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TESS THOMPSON

The
MYSTERY
MATCHMAKER
of
ELLA POINTE

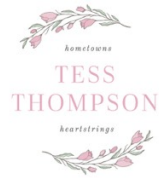
A MATCH *for*
A MATCHMAKER BRIDE

A MATCH FOR A MATCHMAKER BRIDE

THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK SEVEN

TESS THOMPSON



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Also by Tess Thompson

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THE LETTERS

Dear Mrs. Mantle,

I'm writing to thank you for the excellent match you made between Benedict and Amelia. I'm not afraid to tell you, I had my doubts. Not because I didn't believe in your talent, but because this task might stump even the most expert matchmaker. I mean, who wouldn't? Matching two people, one of whom you'd not met in person, is nothing short of miraculous. Benedict's mother is thrilled with your choice, as is the rest of the family. She has quickly become part of the Tutheridge clan. In addition, she is the absolute perfect person for Benedict, even if she has made an enemy of the sheriff. She's made a bit of a nuisance of herself trying to solve the murder of Roland Tutheridge. She rather obsessively jots down notes in a notebook and is determined to find the killer. This has made me and others nervous for her safety. Regardless, Benedict takes good care of her, never letting her out of his sight.

Their wedding was one of the sweetest I've attended. Benedict wept when he saw his bride coming down the aisle at our church. She was lovely in her dress and with that luscious hair of hers fixed in an elaborate twist. After the ceremony, we all enjoyed the party back at the estate. Mrs. Tutheridge invited the whole town, and there were games for the children and mounds of good food. Mrs. Halvorson truly outdid herself with a roasted pig, fresh corn dripping with locally churned butter, and a white wedding cake with raspberry filling. I mention the food mostly because Amelia enjoyed it very much. As she would say herself, she does love cake.

Mrs. Tutheridge is delighted, to say the least. She told me she can now sleep a quarter of a percent better. Once all her children are married, she believes she'll be able to sleep much better.

In addition to the update on Benedict, I'm anxiously awaiting news of the others' matches. Have you made any progress? Mrs. Tutheridge feels Hudson is the most urgent. He's made a mess of his life. His daughter, Bebe, is a terror, and getting worse by the day and causing all kinds of mishaps and stress for the family and staff alike. It will take a special woman to straighten them both out, if you want the plain truth. Furthermore, I have to agree with his mother. Hudson's the one for which I feel the most concern.

Briggs seems content enough lately. Benedict is building him an art studio on the property so he can paint all year round. He's been prolific of late, painting scenes of the island as well as the people who live here. He told me the last time I saw him that he had every intention of staying on the island for the rest of his life. When I asked him if he was at all worried that he would grow old alone, he laughed and said something about alternate ways to conquer loneliness. I didn't want to know what he meant by that, but it's nothing good, I can tell you with assuredness. I'm hoping you can find someone soon. I've been pondering his perfect match and continue to feel he needs a steady, practical woman who also enjoys art. Marrying and living with an artist will have unique challenges. Tempestuous and passionate, that's our Briggs. The right woman will find him interesting and inspiring but not an artist herself. That would never work.

Ella continues to claim she has no interest in marriage. Recently, she told me she will have nothing to do with a union where a woman must promise to obey her husband. While that makes me chuckle, it also worried me. How will you ever find a match for her? It will take a unique man to break through her barriers and beliefs that most men will end up treating her as her father did her mother. I'm hopeful that seeing Benedict in a marriage, and the respectful and loving way he is with his wife, will help convince her.

Along with all that, I have another request of you. Since I first wrote to you, we've made a rather alarming discovery. Mr. Tutheridge had an illegitimate son around the same time Ella was born. It's a long story, but the boy's mother died shortly after giving birth to the baby. Soon thereafter, he was adopted by our local lighthouse keeper and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers were already middle-aged and childless. They were delighted to take him in as their own. From all accounts and my own observation, they are a happy family of three. Recently, Rhett's taken over the running of the lighthouse. Although the Tutheridge siblings were surprised to learn their childhood friend was also their brother, they welcomed him into the family, including giving him his share of the family fortune. He at first declined but was later convinced, mostly because he knew how much it would help his elderly parents.

Obviously, Mrs. Tutheridge won't be asking for a match for Rhett. She's been gracious toward the young man, but he's a reminder of her husband's infidelity. I doubt she'll ever feel like he's part of the family. However, I would like to humbly ask if you might consider finding a match for him. Rhett is a fine young man, hardworking and honest. Soon his parents will retire and live in a residence other than the lighthouse. The stairs have become hard for them, as has the robust nature of the work. In addition, they've had a few health problems over the last year or so. Rhett is having a house built for them, and they'll move before winter. He wants their last years to be comfortable ones.

This will leave Rhett on his own at the lighthouse. He has no plans to do anything else with his life, saying his heart and soul are dedicated to the work. Thus, he will need a wife to keep him company on the long, lonely nights as he ensures the ships and boats are safe from harm.

The inevitable question is, as it was for the others, what kind of woman would Rhett want and need? I've spent more time thinking about this than one probably should, but I seem to have caught the matchmaker bug. This I must blame on you, as your impeccable ability with Benedict and Amelia has proven to me what is possible. It even makes me wonder about a match for myself! I've thought about it and have received

Mrs. Tutheridge's blessing to share with you my identity. I own the bar here in Ella Pointe. How I came to be here is a sordid tale I'll save for another time. Matching me would be a difficult one for you, as a bar owner in a tavern on a remote island with a sad past is hardly a woman's dream come true.

However, I digress. Regarding Rhett, I believe the woman for Rhett should be someone who desires a quiet life in a beautiful location. She should be physically strong, as there are many duties expected of the wife of a lighthouse keeper. In addition, she must not mind living there as her primary residence. You might be surprised by how nice a home it is, although unconventional, with its skinny three levels and the round shape of the rooms. In addition, she will need to know how to cook and take care of a home without much assistance.

I've thought of a way to introduce him to the idea. Similar to what we've planned for the others, he would think he was hiring help. In this case, it would be a housekeeper who will cook and clean. She will live in the spare bedroom, giving them a lot of time alone together. Since the truth of his identity came to light, Rhett now has the financial means to hire help and to have a house built for his parents. Thus, hiring someone will seem like a natural progression. As the winter months bring darkness to our island, I can imagine that the two of them will have a lot of time together. Time to fall in love.

She should be kind and without pretenses, as Rhett is a simple person who enjoys gardening and animals. A love of animals would be ideal, as he adores his dog and cat. In fact, they're treated as members of the family. An enjoyment of reading will be necessary, especially during the cold days of winter. There isn't much to do in those months and being able to be entertained by the simple pleasures of life will make for a happy marriage. She should love the sea and the ships that sail it. A generous nature would be helpful. The job of the lighthouse keeper's wife is one of sacrifice.

I realize this isn't much to go on. Please write back with the status of the others and any questions you may have.

The sheriff nor Amelia has discovered who murdered Roland Tutheridge. I'll be sure to keep you informed if there are any leads in the case. Thus far, it doesn't seem as if anyone who knew Roland cares who murdered him, only that he's gone.

Warm regards,

Matthew Goodwell



DEAR MATTHEW,

I can't tell you how much your letter delighted me. Firstly, I'm happy to know your name and profession. I've been ever so curious about you. Given your generosity in helping Mrs. Tutheridge, I know you're a good man, despite any faults or mishaps from the past. We all have smudges on our looking glasses, don't we? I hope you'll share your tale with me soon, however sordid it might be.

Hearing how happy Benedict and Amelia are together warms my heart. When your proposal for these matches first arrived, I thought there would be no way to find the right partners for our Tutheridge siblings. Finding success with our first couple has given me confidence. Unfortunately, I have had no luck finding the right match for the others. I continue to advertise in the newspapers and am currently experimenting with other ways to find them. I won't bore you listing my creative attempts until they actually work. So far, there have been many interviews and none of them have seemed right. Like I did with Amelia, I'll know them when I meet them. With divine guidance, I truly believe I will find the right matches. Please don't give up hope.

Regarding a match for yourself, what would the ideal woman look like? One who wouldn't mind living on an island, obviously. Also, the hours and nature of owning a bar would be a challenge for a woman who did not have many interests of her own. Perhaps even one who would like to assist you in your endeavors? You have not told me your age, but I assume

you're older than my thirty-eight years given how long you've been on the island. As far as your sad past, might you illuminate me on that point, if only to understand better the type of woman suited to you? I've noticed that people have different tolerances for indiscretions. Knowing yours would be of great interest to me.

I'll be in touch the moment I find a suitable match for one of the Tutheridge siblings. I can't tell you which order they will come, only that they will. God willing.

Warm regards,

Mrs. Aubrey Mantle

P.S. Please address me as Aubrey. We will be good friends by the time this is all over.



DEAR AUBREY,

Thank you for your quick response. Given the difficulty of the task at hand, there is no need to apologize for taking your time. As you say, not just anyone will do. I have faith in you and our Lord above.

As for my age, I am slightly north of forty-five. My sad tale is a simple one, really. I was a bartender in a tavern in Seattle when I was in my early twenties. I fell in love with the owner's daughter. When he discovered our chaste meetings, mostly walks along the water, he fired me and forbade her to see me again. He had grand notions of the type of husband for his only daughter, and I was most certainly not it. Strangely enough, the night after he fired me, his bar burned to the ground. I was blamed for setting the fire, even though I was nowhere near the building that night. He convinced anyone who would listen that I had set the fire, including the police. I was about to be arrested when Roland Tutheridge, who had influence with lawmakers and authorities, presented to me a fresh start here on the island. He offered to build a structure for the bar and my upstairs apartment in exchange for his

discretion about my past and half of the profits from the business.

I have been happy here on the island despite the auspicious beginning. The daughter of my former employer did indeed marry another man her father found suitable because of his status and wealth. I never had a chance, even though at the time my young man's heart believed otherwise. Since then, I've not allowed myself to hope for a woman to love. As you're aware, there are not many women on the island, thus decreasing my odds. Of late, I've wondered if there is someone out there—a perfect match as you found for our Benedict—but I know it's only a romantic notion. My time for love and a family has come and gone. Finding potential matches for me would be a large waste of your time. I am not a man any woman could love. I'm rough and hardened and have most certainly lost whatever handsomeness I once possessed. Regardless, every so often, I wonder what might have been of my life.

What about you, Mrs. Aubrey Mantle? It's my understanding you're a widow? My deepest condolences. How did you meet Mr. Mantle? Was he your perfect match? Were you happy?

Warm regards,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

I have nothing to tell you regarding the Tutheridge matches, other than I think I may have found someone for Briggs. More about that after I know if my instincts prove correct. I'll write as soon as I have more to share.

Daniel Mantle was indeed my perfect match. Sadly, as you know, he passed away a few years back. Still, he's the one I believe responsible for my status as a matchmaker. His voice came to me in a dream, demanding that I do something with my life instead of mourning him and wishing to stay in bed all

day. He was quite clear that I needed a new challenge and reason to get up in the morning as well as a way to give back to the world for all I'd been given.

Before my marriage, I was very poor, raised by my mother after the loss of my father. When Daniel fell in love with me, everything changed. Marrying a wealthy man ensured a life of luxury and leisure. Upon his death, I became a woman of means, but without a purpose. Whatever is left of my life will be dedicated to finding their Daniel for anyone who asks for help. I wish for others the kind of love I had with Daniel. Thinking of it this way gives purpose to our short marriage and my subsequent loss.

I'm sad to hear your tale of lost love and false accusations. It must have been maddening to know you were innocent but without the power to defend yourself. I will say, however, that this woman was not worthy of you if she did not defend you to her father and the authorities. Instead, she did as he wished, marrying for money. This indicates a woman who is weak-minded. From what I know of you thus far, I would say this woman surely wasn't your match.

Do you think it's ever too late to find love? I don't think so. Perhaps I will make it a further mission to find someone for you. If you were to ask for one quality in your perfect mate, what would it be?

Warm regards,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I received your letter in this morning's post, and it gave me such a lift to hear from you. These exchanges with you are certainly a welcome surprise.

About your question regarding my perfect mate. I guess I would say the most important quality would be kindness. Although I'm a big and burly man, I have a tender heart. If I

could help anyone in the world, I would. It appears you are this way, too?

Beyond that, I would like a woman with her own ideas and interests. One who thought of herself as my equal and wanted to approach life as partners in all things. Perhaps even a woman who challenged me mentally. I wouldn't mind it if she made me laugh, and I'd most certainly like it if she thought I was funny. Isn't that every man's wish? To make the woman he loves laugh?

However, my new friend, do not waste precious time or energy on me. As I said before, that time has come and gone.

I'll look forward to your next letter.

Warm regards,

Matthew



DEAR AUBREY,

I hope this won't alarm you too much but I'm afraid we've been found out, mostly because of my big mouth. I said too much to Amelia, and the girl is smart as a whip, as you know. She told Benedict and our latest match, Faith and Briggs, as well. They've promised me they won't say a word to Mrs. Tutheridge or the others, as they're true believers in what we're doing. I never thought I'd see the day Briggs Tutheridge was in favor of matchmaking. He's such a changed man by love, Aubrey, that it warms me to my very core. What you've done here is nothing short of miraculous, as I said before. Does it embarrass you that we all now worship you?

Amelia mentioned to me that she wrote to you that Roland's murder had finally been solved. No one was as surprised as I to discover what happened. Although I cannot condone his behavior, I certainly understand his motive.

I'll await anxiously to hear who you're sending next and for whom.

Once this is all done, perhaps you'd consider a visit to Whale Island to see the joy you've brought to their family. I'd love to show you around our island and for you to meet the Tutheridge siblings in person. If I'm speaking the truth, I'd like to meet you as well. Both Amelia and Faith have told me how lovely you are inside and out, and I can't help but be curious to know more.

Yours,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

This is a surprise indeed to learn we've been discovered. I don't suppose it will hurt anything since they've all agreed to stay quiet. I'm thrilled to hear they believe in the cause now too. There's nothing like falling in love to make you wish it for everyone else.

I've not yet found the right matches for Ella, Hudson, or Rhett. However, I'm diligently searching as well as praying. Soon, I feel certain, their perfect mate will appear before me.

As far as a visit to Whale Island? I surprise myself by considering the idea. Since Daniel's death, I've stayed close to home, living in the past other than when I'm working. Whale Island might be just what I need to move forward in my life. At the same time, I wonder, am I capable of doing so? Living in the present still hurts. Will the grief and sorrow that's become part of me ever lessen?

I should close, as there are matches to be found. Wishing you a good week. I'll be in touch when I have anything to share of my searches.

Yours,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I hope this letter finds you well. I'm writing to tell you that once again you have made a successful match. Ella and Lucca have married and are settling into the residence in the back of their office. I have to tell you—I doubted you could find Ella the right person. I'd even started second-guessing the idea of it being a doctor. However, as usual, your match proved to be just right.

I'm wondering if you've had any leads for our Rhett. I saw him yesterday in town, and he looked exhausted. He said looking after himself is proving more difficult than he thought it would be. In addition, he confessed to feeling lonely living by himself in the lighthouse.

To fill you in on the other matches, Amelia will be having the baby any day now, and she and Benedict are beside themselves with joy. Amelia has taken on learning to cook with her usual enthusiasm and energy. She's becoming so good at it that she may rival the famous Mrs. Halvorson before long.

Faith and Briggs are very happy together. I've never seen him like this and am very grateful you found Faith. She is such a dear girl and has acclimated to the island like she was born here. I know they're hoping for a baby, but thus far I've no news on that front.

Strangely enough, we've had another alarming occurrence. A young teacher at our school has gone missing. She was about to marry a young man from Seattle. Her fiancé was working in the city to save up a little money so they could settle here on the island. Some folks think she ran off, but I find that hard to believe. I'm worried we have another murder on our hands. However, there has been no body and no evidence of any violence. I hope it was only that she grew nervous about her marriage and decided the only way to escape was to leave town. The poor man she was engaged to is devastated. Sheriff White has no theories about what could

have happened to her. Sometimes I think Amelia's right, and he's not the best detective that's ever worn the badge. Please pray for us that she shows up somewhere safe and very much alive.

Lastly, I wanted to ask you about Hudson's match. I do hope you'll find someone suitable. He and Bebe need a good woman in their lives. He's seemed a little more open to the idea of living a more full life of late, attending church and family dinners and not quite as gloomy as he had been.

I should close for now. I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Yours,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

Thank you for your kind letter. I'm sorry to say I have no leads for either Rhett or Hudson. I've found from the past matches that I have a gut feeling when I find the right one. Sadly, none of the young women we've interviewed have given me the tingly feeling in my fingertips. I'll write to you the moment I have someone to send out, you can trust me on that. I'm looking forward to having this project completed so that I can stop scouring the streets of Boston for unsuspecting victims. I've never listened in on so many conversations in my life.

I've been thinking about coming for a visit when this is all done. I'd like to meet these Tutheridge offspring and see them with the matches I've sent out. Meeting you would be a treat as well. Heidi's keen to come with me, if her husband can come along. I thought it would be nice to have a man with us anyway, although I fear I may have to come home without either one of them. Every time we talk about Whale Island, Heidi gets a dreamy look in her eyes. All that talk of water and seals has her wishing for our trip to be sooner rather than later.

I thought that after I've matched Hudson and Rhett, we will celebrate by coming out to Whale Island. My late husband loved to travel, but he was always so busy with work we never managed to go anywhere at all. There's nothing keeping us from a vacation.

I do hope you'll want to meet me in person. I feel as if I know you, given our correspondence. You've been the perfect match for this matchmaker!

I'll write soon.

Fondly,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I've thought of nothing else but the idea of your visit. I would be delighted to finally meet you face-to-face. It makes me look forward to getting the last of the children married off so that I can finally see you in the flesh.

Please, plan to stay for a month or so. I've no doubt Mrs. Bains will want you and Heidi and her husband to reside at the estate during your visit. They've more than enough room now that you've got three of them matched and out of the house.

I look forward to showing my island to you. Perhaps you'll all fall in love and decide to stay? One never knows what can happen. This island seems to have magical powers. Or is that simply you? Also, by fall in love, I mean with the island, of course.

Seeing the kids so happy makes me feel a little envious. I've been a bachelor for a long time. Probably too long to be domesticated. Yet, maybe not? Regardless, it would be nice to have someone by my side. If there is such a lady to be found.

Write soon.

Yours,

Matthew



DEAR AUBREY,

You've done it again, my dear matchmaking friend. Rhett and Sara Rose have made a wonderful match and from all accounts are living blissfully together in the lighthouse. She took the miscarriage hard, as I'm sure any woman would, but appears to have recovered nicely. Such a sweet, dear girl. I was dismayed to hear about how her family treated her simply because of her appearance. Anyway, she's absolutely ravishing, whatever color her eyes are. I'm sure you agree.

They attended church this morning and sat together in the third row next to Rhett's parents. They did not stop holding hands the entire sermon. It did this old grumpy bachelor's heart good.

There is some news of note and perhaps concern. From what Sara Rose has told me, your intention was to put Hudson and Piper in close proximity and see if any connection could be found. Unfortunately, Piper is smitten with our schoolteacher, Caleb King. He's a handsome devil and quite popular with the ladies, so it's not a surprise. However, I do not think they are the right match. Not at all. She needs someone sincere and family-oriented, don't you think?

I say this knowing how loyal she was to Sara Rose all those years. She is now as well. The two of them are family, regardless of blood.

I'm not sure what, if anything, you would like me to do. Please let me know what you think I should do about Piper and Hudson. If you don't have any ideas, that's all right too. Perhaps keep your ears and eyes open for a suitable match for Hudson, just in case. I'll wait for your advisement on the matter.

I believe I mentioned the young woman's disappearance in my last letter. She's been found dead, presumably murdered. Sheriff White's beside himself. We've never had any crime at

all here on the island and now another murder? I hope it won't change your mind about a visit? I promise to keep you safe.

In happy news, Bebe seems to have transformed into a well-behaved child since the arrival of Piper. Thus, if Piper isn't the one who will become her mother, then we will consider it a match for Bebe. Even if she remains only Bebe's nanny, the little girl will be better for it. The two of them seem bonded like family already. It would be nice if by some miracle Hudson could win her heart. He'd have to want to win a heart, of course. I would not count on that either. We've seen miracles, though. Look at Ella, for example. She's as giggly and doe-eyed as the rest of them. I never thought I'd see the day.

Beatrice and Timothy have asked me out to the big house for supper. I close the tavern on the Lord's day and am often asked to join them but usually decline. I'm not sure why. I feel lonely on Sundays and wish there were someone beside me for supper, yet it seems a chore to attend. Perhaps it's all the interaction I have with people during my work hours. My tongue and ears are worn out by Sunday.

I hope all is well with you and Heidi.

With affection,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

Your letter brought disturbing news on both counts. Another murder? It seems impossible. I do hope Sheriff White won't fixate on the Tutheridge siblings as he did the last time. He really needs to become more imaginative when it comes to his detective work.

As for Hudson and Piper, my thoughts are thus. If they're meant to be, then it will unfold as it should, regardless of handsome schoolteachers. I may have been wrong about them. After all, it would seem awfully lucky to have found matches

for Rhett and Hudson in one efficient package. That being so, I shall continue to look for the right prospect. If you wouldn't mind keeping me up to date on the courtship of Mr. Caleb King and our Piper, I would be appreciative.

Heidi has been sick for a week now. Nothing serious, just a cold. However, without her by my side, the days feel long and lonely. One never knows how much a person means to them until they are gone. I was thinking of you one evening as I dined alone. Isn't it sad that there are so many of us alone, with no way of finding one another?

The weather here's been hot and sticky. I'm looking forward to the cooler days that will come soon.

I do hope you'll have time to write with an update on Piper and Hudson. I've had several dreams in which it's clear they're meant to be. Could I be wrong?

With affection,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

As I write this, my hand is shaking. Please forgive my sloppy cursive. So much has happened I hardly know where to start. I'll say it as simply as possible.

Caleb King is not at all who I thought he was. He physically assaulted Piper at our town dance. If he'd not been interrupted, I'm afraid he may have killed her. Piper said he grew ugly toward her when she invited Hudson to accompany them to the dance. It was merely a kind gesture. Piper didn't want Hudson to have to go alone, since it was his first dance since his wife's death. Nothing untoward, I can assure.

Unfortunately, knowing about Caleb's violent streak, I can't help but think it's possible he murdered the young teacher. They worked together, after all. Perhaps they argued over something? I may be reading too much into it.

All that said, Hudson and Piper seem to be growing closer as the days go by. I'm wondering if Caleb sensed an intimacy between them and that's why he became so jealous?

I think you may be right, my brilliant friend. The two of them are the right match.

With affection,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

I could scarcely sleep a wink after getting your letter in the post yesterday afternoon. All night I tossed and turned, worried about Piper. I hope she's been able to stay away from that awful Caleb King. How could he hurt such a sweet woman?

I've nothing much to say from my end, but wanted to get a letter off today before the postman came. Please write as soon as you can.

With affection,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I'm sorry it's been over a week since I've written. It's been chaotic, to say the least. The long and the short of it? Caleb King murdered the schoolteacher. It was also discovered he'd murdered a young woman back east twenty years ago, which is why he came west in the first place.

The rest of the tale is sordid, to say the least. The condensed version is that Caleb was killed while trying to attack the dressmaker, Mrs. Lancaster.

I can't tell you anything else for fear of getting you in trouble should you ever be questioned by the authorities. The less you know the better. I'll say only this. Michael and Mrs. Lancaster are in love. This is worrisome because of Mrs. Lancaster's race. However, the sheriff has agreed to look the other way. After some urging from Mrs. Bains, I might add.

The good news? You won't believe it. Piper and Hudson are in love. Bebe's going to get her mother after all. Throughout this ordeal, Hudson's been a rock, proving to Piper what a good man he is. If I'm correct, we'll have a wedding sooner rather than later.

Alas, we will be done with our project. Is it time for your visit? I hope you haven't reconsidered.

*With affection,
Matthew*



DEAR MATTHEW,

Your last letter has left me of two minds. I'm glad that Caleb King is no longer a threat. However, it's ghastly to think of all the deaths in such a short amount of time. I wonder how many others there were before he came to the island? It's too awful to think about.

Despite all that ugliness, I'm delighted to learn of the match between Hudson and Piper. Bebe must be utterly delighted.

Please send them all my love. A visit might be possible in the autumn.

*With affection,
Aubrey*



DEAR AUBREY,

I was correct. We have had another wedding. Our work together is done. I'm embarrassed to say, given how joyful a little family the three of them make, that I'm feeling lost and sad. Having a purpose bigger than myself has been one of the best experiences of my life. Thank you for agreeing to this outlandish scheme. Thank you for all the letters you've written. They have brought me such pleasure.

I'll not bother you again about a trip west. I assume you'll tell me when you're ready. Please be ready soon.

With affection,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

I was delighted to get your letter with the news of Hudson and Piper's marriage. What an easy one that was for us, wasn't it? I have to give Heidi partial credit, for she's the one who gave me the idea. For some reason, it was not obvious to me when it was indeed staring me right in the face.

The fact that our secret project turned out to be less of secret than we'd hoped has me tickled. Those Tutheridge siblings were too smart for us! Still, they must understand that you and I were merely puppets to the Lord above. Matching your lovely Whale Island residents was surely the result of the divine. Who else could put soulmates together with such ease?

Regardless of what small part I played, I shall miss working with you. What a pair we've made, despite our lack of discretion.

I'm afraid I, too, am feeling rather bereft. These last months have been such fun. What will I look forward to when we no longer have a reason to correspond? Doesn't that sound terrible? What a lonely old lady I must seem to you.

What news do you have? Is your place of business thriving? Has the warm weather gone away as it has here? The leaves are starting to turn ever so slightly, bringing hints of fall. As does the crispness in the autumn air. Heidi and I have enjoyed our walks again now that it's not so hot.

I was thinking the other day of all the stories I haven't told you. It made me wonder—would you even want to hear them? Does anyone?

After I lost Daniel, it seemed to me that there would never be another person who cared to hear the details of my thoughts. Yet when I write to you, it's under the assumption you're as interested in my thoughts as I am in yours.

How many letters would it take to tell you all of my stories? How many would you write back to me?

Sincerely,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I shall continue to write to you for as long as you allow it. I've been wondering about those stories of yours you mentioned. What tales have you yet to tell me?

Since you asked, here is a story for you.

I grew up in a small house in a sleepy little town in Maine. My father owned a tavern, and we did well enough that I never knew what it felt like to go to bed hungry.

When I was eight years old, my mother died suddenly. I'd gone to school that morning as I usually did, except that I'd had only an apple for breakfast instead of Mother's eggs and flapjacks. She was sick and in bed. Too sick to make me breakfast, my father had said when I asked. I'd heard her coughing the night before as I drifted off to sleep, but I was a kid and did not yet know sorrow or tragedy. She had kept all of that from me, as mothers do. When I returned from school that

afternoon, I came into the house expecting her to be better and to greet me with a hug as she usually did.

However, the house was quiet. Not a sound. Nary a footstep or rattle of dishes or Mother humming as she hung out the laundry.

I stopped just inside the front door, heart pounding. Later, I realized death has a smell. Dust and decaying flowers?

I found Father in the sitting room. He'd aged overnight. It was the sagging of his shoulders and devastated look in his eyes that told me what had happened. He didn't have to say the word. She was gone.

I can't remember weeping. Or her funeral or wake. All of the days are blank. I remember only the good times. The cakes she made me for birthdays and holidays. The way she smelled of cinnamon. The softness of her skin and warmth of her good-night kisses. Now, all these years later, I dream of her. She's always smiling and happy to see me. When I wake, I can still feel her lingering presence, as if her spirit remained behind to remind me that she'd never really left.

I try to live my life in a way that would make my mother proud. There are days, perhaps, I don't quite succeed.

With affection,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

I'm sure your mother is looking down at you from heaven and knows what a good man you are. Your story of her death had me crying into my hankie for the innocent little boy who lost his mother. Having been particularly close with my mother, and having lost her, I understand how deep and ongoing the grief is. We learn to go on without them. They want us to, I'm sure. Yet after the loss of a parent, life never feels quite the same. I, too, sense my mother's presence now and then. There are many times a day even now that I wish I

could tell her a funny story about one of my clients or share an accomplishment. I, too, try to be a good person so that she's proud of me. She worked hard all her life for rich people, and then I became one myself when I married Daniel. Isn't that odd? I wish she'd lived long enough for me to spoil her. Alas, it was not to be. A life of poverty brought her early death.

I do not mind that Daniel and I never had children. Especially now that I have my work, I feel fulfilled in ways that have compensated for my lack of family. However, once in a while I think it would be much easier to carry on without my mother or Daniel if I'd just had a child to love after they were no more.

What other news comes from the island? Have Mrs. Lancaster and Michael Moon managed to find a way to be together? I do worry so about them. People can be so full of hatred. Everyone would be happier if others minded their own affairs, don't you think?

Love,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I can understand how you would yearn for a child after losing the two people you loved most in this world. As a man who has not been lucky enough to be blessed with a wife and children, I, too, feel a sense of regret and sadness that I have no family of my own. The Tutheridge siblings have become like kin to me, as have their mother and Timothy. So in this way I'm blessed. It's odd how family can be those without any blood relation at all. Odd and wonderful, I suppose.

As far as Michael and Mrs. Lancaster are concerned, they have essentially married, although it can never be legally binding. They are safe here on Whale Island, as long as they're discreet. That's one benefit to living on a remote and isolated island. No one seems to care about this union one way or the other, but they must be careful anyway. However, even

Sheriff White has left them alone. It's not ideal, but sadly, that's the way it is. I do hope someday all of this nonsense about race will go away. As you know, Lucca had all kinds of trouble back in Boston. It's a shame, really. People can be so small-minded. I'm certain God cares nothing about the color of our skin or our ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, man does not always emulate God. Instead, we distort his teachings for our own benefits.

I'm anxious to learn if I shall finally meet you. Have you thought any further about a trip? Our correspondence has given me much joy, and I feel it would be a disservice to us both if we were to ignore what I believe could grow into a dear friendship. As much as I enjoy writing to you, I find more and more the desire to meet you in person—for lack of a better word—overwhelming. Lately, it's all I think about. You're all I think about.

Would you consider it? Mrs. Bains has asked me to extend an invitation to stay at her estate. She would love the chance to meet the woman who has made her children so happy.

Please let me know your thoughts.

Love,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

As much as I'd love to drop everything and come west, I have a few obligations that need attending to first. There are many factors to think about, including my business. I am currently looking for a match for a young man out in Montana. Thus far, the right woman has not appeared. I will not be able to leave for such a long trip until I have found his perfect match.

I must tell you how sorry I am to say goodbye to the secret project you and I have worked on together. Although I'm delighted to have found matches for our Tutheridge siblings,

it's sad that we no longer have a reason to conspire. I've grown fond of the Tutheridge family without having set my eyes upon them. I find myself wishing they had one more sibling! All the more reason to come for a visit, I suppose.

For fear of making a fool out of myself, I feel the need to say something to you. I feel a connection between us that has surprised me. Since you have confessed to the same, I feel less shy to say so. When my husband died, I didn't think I'd ever have an inkling of interest in falling in love again. However, I, too, have found myself thinking of you more than I would have ever thought possible.

I shall continue to contemplate a visit. I'll work even harder to find my poor widower in Montana a match. He has four children, so the woman must be very special indeed. A challenge, to say the least. Even for me. I say that in jest, of course.

I must ask. How are our brides? Looking forward to their impending arrivals? They are such lucky ladies to be expecting babies. I'm envious, I have to admit.

With affection,

Aubrey



DEAR AUBREY,

I do hope my prayers have been answered and you've found a match for your Montana widower. Admittedly, I care not for the betterment of his life. I wish for his bride to appear for purely selfish reasons.

The weather has grown cooler in the early mornings here on the island, and I find myself longing to show you all the treasures I see during my walks. My greatest wish is take you to each one of my favorite views and special sights.

There isn't much new to tell you on my end. My work at the tavern is not nearly as fulfilling as the work we did together.

However, the fruits of those labors will continue to bring me joy.

Our brides are all doing tremendously well.

Amelia's baby, Jack, grows bigger and cuter every time I see him. He's the pride of Benedict and Amelia, and I can't blame them. He's a fat, happy little man. Quick to laugh like his mother and very fond of eating as well.

Briggs and Faith's baby has arrived as well. A month earlier than she was supposed to, and Mrs. Bains was worried sick. However, both mother and baby are doing well, growing stronger with each passing day. Little Scarlet is tiny and delicate like her mother. Seeing giant Briggs hold that baby might be the sweetest sight I've ever seen.

Ella is still working despite her condition. She says she knows more about what's good for a baby and an expecting mother than anyone else on the island and to mind my own business. I have to agree and could think of no contrary argument. Still, I worry about her traipsing all over the island in the middle of the night. Although, for the most part, unless he's with a patient of his own, Lucca accompanies her.

Sara Rose is absolutely blooming. She's been busy redecorating one of the lighthouse bedrooms into a nursery. Last week at church, she confessed to being nervous, considering what happened last time, but said that Ella assured her she's much past the point of worry.

Piper and Hudson are living out at their new house, happy as can be. Little Bebe seems to have ended her reign of terror. At least for the time being.

Mrs. Bains is beside herself with joy about her growing, happy family. I can hardly wait myself. I suspect I'll never have a family of my own, but being part of theirs gives me a lot of joy. I didn't want to be a matchmaker, yet have found it to be one of the happiest times of my life.

I shall not nag you again about coming for a visit. I'll simply remind you that you are welcome at any time.

With affection,

Matthew



DEAR MATTHEW,

You'll be pleased to hear that I have sent a wonderful young woman off to Montana to work for the widower as a housekeeper. I won't bore you with the details, but I feel quite certain they'll be married before long.

Heidi, who has grown bossier as the years go on, has seized upon the idea of a visit to your beautiful island. In fact, since I shared with her your kind invitation, she's talked of little else. Therefore, I have no choice, if only to get a little peace.

I hope you'll have not changed your mind, for I have purchased train tickets. We will be leaving in two weeks' time.

Heidi's husband, Martin, will accompany Heidi and me on the train. I didn't like the idea of the two of us traveling alone, even though the women I sent out to you certainly did it. They were very brave. I find myself lacking the courage shown to us by our brides. Perhaps it's because I'm older and more stuck in my ways?

Anyway, Martin and Heidi are excited for the opportunity to explore some more of our great country.

I am too, of course. However, I must confess, I'm looking forward to meeting you more than anything else. I've rarely thought of anything with such anticipation. I pray we won't be disappointed in each other.

As I mentioned, we will leave here in two weeks' time. The train ride itself will take a little over a week, as I'm sure you know. By the time we get to you, I'll be completely rattled from sleeping in a small cabin and glad for a peaceful night's sleep.

I look forward to seeing you soon. I'll arrange for the ferry to Whale Island once we get to Seattle. However, we're most likely to arrive on September 30th. I've asked for our trunks to arrive before we do. I'm afraid Heidi and I will have too much

to carry in small suitcases. Women, you know. We have so many clothes and shoes, especially given the length of our visit.

With affection,

Aubrey

MATTHEW

I could hardly believe my eyes. The letter fluttered in my trembling hand. She was coming. I'd almost given up hope that she would agree to such an adventure. Then again, she'd agreed to match a family she didn't know, which was even more outlandish than coming for a visit.

I drove out to see Timothy and Beatrice that same afternoon. They welcomed me back to their sprawling back porch for a glass of lemonade.

The weather was warm, with a hint of fall in the air.

"You've something to tell us," Beatrice said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"As a matter of fact, I do." I grinned, delighted to have such happy news to share with my dear friends. "Aubrey Mantle has agreed to come for a visit."

"How marvelous." Beatrice clasped her hands together. "You did invite her to stay with us?"

"Yes, I hope you don't mind," I said, feeling slightly sheepish.

"Not at all. I wouldn't have it any other way," Beatrice said. "To meet the woman who has brought such joy to our family? It's a dream come true. We'll have a party to celebrate her. All the children and their matches, so to speak." She looked over at her husband, who smiled indulgently. "Timothy, isn't it good news?"

"It is indeed," Timothy said.

“I asked her several times,” I said. “And didn’t think she’d ever agree. She’s bringing Heidi and Martin.”

“Martin?” Timothy asked.

“Heidi’s husband,” Beatrice said quickly. “I cannot wait to meet Heidi as well. The girls say she’s quite the character.”

“You two,” Timothy said, teasing. “Like kids meeting Santa Claus.”

“Aubrey is better than Santa,” Beatrice said. “She’s brought us the greatest gifts we could ever ask for.”

We chatted for a few more minutes about the party we would have to welcome our infamous matchmaker. Beatrice rattled off a list of dishes she would ask Mrs. Halvorson to make.

Timothy sat patiently through her excited prattle. When she took a breath, he turned to me. “This Mrs. Mantle, she means something to you, isn’t that right?”

I flushed as if I were a schoolgirl. “We’ve exchanged a lot of letters. It sounds ridiculous, but I’m a little in love with her.”

“Oh, how romantic,” Beatrice said. “Falling in love over letters. It’s simply divine.”

“What if she’s a troll?” Timothy asked.

“Timothy Bains, you’re terrible.” Beatrice thumped him with the back of her hand.

“The ladies have all mentioned her beauty,” I said. “Not that I should even be thinking about such matters. She’s clearly a beautiful soul inside.”

“Like my wife,” Timothy said. “Pretty inside and out.”

“Now you’re just trying to get back into my good graces.” Beatrice smiled. “Which of course you are.”



AT MY TAVERN THAT NIGHT, the Tutheridge brothers arrived for poker and beer. Their wives didn't approve of the card playing, so they did it at my place of business instead. It warmed my heart to see Benedict, Briggs, Hudson, and their half-brother, Rhett, enjoying one another's company. It was not so long ago that they were at odds. Growing up in such a violent home had lasting effects on the boys, but one could not see it tonight.

"Matthew," Briggs called out. "Come join us for a round."

"No, thank you." I wiped a glass clean of water and set it under the counter. "I'm busy working for a living."

"You're no fun at all," Briggs said.

"I'll bring you another round, though."

"Fair enough," Hudson said.

"Good man," Benedict said.

Rhett, who was studying his cards as if they had a secret message, didn't look up as I brought over a tray of foamy glasses.

The men played with wooden chips but never actually exchanged money. It was only for fun. However, there were nights when it felt as if it were a high-stakes game.

The brothers might love and respect one another, but they still wanted to win.

"Say, we heard a rumor," Briggs said. "And by rumor I mean my mother told us. Is it true? Mrs. Mantle is coming to visit?"

Before I could answer, Lucca came through the door, apologizing for being late. "I had a little emergency happen right before I was about to lock the doors."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" I asked.

"No, broken arm. Nine-year-old kid. He'll heal fast." Lucca grabbed a chair and joined his brothers-in-law at the table.

"I'll get you a beer," I said.

Lucca thanked me as Briggs dealt another round.

“We mustn’t forget the subject at hand,” Briggs said. “Right, Ben?”

Benedict nodded, grinning. “Did you hear, Lucca? Mrs. Mantle’s coming to town.”

“Really? Great.” Lucca looked around the table, clearly confused. “What’s so funny?”

“We have a theory,” Rhett said. “Mostly Briggs, who can’t keep his nose out of other people’s affairs.”

Briggs laughed. “I’m in love with love. What can I say?”

“Our theory has little evidence,” Benedict said. “Merely a gut feeling.”

“And the number of times we’ve seen you hand letters to the captain of the ferryboat,” Rhett said to Matthew as he set Lucca’s beer in front of him.

“Not to mention the number of ones that have arrived for our favorite barkeep,” Hudson said. “With an address from Boston.”

“Don’t you boys have enough to do without getting into my business?” I asked.

“Regardless, it’s true, isn’t it?” Rhett asked. “You and Mrs. Mantle have corresponded with a frequency some might say borders on romantic.”

“Well, if you must insist on asking questions that do not concern you whatsoever, it is accurate that Mrs. Mantle and I have made a habit to send each other letters.”

“I’ve never met a man who wrote a letter to a woman unless he was interested in her,” Briggs said, picking up his hand.

Lucca, who heretofore had not commented, chuckled. “You won’t be disappointed when you meet her.”

“That’s what Amelia says as well.” Benedict said, looking at the cards in his hand. “My wife says she’s one of the most impressive people she’s ever met.”

“Lucca, you’ve met her. What’s she like?” My cheeks burned with embarrassment, but I had to ask.

Lucca’s brown eyes twinkled. “She’s elegant. Smart. Poised. Tall for a woman. Masses of golden hair and one of those faces that makes you want to keep watching her.”

“What do you mean?” Rhett asked.

“It’s a little hard to explain. It’s as if she’s always on the brink of saying something profound,” Lucca said. “Life-altering.”

“She altered our lives,” Hudson said. “We have you to thank as well, Matthew. If you hadn’t done such a good job describing us, she would not have picked our perfect matches.”

“True enough,” I said gruffly. “I was a reluctant and unlikely matchmaker, yet here we all are.”

Briggs raised his glass. “To Matthew. May you find as much happiness with Mrs. Mantle as you brought to us.”

Touched by his kind words, I had to look away for fear they would see the tears that pricked my eyes. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if he were right? Could Aubrey be suited for me? And I for her?

“Wouldn’t it be something?” Briggs said, smiling widely. “If the matchmakers found the perfect match in each other?”

“That would indeed be something.” Benedict grinned back at his brother. “A happily-ever-after for the two people who gave us such joy seems like the right ending to our stories, doesn’t it?”

“You’re going to put a hex on them if you keep talking about it.” Hudson pushed a stack of wooden chips into the middle of the table. “I call. In matters of the heart, you must let it play out as it’s supposed to.”

“As it did for us,” Rhett said.

They all revealed their poker hands. Briggs won, as usual.

AUBREY

Although I had first dismissed the idea to visit Whale Island, I eventually had to come around. As I prepared for our trip, however, the same questions troubled me. Should I do something so unexpected? So bold?

Was Heidi right that we should go? Or was this a fool's errand?

"All the way to Washington State?" I'd asked Heidi during our first conversation about the matter. "It's an outrageous idea."

"I'm sorry, but I do not agree," Heidi had said.

How could she seize upon the idea without a second thought? Who did such things?

Not me.

Then again, I'd never imagined I would become a professional matchmaker. When I'd lost my husband and felt my life was over, Heidi insisted I needed a new purpose. A new way to find meaning, despite my grief.

She'd persuaded me to open the matchmaking shop, and she'd been right. I'd matched dozens of happy couples thus far. The most satisfying work of all had been the Tutheridge matches. With God's help, we'd managed to send the perfect mate to all five of the Tutheridge siblings. A feat that seemed impossible when first proposed.

It had brought me closer to God, too. He had been faithful to me, even during my debilitating grief. For it was God who

sent me just the right matches for lonely souls. There was no other explanation. My success rate was nearly impossible for an ordinary woman to accomplish.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to meet them all?” Heidi had asked. “See that beautiful island? Encounter the man behind the letters?”

Matthew Goodwell. He’d turned out to be a problem. A complicated, addictive problem. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Or writing him letters. He and I had no reason to continue our correspondence, and yet we did. All of which meant he was more to me than a client.

The intimacy of our letters surely meant something? I’d not thought it possible to entertain such an idea. Another man besides Daniel capturing my heart? How could it be?

My only conclusion? The human heart cannot remain frozen in time. Yes, one must grieve for our lost loved ones. But for how long? How much time must go by before we’re no longer shamed by our desire to live? Even if it was without the one person to whom we made vows of loyalty and commitment, forsaking all others?

I must forgive myself for making Daniel a loving memory instead of my present. I was still young. Still had years and years to enjoy the love of another partnership. If I were to find the right man, of course.

Was Matthew Goodwell that man? I would never know unless I met him in person. Which meant we were going west.



I’D DEVoured the letters from Matthew and Amelia describing Whale Island. However, nothing had prepared me for the sight before me now.

Leaving Heidi and Martin to lounge in the plush seats below, I’d wandered up to the deck to get a better look at Matthew’s part of the world.

I leaned over the railing and breathed in scents of briny sea mixed with the earthy tone from the smokestacks overhead. Cool breezes kissed my cheeks and wobbled my hat. The collection of islands, humps of land, covered with trees and spots of open grass, were all around us.

Two boys ran by me, playing chase. A couple walked arm in arm, an umbrella shielding them from the sun. I peered downward, into the blue water that rippled from the wake of the boat. It almost made me dizzy, so I moved my gaze toward land. Near shore, seals watched us, heads bobbing, as if curious. Seagulls flew above, circling, crying—a lonely, yearning sound that brought goose bumps to my arms.

Soon, we came upon Whale Island itself, solid and green with splashes of vibrant orange and red autumn leaves. It was the largest of all the islands, according to our captain, and shaped like a horseshoe. Thick forests of tall firs and cedars gave way to meadows and coves.

Heidi and Martin joined me for the last part of the journey.

“Here at last,” I said.

“It’s breathtaking,” Heidi said.

“I’ve never seen such sights as these,” Martin said. “Thank you, again, Mrs. Mantle, for inviting us.”

“I’d not have had the courage to come without you,” I said.

Soon, we disembarked with the other dozen passengers. As they’d described in their letters, the town of Ella Pointe was perched atop the cliff, requiring us to walk up a narrow and steep trail from the ferry dock. By the time we reached the top, the back of my neck felt damp from perspiration.

We’d been invited to stay with the Tutheridge matriarch and her new husband at the estate where she’d raised her children. I’d imagined the mansion many times and could hardly wait to arrive and see it with my own two eyes.

However, it was Matthew Goodwell who had promised to pick us up upon our arrival and deliver us to the mansion. The idea that I was finally to meet him in person was absolutely terrifying. I felt as if I knew him from his letters, but to

actually see him? Look into his eyes? Would he disappoint? Or would he be as thrilling face-to-face as he was in his correspondence?

I no longer had to ask myself that question, for now he stood before me. A big, broad-shouldered man with silver-streaked black hair. His high cheekbones and strong jaw could have been carved from the finest stone. His dark, deep-set eyes were warm and inviting, as well as intelligent.

He took my breath away. Quite literally. I felt as if I could not get air into my lungs, but that might have been from the hike up the hill. However, the pure masculinity of him made my stomach flutter. This was a man.

“At long last, Mrs. Mantle,” Matthew said, kissing my gloved hand. His firm mouth curved into a smile. His intense eyes fixed upon my face.

“Are we back to our formal names?” I asked, returning his smile. “Or may I call you Matthew?”

He dipped his head in a mimic of a bow. “As you wish.”

I introduced him to Heidi and Martin. “My first match now stands before you. Not that I knew what it would lead to at the time.” I’d put Martin and Heidi together years before without their knowledge. It was only later that I admitted to Heidi I’d arranged for their chance meeting at my annual Christmas party.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Heidi,” Matthew said. “Thank you for all you’ve done to help the Tutheridge family. Aubrey has assured me you’re as responsible for bringing such happiness to the kids as she.”

Heidi blushed, her elfin face lighting up with delight. “It’s my pleasure, sir. Thank you.”

Matthew turned to Martin. “Thank you for coming. It must be a disruption to your life.”

“A welcome one, I can assure you,” Martin said. “I’m here for whatever Mrs. Mantle needs.” Martin was a slight man with vivid green eyes and fawn-colored hair. Soft-spoken and

gentle, he was a great contrast to my feisty, quick-moving Heidi.

“I was relieved to hear you were joining them,” Matthew said. “I never like the idea of women traveling alone. Did your employer agree to the time away?”

“No sir, I’m afraid not,” Martin said.

Martin had been delighted by the prospect but had been worried to ask for the time away. He was right to worry. His employer had dismissed him immediately, simply for asking the question. I’d assured Martin I would compensate both him and Heidi for their assistance. Upon our return, I would find him work.

If we returned.

Where had that thought come from? My life was back in Boston. For a second, I thought longingly of my tidy office and the work I did there. Not for long, though. I was too busy taking in the quaint buildings of Ella Pointe, spotting Matthew’s tavern right away.

“Your trunks arrived, and I had them sent out to the estate,” Matthew said. “Beatrice is looking forward to entertaining you this afternoon. You’ll enjoy your time there, I’m sure.”

“I’ve been looking forward to the famous Mrs. Halvorson’s cooking,” I said.

“Me too,” Heidi said.

“I should warn you, the entire family may stop by this afternoon to welcome you,” Matthew said. “They’re anxious to thank you for all you’ve done.”

“Oh my. I hope no one’s making too much of a fuss.” Would I be embarrassed and overwhelmed? I’d been raised by my widowed mother, without money or status. She’d been a maid all her life and died just after I turned eighteen, leaving me to fend for myself. I’d been lucky. Daniel had fallen in love with me and plucked me from poverty. He’d been a generous man and showered me with affection and a luxurious life. Regardless, I’d never quite felt as though I belonged in

the lavish home he'd bought for me. We never really forget the person we were at five years old.

"My buggy's there, waiting for us." Matthew gestured toward a small carriage attached to two horses. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, please," I said. "Although later, I'd like to see your place of business."

"There will be plenty of time for that," Matthew said, offering his arm. "I want to show you everything."



MY BREATH CAUGHT at the sight of the estate. Whitewashed, with arched windows and a front porch supported by ornate pillars, it was truly a masterpiece. Behind the house, the water unfolded in shades of blue. To our left, a forest of green beckoned. The small pond on the other side hosted ducks who gently floated along its edges.

"Oh my, the house is spectacular," Heidi said, reaching over to squeeze my hand.

"It does not disappoint," I said, smiling. "Although I'm more excited to meet the people inside than I am in the house."

"Mrs. Bains takes great pride in it," Matthew said. "As she should. Every part of it was planned with great care."

Now, as opposed to before her first husband's death, she could enjoy it in peace.

Matthew stopped near a fountain in the curved driveway just as several stable boys rushed out to take care of the horses.

Martin assisted Heidi out of one side of the carriage, while Matthew offered his hand to me. I at first hesitated to take it, worried my physical reaction would be obvious to him. Regardless, I accepted help, giving him my hand so that he might assist me to the damp, muddy ground. The strength of him rippled through my own body, leaving me with weak knees.

I lifted my skirts as we crossed over to the front entryway. As we approached, the door opened and Raymond, the new butler, appeared.

“Good afternoon and welcome. Please come in. Mrs. Bains is waiting for you.”

Heidi and I locked eyes for a moment. I knew from her expression she was thinking the same thing as me. *I can't believe we're actually here.*

“You'll want to see your rooms and freshen up before meeting everyone, I would think?” Matthew asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

“Mrs. Bains asked that you join her in the sitting room while the others are shown to their rooms,” Raymond said to Matthew.

“Thank you, Raymond,” Matthew said before giving me a quick smile.

“We'll freshen up as quickly as we can.” Goodness, I could barely meet Matthew's gaze. It was unsettling. I'd known it would be. No one looked forward to letters from someone, as I had him, and expected otherwise.

Raymond took Heidi, Martin, and me up a staircase of gleaming mahogany and down a hallway.

“Look at the finish work,” Martin said under his breath. “What a fine home.”

“You're to have Miss Ella's old room,” Raymond said, opening the door for me. “And Mr. and Mrs. Boyle, you'll be just across the hallway.”

We thanked him, and he nodded politely before turning to retrace our steps.

“Do you need any assistance?” Heidi asked me. “Your hair or anything?”

“No, I'm fine,” I said. “I'll see you both downstairs in a few minutes.”

I unfastened my hat as I walked through the doorway into the bedroom. Tasteful and understated, without a hint of fussiness, the decor of this house was not like the homes in Boston, with their heavy curtains and delicate furniture. Now that I thought about it, the inside of the house reminded me of the ocean liner Daniel and I had taken to Europe.

I studied myself in the round mirror that hung over the dresser. My cheeks were pink from the brisk air. My eyes sparkled with anticipation. Perhaps the island air agreed with me? Or was this the blush of a smitten woman?

I brushed stray strands of my blond hair back into place. No streaks of silver as of yet. I could be thankful for that. I was in my late thirties, so this was just pure luck.

What had Matthew thought when he saw me for the first time? Had he found me to be as beautiful as his imagination? Did he see the fine lines around my eyes? Would he think me too tall? Too skinny?

Never mind that. I would have to be patient and wait to see how things unfolded. As much as I'd like to think so, I could not orchestrate the outcome. God's will would become evident one way or the other.

Sighing, I smoothed my skirt with the palms of my hands. Was this a mistake? I mustn't make a fool out of myself. That was the main objective, I decided, taking one last look in the mirror.

But I felt alive. It was first time since I'd lost Daniel that I felt this way. God help me, it was Matthew Goodwell who had done this to me.

Again, I told myself—*you mustn't make a fool of yourself.*

AUBREY

The afternoon flew by as the Tutheridge matches dropped in to say hello and thank me. So profuse in their praise, I felt rather like a queen.

Heidi and Martin had gone back into town with Raymond to buy a few supplies and explore, leaving me at the house with Mrs. Bains. Heidi didn't say, but I think she wanted me to have all the attention to myself. She was like that, always thinking of me before herself. Matthew, too, could not stay, but he'd urged me to enjoy myself. I certainly did.

Our first visitors were Briggs and Faith, as well as Amelia and Benedict. I basked in their praise and obvious affection while we enjoyed tea and the most delicious shortbread cookies I'd ever had. Mrs. Halvorson's reputation was proving to be true.

It was quite emotional seeing the fruits of my labor play out in front of my eyes. I had to draw in deep breaths to keep from crying at the sight of Briggs and Faith whispering to each other while their infant slept in a basket by the fire. The love in Benedict's eyes when he looked over at this wife and baby warmed my heart and made me very pleased to think what Matthew and I had done. It might be the most important thing I ever did with my life. That would be enough.

Even though, I had to admit the truth, I was envious of these young couples and their beautiful babies. In their company, my childlessness felt lonely and stark.

Amelia, with baby Jack in her arms, glowed with contentment as she came to sit beside me. She whispered in my ear that she hoped I wouldn't find her too plump. Quite the contrary, I assured her. "You're the most beautiful I've ever seen you. Domestic life suits you."

"I'm having such fun being a wife and mother," Amelia said, with a loving glance toward her husband, who stood near the fire talking with Timothy. "I've become an adequate cook too."

"More than adequate, darling," Benedict said from across the room, before lowering his voice. "Do not tell Mrs. Halvorson, but I think my wife could give her a little competition."

Amelia beamed. "He's much too complimentary."

I peered down at the sleeping baby. Did he look like his father? The shock of black hair on his head was certainly the same. He had such a sweet little pink mouth. A pang akin to yearning thrummed in my chest. Jack woke and started to fuss, making a pitiful mewling sound.

"He's hungry, I'm afraid," Amelia said to me. "We'll have to head home for now, but it's so wonderful to see you. I never thought you'd actually come."

"I couldn't stay away another minute." I stood to embrace her, and a whiff of Jack's sweet baby smell tickled my nose.

"It's been a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs. Mantle." Benedict kissed my hand before following his wife out to the foyer.

"We should go too," Faith said, glancing over at her husband. "We have a few errands in town, and I'd like to get home before dark."

"Yes, of course." Briggs turned to me, grinning. "You've done well, Mrs. Mantle. Some might say miraculously." As Matthew had described, the second of the Tutheridge brothers was a big man and quite dashing. All expected. Yet there was something deeper to his personality than had been described to me in the letters. When he gazed at me, curiosity and interest

glittered in his light blue eyes. He was taking me in, every detail. Trying to figure out how I did it, most likely.

“God’s hand has been with me every step of the way,” I said.

Briggs chuckled, shaking his head. “I would never have believed it to be true had I not experienced it myself.”

“I’m glad to have helped.” I took Faith’s hands in mine. “You’re looking well, my dear. Motherhood has you blooming.” She’d written to me that she’d felt ill for much of her pregnancy, but it was not evident now. “Are you recovered from it all?”

“Yes, very much recovered,” Faith said. “Other than feeling tired from the middle-of-the-night feedings, I’m feeling very well. Having a husband and baby I adore is a dream come true, and it’s all because of you.” She spontaneously hugged me.

Moved, I tightened my arms around her for a moment before we drew apart. “I’m happy for you. Truly.”

And I was. The work had saved me as much as it had benefited anyone else.

Soon, Ella and Lucca arrived to welcome me. They stayed only a few minutes, as they were on their way to check on a family who had been ill. Before they left, they thanked me for everything. Lucca, as handsome as ever, had tears in his eyes when he took both my hands. “I found my home here. Everything I wanted is right here.”

Ella slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. “He tamed the shrew, which is no small feat.”

“You’re not a shrew,” Lucca said. “Feisty. Opinionated. Smart. Qualities that make you interesting, not a shrew.”

“Do you see what you’ve done?” Ella asked me, laughing. “I’m now as sappy as the rest of them.”

“It looks good on you,” I said.

After they left, Rhett and Sara Rose came by.

“Mrs. Mantle, you’re here at last.” Sara Rose hugged me. “It’s been too long.”

“A lot has changed for you,” I said. “All good, I take it?”

“Beyond anything I could have hoped for.” She drew close to whisper in my ear. “No one cares about my eyes here.”

“They shouldn’t have cared anywhere else either,” I whispered back.

I took a moment to study Rhett. Kindness exuded from him. He thanked me as well, telling me he didn’t think any woman would want to move into a lighthouse.

“It depends on the man,” Sara Rose said softly.

“Lucky for me,” Rhett said.

No sooner had they gone than Hudson and Piper showed up with little Bebe.

Hudson, although slighter than his brothers, was no less handsome. He kissed my hand, thanking me for everything I’d done for him. “You’ve changed my life, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am to be the man I was meant to be.”

“I’m glad to have helped,” I said, flushing.

Piper embraced me before stepping back to introduce me to Bebe.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” I said, kneeling to say hello to the little spitfire. “Your reputation precedes you.”

“What does that mean?” Bebe looked at me with clear blue eyes. She’d gotten her aunt’s eyes and her uncle Briggs’s curiosity.

“That I’ve heard a lot about you.” I placed my hands lightly on her arms.

Bebe’s brow wrinkled. “Have you heard bad things?”

“Not in a while,” I said, straightening.

“That’s because my new mother has straightened me out.” Bebe glanced up at Piper. “She’s a miracle worker. That’s what

everyone says.”

I shared an amused glance with Piper. “Well, from the looks of things you’re a wonderful girl.”

“How come you don’t have a husband?” Bebe asked.

“I’m a widow,” I said.

“Like my dad. Until Piper came.”

“That’s correct.”

Piper put a hand on top of Bebe’s curls. “Don’t pester poor Mrs. Mantle. Why don’t you go down and say hello to Mrs. Halvorson.”

Bebe ran off, and we visited with Piper and Hudson for a few minutes. They beamed while telling us about their house and all their gardening adventures.

“We’re so happy together,” Piper said. “And we have you and Matthew to thank.”

“He was a good partner,” I said. “His descriptions of the Tutheridge siblings were so accurate it was as if I knew them myself.”

“We do have one small favor to ask,” Piper said. “It’s about our maid, Lizzie. She’s fallen for a young man named Simon Newton. Which is fine, except we’re uncertain of his feelings. He’s courted her for months now, but it never seems to go anywhere.”

“We’d like him to decide if he wants her and put her out of her misery either way,” Hudson said.

“How can I help?” I asked.

“What if you were to meet with him?” Piper said. “See if you can figure out what’s going on inside his head.”

“I’d be happy to. Perhaps a chance meeting in town?” I suggested.

“That’s a splendid idea.” Piper grinned. “He works at the dry goods store now. We’ll take you there this afternoon. I knew you’d be willing to help.”

“How long will you stay?” Hudson asked, changing the subject.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Long enough to decide if this could be my home too.”

I meant every word. My life was about to shift in an enormous way. Was I ready? Yes, actually. Whatever the changes the days brought, I would welcome them.



HUDSON AND PIPER took me into town in their motorcar. I sat with Bebe in the back seat. During the entire ride she chatted away about every subject under the sun. By the time we reached town, I’d learned all about her school, her new teacher, and the books she liked.

As we pulled up in front of the store, Bebe leaned close to my ear. “I am not at all certain Simon is worthy of our Lizzie. You must find out.”

“Yes, of course.” My lips twitched, but I kept my expression solemn. “I’ll do my very best.”

“How did Simon find his way here?” I asked Piper as we crossed the street.

“It’s somewhat sorrowful,” Piper said. “He came here as the valet of an elderly gentleman named Mr. Jennings. It’s a long story, which we’ll tell you about some other time.”

“Mr. Jennings died. It was extremely sad.” Bebe drew out the word *extremely* and clutched her the front of her dress dramatically. I had to bite the inside of my lip to keep from smiling. “They made me go to the funeral, and it rained really hard.”

“That *is* sad,” I said. Why did it so often rain when we buried loved ones? The day I’d put Daniel in the ground the rain had been torrential. I’d figured it was God crying for me.

After a pointed look at Bebe, Piper picked up the story. “Anyway, so Simon’s now working at the store for Michael

Moon. Michael's been busy with his new... friend."

"I see," I said. "By friend you mean everyone's favorite dressmaker?" Mrs. Lancaster and Michael Moon had fallen in love. Matthew had written to me about their predicament, of course, given the difference in their skin color.

"That's correct," Hudson said.

"Has it been all right?" I asked, hoping they understood the nature of my question. "Safe, that is?"

"They've been discreet," Piper said. "But here on the island, no one seems to care much about what other people do."

"Which is why Michael needed help at the store," Hudson said. "Simon needed a job, so it worked out well."

Just then, a lovely young woman carrying a sack of flour crossed the street, headed toward us.

"Ah, there's Lizzie now," Piper said.

My first thought was this. *She is too young to get married.* Her cheeks were plump and pink, with a hint of the girl she'd been still evident in the way her features had not sharpened. Perhaps this was Simon's thought as well?

Piper introduced us. "Lizzie, we thought you might like to run your problem by Mrs. Mantle. She might have some insight."

"Would you really?" Lizzie's face lit up, and she hugged the sack of flour to her chest like a pillow.

"We'll leave you two talk alone," Piper said. "And meet you inside the shop in a few minutes, Mrs. Mantle."

I'd turned the entire island into matchmakers, it seemed.

After they were gone, I turned to Lizzie. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Goodness me, it's like meeting the queen of England," Lizzie said breathlessly. "You're famous around here, you know." Her mouth puckered as if she recalled something

unpleasant. "If only you could match me with a certain someone I have my eye on."

"Sometimes my skills are not needed," I said. "People fall in love the old-fashioned way all the time."

"Yes, I suppose," Lizzie said. She glanced toward the window of the dry goods shop. "My beloved is right in there. Only he doesn't know he's my beloved, and he may never know because I can't tell him how I feel because he might not feel the same, and then I'll want to die from humiliation."

How could she say that many words without taking a breath?

"Perhaps he's taking his time for a reason," I said. "Do you continue to see each other on a regular basis?"

"Yes, every Saturday evening he comes for dinner at the house," Lizzie said. "Piper and Mr. Tutheridge are so kind, and they always let me sit at the table like I'm part of the family instead of their maid. We have a lovely time. Then, on Sunday he sits next to me at church and afterward we take a walk, unless it's raining, and in that case we share a beer at Matthew's tavern. And we talk and talk about everything. He's dreamy, Mrs. Mantle. Absolutely dreamy."

"Well, that all sounds promising."

"But I want to be married. You found matches for everyone, but here I am pining away for a man who may decide he cares for another more than me, and then where will I be?"

"What would you like me to do?" I asked, sincerely.

"I want you to observe us together and see if you can detect the magical spark that must exist between two people if they are to have a happy ending. I can see it in all of the couples you've matched. It's almost like a glow. Or something."

"I'm headed into the store now," I said. "Would you like to come with me?"

“I’ve already been in once to buy this flour. He’ll think I’m making up excuses to see him if I return.”

“Your family’s in there,” I pointed out, gesturing toward the store. “So it’s not unusual at all. Do you think you’re questioning everything too much? Borrowing trouble, as my mother used to say.”

“He makes my head feel all rumbly,” Lizzie said mournfully. “I can’t think of any way to suggest marriage. The woman shouldn’t do that anyway, don’t you think?”

“Let’s go inside,” I said. “I’ll take a good look at your young man.”

“Yes, yes, quite right. Here we go.” Lizzie took a deep breath. “Just wait until you see him.”

Seconds later we were in the shop. The scents from the bins of sugar, salt, candy, and flour mingled into a pleasant, sweet odor. My gaze traveled immediately to the man behind the counter.

Or perhaps *boy* would be a better word. Like Lizzie, he seemed very young. Although she was right. He was darling, with a ruddy complexion and nice eyes. Kind of small in girth, but not every man could look like Matthew.

Simon came out from behind the counter to greet me. “I’ve heard so much about you, Mrs. Mantle. Are you enjoying your stay so far?”

A nice, low-timbred voice accompanied by his polite manner made him all the more appealing. The expression emitted from his eyes was sensitive and intelligent. I suspected he didn’t miss much. Thus, my conclusion was simple. He knew exactly how Lizzie felt about him.

Lizzie had retreated to stand behind me, as if she were trying to hide.

“Lizzie, did you forget something earlier?” Simon asked.

“What? No. I’m here meeting Mr. and Mrs. Tutheridge. We’re going home after this. I have the flour.” Lizzie held the sack out in front of her, as if he couldn’t see it for himself.

“Yes, I can see that.” Simon smiled weakly, looking slightly confused.

I glanced over to see Piper, Hudson, and Bebe looking at fishing poles. Apparently Bebe wanted one, and her parents were unconvinced that she wouldn’t put a hook right through her thumb.

“Yes, right. I thought you might have remembered something you needed.” Simon flushed an even ruddier shade of pink.

The two of them stared into each other’s eyes for a moment, as if they’d forgotten the rest of us existed. Lizzie had nothing to worry about. This young man was probably saving his pennies so that he could provide a home for her.

“Tell me, Simon, where do you live?” I asked.

“I’m staying with Pastor Bains and his wife,” Simon said. “They generously asked me to stay with them for as long as I needed. After my employer passed, that is.” His voice wobbled slightly.

My heart went out to him. Loss was a part of living. That didn’t mean I had to like it.

“I’m also a guest at the estate,” I said. “I’ll most likely see you around. Two wandering travelers, such as we are.”

“Oh, I’m not wandering.” Simon’s glance slid Lizzie’s way for a second before returning to me. “There’s no reason for me to leave—no place I’d rather be. I’m planning on building a house one of these days. I have a ways to go, but I’ll get there. Mr. Jennings left me a small sum, and I’ve been adding to it every day.”

So I was correct. He was waiting until he could offer her a home in which to keep Lizzie.

“I think that’s very wise,” I said. “You’ll get there in no time with such a positive outlook.”

“I hope so. There are things I want to do.” He flushed again, this time avoiding Lizzie’s gaze.

“Well, I must excuse myself,” I said. “I’m wanted back at the house. But it was a pleasure to meet you, Simon. I’ll be in to purchase something soon, I imagine.”

“Yes, thank you,” Simon said before shuffling back behind the counter.

Back out on the sidewalk, I had to stifle inappropriate giggles. I’d only been on the island for a few hours, but I was already feeling part of a community.

“All in all,” I said to Lizzie as Hudson loaded the back of his car with a few items, “your young man’s as smitten with you as you are with him.”

“Did you see the glow?” Lizzie asked.

“I did.” I hadn’t seen a glow per se, but their mutual affection was obvious. “Lizzie, you must be patient, though. He’s saving up money so he can provide a place to take his bride. You mustn’t pressure him, or he’ll start to feel bad.”

“Really?” Lizzie, still hugging that bag of flour to her chest, watched me with hungry eyes. “Do you truly think so?”

“I do.” I squeezed her arm. “Now, try not to worry and just enjoy your courtship. Not everyone gets such a lengthy one, you know.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Matthew walking towards us. My heart raced at the sight of him. I put my fingers against the pulse at my neck, marveling at what was happening to me.

Lizzie and Simon were not the only ones who were smitten.

I stepped away from Lizzie to meet Matthew halfway.

“What’re you doing out and about?” I asked. “Don’t you have a tavern to run?”

He kissed my hand. “I saw the most lovely vision outside my windows. Would you do me the honor of a walk on the beach tomorrow? I can come out to the estate around ten?”

“I can think of nothing I’d like more.”

He peered into my eyes, smiling. “What coincidence. I can’t either.”

MATTHEW

Could Aubrey ever consider a lout such as me? A tavern owner? A bachelor all these long years? She was a sophisticated woman. A business owner with a direct connection to God, apparently. Furthermore, would I ever have the courage to pursue her?

I arrived right at ten, as I said I would. I'd slept fitfully, thinking about Aubrey for half of the night. She was as lovely in the flesh as she was in her letters. From the moment she stepped off the boat, I could scarcely keep my eyes off of her. Her golden head of hair and smooth skin and pretty eyes overwhelmed my senses. If it were possible to do so, I'd fallen in love with her before she ever set foot upon my island. Now, as I walked up the steps at the estate, my eyes felt scratchy and dry. However, I didn't care. I was about to take the woman I loved on a walk.

Did I dare hope she felt the same about me?

I had to do my best to win her love. Plain and simple. She had come to me for a reason. I was not going to risk losing her for lack of trying.

My work days could be long and tedious, but I had the privilege of making my own hours. The island grew quiet after nine, thus, I closed by ten. The tavern was usually empty by then, giving me an hour to wash up and lock everything before retiring. I'd grown accustomed to my life. The routine of it suited me.

That said, being part of Mrs. Bains's matchmaking scheme had been the most fun I'd had in years. Participating in something bigger than myself had given me a new lease on life. Selfishly, I was sad it was done. All the Tutheridges had their matches, thus my matchmaking days were no longer needed.

Raymond answered the door and asked me to wait in the foyer while he fetched Mrs. Mantle. Minutes later, Aubrey floated down the staircase in a white dress with a light pink sash around her waist. A large hat pinned over her hair did nothing to obscure her beauty.

"Matthew, how well you look."

My stomach fluttered as though I was a boy in school.

"Thank you. I must say you look fine yourself."

"I didn't know what to wear for a walk in the country," she said. "In Boston we often dress for others, you know."

"Dress for others?"

"I mean, for others to see us parading around in our finery. I had to get used to that when I married Daniel. Before then, I'd been the one dressing the great ladies or serving them food."

"I doubt anyone will be watching us," I said, smiling. "But if they did, they would see nothing but loveliness."

I offered her my arm, and we went out to the front porch and around the side of the house, startled to see Ella and her mother seated on the porch in the two of the rocking chairs that lined the wall.

"Oh, hello, Matthew," Beatrice called out cheerfully. "Going for a walk?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. *Please don't ask to join us*, I thought silently.

I tipped my hat toward Ella. "Good to see you."

"We're just here gossiping," Ella said. "No need to trouble yourselves. Enjoy your walk."

Was it my imagination, or did mother and daughter exchange a conspiratorial smile?

I led Aubrey down the path to the pebbly beach where I knew the family often walked and enjoyed bonfires.

Aubrey drew in a deep breath of the fresh marine air. “It smells like heaven here,” she said. “You did not exaggerate about the beauty of your island.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I said, pleased.

We strolled along the water. The uneven rocks were a good excuse to offer her my arm. She took it, her small hand resting in the crook of my elbow.

“I shall miss our work together,” Aubrey said. “It was such fun, wasn’t it?”

“More than I’ve had in a long time.”

“What is it that you want next in your life?” Aubrey asked. “Have you given more thought to the kind of woman you want in your life? you wish for a match of your own?”

“I suppose I do.” Was she proposing she match me with someone else? Had I imagined the flirtation in our letters? Was I that lonely? “As I said, being a tavern owner makes me difficult to match?”

“Why?” Aubrey asked. “From what I’ve heard, it’s a decent living.”

“Not respectable though,” I said. “Not like a preacher or a teacher.”

She laughed at my lame rhyme. “There’s nothing wrong with owning a business that serves the people. Even if it’s beer.”

“What about you? Will you ever want to marry again?”

“I hadn’t thought so, no. Until recently. Maybe all of this love is contagious? Or evokes envy, at any rate. It’s heartwarming to see couples so deeply in love, isn’t it? Reminds me of how Daniel and I were. We were absolutely

mad for each other. To have that with someone else seemed impossible.”

“But now?” I held my breath. *Please let her say, since you.*

“You’ve opened my eyes to the possibility that I could fall in love again.” She glanced up at me, peering at me from under the brim of her hat. “Especially now that I’ve met you in the flesh.”

My heart thumped hard and fast. “Really? Me?”

“I hope it’s not just me who feels something?”

“No, it’s not just you,” I managed to say despite my suddenly dry throat. “But what about my profession? I’m not rich, Aubrey. Not by a long ways.”

“Well, I don’t mind that much. I have my own money. Anyway, I’ve noticed something during my matchmaking work. Whether a man or woman’s rich or poor, they all want the same thing.”

“Which is?”

“To be accepted for who they are, not their social status or wealth. Or lack thereof. We’re all the same, really. We want to be loved and to have someone to love. Someone to call family.” She stopped our stroll for a moment to lean down and pluck a pretty green rock from the ground, placing it in the palm of her hand. “I used to think when I was young and helping my mother that rich people were somehow superior and more sophisticated and certainly happier. After I married I could see they might be better spoken or dressed or educated, but they could be as unhappy as the poor fellow knocking on doors looking for work. I always felt lucky that Daniel and I were so content together. He never tried to change me or I him.”

“Losing him must have been hard.” *Obviously it was hard,* I thought. *What a trite thing to say.*

“Yes, indeed it was. Still is, at times. In my dreams he’s often still with me, guiding me, and then I wake to find an empty spot in the bed where he used to be.” She laughed, a tinkling sound that drifted too quickly away in the breeze.

“Dear me. I’ve just confessed that we shared a bed. How scandalous of me.”

“I think it’s perfectly fine you were close in that way,” I said. “I never understood separate bedrooms for a man and wife. Anyway, I only have one room, whether my wife wanted to share with me or not.”

We reached the end of the beach and turned around to head back. I would be sorry for our walk to end, but what excuse could I come up with to keep her here?

“Do you ever think of living anywhere but on the island?” Aubrey asked after we’d walked in silence for a minute or so.

“Where would I go? The tavern’s all I have.” Not to mention that Beatrice finally let me out of the contract that had me giving Roland Tutheridge half of my profits. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Curious, I suppose.”

I looked down at her, noting the flush of her cheeks from the island air. She was too good for the likes of me. Yet maybe she didn’t care. Maybe she could see herself falling in love with me?

She withdrew her arm from mine to stoop down for another pebble, then walked closer to the shore and hurled it into the water. Laughing, she turned back toward me. “Why is that such fun?”

Tickled, I headed toward her. But a unusual dip in the rocky sand caught me off-balance, and I fell forward. Next thing I knew I found myself on the ground, my right leg twisted unnaturally. Was that a bone sticking through my trousers? Black dots danced in front of my eyes. God help me, I’d broken one of the bones below the knee. The pain hit me then in horrible waves. I thought I might be sick.

I was vaguely aware of Aubrey running to me and kneeling. All color drained from her face when she looked at my leg.

“It’s broken, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I think so. Can you wait here? I’ll get Ella.”

What choice did I have?



I THINK I passed out from the pain while waiting for Ella and Aubrey, but I couldn’t be sure. All I knew was that an hour later I was sitting on Mrs. Bains’s couch with a cast on my leg.

“How long is this going to take to heal?” I asked before tossing back a glass of whiskey given to me by Briggs. It had taken him and Benedict to get me off the beach and back up to the house. Thankfully, they’d dropped by to call on their mother and Aubrey right around the time I fell.

The whiskey felt good down the back of my throat and took the edge off the pain. Ella had given me some kind of white powder as well, making it all bearable.

“How am I going to run the bar?” I asked no one in particular.

Aubrey, who had stayed close and stroked back my hair while Ella put the cast on my leg, was now sitting opposite me in one of the chairs. Her hat had been abandoned, and she looked quite undone, with her bun perched to one side and strands of hair pressed to her cheeks.

“Can you shut it down for a few weeks?” Ella asked.

“How long is this going to take to heal?” I groaned. Weeks?

“Six weeks, I’d say,” Ella said without an ounce of sympathy. “The break was bad.”

This was so humiliating. The first chance I got with Aubrey and I fell and broke my leg? I must have looked like a total buffoon.

“I can’t shut it down for six weeks,” I said. “It’s my livelihood.” I didn’t exactly have savings, given the margins at the bar and that half of it had gone to Roland.

“I don’t think the boys on the island would be too thrilled to be without the tavern for a month and a half,” Briggs said. “There might be riots.”

I groaned again and stared at the ceiling. What was I to do now? How was I supposed to woo Aubrey without being able to move around? For that matter, how was I going to take care of myself? “This is bad,” I said out loud. “Very bad.”

“Can you hire someone to take your place?” Ella asked.

“I’d have to pay them, which I can ill afford,” I said.

“I’ll take your place,” Aubrey said. “You’ll need someone to help you get around, too.”

I stared at her appalled. “You?”

“Have you ever tended bar before?” Ella asked, sounding surprised.

“No, of course not,” Aubrey said. “I don’t touch alcohol. Regardless, I assisted my mother when I was child. She was a maid and cook for various families over the years.” She lifted her nose in the air. “I can certainly figure out how to pour a pint of beer.”

Aubrey? Behind the counter? It was absolutely absurd. Not safe, either, what with some of the ruffians that came in there. Give some men a few drinks and suddenly they wanted to fight everyone within two feet of them. “It’s not safe for a woman.”

Ella raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

“I’m afraid I have to agree,” Benedict said. “Matthew has to break up a fight at least once a week.”

“At least,” I said.

Briggs, grinning, turned from where he was pouring another whiskey, this time for himself. “You know what might work? You and Mrs. Mantle can team up. Run the place together. You can be there to assist her if anyone gets out of hand.”

“They won’t if Matthew’s there,” Ella said. “At least most of time.”

“How do you know about what happens in there, little sister?” Briggs asked, laughing. He knew she came by from time to time. Our Ella didn’t care what anyone thought.

“Very funny.” Ella tugged at her ear. “But now that you say it, I think Mrs. Mantle and Matthew teaming up is a splendid idea.”

“Well, good,” Aubrey said. “That settles it. I shall now add bartending to my résumé.”

“What if he needs help getting around?” Ella asked, much too innocently.

What were they doing? Oh, God, no. They were trying to match us. Revenge must be sweet.

“I agree,” Benedict said. “Mrs. Mantle is going to have to move in with you.”

“Are you all out of your minds?” I asked. “A fine lady such as Aubrey Mantle can’t live in my apartment. Alone with me? No, it’s an outrageous idea.”

“I think it will suit me just fine,” Aubrey said. “It’s not been so long ago that I earned my keep with my hands. I’ve not always been such a fine lady.” Her eyes sparkled, clearly excited over this ridiculous idea.

“But you’re supposed to stay here,” I said weakly. “To enjoy a vacation.”

“Who needs rest?” Aubrey said. “That’s for when I’m good and dead. For now, you need me, and I shall be delighted to assist.”

I laid my head back on the armrest. Whatever Ella gave me in combination with the whiskey was making me woozy. I’d just close my eyes for a moment before continuing to snuff out this idea.

Next thing I knew I woke to a golden light outside the windows. Sunset? How long had I slept? The room was empty except for Aubrey. She sat in the same chair as earlier, this

time with her knitting needles moving at a pace greater than seemed possible. The clicking sound was actually rather soothing.

“I didn’t know you knit,” I said, still groggy.

She looked up. “Oh, you’re awake.” Rushing to my side, she perched on the edge of the sofa and put a cool hand over my forehead. “Are you better? You poor thing.”

“Embarrassed.”

She smiled and brushed hair away from my forehead. “You’ve no cause to be. It could have happened to anyone.”

I groaned, not from pain but from a new wave of utter humiliation. How was I going to bathe?

“Now, we’re going to remain here tonight,” Aubrey said. “Tomorrow Ella’s promised to come fetch us in the motorcar and get us settled.”

“Howwhywhat do you mean? How will I even get up the stairs?”

“Ella had a wonderful idea. She and Lucca have offered their living quarters in the back of the hospital. Since they’ve moved out of there into a house, we can stay without putting them out whatsoever. It’s yards away from your tavern, and there are no stairs.”

“Ella and Lucca have a house?” I asked. “When did that happen? How long was I out?”

She smiled as she once more smoothed back my hair. Her fingers were dry and pleasant on my skin. “I don’t know. Maybe you don’t know everything that goes on here?”

This was highly suspicious. Ella and Lucca did not have a house. That was a complete fabrication. What was going on here? Why would they give up their home for me?

I knew. Deep down I knew. They were matching the matchmakers. Putting us together in a domestic setting was quite obvious.

“Do you really want to spend the next six weeks tending bar?” I asked. “It’s a dirty job. Especially for someone as delicate as you.”

She lifted her nose in the air as she had earlier. A gesture I found adorable. “I’m tougher than I look, Matthew Goodwell. Anyway, what better way to live than in service to others? I am your faithful servant from now until you get better.”

Did she understand what the meddling Tutheridges were up to? If so, it was not obvious. She must see it, though? They were the least subtle team of matchmakers that had ever existed. Yet I had to admit. We had it coming to us.

AUBREY

I'd forgotten what it was like to be needed. Heidi took such good care of me, for which I was grateful. Still, it felt good to be useful.

The living quarters attached to the clinic, although not as dramatically beautiful as the estate, were charming and comfortable. A window in the kitchen looked out to a grassy yard. Although I'd thought it odd Ella and Lucca hadn't taken the furniture to their new home, she'd assured me they were planning on renting it out furnished.

"Lucky for us," I'd said. "We'll be very content there while our patient heals."

Matthew and I had agreed to get settled tonight instead of trying to open the bar. One night without business wouldn't hurt much, he'd assured me. Tomorrow, with my help, we'd open it back up for business. Together we'd manage to keep the men of Ella Pointe in their pints.

Matthew was doing well with his crutches, but every so often I saw him grimace, usually when he hit the cast against a hard object like a chair. Yet I heard no complaints from him. In fact, he was quite stoic, a quality I admired.

As I removed several onions from the basket Mrs. Halvorson had sent over with us, Matthew hovered near the sink, leaning heavily against the rim.

"Go on." I pointed at the kitchen table where two chairs were tucked neatly under the top. "You are to sit right this instant."

He hung his head. "I'm not sure I can do it without assistance."

"Allow me." I hurried over to help him into the chair, disconcerted by his attractive grunt that caused a dart of desire to rush through me. He didn't seem to notice, thank goodness. "All good? Can I get you something?"

"I wouldn't mind a drink," he said, gesturing toward the cupboard. "Ella keeps it in there, I think."

The cupboard housed many things, including a bottle of whiskey. How strange that she hadn't cleaned out the cupboard when they moved? Maybe they would have, had we not needed supplies.

Then the thought hit me. Unless they hadn't really moved? Had they put us here together on purpose? Were they really back at the big house, leaving this one as a potential love nest?

I whipped around, whiskey bottle in hand. "Matthew, do you think they're trying to match us?"

He flushed, nodding. "I wondered when you were going to figure it out. They're not exactly discreet."

I poured him a glass of whiskey and set it in front of him before returning to the kitchen island where a pile of vegetables waited. "Whatever would possess them to do such a thing?"

His mouth twisted into one of his half smiles I found completely endearing. "I don't know that we have much moral ground to stand on."

That was the truth. I laughed. "A fair point, sir. However, what would have given them the idea we wanted to be matched?"

"Happily married people want everyone else to be too?"

The kids had hatched this plan to get us to spend time together? "Those rascals," I said, laughing.

My stomach hadn't stopped with all the fluttering since I first set eyes on the man. What better way to see if we really were compatible than to spend six weeks together?

Heidi had asked if she could at least come and cook for us in the evenings, but I'd politely declined. "This is supposed to be your holiday. I'll not ruin it by asking you to cook."

"But do you even know how to fix a proper meal?" Heidi had asked, not unkindly but in her matter-of-fact manner I had grown accustomed to over the years.

"I'm perfectly capable of putting supper on the table," I'd said in a haughty, confident tone I didn't necessarily feel. "Don't you worry."

Now, as I stared down at an onion, potatoes, and a pile of carrots, I was convinced I'd been overly ambitious. I hadn't cooked in so long I didn't know where to begin. My mother would not have believed how soft and lazy I'd become. Really, what did one make with these ingredients? If only Heidi were here to ask.

"You don't know what to do with those, do you?" Matthew asked, sounding amused.

I tented my hands in front of my face. "I'm not really much of a cook."

"I'm a bachelor, so I've had to cook for myself. We could make a soup. It's easy."

"I like soup," I said, brightening. "But you'll have to tell me what to do."

"Ella said the pantry's full," he said. "And she left us a ham hock she'd gotten from the butcher earlier today. With some carrots and potatoes, it will make a savory soup." He gestured toward the carrots. "Bring me those, and I'll cut them up—if you do the onions. I hate cutting the onions. Makes me cry every time."

"I can't imagine you in tears," I said.

"I've shed a few. Not just from onions."

"I know you have." We locked gazes for a moment. "Even though I wish otherwise."

"Perhaps the future brings more laughter than tears?" Matthew asked.

“I’d like to think so.”

I yearned to be the reason for his laughter. The thoughts going through my mind were not appropriate for a lady in my position. I’d been married for many years. I knew what kinds of pleasures could be found in the marital bed. Daniel and I had enjoyed each other immensely. Could I have that with someone else? With Matthew?

I was still young. Not dead after all, even though I’d felt that way after I lost Daniel. Yet here I was on an island with a man I could scarcely keep my eyes off of. Cutting onions. Life was certainly a surprise.

“What about biscuits?” Matthew asked, grimacing as he adjusted himself in the chair. “They’d go well with the soup.”

I clutched the collar of my dress. “Dear me. You expect biscuits?”

“Yes, I must have them if my leg’s to heal properly.”

“Is that instructions from your doctor?” I asked.

“Absolutely. I’ll tell you how to make them.” He wriggled his fingers, reminding me of the way a person would write using a typewriter. “It’s all in the way you cut the lard into the dry ingredients. The right touch makes them flaky and fluffy.”

I swallowed, dragging my gaze away from his hands. Such long, capable fingers. Ones that toiled all night behind a bar. Did he ever grow tired of serving customers during the evening hours when many men would rather be reclining by the fire in their own home?

After much cutting and chopping, I had the soup boiling. Matthew said the longer it simmered the better it would be. I then followed his verbal instructions to measure out flour and leavening for the biscuits. After the dry ingredients were mixed, I tentatively mixed in several tablespoons of lard. He said the key was not to fuss over it too long or the biscuits would come out flat and hard.

“God forbid,” I said.

Thirty minutes later, we sat down to a steaming meal.

“I’m quite pleased with myself,” I said, helping myself to a fat biscuit.

Matthew took a bite from one dripping with butter. “My, my, delicious.”

“Thank you,” I said, tucking my chin modestly. “It wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be.”

Apparently, my fingers were quite capable of cutting lard into flour. Who knew? I couldn’t wait to tell Heidi. “Heidi will be rightfully shamed at her lack of confidence in my abilities.”

“Indeed.” Matthew reached for another, cut it in half and smeared both sides with butter. “If we had any jam, they’d be even better.”

“Jam?” I asked, offended. “Aren’t they good just like this?”

“Yes, yes, very good. It’s just I have a sweet tooth. Always have.”

“Duly noted.” Would I have to learn how to make jams and jellies in addition to my domestic skills, which at the moment included making soup and biscuits? Not a bad start.

“When you were young, did you help your mother in the kitchen?” Matthew asked.

“Only simple meals, and it’s been a long time. I was just wondering what my mother would think of me now—spoiled and soft.”

“You have had other work to contend with,” Matthew said kindly.

“Yes, perhaps.” I smiled, thinking of my mother. “Somehow she managed to keep us fed. Bread and thin soup a lot of nights, but we never went to bed hungry. I think about that a lot these days. How she made something out of nothing. All for me.”

“She did well. You’re beautiful and clever.”

My cheeks erupted into flames. “Thank you. You’re very kind to say so. But look at you. All these years with Roland

taking your profits, and you still managed to thrive. Although, in my opinion, his actions were criminal.”

“Depending on how you look at it, I suppose it was. But he was the only one who would give me a job after my boss spread lies about me to every establishment in town. Coming here saved my life. I love Whale Island. Love running my business. Now that Beatrice has let me out of the contract, I have much more financial freedom.”

“What she did was right, regardless of your agreement to help with the matches.”

“Yes, I agree.” Matthew was quiet for a moment before adding, “I still marvel at what you did. How was it possible that you sent the exact right person for each of them?”

“There’s no trick to it, really,” I said modestly while enjoying his compliments immensely. “I look for little nuggets of information that could give insight into the kind of life they truly want. I’ve found people’s desires and dreams tell me more than their current circumstance. Everyone has a dream for the kind of life they want. Dreams that complement each other make for a great coupling.”

“I never thought about it that way.”

“With your wonderful letters to assist me, it wasn’t nearly as hard as I thought it would be. When you first contacted me, I didn’t think there was any way I could do what was needed. For that matter, when Heidi had the idea for a matchmaking business, I thought she’d lost all her senses. She was tired of me moping about and figured I needed a job of some kind. As usual, she was right. Otherwise, I might not be here right now. Isn’t it strange to think about the twists and turns a life can take?”

“It certainly is. You being here, eating biscuits with me is a good example,” Matthew said. “If only I hadn’t broken my leg.”

“It’s unfortunate but not life-altering. You’ll heal before long.”

“I had plans,” he said.

“What kind of plans?”

“Plans to woo you with walks and dances,” Matthew said.

“You’ll do fine without those things, I’m sure.” I couldn’t look at him. My entire body thrummed with anticipation.

“I can’t imagine not knowing you,” he said. “Especially now that you’re here.”

“Nor I you.” We gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment. “Luck’s on our side, it would seem.”

“Do you have dreams?” Matthew asked. “Anything you still yearn for, even after all your accomplishments?”

“At first, after I lost Daniel, I was merely trying to survive. Getting out of bed in the morning seemed more than I could manage. Throwing myself into this work saved me, and now, all these months later, I feel a surge of energy. A desire to live fully again. In this way, the matchmaking enterprise gave me more riches than I could have ever imagined.”

A strange noise caught my attention. At first I thought it was a cat meowing, but soon realized it was the sound of a baby crying. A human one.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

Matthew cocked his head to one side. “Can’t be a baby, can it?”

I rushed from the table to investigate. If I was right, the cries were coming from the back door off the kitchen. Yanking it open, I gasped out loud at the sight of a baby nestled in a basket. “Matthew, it’s...it’s a baby. A newborn, maybe?” He or she was tiny, not more than a month old I would guess.

I knelt to pick up the basket. The baby cried so hard that his or her face had gone nearly purple. Hungry? Or frightened? Cold? Too hot? There were so many options. How was one to know?

Matthew had gotten up from the table and hobbled over using his crutches. “No sign of anyone else?”

I turned slowly, basket in hand. “Just her. Or him?”

“A hungry him or her, from the sounds of it,” Matthew said.

“Do you think?” I gazed down at the angry little thing in nothing but a diaper and dressing gown. “Or maybe cold?”

His eyes widened. “I don’t rightly know.”

After setting the basket on the table, I lifted the little mite out of its cocoon and peeked into the diaper. A girl. “She’s the feminine variety,” I said to Matthew.

“What do we do with her?” He pushed the tips of his fingers into his cheeks.

“She needs to be changed.” Her diaper was sopping wet. I reached into the basket, hoping to find a fresh one, but found only a baby’s bottle filled with what I assumed was formula and a blanket she’d kicked her way out of.

“Do you think Ella has more formula in the clinic?” I asked. “Cow’s milk’s no good for babies.” I’d heard before that some mothers had to use the manmade concoction if they couldn’t nurse.

“She might,” Matthew said. “I’ll hobble over there and see in a minute.”

I grasped the bottle. It was cold to the touch. “Isn’t it supposed to be room temperature?” I don’t know how I remembered that, but somehow the information had been stored inside my mind.

“Yes, that’s right. Amelia puts the bottle in a pan of hot water to warm it.”

“I’ll change her first.” My hands shook as I carried the baby into the living room to set her down on the braided rug. “But change into what?” I muttered to myself.

Matthew must have heard me because he called out from the kitchen. “What about one of these clean towels?” His crutches thumped on the hardwood floor as he approached with a white towel in hand, possibly ones they used at the clinic. “Ella had a few stacked in one of the drawers.”

“Yes, that will have to do for now,” I said. “We can’t let her stay in this wet diaper for much longer.”

“I’ll see if Ella has any real diapers when I search for formula,” Matthew said.

“Good idea,” I muttered as I looked down at the squirming baby.

Matthew left the towel with me and returned to heat the bottle. Pins were already stuck into the current diaper, so I took those out to use with my makeshift one. However, once I had the wet one off, I realized I didn’t have anything to clean her with. I’d just have to put the towel over and figure out what to do about that later. After she ate.

She disliked being changed, if her increasingly loud yowls were any indication. How could something so small make so much noise? Her dressing gown was also wet, so I lifted that over her head and set it aside. Later, I would wash them in the sink and hang them near the stove.

Soon, despite my shaking hands, I had successfully fastened my makeshift diaper and wrapped her in the baby blanket. Matthew returned with the bottle, and I settled into a chair by the window to feed her. Drawing her close, I cradled her warm bulk as she sucked from the bottle. By then, I was in a full sweat.

Now that she was quiet, I could think straight again. “Who knew babies were so loud?”

“Not me,” Matthew said. “Jack’s quiet compared to this one.”

“Who is she? Do you have any idea?”

Matthew held up a scrap of paper. “I found this.” He read out loud. “I’m her father but I can’t take care of her. Her mother’s dead. Please look after her. I’ll not be returning.”

“How tragic.”

“The father must have thought the clinic was the best place to leave her—a nurse and doctor were a good choice.”

“Right, of course.” That hadn’t occurred to me. All the howling had distracted me from a coherent thought.

“I’ll have to tell Sheriff White,” Matthew said. “He’ll know what to do with her, I guess?”

“Will she have to go to an orphanage?” My chest ached at the thought. They were such lonely, frightening places—in books at least.

“Maybe someone will want to adopt her,” Matthew said. “A couple who wants children but can’t have them? Like when the Riverses took in Rhett.”

“I’d almost forgotten he was found in a similar way,” I said. “We’ll have to see what the sheriff thinks we should do. For now, she’ll have to stay here with us.”

“We can let White know in the morning,” Matthew said.

“Do you think Ella might know who she is? She delivers all the babies on the island, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, but would he leave her with someone who could identify him?”

“I’ve no idea.” I sighed, thinking of the poor man who had to give up his own child. Whoever he was, the decision could not have been an easy one.

The baby had finished the bottle and started fussing, kicking her little legs and flailing her arms until the blanket had loosened. Her pale pink skin felt cold to the touch. I tucked the blanket around her once again, but she continued to flail about. “What do I do now?”

“Burp her?” Matthew asked. “Amelia does that after Jack eats.”

“Goodness me, this is more nerve-racking than cooking dinner. Two things I know nothing about have suddenly presented themselves to me.” I lifted the baby to my shoulder and gave her a few pats. A burp exploded from her with more force than I’d expected, given her size.

Matthew frowned, adjusting his crutches under each arm. “She sounded like one of the men at the bar after a pint.”

I giggled. The baby had calmed now that she'd been burped. She nestled into my shoulder, wriggling adorably before relaxing. I breathed in the scent of her head, which smelled of new life and promise. She seemed skinny, though. Nowhere near the girth of Jack, that was for certain. Had she had enough to eat? When had her mother died?

What a warm, sweet bundle she was on my chest. I almost hated to put her back in her basket, but I did anyway. She didn't stir when I tucked the blanket tightly around her. In fact, she looked angelic now that she wasn't screaming.

In her sleep, she puckered her pink mouth, almost as if she expected a kiss. Who could leave such a sweet baby alone? Someone desperate. Someone without any other choice. "I think she's about a month old." Still kneeling on the floor next to her basket, I ran a finger over the layer of white-blond peach fuzz that covered her head. There was a distinct ridge right in the middle though. "She possesses a rather bumpy head. Should we be alarmed?"

"No, Jack had that too. The plates of the head have to finish merging or something to that effect."

"This is utterly terrifying." I looked up at Matthew. He had his weight on his crutches, his gaze flickering between me and the infant. "We know nothing about babies. What if she falls ill in the middle of the night?"

"Ella can examine her tomorrow." Matthew gingerly lowered himself into the closest chair. "She'll give her a thorough check. However, I'm sure she's fine. Ella told me babies are tough."

"She seems healthy and well taken care of. Still, I can't help but wonder about her fate. All alone in the world without a mother or father?"

"Yes, it's a worry." His brows drew together, but his eyes were soft. "Surely someone will want to adopt her? Look how precious she is."

The memory of the warm bulk in my arms was a permanent one now, an imprint into my soul. "I agree. I'm not

sure what to think or do.”

“We’ll get help tomorrow.”

He was right. Tomorrow would bring more answers. Whatever they were, I dearly hoped the baby would end up in a loving home.

“She’s in our care for now,” I said. “At least until tomorrow. We must pray I do no harm until we can hand her off to someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“In my experience, your presence heals instead of harms.”

I stood and went to him, cupping his chin with my hand. “Thus far, this trip’s been a surprise. Other than this—you are as dear as I suspected you were.”

He caught hold of my hand and brushed his lips over my knuckles, sending a shiver of desire up my spine. “You are even more beautiful than I thought you’d be.”

“We must keep our heads, Matthew Goodwell.”

“Yes ma’am. Although you’ve muddled mine from the moment I set eyes upon you.”

“We have time,” I said. “Time for wooing and courtship, so don’t feel troubled in that regard.”

“I shall not. This baby, on the other hand, is decidedly problematic.”



THE LIGHT outside the windows told me dawn was emerging when the baby woke me for the third time. Bleary-eyed, I gathered her against my chest and wandered into the kitchen to warm another bottle. I changed her wet diaper while the formula heated. Thankfully, Matthew had several bottles in the storage closet, as well as a pile of diapers.

She cried, little bleats that tore at my heartstrings while simultaneously making me perspire. Not much was worse than

a baby crying, I decided, while fastening the cloth diaper around the tiny, wriggling baby girl.

Finally, the bottle heated to the right temperature. Embers still glowed red from an earlier fire, and I somehow managed to add a new log before sinking into the rocking chair with my little bundle.

The moment the bottle was in her mouth, she stopped crying and started to suck contentedly. As she ate, the light outside changed from a dim gray to a pink sunrise. I stroked my index finger over her soft, fuzzy head, marveling at the perfectness of her.

When she was done and I'd burped her, I expected her to fall back asleep. Instead, she stared up at me with blue eyes that touched my soul. In that moment, something shifted inside me. This innocent angel should stay with me. I could love her as my mother had loved me. There were no accidents. She'd been meant for me, destined to arrive on the doorstep when I was here instead of Ella and Lucca.

I'd not been blessed with a child with Daniel, and I'd been at peace with that truth. But here, in my arms, lay a precious gift. Had God chosen me, knowing I wanted a baby and I was most likely too old to have one?

However, it wasn't up to me to decide. A baby would never be granted to a single woman. I didn't think, anyway.

Daniel, I asked silently, *What do I do?*

His voice came through loud and clear. *Have faith. Everything will work out as it should.*

"Faith," I whispered. "We have to have faith."

She continued to stare up at me for at least another minute, imprinting her soul to mine. Soon, though, she closed her eyes and went to sleep in my arms as if everything had been decided.

MATTHEW

Seeing Aubrey Mantle holding that baby was enough to send me to my knees in a proposal of marriage and a suggestion we keep the child for our own. It was ridiculous. Too soon, and we certainly weren't ready for a baby. Fortunately, I kept my tongue before making a fool of myself.

But Aubrey was purely beguiling. Everything I'd imagined and more. Not only was she pretty, but she was fun and lighthearted. Such a good sense of humor too. That had not come through as clearly in her letters.

She'd made me feel more lighthearted too. Despite the fact that a baby was now asleep in the living room.

I'd have thought I'd know who had brought the baby to Ella and Lucca's doorstep. As the town's bartender, there wasn't much gossip or news I didn't hear at one point or the other.

Aubrey yawned. "Excuse me. I'm suddenly very tired."

"I'm craving rest myself," I said. "Ella said the bedrooms are made up, so all we have to do is fall into them."

Would we be able to rest with a baby here? Ella told me Jack woke multiple times at night to eat. I didn't know about Aubrey, but I didn't feel ready for that challenge. Especially since my leg throbbed.

"Do you think we should sleep now, while the baby does?" Aubrey asked.

I agreed, telling her what I knew about baby Jack's sleeping schedule. "She'll probably wake hungry in the middle of the night."

"I'll get a bottle ready," Aubrey said. "That way I'll be able to feed her right when she wakes up."

"Where will she sleep?"

She gazed down at the baby, obviously smitten. "With me, of course. You're still recovering and encumbered."

The baby was cute. Would she distract Aubrey from succumbing to my charms? Stealing all the attention, I thought, smiling to myself. One should not have to compete with adorable babies.

We said good night and went to our bedrooms, Aubrey with the baby's basket tucked against her side. Once in the guest room, I prepared for bed quickly and fell asleep even faster.



IF THE BABY woke in the night, I did not hear her. I'd slept deeply and woke to the sun sneaking through the crack in the curtains hanging over the bedroom window. Bathing was impossible with my cast, so I did my best with soap and a damp washrag. Thankfully, I felt rested. In addition, my leg hurt much less than it had the day before.

I found Aubrey in the kitchen feeding the baby. She looked up at me with bloodshot eyes and smiled. Dark smears had appeared under her eyes. The baby had not let her sleep. A twinge of guilt for having slept so well disturbed my joy at seeing her.

"Good morning," Aubrey said cheerfully. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Exceptionally so. I gather you did not?"

"This little one's a troublemaker. She woke every two hours and wanted a bottle." Aubrey sighed and closed her eyes

for a second. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve never felt more tired in my life.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve helped.”

“Don’t be. You’re healing, which should be your first priority. A little hardship is good for the soul. However, I will be taking a nap this afternoon if she’s going to put me through that again tonight.”

Again? Weren’t we handing the baby over to the sheriff?

My grimace must have given away my thoughts, because she said, “If she has no other place to go, that is. I don’t know how this works here on the island, but at home there would be government agencies involved.” She hesitated, gazing down at the bundle in her arms. “I’m afraid to let her go. They’ll send her to an orphanage until someone adopts her. It’s not right.”

“What do you propose?” I asked gently. My stomach clenched. Something had happened in the night while I was sleeping. A certain matchmaker had fallen in love with the baby. My heart sank, worried how she would feel once she had to turn the baby over to Sheriff White.

“The note didn’t mention a name,” she said. “That occurred to me during the second feeding last night. How horrible to be born into the world without a name.”

“She’ll have one soon enough.”

She blinked, then gazed back down at the bundle, a sad smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “I suppose her adoptive parents will be blessed to name her.”

I moved to the sink, unsure what say. My instincts told me to be careful not to upset her with too many questions. Knowing my expressions could give me away, I looked out the glass instead of at her.

“She’s so tiny, and what if she goes somewhere desolate?” Aubrey said. “What if she doesn’t get proper care? She’s completely defenseless. I’m worried to let her go.”

“Let’s talk to the sheriff first.” I turned slowly to face her. “Maybe we can keep her until a proper home is found? There’s

surely a nice couple who would love her as their own?"

Aubrey's eyes filled as she looked back at the baby. "I hope they'll see what a gift she is and treat her as such."

It should be us, I thought. We should marry and give her a home. A loving home. Because there was no doubt in my mind that I'd fallen for Aubrey. She'd fallen for the baby. The three of us could be a family.

But was I too old for a wife and child? An infant, no less. What about our financial discrepancies? Aubrey was rich, and I was not. Where would we live? Here or Boston? If she even agreed?

All the questions made my head hurt.

After a nice belch, the little one yawned and made a satisfied grunt. Aubrey carefully put her into the basket and then stood, pressing a hand against her lower back. She wore the same dress as yesterday, only now it was wrinkled and her hair disheveled. She'd not slept much at all and hadn't bothered to undress.

"Have you eaten?" I asked.

"No, and I'm famished. I might kill for a cup of coffee too." She covered her mouth with the back of her hand, but it did no good to disguise her yawn. "I'll start some. I can scramble up some eggs as well. If only Heidi were here."

"No, you sit. I can do it," I said.

She was apparently too tired to protest, because she just nodded her head in agreement.

Clumsily, I moved about the kitchen on my crutches, putting coffee on the stove to brew and scrambling up a few eggs.

A pensive expression on her pretty features, Aubrey sat staring at the baby the entire time.

This would not end well.



AS WE WERE LEAVING the residence to see Sheriff White, Ella and Lucca were coming up the path to their office. They waved and headed toward us, stopping abruptly when they saw what was in the basket.

“What? How?” Ella asked.

We told them everything we knew before asking Ella if she had any idea whose baby she might be.

“I haven’t had any births in the last month,” Ella said.

“We took some diapers and formula for her,” I said. “We didn’t think you’d mind?”

“Of course not,” Lucca said. “I’m glad you thought to look.”

“Come inside,” Ella said. “Let me take a look at her.”

“Does she look all right?” Aubrey asked, sounding apologetic.

“It appears so. You’ve done very well.” Ella ushered us inside and led Aubrey into one of the examination rooms, leaving me with Lucca.

“I’ve never heard of anything like this,” Lucca said.

“I’ve no idea what to do,” I said, grateful to confess. “Aubrey’s afraid she’ll be put into an orphanage.”

“Yes, and we do not want that,” Lucca said. “Not if they’re like the ones in Boston. The babies stop crying for help in those places. They give up trying to get someone to pick them up and care for them.”

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Lucca slipped into the doctor’s coat that hung near the front door. “I agree.” He turned back to me, eyes narrowed. “Mrs. Mantle’s falling for her.”

“Something must have happened to her in the middle of the night,” I said quietly. “I woke to find her smitten. I’d rather it be with me.”

“She’s that too,” Lucca said. “I have a feeling your life is about to drastically change.” He opened a cupboard and rummaged around, organizing bottles and powders.

A voice whispered in my head.

Marry her.

That’s what I want, I almost whispered back. However, I wanted her to choose me not because a baby needed a home but because she loved me. Not out of necessity. A marriage of convenience was not my idea of love.

Regardless, the thought continued to circle around and around in my mind as Lucca went about his morning tasks.

We’d see what the sheriff said, I decided. Then go about our own business.

“What’re you thinking?” Lucca asked gently, sitting next to me.

“As you know, I’m a bachelor. Have been for quite some time. Maybe it’s time I change that. Offer to marry her.” I couldn’t believe I’d said the words out loud. Lucca didn’t even blink or look remotely surprised. He had an uncanny ability to read people. It must be why he was such a good doctor.

“I think it’s a fine idea,” Lucca said. “A short courtship is not unheard of on this island.”

“You gave up your home to make it so,” I said, smiling.

He raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

Just then, Ella and Aubrey came out to the lobby.

“She’s in perfect health,” Aubrey said, gazing at the infant before lifting her eyes toward me. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“It is, yes,” I said. “We should probably head to the sheriff.”

Aubrey frowned but put the baby back in her basket. “Ella, do you know she doesn’t even have a name?”

“She will, though,” Ella said. “Someday soon.”



SHERIFF WHITE WAS in his office with his feet on the desk, smoking a cigar and reading the newspaper when we arrived. He looked up, cigar smoke a halo around his head. I introduced him to Aubrey.

White seemed uncharacteristically animated at the sight of my pretty companion. “The infamous Mrs. Mantle, matchmaker extraordinaire. I don’t know how you managed to find each one of the odd Tutheridge kids a mate. Hats off to you. I didn’t realize you were a mother.” His gaze swept her slender figure. “A new mother?”

“The baby’s not hers,” I said, already irritated. White looked at her as though he wanted to eat her up for breakfast. My hands twitched at my sides, imagining shoving him against the wall and telling him to keep his dirty hands off her.

“We’ve come to tell you about the baby,” Aubrey said. “And ask you what to do.” With that, she launched into the explanation.

“We’ll have to send her to Seattle. There’s an orphanage there.” White puffed on his cigar.

“What if I were to keep her?” Aubrey asked.

I gaped at her. She’d actually said it out loud.

“Aren’t you a widow?” White asked, puffing on his cigar.

“That’s correct.” Aubrey waved White’s smoke away from the sleeping baby with a sweep of her hand.

“A single woman and a baby? I doubt anyone would allow that.” White stubbed out his cigar and placed it in the ashtray on his desk.

“I’m wealthy,” Aubrey said. “And perfectly capable of taking care of her.”

“It’s just not done, ma’am.” White’s eyebrows rose. “Anyway, isn’t that a rash decision? You’ve only just met her.”

“I know. But she’s so tiny, and an orphanage is an awful place to send her.” The rims of Aubrey’s eyes reddened.

“They don’t respond to them when they cry,” I said, suddenly desperate to save the baby from such an awful fate. “And soon, give up trying to get any attention at all. We can’t send her there.”

Aubrey looked up at me, obviously surprised. “They don’t cry? That makes *me* want to weep. She can’t go to a place like that.”

White stared at Aubrey for another few seconds, then rose up from his chair and peeked into the basket. “You’re right about one thing. She’s tiny. Why don’t you keep her for another day? I’ll contact the authorities tomorrow. I’ve got things to do today.”

He practically shoved us out the door and onto the sidewalk. I squinted into the afternoon sun. Yellow and red leaves fluttered, vibrant against their sky-blue backdrop. The air smelled slightly of woodsmoke and decaying leaves.

I suddenly knew exactly what I wanted to do.

Would she be able to imagine a life here? I didn’t want to return with her to Boston. The city would be so strange and foreign to me at this point. How could I leave my home and business? Or could I? Would I do anything to be with her?

“Let’s go sit and talk for a minute,” I said, gesturing toward the bench in a grassy spot that overlooked the water.

“Yes, all right,” Aubrey said, sounding distracted. “Do you think the baby’s cold? Maybe we should buy her another blanket.”

“I think she’s fine.”

We sat side by side, my broken leg in the cast jutting out in front of me. This was already growing tiresome.

I turned to look at Aubrey, who stared out at the water with a bleak expression.

“I have an idea.” I placed my fingers gently on her chin to bring her gaze toward me.

She met my eyes with her own. “An idea?”

The baby stretched but then returned to sleep.

“Do you truly want to keep her?” I asked.

She turned back to the water. “This is the wildest thing I’ve ever said or done—and that’s something, considering what I do for work. Yes. I want to keep her.” Her voice grew thick with tears. “But I can’t. Not without a husband. I’ll have to send her off to a place where she’ll be taught never to ask for anything. To suffer alone in a crib with no one to pick her up when she’s crying or hungry. And I’m here, wishing she could stay with me. I would take care of her, make sure she had all the love she needed.” She blinked back tears. “I’m sorry, what’s your idea?”

“We should marry. Adopt her. Give her a name. Be there when she cries. And laughs.”

Aubrey’s eyes widened, a teardrop stuck in her lashes. “Is that what *you* want? Putting aside the baby, do you feel that way about me? Would you want to marry me?”

“I would. Regardless of the baby, I want you to be my wife if that were to make you happy. I want more than anything for you to be happy.” I shook my head, focusing for a moment on a gull at the end of the grass watching us with one greedy eye. “That’s true. But it’s also true that I’m in love with you. If it’s possible to fall in love over letters, then I was already in love with you before you arrived here. We could give the baby a family. We could be a family. I know I have nothing much to offer you, except my heart. I’m not a rich man like your late husband. All I have is this tavern, which hardly seems adequate for a woman of your elegance and intelligence. But there you have it. Me, offering you a new life. One with me.”

“What about Boston? My work?”

“You would have to give it up. If we were to stay here, which would be my preference.” I paused, clasping my hands in my lap. “Although if you wanted me to return to Boston with you, I would.”

She didn't say anything for what seemed an eternity. Finally, she turned back to me. “I need to talk to Heidi. All of this affects her. It's not fair to make a decision without consulting her first. She's been with me a long time. We're family.”

“But you're not saying no?” I asked.

“I'm not saying no. I just need a little time to sort through everything.”

“Take all the time you need.”

“As long as it's by tomorrow when White ships this little one off?” Aubrey said, with a weary smile.

All I could do was nod in the affirmative. The truth was the truth.

AUBREY

S *tunned* was not a word strong enough for what I felt at the moment. Married? Did he truly want that, or was it simply his kindness? An instant wife and child? When two days ago he was a bachelor?

What about me? Could I give up my business and move here permanently? Would I be a mother to this baby? I didn't know what I was doing. But something had happened to me in the middle of the night. Holding the helpless creature in my arms, my heart had twisted into a shape I didn't recognize. She needed me. I needed her. Matthew knew that. He'd seen it all over my face this morning. Would he be happy with me and a child who wasn't his?

This city girl living here on Whale Island? With a baby and a husband? What a twist of fate had come my way.

I knew without a doubt it's what I wanted. It was as if my entire life had been leading up to this very moment. My lack of children with Daniel. Even his death. All of it led me right here.

I could see the hurt in Matthew's eyes when I told him I needed to see Heidi. However, it was the only thing I could think to do in that moment. She was my best friend and adviser. Oftentimes she gave me advice I was not ready to hear or take action upon. Thus, it was vital that she talk me out of doing what seemed inconceivable just days ago—giving up the life back home for a new one. One for which I was unprepared, to say the least.

Where would we live? In his small apartment above his bar? That was the other thing. He owned a bar. Could I really marry a man who made his living serving alcohol? I hadn't gone as far as joining the women in Boston campaigning to make spirits illegal. It was none of my concern what others did. Still, there was a part of me that knew how drink could ruin men and families. Staying clear of it was best. Also, what kind of family man would he be if he was at the bar every night until God knows when? Yet it was his job. I could hardly ask him to quit.

But he'd asked me to quit mine.

Were compromises what we needed to make this work?

All of this went through my head as I rose to my feet and took hold of the basket where an innocent baby slept, not knowing how easily her life could be one of hardship instead of love and safety.

We didn't talk as we walked back slowly, given his cast and crutches, to Ella's home. All that was not said weighed heavily on both of us. I could nearly feel it in the air.

"I'll have to ask Ella to take me out to the big house," I said.

"She'll take you in the motorcar. Gladly, I'm sure.

"What time will you be back?" Matthew asked as he settled onto a kitchen chair.

I met his gaze, inwardly flinching at the apprehension in his eyes.

"I won't be long," I said. "Maybe an hour?"

"Take your time. I'll keep watch over Rosebud here."

I hesitated. Would a man with a cast be able to look after an infant? No, too risky. What if he dropped her? "I think I'll take her with me. Show her to Heidi."

He smiled. "Speaking like a protective mother already. Yes, fine, I'll wait for you. For your answer."

Spontaneously, I don't know what came over me, I leaned down and kissed his cheek. Seconds later, I was out the door with the baby and headed into the doctor's office to beg Ella for a ride.



THE MOTORCAR BOUNCED through potholes on the way out to the estate. "Mrs. Mantle, are you all right? You're awfully quiet," Ella said, startling me from my thoughts that went round and round without landing on any answers.

"I think she should have a name. And not have to go to an orphanage where she will learn how to stay silent instead of crying out for what she needs. Don't women learn that anyway?"

"Yes, although some of us didn't listen and talk as loud and as often as we wish."

I smiled, knowing how true it was and how marvelous.

"Matthew offered to marry me," I said.

"What?" Ella's gaze darted from the road to me.

"So that I could keep the baby."

"Is that what you want?"

"I think so. It's just that everything's going so fast, and I've never been one to jump into anything. Now I'm faced with the idea of moving across the county, marrying a man I think I fell in love with over letters, and adopting a baby. Each momentous change has been hard for me, and these would all come at once. Heidi will tell me straight if she thinks it's all moving too fast. She might tell me how silly the entire idea is. I'm sure she will."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because she often has the opposite opinion of what my instincts are telling me. When I couldn't get out of bed after Daniel died, for example, she had to pull me out by my hair."

“If you don’t mind my saying, the attraction between you and Matthew reminds me of Lucca and me.”

“It’s disconcerting. From the moment I set eyes upon him, my stomach started making alarming flip-flops. I admit, I’m smitten with Matthew Goodwell. He’s just so very...like home, I suppose I’d say. We’re comfortable together. He makes me laugh and makes me feel young again.”

“What more could you want?”

“More time, I suppose. The baby puts us in a precarious predicament.” I glanced down at the sleeping baby in my arms. She felt so right. So mine. “We have to make a decision before tomorrow. It’s impossible.”

“So was finding matches for people you’d never met,” Ella said. “You’re not afraid of risks.”

“Put that way, you actually make sense.” I smiled to myself as I adjusted the corner of the blanket, which had fallen over one of the baby’s eyes.

Ella was quiet for a moment as we rounded a curve in the road. “He’s not who you thought you would marry, though, is he? Not the type of man you’re accustomed to, I mean.”

“It’s true. My late husband was a wealthy, powerful man who ran in circles Matthew would never be invited into.”

“Is that something you care about?” Ella asked.

“No, I don’t. I never did. In fact, the affairs I had to attend with Daniel were a chore for me. I’m easily bored by frivolous conversation.”

Ella snorted. “I’m the same way.”

We’d arrived at the estate by then. Ella stopped near the fountain but did not get out, saying she had a patient to check on in a few minutes. “But I’ll come by and pick you back up on my way into town. About an hour?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

I climbed out of the car, careful not to jostle the baby, while breathing in the scent of the fallen leaves and damp earth. Such pure air, I thought. A wonderful place to raise a child. As if she agreed, the baby stirred, opening her eyes for a moment before falling back asleep.

Ella gave me an encouraging smile and wave and drove around the fountain and down the driveway.

Raymond ran down the steps to welcome me. I detected his covert, surprised glance at the infant in my arms. He was too well trained to say anything.

“I’d like to speak to Heidi,” I said. “Is she here?”

“She’s out on the back patio chatting with Mrs. Bains. Allow me to escort you there?”

I nodded and followed him around the side of the house, lifting my skirts with one hand while keeping the baby close with my opposite arm.

The two women were sitting side by side on the rocking chairs, both wearing overcoats and hats.

They rose to their feet when they saw me, then blanched in equal measures of pale at the site of Rosebud.

Rosebud? Could that be her name? Had Matthew so casually named her in that way of his that made everything clear and easy? A quality that had come through in his letters, now that I thought about it.

“What in the name of heaven have you here?” Mrs. Bains asked.

“Is that a baby?” Heidi’s expression remained shocked. “You have a baby in your arms.”

“It’s a bit of a story,” I said.

“Shall we go inside?” Mrs. Bains asked. “Is it too cold for her?”

I had her bundled up with additional blankets Ella had given me, so I didn’t think she was cold, but who knew?

“That might be best,” I said.

The three of us traipsed into the living room where a roaring fire warmed our cold hands. Raymond took our coats and scurried off to bring up a pot of tea, per Mrs. Bains's request. Mrs. Bains brought a large pillow from one of the sofas and set it near the fire for the baby. She didn't wake as I placed her in the center of the down pillow. I sank thankfully into a chair, suddenly weary.

"Tell us everything," Heidi said.

"It started when we heard her crying." Without going into excessive detail about the amount of perspiration a howling infant had caused me in less than twenty-four hours, I told them the entire story, finishing with our visit to Sheriff White. "He's said I can keep her for another day while he sorts out what to do."

"Sorts it out? How would he do that?" Heidi asked bluntly. "It's an abandoned baby. Won't they send her to an orphanage?"

"Did you know babies in orphanages learn how to stay quiet instead of crying because no one responds to them?" That did it. The tears came. I couldn't stand the thought of precious Rosebud without my arms to hold her when she needed me. "My goodness, ladies, I think I've fallen in love with her, and I can't let her go. But the sheriff reminded me, very rudely I might add, that a single woman cannot adopt a baby."

"Can't we just keep it to ourselves?" Mrs. Bain asked. "You can stay here and raise her. No one will be the wiser."

"White won't allow it," I said before turning to Heidi. "I knew we didn't like him. Didn't I say so many times over the last year?"

Heidi nodded. "His accusations have been wildly inaccurate."

"There's something else." I quieted when Raymond appeared with our tea. Mrs. Bains excused him, saying she would pour it for us herself.

Raymond, bless him, looked disappointed. I'm sure he was curious to know why I'd suddenly arrived with a baby.

I waited until the clacking of his heels faded away. "Matthew has proposed to me, with the idea that we would raise the baby together. I would have to give up my work and move here. All of which seems quite overwhelming."

I waited for Heidi to act aghast and tell me immediately what a bad idea it was.

"Matthew proposed?" Mrs. Bains said. "How extraordinary."

"He asked you to marry him?" At the moment, Heidi's eyes reminded me of a bumblebee, wide and protruding. She sprang to her feet, glaring at me. "What did you say?" Apparently, I wasn't responding quickly enough.

"I said I had to talk to you."

"Me? Why me?" Heidi asked.

"All of this affects you, for one thing. For another, I rely on your opinion. As you know."

Heidi plopped down into the chair next to me again, cheeks flushed and her hair in disarray. I'd completely discombobulated her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bains sat sipping her tea, a pleased smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Well, what do you want to do? Regardless of me," Heidi asked.

"I can't send this little one to a fate worse than death."

"I see." Heidi's brows knit together. "What about Matthew? Do you love him?"

I nodded, flushing. "It seems like such nonsense—all of this—but yes, I suppose I do."

Heidi clasped her hands together, clearly trying to gather herself. "I predicted you would fall for him. All this time, I thought so."

"I had to ask myself—why else would I have come all this way?" Embarrassed, I stared into the fire. A log shifted,

sending sparks flying against the grate.

“Perhaps Matthew and this baby are *your* matches,” Heidi said. “Your reward for working so hard for everyone else. God’s seen to it that you finally get the family you deserve.”

“You’re my family,” I said. “But what about my work? Who am I without it?”

“You’ll be a mother,” Mrs. Bains said. “The finest and most important job in all the world.”

I sat with that for a moment before speaking. “When it became apparent that Daniel and I couldn’t have children, I put all thoughts of them aside. It was only after I lost him that I wished I’d been granted the privilege of motherhood, simply because I would still have a part of him with me. This is different though. My heart’s been captured.”

“By the baby or the man?” Heidi asked.

“Or both?” Mrs. Bains asked gently.

“Both,” I said. “Definitely both.”

“Heidi, you could take over the business for me,” I said.

She shook her head, causing another bit of hair to loosen from her bun. “No, I don’t have the gift. Anyway, if you were to move, you’ll need your maid. Martin could find work here on the island, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure we could find something suitable,” Mrs. Bains said.

“That would be wonderful,” Heidi said. “Martin’s fallen in love with the place, and I’m happy wherever he is and wherever you are, Mrs. Mantle.”

“Thank you.” More tears stung my eyes.

“You’ve been so good to me. I can’t possibly abandon you now.” Heidi reached over to take my cold hands in her warm one. “Are you certain? This is what you want?”

I drew in a shaky breath. “I shouldn’t be so sure, yet I am.”

Mrs. Bains reached for the bell on the table closest to her. “Then we must get you married immediately if we’re to stop the sheriff from sending this one to the orphanage. I know just the man to do it. My husband happens to be an expert at weddings.”

“Where would we live?” I asked, back to the practical problems facing us. “I can’t raise a child above a bar.”

“You’ll have a house built,” Mrs. Bains said. “We own a lot of property. You can choose one of our spots and make it your own.”

“Yes, I suppose we could. If I sold the town house back home, we could use the proceeds for a dwelling here. There could be a cottage for you and Martin, too.”

“With the trees all around us?” Heidi asked. “And the scent of the water. I’ll be in heaven.”

“I thought you would think this was a terrible idea,” I said to Heidi.

“After all this time, don’t you see?” Heidi asked. “God always sends us the right matches. Our job is to trust in him. Every time we’ve done that, blessings have come our way.”

“It’s true,” I said. “He’s been faithful to us.”

“Bringing all the right people for my children.” Mrs. Bains shook her head. “It’s nothing short of a miracle.”

“Now it’s your turn,” Heidi said to me.

My turn. Yes. I couldn’t wait to tell Matthew my decision. Hopefully he hadn’t changed his mind while I was away.

MATTHEW

If I could have paced the floor, I would have. Instead, I was burdened with these crutches. My chest tightened at the sight of her finally walking up the steps to the kitchen door.

She held the baby close to her chest as she made her way up the path. Tears dampened my eyes. I'd often thought in times past that the wrong people have children when the right ones are denied such gifts. I would have put Aubrey Mantle in that category. But as I watched her come through the door, her expression animated and flushed, I knew there was no way on God's green earth I was letting anyone take this baby from her. If she didn't want to marry me, we would figure out a different way. I had no idea what that would be, but I'd die trying.

I stood to greet her, leaning against my crutches for support.

"Matthew." She stopped just inside the door, shutting it with her backside. "I'm sorry I was away so long. Ella was late getting back to pick me up." She peered at me through narrowed eyes. "You look unwell. You're as white as can be. Have you overdone it? Come, sit. I'll make you some tea."

"I don't want tea," I said. "But I am ill. Waiting for your answer to the biggest, most important question of my life has made me sick."

Her face fell. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry. Let me put the baby down, and then we can talk. I have a lot to tell you."

She placed the baby in the basket near the kitchen stove, where a small fire heated the kitchen nicely.

“Sit. Let’s talk here.” She sat on one side of the table and looked up at me expectantly.

I sat as well, noticing how much better my leg felt today than yesterday. The throbbing pain had nearly disappeared.

“I’ll not make you suffer further,” Aubrey said. “I would like to marry you. But I need to know first—before I commit fully—would you marry me if it weren’t for this baby? If you didn’t feel sorry for me?” She waved her hands in front of her chest. “Don’t deny it. I saw your face in the window. You want me to have her. You’re afraid for me if I don’t.”

“Your heart will be broken,” I said. “Isn’t that right?”

“That’s correct. But I cannot say yes to your proposal until I understand how you feel about me. As a woman, not a friend you care for deeply or that you want to help because you’re a kind and compassionate man. Do you love me?”

I didn’t answer for a moment, thinking about how best to answer her question that wouldn’t sound lame or trite. Finally, I merely said the truth. “If I didn’t love you, I would not care one way or the other about the baby.”

“I want you as well,” Aubrey said. “I want it all. This life here on the island. A family with you. I never thought I would ever feel this way again, but the Lord works in mysterious ways, as the saying goes.”

“Will you be sorry not to have a courtship?”

“I’d say our dozens of letters count as one, wouldn’t you?” She reached across the table and took my hands. “Dearest Matthew, I adore you. I want nothing more than to wake up next to you every morning for the rest of my life. Which means, you cannot die on me. I strictly forbid it.”

“I’ll do my very best to stay alive,” I said.

“There’s one more thing.” She withdrew her hands, got up, and walked around the table to stand before me. “I’d like to be kissed first.” She placed her fingertips in my hair, swooping

my wayward strands from my forehead. Then she traced her finger across my jawline. “I would very much like it if you would kiss me before we officially agree to marry. I’ve been married before, as you know, and believe there should be a particular spark between a man and a woman if we’re to share our lives together.”

There was a spark. I would stake my life on it. But for now, I would simply prove it to her by doing the very thing I’d wanted from the first moment I set eyes upon her beautiful face.

“I’d very much like to kiss you,” I said. “But I must stand in order to do so. Even if I’m relying on my crutches, I want to be upright.”

She smiled and placed the back of her hand against my cheek, then backed up slightly to allow me to rise to my feet.

Putting my weight on my good side freed one hand. I touched her face, tracing along her jawline as she’d done to me. “You’re truly breathtaking. Are you sure you want a lout like me kissing you?”

“*You* are truly distracting. And yes, I am quite sure.”

“Distracting?”

“Yes, I can’t think of much but you whenever you’re near. Your presence flusters me while at the same time I cannot stand to be far from you. I thought of you so much before I came here, but now that I’m here, I find I’m thinking of you in an entirely different way.”

“In that case, I shall kiss you now.” I dipped my head and brushed my lips against hers. The scent of her beguiled me. Her skin was as soft and silky as anything I’d ever touched.

“I think we can do better than that,” Aubrey said. “That was quite chaste for an engaged couple.”

I kissed her again, this time with more passion. There was no doubt in my mind. The spark she spoke of was obvious. “Are you certain now?” I asked, slightly breathless.

“I’m certain, and I can’t wait for more,” Aubrey said. “But for now, we have things to do. We must get dressed and ready to be married. Everyone’s gathering at the mansion for our wedding reception.”

“What?” I stared at her, sure I’d heard her incorrectly.

“We’re to go the church, and Pastor Bains will marry us, then Beatrice is throwing us a party.”

“She is?”

“Yes, and tomorrow we will go to the sheriff and start the process of adopting Rosebud.”

“Rosebud?”

“Doesn’t it suit her?” Aubrey asked. “We can call her Rosie if we decide to, but right now she reminds me of a precious pink rosebud.”

“Yes, I thought so too.”

“You’ll be such a good father,” Aubrey said.

That thought nearly had me fainting right there on the spot. In all of this, I’d thought only of Aubrey. Now I had to be a father. A bachelor who owns a tavern turns into a father overnight? Was it all a recipe for disaster? “I’ll do my best.”

She threw her arms around me, kissing me. “Don’t worry, you’ll fall in love with her.”

“How can you be sure?” I glanced at the sleeping baby, so tiny and innocent. Would my heart open to let her in?

“Because I know you,” Aubrey said.

An image of my mother laughing played before me. I closed my eyes for a moment and let the memory wash over me. I’d made her laugh doing something. Who knows what? Maybe a funny face? Or a joke? I don’t know. All that remained was the memory of her, the way she’d thrown back her head and barked out a laugh that seemed too loud for such a small woman. But that was her. She’d lived and loved with everything she had. Like Aubrey Mantle.

I'd lost Mother so young. I never had the opportunity to make her proud. My instincts would have been to conduct myself in a manner that pleased her. I'd have loved to have that chance. She would be proud of me today. I felt certain. Maybe she was up there smiling right now? Would she be there to guide me as I became a husband and father?

"Matthew, what is it?"

I opened my eyes to look into those of my recently betrothed. "I was thinking about my mother. How important she was to me. How lucky I was to have her, even if our time was cut short. I wish she could have met you."

"I wish that too." Aubrey's eyes glistened.

"You remind me of her. She was gentle but strong and lived life with such passion and courage."

"Is that how you see me? Living life with great passion and courage?"

I laughed. "How else would anyone perceive you? You opened a matchmaking business, agreed to help the Tutheridges without having met them, and now have come across the country and agreed to marry a man not nearly good enough for you and adopt a baby you only met yesterday."

Her hands flew to her mouth in mock horror. "Good God, when you put it like that I sound like a lunatic."

"Perhaps you are, but think of how much fuller your life is because of your unusual decisions."

"Do you think we're really the people to raise Rosebud? We know nothing about babies or children."

"Does anyone when they first have a baby?" I asked. "How are we different from anyone else?"

"I hope you're right."

"You know I am. You'll be a splendid mother, and I shall be proud to be by your side."

"There's one thing I must ask," Aubrey said.

"Anything."

“In our marriage vows, I don’t want to promise to obey you. It’s not that I wouldn’t think of your needs and wants in all decisions, but I’ve been independent for too long now. I can’t agree to obey anyone. Not even you.”

“I’d never ask you to. However, I should probably obey you. If I know what’s good for me anyway.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me. “As long as you keep believing that, then we shall be just fine. And now, I must go. Ella’s coming by to get Rosebud and me. I’m going to dress at the estate and meet you at the church. Lucca’s on his way over to help you dress.”

“Excellent,” I said. “I’ll be ready.”

What a strange day it had been.



LUCCA ARRIVED a few minutes after Aubrey and Rosebud had left in Ella’s motorcar. He had my best suit in his hands as well as a new tie made of purple silk. “A gift from Mrs. Lancaster,” Lucca said.

“Has the news of the wedding spread so fast?” I asked, rubbing my thumb over the silk material.

“Yes, I don’t know how either, as I’ve only just found out myself.”

“This is Ella Pointe, after all,” I said. “Word travels faster than a bald eagle diving for a fish.”

“The ladies have given me strict instructions to make you presentable,” Lucca said.

“We have our work cut out for us then.”

“Especially with your cast,” Lucca said. “Not ideal, but we’ll have to make do.”

With Lucca’s help, I bathed and dressed. Fortunately, he was a doctor and used to seeing people without their clothes on, I thought, as I finished fixing my tie around my neck.

“I wish I didn’t have these crutches to get in the way,” I said.

“Do you mean your wedding night?”

I warmed, embarrassed. I hadn’t been referring to that, actually, but now that he mentioned it, what was I to do? “I’m not exactly graceful with this thing,” I said.

“You’ll find a way, my good man. Nature has a way of taking care of these things.”

I sank onto the end of the bed, feeling slightly lightheaded. “Am I doing the right thing? What if this is a mistake? Not for me but for her and the baby. Can I do this?”

“All men feel worried on their wedding days if they’re adequate enough.”

“Even you?” I asked.

“Why not me? I married one of the most amazing women who’s ever lived. You can bet your life I had apprehensions that day. However, I chose to see it as a challenge. Every day I aim to be half as good as my wife. Thus far, it hasn’t seemed to occur to her how much of a compromise she made when she chose me.”

“Fate chose for you to be together,” I said. “You’re meant to be.”

“I believe the same to be true of you and Mrs. Mantle. Seeing you together has left no doubt in my mind.”

After I was dressed, freshly shaven and hair neatly combed, Benedict and Briggs arrived.

“We’ve come to toast you and fortify you with a dab of whiskey or two,” Briggs said. “No matter how in love you are, marrying a woman is not for the faint of heart.”

“Right, so we’re here to make sure you don’t run the other way,” Benedict said.

“Very funny,” I said. “With this cast, that’s unlikely to happen.”

Benedict placed one of his large paws on my shoulder. “Matthew, I don’t know that we’ve ever properly thanked you for what you did for us. It seems we give Mrs. Mantle all the credit, but if it weren’t for you, none of this would have been possible.”

“And our interfering mother,” Briggs said, handing me a dram of whiskey.

“I still can’t understand what gave her the idea at all,” Benedict said. “It was such an outlandish idea.”

“Your mother endured a lot during her marriage to your father,” I said. “She felt worried that she’d let you all down as a mother. I think this was her attempt to find you all matches that would not end up as unhappy as the one she had with Roland.”

“Perhaps that,” Briggs said. “Or perhaps she understood as no one but your mother truly can what a strange and eccentric bunch she’d given birth to and asked for divine intervention in order to save us from lives of loneliness.”

“Or debauchery in your case,” Benedict said.

Briggs raised his glass. “Amen to that.”

“Do any of you knuckleheads have advice for me?” I asked. “It’s all happening fast, and now I’m worried I’ll be terribly inadequate as a husband and father.”

“Sell the tavern,” Lucca said.

“What?” Briggs asked. “Why would he do that?”

“Because a man needs to be home at night,” Lucca said. “Or in a profession he shares with his wife that requires them to be out all hours of the day and night, such as myself and Ella.”

“What would I do?” I asked. “For a livelihood?”

“Mrs. Mantle is a wealthy woman,” Briggs said. “With the proceeds of the bar, you’ll have a nice bit of your own.”

“The bar is only me, really,” I said. “Your family owns the building. That’s the only thing worth any money.”

“Correct,” Benedict said, taking an envelope from his pocket. “We had our attorney back in Seattle put this together for you a few weeks ago.”

“When we heard Mrs. Mantle was coming for a visit,” Briggs said.

“Anticipating the outcome,” Lucca added. “The boys here figured you might need a chunk of cash to begin married life with.”

“We’ve also found a piece of land for your house,” Briggs said. “If you so choose to accept it as our wedding gift.”

I stared at them, overcome with emotion. “But this is too much.”

“Our father used you for decades,” Benedict said. “It’s the least we could do, not to mention how much you’ve given to each of us. Not just with the matchmaking. You mean a lot to our family.”

“You’ve shown us what it’s like to be a hardworking, honorable man,” Briggs said. “Which we desperately needed to see, given our father.”

Lucca pulled out his pocket watch to look at the time. “We have an hour before we have to get to the church. Should we take him out to show him the property?”

“Splendid idea,” Briggs said, grabbing the whiskey bottle. “We’ll have a toast.”

Not fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the property the boys had picked out for me. The land itself was perched on a cliff overlooking the Sound, with the views of the other islands laid out before us. I turned to look north, spotting Stella. It was wonderful to be such a short distance from Timothy and Beatrice.

Briggs described how they could level the land for the house and pointed to the pebble shore strewn with driftwood below. “You can make a trail down there like we have at the big house.”

Again, I was too overwhelmed by their kindness to think of anything to say. I simply shook my head and said thank you. “Aubrey will love it.”

“We can get to work on it whenever you’re ready,” Benedict said. “Briggs can help you draw up some plans.”

“With the help of an architect friend of mine,” Briggs said modestly. “But I suspect your bride will have an idea of the kind of house she wants.”

“Aubrey will want a cottage for Heidi and Martin too,” I said.

“There’s plenty of room for whatever you want, as long as we clear some logs.” Benedict gestured toward the thick forest on either side of us.

We were having one of the most spectacular autumn days, with the sky a bright blue and sun that glittered on the water. I could easily imagine Aubrey and myself out here during summer evenings watching for harbor seals and whales. Rosebud would be like the other island children and grow up connected to the earth and sea, just as the Tutheridge kids had been.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “Other than I love it and can’t wait to start my life here with Aubrey.”

“In the meantime, we have to get that leg healed,” Lucca said. “You’ll stay at our place until that happens.”

“Mother said you’re welcome at the estate while we get the house built,” Benedict said. “Assuming we sell the bar straightaway.”

“You boys have thought of everything,” I said. “By the by, Aubrey and I are onto you and your matchmaking, interfering ways. We know you and Ella don’t have a new house.”

Lucca chuckled. “We figured you’d catch on soon enough, but we also knew you wouldn’t have a choice. A broken leg is a broken leg.”

“What we didn’t know was how quickly it would all come together,” Briggs said. “Or the baby, obviously.”

“Do you think we’ll ever know who she belongs to?” I asked. “What if the father decides later he wants her back?”

“Yes, well, about that,” Briggs said. “Sheriff White did a little digging after he saw you this morning. He couldn’t find any trace of a father or mother. It’s like she was dropped from heaven.”

“Maybe she was,” Lucca said. “But we’ll probably never know. And by this time tomorrow the paperwork will be started to make you and Aubrey her parents.”

Lucca pulled his watch out again. “Gentlemen, we have to go, or our groom’s going to be late to his wedding.”

We all piled back into Briggs’s motorcar, recently bought right off the assembly line from Ford Motor Company. Soon, we were off to the church, where the woman of my dreams awaited.

AUBREY

The first time I married, I had a full dress with a train and veil. This second marriage of mine would be of a simpler nature. Instead of a dress made from silk and lace, I wore my best evening attire, a dusty pink sheath with an empire waistline and soft, undefined shoulders. It was meant for parties but since this was essentially a day of celebrations, I was quite pleased.

Ella and Heidi helped me dress, and they'd sent for Lizzie, who apparently was the most talented hairdresser on the island.

Lizzie, flushed and excited, had me sit at the dressing table and then proceeded to create an elegant and elaborate bun at the base of my neck. She added sprigs of flowers, and Ella placed a tiara on top of it all. "A family piece for your something borrowed."

"It's beautiful," I murmured. "Did you wear it at your wedding?"

"No, this was mother's when she married my father. I didn't want to wear it for fear of repercussion."

"But what about me?" I said, aghast. "What if it brings bad luck for me too?"

"It won't," Lizzie said. "I said a prayer over it before I put it on your head. Now it's pure and unblemished."

"As long as you're sure," I said, chuckling to myself.

"Are you thirsty?" Heidi asked.

“My throat’s dry,” I admitted.

“I’ll get us a pitcher of water.” Before I could say yes or no, she was off and out the door.

I took one last look in the mirror before standing. The sparkly tiara caught the light, which danced on the walls around us. Soon, I would no longer be Mrs. Mantle.

My stomach tensed. I’d no longer have Daniel’s name. How had that not occurred to me until now? Was this wrong? I’d promised to love Daniel all the days of my life. How could I betray him this way?

“Mrs. Mantle, are you feeling all right?” Ella rushed to my side.

“I’m having trouble breathing.” My chest had tightened to the point I was afraid no air could reach my lungs.

Ella reached out a hand to lead me over to a chair by the window. “I’ll open this and get some fresh air in here.”

The crisp autumn air immediately calmed me. I drew in a few deep breaths.

Ella and Lizzie knelt beside me, smoothing my skirts and asking what they could do.

“Nothing, I’m fine. Just a moment of...” Of what exactly?

“You’re not having second thoughts, are you?” Ella asked.

“Not that. Not completely.”

Heidi came into the room with a pitcher presumably filled with water. She stopped short to stare at me.

“You’re a vision.” Heidi set the pitcher on the dresser and poured a glass of water for me. As she handed it to me, she peered at me carefully. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing,” I repeated. “Other than I’m thinking about Daniel. My husband,” I said to Lizzie as way of explanation.

No one said anything for a few seconds.

“It would be strange if you didn’t think of him today,” Ella said finally. “You loved him very much.”

“I did.” An image of Daniel in his top hat and tails came to mind. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for me. I was always late getting ready, indecisive about what to wear, always worried I would embarrass him. Where had we been going? Some party or the other. Behind him, branches from a pine tree decorated the window. Christmastime. The last one before he died. We’d been going to the Hansons’ annual party. *Daniel, I’m sorry. I’ve moved on from you. I didn’t mean to. It just happened.*

As it should be, he whispered back. You’re alive with so many more good years, and I’m gone. Go. Be free. Raise the baby I would never have been able to give you.

Was that true? Had he been incapable of giving me a child?

I’d not have cared, as long as I was with him.

Now, though? It was true what he said. He was gone, and I was here on this beautiful autumn day. There was a man waiting at the church whom I loved and who loved me.

Does this mean I’ll no longer hear your voice? I asked Daniel silently.

Be well, my lovely girl.

I blinked, and the image of him was gone. Instead, I had three pairs of worried eyes staring at me.

“I’m fine.” I drew in a deep breath, and when I exhaled, it was a goodbye to the man I’d loved so much but had to let go.

“He wants you to move on,” Heidi said, not unkindly but without indulgence either. “It’s time. You have a new life here on the island. A family. The love of a man who really understands you.”

I had that before, I wanted to say, but didn’t. It was true. Daniel had understood me too. He’d seen something in me, despite my shabby clothes and working-class pocketbook. I’d been blessed to love two men during my lifetime. I was lucky. My feelings were different for Matthew than they had been for Daniel, because I was more mature. More confident in myself. Which gave me better tools with which to love Matthew.

Daniel had given me so many gifts, including security, wealth, and adoration. I'd thought I would not make it without him. I was wrong. Not only had I survived after he'd died, but I'd thrived. Still, I would always love him. As it turned out, there was more room in my heart. Room enough for my Matthew.

He would be there at the church waiting for me, willing to give up his entire way of life to make room for a wife and baby. He'd ignited passions in me I thought had died with Daniel. I smiled to myself. Time to begin again. A new life with a good man and a darling baby. Who would have ever thought both waited for me on this island I'd never heard of just two years ago?

Rosebud was with Mrs. Bains, being fed and held before leaving for the church. A sign of all the love that would come to my daughter from not only Matthew and myself but the entire Tutheridge clan. No child could ask for more.

I stood and held out my hands to Heidi. "I'm ready for the rest of my life to begin."

They all exchanged relieved glances. What had they thought? I'd let Matthew down? Let Rosebud go to an awful orphanage? Not today. Not ever.



ALTHOUGH IT WAS A LAST-MINUTE WEDDING, the church felt nearly full. The Tutheridge family filled two whole pews. I hadn't wanted a fuss, embarrassed, but the ladies didn't care. They had hastily thrown together a bouquet of late-blooming roses that smelled sweetly of summer days.

When I arrived at the church, Benedict had offered to walk me down the aisle. I protested at first and then decided, why not? I'd been married in great pomp and circumstance the first time. Matthew, however, had never had a wedding. He deserved to have a memorable day. One he could tell Rosebud about later.

Matthew took his place next to Pastor Bains.

Briggs, at the piano, began to play at the front of the church. When the music started, Benedict tucked my arm into his. Heidi blew me a kiss, then slipped around us to hustle down the aisle to sit next to Martin.

“When love calls to you—you must answer,” Benedict said. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not. Just all the eyes on me, very nerve-wracking.”

“I’ll be right here, and at the end of the aisle, Matthew waits for you. He’s been waiting for you a long time.”

“And I for him.” I nodded and lifted my chin. “Shall we?”

We took one step and then another and soon we were half way down the aisle. My eyes had remained dry thus far. At the sight of Matthew standing there in his fine suit, watching me with an expression of pure love, tears of joy blurred my vision. Grateful for Benedict’s steady arm, we continued, growing closer and closer to my beloved and Pastor Bains.

The church smelled of roses and the women’s mingled perfumes and men’s pomade, as well as the wood-burning stove in the corner. I’d been afraid I’d be cold in my short-sleeved dress, but the sun shining in through the windows helped the paltry stove to warm the room. Dust danced in the sunbeams in time to the piano processional. A quick glance at Briggs made me smile. He knelt over the keyboard with great concentration, his fingers and facial expressions as dramatic as the music.

I took a moment to take in the rows of people in the pews, all of whom I felt connected to in ways that could not fully be explained, except by the hand of destiny. Heidi openly wept, her handkerchief held against her mouth and darling Martin by her side. Faith and Amelia sat together, babes in arms, beaming at me. Ella and Lucca, on the opposite side of the aisle, held hands and gazed back at me, obviously pleased and happy for me. Mrs. Bains, holding Rosebud, sent me a reassuring smile, as did Lizzie. Sara Rose and Rhett, who seemed to always be touching, sat next to Ella, with their gentle smiles directed right at me. Piper, Bebe, and Hudson sat next to Mrs. Bains. Bebe grinned and waved, bouncing in the

pew. I gave her a wink as I passed by, and she winked back. At the pulpit, Pastor Bains appeared overcome with emotion, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

I did this, I thought. I helped to create all the joy and love in this room. With Matthew and Mrs. Bains, of course. And most of all, the Lord above.

Gratitude brought more tears to my eyes. By the time we reached Matthew, they'd spilled onto my cheeks. Dear me, I had no hankie. What was I to do with my bouquet? I should have asked someone.

Sara Rose, seeming to sense my distress, rushed up to take the roses from me.

Benedict kissed my cheek and handed me over to Matthew, who pressed his own handkerchief into my hand while balancing on his crutches. "You're beautiful." He peered down at me, love in eyes. "I'm sorry about these silly crutches. They're such a nuisance."

I giggled, as much from nerves and emotion as the sight of the poor man trying to balance. I dabbed at my damp cheeks with his hankie and breathed in the spicy scent of him that lingered in the fibers of the fabric.

His eyelashes, so thick and black, fluttered. Perhaps he was nervous too? All these people looking at him would not be on his list of favorite activities. Still, I was glad to be here in front of the people who loved and supported us.

"All I care about is that you are here," I said. My throat ached from trying to suppress more tears. This rugged, strong man weakened my knees. I longed for the time when we could be alone, crutches or not.

His eyes peered into mine, steadying me. "You're all right. It's just me."

"Yes, you," I whispered back. "It's been you since that first letter."

Pastor Bains began. "Friends, we are gathered here today to witness the marriage of two extraordinary people. It would

not be an exaggeration to say they were instrumental in changing every single life sitting here today.”

No one spoke, but they didn’t have to. Their silent appreciation came to me in warm waves, washing over me in layers upon layers of love.

“They somehow managed to form a partnership from afar,” Bains continued. “One in which they brought couples—dare I say soulmates—together. A sign from God they were meant to be together? I would say so.”

A murmur went through the church.

“In any union, marriage is about compromise and understanding. I’ve no doubt that together these two fine people will continue to make the world a better place. A true partnership is one that encourages and evokes the best qualities in each other. This is certainly one that does just that, for which we can thank our Heavenly Father. As witness to this blessed event, I’d ask that each one of you in this church today commit to helping them in any way you can during the first days of marriage and parenthood. They will need us all in the days to come as they transition into this new season.”

The next few minutes passed by in a bit of a blur. We exchanged vows, excluding obey, and Pastor Bains blessed us, then pronounced us husband and wife. “You may kiss the bride.”

Matthew dipped his head to seal our marriage with a kiss, his crutches squeaking as he did so.

Our friends clapped and cheered. Bebe had clambered up to stand on the pew, clapping the hardest of all.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Pastor Bains before walking beside Matthew back down the aisle to the sound of Briggs playing the wedding march at the piano. We didn’t make the most graceful of all couples, him with his crutches and me with legs that seemed suddenly made of pudding. I focused on not tripping.

By the time we reached the small lobby of the church, laughter had replaced my tears. “We’re married,” I said. “I can

hardly believe it.”

He drew me close, murmuring against my hair. “My dear wife, here at last.”

MATTHEW

After church, we left in the motorcar with Ella and Lucca to attend our party at the estate. I sat with my new bride in the back seat, trying not to stare at her, but she was so pretty it was nearly impossible.

“I’ve a surprise for you,” I said to distract myself from thoughts of our night to come. “Or rather, the Tutheridge siblings have a gift.” I told her about the property. “It’s on the water and has a flat piece of land perfect for a house. There’s room for a cottage for Heidi and Martin too, if you would like that.”

“How is that possible? It’s too much. Too generous,” Aubrey said.

Ella turned around to look at us from the passenger side of the Model T. “My mother wanted you to have it. We’re all grateful for what you two did for us. Anyway, we own half of the island. A few acres for dear friends is nothing.”

“We were worried you’d be angry once you figured it out,” Aubrey said.

“We were too busy being in love to mind much,” Lucca said.

I winced as the car bounced through a pothole. Aubrey placed her hand on my good leg, obviously sensing my discomfort. She had been a wife before. Acts of physical love would come naturally to her. She would not have to learn them as a new bride might. I was a lucky man.

By the time we arrived, we'd talked through some of the details of our new life together. Aubrey wanted to put her townhome up for sale back in Boston. Heidi and Martin had volunteered to return to the East Coast to sell the home and organize the move. "I have a house full of furniture we could have sent out," Aubrey said. "A lot of nice pieces."

"Won't that cost a fortune?" I asked.

She was quiet for a moment, glancing out the window as we turned down the Tutheridge driveway. "My first husband left me a fortune. Now it belongs to both of us."

I hadn't fully thought all of that through.

"I hope you won't mind?" Aubrey asked.

"It will take some getting used to," I said.

"What about the bar?" Ella asked. "Will you sell it?"

"I'll do whatever my wife wishes," I said.

"Good idea," Lucca said.

Ella smacked him playfully on the shoulder. "You're not funny."

Lucca chuckled. "Yes, dear."

"Again, not funny." Ella looked back at us and rolled her eyes.

"I had an idea," Aubrey said. "About the bar. What if we were to keep it as an investment, while having someone else run it?"

"Who?" Ella asked. "It has to be someone trustworthy."

"What about young Simon?" Aubrey asked. "We could give him a part of the profit to incentivize him. He wants to build a house for Lizzie, but he won't be able to do that working part time for Michael."

I gazed at my wife. She was the kindest, most generous woman. Smart too. "I think that's a fine idea. Let's ask him tonight."

Aubrey's eyes twinkled. "Lizzie will be pleased."



I'D NEVER BEEN to a party where I was the center of attention, and it was not to be today, either. All eyes were on my exquisite wife. How could they help but stare at her? She glowed in the way that only the truly pure and good can. Yet she loved *me*, despite my imperfections and mistakes. Of all the men in the world, she'd chosen to spend her life with me. I doubt I deserved her or Rosebud, but I wasn't going to question God's gifts.

And the way my wife looked at me? No matter where she was in the room, her eyes lit up at the sight of me. This would never grow tiresome, of that I was sure.

Currently, she was sitting with Amelia and Ella eating a piece of cake and laughing over something Ella had said. Briggs was at the piano, playing ragtime music.

Sara Rose and Rhett were dancing in one corner. Hudson danced with both his wife and daughter, the three of them a merry trio.

"If only I could dance with her," I muttered under my breath from where I sat in one of the plump leather chairs by the fire.

"Soon enough, my friend," Timothy said, plopping down in the chair next to me, whiskey sloshing the sides of his glass.

"I can't wait to be done with these," I said, indicating the crutches.

"By Christmas you'll be dancing her around the room," Timothy said.

Just then, Beatrice appeared. Rosebud had been handed off to Lizzie, who was currently gazing down at the infant with adoration. Next to her, Simon sipped a whiskey and spoke softly to her. They would be next, I thought.

"Dearest Matthew," Beatrice said, sitting in the chair her husband gave up for her, promising to return with a glass of sherry for her and a whiskey for me.

“Beatrice, thank you for this party,” I said. “It’s so kind of you.”

“I love throwing parties,” she said. “Now that I no longer have to worry about what Roland will do or not do, I’m as free as a bird.”

“Being in love with a good man looks wonderful on you.”

It was true. She looked twenty years younger than she had before Roland’s death.

“Seeing all my children so happy is good for the complexion,” she said, smiling. “I have you and your wife to thank for all of this.” She gestured with her hand to indicate the people in the room.

“It’s I who should thank you. I have you to thank for Aubrey. Had you not come up with this unrealistic idea to match all of your children, I would never have met her. How you convinced me, I’ll never know.”

“It was not something I’d have ever imagined you doing,” she said. “Which is part of the reason why it had to be you who helped me with my meddlesome plan. You’re a keen observer of people and a wonderful communicator. I knew you’d be the right person to describe this family of mine. I was right, obviously.” A smug smile tugged at her lips. “I’m a little too pleased with myself, if you want to know the truth.”

“I’m pleased with you as well,” I said, laughing. “The boys showed me the property this morning. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’ve earned it. Every inch. I hope you and Aubrey will be happy there for years and years to come.”

“We’ll need to build a house first. I’m not sure the best way to go about that, but I know Benedict will have ideas.”

My wife sailed over to us then, sitting on the ottoman near my feet. “Are you feeling all right?” she asked, leaning close to kiss my cheek. “If you’re in pain, just say the word and we’ll go.”

“Not yet,” Beatrice said. “Mrs. Halvorson’s sending up more trays of food. She’s been working all day.”

I assured them both I was fine. “I wish only that I could dance with my wife.”

“There are many more days of dancing in your future,” Beatrice said before being pulled away by Raymond.

Aubrey placed her hand on my knee. “Should we call Lizzie and Simon over?”

“Yes, let’s do that. I’d like to hold the baby anyway,” I said.

“You would?” Aubrey’s eyes widened in obvious surprise and delight. “Oh, Matthew, I’m so happy.”

“If I’m going to be a father, then I have to do it properly.”

Aubrey motioned for Lizzie and Simon to join us. Rosebud was awake, staring up at the ceiling and making cute noises.

“I’ll take her,” I said to Lizzie.

She placed the warm bundle in my arms. I traced my finger over her peach fuzz of a head. My hand looked enormous compared to her.

“We have an idea we’d like to tell you about,” Aubrey said, all business. I could imagine her in her office back in Boston, efficient and clever. “Matthew, you tell them.”

“I’d like to give up my position at the bar,” I said. “I’d like to be at home in the evenings with my new family. Because of this, I’m going to take on a partner. One who would share in the profits in return for helping to run the place.”

Lizzie paled; her gaze darted from me to Aubrey and then to Simon as if uncertain whether to feel optimistic. “Do you have someone in mind?”

“We do,” I said. “Simon, would you be interested in the position?”

“I have nothing with which to invest,” Simon said. “I’m assuming you’d want me to buy into the business, correct?”

“It won’t be necessary,” I said. “You’ll pay your part by doing a majority of the work, while I enjoy my family.”

“We’ll go over the numbers,” Aubrey added, “and make sure it’s worth your while. Before long, you’ll have enough to build a house.”

Simon’s eyes shone, and his mouth widened into a grin. “I’d like that very much. But what about Mr. Moon? He’s been generous to me. I’d hate to let him down.”

“We can help Michael find someone else,” I said. “There will be someone else happy to take your place at the store.”

“I don’t know anything about tending bar.” Simon played with the cuff of his jacket sleeve, looking worried.

“You’ll easily pick up everything you need to know.” Rosebud wriggled, displacing her blanket. I tucked it back around her and leaned over to kiss her precious head. “Why does her head smell so good?”

“No one knows,” Lizzie said. “Babies heads just smell delicious.”

Aubrey laughed, tickling Rosebud’s cheek. “I’m thinking it’s because they’re so troublesome at this age, what with the feedings and changing of diapers, that God wanted to make sure they smelled nice.”

Her laugh. Nothing had ever sounded better in my life.

“What do you think, Simon?” I asked. “About our offer?”

“You have a deal,” Simon said, holding out his hand for me to shake.

“I’m holding the baby, so you’ll have to shake my wife’s hand,” I said. “She’s the one who thought of the idea in the first place.”

Lizzie burst into tears. “Mrs. Mantle, I mean Mrs. Goodwell, that’s so kind of you.”

“Let’s just say my matchmaking days aren’t entirely over,” Aubrey said coyly.

Simon looked perplexed, but Lizzie nodded as pink flushed her cheeks.

“Also, Lizzie, you must call me Aubrey. It’s going to take a while to grow accustomed to my new name, and I may not know to whom you’re referring.”

Mrs. Goodwell, I thought. Never would I have believed such good fortune would come my way. “I never thought there would be a Mrs. Goodwell, and now this fine woman sits beside me for the whole world to see.”

“The world is of no consequence,” Aubrey said. “I know to whom I’ve given my heart and soul.”

“So romantic,” Lizzie murmured.

Simon placed his hand over Lizzie’s for a moment. “I hope someday, Lizzie, I’ll be able to say the same thing about you.”

“Someday cannot come fast enough,” Lizzie said, glancing over at Aubrey. “But I shall be patient. A wise woman advised me to do so.”

“I’ll work every day for you,” Simon said. “Until I can do right by you.”

“And I shall give you my heart and soul,” Lizzie said.

I smiled over at my wife, who returned my gaze. “It’s time to go home,” Aubrey said, “and put Rosebud to bed.”

I had a feeling the baby was not the only one headed for bed.



OUR WEDDING NIGHT was as blissful as I’d imagined, other than Rosebud interrupting us for several feedings and the awkwardness of my cast. However, just as Ella had promised, my cast was removed six weeks later.

By then, the three of us had developed a joyful routine. Simon took over the bar, leaving me free to spend evenings with my wife and daughter. While we built our house, we

moved back into the apartment above the bar so that Ella and Lucca could have their residence back.

Every day that fall, Benedict and I, along with a half dozen hired men, constructed a house for my new family. I marveled at what money could do. Aubrey had specific requests, and we were able to meet them all because of the wealth she brought to the marriage.

Did I ever feel guilty that I had such a wonderful new life because of her first husband's money? There were twinges, of course. However, all in all, the union and our adoption of Rosebud felt so right that the feelings never stuck around for long.

By Christmas, our house was complete. We'd have to wait until the spring to build Heidi and Martin's cottage because the rainy, damp weather had arrived.

Regardless, they had returned to Boston to sell Aubrey's townhome and close the business. They would arrive soon after the new year and stay at the estate with Beatrice and Timothy until their house was finished.

By the time the Christmas season had arrived, we'd moved into our new house and had convinced Simon to rent the apartment above the tavern. I'd given him a Christmas bonus that ensured his ability to build a house for his Lizzie.

Rosebud changed from an infant to a smiling, gurgling baby. Wispy fair curls replaced her peach fuzz. Big blue eyes peered up at me when I fed her or held her and, as my wife had, I fell deeply in love with our baby. My daughter. I was a father to Rosebud, the best of all jobs. She had captured my heart in ways I hadn't thought a grumpy bachelor like me would ever feel. In her eyes, I saw everything sweet and good in this old world. I would get to live anew through her eyes. What a gift God had given me.

Beatrice and Timothy threw a Christmas party on the twenty-third of December and invited the entire town. Mrs. Halvorson, from all accounts, had been working for a week to prepare a turkey, a ham, and savory side dishes. Baskets with fresh rolls, cakes, and candies filled the buffet. I had just

arranged a few pieces of fudge on a plate for my bride when Lizzie hurried over to greet me with a hug. She practically buzzed with excitement. “Simon proposed last night, and it’s all because of you and Aubrey.”

“I’m so pleased for you,” I said. “He’s doing very well at the bar. It’s a relief to have him as a partner.”

“I know. I’m proud of him.” Lizzie beamed. “We’re going to marry next Sunday. A grand way to welcome the new year, don’t you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Will you and Aubrey stand up for us?” Lizzie asked.

Aubrey arrived by my side then, looking as delighted to hear Lizzie’s news as I was. “I had a feeling we’d hear such good news tonight. We’d be honored to stand up for you.”

“It will be a happy day,” Lizzie said. “I’ll be Simon’s wife—married to my best friend. Can you imagine anything better?”

“Having married my best friend, I would have to say I *can* imagine,” Aubrey said.

As the women embraced, I caught sight of Simon on the other side of the room watching his soon-to-be bride with an expression of devotion. They would be good together, I thought. Better together than apart. Like Aubrey and me.

The night before the party, Ella and Lucca welcomed a baby girl they’d named Lucille. Because of this, they were recuperating at home instead of joining the fun. However, the rest of the Tutheridge family were in attendance. Babies, including ours, had been sent upstairs to sleep in the nursery with one of the maids looking after them, allowing all of us to enjoy ourselves without worry.

Beatrice was beside herself with joy at the birth of her third grandchild. Soon, there would be another, for Sara Rose and Rhett were due in the early spring. Piper and Hudson would give Bebe a sister or brother soon thereafter.

Tonight, however, we were enjoying the food and conversation. After we'd all stuffed ourselves, Briggs and a local fiddle player were convinced to play for us. The furniture had been pushed against the walls, leaving a decent dance floor. Soon, couples twirled around Beatrice's large living room.

I'd been looking forward to taking my wife into my arms and dancing with her at last.

I turned toward her and offered my hand. "May I have this dance, Mrs. Goodwell?"

"Yes, you may, Mr. Goodwell." She wore a dress the color of a cranberry that complemented her fair skin. I thought the same thing every day, but I'd never seen her look lovelier.

"Also, you look more beautiful than ever tonight," I said.

"You're looking fine yourself, Matthew Goodwell."

I was wearing a new evening suit, made of fabric I'd never dreamed of possessing. For fear of sounding immodest, I had to admit that I felt quite dashing.

We danced to the joyous tune of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." I'd never felt more grateful for both of my legs as I had been since getting my cast removed. It felt good to hold my wife and take in the sweet scent of her hair while surrounded by our friends and family.

The crowd, many of whom had imbibed a decent amount of punch by then, began to sing along with the musicians.

"Oh, dear, there will be some headaches tomorrow," Aubrey said, laughing.

"I'm afraid so."

Bebe came running through the living room, darting between dancing couples, with several boys chasing behind. I couldn't discern if they were friend or foe, but I suspected Bebe didn't care. The chase was her aim.

"That girl," Aubrey said. "Her reputation was well-earned."

“Without a doubt.”

We wandered off the dance floor, overly warm, and out to the back porch where we sat side by side in rocking chairs. Rain fell steadily, but we were dry under the awning, soothed by the pitter-patter on the roof.

“Isn’t it wonderful to think of the days to come with Rosebud?” Aubrey asked, tears in her voice. “We have so much to look forward to. Thank you for giving me this life.”

“I’m the one who should be thankful. In fact, I am.”

We sat in compatible silence, listening to the rain mingled with the music and laughter coming from inside the house. Life had certainly been full of surprises and unexpected joy. A husband and father. A new home to share with the woman I’d fallen madly in love with. I might not have appreciated it as much had it all come earlier to me. None of it would have happened if Beatrice had not asked me to help find her children’s matches.

“I’m glad I said yes,” I said out loud to my wife. “When Beatrice asked.”

“I’m glad I said yes to you. All the best things have come to me when I’m brave and open, even if I’m unsure.”

“I’d not thought about it before, but I agree,” I said.

We sat holding hands and rocking to the rhythm of the music, looking forward to the future but completely content in the present.

Life was funny, how everything could change from one courageous decision. Sometimes one had to say yes to what at first might seem outlandish and unrealistic. After all, we have only one life in which to love and be loved. Fears of making a mistake must be set aside and risk embraced. There was also the act of kindness that had to be factored in as well. If I had not agreed to do Beatrice such a large favor, I would not have found myself sitting here next to the woman who made my heart ache with joy.

I don’t know how long we sat there listening to the sounds of the party and the rain on the roof. I know only that it was

one of many happy moments in the lives of two people made for each other.

The matchmakers had their own match at long last.

ALSO BY TESS THOMPSON



EMERSON PASS HISTORICALS

The School Mistress

The Spinster

The Scholar

The Problem Child

The Seven Days of Christmas

The Musician

The Wordsmith

The Rebel

EMERSON PASS CONTEMPORARIES

The Sugar Queen

The Patron

The Pet Doctor

The Correspondent

The Innkeeper

CLIFFSIDE BAY

Traded: Brody and Kara

Deleted: Jackson and Maggie

Jaded: Zane and Honor

Marred: Kyle and Violet

Tainted: Lance and Mary

The Season of Cats and Babies

Missed: Rafael and Lisa

Healed: Stone and Pepper

Christmas Wedding

Scarred: Trey and Autumn

Chateau Wedding

Jilted: Nico and Sophie

Kissed

Departed: David and Sara

BLUE MOUNTAIN

Blue Midnight

Blue Moon

Blue Ink

Blue String

Blue Twilight

RIVER VALLEY

Riversong

Riverbend

Riverstar

Riversnow

Riverstorm

Tommy's Wish

LEGLEY BAY

Caramel and Magnolias

Tea and Primroses

CASTAWAY CHRISTMAS

Come Tomorrow

Promise of Tomorrow

SOUL SISTERS

Christmas Rings

Christmas Star

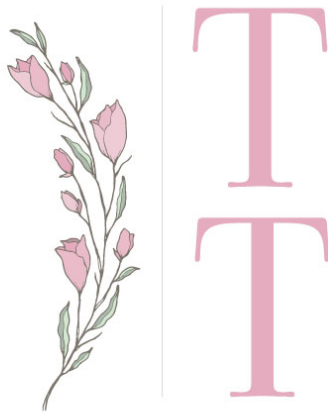
STANDALONES

Duet For Three Hands

Miller's Secret

The Santa Trial

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Thompson is the USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author of clean and wholesome Contemporary and Historical Romantic Women's Fiction with nearly 50 published titles. Her stories feature family sagas, romance, a little mystery, and a lot of heart.

She's married to her prince, Best Husband Ever Cliff and is the mother of their blended family of two boys and two girls. Cliff is seventeen months younger, which qualifies Tess as a Cougar, a title she wears proudly. Her bonus sons are young adults working toward making all their dreams come true out in the world. Oldest daughter is at college studying Chemistry. (Her mother has no idea where she got her math and science talent!) The baby of the family is a junior in high school and a member of a state champion cheer team as well as an academic all-star, including achieving a 5 on the AP World History exam during her sophomore year.

Tess is proud to have grown up in a small town like the ones in her novels. After graduating from the University of Southern California Drama School, she had hopes of becoming an actress but was called instead to writing fiction.

Tess loves lazy afternoons watching football, hanging out on the back patio with Best Husband Ever, reading in bed, binge-watching television series, red wine, strong coffee, Zumba, and walks on crisp autumn days. She never knows what to make for dinner and is often awake in the middle of night thinking about her characters and their stories.

She's grateful to spend most days in her office matchmaking her characters while her favorite cat Mittens (shhh...don't tell Midnight) sleeps on the desk.

She adores hearing from readers, so don't hesitate to say hello or sign up for her newsletter: www.tesswrites.com. You'll receive a free ebook just for signing up!

