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TESS THOMPSON

The
MYSTERY
MATCHMAKER
of
ELLA POINTE

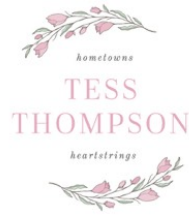


A MATCH for
A RELUCTANT BRIDE

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THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA
POINTE
BOOK THREE

TESS THOMPSON



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For those of you who have felt like a wallflower or invisible or unworthy of love, this one is for you. I wish for you a mirror that reflects the goodness of your heart, for that is true beauty. God doesn't make mistakes. You are a blessing. You are loved.

FAITH

I was being watched. A prickle at the base of my neck told me so. Were they angered by the length of time I'd been sitting on the bench looking at the same painting? Maybe they wanted to take my seat on the bench I thought of as my own? Or was my weeping offensive, sopping up my hot tears with a hanky to keep them from dripping into the collar of my shirtwaist? Or perhaps they were a killer, planning their attack for the moment I walked outside?

I knew only that it would not be a male admirer. Recently jilted wallflowers who spent more time in art museums than with people did not have such powers of seduction.

Wiping my eyes, I turned slowly to catch sight of the bandit. I was right. A woman sitting on a bench across the room was indeed staring at me. She had hair the color of straw and a long, slender neck.

Had she found me odd, sitting by myself for such a long time? On the many days I spent here, I always ended up sitting in this same spot staring at the same painting. Only occasionally would someone stop to look. They never lingered long. No one ever sat. There were not many who studied the work as intently as I. The paintings filled me with joy, gave meaning to my ordinary life. This one was my favorite. I always saved it for last.

I glanced sideways at the woman, noticing the expensive details of her emerald dress and her upright posture. She had the air of someone of importance and wealth. A fine lady. The type I could never hope to be. Especially now that I was no longer engaged to Lionel. Only gossip lingered from our long engagement. Lionel and my best friend had married, leaving me behind to lick my wounds in the company of my beloved paintings. Thank God for art, or I might have curled into a ball and given up completely.

“May I help you?” I asked, finding my voice. “Do we know each other?” Maybe she was a customer at my father’s

bakery, and I hadn't placed her out of context.

"No, I'm sorry. I've been staring, haven't I?"

"It seems so, yes."

"The way you're peering at the painting has made me unable to look away from you. I've never seen anyone so moved by a painting."

"Yes, well, I see it differently today than I did yesterday. That's how I know it's truly a masterpiece."

She got up from the other bench and came over, asking politely if she could join me. I nodded assent, and she held out her hand. I took in her impeccably white gloves and the delicate, expensive-looking buttons on the lower sleeve of her dress. "I'm Mrs. Aubrey Mantle."

"Faith Fidget." I gave her hand a quick squeeze before drawing mine back to my lap. "Nice to meet you."

"Do you come here often?"

I nodded. "Almost every day. After work." Who was this woman, and why did she want to know? If it weren't that she was obviously a woman of means and prestige, I would have gotten up by now and walked away. One can't be too careful in this city.

"Where do you work?"

"I work in my father's bakery. In the front, taking orders and such. He likes to bake but doesn't like helping the customers. He's shy." *Like me.* But I had to do it, or we'd be out of business.

"But you love art? Obviously."

"More than anything else."

"Are you an artist?"

I shook my head. "I wish, but I have no talent whatsoever. Regardless, I could look at these paintings all day. Do you see how there's a story in each one?"

“I’ve never been one with enough patience to look properly. My late husband used to tease me that it wasn’t a race to see who could walk through the entire museum the fastest.”

“A lot of people are that way. There’s nothing wrong with it,” I added, for fear she’d think me rude.

“I’m always more interested in the people around me,” Mrs. Mantle said. “All the details that tell me about a person. For example, I have some ideas about you.”

“As in?” I couldn’t help but be intrigued. Most people didn’t notice me at all.

“Your love of art. The glimmer of intelligence in your eyes. Your simple dark skirt and white blouse hinted that you’d been at work, although I’d guessed a secretary, not a bakery. You mentioned a father but no mother, which leads me to believe your mother has passed away some time ago. You’re in obvious distress, given the tears. I’m guessing a man has broken your heart.”

My brows shot up in surprise. “How did you know?”

“As I said, I watch people carefully. The way you brushed away the tears with such ferocity, as if you wanted to punish yourself for crying. Tell me about him. What happened?”

I thought for a moment. Did I want to tell my pitiful story to a stranger? It was surely one she’d heard before. Left for a woman’s best friend.

An image of Lionel’s face danced before me. His soft brown eyes and a mouth too pink for a man, yet perfect. The pitying way he’d looked at me while saying the words, “I love her. We’re going to marry. I’m sorry, Faith. Truly, I am. But you deserve a man who loves you, and I’m not him.”

Mrs. Mantle seemed to be a woman who would never be silly enough to fall for the wrong man. She would never have allowed herself to give her whole heart to someone who didn’t love her back. Wouldn’t she have instinctually known that he was playing her for a fool? And what of my best friend? The

betrayal that cut so deep it may as well have been done with a real knife.

“You’re correct. I have a broken heart. My betrothed has married my best friend.”

“Oh, dear me. How horrendous for you. It’s no wonder you’re crying.”

Her kindness made the tears return in full force. I held my damp hanky to my face and breathed in and out, in and out.

She patted my hand, almost as I imagined a loving auntie would. Strangely enough, it was comforting.

“I’m lost, Mrs. Mantle. Utterly lost. Humiliated as well. My poor papa had sacrificed so much to give us a small wedding. I had to tell him what had happened, and it was almost worse than when Lionel broke the news to me.”

I’d not wanted the wedding, only to be married to Lionel. Papa had insisted. Meanwhile, as the day approached, I began to dread walking down the aisle in front of all those people more and more. The idea of them all staring at me filled me with terror. Had that driven Lionel into Mable’s arms? *No*, I told myself. *He didn’t love you.*

“So you come here to look at your beloved paintings, hoping they will heal your broken heart.”

“That’s right. It might sound ridiculous, but they’re like old friends. Ones that can never betray me.”

“I understand completely. May I give you some advice? From someone who felt lost after the death of my husband?”

“Yes, please.” Please, tell me what I can do to stop hurting this much. To feel as if I’m dying slowly, a decay that started in my stomach and is working its way through the rest of me.

“I was devastated after the death of my husband. I could barely manage to get out of bed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. The only thing that made a difference was to become involved passionately with another cause. In my situation, it was starting a business. I hurled myself headfirst into building something I could be proud of. I still miss him. I’m not saying that it magically took his place, but it makes living day after day worthwhile. I have purpose and drive. When I cannot sleep at night and I look over to the spot where Daniel used to lie and my heart fills with that terrible ache, I get up and go to my desk.”

“What is it that you do?”

She hesitated for a moment, playing with the buttons on the sleeve of her dress. “I’m in the staffing business. Companies or individuals hire me to find the perfect person for their needs.”

“How interesting. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Yes, well, I’m ahead of my time, perhaps?”

“What kind of positions do you fill?” I asked.

“All different sorts.” She clapped a hand to her forehead. “Strangely enough—and I just thought of it—I’m filling a position right now that might interest you.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Mantle. I have to work for Papa.”

She continued as if she hadn’t heard me. “I have a client who is a very talented painter and even a little famous in Seattle. He’s looking for an assistant. Someone he can teach how to stretch canvases and clean brushes. Remind him to eat when he’s ensconced in a project.

“I wish you good luck finding someone. Seattle’s far away.” All the way across the country. “Will it be hard to find someone from here?”

“In the past, I’ve sent them the right candidate from here.”

“They travel all that way? For a job?”

“Sometimes people need a fresh start,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Like say, while healing from a broken heart. A change in scenery can be just the trick.”

“I wouldn’t be able to leave my papa. He needs me.”

“That’s a shame. I believe you’d be just right for the position. And the artist.”

“What’s he like?” My curiosity got the better of me.

“Dashing and charming from what I know. Very serious about his art but little else. Unmarried,” she added, as if an afterthought.

“That doesn’t sound like a brooding artist to me. I imagine them temperamental and manic, but I’ve never actually known one.”

“From all reports, Briggs Tutheridge is someone who enjoys life. Perhaps a little too much.”

How intriguing. Too much fun? What did she mean by that? My naivete about the world made it difficult to imagine how a person could have too much fun. As a woman who was not invited to dances or parties, it seemed to me that if fun were offered, why not take it? “I say, good for him. Life is short. Isn’t that what they say?”

Mrs. Mantle smiled. I seemed to please her with my answer, but I had no idea why. I sat there for a moment, imagining this dashing painter, probably with silver hair and a curled mustache. “What kind of painting does he do?”

“He earns money by portrait painting. But it’s my understanding that he enjoys painting landscapes of his island.”

“Island?”

“Yes, did I forget to mention that part? He lives on a small island off the Washington coast. They’re called the San Juan Islands and they’re nestled in the Puget Sound. I know little about the area, other than what my client’s told me. Calm waters, green meadows, an abundance of trees, and a mild climate. It rarely snows. There are more wildflower varieties than can be counted.”

“You’re speaking of the San Juan Islands?” I asked, flabbergasted. I’d seen them on the world atlas and been

curious enough to ask our librarian for more details of the environment and indigenous people who dwelled there. She had none, other than to tell me the islands had been named after the Spanish Francisco de Eliza expedition in 1791 to honor his patron, who had a long Spanish name I couldn't recall at the moment.

"Yes, you've heard of them?" Once again, Mrs. Mantle seemed exceedingly pleased by my knowledge of the San Juan Islands.

"I love maps," I said, feeling sheepish. "I study them and dream of all the places I'd like to go if I could."

"I have an idea," Mrs. Mantle said slowly. "What if you were to go out for a short time and help Mr. Tutheridge? It would give you an opportunity to see that part of the world. You can come home after a few months or stay if you really like living there."

"Wouldn't he want someone permanent?" Even though I knew it was impossible for me to go, the idea excited me. No, no. I snuffed it out a second later. I could never leave Papa. He would be lonely without me. We'd always been a team of two, my sweet, dear papa and me. Without me, he would be lost.

"Mr. Tutheridge won't mind. If you want to stay, he will be happy, but he also understands it might not be for everyone."

"Which island is it?" I could picture the cluster of small islands on the map.

"Whale Island. Did you see that one on your map?"

"Yes," I said excitedly. "It's shaped like a horseshoe. Or at least, that's what it looks like to me."

"My client said Whale Island is shaped like a saddlebag, but a horseshoe will do as well."

"Does the charming painter live there alone?" I would not want to be there alone with him. That would simply not do at all. Papa wouldn't allow it, even if I wanted to go.

“Briggs Tutheridge lives with his mother and siblings on a large estate. They call it Stella.”

“Stella? How strange.”

“A little, yes. They’re eccentric, as only the rich can afford to be.”

“They’re rich?”

“Yes, the family is very wealthy,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Their father owned a shipbuilding empire, which was sold after Roland Tutheridge’s death, and the money was split evenly among his widow and the children.”

“How many Tutheridges are there?”

“Four altogether. Briggs, the painter, is the youngest son.”

“What age is he?” My image of an elderly man with a paintbrush might not be correct.

“He’s in his middle twenties,” Mrs. Mantle said.

“That’s very young to have established any kind of painting career, don’t you think? He must be very good.” How I would love to go and see this painter and his island. But no. Papa. I must think of him first.

Mrs. Mantle was taking her calling card from her bag. “If you decide at any point this would be of interest to you, please come by my office. I can give you more details. All expenses to and from will be covered by the client.”

All of them. Goodness, what an opportunity. I was jealous of the man or woman who took the job.

“No better way to heal a broken heart than to travel,” Mrs. Mantle said gently, rising to her feet. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, dear. I hope to see you again.”

“I’m usually here in the afternoons, so we might see each other again.” I smiled up at her. “Thank you for such a nice conversation. I quite enjoyed it.”

“As did I.”

Then she was off, her skirt rustling and leaving the faint scent of sweet perfume behind.

I returned closer to the life depicted in my favorite painting. No use dreaming of faraway islands and charming painters and an estate named Stella. My life was here. I knew exactly what the rest of my life would entail. Working with Papa, coming to the museum, walking in the afternoons for exercise and fresh air, such as it was here in the city.

The first time I'd come to the museum, the picture had drawn me in as a lover might. A soulmate who had waited for my arrival and confessed their affection immediately. *Ah, there you are. The one who will understand me and love me.*

The scene in the painting was a simple one. A man stood before an easel, paintbrush in hand, contemplating his work, his weight favoring one foot more than the other. Behind him, a woman sat next to a creek, a book on her lap and an umbrella shading her from the sun. A brown dog slept in the grass next to her. There was nothing dramatic about the scene, which is why I loved it so fiercely. A depiction of a sweet afternoon in an ordinary life. I suppose I could imagine myself as the woman, reading and stroking her dog while the metallic scent of oil paints mixed with that of the summer grass.

However, today, as I sat here nursing my broken heart, I saw something different. Art changes depending on the viewer's current experience. What once appeared as a happy domestic scene now told me a different story. Perhaps he was not contemplating his work. His worried expression could be one of impending betrayal. He might be thinking of the best way to tell the woman who trusted him with her whole heart that his feelings had changed. He'd fallen in love with another woman. This other woman might be her best childhood friend. Instead of a marriage proposal, as she'd expected, there would be a discussion in hushed, aggrieved tones. He would ask for her forgiveness but would receive none. "We never meant for it to happen. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me? Can we be friends? All of us?"

Since Lionel had broken our engagement, I had walked around with this ache in my belly and chest. I'd not been able

to eat or sleep. Today, Papa had begged me to spend the day at the museum. “Look at your precious paintings, darling girl. They’ll make you feel better.”

As much as I loved Papa and respected his wisdom, he was incorrect. I did not feel better. Although I hoped my assumption wasn’t true, at the moment, it felt as if nothing would ever make me happy again. My whole world had fallen apart. I couldn’t fathom a way forward. Not when everything I dreamed of had been snatched away in the time it took for Lionel to tell me he loved Mable. The two people, besides Papa, that I trusted more than anyone had betrayed me. Six months, he’d said, when I asked him how long it had been going on. Six months. What an utter fool I’d been.

Should I go to the islands? For a short time, as Mrs. Mantle had suggested? I would talk to Papa about it and see what he thought. There was no harm in that.

THAT EVENING, I sat with Papa at our small kitchen table, eating the soup I’d made and a loaf of his famous sourdough bread. People stood in line every morning to buy them fresh. Anything we didn’t sell, we took home. Sometimes it was wheat, sometimes white, and once in a while a rye. Not my favorite, but if that’s all that was left, then so be it.

Our apartment above the bakery was the only home I’d ever known. It consisted of a small kitchen and living room, plus two bedrooms. I’d slept on the same twin bed since I’d turned two. Right around the time my mother left.

“Tell me about your day,” Papa said, smiling in that hopeful, careful way he had of late, worried to cause me further hurt with whatever he said or did. “How was the museum?” He leaned closer over the table, his bald head pink and shiny.

“It was nice. I met someone interesting.”

I went on to tell him about my encounter with Mrs. Mantle and the job she’d offered to me.

“Just right there on the spot?” Papa asked. “Isn’t that something.” He wiped his white mustache with the edge of a napkin. He was forever getting food caught in the bushy thing.

“Yes, and even more outrageous, she suggested I could take the position for a short time, see that part of the country, and return home when I’d had enough.”

Papa didn’t say anything, but I could tell by the way his brows knit together that he was deep in thought.

“What is it?” I asked.

He set his napkin near his empty bowl. “I think you should go.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t leave you. Who would take care of you and run the shop?”

“I’ll hire someone. I was going to when you married Lionel and had a baby anyway.” He stopped, looking stricken with remorse. “I’m sorry, love.”

My face blanched every time the traitor’s name was mentioned.

“It’s all right. Impossible not to speak his name ever again. He was part of our lives for a long time. Someday it’ll be easier to hear,” I said more robustly than I felt.

“I’m serious about the position.” Papa placed his arms over his ample tummy as he did when he was full and comfortable. “You should seize the adventure. Do it while you’re young and have nothing tying you to home.”

“I’m tied to you,” I said. “You’re my home.”

“I know, dear. I’d miss you tremendously, but think of it—working with a painter? Sweetheart, it’s a dream come true. Of course, this Briggs Tutheridge must know from the beginning that you’re only there for a short time. We wouldn’t want to be deceitful in any way.”

I moved my gaze from him to my bowl. The remaining slices of carrots were positioned in the bowl in such a way that they looked like eyes peering out from the face of the moon. Judging me? I squished one with my spoon.

“She’s right, this Mrs. Mantle,” Papa continued. “You need a change. Seeing the world has always been your dream. I never said anything at the time, but Lionel would never have taken you anywhere. Not on his salary anyway. Anyway, he’s the least adventurous person I’ve ever met. That dummy was happy to sit around all day playing cards and drinking tea like an old lady. No ambition, I tell you. I worried myself sick over it, knowing you were marrying a clumsy oaf. He wasn’t good enough for you. Never was.”

“Papa, you’re bad. He wasn’t an oaf.” I giggled. Lionel was tall and lanky and forever running into things or knocking objects off tables. I’d found it adorable. Apparently, and I was only learning this now, my father did not. Regardless, I could scarcely believe what he was telling me. The idea! Leaving him here and traipsing all the way across the country? “It’s impossible,” I said out loud. “I’m a young woman alone. I can’t take a train out there by myself.”

“I could hire you a chaperone.”

“A chaperone?” My mouth dropped, amazed by Papa’s sudden insanity.

“A lady’s maid, like the rich girls have,” Papa said, clearly enjoying his daydream.

“And how would we pay for that?” I asked, laughing. “You’re being silly, Papa. Very silly.”

“You worry about money too much. And you have no sense of fun. Too serious all the time.”

Slightly offended, I said, “Someone has to keep our finances together and our affairs in order.” I did the books, and we were a natural disaster away from poverty. Every night I prayed to God he would keep us and the bakery safe from harm.

Papa glanced over to the counter where a peach pie waited. “Are we having dessert?”

“I’ll get you a piece in a moment. Let’s be honest, you’re not exactly rich, Papa,” I said softly. “We can’t hire someone. That would take money straight out of our profits.”

“Isn’t that generally the idea of hiring help?”

“I don’t take a salary, Papa. You’d have to pay this new person a lot to do what I do.”

“That’s another reason you should go,” Papa said, sounding delighted with himself. “You could earn some money. A little savings to put away in case you ever needed it.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said that makes any sense.”

“I’ll be all right here without you,” Papa said. “In fact, I’ll be happy thinking of you out there, seeing the country.”

“We’re barely turning a profit.” All right, that wasn’t completely true. We were doing fine. Well enough, anyway. However, I worried that if anything were to change, like say a flood, our meager savings wouldn’t last for long. Thus, I worried over every little penny and scrimped and saved wherever I could. Whereas Papa happily baked away in the back of the shop, singing out of tune and eating too many cookies. He wouldn’t hear of raising prices, insisting his customers trusted him to keep the costs reasonable.

Papa was right about one thing. I worried a lot and about a variety of things. Sadly, I hadn’t worried about Lionel falling in love with Mable. That had never occurred to me, and therefore I was not prepared for the worst. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“I’m firing you,” Papa said. “You’re out of a job.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

His pretty blue eyes grew serious. I had brown eyes like my mother. I looked like her, from what Papa had said. “I mean it, sweetheart. You’re going. I insist.”

“I’ve never been away from you. Not ever.” My eyes grew moist and hot just imagining waving goodbye to him from a train window.

“I’ll be here when you return. Or maybe I’ll sell the shop and follow you out west.”

I got up to cut us each a slice of pie and returned to the table. Usually I enjoyed Papa's pies, but tonight it didn't appeal. I pushed a peach around my plate. I'd canned those peaches myself last summer. Who would do the canning if I weren't here?

"Faith, I know I've asked a lot of you over the years," Papa said between bites. "You had to take on the burdens of an adult way before you should have. Let me do this for you. Please. Allow me to set you free, at least for a year or two."

"A year. Goodness, no. I can't go for that long. Maybe six months." A thought occurred to me, which I said out loud to Papa. "Why would Mrs. Mantle encourage me to commit only to such a short amount of time? Do you think they're desperate? What if he's an ogre and no one wants to work for him and that's why she's so flexible?"

"Borrowing trouble, that's my Faith." He sat back in his chair, watching me. "You're doing this. It's a sign from God, running into that woman today. What are the odds?"

I had no idea. Was he right? Should I take this unusual opportunity? "They have a lot of seals out there in Washington. I read about them. And whales. Orcas."

"It's not named Whale Island for no reason." Papa pointed at my uneaten pie. "You going to eat that?"

"I don't know how you can eat at a time like this." Laughing, I pushed the plate over to him. "I'll sleep on it. How's that?"

"Fine. But you're going."

For the first time since Lionel told me goodbye, I felt lighter. I was going to have an adventure. For the first time in my life, I was going somewhere. Just as I'd dreamed of when I was a little girl.

BRIGGS

“What did you say, Mother?” I wasn’t really listening to her, thinking instead about the color of the water and how best to mix my oil paints to get it exactly right. Had she just suggested I hire an assistant?

It was the middle of a late June afternoon. I stood behind my easel, with Mother in a chair next to me, the Puget Sound a mass of blue before us. High overhead, the sun glared down on us with an intensity that made me squint despite the straw hat I’d pulled low on my forehead. Mother used an umbrella to protect her from burning. Glasses of lemonade sweated on a small table next to her.

“I said I’ve hired you an assistant.” Her tone was nonchalant, as if it were something she did every day.

“An assistant? For me?”

“Yes, dear. You’re in desperate need of help.”

“Doing what?” I asked, curious and not entirely opposed to the idea. Usually, I worked alone and preferred it that way. With another person around, it was harder to fall under the spell of creating. Distractions were not an artist’s friend. God knows I’d had enough distractions in Seattle before I changed my philandering ways. If Father had taught me nothing but how to be cruel when he was alive, his death changed me. I did not want to be like him. All the ways and times he’d hurt my mother with his affairs made me inwardly cringe. I had vowed to live a life I could be proud of from here on out, including no more clandestine liaisons with women of any kind. So far, my work kept me interested enough that I did not yearn for my former life of parties and women. Now that I was home with Mother and my siblings, I felt a contentment I had never before experienced. Father’s death had set us all free.

If not for his death, I would still be in my studio in Seattle. A space not entirely wholesome, as it was at the back of a brothel. However, beggars can’t be choosers and all that.

I'd eked out a living painting portraits and had accepted this as the way my life would continue. Not taking money from Father was worth any lifestyle changes I had to adjust to. Many of my clients were referred to me by the madam of the house, Miss Edna Brown. Her clientele had an affinity for women of the night as well as vanity portraits. It had been a life of sorts, not one I'd been particularly proud of. But again, when one is tossed from the family, one has to adapt. Now, though, I was determined to live in a way that Sunday church didn't make me feel like a hypocrite. There was also the worry of a flash of lightning striking me dead.

Mother was continuing with her campaign about the assistant. "Someone to help you with canvases and cleaning brushes as well as keeping your space tidier."

"It could use some tidying." I had to admit I wasn't what one would describe as neat. My artistic nature didn't lend itself that way. Try as I might, whatever space I worked in soon became cluttered and disorganized with brushes and stacks of papers and an occasional empty whiskey bottle. That kind of thing.

Just last week, my oldest brother, Benedict, had surprised me with a small studio. Rustic and cozy, he'd built it on a cliff overlooking the water using material left over from his recently erected house. I'd never have considered moving back to the island when my father was alive. He'd kicked me out of the family home and cut me off financially. "Also, you need to start getting serious about showing your art," Mother said between the screeching of several seagulls that had swooped into the yard from the beach below.

Our lawn and back porch were built on the hillside with a pebbly crescent beach below. I breathed in the breeze that brought the scent of seaweed and marine life and made the temperatures perfectly comfortable. I'd dressed in a linen suit, but by this time of day, I discarded the jacket and rolled up my shirtsleeves.

"You need someone who can manage your affairs and find you opportunities," Mother said.

“That seems unlikely.” I went back to my drawing. Often I’d sketch a scene in pencil to get the design right before beginning a painting.

“What does?” Mother asked.

“Having a show. That’s for real artists.”

“Isn’t that what you are?” Mother peered at me from under the brim of her hat, her blue eyes a shade lighter than the sea.

“I’m a hack at best. Painting rich men’s portraits.” The occasional lady, too. I enjoyed those much more than painting the fat elite. Especially when a young female model agreed to bare it all. Those paintings I didn’t share with my mother. Obviously. She would faint dead away to know half of my activities while in Seattle.

“That’s not true. Your father was incorrect, you know. He knew nothing about art.”

True enough. Being rich didn’t mean one had taste in art or culture. However, that was the least of his faults.

“You mustn’t think of him or what he said to you,” Mother said. “He only wanted to hurt you.”

Thinking of that last conversation with Father, I inwardly quaked. Even months after his death, the thought of him still brought the cold prickles of fear to my skin. He’d been the only man I’d ever been afraid of, and it wasn’t from admiration or awe at all of his accomplishments. It was the years of physical trauma. Habitual episodes of abuse, doled out between Benedict and me. My sister, Ella, and our other brother, Hudson, were spared. Thank God. Benedict and I were large, tough men. Toughness derived out of necessity. Our mass was a gift bestowed upon us by our maker so that my father’s abuse had to finally end. When we were bigger and stronger than him, he was forced to use only his verbal lashings.

Until someone murdered him.

Who that was, we did not know. We might never know. The sheriff seemed to have decided it was Hudson. His gun

had been used as the murder weapon. Thus far, Hudson claimed someone had stolen the gun with his initials carved into the handle from our unlocked cabinet. If that were true, which I believed, it certainly opened up the possibilities of many different suspects. Father had entertained here at the estate often, and there had been a party not long before his death. Any of the visitors that day could have taken the gun from the cabinet. My brand new sister-in-law, Amelia, had done a fine job of writing up the list of suspects and their motives. All of which made my head swim. Especially since any of my siblings could be the murderer. We all had motives, ranging from revenge to inheritance.

“Dear, are you listening to me?” Mother asked, clearly impatient.

“Yes, I’m sorry. You want me to have an assistant. And you’ve hired someone.”

“They’re arriving tomorrow.”

“Arriving? From where?”

“Boston.” She brushed a fly from the arm of her chair, suddenly evasive. What was she not telling me?

“Why Boston? Couldn’t you have found someone local?”

“We need a special kind of person for you,” Mother said.

I knew what that meant. No women. Or if she were a woman, she would be of the elderly variety. Someone I couldn’t seduce. Or rather, a woman I wouldn’t want to seduce. It was true that I had a bit of a reputation as a ladies’ man. One that I may or may not have deserved, depending on how one interpreted the facts. But again, that was all behind me. I was now devoted to a chaste life.

“Did you hire some ghastly old hag?” I asked, pretending to be worried.

“I’ve no idea what she looks like.” Mother sniffed, as if offended.

“Where will this person live? Here at the estate?” When she’d hired Benedict’s assistant, who was now his wife,

Mother had the staff put her in a room upstairs as opposed to the quarters downstairs where Dexter, Mrs. Halvorson, our cook, and the maids resided.

It had been obvious from the beginning that Amelia and my brother were the perfect pair. They'd fallen almost instantly in love. Amelia, however, was a young, beautiful woman. I'm sure Mother would not choose an assistant of the same ilk for me. Benedict was above reproach and would never have seduced an innocent woman.

"Yes, where else would she stay?" Mother asked.

All right, I would let that go. "Why Boston?"

"I asked the same agency that sent us Amelia. They sent the right assistant for Benedict. I'm hoping they'll do the same for you."

I looked away from my drawing and back to Mother. "It was strange, wasn't it? The perfect match for Benedict came in the form of a secretary. I wonder what the odds of that are?"

"A million to one, maybe?"

"I don't know if I like you running my life, Mother. What if I don't want an assistant?"

"I'm insisting."

"I'm a grown man." I didn't really care, but I liked to tease her.

"Somewhat grown," Mother said wryly.

I laughed. "How unkind of you, Mother." I was perfectly mature. She just didn't like how I conducted my affairs, business and otherwise. Mostly, the otherwise. Whiskey, women, and rabble-rousing, to be more precise.

"What is she like, this assistant? Does she have chin hairs?" I plucked at my recently shaved jaw, as if pulling whiskers. No more beard for me.

"Briggs, what would make you say such a thing?"

"I know you found someone as old as the hills. Isn't that right? You don't trust me to behave myself."

“You accuse me unjustly.” She sniffed again and looked away, focusing on the view. “Anyway, I don’t know if she has chin hairs or not, and it doesn’t have any relevance to her competency as an assistant.”

“As long as she can wrestle a piece of canvas onto a frame then I suppose her age doesn’t matter.”

“Correct.”

“Since I’ve been home, I’ve been perfectly behaved. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” She glanced over, tossing a saucy grin my way. Since my father’s death, she’d been a new woman. No longer worried about setting fire to his rage, she had blossomed into a younger version of herself. She even had a male admirer, our pastor, Timothy Bains. He’d been around every morning for a week to escort her on a walk. I didn’t know if I completely approved of his obvious interest in her, but I didn’t want to upset her by questioning their friendship. It was just that Bains was such a bore. I don’t think he’d ever had a fun night in his life. In addition, there was a sad quality about him.

Also, for all I knew, he could be my father’s killer.

The problem with finding the murderer came down to one thing. No one really cared to solve the crime. As it turns out, no one was sorry he was dead. Even the sheriff seemed only mildly interested in finding the truth.

“What do you want me to do with this assistant upon her arrival?” I asked pleasantly. “We do know she is a woman?”

“Yes. She is a she.”

We’d all thought Amelia, having applied for the position as A.F. Young, was a man. Benedict was quite surprised when an enchanting redhead had walked into the library. We suspected Mother knew all along and didn’t say anything. Lying through omission, I might add, was something she always told us not to do.

It had worked out great for my brother. Benedict had trouble with any sort of detail work, and an assistant had

solved many of his problems. None of us knew what was wrong with him, as he was obviously intelligent, but he had trouble focusing on words and numbers. He said they danced around on the page, and any small distraction took him from his task. Amelia had been by his side from the moment she arrived. After their wedding, they'd moved into a house Benedict had built. Only right. Newlyweds needed their privacy. Still, I missed them. It had been so much less dull with feisty, inquisitive Amelia around. As for Benedict? He was my dearest friend and had been all my life. It had always been the two of us watching out for each other. Now everything was different. He had Amelia. Not that I minded. His happiness meant a lot to me. Seeing the way she made him smile was worth losing him. Plus, he wasn't really lost. He'd only moved down the road.

In addition, I still had my sister. Ella was busy nursing the residents of Whale Island, but she found time to spend with me.

Hudson and I had never been as close as Ben and me, but we'd been friends until his wife died. After we lost Rosemary, we lost Hudson, too. His little daughter, Bebe, named after my mother Beatrice, was what Amelia described as a handful. That was the kind way to say it, I supposed. Bebe was a terror.

However, she loved her uncle Briggs, and I loved her. We recognized the feral in each other.

"You'll be welcoming to her, won't you, dear?" Mother asked. "The assistant."

"It will be my pleasure. What's her name?"

"Her name is Faith Fidget. She's the daughter of a baker and has a great passion for art."

"Is she an artist herself?" That would be interesting. What if she were much more talented than I? I wouldn't care for that. I hated to say it, but it was true. My competitive nature wasn't always a good thing. Actually, it almost never was. I couldn't count how many times that particular attribute had gotten me in trouble.

“No, she’s not an artist herself,” Mother said. “But she spends every afternoon at the art museum in Boston. Staring at the paintings, according to Mrs. Mantle.”

“Why would she come here? It’s so far away.”

“She’s always dreamed of seeing more of the world.” Mother reached for her glass of lemonade and took a dainty sip. “I told Mrs. Mantle that she had no obligation to stay longer than a few months if she absolutely despised island life. Or working for you.”

“She won’t despise me,” I said. “I’m utterly charming in every way.”

“Of course, you are, dear.”

“Don’t hold it against me if she and her whiskers fall in love with me.”

“She doesn’t have whiskers. Honestly, Briggs. You’re impossible.”

THAT EVENING AFTER SUPPER, I wandered into town and the local watering hole run by Matthew Goodwell. A man aptly suited to his name if there ever was one. Pleasant and quick-witted, he was always good for a laugh or two while I sat at his bar. His face was interesting, with deep-set dark eyes and bushy eyebrows. In his forties, he had a rugged exterior but a refined, educated way of speaking and a way of looking at a man as though he knew everything about you. Yet he betrayed nothing of his own story or thoughts. Matthew was an enigma. A mystery. Regardless, I liked him and trusted him. He’d been good to my family, especially after Father’s murder. I had nothing to substantiate this, but I felt that he cared deeply about my mother and siblings. Why, I couldn’t say. Father had been as terrible to him as he had the rest of the island.

Amelia had him on the top of her list of suspects. He was one of five men, including the sheriff, who had reasons to wish my father dead.

Other than me and a few men playing cards in a back corner, the bar was empty. Weeknights were quiet around Ella Pointe. Weekends too, for that matter. Even if I'd been looking for trouble, which I wasn't, I wouldn't find any in Ella Pointe.

Matthew was drying pint glasses behind the bar.

"Mother hired an assistant for old Briggs," I said. "Without consulting me."

"Do you want an assistant?" He set aside a dry glass and picked up another.

"I wouldn't mind some help. If Mother wants me to have one, then so be it. I want to make her happy. She's been through a lot. My aim is that whatever time she has left is peaceful and without strife."

He didn't comment on my mother other than to raise one eyebrow. "When's this assistant arriving?"

"Tomorrow. Faith Fidget is her name. I have an image of an old, fussy lady. A battle-ax maybe?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea for you. Keep you in line."

"Heaven forbid." I raised my eyebrows in mock horror.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the door open. When I turned, I saw that it was my sister, Ella. Ella of Ella Pointe. My father had named our town after her. The first and last loving thing he ever did for one of his children.

She grinned at the sight of me and hurried over to take the stool next to me.

"Hello, boys," Ella said. "What're we drinking?"

"What're you doing here, young lady?" Matthew asked. "Shouldn't you be home with your mother?"

"Don't be so old-fashioned, Matthew," Ella said. "I'm a working woman. A thirsty one. You wouldn't deny me a pint, would you?"

"You say that as if it's your first evening here." Matthew picked up a mug and filled it with lager from a large jug.

“Which we both know isn’t true. Did you know your sister became a regular while you were away?”

“Can you blame me?” Ella picked up the foamy mug of beer and sipped. “I didn’t like to be home any more than the rest of my family.”

“Things are different now,” Matthew said. “Yet here you are.”

She rolled her eyes. “If I had a nickel for every time a man tried to send me back home and into the kitchen, I’d be rich.”

“You are rich,” I said.

“You know what I mean.” Ella glanced over at me. “What brings you out tonight?”

“Felt like getting out of the house. Mother and Amelia were planning a potluck for church. All that talk of food was making me hungry and thirsty, so I came into town here to see Matthew.”

“See, Matthew,” Ella said. “Mother and Amelia have all the proper ladies’ jobs covered. They don’t need me. Amelia loves planning parties,” Ella said, laughing. “I’ve never known anyone as excited about a meal as that one.”

“She was hungry for much of her life,” I said. Our Amelia had had a rough upbringing with only her mother to look after them. I doubted those memories would fade with time. What happens to us when we’re young remains ingrained, despite whatever good fortune or love comes our way. I knew from my own experience that moving on from trauma was not as easy as one might think.

“True enough.” Ella took another slug from her beer. Matthew topped off my glass of whiskey, neat.

We chatted about Ella’s patients for a few minutes. She’d been out to the strawberry farm to check on Mrs. Davis and her newborn. Nothing amiss. Baby and mother were doing fine.

“Then I went out to see Rhett’s folks,” Ella said. “They’re both so frail and thin. A good gust of wind could blow them away. But they’re doing better. Now that Rhett has taken all of the duties from his father, his parents are thinking of moving closer to town and fully retire.” Rhett Rivers. Our brother. We’d only recently learned that he was our half-brother. We’d grown up with him but had no idea we shared a bloodline. He’d been abandoned in the woods after his mother died, and the Riverses had adopted him. For many years, Mr. Rivers had run the lighthouse—long before Father came to the island and built a town and a sprawling estate. Now, Rhett had taken over from his father as the main operator of the lighthouse that kept ships safe from harm.

“Rhett’s worried about them,” Ella said. “But I think he’s resigned to the idea that they might not have much longer.”

“Good people,” Matthew said. “Salt of the earth.”

Rhett was good people, too. We’d all been in awe of the decency and lack of greed and avarice after he learned the truth. A graciousness I doubted most men could have mustered. We’d offered him his share of the money from the sale of the business, and he’d eventually agreed. The inheritance had made him a rich man. Nothing had changed in his life outwardly, as far as I could tell, but it must give him a sense of stability that he’d not had before.

Our conversation deviated to other island gossip. Matthew and Ella knew everyone on Whale Island and cared deeply about them. I didn’t really listen, just enjoying the sound of their voices and the calming effects of the whiskey. Tomorrow would come soon enough, and I’d have to figure out what to do with this Faith Fidget and her chin hairs.

FAITH

On a day in late June, I stood at the helm of the ferry that had taken me from Seattle to Whale Island. The air, cool and misty, smelled of the sea. Thick fog obscured much of the view, and above us, the sky was a similar color, as if everything had been washed with gray paint. This was summer? Were the tales of Washington state's weather true? Would I not see the sun for however long I remained on Whale Island?

I pulled my coat tighter, glad for the thickness of the material. Mrs. Mantle had insisted on a new wardrobe and had paid for it all herself. I wasn't clear if she or the client was the benefactor and had been too shy to ask. She'd insisted that a few new dresses were necessary. When I'd asked why I would need fancy clothes to help the artist with canvases and paint, she'd simply said that the Tutheridge family was wealthy and had certain expectations for attending supper and parties.

A spark of worry had come to me. Would I be expected to attend parties? What about formal suppers? This was not something I would have thought to be part of my duties. However, I reminded myself what an opportunity I'd been presented with, and if they wanted me to attend functions then I would do so.

The ferry pulled up to a small marina. As I went out to the deck to disembark, a blast of frigid wind sent a chill through me and nearly ran away with my hat. Fortunately, the pins kept it in place. This fog was like being in a cloud, dampening my cheeks. I could almost taste the salt in the air. Seagulls screeched from somewhere in the mist.

My gaze wandered upward to the cliff. The town of Ella Pointe perched above, quaint and picturesque with whitewashed buildings, a brick schoolhouse, and a church with a tall steeple. Just then, the church bell tolled. Noon. The ride from Seattle had taken at least an hour.

I followed the other passengers off the boat and onto the dock, then up a flight of stairs to the main street of town. What had been more condensation than rain took a sudden turn. Purple-gray rain clouds unleashed a torrent of water. My new hat. The feathers would be ruined, I thought with dismay. I'd look like a drowned rat by the time I arrived.

Mrs. Mantle had said someone would be there to take me back to the Tutheridge estate. Apparently, they called their estate Stella. I'd never heard of anyone naming their home, but I didn't know people like the Tutheridges. No one on the street at home called their apartments anything but the place they laid their head at night after a hard day's work.

The Tutheridge patriarch had died recently. Mrs. Mantle had seemed almost secretive when mentioning his passing, hinting at something untoward. I hadn't asked for further details. I didn't want a reason to back out of the promised adventure by learning something upsetting. I was on the brink of changing my mind enough as it was.

Out of the corner of my eye, I became aware of a man lurching about, shouting to himself. Almost afraid to look, I turned to see that he was dressed shabbily, with dirty hair plastered to one side and a shirt stained with what I guessed to be tobacco juice. Repulsed, I looked away. Where were the people who were supposed to pick me up?

To my horror, the man seemed to be headed my way. What should I do? There were often vagabonds in the city. Papa always told me to avoid looking them in the eye, otherwise, they might try to take money or hurt me in some way. I'd not expected to see something like this somewhere as picturesque as Ella Pointe.

"Miss, you there." The man drew ever closer. His scent arrived before he did, a mixture of urine and booze. "You have a nickel to spare for a thirsty man?" He leered at me, grinning, his decayed brown teeth as unfortunate as the rest of him.

Get away from me, I begged silently, backing away.

He followed. "Miss, did you hear me? We could go to the pub there." He lifted a hand toward the building with a sign

that said Whale Island Pub.

Trembling now, I scanned the street, hoping for someone to rescue me. Rain continued to fall, catching in my eyelashes. Just as I was about to run, a man wearing a shiny sheriff badge appeared.

“It’s all right, miss. Sheriff White here. I’ll take care of this one.”

The sheriff grabbed him by the neck and hauled him away. “Steele, I told you to stay away from people when you’re drunk as a skunk.”

Steele? Was that his name?

He slurred his words as he tried to fight off the sheriff. “I wasn’t doing nothing wrong. Just talking to this fine woman. Haven’t had a drink in weeks.”

“I know better than that,” White said. “I saw you stumble out of the pub from my office window. Come on, time to sober up in my jail. I’ll even throw in a sandwich.”

“Not again,” Steele muttered, but went without further ado. I watched as the sheriff marched him toward the jail. Were there others like him here? Would the entire island be full of criminals?

I looked around, hoping to see a friendly face, still clutching my bag between shaking fingers. Rain soaked into my coat, and my fingers were starting to numb with cold. It was then I saw a Model T lurch to a stop near a grassy area to the left of the stairs. Two young women tumbled from the car, opening umbrellas. They must have known it was me because they both started waving wildly and marching across the grass in my direction.

My heart sank. They were beautiful. The petite one had red hair and creamy skin and wore a stylish summer dress with blousy sleeves that fluttered as she walked. She must not feel the chill, I thought absently. The other woman had dark hair and piercing blue eyes I could see even from some distance.

They rushed toward me, grinning, as if I were the most delightful woman they’d ever seen. This was not the greeting I

was accustomed to, usually blending right into the scenery. My mouth twitched into a smile of my own, despite my nervousness. Would they see a plain wallflower? Could they see right through my new dress to the homely thing I truly was? Surely they would. These were elegant women with their fashionable dresses and large hats and exquisite faces.

The moment they arrived, the redhead opened another umbrella and handed it to me. “We’re sorry we’re late.”

The dark-haired beauty, tall and broad-shouldered with a slim waist, thrust out her hand. “I’m Ella Tutheridge. Briggs’s sister.”

Briggs Tutheridge had a sister. Mrs. Mantle hadn’t mentioned that. Or had she? In such close proximity, I was even more intimidated by Ella’s loveliness. She wore a pale dress in a similar fashion to the redheaded woman, who I could now see had the cutest freckles sprinkled over her nose and cheeks.

“I’m Amelia Tutheridge,” said the redhead. “Formerly Amelia Young. I was hired to be Benedict’s assistant, and we fell madly in love. But forget about all that for now. We have loads of time to get acquainted. Welcome to our little island. We hope you’ll love it as we do.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” I said.

Amelia’s hair was the color of a shiny penny and glistened even under the umbrella. Light green eyes sparkled with compassion. A full mouth shaped naturally into a pout was set sympathetically as she gazed at me.

“The rain came out of nowhere,” Amelia said. “It does that here in the summer on occasion, but don’t worry, it’s not always like this. We’re hoping it won’t scare you off on your first day.”

“Briggs is in dire need of your services,” Ella said. “He’s a bit of a mess. In more ways than one.”

I nodded, not certain what to say. How many ways could one be a mess?

“You’re awfully brave to come all this way,” Amelia said. “I know because I did it less than six months ago. I came from Boston, too. Like you, for a job with the Tutheridge family.”

“Were you sent by Mrs. Mantle, too?” I asked, realizing too late what a silly question it was. Surely there were other staffing agencies than just Mrs. Mantle. It made me sound naive and silly.

A flicker of recognition flashed in Amelia’s eyes. I sensed she knew more than she was letting on but merely nodded. “Yes, Mrs. Mantle recruited me to assist Benedict. He had taken his father’s place as head of the company. Before we sold it. Or, *they* sold it. I wasn’t yet part of the family at the time.” She flushed prettily. “I fell in love with Benedict almost immediately, I’m embarrassed to say.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Ella said. “It was love at first sight for both of them. People meet in all kinds of ways. Or so I hear. Myself? I’m not interested in romance or all the fuss that comes with it. I’m a working girl, just like you, Faith.”

“Really?” Why would a rich girl like Ella work?

“Ella’s our resident nurse,” Amelia said with obvious pride in her voice. “She takes care of the sick and helps to bring babies into the world. Sometimes she has to care for a cow or two.” Her eyes danced with humor. “I was shocked to learn this, and now it seems completely normal.”

Ella laughed. Raindrops pelted the top of my umbrella in a tinny rhythm.

I was an outsider. These two women were close friends. I thought of Mable with a pang. We’d been close once. Now I had no one. *Papa*, I reminded myself. *You have Papa. Be grateful.*

“Any sick creature or human, I’m their nurse. I’m all they’ve got, so they have to take me as I am.”

“Did you study to be a nurse?” I asked, envious of anyone who was able to get an education.

“In a way, yes,” Ella said. “Now, come along. We’re going to get you out of this rain.”

“There’s a marvelous luncheon waiting for you at home,” Amelia said. “Just wait until you taste Mrs. Halvorson’s food. You’ll never want to eat anywhere else again.”

I doubted that. I missed Papa and his crusty bread so much my eyes stung just thinking of him. What was he doing right now? It would be late afternoon back home. He was probably napping by the fire, tired after getting up before dawn. I hoped he didn’t miss me as much as I did him. The idea of him alone made me sad and guilty. *He wanted you to come*, I reminded myself. *Now make him proud.*

BY THE TIME we pulled up to the estate the rain had ceased. I hardly noticed, however, so taken aback by the size of the home. A mansion. Stella. This is where I would be staying? I could hardly wait to tell Papa all about it in a letter I would write to him later.

Ella came to a stop next to a round fountain that also must serve as a watering hole for the horses. I’d only ridden in a car a handful of times, taking public transportation when I couldn’t walk, and had found it to be loud and jostling but still fun. Made more so by the company. The two women chattered away from the front seat, telling me about the family and the island and Briggs’s talent.

Thus far, I’d learned that his father had shunned him, kicking him out of the family when Briggs chose art over business. He’d returned after the late Mr. Tutheridge had passed on after living for several years in Seattle.

“Now, you mustn’t be scared of Briggs,” Ella said. “He has a few unsavory qualities, but he’s actually very sweet and caring.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Amelia said, turning over the front seat to look at me. “He has a frightful reputation. Women of ill repute and all, but I suspect it’s all exaggerated.”

Ella laughed. "Amelia tends to see the positive in people."

"But he is such a dear," Amelia said. "He's a terrible tease and will make you blush, but pay him no mind at all."

Ella was nodding in agreement. "He's a scoundrel with a kind heart. We must warn you, though. Under no circumstances should you be taken in by his charms. He's bound to move on to the next woman the moment you soften toward him. Remember that."

"I am not one tempted by a charming man," I said, bristling. Why would she say such a thing? I wasn't the type to fall for a stranger. It had taken me ten years of knowing Lionel to realize my feelings. Not that it mattered now. He didn't want me anyway. All that emotion for nothing. It was better to remain aloof. "I've accepted my fate as an old maid," I mumbled under my breath, but the ladies obviously heard me.

"But why?" Amelia twisted back around to gaze at me over the back of the seat. I didn't detect judgment or condemnation in her expression. More curious than anything. Nothing wrong with that, I supposed. I'd opened the door, after all. I may as well tell them the whole sordid story.

"I was engaged, and then he fell in love with my friend," I said in a rush, not fully meaning to tell them my entire story in the span of five minutes. "My best friend."

"How awful for you," Amelia said, wrinkling her petite nose. "No wonder you wanted to take the job out here."

"Yes, well, I'm hoping to mend a little." A lot.

"This is the place to do it," Amelia said. "A few walks along the water, and you'll forget all about that louse."

"She must not have been that good a friend," Ella said. "If she betrayed you to be with him."

"We'd been best friends since we were small girls," I said, my throat tightening.

"Did you have any idea?" Ella asked.

“Not a one,” I said, hating to admit to my naivete. “I was always happy they got along. I didn’t know exactly how well.”

“You poor girl,” Amelia said. “It’s lucky I wasn’t there. I might have punched him for you.”

“You’ve never punched anyone in your life,” Ella said.

“I could, though. If provoked,” Amelia retorted, laughing. “This red hair isn’t for nothing.”

“It’s so pretty,” I said. “The rest of you, too—so pretty. And you, Ella.” I sank further into the seat. They needn’t worry about this Briggs seducing me. No one would want to. Not a man like that, especially. Not this plain Jane.

“You’ll fall in love again.” Amelia spoke with firmness, as if she could see the future. “And forget all about those two because you’ll feel what it’s like when a man truly loves you. You know, I was like you when I came here. Certain I was not the type of woman to find love.”

I waved a hand, as if all was well, when inside I was very sorry I’d brought any of this up. Despite the chill in the air, a trickle of sweat rolled down my back. “Never mind all of that. I don’t know why I even mentioned them. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Of course you are,” Ella said. “A stupid man can’t keep you down. I can see you’re strong and determined. You’ll be fine in no time.”

“Is that your professional diagnosis?” Amelia asked in a teasing tone.

“No, that’s my know-it-all tone,” Ella said, laughing. “I’m sorry, Faith, I have this annoying habit of telling everyone what to do and what I think when it’s absolutely no concern of mine. This is why I had to become a nurse. What else could I do with this nagging need to help everyone even when they don’t want it?”

Regardless, her words cheered me a little. The ache in my chest lessened just a smidge. I’d been right to come here. The change would be good for me.

“Your trunk arrived yesterday,” Ella was saying as we climbed the marble stairs to the front doorway. “And Lizzie’s set everything out for you in the bedroom next to Amelia’s. If you need anything at all or you’re lonely your first couple of nights, all you have to do is knock on my door.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“We’ll share a bathroom,” Ella said. “I hope you won’t mind.”

“Not at all.” This growing sense of homesickness gnawed at my stomach. During the train ride out here, I’d had moments of sheer panic, wondering what I had done and wishing I could go back home. A useless wish, as the train wouldn’t stop for little old me. An instinct to run washed over me as I followed the ladies up the steps. *What have I done?*

The double doors opened. A man in a black suit greeted us with a bland smile.

“Dexter, this is Miss Faith Fidget,” Ella said. “Briggs’s new assistant.”

“Pleasure, Miss Fidget. Welcome to Stella.”

Stella. Did Mr. Tutheridge mean for it to rhyme with Ella?

“Nice to meet you, Dexter.” He was older, maybe Papa’s age, with faded blue eyes and a haggard, craggy face. He reminded me of one of those dogs with all the wrinkles I’d seen at the park one day.

I almost gasped when I saw the foyer with dark wood and gleaming floors. “Oh, it’s lovely,” I said.

“I couldn’t believe it when I arrived,” Amelia said. “Wait until you see the garden out back.”

Ella asked Dexter to take me up to my new room. She and Amelia had business to attend to but welcomed me once more before leaving arm in arm through a doorway. I caught a quick glimpse of what must be the main living room, with a fireplace and cozy chairs and sofas.

We went up the stairs, stopping to peer into the music room with a baby grand piano and chairs lined up as if for a concert. I didn't ask to stop and look, even though I wanted to.

"Briggs is our piano player," Dexter said. "In addition to his painting, he's quite an accomplished musician."

This Briggs was getting more interesting by the minute. I couldn't wait to meet him.

We walked down a skinny hallway until we reached a door. My room was simple, possessing a bed, dresser, and desk. A leather chair in the corner looked like a good reading spot. My view faced the front of the house—below was the fountain, and to my left was a wood of firs, pines, and maple trees. Spiky ferns and wildflowers grew between the trees. I'd never seen so many shades of green in my life.

"Miss Fidget, dinner is at eight every night. Mrs. Tutheridge often takes her tea around five, but you're not obligated to join her. However, you're always welcome. Supper, on the other hand, is important to Mrs. Tutheridge, and she would appreciate your presence."

"Me? With the family?"

"Yes, that's the way Mrs. Tutheridge wants it. She expects everyone to dress for dinner," Dexter said. "Your dresses have been hung here in the wardrobe. Lizzie pressed them for you, so you should have everything you need. In the meantime, Mrs. Tutheridge thought you might be hungry and asked if you would join her downstairs for the midday meal."

"Yes, certainly. Do I have time to freshen up?"

"By all means, Miss Fidget. Come down when you're ready. The living room is just off the foyer."

BRIGGS

The morning had been productive. My latest painting of Ella and Amelia sitting at a table in the garden was coming along. They were attired in white dresses and hats and sat at a round table adorned with a tea set. Amelia was across from Ella, with her face toward the sun. Ella was in profile, a pink sash tied in a bow behind her back.

In this piece, I was experimenting with capturing the afternoon light just right. Honestly, it was proving harder than I wished it to be. The glare of the sun came from the east, casting shadows on the lawn and illuminating the lace in the tablecloth. It was precise work, challenging but rewarding at the same time.

By noon, I had worked up quite a hunger and went inside to clean up for lunch. Like breakfast, our midday meal was served on the buffet and everyone came and went as they pleased.

I'd almost forgotten that the new assistant was to arrive today. Was she here already? If so, she would dine with us, and my curiosity would be relieved. I couldn't wait to see who Mother had hired.

I took the stairs up to where Benedict and I had rooms. Once there, I bathed and dressed in a summer suit. If the new assistant was here, chin hairs and all, I wanted to make a good first impression. The more I thought about how helpful it would be to have an assistant, the more I warmed to the idea. Especially given the current state of my studio. I was obsessed with this painting of the girls and had worked feverishly over the past few days. Which meant I'd neglected tidying up. I hoped it would not scare her away when she saw the state of things.

I whistled a little tune as I made my way down the hallway past the girls' rooms and was about to pass by our music room when I saw a woman standing next to the piano, with her back to the doorway. She was slim and small in

stature, with narrow shoulders and a long, proud neck. Her dark blond hair had been pulled back with such force that it made me wonder if it hurt her head. She whirled around at the sound of my footsteps, obviously startled.

“Oh, you scared me.” She placed a small white hand onto the top of my piano, as if to steady herself.

“May I help you?”

She stared at me for a moment. I took in her thin face and wide-set brown eyes. Glassy-looking eyes, I noticed. Yes, like button eyes on Bebe’s teddy bear. Especially the way they were looking at me as if I were the devil. Everything about her was tiny and kind of adorable, if one liked that sort of woman. She was like a pretty little fairy. Even her nose was cute, small and perfectly symmetrical. I had an image of carrying her around in my pocket.

“Are you lost? Has Mother invited you for lunch?”

She swallowed and pulled in her bottom lip with her teeth for an instant and then pushed it back out again, as if she were trying to break the habit.

“I’m...I’m Faith Fidget.” A voice on the higher end of the musical scale and no louder than a little mouse.

“You’re Faith Fidget? But I thought you were going to be a grandmother type with a few chin hairs everyone was too polite to tell you about.”

Her slim, straight mouth twitched into a smile. Dimples. She had dimples, symmetrical and evenly spaced on either side of her mouth. “Chin hairs? What gave you that idea?”

Mother, I thought. She had purposely misled me. “I don’t know really. I thought Mother would not want anyone under the age of thirty and as pretty as you are anywhere near me. I’m Briggs.”

“You’re Briggs?” Her mouth fell open, and those button eyes widened. “You?”

“What did you think I would be like?”

“Mad-looking. With hair sticking every direction and a wild look in your eye.” She waved her hands around and scrunched up her face in what was obviously her perception of artists. She wasn’t entirely wrong. “Paint on your shirt, perhaps?”

“Well, I’m sure I look like that from time to time. On a bad day. Or night, as the case may be.”

“And not so...” She mumbled under her breath before dropping her gaze to the floor.

“So what?” I had to hear her answer.

“Handsome,” she whispered, then flushed red. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

“Ah, well, God was good to me in that way.” I grinned to make sure she knew I was joking. “You have eyes, after all. What other conclusion could you come to?”

She was backing away as if she wanted to run from the room.

“Please, Miss Fidget. May I escort you to lunch?”

“Um, yes. I guess you could. I got lost, and then I couldn’t help but come to admire the piano and this room.”

“Would you like me to play for you? Prove to you I’m not a madman?”

“I’m supposed to go to lunch and meet your mother. Maybe some other time?”

“Yes, fine. I’ll escort you, if I may?”

She granted me a tremulous smile. “Yes, thank you. I’m afraid to get lost in the enormous home.”

“Not to fear. You’re in good hands.”

The look she gave me told me she didn’t believe that to be true but had no choice but to follow me.

“MOTHER, may I present to you Faith Fidget, my faithful assistant.” I laughed at my own joke. I’m sorry to say I’m the only one who thought it funny.

Mother had been sitting by the window with the kitten in her lap. Smoky, named by Bebe, had been acquired in the hope that my niece would learn responsibility by caring for a pet. Thus far, it appeared my mother was the primary caregiver. She and Smoky had bonded immediately, perhaps over their shared coloring of yellow and white. From what I’d gathered, Smoky now slept on Mother’s bed. Which meant we now had a new spoiled member of the family, in addition to Bebe.

Mother, cradling Smoky in the crook of her arm, rose to greet us. “Faith, welcome. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you,” Faith said. “For the room and everything.” Her voice shook slightly. Nervous, I presumed. She had nothing to worry about with Mother. She was as soft as the down feathers in the sofa cushions. She was as soft as her little cat.

“Dexter says lunch is ready, if you two would care to join me?”

We all left for the dining room, Mother explaining where things were and the names of some of the staff as we walked. When we reached the dining room, the delicious aroma of Mrs. Halvorson’s ham and pea soup and freshly made sourdough bread greeted us. The peas, Mrs. Halvorson had mentioned yesterday, were overrunning the garden. “We have them coming out of our ears,” she’d said in her jolly tone. Nothing bothered Mrs. Halvorson. She always had a solution for any problem that came her way.

Lizzie was there to serve us from the soup tureen, shooing us away from the buffet to take chairs at the dining room table. Made of walnut, the table took up most of the room, with seating for twelve, although we were never that number these days.

Mother asked Miss Fidget about her trip west, pulling short answers from our new employee. I noticed she ate little,

nibbling on a chunk of bread and taking only a few bites of soup.

Ella came in as we were finishing up, grabbing a piece of sourdough and apologizing for missing lunch but explaining that she'd been called out to look in on one of the local farming families with a bout of chicken pox.

When we were done with our meal, I offered to show Faith Fidget my art studio. She seemed relieved to be able to leave the table.

The drizzle had stopped by the time we crossed the lawn to the studio. "Is it always this cold in the summer?" Miss Fidget asked.

"Not always, but often. Tomorrow is the beginning of July, so we should have two spectacular months ahead of us."

Faith stopped at the edge of the lawn, looking out over the water. "I've never seen such a beautiful place in my life. It's no surprise you're an artist."

"It does lend itself well to inspiration."

We continued to my studio, built not far from the house in a spot with water views from almost every window. Even during rainy days, the light was adequate.

I looked around the rustic area, trying to see it with her eyes. There were canvases, sheets of paper, and brushes, along with paint tubes, strewn over the crude work benches. My current work in progress was on the easel. The scent of oil paint and turpentine perfumed my space. Hopefully it wouldn't bother her or tickle her nose. Anytime Amelia came by to see me, she started to sneeze and had to leave before we had time to visit.

"As you can see, I'm not the tidiest of men." I gestured toward the corner where at least a dozen paintings leaned against the wall. "I'm not good about tossing what I don't like, thinking I may be able to salvage it at some point but then never do."

She wandered over to the discarded work. "May I look?"

“Suit yourself,” I said. “There are a lot of them. I painted to keep myself distracted during these last few months, you know. To keep my mind off Father’s murder and all that.”

She whipped around, much as she had in the music room. “Did you say murder?”

From the pallor her skin had taken on, it was obvious she had not known the cause of his death. I’m not sure why I thought she would, now that I thought about it. The agency would have kept it hidden until she had already committed to the position. She might have refused the job, especially so far from home. Who knew what she might find here? A bunch of murdering thieves out for blood?

“I’m sorry. Obviously you didn’t know,” I said. “If it makes you less concerned, you should know he was a man with many enemies. His death was purposeful.”

“Purposeful?”

“Meaning, there’s not a killer on the loose. Or rather, there is, but he or she is not likely to murder anyone else.”

“How do you know?” Her gaze remained on my face, so intent it made me nervous. Did she think the killer stood before her now?

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but it’s my best guess,” I said. “He was murdered in February, and there haven’t been any other deaths since.”

“Is that supposed to make me rest easier?” Her expression was one of concern now. Great. She would probably hightail it out of here on the next ferry.

“In fact, yes. You see, my father was hated by almost everyone on the island. Not only do we not think any of us are in danger, no one misses him at all. If the crime’s never solved, I’m not sure any of us care.”

“How awful.” Her hand clutched the cross around her neck. “I mean, he was your father. Aren’t you at all sad?”

“Trust me. I’m not and have no reason to be.”

I could tell by the way she was biting that lip of hers that she was not cheered by my explanation.

“If you’d known him, you’d understand,” I said.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and shivered. “February. The worst month of all.”

I hadn’t expected her to say anything of the sort. I had the urge to laugh. She was such a serious little thing it made me want to be outrageous just to shock her into smiling. However, I might be a rascal, but I also had no desire to hurt her. She had a fragility to her. I must be careful not to hurt her feelings. *Don’t break the assistant, Briggs*, I told myself. “Why do you say so?”

“It’s dreary and bitter cold that time of year back home in Boston. The trees have no leaves. Nothing green in sight. Christmas is over. The new year and all its promise forgotten already.”

“But what about the crocus?”

She blinked, and one eyebrow twitched. “Excuse me?”

“The crocus blooms in February.”

“Here, perhaps. Not in Boston.”

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“I guess I’m not sure. Where I’m from, there are not a lot of flowers, no matter what time of year.”

“Poor February. You misjudge her,” I said, trying to get her to laugh despite my vow only moments ago not to pester her.

She didn’t laugh. I resisted the urge to try harder.

“Did something happen to you this past February?” I asked this tiny, strange girl.

Her eyes flickered with indecision, obviously wondering if she should confess the truth to me or not. On the one hand, her eyes told me, there was no reason to share something so personal. On the other, it might be nice to unburden herself. These were my suspicions only, of course, as I hardly knew

her. Still, from my limited observation of my new assistant, she seemed incapable of disguise. Everything was out there for anyone to see. No poker skills here, I thought.

I had only a few good qualities or gifts; however, I was an expert at reading faces and body language. It might have come naturally or been developed from all these years painting portraits.

“Why do you want to know?” She asked this in a tone of curiosity, not defensiveness.

“No reason, other than I’m nosy. I apologize, Miss Fidget. It’s none of my concern. Quite inappropriate of me to ask such a personal question.”

“No, it’s all right. I take no offense. You like to know people. What they’re really like. What they really think.”

“That’s correct.” I shrugged, slightly embarrassed.

“My fiancé fell in love with my best friend,” she said. “Not in February. Months before that. February was when he told me.”

My chest ached in sympathy. “I’m sorry. That must have been terrible.”

“It was. Thus, my adventure west.”

“Well, good. You’ll forget all about him here in the sea air.” Now I understood why she’d come here.

She spoke softly, as if she had forgotten I was even there. “I can’t believe I will. It hurts. Every minute of the day. I can’t stop thinking about them. What they’re doing. Are they making fun of me? Having a good laugh about what an imbecile I was? Or am.”

“I doubt that very much. How were you to know? They’re the deceitful ones. You were innocent and, I suspect, deserved better than you got. I’d expect they’re wretched with guilt.”

She chuckled without mirth. “I don’t think so. They’re too busy being in love. You know the way it makes you feel invincible? As if it shields you from harm?”

“Being in love makes you feel that way?” Such a concept seemed unlikely, but then again, what did I know? I’d never been in love.

“Yes, or that’s how it was for me. I thought the love between Lionel and me was special. An epic love that would last forever and that somehow protected me from misfortune. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

“Not at all. You trusted him. That doesn’t make you ridiculous.” *Quite the opposite*, I thought, but didn’t say. She was steady and strong. Lovable. I mean, to other men. Not me. She was definitely not my type. Nothing about her appealed to me whatsoever. Too serious and somber. Austere even. No sense of humor as far as I could see.

Fortunately, I would have no inclination whatsoever to seduce her. Not that she’d succumb to my charms even if I tried. I was fairly certain I didn’t appeal to her either. We were opposites in every way.

But what did they say about opposites attracting?

Never mind that, old boy, I told myself. Keep your eyes on your painting and not your comely assistant.

FAITH

My hands shook so violently at dinner that I was afraid I might drop a fork or worse, a glass. We'd started with a green tomato and goat cheese salad, followed by a sliver of smoked salmon on a slender, crunchy piece of toast. I'd never had salmon before and was surprised by the way it melted on my tongue. The main dish was grand, roast duck and pureed carrots. By the time it arrived, I was already full. The rest of them, however, were attacking the duck with enthusiasm and sounds of appreciation. I didn't really like thinking about the poor duck, perhaps snatched from the pond I'd spotted earlier? I scooped some of the carrot dish into my mouth and tried to set aside the image of the male duck's pretty green throat.

My companions consisted of Briggs, Ella, and Mrs. Tutheridge in addition to Amelia and Benedict. The other brother didn't appear.. I was seated between Ella and Briggs, their long legs much nearer the bottom of the tabletop than mine. The chairs were tall, and I had to point my feet in order to touch the floor. I'd noticed Briggs's height earlier, but sitting next to him gave me an even better idea of his size. Benedict, who seemed a gentle, sensitive soul, was even bigger and wider than Briggs.

I needn't have been so self-conscious, as no one required much of me. They all chatted easily, interrupting one another on occasion, and in general, having such a merry time that I felt out of place and missing Papa fiercely.

The young women were so lovely in their evening attire and hair fixed in elaborate swoops that I felt even more invisible than usual. Mrs. Tutheridge, too, was pretty and elegant, with her slim figure and delicate hands and refined way of speaking. Next to me, I could feel the robust strength of Ella, making me feel small and useless. And plain. So very plain. It was as if I were in black and white, and they were all in vibrant color.

“Miss Fidget,” Benedict said. “Tell us more about your life in Boston. We’re rude not to have asked you any questions and carrying on as we usually do.”

Dear me. They wanted me to talk? Earlier, with Briggs, I’d been strangely chatty. Perhaps it had been the cozy, cluttered studio that had made me feel comfortable. Or the man himself? Briggs Tutheridge was charming and easy to be with. He appeared to make his way through life without a care, quick with a quip and not taking himself too seriously. A quality I yearned for in myself.

“What would you like to know?” I asked. The air seemed suddenly dry.

“Your father owns a bakery, isn’t that right?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Where is it?” Amelia asked. “I used to stop at one every day before work. My employer loved his scone every morning.”

I told her the street number, but she wasn’t familiar. She described her boardinghouse and the office building where she worked, but I didn’t know that part of town. “Boston’s a large city,” I said apologetically.

Amelia nodded. “A different world entirely from here.”

“Yes, it is,” I said lamely. The art of conversation seemed to have passed me by.

“And Mrs. Mantle,” Amelia asked. “She found you for us?” She and Benedict exchanged a covert glance. What did they know about Mrs. Mantle?

“Yes. We were at the same art gallery. She saw me staring at a painting and thought perhaps I’d be suited to this kind of work.”

“How extraordinary,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Such a good recruitment strategy.”

I blinked, surprised by this. “Do you mean that she was there purposely looking for candidates for the position?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “She’s very clever. In fact, she found Amelia for us.”

“She found me through an advertisement,” Amelia said. “Asking for someone who loved books. In hindsight, it was awfully shrewd.” Again, she and Benedict exchanged a glance. They shared a secret. Did it involve Mrs. Mantle?

Before I could contemplate this further, Briggs said, “Finding an artist’s assistant at a gallery was brilliant. Don’t you think, Miss Fidget?”

“Yes, I guess so,” I mumbled. “It’s odd I never thought of it until now.” I’d been so wrapped up in the decision and Papa’s encouragement, it had never occurred to me that she had been so deliberate in her search for the right person.

“I don’t care how she found you,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Only that you’re here.”

I returned her kind smile. “Thank you. I’m happy for the chance to see a new part of the world and to work with an artist. It’s my passion, although I have no talent of my own.”

“Thankfully, you don’t,” Briggs said. “One artist in the family is enough.”

Family? If only it were true. I’d have loved to have a family such as this one—big and loud with such obvious affection between them. I had dear Papa, I reminded myself. He was all the family I needed.

AFTER DINNER, we all retired to the living room. A roaring fire that gave the room a slightly smoky smell warmed the room. Behind the metal fireguard, a glowing ember leaped from its log, then fell to an ashy demise.

Briggs offered me a sherry, but I declined. The wine at dinner had given me a slight headache. Hiding a yawn behind my hand, I resisted the urge to rub my eyes.

My best friend Mable had always told me that rubbing my eyes would give me wrinkles before my time. Little details

about her robbed me of current joy. Well, not joy really. Gladness? A full stomach and a warm room with nice people. It could be much worse.

What was Papa doing now? It was three hours later out there. He would be in bed already. I hoped he'd remembered to eat supper. Something good for him with vegetables, like the chicken and potato soup I made during the cold months. He always said it warmed his soul as well as his stomach.

I was sitting in a leather chair near the fire and grew sleepier by the minute, barely able to keep my eyes open. It had been a long journey on the train, and the night I'd spent in Seattle had not been restful. The hotel where I'd stayed was on a busy street near the waterfront. Voices, shouting, and laughter coming from the pub below had kept me up half the night. Then I had nightmares that woke me at least three times in the early morning. Dreams of Lionel and Mable at the altar, in the church where we were supposed to have been married.

Now my head nodded, jerking me awake. Briggs, from where he stood by the table covered with decanters of various alcohol, must have noticed. "Dear Miss Fidget, you must go straight up to bed. I can see you're exhausted."

"I'm sorry. It's been a long journey to get here."

Everyone reassured me not to apologize. Ella said how rude they were not to have sent me straight up to bed and Briggs apologized for not noticing how tired I was and Amelia chimed in that she'd felt the exact same thing when she'd first arrived.

"You poor dear. We've been beastly to you." Mrs. Tutheridge rang for a servant using the small metal bell on the table next to her.

Soon, Dexter arrived, offering to take me upstairs. I didn't think it was necessary, but perhaps this was how rich people did things?

Benedict, who had been sitting on the loveseat with Amelia, stood when I did. I said good night and gratefully followed Dexter up the stairs. He carried a lamp. Although

most of the house had electricity, the hallway was dark. Once we arrived at my room, he asked if there was anything I needed, and I assured him it was only a good night's sleep I craved. Briggs had said he liked to get started right after breakfast but that he didn't necessarily always paint in his studio. Depending on the weather, he'd said, he might be outside, in which case I could spend the day tidying his workspace.

After quickly using the bathroom, washing up, and putting on my flannel nightgown, I pulled back the comforter and slipped between the sheets. As tired as I was, sleep didn't come right away. Instead, thoughts of Lionel and Mable plagued me. They would be on their honeymoon now. I'd heard before I left they were going to the seaside for a week. What did it say about me that I hoped it rained?

After a while, I drifted off to sleep, waking in the middle of the night to the dark room. The curtains at the window were open a few inches, inviting in a beam of moonlight. Had the sky cleared? I got up, shivering a little, and went to the glass and pulled back the curtains. The sky had indeed cleared, and an almost full moon surrounded by stars seemed to bathe the front driveway in a silvery light.

A movement near the watering hole drew my attention. At first, I wasn't sure what I was seeing, but soon realized it was the silhouette of a couple dancing under the light of the moon. Upon closer look, I realized I was right. A couple, swaying more than dancing, clung to each other. Then I realized it was Mrs. Tutheridge, dressed in white, and a man I didn't recognize. A man with hair the color of the moon.

I averted my eyes, feeling like a voyeur. The moment between them was so intimate, it was as if I were in their marital bedroom.

Mrs. Tutheridge had a suitor? Her husband hadn't been dead even a year. Who was this man? Did her children know about him? Was it motive to have her husband killed?

I shivered and pulled the curtains shut. Once back under the warmth of the comforter, I lay in the dark. I was in the

house of a murdered patriarch. Was Briggs right and we were all perfectly safe? Or would someone murder me in my sleep?

Why would anyone murder me? I didn't even live here. Although if it were a lunatic, they might not be discerning enough to distinguish between residents and visitors. Why would they?

Thoughts came swiftly now, playing with my imagination. I squeezed my eyes shut and burrowed more deeply under the covers.

Then a sound echoed through my room. One that sent shivers through my body and made my fingers and toes tingle. It was a ghostly moan and was coming from behind my closed door. Heart pounding, I sat up, clutching the sheet to my neck. The sound continued. What could it be? Was it the ghost of Mr. Tutheridge? Protesting his murder? Coming for revenge?

A pounding of feet from the hallway replaced the ghostly howls. Did ghosts run? Did they have feet with which to make such noises on the hardwood floors? Not having met a ghost before, I wasn't sure.

I lay awake for some time, listening to the noises of the house, hoping the ghost would not return. He didn't. Regardless, I was awake until the light of day crept through the slit in the curtains.

I woke with a start. A quick glance at the clock on the bedside table told me it was after eight. No! I would be late to work on my first day. I threw back the covers, bleary-eyed and in need of a toilet. Could I race across the hallway to the bathroom and then return here to dress? Why hadn't I thought about this last night? I needed a plan. If I were to dress first, then I would have to bathe and put my clothes back on, all of which would be a waste of precious time.

I should have asked Ella the protocol. Was she already up and dressed? Was the bathroom even available?

I opened my door a crack and cried out in alarm. Briggs was crouched under a hallway table, reading a book.

He looked up to greet me, as if it were perfectly normal to be under the table in the hallway. “Good morning, Miss Fidget.”

I spoke through the crack. “Hello.”

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m sitting here.”

“It had occurred to me, yes.”

“I’m playing hide-and-seek with Bebe. This is my hiding place.”

Who was Bebe? Was this some kind of lovemaking game between him and one of the maids? No, that wasn’t right. Bebe was the niece. Hudson’s daughter. Her mother had died, if I remembered the story correctly. “Oh, I see.”

“She’s such a naughty little thing. I think she’s forgotten about our game and is off doing something else.”

Something else? What did that mean?

“Are you all right, Miss Fidget? It’s late. I’d have figured you for an early riser.”

“I overslept. I was awake half the night. There were noises.” I felt compelled to add that last part.

“Noises?”

I was still speaking to him through the crack in the doorway. “Yes. Ghostly sounds.” I imitated the noises.

He gasped, then let out a bark of a laugh before covering his mouth with his hand.

A nice laugh, I thought absently. Hearty but not too loud. It matched the low timbre of his voice.

“What is so funny?” I asked, pretending to be more annoyed than I was. His demeanor and handsomeness had a strange impact on my poor lonely soul. However, my eyes stung from lack of sleep, and I really needed to use the toilet. Not even his charisma could make either ailment disappear.

“I’m sorry. Rest assured, there are no ghosts in this house. I mean, none you can see or hear anyway. We do have a few

hanging around, but they don't make any noise."

"What do you mean?" Was he saying the house was haunted?

"I mean, my father's presence is still felt. The kind of legacy he left behind is one of sorrow, and I'm afraid it's not as easily discarded as one would hope." A shadow crossed over his face. What had his father done to him that made his eyes hard and hurt?

"I should get out of your way so you can dress and do whatever it is women do that takes so much time in the morning."

"Thank you," I said with a dignified sniff.

"Meet me at the studio whenever you're ready," Briggs said. "Meanwhile, I'll find Bebe and tell her the game's over."

"Not on my account, I hope?" I didn't want to interrupt their game, but I did really need to get to that bathroom.

"No. Because she's a little sneak who makes ghost noises in the middle of the night to try to scare house guests."

I felt immediately like the fool I was. Bebe? Imitating a ghost. "Why would she do such a thing?" I asked out loud, allowing the door to open a little wider.

"You've not yet met her?" Briggs asked.

"No, she wasn't around yesterday. Your other brother, either."

"Right, yes. When you meet my little hellion of a niece, you'll understand it could be no other than her playing a prank."

"I feel very foolish."

"Please, don't." His jovial expression dimmed. "It must have been awful to wake to such a noise in a strange house."

"Yes, well, it was."

"I don't know where she comes up with these ideas." His lips twitched, clearly trying to hold in another round of

laughter. “She spends much too much time thinking of pranks. One of her favorite pastimes is imagining ways to frighten our guests.”

“She’s done this before?”

“A time or two.” He grimaced. “The ghost sounds are one of her favorites. I knew immediately who the culprit was.”

This child needed to be punished. “Well, it’s not cute. Not at all.”

He nodded, a lock of his hair falling over his forehead, and he seemed genuinely abashed. “I’m sorry. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Thank you. Now, I need to ready myself for the day. Can you move along, please?”

His gaze glanced just for a second on my nightgown. “Yes, yes, of course. Sorry to delay you. See you soon. There’s breakfast in the dining room if you’re hungry.”

I thanked him and then waited until he was all the way down the hall and heading for the stairs before darting across to the bathroom.

BRIGGS

“S he did what?” Mother asked in a tone of disappointment and shock.

“The old ghost-outside-the-door routine,” I said.

“Poor Miss Fidget. I’ll have to apologize to her. What are we going to do with that child?”

“Are you talking about me?” Bebe appeared, looking innocent in her sailor dress and pigtails. I knew better.

“You and I are no longer playing hide-and-seek,” I said as severely as I could muster. Despite her bad behavior, I had a weakness for my niece. Not that I could explain her naughtiness any better than the rest of my family. Regardless, she was adorable to look at, especially when pretending to be a good girl instead of a little demon of destruction. “You scared Miss Fidget last night.”

“She lost hours of sleep,” Mother said. “You are going to be punished for it, too. I’ll be consulting with your father.”

Bebe’s face fell. I could see her grappling to come up with an answer or excuse, but she came up with nothing.

“Why would you do it?” Mother asked. “When you should be asleep in your bed like a normal child?”

“It makes me laugh.” Bebe crossed her arms over her chest and glared back at my mother. “I didn’t cause her any real harm.”

“But you did,” I said. “You made her feel unwelcome. Which you will apologize for the moment she comes down.”

“And it’s not nice to laugh at someone,” Mother said. “Honestly, Bebe. None of us know what to do with you. But I know one thing. You’ll not be going to Annie’s birthday party tomorrow.”

“But there’s a baby lamb at her house,” Bebe said. “I want to see it.”

“Then you shouldn’t have played a trick on our guest,” I said.

Bebe didn’t reply, but I thought I detected a tiny spark of sorrow in her eyes. She wasn’t totally without redemption. At least, I hoped not.

I went to the dining room to have breakfast. I’d been up since dawn and had already been out for a walk that led to a sketch of a bush of wild roses, all of which worked up a man’s appetite.

I was halfway through a mound of scrambled eggs and several pieces of toast, dripping with butter and raspberry jam, when Miss Fidget arrived. She wore a simple black skirt and white blouse, both seeming a little worse for wear. However, she was going to clean the studio today, so she was smart to wear old clothes. For some reason, the idea of her being practical and without pretenses warmed me to her further.

I stood to greet her and nodded toward the buffet where breakfast had been nicely laid out by one of the maids. “Would you care for coffee?” I asked.

Miss Fidget wrinkled her nose as if she’d smelled something foul. “No, thank you.”

I returned to my chair and picked up a piece of toast. “You don’t like coffee?”

“No, it makes me jittery and makes my mouth taste bitter for hours. I don’t understand the appeal. Papa loves it first thing in the morning, so I always make it for him before he goes down to work.”

“What time does he begin?” I asked, watching from my seat as she surveyed the contents of the buffet. “Before dawn, I would imagine?”

She turned slightly to answer my question. Sun streamed through the window and bathed her in light, making her appear almost otherworldly. “Four a.m. On Sundays, he takes the day off for church and rest.”

“Which means you did the same?”

“Correct. I don’t mind,” she added hastily. “Not at all. Papa needs me, and I would not ever complain. He takes very good care of me.”

“And the other way around, it seems,” I said, smiling. “There’s tea as well, if you prefer.”

“No, I’ll have water instead.” She scooped eggs onto her plate. “Tea makes my hands tremble. I don’t need to be more nervous and worried than I already am.”

“What are you worried about?” Whatever it was, I would like to reassure her that all would be well. Not that I knew that to be true. Regardless, she evoked a feeling of protectiveness in me. Yet she didn’t need safeguarding. This woman could take care of her herself. It was more likely I would need the help than the other way around.

“If there is anything to worry about, I will.” She plopped a few berries onto her plate and then joined me at the table. It was only the two of us at that long table, but sitting across from each other made it seem less so. For a moment, I imagined us at a table like the one Benedict and Amelia dined at in their new home, sharing a meal with the candlelight shining in her eyes. Intimate and cozy. No one else, telling the other about our days.

I blinked rapidly. What in the world? Why had that come to me? Ridiculous.

She poked at a berry, a forlorn expression turning her mouth downward. A sudden urge to make her smile, if only to see those dimples of hers again, nagged at me. But no. I must remain absolutely stoic when it came to my new assistant. No teasing Miss Fidget. She might run out of here screaming and head back to Boston, scarred by the Tutheridge family. Between ghostly noises from the hallway and my bad habit of teasing, she might easily be swayed to leave. Although it was not a natural state for me, I had to do my best to be solemn and reticent.

I continued to steal glances her way. She ate little, and her shoulders just ever so slightly curved forward as if she were cold. I knew that couldn’t be the case. If anything, the room,

with the morning light flooding in, seemed overly warm. She's homesick, I thought. Missing her father. She looked no better rested than when she arrived, thanks to Bebe. "We'll have a light day today. I expect you need a few days to recuperate after such a long trip."

She lifted her gaze from her plate. "Whatever you need, Mr. Tutheridge, I shall do. You mustn't worry about me. I'm tougher than I look."

"Will you call me Briggs? Mr. Tutheridge was my father."

She stared at me for a moment, a look in her eyes that seemed surprised and pleased at the same time. "Yes. Please call me Faith. There's no need for formalities between us."

There wasn't? Perhaps there should be. Would a strictly business relationship and interaction assist in steeling myself against that pink mouth of hers? Regardless of what we called each other, I was not a blind man. How could I resist admiring her pretty face? That adorable nose that turned up just slightly at the end? Her silky hair, the color of our island-grown honey, that made my fingers itch to loosen it from its austere bun?

Never mind all that. I hardly even noticed what she looked like. Or her sweet voice.

Absolutely not.

SHE STUDIED the paintings I had displayed on my workbench. Ten minutes had passed since I first showed them to her, and she hadn't budged. What did she see in them? Was she now sure I was nothing but an amateur and wished she hadn't come all this way to work for the likes of me? It shouldn't surprise me. She'd spent a lot of time in museums and galleries and would recognize the difference between great and mere mediocrity.

Finally, she turned to me. "You're exceptional. I didn't realize."

"Didn't realize?"

“That you’re a real artist.”

“Not really. I paint portraits mostly.” Her words pleased me more than they should.

“But none of these are portraits.” She was correct. There were two landscapes, both of them painted down on our beach. The other two were scenes from our family life, including the one of Ella and Amelia at the table. Lastly, there was one of Bebe sitting in the grass with her doll. I’d done that one in a flash, wanting to capture it before the image was lost from my mind.

“I could look at these all day,” Faith said, “and always see something new. You’re a storyteller.”

It was embarrassing how happy her compliments made me. I’d figured she would not say much of anything at all, just go about her work efficiently and without emotion. In fact, this was the most animated I’d seen her.

“But I must actually do some work,” she said. “Do you want me to tidy up in here first?”

“Yes, sure. I’m going to spend some time on the beach. I’m working on another landscape. This time with two harbor seals poking up from the water. They’re very cute.”

“Seals? I’ve never seen one before.”

“Like I said, adorable. Their eyes are expressive, almost human-like. Wait until you see a baby. You’ll never be the same.”

She smiled, and there were those dimples. God had done a good job on that face. The more I looked at her, the more I admired the subtle nuances. She was a woman one would not notice straightaway. A shame because without a second look, her loveliness would be missed entirely. She wasn’t striking and didn’t command attention; upon closer observation, she glowed with a radiance from within. Then a man couldn’t stop peering at the delicate features of her face and her expressive eyes. Her petite stature suited her. She reminded me of a sandpiper. Small and quick and always serious. There was

something no-nonsense about a sandpiper, intense and focused at all times, looking for something to eat in the sand and surf.

“Well, then, I’ll gather my supplies and head out,” I said more to myself than her. “I’ll see you around noon, and we can go up to have something to eat. Regardless of how much you get done, I’d like you to rest this afternoon. You must be exhausted after your encounter with the ghost.”

“You’re very kind,” she said. “But I’ll see how much I get done first.”

I turned to leave but stopped abruptly. Sheriff White was standing in the doorway.

What did he want?

“Sheriff White, what brings you out?” I asked.

His gaze flickered toward Faith. “Who have we here?”

Was that a flirtatious look in his eyes? I didn’t know what women saw in him, but I’d seen elderly women swoon over him at church. He looked more like an outlaw than a lawman, with floppy hair and amber eyes that glittered as if looking for trouble. An unlit cigar hung from one side of his mouth. That ridiculous thing annoyed me. Either smoke it or don’t.

“This is Faith Fidget. Mother found her for me,” I said before realizing it sounded like she’d been sent for purposes other than working as my assistant. “I mean, she’s working for me. Here, in my new studio.”

“Yes, I think your mother mentioned something about that the last time I saw her.” White seemed to be appraising her as if she were a suspect. Did he always observe people with such intensity? Had it become a habit from so many years solving crimes?

“Pleasure to meet you, Sheriff,” Faith said politely. But I could tell she didn’t like the way he was staring at her because two pink splotches now decorated her fair cheeks.

“I was looking for Hudson,” White said finally, seeming to reluctantly tear his gaze away from Faith. “Had a few questions for him.”

Every week since they'd found Hudson's gun, White had been out here asking the same questions time and again. My theory was that he was trying to get Hudson to confess. Or, at the very least, remind him that he was being closely watched. Thus far, Hudson had stuck to his same story. The gun had been stolen during one of Father's parties. This was plausible. We didn't keep the guns locked up, and someone took it, then used it in the murder.

Did I believe Hudson? I hated to admit it, but I wasn't sure. The way he'd acted the last few years, especially lately, it was possible he snapped and killed him in a moment of uncontrolled violence. Hudson blamed our father for his wife's death. Had he been angry enough to kill? In truth, Hudson was a walking, talking vessel of rage. He was angry at the world and God for taking his Rosemary. Before he lost her, he'd been quiet but always kind and pleasant. The four of us had been tight when we were young. The only friction had been a result of the inequities in the treatment of Hudson and Benedict and me. Which is to say, he was not punished with banishment to the hole in the floor, denied food and water for entire nights.

I'd recently learned that Father had had some silly encounter with a psychic who had told him he would be killed by Hudson. I guess my dear old father was doing his best to give him less reason to kill him than the ones Benedict and I had.

"I haven't seen him today," I said to White now. "Did you ask Dexter?" Dexter knew everything that happened in this house. He had this unusual ability to know where we were at all times.

"Yes, I stopped in at the house first."

"Do you have any further leads on the case?" I asked, just to needle him. I knew he didn't, or he wouldn't be here.

"Other than my working theory, no." White took the cigar from his mouth and stuck it into the inner pocket of his jacket. Despite the warmth of the summer day, he wore a dark suit.

Working theory? Was it that Hudson did it? Or something else?

“If you see Hudson, let him know I was out looking for him.” White tipped his hat toward Faith. “Nice to meet you, Miss Fidget. You keep your eyes open around here. The Tutheridge family has all kinds of secrets.”

No, we don't. Not anymore. Our biggest one had been Father's cruelty toward us and Mother. Now we were learning how to live without fear. Anyway, why did White have to say that? Faith wouldn't sleep again tonight, thinking we were all a bunch of murderers.

“Sure will.” I watched him leave, wishing he'd never return, but I knew he would. I gathered my supplies into my artist's bag to take down to the beach. Benedict made fun of it, calling it my purse, but I didn't care. The bag came in handy for my line of work.

“Would you like to come with me down to the beach?” I asked Faith. “You might see a seal.”

Her face lit up. “Can I, really?”

Those dimples. They were dangerous.

THOSE SEALS DESERVED EXTRA FISH. They were sunning themselves on a rock that stuck up out of the water when we arrived. Faith squealed with delight at the sight of them.

“Aren't they darling?” Faith said. “You're right about their eyes. And look at the baby and his mother. The way they're nuzzling. I've never seen anything as adorable.”

I smiled to myself. They were cute. I'd always been fond of them myself.

She knelt to pick up a pebble from the beach. “We have sand at home. Not this.”

“Yes, it's not the same as the ocean. The Puget Sound has its own ways.”

She squinted as she looked out to the water, even though she had donned a straw hat before we left the studio. The day was exceptionally bright, making the water blue. After the rain

from the day before, the scrubs and rocks had been washed of any dust or debris. A perfect summer day. It was only midmorning, and already the temperatures had warmed. I sat on the log we often used as seating and sketched the seals quickly in my pad. They were good models, hardly moving for long periods of time.

I sketched for a few minutes as Faith explored the beach, stooping to pick up and examine a pebble or two as well as various pieces of driftwood. For a few minutes, she simply stood and stared out to the water, clearly deep in thought. If only I wasn't so curious what she was thinking about I could focus better on my drawing.

Shortly thereafter, she seemed to remember that she was at work and flushed apologetically. "I've stayed too long and neglected my duties."

I nodded, smiling. "Be careful going up the path. It can be slippery at times."

She assured me she would and then headed down the crescent beach to the path that would take her back up to the house.

For the next hour, I sketched several different versions of the seals from various angles, looking for the right composition. Typically, after sketching a half dozen or so, I would choose one to develop into a full oil painting. I found that coming back to them with a fresh eye a day or two later helped me to choose the best one.

My gaze meandered over to our fishing boat tied to the dock. One of these afternoons I should take our small boat out for the afternoon. Do a little fishing. Out of politeness, nothing more, I would ask Faith if she'd like to join me. Perhaps Mother and Bebe as well. We could catch dinner for Mrs. Halvorson and maybe wear Bebe out so that she slept at night instead of pestering Faith.

Yes, an afternoon on the boat would be delightful. Perfect for our guest, who should be made to feel welcome.

FAITH

The morning went quickly. By noon I had the studio tidied, art pieces sorted by size, and paint tubes neatly organized. Hopefully, Briggs would have more for me to do in the afternoon. Nothing was worse than idle hands, leaving more opportunity for unpleasant thoughts and worries. The same could be said for the middle of the night. I yawned, tired in that way one felt in their bones. What I needed was a nap. However, I must appear for lunch on my first day. Mrs. Tutheridge had been clear that I was to join them for all meals.

I left the studio and crossed the lawn to the big house. The sun was almost directly overhead and hot on my shoulders. Just as I had reached the steps leading up to the back porch that stretched the entire length of the house, I heard someone calling my name. I turned to see Briggs heading toward me with his sketch pad in hand.

I waited for him, cupping a hand over my eyes against the sunlight that glittered on the water. I'd taken off my hat in the studio and forgotten to put it back on to cross the yard.

"Hello there," he said, grinning. He had a way about him that made me feel as if I were the most important person in the world. At least in the moment. I felt certain I would be far down the list of importance when it came to Briggs Tutheridge. What a shame that was. It would be nice to be the variety of woman who turned his head. Just for a day, perhaps. Long enough to know what it felt like to be pretty and charming. To be the kind of woman men were drawn to. Fought wars over. Went to the ends of the earth to possess them. Women like Ella and Amelia.

"Did you get a lot done?" I asked, unsure what else to say.

"Five sketches of our friends on the rock. A pleasant way to spend the morning." He pointed upward to the blue sky. "It's going to be a scorcher. After your nap this afternoon, I'd

like to take you out on the fishing boat. It'll be cooler on the water, and it's a great way to see the island."

"And more seals?" I stifled a smile, not wanting to seem foolish. Showing too much excitement over the seals was a sure way to embarrass myself.

Instead, he grinned, seemingly delighted by my question. "Yes, and fish. We might see a beaver or two. Probably some deer close to shore."

"Will I have to fish?" I thought to ask, worried. No worms for me, all wriggling and helpless as they awaited the inevitable hook through their middles.

He chuckled. "Only if you'd like to."

"I don't care for worms."

"Ah, well, if you were to fish, I would put the bait on the hook for you."

I glanced out to the sparkling water. I'd never been on a fishing boat. In fact, my ferry ride yesterday was the only boat trip I'd ever taken. A lot of firsts lately, I thought idly—trains, hotels, working for an artist, living in a fancy house. "Then I would like to go. Very much so. But what about work?"

"There'll be plenty of that tomorrow. Today, you nap after lunch, and then we enjoy ourselves. These days of summer won't last forever, you know. The cool weather will come before we know it. It's best to make hay and all of that."

"While the sun shines?" I asked, unsure what he meant but drawing on a faint memory of that saying.

"Yes, figuratively speaking only," Briggs said. "I don't actually know how to make hay."

A giggle escaped before I could stop it.

He matched me with a laugh of his own before offering his arm. "May I escort you to lunch?"

Reluctantly, I placed my hand in the crook of his arm and walked with him up the stairs and across the porch. We went through a set of French doors to the dining room. The

windows were all open, bringing the scent of the water in with the breeze. Ella and Mrs. Tutheridge were already at the table, chatting about one of Ella's patients. As at breakfast, food was laid out on the buffet, and we were to help ourselves. Relieved, I picked up a plate and selected a sandwich and a scoop of potato salad. Water glasses and cutlery were set at two additional places at one end of the table next to Ella and Mrs. Tutheridge. She did not sit at the head of the table as she'd done at supper, and the tone in the room was relaxed and casual. Still, I felt tense and awkward. I didn't know where to sit. Or what was expected before we ate. Did we say grace? No, the others were already eating. I would say a silent prayer. Papa had always taught me to express gratitude for all meals.

Briggs must have noticed my hesitation because he suggested I take the chair next to his sister. I nodded and did as he asked.

I didn't hear much of the conversation, too much in my own head and feeling strange and misplaced. A dull, achy homesickness had settled in the pit of my stomach. I missed my father and the bakery and our regular customers. These people were strangers to me. They might always feel that way. Sitting at the table with them would not change the fact that I was the odd duck. The one not like the others.

That was true back home, too, I reminded myself. Never in my life had I felt at home anywhere other than with Papa. At school, I'd been so much smaller than the other children. I'd not had a mother like most of the others, further alienating me. The boys had pestered me on the playground and as I tried to walk home in peace. The nicknames had been numerous. Elf. Shrimp. Ugly Duckling. Ladybug. To this day, I didn't understand that one. Ladybugs were cute. Everyone liked them. No one liked me.

Except for Papa.

"I've an idea for the afternoon," Briggs was saying to his mother, drawing my attention away from myself for a moment. "It's going to be hot later. I thought we might take a boat ride, maybe catch a few fish for Mrs. Halvorson. Bebe

could join us and maybe swim and grow tired enough that she won't bother anyone in the middle of the night."

Ella smiled warmly at me. "Mother told me what Bebe was up to. I should have warned you that she might try something like that."

"Bebe's been forbidden to go to her friend's birthday party," Mrs. Tutheridge. "Which she was bitterly disappointed over. I wanted you to know she *was* punished."

"Thank you." I sounded prim even to my own ears. Why couldn't I be relaxed like Ella? Easy with people like Briggs?

Just then, a little girl with blue eyes who resembled Ella and a man who had to be the other brother entered the dining room.

Briggs introduced me to Hudson and Bebe. I studied the little girl, looking for signs of evil. Instead, I was met with big blue eyes framed in dark lashes and a bright smile, revealing the absence of her two front teeth. She seemed perfectly harmless. My scratchy eyes told me differently.

"Are you here because Uncle Briggs chases women?" Bebe asked me as she took a seat next to Briggs while her father filled a plate for her.

I almost choked on the sip of water I'd just taken. Chase women? What had this child heard about her uncle? She must have overheard someone talking. But why would anyone have said I was brought here for that purpose? It was strange indeed.

"For goodness' sake," Ella said to Hudson. "This child."

"Bebe," Hudson said, sounding tired. "Apologize to your uncle."

"What for?" Bebe asked. She was perplexed, not defiant. Obviously, she didn't know that her comment was highly disrespectful.

"Bebe," Mrs. Tutheridge said sharply, causing me to jump. "From now on, you are not to speak unless spoken to."

“But why? I have so many questions all the time.” Bebe crossed her arms over her chest and glared defiantly at her grandmother.

“It’s not appropriate. Not any of it,” Ella said.

“What’s any of it?” Bebe asked.

“The question you posed to Uncle Briggs,” Ella said in a stern voice, “is not something a little girl should ever ask an adult.”

Bebe’s eyes sparked with rebellion, but she said nothing further, slumping over her plate and studying her sandwich with great interest.

I stole a quick glance at Briggs. He actually appeared embarrassed. The tips of his ears were pink, and he was shaking his head and muttering something under his breath I couldn’t quite make out.

Ella, sitting next to me, whispered in my ear. “Sorry about that.” Apparently, she was the only one amused by the comment. Hudson seemed merely weary, picking at the potato salad listlessly.

Briggs cleared his throat. “To answer your extremely rude question, Bebe, Miss Fidget is here to help me with my work. You are to treat her with respect at all times. As we discussed earlier.”

“Yes, Uncle Briggs.” Bebe’s eyes reddened, clearly stung by the reprimand.

“Also, you are to apologize to Miss Fidget for your naughty behavior last night,” Briggs said.

“I’m sorry, Miss Fidget,” Bebe said.

“What made you want to scare me that way?” I asked.

“Because it’s fun. I thought it was funny, but no one else seems to agree,” Bebe said.

“You’ve done it before,” I said. “So don’t pretend like you didn’t know that.”

“No one here likes to have fun, Miss Fidget,” Bebe said. “But I am sorry. I didn’t know it would scare you so much. I thought you’d know it was a little girl playing a joke.”

“Apology accepted,” I said. “But please don’t do anything else to scare me. I’ve come a long way, and all of this is very strange to me. And I miss my papa.”

“I understand.” Bebe nodded solemnly.

I felt a little sorry for her. Here she was without any other children to spend time with and all these adults who were either scolding her or ignoring her.

Everyone returned to eating. The sandwiches were filled with ham and cheese, but I could barely taste them. All I wanted was to go back to bed. I stifled yet another yawn behind a napkin.

“After she has a nap, I’m going to take Miss Fidget out in the fishing boat out this afternoon,” Briggs said. “Who would like to join me?”

“Me,” shouted Bebe, forgetting the request from her grandmother for silence.

“You’ll promise to behave yourself?” Briggs asked her. He might be trying to sound strict, but it was impossible. His voice reeked of affection and good humor.

“I will. I promise.” Bebe was nodding her head with such vigor I was afraid it might jumble her brain.

Bebe in a boat? That sounded like a disaster waiting to happen. Regardless, I would take the chance. A boat ride on a lovely summer afternoon was simply too tempting.

I TOOK A TWO-HOUR NAP, falling almost immediately into a deep sleep, and woke feeling refreshed. Around three, Dexter came to escort me down to the boat. Soon, I was seated on one of the seats in the small fishing boat called a pontoon. Briggs had explained to me that they were extremely steady and good for family outings like the one we were on now.

Mrs. Tutheridge had not come along, but Bebe and Ella were on the boat with us. Hudson, too, had politely declined and disappeared as he seemed wont to do.

Ella and I wore wide-brimmed hats and carried umbrellas to combat the intense sunlight. Bebe had a bathing costume on that had me feeling envious. I would have enjoyed the freedom and coolness provided by one. Instead, I had changed into the lightest dress I owned, a soft white cotton that allowed at least a little room to breathe. Other than the corset, which I wore loose around my torso. There weren't any curves to emphasize, so I didn't ever pull the ties too tightly. Mable had always tugged hers as firmly together as possible so that her bosom appeared bigger than it really was.

I sat at the back of the boat with Ella and watched Briggs maneuver us away from the dock. He'd taken off his suit jacket and rolled the sleeves of his white shirt up, revealing muscular forearms. It was open at the collar as well, granting me glimpses of his smooth, muscular neck. I had to force myself to look away, focusing instead on the ripples the boat made in the clear water.

There was no wind, making the Sound as clear as glass. I trailed my fingers in the water, surprised by how cold it was. It might appear as blue as the tropics, but it was as cold as the Atlantic Ocean at home.

We trawled along the eastern coastline between the two inlets, or saddlebags as Mrs. Mantle had called them. After a few minutes, Briggs dropped the anchor and announced it was time to fish.

Ella sprawled out on the cushion that ran along one side of the boat and propped her umbrella over her head. "I'll watch, if you don't mind."

"I'd rather watch as well." I sat on the opposite side of the boat from Ella but didn't stretch out my legs as she had. I was a guest of my employer, not the daughter of the household. There was a difference between us, and I best remember it or I'd find myself in trouble.

“Suit yourselves,” Briggs said in his good-natured way. “What about you, Bebe?”

“Yes. I’m going to catch a huge fish and be the hero. Mrs. Halvorson will no longer be mad at me.”

“Why is she mad at you?” Ella asked. “Or do I not want to know?”

“No reason at all,” Bebe said. “She’s old and cranky.”

“That’s not the reason,” Ella said to me.

I nodded. Even I knew that, and I’d met Bebe only today.

“I might have taken a cookie or two,” Bebe said innocently. “For my tea party with my dolls. I’m terribly lonely since I don’t get to go to the birthday party.” She stuck out her bottom lip.

“Gracious, child,” Ella said. “You should be on the stage.”

Briggs pulled a tin out from the fishing pail and proceeded to hook a worm and then gave the pole to Bebe. “Sit on the chair here, and don’t put your feet over like you did last time. I don’t want you falling in again.”

Again?

“Uncle Briggs had to save me,” Bebe said. “It was scary, and I’ll never do it again.”

“Fortunately, Uncle Briggs is an excellent swimmer,” Ella said. “Or we’d have had to go back home without a niece. What would we have told your poor father?”

“He wouldn’t care,” Bebe said. “I’m a nuisance to him. I heard him say so to Grammie the other day.”

“He didn’t say any such thing,” Briggs said. “Your father loves you.”

“He said I was the only thing keeping him on the island,” Bebe said matter-of-factly. “Which means he wishes I was never born.”

Tears stung my eyes. As trying as she was, I couldn't bear to hear a little girl say that about her own father. My dear papa always made me feel loved and wanted. Even though we weren't like other families, I never felt I missed much not having a mother. Papa loved me enough for two parents. This poor child thought her father didn't want her. What could be worse? Was this why she acted up?

"That's simply not true," Ella said, exchanging glances with her brother. "He's distracted, that's all."

"Grammie told him she was going to hire a nanny to take care of me." Bebe turned to look at me. "I thought you were her. I saw you in the car with Amelia and Aunt Ella from my window. Did you know I can see everything from up there?"

"No, I did not," I said, unsure if the question was being addressed to me or Ella.

"That's another reason I made those ghost sounds," Bebe said. "I wanted to scare you away."

It made perfect sense, actually. It was a preemptive move. I could see it from her perspective. She felt powerless against the adults who were deciding who she would spend most of her time with.

"But then I heard Grammie talking to Dexter, and she said that you were here for Uncle Briggs. To...to...what's the word?"

"Never mind that," Briggs said, sounding sheepish.

"Tame him. That's what she said." Bebe smiled triumphantly. "Because Uncle Briggs has too many friends instead of a wife."

A wife? Interesting. Somehow Bebe had gotten confused, thinking I was here to make him into a decent man instead of just helping him with his art. She leaped to a lot of conclusions. An active imagination and a talent for eavesdropping were not a good combination. Tame him, though? That was a strange thing to say, I had to admit. Why would she have used that particular word? Then again, Bebe could have gotten it confused. That was probably right. Maybe

she was thinking since Amelia and her uncle Benedict had married that the same thing would happen between us. It was kind of sweet. Bebe was cute, even if she had kept me from a decent night's sleep when I so desperately needed one.

“But now you know I'm here to help your uncle Briggs with his art,” I said to her with a firm but friendly tone. “So you don't have to try to scare me ever again. Right?”

Bebe nodded but averted her eyes, obvious mischief churning in her head.

Leaving me less than sure of her future innocence.

“What's your name again?” Bebe's gaze returned to study me. In the bright light, I noticed the freckles on her nose and the brilliant blue of her eyes. She would be a beauty like her aunt Ella.

“Miss Fidget,” I said. “But if we're going to be friends, you may call me Faith.”

“Fidget is not a last name,” Bebe said emphatically.

“I'm quite sure you're wrong, as I've had it all my life.” I wanted to laugh, but her expression was so serious I remained somber.

“Fidget is something I'm not supposed to do at church,” Bebe said. “Grammie tells me the same thing every Sunday. But fidgets just come to my legs. I can't help it. She doesn't understand, because she's old and her legs don't wriggle anymore.”

There was probably some truth to that. I could remember wriggling a little myself at church when I was Bebe's age.

“You're very chatty this afternoon, Miss Bebe,” Briggs said. “Shall we be quiet so we don't scare the fish away?”

Bebe nodded as she put her finger to her lips in a shushing gesture.

Briggs cast his line in the water with the poor worm writhing on the hook, then lowered onto a bench seat at the rear of the boat. “Sit next to me, Bebe.” He patted the cushion next to him. “Let's catch some big ones.”

To my amazement, the little girl cast her line out almost as expertly as her uncle. I watched, enjoying the scene before me of the large man and his small niece sitting side by side with their lines in the clear, calm water. It was a sight I would not soon forget. If I were a painter like Briggs, I would have enjoyed capturing it with clever strokes of a brush. Alas, I could only commit it to memory, feeling certain there would be a dark day when I would close my eyes and recall the beauty in this simplistic but winsome activity.

A breeze made the warmth of the afternoon pleasant. I took in long breaths of the sea air and felt my shoulders relax. Since I'd set out on this odyssey, I'd kept myself tightly bound for fear I would fall apart. Now, however, I was here in this place of harbor seals and afternoon boat rides and a landscape that took my breath away. Whatever happened, at the moment, I was glad I'd been brave enough to take the journey.

Briggs caught a fish after only five or so minutes. Next, Bebe's line tugged, causing her to squeal with excitement. When her line strained to the point I thought the fish might pull her in rather than the other way around, Briggs took her line to bring the catch into the boat. Deftly, Briggs took hold of it and let out a whoop of triumph. "Bebe, look at the size of this one. Well done."

It was indeed twice the size of the one Briggs had caught. Bebe almost capsized the boat with her delighted jumping about. Briggs had to give her a stern warning to calm her, reminding her that we were no longer close to the shore and the water was very cold.

Both fish went into a net that hung from the side of the boat. I didn't like to think of them trapped in there, awaiting their impending doom. I peered over the edge of the boat to see the shiny silvery fish pushing against the weave of the net.

"I feel sorry for them," I said under my breath.

Ella looked up from the book she'd been reading. "I know. I'm the same way. Hypocritical, of course, since I happily enjoy them at dinner."

True enough. I would most certainly enjoy them, too. At home, Papa would coat them in cornmeal and fry them up along with some roasted potatoes. We'd complain the rest of the evening about the fishy smell after we'd devoured every morsel.

"What is it?" Ella asked. "Has something made you sad?"

Astonished that she'd noticed, I shrugged. "Missing my papa a little. I've never been apart from him."

"You must be close?" Ella asked, with a hint of wistfulness in her tone.

"Yes, it was just the two of us. My mother...well, she wasn't around."

"Did she pass away?" Briggs asked from the rear of the boat. He'd been listening?

"No. She left." I said this flatly, hoping they'd get the hint that I didn't care to talk about my mother.

"My mom died," Bebe said, turning slightly to look at me. "Did you know that?"

"I did, and I'm sorry," I said.

"I don't remember her." Bebe scrunched up her nose. "But Father has a photograph of her in a frame by his bed. He looks at it all the time."

The thought of Hudson mourning his wife this way filled me with sympathy. It was no wonder he had trouble with Bebe. Grief had dictated his life. Lately, I'd done the same thing, lamenting the loss of my fiancé and best friend. How could I move on from the crushing sorrow and pain? I'd thought moving across the country might lessen the anguish, but unfortunately, it seemed to have followed me.

Bebe and Briggs returned to their fishing. I repositioned my umbrella to shield my face from the sun and scanned the horizon, hoping to see a seal. Instead, the water and trees that grew sideways out of the nearby cliffs blurred before my dry and tired eyes. Despite feeling refreshed earlier, the warmth of the day had made me sleepy once more. If only I could close

my eyes for a few minutes, but I was afraid to fall asleep. The cushioned seat was made for lounging and more comfortable than I ever thought a boat could be.

Just for a moment, I told myself, closing my eyes. Nothing had ever felt as good. Vaguely, I heard the seagulls calling out overhead and Bebe's high-pitched chatter interspersed with Brigg's deep voice.

Despite my efforts, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, I woke to Briggs sitting where Ella had been reading. His head was bent over his sketch pad, and he was drawing. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, there she is."

Embarrassed, I sat upright. The sun had lowered somewhat but still beat down upon us. My back was damp with perspiration. Heat rose to my cheeks. Looking around, I realized we were back at the dock. Ella and Bebe were no longer on the boat. Had I slept through the ride home?

"What did I miss?" I asked, alarmed. "Are we home already?"

"Yes, everything's fine. You were sleeping so peacefully that none of us wanted to wake you. I volunteered to stay with you."

"That was very kind. I'm sorry. I couldn't keep my eyes open. It's been a long week."

"Not a problem. I enjoy the gentle rocking," Briggs said. "It relaxes me and allows me to sketch without so many disturbing thoughts and images getting in the way."

"Do you have a lot of those?" I asked, without thinking, then flushed even hotter. What a question to ask someone I barely knew.

His eyes darkened before his gaze returned to his sketch pad. "I am a man with a few demons."

"You don't seem that way."

"Good. No one likes a grown man who wallows in the past, now do they?" He glanced up and then back to his paper. Was he sketching me?

“Are you—never mind.” No, he wouldn’t be drawing plain old me when the scenery was so colorful and glittery all around us. What a fool I was to even imagine such a thing. Even for an instant. I was not a woman an artist like Briggs would ever be moved to capture on paper.

“Yes, I was drawing you. Don’t be cross with me,” he said apologetically. “Using you as a model while you were asleep—terrible manners. Please don’t tell my mother.”

“You *were* drawing me? But why?”

He scrutinized me, holding his pencil aloft, a perplexed expression in his eyes. “The question is not why, but how could I not? You looked like an angel sleeping right here on my very own boat. How was I to resist such a muse? I apologize for not asking permission, though. Ghastly of me.”

“An angel?” Did he think of angels as small and funny-looking, more elfin than a haloed, winged heavenly creature?

“Yes. Or angelic, I guess you’d say.”

For some reason I could not fathom, his words made me feel almost as sparkly as the water that glittered like diamonds in the afternoon sun.

BRIGGS

Without success, I'd tried to keep myself from pulling out the drawing pad after Ella and Bebe departed. But I was weak. Faith was too pretty not to draw, especially asleep when the wary look in her eyes disappeared, and her mouth relaxed. I could see what she really looked like then. Not a tightly held together woman with a careful way of speaking. The woman in my sketchbook was none of those things. She was sweet and vulnerable in the best way possible. When she woke and looked over at me with eyes not yet guarded, my stomach had turned over.

What that meant, I could not say.

Now we were all on the back porch before supper. Bebe and Hudson were joining us for a casual meal of fried fish. Currently, they were playing croquet with Ella on the lawn. Fortunately, Amelia and Benedict had joined us for supper because between the two of us, Bebe and I had caught a half dozen fish.

Dexter had moved a table outside to the porch for our meal. One of the maids had placed small vases of wild roses and candles in silver holders along the middle of the table.

It would have been a perfectly fine evening had it not been for Timothy Bains. I had not known Mother invited him to join us until he arrived with a bunch of flowers in his hands.

My siblings had all welcomed the idea of Bains courting our mother without a second thought. It seemed I was the only one who wasn't pleased. I'd kept my reservations to myself, not wanting to cause Mother any angst. I couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but there was a secretive quality to Bains I didn't trust. All of the men Father had brought here had pasts they were running from. Bains was no exception.

Mother had assured me that he'd been run out of his church back east through no fault of his own. A young woman had claimed he'd tried to seduce her. She was underage, and

Bains was married with a child. For whatever reason, the congregation believed the girl over Bains. He lost his family and his job and came out west. Father had offered him the church here, and Bains had been here ever since.

This courtship of Mother had come out of nowhere. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought they'd planned it all along. Once Father was disposed of, he could make a play for Mother.

I know it seemed far-fetched. But heck, my father had been murdered. It wouldn't be the first time a man killed another over a woman.

For these reasons, I could not fully endorse this new relationship. He might be a killer. He might be a seducer of teenage girls. He might want my mother only for her money. If they were to marry, what would happen to all of us? Would he want us all to move out of the family home so they could have a little love nest?

The whole idea made me feel a little ill. Regardless, I stayed mute on the subject. I didn't want Bains to know I wasn't fully supportive or that I feared he might have killed Father. If my worries were true, I'd discover the truth easier if he didn't know how carefully I watched him.

It seemed lately I spent half my waking thoughts weighing all the suspects. Was it Hudson? Or Bains? There were the others my father played poker with, too. The sheriff, who may or may not have decided he'd had enough of covering up Father's unlawful activities. Our local teacher, Caleb King, had motive, too. Father paid him a pittance in exchange for keeping his secret. Falling in love with his student back east would not be seen as a quality most of the parents on the island would be thrilled about. Michael Moon, the owner of the dry goods store, had similar reasons to wish him dead.

So that evening, I paid close attention to Pastor Bains, looking for clues that would give me answers. However, I saw nothing but reverence for my mother and obvious affection. He was kind and gracious with everyone. By the time we had

strawberry shortcake for dessert, I'd decided clarification about his intentions was necessary. I needed to understand Timothy Bains and what he really wanted. No one could be *this* nice. Not even a man of God. Or a supposed man of God. He might be a murderer.

Mother, sitting on one end of the long table, her eyes shining in the candlelight, was speaking animatedly with Bains about who knows what. She was different the last few months. Each day seemed to bring her closer to the person she must have been before my father pummeled the life out of her. I should simply be grateful instead of suspicious.

After dinner, Benedict and I enjoyed a whiskey on the back porch. For a few minutes, we sat in easy silence. Crickets and an occasional scuffle of a squirrel or rabbit in the bushes reminded us we were not alone. The sea air was sweetened with the scent of wild roses.

Like our mother, Benedict seemed a changed person since the death of Father and the addition of Amelia in his life. We'd successfully sold the shipbuilding business with the final paperwork and money details completed just last week. He and Amelia had started their lives together in the house he'd built himself on a piece of land with water views and lush forest.

"How's married life, brother?" I asked. "Have you settled in well enough?"

"I wake every morning amazed that it's me Amelia wanted," Benedict said. "Married life is better than I thought it would be. Having witnessed Father and Mother's marriage, I didn't know what a respectful, loving relationship looked like."

"She couldn't do better than you." I meant every word.

"I'm not sure that's true, but thank you just the same." He tapped my forearm with his fingers in obvious affection. The two of us had been to hell and back. No one else, not even Ella, could understand what it had been like for us growing up under Father's reign. I shivered, remembering the punishments. We referred to the crawl space where Father had

trapped us as the dungeon. Worse still, we'd endured it separately. Only one of us at a time. Father would not have wanted us to have the other for comfort. He knew we would find solace in each other, thus we were never punished together.

As a boy, I could never decide which was worse. Knowing Benedict was in there and exactly what it was like, or being in there myself.

"You still having the nightmares?" I asked now. Benedict hadn't mentioned one in a while.

"Not as often as before." He was silent for a second before continuing. "I scare Amelia when I wake up like that."

He often woke up screaming from a recurring dream. I'd heard him many nights in the room next door. "I'm sorry about that," I said lamely. My words were not adequate.

"She always soothes me back to sleep. Still, I hate it that she has to see me that way."

"Amelia's strong," I said. "She loves you."

"She knows me. Which gives me comfort I won't make her miserable for the next fifty years."

"I'm not certain of much, but I know that will never happen. I see the way she looks at you. And you her, for that matter."

"I want it for you," Benedict said. "A love like I have with Amelia."

"Nah, I'm not the marrying kind. No one should have to put up with me for any amount of time."

"We'll see about that. I've not given up hope. The right woman might just appear out of nowhere, and you'll be struck with a love there's no walking away from."

We were quiet for a few moments. My heart felt laden with love for my brother and Amelia. What they had represented the best that two people could do together.

“This time next year, you could be a father,” I said. “Wouldn’t that be remarkable?”

“I worry about that.”

“Don’t. Bebe’s the way she is because of...well, you know.”

He chuckled. “Not that. I mean, what if I can’t do it? What if it turns me into a monster like Father?”

“He was that way before you or I came along. But I do understand. I’d feel that way, too.” I paused, reaching for the right thing to say. “You’re going to build a wonderful family. You mustn’t worry.”

“What do you think about Miss Fidget?” Benedict asked, drastically changing the subject. “Will she be a help to you?”

“She’s competent. Steady. Hard to read.”

“Reserved.”

“Wholly disapproving of me. As far as I can tell.”

“Well, can’t blame the poor woman for that,” Benedict said, laughing. “She’s obviously a bright woman. Pretty, too, don’t you think?”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Nice, easy lie. My brother would believe me. He knew the variety of women I typically had enjoyed. Faith Fidget was the opposite of the fun, somewhat loosely principled ladies I spent time with in Seattle. “Not my type at all, you know.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t think so. I have to say, it’s a strange choice.” He said the latter under his breath, as if talking to himself.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “I think Mother found the right person for the job.”

“Right, yes, for the job.”

Before I could ask him what he meant, the French doors opened and Bains appeared. “May I have a word?”

Benedict and I exchanged glances. What did he want? It was too soon to ask for Mother's hand. She would have to wait at least a year after Father's death, surely?

"Have a seat, Pastor," Benedict said. "Care for a whiskey?"

"No, thank you," Bains said as he sat on one of the low-slung chairs that were lined up along the wall. "I wanted to talk to you boys about your mother. Your mother and me, that is."

We didn't say anything, waiting for what he would say next.

"I'd like to marry her," Bains said. "And it's not about the money. I need you to understand that."

"How long have you felt like this for our mother?" I asked, unable to keep the coldness from my voice. "Before Father died?"

"I'm a man of God."

"We're all sinners, Pastor," I said.

"True. But I didn't sin in that way." Bains shifted in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. "I considered your mother a member of my flock. This friendship between us is new. I've always admired her. She handled herself with grace and dignity in spite of all the ways your father hurt her."

"Your relationship gives you additional motive for murder," I said. "You could have planned this beforehand."

"I could have," Bains said. "But I didn't."

That's what everyone said, including my own brother. I felt a flicker of frustration. Why hadn't the sheriff made any headway with the investigation? I'd grown weary of suspecting everyone I knew and loved.

"If my mother wishes to marry you," Benedict said, "we won't stand in her way. Not that we could."

A muscle in Bains's jaw twitched. "She won't do it unless you boys give your blessing."

Benedict looked over at me. In the light from the lantern on the table between us, his eyes seemed to search mine for answers. A silent agreement passed between us. We wanted our mother to be happy. After everything she'd endured, the remainder of her life should be lived in peace and with a man who loved her.

"Does Mother want to marry?" I asked Bains. "Has she told you she does?"

A smile flickered over the pastor's face. "I believe so, yes. She said her children would give us their blessing. Is that not true? If it isn't, then I shall wait until you do. Whether I've wanted it or not, patience has been forced upon me for some years now. Your mother's worth waiting for."

"We want her cared for," I said. "Treated well. Can you do that?" What about the wife and child he'd been forced to leave behind? Where were they? Would they come back at some point to interfere with Mother's life? Something else occurred to me that disturbed my peace of mind. What if he were still married?

"Are you divorced from your first wife?" I asked.

Bains nodded slowly, his expression darkening. "Yes, she made sure of that. She accused me of adultery in the court of law, and I had nothing with which to fight her. Everyone believed the girl. Including my wife. Her story was backed up by her younger brother. He said he'd seen us together."

"A brother?" Benedict said. "And they believed children over you?"

"Yes, her younger brother told his parents and anyone else who would listen that he'd seen us together."

"But why?" I asked. "What would make someone, especially children, do such a thing?"

"I've asked myself that question many times. The boy had evil in him. One of those children who let the devil in instead of the Lord. And she felt slighted." He flushed, obviously embarrassed to talk of such things in front of us. "The girl had made an overture to me. She was embarrassed

when I politely declined her advances. Not often had she heard the word *no*. She didn't like it. Once she told the lie, it got too big, and she had to get her brother to lie, too." He sighed the sigh of a man who had carried his sadness for decades.

"That must have been excruciating," Benedict said, his natural compassion for anyone who suffered evident in his voice. "I'm sorry."

"In hindsight, I see that my wife easily believed the worst about me. That's not how someone who truly loves you would behave. I understand now. At the time, it was immensely painful. She took my son from me." His voice cracked, and his chest rose and fell as he took in a deep breath. "Your father did a lot of bad things during his time here, for which he'll have to reckon with God over, but he did me a favor when he gave me the church on the island. No one else was willing to give me a chance. Did I condone his mistresses? Of course I didn't. Was I mortified every time he asked me to lie for him? Absolutely. In fact, at times, it felt like it was killing me to keep his secrets, especially knowing your mother. How loyal she was. Trusting and good."

"One might describe Mother's feeling as denial. A concerted effort not to see the truth," I said. "She knew about Rhett, for example."

"As did you, Pastor," Benedict said.

"It's true. Your mother and I know everything about each other. She understands why I did what I did, and I understand her. We have accepted each other's imperfections."

"It has to be that way," Benedict said softly. "To truly love another, we must see them as they are and accept their deficiencies without judgment. Amelia has done that for me. Goodness knows I have a lot of them."

"Not so many," I said, chest aching.

"I don't expect an answer tonight," Bains said. "I ask only that you'll consider my humble request. She'll be a pastor's wife, which is not always easy. A lot is expected of me in this community. There are many who will need me at

odd hours of the day and night. She'll be expected to take care of certain aspects of the church life. She knows this and is willing."

"You've talked it all through," I said. "She should get to decide for herself. Mother's had most of her life controlled by men. It's time for her to choose whatever she wants."

"But you have our blessing," Benedict said. "Doesn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so." I reached over the arm of the chair to shake his hand. For now, I would ignore the niggle of doubt and mistrust I had for him. I'd been wrong about people before. Perhaps I was this time, too. *Please, God, let me be mistaken to worry.* It was just that I loved Mother so. When I was a little boy, I'd helplessly witnessed Father's treatment of her. I would have done anything to protect her. "Please, take good care of her. Don't make us regret this."

"I will, and I won't." His handshake was firm, and his eyes compassionate. We would have to welcome him into the family, whether we were ready or not. If Mother wanted him, then so be it.

AFTER BAINS LEFT, Benedict said goodnight as well and went inside to fetch Amelia. I remained outside, nursing a whiskey and trying to figure out why I was in such a foul mood. Today had been a good day. Bebe had enjoyed our fishing trip. Ella hadn't been called away for any medical emergencies. Faith had seemed rested and content after her second nap.

Faith. That was the problem right there. Why was I thinking about her? She worked for us. Like any of the staff. She was not available for my ungentlemanly thoughts.

I stretched my legs out long, listening to the sounds of the night, and gazed up at the stars. They sparkled bright at this hour, dotting the sky with twinkles of light. Old friends, those stars. How many nights had I spent looking up at them? When Father was still alive, I'd often escaped to the beach to watch the stars and feel the healing touch of the marine breeze. Now

I could sit here on the porch, and no one could hurt me. Still, after years of abuse, the residual fears remained like a dormant illness, always ready to pull me back into the black hopelessness of my childhood.

When I was tossed out like trash by Father, forcing me to live in Seattle in a dingy room at the back of my art studio, I'd been fine. Although it was a humble existence compared to residing at Stella, I was no longer plagued with the exhausting tension that came with living with Father and his unpredictable temper. After a time, word had spread about my work among the elite of Seattle. I had one client after another wishing for their portraits to be painted. I'd met all kinds of interesting people and enjoyed parties and wild nights.

At first, it had seemed like exactly what I wanted. Booze and women, an occasional invitation to a nice dinner by a client, suited me fine. Toward the end of my time there, before Father's murder, the shine had dulled somewhat. I was tired and restless at the same time, yearning to be back here with my brothers and Ella and the vast sky and endless blue of the Sound. My heart had always belonged to Whale Island. Now I could stay as long as I wished. Benedict had enticed me with the studio, but I hadn't needed any convincing. After all, I could visit Seattle and my friends there at any time.

Strangely enough, I hadn't yet felt the urge to leave the island. Being able to paint whatever I wanted and not worrying about making a living had unleashed a fearlessness to my work. I painted as if no one would ever set eyes upon them.

However, now Bains would be here. In my mother's bedroom. I'd enjoyed the last few months immensely. Amelia had brought such joy and peace to Benedict. It was almost as if her presence had healed not only him, but the rest of us, too. Would Bains ruin the temporary peace that had come to our family?

As much as I wished it would not be so, Bains would change everything. I would no longer be welcome here. Mother would insist that I could stay as long as I wished. However, the tenor of the house would change with a new

master. Just when I had grown content, my life would be altered yet again by my mother's husband.

What about Miss Faith Fidget? Would she want to remain here for an extended period of time? I could sense her homesickness for her father. She wouldn't be here long.

Which was fine, I told myself. I'd enjoy having help for a few months, and when she was ready to return home, I would move back to Seattle. Resume my life of selfishness and debauchery.

Good. Now that was decided, I would rest easy tonight.

Only I didn't.

FAITH

The Briggs that greeted me the next morning seemed wrung out and exhausted. His eyes were red, and his skin pale under his tan. Was he ill? I watched him closely, looking for clues. He must have seen me watching him because he looked up from his painting. “Is there something you need?” His tone wasn’t unpleasant or even impatient, yet something bothered me. What was it exactly? He sounded and acted distant. As if he regretted yesterday and the familiarity he’d shown me on the boat. Maybe he woke this morning with the realization that I was his employee and he should put barriers between us so I didn’t forget my place.

Not that I would have. I had faults, but my sense of duty was strong. Perhaps stronger than any other quality I possessed.

I’d woken that morning to a cacophony of birds chirping, screeching, and tweeting. The window had been left slightly ajar to let in the cool night air. I’d slept well and felt almost like myself. In addition, I was newly resolved to make the most of this experience. Papa had sacrificed for me to come here; there was no excuse for sniffing around like a child. What a joyful opportunity it was, too. This beautiful location and such a nice family were more than I could have hoped for. Even Briggs, who made my stomach feel strange, was nice enough.

He was more than nice. I was drawn to him, fascinated even. His eyes, blue and penetrating, seemed to see every detail. I imagined he saw more vividly than those of us with ordinary talents. Noticing the subtleties in shades of colors and the nuances of expressions were necessary for his life’s work.

What did he see when he looked at me? Did he dismiss me as plain and without interest? Perhaps he saw my true nature, fearful and timid? Could he see my injured heart? Did he see what a waste I’d made of my life?

These were all questions that I wished I could ask him. Of course, I never would. Briggs Tutheridge had no interest in answering my questions. A man of such talent had no time for the likes of me. Nor should he. I had already begun to feel a sense of protectiveness about him and his painting. His talent must be protected and nurtured. I had become a watchdog already, and I'd been here a very short time. My mouth twitched, imagining what kind of dog I would be. One of those small dogs with the sharp, relentless barks the society ladies sometimes carried around like they would a baby.

Never mind all that, I told myself now. I was here to do a job for him, and that was all. He had no need for my protection. How absurd to even think such a thing. I was a silly, ridiculous person. My job, at the moment, was to clean brushes, and that was it. I must remember why I was here.

I dipped another brush into the jar of turpentine and whisked it briskly to loosen the paint that glued the bristles together. The scent made my eyes water. After attending to each brush, I wiped the dampness away from the side of my face with a lace hanky I kept in the sleeve of my blouse.

"Faith? Is everything all right?" Briggs asked, causing me to jump.

It took me a second to understand why he was asking. My damp eyes. He probably thought I was crying. How embarrassing. "Yes, I'm fine. It's the turpentine."

"Ah, yes. For a moment, I thought you were crying over something I've done or didn't do." He smiled to let me know he was joking. That grin of his could melt the hardest of hearts. Even my bruised one could not help but respond.

"Is that a common occurrence for you?" I asked, matching his tone. "Making women cry?"

"How could you ask such a thing? I make them laugh, not weep." Grinning, he returned to his painting, dabbing at the canvas with the tip of a brush to create the appearance of movement in the water surrounding the rock where the seals sunbathed. I'd been intrigued to see which of his drawings he'd chosen to paint. He'd decided on the one from the angle

that focused on the mother and baby seal, leaving me to think he was more sentimental than I'd have ever thought the rakish Briggs Tutheridge could be.

After cleaning all of the brushes, I looked around to see what else I could do and remembered that Briggs had asked me to put together a frame. Four pieces of wood had been set to one side, cut and sanded to make the frame. A jar of small nails and a hammer were placed neatly in one of the cubbies. I'd organized the messy contents of the workbench yesterday, and it pleased me to see everything in its place. I picked up one piece of the wood and ran my finger along the smooth surface, sanded to the texture of silk.

Earlier, Briggs had shown me how to put the pieces together and secure them with the tiny nails. Now, I worked as quietly as I could, not wanting to disturb his work.

The painting was of Amelia. A wedding gift for Benedict, Briggs had explained. In it, Amelia stood next to tall, pale yellow grass, wearing a white dress and shallow-brimmed straw hat draped with a gauzy scarf. In profile, with her hands behind her back and her head held high, she stared out to sea. Somehow he'd managed to capture the movement of the scarf rustling in the breeze. "Why did you paint her this way? Facing toward the sea instead of looking at you?" I hadn't meant to ask that out loud. I'd interrupted him with my thoughtless and annoying question. It was just that his process engrossed me so.

He answered without hesitation, with the handle of a small brush between his teeth as he used a larger one to fill in the sky. "I saw her standing like that one day, and committed the image to memory. It's how she is, always looking intently for answers and thinking deeply about everything. I hoped to capture it in the painting."

The way he spoke of her made me think he might be a little in love with his brother's wife.

Briggs laughed, clearly reading my thoughts. "I'm not in love with her. However, I greatly admire her."

"How did you know I was thinking that?"

“It’s an obvious conclusion. Even I can see the love I had for my subject in every stroke.”

The way he said the word *stroke*, low and sensual, sent a shiver down my spine. Why had that happened? He meant paint strokes. Not the stroke of his fingers against skin. Goodness, what was wrong with me?

“And I do love her,” Briggs continued. “In the same way I love Ella. She’s a muse of sorts. That hair. And the way she holds herself. Do you see?”

“I do.” Tendrils of her red hair were visible under the scarf. He’d mimicked the color, as well as the shine, perfectly. I should stop talking. He needed to concentrate. “I’m sorry I interrupted you.”

“Not at all. I enjoy the company. Your company in particular.”

My company in particular. Was that true? No, he was only being polite. Regardless, I flushed with pleasure.

I sneaked a few more glances his way, soaking up the splendor of a man doing what God had made him to do. His easel was set near the windows, the canvas secured between its top and bottom holders. Light bathed him in gold. Flecks of dust danced in a sunbeam. I could watch him work all day long and never tire of it. My gaze traveled to the view, where the blue sky was reflected on water as smooth as glass.

With care, I tapped the nails into the wood, making sure to get the pieces as snugly put together as possible. The task was made for me, I thought. I loved to work with my hands, doing something that required precision.

As I continued, I thought about what he’d said about Amelia being his muse. I wished I could be a muse to someone. I’d thought I’d at least be loved by Lionel. Even though I wasn’t exciting or beautiful, I believed we would grow old together, finding joy in our humble, quiet lives. All that time he’d been in love with someone else. Hanging my head, I took in deep breaths and gripped the wood between my fingers, willing the thought of Lionel away. But there it was

again. That pang in my chest. The utterly empty feeling that came from being replaced. Would it ever hurt less?

Forget him. That's what I would do. One day at a time until it no longer paralyzed me with grief and anger and jealousy. Here, it would be easier than at home. I'd done the right thing to come here.

When I straightened, Briggs was putting a different painting on the easel. This one was of Ella and Amelia sitting at a table in the garden.

The pain eased in my chest. How could one be sad in the midst of such artistry? "Oh, that's lovely," I said, forgetting my vow of silence. "The way you capture movement is remarkable. I can practically see the ribbons in their hats dancing in the wind."

"Do you think so?" He peered at it with a skeptical expression on his face. "I hoped to portray the absolute beauty of the afternoon and the two of them. They have such an affection for each other. That moment seemed such a milieu of friendship. As I said before, the image stayed with me, and I had to paint it."

"I almost feel that I'm there with them. I'm pulled into the moment."

He smiled, and his eyes lit up with what seemed to be genuine joy. "Thank you. I'll choose to believe you even though you may only be saying so out of obligation."

"I'm doing no such thing." I looked up and into his eyes. The pensive way he watched me gave me a shiver, which I hid by pressing my hands firmly together until it passed. He smelled good—salt mixed with fresh soap? A nick on his chin where he'd cut himself shaving drew my attention for a split second before meandering to his mouth. His lips were not full but not skinny. Somewhere in between. What would it feel like to have them pressed against mine?

Lionel had a puffy lower lip that Mable had always commented upon. I'd not realized she'd been kissing it herself. Anyway, Lionel's chin had been a little weak. Quite weak.

Briggs's square chin was not weak. Not in the least.

Lionel's kisses had been like tepid drinking water. Perfectly fine but not something I craved, like a glass of ice-cold water on a hot day. Or a warm, soothing tea on a cold day. Somewhere in between. I hadn't particularly liked them, now that I thought about it.

I'd not ever thought about kisses at all. Not really. With Lionel, it was out of obligation that I allowed him to kiss me. After we were married, there would be further surrender. I'd accepted that as part of being married but had never expected to enjoy myself. If it brought a baby, then it would all be worth it.

Strangely enough, in the presence of this man, my thoughts were practically lascivious.

A vein in his neck pulsed. I dragged my gaze away from his slowly. Like pulling a spoon through cold honey—that's how hard it was to return to my workbench.

"Faith."

I picked up one of the tiny nails, rubbing it between my thumb and finger, avoiding his gaze. "Yes?"

"I know you're in pain. I can see it in your eyes. And I wanted to say that in time, you will feel better. One day you'll wake up and not think of him at all."

"How do you know?"

"I've had a broken heart myself. Ages ago now."

"With whom?" That was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

His jaw clenched, and his gaze flickered toward the water. "The sister of a friend. Bit of a love triangle thing, and I wasn't the one chosen."

"Like me."

He tilted his head and scratched the base of his neck. "Yes, I suppose it is. I didn't think of yours as a triangle because you didn't know you were in one. I knew."

“How could any woman not choose you?” I clamped my hand over my mouth, as if that could push the words back inside.

His lips twitched, and his eyes did the twinkly thing I had grown to like very much in a short amount of time. “You’re too kind.” He bobbed his head in a gesture of deference. “I must say the same about you. This man of yours—what’s his name?”

“Lionel.”

“This Lionel must indeed be a fool.”

An image of Mable floated before me, blond and pretty with one of those pert noses everyone loved so much. Tall and slender with a long, graceful neck, she was always laughing and flirting. I’d thought her attention toward Lionel was harmless. “No, he couldn’t have possibly chosen me over her.”

“Nonsense.”

“I can see it all clearly now. How it happened before my eyes, and yet I was too foolish to see it. Mable, my friend, is very beautiful. She has one of those personalities that draws people in. They naturally gravitate toward her.”

My mouth seemed to have a mind of its own as the words tumbled from me. It felt good to talk about it all, even if it was with a man I hardly knew. “She paid a lot of attention to him, always flirting and loquacious. One could hardly get a word in if she were in the room. I liked it that way. I see that now, too. She could shine, and I could fade into the background. A woman like that instinctually knows how to flatter a man, build him up. She had at least a dozen men interested in her. Yet she chose Lionel. I think he might have been as surprised as I was by that.”

“Did she want him only because you had him?” Briggs asked. “I know women like that. Men, too.”

I thought about that for a moment, remembering how she’d been jealous of me when we were at school. Academics were the only place I had shone, and she didn’t. “I don’t know. But perhaps.”

“More than perhaps,” Briggs said, crossing his arms over his chest with a paintbrush sticking out from between his fingers, as if he’d forgotten it was there. “I’ll bet she’s already regretting her decision.”

“It’s too late now. They’re on their honeymoon.” I closed my eyes for a second as another wave of pain crashed into me. “At the seashore.”

“You poor girl. It’s no wonder your eyes are sad all the time.”

“They are?” Had he looked that closely? Why did that give me a little thrill?

“I’m afraid so. Which is a terrible shame. This Lionel doesn’t deserve your affection. Someday, he’ll regret his decision.”

“No, I’m so plain and dull.” My eyes filled. “I’m not a woman anyone would ever feel regret over, only relief that they escaped. No one ever noticed me except for Lionel, and he changed his mind once he knew me. Or when he was offered a prettier, shinier girl.”

“I see,” Briggs said while nodding his head. “I understand now what the problem is. You’ve never looked in a mirror before.”

“What?” Of course I had.

“You couldn’t have. If so, you would know how pretty you are.” His eyes crinkled, and he smiled kindly, almost as if I were a child who needed to be indulged. It was sweet. He was sweet.

And a liar.

Still, I liked his kind words. Very much.

Flushing, I turned away and picked up the frame I’d discarded during our discussion. I had basically fished for compliments. He must think I was the biggest fool he’d ever laid eyes upon. I’d gotten caught up in the moment and forgotten who I was.

“It’s your eyes a man would notice first,” Briggs said softly. “How perfectly round they are, and such a unique color brown. Then they might turn their attention to your pink mouth, shaped just right for your pointy chin.”

I touched a finger to my chin as I blurted out, “But what about my giant forehead, and look at my ears. Enormous for a woman.”

His brow wrinkled before he burst out laughing. “Yes, I’m right. You’ve not looked in a mirror. Not really. Not so you see yourself as you really are. There’s nothing wrong with your ears. Your forehead is wide, but that only indicates a superior brain.”

I laughed, a throaty giggle I had never once heard coming from me.

He grinned and brushed a few stray hairs from the side of my face, close enough I could feel his breath on my skin. “I’ve not heard your laugh before. It’s a nice sound. Your smile, although too infrequent, is rather like the sunshine. And dimples. How could anyone resist those dimples?”

I stared at him, astonished. No one but Papa had ever said such nice things to me. It made me feel like a light glowed inside me, spreading warmth throughout my body.

“Now, are you ready to get back to work?” Briggs asked. “Because I want to finish this painting and start a new one. I have just the subject.”

“One more thing,” I said bravely. “How long did it take before it stopped hurting so much?”

“A while,” he said, sounding evasive.

“A year? Five? Tell me, please.”

“Give it a few months. You’ll heal faster because you’re here. The sea air cures all ailments. Even broken hearts.”

I hoped he was right.

BRIGGS T U T H E R I D G E H A D me completely off-kilter. I'd assumed he would be a trickster and a rascal, given his reputation. Instead, I was discovering with every interaction a man like my father, sensitive and observant. Almost too much. He made me feel exposed, as if I were naked in front of him. Not to mention I couldn't seem to control my tongue, wagging all over the place.

That afternoon, I paced around the room, the braided rug soft beneath my feet. Should I go down to tea? No, I would read here in my room until supper. Enjoy the quiet. Recover from the day's work and the close proximity to the dashing Mr. Tutheridge.

I went to the window, looking out to the watering hole. A carriage with two horses was parked so the animals could drink. Did we have a visitor? Even more reason not to go down. I needed time to recover, and that meant time alone. Lionel had never understood that about me. He liked to be around people every moment of the day and had no empathy for my need for solitude.

A knock on my bedroom door startled me. I hurried over to open it, only to find Ella there. She had a tray in her hands, with a pot of tea and several cookies.

"Mother sent me up to check on you and bring tea," Ella said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but she insisted."

"That's kind of her. I'm fine. A little tired from today."

"Yes, Briggs has that effect on people."

"Why do you say that?" Was it not only I who found him overstimulating?

"The way he teases and is forever asking questions. It *could* be tiring for the reticent-minded. Am I right?"

"Perhaps a little." I realized we were still standing in the doorway. The tray was probably heavy. "I can take that from you."

"No, let me set it on the dresser for you."

“Thank you,” I said, opening the door so that she could pass by.

Ella placed the tray next to the pitcher of water that was always miraculously filled every time I returned to my room, then turned back to me. “Is there anything you need? It must be disorienting so far from home and living with strangers. Strange strangers, I might add.” She smiled.

“Not so strange. Mostly kind.”

“I can see already that Briggs respects you. He’s discerning about people. Although he may seem like a jokester. I hope you won’t find him too much. You’ll be such a help to him.”

“He’s not too much. Maybe I’m not enough,” I said lightly.

She narrowed her eyes, watching me. “I don’t think so. Quiet, yes. But I suspect there’s a lot going on in here.” She tapped her temple. “It may not seem like it now, but your fiancé’s betrayal might possibly be the catalyst for a whole new kind of life.”

“I would never have come here, that’s for certain.” Already, even though the ache still accompanied me everywhere I went, I could see how the island and the Tutheridge family had opened up the possibilities for the future.

“I’ll leave you to your tea,” Ella said at the doorway. She hesitated, a mixture of emotions passing over her face. “I think my mother’s going to marry Pastor Bains.”

I suddenly remembered seeing them dancing in the driveway. The way they’d clung to each other had been almost as remarkable as seeing them in the driveway in the middle of the night. However, it was too soon to marry, wasn’t it? Her husband dead such a short time? Given what I’d heard about Roland Tutheridge, however, the marriage had not been anything to mourn. She was seizing what happiness she could with the time she had left.

“Do you mind her remarrying?” I asked.

“I thought I would, but Pastor Bains is such a good man, and it’s what she wants. It’s frightening, though.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want her to get hurt. Men change after they marry. Or most do, anyway. After the wooing is over, the real man appears at the breakfast table.”

“Do you not want to be married someday?”

“Assuredly, no. I don’t want some man telling me what to do. He’d probably make me quit working.”

“Wouldn’t it be worth it to be married to the man you love?” I asked, wistful. I’d thought I would have already been a bride, walking down the aisle on my father’s arm at our little church. Mable would have been standing next to Lionel as my maid of honor.

They were next to each other all right, just not the way I’d imagined. Jealousy left such a bitter taste in my mouth. I hated it. Never again would I give my heart to any man. “No, you’re right. It’s too risky. A man can pretend to be something completely opposite of who he really is. Or when he suddenly announces he’s in love with your best friend.”

“You poor dear. What a cad. And perhaps worse is the loss of who you thought was your best friend. Any woman who does that to her friend deserves to be married to some idiot.”

I laughed. “Yes, she asked for it, didn’t she?”

“She got the worse end of it, I can assure you,” Ella said.

Coming from her mouth, I could almost believe it to be true.

“All these poor women having baby after baby with no help from the husband,” Ella said. “I see it all the time, and it reinforces my complete disinterest in marriage.”

I thought about that for a moment. Ella must witness a lot of hardship. It would be impossible not to be changed by what one saw. What kind of person took all that on when they didn’t have to? She could lie around this enormous house all day

reading or gossiping with a friend or doing endless needlepoints. Instead, she went out every day and cared for the people on this island.

“I’m glad you came here, Faith Fidget.” Ella smiled, reminding me a little of Briggs in that moment. They had the same mischievous grin.

“If I hadn’t run into Mrs. Mantle that day at the museum, I would never have come here,” I said. “I’m happy I did.”

Ella’s forehead creased. “It’s strange.”

“What’s that?”

“How Mrs. Mantle seemed to know exactly the right people to send out here.”

“She told me she has an instinct about these things,” I said.

“She must. You’ve no idea what Ben was like before Amelia came here. They’re the perfect match, but who could have predicted that?”

“Yes, it *is* odd.” I dismissed the sudden image of Briggs and me standing in front of a preacher. Not all of Mrs. Mantle’s clients married. Of course they didn’t. That was a mere coincidence. Briggs and me? *Don’t be ridiculous*, I told my brain.

“Well, however it came to be, I’m delighted to have two new friends,” Ella said. “It grows tiresome with only the boys around.”

“You’re inspiring to me,” I said spontaneously to Ella. “I’d like to be more like you. Brave and generous.”

“You, my dear, are both those things.” Her face lit up with a smile. “I’ll see you at supper.”

A WEEK WENT BY, and then another. Briggs and I fell into a habitual routine of working in the morning, taking a break for lunch, returning to the studio for a few more hours, and calling it a day by midafternoon. He encouraged me to spend my time off

however I wished. I did so, usually taking a long walk by the water and then returning to the house to read on the porch or in my room until it was time for tea.

Since that day when we'd had such an intimate talk, there was an ease between us. Other than Papa, I'd never felt as unguarded as I was with Briggs. He had this way about him, an air of acceptance, that made me feel as if I were fine just as I was. Perhaps it was because he'd known a lot of people in his young life. I probably seemed bland to him, given all of the colorful people he must know.

It was a warm day in the beginning of August. I had walked the length of the crescent beach and turned back, carrying a small piece of driftwood I'd found on the beach that I couldn't part with. I'd gathered a small collection of pebbles and driftwood since my arrival. One of the maids had found a basket for me to keep them in. Every night I pulled them out and looked at them, remembering exactly the location on the beach from which I'd gathered them. It was a featherbrained idea, I know, but I could have sworn that with each one, I was healing a bit more from Lionel's betrayal. I had no idea how many I would need to feel myself again. As Briggs had said, a broken heart was not healed overnight.

He was right about something else. The sea air had a great effect on me. With all the physical exercise—an artist's assistant did a lot of cleaning and stretching canvases and fetching things that needed fetching in combination with my walking—I was tired when I hit the pillow at night. Each day I woke feeling more rested and stronger than I had in years.

Staring at myself in the mirror that very morning, I'd not looked away in haste. Instead, I'd enjoyed seeing the pink to my cheeks and the way I'd filled out slightly in the arms and shoulders from all the physical labor. Even my hair seemed glossier and not quite so mousy blond.

I looked up to see Briggs sitting on a log not far from the trail that took us up to the house. He wore riding breeches, long brown boots, and a vest over a filmy white shirt. Without a hat, his hair bounced in the breeze. I watched him for a

moment, mesmerized by the utter allure of the man with his fine physique and sharp features.

He looked up and, spotting me, waved.

“Hello there,” he said, friendly as always.

My stomach fluttered. Why did that keep happening? There was a tingly feeling in my thighs as well. I’d only just seen him at lunch. How could his appearance make me feel as happy as a dog when his master returns home?

“I looked in the mirror this morning, and I liked what I saw,” I said in a rush.

He blinked before beaming. “You did? How excellent.”

“It’s this place. It’s made my cheeks rosy. Taken away the pallor to my pasty skin.”

“I believe it was there all along. Your natural beauty, that is. You’re only starting to see it, not that it’s newly appearing.”

I smiled, pleased by his remark. He always knew just what to say. “I don’t know if that’s correct, but it makes me happy to think so.”

“You’ll have suitors lined up out the door soon enough,” Briggs said. “I’ll have to vet them all to see if they’re worthy of my fair friend.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous,” I said, laughing.

He patted the spot next to him on the log. “Come sit. Show me what treasure you’ve found today.”

“How did you know?” I hadn’t told him about my findings or how I saved them in the basket.

“I see you walking out here from the studio,” Briggs said. “Sometimes, I happen to notice when you pick up a shell or pebble.”

“Or piece of driftwood.” I blushed, thinking of him watching me. Did I seem like a fool out there, collecting items he’d seen all his life?

“In fact, it’s one of the best parts of my days, watching you bloom right in front of my eyes. This beach brings you joy, which in turn does the same to me.”

“I didn’t know you were working in the afternoons,” I said. “Isn’t that your riding time?”

“I’ve been working on a new piece. Has me rather obsessed, actually.”

“Will you show it to me?” I’d not known he was working on anything other than his study of the seals. The original drawings had turned into five separate paintings.

“Maybe. When it’s done. I’ll have to see how it all turns out.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” I said, suddenly shy. He made me feel—what was it exactly? As if I were wrapped in a hug whenever I was near him. Yes, that was it. A warm, safe hug.

“Would you ever want to go riding with me?” Briggs asked. “I could saddle up Patches. He’s as old as the hills and very gentle.”

“Ride? On a horse? I’m more accustomed to the streetcar.”

He laughed. “If you’re going to experience the island, there’s no better way than on horse.”

“What would I wear?” Why that had been my first question, I cannot say. Whatever came to my mind, I blurted out whenever I was with him. I was a new Faith here. Lighthearted. Maybe even a teensy bit fun.

“Trousers would be best. That’s what Ella wears.”

“Trousers? On a girl?” I asked, shocked. I’d not seen Ella in pants before.

“When we were kids, she always did whatever the three of us boys did,” Briggs said. “Which meant there were occasional trousers involved. She says there’s no other way to ride. What does she say? ‘This sidesaddle nonsense is for sissies.’”

Thinking of Ella traipsing around after her brothers made me wish I could be more spontaneous and adventurous, with no qualms about anything. She would never let her gender keep her from doing whatever stole her fancy. “I would like to try, I guess. I’ll be terrified, and we might have to turn around right away.”

He turned to face me. His gaze flickered over my features, and he drew in a deep breath.

Watching his mouth curve into a circle, I imagined I was a wisp of fog, being carried gently inside him, down into his lungs, giving life to his heart.

“You really are pretty, you know. I’m glad you’re starting to see it the right way.”

“You’re kind and very sweet. I realize it’s not the first time you’ve heard that by one of the women you flatter.” I said it teasingly so that he could not see how much his words moved me.

“I don’t know that I’ve said it nearly enough to the women in my life.” He looked back out at the water, pensive, and perhaps a little sad.

“I’m sure you’ve said just the right thing. You always seem to.”

He twisted back around to look at me directly. “No, my dear. That’s only with you.”

“Me?” I squeaked.

“Yes, you,” he said softly. “You seem to bring out the best in me. I can’t say that most people have. Your goodness rubs off on me.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.” I looked up to meet his eyes for a quick second before ducking away, bashful. Looking into his eyes had a way of making the ground shift beneath me. Would I be able to stand without falling?

BRIGGS

I was restless and unfocused, prowling around the studio. I'd not slept well the night before, waking from a dream that had my heart pounding and parts of my body alert. I'd not fallen back to sleep until it was almost time to get up and start the day. And my thoughts during those hours? Faith Fidget. Prompted by the most sensual dream I'd ever had about any woman. Ever.

I wanted her. I'd never thought it possible to be so captivated by a woman so quickly. But she'd captured my attention, and it didn't seem particularly keen to go elsewhere.

Faith, who had been quietly sorting through old tubes of paint for the last hour, looked up at me as I traversed yet again from one end of the small studio to the other.

"What is it?" Faith asked softly. "Is there something you need? You're like a restless tiger."

"I'm not sure what's wrong with me today." A lie, but what's a man to say to the object of his obsession? "Other than I don't feel like being inside. Do you want to go on a drive with me? We could go out to the lighthouse so you could meet my half-brother."

"You have a half-brother?" Her eyes widened in surprise. "I had no idea."

"Right." I shook my head. "I feel as if you know everything about me, but you don't."

"I'd like to," she whispered.

"Is it possible?" I asked before I could fully take in what she'd just said. "To truly know someone?"

She pushed the baby-fine hair at the base of her scalp off her neck and cocked her head to one side. "I think you can tell someone everything that's ever happened to you and all your thoughts on every subject and still not fully know them. There

will always be certain feelings that are beyond exact description.”

“Plus, we forget a lot of what happens to us.” She wanted to know everything about me? I wanted to know everything about *her*.

“You have a half-brother?” Faith asked, bringing us back to the original subject.

“Yes, I have a half-brother.” As succinctly as I could, I told her about Rhett and how we came to know he was related to us. “We’d known him all our lives and had no clue who he really was.”

“How did he take the news?” Faith asked. “It must have been a shock to you all.”

“Indeed it was. He was gracious, to say the least. I’d have thought he’d be excited about the money.”

“Money?”

“We gave him his share when we sold the shipyard and the business.”

“After living in the lighthouse, I would guess he was thrilled,” Faith said. “But perhaps he’s like me and doesn’t think of wealth the same way others do.”

“How do you think about wealth?” I asked, curious.

“It’s of no consequence. As in, if I am fed, have a warm and safe place to live, meaningful work, and a few extra pennies to enjoy buying a new book or magazine or some other small trinket, what more would I need?”

Meaningful work. Is that what painting was for me? Or was it merely a decadent hobby?

“Is painting a bit self-indulgent?” I asked out loud. “I mean, there are hungry people. People I could help somehow if I was clever enough. Like Ella.”

“Not at all. Let me think how to say it.” She scrunched up her forehead in that way I’d come to understand meant she was thinking about something carefully. “You’re forgetting

something important. Art is needed in the world. Beauty is needed. You provide that through your paintings. We don't value art enough in this world, especially in America. We're always thinking about how to become wealthier and more powerful, but those among us who are talented or gifted like you, well, their job is to give people an escape from their troubles."

"Escape?" I wasn't sure what she meant.

"When someone gets lost in a painting, as I often do—it provides rest to a troubled mind. Falling into the world depicted with your brushstrokes is like traveling for those without the means to do so. Art takes us to places we would never be able to visit otherwise. It provides comfort to those in pain. We can understand ourselves better and those around us, too. For those with artistic gifts, I can't help but think you're obligated to leave the world more beautiful."

Throughout this little speech, I was alarmed at the emotions rising up from places I didn't even know I had. My eyes were actually hot, and my throat sore. There was such elegance and insight within this tiny woman. How had that Lionel fool ever let her go? He must have been out of his mind. Faith Fidget was a woman a man could build his whole life around. She could be his muse, inspiration, best friend, and confidante.

His? Or mine?

"I've never heard anyone speak of art in quite that way," I said hoarsely. "It's rather illuminating."

She flushed. "I get carried away sometimes. Especially when it comes to art."

"I like it. You've made me feel...good. Very good."

"I'm happy to do so," Faith said, ducking her chin and blushing further.

I had to get out of here, or I might pull her into my arms for what would surely be an unwanted kiss. "What do you say? Shall we take a carriage ride? I'll have one of the boys hitch the horses for us."

“I would like to see the lighthouse. I’ve never been close to one before.”

“It’s a work of art in itself,” I said.

“How wonderful,” she said. “I can hardly wait.”

“We’ll go right after lunch. Will that do?”

“Yes, that’ll do just fine,” she said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

The way she beamed at me was as if the sun had sent itself straight into my heart.

THE WEATHER PROVIDED one of the most splendid days of the summer thus far. Flowers were in bloom along the side of the dirt road that took us into town. Green meadows gave off the scent of fresh grass.

We stopped in town at the dry goods store so that I could pick up a package of yarn for Mother. Michael Moon was behind the counter helping another customer when we walked in. The familiar scent of sawdust and oak barrels filled my nostrils, followed by a waft of brown sugar from an open bin. Items were packed onto every shelf: farming tools; spools of cloth; bins filled with oyster crackers, flour, sugar, and candy.

I made a beeline over to the black licorice and grabbed several. “Would you like a sweet?” I asked Faith.

“I wouldn’t mind a peppermint or two.” She smiled as if remembering a fond memory. “Papa would always have a few of these behind the counter at our shop. I allowed myself one an afternoon. They freshen breath, you know.”

“Do they now?” I held up the string of licorice. “I prefer this, even though they’ve been known to make my teeth black.”

“You’ll look like a ghoul.” She moved to the other side of the bin, eyes dancing. “And licorice is the work of the devil. Nasty tasting—that’s what it is.”

I laughed out loud, which made her giggle. The cutest giggle that had ever graced the world, I felt sure.

She was joking with me. Even poking fun, one might say. All of which was interesting and thrilling, I had to admit. Faith Fidget was starting to open up a little, show me more of her true self. She had a good sense of humor. I liked that about a person. I loved the way her eyes sparkled when she was relaxed.

“Why don’t you like licorice?” I asked.

“It has a foul taste. Have you not noticed?”

“I think people either love it or hate it. There’s no in-between. The same could be said about me, I suppose.”

“No one could hate you.”

“You might be surprised,” I said.

“I would be. *Very* surprised. You’re good-natured and such fun to be around. No one could be in a sour mood for long around you.”

Fun. It wasn’t the first time I’d been described that way. I never minded. In fact, it was a triumph of sorts, given the darkness of my childhood. Maybe I’d overcompensated by telling jokes and teasing.

She was peering at me with curiosity, almost as though she could hear my thoughts. Which had the strange effect of making me want to tell her everything. “When it was hard as a kid, I found it cheered me up to make Benedict laugh. We were always in it together, you know. When he laughed, I felt like a king.”

“That’s sweet and a little heartbreaking,” Faith said softly. “Even if you do like licorice.”

The woman Michael Moon had been assisting was on her way out by then. She gave us a strange look as she passed by us.

“Come along,” I said. “Let’s get Mother’s package and go on with the rest of our day.”

Michael, who I'd been afraid of in my younger years, gave me a curt nod as we approached. He wasn't what one would describe as good-natured or fun. His light blue eyes often seemed cold and judgmental. In fact, he seemed like someone who would benefit from more laughter.

As one of the men who had played poker with Father, Amelia had him on her suspect list. If there was anyone I could see murdering Father, it was him. He indeed had motive. My father took 50 percent of his profits. In addition, Michael had secrets, which Father had held over him. He'd come here after a scandal in his previous life. Something about embezzling money for an operation his mother desperately needed. Father had given him a place to set up shop under the agreement that he took half of the till. With Michael's cool disposition, it was not hard to imagine him plotting a murder and carrying it out.

At the same time, standing here making small talk with him, it seemed out of the realm of possibility. What would have changed to make him suddenly want out from under Father's thumb?

"Sheriff been by here much?" I asked. "He's come out to the house quite a few times to ask me the same questions."

"Nah. He figures he knows where I was that night, I guess." Michael slid the plain paper package across the counter. "This is for your mother. Tell her I added a new yarn I discovered. Made locally here by some woman as old as the hills. It's purple, so I knew she'd like it."

My mother did like purple. To his credit, Michael remembered details about his customers. In fact, he was known for the gift of anticipating a customer's needs before they realized what they knew themselves. In addition, all anyone had to do was ask him for a certain item, and he went to great lengths to procure it. Ella had asked him for a scalpel, and he'd found one for her within weeks. I didn't ask what she needed it for. Her line of work made me light-headed if I thought too hard about her day-to-day activities.

“You ask me,” Michael said, “I don’t think White has enough intelligence to figure out who did it. I doubt we’ll ever know. Which, in most cases, won’t bother any of us one iota.”

“What about justice?” Faith asked. “Isn’t it important that you all know the truth?”

“Perhaps.” Michael shrugged. “But it won’t bring him back, and I’m fairly certain no one wants his return anyway.”

“You might be right about that,” I said lightly, hoping to get off the topic. Lately, it seemed all of my interactions with townfolk were about the murder. That was one reason I hoped it would be solved. How else would we ever move away from the tragedy and start living normally? I knew most of the women in the community were scared a killer was living among us. They didn’t feel safe at night in their own homes. That was not how we wanted people to feel here on the island.

“Bunch of folks have been buying locks.” Michael pointed with his chin toward the glass case where he kept the expensive items. “Never thought I’d see that here.”

“It’s shaken a lot of people.” My gaze traveled to a silver mirror with an ornate handle. Perfect for a young lady to look at herself. Faith needed that mirror. I put the thought aside. Later, I might come back and get it for her. As a token of my gratitude for her hard work. Yes, that was all. Not because it was the type of gift a man gave his sweetheart.

“Is that sister-in-law of yours still snooping around?” Michael asked.

“Amelia? Yes,” I said. I didn’t appreciate the word *snooping*. It made her sound sordid and overly curious.

“I hope she keeps herself out of trouble. Whoever killed Roland might not like her poking her nose into it. She’s an outsider, after all.”

“She’s no longer an outsider,” I said. “She’s a Tutheridge now.”

“That didn’t take long. She sure had her sights on your brother, didn’t she?”

He was starting to really irritate me. Why did he have to be so hostile and ugly? Especially about Amelia, who was only trying to help. And as far as she and Benedict were concerned, they were truly in love. There was no way it could have gone any other way. They understood each other. It was a relationship to be envied. If you were interested in that kind of thing, which I was not.

I paid Michael and then turned to leave. Before I could do so, Michael asked about Mother and Pastor Bains. “Sounds to me like you may have a new stepfather before you know it. I’ll look forward to that party. I’m sure it’ll be fancy.” He accompanied the last part with a sneer.

Why did he always seem so confrontational and negative? Who was he to say anything about my mother? If our parties were too fancy for him, he could simply stay home.

“We’re looking forward to having Bains join the family,” I said. Not entirely truthful, but I wasn’t telling this man about my worries. It was best not to show a man like Moon any weaknesses.

“He’s barely cold in the ground, isn’t he?” Michael asked in a tone I couldn’t interpret. “Old Timothy wasted no time. Makes a man wonder.”

“Wonder what?” I asked. My free fist balled at my side. I pressed the package tightly against my chest.

“How long he’d been contemplating such a union,” Michael said. “And if Roland was in the way. You know what I mean?”

I did know, but I played dumb. “Timothy Bains is a man of great integrity. Whether he had feelings for my mother before Father’s death is neither here nor there. He didn’t make a move until my mother was no longer married. Thus, he has nothing to answer to. In my opinion, anyway.”

“Sure. I meant no harm,” Michael said. “Just curious if any of you kids were worried about the rush of it all.”

“We’re not,” I said firmly. “Faith, we should be on our way.”

She nodded and led the way out of the store and into the fresh air.

“What a horrible man,” Faith said quietly as we walked back to the carriage where I’d tied the horses to a tree.

“Yes, isn’t he?”

We didn’t speak further of Michael Moon, but his words stayed with me as I drove us out of town toward the lighthouse.

UPON OUR ARRIVAL, we saw Rhett outside the lighthouse chopping wood. He straightened and tipped his cap as I pulled up to a thick madrone. It would be a good spot to tie the horses, as there was a patch of green grass to nibble until our return.

Rhett, dressed in his short sleeves, with a set of suspenders holding up a pair of thick tan pants, had obviously spent the day working outside. The woodshed was nearly full with green pieces of madrone. Around here, a lot of people burned madrone for heat and cooking, as it was a hard, dense wood. However, it was impossible to start before it dried. All you would get is a lot of smoke and hissing. Thus, the trees were felled and chopped during the summer months. By fall, they would be nice and dry and useful for a slow burn. Rhett had told me the lighthouse grew frigid during the winter, but the woodstove kept them cozy enough as long as he continued to feed the fire.

Rhett wore a red-and-black cap over his thick brown hair. Muscles rippled under the thin texture of his shirt. As he approached, he snatched the cap from his head and smiled broadly. “Well, hello. What a surprise.”

Benedict said he was almost pretty, this half-brother of ours, and I had to agree. Although he was rugged and wide-shouldered like Benedict, his face had more delicate features—a slender nose, full lips, and high cheekbones.

“What brings you by?” Rhett asked. He was a man who could put anyone at ease with just a smile. There was an innate

goodness about him as well as a guilelessness. I didn't think he ever had an ulterior motive or selfish thought.

"Just wanted to come by and say hello." I hopped from the carriage and held out my hand to Rhett. "I hope you don't mind us dropping in?"

"I'm happy to see you. Anytime." He pumped my hand in greeting before tying the horses to the tree.

While he did that, I hustled around to the other side of the carriage to help Faith. Her hand seemed small in my burly one as I gently assisted her to the ground.

"This is Miss Faith Fidget," I said to Rhett. "From Boston. Mother hired her to help me at the studio."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Fidget," Rhett said. "I'd kiss your hand, but I'm filthy." His hands were indeed dirty, and he'd been sweating in the afternoon sun.

"It's nice to meet you," Faith said shyly. "I've always wanted to see a lighthouse."

"We have one of those all right." Rhett gestured toward a green door at the base of the lighthouse. "My mother will be happy to have a visitor. She's just made a batch of coffee cake. Since our unexpected inheritance, so to speak, she's been baking all the time—frivolous things like coffee cake—and singing while she does it. I didn't know how much money weighed upon her. I mean, I did, but it wasn't clear how much until we no longer had to fret about whether we have enough to keep us fed and dry."

"I'm glad to hear it. And your father?" I asked. "Is he feeling better?"

His face lit up. "Yes, he's much better. I haven't seen him feeling this well in years. Ella has him on a regimen of red meat and beets. She said she suspected his iron was low, and it sure has helped." He looked over at Faith, lowering his voice. "My parents are in their seventies, and the last few years, they've had some health problems. Ella, however, has helped tremendously. That and having a little extra to spend on food, like beef."

“I’m glad the money’s helping,” I said.

“Mother’s bought a new table and chairs. She was like a kid at Christmas,” Rhett said, his fondness for his mother obvious. “Growing up with so much love, I never felt like I lacked anything I needed, but I’m starting to see how much they sacrificed for me.” He looked over at Faith again. “I suppose you know our sordid tale?”

“Oh, yes,” Faith said. “Briggs told me all about it. What a shock all of this must have been.”

“Yes, a little bit.” Rhett smiled as he reached out to pat my shoulder. “This one here’s been generous, as have the rest of the family. They made sure I wasn’t left out when they sold the business. I’m not sure most would have behaved that way. Makes me proud to be a member of the family.”

“We’re proud of you,” I said, meaning it. Rhett was a man I greatly admired. His strength of character shone in everything he did, from taking care of his older parents to running the lighthouse. He never complained, but I imagined the dark winter nights must be tiresome and lonely. I’d never once seen him out at the pub, either. Whereas the rest of the men on the island imbibed regularly. Including yours truly.

“As a matter of fact,” Rhett said, “Mother and Father are going to move into a house. We just decided, and I hired the builders. They’re finally going to retire, and it’s all because of your family.”

“Our family,” I said, correcting him. “I’m pleased to hear it. They’ve earned some rest.”

“Agreed,” Rhett said. “Mother thinks I should hire a housekeeper who can cook for me. We’ll see about that.”

“I can’t tell you how much Faith has done for me since she arrived,” I said. “You’d do well to hire someone.”

“I’ll think about it. I just don’t know how I feel about another person sharing my living quarters. There’s only two small bedrooms, you know. But I can’t cook to save my life, so it may be necessary.”

“You ever think of doing something else?” I asked.

“What else would I do? This lighthouse is my home. I love it. Every single day I get to look at the most beautiful view in the world. I’d never want to give it up.”

He nodded toward the tall, skinny building that kept so many safe. “Come on in, Miss Fidget. I’ll give you the grand tour, such as it is.”

FAITH

The lighthouse had three levels to it, plus an addition of a kitchen off the bottom floor. The kitchen was similar to many I'd seen at home, other than the fact that it was attached to a lighthouse, with a wood-burning cook stove, farmhouse sink, and round table where they took their meals.

The tall structure was shaped like a hexagon so that when inside the rooms had six distinct walls, making for odd but whimsical rooms. Their main living quarters was also the Watch Room with a bank of windows and a long telescope pointed out to sea. It was decorated simply, with a braided rug on the floor, two ancient but comfortable-looking leather chairs, and a small sofa. An ongoing chess game was displayed on a small table with two hardback chairs on either side. A woodstove on one of the walls was unlit, but I could easily understand how needed it would be in the winter.

"This is where we spend most of our time," Rhett said to me. "From here we can see all the boats and ships that come our way. Up above, the lantern room is made of glass, and the lantern's lit at all times." He explained there was also a gallery deck, a platform located at the top of the lighthouse.

Rhett's parents immediately endeared themselves to me, mostly because they reminded me of Papa, gentle with twinkly eyes that peered at me with interest. Mr. Rivers was small and slightly stooped, with thick white hair and neatly trimmed beard. He wore a pair of tan oilskin overalls. "I'm sorry for my appearance," he said to me when he shook my hand. "I didn't think we'd have such a lovely lady visit today."

"I hope we haven't intruded," I said, returning his shy smile. "But I wanted to meet you and see the lighthouse."

"We love having guests," Mrs. Rivers said.

Mrs. Rivers was shorter and rounder than her husband. A simple gray dress matched her hair, which was pulled away from her face and pinned in a bun. Deep wrinkles around her

mouth and green eyes evoked the feeling of intelligence as well as wisdom. She hugged me instead of shaking my hand, pulling me against her soft bosom. For a moment, I was afraid I might cry. A mother's embrace. Something I'd never had was comforting and touched me deeply. Mrs. Rivers was the kind of mother we all wanted. At least the kind that I'd have wanted. What would it have been like to grow up with her guidance and love? Would I be less worried and more serious?

They insisted we stay for a piece of cake and a cup of coffee. "My wife makes a good pot," Mr. Rivers said with a hint of pride. "No watered-down coffee here."

Briggs looked to me with a question in his eyes. Would I want to stay or not? I nodded my consent, only too happy to stay in the charming kitchen with these warm people. Even if it meant I had to pretend to like coffee. I couldn't bear to hurt Mrs. Rivers.

"We'd love to," Briggs said.

How thoughtful that he had asked me first, I mused, as I took a seat at the round table in the Riverses' kitchen. Lionel would never have done so. He'd have plowed ahead with only his own desires in mind.

With each passing day, I was starting to see aspects of Lionel I had not seen clearly when I still believed he loved me. Also, and I hated to admit this even to myself, spending time with Briggs had a lot to do with my discoveries. Observing the way he treated his sister, mother, and Bebe—and yes, me, had changed my perspective.

As the days went on, the real Lionel was emerging in my mind. I could see now how carelessly he'd treated me and how little I had expected of him. Had I taught him how to disregard me because I did so myself? If I'd believed in my own worth, perhaps he would have too.

How had I not seen him for who he truly was? The answer to that question would hopefully become clearer. All I knew now was that wedding him would have been a mistake. It was also possible that his betrayal was the best thing that could have happened to me. I never thought I'd believe that to

be true. But with each passing day, his grip on me loosened. Soon, it might be nothing at all. When the sting of the loss was no longer, and I was free, what would I do with the rest of my life? Who would be in it?

“What brought you here to the island?” I asked Mr. and Mrs. Rivers before taking a sip of coffee. It wasn’t so bad after all. Mr. Rivers was right. His wife made a great cup of coffee, rich and not nearly as biting as I remembered. Were there other things in life I should give another chance?

“Ah, well, that was just dumb luck,” Mr. Rivers said. “We’d just married and had no prospects. The two of us, young and not particularly clever, decided coming west would be a good idea.”

“We’d heard Seattle was full of opportunities,” Mrs. Rivers said.

Mr. Rivers nodded and continued. “When we got there, it was nothing more than a little town, kind of gray and damp, compared to some of the country we’d seen.”

“But then on the third morning, the sun came out,” Mrs. Rivers said. “And we saw that it was actually the most beautiful place in the world.”

“All that rain made everything green,” Mr. Rivers said.

“And Puget Sound is very blue,” she said, as she cut a piece of coffee cake the size of my head and pushed the plate toward me.

“In the paper that morning, we saw an advertisement for a lighthouse keeper here on the island. Strangely enough, my grandfather had been one, and my father had often told me stories of growing up in such a solitary way. He didn’t mind as a child, but the moment he turned eighteen, he left for the city. He told me he wanted to be around people, away from the sound of the whistling wind and the crash of waves on the shore.”

“Yet Frederick felt the calling,” Mrs. Rivers said. “It skipped his father and was passed right on to him.”

“Remarkable,” I said.

“Yes, we thought so, too,” Mrs. Rivers said.

“I applied for the job and got it. There wasn’t much here when we arrived. The lighthouse had been built to help the Canadian and American ships, but there was no store or school.”

“Or church,” Mrs. Rivers said.

“All that came later. After Mr. Tutheridge came.” Mr. Rivers’s expression darkened, but he said nothing further about Briggs’s father.

“In those first years, it was only the two of us for days and days,” Mrs. Rivers said. “We prayed for a baby but one never came.”

“Still, we were happy.” Mr. Rivers sent his wife a fond gaze. “She was the toughest woman you’d ever want to see. Putting up with all of it without complaint.”

“I loved it,” Mrs. Rivers said.

Her husband nodded in agreement. “We learned the ways of the animals and birds. Gloried in the harbor seals and the smells of the salt water. This place is part of us now, and we’re part of it.”

“Was it lonely?” I asked. “All those long winter days?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Mrs. Rivers said. “We had each other.”

Mr. and Mrs. Rivers exchanged a look between them. One of such pure love that it almost brought tears to my eyes. What would it be like to have that kind of love? To spend almost every day of your life with someone and still look at them that way?

“We had pets to keep us company, too. There were quite a few lighthouse cats over the years. This one here is Mousetrap,” Mr. Rivers said, gesturing toward the black cat asleep on the table next to the window. “Kept the mice away and our laps warm in the evenings.”

“And finally, Rhett.” Mrs. Rivers beamed at her son. “An answer to our prayer. A baby boy to raise.”

“We never knew such joy as that,” Mr. Rivers said.

“A little long in the tooth we were,” Mrs. Rivers said.

“Nearing fifty.” Mr. Rivers shook his head. “But nothing like a child to keep a man young.”

I stole a look at Rhett, expecting him to be embarrassed, but he looked as pleased to hear the words as they were to say them.

“A lot of love here in this old place,” Mrs. Rivers said. “Day after day of it. What a life we’ve had.”

“Rhett mentioned you were thinking of moving into town?” Briggs asked.

“We figure it’s time for Rhett to find himself a wife,” Mrs. Rivers said. “And everyone knows a house should not have more than one mistress.”

“We’re old,” Mr. Rivers said. “The stairs have gotten hard for us.”

“You both deserve some rest,” Briggs said. “You’ve served your community well all these years.”

“You’re kind to say so,” Mr. Rivers said. “It’s been our privilege to help keep the ships and boats safe.”

“Finding a wife may prove more difficult,” Rhett said lightly.

I glanced up from setting my cup back in its saucer to see Mrs. Rivers peering at me, as if I were a piece of fish at the market. Would I be a good choice for dinner? Or, in this case, her son?

As much as I could imagine the joy of living out here in this adorable, unique home, I wouldn’t want to be away from Briggs.

I didn’t have eyes for anyone else.

What?

Oh, dear. No, this couldn’t be happening. I was supposed to be mending my broken heart, not finding another way to

break it.

“You have your eye on anyone?” Briggs asked Rhett. There was a new tetchy quality in his voice. Had something annoyed him?

“Not really. I wish I could say yes, but the island has so few women, and most of them are married or too young.” Rhett’s eyes twinkled. “Ella’s promised to keep her eyes open for prospects. However, they’d have to agree to live here with me. This is my life’s work, and I would not be able to leave my post.”

“The right woman will come along. She’ll love the lighthouse as much as you do,” I said, surprising myself. When had I become so positive about love?

“I hope you’re right, Miss Fidget,” Rhett said. “In the meantime, I’m going to have to hire a housekeeper once my mother retires to a life of leisure. I can’t cook to save my life.”

“I’ve spoiled him,” Mrs. Rivers said without any trace of remorse. “It was my pleasure to do so, even though I may have ruined him for his future bride.”

“He’s not the only man around who doesn’t know how to cook,” Briggs said. “I’m in that camp myself.”

“What about you, young man?” Mrs. Rivers asked. “Will you ever settle down here on the island with a nice young lady?”

“A nice young lady would not want to settle with me anywhere,” Briggs said. “I’m not the marrying kind.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Rivers asked, a knowing glint in his eyes. “That’s a man’s famous last words right before he falls head over heels in love and finds himself standing in front of a preacher with the love of his life on his arm.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I asked, caught up in the romance of it all.

“Indeed it did,” Mr. Rivers said. “I was determined to be a bachelor. Untamed and free. Then this beauty here stole my heart.”

“He’s a silly man, as you can see.” Mrs. Rivers’s eyes shone, and for a moment I saw the young woman she once was. The one who had captured Mr. Rivers’s love and loyalty all those years ago. Being here gave me a feeling I couldn’t quite name. A yearning for something intangible that I knew would fill me up and give my life purpose.

I thought of my papa then. All the years he’d been alone after my mother left. Had he ever wished to meet someone and marry again? He might have wanted it but not allowed himself to dream because of me. His priority had been keeping his little girl safe from harm but also from further rejection. I’d already lost one mother. He wouldn’t have wanted to risk another abandonment or worse, a woman who wished I wasn’t there.

“What is it, dearest?” Mrs. Rivers asked me. “Is the cake all right?”

“Yes, it’s wonderful.” I cut a bit of it with my fork, as if I were interested in eating when I wasn’t hungry. The homesickness pushed any hunger away. “I miss my papa, though.” My voice quivered, and I swallowed to get control of myself before continuing. “He would love to see this lighthouse and the island and the seals. Honestly, he wouldn’t believe the beauty of this island.”

“We should bring him here,” Briggs said with an intensity that made my heart thump harder.

“What? No, he couldn’t come here,” I said. “He owns his own bakery back in Boston.”

“We already have one of those,” Mrs. Rivers said, nodding as if that explained everything. “When will he retire?”

“Probably never,” I said. “We’re not in a financial situation where that would be possible. But it would be a dream come true. I’m finding myself falling in love with this place and don’t know how I will possibly leave and return to the city. I can think here. And breathe.”

I became aware of Briggs’s foot tapping under the table. Was he restless again as he’d been this morning? Did he want

to go?

“There was no young man back home?” Mrs. Rivers asked.

Briggs and I exchanged a knowing glance between us before I answered. “Yes, but he decided to marry my best friend instead of me,” I said flatly. It was getting easier to say the words. I didn’t feel the ache in my chest that had been there for months and months.

“I’m sorry, dearie,” Mrs. Rivers said. “How awful.”

“I thought so,” I said. “For a few months, I couldn’t think of anything else but the shock and rejection. It came out of the blue. We’d been planning a small, modest wedding at our church and a few weeks before, he called it off and became engaged to Mable instead. On the same day we had the church booked.”

“Very bad manners,” Mr. Rivers said, clucking his tongue.

“I agree,” Rhett said. “You’re lucky you didn’t marry him.”

“I think you’re right,” I said. “Anyway, it doesn’t hurt as much as it did. Since I came here everything feels different.”

I would have liked to say more but knew it was unwise to share such personal thoughts with people I just met. In addition, Briggs should never know how much of my changed perspective was because of him. He might even be appalled at the idea. Thus, I would never tell him of my burgeoning feelings. He was a nice man. A good man. One who would hate to hurt me, even though it would be inevitable. He’d said so himself he wasn’t the marrying kind. Mousy wallflowers didn’t inspire a man to change his ways. A man like Briggs would need a force of a woman. A queen or lady so beautiful and charming that he would fall in love as Mr. Rivers had and give up his ways so that he might have her by his side.

Mrs. Rivers was nodding her head approvingly at me. “You were right to come here and start fresh. Your father must

have been sorry to see you go but knew it was what you needed.”

“He was the one who convinced me to come,” I said. “I didn’t think I should leave, but he insisted.”

“She loves art,” Briggs said gruffly. “He knew it was a chance for her to do work she enjoyed.”

“I would like to meet him someday,” Mrs. Rivers said. “Perhaps we can convince him to move here if he were to visit?”

I sighed with joy at the thought. “If he could sell the shop and have enough to live on out here, he might consider it. However, I did his books and I’m not sure it would ever be feasible. Moving across country with no means of income wouldn’t be especially wise, would it?”

“Yes, only the young are foolish enough for that,” Mr. Rivers said softly. “When there’s nothing to lose.”

The tapping under the table resumed. What had gotten into Briggs? He was full of nervous energy.

“This has been lovely,” I said. “But we should probably get home.”

“Yes, and let you people resume your day,” Briggs said. “Thank you for the coffee and the cake. It’s been such a nice afternoon.”

We said our goodbyes and drove off into the late-afternoon light. Rhett and his parents stood at the base of the lighthouse waving until we rounded the corner.

“Thank you for taking me there,” I said. “They remind me so much of my papa that I felt like I’d known them a long time.”

“Did you mean it about staying here?” Briggs asked, glancing over at me.

The question surprised me. “I always mean what I say. Why do you ask?”

“Curious, I suppose. I had my doubts about you staying. I wasn’t sure you’d want to.”

“Why didn’t you ask?”

“I didn’t want you to feel obligated to stay if you were unhappy. I’m glad you like it here.” His voice was as soft as the silky sunbeams that filtered through the trees. “You won’t want to stay forever, though. You’ll want to meet a man and marry. Have a family. Be near your father.”

All statements instead of questions. Did he think he knew me well enough to make these assumptions? It should bother me but for some reason, it made me feel safe, as if someone understood me well enough to predict my future. Even though he was dead wrong.

“No one’s going to marry me,” I said. “At some point, I’ll have to accept that my adventure’s over and go home. Don’t worry, though, I would never leave unexpectedly.”

He didn’t say anything. What could he say, after all? Agreeing with me, although truthful, would be unkind, and that wasn’t his way.

After a moment, he asked, “If your father could come here, do you think he’d want to?”

“He wants to be wherever I am, and he would love it here. I just know he would.” I thought about the longing in the letters he sent thus far, written in between his lines of assurances that all was well in his world. I knew him better than that. The nights were lonely. He missed our easy companionship and chatter. He would never say so, of course—much too generous to risk making me feel guilty and coming home because of it.

“It would be a dream come true, but one must be realistic,” I said.

“I suppose so.” Briggs was quiet the rest of the way home, making me curious to know what was on his mind but too shy to ask.

BRIGGS

Something strange was happening to me. I was not sure what to call it, other than an obsession I had with Faith Fidget. I couldn't go a second without thinking about her. All the cute things she said, the ways she'd opened up to me about her life, all stirred feelings in me I didn't think I was even capable of.

Resisting her was impossible. This had never happened to me before. Sure, before now, women had entertained and amused me. Many of them I'd liked and admired. This was different. She was like no one I'd ever met. Her compassion and insight into art and the way she seemed to actually like me for me, not because I was rich or witty like so many of the women I'd associated with in the past.

With Faith, everything was different. The way she listened to me as if she respected me, despite my past.

All of which left me confused and unsure of what to do next.

When she'd told Rhett's parents that she wanted to stay here, my heart had soared. It has also made me want to make a move of some kind. One that would keep her close to me. Keep her on the island and in my house and God help me, in my bed. The only way that was happening was if she agreed to be my wife. Which, honestly, why would she? I was not the man for her. She needed a churchgoing family type. Someone she could build her life around. Not a scalawag artist with a notorious past.

The afternoon after we'd gone to visit the Riverses, I left the studio early with the intent to find Benedict and talk to him. He was the only one I could converse with about such matters. Perhaps he would have advice?

I arrived at his house midafternoon. Amelia was in the vegetable garden, picking pods from a row of climbing peas. A wide-brimmed hat nearly as broad as an umbrella shielded her fair skin from the sun.

What a pretty sight, I thought, as I took in the house Benedict had constructed from wood and rocks, using them as one might bricks. Flowerpots spilled over with sweet alyssum, petunias, pansies, lobelia, and verbena.

I'd not anticipated that Amelia would fall passionately in love with gardening. Although her love of food made a vegetable and herb garden even more attractive. Meanwhile, her husband continued to construct a romantic haven for his bride. Since I'd come out to visit, a trellis with creeping rosebushes had been added to the side garden. Although, they were small, by next summer, they would start their invasion of the trellis. I could already imagine the pink flowers and their scent.

What a pretty scene it was.

Amelia set aside her basket of peapods to come out of the fenced vegetable garden. The bunnies and deer couldn't be trusted not to invite themselves to supper. "Briggs, what brings you by?" She tilted the brim of her hat up to get a better look at me.

"I wanted to see if Benedict had time for a chat." As soon as I said it, I felt needy and overly emotional. This was my brother, though. He wouldn't mind if I were either of those things. It was only that I was not accustomed to feeling this way. Laying out my troubles was not something I did. Not even with my brother.

"He's in his shop," Amelia said, pointing to a dwelling across from the house where Benedict had built a space for his tools and supplies. He'd put workbenches in as well so that he could putter about with his projects. "He's making us a new table. He says we have to have a large one for all the children we're going to have."

I peered at her. Did she mean she was going to have a baby? They'd only been married a few months. Had it happened already?

"Not yet," she said. "But hopefully soon."

I left her to tend her garden and sauntered over to Benedict's workshop acting as if I had nothing urgent to discuss when really I wanted to spring there, sit him down, tell him everything, and beg him for answers.

When I entered the shop, he was using a plane and scraper to smooth away the ridges on an already-constructed table made from oak. It was a work of art with gently curved legs and a rectangular top. From the size of it, he was expecting at least six children.

He greeted me, setting aside his tools. "Briggs?" His intense eyes took me in, seeing into the depths of my thoughts and emotions as no one else could do. "What's wrong?"

"Everything's fine. I just missed my brother. Now that you're a married man, I see less of you than I'd like."

"We need to make it over for supper more often," Benedict said. "But our love nest is very appealing."

I slapped him on the shoulder. "I don't blame you for wanting to keep your beautiful wife to yourself." We sometimes joked about how he'd thought I was romantically interested in Amelia when she first arrived on the island. I knew immediately from the way he looked at her that she was unavailable to me. I'd never seen him smitten before and had had no intention of getting in the way. Not that I could have. Amelia wanted only him.

"Let's grab a beer and go sit out on my porch," Benedict said. "You can tell me how it's going with your new assistant."

Was it my imagination, or had he emphasized the word *assistant*?

Soon, we were comfortable in two chairs on his covered back porch. The house had been built not far from the shore, with a craggy bluff providing a perch from which to see the water and a tranquil place to sit and think or read. Or spend time with your spouse. If one had a spouse. *I don't want one*, I reminded myself.

Not *one*.

Faith Fidget.

“I can see something’s on your mind,” Benedict said.
“Tell me.”

“Well, I seem to have found myself in a situation. One I didn’t anticipate.”

“Go on.” His eyes grew wary. He probably figured I was in some kind of trouble with a woman, which was the case, but not the way he thought. In the past, I’d had a few messy entanglements with women I should have stayed far away from. Beautiful women were my weakness. Back in Seattle, it had been much too easy to find ladies with whom to be involved in a less-than-saintly way.

The man I was then, only a short time ago, seemed far away as I sat with my brother in this peaceful setting. Like a friend I used to know intimately but had lost touch with.

“It’s Faith,” I said, letting out a deep breath. Merely saying the words brought relief. “I’m experiencing feelings for her. Strange ones. Unexpected altogether. I can’t stop thinking about her. Or seeing her when I close my eyes at night.”

“Interesting.”

“Interesting?” I furrowed my brow, watching him for clues. Did he understand what I meant? Could he interpret what was happening to me? If he told me this was the beginning of falling in love, I might panic and run away. Or, I might stay and listen to whatever advice he had for me. “What do you mean?” I had to ask. Subtlety was getting me nowhere.

“Having recently experienced the event myself I can see what’s happening to you. It’s called falling in love.”

“But her? She’s...so good. Pious even. What would she do with a man like me? Nothing. She could do so much better.” Admitting to this insecurity was strangely freeing.

“You don’t think the feelings are mutual?”

“Be serious. Look at me.”

“I’ve heard you’re irresistible to the female gender,” he said lightly.

“We know that’s not true. Amelia clearly chose you from the outset.”

“Yes, but she’s my soulmate. That makes her impervious to your seductive ways.”

“They’re the same, you know. Amelia and Faith are women of substance. Not for a man with a notorious past such as myself. Anyway, she’s in love with the idiot former fiancé.”

“Is she?”

“Why are you looking at me like that? She told me herself.”

“People change. You two enjoy each other’s company. That much is obvious.”

“She understands my artistic nature. Even though she’s nothing like that at all. You should hear her talk about art. It’s enough to make me dizzy with delight.” Or desire.

“All right. Well, now I see. It’s inevitable. You’ve already fallen for her.”

“What’s inevitable? My heart and pride being ruined?” I asked, somewhat mournfully and definitely feeling sorry for myself.

“I think it might be time for you to take a chance,” Benedict said.

“A chance?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Yes, the chance of looking stupid. You’ll never know how she feels unless you use a little of that infamous charm to woo her.” He waggled a finger at me. “Not into your bed but into your heart. A lasting kind of love. Domesticity and all of that.”

I groaned. “Isn’t that the last thing I want?”

“Doesn’t sound that way to me.” He laughed, obviously enjoying himself at my expense.

“This is not funny,” I said.

“It really and truly is.” He sobered. “Listen to me, little brother. All those lies Father told us? About how we were unlovable and too flawed to do any good in the world? That we deserved to be punished for simply having the audacity to exist?”

“Yes?”

“They were made up by him to keep us down and make us feel small and useless. But we are not those things. We weren’t then, and we aren’t now.”

“I know that here.” I tapped my temple. “But inside, I don’t know. I still hear his voice criticizing me. Do you know I can hear him when I paint? Not only is it distracting, but it makes me look with an overly critical eye upon every stroke.”

“I hear him as well. But he’s growing fainter while Amelia’s voice grows louder.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“You know what I’m saying.” He laughed at my expression. “Yes, you *do* know, little brother. Love is the only answer to that which haunts us. If you feel an inkling of love for Faith, you can’t let her go. Not without opening yourself up to her, telling her how you feel. Or at least, spend more time with her. Take her on a picnic or out for a beach stroll.”

“Like you, sly old dog.”

He grinned. “I felt the same way you did, though. I didn’t think I stood a chance with Amelia.”

“But you did.”

“Yes. And now I’m the happiest man on earth.”

I rolled my eyes. “I never knew you were such a romantic.”

“Neither did I. Try it sometime. You might like it.”

ON THE WAY home from Benedict’s, I stopped in at Michael’s store. The pretty silver hand mirror in the glass case had stayed with

me. I wanted Faith to have it to use as a reminder to see herself as I saw her.

Michael was behind the counter, sitting on a stool. An open newspaper was spread out before him. He looked up at the sound of the bell and nodded but didn't stand. "Briggs."

I didn't like the man, but he did have a presence and a deep voice that commanded attention. As an artist, I was drawn to his interesting, slightly weathered features and light blue eyes. All the crevices on his forehead and strong jawline were striking, even though his personality left me cold.

"Michael, good to see you."

He folded the paper and stood. "What can I do for you?" He clapped both hands against the surface of the counter. "Let me guess. You want to buy a certain young lady the silver mirror."

"How did you know?"

"I saw you notice it when you were here yesterday." He used a set of keys to open the wooden door at the back of the case and slipped it out, laying it before me. "It's silver-plated, which means it will need polishing."

"Right." I picked it up, examining the floral design. In addition to flowers on the handle, there was a maiden with flowing hair on top of a heart-shaped medallion. "This is a beauty."

"Agree."

"I'd like it, please. Can you wrap it in paper for me?"

"Yes, sir," Michael said. "I even have a ribbon." He set about cutting a strip of the brown paper and tying it with a piece of twine.

"You hear there's a new dressmaker in town?" Michael asked.

"Sure." I vaguely recalled hearing the ladies talking about it at supper the other night.

“A Mrs. Lancaster. Widow.” Michael glanced toward the front window of his shop. “She’s set up shop right next door to me.”

“Does this trouble you?”

“I’m not sure.” He was a curmudgeon if I ever met one. “She seems pleasant enough. Quiet. Pretty.”

I’d been pulling cash from my wallet but looked up, curious by the tone of his voice. He’d sounded almost soft. Wistful maybe? “I haven’t seen her. But now I want to.”

“Listen, Tutheridge, you stay away from her. She’s too old for you anyway.”

“So she’s your age?” I asked.

“Give or take. More give, probably.”

“Meaning she’s younger?”

“Right. By a few years anyway. It’s been a long time since a woman’s caught my eye. But I thought I might go by and welcome her to town, you know.” His gaze returned to me. “Is that what you’d do?”

“I suppose I would.”

“Would you bring her a little present? Candy?”

“Candy’s always good.” I’d never had to resort to gifts, but I kept that to myself. Moon might not need to, either. Some women liked the strong, silent type. “You should do it. Make a move before someone else in town does.”

“Good point. Caleb King’s handsome. Younger than me, too. Women like him.”

“True enough.”

“Bains is taken, so I won’t have to worry about him,” Moon said.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I probably don’t. But life’s short.”

Taking my package, I said good luck to him and hurried out to the street. Maybe Moon wasn't so bad after all. His frigid demeanor might be hiding a passionate man who had been beaten down over the years by Roland Tutheridge.

As I crossed the street, I saw a man in dirty clothes and without a hat stumbling out of Matthew's bar. Drunk in the middle of the afternoon? I'd been known to sow a few oats myself, so I shouldn't really judge. However, I would never act this way, especially during the day when women and children were around.

Was it my imagination, or was he headed toward me? Great, he was. He studied me for a moment, almost as if he recognized me. I was about to turn in the other direction to avoid him when Pastor Bains appeared at my elbow. Where had he come from?

"Pastor," I said, holding out my hand.

"Briggs, you're looking pleased with yourself," Bains said.

"You might say that, yes. I've just found something for someone I care about."

"That right? Could it be Faith Fidget?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Never you mind."

"Then I'm correct?" Bains asked.

"No one likes a know-it-all."

The drunk was now in the middle of the street shouting and waving his arms around.

"What a menace," Bains said under his breath.

"Who *is* that?"

"Name's Sam Steele. He and his wife, Laura, moved here about a year ago, if I recall correctly."

"Laura? Don't know her."

"She's the one Matthew's always throwing out. Matthew doesn't want prostitutes in his bar."

Right. I'd seen her a time or two. She offered her wares, so to speak, to me one night. I shuddered to think of it. "I know who you mean now. No idea she was married."

"You haven't dipped in there, have you?" Bains asked, a concerned look in his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm a God-fearing man."

"Good. I don't want you messed up with anyone like that. She could carry diseases."

"You're sounding fatherly," I said, touched despite my reservations about the man who claimed to love my mother.

He didn't respond, still looking at Sam Steele, who had been chased out of the street by Sheriff White and was currently being hauled by his collar into the jail.

"I guess he'll have to sleep it off in jail."

"It's odd, but there's something about him. He seems familiar," Bains said. "As if I know him from the past. But for the life of me, I can't place him."

"Best he doesn't recognize you," I said. "You don't need to be messed up with anyone like that either."

He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "You're sounding very son-like." A shadow passed over his face for a quick moment before he returned to his usual passive expression.

It was a shame, really, that he'd lost his son, and I'd had the father I had. Affection washed over me for this man who would soon be my stepfather. "I'm glad you're going to be family soon."

His eyes softened. "Thanks. I hope to be worthy of you all."

"No offense, but it won't be hard to be better than what we had."

"As Michael Moon told me once, it's always good to follow a bad act."

Michael Moon with a show business reference seemed outlandish, but I didn't comment. People were not always

what they appeared on the outside.

BY NOW, I knew Faith's routine. She always walked along the beach after we were done in the studio. Noting the time upon my arrival home from my visit to Benedict and the subsequent purchase of the hand mirror, I realized it was right around the time she walked. Feeling like a boy, I practically galloped across the lawn and then down the trail to our beach. Scanning the horizon, I quickly found her, sitting on a log near where we had our fires, staring out at the water.

I headed her way, calling out to her. She looked over at the sound of my voice and raised a hand, then got up and started heading in my direction. We reached each other a few minutes later.

"Is something wrong?" Faith asked when we were close enough to hear each other.

"Everything's fine," I said. "I have something for you, and I couldn't wait to give it to you."

I'd had the package in my hand, but she must not have noticed it before now because her eyebrows did a surprised little upward jump when I held it out to her. "For me?"

"Yes, I saw it in Moon's shop yesterday and decided you needed to have it."

She took the package from me. I led her over to one of my favorite large rocks to sit. "Open it, please," I said. "I can't wait for you to see."

"You're like a child at Christmas." She smiled gently. Two bright spots on her cheeks told me she was embarrassed but also pleased.

I waited impatiently for her to unwrap it, suddenly flooded with doubt over the wisdom of such a gift. What if she didn't like it? Maybe it would be too heavy for her. The mirror weighed several pounds, at least, now that I thought about it. Would it be too heavy for her to actually use? Why hadn't I considered that? I grew warm.

She carefully pulled the string loose and unfolded the paper. “Briggs, what is this?” She breathed heavily, as if she’d just run down the beach instead of walked.

“It’s nothing really.”

She held it up, and the mirror caught in the sunlight and blinded me for a split second. “This is the most...the best present...I’ve ever been given.”

“It’s to remind you of how beautiful you are. Whenever you doubt, just pull out the mirror and look at yourself.”

Her eyes shone with tears. “This was so very kind of you. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know that I’ve ever owned something this pretty.”

“Well then, it’s time you did.”

She gazed at herself in the mirror, and a smile flirted at the corners of her mouth. “I’ll cherish it always. No matter what happens, I’ll always remember this summer as the best of one of my life.”

“Is that true?” The best one? How about many more summers and a bunch of the other seasons, too?

“Yes, absolutely. I didn’t think it could be without Papa, but you and your family have been so good to me. This whole summer and the trip out here, they’re the best things that have ever happened to me.”

“You’ve brought much light to my life,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Now I really don’t know what to say.” Her cheeks flooded with color. “Other than I feel extremely blessed.”

“You deserve every good thing. Every blessing known to man. Or woman.” I stared at her there in the golden sun of late afternoon. The seagulls were flying above us, making a nuisance of themselves as usual. Our harbor seals were once again sunning themselves on a rock. Bright yellow and purple flowers peeped out from between the rocks and fallen wood. But all I could see was the beauty in front of me. I’d not

thought it possible to love something the way I did this island
or my family or my work, but maybe I was wrong.

FAITH

On Saturday a few mornings after Briggs surprised me with the mirror, I was on my way downstairs for breakfast and wondering what I would do with myself for the entirety of my day off. I still wasn't completely accustomed to such luxuries as two days off in a row. The Tutheridges gave me the entire weekend to do whatever I pleased. I'd have thought I'd like it, but I wasn't ever sure what to do. For one, a whole day without Briggs seemed interminable. Secondly, working for Papa had been a six-day-a-week job, taking off only on the Sabbath day. It had always been important to Papa that we attend church and then spend the rest of the day together. We would make a big meal, one we enjoyed in the middle of the afternoon. After we were full and had cleaned up the dishes, we would spend the rest of Sunday in our living room reading or chatting about nothing much at all. In years past, Lionel had joined us. I should have known something was wrong when he started skipping family Sundays. He'd been enjoying time with Mable.

This morning, the dining room was flooded with sunshine. Ella and Amelia were sitting on one end of the long table, eating and talking. They both gave me warm smiles when I entered the room.

"I've come to take you to town," Amelia said. "And I've talked Ella into joining us."

"Me?" I said.

"Yes, we have a new dressmaker on the island," Ella said. "Mother wants us all to get new dresses for some special occasion, yet to be named."

"A special occasion?" I asked.

"Mother's wedding," Ella said. "She and Pastor Bains should be announcing it any day now. We should all order dresses now so they're ready."

“Do they have a planned date?” I asked. It had all come about so quickly. No wonder Briggs had reservations. He hadn’t discussed it much, but I could sense his worry.

“Sometime in the fall. That’s all she will commit to as of yet,” Ella said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve been saving all my pennies to send home to Papa.”

“No, you misunderstand,” Ella said. “Mother’s treating us.”

“Oh, well, I guess I’d like one,” I said, even though it felt uncomfortable to accept it in addition to my generous wages.

“Who doesn’t love a new dress?” Amelia smiled, her wide mouth showing her white teeth. “I’ve never had so many clothes. I’m completely spoiled.”

As I poured myself a glass of juice and grabbed a boiled egg and a piece of toasted bread, the two of them chatted about what they wanted and the newest fashions they’d seen in a magazine from Paris. All of this was lost on me. I cared nothing for clothes, other than that they covered me. Not that I held it against either of them. They were both made for pretty things, being so pretty themselves.

“Yes, so after breakfast, we can all drive into town in the car,” Ella said. “Crossing my fingers I don’t get any calls today. I’d like to enjoy a day off with you two.”

You two. She meant me? A warmth filled my chest with a happy glow. Would these ladies really want to be my friends? I’d not thought it possible. Could this really be happening? I mustn’t get too carried away. They were probably only being nice.

WE WERE JUST ABOUT to walk into the seamstress shop, which was located between the pub and the dry goods store, when I heard a man shouting.

“Great, it’s Sam Steele,” Ella said under her breath. “What does he want?”

Sam Steele appeared to be in his late thirties, poorly dressed in a shabby suit that looked as if it hadn’t been washed for quite some time. He had greasy hair and eyes with large bags underneath them. Also, unsteady and lurching about, he appeared to be quite intoxicated.

It took me a moment to recognize him. He was the same man in the same state as the one who had made such a fuss the day I arrived. I’d forgotten all about him. Thankfully, he was an anomaly around here instead of the norm.

“Ella, wait.” Sam stumbled but managed to reach us in one piece. Slurring his words, he began a tirade that I found hard to follow. Something about his wife, named Laura, if I got that correct, and her illness and how she’d spread it to him and that it was because of the Tutheridges that he was in the trouble he was in.

“You people think you’re all high and mighty, telling us all what to do. You’re not even a real doctor. Why should I believe anything you say?”

Ella clung to Amelia’s arm. “Sam, please, go home. Sleep it off.”

“I can’t go home. I don’t know who she’ll have there. That’s where she takes them.”

Takes them? Who?

“Your father. He’s the one who did this to me.” He poked Ella’s collarbone hard enough that she yelped and stumbled backward. “I should have killed him when I could. Should have made him suffer. Only someone beat me to it. Maybe you, huh, rich girl? Ella of Ella Pointe.” More slurring, and for a moment I thought he might fall over, what with all the lurching and swaying. He reminded me of a drunk rooster. Not that I’d ever seen a drunk rooster. But if I had, I felt fairly certain they would act just like this. “Maybe Ella of Ella Pointe killed the old bastard. Finally had enough? Snapped. That’s what they say, you know. People snap.”

“What about Mr. Tutheridge?” Amelia asked. “What did he do to you?” Her fingers twitched, probably yearning for that book of hers so she could write down his answer.

“He promised Laura he’d do what was right.” He lurched toward Ella again, this time managing to shove her against the wall, causing her hat to fall off and her head to slam against the brick. Amelia screamed. I would have, but no sound came out of my mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Matthew Goodwell come running out of his bar. He took hold of Sam Steele by the shirt collar and steered him toward the sheriff’s office. “Sorry, ladies. I’ll get this one locked up so he can sober up.”

After he dragged Sam Steele down the sidewalk and into the jail, the three of us stood in shock for a moment until Amelia picked up Ella’s hat. “Are you hurt?”

Ella rubbed the back of her head. “I’m fine. I might have a little bump later, but nothing to worry over.”

“What was that all about?” Amelia asked. “What was he saying? Did your father have an altercation of some kind with him? Or his wife?”

Ella looked evasive as she smoothed her skirt. “Just nonsense. Everyone wants to blame Father for whatever misfortunes they have. Father probably declined giving him a job or something.”

I could tell Amelia wasn’t satisfied by this answer, but she appeared to understand Ella didn’t want to talk about it further. I had the feeling it was because I was standing there.

“Let’s go in,” Ella said, sounding a little shaky. “Mrs. Lancaster is waiting for us.”

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, I stood on a wooden block with three mirrors all around me and the seamstress, Mrs. Lancaster, kneeling to measure the hem of my dress. New to the island, she was a gorgeous woman in her thirties with jet-black hair, dark skin, and warm brown eyes.

She stood and stepped back to get a better look at me. “My goodness, you are a little thing.” Mrs. Lancaster spoke slowly with elongated vowels. She might be from one of the southern states, but I couldn’t be sure. How had she found her way out here?

I glanced at her hand. No ring. Was she a widow? Where had she come from? Why the island of all places? She would find no one here who resembled her exotic beauty. Did she feel ostracized here? I hoped not. As someone who had felt strange most of my life, I didn’t wish it upon anyone else. However, her appearance was so striking I had no doubt men of all kinds turned their heads when she passed by them on the street.

I sighed, feeling a little sorry for myself. It was tiresome to be such an ugly duckling with no hope of turning into a swan. I felt certain that time had passed if there ever was one.

“Papa isn’t very tall, and my mother was petite,” I said. “At least from what I’ve heard.”

“You’re like a porcelain doll, lovey. As cute as can be.” Mrs. Lancaster picked up a notebook and put in my measurements she had taken a few minutes before. How had she remembered them so well? I would have had to write them down immediately. “And your dress will be considerably less expensive than Miss Ella here. She needs an extra yard more than you.” She chuckled.

Ella, who had been looking through spools of material, laughed. “I didn’t ask God for the shoulders or height of a man. I’d love to be petite like Faith.”

She would? That was probably not true. Still, it was nice to hear.

“This world needs all kinds,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “All of you are such comely ladies. Be happy for your uniqueness.”

Amelia, who had been trying on a hat by the mirror, turned around to show us. “What do you think? Too much?”

The hat was wide-brimmed and decorated with a large yellow flower made from crepe.

“They’ll see you coming,” Ella said.

“They always do, what with this horrid red hair of mine,” Amelia said.

“You’re the only one who thinks it’s horrid,” Ella said, rolling her eyes. “If only you knew what you really look like.”

“Women never do,” Mrs. Lancaster said, kneeling to grab something out of a low shelf. “All my years doing this work, not one woman thinks she’s pretty. Not a single one. I want to shake every one of you, but I don’t, of course. That would not be good for business.”

“Where have you come from?” Ella asked Mrs. Lancaster what I’d wondered myself. “How did you come to our little island to open up a shop? I haven’t heard.”

“Mr. Lancaster, may he rest in peace, had dreamt of a place like the island. When he passed away a few years ago, he left me a tidy sum. I’d made dresses out of the house, you know, for the ladies in my neighborhood, and he’d always wanted me to have my own shop. When he died, I decided to come west and fulfill the dream he was no longer able to.”

“I’m sorry,” Amelia said. “That must have been so hard for you.”

“It was,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “But one must continue on, even if at first it is only one day at a time. I held on to our dream, you see. Otherwise, I would have crawled into bed and just withered away. But I stayed true to the promise I’d made to him to open my own shop. Somewhere beautiful, he’d said to me. Bossy old thing.”

“Had you been here before?” Amelia asked.

“No, no. Born and raised in Alabama.” She indicated for me to get down and for Ella to take my place. “My husband and Caleb King were old friends. He wrote to me after Elijah died and said to come out and start fresh here. He said the island was becoming more populated by the day and that a dressmaker was needed. So that’s what I did.”

“I didn’t know Caleb was the way you found us.” Ella climbed onto the platform, sounding delighted. “How lucky

for us.”

“I wondered if I would be as welcomed as Caleb promised.” Mrs. Lancaster began to measure Ella as she talked.

“Why wouldn’t you be?” Ella asked.

“I haven’t seen another black person here,” Mrs. Lancaster said lightly. “Have you?”

Ella flushed. “No, I can’t say I have. It doesn’t matter to anyone here, I can assure you. This island’s full of folks who weren’t welcomed in other places.”

“Caleb said that in his letter to me,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “I knew he’d had his own share of troubles, which gave him some credibility.”

Amelia put aside the hat and came to sit in a nearby chair. “I know it’s not the same, Mrs. Lancaster, but I felt similarly to you when I came here. I was poor and had next to nothing. I didn’t think the Tutheridges would think of me as someone they would welcome into their family. The other residents have been just as welcoming.”

“I’d say you’ve done well for yourself,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “Marrying that handsome Mr. Tutheridge.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Amelia said, beaming.

When we were finished with our measurements, Mrs. Lancaster helped us pick out fabric. Ella chose a blue silk and lace for the sleeves. Amelia decided on a light green with a cream sash. I, still stunned to be included, vacillated between a pale pink and butter yellow, deciding finally on the pink.

“We’ll be all colors of the rainbow,” Ella said as we walked out into the bright sunlit afternoon.

“What about the other thing we talked about?” Amelia asked Ella. “Should we see what Faith thinks?”

“Thinks about what?” I asked.

We stopped in front of the bakery window. I couldn’t help but take inventory, curious to see the shop compared to Papa’s.

Loaves of bread, a shelf with cakes, and rows of cookies looked similar to the bakery where I'd spent so much of my youth working behind the counter. The door opened, and the scent of cinnamon wafted out with a gentleman dressed in a cream-colored suit and bowler hat.

In the glare of the sun, I didn't notice at first that it was Briggs, carrying a box with what probably held a cake.

"Briggs, what are you doing out of your studio?" Amelia asked, teasing.

"I've come to town to fetch a cake for Mrs. Halvorson's birthday. We can't very well have her cooking her own." He grinned in that way that made my stomach feel upside-down. "What are you ladies doing? Corrupting my Miss Fidget, I suppose?"

"If ordering her a new dress is corruption, then yes, we are guilty," Ella said. "Mother sent us in to the new dressmaker. She wants us all to look our best for her wedding."

"I still can't believe it," Briggs said, some of the merriment in his eyes disappearing. "She's rushing into it, if you ask me."

"No one *did* ask you," Ella said. "Nor did they ask me or anyone else. For the first time in her life, Mother is doing exactly as she pleases. We should be happy for her."

I'd suspected Briggs wasn't thrilled about his mother's upcoming nuptials, and I'd been right. Was he worried about Pastor Bains's character? Or that he might be a murderer?

"Yes, I suppose you're right, dear sister," Briggs said. "But what kind of son would I be if I weren't worried?"

"Yes, I'm a little worried, too," Amelia said, sounding as if it pained her to admit it. "But there's no talking her out of it."

"As far as husbands go, she's had such a hard time of it," Ella said. "I have to admit, I didn't think she'd want to jump right back in. I mean, less than a year?"

“She’s in love,” Amelia said. “It makes one do things one would not have thought possible—speaking from my own experience, anyway.”

“Well, I shall run along,” Briggs said, “and let you ladies enjoy the rest of your afternoon.” He tipped his hat and continued back down the street. What a fine form he was, too, striding along with his optimistic-seeming gait.

“Back to our plan,” Ella said, turning toward me. “We have an idea for you. Something you can say no to, so don’t feel pressured.”

“No, not at all,” Amelia said. “It’s only an idea.”

“What is it?” They were beginning to alarm me at this point.

“We were wondering if you’d be interested in having Lizzie fix your hair? Change it up a little?” Amelia half smiled, looking nervous. “Because she has this way with styling and can teach you how to make the side swoop so that it’s not so flat against your head.”

My hair was flat against my head? I touched a spot on my neck under the hat, feeling for my fine hair. “It has no shine or anything to it and is thin and straight. Lizzie won’t be able to do anything with it.”

“Could she try?” Amelia asked.

“Also, we thought you might like to try a bit of rouge and lipstick,” Ella said.

“We could pluck those eyebrows, too,” Amelia said. “To make them more stylish.”

My eyebrows? What was wrong with them? I guess they were kind of thick and unkempt. I’d never thought to bother with them. Hot and embarrassed now, I stared at the ground. A row of ants was making their way along the side of the bakery, no doubt hoping to get in and haul away crumbs.

“It’s just that we think you would really shine with a few minor adjustments,” Amelia said.

“Do I need to shine?” I asked.

“You have such natural beauty,” Ella said. “But a few tricks never hurt a girl.”

I looked at them, one and then the other. Their hair had been swept into a side bump and then elegantly fixed at the nape of the neck, with their hats strategically placed to complement the style. Now that I looked more carefully, their eyebrows *were* plucked into attractive thin lines.

“Also, we have the most wonderful powder and rouge we ordered from Paris,” Ella said. “They do wonders to brighten up a face.”

“Give it a healthy blush,” Amelia added, nodding enthusiastically.

“Are you trying to turn me into a swan?” I whispered, wishing I could run away and hide. Have a good cry and try to forget the utter degradation this conversation was causing me.

“What? No, not at all,” Amelia said. “I’m sorry, Faith. We didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. You’re no ugly duckling. Not at all.” She looked over at Ella, obviously hoping her sister-in-law could save the situation. But it was too late. I’d been embarrassed, and now I could feel myself detaching from them. This was the way I had always done. If things became uncomfortable, I simply faded into the shadows where I belonged.

“Darling, we meant no harm,” Ella said. “We think you’re perfect the way you are. It’s only that we thought you might like some tips.”

“Why should I care about how I look?” I asked, fighting tears. “The man I love rejected me. It’s too late. I should embrace my ugly duckling, spinster fate.” The tears had come now. I was helpless to stop them. All the embarrassment and humiliation that had come from betrayal seemed to wash over me all at once. Was it my bushy eyebrows and limp hair and pale cheeks? Is that what had sent Lionel into the arms of the rosy-hued Mable?

Mable. She had hinted at this kind of thing before, too. Always with her fake smile. The smile I knew was a lie. Now I

knew. I was smarter than I had been. She would give a compliment that wasn't one and smile at me, all to make herself feel superior to me. How had I not understood what she was doing? Now it was happening again. Was this why they'd invited me? Was this what women did? How they coped with whatever insecurities they possessed? Making sure other women felt terrible?

"No, thank you," I said through tears. "I'd like to go home now, if you don't mind. I have things to do for Briggs." I dared not look at either one of them or I'd start to cry harder. I had to get hold of myself.

"Yes, of course," Ella said. "Whatever you want." Her voice was full of dismay and sorrow. *Fake. All fake*, I thought.

"We're sorry, Faith," Amelia said. "We didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It's just that we enjoy these kinds of things and thought you would, too."

"Enjoy what exactly?" I lifted my face, swiping at my wet cheeks. "Pointing out all the flaws in your plain acquaintance? Is that your idea of fun? To demean me? Put me in my place?"

Amelia actually gasped and looked as if she might cry herself. "No, that wasn't at all our intention. We were trying to help."

"We wanted you to feel like one of us," Ella said. "We're all young, and we thought you would want to be our friend. Like Amelia and I became when she came here. We've enjoyed spending time together so much, and we hoped you would welcome the company, given that you've come all this way and have no family or friends around you."

"I came here for a job," I said flatly, having controlled my tears. I would be cold and indifferent from now on. What an idiot I was, thinking women like this would feel anything but pity or disdain toward me. I'd let myself get sucked into the idea that they would want to be my friends. They were just like Mable. Imposters. Mean deceivers. Hidden snakes in tall grasses.

None of us spoke on the way home. I sat in the back and looked out the window, wishing I could enjoy the way the sun sparkled on the water and the cragged texture of the cliffs. When we arrived, I didn't even say goodbye or thank them. I was too angry and ashamed and could not trust that words would even come out of my mouth. I rushed into the house and up to my room so that I could cry without anyone seeing.

BRIGGS

“**Y**ou did what?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “What a surprise that she ran away crying! I never thought either one of you would do such a thing. She’s vulnerable, all this way from home and having been jilted by her best friend and that cheating Lionel. How could you?” I was appalled and angry. My sister and Amelia were the two women I admired most in the world. But this? This was terrible.

“We had no idea she’d take it that way,” Ella said. To my sister’s credit, she did sound miserable. “It was not with ill intent, trust me.”

“We thought she’d enjoy being a little spoiled,” Amelia said. “Mrs. Mantle advised me on my clothes and hair before I came here. She knew I would feel bad about myself if I didn’t fit in with the rest of you.”

“We wanted her to feel welcome,” Ella said. “There was no other reason.”

“The girls at the boardinghouse used to give one another advice all the time about how to fix their hair or make their dresses look newer. Shoe polish was another...” Amelia trailed off, obviously thinking better of continuing.

“Well, don’t look at us like we’re the devil,” Ella said to me. “We’re sorry. And we want to know if you have any ideas of how we could make it up to her?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m a man, for goodness’ sake. I’m the one putting my foot into it all the time, not you two. I’m flabbergasted.” I could hardly bear to think of how hurt Faith must have been. They’d attacked almost everything about her. “There’s nothing wrong with her eyebrows or her hair,” I said.

“You have to admit that she doesn’t look quite polished,” Ella said. “We wanted to help.”

“So you’ve said.” We were in the living room before dinner. Faith had not come down for tea, and I had a feeling she might not appear at supper, either. “You two have really done it.”

“We know. We’re ashamed of ourselves,” Amelia said. “The last thing either Ella or I would want to do is hurt her feelings.”

“She had no self-confidence,” I said. “And she’s sensitive. Not to mention what she’s been through.”

“You’ve already said all that,” Ella said sheepishly. “If you’re done lecturing us, perhaps you could help?”

“I have no idea,” I said, irritated. “But let me see what I can do. In the meantime, you two should leave your beauty tips to each other.”

“We will,” Amelia said. “From now on. Please tell her how sorry we are.”

“I’ll do my best.” I went over to the liquor cabinet and poured myself a generous whiskey. It was odd, really, that I was so worked up over something I would have dismissed as a girl thing. But Faith? She was irreproachable, yet fragile. Despite her strength and courage, she had a deep apprehension about most everything, including her appearance. Especially her appearance. My instinct to protect her from further hurt overwhelmed me and made my hands shake. Yes, I know the ladies hadn’t meant to harm Faith with their gestures, but they didn’t understand what kind of woman had landed in our home. She was not like Ella or Amelia, confident and opinionated, always ready to speak their minds. Faith should be handled carefully, like a fine crystal vase.

I’d go up to her room, I decided, and ask her if she was all right and if I could bring her dinner. I could say it all outside the door so as not to alarm her. All she needed was to feel trapped. Was she up there crying? I couldn’t stand the thought.

I downed my whiskey, gave the ladies one more chastising look, and headed for the stairs. It was unusual being

the one on morally higher ground. It was not as much fun as I'd thought it would be. I'd much rather have Faith unhurt than feel superior to my sisters.

Once I was outside her door, I hesitated. Was this a good idea? What if I made it worse? I had made women cry before, and most of the time, I didn't even know what I'd done. Like Ella and Amelia today, I supposed.

I heard sniffing coming from inside the room. That's it. I had to do something. I must see her and offer a comforting ear. I'd reassure her that her eyebrows were just fine.

She'd not needed much to make her feel inadequate. I knew her. My job now was to boost her up, make her see how pretty she was.

Where that instinct had come from, I had no idea. A different man had emerged because of her. A better one.

I knocked on the door and held my breath, hearing shuffling and footsteps before the door was opened only a crack and part of her adorable face appeared.

"Hello, Briggs. Do you need me to do something for you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I wanted to see if you're all right. Can I bring you anything?"

Her eyes, red and puffy, blinked. "No, thank you."

"The ladies have nothing but remorse for hurting your feelings. They feel terrible. We'd all like it if you'd come down for supper."

"I'm not hungry."

"May I come in a moment? We can leave the door open."

She hesitated, and I thought for sure she'd send me away. Instead, she backed up, allowing me to enter, then sat on the chair in the corner with her arms folded over her midsection as if she were in pain.

Leaving the door ajar, I crossed the room and perched on the end of the bed, holding on to one of the wood posts for

support. “Do you want to talk?”

She stared at me, brown eyes leery and hurt. “They said my eyebrows are all wrong, and my hair is flat. I’m sure there’s more wrong with me, but they were saving that for later.”

“I don’t know a lot about women. But I *have* observed in my female companions that a lot of time and thought is put into how they fix their hair and the colors of their dresses. I’ve seen women practically come to blows over lipstick.”

“Why would they fight over lipstick?”

“I guess they both wanted it. I’m not totally sure, actually. Anyway, my point being, women of your generation are always looking at fashion and such and deciding what they like and don’t. You mustn’t take any of it to heart. They only wanted you to feel included.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion. Regardless, I don’t believe that to be true.”

“I can understand why you feel that way. However, neither has a mean bone in her body. They didn’t understand why this would upset you, but trust me, they want to be your friends.”

She went to the window, drawing back the curtain and looking out to a world sheathed in pink from the setting sun. “I thought Mable was my friend. Now, looking back and knowing what I know now, I can see that everything she said and did was to make me feel bad about myself. She pretended to compliment me, but they weren’t really that. I don’t know what you call that kind of behavior. But I know it happened. Little digs and needles, all meant to make me doubt myself. To question every decision. Do you know she used to criticize Lionel? She’d make snide comments about the way he dressed and how I should help him—implying that it was my fault that his pants were a little too short.”

“This Lionel sounds like an absolute catch,” I said drily. Why were his pants too short? Never mind.

She turned to face me, a brief smile on her lips. “That’s not the point. The truth is that she wanted him for herself, so planting seeds of skepticism in my mind was one of her tactics. As children, she wanted whatever I had. The way to get it was to undermine me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “That is not a friend.”

“I can see that now.” Her voice hitched, and she looked around the room, most likely for a hanky.

I pulled mine from my breast pocket and gave it to her. “Please, use mine.” All this time I’d carried around a handkerchief and never knew what it was for. Handkerchiefs were made to capture the tears of the woman a man cared for.

Cared for? Loved? This Faith Fidget had put some kind of spell on me.

“I know you’re hurting.” I spoke as gently as I could. “I don’t blame you for it. Not at all. You’ve been betrayed by two people you loved. I am not under any illusion that those wounds will heal quickly. However, my sister and Amelia are not like Mable. Don’t let what that horrible woman and Lionel did keep you from seeing the good in other people. Ella and Amelia may have acted clumsily today, but it was not with the intent to harm.”

“How do you know? How can any of us ever know the intentions of others?”

Taken aback by the question, I didn’t answer right away. “I don’t know. Over time, perhaps we develop instincts in such matters.”

“What did your father do to you?”

Once again taken aback by her question, I winced. “Things that a beautiful soul such as yours should never have to know about.”

“I want to know them. I want to know everything about you.” She pressed my handkerchief to her mouth for a moment before continuing. “Never mind. I shouldn’t ask. It’s too personal a question from one stranger to another. I’m sorry. I barely know you, and I’m acting as if I do.”

“You’re not a stranger,” I said. “At least, it doesn’t seem that way to me.”

“Me either,” she said.

Still on the end of the bed, I grabbed both posts so that I was splayed out like a man on a cross, at the mercy of those before him. She returned to the chair and sat with her arms around her knees, watching me with those shiny brown button eyes.

“There’s a crawl space downstairs by the bowling alley,” I said. “When Benedict or I did something to anger Father, he sent us down there to spend a night in the darkness.”

“With each other? Please say you were both there.” Her voice trembled.

“No, separate. He would never have been so kind.”

“Oh, Briggs.” Her eyes filled, but this time it was sorrow for me instead of sadness for herself. Normally, I hated any kind of pity. Yet it didn’t feel bad at all. Not coming from her.

“Dexter helped us. Brought us food and a lantern. At great risk to himself, I might add.”

Something flickered in her eyes, but she only nodded. “Thank goodness for Dexter.”

“You are correct. There were other punishments too, punches and slaps and all that, but nothing was as bad as the utter darkness of that small space.” I felt heat behind my eyes and took a moment to compose myself. “It seemed like the night would never end—so black without the lantern that I couldn’t see my own hand. And when you’re in that state, isolated and cold, a lot of things go through a child’s mind. None of them good.”

“Why would a father do such a thing?” Faith asked. “My papa spent his whole life making sure no harm came to me.”

“What happened to your mother?” I asked. Since she had asked me about my father, I didn’t think she’d mind me asking.

“She left us. Papa feels certain she died not long after. Her parents, my grandparents, searched for her, but it was as if she’d vanished into thin air.”

“Does your father know why?” What would make a mother leave her baby? Then again, what made a man violent toward his own sons? Neither seemed natural.

“He didn’t talk about her much. I think it hurt him too intensely to speak of. He said only that she was unhappy. A domestic life was not for her. He said, just one time, that he could see, looking back, that she had not loved him. Once I came along, she felt trapped. Her only escape was to run away. Papa had to take care of me all on his own. I was by his side every day before I was old enough for school. Later, when I was older, I would rush home from school to help him in the shop. At night, we would have a cozy meal, just the two of us. I never minded. I’d never known any different. Strangely enough, I think of it as a kindness afforded to me by my mother. She left before I would have any memories of her. Without recollection, one cannot miss the one who is gone.”

“Yes, true enough.”

“Papa loved me enough for two parents.” She smiled, making her dimples appear. “He was the one who wanted me to come here. He said it was an opportunity for travel. Something I always dreamed about. I tried to convince him otherwise, worried he would be lonely without me. He’d have to hire someone to help him in the shop. He was having none of that. I learned how to love from him. Unselfish and unconditional. I suppose that’s why I didn’t suspect Lionel of anything and why I didn’t see clearly what Mable was really like. I feel foolish now, of course, knowing what I know.”

“Wouldn’t you rather know how to love with your whole heart?” I asked. “Even if it means you’re foolish at times?”

“I would have thought so, but lately, I’m not so sure.”

“You’ve been hurt,” I said. “But someday you’ll see what a gift your father gave you. Being able to love without fear is a great asset.”

“Are you able to love without fear?” Faith asked.

“Sometimes I worry I cannot love at all, with or without fear.”

“Yes, of course, you would feel that way.”

Not expecting her to understand, I stared at her for a moment. I’d assumed she would contradict me with some kind of platitude. “With his cruelty, Father made sure I understood that I was unlovable. Thus, I have not allowed the idea of love to even enter my thoughts. I’ve thought of it as a pleasure only given to others, not me. If I were to love someone and they proved him right by not returning my affection, it would be as devastating as the rejection itself. If I stay resolute in my vow of distance from all other people, except for my family, then I will never have to know if he was right.”

“You’re not unlovable. Quite the opposite.” She seemed so flabbergasted that it made me chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Faith asked.

“Nothing really. You, I guess. When you’re passionate about something, it’s quite intoxicating. Not that you’re passionate about me.” I went hot and felt sweat developing on the end of my nose. “I meant only when you speak with passion. Or, not passion. Enthusiasm. Intensity? I don’t know what the word is.”

“Whatever the word is, I make you drunk?”

“It’s a figure of speech,” I said, laughing nervously. My silver tongue was not so silver today.

“Regardless, you’ve cheered me up. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Anytime.” I paused. “Does this mean you’ll come down to dinner?”

“Not tonight. I’m too embarrassed. I can’t face them.”

“What are you embarrassed about?” I asked. “They’re the ones who are ashamed of themselves.”

“Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?”

“Maybe,” I said warily, unsure where she was headed.

She touched her left eyebrow. “Are they too bushy? Are the ladies right that they should be plucked like a chicken?”

“Not like a chicken.” I put my hands up in protest. “Anything but that. Like I said before, I think they’re just fine the way they are. But if you’d like them to be thinner, which does seem to be the fashion, I’m sure I can locate something to extricate them with.”

“If I’d had a mother, I might know about these things. Like eyebrows and complicated hairstyles. Papa, as wonderful as he is, never said a word about my eyebrows.”

“I’m astounded Mable didn’t mention it,” I said.

“I thought you said they were fine.”

“Well, yes, I just mean—” I cut myself off. What an oaf I was.

She covered her mouth with the handkerchief again, and I thought at first I’d newly hurt her and was scrambling to think of something to say. Then she giggled. “I’m being ridiculous. I know I am. It’s only that I hate being an ugly duckling that never turns into a swan.”

“What?” Surely I’d heard her wrong? “You’re not an ugly duckling. Not at all. Where have you gotten these ideas?” I held out my hand. “Come here.”

She looked at me with a tentative expression but did as I asked.

I brought her over to the mirror that hung above the dressing table. “Look at yourself.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.” She lifted her gaze to look to her reflection.

“What do you see?”

“Puffy eyes. Dishwater hair. My eyebrows are rather bushy, now that I really look at them.”

“No, that’s not right.” I stood behind her. She was so petite if I were to rest my chin on her head, I’d have had to bend my knees. “Do you want to know what I see?”

She didn't answer, but I took that as a yes.

"I see your pretty brown eyes and how they're perfectly set in your face. Not too close. Not too far away. I see a cute nose with a sprinkling of freckles and a mouth that reminds me of a raspberry. Have I mentioned that they're my favorite berry, mostly because of their color?"

She shook her head.

"This is not dishwater hair that I see," I said, continuing before she could dissuade me. "It's the color of honey, and when you're in a certain light, I can see a little red in there, too. Your ears are—"

She held up her hand. "Don't say a lie. I can see for myself how large they are."

"Fine. They're not ridiculously small like some women's. These are ears that make you such a good listener." I wanted to say, *in fact, I'd very much like to nibble on them.* Instead, I continued on to her skin. "Creamy. Your delicate bone structure and your slender neck? All delicious."

Delicious. I probably shouldn't have used that word.

Her eyes widened. "Delicious? What does that mean?"

It means, I wanted to kiss her raspberry mouth and hold her close, show her how much I cared for her. Yes, I'd kissed many women. Regardless, I knew kissing her would be better than anything I'd ever done in my life.

I saw her swallow. Had she read my mind? I certainly hoped not. The poor girl would run screaming from the room. She was in love with someone else, I reminded myself. Who knew how long it would be before she was ready to love again? Even if she were ready right now, I would be the worst choice she could make. Suggesting a union of any kind with the likes of me was absurd.

Instead, I asked her for a favor only she could grant. It would be a way to keep her with me forever, even after she returned to her papa and their life in Boston. "May I paint you?"

“Me? You want to paint me?” Even after everything I’d just said to her, she still looked at me with wariness reflected from her eyes. Would she ever trust that what I said to her was the truth?

I wanted to say, Yes, that way I’ll always have you with me, even after you leave this place and make my life forever dim. Out loud, I said, “You inspire me.”

That seemed to have no effect on her, so I pulled out the next thing I could think of. “As part of your assistant duties, it would greatly help me if you’d agree to sit for me.”

“I would do anything to help you,” she said quietly. “So, yes, I’ll sit with you. I mean, for you.”

“Tomorrow, perhaps?”

“What shall I wear? Clothes, I hope.” She smiled, obviously teasing. However, this meant she must have gone through *all* of the paintings in the studio. I had more than a few nudes shoved to the back of the cabinet. Hidden, mostly, from my mother’s puritanical gaze. What had Faith thought when she’d found them? I’d have to ask her another time. Right now, I was only relieved that her dimples had returned with her smile.

FAITH

That night I couldn't sleep, running over the day's events again and again, tossing and turning. Finally, I gave up and switched on the bedside lamp to read. But as I did so, it occurred to me that perhaps I should take Ella and Amelia up on their offer to help with my appearance. I'd seen the models Briggs had painted in the past, and they were all beautiful and curvy. There was nothing I could do about my scrawniness, but I could have them advise me on my hair and my eyebrows. Somehow my eyebrows were the cause of the most shame. How had I not noticed how unkempt they were? I never thought about such things. Was that why Mable was currently married to the man I'd thought of as mine? She had thin eyebrows. Her hair was always swept up in an elegant style. If I'd paid more attention to my appearance, would I now be married to Lionel instead of Mable?

Thank God I wasn't. Perhaps I had my thick eyebrows to thank for the narrow escape I'd made.

I didn't want Lionel. Maybe I never had.

I wanted Briggs.

Now I understood what it was to yearn for a man's touch, to imagine his kisses and caresses.

Which meant I was in deep trouble. Briggs Tutheridge wasn't capable of love. He'd said so himself.

I rubbed my eyes, tired but restless all at once. Instead of reading, I got up and paced around the room, trying to decide upon a plan. How would I approach Ella? I'd run away, embarrassing myself further. She might not want to help me now. Not after I'd acted like a child.

Was Briggs correct? Had Ella offered out of kindness, or was she like Mable?

I would have to take a chance. Papa would tell me that very thing if he were here. He would encourage me to

cultivate the friendships. If they were real friends, that is. I would not know if I didn't allow myself the chance to get better acquainted myself with the two women. Briggs was a keen observer of most things. His assessment of the ladies couldn't be that far off. Anyway, if I didn't put myself out there, I would never know.

And as I paced the floor, wincing every time the boards creaked, I thought about how badly I craved friendship. I would most likely be a spinster, but that didn't mean I couldn't have friends, did it? Maybe I could find other future old biddies to spend time with. Ella and Amelia would never be that, though. They were full of life and passion. Futures awaited them, full of children and happy family times. Homes to manage. Husbands to love. Ella might not think so now, but I knew instinctively that she would fall in love and want to marry. Once the right man was presented, anyway.

I stopped at the window, peering out into the dark night. There were so many stars spread across the sky that my blurred, fatigued vision saw only a shiny blanket.

I would go to Ella in the morning and ask her to help me. That's all there was to it. If I were to sit for Briggs, I must look as good as I could. After I left, would he ever look at it? Never mind that.

I crawled back into bed and fell asleep at last.

THE ENTIRE TUTHERIDGE family was at breakfast the next morning, making it impossible to speak to Ella. Later, though, as I was about to embark out to the studio, I spotted her sitting on the porch, reading. She looked up when I stood before her, my stomach in knots.

She stood abruptly. "Faith, again, I wanted to tell you how sorry I was about yesterday. I'm an idiot."

"It's all right. There's a chance I overreacted. I have a lot of worries about my appearance, and your kind offer made them all come to the surface." *Kind offer. Please let that be true*, I thought. *Please be right, Briggs.*

“You’re perfectly fine the way you are,” Ella said. “Forget we ever mentioned it. Truly. We’ll pretend it never happened and start fresh?”

“No, I don’t want to pretend. I’ve been thinking, and I believe you’re right. My eyebrows could do with some plucking, and my hair’s rather listless.”

“Are you sure?” Ella wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want you to do this for any other reason than you want to for yourself.”

“I want to.”

Ella’s expression lit up, dazzling me for a moment. “I’ll fetch Lizzie. We’ll go to my room, and she’ll do everything you need. She’s a wonder.”

Next thing I knew, I was sitting at the dressing table in Ella’s room. Sunlight flooded in through the windows. A vase of fragrant pink roses perfumed the air. Ella’s room was slightly larger than mine, with a view of the water and a stately four-poster bed. Under our feet, a blue-and-white braided rug mimicked the sea.

Lizzie was a robust, pink-cheeked girl who spoke with a slight Irish lilt. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen. She’d come from Seattle, she told me as she combed out my hair. “Happy for the work, I don’t mind telling you.” She went on to say that she’d come over with her parents only four years before, hoping for a better life.

Ella had been called away before we could get started with Lizzie, so it was only the two of us. Frankly, being with Lizzie was a lot easier than being with Ella. I felt relaxed with her, as though I could just be myself. Lizzie was like me, a working girl. The daughter of immigrants given no choice but to earn her keep.

“My mam died just after we got here,” Lizzie said. “The boat was full of disease and sicknesses, and she wasn’t strong enough to make the journey. Pa’s in Seattle with my younger brothers, working at the marina. They have a small fishing boat, and it brings in enough to keep them fed and warm. I got

a job so my brothers could stay in school. They're both bright boys and could make something of themselves, you know, given half the chance."

"My grandfather came from Ireland, too, when my dad was a baby. He and my grandmother started a bakery, and when they died, my father took it over."

"Now look at us," Lizzie said. "Working women."

"Yes, we've done well for ourselves."

"The Tutheridge family are good people," Lizzie said. "I'm blessed to work here."

"Me too," I said, smiling as an image of Briggs's handsome face flashed before me.

"We'll take your hair to one side, like this." Lizzie used a comb to make a part favoring the left side of my head. "That way, I can put in an attractive swoop popular with fashionable young ladies."

"Whatever you think," I said.

Brow furrowed in obvious concentration, Lizzie worked for a few minutes, teasing and coaxing my slippery hair into a style I had not thought possible. I paid as much attention to what she was doing as I could, but her hands moved with such surety and speed that I felt certain I'd never be able to replicate it tomorrow.

Lizzie took what I at first thought was a pair of gardening shears from the drawer along with a gas lamp of sorts. She lit the flame and then set the tool over the top. "The iron will only take a moment to heat."

"What will it do?" The device had two tongs, one concave and the other one convex.

She laughed at the dubious expression on my face. "It'll make curls. I promise, I won't burn you. Or your hair."

"Curls. Right." I nodded as if I'd seen one before when I hadn't and was nervous despite her assurances.

Next, she divided my hair into four parts, then curled small sections into tightly wound coils using the hot iron. It was nothing short of miraculous the way the hot tongs coaxed my thin hair into corkscrews. When the curls were complete, she plucked my remaining hair into a high ponytail. To my surprise, she placed a rolled-up sock underneath and wrapped it with hair from the ponytail and secured it with pins.

Lastly, she brought the right quadrant all the way over to one side of my head, making a puffy bun. The coils in the front were back-combed to add volume and placed one by one into the swirl. She chatted all the while about what she was doing and why, but I scarcely followed. I'd never be able to do this to myself.

When she was done, I could hardly believe my eyes. Soft and romantic, the style looked like something from a magazine. Furthermore, the added volume made my eyes seem brighter and my cheekbones higher.

"Yes, you see there," Lizzie said. "The height brings out your eyes."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know. The rules of nature or something like that." She stood back to further survey her work. "You're lucky, miss. All that hair."

"But it's so fine and slippery. I don't know how you've done it."

"Yes, but there's a lot of it, and the length makes it easy," Lizzie said. "And look at the way it shines. Anyway, the key is the sock."

I had to admit, she'd somehow made the texture seem glossier. As far as the sock? I had no idea that's what women did to make it seem as if they had more hair.

"Now, let's see about your brows." Leaning close, she smoothed each in turn with the pads of her fingers. "We'll just trim them up a bit." She opened Ella's drawer and pulled out a small pair of scissors. With quick snips, she trimmed wayward

hairs and somehow made them into clean arches. “Now, how about a little makeup?”

I gasped. “No, absolutely not. Only ladies of ill repute wear it,” I whispered, afraid someone would hear.

“Are you sure about that?” Lizzie flashed a knowing grin.

“I think so,” I said, now totally unsure.

“Ella and Amelia wear rouge and powder, along with stain for their lips.”

“They do? I can’t see it at all.”

“That’s right. You mustn’t appear as if you have makeup on. If done right, no one will know. You’ll just look extra fresh and pretty.”

Fresh and pretty sounded nice. Against my better judgment, I nodded my consent. If it looked terrible, I would wash it off before going out to see Briggs.

Briggs.

What would he think about my new hair? He’d liked it before, or so he said. What if he hated this mushroom on my head?

Lizzie applied powder, which, remarkably, made my skin look like porcelain. Rouge was dotted into my cheeks and then gently smudged. She ran the tip of a charcoal pencil along the root of my lashes so they appeared thicker. Lastly, she dabbed a pink stain on my lips.

“There, all done.” Lizzie stood back, seeming very pleased with herself. “I’m a master, aren’t I?”

“I’d say.” I stared at myself. My eyes seemed bigger and my skin flawless. I loved my pink lips. Would I be less embarrassed now to sit for Briggs? Yes, I thought. I would. I’d be able to hold my head up higher. Which would be no small feat considering the size of my new hairstyle.

I was just getting up when Ella and Amelia burst into the room. They stopped dead, hands at their mouths.

“Goodness me,” Amelia said. “You’re a picture of beauty.”

“Your hair is spectacular,” Ella said. “Did it take a long time?”

“Yes, it did,” I said. “I won’t be able to do it like this every day, will I?”

“I’ll show you how to tie rags in your hair to make it curl,” Lizzie said. “Then I’ll fix it for you in the mornings. We won’t always use the sock. It’ll be much faster that way.”

“Did you put makeup on her?” Ella asked, squinting.

“Just the right amount,” Lizzie said. “Don’t you think?”

“No one will ever guess,” Amelia said.

“I don’t know,” I said, worrying. “What if your mother notices?”

“She wears it herself,” Ella said. “She won’t mind.”

“She does?” I asked agog. “I had no idea you all wore makeup.”

“Like I said, that’s the way it must be done,” Lizzie said.

“Where did you learn to do all of this?” I asked Lizzie.

“I trained with a woman in Seattle before I came here,” Lizzie said. “Honestly, it’s not hard once you know how. Any maid worth their salt knows how to fix hair.”

I returned to staring at myself. “You were right about my eyebrows. They were sticking every which way, and look at them now.”

“They’re spectacular,” Amelia said, beaming. “I knew Lizzie would make them behave.” She sobered. “Have you forgiven us for being so clumsy with your feelings?”

“Yes, it’s all right,” I said. “Please don’t think of it again. There are reasons I reacted the way I did, and they’ve nothing to do with you. Also, look at me. You were right to suggest a few changes.” Glancing back at myself in the mirror, I felt more like a swan than I had ever thought possible.

A knock on the door drew our attention. It was Briggs, wearing his riding breeches, tall boots, and a blousy shirt open at the neck. I spotted a few chest hairs sticking up from his collar and had the sudden urge to feel them with my fingertips. Would they be as soft as they looked?

Briggs was staring at me, a look in his eyes I could not comprehend.

“I had my hair done,” I said, almost unable to meet his eye from a wave of bashfulness that crashed through me.

“I can see that,” he said gruffly. “It looks nice. You look nice.”

“Do you need me to come to the studio?” I said, starting to get up from the chair.

“No, actually. About that thing I asked you last night. I have a location I’d like to show you.”

I was vaguely aware of the ladies exchanging knowing looks as I got up to follow Briggs from the room, feeling rather like a queen.

BRIGGS BEAT me to the bottom of the stairs and then waited for me, watching as I descended, step by step, his expression somewhere between a scowl and grimace. He almost seemed in pain. Did he disapprove of my new hairstyle? Maybe he noticed the makeup and thought it garish?

“Where are we going?” I asked when I reached him.

He smiled, and his features smoothed as he seemed to take me in anew. “Do you mind taking a ride with me?”

“Of course not.” I noticed the basket by his feet.

“Mrs. Halvorson packed a lunch for us,” Briggs said. “Do you mind eating a picnic?”

I would be all right going anywhere with him, I thought, but simply nodded. “I’d love to go on a picnic.”

“I have the carriage out front.”

I followed him outside, delighted by the warmth of the afternoon. A breeze fluttered the mixture of petunias and begonias that bloomed in the boxes at the bottom of the steps. Just yesterday, I'd seen the gardener tending them from my window.

At home, I knew the names of all the flowers we planted in the hanging baskets outside the shop. Every year I planted them for Papa, enjoying the feel of the dirt in my hands. Watching them grow and blossom as the summer wore on always gave me a thrill. How were they doing without me there? Would Papa remember to water them? Maybe he had his new helper doing it?

Soon we were off, a team of horses trotting along at a slow clip, and thoughts of home vanished.

“One of my favorite spots on the island is up on a hill that overlooks the water,” Briggs said. “I want to paint you there.”

“All right.” Would I have to stay perfectly still? I hoped there was shade. What if I had to use the toilet? Never having been a model before, I wasn't sure how all of this worked.

“Am I dressed all right?” I wore my usual black skirt and white blouse.

“Yes, you're fine.” He seemed distracted, so I didn't ask anything further, just sat back and enjoyed the scenery. The weather was warm but not unpleasantly so, and the gentle rocking of the carriage made me dozy. A scent of flowers and fresh grass and the sea perfumed the air. Beside me on the bench, Briggs's bulky presence made me feel safe and well cared for. Like Papa, I thought drowsily.

On the sides of the dirt road were clusters of small flowers with yellow centers. “Pearly everlasting,” Briggs said when I asked them what they were. “As common as a weed.”

“I like them.”

He smiled, looking over at me. “I do too.”

As we drove along, he pointed out different wildflowers—yellow-headed goldenrods, purple seashore lupines, blue-eyed grass. Chickweed peppered the meadows with their tiny

white blooms among the tall grasses. “Do you see there? Butterflies love them,” Briggs said, gesturing toward the black-and-yellow swallowtails that flitted about the blossoms.

We passed a farm with rows of crab apple trees, their fruit tiny and green, and cows grazing, and a horse farm with a mama and her colt near the fence nibbling at the grass. At least a half dozen bunnies appeared along the way too, their chubby faces wary before they hopped away.

Soon, we arrived at a grassy spot between trees, with the Puget Sound before us as far as the eye could see. Briggs helped me down, then tied the horses to a fir while I walked to the edge of the cliff to peer at the view. In the faraway distance, I could see the outline of another island.

I’d pinned a hat to my hair firmly and tied a scarf around the top to keep the sun from my neck and face. A breeze rippled the gauzy material, tickling my skin. Turning to my left, I spotted our lighthouse perched on the neighboring cliff.

“Do you see the madrone tree there?” Briggs pointed to a rust-colored tree with thin shedding bark that curled into cigar-like cylinders. “I thought you could sit there, resting your back against the trunk.” He cradled a blanket and small pillow in his arms, and for a moment, I could envision him rocking a baby.

“Whatever you want,” I said, blinking away the image.

He led me over to sit under the madrone. After spreading the blanket on a patch of yellow grass and placing the pillow at the bottom of the trunk, he asked if I would unwind my scarf. “Would you mind taking off your hat?”

“I suppose not,” I said, unpinning it and setting it next to me on the blanket before I rested my back against the pillow. Would that silly sock stay put?

“I brought you a few books to choose from.”

“You thought of everything,” I said, smiling up at him.

“This isn’t the first painting I’ve done of a beautiful woman.”

I flushed with pleasure at being included in what I felt sure were many pretty models he'd painted in the past. In fact, I'd seen a lot of them in the paintings at the studio. Some of them without their clothes on. What would Papa say about that if he knew? I hadn't mentioned that detail in my correspondence.

Briggs brought two books for me to choose from, neither of which I'd read. How had he known? Or had he picked two that he thought would interest me and hoped I hadn't read them? One was the autobiography by Helen Keller, and the other Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. I decided upon Helen Keller, hoping her courageous story might inspire me to be less prone to feeling sorry for myself. After my behavior the last few days, I was feeling ashamed of my vanity. How could I complain about anything when there was a woman who had overcome blindness and deafness to become a writer?

The tree was near the edge of the cliff, leaving the water for the background. Would he paint only part of me? My face? Or would it be of the entirety of me, book in lap? Light flickered through the branches and shiny leaves. The scent of earth and fir needles wafted in on the breeze. From above us the songs of goldfinches, sparrows, red-breasted robins, and swallows competed for my attention.

Instead, I watched Briggs as he hauled out his easel and the rest of his supplies and set them up about four feet away from me. That answered that question, I thought, of whether he would paint only my face or include the rest of me. I looked forward to seeing his composition.

"I'd like you to spread your legs out long," he said.

I did so. He knelt close enough I caught the clean smell of his skin. "May I fiddle with your skirt? I promise not to touch a leg."

"Briggs, you mustn't." I giggled, though. My chastising had no substance.

He tugged on the skirt to smooth it over my thighs, then moved the hem up to expose my ankles. "I think I want your shoes off."

“Oh, well, all right.” I’d never taken my shoes off in front of any man but Papa. “Must I stay completely still?”

“Not so much. You may turn pages as you like.” He took the scarf I’d discarded and very deliberately arranged it not far from my legs, then set the hat nearby. I wriggled my toes, happy to have the hot shoes off, even though my feet were still encased in stockings.

Soon, I was lost in the words of Helen Keller, learning of her first years and the illness that robbed her of sight and sound, marveling that anyone could have survived such a thing.

The light had changed by the time I looked up to see that Briggs was no longer behind his easel but sitting on the ground next to it instead, sketching.

“I wanted to get a few more drawings in before we go,” he said. “You’ve done very well.”

“How long have we been here?”

“About an hour.” He unfolded his long legs and offered me a hand. “I’d say you earned a break and something to eat.”

“I’d forgotten all about lunch,” I said.

“Stretch your legs. I’ll get it for us.”

I put on my shoes and rose, glad to feel my feet under me. Stretching my arms to the sky, I drew in a long, cleansing breath to bring me back to the present and out of the life of Helen Keller. I walked over to the edge of the cliff to peer out over the vista. Below me, about twenty feet, if I’d had to guess, water lapped gently at the shore. The sun was high in the sky and made ripples into diamonds. I put my hand over my eyes against the glare, forgetting that I could put my hat back on until Briggs appeared by my side with it in his hand. I glanced behind him and saw that he’d unpacked the basket. Hungry suddenly, I eagerly joined him on the blanket, leaving my hat off, wondering absently if my hair still looked as good as it had earlier. What of the sock? Had the hair fallen apart, revealing my cheat?

“Take off your shoes again, if you’d like,” Briggs said. “I’m going to do the same with my boots. It’s gotten hot, hasn’t it?”

I’d not noticed the heat, comfortable under the shade, but did as he suggested, glad for the thickness of my stockings. I’d never had anyone see my feet. Maybe they would be grotesque to him?

Not only did he take off his boots, but he discarded his socks, too. Curious, I stole a few glances at his white feet. Fine brown hairs decorating the tops. They were nice. Not unpleasant at all. Papa, as much as I loved him, had rather ugly toes, with thick, ridged nails. Briggs’s were smooth and neatly trimmed.

“Have I offended you?” Briggs asked, perhaps noticing my attention on his feet.

“What? No, it’s just that I’ve never seen anyone’s feet but my own and Papa’s.” I could feel my cheeks getting hotter and hotter.

“I’m not putting my socks back on.” He wriggled his toes, making me giggle. “It feels too good out here without them.”

The feast included a baguette, several different local cheeses, and slices of smoked ham. A bottle of island strawberry wine tasted cool and sweet. For dessert, Mrs. Halvorson had packed a dish of cream on ice and a pint of raspberries. As we ate, we chatted about the island. He told me about the local farmers and the fishermen and how they made their livings. “My father was a terrible man, but he instilled in us a loyalty to local businesses and farms. We could survive without much from the mainland, if we wanted to.”

“Do you ever miss the city?” I asked.

“When I was a kid, I couldn’t imagine living anywhere but here,” Briggs said, settling back against another pillow that he’d brought over from the carriage. He sipped from his wineglass, eyes far away, remembering, I supposed, details of those times. This assumption was substantiated when he went

on to tell me about the four Tutheridge siblings and how much they'd enjoyed exploring the woods and beaches, as well as fishing and swimming. "There's a lake on the island, too. Did you know that?"

"I had no idea," I said. "But at every turn, I learn something new about this heavenly place."

"I'll take you there if you'd like. We can have another picnic." He gestured toward the Sound. "I wanted to make sure you saw the view from here. We can almost see all the way to Canada."

"Do you think you'll stay here always?" The wine had made me a little dizzy, but it tasted so good on my tongue I didn't want to set it aside.

"I never thought so. Not after Father kicked me out. I figured he'd live forever, and I'd never be welcomed back. Only the good die young, you know. Unless they're murdered."

"Was it a shock to you? When you learned of what had happened?"

"Yes, to say the least. I happened to be here for Mother's birthday. Who knows what she had to promise to get him to allow me at the house? I couldn't believe what I was hearing, you know, when the sheriff came to tell us the news. It didn't seem possible that anyone or anything could kill him. He was never the victim, that's for sure. But now, when I think back on everything, his fate seems inevitable. No one can treat people the way he did and not have it come back to them at some point in time."

"My papa always says that," I said. "That people get what's coming to them, one way or the other."

"I'd like to think that's true," Briggs said. "To answer your earlier question, I'll most likely stay here. Although, it depends on what happens with Mother and Pastor Bains. I could imagine a time when I'm not welcomed any longer. I don't know that he'll want her grown children living with her once they're married."

“You don’t want her to marry, do you?” The wine made my tongue bold. I wanted to ask him a thousand questions. I wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

“I think it’s too soon after Father’s death.” Briggs made a figure eight pattern on the blanket with the tip of his index finger. He was lying on his side with the pillow under one arm. When he tilted his head slightly, his eyes were illuminated in a beam of light that filtered through the leaves and branches. They were as blue as the sea, with specks of gold in the very center. “I worry that she’s going to marry another man who treats her poorly. We don’t know that much about Timothy Bains. Other than he was run out of his congregation for attempting to seduce a young woman.”

“Allegedly,” I said, remembering the notes in Amelia’s book about the suspects. “He says that he was falsely accused.”

“I believe him. I do. Still, I worry. It’s old-fashioned of me, I know, but I don’t want my mother to marry a divorced man. I mean, she has a certain place in society.”

“Briggs Tutheridge, you’re a dichotomy, that’s for certain,” I said, reaching out with my toe to touch his ankle but pulling back just in time. What was I doing? Never would I have thought I’d be so brazen. Sitting here drinking wine in the middle of the day with a handsome man. My employer, I reminded myself. Which made it even worse. But somehow, I couldn’t seem to get worried over it or fret as I usually would.

“Oh my goodness,” I said, sitting up straighter. “I’ve not thought of Lionel once since we’ve been here. Or actually, all day. Isn’t that remarkable?”

Briggs held my gaze for a moment, a smile playing at his lips but his eyes serious. “I’d say so. You shouldn’t feel sad for a second more. Not for him.”

“I might be all right after all,” I said. “I wasn’t sure I would ever feel as good as I feel right now ever again.”

“You deserve to be happy every second of every day.”

“This place makes me happy.” *You make me happy.* No. *He doesn't make you happy,* I told myself. *He is your employer.* He wanted to paint me. God knows why. This was not a romantic picnic between two people falling in love.

“I never thought the island could be more beautiful,” Briggs said. “But I was wrong. You have made it even lovelier than before.”

I smiled back at him, delirious with joy. I'd enjoy it while I could, I decided. Soon enough, I would be back to my real life.

BRIGGS

She was so pretty, pink from the warmth of the afternoon and strawberry wine. I could barely keep my eyes off her. When I was painting or sketching her, I had a good excuse to stare. Like this, however, it was deeply inappropriate.

“What do you think of my hair?” Faith asked. “Because I have a secret.”

“I liked it before, and I like it now. However, I would like to know your secret.” *Tell me everything*, I thought silently. Every little thing. Every detail. I wished to know every inch of her, inside and out.

“There’s a sock in there.” She pointed to the back of her head. “An actual sock. Can you believe it?”

“I know about these socks,” I said, laughing. “I have a sister. And I’ve known a few women who use them. How else would you get such a giant toadstool on a woman’s small head?”

She giggled. “That’s what I thought it looked like, too. Even though I do kind of like it. I feel like a grand lady.”

“The grandness of you, which is undeniable, has nothing to do with your hair.”

“You have a way with words, Mr. Tutheridge.”

“You bring out the best in me.” I finished the wine in my glass and set it aside, resting my head in the crook of my arm. “This is turning out to be such a good day.”

“I was just thinking the same thing. If I could do a day over again and over again, it would be this one.”

“I wouldn’t mind this one again myself. Not that it’s over.” I watched her as she brought her glass up to her mouth. That mouth. It would be the undoing of me. What would it taste like to kiss her? I imagined it would be sweeter even than the wine.

No, Briggs, no. This was not one of the women who would participate in such behavior. She was pure and good. Innocent. And I was not.

Change the subject. That's what I should do. Distract myself from wishing I could pull her to me and kiss her until she forgot all about that worthless Lionel for good. "Tell me more about your father," I said. "You've heard way too much about mine."

She grinned. "He's round and funny, always cheering me on no matter how much I've messed things up."

"What did he think of Lionel?" I had to ask. Had he seen through the cad as I would have? Although flawed in many ways, I could spot a weak man from a great distance.

"Well, he didn't love him. Not really, anyway. I mean, he was always polite and welcoming, but I could tell there was a coldness between them. I told myself not to worry about it—that once we were married they would become good friends. However, that didn't work because I worry about everything. It's like my thoughts go round and round in my mind, and I can't let go. You've no idea. It's exhausting."

"I might know a little about worrying. Go on, tell me more."

"Papa had known Lionel since we were small children. Lionel used to come into the bakery and ask me for free samples. When Lionel was small, it was fine. But once he grew up to be a man, he continued to ask for free items. Papa didn't like that. He thinks a man should work for a living and not ask for handouts. Men like Lionel, that is, who was perfectly capable of making his own way. Papa's the first person to give a hungry man a free baked good. In fact, he used to send me over to the church every afternoon with whatever we didn't sell that morning. The pastor brought them out to those in need. I always hated to think of anyone being hungry when Papa and I had so much. We can all only do what we can, though, can't we? It's never enough to save the world, let alone one family."

“I can bet your father’s generosity kept many a family from starving,” I said. “It’s no wonder you’re so moral. You get it from your father.”

“I’m not, though. Not really. You should hear all the bad thoughts I have. Mostly about Lionel and Mable, but others, too. I can’t stand any kind of meanness in others. Which, given my size, is not always a good idea. I used to try to protect the children at school whom the others picked on. It wasn’t always easy, I can tell you that. Cruel children don’t like to be questioned. And then there are the sheep who just follow along with whoever is strongest. I had no use for such behavior. I didn’t have many friends because of it.” Her eyes flew open, and she sat up a little straighter. “Goodness, I just thought of that. No one wanted to be associated with me because I stood up to the mean kids, and they figured if they were with me, they would get picked on too. I can’t believe I never thought of it before. It’s all so obvious.” She held out her glass for me to pour her more wine. “I feel so much better now.”

I wasn’t sure it was a good idea for her to further imbibe. She seemed a little tipsy as it was. Then again, she was entirely entertaining this way, talking so fast and with such animated expressions. I could listen to her all day and never tire of it.

What was happening to me? You’re falling in love, idiot. And you’re not even trying to stop yourself.

AFTER WE WERE FINISHED with our lunch and the bottle of wine was nearly empty, I was feeling too drowsy to drive us home. “I’ll just rest my eyes for a moment,” I said. “Before we head home?”

“Do we have to go? It’s so nice here.”

“Not soon,” I said. “After a nap.”

“You’ve ruined me, Mr. Tutheridge, with your blush wine and talk of...what did we talk about? I’ve already forgotten everything we said.”

I turned to lie on my back, with my head resting on the pillow. “Hmm, well, I’ll remind you after I have a few minutes to slumber.”

“Yes, well, if you must. I’ll go back to my book.”

I opened one eye to see her arranging herself against the pillow. She opened the book but then yawned. “Perhaps I’ll rest my eyes, too.”

I closed my eyes and smiled to myself as I heard the shuffling noises of her moving about, probably arranging her pillow as far from me as possible.

Soon, I drifted off, waking some time later to the sun glaring right into my eyes. It had moved lower in the sky, telling me it was late afternoon.

I rolled over to my side. Faith was fast asleep, curled into a half circle, with her hands resting under her cheek and her hair having come loose from its careful styling. The sock she spoke of earlier was visible now and looked slightly ridiculous. If it were up to me, she’d not fall prey to the styles of the day but simply be herself. I’d liked the modest way she’d pulled it back into a bun, but the ladies understood all this far better than I.

Now I reached for my sketch pad and charcoal and quickly sketched her before she woke. Such a lovely, peaceful sight before me. I’d never been as inspired by anyone, either as an artist or a man. She was the embodiment of everything good in the world.

God was with me as my hand moved across the blank page, creating a replica of the vision before me. He was by my side, whispering in my ear that life could be sweet. The cruelty my father bestowed upon my brothers, sister, and mother were not the only story of my life. There was kindness and compassion, too, mostly exhibited by the women around me. Ella’s bravery. Amelia’s tenacity. Faith’s compassion for others. It brought tears to my eyes thinking of the tiny girl she once was defending those who could not defend themselves. God must have smiled in those moments just as he wept for me.

I'd called to him during those long dark nights in the dungeon, and he'd always been there. Working through Dexter, who brought comfort and warm meals. Bitterness had not overtaken all else because love had always been there too. My mother's and Dexter's and my siblings'. It was perhaps even clearer to me because of the stark difference between Father and the rest of the people in my life. A silver lining? Not exactly, but a positive just the same.

And now, as I watched this pretty girl sleeping, my chest ached with emotion. Was it possible that God had sent her to me to remind me of what my life could be? I didn't have to be alone. I was worthy of love. Even though I'd made mistakes and not always led a chaste life, God had delivered this woman to me.

Why was I fighting so hard against the idea of marriage and family? *Because you're afraid Father was right.* It was as simple as that.

I closed my eyes and prayed silently, thanking God for this day and all of the blessings it had brought to me.

I'd not felt this fulfilled in a long time. There was not the tugging restlessness that so often ruled my actions. Was it possible there were more days like this to come?

When I opened my eyes, Faith had awakened and was watching me with those deep brown eyes. What did she think, seeing me sitting this way with my eyes closed?

"I was praying," I said, immediately feeling sheepish for saying so.

"Oh?"

"Thanking him for this day. For you."

She returned to sitting, gazing at me for a long moment. So long, in fact, that I wondered if I'd scared her with my confession.

Finally, she spoke. "I never thought I would have a day such as this. Or that I would spend it with someone like you."

"A scoundrel?" I asked, smiling.

“No, not a scoundrel. A wise, sweet man. Handsome, too. It’s my honor to be here with you. To think I could be a help to you in some way gives me such a thrill. A talented artist wanted to paint me. I’d never have believed it to be true.”

“Do you want to see what I drawing?”

“Yes, please,” she said.

I showed her my pad with the figure of her sleeping. I’d drawn the soft lines of her body and face as best I could, but it didn’t do her justice. There was no way to capture with charcoal how a sunbeam had landed on her hair, making it shine like warm honey, or the flush of her cheek, or the freckles on her nose. No matter what happened, I would remember that moment the rest of my life. I felt sure of it. More sure than I’d ever felt about anything.

“This is what I look like?” Faith asked.

“Yes.” I smiled at her funny expression, a mixture of doubt and wonderment. “But it’s impossible to replicate with only charcoal. Someday soon, I’ll attempt to make it a painting. I’m afraid it would take someone of more talent to express the glow that surrounded you. It will take many iterations, I suspect.”

She looked up from the sketch, meeting my eyes. I swallowed at the swell of emotion that rose from my chest to the back of my throat. “I’ve never felt like someone anybody would notice, especially a man like you. Thank you for making me feel like a swan.” A smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she tilted her head slightly. “You’re an extraordinary man, Briggs Tutheridge. I shall never forget you.”

“What if you didn’t have to?”

“Meaning?” Faith’s forehead creased.

“What if you stayed here forever? You could be my muse for the rest of our days.”

Her mouth opened, but whatever she was about to say, I would never know, because just then, we heard a gunshot. We both jumped at the sound. Behind us, the horses bucked and whinnied.

Faith paled, whispering, “Was that a gunshot?”

“I think so.” I scrambled to my feet and scanned the area but found nothing amiss. A breeze fluttered the maple leaves on a nearby sapling, as if to remind me that all was well.

Then, another shot. This time, it was to my left, somewhere in the nearby wood.

“Someone hunting,” I said. “Nothing to worry over. But let’s go.” I was lying through my teeth. I had no idea if that was true. As far as I knew, it was not hunting season for deer. That would come in the autumn, and around here, we didn’t have many who did so, whether for food or sport. Of course, it could be a hunter. Maybe looking for rabbit or squirrel? However, the fact that my father had been shot not that far from here weighed heavily on my mind. All I wanted in that moment was to keep Faith safe.

As quickly as we could, we gathered up the remains of the picnic and my art supplies and easel. After they were in the carriage, I untied the horses where they’d been grazing in the grass. Fortunately, they’d been tied up or the gunshot might have spooked them badly enough that they ran away.

I hitched them back to the carriage, my heart pounding in my chest, and was about to help Faith onto the seat when a man dressed in dirty denim overalls ran out of the woods. It was Sam Steele. The drunk from town. He carried a rifle. Terrific.

“Faith, let’s go.”

“Wait. Wait, please,” Sam slurred. “I need help. Someone’s shot my wife.” A thick beard and a cap worn low over his forehead made it hard to make out his features, yet I could tell he was scared. That much could not be hidden.

I had no gun of my own, not feeling it necessary to carry one. A mistake, I was thinking now.

“What’s happened?” I asked in the calmest voice I could muster.

“We were out hunting for rabbits,” Steele said in a shaky voice. “And out of nowhere, a gunshot took her down. She’s

just there, bleeding. We have to get help. Miss Ella. Do you know her? She lives at the mansion.”

“That’s my sister,” I said. “Let’s take your wife in the carriage. Ella’s there as far as I know.”

Faith and I both followed behind him into the woods, running as fast as we could. When we reached a small clearing, I immediately saw the crumpled body of a woman near a stream, a gunshot wound bleeding from her chest. Unwashed, tangled yellow hair hung at her shoulders. Even clothed in a dress thin from wear and dirty, she appeared almost emaciated.

I knelt over her and felt her pulse. Nothing. No pulse in her limp wrist. She was already gone. Blood tainted the ground and seeped into the creek water.

Glancing at Faith, I shook my head slightly to let her know what I’d discovered.

The man sank to his knees next to the body and started to keel. “She’s gone, ain’t she?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Faith knelt next to me. “What do we do? Take her back to the house? Have Ella look at her?”

“No, I’ll have to inform the sheriff first. He’ll want to see her as she is now.” I turned to the man, who continued to weep. “Where do you live on the island?”

Sam wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt, then gestured to the north, where the forest thickened further with trees and ferns. “We have a little cabin in there. Nothing much, but it was our home. We came here last year from back east.”

Peering at the dead woman, I remembered seeing her at the pub. Matthew had asked her to leave, and she’d made a fuss, much like Bebe’s tantrums. She’d been looking for customers, and Matthew didn’t allow that in his tavern.

“Do you want me to bring the preacher, too?” I asked Sam.

“We don’t attend church,” Sam said. “Don’t know if he’d come out for me.”

“He would,” Faith said. “Pastor Bains won’t care about that.”

I was amazed by her calm demeanor. Meanwhile, I was a bundle of nerves, my mind moving about from here to there and back again. Was Sam telling the truth? Had someone come out of the forest and shot her, then run away? What would be the motive? Was it like Father’s murder? Had we been wrong all this time and there was a killer on the loose? A murderer who chose victims randomly? Or had Sam done it himself and then saw us there and figured he had to pretend someone else killed her?

There was no way I was leaving Faith here alone with him while I went into town to get the sheriff and send word out to Ella. On the other hand, I didn’t want to leave him alone in case he had killed her and would make his getaway. I didn’t know what to do.

What had been one of the best days of my life had taken a sharp turn in the other direction.

I locked eyes with Faith for a moment, and she seemed to read my mind. “You two go into town and get the sheriff,” Faith said. “I’ll stay with her.”

“No, I’m not leaving you here by yourself,” I said. “What if the killer’s still out there?”

“I’ll stay,” Sam said. “I can’t leave her like this.”

I’d have to take the chance that he wouldn’t run. “You stay then. Faith and I will go get the sheriff. Don’t move her,” I said, as steadily as I could, when really I wanted to grab Faith and make a run for it.

Still on his knees, with a glazed expression in his eyes, he nodded, swaying slightly. Drunk. How drunk I couldn’t say.

“Yes, all right,” Sam said.

Faith and I hustled back through the thicket of trees toward the carriage. The hairs on the back of my neck stuck

straight up, hoping we weren't about to be shot down like Laura. When I looked back, Sam was in the same position, knelt over his wife, his back shaking with sobs. If he had killed her, he was one heck of an actor. Or maybe he felt remorse over what he'd done? Who knew with a man like that?

Once we reached the carriage, I helped Faith up with a shaking hand. Her hair had come completely undone and hung in waves around her shoulders. The sock had disappeared somewhere along the way. Blood soiled her white blouse.

I got into the carriage and took hold of the reins. Neither of us had spoken yet. What was there to say? I knew she was thinking along the same lines as me. There was something that didn't add up about Sam's story. But that was for the sheriff to decide, I supposed. Our job was only to fetch him and Bains.

It seemed as if it took us forever to get to town. I left Faith in the carriage and ran into the sheriff's office. White was there with his feet up on the desk, smoking a cigar and reading an old Seattle newspaper.

We must have looked a sight because he swung his feet from the desk and stood. "What's the matter?"

"It's another murder," I said. "Sam Steele's wife, Laura. Shot up by Eagle Landing."

"Eagle Landing?" White asked.

"That's what we call the cliff next to the lighthouse," I said. "She's dead. We don't know if he killed her or someone else. Faith and I were picnicking up there and we heard a gunshot and then Sam Steele came running out of the woods carrying a shotgun and claiming someone shot his wife."

White was already gathering his jacket and then checked his pistol to make sure it was loaded. "Lead the way. And then I'll have to have you leave it to me and go home, all right? Have someone come get you. I don't need anyone messing up the crime scene."

"Fine with me," I said under my breath before turning to Faith. "Do you think you can take the carriage back to the

house? Tell Ella what's happened and ask her to come out there to get me in the car."

"Yes, yes." She was still pale and seemed a little faint, but if she was scared she didn't say it out loud.

I squeezed her hand and then, not thinking, bent to kiss her cheek. "It's all right. You're all right."

She squeezed my hand in return and nodded. "I'll be fine."

And then she was out the door, running toward our carriage while I followed White to the police wagon he kept parked behind the building.

On the way, I told him everything again and answered his questions. When I described what they looked like, he nodded. "Yeah, I know the Steeles all too well. They've both been in my cell a few times for public intoxication. They came here last year. Poor. Nothing but the clothes on their back. Ella told me they built a cabin and live there, hunting rabbits and growing some vegetables."

"Why would they come here of all places?" I asked, more to myself than White.

"I get the feeling there was a reason. Something specific. Might have to do with your father."

I looked over at White. "As in?" God only knew. There were a myriad of ways my father could have been involved with a woman like Laura Steele. None of them good. None I wanted to know about.

"Laura was sick," White said. "Something God-fearing ladies wouldn't contract, if you know what I mean. Diseases of the unmentionable sort."

I let that sink in for a moment. Not surprising, given her profession, I supposed. Ella must have treated her.

"Matthew had to turn her in a few times," White said. "Your father didn't like her in there."

"Really?" That seemed hypocritical of him since the man had more mistresses than we had island harbor seals.

“Your father was a complicated man.”

Yes, he certainly was. Why would he care if Laura Steele was a prostitute? Had he crossed her somehow, and she was the one who killed him? But if that was the case, how did she get Hudson’s gun? Was she yet another suspect in the murder of my father?

“White, you don’t think she could have killed my father, do you?”

“Nah. She has an alibi. She was in jail the night he was killed.”

FAITH

I hadn't mentioned it to Briggs, but I wasn't exactly experienced in driving a carriage. I'd only driven my father's wagon from time to time, and that had been with our old mule Ozzie pulling at the reins. He wasn't what one would describe as vivacious.

Thus, my hands had shaken as I took up the reins and guided the horses out of town. However, they were tame and gentle. They seemed to know a novice was driving them and took pity upon me. In addition, they knew the way home and that hay and apples awaited them.

Soon, we pulled up to the watering hole at the estate. Dexter came running out, obviously seeing from inside that I had returned without Briggs.

"Miss Fidget, has something happened? Where's Briggs?" His mouth dropped open when he saw the state of my blouse. "Good God, are you hurt?"

Seeing Dexter's friendly face almost made me burst into tears. I'd been more composed than I'd thought possible given the circumstances, but now I seemed certain to fall apart.

"I'm fine. But it's something awful," I said as he helped me from the carriage. "Briggs and I were having a picnic and he was painting and then we took a nap and then we woke to the sound of a gunshot." The rest of the story came tumbling out of my mouth as he led me inside, giving directions to one of the stable boys to take care of the horses all at the same time.

Once inside the foyer, I accidentally saw myself in the mirror. I couldn't decide if it was funny or sad. My hair had completely lost its earlier perfection, and the sock was nowhere to be seen. I'd forgotten completely about my hat. It must be in the carriage along with the rest of our belongings. I said as much to Dexter, who assured me the stable boys would take care of it.

“Mrs. Tutheridge is in the living room,” Dexter said. “Ella too.”

“Briggs asked me to tell Ella what’s happened.”

He nodded absently and led me into the living room. Mrs. Tutheridge and Ella were playing a game of cards. The windows were open, bringing a pleasant breeze to the warm room. How could I have come from such a bloody scene to this?

Ella jumped up at the sight of me. “Faith, are you bleeding?”

“Not my blood.” I felt faint suddenly and grabbed hold of the back of a chair.

“Here, sit,” Dexter said to me. “I’ll get you a glass of water.”

I did so, giving as many details as I could remember. “We just left him there with his dead wife. No idea if he shot her or if someone did come out of the woods. So much blood. I’ve never seen a dead person before.” I shuddered. “And the blood was running into the creek water.”

“Briggs and Sheriff White went out there?” Ella asked, still standing.

“Yes, Briggs thought it was best not to disturb the body so the sheriff would see everything he needed to gather evidence and all of that.” It all sounded completely foreign as I said the words. Evidence. What did I know about that?

“Do you think this means there really is a killer on the island?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “That perhaps it wasn’t personal after all?”

“Not necessarily,” Ella said. “There were troubles between Sam and his wife. He hit her regularly. One time when I arrived, they were arguing over a rather delicate medical situation.”

“Delicate?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Laura Steele has been known for sharing her body in exchange for money,” Ella said in her clinical voice. “And she, unfortunately, developed a venereal disease. One that she gave to her husband. Syphilis.”

“How awful.” Mrs. Tutheridge looked stricken. “Were you able to treat them?”

“No. There’s research happening and progress in Germany, but as of now, we don’t have anything available here in the States. Sadly, it would eventually make her lose her lucidity and muscle control. It might have taken years, but the prognosis wasn’t good.”

“And she gave it to him?” I asked, sickened. The idea of such a thing was beyond my comprehension and experience.

“Ella, what about me?” Mrs. Tutheridge’s voice had changed completely. She looked shocked and pale. Her hands trembled. “Was she one of your father’s women?”

The color drained from Ella’s face as well. “That thought occurred to me. However, when I asked her straight out, Laura told me Father was not a customer. I knew, however, that she’d been down at Matthew’s pub looking for men. I had to tell Matthew to warn the men to stay away. I hated to break her confidence, but we don’t need half the island sick with syphilis.”

“My God, no,” Mrs. Tutheridge said.

“Matthew’s told me Father explicitly asked him to run her off anytime she came around the bar.”

“That seems odd,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Given everything.”

“Matthew told me Father wanted nothing to do with her,” Ella said. “In fact, Father was trying to run them off the island shortly before he was killed.”

“But do we know for sure?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Could he have given it to me?” She now looked green, as if she might be sick. I felt the same way myself.

Ella glanced at me before returning her attention back to her mother. “I hate to ask this, but were you and Father intimate in the later years?”

“Not for some time, no,” Mrs. Tutheridge said, red-faced.

“If he had been with her, it would have been recently. They didn’t come here until last fall.”

Mrs. Tutheridge seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “I suppose you’re right then.”

“You would have had symptoms, Mother. I’d have recognized them, especially having seen Laura Steele’s back in February. They’re fairly severe—fever, sore throat, patchy hair loss. In addition, you would have felt miserable. I promise. You’re not sick.”

“But if she was ill, why wasn’t she in bed?” I asked.

“The initial sickness comes and goes,” Ella said. “Then one goes into a latent stage where there are no symptoms. Regardless, they can still give it to others. She might not have another relapse for years. Maybe less. It just depends.”

“How on earth do you know all this?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked Ella with obvious admiration and awe.

“I read journals. Anything I can get a hold of,” Ella said. “They might not want me in medical school, but they can’t keep me from the books.”

I was only half listening as my mind whirled with all this new information. “Do you think Mr. Steele might have done this to her out of anger? Because she made him sick?”

“It’s very possible,” Ella said. “And if he did, then we’d know it has nothing to do with Father’s murder.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. Mr. Tutheridge had taken part in a seedy kind of life despite his wealth and prestige. Had he gotten mixed up in all of it somehow? If so, had that been motive for Sam Steele to murder him?

I’d nearly forgotten Briggs’s request. “Ella, can you get Briggs out on Eagle Landing? He said to bring the car.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll go right there.” Ella was already headed toward the door when she turned back to us. “Try not to worry. Either of you. But stay inside.”

After she was gone, Mrs. Tutheridge remained very still for a moment, gazing at her hands. “What will become of us?”

“Ella and Briggs will know what to do,” I said, sinking into a chair.

She rose to her feet and went to the liquor cabinet, pouring us each a sherry. “I could use a drink, and I’m guessing you do, too.”

“Thank you.” I took the glass from her outstretched hand. How long ago it seemed now that I’d been sipping pink wine and talking to Briggs.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that,” Mrs. Tutheridge said, sounding weary to the bone. “I didn’t want any of this to touch you. It seems our family is never far from tragedy.”

It hit me hard then about the kind of life Mrs. Tutheridge had had to endure. Her husband and his mistresses, the abuse she suffered. What had kept her going? How was it that she stayed and my mother left? My sweet papa had always been so decent and loyal, yet she’d abandoned him and her baby. The difference in the two women? One put her children above her own happiness. The other wanted only to please herself.

I’d never minded not having a mother. Papa had worried I needed a woman around when I started to mature, but I never felt as if anything was missing in my life. But now, thinking through what had truly happened in this house, an emptiness took hold. Mrs. Tutheridge deserved a better life than the one she’d had with Roland Tutheridge. I hoped Timothy Bains would prove to be worthy of her. If only we could predict the future, we might be able to save her from further tragedy. I understood why Briggs worried about the union. However, from the outside, it was impossible to know what was between them or in their hearts. Only time would tell us whether the story would have a happy ending or a tragic one.

Amelia came rushing into the room, her hat askew. “I just heard in town that there’s been another murder.” Her green eyes scanned our faces before she reached into her handbag and took out her notebook. “Tell me everything.”

BRIGGS DIDN'T RETURN until late afternoon. I’d gone up to my room to bathe and change out of my bloody clothes. Attempting to nap a little before dinner had been impossible, as I was unable to rid myself of worry and anxiousness. How would these murders ever be solved? Was there any weight to Amelia’s suspicions? Around and around went my thoughts, with no conclusions whatsoever.

As far as the suspect list went, nothing had been narrowed down, other than we all agreed it wasn’t one of the Tutheridge family members. No one could prove it, not yet, anyway, but I felt quite sure they were all innocent. Now, knowing about Sam and Laura Steele, we’d had to add them to the list as well.

Could Laura have killed Mr. Tutheridge? Had he spent time with her and caught the venereal disease and then what? They might have argued. He might have come after her, enraged, and she shot him instead.

That made no sense, though, if what we believed was true about the time and location of his death. He’d been coming home from his weekly poker night and been killed not far from his own driveway. Which told me it was someone who knew his schedule and waited there for him. Or, if it was a random killer, the same one who had murdered Laura Steele, then he might have come upon Mr. Tutheridge by chance. The same could be true of Laura’s murder.

BRIGGS

The house was quiet when Ella and I arrived home. Sheriff White had dismissed us so that he could question Sam Steele about what had happened. Ella and I had our theories but White didn't seem inclined to listen.

In truth, we were both relieved to be home, agreeing that nothing sounded better than a good scrub in the bathtub.

When we entered the house everything seemed eerily quiet. Dexter did not greet us.. Mother and Faith were nowhere to be seen. Ella and I agreed to go upstairs and bathe and reconvene before dinner.

I'd just cleaned up and was headed downstairs when I heard the knocker pound on the front door, followed closely by another. What an aggressive knock, I thought, as I hurried to the foyer. Dexter beat me there and had opened the door by the time I reached the bottom step. Sheriff White stood under the awning, a grim expression on his face. My first thought? Someone else was dead.

I exchanged a look with Dexter, who appeared pale and shaky. Was he not feeling well? Or was he as nervous as I that it was the sheriff.

"Sorry to intrude," Sheriff White asked. "May I come in?"

"Hudson's not here," Dexter said.

"I'm not looking for him," White said. "I need to see Ella."

"I'll get her," Dexter said. "She's in the sitting room with Amelia." He lumbered away as if his feet hurt him, leaving me alone with the sheriff.

"Did you have more questions for her about the cause of Mrs. Steele's death?" I asked in a whisper, not wanting to alert any of the staff in case anyone could hear me.

“Something like that.”

Ella, followed closely behind by Amelia and Mother, appeared in the foyer.

“Did you need me to look at the body again?” Ella asked.

“That won’t be necessary.” White stepped forward, drawing handcuffs from his jacket pocket. “Ella Tutheridge, you’re under arrest for the murder of Roland Tutheridge. You’ll need to come with me.”

Amelia and I both gasped. “What did you say?” Ella asked, gripping the banister with such intensity that her knuckles whitened. “Me? Why would you think I killed him?”

“Sam Steele says he saw you that night shortly before Roland was shot,” White said. “Between that and your brother’s gun, I have cause to believe you did it. The way I see it, you took Hudson’s gun and waited for your father to come home, then you killed him.”

Amelia made a disgusted guttural noise. “Why hasn’t Steele come forward before now?”

“He’s not had the opportunity,” White said. “Until today.”

“That’s absurd,” Amelia said. “He just murdered his wife. Why would you believe him? He’s nothing but a lying drunk.”

White glared at her. “Your interest in this case, Mrs. Tutheridge, does not mean I answer to you.”

“That may be true, Sheriff White,” Amelia said, eyes flashing. “But you’re even more incompetent than I thought. Ella didn’t murder her father. Quite frankly, this is an outrage. You must be desperate if the claim from a witness who may or may not be lying is...” She cut herself off, clearly too upset to think of what to say next.

“It’s all right, Amelia,” Ella said, a vein in her forehead pulsing. I’d never seen her quite so ashen. My stomach churned. Why was this happening? None of it made sense.

“I’ll come with you, Sheriff White,” Ella said. “But I’m innocent. If you think I did it, then I’m going to have to agree with Amelia about your competency.”

“Yes, Sheriff White, this is nonsense.” Mother said. “Unfounded and misguided.”

White raised an eyebrow. “Mrs. Tutheridge, Sam Steele saw Ella shoot Roland.”

“Nonsense,” Mother said.

Sheriff White shook his head. “Sam said he was out walking and saw Ella strolling around in the woods, then Roland’s carriage arrived and she pulled out the pistol and shot him.”

“Walking around in the woods?” Ella asked. “In the middle of the night? That’s simply not true. I would never go out at night alone for a walk. It’s bad enough I have to drive around the island at night for my patients.”

“Can you prove you were here at home? Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts?” White asked.

This again. How many times did I have to tell him we were all here asleep?

“Why didn’t Steele come forward before now?” Amelia asked through clenched teeth. “Isn’t it a bit convenient that the night he probably killed his wife, he’s making accusations? How could you take his word over Ella’s?”

“He said he’s been reluctant to come forward because of fear of retaliation.” White puckered his mouth as if he’d tasted spoiled meat. “Your family’s powerful on this island, Mrs. Tutheridge. I am sure you can understand why a man would be nervous to say anything against one of you. Especially to come out against Ella of Ella Pointe.”

“You could have easily taken your brother’s gun that night and used it,” White said. “From all accounts, you know how to shoot that type of pistol. Then you were hoping your brother would be blamed once the weapon was found.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” I said. “This is insanity.”

White stepped forward. “Now, Ella, if you come quietly, we can have a good talk down at the jail.”

Mother was quietly sobbing into her hanky. “Please, don’t take her. She would never kill her own father. She’s a healer, for God’s sake.”

“You have to have more proof than Sam Steele in order to arrest her,” I said. “It’s his word against hers. *Ours.*”

“He was angry when I told them what was wrong with Laura,” Ella said faintly, as if she were putting it together herself. “He acted like it was my fault. Shooting the messenger kind of thing. Maybe this is his way of punishing me? It doesn’t make sense otherwise. Did you question him about Laura’s murder? Were you able to determine if he killed her?”

“He says you killed Laura, too,” White said.

Ella was shaking her head and looking at White like he was speaking a foreign language. “This makes no sense, White. You know it too. You’re arresting me for some other reason, not because you believe Sam. You’re a smart man. You would see right through him. Why are you doing this?”

“I have enough information that I believe it was you,” White said. “It’s always the one no one suspects.”

“You’ll be sorry for this later,” Amelia said, almost shouting. “You’ll be a laughingstock on the island. Arresting Ella. It’s the most asinine thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“Where’s Benedict?” I asked Amelia. We needed Benedict.

“He’s out at the house,” Amelia said. “But he’ll be here shortly.”

I looked over at Dexter, who had been standing near the doorway through all of this. His face crestfallen, he returned my gaze. “What about Hudson?”

“I’m not sure,” Dexter said.

“We need to find him,” I said. “We need everyone here to figure out how to fight this.”

Something from up above caught my attention. It was Bebe looking through the rails from the second floor, crying. Faith stood beside her with her hand on my niece’s shoulder.

She locked eyes with me briefly before I returned my attention back to the sheriff. “We’ll get lawyers and fight you every step of the way.”

“I didn’t want it to be her either,” White said. “It’s killing me to do this.”

“Oh, poor you,” Amelia said, a sardonic twist of her mouth belying her words.

“You’re covering up your own crime,” Ella said. “That has to be it. Why else would you believe Sam Steele? He’s a vindictive man who made his wife sell her body to live.”

“You need more evidence, and you know it.” Amelia spoke fast and without seeming to take a breath. “You’re under pressure to solve this murder by the residents of this island, which has made you hasty and sloppy. Although maybe you’re always this way. I wouldn’t know since I’m new to the island.”

“And there were no murders here before now,” Mother said. “Leaving you untested, Robert. You were good at covering up my husband’s crimes, but I’m not sure what else you’re capable of.”

“Murder, that’s what,” Amelia said, jabbing her finger in the air as if pretending it was the sheriff’s chest. “You killed Mr. Tutheridge, Sheriff White. You’ve been looking for someone to cast blame upon to deflect from your own guilt. I’ll prove it. I won’t rest until I do.”

“Am I allowed to bring my toothbrush?” Ella asked meekly.

“I’ll bring you whatever you need,” Amelia said, crying now in obvious outrage and frustration.

“It’ll be all right,” Ella said. “Amelia, everything will be fine.”

Sheriff White clasped the handcuffs onto Ella’s wrists, then gently pushed her toward the door. “Time to go.”

“We’ll get you out,” I said. “Stay strong.”

“I will.” Ella, still white as a ghost, remained stoic. She’d never give White the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

Where the hell was Hudson? If he was the one responsible for Father's death and let Ella take the fall, I would kill him myself and probably go to jail too. That would be a fine parting gift from Father.

After the sheriff took Ella away, we all stared helplessly at one another. Amelia started pacing around the foyer, muttering under her breath something about Sam Steele and what she wished to do to his limbs in the style of the English and the Scots from long ago.

I looked up as Bebe and Faith came down the stairs. Bebe launched herself into my arms. I held her close and instructed everyone to assemble in the living room. "Family meeting time," I said softly to Bebe, who clung to me. "We'll get this all figured out and Aunt Ella will be home before you know it."

A few minutes later, we were all gathered in the living room. Dexter had not yet arrived back with Benedict, but I expected them any moment. Still no sign of Hudson. Absent from life, as usual.

"Bebe, where's your daddy?" I asked. "Do you know where he went off to this afternoon?"

She shook her head. "At breakfast, he told me he was very busy today and not to bother him. I was to spend the day with Grammie."

"When he left, was he carrying a suitcase?" Amelia asked, biting out the words.

"I don't know," Bebe said from where she was sitting with my mother on the couch, bottom lip quivering. "He wouldn't leave without me, would he?"

I gathered her onto my lap and held her tightly, kissing the top of her forehead. "Don't worry, darling. He's probably out running errands, or maybe he had to go to Seattle for business."

He better have done one of those two things, or there would be hell to pay when he returned. *If* he returned. God, what if he did this and now had run away, leaving Ella to take

the fall? I seethed with anger. *Keep it in check*, I warned myself. *For Bebe's sake*.

“Bebe, I think it would be best if you went downstairs to see Mrs. Halvorson,” I said. “I heard something about carrot cake for dessert. I bet she’d give you a piece if you ate your supper.”

Bebe brightened considerably before jumping from my lap and running out of the room toward the stairs that led to the kitchen.

Seconds later, Benedict, followed by Dexter, burst into the room. “Is it true? He took Ella?”

Amelia ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. “He wouldn’t listen to reason.” Her voice broke. “He put her in handcuffs. What if she has to use the bathroom?”

This struck me as funny, but I restrained myself from laughing. I was veering toward hysteria. I couldn’t think straight. What were we to do now?

“We must remain calm,” Benedict said. “Talk everything through.” Benedict led Amelia over to the couch and had her sit next to Mother. Then he went to stand in front of the unlit fireplace.

“Wait a minute,” Amelia said, so loud and sudden that I jumped. “I just remembered something. Ella told me that Sam Steele became very violent when she told him what was wrong with Laura. He’d made it his mission to harass Ella for weeks after that. Always showing up and acting as if it were a coincidence. Last week, he cornered her as we came out of the bakery.” Amelia had gone from pale to red-cheeked. “He was drunk and shouting at her. Matthew Goodwell saw what was happening and came running out of his pub and chased him off.”

“What was he shouting about?” Benedict asked.

“It didn’t make much sense,” Amelia said. She pressed her fingers into her forehead, clearly trying to remember the details. “He said Roland Tutheridge ruined his life and his

wife's life and that he should have killed him when he had the chance."

"That's not all he said." Faith had been hovering in the corner, watching us. "He said Mr. Tutheridge promised to do what's right."

"Do what's right? About what?" I asked. "Do you think Father harmed them in some way?"

"It's certainly possible," Benedict said. "But how will we ever know the truth now?"

"I know what he meant."

We all jumped at the sound of Dexter's voice coming from behind us. Dexter? I turned around to look at him standing in the doorway, twisting a towel around his hand.

"Laura Steele was Mr. Tutheridge's daughter. They came to the island hoping for money in exchange for keeping his secret. Yet another one."

We were all stunned into silence for a moment until Mother spoke.

"How do you know that?" Mother wrung her hands and then lifted them to her cheeks which were blanched to a shade paler than white.

"Did Father give them any money?" Benedict asked.

"He sent them away," Dexter said. "Called her a liar. Refused to help."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I know everything that happens in this house," Dexter said.

"*Was* she a liar?" Mother asked him.

"No, Mrs. Tutheridge, I'm afraid not," Dexter said. "It was when you were first married. That first year—when you lived in Seattle. You were indisposed with Benedict coming soon. Mr. Tutheridge had relations with one of the maids. She was Laura's mother."

“Are you sure?” I asked. How could he be, given the number of women my father had bedded over the years? I felt sick. How many illegitimate children were there?

“Yes, I’m sure,” Dexter said. “The staff talked, you know. Laura’s mother—Annie was her name—disappeared one day and never returned to work. We heard through gossip that she’d thrown herself into Puget Sound shortly after she gave birth to a baby girl. The child was left with her grandmother, who died when Laura was twelve. After that, Laura did whatever she could to earn money.”

“How could you know this and not tell me?” Mother asked. “Didn’t you think this was something I should know?”

“How was I to tell you such a thing, Mrs. Tutheridge?” Dexter asked. “What good would it have done you to know?”

“All you men, protecting him all these years,” Mother said. “Timothy too. I have to wonder who you were loyal to, Dexter. Me or him?”

“Always you,” Dexter said, his voice no louder than a whisper. “But like the rest of us, I had no power. If I’d told you, he would have dismissed me. I thought it was better to be here for you than be fired.”

“Good Lord, how many more siblings might we have?” Benedict asked.

Amelia grabbed her notebook from the table and held it against her chest. “So what we’re saying here, is that Sam Steele might have murdered Mr. Tutheridge out of revenge.”

“It would make sense, given what he said that day he came after Ella,” Faith said.

“And now he’s blamed Ella to make himself look innocent,” Amelia said biting. “How could White not see that? I could kill that little rodent myself.”

“We’ve had enough violence,” Mrs. Tutheridge said softly. “We have to come up with a plan to get Sam to admit he lied.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Amelia said, huffing. “Or we can torture it out of him.”

Benedict crossed the room to sit next to her and patted her hand. “Darling, I’m fairly certain that’s illegal. I don’t want my bride hauled off to jail.”

“Ella’s in jail. We have to do something.” Amelia covered her face with her hands and let out a frustrated groan before snapping her head back up to address the room. “What are we going to do? We have to get him to tell the truth.”

“I could have a crack at him,” Dexter said, pulling the towel his hands taut. “I have ways to get things out of people.”

“Like what?” Amelia sat up straighter, anticipation shining in her eyes. “I hope it hurts, whatever it is.”

“Or I could pretend to be on his side,” Dexter said. “As if I understood, man-to-man. Outsiders, both of us. That kind of thing.”

“You could ply him with whiskey,” I said. “Loosen his tongue.”

“Maybe flatter him,” Amelia said. “Trick him into admitting how clever he was to get Ella arrested.”

“Where does Sam live?” Benedict asked.

“In the woods. Not far from where we found him and Laura,” I said. “I think we should all go out there and see if we can scare him simply by showing up. Not that I don’t believe in your interrogation abilities, Dexter, but there’s power in numbers.”

“Agree. You two are more of a threat than an aging butler,” Dexter said, gesturing toward Benedict. “I’ll drive you in the car and wait outside should the need for a speedy escape arise.”

“Let’s do it,” I said, standing. “There’s no time to waste.” The sooner we got my little sister released from jail cell, the better.”

“I’ll call our lawyer,” Mother said.

“And I’ll write everything up in my notebook,” Amelia said. “The lawyers might find it helpful.”

FAITH

I wasn't sure what to do with myself after Briggs and Benedict left with Dexter. Amelia and Mrs. Tutheridge were huddled together on the couch going over whatever she had in that notebook. I loitered in the corner, contemplating what would be best, when Amelia looked up at me.

"We're sorry, Faith. We're being rude."

"Please don't apologize. You have other things to worry about," I said, feeling about as awkward as I'd ever felt in my life.

"Maybe Faith can give us some perspective," Mrs. Tutheridge said. "Fresh eyes, so to speak."

"Absolutely. Come sit," Amelia said. "And we'll tell you everything we know."

They went through the list of possible murderers, including the siblings, Mrs. Tutheridge herself, and the poker players.

"What about the staff here?" I asked. "Is there a reason you've ruled them out?"

Mrs. Tutheridge looked blank, followed by aghast. "The staff? Why would they want him dead? He paid their salaries."

From what I'd heard thus far, Mr. Tutheridge clearly had an assortment of mistresses, including Laura's mother, all those years ago. Which led me to think there might be maids who he'd seduced more recently. I'd heard of it happening. In fact, one of the girls I'd grown up with got into trouble when she was lured into an intimate relationship with the master of the house where she worked. Mable told me it happened all the time. I hadn't really believed her, as she was always talking about things as if she were an expert when she actually knew nothing. That was another aspect of her personality that annoyed me, I thought absently before returning to the current subject.

How could I bring that up to Mrs. Tutheridge? Surely, even if he was dead, it hurt to hear about his affairs and betrayals. I know it stung like the worst of all burns because it had happened to me. To have it happen more than once and while *married* would be unbearable.

I didn't want to believe it, but the question hammered at me just the same. Had Mrs. Tutheridge killed him? If so, I could hardly blame her. Women had no choice but to remain with their husbands, despite ill-treatment. It was not a surprise that Ella didn't want to marry, now that I thought about it in that context. She'd seen the worst kind of marriage all her life.

"Please forgive me if this is out of the bounds of what I should say, hardly knowing you and all, but Mr. Tutheridge had...other women."

"Yes, obviously. And children who continue to show up with no warning." Mrs. Tutheridge's eyes dulled. She looked down at her lap. "There were many over the years. Roland forced Timothy to help keep them secret from me. I knew about some, of course, but not this one."

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I know how much it hurts."

"I suppose you do. Mrs. Mantle told me about that unfortunate occurrence when she sent us the letter about you." Mrs. Tutheridge studied me for a moment. "You know you're better off without him. Now that you're here with us, all will be well."

I thought it an odd thing to say. Was she referring to the job or the adventure of traveling so far from home? Or being a part of the family here? How I longed for that. Amelia seemed as though she'd been with them forever. She must have instinctively known how to endear herself. What were her secrets? I would probably never understand, given my limitations. I put that aside to think about later.

"My point is that...um." I coughed to buy time. How did I put this delicately?

I didn't have to.

Amelia said it for me. “You mean, could it be one of his mistresses?”

“Yes, and what if one of them lived here in this house? Working for you as a maid or cook?” I asked.

“I’m fairly certain Mrs. Halvorson was not having a clandestine affair with my husband.” Mrs. Tutheridge giggled in a high pitch. “She despised the man.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “Furthermore, if she despised him, wouldn’t that put her on the list?”

Mrs. Tutheridge paused for a moment, her brow wrinkling, then shook her head. “No, she wouldn’t risk her life to kill him. He wasn’t worth it to her.”

“I tend to agree. This was a crime of passion,” Amelia said. “Someone who had a hatred of him that ran deep. Someone who felt that Mr. Tutheridge had ruined their life.”

“Or could it be someone who loved this family and hated seeing all of you mistreated?” I tossed that idea out to the two women who knew much more about all this than I. However, I was coming to it with fresh eyes and without emotional attachment.

Both ladies gaped at me for a moment. “I hadn’t thought of that. Not really, anyway,” Amelia said after a second. “But there isn’t anyone who qualifies. The maids wouldn’t care enough to ruin their lives or even lose their jobs. Like Mrs. Halvorson, they wouldn’t dare risk it for fear of prison or hanging.” She visibly shivered, possibly thinking of Ella.

“What about Dexter?” I said, sure my suggestion would be unwelcome, but it had to be said. Why had no one thought about Dexter?

“It’s not possible,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “He’s a gentle person. A man who has devoted his life to service.”

“Service to this family,” Amelia said, speaking slowly. “He was the one who rescued the boys from the dungeon. He saw how Mr. Tutheridge treated you. Is it possible he cracked? Maybe he’d finally had enough.”

“I don’t know.” Mrs. Tutheridge’s eyes filled. She dabbed at her cheeks with a lace hanky. “He *is* very loyal. I’ll grant you that. Especially to me. He came with me when I married, you know. His father had worked for our family.” She looked at Amelia, a stricken expression scrunching up her face so that she seemed older than only moments before. “If he did it—I’d be utterly devastated. It’s unthinkable, really. He would have done it for us. To help us get away once and for all. But it’s such a sacrifice. Does he love us that much? Enough to risk his own life?” She splayed her hands over her lap. “There’s something else. He swore me to secrecy. I’ve kept it to myself even though I didn’t want to. He’s sick. Dying, according to a doctor in Seattle. He refused to tell Ella.”

“Oh my.” Amelia sank into a chair. “Sick enough not to care if he gets caught?”

“Knowing this was his last act of love?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked. “Amelia, please say it’s not so.”

“If I could, I would,” Amelia said. “You know I would.”

Something in that theory didn’t quite add up, though. “But if he did it and knows he’s dying, wouldn’t he come out and admit to it when White took Ella away?” I looked from one woman to the other.

“If he did this to save the family, it would certainly seem so,” Amelia said.

“Dexter didn’t do it. He just couldn’t have,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “He’ll spend whatever time he has left in a prison cell.”

“It’s unlikely,” Amelia agreed. “Of all the suspects, he had the least to gain.”

“Or nothing to lose,” I said.

BRIGGS

We drove out to Sam's in the car, parking as close to the edge of the woods as possible, and then marched through the trees with only lanterns lighting our way.

Benedict, who knew these woods better than I, took the lead, with Dexter and me at his heels. It was a clear night with stars peeking through the trees. A sliver of a moon shed no light. Sounds of the forest came to us through the darkness, rustling of leaves and branches. An owl hooted somewhere, as if guiding us along. Benedict walked without making any noise other than his feet through the pine needles and leaves, whereas Dexter's breaths seemed labored and wheezy.

Was he sick?

The idea shook me. A certain clarity came to me then. He had not looked well. Not for months. I'd chosen to ignore it, not wanting it to be true, telling myself he was just getting older. Was he possibly dying? How could I not have seen it before? He'd lost weight. His black suits, which he wore every day, were loose. Dark circles under his eyes and a drawn, weary visage should have given me further hints. However, I was busy thinking of other things. Mostly Faith.

Did Mother know? Had he shared it with her and asked her to keep it to herself? A proud man and one who took tradition seriously, he might not have told her. He was our butler, taking care of us at all costs.

We came upon the cabin seconds later. I could only just make out the shape in the dark. No lights on at this hour. He probably used kerosene lamps. There would be no electricity out here. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

We went up to the front entrance, such as it was. Benedict pounded on the thin, flimsy door and yelled out Sam's name.

Seconds later, we heard crashes and Sam's voice cursing, then the door flew open, revealing Sam. He wore a long red

underwear jumpsuit. When he turned slightly, I could see that the back opened so he could do his business.

He smelled of stale booze, dirty hair, and unwashed armpits.

“What do you want?” Sam growled, hanging onto the door as if he might fall over otherwise.

“We want you to tell the sheriff you lied,” Benedict said in his calm, low voice. “He’s arrested Ella because of what you told him.”

“I did see her in the woods that night. I know I did.” His breath was as foul as the rest of him.

“You’re lying,” I said. “She was home in bed.”

“I took her up a pot of tea myself that night,” Dexter said. “I know everything that goes on in that house.”

“Why did you lie?” Benedict asked in his same eerily placid voice.

“I didn’t. She did it. She’s not the innocent everyone thinks.”

As quick as a cat, Benedict had his large hand around Sam’s neck, shoving him against the wall. “We’re going right now to the sheriff’s office, and you’re going to tell him the truth. Do you understand?”

“I won’t.” Sam’s eyes glittered in the lamplight. Behind him, I saw a rat crawling around the dirt floor.

I shuddered. I hated rats.

“You will.” Benedict tightened his squeeze around Sam’s neck.

“And you can admit to killing your wife at the same time,” I said.

“She was a whore. She deserved to die.” Sam managed to speak despite Benedict’s tight grasp, but his eyes were watering.

“You came here expecting to exploit Mr. Tutheridge,” Dexter said sharply. “And when he refused, you were angry and killed him.”

“That’s not what happened,” Sam said. “I was angry about Mr. Tutheridge refusing to acknowledge his own daughter. He owed her. Just like the rest of his brats, she should have been included in whatever he gave the rest of you. Then he died, and it was too late to get anything from him. We had plans, let me tell you. Big plans. But then he up and died.”

“Do you expect any of us to believe you when you’ve lied about Ella?” Benedict asked. He had his hand placed against Sam’s chest, holding him in place. Beside us, Dexter had pulled out a pistol, which he now had pointed at Sam’s head. When had Dexter started carrying a gun?

Benedict loosened his grip around the pitiful man’s neck. “Admit it, Steele, and we’ll take a nice peaceful ride into town.” He nodded at me. “Tie his hands behind his back.”

I took the rope from under my arm and tied him as tightly as I could without cutting off his circulations.

“Now, let’s go out to the car,” Benedict said.

“Let’s just shoot him,” Dexter said. “He’s never going to tell the truth.”

Even in the dim light of the lanterns, I could see Sam’s posture go from defiant to a twitchy panic.

The gun scared him. Good. The wild look in Dexter’s eyes should frighten him, too. I didn’t know what had possessed our mild-mannered butler. He didn’t seem like himself at all. “What do you want, Steele?” I asked. “Should we shoot you, or do you want to head into town?”

“I saw her,” he said. “I saw her shiny hair in the moonlight.”

“No, you didn’t,” Benedict said. “Start walking.”

We marched him outside the cabin. It would be easy to lose him in the dark on the way back through the woods. He was as slippery as a snake. If he tried to get away, Dexter

might actually shoot him. No, I dismissed the idea. Dexter was a gentle man. Not a killer.

Anyway, Sam would be no good to us dead. We needed him alive to get Ella out of jail.

No good to us dead. Something was bothering me, niggling at my brain. What was I missing in all of this?

As we trudged along, I began to doubt our theory. Sam was right when he said Father was no good to him or Laura if he were dead. Extortion only worked if the person was alive and able to do what you wanted.

I tried to remember the details of the moments after we found Laura and Sam by the creek. What was I missing? Sam had seemed distraught, there was no doubt about it. Yet if what Ella had told us was right, Laura had given him syphilis. Had that angered him enough to kill her? She'd only been valuable to him if Father was still alive. Now that Father was gone, perhaps his anger overtook reason, and he killed her in a moment of passion.

Yes, that was it.

Had to be. He'd killed his wife but not my father. The two things were not related. Which left us pretty much back where we started. Only now Ella was in jail.

We continued through the trees until we arrived at the car. That was when everything fell apart.

OUT OF THE FOREST, a man appeared, carrying a shotgun. In the darkness, I couldn't see who it was at first, but then I knew. The truth nearly toppled me over as I realized it was Timothy Bains.

And he had a shotgun pointed right at Sam.

Bains was almost unrecognizable. His tidy preacher persona seemed deranged. Hair stuck out in every direction, as if he'd run his hands through it in despair. His clothes were

rumpled as though he'd slept in them. I'd done it enough times myself to recognize it.

"It was him," Bains said. "Sam Steele was the one." He pulled back the trigger.

I stepped away from Sam toward Bains with my hands out.

"Bains." It was Benedict's calm voice. "You don't want to shoot him."

"I do. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything. He's the one responsible. He took my whole life from me, and now he's going to die for it."

"Wait a minute." I spoke softly and slowly, as I would to a wild horse I wanted to tame. How did Sam Steele connect to Bains's past? Had Sam had something to do with the lies the girl had spread about him, causing him to lose his wife and son? "Don't do this. They'll hang you for it. What kind of revenge is that?"

"What did I do to you, Preach?" Sam said, sounding surprisingly feisty considering a gun was pointed at his head.

"You lied to an entire congregation, that's what you did. You told them I had tried to seduce your sister. It was your lies that did me in. The reason I was run out of my own church. It took me all this time to figure out where I knew you. Your eyes. The rest of you might have grown up, but your eyes are the same. You robbed me of my family. My boy."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sam said. "I ain't exactly the churchgoing kind."

"No more lies." The gun wavered in Bains's hands. "I'm going to kill you so you can't lie ever again. Ella's in jail because of you. You won't stop. Not until you've filled the world with as many lies and filth as you possibly can. Tell me the truth for once in your pitiful existence. You know who I am."

"Sure, I do," Sam said, peering at Bains and nodding, a wicked smirk on his face. "You're that preacher. The one we

drove away. My sister. She's a very good liar. Meant for the stage."

"Why did you do it?" Bains asked through gritted teeth. "Tell me, or I'll shoot you."

"I'd expect more from you, Preach. There's enough stories in the Bible to tell you why. Some of us are born bad, and that was me. It was a fun game to ruin a man's life." Sam grinned a rictus smile, his rotted teeth making him look even more like a ghoul. "My sister and me—we liked games. She's dead now. Everyone's dead but me. They were all killed in a fire. Did you know that?"

Bains shook his head. "When?"

"A few years after you left," Sam said. "It's just been me taking care of myself since then. Living on the streets, begging for food. I guess you could say I've suffered for my sins. Ain't that right?"

"You've not suffered nearly enough," Bains said. "I lost my boy. He thinks his father's a bad man. I've not seen him since he was young. That's because of you."

"I told you the truth, so now you can't shoot me," Sam said.

"This time, I'm the liar," Bains said. "I'm going to shoot you anyway."

"Listen to me," I said, terror making my voice raise an octave. "Don't throw it all away for this poor excuse of a man. He's not worth it. Please, Bains. Think of my mother. She doesn't deserve this. Don't let him steal happiness from her. She'll be devastated if she loses you. You'd be letting this piece of dirt ruin your life all over again."

The mention of my mother seemed to penetrate whatever madness had overtaken him. Bains brought down the gun. Benedict ran to him and took the shotgun out of his hands and uncocked the trigger, then tossed it away from them to take a weeping Bains into his arms. Unfortunately, with our attention on Bains, we'd forgotten about Sam. He'd loosened the rope from around his wrists and jolted toward the discarded

shotgun. Snatching it into his hands, he pointed it right at me and cocked the trigger. I thought with certainty I was a dead man. I even put my hands up, as if that would stop him.

Faith. I should have told Faith I loved her.

The sound of a gunshot echoed through the night. But it was not me who was shot. It was Sam who crumpled on the ground.

I turned to Dexter. He still had his gun raised. My brother and Bains clung to each other, clearly in shock over what had just happened. Dexter had shot him, quick as anything. Just like when we were kids, he'd saved me from a monster.

Lanterns in hand, Benedict and I knelt next to Sam. He was still alive, his eyes moving frantically from me to my brother. Blood bubbled out of the massive hole in his chest. I put my hands on the wound to try to stop the flow of blood, thick and warm on my skin. *No use*, I thought. *It's too late*.

Sam rested his gaze on me. "I'm dying, ain't I?"

"You have anything you want to say?" I asked, more than a little coldly. He'd been about to kill me, after all. Anyway, it was the truth. He was most certainly dying, if not from whatever the bullet had done to his organs but from the loss of blood.

"I lied about Ella," Sam said faintly. "It was me. I killed Laura. She gave me that sickness, you know, and it started making my thoughts strange. I had no choice but to kill her. It wasn't right what she did. I don't feel bad about any of it. Not a thing. You can all go straight to hell."

No sooner had the words come from his mouth than all life faded from Sam's eyes.

For a second, I froze, unable to process what had just happened. Dexter had killed a man. *God, oh God, not Dexter*. Why had he done this?

Dexter remained standing, but the gun dangled from one hand now. Bains, Benedict, and I, as if pulled by an invisible rope, all walked toward him.

Before we reached him, Dexter tumbled to the ground, as if his legs had suddenly lost all muscle. Had he fainted? Or was he sick?

Benedict and I fell to our knees on either side of him. He was on his back, looking up at us with such love and tenderness in his eyes that it nearly took my breath away. “Dexter?” I couldn’t think of what to say or do. Shaking and sick to my stomach, my thoughts churning.

“It’s all right, boys,” Dexter said softly. “I’ve been sick, and now I’m dying. Won’t be long now. I feel it coming. Death comes for us all at some point, you know. Remember that. Live your lives knowing that time is fleeting.”

“What’s made you sick?” Benedict asked.

“Cancer. When I found out, I thought about you two the most. How much joy it had given me to see you grow up. What a privilege it was to take care of you.”

“We wouldn’t have made it if not for you,” Benedict said, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“And then I got angry. So very angry,” Dexter said as if he hadn’t heard him. “I couldn’t think about anything except what you two boys had endured. Your mother, too, of course. I’d known her since I was a boy, and she’d always been the prettiest, most elegant woman I ever saw. Then I knew what to do. I had to kill Roland Tutheridge. I had to rid the earth of him before I died. I knew when to expect him home. I knew his route, his routines. So I took Hudson’s gun and I waited in the woods until he appeared. Then I shot the bastard. If they caught me, it didn’t matter. I was almost dead anyway.”

I reeled back in shock. Dexter had killed Father. It wasn’t real. Not him. Not kind, gentle, patient Dexter. How could he be a killer?

“Oh, Dexter, no,” Benedict said. “Please, it can’t be you.”

“I did it for you boys and for Ella and your mother. You’ve been the only family I’ve had. All these years, to see how he treated you—I couldn’t stand the thought for one more moment. I couldn’t leave the earth and leave you with him. So

I took care of it. I'd been trained in the army when I was a young man. A sharpshooter. That was what I was known for. Before I became a butler."

I was crying at this point as well. The truth had slowly sunk into my confused thoughts. Dexter had killed Father. In cold blood. For revenge. For us.

"I was going to confess and get Ella out of there," Dexter said. "But then, selfishly, I guess I wanted one last adventure with my boys."

Vaguely I was aware of Bains resting on his knees, watching us, clearly in shock.

"We should have had more adventures," Benedict said. "Done more things for fun."

"I would have liked that," Dexter said. "And not all of them would have ended like this." He chuckled and then winced. "Listen, boys, I'm not sure I'm going to make it home tonight. The pain's gotten worse, and I'm so weak. Will you stay with me until the end? I don't want to go out alone."

"We're here," Benedict said. "We won't leave your side."

"Let us take you home," I said. "Make you comfortable."

"Nah, it's good right here. Looking up at the stars with my boys. We always loved the island, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did." Dexter was dying. Right here and now. I knew it, yet didn't want to believe it all at the same time. "We don't want you to go." I was sobbing now, hardly able to breathe. "How will we go on without you?"

"You're going to be fine," Dexter said. "Better than that. You'll be a triumph. Your art will be known all over the world one day."

I took one of Dexter's hands and held it tightly between my own. We would be right by his side when he passed. He would not be alone in the dark. We would be here, just as he'd been for us those nights in the dungeon. "You were more of a father to us than he ever was. Without you, I don't know that we would be good men. You taught us how to be kind and

sacrifice for people you love. The meals you sneaked to us—they were more than just food. They were love.”

“And the lanterns,” Benedict said.

“Thank you. For all of it. Every act of kindness,” I said, my chest aching.

“You always took care of us,” Benedict said. “At great peril to yourself.”

“I hated Mr. Tutheridge. I’m not afraid to say it. He deserved to be killed. We all know it’s true.” His gaze flickered from one of us to the other. “You forgive me? I can pass in peace as long as I know you won’t hate me after I’m gone.”

“We could never hate you,” Benedict said. “We love you. You’re our family.”

“We understand why you did it,” I said.

“Thank you,” Dexter said simply. A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. “I worked it all out with God. He forgives me, just as he forgives all our sins.” His eyes closed briefly as a wave of pain seemed to take hold of him. When he opened them, he reached out to touch our faces, first me and then Benedict. “Don’t be sad. I’m not.” He turned back to me. “One last thing. Dear boy, please don’t be foolish and run away from that woman. You’re in love with her. Make sure you don’t let her go. She’ll be the best thing that ever happened to you. Also, please tell your mother how sorry I am about leaving on such short notice. I won’t be able to bring up breakfast in the morning. Make sure my replacement is worthy of her. Can you do that for me?”

“Anything you want,” I said.

“Good. I can rest now.” He closed his eyes, and for the second time that night, I saw the life drain out of a man. Only this time, I wept.

WE WERE a messy crew when Benedict, Bains, and I burst into the sheriff's office. He was asleep in his chair and immediately woke when we arrived and jumped up as fast as a squirrel up a tree. The small jail was dark, but I could make out Ella's sleeping form on a cot in the cell. She, too, woke at the sound of our voices, standing up and heading to the bars. "I knew you'd come. Did you find something to get me out of here?"

"We have," Benedict said gravely.

"What's going on here?" White asked Bains, as if he were the source of all knowledge. If he only knew what Bains had almost done.

"It's a rather long story," I said. "And we'll need you to come with us. After you let Ella out."

"We'll see about that. Take me there first." White reached for his hat. "You can tell me everything on the way."

"I can't go back there," I said, breaking down. "I can't see him like that again."

"Bains and I'll take him," Benedict said. "You stay here with Ella. Tell her what happened."

I nodded in agreement and crossed over to fall to the floor next to the jail cell.

Sitting on the floor on one side of the bars and Ella on the other, I finished telling her everything that had happened.

"Poor, dear misguided Dexter," Ella said, wiping her eyes. "I can't believe it."

"I know. And yet it all makes sense."

"Will the sheriff believe his confession? Do you think he'll let me go?"

"I do. In fact, I have a theory. I think he arrested you to get the real killer to come forward. There's no way he believed Sam Steele. In fact, I think he was fairly certain Sam killed his wife."

"It did occur to me as well. He was very nice to me all night, even brought me a snack and a book. If he thought I was

a killer, I'm not sure he would have done that."

I had to admit to myself that White was less of a bumbling fool than I'd thought.

"Poor Mother. She won't know what to feel."

"I know. As soon as White returns, I'll go home and tell her. I'm not looking forward to it. But at least Bains didn't do it. He scared me, though. I thought he was going to shoot him. I really did. What would we tell Mother then?"

"Well, he didn't. And maybe you don't have to tell her exactly how close a call it was."

I nodded, and the two of us rested our heads temple to temple through the bars and began the arduous task of waiting.

FAITH

We waited hours for the men to return. When they had not appeared by ten, Amelia encouraged me to retire. “All of this will still be here in the morning. You might as well get a good night’s sleep. I’m going to stay in my old room tonight since I don’t want to go home without Benedict.”

I trudged upstairs, exhausted from the emotion of the day and the feeling of hopelessness it had created inside me. Once in bed, I lay there listening for the sound of the car in the driveway. None came, and by midnight, I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

At four, I woke to the sounds of voices. Swinging my feet to the floor and rubbing my eyes, I turned on the lamp by my bedside, then reached for my robe. Tightening it with the sash around the waist, I stood still, listening. The noise was drifting up through my cracked window. From the driveway. Briggs. I heard Briggs’s low intonations. Stomach fluttering, I scurried to the window and peeped through a crack between the curtains, not wanting to attract attention to myself.

The three Tutheridge brothers stood near the fountain, huddled together, arms around one another’s shoulders. Where had Hudson been all this time? What had happened with Sam? Had they found him? And what of Dexter? Where was he? Had he collapsed when they arrived home? If he were as sick as Mrs. Tutheridge had indicated, the journey out to Sam’s place in the dark would have taken a toll on him.

I backed away from the window and crept back to bed. It was cold, and by the time I had slipped back under the covers, I was shivering. I’d have to wait until morning to know what had happened. There was no way around it, yet I would be surprised if I was able to sleep another wink.

However, I must have fallen back asleep despite my angst because I woke to the sun streaming through the cracks in the curtains. A quick glance at the clock informed me it was just a little after seven. I lay for a moment in the quiet for evidence

of the usual morning stirrings. Instead, I heard nothing. Not even the clicking of feet on the hardwoods of maids and Dexter preparing for the day. A cold dread filled me. Something was wrong.

I dressed quickly and pulled back my hair before venturing downstairs, wincing as I passed by Ella's empty bedroom. Sometimes silence is the loudest sound of all.

The moment I entered the dining room, I grew even more worried. No breakfast had been laid out on the buffet. There were no staff bustling about as there usually was by this time.

I went to the windows and scanned the porch for occupants. Not a soul. Where was everyone?

Just then, I heard footsteps behind me and turned to see Briggs, still wearing the clothes he had on the night before and looking as if he'd been to hell and back. My fingers and toes tingled with fright. His shirt and pants were stained red. More blood? It had to be. He was unshaven, and his eyes looked bleary and bloodshot. His usual robust stance had been replaced with slumped shoulders. He walked as if his feet were encased in brick. However, when he saw me standing there, a smile came to his face. A sad one, but a smile just the same. "Faith, you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"I don't know. Everything's all mixed up."

"But where is everyone else?" I asked. "What happened last night? I saw you and your brothers talking by the fountain."

"We were filling Hudson in on the night's adventures, such as they were."

"Where's Dexter and the maids? It's like a ghost town around here."

"We've given the staff the day off," Briggs said. "We had to tell them that their leader is dead."

A squeak of shock rose out of my chest. My hands flew to my mouth. "No? Is he gone?"

“Yes. He didn’t make it through the night. We had to tell the staff this morning, and they were all too upset to work. Dexter was sick. Very sick. Last night took whatever was left of him. He died in the forest, with Ben and me holding his hands.”

“No, no. It can’t be.”

“He killed Father,” Briggs said, voice cracking. “For revenge. He knew he was dying, and he didn’t want to leave us alone with him. He had nothing to lose and wanted to make sure we were all safe after he died.”

Nothing to lose. That’s exactly what I’d thought.

Feeling faint, I sank into the nearest chair. “It was Dexter. I can’t believe it. It occurred to me only last night, but I didn’t think I could be right. I didn’t want to be right.”

“Nor I,” Briggs said, sitting in the chair next to me. “But he had no regrets. He said he’s worked it all out with God. I hope that’s true. I can’t stand to think of him anywhere but heaven.” His face collapsed, and he began to cry. “Faith, he was so good to us. If not for him, Ben and I might have lost our minds in that dungeon. Even though he took a man’s life—Father’s life—I understand why he did it.”

“What happened with Sam?” I asked, suddenly remembering.

“Dexter shot him.”

“What?”

With stops and starts, Briggs told me the details of the horrific evening.

“He almost killed you,” I whispered when he was finished. “If not for Dexter. Heavens, Briggs, I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you. If we lost you, I mean.” Why had I said that? He’d think I was in love with him.

You are in love with him.

Fine, I *was* in love with him, but I’d promised myself he would never know of my foolishness.

He reached over and took my hand. “Faith, it’s you I wanted when I thought I was going to die. I wanted to see your face one last time. You were my last thought before he pulled the trigger. Can you imagine that? I thought, ‘I should have told Faith I loved her, and now it’s too late.’”

I couldn’t speak. His words were so unexpected, I sat there gaping at him instead of answering. Had I heard him wrong?

“But I didn’t die, Faith. I’m here. I made it out of there, and now I get to tell you everything that’s in my heart. It’s you and only you. All I think of is you. Every waking thought and then at night in my dreams. I’m not the same since you’ve come here. The old Briggs, the man I was before I knew you, has vanished. Replaced by the one you see before you. Humbled and at your mercy. Because of love, Faith. That’s what has happened, you see. I’ve fallen madly in love with you. I simply cannot live without you.”

“You can’t?”

“Please tell me I won’t have to,” Briggs said.

“But what are you saying?” Dare I hope? Was I dreaming? Briggs loved me? Me? The wallflower? The jilted?

“What I’m saying, darling girl, is that I want you to be my wife. I know you might not love me now, but I just want the chance to try to win your heart. I’ll court you for the next twenty years if it means at last you will be mine. I can change. Be better. Wiser and less impulsive. A serious man. A family man. I won’t be like my father. I would never hurt you purposely or otherwise. There won’t be other women, Faith. Just you. Only you. Forever and ever. Perhaps you still love Lionel, but I cannot go another day without telling you what’s in my heart and hope and pray that someday you’ll love me, too.”

“But I do love you. Just as you are. I wouldn’t change a thing about you.”

His tired eyes widened. “You do? Is that possible?”

“From the very first moment, I knew you were someone who would change my life. That I understood without any ambiguity. I didn’t know I would fall in love with you. Not at first. But as time went on, I found myself wanting to be with you every waking moment. Day and night, there you were, in my thoughts and prayers and dreams. I didn’t think you would ever love a woman like me. I’ve tried so hard to resist the idea, but hope is a slippery slope, isn’t she? Even as I told myself you could never return my feelings, I hoped. Way down in my soul, not even fully admitting it to myself, I hoped for you. And Lionel? I can’t even remember what he looks like.”

“You’ve no idea how happy that makes me.” He jumped to his feet and pulled me into his arms, then whirled me around in a circle. The way I felt in his embrace? It was the weightless bliss of knowing I was cared for. This man would do all he could to protect me, as I would him. My burdens emptied into him. “I’d ask for a kiss, but it cannot be now,” he said as he set me back onto the floor.

“But why?” I whispered. “I’ve wanted one for such a long time.”

“Because, beautiful one, I need to wash my teeth. If I kiss you now, you’ll run away in horror and never return.”

And so it was that our first declarations of love were only verbal. The kiss would come later. Every day for the rest of my life I would be kissed, I thought now as I gazed into his eyes. Every single day of a long life, I hoped, so that I could enjoy being with this man who stirred my soul and made me laugh and made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

ELLA, looking as beautiful as ever despite her stint in jail, told me she would much prefer to remain free for the rest of her life, thank you very much. Mrs. Tutheridge had taken the news of Dexter’s death and confession as hard as one would expect and spent several days weeping, on and off. Who could blame her?

Timothy Bains, for his part, seemed to make a full recovery from his momentary lapse into madness and told Mrs. Tutheridge everything that had happened. We would never know if Sam Steele had been aware all along who Timothy Bains was or if it were mere coincidence. Amelia felt strongly that the Steeles had somehow tracked down Mr. Tutheridge through ties to Bains. But again, we would never know for certain. In the end, it didn't matter. They were all dead, and sadly there was no one around to miss any of them.

Mrs. Tutheridge said she believed it was all divine intervention. Sam had come here so that Timothy could once and for all let go of his past and embrace the future with her.

In early September, Briggs and I walked hand in hand on the beach I'd come to love almost as much as the man himself. "Will you want your own house?" Briggs asked. "Once we marry?"

"I haven't given it much thought," I said. "All I know is that wherever you are, I would like to be, too."

"Well, I *have* been thinking about our future home," Briggs said, stopping me so that we could sit on one of our favorite fallen logs to watch the seals. It was a warm afternoon, and the sky that brilliant blue I'd come to know so well, but a hint of fall brought a crispness to the air. Our harbor seal friends were asleep in the sun on their usual rock. The sounds of seabirds and the gentle lapping of the water were music to me.

"And I think I would like to be with my bride in our own home. Mother and Timothy are about to be married and even though the house is big, it seems wrong somehow for us to live there, too."

"Whatever you want," I said, secretly glad. It would be nice to make our own home together.

"And I have found a piece of land that I think will suit us well. Not far from Ben and Amelia's house. Benedict's agreed to help build it, but we're going to hire a whole team of men so that it's done before the cold, rainy weather starts. You, my

love, will need to start thinking about what kind of house you would like it to be. I want you to have whatever you desire.”

“As long as you’re there,” I said, repeating my earlier sentiment. “Then I will love it. Although, it would be nice to have a sitting room that looks out to the water so that we can lounge together in the evenings to watch the sun set or the fog roll in. And you’ll need a place to paint, of course.”

We talked at length about all the features we wanted in our new home. By this time, we’d shared quite a few kisses, and I had grown quite fond of them. I could barely wait for the time when I would be his wife and wake in his arms after a night of passion. Me? The wallflower? Full of all kinds of ideas of how I would express my love to Briggs Tutheridge.

“Regarding the wedding,” Briggs said. “Are you sure you want something small and without fuss?”

“Absolutely.” I shivered, imagining all those people staring at me as I walked down the aisle. “In fact, the quieter, the better. I will hate all those people looking at me.” We’d agreed to wait until after Mrs. Tutheridge and Pastor Bains married next week. I’d already made it clear I wanted something small. My only request was for Papa to be there.

“That’s what I thought. Which is why I was wondering if you’d like to marry me right now, right here on the beach?”

“Now?” My first thought was of Papa. I couldn’t marry without him there. I’d written to him right away, as had Briggs, to ask for my hand, but we’d not heard back from him yet. The post was slow, but I expected a letter any day now. From the description I’d given him of Briggs and the way we felt about each other, I knew he would not deny Briggs’s request. We’d also asked if he would come for the wedding and perhaps stay forever. That would be a harder sell.

It was then that I saw the small gathering of people down by the rock firepit. The whole family was there, including Bebe, who I could tell even from this distance was running around making a nuisance of herself. Except for Benedict, the family was there, as was Pastor Bains.

“Bains will marry us right now,” Briggs said. “And the family’s here to witness it all. If you’d like, we can do it and have a nice dinner, and then I’ll take you up to my bedchamber and enjoy making you my wife in other ways, too.”

I shivered with desire and a little fear as well. I was an innocent, and I knew with certainty that my husband was not.

“Don’t be worried,” Briggs said, kissing my hand. “I’ll take good care of you.”

“You always do.”

“I think it’s mostly you taking care of me,” Briggs said, kissing me on the lips this time. “I’m a blessed man, Faith Fidget.”

“Soon to be Faith Tutheridge.” I’d been practicing my new signature every night before I went to bed. I was a giddy fool for Briggs Tutheridge.

“So, what do you think? Should we do it?”

“I want to, but I can’t. Not without Papa.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Do you understand?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Hopefully, he’ll write back soon,” I said. “As soon as he says when he can come, we’ll do it.”

He peered down at me with a gleam in his eyes. “I have a little surprise.” He pointed toward the pathway that went up to the house. Standing there with Benedict was my papa.

“You brought him here?” I asked, starting to cry. “Oh, Briggs.”

“When I wrote to him and asked for your hand, I may have suggested he sell his business and move out here. He said he’d think about that after he saw this Puget Sound for himself but that he would come for the wedding in the meantime.”

“Thank you. Thank you. You, darling man. How I love you.”

“Go see him. He’s anxious to see his little girl.”

I kissed his cheek, then ran toward Papa and was out of breath by the time I reached him. We embraced, both crying. “I can’t believe you’re here,” I said.

“Your fiancé wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Papa held me away from him to get a better look. “You’ve bloomed into a ravishing flower. The island air’s good for you.”

“The occupants of the island have something to do with it, too,” I said, shy. “Namely, the man I’m going to marry.”

“He’s a good man, love. Really good. We had a proper chat on the way here in that motorcar. Very loud, I must say, but marvelous.” His mustache seemed to wriggle with joy. “He said you’re going to marry this afternoon?”

“I didn’t know until just now,” I said. “But he planned it all this way. He knows how I worry about everything and don’t like people looking at me, so he thought this would be the best.”

“He knows you well,” Papa said.

Briggs had come up behind us now, standing aside and waiting patiently for us to be through. I turned and held out my hand to Briggs and gave the other one to my papa. “Shall we walk together and join the others?” I asked.

With my two favorite people at my side, we walked down the rocky beach until we reached the small group gathered around the logs the Tutheridge children had made into seats so long ago. Apparently, everyone had already met Papa. They’d sneaked him into the house that afternoon while Ella and I were at the dressmaker’s shop.

A few minutes later, we stood in front of Pastor Bains with the family around us in a semicircle.

“I’ve taken care of this girl since she was no bigger than my two hands put together,” Papa said to Briggs. “Take good care of my precious daughter.”

“Sir, I have nothing else planned for the rest of my life than doing everything in my power to please her and care for her.”

“Painting,” I said. “You must paint in addition to looking after me.”

Everyone laughed.

“She’s the boss now,” Briggs said. “So I’ll be painting as well.”

“Are we ready for the vows?” Pastor Bains asked, his gentle smile genuine as he glanced over at me.

“I’ve been ready since the first time I laid eyes on her,” Briggs said. “With one look, she tamed me.”

“And with one look, you made me feel beautiful,” I said, fighting tears. It seemed this whole day would be one of happy reunions and tearful exchanges.

Briggs shook Papa’s hand one last time. Papa kissed me on the cheek. “You’ve been the very best daughter a man could ever wish for. Now it’s your turn to fly.”

“Thank you, Papa. Will you stay? Please?”

“I’ve already put the shop on the market,” Papa said.

“Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?” Pastor Bains said, beginning.

The next few minutes rushed by, even as I tried to hold on to them, knowing that this moment would never come again. Even though the words were simple and the vows easy to promise because I loved this man as much as a woman could, they were still the most important ones I would ever say.

When it was all done, and I had a plain gold band on my finger and everyone, even Bebe, was in various states of tearfulness, he pulled me close and kissed me for the first time as man and wife. I was married. To Briggs. My best friend and my husband, soon to be my lover, someday maybe even the father of my children if we were blessed in that way.

“You’re my husband?” I whispered, giddy with bliss.

“Forever and ever,” Briggs said, sounding equally elated. “You and me.”

“When’s the cake?” Bebe asked loudly, interrupting the poignancy of the moment.

We all laughed, and so it was that our marriage began in mirth with the love of our family all around us. Not only did we have cake but many other delights, all chosen by Amelia and Mrs. Halvorson. Then we danced under the stars on the lawn until midnight, when we finally escaped up to Briggs’s room to begin our happily ever after.

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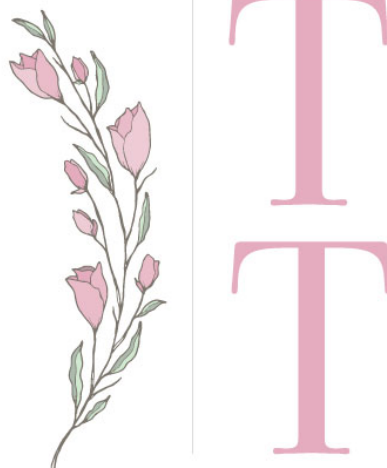
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Thompson is the USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author of clean and wholesome Contemporary and Historical Romantic Women's Fiction with nearly 50 published titles. Her stories feature family sagas, romance, a little mystery, and a lot of heart.

She's married to her prince, Best Husband Ever Cliff and is the mother of their blended family of two boys and two girls. Cliff is seventeen months younger, which qualifies Tess as a Cougar, a title she wears proudly. Her bonus sons are young adults working toward making all their dreams come true out in the world. Oldest daughter is at college studying Chemistry. (Her mother has no idea where she got her math and science talent!) The baby of the family is a junior in high school and a member of a state champion cheer team as well as an academic all-star, including achieving a 5 on the AP World History exam during her sophomore year.

Tess is proud to have grown up in a small town like the ones in her novels. After graduating from the University of Southern California Drama School, she had hopes of becoming an actress but was called instead to writing fiction.

Tess loves lazy afternoons watching football, hanging out on the back patio with Best Husband Ever, reading in bed, binge-watching television series, red wine, strong coffee, Zumba, and walks on crisp autumn days. She never knows what to make for dinner and is often awake in the middle of night thinking about her characters and their stories.

She's grateful to spend most days in her office matchmaking her characters while her favorite cat Mittens (shhh...don't tell Midnight) sleeps on the desk.

She adores hearing from readers, so don't hesitate to say hello or sign up for her newsletter: <https://tesswrites.com/>. You'll receive a free ebook just for signing up!



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