

# *Chapter One*



*N*ever again!" Hannah Oldweiler muttered through clenched teeth as she marched along the street. The heels of her boots scuffed up clouds of dust from the hard-packed ground onto the hem of her yellow linen dress.

The breezes of early autumn brought a contradictory blend of floral fragrance from nearby gardens and the rancid smells from New Bedford Harbor far away at the bottom of the hill. Ordinarily, Hannah did not notice the odors of the whalefishery, ever present to some degree throughout her hometown. But today the stench seemed particularly rank to her, and even the sweet perfume of late-season roses failed to soothe her annoyance over today's luncheon social.

The next time Lila Gantvort invited her to dine, she would find an excuse, any excuse, not to go. All the young ladies in attendance came from the best New Bedford families. All had received a worthy education and should have been eager to participate in enlightened discourse. Instead, Hannah found their company stifling and their conversation trivial.

Could they discuss Coleridge, Wordsworth, or Shelley? No, of course not. It must be fashion, parties, and engagements, for the only thing her childhood friends ever cared about was matrimony. Hannah would have enjoyed an afternoon curled up with

a good book more than all their silly babble. She went to make Papa happy, or rather to appease his idea of what should make her happy.

Poor, dear Papa. He was deeply concerned about her, but there was nothing she could do to ease his worries. Even she did not understand her sense of estrangement from her friends or her reluctance to accept society's assertion that marriage was a woman's ultimate happiness. Perhaps it was because too often she had watched as some vain and pretty acquaintance accepted the proposal of some vain and wealthy man, only to discover after marriage that vanity was all they had in common. Though Hannah was considered a beauty, she refused to play beauty's games. And despite her father's best efforts to make her happy, she felt a restlessness that refused to be pacified.

Her musings about her father softened her mood and slowed her pace. She did not wish to arrive home in a temper, for it would only grieve him. Somehow, she must improve her thoughts.

The distant sounds of the harbor floated up the hill on the friendly breeze: wagons and horses' hooves clattering on the cobblestones, whalers and dockworkers shouting to one another as they performed their duties, and sea gulls calling out to demand a share of the sea's bounty newly arrived in port. The cries of the gulls always seemed to sing out, "Come away and see the world." One day Hannah would answer that siren song.

She glanced across the street at the large Greek Revival house being built for Mr. Blain. Set back from the street some twenty-five feet like many of the County Street houses, its ample front yard would provide Mrs. Blain with plenty of room to plant a variety of flowers. If it were Hannah's property, she would choose rhododendrons to line the semi-circular drive in front of the columned porch. She liked the contrast between the woody

branches of the rhododendron bushes and their colorful trumpet-shaped blossom clusters. But whatever flowers Mrs. Blain chose, the house would be a lovely addition to County Street, where many whale ship owners and captains were building their residences.

Hannah's father, Amos Oldweiler, inherited his stately Greek Revival house. Built in 1810, some twenty-seven years earlier, the structure stood out from the Federal-style homes popular back then. With the Blains' choice of architecture, their home would no longer be unique on the street.

Along with the house, Mr. Oldweiler also inherited a small fleet of whaling vessels from his mother's childless brother. Receiving this propitious bequest as a young man of twenty-five, he promptly left his labors on an older cousin's Indiana farm for proprietary concerns on the Massachusetts shores. He had not been brought up in the whaling trade and possessed no aptitude for wise investments. Still, he tried for twenty years to increase his modest inheritance, or at least to keep it intact. Unfortunately, by the time his only child reached eighteen, she had become aware that her father was simply struggling to keep up the appearances of wealth until she married into one of the more financially secure New Bedford families.

Though he never said anything, Hannah could see it dismayed him when she declined proposals of marriage from agreeable suitors. But he would never press her to accept someone she could not love, merely for security's sake. He was never one to demand his own will, and in this matter he had long ago adopted an attitude of resignation, trusting Providence for both their futures.

His lack of business acumen notwithstanding, the amiable Oldweiler had cultivated a number of friendships in the growing community, and his fondest wish was for his daughter to find

happiness there as well. But since she did not aspire to be a belle in New Bedford's society, Hannah was content for the time being to manage her widowed father's household and to subdue her restlessness through reading her favorite books and dreaming of travel to distant lands.

The autumn day was warm and bright, so Hannah held her parasol close to the broad brim of her bonnet to shield her face from the sun's browning rays. Although she eschewed most displays of vanity, she did wish to avoid developing freckles. One of her governesses—she could not remember which, for none stayed long enough to leave a serious impression—managed to persuade her that her ivory complexion was an attribute worth preserving. That notion became reinforced at Miss Applegate's school in Boston, where Hannah spent several years. Finally, the envy voiced by friends and the compliments paid by suitors prompted her to guard her fair coloring, though often the exercise proved bothersome.

As she mounted the front steps to her white, two-storied home, Hannah's mood improved with the memory that Jeremiah Harris would be coming to supper tonight. The handsome minister was the youngest son of a New Bedford merchant and a close friend to both Hannah and Mr. Oldweiler. Jeremiah decided at an early age not to follow his father's line of work or that of his maternal grandfather, a successful whaling captain, but rather to enter the ministry. He spent several years in Andover Seminary near Boston and was now back home again. To Mr. Oldweiler's delight, he agreed to spend every available Friday evening at their home.

That evening as they sat around the dining room table, Hannah was once again grateful for the encouragement his visits gave her father. Whenever Jeremiah called, Mr. Oldweiler's face glowed with enthusiasm during their stimulating conversations.

The younger man gave his host sincere and respectful attention, but he often gazed at his hostess.

“Hannah, this was an excellent supper, as usual.” Jeremiah touched his napkin to his lips, and then laid it beside his plate. “My compliments to Mrs. Randolph and to your menu.”

“Thank you, Jeremiah, or should I say, Reverend Harris?” Hannah replied. “Papa and I are so glad you could come tonight. You must make this your second home now that you are settled for certain back here in New Bedford. I still marvel that there was an opening for an assistant pastor at our very own church just as you finished your seminary studies. I could not have borne it to see you sent who knows where. I was so afraid you might decide to be a missionary to India or Africa, and we would never see you again.”

“Hannah, what a thing to say,” Mr. Oldweiler said. “Our Jeremiah has chosen the greatest happiness possible in life by serving God, no matter where that takes him.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t we miss him dreadfully if he were to go away again?”

Jeremiah smiled. “You need not worry. I feel no call for southern climes. We’ve plenty of sinners right here in New Bedford who need saving.”

“And you’re just the man to do it, my boy.” Mr. Oldweiler stood and nodded to them. “Now, if you young people will excuse me, I will go have my after-supper pipe. Hannah, why don’t you show Jeremiah those rose bushes you’ve been cultivating all summer?”

“Oh, yes, please do.” Jeremiah stood politely as his host left the room. Almost six feet tall, with a stocky, muscular build, the young man would have made an excellent whaler, had he chosen that profession. His clear blue eyes, unlined face, and sandy brown hair cut just below his ears made Hannah think more of

John, the New Testament disciple, rather than of the Old Testament prophet of doom for whom he was named. Though he ministered in a Calvinist church, Jeremiah's gentle countenance and kindness never made one think of hell fires or damnation.

She grasped his hand and drew him out the dining room door to the terrace. The early September sun still shone above the western horizon, casting its rays on the colorful garden. The clamshell pathway crunched beneath their feet as they wandered among the bushes, she pointing out the different varieties, and he nodding in admiration at her success in growing them.

"The growing season is long over for most roses, but I've managed to discover a few varieties that can endure the summer heat. This is my favorite." She touched the stem of a single, soft bud on one bush. "I call it Ivory Rose after my mother. Her name was Rose, you know. Papa tells me she had the fairest ivory complexion, with just a blush of rose on her cheeks. When this one blooms, its petals are ivory-colored, but a soft pink tint seems to glow near the edges. It's a lovely effect."

"As the mother, so is her daughter. What a beautiful tribute to her."

"Yes. I think it good always to remember she gave her life so I could live."

"Just as Christ our Lord did."

Hannah smiled up at him. "Always the preacher, Jeremiah?"

He grinned self-consciously and stared down at his feet, then glanced toward the end of the garden. "Could we go into the arbor and talk?" Not waiting for an answer, he took her arm, led her into the shady arbor, and sat beside her in the white wooden glider suspended by chains from a sturdy frame.

"You're so very serious this evening, Jeremiah."

"Yes, I am. I have a very important question to ask you."

“Oh?” Hannah turned away. She had not expected him to propose so soon. It would be impossible to refuse without hurting him, and she dreaded causing him pain.

“We spoke a little about my calling a while ago. The truth is, I have been called to be a missionary, but not far away. My mission field is here in New Bedford, most especially among the whalers. You know my grandfather was a whaler, so it’s not as if I have no understanding of them. But you will need to have that understanding too. I know your father has protected you from the roughest of the lot who sail on his ships, and I don’t fault him for that. It was fitting that as his daughter you should move among only the highest of New Bedford society.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say—”

“Please, allow me to finish. I don’t want to draw you unprepared into a situation that will be uncomfortable for you.”

“Jeremiah, I—”

“What I propose, if you would permit it, is that I would like to bring to supper next week a certain whaling captain whose soul, I fear, is in deepest peril. He’s an older man, and while he is not coarse, he is rather rough, although he certainly has manners enough in polite society, or I would not ask you to entertain him.”

Hannah giggled with relief. Proposing marriage was not what he had in mind after all, at least not tonight. “Silly dear, of course you can bring a friend to supper. Is that the question you wished to ask me?”

“Why, yes. It will serve a most important purpose in regard to our future.”

“Our future? In what way?”

“If I am to minister to men such as this captain, I must help you become comfortable in ministering along with me. I want you to become accustomed to—”

"But, Jeremiah," she could not let him continue, "you speak as though our futures were one."

"Of course. Haven't we always known that?"

Hannah tried to think of the kindest possible words to deny his assertion. But no matter what, it was best to face the matter and be done with it once and for all.

"Do you mean to tell me," he teased, "that hope chest of yours is being filled for some other man's home?"

"I have no hope chest. And if I did, why would you think ... why would you assume—"

"Is this my ever-candid Hannah Oldweiler playing the coquette now? After all, it was you who proposed to me."

"I? I did no such thing."

"But when you were ten years old, and I was sixteen, we sat in this very swing, and you vowed that you would allow me to marry no one but you."

"But I was only a child, and you nearly a grown man ... a family friend, like a dear brother to me. Oh, you. You're joking. I demand that you stop."

Jeremiah gazed at her fondly. "Yes, I suppose I should. But as I've watched you grow up so beautifully, I've known it was not enough to be your friend and brother. I've come to realize your childish proposal was my heart's desire as well. I've always felt we had an understanding that we would serve God together." He paused and frowned. "Oh, dear. Now I see that I have failed to honor you by true courtship. It's only fair that you should play hard to get."

Hannah searched his eyes. How often through the years had she gazed into those gentle eyes that never condemned her childish antics? But with all his understanding, how had he failed to observe the deepest changes in her?

"Oh, dear."

“Let me mend my ways. Will this do?” He knelt on the ground in front of her and took her hands. “Dearest Hannah, I love you with all my heart. Would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

She stared down and bit her lip. If she looked into his eyes again, she feared she would do whatever he asked. He was so good, so gentle, so persuasive. But marry him? No. Now that he spoke the words she long feared, she knew she could not accept him.

“My dear friend, I know that as a pastor, you need a wife to stand by your side as a helpmeet. But I’m only eighteen and not yet ready to marry. Besides, Papa isn’t well, and I cannot leave him alone.”

“Your father has already given his blessing. I would never propose to you without asking him first. As to your age, my darling, you have managed his house for four years with great skill, far better than women twice or thrice your age might do.”

“Managing a house is not what I was referring to. I long for something else in life. We live in an amazing world, and this is a time of great discoveries, like the Rosetta stone, the pharaohs’ tombs of ancient Egypt, or the site of the Trojan War. Think of how exciting it would be to actually see those artifacts and places we’ve only read about. I want to see Europe—England, Italy, France. Oh, and of course I want to visit the place where William Penn set sail, bringing with him my ancestor, Peter Oldweiler. I want to see all the places Shakespeare wrote about. I cannot think of being chained to duties and responsibilities far beyond my age and aptitude. I would not serve you well for a pastor’s wife.”

“But of course you would. Is this my capable Hannah thinking so ill of her own abilities?”

“Weren’t you listening to me? I wish to travel.”

"Perhaps some day we can—"

"I don't believe in perhaps. I believe in planning."

Jeremiah slowly stood and brushed the grass and dirt from his trouser legs. Hannah could see the hurt in his eyes, but she would not change her mind. A moment of being persuaded by his endearing charms would condemn her to a life she had long ago known she could not live. After a few moments, he sat back down and gave her a sad smile.

"I hope you will forgive me for taking you for granted. I didn't mean to. Honestly."

"You may always take my friendship for granted. But ...," she looked away for a moment, then turned back to him. "Next to my father, you are my dearest friend, but I will not, I cannot, be your wife."

He was quiet again and deep in thought. When at last he spoke, there was no rancor or censure in his tone, only melancholy. "I don't understand why you want to travel. What use will it serve? It seems so selfish just running off to see the world with no purpose in mind. I have never thought you selfish. Why, you're the most unselfish woman I know. And what better way can a woman serve God than by working beside her husband in the church?"

"Indeed! May we forget serving God for a moment?"

"Hannah!"

"No, I mean it. Young men often go on all sorts of travels before they settle down to their life's work. Even you. And if you had decided to become a whaler after your voyage as your grandfather's cabin boy, who would have told you no? Or if you had decided to work in your father's store or become a professor or anything other than a pastor, who would have said you were out of God's will? There were no pastors in your family. No example

you were forced to follow. You felt it was God's calling for you, and so you made your decision to enter the ministry."

"Yes, but for a woman, her great work in life, the very highest calling is—"

"To be a wife? Why?"

He thought for a moment. "If you have not been called to be my ... to be a wife, then what are you thinking of? You're far too spirited to live an idle life. Other than caring for your father, what will you do?" He waited a moment, his expression open to whatever she would say. When she gave a little shrug of indecision, he leaned toward her. "You see, you're uncertain yourself. What you need is someone older and more experienced to be your guiding hand, a loving husband to help you find the right occupation for your time."

Hannah gave an exasperated sigh. "What you mean is a husband who will tell me what to do and what to think, as if a woman could not find a proper occupation for her life. That's nonsense. A woman should not feel that she must marry in order to be useful. And if she does marry, may it not be to someone her own heart chooses?"

Jeremiah winced, as if he had been struck. "Ah, now I understand. You're in love with someone else." He was quiet for a moment before whispering, "May I know my rival's name?"

"There is no one. Truly."

"Then I still may win your heart?"

"I would be very sad to lose your friendship, but I cannot promise anything more."

Jeremiah took her hand once more and kissed it. "I will be content with friendship for now, but I cannot promise to cease my quest for the owner of this lovely hand."

She smiled, but gently pulled her hand away from him. Thank goodness this difficult interview was over. Now perhaps she

should offer some token of her good will. "You may bring that ship's captain to supper next Friday evening. Until you do find your wife, you will need a home where you can bring these reprobates as you try to save their souls." She noticed with dismay that her invitation pleased him far more than it should have.

Late that evening, Hannah sat on the footstool beside her father's chair, packing his evening pipe, as was their custom. She lifted the elegantly carved pipe to him and struck a match while he inhaled the fragrant tobacco smoke. After the pipe was securely lit, Mr. Oldweiler held it thoughtfully and gazed at his daughter.

"Hannah, I know it's the fashion among your friends for a young lady to decline a gentleman's first proposal, even when she loves her young man. I've not said anything to you regarding your rejection of previous suitors because I was hoping that when Jeremiah returned home from seminary, his boyhood fondness for you might blossom into love. And so it has. He loves you most devotedly. But I must warn you," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "there are numerous other eligible young ladies whose regular church attendance has been assured by, oh, shall we say, a newfound piety that, you may have noticed, coincided with Jeremiah's investiture as our assistant pastor. You'll not want to risk their attracting his attention by waiting too long to accept him."

"But—"

"I've been such a poor businessman, and I have so little security to give you, my dear." He ignored her attempt to interrupt. "You may think his father's wealth, with his eventually inheriting a share of it, is the reason I have always favored Jeremiah. But I must assure you it is his excellent character that has made him dear to my heart, as well as to yours, though sometimes I question whether you or I benefit more from his visits. Just