

Chapter One

Friday, 22 December 1815

Major Simon Lanford shifted his weight to his good leg as he again scanned his Aunt Josephine's drawing room—his drawing room now. His drawing room. His study. His library. His servants. His master chambers. His home. Had Clarence Hall ever truly been his home? Since he entered school, other than holidays, Simon had spent but a few dozen days at the Hall. And as quickly as he finished his tenure at Cambridge, his father had purchased him a commission, as was customary for second sons, and sent him off to the Continent to fight Napoleon.

Even when provided the opportunity to return to Clarence Hall, Simon had remained on the Continent, assisting Wellington or one of the others in charge. Just like his mother, Simon had been the expendable one. The spare. In his father's lifetime, Lord Geoffrey Lanford had shown love to but two people while the man occupied this earth: his first wife, Lady Alice Lanford, and his heir, Lord Richard Lanford. Neither Simon or his mother, Lady Victoria Lanford, had known the previous earl's favor.

As he looked about the room, Simon knew his father would despise the fact Simon was the new earl, for it had been Simon's half-brother, Richard, who had been the *anointed* one, the one instructed in the ways of managing a large estate and the peerage, but Richard had, literally, choked to death on his own spew, too drunk to realize he needed to sit up in bed or die. Although Simon had never prayed for Richard's demise, he had not grieved for the loss of his half-brother, a man he barely knew, but one he despised for all the right reasons.

"Home," he whispered, as he steadied his stance and attempted to feel as if he deserved to be the new earl standing before the gentlemen and ladies with whom his aunt conversed. Simon had no doubt every eye in the room was upon him. After all, he was the 11th Earl of Clarendon, and many of the ladies in the room had set their caps for him, or so he had been told by Riggs, his valet, a man he admired for his stealth on the battlefield and for his cunning means of learning the latest gossip below stairs.

Dear God, I despise this! he grumbled silently. The women his aunt had invited to spend Christmastide at the Hall were more to Richard's taste than his. Only once had he and Richard agreed on the comeliness of a woman. Lady Gwendolyn Bastian had been Simon's first and only love, but Richard could not resist the idea of stealing her away. And so his half-brother executed a seduction of the lady; however, Richard's intentions, as was typical of his character, had not proven as true as were Simon's, but that particular fact meant nothing to the lady. She wished to be the Countess of Clarendon, rather than The Honorable Mrs. Lanford. The last Simon heard of her, shamed by her loose morals, the Bastians had sent Lady Gwendolyn away to live with a distant relative in Ireland, while Simon had been sent to a *certain death* on the European Continent. But he had fooled them all. He had out lived his father and his brother and said "good riddance" to a woman so ambitious she would bargain her virginity to gain a title. No more. When he married, Simon would choose a woman of merit and a loving nature, title or not.

"We are pleased to have Clarendon finally return to us," his paternal aunt, Lady Josephine, Dowager Viscountess of Plankston, said loud enough to draw Simon's attention. She wished him to join her, so she might introduce him to yet another *young lady*. "Young" was the operative word, for he did not think any prospects gathered before him were older than nineteen.

Simon was not but seven and twenty; unfortunately, what he had seen of the world made him feel ancient in comparison to so many fresh-scrubbed faces seeking his attention.

As he carefully picked his way across the room, he wondered, *How many women in this room would recoil at the sight of my mangled leg?* The answer was easy: All. Their sensibilities were too tender.

“You were saying, Aunt?” He bowed stiffly to the group seated before the fire.

His Aunt Josephine smiled courteously. “I was just telling Lady Mareau and her daughter Lady Sophia that it was a shame you did not arrive in England during the summer, so you could have partaken in all the festivities honoring those supporting Wellington and his great victory.”

More gore than glory, he thought, but he said, “I am simply thankful to be standing on English soil at last, Aunt.” He had learned of Richard’s death some three and a half months before Simon fell at the Battle of Quatre Bras, but before he could make arrangements to return to Yorkshire, Napoleon escaped Elba, and the planned victory celebration transformed into another military front. He supposed, in hindsight, he should have insisted upon returning to England, but as Richard had already passed, Simon could offer no succor to those who remained at Clarence Hall. He had always been the interloper here. The Hall offered him nothing but ill memories. Moreover, Simon was never one to leave an occupation undone.

“Your aunt speaks of your glorious connection to Wellington,” Lady Sophia said in what sounded of awe. “We certainly enjoyed the celebrations.” She glanced to her mother for approval of what she said. “It was quite reverential, viewing, of course, from a distance, both His Grace, the Duke of Wellington, and Prince George while in attendance. And the fireworks were quite spectacular, as was the burning of the Castle of Discord. However, the heat was quite unbearable, making all quite uncomfortable. And the streets were full of food vendors and filth. The odors were quite pungent. The air filled with smoke from the staged battles, and I found the sound of the parades quite thunderous.”

“Quite so,” Simon commented in reluctant amusement. The girl’s use of “quite” so often in her speech would surely drive him “quite” insane within a few days if he were foolish enough to claim her. Moreover, she contradicted herself. How could one enjoy something that was so unappealing?

The girl, rather say, any lady he might encounter in an English drawing room, would know nothing of one’s senses being bombarded by the worst of humanity: Dining on stirabout, a watery concoction of oatmeal. The sudden roll of drums along the whole of the enemy’s line. The burst of music from the bands of a hundred battalions. Great columns of infantry advancing over the brow of the hill and marching straight at a man. Two hundred guns firing at the same time. Shot and shell ploughing up the earth at one’s feet. The bagpipes of the Highland brigades. Mist and smoke filling the valley. The tremendous cannonade from two hundred and fifty French guns, firing in close succession. The noise fearful. Loud reports renting the air. A rolling cheer of victory and an equally loud gasp of defeat.

Yet, there was no one in this room who would willingly listen to his stories of undertakings being nothing more than futile feats of bravery. Therefore, he admitted with more calm than he felt, “Despite my exceedingly long stay in a Belgian hospital, I am glad to have missed the celebrations. My memories are too fresh to enjoy such a display.”

“No maudlin,” his aunt warned quietly. “It is nearly Christmastide, a time for hope and for faith’s renewal.”

Simon would soon need to do something about his aunt’s hold on the household. Perhaps both his father and his brother had accepted her tight-fisted maneuvering, but he did not. His

Aunt Josephine had come to stay at Clarence Hall after Simon's mother passed, and it had become evident to everyone that his father did not mean to marry for a third time. She remained to serve Richard in the same capacity, but Simon had never cared for the idea of another woman commanding the household that was once his mother's domain. Even if he did not claim a bride soon, he would insist on his aunt returning to Derbyshire and her role as the Dowager Viscountess of Plankston, rather than serving as the chatelaine of his manor. Moreover, she had never once expressed an affection for him. Even now, she appeared to tolerate Simon's presence at the Hall only for the sake of the earldom.

"I meant no offense, your ladyship," he said dutifully.

Lady Mareau hinted tactfully, "I suppose your injury will keep you from the dance floor at the assembly on the eve of the New Year. I know Sophia had hoped for you to escort her to the floor for the first dance at the assembly."

Simon glance to the girl, who could not be more than eighteen. He had a decade on the chit. How could his aunt think him so shallow? "I fear my dancing days are long removed, my lady, but I am certain Lady Plankston has invited a number of gentlemen to our Christmastide gathering who will gladly assist you in dancing the evening away." He nodded his head in respect. "Now if you will pardon me, I note Mr. Thomas has sought my attention. Likely more guests have arrived." With a curt bow, he carefully negotiated his way across the room, trying not to favor his ailing leg, but failing miserably.

What do I care, he told himself for the hundredth time, *if the women gathered about the room look upon me with pity?* In truth, the household was just coming out of full mourning for his brother. They should not be hosting a house party, but the invitations had been sent out before Simon had arrived, and there was little he could do without sending up an alarm in Society regarding his mental state. Therefore, beyond what was necessary as the host, he would have no use for the ladies his aunt thought worthy of becoming his countess. He had little doubt, thinking he would wish it, each prospective bride would tolerate his aunt's presence at the Hall. Absolutely not. Simon had no desire to do the pretty and court any of them. Bloody hell! He was having difficulty even remembering their names, for none had made an impression on him. Some were blonde and some with dark tresses. Some with blue eyes and some with brown. But to Simon there was nothing unique about any. They were all patterns of the same well-bred woman.

As he entered the foyer, he noted Mr. Thomas was assisting another lady with her cloak. "How many bloody women does Aunt Josephine think I can entertain at one time?" he grumbled under his breath. This one would make eleven. Nearly one for each day of Twelfth Night. He did not possess Richard's easy way with people. When he was still with the Army, Simon had made a conscious endeavor to praise his men's efforts, but such was the extent of his "smooth" talk, and his speech used upon the battlefield would be termed far from *smooth* in an English drawing room.

"I must send someone to prepare your rooms, Miss DeLong," Mr. Thomas explained to the girl as Simon approached.

"I pray they look out over the lawn or over the gardens. I despise a room without a view," the woman declared with a majestic wave of her hand.

Before he could respond, another female, behind the demanding one, said politely, "All rooms with a window possess a view, Claire. One must simply discover the beauty presented in the world."

Although Simon did not agree with the sentiment, for he had seen too much destruction over the past five years, he enjoyed the sound of the words: soft and melodic, the type to soothe a

man's soul. The idea had him stumbling in his wake, staying upright only with the aid of his trusted cane.

The one called Miss DeLong spun in his direction when Thomas murmured, "my lord," and Simon worked to keep the frown from his features. The girl appeared to be another of the well-bred ornaments of Society, typical of all the women he had encountered since his return to England. She dipped a deep curtsy to display her *assets*. When she rose, she said, "My lord, I assume I am in the presence of Lord Clarendon."

Perhaps the girl was not one of the pattern he had observed recently: Simon had not encountered so forward a woman previously, at least not one of the genteel sect. He considered himself liberal, especially when it came to the plight of women, but he had the feeling this one would prove beyond the pale. "I am, miss. But we should wait for a *proper* introduction before we converse. Perhaps one of your parents could perform the deed or, if not, permit me to send for my aunt."

When no one stepped forward, Simon nodded to Thomas, who scurried away without a word. Secretly, he was thankful the soothing voice he heard earlier was not that of the girl's mother or guardian, for the lady's soft words had him thinking the right woman could ease his disappointment at his new situation.

Miss DeLong did not blush from her boldness, which he assumed was a purposeful ploy, nor did she wait for his aunt to appear. "My mother passed some six years removed, sir, and my father is too ill to attend country parties. He permits me to set my own social calendar."

"I see." Simon shot a glance over his shoulder in hopes of spying his aunt. "How liberating." He was not one to stand on protocol. The military had taught him a man's worth was more than his title or his education, but he would not wish to tie himself to such a girl by breaking with propriety too quickly. After a long awkward pause in which his aunt had yet to respond, Simon swallowed his trepidation. "I am Major Lord Simon Lanford, the Earl of Clarendon, lately of His Majesty's service." He executed a stiff bow, balancing his weight upon his cane.

The girl's eyebrow rose as she looked upon him. He knew the exact instant she realized he required the cane for mobility, rather than it being a fashion accessory. Her features displayed her disappointment for a brief second before she recaptured her inviting expression. "I was not told you required a cane," she said without much sympathy. "But I suppose such cannot be helped."

"Claire, please," the same soft voice as before pleaded, before he could offer his retort.

"Miss DeLong?" His aunt's arrival surprised even him, for he had not heard her approach. "We were unaware you planned to join us for our festivities."

"Certainly I planned to join you," the girl said in petulant tones. "Was not an invitation sent to my father's manor some months ago?"

Aunt Josephine shot Simon a look of alarm before saying, "Such was when poor Richard was alive. And I do not observe Lord DeLong in your company."

"Father was too ill to travel," the girl countered.

"I see." His aunt took a deep steadying breath before making her decision, one he was certain would go against her better judgment. "Unfortunately, Lord Buchholtz's party cancelled. Mr. Thomas, you will have someone see Miss DeLong and —"

"My cousin," the girl supplied.

“At least DeLong did not permit you to travel alone,” his aunt hissed under her breath. Aunt Josephine’s tone spoke of her lack of respect for the girl, as well as the less-than-welcoming attitude she would practice with Miss DeLong. “Again, Thomas, you will see—”

The butler nodded his understanding and darted away before his aunt could finish. Simon suspected Mr. Thomas meant to speak to the housekeeper. Obviously, a young woman attending a party without a parent or guardian was a scandal waiting to occur. Mrs. Osborne would place the chit away from any of the gentlemen’s quarters.”

“While Mr. Thomas organizes the necessary rooms, perhaps you might conduct a proper introduction, Lady Plankston,” Simon suggested gently. “Although I will admit I have broken with propriety to make myself known to our guests.”

“Certainly, Clarendon.” Aunt Josephine’s shoulders stiffened. “My lord, this is Miss DeLong, daughter of Lord DeLong.” *Nothing of may I give you the acquaintance.* “Miss DeLong’s father holds a barony of the same name. The young lady was a particular friend of your late brother,” she said pointedly.

Ah, now the situation made sense. His brother had made promises to the girl, and Miss DeLong expected him to keep Richard’s pledges. If such were the case, the chit was in for a rude awakening. Now that he understood the situation, when he looked upon the young woman, Simon could imagine his brother taking a fancy to the girl. She possessed “the look” Richard preferred in his women: golden-haired, heart-shaped face, pouty mouth, svelte figure, blue eyes, and, likely, she was a plaguey nuisance.

“Miss DeLong, welcome to Clarence Hall. The party has gathered in the drawing room. Please feel free to join us after you’ve had time to freshen your things.” Realizing he ought also to welcome the girl’s companion, he glanced over Miss DeLong’s shoulder to discover the most enchanting creature looking at him with the appearance of steady intent. There was a sturdiness in her gaze.

Not a classical beauty, like her fair cousin, but delectable, just the same. Blondish-brown curls escaped the bonnet she wore. He imagined them to be soft and smooth and absolutely feminine. A small, straight nose covered with a sprinkle of freckles on golden cheeks, as if she had recently spent time in the sun. Not so thin as her cousin, but with a well-defined waist and ample breasts, against which a man might rest his weary head. Since arriving in England, everyone had reminded Simon of his duty to secure the earldom. He had ignored all reminders of his siring an heir until this very moment. “And your companion?” he murmured. “Would you please extend an introduction, Miss DeLong?”

The girl glanced to her cousin and back to him, and her brows drew together in obvious disapproval. Realizing he had betrayed his interest in the woman, Simon made himself smile on Miss DeLong. The girl’s features followed suit. At length, she said, “My lord, permit me to give you the acquaintance of my cousin, Mrs. Lamont.”

Missus. The word ricocheted through Simon’s body. The woman was married. *Naturally,* he thought. He knew of few men who would not rejoice at having a woman of Mrs. Lamont’s fine looks on his arm. He made himself say through his disappointment, “Welcome, Mrs. Lamont. I pray you do not find Clarence Hall wanting.”

“I am certain I shall not, my lord.”

With Thomas’s return, Simon said in dismissal, “Anticipating continuing our conversation later, I will release you into Mr. Thomas’s most capable hands.”

“This way, ladies.”

Even though he could not approach the most interesting woman attending his aunt's house party, Simon watched as Mrs. Lamont gracefully climbed the stairs toward the guest quarters.

"Beware Miss DeLong," his aunt whispered near his ear. "The chit means to claim a title. Richard led her to believe she might become his countess. Make certain you are not alone with her. And lock the doors to your quarters at night."

"Perhaps if Napoleon had employed a female strategist," Simon said with a sad chuckle, "he could have outwitted Wellington."

"You make light," his aunt reprimanded, "but do not underestimate a conniving woman. A female soldier would have taken note of the weather and realized cannons cannot move easily and quickly over wet ground," she remarked. "Although Miss DeLong is young, she learned her arts from her mother, a former opera dancer who lured Lord DeLong in."

"Then why was an invitation issued to Miss DeLong?" Simon inquired.

"That is a matter I must investigate. The girl was on the list of a previous party when Richard was still alive. It was when your brother first took her acquaintance and when he became quite enchanted by her independent spirit. Personally, I never cared for the family. People say the former Lady DeLong used some sort of aphrodisiac to trap the baron into marriage. Lady Smithson says her husband heard rumors at his club that DeLong has contracted—" His aunt broke off with a blush.

"I should say a woman of quality should know nothing of such matters, but I am not as *antiquated* as many of my fellow peers," Simon said with a smile to ease her embarrassment.

"My dearest Plankston never treated me as a mere female," she admitted.

"Then Lord Plankston was an oddity, but an oddity I wish to emulate in my own marriage. Thank you for the words of wisdom, Aunt. Now, we should return to our guests."