

Maryland Brides

SECRETS JEOPARDIZE THREE
HISTORICAL ROMANCES

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Chapter 1

Baltimore, July 1900

Where is Aunt Daphne? Why isn't she here to meet me? This is the height of rudeness—me traveling all this way to see her—and my aunt off to who knows where.

Eleanor Kerr stood by the vacant fireplace in her aunt's parlor and waved her white silk fan, painted with depictions of exotic birds, in front of her nose. Stirring a small portion of nearby hot air did little to allay the discomfort of Baltimore in the summer. Having just arrived at her aunt's house, she was still dressed in her stiff traveling suit, a condition she was eager to amend.

She lifted a tendril of deep auburn hair that had come loose from her chignon and tucked it back into place. Papa had sent her to Maryland so she could escape the tropical climate in Louisiana—the state they called home. Malaria had killed her mother more than a year ago, a fate that he didn't want for his only daughter. Yet the summer heat felt no less intense in the formal parlor of Aunt Daphne's row house than it had back in her home in Louisiana.

In her heart, Eleanor knew that Papa had other reasons for sending her to Baltimore. As Mama's illness had progressed, Papa had let business matters slide while he spent nearly every penny on doctors who, in the end, could do nothing. Mama's death had left him so lethargic that he had lost all interest in life. Eleanor wished she could have stayed with Papa to lend support as he revitalized his business. But he would not permit her to remain with him. Her new life in Baltimore promised to be quite different from that of a pampered only child. Here, she would be expected to become self-sufficient by learning her aunt's trade—that of a seamstress.

Eleanor fingered the collar of the suit that she had sewn herself. A pleasant and productive pastime would now be the way she would earn her keep, though not the life of her dreams. Thankfully, she possessed both the talent and patience for sewing while she waited to see what the Lord really had in mind.

She increased the motion of her fan, which offered some relief. At least Eleanor's initial period of mourning had passed, so she was no longer required to swelter in a black frock. Not that she minded bearing a little heat and observing the restrictions of mourning. Wearing black had been the least she could do to show the world how much she missed her mother. She was finally becoming

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accustomed to the muted hues she was now permitted to wear. The dull colors served as a badge for Eleanor to honor her mother. Feeling her eyes mist, Eleanor blinked back tears and forced herself to remember that her dear mama was at home with her heavenly Father.

But for now, earthly matters awaited. Eleanor speculated about reuniting with a relative she hadn't seen in years. They had enjoyed a vigorous correspondence, so Eleanor knew she could expect a certain amount of comfort with her aunt.

Although the youngest of Papa's ten siblings, Daphne was well past her prime to marry and had set up a fine house for herself. The parlor strove mightily to replicate Queen Victoria's palace. A gilded mirror that Eleanor recognized as having once been in Grandmama's house hung from ceiling to floor. It was situated between two front windows of equal height that were dressed in white lace curtains. Eleanor knew without being told that her aunt's choice for winter draperies would be heavy velvet, most likely in a deep blue to reflect the colors in the busy botanical wallpaper that covered all four walls. Along the edges of the walls, hardwood floors gleamed. She could smell the pleasant odor of freshly applied beeswax. The center of the room was protected from the dirt and grime of shoes by a rug light in both hue and weight as was the fashion for Southern homes in the summer. No doubt the covering would be replaced by a lush, dark Oriental rug once the temperatures dipped.

With a gloved hand, she leaned over and ran her left forefinger along the edge of a table carved from mahogany. She lifted it to her face and recognized that not a speck of dirt sullied the white cotton. No surprise there. Each piece of furniture was polished, and she eyed no visible dust. Out of curiosity, she peered into the top of a table and discovered that she could see her reflection almost as well as if she were looking into a mirror. The house clearly reflected the fussiness of the dreary spinster seamstress who was the lady of the house. Eleanor's disposition lent itself to tidiness, but she decided that meeting her aunt's expectations for order would be a challenge.

Lord, I pray that my fears will be unfounded and that Aunt Daphne and I will prove to be kindred spirits. Let my presence here not be a burden upon her. Lead me in Thy will, heavenly Father. In the name of Thy Son, I pray. Amen.

A sense of peace enveloped her. The trip had tired Eleanor. Cutting her glance to a sofa slipcovered in white, she contemplated taking a seat but thought better of it.

"There you are!"

With a twist of her lace-covered neck, Eleanor turned her face toward the door that led to the entry hall. A redhead who could only be Aunt Daphne breezed into the parlor. She wore a large hat with a brim that seemed to be as wide as the span of Eleanor's arms when outstretched. Earlier that day, Eleanor

had donned her traveling dress, a linen affair that was the color of rich coffee flavored with half a cup of thick cream. At the time, she had felt stylish even though her current stage of mourning demanded that she wear subdued shades. But now, amid such a flourish of color, she felt downright drab.

"Welcome!" Aunt Daphne glided to her, reached out, and pulled Eleanor to her with a gusto that caught Eleanor by surprise and nearly resulted in her loss of balance.

Eleanor touched the brim of her beige hat to straighten it. She surveyed the floor without moving her head much, hoping that none of the artificial white magnolia flowers on the hat's beige ribbon had become detached and fallen off.

"Thank you." Eleanor trusted that her voice and expression seemed sweet.

Aunt Daphne held her at arm's length. Her green eyes looked Eleanor over and seemed to register approval. "Did you have a good trip?"

"Yes. I found my train compartment agreeable and shared most of the trip with two sisters traveling to New York. They were pleasant enough."

"I'm sorry I'm late in returning. I had planned to be here to greet you upon your arrival. Were you waiting long?" Her charming manner made Eleanor see why her papa said that her aunt had been quite the belle in her younger years. Not that she seemed all that old. Born a decade and a half after Papa, Aunt Daphne seemed younger than her thirty-nine years.

"No, only a few minutes."

"I trust that my driver took good care of you."

"Indeed. Henry was most pleasant."

Aunt Daphne released her grip so she could gesture with her hands. "Mrs. Alden took longer than I expected to choose her lace, and then I had to settle the bill with her son. Honestly, Raleigh Alden is such a vexation. I pity the woman who falls for his handsome face because she will have quite a wretched life with such a miser!"

"If Mr. Alden didn't want to pay the bill, then you can simply say that you won't provide your services for his mother anymore," Eleanor suggested.

"What? And lose my best patron? Never!"

Eleanor wasn't sure how Mrs. Alden could be Aunt Daphne's best patron if her son didn't want to pay the bill.

"He thought the lace his mother chose was too expensive," Aunt Daphne said in response to her unspoken question. "I had to convince him otherwise. You'd think he couldn't rub two nickels together, when in reality, his is one of the wealthier families in the Baltimore area."

"You certainly have had a difficult afternoon." Eleanor wondered if the events were typical for her aunt.

"Lest you think you've moved into bedlam, let me assure you that every afternoon is not like this one!" When Aunt Daphne removed her hat, Eleanor

noticed that it was most astonishing. The hat was burdened with quite a chore in holding up artificial lemons, limes, oranges, and bananas tied together with a bright yellow bow. Eleanor knew she could never carry off such a concoction, but Daphne wore it well.

Her aunt placed the bright yellow creation on the mahogany stand. "Have you eaten?" Without the hat for a distraction, Eleanor noticed that her aunt's face still held the beauty of her youth.

"Yes," Eleanor answered. "I took a meal on the train, thank you."

"Good. Cook gets awfully grumpy when I ask her to prepare an extra meal. You might as well know that now as later," Aunt Daphne informed her.

"How dare a servant be grumpy with her mistress. Papa never would allow such a thing in his house," Eleanor pointed out. "Why don't you fire her?"

"Fire her? Oh, my dear, do you have any notion of how difficult it is to find a good cook? As it is, I have to let her off on Sundays and Thursdays."

"She must have it easy, cooking for one. I'd conjecture that she has the better end of the bargain."

Her aunt flinched. "So you say. But you see, with the advent of your arrival, her duties have doubled."

"True. And speaking of my arrival, I am ready to retire to my quarters, by your leave." Realizing that she still enjoyed the status of a guest, Eleanor tried to keep her voice from sounding too demanding.

"What was I thinking? Of course you're tired." Aunt Daphne turned slightly and swept her arm toward the foyer. "Your room is upstairs. It's the second door on the right, beside my room."

"Thank you." Eleanor didn't move right away, expecting her aunt to escort her. Instead, Aunt Daphne peered into the gilded wall mirror and brushed her hands over her chignon. Eleanor watched her for a moment until she turned back to face her.

"Well?" Aunt Daphne asked. "Is there a question?"

"No, Aunt Daphne."

"Then unless you didn't learn how to tell right from left at that fancy finishing school that graduated you, I suggest you get situated. For future reference, breakfast is served at six on the dot, luncheon is served at the stroke of noon, and dinner is served at six thirty every night. No exceptions." She nodded once toward the grandfather clock that could be seen from the parlor although it dominated the front hall. "It's already five thirty. I'd best prepare now."

"My, but you are organized." Eleanor wasn't accustomed to such a strict schedule and wondered how she would cope. Unsure of what to do next, she stared at her aunt and discovered she couldn't move one foot in front of the other.

A flash of realization swept over Daphne's face. "You aren't used to doing anything for yourself, are you? I know your father. He spoiled you rotten, I'm

sure." Her kind tone belied her biting words. "As you can plainly see, there is no man in this house to see to it that your pretty little slippers never touch a drop of mud on the street. Here, you will find yourself comfortable, but you will also discover that the Kerr women fend for themselves."

"Yes, ma'am." Spurred by her aunt's words, Eleanor finally found the will to travel up the stairs to her room. She would be fending for herself, indeed. She prayed she was up to the challenge.

The following morning, Eleanor watched as Aunt Daphne quickly ate her breakfast. She sat at the head of the dining room table. After a brief blessing, she tapped the top of her eggshell off and proceeded to dip fingers of toast into the egg, drawing out the runny yolk. Now she was holding the ceramic eggcup with two fingers and spooning out the solid egg white in a ladylike but determined fashion. After sopping up the last of her runny egg with a piece of toast, she still managed to be dainty as she set the tidbit in her mouth.

"This breakfast is delightful." Since she relished runny eggs, Eleanor planned to savor each bite. "And according to our discussions with Cook about the week's menu, there are more good things to come." She allowed herself a tiny smile. Cook's ample figure attested to her skill in the kitchen.

"I'm glad you are finding it agreeable here so far." Aunt Daphne tapped her napkin and quickly set it aside.

"My, what is your hurry, Aunt Daphne?" Eleanor asked.

"Didn't I tell you? We have an appointment today."

"We. . .have. . .an appointment?"

"Of course. With Mrs. Alden."

"Your best patron." Eleanor rose from her seat.

"You remember. Good. In this business, one learns to be accomplished at remembering names. And trust me: Mrs. June Alden is one name you'll want to remember."

"I would think you would be hesitant to return today after yesterday's dispute."

"Oh, that was with Mr. Alden." Aunt Daphne waved her hand in the air as though Mr. Alden were no more than an imaginary bug. "I wouldn't call it a dispute, just part of doing business with them."

Dispute or not, Eleanor felt reluctant. "Why don't you handle it? You don't need me."

"Of course I need you. You've got to learn the seamstress trade sometime. And there's no time like the present, as they say. Now come along." Aunt Daphne headed toward the foyer. Her heels clicked on the hardwood floors, then were silent when her feet made contact with a rug, then clicked on hardwood once again.

Eleanor knew she was compelled to follow a woman with such a determined

pace. By the time she reached the front door, Aunt Daphne had already donned her hat. This time, she wore a crisp white affair with red roses and plumes all around, which matched her white dress embroidered to perfection with red roses.

“My hat!” Eleanor looked down at her morning dress. The beige frock was one of her more sprightly looks, with white lace on the bodice as bold as she dared while in her second stage of mourning. “I’m afraid this won’t do.”

“Nonsense. Of course it will do. The color suits you so well.” Aunt Daphne sighed. “Sometimes I wish my hair wasn’t quite so red. You auburn-haired beauties can wear just about any color you wish and look wonderful.”

Eleanor wasn’t sure if her aunt was flattering her so she would hurry along or if her words were sincere. She suspected her words sprouted from a combination of both. “If you insist, I’ll wear this.”

Aunt Daphne studied her. “You sewed it yourself, didn’t you?”

Eleanor nodded. “Of course.”

Aunt Daphne fingered the lace on the bodice of Eleanor’s dress near her shoulder, then checked the hem of her skirt. Her inspection earned Eleanor a nod. “Very good. This is a fine example of your work. Soon we will double our business.”

“Obviously, if we visit our best patrons every day.” She couldn’t resist a little sardonic smile.

Aunt Daphne laughed. “Mrs. Alden must look at muslin samples today, as she took too long with her lace yesterday. Doing business with her takes longer than with most of my other clients. She tends to delay each process. She does have a companion, a rather dreary girl named Vera Howard, though she is from a good family. Otherwise, Mrs. Alden is a lonely old soul.”

Eleanor nodded with understanding.

“Don’t forget your sewing basket,” her aunt called to Eleanor, who rushed up the stairs.

“I won’t,” she called back, even though she hadn’t thought about it despite the fact they had discussed nothing but sewing for the past few minutes. The idea of being a businesswoman had just begun to take hold of her, and carrying sewing notions with her at all times was merely a beginning.

Father in heaven, I beseech Thee to be with me!

Moments later, Eleanor hurried to the waiting carriage. As she situated herself, Eleanor straightened her hat, a simple mauve invention with a ribbon of lace that matched her dress. She secured her hat with a long stickpin made of ivory.

“I must say, the materials of which your hat is comprised outweigh in quality the imagination of your milliner,” Aunt Daphne noted.

“Truly?” Eleanor patted the brim. “I rather like this hat.”

Aunt Daphne shrugged. “It’s well enough, I suppose. But we must take you

to Eva's to have more hats made for you."

Eleanor self-consciously touched the brim of her understated hat. She liked her own style and wondered if she could feel comfortable dressing as outrageously as her aunt. "I assume she is your milliner?"

"Yes, and she makes me a hat in exchange for a dress. It's a sweet scheme that lets us both cut a fine figure everywhere we go."

"Eva, Vera, Raleigh Alden, Mrs. Alden—my head is swimming as I try to remember all these names."

"Don't worry. You sound as though you will do just fine. I must admit, remembering Raleigh Alden is easy enough. Every eligible lady in town sees him and swoons on the spot." She sighed. "If only I were a decade younger."

"Aunt Daphne!" Eleanor leaned toward her. "I thought he was a miser."

"He is. And so I shall let him pass by. Not that he has ever made any overtures toward me, really." She looked over her niece. "He's a little older than you are. Just about to see his thirtieth birthday, I'd say."

"My, how you talk." Eager to discourage any potential for matchmaking on her aunt's part, Eleanor deflected the conversation from herself as quickly as she could. "With all this calculation and speculation, am I to assume you are ready for another suitor after all these years?"

"Your father told you." Aunt Daphne's pretty features tightened, and her body stiffened.

Her stricken look sent a shot of discomfort through Eleanor. Yet if the two women hoped to live together in peace, she realized she might as well tell her aunt what she knew. She leaned her back against the seat to convey a casual attitude. "Oh, someone mentioned once that you had many suitors, but one in particular stood out among the rest."

Aunt Daphne nodded. "Long ago, when I was young. We courted fifteen years, in fact. Then he met someone else and, and. . ." Her lips drew together to form a tense contour.

"I know." She took Aunt Daphne's hands in hers. Her aunt's thumb bore a callus from years of working as a seamstress, but otherwise her hands were softer than Eleanor had anticipated. "Obviously, he suffered from a severe lack of judgment."

Aunt Daphne's eyes misted, a sure indication that she had never recovered fully from her heartbreak. Looking down at her hands in Eleanor's, she nodded several times in a rapid motion. "That's what all my friends say."

Eleanor gave her aunt's hands a firm squeeze, then released them. She hadn't imagined she could befriend her spinster aunt, but already she felt a bond with Daphne.

"I do enjoy my freedom," Aunt Daphne observed. "And if I were to marry, most likely my husband would insist that I give up my career."

“You might give up fashioning dresses for wages, but I doubt you would be forced to abandon sewing forever,” Eleanor couldn’t resist noting. “On the contrary, you might be busier than ever making frocks and bloomers for a brood of little ones.”

“At my age?” Aunt Daphne’s laughter tinkled throughout the carriage. “I would barely have time for a husband, and the arrival of a baby would be a minor miracle at best.”

Eleanor studied her aunt’s face. “Maybe you could consider a widower with children.”

“Oh, I’ve had my share of those to come knocking, but who can travel and see the world when one is responsible for someone else’s children?”

“Travel?”

“Oh yes. I would love to travel. That is my dream. To save up enough money to travel the world.” Excitement caused her voice to rise in pitch and speed. “Wouldn’t you like to take a steamship to Europe someday? Or maybe even see the pyramids in Egypt?” She set her gaze toward the window, staring out it as though she could see the sphinx just on the horizon rather than the lawn of a fine house they passed.

Eleanor hesitated. “Well, I just did travel across the country.” She didn’t add that the experience had cured her of any desire to journey anywhere else for the next few months—or years.

Aunt Daphne turned her attention to Eleanor. “Exactly. Wouldn’t it be a wonderful idea for the two of us to travel together?” She clasped her hands at the thought.

Eleanor felt the muscles in her chest tighten. “Travel together?”

“Yes. I was hoping that perhaps you’d be keen on the idea of being my traveling companion—and the daughter I always wanted.”

Eleanor clenched her hands and rubbed her fingers together. Looking down, she felt her eyes moisten. How could she not be flattered by her aunt’s emotions? Then again, how could she tell her aunt that she had no desire to see the world? “I—I haven’t thought much about traveling, really. In fact, I’ve barely had enough interest to observe the sights on this very trip.”

“Oh, you’ll learn Baltimore soon enough.” Aunt Daphne dispatched a pitiable look her way. “I know why your dreams have been so small. You’ve been so burdened with responsibilities and occupied with tending to your sick mother. *Tragic* is the only way to describe her death. But let’s not speak of it now. We must put on a happy demeanor if we are to please Mrs. Alden. Remember, we are there to provide our patrons with happiness, not to trouble them with our concerns.”

Eleanor remained silent. Spending long amounts of time in a confined space, whether in a luxurious carriage, a train, or a steamship, held no appeal for her.

She couldn't imagine a scenario where she would desire to globe-trot. Rather than embracing the world after being confined to her time of mourning, Eleanor had made up her mind to live as a religious solitary. What better way to escape heartbreak and pain in the world? She remembered her mother and wished she could have died in her place. Eleanor knew in her heart that her grief was as strong a reason for Papa's insistence that she relocate as his concern for her physical health. He had seen her rebellion when he insisted she head to the safety of a cooler climate so she, his only child, could remain well and start life anew. But a religious life was not his plan for her and certainly no idea of her aunt's.

No one but Eleanor knew how many nights she had spent in anguished prayer, seeking guidance from her heavenly Father. Despite her pleas to let her live a life alone, she felt no leading in that direction.

"Child," Aunt Daphne said, interrupting her thoughts. "Why are you so pensive?"

Eleanor didn't rush to answer. Clearly, Aunt Daphne had big plans for her. Should she tell all and risk her wrath? Or perhaps if she were honest, Daphne could help her find her calling. She took in a breath and spoke. "I know that Papa has asked you to teach me to be a seamstress, but that is not my wish. Ever since Mama's death, I have been praying for guidance on how I might live life as a religious solitary," she confessed. "I was in hopes that you might have suggestions as to how I might pursue that course here in Baltimore."

"A religious solitary?" Aunt Daphne's laughter echoed throughout the carriage. "Don't be silly, Eleanor. You are much too beautiful to cloister yourself. Your father knows that, and he knows your disposition. We'd better follow his instructions."

"I know that Papa has my best interests at heart, but it is inner beauty I seek."

"And I am sure you possess that in abundance." Aunt Daphne studied her. "I know you do. You radiate beauty. And our local bachelors will see that soon enough."

Eleanor felt her face flush hot. "I am not interested in a courtship, Aunt Daphne."

"We shall see," Aunt Daphne said as the carriage came to a stop in front of a brick Georgian-style house with a spacious lawn. "Here we are. The Alden residence. Your first test will be your meeting with Raleigh Alden, Esquire. Are you ready?"

"More than ready." She lifted her nose in the air, practicing her most snobbish look. She was determined to take on her aunt's challenge and pass her first test.

She would steel herself against any and all winsome bachelors. And that included Raleigh Alden, Esquire.