

CHAPTER 1



AUGUST OF 1850

PLOTS AFOOT...

*H*er nimble fingers moved about as she styled Lady Arabella's hair, fashioning the most intricate pattern of curls in preparation for the evening meal. Skilled at the task, Chloe's mind wandered off as she worked. Flashes of memories cluttered her thoughts.

She was looking down from a perch, watching the surprised, wide dark eyes of a handsome man. Seconds before, she had been determined to do him grave harm, but something about his brown eyes had her experiencing great regret. Only a moment before, there had been a hard line to his thin, pale lips, as if he'd been the devil himself. A few strands of rich brown hair escaped his cap.

"...and Mama is just as concerned about Papa's behavior as I am. She admitted as much when we spoke earlier. A few times, I found him trailing after Gregory, as if he were trying to get him alone to

ask him something of importance.” Chloe’s mistress and best friend’s words did not register until Bella started giggling. “Chloe, have you heard a single word I’ve spoken? From the frown on your face, whatever has your attention displeases you.”

Meeting Bella’s eyes in the vanity, Chloe took a moment to consider the words. Embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming again, she offered a blushed apology. “I’m so sorry, Bella. You must think me the worst lady’s maid in all of England.”

“I don’t consider you a lady’s maid at all, my dear friend. It is you who insists on continuing that farce since we left the ship. Both Gregory and I consider you a family member.”

“Who happens to live off the good graces of her relatives?” Chloe smiled. Her taupe complexion stood in dark contrast to Bella’s fair features, mocking any suggestion they were blood relatives. But a year before, the two forged a bond on a fateful voyage to America which went well beyond friendship. “Helping you dress and styling your hair is little compensation for all you and your husband have done—and continue to do—for me.”

Bella took her friend’s small hands into her own. “Won’t you reconsider joining us tonight? Celebrating my first wedding anniversary won’t be the same without you there. Admit it. If my mother and father were not visiting, you would take your evening meal in the main dining area with us like you always do.”

“It’s best to keep in the shadows when others visit, Bella. I know you like to pretend I wasn’t a stowaway on your husband’s ship, escaping a life of servitude to the highest bidder, but it’s the truth.”

“I wouldn’t consent for you to go back to slavery, Chloe. Ever. Nor would Gregory.” Standing up, Bella smoothed the material on her dress as Chloe finished fastening the back. “Are you sure I shouldn’t wear the corset? It was designed for expectant mothers, you know. I feel so huge without it.”

“Binding your expanding waist is the last thing the babe in your womb needs right now, Bella. Don’t make me tell Gregory you have been trying to talk me into helping you secure one in place. You are

just now able to sit down without wincing.” Walking around her mistress, Chloe nodded with approval. “You are glowing, dear friend. How I envy you. You are living a dream, married to a wonderful, brave man, mistress of a grand manor and expecting a new babe in five months.”

“Six months!” Bella chided, putting a finger to her friend’s lips and checking to make sure her husband was not about. Whispering frantically, she continued. “He barely agreed to let me go on the next voyage. If he knew I was four months along, instead of three, he would leave me behind.”

“I will not lie to the captain, Bella. If he asks me directly, I will be honest about how far along you are. I fear you might be even more seasick this time around than the first time we travelled. Gregory knows what is best for you. You should trust him.”

“Men are contrary creatures. Darby, one of the most reasonable of them, refuses to let Lily and their baby come along on this trip, claiming it is too dangerous for them. You are just lucky you managed to return to England without a new husband.” Giggling, she pushed her friend into the bench by the vanity and started fixing her long red hair into soft curls with pins. When she finished, she secured them with bright jeweled combs.

“You and Lily stole the only decent men aboard,” Chloe smirked. “No, that’s not true. I fancied myself in love with another man on the voyage, but you wouldn’t believe me if I told you who it was.” She stared seriously at Bella, wondering why she even mentioned it. Dreams were better left private, especially unrealistic ones.

“Who?” Bella met her eyes in the mirror. “Chloe, tell me which of the men caught your eye. Maybe I can make sure Gregory has the gentleman join us at the captain’s table. Mayhap we can have a wedding before returning to England.”

Chloe was desperately thinking now and wishing she hadn’t mentioned it at all. Deciding to keep this last bit of herself private, she broke eye contact. “It’s the man from the crow’s nest. You remember him, don’t you?” She kept her eyes averted, trying to

remember what he'd looked like. "After all, you climbed all the way up to see him on our first voyage. His name fails me, but his look of astonishment when he rushed down the rope to complain about your presence will stay with me for a lifetime. Then again, the captain's expression was also quite remarkable."

Bella stared at her. "Come now. You fell for him, but you don't even remember his name? Something tells me you're not being completely honest, Chloe."

Her mistress tugged on a tendril of red hair playfully before changing the subject. "Gregory promised we could make a quick visit with Lily and the baby before we sail next week. They say Jillian is the very image of her mother, you know. Including her red hair. But if the baby has her disposition, I doubt Lord Darby will have much rest. Keeping Lily in line must exhaust him, as it is. And Rebekah, her lady's maid, is planning to quit and is looking for a position as a governess. Lily's quite disappointed about that."

"Couldn't she be governess of baby Jillian?"

"That seems the obvious answer, doesn't it? But Lily plans on traveling on ship with her, and Rebekah is terribly prone to vertigo. Voyages are out of the question for her. Be still, Chloe. I'm trying to get this last comb to stay in place."

But Bella's voice was concerned as she continued. "I wish you would join us tonight. My father's disposition concerns me, Chloe. As I was explaining earlier, when you were daydreaming about your hero from the crow's nest, even my mother says something serious is afoot. She is worried that he's deep in debt again. But if he is, he won't talk about it."

"I still have some packing to do before our voyage. I have a few letters to Sarah I was planning to ask the captain to deliver before I found out we would be allowed to sail with him this time. I want to reread them, since I will be able to talk to her about their contents in person now."

Bella reluctantly accepted Chloe's decision and rushed to the meal. Her husband, Captain Gregory Smythe, frowned upon being

late, especially for meals. He was a man of order, running a tight schedule both on ship and at home. Back in her own quarters, Chloe pulled out a handful of missives and pondered their contents. Sarah and Benny had taken her under their protective wing when she had been betrayed by her stepmother and sold into slavery. Bitter at being forced into a life of servitude instead of enjoying the once pampered existence she'd had when her father was alive, Chloe had been thankful for the couple she now referred to as her 'parents'.

Sarah, especially, had taken the time to get to know her, listen to her concerns, and help her face her future instead of living in the past. They were close, so close, in fact, that Chloe often referred to Sarah as her mother. There were few secrets between them. The letters she clutched to her chest now were filled with thoughts and desires she had never spoken aloud before, even to her friends Bella or Lily. Embarrassed by her feelings, she could only express them to Sarah, and then only because miles separated them.

Now she was going to see dear Sarah again. Should she tell her about the images that lingered in her mind constantly? Of the deep brown eyes, strong jaw, and dark hair that belonged to a man she could never kiss, never touch? *Oh, dear God*, she thought. Probably not. Sarah might think she had lost her mind. She walked to the fire and knelt in front of it, reading each page one more time before tossing it into the flames and watching as it was reduced to ashes.

But she could not bring herself to burn the last letter. Destroying it would mean admitting her dreams were never to be fulfilled. She was not ready to give up on them. Not yet. Walking to her wardrobe, she tucked the remaining letter into her coat pocket, where she could pull it out and share her imaginings, if only with herself.



HINTS...

“The meal is surprisingly delicious,” Bella’s father announced. “The shipping business no doubt affords you the opportunity and funds necessary to employ the best.”

Gregory raised his glass. “I’ll convey your appreciation to the cook.”

“I understand you have a slave,” the older man continued, ignoring the sharp intake of breath from his daughter. “Might she be the person who prepared the meal?”

“There are no slaves here, sir. The staff is paid and serve here of their own accord.” Gregory’s voice left little doubt of his feelings at the subject.

“While her skin is more caramel than black, you cannot expect me to believe Bella’s lady’s maid is not of mixed race. How did she come into your employment?”

Arabella replied before Gregory could respond. “The lady’s maid you hired last year to accompany me on my journey to Louisiana did not show up before we departed. Gregory returned your funds for her passage, if you will remember. Chloe came back from America with us.”

Originally, Chloe, a stowaway on Gregory’s ship, had been masqueraded as the missing servant, but there was no need for her father to know such delicate information. Ignoring her husband’s warning glance, she continued. “She is not a slave, father. She is free and more of a friend than a servant. She is also very talented and quite an asset to us.”

“Talented?” Her father took a sip of his wine. “What talents could the chit possibly possess?”

In her haste to defend her friend, Bella started tripping over herself as she listed Chloe’s many gifts. “She is a healer. She has a lovely garden with all kinds of herbs and spices, which she uses to ease all kinds of ailments from a headache to a sick stomach. Her talent with needlework knows no equal, either. Isn’t that so, Gregory?”

“So, the child specializes in all kinds of services? You are indeed

lucky to employ such a person.” Her father’s smile earned him another glare.

Gregory did not seem inclined to even acknowledge the rude comment, but Bella felt obliged to defend her friend’s honor. “Chloe plays the piano better than any lady of the ton I have met.” Turning to her mother, Bella continued. “She plays flawlessly, Mama. You should hear her.”

Wiping his lips with his napkin, her father’s eyes seemed to widen. “I am sure your mother would enjoy such a performance. I, myself, would love to spend more time with this pagan of virtue. Would you kindly call for her and ask her to play for us?”

Gregory stood up and moved out into the hallway, motioning for Bella to come to him. “Invite Chloe down to play,” he whispered to her. “But tell her to select a short piece and excuse herself the moment she’s finished.”

“You suspect Father knows Chloe is a runaway?” Bella fretted, wishing she had not ignored her husband’s earlier signal to stop talking so much.

“Something is troubling your father, and I don’t trust him. I have heard rumors he was having trouble meeting his debts. I have been waiting for him to ask me for funds, but now, I fear he’s planning to secure money in a more sinister way. I don’t want you or Chloe anywhere near him in his current, desperate state.”

“I understand your concern about Chloe, but surely, I am safe in his company.” Bella’s hands settled unconsciously on her rounding belly.

“He tried to marry you off to a scoundrel across the ocean so he could benefit financially. Have your forgotten that?”

“Obviously, *you* haven’t,” Bella said, pressing her lips together. “He didn’t know the man he was marrying me off to planned to kill me, Gregory.”

“That has yet to be proven.” He turned her in the direction of the staircase and planted a sharp smack to her backside. “And try not to tell him where we keep the family jewels and fortune.”

Unlike her mistress, Chloe never second-guessed the captain's orders. She joined them in the parlor and executed a perfect curtsy before settling in at the piano bench. Her fingers gracefully moved about the keys as she shared a tune her father had taught her when she was a young child.

Bella's father did not take his eyes off her. The haunting distress troubling him seemed to slowly melt away, replaced by a sly grin.

He walked over to kiss her hand as she stood up to take her leave. "My daughter was indeed, correct. I know of no one who can challenge your skill at playing. I am sure there are even fewer who rival your beauty. Your lovely red hair and wide blue eyes are becoming. So is your flawless complexion." He chuckled. "You appear more the lady of the manor than a servant...almost as if you were once born to wealth."

Gregory decided it was necessary to get both his wife and Chloe back on board his ship as soon as possible. On the *Arabella*, he was the law and protecting the women would be an easier task.