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TESS THOMPSON

The MAKING *of* A MATCHMAKER



The
MYSTERY
MATCHMAKER
of
ELLA POINTE

~ PREQUEL ~

THE MAKING OF A MATCHMAKER

A PREQUEL

THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK ONE

TESS THOMPSON

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CONTENTS

1. [Matthew](#)
2. [Aubrey](#)
3. [Matthew](#)
4. [Matthew](#)
5. [Aubrey](#)
6. [Matthew](#)

[Also by Tess Thompson](#)

[About the Author](#)

*This series is for my first daughter, Ella Caroline.
My Ella Girl. My answer to prayer.
My heart.*

MATTHEW

Whale Island, Washington
1910

I didn't ask for the job of matchmaker. In truth, that particular task is the last thing I'd have wanted or imagined possible. My natural instinct was to stay out of people's affairs and run my own with a detachment greatly needed in my profession. A bar owner must practice discretion and a certain unemotional state of suspended judgment toward his fellow man. I'd had my share of secrets and tragedy in my younger years. I didn't need further entanglements. In fact, I ran from them, along with any hint of affection or love. I'd had enough of that, too, in my time before meeting Roland Tutheridge and coming to Whale Island to open the pub. Love always led to disaster in one way or another.

And secrets? How they grow without much nurturing at all, like the wild roses on the island. There were many lies and betrayals here, most of them surrounding Roland Tutheridge. However, his secrets began to unravel the night of his death. Or, more accurately, the morning after his murder.

Roland Tutheridge had been shot in the chest and left for dead on his way home from our weekly poker game. No one knows for certain the exact time, other than it was sometime between when he left our local saloon at midnight and early Saturday morning. At dawn, the milk deliveryman found Roland's carriage and horses in the middle of the dirt road that connected the town of Ella Pointe to the Tutheridge mansion.

There were six of us who played poker every Friday evening at my pub. Roland, who owned most of the island, including his grand mansion he'd named Stella. He never said who Stella was, but gossip presumed it was one of his many mistresses. One would presume his favorite mistress, although that could

not be substantiated.

The rest of our poker table consisted of me, a preacher named Timothy Bains, Sheriff Robert White, Michael Moon, who ran the dry goods store, and the teacher of our small school, Caleb King. One could describe us as friends, but as in all things, there were shades of gray between the black and white. Our primary connection? Each of us was indebted to Roland Tutheridge. He'd brought us all to Whale Island at the turn of the century, giving us a second chance at a decent life. All five of us had dubious pasts. Scandals that had kept us from living the lives we'd expected for ourselves. Thus, when Roland offered each of us an escape, we took it. Together, we built a town where once there had been only a thick forest and the scent of marine life in the briny air.

For this, we were grateful. Even though we all hated the man, we were obligated to him. It was a precarious existence. His favor could change on a whim. We were on his payroll. He even owned our homes. In that way, we were his puppets. In exchange for our loyalty, Roland kept our secrets. And we kept his.

The rest of Ella Pointe's residents respected him, even if they didn't like him. For without him, none of us would be here. He'd built this town out of sheer will. The first time he'd seen the island, he knew he must possess it. More so than any man I'd ever known, Roland had a desire to possess and conquer. Women, his children, the people who worked for him—we all understood our most important duty was to please him.

When his murder became known that Saturday morning on a cold, bitter day in late February, it was inevitable the five of us looked at one another with suspicion. Could it be one of us who had killed him? It was possible. But unlikely, in my opinion. Even though we all had made life-altering mistakes, there was not a bad man among us. The only bad seed had been murdered in cold blood.

On the Sunday we buried him, I stood on the precipice above a rocky beach to watch the water below. The Puget Sound spread out wide and blue before me. We had one of our rare but uplifting winter days of pure sunshine. Although the temperature would not exceed forty, the residents of the town of Ella Pointe usually came out to enjoy the feel of mother sun on their faces. Today there would be no enjoyment, no celebration.

The church bell chimed twelve times. Noon. In an hour, we would gather in our place of worship to pay our respects to Roland Tutheridge.

We were a quaint town of whitewashed buildings, including a church, my pub, a dry goods store, and the sheriff's office. If one could call the one room with a single jail cell an office. We'd never had a need for the lone prison cell

and hoped we never would. At the end of town, our newly built brick schoolhouse seemed to look over it all from the black-shuttered windows of the second floor. Empty of children today, as it was Sunday, or one would have heard laughter and shouting. The children were given recess at noon, and sometimes I opened the windows of my residence to hear their happy noises. I was a single man, as were the other Friday night poker players who had come here at the request of Roland. We had little hope of marriage. Women were scarce here. All hope for love was lost. No woman would set foot on such an isolated island unless she had a very good reason.

Around me, madrone and fir trees swayed gently in the sea breeze. Seagulls screeched above us. Harbor seals sunned on the shore, as happy as their human friends were for a fair day.

A bench that overlooked the water was set on a grassy knoll where anyone who so desired could sit and enjoy the view. I did so now, sinking onto the seat and realizing too late that the wood was damp. Soon the dampness seeped through my suit trousers. Rain fell often here in this little part of the world, making it a study in shades of green. As I breathed in the scent of the briny Puget Sound, my heart was heavy. How was I to mourn a man I'd feared and despised? Were there any souls here on earth who would miss him? I suspected his family would not. There was darkness in that house. His children and wife had gotten the brunt of his cruelty. I had a feeling none of us knew half of the crimes he'd committed against his family.

Sighing with dread, I rose to my feet. I must go whether I wanted to or not. I turned away from the water and headed on foot to the church. The entire town was walking in the same direction. There was to be a wake at the estate after the burial. Most would go to pay their respects and to satisfy their curiosity as well as enjoy whatever food the family cook, Mrs. Halvorson, had prepared. For now, everyone was here at the church.

Before taking a seat, I went to the front to greet the Tutheridge family. Roland's three grown sons and a daughter sat in their birth order. Benedict first, then Hudson, followed by Briggs, and finally Ella. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked.

"Thank you for helping us arrange this," Benedict said to me. "You and Pastor Bains have been godsend these last few days." He was the largest of the three, his shoulders as broad as the oldest tree on the island, and had thick, almost black hair. There were rumors he was stupid because he'd had such trouble in school, but I knew differently. He wasn't stupid. School just wasn't for him. He preferred to be outside, chopping wood or building things with his hands. "He's smart but can barely read. Isn't it a shame?" Beatrice had said to

me after a few too many glasses of sherry last Christmas. “He used to beg me to read to him when he was a child. He loved stories but couldn’t read them himself. It’s baffling. His father, of course, has no use for him. If he can’t help run the business, then what good is he?” Her eyes had drifted to her handsome son, who sat near the fire listening to Briggs play the piano with a contented look on his face.

Now Benedict looked devastated. His muscular shoulders drooped. Bags under his eyes indicated a lack of sleep. He was never one for talking, no matter what the occasion, and today was no different, nodding a greeting instead of speaking.

“How are you holding up?” I asked no one in particular.

“As well as can be expected.” Beatrice reached for Ella’s hand. “My children have been a great comfort.”

“Whatever you need, please don’t hesitate to ask,” I said. Despite my gruff exterior, the Tutheridge siblings never ceased to soften me. They were all sweet of nature, with kind and generous hearts. Qualities not seen in their father. Such different dispositions than Roland, it was hard to fathom he’d been their father. When I’d come here fifteen years before, they’d been ten, nine, eight, and six. Watching them grow up in the shadow of darkness cast by their father had not been easy. I’d have protected them if I could. But as in most aspects of my life, Roland rendered me impotent. It was the price I had to pay for my second chance.

“Kind of you,” Briggs said. “None of us had the inclination to plan such a nice funeral for the old bastard.”

“Briggs,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “Not now.”

“Sorry, Mother.” Briggs, slightly smaller in girth, matched his older brother in height. His hair was a light brown, and his eyes were a light blue like his mother’s and sister’s.

I nodded at Briggs, who reached out to shake my hand. His usual rakish expression had been replaced by one of grief. He’d come that morning from his art studio in Seattle, where he made a decent living painting portraits. He had the soul of an artist and possessed great talent. Sadly, his father had railed against Briggs’s choice to pursue art. A year ago, Roland had cut him off financially and told him not to return to the island unless hell freezes over. It hadn’t frozen over, but the devil was dead.

“He only says the truth, Mother. As awful as it is to say about a dead man,” Ella said. Tall like her brothers, she was as pretty as she was sturdy, with glossy dark hair she had pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. There was nothing delicate about the young woman, in spirit or physique. She had not been

as her father wished her to be, dainty and willowy like his wife. Instead, she'd followed her brothers around the island, as tough as they were. Maybe tougher.

"It's not right to speak ill of the dead." Beatrice's blue eyes, red and swollen, peeked up at me from under her black hat. If only she'd married a better man, I thought, perhaps she would have had a more satisfying life. What a waste of a good heart.

"I disagree. Whoever came up with that idea must not have had Roland Tutheridge for a father," Ella said. She and Briggs shared a bitter, amused look.

"Dearest, please." Beatrice's bottom lip quivered.

"All right. I'll be quiet." Ella dipped her chin, but the tips of her ears flamed red. She held so much anger toward their father. Even at his funeral, she railed against him. What else could anyone expect?

"For once," Briggs said out of the corner of his mouth.

A slight smile played at Ella's mouth. She reached over and smacked Briggs's arm. "No teasing me on the day we bury Father."

"Tomorrow then?" Briggs asked.

"Everything will return to normal eventually," Ella said. "I'll tell you when it's all right to resume your attempt at humor."

"I'm funny. Everyone knows I'm funny," Briggs said.

Hudson rolled his eyes and pulled out his pocket watch. "Where is Bains? Shouldn't we get moving along? God only knows what trouble Bebe's gotten herself into back at the house."

"The poor staff might be tied up by the time we return," Briggs said.

"Yes, there's that," Hudson said in a bone-weary tone. "She's been terrible the last few days. I can't get her to do anything I want."

"There, there," Beatrice said. "She's fine."

"She's not fine," Hudson said. "And I'm failing miserably as a father."

Smaller than his brothers, Hudson had his father's brown eyes. Of all of them, he was the only one who seemed inclined toward business. I assumed he would now take the helm of Roland's shipbuilding business over in Seattle. Roland had made money in the railroad as a young man and then invested it into building ships. His fortune had grown even fatter.

"Not failing, darling," Beatrice said. "She's a spirited child, that's all."

Tragically, Hudson's wife had died from influenza when Bebe was only a toddler. He'd moved from the home he'd built for his new bride back into the big house so that Beatrice could help care for little Beatrice, whom they called Bebe. She was now five years old and the spitting image of her mother. Did it hurt him to see his late wife's face reflected in that of his daughter? From all accounts, the child was wild and in need of a firm nanny.

“Spirited is one way to describe her,” Briggs said, teasing.

“Yes, yes,” Beatrice murmured. In contrast to her daughter, Beatrice seemed to have shrunk since Roland’s murder. She was slight, with silver hair that had once been blond. Although in her late fifties, she was still pretty with a full mouth and slender nose. However, the years of violence she’d endured at the hand of her husband showed in the nervous way she held herself, as if at any moment a fist would slam her against the wall.

Roland’s voice echoed in my head. He’d said one night, during a losing streak at the poker table, “A man’s duty is to keep his wife in line. If that means using your fists, then so be it. Isn’t that right?”

The familiar anger with Roland rose up in me. How badly he’d treated her. *Never mind that*, I told myself. *It’s not my place to judge*. God would take care of all of that.

“You’ll come out to the house after this, won’t you?” Ella asked me. Her eyes, bright and intense, were the same color as her mother’s, only they glittered with youth and vitality. She was dressed in black as well, a bright blue sparkling brooch that matched her eyes the only spot of color. One last act of rebellion against her father to wear color to his funeral, even if it was only that of a brooch.

“Of course. And whatever else you need, please ask,” I said.

“I’ve been out at the Wilsons’,” Ella said. “Their baby isn’t well. I’ll need to stop by there before going back to the house. One must care for the living more so than the dead.”

As the town grew in population, medical care had become necessary. It took over an hour by boat to reach Seattle and a hospital. Ella had taken it upon herself to learn nursing from textbooks meant for doctors and was now our sole source of medical care. She could set a broken leg as well as any doctor I’d ever seen. There hadn’t been a baby born here that she hadn’t delivered since the day she’d turned eighteen about three years ago. Now she went from house to house, going wherever she was needed, accepting payment in all forms, including cakes, pies, and slabs of bacon.

Beatrice’s gaze skirted across the aisle to land for a moment on Rhett Rivers and his ailing elderly parents. Around the same age as the Tutheridge boys, Rhett had been adopted when he was only an infant after he’d been found nestled in the hollow of a fallen tree trunk, sleeping peacefully. No one had claimed him, so the childless couple, although too old to raise a child, had happily taken him in as their own. Together, father and son ran our lighthouse.

What was on Beatrice’s mind? Did it have something to do with the Rivers family? Did Roland have something on them as well? Were they tied up in his

secrets and deception like so many of us?

Timothy Bains appeared, wearing a black robe and carrying a Bible. He was in his late fifties, with more silver than black in his hair he tamed with pomade. I often thought he looked more like an outlaw, with his scruffy beard and intense eyes, than a pastor. Whatever he looked like, he was beloved by his flock. He turned away no one and treated a rich man the same as a poor one. We were good friends, but I didn't know much about him other than he'd come here around the same time as I. Running away from something, just like me.

The congregation hushed as he opened the good book. I settled into a pew behind the Tutheridges and prepared to say goodbye to Roland. Or should I say good riddance?

AUBREY

On a day in early March, I drew back the curtains to let the spring sunshine into my office. A year to the day, I thought, since Heidi had had enough of my wallowing and forced me to begin living again. I could remember that morning as if it were yesterday.

My husband had been dead for thirteen months when Heidi finally had enough. She slammed the tray with coffee and biscuits onto the dresser. Unnecessarily loudly, if one were speaking of manners and proper etiquette between a mistress and her staff, but Heidi was more than just my maid. We were as close as sisters. Which is why she had every right to be disgusted with me.

I sat up in bed, startled from my drowsy and depressed state, and pressed my fingers to my temples. My head ached from my restless night. Since my husband died, I hadn't had one good night of sleep. Instead, I tossed and turned before finally falling asleep, only to wake sweating from a nightmare.

"Do you know what time it is?" Heidi glared at me.

Before I could comment, she strode to the window and yanked back the curtains. I cringed from the bright sunlight that flooded the room and drew up my knees under the cover to rest my head, wishing I could hide.

That was the whole crux of the problem, though, wasn't it? I'd been hiding for months and months. When had I last felt the sunlight on my skin or breathed fresh air? I could not say. To the best of my recollection, it had been on the day we put my dear Daniel in the ground. Since then, I avoided anything and everyone except Heidi, hiding in my bedchamber most of the time, crushed with grief. I ate little, only enough to keep me alive apparently, because here I was, shrinking from the light.

"Mrs. Mantle, it is time for you to get up." Heidi glared at me from the foot

of the bed, her arms crossed over her petite chest. She'd been my lady's maid since she was eighteen. The two of us had grown up together, in a way. I'd been twenty and a newlywed when Daniel hired her to work for us. Having come from a background where it was much more likely I would grow up to be the maid instead of having one, she and Daniel had had to train me. Now, fifteen years later, I was accustomed to her taking care of me. In fact, I couldn't imagine my life without her. Other than Daniel, she'd been my best friend and confidante all these many years. There wasn't a single aspect of my character she didn't know and understand, from how I liked my coffee—hot and rich—to the deep ache that now consumed me. My new role in life had become that of a grieving widow.

My husband Daniel had been ten years my senior. In his twenties, he'd sailed the world with the navy and thereafter made his fortune in real estate. We had more money than we would ever need. Before his death, I'd hoped he would retire and spend more time with me. Alas, he perished. In the stupidest of ways, I might add.

He died crossing the street, coming home to me after a day at his office. He'd been run over by an out-of-control team of horses pulling a carriage. I shuddered thinking of it. The horses had trampled him to death. He'd perished after the carriage had disappeared around a corner, dying from wounds to his internal organs. His death was sudden and without suffering, the doctor had told me. I'd prayed every night since that they'd told me the truth. The thought of him leaving this earth alone and afraid was worse than losing him all together.

"I'm tired. Please, I beg of you, leave me be," I said to Heidi as pitifully as a child.

"I've left you be for too long now. It's time for you to rise and be useful." Heidi was small, no bigger than an adolescent boy, with wide-set green eyes that seem to take up more than their share of her heart-shaped face. Daniel used to say she reminded him of a saintly elf. I'd chastised him for being unkind, and he amended it to a *pretty*, saintly elf. I had to admit, his description summed her up fairly well.

"I have nothing to give the world. What good would I be to anyone?" I was a middle-aged, rich, and purposeless woman. Simply another widow with nothing special about me in any way. Being married to Daniel was my only accomplishment. My husband had been the clever one. I was simply his wife, taking great care with my appearance and manners so that he would never feel ashamed of me.

When we'd first met, I'd been certain he would have no use for me at all. I was the daughter of a washwoman, a widow, who could barely keep me fed. At

eight years old, I'd started working for her, gathering up all the bags of laundry from the housekeepers of the wealthy to bring back to my mother, where we sorted, washed, dried, and ironed. When the clothes were done, I then delivered them back to the houses from which they'd come. It was during one such delivery that I first saw Daniel, heading out the front door of the brownstone, carrying a walking cane and wearing a long wool coat. I'd been dumbstruck at the sight of such a beautiful man with his golden curls and soft gray eyes. He'd tipped his hat to me, as if I were someone worthy instead of a dirty little girl working for pennies.

Unbeknownst to me, his housekeeper at the time also happened to be Heidi's aunt. It was years later he hired her to be my personal maid. But that was years and years later. I was still a child that first day I felt his gray eyes on me. He'd only just turned twenty. Not that I knew this at the time, of course. It was a decade later that I ran into him on the street. I'd had carefully tied packages from Jordan Marsh department store in my arms and they'd flown all over the sidewalk. By that time, I worked for Jordan Marsh, delivering purchases to the rich women of Boston.

While on the ground retrieving the wayward packages, we'd locked gazes. Looking into his eyes, it was as if my blood warmed to a new temperature. I felt newly alive. A sense of purpose came to me. I could see myself reflected in his eyes, a new version of myself. One who was educated and well-dressed and, even more importantly, well-spoken. Later, when he called upon me at the store, I was in the back room putting together a delivery when he'd barged in asking to see the "girl with eyes the color of a summer sky." No one knew what he meant, having never actually looked at me. I was disposable then. Not worth a glance.

Except for Daniel Mantle. He saw me. From that day onward, he would wait for me at the end of my shift and escort me to dinner. We went only to a small local pub around the corner from the department store. I was not dressed well enough to go to the places he usually dined.

After only a few months, he'd made the audacious suggestion that I should be his wife. I'd dismissed the idea, telling him how unworthy and unsuited I was for the position, even though I wanted more than anything to be just that. He insisted that my background didn't matter to him. It was my essence he loved. Panicked, I'd barely slept for three nights. The third morning, however, I'd awakened with a plan. I would become the outward version of what he wanted. I took elocution lessons to improve my speech and dancing and etiquette lessons before agreeing to marry him. It would have killed me to think I embarrassed him. Daniel had not cared where I'd come from or how I spoke, but I did. I made sure no one else knew either. He would always say the past was the past and I

was his future. His everything.

“Daniel was the exceptional one in this marriage,” I said. “I was the lucky one to have caught his eye somehow.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” Heidi said sharply. “Need I remind you about the school you helped fund?”

I drew in a breath. She’d never spoken to me this way. “That was nothing.”

“Nothing? It took you three years to raise the money and another to finish the project. You’ve helped how many children?” She continued to glare at me. “Or all the charity work you’ve done over the years?”

“It’s kind of you to say.” However, I knew the truth about my generosity. It was a replacement for the children I wanted and never had. “All of that was for selfish reasons. I needed to feel as if I were leaving a legacy of some kind. It was utterly egocentric.”

“I’ve no idea what that word means, but I suspect I wouldn’t agree if I did. Anyway, Mr. Mantle thought you very brave to move past your disappointment about babies and give so much of yourself to other people’s offspring.”

Daniel had given me everything I’d ever dreamed of, except for children. It wasn’t from lack of trying, either. Who knew why we were childless? Only God, I supposed. Perhaps he’d thought me unsuited? Given how I’d been raised, I’d have had no idea how to properly love a child. I shuddered, thinking of my mother.

I’d not minded having no children. Not so much, anyway. Heidi was right. I *had* thrown myself into charity work, including building a school for underprivileged children. Those who had nothing and no prospects deserved a chance in life.

Now, however, I minded not having a child of my own to love. I minded very much. Because now I was never to set eyes upon my Daniel again, and I wished with all my being that he’d left me a son or daughter who looked like him.

“If I’d had children, I wouldn’t have done all that, now would I?” Even to myself, I sounded petulant. “Daniel thought too highly of me.”

“How many times a day did he tell you how beautiful and smart you were?” Heidi’s eyes flashed, and she uncrossed her arms to grip the metal bed frame. “Mrs. Mantle, you are too talented to allow this self-pity and sorrow to rule your life for one more day. You’re going to find a purpose, and you’re going to charge forth, just as Daniel would have wanted you to.”

My mouth dropped open, and I continued to stare at her, dumbfounded by her attitude. She’d never said a harsh word to me, even when she probably should have. “What talent? I have nothing to offer the world.”

Heidi shook her head, loosening one of her brown curls from its mound on

top of her head. “You do. More than anyone I’ve ever met, you understand others and what they need. Look at all the friends you’ve helped over the years, counseling them on love and whatever other struggles they have. You helped me to find my Martin, didn’t you?”

That was true. I’d observed him at a friend’s luncheon one day discreetly wipe up spilled wine from a guest who had done more than her share of imbibing. The kindness in his eyes had made me think of Heidi. A feeling had niggled at me. Heidi was already twenty-two by then and had no suitors. Too busy for all that, she’d told me one night as she took down my hair for bedtime. “Even though I admit I’m lonely.” She went on to say all her friends were marrying, and she wondered if there was anyone out there for her, or would she die an old maid?

It wasn’t long thereafter that I cleverly arranged their “chance” meeting at the annual Christmas party I threw for all the maids and household staff on our street. Again, it was an instinct that told me he was the right one for Heidi, not anything logical. I was correct. They spent the entire evening talking and dancing. A few months later, they were married in my parlor and had been happily together ever since.

“You have a sixth sense,” Heidi said. “For matchmaking.”

Although true, what good did it do me or anyone else? Everyone I knew was already married, happily or not. In my current circles, there was no one to match. Not to mention that one would have to leave one’s bedroom in order to help anyone, which I had no intention of doing ever again. “What would I do with that skill?” I asked Heidi, continuing to feel sulky and wishing for her to admit that I was right. There was nothing in this world for me.

“I’ve heard from some of my friends about matchmakers,” Heidi said, plumping a throw pillow. “They’re here in the city and send brides out west to the men there. Some of them have reported back that the man waiting was atrocious. Old and furry, for example.”

I laughed at the word *furry*, despite my sad mood. “Some, but not all?”

“Correct. Some, like Martin and me, were the perfect match. You could provide the right woman to the right man.”

Completely bewildered by this suggestion, my forehead wrinkled so tightly I thought it might permanently stay that way. “Are you saying I should become a matchmaker? As in, mail-order brides?”

“Not necessarily only for men out west, but everywhere.” Heidi laughed. “Please don’t look at me as if I’ve just grown horns. You could help a lot of people with your gifts. I have a friend who is in a dire condition, if you know what I mean. She needs a husband right away. A baby is coming.”

“Oh dear.”

“If you could find her a husband, then she will be saved.”

“Well, how would I do that?” No man in his right mind would take on a pregnant bride. Not if they cared about society, anyway. Unless, of course, it could be hidden from prying eyes.

“There must be a way, and if so, then you’re the woman to do it,” Heidi said, clearly unimpressed with my reluctance. This was Heidi—determined and fiercely devoted to her impression of me as a woman of unusual talents and substance. I was not as confident in my abilities. “You will find a way.” She pointed to the tray containing my breakfast. “Now, eat. You have work to do.”

I shook my head and shooed her away. Without much enthusiasm, I got out of bed and went to sit in the chair by the window. I drank a cup of coffee, staring down at the busy street below. From my viewpoint, I could see up and down the entire block. This was a weekday morning, and the world bustled along with carriages and wagons and an occasional obnoxious motorcar making too much noise with its horn that sounded like a grumpy goat. I’d thought cars would be out of fashion by now, but that arrogant Henry Ford had come out with something called a Model T, and now everyone wanted one. Daniel had planned on buying one for us this year. I’d begged him not to, thinking them crass and ostentatious. Maybe if he’d had one, he wouldn’t have died crossing the street on foot.

My thoughts drifted back to Heidi’s suggestion. A matchmaker. Indeed! What an outlandish idea.

Thus, I dismissed the idea, shoving it aside as I had done so often since Daniel’s death. However, the more I thought about the poor girl, pregnant and scared, the more obsessed with her I became. Simply, I could not let it go. Not if I could actually help her. I must, I decided. As a Christian woman, the idea of turning away from someone in need was a sin.

Weeks went by, and I did not act. Frankly, I could not think how to do so. Was I to call on this poor woman and offer my services? For that matter, how could I possibly find her a match? Then one night, Daniel came to me in a dream. He told me that instead of worrying about his suffering at the end of his life, I should worry about those suffering here on earth. He shook out the newspaper and gave me the same look he had when we were first married and I’d been afraid of hosting a dinner party. There was no mistaking his thoughts on the matter. No excuse for cowardice. No reason in the world that would keep me from shining brightly but my own fears and insecurities. “You, my dear, are a force. Embrace it.”

During the moment between the dream and wakefulness, I sat up in bed, lit

the lamp, and said out loud, “Fine, but you’re going to have to tell me how to do it.”

Use the newspaper. It was his voice in my head, no doubt about it. I almost laughed. “The newspaper? That’s ridiculous.” Daniel had been a straightforward type of man. No nonsense and smart as a whip. He’d also had the biggest heart of anyone I’d ever known. He expected greatness from me, and since his death, I’d done nothing but wallow in self-pity. “Really, Daniel, the newspaper? Like I’m advertising for a secretary? This is marriage we’re talking about.”

But he didn’t reply. I lay back down and hugged my pillow close to my chest and looked over to the side of the bed where he’d slept with me most nights of our union. Other couples I knew slept in separate quarters, but we’d always wanted to be together, enjoying the pleasures of married life in every sense. He’d often woken me in the middle of a nightmare when I screamed or whimpered, reliving the horrors of my childhood. If only I could smell him one more time, I thought now. Or feel his arms around me, assuring me that all was well as long as we were together. “You’re safe with me,” he would whisper into my hair.

Tears stung my eyes. I missed him so much. No more idleness, though, I promised myself and him. I would figure out how to match the poor girl with a baby on the way.

The next day, I saw an advertisement in the paper. *Western men seeking wives.* I took it as a sign from Daniel. Hours later, I had our chauffeur, Charlie, drive me to the address in the paper. Appalled by their techniques and the filth of the establishment, as well as the utter desperation in the eyes of the women who waited to be seen, my conviction grew deeper. I must do something to help.

Surely, I thought, I could do it better.

In the hours between my visit and lying down in my bed that night, a matchmaker was born.

MATTHEW

After the funeral, at the Tutheridge estate, I enjoyed a glass of whiskey and a stack of Mrs. Halvorson's small crustless sandwiches filled with cheese made right here on the island. The weather had remained unseasonably bright throughout the afternoon, allowing people to spill out to the back porch.

I sat with Benedict in between one of the arcs that swooped down from the roof of the covered porch. They were meant to be decorative, but most found them useful for seating, especially during one of the Tutheridges' infamous garden parties.

Benedict was a fidgety young man, always moving. Today, he whittled a small piece of cedar using a penknife. His fingers never stopped, except when he looked up to speak to me.

Roland had built his mansion not far from town, around a bend in the road and nestled above a cove surrounded by trees. He'd been so overjoyed at the birth of his daughter that he'd declared the town be called Ella Pointe. Beatrice had asked him to put an *E* on the end to make it seem fancier than we really were. In an unusual moment of generosity toward his wife, he'd conceded. They'd spent two years building the house with its large picture windows and porch that extended from one end of the house to the other. Below, a small rocky beach shaped like a crescent moon had hosted the Tutheridge children in their games and antics.

Benedict and I had been sitting together for about five minutes before he spoke, startling me with his question.

"Who do you think killed him?" Benedict asked, peering at me as if I knew the answers. There was something about running a bar that made people think I knew things. It was true that as the town's thirst quencher, I heard a lot of snippets of conversation and observed many interactions. Again, I kept them all

to myself. Nothing could kill a business faster than a big-mouthed bartender.

"I've no idea, other than I know it wasn't me," I said. It was true, obviously. I knew I hadn't killed him, even though he'd made me angry enough in the past that I certainly could imagine doing so. "Do you have suspicions?"

"The way I figure it—anyone here could have done it." Benedict gestured around the porch where mourners gathered in clusters wearing their overcoats, breath making clouds in the cold air.

"Why do you say so?" I asked.

"He wronged almost everyone here, one way or another. But if I were to make an educated guess, it's one of you from his poker nights who did it. You were all the last to see him alive, and you all have motives." He gestured toward the sheriff, Robert White, who stood with Pastor Bains. Sheriff White was in his thirties and wore his butterscotch-hued hair a little too long and refused to use pomade so it fell seductively over his amber eyes. With a closely cropped beard and lean physique, he moved with grace and intent, two qualities I'd not often seen in tandem. At the moment, he had a cigar in his mouth and a glass of whiskey in his hand. Not for the first time, I wondered about his past. What had led him to police work? Had Roland plucked him from the other side of the prison bars to bring him here?

"Those two, for instance," Benedict said. "They have secrets they don't want revealed, don't they?"

"So do I, for that matter," I said.

"Yes, there's you as well." *Chip, chip, chip*, went the small slivers of wood from his creation. At this point, it was too unformed to know what it would be, but if I'd had to guess, I would have said a knife.

How did Benedict know we all had secrets? Did he have any idea what our secrets were? I'd known White and Timothy for fifteen years and I didn't know. Regardless, if they were like me, they had pasts from which they were seeking redemption. There was a reason they'd agreed to what Roland had to offer. Whatever our roles here on the island, we were here because of the favor of a rich and powerful man, one who had looked beyond our failings to offer us positions in his kingdom.

"A preacher and a sheriff? Don't seem much like suspects to me," I said, glancing over at Timothy Bains. A pipe hung out of one corner of his mouth. I had yet to see him light it up, making it more of a prop than a pipe. Like our sheriff, his rough appearance defied his occupation.

"The secrets in this town run as deep as the Puget Sound," Benedict said. "Nothing, when it came to anything that touched Father, is as it seems. You know that as well as I." His hands stilled as he fixed his bright blue eyes upon

me. "Did you kill him?" Benedict had a straightforward, flat way of speaking that often disconcerted me.

"No, sir. I did not kill Roland."

"It isn't out of the realm of possibility, seeing as how he treated you like an indentured servant. Taking half of your profits and such."

"How did you know that?" A spasm of shock caused me to snap my gaze back in his direction.

"My father greatly underestimated my mind. I'm not as touched as he told people."

I nodded, sympathetic. "Yes, he underestimated a lot of us."

"I know he made you all pay a high price for being here," Benedict said.

"I wasn't aware you were privy to his business affairs."

"I'm privy to my mother, who tells me everything."

I nodded, hoping to conceal my surprise. I'd assumed Beatrice Tutheridge knew nothing of how her husband conducted himself.

"My father was more a dictator than shipbuilder," Benedict said. "He built this town with lies and threats disguised as promises." His emotionless tone disturbed me. I had an image of a boneless bird, all flesh and feathers, unable to fly, that comes crashing to the hard ground.

"I can't disagree," I said, unable to think of anything more sensible to say.

"Which means that you and all of your poker pals are suspects," Benedict said. "There's the three of you." He gestured toward Timothy and Sheriff White once more. "And those two as well."

I followed his gaze, landing on Caleb King. Roland had hired him after Caleb left a teaching position at a prestigious boarding school back east. One from which I suspected Caleb had been fired amidst a scandal. He'd not said specifically what had brought him here when I asked, other than admitting he'd made a mistake or two back east that required him to relocate. We were like Australia, I'd thought at the time, taking in the world's criminals and outcasts.

But Caleb was young and nice-looking, with wavy dark hair and a full mouth always quick to smile. The children loved him, as did the mothers. I noticed how they glanced in his direction at church on Sundays. For that matter, he wasn't much older than a few of his teenage students. Had that been the trouble at his other school? A liaison with a young lady who was also his student? Thus far, he wouldn't speak of his past, leaving me only to make guesses, all of which were probably worse than the truth. Or perhaps not?

At the moment, Caleb was chatting with the last member of our poker-playing group, Michael Moon, who owned our dry goods store. Moon was a swarthy-looking character with moody ice-blue eyes that betrayed no emotion.

He rarely smiled, and the children in town were afraid of him. All of which made him the best poker player among us. Regardless of his demeanor, he was known as being a fair businessman, never overcharging his customers. Despite his steady contribution to the island, there was a nomadic quality to him I could never quite understand, as if there were a string that pulled at him to leave. A restlessness that couldn't be totally tamed even though he'd committed to staying on the island and running the store. He was honoring the promises he'd made to Roland, in exchange for what?

The Tutheridges' butler, Dexter, appeared, carrying a tray of smoked salmon nestled on thin, crisp pieces of bread. I took one and put it onto the plate next to me on the ledge even though I wasn't hungry. "Thank you, Dexter," I said, looking up to see him studying Benedict. What did the gleam in Dexter's eyes mean? He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man with eyes the greenish-gray color of the Puget Sound on a gloomy day. Partially balding, his pink scalp showed under carefully cut and arranged white hair. I'd never been able to get a read on Dexter's age. He could be fifty or eighty.

"What if it isn't one of us?" I asked, wishing I believed it possible. "What about a visitor to the island? A disgruntled associate from Seattle?"

"Unlikely," Benedict said. "No one comes on or off this island without us knowing." This was true. Roland had his own boat, which acted as a primary ferry, bringing residents and guests to and from here to Seattle and a few of the other islands. "The killer is probably here at his funeral. Isn't that a terrible thing to think about?"

"What about one of his children?" I asked carefully, not wanting to anger him. "You all had reasons to kill him."

Benedict winced. "It is true. Any of us had reasons to want him dead, most of all me."

"Why you?" I held my breath, waiting for his answer. What would he say?

"My father loved two things. Making money and having power. He had no tolerance for weakness of any kind. I'm the weakest of his children, therefore I received the bulk of his venom."

Describing Roland as a snake was apt indeed.

I nodded. "I know he was rough on his children. Everyone suspects, given —"

"Given what?" Benedict asked.

"The way you were skittish and frightened-seeming whenever he was around. Your mother, too."

"I think he'd be surprised to hear that. He thought he was so clever torturing us in private." Bitterness had crept into his tone.

I was almost glad to hear it. Not that I knew much about how the human mind worked, but it seemed to me that feeling anger and expressing it toward the father who abused you might be worthwhile.

“So, I suppose it could have been one of his children,” Benedict said. “Or his wife. God knows she’s thankful for long sleeves.”

A tremor shuddered through my body. “How bad was it?”

“She tried to keep it from us when we were small,” Benedict said. “But we used to hear the thumps and the crying.” A wave of obvious pain tugged and twisted his rugged features. “But my mother’s incapable of hurting anyone. She was too afraid of him to try anyway, even if she’d had it in her.”

“I’m sorry, Benedict. For what you all experienced. I wish I could have done something to help.”

“She could have divorced him, you know, for physical abuse.”

I shook my head. “Doubtful. Roland controls much of Seattle with his money and influence. Who do you think he lunches with at his club?”

“You’re right. She was trapped. Like all of us in the family. And all of you, brought here to do whatever he wished, working hard at your enterprises only to have him take most of the profits.” Benedict went back to his whittling, the shavings from his creation fluttering like butterflies’ wings to land upon the floor of the porch and gather around his feet like cherry blossoms on a windy spring day.

There you have it, I thought. Suspects all around us. All with reasons to wish Roland Tutheridge dead.

MATTHEW

A week after we buried Roland, I was summoned to the estate by Beatrice Tutheridge. Dexter had arrived around nine that morning as I was stocking the back with the latest shipment of booze from the mainland, asking on behalf of Beatrice to join her for lunch.

I arrived right at noon and was greeted by Dexter and taken into the living room to wait for Beatrice. A roaring fire warmed my feet, and I was starting to feel a little sleepy when she entered the room. Still wearing black for mourning, she was otherwise looking lovely. Less pinched than the last time I'd seen her, and her color was better.

I scrambled to my feet to greet her, taking her gloved hand in mine and brushing my mouth across her knuckles. "What can I do for you?"

"Let's talk over a meal, shall we?" She smiled brightly. A little too much so, as if she were trying to make something sound better than it was. Knowing Mrs. Halvorson's cooking, it would not be the lunch itself.

Soon we were seated across from each other at the long dining room table. Dexter served us each a bowl of piping hot French onion soup before disappearing in that quiet way of his. I swear the man could sneak up on a deer in the forest and give it a kiss.

"Roland's will was read yesterday," Beatrice said. "Apparently, he'd not updated it recently."

I watched her, worried. What had he done? "Is everything all right? For you, I mean."

“Yes, it’s all fine for me. It’s the children. He’s asked that the business be taken over by his first-born son. Benedict.”

I didn’t know what to say. This was unexpected, to say the least. Why would he have given it to Benedict instead of Hudson, who clearly had more of a business head?

As if I’d asked the question out loud, she nodded. “Yes, it makes no sense. Especially given how hard he was on Benedict.” She shivered. “He called his own son stupid and touched and not worth the space he took up. That was one of his very last tirades against my boy.” Her voice caught. She brought her napkin to her mouth for a second before continuing. “It’s very unusual. The only thing I can imagine is that he had the will drawn up when the boys were still small. Before we knew about Benedict’s afflictions.”

“Yes, I see.” What had any of this to do with me? I’d never been in Roland’s inner circle. Surely she didn’t expect me to explain the man’s behavior? “How does Benedict feel about this?”

“He’d rather be outside building things, as you know.”

“Yes.” I knew Benedict had been working on building a cottage of his own in recent months. I’d assumed it was his deepest wish to live away from his father.

“Hudson has no interest either. Since we lost Rosemary, you know, he’s not himself. He’s like a ghost, wandering around aimless and blank. Sometimes I think he died right alongside his wife.” She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. “He’s in no state to take over such a difficult job.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It must be very hard for him. And you too.”

“Yes, well, we have Bebe. My little sunshine. She should be enough to keep him alive, but thus far, he’s chosen to disengage with the world. Do you know some days he doesn’t even come out of his room?”

“I’m sorry. Such a shame.”

Beatrice looked down at her bowl of soup, as if there were answers in the crusty cheese. “There’s Ella, of course. She’s perhaps the brightest of all of them and has the best head for business. However, she’s a woman, which makes it impossible. She’s also attached to nursing. Ella sees it as her calling.” Mrs. Tutheridge rolled her eyes. “These modern young women are so difficult to understand. A calling? For a woman? Our calling is to be wives and mothers. Not Ella. She traipses around this island acting as if she’s a man. Do you know she told me some of the townsfolk call her Dr. Ella?” She sighed. “It’s beyond description. I don’t know any man who isn’t intimidated by her. She’ll never find a husband. Not after the reputation she’s made for herself.”

I nodded once more and waited for her to continue. There was no chance of me telling Mrs. Tutheridge how much I admired Ella or how respected she was

by the entire island.

“Briggs is the worst of all,” Beatrice said. “His passion lies in art. And chasing women. Women of ill repute, I might add. He’s been doing well for himself painting without any help from Roland, so there’s no incentive for him to take a job he calls a ‘death march.’” She tutted. “Really, where my children get these ideas, I can’t tell you. Anyway, his debauchery and drinking have made the gossip chain chatter away, embarrassing me.” She flushed and dabbed at her eyes again. “One of my friends told me he was painting women in the nude. The nude. Can you imagine how embarrassing that is for me?”

“I can, yes.” If she only knew about my past, she might not be so expressive of her opinion on such things.

“Benedict has agreed to take on the role, at least temporarily. However, I can see how tortured he is over it. He has such a sense of duty, that one. And he’s the sweetest of all my children. The most sensitive. Which is why his father went at him. Roland loved to pounce on those weaker than him. But I digress. He’s very bright, so I have no doubt he can do the job. It’s only his writing and reading skills that are lacking. Well, and sums too. I think there’s something wrong with his eyes. I’ve said so from the beginning, but the doctors can’t find a thing wrong with him. Regardless, I do believe he could run the business, as long as he had a good secretary. At least long enough to sell it. Which is what we all want, I think. We all want to live in peace here on Whale Island.”

“Yes, ma’am. Are you sure you want to sell?”

“It will make Roland turn over in his grave, so yes.”

I had to hide a guffaw by bringing my napkin to my mouth. When I recovered, I told her I agreed with the secretary idea. Most men who ran companies had secretaries. “You and Benedict can find someone suitable, I’m sure.” What did any of this have to do with me?

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m telling you all this?” Beatrice asked, as if reading my thoughts.

“A little, yes.”

“I have an idea.”

“Go on.” I lifted a spoonful of soup to my mouth.

“I’ve been thinking hard about my children over the last few days, and I’ve decided I know exactly what their problems are and how they could be solved.”

I waited.

“They need to be married. Benedict needs someone who can be his partner in whatever venture he decides to pursue after the selling of the shipyard. Someone who can read to him by the fire at night.” She teared up and paused for a moment before recovering enough to continue. “Hudson needs to find a new

mother for our Bebe. I'm not long for this world and if I die, what will happen to the poor girl? And he needs a wife to love. He believes his heart's impenetrable, but he's wrong. The right woman could break through and make him joyful again. Bebe needs a firm hand, and I'm not the one to do it."

I was completely lost by this time, but I sat quietly.

"Ella, God help me, needs a husband to tame her and remind her why God made her in the first place. Not flitting about the island pretending to be a doctor."

"Yes, right."

"And lastly, Briggs needs a good God-fearing woman. A wife who will straighten him out. Take him to church. Curtail all that drinking." She clutched the brooch at her neck. "And all the women. The naked women."

"What do you propose should be done?" I asked. "I mean no offense, but how are you possibly going to put all of this into motion?"

"That's where you come in."

One of my eyebrows shot up of its own accord. "Me?"

"Yes. I need you to play matchmaker." She called for Dexter to come join us.

I stared at her in disbelief. Matchmaker? Me? It was laughable. Or would have been if my lunch companion didn't look completely serious.

Dexter appeared before us. "What do you need, Mrs. Tutheridge?"

"Will you bring me the folder, please?"

"Yes, ma'am." He returned soon with an envelope and set it in front of Mrs. Tutheridge. She took out what looked to be a newspaper article and slid it across the table to me. "This is an article about a miracle worker back east. She matches women from the east with men, mostly out here in the western states. Apparently, she has some sort of sixth-sense gift. Those seeking a wife write her a letter describing their situation and what they're looking for in a woman. Then she searches until she finds what she hopes is their perfect match. If she's wrong and they don't take to each other, the woman simply returns, all expenses paid, to Boston. But her record's extraordinary. Ninety-nine percent of the time, she sends exactly what the man is looking for."

"Are you proposing we use her for your sons?" I was absolutely appalled and slightly amused. The Tutheridge brothers were not about to be matched with a stranger.

"Yes. And for Ella too." She gestured toward the newspaper article. "It says in there that she's matched a few women with men she finds. Isn't that the most remarkable thing you've ever heard of?"

"Yes, quite." Beatrice had lost her mind. "Your children will never agree to this."

“Again, that’s where you come in. You’re going to arrange it all for me, so there’s no paper trail if it ever gets out that they were matched.”

“Beatrice, I don’t know—”

She cut me off. “I’m no bully, Matthew. Not like my husband was. However, I know he had dirt on you. Dirt you don’t want anyone to know about. My husband kept detailed records of those he coerced into coming here. I’m sure it wouldn’t take too much digging to find a turnip with your name on it.”

Aghast, my mouth fell open. I was speechless.

“I’m sorry I have to threaten you. I truly am. But I’m desperate.” Without pausing for breath, she went on. “What we’ll do is this. You’re going to write to this Aubrey Mantle and tell her about each one of my children. I’ve written a list of their interests and habits and a few other things down on a paper right here in this envelope. But you know them too. You’ve seen them grow up. You can imagine their perfect match. You’re going to convey that all in your letter. Roland always commented on what a good writer you are, especially for a bar owner.” She ended with a flourish of her hand imitating writing in the air.

“How kind of him,” I said drily.

“You’re going to be the main correspondent so that I can’t get in trouble in case one of my clever children discovers my ruthless plan.”

“But how will you explain the sudden presence of these potential mates?”

“Well, it occurred to me while thinking about this problem with the business and my poor Benny’s bad eyes and his needing a secretary and all—and it hit me.” She smiled, triumphant. “We will send them out here under the guise of an employment opportunity. Mrs. Mantle, on her end, will tell the women and one man the same thing. They’re coming out for a job.” She counted them off on her fingers. “Secretary for Benny. A nanny for Hudson. An art assistant for Briggs. A *real* doctor for Ella.” She fluttered her hands. “Now, don’t look at me like that. She needs someone to put her in her place, and who better to do that than an actual trained doctor? In addition, she’s the first to admit she can’t do surgeries, which are needed here on the island.”

“So this Mrs. Mantle is going to find matches for not only the job duties but future spouses as well?”

She patted the table, looking like someone who had just solved all the problems in the world. “Isn’t it the best plan you’ve ever heard of?”

“Not totally, no.”

Her face fell. “You must see the brilliance of it. My children will have to be tricked into falling in love, or it will never happen.”

“All this time, I thought Mr. Tutheridge was the ruthless one,” I said. “Perhaps it’s you.”

“I was never allowed to do or say one thing I wanted when my husband was alive. All that’s changed. I’m free to do as I please.” Her blue eyes glittered, more alive than I’d ever seen them. “And for your part in all of this, I’ll give you the lease to your building and quit with these ridiculous payments Roland was making you do.”

My mind whirled with this information. Could I get more out of this than that? What about my friends? Could I get the same deal for them? “I’ll do it, but you have to do something else for me. Give Michael Moon the same deal you’re giving me. The dry goods building will be his. No more fees. For Caleb, let him keep the house he’s renting from you, and he gets to keep all his wages. Same for Timothy Bains, although I know he doesn’t pay any fees, but the house he lives in will be his.”

“Anything else?” She had crossed her arms over her chest and watched me, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes. Sheriff White needs a real home, not the room over the jailhouse.” She opened her mouth to speak, but I raised a finger. “And whatever Roland has stashed away on us—I want it destroyed.”

She touched her fingertips to the side of her face, seeming to turn all this over in her mind. After a moment, she nodded. “Yes, I agree to those terms. However, all this happens after the matches are successfully made for all four and not a moment before then.”

“Yes, agreed. But I’ll need it in writing.”

“I’ll have my attorney put something together.”

“Good. Thank you.” I stroked my chin for a second, thinking. What if one of the men I’d just mentioned had killed him? No, they weren’t murderers. Of course they weren’t. I’d seen them walk out of the bar together. Granted it was before Roland left. Conceivably, one could have jumped him on the road home. No, I dismissed the idea. For the hundredth time in a week.

“What are you thinking?” Mrs. Tutheridge leaned closer to me, narrowing her eyes. “I can see something in your face.”

“I was thinking about Roland. Who killed him.”

“Wondering if it was one of your poker-playing friends?”

“Why? Do you think it was one of them?” I asked.

She didn’t answer right away, her gaze flickering toward the window. When she returned to me, a resolute hardness emanated from her eyes. “I’ll say this, Matthew, since you asked. Whoever murdered my husband deserves a medal, not prison. I couldn’t care less if one of them did it. Or anyone I know. There isn’t a person in this town, including me, who doesn’t have motive.”

The hairs on my arms rose. “You don’t care? What about justice?”

“In my opinion, justice was served. Now we get to carry on with our lives, thank you very much.” She glanced at my plate. “Are you ready for the second course?”

Beatrice Tutheridge was full of surprises. Who would have figured she had such treachery in her? For the first time, it occurred to me that perhaps I was looking right at the murderer, stabbing into the cheese top of her soup with a fork instead of a spoon. I couldn’t help but notice the way the broth seeped out of the holes like blood from a gunshot wound.

AUBREY

On an ordinary morning in the spring of 1910, almost a year after I opened my matchmaking business, a letter arrived that would change the course of my life. Not knowing its significance, as one never does, I was still in bed waiting for coffee and breakfast to be brought up by Heidi. Since her stern talk with me more than a year ago now, she'd once more become pleased with me, assisting me however she could in my new enterprise.

I'm a hard worker, but I have a few indulgences, including breakfast in bed while I read through the letters that had arrived in the late-afternoon post the day before with requests for matches. Anyway, I found I did my best thinking sitting upright in bed with a cup of coffee on the table next to me and a pen in hand, jotting down ideas in my journal. However, when I met with clients and potential matches, the interviews were conducted in my office. It was important to me that clients and my brides, with an occasional groom, knew that I ran a business with integrity and class. Any hint of impropriety and my calling would be over as quickly as it had come. I'd be back to being rich and useless. After everything I'd lost, this could not happen.

My office was on the first floor of a building in downtown Boston. I lived in the apartment above with a small staff, including a cook, two maids, and Heidi.

I'd become a true matchmaker, diving into it as if my life depended on it. Perhaps it did. There's a sign on my door and everything. Men wrote to me from the wild parts of our country and asked if I could find them wives. It is no small task to discover a woman desperate enough to leave everything they know to travel west and marry a man they've never heard of or seen. Yet I do it.

The most important thing is that they must be the *right* match, not just *a* match. I am careful in my scrutiny, using my instincts, but also an extensive questionnaire about the possible grooms' likes and dislikes and what their lives

are like where they live. I also dig into what they're looking for in a wife, if there are children involved, religion, interests, and backgrounds. That kind of thing. After which point, I put advertisements in the newspapers in Boston and New York City with a description of what kind of woman should apply. If I like what I hear in their letters, I interview them in person and decide who I think is the best fit for the man who waits. By the time I send her off, all involved feel hopeful that the match is a good one. There is a clause in the agreement that says either one can bow out, as long as the man pays for her expenses to come back home.

I'm not entirely certain how the business grew to such a robust state. Heidi says it's because of my success rate and word of mouth. Since the article in the newspaper about me, we've been even busier. Men from all over the country now have well-suited matches because of me. They tell others about me, and the letters keep coming. I couldn't help but feel pleased with myself.

However, the letter I was about to read was different from all the rest.

March 31, 1910

Dear Mrs. Mantle,

I am writing to you from the small town of Ella Pointe on Whale Island, which is off the coast of Seattle, Washington. My request may seem odd, but I hope you'll bear with me as I plead my case.

Before I begin, I must explain that this may not be a project you wish to entertain. I presume you'll find it odd and out of the scope of your typical ventures. The three young men and their sister, desperately in need of matches, do not wish for any amount of interference in their lives. Thus, when their mother came to me asking for help, she asked that she remain out of it completely. I'm hopeful that I, too, can remain a secret from the children.

The Tutheridge family suffered from a tyrannical and cruel father, which has left each of them damaged in their own way. Their matches will have to be self-confident but also compassionate and somewhat empathetic if they're to break through the barriers the children have. Under all of it, there's a deep sense amongst them that they are unlovable and unworthy of joyful lives. Their father made sure they believed that every day by berating them, chipping away at their self-confidence until they were left only brittle shells to show the outside world. It is with a heavy heart that I mention this. I wish I could tell you differently, but I feel strongly the truth is the only way to beauty in this instance. Or any instance, for that matter. The poets don't lie in this manner, do they?

Mrs. Tutheridge is a good woman, if not beaten into submission over the years. Perhaps because her own marriage was troubled, she believes strongly that a joyful and peaceful union is the key to a good life? I don't know. As I'm

sure you've encountered in your work, people are difficult to understand. Even our own actions are often mysterious. At least that has been so for me. You strike me, having heard of your reputation, as being a woman of great intellect and heart. Perhaps you do not suffer such crisis of the soul?

Everything we do, including this correspondence, must be done discreetly. Mrs. Tutheridge has asked me to be the primary contact for you, as she doesn't want her fingerprints on any of this. If her children were to discover her matchmaking ways, they would balk even more at the idea. Thus, I've agreed to be the liaison. It might seem drastic, but their mother is correct. The Tutheridge siblings must be tricked into matches. I'm not a deceitful man by nature, but in this case, I'm afraid I must be. The Tutheridge children, although very different from one another, share a commonality. They're all stubborn as the day is long. They were left with fortunes after their father's death. This could possibly make them attractive to the wrong suitors.

At this point, if you're still reading, I should like to provide a little background about the family. After making his fortune in Seattle twenty-five years ago, Roland Tutheridge built a mansion on Whale Island, bringing his wife and two young boys with him. Once there, Mrs. Tutheridge had another boy and lastly a girl.

Allow me to introduce the Tutheridge offspring and explain their predicaments.

Benedict Tutheridge, age twenty-five, is the oldest of the four children of Roland and Beatrice Tutheridge. He is a kindhearted man who loves the island. However, he is a loner, closed off from the world. Although he is an intelligent man and well-mannered, he has difficulty reading and is hopeless with sums. He says it's as if his eyes are playing tricks on him, making letters look strange and out of order. Sadly, his father made him feel stupid all his life, verbally berating him in addition to frequent beatings and punishments, including locking him into a basement closet. His cruelty turned a sweet little boy into a brooding, reclusive man.

Unfortunately for Benedict, his father's business enterprise has been left for him to run. He is not suited for such a position, given his troubles. How is he to keep the books and manage all the correspondence?

That is where you come in, Mrs. Mantle. We would like you to send a young woman suitable for Benedict's heart but who can also act as a secretary, helping him in the business. In addition to her writing and sum skills, it's important that she have a passion for fiction. A bookish kind of woman. This is of utmost importance, in my opinion. I'll explain. When Benedict was a child, his mother read to him at bedtime. Those were the times he seemed most engaged with the

world. When he grew too old to have his mother read to him and he struggled in school, he turned to physical pursuits such as running, swimming, and playing tennis. He excels in anything physical. Still, he loves stories. I can see it in his eyes during church services how much he hangs on every word of the sermon. I daresay, he enjoys the readings from the Bible more than most young men, closing his eyes to listen as if he wants to absorb every word. Thus, a woman who enjoys church as much as she does novels would be ideal. She must enjoy reading aloud to her adoring husband, don't you agree?

In addition, she should be wise and possess a good sense of humor as well as the gumption to break through Benedict's barriers to find the sweet little boy he used to be. This isn't a lot to work with, but I hope, somehow, you will find just the right woman to send out to Whale Island. Of further note, it's important she does not understand our intentions. A woman for Benedict would not be the type who would ever agree to our shenanigans. I'm assuming you'll agree that a woman well-educated enough to keep books and run a business would not be the type of woman to agree to become a mail-order bride. Correct me if I'm wrong in that assumption, of course. I confess to being ignorant in such matters.

One other thought, and this is mine only—but I think it would be best for Benedict to believe it is a man who will come to assist him. The idea of a woman who shines in his areas of weaknesses would be too much for his pride. My hope is that once she arrived he will be so taken with her that he won't mind she's a woman.

Next is Hudson. He is thirteen months younger than Benedict, making him the second born. From the time he was a youngster, he was thoughtful and gentle, with a way with animals and children. He fell in love with a girl he met at school in Seattle when he was only sixteen. They married at eighteen and had a little daughter named Beatrice, named after his mother, about ten months later. They call her Bebe for short. She's five years old and adorable, if not a little headstrong and spoiled. Sadly, her mother, Rosemary, died from influenza when Bebe was a toddler. Hudson was devastated and remains so to this day. In fact, he's a shadow of his former self. His mother can't remember the last time he laughed. His grief consumes him. To be fair, he tries to be a good father to Bebe, but a man can only do so much, especially when in the throes of grief. He's in great need of a governess. One who knows what she's doing and can add structure and discipline to Bebe's life.

Mrs. Tutheridge does her best to help, but she's exhausted by the energetic Bebe, having already raised four children without any help whatsoever from her husband. Some might say she raised four good people despite the torment inflicted upon them by their father. Our idea is to hire a nanny who is also the

perfect match for Hudson. He claims he will never love again, except for Bebe, of course. Thus, we need a woman who loves children and will fall as hard for Bebe as she will for Hudson. The bride must be amenable to marrying a man with a child, taking on the role of mother as if she gave birth to the child herself. The way to Hudson's heart is through his daughter. Lastly, we need a woman with a sunny disposition so that Hudson's darkness will not be a hurdle for her.

This brings me to Briggs Tutheridge. What can I tell you about our Briggs to show him in a good light? Truthfully, he is a scoundrel! My English mother would have referred to him as a rake. I dare say, this isn't the type of man any woman in her right mind would want to marry. Regardless, women flock to him. His charm is undeniable.

In addition to his charms, he's an extremely talented artist. Many of the elite of Seattle hire him to paint their portraits. He spends much of his time in Seattle where he does God knows what in addition to his artistic pursuits. How I hate to admit this to you, but he enjoys women of ill repute. Frequently, I believe. Also, he sometimes paints women in the nude. Not his portrait clients, obviously, but the aforementioned women of questionable character. I cringe as I write this and am sorry to have to say it to you, a woman of high morals, I'm sure, but I thought you should know the facts.

I'd like to say Briggs spends equal time at church and the saloon, but that would be a lie. He gambles and tosses whiskey back like it's water. Despite all this, he is a kindhearted, generous man and loyal to his friends and family. Wherever Briggs is, there is a celebratory atmosphere. His niece, Bebe, adores him, and as far as I can tell, it is reciprocated by her scandalous uncle. Quick to laugh, he enjoys teasing his sister, Ella, whom he is particularly close with. All that said, like his brothers, there is a darkness to him. His father cut him off financially because Briggs refused to give up his art. That's not a concern now, of course, since Roland's dead.

His mother wishes for Briggs to come home to the island and settle down with a woman who can keep him in line. While I don't disagree that this would be ideal, I'm afraid a woman like that would only cause him to become more reckless and rebellious. He needs someone strong and intriguing but not boring or typical. A woman who will occupy his imagination and expand his current opinion on marriage. As of now, he claims to have no interest whatsoever in marriage. For Briggs, the woman should come out to be his artistic assistant. Apparently, there are brushes to wash and canvases to stretch and other details that would be of great help to him. He's had several assistants before, all men, whom he's managed to run off by seducing their girlfriends. To my surprise, he was amendable to the idea of a woman. He hates detail work and prefers to

enjoy himself rather than manage any of the “dirty work” as he put it. It’s imperative that the woman you send enjoy art. Perhaps she could be an artist herself, hungry for work? I’ll leave it to your expertise.

Finally, there is Ella. She is the only daughter in the Tutheridge family. She’s willful, opinionated, feisty, and deeply passionate about the residents of Whale Island. She has taken it upon herself to become a nurse for our community even though she was not trained to do so. Most of her learning has come from books. She’s quite efficient, and our people love her. Regardless, the island needs a doctor who can do more complicated types of procedures, such as surgery. My instincts tell me the perfect match for her would be this very same doctor. A man who will be happy to have such a clever bride by his side as they provide care to the island. He must be easygoing and have a good sense of humor. Unflappable perhaps. Patient and kind are musts. Indeed, he must be somewhat of a saintly man. Ella is a handful. This is a tall order, I understand. If you were to find the right man, we can present him as the new doctor, not as a match for her. She would run away fast if she knew our true intentions.

I’ll look forward to hearing from you. Please include your fee and a plan for how you might deliver three brides and a groom to Whale Island and the Tutheridge clan. If you have any questions at all, don’t hesitate to write to me.

Respectfully yours,

The Mystery Matchmaker of Ella Pointe

I handed the letter to Heidi. “This might be our hardest job yet.”

While Heidi read through the mystery matchmaker’s requests, I went to the window where I did my best thinking. The snow had melted, leaving the roads with puddles and mud. Carriages splattered with sludge from the hooves of horses made their way down the street. Women held their skirts high to avoid soiling their garments. Several motorcars passed with their obnoxiously loud engines, slinging dirt from their tires. Still, there was beauty, too. Flowers in pots outside of the shops peeked up toward the sun. Colorful garments were displayed in the newly opened department store. The bookshop across from my office had the latest fiction arranged in artful stacks in the front of the store.

I had many questions run through my mind. How would I ever hope to find the right matches for such a challenging group of young people? Why did the matchmaker insist on anonymity even with me? I could understand his desire to present matches under the guise of other needs, but why keep it a secret from me?

“This is quite a request, ma’am,” Heidi said. “Do you want to do it?”

I chuckled at the worry in her voice. Heidi was as deeply committed to my clients as I was. She would fret for days about the Tutheridge siblings if I were

to decline the job. Yet, was I really going to take on a nearly impossible task? Would I be able to fulfill his requests, or would it be an exercise in futility?

"I'm going to write back to him and ask a few questions," I said. "But my inclination is to tell him no. There's too little to work with. It's hard enough to match people who want to be matched and are participating in the process."

"A little magic would be helpful, perhaps?" Heidi asked.

"More like a few miracles."

That afternoon, after a walk in the park and a lunch of Mrs. Puttnam's delicious lobster salad, I sat down to write my mystery matchmaker of Ella Pointe a letter. The more I thought about it as I went through my daily business, answering letters and interviewing several young women for matches out in Montana, the more convinced I became that I would politely decline the offer.

However, when I returned to my office, I sat at the typewriter for quite some time, unable to write a word. Why was I questioning this? It was a terrible idea, one fraught with frustration and disappointment for me and the matchmaker on the other end. And their poor mother, haunted by her unhappy marriage and pinning all her hope on me? It was too much.

God, what should I do? I prayed silently. No answers came. The empty paper in the typewriter stared back at me.

Should I agree to this madness or tell him no thank you? If only I had a better idea of what the Tutheridge family was truly like, but without a proper interview or letter from them, I might flounder around for months.

I began to type.

Dear Sir,

I have received your correspondence regarding matches for the Tutheridge family. While I am flattered you think I could successfully find spouses for them, I'm afraid you may be mistaken. I've never matched couples who do not want to be matched. Or, for that matter, don't know they're being matched. Without the intensive questionnaire and interviews I usually conduct with both parties, I'm uncertain I would be able to do right by them. It's a bit like walking around in the dark and hoping not to run into anything.

Regardless, I was able to substantiate much about Mr. Tutheridge and his successful business without much trouble. The wealthy wives of businessmen

here in town knew who he was and of his reputation as a ruthless, shrewd, and punishing leader. This has made me soften further to the idea of helping his widow. I do not have children of my own, but I can easily imagine what it would be like to want to protect them and provide for them a better future than the past they've endured.

I lifted my fingers from the keys. Then I muttered under my breath that no one liked a coward, least of all me. What if I could make a difference in ten people's lives? What if by some miracle, I could find the Tutheridge children the perfect mates? Should I try?

I returned to the typewriter, clacking away, surprising even myself with the answer.

However, I'm compelled to say yes anyway, with the understanding between the two of us that I may not succeed. I'll need more information about each of them. Whatever you can think to tell me will be helpful. Perhaps Mrs. Tutheridge could send me a letter with her own thoughts about her children, including a story or two about them that gives me more insight than I currently have.

I am curious, too, why you must remain a mystery even to me? Wouldn't it be easier if I knew who you were and why you're so invested in the Tutheridge family?

Regardless, I will close now to get this into the mail this afternoon. Please write back with further details as soon as you can.

I hesitated, lifting my fingers from the keys. What should I charge them? They could afford an expensive fee, and I could use the money for my soup kitchen down at the church. We might be able to feed people for a whole year if I were to ask for double what I usually charged. Or triple? In the end, I decided on fifty dollars a match. If they declined, then so be it. This was a nearly impossible task, one that would take every ounce of my skills and intuition. They should have to pay for that. And again, I could fund many meals with the money.

I went back to the typewriter and continued.

My fees are fifty dollars per match, with payment due once the match is accepted by both parties. If the matches I send do not work out, I'll expect Mrs. Tutheridge to pay for their return to Boston. If these terms are not suitable, then I'm afraid I must steer you elsewhere.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Aubrey Mantle

While I waited for correspondence from my new clients, I began the process of recruitment. As I usually did, I arranged for the ads to run in the Boston and New York newspapers. Although the ads usually contained more information about the proposed match and his circumstances, I could not be up-front about the true nature of the inquiry. I didn't like it but felt better knowing that I was actually advertising legitimate jobs. Even if the matches didn't work out, they would have completed a job of some kind.

In the Sunday edition, my ads were in the employment section in various locations, depending on the type of job listed. I scanned them quickly, wondering who else might be reading them at this very moment.

In addition to listing the job and qualifications, I asked them to bring letters of inquiry to my office address. This way I could take a good look at them and invite them to stay for an interview if I thought they had potential.

Seeking experienced secretary to assist gentleman in the running of a family business. Must possess good writing skills. Other requirements include: Must be under thirty years old, unmarried, a book lover, and able to be flexible as well as organized.

Seeking medical doctor willing to move to a small island town off the coast of Washington state. Requirements: Must be under thirty years of age, unmarried, and fully licensed to practice medicine. In addition, a sense of humor, loyalty to family and friends, and the ability to enjoy a quiet country life.

Seeking assistant for successful painter and portrait artist. Willing to do tedious tasks, such as cleaning up and stretching canvases. Must agree to move to a small island in Puget Sound near Seattle. The ideal candidate should desire a quiet, uncomplicated life while working for a complicated man. Must be under thirty, unmarried, and well-educated.

Seeking governess or nanny for widowed father of a five-year-old girl. Must be under thirty, unmarried, love children, and be willing to move to a quiet island. Those seeking a rewarding position in a beautiful albeit remote location encouraged to apply.

After seeing the advertisements in the papers, I prayed the right candidates would appear. This was a job of faith.

MATTHEW

“What does it say?” Mrs. Tutheridge asked me.

I had read through the letter from Mrs. Mantle with great interest and amazement that she’d agreed to work with us and was now sitting with Mrs. Tutheridge in my small living room in the apartment above my bar.

I handed it to her. “You can read it yourself.”

She did so, nodding a few times before looking back at me. “She said yes. I can’t quite believe it.”

“I agree. I thought she would think the whole thing too difficult.”

“Or possibly salacious. We could be nefarious criminals. But it’s clear she did her research on us.”

I laughed at her serious expression. “Your husband’s company is more well-known than you think.” In truth, I hadn’t thought about Mrs. Mantle being unsure of the truth of our request or who we were. In hindsight, I should have. Our request must have seemed extraordinary to her. What did it say about her that she agreed? A hint of adventure and challenge embedded in her very nature? I would imagine so.

“I shall go home and write the letters to Mrs. Mantle this afternoon,” Mrs. Tutheridge said. “But what shall I say about each of them?”

“Tell the truth,” I said. “That way it will be more apparent who is the right match for them.”

“Yes, you’re right, certainly. It will be challenging not to scare off any potential mates.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, look at them, Matthew. They’re raining problems. Briggs is a womanizing scoundrel. Hudson rarely leaves his wing of the house, and his daughter is spoiled and undisciplined. Of course, I love her anyway, but she

needs a good mother. Benedict is a wild outdoorsman, rough on the outside and like pudding on the inside. And, well, Ella, she's possibly the most difficult to match. How will she ever find a man who will find her ambition and sass attractive? And a doctor, no less?"

I chose my words carefully, not sure I believed them myself. "Mrs. Tutheridge, I believe now is the time to pray for a few miracles."

"Amen to that." She patted my hand, reminding me of my mother who so long ago had left me for heaven. If only I'd had someone to love me as fiercely as Beatrice Tutheridge loved her children.

About two months after Roland's murder, we gathered for our first poker game since his death. We were quiet for the most part, playing cards and betting with poker chips worn smooth from use. The chair that had once been occupied by Roland was cast aside and we all inched right or left, depending, to envelop the space where he'd once spent many hours trying to win at a game of luck and skill. We'd established from our first game that we did not play for real money, using only wooden chips, which all went back into a bucket at the end of the evening. Winning earned bragging rights but nothing else. Otherwise, Timothy, as a pastor, had said he could not play. Gambling for money was a sin, but playing for fun had no repercussions, apparently. Caleb said he was too poor to play unless it was for pretend money only. Roland had not cared about real cash, as he had so much, but wanted only to win.

There was a weight in the room that night, all of us avoiding the subject of Roland and his murder. Were any of them suspicious of me? Looking around at the faces that evening, I couldn't imagine any of them capable of murder. However, I didn't know what Roland had rescued them from. They didn't know about my past, either. Regardless of how much time we'd all spent together, there were still secrets.

We'd never talked about what had brought us to the island. Or what we were running from. Or what Roland had done for each of us in exchange for our undying loyalty. For Michael and me, we'd been obligated to give Roland fifty percent of our earnings. I knew this because we'd shared a half bottle of whiskey one night and confessed to each other how poor we were despite our businesses flourishing. Even so, I still had no idea what had precipitated his move here and

the deal with the devil.

We were all free from him now. Did that give any of us the incentive to kill Roland? The answer was a resounding yes.

I'd had a few good hands that night, but not good enough to win. I was down twenty chips by nine o'clock. "Count me out of this one," I said. "I'm going to pour myself a drink. Anyone else?"

Timothy asked for a sarsaparilla. He never touched alcohol except on Communion Sundays. The spoonful of red wine could hardly be counted as a drink. The others asked for whiskeys. I brought out four glasses and the bottle, along with Timothy's cold mug of sarsaparilla. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror behind the bar. My dark hair was beginning to have a lot of white in it, especially near my temples.

When I sat down, they were just finishing a game. Timothy had won with three queens, and he grinned as he scooped the chips toward him. "I guess God's on my side tonight."

"He's usually on Michael's side," Caleb said, picking up his glass. "Michael wins more than the rest of us combined."

Michael shrugged and said without smiling, "I was born lucky."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you cheated tonight, Pastor." Sheriff White lit a cigar, and a puff of smoke shrouded his face for a moment before lifting toward the ceiling.

"How do you know I didn't?" Timothy pushed back a clump of silver hair that had fallen over his forehead.

"You're a man of the Lord," Caleb said, followed up by his charming grin.

"And not nearly bright enough to know how to cheat at cards," White said.

"Very funny," Timothy said.

We all chuckled. I got up and poured another round of whiskey for the four of us. They all glanced up at me, obviously surprised. I rarely gave them free drinks. In the past, I couldn't afford to give away profit. Not when Roland had been around, anyway. I hadn't yet told them about Mrs. Tutheridge's request or how they would benefit if I was successful in marrying off her children. Should I tell them? They might be useful to me. A small town needed all its members to contribute to an effort such as this.

"Gentlemen," I said, splaying my hands on the table. "I have something to speak to you about."

Caleb had lit a cigar of his own and now pushed his chair back from the table. "Is this about Roland?"

"And who murdered him?" Michael asked, a teasing lilt to his voice. "Because half the town seems to think it was one of us."

"They do?" Timothy asked. "Not me, surely."

"I heard a few of the mothers talking outside school today," Caleb said. "The rumor's going around that it has to be one of us."

"Yeah, folks been avoiding looking my way all week," White said, cigar dangling from one side of his mouth. "Mrs. O'Brian actually switched to the other side of the street. I wanted to yell 'boo.'"

"I'm glad you didn't," Timothy said. "As that would have been unkind."

"White, why do they think one of us did it?" Caleb asked.

Our sheriff spoke with the cigar still hanging out of the side of his mouth. "We were the last to see him. In most cases, I'd be looking at us too."

"Are you looking at us?" I asked.

"Maybe," White said. "But I'm a suspect, too, if the townsfolk have anything to say about it." He yanked the cigar from his mouth. "Here's what I'm thinking. Roland had a lot of enemies, and a lot of folks hated him. Everyone on this island is suspect. The problem is, no one's going to talk about whatever grudge they had against him, and no one will tattle on them because Roland's death benefits pretty much all of us."

"None more than us," I said.

"Why's that?" White watched me with eyes that suddenly held the glint of the detective he'd once been.

"You know why," I said. "We all know the five of us were bound to Roland. He knew our secrets and how keen we are to keep them that way."

"If one of us did it, then it would be in response to a new threat he posed," Caleb said. "Because unless something changed, why would one of us murder him now? We've all been here for years."

"That's a good point," Timothy said. "So what changed? Who wants to confess?"

"No one's confessing," Michael said. "Because none of us did it."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I saw you all headed home that night," Michael said. "From my living room, I can see the whole street." Like me, Michael lived above his store. "I hate to say it, but I think it was one of his sons. They had motive too."

"Too?" White asked. "What would be your motive, Moon?"

Michael's light blue eyes hardened as he returned White's glare man to man. "You want to know why I'm here on the island? Is it truth-telling time?" He swept his hand through the air. "We should all confess about why we're here on the island and why we would want Roland dead."

"You start," White said.

"Are the rest of you willing to do so too?" Michael asked, looking around the

table.

“I will,” I said. “It’s about time you all knew my story.”

“I will, too,” Caleb said in his quiet way. “It would be a relief, actually.”

“What about you, Sheriff?” I asked.

“I can guarantee you, mine is the worst offense among us,” White said. “But yes, I will.” He pointed at Timothy. “Will you be joining us, Pastor?”

“Yes, I’ll speak the truth. As long as it stays here.” Timothy’s gaze skirted toward the door, as if he expected someone to enter.

We all nodded and then were silent, the air heavy with the secrets we carried.

“I’ll go first,” I said. “I worked at a bar over in Seattle, owned by a man named William Brown. I’d never been married, even though I was past thirty by then.”

“Why was that?” White asked.

“I spent my youth as a cowboy—traveled all over the west running cattle. I was a cook, actually. Not really a true cowboy,” I added, feeling sheepish.

“You were a cowboy?” Caleb asked, sounding as if he didn’t believe me. “And a cook?”

“I thought you were raised out east,” White said. “Fancy like. The way you talk makes you sound rich.”

“My father was a professor, but we were poor as church mice,” I said. “When I was young, my mother died. Then when I was nearly finished with school, my father perished as well, leaving me with nothing much there to stay for. So I followed my heart out west and ended up running cattle.”

That seemed to satisfy White because he gestured for me to continue. “Go ahead, Matthew.”

I ran my thumb over my prickly chin, gathering my thoughts. “I was getting old and decided it was time to settle down and live a life easier on the body and spirit. When I arrived in Seattle, Brown hired me almost immediately. I told him I could cook and tend bar, whatever he needed.” I whistled between my teeth, shaking my head over the horrible beast I’d had to work for. “He was as mean as the day is long and worked me many hours for not much pay. But I had a room at a boardinghouse that kept me dry and warm, so it was better than sleeping on the ground.” I paused. “Brown had a daughter. Named Mary.”

“Here we go,” Michael said. “A woman enters the picture.”

“Always a bad sign,” Caleb said.

“Mary was pretty and sweet. We started talking one day outside the bar, and then I started taking her for walks along the water. Nothing untoward, mind you, but I liked her. I might have even been in love. Well, the old man saw us one day and fired me. Told me he never wanted to see me again. That night, his bar

burned to the ground.”

“And they blamed it on you?” Michael asked.

“That’s right. Even though I didn’t do it. If you ask me, Brown did it himself for the insurance money. But everyone blamed me, and I couldn’t get a job.”

“Enter Roland Tutheridge stage right,” Michael said.

White popped his cigar out of his mouth and fixed his gaze on Michael. “Stage right? What are you, some kind of actor?”

“Used to be,” Michael said.

“What?” Caleb asked. “Why haven’t you volunteered to direct a play with the students?”

“I do not care for children,” Michael said, his blue eyes cold.

“What happened next?” Timothy asked. “He offered you a bar here?”

“Yes. Said he’d have it built for me, with an apartment above. Only caveat? I paid him half of my profits into perpetuity.”

“Perpa-what?” White asked.

“Forever,” Caleb said.

“What happened to Mary?” Timothy asked, sounding very preacher-like with his kind tone and soft eyes.

A twinge of pain snapped at me. I didn’t think of her often. It had been such a long time. But every once in a while, she’d cross my mind, and I’d relive a little of the heartbreak all over again. “She did as her father wished and married a rich man old enough to be her father. To this day, I’m sure she believes I set the fire.”

“That’s disgusting,” Caleb said. “The old man part, not you.”

“So, that’s my story,” I said. “Would I have liked to keep the profit of this place all to myself? Sure. But I also had a pretty good deal. Room and board plus a job I like.”

“But we’re talking a change in lifestyle, now, aren’t we?” White asked. “If he were to suddenly turn up dead?”

“That’s correct. But I didn’t kill him,” I said.

“I’ll go next,” Caleb said. “My story’s simple. I worked as an English teacher at a girls’ school in upstate New York. I fell in love with one of my students. Lily was her name. She loved me, too, but we never acted upon our feelings. I kept her at a distance, even though it was torture. Keep in mind, I was only twenty years old and she was eighteen. If it hadn’t been for the teacher-to-student relationship, there wouldn’t have been anything indecent about it. But her father didn’t see it that way. He was wealthy and powerful and got me fired. They threatened to revoke my teaching certificate if I didn’t leave town and never come back. I came out here with nothing. Strangely enough, I met Roland in a

bar and I'd been drinking, so my whole story poured out. He offered me a position here on the island, and I took it."

"What did he require of you?" Timothy asked.

Caleb didn't answer for a moment, as if contemplating whether he should. "He asked that I work with his oldest son, teaching him how to read faster and do sums."

"Did you do that?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"I did." Caleb wrapped his slender fingers around his glass. "Whatever ails Benedict was beyond my teaching capabilities. Which angered Roland. He stripped me of most of my pay from then on. I've been living as a pauper ever since."

"You've got to be kidding me," White said. "He blamed you for his son's problems? What a bastard."

We were silent for a few seconds until Michael volunteered to go. "I embezzled money from my employer. The man I stole from was a friend of Roland's. When Roland heard the story of my disgrace, he came to see me and asked me why I did it. I told him I was sending it home to my mother, who needed an operation. That was all true. Roland said he wanted a dry goods store on the island and that clearly I was clever with numbers if I'd been embezzling for a year before they caught me. He'd talked my employer into not pressing charges. He gave me the same deal he did you, Matthew. Fifty percent of the profits and a place to live. I had no other choice, so off I went on his boat."

"What happened to your mother?" Caleb asked.

"She died on the operating table." Stone-faced, Michael picked up his whiskey and drank. "That's my story."

"I'm sorry," Caleb said. "About your mother."

"It was a long time ago now," Michael said.

"When were you an actor?" White asked. "Which seems as far-fetched a thing as I ever heard."

"That was in New York. Just for a few years in my early twenties." Michael took another drink. "I was talented. Had the gift, they used to say."

"How? What? Why?" White asked. "No offense, but you don't seem like the actor type. Don't they have to have expressions? Emotions? That kind of thing?"

Michael's jaw clenched. With those cheekbones of his, it was easy to see every muscle twitch in his face. "I haven't always been like this." Michael rubbed the corner of one eye, his voice thick. "Once, I was a young man with dreams and a warm heart. Life has a way of ending all that nonsense pretty quick."

"All right, that leaves you two," I said, gesturing toward Timothy and the

sheriff.

“My story is simple,” Timothy said. “A teenage girl in my congregation accused me of trying to seduce her. She was the daughter of an influential member of the church. I was run out by way of the pitchfork.”

“Surely not?” I couldn’t believe it. Timothy was a man of integrity. He would never have done such a thing.

“I didn’t seduce the girl,” Timothy said. “I hardly knew her. But it didn’t matter. She was the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of the pillars of the church and community. They believed her. As did my wife.” He paused, breathing deeply. “She filed for divorce, took our ten-year-old son, and went back to her mother in the east. I’ve not seen them since.”

A shock ran through me, causing my toes and fingers to tingle. Timothy had a son? He would be twenty-five by now if he was five back then. “Timothy, I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it from the bottom of my heart.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Timothy said. “Roland somehow heard my story and asked me to come here and start a church. In exchange, I was to assist him—” He stopped, words hanging in the air as we waited. “Keeping his women a secret from his wife.”

“How were you supposed to do that?” White asked.

“I shuttled them back and forth from the mainland. A delivery service of sorts.” Timothy looked down at the table, smoothing it with his hands. “I might take a little of that whiskey.”

I poured some into his empty glass. Things were really starting to get interesting. Our pastor was drinking while the rest of us confessed all our sins.

“Are you saying you brought the women from Seattle?” White asked. “As in, sneaking them onto the island for Roland to do whatever he wished and then took them back?”

“Usually, it was like that.” A shadow seemed to come over him. I could almost see the figure of the grim reaper standing over him. “There were other scenarios as well, but those are stories for another time.” He downed the entire glass of whiskey in one gulp. I got the distinct feeling that he might partake in a little whiskey at home, too. “Sheriff, you’re next.”

Robert White set his cigar crossways over the rim of his glass. “Mine is simple as well. I fell in love with a murderer, set her free, and was forced to disappear.”

“You what?” Timothy asked, having recovered from his own confession. “Was she a murderer when you fell in love with her?”

“Yes. Viola was in my jail. I was on night duty, being the youngest of the deputies. It was just the two of us in a small room consisting of a desk and a cell.

From the cot, she told me the story of her life. ‘Someone should know my side,’ she said, ‘before they hang me.’” White paused to take a sip of his whiskey, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. His gaze fixed on the table, he seemed to fade into the past. “Viola’s was a sad tale, as they almost always are if they land in my cell. Her father forced her to marry a man she didn’t love. She did as she was told, knowing she would be out on the streets if she didn’t cooperate. This poor excuse for a man beat her senseless almost every night. One evening he came home drunk and nearly killed her. If it hadn’t been for the neighbor hearing her screams, he might have. She recovered, with only a scar near her eyebrow to prove it had happened. For weeks, she lay awake at night looking for a way out of her hell, but there were no answers. Nowhere to go. No one to turn to. The next time he came at her, she shot him point-blank with his rifle.”

“Good Lord,” Michael said.

“She was taken into custody and accused of his murder and left in a jail cell until her trial. It was my cell and my watch, and I let her go. Sent her off with all the money I had, some food, and a ticket out of town. Then I told everyone she’d escaped. No one cared about how she’d disappeared—only that she had. The thirst for blood was thick. I was the one who either let her escape or helped. Either way, it was on my watch. I was fired. And then, as Michael said, Roland entered stage right. Offered me the job here.”

“And the payback?” I asked.

“I looked the other way on matters of the law. For him and for any of his children.”

“In what way?” Michael asked, leaning forward. “What ways did he break the law?”

“Taking things that didn’t belong to him,” White said. “Using people for his own pleasure and then tossing them aside. I cleaned up the messes. That’s all I can say.”

I was right about one thing. We all had motive to kill the devil at our poker table. The question was, which one of us did it?

“Maybe we don’t care,” Timothy said. “Maybe we don’t care who killed him or that he’s dead. Wouldn’t it be best if we all just went on with things? Started anew, without having to answer to Roland ever again?”

“It would be a good choice, in my opinion,” I said. “Which brings up the other subject I wanted to discuss with you. I met with Beatrice Tutheridge. She has asked for my assistance in a delicate matter. One that if carried out to her liking, will free us all once and for all. She has no desire to catch the killer. In fact, I think she’s afraid it’s one of us, or worse, one of her children. I don’t think

she'll be pressing you, Sheriff, to solve the crime. Instead, she's focusing on making the lives of her children better. They suffered the most by their father's cruelty. I didn't know quite how much until we spoke. After his death, that is. She wants to find them all good matches and has asked me to help."

"Matches?" White asked. "As in marriage?"

"Correct." I rubbed my chin. Stubby facial hair tickled my thumb. "Like all of us, the Tutheridge children are damaged. She doesn't believe they'll be able to find the right mates without help from a professional matchmaker." I told them about my correspondence with Mrs. Mantle, concluding with her offer. "If I am successful, we're all released forever from the burdens of our pasts. She will promise to keep our secrets and relinquish us from all former agreements with her husband."

"What's this to do with us?" White asked. "His death made all that true. We don't need her *blessing*." He said the last word with a snarl in his voice, evoking the image of a wolf.

"We're already free, aren't we?" Caleb asked. "Now that he's dead?"

"This would wipe it all clean. She would destroy the notes Roland took about us over the years. She gave me her word. Otherwise, won't we wonder if our indiscretions will be passed on to his children? Whoever becomes the next Roland could continue to extract the same fees, so to speak."

"You have your work cut out for you, then," White said. "Because those Tutheridge kids are as messed up as we all are. Anyway, I think one of them did it."

I hoped he was wrong about the Tutheridge siblings. Only time would tell.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Tess Thompson writes small-town romances and historical romance. She started her writing career in fourth grade when she wrote a story about an orphan who opened a pizza restaurant. Oddly enough, her first novel, "Riversong" is about an adult orphan who opens a restaurant. Clearly, she's been obsessed with food and words for a long time now.

With a degree from the University of Southern California in theatre, she's spent her adult life studying story, word craft, and character. Since 2011, she's published 25 novels and 6 novellas. Most days she spends at her desk chasing her daily word count or rewriting a terrible first draft.

She currently lives in a suburb of Seattle, Washington with her husband, the hero of her own love story, and their Brady Bunch clan of two sons, two daughters and five cats. Yes, that's four kids and five cats.

Tess loves to hear from you. Drop her a line at tess@tthompsonwrites.com or visit her website at <https://tesswrites.com/>

