

An excerpt from *The Depth of Beauty*:

He emerged from the trees to see Mandy standing at the water's edge. She was facing the ocean, so he could only see the back of her. She had taken off her shirtwaist and her skirt, leaving only her chemise and a petticoat. Her feet were bare and her rich, dark red hair flowed down her back.

She was bewitching.

She was trying without success to skip rocks into the calm water. Will's own heart skipped. He knew he should respect Mandy's privacy and leave, but his attraction to her kept him rooted to the spot. He watched her arms, those same pale, graceful limbs the baby doc had touched during the presentation. His fists coiled in response.

He couldn't stand it. "I can show you a better way," he called out, walking toward her.

Startled, she turned, and when she saw him, she too froze. She glanced at her clothing sitting on a piece of driftwood, and Will reflexively took off his own jacket.

"Here," he said, beginning to cover her as if she were a child. He paused, looking at the swell of her breasts beneath the filmy material of her undergarment. They were rising and falling with her rapid breaths.

She was anything but a child.

He looked up and lost himself in her almond eyes.

Mandy was the first to break the spell. "What did you mean, a better way?" she asked softly.

He stepped back. "Skipping rocks. Hard to do in the ocean, but it can be done." He looked down at the sand where they stood. "First, find the flattest rock you can. Not too big, about the size of your palm." He picked one up and stood close to her again, reaching for her hand, turning it over, and placing the rock in it. "You hold it like this," he murmured, taking her fingers and wrapping them properly around the stone. He absorbed the feel of his hand touching hers and wanted to hold it properly, as a suitor would, even though he knew he couldn't. He looked around for another rock to demonstrate the throw. "You stand like so, pull your arm back and flick your wrist, so that it spins. See?" He demonstrated and they watched his rock skip four times before disappearing into the water.

Mandy smiled with delight and looked up at him. "I want to do that!" she cried.

"Then give it a whirl," he said.

It took several tries before she was able to skip a rock even twice, but she reacted as if she had just climbed Mount Everest. "I did it!" she crowed.

Will couldn't help but grin at her enthusiasm. "I'll attest to it," he agreed.

They stayed in companionable silence for a bit longer until, once again, Mandy brought them back to reality. "I don't think you came down here to teach me how to skip rocks," she said. "Why did you come?"

He had practiced his little speech on the way down the hill. Why was he so loathe to begin it now? He took a deep breath. It had to be done.

"I heard that Ethel Steubens quit and that you've, um, stepped into her place, as it were."

Mandy's voice lost its levity. "Who told you?"

"Peter Raines."

She nodded. "I should have known. He's beyond worried about what Lia might think."

"So, he's correct? You've been displaying yourself in the... altogether?"

She looked at him with the knowing expression of a woman twice her age. "Do you mean, have I been modeling naked?" She squared her shoulders. "The answer is yes."

Something primal escaped him—something he had worked hard to control. "Well, you are damn well not going to do it anymore."

Her eyes grew wide at his aggression, then narrowed. She pulled her arm away and stepped back. He hadn't even realized he'd touched her. "This doesn't concern you."

"It *does* concern me. You are...you were..." He looked around, took off his glasses, and pinched his nose before replacing them. This was not the way he wanted it to go. "Look, I know you probably feel like you have to help out. You are always helping out. But it's not necessary. We will find someone else. Hire someone else. You are not to engage in that activity any longer."