



Courting Susannah

By Linda Lael Miller

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

In her latest sensual romance, the ever-popular Miller tells a gothic story about a woman, Susannah, who travels from Nantucket to the wilds of Seattle in 1906 to care for her deceased friend Julia's baby. She has never met her friend's husband, Aubrey, but takes her chances, in spite of Julia's last letters, which intimated a troubled marriage, and moves into his mansion. She soon learns that he believes Julia had lovers and that the child isn't his. To complicate matters even more, Julia led everyone to believe that she was involved with Ethan, Aubrey's brother. As Susannah tries to heal the rift between brothers, Aubrey becomes jealous of all the men pursuing Susannah (there's a shortage of decent women) and tries to court her himself even though he swore never to marry again. Miller is in top form in this wonderful tale of a former ugly duckling becoming a swan by virtue of kindness. *Patty Engelmann*

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About the Author

Linda Lael Miller is the beloved bestselling author of more than thirty novels; there are more than twelve million copies of her books in print. Most recently, she has won critical acclaim for her *New York Times* bestseller *One Wish*, and her marvelous tales of life and love in the fictional towns of Springwater, Montana (*Springwater*, *A Springwater Christmas*, and the *New York Times* bestselling miniseries *Springwater Seasons*) and Primrose Creek, Nevada (*Bridget*, *Christy*, *Skye*, and *Megan*). Ms. Miller resides in the Scottsdale, Arizona, area.

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Chapter 1

1906

When no one answered her ring, Susannah McKittrick gathered the last frayed ravel of her courage and, in an act of unprecedented boldness, let herself into Aubrey Fairgrieve's grand house high on one of Seattle's seven hills. Shoulders straight, satchel in hand, glancing neither left nor right lest she lose her nerve and flee like a thief discovered, she mounted the grand staircase, marched along the imposing hallway, and selected a modest but adequate room at the rear.

From the one narrow window, she could see the mountains in their mantillas of white and the unsettled waters of Puget Sound, charcoal beneath a glowering October sky. A muddy patch of neglected garden fell within the range of her vision, as did the churchyard on the other side of a high stone wall, a patchwork of gold, yellow, and crimson leaves tucked round about its slabs, wooden crosses, and statues like a quilt.

She wondered which stone marked Julia's grave, and sudden, weary tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She braced up, as best she could, given that she'd been traveling for more than ten days, having left Nantucket as soon as Mr. Fairgrieve's telegram arrived, and tried to turn her thoughts in a more constructive direction. It was no mean endeavor, considering the rigors of her journey and the weight of sorrow in her heart. She was exhausted, half starved, a stranger in a strange land, and probably an unwelcome one at that, for while Julia's husband -- now widower -- had sent a terse wire to inform her of his wife's death, he certainly had not invited her to join his household and serve as his daughter's guardian. That had been her own idea, and Julia's.

Lingering at the window, she lifted her gaze to the mountaintops again, sighing as she shed her dusty, mud-

speckled cloak and let it fall over the back of a plain wooden chair. Although Seattle's climate seemed similar, she missed Nantucket very sorely in those brief moments of reflection; at a distance, home seemed a far gentler place, and it was easy to discount the isolation, the moody winter skies, the fierce Atlantic storms that battered the island in all seasons.

With a twinge, Susannah turned at last from the vista before her, resolved to make the best of the situation, for the sake of Julia's child. In the mirror over the bureau on the other side of the room, she caught a glimpse of herself, fair-haired, gray-eyed, neither plain nor beautiful, clad in a practical brown sateen gown with a matching bonnet, embellished only by a tufted lining of satin inside the brim. Everything she wore, including her camisole, petticoats, and drawers, had been carefully mended in a stalwart effort to hide the evidence of long use, and although she still felt as though she'd reached the end of her tether, an innate sense of dignity sustained her.

After untying the wide ribbons beneath her chin as she approached the looking glass, Susannah removed the bonnet and set it on the bureau top. She was definitely not as pretty as Julia had been, she thought without the slightest flinch, though her skin was uncommonly clear and glowed with vibrant good health, the seemingly endless sojourn from the east notwithstanding. She wanted a hot bath, a meal, and a good, long sleep, in just that sequence, but there were other matters that must be attended to before she could indulge.

First, and her heart quickened measurably at the thought, she would see Julia's baby -- the infant girl meant to be Susannah's own namesake. Then, inevitably, she must confront Aubrey Fairgrieve, for this was his house after all, and the child, the precious child, was his, too.

Susannah sank down onto the edge of the unadorned iron bed, overwhelmed at the enormity of the task that lay before her. She allowed her mind to drift again, her thoughts wafting back through time like smoke dissipating in a breeze.

Julia, a romantic at heart, had met Mr. Fairgrieve in Boston, where she held a post as governess to the children of one of his friends, and had eloped with the man only weeks after that first innocent encounter, despite frantic letters from Susannah, begging her to be cautious, take her time, *think* about what she was doing.

Julia's letters had been lengthy and effusive in those early months following the marriage, describing her bridegroom as nothing less than a paragon. He was "gloriously" handsome, she'd written, a vital, witty man, thirty-three years of age, with a ready smile, mischievous hazel eyes, and a head of wavy brown hair that gleamed in any degree of light. He stood just under six feet tall, and though he was lean, he had broad and powerful shoulders. He had been reared in the timber camps, where hard work made him muscular, but he was a wealthy man now, and polished; he owned a mansion, wore fine suits, kept magnificent horses, and enjoyed a good cigar every night with his brandy.

Susannah had read her friend's written rhapsodies eagerly, if a bit enviously, for at the time she herself had been employed as a companion to an imperious widow with a dwindling fortune, and though she had lived in shabby splendor in a gray-shingled Nantucket house, she was, as ever, an outsider. When Julia had written that she was with child, Susannah had been overjoyed, but the news had also intensified the loneliness that had always plagued her.

Then, over the course of half a dozen letters, Julia had gone from ebullient delight with her lot in life to bitter uncertainty, followed by rising defiance and, finally, rage. The Fairgrieves' fairy-tale marriage had not merely fallen apart, it had exploded in flaming pieces, yet for all Julia's fury, the precise cause of the destruction remained a mystery.

Of course, Seattle was a rambunctious place when compared with staid Boston. Both Julia and Susannah had practically grown up within the sheltering, if austere, confines of St. Mary's Institute for Wayward and Unfortunate Girls, where they had been educated in music, Latin, stitchery, and literature. Raised with the graces of a lady, if not the means, Julia had seemed overjoyed by her good fortune, thriving in the warm light of her husband's love. What had happened to change everything so drastically?

Susannah's stomach churned. She'd been over and over that question, like someone crawling over sharp stones, trying to find a way out of a dark cave, and all she had to show for the effort were a lot of emotional scrapes and bruises. Still, she couldn't let the matter go; Julia, with all her faults, had been the only "family" she had, and the bond between them was not easily severed, even by death.

Mr. Fairgrieve, for his part, surely had counted himself equally fortunate to land such a prize as Julia, at least in the beginning, for all his money, position, and purported good looks. Julia had been a rare beauty with creamy white skin, enormous green eyes, and a wealth of auburn hair that grew in a tumbling riot of curls. She had been exuberant, full of laughter and mischief, whereas Susannah tended toward shyness and introspection, and yet the two were fast friends from the start. Mere days after Julia's unceremonious arrival at St. Mary's -- she had been dragged there, screaming and kicking, by her mother, a stage actress fallen upon hard times -- the ten-year-olds had adopted each other as "blood sisters," pricking their index fingers to seal the pact.

Just then, the soft, tentative cry of a baby reached Susannah, prodding her out of her private reverie. Julia's child. A nurse or maid must have taken the little one from the house earlier and just now returned.

Heart racing a little, Susannah stood and ventured out of the tiny bedroom into the wide corridor beyond, listening from the deepest parts of herself, opening every pore and fiber to the sound. Closed doors lined the hallway like sentinels, set to keep out the unwanted visitor. Fancy gas fixtures adorned the wainscoted walls, unlighted but shining in the gloom, and here and there a table stood, bare and polished. The scent of beeswax gave the place a mystical aspect, like a passage in some pharaoh's private temple.

The baby's lament had risen to a furious wail by that time, and Susannah's agitation grew each time she paused to press one ear to a door. She was in just that position when the tall double doors at the end of the hallway sprang open and a man appeared, shadow-draped, a small, furious bundle squalling in his arms.

"Damn it, Maisie," he shouted, "where are you?" In the next instant, his eyes found Susannah, standing paralyzed in the hallway. He wore high black boots, well-fitted trousers of some soft leather, a tailored white shirt, and suspenders, and his hair captured what little light there was. "Who the devil are you?" he demanded without preamble.

Susannah stood still as an ice sculpture, though her very organs seemed to flail within her in a kind of sweet panic. Her first attempt to speak failed; her second was a dismal croak. She had hoped to introduce herself and explain her presence in a reasonable manner, rather than simply appear in a hallway like some passing wraith, but that opportunity had already come and gone.

"You must be Mr. Fairgrieve," she managed at long last, and flushed.

"And you are?" he prompted after a distracted nod of acquiescence, stalking toward her. The baby had ceased its pitiful cries and burbled against his shoulder now, sounding calm, almost contented. Idly, he patted the little back with one powerful woodsman's hand. His eyes did not look friendly as he glowered down at her; she saw none of the mirth and mischief Julia had described in her early letters.

She swallowed, then straightened her weary shoulders. "My name," she uttered with hard-won grace, "is

Susannah McKittrick. Your late wife, Julia, was my dearest friend."

"Ah," he said. She saw in his eyes that he remembered, although Susannah had no reason whatsoever to think he approved of her presence. "What are you doing here?"

She drew upon all that remained of her composure. What she'd done was impulsive, perhaps even foolish, but it was, indeed, *done*. Nothing to do now but go forward. "I've come to attend to the child."

He arched one eyebrow, still comforting the baby with an inattentive proficiency that might have been comical, given his size and the sheer impact of his personality, if Susannah hadn't been in the awkward position of a trespasser. "What?" he asked, as though she'd spoken in a language he didn't comprehend.

"Julia asked for my promise -- that I would look after her baby if anything happened to her. When I received your telegram -- "

His frowned deepened. "I see," he said, though he plainly didn't. "Maisie must have let you in."

She swallowed hard, raised her chin a notch, and shook her head. The name, Maisie, was not a familiar one; Julia had never mentioned the woman. No doubt she was a servant.

"I turned the bell repeatedly, and when no one answered, I simply came in." She paused, and color pulsed in her cheeks. "I felt I had no choice, you see. I'd come so far, and in a state of extreme urgency."

She thought there might have been a grin lurking in the depths of those remarkable eyes of his, though there was no knowing for certain. "Do you make a habit of walking into people's houses when nobody comes to the door, Miss -- er -- ?"

"McKittrick," she reiterated. It was all she could do to hold his gaze, but she would not, could not allow herself to be intimidated. She had no acceptable option except to follow through with her grand gesture and find a way to keep her heart's vow to Julia's memory by tending the child. "I do not," she said coolly. She had, of course, admitted herself to the Fairgrieve house out of desperation, not audacity; she had no friends in Seattle, no prospect of employment, and virtually no money. She would find herself in dire straits indeed if this man turned her away.

Susannah felt fresh panic stir within her and attempted to stem the tide by biting the inside of her lower lip.

"You say you were a friend of my wife's," he reflected soberly.

Susannah let out her breath, nodded. Surely Julia must have told him about their shared childhood at St. Mary's, and he had, after all, written to tell her when his wife passed away. For all of that, he seemed surprised by her existence, let alone her presence in the upstairs hallway of his house.

"I've -- I've taken the smallest bedroom -- the one overlooking the churchyard," she said, resisting an urge to twist her hands. Her gaze was locked on the baby; she longed to reach out, cradle the infant in her arms.

Fairgrieve's brows arched, and once again she thought she saw the beginnings of humor far back in his eyes, but the impression was gone as quickly as it had come to her. "I don't guess I object, since nobody else is using it," he allowed. "All the same, I'd still like to know what you want."

She ached to hold the child. "I told you," she said, speaking as forthrightly as he had. "I'm here to take care of Julia's daughter. What is her name?"

He looked down at the babe with a curious frown, as though expecting to be advised in the matter, then met Susannah's gaze again. "I don't believe she has one," he replied, and Susannah would have sworn he had never so much as considered the oversight before that moment, though she had to admit he held his little girl with an ease that seemed to belie some of her preconceptions where his character was concerned.

For a few moments, Susannah was rendered speechless. When at last she found her voice, she sputtered, "No name? But the poor little thing is four months old!"

"Yes," Fairgrieve said, without apology. Then he held the infant out, like an offering. "Here. If you want her, take her. She's hungry."

Trembling, Susannah accepted the precious child. How could an innocent baby be allowed to go *four months* without a proper name? The warmth of the babe brought tears springing to her eyes, and she blinked rapidly, in the hope that Fairgrieve wouldn't see. She took a deep breath or two, in the effort to recover, all the while holding Julia's baby close against her bosom.

"Take her? Where?" she asked, bewildered, when she could trust herself to speak moderately.

"Well, to the kitchen, of course. I believe she needs a bottle."

Susannah stared at him. "Then I can stay?"

He answered briskly, already turning away, heading back toward the gaping doorway through which he had come. "For the time being," he said in dismissal.

Susannah stood there briefly, in the middle of the hallway, and then made for the stairs. She moved in cautious haste, lest Mr. Fairgrieve appear again, having changed his mind, and order her out of the house.

She found the kitchen after some exploration and was impressed to discover that it boasted a real icebox with a crockery pitcher of cold, buttery milk inside, along with a plenitude of cheese, eggs, and other supplies.

Ignoring her own ravenous hunger, Susannah laid the infant in a wicker bassinet set before a bay window, searched for and found a bottle and nipple in one of the cupboards, built up the fire in the cookstove, and put the baby's meal on to heat.

She was seated in a rocking chair, feeding the child, when Mr. Fairgrieve entered from a back stairway and stood watching for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

"You've had practice with babies," he said at some length.

She smiled. "Yes," she said. "There were a lot of children born at St. Mary's, and I helped to take care of them until they were adopted."

He frowned. "St. Mary's?"

Surely Julia had told him about the school, about the nuns and the troubled young girls who often took refuge with them, and yet he seemed genuinely puzzled. "Where your wife and I met," she added, in an attempt at clarification.

He drew up a chair and sat down facing her, their knees almost touching. "St. Mary's," he repeated, as though to extract some private and elusive understanding from the phrase.

Susannah continued to rock gently back in the chair, the baby resting warm and solid and milk-fragrant in her arms, though something had quickened within her. Julia, in her eagerness to belong, had been known to tell the occasional small and generally innocuous lie, and she could be self-serving when it suited, but she certainly must have told Aubrey about her childhood. Hadn't she? Before Susannah could think of a response, Mr. Fairgrieve spoke again.

"Tell me," he said. "Exactly who *was* my wife?"

Susannah was stunned. "I beg your pardon?"

He folded his strong arms. "I'd like to hear a description -- from your perspective."

So he *had* cared, despite Julia's protestations to the contrary. Susannah's heart softened, and she smiled, a little sadly, to remember it all again. She sighed. "Julia *hated* being left behind at St. Mary's -- I think she knew her mother was never coming back for her."

Mr. Fairgrieve leaned forward, listening intently, but said nothing.

"She was an actress on the stage -- Julia's mother, I mean -- and I suppose that's where Julia got her temperament. She was -- well -- somewhat *high-strung*."

Aubrey raised his eyes briefly heavenward. "That's an understatement."

Susannah felt a little defensive on her friend's behalf. "If you'd been there -- if you'd seen how she cried, how she flung herself against the iron gate and called for her mother to come back -- " She closed her eyes against the image, but it was as clear as if it had happened only moments before, though, of course, nearly fourteen years had passed. "The nuns practically had to drag Julia inside. She carried on until she was sick. Finally, a doctor was summoned. He gave her a dose of laudanum to make her sleep, and she was still in such a state that they kept her in the infirmary for days."

Mr. Fairgrieve did not flinch. "St. Mary's is an orphanage, then?"

Susannah nodded. "As well as a school and a hospital."

He sat in silence for some time, absorbing what she had said. "And you?" he asked finally.

"Me?" she replied, confused.

"How did you wind up there? At this -- school, I mean?"

Susannah bit her lower lip. "I was raised there." She looked down at the baby and rocked just a little faster in the sturdy wooden chair. Speckles of sun-washed dust twinkled in the air. "One of those children you read about in penny dreadfuls -- left on the doorstep in a basket -- except that I was in an old fruit box."

"I'm sorry."

She bristled slightly, although there had been a note of gruff kindness in his voice. "Don't be. I was very happy at St. Mary's. The nuns were good to me, and I was given an education of sorts."

"You never married." It might have been either a question or a statement, he spared so little inflection for the words.

Susannah felt the old hollowness inside and quelled it quickly. The baby was asleep now, sweet and sated. "No," she said softly, and at some length. "I worked as a companion after I left school, and there never seemed to be time for anything else."

He sighed heavily, shoved a hand through his lustrous hair. "Until you left your work to come here. To Seattle."

Susannah wanted to weep, though she did not allow herself that release, fearing she might never stop crying. "I felt I could do nothing else. Julia's letters -- "

"I can well imagine Julia's letters," he said wearily and with some disgust. He spread his hands, started to say something else, and bit back the words.

"I won't be a burden, Mr. Fairgrieve," Susannah said, perhaps too quickly. She was a proud woman, but she was prepared to beg if that was what she had to do. "I can give music lessons, if you will allow me the use of Julia's piano, and, of course, I will pay room and board."

"All this," he asked, rising to his feet, "for a stranger's child?"

"Julia was not a stranger," Susannah said.

"No," Aubrey answered. "I don't suppose she was -- to you. But I am." He paused. "Aren't you afraid to live under the same roof with the sort of monster Julia must have made me out to be?"

She met his fierce gaze, held it. "I can look after myself," she said evenly. "My concern is for this baby. I'd like to call her Victoria, if you don't mind. She should have a name."

"Call her whatever you like," Aubrey replied, his voice cool.

"Poor Julia," Susannah muttered aloud, quite inadvertently.

Fairgrieve leaned forward until his nose was barely an inch from Susannah's. "*Poor* Julia," he replied with quiet mockery, "*God rest her soul*, cared for nothing and no one but herself. Her greatest worry, where this child was concerned, was that the pregnancy might spoil her figure. Therefore, whatever you do, please do not waste your sympathy on the likes of my late wife."

Susannah blinked, shocked by the cold fury of such a reply. Yes, she'd known that Julia wasn't happy in the marriage, at least not in its latter days, but even then she had never guessed that the situation had deteriorated into such bitterness and rancor as Mr. Fairgrieve was displaying now. "I do not wish to argue the quality of my friend's character, with you or anyone else," she said. "But Julia looked forward to the birth, and she loved you very much, at least in the beginning. I know that from her letters."

Fairgrieve's expression was one of exasperated contempt, and for all that, he was still very attractive, a contradiction that unsettled Susannah to no small degree. "Julia wouldn't have known *love* from the grocer's lame horse," he snapped. "From the moment she knew she was pregnant, she bewailed her fate and cursed me for a rutting bull with no concern for her delicate faculties." He let out a short, huffing breath. "As though I had anything to do with it."

Susannah's eyes widened as his implication struck home, but she refused to honor such a suggestion with a response. Like everyone else, Julia had not been perfect; she had been quite shallow in some ways, and she could be childish and petulant at times, but she had many good qualities as well. If Aubrey Fairgrieve had been her husband, then he was without question the father of this child, and that, as far as Susannah was

concerned, decided the matter.

"We seem to be thinking of two different women," she said in a reflective tone. "You knew one Julia, and I knew another."

"Apparently," he ground out.

She held the child just a little tighter, and she saw in his eyes that he understood the gesture for what it was, a declaration. She was laying claim to a place, a prominent place, in this baby's heart and future. She also saw his tacit resistance to the idea of surrender in any shape or guise.

Julia had been at least partially correct, it appeared, in her bitter assessment of her husband's nature. He was bone-stubborn, a man who liked getting his own way.

He glared at her for a long moment, without another word, and then turned and left the kitchen.

Susannah lingered in the chair for a while, thinking, and then went back upstairs, laid the baby carefully on her bed, securing her on either side with pillows. That done, she fashioned a cradle from one of the bureau drawers, padding the bottom with a folded blanket and the sides with rolled towels. No doubt there was a nursery somewhere in the house, but for now, this arrangement would do.

After moving a soundly sleeping Victoria to the improvised crib, she ventured out long enough to locate the splendid bathing room Julia had written her about, took a hasty bath in the giant copper tub with its tank of hot water, dried herself off, pulled on a wrapper suspended from a hook on the door, and dashed back to her own quarters.

Victoria was snoring, and Susannah smiled, feeling restored. After unpacking her brush, fresh undergarments, and a not-too-wrinkled cotton dress, she sat on the edge of the bed, took down her hair, groomed it thoroughly, and pinned it up again. A cup of tea, she decided, would be just the thing, and some bread and butter wouldn't hurt, either. Her hunger, in abatement after the encounter with Aubrey, was back in full force.

She dressed, ventured down to the kitchen to set a tray for herself, and returned to eat cheese and bread and drink delicious hot orange pekoe in her room. In good time, Victoria awakened, waving her fat little arms and fussing. Feeling completely happy, despite her grief for Julia and her deep misgivings about Mr. Fairgrieve, Susannah changed the infant, using a damask towel for a diaper, washed her hands in the green and black marble sink in the bathing room, and then wrapped the child in a fresh blanket, purloined from the linen cabinet in the corridor.

Descending the back stairway to the kitchen, Susannah found herself in the presence of a plain, plump woman, just shrugging out of a heavy woolen cloak. Maisie, no doubt.

"Well, now," she said, assessing Susannah with a smile of ingenuous welcome. "You came, then. Good."

Susannah blinked. Suddenly, though she could not have said precisely how, she knew that it had been this woman who had sent the wire that brought her to Seattle, and not Mr. Fairgrieve. "Susannah McKittrick," she said by way of introduction, putting out one hand while holding little Victoria securely with the other.

"Maisie," was the reply, with no last name given. The two women shook hands, and Susannah noticed the little boy then. About three years of age, he huddled shyly in the voluminous folds of Maisie's skirt.

"This is my Jasper," Maisie said proudly. "Say a proper howdy to the lady, Jasper."

Obediently, the boy executed a slight bow, though Susannah still had the sense that he wanted either to melt into his mother's limbs or to bolt.

Once she'd dispensed with her bonnet and cloak and divested Jasper of his jacket, Maisie extended competent arms for the baby. "Here, let me have the precious little critter. She must be plumb starved. I don't know as Mr. Fairgrieve thought to give her a bottle, though mercy knows I reminded him. Got back as quick as I could."

Jasper took an apple from a bowl in the center of the table and made for another room.

Susannah hesitated before giving up the baby, even though she liked and trusted Maisie already. "She's had a bottle," she said as the other woman took Victoria into her arms, bouncing her affectionately. "A nap, too." Susannah blushed when Maisie uncovered the infant and spotted the fancy embossed towel tied loosely into place. "I didn't know where to find a diaper."

Maisie smiled. "You did just fine. Didn't she, sweet-ums?" She made a face, and Victoria gave a chortling gurgle in response. "Miss Julia said you was a resourceful type, and she was right. Now, set yourself down and tell me, how was your trip?"

With that, Maisie took a seat herself, still holding the baby, in the rocking chair where Susannah had sat earlier, and Susannah drew up a short stool. "Long," she said in belated reply. "Maisie, Mr. Fairgrieve -- did he -- well, did he know I was coming?"

Maisie chuckled. "Nope," she said. "I see he didn't throw you out, though."

Susannah put a hand to her breastbone in a mingling of surprise, consternation, and amusement. "Then it *was* you who sent that wire? Why ever -- ?"

"I promised Mrs. Fairgrieve," Maisie said, and looked away into the distance for a long moment. "She wanted you here to look after the little one. I reckoned the mister would let you stay if you showed up."

"Thank heaven he did," she replied. "I'd have nowhere to go if he'd turned me away."

"Oh, you'd have been all right. This is a big house. Lots of hidey-holes to tuck you away in, with Mr. Fairgrieve none the wiser. Why, me and Jasper, we rattle around in this house like two pinto beans in the bottom of a bucket and hardly ever run into another soul."

Susannah closed her eyes for a moment, imagining herself haunting the place like a ghost, living a shadow life, avoiding contact with "the mister" at all costs. It was enough to make her shudder, for she was a creature of sunlight and fresh air. "You and Julia -- Mrs. Fairgrieve -- were friends, then?"

"I wouldn't say that," Maisie said, rocking. "She was the mistress of the house, after all, and I was here to cook and clean. Neither of us ever forgot that. All the same, I felt mighty sorry for her, especially there at the end."

"How -- how did she die?" Susannah ventured, realizing she had been holding the question at arm's length ever since she'd received the wire nearly two weeks ago in Nantucket.

Maisie dashed the back of one work-reddened hand against her cheek. "It was a fever," she said. "Came on sudden, right after this little angel here was born. She was gone, the missus was, before the baby was a day old."

Susannah bit her lower lip, imagining the sorrow and shock of such a thing only too clearly. At St. Mary's, she'd seen many a mother and child perish, sometimes separately, often together. She braced herself. "Did she suffer? Julia, I mean?"

Maisie gave Susannah a long, measuring glance. "Yes," she said. "She was a tiny thing, wasn't she, and she had a hard time."

Susannah blinked back a rush of scalding tears. "And Mr. Fairgrieve? Was he kind to her?"

"He paced the hallway, like any daddy would do, but by the time sweet'ums here came along, Mrs. Fairgrieve had gone right out of her head. She didn't know any of us. Kept calling for her mama."

Susannah sighed. Yes, she thought sadly. The mother who left her at St. Mary's all those years before and never looked back.

"Little while after midnight," Maisie went on, her voice soft with sympathy and sadness, "Mrs. Fairgrieve passed on to the next world, and the mister, well, he left the house and didn't come back till the day they buried her. That was when I reckoned I ought to send for you, like the Missus asked me to -- spoke up right after the first pain came, she did. Said I had to get you to come, no matter what."

Susannah struggled to retain her composure. "Well," she replied at some length, "The message took its sweet time reaching me."

Maisie smiled. "You're here," she said. "That's what's important. You take this baby to Mr. Fairgrieve's room to sleep, and then you go and rest up till supper. You look all done in."

Susannah stood automatically and took Victoria from Maisie's arms. "The crib is in Mr. Fairgrieve's room?" she asked.

Maisie nodded, unfazed by the question or by Susannah's bewilderment, which must have been obvious. "Big room at the front of the house," she confirmed. "The one with the double doors."

Susannah climbed the stairs yet again, carrying the infant, and found her way to the master chamber. Sure enough, the crib was there, among towering, heavy furniture, so masculine in character that she knew immediately that Julia probably had never actually resided within these walls.

A trancelike weariness overwhelmed Susannah as she placed Victoria gently in the elaborate crib, with its drapery of gossamer silk, and she lingered there for a time, forgetting her surroundings, trying to make sense of the situation, the place, the man Julia had loved, and then hated, with such passion.

It all caught up with Susannah then, the pain of loss, the confusion, the effects of a long and difficult journey. She turned from the sleeping baby -- she would return to her room and take a brief rest, as Maisie had advised -- and then the floor and ceiling exchanged places. She stumbled, got as far as the bed, and lay down, her head reeling. Although she had every intention of rallying, she dropped off into a fathomless slumber instead and fell end over end into the sweet refuge of darkness.

The next thing she knew, the room was draped in evening shadows, and a strong hand rested on her shoulder. She looked up and was startled into complete wakefulness, between one heartbeat and the next, to see Aubrey gazing down at her. Because of the relative gloom, she could not make out his expression.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, mortified beyond all endurance to be found lying prone on a man's bed -- particularly this man's bed. "I must have -- I don't know what -- "

"Shh," he said, and she heard amusement in his voice, and something more tender. "There's no harm done."

Susannah bolted upright, and Aubrey stepped back, giving her plenty of room. She pressed the fingertips of both hands to her temples after setting her feet on the floor, trying desperately to reorient herself. She went immediately to the cradle and saw that the baby was gone. She panicked a little.

"She's downstairs with Maisie," Aubrey said gently. Susannah had no right to be soothed by his tone, but she was. Oh, heaven help her, she was. "There's a fine supper waiting for you in the kitchen."

Susannah could not face him, not then. He made light of finding her sleeping, no doubt with abandon, on his bed, but in many quarters, such an infraction, however innocent, was enough to lay even the best reputation to ruin. "Thank you," she said, keeping her head down and hurrying toward the doorway at top speed. Thus it was that she compounded her offense by colliding with Aubrey with such momentum that she surely would have fallen had he not grasped her shoulders and held her upright.

"Susannah," he said, *"it's all right."*

Oddly, she found his kindness more difficult to endure than simple annoyance would have been, or even skepticism. "Yes," she replied, with a sort of tremulous aplomb, addressing herself as much as him.

"Everything is all right."

He let her go than and stepped back rather quickly. for once, he was the one to sound awkward. "I'll carry the cradle to your room," he said. "Then I'll see you downstairs at supper."

She tried to speak and could not. Nodded and fled.

She felt his smile like a kiss on the nape of her neck.

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