

CHAPTER 1



WAITING

TUESDAY, APRIL 3, 1849

The wind on the dock picked up as Arabella St. John stood waiting for the arrival of her maid. A parchment from her father was clutched tightly in her hand. He had hastily handed it to her before abruptly taking his leave.

Life as she knew it was changing far faster than she could adjust. Less than two months before, Mr. Claude Picou had approached her father about taking Bella as his wife, moving her to America, and uniting their two powerful families. The details were worked out before she even heard of the plan. The only person more upset by the arrangement than Bella was her own dear mother. Having her young daughter move across the world to start a new life in New Orleans devastated her.

"Goodbye, Papa," she whispered sorrowfully, as she watched the coach disappear from sight.

Goodbye, my darling. Arabella could almost hear her mother's voice, almost see her tearful face. Marie Adams St. John had been married off at a young age to a baron. While she had eventually learned to tolerate her husband, she had sworn Bella would never have to sacrifice herself in the same manner, 'to be sold to the highest bidder,' as she described it.

Fate and Bella's father had stepped in. The baron had been seduced with the idea of being associated with the bustling success of life in America. No amount of argument set forth by his distraught wife could sway him. Marie had eventually given in. Their beautiful Bella would do so, too.

Arabella thought of her intended. Mr. Picou was attractive, though much older than her own eighteen years. He was fit and well off, and his attire affirmed his wealth. Her friends had been captivated by him, telling her how lucky she was to be selected as his bride.

Yet Bella found herself wishing he had chosen one of them, instead. She felt no attraction to him. As a child, her mother had filled her with hopeful stories of falling in love with a brave and heroic man one day.

She thought of Picou. Brave? She shook her head. Heroic? That one required a truly active imagination. No, the man she was to wed failed to invoke any sort of strong passion in her. At least he did not repulse her too much.

She shivered, in spite of herself. There was something about Mr. Picou that she didn't entirely trust.

Bella could not fault his manners. He had taken her to the park a few times during his stay in England, with her chaperone in attendance. He'd acted quite the gentlemen, and her mother eventually seemed to adjust to the idea of her one and only daughter's new future. Mr. Picou had promised there was plenty of room for her parents to come for nice, long visits at his plantation. When she had asked if it would be possible for her to return to England to see them, he'd vaguely replied that it might be possible.

Reading the letter her father had handed her before his departure, she wondered if she somehow misunderstood the arrangements he had set up for a lady's maid.

Dearest Arabella,

Your mother and I cannot begin to tell you how thankful we are to be joining our futures with Mr. Picou in New Orleans.

She snorted, glad no one was close enough to hear her. Truly? Her mother had been devastated. But she read further.

We envy you in your new, exciting life in America. Your intended assures me he will be anxiously awaiting your arrival in New Orleans. Arrangements for your grand wedding are being made, and the archbishop himself will preside over the ceremony.

Until then, I hope you find your journey to your new home comfortable. The ship you will take generally only carries cargo to America, but I managed to book your passage. I have made arrangements for you to have a servant available during your journey so you will not be the only female aboard. Although young and untrained, I trust you will be able to instruct the child on her duties. Be firm, my dear. Often those below our status try to get away with being lazy. Ask one of the sailors aboard the ship to help you discipline her as needed.

With much love from both of us,

Papa

"Ask one of the sailors to help discipline her, indeed," Bella murmured with a frown. Her mother certainly had not imparted that bit of advice. The people who saw to their family's needs at home were devoted and more like family than servants. Were things so different in America? Had Papa changed that much? She was sure she and her lady's maid would get along splendidly. She only hoped the girl managed to arrive before they set sail. If she didn't, however, Bella was quite capable of attending to her own needs.

She glanced around once again at the dock, managing to occupy her time. Strong men were busy loading large crates and barrels aboard the tall, impressive ship. Further upward, some were busy

securing the ropes above to the masts and preparing to have the beautiful vessel leave the shore.

Craning her slender neck upward, she regarded the magnificent ship her journey would begin with. Two men dressed in uniforms seemed to be staring down at her. *The tallest man with the broader shoulders must be the captain*, she thought. With dark wavy hair, dark brown eyes and a stern, uncompromising jaw, he certainly did not look pleased with her. She caught faint wisps of their conversation as it drifted gently across the wind, "...women aboard...nothing but trouble...slowing us down...distracting the men."

Her spine stiffening, Bella narrowed her eyes at the two men. The shorter of the two, almost as handsome as his unyielding friend, gave her a wide smile. He watched her carefully as he started for the gangplank to head her way. His progress halted briefly when another carriage arrived and a woman with long red hair stepped out. She was breathtaking, and every seaman there seemed stunned by her beauty for a moment.

"You, young man. What is your name?" she called to a crewman nearby. She flounced forward, taking control of the situation as if she was accustomed to being in command. "Kindly load my things for me. The sun is far too bright for me to stand out here very long. Have them sent to my quarters, immediately. My future husband has arranged for me to be well taken care of during this journey. He will be very disappointed if I am kept waiting."

"Miller. Right away, ma'am," one of the crewman responded quickly. He had been attending to the ropes, but eagerly stopped and rushed to do her bidding. "Might I take your things aboard, too, my lady?" he asked Arabella, but his eyes never strayed from the redhead.

"Thank you, sir." Bella nodded and smiled, wishing she had the confidence and manner of the other young lady boarding the ship. She was going to meet her future husband, too? It would be nice if they could pass some time aboard together. Perhaps their future husbands were friends. It would be so nice to have an ally in her

new home. Even if her lady's maid failed to arrive on time, her father would be pleased she would not be the only female aboard after all.

"Excuse me, miss." The shorter of the two men she'd seen above was suddenly at Bella's side. "The captain is eager to set sail soon. He is a man of schedules and organization, you understand. I have been ordered to escort you aboard post haste. Welcome to your new home for the next few months. The *Charlotte* is a beauty, even if she is a little old. But she is massive, and it's easy to get lost aboard. It is best to have a guide until you get your bearings about you."

"Thank you, sir. Do you know if my lady's maid is already aboard? My father said she would be here to help me during the voyage."

"A third woman sailing with us?" The man broke out in a wide grin. "The captain will be interested in hearing about this. If so, I'm unaware of it. If not, your maid may be left behind. Captain Smythe does not hold much patience with people who run late. He has been known to leave men behind for failing to show up at the appointed time."

"Your captain sounds like a rigid man. I gather he is not very pleased to have women aboard his precious ship?"

"Not many are, miss. It is considered bad luck. The captain is concerned your presence will complicate his duties."

Glaring up at the arrogant captain who was still frowning down at her, Bella fought the urge to stick out her tongue at him. She sighed. That bode poorly for the long journey. She would avoid him at all costs. "Why would a grown man believe women aboard ship are bad luck? That's utter nonsense." She took her escort's arm as they headed for the gangplank.

His warm smile made Bella feel somewhat welcomed. "Because you are quite attractive, my lady. And the sailors aboard are bound to notice."



EARLIER

Captain Gregory Smythe stood on the dock glaring down at the young woman who was obviously waiting to board, as his first mate walked away to check on the loading of the cargo. He'd turned just in time to see a fine coach bearing the St. John family crest as it hurriedly pulled away, leaving the young woman and her trunks standing alone on the dock. What man would abandon his own daughter, leaving her vulnerable and alone?

He thought of the letter he'd received from Baron St. John a week earlier, purchasing the passage for his daughter Arabella, and a lady's maid named Miss Tucker. He was to deliver Arabella safely into the care of a man in New Orleans, whom she was to marry.

Gregory frowned. Her father had not mentioned the name of her fiancée, and there was no sign of her maid. It appeared they would be sailing without her. He would not delay their departure and had been quite firm about passengers arriving on time or defaulting payment on their voyage.

But at the same time the baron's letter had come, he'd received payment from a Claude Picou in America, for a young woman named Lily Collingwood, whom he claimed was to be his secretary. Both payments had included passage from Charleston, down to New Orleans. At first, Gregory had balked at that. Sailing from Charleston to New Orleans was quite an added distance just to deliver two ladies, even though the payment for passage had been such a goodly sum. He'd known doing it was against his better judgement. Not only was the danger from privateers greater in that area, something nagged in the back of his mind about the name Picou. He scowled, unable to remember exactly what it was.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. He wished now he'd refused. In the last three days, he'd received news of two ships that had been attacked and sunk due to privateers. He'd heard of Jean Luc Poche,

captain of the *Mermaid's Revenge*. He roamed the waters east of the Carolinas, making himself rich on the spoils of merchant ships.

Gregory had written Baron St. John to tell him he could not promise safety for his daughter and offered to return the sum he'd been paid for her voyage. When there had been no response, Gregory had decided to meet the coach when it arrived with Arabella.

But when it had come, he hadn't been fast enough. The baron had put his daughter and her trunks out of the coach and pulled quickly away, before Gregory had even seen him.

He frowned. Not only was he responsible for the safety of his men, he was responsible for the safety of the two—possibly three—females who would be traveling with them. Women were trouble. Every seaman knew that. And so did every captain.

Miss St. John turned away, after glancing up at him irritably, and he saw the long golden hair that curled down her back, almost to her waist. Her tiny waist was enticing.

What the bloody hell, he cursed himself. Hadn't her father written she was to be married after her arrival in New Orleans? He had no business even thinking about her. Perhaps he'd been at sea too long.

Still, she would be trouble. Even if she was a perfect passenger, the crew on the ship would immediately develop an attraction for her, and they'd be distracted. He'd have to keep a firm eye on her.

"I can tell exactly what you're thinking, Captain." Earl, his chief-mate, approached once again.

The captain raised a brow. "Can you? And that is?"

Earl grinned. "You're thinking that females aboard a ship are nothing but problems."

"Big problems," the captain muttered.

"But you must admit, she's exquisite." A chuckle answered him.

Gregory sighed. "Go down and get her, Earl. She should never have been left standing on the dock alone. Have you seen Cooper?"

"He's down below, watching where the food stores are going." Earl turned to follow orders. At the same time, a coach pulled up to

unload, and a white gloved hand extended from the inside, followed by a woman with long curly red hair escaping from under her bonnet. Unlike the other young lady, this one glanced around, tossing her hair back in a display of pique. She immediately called out to the ship for someone to help her aboard.

"Good God." The captain felt a forbidding mask fall over his face. "That's all we need."

The commander laughed and moved quickly down the gang-plank to carry out orders, as Gregory looked on. The man he referred to as "Earl" was, in reality, Viscount Darby, the son of the Earl of Darbyshire. Aging, he wanted his son to take over for him. But Earl, the independent and head-strong son, had other ideas. He loved the sea, and loved the idea of someday having his own ship. It was in his blood. Although he knew he would become the future Earl someday, he had determined—at least for now—to follow his dream.

Earl's rank in England outmatched that of Gregory's, but he'd eagerly taken second place to the rank of the captain on the ship, to continue learning as much as he could about being in command of his own.

The captain studied, for the fifteenth time, the list of provisions he'd ordered for his crew of sixty men. Forty-eight barrels of beef '*with no unusual parts*'. He had seen to that. Forty-six barrels of pork, fifty barrels of flour, five-hundred pounds of butter, fifteen hundred gallons of whiskey, twice as many of beer and water, one thousand pounds of cheese, and so on.

He'd had extra provisions bought for this trip, since they had to go all the way to New Orleans, and he had no wish to have to try to restock on the coast of Charleston. Of course, most of the coffee they were transporting was not for their consumption. It would be picked up when they arrived. This promised to be profitable, if all went according to plan.

The seamen on his ships ate well; he saw to that. They worked hard, and good food was one of the few things they had to look

forward to. He paid them well, and they generally did their best for him. At the same time, he demanded much of them.

His chief-mate was guiding Miss St. John upward now, toward him, and he straightened his shoulders, looking down at her with an intimidating stare. Miller had brought the redhead up, as well, and she was standing close by, fidgeting with impatience, her eyes narrowed. She cleared her throat.

He turned to her. "Excuse me, miss?"

"I wish to know where my cabin is."

He frowned. "I have no desire to repeat myself. I'm waiting until the other young lady is present."

Her brow creased, but she said nothing.

The first mate approached. "Captain, Miss Arabella St. John," he said. Then, turning toward the other young woman, he nodded. "My apologies, miss. Your name escapes me."

Her voice was curt. "Miss Lily Collingwood."

"Ladies." Captain Smythe bowed stiffly, tipping his hat. "At the risk of making myself quite unpopular with both of you, I wish to inform you that the *Charlotte* is a ship we take great pride in. She runs smoothly. She runs efficiently. My men are capable." He paused, glancing from one to the other.

"I trust there is no need to say this. But I shall say it, and only once. My men are not allowed to fraternize with female passengers." His frown deepened. "To put it quite clearly, private conversations of a personal matter with the men of this vessel will not be tolerated. Do I make myself clear?"

A smile played about the mouth of Miss Collingwood. But Arabella stepped forward. Visible tension showing in her shoulders, it appeared as though she was fighting to keep from slapping his face.

"Do you think us common, Captain Smythe?" She clenched her small gloved hands into fists at her sides. "How dare you!"

He took a step toward her. She took a step back. "Miss St. John,"

he said, in a deep voice. "I'm not suggesting anything of the sort. I say this to all the female passengers who board my ship."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "And how often do you have female passengers travel with you, sir?"

He leaned forward, until his face was extremely close to hers. The scent of honeysuckle reached him, and he fought against its enticing allure. Trying to fortify his resolve, he deliberately intensified his stern gaze downward.

"Never," he said gruffly. Straightening up, he turned toward Earl. "Commander," he said stiffly, still staring down into Arabella's eyes. "Please show the ladies to their cabins."