



The Shape
of
Mercy

THURSDAY

A Novel

SUSAN MEISSNER

Praise for
The Shape of Mercy

“As raindrops become mighty rivers, Susan Meissner’s words seem simple in the beginning, but one thought builds naturally upon another, phrases and sentences flow together with effortless fluidity, and before you know it, you are totally engrossed by the powerful undercurrents of her story. To read Ms. Meissner is to put yourself into the hands of that rarest kind of author: an artist working in the medium of words.”

—ATHOL DICKSON, Christy Award–winning author
of *The Cure* and *Winter Haven*

“I loved *The Shape of Mercy* from beginning to end. Ms. Meissner’s prose sings, and her characters captured my interest from the start. As the story unfolded, those same characters captured my heart. I won’t soon forget Mercy, Lauren, or Abigail.”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER, award-winning author
of *Wagered Heart* and *When Love Blooms*

“*The Shape of Mercy* is vintage Susan Meissner: tender storytelling that keeps you hooked; living, breathing characters that capture your heart and madden you too; and a message of redemption that sticks with you. Meissner deftly weaves the stories of three women of vastly different generations, connecting them perfectly and crafting a winsome, interesting, powerful read.”

—MARY E. DEMUTH, author of *Watching the Tree Limbs*
and *Daisy Chain*

“A compelling tale that will resonate long after you turn the last page. A haunting story, deftly woven, full of layers and textures that will quickly pull you out of the present and into the long forgotten past. Meissner

recalls a tale that must not be forgotten, about the tragedies and senseless cruelties that happen when we abandon grace and turn our backs on mercy.”

—SIRI MITCHELL, author of *A Constant Heart*

“*The Shape of Mercy* is a truly lovely story, one to savor again and again. In a fantastic blend of old and new, this modern-day novel has the scope and feel of a historical. The characters and their journeys will touch your heart.”

—MINDY STARNES CLARK, author of *Whispers of the Bayou*

“A bit of mystery, fascinating history, and the biggest question of all: what would you do for love? I can’t stop thinking about *The Shape of Mercy*.”

—ROXANNE HENKE, author of *After Anne*
and *Learning to Fly*

“With a deft hand, Meissner blends an intriguing storyline, artful writing, and memorable characters for a truly delicious read. This one’s a keeper!”

—DENISE HUNTER, author of *The Convenient Groom*

*The Shape
of
Mercy*

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Window to the World

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*The Shape
of
Mercy*

A Novel

SUSAN MEISSNER



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Apart from well-known real people and real events associated with the Salem witch trials of 1692, the characters and events in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*In memory of Connie Dorough,
who loved without hesitation.*

Fear is the enemy of love.

—ST AUGUSTINE

One



I've heard the story countless times, how I grasped the delivering doctor's scrubs as he guided me into the Dorough family universe of opportunity and duty. My father likes to say I came out of my mother's body insistent on being taken seriously, declaring to the doctor who held my slippery limbs that I was no helpless female unable to forge her way through the world of men.

I've seen the video. My father had the camcorder rolling when my mother pushed me into waiting hands. Dad's aim was discreet, thank goodness, because he'll sometimes show that video when he tells the story. He's even downloaded it onto his iPod. I've seen my open, squalling mouth, heard my mother's throaty cries and a nearby nurse's words: "It's a girl." My infant body is a glistening, angry shade of pink, and I am indeed grappling for the doctor's clothes as if prepared to wrestle him to the floor. My father loves that.

Whispered conversations over the years—which I wasn't meant to hear—have suggested my father enjoys retelling this story because he needs to reassure himself it's not the end of the world that God didn't bless him with a son. Neither was I supposed to hear that my clutching at the doctor's clothes could just as easily have been a cry of, "Help! I'm falling!" rather than, "Stand aside! I've arrived!"

I've long wondered if the whispering people are right. About both.

Imagine you are six, and you're hiding under the dining room table, hidden by the damask cloth that covers it, and all you can see are the

shiny, pointed toes of women in stilettos, clicking their way from room to room. Their skirts swish. Their porcelain coffee cups make delicate scraping sounds as they lift and lower them onto saucers. They've just heard Bryant Durough tell the story of how his daughter, Lauren, was born.

His only daughter. His only child.

Born grappling for power.

One of them titters. "So like a man to see it that way."

"I heard Bryant and Julia have tried everything to have another child," another says.

"Really?"

"Oh, that's so sad. They're such wonderful parents."

"In vitro, too?"

"Yes. They tried in vitro three times. Three times it didn't take."

"Oh, dear."

"Think they'll adopt?"

"Goodness, no."

"No, I suppose not."

"I imagine it's hard for Bryant to be unable to pass along his side of the Durough name."

"There have always been sons born to Duroughs. He's the first not to have one."

"And to think his brother has four sons. Four!"

"Bryant puts up a good front, but I bet it drives him nuts."

"Well, at least they have Lauren."

"Mmm. But you know, for a man like Bryant Durough, it's not the same."

You hear this, and you haven't a clue what *in vitro* means, and you don't know who didn't take what they should have taken and why that is so oh-dear sad.

You do know who Bryant and Julia are.

And you know what the words “have another child” mean.

And the words “at least they have Lauren.”

You crawl away unseen and ponder the idea of another child, another child, another child for hours.

You wonder if having another child means someone wants to buy a new one. You wonder what happens with the old one.

What do they do with the old one?

Throughout the day you consider this, but you don't say anything. You just let it tumble around in your six-year-old head. You stare at the picture in your bedroom of Jesus watching over a boy and a girl as they walk a dark forest path, and you wonder if the boy and girl are brother and sister and if Jesus loves them both the same.

When your mother tucks you in later that night and she leans down to kiss you and the scent of sweet apples is all around her, you look into her face and see nothing there but loveliness. The worry begins to fall away into the darkness, and you reach out your hand to touch her tummy, the place where babies grow. It is flat and smooth. She looks down at your hand and then back up. Her eyes are wide.

You pull your hand away.

She stays a moment longer, caressing you on the forehead where a damp curl rests, and whispers, “Sweet dreams.”

She moves away from the canopied bed with its matching French provincial armoire and dresser. A seashell night-light glows at her ankles as she stands at your half-open door and blows you one last kiss.

It will be another six months before you hear again the story of how you were born.

It will be years before you find out what *in vitro* means.

And you will never be sure why you grabbed the doctor's clothes.

When I met Abigail Boyles, the woman who hired me to transcribe the diary of a girl who died too young, she said to me, “You're an only child, aren't you?”

I asked her how she knew.
 She said, "I'm one too."
 As if that were answer enough.



I'm not the person my father thinks I am.

I am not the determined daughter out to prove she is all the unborn son would have been.

My recent acts of defiance—choosing a state school instead of Stanford and living in a dorm with a shared bathroom instead of a gated condo—are not evidence of my determined, lapel-grabbing nature. I'm not out to prove anything. I grew up believing I was supposed to be what all Duroughs have been: industrious, entrepreneurial, and shrewd—an amasser of wealth, not for the joy of spending it but for the prestige in having it. How could I be anything else?

This is what Dad is, what his father was, his grandfather before him, and his great-grandfather before him. It is what my Uncle Loring and his sons are.

But that's not what I am.

Being a woman isn't what makes me different from all the Durough heirs before me. There are plenty of women in the family who gracefully embraced a life of privilege. My mother, for one, didn't have to stretch out her arms very far; she married into a life she already knew. My grandmother—another Durough by marriage—was tutored in the ways of wealth by her mother-in-law, a woman whose own wealth significantly outmatched the Durough fortune. You don't have to be a man to appreciate the muscle of affluence.

You don't have to be a man to inherit a destiny.

The thing is, I don't want my destiny handed to me. I want to choose it.

This is the treasure the impoverished forget they have: the ability to choose a new road. They may struggle all their lives to stay on it, but at least they chose it for themselves.

This is why I went looking for a job to earn a paycheck I didn't need. Not because I wanted to prove I could earn my own money, but because no one expected me to do it. When you only do what is expected of you, you never learn what you would've done had you chosen for yourself.

Think of it this way. Suppose you have before you two choices: wealth or poverty. Suppose there is no middle ground. Which do you choose?

I'm young, but I have spent my two decades as an only child in the cloistered huddle of affluent adults. I've watched them, learned their language, and observed them scrutinizing the world around them, noting the disparity in the masses. And I have found that the rich and the poor have a hugely significant characteristic in common. As do the accuser and the condemned, the loved and the unloved, the free and the bound. We each think we understand the other.

We don't.

I see the truth of this in Abigail Boyles's wasted life and in a young woman's needless death.

And I see it in me, every time I look in the mirror and see the rich girl who stares back.

We understand what we want to understand. That's how it is. How it's always been.

Two



Sometimes I think I didn't find Abigail Boyles at all; she found me. I have this crazy idea that if I asked her how long she'd been searching for a writer to breathe new life into the story of a young colonial woman wrongfully accused of witchcraft and sentenced to die, her answer would be, "All my life."

Abigail had been waiting for me, for someone to tell Mercy Hayworth's story. It was a story meant to be told.

I met Abigail after I returned to UC Santa Barbara from a long summer at my parents' home in Pacific Palisades, fresh from the lap of luxury and itching to be like the other sophomores in my dorm. Abigail's job posting, skewered to the English department bulletin board along with half a dozen other openings, was the only handwritten notice. The fontlike precision of her script caught my eye. The personal touch drew me.

I had just decided that day to end my dependence on Dad's monthly stipend for my living expenses, though it was something that had gnawed at me all through my freshman year. I had a vat of money I could dip my hand into any time I wanted. I'd always had it. My roommate Clarissa worked in the college bookstore and at a coffee shop, sneaking in study time whenever she could. I hardly ever saw her. I don't know that she resented my unlimited debit card, as she never said anything about it. Maybe that's what bugged me the most. That she never said anything.

Abigail had written her notice on lavender stationery using a black, felt-tipped pen. The *W* in her *Wanted—Literary Assistant* was perfectly formed, just the right amount of arc and sweep. Abigail's posting had a slightly faded patina, and it wasn't dated—that should have been a clue. It was surrounded by job postings printed on ink jet printers and bearing informational tabs torn off here and there by hurried hands.

Hers was the only notice that bore the unseen fingerprints of human touch: lavender paper meant for a personal note and words penned with a steady hand. There was no mention of Mercy's diary, just these lines and a phone number: *Wanted—Literary Assistant for transcription project. Ten hours a week for four months. Eleven dollars per hour. Prefer someone with knowledge of seventeenth-century literature.*

It was the word *literature* that made me write down Abigail's phone number. The other postings were for research assistants, copyeditors, proofers, and writing mentors. That, and the humanity of the posting itself: the artistic *W* and the unspoken knowledge that this technologically bereft employer had a project different from everyone else's.

A classmate, Lira, walked by as I was writing down Abigail's phone number on a Starbucks receipt I'd found in my backpack.

"You looking for a job?"

There was nothing unkind in the way she said it, but I felt my cheeks grow warm nonetheless. I'd had enough short conversations with Lira to know she was paying her own way through college. And she knew what most of my college acquaintances had been able to pick up, though I had made no conscious effort to convey it: my parents were wealthy.

"Um. Yeah."

Lira, a journalism major, leaned in to look at Abigail's lavender paper. My guess is she wanted to see what kind of job appealed to someone who didn't need one.

"Hmm," she said. "What do you suppose that's about?" It was clear

Lira had no interest at all in a posting like Abigail's. If anything, she distrusted it.

I feigned casual curiosity. "Could be interesting." I shrugged and clicked my pen closed.

"This one looks good." Lira pointed to a mauve-and-taupe-colored flier for a copywriting internship at an ad agency. Half its phone tabs had been yanked off.

I could tell Lira meant well. I know now that it was a joke among the students in the English department how long the handwritten ad had been posted, and that many English majors had in desperation called Abigail and either declined her strange job offer or failed to impress her.

But I didn't know this yet.

"I'm going to give this one a try." I nodded toward Abigail's posting. "Can't hurt."

Lira readjusted her book bag on her shoulder and smiled. "Well, I hope it works out." Her eyes, kind but discerning, told me that if someone needed a job for income and résumé-building, they would've torn off one of the ad agency's tabs. But if a rich girl just wanted a little diversion for a few hours a week and the money itself didn't matter, well, here was the perfect match.

We said good-bye and she walked away.

I wondered all that afternoon if she was right: that I wasn't looking for a job because I needed the satisfaction of earning my own money. I needed something else.

Back in my dorm room, I called the number. A woman with a gentle Spanish accent answered the phone and told me she needed to ask me a few questions before setting up an interview with Miss Boyles. In the background I heard her fiddling with papers.

"What is your major?" she asked.

"English with a concentration in Literature and Cultures of Information."

I had to repeat that.

“And your year in college?”

I figured this was a sly way to guess my age. I answered anyway. “Sophomore.”

“And where did you earn your high school diploma?”

This, I learned later, was to see where I was from, where I grew up, where I had learned how unfair the world can be.

“Palisades Point Academy.” I had to repeat that, too.

“Can you wait a moment?” the woman asked. She put me on hold before I could answer but was back within a minute.

“Miss Boyles would like to know if you can come for an interview on Thursday. Five o’clock?”

“Uh. Well, yes.”

“Okay. You have a pen? I give you the address.”

I didn’t recognize the street. It sounded like the address of a residence rather than an office. Abigail’s home.

“Just ring the bell at the gate. I will let you in.”

A gated home. Like my parents’.

“Okay?”

“Wait,” I said. “Can I ask what I would be transcribing?”

The woman hesitated. I heard her cover the phone with her hand. She was consulting someone. “A diary. It’s three hundred years old. It belonged to an ancestor of Miss Boyles who lived during the Salem witch trials.”

The connection to Mercy Hayworth was immediate, and I hadn’t even heard her name yet. My interest instantly soared. A diary. Literature of the most intimate kind, amazingly personal and revealing. Penned during the Salem witch trials and kept for three centuries. Somehow I knew it was the diary of a woman, not a man. A woman with secrets. This resonated within me more than anything else: a diary was where secrets were recorded.

I wanted this job. I had secrets of my own.

“Okay?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” I said. *Yes, yes, yes.*

“Okay.” She hung up.

I stared at the address in my hand for a moment, then went to my computer and googled it. I studied the map and realized Abigail lived in an older, stately neighborhood where the moneyed families of early Santa Barbara built their mansions.

I wasn't sure how Dad would react to my taking on a part-time job that had nothing to do with Durough enterprises, but I knew he would approve of this: my prospective employer lived the kind of life he was familiar with and trusted.

I waited until after I knew my parents had eaten dinner to call my dad and tell him he no longer needed to deposit the spending allowance in my checking account. I practiced saying it a couple times before I called so I would sound calm and confident, like it was the most natural thing in the world to earn my own money.

He took the news better than he had taken my other decisions that made no sense to him, like choosing Santa Barbara instead of Stanford and majoring in something other than economics. Dad was slightly amused, a bit perturbed, but subtly proud of me for doing—albeit without grace—what all Duroughs of the past had done: made things happen instead of let things happen.

I wanted to earn my own money. I was making a business decision. He liked it.

My father does not control by domination; he controls by persuasion. There is a huge difference. I have never felt ignorant or inferior around him, only the pull to conform. It's a very strong pull. My father possesses a keen ability to make people do what he wants them to do. Couple that with his good looks, calm demeanor, and disarming confidence, and it's no wonder I tremble at the thought of disagreeing with

him. I'd won the battle of where to get my undergraduate degree, but I doubted he would concede anything else.

When I told him about the job, I could almost hear him thinking, *This will be good for Lauren. She'll come to see success lies on just one road. The Dorough road.*

He wanted to know the details.

"So it's hourly?"

"Yes."

"How much?" he asked, even though we both knew it didn't matter.

"Eleven," I said as confidently as I could. I knew his gardener's assistant made more plucking snails out of the Dorough flower beds.

"And you'll be doing what, exactly?"

"Transcribing a diary."

"Well, that's different. What kind of diary? Whose is it?"

"It belonged to someone who lived three hundred years ago. I think it'll be very interesting."

He paused for a moment. "You know you could do consulting work for me online for a few hours a week, Lauren. I told you that a long time ago."

Yes, I knew. "I just want to try doing something on my own."

"Well, if you really want to do this, I won't tell you not to."

I refrained from telling him I was not asking for his permission.

"And if you're set on earning your own spending money, I can appreciate that. I can even get behind that," he continued.

I cringed. The words "spending money" put my experiment instantly and squarely into perspective. It was clear to us both that I was still wholly dependent on his wealth for everything else. He didn't mean to sound condescending. He meant to remind me of the big world that awaited me—his world. My little project was just that: little.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Good luck with your interview."

My cheeks felt hot. “Yep.”

“Mom wants to say hello.”

“Okay.”

“Let us know how this works out, okay? I’d like to hear more about it sometime.”

“Sure. Bye.”

I heard the phone being passed from one hand to another. I raised my free hand to my face to rub away the warm hues of humiliation.

“Lauren! You’re getting a job?” My mother didn’t sound alarmed or annoyed. Just surprised.

“Just a few hours a week, Mom. And I may not even get the job. The interview’s tomorrow.”

“Well, I’m sure if you’re being interviewed, you’ll get it,” she said, as only a mother can. Then, as if to prove she had no doubt I would get the job if I wanted it, she moved on. She reminded me that my Uncle Loring’s fiftieth birthday party had been moved up a week. She’d told me several days earlier that the two-day affair was now being held in two weeks instead of three because Uncle Loring had to go to Singapore. I told her I’d be there.

I don’t think Mom thought I had forgotten. She just wanted to remind me where I belonged.

Three



My first impression of Abigail Boyles was that she was unbreakable. Despite her delicate, eighty-three-year-old body with its transparent skin and her glistening, over-watered eyes, she stood straight and stiff-necked when we met on her threshold, with not a hint of frailty to her. A map of wrinkles hardened her face rather than softened it, as if the creases had been massaged into place by sleepless nights, hours of regret, and steady frowning. I knew in a moment she was a woman who had always been alone, yet this did not mean she hadn't loved or been loved. There was an underlying sadness about her, though she smiled genuinely. A sadness that made her unyielding rather than vulnerable.

I was let into Abigail's massive Tudor-style home by Esperanza, the woman who had answered my phone call two days before. She introduced herself as Miss Boyles's housekeeper. Abigail stood behind her, wearing lavender pants the same color as the stationery she had used for her ad. She stood so close she could've easily answered the door herself, and I wondered why she had shadowed her housekeeper to the door. I found out later she wanted to look past me to her circular driveway and see what kind of car I drove.

I drive a BMW.

When she spoke, Abigail's voice was low, controlled, and carefully measured out. It seemed the voice of a younger woman. She extended her hand.

“Abigail Boyles,” she said.

“Lauren Dorough.” I took her hand. It was cool and watery-soft, like she had just lifted it from a jar of formaldehyde. I let go as soon as it was polite to do so.

“Esperanza, Miss Dorough and I will meet in the library.” Abigail looked straight at me as she spoke.

“Right this way.” Esperanza closed the front door behind me and motioned to a set of closed double doors on one side of the tiled entryway. I saw matching double doors on the other side, open to reveal a sitting room in maroon and cream. From the doorway I could see it was beautifully but sparsely decorated and looked as if it were never used. Ahead of me, an L-shaped staircase with paisley-carpeted steps led to the upper floor, and more doors lay beyond the staircase at the end of the long hallway. One door was fully open, revealing large black-and-white floor tiles, flashes of chrome hanging from the ceiling, and countertops free of clutter. Afternoon sunlight fell on a bowl of strawberries sitting near the edge of an island topped with polished granite.

Esperanza opened the double doors across from the sitting room, exposing a room that did not fit with the little I’d seen of the house. Abigail’s library was overly furnished, exploding with paintings, tiered candles, vases of flowers, pillows and cushions—and bursting with books. While the sitting room appeared purely decorative, the library looked as though Abigail spent every waking moment in it, surrounded on all sides by piles and stacks and cases of books.

It was the first time in my life I’d been surrounded by books and felt uneasy. Only half of them were housed on shelves. The rest were loose, unfettered, poised as if to attack.

“Please have a seat.” Abigail pointed to an armchair that sat among towers of pages stacked around it like scaffolding.

I walked to the chair, sat down, and minded my ankles as if the books closest to me might nip at my feet. Abigail sat across from me in a similar chair, surrounded by Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, and Socrates.

Esperanza closed the door and I immediately felt claustrophobic. Abigail smiled as if she knew and wanted to assure me I was safe.

“So, what intrigues you about this job, Miss Durough?”

I’d practiced the answer to a question like this after searching the Internet the night before, educating myself at midnight on how to nail a job interview. I was prepared to say the job called for an interesting blend of skills and abilities I happened to have, but what came out of my mouth were two unrehearsed words:

“The diary.”

Abigail’s smile deepened; she liked my answer. I mentally formed answers to the question Abigail would surely ask next. *Why is that?*

But that’s not what she said.

“You like secrets.”

I colored. “I like autobiographies. I like seventeenth-century literature.”

“Mmm.” She waited for more.

“And I’m drawn to what a woman who lived three hundred years ago would write if she thought no one would ever see it.”

Abigail nodded once. I satisfied her on this point and on another: I correctly guessed the diary belonged to a woman.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said.

The nail-the-interview sites told me, when asked this question, to stick to details that matched the job’s requirements.

“I’m an English major, an honors student, and I like to write fiction in my spare time. I love to read. I like Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George MacDonald, some Hemingway, some Steinbeck. I’ve studied a wide variety of writers: Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolkien.”

“A true fan of literature,” Abigail said like she was announcing it to the audience of books all around us, convincing them I could be trusted. Another point for me. “I think literature reveals more about us than history does.” Abigail settled back in her chair. I hadn’t realized she’d been sitting forward.

She was right. I told her so.

"You've chosen a very interesting focus for your major," she said next.

I didn't know if that was a compliment. I said nothing.

"I think Santa Barbara might be the only UC school to have an English concentration in Literature and Cultural Information," she continued. "It's a very interesting blend."

"UC Merced has something like it, I think."

"But you chose to come here."

"I liked the campus. And I would've missed the ocean."

"And I suppose Merced would have been a little far from home." She cocked her head, as if gauging my response to her snooping. She had obviously looked up Palisades Point Academy and knew where it was, a stone's throw from Malibu, situated in a gated haven where the wealthy laid their heads at night.

I wondered for only a second if she'd figured out who my father was. Of course she had. My Duroughness kicked in.

"Do you have any questions about where I grew up, Miss Boyles?" I kept my tone light, like hers.

Her grin was wide and appreciative. "No, I don't think I have any questions about that."

I waited.

"How about if I tell you a little about me," she said. "I'm eighty-three years old and I'm a retired librarian. My family is originally from Boston, but I've lived in this house since I was five. I've just one living relative in Maine, who surely expects to inherit my estate but is in for a surprise." She looked at the wall of tomes on her left. "I've a mind to will him just the books, since I know he cannot wait to get this house and toss them all out."

I didn't know what to say.

"I've had the diary since I was thirteen," she continued, turning back to face to me. "It's been passed down through eight generations of

my family, and it belonged to an ancestor of mine. Her name was Mercy Hayworth and she was my cousin, eight times removed. She lived in Salem in the late 1600s.”

Abigail waited, letting the date and the town’s name coalesce in my mind with what I surely knew of colonial American history.

“I would like for you to transcribe the diary for me,” she continued, “and edit it for clarity. I want the language to be readable for today’s audience, and I want it typed onto a computer disk. I’ll need help finding a way to have it bound, too. Do you prefer PC or a Mac?”

“What?” I had the distinct feeling the interview was coming to a close.

“PC or Mac. Do you have a preference?”

In a half stutter I told her I had my own laptop.

Abigail shook her head. “No. I’ll provide the computer. Do you have a preference? I will buy whichever one you prefer.”

“Um, a Mac, I guess.”

She nodded. “Do you think you can do this job for me, Miss Durough?”

I couldn’t believe we were finished. Abigail had barely asked me about my qualifications. She had barely asked about anything. I didn’t even know why she wanted the diary transcribed. She didn’t appear to want it published.

The words, “Just like that?” filled my mind, and as I thought them, they climbed out of my head and into my mouth.

“I don’t see any reason not to hire you, Miss Durough. Do you?” Abigail grinned.

“Yes. No. I mean, no, I don’t and yes, I’d like the job.”

“Good. Which days can you come? I was hoping to have you three times a week for several hours at a time.”

“I get out of class on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays at three thirty. I could come then.”

“Excellent. You can have your dinner here with me on those days

and work into the early evening hours, until seven or so. Will that work?"

"Uh, yes. That's fine."

She stood. "I'll see you on Monday, then. Esperanza will give you the code for the gate so you don't have to use the buzzer each time."

I stood as well. Abigail made no move to see me to the door. An awkward moment followed where we just stood and stared at each other.

"Good-bye," she said. Her voice was strangely kind.

"Good-bye, Miss Boyles."

I took a step toward the library door and she called out to me.

"Miss Durough, would you consider letting me call you Lauren? And you could call me Abigail. The formality of using our last names will drive me batty."

I smiled. "Sure. That would be fine."

"See you on Monday, then, Lauren."

"See you then."

I didn't call her Abigail that day.

I walked to the library doors and opened one of them. I looked back as I stepped through, not knowing if I should close the door or not. Abigail stood in her ocean of books, perfectly relaxed, watching me leave her.

I closed the door behind me.

When I got into my car, I called home. I knew Dad would be on the golf course at five thirty on a Thursday and that I would get his voice mail.

It took only seconds to leave a message telling him I got the job.