Chapter Two

"Well, aren't you a cheerful thing this morning?"

Sophia swept a lock of red hair back from her cheek before bending down over the small, wooden cradle. George stood on the balls of his feet, both hands reaching up towards her while his plump fingers made grasping motions in the air. As soon as her hands clasped him beneath his arms, the infant let out a terrific squeal of delight, his blue eyes shining as Sophia swung him over the edge of the cradle and into a full circle through the air before finally settling him on her hip.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked, the sound of her voice only increasing the boy's grin, a grin that sported two white teeth from his bottom gums. As Sophia changed the boy's nappy and put him in clean clothes for the day, she spoke to him of what she'd dreamed about while she slept, of the sun that shone in through the bedroom windows, and of the white roses that had begun to bloom along the hedge. George babbled in reply to every one of her queries, his hands clapping excitedly when she again picked him up and carried him downstairs for his breakfast.

"Would you like some apples?" Sophia asked as she opened a crock of applesauce and poured it into a dish. The boy chattered from his corner of the kitchen, where there was an assortment of wooden blocks and a newly purchased toy horse complete with a wooden carriage that rolled along the floor on clackety wheels.

"We should get a bit of string for that carriage," she went on, her hands deftly slicing off the end of a loaf of dark bread that she passed down to the child. He began to gum the tough bread eagerly, while a sheen of drool collected on his chin and ran down to soak his collar. "That way, as soon as you begin to walk, you'll be able to pull it along behind you all through the house!"

George shrieked around a mouthful of soggy bread and kicked out his pudgy legs as Sophia lifted him from the floor and set him in his high chair at the end of the table. She sat beside him on a tall stool, feeding him bites of apples as he lost interest in the bread and began to tear it to crumbs.

"Perhaps we should go for a walk this afternoon," Sophia suggested, taking the now empty bowl to the wash basin. "If the sunshine holds, we could even have a bit of a picnic. How would you like that?"

She continued to chatter to the babe as she fixed her own breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen. She ate standing up, slipping bites of buttered bread and bacon between sweeping the floor and wiping down the table. The windows would soon need a good wash, she reminded herself as she glanced out into the garden behind the cottage. And the garden needed a good weeding, and the hedge needed a trim, and...

"Or perhaps we'll save the picnic for tomorrow, hmm?" She pinched one of George's cheeks as she passed by his chair, but the boy was too occupied with banging one of his blocks against the tabletop to notice the brief touch. "Besides, Lissy should be coming today to help wash the curtains, and I'm sure she'll want to take you out to search for caterpillars, that is, only if you're a very good boy this morning."

The chores, she hoped, would be enough to take her mind off of other things. Of course, she held the same hope every morning, that the work of running the household, of taking care of little Georgie would succeed in distracting her from her thoughts, but each day, without fail, her smile faltered as she settled into her work, her arms tiring too quickly as she mixed the dough for the fresh loaf of bread she planned to bake later that day.

When she spoke to George, she never allowed those thoughts to show in her words or expression. He didn't need to know that his mother had abandoned him, without a single card or letter to let them know of her current whereabouts. But that had always been Lucy's way, Sophia mused. To run away without looking back, to leave everything and everyone behind her the moment something, or someone, happened to catch her attention.

Sophia wrung out the cloth she had used to wipe down the table and draped it over the edge of the basin. It wasn't even mid-morning and already her back ached, and a knot of tension began to grow between her shoulder blades. The last three months had been the most difficult. Until George was six months old, Lucy had been content to stay with her at the cottage and take care of the boy. But as soon as George had begun to crawl and show some signs of infant independence, Lucy had grown restless. She had complained of the toils of motherhood, of how it was aging her beyond her nineteen years. And then, one afternoon, Lucy had set off for a walk into Stantreath from which she failed to return.

Sophia had no reason to be frightened that something had happened to her younger sister during her walk. The coach always came through Stantreath on Tuesdays, and seeing as how Lucy had up and disappeared on a Tuesday, near to the very hour when the coach found itself outside the inn...

And then she had discovered the note on Lucy's dressing table. It had not been a particularly long missive. No apology, of course. But then, that wasn't Lucy's style. "You'll do much better than I, I'm sure" it had said, signed off with a heart and a looping "L" with which Lucy had taken to signing all of her correspondence.

"Come along, darling." Sophia lifted George out of his high chair and dropped a light kiss on the top of his blond head. "Let's go make the beds, shall we?"

It was five minutes past ten in the morning when Lissy arrived at the kitchen door, a crisp white apron already tied around her waist and a large basket slung over her right arm. "Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Brixton." The young woman shook her head as she apologized. "But Mamma would have me bring these biscuits along for little Georgie. They're a bit stiff, so she thought they might be good for his teething."

"Oh, wonderful!" Sophia took the proffered basket and peeked beneath the cloth that protected the still-warm biscuits. "George is still down for his morning nap, but I'm sure he'll love to nibble on one or two of these with his milk once he's awake."

While Sophia set aside the basket and reached up to replace a hair pin that had slipped from the braid at the back of her head, she surveyed young Lissy. The miller's daughter was a beautiful creature, made even more beautiful by a fine plumpness that gave shape to her burgeoning figure and a roundness to her spectacular complexion, with cheeks and skin as smooth as fresh cream. Sophia grimaced beneath her own freckles, freckles that had dogged her since she was a child and that had failed to disappear completely with the descent of womanhood.

Lissy, Sophia thought, would make a fine wife and mother one day, though the girl seemed to be completely oblivious to her own attractions. Sophia, on the other hand, knew the extent of her own marital limitations. She had little to recommend her towards a prospective husband. Aside from the physical (for who would wish a red haired and freckled young woman on any man?), her sister's behavior had further removed any chance that Sophia had of ever finding a husband. No matter that they had arrived in Stantreath under the pretense of a young widow and her sister attempting to create a new life for themselves.

She had heard the rumors that circulated about them, about herself in particular. That she had never been married at all, that the child had been born to her out of wedlock, and that they'd absconded from their previous home a dozen counties away in order to escape the stain of scandal. And so she remained in her cottage, teaching herself to budget her fifty pounds a year while enduring the haughty looks and outright meanness of the townspeople who chose to look down upon her for having a murky past tainted further by several months worth of gossip.

If they'd had more money, Sophia often wondered... More family, better family, perhaps they would have been in a place to send Lucy away for the duration of her confinement, away from the prying eyes and judging looks of the neighbors. And then, after a few months had passed and the gossip died away, she could have returned with the new baby and claimed it as a cousin or even a foundling left to their care. But Sophia had neither the funds nor the connections for such a scheme. And so Lucy, only eighteen years old when she'd discovered she was with child, had been forced to bear the censure of nearly the entire town in which they'd been raised. That was, until after the child was born and Sophia had embarked on the scheme to pass herself off as a widow and pack up their meagre belongings for a new life in Northumberland.

"There's a small hole here, Ma'am. Right along the seam."

Sophia and Lissy had spent the remainder of the morning taking down all of the curtains and drapes and examining them for any sort of damage before setting them aside for washing. Sophia picked at the knot in her thread and began on the small hole that Lissy had pointed out to her, her fingers moving with more speed as soon as she heard George begin to fuss from her bedroom upstairs.

"I'll go and get him," Lissy offered, and bounded towards the staircase before Sophia could say a word for or against. A minute later, the young woman returned with an already smiling George tucked against her hip, his hands batting at a small ribbon she'd removed from her hair for use as a plaything.

"Mama assures me that he'll be walking before he's aged another month," Lissy said, her smile growing as she flicked the green ribbon out of George's reach before allowing it to slip down between his fingers again.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Sophia matched the young girl's grin with one of her own as she watched the baby and his near-comical efforts to grasp the thin piece of fabric. "Lucy walked early, around nine months, if I'm not mistaken."

"What about you?" Lissy gave the ribbon another flick, only to have George suddenly lunge out and catch it, his knuckles turning white as he held on with all of his strength.

"Oh, no." Sophia laughed. "I was a late bloomer, or so my mother took care to remind me on several occasions. I was late to walk, late to sleep through the night, late to speak my first word, and tragically late to grow a full head of hair. In fact, I was nearly three years old before any of this finally made an appearance." She paused in her sewing long enough to give the end of her braid a gentle tug. "Lucy used to joke that my hair had spent so much time inside my head that it had turned sour, and so came out such a ghastly color."

Lissy laughed out loud, then colored with embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," Sophia waved away the girl's awkward countenance. "You're not the one who has to live with it." She smiled again, and Lissy seemed to relax.

"What color do you think Georgie's hair will be?" Lissy asked after several minutes had passed. "It's quite fair already," she said, and ran her fingers over the short, nearly white hairs that decorated the infant's scalp.

"I'm not sure," Sophia set down her mending and looked at George's head.

Lissy continued to run her hand through the wispy hair on the baby's head, each pass of her fingers producing another coo of appreciation from little George himself. "Perhaps his father is fair, or was as a child. Maybe..." She stopped herself all of a sudden, her eyes growing wide at her own mistake. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice low while her gaze sought out the patterns in the parlour rug.

"Please, do not worry yourself." A twist of her fingers, a snip of the scissors, and the hole in the curtains was sewn out of existence. "It's simply not a matter one can avoid entirely. It will come up, and more than once, I'm sure. And it does not pain me. At least, not as much as you may think." She experienced a brief twinge at this dishonesty, but attempted a small smile to put the girl at ease.

But despite Sophia's words, Lissy continued to chew on her bottom lip. "Do you...?" she began, and then faltered into silence.

"Yes?"

Lissy cleared her throat and tried again. "Do you miss him? Georgie's father, I mean."

Sophia sighed and set aside her sewing. All of a sudden, she experienced that same fatigue that had dogged her for the last few months, that same knot of tension tightening in the middle of her upper back. "Of course I do. He was my husband, was he not? Though sometimes I feel as if we did not have enough time together for me to truly miss him as I should."

"Miss Lucy told me about him," Lissy went on, and Sophia swore silently under her breath at her sister's inability to tell tales. "She described him as a 'fine gentleman'."

Sophia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Well, if that's what she had to say about him, then perhaps we shall leave it at that, hmm?"

Lissy set George on her lap and continued to fuss about him, adjusting his collar, tugging at the knitted socks that kept his little toes warm. She was nervous, Sophia realized, and yet the urge to ask questions, to engage in a bit of gossip was greater than any embarrassment she felt about the subject at hand. It must be the product of having been born and raised in a small village, Sophia mused, that created a need to talk about others and pretend that their world was so much greater than what existed between the vicarage and Mr. Bingaman's sheep farm.

Sophia stood up then in an effort to put a full stop to the previous conversation. She brushed the spare strands of thread from her apron and moved towards the kitchen. "I think it's about time for some tea, hmm? And then George can tuck into his biscuits and milk."

In the kitchen, she put on a cup of milk to warm and set out a handful of the now cool, stiff biscuits in front of George's chair at the table. The tea things were laid out, along with a few slices of bread and some fresh strawberries for themselves, and then she rolled up her sleeves and planted her fist into the bread dough that had been left to rise since the morning.

The sound of the coach outside of the cottage made no impact on her thoughts as she worked over the soft, supple dough. The road beyond the front gate entertained enough travelers throughout the day as to make the rattle of wheels and harness, the clomp of horses' hooves as familiar as the call of the gulls that circled inland from the coast. It wasn't until Lissy stumbled into the room, her cheeks flushed, her hands twisting the edge of her apron, that Sophia finally looked up from her work.

"There's... There's someone at the door," Lissy said, her eyes glancing back over her shoulder, towards the parlour, as if there were an exotic animal ready to burst in through the doorway. "I didn't know... I mean, his carriage... There's a coat of arms, and he looks... Well, he looks..."

Sophia wiped the worst of the flour from her forearms and preceded Lissy out of the kitchen. The front door stood open, the narrow frame filled by the silhouette of a man dressed in a dark coat and trousers. He still wore his hat on his head, the brim keeping his face in shadow. But she saw enough to make out the line of his profile, and the set of his jaw was enough to fill her with a sense of foreboding.

"You didn't show him in?" Sophia whispered to Lissy, who remained behind her.

"I don't know what came over me!" Lissy hissed in reply. "He just... The way he looked at me, and I just felt all my nerves turn to jelly, and I wouldn't have even been able to remember my name if it was asked of me."

Sophia placed a hand on her arm. "It's all right," she said, and smiled. "Just see to George, please? His milk should be warm, and I've already set out some biscuits for him."

Lissy nodded, relief evident in her expression before she collected the baby from his place among his toys and took him into the other room.

As soon as she was gone, Sophia returned her attention to the stranger still standing in the doorway. "I'm so sorry," she began, aware of the streaks of flour on her arms and dress as she took in the precise cut of the man's fine clothing. "May I help you?"

He dipped his head, his eyes disappearing for a moment before they found her again. The blue of them was striking, a pale color that reminded her of the water that beat against the shore not more than a mile away. But it wasn't the color that made her next words pause on the tip of her tongue, but rather the cold displeasure that emanated from them, as if he had come to scold her for some crime which she possessed no memory of having committed.

"Mrs. Brixton?"

He spoke the name with a distaste that matched the cool glint in his eyes. But she noticed that the rest of his face remained calm, his expression giving away nothing of his reason for being on her doorstep.

Her mind worked quickly. It was obvious that he was a gentleman, a gentleman of some distinction judging by his clothes and his manner. And he wished to speak with her as if she were actually Mrs. Brixton, which meant that he must not know her true history.

She blinked up at him and pushed her shoulders back against the twinge of tension that had lodged itself there. "I'm sorry, but I did not catch your name."

She saw the look of irritation the passed across his features before it was quickly tamped down. "My apologies," he dipped his head in the slightest of bows, so slight that she recognized the insult that lay behind it. "I am Lord Haughton."

"Lord Haughton." She inclined her own head but did not bow. "And you find yourself on my humble doorstep today because...?" She tried to keep her tone light, polite. But the line of his mouth, the faint curl at the corner as he surveyed not only her own person, but the parts of the cottage that were visible to him from where he stood were nearly enough for her to step back and slam the door in his aristocratic face.

"Mrs. Brixton," he said, his bright blue gaze pinning her in place. There was no question in his voice now, and Sophia experienced a frisson of fear that he knew very well she had taken to residing beneath this roof under a false name. "You know why I am here. Unless my brother managed to keep his identity a secret from you, a fact that I highly doubt."

"Your brother?" Sophia shook her head. "Again, I am sorry, but..."

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" He stepped inside, without invitation, and began to remove his hat and gloves. Sophia stared at him, rendered into a state of shock by the man's boorish behavior.

"My brother," this Lord Haughton snapped, each word punctuated by the slap of a glove against his hat. "Is the father of your child!"

Sophia opened her mouth and closed it again. His brother. She closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temples, willing away the headache that had already begun to form there. "Come in," she said finally, her voice sounding weary to her own ears. "Have a seat in the parlour, and then... we'll have a nice little chat, hmm?"

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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

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