

FEBRUARY 1816



Amelie seethed in impotent rage as the coach rolled slowly over the frozen, rutted road. Christmas and the New Year were long past and people were saying it was going to be a long hard winter. In Amelie's short life, all winters were hard because she was only eighteen years old, but this one shouldn't have been hard; it should have been wonderful for she had been enjoying her first London season. Now she was being sent home in disgrace and sharing this icy carriage (despite the thick furs and hot bricks under the coach seats) with her equally furious mama and governess. Unfortunately, the temperature in the carriage felt even colder because it was Amelie that her mama and governess were angry with.

Amelie's anger, though also expressed in sullen looks toward her two traveling companions, was almost entirely directed at her father, who was no doubt warmly enjoying the entertainments of the Season at the family's London house. She'd always known he was an insensitive man who didn't understand the wishes and needs of girls or young women. Now she discovered he was a mercenary one, too. Her final interview with him came forcibly to mind once again.

"I have spoken to Viscount Cheviotdale," her father said coldly, "and assured him that even if he should find a way to marry you against my wishes, he will find it an unprofitable business for I shall make no settlement on you beyond what will keep you in tolerable comfort. I'm sure that will have the desired effect."

"Rawdon loves me," Amelie had shouted in reply, "it is only you who cares for money. You are mean, odious, tyrannical, and, and," she stuttered, unable to find the right word to pierce his self-righteous, stupid, smug shell.

"It may surprise you to know that it is you I care for," her father responded, "not money, which is more than that man does. And until you can discriminate between a decent man and a scoundrel, you can rusticate at home for a time."

"No, Papa," she'd cried in anguish, "please. I love Rawdon."

"Away with you," was her father's response, waving her from his study. "And pack. You travel tomorrow."

And leave they did. Amelie, her mama and Miss Anderson, her long-time governess, both of whom were escorting her back to Yorkshire. The two older women were as unhappy as Amelie. Having their own enjoyment of the London Season (though in widely different spheres) cut short by Amelie's foolish infatuation with the town's most infamous gamester, rake and now, because of his growing debts of honor, fortune hunter was something they had not anticipated. And, when Lord Camblesforth insisted they were as much to blame as Amelie and therefore must escort her home, it only compounded their shock.

Lady Camblesforth's conscience, though clearing her or Miss Anderson of actual wrongdoing, couldn't help but admit to some justice in her husband's angry pronouncement. Unless Amelie was a naturally wicked person, and she felt sure she wasn't, then the two people who had taught and guided her since birth must bear some of the blame for this sad failure.

Despite this mortifying conclusion, she couldn't help feeling Amelie needed a lesson. She and Lord Camblesforth were strong

opponents of corporal punishment, but at this moment, when she could see her breath freezing on the inside of the carriage windows, she wondered if capital punishment for spoiled, foolish daughters wasn't entirely justified. A week of bottom-numbing travel back to their home, Camblesforth Hall, over iron-hard rutted roads in freezing conditions was a sad end to a Season she'd looked forward to every year since she herself was eighteen.



LADY MAGDALENE FAULKENER, known to herself and her few friends as Maud, after the empress she so much admired, stared out of the windows of Danesdale Lodge to the snowy wasteland that was the lawn only a month or so ago. Her brilliant blue eyes (that had ensnared so many of her brothers' and father's friends) took in the scene and its transformation from green and pleasant land to arctic tundra, which exactly mirrored her own feelings and fortune.

When she'd arrived at the lodge in October and found its owner to be a frail and fading old man, she'd had hopes of turning the situation to her advantage. Running away from her parents, with their strict Catholic ways, had been a risk but her passion, aroused by yet another quarrel with her mother about how decent young ladies should behave, would brook no restraint. She fled to the shelter of two old family retainers, the Siddalls, for whom she had always been a favorite. They hadn't let her down. She had been given the pretended role of apprentice housekeeper. The Siddalls, on retiring from her father's ancestral home, had taken on the positions of butler and housekeeper to a Mr. Grainger, an elderly recluse who rarely stirred from his house and had no interest in society. As apprentice housekeeper, Maud had the run of the house and no duties. It was just like being at home but without mama's constant complaints about her behavior.

On arrival at Danesdale, it had taken Maud only moments to change her plans from journeying at once to London, which she

could ill-afford for she had little money with her when she left home, to marrying the frail and elderly Mr. Beverley, getting his will changed in her favor, and when he was dead, which could only be months away, descending on London as she ought to have done if mama and papa weren't such miserly, miserable creatures who thought the fashionable world an abomination to be tolerated only for the sake of making good matches for their children.

Her plans had gone well. She'd so well ingratiated herself into the old man's good opinion, and excited what little remained of his manly desires, she was sure he would propose over the holiday season. He hadn't but that she put down to ill health. He did seem out-of-sorts, which was likely just the too rich feasting and drinking. Really, she felt, if they had wed, it would have been a kindness to help him out of this vale of tears because he couldn't possibly be getting any pleasure from being alive. He was so old.

Then he died. It was a crushing blow. All her dreams swept away in one infuriating misfortune. She saw now that should have pressed him harder over Christmas. Her youth and inexperience had led her to be too cautious—that wouldn't happen again. Fortune favors the brave. In future, she would be brave. Weak prevarication had undone her this time, but she would learn from this and act decisively from this day forth.

And another opportunity was already materializing. Siddall had told her there was a fight brewing about the ownership of the lodge and a young man, a navy officer, was to be here soon to stake his, or at least his mother's, claim. Was that a chance to recover her plans? Naval officers were very fashionable just now and if he had made a lot of prize money he may be a suitable partner for someone who was determined to make her mark on the world. But, more likely, he'd be someone who expected her to have his children and look after his house. Would the other claimant, an elderly man, be a better choice? Maud ground her teeth in frustration. She hated waiting and wanted to be active, but her best hope at this time was to wait and see which of the two sides might yet be the foundation

of her spectacular entrance onto the wider stage of London. She knew it would be spectacular, for reading the daily newspapers confirmed the world had no one so talented or so intelligent as she certainly was.



CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GRAINGER, late of the Royal Navy, returning to his rooms from his newly-joined London gentleman's club, studied the mail that had been waiting for him on the hall table. One was an official-looking letter and the other was undoubtedly from his mother. Being a dutiful son and feeling his mother's letter may be more entertaining than the other, he opened it first. His mother's normally neat writing seemed, to his practiced eye, to be awry and his perusal of the contents soon confirmed why.

He opened the other letter. It was from his grandfather's solicitor and said much the same thing as his mother's letter, only in formal phrases rather than urgent entreaty. His maternal grandfather Beverley was dead, and Bev must travel post-haste to the Yorkshire estate, Danesdale Lodge, and take possession. Why he had to do so made him frown. The will was being contested by his great-uncle, Septimus Beverley, who was threatening to take possession and fight the will from the lodge—possession is nine-tenths of the law, as the saying went.

Bev sighed. It seemed he was never to enjoy the delights of London for any length of time. He'd barely found his way around the town since buying himself out of the navy only a few months before. With Napoleon exiled, and the nonsense in America over, peace was finally here. Bev had been able to put a reasonable fortune in the bank from a successful Caribbean cruise during the final days of the conflict and he'd hoped to make up for lost time. He was twenty-eight and had been at sea since the age of twelve. When other young men were enjoying university, squandering their allowances in town, he'd been fighting across the

world. Now, he thought it was his time to enjoy youth before it left him.

“Miller,” he said to the manservant who was lingering, awaiting orders, “it seems I must leave for the North urgently. It may be a stay of some duration with few evening entertainments and I suspect a lot of being outdoors, inspecting fields and forests and such, so pack what you feel I’ll need. But I must be able to carry everything in my chaise. I leave tomorrow early.”

“Very good, sir,” Miller replied woodenly. He was London born and bred and was praying fervently he wasn’t expected to go as well.

“I’ll send word for anything else I need once I know what that might be.”

“Very good, sir.” Miller’s relieved smile wouldn’t have been perceptible to anyone who didn’t know him well.

“But tonight,” Bev continued, “Captains Johnson and Pollack and I will be out until late so be sure I’m wakened early enough to make the most of tomorrow’s daylight.”



“WELL, DAMMIT, BEV,” Johnson said, when Bev told them of his departure, “you don’t need the place. You can buy one of your own and much nearer town than Yorkshire. Tell your mama and the lawyer you won’t do it.”

“Mama would be heartbroken,” Bev replied with a wry grin. “It is her family home and it’s always been understood the estate was for me, so I’ll be living nearby the family when I’m settled in life.”

“But,” Pollack protested, “you couldn’t live in the provinces. I mean be sensible, Bev, consider. It’s our time now and we have to take it—marrying and starting a family shouldn’t mean burying yourself in the country up north.”

“I don’t intend to stay long,” Bev responded soothingly, “at least on this visit. I’ll stay just long enough to see off the old tyrant and

his lawsuit. A few weeks should do it. And by then, you two will be able to introduce me into all the best places.”

“But why must you go? Surely when the will is read, your mother’s right to the property will be clear.”

“It seems,” Bev said, “that my grandfather, like a lot of people, was superstitious about his will. He felt that signing it would in some way lead to his death, so he didn’t sign it when it was written. And nothing his lawyer said could get him to do it. He felt there would be time to sign when he knew he was dying. It didn’t occur to him he might be carried away quickly by a stroke or heart failure.”

“Still,” his friend continued, “your mother is the only child, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Her mother died giving birth and my grandfather was so heartbroken, he never re-married.”

“Then what claim can your great-uncle have?”

“His claim is that, in the absence of a will by my grandfather, then great-grandfather Beverley’s will is the governing document. And it says, ‘in the event of the eldest son dying before the younger son, then the younger son inherits the estate’. My grandfather was the eldest son, and my great uncle the younger.”

“But that was clearly intended to apply when they were young men, not now they are in their dotage and the oldest son has a child,” Captain Pollack responded.

“Perhaps, but the law may agree with great-uncle so I have to race him up north and establish possession. He’s in Bath to take the waters, by the way, so I have a small head start on him. And Mama feels I should go because my great-uncle will find it harder to turn me out or establish himself in residence than if she were to be there alone.”

His friends’ expressions showed their dislike of this tangle, the vagaries of the law being too well known to be sure of a satisfactory outcome.

“Well, if you must go, I say tonight we should go back to the best place we’ve found so far,” Johnson said, at last.

“That nunnery off Chancery Lane,” Pollack agreed. “It will be an elegant send off for our brother-in-arms.”

“Why not,” Bev agreed. “Though you two are more in the petticoat line than I am, I shall keep you company.” His two friends laughed for whatever he may say to the contrary, Bev was very much in favor with the young women of the private houses they visited.