

Chapter One

April 1895

“Father, I’m moving out and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

Annie Belle Wellington, or Belle, as she preferred to be called, was in her bedroom on the third floor of her family’s plantation home, Wellington Cross, packing a trunk.

Her father, Ethan Wellington, had different opinions about his youngest daughter. “It’s not proper, Annie Belle.” He made her feel like a child when he used her first and middle names together.

“It’s perfectly proper these days, and besides, Amanda needs me to cook breakfast, afternoon tea, and supper, and it’s getting too tiresome to travel up and down the road twice a day.”

Belle began working at the Adams House two years ago when she turned eighteen, right after attending finishing school. The boarding house was the first of its kind in Charles City, and the proprietor, Amanda Adams, was a lonely unmarried woman who wanted to do something different after her mother passed away, something to take her mind off of her grief. So she moved to town from City Point, just across the James River, and found a nice big house but was unable to afford it on her own, so she turned it into a boarding house. Belle’s duties in the beginning had included cleaning the rooms and keeping the fireplaces lit. Her father had objected then, not wanting her to be subjected to such demeaning work, but she persisted until she got her way.

“Besides, it’s not safe traveling at night with just me and Junior,” she continued, referring to Cyrus, son of a couple of older ex-slaves, Cora and Cyrus.

Ethan ran his fingers through his graying brown hair. “I just want you to be safe. There are a lot of unmarried men staying in that boarding house. What if one of them tried to hurt you? Who would come to your rescue?”

“I can handle myself. I don’t need a man to rescue me,” she said with a sharp tongue.

Belle didn’t have a man in her life, had never let a man touch her. At twenty, she had plenty of suitors, danced with many men at parties and balls, even kissed a few of them, but she had yet to find one suitable to be a beau. Let alone a husband. She’d learned from a young age how to deal with men by watching her two older sisters, Lillie and Lizzie. Even watched as they made fools of themselves letting their beaus grope them in the garden. Belle wanted something more in life than just getting a man. She saw plenty of men of all ages at the boarding house, but none she wanted to have anything more to do with than check them in, take their money, and fix them some food.

Belle’s mother, Madeline, stepped into the room, hearing the argument. “Is everything all right?”

“Your daughter wants to move into that boarding house,” Ethan said.

“Mother, will you please explain to Father that I’m capable of taking care of myself? You’ve taught me all I need to know about shooting a gun, and I can scrap with the best of them, just like I’ve done with Godfrey and Bertie since I was little.”

“You do know how to handle yourself to a certain point,” Madeline said, “but what if someone surprises you and you don’t see him coming?”

Belle’s mother had been abducted when she was twenty, so she’d always been very protective of Belle and her sisters while at the same time teaching them how to defend themselves.

“I’ll keep a close watch and lock my door at night. And a gun on the bedside table. Please, Mother. I’m twenty years old, unmarried, and I want a career. Like Lillie.”

Her oldest sister owned a dress shop in town where she spent part of her day fitting women into the latest fashions. Belle liked the idea of doing something for herself instead of being herded from one ball to the next looking for a husband like she was some kind of slave at auction.

“I’m surprised anyone can afford a boarding house after the economic slump we’ve had,” Ethan said.

“That’s why the boarding house is so popular, Father. It’s cheaper than the tavern. We only charge twelve dollars a week for room and board.”

“Oh, so it’s we now?” Ethan asked.

“Yes. I think she might make me a partner soon. That’s why it’s so important that I move in with her to help her run things and be close by. You don’t want me to miss this opportunity, do you?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued on, “The boarding house even has modern conveniences like a bath-room for bathing and an indoor kitchen so I wouldn’t have to go outside to cook meals or heat water for tea. And the earth closet is close by on the back porch just outside the bath-room when I need to use the privy.”

“An indoor kitchen? The whole house could burn down,” Madeline said.

Her mother had also lost her memory after an incident when she was twenty and the house she’d been living in was burned to the ground. Sometimes it was hard winning an argument with her because she had experienced so many terrible things and she was extra cautious.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Belle insisted. “And it makes it so much nicer to serve food straight from the kitchen to the dining area without having to go outside in inclement weather.”

“That does sound nice,” Madeline agreed.

Belle continued, smiling inside, knowing how she could get her mother to side with her. “You should see the new bathtub Amanda had put in last week, Mother. It’s cast iron but covered with porcelain enamel so it won’t rust. You won’t believe how smooth it feels. And it’s elevated on four legs. There’s a long curtain that hangs from the ceiling for complete privacy, and there’s a fireplace for heating water and also for warmth in the wintertime.”

Her mother nearly purred. “It sounds so luxurious.”

Belle nodded. “Yes, Amanda said it was advertised to be a hog scalding, but she swore that people in England were taking more baths now, and that our visitors would be more inclined to stay at the house if we had such nice amenities.” She did her best to give as many details as she could remember to butter them up, especially her father.

“I can see you’ve learned a lot about this,” he said.

“Besides,” she continued, “Junior can stay here where he’s needed and stoke your fireplace at night instead of hauling me up the road and back.”

“What do you think, Ethan? Shall we let our last little bird leave the nest?” Madeline asked.

“I suppose you can try this, but Belle, please come back home if at any time you don’t feel safe.”

Belle nodded enthusiastically.

“Promise me,” her father stressed.

“I promise.” She reached over and hugged him first and then her mother. “Thank you both.”

She went back to packing, not hiding her grin.

Her father kissed her forehead before he walked out the door, and her mother stayed to help, asking more questions about the bathtub.

Belle arrived at Adam House before sunset, driven by Junior in the carriage and accompanied by her father, who had insisted on coming. The two men carried her trunk upstairs to the room where Belle would be staying. It was a small room on the second floor across from the library and the reception area where people checked in, a convenient place for her to be situated. She served meals in the library and checked people in just inside the back door of the house.

Customers would enter through the front door and be led to the parlor where Amanda would interview them to determine if they were suitable to stay in the house. In that way, she could weed out the riffraff. Once she approved of them, they were escorted to the back of the house where Belle would check them in, take their pay, placing it carefully and honestly in an old-fashioned tender box that she kept hidden inside the fold-down desk, and would hand them a key to their room.

After her father and Junior left, she put the last of her undergarments into a tall walnut chest of drawers and looked around her new room at the boarding house. *Her* room. It was smaller than what she was accustomed to, but she felt so proud to be living here and being a part of this business. It was a beautiful home and would now be her home.

She walked down the hall to the library and looked at the grandfather clock to see that it was half past seven. There was only one boarder at the moment, a businessman who looked to be in his fifties with graying hair, traveling through town by himself. Dull and boring was her impression when she'd checked him in earlier that day, but he was pleasant.

Amanda came into the library. "Belle, I'm going to turn in early tonight. Mr. Gardner said he was in for the night and wouldn't need anything else. I'll lock up on my way down if you don't need me for anything."

"No, I was thinking about taking a bath. Would that be all right?"

Amanda smiled, tucking a loose strand of her red hair behind her earlobe. "That's the second bath this week, Belle. You'll be the cleanest girl in Virginia if you keep that up."

Belle laughed. "I just love that bathtub."

Amanda's green eyes seemed to twinkle. "I understand. Be careful coming back up the stairs when you're done. Wear your shoes. And lock the bath-room door if you use the privy."

"Yes, ma'am, I will."

"Please don't call me ma'am, Belle. That makes me feel old."

They both laughed.

Amanda sobered and said, "You've been working here for two years so you're like family to me." Belle smiled. "I'm glad you decided to move in here. It'll be good to have another person around here at night."

Belle noted a tinge of melancholy in Amanda's eyes.

"I'm happy to be here, Amanda. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good-night," Amanda said, taking an oil lamp with her down the hallway towards the staircase in the middle of the house.

Belle went back into her room, took off all her clothes, and wrapped a pale pink dressing gown around her. She slipped her feet into some matching slippers, presents from her parents the previous Christmas, picked up an oil lamp, and headed down the hallway. The new gas lamps on the walls were turned off at night for safety and conservation.

She padded down the wooden stairs quietly to the first floor and down the hall towards the bath-room, the next to the last room on the right, located at the stables side of the house.

She carefully turned the handle of the door and was surprised to hear splashing water inside the room.

"Amanda?" she whispered softly. She thought that perhaps Amanda had decided to take a bath before turning in.

She pushed the door open a little further and was shocked to see a man sitting in the bathtub with dark wet hair. A gas lamp on the wall illuminated his cold brown eyes which pierced hers. He was obviously enraged at the intrusion.

She quickly turned her head away. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Gardner. I was told you had turned in for the evening. Please forgive me."

She quickly closed the door and ran back down the hall with her oil lamp swinging dangerously. Before she reached the staircase, she heard the bath-room door open. She quickly flattened herself against the wall around the corner next to a cupboard and put the lamp on the floor behind her. Peeking around the corner, she saw a tall man wearing only a white cloth around his lower body, carrying a lantern. He walked across the hallway into a storage room beside the kitchen. Belle thought it was odd for anyone to go in there.

It was only then that she realized that the man had dark hair, not gray.

He was not Mr. Gardner.

So who was this man?

Was Amanda hiding a man in the house?