

The Sugar Baron's Daughters • ONE

A decorative, ornate frame with intricate scrollwork and flourishes surrounding the title. The frame is rectangular with rounded corners and a double-line border.

KETURAH

LISA T. BERGREN



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Lisa T. Bergren, *Keturah*
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*For Olivia,
In celebration of God's healing work!*

*I love you.
—Mama*



CHAPTER ONE

10 JUNE, 1773

RIVENSHERE, ENGLAND

In the hopes that at least one would get through, their father had sent three copies of his last letter from the West Indies; as it happened, his daughters received them all. The first arrived nine weeks after it was posted. A servant delivered the second on a silver tray, a week after they heard their father had perished. By the time the final, rather ghoulish draft came, the girls were weeks into their grief, and it was buried in a stack of condolence letters.

“I’m only glad that Mother isn’t here to endure this,” Verity said, handing her older sister the letter in her father’s careful script. Her eyes were bloodshot, making them an eerie gold-green. Ket knew she hadn’t been sleeping; she heard the floorboards creaking as Ver tiptoed downstairs each night. Their youngest sister, Selah, never left her room after retiring, but judging from her wan complexion and the dark circles ringing her own eyes, Ket wagered she tossed and turned all night too.

“Here is another you ought to see,” Verity said, handing her a second letter as she shifted through the stack of notes sent from well-meaning kin and acquaintances. Keturah met Ver’s concerned gaze before accepting it and glancing down. From the scrawl, she

knew it was from her father's attorney, Clement Abercrombie, the temporary manager of the entire Banning estate—both that of Hartwick Manor, here in Rivenshire, and Tabletop Plantation on Nevis.

Keturah sighed and closed her eyes. She didn't know if she could bear to read the same words from her father a third time, describing his failing health, imploring his daughters to always remember his fervent love for them. And yet had she not scoured the first and second, searching for variances, any scant detail that might help her connect to their father one last time? No, better to remain in the realm of the head rather than the heart. To read of business, to know of the outcome of this latest sugar harvest. Certainly it had to be better than the last. They desperately needed some glad tidings.

She slid a finger under the wax seal and popped open the heavy linen paper, unfolding it. She settled back into the worn but beautifully upholstered damask chair, what had once been her mother's favorite. But as she read, her heart sank lower and lower. *No, no, no . . .*

"Ket, what is it?" Verity asked, setting aside the rest of the letters and leaning forward. "You look positively aghast."

Keturah realized one hand had gone to her throat and dropped it back to her lap. Her sisters teased her about her hand gestures, instantly reading her many moods. But this . . . Her eyes scanned the letter again. *Crop blight . . . Terrible drought . . . Machinery failure . . . Another overseer lost to the ague . . . Returns far less than the last . . .*

Far less than the last.

And the last had been fully half of the one prior.

She hadn't met with the attorney in London more than once since Father's death, but she knew enough to recognize that this was perilous news indeed. Mr. Abercrombie had hinted that it might be time to find a new West Indies overseer to manage Tabletop, that there were indications of mismanagement in the last years as her father's health deteriorated. Now that man was

dead and there was no longer a choice to be made. He had to be replaced.

But finding a new overseer was a challenge in the West Indies—particularly for absentee owners. She'd overheard enough from male conversations at various social gatherings to tell her that those who saw to a plantation's "management" were notoriously given to *mismanagement* . . . skimming funds, abuse of the slaves, and a rather unfortunate susceptibility to death from either drink or disease. And now Tabletop had lost their latest manager—such as he was—as well as Father. Who was looking after the slaves? Clearing the land to plant the next crop?

"Ket," Verity said, obviously for the second or third time, striding toward her. "What is it?"

Keturah brought her head up and thought about her sister's words. What was it? What was it *not*? This meant everything was about to change for her. Again. "It appears . . . well, it appears I must pack my things and be on the first ship bound for the West Indies." She handed the letter to Verity and rose, her heavy skirts swishing about her as she strode toward the window. She needed to see the sun peeking through the clouds, some remnant of hope. Or was this just the latest reminder that God had utterly abandoned her?

"The West Indies," Selah repeated slowly, as if she had misheard Ket. "But you cannot. Father forbade us to go there!"

"Father isn't here any longer," Keturah muttered, her mind racing. "Such matters now must be decided by us alone." She shook her head as if to clear it and glanced over her shoulder at her sisters. Neither of them knew how dire this word truly was . . . Ket didn't need another meeting with her father's attorney or accountant to tell her that this crop failure meant they were in danger of losing not just Tabletop, but their holdings here in Rivenshire too.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to fully face her sisters. "The harvest was . . . far less than we hoped for, and our latest overseer has died of the ague. The difficulty is this: Father borrowed heavily against Tabletop *and* Hartwick Manor in order to make some

improvements in the Indies. We were counting on a good return from the harvest in order to make a recovery and keep our creditors at bay. Given this news,” she said, gesturing to the letter, “I would expect we have only two, perhaps three years to turn things around. Our creditors shall undoubtedly grow impatient after that and demand satisfaction.”

Verity’s mouth dropped open, and Selah covered hers.

“Surely it cannot be as dire as all that,” Selah said.

Keturah only soberly met her gaze. Verity’s mouth clamped shut. Selah stepped forward and anxiously wrapped her hand through the crook of Ver’s arm, her delicate brows knit in anxiety. But Ket’s eyes returned to Verity.

“That leaves us with two options, Ver. Either one of us must immediately marry, and marry a very *clever* fellow, capable of managing our declining estates, or I must go and find a new manager for the plantation. Our future depends upon it.”

Verity frowned. Selah blinked and stared at her. Not a one of them had a suitor they wished to encourage at the moment. Selah, after all, was only eighteen. Ver was notoriously picky. And Ket—well, Ket had decided to never risk her heart again. Not that the finest unions were built on love. No, in their circle, there were far more factors to consider. And those factors had led her to marry Lord Edward Tomlinson. Just the thought of it made her clench her hands.

Verity was the first to recover. “Perhaps there is another solution?” she said, glancing hopefully between the unread letter in her hands and her sister.

“I fear not,” Keturah said, turning again to the window. She could not bear to stare upon the combined fear displayed in every line of her sisters’ faces—it tripled her own. “These last days I’ve been poring over the ledgers. Last harvest’s profits from Tabletop were but a portion of the previous one. We needed a strong crop to recover, and given sugar’s long growth cycle, we now will not have a chance at it again for more than a year.”

And that was if I were there this very day, hiring a new man.

But I am here, months away from the Indies! She swallowed hard, forcing her terror back, determined not to allow her sisters to see anything but decision and clarity—attributes they'd admired in their father, attributes they would look to her now to provide. She forced what she hoped was a determined, confident expression to her face and slid her shoulders back before glancing at them. "Due to those declining profits, Mr. Abercrombie suspected we needed to replace our overseer; now we must do so in all haste."

"Can that not be done from here?" Verity asked. "Or can we not hire a man to go in your stead? Cousin Cecil, perhaps?"

Keturah shook her head. "From what I've been able to ascertain, the best managers must be wooed away from other plantations or practically escorted from the docks before another secures their services. It is most competitive."

"Keturah!" Verity said, picking up her fan and sweeping it in front of her blushing face. "What a ghastly thought! The thought of *you* fraternizing with men on the docks? The thought of you on the islands at all! There are reasons Father forbade us to accompany him, and illness was but one."

Ket knew she was right. She looked back out the window, unsure of how to respond. *What am I to do? Is this madness? Or is it direction?*

Selah stepped up beside her and was silent a moment before weaving her slender fingers between Keturah's. Together, they looked out at the sprawling, pristine formal garden of the manse. The gardens Keturah had poured so much of her soul into since her return from the north. Gardens she'd freed of weeds and rot and had seen hints of new life in of late.

"Ket, you yourself know why Father didn't want us in the Indies," Selah said. "The stories . . ."

"I have grown weary of the stories," Keturah returned, still staring outward. "I want to see it for myself. And truly, Selah, I do not believe we have a choice in the matter. Our entire future rides on the success of that plantation. I have a head for financial matters as well as horticulture. Perhaps I am a better choice than any man."

“But no man shall give you the time of day, Ket,” Verity said, stepping to her other side. “At least in regard to such matters.”

“I shall find a way to gain their attention,” Keturah said with a heavy sigh, her eyes tracing the hedges of lavender waving in the afternoon breeze. She would miss that deep purple, as well as her rows of prizewinning roses.

“You cannot be serious,” Selah said. “Mother never wished to go. Father would turn in his grave if . . .” Choked by tears, she broke off.

Keturah wrapped her arm around Selah. Could she truly bear to leave her? And Verity too? What would the girls do without her? And yet what choice did she have? They couldn’t lose Hartwick Manor, their childhood home and their last connection to their parents and grandparents before them. The thought of the Banning girls without Hartwick was . . . unfathomable.

Her sisters needed it. To know that home was always right here. A refuge. Sanctuary. A place of peace.

She needed it.

She bit her lip. Did God so loathe her that He wished to see every bit of her once-strong foundation destroyed? Well, she would show Him, as well as every man who stood in her way. A determined woman could find her way. Surely she could . . .

Ket took a deep breath and turned from the window. “It is our time, sisters, to make our own way forward. Our parents are gone now, but our lives must go on. And if you do not wish to live in utter squalor, or accept the suit of the very next young man who wanders through our front gates, we must press forward at once. The only way I can see to do that is to sail west.”

“But the illnesses, Ket,” Verity tried again, wringing her hands. “Some say that four out of five newcomers fail to survive the year.”

“I am quite hale,” Keturah returned, reaching for her hand, seeking to reassure her. “I haven’t had a day abed in years.”

“But what of the wretched way they treat slaves?” Selah said. “I do not think I could bear to see such suffering. ’Tis one thing to give our servants here in England a proper opportunity to live

and learn of the Lord. To learn how to comport themselves and learn the value of hard work. 'Tis another to force them to work the cane fields."

Keturah's mouth became dry at the thought. She knew seeing that firsthand might be the worst aspect. She'd heard enough horror stories from other ladies, whispered behind fans. Worse, there were constant threats of slave uprisings, plantation families kidnapped. Wives raped. Children murdered. And she doubted it was all titillating rumor.

"What I envision is three years there, perhaps four, but no more," Keturah said, resolution gradually steeling each word. "Just enough time to hire a proper overseer, make some investments to improve the plantation, see in a couple of harvests to pay our debts and recover a bit of our fortune, then prepare the plantation for sale at a handsome profit."

"Four years?" Selah said, her voice cracking. "I cannot be without you that long, Ket," she said, lifting a knuckle beneath her nose as her pretty brown eyes welled with tears.

Keturah pulled her closer. "Come now, Sissy. I shall write constantly, and you to me."

Selah only shook her head as if refusing the thought.

"You shall not go alone, Ket," Verity said. "If you must go, I shall accompany you."

Keturah's heart leapt at the thought. It would be so much easier if she were not alone. And yet Verity had suffered from some illness in this past year, and they couldn't both sail away and leave young Selah alone here. "No, Ver. I cannot risk you."

"Why not? If you choose to risk it, so may I."

With one look into Verity's determined gaze, Ket knew she wouldn't dissuade her.

"No!" Selah said in horror, tears dripping down her cheeks as she looked back and forth between her sisters. "You *both* cannot leave me!"

"Then you must come with us," Verity said, reaching out a hand in invitation.

Keturah wanted to protest, and knew she should, but the thought of having both of her sisters with her made her feel almost as strong and capable as when her father lived. For the first time since they learned of his death, she felt a surge of hope in her breast. Moreover, for the first time in years, she knew the thrill of *anticipation* beating in her heart.

She and Ver eyed Selah, waiting on her.

The adorable girl wiped her eyes, sniffed, and squared her shoulders, making her blond curls bounce around the nape of her slender neck. “We shall do as our mother taught us and pray upon it.” She took a firmer grip on each of their hands, practically daring Ket to disagree.

With a sigh, Keturah closed their small circle, taking Ver’s hand too. Far be it from her to dull the shine of her sister’s coppery faith. It had sustained Selah—Ver too—through these last years, even as it had utterly failed Ket.

Heads bowed, Selah said, “Lord, it is with great trepidation that we come to you. And yet I cannot deny a desire to remain with my sisters, and you have planted this plan in Keturah’s fine mind. We beg you to confirm it to our hearts. Is this of you? Shall we be brave and follow where you appear to be leading us? If not, urge us away from what many would call madness. If so, make us courageous, Father. Courageous.”

They stood there in silence, their heads inches from one another. Ket stiffened as she heard them both sniff, knowing tears likely rolled down their cheeks as they continued to pray in silent passion, as their mother had before them. But Ket? She remained silent, teeth clenched, as she waited for God to do what He would with her sisters. Would it not be like Him to keep them from her? To make her sojourn alone, perhaps never to see either of them again?

This, *this* thought made her eyes well up at last and her throat swell. She sniffed, and Selah squeezed her hand, obviously assuming she was praying too. “Thank you, Lord. Thank you,” Selah whispered, as if she’d received word from the Almighty himself.

And Verity whispered, “We give you what is already your own, Lord. Our very lives. Go before us, beside us, and behind us. Amen.”

Both looked up at Keturah then, and she scanned their beloved faces, her heart in her throat. Ver was decided, more firm now. But Selah? She couldn’t tell. Her big brown eyes certainly held a measure of conflict in their depths.

“Our journey shall be undoubtedly rife with challenges,” her little sister said, suddenly seeming more womanly in her countenance and demeanor as she decided. “But where my dearest ones go, so shall I.”

Keturah huffed a laugh and then enfolded both girls in her arms. This felt good to her, so good. Hopeful. How long had it been since she felt such hope, since she felt so . . . alive?

Since before Edward, she was certain. Before her life with him had slowly deadened her heart, piece by piece.

’Tis behind you now, Ket, she told herself, hugging her sisters even tighter. She giggled and laughed with them, each one sharing glances that said, *Can we really be doing this? Is it true? Are we mad?*

Were they mad? Or brilliant?

Brilliant, she decided. Or at the very least, inspired. And inspiration, after so long feeling anything but, was exhilarating.

Yes. The time of death is over. Ahead is life. Hope!

She was certain of it.