

Chapter One

August 1874

Chautauqua Lake, New York

The steamer lurched, vibrated. The whistle blew. They were under way. It wouldn't be long now. Marissa caught her balance and pressed her hand hard over her stomach. Laughter and excited chatter rose around her. It seemed as if everyone on the boat was talking about the Chautauqua Assembly program. Snippets of conversations about the Bible studies, teacher training classes, musical entertainments, recreational activities and lectures the assembly offered swelled to an uncomfortable din.

The lectures. She squeezed the small velvet purse dangling from her wrist, felt the stiffness of the two letters inside and took another breath against the roiling in her stomach. The hum of voices drowned out the patter of the rain against the window at her back. She swept her gaze over the people crowded onto benches or standing shoulder to shoulder in the large cabin and gauged her chances of making it to the door.

"Excuse me." She turned sideways, edged through the crowd and slipped outside. The hubbub of the other passengers aboard the *Colonel Phillips* faded to a low murmur. A cool mist from the falling rain swept under the floor of the upper deck and peppered her face. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and looked around. Lantern light from the windows spread a golden gleam across the wet deck, glistened on the railing. She pulled the hood of her waterproof coat forward, took a cautious step toward the front of the ship, another, then stopped.

"Are you all right, miss?"

A man strode toward her out of the darkness. Obviously, he had no problem walking aboard a moving vessel. She nodded, wiped the moisture from her face. "I'm fine. It's only that I'm unaccustomed to walking on a floor that quivers beneath my feet. It's a little unnerving."

The light from behind her washed over the man's strong, well-defined features, flashed on his white teeth when he smiled. *My, but he's handsome.* Warmth climbed into her cheeks. She turned her face away from a lantern hanging from the upper deck that would, no doubt, reveal her blush.

"It's the thrust of the steamer's engine you feel. The occasional lurch is caused by the paddle wheels when there is a steering correction." The man stopped a few steps away from her. "The deck is a bit slick. May I assist you to your destination?"

He was younger than she'd thought. Perhaps in his midtwenties. A few years older than herself. She glanced across the distance to the railing and weighed her unease against propriety.

"Allow me to introduce myself." The man removed his hat and dipped his head in a small, polite bow that revealed a mass of short brown hair with deep waves crested by sun

streaks. "Grant Winston, at your service." He replaced his hat and flashed his smile again. "At least I am if you will permit me to be, Miss..."

"Bradley." She drew her gaze from his disarming grin, nibbled at the corner of her lip. "I am going to the railing at the front of the ship. If you wouldn't mind walking beside me..."

"It would be my pleasure."

"Then, thank you, Mr. Grant. I accept your kindness." She offered a silent prayer that she wouldn't slip on the wet deck and stepped forward. Grant Winston moved beside her, matching his steps to her uncertain ones. She let out a sigh and took a tight hold when they reached the railing.

"Feel safer now?"

"I will as long as I don't look down."

He chuckled. A deep, pleasant sort of rolling sound that had a smile tugging at her lips.

"I take it you're not a veteran steamer passenger?"

"I'm strictly a landlubber." She laughed to cover the nervous tremor in her voice and peeked over the railing. Dark water flowed beneath the ship, brushed along the side in a sinister-sounding whisper. Her stomach flopped. "I didn't know how intimidating water could be. I should have made Lincoln teach me to swim." The name slipped from her lips without thought. Pain rose, squeezed the air from her lungs. She blinked, thankful for the rain that would hide any betraying shimmer of tears.

"Lincoln?"

The band of pain squeezed tighter. "My brother." Bitterness tainted her voice. She drew a shallow, ragged breath, lifted her gaze and watched the lights on the shore morph to yellow blurs as the ship steamed toward the middle of the long lake. *Don't let him ask about Lincoln, Lord. Please, don't let him ask.* The ship lurched. Her kid gloves slipped against the wet rail. She gasped and tightened her grip.

"It might help if you look at the land ahead, instead of behind. See how it curves around? That's why the captain changed course. The ship will steady now."

His deep voice was calm, reassuring. The tension left her shoulders. *Thank You, Lord.* She gingerly shifted her position and searched for the spot he described.

He gestured ahead toward the right. "When we pass that outcropping, you'll see lights among the trees on the hills at the Chautauqua campgrounds at Fair Point, though it's still quite some distance away."

The wind gusted. He swiped the water from the collar of his mackintosh and tugged it up around his neck. "I understand there are already a great number of people in attendance, though the assembly does not officially begin until tomorrow. And, of course, there are still people coming by steamers both from here in Mayville and from Jamestown at the other end of the lake. Two or three hundred on every ship. A friend here in Mayville told me the captains are leaving port at full capacity."

If he was trying to distract her, it worked admirably. "So many?"

"Yes. It's quite amazing really." He turned toward her, leaned his hip against the railing. "The Chautauqua Assembly program seems to have caught the interest of people from all over. I've spoken with a family from Canada. And people from Ohio and Virginia. And, of course, New York and Pennsylvania."

Oh my! What had she gotten herself into? She swallowed hard and stared toward the outcropping he'd pointed out. The more people who attended her lectures, the better, of course. But she was no orator, only—

"Am I right?"

She started out of her thoughts, glanced up at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I asked if you are attending the assembly."

Her stomach clenched. "Yes, I am." *Because of you, Lincoln. And Father.*

"I thought as much."

She took a steadying breath, thrust her dark thoughts away. "And why is that?"

"Because I believe everyone aboard this ship, save the captain and crew, is headed for the Chautauqua campgrounds. And—" his gaze dropped to her hands gripping the railing "—I figure it had to be something like this advertised assembly to entice you to step foot on the *Colonel Phillips.*"

"You are correct, Mr. Winston." *Though not because I'm afraid of the water.* The conversation had gone far enough. She wanted no questions about her reason for attendance—not with tears threatening. Nor did she want him to find her lacking in proper manners and judge her to be a woman of low behavior. She gave him a polite smile. "Thank you for your kind reassurance and assistance, sir. I'm most appreciative."

He took a step back and made her a polite bow. "My pleasure, Miss Bradley."

The steamer gave another lurch, headed into the wind and started around the outcropping. The rain slanted in between the decks. She clung to the railing and stared out over the water until Grant Winston's footsteps faded away and there was only the patter of the rain against the hood and shoulder cape of her waterproof coat, and the whisper of the water against the ship. A well-brought-up young woman did not look after a young man—not even a kind, helpful one.

She let out a long breath and turned her thoughts to the two letters in her purse. Who had prompted those in charge of the Chautauqua Assembly to send her an invitation to lecture on temperance? Could it be the Mrs. Tobin Swan who had written asking her to lead a group of women in protest against the local vineyards and wineries? Her lips lifted in a grim smile. Wine had destroyed her family. It would be a pleasure to stop its production at its very source.

"Grant me success, Lord, I pray." Her determination firmed. The solitude of the rainy deck was the perfect place to rehearse her lectures. The more she practiced them, the less

chance that she would make an error or miss including an important point when she was speaking.

Grant leaned on the rail and watched the foaming water churned up by the side wheel. It was hard to imagine having a fear of the water. Going for a swim was his favorite way to end a summer workday. But then, he'd learned to swim when he was four years old. Of necessity. Of course, he'd been plenty afraid that day.

He stared down at the lake water and thought back to the moment when he'd stepped on the wet mud at the edge of their pond and slid into the cold water. Fortunately, he'd instinctively pushed hard when his feet hit the stony bottom. A grin slanted his lips. That push combined with the frantic flailing of his arms and legs had brought him back up to the top of the water where he could gasp in air. He'd stretched his arm out in an effort to reach the bank, kicked his feet and stretched out his other arm trying to get closer, and suddenly he was swimming on top of the water instead of sinking to the bottom. Of course, the pond was shallow at that end. Not more than five feet deep even during a spring runoff. Things would have ended differently had he fallen in the deep end.

His grin faded. He'd not thought about that before. He'd best fence that pond if he ever married and had children of his own. He straightened and moved down the railing, leaned against a post and watched the lights of Mayville disappear as the steamer rounded the outcropping. His mother and father were eager for him to marry and produce an heir. Being an only child had its responsibilities—a fact that they pointed out to him more and more frequently of late. It wasn't that he had any objections to being married. He wanted a wife and family the same as any man. He just hadn't met a woman he'd found interesting enough to hold his attention. Although Miss Bradley was definitely intriguing. And she was a "miss." She hadn't corrected him when he addressed her as such. And she hadn't simpered about it, either. He hated that coy behavior.

Muted laughter and voices drifted his way from the crowded passenger lounge at his back. He wiped the rain from his face, stepped over into the silence by the side railing and slid his gaze toward the front of the steamer. She was still there. A dark silhouette against the flickering, rain-streaked light of one of the ship's lanterns.

Miss Bradley was different all right. He wasn't accustomed to a young woman dismissing him from her presence. And he'd never known any woman who shunned society for solitude. Or one who didn't hurry inside as quickly as possible when it rained. So why was she standing out in the chilly, rainy night alone? And what had caused the sadness he'd seen in her eyes? Her lovely blue eyes.

The steamer cleared the outcropping. Pinpricks of light flickered against the darkness ahead. He pushed back the edges of his mackintosh, shoved his hands in his trousers pockets and leaned back against a post studying the shifting pattern of lights. He'd intended to find out

the schedule and attend only the science classes at the Chautauqua Assembly in the hope of finding a way to increase yield at the vineyard. But that was before his chance encounter with the intriguing Miss Bradley. Now he would come to Fair Point as often as he could get away from the vineyard. Foolishness perhaps; the assembly would last for only two weeks. But that would give him time enough to find out the answers to those questions.

A ship's whistle floated through the dark, rainy night. Bells pealed. Tiny lights danced on the water, approached the docking area miles ahead at Fair Point. A frown tugged his brows down. Another steamer was bringing a couple hundred or more attendees to the Chautauqua campgrounds from the other end of the lake. The swarm of people would make finding Miss Bradley difficult. But he liked a challenge...