

## Chapter One of Mr. Shipley's Governess, by Joanne Troppello

Sophie Baird put one foot in front of the other on the path, crunching brown leaves as she walked. Her hands felt warm in her coat pockets. The wind softly caressed her face, a face whose blue eyes held a pain that dug deeply into her broken heart. She knew the passion of faith in God, but now existed as a wayward traveler with no hope.

Twenty-five year old Sophie felt the faint flicker of the fiery spirit inside which kept dueling with her heart not to give up hope even when life treated her harshly. Her Irish roots ran deep within her soul. She grew up in a house with loving parents coming straight from the Emerald Isle after they married. Sophie recalled tales of generations past. Her da told her she possessed the same fire that burned in his people. Sophie smiled as she remembered her dear parents. They died three months ago in a terrible car accident. She wondered how God could take them with so much of their lives left to live. They never even got back to their beloved Ireland.

The cobblestone path led her home to a place no longer alive with joy and expectation, but quiet; as if the lonely old cottage in the woods waited for something or someone to come and make things right again. Sophie wiped back a tear as she neared the door. She loved this old place. Her father built it when he and her dear mother first came to America. They lived in the cottage for a few years until their income increased and they moved into a nice house in the suburbs.

Sophie enjoyed the cottage, considering it her haven. She came to stay for a bit after her parents died. The door unlocked easily enough and she entered the kitchen and hung her coat on a peg by the door. She breathed deeply and resignedly stared at the pile of bills and paperwork

on the table that needed attention. She procrastinated on settling her parents' meager estate long enough and she needed to find closure. "But first, a cup of tea," she said to the empty room, "nothing soothes the soul like a hot cup of tea. At least that's what mum used to say." The kettle whistled shrilly on the stove and she poured the hot liquid into the dainty white china cup, part of a set, given as a wedding present for her parents from Sophie's aunt in Ireland. She treasured her heritage, especially considering the tales told by her parents. She never visited the Emerald Isle, but she planned to someday. She sniffled, remembering her mum's words.

"My darling girl," her mother said, "your da and I want you to go to Ireland. It is our gift to you."

"But, mum, you and da were supposed to go. Your savings, does this mean you cannot go now?"

"Oh, silly child, I insist that you take the ticket. If your da hears you refuse..."

"Refuse what?" Sean Baird asked loudly as he came into the room. "My jewel, I will hear none of this. You will take this trip and finally see the land that flows through your blood." Sophie embraced her parents in one of their final times together before the accident.

As the memory faded, she sipped her half-finished, tepid tea and sighed. She dared not dream of getting to Ireland now due to lack of finances; however, even if the money came, her mood certainly lacked the desire to travel, especially to her parents' beloved homeland.

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"Papa," Anastasia Shipley quietly spoke up from her big canopy bed, "do you think she'll be coming soon?"

“Ana, what are you talking about?” Sebastian questioned and then smiled indulgently at his nine year old daughter.

Anastasia struggled to sit up in the big bed that threatened to swallow her tiny frame. “You know... the governess.”

Sebastian roared with laughter. He put his newspaper down and stood up from his big “Papa bear chair” as Ana fondly called it. He came to sit on the edge of his daughter’s bed. “We don’t call them governesses these days. We are not living in a Jane Austen novel. She will be your tutor.”

“But I do so much prefer governess, don’t you?”

“You *prefer*? When did you become such a proper little lady?”

“Since the day I was born.”

He chuckled again. He knew Anastasia loved to see him cheery; although, he barely laughed anymore, not since his beloved wife died. “Who told you that?”

“Mrs. Andrews told me. She said you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Did she?” he smiled and kissed Anastasia on the cheek.

“Well, Papa? When is my tutor coming?”

“I don’t know. We have to wait now. I’ve only just placed the advertisement in the paper.”

“Well, I hope she comes soon. Mrs. Andrews does her best, but...”

Mrs. Andrews came in the room and set the tea and cookies on the table. “Is she after you, Sir, about that tutor? When I try to help her with the lessons, she’ll have none of me. I don’t have much learning but I do the best that I can, filling in right now til...”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Andrews, you’re doing a fine job being my housekeeper and my daughter’s tutor.”

“I pray this tutor comes soon before your proper daughter drives me crazy.” Mrs. Andrews mumbled good-naturedly as she went out into the hall.

“Papa, you know I love Mrs. Andrews, don’t you?”

“Yes, dear, and she knows it, too. Now let’s have some tea.”

Anastasia sank back into her pillows and Sebastian watched as she smiled contentedly. Obviously, she eagerly wanted this tutor to come. Sebastian knew she desperately needed someone to talk to, especially a young woman figure. Two lonely years passed since her mother died, but now he saw hope resurface in her eyes. His wife used to say that hope springs eternal and he hoped that rang true.

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Sophie shook out her umbrella and opened the door. She carried bags into the cottage and began the task of putting all the groceries away. She grabbed the newspaper when she finished and opened right up to the classifieds. She took some time off from her job at the elementary school, but now she needed to make a decision about the future. She desperately wanted a change, but she knew she still enjoyed teaching. She loved the children in class, her pride and joy. She perused the job listings and sat back with a sigh. Maybe there’s nothing here

for me right now. She stood up to get a soda and then she saw it, right at the bottom of the list. She missed it the first time around. This seemed perfect; not exactly what she planned for, but it fit her current circumstances. It offered a chance to get away from this town and put distance between her and the beloved cottage with all of its precious memories. She never made such a big decision so fast before. She felt as if something urged her to jump at this chance. But led by whom, she wondered; certainly not God. She imagined He filled His time with more important things than her future. After all, her Christian walk lacked its past fervor. Sophie shoved away all intense thoughts and hurried to the phone; she needed to get this job.

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Sebastian walked through the courtyard garden with head bent low and deep in thought. He hoped for a successful meeting with the tutor this morning; he wanted to find a good match for his daughter. He sat down on a bench and turned his view towards home. A movement near one of the balconies caught his eye and he saw Mrs. Andrews settle Anastasia into a big comfortable chair outside her bedroom, tucked snugly in with blankets to keep out the chilly air. Sebastian kept watch as his daughter stared down into the courtyard and smiled. Her eyes seemed to drink in the beautiful sights of an autumn garden, minus the bright red roses, her favorite, but the garden gave birth to a different kind of splendor. He saw an appreciation for the natural world in Anastasia, even from such a young age. His wife cultivated that gift in their daughter. She taught her daughter to revel in the beauty of God's creation. To know that He made the flowers and trees and birds of the air, and that He made her; that the Father of the Heavens loved all His children and wanted them to take hold of his salvation. Anastasia accepted this teaching as a young child before her mother passed away. Little Ana knew her creator. Sebastian overheard her talking to God all the time. Sometimes he insisted that she paid

too much attention to the heavens and not enough time here on earth. Sebastian smiled as he remembered the consistent response, “Oh, Papa, if only mama were still here...she’d understand. I know God doesn’t get tired of hearing me speak. You should try it Papa, I know it would help.”

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Sophie felt tremors sweep through her body with force as soon as she drove up to the expansive home of her possible future employer. She tried to get a grip on this anxiety. The last time she felt this nervous happened when she interviewed for the position at the Elementary school. She slowly opened her car door and willed herself to walk up to the front door. She must not worry; she kept reminding her spinning mind. “Tutoring a young girl can’t be any more difficult than handling twenty-five ten year olds,” she muttered.

As she approached the door, Sophie paused and almost whispered a prayer, but stopped herself. She took hold of the solid brass knocker and pounded the thick cherry wood. The door opened by a butler, which surprised her at first, then she remembered where she stood; in front of a big house with a long private driveway and a butler who answered the door. In her muddled state of mind, Sophie hoped she got through this interview with dignity.

The butler ushered her into an elegantly furnished room which looked like a study and parlor put together. Sophie stood still until Mr. Shipley turned around from his position of gazing out the glass doors. The butler announced Sophie’s entry and shut the doors behind him. “Ms. Baird, please have a seat. I trust you had no problems finding my home.”

Sophie wondered why his use of the word *home* and not house seemed endearing.

“Ms. Baird?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. No, I had no trouble.”

Mr. Shipley moved to sit behind the large mahogany desk. Sophie thought he looked so approachable one moment and then distant the next. “I received your resume. All of your references checked out fine. I spoke with Mrs. Edmonds. She praised you and your teaching abilities.”

“She’s a great administrator. I enjoyed working with her.”

Sophie looked at Mr. Shipley’s hands, preoccupied with his pen, twisting it between his fingers. “Ms. Baird...uh, may I call you Sophie?”

Again, she heard the vulnerability in his voice. “Yes.” She kept her answers short, not wanting to say something foolish.

“Sophie, would it be impertinent for me to inquire why you left your teaching position and are seeking employment with me?” Mr. Shipley cleared his throat, “I only ask because this involves my daughter.”

“Mr. Shipley, I...”

“Please, call me Sebastian. If you’ll be working with my daughter, I expect us to be able to speak freely, as much as possible.”

Sophie nodded and took a deep breath, not sure what to say. She tried to hide the nervousness threatening to overtake her. He broke the silence and suggested, “Let’s take a walk outside. It’s a beautiful day.” He ushered Sophie outside onto the terraced courtyard.

Sophie said, “Sebastian...I, it’s a bit complicated. My reasons were personal. I just needed some time to reevaluate.”

“Is there a man involved?”

Sophie stared, aghast. “Excuse me!”

“Please don’t be offended Sophie,” Sebastian spoke with an air of authority, “this just sounds like a case of trouble in paradise.”

“Mr. Shipley, I resent any delving into my personal affairs. I am here for employment, nothing more. I don’t need this.” She turned around hastily, looking for an exit.

Sebastian touched her arm. His eyes implored her and embarrassment colored his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Sophie...may I still call you that?”

Sophie gave permission and followed him further into the garden. They walked along the path passed the red and gold colored flowers and shrubs. The bright rays of the sun accentuated the colors of the autumn garden. He began to apologize again and from hearing the hesitation in his voice, she knew that apologies came with difficulty. “I was wrong for being so forward.” Sebastian stopped walking. “I’ll make no excuses for the fact that I love my daughter very much and will only accept the highest quality for her. Are you the best person for the job Sophie?”

His direct question caught her off guard. Nervy, but honest, she thought; at least he loves his daughter very much. Sophie stuck out her chin and replied as calmly as her shaky nerves would allow. “Yes, Sir, I believe I am.”

Abruptly, Sebastian changed the subject. “Would you care to have lunch with me...and my daughter? It would give you a chance to break the ice with my Ana.” The plaintive note in

his voice strangely touched Sophie. One minute this man appeared assured and overwhelming, and the next, timid and almost child-like.

“I’d love to have lunch with both of you. It would be a great opportunity to get to know...um, does she like to be called Ana or is that just a name you call her?”

He smiled and said, “I’ve been calling my daughter Ana since the day she was born. It seemed to fit her. My wife wanted a very formal name, thus Anastasia. She became Ana right from the start for me.”

“You’re the only one who calls her Ana,” Sophie stated.

“Yes.” Sebastian led the rest of the way back to the house in silence. As they walked, Sophie’s mind raced with questions, still hesitant to accept this job. Her connection with God severed; she felt no peace, only a sense of unease kept her company.

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The bright streams of sunlight warmed all three occupants in the dining room. Sebastian sat at the head of the table. He watched with great interest as his daughter bubbled over with chatter. Anastasia spoke excitedly to Sophie and Sebastian felt a sense of peace wash over his being. Maybe she’s the right one. Laughter interrupted his thoughts. He looked questioningly at his daughter and Sophie.

“Your daughter is hilarious, Sebastian.”

“That’s something I know very well. She keeps me going.”

“Papa!”

Sebastian reached over and lovingly touched Anastasia's cheek and said, "That's the truth now, and you know it."

She rewarded her father with a wide smile and grabbed another muffin off the serving plate.

The door to the dining room opened slowly and the butler entered, "Sir..."

"Yes, Nigel, what is it?"

"You have a phone call, Sir it's urgent."

"I see," Sebastian said, "thank you." Nigel handed him the cordless phone and then left the room. "Excuse me, ladies." He stepped out of the room, intently listening to the voice speaking on the telephone.

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"Not again," Anastasia muttered.

Sophie cocked her head curiously. "What's wrong Anastasia?"

Looking down at her half-eaten muffin, she replied softly, "He'll have to leave again, I just know it."

"Leave? Where?"

"On one of his trips."

Sophie looked in confusion at her new pupil. Before she asked about the trip, Sebastian came back into the room.

“No, Papa, not again. You said you wouldn’t have to go. Not for a long time. You promised.”

Sebastian came back to sit next to his daughter and replied, “I never said I was leaving, did I?”

“Well, no, but I thought?”

Sophie heard relief in the little girl’s voice. She watched as Sebastian hugged her and promised not to leave her alone anymore.

Sebastian turned to Sophie and shocked her when he asked, “Miss Baird, can you start tomorrow morning?”

Sophie hesitated in answering and he said, “If that’s too soon, then maybe later in the week to get your affairs in order.”

Sophie knew the job description called for her to live on the premises. She eagerly accepted that fact. She mentally assessed everything to pack and responded with, “I think I can manage and if I forget to bring anything, I only live forty-five minutes away.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Yes,” she said brightly. “I’ll be here tomorrow morning at nine. Is that fine?” He nodded and she said, “Ok, great.”

Sophie started to walk out of the dining room. She stopped when Sebastian called her name. “Sophie?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you accepted the position. You can see Mrs. Andrews on your way out. She’ll make arrangements for your personal belongings to be brought to the house and show you your room before your leave.”

“Thank you.”

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Inside the mansion, Sebastian sat upstairs with Anastasia in her bedroom. She lay back in bed with pillows propped up behind her. She grew ill after a bad fever struck at the age of five. She nearly died and suffered poor health since then. He saw to it that Ana received the best possible medical care. A physician made house calls once a week; but still he worried. He watched his daughter as she nodded off to sleep. He hoped she and Sophie made a good match of pupil and teacher, which he knew he needed to entrust to God’s providence.