

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TESS THOMPSON

The
MYSTERY
MATCHMAKER
of
ELLA POINTE

A MATCH *for*
A BOOKISH BRIDE

A MATCH FOR A BOOKISH BRIDE

THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK TWO

TESS THOMPSON



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*For all the bookish girls in the world. Without books, where
would we be?*

AMELIA

The day my life changed began the same as many others before. A trudge to work on a day in early April through the teeming streets of Boston, gripping the bag with Mr. Pitts's scone between the tips of my nearly frozen fingers. An icy rain stung my cheeks. Gusts of cold air crept up my skirt. Most of the snow had melted, leaving the sidewalks muddy. Chunks of dirty snow were the last reminders of the blizzards that had whipped through Boston for most of February.

By the time I arrived at the office building, a ramshackle dwelling in a tawdry part of town, I felt chilled to the very depths of my bones. Averting my eyes from the women who worked the corner and the beggar asleep under the awning of the neighboring business, I unlocked the entrance with my key and then shoved the creaky door open with my shoulder.

A dank, mildewy smell greeted me in the chilly room. My instinct was to keep my overcoat on, but I dutifully hung it on the hook, smoothed my skirt, and straightened my once white but now more of a dingy gray blouse. With quick movements motivated by cold and the knowledge that Mr. Pitts would have his eye on the clock and dock my pay if I was late with his coffee, I lit a fire in the woodstove, set water on to boil, and scooped grounds into the percolator.

The scone he wanted every morning was from a bakery shop about four blocks from our building. Betsy, the baker's daughter, always had it ready for me, even though Mr. Pitts wasn't always expeditious in paying his monthly tab. She did it for me, knowing what a curmudgeon I worked for ever since

the day I'd cried in front of her and told her about the harsh reprimand I'd received the day before. The shop had run out of scones by the time I'd arrived, so I'd brought a hot bun instead. From that day forward, Becky always had Mr. Pitts's scone set aside and packaged for my seven-thirty pickup. Some days, she slipped a little scrap in for me, but only if her father wasn't watching.

After the water boiled, I poured it over the grounds in the top part of the coffee maker. A large portion of my training during my first day had been about how to brew the perfect cup. It wasn't as easy as I would have imagined. He had a lot of steps that must be followed exactly. By now, I could do the whole process without thinking. I arranged his cup and scone on a tray the way he liked. He'd also spent longer than I'd ever thought possible going over exactly how he liked his morning meal set on the tray—the cup to the far right and the plate in the middle, with a folded cloth napkin between them.

Although I'd had a breakfast of pasty oatmeal at the boardinghouse, my mouth watered at the buttery smell of the pastry. All winter my stomach had felt empty and my hands and feet cold. *Come now*, I told myself sternly. There was no reason to feel sorry for myself. I had a job and a dry place to sleep. I was luckier than many, I thought, as I rapped my knuckles against the doorframe. A flake of paint floated to the floor as I did so.

I received no response, other than the phlegmy clearing of Mr. Pitts's throat. He was forever clearing it or coughing or blowing his nose. His ailments were especially bad in the spring. Regardless, I took it as an invitation to speak. "I have your breakfast, Mr. Pitts. May I come in?" I opened the door a crack.

Behind his desk, he was bent over the morning newspaper. Only his shiny bald head greeted me. "Good morning, sir." I waited for him to acknowledge me before setting down the tray. I'd learned that lesson well enough.

Nothing. Silence except for the tapping of his foot against the wood floor. He was displeased with me. What had I done?

I swallowed and drew in a quick breath for fortification. “I have your coffee.”

Mr. Pitts turned the page of the newspaper open on his desk to the Help Wanted section. A hint?

“Sir?” I shifted weight between one foot and the other, pressing the tray against my waist. What had I done to anger him? My gaze swept the small, dark office. Everything was where it should be. His books on finance that I’d never seen him actually open were dusted and placed in alphabetical order. A decanter of whiskey and a glass for his midday drink were on the round table under the slit of a dirty window. Dirty on the outside, mind you. Inside, I cleaned once a week. The stack of correspondence I’d typed the day before waited for his signature. “The scone looks excellent this morning. Not like yesterday’s one at all.” He’d not liked the one I’d brought him the day before. Too dense. “No flakiness whatsoever,” he’d said accusingly. As if I’d cooked it myself. I knew little of his personal life, other than he was unmarried and lived with his elderly mother. Since I was required to bring his breakfast and lunch, it appeared they had no cook. What did his mother eat? I imagined her as a frail woman wrapped in an old quilt waiting for his return, hoping for a warm supper. Perhaps a little projection on my part, given my obsession with my next meal. Anyway, it was none of my concern. Still, I was curious about his life outside of these walls. That’s the way I’d always been. As curious as a cat, my mother had said about me. Curiosity wasn’t always a good quality. I’d learned that lesson from Mr. Pitts, too.

He looked up, a sheen on his wide forehead glistening in the lamplight. Perpetually overheated despite the frigid temperature of the room, his fat cheeks were the same pink as his balding scalp. This morning, he’d taken off his suit jacket, and his white shirt stretched against his rotund belly, leaving gaps between the buttons. I hoped to God one of them didn’t pop off and hit me in the eye. At least he wore an undershirt. I’d never seen him without his clothes, thankfully, but I imagined his stomach looked very much like the top of his doughy head, pink with a few wiry hairs clinging on for dear life.

“You’re late, Miss Young.” He had the kind of voice that made me think of the glutinous jelly left over after a roast had gone cold in its pan.

I wasn’t late. In fact, I was a few minutes early. I kept that to myself. I’d learned on my very first day eighteen months ago that Mr. Pitts was never wrong. I, apparently, was never right. The bakery had not been as busy as most mornings, and I’d gotten in and out faster than usual, giving me ample time to make the coffee. Mr. Pitts had told me during our initial interview that I would be required to light the fire and make coffee for him every morning, and therefore I shouldn’t dawdle with my female nonsense. “Although you don’t seem the type to fuss over your appearance. A lost cause, now isn’t it, with that red hair and pasty skin of yours.” My quick temper had flared at the comment about my hair. I hated it when people talked about my hair, as it was almost always derogatory in some way. I’d pushed my feelings as far down as possible. I’d desperately needed this job. I still did, for that matter.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Every part of me despises you. You’re a flea. A blight on the world, especially mine. Sometimes it helped if I talked to him silently.

“For God’s sake, don’t just stand there opening and closing your mouth like a fish out of water. Set down my breakfast. I’ve never known a heavier breather—Miss Young—than you.” His pronunciation of my name was elongated, as if he found me astonishingly irritating.

Heavy breather? This was a new complaint. I’d not known my breathing offended him. I would have to hold my breath from now on when I came into his office. I’d have to take the risk that I might faint dead away. Getting fired for breathing would put me out on the street. The boardinghouse might not be ideal, yet it was better than a cold alley.

The newspaper, unfolded as it was, took up most of the desk. This was unusual. Most mornings he’d already read the paper by the time I arrived, and it was cast aside for me to dispose of. He didn’t know I took it home every evening. Had he known how much I looked forward to reading the news of

the day in the candlelight of my room, he would have surely tossed it into the trash bin.

Was I to set the tray on the paper? No, that would make it so he couldn't finish reading whatever had captured his attention. That would surely make him angry. Angrier. I took in another breath, forgetting my pact against breathing, and lifted only the cup and saucer from the tray and set it on the top corner of the left page. However, I was unsteady, given my nervousness, and coffee spilled over the brim of the cup into the saucer and onto the newspaper.

With a swiftness I didn't know he possessed, Mr. Pitts swept his arm over the desk, knocking everything to the floor. The cup and saucer shattered at my feet. What remained of the coffee splashed my skirt.

I swallowed hard, willing myself not to cry. Secretarial college had not taught a course on terrible employers. It should have, given what I knew from my first job.

My mother had often said one's fortune could change at any moment. "You must always have hope, Amelia." Her words often came to me during the darkest moments, giving me strength and courage. Lately, though, I wondered if it was wise to dream of a better life. I suspected optimism was a cruel and fickle mistress. Wasn't it better to accept one's fate than to yearn for someone else's life? If only my mother were still alive, I could have asked her.

It was only at night in my room at the boardinghouse that I felt relief from the hardness of my life. I could read then. The lending library and the stacks of books were my salvation.

Not knowing what to do with the tray, I dropped it heavily onto the dry part of the newspaper and knelt to pick up the shards and jagged pieces of china. One particularly sharp piece pierced my thumb, and blood dripped onto my skirt. My only skirt.

Mr. Pitts jerked to his feet and yanked the damp newspaper out from under the tray. "You're the most worthless girl I've ever met." He rolled the paper the way I'd once seen someone

do before whipping their poor dog with it and hurled it at me. “You’re fired. Take the trash with you.”

Instinctively, I’d caught the paper and now held it against my chest. The smell of coffee filled my nose. Fired? I gulped. Should I beg? No. If I had to live on the street, so be it. I would not ask for anything more from this horrible man. “I want my pay.” I glared at him, then held out my hand. “Now. Or I go to the police.”

“The police don’t care about you.” Regardless if that were true or not, he reached into his desk and pulled out what amounted to a week’s wages. Which didn’t include today. But I didn’t argue. I just wanted out of there. I would figure it out later.

I stumbled to my desk and set the paper there while I reached for my coat. That’s when I saw it. Displayed right there in the fold for me to see. The advertisement for a secretary.

Seeking secretary for family business. Candidate must be willing to relocate to a remote island off the coast of Washington state. Skills needed: typing, shorthand, writing and grammar skills, basic math, and a book lover. Must be under thirty years old, unmarried, a book lover, and able to be flexible as well as organized.

Book lover? Well, if it wasn’t the exact description of me, I didn’t know what was. A frisson of excitement coursed through my body. Could this be the change I needed? I knew nothing of Washington state, other than it rained a lot there. Warm rain seemed preferable to my current situation. For in Washington, there was no Mr. Pitts. Here in Boston, there was no Mr. Pitts for me now that he’d fired me, I reminded myself.

Please, God, open this new door for me if it’s your will.

BENEDICT

The numbers swam around the page. I could not focus. Could not grasp anything I saw before me. My mind jumped from thing to thing and never landed back on the papers that covered my desk. I was in the wrong life. Born into the wrong family. Given the wrong job.

I could not make sense of the financial statement. Not me. A bird tweeted from a tree outside. By the window, dust danced in a streak of sunlight. Footsteps in the hallway outside the library drew my attention. Who could it be? Maybe Dexter bringing tea? My eyes dwelled next on the bookshelves, filled with stories I could barely read.

Why had Father done this to me? Several months ago, he'd been murdered coming home from his Friday night poker game. In an instant, everything had changed. I was now president of the company he'd spent his life building. Only now it would be destroyed because of my stupidity. I'd hated him most of the time, but I did agree with him. I was born an idiot, barely able to get through primary school, let alone run a company. Either of my brothers would have been the better choice. My sister would have been the best choice of all. Instead, in one final blow, he'd named me the president. The very last thing I'd have ever wanted.

A knocking pulled me from my tumbleweed thoughts. "Come in."

Briggs, my youngest brother, poked his head around the door. "Have time for a chat?"

“Always for you.” My brother was home at last. No longer shunned. Now that my father was gone, he could stay here and paint instead of living as a refugee in Seattle. Father hadn’t wanted him to pursue his painting. He thought by kicking him out of the family that Briggs would come around. He underestimated my brother’s stubborn independence.

He poured himself a glass of whiskey and plopped into one of the leather chairs. A quick glance at the clock told me it was mid-morning. “A little early, don’t you think?”

“Never too early for whiskey or women.” Briggs gestured with his glass in a mock toast. “Cheers. You’re looking as glum as I’ve ever seen you.”

“It’s all of this. What has he done to me?” I picked up a piece of paper and waved it at him. “Leaving this to me? Why wasn’t it Hudson?”

“I don’t know.” Briggs crossed one leg over the other. He’d been out with his favorite horse and was still in his riding attire, tan pants tucked into his tall boots and a long jacket with an ascot around his neck. Nice-looking, my brother, with his light chestnut hair and intelligent blue eyes. Like the best horse you’ve ever seen. Long legs and a lithe physique. I was more of a bull to his sleek Thoroughbred stallion. We looked nothing alike. I had almost black hair and dark blue eyes and was built wide and thick.

Another difference between us? Briggs was a charmer with the ladies whereas I could barely speak to any of them other than my sister and mother. Briggs had a wit, too—clever with a joke. Despite his outgoing personality, he never missed a detail. Visual talent, I supposed.

“The old man’s dead. I thought we could live in peace.” Briggs touched the scar on his forehead where our father had once smashed him into a wall. “But it seems he’s haunting us from the grave.”

“How’s he haunting you? You’re home now where you belong. Painting whatever you want instead of portraits of ugly rich men.”

“I meant the collective we. I’m always on your side.” Briggs grinned. “It’s always been you and me, brother. I’ll never let you down.”

“I know. As long as there’s not a woman involved,” I said, teasing.

“I’ve given up women. Haven’t I told you? They’re nothing but trouble.” One eyebrow shot up. “You won’t believe what happened to me last week.”

“I probably will believe it,” I said. “Knowing you.”

“It wasn’t my fault this time.”

Before he could tell me more, another knock on the door revealed Hudson. Surprised to see him, I stood. He rarely left his wing of the house these days. I watched him, looking for signs that he wanted to take my job. How I wished he would. If only he would insist on taking the helm of the family shipbuilding business and demand I leave it all to him. However, I saw none of that in his brown eyes. The Hudson he used to be would have wanted it. He’d been ambitious and interested in business. Until Rosemary died. After that, he seemed to care about little, keeping to himself like a dog licking his wound.

“Everything all right?” Briggs asked, standing as well.

The smallest of the three of us, Hudson took after our father in appearance, dark and compact. But the similarities stopped there. My brother was the studious type, quiet and steady, without a smidge of our father’s temper or cruelty. He’d never do to Bebe what Father had done to us. Well, to Briggs and me. Hudson and Ella had been spared the dungeon. That was only for the two misfits. The artist and the idiot.

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’m sorry to interrupt,” Hudson said. “But I was wondering if either of you have seen Bebe. She’s run off.”

Bebe. Another one of our family’s problems. A mischievous little demon in the body of an adorable five-year-old girl. Hudson’s wife, Rosemary, had died from influenza when Bebe was only a toddler. My brother was raising her

alone, with some help from my mother. Lately, though, we'd all been distracted. The murder of our patriarch had consumed all of our thoughts. Which had made Bebe even more of a terror.

Just as I thought that, I saw her streak across the driveway, wearing her nightgown and boots. Even from this distance, I could see that her hair was tangled. What had happened?

"There she is." I pointed out the window.

"The little beast," Hudson muttered under his breath. "She refused to get dressed and then tricked me and ran away."

"Tricked you how?" Briggs asked.

"She locked me in the bathroom." Hudson's thick eyebrows came together. "I'm not sure what to do about her. She's gotten worse."

"Since Father's death," I said. "I've noticed too."

"I think she actually misses the bastard," Hudson said. "Making her the only one who does."

"Do you think we'll ever know who killed him?" I asked.

"I saw Sheriff White when I was out earlier," Briggs said. "He seems to think it was one of us."

"Why? What did he say?" I asked.

"Just a feeling I got from him," Briggs said. "More than anything he said."

"I think it was one of the poker players," Hudson said. "They all had reasons to want him gone."

"Well, we'll know eventually," Briggs said. "And I didn't do it, by the way."

"Nor I," Hudson said.

I didn't say anything, too busy watching Bebe. "Look at this."

The three of us gathered around the window. Bebe was now using a rake as a pretend horse, galloping toward the fountain that served as a watering hole for our horses. Her

skinny bare legs were pink from the cold. “She’ll catch her death out there,” I said.

“I know,” Hudson said, sounding weary. “Mother thinks I should get a nanny. I agree, but where do you find one who could deal with that?” He tapped his finger against the glass.

Our Model T, driven by our sister, Ella, rumbled up the driveway. She parked. Obviously, she’d spotted Bebe and her pretend horse. She marched over to where the little girl was tilting the rake into the water. That made sense. Horses need water. I stifled a smile.

Ella, tall and strong like the rest of us, despite being of the female persuasion. Traipsing around the island on foot carrying her medical bag did that to a woman. She hauled Bebe over her shoulder and carried her across the driveway. Bebe kicked and flailed about, but she had no chance against her aunt. Soon, they disappeared, followed by the sound of the front door slamming.

“How is it Ella can do that, but I can’t?” Hudson asked. “I’m an utter failure.”

“Ella delivers cows in addition to human babies on a regular basis,” Briggs said, obviously trying to make Hudson feel better. “She’s used to beasts who wriggle.”

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, having given up on work, I walked the crescent beach that ran along the bank of our property. Above me, the estate loomed white and pretty on the hillside. Drizzle dampened my face. The air smelled of Puget Sound. Today the water was as gray as the sky. Close to shore, fog floated just above the water like a loosely knit wool blanket. Beyond, though, I could see several of the rocks sticking out of the water like the backs of turtles. Above me, several seagulls screeched in protest of something. Perhaps me?

Being outside usually cleared my mind, albeit briefly. Upon my return to the blasted desk, I would once again feel the tightness at my throat and the clenching of my belly.

Unless a miracle happened, I was chained to the office now, struggling to make sense of a business I had no connection to, other than it had made my family very rich. I sighed and turned to go back to my prison.

Ella stood at the edge of the cliff. She lifted her hand to wave at me, and I did the same as I headed up the dirt trail to the lawn that overlooked the water. By the time I'd reached the lawn, Ella had moved to stand on the wide porch that ran the length of the house. I stomped up the stairs, grinning at the sight of my sister. She sat in one of the rocking chairs, and her dark hair had come undone and was flapping around her pink cheeks. My sister's sapphire eyes and fair skin were stunning against her dark hair. She wore a plain skirt and blouse covered by a wool sweater. She'd been out all night, helping deliver Mary Smith's third baby.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" I asked, leaning to kiss her cheek.

"I wanted some fresh air first." She stifled a yawn behind an ungloved hand. My sister wasn't much for formalities. "Mother wants to see you in the living room."

My stomach clenched. What did she want now? To go over the numbers again? What purpose did that serve? I couldn't make sense of any of it. All these numbers listed in a ledger that swam before my eyes. Why couldn't I stay outside and chop wood? That's what I'd done yesterday afternoon. The slight ache in my muscles reminded me that I'd perhaps overdone it.

"How is Mrs. Smith?" I asked, wrapping myself around one of the posts.

"She's well. Fat baby boy. They named him Isaiah."

"Nice name," I mumbled, thinking of my mother waiting inside. "I should probably go in."

"Yes, probably."

"How did Mother seem?"

"A little better, I think. Not quite so pinched around the mouth," Ella said. "But it's hard to say with her, you know."

“Yes, I do know.” I excused myself and went into the house, taking off my coat and hat and giving them to Dexter, our butler of sorts. He was not a true butler, he often reminded me, because he was an American and not properly schooled in the ways of the English butler. Whatever we called him, he was indispensable to us, running the estate with an easy grace that I found bewildering.

“Your mother’s waiting by the fireplace,” Dexter said. “I had the cook brew a fresh pot of coffee, and she sent up some cookies as well.”

I smiled. Dexter knew how much I enjoyed sweets in the afternoon. “Thank you.”

Mother was sitting in her favorite chair by the fire. Our hearth was made from limestone imported from somewhere or other. Father never ceased to tell whoever was around the entire story. He’d loved to present himself as above everyone else. I’d cringed every time we had a new visitor who had to endure the tour around the house. Tours that took a while. There were two wings in either direction, with Hudson and Bebe taking up one end and my mother the other. Ella, Briggs, and I had rooms in the middle of the house, down the hall from our music room and the library, where I now worked. Father had spent a lot of time in Seattle, but much of the work could be done from here. It was my understanding that the manager in Seattle ran the factory well. He would have had to, or Father would have fired him. That gave me a little peace of mind, but not a lot.

Mother was dressed in black. A small, frail woman, she was still pretty despite being in her fifties. Too young to be a widow. Although in her case, it must be a relief. She no longer had to worry that her husband would hurt her for some small infraction.

“Dearest, come in.” She gestured toward the chair opposite hers. As promised, a coffeepot and a plate of cookies were on the table.

“Hello, Mother.” I kissed her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Just fine.” She gave me a tentative smile.

I poured myself a coffee, grateful for the warmth, and sat. “Did you want to see me about something?”

She lifted her gaze to the fire and then over to me. “I have an idea.”

I braced myself. What was it? Had she convinced Hudson to take over the family affairs? That had to be it. She was probably worried I would lose our fortune. Humiliated and warm suddenly from shame, I told myself it was probably for the best. I was a failure. Father had been right to call me stupid. I’d never done anything to prove him wrong.

“Have you spoken with Hudson? Has he agreed to take my place?” I asked in a rush.

She shook her head before taking a sip from her coffee. “No, he’s not up to it. Sadness has him by the tail.”

I briefly closed my eyes, thinking about the house I was building for myself on another part of the island. It had been my plan to move away from this house and live how I wanted. Grow a garden and have a few animals. Just me. But now that Father was dead, I was needed here. For the time being, anyway.

“I think we should hire an assistant for you,” Mother said.

“An assistant? Like a secretary?”

“Yes, exactly. Someone clever with sums and who can write well. You can instruct them what to do, and they will carry it out.”

Again, my old enemy shame made me hot and flushed. She was right. It would solve a lot of problems. Namely, that I was totally incompetent. “What about our privacy?”

“That’s something we have to let go of, I suppose. If we hire the right person, it won’t matter.”

“Where do we find this secretary? No one on the island is qualified. That I know of, anyway.”

“I’ve engaged a clever staffing expert back in Boston. She’s written to me with a viable candidate for the position.”

“What? Already? You did it without speaking with me first?”

“I thought you might say no,” Mother said without meeting my gaze.

I breathed out, then set aside my coffee. “I’ll go along with whatever you want.”

“It’s not because you’re not capable.”

“But it is.”

“You’re going to do well. With a little help. The detail work can be done by someone else. Think of how freeing it will be. You won’t be tied to the desk all day. An assistant will take care of things and compensate for your little issues.”

“Little issues?” I barked out a bitter laugh. “They’re more than little. Regardless, I agree. I should have thought of it myself.”

“We’ve all been overwhelmed, dearest. None of this is your fault.”

This clever assistant would be my way out. He could do the work, and I would simply be the figurehead, steering strategy but without the headache of all the minutiae.

My mother withdrew her hand from the cookie plate, obviously changing her mind about a treat. “Mrs. Mantle—that’s the name of the woman back east—she said she thinks she can find the perfect person for us.”

“Will this ease your mind?” I asked.

“More than you can know. Not because I don’t believe in you, darling, but because I hate to see you frustrated and sad. This was supposed to be our new chance for happiness.”

“What was?” I asked.

“Your father’s death. Finally, we’re free. I don’t want us to waste another moment sad or afraid. All right?”

“Yes, Mother.” I reached over to take her hand in mine. “If you think this is best, then so do I.”

“There’s something else I want to tell you about,” Mother said, abruptly changing the subject. “In case something happens to me and so that you understand part of the financial picture before the assistant comes.”

“Mother, nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“I hope not. But I still think it’s wise that I keep you abreast of what I know. Your father had his thumb on more people than just his family. People who might have wanted him dead.”

“The poker players?” I asked. “What do you know?”

“Timothy Bains was run out of his church back east after a girl in the congregation accused him of taking advantage of her. He lost his wife and child over it. Roland said he was innocent and that he’d been framed. That’s why he offered him the position here.”

“That’s not a motive.”

“I suppose not,” Mother said. “Other than he might like to be out from under your father’s control. Roland told him what to do, and Timothy felt he had no choice but to do it. Even when it tested his morality.”

“As in?”

“Timothy has been responsible for keeping your father’s mistresses secret, including sneaking them here to the island on the boat.”

My stomach churned. “I’m sorry, Mother.”

“It’s all right. I knew about them anyway.”

She went on to tell me that Caleb King, our teacher, had fallen in love with one of his students and been sent away. “Your father pays him a pittance, and he’s stuck here.”

Michael Moon, our dry goods owner, had embezzled money from his employer. “Roland gave him the shop to run but took fifty percent of the profits. The same is true for

Matthew Goodwell. Your father took half of everything in exchange for giving him the pub when no one else would have taken a chance on him.”

“What did Goodwell do?” I asked. All these men were trapped by Father, just as I’d been as a child. Perhaps I still was.

“He was accused of burning down the bar he worked for. Roland said he was innocent. Regardless, your father helped himself to the profits.

“There’s Sheriff White, too,” Mother said. “Apparently, he’d fallen in love with a female prisoner accused of killing her husband and helped her escape. They’d not been able to pin it on him, but the damage to his reputation meant he was out of law enforcement in Seattle.”

“All in all,” Mother said, “these five men have something to gain from Roland’s death.”

“As I said to the sheriff the day we buried Father, there isn’t a person on this island who isn’t a suspect, including all of us.”

“Well, none of us did it.” Mother’s eyes widened. “You don’t really think any of us capable of killing, do you?”

“Not really. Regardless, it’s true that none of us are sad he’s gone.”

If Father had wanted to leave a legacy, he had done so. Only a murder mystery with a dozen suspects wasn’t what he had in mind. That I knew with certainty.

AMELIA

The weather was frigid, creeping up under my long, tattered coat and between the holes in my wool stockings. I'd been cold since early November and weary of the short, dark days. With weather like this, it didn't seem like spring would ever come when it was only weeks away. A new snowstorm had blown in over the water, bringing icy wind and hard, mean flakes of snow.

I shuffled along the frigid street toward the address listed in the advertisement, clutching the coffee-dampened newspaper between my cold fingers, wishing my gloves were not so thin. The ad had listed her name and address, asking that we apply for the position in person. *I mustn't act too desperate*, I thought. Even though I was. The wages in my pocket would last a week. After that, I would not be able to pay my rent or eat.

I reached Mrs. Mantle's office, located in a grand brick building on a busy street. Unsure what to do, I peered in through the window. A pretty woman with a mound of yellow hair sat behind a desk. She was bending over something I could not see; her mouth appeared to be moving, as if she were reading out loud. Another woman stood in front of a roaring fire in the hearth, warming her hands. I could almost feel the relief that heat would bring.

I tapped the iron knocker and waited, holding my breath. Would they send me away? Was it too late? Maybe they'd already hired someone? I always seemed just shy of success. Not from lack of trying, mind you. With dogged hard work,

I'd managed to stay alive after the death of my poor mother. Only eighteen when she died three years ago, I'd been devastated. How could I survive without her love and support? With no skills with which to earn a living, my prospects were not good. Mother had been adamant I stay in school, even though it would have helped us financially if I'd taken a job instead. I'd only just graduated from high school when I woke one morning to find that she'd died in her sleep. Always frail, she'd grown so thin in the months before her death that it shouldn't have surprised me. Yet it did. I'd been devastated. My only solace was the small savings she'd put aside for me to attend secretarial school. I'd sold what I could in our apartment, knowing I could not keep up with the rent and attend classes at the same time, and moved to the boardinghouse. Fortunately, through the grace of God, I'd done well at school. I wasn't the fastest typist among my classmates, but speedy enough to pass easily. However, I excelled in writing, grammar, and shorthand. Not that I condoned bragging, but I was the best in my class in all three.

The door swung open and a small, dark-haired woman with an angelic heart-shaped face and large eyes smiled kindly at me. "May I help you?"

"I'm here about the job." I was so nervous my voice sounded dry and raspy.

"Which one would that be?"

"The secretary. Washington state," I said, holding up the newspaper. "Here in the paper." Could I sound more idiotic?

"Oh, yes. Come in. I'm Heidi." She held open the door, and I walked into the warm, cozy room that smelled of cinnamon, butter, and apples. Was a pie baking nearby? My stomach rumbled. The room was like a hug. A blue rug covered shiny wood floors. The fireplace was made of white marble that matched the white wainscoting and pink flowered wallpaper. A room for a woman. Not at all what I'd expected from a business establishment. I'd love to spend every day here.

I took in the tall woman standing up from behind the wide mahogany desk. She wore an expensive wool gown in a dark purple that complemented her sharp blue eyes. Her hair, the color of late-autumn grass, was swept in a sophisticated twist at the nape of her neck. She possessed an elegance that hinted at a fine pedigree. I shrank, intimidated. Was this a mistake? Would she see right through me? See that I was not meant for a fine life working for a rich family? That I was more meant for the Mr. Pitts of the world?

She came around the side of the desk to greet me. “Hello. Welcome. I’m Mrs. Mantle.”

“I’m Amelia Frances Young.” I held out my hand even though my first inclination was to curtsy. Absurd. We were in America, not England. Too many British novels.

“That’s quite a mouthful,” she said.

“My friends call me Amelia.” I flushed, embarrassed. A few drops of sweat developed on the end of my nose despite my earlier chill. I shrugged out of my coat. Would they notice how worn it was?

Heidi came forth and offered to hang it in the closet for me. Mortified by the rips in the lining, I reluctantly handed it over to her.

“Would you like to set the paper aside here by the door?” Heidi asked. “You can take it with you when you go, or we can dispose of it for you.”

“I’d like to take it with me, if you don’t mind. I like to read it at night after supper.”

A look passed between the two women. I wasn’t certain if it was pity or confusion. No matter. I was here for a job, not to be introduced into society.

“Come sit,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Here by the fire where it’s warm. Isn’t April supposed to be the beginning of spring? This weather’s abysmal.”

A shy smile lifted the corners of my mouth. “I was thinking the same thing as I walked here.”

We settled side by side in chairs set before the hearth. The room was dim. Hopefully that would hide the shabbiness of my clothes. Mr. Pitts had commented just last week about my one dress, asking why it was I never wore anything else. I'd wanted to reply with a sassy remark about his stingy wages but managed to bite my tongue. Then he'd said this was the reason he could not include me in any of his business meetings. "You're simply not presentable. Which is a shame because I could really use someone to take notes during my meetings with the Willis brothers. The bastards are always trying to cheat me, you know?" I hadn't known but nodded politely while biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. Feeling shame about one's poverty was nothing new to me. Still, it hurt to be cast aside because my wardrobe wasn't nice enough. How would I ever afford a better one if I continued to work for miserly, mean-spirited men? Yet another reason to be here, I thought, resolving to make a good impression despite my nervousness.

"Tell me about yourself," Mrs. Mantle said. "Heidi and I were about to have tea. May we interest you in a cup and a treat? Our cook makes the most delightful gingersnap cookies."

My stomach growled so loudly I was sure they both heard. "Yes, please. That would be wonderful. Thank you."

Heidi disappeared behind a door. I heard footsteps like someone going up the stairs. Mrs. Mantle must live in the apartment above the office. What a place to live and work. Envy crept up my spine, but I pushed it aside to concentrate on the interview.

"What are you looking for in a position?" Mrs. Mantle asked.

I blinked, taken aback. No one had ever asked me what I wanted. Not in an interview, certainly. "Someone decent to work for would be the highest priority." My voice sounded like a little mouse next to the self-confident Mrs. Mantle, whose tone reminded me of a cello, strong and deep with the perfect vibrato.

“Do you currently have a position?”

“Yes, with Mr. Pitts. He’s an attorney. I did his correspondence and other secretarial duties.” I went on to tell her about my education at secretarial college. “I’ve been working for him since I graduated eighteen months ago.” Except I no longer worked for him. Should I tell her? Yes, always be truthful. My mother had taught me that. “Only I don’t work for him any longer. As of this morning. I was fired.”

Her thin eyebrows raised. “Why did he fire you?”

“I accidentally spilled coffee on his newspaper.” I winced, remembering how he’d knocked everything onto the floor.

“The newspaper you brought with you?” Mrs. Mantle asked, her lips twitching.

“Yes. It was divine intervention, I think. I saw your advertisement as he was sending me away.”

“Interesting. Do you believe in that kind of thing? Fate and signs from God?”

Again, surprised by the question, I hesitated. “Yes, I do. My mother’s no longer with me, but I get messages from her sometimes.” Why had I told her that? She’d think I should be taken away to the asylum.

But to my surprise, she said, “Yes. I hear from my husband who passed. Usually in a dream. He told me to open this business.”

“He did?”

“Yes, and I must tell you, having meaningful work has helped my grief more than I would have thought possible. I’m sure that’s what Daniel had in mind when he suggested it.”

“I simply need a job for the money,” I blurted out.

She looked slightly abashed. “How insensitive of me. I apologize. You need a job to survive, not give your life meaning.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you have a husband or any children?”

“No. It’s only me. Thank goodness. I can barely feed myself.”

“I remember those days.”

This woman surprised me at every turn. “You do?” How could a fancy woman like this have had days like mine?

“Before I married Mr. Mantle, I was nearly destitute. As a child, I worked for my mother. She was a washwoman. My job was to pick up dirty bags of laundry and return them clean and pressed.”

“Well, that’s...” I had no idea what to say. It was hard to believe the lady sitting next to me had ever had any troubles at all. “But you seem so grand.”

“I wasn’t always this way. Elocution and etiquette lessons served me well.” She gestured around the office. “They helped me be the kind of wife Daniel needed, and now I use them in my work.”

“Do you fill a lot of positions?” I asked.

“Yes, in a matter of speaking.”

Heidi appeared with a tray containing a teapot with steam rising from the spout and a plate piled high with what looked like small square ham-and-cheese sandwiches. My stomach growled again. Goodness, how embarrassing.

“Would you care for cream and sugar in your tea?” Heidi asked, leaning over to take the teapot in hand.

I didn’t answer, assuming she was speaking to Mrs. Mantle.

“Miss Young?” Mrs. Mantle asked, prompting me. “What do you like in your tea?”

“Oh, you mean me? Yes, please. Anything you have is fine. Or whatever’s convenient. A hot cup of tea will be most welcome.” Most welcome? I sounded like an empty-headed simpleton. I was trying too hard as usual. Always so willing to please. *Desperate* to please. As if this attitude would help me.

It hadn't so far. Instead of rewarding me for my work ethic and desire for compliments, Mr. Pitts seemed to delight in taking advantage of my eagerness to do well.

The tea was served in dainty china cups with pink roses painted on the sides and a saucer so thin I was afraid I would break it in two. I took a sip. It was brewed perfectly, strong with just the right amount of sugar. "This is delicious. Thank you." I set the cup and saucer carefully down on the coffee table. My movements were jerky even when I wasn't nervous. I moved too fast and knocked things over all the time. Mother used to tease me that I was always in too much of a hurry. She was right. I needed to slow down and breathe. However, pushing forward harder than everyone else had served me well in school. I had the sense that if I didn't try harder and go faster than everyone else, I would be left behind. Girls like me weren't given opportunities often. Any time I got one, I rushed toward it. Regardless, I mustn't repeat my mistake of earlier in the day and spill tea all over Mrs. Mantle's beautiful decor.

"You're welcome," Heidi said. "Mrs. Mantle loves her tea and sandwiches this time of day."

"Indeed I do," Mrs. Mantle said, reaching for one of the dainty sandwiches and setting it on one of the smaller plates with the same pink roses painted on the edges. "Aren't you hungry, Miss Young?"

"Always," I said without thinking.

Heidi smiled kindly once again, almost indulgently, as if I were a charming but somewhat dense child. "Have as many as you like. The cook always makes too many. We often have them for supper too."

"We're incorrigible that way," Mrs. Mantle said, grinning. "Since my husband died, it seems supper has become less and less important. Perhaps it's only men who care so much for supper?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I've no father or brothers with whom to compare."

"When did you lose your mother?" Mrs. Mantle asked.

“She passed away when I was eighteen.”

“And how old are you now?” Mrs. Mantle’s blue eyes fixed on my face, as if she were trying to guess.

“I’m twenty-one. Just turned last month, actually.”

“Ah, to be young again,” Mrs. Mantle said.

“You’re not old, Mrs. Mantle.” Heidi tossed several more logs onto the fire and then joined us around the table, helping herself to tea and sandwiches. This was not how I was treated at Mr. Pitts’s, that was for certain. I knew no other secretaries or assistants who sat down for a meal with their boss. “I keep telling her this, but she doesn’t listen,” Heidi said to me.

Mrs. Mantle tapped her temple. “Unfortunately, in here, I’m a hundred years old.”

“Grief does that to a person,” I said again without thinking.

“I’ve found this to be true.” Mrs. Mantle nodded. “As much as Heidi would like to see me married again, I’ve no interest in engaging with another man. No one would compare to my Daniel. He was one of a kind.”

This was a strange interview, I thought. Tea, questions, and information from my hostess that seemed irrelevant to whether I would be a good secretary or not. I quite liked it. Was it that I was so deprived of love that I would take it wherever it came? I suppose so. It wasn’t a crime, I reminded myself, to crave attention. I took the first mouthwatering bite of sandwich. My goodness, what had they done to the cheese to make it so soft? This was the best sandwich I’d ever had in my life.

“Have another?” Mrs. Mantle lifted the plate in my direction, and I took two more. If I didn’t get the position, at least I would go home with a full stomach.

“Thank you. These are very good.” I dabbed at my chin with one of the perfectly ironed white tea napkins folded neatly into a rectangle. Mrs. Mantle’s initials were embroidered into one corner. How quaint and pretty they were.

“Shall I tell you more about the position?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“Yes, please.” I wiped away a wayward crumb from the corner of my mouth.

“The client is in need of a secretary with both skills and discretion. He lives on an island off Puget Sound called Whale Island. Isn’t that a delightful name?”

“Yes, ma’am. Are there whales there?” I asked, worried. I’d only just read *Moby Dick*, and I had no intention of making friends with any whales. “Do they come to shore?”

“I don’t believe so. But I do think they migrate through sometime during the year. I’m not sure when, now that you ask.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I waved my hand in front of my chest. “It’s neither here nor there.”

Mrs. Mantle nodded. “Mr. Benedict Tutheridge is the name of my client. He’s only recently been given the responsibility of his father’s shipbuilding company. The elder Mr. Tutheridge passed away.”

“How sad,” I mumbled, mostly to myself, knowing what it was like to mourn a parent.

“Benedict Tutheridge, from all accounts, is a gentle soul, not necessarily possessing the best disposition for business. He’d rather be outdoors, from what I hear. It’s beautiful on the island, with a lot of trees and beautiful views of Puget Sound. Mild temperatures in comparison to here.”

“Doesn’t it rain a lot?” I asked.

“Yes, apparently that’s why it’s so green there.”

I nodded. That made sense.

“Is rain a problem for you?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“What? No, not at all. It’s this bitter wind I take umbrage with.”

She laughed. “I agree.”

“Thank you?” I don’t know why it came out as a question, but it did.

“Anyway, Mr. Tutheridge has a rather unique problem. There’s something wrong with his eyes, making it difficult for him to read and write.”

“That’s awful,” I said. “How can one survive without reading?”

“Yes, exactly. And sadly, he delights in stories,” Mrs. Mantle said. “He needs someone who can be his hands and eyes, so to speak. Correspondence and such.”

“I happen to be an expert reader,” I said. “I noticed you were looking for someone who liked reading in the advertisement. The moment I saw that I knew I had to apply.”

“Very good. And how do you feel about moving all the way across the country? To a somewhat remote island, no less.”

“I feel fine about it. There’s nothing for me here. No family or ties of any kind. I’d think of it as an adventure.” Something troubling niggled at me nonetheless. “How remote is this island? Are there any people on it besides Mr. Tutheridge?”

Mrs. Mantle explained that the Tutheridge family had made their immense fortune in the shipping industry as well as in the railway. Apparently, Mr. Tutheridge had fallen in love with the small island and had a mansion built there for his wife and their four children. He’d enticed merchants and other professionals to move as well, building a small community in a short span of time.

“It’s a boat ride from Seattle, so not completely cut off from society,” Mrs. Mantle said. “The population is small on the island, primarily made up of the town of Ella Pointe, named after the elder Mr. Tutheridge’s only daughter, Ella.”

How nice for her, I thought. To have a father who adored you enough to name a whole town after you. “Does Benedict Tutheridge have a wife?” I don’t know what made me ask this, but somehow it seemed important to know. Mr. Pitts had no wife, which made him cranky and isolated. Or, at least, that was my guess about why he was such a foul man.

“No, he’s young. In his twenties.” Mrs. Mantle glanced away as she said this, almost as if she had something to hide.

No, don’t be paranoid, I told myself. This is an interview.

“None of the Tutheridge children are married,” Mrs. Mantle said. “They’re all a little lost after the death of the senior Mr. Tutheridge.”

“I can understand. I was the same after I lost my mother. I never knew my father. He died when I was a baby.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I had only my mother, too,” Mrs. Mantle said.

Our eyes locked for a moment. An understanding passed between us over this shared circumstance. “Mrs. Tutheridge, the widow, is a lovely woman devoted to her children. They all live together in the big mansion. You would have a room there as well, so you wouldn’t have to worry about housing.”

“Nice,” I said. “Will it be heated?”

Her brow creased. “I believe so. I never thought to ask. Do you not have heat where you live now?”

“The boardinghouse is cold and damp during the winter and hot and muggy in the summer. Not that I’m complaining. I’m lucky to have a roof over my head.”

“Luckier if there was heat,” Mrs. Mantle said drily.

“Yes, that would be a luxury,” I said.

We chatted for a few more minutes, mostly me answering questions about my life, none of which seemed particularly relevant to the position, but I didn’t mind. Actually, I loved talking about myself. No one ever asked me questions or seemed the least bit curious to know anything about my life. Here with Mrs. Mantle and Heidi, I described in detail my experience with Mr. Pitts, how he screamed at me daily and that it was impossible to please him. It wasn’t until I’d told her all this that I realized she might interpret this as a problem in my performance. Now what would I say? If I backed up, it might make me look even guiltier.

“Mr. Pitts sounds like a terrible man,” Heidi said. “I have a good friend who works for someone similar. It’s awful for her. All the screaming and gnashing of teeth.”

I stifled a giggle. “Yes, Mr. Pitts is a teeth gnasher as well.”

“Such a shame that people have to act that way,” Mrs. Mantle said. “It’s scandalous. But anyway, regarding the position. How soon would you be ready to move?”

I shrugged as hope rose in me. Would she really consider me for the job? “I could be ready whenever you wanted me to go.”

“And it doesn’t give you pause to think of moving all the way there?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“It does give me pause,” I said. “But not enough to turn down the opportunity for a new life.”

“If I were to send you, it would be with the understanding that if things didn’t work out, the client would pay for your return to Boston.”

I let out a happy sigh. “That seems more than fair. What else do you think Mr. Tutheridge would need in a secretary?” I went on to tell them about my high marks at secretarial college and how easy writing and shorthand had been for me. “I’d love to be able to use those skills more. Mr. Pitts didn’t trust me to write his correspondence, only to type it all up. However, I could be an asset to a man who had trouble in those areas.” I folded my hands on my lap. “I’m wondering what would be the best approach?”

“To working for him?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“Yes, I’d hate to hurt his pride by being too intrusive.” I didn’t want him to resent me or wish me gone simply because I could do what he couldn’t. Men were driven by pride, I’d noticed. Not only Mr. Pitts but others I’d observed as well.

“I don’t think it will be a problem. From what his mother said in her letter, he’s quite aware of his shortcomings and is grappling with taking over the family business. Of all the sons,

Benedict wasn't the obvious choice for successor. He's quite unsure of himself and would welcome help, I'm sure."

"Does he know his mother is hiring someone for him?" I asked. What if I got there and he turned me away?

"He knows," Mrs. Mantle said. "From what I can discern, Benedict is an unusually sensitive and humble man. I have a good feeling about him."

I nodded. Mrs. Mantle was impressive. She made me feel at ease and confident. I'd liked to have given her control over my entire life. I suspected she would know exactly what to do at all times. Unlike me, who never quite knew what I was doing and questioned all of my decisions. This one, though? This one seemed like an answer to prayer. "A job on a beautiful island and living in a mansion doing work that's useful is a dream come true," I said out loud. "Almost too good to be true."

"That's because good fortune hasn't happened to you that often," Mrs. Mantle said. "You don't realize what's possible when life has been hard. At least that's how it was for me."

"Yes, exactly." Mrs. Mantle understood me. I'd been wrong to be intimidated by her. She was very much like me. Only she'd had good things happen to her.

"There's one thing you should know," Mrs. Mantle said. "As it might factor into your decision."

I waited. What would she say? What could she possibly disclose that would make me wary to take a job that seemed ideal?

"Benedict's father—Roland Tutheridge—his death was not from natural causes. He was murdered. Shot to death as he returned from an evening at the local pub."

"Murdered?"

"From all accounts, there are many people who benefited from his death."

"Oh. Goodness. A lot of suspects then?"

“Including his own family.” Mrs. Mantle picked up her cup and then set it down again before taking a sip. “Mr. Tutheridge was a cruel, violent man, particularly to his wife and children.”

“Do you think one of them murdered him?” My stomach soured. What was I walking into? “Is it dangerous for me to go there?”

“No, I do not believe any of them murdered him, or I wouldn’t send you out there. I also do not think there’s a deranged killer on the loose. This was a personal killing. One that Mr. Tutheridge brought upon himself. Mrs. Tutheridge—Beatrice—has written detailed letters to me about all of her children. I’m a great judge of character, and there’s nothing alarming me. It’s your choice, of course. I wanted you to know all the facts so you could decide for yourself.”

I thought for a moment. Would it be a mistake to go? What if she were mistaken and one of his own children killed him? Perhaps even the man I would be working for? *No, no, this is an opportunity to change your life*, a voice whispered to me. *You must go*. I would listen to the voice. Walking away from this chance would be a mistake. What did I have here? Nothing. Hopefully I wouldn’t be murdered in my sleep. “I’ll take the job if it’s offered to me.”

All of the sandwiches were gone, and the teapot was empty by the time they escorted me to the door. “I’ll be in touch shortly to let you know one way or the other,” Mrs. Mantle said.

Seconds later, I slipped into my thin coat, sorry to leave this cozy, delicious-smelling room and its delightful companions. However, my stomach was full, and I’d grown sleepy. Going out into the cold would be good for me. Whatever came tomorrow, I would meet it head-on, as my mother had taught me.

AMELIA

I stood at the front of the ferryboat and feasted upon the islands. Beauty was everywhere I looked, like something from a picture book with the blue water and trees and the way the ferry chugged into the port. The sunshine was so bright it made my eyes squint. The temperatures were chilly, but I didn't care. I was warm in my new blue wool coat and gloves Mrs. Mantle had ordered for me.

A woman next to me on the ferry had said it was unusual to have such sunny weather in April, but it was hard to imagine given the splendor of this day. As we docked, I spotted blooming pink cherry trees, daffodils, and tulips just beyond the marina. The waters of Puget Sound were still and without waves, not at all what I'd expected. The ocean at home was nothing like the serene water before me.

I pulled my new coat tighter, disembarking with the other passengers. Sun reflected on the water and made the ripples sparkle like hundreds of jewels. Mrs. Mantle had sent me to her dressmaker before I left, insisting that I would make a better first impression if I were not in my tattered clothes. Under my coat, I wore a dark gray traveling suit and a smart hat with a purple feather. In the trunk they'd sent ahead were three new dresses I could wear in the evenings and to church, a half dozen pair of stockings, and another pair of shoes. Two pairs! One for day and one for night. In addition to all that, Mrs. Mantle had suggested several plain black skirts paired with white large-shouldered shirtwaists. The uniform of the modern woman, she'd said to me at her seamstress's quarters.

As I set foot on solid ground, a seagull looked me over with one eye and apparently found me displeasing, for he took off into the air, screaming out to his mates that a newcomer had arrived. Pebbles and pieces of driftwood covered the skinny beach near the marina. The scent of fish and sea plants greeted me as I clutched my satchel tightly between my gloved fingers and looked around to see if anyone was here to fetch me. Mrs. Mantle had assured me that someone would be there but other than my fellow passengers, there didn't seem to be anyone waiting.

I headed up the hillside, following the other passengers. Once at the top, I took the opportunity to look around at the quaint little town of brick buildings, including a bakery, a dry goods store, and a pub. At the end of the street stood a white church with a steeple. On the other end stood a brick schoolhouse with darling shutters and a dozen stairs leading up to double doors.

There were several men gathered outside the bakery playing checkers. A young woman sat on a bench that overlooked the water.

A sound like a goat bleating drew my attention. It was not a goat but a motorcar with a woman at the wheel. The car lurched to a stop in the grassy area above the marina. A dark-haired woman with the energy and deftness of a large, untamed cat leaped from the vehicle. I stood alone at this point, the other travelers having wandered away to wherever they were going. She rushed toward me, breathless by the time she arrived. "A.F. Young?"

"Yes, that's me."

"You're a girl?"

"Um. Yes." Had she been expecting a man?

She grinned wickedly. "Well, this is a surprise. I thought you'd be a plump little bald man."

"A man?" Plump and bald?

"Yes, I just assumed you were of the male persuasion. A woman coming all the way out here alone? Well, I'd say that's

a woman I'd want as a friend." She was startlingly pretty, with bright blue eyes, fair skin, and a perfectly round face. *A doll*, I thought. *She looks like a doll*. Her almost-black hair was gathered in a neat bun and topped with a small straw hat, a blue ribbon that matched her eyes tied around its rim.

"It's the first adventurous thing I've ever done," I said, suddenly wishing it wasn't. Who was this wild young woman? Did she work for the family too?

"Well, let's hope there's more in your future. Although, it's quiet here on the island. I've never found it to be dull, and I hope you won't either."

"I'm sure I won't. It's breathtaking."

"Isn't it, though? I'm terribly sorry to be late. Mr. O'Brien's cows were blocking the entire road. I had to get out and chase them away." She stuck out her hand. "Where are my manners? I'm Ella Tutheridge. You wouldn't know that, of course. I'm accustomed to everyone knowing me here. I forgot to introduce myself. Mother and Benedict are waiting for you at the house. I offered to fetch you from the ferry. Any excuse to use the car."

"Ella of Ella Pointe?" I asked, taking in her even, delicate features. A Tutheridge had come to greet me? After learning more details in the weeks following my initial interview with Mrs. Mantle, I understood the vastness of their wealth. I would have thought they'd send one of their staff.

"No other." Ella Tutheridge wore a suit dress in a similar fashion to mine in a dark blue paired with a red tie. Tall and athletic in her movements, she was a woman who would look good in a flour sack. Broad shoulders and tiny waist. The curves most women wanted. Including me. Some of us were not blessed in this way. I felt suddenly scrawny and short and very plain. There was my red hair, too. None of the glossy dark hair of Miss Ella.

"I would have been here sooner but as I said—cows in the road. O'Brien has no idea how to build a proper fence, and the little darlings keep breaking through to make an escape. Where they think they're going, I can't say. The meadow has

plenty of grass, yet they can't wait to get out. Just like people, they don't realize what they have right in front of them. I daresay O'Brien will cause an accident of some kind because of his carelessness. Lazy men. I have no use for them."

I nodded, as if I understood exactly. At home, the streets were dirty and busy, smelling of horse manure and human perspiration and an occasional whiff of urine from a drunk the night before. As far as men went, I didn't know any, other than Mr. Pitts. He was mean, but I wasn't sure I'd call him lazy.

She seemed to take me in anew, her gaze traveling the length of me and returning finally to my face. "Goodness, you're a pretty one. So petite and slim. I'm an oaf next to you. That hair of yours is something, and freckles too? I'm jealous. I always wanted freckles."

"Really?" I touched my nose, self-conscious.

"You're like a bowl of cream sprinkled with cinnamon," Ella said.

I laughed, charmed by Ella of Ella Pointe. "I love cream. And cinnamon."

"You're in luck. The aforementioned cows of Mr. O'Brien's give us plenty."

My stomach rumbled. I'd not eaten since the night before. Breakfast at the hotel had been outrageously expensive, so I'd skipped it.

"You're probably half-starved," Ella said. Had she heard my stomach? "Let's get you home in time for lunch." She grabbed the satchel at my feet and nodded toward the car, talking all the way. "I have to be careful in the evenings because of the deer. They leap out of nowhere. The island has more deer than people. All of which forces one to drive slower than one wishes." She grinned, showing straight white teeth. "I've promised Mother I'll be more careful after I almost ran over one of her laying hens. She loves those silly birds like they're pets. Give me a cat any day, but those clucking old ladies? No, thank you."

"I can't imagine driving. You're very brave." I smiled.

“You’ll not need a car. It’s only a toy for me. Recently purchased. I bought it after my father died. He’d not have allowed me to drive, seeing as how I’m a woman, but he’s dead now so I don’t have to worry or answer to him ever again.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be. We’re all better off without him.” She lifted her chin, defiantly, then gave me another devilish grin. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t tell you all the family secrets just yet.” Ella squeezed my hand. “Welcome to Ella Pointe. We’re all thrilled you’re here.

“Get in. Let’s go home.” She tossed my bag into the back of the shiny black Model T while I got into the passenger side. Then she cranked the engine, and it rumbled to life, smelling of gasoline and oil. Ella scurried into position behind the wheel, and we jerked forward. I gritted my teeth. *Do not act scared*, I ordered myself. *Not in front of Ella*.

Soon, we were driving slowly down the dirt street. On either side were wooden sidewalks, mostly empty of people. “This is the only street in town,” Ella said. “Most of the island is wild. We like it that way, but it’s nice to have everything we need right here. I hate going to Seattle. Too many people and too much noise. Every time I go, I can’t wait to get home.

“We don’t get many newcomers, so I offered to pick you up and convinced Mother to let me take the car. She’s afraid to ride in it herself—has no interest in the modern age. My father, on the other hand, embraced everything new. Cars, electricity. Bowling alleys inside of homes.”

“Pardon me?” Had she said bowling alley?

“Yes. A bowling alley no one uses. Father had it put in for a party, mostly to one-up one of his rivals. We have an indoor swimming pool, too. It’s outrageous and embarrassing, considering how little some of the islanders have.”

I’d be interested to see the swimming pool and the bowling alley. I couldn’t imagine either one being in a house.

Ella continued talking, despite the bumps and rattles of the car as we left the bluff of town and headed downhill to a flat area near the edge of the water. The tide was out, and the beach was littered with driftwood. “That body of water’s the East Sound. The island’s shaped like saddlebags, with a fjord of sorts between the west and east sides. We live on the east side with views across the water to the west side. My father owns much of what you see here.” She gestured toward the forest. “Or owned, I suppose I should say.”

“Do they know yet what happened to him?” I blurted out before realizing it was not my place.

“No. There’s a lot of suspects, but the sheriff hasn’t made any progress.”

I wanted to ask more questions but didn’t. Just because I enjoyed a good murder mystery didn’t mean I should start acting like a detective. Still, my natural curiosity was hard to resist.

Ella, not seeming at all flustered by my intrusive question, continued talking. “Your trunk arrived a few days ago. Hopefully one of the maids pressed your dresses and hung everything up in the wardrobe. Dexter, our butler, must have known you were a woman, since he supervised the staff to set up your room. I didn’t even think to ask, assuming you were a man.”

“It’s odd, I suppose, for a woman to have come all this way on her own, so it’s no wonder you figured I was a man.”

“Odd but brave,” Ella said, grinning. “Two qualities I adore.”

We started to climb, leaving the water behind and entering a forested area. I gripped the seat with my fingers. Would the car make it up such a steep incline? It was making the most awful chugging sound. “Is the car all right?”

“Sure. She’s tough, old Lila.”

“Lila?”

“My car. I don’t know why cars are girls, do you?”

“I can’t say that I do, no.” I chuckled under my breath. Ella was what my mother would have called a character. Full of life and possibly the fastest talker I’d ever met.

“Anyway, I named her Lila because my little niece, Bebe, suggested it. She also has a doll named Lila, so it gets confusing at times.” Her laugh was low in timbre, reminding me of a cat’s happy purr. “Mother wants you to dine with us tonight. We eat in the main dining room and have to be dressed properly and all. Do you have an evening dress?”

“Yes, Mrs. Mantle made sure of that.”

“Good. We’ve hardly dined together since Father died. Supper was his favorite time of the day. Delicious food made by Mrs. Halvorson and verbal berating of his wife and children. Loads of fun.”

This deceased Mr. Tutheridge sounded a lot like Mr. Pitts. Was it any wonder someone murdered him? I’d had a few murderous thoughts about Mr. Pitts. Not that I would have acted upon them. They happily throw destitute young ladies such as myself into prison for smaller infractions than murder.

“But never mind all that. You’re here for an adventure, not to be dragged into our family drama.”

“I don’t mind.”

We turned a corner, coming upon a row of blooming cheery trees. I gasped with delight. “How beautiful they are.” A slight breeze shook the blossoms from branches, making them look like fat flakes of pink snow. How nice that it wasn’t.

“What a pretty day,” I said, more to myself than to Ella.

“We ordered it just for you. There are plenty of gray rainy days, so don’t get the wrong idea.”

I smiled, happy so far with my decision to leave everything I’d ever known to come west. An adventure awaited me, of that, I had no doubt. Whether it would prove to be a good one would have to come in time. For now, I would enjoy the beauty of the island and be grateful for the time here, however long it lasted.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the house, it took me a moment to fully take in my surroundings. The house was indeed a mansion. A porch ran the length of the front of the house framed with decorative archways. A fountain in the middle of the driveway most likely served as a watering hole for the horses.

Ella turned off the engine and looked over at me. “Welcome to Stella. That’s what my father called the estate.”

“Why Stella?”

“Rumor has it that was the name of one of Father’s favorite mistresses.”

Mistresses. Plural. Dear me. “Oh.”

Ella laughed. “Sorry. I shocked you.”

“Yes. A little.”

Out of the car, I breathed in the sea air, thankful to be on solid ground. A tall, lanky man in a black suit rushed out the front door toward us. Silver hair and a slackness around the jaw told me he was most likely in his late fifties or early sixties. “That’s Dexter,” Ella said quietly as we waited by the car. “He takes care of us. Impossibly loyal to Mother. He’d do anything for our family, but don’t expect a smile out of him. He’s a serious person.”

Dexter strode across the gravelly driveway with an ease that belied his gangly legs. More of a glide than a walk, I thought, marveling at the way he seemed to hover just above the ground.

He greeted me with a slight bob of his head. His silver hair was thin on the top, with a pink scalp underneath. “Miss Young, welcome. I’m at your service. Whatever you need during your stay, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you.” Oddly enough, he hadn’t seemed surprised by my gender. Why had Ella thought I was a man but Dexter didn’t? He didn’t give much away.

“Careful of your steps, Miss Young,” Dexter said as he grabbed my satchel from the back seat. “The gravel can bite your ankles.”

Bite my ankles? Odd turn of phrase. “Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine, Miss Young.” He glanced at Ella. “How was the drive, miss? Any troubles?”

“None whatsoever. Lila behaved very well,” Ella said.

“Good to hear. Your mother worries about your driving,” Dexter said.

“I’m aware, dear Dexter.” Ella smiled at him with a sweetness and familiarity that hinted at a deep affection between the two. Had he been kind when her father had not? Given them a father figure they desperately needed?

The three of us made our way across the driveway. He was right. The gravel was uneven and loose, making it hard to walk. However, I managed to avoid having my ankle bitten and reached the bottom of the steps without mishap.

Climbing the stairs to the double set of doors, a shiver crawled up my spine. A man had been murdered here. Recently. Had his essence stayed around to haunt the family he’d treated so poorly? Of course not, I told myself. He was dead and wherever our maker had decided to send him. There was nothing to fear. Other than that the murderer might be someone who lived right here in this enormous mansion I was about to walk into. Had I been wise to come here? I stole a quick glance at Ella and set my fears aside. She had welcomed me and put me at ease. Ella of Ella Pointe most certainly did not seem like a killer. Would the rest of the family prove to be the same?

Dexter held open one of the thick double doors for us. Were they heavy? If so, he seemed perfectly adept. We stepped into a foyer, and I almost gasped at the sheer beauty of the place. I’d never in my life seen such decadence. A crystal chandelier with electric lights hung from the high ceiling. A grand staircase led up to the top floor. Exquisite dark paneling

gleamed from the sunlight streaming in through the banks of windows that looked out to the water. A massive sitting room was to the left of the entryway. Luxurious sofas and chairs made me want to curl up near the enormous marble fireplace with a good book. In addition to the warmth of the fire, teak parquet flooring and large area rugs made the room seem snug and inviting despite its size.

My gaze traveled across the room to the bay windows. The house was built on a cliff with a wide grassy lawn. At the moment, a man and a little girl were playing badminton.

“That’s my brother Hudson and his daughter Bebe,” Ella said. “He’s hoping to wear her out and lessen her terribleness.”

“She’s terrible?” I asked without thinking. Was it an impertinent question? My natural curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to know how all the pieces of this family puzzle fit together. Even though it was none of my business.

“You’ll see,” Ella said.

Dexter cleared his throat. “Miss Young, I’ll show you to your room. Mrs. Tutheridge and Benedict will meet with you in the library, but you’ll want to freshen up first, I imagine?”

“How kind of you,” I said. “Thank you.”

“We assumed you’d be hungry by the time you arrived. Mrs. Halvorson made sandwiches and a pot of tea. I’ll have it brought to the library. You and Mr. Benedict will work there. We have a desk set up for you, as well as a typewriter and anything else you will need.”

“Thank you. I’ll look forward to getting right to work.” I wanted Dexter to like me, but I didn’t know if that was a possibility. And if so, would I ever know it?

“I’ll sneak down to the kitchen and steal a bite before I have to leave again,” Ella said, slipping hairpins from her hat. “I’m worried about the Hansen twins. They’ve had coughs that will not go away, so I’m going out there this afternoon.”

I didn’t know who the Hansen twins were, but I assumed they were children. The residents of Whale Island must keep her busy.

“You’ll work yourself to death,” Dexter said with a hint of disapproval in his voice. He didn’t like her working? Maybe he thought it was inappropriate for a young woman of her class? I admired her for it. She didn’t have to work, obviously, but did it anyway. Would I be so diligent if circumstances were different? I suspected not. I’d sit and read all day and do nothing of importance whatsoever.

“Will you be back for supper?” Dexter asked. “Your mother wants everyone there.”

“Yes, I’ll be sure to be back in time and dressed.” Ella gave my hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll see you then. And don’t worry. No one will bite you here. There’s no need for that frightened look in your eyes. We’re perfectly harmless. Now that dear old daddy’s gone away, that is.”

“Miss Ella,” Dexter said reprovably. “Must we say everything that comes to our minds?”

Ella brushed aside several stray strands of her dark hair from where they had stuck to her cheek. “Dexter, dear, there’s no need to keep our secrets from Miss Young. She’ll be practically family now. Anyway, aren’t we all weary of the lies and secrets?”

“As you wish, Miss Ella,” Dexter said without a change to his stoic expression. His face never moved, but what he thought about things showed in the nuances of his voice.

“While you take Miss Young to her room, I’ll stop in and tell Mother and Benedict that she’s arrived.”

“Excellent.” Dexter turned to me. “Miss Young, if you wouldn’t mind following me, I’ll take you upstairs to your room.”

I traipsed behind him, noticing how limber and strong he was for an older man.

“We have many bedrooms to choose from,” Dexter said. “However, Mrs. Tutheridge thought it would give you comfort to be next to Ella and share a bathroom with her. We have electricity and plumbing here, so you’ll be warm and dry.”

“Thank you.”

My room was at the end of a hallway. It did not have a view of the bay but of the front drive. I supposed Ella's room was across the hall. A twin-size bed covered with a patchwork quilt, a skinny desk, and a low-backed leather chair took up most of the space in the room. "I love it."

Dexter showed me the bathroom, pointing to the door opposite the hall. "This is Ella's room here, so there's no need to be frightened in the middle of the night."

Frightened? Why had he said that? Was there something to be frightened of? As in, a murderer?

As if he read my thoughts, he said, "People from the city sometimes have strange notions about wildlife."

I'd not thought about wild creatures. "Are there bears?"

"No, Miss Young." His lips twitched, as if he were about to smile but changed his mind. "There are no bears here. One would have to swim to get here from the mainland, which has never happened."

"Are you sure?" I walked over to the window and looked into the thick forest of trees just beyond the driveway. Was it safe to walk alone?

"Quite sure. We have foxes, raccoons, and deer. A lot of deer. Please don't feed them. We don't want to encourage them to become dependent on humans."

"I wouldn't think of it," I said, as if I'd ever had any extra food to toss to animals of any kind. "Should I be worried about...well, a murderer on the loose?"

A muscle in his cheek flexed. "I would not worry yourself about that. Mr. Tutheridge's death was an anomaly. The island's free of criminals."

"Except for whoever murdered Mr. Tutheridge?" I asked.

"How shall I put this? He was a man hated by most here on the island. His murder was self-inflicted, I believe. As in, he was murdered for a specific reason, not because there's a maniac running around Whale Island. The truth will come out eventually, and that will become clear."

“Why do you think so?”

He shrugged. “The way of the world. Secrets can’t stay hidden forever. Truth always prevails.”

Did it? I knew justice didn’t always prevail. Anyone who was poor could tell you that.

“Is there anything I can get for you before I go?” Dexter asked.

I took another glance around the room. “No, thank you. What time should I come down for tea?”

“When you’re done freshening up, simply tug this, and someone will come to escort you to the library.” He gestured toward a rope hanging from the ceiling. “That will ring a bell downstairs, and one of the maids or I will come right away.”

“Thank you, Dexter.” I removed the pins from my hat and took it off, laying it down on the dresser next to a pitcher of water. My head ached from the weight of wearing it for so long. I yearned to caress my scalp with my fingers, but I didn’t dare muss it before meeting my new employers.

“My pleasure, miss. May I give you a bit of advice?”

Startled by this request, I simply nodded. What had I done wrong? “Yes, please.”

“There’s no need to thank the servants. Otherwise, you’d be thanking us forty times a day. We’re only doing our jobs.”

“Yes, right. I’m not accustomed to being waited upon. I’m more familiar with waiting on others.” The tips of my ears burned with embarrassment. Was it so obvious that I didn’t belong in this world?

“We’re glad you’re here, Miss Young. Regardless of your background. You’ll be of great service to Mr. Tutheridge.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.” He nodded, and then, without making a sound, left the room.

I let out a sigh of relief, glad to be alone for a moment, and took off my overcoat and hung it in the wardrobe. I then sat on

the edge of the bed. My heart sped along at a rapid rate inside my chest, reminding me that I had no idea what was coming or what to expect and that I was a thousand miles from home. But Ella had been very nice, I reminded myself. Acting as if I were a new member of the family. *I can do this*, I told myself. Nothing to fear. No murderer waiting in the bushes. No bears. All would be well. It had to be. I had nothing for which to return home.

BENEDICT

I'd spent the morning stacking wood with our groundskeeper, Harry, and now, as I paced around the library, I was glad of it. My muscles were spent, which quieted my mind. I'd lain awake part of the night worrying about this A.F. Young and what he would mean to my life. Would he make it better or worse? It was not possible to feel more shame about my lack of abilities, so what did I have to lose really? On the other hand, what if he had no respect for me? Worse, what if he pitied me? What if he told everyone in town that Benedict Tutheridge could barely read or write?

This section of the house was on the second floor, directly over the living room and comprised our music room with a grand piano and dozens of chairs for visitors as well as a library that served as a study. We'd had another desk added for A.F. Young to go with the one we'd already had. I'd asked Dexter to put them facing each other so that I could communicate directly with my new secretary.

While I waited, I paced around the room, trailing my fingers over a shelf of books. There were hundreds lining the shelves. None of which I could read.

Mother shuffled into the room about five minutes before teatime. She looked better than she had in months, wearing a becoming dress in a dark blue. Her hair, a silvery blond, was fixed in elegant bumps and curls by her maid, Bitty.

"Mother, you're looking lovely," I said, kissing her cheek.

“Thank you, dearest. Bitty took extra care with me today. I want to make a good impression.”

As if she'd heard her name, Bitty scuttled in with a tray of sandwiches and a pot of tea in a silver pot. In her thirties, Bitty was robust and stout, with a wide face and a merry twinkle in her eyes. She was unmarried and shared a room downstairs in the staff quarters with one of the other maids.

“Mr. Tutheridge, may I pour you a cup?” Bitty asked. She'd started calling me by my last name since Father died. I wasn't sure I liked it.

“Not yet, thank you. I'll wait for our visitor.” The scent of buttery cookies filled my nose. Bitty poured tea for Mother, putting in two teaspoons of sugar. Around the same time, Dexter came in to announce the arrival of A.F. Young.

I was facing away from the door but stood right away to greet my new employee. However, A.F. Young was not at all what I'd expected. A.F. Young was a woman.

A beautiful woman.

The prettiest I'd ever seen. Goodness, who was this angel with her flaming red hair and creamy skin and just the right amount of freckles dotting her adorable nose? Her bright green eyes and full mouth competed for my attention. The oval shape of her face was most extraordinary, and then how it curved into a pointed chin?

I yearned to run my finger along that jawline.

My mind in the best of times was scattered, but my thoughts seemed to have sped up, bouncing around here, there, and everywhere. Part of me noticed that Bitty and Dexter had disappeared, but I wasn't sure when.

Had Mother known she was a woman? Is that why she'd never used a pronoun to describe this A.F. Young? Suddenly, it all made sense. Yes, of course, she'd known and had purposely kept it from me. But why? How could she possibly think a woman was a good idea? I inwardly groaned. This A.F. Young had come from far away. I'd not be able to send her home. Not even to save us both from an impossible situation.

How would I concentrate? It was already nearly impossible to keep my brain on one thing. A woman rescuing the family idiot? I might die of embarrassment.

She was much too pretty for this job. Briggs would not be unable to control himself and flirt with her at every turn. She'd probably fall in love with him, and he would eventually break her heart and then where would we be?

And she smelled of lilacs. My favorite flower. My favorite scent. The floor should open and swallow me whole. Be done with this humiliating life.

I must speak. *Open your mouth and say words*, I told myself. Not hard. So hard.

She seemed as dumbstruck as I, staring at me with her lips slightly parted. Again, what a pretty mouth it was, pink like a summer rose and shaped like a heart, with the bottom lip slightly fuller than the top. A heroine in a novel, that's what she looked like. What had I let my mother talk me into?

Mother had stood by then and stretched out her hand in greeting, which Miss Young shook. "Miss Young, welcome to Whale Island."

"Thank you. I'm grateful for such a charming room in which to stay."

"We wanted you to feel like part of the family," Mother said.

We did? They had her in a room upstairs? Like friends of the family? I hadn't thought about where this A.F. Young was to reside. I'd been too worried about the man's arrival. Which, as it turns out, was even more worrisome than I'd thought. This was madness.

"My son, Benedict." Mother glared at me. "A cat seems to have captured his tongue."

I managed to bark out a welcome. "I hope your trip wasn't too burdensome."

Miss Young's lips curved into a smile. "It was long, but very interesting. I've never been out of Boston, so you can

imagine my delight over the view from my seat on the train.”

That smile. It touched my soul. Made me want to dance. “Oh, yes, I can imagine. I would be the same.”

Briggs bounded through the doorway, dressed for riding and holding his crop in one hand. His cheeks were flushed from exercise and his hair stuck up in several places, as if he’d ripped off his hat while still sweating. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Miss Young. “Who have we here, Mother? An angel?”

Angel? That was my word. Darn him anyway. He didn’t deserve an angel. This one was mine.

Don’t be a fool. Father’s voice. A woman like this will have no use for you.

“Briggs, dear, please mind your manners,” Mother said. “This is Miss Young. She’s here to assist Benedict.”

“Nice to meet you,” Miss Young said, flushing under his gaze. Wonderful. Here we go.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Briggs brought her hand to his mouth for a kiss. “What have we done to deserve such beauty dropping from the sky?”

I had to keep myself from rolling my eyes.

“She’s a professional, Briggs,” I said. “Here to work for us. Nothing at all to do with you, I might add.”

“What a pity. I thought perhaps Mother had invited Miss Young to become my best friend and love of my life.”

“Briggs Tutheridge,” Mother said with a gasp. “You’re incorrigible. Miss Young, don’t listen to a word he says.”

“His outrageousness is often heightened by several shots of whiskey from the saloon,” I said.

Briggs grinned and wagged a finger in my direction. “Brother, ye of little faith. Although, I did stop in to see Matthew.” He turned to Miss Young. “He’s our local saloon owner. Quite a fellow. Always good for a laugh.”

Miss Young glanced over at me. Her hands were clasped together in front of her. White knuckles. She was nervous, and Briggs was making it worse. The desire to throttle my brother had never been stronger.

“All joking aside, no one told me that you were a woman.” Briggs’s salacious gaze turned to me. “Did you know?”

“What does it matter?” I asked. “She’s here to do a job.” Poor Miss Young. We were all acting like imbeciles. “The agency who sent her has a good reputation and has assured us that Miss Young is the perfect...person for the job.”

“Indeed, and on that note,” Mother said, “Briggs, you and I should leave them to their work.”

“Mother, you’re absolutely no fun at all.” Regardless of his protests, Briggs followed Mother obediently from the room, but not before snagging several sandwiches and winking at me. Winking. I should take him out to the woodshed and box his ears. Not that I’d ever actually lay a hand on him. He and I had had enough of that when we were boys.

Once they’d left the room, I asked Miss Young to sit and offered her a cup of tea.

“Yes, thank you.” She sat primly on the edge of one of the twin chairs set before the fireplace.

“Please, have a sandwich,” I said. “Dinner isn’t until eight here, and I expect you’re hungry.”

“I am. Thank you. I haven’t eaten since last night,” she said, sounding apologetic. “I’m feeling faint.”

Why wouldn’t she have had breakfast? Lack of funds? We should have wired money. “Please, have as many as you like.”

“I will, yes.” Her eyes widened as she surveyed the plate and then took two. She took a bite and made a throaty noise of pleasure.

Oh dear, I thought, as I sat farther back in my chair. I hoped she didn’t make a habit of making that particular noise. It was a very attractive sound coming out of her slender throat. One that had an embarrassing effect on my libido.

I watched as she gobbled both sandwiches without seeming to chew. My chest ached. She must be starving.

“Would you like another?” I asked.

She flushed. “I will, yes. Food was much more expensive on the train than I thought it would be. At the hotel too.”

“You shall be well-fed from now on.” I remembered then I was supposed to have poured her tea. I did so now, placing the cup and saucer near her on the table.

She took a hearty swallow before returning the cup to its mate. “What do we do now? Do I start to work right away?”

I almost laughed at her innocent question. Miss Young was young. Younger than me, I suspected, by about five years. “No, we’ll begin tomorrow.”

She narrowed her eyes, observing me. “You didn’t know I would be a woman, did you?”

“I did not.” I hid a smile behind my teacup.

“Ella was surprised too. Did your mother know?”

“I think so. If my detective skills are what I think they are anyway. She very carefully never mentioned your gender.”

“Do you want to send me away?” Her eyes glistened.

I swallowed back my initial response. *Yes, please, take your pretty self and go back from whence you came.* Instead, I said, “Because of the unfortunate discovery of your gender?”

“Unfortunate?” Now her bottom lip quivered.

Why did I always say the wrong thing? “No, not unfortunate. Not at all. Surprising but not unfortunate.”

“I can do anything a man can do. If you’re worried about that, I can assure you of my skills and work ethic.” She reached inside her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper folded into a square. “This is my CV, if you’d like to see it. I mean, if you haven’t.”

I looked down at the paper she’d handed me and shook my head. It would take me an embarrassing amount of time to

read through this. “Can you tell me what it says?” She may as well know the extent of my troubles sooner rather than later.

She flushed again, this time more red than pink. “I’m sorry. I forgot. I’m so thoughtless.”

“It’s all right. This problem of mine is why you’re here, so we may as well speak of it without embarrassment.”

“Yes, of course.” She dipped her head to look down at the paper. Her hair was extraordinary, the way it gleamed in the firelight. “It says here that I graduated at the top of my secretarial class. I worked for Mr. Pitts for a little over eighteen months. My interests include reading—novels mostly.” She looked up, smiling. “It doesn’t include how much I enjoy eating, especially sweets. Or that I always wanted to ride on a boat. Or that I’ve never known anyone who had a music room with a piano in their house.” She flicked her gloved fingers at the stacks of books. “Or had a library with all these books. Or ridden in a motorcar, which I did today with Ella. I’ve also never known anyone to have a town named after them. And my room here? It’s nicer than anywhere I’ve ever slept in my whole life. All in all, everything that’s happened today is new and so very exciting.” She stopped speaking rather abruptly, as if she realized she’d been talking for too long.

She hadn’t. I could have listened to her all day.

“I hope your time here will remain exciting,” I said. “But I doubt it will. The shininess of new things usually dulls after a bit.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Did this woman back in Boston describe the position to you?” I asked.

“She did.”

“And my...condition?”

“Yes. Ella told me how smart you are and that it’s something with your eyes.”

Now I wanted to throttle my sister. “No one knows what’s wrong with me, other than what my father said.”

“Which was that you weren’t smart?”

“I think he used the words imbecile, idiot, Neanderthal, dumb, stupid. There were more, but I can’t recall them at the moment.”

“Well, Mr. Pitts, my former employer, called me the same names.” She ruffled the paper that now resided in her lap. “It doesn’t say that in here either.”

“They really should include more interesting items on these. How can you really understand the extent of a person this way?” The tension in my shoulders lessened. This was a nice woman in front of me. Could she help me run the business? It seemed a tall order for such a young, small woman. “What else, Miss Young? What other items would you include to give me the full picture of A.F. Young?”

“I’m Amelia. No wonder you thought I was a man.”

“I believe my mother and this Mrs. Mantle asked you to put your initials rather than Amelia to trick me. It’s quite obvious to me now.”

“But why?”

“They might think I’d balk at the idea.”

“But you don’t?”

“I do not,” I said.

We shared a smile.

“What else should I know about you?” I asked. “That’s not included on your CV?”

“It bothered me that I wasn’t the fastest typist in my class. I tried, believe you me, I did. But that Gloria Miller beat me out every time.”

“I’m sure your typing will be more than adequate.”

“I’ll do my best. I always do. Even when it doesn’t turn out how I wanted, I keep going. I’ve never had a chance like

this. Never in my life. This place is like a dream.”

“I’m glad you see the beauty. Not all do. Some think it’s remote and uninhabitable.”

“How’s that possible?”

“Not everyone’s made for the island.” Would Miss Young like it here after the newness wore off, or would she be like the other women I’d known and be bored?

“What about you, Mr. Tutheridge? What can you tell me about yourself?”

I got up to stoke the fire before returning to the chair, giving myself time to think. What should I say? “There’s not much interesting about me. Not really.”

“I doubt that.”

“All right then. I’ve struggled all my life with reading and sums. Writing is a disaster. I can’t remember how to spell anything or how to write a decent sentence. My thoughts jump around from thing to thing. During school, every creak of a chair or scratching of chalk on the slate distracted me. Or I’d daydream and realize I’d missed the entire lesson. Teachers couldn’t help me. At home, my father ridiculed me and berated me. Sometimes he beat me.” I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I had no idea he would leave the business to me to run, and I’m absolutely terrified to do so.”

“I’m sorry,” Miss Young said softly.

“When I was a child, I loved being read to. Stories gave me an escape from my real life. But you see, these eyes or brain of mine make it impossible to read a novel.” I stopped, feeling ridiculous, as if I’d just taken my clothes off in front of her. I’d said too much. But maybe not? Miss Young was smiling and nodding her head, as if she understood me perfectly.

“Did I mention how much I love to read out loud?” She continued to smile at me, and I found myself beaming right back at her. Could this be a good match? Of employer and employee. Not the other. A woman like her would never be interested in a lout like me.

“That can’t possibly be true,” I said with a teasing lilt to my voice.

She glanced down at her lap. “My mother couldn’t read. She was not able to go to school and started working when she was only eight years old. I read to her from the time I learned. So I’m experienced in this area.” Another smile, tentative this time, played at her mouth.

“Truly?” I couldn’t believe it. Was it possible that Miss Young would consider adding reading aloud to her list of duties?

“I’ll read to you anytime you like. As long as it’s not *Moby Dick*. I just finished it, and I will never do so again.”

I laughed at the way she twisted up her face as if she smelled something bad. “It’s very long, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Interminable.” We locked eyes. A tension rose between us. Attraction? Was it possible? Regardless, it was a bad idea. This was my secretary. I must run a company and act like an adult, not a smitten boy. She was the first to look away, breaking the spell between us. “Would you like to tell me more about my duties?”

Right. Work. That was why we were both here. Actual tasks must be completed. I looked longingly out the window, wishing I could be outside working on my house or walking along the shore. “We’ll talk about all of that in the morning. You’ve had a long day, and there’s nothing that can’t wait.”

“Whatever pleases you,” Miss Young said.

“Would you like to call me Benedict?” I went hot, embarrassed. Why had I blurted that out like a child?

She blinked, then her face lit up with a pleased smile. “If you wish me to?”

“Yes, I would.” I said this with great confidence, hoping to mask my insecurities and the way this woman flustered me.

“You may call me Amelia. If you’d like.”

“Amelia.” I liked the way it flowed off my tongue in little loops. “It’s nicer to say than A.F. anyway.”

“I agree,” she said.

Would our close proximity make friendship inevitable? I certainly hoped so. If I could keep her away from Briggs, I might have a chance.

Don’t be ridiculous, the mean voice in my head whispered. You’re nothing. An idiot. A mistake. A poor excuse for a man.

I shook my head to get rid of the voice. “Amelia, would you like to see the property? We don’t often get a sunny day in March, and we should take advantage of it.”

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

Nor could I.

AMELIA

I could barely think, let alone take in the glorious surroundings of the estate. Mr. Benedict Tutheridge was the most attractive man I'd ever laid eyes upon. He was a mountain of a man, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. Dark hair and thick eyebrows accompanied a closely cropped beard and mustache. His mouth, full and sensuous, seemed quick to smile, even though there was a sadness in those blue eyes. Deep hurt that he tried to keep hidden but wasn't quite successful.

He offered his arm as we crossed the lawn. "The grass can be slippery."

We started in the front of the house. He pointed out the massive red barn perched on a hill to the left of the house and a man-made pond with a darling white bridge. "We used to stock it with fish when we were young. Mother didn't want us down by the water when we were small, thus we'd played there instead." He gestured toward the fountain in the middle of the circular driveway. "It serves as a watering hole for the horses as well as being decorative."

"That's what I figured when I first arrived," I murmured, mesmerized by the beauty of it all and breathing in the scent of firs and pines mixed with the dank smell of wet ground. Peering into the forest, I spotted ferns and purple and white crocuses poking up through the layer of decaying pine needles and leaves.

Lime-green moss had grown between stone walkways around the perimeter of the house, creating a pleasing

geometric path. In clumps along the way, daffodils lifted their sunny heads toward the sky.

“Careful, the moss can be slippery,” Benedict said. “Please, take my arm.”

I gladly wrapped my hand around the crook of his elbow. Even through the material of his coat, I felt the power of him, the strength in his lean muscles. I stifled a shiver of longing. I’d never cared about any man. Never contemplated the idea at all. I was too busy trying to survive. But this man brought out all kinds of feelings I’d never had. How could it be? I’d only just met him.

We crossed over the back lawn and then down a dirt path toward the pebbly beach below. The sun was setting by then, leaving swaths of orange and pink across the sky and reflected in the water as clear as glass.

For a few minutes, we made our way across the uneven beach, avoiding driftwood and large rocks. “It’s not like any beach I’ve ever seen. I thought there would be shells.”

“Not here. On the coast of Washington, but not up here.”

Without the sun, the air seemed much cooler. I shivered and instinctively drew closer to Benedict’s solid side.

“You’re cold? Let’s go back up to the house.”

I nodded, hating to leave the view. “I wouldn’t mind a little warmth.”

We made our way back up the path until we reached the lawn. The back porch ran the length of the house with a series of curved archways. A screech followed by high-pitched giggles from across the lawn made me jump.

“That’s only Bebe,” Benedict said.

No sooner than he’d said her name, the infamous Bebe raced toward us, with her uncle Briggs not far behind. She was a gorgeous little thing with dark curls and big blue eyes like her aunt Ella. In fact, she looked so much like her auntie that I was momentarily thrust back in time to see the little girl Ella must have been.

“Uncle Benny, help me.” She screamed and threw herself into his arms. “Uncle Briggs has become a monster, and he’s chasing me.”

Briggs arrived next, slightly breathless. “You’re too fast for me, Bebe.”

“He let me win,” Bebe said. “He always does.”

“Not true,” Briggs said, winking at me.

Bebe wore a sailor-style dress in dark blue with a white collar and no hat. I had a feeling that had been lost during her game with Uncle Briggs.

“Bebe, you must say hello to Miss Young,” Mr. Tutheridge said.

Bebe raised her head and peered at me with curious eyes. “You’re pretty.”

I flushed, pleased by the compliment but embarrassed too. “Thank you. So are you.”

“Grammie says I look just like my aunt Ella. Have you met my aunt yet?”

“I did. She picked me up in the car. It was a little frightening.”

“Aunt Ella can be scary.”

“I meant the car, not your aunt,” I said, laughing. “I’d never been in one before.”

Bebe screwed her small face up for a moment, obviously contemplating this. “I don’t think the car is scary, but I’m brave. Are you scared of a lot?”

“I am, actually,” I said, meeting Mr. Tutheridge’s gaze for a second. “But I’ve come across the country to work for your family despite my fear.”

“Which makes you brave,” Briggs said. “One can be afraid and brave at the same time, Bebe. You’ll learn this one day.”

“Not too soon, I hope,” Benedict said. “Where’s your hat? I saw you had it on earlier.”

Bebe touched the top of her head and made a face. “It’s gone. I’ve lost another one.”

Briggs pointed to the porch, where a small straw hat with a blue ribbon waited for its wayward owner. “It fell off when you started chasing me.”

“I see now,” Benedict said. “Bebe is the monster in this game, not poor Uncle Briggs.”

Bebe giggled. “He’s the monster, not me.”

“How old are you, Bebe?” I asked, thinking how articulate she was for someone so small.

“I’ll be six on April twenty-ninth,” Bebe said slowly, as if she’d only recently memorized this fact.

“Will you have a party?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Bebe said. “Maybe no one would want to come.”

“Surely not,” I said. “You must have loads of friends at school.”

“I hate school.” Bebe’s expression dimmed. “Too much sitting.”

With the sun gone, it was growing dark. Several lanterns on the porch came on, casting a yellow light across the lawn. The door to the living room opened, and Hudson appeared. Spotting us, he meandered down the stairs and across the lawn. He had an aimless air about him, as if he’d lost something but couldn’t quite remember what it was he’d misplaced. Wearing a hat pulled down over his eyebrows, I couldn’t at first see his eyes. It was only when he arrived to stand in front of us that I could see they were brown.

“Hudson, meet Amelia Young. She’s been hired to assist me,” Benedict said.

“Right, yes. I think Mother mentioned you were arriving today. I’m Hudson Tutheridge. Welcome.”

“Yes, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

“You as well,” Hudson said. “I hope your journey wasn’t too trying?” He was a few inches shorter than his brothers and of a slighter build.

“It was long, but I’m here now, and all is well,” I said. “It’s a privilege. I’m in awe of your home and your island.”

“I knew I liked you,” Briggs said, grinning at me. “It’s not everyone who understands how special this place is.”

“You’re hardly ever here,” Hudson said, not unkindly, more like stating a fact.

“I wasn’t here much,” Briggs said. “But now things are different. I’m going to stay. Paint from here.”

“Really?” Hudson asked. “For how long?”

“I’m not certain.” Briggs shrugged. “I’ll listen to the muses.”

“Muses? Is that what you’re calling your female companions these days?” Hudson asked.

“I was referring to the island.” Briggs’s eyes dulled. Had the comment hurt him? Was there a rivalry of sorts between the brothers?

Hudson turned to his daughter. “Bebe, it’s time to come inside and get cleaned up for supper.”

“Not yet.” Bebe stuck her bottom lip out. “I’m playing with Uncle Briggs.”

“Bebe, now.” Hudson held out his hand.

His little daughter ignored it, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the grass between her feet.

“You’ve worn me out, Bebe,” Briggs said, obviously trying to help. “And made me very hungry. Aren’t you?”

“I’m not.” Bebe stomped her foot. “I don’t want to go inside. I want to play.”

Such defiance. I’d never known a child to argue with her elders.

A look of irritation crossed Hudson's face, followed by a defeated slump of his shoulders. "If you'd rather, you can go straight to bed without supper."

Bebe exhaled with an exaggerated sigh. "Why must I eat with the servants? I want to eat with all of you."

"You're too young," Briggs said. "Anyway, it's boring in the dining room. Nothing but adults talking about the weather."

"Bebe, come. I mean it," Hudson said. "Or there will be no playing outside for you tomorrow at all."

"Fine." Head hanging, she trudged toward the porch as if her shoes were made of cast iron.

Hudson, with a similar gait, followed behind without saying another word. A twinge of sympathy rose in me at the sight of the two figures ascending the stairs, together but so far apart. He seemed as though he'd given up on participating fully in life. Clearly, Bebe was in need of a little discipline. In Hudson's defense, it couldn't be easy raising the child without a mother. A man on his own must find it trying.

The more I learned of the Tutheridge family, the more I understood how complicated the relationships were among the siblings and perhaps their mother too. I'd thought money fixed all ills. Apparently, that was not so.

"She's in need of a nanny," Briggs said. "I'd thought Mother was exaggerating, but she's a little terror. We've spoiled Bebe. To compensate."

"Which has not been good for her," Benedict said. "And Hudson's overwhelmed. We know he loves her, but he's not taken hold of her as he should. Since he lost Rosemary, it's been a struggle for him."

"How tragic," I said. "He must have loved her very much."

"They fell in love at age thirteen and never needed anyone but each other." Benedict's voice sounded wistful.

"We all loved Rosemary," Briggs said. "She was good for Hudson. He was a different man than the one you just met."

“Father’s favorite,” Benedict said.

“Why?” I asked.

“We’re not sure,” Briggs said. “Only that Benedict and I always came up short when it came to our father. I’m an artist and refused to do what he wanted.”

“And I was the village idiot,” Benedict said.

“Don’t say that,” I said. “Please.”

“I always tell him the same thing, but it’s no use,” Briggs said.

I looked at Briggs carefully. I’d not yet seen this side of him, the one full of sorrow and sympathy.

“Shall we go into town after supper?” Briggs asked, his gaze on me. “I could take you for a drink at the pub.”

I clutched the brooch at my neck. “I’d sooner jump into Puget Sound headfirst than visit a saloon with you or anyone. I’m not that kind of woman.”

“How unfortunate for you,” Briggs said, eyes sparkling with mischief. “However, I shall take it under advisement.”

“Take what under advisement?” I asked.

“To change my wicked ways so that I’m worthy of you.”

Benedict made an impatient noise with his mouth. “Briggs, really?”

I laughed. “Not to worry, Benedict. I can see right through your brother. Briggs has no intention of being tamed by any woman, and especially not by the likes of me.”

Briggs clutched his chest. “You wound me, Miss Young.”

“I doubt that.” I couldn’t help but laugh. Briggs amused me. I liked him, although he was not the least bit romantically interesting to me. Not like Benedict, with his tempestuous expressions and serious eyes that seemed to look right into my soul. I wasn’t completely sure, having only just met him, but Benedict seemed a man who would be careful of a woman’s heart. A man who would know that his actions and words had

the possibility of wounding a tender soul. He had been bruised too, I thought, as I sneaked another peek at him. The fading light of day did nothing to diminish the strength and beauty of his features.

When I looked back at Briggs, he was watching me with interest. Had he seen my look of admiration? Briggs might be careless with a woman's heart, but he was also smart. I should have been more guarded, I thought, chastising myself, and not stared with yearning at my new employer.

"You know what, Miss Young?" Briggs asked, his eyes more sincere than I'd yet seen them. "I believe you're just what we've been waiting for."

I simply smiled, suddenly bashful. This day had not been at all what I'd expected. The train ride out here was already fading from memory as the Tutheridge family swept me into their fold.

DINNER WAS SERVED in the formal dining room. Just off the living room, the windows also looked out to the Sound. By the time we were seated, darkness had come, but inside was almost as pretty. A centerpiece made of white tulips and candles adorned the table. I was seated between Briggs and Ella with Benedict across from me. His eyes glittered in the candlelight. Mrs. Tutheridge sat on one end of the large table. No one sat on the other end, where I assumed the elder Mr. Tutheridge had sat during his reign of terror. There was no sign of Hudson.

I was nervous, not accustomed to formal dinners. Thank goodness I had a decent dress to wear, thanks to Mrs. Mantle's seamstress. It was a blue silk that fit my slim figure well. Even I had to admit that I looked nice when I examined myself in the mirror.

Determined not to make an error, I watched the others carefully, picking up the same silverware they did and copying how they helped themselves to the food offered from the trays

presented by the serving ladies. We dined on spring lettuce in a vinaigrette so tangy and tasty, I had to keep myself from eating it too fast. Next to me, Ella picked at hers, not eating any of the purple greens, eating mostly the croutons. Not that I blamed her. Those croutons, buttery and garlicky, melted in my mouth.

While we ate, Ella filled us in on the latest baby born on the island. She'd been on her way out to check on the sick twins when Ralph Mason flagged her down on horseback to ask for her assistance. "They have a small farm all the way on the other side of the island," Ella explained to me. "Grow strawberries and peas and sell them locally and in Seattle. They had a little boy this time, Mother."

"Let me guess," Mrs. Tutheridge said. "They paid you with strawberries."

"We're having shortcake for dessert." Ella grinned, obviously pleased with herself.

Cake? In addition to all of this? I couldn't believe my luck.

"Thankfully, we don't need your salary to live on." Mrs. Tutheridge drank from her glass of Chablis. "Or we'd be at the mercy of the seasons."

"People pay me what they can," Ella said. "I don't expect anything at all, but the people here are proud. They don't want charity."

"I've never had strawberry cake," I said. "But I'm sure I'll like it." Unaccustomed to wine, I sipped from my glass tentatively. The Chablis made my eyes sting and my throat tickle. Briggs had said something about it tasting like grapefruit. A fruit I'd never had, so who knew?

A piece of pink fish covered in butter sauce and served with creamy mashed potatoes sprinkled with chives arrived almost immediately after the salad plates were cleared. "What is this?" I asked, breathing in the scent of garlic and butter as well as fish.

"Salmon from right outside our door," Briggs said. "You'll never have better."

“The natives lived on salmon,” Ella said. “Until white people ruined their communities.”

No one said anything to that. Feeling slightly awkward, I picked up the second fork on my left and poked at the fish. It fell apart in layers. I brought a small bite to my mouth, not sure what to expect. It tasted of salt, butter, and the mild, creamy salmon. Briggs was right. I’d never had fish this good. My eyes closed as I savored a second bite paired with a dab of potatoes. “My goodness, that’s good.”

“I caught it this morning,” Benedict said, pointing toward the windows. “Right out there.”

“Delightful,” I said, taking another bite.

“Fishing’s one of Benny’s favorite pastimes,” Ella said. “Which is nice for the rest of us.”

“Quite right. So clever, darling,” Mrs. Tutheridge said to Benedict.

“Speaking of fishing, I saw Rhett Rivers today,” Ella said. “He was in town getting supplies and asked after you, Mother.”

“After me?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Whatever for?”

“Because your husband died,” Ella said.

“Oh, yes, of course. How is he?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. Was it caution in her voice? Who was Rhett Rivers, and why did Mrs. Tutheridge pale at the sound of his name? “Is his mother well?”

“Millie’s fine,” Ella said. “But she and Joe are getting up there. I worry about them in that drafty lighthouse. They’re lucky to have such a loyal son. He looks after them.”

“They’re a thousand years old,” Briggs said to me. “And run the lighthouse. Or used to, anyway. They adopted Rhett when he was a baby.”

“Rhett was a changeling,” Briggs said. “Discovered in the woods.”

“Only hours old,” Ella said, shuddering. “Perfectly healthy. His mother was not so lucky. She’d died out there giving birth all alone.”

“Poor girl,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

“She’s one of the reasons I decided to become a nurse,” Ella said. “The story of her death haunted me as a child.”

“Was that the reason?” Briggs asked. “I’ve never heard you say so.”

“One of them, anyway.” Ella shrugged. “Other things, too, but I don’t want any woman on this island dying during childbirth. Not if I can help it.”

“Rhett’s been a joy to Joe and Millie,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Isn’t that right?”

“Sure,” Ella said. “Still doesn’t make it right. Whoever got that poor girl pregnant and just left her to die alone. There’s a special place in hell for him.”

“Rhett’s done fine, though,” Briggs said. “The Riverses are fine people and have treated him well.”

“You won’t meet a finer man,” Ella said.

“You stay away from him.” We all jerked up at the strident quality of Mrs. Tutheridge’s demand. “Do you hear me, Ella?”

Everyone went quiet for a moment. The air felt charged, as in the middle of a lightning storm.

Ella set down her fork, her eyes wide. “Mother, why? He’s such a sweet man. I don’t think he’d hurt a fly. In fact, he’s rather like a buck, the way he wanders quietly through the forest.”

“A buck,” Briggs said. “Yes, perfect. He’s quiet and always watchful. I wonder if his ears twitch at the sound of a branch cracking?”

“Dearest, really,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Must you make a joke out of everything?”

“I think I must,” Briggs said. “I’m sorry, Mother, but it’s the curse of the middle child.” He took a slug of white wine.

There were two wines. White for the fish and a red one for whatever came next.

“I’m sure he’s perfectly nice.” Mrs. Tutheridge’s tone remained sharp. “But he’s not for you, Ella.”

Continuing to look bewildered by the sudden turn in the conversation, Ella addressed her mother. “You’ve nothing to worry about. I’ve not fallen in love with Rhett. We grew up with him practically—he’s more like a brother—the same with all the boys I went to school with.” She turned to me. “There’s absolutely no one on this island I would ever feel that way about, thus I’m going to die an old maid.”

“You could go off the island,” Briggs said.

“Bite your tongue, brother. I have everything I need right here,” Ella said.

Throughout that exchange, I’d stolen glances at Mrs. Tutheridge. She’d relaxed when Ella said she was not attracted to the changeling boy. She must be worried Ella cared for a man beneath her. I suppose I couldn’t blame her. That meant she would feel the same about me and one of her sons. Benedict and I were not equally matched either. *I must remember this*, I thought. *I’m a secretary. An employee.* Regardless of where I dined. Benedict was my superior. Nothing more and nothing less. Already, my overactive imagination had been playing tricks on me, hinting that he might be smitten with me as I was with him. I’d only been here for one afternoon, for goodness’ sake. How ridiculous could I be?

Quite ridiculous, I thought, as I caught myself staring at his broad neck as he swallowed a bit of wine and imagined what it would feel like to place my mouth there and give him a little kiss.

My oh my. I returned my attention back to my food and swore to God and myself that I would not think one more fruitless and scandalous thought.

BENEDICT

In the days following her arrival, I spent many hours with Amelia, sharing the history of the company. I'd explained that my father had made his first money through the railroad and then invested what he could into a shipbuilding company out of Seattle. We had managers at the site, I told her, as well as a controller and other necessary roles. My unwanted task was to drive the strategy of the company. "For which I'm dolefully unqualified."

"Nonsense," Amelia had said. "You only needed someone like me to take care of the details while you use your excellent mind to manage the business."

I doubted she was right but kept that to myself. Instead, I'd gone on to describe more of what I needed from her. Her job was to take my dictation and type up correspondence and direction to our management team at the factory. In addition, I needed her to help me sort through budgets and profit-and-loss reports. All of which involved endless numbers and line items. Fortunately for me, Amelia grasped everything with ease.

On the other hand, I hated every minute of it. That is, other than being near her. I could do that all day, every day.

By the time lunch arrived on our third day together, we'd already knocked off several letters and gone over the profit and expenses for the previous month.

A good rhythm had developed between us in such a short time. We were a nearly perfect match. If only she'd been sent

by God for a different kind of match. One that involved a wedding license rather than business correspondence.

Don't be a fool, I told myself. A woman like Amelia would not ever consider a man like me. She knew all my shortcomings and must feel sorry for me. Pity could not be felt in tandem with love. Only respect and admiration led to love.

This was on my mind as we sat down together to have hot bowls of chowder and chunks of sourdough bread at the small round table in the library. Outside the windows, a cold drizzle fell. Inside, we were warm and dry, with a fire going in the hearth.

“Do you always have lunch here?” Amelia asked.

“If I have to. I prefer to eat outside when I can. Before this was all dumped on me, I spent most of my time outdoors. Since my father's death, my life's not been my own.”

“I hope I'll help with that, at least a little,” Amelia said.

“I believe you will.”

“Do you have a direction for the company planned?” Amelia asked, pushing aside her empty bowl of soup.

“I have an idea. I don't know if it's good or not.”

“Yes?” She raised an exquisite eyebrow. If anything, she looked even more bewitching than she had the day she arrived. Looking professional in a plain black skirt and a white blouse with puffy sleeves, she glowed with good health. The smudges under her eyes had disappeared after a few good nights' sleep.

Bewitching. Beguiling.

Distracting.

I blinked her back into focus to answer her question. “I'd like to sell the company.”

“Really? But isn't it your family's livelihood?”

“It has been for many years, yes. Regardless, I don't want to run it. My brothers don't. Ella's certainly capable, but her heart is here with the residents of this island. My father can't bully us into doing what he wants any longer.”

“But what about the upkeep of this house?” Amelia asked. “Would you be able to support it if you sold the business?”

I nodded, knowing what she meant. I’d shared with her the household expenses and staffing costs. Staggering amounts of money went in and out of this house on a monthly basis. “When the gold rush happened in Alaska, my father’s ships and parts made him more money than we could ever spend in a lifetime. There’s plenty for all of us, including keeping up the house and giving each of us a good portion to do with whatever we wish.”

She seemed to sit with that for a moment, a myriad of expressions moving over her face in the same way clouds move across the sky on a windy day. “I can’t imagine that kind of money,” she said finally.

“It’s useless if you’re in a prison. That’s what all this is for me.” I pointed at the pile of papers we’d gone through that morning.

“What would you do instead?”

“Be free,” I said.

“If you sell the company, I suppose I’ll have to look for a new job,” Amelia said. “I’ll be sorry to go, but I’ll do whatever it takes to assist you in the meantime.”

I’d not thought about how it would affect her. What an insensitive beast I was. “There are other ways you could contribute here. Although you’ll soon be swept up by some lucky fellow and no longer need to work.”

Her eyes widened. “No, I don’t think so. Women like me don’t marry.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would you say that?”

She shrugged and looked forlornly out the window. “It’s this red hair.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Your hair’s striking. How could it keep you from love?”

“It’s horrid. And there’s my temper. And my clumsiness. And the way I can’t ever seem to mind my own business.”

“I think you’re greatly mistaken,” I said, chuckling. “Your beauty and intelligence are extraordinary, even if you don’t see it. Surely you know this deep down?”

“I have to admit, it pleases me to hear you say so. Mr. Pitts did his best to rob me of whatever self-confidence my mother had bestowed upon me.”

“Ah, yes. That I understand,” I said, smiling despite the sadness of that truth. For me and for Amelia. “My father was particularly adept at that too.”

“We’ll make a pact, then? To build each other up instead of tearing down?”

“I’ll gladly make that pact,” I said.

“I’ll try to live up to your image of me and not disappoint.”

There was no way she would change my mind about her, I thought. No way at all.

MOST SUNDAYS, I took the women in my family to church. Father had always refused to go. Hudson no longer attended now that Rosemary was not around to insist. Briggs was not what one would describe as a regular attendee of anything but the pub and the brothels he visited in Seattle.

Ella, surprisingly, never missed a service, even if she’d been up all night with a patient. My sister seemed to have a relationship with God of a personal nature. She was often on her knees at home, praying. She’d been that way as a child, too, telling me several times of her late-night discussions with God.

The first Sunday Amelia was with us, I didn’t ask her to attend, not knowing her religious beliefs and also feeling respectful of her days off. I’d given her both Saturdays and Sundays off each week and had told her to do with them as she pleased.

But I was pleasantly surprised when she asked me Saturday during dinner if she could join us for church services. Mother and Ella were both at the table when she asked. We enthusiastically said how happy we would be to have her join us.

Sunday morning proved to be another beautiful day. Fog hovered over the water until after nine and then seemed to magically lift and dissipate, leaving a blanket of pale blue sky reflected upon the Sound. I'd been out for a walk earlier but had come back to bathe and dress for church. By the time I arrived downstairs, Dexter had had the horse and carriage brought around to the front. Ella and Amelia were ready, wearing pretty dresses and hats. Mother came down with Bebe shortly thereafter. Bebe, scowling and growly, was loudly refusing to go even as Mother dragged her down the stairs.

"You will stop all this fussing immediately," Ella said to Bebe. "Or you'll face the consequences when we return."

Bebe lifted her chin and sent daggers across the room to her aunt. "What will happen to me?" She seemed to be weighing whatever the punishment might be with having to attend.

"You'll be spending the rest of the day doing heinous chores," Ella said. "Like cleaning out the pig's trough and helping Mrs. Halvorson by peeling potatoes."

"Those don't sound worse than church," Bebe said.

"Why don't you like church?" Amelia asked as she placed a pin into her lovely hat with the bright purple feather. "Don't you like to hear the Bible stories?"

I'd mentioned to Amelia that our church offered Sunday school to all of the island children. Their teacher was the daughter of our town baker, a young woman rumored to have suffered a traumatic event during her childhood that had made her skittish and frightened of men. Children, however, she enjoyed. From what I'd observed, anyway.

"Church is boring," Bebe said, narrowing her eyes as she peered up at Amelia. "You like it?"

“When I was a child, I looked forward to it all week,” Amelia said. “I loved hearing the stories, and sometimes we were given a cookie by the pastor’s wife. How I looked forward to that cookie.”

I stifled a chuckle. The way Amelia tucked into her food tickled me.

“We don’t get cookies,” Bebe said. “Even though Miss Lauren works at the bakery.”

“That *is* unfortunate,” Amelia said. “But maybe your grandmother would allow you a cookie if you behaved well at church?”

“Would you?” Bebe scowled, watching Mother.

“I’ve never seen you behave nicely at church,” Mother said. “But if you did, then you could have a cookie and some milk. *After* you eat a good lunch.”

“I’ll think about it,” Bebe said.

Ella marched forward and put both hands on the little girl’s shoulders. “I’ll tell you what. You will stay home and clean the floors instead, and you’ll have no lunch or cookies.”

Bebe stuck her nose up in the air. “I don’t clean floors. That’s for servants to do.”

“Get your coat on,” Ella said, sternly. “I’ll have no more of this sass.”

Bebe huffed but went to the closet and allowed Dexter to assist her. Despite her pouty attitude, she looked adorable in a red coat with a hood.

“You look like Red Riding Hood,” Amelia said.

“Who’s that?” Bebe asked.

“She’s a character in a fairy tale,” Amelia said. “You don’t know the story?”

“No. Why should I?” Bebe glared at Amelia.

“If you are nice and quiet during church, I’ll read it to you when we get home,” Amelia said. “But only if you’re good.”

Bebe seemed to contemplate this offer for a second. “I’ll go, I suppose.” She lifted her chin, haughtily, as if she were doing us a great favor.

The truth though? She must have really wanted to hear that story. For that matter, so did I.

A few minutes later, I had all of the women and one naughty little niece safely tucked into the carriage. By the time we arrived in town, Bebe had managed to take off her boots and was refusing to return them to her feet. I’d been up front driving, so I wasn’t sure exactly how this transpired, but my sister was clearly agitated. Amelia’s hand shook as I helped her out of the carriage. Mother had tears in her eyes and dabbed at her cheeks with a lace hanky.

“She won’t budge,” Ella whispered to me as I assisted her safely to the ground. “The little monster.”

“Let me try.” I poked my head inside to find Bebe without her boots and a feral gleam in her eyes. “Why did you take off your boots?”

“My feet were hot.” Bebe glared at me from a corner of the carriage like a baby fox trapped in a den.

“Put them back on,” I said.

“I don’t want to.”

“It’s not a question of want,” I said. “You will put them on, or I’ll haul you out of here like you’re a baby instead of a big girl. Do you want everyone to see that?”

A hint of a smile hovered around Bebe’s pink mouth. Had I said the wrong thing? Maybe she *wanted* to cause a disturbance going into church?

“I’m coming in now,” I said. “And taking you into church. Do you understand?”

“No! I won’t go. I’ll stay in the carriage.” She curled into a ball, as if I were going to physically harm her. If she had any idea of what I’d experienced as a child, she would know how good she had it.

As gently as I could, even as my temper flared, I pulled her into my arms. She kicked and screamed with surprising strength. Ella darted back into the carriage to get the boots, and she and Amelia stepped out of the way to huddle with Mother at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the church. Our terror had no plan to subside, continuing to holler and flail about, her knees jabbing into my ribs.

Several women passed us by, staring with pity in their eyes. Or judgment. I wasn't sure which. Where was my brother, anyway? He should be dealing with this, not me. "Ella, will you take care of the horses? Amelia and Mother, go in without us. We'll *both* join you in a minute." I had to practically yell myself to be heard over the cries from the beastly creature in my arms.

"That's enough." I slung her over my shoulder. She kicked my chest until I clamped one of my large hands over her ankles. I'm not sure if she was tired, but finally, the caterwauling ceased. I could now hear myself think.

I stalked down the main street of town with Bebe dangling over my shoulder. Fortunately, she was light, because now she'd made her body completely limp. Deadweight was always the worst kind. I headed to the bench that overlooked the water and plopped her down as if she were a sack of flour, then knelt beside her. Placing my large paws on either side of her hips, I looked into her eyes. On high alert, hoping she would not try to kick me, I spoke as sternly as I could. "What in God's name has gotten into you? You're not an animal. You must wear shoes, especially to church."

"Why doesn't my papa have to come to church?" Blue eyes stared into mine with startling intensity.

Good question. "He's a grown-up and doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to. When you're grown you'll have a choice to do the same. For now, however, young ladies in the Tutheridge family go to church. Don't you want to see the other children at Sunday school? They'll have a good story, and you can recite your Bible verse from last week."

"I don't know it."

“Is that why you don’t want to go?” I asked. “Because you didn’t learn the verse?” I could empathize, having felt shame my entire life for not doing well in school.

“I don’t care about that silly verse. It’s stupid. Why do we have to memorize them anyway?”

“Because that’s how you get closer to the Lord.”

“The Lord doesn’t care about us. Can’t you see that? He let my mother die.” Her voice quivered. “And James said at Sunday school last week that Grandfather was dead because he was mean as a snake.”

“Who is James?” My anger instantly rose. No wonder she didn’t want to go to church.

“No one. Just a boy I go to school with.”

“Well, I don’t know where he heard that about your grandfather but...” What did I say? It was true that Father was dead because someone he’d treated badly had finally had enough. He had been mean as a snake, and he was dead because of it.

“Bebe, when people say such things, you have to ignore them. Turn the other cheek, like we’re taught in the Bible.”

“I’d rather kick him.”

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from laughing. Sometimes she reminded me of Ella. “I understand. But we mustn’t do such things. If you’re frustrated or mad, you should talk to your father or grandmother. Or Ella.”

“What about you?”

“You can talk to me, too, but I’m not as smart as the others. They would probably be able to help you better than I.”

“Why does that lady live with us now?”

“Amelia?”

Bebe nodded.

“She works for me. Helping me run your grandfather’s business.”

“I don’t like her.”

“Why?” How could anyone not like Amelia?

“She gives me looks. Bad ones. Like I’m bad.”

“Sometimes you behave badly. Today, for instance.”

“I don’t care,” Bebe said.

“I know, but the rest of us do.” I stood and took off my hat, then lifted her to her feet so that she was standing on the bench in her stocking feet. “Come on. I’ll give you a piggyback ride to find your boots. And then you’re going into Sunday school and you’re going listen and be still during the lesson.”

She didn’t say anything, other than to stick her bottom lip out, but when I turned around she climbed onto my back, hugging me a little too tightly around the neck.

“Easy now,” I said. “You don’t want to choke your uncle Benedict.”

She loosened her grip and sighed before resting her chin on the top of my head.

Something had to be done about Bebe. I had no idea what the solution could be, other than her father needed to pay more attention to her. She needed discipline and consequences. Not that I knew anything about raising children. However, she had experienced a recent trauma. Losing my father was complicated for the adults in the family, but perhaps it was for her too. He’d never spent any time with her, so I didn’t think she missed him necessarily. But she could be acting out because she didn’t know how else to express her confusion. Whatever the cause, we must fix her. She was our responsibility, whether she was a feral baby fox or not.

AN HOUR LATER, I lingered near the pulpit, gathering the energy to get Bebe from Sunday school. Ella had taken Mother and Amelia out and would bring the carriage around for me. I was stuck with fetching Bebe.

I made my way up the aisle. When I reached the last pew, Pastor Timothy Bains gestured for me to wait. “May I have a quick word?”

“Yes, of course.” We stepped out of the aisle and moved up to the front and sat together in the first pew.

“I wanted to ask after your mother. Is there anything I can do for her? Or the rest of your family? I’ve never had a member of my church experience such a tragedy. Murder.” He shook his head. “I’m out of my element, I’m afraid.”

“We’re doing as well as can be expected.”

“I could come out to the house and pray with her. Please let her know I’m available anytime.”

“I’ll do that.”

I expected him to leave me then, but it seemed he had more to say. “Sheriff White told me he has no leads on who killed your father.” He grimaced and rubbed his chin. “Such a nasty thing. You all must still be reeling.”

“Yes, yes.” What did he want me to say? Was he fishing to see how much we knew about the murder? Had he done it? A preacher killing a man in his own congregation seemed far-fetched.

“Do you miss him?” I asked, curious.

He looked away, his expression hardening. “We played poker every Friday night. That was the extent of our friendship. I’m not sure anyone in this town misses him. Perhaps even his own family is glad he’s gone?”

“Well, yes. I mean, no.” He’d thrown me off with that last question. How did I answer without making it seem like anyone in my family could have pulled the trigger? Is that what he thought? Was he digging for answers?

“Your mother told me about what it was like for you and Briggs growing up.”

I drew in a sharp breath. “How much did she tell you?”

“I’m not sure if I know it all, but she did tell me about the punishments your father gave you and your brother. As well as a few hints about how he treated her.”

“I see.” Mother had told him about the dungeon? That surprised me. It was such a shameful thing to have shared. She was our mother, after all. Yet powerless against him.

“I’m available if you ever need someone to talk to or pray with,” Timothy said.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. We’re all fine. The Tutheridge family’s tough.” We had to be.

“How’s the young lady working out? Amelia Young? I was glad to see her at church.”

I blinked at the abrupt change of subject. “She appears to like it here. I find her delightful to work with and be around. We couldn’t be happier, really. I hope she’ll stay.”

“Do you think she’ll leave? Island life isn’t for everyone.”

“It’s too soon to tell.” I’d like her to stay. Forever. But I kept that to myself.

I FOUND Bebe sitting on the floor with another girl, seemingly having a fine time, given her grin and happy chatter. She stood and ran toward me, hurling herself against my legs. “I thought you’d never get here.”

“Let’s go home and have some lunch.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Where else would we go?” I asked, taking her hand and leading her out of the room and around the side of the building.

“We could get bread at the bakery and go down to the water and feed it to the ducks.”

“Some other time,” I said.

She must have been tired, because she didn't argue. Thank goodness.

By the time we reached the driveway, Ella was waiting for us.

"I'm driving," Ella said. "Mother already left with the sheriff. He's taking her home."

The sheriff? Did he have news?

"You ride with Amelia and Bebe," Ella said to me.

I laughed, knowing better than to argue, and obediently climbed in after Bebe. Amelia was already there waiting for us. She'd sat between Ella and me in the pews and had seemed to enjoy the sermon. She knew all the hymns by heart, barely glancing down at the music book we shared. Upon reflection and after our discussion, Timothy's sermon was interesting. He'd talked about sins and how we're forgiven, no matter how heinous the crime. Was he talking about himself?

We'd only been in the carriage a few minutes when Bebe fell asleep against my side. Her weight felt warm and pleasant. All that fussing and hollering tired a girl out.

"How did you like our church?" I asked. "Was the sermon to your liking?"

She lifted her gaze to mine and spoke quietly. "The sermon was good. But there's something not quite right about Timothy Bains. It seems as if he has something in his past that he regrets or needs redemption from."

I nodded. Should I tell her everything I knew about the suspect list? How could it hurt? With her quick mind, she might be able to solve the mystery. "You're right about Bains. There's more, too." As succinctly as I could, I told her about the others from the poker game. "Any of them could have followed him home and killed him on the way."

"Yes, true." Her brow wrinkled. "When we get home I'm going to make a list of possible killers and their motives."

"I don't know if I want you involved in all of this."

Her face fell. “But I’m here, and I might be the most curious creature in the world. I won’t be able to let it go. If there’s a puzzle, I must solve it.”

I chuckled. “We didn’t hire you to be a detective, but if you have that to offer, then who am I to disagree?”

“I should read Sherlock Holmes and see if I can learn any tips.”

“That’s only fiction,” I said. “I doubt we can learn anything about detective work.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Give me a chance, at least. Will you tell me everything you know?”

“For your notebook?”

“*Our* notebook,” she said.

We were quiet for a moment. I thought some more about Timothy Bains and his strange sermon and the talk he had with me afterward. “It’s impossible to imagine that gentle preacher capable of murder,” I said out loud to Amelia. “Plus, he doesn’t have the motive the two shop owners have or even Caleb.” My eyes widened as the next thought occurred to me. “He asked about Mother, seeming more concerned than he would over one of his flock. Several times he mentioned letting her know he was around to talk or pray with her. Maybe he’s in love with Mother and he killed her husband to get him out of the way?”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “No, it can’t be. Your mother would never be involved in adultery.”

“Other than my father’s,” I said drily. “She may not know his feelings. He may be waiting to approach her until the proper mourning period is over.”

“It’s a theory,” she said.

“But implausible? Isn’t love one of the primary motives for murder, along with money and revenge?”

“Ah, there it is. I knew I could get you interested in solving this crime.” She grinned and was so pretty my heart

skipped a beat. If helping her with her suspect list meant more time with her, then I was definitely a willing participant.

AMELIA

One warm afternoon, I took a walk around the property, delighted by the fresh air and budding trees and shrubs.

How far away my life in Boston seemed. But were my days here numbered? He'd surprised me when he told me of his wish to sell the shipping business. I would hate to leave. Maybe I could find another position here? I would have to face it when the time came. For now, I would enjoy myself.

The sun was setting by the time I turned back toward the house. There was still an hour until dinner, so I would have time to bathe and dress for the evening meal. I stepped up onto the wide veranda that ran the length of the mansion. Six archways dipped along the wall of the covered patio and at this moment, Ella, dressed in white, sat on the ledge between the first archway, looking out to the water. She lifted a hand in greeting. I'd not seen her much since our first encounter. From what Benedict had said, she'd been busy with an outbreak of chicken pox with several neighboring families and had come home too tired to dine with us at supper, taking her meal in her room.

I walked up the stairs and along the patio until I reached her. She gave me a warm smile. "How are you holding up, Miss Young?" Ella asked.

"Please, call me Amelia."

"And not A.F.?" Her eyes danced with mischief. "You were quite the surprise for Ben. He thought you were a man."

“Yes, I know.” I sat next to her, the two of us nestled into the curve of the archway. “I thought he might send me home then and there.”

“I believe my mother knew and chose not to tell him.” Ella said this casually, but I couldn’t help but feel there was more to it.

“Why would she do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. She’s up to something. Nothing nefarious. But there’s a purpose in her step lately. You being here has made a big difference in all our lives.”

“Really? How so?” I was surprised to hear her say it, as I’d been here such a short time.

“I don’t know how to explain it, other than to say my mother and Ben seem to have a new lease on life. You’ve eased my brother’s burden.”

“I’m happy and pleased to do so if that’s the case.”

“I should go and get ready for dinner,” Ella said. “I’m home tonight. As long as no one goes into labor, I should be able to enjoy a meal with my family.”

“It’s nice to see you,” I said, feeling suddenly shy but grateful to have a new friend.

She linked arms with me as we walked toward the double doors that led into the living room. “It’s nice to have another girl in the family.”

In the family? What a thrilling sound those words made together. If only it were true. But I must remember I was an employee, not a Tutheridge.

THE SECOND SATURDAY after I arrived, Benedict gave me my first paycheck. I was astounded at the amount. I’d never had that much at one time.

“It’s more than we agreed upon,” I said to Benedict.

“You’re more than we anticipated. For being here such a short time, I’ve come to rely on you. You deserve it. Probably more.”

Benedict wore a flannel shirt and a pair of denim pants, looking rugged and as appealing as ever. “I’m going over to my house to work today. You should do something just for yourself. Go into town and buy something frivolous.”

I couldn’t imagine what that would be, but I agreed that town sounded like a good idea. The whole day lay ahead of me with no responsibilities. What could be better?

Spending the day with Benedict.

That little voice in my head was starting to annoy me.

A few minutes later, I asked Dexter if it was possible to be driven into town.

“Yes, right away, Miss Young,” Dexter said. “Allow me to drive you myself. I have several items to pick up for Mrs. Tutheridge.”

“Wonderful. I can be ready whenever you are.”

He glanced toward the dining room where Mrs. Tutheridge and Ella were enjoying a late breakfast. “I’ll let Mrs. Tutheridge know where we’re headed. If you want to get your coat and hat, I’ll meet you right back here.”

Nodding, I ran up the stairs to my room, excited to see more of town. When I’d arrived, I’d been too nervous to look around much, but today the sun was out, and I had no obligations. I put on my new hat, smiling at myself in the mirror. The purple feather always lifted my spirits, reminding me of Mrs. Mantle and the time we’d spent together. I grabbed my coat from the closet. When indoors, the sun could fool you into a false sense of a warm day. My morning walk had told me otherwise.

Soon, we were headed down the dirt road toward town. As we bounced along, the horses walking at a leisurely pace, I glanced over at Dexter. He was around Mrs. Tutheridge’s age, with thinning hair and a beaky nose. Not bad-looking, but not really handsome, either. Had he been better-looking when he

was young? I suspected not. Even when smiling, he had a hawkish visage, thanks to that unfortunate nose. However, his personality was considerate and kind. He'd been gracious since the moment I arrived. After we got the thank-you rule out of the way, he seemed to approve of me. Last night, he'd dropped off a heating pad to keep my feet warm, saying it was supposed to drop below freezing. He'd been right.

By now, the sun had melted away the frost. Water sparkled on the branches of trees and the wild grass that grew on either side of us. The lushness of spring was evident everywhere, from the budding trees and green grass and wildflowers that dotted the meadows. I breathed in the sweet scent of sea air, grateful to be exactly where I was.

“Dexter, may I ask you something?”

He looked over at me, still holding the reins loosely in his hands. “If you wish.”

“How long have you been with the family?”

“Since Benedict was a baby,” Dexter said, smiling. “I’ve known him all his life. A good boy and a fine man. A miracle, considering.” He said the last part under his breath.

“Was it terrible for him?” Thinking of a young Benedict being hurt made my stomach curdle. I couldn’t stand the idea of anyone hurting him, especially his own father.

“It was, yes.”

He didn’t seem inclined to say anything else on the subject. Instead, he described how close the three boys had been when they were children. Hudson and Benedict, being so close in age, were almost like twins.

“I wonder what happened between them?” They certainly didn’t seem close now. Hudson didn’t seem close to anyone, eating in his room most nights and coming out only when Bebe was playing in the yard.

“His wife’s death was a terrible blow to him. Terrible. The night Rosemary died, he was in Seattle with his father for business—blamed himself that he hadn’t been there to take care of her when she was sick. After he lost her, he withdrew

from everyone. He was especially angry at his father for insisting he attend some meeting or other.”

Interesting. Further motive. I would jot it down in my book when I got home.

Now that he'd started talking, Dexter didn't seem inclined to stop. “Mr. Tutheridge was hard on Briggs and Benedict. It was awful to witness. The scars are still there, both inside and out.”

I shuddered. I'd noticed the scar on Brigg's forehead. Were there more? “Those poor boys.”

“There's a room downstairs.” He shook his head. “No, in fact, it's more of a crawlspace than a room. Off the bowling alley. That's where he took Benedict and Briggs to inflict his punishments.”

I felt sick. A dark, cold space would be so frightening to a little person. “What kind of punishments?”

“A good beating, followed by a night alone in the dark. He locked them in. I sneaked them food and a lantern when I could, but Mr. Tutheridge had eyes in the back of his head.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “How awful.”

“T'was indeed.”

I shivered. Why hadn't it occurred to me before now that Benedict could have killed his father? Had he inflicted death upon his father as revenge? An image of Benedict's haunted eyes when he didn't know I was watching played before me.

“What about Ella and Hudson?” I asked. “Did they receive the same treatment?”

“Never Ella. He simply withheld his affection from her. She was such a pretty little thing and worshipped her brothers. Her father ignored her mostly. Made sure she knew her place. She had the last laugh on that one.”

“What about Hudson?” I asked, fighting tears. Was her desire to be useful because she had not received any love or attention from her father?

“Hudson was Mr. Tutheridge’s favorite. He was the most like his father, as far as his interests and abilities. An academic star and a head for business—that was our Hudson. The golden child, you might say. Fortunately, he’s kind like his mother.”

“He wasn’t taken to the basement room?” I asked, feeling newly sick.

“No. His punishments were like those of Mrs. Tutheridge. A boxing now and then but no dungeon.”

“What? Even Mrs. Tutheridge?”

“Miss Young, the horrors experienced in that house are nothing a woman of your sensibilities should ever have to know.”

“I shan’t like to know, and yet I would.” I twisted slightly to get a better look at him. “What a terrible thing for you to have to witness. It must have been difficult?”

“It was. I did my best when I could.”

“I always thought the rich didn’t have troubles. Why would anyone with a full stomach ever want to hurt anyone else? I mean, I could imagine if it were a life-and-death type of matter—you know, fighting over food and such. But why would a man like Roland Tutheridge want to hurt his little children?”

“Because he wasn’t a man. He was a monster. His mother did it to him.”

“How do you know?”

“I met her a few times.”

“I see,” I said, although I didn’t actually understand what he meant.

“She was a horror,” Dexter said. “The worst kind of mother, giving only conditional love. Thus, he learned to seek success no matter the cost or whom he hurt.”

“What happened to his mother?”

“She passed away years ago.”

We continued on, silent for a moment until Dexter continued.

“I knew Mrs. Tutheridge before she married Roland Tutheridge. My father worked for her family. I’ve always been devoted to her, since we were young. When she married Mr. Tutheridge, she asked that I come along to run their household. I’ve been with them ever since. I’d do anything for her and the children.”

“I’m sure they appreciate you,” I said. “You never thought about leaving?”

Dexter snapped the reins, urging the horses to go faster now that we were on the main road to town. “I am her loyal servant. The idea of working elsewhere never occurred to me. This family has been my livelihood and identity since my birth. Mrs. Tutheridge and I were taught all our lives to know our place. She was the daughter of a rich diplomat, and I the son of an English-born butler. We have both accepted our fates, as one must.”

“Yes, I understand.” I, too, needed to remember my place in this world and not get any grand ideas.

We arrived in town. The entire island seemed to have had the same idea as I. Downtown bustled with people, shopping or strolling along the main avenue. Women with umbrellas to keep the sun from their faces. Men in their weekend suits, taking care of errands.

I looked over at Dexter. He’d grown pale, and his hands trembled. “Dexter, are you all right? Are you ill?”

“I’ve talked too much. Said things I shouldn’t. Is it too much to ask that we keep that between us?” He darted a glance my way.

“I wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise. You and I have more in common than you probably think. I’d never do anything to put you in an awkward position.”

“Thank you.”

“Think no more of it.” I gave him my best smile, hoping to reassure him. “We’ll keep all this between us.”

ON MONDAY EVENING AFTER DINNER, I was passing through the foyer toward the hallway when Benedict appeared. “Amelia, may I bother you for a moment?”

My heartbeat raced at the sight of him. He wore a suit but no tie, with the collar open at the neck, revealing the hollow of his throat. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

“I was wondering about that offer of yours—to read to me?” He dipped his chin, seeming to examine his toes. “You see, a new book’s arrived, and I’m desperate to hear the story. Would you be willing to read a chapter to me?”

“Yes, I’d be happy to. Where?” I looked around the foyer, as if he’d suggested we settle ourselves right here.

“Everyone but Dexter’s gone up to bed,” Benedict said. “But he can chaperone us in the living room, if you wouldn’t mind?”

I nodded, following him while willing my feet to walk instead of skip. Dexter was indeed there, sitting in the shadows. Poor man. I hoped he didn’t mind having to be present. Hopefully, he liked novels too.

“I’m a little embarrassed to show you the book,” Benedict said. “You mustn’t make fun of me.”

“I’d never do any such thing.” Now I couldn’t wait to see what it was.

He went to the desk and returned with his bounty. I smiled at the name. It was an L. M. Montgomery novel. A follow-up, perhaps, to her very popular *Anne of Green Gables*.

“It’s not about Anne with an *E*,” Benedict said. “But it looks good just the same.”

I laughed, thrilled that he knew the book I’d loved so much myself. The girls in the boardinghouse had passed it among us until we all had a turn. “I adore that book.”

“As do I. From the description, this has great potential to be as wonderful,” Benedict said.

“Absolutely,” I said, taking the book from him and settling in one of the chairs by the fire. “But why would I tease you about loving Anne with an *E*?”

“Isn’t it written for young girls? More for Bebe than I?”

“Not Bebe. Not yet anyway,” I said. “But yes, it’s a little unusual for a man to request this one, but it’s their loss then, isn’t it?”

He sat across from me, his face as happy as a child awaiting a treat. “I cannot wait. It’s been here for weeks, and I’ve stared at it as one would a sweetheart.”

I laughed again. “Books might be better than a sweetheart. They never let us down, do they?”

“Did you have a sweetheart who let you down?” Benedict asked.

I hadn’t expected that question, and it momentarily startled me, keeping me from answering. “No, not me. I stayed clear of any such entanglements, but the girls in the boardinghouse were always having their hearts broken. I decided it was best to protect my tender one.”

“Wise.” His voice sounded husky in the quiet room.

I met his gaze for a second longer than was appropriate, then looked back at the book, flustered. Thank goodness Dexter was supervising, or I might feel unsafe. No, not unsafe. Vulnerable to my own impulses. I swallowed. I’d never felt anything remotely like this with any other man. Later, I told myself. Think about that later. Right now, I was to read. “Shall I begin?”

“Please.” He closed his eyes, obviously ready for the story.

I turned to the first page and began to read, almost immediately taken with the characters. At the end of the first chapter, I looked up from the book. Benedict had listened without moving a muscle. Had he been as absorbed in the story as I? Dexter, on the other hand, was softly snoring.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Worth continuing?”

“Yes, yes, indeed. Doesn’t she have a remarkable way with words? I know she’s considered overly romantic in some circles, but I love it.”

“I agree,” I said. “Would you like another chapter before we head up to bed?”

“Would you mind?” He grinned, looking like a boy.

“Not at all.”

And so it was on that night we began our ritual of reading together for an hour after supper with a sleepy Dexter chaperoning. If anyone had known that Dexter slept through most of our evenings together, they may have considered someone else to watch over us. Fortunately for me, no one noticed.

BENEDICT

After spending the day working on my house, I was physically tired, which always helped my mind to be less jumbled. Plus, the sun had shone all day. Spring seemed to be hanging around in earnest now, filling my heart with a lightness of spirit. As much as I loved the rain and fog, I found by this time of year I was ready for sun and longer days. My mood almost always lifted in April.

As I passed by the living room, I noticed Mother sitting by the fire looking somewhat forlorn. She had a cup of tea in her hand but seemed to have forgotten it was there. Instead of going upstairs to bathe, I stopped to check on her. “Mother? May I be of service? Is anything troubling you?”

She blinked, seeming to notice me for the first time. “No, I’m fine. Lost in thought.”

“I’m back from working at the house.”

“I can smell you from here,” Mother said, smiling.

“I’ll go up and bathe and change.” I chuckled. “I hate to offend the ladies of the household.”

“How do you think it’s going with Miss Young? Amelia, that is. Do you like her?”

I avoided making eye contact, pretending to warm my hands by the fire. “She’s fine. Very efficient. Bright. She was a good choice.” Had she noticed I could barely keep my eyes off Amelia? It was all I could do to keep my itchy fingers from reaching for a wayward tendril at the base of her neck. Oh, her neck, so long and fair, almost regal.

“Good. I’m glad. I felt responsible for the match.”

“This woman back east must really know her business,” I said. “She sent the perfect secretary for us.”

“I’m going to find someone for Briggs next.”

“An assistant? Does he want one?” I asked.

“Yes, for cleaning paintbrushes and stretching canvas, as well as keeping his books and scheduling clients for portraits.”

“I could see how much help that would be to him.” I studied her for a moment. “You’ve never said what you think about his choice of career. Will you support him now that Father’s died?”

“I’d like to help him as much as I can. But your brother’s ways will be the death of him if he isn’t careful. It’s only so long before a cuckolded husband seeks revenge on Briggs.”

“I think his reputation may be exaggerated. He seems more intent on working on his paintings than fraternizing with women.”

“I hope you’re right.” Mother looked at me for a moment, a wrinkle in her brow. Fine lines etched in all directions on her pretty face. She wore a casual dress this afternoon. Not black, I noticed. Had she given up on mourning? She wasn’t exactly the grieving widow. Not that I blamed her for it.

“What kind of woman do you think would be good for Briggs?” Mother asked.

“For a secretary?”

“No, I mean for a mate. A wife. What do you think it would take to get him to settle down?”

I chuckled at the idea. “I can’t imagine he will ever settle for one woman and marry. We would need a miracle for that.”

“What about for you?” Mother stirred sugar into her cup of tea, slowly, as if it were a cauldron and she a witch. I wished she could invent a magic potion that would make Amelia fall in love with me. She was the kind of woman I would want. Smart but with a genteel softness to her that touched my soul.

Would she ever look at me as anyone other than her employer? Dare I hope? No, I should not. Hope got a person in trouble.

“Benedict, I asked you a question.”

“I don’t think any woman would want to marry me.” My throat tightened at the truth of those words.

“I think you underestimate your appeal, dearest. You’re handsome and strong. You’re a wonderful conversationalist.”

I laughed. “That, madam, is a lie.”

“You’re good when you know people. Like with me. Or say, Amelia?” She tossed that out ever so casually. What was she insinuating?

“Amelia is easy to talk to,” I said slowly. “She’s unusual that way.”

“Or perhaps the two of you have an ease with each other? You don’t know. She may not find everyone as easy to talk to as she does you.”

Glancing out the window, I rubbed my forehead with the pad of my thumb. Over the water, an eagle soared, looking for his dinner. “If you want to know the truth, I find Amelia Young beguiling. She’s everything a man could want.”

“What about Amelia for Briggs?” Mother’s pale eyes glittered, testing me. I was onto her.

I wanted to shout *over my dead body* but managed to keep that to myself. “Briggs should stay away from her. She’s a woman who deserves a loyal husband, one with whom to build a life. Briggs is not that man.”

“What about you?” Mother asked. “Will you ever be able to see how much you have to offer a woman like her?”

From out of nowhere as he often did, Dexter appeared, holding a fresh pot of tea. “Mr. Benedict, sir, would you like a cup?”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I’m headed upstairs. Is Amelia back from town?”

“Yes, she’s in her room resting,” Dexter said.

“Did she enjoy town, do you think?” I asked, wanting to know every detail of his time with her.

“She did. Very much. Said it wore her out, though.”

“Thus, the nap?” I asked.

“Yes sir.” Dexter nodded and backed away, padding softly out of the room.

“Have you ever noticed how he can sneak up on a person?” I asked mother, quietly.

“He is rather light-footed.” She smiled, her fondness for Dexter obvious. “I don’t know what either of us would have done without him all these years.”

I shivered, remembering how often he’d saved me from Father. “Indeed.”

“Now, answer my question,” Mother said. “You find Amelia beguiling. Wonderful word, by the by. And you don’t want your brother to have her. She’s proven herself to be more than adequate as your assistant. What more do you need to know before opening your heart to the possibility of a match?”

I smiled, wishing for a moment that it was as easy as my mother’s suggestion. I liked Amelia, therefore she could be mine. My mother’s presumption was nothing but a daydream. She wasn’t taking into account that this was me. I was a beast and Amelia the beauty. A recluse, more comfortable outside in the mud than in here balancing sums.

There were the scars, too. From the times Father had broken the skin on my back. What would they feel like under a lady’s fingers? Would she find me repulsive?

I closed my eyes, pushing away the memory. It hadn’t happened since I grew big enough to fight back. I’d grown so much larger than my father. That had been the final rescue, keeping me from banishment to the dark room below the bowling alley. “Mother, I don’t know if I could ever be ready to love a woman like Amelia.”

“Why ever not?” She looked at me as if I’d just said something absurd when we both knew it was true. I was a

freak. A monster with scars on my back and my heart.

“Do you know what he did to us down there?” I asked quietly.

She flinched, as if I’d slapped her. “Yes, I know.”

“Did you ever try to stop him?” I’d never had the courage to bring up the subject of our punishments. It seemed as if she never knew they’d happened, but that was impossible.

“How could I? Every time I dared question him, I paid for it. Even when I didn’t challenge him, he came after me. There were nights he came home drunk and smelling of cheap perfume and yet it was my fault.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “But believe me when I say I tried to save you boys. Many times.”

I didn’t recall any of those times. I could only remember how he’d marched me down to the room about once a month for whipping and then the night alone in the dark, locked away from the rest of the family. The infractions were never clear, other than being stupid and an embarrassment to him. Briggs defied him outright, which caused him to be thrown in there even more than me. I’d tried my best to stay invisible, but Father saw me anyway.

“A month before he was killed,” Mother said, “he almost choked me to death.”

“What?” I hadn’t known.

“Your father came home from wherever he’d spent the last few days in a terrible mood. I think he must have quarreled with his latest mistress. He took it out on me, whatever it was that triggered him. I thought this was the time. I was finally done. But then Bebe came knocking at my door. You know the child has no boundaries. She barged right into the room and saw your father pummeling me. She started screaming. It’s the only time anyone has been able to stop him in the middle of one of my punishments. God bless her. If she hadn’t appeared right then, it might be me who was dead instead of your father.”

I stared at her. What was she saying? Had she murdered him? Before he could kill her? No one would blame her if she had. “Mother?”

She grimaced and touched her pale fingers to her cheeks. “I didn’t kill him, Benedict. But I’m not sad he’s gone. For the first time since I married, I can breathe. I woke this morning looking forward to the day. A peaceful day without pain. Time spent with my children without having to worry that he could become enraged at any moment. Whoever it was who did kill him, I’d like to thank them.”

“Mother, what about Briggs? He has a temper, you know. He never acted afraid of Father, even though I know he got the same treatment as me.”

“It’s crossed my mind. He’s a good shot, your brother. Roland had mentioned it to me several times after you all came home from hunting deer.” She closed her eyes, the memory obviously painful. “Do you know what I thought when he told me what a good shot Briggs was? I thought, if only he would accidentally shoot you.” She opened her eyes. “What kind of person thinks such a thing? Wishes such a fate upon their own son? If he did it, then I’m the guilty one. I thought about such a horrible thing.”

“You didn’t cause anyone to shoot Father. You’re innocent in all this.”

“No, I’m not. I should have taken you children and left him. Run far away where he couldn’t find us.”

“How would we have lived? A woman on her own with four children? Mother, you know it would have been impossible. We had no place to go. Your parents were gone. You’ve no siblings.”

“Can you ever forgive me?” Mother’s eyes had filled again, and tears fell down her cheeks. I took my handkerchief and dabbed away the dampness.

“There’s nothing to forgive. You were as much a victim as Briggs and me.” I hesitated, wanting to ask what had been on my mind for so long. “Why was it only Briggs and me? Why

not Hudson? Ella, I can understand. He saw a daughter differently. But Hudson? I never could figure it out.”

A mixture of emotions passed over my mother’s face. She was trying to decide whether to tell me something or not. Whatever it was, it felt important, like something I needed to know in order to survive. Why did I think that way? I cannot say. The physical danger was no longer present, but there was still a sense all around me of something threatening. Should I be afraid for myself? That I could never be the man Amelia would want? That my damage was too deep? Too irreversible?

“What is it?” I asked. “Why not Hudson?”

“This is a strange tale but the truth. When I was pregnant with Hudson, your father and I were at a party in Seattle. They’d hired a fortune teller as part of the entertainment. She cornered me before I left and insisted she tell my fortune. Your father was there, impatient, but allowed it anyway. The woman put her hand on my belly. Her eyes glazed over, and she started to tremble. Roland rolled his eyes, of course, thinking it a hoax. When the gypsy opened her eyes, I could see terror there. She told me that my unborn child would someday kill his father. Roland pretended he thought it all ridiculous, but I could see how it shook him. He was a great one for the classics, you know. Fate being predetermined and all that. He believed her, I think.”

“Are you saying he left Hudson alone because of this fortune teller?” I laughed without mirth. “You’re right. Totally outrageous.” Was it true? It seemed far-fetched for my father to have believed a psychic. He would never have gone in for that kind of nonsense. Or had he?

My next thought chilled me to the bone. What if the fortune teller had been right? What if Hudson killed him?

My mother sighed. Had she thought the same thing? Perhaps immediately after we learned of Father’s death? Sheriff White had come out to the house early that morning. One of the men at our local dairy had seen his carriage in the middle of the road during his deliveries. He’d quickly seen the gunshot wound and hurried off to wake Sheriff White.

White had come to the house to inform us of Father's demise. I'd been awake, unable to sleep, and heard the horses, followed by a pounding on our front door. The rest of the household was still peacefully slumbering when I opened the door to see the sheriff standing there.

In addition to the early hour of his visit, the sight of White's grave expression filled me with a cold dread. Something had happened. Was someone hurt or dead? Briggs came to mind first. Maybe he'd been in a bar fight, or someone's husband had shot him?

I said a silent prayer. *Please, God, not Briggs*

"Is your mother here?" Sheriff White asked me.

"Where else would she be?" I asked. It was only later that I realized she was on the suspect list, like the rest of us.

"In my line of work, it's not wise to make assumptions," White said.

"I'll wake her. But first, please tell me what this is about. Is it Briggs?" I held my breath, expecting the sheriff to say yes. Instead, he shook his head and put his hand on my shoulder. "It's your father. He's been shot. As far as I can tell, he was shot on the way home from our poker game last night."

I rubbed my eyes now, setting aside that memory to focus on what my mother was saying. "Mother, is it possible the fortune teller was right?"

She looked at me with eyes so full of pain that I winced. "I don't know. It's a possibility. Hudson's changed since Rosemary."

"Do you think he blamed Father for Rosemary's death?" Why had this never occurred to me before? It was obvious now that I thought about it.

Mother winced and placed one finger against her right temple. "I do."

Rosemary had died from the flu. Hudson and Father had been away with the boat, making it impossible to get her help.

“I blame him too,” Mother said. “He was with one of his women that night and made Hudson go with him to some silly meeting instead of letting him stay with his sick wife. If we’d been able to get her to Seattle maybe she wouldn’t have died.”

“He doesn’t have it in him, Mother. Hudson’s heart is soft. He couldn’t do it.”

“People surprise me sometimes, but I agree with you.”

I heard footsteps behind me and turned to see one of the maids coming in to stoke the fire. Had she heard us? How much did the staff know about us? Probably everything.

I LAY in bed that night, the darkness enveloping me and bringing memories I tried to push away. However, they refused to be set aside, a particularly vivid one playing before my closed eyes.

I was ten. The three of us boys were like stairsteps. Hudson was nine and Briggs eight. We were walking home on the last day of school before the summer break. Carefree and pleased at the idea of long summer days to play, we chatted about our plans for the summer. Days of outside play and adventures loomed before us. Father was often gone in the summer, leaving the house in peaceful quiet.

I only half listened to my brothers’ banter. My focus was on the wildflowers that bloomed alongside the road and the scent of grass and marine life and dirt. The birds were singing their hearts out. Golden arms of sun filtered through the trees. It had rained the day before, leaving brown puddles.

Those puddles.

Briggs couldn’t help himself. He splashed in nearly every single one, soaking his boots. Dexter would gently chastise him and tell him to leave them down in the kitchen so that he could clean them up. I wasn’t worried about Briggs getting in trouble for his muddy boots, because Father had been gone for several days and was not expected home until next week.

Dexter would take care of us, as he always did. Or when he could, anyway.

My heart sank as we turned the last corner before our house. Father's horse drank from the watering hole in front of the house.

"Why is he home?" I asked, as if they would know.

"He came home early." Briggs paled and bent over to brush some of the mud from the tops of his boots. To no avail. They remained wet and dirty.

"Why would you risk it?" Hudson asked. "Is it really that much fun to jump in the puddles?"

"Yes. It is. You should try having fun sometime," Briggs said.

"Father will not be pleased," Hudson said, sounding worried. "This isn't good."

"I'll be in the dungeon for certain." Briggs smacked his lips, as if proud. "One of you will have to bring me something to eat, because I'll be in there all night."

"Maybe he won't notice your boots," I said. Despite being the scapegoat in most of Father's games, I always had hope. If I remained optimistic, then I would not fully despair. There was always another chance that Father might be kind instead of punishing.

"Slip in the back door," Hudson said, ever the practical one. The brother who didn't have to worry about the dungeon could keep his wits about him. "We'll distract him if he's in the sitting room."

"Yes, good idea," I said. "We'll say you walked home a little later than us."

With our plan intact, Hudson and I went in through the front door, and Briggs slipped around the side of the house to the kitchen entrance.

There was something about the house when Father was home. The air denser, hushed. Voices no more than whispers.

It was as if the house held its breath, hoping, as I did, that Father would not erupt.

We had no such luck that day. Father stood by the fireplace, his hands interlaced behind his back. Fear traveled up my spine even before he slowly turned to look at me. Hudson fell back. Both of us knew it was something I'd done.

I just didn't know what it was.

Until I saw the paper in his hand. A report from our teacher, most likely with our grades from the semester. Now I knew. It was because of my poor showing at school.

I already knew what it would say. Fails in every subject.

My father spoke quietly, his eyes glittering with contempt. As if I were stupid on purpose. If he only knew how hard I tried to make sense of what was on the page or in a row of sums. But my mind could not take hold. Could not stay put on whatever the word or phrase or question. The best way I could describe it was to compare the distractions in my mind to that of a tin full of glass marbles. One marble bounced against another, making the brittle sound of glass on glass. My thoughts were this way too. One came and then another and another and another until I could no longer remember what it was I was supposed to be doing.

“What is this travesty? This blight on our family?” Father asked through clenched teeth. I glanced around the room, hoping to find Mother, but she was nowhere to be seen. Ella, only six, had been ill that morning and kept home from school. Mother might be with her, I thought absently. Good. Ella was sensitive and smart. She picked up on everything. I didn't want her to see whatever was coming next.

“You've failed in every subject. The teacher thinks you might have something wrong in your brain. I told her wasn't that obvious by now? You're an idiot. You've always been an idiot.”

I hung my head, ashamed, my eyes stinging. I held my breath, trying to keep the tears from starting. It made everything worse when I showed weakness.

“You’ve brought shame to this family from the day you were born,” Father said, still in that overly calm voice that chilled my blood.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I tried. I truly did.”

He came closer, menacing, reminding me of pictures I’d seen of the grim reaper. “You will spend the night in the punishment room, thinking about what you will do differently next school year. Downstairs. Now.” He was already loosening his belt.

I handed Hudson my books and lunch box. We locked eyes for a moment. His concern nearly drove me to the tears I’d successfully kept at bay. Brown and earnest, those eyes. Brothers. Solidarity. If only he could go with me. It wouldn’t be so bad if one of them were with me. The scrambling, scratching noises of rats scurrying about the room would be less difficult to withstand.

But Hudson never received the punishment. Hopefully, Briggs had managed to clean up his boots and would be saved from the same fate.

With a sinking heart, I followed Father downstairs. *Don’t cry, don’t cry*, I repeated silently over and over. I was strong. I could get through another night there. I always had before.

Father and I walked past the bowling lanes and the pool to the opening in the floor. He lifted the trap door, and I felt in the dark for the first rung of the ladder, then made my way down until my feet reached the hard floor. Father came right after me, climbing down the ladder with great ease. I could make out his bulk in the faint light from up above. Soon, it would be completely dark.

But first, I braced for his belt against my bare back. My stomach turned over at the sound of him sliding it through the loops of his pants. “Pull up your shirt,” he said.

I did as he asked. The first one was always the worst. The second and third, my body knew what to expect. Only three. Thank God it was always the same. Just three.

My skin stung as I pulled my shirt down. I would wait until he left to see if he'd broken the skin. Like a wounded animal, I crawled to the corner and curled into a ball. The ladder creaked with my father's weight. Seconds later, the trap door slammed closed, and the darkness surrounded me. I closed my eyes and let the tears come. It was the only relief to being banished to this dungeon. I could cry in peace.

Careful not to touch my back against the wall, I felt under my shirt where he'd hit me. Damp. Blood. It was the belt buckle that broke the skin if he whacked me just right.

I fell asleep. When I woke, it was to the sound of the trap door opening. I looked up to see Dexter making his way down the ladder, carrying a kerosene lamp and a basket. I breathed in the scent of the kerosene and fried food. Mrs. Halvorson's fried chicken. I almost cried at the thought of the crispy skin and tender meat.

"Are you all right?" Dexter whispered.

"I was asleep," I whispered back, conscious of the risk he took to bring me food.

"I've brought you supper."

My stomach clenched. What if Father found out Dexter was here? He would be let go, sent away. "Were you careful? I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Your father left for the pub. He won't be back until later." The hatred in Dexter's tone was obvious. Sadly, that warmed me a little. Fear and misery were lonely endeavors. I clung to any kindness.

I took the glass bottle of water from his outstretched hand. My mouth was dry and tasted of fear. I took a long, greedy drink.

"What did he do to you?" Dexter asked.

"The same as last time." The same as every time. My father was consistent. One couldn't argue that point.

He set the lantern down beside me and asked if he could look. "I brought bandages."

I let him lift my shirt, whimpering as he pulled the fabric away from my wounds. His intake of breath told me how bad they must look.

“What time is it?” I tried not to cry from pain as he gently spread ointment on the cuts.

“Around nine.” Dexter pushed the basket toward me with one hand while still administering to my back with the other. “Eat. You must be hungry.”

“A little.” A lot. Reaching into the basket, I felt around until I found a biscuit, flaky and warm against my skin. The first bite melted in my mouth, and I groaned. Ironically, food never tasted better than when I was in the dungeon.

I yelped when Dexter placed gauze on the cuts.

“I’m sorry,” Dexter said. “I’m done now. The ointment will help them heal faster.”

He set a plate with chicken, mashed potatoes, and peas next to me, his face macabre in the lamplight. “Your father’s off to Seattle in the morning so you’ll have the rest of the weekend to heal.” He didn’t say why, but I knew. One of Father’s women.

“Is Mother all right? Did Briggs get in trouble for his boots? Is Ella better?” All the questions tumbled out of my mouth before I tore into a piece of the chicken.

“Your mother’s in bed with one of her headaches. Ella’s much improved. It’s only a cold, nothing to worry about. Mrs. Halvorson helped Briggs clean up his boots and clothes without drawing attention. He and Hudson are already in bed. They asked me to make sure you had supper. I’ll be right back with a blanket and pillow. I couldn’t get everything down at once.”

I took another bite of delicious crispy chicken as he scurried up the ladder, coming back minutes later with the promised pillow and the heavy quilt.

“I’ll be back at dawn to fetch them,” Dexter said. “So that Mr. Tutheridge won’t know I brought them.”

“Thank you.” My voice wobbled. I so desperately wished he would stay with me.

“Be brave, little soldier.”

“How come God made me an idiot?”

“God doesn’t make mistakes.”

“I’m a mistake, aren’t I? Father says I am.”

Dexter was quiet for a moment. I thought I heard the grinding of his teeth, but that might have been my imagination. “What’s your favorite animal?”

His question surprised me. “An eagle. A bald eagle.”

“An eagle, yes, that’s the one for you.” Dexter placed his hand on top of my brown curls. I wanted to crawl into his lap and cling to him, beg him to stay.

“After I leave, close your eyes and imagine yourself as a bald eagle, majestic and without fear. Powerful and strong. Can you do that?”

“I can.” I sniffed. Could I, though? The long night ahead filled me with dread. If only Mother would come and read to me. Even as I thought it, I knew it was a futile wish. She would never go against my father. If it pained her to see the punishments he doled out to Briggs and me, I could not see it. Her blue eyes betrayed nothing but fear.

“I’ll leave the lantern,” Dexter said. “But turn it off when you’re ready to sleep. I don’t want you to knock it over and start a fire.”

“All right.”

“Powerful and strong,” Dexter repeated. “Don’t forget that’s what you are. He can’t take that from you. Not tonight. Not ever.”

He’d left me after that, and I finished every bit of food. I had to urinate and did so using the bucket in the corner. The one that was always here, waiting for Briggs or me. Dexter must dump it in the mornings. “I’m sorry,” I whispered to him, as if he had not gone already.

I curled up with my blanket and pillow and closed my eyes. Powerful and strong. In my imagination, I grew wide wings and eyes that saw every movement. Over the water, I soared, king of men and beasts.

BENEDICT

One morning before breakfast, I walked out to our strip of beach. My mind felt as foggy as the mist that hung over the water. I stopped to stand at the edge of the shore to watch a mother duck and her five babies gliding along the surface of the water. The sight of baby ducks and their obedient line behind their mother always made me smile. A snap of a twig behind me drew me away from the view. Sheriff White, wearing a red hunting jacket and tall boots. No badge in sight, he could be a regular resident bird hunting.

I greeted him with a handshake. “What brings you out this morning?”

“Had a few questions for you.” He took out a pipe from the inner pocket of his jacket and lit it using a silver lighter.

“Sure thing.” I braced myself. What would he ask me? What had he discovered since my last encounter with him?

He took a puff, filling the air between us with the scent of cherries and tobacco. “I wanted to ask you about the whereabouts of your family the night Roland was murdered. Do you know for a fact that everyone was home in bed?”

“I can’t say for sure about the rest of my family, but I was asleep in my own bed. I’ve no reason to think anyone else was out either.”

The night of Father’s murder, I’d worked all day on my house and was so tired I’d had a quick bite of supper in my room and then went straight to bed. “The next thing I knew, you were knocking on our door with the news.” I looked out

toward the water. A seal's head popped up out of the surf, bobbing happily.

"Right, so you said before." Another puff from his pipe made a halo above his head. "Remind me why Briggs was home that night?" White asked.

"Mother's birthday."

"That was a week away at that point, isn't that right?"

"Yes." I shoved my hands in the pockets of my overcoat. The weather was chilly this morning. A soft drizzle dampened my face.

"Your brother's finances are not what they once were. After your father kicked him out, that is."

"He's made a fine living with his painting." Hidden inside my pockets, my hands balled into fists.

"Your mother mentioned something about Briggs and women problems," White said.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Probably nothing. But I like to make sure I understand the full picture. You know, as in regard to a man's character."

"My brother has a lot of women," I said flatly. Women couldn't help but fall in love with him, much to their own detriment. "Doesn't mean he's a murderer."

"He told me he asked your mother for a loan."

What? Briggs needed money? No one had told me about it. "I hadn't heard that." Why would he need it? To pay off a disgruntled husband? Or blackmail of some kind? Trouble followed Briggs like bees to honey.

I should get beehives, I thought absently. They were so good for one's garden. Honey would be most welcome, too. I did love a black tea with a drop of honey. I blinked, remembering where I was. I must focus. I was like a bee, hopping from one flower to the next.

"Benedict, I asked you a question."

I looked back at the sheriff. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

A flicker of impatience flashed in his eyes. The same look I’d gotten from people since I was a boy. He thought I was stupid. Just as my father had. And every teacher I ever worked with. Even Caleb King, who had worked so patiently with me, had finally given up hope.

“Do you know what the fight was about?” White asked. “The night your father was killed?”

I inwardly winced, remembering the fight between Father and Briggs with my mother looking on helplessly, wringing her hands. I hadn’t known it was because Briggs had asked for money. Now, thinking back, it all made sense. Father’s face had been purple with rage, and he had called Briggs spoiled and worthless, with a hobby better suited to a teenage girl looking for a husband.

“I knew they’d had a fight. I didn’t know what it was about.” I’d happened to walk in during the middle of it. Briggs had stormed out seconds later. I’d made haste to my room.

“How did you get the money to buy the piece of property?” White asked me.

Again, the question discombobulated me. What did that have to do with anything? “When I turned twenty-five, a trust set up by Mother’s father became available to me.”

“And does Briggs have anything similar?”

“No, it was set up for Hudson and me before Briggs was born. Our grandfather died before he could do the same for Briggs or Ella.”

“Did you give Briggs money?”

“I have in the past. Just a little here and there.”

“Would you have done so this time?”

“If he’d asked, but I’m assuming the amount he needed was more than he thought I could afford to give him.” The moment it was out of my mouth, I regretted saying it. I’d just made Briggs look very guilty.

“I see.” Sheriff White puffed on his pipe, a contemplative look in his eyes. “Did any of the rest of you have the kind of problem Briggs had? A problem only your father’s wealth could solve?”

I shook my head. “Not that I know of. Ella works mostly for free around here, but she has no expenses as long as she remains living here at the estate. Hudson inherited money from his late wife.”

White nodded and then plucked his pipe from his mouth, thumping it against the bottom of his boot to clean it of residual tobacco.

The seal continued to watch us from about fifty feet from the shore. His doleful eyes passing judgment.

“What about your mother?” White asked. “Did she have a motive for wanting him dead?”

“I think you know the answer to that. You knew my father well, didn’t you? Did you know what went on here at the house?”

One eyebrow lifted before White turned his gaze back to the water. “I had my suspicions.”

“My mother says Father knew things about each of you that would ruin your reputations if they got out.”

“True.” His pipe dangled from one side of his mouth.

“Which makes you all as suspect as the members of my family.”

“I suppose you could look at it that way.”

“What about you, Sheriff? Had he threatened to expose your secret?” I purposely hardened my eyes, hoping to seem intimidating. It didn’t work. Nothing ruffled this man.

“He hadn’t threatened to expose any of us. However, the possibility was always there. Unspoken. Your father knew he had us all where he wanted.”

“Let’s speak the truth then, shall we?” I asked. “There’s hardly a person on this island without a reason for killing him.

Whether they're related to him or not. He was a puppet master. A violent one when it came to his family. Any one of us could have done it."

"But only one of us did."

"Unless there were two or three people who banded together." That thought hadn't occurred to me until now.

"Like you and your brothers, for example?" White asked.

"Or you and the rest of the Friday night poker gang." I scrutinized him, taking in his sharp eyes in direct juxtaposition to his casual, almost cocky expression. He wasn't a large man, especially compared to my beastly bulk, but there was a sinewy strength to him. I'd guess he was a fast runner, if need be.

"Can't argue with you there. Sins of the past, you know? They always come back to haunt a man." White's intelligent eyes dulled, and a slight hunch in his shoulders was that of a man who had loved and lost. "I can promise you this—I want to find the killer in equal amounts to hoping I won't."

"I understand." I did. Seeing a man hang for killing a monster? No one wanted that. Most especially my family.

With that, White bade me farewell. I watched as he made his way over the pebbly beach and up the path to the house.

I turned back to see if my seal remained watching me. But he was no longer there to judge me. This made me feel more alone than usual.

AMELIA

I was in the library typing up the last of Benedict's correspondence when he arrived, flushed. He seemed to bring the essence of the sunny spring day with him. He hadn't been at breakfast, and I'd worried he was ill, but he was clearly fine. "Good morning." My stomach fluttered at the sight of him. I sat up straighter. My thighs tensed. His scent, spicy and clean, alarmed me. My desire for him threatened to snatch all reason from me. This feeling, whatever it was, had grabbed hold of me and didn't seem likely to let go. Of late, Benedict Tutheridge occupied my every thought. Even during sleep, he was there, playing a part in all my dreams. I flushed, remembering the one that had woken me this morning.

"I'm sorry to be late." He tilted his head, watching me. Had he noticed my reaction to him? Could he sense the contents of my dream?

"I had enough to keep me busy," I said tightly, hoping to conceal my scandalous reaction to him. "Please don't worry."

He discarded his jacket, hung it on the rack near the doorway, and rolled up his sleeves. Leaning over the desk to peer at me, he asked, "Do you ever have days when you want nothing more than to be outside?" His shoulders and upper arms strained against the material of his white shirt. I loved it when he discarded his jacket.

What a little idiot I was turning out to be. I'd never been attracted to a man before, and this crush of mine was starting to become bigger than it should. I had no reason to hope for

more. I should be grateful I could be here on this beautiful island working for such a decent man and be done with it.

“Sometimes,” I said, answering his question.

“The afternoon will be warm, and we’re stuck looking at numbers.” He sighed. “I don’t know what I’m doing in here. Out there.” He pointed to the window. “That I understand.” He loosened his tie so that it hung loosely crumpled against his throat.

I swallowed and forced my eyes from his neck to his mouth. *No, not mouth. Eyes. Amelia, you must look in his eyes.* “I can take care of everything here if you’d like to take the day?”

His eyes flickered with obvious indecision. This war between duty and desire plagued him daily. “Only if you join me. Otherwise, I’ll feel too guilty. I could drive you around the island and show you a few of my favorite views.”

Yes, I shouted silently. Yes, yes, yes. “What about all of the work we need to do this afternoon?”

He let out another sigh and hung his head. His thick hair fell over his forehead. If I reached out over the desk, I would be able to feel it for myself, discover the sensation it would give my fingers.

“Can any of it wait until tomorrow?” Benedict asked.

I went through the tasks I’d already prioritized in my notebook that morning. There was really only one item that needed his attention. The budget for the final fiscal quarter of the year required his approval. I’d spent the last hour simplifying it for Benedict so that it wasn’t a list of numbers and items that would swim before his eyes.

“The budget for the ship came in yesterday,” I said. “The line items need your approval. We could go over it quickly. I’ve gone through it carefully and can describe each item verbally and you can tell me yes or no.” I’d come to understand over the last few weeks that the balance between supplies and equipment versus profit was a precarious game. It took an incredible amount of cash to build a boat. The

numbers in my ledgers represented real money. My head swam if I thought too hard about it.

“Is this for the battleship?” Benedict asked.

“That’s correct.” Our factory manager had sent a package yesterday asking for Benedict to approve the supply budget for the next ship, a commission from the government for a military vessel. A battleship. The idea made me nervous. Did this mean we were anticipating a war? When I’d mentioned that to Benedict, he’d said the military wanted ships to seem prepared for any enemy attack, thus lessening the chance of one. It didn’t necessarily mean we were anticipating war. Thank goodness.

“It won’t take long,” I said. “And then you will be free.”

Benedict smiled, shaking his head. “Amelia, so trustworthy and dedicated. What would I do without you?”

“It’s nothing, really.” I’d do anything for you. Anything at all.

“If we have to, then we shall, but I swear, this work will be the death of me.” He sat behind the desk and rubbed his eyes, as if the whole idea of continuing on exhausted him. “Shall we begin?”

“The sooner we’ll finish.” I smiled, reaching for the stack of papers I’d prepared.

“You’ve made it very organized, which helps me immensely. Thank you.” He swept a hand over the clean surface of his desk. I’d tidied it for him earlier. As intelligent as I knew he was, he was messy and disorganized. It took only a few hours in the morning before his desk was cluttered with papers.

“You’re welcome.” He was so appreciative of any small task, which made me want to do more. Anything, really, to make him smile.

His eyes glittered as he looked around the office. “Thank you for your kindness. The ways in which you try to disguise how worthless I am do not go unnoticed.”

“You’re not worthless.” I said it more vehemently than was perhaps warranted, but I couldn’t let him speak of himself that way. “You’re doing a wonderful job, juggling all of this. Especially considering you weren’t prepared for such a thing.”

“If it weren’t for you, I would be in a sorry position indeed. You’ve saved me.”

“I could say the same to you. This job saved me from the streets. Do you know I started to develop a twitch in my eye the moment I walked into Mr. Pitts’s office?” I touched my face to show him where a pulse had regularly irritated me.

“Awful,” Benedict said gruffly. “You must have dreaded going to work.”

“You’ve no idea. He shouted at me every day, for one thing or the other, and made me so nervous that I became clumsy, forever dropping things or spilling his coffee. As you know.”

“Yes, for which I’m grateful. Had you not spilled the coffee, you might not have come to me. To us, rather.”

“I’d not thought about that before,” I said. “My mother used to say that one should never despair. What seems a bad thing sometimes turns out to be a good one. I never understood how she could be so sure of this. Given her life. Things never got better.”

“She had you,” Benedict said. “That was enough.”

My eyes stung. “Do you think so? It haunts me. Thinking of her hard life and how she died so young. So broken. I’d wanted to take care of her. Give her some good years. She died before I could do so. I believe she worked herself to death, and it was all for me.”

“I feel quite confident that your presence in the world gave her all of the joy she needed.” His tone was light, yet I felt his sincerity in the deepest part of my heart.

“I hope so,” I whispered.

“She’s watching over you from up above. I know she’s proud of you. I have no doubt about that at all.” He leaned further over his desk, capturing my gaze and locking me to

him. I could not look away. Everything else but the blue of his eyes fell away. Those eyes of his. How they moved me.

“As the man who has the privilege of being in your company every day, I know of what I speak. The sheer miracle of it. Of you.”

I sucked in a breath as my stomach fell to the floor. “Is that what you truly think of me?”

“My dear, I never lie.” He pressed both hands into the desktop and dropped his gaze. “You make me feel less ashamed of who I am. I didn’t believe anyone could do that for me.”

“You should never be ashamed. Not for being who you are. We all have difficulties. Areas of weakness. You’re brave, confronting yours the way you do. Coming in here every day when every instinct calls you elsewhere.”

“You’re the brave one, Amelia.” Benedict hesitated, still looking down at the desk. When he lifted just his eyes to look into mine, they shimmered with unshed tears. “The sheriff came by this morning.”

“Yes, I saw him arrive.” At the time, bells of alarm had sounded in my head. Were there updates on the case? Had something come to light? “What did he want?”

“He had questions for me.”

My stomach clenched. “What kind of questions?”

“He asked me about the whereabouts of my family the night Father was killed.” He tugged on his tie again, loosening it further. That small piece of material was like a noose around his neck, I thought. Like the work before us.

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him what I knew. Briggs, Ella, and my mother were all in bed. Hudson and Bebe, as well. Although, I shouldn’t think Bebe’s a suspect. Other than her, he’s considering us all.”

“Does he have any evidence?” I asked, feeling a bit like Sherlock Holmes.

“I don’t believe so. Only motives. Are you frightened here? Or by me?”

Taken aback by the question, I stuttered. “Wh...what? No, why would I be?”

“My father was murdered. Every family member in this house is a suspect.”

“Well, I’m not afraid. Nor do I believe any of you capable of such a thing.”

“Briggs and me—we hated him. For reasons that could make a man capable of murder.”

Our eyes met and gazes locked.

“But you didn’t, did you?” I asked. “Nor did Briggs.”

“They say that men who know violence at the hand of their father go on to be that way themselves.”

“Are you worried that’s true of you? Or Briggs?”

“I worry, yes. What if having a son makes it so? Changes me?”

“It won’t. Your father was that way before you were born. I feel certain of that. Cruelty isn’t brought about by fatherhood.”

“Not even for a Tutheridge?” Benedict asked softly.

“You would know already.”

He let out a long sigh. “I’m glad you believe me incapable of violence. Your opinion of me means a great deal. More so every day.”

“Rest assured.” I could barely speak from the lump at the back of my throat.

“Now, let’s go through that budget so we can get out of here.”

I nodded and reached for my notebook, feeling sorry to leave the conversation for such tedious work. However, duty called to me. I would not let down Benedict or his family by my negligence.

BENEDICT

A little after noon, having hitched the horses to our small carriage, I tucked a blanket around Amelia's lap. "Are you warm enough?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you." Emerald-green eyes peeked up at me from under the brim of her hat. In the sunlight, her freckles were visible, sprinkled over her nose and forehead. I wanted to count them. Kiss each of them.

"I'm glad it's not the motorcar," Amelia said as I positioned myself next to her. "Such a lot of noise and bouncing. The trotting of the horses is soothing, don't you agree?"

"I do." I glanced over at her, smiling.

She smiled back at me, then smoothed the blanket over her lap where it had buckled at her thighs. I heard the faint evidence of a rumbling tummy.

She placed her hand over her chest. "Did you hear my stomach growl?"

"Not at all."

"You're a liar, Mr. Tutheridge." She playfully smacked the sleeve of my jacket.

"There's no need to be embarrassed. It's past our usual lunch time."

"I do so enjoy lunch. More than normal people. In fact, a majority of my thoughts are about food."

I laughed. “Mrs. Halvorson packed a basket for us. You won’t be hungry for much longer.” I clicked the reins to tell the horses it was time to go. They obediently took us around the watering hole and down the driveway. When we reached the main road that went around the island, they quickened their gait.

The sun glistened in the muddy water of the puddles along the road. Grass, still heavy with rain from the day before, tilted to one side.

We settled into a quiet ride, the steady clomp of the horses’ hooves making a soothing rhythm. I didn’t feel my usual anxiety to conduct a conversation as I did with anyone other than Briggs or Ella. This silence was comfortable. If I wanted to speak, I would. Whatever it was I desired to say would come out of my mouth as easily as the sun warmed our shoulders. I don’t know how I knew this, but I did. And in that knowing came a peace I had not felt many times in my life.

I drove the horses down the main street of town. The shops were open, and people bustled about doing errands and greeting one another.

“This is the sweetest town,” Amelia said, sounding wistful. “I’ll remember it all my life. After I’m done here, I’ll keep the memories close.”

The idea of her departure gave me a dark, empty feeling. I would not think of it. Not today. Like her, I was gathering memories to take out and enjoy later.

I turned right out of town and a few minutes later, we arrived at the dirt driveway to my property. Soon, the skeleton of my house appeared.

“What is this?” Amelia sat forward in the seat. “Is this your house?”

“Not yet finished, but yes.”

Thus far, I’d poured the foundation and constructed the frame. My father’s death and subsequent news that I was to take over the company had waylaid my plans. However, with the good weather, I would have the walls done in no time.

“The view’s stunning,” Amelia said.

Built on the high bank, the Sound spread out before us in swaths of blue. “I’ll put windows in every room.” I halted the horses near a thick oak. “To take advantage of the location.” Hopping out, I went around the other side and helped Amelia down from the carriage.

“You’ve done all of this yourself?” Amelia asked.

I unhitched the horses while Amelia wandered to the edge of the bank. When I had them safely tied to the tree, they nuzzled noses before nibbling on the spring grass underfoot.

I joined Amelia. She had continued to stand in the same spot, obviously enjoying seeing the water. “I was making good progress until my father died and everything turned upside down.”

“Are you building it to live in yourself?” She turned toward me, her eyebrows lifted. “Away from the big house?”

“Precisely. I want a place of my own. Does it seem strange to you?”

Her mouth twisted into her thinking face. I had grown familiar with it over the last few weeks. “A little. Only because I’ve been lonely since my mother died, and the idea of living with others is appealing. Despite the meager conditions of the boardinghouse, I liked being with the other girls for meals.” She smiled, obviously enjoying the memory. “We had some good times despite being poor little church mice.”

“The right companionship can be joyful,” I said.

“As can solitude.”

I grabbed the picnic basket and blanket from the carriage. “There’s a nice spot with a tree stump for a table if you don’t mind sitting on it?”

“Not at all.” She took my arm, and we stepped carefully through the damp grass and stones until we reached the edge of the bank. I spread the blanket out over the stump, and we each took a side before delving into the lunch Mrs. Halvorson

had sent. There were pieces of fried chicken and German potato salad flavored with fresh herbs and tangy vinegar.

“I adore fried chicken,” Amelia said, followed by an excited squeal.

For a second, the memory of the night in the dungeon resurfaced. Had Dexter brought me fried chicken other nights as well? I couldn't remember. Never mind. It was over. In the past. Now I was having a picnic with Amelia.

She grinned as she reached in to take a piece for herself, then scooped a good portion of the potato salad. “This is a good day.”

“Yes, it is,” I said softly.

As always, Mrs. Halvorson's chicken was crispy on the outside and juicy in the middle. I looked over to see Amelia chewing with her eyes closed, an expression of pure delight on her face.

She must have sensed my attention because she opened her eyes and laughed. “This is one of the best things I've ever eaten. If I were you, I don't know if I could leave the big house and miss out on these kinds of meals.”

“I haven't really thought about any of that yet.” In truth, the idea of being free, despite having to cook for myself, was more appealing than anything else. But perhaps I hadn't been hungry most of my life like Amelia. If I had, I might value the luxury of having what I wanted to eat anytime I wanted it.

“You won't be lonely out here?” Amelia asked. “Away from everyone?”

“I'll get a dog.”

That made her giggle. “A dog. Man's best friend.”

“I can go and see Mother and the others whenever I want.”

“And stay for supper,” Amelia said. “Definitely stay for supper.”

After we ate, we put the basket back into the carriage, and I gave the horses some water from the stream that ran through

the property and slipped each of them an apple. Leaving them to their happy chewing, I asked Amelia if she'd like to go down to the shore. She nodded but seemed wary. "Is it hard to get down, though?"

"I've built a rock path into the embankment. Come see."

I'd built a staircase of sorts with large flat stones nestled into the slope of the hill that took us down to the pebbly beach.

"Oh, don't you love the smell of the sea?" She breathed in through her nose. "I'll never tire of it."

"Would you like to walk?" I gestured to the end of the beach, such as it was, no more than two hundred yards away.

"Yes, please." She held tightly to my arm as we strolled over the rocky beach. In addition to the pebbles, pieces of driftwood and strings of kelp and seaweed peppered the shore.

This was only a small cove, protected from wind by the land surrounding us, but it was mine, and I loved every inch of that land. At the end of the arch, we could go no further. We sat on the log of a fallen tree, made smooth from decades of rain and seawater, to enjoy the beauty before us.

"I wish my mother could see this," Amelia said, taking another deep breath with her nose lifted into the air. Strands of her coppery hair stuck to her pink cheeks. I ached to smooth them away from her face.

A group of harbor seals basked in the afternoon sun on a rock that stuck up from the water a few feet from shore. They were so still they seemed almost like statues in addition to being a similar color to the rocks that I hadn't noticed them until now. Apparently, Amelia hadn't either because she squealed and clutched my arm. "Do you see them, Benedict?"

"Yes, they're not bothered by us," I said. "Thankfully. I hate the idea of taking over their territory."

The seals were various sizes, with the largest looking to weigh about the same as a grown man. A baby, its light fur spotted with black dots, nestled near its mother. In addition, two of similar size to the mother lay together on the other side

of the rock. As we watched, the pup nudged its mother with a kiss, nose to nose.

“Did you see that?” Amelia’s voice had a dreamlike quality to it, in addition to a tiny crack that betrayed her grief.

“You’re thinking about your mother,” I said.

“How did you know?” Amelia turned to fix her beautiful eyes upon me. I wanted to haul her into my lap and kiss her. “Am I so obvious?”

“Your face betrays you,” I said. “I’m starting to know what all the different expressions mean.”

“Being here—it’s so quiet that one turns contemplative.”

“I’ve always thought so.”

“The noise of the city. It never stopped. Even at night. ” Amelia gestured toward the water. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You’re welcome.” That she liked my little piece of the world made me ridiculously happy.

“Did your father know you were building this house?” Amelia asked.

The water lapped against the shore in a pleasing rhythm. “He did not. This part of the island does not belong to our family. I bought the property of my own accord.”

“Would he have been angry at the idea of you moving away from the estate?”

I sighed, remembering one of the last conversations I’d had with him. He’d been decidedly negative about my existence in the world, berating me for not doing more with my life. “I bought the land after a particularly difficult discussion with Father. At the time, I couldn’t have imagined he’d be dead within a year. All I knew then was that I had to find my own way or live under his thumb for the rest of my life.”

“How come there’s no Mrs. Benedict Tutheridge?”

Where had that come from? She'd kind of blurted it out as though it had been on her mind for a while. "You know why. Don't you? Given the way I am?"

"No, I don't know anything of the sort. You must stop believing the lies your father spewed at you. Any woman would be lucky to have you by her side."

"It would have to be the right woman."

"Yes, someone worthy of you." She lifted her gaze to meet mine, unblinking. We were inches apart on that smooth log. A mighty gust of wind, I thought. That's what I needed. One that would nudge her closer to me. Near enough that our mouths had nowhere to go but to each other.

"Promise me you won't settle for just anyone." She spoke softly, but I heard every word, and perhaps her heartbeat too.

My mind quieted. There was nothing but the pools of her green eyes and the faint scent of her skin. Lilacs and talcum powder.

"Benedict, promise me you won't settle for anything less than you deserve."

"I promise. But where shall I find this woman?"

"Could she be near? Nearer than you thought possible?"

The courage of this woman.

Her hand found mine. Our fingers intertwined, not grasping or restrained, but laced together just the same.

I swear I saw right into her soul in that moment. All the magnificence of her character, the strength of her heart. Offered to me! Could she be the medicine I'd needed all my life? A lighthouse on a stormy night to guide me home?

I would kiss her. Lean right in and capture her mouth.

Just then, someone called out, startling us. We dropped each other's hands and looked toward the sound. It was Briggs headed our way.

There might be a second murder in the family. Because right about then, I wanted to throttle my brother.

AMELIA

The day after our picnic, I woke with a start to the sound of gunshots. I went to the window and saw that it was Hudson shooting targets out by the barn. He appeared to be a very good shot. Had he used that skill to murder his father? I grabbed my notebook and added that to the page on Hudson.

Another shot made me jump. I shivered and told myself to set it aside for now. I had to get ready for work. Benedict would be waiting.

Benedict.

My stomach fluttered. Like a silly schoolgirl, I took a moment and twirled around the room. I never thought I'd look forward to work this much. Was this what it was like to fall in love? If so, I quite liked it. As long as he returned my feelings. A little worry niggled at me. What if it were only me feeling this way? No. *Just be brave and honest*. I couldn't be so far wrong. Could I?

No, it wasn't just me. He was going to kiss me. If Briggs hadn't appeared, he would have.

I closed my eyes, remembering what he'd looked like, so close I could smell the shaving soap he'd used that morning. The way Benedict had looked at me—I thought I might melt right there on that log. I'd been so bold to reach for his hand. And I didn't even feel guilty or ashamed. We'd been in a world of our own with rules we made. Rules that included

holding hands and kissing. I wanted to live in that world always.

Sadly, Benedict was called away that morning to a meeting in Seattle. Regardless, I had plenty of work to keep me busy. Gray skies had dumped rain all day, creating a comforting pitter-patter on the roof. The office felt lonely without him and too quiet without his lumbering about in his restless way.

I was just finishing up for the afternoon when Briggs arrived, carrying a bottle of champagne under his arm.

The kiss interrupter. The handholding intruder.

“May I help you?” I asked politely while suppressing an urge to flee.

“I came by to see how you’re faring.” Briggs held up the bottle of champagne. “I stole this from the cellar. Would you care for some bubbly?”

I glanced at the clock. Almost five. Teatime. Most days, at the request of Benedict, I’d joined him and his mother in the living room. “No, thank you.”

“Why ever not?”

I drew in a breath to steady my nerves. There was a recklessness about Briggs that made me feel as if I might fall off a steep ledge at any moment. I shrugged, then folded the last letter of the day and slipped it into a previously typed envelope. “I’ve never had occasion to drink champagne and don’t see the need to start now.”

He set the bottle on my desk. “What do you drink?”

“I would never turn down a cup of tea.”

“Mother’s in the living room having tea as we speak,” Briggs said. “Would you like me to escort you?”

“No, thank you. I can escort myself. Has Benedict returned from Seattle?”

“Who knows? But who needs him? I’m here at your beck and call. I’ve come to see if you’d like to join me for dinner on the porch this evening? Just the two of us.”

My mouth dropped open at the outrageous request. “Alone? With you? Is this a common occurrence for you? Dining with young ladies alone?”

“On occasion.” His eyes twinkled. “I have many women... friends. Friends with whom I enjoy a meal in private. Etcetera.”

I swallowed, not knowing exactly what etcetera referred to but assuming it was not of a virtuous nature. “How nice for you,” I said stiffly. “But I have no interest in dining with you or anything else, including etcetera.”

“Are you sure? Wouldn’t it be nice for us to enjoy each other without the interference of the rest of them? We could get to know each other better over a nice meal. You *do* like supper, I’ve noticed.”

I flushed, unsettled. Had everyone noticed how much I enjoyed food? I really needed to eat slower and less. It was just that the meals here were so good, and I’d been hungry for such a long time. “I do enjoy a good meal.”

“Excellent. I’ll expect you at eight.” His eyes sparkled, teasing me. This was the art of seduction. However, it did not work on me.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said. “I mean, I enjoy eating, but not with you.”

He clutched his heart. “You wound me.”

“I’m sorry to be blunt, but I’d like to make it clear—I’m not interested,” I said firmly. “In dining with you alone or otherwise.”

“But why?” He had the audacity to appear hurt.

“Because I’m not the kind of woman who desires to be one of your mistresses—a woman you use and toss aside.”

“Is that what you’ve heard?” Briggs asked.

“I’m afraid it’s obvious.” I smiled to take the sting from my words. “While I’m sure other women have enjoyed your company, I’m not looking for that kind of friendship.”

He peered at me with glittering eyes, obviously intrigued by this answer. “What kind of friendship are you looking for?”

At first, I thought I would ignore the question but then decided he needed to understand that not all women would take whatever scraps he handed out before moving on to the next conquest. “I would like a man who loves me with his whole heart and wishes to make a life with me. A family and partnership and growing old together.”

“I see.” He grinned. “You’re right, Miss Young, we are not at all suited.”

I laughed, the tension from earlier relieved. “I’m glad we agree.”

“My dear, I apologize if I’ve offended you. I meant no harm. In fact, I’m harmless. A flirt who would never actually hurt a woman knowingly.”

“Not on purpose?” I asked, smiling. “That seems a rather precise distinction.”

“I cannot be held responsible for every woman who falls in love with me.”

“I’m sure that’s incorrect.” I moved toward the door.

“My dear, why are you running from me?”

“I’m not running from you. But rather toward tea.”

“Cake over Briggs, how sad.”

“Cake is simple and sweet. You are not, sir.”

He threw his head back, laughing. “That red hair of yours doesn’t lie.”

I conjured my old typing teacher, glaring at him, hoping to intimidate him into good behavior. “Do not talk about my hair.”

“I do apologize. I didn’t realize you were sensitive about it.” He paused, grinning. “Anyway, you have passed my test.”

“Test?”

“I wanted to see if you were interested in one of the Tutheridge boys only for our money. Any of us would do—that kind of thing.”

“What? How dare you.” I wanted to slap that smirk from his face.

He put his hand up as if I were about to hit him. “I love my brother. I don’t want him hurt. It’s obvious how he feels about you. Leaving me with one question. Are your intentions honorable?”

“My intentions?”

“Yes, do you return his feelings?”

“It’s really none of your business.”

“I can see by your blushing that you must. Please, don’t hurt him.”

“I would never do so if I could help it.”

We locked eyes, both sizing the other up.

“Excellent. Now, since we understand each other, may I escort you downstairs to tea instead?” Briggs offered his arm.

“I’m fine on my own, thank you.” I smoothed my skirt and headed out of the office and into the music room, then down the stairs.

Briggs followed closely behind. When we were on the main floor, he put his hand on the sleeve of my arm to stop me, pulling me behind the decorative statue of the angel that stood in the lobby waiting to greet visitors.

“I’m sorry if I offended you. Can we be friends? It’s always so dull around here, and you’ve brightened the place. And you make my brother smile, which means you make me smile.”

“Friendship is welcome.”

“Good to know.” He offered his arm once more. “May I escort my new friend to tea?”

I was about to concede when a knocking on the front door startled us both. Through the glass window I could see a young man with dark hair and a shabby suit standing outside on the porch.

Briggs hurried to the door. “Rhett, what brings you here? Everything all right?”

Rhett snatched his hat off his head. “I’m sorry to intrude, but I need to see Ella. My father’s very ill.”

Dexter had appeared. “Wait here. I’ll get her.”

Rhett stood in the foyer, looking uncomfortable, shifting from one foot to the other, still clutching his hat against his chest, clearly distressed.

“May I present to you Miss Amelia Young, our new secretary,” Briggs said.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Young,” Rhett said, lifting his light green eyes to meet mine. His tone sounded as weary as his shoes were old. I’d not seen anyone who looked this poor during my time here but then again, I’d hardly been off the estate. Still, there was something familiar about him. He had the same build as Benedict, thick and tall. However, the features of his face were delicate, almost feminine, with a wide full mouth and small nose.

“What have you heard?” Briggs asked. “Any gossip you want to share?”

“No, only that she had come from the east.” He looked over at me. “We’re not used to strangers here.”

“I’ve gathered that,” I said, touched by his shy demeanor.

“Rhett here runs the lighthouse with his father,” Briggs said.

It was then I remembered. This man was the changeling found in the forest and raised by the lighthouse couple.

“The island wouldn’t be safe for ships without them,” Briggs said.

“It’s our pleasure, Mr. Tutheridge.” Rhett’s voice deepened. “My father’s been at it for a long time. Before most people were here on the island.”

Ella came into the foyer, slightly breathless and carrying her medical bag. “Hello, Rhett. Is it more of the same?”

“Yes, his breathing’s labored, and he’s too weak to get out of bed.”

“Let’s go now. I’ll drive us in the car. You came on foot I take it?” Ella asked.

“Yes, thank you.” The two of them charged out of the front door.

“What’s wrong with Mr. Rivers, do you know?” I asked Briggs.

“Ella says he’s suffering from a heart condition.”

“What about his wife?” I asked. “Is she well?”

“She won’t be far behind if Ella’s prediction is correct. They’ve been together since they were sixteen years old. Ella says couples who have such a close bond usually die within a short period of time from the other.”

“How sad,” I said.

“Not really. They had the kind of love most people dream about.”

“Why, Briggs, are you a romantic, and this scoundrel behavior nothing but an act?”

He put his finger to his lips. “Don’t tell anyone. My reputation’s all I have.”

Just then, Benedict came barreling into the foyer through the front door. He tugged off his hat and stopped at the sight of the two of us standing there, looking from me to Briggs and back to me. I flushed at the sight of him, my senses suddenly on high alert. How could anyone be so masculine and beautiful at the same time? This afternoon, he had a shadow of a dark beard, and his hair hung over his forehead damp from the rain, giving him the most delightful disheveled appearance.

“Briggs. Amelia. Am I interrupting something?” Benedict asked with a growl in his voice. Had he jumped to conclusions? If so, he overestimated his brother’s charms and the growing attachment I had to him.

“No, Miss Young and I were headed to tea. With Mother,” Briggs added.

“Is Mr. Rivers sick again?” Benedict gestured toward the driveway, no doubt having seen Rhett and Ella leaving.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Briggs said.

“What a shame,” Benedict said. “Anyway, I must go upstairs and make myself presentable for tea. Please give Mother my apologies for being late.”

I nodded, watching him walk up the stairs, his muscular backside too delectable to look away from, and forgetting entirely that I wasn’t alone.

“I see it clear as can be now,” Briggs said, causing me to jump. Mercy me, I’d been lost in my own thoughts. Thoughts of Benedict.

“You see what?” Why was it so warm in here?

“You, my dear, are falling for my brother.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. And lower your voice, for goodness’ sake.” I looked down the hallway but it was empty.

“I offer you my assistance,” Briggs said. “I’ll be your Cupid.”

“How would you do that? I mean, if I wanted you to.” I added the last part to make sure he understood we weren’t entering into a contract of any kind.

“No one knows Benedict better than I. I’ll be your adviser, so to speak, on all aspects of my dear brother.”

“As in?”

He sobered, looking more serious than I’d seen him. “My father was cruel to him. His wounds are deep. If he confuses you, I shall be here to assist. He’s a good man but complicated. You, it seems, are less so.”

“No, I wouldn’t say I was in the least complex.”

“I think that will serve you well in this situation.” He placed his fingers briefly on my sleeve. “And please, may I reiterate my sincere offer of friendship and assistance. Perhaps someday you’ll be my sister-in-law.”

“You sir, are a dreamer.” I chuckled. “But I appreciate the good will.”

“Let’s go have cake.”

“I do love cake,” I said.

He offered his arm and this time I took it.

MRS. TUTHERIDGE WAS in her favorite chair by the fire working on a needlepoint when we walked into the living room. She glanced up and frowned before greeting us with a nod of the head.

“Mother, Benedict will be down shortly,” Briggs said. “And apologizes for being late.”

“Poor boy left here at the crack of dawn.” She looked over at me with a kind smile. “You must be thirsty and famished, dear. You’ve been working without a break all afternoon.”

“It’s not hard work, Mrs. Tutheridge, compared to what I’m used to. Regardless, I love to be useful.”

“We’re grateful you’re here.” She went back to her needlepoint while Briggs and I helped ourselves to a cup of tea and one of the small cakes.

“Rhett Rivers came by for Ella,” Briggs said. “His father’s poorly.”

Mrs. Tutheridge seemed to tense, her shoulders lifting toward her ears and her mouth tightening. “Ella’s going to catch her own death out in this weather. Does that man have to drag her out every time his father sneezes?”

“Hardly, Mother. Ella’s the toughest of all of us,” Briggs said in his lackadaisical way, crossing one leg over the other. He was on one end of the couch, and I on the other.

“What is it you have against the Riverses?” Briggs asked.

Mrs. Tutheridge huffed. “I’ve nothing against them. Don’t be ridiculous. I hold no ill will for anyone.”

Briggs lifted an eyebrow. “Whatever you say, Mother.”

“Young man, I’ll have you mind your manners.”

I held my breath as the two stared each other down.

“My apologies, Mother. It just seems like whenever their name is mentioned you grow disagreeable.”

“You’re imagining things. As you’ve always done.”

Briggs laughed. “I’m an artist. Aren’t I supposed to imagine things?”

“Yes, dear. I suppose so.” Mrs. Tutheridge returned to her needlepoint.

I glanced toward the window. The water was obscured by fog, and the rain continued to fall. “So cozy,” I said under my breath.

“Isn’t it though?” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “I love the rain.”

“I’m growing to like it myself,” I said before taking a sip of the soul-fortifying tea. Our treats today were white cakes the size of a small biscuit and miniature sandwiches filled with creamy cheese and a slice of smoked salmon. I took only one of each, remembering my earlier vow.

Benedict arrived, cleaned up and shaved, smelling of spicy soap. He greeted me with a nod and then kissed his mother on the cheek before lowering his long legs into the other chair. “I’m half starved,” he said, piling his plate with sandwiches. “Going to Seattle will do that to a man.” He and I exchanged a quick glance. “Amelia, how was your day? Is there anything I need to take care of?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until the morning. I missed you today,” I added, forgetting for a moment we were not in our

own world. "In the office, I mean."

Briggs laughed. "This is going to be fun."

"What's that?" Benedict asked, sounding grumpier by the minute.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I just love watching the sun come out," Briggs said.

"You make no sense, dear," Mrs. Tutheridge said. "Have you been in the whiskey again?"

AMELIA

As I bathed and fixed my hair for the evening, I thought about Mr. Tutheridge and his other women. How much had she known? Whatever it was, I felt great sympathy for Mrs. Tutheridge. What would it be like to be married to a man, having raised children with him, only to learn he spent time with other women?

I pinched my cheeks to make them pink and took one last look in the mirror. The island air was good for one's complexion, I decided, somewhat pleased with my appearance.

When I stepped out of my room and into the hallway, Ella was just coming out of her own room. She beamed at the sight of me. "Don't you look pretty?"

"Thank you. As do you." She wore a gown made from gauzy gold and green material with decorative beads down the front and puffy sleeves that covered only her shoulders and upper arms. Long white gloves completed the look.

We walked down the stairs together and into the dining room, where the rest of the family was gathered around the fireplace. Mrs. Tutheridge was on the sofa, working on a needlepoint. This evening, Bebe was with us, playing a game of cards with her uncle Briggs when normally she would have already been tucked into bed. Hudson was in an oversize leather chair with his head bent over the newspaper. Both men stood when Ella and I appeared.

I glanced around the room, looking for Benedict, and found him standing in a corner with a small glass of sherry in hand. His eyes met mine for a moment, and his mouth twitched into a quick smile. I smiled back, drawn in by his presence and momentarily forgetting the rest of those in the room.

“Would you care for a glass of sherry?” Briggs asked me.

“She doesn’t drink sherry,” Benedict said. “Or anything at all.”

“I’ll have her glass then,” Ella said.

Her mother glanced up, a disapproving set to her mouth. Ella didn’t seem to care, moving over to the bar where Briggs poured her a glass.

Ella and I sat together on one of the love seats. Bebe and Briggs finished their game, and she crawled into his lap and snuggled against his chest. He might be a rake, but he was a gentle and loving uncle. People could be more than one thing, I thought. Even qualities that would seem to be in direct opposition, as in the doting uncle and the man who bedded dozens of women.

Hudson had not looked up from the newspaper. He seemed incapable of engaging with anyone in the family, even his little daughter. Benedict crossed the room to sit next to his mother.

“Hudson, anything of interest in the paper?” Ella asked, clearly trying to draw him into the conversation.

He looked up and blinked. “Not really.”

“I was in town earlier,” Ella said. “And everyone was buzzing about the summer party.”

“What’s that?” I asked. A party sounded promising.

“We throw an annual garden party on the summer solstice,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “The whole town’s invited, and we put out a huge buffet. We eat out on the lawn, weather permitting, and there’s pie and cake contests, obviously.”

Obviously.

“Judged by Benedict, Hudson, and me,” Briggs said, grinning. “Best job in the world.”

“Mrs. Wilson wins every year for her blackberry pie,” Ella said. “And Mrs. Davis gets mad and says the contest is rigged somehow and storms home early.”

“What about the cake?” I asked. “Who wins that?”

Briggs leaned forward, animated. “It’s a close call every year between our own Mrs. Halverson’s carrot cake and the local bakery’s white with buttercream frosting.”

“Others do enter,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “But no one has a chance between those two.”

“Mother and I get to judge the cakes,” Ella said. “Perhaps this year you will help us, Amelia?”

“Judging a cake contest is my dream come true,” I said only half joking. Although I hadn’t had much of it in my life, every year for my birthday my mother had managed to make a pound cake for me. Even now, I could recall the buttery sweetness of the very first bite.

“We also have music,” Hudson said, speaking for the first time. “A group from Seattle comes every year.”

“They play ragtime music, and we dance,” Ella said. “It’s glorious.”

“The girls all wear their pretty summer dresses,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “It’s one of my favorite times of the year.”

Benedict went on to explain that the tradition had started the first year they’d lived at Stella. “We were all around Bebe’s age when we had the first one.”

“There’s also the church picnic and dance,” Benedict said. “At the schoolhouse. That’ll be coming up soon too.”

“My late husband loved parties,” Mrs. Tutheridge said without emotion. “He loved to have all the island residents here to the house. We have a Christmas party too.”

“You have a church picnic with a dance, plus the summer party and a Christmas one too?” I asked, excited. “Will they

all have cake.”

Briggs laughed. “There’s a lot of cake in our future.”

Bebe lifted her head from Brigg’s chest. “Miss Amelia, Santa comes to the party. Did you ever see him before?”

“I’ve only seen him in paintings and books,” I said to Bebe.

She made a face, clearly sorry for me. “He’s fat and jolly.”

“Yes, and brings good girls something nice in their stocking,” Hudson said.

“Like me?” Bebe asked, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

“You haven’t been terribly good,” Briggs said, resting his chin on the top of her head. “But there are still a lot of months in the year.”

“What about you, Briggs?” Ella’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Have you been good?”

“Again, the year’s still young,” Briggs said, laughing. “Plenty of time for redemption.”

Hudson cleared his throat and returned to his paper.

“What a wonderful thing to do,” I said. “The parties give everyone something to look forward to at least twice a year. It’s really quite generous of your family.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “I was always afraid it would seem frivolous and extravagant to those struggling to get by day to day.”

“I was one of those all my life,” I said. “My mother and I would have adored to come to a party with good food and community. If anyone says anything ugly about your parties, they should stay home and leave more food for the rest of us.”

Benedict chuckled and shot me a teasing glance as if he knew my mind was always on food. “Wait until you see the spread Mrs. Halvorson puts on, Amelia. It’ll be hard not to stuff yourself silly.”

“Like I do every year,” Briggs said. “And then I’m in agony for the rest of the night.”

“We’ve all been known to overindulge at Father’s parties,” Ella said. “Do you remember the time Hudson fell onto the dessert cart?”

Hudson lowered his newspaper, his usual dour expression transformed into one of humor. “My wife was very angry with me that day.” He looked over at me. “I’d had a little too much punch. It was rather embarrassing, and my wife made me sleep in the guest room that night.” His voice warmed, clearly cheered by the memory.

“She never let you get away with anything,” Briggs said. “May she rest in peace.”

“Are you talking about my mother?” Bebe asked.

“We are,” Briggs said.

“I wish I could remember her,” Bebe said.

“She was beautiful and very sweet,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

I stole a glance at Hudson. He’d withdrawn into himself again, burying his face back in the newspaper. The memories of his wife must be bittersweet. Had he been different before her death? Less somber and more lively like Briggs and Ella?

What was it with Mr. Tutheridge and his love of parties? I found it hard to understand such contrasts in personality. A man who loved parties but was cruel to his own family? Had his public image been much different than the one he showed his children? People could be more than one thing, I reminded myself. Before I could stop myself, I asked, “What made Mr. Tutheridge love parties so much?”

“Father loved to show off for the people,” Briggs said, cutting off whatever his mother was going to say. “Nothing made him happier than being better than everyone else.”

No one spoke for a second or two. Hudson set aside his newspaper and scooted to the edge of his chair. He looked bone-weary, with bags under his eyes. “Bebe, darling, it’s time for bed.”

“No. I’m not tired. I want to stay up.” Bebe’s bottom lip quivered.

“I’ve already let you stay up an hour past your bedtime.” Hudson stood, holding out his arms. “Come along.”

She hurled herself off Briggs’s lap and onto the floor, where she proceeded to kick her feet and scream, “No, no, no.”

Hudson looked done in and sank back into his chair, rubbing his eyes. The epitome of exhausted.

“For goodness’ sake, girl. Your acting’s horrid.” Briggs looked stricken by his niece’s behavior. “Is she always like this?”

“More often than not,” Benedict said. “She has a very strong will.”

Ella’s eyebrows lifted as she exchanged a glance with me.

Briggs scooped the flailing child into his arms and tossed her over his broad shoulder. This was clearly a Tutheridge move because Benedict had done the same thing at church that morning. She continued to scream but no longer kicked because one of Briggs’s large paws trapped her legs. He lumbered out of the room.

When it was once again quiet, Mrs. Tutheridge said, “Hudson. You must have a firmer hand.”

His shoulders slumped. “She’s fine. We should have put her to bed on time, that’s all.”

Why didn’t she have a nanny? It seemed odd that a family with money didn’t hire someone, especially since the child’s mother had died.

It must be hard to raise Bebe without a mother. I could not blame Hudson for being distant. Grief isolates a person until they cannot see what’s right in front of them. I would pray tonight, I decided, that God send him and Bebe a new love. Or at least a nanny.

AT SUPPER, we had a tomato bisque for the first course, followed by pork medallions in a cherry sauce. My mouth watered as I prepared to take a bite. I was seated next to Briggs at dinner, with Ella and Hudson across from us. Benedict, upon his mother's request, had taken the seat previously occupied by the late Mr. Tutheridge. She'd surprised us all with the request as we'd entered the dining room. Benedict had reluctantly agreed.

Now, as we lifted our forks to begin eating the pork, he shifted in his seat, as if he were uncomfortable. It would take time, I thought, for him to adjust. In a few months, it would begin to feel normal to them. At least, that's what I assumed would happen. I didn't know for certain, of course, but having adjusted several times myself to new circumstances and learning to live without my mother, I felt strongly that over time people adapt to whatever comes their way.

"There's something I wish to discuss," Benedict said. "Since we're all here." He nodded toward Ella. "As God has seemed to spare our island nurse tonight."

Everyone turned to look at him. Was he going to bring up his idea to sell the company? If so, he'd clearly decided it was the right thing to do.

"I think we should sell," Benedict said. "The entire shipping company. We have enough assets with land ownership and other investments that we will be able to divide the profits and live well the rest of our lives."

No one said anything for a moment. Mrs. Tutheridge was the first to speak. "Your father started the business from nothing. It's his legacy. One that he assumed would be carried on to the next generation."

"I understand that, Mother," Benedict said. "But none of us want it."

Mrs. Tutheridge looked around the table. I followed her gaze. Ella was staring at her plate. Hudson and Briggs were

both watching their brother with expressions I couldn't read. If I were to guess, it was a mixture of relief and regret.

Mrs. Tutheridge twisted her fingers around the stem of her glass. "Is that really what you all want?"

"We can sell it for a good profit," Benedict said. "Amelia and I worked it out—the price and how it would be divided among us. There are other investment opportunities, Mother. We don't have to be tied to this albatross if we don't want to be."

"What about you, Hudson?" Mrs. Tutheridge asked. "Are you sure you don't want to run it?"

"Selling would be a relief to me," Hudson said. "If things were different, I might have liked to, but not now."

"Mother, what do you think?" Benedict asked softly. "We won't do anything without your blessing."

Mrs. Tutheridge set aside her fork and looked around at each of her children. "I want whatever makes you all the happiest. Benedict, will you know what to do to sell? It seems arduous."

He caught my eye from across the table. "With help, yes. We also have Father's attorneys to help us. It might take a while to find the right buyers, but it can be done."

"Then so be it." Mrs. Tutheridge brought her napkin to her mouth. "I suppose it's time for us all to think about moving on and what's next. The company was your father's whole life. Letting it go is not what he would have wanted. But I guess we were all tortured long enough by his desires. We're free now."

"Yes, Mother, we are," Briggs said. "We can be a family now instead of people living under the roof of a tyrant."

"I suppose that's true," Mrs. Tutheridge said slowly. "It's peaceful here now. I no longer wake up afraid." She picked up her fork and stabbed it into a piece of potato that she didn't bring to her mouth. "May he rot in hell."

BENEDICT

After dinner that evening, Mother went straight up to bed. Ella and Hudson played a game of checkers in the living room but retired soon thereafter as well. That left Briggs, Amelia, and me. I'd been on edge for the last few minutes, watching him shamelessly flirt with her. Of all the men I knew, he would be my last choice for a woman like Amelia.

I glowered at him from my favorite chair by the fire. He was completely oblivious. As usual.

"Tell us more about your life before you came to us," Briggs said, helping himself to a whiskey.

"There's not much to tell," Amelia said. She told him about her job with Mr. Pitts after school, as well as losing her mother, all of which I knew. She'd told me everything first I thought, bitterly. Not Briggs.

When we were kids, Briggs had always been the funny one. He'd been able to make me laugh no matter how bad it was. Hudson had been the smart one and a clear leader. He'd changed after we lost Rosemary. So much so, it was hard for me to remember what he'd been like before she died.

I had always been the dunce.

The four of us had always been tight, looking out for one another as best we could. I adored all of my siblings, but that didn't mean at times I hadn't felt jealous of Briggs for his personality and Hudson for his brain. Ella was exempt from it

all, our little sister and favorite pet. She'd kept up with us, too, even though she'd been younger and a girl.

"That's my story," Amelia said. "Nothing very interesting. Being an artist, for example, is much more intriguing."

"I'm no good," Briggs said, grinning. "Not the type of artist anyone will remember after my unfortunate demise."

"Unfortunate?" Amelia giggled. "Why will it be unfortunate?"

"Knowing the scrapes I get into, I'd say it's likely," Briggs said. "But until then, I plan on having as much fun as I possibly can."

"You should paint Amelia," I blurted out.

"What, no. Not me." Amelia lightly touched her hair. "Who would want this in a painting?"

"I think you're exquisite," Briggs said. "Your hair and the rest of you."

My brother always knew exactly what to say to a lady.

"You're too kind," Amelia said, flushing a pretty pink.

I wanted to shout, I'm kind. I was kind first.

I didn't stand a chance against my brother. Not with women or anything else for that matter.

"When will you be returning to Seattle?" I asked Briggs flatly. "Anytime soon?"

"Are you anxious to get rid of me?" My brother's eyes flickered with mischief. One brow raised as his gaze swept me from head to toe. He knew what I was thinking. He knew I liked Amelia. What would he do with that information? For all his faults, my brother was a generous spirit, especially when it came to his siblings.

"Not at all." When it came to love, one must sometimes lie. "But you've been here for months. I'd have thought your life in Seattle would come calling by now."

“As usual, dear brother, you’re correct. I am leaving tomorrow to spend a few weeks painting a socialite’s portrait. Would you two care to join me? We could stay at the house in Queen Anne.”

“We can’t. Amelia and I have a lot of work to do before we negotiate an offer from a buyer.”

“Or two,” Amelia said. “We might have two interested parties. Or more.”

“We’ll work on our plan tomorrow,” I said to Amelia, hoping Briggs would get the hint and go to bed. “I’ll need help drawing up all the papers and correspondence. Our attorney will need to be involved, too.”

Amelia nodded, seemingly undeterred by any of this.

“Come on, what do you say?” Briggs asked. “You two could come with me tomorrow. We can show Amelia around Seattle.”

“We have too much work to do,” I said. “As I said before.”

“Some other time?” Amelia said.

Was she being amicable, or did she really want to go? Was she drawn to Briggs? Did I seem like a fool next to my charming brother? Women fell at his feet. No one had ever fallen at my feet or anywhere else.

THE NEXT MORNING, I was in the library when Amelia came in five minutes early. She gave me a cute smile and rubbed her hands together. “It must be a relief to have your family’s blessing about the sale. What should we do first?”

I’d not slept well, dreaming about Amelia and Briggs out together in Seattle. He’d taken her along the wharf and through Pioneer Square, showing her all the sights. I spoke somewhat curtly when I answered her, asking if we could begin correspondence to our attorney. “If we hurry, we can send it with the mail boat this morning.”

Her brow furrowed for a moment. I could see my tone had hurt her. I should apologize. But with what excuse? That I thought she was probably falling in love with my brother like the rest of the single women on the island and probably half of Seattle and that made me want to punch something?

Instead, I turned back to the pile of papers on my desk. “Can you read through these today and respond back?”

“Yes, of course. Is there anything else?” She matched my curt but polite tone.

“No. I’m going out, so I’ll leave you to it.”

Ignoring the hurt expression in her eyes, I grabbed my hat and coat and stomped out of the house, angry at myself and Briggs and the world. I’d go work at the cottage, I decided. Put some more walls up, anything to get rid of the aggressive energy that made me want to hit a wall.

I muttered to myself as I hitched up the horses to the wagon I used when working, unable to settle down enough to give Mabel and Tom strokes on their noses. But they didn’t protest or rail against me. They seemed to understand and were still and cooperative as I finished getting us prepared for a trip out to my property. I was about to climb up into the wagon when Briggs came out of the house, striding toward me in his riding outfit.

“Hello there,” Briggs said. “Where are you headed?”

I avoided looking directly at him by pretending to examine the reins. “None of your business.”

He cursed under his breath. “What’s gotten into you?”

“You don’t want to know,” I said.

“I would, actually.” He leaned against the side of the wagon, looking at me with his usual sardonic expression.

“Fine. I don’t appreciate you flirting with my secretary.”

He rubbed his chin, looking at me as though I’d just grown another head. “If I choose to flirt with Miss Young—and that’s an *if*—what’s it to you?”

“She’s our employee. Not a woman sent here for your pleasure.”

“Interesting. Why did you take her on a picnic, then? And almost kiss her.”

The nerve. The jerk had known it and interrupted us on purpose.

“I was simply showing her the island,” I said. “As part of her duties.”

“What other duties did you have in mind for her?”

“Listen, Briggs, for once, can you give me a chance without swooping in and taking her for yourself?”

“What could you possibly mean by that?” He glared at me, his eyes glittering. I’d hurt him. Good.

“You take whatever you want with no consideration of anyone else. You always have.”

“I always have? Are you insane?” Briggs sighed, sounding aggravated. “What have I ever taken from you?”

“Mother’s affection, for one. You’ve always been her favorite.”

Briggs’s brow furrowed. “I doubt that very much.”

“Any girl Hudson or I pined for, you swept in and took her for yourself.” I shook my head. “Don’t deny it.”

“Who did you ever pine for? I didn’t think you were interested in romance, what with your traipsing through the woods and tossing logs about like Paul Bunyan.”

“I’m interested in love, which I know makes no sense to you, what with *your* traipsing around Seattle with women of ill repute. How many mistresses do you have?”

“Don’t be absurd. I have no mistresses. Whatever you heard is probably false, but what that has to do with my supposed swooping in of the women you and Hudson favor, I wouldn’t know.”

We were right up in front of each other's faces, inches apart. I could smell the pomade he put in his stupid hair.

"Miss Young is a respectful lady," I said, "who deserves better than the likes of you."

"And I suppose you think that's you?" Briggs poked my chest with an index finger. "Mr. Righteous and Misunderstood. Poor old Benny with all his precious problems. Mother whispering to the rest of us not to make you feel bad because learning was so hard for you. Always telling us not to brag about our accomplishments or demonstrate how easy everything was because we didn't want to make Benedict feel jealous. So that's what we did. Found ways to belittle our successes so that you didn't feel bad. All the while, Mother didn't notice one thing we did, too worried about you. Why do you think I had to develop this charm? It was the only way to get Mother's attention. So if you're looking for someone to blame for your ineptitude with women, look in the mirror. If Mother hadn't coddled you for your entire life, maybe you'd know how to properly court a woman."

Furious, I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him against a tree. "I'd love to trade places with you for a day. You'd see what it's like to go through life as an idiot." I shoved him aside and knelt over, breathing deeply to regain my composure.

"You're not stupid," Briggs muttered, straightening his clothes. "There's something wrong with your eyes, and you're easily distracted."

"That's what Mother always said to make excuses for me." In fact, she'd said it to me at least a thousand times. Each time it had taken a chunk of my spirit until there was nothing left of me. "I'd have given anything to be like you or Hudson."

"It's true, you know," Briggs said. "Mother's right. Obviously, there's something about your brain that makes it hard to read and do sums. Regardless, you're wise, which is different than book-smart."

I studied him. Was he mocking me? He kicked at the dirt with the toe of his boot and shoved his hands into the pockets

of his coat.

Briggs looked up at me, his expression one of surrender. "Father's gone now. He can't hurt you again. You can court whomever you want, and he's not here to make you doubt yourself."

To my horror, my throat tightened, and my eyes stung, wanting to release tears. I slumped against the tree, my legs suddenly weak. "His voice is in my head. All the time."

"Mine too," Briggs said. "But we can't let him win."

"How?"

"By being there for each other. Remind each other of the great men we are."

I sank to the ground and leaned against the back of the tree. "I've never felt like this before. Like I might have a chance for love."

"The way she looks at you, brother, there's no doubt in my mind how she feels. Not to mention that she told me so herself."

I jerked upright. "What did you say?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that I've been looking out for you? Making sure she's not after one of us for our money?"

"She's not like that."

"I know. I mean, I know that now," Briggs said. "She was quite clear on that point."

"You asked her about this?"

"I did. I wanted to know her intentions with my big brother."

"Briggs." I shook my head. "Sometimes I feel like I don't know you."

"I *am* often misunderstood." He gave me a doleful look. "People always think the worst of me."

"It's not that. Not really."

“This family thinks I’m nothing but a reckless fool with too many women.”

“Isn’t that true?” I asked.

“Depends on how you look at it. Anyway, my point is—I would never try to take your woman. I pray every night he sends you a woman to love. I think maybe he’s finally said yes.”

“She’s perfect,” I said. “For me.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Now stop acting like a jackass. You’re going to push her away if you act like this.”

“I don’t know. What if I make a total fool out of myself? A woman like that? What would she want with a man like me?”

“You’re the finest man I know. Strong, kind, smart, loyal. Filled with integrity and a passion for hard work. She’d be lucky to get you.”

I couldn’t speak because of the emotion that had welled up inside me. Briggs put his arm around my shoulders and brought me in for a quick embrace. “Listen to me. It’s my voice that gets to be in your head from now on. Not Father’s. You remember what I said and remind yourself of it every single time doubt creeps in. He doesn’t get to have the last word.”

We sat for a few seconds in silence. Briggs disentangled from our embrace and stood up, brushing off his pants.

“What about you?” I asked, standing as well. “Should I start praying for your woman to arrive, or are you going to continue your evil ways?”

He grinned, clearly unrepentant. “I’m never dishonest with the women I spend time with. They know I’ll never marry or fall in love with them.”

“And yet they agree to be with you?” In a biblical sense, I added silently. My brother was a scoundrel. But as he said, at least he was forthright.

“Apparently, I’m irresistible, despite my lack of domesticity.” He sobered. “Actually, my reputation doesn’t

really match the truth. I'm not what I seem."

"What are you?"

"The loneliest man on the planet?"

"Is that a question?" My chest ached. Was he being honest? "Are you really lonely?"

"The parties get old. So does the city. All the people who pretend to be your friend because they think you're rich. No one cares about me in that life. Not truly." He paused, glancing back at the house. "I may stay here for a while longer. Work on my painting. Now that he's gone, it's safe for me here."

"I'll build you a studio," I said. "Wherever you want."

"You'd do that?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"And I for you."

For the second time in less than five minutes, we embraced. In my ear, Briggs whispered, "He took too much from us already. Don't let him take Amelia from you."

Then he let go and strode toward the barn without a backward glance. He'd made his point, and I'd heard him loud and clear.

As I drove away, thoughts of my father traveled with me. Would I ever move past all the ways he broke me? Was his ghost still here, haunting me? Reminding me of my failures and all the reasons why a woman like Amelia Young would never fall in love with me? No. Briggs would be the voice in my head now. I'd promised him.

AMELIA

Still stinging from Benedict's odd behavior, I dived into the tasks of the day. By noon, I'd typed up notes from Benedict's dictation the day before as well as several letters that needed to go out in the afternoon post. I'd hoped he'd return to eat lunch with me, as he had most days, but a tray was sent with a meal for one.

I ate at the small table we usually shared and read from a book I'd found in the Tutheridge library shelves, a wonderful novel by E.M. Forster called *A Room with a View*. I'd heard of it when I was in secretarial college but hadn't time or money with which to purchase it. The library here at the estate was almost worth any amount of heartache caused by my new employer.

Still, my mind wandered, and I found myself reading the same paragraph over three times before setting it aside to focus on a salad made from tender shoots of lettuce and shredded carrot tossed with a sweet dressing that tasted of raspberries and vinegar. A tomato soup with a generous hunk of sourdough bread completed the meal. I ate with my napkin tucked into the collar of my dress, always afraid I would stain and ruin the shirtwaist.

I'd only just finished when I heard footsteps coming up the stairs to the music room and then head toward the library. I braced myself, thinking it would be Benedict. Would his mood have lightened by now? I couldn't imagine what I'd done to anger him.

To my surprise, it was Briggs who entered the library, wearing a dark suit with a blue tie.

“Good afternoon, my dear.” Briggs gave a little bow and came up grinning. “I’ve come to tell you I’m staying here on the island instead of going into the city.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“I’ve decided it’s better for me and my family if I stay. I’d like to do more landscapes and focus less on portraits of the vain.”

“I think it’s a wise choice.” I gave him a weak smile.

“Are you all right? You seem off.” Briggs joined me at the table, peering at me with such kindness I almost burst into tears.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” I said.

He didn’t say anything for a moment, studying me with his head tilted to one side. “Is this because of Benedict? His behavior this morning?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I had a conversation with him myself.”

“I think I did something to anger him.” Briggs might have been a cad with too many lady friends, but he was easy to talk to. He was turning out to be a surprisingly good friend.

“No, it wasn’t you. It was me.” Briggs fiddled with his tie, seeming uncomfortable for a moment. “He misinterpreted our friendship and was jealous. Simple as that.”

I was dumbstruck for a moment. “Jealous?”

“Yes. In fact, he and I had words.”

“Are you sure that’s all it was?” My chest inflated with hope.

“Quite sure. I’ve educated him on the truth of the matter, which is to say you’re smitten with him, not poor old Briggs. I assured him I was not a threat. We hashed out a few other things as well. All in all, a fruitful interaction.”

“There’s nothing ‘poor old Briggs’ about you,” I said, laughing.

“You’ve no idea the depths of my loneliness.” He flashed me one of his careless grins and stood, straightening his long legs and resting his hands on the back of his chair. “As I said before, Benedict is a complex man. Falling in love with him is not for the faint of heart. Are you sure he’s who you want?”

“Do I have a choice? Doesn’t it happen with or without our consent? Falling in love, that is.” Briggs was more experienced in matters such as these. Surely, he would have some insight?

He sobered for a moment, the twinkle in his eyes dulling. “You may be right. Not having been in love, I can’t say for certain. All I know is that Benedict is a wounded man, and loving him requires patience. At times.”

“I have wounds of my own.”

“I’ve known a lot of people in my lifetime, Amelia, and almost every one of them has a wound of some kind.”

“You hide yours better than Benedict,” I said.

“I was born rebellious. A gift in a way and a curse in another. Benedict never stopped wishing for our father’s love. I knew it would never come, and so I fought with everything I had. All the time. Railing against anything and everything my father wanted.”

“Is that why you chose art?”

“No, not exactly. Father was not keen on my choice of career,” Briggs said. “Saying art was for freaks and—a word I won’t say out loud. A word that would indicate affection between two men. But the truth is—art is my way of making it through the world. Painting is who I am, regardless of what he or anyone thought about my choices.”

“Is that why you have so many mistresses?” I blurted out.

“Pardon me?”

“To make sure everyone knows you’re not what your father said you were?”

His brows came together, and then he paled slightly. He put several fingers up to his temple and tapped before smiling. "I'd not thought of it, but you may be onto something. However, my affinity for beautiful women might be the culprit after all. Regardless, if I'd spent less time trying to prove my father wrong, I might be a better painter but not nearly as skilled in the art of lovemaking."

"Briggs, really? You're incorrigible. You should not be speaking of such matters to a lady such as myself."

"My apologies." His eyes softened with obvious affection. "I'm glad it's you he's fallen for. I can't imagine a better match for my brother. Or for our family."

My eyes stung. "Thank you. I thought you would all think I was not of the right background for Benedict."

"I know a lot of different kinds of people," Briggs said. "And do you know what I've discovered? We all bleed the same way. Mourn the same and love the same and go to sleep hoping to wake to a better life."

"Is that true for you? Even now that your father's gone?"

"I'm afraid it is." He sighed and straightened from where he'd been leaning over the back of the chair. "My demons have sharp claws and they have hold of me."

"They can't hold you forever."

This seemed to pull him from his somber pondering. "One can hope. Anyway, I have to go. I'm going to Seattle for the afternoon to pick up art supplies from my studio. Benedict's offered to build a studio on the property, but for now, I'll paint from here."

"How wonderful, Briggs."

"I'll bring you some candies, if you'd like?"

I clasped my hands in front of my chest. "Oh, yes, would you?"

"I think it's safe to say there's not much I wouldn't do for you." He headed toward the doorway.

“You are a good brother,” I called after him. “And friend.”

He turned to face me, standing in the middle of the doorway, almost like a piece of art. “For years and years, being a good brother was all that kept me from darkness. I shall never take it for granted.”

With that, he was gone, and I was left alone to return to my work and hope for Benedict’s return.

I DIDN’T SEE Benedict the rest of the afternoon. At five, I straightened the library and decided to skip tea and read in my bedroom instead. I didn’t want to see Benedict in the company of others for fear I would give myself away. In my room, I settled into the big chair and began to read. A knock on the door drew me from the story.

“Yes? Come in.”

It was Dexter with a tray holding several small cakes and a pot of tea. He set it on the bench at the end of the bed. “Mrs. Tutheridge sent this up, Miss Amelia. Also, she asked me to tell you there would be no formal meal tonight, as she has a terrible headache. We’ll have your supper sent up if you’d like?”

“That would be fine. Is Mrs. Tutheridge terribly unwell?”

“From time to time she has these headaches that require a dark room and quiet. She’s usually fine after a day or so.” He pulled an envelope from his apron and set it next to the tray. “Also, this is from Mr. Benedict.”

I thanked him, forgetting I wasn’t supposed to do so, and then apologized, both of which evoked a frown from Dexter.

“Please ring if you need anything,” he said, then closed the door behind him.

Unsettled, I didn’t bother with the cake, something I never thought I’d do. Turning down food would have seemed incomprehensible to me before I arrived here in the land of

desserts and tea. However, I'd been fed well since my arrival, and I didn't want to outgrow my new dresses. Skipping cake more often than not would be prudent.

Right now, I was more interested in the contents of the envelope than sweets. I tugged open the flap and pulled out a thick card with Benedict's initials embossed at the top. In his careful print, a simple sentence read: *Walk? Half past five?*

Was this an apology for his earlier behavior? I hoped so. I would forgive him right away, of course.

I scooped a teaspoon of sugar into a cup and poured steaming black tea over it, then stirred. It was a quarter past five already. I would have to leave in a few minutes.

Was Briggs right? Had his grumpiness been because of jealousy? If so, Briggs had set him straight. Perhaps he no longer felt threatened and would return to normal. With that positive thought, I pinned my hat into my hair and headed downstairs.

BENEDICT WAS ALREADY WAITING for me on the lawn when I arrived.

"You came," Benedict said without meeting my gaze.

"I had a good mind not to." I hadn't meant to sound combative, but perhaps I was more angry than hurt.

His expression darkened, and his head drooped forward like the last of the daffodil blooms. "I'm sorry for my behavior earlier."

"Did I do something to anger you?" I would pretend I hadn't had a visit from Briggs. I wanted to see what he said without prompting from me.

"No, you didn't. I was irked over something else."

I didn't know quite how to respond, so I shrugged and asked if there was anything he needed. "I've completed the

tasks you left for me this morning, but I'm happy to return to the library if you needed something tonight."

"No, thank you." He removed his hat, ran a hand through his hair, and then returned it to his head. "I'm sorry I was such a bear earlier. It's inexcusable, and I sincerely apologize."

"You did nothing wrong. You're my boss. You're allowed to speak to me as succinctly as you want."

"Succinct." His lips twitched. "Is that the word for it?"

"I can think of others," I said, unable to hold back a saucy grin.

"Amelia, I hope I'm also your friend and not only your employer."

I warmed from his words, all anger forgotten just like that. "Yes. Of course."

He turned toward the water. "Would you like to walk? The tide's low."

I hesitated. Should I? Was I setting myself up for a terrible fall? I'd never been in love. I'd never even met anyone I found remotely alluring. This man, despite his broodiness and mood swings, had drawn me into his life and without warning he was all I could think about. What was happening to me? "I'd like a walk," I said finally. "To clear the cobwebs, as my mother used to say."

He offered his arm, and we headed toward the stairs that led down to the shore. "What was your home like growing up?" Benedict asked.

"A small, damp one-room apartment on an alley street. Times were lean, but my mother managed to keep us alive. It seemed we'd get ahead a little, and then the landlord would raise the rent, or the price of food would go up. She never complained, though. Not once." I could remember waking one night to see her huddled in our one chair, crying. I'd never asked her about it, just closed my eyes and pretended everything was fine.

We were on the shore now. The tide was low, leaving all kinds of interesting rocks and strings of seaweed and fat kelp in its wake. I kept hold of Benedict's arm, feeling the muscles ripple under my touch as we walked.

"What else? Tell me more," Benedict said.

"The two of us shared a small bed and made our meals on the wood cookstove. I never thought anything of it until I started school and saw that not all the children lived as we did. Although a lot did. In that neighborhood, survival was uppermost on everyone's mind. A woman alone had it the worst. She wanted more than anything for me to get an education and break out of poverty."

"Which you did."

"It was hard to keep going after I lost her. We'd been so close and always did everything as a team. I can remember the first day of secretarial college, staring at the entrance to the building and wondering if I could go inside. But then I remembered how much she'd sacrificed for me and plucked up the courage to get on with it. "

"You're courageous. Not many women would come all this way to a remote island to work for people they'd never met before."

"You might be surprised what desperation does to a woman. You speak as if I had more promising choices than this one." I shuddered, thinking of Mr. Pitts's menacing stare and volatile temper.

"Still, coming all this way must have been frightening?"

"Mrs. Mantle was very persuasive. Have you met her?"

He looked blankly at me. "Mrs. Mantle? I can't say that I have. I didn't know about her at all until Mother told me you were coming."

"Do you find that strange?"

"Which part? That you're a woman?" His tone had lightened, our earlier tension having disappeared into the fresh spring air.

“Not that,” I said, smiling. “I meant that it was strange your mother sent for me. Couldn’t she have hired someone from the island?”

“I suppose she wanted to ensure certain qualifications were met. Not many on the island would have your skills. In fact, probably no one.”

“It still feels as if there was more to it,” I said. “But perhaps that’s just me.”

“I wouldn’t think too much of it. My mother isn’t the sneaky or manipulative type. That was my father.”

“You’re probably right. I’m naturally suspicious.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “That’s all I know.”

I halted, wanting to hear more. “I’m glad to be here.” I looked up into his eyes. “The island has healing powers, I think. I sleep well here. And all Mrs. Halvorson’s delicious food has made me feel strong.”

“You are strong. And beautiful.”

I gulped in air. My stomach did flips. “Thank you. I’ve never thought so.”

“Do you not have mirrors in Boston?”

“Yes, of course, we do,” I said, not getting the joke at first. “Oh, you mean because...” I trailed off, feeling silly.

“I mean because there’s no way you could look in a mirror and not see the most beautiful woman in the world staring back at her.”

“You don’t know that many women.” I let my eyes sparkle up at him. My body buzzed with excitement and this delicious feeling that was even better than food. I could dance across the rocks and pebbles and never feel a thing. “There are a lot of people in the world. You can’t possibly know if I’m the most beautiful of all.”

“I don’t have to see any others to know.” He lifted a tendril of my hair that had loosened in the breeze. “I can’t think of

anything but you. At night, when I close my eyes, I see your face.”

“What am I doing there behind your eyes?”

“Smiling at me. Or sometimes your forehead gets all scrunched up, like when you’re thinking.”

“I’ll give myself wrinkles,” I said.

“You would still be beautiful. Even if this glorious hair of yours turns silver. You will still be the prettiest of all.”

Breathless, I stared up into his eyes. He studied me, then put both hands on the sides of my arms. “I’m a misfit, Amelia. I don’t know how to court a woman or how to charm her into falling in love with me. Not like Briggs does. Tell me, do you care for him that way?”

“He makes me laugh,” I said. “But he doesn’t make me feel this twisty thing in my chest. Or make birds sing inside me.”

“Birds sing inside you?”

“Because of you. Never before this.”

“Birds are singing for me, too,” Benedict said. “And butterflies have nested in my stomach. You’ve invaded my dreams and thoughts.”

Goosebumps rose on my arms. “It would never be anyone but you. Waste no more time or energy being jealous. There’s no need.”

“I’m like a beast to your beauty.”

I laughed. “I didn’t know beasts were tall and broad and so handsome.”

“You think me handsome?”

“Your eyes, Benedict Tutheridge, are enough to make a woman lose all her pious intentions.”

He drew me closer, peering into me with those aforementioned eyes. “What would you say if I asked to kiss you?”

“Are you asking?” I floated above the ground, delirious with joy over his words and the earnestness in his expression.

“I am. Will you allow me to kiss you?”

“I’ve never been kissed,” I whispered. “Will I do it wrong?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” He lifted my chin with the tips of his fingers. His gloves smelled of leather, and his breath was soft against my skin. It felt like eternity that we remained thus until finally he brushed his lips to mine, quick and dry. I had not expected his lips to feel plump or for my response, which was to throw my arms around his neck and pull him closer, demanding more. He obliged, kissing me again. This time the kiss made my mouth fall open and let him inside. I nearly swooned. Desire rushed through me, rendering me useless for anything but clinging to him. His arm around my waist tightened, pulling me to him so that there was no distance between our bodies. I’d never in my life experienced anything as pleasurable as his kisses or the feel of his muscular frame holding me.

When we parted, my legs felt wobbly. If I fainted dead away, it would absolutely ruin the romantic moment. But I didn’t pass out. I simply stared up at him and marveled at the direction my life seemed to be headed. Straight to Benedict. Hurtling toward him at a speed I could not control. Benedict Tutheridge had changed every single thing about my life. He’d become my dream and deepest desire. He was all I wanted now. Would he break my heart? I couldn’t know. Regardless, I was no coward. If love took courage, then here I was, standing up and asking for what I wanted. Now it was in God’s hands. He knew what I wanted. And from the way Benedict was looking at me, he did too.

AMELIA

“I ‘ve thought of a new story for us to read.” I held up *Much Ado About Nothing* to show them. “I found it in the library.”

We had just settled in before the fire. Mrs. Tutheridge was in her usual chair doing her needlepoint but looked up with delight in her eyes. She became more robust by the minute, her husband’s shadow no longer causing dark bruises under her eyes. Over the last few days, she had joined us when I read to Benedict, allowing poor Dexter to retire early. God bless the man. He never complained, but his job must be trying at times. Although probably not as much as it had when Mr. Tutheridge was alive. I didn’t want to think about what he’d seen over the years. My mother had known everything about the family she’d worked for. People forgot that servants had ears and eyes.

Benedict stretched his long legs out before the fire. “A play?”

“Yes, Shakespeare,” I said gleefully. “The play with your names in it.”

“Benedict and Beatrice,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

I nodded, excited. “Were either of you named after the play?”

Mrs. Tutheridge smiled. “Not really. I’d always liked the name Benedict from when I read the play as a young woman. It was my favorite because there was a Beatrice in it. I was

nothing like her, of course. She was witty and courageous and stood up to Benedict.”

I didn't say anything. What did one say to such a thing? It was true, after all. She'd allowed her sons to be hurt by their father and had turned away from the truth. However, what could she have done? She and the boys had been at the mercy of a cruel man.

“I'm looking forward to hearing it read,” Benedict said. “Although this Benedict sounds like a rascal.”

“More like Briggs than you,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

“Did I hear my name?” Briggs appeared and headed straight toward the bar, pouring himself a whiskey.

“We're about to start reading *Much Ado about Nothing*,” I said.

“One of my favorites,” Briggs said. “Mind if I sit with you?”

“You read Shakespeare?” I asked.

“Don't look so aghast,” Briggs said, grinning. “I'm a cultured man, after all.”

“Is that what you think of yourself?” Benedict asked, teasing.

“Briggs, that would be wonderful,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “It's nice to all be together.” She sounded so pleased that it almost brought tears to my eyes. How she must have missed him when he was banished from the family.

Ella came into the room, her heels clicking on the hardwood floors, dressed in a plain skirt and white blouse, much like my own. She'd been working today and had missed supper. “Hello, family.”

“Darling, how was your day?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Did you get anything to eat?”

Ella plopped onto the other end of the couch from me. “Yes, Mrs. Halvorson set aside a plate for me. I ate in the kitchen just now. My day was fine, other than there's a terrible

cold going around. I was up to my armpits in feverish children.”

“Ella, really? Armpits?” Mrs. Tutheridge gave a disapproving sniff. “The things you say.”

“Are the children all right?” I asked. “Poor babes.”

“Yes, they’re all fine. Children are resilient.” Ella smiled reassuringly. “The Browns’ littlest gave me a scare, but his fever broke this afternoon. Thus I was able to return to my loving family.”

For the thousandth time since my arrival, I thought about how pretty she was. There was such a terrific energy about her. I was growing very fond of her and Briggs. Hudson, however, was mostly invisible. He rarely joined us for dinner. I’d have forgotten he was even around most days if it weren’t for his daughter. She made her presence quite known, usually at the top of her lungs.

“Would you like to stay and hear Amelia read to us?” Benedict asked.

“I’d love to stay, but you mustn’t hold it against me if I fall asleep. I was up half the night with Mr. Rivers.”

“Is he any better?” Benedict asked.

“Stable,” Ella said. “But elderly. Rhett’s beside himself with worry.”

“We should have him out to dinner,” Briggs said. “To cheer the poor fellow up.”

“Great idea,” Ella said. “He’s such a dear.”

Mrs. Tutheridge muttered something under her breath and pulled out a stitch. Ella caught my eye and raised a brow.

I began to read, trying not to stumble over the old-fashioned language. After the first scene, I looked up to see all of the Tutheridges smiling, obviously enjoying it as much as I.

“You could be an actress,” Ella said, eyes shining. “You really read so well. Doesn’t she?”

“Agreed,” Benedict said. “Like everything else she does, Amelia is superb.”

I flushed, ridiculously happy from his words of praise. “Well, I shan’t leave my real job for a life on the stage. Not yet, anyway.”

“I would like to see Amelia act out all the parts,” Briggs said. “Playing each of the characters. Performing right here, changing your voices and darting around the room.”

I laughed. “I’m afraid I’m not that talented.”

Briggs jumped to his feet. “Give me that book.” I did so, and he proceeded to read the next scene, acting out the parts in front of the fireplace with great exaggeration. We were all laughing so hard by the end that no one heard Dexter come into the room until he was right next to Briggs.

“Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt. But one of the maids has asked for Hudson, and I can’t find him. Bebe has awakened from a nightmare and wants her father.”

“Where could he be at this hour?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked.

“He went out earlier this evening,” Briggs said. “I saw him leave. No idea where he went, though. He’s been acting strangely. I mean, moodier than usual.”

Moodier than usual. I wasn’t sure that was possible. What was Hudson up to? I’d never known him to leave the house. Should I be suspicious? Move him to the top of the suspect list?

Mrs. Tutheridge let out a sigh and put aside her needlepoint. “I suppose I should go up and put her back to bed.”

“No, Mother, I’ll go up and soothe Bebe back to sleep.” Briggs wagged a finger at me. “But don’t read any further until I return.”

ONE SUNNY MORNING I was walking in town, peering into the windows of the bakery at a display of cakes and pies, when I heard someone behind me. I turned to see that it was Caleb King. The teacher, I reminded myself. Possible murderer? I had no idea, but I'd sure like to know. The more I thought about Mr. Tutheridge's murder, the more I wanted to solve it. I had a sense that knowing the truth would help the Tutheridge family to heal.

Caleb nodded and held out his hand. "I'm Caleb King. I don't believe we've been introduced."

"Nice to meet you. You're the teacher, isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's correct." He took off his hat and brushed back thick locks of dark hair. A nice-looking man but not particularly rugged. Instead, he possessed an air of education and class.

"How are you finding island life?" Caleb asked.

"I love it." I gestured toward Puget Sound. "What's not to like? I've never lived anywhere near as pretty. How about you?" I would ask him questions until he ran away. Then I would write down my findings in my notepad. If only I'd brought it with me. I should have known I would run into someone in town. "Where are you from?" I asked casually. Just making conversation, I told myself.

"I grew up back east."

"Me too. Boston."

"I was in upstate New York."

"Did you teach there?" I asked.

"I did." His eyes were heavily lidded, giving him a mysterious aura. "But I came west ten years ago."

"Whatever gave you the idea?"

"Same as you, I suppose. The job offer was a good one, and it was a chance to live on a beautiful island."

"Has Mr. Tutheridge's death shaken you at all? I mean, is it safe here, do you think?" I studied him intently, looking for

signs of guilt. I saw nothing but a pair of hazel eyes. Ones that seemed to be observing me as keenly as I was him.

“Mr. Tutheridge had a lot of enemies,” Caleb said. “But I don’t think the island’s unsafe. Not for most of us anyway.”

“Were you one of his enemies?” I bit the inside of my mouth to rid myself of the nervous energy. Was I pushing it too hard? I needed to go to detective school and learn how to interrogate properly. My mother used to say I was more curious cat than human. I could never let a thing go. If there was an answer to be had, I wanted it more than anything.

“Mr. Tutheridge was someone with whom I played a poker game once a week. Other than that, I didn’t know him well.”

“And no reason to wish him dead?”

His eyes flickered with an emotion I couldn’t read. Surprise at the question maybe? Or was it that he did in fact want him dead? Had he been happy to see him go, regardless of whether he killed him or not?

“I wouldn’t wish death upon anyone,” Caleb said. “In fact, I’m a pacifist—raised as a Quaker. I wish no physical harm to any living creature.”

A Quaker. Well, that was interesting. “I suppose even Quakers snap every once in a while, don’t they?”

“Yes, they’re as vulnerable to human emotion as the next man.” He looked behind me, not meeting my eye. “How are you doing working for Benedict? He was not the brother we thought would take over the business.”

“He’s perfectly capable, especially with a good assistant by his side. He’s quite brilliant actually, despite what his father told him all his life.”

“I know that to be true.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I tutored him when I moved here. He’s intelligent, but the problem with his reading makes it seem that he is not. His father was hard on him.”

“What did you hear?” I held my breath, knowing my questions were intrusive.

“I didn’t have to hear anything,” Caleb said softly. “I saw it with my own eyes. When the tutoring didn’t help, Mr. Tutheridge was not happy with me or Benedict. I tried to explain to him that Benedict has certain difficulties but that he was intelligent and creative.”

“What did Mr. Tutheridge think of that?”

A ghost of a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “He didn’t care for that opinion. Roland wasn’t one for advice, I guess you could say.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t ask you to leave because of it,” I said.

“He did something worse, actually. He docked my pay, making it impossible for me to live well. If it weren’t for my gardening skills, I might have perished long ago.”

I took in the shabbiness of his coat with frayed sleeves, and a quick glance at his feet showed me old boots that had probably been polished many times.

He was a fastidious man though. His nails were clean and cut short and his beard neatly trimmed.

“That must have been hard,” I said.

“It was. Still is.”

“Why do you stay?”

He didn’t answer right away, looking out to the water. I watched a myriad of emotions cross his handsome features. “I was forced out of my other school because of false rumors about me and one of the students. It’s followed me ever since. Roland knew I wouldn’t be able to get a teaching job anywhere else. Not with that in my background. Thus, I’m stuck here.”

“There are other lines of work, surely?”

“Not for me. Teaching is who I am. And anyway, there aren’t endless opportunities for people like us.”

“True enough.” He recognized that I was also poor. *Of course he did, ninny*, I told myself. *Why else would I have a job?* If I had a rich father or husband, I would not have had to take a position.

“Does Mr. Tutheridge’s death make it possible for you to ask for better pay?”

“It does, yes. I must hope Mrs. Tutheridge is more generous than her husband.”

“She is. I know she is.” I made a mental note to ask Benedict why Caleb’s wages hadn’t been raised.

His gaze was back on me, rather penetrating and chilling. “Tell me, Miss Young, why are you so interested in the murder?”

I shivered, wishing I’d worn my overcoat. “I’ve grown fond of the family I work for. I’d like it solved for them.”

“I don’t mean to sound overly dramatic, Miss Young, but be careful about who you ask questions. Whoever the killer is, they will not think kindly about the new secretary acting like an amateur sleuth.”

I drew in a sharp breath. He had a point. Was this a threat or simply a kind suggestion? I suppose that depended on whether he’d murdered Roland Tutheridge or not.

“I’ll be sure to take your suggestion under advisement,” I said.

He smiled, clearly amused. “You know, Miss Young, you might be just what the Tutheridge family needed after all.”

“After all?” Why had he said it like that?

He looked down at those ragged boots of his. “I mean, it seems as though they have a champion in you. Do be careful, though. They were raised by Roland Tutheridge. What you see on the surface may not be the whole story.”

“Duly noted.” I gave him a tight smile. “And now I must be on my way. It was good chatting with you.”

He tipped his hat. “You as well.”

BENEDICT

One afternoon, I dropped into the dry goods store on my way home from working on my house. In the last few days, I'd made a lot of progress and was in need of more nails and a new blade for my saw.

I went straight to the counter, happy to see it was quiet. Michael Moon greeted me with one of his half smiles. He wore a green apron over his shirt and had been reading a book that he quickly hid under the table.

“Benedict, what can I do for you?”

I told him what I needed, and he asked if I wanted to wait. “Sure, I don't mind.” I wandered around the store, taking in the bins of flour, sugar, and hard candies. Candy. Amelia might like it if I brought her some. I would. Nothing wrong with a gift to tell her I was thinking about her. Right?

I was so out of my element. Wooing a woman was not as easy as Briggs made it seem.

“Benedict, these are ready for you.”

I returned to the counter and waited for Michael to add up what I owed him. When I'd paid and prepared to leave, he stopped me.

“How's that Miss Young working out for you?”

Michael was not what one would describe as personable. In fact, he was kind of a curmudgeon, scaring children and small dogs with his stern expressions.

“She's just what I needed,” I said.

“Pretty too.” His light blue eyes gazed at me in a way that made me feel exposed. Like one of my recurring dreams of being naked in the middle of the main street of town.

“Indeed.”

“Briggs was in the other day,” Michael said. “Told me how close you and Miss Young were.”

For the second time in recent memory, I wanted to throttle my brother.

“You might say that.”

“Your mother would like it if you married,” Michael said. “Ease her mind.”

How did he know what my mother wanted? “She’s fine with the way things are. Mother, that is. I wasn’t aware you knew my mother well.”

“Timothy Bains and I are good friends. He’s been keeping watch over her.”

Watching over her? What did that mean?

“What about you?” I asked to veer the conversation away from my family. “Anyone you’re interested in?”

“No, that ship’s long since sailed.”

“But you’re still young,” I said. “Surely there’s a Mrs. Moon in your future.”

“Nah. Not likely.” He slid the receipt toward me, watching me the whole time. “You know, I was raised by a mean old man too. No one was too sorry to see him pass either.”

His abrupt change of subject surprised me. We hadn’t been talking about my father.

“Sure. It’s a long list of people who wished he were dead.” I kept my voice casual, hoping to draw him out. I suspected he was doing the same to me. “Matter of fact, it sounds like the sheriff has your name on that list. Mine as well.”

“I’d have killed him a long time ago if I were going to,” Michael said. “And been richer for it.”

He handed me the bag of nails. “Just take care of yourself. Enjoy your freedom.”

“Same to you.”

WHEN I ARRIVED HOME, I found Amelia in the library furiously writing in her notebook. She looked up, beaming at me. “I’ve news.”

I sat behind my desk, hoping my delight at seeing her wasn’t akin to a puppy and its master. “What’s that?”

“I met Caleb King today. We chatted. I asked a few questions.”

“What kind of questions?” The hairs on my arm stiffened.

“About his background. Where he came from and why. I didn’t learn anything we didn’t know already, but I found it interesting how forthright he was. He told me all about his deal with your father. However, he also acted skittish and guilty. And then he told me I should be careful asking questions around town. He said I could be putting myself in danger.”

My stomach hollowed out, leaving me empty and shaky. I hadn’t thought about our sleuthing in that way. Caleb was right. If the killer thought she was getting too close, would he go after her?

“I don’t want you in danger,” I said despite my tight throat.

She blinked and stared at me as if I’d just said something outlandish. “Benedict, we have to solve this case. It’s important that you all know the truth.”

“Not if it puts you at risk.”

“No one’s going to murder me.”

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

“All right, I can’t.” Amelia dipped her pen back into the ink bottle and pulled her notebook closer. “I have to write all

of this in the notebook. In case something happens to me, you'll have all my notes." The whole thing would have tickled me had it not been that there was a killer among us. This was not a murder mystery and we were not Holmes and Watson. Caleb was right. The closer Amelia got to the killer, the more danger she was in.

We were interrupted from further discussion when Mother arrived. She paused in the doorway, worrying her fingers through her lacy handkerchief.

"Mother." I stood, alarmed at her face, which seemed to have drained of color. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine, but I wouldn't mind sitting."

I escorted her over to the chair I had been occupying.

"I've something to tell you," Mother said. "Timothy's encouraged me to tell you children the truth. That it's the only way to get rid of my headaches. Well, he didn't say that part, but he might as well have."

"Shall I leave you alone?" Amelia asked, half rising from her chair.

"No, you may stay." Mother spread her hanky over her lap. "You'll know soon enough." She paused, obviously gathering herself. "As you know, your father had mistresses. He didn't know I knew about his affairs. He never thought I was smart enough to see what he did, but that was a mistake on his part. Timothy protected him from any consequences that might have come his way. One most of all." She drew the hanky from her lap and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "Your father had an illegitimate son. Here on the island."

My heart raced. I could not speak through the lump in my throat. My mouth seemed to have drained of saliva as well.

"Do you know who he is?" Amelia asked.

Mother nodded, stabbing at her cheeks now as if to reform the shape of her face. "The mother was a girl on the island. Barely grown when your father started after her. Timothy found her body and the baby, still alive, in the woods while walking his dog. The baby survived, but it was too late for the

girl. Your father, upon hearing about the news, went to Timothy and told him the child was his. He asked him to place the baby with a family and to keep his secret. In exchange, your father kept his.”

“You knew this?” I finally found my voice. My mind was jumping all over the place, trying to put all the pieces together.

“I saw your father with the girl one night. From this very window. She’d come in the middle of the night. It was obvious she was pregnant. They argued near the water hole, and then she ran off. I heard him come upstairs and go into his room as if nothing had happened. But I knew. She was pregnant with his child, and he sent her away to make it on her own.” Mother’s voice trembled. “I should have done something. But I didn’t know who she was or where she lived. I was pregnant with Ella at the time, and you boys were all little and needed me. It’s all an excuse, but at the time I didn’t know what to do. A month later, Timothy found them. She’d died all alone out there, giving birth to my husband’s child.” Mother was crying, tears dampening her cheeks faster than she could wipe them away. “Timothy made the arrangement with Mr. and Mrs. Rivers. They very happily took him and raised him.”

The truth of what she was saying almost knocked me over. Rhett Rivers. He was our half-brother.

“Mother, how could you not tell us?” I asked, aghast and unable to keep the question to myself. “He and Ella...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. It was too ugly. Too sickening to even contemplate.

“They’re friends. That’s all.” My mother spoke firmly. “I’ve asked her.”

“Thank God,” I said.

“She said she’s never felt that way about him,” Mother said. “And yes, thank God.”

“Does Rhett know who he is?” I asked.

“No. Your father made sure of that.” Mother had stopped crying and was answering in a monotone way, as if she were almost too exhausted to speak. “But he should know. He

should have part of the inheritance and the proceeds from selling the business.”

I couldn't think about those kinds of details at the moment.

Taking in the idea of Rhett being a brother was too much for now. “Do the Riverses know?”

“No. No one but Timothy and me. Your father, of course.”

“What if Rhett did know?” Amelia asked, startling me. “What if he found out somehow and he murdered Mr. Tutheridge as revenge?”

Mother and I were both quiet for a moment. She was right. It made him part of our long list of suspects. A list that seemed to grow by the day.

“What about you, Mother? Had you finally had enough? Did you crack?”

“I'd known about Rhett for a long time. If it would have broken me, it would have already happened.”

“What about how it all adds up to something big?” I asked, unable to let it go. “All his transgressions and lies and manipulation. All the times he hurt you with his fists? Did you finally have enough?”

“Darling, I can see why you would wonder such a thing, but do you really think I'm capable of pulling the trigger? On my own husband? Do you actually think I'm brave enough to do something like that? After all this time? Maybe when I was younger, but now I'm an old lady. I wasted my life with a sadist of a man. The only thing I have are you children. I would not risk jail or hanging and be taken away from you all and Bebe. Not even to see him dead. Am I sad? Only for myself.” She giggled manically. “Isn't that the funny part? I have been reduced to only thinking of myself. Which I don't deserve. I'm as guilty as he was in all of these things. I knew and looked the other way. I was powerless to keep him from hurting you boys. This has been a house of horrors, and I her mistress.”

I stole a quick glance at Amelia. She wore an expression of pity and shock. What must she think of our family? For that

matter, what did I think? This was all such a revelation. None of it made sense to me yet. I needed time to think. For now, I was frozen. Unsure of what to do. Comfort Mother? Demand that she tell the others? Invite Rhett to the house for a conversation? Good Lord. My father would haunt us forever. Even from the grave, he reached out to make sure we remained miserable.

“I should have killed him,” I said out loud, surprising even myself. “He didn’t deserve to live.”

“You didn’t. Please tell me you didn’t?” The desperation in my mother’s voice brought stinging tears to my eyes.

“I did not.” I looked at her with complete unmasking of all of my usual tricks to remain unseen. The mask I kept in place to hide from the world seemed to be slipping away little by little. Father’s death had torn me wide open. Amelia seemed to be putting me back together, but the newly formed me was not the same. I no longer felt the need to hide, to try to fade into invisibility.

“I’ll go to Rhett.” Even as I said the words, I wished I didn’t have to tell him the sordid details of his lineage. “And tell him the truth.”

“Take Briggs with you,” Mother said. “It’ll be better if the two of you do it together.”

I knelt on the floor at my mother’s knees. “It’s the right thing to do. He should know who his father was.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right,” Mother said. “So why do I feel more scared than I ever have?”

Amelia tented her hands and placed her elbows on the surface of the desk. “Because facing the reality of the indecencies of your husband is enough to frighten anyone. You didn’t do this. Either of you.”

“But we have to clean up Father’s messes,” I said more to myself than the women.

Amelia nodded and gave me one of her sweet smiles. For whatever reason, it was enough.

I WENT TO BRIGGS FIRST. He was out in the yard painting a picture of the water. I apologized for interrupting his work, but he only shrugged and set aside his paintbrush. “Never mind that. I don’t like how this one’s turning out anyway.” His eyes narrowed as he took in my nervous state. “What’s the trouble?”

“You better sit down for this,” I said.

“All right.” He followed me to a pair of wooden chairs that Dexter brought out on warm days. I pulled my hat lower to avoid the glare of the sun.

“There has been an interesting development in the story of our family.” How else was I to start? It wasn’t every day that you told your brother that there was another of us. A secret baby kept hidden from us all these years, yet right in front of us the whole time. A boy who had grown up only miles down the road without any knowledge of his true family.

“It’s known, now more than ever,” I said, “that Father had many transgressions. With women other than Mother.”

“Haven’t we always known?” Briggs had a cloth with him that smelled of turpentine, which he was now cleaning his fingers with.

“In theory,” I said. “But now we have to face the consequences of one of his relationships.” Just come out and say it, I told myself. This is Briggs. He can handle anything. “Rhett Rivers is our brother.”

Briggs flinched, then his mouth dropped open before he uttered an expletive. “Rhett? But he was the baby found abandoned in the woods. He’s Father’s son?”

“It appears that way, yes.”

Not often had I seen my brother surprised. One of his gifts was the ability to continue forth despite obstacles and unexpected turns. This one seemed to have him in a state of shock. “Does Rhett know?”

“Mother says no.”

“She knew?”

“She suspected it—more than that—she saw the girl come here one night, obviously with child, wanting to see Father. When the news came later about a dead young woman and a baby, she figured it was his.”

“But she didn’t do anything? Say anything?”

“No. She couldn’t. Or it seemed that way to her. Father was cruel, especially when confronted. She was pregnant with Ella. The three of us were small. What else could she do but stay silent?”

“And the baby was safe with the Riverses,” Briggs said slowly. “So she could console herself with that knowledge.”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Does Ella know?” Briggs asked. “Because they’re friends, you know. I’ve wondered if she liked him.”

“She says they’re friends but no, she doesn’t know. Not yet.”

Briggs cursed again and muttered to himself about how many other children Father had we didn’t know about.

I’d wondered the same thing myself.

“What are we going to do?” Briggs asked.

“We have to do what Father wouldn’t. The right thing.”

“Meaning? Cut him into the family fortune?” Briggs asked.

“That’s my thinking.”

“Hudson’s not going to like this. Not at all. And God only knows what our little sister will think. Father. What a mess he left us.”

“Which seems to unfold more and more every day,” I said, thinking of the suspect list and all of the reasons why various people wanted him dead.

“What if Rhett’s the one who killed him?” Briggs asked. “What if he figured it out and killed him for revenge?”

“I’ve thought of that too. Yet another suspect to add to Amelia’s list.”

“Amelia’s?”

“She’s obsessed with finding out who killed Father. She has this notebook where she writes all her clues down.” I smiled, thinking of how adorable she was bent over her notes, and brightened for a second at the idea before remembering what waited for us. “Should we tell Hudson and Ella before we go out to see Rhett?” I asked.

He nodded, and we exchanged a grim glance. No telling what Hudson would do. He was unpredictable these days. As far as Ella went? We had to pray that her feelings for him were only platonic, or she was in for an even bigger shock.

I ASKED Ella and Hudson to come out to the beach with Briggs and me. I thought it would be best to tell them without the fear of being overheard by any of the staff.

The breeze had picked up by late afternoon, bringing the briny scent of the sea to our noses as we went out to our favorite spot to gather together. When we were kids, we’d come out here often to have our family meetings, away from Father’s ear and Dexter’s careful watch. Briggs and I had dragged fallen tree limbs into a semicircle and then made a firepit of rocks. Today, with the sun shining, we did not build a fire but we sat in our usual spots. Briggs and Ella on one log and Hudson and me on the other.

Beforehand, Briggs and I had agreed that he would be the one to tell them about Rhett. He was the more articulate of the two of us, obviously, and it was going to be enough of a shock without any of my blunders.

Ella’s nose scrunched up as she looked at me. “What’s so important that we needed a sibling meeting?” She made a tent

of her hands, watching me with twinkling eyes. “Are you going to tell us about Amelia? That you’ve fallen in love?”

“He has, but that’s not why we’re here,” Briggs said.

Truth. I had fallen in love. However, that was not why we were here.

“What is it?” Hudson asked blandly, but I knew he was annoyed to have been drawn out of his cave. “I have things to do.”

“As in?” Ella asked, eyes snapping with impatience. She’d had just about enough of Hudson. I think we all had.

“Never mind that,” Briggs said in a soothing tone. “We have something important to tell you. A little shocking, actually. But remember, this has nothing to do with us. We’re all still the Tutheridge siblings. Here for one another, no matter what happens.”

“Just get on with it,” Hudson said, obviously not caring whatsoever about our familial bonds.

Briggs and I exchanged a quick glance before he told them the reason for our meeting. “We have learned, through Mother, that Rhett Rivers is Father’s illegitimate son.”

Ella made a sound like a cat who had its tail stepped on. “What?”

Hudson, for once, seemed to have been shaken out of his snarly mood. His face drained of color, and his eyes seemed almost black despite the brightness of the hour. “Impossible. We would have known by now.”

“One would think,” Briggs said. “But Father was able to keep it a secret all this time. He let the Riverses take him and never looked back, apparently. There was nothing in the will for him, as you all know.”

“How did Father know the young woman?” Ella asked. “Rhett’s mother.”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But it sounds like she was an islander. Maybe the daughter of an early settler here. She had no family.”

“Other than Rhett,” Ella said softly. “But she didn’t live to see him more than a few hours old. Rhett knows that much. The Riverses have told him everything they know about her, which wasn’t much.” She drew in a sharp breath. “Father was even more of a snake than we knew. Which I didn’t think was possible.”

No one said anything for a moment as we absorbed the truth of my sister’s words. Father had cared for no one but himself. He proved it in every action he’d taken. I went on to tell them what Mother had told me about the night the girl came to the house.

“She knew?” Ella asked. “All this time?”

“It seems that way,” I said.

“How could she have let her be sent away?” Ella asked. “A pregnant girl came to her door needing help and Mother let her leave.”

“She didn’t know what to do,” Briggs said. “You were in her tummy, Ella. We were little. You know how Father was.”

“I have to think about that,” Ella said. “Poor Rhett. Do you think he’ll feel rejected and abandoned all over again when he learns the truth?”

“He was the lucky one,” Hudson said. “He didn’t have to live here.” His eyes were glassy and unfocused, as if he might tear up at any second. I’d not seen emotion on my brother’s face for a long time. The usual shield, as formidable as cast iron, had broken open, and I could see hints of the boy he had been.

“He was raised by two loving people,” Ella said, nodding in agreement. “They have cherished him and loved him. He never had anyone raise their hand in anger.”

“Or get locked in a crawl space,” Briggs said under his breath.

“He may not see it that way,” I said. “His parents were poor. He’s had to help his father every single day since he was old enough to do so. They’ve struggled. Not lived like fat cats.

Not like us. But we have to make this right. He deserves to be part of this family.”

“By part of this family—you mean financially?” Hudson asked. “What else would he want to do with this disaster of a family?”

“You might be surprised,” Ella said. “He’s a gentle soul. He and I have been good friends since we were children. As loved as he’s been by the Riverses, knowing he has siblings will be seen as a blessing.”

“Unless he killed Father,” Hudson said.

Ella gasped. Clearly, the idea had not immediately occurred to her as it had the rest of us. In fairness, she knew him well, and my brothers and I did not.

“He wouldn’t kill a spider,” Ella said. “Let alone a man.”

“How should we approach him?” Briggs asked, bringing us back to the task at hand. “Ella, do you want to tell him? Or should we do it together?”

“It’s probably best coming from Ella,” Hudson said. “But perhaps we should all be together. Let him know that we mean no harm and want him to be part of the family.”

“No, I’ll do it,” I said. “I’m the oldest. It’ll be too much if we’re all there.”

“Agreed,” Hudson said. “And about the money too.”

I stared at him, shocked by this burst of generosity. I’d have thought Hudson would not want to share the family fortune.

“There’s enough for all of us,” Hudson said. “We all know that to be true. Benedict’s correct. We have to make it right. For once, we can actually do something to make up for Father’s horridness.”

Ella swiped at her pink cheeks and sniffed. I handed her my handkerchief, which she twisted around her fingers instead of wiping her eyes. “Once we sell the company, we’ll divide it all up and be done with it. Everything Father built, we walk away from. We’ll finally be done with him.”

“It is a stab in his back,” Hudson said, smiling. “Selling his life work.”

“It’ll feel good,” Briggs said. “Darn good.”

“On second thought, I think we should tell Rhett together,” Ella said. “Show him that we’re united and that we all want to give him his rightful inheritance and be part of this family if he wants to be. I’ll ask Rhett to come out to dinner tonight. We’ll tell him then.”

We all nodded in agreement. My stomach churned just thinking about what was to come. Poor Rhett. He would be devastated. Hopefully, the knowledge that he would now be rich would soothe the pain.

“Is Mother all right?” Hudson asked.

“She’s glad to have it all out in the open,” I said. “Including him as one of us might be hard, though.”

“She’s carried around a lot of guilt,” Briggs said. “Maybe she’ll be relieved.”

Ella stared out to the sea. “I love Mother. You know I do. But she’s not innocent in any of this. She let him hurt you boys. Over and over again. She let a girl die.”

No one said anything. What could we, after all? Everything Ella said was the truth. Yet Mother had done her best in an impossible situation. Regardless, none of us could move away from the past without forgiveness. Not of Father, mind you, but our mother, who had been as much of a victim as the rest of us. For now, we must welcome a new member of our family. I only hoped he would be gracious enough to forget the past and open his heart to us.

AMELIA

After Benedict left and Dexter took an emotional Mrs. Tutheridge up to her quarters, I hurried upstairs to my room. Once there, I took out my notebook to read over my list of suspects and motives. Unfortunately, I had to add Rhett Rivers as the latest possibility.

Around five, I went out for a walk. The weather was glorious, and I wanted to spend a little time soaking up the sun. It was not that I was hoping to run into Benedict or Briggs and ask a thousand questions. No, not that. I mean, I had a conscience. Despite my curious cat ways, I understood that this news would test the Tutheridge family in a whole new way.

I put on a light coat and went out to the grassy lawn, standing for a moment to look out at the water. The Tutheridges' boat was docked not far from shore, bobbing gently. Seabirds squawked overhead as I made my way down the trail to the beach. I'd learned to walk more easily on the uneven rocks and pebbles. In fact, I was feeling like a real islander.

I strolled down to the end of the beach. As I rounded a clump of trees that sheltered a small cove, I saw that Ella sat alone on a log, bent over her own knees. Her shoulders shook. Crying? Tough Ella? My chest ached for her. She'd taken the news hard. Had she thought of Rhett as anything more than a friend? Please, God, not that. Or was this just a natural reaction to having one's world turned upside down? It wasn't every day a girl found out she had a secret brother.

Should I go to her? Or walk away pretending I hadn't seen her? I didn't want her to feel her privacy had been interrupted, yet she might want comfort. While I was deciding, she looked up and saw me. She wiped her face and waved, calling out to me.

I waved back and made my way toward her.

She patted the spot next to her on a smooth log. Closer, I could see that a crude firepit had been built with rocks.

"Have you heard?" Ella asked.

"Yes. I was there when your mother told Benedict." I settled just inches from her, taking in her red eyes and blotchy skin. "Would you rather be alone?"

"No, not really." She leaned her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her. Strands of her hair tickled my cheek.

"I'm sorry, Ella. It must be such a shock."

"I'm thinking mostly of Rhett. All these years he had to wonder who his father was, only to find out it was Roland Tutheridge. I can't imagine what he's going to think or feel."

"He'll be astounded, no doubt." What a lame answer, but I couldn't think of anything better to say.

"Rhett has been my best friend. All this time, we've been friends not realizing we're related. I can't understand it. Not really."

I squeezed her shoulder. "Not yet. But you will. Give it a little more time."

"Ben wants to give him his share of the family money."

"I wouldn't expect anything else of him. It was his first thought."

"Father was awful to Ben, and yet he remains so good. Don't you find that remarkable?"

"I do. He shouldn't be kind. Not after what he experienced as a child."

“You’ve helped him,” Ella said. “Brought him to life. Made him smile. I’m thankful. I hope you know that.”

“I’m the one who should be grateful. You’ve welcomed me into the family and made me feel part of something. I’ve wanted that more than anything, especially after I lost my mother.”

“Could you be happy living here? So far away from a city?”

“I’m already happy here.” It was true. How could I not be? “This island and your family are the best things that have ever happened to me.”

She laughed ruefully. “I’m glad you see it that way. I’m not sure everyone would think the Tutheridge family was a blessing. Some might call us a curse.”

“You are not your father. Neither is Briggs or Benedict.”

Ella sighed, looking out to the water. A seal lifted its head out of the water and seemed to watch us for a moment before diving back under, leaving only a ripple in its wake.

“I can’t help but worry about Rhett,” Ella said. “He’s a sensitive soul.”

“It may take him some time to adjust to the idea.”

“We’ve invited him to dinner. So we’ll know soon enough how he reacts to finding out he has four siblings.”

“He’ll see the good fortune in it,” I said. “I just know he will.”

We sat looking out at the water for a few moments before Ella asked, “Do you have any idea who murdered my father?”

“I’ve come up with a long list of possibilities but nothing substantial.”

“Will it be worse for us to know the truth?”

“I don’t think so. The truth is always better,” I said.

“Do you know my greatest fear? Being like him. Selfish and greedy.”

“Is that why you became a nurse?”

“Partly, I suppose,” Ella said.

“Would you ever want to marry?”

“There’s no reason for me to. I’m rich on my own. What betterment to my life would a man bring to me? Rather, he’d keep me down, make me obey. Which I would loathe and soon come to hate him and the other way around.”

“You can’t imagine falling in love?”

“No. I learned a long time ago how to keep myself from getting hurt. Stay out of the way. Live in the shadows without causing a fuss. Become so independent that you need no one.”

“Not all men are like your father,” I said. “You said so yourself.”

“Yes, but what if the one I married, thinking the best of him, turns out to be like Father? A woman doesn’t know until she’s married. That’s when he shows you who he really is.”

I shut my eyes as a wave of pain engulfed me. “My father ran off before I was born. Mother told everyone he was dead, but that wasn’t true. He didn’t want us. That kind of rejection never really heals.”

Ella took a sharp intake of breath. “I’m worried Bebe’s going to turn out just like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father didn’t love me or have any time for me. And look at me, all prickly and mean. Hudson’s no good with Bebe. He’s either ignoring her or trying to make her go to bed.”

“Firstly, you’re not mean,” I said, poking her softly with my elbow into her ribs. “You are a little prickly. But not enough to keep a man from loving you. If you so chose to let him in. As far as Hudson goes, he’s hurting. That’s different than your father.”

“Hudson’s utterly lost. I don’t know if he’ll ever fully return to us.” She wiped the corners of her eyes. “You’ve got

me crying, you meanie.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, laughing. “And I shall not give up hope of the right man coming to you.”

“What about you and Ben?” Ella asked.

“Well, that’s up to the Lord,” I said. “He knows my heart.”

“God or Ben?”

I laughed again. “I meant God. I’m fairly certain Benedict is already aware of my feelings toward him.”

“I know one thing. You are an answer to my prayers,” Ella said. “It’s like God made you just for Benedict.”

“Maybe Mrs. Mantle’s more matchmaker than staffing expert?”

“Mrs. Mantle?” Ella’s brow scrunched into thin lines across her forehead. “The one who arranged for you to come here?”

I nodded, smiling. “The poor woman had to fix me up before I was ready. She had dresses made for me. It was like having a fairy godmother.”

“That’s kind of romantic.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in romance?”

“For other people, I believe. It’s only for myself that I know there’s no hope.”

“One never knows when your life is about to change,” I said. “Then all of the sudden, it does.”

I looked out over the water. The late-afternoon sun sparkled on the water. A few harbor seals had come to shore and were lying about on a large rock. *No cares in the world, those two*, I thought. *Not like the humans who walk this beach.* “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” Ella said.

“Do you think I’m good enough for Benedict? Given my background.”

Ella scooted a few inches away to look me in the eye. “He would be a lucky man to have you by his side. Trust me.”

“That’s what Briggs said.”

“Well, there you have it. We’re all in agreement.” She stood and held out her hand to help me to my feet. “We should go inside and get ready for dinner. I can’t wait for this night to be over.”

BY THE TIME I reached the lawn, following Ella, I’d decided dinner with the family was not a good idea. All of it would be hard enough for Rhett without my presence making it more awkward. Once in my room, I rang for a maid.

Dexter arrived a few minutes later. “May I get you something, Miss Young?”

“I’m sorry to bother you,” I said. “But I wanted to let you know I’d like my supper up here in my room tonight.”

“I think that’s wise.”

Good old Dexter. He could say a lot with just a few words.

“Did you know about Rhett Rivers?” I don’t know what possessed me to ask, but there it came out of my mouth.

He shifted from one foot to the other and looked as if he might not answer. Then, he seemed to decide to do so despite his better judgment. “There’s no end to the list of things I knew about Roland Tutheridge, but that was not one of them.” He grimaced as if he had a headache. “Will that be all?”

I put my hand briefly on his arm. “I know I shouldn’t thank you but I wanted to say—I don’t know what any of us would do without you. I’ve grown reliant upon you in my short time here. Thank you for chaperoning our reading evenings.”

“It’s my pleasure. You’ve made Benedict laugh. For that, we are all grateful.” He bobbed his head and then exited the room.

Touched by what he'd said, I perched on the side of my bed and took in a deep breath, fighting the sting of tears behind my eyes. Every household needed a man like Dexter, wise, loyal, and hardworking. Yet it raised the question, was he lonely? Had he ever wanted a wife and children of his own? Clearly, he counted the Tutheridge family as his own.

As did I. For better or worse, I was falling for all of them.

BENEDICT

Rhett arrived around seven that evening. He wore a black suit, frayed at the sleeves and thin at the elbows. What had he thought when Dexter had asked him to come for dinner? He took off his hat when Dexter ushered him into the living room. The rest of my family had agreed to stay in their rooms until supper was served at eight. Which left just me.

“May I offer you a drink?” I asked after Rhett had settled into my mother’s usual chair by the fire.

“No, thank you.” Rhett pulled at the sleeves of his jacket. He was a big man. Built like me. I could see it now that I looked at him with new eyes. Half of my father was in this man, as he was in me.

I poured myself a whiskey and joined him by the fire. The last of the daylight was fading outside the windows, leaving the sky with streaks of pink and orange. “Nice evening,” I said.

“They often are this time of year.”

“You’re probably wondering why I asked you for supper?” I sipped my whiskey, grateful for the warm feeling it gave the back of my throat.

“I am, yes.” Rhett had a shock of medium brown hair, light green eyes, and a delicate bone structure. A cleft dented his chin. “Summoned, as I was.”

He was a man of few words. A quiet, still man, comfortable in his own company, not one prone to loneliness or doubt. A sudden memory came to me. One morning I’d run

into him fishing. I'd watched him for a moment, this lone man on the beach, catching fish for his family, and had felt a kinship. Had some part of me known?

I wished Briggs were with me. He would know how to say it with grace, unlike me.

"We've recently discovered something that makes it impossible to continue on without telling you."

His expression grew wary. "Yes?"

"I'll say it simply. Roland Tutheridge was your father. We're half-brothers."

He didn't react at all; not a muscle twitched. His gaze remained fixed upon me. "How do you know this?"

"My mother suspected it." I told him the tale she'd shared with me earlier. "She didn't know the details and never asked. Buried her head in the sand, so to speak. Now, however, she knows it was your mother who showed up here that night. Most likely to ask for his help."

He shifted. Only slightly, mind you. "My parents—the Riverses—they told me they'd seen my mother around a time or two. They'd not known her personally. She grew up here, a descendant of the native tribes who used to live on the islands. They told me she had no one, as far as they could tell. She'd lived alone out in a cabin in the woods. I found the remnants of it one time. Over by Fawn Bay. Most of it had been destroyed by a fire." He pulled something from the breast coat of his pocket. I found this. I think it was hers." He showed it to me. A wooden hair comb, made from cedar from what I could tell, intricately carved and polished. "This was under a group of ferns. Like she'd put it there for me to find."

Fawn Bay was on the other side of the island. A wooded area, populated with deer. A burned cabin. My father must have done that. Or had someone do it for him. Hiding his shame.

"Did you know before?" Rhett asked me. "About me?"

"No. We suspected he had women in Seattle—the way he would be gone for long periods of time and then return to my

mother. To us. He would make up for lost time.” I didn’t say anything further. In time, perhaps, we could tell Rhett the fate he’d avoided.

“Ella told me what it was like here for you and your brother,” Rhett said. “Some of it, anyway. I always thought there was more that she didn’t say.”

“You were better off with the Riverses.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “It would seem so.” His forehead wrinkled. “Is Ella all right?”

“She’s upset and shocked but more concerned about you than anything.”

“We’ve been good friends. I always felt a harmony between us. Also, a protectiveness.”

“Like a brother,” I said.

“It never occurred to me. Not once.”

“To us, either. My mother feels great shame,” I said. “And remorse.”

“What was she supposed to do? Take in a baby from her husband’s mistress? It would be too much to ask of anyone. I was blessed to have the Riverses as my parents. It was the best thing for me. Besides being with my real mother, of course.” He stared into the fire, quiet. The clock on the mantel ticked away the seconds. “Your father abandoned her. Left her to give birth and die alone. This is not a man I would have wanted to live with.”

“Having lived with him, I’d have to agree.” I shifted, then finished my drink before moving on to the next subject. “We want to make things right. Give you a share of the family assets.”

He blinked and smoothed a hand over his hair. “Assets?”

“Money,” I said. “We’re selling the business. Proceeds will be distributed evenly among the siblings. Mother’s already taken care of. Father’s will made sure of that. But the rest of it is ours. We want you to take a share of what’s rightfully yours.”

“No, thank you.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I don’t want his money. Thank you for your generosity, but taking money from the man who abandoned a young woman and his child would not be right.”

“But it would make your life easier.”

“I disagree. Taking money that does not belong to me will only cause trouble. Darkness will come and take hold of me and not let go. My parents have provided a living for me. The lighthouse is my home and where I will spend my life. It is all I know.”

I wouldn’t press him on it now. Later, when he’d absorbed what I’d told him, he might change his mind. However, I understood what he meant. I’d felt similarly myself about Father’s money. However, I figured I’d earned my share. All those nights in the dungeon had to amount to something besides the darkness I carried.

“What do you want from me?” Rhett asked. “Have you really asked me here to offer money?”

“We want you to know that we’re here if you have any interest in being part of this family. We would understand if you didn’t. Perhaps staying away would be advisable.” I smiled to soften it, my dry lips cracking as I did so.

“Ella is my good friend,” Rhett said. “Now maybe you will be too. And your brothers?”

“We’re all reeling a bit from this revelation, as I’m sure you are, but we would like that very much.”

The sound of heels in the foyer was followed by the appearance of my sister. She’d been crying, that much was obvious by her pale complexion dotted with pink and puffy skin around her eyes. Rhett and I both stood.

She held out her hands to Rhett. “I guess this explains why we’ve always been such good friends?”

“Yes.” Rhett nodded, returning her smile and taking her hands in his for a moment. “Don’t cry now. Nothing’s

changed. Not really. I'm as well as I was yesterday."

Ella glanced over at me with a questioning expression. I'd retreated to stand near the fire, suddenly chilled, but gave her my best big-brother smile. *All will be well*, I told her silently.

"Mother isn't going to join us for dinner," Ella said. "Rhett, she asked if I'd give you her regards."

"This is strange for her," Rhett said. "Hard."

"Isn't it for all of us?" Ella asked. "We're sorry for what he did."

"You have all suffered more than I," Rhett said.

This man. Rhett Rivers made me want to be a better one.

"There *is* one thing I might like from you," Rhett said. "If it's not too much trouble. Could I choose a few books from your library? The nights are long at the lighthouse. Reading keeps my mind occupied but also alert to anyone who needs my help."

"Whatever you wish for is yours," I said. "Would you like to go up now and pick out a few to take home tonight?"

"Nothing would please me more," Rhett said.

My father told me once that every man had his own currency, the thing they want more than anything else. Apparently, Rhett's was books. We had more in common than I'd ever have imagined just one day ago.

AMELIA HAD ALSO SENT her apologies for dinner. Thus, it was only the Tutheridge siblings at the table. Five when there were only four just yesterday.

Fortunately, Ella and Briggs did most of the talking, keeping it to benign subjects such as the weather and island gossip. Ella always had funny stories to tell about her travels around the island, taking care of the sick and helping in childbirths.

We had roast chicken for dinner with a salad of baby greens from the spring garden. Radishes and small carrots had been shaved and mixed into the lettuce. Goat cheese from our local dairy farm was delicious in contrast with a tart and tangy vinaigrette. I hoped Amelia had enjoyed it.

We were halfway through the main course when talk turned to Rhett's work at the lighthouse. He wasn't a storyteller. Ella had to pull it out of him by asking questions.

"You trade off every other night, isn't that right?" Ella asked. "With your father?"

"Not anymore," Rhett said in his soft voice. His manner of speaking made me think of the quiet life he lived. Had his home made him into the thoughtful man before us or had he gotten it from his mother?

"My papa's become frail. He's no longer the young man he was when he took the position forty years ago. As you would see in the logbook, it is mostly me now that keeps the light on during the dark nights."

"Does it ever get lonely up there?" Briggs asked, helping himself to another mound of potatoes and a chicken leg from the platter offered by Dexter. "For female companionship, say?"

"Briggs," Ella said. "That's none of your concern. Not everyone has mistresses on every other street in Seattle."

An awkward silence followed. Briggs had the decency to look abashed. Would the understanding of what our father had done and what he'd hidden show him the errors of his own path? Did he feel shame for the swath of women he'd seduced and discarded? Did he have illegitimate children of his own out there?

Rhett smiled. "It's all right. To answer your question, it does feel remote at times, as if the world goes on without me while I sit and wait. My parents are not well, and elderly, as you know. Losing them will be very difficult for me." He looked around the table, landing finally on me. "I worry, sometimes, in the middle of one of those long nights, that I'm

destined to be alone for the rest of my years after they're gone. Who would want to marry a lighthouse keeper?"

"You have us now," Ella said. "Now we're your family."

"That idea will take some getting used to. For all of us," Rhett said. "Thank you for welcoming me, even if it's only out of obligation."

"What else would it be?" Hudson asked, speaking for the first time. "Our father has thrust this upon us. None of us asked for this, most of all you." His tone was mild, but the seething anger underneath was nonetheless apparent. What would he have been like if he'd been treated as Briggs and I were? "As far as a wife goes, you could always order one."

Ella nearly choked on her bite of chicken. "Hudson, what are you talking about?"

Hudson's mouth twitched. Was he amused or irritated? I could never tell these days. "I mean no harm by my suggestion. I'm merely saying—there *are* mail-order brides. They send them from the east for lonely men."

Rhett gazed at Hudson, a quizzical expression on his face. "What an odd thing to do. Ordering a person?"

"They're desperate for wives," Hudson said. "And willing to pay."

"I'm afraid that's not something I could do," Rhett said. "No matter how lonely I am."

"Why would a woman do that?" Ella asked no one in particular. "Agree to marry a man she'd never laid eyes upon?"

"Most women aren't like you, Ella," Hudson said.

"Meaning?" Ella asked.

"Independent. With a job. Even when you don't need one and no one asked you to play nurse." Hudson picked up his wineglass and took a sip.

Rhett gazed at Hudson without blinking. "You're angry. Is it my presence, or is it something else?"

“The number of things I’m angry about wouldn’t fit in this room,” Hudson said. “And all paths lead right back to my father. You, however, have done nothing to provoke my anger. You’re just a victim like the rest of us.”

“What did he do to you, dear brother?” Briggs asked, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Oh, favored one. Benedict and I were the ones who got the hole.”

Hudson shook his head. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, really, Hudson.” Ella set aside her fork and glared at him from across the table. “What are you so angry about?”

“Our dear departed father killed my beloved,” Hudson said. “As sure as if he’d struck her down with his own hand.”

I scratched behind my ear, attempting to think of what I could say to alleviate the tension. *Welcome to the family*, I thought. Rhett would probably run out of here screaming and never return. I certainly wouldn’t blame him if he did.

Instead, Rhett turned his attention on Hudson. “What do you mean? How did he kill your wife?”

“Here we go,” Ella muttered under her breath.

“We had taken the boat to Seattle, supposedly on business. Instead, he spent most of his time with one of his whores,” Hudson said. “Leaving them no way to get off this blasted island to get her medical care.”

Rhett had flinched at the word *whores*, reminding me of the way a horse’s muscles flick away a fly. His mother had been one of Father’s women. He would not appreciate her being called such a vicious name.

Hudson seemed oblivious to anyone’s feelings but himself. “So do you see why my anger runs deep? Can you begin to understand what this man—our father—did to all of us? What he did to your mother, he also did to my wife. Abandoned her and let her die unnecessarily.”

Rhett was quiet for a moment, his brow wrinkled in concentration. “You’re right. That’s exactly what he did. We

can hate him for that. We can mourn the women he hurt and let die from his own carelessness, his lack of humanity. However, if we allow anger to rule our lives, we will forever be victims. This man who gave us life—he is not our father but our enemy. Don't let him win again, Hudson. Set yourself free.”

Hudson bowed his head. “You're right, of course. I'm not strong enough to let go of my anger. It's the only thing keeping me alive.”

AMELIA

The morning after the family welcomed Rhettt at dinner, I woke from a nightmare about Mr. Pitts in which he pointed a rifle at me. I woke just as he pulled the trigger. For a moment, I lay there, heart pounding. Was it a sign? Was I in danger?

Something must be done. This case must be solved. I scrambled out of bed and tried to shake off this feeling of dread that seemed to have taken residence in my stomach. I was not hungry, which for me was odd. The thought of food actually made me feel even more ill. A sense of urgency remained as I bathed and dressed. Before going downstairs, I paced in front of my bedroom window. What was it that needed to be done? My eyes were drawn back to the notebook on the desk. I opened it and read through my last entries, but there were no answers. There were more suspects than harbor seals on this island.

It was time to get the sheriff involved. He needed to be prodded into action, and I was the one to do it. I was the only one who couldn't have done it on this entire island. That was a sobering thought. Again, my stomach rolled over on itself.

Benedict was not in the library. I took it as a signal to head into town. Yes, today was the day. I needed to understand what the sheriff knew. In addition, I wanted to look him in the eyes. He was as likely to have done it as any of the rest of them. I abruptly turned from the window and gasped. Dexter stood in the entryway carrying a tray with a pot of coffee and a plate of scones.

“Oh, Dexter, good morning. I didn’t hear you come up.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Young. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Ella says I have an uncannily soft step.”

“I’ve thought the same.” I smiled and thanked him for bringing up the coffee and breakfast.

“It’s not like you to skip breakfast,” he said. “I was worried you were ill.”

“This is kind of you. I woke not feeling well, but I think it’s only nerves.” I watched him as he poured coffee into a cup and added a teaspoon of sugar and a bit of cream. No small detail went unnoticed by Dexter. He knew how I liked my coffee and my breakfast habits. Not for the first time, I wondered what other secrets he knew.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Dexter asked. “I could send up chamomile tea. Mrs. Tutheridge says it calms her nerves.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’m feeling better.” I picked up my cup of coffee, breathing in the nutty scent. “Dexter, what’s your opinion of the sheriff?”

“He was in thick with Mr. Tutheridge. Like the others, White was indebted to him.”

“Do you think he’s an honest man?”

“Most people have secrets. Some big. Some small.” Dexter looked down at his feet before peeking up at me. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Yes, you may.” What would he ask? Had he seen Benedict and me? Was it obvious to everyone how madly in love I’d fallen with the Tutheridges’ oldest son?

“Why are you obsessed with solving this murder?”

I inhaled slowly, unsure how to answer. “I guess it’s the puzzle of the thing. I can’t ever let go of something until I figure it out. Also, I care about this family now. I didn’t expect that when I came here. I thought this would be a job in a beautiful location, but it’s become more to me than that. My instincts tell me this family I’ve come to love will never be

fully free until they know the truth about what happened. They need to know they can trust one another or this family will never be healed.”

“You care for them. I can see that.” Dexter nodded thoughtfully. “They’re not without flaws, but other than the deceased, they’re all good people who were traumatized by the patriarch. If you’d been here then, you would know how much his death has improved all of their lives.”

“Benedict has told me a lot of what it was like for them.”

“What he and Briggs went through—it wasn’t right. It was evil. Pure evil.”

“He told me what he did to them,” I said.

“That dungeon he sent them to,” Dexter said. “What kind of man does that?”

“I’ll never understand. His own boys. It makes me sick.”

“I risked punishment of my own by taking blankets and food, even a lantern. It was so dark down there they couldn’t see their hand in front of their face.”

My eyes stung as I envisioned a little Benedict and Briggs banished to the darkness. “They were only boys.”

“That’s right.” He cocked his head to the right. “It’s good you’re here, Miss Young.”

“I’m glad to be here.”

“I feel better knowing that if something were to happen to me, the family has you. You possess a certain ferocity I respect.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. You’re fit as can be.”

“One never knows, do we? When our time will come?”

He gave me a polite bob of his head before leaving me to my coffee and scones.

It was nearing nine already. Where was Benedict? The weather was good. He might have gone out to the cottage to do some work. He’d been slipping away for a few hours each day.

An urgency to finish before the winter had seemed to catch hold of him of late. Now that I knew what this job required, I could work without him. Still, I missed his steady presence by my side. I spent nearly every waking hour with him, yet yearned for him the moment he was not within sight.

I HAD FINISHED up my work by noon and went down for lunch to find only Ella in the dining room. She stood by the window looking out at the view but turned when she heard my footsteps. Her face lit up as I crossed the room toward her. “Amelia, I think it’s only us for lunch.”

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Ben went to work on his cottage. Briggs is painting down on the beach and said not to bother him—something about breaking his cycle of creativity or something. Mother has a headache and is in her room. Bebe, praise the Lord, went to school without any dramatics this morning.”

“And Hudson?”

“No sign of life this morning. I was out all night with a sick cow, so I slept until mid-morning. If he’s here, I wouldn’t know. Given that he rarely leaves the house, I’d bet he’s in his wing sullen and angry like he has been for years now.”

“A sick cow?” I asked, unable to let that detail go without knowing more.

“Sometimes I have to be a veterinarian too.” She grinned saucily. “It’s best to have more than one skill when living on an island.”

“You have more than two, I’d say. It’s possible you might be the most talented and competent person I’ve ever known.”

“You’re too kind. Not that I don’t agree, of course.” Ella laughed.

I went to the buffet and helped myself to a cup of the split pea soup, dribbling at least a teaspoon onto the table runner,

then dropping a roll on the floor from fingers that felt fat and shaky. Rattled and anxious, with my thoughts veering from one subject to another. Although thankfully my hunger returned after a cup of coffee and a few nibbles of a scone. It was impossible to resist Mrs. Halvorson's cooking. Still, I could not let go of this idea I had to visit the sheriff. I would go this afternoon. That was all there was to it.

Ella and I sat together at the big table in our usual spots. Instead of eating, she scrutinized me from across the broad tabletop. "What's gotten into you today? You're as jumpy as a hen in a foxhole."

"Yes, I'm a mess." Should I tell her everything in my worried mind? Yes, Ella was my friend. She would understand. "I'm thinking of going to the sheriff with my notes and list of suspects."

"What's your reasoning?" Ella asked.

"I want to look him in the eyes and see what he has to say for himself. There's been no progress made as far as I can tell, and I want to know why he's stalling."

"Incompetence?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's a darker reason than that," I said.

Ella nodded, clearly understanding what I was insinuating. "He has as much motive as anyone else."

"But you don't think he did it?"

"I have no idea. My problem is apathy. I don't care who did it, only that he's gone. Whoever killed him had their reasons and from what we know, we'd probably agree with them. Why is it *you* can't let it go?"

"Dexter just asked me the same thing." I told her what I'd told him. My obsession with solving anything puzzling and a growing fondness for her family. "Don't you think there's value in knowing the truth? Won't it help set you all free?"

She picked up her spoon and scooped it into the soup. "You might be right. My brothers are still entangled in the webs Father made. However, I'm not convinced we'll ever be

free of the past, even if we know who ended his life and therefore the torture he put us all through in one way or another.”

The sadness in her voice touched me.

“What did he do to you?” I asked softly.

“You really have a way of getting right to the matter, don’t you?” Ella asked.

“I like plain speech.”

“As far as what Father did to me? The same as the others, only he never hurt me physically. There was not one of us who satisfied him. We all had the audacity to fall short of his expectations. I’m sure he had big dreams before we were born of what his children would be like, and not one of us lived up to them. He loved to tell me to get back into my place, to stop pushing so hard to be like a man. He didn’t think I should be allowed to have a job that matters. One that helps people instead of wasting away like a pretty flower, blooming in the spring and dying shortly thereafter. I wanted more. He didn’t like that. In fact, he did everything he could to thwart my ambition, including taking me out of school.”

A smile played at her lips. “He underestimated my tenacity. Where there are books, there are ways to learn whatever we wish. I was able to find a copy of a medical textbook and then studied every night for years. He didn’t know, of course, until I started nursing the people of this island. By then, he couldn’t stop me. I’d helped too many people. But the difference between me and Ben? He always cared about what Father wanted. What he thought. I never did. I just went ahead and acted like myself anyway. As it turns out, there’s not much he could do to keep me from my purpose in life.” She gestured toward my notebook, which I’d brought with me to lunch in case a thought occurred to me and I wanted to write it down.

“You have me in there as a suspect?” Ella asked.

“I don’t.”

“Why not? You don’t think a woman could have done it?” Her eyes glittered just thinking of the challenge, obviously forgetting we were talking about the murder of her father.

“I think a woman could have, but not you.”

“What’s your reasoning?”

“Like you said just now, you didn’t care enough. The person who did this cared very much about your father. They either wanted to punish him or stop him from controlling their lives or income. You haven’t the need for either of those things.”

“True. I’m glad he’s dead, don’t doubt that. I wake every morning now with the feeling that anything’s possible, including my brothers’ peace. That’s what I care about, Amelia. What’s left of my family. What’s left of this life that we can salvage and thus create new memories. Ones that don’t involve my father’s torment.”

“Do you want to come with me to see the sheriff?” I asked. “I could use the company.”

“Yes, I’ll come. Why not? Two sets of eyes on him can’t hurt.”

Especially these two sets of eyes, I thought, smiling at my clever friend.

WE FOUND the sheriff not at the jail but in the pub. I’d not set foot in the place thus far, but Ella seemed quite familiar. She introduced me to Matthew Goodwell, who stood behind his bar drying glasses with a hand towel. Mr. Goodwell. He was on my list. Fortunately, he seemed oblivious to my suspicions as he greeted us with a wide smile.

“Good to see you, Miss Young. How are you settling in here on our little island?”

“Very well, thank you. I enjoy my job very much.”

“Benedict’s a good man,” Matthew said. “Tossed into a situation that makes him uncomfortable. From what his mother tells me, he’s blessed to have you.”

I blushed. “Thank you. I’m happy to do my best for him.”

“You’ve been speaking to my mother?” Ella asked, sounding suspicious.

“Sure.” His eyes shifted right and left, then up to the ceiling, as if he were hiding something. What if he was smitten with Mrs. Tutheridge too? Would he and Pastor Bains have to fight over her? He was the right age, give or take a few years. Marrying a younger man might reduce a woman’s odds of becoming a widow again.

“Do you see her often?” Ella asked. “I’ve not seen you out at the house since before Father died.”

“She stops by here every once in a while.” Again, he seemed evasive.

“My mother comes into the pub?” Ella asked.

“She likes how I make a cup of tea. What can I say?” Mr. Goodwell said. “Now, what brings you two lovely ladies in? Surely not for a drink?”

Ella continued to look at him warily. Was she thinking the same thing as I?

“We’re looking for the sheriff,” Ella said. “And heard he was here.”

Goodwell gestured toward the corner of the room where the sheriff sat playing checkers with Timothy Bains. Both appeared to be nursing pints of ale between moves.

Ella and I exchanged a look before heading their way. They raised their gazes to us as we approached. I detected a faint hint of alarm in the sheriff’s eyes before he greeted us with a nod of his head. “Ladies, can I do something for you?”

“We wanted to talk to you. Privately,” I said. “If you don’t mind, Pastor Bains.”

“Absolutely,” Bains said. “I should get back to sermon writing anyway.” He stood and reached for his hat. “I’ll see you on Sunday, isn’t that right, Ella?”

She grinned and lifted a shoulder. “Unless someone goes into labor, I’ll be there.”

“Good girl,” Bains said, giving Ella an indulgent smile before tweaking her nose.

After he was gone, Ella shook her head. “He still thinks of me as ten years old.”

“Do you want to sit?” Sheriff White asked us. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, we’re fine,” Ella said.

I looked around the pub to make sure there was no one near enough to hear our conversation. Fortunately, there were a few men sitting at the bar, but the room was otherwise empty. Ella and I pulled up chairs. The sheriff set aside the checkerboard.

“What can I do for you?” A hint of impatience flickered in White’s eyes.

I pulled my notebook from my purse and set it on the table. “We’ve been working on a list of suspects and have several insights we’d like to share.”

“Mostly Amelia,” Ella said. “I’m just along for fun.”

He took the notebook from my outstretched hand. “Am I supposed to read through this entire thing?”

“No, just flip to the earmarked page,” I said. “That’s where I summarize everything.”

As he read through my notes, I took a moment to study him. I guessed him to be in his thirties even though he had a grizzled, world-weary appearance. He wasn’t what I thought a sheriff should look like, with his tousled hair, scruffy beard, and sarcastic expression. Or was this what all western police were like? Rugged and dangerous?

“What exactly am I supposed to do with this, Miss Young? Especially the part where I’m considered a suspect?”

“Well, we have to look at every angle, don’t you think?” I asked as reasonably as I could. It should be obvious why he was on the list. Shouldn’t it? Or did he assume because he was the sheriff that he was exempt from suspicion? “You can’t expect it otherwise. You were one of the last people to see him alive. Surely you’re as possible as any of the other men Mr. Tutheridge played poker with.”

A muscle on the side of his face twitched. “Yes, there’s validity to your logic.”

“Well, what do you think about the rest of it?” I asked. “Are you leaning one way or the other?”

“Miss Young, that is not your concern. In fact, you should not be snooping around and coming up with theories. There’s a murderer on the loose. It’s not safe for you to be conducting yourself in this manner.”

Why did everyone keep telling me that? “That’s a risk I have to take.”

“Why do you have such an interest?” White asked me.

The question of the day. Clearly, I was not typical. Young women were not supposed to ask so many questions or push for answers. Then again, I already knew I was different than most. And I didn’t care. “I have my reasons.” I wasn’t about to share what they were with the sheriff. Ella was one thing. The sheriff, with his aggressive body posture and challenging eyes, made me uneasy. Not to mention that he’d just pointed out I might be opening myself up to danger. Still, I couldn’t keep myself from blurting out this next thing. “Do you have any idea who did it?”

“I’m gathering evidence, Miss Young. Don’t worry yourself. Take care of your own business.”

I felt as if he were patting me on the head and sending me off to play in the schoolyard. “This is my business. The Tutheridge family have taken me in and treated me as one of their own. In turn, I give them the same care.”

Ella, perhaps sensing my growing agitation, linked her arm to mine. “We’ll be leaving you to your work now, Sheriff. Please let us know if we can help.”

“How are your shooting skills, Ella?” White asked. “Are you as good as your brothers?”

“Hudson’s an expert with a gun,” I said. “It’s right there in my book. The other brothers are also good shots, according to the staff, but neither carries a gun.” I pointed at the notebook. “Which is also captured in my notes. Page ten.”

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then slid the notebook across the table with his index finger, as if it disgusted him to touch the leather casing. “Duly noted. I’ll tell you what—your time would be better spent helping with the dance and church picnic. That’s what we need in this town. I must go and do my job. I suggest you do yours. Good day, ladies.”

Dismissed. Typical. Rankled but not wanting to embarrass Ella, I allowed her to steer me away from the sheriff’s table and toward the door. Matthew Goodwell waved goodbye. Was it just me or did he seem amused?

Once we were outside, Ella suggested we take a walk down to the water. Needing to cool off, I agreed. She withdrew her arm, and we crossed the street over to the grassy knoll and stood peering out at the Sound.

“I’m afraid you may have made an enemy,” Ella said.

“I don’t care. He should do his job. Do you think he has notes of his own?”

“Maybe.” Ella laughed. “But he sure didn’t appreciate yours.”

“That much was obvious. That man’s infuriating.”

“I’m sure you’re not the first woman to think that. He has a reputation almost as bad as Briggs.”

“He’s not nearly as charming. It’s a wonder any woman would find him attractive in the least.” I darted a look her way. “You don’t, do you?”

“No. He’s not for me.” She led me to the bench that looked out over the water. We sat side by side. The sun was high in the sky, but my hat shielded my eyes from the glare. The sheriff had acted like a guilty man. If he had done it, the case would never be solved. Unless I kept on investigating, that is. A shiver ran down my spine. Was he right? Was I in danger? Or was he warning me that I would be if I didn’t stop, and was he the one I should be afraid of?

Those thoughts were interrupted when Ella brought up the church picnic and dance. “It’s always fun. The whole town shows up.”

“How nice,” I said.

“Giving folks something to look forward to is always a good thing,” Ella said. “What about you? Will you enjoy attending a dance? Perhaps on the arm of my brother?”

“I prefer picnics,” I said, laughing. “More food.”

“We have punch and cake at the dance.”

“As you know, I *do* like cake.” I looked sideways at her. “Are you trying to distract me from my sleuthing?”

“I might be.”

I nudged her with my elbow. “Fine. You’re probably right. I should let this go. I’ve made an enemy of the sheriff, which is not a good thing. Not for me or your family.” I only wanted to clear the Tutheridge family from guilt, but maybe it wasn’t my place. No one wanted me poking around, stirring up trouble.

“Tell me more about this dance,” I said. “I’ve never been to one.”

BENEDICT

Since the very first summer my mother lived on the island, she'd hosted the summer solstice party at the house. As children, we'd looked forward to it every year. It was a reprieve from the terror I felt for at least a day. My father acted like a doting parent during public events. Briggs and I knew we would not be beaten on those days. I could breathe easy for the entirety of our party.

Although she'd never said so, I believed Mother had dreaded the party in years previous.

This time seemed different.

Mother had thrown herself into the planning like no other year I could remember. Without my father looking over her shoulder and dictating how things should be, her true creative nature emerged. One morning, I was already in the office when my lovely assistant entered, followed by my mother.

Mother's cheeks were pink. She'd put on a little needed weight and picked up a healthy glow. Her eyes, which had been an unvarnished, dull blue for too long, sparkled. She looked fifteen years younger than she had just a few months ago. My father's death had freed her and returned her to the woman she must have been before the prison sentence of her marriage.

"We have a few ideas for the party," Mother said. "Amelia thought of several ways to make it fun for the children. Tell him, dear."

“Games.” Amelia’s eyes shone as brightly as Mother’s. In fact, the two of them were adorable together. Like children at Christmas, I thought. How I loved to see them excited and joyful. It was contagious because I immediately began to feel the same way.

“What kind of games do you have in mind?” I asked. Father would never have allowed such activities. He tolerated children at the party, but they were not allowed to run and play because of the lawn and the shrubbery. He’d believed children enjoying themselves could only result in the demolition of one of his prized showpieces. Now that he was gone, our lawn would be perfect for games and hopefully result in happy children.

“Tug of wars with a rope. I saw them once at a party when I was a kid, and they looked like such fun.” Amelia giggled. “Everyone falling and laughing. I’d have given anything to join them.”

“Were you not a participant?” I asked, tickled by her youthful glee.

Her expression sobered. “Oh no, I wasn’t invited. I was only there to help my mother. She was a maid for the Thornhills. I helped her on the days I didn’t have school. The party was for one of the children in the family. Mary. When she turned eight, if I recall correctly. I was able to watch while I assisted my mother.” Her tone turned wistful. “The trays were heavy, filled with all kinds of treats. My job was to carry them around and offer the food to guests. There were these tarts filled with pudding and sandwiches made of cucumbers and creamy cheese. Pieces of bread toasted and smeared with butter and topped with tomato and mozzarella. How my mouth watered! By the end of the day, my shoulders ached, but I was proud to take some of my mother’s burden.”

“They didn’t give you anything to eat or drink?” Mother asked her, looking horrified at the idea.

“Oh no, I had a few sandwiches and treats. They’d fallen on the floor, and I scooped them into my apron when no one was watching, and then I hid in the pantry and stuffed them

into my mouth as fast as I could. Which defeated the purpose of my thievery, as I didn't enjoy them at all, and they sat like a hard ball in my stomach the rest of the day." She said all this lightly, as if it were a hilarious story.

To me, it was a heartbreak of a tale. I could easily see her as a waif of a thing, helping her mother serve the rich guests while longing to play and enjoy the food.

"Let's see—what other games were there?" Amelia asked, looking up at the ceiling as she conjured the memory. "There was one where they were supposed to transfer an egg to one another without using their hands." She giggled again, her eyes alight. "That was too funny. Almost no one could do it, and the eggs fell onto the ground. They were boiled, though, so it didn't cause any mess."

She went on to describe a few other games, including tug-of-war and a ring toss.

I only half listened, too saddened by the thought of little Amelia looking upon the party without being able to participate.

"I didn't drop a single tray that day. Mother was very happy with me."

"What do you think, dear?" Mother asked me. "Do we have your permission to plan for the children?"

Startled by the question, I looked up at Mother. At some point, she'd sat in Amelia's desk chair and was now perched forward, her hands clasped on her lap.

"You don't need my permission," I said. "You're the mistress of the manor, so to speak."

Mother blinked. "I am?"

"I'm your guest," I said. "This is your house now."

"But you're in charge. Isn't that what your father intended?" Mother squinted, as if she didn't recognize me.

"I couldn't care less what he intended," I said. "He terrorized us for too long. I am at your service, Mother. Whatever you wish shall be."

Amelia was smiling at Mother. “I told you he would say it was fine. Didn’t I?”

“You did.” Mother gave me a sad smile. “I’m not accustomed to having a say over anything. It will be an adjustment for me to do so. Amelia said you would want me to have whatever I desired at the party. I’m ashamed to say I wasn’t sure what you would think. Your father raised you, after all. It wouldn’t surprise me if he’d taught you to hate women like he did.”

I didn’t know what to say, especially in front of Amelia. It was true what Mother said. He’d had a disdain for women, always treating them only one notch above a servant.

“Benedict doesn’t hate women,” Amelia said.

We both turned to look at her. She was standing with her back to the fire, looking utterly exquisite in the orange light. Even dressed simply in her dark skirt and white blouse, she could have passed for a princess.

“He likes them quite a lot.” Amelia grinned. “How could he not when he has you and Ella? Two extraordinary women right in front of him.”

“Is that how you see me?” Mother asked her. “Not a wallflower? Someone to dismiss?”

“Of course not,” I said.

Mother beamed. “Before I met your father, I used to think of myself as clever. I’d had dreams of becoming more than my own mother, who had been frustrated by the confinement of wife and motherhood. I went to college for two years before my father encouraged me to marry Roland and, as he put it, ‘stop with all this education nonsense.’ That was the end of my dreams. I was in love, so the sting of disappointment didn’t come until later. A few months later. The first time he hit me.”

Amelia paled. If there had been a mirror, I felt certain I would have looked as white as a sheet myself. Mother had never talked much about her life before marriage. What had she been like? Plucky and brave like Amelia? Had he slowly

beaten that out of her until she was a wisp? A shadow of her former self?

“What dreams did you have?” Amelia asked quietly.

“They seem foolish to me now,” Mother said. “But I fancied myself smart enough to have a job. I would have loved to have learned a trade, even. Anything to keep the boredom from making my mind foggy and slushy. I envy you, Amelia. Your courage and your opportunity.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” Amelia said. “I’ve been motivated only by the need to stay alive. For me, it was learn a useful skill or live a life of poverty like my mother had.”

“What happened to your father?” Mother asked.

“He left before I was born. After that, my mother had to figure out how to keep us fed and sheltered.” Amelia’s voice trembled. “She got the job with the Thornhill family when I was five. Things were better after that. She put away every penny she could so that I could go to secretarial college. If she hadn’t had to work so hard, perhaps she would still be with us.” Her eyes flooded with tears. She waved a hand in front of her face. “Enough of that. My goodness, you two have me telling you my sad stories. Really, my childhood was fine. My mother was loving and good. That’s all I knew, so it didn’t bother me about being poor.”

“Except for the day of the party?” I asked. “Seeing the children having fun and stuffing themselves with food? You must have felt left out that day.”

“Yes, but it never occurred to me that I could have more than I did.” Amelia rubbed her hands together in a dismissive gesture. “We were servants, and that was that. I was a child, though. There were days I felt resentful and jealous. Of course there were. However, my mother taught me that one mustn’t dwell on what we don’t have. Instead, we should be grateful for what we *do* have. Especially love. I remember a lot of sweet times with Mother. We were happy. I miss her.” She paused, glancing toward the window. “I’d thought I might miss her less as the years went on, but it’s not that way. I wish

she could see me here. Or better yet, be here to see the way the water sparkles in the sunlight and take in the scent of the blooming fruit trees. She would have loved it here. Just as I do.”

“She did well, Amelia. You’re a wonderful young woman and very competent,” Mother said. “I know she’s looking down upon you with great pride.”

Amelia’s eyes glistened. “You’re too kind, Mrs. Tutheridge. I’m delighted to be of use to your family.”

Talk returned to the party. They discussed further ideas, including an apple-bobbing tub and a buffet of grilled meats and salads.

“Croquet,” I said. “Badminton too.”

They both lit up like the brightest sunshine.

“Good ideas, Benedict,” Mother said.

“Won’t this be fun?” Amelia bounced on the tips of her toes.

“We’ll serve cider too,” I said. “And champagne for the adults. It will be as festive as any party ever has been.”

Mother’s expression dimmed. “Will people want to come? After the murder and all? Maybe they’ll see us as tainted. There’s the church picnic and dance already planned. Maybe we should just let that be the event of the summer?”

“Mrs. Tutheridge, speaking from experience, no one will want to miss out on food and fun, especially given how hard most people work each and every day. And two parties in a summer is even better than one.”

“They’ll risk being in the presence of a murderer for it?” Mother asked, obviously joking.

Regardless, there was a grain of truth behind her words. Would we be forever known for the murder of our patriarch? Was it possible to move forward despite the scandal? We were about to find out.

“Also, dear, one more thing.” Mother watched me with the wary look of an animal accustomed to being hit. “We were thinking about having a dance that evening. We could clear everything out of the living room and make it like a ballroom. What do you think? You can say no. But we thought we’d ask. I know there’s already the church dance after the picnic, but we could make it more like a ball, and everyone loves to dance.”

I glanced at Amelia, catching her watching me before she quickly looked away. They shared similar expressions. They didn’t want to be disappointed. Because of this, they’d told themselves they didn’t care that much. I could see, however, that they did care. A lot. Two women who had been denied joy for much too long. They should have whatever they wished for and if it was a dance, then I’d make sure it happened.

“A dance sounds like a splendid idea.” I spoke with false drama and stretched my arms out wide. “If a certain young lady promises me a turn around the floor.”

Amelia flushed bright red. My mother, as if watching a game, looked from me to Amelia and then back again to me. I’d have thought Mother would be surprised at my bold flirting. Instead, she seemed as if she’d expected it. Perhaps I had not been as good at keeping my feelings from showing as I thought. She didn’t seem displeased. Quite the opposite. Her eyes gleamed with...with what? Pride? Satisfaction? As if she’d orchestrated the entire thing herself.

I was not the only one falling for Amelia Young. My mother was taken with her as well. I’d thought she would care about Amelia’s station in life and think she was not good enough to marry into our family. However, I could see now that was my father’s view, not hers. I was starting to see my real mother emerge day by day.

A thought occurred to me then. One that I would never have thought about in a thousand years until today. What if Mother were the one to take over the company? Would she want to? Would it fulfill those long-ago dreams?

I would speak to Amelia about it later. She would have an opinion one way or the other. I was already relying on her for more than I'd have thought possible after knowing her for such a short time. Was it fair to her? Regardless, I craved her guidance and approval. I might not be the smartest man ever born, but I knew one thing. Amelia Young was special. And I was lucky to have her in my life.

THAT NIGHT, we'd settled into our usual spots in the living room to read. We'd finished the Shakespearean play and were now reading the first volume of Sherlock Holmes. I'd teased Amelia for having chosen a mystery, and she'd retorted that perhaps we could learn some tricks from the detective. Before Amelia started reading, I brought up the subject of Mother working at the company. For a moment, she said nothing. I'd learned in our time together that she liked to think things through before speaking. My natural inclination to fill the silence when nervous had to be snuffed out, or I'd never get the gems of wisdom that came from her fine mind.

"It's an interesting idea," she said finally. "But will it be too much for her? She's not a young woman."

"Shouldn't she at least be given the choice? She never had the opportunities she wished for. Her marriage was abysmal. This is a chance for her to have a whole new life."

"I think you should speak to her about it," Amelia said. "And see what she thinks."

"Yes, there's no harm in that."

We were interrupted by a wail coming from the hallway, followed by a thumping noise. I knew that sound. It was Bebe having one of her tantrums. What were we going to do with the child? If she continued on like this, she'd grow up to be a terrible shrew of a woman with no prospects of marriage or otherwise.

"Something needs to be done about her," Amelia said. "Your mother spoils her. And your brother...well, I shouldn't

say my opinion about him.”

“I couldn’t agree more. She needs a strong hand. Discipline.”

“Consequences,” Amelia said firmly.

Just then, Hudson came storming into the room, running his hands through his hair, obviously distressed. The wailing and kicking continued from the hallway. He sank into one of the couches and buried his face in his hands. “I don’t know what to do. She’s out of control.” He looked up, not at me but at Amelia. “You must be appalled by what you see in this house.”

Her eyes widened, then her gaze darted to me. “It’s none of my business,” Amelia said kindly.

“That’s correct,” Hudson said. “It isn’t.”

“Hudson, don’t be rude,” I said.

“It seems everyone has an opinion about my child yet aren’t willing to help,” Hudson said. “Parenting isn’t as easy as you all seem to think it is.”

“I’d like to help,” Amelia said. “Would you like me to try to get her to stop all that racket? It might shock her a little if I got involved.”

“I don’t care.” Hudson rose and headed toward the whiskey cabinet. “I’m going to have a drink.”

That might be part of the problem. I kept that to myself and watched Amelia cross the room toward the hallway. She had a regal way of walking, with her head held high. A proud woman. Strong and smart, too. Could she ever love me as I did her?

Hudson sat across from me, observing me over the rim of his glass. “You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“I recognize the look in your eyes. It’s not been so long since I fell in love that I don’t know the symptoms.”

The pain in his voice made me wince. “What can I do for you, brother?”

He downed his whiskey and set the glass on the table. The screaming from outside the door had ceased. I strained to hear Amelia’s voice but couldn’t. What had she done to silence the tiny beast? “There’s nothing to be done about me,” Hudson said. “I’m hopeless. This darkness in my soul is here to stay.”

“What about Bebe? She needs you to step up and be the father you’re capable of.”

His eyebrows rose in obvious surprise at my forthrightness. “How do you know what I’m capable of? You’ve always hated me.”

“I don’t hate you.” My head reeled backward as if he’d shoved the palm of his hand into my forehead. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“You and Briggs have always hated me. Because Father left me alone. Don’t try to deny it. I would hate me too. If it makes you feel any better, I’ve suffered too. Losing Rosemary was my worst fear, and it came to pass.”

“I don’t want you to suffer.” I was in shock. Had he felt this all along? “You were spared, and I was glad. It was hard enough to watch one of my little brothers be hurt. I would have taken it all if it meant he’d leave Briggs alone.”

“Why was I spared?” Hudson shook his head. “It never made sense to me, other than he didn’t care enough about me one way or the other. You two evoked such a response from him, whereas I was invisible.”

Neither of us had heard my mother come into the room until she was standing right beside us. “I know why,” she said. She sat next to Hudson. Seeming so small next to him, she reminded me of how fragile she still was. “It’s because of the psychic.”

AMELIA

I 'd found Bebe on the floor screaming and kicking her legs against the hardwood floor. She was deeply devoted to the tantrum. I didn't know if she was ignoring me or hadn't noticed my presence. Using purely instinct, I dropped to the floor and sat with my back resting on the wall. I'd wait her out, I decided. Stubbornness did not belong to her alone. I could match her with my own grit, I felt certain.

Goodness, this girl could really make some noise. Her face was purple with rage. I hoped she wouldn't hurt herself flailing about that way. After a few more minutes, she seemed to sense that another person was near. She stopped screaming and rose from the floor to look at me. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"What do you want?" Bebe crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me.

"I wondered what all the fuss was about," I said. "Whatever is the matter?" I asked this in a conversational tone, as if it weren't ridiculous to be on the floor having a fit when the child had so much. Yes, she'd lost her mother. Like her, I'd lost a parent before I was old enough to remember him. Like me, Bebe had never known her mother. The absence of something or someone never known to you is a loss just the same.

"I'm very very angry," Bebe said, then smacked her heel against the floor for emphasis. She'd stopped screaming, though, for which I was grateful. Despite the tantrum, she was

adorable in her nightgown with her hair divided into two braids that hung over both shoulders.

“What happened to you?” I tilted my head to indicate how ready I was to hear about her traumatic event.

“Father wouldn’t let me have cake.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t eat my supper. No supper. No cake. That’s what he said. But he’s never said that before. The maids always give me cake whenever I ask for it.”

Demand *it, you mean*, I thought. “Did your father know?”

“Know what?” Her chin jutted out, and she continued to glare at me. I was the enemy. Interesting. Did she react this way to all of the guests who stayed here? Or was it only young women? Was this her reaction to not having a mother?

“Does your father know the maids give you cake even though you didn’t eat your supper?”

“I don’t know. Usually he’s not at supper with me. I eat with Mrs. Halvorson.”

My heart ached, thinking of her eating alone with only her dolls. I’d assumed that Hudson ate with her. Since my arrival, he’d only joined us in the dining room twice.

“My dolls enjoy cake, too,” Bebe said. “And I never make them eat that hideous pea soup.” She made a terrible face. “Have you tasted it? Do they make grown-ups eat the same horrible things?”

This little girl had quite the vocabulary. She may be undisciplined, but there was nothing wrong with her brain. I’d noticed Mrs. Tutheridge spoke to her as if she were an adult. Perhaps that was why Bebe felt entitled to rule the roost. Regardless, I would try speaking to her in that same way. Honestly, though, I knew nothing about children, other than they were small and had high-pitched voices.

“Father tried to get away from me, but I followed him down here. I refused to go to bed. Then I screamed to get his attention.”

“Did it work?”

“No, he just left. Like he always does. He has no interest in me whatsoever.”

“That’s not true. He’s your father. He loves you.”

“I don’t think so. Grammie loves me. Uncle Briggs loves me. Father’s too busy being sad to pay any attention to me. That’s what I heard Aunt Ella telling Grammie one time.”

Although I sympathized with the poor man, frustration made me want to shake Hudson. He was neglecting his daughter and hadn’t stepped up to run the family business when they needed him. Instead, he’d chosen to give up on life altogether. What could be done about him?

My mother’s words came back to me. Always put your faith in God. Ask him for what you need.

She was right. I would put my trust in him. It would take something as mighty as his love to rescue one of his fallen sons.

For now, however, I must put my attention on Bebe. She needed a firmer hand. I already had a job, but it was becoming more and more obvious that Hudson needed to hire a nanny. One who would not allow a spoiled child to rule the roost.

I gazed at her. She was now sniffing and wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her dressing gown and looking quite pitiful and sorry for herself.

“I believe now is the time for you to go back up to bed. It’s much too late for a young girl to be awake. You’ll be tired for school.”

“I don’t want to go to bed. I want cake.”

“We’ve already discussed that particular wish, my dear. You didn’t eat your supper, thus no cake.”

Her nose crinkled and her bottom lip protruded. A rebellious sparkle in her eyes told me she was readying herself for another tantrum.

I raised my hand, as if I were a strict teacher. “Don’t bother making a fuss. You’re all out of chances for this particular evening.”

“What does that mean?” She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and glared at me.

“It means, little one, that I and everyone else in this family has had just about enough of your terrible behavior. You’ve upset your grandmother and your uncle Benedict. They’re in there debating about what to do with you.”

“They are?” Her eyes widened. Fearful? Good. She needed to feel frightened and maybe even a little ashamed of herself.

“Yes, and you know, your poor grandmother is coping with quite a lot these days. She doesn’t need you acting like a brat.”

“What’s a brat?”

“Someone who won’t eat their dinner and then cries because they can’t have cake. Is that the type of girl you’d want for a friend?”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s a shame. I would have liked to have a new friend. I’ve only just arrived here from very far away. I was hoping we could be confidants.”

“What’s a confidant?” She pronounced it con-faw-dyant.

“A fancy word for a friend.”

“I don’t have friends. There are no other children here. Haven’t you noticed that?” She spoke with great scorn.

“I saw some in town. Maybe one of them could be your friend. You’re at school with many children, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.” She lifted her chin, eyes bright. “But no one likes me.”

“No one will like you if you behave as you’ve done today. Wouldn’t it be better to show them how kind you are?”

“Am I kind?” Her chin wobbled. She bent her knees and wrapped her arms around them.

“Everyone has the capacity for kindness *and* cruelty. We must decide for ourselves which we want to be.”

Her gaze had locked upon me as if I were a puzzle to be solved. I’d lost her. “You must decide if you’re going to treat people with kindness or act as you have today. It’s a choice.”

“I wanted cake. Why can’t I have what I want?”

I thought for a moment about what to say next. As bratty as she’d been, it was obvious this was an intelligent and curious child. Her mind needed to be occupied with something other than her own petty desires. But with what?

I would have to do further thinking. What had I enjoyed as a child? Reading and walking with my mother to do errands on her days off from her work. We’d had such fun together, no matter what we were doing, always sure to tell each other of all the day’s events. I’d always felt my mother’s undivided attention during those times. Even as she picked through produce at the market or bargained with a merchant, I’d always felt her interest in me.

“What do you like to do?” I asked Bebe. “Besides eat cake.”

“Play with my dolls. I pretend they’re a family and I’m their mother.”

My heart squeezed, gripped with pain for Bebe. Even though she had not known her mother, she was trying to make a family. Her motherly instinct was alive and well despite having no role model for such behavior.

“If you behave nicely over the next few days, we can have a tea party with all of your dolls. Would you like that?”

“Will there be cake?”

I hid a smile behind my hand. This was a clever one, despite her rather unappealing attitude. With the right nanny, she could be taught how to act appropriately. However, I wasn’t the one to do it. She needed a governess with experience.

I stood and offered my hand. “Come along. I’ll tuck you back into bed.”

She sighed, clearly still of the opinion of her unjust treatment. “My tummy’s rumbly.”

“That’s why you should have eaten your supper.”

She allowed me to help her from the floor. To my surprise, she leaned against me for a moment in a quarter hug before trudging up the stairs.

I followed behind, laughing silently at the way her feet seemed to be made of lead. Perhaps Bebe was meant for the stage?

Once we were in her room, she obediently got under her covers. I sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed the quilt over her. She peered up at me and yawned. The crying jag had worn her out.

I glanced around the room, taking in the dolls and giant dollhouse and a shelf full of picture books. A rocking chair and dresser were painted a crisp white. Yellow curtains hung over the windows. A braided rug took up much of the floor. “I like your room.” I pushed her thick hair off her forehead.

“Father said my mother decided what should go in here.” She pointed to a series of paintings, all of native birds. “Uncle Briggs painted those for me before I was even born.”

“They’re nice,” I said. “I love birds, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, very much.” She yawned again. Her eyes fluttered, fighting sleep. “I want to know all about them.”

Birds. Perhaps she would like a book with pictures of birds and their descriptions? Did such a book exist? If so, she and I could memorize them all and then try to spot them during nature walks. Exercise would be good for this mischievous little demon.

Her eyes finally closed all the way. I remained still, waiting for her to fall completely asleep. When her breathing steadied, I brushed a quick kiss onto her forehead. She was really quite adorable. Especially when asleep.

I RETURNED to the sitting room. Benedict, Mrs. Tutheridge, and Hudson were all gathered around the fire, staring into the flames. Tension crackled as loudly as the burning logs. What had transpired while I was with Bebe?

Benedict gave me a quick smile and stood to greet me and escort me to the couch. “How’s Bebe?”

“She’s fine. I got her to bed, and she’s asleep. She was angry about the lack of cake.”

Hudson rubbed his eyes. “I know. She wouldn’t go to bed and started with all that screaming and flailing about. I didn’t know what to do. Aren’t we lucky you’re here to save the day.”

I inwardly bristled at his sarcastic tone. “It’s my pleasure.” Not true. But someone had to do it. Her father didn’t seem inclined to do so.

“How did you get her to calm down?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked.

“I sat down next to her on the floor, and we had a little discussion. Where I made the case for being kind over demanding.”

Benedict laughed. “Bebe didn’t stand a chance. Not against such a formidable foe.”

I exchanged a humored glance with him. “I was gentle. Straightforward. She needs to understand how her behavior doesn’t serve her and makes her family miserable.”

“Amelia’s like that with me too,” Benedict said to his brother, smiling. “Soon, I’m doing her bidding without even realizing what has happened.”

“You’re exaggerating,” I said, pleased by his assessment. I liked the idea of being formidable.

“Our plucky heroine saves the day,” Hudson said under his breath.

Well, he didn't have to be nasty about it, I thought, my pleasure draining away as quickly as it had come. I should bite my tongue. I could hear my mother's warning as if she were right here in the room. *Be polite, dearest. He means no harm to you.*

But he does, I wanted to retort back to this fictional advice from my deceased mother. I gritted my teeth instead, hoping for the feeling to pass.

Unfortunately, Hudson continued, obviously trying to get a rise out of me. "You've inserted yourself into this family, haven't you now? When no one's asked you to."

"Hudson, that's enough," Benedict said, more like a growly bear than human.

"It's all right," I said. "Everyone's entitled to their own opinion. Clearly, Hudson doesn't approve of me. I'm not bothered in the least. It's not the first time an insecure man has tried to undermine my confidence."

Mrs. Tutheridge actually gasped. I'd gone too far. But there was no turning back now. I would not apologize. No wonder Bebe had to resort to tantrums. Her father was infuriating.

"I'm not insecure," Hudson said. "And I would never attempt such a futile quest as to put a ding in your overflowing self-confidence. A fool's errand, that would be."

"Perhaps it's laziness then?" I smoothed my skirt over my lap, too warm near the fire. "That keeps you from being a father to that girl. Or self-pity?" I stared him down.

Hudson's brown eyes were like two polished stones, staring right back at me.

Good. I'd gotten a rise out of him. That's what he needed.

"What-is-that-supposed-to-mean?" Hudson asked, a staccato beat between each word.

"It's simple," I said. "Your daughter needs you, but you'd rather feel sorry for yourself and hide away in your wing of this mansion. Poor, poor Hudson."

“Amelia.” Benedict’s eyes now held a warning. He was trying to save me from my temper. Just as my mother had all my life. He needn’t have bothered. It was too late now. I hunkered down deeper.

“Your daughter’s under the impression that you don’t love her,” I said.

“What?” Hudson was on the edge of the chair.

“She told me that tonight during our talk. You might like to try having one with her. You’d probably learn a lot.”

“Who do you think you are?” Hudson jerked to his feet and pointed at me. “You know nothing about this family. Nothing about how we’ve suffered. My wife *died*. Bebe has no mother. How dare you speak to me about my daughter.”

“Someone should,” I said. “You need to hire a nanny. Someone to straighten her out. Create rules and discipline.”

“What do you know about children?” Hudson’s dark eyes fixed upon me. A shiver of his shoulder blades reminded me of a coiled rattle snake before it strikes.

“Not much.” I conceded this point with a dip of my chin. When I spoke, I made sure to keep my voice even and rational. “However, Bebe’s misbehavior isn’t hard to see, even for someone who isn’t familiar with children. She’s out of control because you’ve all allowed her to be. I saw it time and time again when I was younger. The family my mother worked for had a house full of them.”

“You know nothing about this family.” Hudson’s voice had risen in both volume and pitch. “Or any family. You’re a secretary with a high opinion of herself.”

My temper snapped. This man was insufferable and spoiled. No wonder his daughter acted the way she did. She’d learned it directly from her father. “These are both true,” I spat back at him. “Regardless, before she died, my mother taught me manners and the difference between right and wrong. Both of which Bebe is sorely in need of.”

“You have no idea what we’ve been through,” Hudson said again.

“My father left my mother before I was born,” I said. “Only she didn’t have the luxury of sitting around feeling sorry for herself because she had a child to feed and shelter all on her own. If she’d had a house like this one and all the money in the world, perhaps she could have given up on life as you obviously have.”

“Amelia, my husband was a hard man,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “The damage he’s done to all of us is impossible for you to understand.”

The inside of my stomach was as hard as a walnut. “I understand only too well how it is to be at the mercy of rich, cruel men. Don’t think for a minute I don’t. But again, I don’t have a life of ease with which to wallow in self-pity. People like me have to get on with things. I’ve always envied people with money, but perhaps I’m the luckier one. I don’t get to make excuses for my behavior because I have to take care of myself—you know—like food and shelter. No, you don’t know anything about that. How could I ever forget?”

Mrs. Tutheridge clasped her hands in her lap and stared into the fire. Benedict’s fingers gripped the arms of his chair, knuckles whitened with tension. Hudson turned slightly away from me. Dismissing me. I could almost read his mind. He was chastising himself for engaging with me at all. I was not worth fighting with. I didn’t matter enough. I’d lost them. My temper had erupted and ruined everything. Why couldn’t I just keep my mouth shut?

Even as I thought this, my pride refused to back out of the way. I rose to my feet on wobbly legs and glared back at Hudson. “I may be beneath you in my station, but I’m still a person with opinions and a right to express them. If you don’t like it, perhaps I should return to Boston.”

“Let’s not be hasty,” Mrs. Tutheridge said, voice shaking. “I’m sure you didn’t mean what you said, Amelia. Isn’t that right?”

“I’m afraid I *did* mean it. I don’t have much in this world, but I have my integrity. I’m not going to pretend to believe something or lie about it just to make peace. I’m alone and

without any power, Mrs. Tutheridge. I have only my principles to guide me.”

“Will they keep you warm at night?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Dear, sometimes we have to choose the people in our lives over our ideals.”

Ideals? What was she saying? This had nothing to do with ideals and everything to do with the well-being of her granddaughter.

“You chose Father over your principles.” Benedict spoke so softly I wasn’t sure I’d heard him correctly.

“I’ve no idea what that means, young man,” Mrs. Tutheridge said, heat rising to her cheeks in pink swaths.

“You stayed with him when he hurt your sons and you,” Benedict said in the same quiet voice. “Perhaps some principles were warranted.”

“I was married. There was nothing that could be done to save me from him. No protection from anyone or anything. That’s the way it is for women. I had no choice.”

“There are always choices,” Benedict said.

“What would you have me do? Grab you all and live on the streets? Your father would have made sure we all suffered for my betrayal.”

“What about his betrayals? Plural.” Benedict’s eyes were glassed over. “Do you know what he did to us in that dungeon?”

“Haven’t we been over this?” Mrs. Tutheridge inhaled and turned toward Hudson with a stiff smile on her face. “Darling, there’s nothing wrong with the idea of finding help. We can hire someone for Bebe. I’m unable to give her what she needs.”

“Bebe *needs* her mother,” Hudson said. “That’s all she’s ever needed, but she was taken from us.”

“Bad things happen all the time,” I said, anger rising to the surface once more. “To everyone. We must carry on, find new ways to cope with whatever has come our way.”

“You’re the most sanctimonious woman I’ve ever met,” Hudson said. “How dare you come into our home and tell us what to do. You don’t belong here. You’re not family. I don’t understand why Mother’s acting as if you are. Eating with us. Sitting here in the evening as if you aren’t part of the staff. None of it makes any sense.”

“Hudson, enough,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

“It’s not enough, Mother.” Hudson pointed at me. “She should go.”

I looked over at Benedict. He wouldn’t meet my gaze. Instead, he stared listlessly at the painting of his father above the fireplace.

I should apologize, I thought. Make this better. I couldn’t. I simply couldn’t do it. I would not budge from my position. I was right.

“Benedict, she should go,” Hudson said. “Dismiss her. Now.”

“You don’t make the rules here,” Benedict said to his brother through gritted teeth. “I’m the head of the family now.”

Hudson rolled his eyes. “How that decision was made is beyond all comprehension. Leaving the illiterate brother in charge? He might as well have signed us over to the devil.”

Benedict lifted his head. “It must be nice, little brother, to have such a good excuse to be a complete and utter ass.”

“She’s made everything worse.” Hudson gestured toward me, an expression on his face of supreme disgust. “You’re letting her run this family simply because you want to get in her knickers. She’s nothing but the daughter of a maid with an ability to type. We’re giving a woman who would be working the streets—if it weren’t for us—a place at the table? At *our* table?”

Mrs. Tutheridge and I both gasped. The pain in my chest made it hard to breathe. Working the streets? How had he come to that conclusion? I was poor. That didn’t mean my only choice was prostitution.

“If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” Hudson said to Benedict. “We’re left with you and this *girl* running our company.”

“Bebe would still be a brat,” Benedict said. “Whether you were in charge or not. Those two things are not interchangeable. As dumb as you think I am—and you’re probably right—the fact remains that you’ve allowed her to run wild because you can’t get beyond your grief to look after her properly.

“I begged you to take over the company,” Benedict said. “You refused. Which means you don’t get to criticize how I’m doing it.”

“You’re allowing this...this...interloper to tell you what to do. Father must be turning over in his grave to know a common tart is running his life’s work.”

Common tart? How could he say such a thing? I was as virtuous as one could be. *Defend me*, I thought, silently, hoping Benedict could read my mind. *Defend me. Tell him what I mean to you.*

But he didn’t, sitting instead like a statue in his chair, a stricken look on his face. Suddenly, I knew Hudson was right. I was not helping anyone by being here. In fact, I was making things worse. Brothers were now fighting. Mrs. Tutheridge was having to hear filthy words come from one of her beloved sons.

As much as he liked me, Benedict couldn’t side with me over his family. After everything that had been said today, it was obvious I should not be here. This whole thing had been a mistake. Mrs. Mantle would be so disappointed in me. I would have to go home with my tail between my legs and tell her I’d failed. I’d fallen in love with my employer. His family hated me. I was a disaster.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “I shouldn’t be here. I’ll go and pack my things.” I turned to Mrs. Tutheridge, speaking calmly despite the giant lump at the back of my throat. “Would you please have Dexter arrange for the boat to take me to Seattle first thing in the morning?”

“Amelia, no.” Mrs. Tutheridge was up and out of her chair, moving toward me with her hands outstretched.

“No, I can’t stay. Not after what he said. It’s made everything seem tawdry. I’m sorry.”

Fighting tears, I fled the room. By the time I reached the stairs, I was nearly choking with the effort to keep my sobs from rising out of me and stumbled blindly down the hall to my room. Once there, I threw myself onto the bed and allowed myself to give in to the tears.

BENEDICT

Rage had rendered me incapable of moving. I'd never felt such anger. Not even with Father. He I feared. My brother? I hated him. How could he say what he'd said to the woman I loved? He'd hurt her and turned her against all of us. I could see it in her eyes right before she ran out of the room. Pure hatred. For all of us.

Finally, I rose to my feet, overcome with the need to hurt Hudson, to wipe that smug expression from his face. I would pummel it out of him. My faith be damned.

I lunged toward him. My girth and strength were enough to defeat him. Yes, I might be stupid, but I was strong. And right now, I was mad enough to kill him.

"You will pay for what you said." I picked him up by the collar of his shirt and shoved him against the wall. "You hurt her and called her names and you know why? Because she's right about you. You're weak and selfish and act more like a child than Bebe."

He cursed at me.

"Shut your filthy mouth." I hit him square in the jaw, happy to see how it snapped his head back. Then I punched him in the nose, drawing blood. A lot of blood. I would do it again. Really hurt him this time. However, someone pulled me away and knocked me to the ground. Briggs. He put a boot on top of my chest. "What in the name of all that's holy is going on here?"

Ella must have come in right behind him because she was kneeling next to Hudson, who to my satisfaction had crumpled to the floor. His entire face was covered in blood. Good. I hoped it hurt.

Mother was crying. I couldn't see her from my position under Briggs's enormous foot, but I could hear her soft weeping. Shame filled me, blunting my anger. "He called Amelia a tart."

"What?" Briggs removed his foot from my chest and stomped it on the floor before reeling toward Hudson. "Why would you say that? How could you say that to the woman who has done so much to help our family?"

I sat up. Ella jerked away from Hudson and stumbled over to Mother, holding on to her arm as if her legs might give out on her.

Briggs lifted Hudson to his feet and pinned him against the wall. "What's gotten into you? You're pathetic, you know that? Going after Amelia when you're the one who needs to stop acting like a child."

"That's what I said," I muttered, less angry now that Briggs was on my side.

"I didn't hear you defending her," Hudson said to me, snarling. "Is that because you've already bedded her and know the truth?"

"Hudson!" Ella's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again to shout at him. "You should be ashamed of yourself. What's the matter with you? Amelia is an innocent. A Christian woman. She would never do such a thing."

Briggs drew up to his full height. "I know a few whores, and if it was between them and you, dear brother, I know who'd I'd choose."

"He said tart, not whore," Mother said, mumbling under her breath in a way that sounded like a mixture of a prayer and an exclamation of deep shock.

Hudson, for his part, seemed unmoved by the drama he'd caused. If he'd shown any kind of remorse, I might have been

able to forgive him. Instead, he acted as if all of it were the fault of others.

“Why is everyone so enthralled with this girl?” Hudson asked. “She’s nothing to us.”

“She could be something,” Mother said, “if you didn’t run her off.” She looked over at me. “Benedict, go to her. Make this right.”

“What am I supposed to say?” I asked, anger raising my voice. “That she should stay after my brother called her a whore?”

“Tart,” Mother said again. “Please, Benedict, go to her. Apologize for all of us.”

“She’s the best thing to ever come your way,” Ella said softly. “Don’t let Hudson and his insanity cause you to lose her.”

I rubbed my forehead with the palms of my hands, pressing hard, hoping some sense would come to me. My thoughts were all jumbled. I couldn’t hold on to any of them for long enough to come up with a plan. This is why I needed Amelia. She calmed me. Helped me put all my jumping thoughts into order. Hudson was right. I’d come to rely on her a great deal. No, it was more than that. I’d fallen in love with her.

From the anguish on her face just now, I knew she wouldn’t believe me if I told her how much I loved her. She thought I’d betrayed her. Taken my brother’s side when really I wanted to hurt him. Badly. I drifted back to the confessions we’d whispered in each other’s ears on the beach. She felt the same about me. I think she loved me, too. Could I convince her to stay?

“Do you want me to talk to her?” Ella asked. “I can go up there and apologize on behalf of the family for our brother’s boorish behavior.”

“It might be best,” Mother said. “You know how your tongue gets all tied up, Benedict.”

I stared at my mother for a second. Her concern was genuine, of course. She wanted me to be happy. Of that I had no doubt. But telling me about my tied-up tongue did not help me. It only made me feel foolish and useless and like a child. It was time I acted like a man. I was the head of this household now. Starting now, I would become what my father never thought I could be. A leader.

“No, Mother. I will speak with her myself. My tongue doesn’t betray me when I’m with Amelia. She makes me feel competent and understood.”

“I have to agree,” Briggs said, a twinkle in his eyes. “She does the same for me. Not that it’s the same, of course. I’m only her friend, but she has a way of making a person feel encouraged and valued just as we are.”

“I think so too,” Ella said. “She never makes remarks about how I need to marry and settle down and have babies of my own like many of the other women on this island. She came in and helped us without trying to change us.”

“Benedict, do you love her?” Mother asked.

I avoided making eye contact with any of them, trying to gather my thoughts. I wanted to put into words how I felt, but it was impossible to describe the beauty of the moon. For me, at least. So I simply said, “Yes.”

Briggs slapped me on the shoulder. “Good man. Go up there and tell her.”

I nodded. I would tell her. I’d do whatever she wanted to make this right. First, though, I had to say something to Hudson. Something I should have said a long time ago. “Hudson, I forgive you for escaping the punishments inflicted upon Briggs and me. I’m letting you loose from this noose around your neck. This way you act—I know deep down it’s because of your guilt about how different things were for you than they were for the rest of us. You’re forgiven for all of that. But I cannot forgive you for disrespecting the woman I love. I cannot look at you. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to again.”

He made no response, other than to raise one eyebrow and walk out of the room.

No one spoke for a moment after he left.

I smoothed my jacket and my hair. It was now or never. I was afraid of rejection, but I was more afraid that the look of betrayal and pain would remain on Amelia's face. "Wish me luck."

Ella came forward to throw herself around me. "You can do it, Ben. I know you can. I see the way she looks at you."

"Like you hung the moon yourself," Briggs said. "May we all be that lucky one day."

I thanked them and kissed my mother on the cheek. "I'm sorry for all the trouble today."

"It's not your fault." Mother pressed my hand to her cheek. "Go win her over."

"I'll do my best."

MINUTES LATER, I knocked on Amelia's bedroom door. "It's me. May I come in?"

There was no answer for a few seconds. During which time I felt like I might die. Finally, her footsteps making their way to the door gave me hope. She opened it just a crack. Her eyes were red and puffy. I had done that to her. I hadn't spoken up when I needed to. I'd never felt this bad in my whole life. Not even when Father would humiliate me and hurt me.

"I'm sorry. I should have defended you right in the moment."

The door opened a tiny bit more. "Why didn't you?"

"The words wouldn't come. I was so shocked by his behavior I went numb." I hesitated, wanting her forgiveness more than anything. "Words. Sometimes they don't come. Especially when I'm upset."

“I know,” she said softly.

“Or angry.”

“It hurt me.”

“Please, forgive me? May I come in?”

“Yes, if you must.” She moved back from the door, swinging it open to let me in.

When the door shut behind me, I grabbed her around the waist and held her tightly against me, feeling her heart flutter like the wings of a bird. A trapped bird. “I’m sorry. You have every right to be mad and hurt. But please, you know how I admire you. That I’d do anything for you if I could. Let me make it up to you.”

She withdrew from my embrace and went to sit in the chair. “Why would he say such things to me?”

“Because you challenged him. He’s never had anyone stand up to him before. And he knows you’re right about Bebe. And everything else.”

“You don’t think of me the way he described, do you?” Her eyes filled with tears. “Because if you do, I cannot stand it. I shall leave and never look back.” She paused, taking in a tremulous breath. “Have I done something to make him see me as a common street whore?”

“*Tart* was the word he used.”

Her eyes snapped, anger replacing sadness. “It’s the same thing.”

“No, you’ve done nothing but brought light and goodness into this house. He used words he knew would hurt you the most. Like my father, he can sense where people are vulnerable and use it to hurt them.”

“Promise me, next time, you’ll defend me.”

“If you’d seen the bloody nose I gave him just now, you wouldn’t have to ask.”

“You didn’t?”

“I did,” I said. “I might have kept going if Briggs hadn’t pulled me off him.”

“I’m sorry to say that I’m glad. Isn’t that terrible?”

“No. He deserved much worse than I gave him.”

“He was mean. So mean.” Her voice continued to wobble. Damp, hurt eyes widened, as a thought seemed to occur to her. “The kiss on the beach. Did Hudson see us? Is that what gave him the idea I was a tart?”

“Perhaps. But it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter. It’s you and me, Amelia. You make me feel like a normal man, not some freak.”

She gave me a tremulous smile. “You’re not a freak.”

“You make me feel I could do whatever I dream of.”

“You can.”

“Amelia, you have to stay. You have to stay and let us make this right.”

“How can I stay when Hudson hates me so?”

“He doesn’t hate you. He hates himself. Can’t you see that?”

“Yes, I can. But it will be strange living here after what he said. What I said to him, for that matter.”

“What if my house was finished? And we married and moved there and it was just the two of us forever?”

“Is that what you want?” Amelia asked, her eyes wide. “To marry me?”

“It’s the only thing I want. You. I want to be your shelter and protector and for you to be the same for me. I want to be an us.”

“Benedict.” Her voice was low and serious.

“What is it?” My heart sank. I was wrong. She didn’t care for me as I did her. I’d not defended her, and she no longer wanted me. “Have I ruined everything?”

She rose and took my hands. “No, you’ve not ruined anything. Our kind of love can’t be so easily discarded. Not for any reason.”

“You love me?” I could barely contain my joy.

“You’re my family now. When I thought you sided with Hudson, it felt as if the world had ended, but now you’re here and everything’s all right again. And yes, I love you.”

“I would never take his part over you. Or anyone’s.” I kissed her, both hands cupping her face. She trembled, reminding me again of a bird. A sparrow, so small and lovely. “I know it’s fast and maybe we’re breaking the rules, but I don’t want to wait.”

Her eyes shone with tears. Only this time they were happy ones. “I don’t know the rules of love. All I know is that I feel the same.”

“I had no idea then, but I think I was building the house for you. Some part of me felt you were coming and I would need a home to take you to. Please, make me the happiest man in the world and say you’ll marry me.”

“Are you sure it’s me you want?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

“I never expected to fall in love. It never occurred to me that it would ever happen for me. I thought I’d be an old maid.”

“I never thought I’d fall in love with my secretary, especially since I thought you were a Mr. Young instead of a Miss.”

She laughed. “Oh, Benedict, is it possible to be this happy when a few minutes ago I felt like I was dying?”

“Yes, my love, yes.” I pulled her close and kissed her, marveling that this woman wanted me.

A SOFT KNOCK on the door, followed by the sound of Hudson's voice interrupted our moment. He really had great timing, this brother of mine.

"Come in," I said.

"I've come to apologize to you, Amelia," Hudson said. "I don't know what's wrong with me. It's just...well, there's no excuse. It seems that I'm so unhappy that I want others to be too. My wife would be ashamed of me. I'm ashamed of myself."

I watched Amelia as a myriad of expressions crossed over her pretty face. First, hostility, then uncertainty and finally forgiveness. "Thank you, Hudson. It takes a big man to apologize, especially to a woman."

"Can you forgive me?" Hudson asked. "For being such a horrible person?"

"You're not horrible," Amelia said. "Not at all. You're hurting. And, as you said, it makes us lash out."

"Like Bebe," Hudson said. "You're right, of course. I do need to hire someone to help me."

"In the meantime, be there for Bebe," I said, tentatively. "Not just physically, but engaged. Paying attention."

"I've not paid attention to much but my own grief," Hudson said, voice breaking. "I have to do better. I'm just not sure how."

"We're a family," I said. "We'll figure it out together."

"We haven't been the family we could be," Hudson said, tears streaming from his eyes. "Because of him."

"But he's gone now. We can start fresh." I held out my arms and Hudson allowed me to embrace him.

When we parted, he once more turned to Amelia. "I'm assuming you're going to be part of this family, too?"

"I believe I am." She smiled tremulously at him, then me.

"She's going to be, yes. Which makes me the most blessed man in the world."

“I’m happy for you,” Hudson said. “I hope to build trust and even friendship with you, Amelia.”

“Time heals all wounds,” Amelia said. “At least that’s what my mother always told me.”

“Thank you. Truly.” Hudson bowed his head and then left the room.

As the door shut behind him, I turned to Amelia. “You’re more generous than I could ever be.”

“We have everything and he’s broken,” Amelia said. “It’s easy for me to be compassionate when I have you and our life together to look forward to.”

My heart felt as if it could burst with happiness. I took her in my arms and kissed her, returning to the moment before my brother had come to apologize.

BENEDICT

The day of the church picnic began with a layer of fog over the Sound. However, by mid-morning, it had lifted, and the water looked as smooth as blue glass. I'd heard Ella and Amelia in her bedroom as I passed by that morning, giggling, and a joy I'd rarely felt in my life overwhelmed me. I had to stop outside the door and soak it in for a few seconds before continuing down the hallway.

I drove my mother, my sister, Amelia, and Bebe into town for the picnic. Bebe talked the entire way, asking about the games and who would be there and could she do whatever she wanted, even if it meant running away from a boy.

"Why are you running from a boy?" Ella asked.

"Henry said he wanted to kiss me," Bebe said. "If he catches me and puts that old frog mouth of his on me, I'll kick him as hard as I can in the shins."

"You don't like Henry?" Amelia asked.

"He's a *boy*," Bebe said. "Disgusting."

"Wise thinking," I said.

"Agreed," Mother said.

"Look, Uncle Benny." Bebe squealed and bounced in her seat. "There's a tug-of-war. I can't wait to do that."

I looked across the lawn, strewn with people and picnic blankets. What a pretty sight it was—most of the ladies wore dresses made of pastel summer linens. Amelia wore cream, and Ella was in a pale yellow. Mother, however, had worn

black. It was a pity she had to wear such somber attire. This was the first year she could enjoy the church picnic without my father there to control her every move.

I let the ladies and Bebe out with our baskets at the front of the church and then tied the horses up under the shade of a tree. After setting a bucket of water and a pile of hay out for them to eat, I joined the others on the church lawn. The entire town seemed to be here. Children, shouting with glee, were playing various games such as races, tug-of-war, and badminton. Ladies had blankets spread out over the lawn and were unpacking plates, utensils, and glasses. Ella and Amelia were near the long table already strewn with various dishes, talking with Mrs. Halvorson, who always took it upon herself to direct the other women where to place their contribution to the potluck lunch.

Our Mrs. Halvorson was a stout woman with ruddy cheeks and silvery hair normally covered with a hairnet. It was so seldom I saw her anywhere other than our kitchen that I almost didn't recognize her. Today, she wore a light blue dress over her plump frame and an enormous hat adorned with a multitude of purple and red feathers. She was possibly our most popular resident, admired by all the women for her cooking skills and generous spirit.

My attention returned to Amelia, as she, Ella, and Mother came my way, asking if I had a preference about where to sit. "Under the shade of a tree," I said. "To protect your skin from sunburn."

"How thoughtful of you," Amelia said.

We locked eyes for a moment, and it took a great deal of control not to pull her into my arms and kiss her. Since our kisses, I thought of little else, except for how to get another one.

Instead of kissing, I led the ladies over to the shade of a maple and spread out our blanket. Bebe had joined a group of girls over by the games. Ella and Amelia had already set our contribution to the potluck, a basket of fried chicken, potato salad, and piles of Mrs. Halvorson's cookies, with the others.

Along with casseroles, the table was almost completely covered with freshly baked bread, cakes, and pies. I looked forward to loading up a plate and opening a bottle of Mrs. Halvorson's strawberry wine, hidden in our picnic basket next to a jug of lemonade.

After we'd settled, I spotted Briggs and Hudson making their way across the lawn. They'd come early to help set up the long tables that now held copious dishes of food. I'd been pleased to see Hudson making the effort. Last year he'd not attended. Or the year before that, if I remember accurately. Was it possible he was starting to rejoin the world? Since he'd apologized profusely to Amelia, he'd been almost pleasant to be around. The turmoil had been for the best, even if it had been painful in the moment. As for me, I was thankful for Amelia's forgiveness of both of us.

Briggs plopped beside Ella and immediately pulled out a flask from the inside of his jacket, then took a deep swig before handing it to Hudson.

"We also have wine," Ella said. "And lemonade."

Mother and Amelia asked for lemonade. After making sure they had a glass of the tart juice, I opened one of the bottles and poured some pink wine for Ella and myself. The afternoon had grown pleasantly warm. I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves. All around us, people were getting up from their blankets to fill their plates with food.

"We better go or there won't be any chicken left," Amelia said, sounding worried. "And I must have one of those ginger cookies. They smelled delicious this morning coming out of the oven."

I chuckled under my breath and stood, offering her my hand. "I'll join you."

She beamed up at me as I helped her to stand. "Mr. Tutheridge, lead me to the food."

We stood in line behind a group of teenage boys who looked hungry enough to devour every last morsel laid out on

the table. I whispered in Amelia's ear, "We might have to fight them for the last piece."

"Don't tease me," Amelia whispered back. "Not about something as serious as fried chicken."

We filled our plates, along with one for Mother, and returned to my family. Ella and my brothers were at the end of the line.

"Poor things won't get any chicken," Amelia said. "Early bird gets the worm."

We settled together on the blanket. I stretched my legs out long. Mother and Amelia rested their backs against the pillows I'd brought. We all ate and talked until the rest of our family returned.

Something had happened. Ella was red-faced, and her hands were shaking. I immediately grew concerned. It was rare to see my sister flustered.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

Ella sat next to Amelia, sharing the pillow. "Yes, just some idiot in line said something under their breath but loud enough for us to hear about the rumors that one of us killed Father."

Briggs grinned. "Ella took care of him with her sharp tongue."

"Well, people shouldn't just go around talking about things they know nothing of," Ella said. "This is real for us, not some fodder for gossip."

"Yes, but they can't help themselves," Mother said. "Until the truth is known, we'll all be under scrutiny and speculation."

Hudson nudged Briggs for another swig from the flask. All three of them seemed shaken by the thoughtless man's comment. Even Briggs, who normally let things slide right off his back, seemed angry. Would it ever end? The questions about our family? The assumptions that one of us, or possibly all of us, killed our own father? Yet another legacy left to us from our dear departed father.

He was the gift that continued to give.

“Let’s not allow that idiot to ruin our day,” Ella said. “Pour me some more of that wine and let’s tell Amelia what to expect at the dance tonight.”

“Expect?” Amelia looked worried. “What do you mean?”

“You should assume your dance card will fill immediately,” Briggs said. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we have many more men on this island than women.”

“Especially beautiful ones,” I said.

Amelia blushed. “I don’t want to dance with strangers.”

“We may have to fill up your card before anyone gets to you,” Briggs said. “Keep you safe from harm.”

“Where do I get this card?” Amelia asked.

“They hand them to every woman who comes in,” Hudson said, smiling. “Then the men rush to write their name in the blank spaces next to each type of dance, waltzes and so forth. When we were courting, my wife used to fill in my name on every line before the dance even started. We’d spend the whole night in one corner, ignoring everyone else.”

I’d not heard him talk about her in a long time. Not like this. It almost seemed as if he were enjoying the memory instead of it causing him pain.

“My husband liked to think of himself as high society,” Mother said to Amelia. “He insisted we use dance cards, like our barn dance was a ball in London. Silly really. The people here want to enjoy a night off from their work and listen to the music, not worry about formalities.”

“Who plays the music?” Amelia asked.

“The lady who plays the piano at church and a fiddle player, along with Rhett, who sings,” Briggs said.

“Rhett sings?” Amelia asked. “I’d have thought him too shy to get up in front of all these people.”

“You’ll see,” Ella said. “He’s quite good.”

“He must have gotten that talent from his mother,” Hudson said. “Since none of us can sing a note.”

Mother looked away, her eyes distant. None of us said anything for a moment. Leave it to Hudson to say something awkward and upset Mother.

“Shall I pour you another lemonade?” I asked Mother.

“What? Yes, thank you, dear.” Her cheeks were flushed pink, but as I followed her gaze, I realized she was looking at Timothy Bains.

He stood chatting with Rhett’s elderly parents, but he must have felt our eyes upon him because he looked over to give my mother a smile before returning his attention to Mr. and Mrs. Rivers.

Was there something between them? If so, how long had it been going on? Had he wanted Father out of the way? No, it couldn’t be. Neither Bains nor my mother was dumb enough to risk my father’s anger. Whatever this was had started after Father’s death. At least, I hoped so.

THE AFTERNOON FLEW BY, and soon it was time to take a tuckered-out Bebe home. As opposed to the drive into town, the ride home was quiet, with a sleeping Bebe slumped against Mother. We all went our separate ways to rest before getting ready for the dance.

Around sunset, I went downstairs dressed in my finest suit and tie. I’d never been excited at the prospect of a dance before. Tonight was different. Amelia would be there. She wanted to dance with me. I, Benedict Tutheridge, dunce of the family, had the prettiest girl in town by my side.

I’d worked it out with my siblings that I would take Amelia to the dance without the pleasure of their company. Briggs had teased me, but I didn’t let it stop me. I paced around the foyer, waiting for her to come down. I already had

the small carriage hitched to the horses and waiting at the watering hole.

Footsteps drew my attention to the stairway. Amelia, holding on to the railing with a white-gloved hand, made her way carefully down to the first floor. I gripped the banister for fear my wobbly knees might buckle. What a beauty, in her pale green gown and new hat with a matching ribbon.

When she reached me, I instinctively held out my hands and she took them, allowing me to kiss one and then the other. Her lilac scent lingered in the fabric of the gloves. I drank in her pink cheeks and bright eyes and the fine hairs that curled at the nape of her neck. "I didn't think it was possible."

"What?" Amelia asked.

"For you to look any more beautiful than you did this afternoon."

She giggled and ducked her head, looking up at me through her lashes. "It's a new dress. I had it made with some of my wages. Terribly frivolous, I know. Ella convinced me."

"She was right to do so. You deserve a new dress. You've worked hard."

"Not so hard. Not really. Regardless, I'm excited. A dance. Me. I never thought I'd be so lucky. All that delicious food today and now this. You've no idea how excited I am."

"I think I do. Surprisingly, so am I."

"Do you normally dislike dances?" Amelia asked.

"I've been apathetic toward them. But that was before."

"Before?"

"You."

She touched her fingertips against the side of my face. "You say such sweet things."

"All true. You know that, don't you? That every word I utter is the truth. Especially about you."

“I feel every one of them right here.” She tapped her chest. “Each moment’s a treasure.”

“There will be more. Many, many more moments between us.” I brushed my mouth against hers, felt her breath hitch, and the way she seemed to lean into me. “We must go, or we’ll miss the whole thing.”

“Lead the way.”

DUSK HAD SETTLED in by the time we headed out, side by side in our small carriage. Above us, a scattering of stars and a quarter moon sparkled from an indigo sky.

“It’s such a pretty evening,” Amelia said softly. “I’ve never seen a sky quite that color.”

“Yes, the color of the gloaming, somewhere between blue and purple. I’ve always found this time of evening magical, as if anything’s possible. Or at least that’s the way it seemed to me as a child. Briggs and I used to sit on the porch and watch the stars come out one by one. I only made a wish on the first one we saw, but Briggs wished on them all.”

“What did you wish for?” she asked softly before a rut in the road jostled her, and her shoulder bumped into mine.

“Only to be safe from harm. For myself and Briggs.” My throat ached, remembering the little boys we’d been. How vulnerable we were then, under that sky full of stars.

“Oh, Benedict.”

“I know.” I glanced over at her, catching her eye in the light cast by the lanterns. “Did you ever wish on a star?”

“Yes, many times. You and I had the same one. I wished for a warm place to live and a full stomach and my mother’s health. All of which adds up to the same wish as yours. To be safe.”

“Do you feel safe with me?” I asked.

“The safest I’ve ever felt.” Her hand traveled to find mine in the dark. “It feels as good as I thought it would.”

“What’s your wish tonight?”

“Everything I want is right here,” Amelia said. “Asking for more would be greedy.”

The horses trotted along, perhaps sensing my lack of urgency. I preferred to have Amelia all to myself than share her with a packed schoolhouse full of men who would clamor to scribble their names on her dance card.

“What about you?” Amelia asked. “What’s your wish tonight?”

“Being here with you—it’s more than I ever thought I’d have. I, too, feel guilty for asking for anything more. Still, I wish that you’ll stay forever.”

“I’ll make that my wish, too, then.”

My father’s voice echoed through my mind. Imbecile. Idiot. A woman like Amelia is too good for you. You won’t possibly hold her interest.

We arrived at the back of the schoolhouse where the horses would be looked after by a stable boy until our return. The son of a local farmer, he raised his hand in greeting. “Hello, Timmy. How are you this evening?”

“Very fine, Mr. Tutheridge.”

I helped Amelia from the carriage and thanked Timmy by giving him a modest tip. I’d give him another when we came back for the horse and carriage.

We walked together toward the schoolhouse, all lit up and the sound of music coming from the open windows. As we were about to round the corner of the building, she tugged me behind a hydrangea bush and placed her hands on either side of my face. In the dim light, I could only make out the shape of her face, but it didn’t matter. I could see her, just as she could see me.

“What is it? Where did you go just now?” Amelia asked. “It seems as if you’ve traveled a great distance from me.”

My bones ached with longing for her. “Voices in my head. Cruel ones. Reminding me of who I really am.”

“He’s no longer here, Benedict.”

My stomach fluttered at the sound of my name coming out of her lovely mouth. “How did you know it was him?”

“Who else would it be?”

“As you say, he’s no longer here,” I said. “But moments of doubt about myself may stay with me the rest of my life. I can’t promise they won’t.”

“He lies, you know. That voice in your head. He had no idea who you really are. But I do. I see you as clearly as I’ve ever seen anything. You’re like the moon. Impossibly beautiful even on the darkest of nights. Nothing can harm the moon. I’ll be patient, Benedict. And love you as hard as I can so that it becomes bigger than the damage he did. Until it’s my voice you hear.

“Can you send him away for tonight?” Amelia asked. “See and hear only me?”

The tenderness in her voice made my chest ache. “Consider it done. For you, if I could, I would pull a star from the sky.”

“I would hold it close to my heart.”

I drew her to me. “May I steal another kiss before the night begins and all of the town asks to dance with you?”

“You needn’t steal it. I offer it to you of my own accord.”

I smiled and lifted her chin with my fingertips, then leaned down to brush my lips against hers. Chaste, so as not to alarm her, here in the dark all alone. How I yearned for something less so, but I was a gentleman. My mother had taught me that, at least. One didn’t need to read well to know how to behave toward a woman.

She pressed against me, kissing me harder than I’d dared. I might burst into flames, I thought.

“I never knew what the fuss was about kisses,” Amelia murmured when we drew apart. “In books, they often make such a ruckus over them. Now I understand.”

“As do I.” I kissed her again and would have lingered had I not heard voices approaching. Not wanting to risk her reputation, I reluctantly took her arm once more and headed toward the dance, saying a silent prayer of thanks to the Lord above for bringing an angel to my doorstep.

AMELIA

I'd never had such a night as the one I shared with Benedict. When we arrived, several men asked if they could sign up for a dance on my card, but I just shook my head and explained I was here with Benedict. I don't know if it was his status in the community or his broad shoulders, but no one asked again. He'd not asked for me to do this, but the idea of anyone else left me cold. I wanted nothing more than to be near him. Moving around the dance floor in his strong arms seemed like the home I'd been searching for since the death of my mother.

We took a break around ten for a glass of punch and a cookie and went outside to sit together on the front steps. Somewhat breathless from the vigorous last dance, I filled my lungs with the fresh night air. To the right of us, standing under an oak tree, were Briggs and Sheriff White.

After a few minutes, Matthew Goodwell appeared. We invited him to join us, and he did so, leaning up against the side of the building a few steps below us. Like the other men Roland Tutheridge had played poker with, he reeked of sadness and regret. Why had he never married? Lack of women on the island, most likely. He was a rugged, handsome man with silver strands woven into his thick black hair and a charming smile. His eyes were deep-set but beautiful, although bushy dark eyebrows made him seem slightly menacing.

Our punch glasses were empty. "I'll get us another glass," Benedict said. "Matthew, may I get one for you?"

“No, thank you.” Matthew patted the breast pocket of his jacket. “I’ve got my drink right here.”

“You’ll be all right?” Benedict asked me. “I’ll be quick.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be right here when you return.” Our eyes locked in the way they so often did before he left me alone on the steps with Matthew.

“How are you two enjoying the dance?” Matthew asked as he sat next to me on the steps. “I’ve noticed you’re not giving any other of the lonely men an opportunity to woo you with their dancing skills.”

“I’ve come with Benedict. I don’t wish to dance with anyone else.”

“You’re getting along well with your boss, I see.”

I bristled at the word *boss*. Benedict was much more than that to me. Hearing the word reminded me that I was not his equal. At least not in the eyes of the people on this island. “We’re here as friends. Not employee and employer.”

“That’s obvious, my dear.”

“Oh. Well. Good. I guess.”

“There’s no shame in it. People meet in all different ways these days.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said.

“Only that you’re a good match.”

As in marriage? Or did he mean work? Or something else? “What do you mean?”

“Simply that it appears you and Benedict are a good match,” Matthew said. “Working together and otherwise—you seem to fit together.”

“I believe so.” Why was this man so interested in my relationship with Benedict anyway?

“You, my dear, have brought sunshine to him when before there was only rain and gray skies.” He leaned closer and

spoke quietly near my ear. “In fact, I’ve never seen him happy before now. He’s quite altered. For the better.”

I buzzed with joy. “I, too, am altered. In all the good ways one can be.”

“Good. I shall report back to Mrs. Mantle that all is well.”

Mrs. Mantle. I twitched with surprise. “You know Mrs. Mantle?”

He froze for a second, looking like a child caught stealing a treat. “Um, yes. Kind of. Mrs. Tutheridge mentioned she was using an agency back east, and I offered to help.”

“What kind of help?” I asked.

He sucked in his cheeks before letting out a puff of air. “Writing to Mrs. Mantle with a description of what we needed here.”

That was odd, but made sense too. Mrs. Tutheridge would doubt herself and worry she wouldn’t be able to tell her exactly what they were looking for. “I see. You helped her from this end. To find me.”

“Correct.”

“Do you exchange letters with her often?” I asked. Had I heard a hint of longing when he said her name? Surely not. They’d never met. People fell in love over letters, though. At least in books.

“Not really, no. I shouldn’t have said anything. Mrs. Tutheridge didn’t want anyone to know I was assisting.”

“But why?” Matthew Goodwell was a mysterious man. He seemed to say two things at once, and I wasn’t sure I understood either of them. Or perhaps it was my imagination?

“She doesn’t want them to feel she’s interfering.”

I sat with that for a moment. Understandable, given the stubbornness of Ella and Briggs. Benedict had seemed grateful for his mother and Mrs. Mantle’s assistance. Although he’d thought I’d be a man. Maybe that was the reason?

“What is Mrs. Mantle like in person?” Matthew asked. “I have a sense of her from her letters, but I’m curious to know more.”

“She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Glows from the inside out. Kind and very smart, with the most eloquent speaking voice. I admire her more than I can say.” I closed my eyes for a moment to describe her accurately. “She has wide-set blue eyes and a chin like the point of a heart, except at the last moment decides to be square on the bottom.”

“Is she tall or short?” Matthew asked.

“Tall, with loads of golden hair that her maid, Heidi, fixes for her. Other than her grace and refinement, we have a lot in common.” I explained how we’d both grown up poor and had relied on education to advance our lives. “She told me that she and I are a rags-to-riches type of story. She knows I’m fond of books. Only I’m still in the rags chapters.”

“I asked her to send someone who loved reading. For Benedict’s sake.”

“You did?” That was a surprise. “I wouldn’t have thought that was necessary for the secretarial duties.”

“One must do more than work, Miss Young.”

Right then it came to me. There was more to this than I’d thought. Was Mrs. Mantle more than an employment agency? Had she and Mr. Goodwell wanted more for Benedict? Like a wife? “Mr. Goodwell, was I sent for more than just the secretarial job?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m supposed to be discreet.”

“Were you and Mrs. Tutheridge looking for a woman or a secretary?”

“Can’t it be both?”

I gasped. “What are you saying? Was I sent for Benedict... for his...wife?”

“There may have been some hope that you and Benedict found you had a lot in common and formed a friendship. A deep friendship.”

I was shocked into silence for a moment. “Like a mail-order bride?”

“Nothing so cut-and-dried. More of a match. Put together by a matchmaker.”

It all made sense, really. With Matthew and Mrs. Mantle working together, they were able to find the right secretary and friend for Benedict. As luck would have it, I’d seen the advertisement and applied for the job.

“Divine intervention,” I said out loud. “Aided by you and Mrs. Tutheridge.”

“Listen, Miss Young, would you mind not telling Benedict about my involvement? It might embarrass him.”

“Embarrass him? That’s the least of what he’ll think. You’ve tricked us. Brought me here under false circumstances.”

“Um, yeah. I wasn’t supposed to tell you any of this. I have a big mouth, apparently.”

“Mrs. Mantle had a part in all of this? Or just you and Mrs. Tutheridge?”

“She is a professional matchmaker.”

My stomach dropped. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. They’d sent me here to fall in love with Benedict? Darned if it hadn’t worked, too.

“Maybe someday we can tell him, but for now let’s keep it between us,” Matthew said.

“I can’t lie to him. I would never lie to him.”

“Withholding information for a period of time is a gray area, don’t you think?”

“I most certainly do not.”

Benedict appeared with our glasses of punch. “Is everything all right?”

I smiled to reassure him. “Yes, all is well.” I needed time to think this through. The last thing I wanted was to cause

trouble between him and his mother, but really, this was outrageous.

Then again, did it matter how I'd come here, or only that I was here at all?

IT WAS NEARLY midnight by the time we arrived back at the house. I was exhausted but happy and definitely looking forward to my bed. If only Benedict could accompany me there. My goodness, my mind had become treacherous and scandalous. Thinking of a man in my bed indeed?

I'd thought of nothing else but Matthew's revelation the rest of the night. Regardless of what he thought of his mother's interference, I didn't want to start a life with Benedict with a lie.

As we walked from the barn to the house, he reached out and took my hand. "Thank you for allowing me the pleasure of escorting you this evening, Miss Young."

I laughed at the formal use of my name. "We're past that, aren't we?"

He stopped at the entrance to the house and took both my hands. "What are the odds that you would come here? I can't believe our luck."

"About that. I have something to tell you. Sit with me for a minute?"

We sat on the steps facing each other. "I learned something tonight. I'm not sure how you'll feel about it. But I need to tell you the truth."

"What is it? Are you sick?"

"What? No, nothing like that. It's about the odds of us meeting—you see, we were matched by your mother and Mrs. Mantle, with Matthew Goodwell's assistance."

"I don't understand."

“I was sent here in the hopes that we would fall in love. That’s why she wanted to know if I loved books. It’s all so obvious to me now.”

He sat there, looking stunned for a moment. “Are you saying they sent you to be my wife, not my secretary?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I’m assuming your mother didn’t think you’d take kindly to the idea of being matched.”

“She’s right.” He stared at the spot between his knees. “I’d have told her that no one would want to be matched with the town idiot. I would have shut down the idea immediately.”

“I would certainly not have come out here to marry some man I didn’t know. Like a mail-order bride.”

“You would be the last woman in the world to do such a thing,” he said. “I wouldn’t want a woman like that—someone who would marry only for money. But Mother planning all this? Getting Matthew involved? I am stunned.”

“And Mrs. Mantle is an actual matchmaker. Think of it. She lied to me, too. Now I know why she wanted me to have a new wardrobe. She wanted me to look nice for you.”

I could practically hear his mind churning, trying to make sense of what I was saying. “Like you’re some kind of commodity,” he said. “This is outrageous.”

“Your mother’s heart was in the right place,” I said lamely. My stomach was in knots. I’d never seen Benedict angry, and it scared me a little.

“I can’t believe this.” He looked up at me, then started to laugh. “Their ridiculous scheme actually worked. They found my perfect match.”

“You’re not mad?”

He shook his head and brought my hand to his mouth as he looked into my eyes. “I should be. I don’t appreciate being lied to. However, they brought you here, and it’s changed my whole life. You’re everything I could hope for.”

“Your perfect match.”

“That’s right. My heavens, my mother. The nerve.” He shook his head, chuckling. “I didn’t think she had such treachery in her. But this Mrs. Mantle knows what she’s doing. You’re everything, Amelia. Everything to me. I want to make a life with you more than anything. We’ll get married and move to my new house and make a dozen babies?”

“A dozen?” I asked, laughing.

“Half dozen?” He pulled me against him and crushed his mouth to mine, whispering, “I love you, Amelia Young.”

Just then the door opened and Ella and Briggs spilled out to the porch. They both started to laugh at the sight of us entwined.

“Young lady, isn’t it past your bedtime?” Briggs asked.

“Yes, it most certainly is.” Ella wagged a finger at me. “You’re both very naughty.”

“Midnight. Kissing on the porch,” Briggs said. “I never thought I’d see either of you carrying on this way. I’m the one with the reputation for kissing.”

“The difference, dear brother, is that you’re kissing more than one at a time,” Benedict said, helping me to my feet. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me close. “I desire no other kisses than Amelia’s.”

“You two are going to give me a toothache,” Ella said.

“Toothache?” Benedict asked as he followed me inside to the foyer.

“From all that sugar.” Ella laughed and gave my hand a quick squeeze.

“We’re getting married,” Benedict said. “Does that make it better?”

Ella screamed. “You are? Oh, Amelia, welcome to the family.” She yanked me into a hug with her strong arms. “I knew we were going to be sisters. I just knew it.”

When Ella let go, Briggs kissed my cheek. “Welcome to the family. I couldn’t imagine anyone better for old Ben here.”

“A great match,” Benedict said, winking at me.

“We’ll have such fun planning the wedding,” Ella said. “I promise not to take over, but whatever you need, I’m here.”

“You could be my maid of honor and stand beside me at the church,” I said.

Her face lit up. “Really? I’d be so honored.”

“What about you?” Benedict asked Briggs. “Can you bear to act civilized for an hour or so and be my best man?”

“It has to be me,” Briggs said, sounding husky. “After all the hard times we went through together, it has to be me.”

“Agreed,” Benedict said.

“Come on upstairs before Mother catches us all,” Ella said. “We can talk all about the wedding tomorrow.”

“I am tired,” I said, yawning. “Even though tonight was the best night of my whole life.”

“Really?” Ella rolled her eyes. “We’re going to have to get you out more.”

“I offered myself to her when she first arrived,” Briggs said, grinning. “She could have had the fun brother, but she chose this one.” He poked Benedict in the chest.

“You never had an iota of a chance,” Ella said. “For many reasons.”

Briggs grabbed for her, but Ella was too fast, ducking away from his large hand, both of them laughing. For a moment, I was suspended in time, soaking it all in, love flowing through my veins for all three of them.

“Come on, brother, let’s have a nightcap,” Briggs said to Benedict. “And let these two get their beauty sleep.”

“Good night, sweetheart,” Benedict whispered in my ear. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night.” I gave one last glance at my beloved before starting up the stairs with Ella. Halfway up, I turned back to see the brothers hugging.

When Ella and I reached our doorways, she hugged me again. “We’re blessed you came to us. So very blessed.” She turned away, obviously embarrassed, and slipped inside her room.

I stood for a second looking at her closed door, knowing that the blessings went both ways.

AMELIA

One sunny day we were delighted to get an offer for the company. The price was fair, and the Tutheridge siblings would be free of the burden their father had left them with. Before we agreed to the sale, though, Benedict and I sat down with his mother after dinner one evening.

“Mother, have you ever thought about running the company?” Benedict asked.

She looked up from her needlepoint. “Me? What an outlandish idea.”

“You said you wished you could have had a career,” I said. “You’re perfectly capable of running it.”

“I appreciate your faith in me,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “But I’ve no interest in taking over your father’s work any more than the rest of you.” She smiled primly. “I have other interests anyway.”

“You do?” I asked.

“I’ve been asked by a certain pastor if he could court me.” She flushed furiously. “And I’d like that very much.”

“I knew it,” Benedict muttered.

“Do you mind, dear?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked.

Benedict granted his mother a warm smile. “I want you to be happy, and if Timothy Bains makes you happy, then so be it.”

“There’s only one problem,” Benedict said. “We still don’t know if he killed Father.”

“I can assure you he didn’t,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “I would know. Just as you know Benedict is incapable of hurting anyone.”

“Do you think we’ll ever know?” I asked. “Or did someone commit the perfect crime?”

Dexter appeared as if out of thin air. I really didn’t know how he did that. “Mrs. Tutheridge, the sheriff’s here.”

Mother dropped her needlepoint. “Show him in.”

A minute later, Sheriff White came through the door.

Mrs. Tutheridge stood to greet him. “What brings you out here tonight? Do you have information?”

White looked grim. What had he found? Had my notes helped him? If they had, he’d never admit to it.

“Evening, everyone. I’m sorry to disturb your evening, but I need to talk to Hudson about the murder of Roland Tutheridge.”

Mrs. Tutheridge’s legs buckled under her. Benedict rushed to catch her before she fell to the floor.

“What evidence do you have?” I blurted out. “How can you prove it?”

“Miss Young, need I remind you that you’re not my deputy?”

“No, sir,” I said.

Was it really Hudson? He had motive. I’d established that clearly enough. I shivered, remembering the psychic’s prediction. Had she been right all along?

Hudson was sent for and arrived in the room looking disheveled, as if he’d been in bed already.

“What’s this about?” Hudson asked.

“I need to ask you some questions,” White said. “Do you want to talk alone?”

“No, you can say whatever it is you need to say in front of my family.” Hudson stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

“We found the gun used in the killing,” White said. “With the initials H.T. carved into the handle. Everyone around these parts is aware of your superior gun skills. Furthermore, the gun had been buried not far from where Roland was killed. Our hound found it.”

“My gun went missing,” Hudson said. “Right around the time of the murder. Someone might have taken it and used it. Maybe hoping you’d pin it on me.”

“Why didn’t you mention your missing gun to me before now?” White asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think it had anything to do with the murder.” Hudson’s shoulders slumped. “I wouldn’t kill my own father.”

“Is it true what Miss Young here had in her notes?” White asked. “You blamed your father for your wife’s death?”

Hudson glowered at me in a way that made me believe he could be a killer. Or at the very least, wanted to kill me. “The week before his death, we had all kinds of people here for a party,” Hudson said. “Any of them could have taken my gun.”

“It wasn’t locked up?” White asked.

“No. We keep all the guns in a cabinet off the kitchen,” Benedict said. “We had a lot of people here that day. Including all of Father’s poker friends.”

“Like you,” Hudson said to White. “How do we know you’re not trying to cover this up by blaming me when you’re actually the one who killed him? Weren’t you tired of looking the other way? Covering up Father’s shady business deals and liaisons with women?”

“No doubt I was tired of him and the ways he controlled me and this town,” White said. “But I didn’t kill him because of it.”

“I’m innocent,” Hudson said. “If it was my gun that killed him, then someone took it. Maybe I’m being framed? By a crooked cop, for example?”

White took a cigar from his jacket pocket and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. Not at all worried, I thought. Or pretending not to be. Was it possible he was framing Hudson? But why?

“You have to prove it, White,” Benedict said. “My brother’s gun isn’t enough. Someone stole it from our home and used it on Father. Again, it could be anyone.”

“Regardless, this is the best lead I’ve got, and all signs point right here.” He took his unlit cigar from his mouth and waved it at Hudson. “But then again, I’ll admit, I need more evidence to feel completely convinced. As far as someone framing you—do you have any enemies?”

“Not that I know of,” Hudson said. “I don’t get out that much.”

“He’s basically a recluse,” Mrs. Tutheridge said, wringing her hands. “I would have known if he was out at night.”

“You were asleep,” White said. “You said so yourself that you slept hard that night. He could have easily slipped out on foot and waited for Roland to come home from poker. No one knew his schedule better than a recluse. Isn’t that right, Hudson?”

“Yes, I knew his schedule. But I didn’t do it. I wouldn’t do that to my daughter. She already lost her mother. I wouldn’t risk going to jail or being hanged and leaving her an orphan.”

“Just know I’m watching you.” White resumed chewing the end of the cigar. Disgusting habit, I thought. “You’re not to leave this island.”

Hudson nodded. “We already established that I’m a recluse, so you don’t need to worry.”

After the sheriff left, we all sank into chairs. Dexter poured the men a whiskey and then left to make Mrs. Tutheridge and me a cup of tea.

“Why did you tell him that about me?” Hudson asked me. “You planted the seed in his mind that I did this. What gives you the right to stick your nose into every nook and cranny of our lives?”

“Hudson, don’t start on her.” Benedict scooted forward, causing the leather chair to groan under his weight. “I won’t have you disrespecting her ever again.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I stand behind what I did. You *are* a suspect, Hudson. That it was your gun makes you look guilty. Which I had nothing to do with since I didn’t know that until today.”

“Do you think I did it?” Hudson asked me, his expression dark.

I looked him in the eye. “No, I don’t think you did it. I don’t believe anyone in this family could do something so heinous even if he deserved it. Despite your somewhat unpleasant personality, I believe what you said about Bebe. You wouldn’t risk leaving her.”

“He hasn’t arrested me yet.” Hudson crumpled over his knees and breathed deeply, his back rising and falling. When he looked up, his expression had become contemplative instead of beleaguered. “Which makes me think he has other ideas about who it could be. He wanted to see my reaction.”

“We can’t rest until we find the real killer,” I said. “The answer has to be right in front of us.”

“I agree,” Benedict said. “But I don’t know how we’ll ever know.”

“We have to find out,” I said. “Or risk Hudson being falsely accused.”

“I’ve been terrible toward you. Why are you being nice to me?” Hudson asked, eyes narrowed.

I answered as kindly as I could. “Because you’re my family now. You’re all my family. I’m marrying your brother because I love him, and even though you don’t reciprocate, that means I love you, too.”

“I’m sorry for how I’ve acted.” Hudson buried his face in his hands. “These last few weeks have been miserable for me, knowing how I behaved, and now this. What kind of father can I be to Bebe? I have to get myself together. Start living again. Be her father.”

“Oh, darling, I hope you mean it,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

“What if he arrests me?” Hudson asked. “What if I’m convicted?”

“We’ll get lawyers. We’ll hire a thousand of them if we have to,” Benedict said.

“But surely it won’t come to that?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked.

“It won’t,” Benedict said firmly. “The truth will prevail eventually.”

I sincerely hoped he was right, with a caveat. I didn’t want it to be any of the members of the family I’d come to love with all my heart. Yet I knew deep in my bones, where instinct met facts, that none of them were capable of such violence. Not even Hudson. Which meant the killer was somewhere on this island, going about his or her life guilty of taking another’s. Would we ever know for sure? Did we truly want to? These were all answers for another day. For now, I knew only that I had found my family at last.

IT WAS Ella who suggested we marry on the morning of the summer solstice and celebrate with the entire town that afternoon and evening at the summer solstice garden party. I’d been unsure at first, not knowing how it would feel to share the day with strangers who might wonder if Benedict had chosen wisely. I mean, my red hair and freckles would be on display for the entire town to judge. But in the end, I came to understand how important it was to Benedict that our marriage be the mark of a new beginning for the Tutheridge family—a celebration of love after years of tyranny. Thus, having the whole town in attendance seemed inevitable, despite my reticence.

That, and Ella had no patience for my lack of self-confidence, giving me a proper telling off, followed by dragging me to the mirror and listing off all my good qualities.

Roses scented the air and sunlight flooded the garden during our wedding reception. All around us, people were enjoying a feast of roasted pig, mountains of baby red potatoes, and sweet peas. Later, we would enjoy a multilayer white cake with raspberry filling and a buttercream frosting. I could hardly wait.

For the ceremony and reception, I wore a white dress with draped layers of silk and lace from a pattern Ella had helped me pick. Mrs. Tutheridge had surprised me by sewing it herself. We'd had such fun together during the measurement and fittings. She was a new woman from the one I'd met when I first arrived. Love had a way of changing a person, I thought, as I watched Timothy Bains take her hand.

The mystery of Roland Tutheridge's murder had not been solved. Sheriff White had not arrested Hudson, nor had he come up with any alternatives. Thus, we were left with many unanswered questions.

However, during cake and champagne toasts given by Ella and Briggs, in which they were uncharacteristically sentimental, I cried from the sheer joy of it all. My new life with my greatest love. Nothing could ruin what we had, not even the ghosts of the past. Benedict was mine. We were beginning our lives together. Sadness and pain were in the past.

The scent of roses mingled with the sea air. Benedict took my hand and led me up the stairs of the porch, where couples had begun dancing, and pulled me close.

"Mrs. Tutheridge, may I have this dance?"

"No one but you, my love, shall fill my dance card."

"Have I told you how you weaken my knees?" Benedict asked.

I looked up at him, my heart in my throat, so in love it made me dizzy. "I hope I always will."

“I’ve no doubt. You’ll always be my greatest love. My shining star.”

LATER, after tearful goodbyes from Mrs. Tutheridge and Ella, Benedict drove me out to our new house. He and his brothers—yes, even Hudson—had worked tirelessly to have it ready for us to move into on our wedding night. He insisted on carrying me through the front door. “I’ll show you every detail tomorrow,” he said, his mouth lingering at my ear. “But I must take you to the bedroom or I may die of longing.”

I clung to him as he carried me up the stairs, strong and steady and not a bit winded, as if I weighed nothing. The fat round moon reflected off the water and bathed the room in a silvery sheen. A breeze fluttered the long white curtains that framed the bay windows.

“It’s the perfect night,” I whispered.

“Made for you and me.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

“Are you scared?” Benedict asked.

“A little.” I breathed in his scent of pine needles and citrus, and I longed to place my mouth against his neck, to feel the sinewy strength and salt of his skin. Yet I was shy. A bride on her wedding night. New to the intimacy of husbands and wives.

“Me too.”

“But it’s us,” I said. “We needn’t be afraid.”

“The first night of many, many more. We must think of it as practice, yes? Not perfection the first night?”

“I shall enjoy practicing,” I said.

He kissed me, then set me gently onto the edge of the bed. The mattress creaked under my weight. My legs hung over the side, not quite touching the hardwood floor. He knelt before

me and slid off one of my shoes and then the other, his fingers nimble and strong. I held my breath, unsure what to do. Was I to lie back? I could hear my heart beating between my ears.

His thumb brushed the arch of my foot, sending shivers throughout my body. “Relax, my love. Unlike school, I’ll be a fast learner when it comes to the ways of love.”

I smiled in the darkness and gave myself to him, knowing that I’d come home at last.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Tess Thompson writes small-town romances and historical romance. She started her writing career in fourth grade when she wrote a story about an orphan who opened a pizza restaurant. Oddly enough, her first novel, “Riversong” is about an adult orphan who opens a restaurant. Clearly, she’s been obsessed with food and words for a long time now.

With a degree from the University of Southern California in theatre, she’s spent her adult life studying story, word craft, and character. Since 2011, she’s published 25 novels and 6 novellas. Most days she spends at her desk chasing her daily word count or rewriting a terrible first draft.

She currently lives in a suburb of Seattle, Washington with her husband, the hero of her own love story, and their Brady Bunch clan of two sons, two daughters and five cats. Yes, that’s four kids and five cats.

Tess loves to hear from you. Drop her a line at tess@tthompsonwrites.com or visit her website at <https://tesswrites.com/>

