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CATE CAMPBELL

A BENEDICT HALL NOVEL

THE
BENEDICT
BASTARD



Books by Cate Campbell

Benedict Hall

Hall of Secrets

The Benedict Bastard

THE BENEDICT BASTARD

CATE CAMPBELL



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Table of Contents

[Books by Cate Campbell](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[A READING GROUP GUIDE](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[BENEDICT HALL](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

For the “little kids,” with love,

Judy, Bo, and Sarah

Staunch companions on the journey

CHAPTER 1

Bronwyn fitted a cigarette into her holder, and looked around for some gentleman to offer her a light. The Cellar was crowded with partiers, a crush of people elbowing one another, stepping on one another's feet, shouting to be heard over the din. There were never enough tables, and chairs were crammed together any which way. She had a flint lighter in her handbag, but she decided it wasn't worth trying to reach under her chair to drag it out. In any case, if it was smoke she wanted, an abundance of it hung in the air, billowing against the low ceiling, dimming the lights in their stained shades. Her dress would reek of it in the morning.

Fortunately, her maid was a wizard at dealing with that. And had plenty of experience.

Bronwyn leaned against the brick wall, crossing her silk-stockinged legs and brandishing the Bakelite holder like a scepter. Johnnie pushed his way toward her through the throng, holding the drinks aloft in his two hands and turning sideways to fit his bulk between the chairs. He grinned as he caught sight of her. He evaded the waving arms and tossing heads, managing somehow to set the cocktails down without spilling. He collapsed onto a chair that was much too small for him, and dashed at the perspiration dripping down his cheeks. "Gosh!" he cried. His voice was barely audible above the tinny plonk of the player piano's keys. He leaned close to make himself heard, enveloping Bronwyn in a gust of gin-scented breath. "I think half the town is down here!"

Bronwyn picked up her cocktail and eyed it, tipping it this way and that.

"It's a Fallen Angel," Johnnie bellowed. "That's your drink, isn't it? A Fallen Angel?"

"It doesn't look like one," Bronwyn said doubtfully. "Gin and lime and crème de menthe? It should be green."

"Well—it's sort of green." Johnnie peered at the cocktail. "Willy said it was a Fallen Angel."

Bronwyn shrugged. "Never mind," she said.

"What?"

She waved her hand, and took a sip of the drink. It wasn't a real Fallen Angel, though Willy, the barman, had tried to make up for the deficit of crème de menthe by adding sugar syrup. At least here at the Cellar she could trust the gin. As she had laughed to Johnnie the last time, they could trust the gin at the Cellar because Willy made it in his very own bathtub.

"Come on, Bron, let's cut a rug," Johnnie said. He tossed back his own drink, which was probably straight gin—Johnnie wasn't the discerning sort, which was why he was content to squire Bronwyn Morgan around the speakeasies of Port Townsend. He jumped to his feet and reached for her hand.

"I don't see where," she protested.

"We'll make room, over there in the corner. Come on, we'll put another nickel in the piano. Everybody wants to see you do the Black Bottom!"

Bronwyn polished off the drink, grimacing at the bite of rough gin and sour lime. The taste didn't really matter. It would have been nice to have a real Fallen Angel, like the ones people drank in New York and Seattle, but gin and dancing were why she had come to the Cellar. Gin, awkward dancing, loud voices, bad music, bad company—they irritated her enough to distract her from the other irritants in her life. She got to her feet, and Johnnie gripped her hand to pull her through the crowd.

People nodded to her and spoke her name as she wound among them. Most of them called her Bronwyn, because she was by far the youngest woman in the place. There were a few—men mostly—who called her Miss Morgan. They were the ones who would no doubt mention having seen her stirring afresh the embers of her father's wrath. She smiled brazenly at each of them, and flourished

the cigarette holder. When the Black Bottom began, she threw herself into the steps, making her skin swirl to show the satin garters clasped around her thighs.

She liked the Black Bottom, because it had no rules. The dancer didn't have to touch her partner—in the case of Johnnie Johnson, this was preferable—and she was limited only by her own talent for movement. Bronwyn knew her personal faults very well, assisted in her understanding by her father's frequent reminders, but she also knew her strength, and it was dancing. The foxtrot, the rhumba, the swooping steps of the tango, all came as naturally to her as walking.

It was what had first drawn Preston to her, at the Bartletts' reception three years before. She had been dancing.

On that day, in the summer of 1920, she hadn't worn garters or carried a cigarette holder. She had dressed in the most modest of afternoon frocks, a drop-waisted georgette with a scarf hem and a lace-edged collar with long points. She had recently cut her hair in the Castle Bob, and her mother had allowed her a touch of lipstick. She was sixteen, but she was certain she looked at least eighteen. She had just been accepted into the Cornish School, and she was feeling very grown-up, a young woman with the world at her feet and a shining future.

Now, at nineteen, she understood that the younger Bronwyn had been as naive as a kitten. She had believed that an older man's attention, the shine of admiration in his eyes, the way he watched her every movement, meant he had fallen in love with her. And she had—dizzily, breathlessly, passionately—fallen in love with him. He was a decorated war hero. His family was even wealthier and more respectable than her own. His dancing made her feel like a creature made of cloud, swirling as weightlessly as a puff of mist.

She was older and wiser now, and neither condition brought her much joy. She swung into the high-thrusting motions of the Black Bottom, knowing that her father hated this dance. He said it was because he didn't like girls flinging themselves about, but Bronwyn understood it was the sensuality that offended him. She hadn't known the Black Bottom when she was sixteen. She wouldn't have understood it.

Someone put another nickel into the piano, and a Charleston began. Without bothering to see if Johnnie joined her, Bronwyn began the dance. It took more space than the Black Bottom, but people stepped back to give her room. The rhythm swept her up. She was adept at the sliding kick-step, the shimmy, the coordination of hands and knees and feet. Her heeled pumps skimmed the floor, and her beaded dress shimmered. Johnnie tried to keep up, but his big body was awkward, and his efforts made her laugh. She knew every step, having seen all the films, with a pianist beneath the screen inventing tunes to match the dance. Bronwyn had invented a few of her own steps, too, which would no doubt soon show up at someone's debutante ball or engagement party.

Someone else would have to demonstrate them, though. She wouldn't be invited to these events. Her parents had fooled no one by sending her to Vancouver. No one in Port Townsend would mention the matter in the presence of Chesley and Iris Morgan, but everyone knew their daughter was ruined. No matter how frantically she danced, no matter how many Fallen Angels she drank, she couldn't pretend otherwise.

Still, she couldn't hate him. She had loved Preston Benedict. She was still in love with his memory

* * *

In that faraway summer of 1920, everyone Bronwyn knew was giddy about the new decade and the unfolding of a peacetime era. Port Townsend was recovering from the collapse that had threatened the city twenty years before. Businessmen were growing fat on the boom in lumber sales, and planning their profits from the new paper mill. The more daring among them padded their incomes by importing Canadian liquor for the speakeasies in Seattle. The boys who made it safely home from the

war were celebrated as heroes, and had their pick of Port Townsend beauties.

Bronwyn and her friends read *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and planned their debuts. They cut their hair and rolled their stockings, and tried, in secret, to learn to smoke cigarettes. They liked to think of themselves as daring, independent women of the new century, but in truth, they were very like their mothers. They understood the rules of their social circle. Though they cast off their corsets and shortened their dresses, their magical girlhoods were meant to end, inevitably, in fairy-tale weddings.

None of the girls gave much thought to what came after. There would be honeymoons. They were expected to know how to choose menus and entertain guests. They would learn to manage maids and cooks and laundresses. To Bronwyn and her friends, marriage was just a grown-up version of playing house.

Their fathers treated them like dolls on a shelf, to be seen and admired until they would, one day, be plucked down and settled on a different shelf. Their mothers watched over them like swans over their cygnets, guiding their steps, protecting their good names, eyeing the young men to sort out the ones with the best prospects. Both mothers and fathers believed, as their own parents had, that the less girls knew, the better off they were.

The girls grew up in blissful ignorance of their own physiology. They were told their monthly periods were the curse of women. No one explained why, or how they were connected to the greater mystery.

Bronwyn's view of romance was more Jane Austen than D. H. Lawrence, more *Snow White* than *The Scarlet Letter*. The union of men and women was a misty, magical idea, a fantasy of white silk and flowers, of veils and pearls and wedding cakes. She knew nothing of the realities of flesh and blood, of passion and pain, or of treachery.

Such a lovely June day it had been, when Bronwyn and her friends Bessie and Clara clustered near the French doors of the Bartletts' ballroom, giggling and whispering together. Their mothers were nearby, but the girls were doing their best to ignore them.

Bessie nudged Bronwyn. "Don't you just love a man in uniform?" Bessie was wearing a dress with a high collar, to hide the reddish freckles that so embarrassed her. Bronwyn and Clara had found a recipe for her, a paste of rye and tartar and oil of roses, but it wasn't working.

Clara said, "The Bartletts invited all the officers up from Fort Worden." She blushed as she said it and turned her back on the knot of young men gazing around the room.

Bronwyn looked past her at the reception line, where the Bartletts stood with their daughter Margaret. The party was in Margaret's honor, to signal the end of her debut year. Margaret had always been plain, but she looked almost pretty today, powdered and pressed and coiffed. The officers bowing over her hand did indeed look handsome, the whole crowd of them, with their shining boots and polished buttons. Bronwyn was about to say so when Bessie whispered, "Who is *that*?" and the other girls turned to look at the stranger just entering from the garden.

Time suspended for Bronwyn. The soldiers in their uniforms faded from her consciousness, vanquished by this new arrival. He paused in the doorway, and her heart paused with him.

The afternoon sun burnished his pale hair to gold. His suit was the latest cut, broad shoulder, pleated trousers, a vest of taupe silk. In his breast pocket, just peeking out so everyone could see, was a notebook and pen. He was not particularly tall, but his features were finely cut, and his eyes—oh! Such a clear, pale blue, shining even across the crowded ballroom.

Bessie hissed in Bronwyn's ear, "D'you know who that is? That's the newspaperman! The columnist!"

"What columnist?" Bronwyn whispered back. Her mouth had gone dry, and her heart resumed its beat, thudding hotly beneath her silken frock.

"With the *Times*, silly." Bessie poked her with an elbow. "He writes 'Seattle Razz.' Everyone

reading it!”

“*He’s the one who writes ‘Seattle Razz’? But he’s so young!*”

Bessie shrugged. “Not so young, I guess. I mean, he went to the war and everything. Of course he doesn’t wear his uniform anymore, but Mama says he was a captain in the British Army. Has all sorts of medals and things.”

“Oh . . .” Bronwyn gazed at him in astonishment. She had never seen a more appealing man. He came into the ballroom with a step that was modest, almost diffident, as if he wasn’t sure anyone would notice him. He touched his hair in an absent way, smoothing his forelock back with one finger. It didn’t stay, but fell down again over his forehead, a strand of gold gleaming above those ice-blue eyes.

Bronwyn could hardly breathe past the melting sensation in her breast.

“And,” Bessie went on, parceling out information like sweets from a box, “he’s one of the Seattle Benedicts. You know, the ones who have Benedict Hall. On Millionaire’s Row.”

“Oh . . .” Bronwyn said again. It wasn’t like her to be wordless, or to lose her composure, but this man was nothing like the callow boys she knew, nor even like the grinning soldiers lined up on the opposite side of the ballroom like puppets. He was just—just—*perfect*.

She could hardly bear to watch him bow over Mrs. Bartlett’s hand, then take Margaret’s. Margaret gave him a coquettish smile, confident in her lace-and-chiffon afternoon frock, her drab hair caught up with loops of pearls.

Pain shot through Bronwyn at the idea that Preston Benedict might take a shine to Margaret Bartlett. Perhaps he would even ask her parents if he could court her. She was the proper age, after all. Her family name was impeccable. Worse, she was looking her best today.

Bronwyn felt a sudden and staggering sense of loss. It made no sense, since she hadn’t even met Preston Benedict, but she yearned toward him nevertheless. He flashed a smile at stupid Margaret before he put out his hand to Mr. Bartlett. Bronwyn wanted to push her way through the crowd and seize his arm.

She knew what her mother would say about him. He was not only too old to be introduced to a young lady who was not yet out, but he was a newspaperman. Iris Morgan maintained that a real lady appeared in the papers only three times in her life: at her birth, at her marriage, and at her death. She might make an exception for a debutante event, perhaps a ball or a fashionable tea. She would never ever approve of her daughter being mentioned in “Seattle Razz.”

A small band, trumpet, saxophone, and piano, began to play from an inner corner of the ballroom. Young men glanced around in search of partners. George Bartlett, Margaret’s younger brother, started toward Bronwyn, but Iris Morgan, appearing as if from nowhere, stepped between them. Though she blushed at having to assert herself, she said, “No dancing, Bronwyn. Not until you’re out.”

“But, *Mother!*” Bronwyn cried. “Bessie’s dancing, look! And Clara!”

“I don’t think your father would like it,” her mother said, glancing around as if Chesley might show up at any moment.

“You let me dance at Clara’s birthday party!”

“That wasn’t public.”

“Mother, please! Just let me dance with George. It’s his house, after all.”

Iris hesitated, gazing at her daughter, lifting a hand to smooth a wrinkle in her collar. “I just don’t know . . . I’m afraid . . .”

“*Mo-ther!* You’re always afraid.”

George reached them at that moment, saying brightly, “Good afternoon, Mrs. Morgan. You look so lovely—you could be Bronwyn’s sister!”

“George, shame on you.” Iris colored, and gave an embarrassed titter. “Such flattery.”

It could have been true, though. Bronwyn and her mother looked much alike. Their honey-brown hair was dressed in identical finger waves, firmly fixed with flaxseed gel. Their eyes were the same hazel, sparkling with flecks of gold. Iris's skin had grown soft around her chin and throat, but it was still fine-grained and clear.

Bronwyn took advantage of the awkward moment by putting out her white-gloved hand for George to take. "Just one dance, Mother," she said. "Listen, it's the new foxtrot! Please."

Iris didn't exactly give her permission, but she sighed, and as she pressed an uncertain hand to her embroidered bodice, the young people made their escape onto the dance floor.

George wasn't much of a dancer, but he was better than nothing. Bronwyn danced the foxtrot with him, then a one-step and the Castle Walk. She felt her mother's worried gaze on her, but she didn't look back for fear Iris would make her stop. When she saw Preston Benedict watching, she pretended not to notice, but she made her steps smoother, her turns swifter, the movements of her head and hands as graceful as she could. Her skirt fluttered gratifyingly around her ankles, and the narrow scarf around her throat rippled like a ribbon of cloud.

When Preston cut in, George was forced to give way. A slow waltz began, and Bronwyn, her head fluttering into her throat, took special care not to catch her mother's anxious eye. She floated away from Preston's assured clasp, and knew in her bones that her life would never be the same again. Her fairy tale had begun.

In the bliss of gliding across the dance floor in his arms, of feeling his cheek brush her hair, in the enchantment of being chosen over every other girl in the room, Bronwyn Morgan forgot that even a fairy tale has its dark side.

CHAPTER 2

The new automobile had a distinctive smell to it, a scent Margot couldn't name. She sniffed curiously as Blake closed her door and climbed into the driving seat. As he pressed the starter, Margot settled herself against the mohair velour, and removed one glove to caress its silken texture. "Do you like it, Blake?"

"Do you mean the motorcar?"

"Yes."

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror, and reached up to adjust the angle. "Well, Dr. Margot," he said, his deep voice noncommittal. "It's certainly a change."

"Green!" she marveled. "I can hardly believe Father could make such a racy choice."

"It's elegant, don't you think? It's called a Phaeton. The steering wheel is solid walnut."

"Very chic."

"Yes. I believe it's quite up-to-date." Blake smiled at her in the mirror as he put the automobile in gear. He pulled out into Fourteenth Avenue, and didn't speak again until he had safely negotiated the turn. "I recommended the black, but Mr. Dickson wanted something different from the Essex. I believe he hopes Mrs. Edith will bring herself to ride in it."

"But she rode in the Essex, didn't she? After the accident, I mean?"

"Only to go to the cemetery. And later, Steilacoom."

Blake was being tactful. For more than a year, Margot's grieving mother had hardly set foot outside of Benedict Hall except to visit an empty grave. Everything had changed when she learned her younger son was alive. Nothing would do for her then but to go straight to the state hospital where Preston was being held. Margot and her father feared Edith would break down when she saw how badly Preston was burned, and when she grasped the truth of the terrible things he had done.

They had misjudged her.

Edith made regular visits to see her son until he was moved to a private sanatorium in Walla Walla. That was too far for a day trip, whether by motorcar or by train. Edith was planning to visit, and frequently spoke of it. Margot doubted this was a good idea, but it was the only thing her mother took any interest in. She sent Preston packages from home, she bought him clothes and toiletries, and she kept his place set at the dining table in Benedict Hall, ready for the day of his return.

Margot suspected Edith would have responded the same way if Preston had gone to jail, which was his only remaining alternative. Edith had an infinite capacity for denial where her youngest son was concerned.

Blake interrupted her thoughts. "Do you like the new motorcar, Dr. Margot?"

"I do," Margot said. "It's quieter than the Essex. The upholstery is beautiful."

"Indeed. Very handsome."

"But green! It seems like a symbol for something. A sea change, perhaps."

"It has been a year for change," he said mildly.

"Blake, you're a master of understatement."

"Yes, ma'am," he said gravely, and Margot chuckled.

Curious eyes followed them as the sparkling automobile rolled at a majestic pace into the East Madison neighborhood. Small boys stared, and some pulled off their caps in awe. Women with shopping bags turned their heads. Blake behaved as if he didn't notice, but Margot smiled and waved with winning tentative nods. There was no room to pull over in front of the Women and Infants Clinic, so

Blake was forced to stop the Cadillac in the middle of the road. An elderly Negro woman came out of the house across the street to gape at it. Blake tipped his driving cap to her, and she dipped a rather elegant half-curtsy, as if he were royalty. Even Blake had to chuckle at that.

Sarah Church came dashing out to meet them, her nurse's cape rippling around her. Blake opened the door of the Cadillac, and as she climbed in, he relieved her of the case of medicines she carried. She dimpled at him, and pressed her hand to his arm before she climbed into the back beside Margot.

She perched gingerly on the mohair upholstery, as if afraid her slight weight might mar its smooth surface. "Dr. Benedict," she breathed. "Your new motorcar is—I mean, it's just—"

"Isn't it, though? I think so, too, and so does your neighbor across the street." She smiled at Sarah and patted the seat. "Come now, lean back. I've been assured we can't hurt the material by sitting on it. Let's enjoy this splendiferous ride while we gird our loins for battle."

"Are we going into battle?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm told Mrs. Ryther is something of a terror."

"It's hard to imagine that, considering the work she does."

"Perhaps you have to be a terror to take on such burdens. How many children does she have now?"

"Over a hundred, I believe."

Margot shook her head in wonder. "I'd be cranky if I had so many children to watch over. I suppose if she's difficult we should make allowances."

Margot leaned back, and gazed out the window at the sparkling day. It was good to be outside the hospital for a few hours, to be driving through the green-boughed streets of Seattle. Spring blossoms were all around her, sprawling rhododendrons blazing pink and red, azaleas flashing their starry flowers against the layered greens of fir and pine, cedar and vine maple. Every year, May surprised her with its heady scents and glowing colors, as if the rains of winter had erased its memory.

Nineteen twenty-three was off to a fine start in every way, as far as Margot was concerned. Benedict Hall hummed with life, and it was hard sometimes to know who was where.

Cousin Allison was always in motion, rushing off to her University classes, racing back to snatch up her tennis racket or a stack of books. The family's telephone rang even more often than Margot's, almost always for Allison. She had taken to flopping on the floor, so the maids had to step over her legs, until Blake ordered a chair brought from the small parlor so the girl could sit properly for her endless conversations. He had issued strict instructions to the staff that they were not to eavesdrop on these telephone calls, but no one believed those orders had any effect at all.

Little Louisa had begun to walk in earnest, toddling at top speed wherever she went. Nurse followed with her hands outstretched, ready to pick her up when she fell, and trying to prevent her tumbling down the long staircase. Everyone in Benedict Hall doted so on the baby that Nurse had put her foot down about naps and bedtime and what she called "too much excitement." The excitement, Margot thought, came mostly from Louisa herself, who found entertainment in everything she saw, from the Irish maids' freckles to Hattie's long apron strings, which she liked to use for balance as she negotiated the kitchen on her fat, unsteady legs.

Frank had settled nicely into living in the Benedict household, and Hattie, delighted at his young man's appetite, exerted herself to make his favorite meals. Since he preferred simple dishes, mashed potatoes and roasted meats, Hattie's skills were shown to better advantage than when she strove for the *haute cuisine* Edith had ordered in the past. Ramona was too busy with the baby to fuss much over menus, and Edith had lost interest, with the result that the food in Benedict Hall was both plainer and tastier than it had ever been.

And Margot, somewhat to her surprise, loved being Frank's wife.

She thought about this as they turned north on Stone Way toward the Ryther Child Home. She had feared she wasn't suited for marriage. She feared giving up her independence, and she worried about

diluting the single-mindedness that carried her through the daily challenges of her medical practice. She had found, however, that coming home to Frank in the evenings, sitting close to him as the family gathered to listen to the cabinet radio in the small parlor, climbing the stairs with him at night, sometimes even having time for breakfast with him in the morning, strengthened her. She felt as if she had a foundation from which she could accomplish nearly anything. She was Dr. Benedict all day, and at night if she was called out to a patient. But in the evenings and in the early mornings, at rare social events or when she and Frank slipped out alone, she was Mrs. Frank Parrish, and she liked it very much indeed.

She came out of her reverie as Blake pulled the Cadillac up in front of a large brick building. It had three floors stretching to either side of a formal entrance. Flowers and shrubs filled the front garden, surrounded by a picket fence. Ranks of clotheslines stretched the length of one side of the building. Four surprisingly small children were taking down dry clothes and piling them into a basket. They turned to goggle at the automobile, and at the people emerging from it and turning up the walk.

They did make a sight, Margot supposed. She was taller than most women, and she was carrying her medical bag. Sarah Church, with the box of medicines in her arms, was petite, and very pretty, with bright brown eyes and thick curling hair pinned up beneath her nurse's cap. Blake, leaning on his cane, insisted on accompanying them, saying he wasn't sure just what they would find inside.

And of course, Blake and Sarah were Negroes, while Margot wasn't. That alone would cause a stir.

They paused at the entrance to the house. Sarah said, "I did make a telephone call to Mrs. Ryther to tell her we were coming, but we might be a little early."

Margot nodded, and knocked briskly on the door.

It opened immediately. A young girl, aged fourteen or fifteen, wearing a voluminous printed apron over a cotton housedress, said in rehearsed fashion, "Hello, and welcome to the Ryther Home."

"Hello," Margot said. "Thank you." She smiled at the girl. "I'm Dr. Benedict, and this is Nurse Sarah Church, from the Women and Infants Clinic. And Mr. Blake, our driver."

"Yes?" The girl didn't move, and Margot wondered if her job was to keep undesirables from crossing the threshold.

"I believe Mrs. Ryther is expecting us."

A sudden, childish screech from somewhere in the house made the girl flinch, but she didn't budge, though more shrieks followed, punctuated by the crash of something like a stack of aluminum saucepans. "Mother Ryther is busy at the moment," the girl said carefully.

"It sounds like it," Margot said.

The girl's composure cracked just a little. She gave a small shrug, and pleated her apron with her fingers. "It's bath day. The little ones never like it."

Sarah moved forward, and Margot stepped to the side, out of her way. Sarah had spent the past year working with mothers and babies, and Margot was happy to let her take control of this interview. "May we come in?" Sarah asked directly.

The girl in the apron gazed at her, her mouth a little open. Probably she had never spoken to a Negroess before. In this neighborhood, colored people were rare, unless they were servants. The Ryther Home couldn't afford servants. Mrs. Olive Ryther—everyone called her Mother Ryther, even the newspapers—cared for her charges with just three matrons to assist her. She was famed for wringing contributions out of every business and charity in the city, and even this sprawling house had been built by soliciting donations. "Buy a brick for the Ryther Home," had been the slogan. Margot was certain her father had paid for several.

Sarah was accustomed to a variety of reactions to her dark skin, and she was more accepting of them than Margot. She said now, in a matter-of-fact tone, "Mrs. Ryther will want to speak to Dr. Benedict. It's about vaccinations. And money."

The girl's gaze drifted from Sarah's youthful face to Blake's lined and grizzled one. She said in a distracted way, "I guess. I just don't—"

"Why don't you go and ask?" Sarah said. "We'll wait here. But do tell Mrs. Ryther it's Dr. Benedict, from the Women and Infants Clinic."

Margot added, with a touch of asperity, "And Nurse Church."

At the girl's puzzled expression, Sarah said gently, "That's me. I'm Nurse Church."

"Oh! I didn't know—that is, I thought because—" The girl's cheeks flamed an uncomfortable red and she took a step back. "Wait, please." She shut the door with a bit more emphasis than needed, and Sarah cast Margot a rueful glance.

Blake gave his deep chuckle. "Like the Magi," he said. "Three strangers at the door."

"And bearing unfamiliar gifts," Margot said.

They stood on the sunny porch for several minutes, listening to the racket from inside the house. Occasionally, they heard the slam of the back door, and quarreling voices coming and going, presumably with more laundry to hang. "How do you suppose," Margot said, "these people manage to raise a hundred children?"

"Strictly," Sarah said, and Margot saw she was serious. It made sense, she supposed, but she wondered what this Mother Ryther would be like.

Another girl, slightly older, opened the door again, and stood back to let them come in. "Mother Ryther will see you now," she said. She wore an apron, too, a short white one. Beneath it she was neatly dressed in a shirtwaist and a skirt that was a bit too long for fashion. Her hair was pinned up behind her head, and she wore wire-rimmed spectacles. "I'm Maisy Chisholm," she said. "Mother Ryther's assistant."

"How do you do, Miss Chisholm?" Margot said. "I'm Dr. Benedict, and this is Nurse Church. Mr. Blake is our driver."

The three of them trooped into the cool shade of the hallway, and the girl said, "This way, please, Dr. Benedict." She led the way down a corridor.

Margot glanced around curiously as they walked. The floor was bare wood, well polished. There were several doors, all closed. The noise went on unabated, and from somewhere came the aroma of soup on the boil. A carpeted staircase led straight up the middle of the house.

Their guide, seeing Margot's interest, pointed to it. "The dormitories are upstairs," she said. "There are playrooms and sickrooms down here."

"Sickrooms?"

"Yes. We separate children who get sick."

"That's wise, Miss Chisholm."

The girl executed a most superior sniff. "Of course, Doctor. Mother Ryther has been taking care of children for a long time."

Margot suppressed a smile. Maisy Chisholm couldn't be more than seventeen, but she was as sure of herself as any adult, or at least she behaved as if she was. Margot wondered if she had been one of Mother Ryther's orphans.

The young woman stopped and knocked on an open door. She said, "Mother Ryther, here they are." She stood aside, and gestured for them to go in.

A battered desk filled most of the small room, with two spindly, mismatched chairs facing it. Bookshelves and glass-fronted cabinets, all stuffed with books and magazines and what appeared to be photograph albums, crowded the rest of the space, and an enormous ledger rested on the desk's surface. Seated behind it was a woman much older than Margot had expected. She had a long face, sharp dark eyes wreathed in wrinkles, and gray hair falling out of its pins in a way that suggested she had put it up in a hurry. She held a fountain pen poised over the ledger, and a sheaf of paper in her

other hand. She laid both down, and waved her ink-stained hand toward the mismatched chairs. "There are only two, I'm afraid. No room in here for any more."

Miss Chisholm introduced them, one by one, applying their correct titles. Mother Ryther scowled at each of them in turn, peering through a pair of round spectacles. She reminded Margot of someone but she couldn't think yet who it was. Blake stood to one side, leaving the chairs to Margot and Sarah. Miss Chisholm withdrew, closing the door of the cramped office behind her.

"So," Mother Ryther said. "You want to examine my children. Inspect my home."

It was spoken like a challenge. Margot tried to choose her words carefully. "What we want, Mrs. Ryther," she said, "is to apply for funds on your behalf. They'll be supplied through Sheppard-Towner but there are requirements to be met."

"Oh, yes, Sheppard-Towner," Mother Ryther said. Her lips pulled down, drawing deep lines around her mouth. "The Better Babies Act."

Margot disliked the jocular label. It was misleading, for one thing. The Sheppard-Towner Act wasn't just about babies. It provided aid and assistance to mothers as well as their children. The Women and Infants Clinic could not have existed without it, and though the clinic was barely a year old, Sarah and the physicians who assisted her had more work than they could handle. It was Sarah who had called the Ryther Home, and its unvaccinated children, to Margot's attention.

Sarah spoke in her pragmatic way. "Government money will help to provide medicines and supplies, and educational materials as well. I'm told you place a high value on education for your children."

With a deliberate move of her heavy body, rather like a great ferry turning toward a dock, Mother Ryther faced Sarah, and contemplated her for a moment that went on slightly too long for courtesy. Margot was just drawing breath to remonstrate when the old woman spoke at last. "Nurse Church," she said. "Fully trained, I presume?"

Sarah met the old woman's gaze with a level and unwavering one of her own. "Of course. I manage the Women and Infants Clinic."

"You're a properly registered nurse?"

Margot bristled, and drew breath again, but Sarah said, without rancor, "I'm a graduate of the University of Washington, Mrs. Ryther."

"That can't have been easy for someone like you."

It was too much. Margot rapped, "Nurse Church has my full confidence."

Mother Ryther ignored her. "I've never met a nurse who was a Negress."

Sarah's dimple flashed. "I must send you a biography of Mary Eliza Mahoney, then. She's also a nurse. My mother studied with her."

"Hmm." Olive Ryther gave a sharp nod, as if granting her approval. Margot saw laughter in Sarah's eyes and in her fleeting dimple. She herself couldn't see the humor.

Mother Ryther turned next to Blake, and Margot had to press her lips together to keep from protesting this examination of her staff. The interview was not going as she had planned. "Mr. Blake," Mother Ryther said. "Why did you feel the need to come inside? I believe the usual custom is for the driver to wait with the automobile, especially one as fine as your Cadillac."

Blake's deep voice reverberated in the small room. "Ma'am," he said, "these two ladies are in my care, just as your children are in yours. Meaning no disrespect, but we didn't know what we would find within your walls. We heard a good deal of shouting from the front door."

For the first time, the flicker of a smile twitched at the old woman's mouth. "Bath day," she said. "And housecleaning. Squabbles and stains seem to go together."

Margot leaned forward, and picked up her medical bag with a decisive gesture. "All that's needed, Mrs. Ryther," she said, "is for us to inspect your dormitories, your kitchen, and your bath facilities."

We want to assess the needs of your children. Vaccinations will be required, of course. Nurse Church will handle the paperwork.”

Mother Ryther gazed at her through her spectacles. “I don’t hold with vaccinations.”

“Why?”

“Sticking my children with needles? Putting God-knows-what into their little bodies?”

“It’s 1923, Mrs. Ryther,” Margot said, striving for patience. She could feel the clock’s swift ticking, the relentless passage of her one free afternoon. “Medicine has advanced a great deal, which you must know. Diphtheria, smallpox, whooping cough—our children don’t need to suffer these anymore.”

“Newfangled,” Mrs. Ryther said.

“Hardly,” Margot said. “Their efficacy is well proven.”

“It doesn’t make sense, injecting germs into children.”

“You misunderstand,” Margot said. “Vaccines are inactivated viruses and bacteria. They’ve been used for thirty years and more. I can send you the research, if you like. In the meantime, the government supports our work, and wants your children to benefit as the ones at the Clinic do.”

Mother Ryther was clearly an expert at the long, considering stare. She favored Margot with one now, and Margot’s foot began to tap in irritation. Finally, the old woman said, “Dr. Benedict, the governor is a good man, but he doesn’t know what’s best for my children.”

“No, he doesn’t.” This was Sarah, speaking crisply. Mother Ryther’s eyebrows lifted. “But you turn to donations and assistance when you need them, don’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

“It’s good for the community to help,” Mother Ryther said.

“No doubt,” Margot said. “The question is, do you want us to help as well? If not, perhaps you should waste no more of your time.” To underscore her point, she stood up, her bag in her hand. Beside her, Sarah also stood, though she left the heavy box of supplies on the floor.

Mother Ryther pointed to the box. “What’s in there?”

Sarah seemed not to share Margot’s impatience. She answered in detail, listing the contents of her box and ticking the items off on her slender fingers. “Thermometers. Two stethoscopes. A supply of vaccines and serums for common childhood illnesses.”

“We can test any children you think are at risk,” Margot put in. “We should also test for tuberculosis.”

“What do you usually do about medical attention?” Sarah asked.

“What any other mother does,” Mother Ryther said with asperity. “I call a doctor.”

“Can you pay your physicians?”

“We trade,” Mother Ryther said, with no evidence of embarrassment. “Milk and eggs and vegetables.”

Margot had taken her share of such “trade,” especially in the early days of her private clinic. Some of the offerings that had come her way were less than helpful, but she had accepted them just the same.

“Well, Mrs. Ryther,” Sarah said, brusque and efficient now, as if the matter were settled. “Your children will fare better with preventive care than waiting until they’re ill to see a doctor.”

“And the government will pay.”

“The government will help. But applications need to be made.”

The old woman picked up her pen and toyed with it, glancing from Sarah to Blake to Margot, evidently in no hurry to make a decision.

Margot said, “The vaccinations will be required. There will be no money without them.”

Mother Ryther’s eyes flicked down toward the ledger on her desk. Margot could see now she was in the process of managing bills. Surely this woman felt the pressure of time just as she did.

Mother Ryther said, “And who is going to give these vaccinations? This nurse?”

“Nurse Church has been doing this work for some time now, Mrs. Ryther. We’re lucky to have her. Her skills are excellent.”

“Hmm. I suppose we’ll see.” Mother Ryther put her hands on her desk and pushed herself to her feet. She was wearing a long dress with a high collar, and when she stepped in front of the desk, Margot saw old-fashioned button-up boots beneath it. She moved stiffly, and her hand moved to her back, then dropped self-consciously to her side. As she approached the door, Blake opened it, and gave one of his small, formal bows. Mother Ryther, seeing this, raised her eyebrows at Margot once again, as if to warn her she wouldn’t be charmed into compliance.

A new odor struck Margot at the top of the staircase of the Ryther Home. It reminded her a little of the hospital smell, that miasma of disinfectant and medicine, floor wax and bleach. In this case it was overlaid with the sort of aroma she associated with bodies. Young bodies, big and small, clean and very likely not-so-clean, healthy and—at least some of them—ill. Her nose twitched, and when she glanced down at Sarah, she saw Sarah’s wide, delicate nostrils flutter. The noise was muted now—she could only suppose the bath day crisis had passed—but the house was full to the brim with the sound of children.

“Usually most of the children are at school,” Mother Ryther said over her shoulder. She walked steadily, but with a side-to-side gait as if her feet hurt her, or perhaps it was her hips. She was too old for such work, Margot thought. But who else would take on such responsibility?

“Today is a holiday,” Mother Ryther said, “so we moved up bath day to keep them busy.” She paused at a door. A torrent of voices poured out when she opened it, but when Mother Ryther put her head around the doorjamb, the room fell quiet. She clicked her tongue, once, the way Hattie sometimes did at Benedict Hall, and then withdrew, closing the door. She seemed not to notice the tide of sound rising again as they walked on.

“You may already know that we require all our children to stay in school until the age of fourteen. The boys learn a trade, and the girls enroll in business school. We rarely accept pregnant girls because fortunately there are other places for them to go. Our mission—” She stopped again to open a door. In this room there was only a murmur of conversation in light feminine voices. A girl greeted her, and she nodded, and closed the door again. “Our mission,” she repeated, as she led them onward down the corridor, “is to give orphaned or abandoned children the same opportunity in life as those who grow up with their own parents.”

She paused before a double door, behind which came the sounds of small children at play, mixed with the wails of at least one baby. With her hand on the knob, Mother Ryther said, “I believe these are the children you should meet first. They’re the ones with the greatest need, because they’re so young.”

“How do you find them?” Sarah asked.

“Mostly,” Mother Ryther said, her voice softening, easing into a tone of resignation and sorrow. “our children find us. Infants are sometimes left on our doorstep. Occasionally, the hospitals send newborns, either because they’ve been abandoned or because the mother died in childbirth.” Margot winced at this. “Once in a while a poor mother comes in person, and either leaves her children, or takes up residence with us if she has no place else to go.”

It was the first time she had spoken with any emotion, and she gave a slight shake of her head, as if to deny the hint of weakness. As she pushed the doors open, Sarah and Margot exchanged a glance. Blake, close behind them, with the box of supplies balanced on his hip, cleared his throat.

Mother Ryther cast a warning eye back at him. “Men are not generally allowed here,” she said. “Some of our older girls help out here in the nursery, and we want them protected.”

“Will you accept my voucher for Mr. Blake’s character?” Margot asked solemnly.

"I will. This time." The wrinkled lips pulled down again. "Come in now, and meet my younger children." Mother Ryther went into the room, and held the doors wide for the three visitors to pass through.

Margot's experience of nurseries was of two extremes. At Benedict Hall, little Louisa and her nurse dwelt in a beribboned haven of pink and cream silk, of puffy quilts and tufted pillows and pasted flocked wallpaper. At Seattle General Hospital, the nursery was all white, with cribs of white-painted iron, bleached sheets and pillowcases, nurses in long white aprons and starched caps. Only the floor was dark, the uniform brown of the linoleum that covered every hospital floor.

Here, in the Ryther Home, her first impression was of unrelenting drabness. Cribs and cots lined the walls, each covered in blankets clearly handed down from an earlier time, and washed until the colors had melded into one vague gray. The walls were dingy, though the house was only three years old. The curtains, hanging dispiritedly from their rods, were a sallow beige, and the linoleum floor was also beige. A bucket of diapers soaking in Fels-Naptha stood in one corner, its distinctive smell permeating the warm air.

The only color came from the children themselves. Margot counted fourteen of them, their hair every shade from blond, to red, to a curling head of hair as black as Sarah's own. There were no Negro children, but there were two that must, Margot thought, be Indian. The youngest was standing in a crib, the source of the wailing she had heard from the corridor. Tears ran down the child's cheeks, and its nose ran copiously.

Two teenaged girls in printed aprons were ferrying children back and forth from an attached bathroom, wrapping the clean ones in towels, seizing the reluctant remainders to work their clothes off and get them into the bath. It was obvious they had their hands full, but when the visitors came in they lifted the current wet ones out of the bath and carried them to Mother Ryther. Four older children, five or six years of age, trailed behind them. Others, several who looked to be about four, and one silent, slow-moving child of about three, wandered aimlessly through a litter of toys and blankets. The remains of lunch were stacked on a sideboard, and a counter held a stack of boiled and folded diapers next to an enormous jar filled with nickel-plated safety pins.

The room felt chaotic to Margot. She drew a breath, unsure where to begin. She heard wheezing from somewhere, and it distracted her as she tried to locate the sufferer.

Sarah crossed the room with a quick, unapologetic step, smiling in friendly fashion to the two older girls as she passed them. She walked straight to the crib, and gathered the howling baby into her arms. From the pocket of her cape she produced a huge white handkerchief, and began scrubbing the child's face of tears and mucus.

One of the girls said defensively, "She cries a lot. I think she misses her ma."

Sarah said, "She should be held when she cries."

The girl said, "Don't do 'er any good to spoil 'er."

"It doesn't do any good to break her heart, either." Sarah settled the child against her, tucking the little head under her chin as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The baby clung to her with both arms and both legs, shuddering as her sobs began to subside.

Mother Ryther stood in the very center of the room, her arms folded. "That one came a week ago," she said. "A policeman brought her. He found her wandering down in the Tenderloin, and nobody to claim her."

Margot heard Blake draw a sharp, painful breath. She felt the same sorrow, but like Mother Ryther she had learned long ago to discipline her feelings. Pity wouldn't help these abandoned children. Sarah's instinctive caretaking would. And medical attention, which was what Margot had to offer.

"I assume you deal with louse infestations, obvious infections?" she asked.

"Doctor," Mother Ryther said. "I've been taking care of babies for longer than you've been alive."

The answer to your question is, Of course.”

Margot accepted this without argument, though she could have cited a hundred cases in which years of experience seemed to amount to little. She turned to Blake. “Could you set the box of things on the counter, Blake? I may as well start with this child, and work up to the older ones.”

She turned as she spoke, to indicate the area she meant, but Blake was staring into a corner, his lips parted as if he had been about to speak, but was distracted.

Margot, another instruction dying on her lips, followed the direction of his gaze. Her heart gave a sudden lurch.

The child crouched near the wall. He held a toy in each hand, and he was staring up at the stranger with an intent expression at odds with the childish softness of his features. Two, Margot thought he must be. Certainly no older than three. His eyes were a clear, translucent blue, and his hair was a pale ash blond, almost white. Nearly transparent.

It was a thing Margot remembered about her youngest brother when he was small, the silvery color of his hair. The crystalline color of his eyes had never changed, even when he was an adult. The two together, and the shape of the child’s chin, the silhouette of his head, made her shiver.

This little one could have been the identical twin of Preston Benedict when he was tiny. For long seconds Margot and Blake stared at him.

Sarah interrupted them by carrying the baby forward and laying it on a blanket on the counter, beginning to strip off its ill-fitting and stained shirt so Margot could begin her examination. Margot blinked, and made herself look away from the toddler in the corner. She took the stethoscope Sarah was holding out to her, and fitted the earpieces into her ears while Sarah unpinned the baby’s white diaper. The little girl’s bottom and belly were red with rash.

Margot turned to her work. It was coincidence, of course. Preston had put the idea in their heads with his claims of a child. They would have known if it was true. Someone would have come to them. The Benedict name—and wealth—had that effect.

With the earpieces of her stethoscope in her ears, she bent to listen to the baby’s heart and lungs. There was no time for pointless speculation. She had work to do.

CHAPTER 3

“Your eyes,” Preston had said, “are so unusual. It looks as if someone sprinkled gold dust in them.”

His white smile included both Bronwyn and Iris. They had withdrawn to one of the small round tables in the Bartletts’ parlor, where the buffet was laid out with a grand silver tea service. Tiered plates held sandwiches and cakes. Iris had been anxiously twisting her handkerchief when their walk ended, but Preston had returned Bronwyn to her mother with a respectful bow, and now was charming both of them, bringing cups of punch and a saucer of finger sandwiches.

Iris said in a voice so diffident it was barely audible, “Thank you, Captain Benedict. Please do sit down with us.”

“Call me Preston, please, Mrs. Morgan. I took off the uniform months ago.”

He pulled up a chair and sat down. Iris said, “I’m sure your parents are so very glad you’re home safe.”

“So they say,” he said, with a light laugh that made the golden lock of his hair flutter above his eyebrows. He touched his pocket, where the pen and notepad were unobtrusively displayed. “I believe my father is relieved that I’m gainfully employed once again.”

“Your column,” Bronwyn said. Her cheeks felt warm, and she feared she was unbecomingly flushed. She picked up the cup of cold punch and took a sip.

“Do you read it?” he asked, with a sudden focus on her that made her cheeks feel even warmer. She bobbed her head, afraid of saying something silly. “That’s marvelous, Miss Morgan. I do hope you enjoy it.”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed. “Yes, very much.”

“How kind.” He smiled into her eyes, and her heart fluttered in response.

Iris gave a small, discreet cough. “I was surprised that Anabel Bartlett invited the press to Margaret’s party.”

Preston’s regard returned to her, and a faint, charming line appeared in his smooth brow. “Don’t you approve, Mrs. Morgan? Gosh, I’m sorry about that. I assure you, I always do my best to keep ‘Seattle Razz’ respectful. This is such a *chic* event, don’t you think?”

“Well—I suppose—”

“Oh, yes, Mother, it is,” Bronwyn said suddenly. “Everything straight from Emily Post, right down to the sandwiches.” She pointed to the ones on the plate in the center of the table. They were perfect and quite unnaturally symmetrical, with paper-thin slices of cucumber arranged between buttered slices of bread. The crusts had been neatly cut off, and Bronwyn could imagine the leftover bits of sandwich lying around on the counter in the Bartletts’ enormous kitchen. She wondered if the servants got to eat them, or if they were just thrown out.

Preston chuckled. “I keep a copy of *Etiquette* on my desk at the paper’s offices,” he said in a confiding way. “Although I admit there’s more news when a hostess defies the rules than when she follows them to the letter!”

At this they were all smiling, exchanging confidential glances. Bronwyn felt infinitely sophisticated at that moment, she and her pretty mother sitting at a private table with the newspaperman, sharing an inside jest. He was not wearing gloves. When he put out his hand to pick up his cup, she followed the gesture, drawn by the even texture of his skin, the masculine shape of his fingers, the fine golden hair that marked his wrist below snow-white cuffs. Her stomach contracted strangely as she remembered the feel of that cool, strong hand pressed against her back, guiding her in the steps of the waltz. The

fabric of her dress was so thin it was as if his palm had touched her bare skin. He had breathed into her ear, “~~You dance like an angel, Miss Morgan!~~” and she had utterly, absolutely, believed him.

She said, “You won’t find broken rules in Mrs. Bartlett’s home, Captain Benedict. You’ll have to dig up something else to write about. Do you want to hear the latest gossip?”

“Bronwyn!” her mother said. “Captain Benedict doesn’t want to hear childish tales.”

Bronwyn gave her mother a slow blink, lowering her eyelids in a deliberate way that told Iris the use of “childish” had irritated her. Iris shifted, pulling back slightly in her chair.

If Preston noticed this brief familial conflict, his face didn’t reveal it. He said, with a confiding air, “Mrs. Morgan, truly, I love tales of all kinds! We newspapermen deal in stories, big and small.”

His smile was an irresistible combination of shyness, as if he wasn’t sure of his reception, and confidence, as if he believed in himself no matter what. Bronwyn watched her mother, normally so hesitant and suspicious, dissolve before his charm like a bit of ice caught in a sunbeam. He was terribly suave, she thought. It was no wonder the society dames of Seattle gave him *entrée* into their majestic homes, awarded him early notice of their announcements, and even told him their secrets. She supposed he knew many secrets, but was much too well bred to reveal them.

She felt, even then, as if she was meant to meet him. When he asked if he could escort them home, her mother and herself, she felt envious eyes on the back of her neck as she took his left arm and her mother his right. Bronwyn walked out with her head high, her feet as light as if she trod on clouds. She pretended not to notice that the other girls—and their simmering mothers—were watching as Captain Preston Benedict handed her into his gleaming black Essex motorcar, and climbed in to sit opposite the ladies, his Homburg poised on his lap. The driver, a tall Negro who had taken off his cap and bowed to them as they approached, closed the door behind them, then got into the driving seat and started the engine.

Preston said, “Can you direct Blake to your home, Mrs. Morgan?”

“Oh! Oh, yes, thank you, Captain Benedict. Just turn left here, then right on Lawrence, and left on Monroe. We’re at the top of the hill.”

“Of course,” he said, and relayed her instructions to the driver, as if he either couldn’t hear Iris’s soft voice, or as if he was trained not to listen.

They all settled back to enjoy the stately ride up the hill. The sun was setting behind them, gilding the snowcapped Olympics as well as Preston Benedict’s golden hair. Bronwyn said impulsively, “You must stay for dinner, Captain Benedict!”

Her mother said hastily, “Now, Bronwyn, you mustn’t be gauche. It’s been a lovely afternoon, but I’m sure Captain Benedict. . . that is, of course you would be most welcome, Captain, but you have such a long—that is to say—how will you get back to Seattle?”

In his habitual boyish gesture, Preston pushed his forelock back with one finger. “Well, actually, Mrs. Morgan,” he said, then stopped. “No, no, I wouldn’t want to put you out, but—”

“I know!” Bronwyn cried. “You came over on the ferry, didn’t you? One of the Mosquito Fleet. The boat won’t leave until the morning. You can’t go home until tomorrow!”

Her mother’s fingers found her hand beneath the cover of their skirts, and pinched. Bronwyn subsided, but Preston said, with a small, self-deprecating gesture, “As it happens, the paper is putting me up at the Bishop. Blake has a small room as well, naturally.”

The words were innocuous, mere courtesies, but Bronwyn understood what they meant. Preston wanted to spend more time with them. With *her*. They had been fated to meet. She *felt* the connection between them, like a silvery strand of spider silk stretching from one to the other, and she could tell—she knew it had to be true—that he felt it, too, that he could no more bear to be separated from her when they had just found each other, than she could.

Her mother gave a genteel cough. “Captain Benedict, of course we would be delighted to have you

join us for dinner if you don't have other plans."

He touched his forelock again, then dropped his hand as if he hadn't meant to do it, as if perhaps someone—his own mother?—had told him to stop. It was endearing to watch. "So good of you, Mr. Morgan," he murmured. "Of course, I have Blake to think of . . ."

Bronwyn sighed over such kindness, this noble concern for his servant. She had met so many men who gave no thought to anyone's comfort but their own, who would never for a moment put an evening's pleasure at risk for the sake of someone like this Blake.

There was a brief moment of tension, during which Bronwyn knew precisely what was running through her mother's mind. The driver was a Negro. Their cook, Mrs. Andrew, was a prickly, unpredictable sort of woman. She tended to bully everyone in the house except Daddy, and more particularly Mother. Bronwyn couldn't guess how Mrs. Andrew might react to Blake, and she supposed her mother couldn't, either. For that matter, she couldn't predict how Daddy would react to an unexpected guest, though someone from the Benedict family would surely command his respect.

She held her breath, awaiting her mother's ruling. She was uncomfortably aware of the slight stiffening of the driver's neck, the resolute way he kept his eyes forward, guiding the shining motorcar down Lawrence toward their own street.

Iris said at length, in a way Bronwyn knew took some courage, "Naturally, Captain, your driver is welcome to take his supper with our cook and the maids. I'm quite sure—" She coughed again, a tiny, rabbit-like sound. Bronwyn loved her mother, but she couldn't deny she was that sort of woman, shy and skittish as a bunny. She said, "I'm sure Mrs. Andrew will be delighted."

There was no certainty in Iris Morgan's voice. Bronwyn hoped neither man would notice.

Preston had been pleased with himself after this exchange. He had seen Blake's neck go rigid, and he could imagine this fluttery woman would think he was embarrassed. He had handled the whole thing with aplomb, he thought, painting himself as the concerned employer, the gentleman who put his servant's needs above his own pleasures. Of course, he didn't give a damn where Blake ate his dinner. He didn't give a damn if Blake had dinner at all. But that was something these two didn't need to know.

Idly, reflexively, he pushed his forelock out of his eyes, and saw the girl, the tender, lovely child drinking in his every move.

The mother did, too, and that intrigued him.

It was the sort of thing he loved above all else. It was gratifying to be recognized as a hero, a champion of the underdog, a successful and popular man unaware of his own charm. The matrons and debutantes of Seattle saw him somewhat differently, because, through his column, he had power over them. They were careful around him, exerting themselves to please him, but wary.

These two, the mother and the daughter, were different. They were provincial, naturally, but their naiveté had its own appeal. It wasn't bad for a fellow to be treated with respect, after all. A man making his way in the world with only his wits and his talent, deserved that.

It was what the pater didn't understand. It had been months since Preston went to his father's offices to share the good news of "Seattle Razz," but Dickson's reaction still rankled. It festered in Preston's heart, reminding him of his father's years-long preference for his older sister over him. It didn't matter that he had proved Dickson wrong, that "Seattle Razz" was a great success. Dickson, Benedict found his younger son a disappointment, and he barely bothered to hide the fact. He couldn't grasp the impact such a column—wry, pointed, always up-to-date, with the most modern sensibility—could have on the city's society.

The mater admired it, but then, Edith Benedict had always been predisposed toward her younger son. She understood him. He was her favorite, and naturally he enjoyed that, though she was a little

obvious about it. Preston caught the looks that passed between his sister and older brother, or even between his sister and his father, looks that made him grit his teeth.

He had to admit his mother was not the only person in Benedict Hall who appreciated who and what he was. Hattie loved him, too, but Hattie was merely the cook, and not much of one at that. And the Negress. She was sweet, and she put herself out to please him, but she really didn't count.

These thoughts distracted him, and spoiled his mood entirely by the time the Essex pulled up in front of Morgan House. He felt irritated and restive, wishing he had never accepted the invitation. He had to watch Iris Morgan face down her cook's objections to having a Negro dine in her kitchen, and he hid his boredom behind a bit of fuss with hats and gloves and coats.

Blake, as always, pretended to dignity. Acted as if he was above it all. It was no wonder he and Margot were thick as two thieves. They were both experts at putting on a show.

It had been entertaining, though, and by the time he was escorted into a surprisingly elegant parlor his good mood had returned, fed by the girl's obvious infatuation and almost equally by Blake's discomfort. He decided to exert himself, to charm the two Morgan women and even to be respectful to the paunchy little man who was the father of the house. Why not? He had an entire evening to kill in this tedious town. There was certainly nothing better to do.

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