

One

Central Queensland, 1873.

“They can’t make me go to England!”

There was no-one to hear her but the black crow which watched with beady eyes from a nearby gum tree. Seething with helpless frustration, Louise Ashford crumpled the letter into a ball and stuffed the pages inside her sleeve. It was just like her autocratic father to direct her future without thought or care for her own wishes.

Clutching at the gate with trembling hands, she pressed her face against the sun-bleached timber and inhaled its homely, comforting scent. With the Queensland sun beating upon the nape of her neck, her parents in England seemed more remote from her than ever.

It would be autumn in England now, the leaves turning gold and brown, then falling to be raked and burnt in blazing bonfires. The air would be cold and bleak with the biting promise of snow. “Home” her parents had still called it, even after twenty years. To Louise it sounded a grim, forbidding place, despite her parents’ descriptions of green fields and hedgerows, the balmy Devonshire summer. She suspected these recollections had become a little idealised over time.

Beyond the gate, perhaps half a mile away, a dust-pall overhung the stockyards, rising sluggishly above the trees. She could hear the cattle bellowing, dogs barking and men shouting, and longed to be participating in the activity. Such was the story of her life.

She remembered riding in the afternoons sometimes back at Banyandah to watch the cattle being brought in; sedate excursions with a groom or a governess and her younger sister. Her father, her brother and half-a-dozen stockmen had been in charge of the herd, with the cracking stockwhips, bawling cows and clouds of floating dust creating an atmosphere of noisy confusion. And she had to sit her mount and watch them. Harry Ashford’s daughters didn’t demean themselves by working with the men.

The rumble of iron wheels on the dirt road, the soft clop of horses’ hooves and the jingle of harness made her straighten abruptly. She struggled for composure as James’s wife Mary drove up in the buggy, her daughter Sarah seated beside her with a picnic basket at her feet.

“Louise, I was wondering where you were.” Mary was a gentle, slender woman who handled the buggy pair with surprising ease. “I’m taking morning tea to the men. Would you like to accompany us?”

“Of course, Cousin Mary.” She hardly felt like being sociable, but the cattle yards as always drew her like a magnet. Louise opened the gate and closed it again as the vehicle passed through, lifting her skirts in one hand to step up to the rear seat of the Abbot double buggy.

“You seem upset.” Mary clicked up the horses. “Is it your father’s news?”

“It is, rather! He says I must accompany Charles to England on the first ship available. He’s written to Charles and instructed him to collect me, so it seems there’s no way out of it.”

Mary shook her head. “I wish I could be in your shoes, Louise. I know James has prospered here, but oh dear, I miss England so! The cool, wet climate, the greenness, to say nothing of family and friends... It broke my heart to leave it all behind.”

Louise gritted her teeth, sensitive to the implied rebuke. “I’m not close to my family--and if you knew them better, Cousin Mary, you’d understand why! Charles is the only one I saw much of, as a child. And Australia is my home in the same way that England was yours. I’m a ‘Cornstalk’, a colonial, and I love the bush.” She tossed back her long dark hair. “I detested Sydney when we used to visit Mama’s friend Lady Baxter there. The cold, wet winters! And I’m sure England would be far worse.”

Mary frowned, but there was a hint of compassion in her voice now. “You’ve no choice but to accept your father’s wishes, my dear. You’re only eighteen, and your place is with your family. We love having you here, but we can’t intervene in this. And I’m sure Charles won’t be dissuaded.”

Louise bit her lip and turned away, for she knew Mary was right. She’d been allowed to stay behind when her parents travelled to England, but it was different now that her father had inherited the family estate and intended to remain there. She’d adored her elder brother as a child, but the gap between them had widened with the years. Charles could be as merciless as her father when he chose.

Mary drew the buggy to a halt under a shady iron-bark tree a discreet distance from the yards. It wouldn’t be prudent to go closer, for the smell of singed hide and the bawl of bellowing calves made it obvious the men were branding--not a fit spectacle for the delicate eyes of a lady.

Lindsay, Mary's youngest son, was the first to join them. He'd escaped his studies to help with the mustering, and as he happily set about gathering leaves and wood for a fire, Louise marvelled that this was the same lad who continually procrastinated and fiddled in the school room. Once the billies had boiled, Cousin James and his two elder sons joined the ladies beside the buggy. The stockmen took their pannikins of tea and slabs of cake, retiring to a respectful distance.

"Hush," Mary admonished Lindsay and Sarah, who were chattering excitedly. "Run away and play while we adults talk. Louise has some news to tell you, James."

"Oh? What's that?" James looked up from his tea and smiled at Louise in a friendly, quizzical fashion.

Despite her bad humour, she found herself returning his smile. James was a quiet, courteous man who bore no resemblance to her own family. He was short and fair, while all the Ashfords, including herself, were tall and dark. The contrast in personality was equally marked: perhaps that was why she liked him so much.

But her expression darkened as she related her news. "The mailman brought a letter from Papa. My grandfather passed away in June, but it seems my Uncle George, who was to have inherited, succumbed to a tropical illness in South America. This means Papa is now Squire of Fenham Manor." Her voice sharpened with sarcasm. "My parents are ecstatic, despite their grief for poor Grandpapa. Unfortunately they now expect me to join them in England."

James's smile faded. "It is only right that you should do so, Louise."

"Perhaps England won't be so bad," Jack, the eldest boy, commented quietly.

Louise glanced at Jack, a gangling twenty-year-old in dirty shirt and breeches. His bashful admiration had both irritated and gratified her at first, but his confidence seemed to be growing of late. "They'll never allow me to return here." Suddenly she was close to tears, clenching her fists in frustration. "Oh, damn Uncle George for dying on us!"

"Louise!" Mary looked shocked. "Such language from a lady!"

"I beg your pardon." Louise would have reacted sullenly to a similar reprimand from her mother, but she had much fondness and respect for Mary. And she was only too aware of the Barclay men watching her in astonished fascination. It was fortunate the younger children weren't listening.

It was Mary who broke the awkward silence. "It's only natural that your family want you with them. I'm sure they miss you, Louise."

"Miss me?" Louise made a little derisive sound in her throat. "You don't know my parents well, Cousin Mary! I'm sure Papa has hardly noticed my absence, and as for Mama... She expects me to be her companion now, but she forgets that I seldom saw her as a child. We were raised by nursery-maids and governesses." She felt her fingers curling into fists of frustration. "I didn't know what a proper family was until I came to stay with you."

Mary's eyes softened. She looked at James, who took a sip of tea before replying in a careful tone. "I'm sorry, Louise, but I think you'll have to make the best of it. I felt your father wasn't anxious to leave you with us in the first instance, so I won't interfere in this now."

That was certainly true. It was only a chance meeting between her father and James that had led to the invitation, for the cousins hadn't seen each other in years. James Barclay wasn't so well up in the world as the Ashfords and her father had been offended by James's suggestion that Louise act as tutor to his two younger children. But Louise had been determined, thinking it an adventure. She liked children and preferred to feel she would be a useful addition to her cousin's household.

It had turned out even better than she'd expected. She enjoyed tutoring Sarah and Lindsay, and the closeness and camaraderie of this simple family had somehow exposed the cold arrogance of her own. Her mother's idle lifestyle, pursuing the social round of races, charity balls and afternoon teas, now seemed shallow and trivial.

She looked up as Mary spoke.

"Think of it as an adventure," her cousin's wife said bracingly. "A chance to travel, to see another country."

Louise shuddered. "Four to five months at sea--I'll be miserably sick! I'm a dreadful sailor."

Mary's face turned grim. "You'll manage, Louise. It's the children who suffer most. We had two little ones when we sailed from England--Jack was three. He survived but his younger brother didn't."

Chastened, Louise bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Cousin Mary. I didn't know."

She was silent then, but her resolve hadn't weakened. If the Barclays were unsympathetic, she'd have to make her own plans.

She'd find some way to stay here in Australia!