

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# TESS THOMPSON

*The*  
MYSTERY  
MATCHMAKER  
*of*  
ELLA POINTE

*A* MATCH *for*  
A BUBBLY BRIDE

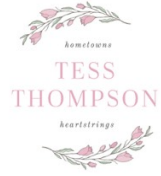
# A MATCH FOR A BUBBLY BRIDE

---

THE SECRET MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK SIX


# TESS THOMPSON



Copyright © 2023 by Tess Thompson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

1. [Piper](#)
2. [Hudson](#)
3. [Piper](#)
4. [Hudson](#)
5. [Piper](#)
6. [Hudson](#)
7. [Piper](#)
8. [Hudson](#)
9. [Piper](#)
10. [Hudson](#)
11. [Piper](#)
12. [Hudson](#)
13. [Piper](#)
14. [Hudson](#)
15. [Piper](#)
16. [Hudson](#)
17. [Hudson](#)
18. [Piper](#)
19. [Hudson](#)

[Also by Tess Thompson](#)

[About the Author](#)

*For Isabella Nanni.*

*Who translated my books into the beautiful Italian language  
and thus changed my life.*



## PIPER

**M**y arms ached and sweat gathered at the base of my neck. Rowing a boat was harder than it looked. The midmorning sun was relentless, even on the water, and I longed to jump in for a cool swim. My charge, six-year-old Bebe, had not stopped talking since we left the shore. She was particularly fond of asking questions.

Where did bees come from? Why was August hotter than any other month? Was Mr. King really my sweetheart? All asked in quick succession, not waiting for me to answer before flinging another one.

Part of being a nanny was a commitment to perpetual learning, no matter the activity. Inquisitiveness was one of my favorite qualities in a child. This one had as much as five children put together. Other than my dear Sara Rose, whom I practically raised into adulthood and now considered family, no child had captured my heart quite like Bebe Tutheridge.

“I don’t know where bees come from, other than God made them to help populate the earth with flowers.”

As if to agree with me, the sweet scent of wildflowers and roses from the gardens drifted in on a sudden breeze. I stopped rowing to catch my breath. The waters of the Puget Sound, where the San Juan Islands clustered like lily pads in a pond, almost connected but not quite, rocked the boat gently. My wide-brimmed hat shielded my face from the sun, but regardless, my scalp and the nape of my neck perspired.



“What about August?” Bebe asked, wrinkling her freckled nose and staring at me with her earnest blue eyes under the brim of her hat. “How come it’s so hot?”

“In this part of the country, the summers are cool, with the warmest days in August.” The weather had been sunny and mild all through July, giving us many opportunities to explore the island together. Now, a few days into August, it seemed that summer had truly arrived. Temperatures had climbed into the eighties for three days in a row. Bebe and I had spent a lot of time outdoors playing croquet and lawn tennis. Today, hoping for some relief from the heat, we’d decided to take the rowboat out. Not my best plan, as I was now a sweaty mess.

We were not far from shore. I was not entirely confident in my captain abilities and didn’t want to get too far adrift. Regardless, I’d have a blister between my index finger and thumb from rowing before the day was through.

“I heard Papa say Mr. King was courting you.” Bebe pushed her straw hat from her head, leaving it to dangle around her neck by the string.

An instinct more than conscious thought had me reaching out to put it back in place. I’d positioned a lot of hats back on small heads over my decade as a nanny. “Hat is a must, not a maybe,” I said. “Do you want to have a sunburn and have your gramma irritated with me and you?”

Her grandmother and mistress of the estate and my employer, Mrs. Bains, was always on her about her sun hat. Bebe, whenever possible, freed her dark head from captivity and raised her face to the sun as if it were an old friend.

“Is it true about you and my teacher?” Bebe asked.

I’d hoped she’d forgotten that question. Not our Bebe. A memory like an elephant, this one.

The island school’s teacher, Caleb King, was indeed my beau. “He’s a special friend.”

“Will you marry him?”

*If he asks*, I thought but didn’t say. “He’s only a friend. Nothing for you to worry yourself about.”

Caleb and I had bonded over our love for children the first time we met. After that, he'd asked to court me and I'd said yes. We'd taken buggy rides, had picnics, and walked along the water's edge. Such happy times for me. Feelings stirred in me that I'd not felt before. Was it love? I had no idea. It was not like Sara Rose and Rhett, who had fallen in love at first sight. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because Caleb was so much older than I. He was over forty and I was twenty-eight. Anyway, he was more sensible and less spontaneous a man than Rhett Rivers.

I'd had several proposals back in Boston, but it had never felt right. I'd decided I'd be quite content as a single woman making her own way as a nanny or governess. My parents' marriage had been a fraught one, mostly because of my father's philandering. Mama once said, after too much Christmas punch, that my father had never met a whore he didn't follow home. At the time, I had no idea what that word meant. It was only later that I realized the true meaning of what she'd said. By that time, my father had broken both our hearts.

"What's the difference between a beau and a friend?" Bebe asked.

Good question. "It's complicated. You'll understand better when you're older. Why do you want to know, anyway?"

She tugged on her shell-like ear. "I can't tell you."

"Ah, we have secrets between us now?" I added just a hint of disapproval. As unruly as Bebe could sometimes be, she had an innate instinct to please the adults in her life. It was only that we were all so confusing that it was hard to know how to do that. This was my guess, of course, based on my own remembrances of childhood. Raised in a home that throbbed with tension, I'd been on constant alert as to ways to please them. If I'd known a way to make them happy and stop fighting, I would have done it. As an adult, I knew making my parents' marriage a happy one was impossible. They were responsible for their own happiness.

But Bebe didn't know this. She was innocent and vulnerable. Sweet, adventurous Bebe had not been the challenge everyone said she would be. I'd been warned of her mischievousness and tendencies toward naughtiness before I took the position. They had been mistaken in their assessment. Mostly, I figured, because they knew nothing about children. Bebe was a delightful, inquisitive little person who made me laugh and inspired me to be braver and seek more of the thrills of living than I ever had before.

It made my chest ache to think of how she vied for her father's attention. When she was good or bad, she did it all to pull her father's gaze toward her. To no avail. Hudson Tutheridge was an insufferable, snobbish bore. As much as I cared for Bebe, I could not find one thing to like about the man. Other than he was quite easy on the eyes. All the Tutheridge men were blessed with good looks. Unfortunately, Hudson Tutheridge was an example of someone pretty on the outside and ugly on the inside.

Mr. Tutheridge's moods were uneven, although mostly nasty, bullish, or gloomy. Did I feel bad for him? Of course I did. He'd lost his wife when Bebe was only a toddler. From what his sister, Ella, had told me, he'd once been a fun-loving, generous man. Losing his wife had left him bereft. So much so he could not love his daughter.

I could not bear him. The moment he entered the room, my skin crawled. Especially after I came to live at the mansion. I'd looked forward to it at first, thinking of living in such a grand estate, with views of the Puget Sound and the expansive lawn and a room of my own. However, it took only a few days to know the truth. The more time I spent in the presence of Hudson, the less I liked him, which diminished my enjoyment of my new position. My new life.

Why did God give children to people like him? I'd had experience with bad parents in all of my jobs. Especially Sara Rose. Ignorant, awful people who made her feel as if she were unlovable simply because she had eyes of different colors. What idiots they were. A flash of anger made my hands ball into fists. Never mind, though. I smiled to myself. She'd had

her happy ending despite how cruel her parents had been to her. The smartest thing we'd ever done was come out here to Whale Island.

"You have a secret." Bebe pointed a finger at me. "Actually, a few of them."

"Please do not point."

"Why?"

"It's bad manners. And why do we think I have secrets?"

"*We* don't. *I* do," Bebe said.

"What secrets do you think I keep?"

"You're not as happy as you pretend, for one."

"That might be true." My mother always commented on my sunny disposition. This had pleased her. Thus, I honed the skill of joyfulness, even if sometimes I would rather have hidden under a pillow to weep.

"I heard you talking to Miss Sara Rose one day. You were crying."

"You have got to stop eavesdropping," I said reprovably. "It's going to get you into trouble one of these days. Sometimes when adults talk, there are things you don't understand and thus interpret incorrectly."

"You were crying about your beau. I know you were."

How had she known that? Bebe was too smart for her age. I *had* been crying about Caleb. He'd been unexpectedly impatient with me during our Sunday afternoon drive, speaking harshly to me when I asked him a question about why he'd left the East Coast and come to Whale Island. He'd actually insinuated that I was prying into his life. It had been so unexpected that I'd been stunned into silence. We'd parted that afternoon with only a curt goodbye. Later that same day, I'd talked it over with Sara Rose when she and Rhett had come for supper at the big house.

Caleb had dropped by the next day after school let out to apologize. He'd said there were some things in his past that

he'd rather leave there and could I understand that? I'd agreed, happy he seemed back to his charming self. Still, the whole incident gave me pause. Did I really want to fall in love with a man who didn't want to tell me about himself? Since then, he'd been gracious and sweet. I'd decided it was a momentary lapse. No one can be perfect all the time.

"I was crying because a friend hurt my feelings," I said now to Bebe. "Has that ever happened to you?"

"Yes, sometimes at school." Bebe sighed, sounding about a hundred years old. "Girls can be very mean."

"Not all of them. You'll find a few in your life that you will love and trust, like I do Sara Rose."

"Tell me the story about how you met her when she was only a kid."

I'd told Bebe the story several times. For some reason, she loved hearing about it.

"Well, she was only ten and I had just turned eighteen, having graduated from high school. I heard about a family with a little girl who didn't go to school. They needed a governess, and I needed a job, so it was such good luck that I happened to run into this particular acquaintance, who told me about the job. So I went to the house and met Sara Rose. She liked me, and I liked her. My mother had just died, so I was sad and a little lost. Right away we grew close. Her family was not very nice to her, making her stay in her room and forbidding her to go to school, which she wished for very much."

"On account of her eyes," Bebe said. She'd heard this story before. "One blue one and one brown one."

"Correct. They made her feel bad about being different, and that was wrong. What have I told you about that?"

"To be myself and not care what others are thinking or doing. Except if myself is thinking about doing something bad. Then I should not be myself."

We might need a little more work on understanding fully what I meant, but for now, it would have to do. "Sara Rose

was lonely for other kids, and her own sister was selfish and cruel, so I had to be like her big sister and love her so that she knew she wasn't alone in the world."

Bebe tented her hands, eyes dreamy. "That's the part I like the best. About how you became each other's family."

Sara Rose had been desperate for love and companionship. I'd recently lost my mother. We'd needed each other. Teaching her had been easy because of her intelligence and innate curiosity. "We certainly did. In our eight years together I taught her everything I knew, and of course, I learned from her."

I didn't tell Bebe the full story, for fear it would cause her to see Sara Rose differently. Mrs. Wilcox had told Sara Rose her unusual eyes were the mark of a demon or the devil. Just thinking of it made me angry all over again.

"What did you learn from her?" Bebe asked.

"How to be humble and loving even when people are nasty."

"Why would you want to?" Bebe asked. "I'd rather be mean right back."

I hid a smile behind my hand. "Because that's the way Jesus wants us to be. We should always behave as he asks us to in the Bible."

"Right. Good old Jesus. He said a lot of things."

"Bebe," I scolded, biting back a laugh. "You must always speak of our Lord and Savior with reverence."

"What's reverence?"

"Great respect. To revere someone is to hold them in esteem."

"Then you came here to Whale Island," Bebe said, back to the story. "And Sara Rose met Rhett and now they're married and live in the lighthouse."

"Yes. She has her happy ending now. Which, in turn, makes me happy." I left out the tragic circumstances

surrounding our need to leave Boston. Bebe was too young to know that evil men like the one who had hurt Sara Rose existed. For as long as I could, I would protect Bebe and keep her innocent. The cruel world would come to call on her soon enough.

---

A KNOCK on Bebe's bedroom door, followed by Lizzie's voice asking if she could come in, interrupted our reading time. After our noonday meal, if we'd been particularly active as we had this morning, I encouraged Bebe to rest while I read to her. We were snuggled together in the window seat with the shades drawn to let in only slivers of light.

"Come in," I said.

Lizzie, one of the maids, a darling girl with a talent for fixing hair, bobbed her head in greeting. "Miss Jayne, I'm sorry to disturb your reading time." Her cheeks were flushed from the warmth of the afternoon, and she was slightly out of breath.

"It's no trouble," I said. "Is there anything wrong?"

She lowered her voice. "No, it's just that Mr. King is here to see you."

How odd. Caleb knew I was working. Why would he come by the house? Mrs. Bains discouraged visitors for the staff, including me.

"Dear me," I said.

"I can stay with Bebe if you'd like to go down for a minute." Lizzie's pretty face brightened further when Bebe nodded enthusiastically. Lizzie was only sixteen, practically still a child herself. "Mrs. Bains is out back with Mr. Bains."

"Thank you. So kind of you. I'll see what he wants and be back very soon." I untangled myself from Bebe and hurried downstairs.

Caleb was standing in the foyer, hat in hand, wearing a tan summer suit. He took my breath away. Such a handsome man. And he liked *me*. I could hardly believe it.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, whispering. “I’m working.”

“I know. I’m so sorry to disturb you. It won’t take a minute, but I just had to see you.” He pulled a small box from his jacket pocket. “This just came in with the post and I couldn’t wait another moment to give it to you.”

He handed me the box.

“It was my mother’s, and my sister found it in a box in her attic and thought I might like to have it for someone special. And now I do.”

I lifted the lid to see a silver locket on a chain. Plain but pretty nonetheless.

“Maybe someday you could put my picture in there?” Caleb asked.

Pleased with the gesture, I wanted to keep it, but it wasn’t right. If we were engaged, maybe. But not now. “This is too much. It’s a family heirloom. I can’t possibly accept it.”

“Please, I want you to have it. A promise of things to come?” He took my hand and brought it to his mouth for a quick kiss.

“Let me think about it,” I said, doing my best to be coquettish but probably failing miserably.

“Will you keep it while you think?” His eyes twinkled down at me.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt anything,” I said.

“Also, I’ve come to ask you if you’ll attend the dance with me this coming weekend?”

I’d been hoping he’d ask me. “I’d be delighted.”

“I couldn’t be more delighted, Miss Jayne.”



“Nor I, Mr. King.” I pushed him gently toward the door. “However, you must go before I get into trouble.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Caleb flashed a charming smile that weakened my knees. How was it possible that such a fine man was interested in me?

A little voice whispered to me. *But do you know him fully?*

I told the voice to be quiet.

There had been that incident the other night when he’d been less than charming. But it hadn’t happened again since. He’d had a bad night. That’s all. Everyone has one occasionally. It wasn’t as though he was perpetually grumpy like my employer, Mr. Tutheridge.

---

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I sat in a rocking chair under the shade of the covered porch. Grateful to be out of the sun, I watched a hatless Bebe practice her cartwheels on the lawn. Every time she went over, her skirt lifted, showing her pantaloons. Despite this, she was getting better at them, her legs straighter. Lizzie brought out a pitcher of lemonade.

“Lizzie, you’re a godsend,” I said, smiling up at her as she set the tray on the table next to my rocking chair.

“Mrs. Halvorson thought you and Bebe might be parched after your boat ride this morning. She doesn’t know how you do it, keeping up with that girl.”

Mrs. Halvorson was the estate cook. As far as I could tell, her genuine goodness came out in her delicious meals. “I don’t mind, but I do sleep well at night.” I was asleep the moment my head hit the pillow. Bebe woke early, which meant I had to as well.

All the rowing had given me a stinging blister on my left hand, so I used my right to pick up the glass. I was naturally left-handed, and my mother had tried to change me to be like most other people. To her frustration, it didn’t work. I was as left-handed as could be. She wanted nothing more in life than

to fade into the woodwork. The way to do that, she'd said, was to pretend to be like everyone else. After she passed away, I was under no obligation to keep trying, so I just let myself be.

Lizzie stood at the edge of the porch and cheered when Bebe did an almost-perfect cartwheel. Bebe curtsied.

Lizzie returned the curtsy before looking back at me. "She's done so well since you came here. You have such a way with her."

"Everyone has their gifts. Mine happens to be with children. I love my work."

"Do you like the island?" Lizzie asked. "Does it seem boring? You know, you being a city girl and all?"

"Honestly, I could spend the rest of my life here and be quite content," I said. "How about you?"

"I love it here too, but I miss Ella. She used to let me fix her hair and help her get dressed for the evening. She always told me clever stories and made me laugh. It's been quieter around here since she married. I wish I had a beau like you."

"Maybe someone will move here," I said. "Someone just right for you."

"I think that only happens if you're a Tutheridge." Lizzie grinned. "What an odd thing it's been, seeing them married off one after the other. Mrs. Bains must be relieved."

"Why's that?"

"She wanted them all to marry." Lizzie drew nearer and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I've heard rumors they were sent here by a matchmaker."

"Seems unlikely, doesn't it?" I played dumb, knowing it was true. Sara Rose and I hadn't known it at the time, but Mrs. Mantle was a matchmaker. She'd sent Amelia, Faith, and lastly Lucca to the island. Sara Rose had been sent specifically for Rhett Rivers. Thank goodness, I'd come as a companion to Sara Rose. There was no one acting puppeteer for me, and I'd found Caleb anyway.

“I should get on back to the kitchen. Mrs. Bains will want her tea soon.”

“Thanks for the cool drink, Lizzie.”

“Anything for you, Miss Jayne.”

After Lizzie left, Bebe came bounding up the stairs for a glass of lemonade. I poured her a small one, not wanting her stomach to cramp. Normally I would ask her to do it herself, believing that children should be taught independence and self-reliance. However, the pitcher was heavy and slippery with condensation. It would do no good to get us both in trouble.

The screen door opened and Hudson Tutheridge appeared, dressed in a linen summer suit and light blue tie. He was the smallest of the Tutheridge brothers, coming in at only six feet. His torso was slimmer and his shoulders less broad than Briggs and Benedict, but he was still a substantial man. He had thick dark hair like his daughter and similar eyes. All in all, with his nicely shaped nose and full mouth, he was a handsome man. If you liked the insufferable kind.

“Papa, what are you doing out here?” Bebe leaped up from the chair next to me and threw her arms around his legs.

To his credit, he didn't push her away. However, he wasn't exactly demonstrative either, simply patting her head, which was without its hat. Cartwheels could not be done in a straw hat. I glanced out to the grass and saw it sitting by its lonesome near a rhododendron bush.

“Bebe, please get your hat,” I said.

She stuck out her bottom lip but didn't sass me. Instead, she ran down the steps and then, perhaps remembering her triumph of earlier, shouted back to her father. “Do you want to see my cartwheel?”

“If I must,” Hudson muttered under his breath.

This man made me want to punch something.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Tutheridge,” I said pleasantly. He was my employer, and as much as I disliked him, I had to be

on my best behavior. I really didn't want to lose this job. For one thing, I was already so fond of Bebe.

"Afternoon. Taking it easy, I see?"

I bristled but hid my irritation as best I could. "Yes, we're taking a break from the sun. Bebe and I took the rowboat out this morning."

Bebe did a cartwheel, not far from the steps, then straightened. "Papa, did you see? Did you see?"

"Yes, quite impressive." His tone of voice belied his words.

"I can do it again," Bebe shouted.

"Must she show her underwear every time?" Hudson yanked his straw bowler hat from his head and hung it on the back of the rocking chair next to mine. In all, there were a dozen rocking chairs lined up on the porch. Mrs. Bains had only recently added them, she'd told me. So that her family could all visit during nice weather.

"Do you want me to have her stop?" I asked. He was her father. If he thought it unladylike, then I had to respect his wishes. "It's just that she enjoys it so. And it wears her out."

"I suppose it's fine in the privacy of our backyard. But I don't understand the purpose of these cartwheels." He sat, not beside me but with a chair between us. This was new behavior. He'd never come out here before. Was he going to fire me?

"They're fun, that's all," I said. "She's doing them for the sheer joy of it."

He didn't reply. I folded my hands on my lap and then yelped in pain from my blister.

"What is it?" Hudson asked sharply.

"I have a blister." I held up my hand. "From rowing the boat earlier."

One brow arched before he returned his gaze toward the water while pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and

placing it on the arm of my chair. “Wrap that around so you don’t keep smacking it.”

Surprised by his thoughtfulness, I did as he suggested.

“Miss Jayne, I have something I wish to discuss with you. It’s rather delicate.”

“Yes, of course.”

Was he going to fire me? Please, God, not that.



## HUDSON

Miss Jayne's pretty eyes were transfixed upon my face. She was scared of me. I could see that plain as the water that glittered under the August sun. It was no wonder, given my behavior toward her and the rest of the people in my life. I'd worn my grief like a shield, keeping loved ones away.

Losing my wife was not something I thought I could ever get past, but I was finally seeing that life could go on and that I must be a better man or I would lose my daughter forever.

"Are you going to fire me?" Miss Jayne asked.

Fire her? "No, of course not. Why would I do that?"

"You never seem particularly pleased with me." She fiddled with the handkerchief wrapped around her hand, avoiding my gaze.

"That's just my way. I'm not effusive."

Her lips twitched. "That's one way to put it."

"You've brought up an excellent point and why I would like to talk to you."

Miss Jayne glanced back up at me, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink. I found her undeniably beautiful. She wasn't so young that she hadn't seen a bit of the world, which gave her depth in her eyes and demeanor.

I guessed she'd suffered a time or two and could understand those for whom life had not always been easy. Not that I wished torment on anyone, but it did make me feel less

alone to think there were people out there who could understand and not condemn me for the way I'd allowed sadness to rule my life.

“What can I do for you?” Miss Jayne asked. “Anything you'd like, I'm at your service.”

“Yes, well, it's embarrassing. But here it is. I would like you to teach me how to be a better father.”

She twitched as if a fly had flown too close to her face. “That's not what I expected you to say.”

“It's just that I've watched you carefully these last few months. You have an ease with her that, frankly, I'm jealous of. I'd like to have that kind of relationship with her.” I splayed my hands over my knees, leaning forward slightly. “I'm afraid I don't know how. I've been isolated and sad for so long that I've forgotten how to live. Or love. Even my own daughter.” I gestured toward Bebe, who had abandoned her cartwheels and was now perched on her haunches watching two squirrels chase each other up a tree. “Look at her, Miss Jayne. The perfectness of her. I've let her down. I want to do better. After thinking it through, I thought you might be able to assist me.”

“There's nothing to it,” Miss Jayne said. “Other than you must spend time with her. It's just that...” She trailed off. What was it she wanted to say?

“Go ahead. You may say whatever you please,” I said.

“Yes, well, I'd like to say, with the utmost respect, that Bebe's desperate for your attention. She worships you. Some of her antics are simply to get your attention.”

“I have no idea why.”

“Little girls always love their papas. There are many mistakes made by parents, but children can forgive more easily than adults. Their memories are shorter. An act of kindness by a parent will wipe most hurt away.”

“I never know what to say to her. My wife, she was such a wonderful mother. Affectionate and loving. You should have seen the way she looked at Bebe. I've never seen such love on



anyone's face. Not before and not since. When I lost her, it was hard to look at Bebe and not see her mother."

She sat perfectly still, obviously waiting for me to continue.

"Knowing how much her mother wished to be here, and yet she was stuck with me. All the while thinking it should have been me that died. Everyone would have been better off had it been."

She twisted my handkerchief around the other hand. "Please don't say that. You are very loved."

"Not by you." I smiled.

The corners of her mouth lifted for a split second before she sobered. "I'm scared of you."

"I'm sorry I've frightened you. It's just that nothing comes out quite the way I want it to. I mean no harm. I'd not like to think I've become my father."

"How do you mean?"

"He was a cruel, violent man who enjoyed making his wife and children miserable. It was a sport to him. Some men take up tennis. My father liked to inflict pain. Verbal and otherwise."

"Did he hit you?"

"Occasionally. My brothers got most of it. And Mother. He was beastly to her. I hate to think about it."

"Why were you mostly spared when the others weren't?"

Should I tell her the embarrassing reason? She was from the city. Maybe she'd heard of fortune tellers. "You won't believe it. A woman who claimed to be a psychic predicted that I would kill him. I suppose he didn't want to risk angering me. It's ludicrous. But that's how he was. A bully. Hurting others because he was a fearful little man."

I stopped, realizing I'd said too much. "I don't think I've talked this much at one time in years."

"It's nice to know you a little better," Miss Jayne said.

“What about you, Miss Jayne? Did you have a good father? A loving mother?”

Her expression darkened for the briefest of moments. So quick, I wondered if I’d seen it at all. By the time she glanced back at me, her bright exterior was clearly pasted back onto her face. She could write a book about how to look cheery even if the sky were falling all around you. I’m sorry to say so, but it rankled me that she couldn’t simply say the truth. Not many people did, I’d found. To the outside world, they presented only their best. Pretending everything was fine when it wasn’t.

“My father and mother have both passed away,” Miss Jayne said.

I wasn’t getting any more out of her, that much was obvious. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was a long time ago. I’m perfectly fine. I have Sara Rose. She’s my family. And your daughter makes me smile and laugh every day.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that. You laugh a lot.”

“Does it bother you?” She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin slightly, as if ready to spar.

“It makes me curious.”

“Curious? About how someone can find so much joy in the world?”

“Something like that.” My lips twisted, and a bitter taste came to my mouth. She didn’t like me, or maybe she pitied me. I couldn’t tell which, and I didn’t know which was worse.

“I wake up every day, Mr. Tutheridge, and think to myself—I choose to be happy. I even smile at myself in the mirror. And then I go about my day, and I’m joyful and delighted by any small thing that happens to me.”

“What about the bad things?”

She shrugged. “Not many bad things happen to me. Perhaps they cannot attach to me because they know it will not bother me much.”

“That makes you sound mentally ill. Bad things are not like pollen. They don’t catch hold of your clothes.”

“Or make you sneeze?” She lifted her head and had the audacity to laugh.

I couldn’t help but chuckle myself. “Have you always been this annoyingly cheerful?”

“I think so. It’s just my natural disposition, I guess. I like myself tremendously because of it.”

“I would enjoy liking myself again. I used to.”

“Ah, so you’ve not always been scary and grumpy?” Miss Jayne asked.

“When I was a younger man, I was happy every day. I’d known Rosemary most of my life, and when we fell in love and married it seemed that my life would continue that way. I felt blessed. I was blessed. And then God took her from me.”

“But he left Bebe for you.”

I rubbed my forehead. This conversation had given me a headache. “Right. Which is why I’ve come to you for help. Can you advise me? Perhaps give me a list?”

“A list?” She tossed her head back and laughed. “That is truly hilarious.”

Heat flooded my neck. “Why is it funny? I am asking for instructions. Humbly, I might add. You should not make fun of me.”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible, Mr. Tutheridge, not to find you amusing. If I didn’t, what would I think of you instead?”

“That I’m scary and grumpy?”

“You guessed correctly. Now, I shall recover from my amusement and think seriously about your request.”

“Yes,” I said with enthusiasm. “I need you to tell me precisely what to do. A step one, if you will.”

She nodded, then wiped her brow again. It was hot, even in the shade. “All right, if you insist. Here is the first step. You

must take her to do something fun. An outing of some kind.”

“An outing? As in?” I twisted my head to one side for emphasis.

“A trip to the lake.” Her eyes lit up. “Yes, take her up to the lake tomorrow afternoon for a swim. The water’s nice and warm this time of year, according to Sara Rose. I’ve been wanting to take Bebe up there after Sara Rose told me how lovely it was, but alas, I have no way to take her there.”

“You could ask to borrow one of the carriages,” I said, feeling guilty. I should have offered it before now.

“No, thank you. I’m scared of horses. I prefer to walk on my own two feet.”

“You’re afraid of horses? How is that possible?”

Again, a shadow crossed her face, then quickly vanished. “I was kicked very hard as a child. Broke my leg. On cold nights it still aches. Since then, I have stayed away from them, thank you very much.”

“All right, we’ll put that away to discuss a different time. I will take us all swimming tomorrow. We’ll take a picnic. How’s that for fun?” I grinned, proud of myself.

“I’m to come too?” Miss Jayne asked.

“Well, yes. Don’t you want to?”

“I assumed this excursion would be just the two of you.”

“God, no. Haven’t you been listening to me whatsoever? I am incapable of entertaining her on my own. That’s why I’ve hired you.”

She chuckled. “I’d like to join you, if you want to know the truth. This heat does not agree with me. Leaves me limp as an unwatered flower.”

“Wait a minute, Miss Jayne. I thought you said *nothing* bothered you. Not ever, after your cheery little discussion with yourself in front of the mirror?”

“I can still feel the heat, but I choose not to let it ruin my wonderful time.” She lifted her chin again in that way, inviting

a challenge. She might be a bubbly woman, but she was also strong.

“What time shall we leave tomorrow?” I asked.

“A little before noon? I’ll have Mrs. Halvorson prepare a picnic for us.”

Neither of us had noticed Bebe standing on the steps. She squealed and ran the rest of the way up to where we were sitting. “Where are we going? A picnic? Where to? Where to? Oh, I can hardly wait.” Her face fell, and she said in a small voice, “I get to go, don’t I?”

Miss Jayne held out her hand and pulled Bebe onto her lap. “Of course, you get to come, goose. You go where I go. We’re a team, remember?”

Bebe’s eyes shone with joy. It shamed me to see how easily it was to please her. I was a beast.

“Your papa is taking us to the lake tomorrow,” Miss Jayne said. “And we will wear our bathing costumes and swim to our heart’s content.”

“This is a dream come true.” Bebe jumped off Miss Jayne’s lap and threw herself into mine. “Oh, Papa, you’re going with us, and we’re going to have a picnic. I might die from happiness.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” I said. “But I’m looking forward to taking you both up to the lake.”

Bebe bounced off my lap and ran back to the lawn. “I have to do a cartwheel to celebrate my good fortune.”

She proceeded to do so, bloomers out for all to see.

---

THAT EVENING before supper I went down to consult Mrs. Halvorson about our picnic lunch. She and Mr. Halvorson were enjoying their evening meal.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your supper,” I said.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “We were just complaining about the heat. As folks do.”

“My tomatoes love the heat,” Mr. Halvorson said. “But this old man doesn’t.”

Mrs. Halvorson stood, taking her plate over to the sink, then slipping her apron over her head. “What can I do for you, sir?” Mrs. Halvorson had called me sir even when I was a little boy. I’d often come down here when my father was on one of his rages. She had always welcomed me into the warmth of her kitchen, given me something to eat, and asked if I’d like to talk. I usually didn’t, but that was all right with her too. She’d showered me with affection, not only with her food but her kind smile and easy laugh. She had shown me love my father couldn’t, and my mother was too busy trying to survive to pay much attention to me at all.

“I’m taking Bebe and Miss Jayne up to the lake for a picnic tomorrow and was wondering if I might trouble you to fix us a basket?”

“I would be delighted.” She was trying to hide it, but I could tell I’d surprised her. “Would you prefer sandwiches or fried chicken?”

I thought of Mrs. Halvorson cooking in the heat. Chicken took a lot of effort. I knew that from watching her when I was a kid. So many steps and then standing near the nearly boiling grease.

“I prefer sandwiches,” I said. “With cheese and ham, perhaps?”

“Consider it done. Thanks to my dear husband, the garden had given us some wonderful choices for a picnic basket.”

From the table, Mr. Halvorson looked up from his supper. “I’ve grown quite a crop this year, if I do say so myself.”

Mrs. Halvorson patted my arm. “I’m pleased to see you getting out and enjoying some time with Bebe.”

I leaned against the worktable that occupied much of the kitchen and hung my head. “I’ve not done well, Mrs. Halvorson. Not well at all.”

“You had a terrible blow, losing Rosemary. You mustn’t be too hard on yourself.”

“I’ve not been hard enough. That’s the trouble.”

“What’s happened to inspire this change?” Mrs. Halvorson asked.

“I don’t know. I suppose Miss Jayne has shamed me. She’s so good with Bebe. My daughter’s thriving under her care. She hasn’t had a single tantrum since Miss Jayne arrived. She keeps her busy with activities and stimulates her keen little brain with books and games. I’ve been watching in awe and lately, I’ve been wondering why I’m allowing myself to miss out on my girl’s childhood. It’s only that I’ve felt inadequate. Not sure how to proceed or how to be a father. I never had one to emulate, you know.”

“Most certainly not.”

“Miss Jayne suggested the picnic and a swimming party.”

“It’s a fine idea,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “I’m glad, sir. Very glad.”

For the first time in a long time, I felt there was hope for me. A way out of the sadness and stagnation I’d let myself fall into and remain in.

It had occurred to me that Miss Jayne had inspired me in more ways than one. Being around her was infectious. I wanted to wake up in the morning and decide to be happy. Tomorrow, maybe? Should I stand in front of the mirror and tell myself that happiness was a choice?

---

I DRESSED for supper in my formal suit upon the request of my mother. Apparently, Briggs and Faith were joining us. Miss Jayne had been invited to dine with us as well, even though she usually ate with Bebe. But for whatever reason, Mother had asked her to join us tonight. Mother insisted we dress for dinner. I didn’t care for the dressing-up bit and often ate in my room for that very reason. Tonight, however, when I came

down to the living room, I was surprised by how pleased I was to see Miss Jayne.

She looked ravishing in a light blue gown that complemented her skin. Although fair-headed, her skin was not as pale as my sister's or Faith's, for that matter. She had the kind of skin that glowed as if kissed by the sun. I'd noticed it before, of course, but after our spar this afternoon, I was starting to see her in a whole new way. I'd thought she was the type of woman only good with children. But she was witty and charming. As it turned out, she had a way with grumpy widowers as well. I hadn't felt such a spring in my step as I did tonight in a long time.

Since Rosemary.

"Hudson, it's lovely to see you," Mother said, raising her cheek for a kiss.

My stepfather, Timothy Bains, was standing nearby and brought over a glass of whiskey without me having to ask.

Briggs was enjoying one as well, sitting near the open windows that looked out to the water. A breeze had picked up and cooled the room, as well as bringing the scent of the sea.

"Tell us how the treasure hunting's going," Briggs said, grinning. He thought it a great joke. My obsession with the supposed sunken ship had been quite the topic of ridicule within the family. Slightly offensive.

"I'm officially announcing my retirement," I said. "I've decided you're all correct. There is no treasure. No sunken ship. However, I have enjoyed going through the process of coming to this conclusion. It's given me something to occupy my gloomy thoughts."

Miss Jayne's brows knit together, indicating a curiosity. However, she was too polite to ask.

"I've been obsessed," I said sheepishly, "with the story of a sunken ship loaded with treasure. But I've done enough research to conclude it's nothing but an old wives' tale."

"I was hoping there was treasure," Faith said in her soft voice. "I would have liked to see a jewel or two. And I didn't



think it was kind the way my husband has teased you so.”

“You’re sweet,” I said, bobbing my head in her direction. “But having Briggs tease me has been most welcome. It means I’m somewhat back to my old self. No one would have dared do so this time last year.”

“Darling, it’s good to hear you say this,” Mother said. “You know how I’ve worried.”

“Well, happiness is a choice, Mother, in case you haven’t heard.”

Mother’s eyes narrowed, gawking at me as if I’d suddenly grown a second head.

“I’m serious,” I said, with an amused glance in Miss Jayne’s direction. “A wise person told me that just today, and I’m vowing to take her advice.”

“Miss Jayne, did that come from you?” Timothy asked.

She’d flushed as pink as our peonies in June. I’d embarrassed her. Even when I tried to be nice, it came out all wrong. “It probably sounds silly, but I remind myself every day to be grateful and happy.”

“God is pleased with you,” Timothy said. “Of that, I’m sure.”

As the pastor of our island’s church, he often brought the conversation back to God.

Miss Jayne smiled. “I’m teaching the concept to Bebe too.”

“She’s been absolutely delightful lately,” Faith said. “Honestly, for fear of sounding rude, she’s a new girl since you’ve come into our lives. Although, I’m fond of her either way. Even if she can be willful and temperamental, her heart is good. Just like her father’s.”

“Thank you, Faith,” I said, touched.

“Most importantly, she’s strong, and she’ll need that for this hard world,” Faith added before picking up her knitting

needles and a ball of purple yarn. She'd started making prayer shawls for Timothy to give away to church members.

"Miss Jayne's a miracle worker," Mother said, as if the miracle worker weren't in the room.

"Thank you, all," Miss Jayne said. "It means a lot to hear your praise."

It pleased me as well to hear my daughter praised. I don't know that I ever had. Miss Jayne brought out the best in her. Could I learn to do the same?



## PIPER

I woke the next morning feeling lighthearted. We were taking Bebe on a picnic. I couldn't wait to see her enjoying the water. After washing and dressing quickly, I scurried over to Bebe's bedroom. I purposely woke before her. One had to get a head start on my little charge.

Bebe was still asleep, holding her stuffed bear close to her chest. The room was any child's dream, with a rocking horse, dollhouse, and not one but two baby dolls. Books lined an entire shelf. Her wooden toys had been put away neatly the night before. Another rule I insisted upon. She had to clean them up herself.

When I stepped over to pull a play dress from her wardrobe, she stirred. By the time I'd turned back around, she was sitting up in bed rubbing her eyes.

"Good morning, Bebe. How are you this fine morning?"

"Good morning, Miss Piper. I'm well, thank you."

I smiled to myself. I'd taught her the first day I came here that we were to greet each other pleasantly in the morning. We were working on her manners, and although she sometimes forgot, the lessons were going well.

I drew back the curtains. The bright morning sun flooded the room. "Do you remember what's happening today?"

"Yes, we're going to the lake. With Papa." Bebe scrambled out of bed and into the middle of the room, blinking against the sudden light. Her hair had loosened from the braid, as she was a restless sleeper.

“Yes. Mrs. Halvorson is making us a basket of food, and we must dress in our bathing costumes so that we can swim.”

“A picnic. Yay.” She might not have heard the last part because she was jumping up and down, screaming with delight.

“First, though, we will have our breakfast, and you will do your chores.”

“Yes, Miss Piper.”

Since my arrival, I’d implemented a few small chores for Bebe to complete each day before breakfast. The first was to make her bed. The second was to fold her nightgown and put it in the drawer. Then she was to dust her dresser and the shelves with a feather duster.

When I’d first proposed the idea, she’d stuck her nose in the air and said, “Isn’t that what maids are for?”

To which I’d replied, “You want to be an independent young lady who can take care of herself someday.”

“But why?”

“What if you grow up and you don’t have a maid? You wouldn’t know how to do anything for yourself, and that would be a tragedy.”

She’d only looked at me with her big eyes.

“Anyway, you’ll enjoy looking after yourself and contributing to the household. Think of how much nicer it will be for Lizzie to come in and find you’ve already made the bed. She’ll think very favorably toward you. ‘What a clever and kind girl that Bebe is,’ she’ll say to herself.”

That had provoked a response. “I’d like Lizzie to think me clever.”

“And kind,” I prompted.

“I don’t care about that as much as I do clever.”

Bebe was still a work in progress. But weren’t we all?

Now she hurried to get dressed without me having to ask her. Unfortunately, she thought we were putting on our bathing costumes right away. “No, wear one of your play dresses for now. We’ll change before we go later this morning.”

“I can’t wait.” She twirled around the room, lifting the skirt of her nightgown and reminding me of a little fairy.

If I weren’t careful, I’d get as attached to this one as I had Sara Rose.

---

THE DAY WAS as warm as the one before, and I was overheated by the time we reached the lake. Bebe had not stopped talking the entire time, and I could see from his clenched jaw that her father was already tired.

We’d taken one of the automobiles, and I quite enjoyed the rumble of the engine and the way it blew the ribbon of my hat this way and that. Still, I was glad to be at the lake, as it was cooler here in the higher elevation.

Mr. Tutheridge grabbed our picnic basket from the back of the Model T, and we all traveled by foot along a dirt path toward the lake. I’d not yet seen it, even though I’d been here since spring and felt almost as excited as Bebe.

On either side of the path were wild blackberries, still red but ripening right before our eyes. Dust covered our shoes by the time we reached the lake, and sweat was making its merry way down my back, the base of my neck, and the sides of my face. I must look a mess. If only my friends back in Boston could see me traipsing about the island like a country girl.

I’d not anticipated loving Whale Island as much as I did. Truly, it might have been the most beautiful place on earth. Not that I had too much with which to compare it. However, we’d traveled across the country on the train, and I don’t think we’d seen anything as picturesque as the islands. Everywhere one’s eyes were lucky enough to look, there was a scene of the Sound, trees, meadows, and now this lake.

We settled in the shade of a birch tree, laying out a blanket and unpacking the picnic basket. Bebe was anxious to swim, so I allowed her to go in before she ate anything. She'd be hungry soon enough.

"Be careful, Bebe," Hudson said.

"I know how to swim, Papa. Uncle Briggs taught me. Otherwise, I don't get to go out on the boat."

A flicker of shame passed over Hudson's finely crafted face. Yet another thing someone else had done with his daughter. No matter, I thought. We would change that starting this very day.

Mr. Tutheridge and I were wearing our bathing costumes under our clothes. As he stripped down to his costume, I couldn't help but notice the sinewy strength of his arms and shoulders. Even in the ridiculous bathing costume men were forced to wear, he looked good. Men's costumes always made me think of something a baby should wear, not a man. Mine was not much better—basically, bloomers and a long-sleeved blouse, which covered almost every inch of me.

We walked to the water's edge. Bebe plowed ahead, diving below the surface before coming up to grin at us. "It's not that cold."

I sat to take off my shoes. "I'll stick my foot in first," I said to Hudson.

"Yes, it can be cold," he said. "But not so much when you're a child."

He sat on a fallen tree. "I'll wait to see what you think of the temperature," he said, smiling.

Wincing from the pebbles that populated the side of the shore, I made my way toward the water. One foot at a time, I told myself. I put my right foot in first. It actually didn't feel that cold. Much less so than the Puget Sound.

By the time I'd put both feet in, I was feeling more confident. I'd never done more than wading before and, unlike Bebe, didn't know how to swim.

“I’ll sit on the edge here,” I said. “Since I can’t swim.”

“You can’t? I’m sorry, we could have done something else,” Hudson said.

“No, no, this is the perfect outing. I’ll enjoy watching you two.”

Bebe, in fact, was rather fishlike, darting under the water and splashing about as if she were born to it. Maybe it was in the Tutheridge blood?

“I’ll join you here, if you don’t mind,” Hudson said. “It’s a little cold for me.”

We sat in silence, enjoying Bebe’s pure delight. The water was the prettiest shade of blue, and the sky and trees reflected in the glassy lake, making it seem as if there were two worlds to watch instead of only one.

“Did you come here a lot as a boy?” I asked.

“Yes, sure we did.” He pointed toward a cliff up above. “We used to jump in from there.”

“I can think of nothing more terrifying.” My stomach went queasy just thinking about it.

“We loved it here.” Hudson’s tone had turned wistful. “There were some happy days for the four of us. Even though I always felt like an outsider with my brothers and sister.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s complicated.” He picked up a pebble and tossed it into the water. Little minnows had come to examine his feet. “Mostly has to do with Father. You know, that he treated me differently.”

“That must have been strange for you. On the one hand, you didn’t want to be hurt like your brothers. On the other, you felt guilty for being singled out.”

He lifted his gaze from the water to look over at me. “That’s precisely what it was.”

“I can imagine it felt isolating for you.”



“You could say that, yes.” He tossed another pebble, scaring the fish away. A dragonfly flew around his head for a moment and then was gone as quickly as he’d come. “Most of my life I’ve felt alone. Until Rosemary. She made me feel as if I belonged to something greater than myself. The two of us were a family of our own. Then Bebe came, and I thought no man alive felt as happy and blessed as I.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, wishing I could reach out and comfort him somehow. This was a strange urge, I thought. Wanting to touch Hudson Tutheridge?

“Everyone was right, you know,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “Last night at dinner. Your presence here has changed Bebe so much. For the better. I hope you won’t mind me saying this, but I feel hopeful about the future for the first time in a long time.”

“That pleases me immensely,” I said. “Just think. Yesterday at this time, I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I’m working on my demeanor. I hate that I scared you.” He turned his gaze toward Bebe, who had come in from swimming to explore the shallow water close to shore. She crouched, very still, wanting the minnows to come so she could examine them better. I loved how curious she was about all things. I hoped she never lost that. It makes one’s life so much more interesting.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been off-putting,” he said. “You deserve better.”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself at all. I’ve worked for much worse than you, believe me.”

“Worse than me how?” He’d returned his gaze to me and was eyeing me with the same curious eyes he shared with his daughter.

“Before I came here, I had an employer who struck me with a book. Gave me a black eye.”

“Why would he do such a thing?”

“I’d accidentally walked into the parlor whilst he was doing something unmentionable to one of the maids.”

“How awful.”

“Yes, it wasn’t my finest moment. I froze like a complete fool and I probably had my mouth half open in utter shock. He picked up a book from the desk and hurled it in my direction. I don’t know if he meant to or not, but it hit me directly on my right cheekbone. Hurt like the dickens. Not to mention what I saw with my own two very innocent eyes.” I shuddered at the memory. The sight of Mr. Hutton’s saggy bottom and the other thing, wholly enlarged at that point, was not something that would ever leave my mind.

“I can see the whole scene reflected in your eyes,” Hudson said. “I’m glad you were able to leave there and come out here.”

“If it hadn’t been for Sara Rose, I would never have ventured so far from home. Not that there’s anyone there for me any longer. Sara Rose is the only family I have.”

“May I ask what happened to your parents?”

“They passed away not long after I went to work for Sara Rose’s family. They were living apart by then. My father lived with his mistress.” I put my hand over my mouth as if I could stuff the words back inside. Why had I told him that shameful part of my history?

“Ah, well, if we’re talking mistresses, there’s absolutely no way he could compete with my father. He had one after another. With two of them, he had a child.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that from Sara Rose.”

“It’s nice about her and Rhett, isn’t it?” Mr. Tutheridge said. “Falling in love like they did. Rhett’s a fine man.”

“My Sara Rose is a fine woman, so yes, it’s a very happy thing.”

“What about you?” he asked. “I’ve heard rumors Caleb King’s courting you.”

I flushed. “Yes, a bit.”

“Do you like him?”

“I think so. But don’t worry, I’d never quit my position here with you if something more serious were to develop.”

“He’s older than you by quite a bit.” Mr. Tutheridge said it without judgment in his voice. More like stating a fact than reproving. “Will you mind about that?”

“I’ve not thought about it much, other than it’s refreshing to meet a man who has a sense of maturity about him. Back home, I had a few young men try to court me. I’d rather have had a tooth pulled.”

“Why? What was wrong with them?” He leaned forward slightly, obviously interested.

This was why I kept telling him things, I thought. He was an excellent listener.

“They were dull, for one, but mostly they acted like boys, and I’m interested in a man.”

“Wise of you,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “It will take a man of great strength of character to be worthy of your heart.”

I stared at him. That was such a nice thing to say. “You’re surprising me the last few days. What’s happened to you? You seem different.”

“I don’t know how to describe it, other than seeing all my siblings so happily paired off has made me realize that I should start living again. Be open to new experiences. Spend time with Bebe before she’s all grown up. Like I said before, your appearance has shaken everything up for me.”

“I’m glad. Truly.”

We shared a smile.

“Regarding Bebe, would you like to give me instruction? How should I be acting today?”

“You’re doing well. She just wanted you to come along. You don’t have to perform any tricks.”

“Good, because I don’t know any.”

Bebe took that moment to announce that she was starving and was it time for lunch yet? I’d been right to have her get

exercise before eating. Otherwise, it would have been a battle. Now she was good and hungry. I was as well.

“Yes, come here.” I stood and reached for the extra blanket I’d brought. “Use this to dry off a little before you sit down. I’ll unpack our lunch.”

A few minutes later, we were all under the shade of the tree, expressing delight with the treats Mrs. Halvorson had sent. There were ham sandwiches with a creamy cheese made on the island that melted in my mouth. A bowl of fresh raspberries was almost too pretty to eat but we managed to do so anyway. There were cool slices of cucumber that she’d put into a tangy vinegar. For dessert were small tea cookies with drops of raspberry jam in the middle.

Bebe asked if she could continue playing and we said yes, but that she would have to wait thirty minutes before swimming.

“Why?” Bebe asked.

“Otherwise, you might get a cramp,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “And I would have to wade in to save you, and I’m too full to do much but lie here in the shade.”

Bebe appeared doubtful but didn’t argue. “I’ll play by the water, not in it.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “But first, may I have a hug?”

“Yes!” Bebe hurled herself into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You’re very wet,” he said, laughing. “Off you go.”

We were both smiling as Bebe headed toward the shore.

“I don’t know how Mrs. Halvorson knew,” I said. “But this kind of cookie is my favorite.”

“Would you say that about any sweet she sent?” Mr. Tutheridge asked.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re so agreeable you might convince yourself that whatever cookie she sent along was your favorite.”

“One must be adaptable.” I grinned.

His eyes were gentle as he handed me another cookie. “Just be careful with King, all right? Make sure he’s really your favorite, not just the one presented.”

I thought about that for a moment. Should I be offended? Or was he merely being protective? He’d certainly figured me out. I was amiable. Regardless, in matters of the heart, I had strict rules. Thus far, no man had lived up to my expectations. As smitten as I was with Caleb, there was still a part of me that watched him, almost detached. I did not want to be hurt, and there were secrets from his past. Was his reticence to speak of them cause for alarm? I had not decided yet. Whatever I decided, it would be my choice to make.

“Have I overstepped?” Mr. Tutheridge asked. “If so, I apologize.”

“I’ve decided you’ve brought it up merely to protect me from harm, for which I am appreciative.”

“That is correct.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Tutheridge—I am a discerning woman. If there are any causes for alarm, I shall remove myself from the relationship immediately.”

“For fear of being presumptuous, I’m relieved to hear you say so. You’re too special to marry the wrong person and live miserably.”

“Like my mother,” I said under my breath.

“My mother as well.” He was quiet for a moment, looking out toward the water. “Would you like a glass of strawberry wine? Mrs. Halvorson packed it at the bottom of the basket to keep it cool.

“I’ve never had strawberry wine.”

“It tastes like punch.”

“Then I shall enjoy a small glass,” I said.

He pulled out the bottle from the basket and poured us each a tiny amount. “Let’s have a drink and toast to your future, Miss Jayne. May all good things come your way.”

“And your way too.”

“To us.”

To us? The way he said it made it sound like there was an “us,” as in us together, instead of our separate happy endings. Oddly enough, the idea didn’t seem hideous at all.



## HUDSON

The afternoon had passed quickly, and I was surprised to find myself sorry to see it end. Bebe seemed to agree, although she fell fast asleep on the way home despite the bouncing of the tires in the dirt road. When we arrived, she woke grumpy and sunburned. Miss Jayne gathered her up and took her up the stairs to get her cleaned up and ready for dinner.

I went to my bedroom to do the same. We lived in the far wing of the house, where a small sitting room separated my bedroom from Bebe's. Just as I was coming out after a nice bath and donning a fresh shirt and suit, Miss Jayne was leaving Bebe's room.

"Hello there," I said. "Is all well with Bebe?"

"Yes. She's playing quietly for a few minutes before I bring up her supper. With all the sun and exercise, she's tired. I predict she'll be fast asleep by half past seven."

"Then you've done your job." I hesitated, awkward and unaccustomed to giving thanks to anyone, but then plowed ahead. If I were to be a different man, I must start with small actions. Over time, if I were lucky, they would accumulate, and eventually, I'd be transformed into the man I wanted to be. "Thank you for today. It was such a good one."

"Bebe said it was the best day of her life." Miss Jayne smiled. "So I'd have to say we did well. I'm glad it wasn't too tiresome for you."

"Not at all. I'll look forward to our next adventure."



She smiled and waved her hand toward the window. “What shall it be? A boat ride? She enjoys those a lot.”

“Why not? We should enjoy the weather while we can.”

“Agreed.”

“How is tomorrow?” I held my breath, worried she would say no.

“Tomorrow’s as good as any other day. Do you want to ask Briggs to accompany us? He’s the one who usually takes us out on the big boat. The rowboat wouldn’t fit all of us.”

“That will not be necessary. I’ve been known to take the boat out from time to time.”

“Wonderful. Should we say one o’clock?”

“Excellent.” She had not yet had time to change her clothes. The sleeve of her bathing costume cover was wet from Bebe’s head. “You should go have a bath and a rest yourself.”

“I am headed that way.” She smiled brightly at me. “Have a good night.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Are you headed out with Mr. King?” I found myself wishing she wasn’t and dining with us instead. But I kept that to myself. I had no reason to interfere any further. I’d pushed a little too hard earlier. Why I’d said anything about my worries about King was beyond me. As if it were any of my concern.

“Yes, he’s taking me to the dance in town.”

“That’s tonight?”

She grinned. “Yes, and I’m looking forward to it more than I should. Briggs is playing music with a few of his friends. It will be quite a party, I’m sure. Are you attending?”

“I’d not thought about it.” Attending a dance at the school was the last thing on my mind these days. Back when Rosemary and I had been courting, I would have counted down the days in anticipation of holding her in my arms and seeing her so happy. But that was long ago. What would I even

do at a dance? Stand in the corner feeling foolish and envious, that's what.

"You know what?" She clasped her hands together. "You should come with us. Caleb would love to have you join us, I'm sure."

I was not at all sure of that. In fact, I was fairly certain that would not be the case at all. "No, I couldn't intrude."

"But you must. Everyone will be there. Maybe you'll have a good time, and wouldn't it be better than sitting here alone all night?"

"I don't know. There's no one to dance with."

"You can dance with me," she said. "It wouldn't look good for me to dance with Caleb all night. You'll be doing me a favor, keeping gossip down about Caleb and me. You know how people are. They're all talking about us, making guesses about when we will announce our engagement."

The idea twisted my stomach. Why was I worried about her and King? It made no sense. Caleb King was a good man. As far as I knew, anyway.

"Yes, I'll join you then," I said. "If you're sure?"

Her face lit up. "I'm quite sure. Your mother and sister will be pleased to see you out and about."

"Yes, for that reason alone, perhaps I should go."

"There are a few young ladies on the island, surely? Maybe one will catch your eye."

I kept my tone lighthearted. "I'm trying, Miss Jayne, to begin to live again. However, dancing with a stranger will not be happening. Much too frightening." No one would want to dance with me anyway. I was the town ogre. It was obvious by the way people averted their eyes when I was in town or here at the house for one of Mother's parties I was not well-liked. Not anymore.

Miss Jayne brushed her fingers lightly on the sleeve of my jacket. "You never know when love might find you. Look at

me. I thought I'd be a lonely spinster, and here I have a handsome man courting me."

*All the more reason for me to tag along tonight*, I thought. What if King was not as trustworthy as he appeared? She would be all alone with him, perhaps in the dark. It was dangerous. I would join them, if only to keep a close watch on King.

"What time am I to be ready?" I asked.

"Your mother said we would have an early supper so we could all head out about seven. Shall I tell her you're joining us?"

"No, I'll do it, but thank you. Go have a rest. I'll give Bebe her dinner and tuck her in so that you can rest and dress for the dance."

"That's so kind of you. Thank you. I was worried about getting ready in time. Look at me. There's a lot of repair to do."

"You look fine to me." She did, with her mussed-up hair and rosy complexion. A smudge of dust on her left cheek added to her charm.

"You've been quite pleasant today, Mr. Tutheridge," she said, a teasing lilt to her voice. "If I were to give you a grade, it would be the highest of marks."

I did a mock bow, grinning. "You make it easy." I gestured toward the door. "Go on now. I'll see you at supper."

She hustled off, leaving the scent of her perfume in the air. For a long moment, I gazed at the door from which she'd left, wondering why it suddenly felt lonesome without her.

No matter, I told myself. She had her whole life ahead of her. The last thing she needed was a grumpy old fool like me entertaining thoughts of more time together. She was in love with King. That much was obvious.

---

BEBE WAS PLAYING QUIETLY with her dollhouse when I entered the room, so absorbed that she seemed not to notice me. I was about to call out to her when I noticed what she was doing. She had the father doll and the mother doll standing in the living room, and she was pretending they were having a discussion.

“Miss Jayne, you’re looking lovely this morning.” Bebe wriggled the male doll.

“You are too, Mr. Tutheridge. Won’t Bebe be delighted to hear of our engagement?”

My mouth dropped open. First of all, her imitation of our voices was uncannily accurate. Secondly, what was she thinking? Our engagement? We had spent only one afternoon together and already she was marrying us off?

I stood in the doorway, trying to catch my breath as a wave of grief weakened my knees. My poor, sweet Bebe. She wanted a mother so badly that she had imagined us engaged? This was my fault. I’d not given her enough love or affection. Of course she had become attached to her attentive and affectionate nanny. Of course she would dream of what it would be like to be a family.

“Bebe?”

She jumped and dropped the dolls onto the floor of their little house. So much for their tender embrace.

“Papa, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry, darling. What game were you playing?” I was curious to see what she would say.

She blinked those blue eyes of hers that were so much like my sister’s. “Just a game.”

I came farther into the room and knelt on my knees next to her. “What kind of game?”

“It’s a make-believe game. I have my dolls do what I wish would happen in real life.”

“I see.”

“Do you want to know what it was?” Bebe asked.

“If you’d like to tell me, then yes.”

“I was pretending that you and Miss Piper were in love and getting married. She would become my mother and we would all live happily ever after like they do in fairy tales.”

“I thought fairy tales had stories about evil stepmothers,” I said, smiling.

“Not all of them.” She uncurled her legs and went to sit in her rocking chair. She was barefoot and wearing a clean dress. Miss Jayne had even managed to wash and braid her hair. She was a wonder. Apparently, Bebe agreed.

“Darling, you must not daydream about Miss Jayne and me. She is our nanny. It wouldn’t be appropriate for the two of us to have any kind of relationship that went further than employer and employee.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” Bebe’s thin eyebrows came together. “Why not?”

“It’s just not done. She works for our family.”

“But Uncle Benedict and Uncle Briggs married their assistants. How’s this different?”

Good question.

“Miss Jayne would never want to marry me.”

“Why? You’re handsome and very smart. Everyone says so.”

“I doubt that,” I said under my breath. “Miss Jayne is being courted by Mr. King. She seems to care for him a great deal. It’s best that you and I remember that, all right?”

“Do you pray at night, Papa?”

“Yes.” That was a fib. Most nights, I didn’t talk to God. I’d not forgiven him for taking my Rosemary.

“I pray every night, both out loud and the ones I say silently after Miss Piper leaves. Then no one can tell me what to pray about. Not even you or Miss Piper.”

My mouth twitched but I managed not to smile.

“Therefore, I shall continue to pray for what I want. And what I want is for you and Miss Piper to marry. She’s perfect for us, Papa. She even makes you laugh, and she got you to take us to the lake.”

“She’s persuasive that way.”

“Did you have fun today?”

“I did. Very much so,” I said. “I’d like to do more fun activities with you.”

“Like what?”

“Going out on the boat. In fact, we’ve agreed to go tomorrow afternoon.”

She threw herself into my arms, as she was wont to do of late. “Thank you, Papa.”

I held her close, kissing the top of her head. Since Miss Jayne had come to us, Bebe’s head smelled particularly sweet. “You’re welcome.”

She rested her head against my chest, snuggling close. “Papa, I’m not going to give up. Even if my heart’s broken in the end. I can’t stop just because I’m scared.”

“I don’t want you to be hurt, my love. But I also don’t want you to stop dreaming and wishing for things you want.”

“Is that what you’ve done?”

I thought for a moment before answering. That was exactly what I’d done. After I lost Rosemary, I’d stopped believing that dreams could come true. Or, if they were granted, they could just as easily be snatched away. It was easier that way. If I shut down all hopes and dreams of love, then I would not be disappointed. Had I taught my daughter to do the same thing?

Apparently not, for here she was pouring out her secrets to me.

“I have missed your mother very much, and it’s made me lose sight of hope,” I said finally. “And that’s wrong. I don’t want you to do what I’ve done. You keep dreaming, darling

girl. For whatever you want. Just know that sometimes God has other plans for us.”

“I’m going to ask him for *this* plan.” My daughter was nothing if not stubborn.

“You do that, brave one.”

“Mr. King makes her cry.”

I stiffened. “What? Why do you say that?”

“I heard her one time with Miss Sara Rose. She was crying because Mr. King had been cruel to her.”

The visceral reaction that came over me was unexpected. I would hurt him if he did anything to harm Miss Jayne. I would. With my bare hands. How dare he be anything but good to her? If she were mine, I would shower her with love. I’d make her laugh, not cry.

“Do you know this for sure?” I asked, much more calmly than I felt.

“Papa, kids know a lot more than you think.”

It hadn’t been such a long time since I’d been a child. I knew this to be true. The four of us had known everything that happened in this house. That’s why we’d been miserable most of the time.

“What if she marries him?” Bebe asked in a small voice. “And we lose her forever?”

“She’ll stay with us, even if she marries. She told me that herself just this afternoon.”

Bebe relaxed slightly. I’d not realized how tense her little body had been.

I kissed her head again. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Anything, Papa.”

“Will you try not to worry so much about all this? You’re just a little girl. You shouldn’t have to think about such things.”

“I’ll try.”

Even I knew it was futile. She would do no such thing. My daughter had never been able to let anything go. Whatever she wanted, she wanted with her whole heart. Nothing and no one could stop her.

*Please, God, I prayed for the first time in a long time. Protect my little girl from hurt.*

“Would you like your supper now?” I asked. “I bet Mrs. Halvorson has made something delicious for you.”

“Yes, I’m hungry. Will you eat with me? In the kitchen? Mrs. Halvorson and Mr. Halvorson are fun to eat with. When I’m allowed, that is. Miss Piper says I’m not to make a nuisance of myself when they’re enjoying their supper. But sometimes I’m allowed to stay.”

“I’ll tell you what. How about we go down together and ask her? I’m going to have an early supper tonight, too, so we may as well eat together.”

“Why are you—wait, are you going to the dance?” Bebe had disentangled herself to look at my face.

“I am.”

“Oh, Papa, this is such good news. You’ll be able to ask Miss Piper to dance. She loves dancing. She told me all about it one day.”

Bebe had not listened to a word I said about the impropriety of courting one’s daughter’s nanny. Oh well, I thought. If she wanted to keep asking God, then who was I to stop her?

---

MRS. HALVORSON WAS JUST SERVING up dinner for her husband when we arrived like refugees in her kitchen.

“What are you two up to this fine evening?” Mrs. Halvorson asked.

“We’ve come to beg for our supper,” I said. “Bebe and I wondered if we could eat with you tonight.”



“We would be delighted. I’ve made something light on account of the heat. Mrs. Bains asked just for a cold potato salad and slices of ham. Will that do?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “And thank you for our picnic earlier. It was delicious.”

“I noticed you didn’t drink much of my strawberry wine,” Mr. Halvorson said from where he was sitting at the table. “I’m insulted.”

“Well, the young lady didn’t want to lose her head,” I said laughing. “It has nothing to do with your fine wine.”

“More for me, then.” Mr. Halvorson grinned as he lifted his glass to his mouth.

“He acts as if he doesn’t have a glass whenever he wishes.” Mrs. Halvorson shook her head. “He’s incorrigible, this one.”

I sat at the table next to Mr. Halvorson. He’d been reading the newspaper but set it aside when I pulled in my chair. Bebe asked Mrs. Halvorson if she could help, which surprised me as much as anything else that had happened that day.

“Yes, dearie. You bring the bread to the table.” Mrs. Halvorson handed Bebe a tray with the loaf of bread and a small bowl of butter. “I’ll just slice us up some ham, and then we can eat.”

Bebe, with an earnest expression on her face, placed the tray down next to Mr. Halvorson.

“It’s like old times,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “Your papa used to join us for dinner a lot back when he was your age. He and your uncles and Aunt Ella, too. We had such fun times, didn’t we?”

“They were some of the best of my childhood.” It was true.

“Your papa was such a cute boy,” Mrs. Halvorson said.

I watched her, curious what she remembered. Much of those years were a blur to me.

“It wasn’t always easy for him,” Mrs. Halvorson said to Bebe. “But he never complained.”

The two Halvorsons exchanged a glance. They’d seen a lot during their time in this house too. Children and staff—both knew more than anyone figured they did.

“But now we have such happy times ahead of us,” Mrs. Halvorson said, plunking potato salad on my plate. “Your grandmother’s remarried and so happy with Mr. Bains. Aunt Ella and your uncles are happily starting their lives. We have a new baby in the family. And we have you, Miss Bebe, growing up so fine. Lizzie was telling me the other day that you make your own bed and dust every day. We’re very proud of you.”

Bebe beamed. “Miss Piper taught me how to do it. Now I do it every day without even being asked.”

“Good for you,” Mr. Halvorson said. “Self-reliant is a good way to be.”

“That’s what Miss Piper says, too.” Bebe stabbed a potato and gobbled it up hungrily. “I love doing my chores.”

I’d not known Bebe was doing chores. Miss Jayne hadn’t mentioned it. Why was that? She might have consulted Bebe’s father. But then again, why would she? I’d acted completely uninterested in my child. What she must think of me?

I would do better. I had to.



## PIPER

I dressed for the dance more carefully than I usually did, excited to see Caleb and hoping to properly turn his head.

Lizzie had offered to fix my hair, and I'd accepted. The woman was magical, creating a beautifully tall bun with the use of a sock tucked just right. I'd say it rivaled anything I'd seen in magazines.

When I descended the stairs, Mr. Tutheridge was there waiting for me. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him in his gorgeously made suit. He'd shaved and had on an elegant ascot that enhanced his eyes.

"Mr. Tutheridge, you're absolutely splendid this evening."

"Why thank you, Miss Jayne. I will say the same to you. That's quite a dress."

"Do you think so?" It was newly made by Mrs. Lancaster. I'd chosen the material myself, a sky blue that I thought complemented my skin and hair. In addition, blue always made me feel cheerful. "I've just bought it. Now that I have a little money, I thought I'd splurge on myself."

"Mrs. Lancaster knows her craft," Mr. Tutheridge said.

"How did you know it was from her?"

"Where else would it have come from? And I saw you coming out of her shop with the box under your arm the other day. I was hoping you'd gotten something nice made. You've been working hard."

“Thank you, Mr. Tutheridge. I’m very grateful for this wonderful position. You’ve been more than generous.”

“You deserve every penny.” He tilted his head, peering at me. “Shall we wait for Mr. King outside?”

“Why not? Then he won’t have to tie the horses,” I said. “Very thoughtful of you.”

“I do hope he won’t mind my joining you,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “Perhaps we should have asked him.”

“He won’t mind at all. Why would he? The more the merrier, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure all men would agree.” He opened the door and held it for me to walk through.

The air had cooled considerably, and a breeze brought the scent of the sea and the smell of rose petals that had basked in the sun all afternoon.

“I’m glad it’s cooler,” I said. “Lizzie fixed my hair so nicely, I’d hate to overheat and have the whole thing tumble to the floor.”

“What do you mean?” He’d closed the front door behind him and now stood next to me at the top of the stairs.

“I shouldn’t tell you this,” I said, “because men aren’t supposed to be privy to our beauty secrets, but Lizzie’s put something in my hair to make it look bigger and thicker.”

“Whatever is it?”

I laughed at the expression on his face. “Only a sock.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

I heard the clomping of hooves and looked up to see Caleb coming up the driveway. “Isn’t this such fun?”

“Indeed.”

The dour way he looked at Caleb’s wagon made me think otherwise. Most of the men in town drove wagons, a few carriages, and the Tutheridge family had several motor vehicles. Caleb was not rich and couldn’t afford more than the

simple wagon. I didn't care one whit. It was not what a man had but what he did that mattered to me. Anyway, I was a working girl myself. There was no reason to expect otherwise. Not everyone could be as rich as the Tutheridges.

I hurried down the steps to greet Caleb. "Don't get down," I said. "Mr. Tutheridge is joining us tonight, so he'll help me up."

Caleb frowned, a glint in his eyes that made me nervous. In addition, a corner of my eyelid twitched. Maybe he *would* mind that Mr. Tutheridge was coming with us. *Should* I have asked?

Mr. Tutheridge stepped up to the wagon. "Any problems if I tag along, King?"

"None whatsoever," Caleb said. "If you don't mind being a third wheel."

That was unkind, I thought. Mr. Tutheridge had suffered a great loss. The least we could do was offer to keep him company on his first venture out to a dance since his wife had died. In fact, Caleb should know more about that than I. He'd lived here for years and knew the Tutheridge family. Should I speak to him about it later? Perhaps he could do with the same lessons I gave Bebe about compassion and good manners?

"I don't mind," Mr. Tutheridge said. "I'm used to it, given how happily married my siblings are these days." He gave me his hand and helped me up into the front seat next to Caleb.

"Would you want to sit up front?" I asked.

"No, my dear. It's your evening, and I'm nothing but an interloper."

"You're no such thing," I said as I pulled the dust cloth over my dress.

"You look lovely," Caleb said. The pouty expression around his mouth remained. Was he actually jealous of Mr. Tutheridge? I'd done nothing but say how hard he was to understand or get to know. I'd not said anything unkind, as that was not right. If a nanny didn't like their employer, it was up to them to leave, not talk poorly about them.

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s a new dress.”

“I see.” Caleb shook the reins and the horses began to trot, carrying us down the driveway toward the road that led into town.

*I see.* Why had he said it snarly like that? His tone had definitely been one of disapproval. Did he not think I should buy myself a dress? A few times the topic of money had come up, and he’d implied that he was paid a pittance for running the school. Legacy arrangement with the late Mr. Tutheridge, he’d said. “Hoping soon to be paid what I’m worth.” I’d asked if he thought he’d be getting a raise soon, and he’d nodded. “I’m counting on it. Otherwise, I can’t do certain things with my life. Things I really want.”

We’d left it at that, but I had felt a sliver of excitement. Did he mean to propose to me? Was that something he really wanted?

“Did you have a nice day?” I asked Caleb now, hoping to cajole him out of his bad temper.

“Yes, thank you,” Caleb said. “Nice to have the day off. I’d have liked to spend it with you, of course.”

“How sweet. But I had to work. As you know, Saturdays are Bebe days. I like to take her on an outing if I can.”

Caleb was acting positively surly. What was the matter with him?

I decided to ignore his foul attitude and pretend everything was fine. “Today, Mr. Tutheridge took us up to the lake. It was the most glorious day. Bebe was thrilled, of course.”

“Thrilled? Over the lake?” Caleb asked.

“Having her father along with us was a special treat.” I turned back to smile at Mr. Tutheridge. “She adores her father. Warms a person’s heart to see them together.”

I might have been mistaken, but it seemed as if Caleb instructed the horses to run at that particular moment, yanking my head back as they charged forward.

“Why did you both take her to the lake?” A muscle in Caleb’s cheek flexed. He spoke quietly, I assumed, to keep what he was saying from reaching our passenger. The wagon was loud and the road bumpy, making it hard even for me to hear Caleb. “Isn’t that something a father should do on his own? He could have given you the day off to spend with your beau.”

“You know I work on Saturdays,” I said, hot, but managing to keep my voice low. “Why would you think I could drop everything to be with you?”

“No reason.” Caleb went silent, and I fumed quietly. What had gotten into him? He was acting as he had the other night when he made me cry. I was starting to wonder if there were two Calebs.

Whatever it was, I didn’t appreciate him acting like a spoiled child. If he had a problem with me inviting my employer to join us, after what Mr. Tutheridge had experienced, then maybe I didn’t know him as I thought I did.

By the time we arrived at the schoolhouse, my mood had completely soured. I’d so looked forward to this night. It was obvious to keep Caleb happy I shouldn’t have invited Mr. Tutheridge. Well, too bad. I wasn’t going to change my instincts just to please him.

“Hudson, tell me something,” Caleb said as he jumped from the wagon. “Have you and your siblings figured it out yet?”

“Pardon me?” Mr. Tutheridge asked, hopping down to join him. I guess I would have to help myself out of the wagon, I thought, annoyed, as I jumped to the ground.

“The matchmaking scheme? Your mother and Matthew?”

Mr. Tutheridge was staring at him blankly. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your mother hired some woman from back east to match you all. Name’s Mrs. Mantle.”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Tutheridge continued to stare at Caleb.



“Matthew told me your mother figured you and your brothers couldn’t find someone on your own, given your troubles. Ella too, obviously. It appears you’re the last one. She saved the hardest for last. Or maybe it’s been impossible to find someone for you.

“Surprised me when Sara Rose showed up. As far as I knew, it was only the full bloods for whom matches were sought,” Caleb said. “Illegitimate sons apparently get a wife too. Makes you wonder if Miss Jayne here was sent for you.”

My mouth dropped open as I remembered some of the details of our interview with Mrs. Mantle and Heidi. They’d exchanged a look when I’d told them I would be looking for a nanny or governess job. Surely they hadn’t intended me for Hudson Tutheridge? No, it was impossible. They were only happy that I could accompany Sara Rose to help with appearances. None of it had anything to do with me.

“How do you know this?” Mr. Tutheridge asked with a growl in his voice.

“Matthew told us. In exchange for his help finding you misfits a match, your mother agreed to get rid of whatever it was your old man had on us.”

“Had on you?” I asked, breathless.

Caleb turned to look at me, his eyes as hard as stones. “None of your concern, my dear.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Mr. Tutheridge asked.

“Because, regardless of why she’s here, this Miss Jayne’s not your match. She belongs to me. Whatever ideas you’re having about her, you can rest assured your mail-order bride’s arriving any day now.”

Belongs to him? I didn’t like the sound of that. Even if we were to marry, I wasn’t something to be owned.

Who was this man, and did I know him at all?

---

THE MOMENT WE ARRIVED INSIDE, I spotted Sara Rose and Rhett over by the punch bowl. Not caring at this point what Caleb thought, I asked Mr. Tutheridge if he would like to go with me to say hello.

He glanced at Caleb, obviously unsure what to make of the sudden freeze between us. “No, thank you, Miss Jayne. I see my brothers over in the other direction.” He nodded politely at Caleb and then me. “Enjoy your evening. Thank you for the ride into town. I’ll find another way home.”

I glared at Caleb before storming off to Sara Rose.

“Dearest, what’s the trouble?” Sara Rose asked the moment she saw me.

My cheeks were as hot as red pokers I was so angry. “It’s Caleb.”

She took both my hands and looked into my eyes. “Has he upset you?”

“Yes, indeed he has.” Realizing how rude I was being, I looked over at Rhett and said good evening.

“I think I’ll leave you two lovely ladies to chat,” Rhett said. “I’ll go over and say hello to my brothers.”

“Thank you.” Sara Rose peered up at him with such love that it almost brought tears to my eyes. She’d suffered so much for most of her life, and now she had Rhett, a wonderful husband. Someday, hopefully, they would have a child. I knew that would make Sara Rose’s life complete.

Sara Rose took me by the arm and led me outside. On the way we passed Caleb, who acted as if he hadn’t seen me, bent over talking to one of the local girls. *Fine, go ahead*, I thought. *Dance with her*. I would ask Rhett to take me home.

Once we were safely outside, Sara Rose tucked her arm into mine and led me out to sit on one of the benches in front of the school. “Tell me everything.”

She was so pretty in a cream gown with a pink sash that I almost forgot my anger, but then it came roaring back. “It’s Caleb. He was absolutely rude to Mr. Tutheridge.” I told her

the full account of the evening thus far. “And he was going on about Mrs. Mantle being a matchmaker, implying that I was sent for Mr. Tutheridge when we all know I tagged along with you. I was not purposely sent here.”

Or was I?

“How awful,” Sara Rose said. “Why would Caleb have even brought that up?”

“He said he wanted Mr. Tutheridge to understand that I was not his match. I belonged to *him*. It was awful. Poor Mr. Tutheridge looked absolutely dumbfounded by the whole affair. He told us he’ll find another ride home. And I shall do the same. I think there are two Caleb Kings. One is charming and funny, and the other is actually a frightening, possessive brute.”

“I don’t think you should continue seeing him,” Sara Rose said. “He’s done nothing but make you unhappy lately.”

“I know.” Still, there was a part of me that wanted to forget his behavior this evening. I glanced through the windows of the schoolhouse. He was no longer near the entrance.

“He was obviously jealous,” Sara Rose said. “And unhappy you’d offered Mr. Tutheridge a ride.”

“But why? Mr. Tutheridge is Bebe’s father, for goodness’ sake. I work for him. And everyone knows he’s in love with a ghost. How could Caleb possibly be worried over him?”

“Caleb might be the possessive type of man. I’ve heard about those kind. Not that I have any experience of that. Rhett is such a confident person that he would never think to be jealous.”

“You would never give him cause to be. Your relationship’s built from trust and mutual affection. Caleb and me? Well, it’s not turning out to be at all what I thought it would be.”

“You don’t think he would be violent, do you?” Sara Rose knew a little about men who appeared nice on the outside but were actually monsters.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “But I don’t suppose I should go anywhere with him alone. He’s obviously not the kind of man I want to be with for any length of time.” I felt tears coming. I’d so looked forward to this night, dancing with Caleb and laughing with Sara Rose and Rhett. I’d gotten it all built up in my mind, which was silly. “I don’t know what’s come over me lately. I was actually hoping this might go somewhere. I didn’t think I wanted to marry, but seeing you so happy had given me hope.”

“Yes, well, there’s no reason to give up hope. The right man might come at any moment.”

“That’s the very thing I told Mr. Tutheridge earlier. Before Caleb acted so abysmally.”

“I wish Mrs. Mantle would send someone for you,” Sara Rose said. “A good match for the finest person I know.”

“It’s unlikely she could find anyone suitable. I’m going to die an old maid.”

“No, you mustn’t think that. But, please, dearest, don’t go out with him again. And anyway, he’s too old for you. I actually saw strands of silver in his hair. You should have someone your own age.”

“I suppose.” Regardless of age, I’d clearly misjudged Caleb. How could I have thought so highly of him?

Strangely enough, I felt affection for Mr. Tutheridge. Over the last few days, as I had with Caleb, I’d seen a new side to my employer. Mr. Tutheridge was proving to be considerate and compassionate, if not a little lost. He was trying with Bebe. Today had been such a perfect outing. Bebe had beamed so brightly all day, which made my heart sing. His grief had overwhelmed him, leaving Bebe stranded. But it was not too late. They could be close. I knew they could. She and her father needed each other. If I could help in any way, I would do so.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb approaching. The music had started up, a lively tune with a fiddle and piano.

“I’ll give you a minute,” Sara Rose said. “But I’ll be keeping watch out the window.”

“Yes, all right.”

Sara Rose didn’t even bother to say hello to him, walking right past him as if he wasn’t even there.

“May I sit with you?” Caleb asked.

“If you’d like.” I was stiff as a board on the outside, but inside, my stomach churned.

“I’m sorry for my behavior,” he said. “If you want to know the truth, I was jealous. When I saw the two of you standing there waiting for me, all chummy, it made me angry, and I just couldn’t seem to shake it.”

“You were very rude.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me? Come inside and dance with me?”

“No, thank you,” I said. “And I’ll find another ride home.”

“Listen, Hudson explained everything to me,” Caleb said. “Apologized for worming his way into our date.”

“It was not his fault. I asked him to come with us.” Anger rose back up as quick as could be. “He has done nothing wrong.”

Caleb jerked to his feet. “If you’re going to be unreasonable, then I have nothing more to say to you.”

I rose to my feet as well and glared right back at him. “I have nothing more to say to you.”

He stepped closer and spoke through gritted teeth. “You will not disrespect me. Ever.” Without warning, he yanked on my arm so hard that it caused me to yelp. “Shut up.” He pulled me around the side of the building and pushed me against the brick wall, trapping me with his arms. “Do you understand me?”

“You’ve gone insane. Please, just leave me alone.” My arm hurt, but I didn’t want him to know how much.

“You started this whole thing. You. Not me. I was courting you. Respecting you, and you go and do this to me. Right in front of my face. Carrying on with Tutheridge.”

“What is wrong with you?” I whispered.

“It’s you that’s the problem. Leading me on. Acting the innocent. All coy and flirtatious and all the while you’ve been carrying on with Tutheridge. He’s not a good person, you know. A terrible father and a recluse. Just because he’s rich doesn’t make him the right one for you. I was the right one for you, and now you’ve ruined everything.”

“He’s Bebe’s father and my employer and deserves my respect,” I said as calmly as I could while simultaneously trying to figure out how to escape. “And he’s not terrible. Not at all. He’s a fine person. He’s hurting.”

“He deserves your respect but not me? Is that how it is?”

“Caleb, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’re scaring me.”

“Good. I want you to be scared. I should have taken what I wanted.” He yanked back my head and slammed it against the wall. If it had not been for the sock under all my hair, he might have broken my scalp.

Without warning, he was yanked away from me by Mr. Tutheridge. Rhett shoved Caleb to the ground. Mr. Tutheridge dropped to his knees and pulled back his fist, but Rhett stopped him.

“No, don’t do it. Don’t sink to his level,” Rhett said. “We’ll tell the sheriff what happened.”

“You will not touch her.” Mr. Tutheridge pulled back his arm but got right down in his face. “You won’t even look her way. Ever again. Do you hear me?”

Sara Rose rushed toward me and put her arms around me. She must have seen what happened and went to get the men. It was smart of her not to come alone.

Caleb tried to get up, but Mr. Tutheridge pushed him back down to the ground and trapped him with both hands on his

shoulders.

“Get off me,” Caleb growled. “You have this all wrong. She was the one who lured me back here.”

Rhett put a foot on Caleb’s chest. “You are a liar. Is this what happened to Miss Woolf? Did you kill her because she turned down your advances?”

That thought had occurred to him too?

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Caleb could barely speak with Rhett’s heavy boot on his chest, but he managed to spit out, “I had nothing to do with that.”

By then, the sheriff appeared. “What’s the trouble here, gents?”

Mr. Tutheridge got to his feet. “This man assaulted Miss Jayne, and I would like him arrested.”

“Are you hurt?” Sheriff White asked me.

“My arm hurts,” I said. “And the back of my head. But I’m fine.”

Sara Rose loosened her grip, obviously worried she’d hurt me. “Come on, let’s get you out of here. Rhett, we’ll be waiting inside. Please come get us as soon as you can.”

I allowed her to lead me around the side of the building, not looking back. To think, just an hour ago, I thought this would be the best night of my life.





## HUDSON

**I**t took me a full twenty minutes to stop shaking with rage. After Sara Rose took Miss Jayne away, the sheriff asked us a few questions and sent us home. With no promises of what he was going to do with King. Knowing Sheriff White, probably nothing. They were old friends.

Rhett and I went out to the front of the school to find the ladies. They were huddled together under the awning of the schoolhouse. My fingers curled at the sight of Miss Jayne crying. I'd had a bad feeling about King, and I'd been correct. There was something not quite right about the man. His overreaction to my presence had hinted at a violent nature. I should know. I'd grown up in my father's house.

Rhett said he would fetch his buggy and come get us if I'd stay with the ladies. We exchanged a grim glance before he took off across the schoolyard to the grassy area where the horses and buggies waited.

I strode up the stairs and toward the ladies, all the while telling myself to remain calm. Miss Jayne didn't need to see how shaken I was.

"Mr. Tutheridge, I'm so very sorry." Miss Jayne dabbed at her eyes with a hankie. "I'm beyond mortified."

"This was not your fault," I said gruffly. "Let's get you home. Rhett's gone to get his buggy."

"I've ruined the evening," Miss Jayne said. "For all of us."

"Again, you did nothing wrong," I said.

“Not at all,” Sara Rose said. “Will the sheriff throw him in jail?”

“Not likely,” I said. “They’re cohorts, so to speak. He’ll get a slap on the wrist and be on his merry way.”

“But he hurt her,” Sara Rose said, her voice quaking with obvious rage. “He should not be allowed to teach children.”

“I agree, but what’s right is not always what happens,” I said.

“That’s true,” Sara Rose muttered under her breath. “Men like that get away with anything they like.”

I studied her for a moment, a bad feeling creeping up the back of my neck. She had suffered some kind of violence by a man. Before she came here, maybe? Had that been the reason she’d come? Thank God for Rhett Rivers. She was in good hands now.

“You could stay and dance,” Miss Jayne said to me. “It was such a good step for you.”

“I’d rather accompany you home,” I said. “And make sure you’re safely behind doors.”

“Thank you,” Miss Jayne said meekly. “I’m grateful.”

By then, Rhett had arrived in front of the school. I escorted the ladies to the buggy and helped them into the back seat, then jumped up front with Rhett. A quick glance showed that the side of the school where King had assaulted Miss Jayne was now empty. White and King were probably off sharing a bottle of whiskey at the jailhouse. This was such an abomination.

Rhett clicked the reins and the horses set off, out of town and onto the familiar dirt road toward home. Ironically, the night could not have been more beautiful. A million stars twinkled at us from a purple sky. A crescent moon hung just above the trees. Scents of roses and hay drifted in on the breeze. We passed a strawberry farm, and I could swear I could smell the ripening fruit. I’d not noticed it on the way in, too preoccupied with King’s obvious anger at my presence.

In hindsight, I should have known better than to get into a man's territory. He'd expected to take her to the dance as a couple. I'd ruined that. Still, his reaction was more than a little disturbing. I'd heard what he said on the way into town, despite him lowering his voice. The jealous reaction had lifted the hairs at the back of my neck. A premonition of what was to come?

My thoughts turned to the dead teacher. Miss Woolf had worked for King for most of the school year before she suddenly disappeared. Her fiancé had been working in Seattle to save money to marry and start a life on the island. They'd bought a little piece of land on the northern part of the island and planned to build a house.

Like the one I built for Rosemary that now sat empty. No, I wouldn't think about that. Not tonight.

Miss Woolf had been strangled, according to the sheriff. Was it possible King did it? Had they been having some kind of relationship outside of school? Perhaps he forced himself upon her? If she'd rejected him, he might have become angry enough to do something violent. He clearly had it in him if tonight was any indication.

By the time we arrived at the estate, I'd worked myself into a frenzy of worry. What if King came after her? He might try, especially given his humiliation of earlier. Or he could come after Rhett or me? An act of revenge?

I put that aside and helped Miss Jayne from the buggy, sorry to see that her hands continued to shake from her ordeal. She would need a generous pour of whiskey when we got inside.

After getting Sara Rose into the front of the buggy, we waved them off, and I guided Miss Jayne toward the front door. An owl hooted in the woods, sending shivers up my spine.

By the time we got to the top of the stairs, Raymond, our butler, had yanked open the door. Why hadn't he gone to the dance? Mother always gave the staff the night off to attend any community function.

“Raymond, why are you home?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I had no interest in attending. I’d rather be here making sure Mrs. Bains has whatever she needs.”

We walked through the front door and into the foyer. “Is Mother still up?” I asked.

“No, Mr. Tutheridge, she and Mr. Bains retired a few minutes ago. Is there something I can do for you?” His gaze flickered surreptitiously to Miss Jayne, concern in his eyes. “May I ask, are you all right, Miss Jayne? Are you ill?”

She looked up at me, begging me silently not to say anything.

“Miss Jayne was tired,” I said. “And I was not having fun, so we decided to come home early.”

“Very good, sir. Would either of you care for a drink in the living room?”

“Miss Jayne?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t mind a small glass of something strong,” she said.

“I would as well,” I said.

The three of us crossed the foyer and into the living room, where only a solo lamp lit the space. It was obvious that poor Raymond had been on his way to bed, probably delighted by an early night.

“Raymond, we’re fine. Please, go on downstairs,” I said. “I’ll look after Miss Jayne.”

His eyes momentarily flickered with indecision.

“I insist,” I said.

“Thank you, sir. Miss Jayne, goodnight. I hope you’ll be refreshed in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Miss Jayne said. “Was Bebe all right tonight?”

“Not a peep out of her,” Raymond said. “In fact, I just checked on her. Mrs. Bains said she would do the same before

sleeping.”

A quick look at Miss Jayne told me she was about to start crying again. I took her by the hand and asked her to please sit. “I’ll get you something to drink to soothe your nerves. Whiskey or sherry?”

“Sherry, please.” Her voice sounded dull and listless. I could kill King with my bare hands, snuffing out her light the way he had. She’d been giddy and happy when he’d picked us up. So utterly charming in her enthusiasm. Shining as bright as she always did.

She’d had big expectations. I’d seen the romantic stars in her eyes. By the time we had reached the schoolhouse, they had turned to flinty anger.

The night had not turned out as either of us thought it would, that was for certain.

I poured her a sherry and a slug of whiskey for myself and joined her. There were twin leather chairs by the fire where Mother and Timothy often relaxed here together in the evenings. Tonight, it was too warm for a fire. Raymond had left the windows open, and the fresh air coming in through the screens brought relief from the heat.

She took the glass of sherry from me and gulped it down. I’d not seen her drink much at all. She wasn’t like my sister, who could drink with the men.

“Would you care for another?” I asked, already back on my feet.

“Please?” She held out the glass.

I filled the delicate flute and returned back to my seat, sipping my own drink and wondering what I could say that would make her feel better.

“May I ask if there’s anything I could do for you?”

She looked over at me, tears sparkling in her upper lashes. My God, she was beautiful. “You’ve been so thoughtful and gentle. There’s nothing else you could do. What is done is done.”

“I saw you go outside with Sara Rose and then noticed King followed you a short time later. I should have gone out there.”

“He was talking to that girl. Did you see that?” Miss Jayne asked. “And then had the nerve to come out and accuse me of...”

“Of what?” I asked, sharper than I wished.

“Never mind. It’ll only make things worse.”

“No, please, tell me what you were going to say.” I touched a finger to my forehead and tapped. “I promise to remain calm.”

She smiled. “Why do you do that? The tapping?”

Miss Jayne had noticed I’d done it before? Interesting. “It’s a technique I use to calm myself. I’ve recently learned it. When I tap my forehead, it’s like a reminder to stay focused on what the other person is saying, rather than to get lost in my own thoughts. It’s something about the repetition of it that helps.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” She looked at me over the rim of her glass, an expression on her face I couldn’t understand.

“It’s nothing really,” I said. “Just a way to steady myself, think through what I want to do or say next. I’ve been known to lose my temper, and I don’t like it.”

“I’m glad for your temper tonight. If you and Rhett hadn’t shown up when you did, I don’t know what would have happened.”

“Well, we did, so we mustn’t go there.”

We were interrupted by the clicking of shoes on the hardwood floor. To my surprise, it was Briggs and Faith.

Faith scurried over to us. “Miss Jayne, we heard what happened and came to check on you.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine.” Miss Jayne held up her sherry glass. “This has helped. As has Mr. Tutheridge’s steadying

presence.”

Faith sat on one end of the couch opposite where we were sitting, looking concerned. “I noticed that you and Sara Rose had gone outside,” Faith said. “I started to worry when I saw Sara Rose running in to get Rhett and Hudson. Ella and I followed them out and saw that he had you pinned against the wall. While Rhett and Hudson took him down, we ran as fast as we could to get the sheriff.”

“Little good that did,” Miss Jayne said, uncharacteristically bitter.

“Oh, dear, I was afraid of that,” Faith said. “He’s not the most competent of men.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be playing music?” I asked my brother, suddenly remembering that he had been at the piano when we left.

Briggs sauntered over to the whiskey cabinet to pour himself a drink as he answered. “I left the playing to a kid. He wanted to get up there, and I wanted to come see if you and Miss Jayne were all right.”

“I can’t believe it,” Faith said. “I always liked Mr. King. He seemed awfully nice and showed such dedication to the kids.”

“They say that about people all the time,” Briggs said. “Then you find out they’re a murderer.”

Briggs went quiet, slumping against the whiskey cabinet. It had been months now since we discovered who murdered our father, but it still hit us every so often with a sharp blow. A person we’d loved and trusted had killed our father. For us. That made it all the more complicated to understand. Nothing was black and white in this life. Everything seemed to be in shades of beige. The man who had protected us against our father had also murdered him.

“We stopped by to see Amelia and the baby earlier,” Faith said. “Little Jack is so sweet, but he’s kept them up all night. Amelia wasn’t her usual perky self. However, she still had

enough energy to rattle on about who had murdered Miss Woolf.”

“Wait until she hears about this,” Briggs said.

I became aware that Miss Jayne was sniffing and looked over to see that she’d begun to cry once again. We were being insensitive talking so casually about the man just hours ago she’d thought might be her future husband. The idea made me sick to my stomach. What if she’d married him and found out what he was like after the fact? Like my mother.

“Miss Jayne, we’re sorry.” Faith leaped to her feet. “What idiots we are.” She knelt on the floor next to Miss Jayne’s chair. “Did you care for him very much?”

She nodded, dabbing at her eyes with a hankie. “I did. I mean, obviously, I don’t now. But I’d been smitten with him. I’ve never felt that way about anyone before.”

“You poor girl,” Faith said. “I understand, having been there myself. My former fiancé decided to marry my best friend instead.”

“That must have been awful.” Miss Jayne had stopped crying, jolted out of her own sadness. She was empathetic. Such a fine quality.

“But it really wasn’t,” Faith said. “Or I never would have found Briggs. I’d never have come here.”

Briggs took a swig of his whiskey. “So, tell me, what are we going to do about King?”

“Run him out of town?” Faith asked, surprising us all with her venom. We all stared at her.

“What? He deserves to be sent away. He hurt Miss Jayne.” Faith’s voice had risen a half octave. “If I were to have a child, I wouldn’t want him teaching him or her.”

“Agreed,” Briggs said. “I always liked the guy despite his alignment with Father. But this is a whole new side to him.”

“I feel like a fool,” Miss Jayne said under her breath.



“You must not feel that way,” Faith said. “You cannot blame yourself. He showed you a false picture.”

“He wooed me with determination, too,” Miss Jayne said. “I thought he was the most generous, caring man I ever met.”

“We’ve all had a few in our pasts that have turned out to be not at all what they seem,” Briggs said.

“Not me,” I said. “Rosemary was exactly who I thought she was. She never wavered. Never surprised me.”

“You and Rosemary were unusual,” Briggs said. “For one thing, you’d known her most of your life. There were no surprises by the time you married her.”

“Only that she loved me back,” I said smiling, pleased that I could speak of her without it causing the horrible, dark ache that had made going forward impossible.

It’s Miss Jayne’s presence, I thought. She’s warming me.

Was tonight a sign? Should I consider pursuing her? Bebe wanted it. Why couldn’t I?

There was the little problem of her affection for King. But maybe that would fade away completely now.

I suddenly remembered Miss Jayne’s injuries. She might be hurting, and I was sitting here drinking a whiskey. “Miss Jayne, are you in pain? How’s your arm? Should we get Ella out here?”

She shot me such a tender smile that my heart seemed to enlarge for a moment. “I’m not hurt. Not really. Only a little bruised, both in spirit and body.”

Faith rose to her feet to join her husband on the couch. “It’s best you found out now. This way, if the right man does come along, you’ll be ready for him.”

“True enough.” Briggs exchanged a look with his wife. “There’s the perfect man out there, probably looking for you as we speak.”

“I don’t think so,” Miss Jayne said. “This is the one and only time I ever liked anyone. And it will be the last. I’m

going back to my vow of spinsterhood. I have my work and my friends. That will be enough.”

Briggs took his wife’s hand and gave it a little squeeze. “I remember thinking similarly when this beautiful creature walked into my life. I’d never have known love was coming my way and that it would hit me hard and fast, despite coming in this small package. However, we must have our eyes open to see it. I hope you’ll remember that in the days to come, Miss Jayne. You’re too smart and lovely to grow old alone.”

Miss Jayne pressed the hankie under her damp eyes. “You’re all too kind. Really. But I must go up to bed. My head’s aching, and I have an early morning with Bebe.”

Briggs and I rose to our feet as she said goodnight and left the room.

I hated to see her go, but she was right. Bebe would be up early, wishing for attention.

When I sat back down, my brother and his wife were watching me.

“Yes?” I asked. “Something I can help you with?”

“Not a thing,” Briggs said. “Not a thing.”



## PIPER

**T**he next morning, I woke to the same headache I'd gone to bed with. Groaning, I forced myself to get out of bed, bathe, and dress.

By the time I went to get Bebe ready for the day, I was feeling slightly better. She would cheer me up, regardless of my low spirits.

When I opened the door to her bedroom, she was already awake, sitting cross-legged on her bed, reading a book.

"Good morning." I walked to the window and drew back the curtains to see the bright blue water this morning. "It's a breathtaking day."

"Good morning, Miss Piper. I was waiting patiently for you to wake."

"Why, thank you. I had trouble getting out of bed."

I scanned the room. Everything tidy. Bebe's clothes were all laid out on the dresser. Lizzie had done a good job. I must remember to thank her.

Bebe clambered out of bed and ran to me, nearly toppling me over with an energetic hug. "I'm glad to see you. I missed you last night. How was the dance?"

"It was fine, thank you. I missed you as well."

She peered up at me. "Do we still get to go on the boat today?"

I'd completely forgotten about the boat. "Yes, I'm sure your father's still planning on it."

From the doorway came a deep voice. "Your papa is looking forward to a boat excursion with two lovely ladies."

"Papa, I'm not a lady." Bebe beamed nonetheless.

"I've made all of the arrangements. Won't it be fun to show Miss Jayne the sights?"

"Yes, yes, yes." Bebe jumped up and down. "I'm the happiest girl in the whole world. Thank you, Papa."

"I'll see you both at breakfast, then?" Mr. Tutheridge met my gaze. "If Miss Jayne is feeling well enough?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine," I said. "I'm looking forward to the boat ride too."

He gave us each a nod and then turned and headed out to the hallway. The clicking of his boots on the hardwood floors made a pleasant sound. He had a nice gait, I thought absently. Not too hard-heeled. My last employer had an angry walk. I could hear him coming from wherever we were in the house.

I must remember how lucky I was to be here in a beautiful home and on a breathtaking island. Caleb had turned out to be frightening, but nothing else had changed.

After Bebe was dressed and her hair made into two braids and her teeth washed, we went downstairs to the dining room. Mrs. Halvorson and Lizzie always put out such a nice breakfast, and this morning was no exception. There were eggs and slabs of ham, as well as toasted bread and fresh berries.

I supervised Bebe at the buffet. Since my arrival, I'd insisted she make her own plate at the morning meal. However, I still had to keep watch to make sure she had some eggs and not just blackberries.

Mr. Tutheridge was already at the table, as was Mrs. Bains. They both greeted us with a nod. Mrs. Bains gave me a knowing glance. Had her son already told her what had happened at the dance? Given the sympathy in his eyes, my guess was yes.

“I have some business to attend to in town,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “If you’re amenable, I thought the two of you could go with me, and then we would head down to the dock where Captain Wells will be waiting for us. I forgot to tell you this earlier, but we’ll be delivering mail to all the islands. He does it every several days, Miss Jayne. If there’s any mail at all, that is. The other islands have fewer residents than us, so it’s not every day there’s mail to bring.”

“Oh, I hope there’s some today,” Bebe said. “That would be a dream come true.”

“You’ve dreamt of delivering mail?” Mrs. Bains asked, lips twitching. “What a strange desire for a little girl to have.”

Bebe frowned for a second. I didn’t like when Mrs. Bains implied that Bebe was strange. Children took all of that in, and who knew what kind of effect it could have? Adults often forgot that children were tender. They weren’t yet able to sift through the nuances of language. If her grandmother told her she was strange, then she would feel strange.

“It’s been a dream of mine, too,” I said.

“Really?” Bebe’s eyes lit up. “Is it because you want to see where all the letters go? I see the boat pass by sometimes when I’m down at the beach and I wonder which island he’s going to and where he takes the mail. I can’t stop wondering about all those letters.”

“That’s precisely what I’m interested in, too,” I said. “Are there post offices on all of the islands, for example? Or does he take it directly to people’s houses? Does he do it on foot? Or from a horse?”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been wondering,” Bebe said.

I’d never wondered about the post in my life, but I wanted Bebe to feel as if someone understood her.

When I glanced over at her father, he was gazing at me with a strange expression on his face. Maybe he thought I was strange too? That was fine. Bebe and I could be strange together.

---

TOWN BUSTLED WITH PEOPLE, buggies, and wagons. Mr. Tutheridge left Bebe and me to take care of whatever business he had, leaving us a chance to wander around looking at the shops. We stopped in front of Mrs. Lancaster's shop, admiring the dress on display. It was a bright purple material and made with silk and lace.

"Pretty, don't you think?" Bebe asked.

"Wonderful. I wonder who she made it for?"

"Maybe for the window?" Bebe scrunched up her freckly nose. "To show people what she could make for them."

"I think you're correct," I said. "It makes me want to order a new dress right here and now. But come along, let's wait in the alley where it's shady. I'm very warm."

"You should have fine dresses," Bebe said as we rounded the corner into the quiet, dark alleyway. "A wardrobe full of them. Every color of the rainbow. Then Papa could take you to fancy places in the city. You would look perfect together."

I looked down at her. She wore a straw hat with a pretty red ribbon to match her sailor dress and looked absolutely precious. However, this conversation was troubling. Why was she talking about her father and me doing something alone? Dressed up? In Seattle?

Had the last few days given her ideas? The poor mite. She wanted a mother. A family.

The next thing she said confirmed my suspicions.

"Jack has a mother and a father. He's the lucky cousin."

"Yes, he is lucky," I said, biding time. What was the best approach? Should I ask her to tell me more? Or ignore it and hope it went away?

"Did Mr. King make you cry again?" Bebe asked.

How had she known that?

“Were you asleep last night?” I asked.

“Yes, but I woke up when I heard your footsteps and looked at the clock and it was much earlier than I expected you to be home from a dance. And I heard you crying.”

“I should never have taught you to tell time,” I said.

“Why?” Bebe looked up at me.

“I’m only teasing. And to answer your question, Mr. King and I will no longer be seeing each other.”

Bebe made a satisfied smacking sound with her lips. “Too bad for Mr. King.” She hesitated, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “But good for us,” she said under her breath.

I’d been focused on Bebe, thus didn’t see Caleb until he was upon us. He approached casually, as if he hadn’t banged my head against the wall less than twenty-four hours before.

Bebe slipped her hand into mine and took what appeared to be an instinctual step backward.

“Miss Jayne. Miss Bebe.” He tipped his hat.

I didn’t want to meet his gaze, but I also didn’t want him to think he scared me. Lifting my eyes, I looked into his. They were as gentle and as innocent as one of the harbor seals. “What do you want?” I hated to be rude in front of Bebe, but he had to get the message. I no longer wanted his presence in my life.

“I came by the house to see you, and Mrs. Bains told me you were in town. I merely wanted to say I was sorry for the kerfuffle last night. I can assure you, the sheriff thought nothing of it, so you mustn’t worry about being hauled into jail.”

My mouth opened in shock. What was he saying? Why would the sheriff haul me into jail?

“You’re lucky I haven’t pressed charges,” Caleb said. “Against your father, Bebe. And your uncle Rhett. Fortunately, I’m not the kind to hold a grudge.”



Bebe just stared up at him with frightened eyes.

“I could say the word to the sheriff and your nanny would be in jail. It’s against the law to strike a man.”

“I did no such thing.” My voice had risen a good octave. I knew better than to fight back with a man like this. He’d followed us. I felt certain. His aim was to berate and embarrass me in front of Bebe. And possibly scare us both.

“If you think you can come here and start telling tales about me, you should check again.” Caleb’s eyes glittered despite the shadow of his hat and the awning under which we stood. “I’m the beloved schoolteacher. The man who has sacrificed so much for the children of Whale Island.”

Bebe’s grip on my hand had tightened to the point of pain. There was no way she would go to school now. Not when her teacher was threatening her nanny.

Before we could continue, Mr. Tutheridge appeared. By the look of thunder on his face, it was obvious how angry he was.

Caleb had the brains to at least look a little frightened. Mr. Tutheridge might be the smallest of his brothers, but he was still a large, muscular man. He shoved Caleb with the back of his arm, kind of the way one would an annoying insect. Which caught Caleb off guard. He fell right on his rear end.

To my horror, Bebe giggled nervously.

I dropped her hand and held her close, shielding her from Caleb’s rage. I could practically feel the heat of it, the anger seething inside him. How had I not seen it before? This man was not well.

Caleb leaped to his feet and lunged at Hudson, fists drawn. However, Hudson moved at the last moment, leaving Caleb grasping at air. He reminded me of a cat at a window, the way they scratch and scratch when seeing a squirrel.

“Listen, King,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “You stay away from my family. If I see you around Miss Jayne or Bebe again, it will not end well. You hear me?”

“What about her education?” Caleb adjusted his hat.

“If I have anything to say about it, you won’t be here come September,” Mr. Tutheridge said.

“Your father thought he could control me,” Caleb said. “And I put up with his abuse for way too many years. I’m not taking the same from you.”

“This has nothing to do with the deal you made with my father, which I’m starting to wonder—did you come here for less-than-innocent reasons? Were the rumors about you and a student more than just lies? What did you do back east?”

This confused me, but I would ask Mr. Tutheridge about it later. For now, I just wanted to get Bebe out of here.

“We should go,” I said quietly. “Captain Wells will be waiting for us.”

“You remember what I said,” Mr. Tutheridge said to Caleb. “Stay away from my family.”

“I’m right about you two, aren’t I?” Caleb practically snarled. “Right in front of my eyes and I didn’t even see it. You’ll be sorry you made me look foolish.”

Mr. Tutheridge took Bebe’s hand and offered his other arm to me. I gladly took it, happy for his steady strength. “King, go home. Get a plan together. Because I can guarantee you, I’ve made it my mission to rid this town of you.”

We started walking away. I could feel his wrath at the back of my neck. It chilled me to the bone.

---

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Mr. Tutheridge and I sat together in the front of the boat. I had an umbrella open over my head to thwart the bright morning sun. He had his jacket off and had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. The look suited him.

“What exactly does King think is happening between you and me?” Mr. Tutheridge asked.

“When he got nasty last night, he started going on about the two of us having a secret affair.” I glanced toward the back, where Captain Wells was letting Bebe steer, to make sure she was not within earshot. “He somehow interpreted you accompanying us last night as some kind of joke on him. As if we conspired to make him look bad. He kept talking about respect. Or lack thereof.”

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became. What had triggered his rage had been the idea that the two of us would conspire to make him look the fool.

Mr. Tutheridge didn't speak for a moment, gazing out over the water. The boat, powered today by sails, took its leisurely time. The ripples left in the wake of the boat mesmerized and relaxed me. Overhead, a seagull screeched. “I believe you're right. It was quite a leap to make, though, wasn't it?”

“I'd never seen that side to him. It was like a monster suddenly awakened.”

“That's not true, is it?” His pretty blue eyes peered at me from under his charming straw hat.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Bebe told me he made you cry.”

“That child.” I couldn't help but chuckle despite the seriousness of the subject matter. “One afternoon, after I asked him a question about his past, he snarled at me. Quite cruelly, actually. He apologized profusely afterward, and I thought it was a one-time incident. I was wrong, obviously.”

“I'd have never predicted it. Yet something was bothering me about him,” Mr. Tutheridge said.

I took a deep breath. “Do you think it's possible he killed the teacher?”

Hudson rubbed his nose and tilted his head to the side. “I think it's possible. The rage we saw in him? It scared me.”

“She might have gotten involved with him. Or maybe he made advances and she rejected him.”

“If only Amelia weren’t indisposed with the baby,” Mr. Tutheridge said.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“She’s kind of an amateur sleuth. She could help us solve the mystery.”

“If only someone would.” I pressed my hands together, unable to shake my fear. “I’m worried for myself, of course, but more so about Bebe. What if he tries to hurt her to get back at us?”

Mr. Tutheridge sighed. “Yes, you’re right to worry about both things. As am I.” He placed his large hands over mine and then seemed to remember our relationship and abruptly pulled back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” I didn’t mind. In fact, his warmth had been comforting. “This is all my fault, dragging you and Bebe into my poor decision.”

He turned his head all the way toward me. “We’re in this together. And again, none of this is your fault.”

His words gave me such a sense of relief. “I’m still sorry.”

“I have a house on the other side of the island,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “I had it built when Bebe was a baby. I wanted to get them out of my father’s house. But then Rosemary died, and I thought it would be better for both of us to stay at the estate. The house was for Rosemary. Everything I did was for her. I wasn’t sure I could face it, you know? A house meant for my beloved wife?”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s too hard.”

“Anyway, I bring it up because maybe we should go there? You, me, and Bebe. We could hide out until I find a way to get rid of him or prove he killed that girl.”

Just the three of us? What conclusions would Bebe jump to if we were all alone in a cottage?

“Are you worried about being alone with me?” Mr. Tutheridge asked.

“Not for the reasons you think,” I said.

“What do you think I think?”

“That it would look inappropriate for us to be there alone and that I’d be worried about gossip.”

“You’re not worried about those things?” Mr. Tutheridge asked.

“Not really. As long as it didn’t reflect poorly on you or Bebe.”

“What then?”

Should I tell him about my worries about Bebe? Or would it make the whole thing worse? Yes, just tell him. The two of us were in this together, after all. He said so himself. “I’m worried Bebe will read more into it. She has such a tender heart and I think she’s imagining that we would...that we could marry.”

“Yes, I see.” He took off his hat and brushed his hand through his hair, squinting into the sunlight.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” I said. “Out with it.”

“Fine. Last night she was playing with her dollhouse, pretending two of the figurines were you and me. We were married in this scenario.”

I knew it. “Poor baby.”

“I know. She wants a family like Benedict and Amelia. It’s not fair.”

We were quiet for a moment. Life was not fair. My mother had told me that often. As much as I wished it was not true, I knew it to be. Life could be so cruel.

“Anyway, what do you think?” Mr. Tutheridge asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Should we go to my house?”

“We could bring a maid,” I said without thinking it all the way through. “That way there would be two of us who work for your family.”

“Yes, I suppose we could do that.”

“Maybe Lizzie? She could do some of the cooking. I’m afraid I’m not very experienced in the kitchen.”

“If Mother could spare her, then yes. She would be an excellent choice.”

“How many bedrooms does this cottage have?” I asked.

“It’s more than a cottage, I guess one might say.” His mouth curved up into a smile. “It’s actually a four-bedroom house. Some clever fellows from Seattle built it for me. It was too much to do on my own.” His smile went away. “I’d thought I’d fill it up with children.”

“Mr. Tutheridge, that’s terribly sad.”

“Yes, it is. But life moves on. Isn’t that what everyone’s telling me?”

“What would we tell everyone about why we’re going?” I asked.

“We’ll tell my family the truth. They’ll agree that this is the right thing to do.”

“I would rest easier,” I said. “And maybe the sheriff will figure out if he killed that girl or not. Then we can come home.”

“I went to see the sheriff when we were in town,” Mr. Tutheridge said. “Told him my theory about King. He was having none of it. If he hurts or kills another woman, it’s on White’s shoulders.”

I shuddered. “What if you hadn’t come with me last night?”

“I can’t think about that. Bebe and I can’t lose you.”

*Bebe and I?* That was an interesting way to put it.

“I say we go,” I said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

“When we get home, I’ll work everything out.” He stood and offered me his hand. “For now, let’s rescue our poor captain from any more of Bebe’s questions.”



## HUDSON

That evening before supper, I sat with Mother and Timothy in the living room to tell them my plan to take Bebe and Miss Jayne to my empty house. Miss Jayne was upstairs getting Bebe to bed, so I'd taken the opportunity to speak to Mother without the worry of my daughter's little ears eavesdropping.

"I'd almost forgotten you even had that place," Mother said. "Are you sure he doesn't know where it is?"

"I'm positive. No one knows exactly where it is other than family. It's a safe place for us."

"He had the nerve to come to our house and ask for Miss Jayne," Mother said. "Such a beastly man."

"Caleb King is not who we all thought he was," I said.

"Obviously not," Mother said. "You'll need to take one of the staff with you to help cook and clean."

"Do you think we could borrow Lizzie?" I asked.

"Yes, good idea. Although I'll miss her. She's such a sweet girl and always so cheery." Mother took a sip of her tea and looked over at her husband. "You've been quiet, Timothy. What're you thinking?"

He set aside his cup of tea and stretched his legs out in front of him, staring unfocused at the wall. "I can't believe this of Caleb. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen anything remotely close to this behavior."



“Hudson, do you really think he could be responsible for that poor girl’s death?” Mother asked.

“I’m afraid I do,” I said. “If you’d seen what he did to Miss Jayne the other night, you might be able to imagine him capable.” I got up to pour myself a drink. “How are we going to get him out of here by the time school starts in the fall?” I asked, mostly directed toward Timothy. “He’s been a close friend of yours. Do you think he’ll go if the school board asks him to?”

“The school board’s made up of Tutheridges and myself,” Timothy said. “We can fire him, certainly. I know he’ll take it hard and may or may not go without a fight. Roland hardly paid him enough to live on, so I doubt he has any savings, making his choices limiting.”

“We could pay him off,” Mother said. “I know you hate to give a man like that money, but we’d be rid of him, and maybe that makes it worth compromising our principles. I would rather have Bebe and Miss Jayne safe than anything else.”

“She makes a good argument,” Timothy said. “But if we were to anger him further, who knows what he’ll do? A trapped animal fights back. I suggest we wait. You and Miss Jayne take Bebe away, and we’ll hope White gathers enough evidence to arrest King. I’ll go into town tomorrow and see the sheriff. We go way back. Maybe I can get something out of him.”

Raymond entered the room and announced that Sheriff White was in the foyer.

“How strange,” Mother said. “Speak of the devil and they shall appear.”

“Raymond, please show him in,” Timothy said.

Mother and I exchanged a quick glance. Neither of us was fond of Robert White. Any time he’d been out here since Father’s death had been to accuse one Tutheridge or another of murder.

Seconds later, White appeared, hat in hand. “Good evening. I’m sorry to intrude.”

“Not at all,” Mother said.

Timothy and I stood to shake his hand.

Mother invited him to sit. “What can we do for you?”

“Would you care for a whiskey?” I asked.

“Don’t mind if I do,” White said.

I poured him a drink and took it back to him, then sat to hear what he had to say.

“I wanted to follow up on the incident from the other night,” White said. “To see if Miss Jayne was all right.”

“She’s not all right,” I said. “In fact, we had another run-in with him today. This time in front of my daughter. He insinuated that you’re on his side and made some wild accusation about Miss Jayne being the one to have hit him. He’s not in his right mind, Sheriff. Quite frankly, I’m worried about my daughter and Miss Jayne. And perhaps myself.”

“I’m not on his *side* if he’s a criminal,” White said. “But I have no evidence of that. He’s a long-standing member of this community. I don’t have to remind you, Pastor Bains, that Roland had his thumb on all of us. If Caleb was a violent man, wouldn’t he have done something like this sooner?”

“Maybe he’s only violent toward women,” I said. “As far as evidence, how could his assault of Miss Jayne not be considered criminal? He had her up against the wall. He gave her a lump on the back of her head the size of a lemon.” I actually didn’t know if that was true, but it wouldn’t surprise me. Miss Jayne was too tough to tell me if she were hurt, but I’d seen her wince at the bright light more than once today.

“Trouble is, it’s his word against yours.” White took a swig from his whiskey. “And I mean no offense, but it’s not like you’ve been a contributing member of this community since you lost your wife. If I asked anyone in town who they liked better, I can guarantee you that it would be King over you.”

That hurt a little. Especially because I knew it was true. I used to be well-liked, but since Rosemary, I’d become a man no one wanted to be around, and I couldn’t blame them. “I’ve

no doubt you say the truth. But I know what I saw. He's a violent man, Sheriff. If you don't do something about him, my brothers and I might have to."

"Hasn't your family been involved in enough violence?" White finished his whiskey and set it down hard on the table next to his chair.

"Robert, really?" Mother asked.

"Look, all I'm saying is that I can't arrest a man without evidence," White said.

"Maybe I should have Amelia look into Miss Woolf's death," Mother said.

I almost laughed but managed to control myself. Mother was wicked tonight, poking at the sheriff where it hurt the most. We all knew no love was lost between Amelia and Robert White.

"Thank God that woman's home having babies. Where she belongs," White said. "Amelia Tutheridge is nothing but a menace."

"That's my daughter-in-law you're talking about, White," Timothy said, obviously hot. "I'll ask you for a little respect in my own home."

White shook his head as he got to his feet. "Your house. Roland's rolling in his grave to hear his precious Stella referred to as someone else's house besides his own."

"Well, he's not here," Mother said. "And Timothy's my husband, which means *precious* Stella belongs to him."

"I meant no harm." White put up his hands defensively.

"I doubt that," Mother said. "You've had it out for this family since Roland was murdered."

"Mrs. Bains," White said slowly, "your late husband squeezed us dry for decades. As you know. Your promise to make this right to those of us he underpaid should be taken care of now. I don't know what kind of deal you made with Matthew exactly, but I've had enough. You fix my pay, and

maybe I'll think a little harder about delicate Miss Jayne's bump on the head."

"Are you threatening us?" Mother's eyes were practically bugging out of her head.

"Not a threat," White said. "Rather, a request of you to do the right thing. You may not think I'm competent, but I'm what you're stuck with. I don't feel inclined to work too hard when I can barely feed myself."

"Fine. If that's what it will take for you to do your job, I'm happy to give you a raise. It'll be done by the end of the week."

"You mean it?" White peered at Mother.

"I mean it. Now go do something about Caleb King. Or neither one of you will have a job."

"Are you threatening me?" White asked.

"You can bet your sweet bottom I am." Mother's eyes blazed. I'd never seen her like this. I liked this new, feisty version of my mother. In fact, she reminded me of Ella. Had this been her true nature before my father beat her down?

"All right then." White picked up his hat from where he'd set it on the table. "I'll show myself out. Let me know if there's anything I can do to expedite this new arrangement."

Mother only nodded.

None of us spoke as we watched White cross the room and head for the foyer. When we heard the door close, I turned to Mother. "That was impressive."

"You're not the only one who can change and grow." She gave me a smug smile. "I'm assuming you'll want to tell Bebe and Miss Jayne. I'll call Lizzie in to ask if she's willing to go with you."

"Yes, ma'am."

Timothy and I exchanged an amused look before I headed upstairs.

---

THE NEXT MORNING, the four of us headed out in the motorcar. Bebe was delighted with the prospect of this unexpected adventure. Miss Jayne seemed undaunted by the change, as calm and sunny as always. As far as I could tell, given her shining eyes, Lizzie seemed more than content to accompany us.

The house was on the northwest side of the eastern half of the island. Rosemary and I had picked out the property when she was pregnant with Bebe.

My stomach fluttered at the sight of my house. It was modest compared to the estate, of course, but I thought the four-bedroom farmhouse was just about perfect. After I helped the girls out of the motorcar, I stood back, watching. What would Miss Jayne and Bebe think of this labor of love?

Bebe ran up to the front porch and did a little twirl of happiness before running inside. Lizzie followed, almost as giddy as the little one. She wasn't very old, I reminded myself. If her family hadn't been so poor, she would be in high school in Seattle.

"Mr. Tutheridge, it's wonderful." Miss Jayne beamed at me. "Bebe will be very happy here should you decide to stay."

"Do you think so? I thought it might be even lonelier for her. At least at home, there's always someone to bother with one of her unending questions."

"Yes, but this is your house. A home for you and your daughter."

"And her nanny?" I asked.

"For as long as you need me, I'll be here." She brought her hands to her cheeks as she seemed to take in the house anew. "Oh, Mr. Tutheridge, this is the type of home I've always dreamt of working in. A farmhouse tucked away in a private little part of the island—it's simply wonderful. I adore front porches."

“I have one in back as well. Come around. I’ll show you the view.”

I’d had a nice-size lot cleared for the house and gardens, but the best part was access to the beach from my own lawn. Unlike many of the houses on the island, this piece of land was at sea level, which meant we had a beachfront.

We went around the side of the house. Miss Jayne exclaimed over the lawn and the water being right there and the back porch that was “dreamy.”

“I couldn’t love it more,” Miss Jayne said. “How is it in such good shape when no one’s lived here for years?”

“I spend time here,” I said. “It’s been on my mind to make a change and bring Bebe to live here permanently, but I haven’t seemed capable of making the final decision.”

“What’s kept you from deciding? Or do you know?”

I hesitated for a moment. Admitting to my weaknesses was becoming a habit when it came to my interactions with Miss Jayne. “I’ve not been able to imagine being here without Rosemary. I’ve told myself it’s better for Bebe to be with my mother. But the truth is, I’ve used my family and staff as a crutch. Bebe would be happy here. I think, anyway. It’s just me. And my weaknesses.” After I buried my wife, the idea of being alone with Bebe had overwhelmed me. Living here alone with my child seemed like a job for a better man.

Yet here I was, and for some reason, I could see it much more easily than I ever had before. It was Miss Jayne. She would help me with Bebe, and thus I wouldn’t be so afraid I would mess up and break my daughter into pieces. I’d already hurt her enough.

“Grieving is not a weakness,” Miss Jayne said quietly. “You’ve done the best you can. Now you’re doing better, getting stronger, you can decide if it’s the right time to make such a drastic change.”

My eyes stung. She was such a kind person. “You’re generous to say so, Miss Jayne. Thank you for not shaming me further.”

“I think you’ve done enough of that all on your own.” She gave me a sweet smile. “Now show me the inside. I can hardly wait.”

I escorted her through the back door into the sun-drenched kitchen, where we found Lizzie exploring her new domain. From upstairs, I heard Bebe’s footsteps running from room to room.

“Mr. Tutheridge, it’s such a pretty room,” Lizzie said. “I shall be very pleased to work here every day.”

Even I could admit, the kitchen had turned out very well. A breakfast nook nestled between bay windows that looked out to the water. The glass had cost me a fortune, but it was worth it to be able to look at the water from my own kitchen. I’d installed a modern cook stove and farmhouse-style sink, as well as an icebox. I’d designed all of it specifically for Rosemary, adding whatever she wanted into the plan. Mrs. Halvorson had been teaching Rosemary how to cook in the months before my wife’s death. Rosemary had looked forward to spending time in this kitchen preparing meals for her family. Now it had sat empty all these years.

How could I have ever known that Rosemary would never have the chance to live here? To cook in the kitchen I designed for her? Or walk upstairs holding a baby with me behind her?

Never mind that, I told myself.

“You’ll stay here,” I said to Lizzie, gesturing toward the maid’s quarters just off the kitchen.

Lizzie dashed over to look inside the cozy room with a single bed and wardrobe. When I’d first planned the house, I’d assumed Rosemary and I would have a housekeeper who helped with cooking and the care of the baby.

“Mr. Tutheridge, it’s all mine?” Lizzie asked, beaming.

“Yes, it’s yours.” I couldn’t help but smile back at the spoiled girl.

“I’ve never slept in a room without other people. Not once.” Lizzie clutched the cross that hung around her neck. “This is truly a blessing, Mr. Tutheridge.”

“You’re a blessing to us,” I said. “Without you and Miss Jayne, Bebe and I would be quite lost.”

“We’re lucky to have such a lovely place to work. Are we not, Lizzie?” Miss Jayne trailed her fingers along the counter and the wooden prep table I’d had custom-built for the space.

“Oh, yes,” Lizzie said. “I only hope I’ll make Mrs. Halvorson proud. She’s a lot to live up to, you know.”

“You’ll do splendidly,” Miss Jayne said. “I’ll be here to help, too, so you mustn’t hesitate to ask if you need assistance.”

“Thank you, Miss Jayne, but you have your hands full with Miss Bebe,” Lizzie said.

Miss Jayne walked over to the eating nook, placing a hand over the back of the built-in bench. “I’ll enjoy sitting with Bebe here at breakfast.”

We left Lizzie to unpack some of our supplies and went into the living room next. Other than a rocking chair, the room was without furnishings. Empty shelves lined either side of the stone fireplace. A cozy window seat designed for optimal views of the water was perfect for reading or daydreaming. But alas, no reading or dreaming had been done in this house.

“I’ll have to order furniture,” I said. “If we’re to stay, I mean.”

“It’s beautiful, even bare.” She sat on the window seat, peering out to the water. “This is the perfect spot for Bebe and me to read.” She tilted her head to look up at me. “If that’s all right with you, of course.”

“Bebe will love it, and so will I.”

She stood, smiling. “May I see the upstairs?”

“Yes, yes. Come with me.”

I led her up the stairs to the second floor, where two bedrooms were built on either side of the hallway.

“This one’s for you.” I opened the first bedroom door and held it for Miss Jayne to enter what would be her bedroom for



however long we remained.

A double bed had been made up before our arrival, thanks to Raymond. Miss Jayne's trunk had been delivered, and all of her clothes hung in the wardrobe.

"I'm living like a lady since I've come here," Miss Jayne said.

"Bebe's room's just across the hallway, so you'll be able to hear her at night if she needs you," I said. "I'm right next door as well." I gestured toward the adjoining wall.

We crossed over to peek into Bebe's room. I'd asked Raymond to bring out Bebe's dollhouse and some of her toys to be here when we arrived. Bebe was now on the floor putting all of the furniture and little dolls in their proper places. Raymond wouldn't have known where everything went.

"Will it do?" I asked Miss Jayne gruffly. I'd not anticipated how much I would crave her approval. My heart and soul were in every board and nail and stone in this house.

She turned slowly to face me. "You've built a special home."

This pleased me more than I could say. All I could do was grunt a thank you.

"What do you think, Bebe?" Miss Jayne asked.

"I think I love it here. Thank you for bringing me here, Papa." Bebe leaped up and threw herself against my legs, causing me to lose my balance. Miss Jayne had to reach out to steady me. Her touch sent a strange tingling sensation up my spine to the back of my neck. This was disconcerting, to say the least. When Miss Jayne had first arrived, I'd given her little thought, other than relief that she seemed so competent. But now? She was quickly becoming a huge part of my world. Could I fall in love again? I never thought so. Yet Miss Jayne was special. However, I wasn't special. I was a grumpy, incompetent father. No one would want me. Especially not Miss Jayne.

"Forgive me," I said. "This girl's stronger than she looks." I swung Bebe up and over my shoulder and tossed her onto her

bed, mostly to hide my embarrassment about my lingering look into Miss Jayne's exquisite eyes. Bebe squealed and then bopped upright to launch herself back to her dollhouse.

Rosemary would have liked Miss Jayne very much, even though they weren't at all alike. Rosemary was quiet and shy unless she was comfortable. She'd never felt at ease around my parents, even after all the time we'd been together. But when we were alone in our wing of the house, she would come alive, laughing at my bad jokes and speaking loving words in her soft voice.

Miss Jayne was another kind of person. Funny and outgoing. More like Amelia and Ella, who were so good with people. Faith reminded me more of Rosemary. I'd never have thought Briggs would fall for a woman like that. But they were happy together, balancing each other out.

Lizzie was still bustling about the kitchen by the time the three of us returned downstairs.

She grinned at the sight of Bebe and me standing in the doorway. "You look very fine, standing in your own home, Mr. Tutheridge."

"Thank you, Lizzie." I looked away, embarrassed.

Bebe squeezed by me. "Lizzie, I have a room here and my toys are already there and I'm going to make my bed every day and dust and put away all my belongings so you don't have to work so hard."

"I'm very grateful for your help, little miss," Lizzie said. "You've grown up to be such a helpful girl. Every day I think, what a lucky lady you are, Lizzie Brown, to work for a family with such an unspoiled child."

"Really?" Bebe grinned and glanced up at me, probably to see if I'd caught all that.

"Indeed, yes," Lizzie said.

"Isn't that nice to hear?" Miss Jayne asked Bebe.

"A thousand times, yes." Bebe flopped onto a chair, spreading her legs wide and slumping as if utterly spent. "I

never thought I'd hear anyone say those words about me."

"You've earned them," Miss Jayne said. "I'm proud of you."

"As am I," I said.

"This might be the best day of my life." Bebe grasped both sides of the chair with her small hands and lifted herself up a few inches from the seat. "I don't want it to ever end."

"Didn't you say that about yesterday?" Miss Jayne teased. "And the day before?"

"They just keep getting better," Bebe said quite seriously. She pointed at the pile of potatoes and carrots on the table that Lizzie had already chopped up in preparation for supper. "What are you making?"

"Stew for supper later," Lizzie said. "Mrs. Halvorson taught me a lot of dishes. I'm hoping to make her proud like you've done for Miss Jayne."

Bebe scrunched up her nose. "I'll miss Mrs. Halvorson. I just thought of it. I forgot to say goodbye."

"You'll see her all the time." I tousled her hair. "We're going for dinner on Sunday when Lizzie has a day off."

"That's good. I don't want Grammie to be too lonesome," Bebe said.

I had a feeling my mother was doing a jig at this very moment.

"What should we do today?" I asked. "Explore our new beach?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Bebe shouted.

"Bebe, where are we right now?" Miss Jayne asked.

"Inside?" Bebe asked.

"Yes, and what do we do inside?"

"We use our inside voices." Bebe looked pleased with herself for getting the right answer before turning to me. "Papa, that means you have to talk quietly. I didn't know that

before Miss Jayne came here. But I do now even though sometimes I forget.”

“Thank you for informing me,” I said. “I shall act accordingly.”

“I can’t promise you I’ll remember to help you remember,” Bebe said. “But I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all we can do, isn’t it?” I kissed the top of her head.

My daughter flashed her wicked grin, and my heart seemed to have been temporarily squeezed by a tight hand.

I glanced at Miss Jayne, expecting that she would be looking at Bebe. Instead, she was watching me. She averted her eyes when I turned, but not before I saw something I’d not seen since Rosemary. She liked me.



## PIPER

**F**or our first night in our new home, we had a bowl of Lizzie's stew, which was a little on the bland side, but we were all too polite to mention it, simply adding a little salt and pepper to our portions. After we were done, Mr. Tutheridge suggested we make a fire down on the beach. "If we hurry, we can catch the sunset."

Bebe, of course, was more than willing. I wasn't really keen on the idea of being outside in the dark but didn't argue. If Mr. Tutheridge thought it was safe, then I would trust him.

We brought a blanket to sit on, arriving only minutes before sunset. The sky was streaked in pink and orange as the sun slowly sank below the horizon. Bebe ran down to the shore to play in a small patch of sand, leaving the two of us alone.

"I was thinking about something," Mr. Tutheridge said. "And that is the formality with which we address each other. If it would please you, I'd prefer if you would call me by my first name. Hudson."

"I'm aware of what you're called," I said, laughing. "But thank you for the reminder."

He laughed. "I'm sorry, that was silly."

"I would like to call you Hudson. But that means you must call me Piper."

"I gladly accept. Where did such an unusual name come from, anyway? I've wanted to ask you that for ages now." He picked up a stick and poked it into the dirt.

“It’s unusual, yes. My father had an artistic temperament. He liked the eccentric and different. Loved variety. In women too, sadly, for my mother.”

“I found it nearly excruciating to see what my father did to my mother,” he said. “I understand only too well.”

“I know you do.” I leaned against the log, stretching my legs out, before realizing that I was acting as if I were with friends, not my employer. I moved to sit more elegantly, but he stopped me.

“Please, be comfortable. We’ve had a long day. There’s nothing wrong with stretching out your legs.”

“Thank you. I’m becoming too comfortable with you,” I said. “I’m acting as if I’m with Sara Rose and Rhett.”

“I hope you’ll consider me a friend,” I said. “We’re going to be living here in close quarters. There’s no reason not to make our own rules about how we interact.”

“I’m used to much more formal relationships with my employer.” I flushed under his scrutiny. He gazed at me with an expression in his eyes I’d not yet seen. Almost as if he thought me pretty? No, not that. *He’s only being nice*, I told myself.

Why, then, did I just get that quiver of excitement in my belly?

“It’s a relief to be here,” he said. “I hope you’ll be content here and not too bored.”

“I’m happy wherever I am.”

“I’ve noticed. I wish I could be more like that.”

We were quiet for a moment, watching the sky. Bebe, down near the water, was busy stacking rocks and talking to herself.

My thoughts drifted to Caleb. I shivered, remembering the look in his eyes yesterday in town. Were we truly safe here?

“Are you cold?” Hudson asked.

Hudson. I would have to get used to the idea of using his first name. I'd never worked for anyone who had asked me to do so. None of my other employers were like this one, however.

Earlier, watching him with Bebe, I'd felt a strange shift of emotion. I'd started to like Mr. Tutheridge over the last few days, but this afternoon something had tugged at my heart. He was a good man. Not as flashy or charming as Caleb, but perhaps that meant he was more authentic?

"No, I'm not cold. I was thinking about Caleb. Feeling such a fool."

"You're not a fool. You would only be one if you continued to let him treat you abhorrently. You're an impressive young lady. Stronger than you think."

"It's easy to be strong for others," I said, thinking of how protective I'd felt over Sara Rose all those years I looked after her. "Many women don't have choices when it comes to their own lives."

Bebe, a silhouette in the fading light, shouted from the shore. "I found a treasure." She held something up to show us, but I couldn't make out the nature of her find.

"Bring it to us," I called out.

"It's probably another rock," Hudson said. "She's always begging Mother to let her have a collection."

Bebe ran over the pebbles and stones like a gazelle, reaching us in seconds. She held out her hand to show us. "It's a locket."

I gasped. It was identical to the one Caleb had given me. The heirloom from his mother. How had it gotten here? As far as I knew, the one he'd given me was tucked away in a pocket of my trunk. In fact, it had been there last night when I'd packed. I'd stared at it for a moment, unsure what to do with it, having forgotten I still had it in my possession.

"What is it?" Hudson watched me.



“This is the same locket Caleb gave me. He told me it had been his mother’s.”

Hudson took it from Bebe, turning it over in his hand. “This one looks like it’s been in the water awhile. It’s slippery with algae.”

The thought hit me like a slap in the face. There was more than one locket. He’d given the same supposed family heirloom to the dead girl.

I peered over at Hudson, who looked up from further examining the necklace to meet my gaze. “There might be more than one?” Hudson asked.

“Yes. Exactly what I was thinking.” We couldn’t say it out loud for fear of alarming Bebe, but I knew he was thinking the same as I.

“Bebe, go down and see if you can find a pretty rock for Miss Piper?” Hudson suggested.

Bebe took off, forgetting completely about the locket.

If only I could.

When she was out of earshot, I turned to Hudson. “The chain is broken, which means it could have been on the girl’s neck when she died.”

“Or she yanked it off?”

“Or it caught on something after she was already dead.” The sheriff had told the townsfolk the girl had been strangled before she was thrown into the water.

“Either way, this makes King look more than guilty,” Hudson said. “Let’s talk to the sheriff first thing tomorrow. He won’t be able to deny this connection.”

“It depends,” I said, “on how tight those two men really are.”

---

WHEN THERE WAS ONLY a little light left, Hudson built a bonfire and then snuggled up with Bebe by his side. We chatted and answered Bebe's many questions. Finally, when she couldn't seem to think of any more, she asked me for stories.

"Yes, tell us stories of your life in Boston," Hudson said.

I had to think for a moment. What would interest them? I settled on the story of the first time I met Sara Rose, embellishing for Bebe about the interview I'd had with Mrs. Wilcox, portraying her as a wicked witch.

Bebe shivered. "Was she ugly like a witch?"

"No, actually she's very pretty," I said. "Which should show you that what a person looks like is no indication of their character. A pretty woman can be ugly inside. That's what Mrs. Wilcox was."

We chatted some more about my former life. Before long, Bebe asked her father to tell her a story about when he was a boy. He hesitated, perhaps recalling which story would be best to tell his little girl that wasn't a tale of woe.

"Let's see now," Hudson said. "You know how we have a summer party at the big house every year?"

Bebe nodded. "Oh yes, Miss Piper, it's a lot of fun. Mrs. Halvorson cooks for days and days and the whole table's covered with cakes and cookies."

"I can hardly wait," I said.

"One time, when I was about ten," Hudson continued, "the day of the party finally came. We all looked forward to it, just as you do now."

"Was Mrs. Halvorson cooking for days and days?" Bebe asked.

"Yes, she's been with us for as long as I can remember. And it's funny you ask, because this is a story about Mrs. Halvorson."

"I love Mrs. Halvorson," Bebe said vehemently. "She's nice to me and never says I'm a pest."

“That makes me like her even more,” I said.

“Anyway, the morning of the party came and as I usually did, I ran down to see Mrs. Halvorson right away. Sometimes I would help by bringing things in from the garden that she needed for her recipe. Mr. Halvorson supervised, of course, but I loved being out there with him. Helping if I could. So I went down and there was Mrs. Halvorson, not at the stove as she usually was but in a dead faint right in the middle of the kitchen. No one else was there. The maids and Mr. Halvorson were busy doing their morning tasks.”

Bebe had gone completely still.

“Of course, I thought the worst, imagining her dead, but I very bravely knelt next to her. I stroked her cheek, and her eyelashes fluttered, and then she opened her eyes. She asked me what happened and I said I didn’t know but that she was on the floor in the kitchen. ‘I fainted dead away,’ she told me. I asked why, never having witnessed anyone fainting before. She said it was because she hadn’t had enough water and the kitchen was so hot. She’d been working in there day and night to get ready for the party. Mr. Halvorson came in then and we had her drink two glasses of water and have something to eat. After that, she got right back up and managed to get everything done in time for the guests. However, she was very embarrassed that she fainted and made me promise not to tell my parents. I’d never been asked to keep a secret before. I felt special.”

“Miss Piper says secrets are bad,” Bebe said.

“Most are,” Hudson said. “But in this particular case, Mrs. Halvorson didn’t want to appear weak or like she couldn’t do her job. She and Mr. Halvorson were very poor before they came to work for us. Staying in their position was important to them. If I’d told Mother, she might have thought something was wrong with Mrs. Halvorson.”

“Why did you tell us this story?” I asked softly, too curious not to.

“I don’t know. It always stuck with me. Mrs. Halvorson was my favorite person back then. As a boy, the kitchen was

where I went if things were scary upstairs.”

“Like when Grandfather yelled?” Bebe asked.

“You remember that?” Hudson asked.

“Sure. It wasn’t that long ago.” Bebe shrugged.

“Did he scare you?” I asked.

“Yes. Aunt Ella used to take me away when he was shouting and throwing things. I didn’t like that at all.”

“No one did,” Hudson said.

“Do you think we could live here forever?” Bebe asked.  
“Just us and Lizzie?”

“You don’t miss the big house?” Hudson asked.

“Not yet,” Bebe said. “I like being in a smaller house so that I’m closer to you and Miss Piper.”

“That makes perfect sense,” I said. “We’re here for now, and we won’t worry about the future. Otherwise, we won’t enjoy the moment.”

A crackle behind us caused me to jump.

Hudson immediately grabbed the lantern and rose to his feet. “It’s only a deer.”

My heartbeat slowly went back to normal. However, I was ready to go inside. “I think we should head back to the house.”

“Yes, it’s been a long day,” Hudson said.

Bebe started to protest, but I shot her a look and she closed her mouth and smiled sweetly instead.

---

THE NEXT MORNING, Hudson and I left Bebe with Lizzie and went into town to pay a visit to Sheriff White. We found him in the office of the jailhouse, smoking a cigar with his feet up on the desk. The small room smelled entirely of cigar. Smoke hovered near the ceiling.

I might have imagined it, but I think I saw him cringe at the sight of us in the doorway.

“Come on in.” White swung his feet off the desk and straightened his tie. “What can I do for you?”

Yes, there was definitely a wariness in his eyes.

I sat in the visitor’s chair while Hudson remained standing. From my purse, I pulled out both lockets and set them on the desk.

“What have we here?” White leaned forward to get a better look.

“One of them was given to me by Caleb King,” I said, flushing with embarrassment. The whole thing was sordid and mortifying. “The other washed up to shore last night.” I pointed out that it had obviously been in the water for some time.

“Coincidence?” I asked. “Or a connection that ties Mr. King to the murder of Lucinda Woolf?”

“Why would he have two of the same locket?” White stubbed out his cigar, looking mildly more interested.

“He gives them to women,” Hudson said. “Women he’s courting or seducing. A pattern?”

“Unlikely, but go on,” White said.

“Why it is unlikely?” I asked, peeved.

“He’s been here on the island for a long time,” White said. “Why would he suddenly be giving out lockets and then murdering the women he’s gifted them to? It’s far-fetched, to say the least. You don’t know how this got in the water. It could be from anyone. You have no evidence it’s related to the dead girl whatsoever.”

“But it’s exactly the same as the one Caleb gave me,” I said.

White brought out a magnifying glass and studied them each in turn and then set them next to each other on his desk.

“They’re similar. But a silver locket is just a silver locket. There are hundreds, I’m sure.”

“Why are you hesitant to consider King as a suspect?” Hudson asked, his enunciation clipped.

“You saw what he was like the other night,” I said. “If Mr. Tutheridge and Rhett hadn’t come around, he might have choked me to death.”

“Maybe he had a relationship with Miss Woolf,” Hudson said. “She did something that angered him and he lost his temper and strangled her.”

“She was engaged to someone else,” White said.

“And that tells you what exactly?” Hudson asked.

“Have you asked him any questions?” I asked. “About what happened the other night?”

“As I told your employer, Miss Jayne, how I conduct my business is not your concern. Furthermore, if I thought he was guilty of something, I would arrest him. Having a spat with his lady friend is not enough for me to think him capable of murder.”

“Spat? Is that what you call it when a man smashes your head into a brick wall?” I asked, rising from my chair in agitation.

“Amelia’s right, you’re completely incompetent,” Hudson said.

White flushed red. “Do not mention that woman’s name to me. She’s a menace. Absolute menace.”

“That’s my sister-in-law you’re talking about,” Hudson said. “Show a little respect.”

White sighed and splayed his hands on his desk, looking at us sideways. “Is there anything else?”

“What’s the name of Miss Woolf’s fiancé?” Hudson asked.

“No way I’m giving that to you,” White said. “I do not condone you two poking around something that doesn’t

concern you. For that matter, I haven't ruled him out as a suspect."

We could find out his name another way, I thought. This was too small an island for someone not to know him.

"Let's go," I said. "This is a waste of time." I reached over and snatched up the two locket before White could stop me. Then I turned on my heel and walked out the door, Hudson following close behind.

"Let's talk to Michael Moon," Hudson suggested. "He knows everything that happens here."

"Agreed."

He offered his arm, and I took it.





## HUDSON

**M**oon was at the counter helping a customer when we arrived at his shop. To occupy our time, we wandered around the store, admiring this or that. When Moon was done, he called us over.

“You two clearly have something on your minds,” Moon said. “As neither of you have ever lurked in my store for any amount of time. You’re both what I’d call efficient and single-minded shoppers.”

Why he felt the need to go into such descriptive detail of our buying habits, I couldn’t say. Regardless, I set that aside so that we could ask him about Miss Woolf.

“We’re wondering if you know the name of Lucinda Woolf’s fiancé,” I said.

Moon scratched his neck and squinted, obviously trying to remember. “It’ll come to me in a minute. Why do you ask?”

Instead of answering his question, I asked another of him. “What do you know about Caleb King? What did he do before he came here?”

“I don’t know much about his past.” Moon’s light blue eyes flickered toward the door, as if he expected King to enter.

“You’ve played poker with him for years,” I said.

“I have to ask why you’re asking,” Moon said.

“He hurt Miss Jayne the other night rather badly. Shoved her head against the brick wall of the schoolhouse and then tried to strangle her.”

“I heard about that,” Moon said. “The whole town’s talking about it. I’m sorry he hurt you, Miss Jayne.”

“He’s your friend, isn’t he?” Piper peered at Moon closely.

“Our relationship has become complicated of late,” Moon said.

“Why’s that?” Piper asked.

“That’s my business,” Moon said.

“Have you ever seen him be violent?” I asked. “Like after a night of cards and drinking, for example?”

Moon looked away, tapping his fingers on the glass case that displayed some of his more expensive items. “There was something once. I don’t think anyone knows this but me. One night, after our game, I happened to see him walking back up to his place in back of the school. There was an old stray dog running around, begging for food, probably. The dog went up to him, wagging his tail. Caleb pulled out a gun and shot him right between the eyes.”

Piper gasped. “Why would he do such a thing to an innocent dog? That’s horrible.”

“It was so odd that the next day, I almost wondered if I’d dreamt the whole thing. For one thing, there was no trace of a dead dog. No blood or anything. But a few days later, the carcass washed up on shore.”

“Just like Miss Woolf,” Piper said.

“I’d put it aside, you know, because he’s always been so well-liked and charming. I’ve never heard one complaint about him with the children all these years. I decided he’d had too much to drink and maybe he had a bad experience with a dog before? I don’t know. I will say, it struck me as odd and horrifying. I have a soft spot for dogs. I wished he’d come up to me instead. He’d probably be sitting behind the counter right now.”

“Violence against an animal might indicate he could do the same to a human.” Piper peered up at me with wide eyes.

“My father was mean to animals,” I said, nodding. “I won’t say what he did, but it was indicative of his cruel nature.”

“What’s the reason you want to talk to the fiancé?” Moon asked, circling back to our first question.

“We thought he might have some insight into her relationship with King,” I said. “They worked together at the school. Maybe they started having an affair and things went bad?”

“If Caleb became jealous, he might have turned violent,” Piper said. She told Moon about how he’d acted after I’d gone with them to the dance. “It was like he was one man one minute and someone totally different the next. I’ve never been scared like that before, and I’ve worked for some mean men.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Jayne,” Moon said.

“Your buddy, Sheriff White, refused to bring him in,” I said. “Acted like hitting and almost choking a woman to death was completely normal.”

Moon looked at me for a moment. The knowing glint in his eyes told me he was thinking about how my father had treated my mother. He confirmed my suspicions when he said, “Men like that tend to stick together. White and your father had similarities. Neither one of them have any respect for women. But Caleb King? I’d never believed he would hurt a woman. People hide who they are, especially if it’s shameful behavior.”

“Correct,” Piper said.

Moon smacked the counter. “I’ve got it. His name’s Ernie Thomas. They were in here one day buying nails not too long before she went missing. He was building a cabin on that property he bought on the north end of the island. Do you know the place?”

“I think so,” I said.

“In fact, I think he may be living out there. I saw him a few weeks ago—came in to buy bullets—and I asked him if he’d moved to the island permanently. He said he wasn’t sure

if he was going to stay or go back to Seattle. I felt sorry for the fellow. He looked rough, you know, like he'd been hitting the bottle. Her death hit him hard. You might drive out there and see if he's living in that shack he built."

Moon might have mentioned that he was living here in the first place. But never mind. I wanted to ask him about the lockets before another customer appeared. "There's one other thing we wanted to ask you about."

Piper pulled the two lockets from her pocket. She'd wrapped them together in a handkerchief and set them both down on the counter. "Did you sell these?"

Moon looked at them closely. "Could be. If so, it was a while ago. I haven't carried this kind of thing here since I was sold a bunch of junk from a salesman claiming he had real silver. They turned out to be no more than tin that went green when they were exposed to human skin. Anyway, I stopped selling any jewelry after that. I don't need that kind of trouble.

"Was one of them in the water?" Moon asked.

"Yes. It washed up to shore," Piper said. "And the other one was given to me by Caleb King. He claimed it was one of a kind. Which clearly isn't true."

"Is it possible these were sold here?" I asked.

Moon scratched his chin. "Let me go through my receipts and see if I can find anything. But why do you care where they were purchased?"

"We want to know for sure that Caleb King purchased both," Piper said. "To see if what we suspect is true. Caleb King murdered Lucinda Woolf. These lockets tie the murder and Caleb together, if that's the case."

"Do you know if the dead girl had one of these for sure?" Moon asked.

"No, that's why we want to talk to the fiancé," I said.

"Makes sense." Moon sighed, looking suddenly weary. "And you went to the sheriff with all this?"

“That’s right. Only to be dismissed,” I said. “He’s acting really cagey. I don’t know what to think.”

“None of my old friends seem to be what I thought they were,” Moon said. “I’ll check through my books and get back to you.”

We thanked him and left together. “Let’s drop in on Ella and ask her how to get to Ernie’s property,” I said.

She nodded but didn’t say anything further. God only knew what was going through her mind. I could barely keep track of my own thoughts.

---

I’D GUESSED CORRECTLY. My sister knew exactly where his property was and how to describe it to me. By the time Piper and I set out, I felt confident we could find him. That is, if he was still there. Since Moon hadn’t seen him for a few weeks, he might have cleared out and gone back to Seattle. I highly suspected that was the case, as he would have had to go into town for supplies. A man couldn’t live on bullets, after all. Unless he’d needed the bullets to kill animals to eat?

A shiver went down my spine as it occurred to me what else he could use a bullet for. Revenge? Did he suspect something had happened between King and Miss Woolf?

Using the landmarks Ella had told me as a guide, we headed north. If she were correct, his place was just west of the road that ran north to south on the eastern side of the island.

“It should be here somewhere,” I said to Piper. “If Ella’s landmarks were right.”

Piper leaned forward, looking through the front window. “Yes, do you see the smoke?”

I followed her gaze. A sliver of smoke floated above a thicket of trees. “This has to be it.”

I turned left into a rough driveway. Soon, we reached a small, crude shack, clearly put together as a temporary residence. The property was desolate, with no horses or animals.

My stomach clenched with nerves as we approached the front door. Before we could knock, the door opened to a man standing there with a shotgun in his hands. He immediately lowered the gun.

“Mr. Tutheridge, isn’t that right?” Ernie was dressed in a dirty flannel shirt and denim pants. A thick beard covered much of his face.

“Yes, I’m Hudson Tutheridge. We’re sorry to intrude,” I said. “But we wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“Sure thing. I’m Ernie Thomas.” He held out his hand, and I shook it.

“This is Miss Jayne,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ve seen you around. You and King.” His lip curled in obvious distaste.

Piper blushed. “That’s right.”

“Let’s talk outside,” Ernie said. “My place isn’t fit for a lady. This was just a shed I could sleep in while I built our house. Since I lost Lucinda, I haven’t had the heart to build the home we dreamed about. I figure I’ll just live out here until I feel like there’s a reason to go on. If that ever comes.”

I put my hand briefly on his shoulder. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Yes, Lucinda told me Bebe’s mother had passed away,” Ernie said. “She was fond of Bebe.”

Fond of Bebe. Lucinda Woolf had been a good teacher. Now she would never get to have the future I’m sure she dreamt of.

He led us out to a grassy area on the other side of the shack where he’d made a table from a roughly hewn board laid over tree trunks. Ashes from a campfire told me he’d been cooking out here. Pity for the man hit me hard. I knew what it was like

to just exist, waiting for the pain to subside so you could make some kind of new life for yourself.

“Have a seat.” Ernie gestured toward a rickety chair by the table.

“That’s not necessary,” Piper said. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“You had questions for me?” Ernie asked, fixing his bloodshot eyes upon me and then Piper.

Piper nodded my way, clearly wanting me to take the lead.

“We wanted to ask you about your late fiancée’s relationship with Caleb King,” I said.

His eyes filled, and he wiped them with a dirty handkerchief he drew from his pocket. “I told the sheriff all this when they found her body.”

White. Someone should take his badge.

“Do you mind telling us?” I asked. “Miss Jayne here has had a disturbing experience with Mr. King and we’re wondering if you could help put together...” I trailed off, not sure how to say what we wanted.

“You want to know if Lucinda was involved with King?” Ernie asked.

Relief flooded me. He understood the nature of our visit. That would make it easier. “Yes, if you had any insight into that, I would be appreciative.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know. We bought this piece of property with every cent we had after she’d taken the job at the island school. She rented a room from a widow named Mrs. Cooper. Close to town, you know, so she could live real cheap. We were saving up to start building our house.”

Mrs. Cooper lived within walking distance of the school. The arrangement would have been ideal for a teacher.

“We were thrilled. Lucinda loved this island. First time she set eyes on the place, it was all she wanted.” He teared up and

paused for a moment to dab at his wet cheeks. “At first, she was real happy at her job. She always had a heart for kids and was charmed by the sweet schoolhouse and all. But then she started getting a strange feeling about King.”

“How do you mean?” Piper asked.

“He watched her all the time. She’d look up from working with one of the kids and he’d be staring at her. Gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. Then something scary happened. One night she woke up from a bad dream. It was a full moon, so she got out of bed to look out the window, hoping to settle her nerves before going back to sleep. She loved full moons. She looked out the window and there he was. King. Watching the house. Scared her to death. She ran out of the room and barricaded the front door with a chair. After that, he kept getting creepier. He’d ask her to stay after the kids left to go over lessons and that kind of thing. She didn’t know what to do because she really needed that job.”

He paused once more to wipe his eyes. “I never knew any of this until it was too late. She hadn’t wanted to tell me. Didn’t want to worry me. But the last few letters, she told me everything. The last thing she told me was that King had propositioned her, insisting they were soulmates and that she should break off her engagement. He even left her a locket under her pillow. Which scared her badly.”

“How did he get into her room?” Piper asked.

“No idea. That’s the creepiest part,” Ernie said.

“Soulmates,” Piper said under breath. “That’s what he told me, too.”

“She told him she wasn’t interested, and he got really angry,” Ernie said. “They argued and she said she would go to the sheriff if he didn’t stop harassing her. He threatened to dismiss her if she said anything to anyone. In her last letter to me, she said she’d agreed and then rushed off to write to me, praying he wouldn’t take the letter before she could put it in the post. By the time I got that letter, she’d disappeared.”

“You told the sheriff all this?” Piper asked.



“Every bit. Even showed him the letters. She was a good writer. Very descriptive.”

“Do you think we could see them?” Piper asked.

“I gave them to Sheriff White. He said they were evidence and that he had to keep them.”

White. Once again, all progress stopped with White.

---

ONCE WE GOT BACK to the house, Piper and I walked down to the water before going inside so we could discuss what we'd learned.

“I've no idea where to turn,” I said. “If White's not willing to take any of our information seriously, or Ernie's for that matter, then what choice do we have?”

“What if he hurts someone else?” Piper asked. “Some unsuspecting woman.”

Without thinking, I reached out to take her hand. To my surprise, she didn't withdraw, simply stared down at our clasped hands.

I let go. “I'm sorry.”

She looked up at me, questions in her eyes. A thousand of them. “It's all right.” She returned to watching the water. Gentle waves lapped at the shore. A fish jumped in the water not far from where we stood.

An emotion I couldn't at first name stirred within me. Something so long dormant I almost didn't recognize it.

I desired Piper Jayne. How it happened, I could not say. The yearning had crept in slowly, growing day by day as I got to know her. Before I knew what was happening, I started falling for her. Now? I wanted to kiss her pretty mouth.

“May I ask what you're thinking?” I asked.

“I'm thinking it's strange to call you Hudson and not Mr. Tutheridge. Something's shifted between us. Am I wrong?”

I hadn't expected her to say that. I'm not sure what I thought, but it wasn't that. "You've known me as one thing and perhaps it's becoming something else?"

"Is that a question?" she asked.

"I guess it is." I paused, gathering courage. "For me, at least, it's becoming...you're becoming important to me."

She breathed in as though someone had punched her in the gut. "How could it be when I've been such a fool?"

"Do you mean about King?"

She nodded. "I'm very embarrassed. I thought I was in love with a murderer. How could I not see it?"

"He had a whole island fooled into thinking he was a wonderful man. A teacher whom everyone admired. There wasn't a person on this island who wouldn't have said how blessed we were to have him. You mustn't be so hard on yourself. He was a very good actor."

"I've dragged you and Bebe into all of this. If anything were to happen to either one of you because of my lack of good judgment, I would never forgive myself."

"Nothing's going to happen to us," I said. "That's what I'm here for." I knelt to pick up a pebble and tossed it into the water. "I've been purposeless for too long. I'm ashamed of how I've been. With Bebe. And my life. You've inspired me to be better. You're so good with Bebe and patient with me. I'm unworthy of your time, let alone your affection. If you had not come into our lives, I don't know if I'd ever have awakened from my stupor. I'd lost myself. And poor Bebe. What a horrible father she's had."

"Not horrible. A little distant perhaps. Many fathers are that way. The fact that you're sorry about it, or even see it, puts you ahead of any of the men I've worked for in the past."

Her words touched me more than I could express. For a second, I tried to gather my wits before saying anything stupid and scaring her away. I was not successful. "Would you ever consider marrying a man who has a child?" The words spilled out with no way to drag them back inside my traitorous mouth.

Her eyes fluttered, as she was obviously startled, but she composed herself before answering. "It would depend on the man."

"And the child?"

"I love all children."

"What about my child?" I asked. "Do you think you could ever love her as if she were your own?" I held my breath, praying she would not think me too forward.

"I already do love her. I try not to think of being a permanent person in any of the lives of any of the children I take care of. Yet look at me and Sara Rose. We're family. It's a funny thing, isn't it? How sometimes family are the people you meet along the way? When you least expect it?" She fell silent for a moment. "I have to admit, I've thought about you a lot over the past few days."

More words tumbled out of my mouth. "I've been unable to think of much else except you for weeks now. I was jealous of King. But it's been such a long time since I felt this way, I didn't even recognize that's what it was."

"Well, you needn't have wasted a moment of jealousy on him. Now that I see who he truly is." She shivered and wrapped her arms around her waist. "To think, he could have killed me during one of our drives. I spent a lot of time alone with him."

"I don't want to think about that. What a loss it would be to the world if your light no longer shone."

She turned to look up at me. "You say nice things to me. Surprising things. And you have a way with words, which I had not predicted."

I smiled. "You bring out the best in me." For a second, I debated about whether to bring up the subject of matchmaking. In the end, I decided it should be broached. If only to gauge her reaction. "What do you think about this matchmaker theory?"

"Well, it seemed far-fetched that it could actually work, let alone be arranged. However, I was witness to Sara Rose and

Rhett's natural progression from strangers to husband and wife. The rest of your siblings were obviously matched with their soulmates. I'm left with no other choice but to believe it to be true."

"Do you think she'll send someone for me?" I asked, then held my breath. Would she understand my true question?

"I'm not sure," she said quietly.

"Is it possible you've been sent for me?" It was best just to ask. Get it all out in the open.

She breathed in a quick, sharp breath. "I don't know. I was Sara Rose's chaperone."

"Which means Mother is working with Mrs. Mantle for someone for me," I said.

"Yes, maybe."

She peered out to the water, an expression on her face I couldn't read. "There's something I haven't told you. Something I didn't think anything of at the time. When we went to see Mrs. Mantle about a position for Sara Rose, the subject eventually came up about my profession. When I said it, Mrs. Mantle and her maid, Heidi, looked at each other. A knowing look, I should say."

"As in, a nanny for Bebe could be a wife for me?" I asked.

"Precisely."

"Do you think you were sent for me?" I might as well ask it directly. No reason for subtlety at this point.

"I think it's a possibility," Piper said. "A two-for-one type of arrangement? As insane as that sounds."

"And what would you think the odds are for us?"

"Odds?"

"Do you think, if indeed you were sent for me—is it something you would consider? Would you be interested in pursuing it? Me. Pursuing me. Or having me pursue you." I smiled, sheepish. This was awkward and embarrassing, but I had to hear her thoughts.

She didn't answer for a torturous few seconds. "I have to think about it. Examine my feelings. This circumstance with Caleb has shaken my confidence in my own judgment. I would hate to rush into anything and have Bebe's hopes raised, only to be crushed."

As much as I hated hearing it, she was right. There was Bebe to consider. "She has a tender little heart. You're right to protect her."

"We'll have a lot of time to spend together," she said. "Without a courtship, since I work for you."

"Yes, there's that." I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket. "Am I right to have hope?"

A gentle smile curved her mouth upward. She peeked up at me through her lashes. "You're right to have hope. I enjoy my time with you and Bebe more than I can say."

What about me alone?

Piper gestured toward the house. "Let's go up. Lizzie's probably worn out by now."

I followed behind across the pebbly beach toward the house, enjoying watching her small waist and the sway of her skirt. She hadn't outright rejected me. I'd choose to be hopeful, I decided. Perhaps I could win her heart by being steady and straightforward? She'd been hurt by King. Not something a woman recovered from overnight. Patience was key. Or had I proven to be unlovable from the very beginning and now it was too late?

No. I would be hopeful. Even if I had to stand before the mirror every morning to remind myself.



## PIPER

**M**y legs were shaking so hard that I could hardly walk back to the house. Hudson's words had shattered me, leaving me uncertain about everything I thought I knew. He wanted to court me? It was all I could do not to faint dead away. In a thousand years, I would not have predicted that I would be the one to turn his head. To remind him that a man cannot live alone forever.

As I'd said to him, we must be careful. For Bebe's sake and perhaps our own, too. We were both vulnerable, with hearts nearly as tender as Bebe's. I'd allowed myself to believe in a man, and he'd proven to be horrible.

When we arrived back at the house, Rhett and Sara Rose were inside waiting for us. Bebe was between them on the window seat, talking about a seal she'd seen earlier.

Sara Rose jumped to her feet when she saw me. "I hope you don't mind that we've come unannounced?"

"Of course not. I'm always happy to see you," I said as we embraced. "How did you know where we were?"

"I sent them a note this morning," Hudson said. "I didn't want Sara Rose to be worried about where you were and with whom."

Rhett had gotten up to shake Hudson's hand. "There's another reason why we wanted to come by," Rhett said.

Lizzie appeared with a fresh pot of tea and small sandwiches. "I've brought tea, Mr. Tutheridge."

“Lizzie, you’re a mind reader,” Hudson said. “Everyone, let’s talk outside. There’s no place to sit in here.”

“I’ll bring tea out,” I said to Lizzie. “If you wouldn’t mind taking Bebe into the kitchen? I think I smell cookies?”

“Yes, I just made a batch.” Lizzie’s easy smile brightened the room further. “If you say it’s all right, we could have one with a glass of milk?”

“That’s fine,” I said. “But only one. Supper’s in a few hours.”

Bebe skipped out of the room with Lizzie. Hudson held the door to the back porch open for us. Sara Rose and I took the porch swing, and the men leaned against the railing.

“We have something to tell you about King,” Rhett said. “Given that you’re hiding out here, I can see that you’re worried about his volatile behavior.”

“We decided it was best to go somewhere unknown to him,” Hudson said.

“I think that’s wise,” Rhett said. “Especially after what we heard today.”

“We were in town this morning,” Sara Rose said. “And we saw Mr. King going in to see Mrs. Lancaster.”

“The seamstress?” Hudson asked.

“That’s right.” Sara Rose nodded. “I had a sudden strange feeling that we should follow him. So we ran across the street. By the time we entered the shop, he had her trapped behind her counter, threatening to hurt her unless she told him where you’d gone and with whom.”

“Why would he think she would know?” Hudson asked.

“Apparently, he was asking everyone,” Rhett said. “Ella said he came by her office as well. But Lucca was there with her, so he didn’t try anything.”

“But Ella said he was threatening nonetheless,” Sara Rose said. “Under the surface.”

“Why would he get violent with Mrs. Lancaster?” I asked.



“She told us after we chased him out that she’d instructed him to get out of her store—that she didn’t serve murderers.”

“What? How does she know anything about that?” I had my hankie out, twisting it anxiously around my fingers.

“Apparently, it’s all over town,” Hudson said. “A group of families are asking for his resignation.”

“It wasn’t just us who saw him hurt you the other night.” Sara Rose shuddered. “People talk. Conclusions are made.”

“Yes, well, it’s not a big leap to make.” I hadn’t told Sara Rose about the lockets but did so now.

“My God, so he did do it,” Sara Rose said when I’d finished.

Hudson took up the story then, filling them in on our visit with Ernie.

“The poor man,” Sara Rose said.

“White needs to take care of this,” Rhett said. “Or some of the folks in town might decide to take it into their own hands. “Why is White hesitating? What’s his motive here?”

“I can’t tell you,” Hudson said. “Except that the two of them go way back.”

“Or he had something to do with the girl’s murder, too,” Sara Rose said. “They might have been in on it together.”

“He might have helped King cover it up,” Hudson said.

“Why, though? He’s supposed to be a man of the law,” Sara Rose said.

“That doesn’t preclude him from being a criminal,” Rhett said. “There are corrupt men in every profession.”

We chatted for a few more minutes before they had to go. Rhett liked to have an early supper so they had some time together before his night shift.

After saying goodbye, Hudson and I went back into the house. There was nothing to be done. We had to hope King

went quietly. If the people wanted him gone, surely there was no way he wouldn't go?

I put it aside when Bebe came back into the living room with a milk mustache. "Let's get you cleaned up. Then you can go outside to play for a while before supper."

Bebe peered at me closely. "Miss Piper, you look different."

"Different? How?" I asked. "Do I have a milk mustache like someone else we know?"

"No, that's not it." Bebe shrugged. "I'll figure it out some other time. I want to go down to the beach and finish my rock castle."

I gestured for her to head upstairs. "Wash your face and then come back down. I'll go down to the water with you."

"Yes, ma'am." Bebe took off up the stairs, singing off-key.

Hudson had been lurking over by the bay window. During the late afternoon, the sun was at an angle that made the water sparkle like jewels. From his stiff shoulders and troubled expression, I knew he was worrying. My heart softened further toward him.

Was it possible I could fall for him?

Too soon, I thought. A few days back, I'd been daydreaming about a man who was possibly a murderer. I hadn't thought so before now, but I'd learned the truth about myself. I did want to marry. I'd like to have a child of my own. Be a mother instead of a nanny. Keep house for a man. Was that why it had been so easy to fall for Caleb? Was I that desperate?

Hudson slowly turned, seeming to notice that I'd been watching him.

I flushed and looked away.

"I want to go into town and talk to White," Hudson said. "But I'm afraid to leave you ladies and Bebe here on your own. Do you know how to use a gun?"

“Goodness, no.” I clutched the collar of my dress. “I’d probably shoot my own foot.”

“Maybe I’ll go in tomorrow and bring you three with me,” Hudson said. “You can look around town while I talk to White. I want answers.”

“Agreed.” I reached for my hat that I’d hung on a hook by the door. “But for now, let’s enjoy our evening. Would you like to come with me to the beach?”

He studied me for a moment before answering. “I think that’s a mighty fine idea. I’ll bring my fishing pole.”

We exchanged a smile before Bebe came bounding down the stairs with her straw hat dangling by its string around her neck. She’d remembered to bring it, at least. I should praise her. Before I could, her father jumped in and did it himself. Soon, they might not need me at all.

---

THAT EVENING, we dined on corn on the cob drenched in butter and trout Hudson had caught while the little miss built her impressive rock castle. My only contribution was to cheer them on in their endeavors and watch the sun lower in the sky. All in all, a pleasant way to spend the late afternoon.

After supper, Bebe and I helped Lizzie clean up, talking easily together. Lizzie had good stories about her younger brothers that made Bebe and me laugh.

I ran Bebe a bath, grateful for indoor plumbing. She scrubbed the dirt from her arms and legs, and then I lathered her hair. When I’d first started with her, she’d made a fuss about the water getting in her eyes when I dumped the bucket of water over her head. By the end of her baths, I’d been on edge. Soon, though, I’d taught her to press the washcloth into her eyes to avoid any water. Now bath time was peaceful.

I let her play for a few minutes while I sat on a stool next to the tub. The upstairs was as nicely finished as the living room and kitchen on the first floor. Cabinets and shelves had

been added even in the bathroom. This was a house that invited family life. A great place to raise a child. Or children, I thought, smiling to myself.

Later, I read to Bebe in her room before tucking her into bed. I was about to turn out the light when I saw Hudson in the doorway. "I've come to say goodnight," he said.

"You're right on time. She's about to fall asleep."

I shuffled away, wanting to give them privacy. Hudson's changes had been so good for Bebe. She had been the most content I'd ever seen her since we'd come to live at this house.

I wandered downstairs and into the kitchen. Lizzie was there staring out the window. A sadness swathed her in the orange light of sunset. She looked up at me, planting a smile back onto her face when she saw me.

"Are you missing your family?" I asked.

She exhaled, seeming relieved to be asked. "Yes. Some nights are worse than others. I have a brother Bebe's age and when I spend time with her it always makes me lonesome for him and the others. My mother died last year. That's why I came to the island for work. Papa needed me to help him. Mama took in wash when she was alive and that helped us a lot. With her gone, he needed me to make up the difference. The Tutheridges have been very good to me."

"They have me as well," I said.

"Do you think Caleb King really killed that girl?"

"I do," I said. "As hard as it is to believe."

"I thought he was dreamy. So polite and smart. I was a little jealous when you started going out with him."

"He's much too old for you," I said. "He was too old for me, but even more so for you."

"Do you think I'll ever find a love of my own on this island? Or am I going to be like a few of the maids at the estate who have been with the family for ages and live in the servants' quarters, never with a house of their own?"

“It’s funny you should mention that,” I said. “I was thinking about that very thing earlier. What it would feel like to be the lady of a house like this one. Raising a brood. Enjoying all the simple pleasures in a simple life.”

“Do you want that?” Lizzie asked.

“I never thought I did, but moving out here has changed me. It’s hard to explain why. I don’t even know myself.”

“Ella blamed it on the island,” Lizzie said. “She told me that when she married Lucca.”

“The island?” I asked.

“She says the island causes people to fall in love even if they don’t want to. She didn’t want to fall for Lucca, but she did. I can’t understand anyone who says they don’t want love. It’s all I want. My mother wanted it for me too. She’d always talk about how I was pretty enough to catch the eye of a well-to-do man. I’d be happy to catch the eye of anyone at all.”

I chuckled as I joined her at the table. “‘Anyone at all’ is not a worthy ambition. You could end up making a mistake like I did with Caleb. Don’t be like me. Be suspicious of any man who comes calling.”

Lizzie lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think Mr. Tutheridge fancies you. He looks at you that way, you know, that men do when they’re in love.”

“Don’t be silly.” I brushed it aside but her observation worried me. What if others saw what she did and jumped to conclusions? I’d be a fool to turn down a man like Hudson Tutheridge. Most people in my position or Lizzie’s would marry him in a second if he were to ask. However, I had to love him if I were to contemplate such a drastic change. What if I couldn’t return his feelings? He might ask me to leave. Then what would I do?

“It would be awfully nice for Bebe,” Lizzie whispered. “He’s terribly handsome, too.”

“Yes, I have noticed that.” I playfully slapped her wrist. “Enough of that now. You’ll have me daydreaming about something a girl like me could never have.”

“You never know,” Lizzie said. “This is America. Anything could happen.”

---

THE NEXT MORNING, we went about our usual routine, having breakfast and planning our day. Hudson had said there was a spot not far up the beach where harbor seals were known to frequent, and would either of us care to join him?

Bebe had said yes before he even finished the sentence. Before I could answer, we heard the rumble of a car. My stomach clenched. *Please be someone from Hudson's family and not an unwanted visitor.*

Fortunately, it was Ella. From through the window glass, I watched as she got out of the car, her mouth set in a grim line and her cheeks pale. Something had happened.

Hudson and I locked gazes. He saw what I saw.

“Let's go see what she needs,” Hudson said.

I instructed Bebe to stay inside with Lizzie and finish her breakfast.

Bebe opened her mouth to object, but I shut down any grousing with a curt nod. She knew what that meant. No arguments.

“We'll be back in a few minutes,” I said to Lizzie, who looked up from her focus on frying a pancake and nodded.

Hudson and I went out together to greet his sister. The morning dew sparkled in the morning sun. Rain had fallen sometime during the night, leaving behind the fresh scent of grass and flowers.

“What's happened?” Hudson asked Ella, clearly agreeing with my assessment.

Ella wrapped her arms around her waist as if she were chilled. “Caleb King's dead. Someone shot him. Last night. Two children found him this morning just outside the

entryway of his apartment. From what Lucca and I could tell, he'd been dead only a few hours."

My legs trembled, and black dots danced before my eyes. Caleb was dead. Shot? Murdered. "Do they know who did it?"

Hudson, perhaps sensing my distress, offered his arm. I gratefully took it.

"The sheriff's brought in Ernie Thomas," Ella said. "He's the obvious suspect."

Ernie? "Do you think he did it?" I asked.

"I have no idea." Ella shook her head. "But from what I saw in town just now, the whole island's terrified. This is yet another murder here. We're going to lose residents if this keeps happening."

"There were others who had threatened King," Hudson said. "The parents of some of the schoolchildren were shouting for his resignation."

"It could have been one of the parents," Ella said. "But why would they murder him instead of run him off the island? It takes a strong motive to want to kill someone."

"Agreed," Hudson said. "But my gut's telling me there's no way it was Ernie Thomas."

"We went out to see him yesterday," I said to Ella. "He seems like a sad, defeated man without enough energy to shoot anyone."

"Except he had motive," Ella said. "If he thought King killed his fiancée, he would want him dead."

"He's thought King murdered her all this time," I said. "Why would he suddenly decide to kill him now?"

"Maybe it's because of us," Hudson said. "We went out there and agitated him, perhaps reminded him of his anger."

An image of Ernie's kind, sad eyes came to me. If he was a murderer, then I'd lost all semblance of discernment.

"White asked me to come out and ask you to come into town," Ella said. "He has questions, apparently."

“How delightful.” Hudson’s mouth twisted in distaste. “There goes our day.”

“Whoever did this shot him at close range,” Ella said. “And he was not killed where they found the body. He’d been moved.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because there was not enough blood,” Ella said.

“That hardly narrows it down,” Hudson said. “Except I know it wasn’t Miss Jayne. She’s never shot a gun.”

I covered my hand with my mouth to keep hysterical laughter at bay. The man I thought I loved this time last week was now dead, and all I could feel was relief. What kind of person did that make me?

After Ella drove away, we turned to each other.

“This makes no sense,” Hudson said. “It’s not Ernie. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I find the idea highly unlikely. He doesn’t have it in him.”

“We’re going to have to tell Bebe,” I said. “And Lizzie. They’ll hear about it in town at church on Sunday.”

With heavy hearts, we walked back toward the house to share our troubling news. Before we reached the front door, Bebe came barreling out near tears. Now what?





## HUDSON

**B**ebe stopped in front of us. Her bottom lip trembled. “Papa, why did Ella leave?”

I rearranged my expression to hide the worry coursing through me and my jumble of thoughts. King was dead. What had happened? Would the sheriff blame me, as he did when my father was murdered?

“She had to get back to town to take care of her patients,” I said out loud to Bebe.

“Why didn’t she want to see me?” Bebe asked.

“It wasn’t that, silly goose,” I said, swinging her up into my arms and twirling her in a circle.

She squealed with joy, her worry about her aunt Ella quickly forgotten.

I set her on the ground. “But we do want to talk to you. Come sit with me on the steps.”

Bebe slipped her hand in mine and we went to sit on the top step of the porch. Piper joined us, sandwiching Bebe between us.

I wrapped an arm around my daughter’s small frame. “Aunt Ella was out to tell us some disturbing news.”

“Did Mr. King hurt someone?” Bebe asked.

Her question was like a punch in the stomach. Why had that been her first thought? “No, not that we know of. But Mr. King has died.”

“Dead?” Bebe’s eyes widened. “How?”

“They think someone killed him,” Piper said. “But we don’t know anything except that.”

“Do we still get to go see the seals?” Bebe asked.

“I’m sorry, but no. Miss Piper and I have to go into town about some business. We’ll be back this afternoon, and if we have time, we can go see the seals then.”

Bebe’s face fell, but she nodded without any fussing. “I understand.”

Lizzie had come out by then, asking if all was well.

“May I speak with you inside for a moment, Lizzie?” Piper asked.

“Am I in trouble?” Lizzie asked.

“Or is it me?” Bebe asked.

“It’s neither of you,” Piper said, chuckling. “Have either of you done anything that would get you in trouble?”

Bebe shook her head.

Lizzie smiled saucily. “Not today.”

“Come along then.” The two women walked into the house. Bebe had wandered over to look at a toadstool, giving me a moment to think through everything I’d heard from Ella. Sadly, I came up with no solutions or answers to all the questions her visit had evoked.

By the time Lizzie and Piper returned to the porch, Bebe had managed to get her hands and knees muddy.

Piper now wore a hat and gloves. Lizzie was pale and shaky. Obviously, Piper had told her about King. “Lizzie’s going to look after you again this morning,” she said to Bebe. “Please behave yourself.”

“I will.” Bebe grinned at Lizzie. “Do you want to see if we can find any frogs?”

“I can think of a thousand things I’d rather do.” Lizzie made a face that caused Bebe to go into fits of laughter.

Bebe ran off to begin her frog hunt. Lizzie clutched the cross she always wore around her neck. “Should I keep Bebe inside today? Since there’s a killer?”

“No, go about your day as usual,” I said. “No one but my family even knows we’re here. You’re safe.”

Piper squeezed Lizzie’s hand. “I know it’s scary. I’m frightened too.”

“Please hurry home as soon as you can,” Lizzie said.

“We will,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

We said goodbye to them and headed out in the motorcar. When we reached the dirt road that would take us into town, it occurred to me that we could return to the big house. Now that King was gone, there was nothing to be afraid of. Although, there was obviously a killer somewhere on the island. Did that put us in danger?

“I’ve been thinking about our living arrangements,” Piper said, echoing my thoughts. “Do you want to return to the big house?”

“I was currently contemplating that very question.” The truth was, I liked being out here without the bustle of my mother’s large household. It was nice to be in my own home. “I’d thought it would hurt to be in the house I made for Rosemary, but it hasn’t felt that way at all.”

“I think it’s good for Bebe,” Piper said. “She loves being here with you.”

“What about you? Which of the two houses do you prefer?”

“As I’ve said, I prefer whichever makes you and Bebe the happiest. I’m fine, as long as you’re both with me.”

Touched by her comments, I remained quiet the rest of the way into town, not wanting to break the mood with further questions. If I were to win her heart, I must proceed with caution and thoughtfulness. Otherwise, I could ruin everything.

We went straight to the jailhouse to see the sheriff. However, before we could enter, the sheriff came barreling out the door. He stopped abruptly at the sight of us.

“Good. I wanted to talk to you both,” White said.

“What can we do for you?” I asked, careful to keep disdain from my tone.

“Is Ernie Thomas in jail?” Piper asked.

“Yes, I have him in the cell.” White spoke evenly but with a hint of caution in his voice. “But without more evidence, I’m probably going to have to let him go.”

“Do you have any evidence at all?” Piper asked.

“He has no one to back up his story that he was alone out on his property,” White said. “But no one saw him in town, as far as I can tell. Moon keeps a watch on everything that happens on this street, and he said he hasn’t seen Thomas for weeks. Matthew says he hasn’t been into the tavern.”

“Did Ernie tell you we went out to see him yesterday?” I asked.

“He mentioned it, yeah.” White took a cigar out of his jacket pocket and lit it with a silver lighter. “Which is real curious, isn’t it? Seems a strange thing for either of you to do.”

“We’re trying to understand what really happened to Miss Woolf,” Piper said. “When Michael Moon informed us that Ernie was living out on his property, we went out to hear things from his perspective.”

“He told us you have the letters Miss Woolf wrote to him,” I said. “Isn’t that enough to raise your suspicions about King’s involvement in her death?”

White puffed on his cigar but said nothing. The man was infuriating.

When he didn’t say anything further, my annoyance grew. “What was the reason you wanted to see us?” I asked again, this time letting my words drip with disdain.

“Right, yes. I have to ask you both, where were you last night between the hours of midnight and eight a.m.?”

I should have known. He would just love it to be me who killed King. He’d hoped it was me who killed Father. I actually thought he’d been dismayed to learn it was not me. He’d once again be disappointed if he hoped I had anything to do with King’s death.

“We were both home in bed,” Piper said. “With Bebe and Mr. Tutheridge’s maid, Lizzie.”

“At your house, not your mothers. Isn’t that right?” White asked.

How had he known about my other house?

“The one you built for your wife?” This was delivered without inflection yet was full of meaning regardless. I knew about the art of manipulation. I’d witnessed Father’s behavior every day of my childhood. White loved to poke at me, hoping to rile me to anger. I wouldn’t allow it. I’d learned at an early age to disguise my feelings and thoughts. Staying removed and impassive during one of Father’s rages had always served me well.

However, it was easy to see the sheriff wanted something from me. I just wasn’t sure what it was.

Was it possible he’d killed King? Had Caleb King had something on him? Was that why he’d dismissed all inquiries into King’s relationship to Miss Woolf? It was either that or White was guilty of killing Miss Woolf himself. The more time I spent with White, the more convinced I became that he was not an ethical lawman.

“We moved out to my house to stay clear of King,” I said. “He threatened Miss Jayne and my little daughter. As you know. I’m sure you can imagine, I was frightened and did what I thought was best to protect my family. If you’d done your job, we wouldn’t have had to move out there.”

“I thought you’d move out there long ago,” White said in the same bland tone. “But then I figured living in the house

you'd built for your wife was too painful for you. Now that you have Miss Jayne, maybe it's more appealing?"

My fists clenched at my sides, but I forced my fingers to relax. I'd have loved to punch his smug face, but we had enough trouble as it was. I certainly wasn't going to respond to his comment though. Why I did or did not live in the house I'd built for my wife was none of his concern.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Piper said to White. "Insinuating there's anything untoward going on between us is appalling. I'm Bebe's nanny."

"You seem close. Dare I say, intimate? King thought so, anyway." White shrugged his shoulders and puffed on his cigar.

"King was a delusional madman," Piper said. "What he said was not based on any truth."

White nodded and took the cigar from his mouth. "I'll come out to your place later to ask Lizzie a few questions. She might have some insight into what's really going on between you two. And why it was in your best interest to get King out of the way so that Miss Jayne had no further distractions from your ultimate goal."

Piper gasped. Her face ripened into a purplish hue. I'd never seen her this angry. King had scared her. But this was pure rage. "How dare you, Sheriff White." Piper spoke through clenched teeth. "Mr. Tutheridge and I have one goal, and that's to take care of Bebe. You know how difficult her childhood's been. In fact, you're responsible for what she had to see with her innocent eyes. You looked the other way while her grandfather abused her grandmother. You acquiesced to Roland Tutheridge for years and years, doing his bidding to the detriment of the citizens of this island. You may get away with it here, but eventually, you'll have God to answer to."

"Miss Jayne, although I applaud your courage with that little speech, I can assure you I was not responsible for Roland Tutheridge's actions. To that end, if Hudson was so concerned about his daughter's well-being, why did he remain living at the house? Especially given that he blamed his father for

Rosemary's death? It's plausible to reason that Bebe's troubles were because of her father. I had nothing to do with the Tutheridge family, other than being under Roland's employment."

Piper drew in a quick breath. My father's involvement in Rosemary's death was not known to her. Now, thanks to White, I would have to tell her the story. Could I ever truly move on if I remained on this island? The ghosts of the past clung to every shadow here.

"Do you really believe the deaths of Miss Woolf and King aren't related?" I asked White.

"What I think about either murder is not for you to question," White said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a criminal inside here who I'm morally obligated to feed a meal." His cigar dangled from one side of his mouth as he tipped his hat and went back inside the jailhouse.

I placed a hand on Piper's elbow and steered her away from the jail and down to the next block. Even with such a light touch on her arm, heat emanated from her skin.

"Please accept my apologies," I said. "He has no right to insult you in that way. I'm mortified you had to endure such treatment."

She abruptly halted in front of Matthew's tavern. Breathing hard, as if we'd just run up a hill, she took a moment before answering. "You have nothing to apologize for. He is an abhorrent man. A small, petty little person. What has he against you? It's obvious he doesn't care for you."

I adjusted my hat against the glare of the sun. "It's that I'm a Tutheridge. My father was not good to the men he brought over with him. He had knowledge of their pasts he used to manipulate them. Did King ever tell you about his arrangement?"

"No, we rarely talked of finances," she said. "Other than he hinted his situation might be changing soon."

I explained to her the nature of my father's business relationships with the five men he'd played poker with every



week. “In general, he kept their secrets and they kept his in exchange for money. I don’t know what my father had on any of them, but whatever it was played a significant part in their lives. Including Caleb King’s.”

I turned to see Matthew Goodwell coming down the street. Spotting us, he sped up, gesturing to wait for him.

“I suppose you’ve heard about Caleb?” Matthew asked when he arrived, slightly out of breath. “Terrible thing.”

“We’ve just been in to see the sheriff,” I said. “The fool’s arrested poor Ernie Thomas.”

“Yeah, I saw that this morning,” Matthew said. “I’m sorry to intrude on your day, but do you two have a minute to talk?” He glanced around. “But not here. Would you have time to come upstairs to my apartment? I don’t open for another hour or so. We can speak in private.”

“Certainly,” I said.

We followed Matthew down the alleyway to the back door of his building and then up the stairs to the apartment above the bar.

I had never been up to his residence and was surprised by the barrenness of the decor. He had only a simple table with two chairs and a small sofa set before the fire. What a lonely life he must have, I thought.

He asked us if we wanted a glass of water or coffee but we declined.

“Please sit,” Matthew said, indicating the sofa. He grabbed one of the hardback chairs from the table and brought it to sit across from us. This time of year, the fireplace wasn’t being used, and the windows were open to let the breeze freshen the room.

“I wanted to talk to you about King,” Matthew said. “I know a little about the nature of his past. The reason he came to the island. I thought it might be relevant, given what happened to you, Miss Jayne. Which I’m very sorry about, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Piper said.

“When Miss Woolf showed up dead, I had a bad feeling King had something to do with it. In fact, when she went missing, the first thing I thought of was King. I don’t know why, as I’ve never seen any behavior that would indicate such violence. I’d always known him to be gentle and patient. The children here have always loved him. But the feeling wouldn’t go away. So I decided to do a little digging.”

Neither of us spoke, not wanting to interrupt.

Matthew drew in a breath. “But first, let me tell you what I already knew. Or the story he told me, anyway. Before he came here, King had been fired from a private school back east. According to him, he and a student fell in love but never acted upon it. She was eighteen and he was only twenty, so it wasn’t as untoward as it could have been. But still, he was in a position of power over her. When the girl’s father discovered their feelings for each other, he was able to get King fired from the school and basically run out of town. Destitute, he came west and met Roland Tutheridge, who then hired him to tutor your brother Benedict.”

“Yes, I remember.” The island had had fewer residents then so King had tutored Benedict at the house. Soon thereafter, my father had the school built, and King became our teacher.

“King told me this story not too long ago. In fact, it was after your father’s murder that the five of us who played poker with him finally told one another our reasons for taking Tutheridge up on his offers of employment. We each had a story that made it impossible for us to have many choices about our lives. Thus, we all ended up here. In your father’s pocket one way or the other.”

“Yes, my mother hinted at such,” I said. “But never shared the full details of why or how you got here.”

“Right. Your mother asked me for a favor and once it’s complete, she will let us all out of our financial contracts Roland put in place.”

“What favor?” I asked.

“It’s not for me to share as of yet,” Matthew said. “Nothing nefarious, I can assure you. Anyway, to continue, I started thinking about King’s story. Like I said, after the young woman went missing and then turned up dead, something about it started to bother me. She and King had worked together closely. He was the last person who saw her before she disappeared. It started keeping me up at night. I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d told me. Could it all have been a lie? What had really happened back east? I can’t explain exactly why—perhaps instinct—but I decided to look into King’s story. It took some doing and some help from a friend in Boston, but I managed to find the school where he worked. He’d mentioned the name of it to me one time in passing and by the grace of God, I remembered it. My friend made some inquiries and discovered that King had not told the story correctly. In fact, the girl’s father didn’t have him fired. King ran away. After the girl turned up dead.”

“Oh my God.” Piper’s hands flew to her mouth. “He killed her?”

“My friend made a trip to see the father,” Matthew said. “He told her a very different story than the one King told me. Like I said, the young woman had been found strangled. King was never seen again. He came out here, met your father, and started a new life.”

We shared with Matthew what Ernie Thomas had told us. “He felt certain King murdered her but had no way of proving anything,” I said.

“Except he gave the sheriff her letters she’d sent to him during her time here. From what he said, it seems clear that King made advances toward her and she rejected him. Days later, she went missing, only to turn up strangled.” Piper’s voice shook and tears gathered in her lashes. “I’m sorry. It’s so very upsetting.”

I pressed a hankie into her hand. She dabbed at her eyes.

“It’s quite understandable,” Matthew said. “I agree, it’s horrible. And I’m afraid I have a part in this now. King’s dead

because of me.”

“What do you mean?” Piper sat forward slightly, wrapping the hankie around her finger.

“All of my digging set off another course of events,” Matthew said. “The girl’s name was Marybeth Jennings. Her father, now elderly, was only too happy to speak to my friend. After meeting with him, she said his grief had consumed him for decades, leaving him with only one desire.”

“Revenge,” Piper whispered.

“That’s right. He wanted to find his daughter’s killer and seek revenge. However, he’d never been able to find any leads about King’s whereabouts. Aubrey Mantle, feeling sympathetic, told him what she knew about King and that he lived here on Whale Island.”

“Mrs. Mantle?” I asked, confused for a moment.

Matthew blinked, seemingly surprised at the slip of his tongue. He hadn’t meant to say her name, I felt certain.

“Yes, that’s my friend I asked to help me with all of this,” Matthew said.

“The matchmaker?” Piper asked, eyes twinkling for a second.

He flinched, obviously taken aback. “Mrs. Mantle runs a staffing business.”

“We’ve heard it’s more than that,” I said. “We were curious to know when my match was coming?”

Matthew had the decency to flush red. He tugged on his ear and tilted his head as if ridding his ear of water. “I’m not sure I follow.”

I laughed. “We’re pretty sure you do.”

“Is Hudson getting a match too?” Piper asked, with a slight edge to her voice. Did she not want me to have a match? *Please, let that be so*, I silently prayed.

Matthew put up his hands. “Fine. I’ll just tell you. I hate to lie about anything, and keeping this secret has proven

impossible. The Tutheridge siblings and their spouses are too smart for me. My secret matchmaking has not been so secret after all.” He turned to Piper. “You, Miss Jayne, you have been sent here for Hudson.”

“But I came with Sara Rose. She was Rhett’s match,” Piper said.

“Yes, well, have you ever heard of the saying, ‘kill two birds with one stone?’” Matthew asked. “She felt strongly that you were the perfect match for Hudson here. Thus, your desire to accompany her played perfectly into her plan. Mrs. Mantle’s a force to be reckoned with. Between you and me, I think she must have a direct line to our heavenly father.” He pointed toward the ceiling.

Miss Piper Jayne had been sent for me? I’d suspected it, but hearing confirmation nearly knocked me over. Words failed me. Beside me, Piper seemed to have momentarily frozen as well.



## PIPER

“**M**ay we please return to what you were saying about the murdered girl’s father knowing Caleb was on Whale Island?” I asked out loud, while my mind turned with this new information.

A match for Hudson. I’d been sent for him.

Never mind that now, I told myself sternly. I must pay attention to what Matthew was telling us about Mr. Jennings.

“Yes, well, this is all presumption on my part,” Matthew said. “But knowing that this man, who has wanted revenge for two decades, suddenly knew the whereabouts of King, I have come to the conclusion that he sent someone to murder Caleb. Which means it’s my fault he’s been killed.”

“Is there any way to know if anyone new has come to the island?” I asked.

“I’m sure we can ask around,” Matthew said. “I’ve been in such a state of nerves that I haven’t gotten that far.”

“The ferry captain might know,” Hudson suggested.

“Or maybe Michael Moon?” I asked. “If someone had come to town, they might have need of supplies.”

“Is there any way to know if your theory is correct?” Hudson asked. “If this Jennings fellow hired someone to kill King, we might never be able to prove it. And honestly, it’s not that I’m sorry to see King gone, but I don’t want poor Ernie to go to jail for a crime he didn’t commit.”

“And the sheriff’s incompetent and mean,” I said.

“White said he doesn’t have enough evidence to keep him in jail for long,” Hudson said. “I think he’s hoping to find out something today, but I have bad news for him. There’s nothing there.”

“I have to admit, White’s been acting strange of late,” Matthew said. “As if he has something to hide.”

“Agreed. I thought maybe he was involved somehow with the missing girl and was covering for himself and King.” Hudson glanced at me. “We both thought so, didn’t we?”

I nodded. “Yes, up until you told us this latest piece of news, I thought all of this was connected. The two murders, I mean.”

“I’ll be down at the dock when the ferry comes in today,” Matthew said. “To ask the captain if he brought anyone to the island yesterday that he didn’t recognize. I’ll also keep an eye out for anyone who boards from here. If they’re a stranger to me, they just might be the murderer.”

“If we figure out who he is, will White arrest him?” I asked. “He seems particularly set on harassing Hudson—I mean Mr. Tutheridge—than actually solving crimes.”

“What did he say to you this morning?” Matthew asked.

“Besides insinuating that Mr. Tutheridge and I were having a salacious affair?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“How odd,” Matthew said. “I’ve never known him to be so erratic. Something’s troubling him. I have no idea what it could be. Your mother’s promised to rip up whatever agreements the five of us had with your father. Which will give us a lot more money to live on.”

“What did you work out with my mother?” Hudson asked. “What’s the agreement?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Matthew said. “I have a big mouth. I never knew quite how big until your mother asked me to keep all these secrets.”

“What other secrets?” Hudson asked.



Matthew grew redder. “For heaven’s sake. What’s the matter with me?” He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. “Your mother asked me to help her get you all matched and married in return for her letting us all out of our contracts. Being released from those agreements will make a huge difference in our lives. We’ve all been kept near poverty because of our deals with your father.”

“I didn’t think she had a sneaky bone in her body,” Hudson said. “I’m flabbergasted by this entire affair.”

“Yes, well, she thought you all needed a nudge in the right direction,” Matthew said. “Believe me, I had no interest in playing a part, but as I said, she had a compelling exchange. In addition, I care about you and your siblings deeply.”

“Thank you,” Hudson said. “Very kind of you to say so.”

Since the announcement that I was his match, Hudson had not looked at me once. This was all so terribly awkward. How would we go home together now?

Why had she thought it would be me? My curiosity was too much. I had to ask.

“Matthew, why did she send me for Hudson, do you think?”

His mouth twitched into a smile. Despite his claims to the contrary, I had a feeling he liked playing matchmaker.

“We asked Mrs. Mantle to send us a woman who loved children. Someone with a certain maturity to her—one who had dealt with some of life’s blows as Hudson has.” He turned toward Hudson. “We thought the key to your heart, Hudson, was someone who loved your daughter as much as she loved you.”

It was my turn to blush. Why had I asked? However, she was right. I did love children. I was a mature woman who had seen my share of trouble.

“I might point out, Mrs. Mantle has not been wrong once,” Matthew said. “Her matches have been one hundred percent successful.”

“But Hudson—I mean—Mr. Tutheridge never expressed interest in remarrying,” I said.

“His mother doesn’t worry about what the kids have said or didn’t say about their interest in a domestic situation. No one protested harder than Ella until the moment she met our new doctor. I’m afraid mothers know us better than we know ourselves.”

“We’ve taken enough of your time.” Sweat was dampening the back of my neck. It was ungodly hot. As much as I dreaded the drive home with Hudson, it was time to get out of here. I needed to think all of this through.

We said goodbye to Matthew and headed out and back down the street to the car without saying a word to each other. Had our easy friendship been ruined with this matchmaking business?

Or was Mrs. Mantle right? Was I Hudson’s perfect match?

And who murdered Caleb King?

---

WHEN WE RETURNED HOME, Bebe and Lizzie had lunch ready for us and stories to tell about their morning. They’d gone down to the water and fished and lo and behold had caught one, which we were now enjoying for our midday meal.

Hudson and I were still awkward around each other, but by the time Bebe’s happy chatter had distracted us, we both seemed to forget about the disturbing news of our planned match.

That afternoon, as promised, we all piled into the car and drove up to the beach Hudson knew had several families of harbor seals. Lizzie, thrilled to be joining us, seemed not much older than Bebe as we bounced along the dirt road. They shared the same ecstatic grin as the breeze blew the ribbons of their hats to and fro.

When we reached our destination, Bebe asked for permission to take off her shoes and stockings so she could

play in the water.

“That’s fine. Please try not to get your skirt wet, though.”

“Can Lizzie come too?” Bebe asked.

I turned toward Lizzie. “That is up to her.”

“I am awfully warm.” Lizzie’s cheeks were indeed pink from the heat.

The moment we parked, the two of them hopped from the car and ran to the water, giggling the entire way.

“Occasionally, Lizzie seems like a kid.” I smiled, watching the girls taking off their shoes.

“Except she has the burdens of adulthood—sending money home to help her father makes her very grown-up indeed.” Hudson reached into the back of the car to grab the blanket and our picnic supper of sandwiches and apples. We arranged the blanket under the shade of a birch tree, whose leaves fluttered in the breeze above us like soft percussion music.

Lizzie and Bebe squealed as they dipped their toes in the cool water of the Puget Sound.

“Lizzie may take my job,” I said. “She’s wonderful with Bebe.”

“She’s good with her, yes. But no one’s quite like you.”

I thanked him, embarrassed that it seemed as if I were asking for praise.

We were quiet for a few minutes. I sat leaning against the tree trunk, pretending to watch the girls while stealing glances at the man next to me.

Hudson took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He used the spare blanket to put behind his head and stretched his legs out long. I couldn’t help but notice his lean, muscular frame. The thin material of his shirt clung to his muscular shoulders and chest. What would it feel like to rest my head there? To have him stroke my hair?

Was Mrs. Mantle right? Were we a perfect match?

At some point, we would have to talk about what we now knew to be truth, not just speculation on our part. I just didn't know how to broach the subject of our match.

"About this matchmaking nonsense," Hudson said, as if he read my mind. "Should we speak of it further? Now that we know without a doubt what my mother's been up to?"

"It's not entirely nonsense," I said, relieved he'd brought it up so I didn't have to. "She's successfully married off four couples."

The girls waded out of the water and sat in a small patch of sand with their backs to us. Bebe's high-pitched chirp and Lizzie's lower tones mimicked the songs of the birds that flitted from tree to tree.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Hudson said.

"About what?"

"This whole debacle. Murders. Matchmaking." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'm trying to decide if it's better or worse that we now know my mother's been manipulating this entire thing."

"Your brothers and Ella are happy, though. Surely that's all that matters." The moment I said it, I wished I could take it back. God forbid he think I assumed he and I would end up married simply because his mother sent for a mail-order bride.

"Yes, I suppose. I still don't like being lied to."

"A lie by omission," I said gently. "She wants you all to be happy."

"As far as the two of us? Should we take any stock in Mrs. Mantle whatsoever?"

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Are you going to make me say it?" His mouth lifted into a gentle smile for a second before he sobered.

"I think I am." I held my breath, waiting.

"It is possible Mrs. Mantle was right about us?" Hudson asked.

My pulse sped as I internally debated with myself. Should I tell him the truth or keep my feelings to myself? He'd been so open with me. I owed him the truth. "I think it's a definite possibility. I'd not have thought so. Even a week ago. But spending time with you has shown me who you really are. A great man who suffered a terrible blow. One which continues to haunt him. And I'm left with one question—can this man ever love another as he did his wife?"

His eyelids fluttered before he lifted his gaze to meet mine. "I didn't think so. Until recently, I assumed I would be alone for the rest of my life. You have changed my perspective. Given me a glimpse into what life could be like having sunshine every day of the year, regardless of the weather. You are pure light, Piper Jayne. You make my heart lighter."

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Here is my question for you." Hudson shifted to his side, resting his head in one hand as he peered at me. "Could you ever like me a little? Being the opposite of the sun and all?"

I smiled as the image came to me. "You're more like a silvery moon. Quieter than the sun, but equally beautiful."

"The sun and moon are never in one place. Isn't that sad?" He brushed a lock of hair that had fastened to my damp cheek with the pad of his thumb. His touch sent a thrill through my entire body.

I laid my hand on his for only a second, knowing I had to be careful because of Bebe's discerning eyes. "We're in the same place right now. I see you. All of you."

The rest of the world disappeared, and it was only the depths of his eyes, pulling me into his soul. My stomach fluttered when his gaze dropped to my mouth. What would his kiss be like? Caleb and I had shared a few chaste kisses, but I never allowed him to linger long. Now, though, I could imagine wanting Hudson to linger. Forever.

Oh my, forever? Was that really what I wanted?

The weather was so warm. I felt almost faint. Or was it being in such close proximity to Hudson? My mouth seemed

suddenly without any moisture at all.

He sat up, his brows knit in concern. “Are you all right? Is it the heat?”

“No, I’m fine. Really. Don’t fuss.”

“Have water,” he said, already pouring some into a glass.

I took it and drank gratefully. When I’d finished it all, he took the glass and put it back in the basket. “We don’t want you fainting like our overworked Mrs. Halvorson. I must do a better job of looking after you.”

“I’m fine, really. But thank you.” Hudson was a thoughtful man. He must have been a good husband. The thought of poor Rosemary having to leave her precious daughter and handsome husband made my eyes sting. *I’m sorry you’re missing this*, I thought.

“You rest. I brought something to read.” Hudson dug a book of Shakespearean sonnets out of the picnic basket. “Do you have a favorite?”

“The one about his ugly mistress,” I said. “Will you read that one to me?”

“Out loud?”

“Yes, silly.” I laughed. “How else?”

He smirked but opened the book, taking a few minutes to locate the one to which I referred.

“Ah yes, here it is,” Hudson said. “Sonnet one hundred and thirty.” He cleared his throat and gestured dramatically. “I shall attempt to act it out as best I can.”

I giggled. “I can hardly wait.”

“My mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun.” Hudson stopped abruptly. “The poor man. If only he had had a woman like you. He would never have had to write such things.”

“Hudson Tutheridge, you’re a flatterer.” Still, I laughed, tickled by this side of him.

“I say nothing but the truth,” he said before continuing his poetry reading.

After he was done, he set aside the book and looked over at me. “Tell me, if you will, beautiful Piper Jayne, what it is you like to do best?”

*Beautiful.* How I loved hearing the word, even though I knew it was a sin to be so vain. “I’ve never thought about it much. Working has taken so much of my life, there’s not much left at the end of the day. But I love to read in the evenings, with a fire blazing to warm my toes. Spending time here by the water has quickly become a favorite. What about you?”

“Without a doubt, this is one. Right now. Sitting by the water on a warm, sunny day with exceptional company and the sounds of my daughter’s laughter.” He picked up the book of sonnets. “And William, of course.”

“I never would have guessed you to be a hidden romantic.”

“I was never in hiding,” Hudson said. “Just in dormancy.” He looked at me with a serious expression. “You’ve brought it to the surface.”

I played with the fringe on the corner of the blanket. “What does a courtship look like between a nanny and her employer?”

“I don’t think it’s ever been done properly,” Hudson said. “There have been many clandestine affairs, I’d guess.”

“No, do you think so?” I shivered, unable to bring myself to think of any of my former bosses in that way. None of them were as handsome as Hudson Tutheridge, that was for certain.

“With Lizzie and Bebe near, we’ll have no choice but to remain chaste,” Hudson said, wriggling his eyebrows.

I couldn’t help but giggle and flush like a schoolgirl. “How could it be that for months I didn’t like you at all?”

He put his hand over his chest. “Miss Jayne, you wound me.”

“You have to admit, you were a bit grumpy when first we met.”

“I’ve been grumpy for four years. It’s exhausting. And impossible to remain thus when in your company. As I mentioned.”

We were interrupted from our shameful flirting when Bebe came running up to show us her latest rock. After properly exclaiming over it, I was able to get Bebe to drink a glass of water. We invited Lizzie to come sit with us, giving her a drink as well. It was such a treat to spend time with all three of them. Almost like a family.

---

THE NEXT MORNING, Hudson took all four of us into town for church services. It was a subdued congregation that morning, with the pew Caleb had always occupied empty.

After the sermon, everyone gathered for a moment in the lobby and out on the lawn. Children played chase under the trees while their parents talked with friends and neighbors. I didn’t have to hear the conversations to know they were all talking about Caleb King’s murder.

It took me a moment to realize that people were looking my way. They wondered if I killed him. It hadn’t occurred to me that anyone would think so, but now it seemed obvious. Everyone knew what he’d done to me. I would suspect me, too.

Sara Rose and I locked eyes from across the lobby. She gestured for us to meet outside, which I was only too happy to do. I had much to tell her.

We embraced under the shade of the tree but did not sit on the bench. It held too many bad memories for me now.

“I’ve been worried sick over you,” Sara Rose said. “We were not aware until this morning about his murder. It’s awful to think about. I still can’t believe how this has all come to pass. Here I thought you’d probably be married to him by now.”



“Yes, well, fortunately, I didn’t marry him before discovering he was a murderer.” I drew closer and told her as quietly as I could everything we’d learned over the last few days, including what Matthew had told us.

“My God, it’s beyond understanding,” Sara Rose said when I finished. “Dear me, when I think of what he might have done to you. It’s absolutely terrifying.”

“God has been by my side,” I said. “No question.”

“And now there’s another murderer, probably still on the island.”

Just then, as if planned, Matthew and Hudson arrived, with Rhett not far behind.

“Did you see any strangers get on the ferry?” I asked right away, remembering his promise to check the records.

“No.” Matthew shook his head. “And the captain said he’d brought no one over in weeks that wasn’t a resident. He keeps a log of all guests—has them sign their name in a book. There’s no one on that list for the last month that doesn’t live here or visit frequently because they have family here.”

My blood ran cold. “Which means it’s someone here on the island. Someone we know. Not the girl’s father.”

“It would seem that way,” Matthew said. “On one hand, I’m relieved I didn’t aid in his murder. On the other, that means it’s someone we know. The question is, who else had a motive for killing him?”

“I don’t know,” Rhett said. “This entire affair has the whole town on edge. Roddy, my helper, said his mother didn’t sleep a wink last night, frightened that someone would come to the house and kill her and her husband. I long for the days when we hadn’t had any murders in our little piece of paradise.”

I think we would all agree.



## HUDSON

“Is it true Mr. King was shot with a gun?” Bebe asked the moment we got home from church.

“What did you hear?” Piper asked.

“Wally told us all about it after Sunday school. He said there was blood and guts everywhere.”

“Wally should learn that gossip is not an attractive quality,” Piper said before sending a worried glance my way.

“Mr. King was shot,” I said. “But Wally has no idea what he’s talking about.”

“Are you glad he’s dead?” Bebe asked, watching Piper closely. “After he scared us so much?”

“I would never say I was glad to see a young man perish,” Piper said. “However, as you know, Mr. King proved himself to be of inferior character.” Piper glanced at me again. “Your father and I are relieved that we no longer have to worry about him causing us any problems.”

“Did you kill him, Papa?” Bebe asked, tears suddenly flooding her blue eyes. “Or you, Miss Piper?”

“Why would you ask such a thing?” Where did she come up with these ideas?

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “Wally said people in town were saying maybe you did it after what he did to Miss Piper. You know, smashing her head into the brick wall. Or that Miss Piper did it for revenge.”

Piper steadied herself by putting a trembling hand on the kitchen table.

“Bebe, come here.” I sat and patted my knee. “Let’s talk.”

My daughter crawled onto my lap. I took my handkerchief and dabbed her cheeks dry.

“Now, listen, my darling. What happened with Mr. King that day in town worried me. It’s my duty to look after you and Miss Piper. Lizzie as well, of course.” I darted a look at Lizzie, who was putting a roast in the oven for Sunday dinner and appeared not to have taken offense. If only everyone could be as easygoing as Lizzie. Including myself.

“But I would never hurt another human being unless I had to defend myself or one of you ladies. We came out here to stay away from Mr. King. But neither Miss Piper nor I would ever hurt someone unless they were trying to hurt you.”

“Or Lizzie?” Bebe asked.

“That’s right. Miss Piper doesn’t even know how to shoot a gun, and she was sound asleep when all of this happened. As was I. They will find who did this. Wally will find something else to gossip about.”

“Will I have to go to school in the fall?” Bebe asked, lip continuing to tremble. “Wally said the school might have ghosts now because of Miss Woolf.”

I drew her more tightly to my chest, kissing the top of her head. “There are no ghosts at school or otherwise. They’ll hire another teacher. But the beginning of school is weeks away. I’m sure your grandmother and Mr. Bains will find someone suitable.”

Bebe hugged me around my neck, then nestled into my chest. “I told that big fat mouth Wally that you would never hurt anyone. I’d have punched him in his big stupid, freckled face if Pastor Bains hadn’t been watching us.”

Across the room, Piper and Lizzie exchanged amused glances.

“We mustn’t talk of hitting someone in their face, big fat mouth or not,” I said gently. “Even when someone says something false about someone we love, we have to keep our tempers at bay.”

“At bay?” Bebe asked. “Like the sea?”

“No, it’s just an expression. I mean, we cannot allow anger to make us strike out in any way. Either with our fists or our tongues.”

Bebe giggled. “You can’t hit anyone with your tongue.”

“You can hurt someone’s feelings by wagging your tongue too much. Like Wally,” I added drily. “By tongue, I mean you can hurt someone with your words.”

“Oh, I see.” Bebe shifted to look up at me. “Papa, do we have to go back to the big house now?”

“Would you rather stay here?” I asked.

“Forever and ever,” she said earnestly.

“Why do you prefer to live here?” I asked.

“Because it’s like we have a family. You and me and Miss Piper and Lizzie. We don’t have anyone else around to tell us what to do or give disapproving looks. By that, I’m sure you know who I mean.”

Not a question, I noted.

“Grammie?”

“That’s correct.” She nodded solemnly. “Miss Piper told me that Grammie has very high standards for how a little girl should act. But Grammie never told me what they were. Whenever I do something wrong, she makes a face like this.” She paused to demonstrate by narrowing her eyes and pursing her lips.

It looked so much like my mother I had to laugh.

Bebe grinned, obviously pleased that she’d amused me. “Anyway, Miss Piper said that when Grammie does that, I should think about what I am doing that upset her.”

“Have you been able to do so?” I asked.

“Not really. It seems like most everything I do aggravates her.” She said the word *aggravate* slowly, as if she’d only just learned the word.

“Well, you mustn’t take it to heart. My mother’s getting older and has less tolerance for rambunctious little girls.” I chuckled, remembering the same expression on Mother’s face during one of Ella’s antics. “Actually, she never had much tolerance for your aunt Ella, either. And look how well she turned out.”

Piper turned from where she’d been stirring something on the stove. “That is an excellent observation. However, it’s important we remember our manners at all times, even if it means holding our tongue.”

“The tongue again,” Bebe muttered, nodding her head knowingly. “Which means our words.”

“That’s correct.” Piper shook the wooden spoon at Bebe, smiling indulgently. “You’re a quick learner.”

“Yes, and if you’re in doubt about what’s appropriate, you need only ask Miss Piper or me and we’ll give you guidance,” I said. “That’s our job. To raise you up to be a lady and not a hooligan.”

“What’s a hooligan?” Bebe asked.

I set her back on her feet. “A wild child. Which you are not. You are a smart, polite young lady. Now, go upstairs and change out of your church dress. You can play outside until our dinner’s ready.”

She did as I asked, running up the stairs, all concerns about the possibility of our murderous tendencies seemingly long forgotten.

“If you don’t mind me saying so,” Lizzie said, turning to face me, “I think you and Miss Jayne are the most marvelous parents. Or parental figures, in the case of Miss Jayne. If only my father would teach my brothers about manners. I’m afraid they’re *all* growing up to be hooligans.”

“More reason for you to stay with us,” I said to Lizzie. “Speaking of which, how do you two feel about staying here rather than returning to the estate?”

Piper gave me a bland smile, but I could tell by the sparkle in her eye she was delighted at the prospect of staying. “As I’ve said, wherever you and Bebe are the happiest is where I want to be.”

“Thank you for asking, sir, but it’s not my place to have an opinion,” Lizzie said. “I go where I’m told.”

I thought for a moment about what she’d said. Rosemary had always treated the maids and kitchen help with kindness and respect. She’d been appalled at how my father treated the staff. “You know, Lizzie, I’m going to have to disagree. My late wife always said that everyone should have a say in how their life is lived. You should get to decide where you’d like to work. If you’d rather return to the big house, you have my blessing. You may choose without fear of repercussions.”

Lizzie beamed, straightening her apron. “I love it here, Mr. Tutheridge. It’s such fun to be with Miss Jayne and Bebe all day. I love my little room. As I said, I’ve never had one all to myself before. I’ll be quite spoiled after all of this and sad to ever work anywhere else.”

“As will I,” Piper said.

I placed my hands on my knees, leaning forward slightly. “All right then, it seems we have a consensus, as I would also like to stay here, too. However, are you sure it’s not too much work to do alone, Lizzie? All the cooking and cleaning?”

“Sir, I have a thousand brothers. This is nothing.”

“It’s settled then. We shall stay put.” I grinned. “Which means we need to order some furniture.”

---

LATER, I surprised the ladies by pulling out an old table I had stored in my shed and setting it in the shade of the birch tree in the backyard. Lizzie draped a tablecloth over it, and Bebe and

Piper picked wildflowers and put them in small vases in the middle of the table. The weather couldn't have been lovelier for dining outside.

We dined on pieces of succulent roast beef with smashed potatoes flavored with scallions and garlic. Since we'd decided to stay here at my house, it felt almost like a celebration. Not only that, King was dead. I didn't have to worry about every twig snap in the woods surrounding the house.

We convinced Lizzie she should eat with us. She agreed, but only if we understood this was not something that would become a regular habit. "Only in the summer," Lizzie said, as if bargaining with herself.

"Whatever you want," I said.

After we were finished with our meal, the ladies and Bebe cleared the table. I went out to the woodshed to chop some wood, in case we decided to have another bonfire that evening.

I was just finishing up when I heard horses coming up the driveway. Surprised to have a visitor, I dabbed my sweaty brow and walked around the front of the house to see who had decided to drop by unannounced. It was my mother and Timothy.

I'd never brought my mother out here before. Mostly because I didn't want to hear her judgment, whatever it was, about the size of the house or its decor. However, it was actually nice to see them. I had every right to be proud of my home, whatever she did or didn't think.

I peeled off my work gloves to shake Timothy's hand.

"What brings you out?" I asked.

"We're sorry to come by unannounced," Mother said. "But we might have had to wait an eternity for an invite from you."

"You're welcome anytime, Mother. With or without an invitation. In fact, I was just discussing whether or not to return to Stella and have decided it's time for us to be on our own. This house was just sitting here. Waiting for a family to arrive."



“Family? Interesting choice of words.” My mother’s delight was not hard to miss. She put her hand in the crook of Timothy’s arm. “Do we get a tour?”

“Yes, but first, I would like to ask you about this matchmaking you’ve been doing.”

Mother paled slightly and widened her eyes to prove her innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t bother pretending. Matthew told me everything, including that Miss Jayne was sent out for me. Now that you have the others married off, that is. I don’t know if you were saving me for last on purpose or not, but I know what you’ve been up to.”

“Well, that’s very imaginative of you.” Mother looked up at Timothy.

Timothy sighed. “Your mother was worried about all of you finding a match. Especially given the sparse population of the island.”

“And?” I asked.

“How could you ever find your perfect matches here on the island? She heard about this genius matchmaker back east and decided to hire her.”

“Roping Matthew into your deceit as well,” I said.

“When and what did he tell you?” Mother asked.

“Only recently. And he told us everything. He says the others know, too.”

“They do? Oh, dear, well, that’s not good news. Is everyone quite angry with me?”

“Mother, given how happily married they all are, I don’t think they care about the methods employed.”

“It’s for your own good,” Mother said, recovering slightly from her shock. “Speaking of which, how is it going between you and Miss Jayne?”

“I almost hesitate to tell you this for fear of your head swelling even larger,” I said, enjoying teasing her a little too

much. “But your evil plan may just be working.”

“Now that Caleb King’s out of the way especially,” Mother said, biting out the words.

I stared at her. She’d said that with such viciousness. Was it possible she’d had him killed? I immediately dismissed the idea. My sweet mother could never hurt anyone. Even in her desperation to find a match for me, she wouldn’t commit murder. If she had it in her, my father would have been poisoned long ago.

Bebe, a delighted grin plastered on her face, came running out to see her grandmother and Timothy.

“Grammie, I’ve been practicing not annoying you with my antics.”

My Bebe had quite the vocabulary, I thought. One that appeared to be growing with every passing day. Piper always spoke to her as if she were a little adult, which I suppose she was. Furthermore, Piper challenged my daughter to think through situations and come to her own conclusions. The result was a child with a sophisticated vocabulary. Add that to her cleverness, and we had quite the potential scholar. If only she used her intelligence for good and not evil, I would be pleased.

“What have you been doing to practice such a feat?” Mother asked as she and Bebe headed toward the house.

Timothy remained where he was. “You have a moment to talk?”

“Sure. What’s on your mind?” I asked.

“I’ve come from visiting Matthew. He told me about what King did back east,” Timothy said. “I had no idea whatsoever, as I’m sure you guessed. You think you know people simply because you have years of history with them, but the truth is, it’s hard to know who anyone is underneath. If they choose to hide who they are, then it’s impossible to know what you don’t know.” He let out a heavy sigh. “Anyway, Matthew had a message for you. The father of the girl Caleb presumably

killed back east arrived this morning on the ferry. Gerald Jennings was a day too late.”

“Too late to do whatever he was going to do to the man who killed his daughter.”

“Right. Matthew invited Gerald Jennings and his valet to stay with him instead of sending them back to Seattle, but your mother intervened, inviting him to the estate instead. There’s so much more room there, and Mr. Jennings is elderly and frail. I don’t think he could have murdered Caleb even if he tried. A good wind could knock him over.”

“What did he do when he found out Caleb was dead?”

“Matthew said his legs buckled under him and he wept. Poor soul.”

“How incredibly sad,” I said. “The poor man.”

“He’s resting at the house now, but he’d like to meet Miss Jayne,” Timothy said.

“To ask her what, I wonder?”

“It’s probably hard for him to explain, but my guess is that he wants to speak with another woman who knew him. In addition to all that, the sheriff let Ernie go.”

“Really? How did that happen?”

“I may have had a word with him,” Timothy said. “It’s hard to deny the request by your pastor. He had no evidence to keep him there. I think he knows Ernie didn’t do it, but there’s something in the sheriff that makes it impossible to admit his mistakes or failings. It’s not a good quality in a man. One has to know when to apologize.”

“Did Ernie head back out to his property?” I asked.

“I believe so. Although I hate to see him go back to that shack after everything he’s been through.”

“He needs work,” I said. “Is there anything you and Mother need at the house?”

Timothy nodded, slowly though, as if he weren’t entirely certain. “I worry about your mother, that’s all.”

“The man had nothing to do with King’s death,” I said. “I’m certain of it.”

“You’re most likely correct. Your mother and I could hire him to help Mr. Halvorson. He could use some assistance now that he’s getting older. If Ernie wants to, he can board at the house with the rest of the staff. I imagine he’ll find it easier than trapping rabbits for his supper. I’ll go by and see Ernie on our way home and see if he wants to take us up on our offer. He may choose to return to Seattle after all this.”

“I wouldn’t blame him.”

“Nor I,” Timothy said. “I feel for the man. I really do. Losing his love the way he did. It’s horrific.”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “But if we can put him to work and welcome him into the community, then it’s something.”

Timothy hesitated for a moment. “There’s another thing I wanted to mention.”

“Go ahead.” I braced myself for a question about Miss Jayne, but it was something else altogether.

“Ella and Lucca are done examining King’s remains,” Timothy said. “They’ve given permission to put him in the ground. You know I have to bury him properly. He was a member of my church.”

“A proper church service for a murderer?” I asked.

“It is not for us to judge. That is up to God.”

I simply nodded. Saying anything further could only make Timothy feel poorly, and that’s the last thing I wanted.

“I’ve been trying to decide what’s bothering me the most. His death or what he did? It’s hard to reconcile. The man I thought I knew against the one he truly was. He and I had been friends for a long time.”

“It’s all right to mourn the man you thought he was,” I said. “Either way, it’s a death.”

“I suppose it is.” A sly smile lifted Timothy’s mouth. “I must ask—how is everything going with Miss Jayne?”

I didn't answer for a moment, shoving my hands into the pockets of my pants. "She has been a surprise. I'll leave it at that."

"Mrs. Mantle really is quite a genius," Timothy said, chuckling

"More like a miracle worker. This is me we're talking about. But I can't say with certainty what Miss Jayne feels about me. That remains unclear. However, I'm hopeful."

Timothy slapped me on the back. "God's watching out for you. Put your faith in him."

As we walked into the house, Rosemary came to mind. We'd been happy together. But she would want me to be happy without her, too. It would please her to see me finally moving forward with my life. She'd always wanted what was best for me. Now it was time for me to want that, too.



## PIPER

Several days passed without incident. Hudson and I had agreed to stay home the day of the church service for King. Instead, we took Bebe and Lizzie to the lake for a swim. Without the threat of King looming over us, we were able to enjoy the day without fear.

The next day around noon, Matthew showed up, accompanied by a well-dressed elderly man.

“Mr. Jennings, I assume?” Hudson asked as we stood watching Matthew assisting the older man from the wagon from the window.

“What does he want?” I asked.

“I have a feeling he wants to meet you,” Hudson said. “And talk about his daughter. As strange as it sounds, I think it will help him.”

We went out to the bright day together. Bebe was inside setting the table for lunch and appeared oblivious to the arrival of our guests.

I followed Hudson out to the front, where Matthew had just hitched his horses to a pine tree.

“Hello, sorry for the intrusion,” Matthew said.

“Not at all,” Hudson said.

“This is Mr. Robert Jennings,” Matthew said.

Hudson shook his hand and then turned toward me. “This is Miss Jayne. She helps me with my daughter.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my dear.” Robert Jennings was at least eighty if I were to guess, stoop-shouldered and frail. His hand trembled when he took mine. “Matthew’s told me all about what that beast did to you. Please accept my sympathies and well wishes for a full recovery.”

“Thank you. I’m doing just fine.” I touched the fading bruises around my neck. “So kind of you.”

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt your afternoon,” Mr. Jennings said. “But I felt an urgency to speak with you.”

“Anything we can do to help, we will,” Hudson said. “Come inside. You must stay for lunch. We usually eat at noon.”

“I couldn’t possibly intrude,” said Mr. Jennings.

“I insist,” Hudson said. “But let’s sit outside on the back porch while we wait.”

“I’ll bring us something cool to drink,” I said.

The heat of the day was at its peak, so we led them around the house to the covered back porch to take advantage of the shade. Lizzie had made a pitcher of lemonade for lunch and suggested I take that out for our guests.

“Who is that man with Matthew?” Bebe asked.

“He’s just a friend visiting from far away,” I said. “You will stay here with Lizzie until I say otherwise.”

“Yes, Miss Piper.”

When I returned to the porch with the pitcher of lemonade and four glasses, Mr. Jennings was in the middle of describing his tiring travels across the nation on the train. “An old man like me should probably not have taken such a long trip, but I had my valet with me. He’s a young man and alert. Strong as an ox. Or I would not have been able to come.”

“I’m glad all was well,” I said, handing Mr. Jennings a glass. “Careful, though, it’s slippery from the condensation.”

“You must be very good with the young lady,” Mr. Jennings said.



I blushed, realizing he was teasing me about giving him instructions about how to drink a glass of lemonade. “I apologize,” I said. “Force of habit.”

“No need. I appreciate the recommendation.”

After I had given the other men their glasses, I sat in the chair next to Mr. Jennings. Matthew and Hudson remained standing, leaning against the porch railing.

“I suppose the question must be answered as to why I have come all this way?” Mr. Jennings asked.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to us,” Hudson said. “We can understand why you would want to seek him out. For many reasons.”

“Yes, it was physically impossible for me not to come. When I heard from Mrs. Mantle about the whereabouts of the man who I feel certain killed my daughter, it was as if I was compelled by a power far greater than myself. I’ve spent the better part of twenty years thinking about what I would do to him if I ever had the chance to see him face-to-face. However, when it came down to it, all of the fantasies I’d had over the years were merely that. I am an old man now, unable to physically harm much more than a gnat flying about my head. Even if I’d gotten here before he was killed, I don’t honestly know what I would have done. All that to say, Miss Jayne, that it seems especially important for me to meet you and ask you a few questions about Caleb King.”

“Please do,” I said. “Anything. I’ll answer as best I can.”

“Thank you.” Mr. Jennings took out a handkerchief, neatly folded into a square, and brought it to his mouth to wipe perspiration from just above his upper lip. “After Marybeth was killed, I found her journal. In it were several pages describing her schoolgirl fascination with her teacher. How charming and funny he was. How handsome. And so on. But in the pages right before her death, her opinion of him changed. She wrote of feeling afraid. He’d asked her to stay after class one day, and she agreed to taking a walk in the woods. She spoke of it as both exciting and frightening. In her words, she said she assumed her nervousness was due to the

nature of their relationship. Not one of equals but of teacher and student. She wondered if she would feel differently if it was a boy of her own age. The next and last entry describes an incident that occurred that afternoon. Mr. King had kissed her. She'd not liked it, calling it rough and scary, and had run home. The last sentence she ever wrote was this: 'Mr. King threatened to hurt me if I told anyone about what happened.'"

We were all quiet for a moment before Mr. Jennings continued.

"I showed the diary to the authorities, but by that time, King had already fled town, unbeknownst to me or the police. He was never seen again. Until Mrs. Mantle came to visit me, I'd had no idea where he was. Or if he was even alive."

"How extraordinary," Hudson said. "All this time, he was living here, teaching school and without any indication of the violence in his past or future."

"Miss Woolf's fiancé, Ernie Thomas, has letters from her that indicate similar experiences," I said. "As for me, I have a similar tale." I told him about how charming he'd been during our courtship and that I had no idea of his dark side until several months into the relationship. "And then, he just turned. That night at the dance, I would never have thought it would end that way." I went on to describe the incident in town.

"In front of the child?" Mr. Jennings asked. "What kind of man does that?"

"The same kind who murders innocent young women," I said.

"As hard as it must be for you to speak of it, I appreciate your candor." Mr. Jennings dotted his forehead. "It's haunted me, you know, thinking of her last moments. How scared she must have been." His voice cracked, and he paused, dabbing at his wet cheeks. "She was such a dear girl. Such an innocent. Truly naive. I'd kept her so protected, you know. Afraid to let anyone hurt her. But she begged me to go to high school. She was such a smart little thing, and I couldn't say no. I'm sure she was flattered to be getting attention from her handsome young teacher. She would have had no idea such a thing could

even happen. Not to a girl like her, born to wealth. Wealth which I thought provided safety. I was wrong. There are monsters living among us. I should have taught her that instead of how to be polite and pleasing.”

“There’s no way you could have prepared her,” Hudson said. “As much as we want to, we can’t possibly warn our daughters about the dangers they may or may not face. There’s simply no way to know.”

“I do the guessing game until I drive myself nearly mad. If only I’d kept her at home instead of sending her to school. If only her mother had lived, maybe things would have turned out differently.”

“I know all about that game,” Hudson said. “When I lost my wife, it was the same for me. She died of influenza. And I think every day since—what if I’d taken her to the doctor in Seattle when she first got sick? What if we hadn’t been living on this remote island? On and on it goes like that. And at the end of all the questions, I’m left with only emptiness. The kind of lonely that can only come after the loss of someone we deeply loved.”

I could no longer see due to the tears that had flooded my eyes. Matthew must have been similarly affected, because he suddenly turned toward the Sound as he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket.

“Mr. Jennings, I want you to know something,” I said. “It may not lessen your pain, but I believe that even if she was scared, she was comforted by how much you loved her. She thought of you at the very last moment.”

“How do you know?” Mr. Jennings openly wept now.

“Because when I thought Caleb was going to kill me that night, my thoughts went, in what I thought would be my final moment, to the person I loved best in the world. Knowing how much I’d been loved and how much I’d loved her had given me a sense of peace. He couldn’t take that away from me. Not even the hate and evil with which he attacked me could penetrate love. It was a shield around my heart. My last

thought would have been—how lucky I have been to have loved and been loved so very well while I was here.”

“It would ease my mind so to believe what you say,” Mr. Jennings said. “For I loved her more than I could ever say.”

“You’ll be able to ask her one of these days,” I said. “When you meet again in heaven.”

“Thank you, Miss Jayne.” Mr. Jennings’s handkerchief was fully damp by then, but he’d stopped crying. He picked up his glass, carefully, and took a sip. For a moment, he peered into the glass, and a deep breath rippled the silky fabric of his tie. “I wasn’t entirely sure why I’d come all the way here, but now I know. It was to meet you. You’ve helped me tremendously, Miss Jayne.”

“I wish there were more I could do,” I said. “Please, don’t hesitate to ask if there are any further questions weighing upon you.”

Mr. Jennings set aside his glass and peered at me with such earnest need that it took my breath away. “Tell me what you saw in him. Before he showed you who he really was. What was it about him that drew you in?”

“If you’re asking if I was completely fooled by him, then the answer is an emphatic yes. I consider myself to be less of an innocent than I would have been at eighteen. I’ve worked my entire adult life and known some bad people, some of whom I worked for. Caleb King was the master of disguise. Whatever your daughter initially felt for him was not her fault. I can easily give you that advice, but truthfully, I’ve been struggling with the same thoughts about myself. I’ve felt like such a fool.”

“Dear me, of course you would,” Mr. Jennings said.

“He fooled a lot of people for a long time,” Matthew said. “Even a salty old barkeep such as myself.”

Mr. Jennings nodded sadly, his eyes blank now. “I cannot help but wonder if there was something I could have done differently. Did she not get enough of what she needed from me and thus turned to this charlatan for affection?”

“I can assure you, Mr. Jennings, from the bottom of my heart, that it was nothing you did or didn’t do. I have known you only five minutes and I can see how much you loved your daughter. She knew it too. Children know these things.”

Even as I said it, I started to question my relationship with my own father. Was his neglect and self-centeredness the reason I so easily believed Caleb King? I would put that aside to think about later, I decided. Mr. Jennings was my priority at the moment. I didn’t want him leaving here feeling at all confused about what had happened to his daughter.

“Miss Jayne, your words mean so much. My wife died when Marybeth was small, and I worried so many times about being enough for her. Men are not as equipped for affection and sensitivity as our counterparts. I’m afraid I’ve been woefully inadequate.”

I placed my hand over his knobby, aged one for a moment. His skin was cold to the touch despite the heat. He was too old to be traveling around the country chasing answers, I thought. This trip might have killed him. The one home might. A renewed rage rose in me. Caleb King had taken everything from this sweet man. Whoever killed him, for whatever reason, at least I could rest easy knowing he could no longer hurt anyone else.

I glanced over at Hudson. He gave me a reassuring smile. His eyes, however, revealed his pain. Unfortunately, he understood Mr. Jennings’s concerns better than anyone else on this porch.

“Mr. Jennings,” I said. “As you may have discerned, Mr. Tutheridge lost his wife and is raising his daughter alone.”

“Not alone,” Hudson said. “I have my family. And you. If I were truly alone, God only knows how my darling little girl would be faring.” He shifted his gaze fully on Mr. Jennings. “But, sir, I do understand your predicament. We can only do the best we can for our children. Without their mothers, they do not have as much chance as they otherwise would have. No one loves a child like their mother. Still, it’s also true that no one loves their little girl quite like a father. You must put to

rest these thoughts that torment you. The man who did this to Marybeth is now where he belongs. About as far from heaven as you can get, I might add.”

“Is your little girl here?” Mr. Jennings asked. “I’d like to meet her if I could.”

“I’ll bring her out,” Hudson said. “Be warned, however. She has a lot of energy.”

“Perhaps some of it will rub off on me,” Mr. Jennings said.

With stinging eyes, I watched Hudson go inside the house before returning to our guest. “Will you stay for long? Or do you have to go home?”

“I have no one to return to,” Mr. Jennings said. “But I suppose I’ll go home just the same.”

“You could stay a while,” Matthew said. “I spoke to Mrs. Bains this morning, and she said she hoped you’d stay for a few weeks at least.”

“Did she? How kind of her,” Mr. Jennings said. “I have recently sold my estate and have kept only Simon, my valet.”

“So you have no home to return to?” I asked.

“I’m an old man. Not long for the world. I wanted to get my affairs in order before I pass. The house was too much for me. I sold it a few months ago, and Simon and I have been living in a hotel. It’s quite nice to have no responsibilities. So I suppose I could stay a few weeks. At least. It’s lovely here. Some of the prettiest country I’ve ever seen, and I did a lot of traveling as a young man.

Bebe came out to the porch, walking slowly with her head held high. Hudson must have warned her that we had a distinguished guest, or she would have come running out, chattering away.

Mr. Jennings’s face lit up at the sight of Bebe. She was looking particularly fetching in her plain blue dress and braids tied with pink bows on their ends.

“May I present to you my daughter, Beatrice Tutheridge,” Hudson said. “We all call her Bebe.”

“Hello, dear Bebe. I’m Mr. Jennings. I know I’m awfully ugly and old, but it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Bebe curtsied and then bowed, as if the king of England were before her. “The pleasure’s all mine, kind sir. And wrinkles don’t make a person ugly. They give them character. Miss Jayne told me that, so I know it’s true.”

Her unexpected behavior made me want to belly laugh. I managed to remain calm but purposely did not look at Hudson, knowing I would lose my composure if I did so. I’d been reading her too many fairy tales, I thought. All the bowing and bobbing of heads.

The sound of horses coming down the driveway drew my attention. “Someone’s here.” I tensed. How long would it be before I stopped dreading the sound of someone’s arrival?

“It will be Simon,” Mr. Jennings said. “Probably to check up on me. He’s such a bore. Always wanting me to take a nap and go to bed early.”

“I understand completely,” Bebe said. “It’s a terrible way to live.”

“Indeed.” Mr. Jennings and Bebe shared a look of understanding.

“I’ll greet him and invite him back here,” Hudson said. “We’ll get him to stay for lunch and save you from a nap.”

I left the men to be entertained by Bebe and went back to the kitchen to see if Lizzie needed any help and to let her know we would be one more for lunch.

She was leaning over a bowl, furiously whipping a batch of pudding together. Damp hair stuck to her cheeks and the back of her neck. She looked up when I came in and set aside her wooden spoon.

“We’re one more for lunch,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s no trouble, Miss Jayne. I’ve prepared cold slices of beef and a tomato salad with a fresh loaf of bread. We have plenty.”

“You’re a blessing,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Who else will be here besides Mr. Goodwell and Mr. Jennings?” Lizzie asked.

“Mr. Jennings’s valet,” I said. “I haven’t yet met him.”

We went to the window together to look out at a tall young man with golden hair and a trim physique coming up the steps of the porch. Even from here, it was obvious what pretty blue eyes he had. He seemed around Lizzie’s age or maybe a few years older. Not what I’d expected.

“Goodness me,” Lizzie said. “Look at him.”

I laughed. “Lizzie, we must keep our heads.”

“Must we?” Lizzie asked dreamily.

“I’ll tell them to come to the table then?” I asked.

She snapped to, flushing with obvious embarrassment. “Yes, of course. Have everyone sit and I’ll bring the first course.”

“I think it would be better if we did a buffet,” I said. “That way you can eat with us.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly. Not with guests here.”

“Shall I ask Mr. Tutheridge what he would prefer?” I asked.

“What would I prefer?” Hudson asked.

I turned to see him standing in the doorway. *Goodness me*, I thought. *Look at him*.

“I’m trying to convince Lizzie to join us for lunch.” I lowered my voice. “She would like the chance to meet a certain someone’s valet.”

Hudson’s eyebrows raised. “I see. Then, by all means, you must join us.”

“I’ll die of embarrassment if I do anything foolish.” Lizzie brushed aside the hair that clung to her cheek. “And I look a mess.”

“You won’t do anything foolish,” I said, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze. “But would you like to clean up a



little before our meal?”

“Would you mind? I’ll be quick as lightning.”

“Not at all,” Hudson said.

Off she went toward her room, tripping on her skirt before rectifying herself and disappearing behind a closed door.

“What’s gotten into her?” Hudson whispered.

“She got a good glimpse of the valet,” I whispered. “A very good glimpse.”

“I hope you haven’t noticed the comely nature of the valet?” Hudson asked, drawing nearer. “Or I shall be crushed.”

I looked up and into his eyes while smoothing his tie with the palm of my hand. “I see only you.”

He covered my hand with his. “Do you really? Please don’t play with my heart.”

“I would never play when it comes to matters of the heart. Especially yours.”

He snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me close. “You are beautiful this afternoon. I can think of nothing but kissing you.” His mouth lowered.

I sucked in a breath, taking in his scent of soap and shaving powder. He had such a fine, full mouth, I thought as he pulled me against his chest. Desire flooded me, leaving me breathless.

Was he going to kiss me? I wanted him to. Desperately.

“May I kiss you?” Hudson whispered, his mouth close to mine. His warm breath smelled of peppermint.

I ached for him. “Yes, please do.”

Then, from Lizzie’s room, we heard a crash and then her voice. “For heaven’s sake.”

We jerked apart, both turning to look. Only silence met us.

“Dear me, do you think she’s all right?” I asked quietly.

Lizzie's door opened and just her head appeared. "I'm fine. Just dropped my brush. Almost ready." She withdrew quickly, reminding me of a turtle.

"Where's Mrs. Mantle when we need her?" Hudson asked.

We both broke into fits of laughter but pulled ourselves together when Bebe came running into the kitchen to announce her absolute starvation.



## HUDSON

Our guests followed me into the dining room, where somehow the girls had managed to set two additional places at the table. We didn't yet sit, waiting for the ladies. Soon, Piper and Lizzie brought in the trays of food and set them on the buffet.

"We've invited Lizzie to dine with us," Piper said. "Since it's so rare we have such esteemed guests."

"Hardly esteemed, my dear," Mr. Jennings said. "But we're delighted to join you and apologize if our arrival caused any trouble to you, Miss Lizzie."

"No trouble at all." Lizzie's glance darted toward Simon.

"Ladies, allow me to introduce my valet, Simon," Mr. Jennings said.

"It's nice to meet you all. Thank you for inviting me." Simon smiled at each of us in turn, saving Lizzie for last, lingering for a second. "Thank you for fixing enough for us."

"I always make too much." Flushing furiously, Lizzie smiled back at him. "I have five brothers, and they're always so hungry."

"Shall we eat?" Piper asked with an amused glance in my direction.

I encouraged everyone to fill their plate from the trays on the buffet. There were slices of cold beef, crumbles of local cheese, blackberries, and freshly baked French bread. Lizzie

had opened several bottles of Chablis, and I poured everyone but Bebe a glass.

Piper took the only seat left, at the other end of the table. It suited her, I thought. She belonged at the head of any table.

“Lizzie and Simon, you may sit on the side closest to the window,” I said. “If you don’t mind.”

Simon smiled. “Delighted.” He set his own plate down and pushed back the other chair for Lizzie. “Please sit, Miss Lizzie.”

She stared at him awkwardly for a moment, clearly not used to being treated like a lady instead of a maid. But finally, she nodded, put her plate down and sat. Simon immediately followed.

“I want to sit next to Mr. Jennings,” Bebe said.

“You must ask your father where he’d like you to sit,” Piper said, unfolding her napkin and placing it in her lap.

“May I, Papa?”

“Yes, you may sit next to him,” I said. “However, you must mind your manners. Mr. Jennings is a special guest.”

“Yes, Papa.” Bebe slipped into the chair and looked up at Mr. Jennings expectantly.

“What a delightful lunch companion I shall have today.” Mr. Jennings winked at Bebe, who beamed back up at him.

I held Mr. Jennings’s chair to assist him. When he was situated, I took my seat at the head of the table. It felt good to be at my own table and not my mother’s. This is where Bebe and I belonged. Whatever happened in the future, I knew this to be true.

“Shall I say grace?” I asked.

“Please do,” Piper said.

I said a short prayer of thanks, knowing everyone was anxious to begin.

Soon, we were all enjoying the delicious food. Mr. Jennings seemed to have shaken off his earlier grief, at least for the moment, and entertained us with the story of how he'd made his fortune inventing a toiling tool for farming so light it could be pulled by only one horse. "There were other tools invented over the years, but it was always my best-selling product. I sold it all to a big company about ten years ago and have retired. But I had such fun in those first years. Building a lucrative business can be quite satisfying. Especially if you know why and for whom you're building it." A flicker of sadness passed over his craggy features. "I can say here at the end of my life that it all circles back to love. It's our strongest motivator. We are at our best when we love others. Even after they're gone, you know. The love remains."

I teared up and had to breathe in and out deeply to control my emotions. Not only did I have my memories of Rosemary, but I had Bebe as proof of what a great love between two people could bring.

"If you find someone you love, hang on to them with all your might," Mr. Jennings said. "It's the only thing that truly gives our life meaning."

Simon tore his gaze from Lizzie to address his employer. "By all means."

"I love Papa and Miss Piper and Lizzie," Bebe said. "It's easy to love them. Does that mean I'm good?"

"You're good for many reasons," Mr. Jennings said. "But perhaps most of all because of how much you love those closest to you."

"Do you have someone waiting for you at home?" Piper asked Simon. "A young lady?"

Simon shook his head, a little too emphatically. "No. No one at all. I'm free as a bird." He took a quick sideways glance at Lizzie. "What about you, Miss Lizzie? Do you have a beau?"

"No. No one at all." Lizzie's gaze remained on her plate. Her ears reddened. "This is a small island."

“Such a shame that a beautiful young lady such as yourself should be without a beau,” Simon said.

Mr. Jennings, who, I suspected, despite his age, didn’t miss much, shot me a knowing glance.

“All the more reason to stay,” I said, leaning close to his ear.

“I would have to agree, dear boy,” Mr. Jennings said.

Bebe overheard us. Those young ears of hers didn’t miss much either. She and Mr. Jennings were a good pair, I thought.

“Will you be staying on the island, Mr. Jennings?” Bebe asked, excitement making her tone even higher-pitched than usual.

“What do you think about an extended stay, Simon?” Mr. Jennings asked.

“I’d say it’s a fine idea.” Simon grinned. “I mean, whatever you wish, sir. I’m here to serve.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Bains have invited us to stay for as long as we wish,” Mr. Jennings said. “I’d hate to take advantage of their kind offer, but it would be nice to remain a few more weeks at least. The trip out here was harder than I’d hoped it to be. I’m not looking forward to repeating the journey any time soon.”

“If you stay until the end of August, then you can come to my grammie’s party.” Bebe grinned. “The whole island’s invited.”

“What kind of party?” Mr. Jennings asked. “Will there be dancing?”

Bebe fired off the answers and questions without taking a breath. “Yes, there’s dancing. On the back porch. It’s a really big porch. Grammie says all parties should have music and dancing. Do you dance?”

“I used to be quite the dancer,” Mr. Jennings said. “But now my hip bothers me too much.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Jennings,” Bebe said. “There’s tons of other things to do besides dance. Mrs. Halvorson makes heaps and heaps of food. Last summer my uncle Briggs said he almost made himself sick from eating too many cookies. He told me it was a cautionary tale, which I didn’t understand. I should ask him what he meant, now that I think about it.”

“Bebe, please focus on your meal,” Piper said. “We mustn’t dominate conversations.”

“Right. Sorry.” Bebe grinned, obviously undeterred by the gentle reprimand, and went back to stabbing tomatoes with her fork.

“What about you, Simon? Do you find our little island pleasing?” Piper asked.

Simon’s glance darted sideways once again. “I don’t think I’ve seen anything prettier in my life.”

We continued our fine meal, continuing to laugh and engage in easy conversation. Lizzie, despite the earlier battle with her brush, looked radiant, all pink-cheeked and sparkly-eyed.

If he wasn’t careful, Mr. Jennings would have to return to the East Coast without his valet.

---

NO SOONER HAD we sent Mr. Jennings and Simon on their way than another buggy appeared in my driveway. Peering closely out the window, not recognizing the buggy, it took me a moment to realize it was Mrs. Lancaster. Why would the dressmaker be here? How had she found my place?

I mopped my brow as I went out front to greet my visitor. The afternoon was the warmest we’d had all year and without any breeze, the air felt cloying and the sun unforgiving. It wasn’t the first time I was thankful for the shade of the trees.

Lizzie and Piper had finished up the dishes and were resting on the back porch. Bebe was in the process of bringing



buckets of water up from the well and watering my roses. They'd gone as limp as the rest of us.

Mrs. Lancaster immediately apologized for invading my privacy. "Ella was kind enough to share your location. She would have brought me out herself, but she has to deliver a baby this afternoon. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I said, helping her down from the buggy. Bebe had come running over by then and offered to give Mrs. Lancaster's horses some water.

"That would be kind of you," Mrs. Lancaster said.

I instructed Bebe to tie the horses to one of the trees. "Give them an apple, too."

"Yes, Papa." Bebe dashed toward her discarded bucket as I turned back to Mrs. Lancaster. "What brings you by?"

"I've something to discuss with you and Miss Jayne. It's urgent."

"Miss Jayne and our maid Lizzie are resting under the shade of the porch. We've had lunch guests and with the hot weather, they're wilted." I asked her to follow me around the side of the house.

Lizzie had gone inside by the time we arrived at the back steps. Piper stood to greet us, a questioning look in her eyes. "Mrs. Lancaster, what a surprise."

"Again, my apologies for interrupting your day," Mrs. Lancaster said. "But I need help, and you're the only two I could turn to."

"We're at your service," I said, leaning against the porch railing. I really needed to get more chairs out here.

"I have a rather delicate situation and nowhere else to turn." Mrs. Lancaster pulled a hankie from her sleeve and wiped the palms of her hands. "This heat is so unexpected. I've grown accustomed to the mild weather." She closed her eyes for a moment, as if something pained her, before folding her hankie and returning it back inside her sleeve. "I'll speak as plainly and with as much honesty as I can. Michael Moon

and I have become involved. Romantically speaking. We're in love."

"I see." My stomach clenched. A relationship between two people of different shades of skin was not something that happened. Not in the open, anyway. It wasn't safe.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're right," Mrs. Lancaster said. "However, our hearts don't seem to care about social conventions. Which is why we decided to keep our relationship secret. I've seen my share of violence over the color of my skin. Although Michael reassures me that no one will care one way or the other here on the island, I feel less than convinced. Never marry, of course, or risk jail. I have a business and do well enough to take care of myself in some comfort. As does he, making it easy to have two households and enjoy each other's company as we see fit."

Piper didn't say anything, but I could tell she was surprised by Mrs. Lancaster's confession by the tension in her clenched jaw.

"Go on," I said to Mrs. Lancaster.

"Yes, well, all was fine. We kept to ourselves and no one seemed to notice. That is until Caleb King saw Michael entering my apartment one evening. We didn't sleep a wink that night, worrying that he would go to the sheriff. Instead, King came to Michael the next day and assured him our secret was safe with him. With a caveat. As long as Michael kept his secret, then King would keep his. His tone was mildly threatening, which was confusing. Michael had no idea what secret to which he referred but agreed, saying he had no interest in doing any kind of harm to such an old friend. A few days later, we heard about what he'd done to you at the dance. It wasn't until then that we wondered about his involvement with the death of Miss Woolf. Obviously, we weren't the only ones in town pondering his guilt. But we didn't say anything to the sheriff, having no evidence whatsoever, except for some strangely subtle threat from King. But then you two came by to ask about the lockets. Michael didn't at first remember selling them to him, but when he went through his books, he found a notation in the ledger from ten years ago. Three

lockets. Sold to Caleb King. Then King's insinuation about secrets all made sense. He thought Michael remembered selling him the lockets."

"Which he didn't," I said, thinking out loud. "But now does."

"That's correct," Mrs. Lancaster said. "They go back a long way, you know, and it was hard for Michael to accept the truth about one of his oldest friends. But after what you two said and the lockets themselves, there was no way we could deny the truth. They were evidence of guilt. They had to be. So we talked it over that evening and he decided to tell the sheriff in the morning. Although we were afraid about what it would mean for us, we knew we couldn't keep it to ourselves. The poor girl deserved better. Michael took the proof of purchase to the sheriff. He had no idea if White thought it important or not, but at least we'd done the right thing. But then something happened." Her voice wavered, and she pressed the hankie to her mouth, brown eyes glistening with tears. "Something terrible."

"Take your time," I said.

She drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Caleb barged into my shop, demanding me to tell him your whereabouts. I didn't know, of course, and told him so. That angered him. If Rhett and Sara Rose hadn't come by, he might have hurt me. Instead, he ran off. However, he came back later that night—right as I was closing. With a gun in his hand this time. He asked me if Michael remembered about the lockets."

"How did he know to ask you that?" Piper asked.

"Because we showed the lockets to the sheriff," I said.

"Which means White asked him about them," Piper said. "Has to be."

"Yes, that's what we decided as well. I told King I didn't know what he was talking about, but he wouldn't listen. He told me he was going to have to get rid of me and Michael. It was the only way, he said. No choice but to strangle me. The excited look in his eyes was bone-chilling. Like he was

looking forward to killing. Again.” She winced as her fingers brushed the side of her head. “He hit me with the pistol, knocking me onto the floor, then jumped on top of me and put his hands around my neck. I fought as hard as I could, but I was no match for his strength. I thought it was over for me. Meanwhile, Michael had let himself into the back with the key I’d given him. He found us struggling on the floor. King had set the gun aside, and Michael grabbed it and pointed it at King’s head, demanding he let me go. King jumped off me and lunged for Michael. They tussled on the floor, fighting for control of the gun. And then it went off.” She brought her shaking hands to her chest in a praying position. “The gunshot killed King. He died right there in front of us.”

“Oh no,” Piper whispered.

We locked gazes for a split second, the truth about why Mrs. Lancaster had come to see us a horrifying revelation.

“Yes, and now we don’t know what to do,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “In the middle of the night, we moved the body to make it look like he was killed somewhere else. Then we did our best to clean the floor of all traces of blood.” She shuddered. “It was terrible.”

“This was self-defense,” Piper said. “You must tell the sheriff what happened. He’ll see it wasn’t your fault.”

“In theory,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “However, we don’t know what Sheriff White knows about us already. I can’t imagine King didn’t tell the sheriff about our relationship as a way to discredit us. We’re sure we’re about to be arrested, for one crime or the other. Maybe both.” She dabbed at the tears now rolling down her cheeks.

Both of us sat stunned for a moment.

“What can we do?” Piper asked finally. “Why did you come to us?”

“We’re leaving the island,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “To find a place to hide. Somewhere he can’t find us. I’ve come to ask for a ride into Seattle on your boat. We want to leave tonight.”

“But what about your businesses? Your homes?” I asked. “You’d leave everything you’ve worked so hard to build.”

“It does us no good if we’re in prison. Or hanged,” Mrs. Lancaster said.

“This isn’t right,” Piper said. “He was trying to kill you.” She turned toward me. “Can you do anything? Or your mother? Someone of influence? You could go to White and tell him what Mrs. Lancaster’s just shared with us. Perhaps you could convince him of their innocence.”

“White doesn’t care for me,” I said. “Or most of my family. However, my mother does control his financial well-being. She also knows his secret. It’s a secret so big that it would send White to jail if anyone discovers the truth. My mother has the proof.”

Mrs. Lancaster’s eyes brightened slightly. “What are you suggesting? Threatening him?”

“I guess I am,” I said slowly, still thinking through the details. “Or at least presenting the facts and making sure he understands that if he arrests either of you for any reason, Mother will turn him into the authorities in Seattle.”

“You would do that for us?” Mrs. Lancaster asked.

“What’s happened is not your fault,” I said. “Having dealt with King ourselves, we know his true nature. How dangerous he was. White might see clearly why you did what you did, even without resorting to threats. I’ll go out and talk to Mother first and then go see White. He hasn’t arrested you yet, so he may not have a clue as to what really happened.”

“He’s incompetent enough not to put together all the pieces,” Piper said.

“Or is he only pretending to be stupid?” I asked. “I still can’t figure out why he was so reluctant to see the truth about King. Especially after you two went to him with the ledger. White is a dichotomy if there ever was one.”

“What if he knows the truth?” Piper asked. “He knew it about Caleb and now he knows about Michael. His loyalty to

both of them perhaps proved to be more important than the law?"

"King murdered a young woman," I said. "How could White look the other way? He claims to be a man of integrity." I shook my head, straightening to my full height. "There's only one way to find out. I have to go see him. Will you wait here with Miss Jayne?" I asked Mrs. Lancaster. "That way you can stay hidden."

"Yes, I can. Michael's in town at the shop, acting as if everything's normal." Mrs. Lancaster wrung her hands. "We didn't want to alert the sheriff by doing anything out of the ordinary. We just wanted to slip away unnoticed."

I thought for a moment more, formulating my plan. "With your permission, I'm going to go see White and tell him everything. You can't live a life on the run. The only way out of this is to tell the truth and hope that White responds to reason. Or threats."

The women both nodded, fear in their eyes as hot as the afternoon.



## HUDSON

I left Bebe with the ladies, promising to return as soon as I could. Despite the tension on Piper's face, Lizzie and Bebe seemed oblivious that anything was wrong.

I drove out to my mother's house first, wanting to make sure she understood what I was about to get her involved with. Hopefully, she would see things as I did and agree to the plan.

Mother and Timothy were playing a game of cards on the back patio, glasses of iced tea sweating in the warm air.

They asked me to sit with them, clearly seeing I had a reason for coming by so late in the day.

"What's happened?" Mother asked. "Is Bebe all right?"

"Yes, everyone's fine," I said. "Bebe's at home with Piper. I mean, Miss Jayne. It's about Caleb King."

"Oh dear," Mother said with a worried glance at her husband. "What have you done?"

"I've done nothing. Well, not exactly." As best I could, I told them everything I knew about the situation, ending with a question. "Are you willing to help them?"

"By insinuating that I would give him up to the police unless he agrees to look the other way?" Mother asked.

"Yes, that's about it," I said. "As sordid as it sounds."

"Dear me. Will we ever be finished cleaning up your father's messes?" Mother asked. "I don't know about getting



involved in such a nasty affair. And Michael and Mrs. Lancaster in love? I mean, it's just not done."

"Love has no rules," I said. "Other than the chaos it inevitably brings to our lives. Surely you can't hold their love against them? Look at you and Timothy. Would anything have kept you apart?"

"Too many to count," Mother said simply. "But we chose not to care and do what we felt in our hearts."

"Which is all they're doing," I said. "Despite the danger it's caused, they've committed to each other."

"This is a terrible situation," Timothy said. "However, Jesus would want us to help, I think. Two innocent people will lose their lives if we don't. Haven't we had enough bloodshed?"

"I'm not White's favorite person as it is," Mother said. "Nor are you, dear son. This will give him more reason to hate this family. Should that worry us at all?"

"Mother, think about what King did to those poor women. Shouldn't we end this? Give Michael and Mrs. Lancaster a chance for happiness?"

"In theory, I agree," Mother said. "But my first instincts are to protect my family. I'm frightened he'll retaliate somehow."

"For fear of sounding distasteful, you have the upper hand here. You control his pay and his fate. You can get him to look the other way. In other words, you can force him to comply."

"Yes, well, it would seem so." Mother's gaze fluttered toward Timothy. "It's just that this feels awfully like something your father would do. It's unseemly. Getting involved in something criminal and scandalous is not my primary goal in life, as it was his." She paused, worrying her fingers through the lace trim on her sleeve. "But I cannot let Michael and Mrs. Lancaster hang. If he'll respond to our threats, then we shall have to do it and hope God will forgive us for our actions. You go to the sheriff and tell him I'm

prepared to pull his salary and report his sins to the police in Seattle.”

“What did White do to get himself tied to Father?” I asked. “I’ve never known.”

Timothy ran a hand down his beard. “He fell in love with a female prisoner in jail for killing her husband. One night, he allowed her to escape. He was fired for incompetence, but in reality, it was a calculated risk. He’d wanted her to be free, despite what she’d done. The husband was abusive. Like yours, my love.”

“Yes, I understand,” Mother said. “That’s all in Roland’s notes. Including the offer he made to White. He kept White’s secret, just as the sheriff kept so many of Roland’s. White will not risk being discovered. Present it that way to him, dearest. Either he complies or I talk.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go speak to him now.”

“One more thing,” Mother said. “You tell Michael that our financial agreement is over. I want to give him the building, too. No more rent or sharing profits. It’s not right. As long as White does as we ask, his new pay increase will remain.”

“Will do. I’ll report back.”

With that, I stood, saying goodbye and leaving before Mother could change her mind.

---

THE SHERIFF WAS in his office, smoking a cigar and reading a book. Upon closer inspection, it was a popular mystery title. If only he were as good a detective as the one in the book. We might not be in this mess if he did his job instead of sucking on that cigar all day.

“What do you want?” White asked.

“To talk.”

He gestured with his chin toward the empty chair. “Have a seat.”

I got straight to the point. “I’m here to talk to you about King’s murder. I know who did it and why.”

He removed his feet from his desk and actually set aside the cigar. “How’s that now?”

“The guilty party has told me the truth. I’ve come to advocate on their behalf.”

White rolled his eyes. “If you think you can sway me on matters of the law, then you have a large disappointment coming.”

I ignored his comment and proceeded with my plan. “I come as my mother’s messenger. She has a deal to offer you.”

“This should be good,” White said drily. “I suppose she’s taking away the extra salary? The one she only recently agreed to give me?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “She has a particular request. Should you agree to it, all financial offers will remain intact.”

His cheek flexed. “Out with it. I haven’t got all day.”

“Yes, fine.” I told him what I’d told Mother and Timothy, leaving out no detail. “In conclusion, it was clearly self-defense. You know for a fact that King knew about the proof of sale because you told him so yourself.”

His eyes glazed over for a moment, staring at the wall behind my head, and spoke as if he’d forgotten I was there. “The gun went off. It explains why the shot was so close range. They were entangled.”

“My mother and I want you to look away. Close the case on King for lack of evidence. Or whatever it is you would have to tell the islanders.”

“They’ll still be afraid,” White said. “If no one is brought to justice, they’ll not rest easy. What do you expect me to do about that?”

The chill of his frosty tone and accusatory expression churned my stomach. “They’ll forget about it after a time.” I wasn’t sure this was true, but felt it necessary to say.

“People deserve to know if there’s a killer living among them.”

“Michael Moon’s not a killer,” I said. “He saved the woman he loved from strangulation. King’s motive was clear. He wanted to keep them quiet.” Anger clenched my fists, and I had to consciously unfurl them. “Why did you tell him about the ledger anyway? Can’t you see how sure it was to incite him to further violence? Didn’t it occur to you that he might try to hurt Mrs. Lancaster and Michael?”

White blinked, then sat back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. “I have my reasons.”

“What are they?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “Why have you protected King? Why have you been so unwilling to see his guilt?”

“I saw what you saw,” White said. “However, I was biding my time, waiting for him to mess up. Simply put, I didn’t have enough on him to make an arrest stick. As you know, I’ve become notorious for arresting the wrong people. I didn’t want that to happen again. Especially if the wrongly accused was our town’s beloved teacher. How would that have looked?”

“What about almost choking Miss Jayne to death?” I asked. “Wasn’t that an indication of his violent nature? One you could use to justify his arrest?”

“I needed more.”

“Well, now you know what he did and how he died. The question is—what do you want to do about it? In my opinion, Mother’s offer is the best you can do. You’ll get what you want, and we’ll all walk away free.”

“What do you think I want?”

“To stay on the island and out of prison?” I asked.

White rose from his chair and went to the window, looking out with his back to me. “Michael should have come to me himself.”

“About which part exactly?” I asked.

“After he accidentally shot King. I can’t understand why he didn’t. After all the years we’ve been friends?”

I peered at him, trying to decipher any hidden meanings behind his words, but saw only a hint of pain in his eyes. What were his thoughts on Michael and Mrs. Lancaster’s relationship? Did he know? Surely King told him. “Did King tell you about Michael and Mrs. Lancaster?”

White slowly turned around to face me. “Sure, he mentioned it. As a way to manipulate me. I knew what he was doing.”

“Are you going to arrest them for it?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I couldn’t care less what a man does behind closed doors. Unless he hurts someone, obviously. Which King did. After everything I’ve witnessed the last few weeks, I know that to be true. In fact, he may have killed more women than we’ll ever know. Men like that don’t have twenty years between murders.”

That thought chilled me. Were there others? How many?

“I had to play it his way,” White said, sounding grim. “To keep him believing I was on his side while I investigated further.”

I thought about that for a moment. He had a point. Playing the part of a friend while investigating them for murder would be a balancing act. A careful one. Leaving no room for error. Had I misjudged White? If only he’d trusted me, we could have worked together.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

White sighed and picked up his unlit cigar, rolling it over in the palm of his hand. “I think you said it best. I don’t have a choice. Your mother’s wishes are my commands. It’s been this way for twenty years, you know. Answering to the Tutheridge family.”

“Is that why you hate us?”

White’s eyebrows darted up his forehead. “I don’t hate any of you. I don’t trust you.”

“Trusting each other might have saved a lot of heartache,” I said. “But it’s too late now. Will you let Michael and Mrs. Lancaster stay and live as they please?”

“Like I said, their relationship means nothing to me. If your mother wants them here, then that’s how it’ll be.” He motioned toward the door. “And now, I need you to leave. I have things to do.”

Dismissed just like that? Fine with me. I couldn’t wait to get home to my family. The day had been too long already.

---

BEFORE HEADING HOME, I went to see Michael at his shop. Knowing he would be worried about his love, I wanted to assure him she was fine out at my place. Additionally, I wanted to tell him about the conversation I’d had with the sheriff. I could only imagine the tension he must feel, not knowing if he had to make an escape.

Michael was up on a ladder putting away a shipment of fabric when the bell above the door alerted him to my entrance. Other than the two of us, the shop was empty.

He immediately climbed down from his ladder to greet me, his eyes glittering with nerves. I’d never seen him so pale.

“I come in peace,” I said. “And with good news.”

“Lock the door and turn my Open sign to Closed, would you?” Michael asked me. “So we can talk in private?”

I did as he asked and then joined him at the counter. “Mrs. Lancaster’s safe at my house. She told us everything. Afterward, I came into town to talk to White. Or, rather, to make a bargain with him.”

Michael’s lips looked almost blue against the pallor of his skin. He gripped the edges of the counter with his fingertips. “And?”

“Mother has ensured that no action will be taken toward you or Mrs. Lancaster for either of your crimes. Not that I see

them as crimes,” I rushed to add.

“Others would.” He squinted, staring at me as if I were an apparition he couldn’t quite believe stood before him. “What did your mother do to get him to look the other way?”

“She promised to keep his secret. The one that brought him here.”

Michael perched on the stool behind the counter. “Why would she do that?”

“She believes in justice. In addition, she has the proof of his crime, thanks to Father’s meticulous notes. White doesn’t want to go to jail.”

“It’s been decades since he let the woman out,” Michael said. “Would the authorities care any longer?”

“I’ve no idea. My father probably bought someone off back in the day to ensure White’s anonymity here on the island, so it may be a moot point. For that matter, we don’t even know if White’s his real name. My father had his dirty fingers in a lot of dirty business. Who knows what Father came up with to free White from his former life. But without his protection, White’s vulnerable. I used that for leverage to get what we want. Which, unfortunately, makes me like my father.” I grimaced, knowing it was true. “Regardless, I want you and Mrs. Lancaster to be safe. What happened was through no fault of your own.”

“Does White see that?”

“I think so,” I said. “It’s hard to tell what he’s thinking most of the time.”

“Always has been.” He sighed in obvious relief. “I can’t thank you and your mother enough.”

“Things are going to change for you,” I said. “Mother’s lifting the agreement you made with Father. Everything you make from the shop is yours from now on. She’s also gifting you the building.”

He twitched, as if I’d threatened to hit him, and eyed me with suspicion. “But why?”

“My mother hasn’t always been proud of the way she’s behaved and colluded with my father over the years. She’s ready to let go of the past and start fresh. For herself and the rest of you, too. King’s dead. White’s contained. It’s time for all of us to enjoy our lives.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Michael’s head dropped and his shoulders rose and fell before he looked back up at me. “This is generous of your mother. I won’t be able to repay her kindness.”

“The best way to do so is to live well,” I said. “This is a chance for you to start a new chapter.”

“And you?” Michael asked. “Seems to me it’s about time you should move on as well. Maybe into the arms of the beautiful Miss Jayne, for example?”

I chuckled. “If she’ll have me. I’m still working on winning her heart.”

“Won’t be long, I shouldn’t think.” He stuck out his hand and we shook. “Thank you. For everything.”

“You’re welcome. I’m off now to tell Mrs. Lancaster the good news. I’ll send her your way.”

“Much obliged.”

He walked me to the door and unlocked it, thanking me again as I made my way into the sunlight. Home to my girls, I thought. Where I belonged.





## PIPER

The days rolled by one after the other in the weeks following Caleb's murder. Island gossip soon died down, and it seemed by the time of the Tutheridge family party that no one remembered the sordid details of the past few months.

We'd developed a contented routine out at the new house, enjoying the long days of summer to the fullest. Lizzie and I had become fast friends, enjoying working side by side to care for Bebe and the house. The steadying presence of Hudson grounded us all. I could not remember a better time in my life.

In the evenings, after Bebe went to bed and Lizzie retired to her room, Hudson and I sat together on the back porch, watching the stars pepper the sky, and talked and talked and talked. Until it felt like there was nothing we had not shared with each other.

By the day of the party, it was quite clear. I was in love with Hudson Tutheridge. Not the immature infatuation I'd felt for Caleb. This was real. A relationship grounded in mutual respect, friendship, and a deep desire to truly know each other. Not only the good but the bad too. He told me every detail he could remember from his childhood, and I reciprocated by doing the same. We talked about our dreams and goals for ourselves and for Bebe. I even told him how much I wished for a child of my own. One night, he leaned close and kissed me. Such a dizzying kiss. Such a life-changing moment.

Still, I wasn't certain when or if he would ask for my hand. It was the natural progression of things. At least I thought so.

But maybe he wasn't ready. Even though we'd grown close, perhaps he could not allow himself to marry again. I didn't know, and I had to confess to myself that I cared deeply. I wanted to marry him. I wanted to be Bebe's mother, not just her nanny.

The morning of the party, Lizzie did my hair for the party, and then I helped do hers. "Do you think he'll be there?" Lizzie asked as I put the last pin into her bun. "Will he notice my new dress?" She smoothed a hand over the skirt of her new summer gown made by Mrs. Lancaster.

She meant Simon, of course. "I'm sure he'll be there. And I don't think he'll notice your dress, only how lovely you are."

Lizzie beamed at me from the mirror. "I hope he'll ask me to dance."

"I'd be surprised if he let you out of his sight." I stood back to look at my work. "I think I've done almost as well as you."

Lizzie stared at herself for a moment, straightening the collar of her lavender dress. "I do look nice. This is such a good color for me. Mrs. Lancaster was right. She said Simon will fall in love with me the moment he sees me. He won't have a choice."

I laughed. "Mrs. Lancaster is talented, but I don't think she has the power to make a man fall in love simply because of a dress."

Lizzie's face fell. "You don't think so?"

"The dress has nothing to do with the woman you are. And you, my dear friend, are special, whether you're wearing a tiara or a bonnet."

"It will always be a bonnet," Lizzie said. "Which is just fine with me."

Since their first meeting, Simon and Lizzie had gone on several walks after church services, and a few days before he'd dropped by to deliver a bouquet of wildflowers. Hudson had given Lizzie permission to take an hour off to accompany him

down to the water. She'd returned flushed and animated. I could only imagine what had transpired between them.

Mr. Jennings had settled so comfortably at the estate that he'd confessed no desire to leave the island. Mrs. Bains was only too happy to have him remain. He livened things up, she'd told me. "And he and Timothy have great debates about religion and politics so that I don't have to."

Bebe had been up earlier than usual, excited for the day's events. Lizzie, too, had rosy cheeks and bright eyes as the four of us set out in the motorcar for Stella.

I listened to Bebe and Lizzie's happy chatter from the front seat. Hudson, wearing an attractive linen suit and a bowler hat, drove with a smile on his face, occasionally glancing over at me.

When we arrived, Lizzie and Bebe scrambled out of the car and went hand in hand toward the garden party.

The driveway was packed with carriages, and the poor stable boys were run nearly ragged taking care of all the horses. From the garden came the noises of laughter and voices. Later, there would be music and dancing, but for now, the guests were probably digging into Mrs. Halvorson's delicious feast. I would have to pay a visit to the kitchen and see if she needed anything.

I waited for Hudson as he spoke to one of the stable boys. When he was done, he came over and offered me his arm. "Shall we?"

He took my breath away. "Yes, please."

We strolled across the driveway and toward the house. When we were at the front entrance, he stopped. "There's something I wanted to ask you before we join the party. I thought it would wait until later, but I feel a sense of urgency to ask you before we join the others. A stolen moment, perhaps?"

My heart beat fast under the bodice of my gown. "What would you like to ask me?"

He glanced around us. People wandered the grounds. A few curious glances were directed our way. “Not here. Wait one more minute, and we’ll know if you will make me an even happier man.”

I laughed and swatted his arm. “You’re a mean man.”

“I promise to make it up to you.” He tugged on my hand. “Let’s go inside for a moment. It suddenly occurs to me that I’d like to ask you in the kitchen. That’s where I spent my happiest times, you know.”

“Whatever you want,” I said.

We stepped into the foyer and then down the stairs to the kitchen. When we reached our destination, glorious scents of Mrs. Halvorson’s delicious food filled the air. Counters and the table were stacked with pastries, cakes, and cookies. Mrs. Halvorson was putting the final touches on a cake but looked up to greet us with one of her warm smiles.

“What brings you two down here?” Mrs. Halvorson asked, pushing aside a stray strand of hair from her cheek with the back of her hand.

“I’m going to ask Miss Jayne an important question,” I said.

“I see.” Mrs. Halvorson smiled, but her eyes filled. “But here?”

“This is the spot where I’ve been my happiest. You always brought out the best in me,” Hudson said.

“Dear me, you’re going to make me cry,” Mrs. Halvorson said.

“Which makes the kitchen an appropriate place to declare my undying love for this miraculous woman.”

“Well, it’s as good a place as any, I suppose,” Mrs. Halvorson said.

“Do I have your blessing?” Hudson asked her.

“It’s not for me to say, either way,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “But if it were, I would give my most enthusiastic blessing.”

“Thank you,” Hudson said.

“You should be alone to share such a special moment.” Mrs. Halvorson shook her head, chuckling, and set aside her frosting knife, then wiped her hands clean with a damp cloth. “Not with a frumpy old lady breathing down your necks. I’m supposed to be upstairs anyway but had to finish the cake. However, I must now go up to the garden and make sure everything’s going as planned. I’ll leave you to it.” She stopped on her way to the door to take my hands in her warm ones. “I’ve known this man his whole life and know there’s no finer one to be found.”

I choked up at her kind words. “I know.”

She winked at Hudson and then scurried out of the room. Her footsteps faded as she ascended the stairs.

He took my left hand and kissed each finger. “You are a vision. A beautiful dream come true.”

“Thank you.” I held my breath. Was this the moment? The one I’d hoped for?

“I’m not a simple man, as you know. I’m an imperfect one. As you also know.”

“You’re perfect to me,” I said.

He smiled and brushed my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “I want to marry you. More than anything else. I want you to be my wife and make a home for Bebe. Give her a real family. Would you ever agree to such a thing?”

“Are you asking now, or is this hypothetical?” I asked, teasing. My heart beat even faster. The humming between my ears and the tidal waves of emotions were enough to make me dizzy.

“I am indeed asking.” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a ring. “Would you accept this and agree to be my wife?”

I glanced down at the ring, curious, although it could have been a string and I wouldn’t have cared. But it wasn’t a string.

A ring. An emerald set between two small diamonds sparkled under the light. “Oh, it’s beautiful,” I whispered.

He took my hand and slipped it over my finger. “Is that a yes?”

“It’s a yes,” I said. “A very happy yes.”

He kissed me, gently but with more urgency than ever before. We couldn’t get married fast enough for me, I thought. The sooner I could share his bed the better.

“This was not at all how I planned it,” Hudson said when we finally pulled apart. “But as I mentioned, it seemed right that we should be engaged before the party. I wanted to tell my family the good news all at once. What better night to do it than this?”

“When should we tell Bebe?” I asked.

“Let’s do it now. She’ll be so happy.”

“And always associate it with the garden party, which she loves. It’s the perfect time.”

“Are you sure?” Hudson asked. “We come as a package.”

“The very best package in all the world,” I said, standing on my tiptoes to kiss him once again before we headed upstairs to find our Bebe.

---

BEBE WAS JUST FINISHING up a win in the gunnysack race when we arrived in the garden. She let out a triumphant yell when she reached the finish line. The boy who had been close behind didn’t look too happy about it either.

Hudson motioned for her to join us. She skipped over to us.

“Am I in trouble for winning?” Bebe asked, looking worried.

“You’re only in trouble for winning if you were cheating,” Hudson said.

“I never cheat. What’s the fun in that?” Bebe asked.

“That’s my girl,” I said.

Bebe beamed up at me.

“Come along now,” Hudson said. “We have something to tell you.”

Her face fell. The worry in her eyes twisted my heart. She thought we were going to tell her something bad. The poor little mite. I could only imagine what she was thinking. She’d had so many disappointments in her life. This was not going to be one of them.

“It’s something wonderful,” I said.

“Really?” Bebe’s eyes lit up, all worries quickly abandoned. “Is it the answer to my prayer?”

“Maybe,” I said with a glance up at Hudson.

His eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Yes, it is.”

We each took one of her hands and traipsed down to the beach. The weather was perfect, not too hot but sunny, and the water like glass. Seals basked under the cloudless sky, lifting their heads lazily when we passed by to sit together on a fallen log.

With Bebe between us, Hudson looked over her head and into my eyes. I nodded, wanting him to be the one to tell her.

“Bebe, Miss Jayne and I are going to marry.”

Bebe’s gaze bounced from one of us to the other. “Each other?”

“Yes, each other,” I said, laughing.

“Does this mean you’ll be my mother?” Bebe asked in a small yet hopeful voice.

“Yes, that’s exactly what it means,” I said.

Bebe’s head dipped, and her small back moved up and down with the force of her sigh. “God listened. He heard me.” When she lifted her eyes to mine and then her father’s, the



ecstatic expression on her face made my chest ache with happiness.

“Will I call you Mother?” Bebe asked.

“If you’d like,” I said. “Or Mama. Whatever seems the most appropriate.”

She squinted, staring at me. “I’ll ponder it. I never thought of it until just now.”

“Take your time,” I said. “It will be a few weeks at the very least before we marry.”

“Why?” Bebe asked. “You could just do it right here. Today. The whole family’s here.”

Before I had time to sort through that idea, Hudson agreed. “She’s right. Let’s do it. Get started living.”

“Yes, fine. All right.” I smiled back at him, my whole body thrumming with excitement. “If that’s what you’d like, then I’m sure Timothy will comply.”

“You won’t mind not marrying at the church?” Hudson asked.

“Not if you don’t,” I said. “And if a preacher marries us, I can’t see that God will mind where we are.”

“Any time there are two or more gathered in his name, then he is there,” Bebe said. “I learned that in Sunday school.”

“Did you?” I asked. “How wonderful you remembered. I’m proud of you.”

She leaned her small, sweet head against my shoulder but didn’t say anything further. The three of us sat that way for a few minutes, watching the water. I suspected we were all happier than any of us ever thought we could be.

---

NOT MUCH LATER, I sat in the living room with the women who would be my sisters-in-law, waiting for Timothy to call us out to the lawn for our impromptu ceremony. The news of our

nuptials had passed through the guests and family as quickly as a wildfire on a dry prairie. Now Ella, Faith, and Amelia sat around me, asking questions about how all of this had transpired between Hudson and me. I told them as much as I could without making the whole affair more scandalous than it already was.

“This is a miracle,” Ella said, tearing up. “We’ve worried about him more than you could know.”

“He’s been a miracle to me,” I said. “Bebe, too.”

Sara Rose scurried in from the porch with an update. “They’re almost ready for you. The whole town’s here, and they’re all staying to watch. Are you sure you want to do it today? We could plan a wedding for you. Something more private.”

“I’m sure.” I patted the arm of my chair so that she’d come sit next to me. “I don’t want to wait another moment.”

“Who knew Mrs. Mantle could send two of us out here at the same time?” Sara Rose asked, perching on the wide arm. “One for each of the remaining brothers. She’s really quite talented.”

Amelia, who had left her infant with a maid upstairs so she could be with us, nodded. “Isn’t it something? All of us matched by the same two people?”

“In addition, we all have one another now, too,” Faith said. “I always wanted sisters.”

“You sure have a load of us now,” Ella said.

“I wonder if Mrs. Mantle will ever come out and meet the Tutheridge family?” Sara Rose asked. “Wouldn’t she like to see all the happy couples she’s helped?”

“I think she and Matthew have exchanged a lot of letters,” Ella said. “I have a feeling she may come out just to meet him.”

“Wouldn’t it be terrific if the matchmakers were matched to each other?” Faith asked softly. “A perfect ending to this family saga, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ve thought it for some time,” Ella said. “And the evasive way he answered my questions about her the other day made me even more sure. He’s smitten.”

“He’ll be even more so when he sees her,” I said.

“Oh, yes, she’s so very pretty,” Faith said.

“Well-spoken and elegant,” Amelia said. “I wish I could be more like her.”

“You’re fine how you are,” Ella said stoutly. “I don’t want to hear otherwise.”

They exchanged a saucy grin.

Just then, Mrs. Lancaster came rushing into the room. She hustled over to us, obviously in distress.

“What is it?” I hoped nothing had happened. God forbid the sheriff hadn’t kept his word.

“I’ve only just heard you’re getting married,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “And depriving me of the joy of making a dress for the woman who helped save me.”

“Not to worry,” I said. “You can make me something to wear for another occasion. Perhaps there’s another wedding coming soon?”

Her dark eyes dulled. “We can’t marry, of course, but wouldn’t it be lovely if we could?”

“What are you talking about?” Amelia said, frowning. “A girl has a baby and gets cut out of all the gossip.”

“Mrs. Lancaster and our very own Mr. Moon are sweethearts,” Ella said.

“I’ve missed out on everything,” Amelia said. “Let that be a lesson to all of you. Don’t have a baby. They’ll stick you in the house and never let you come out.” Without taking a breath, she continued. “Anyway, that’s stupid that you can’t marry. We should do something about it.”

“What do you suggest?” Mrs. Lancaster asked, obviously amused, as she sat next to Faith on the couch.

Amelia crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t know. It’s just so many things are unfair, and it makes me mad. Also, I hope you’ll be happy together. Even if you can’t marry.”

Mrs. Lancaster gave her a sad smile. “We’ll have our own ways of being together.”

“You’ll be safe here,” I said. “We’ll make sure.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Lancaster said. “Suffice it to say, this kind woman and Hudson Tutheridge rescued me from a fate possibly worse than death. Prison.”

From the looks exchanged around the room, it appeared I was not the only one to know how Caleb King had left this world. The Tutheridge siblings had no secrets. Not anymore, anyway.

Faith sighed. “We’ve had so many troubles on our little island. I hope this is the end of them.”

I glanced up to see Ernie, dressed in a black suit, enter the room with a tray of champagne. “Excuse me, ladies, but your mother asked if I’d send this in for you to enjoy while we’re getting everything set up.”

“How fine you look,” I said to him.

He smiled shyly. “Thank you, Miss Jayne. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I’m enjoying the work here tremendously. Today I’m helping in the house because of the party, but tomorrow I get to work in the vegetable garden. Mr. Halvorson has some fine zucchini that needs picking. And green beans. You never saw so many in your life.”

“How are you finding the living quarters?” Ella asked.

“Very fine,” Ernie said. “It’s not so lonesome now that I live with the rest of the staff. Having quite the time, I must say, even though I still miss my sweetheart.” A sadness came to his eyes, but he dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “But never mind that. We have a wedding to celebrate.” He set the tray of champagne-filled glasses on the coffee table. In addition to the champagne, there were small tea cakes.

“Oh, look at those,” Amelia said, snatching one up. “I really shouldn’t, but I can’t resist.”

Ernie excused himself and was soon gone to take care of other tasks.

“You’re looking very well,” Ella said. “So trim after having had a baby so recently.”

“Jack keeps me up half the night, so it’s no wonder,” Amelia said. “But he’s so precious I don’t mind. I think he’s going to be naughty like his uncle Briggs, though. He has that look in his eyes. Do you know the one, Faith?”

“I surely do.” Faith giggled. “It’s impossible to resist, just like your cakes, Amelia.”

Ella yawned. “I’m sorry. It’s not the company. I’ve been up too early lately.”

“With patients?” I asked.

“No, actually.” Her mouth twitched into a smile. “I’ve not been well in the mornings.” She brushed a hand over her stomach. “Seems there’s a little person growing inside me. Apparently, this whole baby business is contagious.”

“You’re not? Really?” Amelia squealed. “This means Jack will have a cousin. What a happy day we’re having.”

“He’s going to have more than one,” Faith said, ducking her head and blushing.

“Faith Tutheridge, do not tease me,” Amelia said. “Are you really?”

“Guilty,” Faith said. “I blame my husband, of course.”

I glanced up at Sara Rose, hoping their happy confessions didn’t hurt her. After losing her baby, I wasn’t sure how she would feel. However, she was smiling to herself as though she had a secret of her own. “Sara Rose?” I asked. “Are you too?”

“How did you know?” She reddened further. “It’s still early, so something could happen like last time, but I’m hopeful.”

We all rushed to congratulate her.

“I’ll be praying every night for all of these little ones,” Faith said. “That we can all get through healthy pregnancies and come out with fat babies.”

“Mother’s going to be thrilled.”

“So will Bebe,” I said. “She’ll love bossing them all about when they’re a little older.”

Lizzie came into the room carrying a bouquet of roses picked from the garden. “I put this together last minute,” she said. “Because every bride should have flowers.”

“Thank you, Lizzie,” I said, taking them.

“I’ve got to get back to Bebe,” Lizzie said. “She’s out there trying to get all the guests to gather into a semicircle, and I’m afraid no one’s listening. Too much punch, I think.”

Mrs. Bains passed by Lizzie on her way into the room. “They’re ready for you, dear. The rest of you, go wait with the others. I want to talk to my new daughter for a few minutes.”

Sara Rose whispered in my ear. “I’m so happy for you. And now this means we’re truly family.”

“Forever and ever.” I squeezed her hand and watched as the ladies all filed out of the room, leaving me with Mrs. Bains.

She sat across from me. “I wanted to tell you how pleased I am that everything’s worked out so well. You make Hudson and Bebe very happy. I couldn’t be more grateful.”

“Thank you. I’m grateful, too.” I squirmed a little in my chair. This was my mother-in-law, after all. Staying in her good graces would prove important as the years unfolded.

“I also wanted to thank you for how you handled everything with this unseemly turn of events. You’ve been very brave, but I’m glad it’s over.”

“I noticed White wasn’t here today,” I said.

“Hopefully he’ll rejoin the rest of the island at some point,” Mrs. Bains said. “For now, I’m delighted he has no

reason to inquire further.” She stood. “Now, are you ready to marry my son?”

“More than ready,” I said.

“May I offer you my arm?” Mrs. Bains asked. “As unusual as it is, I would love to walk you out.”

“I’d be honored.”

She pressed her hands into mine for a brief moment. “You look beautiful.”

Before we headed outside, I just had to ask. “Is it true? You arranged for all of these matches?”

She shrugged, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. “When you’re a mother, you’ll understand why. They’ve all had such a hard time. And now, it seems as if the hard times have passed. Love conquered all. Eventually, anyway.”

A few minutes later, with Bebe standing close, we exchanged vows. Hudson’s eyes leaked tears through most of the promises we made to each other, but I could only smile when I swore to be faithful and loving through all the days of my life.

“You may now kiss the bride,” Pastor Bains said.

I placed my hand on Hudson’s cheek. “No more tears. Not today.”

“Not even happy ones?” Hudson replied before capturing my mouth with his in what had to be the best wedding kiss that had ever happened.

The crowd cheered and we parted, holding hands.

Bebe slipped her hand into mine and looked up at me. “I think I’ll call you Mama.”

I knelt and kissed her cheek. “I shall answer proudly whenever you call for me.”

She threw herself into my arms, knocking me down and onto the grass. The entire party erupted into laughter. Bebe, however, looked as though she might cry. Sitting on the grass,

I held out my arms. “Come here, love, and give me a proper hug.”

I pulled her onto my lap. Hudson sank to the grass next to us and wrapped his arm around my shoulder and drew us both to him. We stayed that way, the three of us clinging to one another as the world went on around us. A family.





## HUDSON

**A**t midnight, we lay entangled in the sheets, a nearly full moon smiling at us through the open window. Sea breezes scented the room with the sweet smells of summer. Outside, a cricket sang happily, as if to serenade us.

We'd left Lizzie and Bebe at the estate to enjoy a few days alone at my house. Not exactly a honeymoon, my mother had said, but better than nothing.

Piper rolled to her side and peered at me through the silvery light. "Do you think I'll ever stop being surprised when I see you next to me?"

"In time, maybe?" I shifted so that she could rest her cheek against my bare chest. "You'll start to tire of me after a while."

"Not for a thousand years, at least."

"Such a short amount of time? I'll be devastated on that last day, knowing how bleak it will be without you."

She laughed, her breath warm on my skin. "Then I'll have to stay another thousand."

We were quiet for a moment. The curtains shivered in a gust of wind, and the temperature dropped. I dragged the quilt over us and held my new wife close until we drifted off to sleep. Two bodies, but one heart. All the while the moon hovered in the pinkish sky, washing us in its silvery beams.

When I woke, the sun had sent the moon to bed. I blinked against the light that streamed through the windows. Memories

from the day and night before flooded my mind. I was married! To the most generous, beautiful woman in the world.

From downstairs, I heard the sounds of someone moving about the kitchen. Scents of coffee traveled up the stairs to tease my nose.

A few minutes later, my bride arrived with a tray of coffee and a breakfast of berries and boiled eggs Lizzie had left for us. She wore a white cotton dressing gown, and her hair was in a braid that hung down her back. Her skin, as dewy as the morning itself, glowed. I'd given her that glow, I thought, remembering the pleasures of the night before.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said. "Beautiful wife, that is."

"Good morning, husband," Smiling, she set the tray on the dresser and turned around to look at me. "I didn't know what to do with myself when I woke before you, so I decided to make myself useful and brew a pot of coffee."

"You could've woken me." I grinned. "I'm sure we could have thought of something to do."

She laughed, blushing. "It did occur to me. But you seemed so peaceful, I let you be."

"You must never let me be."

"I promised you I wouldn't," she said. "It was in the vows, if you recall?"

"It sounds vaguely familiar," I said. "Come back to bed. It's cold in here without you. We have nowhere we need to be."

"Isn't it heavenly? Yesterday was eventful enough for years to come. We were engaged and married in the course of hours." She poured us each a mug of coffee and joined me, propping pillows against the headboard. We drank the hot, bitter coffee and looked at the sparkling blue water.

"It was quite spontaneous of us," I said, breaking the silence and setting aside my empty mug. "Getting married on the same day we agreed to an engagement."

She hadn't finished her coffee but discarded it on her bedside table and shifted to face me. "We knew it was right. Why wait?"

"I couldn't agree more," I said. "The idea of delaying the moment I could take you into my bed was more than I could endure."

"You would have lived," she said, teasing. "But I'm glad we didn't have to. I was more than ready to start our life together."

"As was I." I kissed her

"Bebe, too. We didn't need to prolong an engagement when we're all better off together."

"She's waited long enough for the family she deserves." I took her hand and made circles on her palm with the pad of my thumb.

She brought my hand to her chest. "Do you feel the happy beat of my heart? How is it possible that my heart grew overnight?"

"Mine grew the first time I ever met you and hasn't ceased since," I said. "At this rate, I'll explode with love before long."

She leaned close to peck my mouth. "I love you so. Have I told you?"

"I believe you may have mentioned it once or twice last night," I said.

Giggling, she nudged me in the ribs with her elbow. "Don't tease me, or I'll perish from embarrassment."

"My apologies," I said, kissing her hand. "But you made the most delicious noises."

She covered her face with her hands. "Stop it. You're a beast."

I laughed. "I'll be good from now on. It's just so much fun to make you blush."

"As I said, you're a beastly man."

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For loving Bebe. And me.”

“It’s the easiest thing I’ve ever done,” she said.

We ate the eggs and soft pieces of Lizzie’s bread smothered in butter, luxuriating in the decadence of breakfast in bed.

“Not that we can do this often, but isn’t it heaven to have such a lazy morning together?” Piper asked. “Lounging around in bed with the man I love? Life can’t get better than this.”

“It cannot.” She was in love with me. Grumpy, bitter Hudson Tutheridge. Who could have guessed the sun could love the moon? I’d not thought them compatible, yet here we were, basking in the glow of new love.

Lasting love. Thanks to Mrs. Mantle and my interfering mother. God bless them both.

“We should have as many of these mornings as possible,” I said. “Whenever we can.”

She looked deeply into my eyes. “I couldn’t agree more. We must always make the most of each day we’re blessed with.”

With that, she drew nearer, obviously ready to make good on her promise. As was I.

---

Hello from Tess!

Join my newsletter and never miss a release or sale [HERE!](#)  
You’ll get a free ebook just for signing up.

To join me in my Facebook group for sneak peeks and other bookish fun, hop over using this link to [PATIO CHAT!](#)

Sending so much love from my home to yours. XO

ALSO BY TESS THOMPSON



**EMERSON PASS HISTORICALS**

The School Mistress

The Spinster

The Scholar

The Problem Child

The Seven Days of Christmas

The Musician

The Wordsmith

The Rebel

**EMERSON PASS CONTEMPORARIES**

The Sugar Queen

The Patron

The Pet Doctor

The Correspondent

The Innkeeper

**CLIFFSIDE BAY**

Traded: Brody and Kara

Deleted: Jackson and Maggie

Jaded: Zane and Honor

Marred: Kyle and Violet

Tainted: Lance and Mary

The Season of Cats and Babies

Missed: Rafael and Lisa

Healed: Stone and Pepper

Christmas Wedding

Scarred: Trey and Autumn

Chateau Wedding

Jilted: Nico and Sophie

Kissed

Departed: David and Sara

## **BLUE MOUNTAIN**

Blue Midnight

Blue Moon

Blue Ink

Blue String

Blue Twilight

## **RIVER VALLEY**

Riversong

Riverbend

Riverstar

Riversnow

Riverstorm

Tommy's Wish

## **LEGLEY BAY**

Caramel and Magnolias

Tea and Primroses

## **CASTAWAY CHRISTMAS**

Come Tomorrow

Promise of Tomorrow

## **SOUL SISTERS**

Christmas Rings

Christmas Star

## **STANDALONES**

Duet For Three Hands

Miller's Secret

The Santa Trial

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Thompson is the USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author of clean and wholesome Contemporary and Historical Romantic Women's Fiction with nearly 50 published titles. Her stories feature family sagas, romance, a little mystery, and a lot of heart.

She's married to her prince, Best Husband Ever Cliff and is the mother of their blended family of two boys and two girls. Cliff is seventeen months younger, which qualifies Tess as a Cougar, a title she wears proudly. Her bonus sons are young adults working toward making all their dreams come true out in the world. Oldest daughter is at college studying Chemistry. (Her mother has no idea where she got her math and science talent!) The baby of the family is a junior in high school and a member of a state champion cheer team as well as an academic all-star, including achieving a 5 on the AP World History exam during her sophomore year.

Tess is proud to have grown up in a small town like the ones in her novels. After graduating from the University of Southern California Drama School, she had hopes of becoming an actress but was called instead to writing fiction.

Tess loves lazy afternoons watching football, hanging out on the back patio with Best Husband Ever, reading in bed, binge-watching television series, red wine, strong coffee, Zumba, and walks on crisp autumn days. She never knows what to make for dinner and is often awake in the middle of night thinking about her characters and their stories.

She's grateful to spend most days in her office matchmaking her characters while her favorite cat Mittens (shhh...don't tell Midnight) sleeps on the desk.

She adores hearing from readers, so don't hesitate to say hello or sign up for her newsletter: [www.tesswrites.com](http://www.tesswrites.com). You'll receive a free ebook just for signing up!

