

PROLOGUE

The first thought to cross Amelia's mind – “My life is over” – was patently ridiculous. She was, after all, but 19 years of age and in the very bloom of youthful good health, her current lightheadedness notwithstanding. Wealthy, too, if that counted for anything, and beautiful in all the ways that seemed to matter to the suitors that came calling at her father's estate in their vain efforts to secure her regard.

But at that moment, to Amelia Winstead, it seemed as if her future was, indeed, in doubt.

As she perceived it, standing immobile in Mr. Winstead's study, all colour had seeped out from the world. Everything around her – the rugs, the draperies, her new frock of sunny pale yellow – suddenly appeared to her in shades of cool grey, as if the blood draining from her face had taken with it not just all the life from her skin but from her surroundings as well. Her own anxious breathing sounded oddly muffled to her, as though it passed through a thick blanket, and the only other noise, the ticking of the longcase clock just across the room, seemed to come from miles away, and slowed, as if it were processed through treacle. Unsteady on her feet and slightly queasy, she tried to analyse this new sensation, this feeling of *betrayal*, something which she had never before experienced in her all her coddled years.

There was, too, the throb of a more familiar feeling – anger – but never had it been so strong, nor directed at one so beloved.

“Papa, tell me you did not do this!” she finally burst out, unable to bear it any longer, her usually agreeable voice skewed upwards in pitch to a strident, almost avian, cry. Her fists clenched, her slim form quivered. “You cannot be serious!”

On such an autumn morning, when the sky was a cloudless, crystalline blue and the air held a crisp promise of the winter to come, Amelia would most frequently be found rambling contentedly about the grounds of her family's estate, Kennerleigh Hall. But on this day she stood in her father's study, and her trembling had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

"Oh, but I have already done it, my dear!" Hugh Winstead chuckled, leaning back in his well-worn leather chair, the gentle creases on its surface mirroring those on his face. He folded his hands upon his barrel chest as he grinned at his only child, his hazel eyes twinkling mirthfully. "Indeed, I have sent a copy of your manuscript to a Mr. Crosby in London, and he has readily agreed to publish it. In fact, he flatters you with his compliments. Are you not excessively amused?"

"No. No! No, I am not!" Amelia walked with agitation about the room, her skirts brushing the polished wood floor. "That was no manuscript, Papa; that was my journal! You know full well it was never meant to be seen by anyone...."

"Except for me."

"Except for you, of course. Yet those accounts of mine were for our private amusement, yours and mine. They *cannot* be published." Glaring at her father, her eyes burning, she demanded, "Write to Mr. Crosby this instant, and tell him that you have changed your mind. Send the letter express, and I will consider forgiving you."

This imperious command was met with only a hearty laugh from Mr. Winstead. Amelia reflected on the picture she made at the moment, her arms folded across her chest, and immediately realized that she resembled nothing so much as the small girl she once was, threatening with a pout to withhold her affections from an adored parent. Both she and her father knew well from experience that such threats could only be empty ones; it was a ploy that had never worked with Mr. Winstead,

nor for that matter, with his wife. So she quickly changed tack and appealed to his sense of reason.

“Have you not considered, Papa, that within those pages I have made a mockery of nearly all in the neighbourhood, expressed my ridicule for their idiosyncrasies and shortcomings? Did you not for a moment consider how our friends would react? That journal was meant to be a harmless diversion; I never intended to offend anyone.” Her face, which had grown flushed with anger, paled anew as she realized the full ramifications of her father’s actions. “I will be ruined!”

To Amelia’s chagrin, the gentleman merely laughed again. “Pray, put your mind at ease, daughter. Have you no trust in me? I have taken great care to change all the names and scores of details; it has been the work of several weeks! No one in the neighbourhood will recognize himself.” Mr. Winstead watched expectantly as Amelia calmed, but she remained guarded and was not yet mollified. He continued, “Do you think I would endanger our position here by revealing what you truly thought of Mrs. Hancock’s ugly daughters, or Clarice Ardmore’s lack of skill at the pianoforte? Why, there would certainly be a shortage of inspiration for your next work if you could not hereafter attend the local assemblies! If it pleases you, my pet, think of it as your first roman à clef, and worry no more about it.”

The young woman shook her head. She was far from satisfied; there were other matters which concerned her. “Is it not unseemly for a lady to publish, Papa?” Gesturing at the books crowding every inch of the study walls, she added, “Tell me, where in your collection are the bold, satirical works written by the daughters of gentlemen?”

“Come, child, you are being unreasonable, not to mention overly modest,” Mr. Winstead huffed, running a hand through his thinning grey hair. “Do you not think

your own musings worthy of being seen by the wider world? Are they not equal to the scribbles of a man? Faith, Amelia! I have not read more astute observations of human behaviour written by any male, nor none so witty.”

“What *I* think is irrelevant. Do you really wish me to be exposed to the gossip of the neighbours and the curiosity of strangers?” Her large green eyes pleaded. “Tell me at least you have protected my good name by identifying me only as ‘A Lady.’”

At this tense juncture Mr. Winstead finally rose from his chair and took his daughter’s slender hand in his own. He could tease her no longer. “Fear not, my love,” he said tenderly, yet still fighting to suppress the laughter in his voice. “In reading the whole of your work, I thought that the forceful expression of your opinions had a decidedly...*masculine* air. In fact, it pleased me that I had the wherewithal to play a fine joke on an unsuspecting populace. Therefore, I have contrived a male author for your book, and suspicion need never be cast upon you.”

Here was a new, intriguing idea, and Amelia paused to consider it. Withdrawing her hand from her father’s, she paced the room again, this time more calmly, purposefully, carefully weighing Mr. Winstead’s words. *Might it work?*

Amelia was, at times, possessed of a wicked sense of humour, a trait she had in common with the man before her, and the sly nature of this particular subterfuge appealed to her. She began to see, instead of treachery, the seed of a brilliant joke, one which could be played on a broad scale, over the entire neighbourhood.

Smiling slightly in anticipation of shared mischief, she attempted to conceal her growing excitement. She lowered her eyes and took on an air of nonchalance, trailing a finger along the edge of her father’s desk.

“And the name of this promising new author?”

“Bartholomew Findlay.”

Amelia tested the name on her tongue and nodded. “We know of no gentleman by that name.”

“We do not, nor to my knowledge, does anyone else; I have created him out of whole cloth.”

“I see.” The temptation of this naughty ruse became irresistible, and she felt herself giving over to its exhilaration. “And what is Mr. Findlay’s clever treatise now called?”

“*On Country Society*. There, you see? A good, plain, lazy title which reveals absolutely nothing. I have ensured that no one will distinguish the county, much less the neighbourhood. Now, my dear, do you feel better?”

“A little,” she admitted, but there was one question yet to be answered. “Does Mama know?”

A derisive snort was all Amelia received in reply, but it was sufficient. Dorothea Winstead, an affectionate wife and adoring mother, was not an unintelligent woman. But she was of a sober and serious bent, at a loss to understand the sort of tomfoolery that so amused her husband and daughter. She read extensively but selectively, mostly sermons and dissertations on morality, and preferred quiet absorption in her fine needlework above all other entertainments. Amelia knew that her mother would surely disapprove. It was best, then, that she remain unaware of it.

The two conspirators having thus agreed to keep their secret between themselves, Amelia left her father still chuckling to himself in his study. Anxious for the fresh air she had been denied when Mr. Winstead had waylaid her in the hallway – especially now after such an emotionally exhausting interview – she quickly retrieved her spencer and, pulling her bonnet over her chestnut curls, dashed outdoors.

Once outside, she headed for the well-trodden path that led around the perimeter of the family's property to her favourite spot, by a small stream that flowed musically over stones rounded and speckled like the clutch of house sparrow eggs she had espied tucked into the ivy the previous spring. Now, squinting against the sun, she seated herself upon the grass with a sigh. As a few yellow leaves drifted languidly into the water, she took several calming breaths and mulled over this hoax her father had concocted.

The journal itself was the culmination of years of disciplined study and practice. As a child, Amelia had always been fond of writing, and her father, highly entertained by her precocious wit, had encouraged her. Once she had outgrown her governess, a series of tutors had assisted her in honing a fine writing style, much to the detriment of the more ladylike pursuits which her mother would desire her to learn. Her hands and temperament better suited to her pen, Amelia cared nothing for needlework; starting from a young age, she had complained bitterly and often enough when Mrs. Winstead forced the canvas into her unwilling hands that the good woman soon gave up the enterprise as lost. Though she was possessed of a pleasant singing voice, her skill upon the pianoforte never progressed beyond passable, and so Amelia preferred not to perform in company. Her accent when speaking Italian and French was precise, but her vocabulary failed her. Only her artwork was sufficiently proficient in her mother's eyes, although Amelia mostly exercised this skill to add the occasional humorous illustration to her own texts: to her mind, she had no finer brush than her words, for with them she drew more exquisite likenesses than any pigments could conjure.

As she grew, Amelia would return from a social engagement, and having no sister with whom she could share her observations, would write her impressions

directly in what would become a long series of diaries. Eventually she grew bold enough to share these with Mr. Winstead, and the two passed many a merry hour reviewing what was said by whom, who was wearing what, and, most significantly, what an objective witness might make of all of it. Soon Amelia was writing commentary as incisive as was ever set to paper, on the whole breadth of country life, from cradle to grave. Her father could merely stand back and admire what his beautiful child had wrought. It was a formidable achievement, and Amelia knew it chafed at him that he could do nothing more to advance her talents. He was, she felt, the most doting of parents.

But Mr. Winstead, grown man though he was, frequently displayed the sense of humour of a schoolboy. He was no stranger to good-natured trickery, most often played on his unsuspecting wife, the servants, or his particular friends. Occasionally Mr. Winstead would go to great lengths to induce a reaction. He had, for example, put a live chicken in the pot for Cook to uncover, and stood by to enjoy her startled shrieks. On another occasion he somehow managed to replace the gaily coloured embroidery threads of three visiting ladies with a dozen drab shades of brown, and their pincushions with small red potatoes. No one could help but forgive him his antics, for he never acted maliciously, and his japes never exposed their victims to public humiliation of any kind. Amelia was often involved in such escapades as her father's accomplice, as her merry personality and wide-eyed imitation of innocence could be useful in distracting or disarming his victims. In the end, the two would privately share a good laugh over the joke.

In fact, had her father but asked her to join him in this latest prank, she might have cheerfully acquiesced, finding the notion itself nearly as amusing as he did. Yet, that he had made free with her property without her consent still irked her. Further,

she was uneasy as to the extent of Mr. Winstead's revisions to her journal, worried that they would be insufficient to disguise the identities of the actors in her work.

Her greatest concern was her depiction of old Nathaniel Torrington, a spry bachelor of advanced years who owned the grand estate Leydenfield. The entire community held him in awe for his wealth and generosity, yet there was not one among them who did not secretly snigger at the old man's eccentricities. He was fond of company and would attend all the local soirees and balls, yet his behaviour there was sure to cause disruption. A gentleman of no talent whatsoever, he would often loudly lend his voice in accompaniment of a young lady on the pianoforte, singing the wrong melody entirely and occasionally inventing the lyrics as he went along. Likewise, he might unexpectedly begin dancing a reel while the rest of the party assembled for a quadrille. This was a source of particular pain to whichever lady – Amelia included – was unlucky enough to be paired with him, but none would dare offend him. His own parties were legendary in their opulence, with delicacies aplenty and the most diverting entertainment to be had outside of London, and there was not an individual in the neighbourhood who wished to be excluded.

Speculation abounded as to who the successor of Leydenfield might be, as Mr. Torrington had never married, and as far as anyone knew, he had no family at all. In fact, on Christmas, Easter, and other occasions, owners of neighbouring estates would take turns inviting him for their festivities so he would not be alone. There were in the county one or two particularly conniving mothers who thought nothing of attempting to marry off their young daughters to this aged man, but to the relief of all concerned, Mr. Torrington displayed no interest in marriage, satisfied to live out the rest of his years enjoying only public companionship.

It might be hard, Amelia thought, to conceal the identity of such an unusual gentleman. She gnawed her lip and toyed nervously with the satin ribbon of her bonnet, vigorously yanking apart the bow and re-tying it. It would take only the identification of Mr. Torrington to give the entire game away.

Yet perhaps all her apprehensions were exaggerated. After all, weren't many of the personalities present in her journals typical of *any* country neighbourhood? There were gossips and idlers, gluttons and simpletons all over the kingdom. And hadn't her father assured her that he had taken pains to protect their position in the community? Did he not always come away from his schemes unscathed?

A sudden thought occurred to her, and she clapped her hands together with the relief it brought, her brow smoothed. Books are published every year, of course, some to slight acclaim and most to no notice at all, she realized. Surely her amusing little study would never make much of an impression. After Mr. Winstead had had his fun, it would all fade away, except perhaps as a pleasurable memory of a particularly good private joke.

Really, she concluded happily as she rose, brushing off her skirts, what could be the harm in it?