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Summary: Duke Crocker thinks he has life just the way he wants it—until those around him start meddling.

A Bride For Duke
By Scribblesinink

Rain and wind lashed at the stately wooden house that occupied a prime spot in a small town on the coast of New England. The house shook under the onslaught, boards creaking, while the fire in the hearth hissed as rain drops trickled down the chimney to die in the flames, and the oil lamps fluttered in a chilly draft worming its way through the tiny cracks around the window frames. It was the kind of night sensible folk would remain indoors, weather unfit to send even a dog out in.

Which was a real shame, Duke Crocker thought to himself as he turned over the page of the newspaper he was decidedly not reading. Spending an evening at home with nobody but his aging aunt for company was certainly not his idea of fun. His favorite pastimes leaned more toward dicing and playing poker in the back room at the club, while enjoying a drink or two and chatting up the serving girls. There would be plenty of time to behave like an old man later, once he actually was an old man.

As another gust rattled the window pane, he snuck a glance over the edge of his paper at the elderly woman in the rocking chair across from him. She'd had him drag her chair nearer to the fire, where it would warm her "aging bones", as she was wont to say. Aunt Myrtle didn't notice his scrutiny; she was squinting at her needle work, neither the hearth nor the sconces on the wall, nor the oil lamp on the work table at her side providing quite enough illumination for such detailed work.

Duke was about to suggest she put the work down before she ruin her eyes—a role reversal if he ever saw one—when there was a flash of lightning to add to the storm's violence. As a rumble of thunder followed, fresh buckets of rain slashed at the windows, making them shake in their casements. Duke shivered involuntarily. Perhaps it was for the best that he hadn't gone out after all. The town was a mere few minutes on horseback, but he'd have gotten soaked to the

skin, and he fancied that as little as the next man.

There was a banging noise outside, a sound different from the howl of the storm. Duke cocked his head to listen more closely. Was it a tree branch hitting the roof? Another thump was followed by a woman's startled cry, abruptly cut off. Duke shot up straight. That had definitely come from the front porch.

Aunt Myrtle, lowering her needlework, met his gaze, her own questioning. Her eyesight might be failing, but there was nothing wrong with her hearing.

"Stay here." Duke was only dimly aware he had kept his voice low. Why, he had no idea. The storm was loud enough he could have shouted the words and likely nobody outside would have heard him. Still, discretion was the better part of valor.

Gathering his feet under him, he went to the dresser and took out the pistol he kept there. Checking the weapon was loaded, he held it down at his side, barrel pointed at the floor, as he tiptoed toward the front door. A glow of light danced with him. Casting a look back across his shoulder, he saw Aunt Myrtle had snatched up a lamp and was scurrying after him.

Knowing better than to tell her to return to the parlor and leave the business of dealing with a possible burglar to him—he'd never known a woman as stubborn as his aunt—Duke turned back to the front door. The clamor of the driving rain and howling wind increased tenfold as he inched it open. At first, he saw nothing untoward—at least, beyond the flying rain and tangles of twigs and leaves racing across the lawn before the wind.

"Oh my goodness."

Aunt Myrtle's words drew Duke's attention down to something white and shapeless lying on the porch at his feet.

"What the blazes?" Stashing his pistol in his belt, he knelt next to the object, quickly recognizing it was a body. Turning it over gently—turning *her* over; it was a woman around his own age—he noted a nasty-looking cut marring her otherwise smooth forehead. Blood trickling from the wound had mingled with the rain water glistening on her face. The rest of her was as wet as her cheeks, her dress clinging to a shapely-looking form.

Her eyelashes fluttered as Duke brushed some strands of damp hair from her face. She blinked uncertainly at the glow of the lamp that Aunt Myrtle was holding high above them. Her mouth moved, but no words came out.

"Who are you?" Duke blurted the first question that sprang to mind.

"Au—Audrey," the young woman managed to squeeze out through trembling lips. Behind Duke, Aunt Myrtle sucked in a startled gasp of air. Then the woman's—Audrey's—eyes fell shut again and she slumped limply in Duke's arms. She had lost consciousness before she could tell them anything beyond her name.

oOo

An hour later, Audrey was asleep in the guest bedroom. Outside, the wind had eased, although the rain was still pattering softly against the windows. Dora, the Crockers' housekeeper, was setting a tray with a freshly brewed pot of tea and a teacup on the nightstand, in case Audrey woke up, while Aunt Myrtle straightened the blanket around the sleeping woman and tucked it in more tightly.

Duke was watching from the doorway, propped up against the frame as he enjoyed his first good look of Audrey since, at Aunt Myrtle's direction, he'd carried her upstairs. As soon as he'd placed her on the bed, his aunt had chased him out of the room, telling him to wait outside on the landing while she and Dora got Audrey out of her wet things and into something dry and warm.

Audrey was very pretty, Duke mused, though her skin was unhealthily pale against the white of the pillow. The streaks of blood and rain had been cleaned away, her hair had been brushed and untangled, and her long lashes rested quietly on smooth cheeks as she slept. "I wonder who she is," he speculated out loud, stepping aside to allow Dora to leave the room and return to her domain in the servants' quarters. "And what could she possibly be doing on our doorstep on a night like this?"

Aunt Myrtle cleared her throat, and Duke redirected his gaze toward her. Something in her expression was... slightly guilty? He recalled the shocked indrawn breath he'd heard when Audrey had gasped out her name. He narrowed his eyes. "Do you know?"

Aunt Myrtle dipped her head. "I believe so, yes. If I'm right, Duke..." She paused for a moment, to look over at the bed with what Duke could only describe as a fond look. "If I'm right, this poor thing is your betrothed."

"My—*what?*" Duke yelped, louder than he'd planned. The woman in the bed stirred.

"Sssh. Don't wake her." Aunt Myrtle held a finger to her lips and beckoned Duke with her other hand to precede her outside. She closed the door behind them quietly.

Duke bit his tongue impatiently until the door was shut and his aunt had turned

toward him again. "I say again: my what?"

Aunt Myrtle offered him a rueful smile. "You heard me the first time. Come, let's go into the parlor, and I'll explain."

As soon as he strode into the parlor ahead of his aunt, he made a beeline toward the liquor cabinet. He could feel Aunt Myrtle's disapproving eyes on his back, but he ignored her; he had a strong sense he was going to need a stiff drink for this particular story. The fire was dying down, and he considered putting another log on, then decided against. It was growing late; soon, they'd be off to bed and he'd have to bank the fire anyway.

Aunt Myrtle settled into her rocking chair, her hands in her lap as she stared into the low flames. Taking up a position near her, leaning against the mantelpiece, Duke swirled the liquor in his glass, resisting the urge to demand the explanation out of her right now. He'd learned as a little boy that pushing Aunt Myrtle never led to anything. No, better he wait her out until she was good and ready.

At last, she drew a breath and tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "Duke, dear. You know I only have your best interest at heart."

"Not sure what a surprise fiancée has to do with that." He was startled by the bitterness in his own voice. He threw back the drink, letting the alcohol burn a path down his gullet. His lasting bachelor state had been a bone of contention between them for several years now, with Myrtle appealing to him with increasing urgency to find himself a suitable wife and settle down, and Duke refusing to even entertain the notion of marrying any of the acceptable local girls she kept pointing out to him. Partly he resisted simply because he didn't like adhering to others' expectations. And partly because he couldn't imagine willingly spending the next forty or so years with any one of those women, even though the idea of finding a woman he could settle down with for the rest of his life did hold a certain attraction.

Aunt Myrtle's lips twitched. "When your father died, he asked me to look after you, Duke. Make sure you'd grow up well."

"And you did." Duke snorted. "So you can stop meddling. I can make my own decisions." He ducked his head a little so he could fix his gaze on Aunt Myrtle's. "I'll decide when—and if—I get married."

"I know, I know." She sighed. "Duke, I'm getting on in years. It won't be long before I... go. I merely want to make sure you won't be alone when I do."

He gave her a small bow. "I appreciate that. But Aunt Myrtle, how could I marry this woman, Audrey? I don't know her, and she doesn't know me." Something

else occurred to him and he looked up at his aunt again. "How did you even find this girl?"

"Uh...." To Duke's surprise, Myrtle's wrinkled cheeks turned a rosy pink. "In the newspaper."

For the second time that evening, Duke bellowed out a "What?"

Myrtle shrugged her thin shoulders. "The men out West do it all the time. I thought—."

"Balls." For once, Duke didn't bother to swallow the cuss word in his aunt's presence. "You got me a mail-order bride!"

oOo

The following morning dawned bright and sunny. Though the lawn was dotted with debris from the storm, the sky was blue, with only a few feathery clouds to mar the expanse. Duke admired the view through the dining room windows as he enjoyed a plate of scrambled eggs and crispy bacon along with a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

The creak of the door being opened slowly drew his attention. He turned his head, expecting his aunt to come in. To his surprise, it was Audrey. She was wearing a blue dress that seemed a little too large around her chest. Duke thought he recalled seeing his aunt wearing that very dress before. Well, that made sense. Though he'd searched in the rain, he hadn't found any sign of whatever belongings Audrey had brought with her, and her own garments would have been ruined beyond repair.

She hesitated in the doorway when she saw him. "Um...."

"Good morning." Duke smiled at her, aiming to be civil. Aunt Myrtle's meddling had brought her here, and it wasn't Audrey's fault she hadn't consulted Duke. He waved at her to join him at the table. "Come on in. You must be hungry."

A radiant smile lit up her face. "Starving," she admitted with a chuckle.

Duke stood and pulled out a chair for her. Once seated, she loaded her plate with food. Duke stared at it, wondering how she managed to eat all that and still keep her figure. Most women he knew merely pecked at their food. "So. You came to marry me, huh?"

Audrey's head whipped up, and she choked on a mouthful of toast. As she fought to regain her breath, Duke reached over to pat her between the shoulder blades with one hand while he poured and offered her a glass of juice with the

offer.

"Better?" he asked, as she drank greedily from the juice and wiped moisture from her eyes.

She wheezed a breath, nodded, and carefully set the glass back down. She coughed one more time, then asked, "Did you just say 'marry'?"

"I did." Duke nodded blithely. "That's what Aunt Myrtle said you're here for. Are you telling me it's not true?"

"I—." Audrey hesitated, her eyes growing round. Then she lowered her head, and whispered, "I don't know."

Duke furrowed his brow, no longer as amused as he had been. He liked a good joke, but he preferred not to be the butt of it. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean, I don't know." Audrey's head came up again and she glared at him. "I don't remember. I don't remember—*anything*." The last word came out in a horrified squeak. If Duke had thought she might be pulling his leg, the anxious expression on her face made him rethink.

"What do you remember?" he asked, gentling his tone.

"My name," she said after a moment's contemplation. "And—and not much else." She raised her hand and gingerly touched her fingers to her temple, where the scabbed-over cut was now surrounded by a dark bruise. "I think I must've hit my head."

"That would be my guess, too." Duke filled her in on the little he'd learned about her.

"So," Audrey recapped after he was finished, "you found me half-conscious on your porch. And your aunt says I'm here so I can become your wife."

Duke nodded. "That about covers it."

Audrey gave herself a shake. "That makes no sense." She knitted her brows together. "But I think... I think I am here for a purpose."

"Well, dear." Aunt Myrtle swept into the room. From the expression on her face, Duke suspected she'd been listening outside the door for the past few minutes and had heard most of his exchange with Audrey. He gave her a wry look that she pretended not to see. "No need to fret about it. You'll have plenty of time to figure everything out. I would suggest, if you feel comfortable, you stay with us

for a while and we'll see if your memory returns. I'm sure Duke won't mind."

"I don't know." Audrey gave Duke an uncertain look. "Maybe I should—."

"Don't be silly," Duke found himself saying, much to his surprise. "Where else could you go? You brought nothing: no money, no valise." He lowered his gaze a bit. "No clothes."

Audrey blushed and reflexively plucked at the blue dress. "Since you put it that way...", she muttered. More loudly, she added, "Thank you." She managed to include both Aunt Myrtle and Duke in her answer, and Duke felt like a boor for ever making her uncomfortable.

oOo

"Do you remember anything yet?" Duke asked. Audrey's arm was tucked under his as they strolled side by side along the town's main street, her purchases from the store in his other hand. It felt natural, as if she belonged there—as if they'd done it before.

They'd set out once they were done with breakfast, after Aunt Myrtle had suggested taking Audrey into town so she could buy some "personal items", seeing as the poor girl had literally fallen on their doorstep with nothing except for the clothes on her back. However, as soon as Duke agreed it was a good idea, Aunt Myrtle developed a migraine and begged off, retreating to her room after securing a promise from Duke to escort Audrey while she shopped. Duke had rolled his eyes inwardly at his aunt, understanding very well that the sudden migraine was a figment of her imagination designed to push him and Audrey together.

Now, a couple hours later, he couldn't remember why he'd objected to the ruse. Audrey had proved pleasant company, even if she seemed to retreat into her own mind every now and then. Duke reckoned it was due to her head injury and memory loss. Perhaps her recollections would return soon, and then she'd remember how she'd gotten to his house and if her purpose had truly been to marry him.

He couldn't decide whether he should be relieved or offended she didn't remember. He wasn't a fool; he was aware he was considered an eligible bachelor. If he hadn't already known, the curious and frequently envious glances thrown his and Audrey's way as they made their way around town would have told him as much.

"Not... really." Audrey answered to his question with some hesitation. "Parts of this seem familiar. Like... like I've seen it before. But I can't remember!" She uttered the last words in a cry of frustration.

"You will," Duke said, managing to sound more assured than he felt. He didn't know the first thing about head injuries. But he found it hard to imagine a beautiful woman like Audrey would enter his life with no knowledge of her existence before they met. He peered sideways at her, studying her profile as they walked. Yes, his first impression was correct: she was very pretty. Even more so now the fresh air had brought color to her cheeks, and a bit of a sparkle to her eyes, even if they were presently dimmed a little by the anxiety of not knowing who she was and what had happened to her. Perhaps he—.

"Watch out for that car!" Audrey's warning was accompanied by a firm yank on his elbow that dragged him back from crossing the road. A horn honked and one of those new-fangled automobiles zipped past, its driver gesturing angrily for Duke to get out of his way.

Heart hammering against his ribs, Duke scowled at the mud splatter the vehicle had left in its wake. That had been too damned close. "Are you okay?" he asked Audrey. Her eyes were wide and she was breathing rapidly, clearly as shaken as he was. Then what she'd said sank in. "Wait. What did you call that thing?"

Audrey looked away. "I don't remember."

Duke narrowed his eyes. That was a lie. "Yes, you do. You called it a car. Where did you get that word from?" In his experience, everyone called them automobiles, ever since the newspapers had introduced the word for the new horseless carriages a few months back.

Audrey gave a slight shrug. "I don't remember." She met his eyes this time. The truth, then. "But I think... I think I've been here before."

"Where?" Duke gestured lightly with the hand not holding her purchases. "This street? This town?"

"No. Yes. No." Audrey shook her head as she made a noise of disgust. She pulled in a breath. "I meant, this *time*."

"This... time?" Duke gaped at her. Was she starting to lose her mind along with her memory?

Catching his dismay, Audrey gave a small shrug. "Sorry. I know it doesn't make sense."

"Okay. Okay." Duke took a deep breath and, switching Audrey's purchases into his other hand, patted hers where it still rested, warmly, on his sleeve. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

o0o

But Audrey's memory didn't improve. A month after Duke had found her on the porch, she still couldn't recall anything beyond her name, or the fact she'd so naturally called the automobile a "car".

Duke no longer cared about her lack of recognition, beyond the fact it sometimes seemed to make her sad. He cared a great deal about *that*, always trying to lighten her mood and bring out the radiant smile she'd showed him that first morning, which he'd grown to love very much. He succeeded more often than not.

While she was still recovering and easily tired, he would read to her in the evenings. Later, when she was stronger, he took her out riding into the surrounding countryside or for strolls along the beach. She loved the sea and the top of the high cliff half a mile from the house became her favorite place. The first time Duke took her there, she grew wistful, staring out at the small islands dotting the water. Duke had walked up behind her, standing close enough that the scent of her soap mingled with the salty sea air in his nose. "What are you thinking about?"

"Trouble," she muttered, as if to herself. "It's a Trouble."

"What is?" Duke had reached for her; the instant he touched her shoulder, she'd given a start, asking *him* what he was talking about. He'd had no answer beyond the few words he'd caught. Audrey had mulled them over, and eventually dismissed them—or so she'd said.

None of it mattered to Duke. He enjoyed Audrey's company far too much, and hadn't felt any desire to go into town for cards or drinks since she showed up.

Yes, Audrey had definitely made life better in Duke Crocker's opinion. The only shadow on his current happiness was Aunt Myrtle's health. Her pretend migraine had morphed into a racking cough that shook her entire body, and she was growing more frail with each passing day. The doctors Duke sent for said there wasn't much they could do, other than make sure she was comfortable and provide laudanum for any pain she was in. Duke hated seeing her like this, hated that the prediction she'd offered him the night Audrey had appeared seemed to be coming true far sooner than he'd have believed. "Won't be long now," the town doctor had whispered that very morning, on his way out after his latest visit.

Well, the doctors might not be able to heal whatever was ailing his aunt. But there was one thing left that Duke could do for her before she passed away.

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Audrey said yes.

For the longest moment, Duke was afraid she'd turn him down—once he'd finally gathered up the courage to ask her, on her favorite cliff-top. Her expression, as she sat perched on a flat boulder before him, had grown thoughtful and her gaze had shifted from his face to the far-off distance, staring out across the ocean toward the islands.

"Forget I said anything." Duke clambered back to his feet, heart aching. "You should get better first—."

"No, Duke, that's not it." Audrey held out a hand to stop him. "I—I may not remember if what your aunt says is true, but I'd very much like to be your wife. I just feel... I feel like I'm running out of time."

He sank to one knee again, taking her hand between his and seeking out her gaze. "I'll do anything—anything—you need me to. I promise."

Audrey sighed. "I know," she whispered.

He held her gaze, lost in the depth of her eyes. Her mouth, lips slightly parted, was soft. And close. Very, very close.

She moved nearer still, until her lips touched his. Her mouth was as gentle and pliant as Duke had anticipated. As the kiss deepened, he gave himself over to her: to the touch of her fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck; to her taste, milk and honey and Audrey and—.

With a supreme effort, he pulled back, breaking the kiss. This was wrong. He shouldn't be kissing her like this; they weren't married yet. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Audrey licked her lips unconsciously, and Duke found he couldn't look away. "That was very nice."

Shaking his head, Duke gave a wry laugh. "Sometimes, you say the oddest things."

Audrey uttered a chuckle of her own. "What can I say? I'm an odd girl."

oOo

As Duke had expected, Aunt Myrtle was beyond herself with joy—and more than a little smug—to learn her plan to find Duke a bride had worked after all. Enough that she roused herself from her sick bed to partake in the preparations for the wedding.

Once the decision was made, the wedding was planned with utmost resolve and speed: only another few weeks more saw the entirety of the town, as well as a number of out-of-town Crockers, gathered in the local church, the minister waiting with Duke at the end of the aisle until Audrey joined them.

The minister cleared his throat and intoned the opening words of the ceremony. "Dearly beloved: we have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond—."

Tuning out the minister's droning words, Duke glanced at Audrey from the corner of his eye. She looked amazing, he thought: the simple gown enhancing her beauty, her hair adorned with a circlet of tiny flowers. She gave him a slightly uncertain smile. Was she worrying about what would come next? Or having second thoughts?

Before he could consider the questions further, the minister's words filtered into his brain again and he became aware the man had nearly reached the end of his litany. "—instituted by God. Into this holy union, this man, Duke Crocker, and this woman, Audrey—," The minister stumbled a moment as he realized he had no last name for her, but quickly gathered himself and went on, "—now come to be joined. If any of you can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now; or else for ever hold your peace."

As the minister paused, a hushed silence descended over the church. Checking back across his shoulder, Duke saw everyone was sneaking peeks at everyone else, trying not to display their curiosity too openly. Of course, nobody expected anyone to say anything. The minister drew a breath, preparing to speak again.

"Stop. This is wrong."

A collective gasp went through the gathered crowd, and heads whipped around, searching for the speaker.

Duke gaped, his jaw dropped. Only he and the minister were close enough to know it had been Audrey herself who'd spoken out against the wedding.

"Audrey?" he croaked. Had she changed her mind? Had she decided she didn't want to marry him after all?

"I'm sorry." Audrey kept her voice low but, even so, those nearest—among them Aunt Myrtle—heard her and there were more indrawn breaths as they also understood who had objected. "I'm sorry, but—." She tapped the side of her head, making the flower circlet shake. "My memory just came back."

"Just now?" Despite the situation, a tentative grin tugged at the corners of Duke's mouth. "That's.... That's good, right?"

"Very good." Audrey's gaze flickered around the gathered congregation, who were staring at them and whispering amongst themselves. "Damn," she muttered, startling Duke. She looked back at him. "Is there a place we can talk? Privately?"

"Um." Duke peered at the minister, who was watching them with impatient interest. He must have heard the entire conversation, because he gave a nod and a wave of his hand, indicating they should follow him, without the need for Duke to relay Audrey's question.

A few minutes later, Duke and Audrey were standing alone in the church office, the door closed. Beyond it, the muted clamor of many voices rose, as the people in the church used the opportunity to express their shock and opinions about the unexpected turn of events.

"Audrey, what has gotten into you?" Duke sought Audrey's hand and was relieved when she didn't pull herself free.

"My memory. I remember everything." Her lips twitched, though her eyes were sad. "Your name really is Duke Crocker," she began.

Duke again opened his mouth, not entirely sure if he should be amused or annoyed.

"Please." Audrey rested a fingertip against his lips. "You live in Haven, in the year two thousand and ten. Around a hundred years from...from now." She waved with her free hand at their surroundings.

Okay, this had gone far enough. "That's not funny—." Duke yanked his head away from her touch.

"Duke. Do you trust me?" Audrey's tone was intense, as was the look in her blue eyes when she captured Duke's gaze with her own.

"I do." Duke found he didn't need to think about it.

"Then please, close your eyes. Listen to my voice. Don't say anything."

He couldn't deny her. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the warmth of her hand in his own and on the soft cadence of her voice as she continued to speak. She told him about a boat he owned, the Cape Rouge, and went on to describe a vessel unlike any he'd ever seen. Yet he found he could easily picture it, as if it were as familiar to him as the house he shared with Aunt Myrtle. "You also own

a bar, the Grey Gull. I rent a room upstairs. You're my landlord."

In his mind's eye, Duke saw a two-story gray wooden building, with a wraparound porch and a wooden deck circling the second floor. He smelled the sea and heard the screech of the gulls flying over the building, along with the clank of glasses and laughter rising from within.

"You took me out to dinner once. Remember?" Audrey continued, speaking in a low tone. "You set it up on the island, didn't even know if I'd say yes. We took a boat—."

Abruptly, a roar rose in his ears, drowning out Audrey's voice. Dizziness washed over him and he stumbled in an effort to regain his balance.

"Holy crap, it worked," a male voice said. Strong hands grabbed Duke's elbows to steady him.

"Nathan?" Duke opened his eyes, blinking into the glow of bright lamps, and found he was in the main room of the Gull. It was empty except for Audrey and Nathan, both of whom were looking at Duke with equally relieved expressions, although Audrey looked tired as well. Duke smiled at her as he regained his footing and straightened. "Hey. So, what—? How—?" He wasn't even sure where to start asking questions. Unbidden, something popped into his memory: something the Audrey in that other world, which was already fading as if it had been a dream, had said. "This was a Trouble, right?"

Audrey nodded, her features carrying a mixture of grim gravity and exasperation. "Meet Alice." She indicated a girl Duke hadn't previously spotted, huddled in a corner. Taking the girl in, he vaguely recalled talking to her for a bit while he served her an iced coffee. He remembered noticing her eyes were red-rimmed, as though she'd been crying, and that he'd asked her if she was alright. She'd confessed that her boyfriend had just broken up with her. Duke couldn't recall exactly what he'd said in reply—something about the drink being on the house had featured in there—before the Gull had turned busy shortly after and he'd left her to quietly sip her drink and read a novel she'd pulled from her bag.

"I'm sorry," Alice muttered as he caught her eye. "I didn't mean to do it."

A open book was spread face down on the table before her. Duke caught a glimpse of the cover, recognizing the style of those silly romance novels Evi had sometimes liked to read. *Uh oh*. He swiveled his head from Alice to Audrey to Nathan and back to Audrey. He gestured at the book. "Don't tell me. She's got some kind of... of down-the-rabbit-hole Trouble?"

Audrey chuckled. "She told me she pictured you as the main character. Then, *poof*. You disappeared straight out of the Gull."

Duke looked at Alice again. She ducked her head, blushing. "Like what happened with snowglobe girl?" Damn, he really had to stop being the victim of replacement Troubles. "So... everything that happened in *there*—" he gave a helpless wave with his hand, "—happened in that damned book?"

"In a way." Audrey shrugged. "Unfortunately, even after Alice realized what she'd done, she didn't know how to undo it. I had to go in after you."

"Thought you were immune to the Troubles," Duke muttered, part angry Audrey had risked herself for him, part pleased she considered him enough of a friend to have done so.

Audrey let out a rueful little laugh. "The plan was for my memories to not be affected by the Trouble, for it to not make me believe that life was real. Except —."

Duke barked a laugh of his own as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. "Except you somehow hit your head and lost your memory the old-fashioned way?"

"Yep." Another low chuckle. "Wasn't part of the plan."

"We were getting very worried," Nathan complained. "You were both gone for hours. We weren't sure—."

"Hours?" Duke exclaimed. "I was in there for weeks!"

As soon as the words left Duke's mouth, Nathan's gaze swiveled from Audrey toward Duke, his expression turning unhappy and a little hostile. "Weeks?"

"Um, very dull weeks," Duke backpedaled. Probably best not to tell Nathan he'd been about to marry Audrey in that other world. "Very boring. You wouldn't have liked it one bit."

"Hm." Nathan made a noise that indicated he didn't entirely believe Duke.

"Hey, guys?" Audrey called their attention back to her. She spread her hands. "All's well that ends well, right?"

"What about—?" Duke gestured toward Alice.

"Alice has promised she won't mentally cast real people into the novels she's reading again," Audrey reassured him. Alice was bobbing her head emphatically, still looking at him a little warily.

"Hey, kiddo, wasn't your fault." Duke flashed her a grin and she rewarded him with a tiny smile in return. "When I was sixteen, I always pictured Sally—."

Nathan let out a groan. "We really don't need to know that, Duke."

Audrey simply rolled her eyes.

Duke shrugged. "Okay, then."

oOo

Much later that same evening, alone in his stateroom on the Cape Rouge, Duke was getting ready for bed, when something fell out of his pants pocket. It clunked dully against the carpeted metal floor. Glancing down, Duke's breath caught. He slowly knelt to pick up the object, holding it up to the lamplight.

A startled chuckle escaped him as he confirmed what he'd first thought: it was a damned wedding ring. Not something he normally carried around in his pocket, so it could only have come from one place.

How much of it had been real? And how much had only happened in Alice's imagined wonderland?

He'd probably never know.

About to toss the ring onto the dresser, Duke reconsidered the move. Instead, he carefully tucked the ring away in a corner of the top drawer, where it would be safe from prying eyes.

Perhaps he'd have a use for it later. Some day....

Disclaimer: This story is a transformative work based on the Syfy/Entertainment One/Universal Networks International series *Haven*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it. Please do not redistribute elsewhere without author attribution

End notes: Based off a prompt for <http://unconventionalcourtship.dreamwidth.org/401.html> that read: "*Montana Mail-order Wife* (Charlotte Douglas). Rancher Wade Garrett's mail-order bride turned up with a huge bump on her forehead and a case of amnesia. Rachel O'Riley didn't know who she was let alone that she'd agreed to a marriage in name only! But handsome Wade certainly aroused her interest."

Other than this brief summary, the original novel and my story have no connection. Blame any historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies on the fact

the world Duke finds himself in is seen through the lens of a (bad) imaginary romance novel and not actual historical fact. The reference to Duke taking Audrey to dinner on an island beach is based on Tanaqui's ficlet *Bon Appetit!* (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/949100/chapters/2787652>). Also serves to cover the *Books/novels* bingo square.