

Sail  
Me Away  
Home

Ann  
Clare  
LeZotte

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# Chapter

## One

Honeybees are happily drowsing in blooms before returning to their hives. *A swarm of bees in June is worth a silver spoon.* We'll have stores of honey for winter. The plovers, with their orange beaks and black squiggles across their foreheads, are nesting contentedly on the beach.

Meanwhile I'm grounded, like a rusty anchor sunk in a seabed. Brightly colored fish swim quickly around it. An old humpback whale passes overhead. Looking down, the great beast admires the grappler's patience. The reliable metal is waiting for someone to haul it to the surface and take off full speed.

While the students practice their penmanship, some yawning or falling sideways in their seats, I shut my journal and wipe my brow. I rise and try to pry open a window painted shut in the Meeting House classroom. I'm careful not to cuss.

Townfolk believe if I could manage a child rendered feral by abuse on the mainland, I am a good

match for their offspring. Not all the school's teachers have been deaf but it's an advantage. Papa says my signing is most expressive.

Oh, I have tales to tell! But I'm relegated to the standard teachings dictated by our stuffy town council. If I had wind in my sails, I could push beyond them. I had such resolve when I last returned from the mainland, but without any new opportunities, it's dribbled away.

My encouraging mentor, Mrs. Pye, wasn't nearly as short-tempered as I am. I was her pupil in the traveling school that lands in Chilmark during the months when children unlace their boots and stare longingly out the windows.

*They don't need me*, I secretly think. I fold my skirt under me and sit at the desk. The students are mainly woolly-headed and meek like our sheep. They like to trick me but fortunately, not too often. No Wampanoag children are allowed here for learning, and I sneak in the three young Irish boys working at our farm when they show interest. I am determined to treat all—no matter their dress, parentage, or how many acres their family owns—as equal. But I long for a challenge,

someone to reach and be inspired by, like Beatrice.

She was my first pupil, the girl locked on the top floor of a well-respected manor outside of Boston. When we first met, she was filthy and seemingly without language. She frightened me. It wasn't because I didn't realize the deaf outside of my village—where a high percentage are born without hearing—were treated monstrously. I did. But before I saw her as her own person and learned her history, I viewed her as what I might have become if I had been born anywhere but Martha's Vineyard. The most important thing she showed me is that we needn't be exactly alike, even in communication, to understand and support each other. I don't use oral speech as she does, but we have much in common.

For a moment, Beatrice's name seems to linger in the air, written in the dust the children produce by happily banging their erasers to clean them. I hope she's at home with the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe on Cape Cod, not taken back to . . . *Stop fretting over what you cannot change!*

I'm broken from my reverie by movement in the classroom. The half dozen pupils all turn to look toward one of their own, puzzled.

Liam, a nephew of Papa's farmhand Eamon, is proving himself more observant than I first imagined. When he arrived with his brothers from County Galway, he would provoke me at every turn. He learned our island sign language easily as soon as he chose to, so quickly that I knew he'd been absorbing it all along.

He sits in the back and raises his arms to spell with both hands.

"Beltane," he signs. His dark eyes are mischievous.

Zounds! Just what the council warned me against. I imagine Reverend Lee shaking his head at the pulpit.

"May, last month," I sign, my hands turning back the invisible pages of a calendar. The other students look between us.

"No school before," he insists. "We celebrate now."

At the sign for "celebrate," the children put aside the slates I haven't yet checked and corrected. They jump up out of their boredom. I feel a stirring too. I'm sure Mrs. Pye would agree that it's the students who bring the lessons and an otherwise bare teaching space to life. Though I've been slack in my duties.

Can I teach what he's asking?