

Chapter Twenty-Three

One month later
August 1875

Silas hadn't been able to concentrate all morning on the work on the schooner. The Winslows were due back that day and all he could think of was seeing Cherish once again. He was aware just when the schooner from Eastport lowered anchor in the harbor. He calculated the time of their disembarking, knowing Jacob was meeting them with the wagon and bringing them home.

He wondered if they would come to the boat shop at all today. He couldn't imagine Mr. Winslow not making an appearance.

Silas came up from the shipyard and looked over the shop one more time. The wood shavings had been swept up, the tools neatly hung on their hooks or placed into the toolbox. No new work had begun, and if the cavernous room had a vacant look, at least it looked neat and clean.

When the afternoon waned and no one from the Winslow house came, Silas swallowed his disappointment. He toyed with the idea of going there and reporting on things in the past month, but then changed his mind. They were probably weary from their journey. Maybe Winslow even had taken to his bed.

He hadn't had news from any of them in the month they'd been away. He'd known from Celia only that they'd spent most of the month on a lake resort somewhere in the White Mountains with a cousin, the same one who'd escorted Cherish all over Europe.

Cherish hadn't written to him at all, not even a postcard.

He sighed and closed the shop in the late afternoon. No use keeping it open. He headed to the point to work on the yacht in Caleb's workshop.

The following morning he came down to the shipyard without bothering to stop at either the boat shop or office, not thinking anyone would be there so early. But when he arrived at the schooner, Will hailed him.

"The boss is back," he said with a grin. "Wants to see you as soon as you're in."

"Thanks," Silas replied, turning and heading back up the beach to the buildings, neither his tone nor features betraying what he was feeling inside. Would she be with her father? Would Winslow be satisfied with Silas's stewardship during the time he'd been away?

He knocked on the office door and opened it. His eyes went immediately to Cherish, who sat in front of her father's desk, studying a ledger. She glanced up as he entered, but said nothing.

His eyes lingered on her. She wore a simple navy blue skirt and white blouse, her hair in a knot at the nape of her neck. She looked older, more subdued than he was accustomed to seeing her.

"Silas! There you are!" Tom Winslow called out, standing and coming around the desk, his hand stretched out.

"Welcome back, sir," Silas responded, dragging his eyes from Cherish and taking the proffered hand. Winslow took his in a firm grip. "You're looking very well," he told Cherish's father, noting the man's tanned features and cheery demeanor.

"I feel like a new man. How have you been, son? Everything looks wonderful. You did a fine job holding down the fort, didn't he, Cherish?" He turned toward his daughter.

"Yes," she answered quietly.

Silas wondered at her reserved manner. Was it her father's health? Was it the fact that no new orders had come into the shipyard? Why then did Winslow seem so exuberant?

Winslow kept a hand on his arm and led him toward a window overlooking the shipyard below. They saw the schooner hull, which the men were painting.

"She's about ready to launch. Have you set a date?"

Silas glanced at Winslow. He wanted *Silas* to set a date? He felt the pressure of Winslow's hand on his arm. He couldn't recall Winslow ever touching him like the son he was calling him. "No. I thought I'd wait until you got back."

"So, what do you estimate?"

He shrugged. "Another week, ten days. We're just painting the hull with the copper paint. The rest of the interior work can be done after she's launched."

Winslow nodded. "Good, then. Let's look at the calendar."

They walked back to the desk and leaned over a desk calendar. This time Cherish didn't look up. Silas gazed at the top of her head.

Having no reason to linger, although Winslow seemed in no hurry to dismiss him, Silas said, "Well, I'll get back down to the yard."

"Oh, sure. Didn't mean to keep you. Say, why don't you come up to the house for dinner?"

Silas glanced from father to daughter, who seemed not to have heard, although he noticed her pencil had stopped writing.

"Thank you, but Mrs. McDuffie is expecting me at the parsonage."

"Oh, of course. Well, what about tomorrow? That way you can let her know you won't be home. I want to speak to you about a few things."

"All right," he answered slowly, wondering what was coming. The termination of their temporary arrangement?

He nodded to Cherish, who looked up only when he was saying goodbye to her father.

"I'll be seeing you, Cherish."

"Goodbye, Silas."

The next morning Silas entered the boat shop hoping to see Cherish before going down to the shipyard. He breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing her sitting on a high stool, looking at a lines drawing, like old times.

He cleared his throat. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

Again she was a vision to his hungry eyes, dressed this morning in a pretty calico print, her hair in a ponytail. He approached the worktable. "Are you glad to be back home?" he asked, wondering how to get past the formality that was between them.

"Yes."

"How was Boston?"

"Very nice, thank you."

She was studying the plan, and he couldn't help the disappointment he felt at her dismissive though polite replies.

"Did you see many friends?"

"Yes. What do you think of this plan for a schooner?" she asked. "On our trip back George Henderson asked Papa for his opinion. He's thinking of having it built."

Silas drew the paper closer to him and looked at it, but his eyes didn't really see it. Instead, the hint of lilacs reached his nostrils and he noticed the sheen of the dark brown hair cascading from its yellow ribbon down Cherish's back.

He remembered the feel of her soft lips against his in this very room. It seemed an eternity ago.

"Well?" Cherish asked him, seemingly unaware of where his thoughts had wandered. Her own tone was businesslike.

He focused on the lines drawing and saw it held the three views for a forty-foot fishing smack. He made the proper replies, all the while realizing that his harsh words to her had been as effective as he'd hoped. Cherish acted like a polite acquaintance, and he didn't blame her. He'd treated her rather cavalierly and now he was reaping the rewards.

At the noon hour he quickly washed up at the water pump and put on the clean shirt he had brought. He managed to enter the office before Cherish had left.

Her father looked up with a smile. "Are you ready to join us? The Boston doctor said I had to do a lot of walking."

They walked three abreast, Cherish between them. Winslow asked him about the McDuffies. "I ran into Captain Phelps. He said you were doing some work for him. Tell me about it."

His tone did not seem accusatory in the least. "Well, he wanted to commission a yacht. Actually it's for an acquaintance of his in Boston. We worked on some plans and models and have laid the keel. His friend wants it built mainly for speed."

Winslow nodded and asked him some more questions about it. He seemed genuinely interested. Although Cherish had given him a startled glance at the first mention of Caleb, she did not participate in the conversation at all. Silas swallowed his disappointment, remembering all the times Cherish and he had discussed different aspects of boat design.

Soon they arrived at the house, where Silas was greeted warmly by Mrs. Sullivan.

Although the meal proceeded pleasantly enough, he soon noticed that it was Mrs. Sullivan and Mr. Winslow carrying the conversation. Cherish answered cheerfully enough when spoken to, but did not contribute of her own accord. He keenly missed her interest in his boatbuilding activities.

As soon as the meal was over, she disappeared into the kitchen to help her aunt and Celia with washing up. Silas felt frustrated in his desire to see her alone and ask her about her month away. What had it done to her? What had *he* done to her?

But Mr. Winslow called him into the parlor. "The doctor forbade my accustomed cigar," he told him as he settled himself in his armchair. "Have a seat, Silas."

Winslow sat regarding him a moment when the two were seated. Silas began to feel uncomfortable. He wasn't used to Mr. Winslow's new manner—half jovial, half amused. It was almost as if the two of them—father and daughter—had undergone some sort of transformation during their time away, more so than in the two years Cherish had spent away from Haven's End.

"So you've found favor with Caleb Phelps."

"For the time being. There's no knowing how the vessel will sail until it's launched."

"That's true, that's true. But you've got a track record, Silas. I have all the confidence that she'll be a beauty."

Silas shifted on his seat. "Well, it's only one yacht. I still need to find full-time work at a shipyard. I was just waiting... until you came back." He cleared his throat. "And now, until the yacht is completed."

"Yes, of course." Winslow fell silent again, though he continued to regard Silas keenly, until Silas felt as if there must be something unusual about his face.

"I'm selling the shipyard," he said abruptly.

Silas stared at Winslow. "Excuse me?"

"I said I'm selling the shipyard. I've given it a lot of thought this past month. The heart specialist put it to me bluntly." He tapped his chest. "It isn't what it used to be. It sustained a lot of damage, and who knows when it'll decide to stop on me again. So no matter how much I might have wanted to protest, the fact was that I could either accept it and make my peace with God and enjoy the few years I have left—if in fact they are years—or I could squander the remaining time with a lot of worries."

He nodded his head at Silas. "I may be a pigheaded fool at times, but this time the good Lord managed to get my attention long enough for me to see what has been staring me in the face for a long time."

Silas still didn't understand where the conversation was leading. He felt shocked over Winslow's revelations about his health and decision to sell the shipyard. He thought about something else. "What about Cherish? She loves the shipyard."

He nodded. "Yes, that's so. It's going to be hard on her."

He stared at the older man. "You haven't told her?"

"Not yet. As I said, I've been mulling things around in my own head these past few weeks." He tapped the arms of his chair with his hands. "So, young man, do you want to buy it?"

"Me?"

He nodded calmly, as if he had said the most natural thing in the world.

Silas sat forward. "But that would be impossible."

"Would it? As I see it, you've already paid for it. Twelve hundred dollars cash."

Silas wiped a hand across his mouth, trying to absorb what Winslow was telling him.

"Silas, the Lord opened my eyes to the truth. You're like the son I never had, the one I always wished for. I'm sorry for not seeing that sooner, for treating you like a hired hand for so many years instead of the most talented boatbuilder I've ever seen at work in all my years in the business.

"My daughter tried to tell me many a time. She'd get angry at me, but that only made me more adamant in not seeing the talent in you."

Silas stood, unable to sit any longer. He couldn't fathom the words coming out of Winslow's mouth. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand. I can't—"

"I know this is probably a little abrupt for you." The older man's tone was gentle. "You think about it. I know the shipyard needs someone with a fresh vision. I think you're that man. Maybe it will no longer be a yard for building sailing ships. Maybe you'll make a name for yourself building yachts for speed and pleasure. In any case, I leave the decision up to you. If you decide you'd rather find work in a bigger yard, I'll still sell this and repay you your money."

"But what will you do?"

He shrugged. "I told you. I'm about useless now as far as work goes. Cherish has talked about getting a job teaching in the fall, perhaps. We have this place. We'll get by."

Silas shook his head. He couldn't see Cherish away from her beloved shipyard, much less forced to seek employment.

"Anyway, you give it some thought. If you still want to seek your fortune elsewhere, I'll understand perfectly. Your savings will see you on your way to fulfilling that dream you had of owning your own yard. You'll never know how grateful I am for your help when I most needed it."

"You don't have to repay me."

"I do and I will." His tone was firm. He rose from his chair. "Anyway, take all the time you need. Now, let's talk about more agreeable things. Are you going to invite me down to view this yacht you're building?"

"Of course. Whenever you wish."

Winslow escorted him to the door. As he stood holding the knob, he focused his keen gaze once more on Silas. "If you still care for that daughter of mine the way you gave evidence to that day I caught the two of you, you have my blessing."

Of all that he had heard that afternoon, this statement astounded him the most. "Does that mean you wouldn't object to my asking her to marry me?" He wanted it clearly spelled out.

"I certainly don't mean anything less."

"Yes, sir." The older man held out his hand and slowly Silas took it.

Having Winslow's blessing and putting his intentions into action proved to be two different things. Cherish appeared as aloof and evasive as a fawn. Whenever he did manage to be in her company, she rarely made eye contact with him—which was so contrary to those clear, direct gazes that used to make him so uncomfortable. Now he craved those looks. What a fool he had been.

Was he too late? Had she met someone in the past month? Had she finally gotten over her girlish infatuation as he'd kept insisting it was?

It certainly wasn't Winslow's fault if Silas seemed to make no headway with Cherish. When he wasn't inviting Silas to dinner, he was asking him to come calling in the evening.

Cherish would then spend half her time in the kitchen. When she did finally sit down in the parlor with them, it was usually to bend over some stitching and not contribute to the conversation at all. After a while she would rise and disappear into another room.

The second time she did this, Silas decided to go in search of her. He bid Mr. Winslow and Mrs. Sullivan good-night and headed toward the kitchen to exit by the back way. Sure enough, Cherish sat at the kitchen table reading by a kerosene lamp.

He came and stood across from her. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, just a book." She shut it, but didn't offer to show it to him.

"Do you mind if I sit down a moment?"

"No, of course not." But her tone conveyed only perfunctory politeness.

"Your father seems a very different man since his return," he began, not really knowing how to proceed.

She placed her chin in her hand and looked out the window. "Does he? I suppose he does to you, since you've only just seen him. To me, it seems a more gradual change—ever since his collapse, really."

"Does the specialist really give him so little hope?"

She nodded and began picking at a thread in the tablecloth.

"I'm sorry, Cherish." How he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, but she didn't seem to want anything from him. He remembered when she was a little girl and would run to him for solace.

"We've grown closer to each other in the past month, but in a different way. I was always Papa's little girl, but now I feel he sees me as a person in my own right."

Cherish stared out at the waning light. She turned as she finished speaking and was caught by the intent way Silas was looking at her.

Don't look at me that way! You'll destroy all the equilibrium I've managed to build up in the weeks I've been away.

She dragged her gaze away.

Before she could compose herself, he spoke, his voice as calm as always, which told her he was the same. Nothing had changed with him.

Not what I will, but Thy will be done, she reminded herself.

"You know there's a grange dance tomorrow night. Are you planning on going?"

He'd caught her off guard. "No."

"Why not? I thought you enjoyed those dances."

"I enjoy sitting at home just as well."

"I'm sure your father doesn't want you sitting here every evening. He'd want you to get out and be around young people."

She smiled sadly. "You sound like an elderly aunt."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, that wasn't my intention. I just mean you should—"

She cut him off before he could pursue the topic. "Tell me more about the project with Captain Phelps."

He eyed her warily a few seconds, then proceeded to tell her how the captain had approached him. She didn't really listen to his words, but let them wash over her like a balm. She preferred to drink in his features as she made the appropriate movements to indicate she was listening.

His greenish-gray eyes looked somber, although he was speaking about something he loved. He was blessed with that smooth, deep golden skin that some blond people of northern European extraction had. His dark golden hair was bleached lighter at the ends. He still pushed back the shock that insisted on falling forward.

Soon he would leave for good. In the month she'd been away she'd come to accept that. She was prepared for whatever life the Lord had for her without Silas.

She smiled in encouragement at what he was saying, and was rewarded by seeing the light touch his eyes as he described the way he envisioned the yacht.

When he rose to leave, she congratulated herself on her casual way of bidding him good-night, not even giving him her hand. Soon she bent back over her book. Who knew that the words merely stared back at her, their meaning as impenetrable as a rock wall?

Silas didn't know what more to do. Cherish was unreachable, more so than when it seemed she was on the brink of marrying Warren Townsend.

He finally confided his doubts to Mrs. McDuffie.

She smiled at him as she wiped the dishes dry. "Have you told her what you're telling me?"

"How can I? She doesn't seem to want to be around me."

"This doesn't sound like the Cherish I know." She laid the plate on a stack and took up another. "Sometimes a woman needs to be courted. You have her father's approval. Why don't you take advantage of that?"

He thought over her advice, wondering how to go about courting a young woman who, by her own admission, had been courted by the best in Europe. She'd certainly had her choice of the best in Hatsfield, and they had not impressed her.

What could one semiemployed boatbuilder, whom she'd known practically all her life, do to impress her?

He remembered when she'd first come home—her enthusiasm, her joyfulness whenever they were together. He remembered her pride in her cooking ability. He thought about the day she'd insisted he accompany her on a picnic.

A picnic. The image of that day alone with her in the meadow took hold.

He asked Mrs. McDuffie's advice.

"That's a wonderful idea. The days have been so warm—you must enjoy the good summer weather while it lasts. I can prepare a picnic basket for you."

"I appreciate that, but...I'd like to do this myself."

She nodded in understanding. "I'll show you where everything is."

Convincing Cherish to accompany him was another story.

"A picnic?" She looked as if he'd suggested taking cod-liver oil. "Oh, that's sweet of you, but I really must go home. Papa and Aunt Phoebe are expecting me for dinner."

"It's all right. I told them."

"You told them?" Her eyes widened. Then she glanced out the window. "But the weather. Aren't we supposed to get fog?"

"It's a perfectly fine day."

"I don't know. I'm not prepared—"

"What's to prepare for?" He was beginning to wish he'd never proposed the idea. "It's just a picnic. Who knows when we'll have another opportunity? You used to like picnics."

She met his gaze a second, and he wondered if she was remembering their picnic at the beginning of the summer.

Then she looked away. The next second she'd stood and was brushing off her apron. "Oh, all right, if you insist." Her tone was ungracious—something he'd never heard from Cherish Winslow.

They were silent on the sail over. When she noticed he was heading out to sea instead of to the next bay, she turned to him. "Where are we going?"

"I thought we'd try McKinnon Island. We can get a view of the puffins."

She nodded and turned away again. He was content to watch her profile, the way the tendrils of hair flew away from her face.

When they landed at the island, which housed only a lighthouse, he rowed them to the small dock in the skiff. Before he had a chance to help her out, she jumped out herself.

She ran ahead of him up the pebbly path as he followed more slowly with the picnic hamper.

They climbed up a slope through tall grass to the top of the island. The lighthouse keeper walked toward them and they waved. When he neared, they chatted a few moments, then headed beyond the lighthouse to find a spot for their picnic.

They chose a sheltered spot where they could look at the sea all around them and keep an eye on the grassy slope and rocky shore before them to watch out for the puffins. Silas laid the simple food out diffidently, noticing the unevenly cut bread.

"I hope I remembered everything. Here are some pickles," he said, removing a jar. "And lemonade. Mrs. McDuffie gave me some slices of cake for afterward."

"Everything looks delicious," she said, taking a sandwich from him, her fingers not touching his.

They bowed their heads and said a blessing. Afterward they ate in silence, the sound of the waves sufficient. When they'd finished eating, they watched the puffins, which had reemerged after a while, since Cherish and Silas had sat so still. He handed her a pair of binoculars and she took them wordlessly.

The puffins were like miniature penguins, with the exception of their thicker, more colorful beaks. Cherish pointed to one and they watched as he dived off a rock and emerged from the water with a fish in his beak.

Cherish handed the binoculars back to him. "Thank you." Her eyes, for the first time since her return, glowed with something of their old enthusiasm. "Thank you for bringing me here today."

He knew it was now or never that he had to talk to her. But it was harder than he'd expected. He looked down at the emerald grass between his knees and began to pluck it absently.

"You know, when I first arrived in Haven's End, to be apprenticed to your father, it was the first time in my life I'd been away from home, away from everything I knew...those I loved and who loved me. I didn't understand why I had to be sent so far away. All I knew was that Papa had died and life would never be the same again."

He drew a deep breath, not liking to recall those days. "The nights were the worst. Your father would close up the shop. I'd hear that last turn of the key, and I'd know I was alone for the night. Then the sounds would come, the creak here, the sudden gust of wind, the ceaseless drone of the waves, closing in on me."

"I knew I had to behave like a man. I was twelve. I was no longer a baby, I knew that full well. Yet I can't count the number of nights I cried myself to sleep."

He glanced across at her, his arm propped against his knees. She hadn't made a sound, but sat watching him, listening. He gave a lopsided grin. "You were the only friendly face in those first days, the only one who seemed to sense how homesick I was. You remember what you gave me that first day?"

"I remember," she answered softly. "Annie. She was my favorite doll. I must have really felt sorry for you that day to give up Annie."

He eyed her. "I still have her."

She looked at him in amazement.

"Do you know how many nights I fell asleep crying over that rag doll? Quite a few, as your childish mind supposed."

"I'm glad you had Annie."

"She got pretty sodden that first month, though I wouldn't have admitted that to anyone, least of all to such a self-assured five-year-old."

She smiled. "I was pretty cocky back then, wasn't I? I'm sorry you were so lonely."

He looked seaward. "I learned to concentrate on the reason I'd come here—to learn to build boats, and maybe some day even to design them. I knew I was being given a rare opportunity for a boy whose life would probably have followed his father's as a fisherman if he had lived." He sighed. "So I learned to put aside self-pity and loneliness and concentrate on what I loved best."

"Somewhere along the way I forgot how to love anyone or anything else."

Cherish's heart sank. It was as she had feared. She scarcely heard his next words as the numbness threatened to envelop her.

"It took a beautiful young woman of the same fearlessness and single-mindedness of that five-year-old to show me what I had missed."

Her eyes turned to him in wonder. *Could it be?*

"Cherish..." His voice faltered. "I wish you could understand how deeply I care about you."

She finished for him, her tone flat, "It's just not *love*."

"It *is* love. It's the kind of love that rips a man apart with longing. You don't know how hard this summer has been for me ever since you came home, so much a lady. I never dreamed you cared the least bit for me, much less aspired to win you—my feelings were buried too deep. I would never have discovered them on my own. But as you came to make me see how much I did care, I realized I hadn't even known they were there."

He gave a dry laugh. "I guess maybe that's why I never looked at another woman after losing Emma. I think I've always been in love with you."

His hands tore at the grass. "I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to separate you from your father—I never wanted you to go through what I'd been through."

"It's why I didn't let myself even dream of having you."

"Oh, Silas, why didn't you tell me? You made me think you didn't care."

"I didn't want you to have to go against your father's wishes if all you felt was a girlish fancy."

"Silas! Do you think that's all I felt?"

He answered slowly, as if groping for the explanation. "I didn't want you to defy your father just to get something you couldn't have, and once you got it, decide it wasn't worth having. You know, I haven't the education you've had, been to the places you've been to..."

Tears smarted her eyes. There was nothing to say against that. If he thought so little of her.

"Don't cry, Cherish. I don't ever want to hurt you. I'm sorry if it causes you pain to hear this, but I wanted to explain what I've been going through."

"It wasn't until you went away this past month that I realized—" he swallowed, looking straight ahead at the ocean, his hair falling over his forehead "—I realized how bleak life would be without you...how much I'd been fooling myself to think I could give you up."

"Oh, Silas," she whispered.

"And when you did come back—after I pleaded with God to at least let me have your friendship—you've been so distant. I didn't think life could get any worse." He sighed deeply. "I guess what I brought you out here today to say is that I love you with all my heart, and I'll take any little part of yours that you're able to spare me—"

She laid a hand gently on his forearm. He looked down at her hand, but otherwise remained motionless.

"Silas, do you think you'll ever come to believe that my heart is yours—that it's been yours for the last fourteen years? The only reason I didn't show you this before was because I was being the dutiful daughter. I was learning patience. I was waiting, dreaming, for the day I could come to you as a woman and offer it to you."

He turned to her as she spoke, his eyes taking on hope as she revealed her heart to him. He reached his hand upward to cup her cheek. "Forgive me, Cherish, for doubting that love. I never will again."

She smiled.

Slowly he leaned closer, his fingers touching her temple lightly, his eyes gazing at her in wonder. "You are so beautiful," he breathed. His fingers stroked her cheek.

"Am I finally going to get kissed properly?" she asked with a giggle.

He smiled at her. "I don't know about properly...but I shall do my best."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of your efforts?"