

THE MAKING OF A MATCHMAKER

A PREQUEL

THE MYSTERY MATCHMAKER OF ELLA POINTE

BOOK ONE

TESS THOMPSON

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*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.