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TESS THOMPSON

The
MYSTERY
MATCHMAKER
of
ELLA POINTE

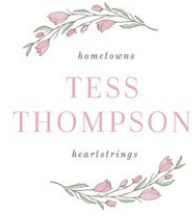
A MATCH *for*
A WILLFUL BRIDE

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THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK FOUR

TESS THOMPSON



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For Linda Estrin, matriarch of my adopted Washington family, who encouraged me so much in the beginning of my career as well as kept me in milk and bread a few times by buying the paperbacks during my very lean single mother years. She probably never knew how much those \$20 meant to me. I am forever grateful for her kindness.

LUCCA

The men came out of the shadows like monsters suddenly awakened after a long sleep. Two of them, emitting the acrid scents of cigarette smoke and grease trapped within the coarse fabric of their coats. They lunged at me, these lumbering vessels of rage, hungry for the taste of enemy blood. Instinctually, I tensed to run. However, it was too late for escape. They were on either side, trapping me between them. I'd not been paying attention, and now I would pay for my lapse into daydreams and memories of the Tyrrhenian Sea. If I knew anything since coming to America, it was to be ever watchful. Always suspicious. Endlessly wary of the white men who lived in Boston and hated me because I was Italian.

Screaming obscenities and racial slurs, they shoved me into an alleyway outside the tavern from which they most likely imbibed more than was good for a man. I was a doctor and could have schooled them on the health risks that accompanied habitual drunkenness. They were clearly not interested.

I'd almost made it home. So close. It was a cold, crisp autumn night, and I was only blocks from my apartment. I would have been safe behind my locked door having a hot cup of tea if I'd been a few minutes earlier. I thought at first they were robbers. Good luck finding much to take from me, as my pockets were empty. Would that make matters better or worse?

But it was not money they were after. They beat me with their fists and kicked me with the steel tips of their boots. As I collapsed onto the dank dirt and curled up like one of those roly-poly bugs, I thought this time they might actually kill me. I was wrong.

Preparing for the worst, I closed my eyes, but another kick didn't come. Instead, I heard a woman's voice shouting for help, followed by footsteps.

I opened one eye. My assailants still stood above me, but they'd straightened. Coming toward us was a policeman carrying a baton, followed closely behind by two elegant ladies. One tall and flaxen-haired with high cheekbones, the other short with a round elfin face.

Guardian angels, or were they real?

The men took off running in the other direction, with the cop following. The two ladies knelt over me. I could tell from their stricken expressions that my face must look pretty bad.

"Sir, can you hear me? I'm Mrs. Mantle, and this is Heidi. We'll get you to a doctor."

"I am a doctor," I said. A doctor without a practice or patients, but I had the medical degree and the knowledge to heal. Too bad no one here wanted a doctor of Italian descent. "It's not necessary to call anyone. I'm fine. Just a little bruised." I breathed in deeply to assess the damage. My ribs were sore but not broken. I sat up the best I could, humiliated by the state of my appearance. Light-headed, it was impossible to rise to my feet just yet.

My nose bled profusely. I reached into my pocket to get my handkerchief and held it against my face. Dirt and filth from the alley had seeped into my suit. Although poor, I was fastidious about my appearance, making sure my clothes were washed and my shoes shined even though they were a bit shabby from wear. Freshly shaven, nails and hair trimmed as if I were a gentleman, completed the package I presented to the world. They might not want me here, but I had pride. My mother had sacrificed everything for me to come to America. Mrs. Cole, my benefactor until she passed away a few months back, had given me money from her own pocket to send me to medical school. I owed it to those two women to be brave and never give up, even though obstacles thwarted me at every turn.

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Mantle asked, continuing to kneel on the dirt, probably ruining her fine dress.

Heidi, who I instinctively knew was Mrs. Mantle's maid, remained on the other side of me. Both peered at me with worried gazes.

"I don't have the money to go to a doctor," I said, stifling a groan as I scrambled to my feet. "But thank you. I'll be fine now. I appreciate the help. My apartment is there, so I'll be on my way." I pointed to the sad, partially crumbling building where I rented a room I shared with a few rats.

"You live there?" Heidi asked, a knowing look in her eyes. "I know that building. A few of my friends have lived there in the past. The landlord is a

bad man.”

“Indeed,” I said. “But what’s a pauper to do?”

The women exchanged glances. They were smart, these two. I was a doctor who couldn’t practice because people hated Italians.

“We were passing by and saw them attacking you,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Horrible, horrible men. I’m assuming you didn’t do anything to provoke them?”

“Other than walking by, no, and being an Italian Catholic.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Terrible the way some people behave.”

If I’d left the library at an earlier hour, they might not have been standing under the awning, drunk and waiting for someone on whom to unleash their pent-up rage. Not at me. Not really. That was the thing about hate. It wasn’t personal. Any Italian immigrant could tell you that.

“May I ask, Mrs. Mantle, what you two are doing out alone in this neighborhood?”

“We live three streets over,” Mrs. Mantle said. “But we hardly ever come this way.”

Three streets over. That made all the difference. Mrs. Mantle must be rich. I’d guessed her to be a woman of means by her elegant dress, but this confirmed it. They lived on a nice street with expensive apartments. Doormen and security. The city was like that, rich and poor living not far from one another, yet drastically apart at the same time. “We were coming back from a tea at one of the hotels. It’s Heidi’s birthday tomorrow, and we were treating ourselves to cakes. Fortuitous, don’t you think?”

“Certainly is,” I said.

Mrs. Mantle had a glint in her eye, as if she meant more than just appearing at the right time to save me from the men. What else had she meant by *fortuitous*?

“I’m thankful for your help,” I said. “I thought they might kill me this time.”

“They’ve done this before?” Heidi asked, aghast.

“Not those particular men, but there are dozens like them, always looking for a fight,” I said.

“What’s wrong with people?” Mrs. Mantle asked, as if Heidi or I would know the answer.

“Thank you again,” I said, attempting a smile but wincing instead. My lip must be cracked. Fortunately, my nose seemed to have stopped bleeding.

“You must come to our home for supper,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Perhaps even stay the night so we can look after you.”

“No, no. Thank you, but that’s not necessary.” I must look really bad if they were offering me a room in their home.

“Please. What’s your name?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“Dr. Lucca Coletti,” I said, bobbing my head and realizing I’d lost my hat somewhere. Scanning the alleyway quickly, I spotted it not far from where I’d fallen. I leaned over to fetch it and yelped in pain. Now the women would really insist.

I was right.

“You must come with us,” Mrs. Mantle said. “Heidi will take good care of you. You can have a bath and a warm meal and a soft bed to sleep in.”

“But why would you do that?” In all my time in Boston, almost no one had shown me any kindness. Mrs. Cole had made up for all the abuse. She was as kind as a thousand good people put together. Was Mrs. Mantle another woman like my former benefactor? Born good?

“We’re Christian women,” Mrs. Mantle said. “We can’t leave you in this state. It wouldn’t be right.”

“You mustn’t go home alone,” Heidi said. “You need looking after. You’re a doctor. You know how critical it is that someone who has sustained such a beating have supervised care.”

She had a point there. And that meal and bath and bed sounded too good to pass up, even if I had to leave my pride behind.

“Yes, I’ll go with you.” Desperate men didn’t have choices. An offer like this one had to be seized. “But I go in protest and not in any way admitting to the severity of my injuries.”

Mrs. Mantle chuckled. “Yes, well, you *are* a man.”

The three of us walked together out of the alleyway and onto the street. While we strolled, my stomach growled. I’d not eaten since noon. My light-headedness might be related to hunger or my injuries. Either way, I looked forward to a decent supper.

“What brought you out tonight?” Mrs. Mantle asked. “Were you at the tavern?”

“No, I was on my way home from the library. I spend many afternoons there.” The library was warm and comfortable. The librarians there had grown accustomed to my presence. I stayed out of the way, reading medical journals in a corner on the main floor. While I looked for work, I stayed

abreast of any new developments in my field. In the meantime, there were plenty of poor people in the Italian community who used my services. All unpaid, of course. If someone needed my expertise, I couldn't turn them away, even though most were as poor as I.

Soon, we were at the entryway to a grand building with several doors to the outside indicating that there were probably four apartments in total. A sign hung over the door that read Mrs. Aubrey Mantle.

"What do you do here?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

"I have several different entities," Mrs. Mantle said. "But primarily, I put the right people together."

"I see." I didn't, but was too polite to ask any follow-up questions.

Mrs. Mantle walked through the doorway and motioned for me to follow. "One of my specialties is in staffing. I find the right employee for employers."

"I didn't know there was such a service," I said. "Do you place doctors by any chance?"

Mrs. Mantle shrugged out of her coat and handed it to Heidi, who hung it in a closet, along with her own.

"May I take your coat?" Heidi asked me.

"Yes, please." Embarrassed by the dirt and blood, I'd have rather not handed it over. Regardless, I unbuttoned my overcoat as I glanced around the sophisticated office. Chairs were arranged around a coffee table facing an unlit fireplace. The room was mostly unadorned, much less fussy than I'd have expected from such an elegant woman. A few paintings of flowers hung on the walls, but other than that, it seemed to be a place of business, not leisure.

Handing Heidi my coat and hat, I thanked her.

"My pleasure, Dr. Coletti," Heidi said.

"I apologize for the chill," Mrs. Mantle said. "We don't light the fire if we're not working. Come upstairs. Our cook will have supper ready soon, and I'd like a sherry. Will you join me?"

"I'd be honored," I said before following her up a staircase to the floor above.

The second story had more of the cathedral ceilings and polished hardwood covered with Oriental rugs. Ornate French furniture, along with a fancy gold chandelier, intimidated me. Mrs. Mantle was wealthy indeed.

Mrs. Mantle invited me to sit by the fire and brought me a glass of sherry,

which I gladly accepted. I'd have liked a glass of wine but didn't want to impose. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

After bringing me a cold compress made from a cloth and piece of ice, Heidi left us to check with the cook about dinner. I couldn't be certain, but it seemed as if the ladies nodded in silent agreement about something as Heidi passed by.

I sat in a chair near the fire and put the compress against my throbbing nose. Heidi was right. Ice would help stop the swelling. However, it stung before it started to numb my injured face.

"Tell me more about yourself, Dr. Coletti." Mrs. Mantle settled into the loveseat across from me, folding her hands across her lap. Now that we were inside where it was light, I got a better look at her. She was beautiful, with bright blue eyes and a beguiling smile. If I were to guess, I'd have said she was about ten years older than I. A glance at her left hand told me she was married. Or widowed? There had been no mention of a husband.

"What would you like to know?" I asked.

"I'm assuming there's no Mrs. Coletti?"

"I'm twenty-six. Unmarried. No prospects in sight."

"Wonderful," she murmured under her breath. "Tell me about your schooling and what brought you to America."

"I'm from an island called Sardinia."

"An island?" Mrs. Mantle sat forward. Was it my imagination, or did she light up when I said that?

"It's off the coast of Italy and very beautiful," I said. "The people there are very poor. When I was fourteen, I was sent to America by my mother. She wanted me to have more opportunities and saved everything she could so I could come here and make something of myself."

"And you became a doctor? She must be very proud."

"She was. She's passed away."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Mrs. Mantle said.

"It's been a few years now, but the grief never goes away, does it?"

"I can safely say it does not. I lost my husband not long ago. Some days are worse than others."

"Yes, very true." There were moments that I remembered I would not see my mother again. Moments that almost brought me to my knees with grief.

"How did she possibly pay for school?" Mrs. Mantle asked, not with any judgment in her voice. If anything, she appeared only curious.

“My mother didn’t. It’s a long story, but I was fortunate to find work as a stable boy for a rich widow. Mrs. Cole was a benevolent woman and saw potential in me.”

“In what ways?” Her eyes sparkled.

I flushed, hoping I wouldn’t sound arrogant. “The man who took care of her horses before me had left everything in a state of filth and bacteria. Several of the horses were sick. I recognized the symptoms from my experience at home with our neighbors’ horses. I spent weeks cleaning the stables, taking care of abscesses on a few of the younger ones. Several nights I stayed up until dawn nursing the two sickest of the poor animals. I was able to save them all and had her stable clean and sanitary by the end of my first month. She saw that I had a gift for healing and suggested I go to veterinary school. I confessed that my dream was to be a medical doctor. She arranged for me to go to school and paid for university and medical school.”

“How remarkable.”

“She was an extraordinary woman, widowed with no children. She took me on as her project, telling me she needed a few good deeds to make it into heaven.”

“May I ask, has she tried to help you find a job?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

Another loss. One that hurt almost as much as Mama. “Unfortunately, she passed away just as I was finishing medical school. She knew I was about to graduate though, which made her proud.”

“I can imagine. She didn’t leave you anything in her will?”

Despite the personal questions, I didn’t mind. Most people weren’t interested in me at all. “She had a brother who inherited everything. He wasn’t interested in supporting me further. Since medical school, I’ve been looking for a position, but no one wants to hire me.”

Her cheeks reddened with obvious agitation. “People are quite ridiculous, forgetting that their grandparents or great-grandparents were immigrants not so long ago.”

“From England and Ireland. Not Italy.” I said this flatly, without emotion. If I let myself become upset, it only made the situation worse. “People here don’t trust Catholics. We’re foreign, different. People feel threatened by something or someone that isn’t like them.”

“What have you been doing for money?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“Odd jobs here and there.”

“That must be difficult, after all your schooling.”

“My mother taught me to be humble and do what’s necessary to survive. Back in our village, people contributed however they could without complaint.” A pang of homesickness came, thinking of how excited the villagers had been when I set out for America; sure I would be a great success. I hadn’t been sure, but knowing the well-wishes of my friends and neighbors had sustained me through the horrendous boat ride and subsequent arrival in an unfamiliar port in a country that spoke mostly English. But I’d been young and picked up the language and adjusted quickly. When Mrs. Cole had taken me under her wing, I couldn’t believe my good fortune. “I miss being part of a community. Having a place to call home.”

“Will you return to Italy?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“No, I promised my mother I would not waste her sacrifices by giving up.” I swallowed the familiar lump in my throat. “There’s no one to go home to. My father died when I was young, and I have no siblings. I’d love to be part of a big family, but it was only Mama and me.”

Mrs. Mantle nodded, seeming delighted by this response, although I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps she was only trying to encourage me. Obviously, I’d been a little down on my luck.

“It’s serendipitous—our meeting today.”

“How so?” I asked.

“I have a job you might be interested in. It’s an opportunity to start a small medical practice on a remote island off the Washington coast.”

“Washington? All the way across the country?” I’d seen it on a map but had not thought about going so far from the city I now knew well.

“Yes, there’s a group of islands in the Puget Sound called the San Juans. Whale Island is one of the largest, with a small population mostly residing near or around the town of Ella Pointe. They’re in need of a doctor.”

“Please, tell me more.” I couldn’t keep the eagerness from my voice.

“It’s a growing community, but they need a doctor. One of the residents—Ella of Ella Pointe—acts as a nurse and midwife. However, she can’t perform surgeries or diagnose more complicated maladies, and there’s a great need for that.”

“Ella of Ella Pointe?” Had the town been named for her?

“Her father was one of the original settlers on the island.”

“He named it after his daughter? How sweet.” Having lost my father so early, I often felt envious of those who had been raised by two parents. A father’s pride would have given me great joy even if he hadn’t been rich

enough to be the founder of a town.

“Yes, well, I suppose you could say that.” She looked away for a moment, as if trying to decide what to say next. “But her father was not a good man. When he died last winter, no one mourned his passing.”

“I see.” There was more to the story. I could tell by the glint in her eyes and intonation of her voice.

“Mr. Tutheridge’s four children and widow remain on the island,” Mrs. Mantle said. “They inherited massive wealth from a shipbuilding company they recently sold. The family does a lot for the people, especially Ella. She’s rather remarkable. In fact, she educated herself through books and manuals so that she could care for the people of the island.”

“She sounds unusual.”

“Indeed.” Mrs. Mantle’s eyes narrowed, watching me. I could not shake the feeling that she was measuring and weighing every aspect of my character. She took her duties seriously, which I found commendable.

“What do you think of women working?” Mrs. Mantle asked.

“You mean in professional jobs? Because they certainly work in homes, don’t they?”

“Yes, careers, not homemakers. Do you think women should stay home and do whatever their husbands tell them to do? Should they be allowed to work?”

“I was raised only by my mother,” I said, smiling. “I can tell you with great assuredness she and the rest of the women in the village worked from dawn until dusk, whether they were paid for it or not. Women do whatever they have to do to take care of their parents and children, and whoever else needs assistance. They may not have a title, but they’re working hard every day. So, no, to answer your question. Not only do I agree that women should work outside the home if they so choose, either out of necessity or passion, but their contributions to home and family should not be overlooked. My mother and all of the aunties in my village took care of anyone’s children or elderly parents who needed help without fuss. To me, they were the heart of our community, quietly contributing to the welfare of us all.”

My impassioned speech seemed to amuse Mrs. Mantle. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Embarrassed, I examined my fingernails. I too often made a fool of myself with my speeches. It was just that when I was excited over something, I couldn’t help but speak of it with fervor in my voice and demeanor. My

fellow students at medical school had teased me about my lack of aloofness. We were taught at school to see our patients only as medical cases, not people. I'd tried. I really had. But it wasn't in me. Helping people was an honor. One that should be treated with great diligence. We had the power to save lives but also to lose them. Paying attention was imperative, and that meant we had to care. Although I'd been criticized for it, I had no intention of changing my ways. If only I could get the chance to use all of my education. Was Whale Island a possibility?

"The people on the island are not rich," Mrs. Mantle said. "Many can't afford doctors."

My heart sank. As much as I would have willingly given away my services for free, I had to eat. I needed shelter and clothes, not to mention an office and surgery. "If the people can't pay, how would I earn enough to live on?"

"Mrs. Tutheridge, the widow, is paying for a doctor's office to be built. It will be done shortly. There's also a residence attached for the doctor. She plans on supplementing whatever income is necessary, as well as providing the apartment for free."

"But why would she do such a thing?" I asked.

"As I mentioned, she and her children are dedicated to the residents of Whale Island. Her husband, before his death, owned most of the buildings in town. Mrs. Tutheridge has inherited them and intends to use them for good, including finding a doctor willing to live on the island. That way of life can be confining to some. How do you feel about living in a place that's hard to get to unless by boat?"

"I loved living on an island when I was small," I said. "Your world, no matter where you live, can be as big or small as you want it to be, depending on your capacity for curiosity and interest in whatever's going on around you."

"Yes, agreed," Mrs. Mantle said, nodding her head. "There *is* a ferry from Seattle, but still, it's rather isolated. The Tutheridges provide a lot of work, employing a large staff at their estate. In town, there are the usual merchants one would expect in a small community."

"Let me guess," I said, enjoying this discussion. "A church, a saloon, and a dry goods store."

"There's a sheriff as well. And a school for the children."

"How will the doctor be chosen?"

“They’re relying on my recommendation.” Mrs. Mantle folded her hands on her lap, still watching me.

I nodded, leaning forward slightly. “Would you like references? I have several professors who can tell you what I was like in school.”

“And the horses, I suppose?” Mrs. Mantle said, obviously teasing. “They could tell a good tale about your abilities.”

“If they could talk, yes.” I chuckled. “If only that were possible.”

“How would you feel about working with Ella Tutheridge?” Mrs. Mantle asked. “She won’t want to give up her nursing duties. The clinic they’ve built will work well for a doctor and a nurse to practice in tandem.”

“From the sounds of it, Miss Tutheridge has done an excellent job. I’ll be happy for her help, if she so chooses. She knows the community far better than I. The poor woman must be overworked, caring for the residents all by herself.” I was imagining a battle-ax of a woman, strong and determined, uninterested in marriage or a domestic life. Was she unattractive? A woman headed for spinsterhood? Was she the type who marched for women’s rights and the vote?

Over the last few years, I’d met many women who were passionate about the cause, all fierce, strong, and brilliant. However, many had sacrificed for their ideals, giving up on love or romance to concentrate on their beliefs. Many men didn’t like it, feeling threatened and worried women were going to somehow take over the world. Given the women I’d known, it would probably be for the best if they did.

In fact, Mrs. Cole had been zealous in her desire for equality among genders as well as heritage. She’d fought for those causes all her life, both monetarily and through hard work organizing campaigns to convince society that women should have the same rights as men.

Women would win the vote eventually, I felt sure. If only Mrs. Cole had lived to see it. Unfortunately, she’d been taken too soon, and her brother had made sure to erase any good she’d done the moment he inherited her fortune by immediately pulling the funding. Including mine.

“What if she’s not happy to see you?” Mrs. Mantle asked. “What if she’s territorial, for example?”

I blinked, surprised by the question. Did Ella not want a doctor to arrive on the island? Maybe she preferred to work alone. “Does Ella disagree about the need for a doctor?”

“She hasn’t been asked or told that the office is meant to be shared with a

doctor.” Mrs. Mantle shifted in her chair, clearly agitated. “It’s Mrs. Tutheridge who feels strongly they need someone who can perform surgeries. They’ve recently lost several people to gunshot wounds.”

My stomach dropped. Gunshot wounds? How untamed and dangerous was this island? Would it be like the stories of the Wild West during the gold rush? No lawmen or rules, just independent-minded folks and a few criminals making it up as they went along? “Will I be walking into danger?”

“I don’t think so.” Mrs. Mantle dipped her chin and tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair. “Although Ella may prove to be trouble.”

“She’ll be upset, won’t she, to find out her mother’s arranged all of this without her knowing?” I asked.

“I’m not sure how she’ll react. However, I believe the right man, or doctor, will convince her that she and the island are better off if she has someone to share the burden.”

“Yes, she must be tired, doing it all alone.” I’d have to win her over. “I’ll do everything I can to earn her trust and friendship. If she understands that whatever she was doing before my arrival should remain that way, then perhaps she’ll be more amenable to my presence. I can understand why she wouldn’t want someone like me, with no experience other than medical school, to start telling her what to do. I’ve noticed certain women dislike that very much.”

“No, Ella wouldn’t take kindly to that.”

“I’ve worked for a very opinionated and passionate woman. I think I’m pretty good at charming them into liking me. Mrs. Cole didn’t want to grow fond of me, but she couldn’t help herself.” I grinned, remembering what good friends we’d become. She’d helped fill the hole left by my mother. Now I had neither of them.

I set aside the stab of pain to further convince Mrs. Mantle I was the man for the job. “I pride myself on my ability to enchant the most willful of people. God bestowed me with a gift that way. Horses, children, and stubborn women.”

“I see, yes.” She glanced at the portrait of a man that hung over the fireplace and gave an almost imperceptible nod. The painting must be of her late husband. “When would you be able to go?”

“I could go soon. There’s nothing keeping me here.”

“Very good.” She smoothed her skirts. “I’ll write to Mrs. Tutheridge. Or, excuse me, Mrs. Bains. She’s recently remarried. To the preacher, Timothy

Bains.”

“Soon after husband’s death, then?”

“Yes, I have the feeling her children weren’t completely thrilled.

“My hope would be by the time you arrived, Ella’s mother will have told her the truth. I’m encouraging her to do so, but I’m not sure exactly what you’ll be walking into.”

Trouble, I thought. This would be trouble. What choice did I have, though? An opportunity like this one would rarely come my way. If ever. I’d do it and pray that all would be well.

LUCCA

I'd been raised on a beautiful island with turquoise water, rolling hills, and dramatic rock formations. The idea that anywhere else could compete with Sardinia's lavish abundance of natural beauty had not occurred to me. However, that was before I'd seen the San Juan Islands. The terrain, although completely different from that of the Mediterranean, was equally stunning.

On the ferry ride from Seattle, a few of the locals marveled at my luck. Apparently, it was a good day to have arrived because the weather, albeit chilly, was sunny. A cloudless sky reflected in the waters of Puget Sound as I leaned over the railing to get a better look. We were close to docking by then, and I spotted seals sunning on a rock, gulls flying overhead, and a majestic gray-and-tan crane with a white head streaked with black. How did the creature stand on those skinny legs? They seemed incapable of holding up such a large body. Next, I spotted a pair of blue herons residing on a nest of twigs, watching the ferry approach with suspicious glances.

I breathed in the scent of fish and seaweed. Autumn leaves fluttered in the breeze, flashes of reds, oranges, and yellows tucked among the green of firs and pines.

We docked, and I, along with a handful of other passengers, disembarked. Mrs. Mantle had told me the tavern owner in town, Matthew Goodwell, would be there to greet me. As I climbed the dirt trail to the cliff where the town of Ella Pointe perched, a middle-aged man wearing a long overcoat waited in a patch of grass.

He raised a hand, obviously knowing it was me he was here to fetch. The man had to be Matthew. Mrs. Mantle had said he was in his forties, with salt-

and-pepper hair. I didn't fully understand the nature of their friendship and hadn't asked. However, I'd noticed a flush came to her cheeks when she'd told me he was helping to coordinate my transition to the island. In addition, her voice had grown slightly higher in pitch. Perhaps they were corresponding about more than just business?

"That's how he described it anyway," Mrs. Mantle had said to me. "You'll have to write and tell me if he's as handsome as I imagine him to be."

As a man, I couldn't be completely relied upon as a judge of male attractiveness, but he seemed nice enough looking to me, with a lean build and chiseled features. Per her request, I would write and tell her of my observations. When I reached the top of the cliff, my gaze traveled the length of the main street of Ella Pointe. I made out a church with a white steeple, a brick schoolhouse, and various businesses on the main street of town. *What a pretty little town*, I thought. This was my new home? I could hardly fathom my luck.

"I'm Matthew Goodwell." The man reached out to shake my hand. Firm shake. Eye contact as well. Would my heritage bother him or anyone else on the island? Time would inform me either way.

"Good to meet you," I said.

"You as well." He gestured toward one of the buildings in the middle of town with a sign that read Ella Pointe Tavern. "That's my bar. You're welcome anytime, and drinks are on me. I imagine you get thirsty from time to time."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind." In truth, I wasn't much of a drinker, especially in a tavern. Nothing good ever came from the time men spent there, in my opinion. "I'm looking forward to seeing my office and residence."

"I'll take you by there first but must warn you, there's a lot of work left to do on the residence. You'll not be able to live there for at least a month. The office and surgery room are nearly complete. I hope you'll be pleased. Mrs. Tutheridge—I mean—Mrs. Bains has asked me to bring you out to the estate after I give you a quick tour. She has a room ready for you."

"I'll be staying at the estate?" This was news to me. I'd anticipated moving into the apartment behind the clinic upon my arrival.

"Yes, just until they finish your home. Mrs. Tuth—Bains is a gracious hostess, and they have a beautiful home. They'll look after you for however

long it takes to get your residence complete.”

“I hope it won’t be too much trouble?”

“Not at all. Her sons have recently married, and she has several empty rooms because of it.”

“And she’s married recently as well?” I asked, hoping I recalled that correctly.

“Yes, to our preacher, Timothy Bains. Good man. She deserves someone good after what she endured during her first marriage.”

I’d have liked to ask more but held back, wanting to make a decent impression. I knew from Mrs. Mantle that Matthew was particularly close to the Tutheridge family.

“We have about another week of work before you and Ella will be able to see patients there,” Matthew said. “Won’t be long, and the island folks will be glad to have a place to go when they’re sick.”

“Has she agreed to work with me?” My spirits lifted even higher. Perhaps the worry over Ella had been unfounded. However, my joy quickly dissipated by what was said next.

“Not exactly.” Matthew cleared his throat. “She’s not really aware of your impending arrival.”

“Pardon me?” Did he mean she didn’t know I was setting up practice here?

“Right, Ella doesn’t know you’re coming.” He hesitated, seemingly searching for the right words. “She thought the clinic would be hers alone. And she doesn’t know it was her mother who arranged for you to come here.”

“No one told her?” My heart sank. This was terrible. She would be spitting mad once she learned the truth, thus setting me up for failure before I had a chance to try to win her friendship.

“We’re not certain she’ll be happy about this turn of events. Of course, we hope she’ll see how beneficial it would be if you were to team up to practice medicine together.”

“And if she’s not?” I asked.

“You’ll have to compete for patients, I suppose.”

“That makes no sense for an island this size.” How would I make a living? The people here knew Ella. They weren’t going to trust a stranger. An outsider.

My stomach lurched. I felt empty and shaky. This had been a mistake. I was out here starting over once again in a community where no one wanted

me.

“We’re hoping she’ll see what a good pairing you could be,” Matthew said.

Pairing? What a strange word to use. Or maybe not. I suppose it was a partnership if we were to treat people together. Except we probably wouldn’t.

Matthew played with the rim of his hat, gazing toward the water. “We thought it best to get you here first before we told her. That way, she can see the person, not just the concept. If she thinks it through, she’ll see this is the best thing for her. She’s been run ragged taking care of the sick, acting as a midwife, and caring for our elderly. Once she meets you and assesses your character, she’ll come around.”

“I hope so. Otherwise, I have to question my decision to come here.”

“I understand and can only ask that you have a little faith. She may take a while to see her mother’s wisdom in this matter, but Ella’s a smart girl. She’ll see this is for the best.”

I nodded as if I agreed, when in reality it was the opposite. Why would they not tell the woman who had been acting as a medical caregiver that a doctor was coming? It would change her life, for better or worse. She should have been allowed the courtesy of knowing before springing the idea on her. Also, they’d set me up for trouble.

Regardless, I was here now. There wasn’t much to be done about it now.

WE WALKED around the tavern to a newly constructed building on what I assumed would eventually be a side street. As of now, it looked more like muddy sludge. However, the building was fine, made of brick, with an attractive awning over the entrance. Best of all? My name was on the door.

Dr. Lucca Coletti, M.D.

If only my mother could see it.

There were two men working at the office that smelled of wood shavings, installing cabinets. Matthew introduced them as two of the Tutheridge brothers, Briggs and Benedict.

They were welcoming but a touch guarded. Had they known I was coming? “I’m sorry to interrupt your work,” I said. “Did you know I was arriving today?”

“We recently learned of your impending arrival,” Briggs said.

“We’re sorry the place isn’t ready for you,” Benedict said.

“It’s no problem. Matthew says I’m to stay at your mother’s home until everything’s finished.”

“You’ll be well taken care of there,” Benedict said. “Although we’ve recently hired a new butler, and it’s been somewhat chaotic.”

“Mother can’t remember his name, for one,” Briggs said.

The brothers exchanged a glance I could not interpret. They looked alike, although Benedict was slightly taller and thicker. My initial sense was that Briggs had a playful personality, whereas Benedict seemed the more serious of the two.

“Do you want a tour?” Briggs asked.

“Certainly.” I nodded.

Matthew excused himself, promising to be back in a few minutes to take me out to the estate, but said that his beer maker had come by to deliver a few kegs and he needed to attend to business.

After he left, the men showed me around the medical office first. I couldn’t have been more pleased. There were two examination rooms, a waiting area, and a small administrative room with a nice-sized desk. A surgery in the back still needed tools and a sink, but the operating table itself had already been placed in the middle of the room.

“How did you know how to do all of this?” I asked.

“I have a talent with this kind of thing,” Briggs said. “I’m an artist, so it comes naturally to me.”

“His mathematical abilities came in handy as well,” Benedict said. “I’m more the muscle, and he’s the brain.”

“Ella told us what she wanted,” Briggs said. “She based it on a medical practice she’d visited on the mainland.”

“Regardless of who did what, I’m grateful. Thank you.” I gave them my most humble smile while inside, fear mounted. Ella had helped design the place, thinking it would be hers.

“It wasn’t only us,” Briggs said. “We had a lot of assistance. That’s kind of how we do things on the island. People help out their neighbors when they can.”

“I’m from a village in Sardinia, and it’s much the same.”

“You’ll have to describe it to me sometime,” Briggs said. “I’ve heard the water of the Mediterranean is actually turquoise.”

“Yes, it is.” A pang of homesickness hit me. I pushed it aside. “Can I ask you something? Matthew told me Ella doesn’t know I was coming and that she was under the impression she was to run the practice on her own. Yet my name’s on the door.”

“Yes, well, Mother wasn’t entirely truthful with her or us,” Briggs said. “We had no idea about you or your impending arrival until this morning.”

“Ella’s been gone for a few weeks,” Benedict said. “She doesn’t know about you yet.”

“You thought you were building this for Ella?” I asked, gesturing around the room. “Just for her?”

Benedict nodded. “The sign on the door was our first clue that Mother had other plans.”

“Why would she do this and not tell her own daughter?” I asked, flabbergasted and feeling sicker by the minute.

“Mother has certain ideas about how we should live our lives,” Benedict said. “She pushes whatever she thinks we need on us whether we want it or not.”

“Apparently, she thinks we need a doctor.” Briggs’s mouth twitched as if he couldn’t decide whether to frown or smile. “Ella disagrees.”

“This is dismaying, to say the least,” I said.

“Agreed,” Briggs said. “We’re staying clear of the house until things die down. They’ve had battles about Ella’s nursing before now, but this one will be the worst of all.”

“Doesn’t your mother want her to nurse?” I asked.

“Mother’s old-fashioned,” Benedict said. “She doesn’t like Ella driving all around the island, going into houses of people she doesn’t really know. Especially because she’s a Tutheridge.”

“I find it all a little disconcerting, if I’m to be honest,” I said.

“We can understand why,” Briggs said.

The men exchanged another glance.

“Should we tell him?” Briggs asked. “It only seems right.”

“Yeah, I think we have to,” Benedict said. “He should know the truth.”

The truth. I swallowed. What now?

“Well, we have a theory,” Briggs said. “Not fully proven, you understand.”

“All right.” I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“We have every reason to believe that Mrs. Mantle is a matchmaker,”

Briggs said. “And that Mother had you sent for the purpose of courting and marrying Ella.”

I almost laughed until I saw their expressions. They were dead serious. “But why? How?”

“Mother thought we would not find the right women without her help,” Briggs said. “Turns out she was right.”

“Let me explain fully. The women we’re now married to,” Benedict said, “they were sent by Mrs. Mantle specifically for us. We don’t know how she did it, but she sent the perfect woman out here for each of us.”

“How strange,” I said under my breath.

“And it was Mother’s suggestion we hire assistants.” Briggs paused, tension building in my gut as if I were reading a suspenseful book. “First, it was Amelia—sent out to be Benedict’s secretary. They fell in love. Next, Faith arrives.” He grinned, and his eyes softened. The man was clearly in love. “Faith and I quickly fell for each other. Now we’re married.” He held up his hand to show me his gold band. “Best day of my life, but I digress.”

Benedict nodded, taking up the outrageous story. “Right, so Amelia and I fell in love. Come to find out, Matthew was in on the whole scheme as well. Mother didn’t want us to know what she was doing, so she made him write to the matchmaker.”

“Mrs. Mantle,” I said. Was this true? How could it be?

“Once I knew what she’d done with Amelia and me,” Benedict said, “I knew she’d done the same thing with Faith and Briggs.”

“Meaning she sent Faith here for you?” I asked Briggs.

“That’s correct,” Briggs said. “Basically, Mother’s having people sent out here for us under the guise of employment.”

“Mrs. Mantle is very good at her job,” Benedict said.

“Yes, this Mrs. Mantle knows what she’s doing.” Briggs shook his head. “I had no intention of marrying, and now look at me. Completely domesticated.”

It was slowly dawning on me what all this was about. They thought I’d been sent for Ella. Good Lord, could this get any worse?

Briggs clapped his hands together. “We think they’re doing it to you two.”

“Does Matthew know you know?” I asked.

“Yes, but Mother does not,” Benedict said. “We think it’s best if we keep it from her.”

“But why? Don’t you want to confront her?” I asked.

“We’re not entirely sure,” Briggs said. “Someday, maybe we’ll confess, but for now, we’re keeping it between us.”

“You think they sent for me as a match for Ella?” I asked out loud. Hearing the words come out of my mouth made it all seem real.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Briggs said. “We knew it the moment we learned about you. Mrs. Mantle sends out someone with things in common. For me, it was art. Benny and Amelia are head over heels for books.”

“And since Ella’s obsessed with work,” Benedict said, “we figure Mother thought a doctor would be the right match for her. You could work together, and Ella would be content because she could continue her career but be happily married as well.”

“As a nurse and wife,” Briggs said. “Do you see?”

I felt the need to sit, but there were no chairs. Instead, I reached for a wall to steady myself. “What you’re telling me is that I came across the country, leaving behind everything familiar, not for my medical skills but for a love match? It’s outlandish. Impossible.”

“You haven’t met our mother yet,” Briggs said. “She’s the kind who has never had any power, and now that our dear old dad’s dearly departed, she’s running amok.”

“In her defense, we’ve all worried Mother,” Benedict said. “She’s despaired that any of us would marry. I didn’t think anyone could love me. Briggs thought he wanted to be a bachelor forever.”

Briggs sighed. “And then Faith came, and my whole perspective changed. It happened the very first time I saw her.”

“Good Lord,” I muttered. “What if Mrs. Mantle’s right about Ella and me?”

“She’s been right twice,” Briggs said. “But this time, we’re not sure. Ella’s the most stubborn, opinionated, independent woman you’ll ever meet.”

“She doesn’t want to get married,” Benedict said. “Or give up her freedom. We’ve always pitied any man who tries to win her heart.”

“It’s because of our father,” Briggs said. “There’s no way she wants to be trapped like Mother was, not because Ella’s inherently flawed.”

“Right, she pushes everyone away,” Benedict said.

“She’s pretty,” Briggs said. “So, listen, man-to-man, you have to know the hornets’ nest you’re going into. If you fall for her, there’s a distinct

possibility she will break your heart.”

“Or not,” Benedict said. “Look at Briggs.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be better if I didn’t know?”

“We think you should go into all of this knowing the truth,” Benedict said. “Because what they’ve done, well, it’s not necessarily right to mess with a man’s life this way. And it’s not going to be easy, running a practice with Ella fighting mad.”

“I don’t have anything to return to,” I said. “This is the best chance I have. Back east—” I cut myself off. “Never mind. Regardless, I appreciate you telling me the truth, no matter how absurd it all sounds.” My legs felt wobbly. I leaned back against the wall and folded my arms over my chest. “It’s unlikely I’ll fall in love with her, so you needn’t worry about that.”

“Famous last words,” Briggs muttered.

“No, I’ve no need of a wife. I’m not particularly fond of conflict. All the marriages I’ve seen were unhappy ones.” In the village I’d grown up in, couples quarreled more than they loved. My mother had raised me alone after losing my father. Sometimes I’d thought we were the only peaceful house in the village.

“All of them?” Briggs asked, wide-eyed.

“From what I could gather,” I said.

“Well, good. You and Ella will agree then,” Benedict said. “Neither of you are interested in marriage.”

“As far as working together, will she want to?” I asked.

“Oh, heavens, no,” Briggs said. “Not a chance in hell. Excuse my language.”

What had I gotten myself into? It was as if I’d fallen into a strange land where nothing made sense.

ELLA

For the most part, the pebbly beach below my family's house provided comfort. The scent of the sea, the pretty harbor seals, the feel of the pebbles beneath my feet were like old friends always there to soothe me, no matter how challenging the day or night had been.

Not now, however. Rage made my other senses disappear until I was left shaking and wanting to hit something. Or kick.

"You won't believe it," I said to Amelia and Faith, almost choking on the words. Anger had also made me inarticulate. "First of all, my mother is a traitor and a liar."

"What do you mean?" Faith asked in her soft, sweet voice.

We were walking three abreast along the beach, as we often did. A light drizzle fell, but we wore raincoats and hats that kept us fairly dry.

When I'd first spotted the sign on the door, I hadn't believed my eyes. Dr. Lucca Coletti, M.D. had been painted plain as day. I'd immediately thought, who was Lucca Coletti, and why is his name on the door?

On *my* door. At *my* office. On the building *my* brothers had built for our island hospital. Where I could treat *my* patients.

Months before, Mother had surprised me by suggesting we build a medical office, as she'd often nagged at me about working too much, adding that it was unbecoming for a young lady and how would I ever find a husband? To which I responded the same way I always had, "I don't want a husband."

When she'd sprung the idea of building an actual medical office, I'd been pleased but astounded at her change of heart. Maybe Timothy, her new husband, had influenced her? Either way, I'd gladly agreed. In fact, I'd taken

it as a sign. Mother had finally accepted me for the way I was—an independent woman with a career. She'd even funded the whole project, which had touched my heart in a way nothing ever had.

But she'd been lying to me, planning this whole time to hire a doctor. It was the only explanation. While I'd been in Seattle for a few weeks of training at the hospital there, she'd arranged for him to come. What had possessed her?

Who needed a doctor in Ella Pointe? They had me. I'd delivered babies, nursed children back to health, taken care of the elderly and their ailments for years now. No one had complained, especially since I worked for free. Who was this interloper? How had he even found us? I sure hoped he didn't expect to be paid a city salary here on Whale Island. The residents were poor for the most part, paying with whatever they could. Like with hats, for example. Mrs. Murphy was pregnant, and I was almost positive she was carrying twins. She'd already knitted me two hats.

"I saw the sign," I said now to Amelia and Faith.

"Saw what?" Amelia asked, sounding apprehensive. What did she know?

"The sign on the door of the new clinic says 'Dr. Lucca Coletti.'" I gave them each a sidelong glance. "Do either of you know anything about this?"

My two best friends, who also happened to be married to my brothers, looked at each other before turning their attention to me. I could see it on their faces. They'd seen the sign too. Maybe they'd even known before me. I should have guessed when they arrived for our walk looking tense and a little cagey. They'd intended on breaking the news to me. Too late. I'd been in town earlier and seen it for myself.

"Yes, well, we saw it too," Faith said, confirming my suspicions.

"And wondered if your mother had anything to do with it," Amelia said.

"Who else could it be?" I asked, the bitter taste of betrayal thick on my tongue.

"The question is why?" Faith said.

"She doesn't want me working," I said. "She thinks this will put me out of business, so to speak."

Was she paying his salary? She had to be. I might be sick right here on the beach. The betrayals just kept coming.

"Why would Mother tell me she was having it built for me if she intended on hiring a doctor?" I asked.

"We're not entirely sure," Amelia said. "Benedict had no idea. He

thought it was for you.”

“Nor Briggs,” Faith said. “Then yesterday morning, they arrived at the work site and there was a man there painting the sign above the door. After that, he and Briggs put two and two together.”

“Two and two adds up to one Dr. Lucca Coletti,” I said bitterly. “Mother must have sent for him. How could she have kept this from me? When she suggested hiring assistants to Briggs and Benedict, she’d told them what she was doing. It’s because I’m a woman, that’s why. I don’t have the same say in things as a man. I’m so furious I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Before either of them could answer, I continued with my rant. “I won’t do it. I refuse to work for him.” The thought of answering to a man caused bile to rise to my throat. How dare Mother. She was going to hear it from me.

“I have a good mind to move out,” I said. “But where would I go?”

Silence. Neither of my sisters-in-law offered the guest room at their homes, I noticed.

“Let’s sit for a moment,” Amelia said. “Talk all of this out.”

“There must be an explanation for your mother’s actions,” Faith said.

Why did it seem as if they knew something I didn’t? Suddenly, I felt suspicious. Had they been in on it?

We had walked to the end of our beach, drizzle dampening our faces until we’d reached our favorite place to sit and watch the water. Earlier, the sky had been a brilliant blue, but clouds had swooped in without warning. Now the Puget Sound was gray to match the sky. And my mood.

It was a few weeks into November, and the weather had turned cold and damp. We would have sunny days between now and spring, but there wouldn’t be many. The hours of daylight were short this time of year. I didn’t care for the dark. In truth, I was afraid of the dark, especially since Father’s murder. Regardless, I often had to drive at night to take care of my patients, leaving me no room for fear. I had to be brave.

My island. My people. No one wanted a doctor here.

Right?

We sat on logs arranged around a crude firepit my brothers had made years ago. The four of us had used it as a sanctuary when Father was on a rampage. A few pieces of charred wood, remnants of our last bonfire, were now waterlogged from the heavy rain the night before.

“Why would she have his name on the sign? Or at least she could have told me what she was doing so I wasn’t gobsmacked by it. To think, I was

just merrily going about my day, dropping by to see how the boys were getting on with the remodel since I'd been in Seattle." I stretched out my legs and pointed my toes to ease the tightness in my calves. I'd had to walk a mile up a hill in the middle of the night to help one of my patients give birth. She and her husband lived on one of the highest elevations of the island, and this time of year, the ground was too wet to get up there in our Model T.

"I'm not sure," Faith said, her voice jangly. "It's odd. Like a lot of things around here."

"The nerve. The absolute nerve," I said, wondering vaguely what she meant by that. I was too worked up to ask for clarification. "How could Mother have lied to me like this? She told me the office was for me. Me alone. Not to share with some interloper. And my name isn't even on the sign." That might have been the worst blow of all. My own mother didn't respect what I did because I was self-taught. Or was there a different reason?

Dr. Lucca Coletti. Two *T*s when one would have done just fine. What kind of name was Coletti anyway? Italian? They were such a beautiful people. Would he be thrillingly handsome just to make matters worse? The women of the island would flock to him, forgetting all about my loyal care just for a chance to look into long-lashed brown eyes.

Unfortunately, I, too, had a penchant for brown eyes. Darker complexions and shiny black hair were also weaknesses. There had been a boy in Seattle when I used to visit my father's shipyard who had caught my eye, but that was before I understood that men were not to be trusted. Other than my brothers, I had vowed to stay away for fear I'd end up like my mother.

And now, with Father gone, peace had come to our lives. I had no intention of getting myself trapped within the confines of marriage and going back to the life of tiptoeing around and trying to stay out of sight of an angry man looking for a fight. A marriage like that would be a fate worse than death. I could practically feel the chains around my neck just thinking about it. I didn't need a man. I had my own money. My own job. For now.

What if the other ladies on the island switched to his care simply because he was young and handsome? Fresh meat. Not that there were that many unmarried women on the island. Men far out populated women. However, even married ones enjoyed a good look at a handsome man. Especially one who felt your neck for inflamed glands when you were sick, massaging with long, warm fingers.

Maybe he would be ugly and horrible. *Please, let him be ugly*, I thought.

He would wither on the vine and go back from whence he came. They'd be stuck with old Ella. Just as it had always been. As it should be.

"We saw him," Faith whispered. "Just now, in town."

"You saw him?" I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice. How had they not mentioned that until now?

"We stopped by to see the boys," Amelia said hastily. "We weren't seeking him out or anything of the sort."

Bracing myself for the worst, I crossed my arms over my chest. "Please tell me he's old and hideous."

Again, a look passed between my sisters-in-law.

He *was* handsome. I knew it before they even uttered the words.

"He's young," Faith said. "And looks a bit like a Greek god."

"How would you know what a Greek god looks like?" I asked, bothered. A Greek god? For heaven's sake.

"I mean, how I would imagine one to look," Faith said.

"He's good-looking," I said, more to myself than them. "Of all the luck."

"I mean, if you like wide shoulders and big brown eyes," Amelia said.

"And a nice smile," Faith said. "He has a very nice smile."

"Good teeth," Amelia said, nodding.

"One of those welcoming type of faces," Faith said. "You know the kind."

"Not really," I said drily. "Aren't those usually on dogs? In fact, I have no idea what you mean at all." This conversation further aggravated me. This Greek god was trouble. He would ruin everything. My life that I loved would never be the same.

"He has a wide forehead and this square jaw," Faith said.

"Tapered." Amelia nodded with enthusiasm.

"What does tapered mean?" I asked.

"A face that goes like this." Amelia sucked in her full cheeks and lifted her eyebrows.

"How closely did you look at him?" I asked, aghast. "You seem to have committed every detail to memory."

"We had to be polite to him," Faith said.

"Welcoming," Amelia said. "Like people were to us."

Faith and Amelia. Two nicer women had never walked the earth. It was nauseating.

"He has just a touch of an Italian accent," Amelia said. "He's also very

attractive.”

“He said he couldn’t find work back east because people don’t like Italians,” Faith said.

“Stupid,” Amelia added.

“Well, that is stupid.” I didn’t care where he was from, only that he was here. “But still. Why did he come to Whale Island? He’s going to ruin everything.”

“He asked about you,” Amelia said. “We mentioned how clever you are.”

“And pretty,” Faith said.

I groaned. “Why would you mention anything about my appearance? It has absolutely no relevance whatsoever to my competency.”

“Oh, yes, we know that,” Faith said hurriedly. “We were only thinking...” She didn’t finish her sentence, flushing instead and looking to Amelia for help.

“What exactly were you thinking?” I snarled, feeling feral. “Matchmaking?”

Amelia coughed, as if she’d taken a sudden drink that went down her airway instead of the esophagus. “Not that.”

“Not exactly,” Faith said, sounding more than a little guilty.

“You two are supposed to be on my side,” I said. “Which means you know how I feel about getting yoked to a no-good man.”

“Like us?” Amelia’s eyes danced. Her copper hair curled around her face, blown about by the wind.

“Benny and Briggs are different.” I pulled my coat tighter. This weather was miserable. I was tired and cranky anyway, even before I saw that infuriating sign.

“Has it occurred to you that having a doctor on the island will give you time to rest and be with family?” Amelia asked. “You’ve been working hard for all these years. A little time off wouldn’t hurt you, surely?”

“Don’t try to placate me. Nothing will make me feel better. I don’t want him here, and if I have anything to say about it, he won’t be *on the island* for long.”

“What do you plan on doing to run him out?” Faith asked, sounding more curious than accusatory. She was such an innocent that she had trouble seeing the ulterior motives in people. Thankfully, she had Briggs to look after her. My brother was a man of keen observation and discernment, especially when it came to people. Who knew what would have happened to sweet Faith had

she not found him? She'd probably still be licking her wounds from the cad who broke her heart. He'd been having an affair with Faith's best friend right under her nose, and she hadn't had a clue. That would never have happened to Briggs or me. We could find a rat with ease.

"I'm going to make sure no one goes to see him," I said, thinking out loud. "I'll make the rounds, telling them all that he's no good and wants to take over. They won't like an outsider telling them what's what." That was the honest truth. People here were distrustful of strangers. Even handsome ones.

"People can start medical practices wherever they want," Faith said.

"Mother did this," I said. "She brought him here. I'll not be able to forgive her. I'm telling you right now."

"Please, don't say that," Faith said. "She's your mother."

"I'll say it because it's the truth, which seems to be in short supply around here," I said.

I stewed about it all the way back up to the house. Even Amelia, who was normally chatty, was quiet. No advice offered would be well received, I could promise them that.

Never mind. I would come up with a plan to poison everyone against him. It was for their sake. Some stranger wasn't going to take care of us. Not on Whale Island.

"YOU TOLD me the clinic was for me," I said.

Mother looked at me for a long moment, seemingly trying to decide how truthful to be. I expected a lie. Instead, I got what I interpreted to be a half-truth. "I initially meant for the office to be for you." She stopped, examining her hands as if there were answers in the lines on her palms. "But then I thought about how hard you work and that you might never find a husband if you were forever clomping around in the middle of the night and giving up any semblance of a social life for your work."

"Did it ever occur to you that I'd like to be consulted on matters regarding my life and career? I don't want a social life. Or a man. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Well, what about what I want? The rest of the family is here for Sunday

dinner while you're always out and about somewhere helping people who might be in better hands with a real doctor."

My mouth fell open. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A lie might have been more welcomed than this. "You don't think I do a good job caring for the people of this island?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Of course you do. I simply meant that there are limitations to your abilities. You haven't been to medical school, as much as you act as if you have."

"Act as if I have?" I was now completely speechless. My own mother.

"You might hurt someone one of these days because of lack of knowledge, and you would be devastated if that happened."

I already had been with the patient with the burst appendix, but I wasn't telling Mother that. It would only be ammunition.

"I'm afraid for you," Mother went on. "You put too much into your work, and what if it all went awry? Then who are you? What have you to look forward to?"

"It's already gone awry," I said, finding my voice at last. "Thanks to your intervening. You've hired a man. A doctor. Someone to take my place in the hearts of the residents. Everyone will want to go to him because he's a real doctor. I'm finished." To my dismay, tears had crept into my voice. I hated crying. When I was a kid, I'd prided myself on being as tough and stoic as my brothers.

"Do you know that lack of sleep will turn you old and ugly before your time?" Mother asked.

Stunned, I almost gasped out loud. "What are you talking about?"

She ignored my question. "Dear, why do you care so much? What is it that makes you desire to be loved by strangers?"

"They're not strangers. They're my patients. I care deeply about them."

"Too much. You give too much and neglect yourself and your family." Mother stuck her chin out stubbornly, reminding me of myself and my niece, Bebe. She'd never been like that when Father was alive, but since marrying Timothy, she'd emerged stronger and much more opinionated. Not to mention interfering. "All because you crave praise and attention."

"That is simply not true." I knew where she was going with this, but playing dumb suited me just then. She was implying that my need for admiration was stronger than it should be. Perhaps she was right. She'd done her best, but there had not been enough parental love in this house. Mother

had survived, existed even, but not been fully present. That's what happened when a woman was consistently abused. She disappeared inside herself.

I didn't experience anything as bad as Briggs and Benedict. While they were physically punished, mine had been more psychological. Father had wanted me to placate and succumb to his wishes. For Father, having offspring was more like collecting trophies. He wanted us to be perfect soldiers, or in my case, a pretty little princess. A nice little girl who didn't speak up or have interests or ambitions. When I was little, I'd tried. But the older I got, the more I rebelled. As much as was safe to do, anyway. Even I wasn't spunky enough to outwardly rebel. He couldn't change my thoughts, though. They were all mine.

I'd not cared that I'd been a disappointment to him by not being the little doll he'd wanted and thought he got until I learned to talk. He'd named Ella Pointe after me before he really knew me. I'm sure he regretted it the rest of his life. All I knew was that I was invisible to him. He acted as if I didn't even exist.

I didn't want his love or attention. I was glad to not be disciplined like my brothers. The lucky one. Or at least, that's what I told myself. However, looking back, maybe my need for praise that never came was sought out through my work.

I knew one thing with certainty. The life my mother had with my father was not one I wanted. Gratitude of my patients aside, my work provided independence. I'd told myself that if I were to be tossed out of the house as Briggs had been, I would be able to support myself.

Or would I? Most of my patients didn't pay me other than what they could afford, which was sometimes a pie or cake. If I'd needed money to live, I wouldn't have the lifestyle I was familiar with. No Model T to drive or maids to do my hair. None of Mrs. Halvorson's exquisite food.

Right now, however, none of that was foremost in my mind.

"Is it too much to ask that you work in partnership with him?" My mother continued to look at me with a mixture of pity and irritation.

"I don't know how you expect me to do that. He's not one of us."

"Not yet, but he might be. He's had a hard time here in America. I expect you and the rest of the island to treat him better than that. As a matter of fact, I've invited him to stay here with us until the residence is finished."

"He's...he's staying here? In our house?"

"Only until his apartment is done." She said this with such a nonchalant

air that it infuriated me further. How could she invite him here? And how could she give him my place?

“The residence that was supposed to be for me?” Originally, Mother had suggested we build an adjoining residence for nights I needed to sleep at the office to keep watch over a patient. I’d even thought about moving there permanently to give Mother time alone with her new husband. I’d started to wonder about my place in the family. Was I in the way? Would they rather be alone? Although she’d never said so, I felt I intruded into Mother’s new life by remaining at the estate.

“You don’t care, surely? Isn’t this your home?” Mother asked, sounding hurt.

How could she be hurt? I was the one who had been harmed.

“Mother, I’ll never forgive you for this. Nursing is my whole life, and you’ve just taken it away from me.”

Before she could answer, I stormed away, worried if I stayed much longer I’d say things I regretted later.

As I exited the room, I heard Mother say, “I expect you for supper tonight.”

We’d see about that.

It wasn’t until I was halfway up the stairs that I realized what she meant.

Dr. Lucca Coletti would be here for our evening meal. Because he lived here now.

ELLA

In the end, I decided I would join them for supper. I couldn't hide in my room, avoiding the world forever. Anyway, I wanted to see this Dr. Coletti with my own eyes.

I dressed with care that evening in a new gown made from silk the color of eggplant with lace sleeves. The color suited my fair skin and dark hair. Perhaps it flattered my blue eyes, too? I wasn't sure. People often told me I was pretty, but I didn't see it. For one thing, I was tall and wide-shouldered, making it difficult to appear feminine and dainty. Next to Amelia and Faith, I was like a lumberjack.

Regardless, my reflection pleased me tonight. I smoothed my hands over the skirt, admiring Mrs. Lancaster's handiwork. Our new dressmaker in town was a genius. The dress fit perfectly, and the cut of the waist and minimal material over the shoulders flattered my shape.

Lizzie had fixed my hair earlier using all her tricks, including a sock tucked into my hair to make the bun high and wide on top of my head. Now I swept rouge onto my cheeks to add a little color to my skin and made up my eyes.

If I were to meet my new enemy, I must look my best. Ready, I ventured downstairs, heart thumping, prepared for battle.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I felt the loss of Dexter all over again. He'd always been there to greet me. The house felt barren without him, as if the ceiling had been stripped away. Everything was different. Father dead. The boys married. Dexter gone. Mother remarried. All of it I'd taken in stride, dealing with one change after the other without making a fuss. But hiring a doctor without telling me? It was too much. I didn't know what to

do.

Just outside the door to the living room, I hesitated, hearing Mother's soft tones and Timothy's resonating timbre and a stranger's voice. Coletti.

My feet ached to run in the other direction. To go down to the beach and converse with the seals rather than go in and face the man who would change my life. *Do it now*, I ordered myself.

So I did, stepping into the room with my shoulders squared and my head held high. There he was, dark head bent slightly as he listened to whatever Mother was saying. He looked up as I approached. Brown eyes fringed with thick lashes widened at the sight of me. His jaw was indeed square and his cheekbones high. The girls had described him perfectly. Unfortunately, he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen in my life.

My knees wobbled. Thank God for long dresses.

The three of them stood around the liquor cabinet. Mother was dressed in a dark blue gown paired with white gloves and a string of pearls. Timothy, with his salt-and-pepper beard and his mostly silver hair combed back and held in place with pomade. He wore an evening suit made from black cashmere. Mother had insisted he be fitted for several new suits after they'd married. He hadn't protested. Not much, anyway.

"May I introduce you to Dr. Lucca Coletti," Mother said.

Not wanting to be rude, and for that reason only, not because I could scarcely take my eyes off him, I turned to Dr. Coletti and offered my hand. He took it, brushing his mouth against the fabric of my gloves. Very unsanitary, I might add. He could have a cold or the flu and now his germs were on my gloves. As a doctor, he should know better.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Tutheridge." He smiled. The girls were right about that too. Nice teeth, all straight and white. "I've heard a lot about you."

"I can't say the same about you, Dr. Coletti," I said stiffly. "I had no idea a doctor had moved to the island until I saw your sign in town."

"I'm sorry you were surprised," he said, looking straight into my eyes. "I can understand how shocking that must have been."

He seemed genuine. None of this was really his fault. Still, he was here, and I wanted him to leave. Darn it all, I thought silently. I'd been right to worry. I was finished. No one would choose a woman if there was a man available. Especially one who looked like Dr. Coletti. Soon I'd have no patients at all.

“It was,” I said. “Rather treacherous on my mother’s part, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ella,” Mother said. “Please.”

“Miss Tutheridge, let me assure you, I’ve no intention of getting in your way,” Dr. Coletti said. “From all accounts, you’ve done well by the people of this island.”

“Then what work will be left for you?” I asked, blurting it out with a rudeness I hadn’t intended.

Lucca Coletti blinked his thick lashes. Up and down they went three times. Were they as silky to the touch as they appeared to be?

“My understanding was the island needed someone for more complicated procedures.” Dr. Coletti had a slight Italian accent—shortening vowel sounds, rolling his *Rs*, and dropping all of the *Hs*. The cadence was almost musical. Very attractive. Mesmerizing. Dangerous. “Such as surgery or setting broken bones,” he added. “Or anything for which you’re not trained.”

I flushed with heat. Surgery? He was right. I couldn’t open up a person and do whatever was needed. Last year, a stubborn patient who had refused to seek treatment in Seattle, even though I’d begged him to, died from a burst appendix. If I’d known how to take it out of him, he would be alive. There were times, I had to admit, that island folk were too distrustful of outsiders. He had insisted it was only I who could take care of him. That assumption had cost him his life. And left me with many sleepless nights. Dr. Coletti would have been able to save him.

“Well, we do just fine for the most part,” I said. “Do you know how to deliver a baby?”

“I could if I had to, but they didn’t teach us much about that at medical school.”

Of course they didn’t. Men had no concern for women’s health. “That’s the primary need here, Dr. Coletti.” As in, *We don’t really need you here. Why don’t you go on home?*

“Then we shall be able to coexist without problem?” He nodded his head in a way I supposed was to indicate deference. Instead, it made me mad. There was no need for condescension. “And please, you must call me Lucca. We’re peers, after all.”

Peers. Well, that was true. We *were* peers. I supposed that was generous of him to say. I liked it. A little. Not a lot. He was still a man trying to take my job.

“I’ve dedicated my life to the welfare of our residents, Lucca,” I said. “I hope you understand what that means.”

His eyes sparkled with humor. “I do not think you’ll let me forget, am I right, Ella of Ella Pointe?”

I bristled. Who was he to call me that without permission? “Lucca of—where are you from?” I asked. “So that I might give you a title?”

“I’m from an island off the northern Italian coast called Sardinia.”

Why did that pronunciation sound so good coming from his mouth? I had the sudden urge to ask him to speak in his native tongue. No, I mustn’t get sucked in by his charms.

“I’ve always heard it pronounced Sardinia,” I said.

“This is because you are American,” Lucca said. “So you use the English word. But where I’m from, we say it the way it should be spoken.” His dancing eyes told me he was teasing, but it irked me anyway.

“You’re in America now, so perhaps you should say it the way we do.” I said it with a flair of flippancy that came out with more than a little edge. It wasn’t that I was purposely being sassy, but somehow everything was coming out drenched in disdain and sarcasm. Mother had always said I was no good at hiding my true feelings. I could practically feel the mental daggers she was probably sending me.

“What would everyone like to drink?” Timothy asked, clearly trying to steer the conversation in another direction.

I asked for a sherry, as did Mother.

“Do you have red wine?” Lucca asked. “I haven’t had a decent glass in a long time. I’ve been very poor. Like a little church mouse.”

“We can have Dexter open a bottle.” My mother clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes watering. “I’m sorry. Not Dexter. The new one.” She looked over at me. “Why can’t I remember his name?”

“Raymond,” I said.

We’d only just hired him, having gone through a few candidates before Mother was satisfied. Raymond was about my age and had emigrated from England, thus he knew all the formal ways that Mother liked. However, she couldn’t seem to remember his name. More than once, she’d called him Dexter, only to apologize profusely.

“Please, don’t go to any trouble,” Lucca said. “A sherry is just fine for me as well.”

“If you’re sure?” Mother asked. “Tomorrow, we’ll be sure to have a

bottle of red open. A Chianti, perhaps?”

“Whatever you have available will be fine.” Lucca took the glass of sherry from Timothy’s outstretched hand, and we all settled in chairs by the fire.

“We always have wine with dinner,” I said. “One white and the other red.”

“Ah, yes, but what are their varietals, and where are they from?” Lucca asked. “These are all important things to know about wine.”

Of course, I knew that. I’d only been commenting on his obvious snobbery. He should know right away that he wouldn’t be tough enough for island life and our simple people. The sooner he realized that and went away, the better for all.

“How were your travels?” Mother asked Lucca politely. “Did you have any trouble getting here?”

The sparkle in his brown eyes grew flat and dim. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” A bland smile followed as he appeared to pull himself from whatever bad memory had temporarily seized him.

That brought up the question, what *had* happened to him on the way out here? Life must not be easy for him. Even though we didn’t have much in the way of racial strife on the island, in Seattle, minorities were not treated well, particularly those who had come from Asian countries. It must be similar for Italians back east. All of which made me sad and angry. Regardless, that did not change the facts. I still didn’t want Lucca Coletti here. Not because of his background but his profession.

Still, I *did* understand how it felt to be shut out because of the way you were born. In my case, being a woman made it extremely difficult to attend medical school. If I’d had more ambition, I might have pursued it. But I was a Whale Island girl with no desire to reside elsewhere. Sadly, I couldn’t keep people from moving here and setting up medical practices if they so chose.

I’d have to run him off. That’s all there was to it.

LUCCA

Ella Tutheridge was a beauty with blue eyes and a heart-shaped face. Her alabaster skin glowed with health and youth. It was a shame she hated me.

I'm not the smartest man ever born, but that much was obvious. From the moment she walked into the room, I'd been picking invisible sharp knives out of my back.

We were already into the second course, clams cooked in garlic and white wine over freshly made pasta, and she hadn't looked at me once. Her obvious hostility had been clear during drinks, but now she hardly said a word.

I went through what I'd learned thus far. She hadn't known I was coming. She didn't want me here. I was a threat to her. Not her livelihood, as it was obvious she had no need for money, but to her sense of self-worth. She was a woman who valued herself only if she was useful to others. In addition, being needed was important to her. She also didn't like to be ignored or dismissed. That's how she'd taken her mother's betrayal.

My perceptions could be completely wrong, of course. But my instincts told me otherwise. I would see if my assumptions were correct over time. If she didn't murder me in my sleep.

Mrs. Bains seemed like a perfectly nice woman. However, what she'd done to her daughter was appalling, especially if her sons were correct and this was all a ruse to marry Ella off. She was playing with people's lives. Mostly mine. I'd come all this way only to find I was Ella bait. My doctor skills may or may not be needed. It was clear that Mrs. Bains's actions had hurt Ella and driven a wedge between them. I was sorry for Ella. I'd have reacted much the same had the situation been reversed.

Whatever family drama ensued was no concern of mine, I told myself as I bit into a clam. I would do my job and stay out of everyone's way. All that would be easier once I moved into my own home. For now, I would do my best to keep my head low.

As far as this matchmaking nonsense went? I would not allow myself to believe that my fate was intertwined with Ella's. It might have worked for the other couples, but Ella and I were about as mismatched as two people could be. Even if she was so exquisite to look at and fun to talk with. She did not feel the same way about me.

"Tell me, Lucca, what made you decide to invade our little island? Of all the places in the world?" Ella set down her fork and picked up her glass of red wine, a delicious French Bordeaux with a finish that brought images of the cold, dry caves where bottles were often stored. It was a pity she had no interest in wine.

"I need work," I said. "It's as simple as that. The opportunity to come west seemed like a good one. I'm not a complicated man, so I can't say there was much thought to my decision other than survival. My understanding was the island was in need of a doctor to provide care. It seemed ideal." The moment I said it, I wished I could take it back. I hadn't meant that she wasn't providing adequate care. Not at all. She seemed to think otherwise. Or it seemed that way by the way her blue eyes had turned to ice.

She stared at me from across the table. "What gave you the impression you were *needed* here?"

I swallowed back a nervous laugh. She was intense, Miss Ella of Ella Pointe. And scary. Sweat dribbled down the base of my spine. "I mean, not that you aren't doing a good job here. That's obvious. Of course."

"What's obvious?" Ella asked. "What evidence do we have that I'm doing a good job?"

"The people I've met thus far have been rather effusive in their compliments." That wasn't completely true. I'd not talked to anyone other than her family members and Matthew.

"Yes, the people of Whale Island know I'd do anything for them," Ella said. "And they believe in my competency. Here at Stella, things are not that way. Obviously." She sent a pointed look toward her mother.

I stifled a nervous smile. They called the estate Stella, which I had found highly amusing until Mrs. Bains explained to me that it had been named after one of her late husband's mistresses.

She'd not said anything further about her late husband, and I didn't ask, even though I was curious. Thus far, everyone had been a little cagey about Roland Tutheridge's death. But now, the subject veered toward him.

"Did you know my father was murdered?" Ella asked.

Murdered. A shudder of shock went through me. No one had mentioned it, including Mrs. Mantle. Did she know? "I hadn't heard that, no," I said, attempting to keep the rattle out of my voice. "I'm sorry."

"No one was sorry to see him go," Ella said.

"Dear, must you?" Mrs. Bains asked.

"Mother, he should know the truth." Ella turned back to me. "We live in a wild place. There have been three murders here this year. Although one could be counted as a preemptive killing."

"Preemptive?" I asked, croaking.

"Well, yes, because this bad man was about to kill Briggs, so Dexter had to step in and kill him before he could hurt my brother, so I don't know if it fully counts. But as you can see, this is a dangerous island to live on."

"Three killings seem a lot for one small island," I said.

"They were unrelated," Mrs. Bains said, sounding hasty and dismissive at the same time. "My husband was murdered by...Dexter. Our longtime employee. It's a long story and one I don't want to discuss at supper. Especially on your first evening here."

"We should tell him the truth of what he's agreed to," Ella said, a continued glint of hostility in her eyes. She was trying to scare me.

She was succeeding.

"How did they die?"

"Gunshots," Ella said. "This is the west. People carry guns."

Gunshot wounds. Mrs. Mantle had said something about that during our discussion. A sliver of doubt traveled down my spine. What if I'd come to a dangerous place? One that didn't tolerate men from Italy?

"Father was shot on his way home from a night of poker," Ella said as she casually buttered a roll. "A few months later, a man shot his wife for giving him syphilis."

"Ella's exaggerating," Mrs. Bains said. "The young couple in question were not from here. They'd only lived here a short time when the trouble happened."

"She was a prostitute," Ella said, a smile tugging at her lips. She was enjoying this. If she had the daggers out already, I was in for a bumpy

transition. It would only get worse. “She gave her husband the disease, which made him lose what he had left of his mind, and he killed her. Blood everywhere.”

“Ella, please don’t.” Timothy set his fork down next to his plate and spoke as if he were a weary traveler still days from arriving home. “I’d really like to have a pleasant meal.”

I studied him more closely. He was a good-looking man with silver and black hair and a build that suggested more of a lumberjack than a preacher. At the moment, however, his face had clouded over in anger.

Good Lord. What *had* I gotten myself into here? “Is that a common malady here?” I asked, squeaking a little. There was more to all of this than even Ella was saying, and what did it have to do with Timothy Bains?

Ella held her wineglass at the end of her long fingers. She was a tall woman with a strong, sturdy build, yet there was a grace and elegance to her long neck and limbs. An intelligence radiated from her pretty eyes. Way too smart for the likes of me. She would have me headed home before I could unpack. That was her goal, and everything I’d learned thus far told me she always got what she aimed for, even if it meant trampling a few unsuspecting doctors on the way.

“No, if he’s staying to treat the people of this island,” Ella said, “then he should know that we have as many insidious crimes as the city. Prostitution. The spread of venereal diseases.”

“That’s not what Timothy’s referring to,” Mrs. Bains said sharply. “Think for a moment, Ella, about someone besides yourself. The entire incident was excruciating for Timothy. Speaking of it only makes the pain linger.”

Ella actually looked abashed, flushing and lowering her gaze. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Timothy. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s all right,” Timothy said. “If Dr. Coletti is going to live with us, he should know the truth about what happened.”

“No, please, don’t feel obligated,” I said. “None of this is my business.”

“You’re right,” Ella said.

Timothy shot her a disappointed glance before returning his attention to me. “Years ago, when I was about your age, I was married and had a son. A young woman in my congregation accused me of seduction. Her younger brother lied about seeing us together, and I was ousted from my church. Subsequently, my wife filed for divorce and took my son away. I’ve not seen either since.” His tone had grown husky as the story unfolded. “The boy who

lied for his sister, now an adult, somehow found his way here. We don't know how or why. He and his wife are now dead. Another long story."

"Dexter shot him," Ella said. "After the man, Sam Steele, shot his wife. It's all very sordid. You should consider the community you're moving into, don't you think?"

"There are murders every day in Boston," I said more mildly than I currently felt. Dead bodies seemed to be piling up everywhere on this island. How many murders should a small community have? Hopefully, they'd capped out for a long time to come.

"Nothing like that ever happened here before," Mrs. Bains said. "And we don't expect it to again."

"I would hope not," I said.

"But you never know," Ella said.

Her raised eyebrow made me laugh. "I'll have to pray I'm not next."

"Good idea." Ella pinched a piece of her roll and smashed it between her thumb and finger. Like a bug.

Or a doomed doctor.

ELLA

After dinner, we all retired to the living room for glasses of brandy. I would have said goodnight and gone upstairs, but I was too riled up to sleep. We gathered around the fireplace. Mother pulled out a game of checkers, and she and Lucca played a few matches while I stared into the flames. Timothy had his Bible out and was taking notes, possibly for a sermon.

“You all right?” Timothy whispered to me.

“I’m fine,” I said.

He continued to speak in whispers, obviously conscious that Mother was only across the room. “Please, dear girl, try to be patient with your mother. She wants what’s best for you.”

“We have a disagreement about what that is,” I whispered back.

Our conversation was abruptly stopped when Mother announced that she would be retiring for the evening. She stood and gestured for Timothy to join her.

“Goodnight,” Mother said to Lucca. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bains,” Lucca said.

Before I understood what was happening, Mother and Timothy had disappeared. I was vaguely aware of Raymond bustling about in the background. Poor man. Mother must have told him to stay with us. God forbid an adult woman should be left alone with a man. This patriarchal society was maddening.

Lucca asked if he could sit beside me. “I’d like a chance to speak with you.”

“Suit yourself.” I drank the rest of my brandy, wishing for more but

knowing it would give me a headache, and asked Raymond for water instead.

“I’ve been thinking about how we might best work together.”

“We won’t be,” I said.

“What if we were to work side by side? I won’t interfere in your business, and you don’t interfere in mine.”

“I don’t trust you,” I said flatly. “Men say these things, and then they do the opposite.”

“To whom are you referring? Any man? Or one in particular?” His voice was almost hypnotic. Almost, but not quite. I was stronger than that. I blinked away the manipulation of his demeanor and musical voice.

“Never mind.” There was no chance I was going to tell him my personal, very intimate thoughts about my parents. About what I’d seen time and again in their marriage. What he’d done to my brothers. How he’d iced me out of his life. Dismissed me. No acknowledgment whatsoever.

“Ella? Please, we must talk all of this through.”

“There’s nothing to discuss. I will not be ignored. That’s all. I will not work for you.”

“You wouldn’t be working for me. Perhaps it will be the opposite?”

“What’s that mean?” I stared him down. This infuriating man would not get the best of me.

“This is your island. You know the people here. I’ll be your humble servant, learning from you.” He faltered, seeming to search for the right word. “I will look to you for guidance.”

Why did it all sound so lovely coming off his tongue? Lies, I reminded myself. All lies.

“You’re a remarkable woman, Ella Tutheridge. Impossible to ignore.”

“My father did.” Why had I said that? I’d just promised myself I was not going to share anything personal. That’s how one encouraged ridicule. Showing vulnerability to a man gave them all the weaponry they needed to win the war.

“But he named a town after you,” Lucca said, obviously referring to my father.

“That was before I was a person. He liked me well enough when I was an infant and he could still dream of the kind of little girl he wanted. Oh, yes, he had high expectations of what he wanted. Unfortunately for him, I was not at all what he wished for in a daughter. His little girl was not like her mother.”

“How is that?”

“Subservient. Willing to take abuse instead of fighting back.”

“What about your nursing? What did he think of that?” Lucca asked, seeming genuinely curious.

“He never said one word about it. After Rosemary died of complications from the flu—Hudson’s wife—I knew I had to do something to help. My father was away with the boat, and we couldn’t get her medical care. From that moment on, I knew I had to take care of the people here. So I went to school. Or at least, a school of one, the student and teacher being the same person.”

“Remarkable,” Lucca said.

Why was he being so nice? It was galling.

When I didn’t say anything, he asked yet another question. “It was your sister-in-law’s death that made you turn to medicine?”

“Yes. She was so good and kind. I couldn’t understand how the flu could kill her. The whole thing made me fighting mad.”

“When you’re angry, you come up with a plan to fight whatever it is?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?” I crossed my arms and peered at him.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help myself. I’m very interested in people and their stories.”

“That’s a good trait in a doctor,” I said reluctantly. As much as I hated to admit it, this man had a way about him that made a person melt.

“I’d like to think so.”

“Since we’re asking so many questions, I’ll ask one of you. What happened back east that made you want to come here?”

“I couldn’t get anyone to give me a chance. Not at the hospitals or any of the doctor’s offices I approached. No one wanted an Italian Catholic on their staff.”

I’d thought that to be the case, and I’d been right. How horrible for him. “I’m sorry,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “Not that you’re Italian or Catholic, but the way you were treated.”

“Yes, well, this is why the chance to come here was very appealing. And so far, everyone’s been friendly and welcoming. Other than you.” He smiled, his expression almost flirtatious.

I found myself wanting to flirt back. No, no. No flirting with the enemy.

“I’m not unfriendly,” I said.

“What would you call it then?” Lucca asked me in a teasing tone.

“Because if this is friendly, your unfriendly must be ferocious indeed.”

“I’m normally a fun person,” I said, sulky. “People love me.”

“Yes, I can see that.” His eyes twinkled. “I’ve actually been warned about you.”

“Warned? By whom?”

He flushed and sobered. “I shouldn’t have said that. Never mind.”

“Who talked about me?” I turned to face him directly, gripped by an instinct to poke him in the chest.

“Your brothers may have mentioned that it would be easy for me to fall in love with you, and if I did, you would break my heart.”

“That’s absurd.” Why had they told him that? I hadn’t broken any hearts that I knew of. “They’ve got some nerve. First of all, they shouldn’t be talking about me to you. Especially not to you.”

“Because I’m the enemy?” A muscle twitched near his mouth.

Had I hurt his feelings? He should never play poker. Everything he felt showed in his eyes and expression. If I were seeing it right, this was a man of deep feelings and sensitivity. “Something like that, yes.” I lifted one shoulder apologetically. “Not an enemy but a foe.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A foe is not personal,” I said. “An enemy is someone you hate because you know them.”

“I see. That’s an interesting distinction.” He rubbed his chin, which had developed a dark stubble by this time of night.

“You won’t fall in love with me, so you can put that worry aside,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I’m not your type,” I said.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t want a man. Ever. And you’re the marrying sort, aren’t you?”

He seemed taken aback by that question but answered anyway. “If God blessed me with a woman to love and who loved me in return, then I should very much like to marry. Make a family of my own. But I would not want to marry a woman who evoked conflict and made me miserable. So I will be selective.”

“See. There you have it. You’re too sensible to let yourself fall in love with someone so ill-suited. Can you imagine me as someone’s mother?” I laughed self-consciously.

It wasn’t really funny. Inside, I knew I wasn’t made for motherhood. No

instincts for it. Nothing to give a little person who would need me to be wise and loving when I was neither of those things. Mother had loved me, sure, but with Father's violence, her affection was thwarted. She had tried to protect us but without success. History would not repeat itself. Not if I remained single and childless. Safer that way for all involved.

Anyway, we had Faith and Amelia in the family now. They were natural nurturers who would no doubt be excellent mothers. Loving others was like breathing to them. For me, it was more of a long slog up a mountain, lungs burning and limbs aching.

Lucca appeared to think through my question before answering. "Yes, I suppose I am too sensible to fall for the wrong person. I've had enough trouble. I don't need to borrow any more sadness."

Immediately, I had to know more. "What kind of trouble?" Why did I care? I spoke sternly to myself. Walk away. Get some fresh air. You're acting like a girl. I knew Lucca Coletti was dangerous. Those eyes. That mouth.

"My mother died when I was in medical school here in America. I never got to say goodbye." His eyes darkened to a deeper shade of brown. "She raised me by herself after my father died. Just the two of us meant we were close. Mama wanted this for me. America. It was her dream, not mine."

"And yet here you are," I said softly, sympathetic in spite of myself.

"Yes. She would be pleased. I was only fourteen when I left Italy. It was hard. I've been looking for a home ever since."

Thinking of his mother sending away her only son when he was still a boy was enough to break my heart. Looking for a home? That, too, softened me and made my chest ache.

"I am sorry," I said simply.

"It is all right. I'm still breathing. Nothing's killed me yet. And now I have a new chance here."

No, he didn't.

One of us had to go.

I found myself wanting to know more, despite my resolve. "How did your mother die?"

"Mama was sick for a while. I only knew because one of her friends wrote to me with updates. She would have kept it to herself, I think. There were no doctors in our village, only a midwife—a woman much like yourself—so I'm not certain, but I believe she had some kind of cancer. I wasn't there, so I can't tell you anything more than that. Like you with Rosemary, it

makes me want to do the best I can for people. It gives me a small comfort to know she knew I was on my way to becoming a doctor. She wanted that for me.”

“Did you want to be a doctor, or was it all for her?” Yes, that was it. He didn’t even want to be a doctor. All the easier to get rid of him.

“I desired it too. But for different reasons. She wanted it so that I would be an accomplished person. An important person. For me, I liked the idea of helping people. School was always easy for me. I wanted to make use of my talent in academics and combine it with my natural curiosity about people. Do I make sense? Sometimes, even after all these years, I can’t think of the right English words.”

“It makes perfect sense.” Why was the room so warm?

Lucca smiled, and my stomach did flips. No. No. This was not happening.

“Thank you. You’re kind to say so,” he said.

“Well, I should head upstairs. I have a big day tomorrow.”

“I’m glad we have this all worked out,” Lucca said as if we had. “I’ll not be falling in love with you and you’re incapable of falling for anyone. Thus, we have established rules, and all will be well. We’ll work together and build a wonderful practice.”

“That will never happen,” I said. “I’ll leave here if I have to.”

“Nothing so drastic must be done, surely? It is very foolish to think so. Nothing between us is impossible to work through.”

“You’re wrong.” I drew in a deep breath, unsure what to say next. His calm demeanor was beyond annoying. In fact, it made me want to fight him even more. Instead, I bade him goodnight and went up to my room, head aching. *Tomorrow things would be clearer*, I told myself. I wouldn’t be softening toward my foe as I almost did tonight. I must stay strong if I were to drive him away.

LUCCA

The first morning after my arrival on Whale Island, I woke to the sound of giggles outside my bedroom door. Raymond, when he'd shown me where I would be staying, mentioned the spacious room had once been Benedict's. My one-room apartment in Boston I shared with the rats was a quarter of the size, I thought, as I pulled back the quilt and set my feet upon the braided rug. A desk and dresser, along with a four-poster bed and a leather chair were all a man needed, especially since my meals were now given to me. I was lucky. Even if Ella Tutheridge didn't want me here.

The giggles continued, sounding as if they were coming from a child. Someone had mentioned a little girl. The daughter of Hudson, the brother I had yet to meet. Children's laughter made me joyful. Surely there was no better sound in the world? Although I looked forward to meeting her, I didn't want to peek out to the hallway while wearing my dressing gown. Instead, I got up to bathe and dress in the adjoining bathroom.

When I was ready, hair combed neatly and freshly shaven, I headed downstairs to the scent of bacon coming from the dining room. Breakfast had been laid out on the buffet. At the table sat a little girl who looked like a smaller version of Ella and a man who must be her father. He resembled his brothers but was shorter and slighter.

"Who are you?" Bebe asked, pinning me with a suspicious gaze.

"Good morning. I'm Lucca." I was surprised to see a child at the table. Here in America, it was common for the children to be fed separately, especially in wealthy homes. In Italy, we were fond of children and included them in most family endeavors. At least, that's how it had been in my village. There weren't any rich people there, however, so maybe other parts of Italy

were different.

The man stood and held out his hand. “Hudson Tutheridge. And this is Bebe. Welcome to Whale Island.”

“Thank you, I’m pleased to be here.” I glanced at Bebe, who was staring at me with obvious curiosity.

“Are you going to marry my aunt Ella?” Bebe asked.

“I wouldn’t think so,” I said uneasily.

“Bebe,” Hudson said before making a disgruntled noise in his throat. “Why would you ask him that?” He returned to his seat and picked up a coffee cup but didn’t drink from it.

“I heard Grammie talking,” Bebe said, sounding affronted. “What have I done wrong now?” She lifted her chin in defiance.

“Speaking about things you know nothing about is unwise. We’ve gone over this.” Hudson sighed and sent me an apologetic smile. “She overhears things and often misinterprets them.”

“Easy to do when you’re young,” I said, pretending it was nothing even though it worried me. Maybe it was nothing, but all this talk of matchmaking had me on edge.

I went to the buffet and filled my plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes and set it on the table next to a folded napkin and silverware, then sat. A maid, who had entered with a plate full of toast, asked if I would like coffee and juice. I said yes to both, pleased. Whatever reason Mrs. Bains had sent for me, I would not starve here.

“How old are you?” I asked Bebe.

“I’m six. I go to school.”

“Do you like school?”

Bebe scrunched up her nose and twisted her mouth sideways. “Sometimes. Sometimes it’s dreadfully dull. Some of the other children are thick. I’m the smartest one.”

“Bebe,” Hudson said. “I’ve clearly instructed you to stop telling people that.”

“I forgot.” Bebe’s blue eyes widened. They were a lovely hue of blue, the combination of a twilight sky and a sapphire gemstone, and identical to her aunt Ella’s. They might be the prettiest eyes I’d ever seen.

“Do you have a favorite subject at school?” I asked Bebe.

“I like to read the best,” Bebe said. “We have a lot of books in our library, but not very many of them are for kids like me. At school, we have a row of

them and we can borrow them for one week at a time. That's plenty of time for me, and I wish I could have more, but there are other students to think of. That's what Mr. King said, anyway. He said we can only take one home at a time."

"I can see how that might be frustrating," I said sympathetically. "I love to read as well."

"Do you read in bed?" Bebe asked.

"Sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"My aunt Amelia told me that's her favorite place to read," Bebe said. "But I'm not allowed to read more than a half hour because I need my rest. I'm growing."

"I think that's wise," I said. "I'm a doctor, and I can assure you a good night's sleep is very important. That's actually when we grow. Did you know that?"

Bebe's forehead wrinkled. "I don't notice a difference when I wake up. I'm still the same as the day before."

"Are you bigger than last year at this time?" I asked, buttering a piece of toast.

"I am."

"Then you're growing at such a small amount every night that you don't notice it. Pretty soon, though, without realizing it, you're a whole inch taller."

"And I'll need new boots," Bebe said, grinning.

"Isn't being a human remarkable?" I asked.

"I guess so." Bebe returned to attacking her potatoes, spearing them with a fork and popping them into her mouth.

There were a few seconds of awkward silence. I wasn't necessarily a shy man, but my experiences in America with men of Hudson's background and status had often been unpleasant. Thus, it was hard to think of anything to say. I was more comfortable talking to children. They were so much less likely to have preconceived notions about a person.

I needn't have worried. Hudson seemed friendly enough, asking me about my journey and if my room had been comfortable. I assured him that the room was pleasant and how thankful I was for the hospitality.

While we chatted, I took the opportunity to study Hudson Tutheridge. He had a defeated quality, evident from the circles under his eyes and sallow skin. Too, although subtle, a slight stoop of his shoulders made him seem older than he probably was. Losing his wife must have been ghastly,

especially leaving a child behind.

I almost choked up, thinking of my mom and how she had to raise me all alone after my father died. I'd been so young when he passed that I remembered nothing about him. And now Mama was gone too.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I drank my coffee and ate hungrily, thinking about the day ahead. Was I supposed to go into the office? How would I get there? Would patients start arriving the moment I unlocked the doors? I'd just taken the last bite of a piece of bacon that melted on my tongue when Mrs. Bains arrived in the dining room, followed closely by the maid named Lizzie.

"Good morning, all," Mrs. Bains said. "Lizzie, will you pour me a cup of coffee and make a plate for me?"

Lizzie nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Bains. Right away." Soon, a plate of food and a steaming cup of coffee were placed in front of my hostess.

We chatted briefly about the weather and the invitation to use Wille, the chauffeur, to take me anywhere I wanted to go on the island.

"Will you want me to go into the office today?" I asked.

"I think it would be wise to have a look around," Mrs. Bains said, "and tell me if we've missed anything by way of supplies. My sons have finished, and it's ready for our new doctor."

"But Aunt Ella's the one who takes care of the people here," Bebe said before turning toward her grandmother. "Why would we need him too?"

"Aunt Ella's a nurse, love, not a doctor," Mrs. Bains said. "Dr. Coletti can perform surgeries and all sorts of things Ella cannot do."

Bebe's eyes widened. "She won't like it."

"Isn't it time for you to leave for school, Bebe?" Mrs. Bains asked.

Hudson, who may or may not have been listening to the latest exchange, jerked to his feet. "Finish up your breakfast, Bebe. I'll get the buggy and horses ready. Meet me out front in five minutes."

"Yes, Papa."

Hudson nodded in my direction. "Nice to meet you, Lucca. I wish you the best of luck."

Why had he said it as though I was heading into battle or maybe to prison? "Thank you."

After he left, Bebe ate one more bite of toast and then leaped from her chair. "I'll bid you farewell, Dr. Lucca. I must leave for whatever torture they have waiting for me."

I chuckled. "Farewell, fair Bebe. Have a good day at school."

"I'll do my best." As the little girl passed me, she stopped and whispered in my ear. "They want you to marry Aunt Ella. I heard it all. No one thinks I know anything, but I do."

Before I could think of anything to say, she'd skipped from the room.

"What did she tell you?" Mrs. Bains asked, picking up her fork. "God only knows with that child."

I looked across the table at my employer. She was a pretty woman, fair and petite with an intelligent glint in her eyes. Should I tell her the truth? Confront her about all of this matchmaking business?

I didn't have to make the decision because Ella swooped into the room, bringing the scent of flowers with her. She took one look at me and appeared as if she might run but instead only raised an eyebrow as a way of greeting and went to the buffet.

"Good morning, dear," Mrs. Bains said.

Ella mumbled a greeting without looking in her mother's direction, setting several pieces of toast on a plate before joining us at the table. Lizzie brought her a cup of coffee and a pitcher of cream, which Ella liberally poured into the steaming beverage.

"How did you sleep?" Mrs. Bains asked.

Unsure to whom she was speaking, I glanced over at Ella to indicate she should answer first.

"I slept horribly," Ella said. "Which should be no surprise to you, Mother. It's hard to sleep when your entire world has turned upside down."

"She's always been a tad dramatic," Mrs. Bains said to me.

"Perhaps, but it's completely understandable that she feels that way," I said. "I would."

"Are we now talking about me as if I'm not in the room?" Ella asked, spreading raspberry jam over her toast with vicious strokes.

"Ella, really," Mrs. Bains said. "You're acting like a child."

If Mrs. Bains's intention was to match us, she might choose to show Ella in a better light in front of said suitor. Instead, she appeared critical and impatient with her daughter. Hardly a winning advertisement.

Not that I blamed Ella. Her mother had put her in an intolerable position. If only I knew what to do about it. I'd love to make peace. From the way Ella glared at me from across the table, I was alone in that wish.

Thus far, the Tutheridge brothers had told me their theory about why I'd

really been summoned here, now backed up by Bebe's childlike but keen observation. I was further conflicted about my choice. The truth was, Ella didn't want me here, and I didn't blame her. If she learned about her mother's real reason behind hiring me, it would make matters even worse.

No one had asked her what she wanted and had simply presented her with the new doctor as if she should have no say about the community she'd devoted her entire existence to. It was not fair. My part in it, however innocent, made me feel complicit. I didn't like it. Stealing someone's dream and identity was not right. I was supposed to have devoted my life to caring for others, not harming them.

What had possessed Ella's mother to interfere in such a massive way? Taking it upon herself to matchmake her children was barbaric. How had it worked so well for Benedict and Briggs? I could see one match working, but two? Was Mrs. Mantle really that good?

I thought back on my conversations with Mrs. Mantle. She'd asked interesting questions, ones that seemed unrelated to the practice of medicine. How had I not noticed? She'd emphasized the possible conflict with Ella, which in hindsight was odd. Unless, of course, she was in the matchmaking business and not the staffing one.

Thinking through all of this made me feel even less sure of my decision to come here and also a bit like an innocent cow sent to slaughter. I'd come here under false pretenses. Did anyone actually believe the community needed a doctor? And if the answer to that was no, I felt even worse about Ella. She didn't want to marry or have a traditional type of life, yet her mother was doing whatever she could to manipulate her into compliance. *Good luck*, I thought. If Ella caught on to what was really going on here, she would rebel even further.

Perhaps I should leave, return to Boston or maybe see about finding a position in Seattle? It might work out all right. People seemed less bothered by my ethnicity out here in the wild west. Would I have a better chance on Whale Island than back east? It appeared thus.

Should I write to Mrs. Mantle and ask her to tell me the truth? She didn't seem like the kind, when asked outright, to lie.

How could anyone have thought this was a good idea? The more I thought about it, the worse I felt about Ella. She deserved better than for everyone to lie and manipulate her. She was a grown woman who had single-handedly taken care of an entire island of people. A few cows, too, from what

I'd heard from the staff at the estate.

All this left me confused, anxious, and perplexed about what to do next. For now, however, I must do as Mrs. Bains asked and go into town and open my practice for the very first time. God help me.

ELLA

The bite of toast I'd forced down tasted of sawdust. How many more breakfasts could I endure with Mother and Dr. Coletti? She wasn't even trying to hide her disrespect and disdain for me, criticizing me in front of the doctor. How had I not seen what she really thought? All these years I had thought of Mother one way, and now I was starting to see another side of her. I'd never have wanted her to remain downtrodden and abused as she was by Father, but the pendulum had swung so far the other way, it made my head spin.

From the look of discomfort on his face, Lucca felt bad for me. Pitied me. Which I loathe as much as disrespect. My anger, however, had steered further from him and landed fully on Mother. What was I supposed to do now? I couldn't remain here, not the way I felt now. The hurt and anger were too fresh, too raw, for me to live under the same roof.

Where would I go? I had the means to choose anywhere I wanted. I'd never wanted to be anywhere but here.

"Lucca's going into the office today," Mother said. "If you want to go with him."

"Is that so?" Why would she suggest I go with him? Just to rub salt into my gaping wound, most likely.

"Your brothers have completed the rest of the work." Mother's delivery was chipper, but the way she pushed her eggs around her plate told me she was nervous. Good. She should be on edge in my presence. She'd ruined our relationship. I shouldn't be the only one sorry for what had happened.

She continued on in that ingratiating tone. "Isn't that wonderful? You two can start spreading the word around the island that the clinic is open for

business. It's very exciting."

"Would you like to join me?" Lucca asked, a flash of sympathy in his eyes.

Which I fully rejected.

"I've got other things to do today," I said. "No, thank you."

"What do you have to do that's more important than working for the doctor?" Mother asked. "Setting up a proper practice?"

Working for the doctor. Flashes of red danced before my eyes. Under the table, I pressed my fingertips into the fabric of the skirt that covered my thighs. "I don't work for Dr. Coletti," I said. "I work on my own, as I've always done. However, I can see how I'll quickly become obsolete. Soon, the islanders will think they can only get good care from a real doctor. You've gotten what you wanted, Mother. An educated man has come to town. However, I'll not be joining him at the office or anywhere else. He's on his own."

"Ella, can't we talk it through?" Lucca asked, his brown eyes full of concern. "As I've said, I'm willing to make whatever arrangement suits you."

He needn't be concerned about me. I'd soon be out of his way, and he and Mother could throw a party and invite the whole town and talk about how much better off they all were now that Ella had been driven away.

"The arrangement that suits me is no longer an option," I said, fighting tears. Blast it. I would not cry in front of them. That's what bedrooms were for. "In fact, I'm thinking about moving away. There are other communities in Washington state that could use a good nurse."

"Ella," Mother said with a little gasp. "You can't mean that. Move away from your home? Your family?"

"I would never have chosen this for myself," I said to Mother. "But thanks to you, here we are." I turned to Lucca, inwardly wincing at the tortured expression on his face. "You seem like a good man. I'm sure you'll do very well here."

With that, I set aside my napkin and rose unsteadily to my feet. *Please, I begged my shaking legs, take me out of here.*

AFTER BREAKFAST, I went out to check on a few patients, then went for a

drive, ending up down by the docks where the fishermen gathered after their morning catch to gut and clean the fish around noon. Some of the seafood would be sent to the market in Seattle and some would be sold to locals, including Mrs. Halvorson for our family and staff.

The weather had remained gray and damp, a constant drizzle for which anyone but an island girl like myself would need an umbrella to save their hats from ruin. I'd solved the problem by not wearing one at all. And it wasn't only to vex Mother, either. On fall and winter days when the wind blew, they were nothing but a nuisance, impeding my movement and agility.

Most of the fishermen I knew, but there was a new boat docked today. Had someone new moved here, or was it only visiting from one of the other islands? Breathing in the familiar fishy scent, I walked down the pier, stopping to say hello to Mark Field and his son, Roddy, who was cleaning the deck of their fishing vessel. Mark was a large man with calloused hands and skin weathered from the sun. His hair had turned silver over the years, but it had once been red, like Roddy's.

Roddy was sixteen now, a strapping young man with gorgeous copper hair and freckles that covered most of his face. The last time I was out at their strawberry farm, his mother, Lottie, had said he'd started going out with his dad in the mornings. "He'll fish for a living like his father, whether I want him to or not."

I'd mentioned how calm the waters were here, and she'd agreed, saying something about how good she had it. "A lot of fishermen's wives aren't so lucky."

"Mark, good to see you. Good catch today, I hope?" I asked now, pulling my overcoat tightly closed at the neck. It was always colder on the water.

Mark tipped his cap at me. "Yes, Miss Ella. Couple of big lingcods today. Mrs. Halvorson was already down here buying one of them for your family."

"I'll look forward to that tonight," I said. "She makes excellent chowder." I said this even as my stomach turned over at the idea of eating. I'd barely choked down a few bites of toast at breakfast, what with my dreams dying right in front of me.

I glanced once more at the new boat. "Who is that?" I asked.

"New feller named Sebastian Wilkes," Mark said. "Kind of a strange one."

"How so?" I asked, curious now.

"Bad seed, if you ask me," Mark said. "Said he's here looking for lost

treasure. I told him there was no such thing around these parts, and he started rambling on about the lighthouse over on Moore Island having records of a ship lost at sea with jewels and such. Complete and utter nonsense, I can assure you, Miss Ella.”

“That doesn’t sound evil,” I said, chuckling. “But perhaps misguided?”

“Matthew said he had to kick him out of the tavern the other night for causing a fight,” Mark said. “I’ve seen him stumbling around his boat drunk in the morning. The *morning*, mind you. Not the kind we like here, as you know.”

“Yes, I see,” I said. “Be sure and tell the sheriff if he gives you any trouble.”

“I will, Miss Ella. I surely will,” Mark said.

Just then, a man emerged from the very boat that we’d been discussing. He wore a red bandanna tied around long hair that needed a good washing and combing and britches that were tapered around his ankles. I’d never seen such a man before, other than in paintings of pirates. From the front of his boat, he swayed and rubbed his eyes, looking around as if he didn’t know where he was.

“See what I mean?” Mark asked me. “That boat isn’t long for the world either. Wouldn’t surprise me if the thing sinks to the bottom of the sound if he ever troubles himself enough to take it out fishing. So far, he seems content to drink whiskey and pore over a bunch of silly maps. He had the gumption to ask if I wanted a cut and would I take him out in our boat sometime so he could dive down into the water and look around. Complete lunatic, I’m telling you.”

“Well, he looks like a pirate,” I said. “Aren’t they always looking for buried treasure?”

“Bunch of fiddlesticking nonsense,” Mark muttered. “We’re going back out for a few hours, so we best be off.”

“I should get along too,” I said. “I might introduce myself to him. Let him know there’s a nurse on the island.”

“Suit yourself,” Mark said. “I only hope he won’t stay around long enough to need nursing.”

I watched Mark and Roddy rumble away in their fishing boat. Did they ever get tired of fishing for their livelihood? Or did they wake each day excited to go to work as I did? Or, I used to, I reminded myself. Today I woke up feeling sick with dread of what was to come.

I wandered over to introduce myself to Sebastian. He was now sitting on the side of his boat, if one could truly call it that. It was actually more of a rickety barge. How had he made it from Seattle in that thing?

He looked my way as I approached. Dark, deep-set eyes seemed to sweep along the length of me. I was glad for the bulkiness of my coat, as the way he peered at me made me feel nervous. Maybe it had been a mistake to come over to greet him.

“What do we have here?” He jumped to his feet, rather unsteadily, and gripped the top of the helm.

“I’m Ella Tutheridge,” I said, deciding at the last moment not to extend my hand. His fingernails were filthy, and I could smell the stale alcohol and unwashed body from here.

“The Ella? In the flesh?” He grinned, revealing a mouth short of a few teeth.

“Yes.” I attempted a smile, but every sensory detector in my body was telling me to run. There was no reason. Not really. Surely I could outrun him. “I saw you here and thought I should come say hello.”

“I hear you’re a nurse. Ain’t that right?”

“That’s right.” The way he looked and sounded made me remember a mangy rabid dog that had chased me through the woods when I was a kid. I’d been out collecting specimens for my plant catalog and looked up from admiring a bleeding heart’s pink flowers and there he was, a good twenty feet away, teeth bared, ready to pounce. I dropped everything and ran the other direction. I’d never run so fast in my life. Sometimes I still had nightmares about that dog.

Dexter had shot him from the porch just as he was gaining on me.

How had I forgotten that part?

What other memories was I repressing?

“Well, I got this real sore leg. Would you be able to look at it for me? You’d have to come on my boat, though.”

“I wouldn’t be able to do that today, I’m sorry. I’ve other patients that are waiting for me.”

He suddenly leaped from his boat to the pier, surprisingly agile. Especially for a man with a leg injury. “But it’s real bad. I cut it when I was out looking for the treasure. You ever hear about that?”

“I can’t say that I have.” I turned to go, anxious to get away from him. He gave me a bad feeling. Mark was right. There was something off. Possibly

evil?

He reached into his coat and came out with a silver flask, which he brought to his mouth for a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Come on, now. Come on inside here. I really need to show you my injury. You don't want me to die, do you?" As he put his flask back into the inside pocket of his coat, I spotted a gun attached to his belt. "Aren't you obligated to help the sick?"

I couldn't really muster much in the way of sympathy, but I was a nurse, after all. Hadn't I just been telling everyone how loyal I was to the people of the island? Also, he had a gun.

As I was contemplating all of this, Sebastian ambled over to stand before me. I stepped away from him, but not far enough. The platform was skinny, and I really didn't want to fall into the water.

He was right on top of me now, holding out a long, strangely double-jointed finger in my direction. Then he grabbed me by the neck with one hand and pulled me against him with the other. "Don't you want to see what it's like to kiss a pirate?" A shiver of fear sliced through me.

"Let go of me." I tried to free myself, but for a man made in the shape of a string bean, he was strong.

"You stay still, and this won't hurt at all." His breath was foul and seemed to coat my skin.

I screamed, but a greasy hand clamped over my mouth. "What did I tell you? You've got a real spunk to you, gal. Just my type."

I heard a voice shouting behind us. In Italian? Oh no, it was Lucca, here to witness my humiliation.

"Get away from her." Lucca grabbed the man by the collar and practically lifted him off his feet and tossed him onto the hard dock.

"He has a gun," I shouted, breathless and scrambling upright, still with the scent of Sebastian in my nose and mouth.

Lucca had one boot on Sebastian's chest. "I don't think he's going to shoot anyone, isn't that right? Or should I break every bone in your body just to be sure you don't hurt anyone?"

Strangely, given how he'd overpowered me, the skinny man crumbled physically and emotionally under the weight of Lucca's foot. "No, I mean no harm. Let me be. I'll stay away from people. I promise."

"You will stay away from women in this town," Lucca said. "Most especially this one. Do you understand?"

“Sure, I promise. You’re hurting me.”

Lucca lifted his boot but remained standing over him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another figure running toward us. It was Sheriff White, gun pointed in our direction. Someone must have seen us besides Lucca and told the sheriff.

Trembling, I brushed my hands over my coat, as if that would help get rid of the horror I’d experienced in those few terrifying minutes.

“He has a gun, Sheriff,” I said. “Attached to his belt.”

“You pull that out nice and easy and slide it over,” White said.

Sebastian, meek as a baby lamb, did as he was asked. But I knew he was a rabid dog, not a gentle sheep. This man needed to be run off the island. My brothers might be able to make that happen.

The sheriff hauled Sebastian up from the floor of the dock and marched him toward the jail cell where he belonged. Having recently been there myself, I could say it was considerably better than his boat.

“Are you all right?” Lucca asked.

Why did it have to be Lucca who rescued me? “Yes, I’m fine. He scared me, that’s all. If you hadn’t seen us, I don’t know what would have happened. I was no match for his strength.”

“Mean dogs like that are shockingly strong.”

Mean dogs. That’s exactly what I’d thought of. “Yes, he reminds me of a rabid dog who chased me one time.”

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” Lucca asked. “Do you want to come up to the office and have me take a look at anything?”

“No, nothing’s broken or requires surgery,” I said, the sour taste in my mouth worse than even the moment before.

“Yes, right. Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply you needed me.”

The truth was, I *had* needed him only moments ago. I should thank him at least. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“I was down here looking around when I saw you talking to him and instinctually felt you were in danger. Then I saw him lunge for you, and I took off running.”

“Like I did from the rabid dog,” I said, more to myself than him. “Have you ever been chased by a dog?”

He looked at me queerly before answering. “Not dogs but humans. In fact, that’s how I met the woman who sent me here, but that’s probably a story for another day. Let me escort you up to your car at least.”

My legs were still wobbly, so I accepted the offer of his arm. “What were you doing down here?” Lucca asked.

“I don’t know. Nothing really.” The weight of what had almost just happened was starting to sink in. I was feeling worse by the second.

We’d reached my car by then. “I don’t know if I’m ready to drive,” I said. “I need a moment. Or a drink.”

“Would you like one?” Lucca asked, his brown eyes soft and sympathetic. “There is a tavern within walking distance.” He stood a few feet away from me. So that I wouldn’t feel threatened? If true, it was thoughtful of him, I had to admit.

“Mother doesn’t like it when I go to the tavern.” *All the more reason do to so*, I thought. “In fact, I think I would like a drink.”

“No one could blame you after what you just experienced. I’m very sorry that happened to you.”

I was still shaking, and my teeth felt jangly, as though they might start clattering away like a skeleton. “It was good fortune you came along when you did. Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome.” He touched the brim of his hat. “I’ll see you later tonight then?”

“Yes. I suppose you will.” He would be at the house. All the time. My brothers needed to get that apartment done sooner rather than later. I’d looked forward to staying there for months now. It was not to be.

I watched as he walked away, head bent slightly, looking lonely. He must be reeling from the last few days. Most of it was my fault too.

“Lucca, wait.”

He turned back to me. “Yes?”

“Would you like to join me for a beer at the tavern? We have our own island variety, and it’s really good. Although, be warned, the bitterness might put hair on your chest.”

His mouth curved upward in that slow grin of his. “What if I don’t need any more hair on my chest?”

What did his chest look like under his clothes? Did he have too much hair? Did it crawl over his shoulder like Mr. Tucker’s? Or was his skin smooth and silky? I’d like to see for myself.

No, I wouldn’t, I told myself sternly. I have no interest in him whatsoever.

“I cannot be held responsible if it gives you copious fur on your thorax.” I

grinned back at him, feeling suddenly lighter.

“Are you sure you want my company?”

“I’ll buy. It’s the least I can do after you saved me from that horrible man.”

“True. I deserve a beer.”

What was I doing? Drinking with the enemy? He was becoming a complicated nemesis, the thief of my dreams but also a brave hero who had saved me from peril. How was a girl supposed to act? What was I to feel?

No answers came, so I took his arm and started toward the tavern.

LUCCA

If I were to have predicted how my day would go, it would not have come close to the truth. First, I waited in an empty doctor's office for patients that never came. Not that I'd expected much for the first day, but I thought we might get one or two who wandered in with a common head cold or chicken pox. Then, out of boredom, I wandered around town looking at everything, meeting a few of the shop owners, including Michael Moon, whom I wasn't sure I liked or despised. He was one of those people, I guessed, who folks either loved or hated with nothing in between.

To my pleasant surprise, no one seemed to notice my Italian heritage, or if they did, they hid it well. Not that bigots usually had any reason to keep their hatred to themselves. In my experience, a man knew where he stood with another right away.

And finally, down by the docks, I couldn't believe my eyes. A man assaulting Ella?

It was... For a split second, I froze, but soon recovered and started shouting in Italian. I don't know where that had come from, as I tried not to speak it much for fear of causing myself trouble.

I was beside myself from what I'd seen. Terrified, too. And enraged. I would have loved to hurt the man, but I doubt that would have looked good for the new doctor to break someone's nose on his first day at work.

Now here I was in Matthew's pleasant tavern sipping a beer across the table from Ella. The biggest shock of the day might have been when she asked me to join her. A lesser surprise was my reaction to her request. Sweaty palms, a racing pulse, and flutters in my stomach. As if we were courting and she'd finally agreed to accompany me for an evening out. I was

ridiculous. I knew it. But somehow, it seemed inevitable that I would fall in love with Ella Tutheridge.

Despite her hostility, I could see the person she was under all the anger and hurt. Without a doubt, I knew I was in the presence of greatness. She was extraordinary. God help the man who got in the way of her ambitions and dreams.

That man was me.

My instincts told me that if it were true and I had been chosen specifically for Ella, Mrs. Mantle had done well. How had she known that Ella was the kind of woman I would fall for? Could she be the only woman I would fall for, period? It didn't matter. Not in the end. For Ella didn't want me or any man. Love was only a concept for her. One that lived only in her head, not her heart. Ella didn't want me here, had no plans to marry, and was probably hatching plots to get rid of me at this very moment.

I sensed trouble ahead. My feelings were like a summer storm, moody and unexpected. It was as if I could see purple clouds on the horizon, moving toward me at a speed unrealized by man, and they would unleash torrents of rain upon me at any moment. The heartbreak would come whether I wanted it to or not. Ella Tutheridge would never fall for me. This was the error in Mrs. Mantle's match. One must want love to accept love. She didn't have any use for me or love, and I had to face that truth.

"Tell me about the rabid dog," I said.

She looked away for a moment, as if deciding whether to tell me this story that would give me insight into who she truly was beneath the bravado and brittle edges. In the end, either because of today's trauma or the hoppy beer in her glass, she answered. "The short version is that I was out picking specimens for my summer project—flowers that I pressed into books. Once they dried, I was going to display them and give them to my mother as a gift. I spent a lot of time that summer searching for every kind of flower that bloomed on this island. Back then, I had an insatiable need to keep my brain occupied."

"Do you know why?" I asked.

She lifted her glass but didn't drink, staring into the amber liquid for a moment. "There were two primary reasons. If I sat in stillness, the truth about my life and my family shouted at me—pull us out and examine all of it. The fighting, the physical and mental abuse Father bestowed upon his family. Keeping busy helped to drown out the screaming. Symbolically speaking."

She sipped from her glass, foam from the beer lining her upper lip.

If only I could reach over and wipe it clean with my own mouth.

“There was also screaming of the real kind,” Ella said. “My father, as I’m sure you’ve already gathered, was a cruel man who enjoyed hurting his wife and sons. I didn’t want to see it—did everything I could to avoid the truth—but of course, it’s impossible. Even the smallest child in the house knows what’s happening behind each slammed door, each cry of pain. The more I had to occupy my brain, the better I coped. Perhaps I’m doing that now too.”

“Keeping busy, you mean?” I asked.

“Yes. As a way to avoid thinking too much about the hard truths.” She took a dainty sip from her glass.

“You said there were two reasons. What’s the other one?”

“Ah, yes. The second one. You remembered I said two?”

“I did.” I drank from my glass, enjoying the bitterness of the hoppy beer. It was different than the beer back east, fuller-bodied on my tongue.

She looked out the window to the street, sadness etched across her even features. How could one so beautiful be so sad? What her father had done was no less than criminal. He’d made the most precious gift to the world hard and cold. Even though he was gone, he haunted his daughter. She was still running as fast as she could, hoping to escape the memories.

School must have let out because children were walking, mostly in pairs, past the tavern, chattering and laughing. Fallen leaves fluttered and crunched under their feet.

“I think perhaps there was only one. I misspoke,” Ella said finally. “Everything leads back to Father. Isn’t that a shame?”

“It is, yes.”

I held back from asking anything else. This openness between us was fragile. I didn’t want to risk jarring her out of whatever was happening between us.

“What about you, Dr. Coletti? What’s made your eyes sad?”

I flinched, startled that her thoughts mirrored my own. Was she only seeing herself in my eyes? “A great many things make me sad. Unfortunately.”

“Tell me one of them.”

“My mother. I miss her. I haven’t seen her since I was fourteen, yet she’s always on my mind. It was the two of us. She wanted all of this for me. I would have rather stayed home.”

“That is sad. I’ve never wanted to live anywhere but here. Leaving seems impossible.”

“You don’t have to, you know. We can stay here together.”

And that was it. A light turned off in her eyes, followed by flat hostility. Yet the words from her mouth were polite.

“I should probably get back to the house, but thank you for joining me for a drink.” She got up, smoothing her skirt. “I’m anxious to get out of these clothes. I can still smell his stench on me.”

I leaped to my feet so quickly, the table rattled. “Shall I accompany you home?”

“No, thank you.”

And that was it. She was out of the door before I knew what had happened. So much for progress or connections. All hopes were once again dashed.

For a moment, I sat looking into my beer, miserable, but was interrupted by Matthew taking the chair across from me. “Not proving easy, is she?”

“I can’t say that she is, no. I can’t blame her, though. She sees me as the end of life as she knows it. I’m the enemy.”

“You seemed almost cozy there for a moment.”

I looked over at him, trying to figure out this enigma of a man. Who was Matthew Goodwell really? What part did he play in all of this matchmaking nonsense?

“Tell me the truth,” I said. “Why was I brought here?”

Without blinking, he answered, “Because we need a doctor. What other reason could there be?”

Sticking to his story? At this point, I knew much more than I should. My instincts told me it was better to feign ignorance.

“I should be off,” I said. “In case a patient comes to see me. Doubtful, but I would hate to miss them.”

“Give it time,” Matthew said.

“That’s all I have.”

I WOKE before six the next morning, wide awake and hungry. Supper the night before had been with only Mr. and Mrs. Bains. No sign of Ella, and

when I asked about her, Mrs. Bains shrugged and said Ella wasn't feeling well and had retired early. After the day she'd had, who could blame her? Had she told her mother what happened? Probably not. Ella, as angry as she was, might not want her mother to worry over her safety. Additionally, it might give Mrs. Bains further reasons for Ella to work with me and not alone. She had a point there, I had to admit. After seeing what had happened on the dock, it made me nervous for Ella, driving alone at night and going into people's homes alone. Who knew what kind of criminals lived among us? So far, the idyllic-looking island seemed to have a dark undertone.

After dressing, I wandered downstairs. No one was up, so I followed the scent of bacon down to the basement kitchen where the staff was gathered around a roughly hewn table having their morning meal.

Mrs. Halvorson, whom I'd met yesterday, was the only one standing at the stove. She waved a spatula in my direction with one of her plump hands. "Good morning, you're an early bird, I see." Her face and middle were pleasantly round. She moved with the grace of a woman who knew every inch of this kitchen.

"I do wake early most days," I said. "But come evening, I'm dead on my feet."

"Sit and eat," Mrs. Halvorson said. "Lizzie, be a dear and fix him a plate, won't you?"

Lizzie sprang to her feet. "Yes, ma'am. Do you want a little of everything?"

"Whatever you have, I shall eat," I said.

A steaming cup of coffee appeared before me, followed by a plate of toast and eggs as well as slabs of bacon. While I ate, I learned everyone's names. In addition to Lizzie and Mrs. Halvorson, there was Tilda, a young, plump kitchen maid with a shy smile wearing a chef's hat that seemed at least two sizes too big. Raymond, the new butler, was a young man from England. Nice-looking, with clear, honest eyes and a way about him that made him seem eager to please, if not a little exuberant. I understood, feeling a bit like a puppy myself on many occasions. We were young, still trying to prove ourselves.

He'd been trained in London, then found his way to America much like me, and was now here on a remote island he'd never heard of.

"I'm happy for the work," Raymond said. "If only Mrs. Bains could remember my name, it would give me more confidence she'll want me to

stay. They told me it was a trial only and that I must consider it like a six-month job interview. Doesn't make a lad feel secure, I'm afraid to say."

I nodded, feeling similarly.

In addition to Lizzie, there were several other maids who cleaned, did household chores, and built fires before the family woke in the mornings. Mary, a scrawny waif of a girl with pale skin and dark circles under her eyes, told me she spent most days in the laundry. "I'm like a mole down there. That's why I'm so tired-looking."

I thought there might be another reason for those under-eye circles, but I'd have to follow up on that later.

Lizzie, who appeared to be another rung higher in the hierarchy of staff, took care of Ella and Mrs. Bains. She seemed younger than the other maids, possibly still in her teens, but I couldn't be certain. A pretty girl with round cheeks and glossy dark hair, she spoke with an Irish lilt. Although short in height, she appeared robust and strong.

"Crisscrossing between the two as best I can," Lizzie said, sitting back at her place. "Ella likes me to help her with her hair, but other than that, she does everything herself. Mrs. Bains requires more from me, including bringing up her coffee in the mornings. She says she's not fit company until she has a first cup. Ella's independent, and her schedule's unpredictable, but I jump whenever she needs me."

"Lizzie has a particular talent for hair and clothes," Mrs. Halvorson said with obvious pride in her voice. "She studies fashion magazines and duplicates what she sees. Quite remarkable, if you ask me."

Lizzie grinned, tenting her hands under her chin and fluttering her eyelashes. "It's nothing really. I just love fixing hair and picking out clothes—it doesn't even seem like a job. How lucky I am to have landed here where I get to do such pleasing work. And I simply adore Ella. I want to be just like her. I mean, not a nurse or anything like that, but beautiful and poised and so smart. Too bad, though. I haven't a serious thought in my head. If I'd been able to go to school, maybe I'd be intelligent, but it's too late for all of that. My brothers, though, they're going to school in Seattle. I told my dad they weren't allowed to quit school, and I'd send whatever I could to help them."

"Lizzie's a good girl," Mrs. Halvorson said.

"Even if I seem like a dolt compared to Ella." Lizzie grinned again, clearly not caring one wit about her lack of intellect. I admired people like her, joyful and grateful about whatever life brought their way. She reminded

me of my mother.

“Many mornings, Ella eats down here with us before collapsing into her bed,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “Poor girl’s out at all hours, usually helping with a baby. She’s a saint, that one.”

On the other end of the long table sat two young men wearing overalls, who informed me that they were stable boys and helped in the gardens. I wanted to tell them about my experience with horses but decided it might make me seem less like a doctor.

Mrs. Halvorson sat down to have a bite, sighing as she eased into the chair. “Mrs. Bains likes the food to be hot at eight,” she explained to me. “Which gives me ample time to fill my own stomach first.”

“And mine,” Tilda said in a squeaky voice. She reminded me of one of those cute chipmunks I’d spotted outside yesterday. “Mrs. Halvorson’s ever so good to us. The last place I worked, the head cook scared me to death. I developed a permanent twitch.”

“It’s not permanent if it’s gone now,” Lizzie said, smiling.

“Yes, right,” Tilda said. “Lucky for that.”

“Do you all live here at the house?” I asked, breathing in the scent of the fresh coffee as I brought the cup closer to my mouth.

Lizzie explained that they all lived in the quarters off the kitchen, sharing rooms and mealtimes. Other than Raymond, they’d all been with the family for at least two years and claimed to be content with the work and Mrs. Bains.

Mrs. Halvorson and her husband, the head groundskeeper, had been at Stella for fifteen years. They shared one of the small cottages not far from the house reserved for married couples.

“Enough reason to get married right there,” Lizzie said, laughing. “Just to get a cottage to yourself.”

“You should be looking for someone,” Mrs. Halvorson said reprovingly. “Lest you lose your looks early.”

Lizzie grinned, rolling her eyes. “Mrs. Halvorson’s trying to marry me off, but so far no one’s asked.”

“Won’t be long, I suspect,” I said. She was a pretty girl with a bright personality. Surely she would be snatched up before long?

“There’s more men here than women, which improves my chances,” Lizzie said.

“Let’s learn a little more about the doctor,” Mrs. Halvorson said with a

pointed look at Lizzie.

“Drat, I talk too much. I’m sorry.” Lizzie pressed her fingers against her lips. “Not another word.”

“I hear the office is done,” Mrs. Halvorson said to me. “How wonderful.”

“Yes, I was there all day yesterday,” I said. “No one came to see me though.”

“Give it a few weeks,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “People here are slow to catch on to new things.”

Mr. Halvorson came in from outside just as I was finishing up the last of my bacon.

“Pleased to meet you,” Mr. Halvorson said, snatching a cap from his head. “I’m sorry to be late for breakfast. I had a fitful night’s sleep. Can’t say why.”

“You kept me up half the night with your tossing and turning,” Mrs. Halvorson said.

“I, too, had trouble falling asleep,” Lizzie said with a teasing glance toward Mary. “My roommate here snores, and if she falls asleep first, I’m done for.”

Mary’s ears turned red. “I don’t snore.”

“If only I could capture the sound somehow and prove you wrong,” Lizzie said.

“You should come by my office,” I said to Mary. “We might be able to remedy your ailment.”

Mary’s eyes grew wide, making her flat face appear even more so. “You can cure snoring?”

“If we can find out why you’re snoring, we might be able to,” I said.

“Like how?” Mr. Halvorson asked as he took a place at the table next to his wife. “I ask because the missus here claims I snore. It might just be an excuse to smack me with a pillow and scare the you-know-what out of me.”

“He exaggerates,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “Pay him no mind whatsoever.”

“To answer your question,” I said. “Snoring is often caused by an allergy of some kind. Food usually. Do you drink a lot of milk?”

“Mary does. Probably a gallon a day,” Lizzie said.

Further blushing by our poor Mary betrayed the truth in the joke. “Yes, I do love milk. I’m half baby cow, I guess.”

“Would you consider giving it up for a few weeks to see if it helps?” I asked.

“I guess I could,” Mary said, sounding doubtful. “Oh, but what if it is milk? I shall be forever bereft.”

“But if it solves your snoring, won’t that be wonderful?” Lizzie asked, her eyebrows lifted in a teasing manner. “For me, at least?”

“I’ll do it,” Mary said. “But I won’t like it.”

One patient at a time, and I might be able to build a practice. If Mary was my first, then more could follow. I must stay positive.

ELLA

The morning had flown by, and I was now headed into town to see if Michael Moon had gotten the shipment of clean bandages I'd ordered.

I wasn't entirely in a snit, but close enough. I'd been out to check on an elderly patient fighting a chest cold and then out to a family with a bad case of the chicken pox that had taken down the entire household. Finally, I'd stopped in to see Mrs. Walsh, who was expected to give birth at any moment. Both patients had asked me about the rumor of a new doctor in town and what did that mean for me?

It wasn't as if I hadn't expected the questions, yet they nettled me just the same. I'd thought about how to answer the night before while tossing and turning, too hot, then too cold. Before falling into a fitful sleep, I had resolved to tell the truth as I knew it. Thus, with each question, I told the truth as I knew it.

"Dr. Coletti has come from back east to open a medical practice. He's never actually treated patients, and I know little about him. He just showed up here out of the clear blue sky." All right, fine. Not exactly impartial, but I was too angry to do otherwise.

Mrs. Walsh, who had waddled over to the rocking chair on her porch, nodded sympathetically. "I heard it was your own mother brought him here."

Oftentimes, her thick Scottish accent made it difficult to decipher her meaning, but not this time. I knew precisely what she'd said.

"Well, there's a lot of rumors going around. As there always are on this island." I left it at that, not wanting to feed the fire.

Now, the Model T bouncing through muddy potholes, I wondered if that had been the right tactic.

By the time I reached town, I was tasting metal from all the invisible nails I was chewing. To make matters worse, the doctor's office looked particularly clean and crisp, all ready to welcome my patients. Seeing it, I felt sick all over again.

I parked the car with no intention of setting foot in the place, but somehow my feet led me there anyway.

During my mostly sleepless night, I'd also thought long and hard about what I should do next with my life. Should I leave the island? Perhaps find another community in need of a nurse? Financially, I would not have to worry for the rest of my life. Therefore, I could go somewhere I could be useful. Was it the only way to make sense of this whole mess?

I yanked open the door that fed into the small waiting area and ran right into Dr. Coletti, who apparently had been on his way out. We stared at each other for a moment longer than was comfortable.

"You," I said.

"You." He grinned, friendly as could be. "What brings you by?"

I had to bite the inside of my lip to keep myself from returning his butterfly-inducing smile.

"No reason, really. I was in town and thought I'd see how...how you were." I looked around the place, peering behind him into what would be the examination room. If it had been mine, I would have been thrilled. Everything was laid out with precision, from the examination table to the cabinets and even the chairs in the lobby. I'd have spent the rest of my life here, dedicated to the people of this island.

"I'm delighted to see you," Lucca said. "Does this mean you want to talk about how to work best together?" He looked so hopeful that a large case of guilt sickened me further.

"I've no intention of working with you." I lifted my chin and squared my shoulders, hoping to show how resolute I was in my decision.

"Are you leaving the island then?" Lucca asked.

"I've not decided. For now, I shall continue as always, making house calls and being as useful as possible. You and my mother have an arrangement, and I'm powerless to do anything about it."

"There's no reason we can't share the office here. You can see the patients with mild maladies and the pregnant women. I'll do the more complicated procedures such as broken limbs and surgeries."

The words *mild* and *complicated* were the only two I'd heard in those

sentences. On fire, I glared at him before spitting out a biting response. “I’ve been doing fine without you. In fact, I doubt very much that any of my patients are going to want to be seen by a stranger. They’re very loyal to me.”

“Your mother brought me here to be a doctor.” He spoke softly, with that slight accent, both of which had a hypnotic effect on me. Or they would have, if I hadn’t been full of rage about my situation. “But I will be much more successful if you’re my nurse.”

“How generous of you, Dr. Coletti,” I said. “Gifting me with curing the common cold. How will I ever thank you?”

“Sarcasm isn’t necessary,” Lucca said. “I’m trying to be reasonable. We can find a solution if we agree to try.”

“How about if you just go home? How’s that for a solution?”

“I have no home to return to. I’ve nothing, really. Other than the hope that comes with this place. Which you seem entirely focused on sabotaging.”

I didn’t say anything. What could I say to that? He was right.

Lucca grunted softly, clearly losing patience, all of which evoked strange tingles in my stomach.

“Why are you so against me being here?” Lucca asked. “It would be nice to share the burden, no? Have you not grown weary?”

“I shall never grow weary of doing what I can for the people here. Perhaps that’s the part you can’t understand. A loyalty to a community. You have none, and mine is not for sale.”

A flash of temper flared in his dark eyes. “I know everything there is to know about being part of a community. I had to leave mine when I came to America. Every single person I ever loved was there. When I left, the entire town came out to cheer me on, give me their last piece of bread so that I had something to sustain me during the journey. So yes, Miss Tutheridge, I understand loyalty to a community. I came here hoping to find a place to once again belong. I’m sorry if you do not want to work with me, but I’m not going anywhere. I have no choice.”

I had to admit, his impassioned speech had moved me a tad. He’d left everything he knew for the chance for a better life. How could I fault a man for that?

“I’m sorry for how this has happened, and I can understand how angry you must be,” Lucca said.

I put my hand up, interrupting him. “It’s not personal. I just don’t think we need another doctor here on the island. Not when they have me.”

“Has it ever entered your mind that I might be able to learn from you and you from me? We have different training and experience, which could make this practice all the more useful.” His tone had become terse, and his glittering eyes seemed almost black.

“I study on my own. When there are no options presented, I make some of my own. I don’t need you.”

“Admirable. Truly.”

Narrowing my eyes, I studied him for signs of scorn, but there were none.

“It’s a common pairing, you know, doctors and nurses,” Lucca said.

It was true, of course. Why was I resisting this so hard? What he said actually made sense, which infuriated me further. And why couldn’t I stop staring at his sensual mouth and that strong jawline? I was annoying myself to no end.

“I’m suggesting we at least try,” Lucca said. “Show a united front to the patients that we’re working well together.”

“Why should I do that when I have everything to lose?”

“What will you lose?” Lucca asked softly.

His question took me aback for a moment. What did I have to lose? Power. Freedom. Having to answer to a man. How could he not see that?

I let out a breath and returned my attention to the interloping doctor. “Your presence here means I’ve already lost everything I have worked hard to build. I will not answer to a man.”

“Wonderful.” He nodded curtly. “Then I’ll continue setting up my practice, and you can go ahead with whatever it is you do.”

The man had the nerve to turn away, shrugging with indifference and dismissal. Of me.

Nothing made me more mad. I turned on my heel and stormed out of the office. His office, I reminded myself. I was no longer under the illusion that I would ever step foot in there again. I was done.

I PRESSED the pedal hard and lurched into the street. A drive was what I needed. It would clear my head. Get out some of this rage. Maybe it would even help me figure out what I was to do with the rest of my life. I turned onto the road that led toward our estate, pushing the car hard.

Muttering under my breath about the nerve of the man and how could my mother have done this to me, practically blinded by my tears of outrage.

I rounded a bend in the road, taking the curve too fast, and came face-to-face with a deer. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. There was a horrific thump, and then the deer flew through the air, landing in a bloody mess on the hard ground. Heart pounding, I pulled off to the side of the road. Was she still alive? If so, her injuries would be severe. I'd have to take care of the poor creature, put her out of her misery. God, no. Why, why, why was I so impulsive and careless? I grabbed my pistol from the glove box. Perfect end to a terrible day, I thought. Now I would have to shoot a beautiful doe.

I knelt near her, examining her closely for signs of life, but she lay still, her eyes glassy. She was dead. At least she hadn't suffered.

What had possessed me to drive so fast? Sick over what I'd done and so disappointed in myself, I collapsed in the tall, damp grass and started to cry. Selfish thoughts and actions had caused this. What if it had been a child? I was supposed to be a healer, not a killer.

Was I a violent person like my father? Did his rage and cruelty run through me? Lucca Coletti had swiveled my whole world upside down, and it had already been turned over several times since my father's death. Father murdered by Dexter. Then we lost Dexter too. The boys got married. Hadn't that been enough change? No, Mother had to bring him here just to vex me.

A memory of my father dragging my mother by the hair played before me.

I'd been about Bebe's age, playing behind a couch. They'd not known I was there when they came into the room. I'd peered around the corner to see him dragging her by the hair, which had come loose from her bun.

That was where my retention failed me. I couldn't remember what happened after that. Perhaps I didn't want to as a way to protect myself. The story always ended the same anyway. As with so many times before, Mother would take to her room for a week after he hurt her, hiding her injuries from the world and the staff. Other than Dexter. He'd been privy to it all.

A beat of grief coursed through me. Dexter had been such a loyal member of our staff. Too loyal. What had possessed him to take such action? I knew the answer. He was desperate to protect us. Knowing he was dying and would not be here to shield us from Father had pushed him toward the inevitable ending. We were better for it. I knew that to be true. Still, reconciling my love for Dexter and horror at what he did was not easy. Many nights I'd lain

awake, imagining Father's last moments. Had he known it was Dexter? Or had it all been too fast?

Not that thinking about it would bring answers. Both men were dead. I would never know the details.

I brought my knees up to my chest and rocked as I had done when I was little and upset. The deer would have to be hauled away. I'd have to ask Mr. Halvorson for help. He'd know what to do with the carcass. She would have to be butchered and made into meat. "I'm sorry," I whispered and started to cry all over again.

Mother and I had had a good relationship despite all of the trouble with Father. But this thing that she'd done, bringing him here, I couldn't understand it. Unless my original theory was correct. She'd brought him out here hoping I would fall in love with him. Why else would she have done something she knew would anger me?

What had given her this idea was beyond me. Were we supposed to fall in love simply because we shared a profession and worked together in a small office? As absurd as that idea was, I felt certain that's what she had imagined. I knew it with every bit of intuition I possessed. My mother wanted me to be someone's wife. She would rather have me married than be who I truly was. How could she not understand how wrong she was? I wasn't meant to be like everyone else.

It did bring up the question, however, about why it was so important to Mother that I marry. She already had Bebe, and there were many grandchildren to come, given my brothers' recent nuptials, so it couldn't be that. Did she truly think that the only way to have a fulfilling life was to give all my power to a man? How could she think that would make me happy?

I'd never felt as alone as I did in that moment. How could it be that I was so different from everyone else? Even Amelia and Faith, who I adored, wanted what they should want. Why was it only me? A freak of nature, that's what I was, I thought, as more sobs rose from my chest.

Hearing an approaching wagon, I looked up, drying my eyes hastily so whoever it was wouldn't see me crying. No, not him. It was Lucca. He would see what I'd done. Darn it all anyway. Second day in a row that he had to come to my rescue.

When had he gotten a wagon?

He halted before me. The horses whinnied hello, not understanding my utter despair. "Miss Tutheridge? Are you hurt?"

“I’m fine.” I scrambled to my feet, humiliation running hot throughout my body. Why did it have to be him? “I hit a deer.”

“I can see that.”

“She’s dead.” My voice wobbled again. Darn it, I could not cry in front of him.

“Yes, I’m sorry.” Jumping from the wagon and quickly tying the horses to a nearby tree, he came around to inspect the carcass. Although his hat cast a shadow over some of his face, I could see a spasm of pity in the twitch of his cheek. “Poor thing.”

“She didn’t suffer,” I said defensively.

“I mean you.” He looked over at me. “It’s a terrible thing to take a life.”

“Yes, it is. I’ve been sitting here feeling very sorry for myself.”

“I would, too,” Lucca said.

For the first time, I thought about the car. Turning to look at the grille, I winced. Blood and hair from the deer were stuck in the grate. A wave of nausea weakened my knees. “I’ve never killed anything. Not even when we were kids and the boys hunted squirrels and rabbits. I could never bear to hurt a living creature.”

“I understand.” His voice was sympathetic and kind. Kinder than he should be, given how I’d treated him earlier. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. I have to go home and ask Mr. Halvorson for help with the... body.” I swallowed hard, afraid I might be sick.

“What happened? Did she just come out of nowhere?”

“No, I came around the corner too fast,” I said, surprising myself by telling him the truth. “If I’d been going a normal speed, it could have jumped out of the way.”

“I feel responsible.”

“What? Why?” I peered at him with suspicion.

“You were mad at me. This is why you were driving so fast. Isn’t that true?”

He must be tired. His accent was stronger than usual.

“Yes, that’s correct,” I said. “But it’s no excuse. This island—I’m supposed to protect it and all of its creatures, human or otherwise. It could have been a child, for God’s sake.” Tears threatened to return in full force.

“But it wasn’t,” he said softly. “Everything’s all right.”

I looked up into his brown eyes. Why was he nice to me? He had every reason not to be.

That was it. I was a bad person. I'd suspected it for some time but had convinced myself that by doing all the charitable work, I was somehow redeemed. I was like my father. Undeserving of any human kindness.

“Would you like me to take you home? Are you too shaken up to drive? We can send someone back for the car.”

For a second, I intended to tell him I was fine. However, my legs were all wobbly, and I still felt as if I might be sick. “That would be helpful, thank you.”

LUCCA

As irritated as she'd made me earlier in the day, I could not help but feel sorry for her. She was in such obvious distress over the deer that her hands were shaking, and all color had leached from her face. Was this an overreaction because of everything she'd experienced this past year? Losing her father in a violent way only to find out it was a beloved staff member who had killed him would be difficult for anyone. She was tough, but maybe not as much as I'd thought this afternoon when she stomped out of the office.

"May I help you?" I asked, offering my hand to assist her into the wagon.

"Yes, I suppose." She sighed, sounding weary.

After I had her tucked under a blanket, I untied the horses, and we ventured forth. The sun had set, leaving behind a pink-and-orange sky. Without it, temperatures quickly dropped, and Ella seemed to be shivering. I needed to get her home and before a warm fire. She was quiet on the seat next to me, sitting up straight as she always did. Proud. Forever proud.

However, she'd admitted to me how disturbed and regretful she felt over the deer, which I'd found as endearing as the sight of her crying. I hadn't thought she ever cried or ever would. For some inexplicable reason, that softened me toward her even more. That feeling of my inevitable falling in love with Ella washed over me once more. Falling fast, I thought.

I'd been furious when she'd stomped out of the office, but all of that was forgotten now. Ella felt deeply about things, that much was obvious. She might care too much about everything. I understood that quality only too well. There were many times in my life when I wished I hadn't cared about anything or anyone. It would be easier to get through life that way. Instead,

people like Ella and me wanted to save everyone, and when we couldn't, it hurt. Just as it would killing an innocent deer.

People in these parts hunted, of course. There was nothing wrong with it, especially since the island would be overrun with deer otherwise. Regardless, Ella wasn't the kind to hunt. This one would be with her for a while.

This was all conjecture, of course. I didn't really know her well enough to be so presumptuous. Regardless of my audacity, instinct told me I was right. We had a lot in common, even if she would never admit it. I understood her because I was like her.

Was it possible Mrs. Mantle, with the help of God, really did know what she was doing? Could I be a match for Ella? Would Ella ever see it too?

As quickly as I thought it, I dismissed the idea. Was the island air turning me fantastical like the rest of them? Believing in meant-to-be and soulmates? No. That was not the situation here. Not at all. I was merely commiserating with her sorrow over killing a living creature. It didn't mean we should stand before a preacher anytime soon.

I would, though. I truly would. If she asked. Which she wouldn't.

What were these thoughts that invaded my mind? Where had they come from? I was under a spell. That was the only explanation.

"Where did you get a wagon?" Ella asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I bought it from a local farmer."

"You're looking a little like an islander."

"Your mother's generous to lend me a few of your horses every day."

"Yes, she's thoughtful, all right," Ella said.

Sarcastic tone? Yes, I decided. Definitely.

My presence had caused strife between Ella and her mother. None of this had been by my own choosing, and I was as much a pawn in Mrs. Bains's game as Ella. Regardless, I felt bad. Mrs. Bains had taken a great risk to bring me here, regardless of the reason. Ella didn't want a doctor or a husband. Her mother's actions would be a betrayal of the worst kind. It was no wonder Ella was hostile toward me and angry at her mother. I didn't blame her. Not one bit.

I wished I could express all this to her and tell her I was sorry for how things had turned out, but the words weren't available to me. Never before had I experienced such a strange sensation of push and pull. My feelings about this whole matter had become complicated. On one hand, I agreed with Ella. Her mother had tricked her and lied to her. Which, in addition to Ella's

disdain, made me want to go home. On the other, I needed the work, despite how it had come to be. In addition, my quickly growing affection toward Ella made me want to stay even more. The heart hopes, despite facts to the contrary.

“It must be disappointing,” Ella said quietly. “How all of this has unfolded for you. For that, I’m sorry. You didn’t ask to be in this tangle of my mother’s web.”

“Nor did you.”

“I let myself believe my dream of the clinic had come true. That’s when I get in trouble. When I think everything’s working out like I wanted. Why should I believe such a thing when my mother so clearly wants me to marry and be like everyone else? Sending for you is about as clear a message as I can receive. She doesn’t like the way I am.”

“That can’t possibly be true. She cares a great deal about you.”

“My parents have one thing in common. Apparently, their love is conditional. I didn’t think Mother was that way. Father, yes.” Her voice sounded so forlorn that it made me want to stop the wagon and pull her in for a hug as my mother had done whenever I was sad as a child.

Not that I would ever be that presumptuous. The fact that she was speaking to me at all was progress.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” I said. “We can work together however you wish.”

Ella’s head drooped. “No, it’s more than that now. My mother’s won, but she won’t get me to surrender. I’ll leave the island before I do that. She can’t control me. I won’t let her control me.”

“This island’s your home. Where else would you go?”

“There’s a lot of places that need a nurse. Somewhere my mother has no say in what happens.” She was quiet for a moment. “This whole thing has me flummoxed, really. All my life, my mother was this subservient wife, unable to protect her sons from our father and essentially having no power over anything whatsoever. And now, without Father, she’s become almost as bad as him.”

“Sometimes those who love us the most think they know what’s best for us,” I said. “And that’s not always true. We all see each other through eyes biased by our own likes and beliefs. What we want, we believe others should too. Your mother values marriage and children and thinks you should as well.”

“But why? Why can’t she just let me be myself? Do you know I actually thought she was proud of me? All these years, I thought it was Father who disapproved of my choices. Now I see it’s her too. And that hurts more than Father. I knew what to expect with him.”

“What did he do to you?” I had to ask. Curiosity was killing me.

“Pretended I wasn’t there. Dismissed me. I was invisible to him. The boys were physically abused, which is worse, but the cruelty he showed me was painful nonetheless.”

“I can understand that,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

This was the crux of Ella, I thought. The reason my arrival had hit her so hard. Her mother had made a decision that would change Ella’s life, and she hadn’t had the respect to tell her first. Being dismissed as unimportant was the very thing Ella hated the most.

“Do you remember when you asked me my second reason for wanting to be busy?”

“Of course.”

“It’s to prove I’m here. That I’m not invisible. That I matter.”

“Ella, I know it means nothing coming from me, but you matter. You matter a great deal and not only because of the work you do.”

“Why do you think so? You’ve known me such a short time.”

“Valid argument,” I said, chuckling. “But I feel I know you better than you would surmise from our limited time together. I see in you a greatness. A leader of significance. I don’t know how or where or why, but you will do outstanding work on this earth before you go home to heaven.”

“You’re a strange man.” She said it lightly but with a ring of truth nonetheless.

She thought I was odd? Should that bother me? Why should it? Yes, I was different from other men. That was fine. I liked myself just the way I was. “I’ll take it as a compliment, whether you meant it that way or not. It is with pride that I accept your decree. I am a strange man and proud of it.”

She laughed. “Do you see? That is a peculiar thing to say.”

“You’re odd too, you know.”

“Oh, yes, I know. I’ve never wished to be like everyone else. But now, I wonder, wouldn’t it be easier? Wouldn’t it be nice if I acted like every other girl and pined for a man and wedding band?”

“Nice for whom?”

“For me, I guess. Then I wouldn’t be all alone contemplating leaving the

island and never speaking to my mother again.”

“I’m not going to say it again,” I said. “But you know what I want.”

“Do you really want that? The two of us to work together?” Ella asked.

“I really do. I’ll be honest with you, I’m afraid the islanders will never accept me, and I will have come all this way for nothing.”

“None of this is your fault.” Ella sighed, gazing at me for a moment, as if I were a puzzle that could never be put together. “I do know that to be true. In different circumstances, we might have been friends.”

“But not now?”

“I don’t see how I could ever like you simply because of what you represent. Betrayal. Lies. Loss of control.”

We’d reached the driveway by then. I kept quiet the rest of the way to the house, oddly hurt by the last remark even though she’d conceded to my innocence in the matter. Instead of building a practice, as I thought I would, I’d been sucked into family drama. Strife that had nothing to do with me, yet affected every part of my life here.

An ache for my mother came over me. She would know what to tell me to do. Was she in heaven watching me? Would she send me an answer?

Once we’d arrived, I let the horses drink at the fountain while I helped Ella down from the wagon. “Do you need anything else? Anything at all?”

She glanced up at me, her eyes still red from crying. “No, you’ve been very kind. Thank you.”

I nodded and watched as she walked up the steps and into the house, as lonely as I’d ever been.

THAT NIGHT, Ella didn’t appear for the evening meal. I’d not seen her since I dropped her off earlier other than when her car appeared in the driveway. Mr. Bains and Mrs. Bains were fine company at dinner, even though I felt a bit out of place. These were not the sort of people I’d ever known intimately. By that, I meant rich. I hated to admit it, but wealth intimidated me.

After supper, I excused myself and went out to the back porch to look up at the sky. The inky night with millions of silver stars twinkled from God’s vast canvas. They seemed so close that I lifted my hand as if to draw them to me, but they did not come, simply enjoying their spots from the heavens too

much, I supposed. I drew in a deep breath, feeling the peaceful surroundings entering my body, freeing me from the strain of the day. The crisp evening air caressed my skin and carried the scent of the sea and woodsmoke.

Torches on either side of the steps had been lit, and their orange flames occasionally flickered and sputtered. I'd splurged earlier that day and bought a cigar. First, I took a moment to breathe in the fresh air before lighting it from the flames rising from one of the torches. An aroma of decaying leaves mixed with the smoky scent of the cigar as I settled on the bottom step of the porch where I could sit without the obstruction of the awning.

It was remarkably quiet here. Nothing but the sounds of nature. A rustle here or there from an unseen critter and the whisper of a breeze ruffling the last of the autumn leaves. An owl hooted, sending shivers up my spine. An owl! I'd never heard one before now. All these years, I'd thought it more of a construct of children's books, but here he was, evidence of the distinct call I'd heard only in my imagination. Another hoot, as if to remind me of his presence, sent a lonely yet exhilarating feeling through my bones.

This was a wonderful place to live. Ella should not be run out of here. Not because of me. I had to convince her to stay and work with me. It was the only solution for both of us. I had nowhere else to go. She had no desire to go anywhere else. A compromise must be found.

I puffed on my cigar but didn't inhale the smoke into my lungs, enjoying the smell and sense of luxury it gave me.

I heard the door to the porch open and close and turned to see that it was Ella. She obviously hadn't seen me yet because she wrapped her arm around one of the pillars and let out a long sigh staring up at the stars. The scent of my cigar must have alerted her to my presence because she turned in my direction.

"Lucca, what are you doing out here?" Her voice was as crisp and lovely as the air. She stepped into the light cast off from the torches. I craned my neck to take in the silhouette of her feminine curves before returning to staring up at the sky. My stomach fluttered despite my best efforts.

"Having a cigar. Looking at the stars."

She came down the stairs, the heels of her boots making a tapping noise on the wood, and sat just one step above me. "May I join you?"

"Please." I stubbed out my cigar, not wanting to douse her with smoke.

As if by magic, she pulled a silver flask from the inside of her coat. "I've taken it upon myself to fill a flask, from which I will be having several

drinks. Would you like one?"

"From the flask?"

"No, I've brought two glasses." Again, she reached into her coat, conjuring two tumblers. "I saw you out here and thought I'd see if you'd like company, but I can make myself scarce if you'd rather be alone."

"No, please, sit." I shouldn't have been as pleased as I was. Hope's sneaky that way. She'd seen me and wanted to join me? Progress? Or just the result of such a difficult day?

Ella poured us each a modest glass and then handed one to me. "Why the stairs and not one of these comfortable chairs? Wait, don't tell me. The stars."

"Exactly." I sipped cautiously, not accustomed to the intensity of spirits. But this one warmed my throat and chest.

"It's a pretty night," Ella said. "I love autumn evenings such as this."

"Do you know, I've never seen a sky like this until tonight. It's quite something, isn't it?"

"I've always thought so."

We were quiet for a moment. The owl hooted again.

"Or that," I said. "An actual owl. He makes me feel like a boy."

She laughed. "I can see you as a little one, all eyes and floppy hair."

"How did you know?"

"It's not at all difficult to imagine," she said. "You have this softness—a pureness—in your eyes that's hard to look away from."

"In what way?" I asked, intrigued.

"The sheer beauty of them," Ella said. "You've heard this before, I'm sure?"

"No one has said much of anything about my appearance." Not completely true. I knew the elderly ladies in the Italian neighborhood back in the city sometimes whispered and giggled to one another whenever I was around. "But thank you. I'm blushing from the compliment."

"I doubt that," Ella said, then took a swig of whiskey. "When I look at you, I see a man who believes that good exists in the world and that everything will be fine."

"I do believe those things. Even though I've seen evidence that I'm wrong on both counts."

"Yes, well, one must grow up whether we want to or not." Ella set her empty glass next to her and pulled her coat tighter, leaning forward over her knees.

“What was small Ella like? Your niece looks just like you, so that’s not hard to picture in my mind. But what about the rest of it? What was busy little Ella up to at age eight, let’s say?”

“Always trying to keep up with my brothers. We lived outside back then. Exploring the woods and the beach. I never wanted to come back into the house on those days. Especially if Father was home. He spent a lot of time in Seattle. We loved those times.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that,” I said.

“Has anyone told you about his mistresses and illegitimate children?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, there’s Rhett, whom we grew up with, never knowing he was our brother. He’s been one of my dearest friends all my life.”

“Yes, I think I’ve heard something about that.”

“He took it remarkably well,” Ella said. “We cut him into the money left from Father.”

“Not everyone would do that.”

“He said no at first, but he wanted to give his elderly parents a more comfortable life, so he came back around to the idea.” She explained that Rhett’s adoptive parents had raised him in the lighthouse and had since retired, leaving only Rhett to guide ships. “They’ve moved closer to town and are doing much better since. The life was too rigorous for them, but they’d have never admitted it. His heart is weak, and she has arthritis starting in her hands. Both are feeling much better now. I keep a close watch on them, though. You’ll have to once I’m gone.”

“Or you could stay and do it yourself.”

She was silent for a moment. I chastised myself for bringing it up when we’d been having such a nice talk.

“Do you ever feel like there’s no place in the world you belong?” Ella asked finally.

“All the time.”

“I never felt the same as other girls, as I’ve mentioned too many times already—but I always felt like the island was my home. Now I don’t know.”

What could I say that would make anything better for her? My attempts thus far had failed without question.

“You’re not making this as easy as I thought,” Ella said.

“What’s that?”

“Hating you. Blaming you.”

“Hatred is easier when you don’t actually know a person,” I said.

“Has it been bad for you here? In America.”

“Yes. Good too, though.” I told her about Mrs. Cole, how she’d sent me to school and taken such good care of me. “Until she passed away and her brother made sure her generosity was no longer extended to anyone but him.”

“That must have been terrible.”

“It was. In addition, I miss her. Not only the comfort and ease she had afforded me but her presence. The second and last person who believed in me and loved me. She was like a second mother to me, and now I have none.”

“Why are our mothers so important to us?” Ella asked. “How is it they define so much of who we are and what we feel about the world?”

“They’re the first eyes we ever look into,” I said. “The first eyes that guide us and teach us how to interpret everything. Without them, we’ve lost our compass.”

“I feel as if I’ve lost mine,” Ella said. “Or the idea, at least, of who I thought she was to me.”

“Ella, would it be better if I left?” I didn’t want to ask because I knew the answer, but I couldn’t sit here without feeling responsible for her unhappiness.

“Just twenty-four hours ago, I would have said yes. But the more I understand what’s happened, the more I see this is about my mother and how she views me. What she wants for me versus who I truly am. I’m sorry you have to be in the middle of it all. I don’t know why it hurts so much.”

“She’s your mother. You want her to love you just as you are.”

“Yet she never will,” Ella said.

I would, I thought. Given half the chance, I would love her just as she was.

“To answer your question, no, you shouldn’t leave. They hired you to be our doctor, and I must concede defeat and let my dreams go. If either of us is to leave, it must be me. I can’t go barreling around the island in my car, angry and vengeful, killing animals.” She said this lightly, but I could hear the hurt in her voice nonetheless. “I don’t want to be like that...like my father.”

“You could never be like him.”

“No offense, but you don’t know me well enough to make that statement.” She tilted her head toward the sky, and her chest rose and fell as she breathed deeply, in and out. “I don’t like the person I’ve been the last few days. Killing that graceful animal today made me see myself clearly. If I stay

here, I'll become my father. Angry and scheming and cruel. That is not how I want to spend my life." She looked over at me, her eyes reflecting the flame of the torch. "You'll do well here. I know you will. I'm leaving the people I've cared about very much in good hands. For that, I'm grateful. And now I must go to bed, for I'm slightly drunk, and if I stay much longer who knows what I will say?" She stood, a little awkwardly, reaching out for the railing to steady herself. "Also, Lucca, I must tell you thank you. Since we've met, you've been nothing but gracious. Thank you for that and for today and for rescuing me from that horrible man. I'm sorry for how I've behaved."

Without saying anything further, she fled up the stairs, leaving me alone with the stars and the lonely call of the owl.

ELLA

The next day, I went by to see Rhett's parents. Mrs. Rivers was enjoying decorating a home that wasn't the lighthouse for the first time in her married life. The project had given her renewed energy. Mr. Rivers, who had battled through some serious health problems and come out the other side, seemed like a new person. The burden of poverty had weighed heavily upon them. Now that it was lifted, they could rest easier and thus grow more robust.

I pulled up in the car, parking near the barn where they kept two horses and a few chickens. The weather was biting cold, but the skies were clear. All around me, the red and gold colors of fall were bright and cheery. Fallen leaves cushioned the path to the front door.

I climbed the steps up to the modest front porch and knocked on the blue door, admiring pots of mums and two rocking chairs facing the meadow. I could easily imagine Mr. and Mrs. Rivers sitting there in the evenings to watch the sun go down. Growing older together, best friends and companions. What was it like to know that one person who loved you more than anyone else was always by your side?

I would never know. I didn't want to know.

Mrs. Rivers answered the door wearing an apron over a light brown dress, a pair of spectacles perched on the end of her nose. When she saw it was me, she grinned and held her arms out to embrace me. I didn't usually accept hugs, but for Mrs. Rivers, I made an exception.

"What brings you out, Miss Ella?" Mrs. Rivers stepped back to allow me to pass by her and into the foyer.

"Just wanted to look in on you. It's been a week or so, hasn't it?"

“How kind of you, darling girl. Come in. I’ll show you my new sofa. Rhett brought it over from Seattle just a few days ago.”

She gestured for me to follow her down the small hallway to the sitting room. Set near the fire that glowed cheerfully from the hearth, the aforementioned blue-and-white couch immediately evoked visions of a nap.

“It’s perfect,” I said. “The house looks delightfully cozy. You’ve done so much.” When they’d first decided to purchase the cottage, it had been empty for quite some time and needed a lot of repairs. Benedict had offered his services, installing new floors and tearing out rotting cupboards. New windows and fresh paint had transformed it into a beautiful home. The final touch? Electricity and plumbing. Luxuries still, even though most new houses had them. Out here on the island, there were many that had neither. Most of my patients, in fact, lived without indoor plumbing or electricity. It always stood out to me what an elevation of lifestyle indoor plumbing, even more so than electricity, brought.

Upon a recommendation from Benedict, Rhett had hired someone from Seattle to install both. Wiring was not something Benedict felt comfortable doing, even though he loved the physical labor of carpentry.

Thinking about Benedict, I surged with pride. He’d come far, battling his troubles with reading and writing to emerge as a great carpenter. He’d told me recently he was never more happier than when the scent of sawdust tickled his nose. “That and spending time with my wife, of course.” He hadn’t needed to add that part. It was obvious how in love they were. Both glowed any time the other was present.

“We love our new home,” Mrs. Rivers said. “The lighthouse was always so cold, and our old bones ached. Here, with the fireplaces and good walls your brother put in for us, we’re as content as can be.”

She certainly looked as if she were thriving. Short and slightly plump, her eyes sparkled from a face that glowed with good health. I’d encouraged her to eat more meat and other food with iron. Now that they could afford to do so, she confessed to feeling more energetic.

“Do you want tea or coffee?” Mrs. Rivers asked. “I have a few slices of cake left too.”

“No cake, but a spot of tea sounds nice. The weather’s chilled me.”

“Come into the kitchen. I’ll put the kettle on.” As we walked across the hallway, she explained that Mr. Rivers had gone into town to buy a few necessities. “We’re taking dinner over to Rhett later. He’s lonely out there,

even though he won't admit it."

"He needs a helper," I said. "So that he doesn't have to stay there all the time."

"I agree." She filled the teapot and set it on the stove to boil. "Here, sit. Tell me how you're doing."

We both sat at a round table in the cheerful yellow kitchen, chatting for a few minutes about the weather until the tea was ready. When she returned to sit, she peered at me with a mixture of sympathy and curiosity. "Tell me, Miss Ella, how you're doing with the new doctor in town."

"He's no concern of mine," I said.

"Is that right?" She raised both eyebrows for a split second. "I'd find the whole thing annoying, if it were me. Maybe a tad threatening as well?"

I let out a long sigh. "Most of all, I'm hurt. Do you know it was my mother who invited him here and is paying him?"

"Oh, dear me, no, I hadn't heard. I'm not much for gossip." She smoothed a weathered thumb over one of the pink flowers painted on her china cup. "I'm sorry too. Whatever was your mother thinking? Didn't she realize how much it would hurt you?"

There was no love lost between my mother and Mrs. Rivers. Even if they'd naturally liked each other, the truth in their pasts would prevent them from a true friendship. My mother had known that Rhett's biological mother had had an affair with Father. The woman, no older than a girl, really, had come to the house asking for help not long before she gave birth alone. She was sent away and perished alone in the woods shortly after having the baby. The Riverses had taken Rhett in and raised him as their own.

Objectively speaking, my mother had blood on her hands. She knew about the girl and probably could have prevented her death had she acted upon that knowledge. I understood why my mother didn't or couldn't speak up against Father. But to an outsider, it might seem like cruelty. Whatever Mrs. Rivers's opinion on the matter, she never said a word to me.

Now, however, it was there between us, a lead ball of the past weighing us down.

"I don't know," I said, answering her question. "If I did, it might aid my understanding of what appears to be a not-at-all-subtle manipulation. All she said was that she thought I needed help and that she had to go behind my back or I would have said no. I'm a fool, Mrs. Rivers. I thought they were building the clinic for me."

“You mustn’t think any of this is your fault.” She patted my arm with such affection, my eyes felt the stinging hot prickle of tears. “Your mother’s put you in a terribly awkward position. How are you supposed to know what to do?”

“That’s just the thing,” I said, relieved to have someone who seemed to understand things from my point of view. “Everyone keeps telling me I should rest more and that Dr. Coletti’s presence will allow me more time off to do whatever I please. But I don’t want to rest. I don’t need days off, and I get plenty of sleep. Do you know my mother had the nerve to tell me I would grow old and ugly before my time because I spend so many nights up with patients?”

“I don’t think hard work ever made anyone look ugly. Doing what you love will do the opposite—keep you young and curious. Do you know, curiosity is my favorite quality in a person. You’ve always been curious enough for two people, let alone one.”

“Thank you.” Again, I nearly started crying. Her kindness and understanding touched my heart. “Sometimes I feel no one in this world understands me. Even Amelia, who has such a fierceness and intensity, thinks I should marry and be like everyone else.”

“You, my dear, have your own path. Just like Rhett. Most young men wouldn’t want to have taken over the lighthouse, but he feels it’s part of him.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true. I never thought about it. I can’t imagine him doing anything else. He’s an honorable man. You did a wonderful job of raising him.”

“Ah, it was a joy. Every minute of it. I miss the little boy he was but am enjoying the adult version of him as well.”

I sipped my tea, thinking. “Do *you* think I should marry and have children?”

She blinked and touched her upper lip with the tips of her fingernails, tapping them against her teeth. I’d noticed she did this when contemplating something important. “If I’m being honest,” she said finally, “I would like to see you have a love of your own and a child or two. Having a family brings such meaning to your life. Or, I should say, it did for me. You may be different. Having a career may give you all of that. If it does, then I say go on being true to yourself.”

“To thine own self be true,” I said, quoting Shakespeare.

“All that said, I think you could have both. You can be a nurse and a wife. They’re not mutually exclusive. If you found the right man, that is. He’s going to have to be strong and smart if he’s to deserve you.” She stopped, taking a slurp of tea before returning her gaze to me. “Tell me the truth, dear. Aren’t you lonely for a love of your own? A husband who will look after you no matter what?”

“I can’t be lonesome for something I never knew existed.” I fluttered my fingers as if to rid myself of the memory of my father. “The way Father treated her. The things he did to all those women. I can’t imagine how I could ever trust a man who isn’t one of my brothers.”

“You think of your brothers as good men?”

“Yes.”

“Then is it possible there are other good ones out there? Of course, you’re right to be selective. You’ll know when it’s the right one.”

“Part of me knows Mother asked him here hoping I would fall in love with him. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

“What’s he like? Is he handsome?”

I laughed. “Unfortunately, yes. He’s also nice. Well-spoken. Kind. Obviously intelligent. I’d like to hate him, but it’s impossible.”

“Could you see yourself working with him?”

I shook my head. “No, I can’t. I work alone. That’s how I like it.”

“My suggestion would be to give Dr. Coletti a chance. Not as a potential husband but as someone who could share the burden of caring for the people of this island. We’re only getting bigger by the day.”

“All the babies,” I said, stifling a yawn.

“You do seem tired, dear, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“I don’t know how to play well with others,” I said. “I’m bossy and like things my way. I like being on my own.”

“It all makes sense, given how controlling your father was and how he withheld love from you when you didn’t do as he wanted. He did you a great disservice, but it’s not too late for you to grow and change and realize how worthy of love you are.”

This time I did cry. “Do you really think so? Because sometimes—often—I think no one will love me, so I pretend, mostly to myself, that I don’t want anyone.”

“I know you,” Mrs. Rivers said. “You’ve been my son’s friend for a long time. I’ve watched you grow up. There’s no better girl than you.”

“I appreciate you saying so, even though I haven’t felt very good the last few days.”

“That’s right. It’s never been easy to be a woman in a man’s world, and your mother had it particularly rough. I’m sure she feels she wasted so much of her life, and now that she’s been set free, she wants to make sure her babies are happy and have their own little nests. I know I wish Rhett would find a wife to share the burden of the lighthouse with. I hate thinking of him there at night all alone.”

“He’s tough. He doesn’t mind.”

“Just like you,” Mrs. Rivers said.

“I’m thinking about leaving here. Going to another community that needs nursing.”

Her eyes flew open in shock. “No, surely not? Can’t you find a way to work with him?”

“It won’t be with him. It will be *for* him. And that I cannot do.”

“Sometimes in life, the very thing we think we cannot do is the thing we absolutely should do.”

Was she right? Was I wrong to resist? To deny the possibilities simply because I was so angry at Mother?

“Just tell me you’ll think about it,” Mrs. Rivers said. “Before you do something so drastic.”

“I’ll do some thinking, yes.” Glancing at the clock, I realized I needed to go. “I have a patient to check up on.”

“Be on your way then. Come see me soon and tell me how it goes with the doctor.”

I promised her I would and left, feeling lighter than when I’d arrived.

LUCCA

Yet another day in an empty office. Surely someone had a sore throat? Or a broken arm? Anything so that I didn't feel useless and laughable sitting in the office with nothing to do. The sound of Benedict's hammer and saw as he worked on the residence my only company, I decided to put the Closed sign in the window and take a walk.

I wasn't a man prone to anger. Even as poorly as I'd been treated at times, I never allowed myself to succumb to rage. Some might say I pushed it down too deeply, not wanting to admit to myself how feeling helpless made one angry. However, my mother had taught me that self-pity and blaming others were not qualities the Lord felt particularly fond of in his people. Thus, despite the setbacks and obstacles, I continued onward, always hopeful that tomorrow would be better. Today, however, a tiny crack had allowed in a few moments of self-pity and anger. Not at anyone but the situation itself.

My mood lifted, however, as I walked past the bakery and its scent of freshly baked bread wafting into the crisp autumn air. Folks bustled about, doing errands or socializing. The sun shone brightly, making the water a crystalline blue. I'd already grown accustomed to the way the Puget Sound changed hour by hour here, as fickle as the sky. Accustomed but not complacent, mind you. The views beguiled me. Despite the disappointment I felt in regard to Ella and the awkward position we found ourselves in, and my growing, albeit unwelcome, longing for her, I couldn't help but feel gratitude for the natural beauty before me.

Yesterday I'd walked along the Tutheridges' private beach, marveling at the harbor seals sunning themselves. I'd found Bebe making mud cakes by the shore nearby. When I'd greeted her and commented on the cute seals, she

had informed me they were harbor seals, not sea lions. “People who visit here don’t know the difference,” she said, lifting her chin in the same way Ella did when she was irritated or disdainful. I’d seen it more than a few times.

“Well, I know now, so thank you,” I’d said.

“It’s all right. You’re a stranger here, so you can’t be expected to know anything about our island.”

As if I needed any reminders.

Now, I sat on the bench that looked out to sea, the sunshine warm on my shoulders. Seagulls flew overhead and seemed to call out complaints to one another in their screeching tones. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two young ladies approaching. I turned, realizing it was Amelia and Faith. They both waved and made a beeline in my direction.

I stood, tipping my hat. “Good afternoon, ladies. What brings you to town on this fine day?”

“Hello, Dr. Coletti,” Amelia said. “We’ve come to town to do a little shopping and see how you’re getting on.”

“How kind,” I said. “Thus far, I have had no patients whatsoever.”

“Maybe no one’s sick?” Faith asked, peering up at me from under the brim of an attractive straw hat.

“Or they’ve called Ella out to them,” I said. “Which is understandable. It’s only been a few days.” If I said it enough, perhaps I could start believing it too.

“The people here are accustomed to Ella,” Amelia said.

“And suspicious of outsiders,” Faith added.

“We’ve both experienced it,” Amelia said.

“There’s not much I can do,” I said.

“We have a few ideas,” Amelia said. “Can we meet you back at your office in a few minutes to discuss it?”

“I have nothing else to do this afternoon,” I said, smiling. “Come by any time.”

“WE HAVE A TEENSY BIT OF ADVICE,” Amelia said, settling into one of the guest chairs in my small administrative office just off the waiting room. If I’d had any paperwork to do, the space would have been ideal in which to do so.

Light walls contrasted well with the dark mahogany furniture. Additionally, a set of windows near the ceiling let in a nice amount of natural light, but also provided privacy. It made me feel like a real doctor when I sat behind the desk. Except, obviously, for the lack of patients.

“I’m all ears,” I said.

“We’ve debated at much length about whether to come to you or not,” Faith said.

Amelia nodded. “In the end, we decided we must be brave and not worry if Ella’s mad at us in the short term because in the end, everything will work out as it should.”

Intrigued, I encouraged them to tell me more.

“We understand that Benedict and Briggs have told you about Mrs. Mantle and her actual profession?” Amelia asked.

“Yes, they told me she’s a matchmaker, and the reason I was brought here was for Ella.” Saying the words out loud made them seem no less outrageous.

“Yes, good, you understand.” Amelia leaned forward expectantly.

“Do you believe it to be true?” Faith asked.

“It seems the evidence points that way, yes,” I said. “As unlikely as it sounds.”

“Yes, I felt the same way,” Faith said. “Yet it’s all true.”

Amelia gripped the arms of the chair. “Benedict and I knew before we even married the trick they’d pulled over on us. Of course, by then, we didn’t care how we got together, only that we were. Then, they did the same for Briggs and Faith.”

“If you’re correct, in this particular match, Mrs. Mantle will fail,” I said. “Ella has no interest in marriage and definitely not to me.”

“We thought you’d say that,” Amelia said. “At first, it’s impossible to comprehend.”

“We felt that way too,” Faith said. “But Mrs. Mantle has some kind of gift that mere mortals cannot understand.”

“I agree,” Amelia said.

“She saw me gazing at a painting,” Faith said. “And I suppose, although she’s never said, she felt inspired to interview me as a match for Briggs. My passion for art was her impetus, but when she interviewed me—in hindsight only do I understand this—she asked a series of questions meant to uncover the truth of my character and the possibilities of a match with Briggs. We’re opposites, you see, but somehow Mrs. Mantle understood how we would

complement each other. She predicted a natural attraction would arise between us that would lead to love. Which it did.” Her petite features relaxed into an expression of sheer contentment. “Making me a believer in not only love but the wisdom of matchmaking. And most importantly, that this is nothing short of a miracle. Given the odds of us meeting.”

“Which makes us believe God had a hand.” Amelia studied me with narrowed eyes. “I know you’re skeptical. I would have been, too, had I not experienced it myself. Mrs. Mantle advertised for a secretarial position and said that applicants must have a love of books. When I saw it in the newspaper, I knew I had to apply for the job.”

“And when you got here, was it obvious to you that Benedict was your one and only?” I asked, pulled into the story despite the doubts about my own situation.

“Yes, very much so,” Amelia said. “It was all too easy. We grew close very fast, and before I knew it, he’d admitted he’d fallen in love with me, and I told him I felt the same, and here we are now, starting a life together. It all sounds simple, doesn’t it? I mean, now it does. At the time, I was not aware of how we’d been set up to do exactly what we did.”

“Fall in love.” My fingers tingled. Why, exactly, I could not say.

“Right. Hopelessly so.” Amelia smiled, her eyes shining with emotion. “The odds of it all are nonsensical. We can imagine how it must seem to you, but having been through it already, we know how this will go. God has a plan, and that’s all there is to it. Isn’t he good to us?”

“Yes, exactly,” Faith said. “How else would she have sent us straight to our soulmates? None of this is an accident. You don’t see it yet, but you will. I certainly couldn’t believe a man such as Briggs would fall in love with plain old me.”

“You’re not plain,” Amelia said in a way that made me expect she’d said it many times before.

“I respectfully agree,” I said to Faith. “You’re lovely.”

“Thank you,” Faith said, blushing. “It’s a bad habit I have. Putting myself down. Briggs is constantly scolding me about it.”

“As he should,” I said.

“So you see,” Amelia said, bringing it back to the subject at hand. “Mrs. Mantle obviously has a very clever way of doing things. Add in an interfering mother and the helper she enlisted to aid her Cupid leanings, and suddenly it all makes sense.”

“Why did Matthew want to be involved in something like this?” I asked.

“His ties with the family are deep,” Amelia said. “We’re not entirely sure how Mrs. Bains convinced him, but she did.”

“He’s a man with secrets,” Faith said. “Like so many here.”

“Regardless, we feel strongly that you’ve been sent by Mrs. Mantle for Ella.” Amelia looked at me with a mixture of excitement and challenge on her face. “I can see you believe it too.”

“Yes, it’s hard to argue otherwise,” I said. “That said, Ella has no interest in me. For my part, I’m doing everything in my power to avoid falling in love with her.”

“Oh, you mustn’t do that,” Amelia said, sounding horrified.

Faith wrung her hands, nodding in agreement. “Goodness, no. Resisting your feelings is the worst thing you could do.”

“All this nonsense about never marrying is only a reaction to her father’s treatment of their mother,” Amelia said. “Once she falls in love with you, she’ll see how wrong she was. That’s why we had to come to you and beg you not to resist the ways of nature. In our situations, neither party resisted, so this might be trickier, but it’s still possible. One cannot outrun fate.”

“Not for long,” Faith said.

“Humans get ourselves into trouble when we try to change the course God wants for us,” Amelia said.

“How do we know what that course is?” I asked.

“He works through other people,” Faith said, as if it were obvious.

“All right, sure.” I felt a little light-headed.

“Are we making sense?” Faith asked, concern in her eyes. “You look slightly pale.”

“More green, I would say,” Amelia said.

“It’s all a bit overwhelming, I must admit,” I said.

“Think back to when you met Mrs. Mantle,” Amelia said, immediately back to work convincing me Mrs. Mantle was in the soulmate business. “Didn’t she ask you odd questions for a job interview?”

I nodded. “Yes, her face grew animated when I mentioned I was from an island. I found that quite unusual. She sent me for Ella. However, in this particular case, I believe she’s made a mistake.”

“God doesn’t make mistakes,” Faith said. “Only people do.”

“And we think it would be a mistake to—say—go home. For instance,” Amelia said.

“Once you get to know the real Ella, you’ll see that you’re perfect together,” Faith said. “At least, that’s how it was for us.”

“I’ve already seen the real her,” I said. “And I cannot lie. She’s as charming and beautiful as this island.”

“Well, then, excellent.” Amelia clapped her hands. “We thought you’d dismiss the entire idea.”

“And no matter how she acts, don’t pay a bit of attention,” Faith said. “If she pretends to dislike you, for example.”

“Actually, we’ve had a few good talks, and I can see that her reaction to my arrival has nothing to do with me. This is about her mother and what Ella feels is the ultimate betrayal. For that reason, she’s talking about leaving the island.”

“What? No, she can’t,” Amelia said.

“She’ll mess everything up,” Faith said. “We have to do something.”

“I’ll do whatever you ladies suggest,” I said. “But, please, don’t get your hopes up. The way Ella’s mother set her up is not something easy to forgive.”

“Unless she falls in love with you,” Faith said. “And then she’ll see it was all for the best.”

Which was never going to happen.

Yet my fingers continued to tingle. A sign of something? If so, I just had no idea what it was.

ELLA

By the time I arrived at the log cabin where Maddie and David Holden lived on the north end of the island, she was already in active labor. I'd known for months now that there were two babies growing inside her uterus. Dual heartbeats and the size of her pregnant belly told me so.

Thus, I'd been concerned about her delivery and had asked David the last time I was out to send for me immediately when the contractions started. I'd been dressing for supper when Lizzie came to tell me that David had come by asking if I would go out to their place. "Mrs. Holden's in labor," Lizzie had said, thrusting a lunch box at me. "Mrs. Halvorson made you a sandwich, as we figure you'll be there all night."

I'd changed into work clothes and hurried out to the car in the dark, rainy evening, wishing babies had the courtesy to come during the day. On the way, I dared not eat the sandwich, afraid to hit another deer.

The hours passed slowly as I tried to make Maddie as comfortable as possible. She and David were young, not much over twenty, and had moved from Minnesota to Whale Island only a few years ago. She'd told me her and David's families had come from Sweden before they were born. They'd met as teenagers and fallen in love. He'd dreamt of moving west, and somehow they'd found their way here. These would be their first babies.

Tall and slender, with light blond hair and fair skin, Maddie was strong and healthy. Capable of delivering twins, I told myself, even though I was as nervous as a cat. I felt her stomach, searching for the babies' heads, praying the first one was head down. Breech births were tricky enough with one baby, but two would make it dangerous. "There," I muttered. "That's a head, and it's facing in the right direction."

In between contractions, Maddie rested in a chair while I made up the bed with a set of old sheets, knowing what was to come.

Maddie's labor was hard, and she screamed out in pain with each contraction, her knuckles white and her face twisted in agony. During the quiet moments of reprieve, I could make out the thump of David's boots pacing the living room floor.

At various times, I had her kneel over a chair or get down on her hands and knees. I'd found these positions to assist in labor much better than a woman lying in bed. It also served to distract the mother from the intense pain of labor.

Finally, she was fully dilated, and I told her it was time to push. One push, then another, and I saw a head. "I see a head with downy white hair," I said to Maddie. "Won't be long now."

After a dozen pushes, she fell back exhausted onto the bed. "I can't do it, Ella."

I wiped her brow and smoothed back her damp hair. "You're doing so well. Just a bit more, and you'll get to meet your babies."

"You really think there's two?" Maddie asked, voice dry.

"I'm sure."

A few pushes later, we had a little boy weighing around six pounds. I couldn't be sure of his exact weight as the Holdens had no kitchen scale. However, I'd delivered enough babies, I could guess fairly well. His cries sounded remarkably like a baby lamb, but they were strong enough. His lungs were fully developed. One worry off my list.

I cut the umbilical cord and held the baby boy up for his mother to see. The babies were a few weeks early, which meant he had a sticky white goo covering much of him. "We'll get him cleaned up, but do you want to hold him first?" He continued to wriggle and bleat tiny cries.

Her eyes reddened and filled with tears. "Is he all right? Is he supposed to cry that way?"

"Yes, that means his lungs are fully developed. He's doing very well," I said. "Here, hold him for a moment before we deliver the other one. You'll want to nurse them both right away, but we'll wait for a moment."

She held out her arms, and I placed him with his mother. "Oh, Ella, he's so small."

I let her hold him for a moment before calling David in to help. We had another baby to deliver.

I asked David to clean the baby with a warm cloth and swaddle him in one of the cotton blankets I'd brought with me. I'd had a dozen of them made and gave them away to each newborn. Today, I had two of them.

"Me?" His voice shook, and his brow glistened with sweat. "What if I hurt him?"

"You won't, Dad." I gave him an encouraging smile. "You were made for this."

I set him in his arms. The baby flailed a bit but stopped crying. David's face was rapt with instant love. I'd seen it many times before, but it never ceased to bring tears to my eyes.

"Gently now. And then wrap him in a blanket and hold him against you. Another one's coming."

"Stay in here?" David asked. "With you?"

"David, please," Maddie whispered right before a contraction seized her attention back to the task at hand.

"It's time," I said, resuming my position at the bottom of the bed, praying silently. *Please, God, guide me. Help me get this one out safely.*

The next push brought the baby's head mostly out. Unfortunately, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his or her neck.

"Don't push with the next contraction," I said. "I just need to slip the cord over the head." *Steady now*, I told myself, taking a deep breath. With my fingers, I gently loosened the cord, tugging it over the baby's head. "Got it. Next push, and she or he is out."

Maddie, with the last of her energy, pushed as hard as she could, and the baby slid right out and into my hands. "It's a girl." Smaller than her brother by at least two pounds, she didn't cry for a few seconds. The longest two seconds of my life. But finally, a cry no louder than a kitten's mew came out of the teensy body.

Thank you, God. She would be all right.

I handed her to her mother and cut the cord. Maddie appeared to have forgotten already how difficult it had been to get them out and was now staring down at her daughter with a face that glowed with love. "She's smaller than him but so sweet. Isn't she, David?"

David came to sit beside her on the bed, fully crying now, still clinging to his baby boy. "How did you do it, Maddie? How could you make two perfect little people?"

Maddie laid back on the pillow. "I don't know. I'm so tired."

“Rest for a bit,” I said. “David and I will take care of the babies. You’ll want to try to nurse right away.”

Maddie nodded. “Yes, I’ll do my best.”

The rest of the hour passed in a blur of activity. I had to get the placentas out, so I told David to stay up by his wife so he didn’t have to witness it. He might faint on me and hit his head. I only had two hands, and they were full already.

Two hands.

All was well, but what if there had been trouble? Would I have known what to do if the babies were breech? I’d never delivered twins until today. I didn’t really know what I was doing.

Wouldn’t it have been better if Lucca had been there to help if I needed it? Should she have given birth at the clinic where he could have cut the babies out? My pride had kept Maddie from a doctor’s office and care. I could have lost all three of them.

The very thought chilled me to the bone. I needed to stop all this nonsense. This was not about me but about the people of this island. They needed Lucca. And maybe I did too.

WHEN I RETURNED HOME for a meal and a nap, I saw Lucca on the porch drinking coffee, a wool blanket spread out over his lap. I’d decided already. Now I just had to tell him. Apologize for my behavior and make this right.

He looked up in surprise at the sight of me. “Ella?” His forehead wrinkled in what appeared to be concern. I must look a fright.

“Good morning. May I join you?”

“Yes, please.”

I sat in the rocking chair next to him just as Lizzie appeared with a tray holding a silver pot of coffee, another cup, and several scones.

“Would you care for coffee, Miss Ella?” Lizzie asked, placing the tray on a side table.

“Thank you, Lizzie. I can think of nothing I’d like more at this very moment.”

I waited to speak as Lizzie refilled Lucca’s cup and poured one for me. Stifling a yawn behind one hand, I reached for the cup with the other.

Lizzie excused herself and disappeared inside. I turned to Lucca. Now or never.

“Have you only just returned from a birth?” Lucca asked before I could launch into my speech. “Your mother said you were on the other side of the island with a patient.”

“Yes, I’ve just come from there. Maddie Holden gave birth to twins.” My chest tightened just thinking about it. “I thought I might lose the smaller of the two babies. She had the cord wrapped around her neck. I was able to free it, but I was not at all confident I could do it in the moment. I’m guessing she weighs only four pounds. She’s scrawny, but her color seems good. Her brother was six pounds and robust. Lungs seem to work well, considering his bellowing. I’m worried about the mother, too. She had a hard labor, and now she’s going to have to learn to nurse them both.” I was rambling.

“It sounds like everything was all right. You did very well.”

“Yes, in the end.” I closed my eyes, remembering the fear in Maddie Holden’s eyes. “Lucca, if you’d been there, working with me, I would have felt much better.”

“What?” He stared at me with a blank expression. “What do you mean?”

“I wish I’d asked you to join me. Or that I had brought her into the clinic.” My voice threatened to break. I swallowed back the lump in my throat. “I have been selfish and petty, thinking only of myself and my wounded pride. Last night, I felt more alone than I ever have in my life. I’ve never been more scared.”

He was still staring at me as if I had two heads.

“I’ve been wrong—making this about me and my hurt over Mother instead of the people of this island. The truth is, we’re all better off with a real doctor here. I’ve been stubborn and immature. All this time I’ve claimed to care for my patients, but really I’ve thought only of myself. I’m deeply ashamed.”

He seemed to come out of his trance, blinking his eyes as if to wake himself. “Don’t be. If you’d been consulted in the decision, you would have reacted differently.”

“True, but it doesn’t excuse my behavior.” I met his gaze. “It’s hard for me to say, but I think it would be best if we worked together.”

“I’d be honored to share the burden with you,” Lucca said. “Be there to support you, no matter what, like partners do.”

“We cannot be partners. Not in the true sense. I’m a woman. You’re a

man with a medical degree. No one would take a pairing like that seriously. Soon, I'll be *Doctor Coletti's* nurse."

He clucked his tongue. "Such a pessimist."

"I'm not. I'm a realist," I said. "Women have to be. But I also know that you deserve my respect for your schooling and everything else about you too. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Lucca said. "I've had empathy for you all along, knowing what it feels like to be the outsider, the one who has to try harder than everyone else."

"Thank you."

We locked gazes for a moment. That flutter in my belly returned. What was this? It was a feeling I could not identify. I'd never had it before meeting Lucca Coletti. Excitement? Anticipation?

Desire?

God, not that. Was it always to be there while in his presence?

"We can make our own agreements," Lucca said. "Our own way of doing things. Together. Anyway, with the island's growing population, how were you planning on taking care of everyone by yourself? You won't always be so young and full of energy."

I hadn't thought about it that way. Not once. I'd been too busy to worry about the future. "I thought the clinic would help with that. Bring them all to me instead of the other way around, so that it would be easier on me."

"But then I came and ruined everything."

"Yes, that's right," I said lightly. "But maybe we could—I don't know—"

"Divide and conquer?"

"Can you promise to respect me? Treat me as an equal?"

"I would have it no other way," Lucca said.

Somehow, he'd charmed me into liking him a little. Fine, a lot. How was that possible when only days ago I was planning ways to destroy him? Turn the island against him?

What if he went away after all this? He might decide to move back to his own country. "Do you ever think about going home to Italy?" I asked at the same time I realized how much I wanted him to stay.

"Sending me away already? I thought we'd just agreed to a partnership?" He flashed that grin again.

"I mean, are you ever homesick? Not that I want you to leave," I added hastily.

His expression sobered, and his eyes glistened with obvious emotion. “I cannot go, knowing Mama is gone. It would be too sad to be in our village knowing she was no longer there. Everywhere I looked, I would think of her. I miss her bad enough here.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

“Shall we shake on it? Partners?” He held out his hand for me to shake.

I didn’t have gloves on, so it was skin to skin that I felt his touch for the first time. His hand closed around mine, warm and calloused. This was a man who had done physical work. Not like me. My hands were soft and without scars or calluses. Even more reason to respect him.

Then the most alarming thing of all happened. A tingle that started at my fingertips spread throughout my entire body. Like a forest fire. Reaching every part of me. Burning me up.

This was bad. Very bad. I should not be responding this way. Please, God, don’t do this to me. Don’t curse me with falling in love.

I pushed it all away. We must concentrate on Maddie and the babies.

“Will you come with me out to the Holdens’? I’d like you to examine all three of them.”

“It would my pleasure.” He smiled and I smiled back and my stomach betrayed me once more.

LUCCA

We didn't talk during our drive to the north part of the island, as the car was loud, and the many potholes and roots in the road jostled us at every turn. When we arrived at a small log cabin, Ella shut off the engine and turned to look at me. "I'll go in first and see how she's doing. I want to warn her I'm bringing a man in."

I nodded. "You're in charge."

She smiled back at me from across the seat. "It almost seems like you mean that."

"I never lie."

"Good. I'll be back in a moment." She reached into the back for a basket.

"What's in there?" I asked, having not seen it until now.

"Some supplies, packed by our own Mrs. Halvorson. I asked her for some flour, sugar, yeast, and several jars of canned tomatoes from our own pantry. The Holdens live mostly on what they can grow and catch. Fortunately, it's pretty easy to catch fish or rabbits. There are a lot of them on the island and no natural predators."

"Is that right?" I asked, realizing I'd never thought to ask.

"Yes, no bears or mountain lions or anything else that would help keep the deer and rabbit population down. That and wayward nurses driving cars." Her gaze dimmed momentarily before she shook it off and gave me a brave smile.

"Stop that," I said. "It was an accident. That's all."

"Yes, well, off I go. I'll be back in a minute."

While I waited, I got out of the car to look around, remembering my own village and how reliant we'd been on gardens and fish. One had to be forever

diligent, planning where the next meal would come from.

The house had been built on a flat piece of land not far from the Sound. Through the trees, the water was gray to match the sky. There were several purple clouds just to the east that seemed to be headed our way. It was cold today, too. Colder than I'd experienced here thus far.

A layer of fallen leaves and pine needles made a blanket around the house. A thin plume of smoke drifted out of the brick chimney. To the right of the house, positioned about twenty feet from the front door, stood an outhouse. Indoor plumbing was a luxury here, I thought. The Tutheridge mansion was probably not typical.

I leaned against the car with my gloved hands stuck into the pockets of my coat. Behind me, footsteps crackled through the fallen leaves. I turned to see a man in a red-and-black-plaid hunting jacket, a gun slung over his shoulder, and the carcass of a rabbit in his left hand. A hat pulled low over his forehead made it difficult to make out his features, but he appeared to be about the same age as I, with mottled skin hinting of former acne.

I straightened and introduced myself, lest I make him nervous. He had two little babies inside, which was sure to put him on high alert.

"Dr. Coletti," I said, holding out my hand. "I'm here with Ella to check on your wife and babies."

He shook my hand, still dangling the dead rabbit in the other. "Pleased to meet you. I'm David Holden. Call me David."

"Ella wanted to check with your wife first before inviting me in."

"Yeah, well, my wife Maddie isn't doing too good. Weak and pale as can be. I went out to see if I could get her some meat for dinner. Ella told me it's important she eats well with two suckling."

"Good advice."

Ella appeared on the small porch and called out to us that it was all right if I came into the house.

"I'll just take care of this." David held up the rabbit. I couldn't bear to look at its dead eye staring at me.

I followed Ella into the small, tidy cabin. A woodstove put out enough heat to make it warm and cozy. It comprised only three rooms. A sitting area with a couch and rocking chair. Through an open door, I could see a small kitchen with a wood-burning cookstove and wide sink. On the other side, a door to what I assumed was the bedroom had been shut.

"Maddie and the babies are in there," Ella said. "She said you're welcome

to come in, but I'll go with you."

"Lead the way," I said before entering the room. A thin woman with long yellow hair tied into a braid and pretty pale blue eyes sat against a stack of pillows in the middle of a double bed. The furniture, including a dresser, was crude, made of the same logs that David had used to construct the cabin if I were guessing correctly.

The babies, wrapped in blankets, nestled on either side of the new mama.

"They've just eaten," Maddie said in a dull, exhausted voice. "So they're quiet for now."

"That'll give us a chance to take a look at you," Ella said softly. "Then we'll stay for a bit so you can get some sleep."

"My husband needs to eat," Maddie said. "I should get up and fix him something."

"Let's see how you're doing first." There was no way this poor woman was getting up to fry that rabbit. I'd do it myself if need be. My mother had taught me how to cook when I was just a boy, and I could make something tasty with very few ingredients. Being poor made that a necessity.

I perched on the side of the bed, careful not to jostle the babies, and took my stethoscope from my doctor's bag. A gift from Mrs. Cole before she passed away, including the instruments and tools I needed for basic exams, including a scalpel and mercury thermometer, various syringes, microscope slides, and a tongue depressor. I also had morphine, atropine, strychnine, and digitalis if needed for various treatments.

Maddie had given birth to the two babies five minutes apart, Ella informed me. Elliot had come first, followed by his frailer little sister, Eliza.

"Named after my folks," Maddie said weakly.

"Afterbirth presented as normal," Ella said. "I don't have any reason to believe anything was left inside her. But I've not helped with many sets of twins, so another pair of eyes would be appreciated."

I nodded and started my examination of both mother and babies. They were all in fine shape, considering. Ella had done a stupendous job. The baby girl was fragile and tiny, but given time and proper care, would soon catch up to her brother. "The most important thing is for you to eat well," I said to Maddie. "Nursing two of them is going to take a lot out of you. Do you have anyone who can stay for a week or so to help?"

"No, it's just us." Maddie's eyes filled with tears and ran down her thin, pale cheeks. "My mother lives far away."

“I see,” I said, making eye contact with Ella. “Ella and I will talk and see if we can think of a way to help.”

“For now, get some rest,” Ella said from the other side of the bed. “We’ll stay and get supper going. Mrs. Halvorson sent over a few items.”

“What a blessing you are to us,” Maddie said, closing her eyes.

I took one more peek at the sleeping babies before gesturing toward the door. Ella nodded, and I followed her from the room, closing the door behind us.

David Holden came in through the back kitchen door just as we were entering. He’d skinned the rabbit and taken out the guts, as well as the head, leaving a fine-looking piece of meat.

“How is she?” David asked after setting the meat on the wooden counter next to the sink.

“She’s doing very well,” I said. “Ella took great care of her and your babies.”

“Ella always does. But she thought having a doctor out here was wise. Last night took it out of all of us.” He paused, looking down at his feet. “I can’t pay you much of anything.”

“Don’t worry about that for now,” I said. “Maybe when I get settled into my new home in back of the office, you can help me fill the woodshed.”

David nodded, eyes warm. “That I can do.”

“She’s resting now,” Ella said. “But she needs to eat well. You’re going to have to be diligent about making sure she has enough to eat.”

“I don’t cook much,” David said. “But I can fry up a flapjack, thanks to my bachelor days.” He sighed and sank wearily into one of the kitchen chairs. “Can’t believe I’m a papa of two. I sure hope I can figure out how to take care of them.” The rims of his eyes reddened. “I never heard such screaming as I did last night. I thought I was going to lose her. And God knows, it would kill me if that happened. She’s the only good thing ever happened to me.”

“We didn’t lose her,” Ella said firmly. “That’s the way it sounds when a woman’s in labor, and she had a hard one because there were two of them.”

“It scared me half to death,” David said. “And I’m equally terrified that I now have a whole family to look after. I’m worried about keeping us fed.”

“My mother asked me to mention that we may need some help this winter out in the barn,” Ella said. “We lost one of our stable boys last week. Went back to Seattle and his sweetheart there.”

David brightened. "I'd be grateful, Miss Ella, if you and your family had any work at all. I'll do anything."

"Come by tomorrow when you're refreshed and talk to Mr. Halvorson," Ella said. "He'll tell you more about what he needs."

"Will do. Much obliged," David said.

"Now, let's cook up some food for the new mother," Ella said.

Remembering the jars of tomatoes and other supplies, it occurred to me I could make a rabbit ragout and some fresh pasta. When I suggested this to Ella, her eyes widened in surprise. "You know how to do that?" Ella asked.

"My mother taught me everything she knew," I said. "I know how to can and store food for the winter too. I'm like a squirrel."

This made Ella laugh, which in turn warmed my chest. She had a laugh that sounded like wind chimes in a storm, tinkly and fast.

"I'll go down to the creek and get us some water to boil," David said. "I don't know what a ragout is, but I have a feeling I'll like it just fine."

"You will," I said. "And it'll give your wife some nutrients she needs."

ELLA

I watched in amazement as Lucca mixed together flour and water to make dough for pasta. While that was set aside to rest, he chopped the rabbit into small chunks and fried them up in a Dutch oven Maddie kept near the stove. As he did all that, I was instructed to cut up an onion and carrots, which he added to the pot along with a jar of canned tomatoes. He'd found a hanging string of garlic in the pantry, and had diced two cloves and dumped those in as well. "This should simmer for a few hours," he said.

Soon, the simple kitchen smelled of stewing tomato, onion, and garlic.

"Dr. Coletti, you surprise me," I said.

"Because of my superior cooking skills?"

"Yes. I had no idea you could cook. Mrs. Halvorson would be impressed."

"I shall offer to cook for her one night and have her give me a grade." Albeit subtle, hints of his heritage were in his speech and his cooking.

"I wouldn't have expected all of this from a man," I said. "But you continue to challenge what I thought I knew."

He smiled. "I like to hear that."

"Do you now?" I found myself smiling back at him, feeling like a girl.

"My mama taught me when I was very young. She worked hard, so I had to help as much as I could."

"What did she do?"

"She was a seamstress and also took in washing. We always had a backyard full of clothes drying on the line. The sunshine and sea air gave them the most wonderful fresh scent. One of my first memories is of seeing them flutter in the breeze. I must have been lying down and looking up at

them because they swayed like people dancing.”

People dancing? What a romantic scene to see when really it was only drying clothes, ones his mother had put much effort into by the time they were on the line.

“What was your mother like?” I asked. “Besides working, what did she do?”

“Ah, well, everything. She was both mother and father to me. It was a great responsibility, raising a son on her own. But we had the village to help. There were always friends to look after me if Mama needed help. I was well loved, even if times were lean. In the middle of the village, a water fountain served as a meeting place for women and children. I spent many mornings there, filling our containers, listening to the women gossip.”

I could easily imagine small Lucca, with his big brown eyes and tanned skin, running through the village, playing with the other children.

“What do we do while it cooks?” I asked, gesturing toward the ball of dough resting in a spot of sun on the table.

“That’s the fun part.” He explained that we were to roll and cut the pasta dough into ribbons. “I’ll let David know to cook them in boiling water for only a few minutes and then pour the ragout over them. Once we have the pasta cut, we can give them some privacy to make their nest.”

“It’s a shame we can’t eat with them,” I said, mouth watering. “This all smells really good.”

“I’ll cook for you some other time. Does Mrs. Halvorson ever have the day off?”

“Every Monday,” I said.

“I’ll ask her if she’ll allow me to borrow her kitchen,” Lucca said, “and make something for the family.”

He’d taken off his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves, entrancing me with his tanned, muscular arms. The kneading motion with his large hands led me to think of things I shouldn’t. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. The pure enjoyment cooking seemed to give him inspired me. Was there anything like this for me? A hobby that brought joy? Mostly, I worked. I’d not thought about it much before, but perhaps it would be wise to have more in my life than just nursing. However, there was something about being idle or pursuing a leisurely activity that made me nervous. Was the need to prove my worth that intensely ingrained?

David returned with water as well as armloads of wood that he’d stacked

outside the back door. I'd been only vaguely aware of his presence, so occupied with my chopping tasks. When he came in, he complimented us on the smell and asked if we wanted to stay. We refused, telling him to keep a close watch on his wife.

"And make sure she has a healthy portion of the pasta and rabbit," Lucca said.

"We'll be out tomorrow to check on you," I said.

When we were driving away from the house, me at the wheel and Lucca, who smelled of cooking oil and onions mixed with remnants of shaving soap, had his long legs stretched out and the back of his head resting on the seat.

"This was a good day," Lucca said. "Thank you for letting me be a part of it. I'll point out that you did not need me in the slightest."

"I appreciate you saying so," I said, flushing with pleasure at his kind words. "Regardless, it was really nice to have another opinion. I have to admit, I can't tell you how many times I've questioned my decisions and diagnosis."

"In medical school, they encouraged us to spend time with colleagues, discussing techniques and asking each other's opinions. I think it's good medicine to do so."

"I agree. It was silly to fight so hard against you." I smiled across at him before we bounced in a pothole, and I returned to watching the road.

WHEN WE REACHED THE HOUSE, Mother was waiting in the living room with Rhett. I'd not yet introduced Rhett to Lucca but did so now.

"We've been out to see the Holdens to check on the twins," I explained while simultaneously taking in Rhett's tense expression. "Are your parents all right?"

"No, they're fine. Thank you," Rhett said. "It's a message from the big island. The lighthouse keeper there has fallen, and they need someone to patch up a broken leg and possible internal injuries. One of the residents has come with a boat, asking for Ella. He's waiting down at the docks to take you there, if you're willing?"

"Yes, but it sounds like Dr. Coletti should come with me. If he has internal injuries, we'll need a surgeon."

“He’s in bad shape,” Rhett said, “if he fell from the tower. Rumor has it, he drinks a touch. He may have been drunk.”

“We’ll head out right away,” I said.

“Both of you?” Mother asked, sounding delighted.

“There’s a storm coming in,” Rhett said. “I can feel it in the air and see it rolling in from the lighthouse. You should go now if you’re going to get there before dark.”

“We’ll most likely be there overnight,” I said to Lucca. “Pack a bag, and I’ll meet you here in a few minutes.”

He agreed, and we parted ways to head to our rooms to pack. I ignored Mother’s pleased, smug expression.

THE BOAT TURNED out to be a sailboat, not of substantial size. By the time we headed out, the wind had picked up, which was good in that it got us there faster but bad in that the water was rocky. I was all right, having grown up on boats, but Lucca looked positively green.

Jack Winger was our captain, an older, potbellied man with a face reddened from years of fishing. On the way, fog rolled in, making it hard to see, but Jack didn’t seem bothered. He told us what he knew about Silas Livingston’s predicament. He had fallen several days ago and had been outside all this time, unable to get himself indoors because of his injuries. Moore Island’s dairy farmer brought milk and cheese to the lighthouse once a week and had discovered him near the woodpile, curled up like a bug and moaning in pain. Several of the islanders had carried him into the lighthouse and put him to bed, but by then infection had already taken hold.

“We ain’t doctors, but the women here know a fever just by feeling a forehead,” Jack said. “And Silas has a bad one.”

“Do you know how he fell?” Lucca asked.

“Well, he’s been known to drink a touch,” Jack said.

Lucca nodded, as if he’d expected that answer. I supposed people who injured themselves because of over-imbibing were not unique to our islands.

Finally, we arrived at Moore Island. There was no marina or dock on this remote, sparsely populated island, thus we were forced to traipse through the shallow water to the rocky beach. From there, we hiked through a wooded

area that smelled of damp earth and pine.

Situated north of Whale Island, there were only a dozen families who mostly fished and farmed the rich soil of Moore Island to stay alive.

Jack passed us off to a younger version of himself, his son, who took us the rest of the way to the lighthouse in a wagon pulled by one bored, sullen donkey. An icy wind blew hard and slanted rain seemed to slice through the air to sting my cheeks. This was no ordinary sprinkle but a nasty storm that made the trees sway and what was left of the fall leaves be yanked from their branches.

Lucca and I sat in the back seat of the wagon. I shook from the cold. Wading into the water had soaked my stockings, boots, and most of my skirt, which now hung twisted and heavy around my ankles. Next to me, Lucca's body radiated heat, even though I'm sure he was as cold as I. Inching ever closer until we were pressed together, I took comfort in his warmth. "Do you mind?" I twisted slightly to speak into his ear.

"Mind what?"

"That I'm so close to you?" My teeth chattered, and it took much effort to grind them into submission.

"I'm grateful for it. For you. May I put my arm around you?"

"Yes, please."

Lucca wrapped his arm around my shoulders, his hand on the crease of my coat near my upper arm. "We make heat between us, yes?"

"Yes." In more ways than one. Whatever that meant.

You know what it means, I told myself. *Deny it all you want*. There was heat between us regardless of the weather. How was it possible that I craved his touch when he was supposed to be my nemesis?

Darkness had already set in, and the lantern tied to the front of the wagon did little to shed light on our path. I was an island girl and not afraid of nature, but the combination of the weather and the lack of light made it easy to envision the eyes of creatures watching us as we passed.

By the time we reached the lighthouse, I was soaked through. Lucca, I assumed, was the same.

Billy said his wife, Nora, was inside with Silas, keeping a watch on him until we got there.

"We'll send her out," I said. "Won't be long."

"I appreciate that," Billy said. "My mother's looking after the young 'un, and who knows what trouble she's caused her."

“Will you come by in the morning?” I asked. “We’ll plan to stay the night.”

“Yes, I’ll come after breakfast. There should be supplies in Silas’s cupboards and icebox. I usually bring them out to him once a month.”

“Thanks, Billy. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Much obliged to both of you.”

Lucca and I ran through the rain to the front entrance of the lighthouse. Shrugging off our wet coats, we headed up the skinny staircase to the living quarters. I’d been in the lighthouse on Whale Island many times, but not this one. As far as I knew, Silas Livingston had never needed a nurse. We looked quickly around at the rustic, makeshift kitchen. The wood cooking stove was cold. A pot of beans in a pan had obviously been abandoned when Silas hadn’t returned and were now dry and charred black. The smell of burned food lingered in the tiny space. I’d come down and clean after we looked at Silas.

We climbed the skinny staircase without a word between us. Lucca’s posture was stiff, as was mine. Tension clenched the muscles in my stomach. As a nurse, one of my strengths was my instincts. Right now they were telling me we were about to enter a dire situation. The fact that he was alive at all after a fall like that was miraculous. Could we hope for another one, or would we lose him tonight? I greatly feared the latter.

Nora, Billy’s wife, was with Silas when we arrived, sitting in a rocking chair and rolling a cloth into a spiral between white-knuckled fingers. The patient was in his bed, groaning in pain and delirious, given the incoherent babbling coming from his mouth. Inside the room, the air felt dense and stuffy, scented with the smell of camphor and human body odor coming from Mr. Livingston.

“He’s been speaking nonsense since we found him,” Nora said. “I didn’t know what to do but pray. Is he dying, Miss Ella?” Her gaze swept over Lucca. “Who’s this now?”

“This is Dr. Coletti,” I said. “He’s just arrived on Whale Island to open a medical practice.”

“You’re working for him, then?” Nora asked, glancing at Lucca with suspicion and possible hostility in her eyes.

“She’s working side by side with me,” Lucca said. “Partners.”

“I see,” Nora said. “You know how loved she is here? You best treat her right.”

“I’m starting to get a picture, yes,” Lucca said, amusement playing at his lips.

“She saved me and my baby,” Nora said. “I was sure to die, and my sweet baby girl too.”

Nora was an angular little thing with a long, thin face and large wide-spaced eyes. I’d met her a few years back when I’d been called to the island to assist in the birth of her first child. By the time I’d arrived, Nora had been in labor for seventeen hours without much progress. I could tell by touching her belly that the baby’s head was large and possibly too big to pass through her narrow hips. I’d used a technique of various oils to relax her perineum and a kind of hypnosis in combination with an herbal concoction made of chamomile, lavender, and lemon balm that I spread over her neck and chest. Once I had her taking in and releasing deep breaths, I’d been able to lull her into a more relaxed state. Often I found first-time mothers to be so tense that they could not dilate as quickly as they should. My homespun remedies worked well for Nora. All was well in the end, and they’d named the baby girl Ella. That had made me feel a little too proud of myself.

“I have to get home,” Nora said. “Ella’s probably given my mother-in-law one of those headaches she gets.”

We thanked her. She promised to return in the morning to see if we needed anything. “And Billy made sure the light was on up above. In this storm, a ship would need it.”

“No one’s out in this, I hope,” I said.

“Let’s pray you’re right,” Nora said before leaving us to our work.

Lucca started examining Silas while I looked about to see what we could use to help clean him and cool his feverish skin. An infection, I assumed, had caused the fever as his body fought furiously to survive. The stove in the living room had been loaded with logs and stoked, probably by Billy, so I put a pot of water on it to boil. I’d worry about the kitchen later. I found cloths and a bar of homemade soap in the drawer downstairs. By the time I returned, Lucca had taken Mr. Livingston’s flannel shirt off, revealing terrible bruising on one side of his body, where he must have fallen.

“His left leg’s broken, and the right one has a terrible gash that’s become infected,” Lucca said. “He was outside in the elements for days, so it’s no surprise. I’m fairly certain he has broken a few, if not all, of his ribs. He started to scream when I touched his abdomen. Possible internal bleeding from God knows what. He has a fever of a hundred and four. I don’t know. It

may be too late to save him. If we'd gotten to him sooner, maybe, but I'm not hopeful. Not at all."

After bringing up the pot of hot water, I wiped the poor man's forehead, taking in his bushy white eyebrows and bulbous nose, and spoke soothingly to him. Lucca had morphine in his medicine bag, which he administered to him for the pain. Soon, the medicine took effect, and Mr. Livingston calmed. We took off his pants as gently as we could. I washed him with soap and more of the warm water, removing mud from the creases on his neck and scrubbing his leg clean in preparation for a plaster cast while Lucca cleaned and bandaged the gash on the other leg. Then I helped prepare plaster from supplies in my own medical bag. I would not be able to do a surgery, but I'd fixed a lot of broken arms and a few legs in my day.

"We need to get him back to Whale Island," Lucca said after we were finished with his leg. "If any organs have been injured, I can't operate on him here. Not without a proper surgery. If we can get him through the night, we can take him back tomorrow. Until then, we need to keep him as comfortable and cool as possible. This fever has me worried. If it goes much higher, we'll lose him." He glanced at me, his dark eyes soft. "I know you know all this. I talk a lot when I'm nervous."

"It's all right." I placed my fingers on his forearm. "We're a team."

"Yes, thank goodness we're together. This is going to be a long night."

"I was thinking the same thing," I said.

For the next hour, I placed damp, cold cloths on his torso to keep the fever from getting any higher. Lucca maneuvered the broken bone into place, and then together, we put the plaster on, hoping we had it right despite the dim light.

The morphine kept our patient asleep and without pain. Outside, the weather continued to worsen, battering against the walls of the lighthouse with a ferocity I'd rarely seen on the islands. Kerosene lamps were our only light. During the time we'd worked on Silas, I'd forgotten how cold I was. The fire in the woodstove had helped to dry my dress somewhat. However, my boots and stockings were as damp as ever. With the way the rain had been falling on the way over, I doubted my change of clothes were dry, but they would be better than this.

Once we had him stabilized, I realized how hungry I was. We hadn't eaten since before we left for the Holdens' place. "Do you think he has any food here or just booze?" I asked Lucca.

He was at the window, looking out into the black night as the wind howled and shook the walls. I stifled a yelp at the sound of a cracking tree limb somewhere outside. I hated the dark, and it was made worse by the awful whistling sound. He turned slowly, his expression unreadable. “There should be. We can leave him for a moment to see what we can find.”

“I’d like to take off my wet boots and stockings,” I said. “And put them here near the woodstove to dry,” I said as I put several more logs into the fire and shut the door firmly. “And change into a different dress.”

“I’ll go downstairs and see what there is to cook up and give you some privacy while you do whatever it is you need to do.” Was it my imagination, or had a flush come to his cheeks?

I shivered, and this time it was not from the cold. My goodness. Where had that thought slid into my sinful mind?

I would be alone with him the entire night. In any other circumstance, it would be deemed inappropriate for a man and woman to be alone, but since we were professionals, no one would make a fuss. Not that I cared what people thought. Obviously. But I wouldn’t want my family to be embarrassed by anything I did.

“There was firewood by the cookstove,” I said. “Do you know how to make a fire?”

He looked at me with an expression of disbelief. “Believe me, Miss Ella Tutheridge. I know how to make a fire and keep it burning.”

I swallowed. *There was not a double meaning in his words, ninny*, I told myself. He was simply saying he knew how to light a fire. My sanity was surely slipping.

LUCCA

I found ample supplies downstairs in the kitchen, including a bin of potatoes, carrots, onions, and a strange-looking root vegetable I didn't recognize. In addition, there was flour and sugar and what appeared to be a sourdough starter. Silas Livingston was a bachelor who knew how to take care of himself. How else would he survive out here all alone?

Further investigation revealed a closet with several bottles of whiskey, perhaps the source of Silas Livingston's imminent demise. On the same shelf with the booze was a full bottle of maple syrup. Hadn't someone mentioned flapjacks today? Yes, David Holden had said he made them in his bachelor days. They would do the job tonight too. Syrup and melted butter over a hot mound of flapjacks was perfect for a time like this, fast and filling.

I found a bowl of eggs in the icebox. Were there chickens? We would have to explore that in the morning, weather permitting. If they survived the night.

I hustled around, mixing the batter and placing lard into a cast-iron skillet. The burned beans had left a nasty smell, so I disposed of them in the trash bin. I'd take it out in the morning, as it was adding further to the stench of the place. Coffee grounds were an additional culprit. Given that there were a few spots of mold evident, it was my guess Silas had been outside for about three days. How had the man survived?

It must be a lonely existence out here, I thought, as I whipped together the batter. No wonder the man drank. I might lose my mind if I were to try even one winter. I'd enjoyed the noise and bustle of my Italian community back in Boston. Being with people from my native country gave me a sense of belonging. In addition, I was well-liked because of my medical abilities.

There was not a cut or illness that I couldn't tend to for free. In fact, many of the Italian immigrants had known about me and asked me for help.

I hadn't thought of it until just now, but that made my experiences like Ella's. The only difference? She didn't need money to survive. I, on the other hand, couldn't live like that forever, giving free medical care, even if my heart remained in that community. It was no surprise that immigrants from the same country flocked together. A sense of familiarity and belonging became even more important when away from your native country. Especially if there was no hope of returning to everything and everyone you'd loved.

Ella came down just as I was pouring batter into the hot pan. She'd fixed her hair, which had been wild and windblown when we arrived, and changed clothes.

"Was your spare dress dry?"

"By some miracle," she said. "Stockings too."

I looked down at her feet, encased in a new set of stockings. Her shirtwaist was fresh as well. It had been wise to bring our overnight bags.

"Are those pancakes?" Ella's face lit up.

I flipped one and then the other. "Breakfast for supper?"

"I've never in my life had breakfast for supper." She rubbed her hands together. "But I have a feeling I will enjoy it very much."

My God, she was a beauty. Smart as a whip and funny too. Such a pity that she was so adamantly opposed to marriage. She would have made some lucky fellow a very happy man. I wished it were me.

It was a shame that Mrs. Mantle had been wrong about this one.

When I had our flapjacks finished, I fried up a few of the eggs. "Do you think there are chickens out there?" I asked Ella.

"No, my guess is these are from Jack's farm. They gave me some as payment last time I came over here." She sat at the rough-hewn table and let out a long sigh. "Goodness me, I'm exhausted."

"It was the cold," I said, "Saps energy."

"Not to mention a very sick lighthouse keeper." She glanced around the kitchen. "Did you find anything to drink in those cupboards?"

"In there." I pointed toward the pantry. "Whiskey. I wouldn't mind a pull myself. Might warm us up."

"I have the kind of chill that comes from the inside," Ella said. "Good excuse for a drink if you ask me."

“How do you like your eggs?”

“Over medium, if you can.” Ella set a glass near me and poured one for herself before returning to the table. “Amelia says you can learn a lot about a person by how they like their eggs. What about you?”

“I like them cooked but runny.”

“I wonder what that means about us?” Ella asked, chuckling. “If only I’d asked her for more details. She loves food.”

“As do I.”

“You must miss the cooking from your village,” Ella said as I set a plate in front of her. “You’ll have to have Amelia over if you cook. She’d be delighted.”

“I’ll make it for all of you. Anytime you want.”

I joined her at the table, and we ate in silence, both of us half-starved after the day’s events. When Ella was finished, she pushed her plate aside. “That was the best breakfast for supper I ever had.”

“You just said you’d never had breakfast for supper.” I laughed, tickled by her adorable expression. Sometimes she looked so young that it seemed impossible she took care of so many people.

“I was thinking about something,” I said. “That we have in common.” I told her about how I’d cared for so many in my community back home. “We’re not so different, you and I.”

“I’m starting to understand the truth of that. We are a good pairing, don’t you think? Now that I’ve come to my senses?” Her cheeks flushed. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t long ago I was trying to figure out how to send you packing. I’ve gone from not wanting you here to seeing how much of an asset you can be to the people I care about. It’s good for the residents of the islands to have two of us. Especially you, actually. I’m nothing more than a self-taught fraud.”

“You are not a fraud. You’ve been doing the hard work all on your own for years now. How many days have you had that were similar to today?”

“A lot.”

“How many nights you’ve been up until dawn?” I asked.

“Many. Too many to count.”

“There you go. You’re not a fraud if you’ve done the work well, even without a formal certificate to say you’re qualified. Americans seem to crave

validation from outside sources.”

“We do? I never thought about it, but I suppose we’re a culture based on achievement.”

“Anyway, you can do almost everything I can,” I said. “And look a lot prettier doing so.”

She hesitated for a second, glancing down at her hands, a sliver of a smile played on those pretty lips. “Lucca Coletti, are you flirting with me?”

“No, simply stating a fact.” I returned her smile, unable to stop my treasonous heart from beating in double time.

“I’m all right, I guess,” Ella said. “Other than I’m a giant compared to other women. One time, at school, a boy said I had the shoulders of a man. That hurt my feelings something terrible. I’m ashamed to admit to a certain amount of vanity. Amelia and Faith are so slim and petite, and then here comes the giant oaf.”

“You are anything but an oaf. Who was this boy who made you feel bad? He should know that something he said had such a negative effect on a woman who should only see how extraordinary she is, not worry about her stature. I would like to wring his neck.”

She laughed. “His family was only here for a short time, so I’m afraid that would be impossible.”

“He probably had a crush on you,” I said. “Boys can act like complete imbeciles when they like a girl.”

“I don’t know, maybe. It seemed, instead, that he didn’t like me because I was strong-willed and opinionated and smarter than him. Men—or boys—don’t seem to care for strong women.”

“Ah, see, this is the truth of the matter. They are boys, not men, who feel threatened by assertive, smart women. A man sees an equal and wants to know her better. He might do whatever it took so that he was the one to whom she confides—tells all her secrets to.”

She gazed at me with warmth in her eyes, resting her chin in one hand. “You’re a charmer, aren’t you? Do women do whatever they can to be near you? Fight to get your attention?”

“I cannot say that they do,” I said.

Ella raised both eyebrows, shaking her head. “You’re a liar. There’s not a woman in the world who could resist you.”

If only that were true. If only it was Ella who couldn’t resist me. “As far as your shoulders are concerned, God made them wide so that you would

have the capacity to carry many burdens. He made you exactly right, and you honor him with the way you live in the world.”

Her eyes glistened. “That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. I shall never forget it.”

“All true.”

“And now I’ll give you a compliment to rival that one.” She paused, obviously enjoying the dramatic effect. “You were given too many gifts to narrow it down to only one, so I shall say only this. You were given intelligence and compassion, which makes you a good doctor. But it’s your tenacity I admire most. With all the obstacles that have come your way, you have stood tall and faced them with a strength of character I’ve not seen in many men. Or women.”

“I am not worthy of such praise.”

“I disagree.” She gestured toward her empty glass. “I’d like another, but I’m afraid my tongue will loosen even further.”

“It seems to bring down your inhibitions, so I’m all for it,” I said, pretending to reach for the bottle.

Ella’s thin eyebrows came together as she peered at me. “Why do you want that?”

I’d like them to do a lot more than that, I thought, then immediately warmed at the images that passed before my eyes. “I’d like to know more about you,” I said out loud. “In fact, everything.”

“There’s not that much to know. Not really.” She played with a knot on the tabletop, running her finger along the grooves. “I’m not very interesting.”

“I beg to differ. You might be the most fascinating woman I’ve ever met.”

“Surely not?” She laughed at the expression on my face. “You’re actually serious?”

“I would never joke about something so true. It would be cruel, would it not?”

“Of course, it makes me wonder what you see,” Ella said. “Being vain and all.”

“I can tell you without hesitation,” I said. “You do a job, a hard one, when you don’t have to. I find that a most interesting quality.”

“As I’ve said, seeing Rosemary die when she could have been saved with proper care affected me deeply.”

“Understandable,” I said.

“Her death turned my brother’s life upside down and left a little toddler to be raised without her mother. Seeing that, I thought to myself, if I could save one life it would be worth it. So I set to studying while spreading the word that I was available to help, no matter if they could pay or not. It took me two years of bookwork every day before I felt competent enough to diagnose more complicated cases. After a time, though, my confidence grew. Now you see before you a nurse almost as arrogant as a doctor.”

I laughed. “You’re not arrogant. Self-assured. I find it intoxicating in a woman.”

“It’s impossible not to like you, Lucca Coletti. And I really want to.”

“Want to or wanted to? Have you forgotten your contempt and now see what a grand person I am?”

Ella looked into my eyes. My thighs tightened in response.

“I do see you,” she said. “And wonder at times if you’re only a dream.”

“I’m real, I can assure you of that.” I held up my wrist and pretended to take my pulse. “Yes, still breathing.”

By now my glass was empty, but I didn’t pour another. Since I seldom drank, it went straight to my head, and I had to remember this was not a date but work. A man was fighting for his life upstairs, I thought guiltily, and I was here enjoying the company of a beautiful woman and forgetting all about him. “Should we check on Mr. Livingston?” I asked.

She blinked. “Goodness, I almost forgot why we were here. It’s such fun to talk to you.”

“I feel the same way.”

We got up simultaneously and washed up the dishes before heading up the skinny stairs to see our patient.

Our patient. I liked the sound of that.

I followed behind Ella, enjoying the sight of those broad shoulders she so despised. Women never understood their beauty or power. Men had done a good job making sure they didn’t. Regardless, I had no problem admitting that the woman before me was too good for me. Perhaps too good for the world. I shivered. *Please, don’t let that be a premonition.*

SILAS WAS STILL asleep and seemed to have regained a little color. I still felt

uncertain about whether he had internal bleeding but having cleaned out the gash in his leg, hopefully the infection wouldn't worsen and his fever would break.

"Goodness, is that a boat?" Ella asked.

I turned to find Ella at the window. "In this weather?"

"I thought I saw a boat. Wait for the light to come back. Yes, there. Do you see?"

Squinting, as if that would help me see anything in the dark during a torrential downpour, I peered out toward the water. Sure enough, a small fishing boat bobbed up and down in the unforgiving waves and wind. I made out three human forms. Why were they out in this storm?

Then, without warning, a giant wave broke across the side of the boat, sending it careening into the jagged rocks at the base of the shore. I gasped in horror as the boat capsized, its three passengers tumbling into the black water.

"We have to help them," Ella said, shouting. "They'll drown."

I nodded, not really thinking especially clearly, having no experience with being a lighthouse keeper and with the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

We each grabbed a lantern and hustled back down the stairs and out into the night. The rain stung my cheeks, and the scent of the sea was strong in my nose, as if it were an angry animal spewing poison. We ran over the flattened grass toward the water. In our haste, neither of us had put on our coats, although they were still wet from our earlier excursion and wouldn't have been much use to us. I swiped water from my lashes and the tip of my nose, but a good amount was still gathering in my shirt collar.

Fortunately, the ground was flat, and we reached the cliff in no time. It took a moment to spot a set of crude stairs that led down to the shore. Feeling a sense of deep urgency, Ella and I sprinted down the steps to a skinny piece of beach not far from where the boat had capsized. Now, the fishing vessel, in several pieces from the force of the impact, was on its way to the bottom of Puget Sound.

The beam of light from the lighthouse made it so we could see better than I'd have expected. Frantically, we searched for a sign of the men we'd seen. If they couldn't swim, they would be in trouble. Still, the boat had been close to shore. Surely they could make it to safety?

Ella tugged on my arm. "There. Do you see him?"

Indeed, what appeared to be a human was flailing about in the water, then disappeared under the surface. "I'll bring him in," I shouted over the sound of the wailing wind.

The chill of the water was so shocking I felt as if my heart might give out right then and there. I could hardly see a thing without the lantern even with the light from the lighthouse. However, to my surprise, the water was not deep here. I could walk out to him. He'd swum away from the boat until he could touch the sand. But why wasn't he coming in? When I reached him, he was standing, looking around wildly. "Sir, are you all right?"

His head whipped in my direction. "My boy. I can't find my boy." He hadn't been drowning. He'd been looking for his boy.

My blood chilled further. A boy. God help us.

ELLA

While Lucca swam to assist the man in the water, I continued to scan the horizon, hoping to see the other two men. There. Something moved down at the end of the skinny shore. Was it a person? I started running, tripping several times from the slippery pebbles under my feet. When I reached him, he was lying on his back. I fell onto my knees and pressed my hands into his chest. He was a young man, perhaps even a teenager. And he was breathing.

“Sir, are you all right?”

“Yes. Cold.” He was shaking from chill and shock. “My dad. He’s still out there.” The boy sat up as if he were going to go back into the water. It was then I realized who he was. This was Roddy Fields. It was his father who was out there. Why in God’s name had they been out on their boat in this storm?

“Lucca’s got him.” I stood, gesturing wildly to the two men.

Lucca appeared to see me and understand because he turned back to the man, and they started to swim to shore. As they drew closer, I realized they had not been out very far. Everything seemed different in a storm at night.

“He’s alive?” Roddy asked.

“Yes, yes. He’s bringing him in now. Please, just rest. We’ll take you up to the lighthouse to get warm.”

“Miss Ella, is that you?” Roddy asked, seeming to truly take me in for the first time.

“Yes, I’m here helping the lighthouse keeper.”

Suddenly I remembered there was a third man. “But was there another person with you?”

Roddy's face hardened. "That pirate man from the dock. He was why we were out there."

"What? You were kidnapped?" I asked.

"Yes, at gunpoint," Roddy said.

I couldn't ask anything further because Lucca and Mark stumbled toward us. The men hugged, holding on to each other as they'd probably wished they could when they were in the water.

"Sebastian Wilkes forced them out into the water by gunpoint," I said to Lucca. "That's why they were out in this weather."

"Did you see where he went? When the boat crashed?" Lucca asked without missing a beat. He was in crisis mode, I realized. A doctor would be trained for emergencies such as this. A new admiration piled on top of that which I already felt.

The men were shaking their heads.

"He was drunk as could be and wanted us to take him to Moore Island," Roddy said, teeth chattering. "Something about treasure from a shipwreck off Moore Island."

"We told him, just take ours, but he made us come with him," Mark said. "Lot of luck that did him."

"When the water got choppy, and the wind blew us all around, we got disoriented," Roddy said.

I wanted to ask more questions, but we were all shivering. Seeing no sign of Sebastian, I suggested we go up to the lighthouse and get warm. And safe. We would lock the door the moment we got inside. That said, it was more than likely he drowned if he was as drunk as Mark said. "We can look for him from the watchtower," I said.

Bedraggled and shaking with cold, the four of us managed to get up the steps to the cliff and then into the warmth of the lighthouse kitchen. I had the men take off their heavy fishing jackets and hang them near the stove to dry. However, they were still drenched from head to toe. I was able to find some clean clothes in the dresser and begged Silas for his forgiveness before I handed them to the men. "Go down to the kitchen and put these on. I'm going to change up here."

Fortunately, my dress from earlier had dried by the fire. Off with one and into the other, I thought, as I tugged off my wet stockings.

By the time I got downstairs, Roddy and Mark had collapsed into the chairs near the stove in the kitchen. I draped blankets over their shoulders and

poured Mark a generous whiskey. They seemed pretty well, considering what they'd just gone through. "Are you hungry?" I asked. "We have some leftover flapjacks, and I can scramble up some eggs."

"Maybe later," Roddy said. "Right now, I feel filled with seawater."

"I'm too tired to eat," Mark said.

We would need to sleep at some point, but the men were too shaken up at the moment. Lucca, in the meantime, had put on his change of clothes and was already checking in on Silas.

Good Lord. What a night. I guess I didn't need to worry about the two of us being alone here without supervision.

Lucca returned, and we sat with Mark and Roddy to learn more about what had happened to them. "We were down at the dock getting the boat prepared for the storm when that lunatic jumped onto the boat, waving a gun around and telling us to get in and take him to Moore Island."

"To find this shipwreck with jewels and treasures," Roddy said. "He'd been going on about it the other day, but none of us paid any attention."

Mark nodded, then continued the story. "That was the whole reason he'd come to the islands. The fool had heard about a ship that sank back in the 1800s not far from here. Apparently, he took that heap of a boat of his out to find this sunken ship. He didn't get far. His boat started to leak, and the whole thing's at the bottom of the Puget Sound now. I wished it would have taken him with it, but turns out he can swim."

"Is that true?" Lucca asked. "About the shipwreck."

"I doubt it," I said. "I think it's more folklore than anything."

"I've heard tell of it before," Mark said. "But none of us believe it to be true. We've fished these waters for a long time and never once saw any hint of a sunken ship."

"Wilkes is not right in the head," Roddy said. "I swear I thought he was going to shoot us. The way he was waving that thing around, it could have gone off at any time."

"Because of the rain, no one was down at the docks to see us," Mark said. "Or someone might have sent for the sheriff. And now I've lost my boat." He buried his face in his hands and let out a deep, heart-wrenching sigh. "How will I make a living?"

"How awful," I said, feeling sick to my stomach. Why did these horrible people keep coming to our islands and messing up our peaceful existence?

I glanced at Lucca, who returned my sympathetic gaze.

Mark raised his head from his hands and looked over at me. "Lottie must be worried sick. Like I said, we got kind of turned around but finally figured out which direction to go. We saw the lighthouse, of course, and knew we were almost there. What would happen once we arrived was unknown, of course. But the whole time I was praying we would survive the storm."

"Then this big wave came, and before I knew what was happening, we were crashing into those rocks," Roddy said. "I thought we were done for. But I swam to shore, hoping Pa was doing the same."

"When we got separated, I thought he went under," Mark said. "I was frantic, trying to find him in that dark water."

"Thank God you're both all right," I said. "We'll get you another fishing boat, Mark. We can raise money somehow. We take care of one another here."

"You think?" Mark said, sounding hopeful. "Would folks do that for me?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it," Ella said.

"What are *you* doing here, Miss Ella?" Roddy asked. "I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought I was dreaming for a minute."

I explained about Silas and how he'd fallen and that Billy and Nora had sent his father over to fetch us. "We did what we could, but we need to get him back to Whale Island the minute this storm breaks. We'll get you two back to Lottie, too. I'm sorry she has to endure a night of not knowing what happened to you."

"She'll inform the sheriff," Mark said. "After seeing our boat was gone."

"Poor Ma." Roddy rubbed his cheeks as if they hurt. "She'll be crying all night."

"We'll head out as soon as we can," Lucca said. "But for now, we should all try to get some sleep. There's only one bed and Silas is in it, so you two will need to sleep in the living room. I will sleep on the floor in Silas's room in case he wakes up in pain." He turned to me. "There's a small area on the very top that has enough room for one person to lie down. I think it will be all right for you."

I thanked him for the thoughtful gesture. My only problem now? I had to use the bathroom, and the only one available was outside.

"Does anyone else need to use the toilet?" I asked. "If so, there's an outhouse placed back a bit from the lighthouse."

"I'll go with you," Lucca said. "If there's a dangerous man with a gun out

there, I don't want you going alone."

Thank the good Lord he was a gentleman. My fear of the dark flummoxed me enough, but there might be a killer on the loose.

Lucca offered his arm on our way to the outhouse, and I took it, grateful for the support and warmth of him. And the rain had stopped. Even the wind had died down. How could it have changed this much in the time it took us to get the men back from the beach?

"The rain has stopped," Lucca said, echoing my thoughts. "How odd."

"Yes, it feels like a different world entirely."

"The day has been full of surprises," he said.

"I have a confession to make," I said, speaking low. "I'm afraid of the dark."

"Are you? I'd not thought you were afraid of anything. From my observations today anyway, it seems you're tougher than most, including me."

"I must do a good job of pretending then," I said. "I've been scared the entire time since we got on the boat to come over here. I'll add, as well, that my patients do not always give me such adventures as they have today."

"I would hope not," Lucca said, chuckling. "I'm exhausted. I shall fall asleep on the floor or wherever with ease."

We reached the latrine, and Lucca left me alone to do whatever it was I had to do. Blushing with embarrassment at having to use the bathroom with a man so near, I rushed in and got it over with as quickly as I could. Feeling much relief and a strong desire to wash my hands, I sprang out of the wooden structure as though I was attached to a coiled spring, gripping the lantern with both hands for fear I'd drop it.

Light from Lucca's lamp filtered through a clump of trees. I called out to him, and he came running, the light from his lamp creating a rainbow effect.

"You'll be all right if I use it?" Lucca asked. "Just stay right here. I won't be a moment."

"Yes, fine. Do hurry."

"I will." He sprinted toward the outhouse, which smelled as foul as one would expect. I put a hand over my nose as I waited, not wanting to stray too far. As I stood there, the noises of the night seemed perfectly natural. That's what I told myself, anyway, when the sounds of snapped twigs and dried leaves sent a spasm of fear down my spine.

After what seemed like ages but was really only a few minutes, Lucca

returned to me, his smile reassuring despite the lantern giving him a ghostly appearance. How was it I felt such comfort with this man I barely knew?

We walked back to the lighthouse in silence, our lamps illuminating only several feet in front of us. Once inside the warm kitchen, Lucca suggested he gather water from the well. We'd used almost all of the water in the jugs on the counter. I would not take for granted our indoor plumbing and electricity ever again. One seldom realizes how easy things are until they're not.

I washed my hands with what was left of the water while Lucca went out to the well carrying both jugs. Should I have gone with him? He was so good to have offered. We were both dead on our feet. The idea of him out there alone sent further shots of cold fear through my veins.

When Lucca returned, I almost hugged him from relief. "Thank you," I murmured instead. "I was worried."

"Anything for you." He grinned, looking utterly done in.

"Let's sleep," I said.

He nodded, and we headed back up the stairs. Both Mark and Roddy were already fast asleep on the floor, both snoring softly.

"You know," I said casually in a whisper, as if I just thought of it, "wouldn't it be better if we both slept in the bedroom with Silas? In case he needs anything, there are two of us."

"You mean for us to sleep together on the floor?" Despite his whispered reply, he sounded so scandalized I almost laughed.

"Two professionals, caring for a patient. What could be wrong with that? And we'll keep it to ourselves so no gossip will arise. Not that I care particularly what people think of our sleeping arrangements."

"Or what they think of pretty much anything else?"

"Yes, that too." I chuckled as I followed Lucca into the bedroom.

Silas was sleeping peacefully when we entered the room. While Lucca administered another dose of morphine to him, I made a bed on the floor from quilts and additional pillows I found in the closet. I'd been in every drawer and closet in Silas's entire house during my time here. It was an invasion of his privacy, but desperate times meant new rules. Including, it seemed, sleeping on the floor with a man.

Well, we had our clothes on, I thought, justifying it to myself. There's nothing wrong whatsoever with two colleagues sleeping next to their patient. Their very sick patient.

I took down my hair in the light from the lantern and settled onto the

floor, wishing I had my toothbrush.

A few minutes later, Lucca joined me on the floor, keeping a good foot between us. He looked over at me, his cheek resting on his hand. “Your hair.”

“What about it?” I asked, matching his hushed tones and self-consciously grabbing a swath that hung over my shoulder. “Have I something in it?”

“No, not that. It’s simply spectacular.”

Nothing special about it, I thought. Long and dark and, yes, shiny. I was lucky that way, mostly because Lizzie had come up with this concoction I used once a week that made it soft and glistening. “Thank you. By the end of the day, my head aches from having it in the bun.”

“I can imagine it would.” He sat up and reached for the lamp. “You ready? Shall I blow it out?”

I nodded and closed my eyes, wishing we could keep the light on but knowing it was better to snuff it out and embrace the darkness. Lucca was here, I reminded myself. *Nothing can harm us. Unless the criminal is lurking outside.*

“Did you lock the door?” I whispered, jerking up. With the light from the lantern on top of the lighthouse, I could actually make out Lucca’s form. He was lying on his side, both hands tucked under his chin like a little boy. Adorable.

“Yes. Double latched.” I heard him yawn and took pity on him by not asking anything else.

Sleep should have come immediately, given all of the strenuous activity of the day, but for some reason, I felt wide awake with jangled nerves and a heightened sense that sleeping next to a man gave me. Lucca. Not just any man. The man who made my skin burn and ache for his touch.

What would it be like to sleep in a bed with a man every night? The dark wouldn’t seem as frightening. That was a positive. But I’d still have to wake up in the daylight and contemplate the rest of the day with a man who most likely would tell me what to do and how to do it.

What if it were a man like Lucca? He would respect me. Admire me even, if Lucca’s words earlier today were true. Which they seemed to be. We had performed together under a lot of stress these last few hours, and not once had I sensed any disrespect or impatience directed my way. We made a great team. My brothers had both told me on separate occasions that they felt a sense of teamwork when paired with Amelia and Faith that seemed right and natural. The way I was starting to feel about Lucca.

No, no, no.

What if it *were* Lucca? Not just a man *like* Lucca. Again with the intrusive questions. My mind was annoyingly whirling with all kinds of accusations tonight. *I've turned on myself*, I thought.

I rolled over to my other side, trying to get comfortable. The floor was not like my mattress at home, plus I was cold. I'd not gotten warm after our last trek out in the elements, and now I couldn't seem to stop shivering. What I wouldn't do for some of Lucca's body heat. It was a known fact, medically speaking, that shared body warmth kept people from freezing to death in some of the iciest conditions.

I would just have to put all those notions aside and sleep. Tomorrow promised to be as tricky as today, and I needed my wits about me.

Listening for the sounds of Lucca's deep breathing that would indicate he'd fallen asleep, I heard nothing. Not a breath or movement was coming from over there. I wanted to ask him if he were still awake, but what purpose would that serve? This overwhelming sense of loneliness had joined my utter chill, and a wretchedness seemed to take over all my senses. "Lucca," I whispered, almost as if my voice were coming from somewhere other than my own mouth.

"Si?"

"Are you awake?"

A chuckle, then rustling as he moved about. "Yes. You?"

"Yes."

"We should be asleep by now," Lucca said, still whispering. It seemed half of our conversations this evening had been whispers and the other half shouting.

"I know," I said. "But I can't fall asleep."

"It's been a war today. We're overly stimulated."

"Is that your medical opinion?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

"I'm really cold," I said.

"Me too."

"Have you heard about how good shared body heat can be for surviving freezing to death?" I asked in my best nurse tone.

"We're not freezing, just cold." Another almost silent chuckle, more of a chortle deep in his chest.

That chest. How I would like to explore every muscle with my fingertips.

What was possessing me? The devil, perhaps?

“However, if you’re that cold, I would be honored to offer myself to you,” Lucca whispered. “I have been accused of running hot in the past.”

In the past? By other women? Was he not the innocent I was? Probably not. Men never were, it seemed. Not that I knew much about relations between men and women.

I knew the mechanics, of course, having studied humans scientifically speaking. I’d delivered dozens of babies, thus I knew the consequence of such actions. But what of the emotional aspects? What of love? And lovemaking? Married couples were supposed to be that way with each other. I’d never thought much about it, having no wish to marry and a moral compass that would never allow me to do such things outside of a marital bed. I was an outlandish woman when it came to my career, but I would never compromise myself that way and bring shame to my brothers and Mother. In addition, not to be arrogant in any way, but the girls on the island looked up to me. I had to be a good role model for them.

So why was I lying here in the dark with Lucca Coletti and wishing to inch close enough that he could pull me into his arms? Only to get warm so that I could sleep. That was all. Yes, sleep. To slumber and rest my weary soul. My only wish, I told myself. Purely innocent.

“I’d like to be near you and borrow your heat,” I said. “If you could bear it?”

Silence for a moment before the floor creaked, and I felt the nearness of him. His breath tickled my neck when he spoke close to my ear. “I can think of worse burdens than providing comfort to you.” He drew even closer, and despite the dark, I could sense where he was, including that his arm had now pulled me close to his chest. “Sleep here, like this.” He rested his chin on the top of my head. “I’ll keep you warm until you fall asleep.”

“What about after that?” I asked, my eyelids suddenly heavy.

“I shall be here when you wake.”

And with that, I drifted off to sleep.

LUCCA

The most beautiful woman in the world was asleep next to me. In a billion years, I would not have predicted any part of this long, strange day. From now forward, I thought, I would think of this day as the beginning of a new life. A day that changed everything.

Not only had Ella accepted me as a colleague, but I sensed her growing affection toward me as well.

What was this between us? A comfort and companionship of which I'd not thus experienced. She was simply perfect. To me, anyway. I'd thought we would be enemies. Only yesterday, that seemed to be the direction we were going, and yet today, we were friends. Now we were sleeping together for warmth. Or so we said anyway. I knew it was an excuse to be close, as the room was cold but not frigid. We had quilts and even pillows. Still, she had asked me to hold her, and how could I say no? There was nothing wrong with it. Not at all. We were two doctors, essentially anyway, taking care of a patient. It was absolutely necessary that we stay in this room looking after Silas. What if he woke in pain again, for example? It might take two of us to subdue him and administer more morphine.

My lids were now heavy. Holding her, smelling her hair, which somehow held the scent of lilacs despite everything we'd done that day. Had Mrs. Mantle been right about us? Was Ella my true destiny? Were we the perfect match? What would Ella think of such an idea?

She would run.

That's what a woman like Ella would do at any hint of commitment. She'd been clear the last few days. Marriage was not for her. I was not for her.

Why, then, did it feel so right having her asleep next to me? Why, then, did she ask to be?

Tiredness overtook me finally, and I drifted away to the land of slumbers and dreams.

I dreamt of my mama and home. We were sitting at the table in our tiny kitchen. Mama was at the stove, waving her wooden spoon, dramatically gesturing toward the window. "You must go, Lucca. You know you must."

"You went away, Mama. You're no longer here. I want you to come home."

"I can't. You know that." Mama tutted and returned to the stove. The pot of sauce began to boil over, dripping down the sides and onto the cookstove.

"Mama, the sauce." But she was gone, leaving nothing but an empty space.

I called out to her but to no avail. Then I sensed movement at the doorway. Turning, expecting it was Mama, but no. Ella stood there. She wore only a thin nightgown, and her hair spilled over her shoulders.

"Ella? How did you get here?"

"I swam."

"Are you cold?"

"I came to save the sauce. Do you see how it's boiling over?" Ella asked. "It needs your attention. Your patience."

"How do I make it stop?"

"Take it from the stove." She strode across the kitchen and picked up the pan using bare hands. Then she screamed, and the pot fell to the floor, spilling sauce all over the tiles.

I woke with a start and a yelp. Ella, who was now asleep next to me rather than on my chest, stirred. In our sleep, we must have adjusted to our normal positions. She slept on her side, as I did. Her hair splayed over the pillow like silk in the light that drifted in through the window. I had no idea what time it was, but it was still dark outside. From what I could tell, the rain had returned and ran down the windows in tiny rivers.

"You all right?" Ella asked. "What is it?"

I'd wakened her with all my thrashing about.

"Yes, fine. I woke from a nightmare, that's all," I said.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Her voice, thick with sleep, was delicious in my ear.

"No, not now. Go back to sleep."

She nestled closer, and I pulled her back toward me, this time wrapping both arms around her as she curled her body against mine. We fit so well. As if we were meant to be.

“I was dreaming, too,” Ella said. “I was in jail again.”

Again? I’d have to ask her more about that in the morning.

Thankfully, I fell back to sleep and didn’t dream again, waking to the light of day feeling much refreshed. The storm had passed, and now the sun shone. How was it possible?

For a moment, I lay there, not sure where I was, then saw Ella still asleep next to me. Her breathing steady, and her face calm and peaceful. She was a vision of womanhood. Such a nice combination of assuredness and femininity. She was everything I could ever hope for in a mate.

Did I have any hope at all? Would she fall in love with me little by little if I were patient? Was that what my mother had been trying to tell me in the dream? Patience had never been my strongest quality. However, if patience meant I could win Ella’s heart over time, then I would wait forever. This woman was my destiny, the reason I came out here. Perhaps, even why I came to America. It was all starting to unfold before me. Would Ella feel the same way, given time?

Yes, I was a romantic. I’d been that way all my life. Maybe I was only imagining the connection between us, as if we’d known each other for a lifetime already. Or maybe I wasn’t.

The boiling pot spilling over the tiles played before my eyes. What had that meant? Was it simply a reflection of how Ella made my blood boil? Whatever it meant, I vowed to myself to keep a steady head but a hopeful heart. How else was a man to convince this lively woman asleep next to me that I was her one and only and as important to her as her work and family?

Would she see that I was her family?

Because as ridiculous as it sounded, even to my own romantic ears, I was supposed to be here for her and she for me. A match? I’d not have believed it if I’d not experienced the last few days. Mrs. Mantle was very good at her job.

OUR PATIENT MADE it through the night. Sadly, an hour or so later, as I tried to

figure out how to get him out of the bed and over to Whale Island without hurting him further, he stopped breathing. The infection had killed him.

Billy had already come to take us back to Whale Island when I went down to tell everyone the sad news. They were sitting around the kitchen table finishing up a breakfast of scrambled eggs and flapjacks.

“He didn’t make it,” I said, voice cracking.

Ella’s hands flew to her mouth. “No.”

“The infection, I think.” I sank into one of the chairs, suddenly weary. “I was worried he wouldn’t make it, and I was right.”

“You did everything you could, I’m sure,” Billy said. “You mustn’t blame yourself.”

“We’ll have to make arrangements,” I said.

“The missus and I’ll take care of him,” Billy said. “He wanted to be buried in our little cemetery not far from here. Despite some shortcomings, he was a good man and one of us. We’ll make sure he rests in peace.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Real sorry to hear about your boat, Mark,” Billy said. “Such a shame.”

“Thanks.” Mark seemed cheered this morning. Ella had spent most of breakfast talking about how she would throw a fundraising party. “Miss Ella here thinks she can help us get a new one.”

“I saw the wreckage down at the shore,” Billy said. “It’s a miracle you two lived.”

“I wish we knew with certainty what happened to Wilkes,” Ella said. “If he made it, he’s here on the island, and who knows what trouble he could cause?”

“If he drowned, he’ll wash up,” Billy said. “Unless he got tangled in some seaweed. That happens here. Folks diving for treasure in that shipwreck that probably never even existed. People have the strangest notions sometimes.”

It did make me wonder about the folktale, though. Could there be any truth to it? Or was it one of those stories that had grown into a myth?

When we arrived down at the shore, the four of us thankful to be going home, Billy had put a board from his boat to the beach so we didn’t have to wade through the water. I was not sorry. I’d had enough of wet clothes to last a lifetime.

“What is that?” Ella asked, pointing to a leather-bound book that appeared to have washed to shore.

“I know what it is,” Roddy said. “That’s the notebook Wilkes was always carrying around.”

“He told us all the clues to the sunken ship were in there,” Mark said, scorn in his voice. “Darned fool.”

I bent down to pick it up. Waterlogged now, it wouldn’t be any use to anyone, but I’d take it back with us anyway. Maybe something had survived. As I straightened, I saw out of the corner of my eye what I thought was a harbor seal. When I turned to look, I gasped. It wasn’t a seal. It was a body.

“Look there,” I said, practically shouting.

They all turned to see what I had already seen. Sebastian Wilkes’s drowned soul. I guess that answered that question.

I turned to Ella. “That’s that, I guess.”

“Yes. Does it make me sound awful to say I’m glad?” Ella asked.

“Not at all. Especially after what he did to you,” I said.

After that, we all piled into Billy’s boat. He said he’d take care of burying two men later that day and for us to all go home and get some rest.

I would rest easier knowing that Wilkes was not on Moore Island terrorizing people.

BY THE TIME we arrived home, Ella and I couldn’t help but laugh at the bedraggled state of our appearance. Our clothes, muddy and misshapen, clung to our skin. Neither of us had had a bath, and we needed one desperately. Yet somehow, Ella had never looked more beautiful with her disheveled hair and unwashed face. A smudge of mud on her left cheek made me wish to wipe it away with my thumb and follow it up with a kiss.

Instead, we went inside, weary but grateful to be home. Hudson was just coming down the stairs when we arrived in the foyer.

“What happened to you two?” Hudson asked.

“It’s a long story,” Ella said. “But we brought you something.” She pulled out the notebook from her overnight bag. “Have you ever heard the story about the sunken ship off Moore Island?”

“Sure I have.” Hudson took the notebook from Ella’s outstretched hand.

She briefly explained where the notebook had come from. “I thought you might find something interesting in there. Surprisingly, some of it is still

readable, despite being in the water. It has some kind of wax coating or something that preserved the pages. There's a map in there, supposedly where the ship sank."

"Interesting." Hudson actually seemed engaged. I'd not seen him that way before. "I get to keep it?"

"Happy birthday," Ella said. "A few months early. And now we must bathe."

Ella and I excused ourselves, heading up the stairs. "I'll see you later?" I asked.

"Yes, after a bath."

"Can you imagine anything better?"

She smiled, shaking her head. "I can't. But what an adventure we had." Sobering, she looked down at her ruined boots. "I'm sorry we lost him."

"Me too. But we did our best."

"All right, then. I'm off." Ella looked at me with her serious blue eyes. "Thank you for being by my side through all of this."

"It's my pleasure."

Minutes later, I was in the tub. The bath was unparalleled. Nothing had felt as good as scrubbing the dirt from my body with warm water and soap. Other than holding Ella in my arms, that is.

After I had cleaned up properly, I went downstairs, hoping for a meal. Raymond suggested heading to the kitchen. "Mrs. Halvorson will take care of you," Raymond said. "You must be hungry after your ordeal."

I was and took his advice. Mrs. Halvorson and her kitchen maid were both there. Mrs. Halvorson was kneading dough while Tilda cut carrots into half-inch slices.

"Can you spare something to eat?" I asked, sinking into a chair at the table.

"We have some soup left over from lunch and a slice of crusty bread," Mrs. Halvorson said.

"That sounds like just the thing."

Ella appeared a few minutes later and joined me at the table. Mrs. Halvorson and Tilda wanted to hear a full report of our adventures, which Ella and I told them between bits of bread and spoonfuls of heavenly split pea and ham soup. By the time we were done, Mrs. Halvorson was aghast, and Tilda looked as if she might burst into tears.

"Poor Mr. Livingston," Tilda said. "What a terrible way to go."

“We made him comfortable, at least,” Ella said. “So that his suffering wasn’t extended further. I can only imagine his despair, out there all alone.”

Mary and Lizzie came into the kitchen at the tail end of our stories, disappointed to have missed the details.

“We can tell you later,” Tilda said.

“Mary, how are you feeling these days?” I asked. “Since you gave up milk, are you better?”

“She’s stopped snoring completely,” Lizzie said before Mary could answer. “And look how much better her color is. Don’t you think?”

I had to agree. Her skin had cleared of blemishes, and her eyes were brighter. “I think my suspicions were correct. I’m sorry about the milk.”

“I don’t mind as much as I thought I would,” Mary said. “I feel so much better that I’m quite happy to stay away from the stuff.”

“Sometimes the very thing we think we want gives us the opposite of what we need,” Ella said in a pensive tone.

“Amen to that, dear,” Mrs. Halvorson said. “I wish more young people would realize that before they made a big mistake.”

“Like what?” Tilda asked. “What kind of mistakes?”

“Mostly, walking away from love when the perfectly smart thing would be is to stay put and accept it as the gift it is.”

Ella coughed. A bit of soup must have gone down the wrong tube. She got up from the table and went to the corner, still coughing as one does when that happens. I hurried over to her with a glass of water. When she was done, she took it from me and sipped cautiously. “Thank you. I don’t know how that happened.”

I glanced at Mrs. Halvorson. She returned my gaze and then shrugged sheepishly. Mrs. Halvorson wasn’t exactly subtle. I loved her for it.

After we finished eating, Ella suggested we go out to see how the Holdens were doing, and I agreed. As tired as I was, making sure the babies were thriving was more important than a nap.

But how I longed for a nap.

IN THE FIRST few weeks of December, Ella and I spent almost every day together. We started by making house calls together so that Ella could

introduce me. During these visits, she suggested the next time they needed help to come into the office. There were varied responses and levels of enthusiasm about this new idea.

Some seemed unbothered, agreeing easily. Others grumbled under their breath about convenience and how this would make seeing Ella much harder. She reassured those that she or I were available to come to their homes should they need it. Only a few said they were accustomed to Ella and didn't need a newfangled doctor telling them what's what. Or something to that effect anyway. Ella and I simply smiled politely, figuring folks would do what they were going to do, even if it didn't make sense.

We grew into a routine that suited me well. As far as I could discern, Ella felt the same. At the office, we became accustomed to our new surroundings and working together. After a week, it seemed as if we had always practiced medicine together. Each day brought new patients to our door.

During our house calls and between patients at the office, we talked all day long about everything. Our patients, stories from our pasts, hopes for the future. Yet in all the chatter, we never once mentioned how we felt about each other. We hadn't brought up the night we'd slept on the floor or how close we'd become that night.

I wanted to confess to her. Very much. At times, I thought words of love might spontaneously erupt from my mouth. There wasn't a minute during the day I didn't long to pull her into my arms and ask if I could kiss her. Just once, I thought. So that I could savor the memory every day for the rest of my life.

I was too shy to act. I couldn't risk losing her friendship if I was wrong that there was something special between us. It might be, I reasoned, that it was only I who felt this way. Unrequited love must surely be the worst kind of all.

Then, one day, Ella said something that shocked me to my very core.

We were driving home from another visit to the Holdens, who were doing well, and the babies grew a tiny bit bigger and stronger every day. Maddie had managed to feed them both with breast milk, which she was pleased over. Other than her exhaustion, the whole family was doing well. Each time we came, Ella brought something from Mrs. Halvorson, so we knew they were getting some good food. David had come to work at the estate in the barn and enjoyed lunch with the rest of the staff. I worried about Maddie out there alone with the babies with no one to assist her. Ella had the same worries and

decided we should lend some of our staff to them. Just until the babies were no longer nursing. Maddie had confessed that it seemed one of them was eating most hours of the day and night.

Thus, we sent one of the maids out to help a few days a week. Lizzie went on Mondays, Mary on Wednesdays, while Tilda took a Friday shift, preparing enough meals to get them through the weekend. When some of the ladies in town heard about Maddie's predicament, they organized a round-robin of assistants for Tuesday and Thursday.

All in all, Ella had handled everything magnificently, as she always did.

We stopped just before we reached the driveway, Ella pulling to the side of the road unexpectedly. She shut off the engine and turned toward me, her body shifting in the seat.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

She seemed kind of twitchy and pale, and her eyes were darting up and down and back and forth. "Yes, I'm fine. I mean, I think I am. I may be in the process of losing my mind."

"I doubt that," I said.

"You see, I've been thinking about something. It might sound ridiculous to you, but I'm going to say it anyway. I think Mother brought you here for purposes other than bringing a doctor to the island. I think she's matchmaking us. I don't know exactly how it works, but it has something to do with this Mrs. Mantle. When I suggested this idea to Amelia and Faith, they brushed it aside. Even though it seems even more likely since the two of them were essentially matched in the same way. I don't know how I didn't see it before." She stopped, her gaze intense. "And I want to know what you think about it."

"What I think?" I splayed my hands over my thighs, buying time. What would I tell her? Did she really want to know the truth about how much I adored her and that I'd known for quite some time that what she suspected was, in fact, reality?

ELLA

“Well?” I asked Lucca, who sat across from me, avoiding my gaze and squirming around in his seat as if there were bugs crawling up his legs. “I know. You think no one in modern times would matchmake. I mean, it’s barbaric.”

“Yes, I can understand how one could perceive it that way.” He spoke slowly, as if trying to think of what to say.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Lucca? Can’t you see what’s going on here?” I placed my hand briefly on his arm. He jerked it away, as if I’d burned him.

I deflated. He didn’t want my touch. Maybe all this longing only went one way? Regardless, it had to be brought out into the open.

He drew in a deep breath and looked over at me. His brown eyes glittered with...what? Desire? Passion? Disgust? How was I to know? This love malady might be the worst of all illnesses. For one thing, it was nearly impossible to diagnose, even in oneself.

You see, I’d decided something in the middle of another sleepless night. My resistance to Lucca had become untenable. I could no longer convince myself that I felt nothing but professional respect for him. I tried. How I tried. I told myself everything I could think of to dissuade myself from these emotions and fantasies that coursed through me. I was in love with Lucca Coletti. He was foremost in my thoughts during the day and night, quiet and chaotic. It was him.

For the first time, I understood what it was to be sick with love.

I was even thinking about what cute babies we would have. I’d gone completely out of my mind.

All this, after finally admitting it to myself, had been set up by Mother. My suspicions about my mother from the very beginning were correct. She'd had Lucca sent here for me in the same way she had ordered Amelia and Faith for Ben and Briggs. We were all being manipulated by one interfering mother.

Which infuriated me. Kind of. I mean, Ben and Briggs were happy. I was glad for that. Yet it didn't seem right. This wasn't the dark ages of arranged marriages. At least, not here in America. Mother was messing with the laws of nature.

I'd gone to Faith and Amelia and told them my theory. They'd acted strange, not really answering the question, instead asking me how I felt about Lucca. I wasn't about to admit that. Not yet. Not until I knew if my infatuation was for naught.

Amelia had looked me straight in the eyes. "You can't tell me you feel nothing for him. I can see it in everything you say and do."

"That's not the point," I'd said. "If Mother sent for him, that means she sent you two here for the same reason. And that this Mrs. Mantle is a matchmaker, hired by Mother."

Faith wouldn't even look at me as she made an excuse to leave the room. Amelia hastened away as well, making up a sudden appointment she had to get to.

Now Lucca was seeming equally evasive.

"If it were true, that Mrs. Mantle and your mother arranged this strange way of meeting, would it change anything about how we...about how I..." He trailed off and turned back to look out the front window of the car.

"About what?" I asked gently when, in reality, I wanted to shake the truth out of him.

"Would it change how I feel about you? How we met isn't really the important question. It's *that* we met. This is the important part. And the answer is no. I'd be in love with you either way."

What had he said? Could it be true? He loved me too?

As if he could read my thoughts, he turned to face me. "Yes, I'm in love with you. It might have been love at first sight. Regardless of how or when it happened, it did. But I know you're not interested. You don't want a man or marriage. I respect that, too, Ella. I would never force myself upon you or expect that I could change your mind. I've tried to keep myself from falling, but it proved impossible. You're you—and to me, God has made nothing

more beautiful in all of creation.”

Hot tears started behind my eyes. “Lucca,” I whispered. “What if I were to tell you that I’ve changed? You’ve changed me. I no longer recognize my own thoughts.”

“What are they?” Lucca asked. “Tell me. Please.”

“I’ve been thinking about what adorable children we would make.”

He threw his head back in laughter.

“Why are you laughing?” I asked, horrified. “Because I would be a terrible mother, and everyone knows it?”

He immediately sobered. “Ella, you would be a wonderful mother. I’ve seen how you are with patients. So calm and nurturing. All qualities that would make you excel at motherhood. I’m laughing because I never thought I’d hear those words come out of your mouth. They delight me. You delight me. Is there any way you could love me? Allow me to be the man who makes babies with you? I would never tell you what to do or treat you poorly. You know me by now, don’t you? You can see how we work together as partners?”

“I think I do,” I said. “You’ve done exactly as you said you would. So why shouldn’t I believe you?”

He smiled and reached across the seat to brush his knuckles against the curve of my jaw. “There’s no reason. You don’t need to go through this world alone, Ella. Not if you can love me even a little of the way I love you. Can’t you see how nice it would be to marry your best friend?”

“Am I your best friend?”

“Without a doubt,” Lucca said. “You’re my favorite person. Sleeping with you against me was sublime. Perfection. I thought to myself—what if this woman was yours every night? To hold and caress. To tell secrets to in the quiet of the night.”

“I thought about that too.”

His knuckles returned, this time brushing my cheek. “Can you imagine the life we would have?”

“I can. Indeed, I can. And it’s not just a little love that I have for you. My whole heart and soul loves you, Lucca Coletti.”

“No, is it true?” The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled back at me.

“Yes, it’s true,” I said.

“Is this where you want me to kiss you for the first time?” He gestured toward the outside of the car. Rain beat gently against the rooftop. Other than

the pines and firs, the trees were without leaves, their bare branches delicate and spindly. Yellow grass, laden with water, bent toward the ground.

“Why not here?” I studied his full mouth, desire flooding any reason. This would be where I was kissed for the very first time. Right here on the side of the road during a rainy afternoon. This is the story I would tell our children.

He leaned closer. “Ella Tutheridge, may I kiss you?”

I breathed in the spicy scent of him and closed my eyes, murmuring, “Yes.”

His lips touched mine, a little tentative at first, but when he felt me respond, the kiss deepened.

So this is what love is, I thought. Who would have guessed that it could happen to me?

THAT NIGHT, we snuggled on the swinging loveseat on the porch and watched the rain fall. Mother and Timothy were out that night, leaving us alone to talk and hold hands without prying eyes.

“I have to tell you something,” Lucca said. “And I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it, and I really don’t want to make you mad and have you run away.”

“I won’t run away.” I leaned my head on his shoulder.

He smoothed a blanket over both of us, as if that would keep me from escaping. Not that I wanted to.

“About this matchmaking idea of yours.” He lifted my hand and kissed it before tucking the blanket more tightly around my legs. “Your brothers and sisters-in-law all believe it to be true.”

I sat up straighter and turned to look at him. “What? When?”

“They told me at separate times that they were all fairly certain your mother’s behind it. For each of you.”

“I knew it. Why didn’t anyone think to tell me?” Disrespectful, that’s what it was. Especially when I’d come right out and asked them.

“I cannot speak directly for them, of course,” Lucca said. “But I believe they thought if you knew, you would resist it further.”

I laughed, feeling bitter and amused at the same time. “Yes, well, there’s

something to that. I don't like to be lied to or manipulated."

"I know. Which is why I hesitated to tell you. However, there should be no secrets between us. I want to start out that way and remain thus."

"Did thinking we were being matched make you want to resist it more?" I asked.

"Not really, no. At first, I thought the idea outlandish and far-fetched, but then I came to see that they were probably right. For one thing, Mrs. Mantle asked me strange questions before she sent me here."

"Like what?"

He told me she'd asked him about how he felt about women working and how excited she'd been to learn he was from an island. "That one could be explained, I suppose. She would want to make sure whoever was placed here could acclimate to island life. Wondering my thoughts on women, though, was unusual."

"She wanted to know if you were a man who would respect me," I said. "Which is what I would need, otherwise, I would never fall in love. Not with a man who couldn't treat me as his equal. It's quite clever."

"It is. A match made in heaven?"

"Damn it all, I'm still mad at Mother and the others for not telling me the truth." I was quiet for a moment, listening to the pitter-pat of rain on the porch's roof. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't dare. If you were unaware of the plan, then there was a chance for me. Do you see?"

"You didn't mind being matched? Coerced out here under false pretenses?"

"I did mind. At first. But then, as I started to fall for you, I knew this Mrs. Mantle must be some kind of genius. Or God whispers in her ear how to pair soulmates."

"Do you think that's what we are?" My hand traveled over the blanket to find his.

He took it in both of his, then kissed each of my fingers. "I do."

"And those rats, Amelia and Faith. I outright asked them, and they avoided the question altogether." I couldn't really muster much anger. Being in love did that to a person.

"Again, my love, they were worried about your reaction," Lucca said. "When they came to me, they were very concerned your brothers had interfered and messed up the natural course of things."

My love? How nice it sounded. “Because they told you I was incapable of love?” I asked.

“Something like that. The ladies warned me against pushing aside my own feelings, even if it seemed hopeless. So I didn’t. I let myself feel all of them. I thought I wouldn’t be able to avoid a broken heart, but it was worth the risk. I had to try.”

“You were charming and always said the right thing.” I conceded this point, as if it weren’t obvious what had happened here. He’d been utterly lovable from the start. How could I not fall for him? Even I could not resist wit, compassion, and his physical beauty. Beyond that, though, there was something about us that fit together.

“They also told me about your parents’ marriage and how that had convinced you that men were mostly beasts.”

I swallowed the emotion rising up from my belly. They were right, obviously. “It was hard to watch. To be part of,” I said in a small voice. “But you’re not like my father. I hope I’m not, either.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because children of men like Roland Tutheridge always wonder if, at some point, the ghastly side of us will appear.”

“You have no ghastly side,” Lucca said. “I’ve studied you carefully.”

I laughed. “I hope there’s still more to learn, or you’ll grow bored.”

“You will never bore me. Vex me, perhaps.”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m only teasing you. We were meant to be,” Lucca said. “And soon, I’ll convince you to marry me.”

“You won’t have to convince me. I would have said yes.”

“Then I shall ask.”

“No, you won’t. Because I’m asking first.” I hopped out from under the blanket and went down on one knee. “Will you marry me, Lucca Coletti?”

Grinning, he said, “Yes, yes, yes.” And then he hauled me onto his lap and made sure I knew he was serious.

“A marriage of equals,” I said, right before I bent down and kissed him. This man. He was my heart.

WE KEPT our feelings to ourselves in the days leading up to the new year. They were heady ones, filled with work and kisses and the growing familiarity we felt in each other's arms. When I was with him, I rarely thought about how we'd come to be.

Still, it bothered me about Mother. I wanted her to tell me the truth. However, I couldn't bring it up without confessing that her little plan had worked. So I waited.

Several days before Christmas, the entire family came for the feast. It turned out to be one of those days where the sun shared the sky with fat rain clouds. One moment, the sun shone. The next, a cloud blotted out the light. Back and forth it went.

Between the rainfalls, Amelia, Faith, and I went for a walk on our beach. I wanted to tell them about Lucca and me, but I hardly knew where to start. Lucca had stayed inside to ask Mother and Timothy for their blessing on our marriage. We both knew they wouldn't say no.

"How are you two sleeping at night?" I asked casually. The wind blew cold air up my skirts. I tied a wool scarf more tightly at my neck.

"Fine, why do you ask?" Faith glanced at me nervously.

"I wondered if you felt guilty about anything, for example," I said.

"What would we have to feel guilty over?" Amelia asked, a mischievous smile playing at her lips as her red hair whipped around her face.

"I don't know," I said. "How about keeping Mother's secret from me?"

"What would that be?" Amelia asked. "I'm sure we know nothing about anything."

"Oh, you two know a lot. Don't pretend otherwise." I stopped by our firepit, nothing but a sappy mound of charred wood. Come summer, we would gather around it. I would sit with Lucca on one of the logs. Part of a couple. I'd not thought it possible.

"We want what's best for you," Faith said. "Always."

"I do know that," I said. "Apparently, you all knew that Lucca was sent here for me."

"Did it work?" Faith asked breathlessly. "Please say Mrs. Mantle was right once more."

I'd wanted to torture them a little longer, but my feelings came spilling out. "It did. I can scarcely believe it, but it was like I was being hurled through the wind toward him with no way to stop myself."

"I felt that way, too," Amelia said.

“Divine intervention,” Faith said. “It’s the only explanation.”

“And a manipulative mother. Did she really think we needed this much help?” I held up a hand, laughing. “Don’t answer that.”

“Benedict said the apartment will be done in a few weeks,” Amelia said. “Perfect timing to build a little nest for two lovebirds. You are marrying him, right? Because I have to tell you, the marital bed is quite enjoyable, and you won’t want to put it off for long. Am I right, Faith?”

Faith, flushing a deep red, merely nodded.

“Your mother’s going to be beside herself with joy,” Amelia said.

“Your mother doesn’t know we all know,” Faith said. “Amelia thought we should keep it to ourselves and see what developed between you two without interference.”

“The boys told Lucca almost from the first,” Amelia said. “And almost messed the whole thing up. There must not be resistance, or fate will go awry.”

“I think love is impossible to resist,” Faith said softly. “Even when we think no one could love us. When it comes, we have no choice but to allow it to be the one and only leading force in our lives.”

“Faith, you’re practically philosophical today,” Amelia said before turning to me. “Now, tell us everything. When did you first realize you were falling?”

Thus, my story unfolded as we walked back up the beach. And I have to say, telling your two best girlfriends about how you fell in love with the man made for you was more fun than I’d have ever guessed.

LUCCA

I stopped at the doorway to the music room, listening for a moment to the sound of someone playing the piano. I'd not been in that room much during my stay, as it was kept for special occasions. Tonight, rows of chairs had been set as if for a concert. Briggs was at the grand piano, practicing for his later performance. Ella had informed me a Christmas tradition would begin that night. Briggs was to play holiday songs after the meal as a way to foster the holiday spirit and welcome in the season.

"A way to rid us of the ghosts of Christmas past," Ella had said, then shivered.

I'd embraced her, holding her close, hoping to rid her of a few myself.

Now, the notes of "The First Noel" filled the house with hope and joy. I'd not known he could play the piano in addition to his skills as a painter. He was a talented man. Soon, if all went well, he would be my brother-in-law. I left him to it and went downstairs.

I had a purpose, and that was to ask Mr. and Mrs. Bains for Ella's hand. It was a courtesy only, as Ella had assured me that if she wanted to marry me she would and that whatever they thought about it was neither here nor there. Regardless, it was the right thing to do. Mama would expect it of me.

How I wished she could know Ella. They would have loved each other.

I asked if I might have a word. They welcomed me and asked if I wanted to sit and could I use a drink? I sat but declined the drink. I wanted to get this over with. Ella and I had agreed that today was the day we confessed our feelings and intentions to the family. She didn't even mind that her mother had been right, she'd said to me last night after I'd kissed her.

I sat in the chair across from where Mr. and Mrs. Bains were sitting in

front of the fire, playing cards. "I'm sorry to interrupt your game," I said. "But there's something I'd like to ask."

Timothy nodded, a shiny silver lock of hair falling over his forehead. "What can we do for you?"

"Well, you see." I cleared my throat. "I'm in love with Ella."

Mrs. Bains nodded, tenting her hands under her chin. "Are you now?"

"Yes, and she is with me," I said. "And we'd like to marry. I'm asking for your blessing."

"It's not mine to give," Mr. Bains said. "As I'm not her father. But if I was, I would give it to you."

"Mrs. Bains?" I asked.

To my alarm, Mrs. Bains started to sob. Her husband handed her a hankie, and she buried her face in it for a moment. When she looked up, she was smiling through her tears. "It's a miracle. That's all there is to it. I never thought. Ella, you know. The way she is."

"Mrs. Bains, Ella is perfect for me. I wouldn't want her any other way than exactly how she is. I didn't think she would fall in love with me. I truly didn't. But now that she has, I'm simply the happiest man on earth."

"Isn't that what all men in love say?" Mr. Bains asked. "Which makes it impossible to be true, but we understand the sentiment."

"When will you propose?" Mrs. Bains asked, seeming to have recovered from her crying jag.

"Yes, well, about that—Ella proposed to me. Then she told me what kind of wedding she wanted, and I agreed."

"Good man," Mr. Bains said. "You'll have a happy marriage if you keep that attitude."

Mrs. Bains made a face at her husband. "Good point, dear. Hopefully, you'll remember that."

"What did Ella want?" Timothy asked. "I hope it was a church wedding."

"It was," I said. "On New Year's Eve."

"Glory be, God is good." Mrs. Bains clasped her hands together. "A holiday wedding. How lovely. We'll have to start planning immediately, of course. Leave it to Ella to pick a date only a month away. I'll have to get Mrs. Lancaster making a dress tomorrow. Ella will want something simple because of her wide shoulders. Too much lace is not good with her figure."

"Mrs. Bains, I'll not care what she wears, lace or not, and her shoulders are just right."

“I agree, dear,” Mrs. Bains said hastily. “It wasn’t a criticism.”

“But it’s good that you’re defending her,” Mr. Bains said.

It was then that I heard a giggle coming from behind the chair in the corner of the room. A glossy head of dark hair appeared. Bebe. “Ella’s getting married,” she shouted. To whom I couldn’t say. And then took off running repeating it over and over as she headed downstairs to the kitchen.

“I guess everyone will know now,” I said. “Ella might have liked to tell everyone herself.”

“That child,” Mrs. Bains said. “I didn’t know she was in here, being quiet for once. Sneaky, that’s what she is. She’ll be the death of us all if we don’t get a nanny. I have a good mind to ask Mrs. Mantle for help with that.”

I had a feeling she already had.

THE CHRISTMAS FEAST consisted of turkey and cranberries along with Mrs. Halvorson’s mashed potatoes and gravy. We all gathered around the table; even Bebe got to sit with us, after promising to behave herself. Hudson was beside his little girl and seemed to be putting on a brave face despite how hard the festivities were for him. According to Ella, he struggled with any holidays since he’d lost his wife.

Mr. Bains said grace, and then Mary and Lizzie brought around platters and bowls for each of us to take what we wished. The chandelier sparkled merrily over the table set with fine china and crystal glasses.

Ella was dressed in a dark blue dress that matched her eyes, and her hair was twisted into an elaborate knot on top of her head. How women did these things, I couldn’t say.

“You’re stunning,” I whispered in Ella’s ear.

“You’re stunning,” she whispered back.

“This might be the happiest day of my life,” Amelia said, staring at her plate of food lovingly. She wore a green dress that complemented her hair and fair skin. There was a glow about her tonight as well.

“Wasn’t it our wedding day?” Benedict asked, teasing.

“Oh, yes, right. But this is second.” Amelia grinned and lifted her fork. “I almost don’t want to start because the sooner I do, the sooner it will all be gone.”

“There’s always seconds,” Benedict said. “Now that you’re eating for two.”

The whole table went silent, then burst into cheers and applause.

“Is it true?” Mrs. Bains asked when the noise died down. “Please, say it’s true.”

Amelia, blushing, nodded. “Yes, if my calculations are correct, we’ll be welcoming a new Tutheridge into the family sometime in July.”

“How wonderful,” Faith said, eyes shining. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Well done, brother,” Briggs said, lifting his glass. “I hope we’ll have news to share sometime soon as well. We’re certainly doing our part to make it happen.”

“Briggs!” Faith looked mortified as she dropped her fork into her mashed potatoes. “Really, you’re incorrigible.”

“We’re married. Nothing wrong with it.” Briggs grinned and lifted both shoulders in a carefree shrug. “I’m a lucky man, and this is Christmas, so I’m sharing my good fortune with my family.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Mrs. Bains said. “You *are* impossible.”

“I am thankful for my beautiful, patient, loving Faith, who I love with all of my heart,” Briggs said. “I never knew the full meaning of Christmas until now. I’m truly blessed.”

“Oh, Briggs,” Faith said, blushing. “I love you too. And soon, my papa will be here on the island permanently. I got a letter today. He’s sold the bakery.”

“Wonderful news,” Mrs. Bains said. “He must stay here at the house, don’t you think? You two lovebirds will need the extra bedroom at your house for the baby. Think of it. Another precious grandchild.”

“Am I the *first* precious grandchild?” Bebe asked.

“You are precious, and you were first,” Mrs. Bains said.

“So yes?” Bebe’s forehead wrinkled.

“Yes, dear,” Mrs. Bains said with an indulgent smile.

I’d been seated next to Ella and felt her competent hand reach for mine. I gave it a squeeze.

“We’ve an announcement, too,” Ella said. “Lucca and I are getting married. I asked, and he said yes.”

The table once again erupted into cheers, and everyone talking at once.

“Congratulations,” Amelia said. “I prayed hard for this.”

“As did I,” Faith said shyly. “That the perfect man for you would come,

and here he is.”

“Well done,” Briggs said to me before winking at Ella. “You tamed the shrew.”

“Hush,” Ella said. “You were the one tamed.”

“I used to be a scoundrel, but my wife saved me from myself,” Briggs said. “That’s the truth, and we all know it.”

“You’ve made me very happy,” Mrs. Bains said, dabbing at her eyes. “All of you. When I think of what this table was like last year, it’s hard to believe how much has changed. Love seems to be finding us all.” She looked down the table at her husband. “And you, my dearest. Love has come even to me.”

“I’m the thankful one,” Timothy said, tearing up. “I’ve been alone for such a long time, and now I have all of you.”

“For better or worse,” Briggs said. “We’re yours now.”

“Welcome to our family,” Benedict said. “You have yourself a very special woman.”

“He knows,” Ella said.

“I do. Thank you, all. For your hospitality and generosity. I, too, cannot believe the blessings God has given me. I could not have imagined it. All of you.” I shook my head, afraid I would start to tear up as well.

“Even Aunt Ella found love,” Bebe said, shaking her head. “We never thought anyone would put up with her, right?”

“Bebe,” Hudson said. “That’s not nice.”

“Although true,” Ella said, laughing. “Yes, Bebe, even I have found my perfect match.” She gave her mother a pointed look. “With a little help from interfering elves.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Mrs. Bains sniffed, as if offended, and picked up a glass. “Let’s toast. To family and love and second chances at happiness.”

“Wait, Mother, I’d like to say something,” Hudson said. “I wanted to say out loud how thankful I am for all of you. I know I’ve been a bear to live with, and I’m vowing here and now to do better. I’ve let grief rob me of my life, and I no longer wish to live this way. I’m pleased for all of you—finding your perfect mates. I had mine, and even though it was cut short, I wouldn’t change anything. Rosemary was my match, you know. I loved her with all my heart, but I know she wants me to get on with things. I’m going to try. For her.”

“We all miss her,” Benedict said. “I hope you know how much we all loved her.”

“I do, yes,” Hudson said. “And she gave me the biggest gift of my life in Bebe.”

“Me?” Bebe asked, her voice an octave higher than usual, which was saying something.

“Yes, you, my darling girl. It’s you and me,” Hudson said.

Bebe grinned. “You and me. Daddy and me.”

“Also, I think I’ve found a new passion,” Hudson said, glancing at me. “The notebook that horrible man left—I don’t know where he found it—but there’s enough there that I think he might be right. There may be a ship buried down there somewhere, and I’m going to find it.”

“But, dear, must you?” Mrs. Bains asked. “Is it worth your time?”

“I don’t know if it is or isn’t, Mother,” Hudson said. “But it’s something that interests me, and for now, I have to cling to that.”

“Yes, I see,” Mrs. Bains said. “As long as you don’t become obsessed.”

“Highly likely that I will,” Hudson said, smiling at his mother. “But it gives me a purpose for now anyway.”

“Well, all right then,” Mrs. Bains said, raising her glass once more. “Cheers to you all.”

We all lifted our glasses, and I looked around the table at each face. This would be my family now. I had a family and a community and a woman to love for the rest of my life. I’d longed for it all and asked God, and he had sent it all to me. No matter how I got here, only that I did.

ELLA

We were married on New Year's Eve as planned. The days leading up to the wedding passed in a flurry of activity. After the first fitting for my gown, I confronted Mother about her meddling, and she gave me a full confession. We were right. She'd arranged, through poor Matthew, to find matches for each of us.

Not only was she not sorry—she was exuberant. “I've only Hudson left, and then I'll be able to rest easy. Anyway, you can't be angry with me. Look what happened for you. I was right to do what I did.”

I couldn't argue with that logic. She was right. Maybe the saying was true, mothers really do know best.

“And now you must forgive me for ruining your life,” Mother said a little arrogantly. “Since I actually saved it. Now you'll be a nurse and a wife to a talented and caring man. I've done very well, if I do say so myself.”

I rolled my eyes, but once again, how could I argue with that? It was all true.

“Hudson, though? Mother, I don't think he wants to remarry. His heart's still with Rosemary.”

“Rosemary's dead,” Mother said flatly. “And Bebe needs a mother.”

“Well, what's your plan then?”

“Mrs. Mantle has her ways,” Mother said.

I couldn't help but feel hopeful. Look what Mrs. Mantle had done for the three of us. Maybe she could send the right match for Hudson. I would ask God every night before I drifted off to a happy sleep. *Please send the right one for Hudson and Bebe.*

On my wedding day, however, I thought of nothing but Lucca. My

groom! It would take me a while to become accustomed to calling him my husband. I practiced in front of the mirror introducing myself as Ella Coletti. It had a nice ring to it, in my opinion.

The ceremony was short, as they usually are in the Protestant church. Thankfully, Lucca didn't mind getting married in my church instead of a Catholic one. He said he didn't think God cared which denomination we were married in, as long as it was a church of some kind.

Timothy married us, tearing up through most of it, which touched me greatly. Seeing him standing there in the church, I felt how much he wanted to be the father we never had, even though he found us so late in his life. I suspected his son was never far from his mind. Would he ever have the chance to see him again? I hoped so. Another request to add to my prayers, I thought, as he danced with my mother at the reception.

What a reception it was, too. We had it at the house afterward for just the family and a few friends. Gathered in the living room before our wedding feast, we had champagne and toasts. There was so much laughter and mayhem as the boys gave speeches and embarrassed me with stories from our childhood. Despite their teasing, I had never felt more loved than I did that night. Even so, I was nervous and distracted thinking about the events that would follow. Soon, I would be in a bedroom alone with my husband. My husband! I would wear my new silk gown and have to show him every part of myself. Would he like what he saw? It was too late now, I thought. He'd already said yes.

How strange it would be to leave the only home I'd ever known and move in with Lucca. Luckily for me, my new husband didn't care if I knew how to cook or clean and had agreed to hiring a housekeeper to look after us.

We enjoyed Mrs. Halvorson's wedding supper of slabs of roast beef, creamy potatoes, and glazed carrots. After the meal, we all had a glass of delicious raspberry punch and danced in the music room to Briggs's piano playing. The Christmas tree gave off the delicious scent of fir needles, adding to the ambiance of the night.

My new husband held me firmly in his arms, leading me across the dance floor in a waltz. His gaze had rarely left me all day and remained there now. "How could anything or anyone be as pretty as you are right now?" Lucca said, his breath warm against my neck. "I cannot wait to take you home."

I shivered with desire, thinking of what was to come. "Shall we go soon?"
"Say the word, and I'll sweep you out of here."

“No one will mind, will they?” I asked, glancing around the room at my family dressed in their finest clothes as they twirled around the dance floor. Even Bebe and Hudson were dancing. She had her shoes off and stood in her stocking feet on top of his and gazed up at her father with complete adoration. It was enough to bring tears to my eyes, which it did.

“I think it’s expected on a couple’s wedding night that they leave before the guests,” Lucca said.

Thus, we were the first to leave, everyone throwing rice after us as we left in the car to spend our first night together in the apartment behind the doctor’s office. In the end, it turned out that apartment was my home after all.

Falling into bed without bothering to change into night clothes, Lucca and I were the only two people on earth that night. He was gentle and patient, melting away any nervousness I had. And I had to admit, Amelia was quite right about the joys of the marital bed.

At midnight, satiated for now, we got out of bed, wrapped blankets around our shoulders, and went to sit by the fire in our new living room that still smelled of wood shavings. Lucca tossed a few more logs onto the fire, and then we settled together on the sofa.

“Happy New Year,” he said. “It’s after midnight.”

“Happy New Year.” I smiled back at him, so full of love it seemed I might burst.

He swept his arm under my knees to bring my legs onto his lap. “This is what I’ve imagined since I first met you. The two of us together, content to do nothing but sit in front of the fire and talk.”

“I didn’t know I could be this happy,” I said.

“I’d heard what it was like to be in love, but it’s so much better than anyone could describe. This feeling in my chest...”

“Like it might burst?”

“Yes, that’s it exactly.”

“I was thinking the same thing just now,” I said.

“Isn’t it funny how we do that?” He stroked the arch of my foot with his thumb, watching me. “I love your hair down like that. You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about a moment just like this. To think, we’ll have a lifetime of them—it’s too much to even contemplate.”

“Thank you for saying yes to my proposal,” I said.

“As if I would have ever said no. Not possible.” His dark eyes sobered. “I wish only that my mother could have been there today. I thought about her a

lot, knowing how much joy it would have given her to see me in love and welcomed into a new family.”

“I would have loved to meet her.”

“Well, she lives on in my sauce anyway,” Lucca said. “I’ll make it for us tomorrow and begin a new tradition. Merging my heritage and yours.”

“I can already taste it.”

“I prefer to taste your kisses,” Lucca said.

“How about both?” I reached out to touch his chin, prickly with stubble by this time of night. “You will always have my kisses, whenever you want.”

“Everything I could ever wish for has come true. You. This community. Our work. A family. How good God has been to us.”

“Yes, even though I was willful and rebellious, he brought you to me, and for that, I shall be forever thankful.”

We sat together watching the fire for some time until our eyelids grew heavy and it was time to retire to our bedroom, where we fell asleep in each other’s embrace, heartbeats as one on the very first night of the rest of our lives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Thompson is the USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author of clean and wholesome Contemporary and Historical Romantic Women's Fiction with nearly 50 published titles. Her stories feature family sagas, romance, a little mystery, and a lot of heart.

She's married to her prince, Best Husband Ever Cliff and is the mother of their blended family of two boys and two girls. Cliff is seventeen months younger, which qualifies Tess as a Cougar, a title she wears proudly. Her bonus sons are young adults working toward making all their dreams come true out in the world. Oldest daughter is at college studying Chemistry. (Her mother has no idea where she got her math and science talent!) The baby of the family is a junior in high school and a member of a state champion cheer team as well as an academic all-star, including achieving a 5 on the AP World History exam during her sophomore year.

Tess is proud to have grown up in a small town like the ones in her novels. After graduating from the University of Southern California Drama School, she had hopes of becoming an actress but was called instead to writing fiction.

Tess loves lazy afternoons watching football, hanging out on the back patio with Best Husband Ever, reading in bed, binge-watching television series, red wine, strong coffee, Zumba, and walks on crisp autumn days. She never knows what to make for dinner and is often awake in the middle of night thinking about her characters and their stories.

She's grateful to spend most days in her office matchmaking her characters while her favorite cat Mittens (shhh...don't tell Midnight) sleeps on the desk.

She adores hearing from readers, so don't hesitate to say hello or sign up for her newsletter: <https://tesswrites.com/>. You'll receive a free ebook just for signing up!

