



To Honor and Trust

✦ BRIDAL VEIL ISLAND ✦

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CHAPTER 1

BRIDAL VEIL ISLAND, GEORGIA
JANUARY 1913

Callie Deboyer opened the ornate front door of Fair Haven, certain there had been a terrible mistake. Who was this woman? Surely she couldn't be the nanny Mrs. Bridgeport had hired for the children.

With hat askew and mousy brown hair laced with strands of gray jutting in all directions, the woman standing on the other side of the threshold squinted at Callie through the screen door. Did she dare open the door of Luther and Eunice Bridgeport's elaborate twelve-bedroom cottage to this woman?

"Good morning." The woman leaned forward. "I'm Maude Murphy, the new nanny. Are you Mrs. Bridgeport?"

Callie cautioned herself to withhold further opinion. If this was indeed the newly hired nanny, she didn't want to start things off poorly. She didn't want to be accused of judging a

book by its cover, but this woman was not what she'd expected. Maude Murphy came with a fine recommendation from one of the former residents of Bridal Veil Island, but this woman's appearance belied someone with years of experience as a nanny to wealthy families. Despite the fact that Mrs. Bridgeport and Mrs. Murphy had exchanged correspondence, they'd not yet met in person, and Callie couldn't help but wonder how their first meeting would go. Would Mrs. Bridgeport be as shocked as she was?

Mrs. Murphy's shoulder sagged a bit to the right, probably due to the weight of the traveling case she grasped by one hand. At the sound of clattering shoes in the hallway, Callie glanced over her shoulder. Five-year-old Daisy stopped behind Callie and peeked around her skirts while seven-year-old Lottie stared at the woman.

Lottie leaned forward until her upturned nose touched the screen. "Who are you?"

Before Callie could correct the girl's unsuitable manners, Mrs. Murphy stooped down and placed her nose near the other side of the screen. Nose-to-nose, they stared at each other for a moment. "I am Mrs. Murphy. Your new nanny. You must be Lottie."

Lottie took a quick backward step. "You're too old to be our nanny."

"Lottie! You owe an apology to Mrs. Murphy."

Oh dear. So did she. She'd kept the poor woman on the porch now for several minutes. Without waiting for Lottie to beg the woman's pardon, Callie reached forward and opened the door. "Do come in, Mrs. Murphy. I'm sorry to have kept you standing on the porch." Callie gave Lottie's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "What would you like to say, Lottie?"

Lottie coughed as she inched forward. “I’m sorry I called you old, but our other nanny, Miss Sophie, was young like Miss Callie.”

Daisy stepped from behind Callie. “Miss Sophie got married.” Lottie gave the older woman an appraising look. “Are you going to get married?”

Mrs. Murphy sat her traveling case inside the front door. “I’ve tried that twice before. I don’t think I’ll be doing it again.”

The children appeared confused, but Callie didn’t give them an opportunity to ask further questions. “Why don’t you girls run upstairs and tell your mother that Mrs. Murphy has arrived and we’ll meet with her in the sitting room.”

Lottie coughed as she and Daisy ran up the steps. Mrs. Murphy watched for a moment. “Is the girl sick?”

“No, but she does suffer with a cough some of the time.”

Mrs. Murphy nodded. “I see. Well, I don’t want to take charge of children in need of constant medical care, if you know what I mean. I’m not good around sickness and such.”

Callie peered at the woman, wondering why she would become a nanny if she didn’t want to care for a sick child. “All children are ill from time to time, but the Bridgeport children are generally quite healthy.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

The two of them were as different as day and night, clearly separated by much more than their years. Using her own five-foot-six-inch height as a guide, Callie surmised Mrs. Murphy would measure a mere five feet, perhaps a little less. The woman’s hair was dull and askew, while Callie’s rich coffee-brown hair bore a beautiful sheen and had been carefully arranged. She couldn’t condemn the woman for the deep lines that creased her weathered face or for the extra pounds that had settled

around her midriff. She'd obviously lived enough years to earn every wrinkle and pound. Still, Mrs. Murphy's outward form proved a stark contrast to Callie's flawless complexion and trim figure. There hadn't been much wind this morning, so Callie decided the woman's rumpled appearance must have come about during her boat ride across the Argosy River from Biscayne. If not, Mrs. Bridgeport might dismiss the woman before she'd even begun her position.

"Would you like to straighten your hat before we sit down, Mrs. Murphy? There's a mirror in the sitting room that you can use." Callie waved the older woman toward a rectangular mirror surrounded by a frame of molded brass and tortoiseshell. The mirror was perfectly centered above an ebony side table. With its spiral-turned legs and carved ivory figurines, the table was a favorite purchase of the Bridgeports, made during their European travels.

Mrs. Murphy stepped in front of the mirror, tucked one loose strand of hair behind her ear, gave the no-nonsense felt hat a tug, and turned around. "That will do for now. I figure the missus is more interested in my ability to care for the children than whether my hat is perched at a proper angle."

She propelled herself across the room with a short-legged gait and settled on the pale blue upholstered settee. Her feet barely touched the floor, and Callie wondered if this woman would prove capable of handling young Thomas Bridgeport. At twelve years of age, he was already taller than Mrs. Murphy, though she likely outweighed him by at least twenty pounds. Still, Thomas could be a handful—especially if he decided he didn't like someone.

"I understand you've worked as a nanny for several wealthy families in the area, Mrs. Murphy." Callie took a seat in an

open armchair near the settee. From the appearance of her work-worn hands and ragged fingernails, Callie wondered if Mrs. Murphy's recent employment had been as a nanny or a housekeeper.

Callie immediately scolded herself for the judgmental notion. She disliked the fact that so many of the women in the Bridgeports' circle of friends judged everything from outward appearance. Shortly after she'd begun to work for the family, Callie realized that she'd taken on some of those same behaviors. Over the past couple of years, she'd been asking God to nudge her when such thoughts crossed her mind. God had been faithful to answer her request. It seemed as though He was prodding her far more frequently than she'd expected.

Mrs. Murphy squared her shoulders. "I sent my letter of reference to Mrs. Bridgeport."

Callie hadn't intended to insult the woman, but Mrs. Murphy certainly appeared offended. "I know she was pleased with the recommendation, or she wouldn't have hired you to work with the children."

Mrs. Murphy gave a firm nod that jostled her hat back to its previous off-centered position. Given the woman's curt reply, Callie couldn't decide if she should mention the hat. Before she could make up her mind, Mrs. Bridgeport sashayed into the room, wearing a pale yellow dress of imported batiste, adorned with wide inserts of French lace. Her ebony hair was fashioned in a perfect Grecian coiffure that accentuated her azure eyes and fair complexion.

Before greeting Mrs. Murphy, Mrs. Bridgeport hesitated and let her gaze sweep over the woman. She clasped a palm to her bodice and flashed Callie a look of concern before returning her attention to the new nanny. "Good morning, Mrs. Murphy."

Mrs. Murphy scooted forward on the settee and bobbed her head. The movement was enough to launch her hat into a graceful pirouette. All three women stared at the chapeau as it came to rest on the patterned Axminster carpet.

Mrs. Murphy jumped to her feet, retrieved the hat, and squashed it atop her head with the flat of her hand. “That ought to hold for a minute.”

“I’d be pleased to loan you a hatpin, if you’d like.” Callie edged forward on her chair.

“That’s not necessary. It will stay put if I don’t move my head much.”

Callie nodded. “In that case, I’ll leave the two of you to your discussion and go upstairs to help the children unpack their belongings.”

Mrs. Bridgeport gestured for Callie to remain seated. “I think you should stay, Callie. After all, you spend almost as much time with the children as their tutor and can likely answer some of Mrs. Murphy’s questions more easily than I.”

Callie sighed and settled back in the chair. She would have preferred to be elsewhere while Mrs. Bridgeport conducted her interview with Mrs. Murphy. Callie knew her mistress well. Being present meant Mrs. Bridgeport would ask Callie’s view of the newly hired nanny. If there was one thing Callie didn’t want to do, it was give an opinion.

Mrs. Bridgeport sat in a chair opposite Mrs. Murphy. “I don’t normally hire anyone without a prior personal interview. However, when I received the superb recommendation from Harriet Winslow, I thought you would be perfect for our children.” From the quiver in her voice, Callie guessed Mrs. Bridgeport wasn’t truly convinced she’d made the right decision.

“I met your daughters, and I believe we’ll do just fine.” Mrs.

Murphy's lips curved in a half smile. "Your letter said you also had a twelve-year-old boy. I haven't met him yet, but I know boys can be taxing from time to time. 'Course there's plenty for boys to do here on the island, so between his teacher and me, we should be able to keep him from getting into too much trouble." She shot a look at Callie. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Bridgeport said. "I plan to enroll Thomas in golf and tennis lessons. And he enjoys riding horses, so I doubt you'll find him the least bit troublesome. He's a fine young man."

"Too bad he doesn't have a brother. Boys seem to behave better when they have a brother close to their own age."

Mrs. Bridgeport shifted in her chair. "He has three older brothers. The two closest to his age are in boarding school. Thomas will turn thirteen next year, and he'll then go off to join his brothers at boarding school." Mrs. Bridgeport rang a bell for the housekeeper and requested she bring a tray of lemonade. "Have you worked for any of the other families on Bridal Veil, Mrs. Murphy?"

"No, I haven't, but if you want another recommendation, I could see about getting a letter from one of my other employers. They've moved to Boston, but I think I have their address."

Mrs. Bridgeport opened her fan and flapped it back and forth. "That won't be necessary. I'm sure this will work out just fine." She glanced toward the hallway. "Have your belongings been delivered? I saw only one small case by the front door."

"They should be bringing them up from the dock anytime now."

The housekeeper reappeared with a pitcher of lemonade and three glasses balanced on a silver serving tray. Mrs. Bridgeport motioned for her to place it on the side table. "Mrs. Murphy,

this is our housekeeper, Lula Kramer. Lula, this is Maude Murphy. She is replacing Miss Sophie as the children's nanny."

Lula glanced at Callie before she turned and smiled at the new arrival. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Murphy. I'm sure you'll be very happy here. When you're ready, I'll be pleased to show you to your living quarters upstairs." Maude tipped her head as she thanked Lula. This time her hat slipped forward but stopped just short of falling off. Lula pointed to Maude's head. "Would you like me to put your hat over there with your traveling bag, Mrs. Murphy?"

Maude snatched the hat from her head and finger-combed her disheveled hair. "I'll just hold it. No need to bother yourself."

Mrs. Bridgeport lifted the pitcher to pour lemonade, but before she had finished, Maude jumped to her feet. "I'm not particularly fond of lemonade. I believe I'll take Lula up on her offer to show me to my room." She held her hat in front of her like a shield. "Unless you have some other questions for me, Mrs. Bridgeport."

"No, that's fine. We'll talk more later—after you're settled. I'll want to go over your duties so there are no misunderstandings about my expectations."

Callie didn't miss the concern that deepened the creases in Maude's face. No doubt she was uncomfortable, and who could blame her? Being the new person in a household was difficult. To find one's place within the familial framework without offending the employer or other staff often proved to be a challenge. Callie had been readily accepted by both family and staff, but that was due to the Bridgeports' friendship with her grandmother. There had been no barriers for her to surmount, but she had seen new servants falter under

such pressures. Mrs. Murphy appeared confident and strong-willed. Perhaps she could overcome the scrutiny that was sure to come—not merely from the Bridgeport servants but from servants in other households, as well.

Once the two were out of earshot, Mrs. Bridgeport handed Callie a glass of lemonade. “She isn’t at all what I expected.”

Callie took a sip of her drink. “She seems nice enough.”

Mrs. Bridgeport frowned. “Did you see her hair? And that hat? The hem of her dress was frayed. Didn’t you notice? Mind you, Callie, I’m not going to judge her abilities on a frayed hem, but she’s not what I anticipated. Harriet Winslow is a woman of impeccable taste, and I simply cannot imagine her hiring someone as unkempt as Mrs. Murphy to care for her children.”

“The Winslow children are much older now. Perhaps Mrs. Murphy was a little tidier when she worked for them. If she’s good with the children, that’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Bridgeport traced her finger through the condensation on the outside of her glass. “I’m not sure that’s true, Callie. If the person charged with teaching a child to be neat and well groomed is unkempt, what does that say to a child?”

“She’s likely gone upstairs to refresh herself. The next time you see her, I’m certain you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“Eunice!” The screen door banged, and Mr. Bridgeport strode into the hallway. “There’s a trunk being delivered from the dock. The wagon’s out front. Where does it go?”

“Upstairs to the nanny’s room. Mrs. Murphy has already arrived.” She shooed him aside. “I’ll direct them.”

Spying the pitcher of lemonade, Mr. Bridgeport helped himself to a glass. “Good morning, Callie.”

“Good morning, Mr. Bridgeport. Did you have a good hunt?”

A smile curved the man's lips. "Indeed. They'll be serving some of the quail for dinner at the clubhouse tonight." He dropped into one of the chairs. "Nothing like a morning hunt in the great outdoors to revive the spirit."

Callie wasn't sure about the hunt part, though she did enjoy watching an early morning sunrise on Bridal Veil Island. A sunrise or sunset in the city simply could not compare to those on Bridal Veil. She stretched forward and eyed the front door. "I thought Thomas was with you."

"He is—or he was. I gave him permission to remain at the barn and help curry the horses. He'll be back in an hour or so." Using his thumb as a pointer, Mr. Bridgeport gestured toward the stairs. "How's the new nanny? You think the children will like her?"

"She's quite different from Sophie. Older."

He nodded. "Well, if she passed Eunice's inspection, I'm sure she'll do just fine." He downed the remainder of his lemonade. "I'd best get out of these hunting clothes before Eunice sees me sitting on her good furniture." He turned toward the hallway but stopped as Mrs. Bridgeport and Mrs. Murphy descended the stairs.

For a moment, his mouth gaped open and his eyebrows furrowed as he stared at the two women. "In heaven's name, who are you?"

"Luther, I'd like to introduce you to our new nanny, Mrs. Murphy."

Callie leaned forward and immediately understood Mr. Bridgeport's puzzlement. Although Mrs. Murphy had changed her dress, she appeared even more rumpled than when she'd first arrived. If she didn't prove to be excellent with the children, Callie feared Maude would soon be seeking another position.

During the few weeks since Sophie's marriage, Callie had managed to act as both nanny and tutor, but to attempt to handle both positions through a full winter would be impossible. Locating, interviewing, and hiring a qualified candidate now that they were in Georgia would prove extremely difficult, if not impossible. Most locals wouldn't want to move north once the family returned home. Callie pressed her hands together and offered a silent prayer that Mrs. Murphy would prove to be a perfect nanny who would shower the children with affection.



CHAPTER 2

Eager to check into his room, Wesley Townsend strode toward the steps of the Bridal Veil clubhouse. He'd been opposed to coming along on his family's yearly winter retreat to the South but had eventually given in to his mother's tearful plea. Now, after traveling by train from Massachusetts to Georgia with his married siblings, their spouses and children, as well as his parents, Wesley needed some time to himself. Not that he didn't love his family, but he had grown exceedingly weary of their constant talk about his future. Each one of them seemed to think he or she knew what was best for him. And all of them agreed that the first order of business was to find him a wife. But Wesley had no intention of seeking out a wife at this stage of his life. Too much had happened over the past few years and he needed time to discover exactly what he wanted to do before he thought about marriage—not the other way around.

“Do slow down, Wesley. This isn't a footrace; it's a vacation.” Blanche Townsend tugged on her son's arm and glanced over her shoulder. “We've left the rest of the family in our wake.”

“They're not that far behind, Mother. I'd like to get registered and into my room.”

“I think your father will need to take care of the registration, Wesley. We’re here at the invitation of Josiah and Margaret Wade. Your father made the arrangements for all of our rooms through Josiah and the hotel director.” She glanced about the perfectly manicured grounds. “Use of the facilities on this island is by membership or invitation only. Since the Wades were sailing for Europe, it was most kind of them to offer us their apartments.” She squeezed his arm and smiled. “We can wait in those lovely wicker chairs on the porch.” She tipped her head closer. “I told Margaret I don’t think I’ll sail for several years. After the disaster with the *Titanic* last year, I’ve developed an aversion to ships.”

“I don’t think you need to fear sailing, Mother. There are train wrecks, yet you still ride trains.”

“I know you’re right, Wesley, but still . . .” She clasped a hand to her bodice and shook her head. “Those poor people. I do hope the Wades will be safe.”

“As do I,” he said as they climbed the steps and sat down on the wide porch that surrounded the huge clubhouse and surveyed the lush lawns and ornamental shrubs.

For as long as he could remember, their family had wintered in Virginia at White Sulphur Springs. He’d been astonished when his father had announced the family would visit a new locale this winter, but his surprise had vanished when he learned two textile investors would also be visiting the island. His father would be closing a deal to expand the family’s textile mills in Massachusetts as soon as they returned home in the spring, and he likely planned to mix business with pleasure while on Bridal Veil.

No doubt his older brothers, Charles and Daniel, were also in on the scheme. And his sister Helena’s husband, Richard Kennebec, who also worked in the family business, had probably

been the one to discover the investors would be on the island. Since his marriage to Helena, Richard had used his ability to sniff out such details in order to help the company. Wesley had heard rumors his brother-in-law enjoyed gambling, and he now wondered if Richard gathered his information at the racetrack and gaming tables. For his sister's sake, he hoped this wasn't true, for he had a few friends who had ruined their lives with such pursuits.

His mother stepped to the railing as his father climbed the steps. "When will they bring the luggage, Howard? I do want to freshen up as soon as possible."

Helena and Richard approached the front steps moments later. Richard carried their baby boy while Helena attempted to keep the two girls in tow.

Howard Townsend raked his fingers through his thatch of thick white hair. "I must go inside first, Blanche. Give me a few minutes and we'll get settled." His jaw twitched as he turned and looked at Wesley. "Look after your mother while I take care of registering the family and securing our keys."

Wesley nodded. He doubted his mother needed "looking after," but he didn't argue. The twitch in his father's jaw meant only one thing: The family patriarch was reaching the end of his rope.

"I believe this is going to be a wonderful change of pace for all of us, don't you?" His mother let her gaze sweep from one family member to the next. "It's too bad Charles had to remain in Massachusetts." His mother glanced toward Daniel. "And your father says you'll be staying only a week or so. That saddens me very much."

Wesley didn't comment, but he thought Charles and Daniel were the fortunate ones. He would be here all winter, listening

to how his life had taken a wrong turn and that he needed to move forward and make some decisions regarding his future. With the acquisition of several woolen mills due to take place as soon as they returned to Massachusetts, Wes was expected to manage the new mills, or be prepared to support himself with some other form of meaningful employment.

“If Father is going to be away all winter, Charles and I need to be in Massachusetts to take care of the business. Melody may remain an extra week or two, but she doesn’t want to be separated for too long.” Daniel grinned. “We are newly married, after all. And Father will be working while he’s here. He plans to hold several meetings with investors who will be vacationing at Bridal Veil.” At age twenty-eight, Daniel had as much charm as a dose of castor oil.

“What happened to my fun-loving brother?” Wes eyed Daniel and scooted to the edge of the wicker chair. “I remember when you enjoyed playing tennis and riding horses.”

“The rest of us grew up and learned to work for a living. How long has it been since you’ve actually done anything useful, Wes?”

The words stung like salt in an open wound. “I’m not sure anyone in this family believes I’ve ever done anything useful, Daniel—especially you and Charles.”

“Now, boys! Let’s don’t ruin our vacation before it’s even begun.” Blanche patted Wesley’s shoulder. “And we all know how hard you worked in college and medical school. And down in Texas, too.”

His sister, Helena, bobbed her head. “And I’ve commended you over and over for the work you did with those New York doctors, Wesley.”

“That’s right, Helena. We all have expressed our admiration.”

His mother glanced at the group with a look in her eye that defied any one of them to disagree. “Haven’t we?”

“There’s no need to coerce them, Mother. I know what they think. And frankly, it doesn’t matter. I don’t dictate how they should live their lives, and I’m not going to permit them to have a say in mine.”

Daniel shook his head. “We’re not attempting to tell you what you should do, Wes. But you’re twenty-five years old. You’ve said you don’t want to return to medicine. If that’s the case, you know you’re needed in the family business. With the recent acquisition, there’s a real need for you to step up and manage the new mills.”

The family business was the last place Wes wanted to spend his time. Working in the office of the family textile mills was as unappealing as a toothache, but it appeared this entire vacation would be riddled with pressure for him to take his “rightful place” in one of those mills.

“I have keys!” Wesley’s father strode toward them with several keys in his hand. “All of the rooms are adjoining except for yours, Wes. They couldn’t manage to get all of us together. I hope you won’t mind.”

“Not at all. Just hand me my key, and I’ll find my room.” Wes stepped forward and extended his hand.

His father clamped his hand around the keys. “They have their own way of doing things here at the clubhouse, and we’ll be expected to abide by the rules.”

Wes exhaled a long breath. “I’m sure there will be ample time to hear the rules later.” He hoped his father wasn’t going to read a set of regulations before they could go to their rooms.

Mr. Townsend waved the family to silence. “The first rule is that the hotel staff will escort each family to their room.

They want to be certain we are properly settled. We are asked to wait in the grand sitting room just inside the front doors or enjoy ourselves here on the porch until our name is called. The hotel clerk said a young lady would be out shortly to serve us lemonade.” He extended his arms to Helena’s daughters, and both little girls came running to him, each one settling on one of his knees.

Wesley was surprised by the show of affection. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when he’d sat on his father’s knee. In fact, he didn’t recall his father being home much at all during his childhood. When they’d spent winter months at White Sulfur Springs, his father would remain for only a week or so, and then he’d return to his work in Massachusetts. Shortly before their departure for home, his father would reappear to travel home with them. And during his summers in Lowell, Wesley spent most of his time outdoors with his brother or friends. Exploring the woods had instilled an interest in trees and plants that had never left him. While in college, he’d taken a number of botany classes and had enjoyed them so much that he’d briefly considered becoming a botanist rather than a physician. His life wouldn’t be in this present state of disarray if he’d become a botanist or landscape architect—anything other than a medical doctor.

The clerk called out his father’s name, and both girls jumped down. “Can we come and see your room, Grandpap?”

Any sign of his earlier irritation vanished as he winked at his granddaughters. “As soon as your mother and father give you permission, you can come to our rooms.” He leaned down and kissed each of them on the cheek before they followed the hotel clerk.

Wesley reached for his small traveling case and withdrew a

book. While his brother and Richard were talking about the textile mill, he read about the art of architectural landscape. Once he had settled his belongings into his room, he planned to begin exploring the island. He was eager to find new floras that were listed in his book. On their short buggy ride from the dock to the clubhouse, he had observed any number of plants he'd never before seen. And the landscaping around the cottages and clubhouse was magnificent—proof that work could be found for good landscape architects.

Helena's husband, Richard, leaned against one of the thick white porch columns. "I hear they have an excellent golf course here on the island, Wes. That should keep you occupied for the entire winter."

Wesley couldn't decide what bothered him more—Richard's arrogant sneer or the sarcasm in his voice. For an instant, Wesley considered mentioning the racetrack as the place where the family would likely find Richard, but such a comment would hurt his sister more than Richard.

"Thank you for thinking of me, Richard. One of Father's friends told me about the course before we left Massachusetts. If it's as good as he said, then you can be sure I'll spend a great deal of time there." He flashed a smile at Richard. "You should give golf a try. The fresh air and exercise might help you."

"Is that what you learned in medical school? A little fresh air and exercise will fix any problem?"

"It won't fix all problems, but fresh air and exercise are proven to aid good health." Wes patted his stomach. "And it appears you've put on a bit of weight."

"I could have told you fresh air and exercise aid good health. It would have saved your father the money he spent sending you to medical school."

“Stop, Richard!” Helena reached for the baby in his arms. “Take the girls and let them watch the croquet game on the lawn.”

Once they were alone, Helena took a chair next to him. “Don’t let Richard’s comments bother you, Wes. He’s not happy unless he’s irritating someone.”

Wesley glanced over the railing at Richard and the two girls. “The girls are growing up. They’re good-looking children.”

Helena’s lips curved in a forlorn smile. “I long for the days when they were much younger and more dependent upon me.”

Wes chuckled. “You could always have more. Besides, they’re only five and seven. It’s not like they’ve become adults just yet.”

“Speaking of children, when are you going to find a girl and settle down? Mother mentioned several young ladies she thinks would be perfect for you.” Helena resituated the squirming baby on her lap.

Wes pushed up from the chair and settled against the white wooden railing that surrounded the porch. “I’m beginning to think this entire vacation was arranged to either force me to accept a position at the textile factory or to find me a wife.”

“Or both.” She grinned at him. “You know Mother and Father. When they come together with a plan, they usually circle around and tighten the ranks.”

“So there is a plan?”

She held up her hand. “I was only joking with you. However, you know that Father believes you should be doing something with your future.”

He closed his book and tucked it back into his bag. “I’m glad to hear that everyone knows exactly what I need.”

“We’re your family, Wes. We all want you to succeed and

be happy.” She swatted a pesky fly away from the baby. “Did Mother mention the masked ball to you?”

“No.” He sighed. He disliked the formal events that the resorts seemed to think necessary each season. “Why so soon? Couldn’t we enjoy at least a week or two without some formal gathering?”

Helena flashed him a smile. “I believe this is a welcoming ball so that newcomers like us can get acquainted with the other guests. It wouldn’t be a welcoming ball if they waited for two or three weeks.”

“Maybe I can convince Mother I don’t need to get acquainted.”

Helena laughed. “You know better than that. The rest of us received our instructions about the teas, card parties, and balls that we’re expected to attend before we ever departed Massachusetts. She likely feared you wouldn’t come if you’d received the information in advance. You have a few days’ reprieve. As I recall, the ball won’t be held for three more days. Oh, the clerk just called our name.” She jumped up and waved to Richard. “Bring the girls, Richard. They’re ready to take us to our room.” She patted Wes on the arm. “I’m sure they’ll come for you soon.”

He nodded. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Wes leaned back in his chair and watched his sister and her family as they made their way to the hotel entrance. In some ways, he wished he could be like Charles or Daniel or Helena—that he could be satisfied marrying the proper socialite and working for the family business. But he didn’t fit the mold. And he doubted he ever would—not after all that had happened in Texas. In fact, he wondered if he would ever find peace again.