and three seconds for each exhalation, or else she thought she might be ill.

"So..." His voice sounded from the other side of the table. "Mrs. Brixton, are there any comments or questions you may have for me before we move forward with this?"

One... two... three..."Only one thing," she said, her voice tight as she attempted to speak between clenched teeth. "My own condition, actually." Her eyes met his. One... two... three..."And that is that you must leave this house. Now."

He swallowed. She saw the rapid up-and-down motion of his Adam's apple before it again disappeared behind his neatly tied cravat. "Mrs. Brixton, I fear you misunderstand—"

"No," she said again, this time with more vehemence. "I understand perfectly well. You have come here from your elegant townhouse, or your estate, or from wherever you choose to rule over your perfectly ordered little world, and you have insulted not only myself and my sister, but also a mere child, one who had no control over the ignominy associated with his birth. And on top of everything, you have chosen to throw a bit of money at me in the hope that your brother's mistake will not become a scandal that should reflect badly on you. Now tell me, my lord, is there anything else I may have misunderstood?"

She heard the sound of her own heart pounding in her chest, the noise of it drowning out all else. It had been a mere guess as to the reasoning behind his actions, her assumptions based on what little body language he had given her along with his words. But she was not a stranger to those who had attempted to deceive her, and so she had known, from the first moment that Lord Houghton had set foot inside the cottage, that he had not arrived with any intention other than obtaining something that would be of benefit to him and his blasted family.

Sophia stood up, the legs of her chair scraping across the freshly swept floor. She said nothing more. In fact, she doubted if she had the courage to speak another word without descending into a litany of shouted name-calling. She simply wanted the man out of her sight, out of her thoughts, forever.

"Mrs. Brixton." Houghton stood and made a low bow, the gesture most bristling than if he'd done nothing at all.

She did not follow him out of the room. The heavy strike of his boots as he left the kitchen, followed by the slam of the front door was more than she needed in order to trust that he was gone, finally gone.

It wasn't until Lissy appeared at the kitchen door, her shoulders rounded forward in the meekest of postures that Sophia realized she had not moved from her place beside the table.

"Ma'am?" The poor girl took a single step into the room.

"George," Sophia said, her voice barely above a whisper. "How is he?"

"Nearly asleep in his cradle."

Sophia nodded, her thoughts someplace far away. "Good." She stirred herself, then, and thought to shift her gaze towards Lissy and give the lovely girl a smile. "And thank you, for everything."

Lissy blushed prettily and took another step forward. "Is... Is everything well? That man..."

"He will not be bothering us again," Sophia said, her smile gaining strength. "Now, let's return to those curtains, shall we?"

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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