



A DANGEROUS  
ENGAGEMENT

ASHLEY WEAVER

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# CHAPTER ONE

Chelsea Piers, New York City  
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I came to New York for a wedding; I never imagined I would bear witness to two deaths. Strange the turns life takes when one least expects it.

A cool breeze ruffled my hair as I stood on the deck of our cruise liner, watching the city grow closer. Before us lay Chelsea Piers, and, behind them, the buildings of Manhattan rising proudly against the cloudless blue sky. It gave me a thrill to look at that skyline. It was almost as though I could feel the energy increasing with every passing moment. Already the soft silence of the sea was fading as faint yet distinctly urban noises of the city began to be carried out across the water on the wind. Gulls soared and dipped above, calling raucously as if welcoming us to their lively domain.

‘It presents a pretty picture, doesn’t it?’ my husband, Milo, said as he came to stand beside me at the rail. His

normally smooth black hair was tousled by the wind, his eyes were far bluer than the water, and his complexion had been darkened by his time spent on deck during the voyage. He looked handsome, relaxed, and well-rested.

I felt none of those things. Though this was not my first trip to New York, it had been the least pleasant voyage thus far. The waters had been choppy, and I had spent most of the four days at sea in our stateroom feeling ill. I was immeasurably glad that land was in sight.

‘I’m almost sad to see the voyage end,’ he said, in direct contradiction to my own thoughts, as he leant against the rail. ‘Perhaps we should take a pleasure cruise when we return to England.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, without any great enthusiasm. The water had been so unkind that, at the moment, I didn’t want to think about taking a bath, let alone another voyage.

‘But first things first,’ he went on, turning his back to the wind and cupping his hand around a cigarette to shield it from the damp gusts of sea air before flicking on his silver lighter. ‘We haven’t been to New York in some time. When this dull business is over, we’ll have some time to enjoy ourselves.’

The ‘dull business’ in question was the marriage of my old friend Tabitha Alden. It was this event which had drawn us to New York. While I was very much looking forward to seeing Tabitha and taking part in her wedding, Milo had accompanied me grudgingly, enticed more by the promise of riotous nightlife than by any desire to sit in a pew beside me on the special day.

‘You needn’t make it sound as though it’s going to be a chore,’ I said. ‘Tabitha’s wedding is going to be lovely.’

‘With alcohol illegal in this country, I don’t see how it will even be tolerable.’

I laughed. ‘Surely you don’t mind weddings as much as all that.’

‘The only wedding I’ve ever wanted to attend was ours,’ he said, blowing a stream of smoke into the wind.

I turned to look at him, quirking a brow. ‘Indeed? No one had to drag you to the church? I’ve always wondered.’

‘I was there before you were,’ he replied. ‘I half expected you to change your mind, and it wasn’t until you reached the altar and I looked into your eyes that I felt I could rest easy.’

His tone was light, but he appeared perfectly serious and I was touched. Milo was rarely sentimental, and the unexpected moments when he revealed a hint of sincerity always caught me off guard.

‘For that lovely sentiment,’ I said softly, ‘you needn’t ever attend a wedding with me again.’

His eyes met mine. ‘I’ll follow you into as many ceremonies as your heart desires, my darling,’ he replied. Then he tossed his cigarette overboard and leant in to kiss me.

For the next few moments, my seasickness was entirely forgotten.

Our romantic interlude concluded, I went back to the stateroom as we prepared to dock. I wanted to make sure that everything was in order. My mother would have been shocked that I had stood on the deck as long as I had; she disapproved of looking as though one were a vulgar tourist overanxious to reach New York. Not for the first

time, I felt a traitorous sense of relief that a prior – and more prestigious – social obligation had prevented her from joining us on this trip.

The stateroom was panelled in dark wood, decorated in a tasteful, modern manner. If we hadn't been lurching from one side to the other for several hours of each day, the furniture, mercifully, bolted to the floor, I might have almost believed that we were in a small hotel suite. I hoped the voyage home would find less tumultuous seas and I might enjoy it a bit more.

I walked through the sitting area with its geometric-print rug and dark blue sofa and chairs and into the well-appointed bedroom, avoiding, as I had done for the entirety of the voyage, the view of moving water visible through the glass doors that led onto a balcony.

Winnelda, my maid, looked up as I entered. 'Oh, there you are, madam,' she said, closing the suitcase that lay on the bed. 'I'm nearly finished, I think. I've left your lighter coat, as well as your hat and gloves, in the wardrobe along with your handbag. Parks has gone to see about the trunks.'

Milo's valet was sure to have everything well in hand. Between his rigid efficiency and Winnelda's rather more relaxed organisational style, we were quite well taken care of.

'Thank you, Winnelda. We'll be docking soon, but we've some time before we disembark. Go up on deck and get your first glimpse of the city, if you like.'

'Thank you. I think I shall. I'm ever so excited to see New York, madam,' she said, her platinum curls bobbing in her enthusiasm. 'I've only ever seen it at the cinema, and I can't wait to tell my friends what it's really like.'

‘I think you’ll enjoy it,’ I said. ‘I don’t expect I shall have much for you to do while I’m here, so you should have quite a good bit of free time.’

‘I’ll look forward to exploring. It will be easier than Paris, I think, since we all speak the same language. Or nearly the same language, at least.’

She turned to go but stopped in the doorway. ‘I didn’t pack the things in the desk. I thought perhaps there would be documents and things you’d want to look after yourself.’

‘Yes, thank you, Winnelda.’

She left then, and I crossed to the little wardrobe. Taking out my hat, a fetching thing of rust-coloured straw bedecked with burgundy roses, I went to the mirror and put it on, adjusting it to a jaunty angle on my dark waves. My fair complexion looked even paler than normal, but at least the colouring of the hat gave the illusion of a bit of pinkness to my cheeks.

Gathering up my jacket, gloves, and handbag, I went back into the sitting room, moving to the little desk that sat in the corner. I hadn’t had much need for writing letters on the voyage, and the rolling of the ship would have made it difficult, but I had placed a few documents there when unpacking.

I began sorting through the papers and my eyes fell on Tabitha’s last letter to me, the one she had sent asking me to take part in her wedding.

I picked it up, pulling the pale pink stationery from the envelope, and glanced over the letter, feeling as I had the first time I read it, and all the times since, that there was more to it than met the eye.

*Dearest Amory,  
I can't tell you how excited I am to announce that I am to be married. I DO hope that you will be a bridesmaid (or is it brides-matron since you are married, I forget?). Tom is wonderful. I can't wait for you to meet him. It's been a bit of a whirlwind (almost strange the way we met and fell for one another so quickly) but we're madly in love, and I know we shall be very happy together. Even better, he is going to work with father. He's a genius at business things, and I know the two of them will be a smashing success. We've had our ups and downs, but I believe with all my heart that things are going to be better than ever. It's as if all my dreams are coming true at once. Oh, DO say you'll be in the wedding. Then everything will be perfect.*

*Write back soon with your answer. I DO hope it will be yes!!*

*Yours fondly,  
Tabitha*

This letter was just as Tabitha's letters had always been: effusive, disorganised, and embellished with heavily underlined words for emphasis. I wasn't sure, then, why I had felt there was something different about this one, some undertone that made me a bit uneasy.

I supposed one aspect of this was the suddenness of her engagement. She and the young man in question had not known each other for long, and she had fallen madly in love and agreed to marry him in a short span of time. Of course, Tabitha had always been one to throw herself



wholeheartedly into things, so there was no reason why love should be the exception. As I had done much the same thing myself when I met Milo, I had to acknowledge a hasty engagement in itself was not something to be concerned about.

However, I also knew that the Alden family had been in a somewhat difficult financial situation following the stock market crash of 1929. Tabitha's letters had spoken of it somewhat vaguely, though she had clearly not wished to elaborate upon the misfortune of her family.

The hint that her fiancé was going to contribute to the family's business dealings made me wonder if part of what she believed to be love was, in fact, a sense of duty she felt to her father. I did hope that Tabitha wasn't rushing into something to help her father's company in some way.

Then again, perhaps I was reading too much into things. Milo often said that, having been involved in several mysteries over the past year, I was constantly looking for trouble. On the contrary, I had a great abhorrence for anything of the sort. But once faced with a problem, my conscience wouldn't let me rest until I had come to some sort of conclusion.

Nevertheless, I reminded myself as I gathered up the rest of the letters and papers from the drawer and shuffled them into a stack, now was not the time for such things. Tabitha's wedding was a joyous occasion, and I did not intend to spoil the experience by worrying about things unnecessarily.

'Ready to disembark, darling?' Milo asked as he came into the stateroom.

I looked up, tucking the letters into my handbag. ‘Yes, please. I’m dying to set foot on dry land.’

Free of the ship and customs at last, we found our way through the exuberant crowds of weary travellers and the friends and relations that awaited them to the car the Aldens had sent for us. Milo examined the sleek, low-roofed black automobile with a collector’s eye, and apparently found it to his liking.

‘He has good taste, for an American,’ he told me as we slid into the plush leather back seat.

‘I trust you won’t add that qualifier when talking to him,’ I said. Tabitha’s father, Benjamin Alden, had met Tabitha’s mother when travelling in London for business. The two had eventually wed and settled in England, not far from my family home. Mr Alden had set about being as much of a country squire as it was possible for an American gentleman to be, and Tabitha and I had often found ourselves in each other’s company, though she was a bit younger than I.

Then Mrs Alden had died in an accident when Tabitha was fourteen, and she and a heartbroken Mr Alden had returned to New York. We had kept up a correspondence since then and visited each other once or twice, and it seemed to me that she had acclimated well to life in the United States.

‘Did you say Mr Alden had experienced recent financial difficulties?’ Milo enquired as the car pulled away from the kerb.

‘That was the impression I had from Tabitha. Why?’

‘This car is a Duesenberg Model J Tourster, worth at least

twelve thousand dollars,' he observed, lighting a cigarette.

My brows rose. 'Perhaps things have improved.'

'It would seem so.'

We drove along, enjoying the crowded, colourful streets of a city so like London, yet so different. There was something undeniably appealing about New York, a breathless vitality that seemed to pulse through it, making everything seem brighter and more alive every time I visited.

Eventually the crowded streets gave way to a neighbourhood filled with stately houses and cheerful little parks, a quiet, unhurried haven in the middle of a bustling city. At last the car pulled to a stop before an imposing white edifice. I found myself a bit surprised at the grandeur of the building before me, especially given Tabitha's hints at her father's financial woes. Whatever Mr Alden's difficulties had been, it seemed that they had, indeed, not been of a lasting nature.

We alighted from the car and made our way up the front steps to the grand front doors.

A butler pulled one open just as we reached it. 'Welcome, Mr and Mrs Ames,' he said, ushering us in and taking our jackets. 'Miss Tabitha is expecting you in the drawing room, if you'll follow me.'

He led us down a long hallway, decorated with an assortment of art in gold frames, to a large drawing room. Tabitha Alden was sitting at a desk along one wall writing something, but turned at our approach and jumped up from her seat and hurried towards us.

Then, in a display of what my mother would likely describe as an unfortunate by-product of her American upbringing,

she threw herself into my arms with great enthusiasm.

‘Hello, Amory! It’s so good to see you.’ She pulled back from the embrace, her eyes moving over me. ‘You look wonderful, you’ve barely changed at all!’

‘You look much the same yourself,’ I replied. Though the young lady she had been on my last visit, well before my marriage six years ago, had, of course, grown into an attractive young woman, she was still recognisable as the girl I had known. Her wavy hair was a bright golden hue that gleamed with hints of red when the sunlight shining through the window hit it, and her large blue eyes and the cheerful smile that flashed across her face were the same as they had always been. Indeed, I could still see in her features hints of the merry, energetic child with whom I had forsaken piano practice to parade before mirrors draped in our mothers’ ball gowns.

‘Of course, I’ve seen your pictures in the society columns from time to time, so I’m not entirely surprised at how you look. And this must be Mr Ames,’ she said, turning to Milo.

‘Yes, this is my husband, Milo,’ I said.

‘How very nice to meet you,’ she said, extending her hand to him. ‘I’ve seen you in the society columns, too. You’re even handsomer in person, though perhaps a bit less wicked-looking.’

‘Thank you. I think,’ Milo said dryly.

‘Oh, you mustn’t mind me. I’m always saying improper things,’ she said without embarrassment. She really was just as I remembered her: lively and cheerfully forthright, with no hint of self-consciousness. In any case, she was right. Milo had begun to live down a good deal of his past infamy.

‘Come sit down. We’ll have tea.’ She led us to a cluster of very good furniture before the fireplace. ‘How was your voyage? I wanted so much to be there to meet you on your arrival, but the seamstress was just here for a fitting, and it’s very difficult to put her off.’

‘I understand completely,’ I said. ‘The voyage was a bit rough; I’m glad to be on steady ground. How are the wedding preparations?’

‘I never imagined there was so much to tend to, but it’s all going well. I’m so glad that you could come. My wedding just wouldn’t have been the same without you.’

The maid brought a tea tray into the room just then and set it on the table near Tabitha.

‘I suppose I ought to have asked you if you wanted to go to your room to freshen up,’ she said as she poured. ‘I sometimes get ahead of myself. It’s just so nice to see you again.’

‘Tea sounds lovely,’ I told her truthfully.

‘It’s one of the things that remains with me from England,’ she said. ‘I’m fairly American now, but I must still have my tea.’ I had noticed that her accent had softened considerably. If one didn’t know she had spent a good part of her life in England, one might not even notice it.

‘Are you sure it’s convenient for us to stay?’ I asked as I accepted my cup and saucer. Though we had fully intended on going to a hotel, she had insisted that we stay at the Aldens’ residence.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘I’m very glad to have you here. Dad is gone a good deal of the time, so it’s just me in this big house. Besides, we’ll be able to catch up. Letters are

a good way to stay in touch, but I'm looking forward to some long conversations. One can't always put what one wants to say in a letter.'

She looked up at me as she said this, and I thought I caught something in her gaze, the hint that there was a deeper meaning beneath the words. I had the impression that there was something in particular she wanted to discuss, just as I had when I had first read her letter.

The moment passed, however, and she offered us sandwiches, biscuits, and little cakes, which I was eager to enjoy now that I had left the ship behind. I supposed now, with Milo sitting beside us, was not the time to press the matter.

*Focus on the wedding details before you look for a mystery, Amory,* I told myself. There would be plenty of time for that later.