

# THE MARRIAGE MASQUERADE

BRIDES OF THE WEST

~THE KENNABRAE BRIDES~

BOOK TWO



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, Kings James Version.

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## CHAPTER 1



*DULUTH, MINNESOTA, APRIL, 1906*

Noah Kennebrae tilted his head and didn't meet his brother's eyes in the mirror. "I'm through talking about this."

The razor scraped against his cheek, removing thick brown beard in relentless swatches. The tangy smell of shaving soap mixed with bitterness. His pride lay like the whiskers in the basin, chopped off and scattered. How he'd enjoyed wearing this full beard, the mark of his captaincy. Kennebrae captains always wore a full beard.

"At least tell me where you're going. I need to be able to contact you." Jonathan put his hand on Noah's shoulder.

Noah shrugged off the gesture and rinsed the razor. He cut another patch of whiskers, careful to square off the sideburn. "I can't think why you'd need to contact me. You have everything well in hand."

Habit led him to look out the window toward Lake Superior. The hulk of his first and only command crouched on the

shoal where he had grounded it last November. Ice-encased for months, it now rocked with the pounding of the recently freed surf. Jonathan would be out there later today, directing operations. Salvagers would swarm, unloading tons of iron ore, patching the hull as best they could before towing the crippled steamer into the safety of the harbor.

Though Noah mourned the loss of the *Bethany*, he mourned the loss of his crew more. Ten men dead as a direct result of Noah's arrogant foolishness. Only God's mercy had kept the entire complement of sailors from perishing during the storm, including his own brother.

"You should stay here and oversee the salvaging yourself. You're running away, and there's no need." Jonathan rammed his fingers through his hair. "What's happened to you? You've changed so much. This is nonsense."

"Is it? Is it nonsense when no one will look me in the eye? When the widows of my crewmembers are grieving because I couldn't bring my ship into the harbor? I need a clean break, away from Duluth." His hand trembled, and he lowered the razor. Shame made it difficult to meet his own eyes in the mirror. He set his jaw, gripping the edge of the basin and forcing himself to stare into his reflection, to take the pain he so justly deserved.

*Coward. Murderer.*

"I know things look dark now, but you wait. Sentiment will change once the salvaging is finished. And I'm sure, once the engineers go over the *Bethany*, you'll be exonerated of any wrongdoing."

Noah snatched up a towel and wiped the excess lather from his face. The sharp smells of soap and cotton pricked his nose, and he fought to relax his gritted teeth.

Again his gaze shot to the window. At least the constant

reminder of his failure would be removed from display soon. Not that he would be here to see it. He couldn't take one more day in Duluth—the stares, the whispers, the looks of pity. He had to get away before the guilt ground his soul to powder.

“Is that all you're running from?” Jonathan's stare pierced like a harpoon. “What about the wedding?”

Noah shouldered into his suspenders. “You know my views on that. Just because you fell in love with your arranged bride doesn't mean my marriage would wind up the same. Grandfather will have to break things off since it was his idea in the first place. I don't even know who he had lined up, but it won't matter now. No man is going to want to marry his daughter off to a disgraced ex-captain. I suppose I'm lucky Grandfather let me get out of the hospital and back on my feet before he started nagging about a wedding again. Broken ribs and pneumonia—a blessing in disguise. He'll have to turn his matchmaking schemes on Eli instead. It should be easy. Eli can marry whoever Grandfather chose for me.”

Noah headed into his bedroom, rolling down his sleeves and buttoning the cuffs. He swept keys, watch, and coins off the dresser and into his pants pocket.

Jonathan put himself between Noah and the hall door. “Noah, I can't let you go like this. At least tell me where you're headed and when you plan to come back.”

Noah noted the square jaw, the glint in his older brother's brown eyes. So much like their grandfather, Abraham Kennebrae. Bossy, dictatorial, sure of himself and his decisions. Noah envied Jonathan his confidence. He hadn't realized what a valuable commodity confidence could be until catastrophe stripped it away, leaving a husk, a shell that threatened to crumble at the first strong wind. “You have to

promise you won't tell Grandfather where I am. He'll only want to drag me back and force me into marriage."

"I won't tell him where you've gone, but I will tell him you are all right. You owe him at least that much, to not have to worry after your safety." Jonathan crossed his arms.

Noah lifted his jacket from the bed and shrugged into it. He withdrew a telegram from the breast pocket and handed it to his brother.

Jonathan read the sheet aloud.

"APRIL 15 1906.

NICK KENNEDY

ARRIVE SUTTON ISLAND LIGHT VIA FERRY *JENNY KLAMATH*  
APRIL 20 TO ASSUME ASSISTANT KEEPER POSITION STOP STAN-  
DARD WAGES UNIFORMS AT YOUR EXPENSE STOP

JASPER DILLON – INSPECTOR, US LIGHTHOUSE BOARD"

His eyebrows pinched over his nose. "Nick Kennedy?"

Noah stared at the door behind his brother. "You don't think they'd have given me the job if I had applied as Noah Kennebrae, do you? Nick Kennedy is close enough."

"Lying to your employers isn't the best way to start out a new job." Jonathan folded the paper into precise creases and handed it back.

Noah squashed the tickle of guilt Jonathan's accusation sent swirling through his chest. "It isn't a lie. From the moment I walk out that door, I'm Nick Kennedy, assistant keeper of the Sutton Island Light. No past, no manipulating grandfather, and no marriage to a stranger."

"You won't even meet her? At least tell her in person why

you won't marry her? It's not like you to cut and run when things get tough."

The barb hit like a shot from a Lyle gun.

"Running is never the answer." Jonathan stepped aside, lines of sorrow etching his face.

Noah swallowed hard and picked up his sea-bag. "All I know is I can't stay here. I have to get out."

"When will you come back?"

"I don't know." Maybe never. When he could look his crew members in the eyes and not feel he'd let them down. When he could sleep through the night without nightmares of being frozen to death in his own pilothouse. When he found some way of getting through a day without wishing he had perished in the storm folks were now calling the *Bethany Blow*.



Anastasia Michaels pounded up the curved staircase in an unladylike manner sure to send Hazel into a dither. She rushed down the hall to her bedroom and skidded inside. The door slammed with a thud, and she sagged against it, her hand still clutching the knob.

Hazel looked up from the rocker beside the fireplace. Her needle hovered over yards of white nightgown material.

"What is it this time, child?" Hazel had a dried-apple face, her eyes gleaming like two pips amid the wrinkles. She regarded Anastasia with a calm, unruffled expression. Nothing Anastasia did seemed to rile the woman who had looked after her for all of her nineteen years.

Anastasia panted, one hand on her chest, breathless more from her news than from running through the halls of

Michaelton House. “Father’s home from Hibbing. He went right into the study with an old man in a wheelchair. He didn’t even greet me after being away for months. And do you know what they were talking about?”

Hazel eyed her shrewdly. “And how is it you overheard them if they went into the study?”

Anastasia’s ears tingled with heat, and she twisted her hands at her waist. “Well, I walked by the door, and my shoe was unfastened. I had to bend over, and it just happened to bring my ear down to the keyhole. . .”

Hazel’s eyebrows lifted.

“Oh Hazel, now isn’t the time to chide me for eavesdropping. It’s the only way to find out anything around here. Father and that man are hatching the most awful plan.” She flung her arms wide.

Hazel ran her gnarled hand across the fabric in her lap and resumed her mending. “It can’t be as bad as all that. I’ve told you eavesdropping only gives you part of the story. Your father is an upstanding businessman. He wouldn’t be doing anything underhanded.”

“But he is!” Anastasia plopped onto the footstool beside the rocker and anchored her elbows onto her knees, her hand providing a perch for her chin. “They’re downstairs right now arranging my marriage. To a stranger—the grandson of the man in the wheelchair. They’re discussing me as if I was a company asset. Father is talking about mergers and gross tonnage and quarterly profits. And the other man is just as bad. He’s gloating over railcars, loading docks, and net worth. It’s disgusting.”

The lines around Hazel’s lips deepened, her eyes dimming. “So the time has come.”

Anastasia sat up and gripped the edges of the footstool.

“You don’t seem surprised.” Her heart fluttered like a captured bird. “Please tell me you didn’t know about this.” She frowned at Hazel.

Hazel poked the needle in and out furiously.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Your father forbade me to tell you, Annie.” No one but Hazel ever called her Annie. “He told me months ago so I could look for another place if I chose. Once you’re married there will be no need for me. Your husband will no doubt have his own staff. If I don’t want to find a new position, your father will retire me to a cottage he owns in Hibbing to live out my days.”

“How is it he wanted you to be prepared and spared no thought to warning me?” Anastasia bounded up to pace the rug. “Who has he chosen? How could he know what kind of man would be a good match for me? He’s so wrapped up in his business he barely knows what I look like. He spends all his time at his mines, then the first time he’s home in months, he’s making plans to rid himself of me.”

Hazel set aside the mending and rose, her shoulders stooped with age but her step light. “I don’t see what you can do about it, child. Your father has worked out the legal details. They’ll be setting a wedding date now, I imagine. That was the last thing to do once your father got back to Duluth.”

“I’ll just show you what I can do about it. I’ll march right down there and tell both those old schemers what they can do with their old wedding plans.” She headed to the door, hands fisted at her sides.

Hazel grabbed Anastasia’s elbow. “Annie, you’ll just embarrass yourself and anger your father. Their plans won’t be set aside by your tantrums.”

“But what else can I do?” Hot tears pricked her eyes. How could he do this to her? Why wouldn’t he even consult her before signing her away like one of his business contracts? He never would have treated her brother, Neville, like this. Not his son and heir. “Hazel, won’t you help me?” She gripped her hands together, trying to calm her jangling nerves and think.

Hazel’s eyes swept Anastasia, her wrinkled face softening into gentle lines. “Don’t you even want to meet the young man? He might be nice, you know.”

Anastasia waved her hands, pushing the idea away. “No, I don’t want to meet him. What kind of man lets someone else decide his future? Not the kind I want to marry, that’s for sure. I spent my entire childhood trying to earn Father’s respect and love, and he ignored me. If I let him choose my husband, he’ll pick someone just as cold and unfeeling. I can’t live like that. I can’t live without love.”

“How do you plan to get out of this then?”

“I’ll get a job. Maybe as a seamstress or a governess or something.” She threaded her fingers through the heavy, blond curls lying on her shoulder. She knew precious little about sewing or caring for children, but she’d rather do that than be shackled to a stranger for the rest of her life. And Anastasia could count on Hazel for help, as she always had. She just had to wait for it.

Hazel tapped her pursed lips, eyeing Anastasia. “You’re so much like your mother. Twenty-five years ago I stood in her bedroom having very nearly this same conversation. She was forced into marriage with Philip Michaels, a perfect stranger. I couldn’t do anything to help her. But I will try to help you now.”