

**Marc Dupree's words  
threw Laney completely off guard,  
as did his soft tone.**

“Are you still in need of money, Miss O’Connor?”

“Yes,” she admitted before she could stop the word from rushing out. Why, *why* did she find herself wanting to lean on this man, when she knew he was dangerous to everything she held dear?

For a long moment Dupree stared at her, those blue-blue eyes piercing straight through her, as though he could see inside every one of her secrets. “Then I have a proposition for you.”

A number of terrible possibilities came to mind. For the past twenty-four hours Laney had experienced nothing but fear and desperation. The feeling of falling into a pit with no way out had been dreadful, panic-inducing. Terrifying.

Was she about to fall deeper into that pit, thanks to this man and his...proposition?

No. She couldn't lose hope. For the sake of the children she had to believe good would come out of this awful situation.

“What kind of proposition are you suggesting?”

“Come work for me at my hotel.”

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## **RENEE RYAN**

grew up in a small Florida beach town. To entertain herself during countless hours of “lying out,” she read all the classics. It wasn’t until the summer between her sophomore and junior years at Florida State University that she read her first romance novel. Hooked from page one, she spent hours consuming one book after another while working on the best (and last!) tan of her life.

Two years later, armed with a degree in economics and religion, she explored various career opportunities, including stints at a Florida theme park, a modeling agency and a cosmetics conglomerate. She moved on to teach high school economics, American government and Latin while coaching award-winning cheerleading teams. Several years later, with an eclectic cast of characters swimming around in her head, she began seriously pursuing a writing career.

She lives an action-packed life in Lincoln, Nebraska, with her supportive husband, lovely teenage daughter and two ornery cats who hate each other.

RENEE RYAN

*Charity House*  
*Courtship*

*Love Inspired*

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CHARITY HOUSE COURTSHIP

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Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit,  
but in humility consider others better than  
yourselves. Each of you should look not only to  
your own interests, but also to the interests of others.  
—*Philippians 2:3, 4*



To Sheila Vittitow and Jean Smith.  
Your dedication to serving the Lord  
always humbles me. Thank you for your stellar  
example. I'm honored to call you ladies my friends!

## Chapter One



*Denver, Colorado*  
*June 1879*

Laney O'Connor hesitated outside the legendary Hotel Dupree, unsure how best to proceed. Suspended in her moment of indecision, she took a slow, calming breath. The gesture did little to dispel her increasing agitation. She was, after all, about to commit a brazen act.

Could she pull this off?

Did she have any other choice?

A wave of doubt crested. With a hard swallow, she shoved the unwanted emotion into submission. This was no time for uncertainty.

Yet here she stood, motionless, hardly daring to breathe.

Lifting her gaze, she studied the ornate building in front of her. Not out of curiosity, but to gather the courage she would need to enter the most exclusive establishment in Denver and finish what she'd started this morning.

The Hotel Dupree was—as all the periodicals claimed—the most elegant building in town. Although the sun had set hours ago, modern gaslights bathed the structure in a golden, welcoming glow. Nine stories high, and boasting

large, wrought iron balconies on every floor, the beautiful stone structure brought to mind beloved childhood tales where happily-ever-after always reigned.

Would Laney find her own happy ending here tonight?  
Doubtful.

But she had to try. She had to forget that time had run out for her, that a shady, unscrupulous banker wanted his money in less than three days.

Three. Short. Days.  
An impossible deadline.

Tears pushed at the back of her eyelids, a frightening reminder of her own helplessness, of the sharp, terrifying fear that she couldn't raise the five hundred dollars in time.

For weeks, Laney had prayed for an answer to her dilemma. She had all but begged the Lord to reveal a solution, *any* solution. Silence had met her countless appeals.

Now, with the clock ticking and no one to rely on but herself, Laney had to obtain the money on her own.

In the only way she knew how.  
*Please, Lord, please let him show.*

Squaring her shoulders, she pushed through the rotating doors and entered the hotel's main lobby. Stepping to the side, she stabbed a cursory glance through the large room. The rich fabrics on the furniture, the expensive mahogany paneling on the walls and the polished marble floors spoke of an attention to detail Laney appreciated.

As much as she admired the beautiful décor, the tiny alcove in the far corner captured the majority of her interest. Small, private, out of the main traffic flow, the nook was a perfect spot for her clandestine meeting.

Head high, eyes cast forward, Laney made her way across the lobby. She kept her steps slow and purposeful, but not too obvious. She had to draw as little attention to herself as



possible. Hard to do, considering the dress she'd borrowed for this occasion.

She prayed her choice of clothing hadn't been a mistake. The gown wasn't meant to entice, but rather to remind a man of his duty. And why he had that obligation in the first place.

Once nestled in the hidden alcove, Laney placed her back to the wall and waited for her quarry.

Searching faces only, a sense of foreboding slipped through her resolve. Her pulse kicked into an erratic rhythm, punching ruthlessly against her ribs. *What if he doesn't show?*

No. She couldn't give into doubt.

Her entire plan hinged on Joshua Greene's cooperation. And his assumption that she was a woman of questionable character. Sighing past a wave of guilt, Laney shifted her position slightly, ran her gaze through the room once more, but found no one bearing the familiar mane of gray hair and ruddy features she sought.

Another adjustment to her stance and she felt her attention pulled to the left, inexplicably drawn to the most compelling pair of steel-blue eyes on a man she'd ever seen.

Their gazes locked. And held.

Why couldn't she look away?

Stunned at her own daring, she pressed her lips tightly together. Her breathing hitched in her throat. For a terrifying instant, every rational thought receded from her mind.

Riveted into immobility, she continued staring at the handsome stranger. He stared back. Boldly, relentlessly, with a bleak expression on his face. *That look*, that stern, unyielding glare sent a shiver tripping along her spine.

Laney quickly broke eye contact. Something felt off about this whole situation, now more than ever. A sense of impending doom urged her to leave the hotel immediately.

She ignored the sensation, knowing she couldn't leave. Not yet. Not without her money.

Against her better judgment, her gaze sought the handsome stranger once again.

He hadn't moved from his earlier position.

This time, his lips curved around a fixed smile. Distrust, suspicion, they were both in his gaze.

Who *was* he? And what did he think she was planning to do here tonight?

Knowing how she was dressed, sensing he'd come to the absolute wrong conclusion, she nearly rushed out of the hotel.

*The children, she told herself. Think of the orphans.*

The reminder helped her recover the necessary courage to finish what she'd come here to do. Yanking her gaze free, Laney melted deeper into the shadows of the alcove.

She held her breath, waiting, counting the endless seconds, praying the stranger would grow tired of watching her and leave. Finally, after shooting one more look in her direction, he disappeared into the adjoining restaurant near the bank of elevators.

Instead of experiencing joy over his departure, another bout of uncertainty reared.

Again, Laney disregarded the feeling.

She could do this. She *had* to do this. For the abandoned children who needed the safety of the home she alone provided.

A movement at the hotel's entrance cut through her thoughts. Joshua Greene had arrived.

Relief nearly buckled her knees, even as the well-dressed, gray-haired gentleman paused in the doorway. Laney eyed him cautiously, hopefully. Dressed in an expensive, hand-tailored suit, the cut as elegant as the man himself, Judge Greene looked every bit the distinguished Denver citizen that he was.

He glanced around the room with a caged expression on

his face. Apparently, he was as unsettled by the nature of their impending transaction as Laney.

Wanting to ease his mind, she moved out into the open and flashed her brightest smile at him. He did not return the gesture. Instead, he tugged his hat over his face and set out in her direction.

Despite her impatience to be finished with this uncomfortable meeting, she waited until he was nearly upon her before speaking. "Good evening, Judge Greene."

A brief nod was his only answer.

So, he was going to play it that way. Laney sighed. "I'm sorry we had to meet this way." And she was. More than she could put into words.

"I, too, am sorry, Miss O'Connor." His lips twisted into a frown. "But I suppose it's better than the alternatives."

It was her turn to nod in agreement. Given the unorthodox nature of their relationship, Laney could never have met him at his home, or hers. And certainly not his office in the courthouse. The Hotel Dupree provided them anonymity.

Wanting to protect his identity as best she could, Laney took his arm and pulled him into the shadows with her.

He followed willingly.

Once they were out of sight of the other hotel guests milling about, he wasted no time with pleasantries.

"Miss O'Connor." He kept his voice low, his words barely audible over the din from the lobby. "As much as I sympathize with your predicament, you must never again contact me as you did this morning. Such recklessness goes against our original arrangement."

The reminder slammed into her like a punch. "I had no other choice," she whispered.

"I know, my dear." Softening his tone, he patted her hand with a benevolent, fatherly touch. "I understand this is dif-

ficult for you. Truly, I do. If it's any consolation, you look very much like your mother tonight. Quite beautiful, really."

Instead of relishing the compliment, Laney's heart filled once more with guilt.

She hated putting this man in such a precarious situation. But what else could she do? Her loan had been called in six months early. And this former "friend" of her mother's owed Laney far more than she was asking of him tonight.

Considering the circumstances, he was getting off easy.

*Keep telling yourself that.*

As if wishing to finish their business as quickly as possible, he slipped a hand inside his coat then pulled out his wallet. A flick of his wrist and she was in possession of her money.

Surprised at how quickly the transaction had gone, Laney automatically curled her fingers over the large bundle and pressed it to her heart.

"Can I assume this settles our account?"

"Yes." She gave him a firm nod. "Thank you, Judge Greene. As per our agreement, you owe me nothing more."

"Excellent." He turned to go, then spun back around to face her. "I know I don't have to remind you of the necessity for secrecy, but under the circumstances, I feel I must verbalize my request so there is no misunderstanding."

Knowing what was coming next, Laney waited silently for him to continue.

"Never reveal who gave you this money, Miss O'Connor. Or why."

She clutched the bills tighter in her fist. "No, I won't. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you. I trust we shall not meet again. I..." As if only just realizing what he was saying, a sad smile crossed his lips. "Take care of my boy."

Such an easy request. "You may count on it."

Without another word, he pivoted on his heel. This time, he didn't turn around.

Light-headed from joy over her success, Laney slumped against the wall and sighed. She glanced after the judge's retreating back. He moved quickly, already halfway to the bank of elevators. At least he was sticking to their plan. As agreed, he would ride to the ninth floor of the hotel, and then exit the building by way of the back stairwell.

Laney would leave the way she came, after she drank a cup of coffee in the restaurant. Twenty more minutes and she could put this whole ugly business behind her.

The thought that she'd jeopardized the reputation of the most respected judge in town left her with a mild case of regret. But then she drew on the image of the children sleeping soundly in their beds. One in particular came to mind and her conscience eased.

Regardless of what Judge Greene told himself, he hadn't come here tonight out of altruism. Nor had he shown up to pay off the debt he owed, at half the cost. No, he'd come to ensure Laney kept his son's parentage a secret.

He'd paid handsomely for her silence. Or so he'd thought. What he didn't know, what Laney hadn't reveal during their transaction, was that she would have kept his secret for free.

Now that Marc Dupree had taken over the day-to-day operations of his hotel, he no longer tolerated dishonorable behavior. Not from his employees, *or* his guests. After months of ensuring every member of his staff adhered to this strict policy—and a handful of tussles with unruly patrons—the Hotel Dupree was now considered the most elegant, well-run hotel this side of the Mississippi.

Marc had worked hard to earn that reputation. He would allow nothing to ruin what he'd built out of the worst possible betrayal a man could suffer. Already cautious by nature,

years of running the most dangerous saloons in the West had taught him how to spot trouble before it began. Thus, the moment the stunning woman in the gold dress entered his lobby he'd known—*known without a doubt*—she was going to pose a problem.

The way she'd scanned the lobby with a calculating eye, searching male faces only, had told its own story. When she'd stared at him from across the room, as if daring him to call her out for some misdeed, Marc had taken it upon himself to do just that.

Once he had concrete proof. He was, after all, a fair man.

The fact that he'd been unexpectedly affected by the woman's striking beauty made no difference. He would not abide dishonest dealings in his hotel.

No matter the circumstances.

Careful to keep outside the woman's line of vision, he observed Judge Greene step inside the empty elevator closest to the restaurant. If Marc had been a betting man, he'd wager half his fortune that the woman would soon follow her "friend."

Swallowing his distaste behind a sneer, Marc found himself torn between tossing the little beauty out of his hotel and waiting to see how long it would take her to make her way to the elevators.

He guessed two minutes. Perhaps three.

She proved him wrong, by lingering in the alcove a good five more minutes than he'd predicted. Marc took the opportunity to study her more closely.

She'd arranged her rich, mahogany hair loosely atop her head, with several strands cascading free at random. The tousled effect was both captivating and enthralling, a sure sign she'd taken great care with her appearance. The gold dress complemented her figure to perfection, its tight-fitting bodice cut just high enough to avoid indecency. But only just.

Marc knew better than to allow such an artful display to send his logic disappearing into another room. If his experience with Pearl LaRue had taught him anything, it was that a man could trust no woman.

This one, no matter how exquisite, was no exception.

She set out, heading straight for the bank of elevators near the restaurant. Exactly as he'd predicted.

Uncommonly disappointed in a woman he'd never met, Marc cut across the lobby in a wide arc, keeping to the left of her so she wouldn't notice his approach. Two feet away, he reached out and caught her by the arm.

Ignoring her shocked gasp, he spun her around to face him.

For an endless moment his mind emptied of all thought. His heartbeat roared in his ears, making it difficult to concentrate on anything but the stunned woman blinking wide-eyed back at him.

Up close, her refined, delicate beauty took his breath away. In contrast with the bold cut of her dress, everything about her was soft and inviting. Her face, her figure, even her light amber eyes spoke of a kind soul and a generous heart.

Completely unexpected. Enough to render him speechless.

She stared back at him, unmoving, waiting, holding silent, as if trying to gauge his mood before making her move.

Wounded, that was the word that came to mind as he gazed into those exotic, heartbreaking eyes. Vulnerable. Desperate.

All a lie. Her kind *always* lied.

Marc gave his head a hard shake. "Miss," he said past the drumming in his ears. "I would like a word with you in private."

He felt her betraying tremble, an instant before she physically repressed the sensation and then smoothed a look of calm across her face. The alarming speed in which she re-

gained her composure proved Marc's earlier assessment. Only a woman with something to hide would respond with such calculated control.

"If you would be so kind as to come with me," he added with an edge of warning in his words, "I'm sure we can avoid an unnecessary scene."

As if coming out of a daze, she tugged on her arm, hard. "Sir, I suggest you release me before *I* make a scene."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Marc tightened his hold, not enough to hurt her but enough to make his point.

"Who do you think you are?" An impeccable mix of indignation and shock sounded in her voice.

Oh, she was good. She looked *and* sounded generally taken aback by his behavior.

But Marc had seen that very same expression on another woman's face. The reminder was enough to harden his heart.

"My name is Marc Dupree," he said with hard-won authority. "The owner of this hotel."

"Well, then, Mr. Dupree." She swept a lock of hair behind her ear with a trembling finger, the only sign of her agitation. One he would have missed had he not been watching her so closely. "I must compliment you on your fine establishment."

She punctuated her words with a brilliant smile. The same one she'd given Joshua Greene earlier.

Marc had seen enough. He motioned to his security man, Hank, watching from across the room.

Well-versed in the need for propriety, the big man sauntered over in a casual manner.

"Hank, please escort Miss—" Marc leveled a look on the woman. "I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure of learning your name."

A sound of despair slipped from her lips as she fixed her eyes on the rotating doors at the other end of the lobby.

"Now, now, that wouldn't be wise, Miss..."



She snapped her gaze back to his. "Oh, honestly, this is absurd." Indignation masked any signs of her earlier anxiety. "My name is Laney. Laney O'Connor."

"I trust that's your real name."

"Of course it's my real name. Why would you ask such a question?"

Marc lifted a single eyebrow. "I find women like you often use a variety of names."

"*Women like me?*" She frowned, as if trying to discern the meaning of his words. The moment understanding dawned, her eyes widened. "Oh...*oh.*" She yanked once again on her arm. "You insult me."

He almost believed he'd offended her. Almost.

"Hank, please escort Miss O'Connor to my office." Marc lowered his lips to her ear. "This will go much easier for you if you cooperate without a fight."

"I...I don't understand. I've done nothing wrong."

They both knew that was a lie.

"Then you won't mind if I take a look inside your satchel." Giving her no opportunity to respond, he let go of her arm and commandeered the tiny bag dangling from her wrist.

Shock and fury flared in her eyes. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Ensuring that nothing unsavory occurs in my hotel."

Gaze locked on the tiny satchel, she lunged for him.

Marc shifted to his left.

She went stumbling past. One step, two, by the third she caught her balance and swung back around to face him. "Mr. Dupree, please. You...you've made a terrible mistake."

Panic sounded in every word.

Marc remained unmoved. How many times had Pearl given that very same appeal, with that precise look of distress in her eyes?

"A mistake?" He shook his head. "Not likely."

“Please,” she whispered, her shoulders slumping forward. “You have to believe me when I say I’ve done nothing improper in your hotel.”

*Yet.*

The unspoken word echoed in the air between them. Marc nearly called her bluff. Except...

Her desperation appeared real.

Something in him, some hidden part he thought long dead, reconsidered confiscating the ill-gotten money and returning it to its rightful owner. Perhaps, as Miss O’Connor had claimed, Marc had misjudged the situation.

He nearly relented and gave her back her reticule without further delay. But then he remembered what he’d witnessed moments earlier. One of Denver’s most prominent citizens—a federal judge, no less—had given this woman a large sum of money. In a very secretive, clandestine manner.

Something unsavory was afoot in his hotel. And Marc needed to collect all the facts before he could act.

Of course, questioning Miss O’Connor would require privacy.

Decision made, he hitched his chin toward Hank. Needing no further instruction, the other man took her arm.

She didn’t fight this time, nor did she try to appeal to Marc’s compassion. She did, however, release a defeated sigh, as though she understood she had no other choice but to cooperate.

“Mr. Dupree.” She wrapped her dignity around her like a protective shield. “Once I have explained my actions here tonight I trust you will return my reticule.”

Marc leaned forward until their noses nearly touched. “That, Miss O’Connor, will depend completely on what you reveal.”

## Chapter Two



Laney tried to formulate a new strategy as the large, beefy man named Hank escorted her through the hotel lobby. Unfortunately, Marc Dupree followed closely behind them. So closely, in fact, that she could smell his spicy, masculine scent.

The heady aroma left her slightly light-headed, and her mind filled with the same hopelessness that had been gnawing at her all evening.

No. She couldn't give up. Not now. *Not ever.*

Maintaining her outward calm, she kept her steps slow and steady, her expression mild. Despite what the hotel owner might think, the five hundred dollars in Laney's reticule belonged to her.

Of course, per her deal with Judge Greene, Laney couldn't disclose the reason he'd given her such a large sum of money. She would have to come up with another explanation, one that would protect the promise she'd made and still satisfy Dupree's suspicious mind.

As if reading her thoughts, the annoying man moved in closer still, narrowing the distance to mere inches. "Thinking up a good lie, are you?"

*Arrogant brute.*

He thought he had the situation all figured out.

When he was so very wrong.

“I’m warning you now,” he continued in his low, husky baritone. “I’m not a man easily fooled.”

Her breath caught on a gasp. Oh, she had no doubt he was a sly one. The sense of danger pulsating out of him nearly overwhelmed her. But she coaxed her fear into compliance and focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Hank’s hold on her arm remained remarkably light. Laney considered making a break for the rotating doors behind her. But she sensed if she tried to escape, the hired ruffian would tighten his grip to painful proportions.

Mind working quickly, she considered other options. Even if she managed to get away from Hank, there was the matter of Marc Dupree. Laney could feel his suppressed anger as he walked directly behind her.

Again, he leaned in close. Too close. “I wouldn’t try to run if I were you.” The warning sizzled in the tiny space between them. “You’re no match for Hank. Or me.”

Laney seethed at the man’s self-assurance. Nevertheless, she knew better than to fight at this point. Not without an escape plan.

Praying for a calm she didn’t possess, she allowed Hank to usher her inside a small room in the back corner of the hotel.

Dupree entered a few steps behind them and shut the door with a resounding click.

The moment Hank released her arm Laney pivoted around and took a step forward. Dupree shifted directly in her path, an ironic twist of his lips.

Out of ideas but not out dignity, she opened her mouth to express her outrage over his behavior. Unfortunately, words eluded her.

Eyebrows raised, Dupree stared at her, waiting, taking her measure, silently challenging her to defend herself.

The noisy din from the hotel lobby pervaded the cold mood in the room.

Laney ignored the racing of her pulse, putting it down to sheer desperation, and returned Dupree's glare with equal intensity.

The handsome, chiseled features and square jaw created a deceptively appealing picture, as did the thick black hair against his smooth, olive skin. In contrast to his severe good looks, the crisp white shirt he wore, red silk vest, and matching neck cloth added a refined dignity not often seen in the West.

For a brief moment, as she continued holding his stare, Laney detected a familiar restlessness in his blue-blue eyes, the kind garnered from a painful past much like her own. A kindred spirit?

Hardly.

This might be her first face-to-face meeting with Marc Dupree, but she'd heard all the rumors. His reputation as a ruthless businessman was legendary around town. Known for demanding unreasonably high standards from his employees—as well as everyone else around him—she doubted he had an ounce of mercy in his heart.

Such a man would never understand what had brought Laney here tonight. She would be wise to consider him no different from the heartless banker who'd called in her loan six months early.

Apparently finished with his silent scrutiny, Dupree turned to Hank and handed over Laney's reticule. "You know what to do with this."

"Sure thing, boss."

Pretending to misunderstand, Laney reached out as Hank swept past her. "Oh, how kind of you to walk that over to me."

Hank paused midstep.

"Ignore her," Dupree ordered.

Cocking his head, the big man eyed her cautiously. She thought she detected a note of sympathy in his eyes but then he shook his head and continued on his errand.

As if bored with the whole affair, Dupree leaned against the shut door and crossed his arms over his chest. His casual stance was an illusion, of course. Laney easily detected the concentrated focus behind that bland manner of his.

Recognizing the sensation in her stomach as fear, she forced herself to speak as though nothing was amiss. "Come now, Mr. Dupree. Considering the late hour, perhaps you would be so kind as to return my reticule now. I'm sure we can have our *little discussion* some other time."

His expression never changed, but his gaze narrowed ever so slightly. "Not a chance, honey."

Out of the corner of her eye, Laney caught Hank reaching out to a small, metal safe situated on the floor next to a sturdy-looking desk.

Renewed panic reared, abrupt and violent, stealing her ability to think logically.

Knowing Dupree watched her as closely as she eyed Hank, Laney inched slowly into a new position, lowered her lashes and focused covertly on Hank's fingers working the dial.

The melodic tick, tick, tick, of the spinning lock filled the room, diminishing her chances of an easy escape with each turn. Another few clicks and Hank pulled opened the safe. He shoved her reticule deep inside then closed the door with a hard snap. Another twist of his wrist and the lock went spinning again.

As the tumblers cleared, her composure snapped.

She whipped around to glare at Dupree. "You can't do this." Her breath came in short, shallow gasps. "It's...it's stealing."

"Don't be so dramatic." Dupree waved his hand at her in

a careless gesture. "I have no plans to keep your reticule indefinitely, nor its valuable contents."

"I don't believe you."

"No? What if I told you I plan to return the large sum of money to its rightful owner at once?"

Her throat tightened at the very idea. "You... Mr. Dupree, you can't do that."

"Can't I?"

"But you..." Her mind raced for a solution to this new, awful threat of his. "You promised to give me a chance to explain."

"Indeed, I did." He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Do proceed with your explanation, Miss O'Connor."

Her gaze automatically tracked toward Hank. Standing partly in the shadows the big man appeared deeply enthralled with his thumbnail.

Laney sighed. "Very well. The gentleman gave me that money for—"

She cut off her own the words, remembering Judge Greene's adamant request. *Never reveal who gave you this money, Miss O'Connor. Or why.*

She'd given her word. Yet, due to no fault of her own, she'd already violated a portion of her promise. She could not reveal the rest.

"Joshua Greene gave you the money for..." Dupree prompted.

Laney pressed her lips tightly shut. How to respond?

*Think, Laney. Think.*

In the ensuing silence, Dupree motioned to Hank. The other man dropped his hand and strode out of the room without a single glance in her direction.

With only the two of them left, a thick blanket of tension fell over the room. Laney prayed for divine intervention.

*Please, Lord, show me a way out of this quandary.*

No quick solution came to mind. She spun in a slow circle, taking in the room from the perspective of a captive—searching for a route of escape. There was no back door, only a small window high above the floor just to the left of the large desk.

Tossing a smile in Dupree's direction, Laney sidled in the direction of the window as nonchalantly as possible.

The size was right, but she'd never make it through the tiny opening in her borrowed dress. Perhaps there was still hope. Having eyed an armoire before setting out, she moved back to the other side of the room, and then threw open the cabinet doors.

"What's this? Several sets of trousers and shirts?" She slanted Dupree a look over her shoulder. "Don't you keep a room for yourself here in the hotel?"

He didn't answer her question directly. "As I'm sure you've already concluded, Miss O'Connor, there are no additional exits in this room."

"I don't have any idea what you mean."

A patronizing grin slid onto his lips. "Naturally."

How she hated his condescension. The sneering attitude reminded Laney of Thurston P. Prescott III, the banker who'd refused to give her more time on the remaining portion of her loan. All because of a cold, judgmental heart.

Suppressing a scowl, she closed the cabinet doors and twirled in another slow circle. "Oh, my. You have a fireplace. I say, Dupree, your office is exceedingly well furnished."

"I like nice things."

"Of course you do."

She doubted a wealthy man like him knew what it meant to be penniless and scared, never knowing when the next meal would come. But Laney did. As did the children whose mothers had sent them to her orphanage for safekeeping.

Laney had pledged to those women that she would provide



every child living in Charity House a Christian upbringing, the comfort of a warm bed and the promise of three meals a day. She would not fail them simply because a suspicious hotel owner had misread her transaction with a prominent judge in town.

Drawing confidence from the thought of her honorable mission, Laney made her way to the fireplace mantel. She immediately took note of the tin photographs arranged haphazardly across the handcrafted stone.

How odd, she thought. The man leaning against the door, watching her through narrowed eyes, couldn't possibly have loved ones. And yet, photographs meant family and friends. Drawn to one image in particular, Laney ran her finger along the pretty gold frame.

Concentrating on the photograph beneath her hand, she looked from the stunning woman smiling up at her, to Dupree, then back again. The resemblance was uncanny. Was this his sister? No. He seemed too hard to have a sister.

And Laney was wasting valuable time.

Glancing to the heavens, she prayed for guidance. *How do I proceed, Lord? What do I say to protect Charity House and the children?*

"Enough stalling, Miss O'Connor." Dupree pushed away from the door and made his approach. "Your failure to explain your actions here tonight speaks volumes. As such, the money you accepted from Judge Greene will remain secure in my safe, and *you* will wait in this office while I go in search of the man myself."

No longer caring about pride, or dignity, Laney met Dupree halfway across the room. "Please, I beg you. Don't involve Joshua in this."

"So now it's Joshua, is it?"

"I meant... Judge Greene." The correction came too late. She saw the censure in Dupree's eyes.

“I’m afraid, Miss O’Connor, *Joshua* involved himself—and consequently me—when he agreed to meet you in my hotel. Since I imagine he’s smart enough not to use his real name on the register, I must ask an indelicate question. Which room is he waiting for you in?”

Laney stifled a groan that rose up in her throat.

This man seemed determined to think the worst of her. With very little evidence, he actually believed Judge Greene had rented a room in this hotel with the express purpose of spending the evening with her.

Laney would be insulted if Dupree wasn’t so completely incorrect.

Then again...

Perhaps his mistake was a blessing. Perhaps Laney could use this man’s ugly assumption of her character to her advantage.

Why not buy herself some much needed time while he went on his search. A search that would prove highly unsuccessful.

“Joshua is in room...” she paused, blinked, and then pretended to accept defeat at last “...912.”

For an endless moment, Dupree studied her face. Laney held her breath. The look of disappointment in his eyes—disappointment in *her*—nearly made her rethink her plan.

Should she tell him the truth? Maybe he would understand her situation. Maybe he would care.

And *maybe* Marc Dupree was no different than the shady banker demanding his money before their agreed upon deadline. Simply because he thought the children in her orphanage didn’t deserve a safe home in which to live. Not because they were bad children, but because of how their mothers chose to earn their living.

A living that Marc Dupree had accused Laney of conducting here tonight.

No. She couldn't trust him.

The risk was too great.

With renewed determination, she lifted her chin a notch higher.

Dupree's lips twisted into a frown. "Stay here."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and slammed out of his office.

At the sound of the lock striking into place, Laney blew out a hard burst of air.

*Stay here.* As if he'd given her any other choice.

At least he wouldn't find Judge Greene on the ninth floor. Or any floor, for that matter. Denver's most respected federal judge had already exited the building by way of the back alley. By now, he was probably enjoying the rest of the evening with his very proper, very naive wife.

Dupree would be furious when he returned to his office empty-handed. Laney didn't plan to stick around to find out just how angry. Of course, if there was no money waiting for him in the safe there could be no reason to approach the judge, now or in the future.

No evidence. No shady dealings.

Laney knew what she had to do. And she had precious little time in which to do it.

Pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, she looked frantically around the room. A new plan began formulating in her brain. One that would require a different ensemble than the ridiculously fancy dress she wore now.

She hurried across the room and flung open the doors to the armoire. Smiling wryly, she reached for a pair of worn trousers. Then thought better of her choice and dug deeper.

One by one, she tossed out clothing items until she found the most expensive pair of trousers and the finest linen shirt among the lot.

Kicking off her shoes, she made the change as quickly as

possible. Her fingers shook over the buttons but she remained focused. Shoving up the too-long sleeves, she folded her discarded dress into a neat ball then rushed over to the safe.

Thankful she'd paid attention to Hank's fingers working the lock, she spun the dial around, clearing it, then proceeded to get down to business.

Three turns to the right, two more to the left, a final one to the right and...

*Click.*

Blessed success. It took both hands to open the surprisingly heavy door. She eyed the contents, took only what belonged to her, then pushed the safe closed.

Feeling contrary, she scribbled a quick note to the owner of the hotel—it was the only proper thing to do after all the hospitality he'd given her—then, with a bold sweep of her arm, cleared the desktop of all papers.

She jumped onto the desk.

Looking to the window, she let out a chuckle. She'd scaled too many walls, jumped on and off too many trains, to let a measly little slab of glass three feet above her head daunt her now. A quick flex of fingers, a check to make sure she'd secured her reticule tightly around her wrist and she was ready.

Mind focused on one task at a time, she grabbed the window's frame with one hand and felt around for the opening with the other. Finding the lever at last, she unlocked the latch and pushed the glass forward until she'd created a substantial slit. Careful to avoid catching the silky material on any random piece of wood or metal, she threw the borrowed dress out the opening.

Her foot found a toehold in the wall's masonry. Pulling with her arms and pushing with her feet she raised herself up. Once she was halfway through the window, she grasped the outside casing and tugged again. One final push and she was free.

*Free.*

Tumbling toward the ground, she used the momentum of the fall to gather her balance.

As always, Laney landed on her feet.

Smiling, she picked up the dress, checked the condition of her reticule and took off at a full run. She made it exactly five steps before colliding into a solid mass of silk-encased muscle.

“Oh!”

The dress plummeted from her clutches. Head reeling, mind focused on escape, Laney instinctively bent to snatch the garment as quickly as possible. Her progress was halted midreach.

Powerful arms trapped her from behind, while an annoyingly familiar voice rang in her ears. “It would appear, Miss O’Connor, you have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

## Chapter Three



Laney tried to twist free, but Dupree's hold tightened around her waist. "Be still," he ordered.

His haughty tone slid over her, making her bolder than usual. "Or you'll what? Hurt me?"

His arms jerked, just a bit, enough to tell her she'd hit her mark. "I'm not in the habit of harming women."

"Then release me."

He had the audacity to chuckle. "Not a chance, honey."

*Honey?* Laney ground her teeth in frustration. But she wisely remained unmoving. As covertly as possible, she lifted her gaze and studied the window she'd just slipped through. How could Dupree have known she'd escape by way of that tiny opening?

He chuckled again. "I'm an observant man, Miss O'Connor. I watched you eye my window with the same longing that a land-bound sailor tosses at the sea."

"How dare you?"

"I dare because I can." He shifted his hold, drawing his arms tighter around her, as if he suspected she would make a break if he gave her an ounce of opportunity.

He was right, of course. The cad.

The knowledge that he could read her so easily sent a

shiver of alarm skidding down her spine. Her bravado of only seconds before disappeared. Clearly, she'd underestimated the man.

A mistake she wouldn't repeat.

She had to get away. But how? At the moment, he had the advantage. Unacceptable. She couldn't allow him to keep her imprisoned in the alleyway where the dim light from the adjacent street made this encounter all too intimate. Terrifyingly so. "Let me go."

"Not until you hand over Judge Greene's money."

"Money?" She struggled with every ounce of her strength, and managed to lengthen the space between them by an entire four inches. "I don't know what you mean."

"So we're back to that. You might want to reconsider your denial in light of your present situation." He spun her around to face him, clamped his hands on her shoulders and dropped an assessing glance over her. "As you must agree, you are in no position to argue."

Far too aware of his hands on her shoulders, she swallowed back a sarcastic retort. She should be furious with indignation. Yet, as he held her trapped inside his gaze a strange, almost pleasant situation rippled through her.

What was wrong with her? This man was the enemy. The enemy! "You seem to be under the impression that you are in control right now."

His fingers flexed, then gripped her again. Not any harder, just more securely. "Wonder where I'd come by such an idea?"

His smug attitude quickened the fight in her. Calling upon the lessons she'd learned from the friendly Chinese man at the mining camp outside Cheyenne, Laney dropped low, then bobbed to her right. She managed to surprise Dupree long enough to free herself for a full half second.

But he reached out, grasped her again then lifted her back to an upright position.

“Release me, you oaf.”

Placing her directly in front of him, he flattened his lips into a grim line. For a brief moment, their feet shuffled in a bizarre dance of wills while she tried to get free and he made sure she didn't.

Fully in control of the situation, Dupree concluded their perplexing waltz once he had her in a spot where her only route of escape was through him.

Apparently satisfied with this new arrangement, he released her shoulders at last. “Now.” His low, gravelly drawl drifted through the air between them. “Where were we?”

A shudder of unease racked through her. “Your manly display of physical intimidation is rather pedestrian, don't you think? Especially in light of the fact that I have done nothing wrong here tonight.”

“You claim innocence, yet you tried to make a quick escape before my return. And now that we're on the subject.” His eyes narrowed over her. “I don't remember giving you permission to borrow my clothes.”

She jerked her chin at him. “I'm not afraid of you.”

“You should be.”

Keeping her eyes locked with his, she faked to the right, then shifted quickly to her left. He shot out a restraining arm, and once again, moved her back to center.

“I'm warning you, Dupree—”

“Dispensing of the ‘mister,’ are we?”

Laney sniffed. “Mister implies a gentleman.” She trailed her gaze across his far too handsome face, down to his fancy vest then back again. “Regardless of the manner in which you dress, we both know you are no gentleman.”

“And since you are no *lady*, am I to assume we can dispense of any further pretense of good manners?”



Without waiting for her to respond, he reached out and captured a loose tendril of her hair, twined it around his finger.

For a long, stifling moment the strange sensation she'd experienced only moments before slipped through her again, freezing her into immobility. Why wasn't she slapping his hand away? Had she no pride left?

Yes, of course she did.

Calling upon every bit of her outrage, she said, "Release me this instant."

"In due time. But first." He let go of her hair. "I want that money."

"Well, you can't have it."

Even in the dim light she could see the exact moment his patience ran out. He grabbed for her reticule.

"Oh, no." She whipped her arm behind her back. "This money is rightfully mine, given to me for a very good reason."

"So you say." He stopped his approach and crossed his arms over his chest. "If you *are* innocent, as you keep claiming, then you should have no problem sharing with me why Judge Greene gave you the money."

"I...can't tell you."

"Of course you can't."

For reasons unknown to her, Laney again wished she could tell this man the truth. Marc Dupree would be a powerful ally against the likes of Thurston P. Prescott III.

"All right, Miss O'Connor. Since you refuse to do so yourself, let me explain the situation for you."

She swallowed back a sarcastic retort and thought through her options. Except for crashing through him, she was stuck. For now.

"From your speech alone, I can only assume you're an educated woman. And since we both know an educated woman

can earn money in a variety of ways, your presence here tonight can mean only one of two things.”

Oh, how she hated that self-righteous tone in his voice, the one that sounded far too much like a banker she knew. “You have it all figured out, don’t you, Dupree?”

“Sadly, I do.” He dropped his hands to his sides and let out a regretful sigh. “The way I see it, you are either blackmailing Judge Greene or—”

“*Blackmail?*” Laney’s breath clogged in her throat. The nerve of the man. The gall. Next, he’d be calling her out for prostitution.

“Or...” he leaned over her “...the judge was soliciting your services for the evening.”

And there it was. The nasty accusation she’d feared. She barely resisted the urge to slap him, knowing the gesture would serve no purpose. Which only added to her frustration. “You scoundrel.”

He continued as though she hadn’t spoken. “Either way, neither activity is allowed in my hotel. So, again, I suggest you hand over the money with no more fuss so I may return it to Judge Greene.”

“You seem to take great pleasure in thinking the worst in people.”

“Not *all* people.”

Out of patience herself, she placed her palms on his chest and shoved. Hard.

He didn’t budge an inch. Provoking beyond measure, yet invaluable information for the future.

“I know firsthand what women like you are about, Miss O’Connor.”

“Making assumptions again?”

“Absolutely. But I will admit, as reprehensible as I find your choice of lifestyle, I’m certain there are others who

find you alluring and appreciate your, shall we call them... talents.”

Laney sidled to her left.

Dupree scooted her back to the right.

“Talents?” she asked in an overly polite tone. “What sort of talents are we talking about?” As if she didn’t know what he meant.

“For one, you dress like a well-bred lady with an accomplished eye for style.” He dropped his gaze a moment. “Your present attire not included.”

This time, she strayed to the right.

He hauled her back to center. “You speak with perfect diction, somewhat uncommon in these parts. And, most recently, you climbed out of my window with the finesse of a—”

“Skilled acrobat?”

“Precisely.”

Not sure what she heard in his voice—grudging respect, censure?—she granted him her most unpleasant smile, the one she reserved for bankers and highborn gentleman in red silk vests.

Finally, an idea came to her. She could still get away with the money—*her money*—but before she resorted to such an underhanded tactic, she had to try to escape in a fair manner one last time.

Didn’t she always tell the children to think before they acted? Didn’t she warn them of the dangers of sinful behavior? How could Laney ignore everything she tried to teach the children and still face them in the morning?

Determined to hold onto the remaining scraps of her integrity, she scrambled to her right. Again, Dupree pushed her back to her original position.

So be it.

*I tried, Lord. Truly, I tried. I pray, please, forgive me for what I’m about to do.*

“You know, Dupree, I have other, equally impressive... talents.”

“Oh? Do you cook, sew, ride a horse with great skill?”

Sniffing at his attempt to goad her, she took a step toward him and grasped the sides of his vest. “You are becoming redundant.”

“As are you, honey.”

*Honey.* She was really starting to dislike that word. Nevertheless, she touched her fingertip to the top button of his vest.

Eyes lowering to half-mast, he captured her hand in a light but firm grip. “I wouldn’t advise continuing down this path, Miss O’Connor.”

Allowing him to misunderstand her intent, she moved a step closer. “You sure you don’t want to see what I can do?”

His look turned sardonic. “I’m afraid I must decline further demonstration of this particular skill.”

“Once again,” she tugged her hand free, “you have chosen to misread the situation.”

He swallowed. Once. Twice. Then again more slowly. *Very* slowly. “By all means, honey, prove me wrong.”

“Gladly.” She shifted her weight, planting her left foot slightly behind her right. To keep his attention off her new position, she toyed with his lapel again. “You see,” she said in a light, airy tone. “When cornered, I fight like I do everything else.”

“You lie and cheat?”

“No.” She gave him her most brilliant smile and took a step back. “I win.”

She raised her right knee and, leading with her heel, slammed her foot into his chest. The blow landed exactly as her friend had taught her.

Caught off guard, Dupree stumbled backward. His gasp of surprise wasn’t as gratifying as Laney would have predicted.

This was her one chance. With a quick snatch, she re-

trieved her bundled dress and tore around the corner at break-neck speed. She quickened her pace to a flat-out run as the bellowed promise to hunt her down like a rabid dog nipped at her heels.

Minutes later, Marc charged wordlessly to the back of his hotel. Holding on to his anger—*barely*—he released the lock and with a violent shove, plowed into his office. The earsplitting crack of door meeting wall punctuated his foul mood. Unfortunately, the jarring noise did nothing to eliminate the reality of the last ten minutes. Not since Pearl ran off with his fortune could Marc recall a time he'd suffered so complete a defeat.

Oh, he'd known Miss O'Connor would attempt to steal away with what she *claimed* was her rightful possession. He'd even expected her to resort to whatever means necessary to escape. Her kind always thought in terms of survival. What he hadn't imagined was to find room 912 empty and Joshua Greene long gone by the time Marc had arrived.

Had the judge known he was coming to confront him?

Not possible. There had been no time or opportunity for Miss O'Connor to warn him.

Rubbing the spot where she'd landed her heel to his chest, Marc let out a frustrated hiss. How could such a tiny, delicate woman land a blow with so much force? She hadn't hurt him, not by half. He'd suffered far worse from rowdy drunks and mean-spirited outlaws. Nevertheless, she'd taken him by surprise, enough to throw him off-balance and make her getaway.

The situation defied logic. And Marc was a man who relied solely on logic. Emotion, blind faith, he allowed neither in his life.

Shifting his angry gaze around what used to be his highly organized personal sanctuary, he slammed his fist into his

open palm. He'd left the woman alone for fifteen minutes and she'd wreaked havoc. Risking a step through the clothes scattered on the floor, he tripped over a very delicate, very female slipper.

He kicked the offensive shoe out of his way and eyed the strewn papers at his feet. Papers that had once been in neat piles on his desk.

"Did she leave nothing untouched?"

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Marc fought for control. But then he spotted a slip of paper propped against a pile of books on his desk. A second later, he whipped the note from its perch with as much intensity as he'd used to enter the room.

If the miserable handwriting was any indication, Miss O'Connor had scrawled the words with as little care as she'd given his office.

Marc's irritation only increased as he read her parting jab.

*My Dear Mr. Dupree,*

*Thank you for your splendid hospitality this evening.*

*But I'm afraid I must decline your offer to remain any longer. I have a much more pressing engagement with your window.*

*Yours most humbly,*

*Miss Laney O'Connor*

Crushing the paper in his fist, Marc stifled the urge to take off after the woman without formulating a plan of action. Not the most logical move. Calling upon his well-honed control, he shut his eyes and released all the air from his lungs.

Dark, ugly thoughts linked together in his mind until one emerged over all the others. Laney O'Connor had chosen the wrong hotel, on the wrong evening, to play out her little intrigue with a federal judge.

Five years ago, Marc had embarked on the greatest debacle of his life—marriage to Pearl LaRue. The events of the last hour merely added another layer of indignity to his rash, youthful mistake of thinking he could turn a bad woman good.

Having been raised by loving, Christian parents, Marc had operated on the belief *that all fall short of the glory of God* and that the Lord's unending grace was administered through His people. People with the means and desire to serve.

He'd been naive, painfully so. But Marc had learned his lesson, thanks to Pearl's betrayal. When she'd grown bored with him, she hadn't simply run off with another man. She'd robbed Marc blind. She'd emptied his bank accounts, his personal safe and, most humbling, his wallet—*then* she'd found someone else to share her spoils.

Marc's resulting years of poverty had taught him well. Back on his feet, his coffers fuller than ever, he was no longer in the business of saving souls.

That didn't mean he didn't offer women of questionable virtue a chance to change their lives. He provided them with an honest living, but left the condition of their souls to the local pastor. If they chose to return to their old way of life, who was he to stop them?

Which begged the question. Why was he so disillusioned with Laney O'Connor's behavior tonight? What about the woman made Marc want to give her the benefit of the doubt?

Was it the look of desperation he'd caught snatches of in her startling gaze?

He knew better than to trust her, or her lies. And yet, here he stood, on the night of what would have been his wedding anniversary, wanting to believe in a woman no different from the one he'd married all those years ago. He'd thought he'd learned his lesson.

An uncomfortable ache spread through him as he realized

just how much he'd wanted Laney O'Connor to be the innocent she'd proclaimed to be over and over again.

Even now, the thought of her making her way through the Denver streets, alone, with all that money, at this late hour, didn't sit well with him. He—

A loud rap against the doorjamb knocked Marc out of his musing.

"Mr. Dupree, I'm sorry she got away." Hank's gaze tracked through the room. "She...I mean, I never thought she'd climb out of the window. I thought—"

Marc lifted a hand to stop the stilted flow of words. "I know, Hank. She fooled us both." Remembering the way she'd toyed with his vest, drawing his attention away from the situation, then unceremoniously kicking him in the chest, he shook his head. "In more ways than one."

"She seemed, I don't know, honest." Hank visibly cringed as his gaze landed on the open safe. "I never would have taken her for a woman of such questionable...character."

The same thought had gnawed at Marc from the start, but he'd learned long ago that people were rarely what they seemed. He shouldn't have been surprised by Miss O'Connor's deception. But he was. Shockingly, profoundly, inexplicably shaken to the core.

"The world is full of dishonest people," he said for Hank's benefit as well as his own.

*All sin and fall short of the glory of God.*

His mother's favorite Bible verse and a truth that pertained to Marc far more often than not. Despite his efforts to remain above reproach, he made mistakes. Perhaps knowing he often *fell short* explained why Marc still wanted to believe Miss O'Connor wasn't what she seemed. That she was...somehow...more.

"I wonder how she figured out the combination," Hank said, still eyeing the open safe.



Marc rubbed his palm over his chest. “She watched your fingers.”

“You...” Hank blinked at him. “You knew?”

Marc nodded. Pearl had pulled a similar stunt.

The abrupt silence that fell over the room stood in stark contrast to the noise echoing from the main part of the hotel.

In the ensuing hush Marc came to a decision. “I’m going out. While I’m gone, switch that,” he pointed to the safe, “with the one in my rooms upstairs.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Marc paced to the doorway. Hank stopped him before he could leave. “Where you headed? In case I need you.”

Taking a deep, calming breath, Marc stated the obvious. “Holladay Street.” Where the bulk of Denver’s brothels were located.

“The Row? You think Miss O’Connor lives...*there*?”

“It’s the most logical place for a woman like her.”

Not that Marc thought she was a regular, run-of-the-mill prostitute. Considering her mode of dress and impeccable speech, he feared she was something far worse. A madam. One who employed the kind of girls Marc hired away for their own good.

This was no longer about money. In truth, his clash with Miss O’Connor had never been about the contents of her reticule. But rather, how and why she’d acquired the large sum.

Marc wasn’t through with the woman.

Once he located her on The Row he would explain to her, in excruciating detail, why she could not use his hotel to conduct her unsavory business ever again. No matter how discreet or desperate she might be. He would then seek out Judge Greene and explain the situation to him as well.

This wasn’t personal. Hotel Dupree’s sterling reputation was at stake, a reputation Marc had spent three years honing to perfection.

“One thing’s for certain, Hank. I’ll root our little fox out of her lair before daybreak. And when I’m through with her, she’ll be sorry she ever strayed into my hotel.”

Hank’s smile bowed with the same grim determination Marc savored in his own heart. “Happy hunting, boss.”

## *Chapter Four*



Home at last, Laney stood at the bottom of the front steps and admired the three-story house glowing golden under the streetlamp. She couldn't help but smile at the house that was now a home for nearly thirty abandoned children.

After four lean years, and two strapping loans, Laney had turned the ordinary structure into an enchanting brick mansion. The result was as fine as any house owned by her fashionable neighbors in the Highlands of North Denver. She'd come a long way from the grubby mining camps and saloons of her childhood.

In her overzealous attempt to provide more than a roof and bed for the children, she'd left no detail to chance. She'd furnished the twelve bedrooms, two sitting rooms, and three parlors with tasteful furniture. She'd hung expensive wallpaper, ordered rugs straight from Paris, and purchased assorted fineries for every room.

Perhaps she'd gone a bit overboard.

How could she not? What better way to demonstrate God's majesty than by providing the children with unspeakable beauty and grandeur in their everyday lives? Lives that had been filled with far too much squalor and despair prior to arriving at Charity House.

An image of Marc Dupree splintered through her thoughts and a sudden, ugly dose of conscience whipped through Laney. She hadn't behaved completely without fault tonight. In fact, she'd been intentionally misleading, deceptive even, practically lying to the man. Just how far was she willing to go to save Charity House from foreclosure?

The front door opened a crack, rescuing Laney from further reflection on the consequences of her behavior this evening. Katherine Taylor, the young woman she'd left in charge, came out onto the porch. "Well? What happened?"

Laney skipped up the steps. "We did it, Katherine." She pulled her friend into a fierce hug. "Our worries are finally over."

"You got the money? He gave you all of it?" Katherine pulled back and searched Laney's face. "All five hundred dollars? How did you convince him?"

"The details aren't important."

Stepping farther back, Katherine scanned Laney from head to toe. "What happened to Sally's dress?"

"Plans changed." Laney held up the gold silk bundle. "I had to switch clothes at the last minute."

Katherine planted her balled fists on her hips. "You didn't do anything unlawful, did you?"

"Of course not."

The truth, up to a point. She'd only allowed Dupree to *think* she'd planned to conduct a shameful act with Judge Greene. Her actions had been misleading, but not criminal.

Considering how Katherine would worry herself sick if she knew the full story, Laney decided to keep the details of her encounter with Dupree to herself. "I have in my possession the money we need to save Charity House. Now stop with the questions and enjoy our moment of triumph."

"Oh, I'm thrilled. But why won't you look me in the eye?"

I'm almost twenty. Plenty old enough to handle whatever it is you're hiding from me."

Laney squared her shoulders. But to her chagrin, she couldn't hold Katherine's gaze longer than a second or two. It was no use pretending all was well. She was going to have to tell her friend at least part of what had occurred this evening. "Don't start making judgments before you hear the whole story."

"Oh, Laney, what did you do?"

"Only what was necessary."

"No, I'm sure you did more, as always. Look at this place." She wound her hand in a circle. "It's a mansion. Orphanages are usually full of filth, misery and despair, especially for the likes of us, the unwanted children of prostitutes."

Uncomfortable with the turn in conversation, Laney grimaced. "I didn't do anything special."

"No, you just made a dream come true for children who have lived without hope most of their lives. You are a good, Christian woman with a big heart, Laney O'Connor."

If only that were true. "Don't make me out to be more than I am. When my mother moved us to Mattie's brothel, I couldn't get out fast enough. I didn't want to go it alone, so I took the rest of the children with me. That's selfish, not noble."

"Keep telling yourself that, but I know how hard you've worked to make Charity House a reality. You wouldn't intentionally jeopardize it by..." Katherine's voice trailed off. "Are you sure everything's all right?"

Laney looked over her shoulder, praying she'd done enough to ensure Dupree hadn't followed her. She'd darted up, down and across several streets, then doubled back three more times.

But just in case...

"Let's head inside for the rest of this conversation."

Frowning, Katherine allowed Laney to hook their arms together. "We're going to keep Charity House, right?"

The quick flash of terror in the younger woman's eyes, the same one Laney saw every time she looked in the mirror, called to the part of her that would do anything to save the orphanage. Unfortunately, her efforts never proved enough. Oh, she provided a home, material luxuries, and even love, but she had yet to figure out a way to erase the one thing the orphans all shared.

Uncertainty.

Mistrust and fear lived in all their gazes, in their very souls. It was one thing to teach the children about Christ's love, quite another for them to accept the Lord in their hearts, fully, and without reservation.

If only it were easier for them to believe they mattered, truly mattered, as precious children of God. But their pasts didn't allow for a straightforward, trouble-free path to salvation. The choice to believe was an individual matter, one Laney couldn't settle for anyone but herself, despite her desire to do so for the children in her care.

When she'd stared into Dupree's eyes, Laney had seen a similar restlessness and need for peace.

Could that have been why she'd come so close to sharing her troubles with him? Because something deep within her had recognized a hurting soul like her own?

*No.* Ridiculous, dangerous thinking. Clearly, she'd lost her perspective. Thanks to the harsh reality of life as the daughter of a prostitute who'd killed herself with too much laudanum, Laney knew better than to rely on a man, *any* man. After witnessing her mother's choice of lifestyle and eventual destruction, how could Laney toss away her caution after one evening in the company of Marc Dupree?

A breeze kicked up, rustling the bushes lining the porch.

The ominous quiver in her heart urged Laney to pull Katherine toward the house. "Inside. Quick."

"Why the urgency?" Katherine looked behind her. "Laney? Are you in trouble?"

Concentrating on hustling the other woman inside the house, Laney tugged harder. "Quickly, Katherine. Quickly."

Once in the front parlor, with the dark night firmly locked outside where it belonged, Laney tossed Sally's dress on a blue velvet couch. Katherine moved through the room lighting candles. Laney waited, savoring the moment of serenity passing through her. How she loved the soft, warm glow of real candlelight.

Katherine lit the last candle, turned and centered her gaze on Laney's bare feet. "What happened to your shoes?"

Waving her hand in a dismissive gesture, Laney moved deeper in the room. "Nothing to concern yourself over."

"Perhaps it's time you shared the details of your evening with me."

Laney worked her reticule free from her wrist then handed over the bag. "This is all you need to know."

Fingers shaking, Katherine opened the satchel and caught her breath inside an audible gasp.

"It's real," Laney said with a smile.

Almost reverently, Katherine touched the money with a delicate caress, as though afraid it would disappear if she handled it improperly. "Oh, Laney." Unshed tears pooled in her eyes. "Our troubles are truly over."

Drawing closer, Laney peered inside the reticule as well. Why didn't she feel the same joy she heard in Katherine's voice? Perhaps because she'd come so close to losing it all. She hadn't been prepared for Marc Dupree. Or her strange reaction to him. Or the inexplicable need to profess her situation and ask for his assistance, no matter how fleeting.

A thousand ripples of unease churned in her stomach,

reminding her of the weakness she'd discovered in herself tonight, the unthinkable wish to rely on a man, a man with impossible standards she could never hope to meet.

"All right, Laney. What happened? You might as well tell me whatever it is you're hiding behind that scowl."

Sighing, she lowered to a brocade settee and gave up pretending everything had gone as planned. "I went to the Hotel Dupree to meet Judge Greene at the agreed upon time..."

She stopped midsentence, unsure how to continue. How could she tell Katherine about Marc Dupree and their strange run-in? "I don't know if you should hear this, Katherine. You're not like the rest of us."

"Of course I am."

"No, you're not." Laney softened her words with a smile. "Your mother only turned to prostitution after your father died. She never made you live among it. That alone makes you different. You're also formally educated. You went to that prestigious school back East. What was it called?"

"Miss Lindsay's Select School for Young Ladies." Katherine sat beside Laney and set the reticule between them. "But that was my past. I'm here now, as much a part of Charity House as the rest of the orphans."

"Not by choice. You'd still be living in Boston, probably married to a wealthy gentleman, if that school hadn't expelled you when they found out about your mother's profession. Even now, you could get a teaching job in any number of places."

Eyes blinking rapidly, Katherine swiped at her wet cheeks. "But Charity House is my home. Where I belong. I'd do anything to keep this orphanage running."

"As long as it was ethical."

"Well, yes, that goes without saying." Katherine took Laney's hand. "All right, enough stalling. Let's have the rest of it. You went to the hotel, and..."



Laney bit her bottom lip as she searched for the right words. Katherine might have been forced to return to Denver, but she was still a product of her years back East, educated, moral, raised with Christian values, an example for the others. Would she understand the desperation that had led Laney to withhold information from Dupree?

She didn't want to find out. Not tonight. "And...the judge handed over the money. His debt is canceled. Charity House is saved. The end."

"So, it's that simple."

Laney drew a quick breath of air. "Yes."

"Don't you think I deserve to hear the rest, the portion you're hiding from me? Please, I've lived with the fear of losing Charity House just as deeply as you have. Maybe more." A shadow fell over her face. "I have no skills, no real life experiences to speak of."

"You have an education. You could teach school, just as you've taught me."

"Who would hire a woman like me, an infamous madam's daughter?" Katherine shut her eyes a moment and sighed heavily. "I have nowhere else to go. Now convince me I have nothing to worry about."

Taking a deep breath, Laney began her tale, but Katherine cut her off almost before she began. "The hotel owner witnessed the transaction?"

"It gets worse." Laney proceeded to tell her friend the rest.

When she reached the end, Katherine gaped at her for several long seconds. "He confiscated the money? But why?"

"He runs a *proper* hotel, Katherine, something I can't fault him for." Dupree, for all his other unsavory characteristics, was clearly a man of integrity. Hard on others, true, but probably just as hard on himself.

Before she started sympathizing with the cad, she shook her head and continued. "When he saw me speaking with

Judge Greene and then witnessed money changing hands, he thought...well, he thought the worst.”

“Oh, Laney.”

“I never admitted to any wrongdoing. Why would I? I’d done nothing improper. But I couldn’t reveal my reason for meeting with Judge Greene, per his adamant request. Nor did I try to dissuade Dupree’s misconception of my character.” And that had been wrong of her, dreadfully wrong. “When he locked me in his office—”

“He didn’t.”

“He did.”

“But I don’t understand.” Katherine shook her head. “How did you get the money back?”

She touched the reticule, pulled on one of the strings, then the other, toyed with them. The gesture reminded her of the way Dupree had captured her hair around his finger, how he’d stared at it for an endless moment, and how—

She cut off the rest of her thoughts and focused on answering Katherine’s question. “I had to...um...climb out of his office window, hence the change in attire.”

“Oh, Laney.”

She glossed over the part about breaking into his safe, making sure to tone down her use of physical violence to make her final escape from the alleyway.

“Oh, Laney.”

“Would you stop saying ‘Oh, Laney’ in that disenchanted tone of yours? You sound like a shocked, elderly aunt instead of a young woman barely twenty years old.”

“Well, someone needs to think like an adult.” Katherine jumped to her feet and paced through the room. After her second pass, she turned back to face Laney. “Tell me more about this hotel owner.”

A shudder quickened Laney’s pulse. Dupree had been a formidable foe, far more clever than the banker she’d sparred

with this morning. Prescott incited only disdain in her heart. While Dupree called up a mixture of emotions that confused her, and blunted the edge she usually relied on to aid her in sticky situations.

“I never want to see that man again. He’s judgmental, arrogant and enjoys jumping to conclusions without a shred of evidence.”

Eyebrows traveling upward, Katherine wrapped her arms across her waist and said, “Not a shred?”

Laney broke eye contact. “All right, maybe I sent his mind in a few wrong directions.”

“I read in the *Denver Chronicle* that he’s impossibly handsome.”

“You have no idea.”

Silence fell over them as each considered the events of the evening from their own perspective.

“Laney?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think Mr. Dupree will leave the situation alone now that you’ve taken the money?”

“I..” A shudder of apprehension passed through her. “I don’t know.”

“Will he still try to confront Judge Greene without the evidence in hand?”

She could lie. She could pretend matters weren’t as dire as they really were. Their long-running friendship deserved better. “He might.”

Hands trembling, Katherine sank back on the settee. “What are we going to do?”

“The only thing we can do. We’ll pay off the loan the moment the bank opens in the morning.” The idea swelled within her, creating a sense of peace she hadn’t experienced in days. “That way, no matter what Dupree decides to do next, we’ll already own Charity House. Even if he confronts

Judge Greene there won't be much either man can do at that point."

"Other than make trouble for us, in all sorts of awful ways."

Laney batted away Katherine's objection with a flick of her wrist.

"No. Don't dismiss my concerns like that. What if Judge Greene teams up with Mr. Dupree, if for no other reason than to save face? What if they try to shut us down for some unknown, yet perfectly legal reason? What if they—"

"Stop, Katherine. Just stop. We must stay positive, and pray that Dupree will drop the matter now that I'm gone."

"You really think he'll leave us alone?"

"Yes, as long as he doesn't find us."

Katherine sighed heavily.

Looking at the clock on the mantel, Laney shoved her worries behind a brilliant smile. "Three hours, Katherine. We only have three short hours before the bank opens for business. By the time Dupree finds me, *if* he finds me, he'll be too late."

"You seem awfully confident." Rising to her feet once again, Katherine moved to the window and looked out. "You're sure he didn't follow you home?"

Laney joined her friend at the window. "I was careful to lead him far away from Charity House. If I'm as good as I think I am, which I am, Dupree is looking for me on The Row."

"*The Row?*" Katherine's mouth dropped. "He thinks you live in a...a...brothel?"

A slow smile spread across her lips. "That would be my guess."

"You're reckless. That's what you are." Although Katherine's tone held far too much worry for Laney's peace of mind, a loving glint filled the other woman's gaze.

Visibly relaxing, Laney smiled in return. “Perhaps I am more than a little reckless. But thanks to my quick thinking, Marc Dupree is chasing shadows on the other side of town. Now, stop worrying and trust me.” She squeezed Katherine’s arm. “I have matters completely under control.”

Katherine rubbed her temples. “Why is it every time you say that we end up in worse trouble than before?”

## Chapter Five



Precisely three hours after arriving home from the Hotel Dupree, Laney bypassed the tellers, skirted along the high railing on her left, then charged toward the bank owner's private office. Unwilling to wait for a response to her knock, she turned the knob and pressed forward. "I'm here to discuss my loan."

Thurston P. Prescott III didn't bother looking up as he waved his fleshy hand in bored indifference. "There is nothing more to say, Miss O'Connor. My terms stand."

*Outlaw*, she wanted to scream. *Cheat*. Just yesterday, he'd adopted that same thinly veiled scorn, then shamelessly called in her loan six months early. No warning. No viable explanation. Merely the end of all her dreams for the children.

Exhaling slowly, Laney forced aside her hostility and coaxed her lips into a pleasant smile. "I have one final item to address."

His attention riveted on the papers before him, Prescott scratched his salt-and-pepper beard and patently ignored her. Laney widened her stance, calling upon the patience she'd lost the day before while standing in this very spot. The constant, even ticking of the wall clock beat in stark contrast to the banker's furious scribbling. The rich smell

of polished mahogany and perfectly aged leather extolled power, ownership.

Laney refused to be intimidated.

She poked at the stack of papers nearest to her, sending them scattering to the floor. "Oh, my, look what I've done."

Prescott's head snapped up. Frustration knitted across his bushy brows. "I thought I made myself perfectly clear. As of this morning, you now have two days left to come up with the money." He dipped his pen in the inkwell on his left, then returned his gaze to his paperwork. "You know the way out."

Oh, no. He wasn't sending her away yet. Not before she'd settled her loan. "I will take only a moment more of your time."

Silence was his only reply.

Laney released a small sigh of satisfaction and plucked the neatly wrapped bundle of money from the hidden pocket in her skirt. "Perhaps you'll be interested in what I have to say now."

With a steady hand, she set the sizable pile directly where he'd fastened his attention after dismissing her so coldly.

In one swift movement, he snatched the money off the desk and looked up. His small, sharp eyes hardened. Sputtering, he flung his ugly glare from her face to the money in his hand and back again.

"It's all there." Laney granted him her most pleasant smile. "All five hundred dollars."

For a moment his gaze filled with disdain, but then he set the money back on the desk and cleared his expression of all emotion, save one. Suspicion. "How did you come upon this much money in one day?"

A flicker of conscience ignited, making it no longer possible to escape the truth any longer. Yes, Judge Greene had owed Laney the money for Johnny's room and board over the past three years. And, yes, he should have been paying

all along for his son's care. But that didn't make what Laney had done the most ethical of routes she could have chosen to raise the money.

She'd used the man's former "friendship" with her mother—as well as his current one with several other women in Mattie's brothel—to insist he pay off his debt. Worse, Laney had led him to believe she would make his life difficult if he didn't do so at once.

That had been wrong. Justified, perhaps, but wrong.

*Forgive me, Lord.*

Drawing in a slow breath, Laney fought to keep the shame out of her voice as she spoke. "Does it matter where the money came from?"

Eyes narrowed, Prescott slapped both palms on his desk and leaned forward. "Yes, Miss O'Connor, it matters significantly. I must know, without a single doubt, that every dollar of this money is truly yours."

Laney sighed. She should have been prepared for such a reaction. But she'd been so relieved Judge Greene had cooperated without a fuss she hadn't thought much further. After convincing Katherine all was well, she'd changed clothes, helped with the children's morning routine, then hurried to the bank.

Tired now, and more than a little frightened, she did what came naturally. She fought for what was hers. "Telling you where or how I got this money was not part of our agreement. All you said was that I had to pay off my loan in three days. And there is my payment." She pointed to the money.

A succession of creaks and groans exploded in the air as the banker shifted his considerable frame into another position. Resting his elbows on the chair's arm, he steeped his fingers under his chin. "Did you steal it?"

"No." The very idea.



“Then I’ll ask just one more time, before I throw you out of my office. Where did you get the money?”

How she detested that smug condemnation in his eyes. A man like Prescott, with his fancy clothes, obscene wealth, and judgmental nature exemplified all that threatened her children’s chance of a secure future. “Let’s just say I have a...benefactor.”

Now why had she said that, as though she were a woman cut from the same cloth as her mother? She had no doubt Marc Dupree would positively go apoplectic if he heard what she’d just claimed, all but confirming his bad opinion of her.

Disturbed by the direction of her thoughts and that she’d think of the handsome hotel owner at a time like this, she batted at a stubborn curl falling loose from its pins below her hat. What did it matter what Dupree thought of her? If she’d done her job properly last night, and had fully misled him into thinking she lived on The Row, she would never see the man again.

*A pity.*

No. Not a pity. A blessing.

Studying her with narrowed eyes, Prescott rose from his chair and made his way around the desk.

Laney threw her head back and held his stare, refusing to stir as the banker drew closer. No matter what happened in the next few minutes, she would not let this man see how much she abhorred his self-serving attitude. The one that led him to give and take money whenever it pleased him.

“You have a...benefactor?” He practically spat the word.

“I do.”

“You expect me to believe some misguided soul gave you five hundred dollars? Your friends on The Row may help you out on occasion, as well as a few saloon owners, but I know for a fact that none of them have the kind of money you just delivered here today.”

Laney swallowed back a nasty retort and concentrated on remaining calm. "Is it so hard to comprehend?"

"I find it impossible. No one would give money to you or that...*home*...of yours. A place filled with illegitimate children with mothers working on The Row." His face inflated with fury. "It's beyond repulsive."

Laney recoiled at the callous words. "No child is repulsive." *Let these little ones come to me.* "There are many people in Denver who see the need for my orphanage."

"You mean the shamed mothers of your kind who need a place to discard their brats."

Her knees buckled at the venom in his tone. Hands trembling, she grasped the side of the desk to steady herself. This man, with his refined eastern accent and overfilled belly, had never cared about Charity House. Or the children. But surely, he held a fondness for one of them. "What about your son?"

"Don't ever mention that boy in my presence again." His rage reverberated in his voice.

"But I thought you wanted to provide for Michael's future, if not for the other children."

"That was never my intention." Prescott's lips twisted in a snarl. "He's Sally's problem, not mine."

*Hypocrite.* Just like the men who'd come to Laney's mother, wanting their pleasure and paying handsomely for it, then cursing her unholy profession once back in their daily lives on the righteous side of Hollady Street. "If that's how you feel, then why lend me the money in the first place?"

"Simple." He let out a bitter laugh. "I knew you could never pay back that much money in time. I gave it to you so you would fail. And then Denver would be rid of you and your brats for good."

He'd wanted her to fail? He might as well have grasped her heart and squeezed the very life out of it. She clamped her lips tight shut, shunning the weak tears that would pro-

claim her despair to this man. All this time, Laney thought Prescott had loaned her the money for the benefit of his six-year-old son. She'd been wrong. So...very...wrong.

"It doesn't matter what you think," she said, realizing the truth as she spoke it out loud. "You signed our agreement. That makes it legal. You can't deny me the right to pay off my loan."

He blinked, his insults held in check for the first time during their association. Sensing victory, Laney clutched her small advantage and pounced. "Take the money and let's be done with this distasteful business between us."

Prescott paused. "I'll have to count it."

Hardly daring to breathe, Laney nodded. "By all means, take your time. My morning is yours."

As he rounded his desk and lowered back into his chair, a sense of euphoria built inside her.

*Almost there.*

Counting one bill at a time, he made slow work of checking the amount.

*Almost there. Almost there.*

His gaze unreadable, Prescott set the last bill on top of the pile and looked up at her.

"You lose, Mr. Prescott." Laney allowed a full smile to lengthen across her lips. "And now I own Charity House."

*I own Charity House.* The thought coiled in her head, making her dizzy with relief.

All she had to do was endure a few more tense moments in this awful man's company and she'd never have to deal with him again.

"Before I leave this morning I want the deed to Charity House. And I want you to put in writing that I have no more debt owed to this bank. Or to you."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

What? "Why not?"

“You’re short the full amount.” He patted the stack of money.

“Short?” That couldn’t be correct. “The full amount is there, all five hundred dollars. I counted the stack myself, just this morning.”

“You didn’t include the interest.”

Every fiber of her being froze at the look of pleasure on Prescott’s face. “Interest?”

“You can’t think I would have given you three extra days on your loan without a penalty.”

He had the audacity to look sorrowful now, as though the matter was out of his hands. A lie. They both knew he was the owner of this bank. He could add or subtract any terms he liked, on whatever whim suited him.

“Have you no decency?” she whispered, trying to reconcile the man standing before her with the one he presented to the good people of Denver. He attended church every Sunday, pretended piousness while in the pew, and then conducted shameless usury the rest of the week.

“How much interest are you talking about?”

“Ten percent.”

She gasped.

“But to prove I’m a fair man, I’ll extend your loan through the end of the month without adding any additional fee.”

Fifty dollars. He wanted an *additional* fifty dollars in less than three weeks. It might as well be five thousand. How would she ever raise more money, when she’d already tapped all her normal sources, a few not-so-normal, and then one more?

She’d failed. When she’d come so close to victory.

And somehow Prescott knew she had no more resources at her disposal.

No. *No*. She couldn’t give up. Not with nearly three weeks left to formulate a plan. Surely Laney could find the extra

fifty dollars in the allotted timeframe. She could go to the children's mothers, again, or even Mattie Silks herself. Laney could cut costs to the bare bone, or maybe find a job.

What sort of job would pay that kind of money?

Something...anything...

*Please, Lord, show me the way.*

"All right, Mr. Prescott. I accept your terms." As if she had any other choice. "You will have the additional fifty dollars by the end of the month."

"Good enough."

Not by half. Laney had learned her lesson. She knew better than to walk out of this office with only a verbal agreement between them. Not this time. Not ever again.

"Before I go," she said, "I want the new conditions of my loan in writing, spelled out in clear language, signed by us both with at least two witnesses present."

Owl-eyed and motionless, he blinked up at her.

Laney held his stare, boldly, fearlessly, silently calling his bluff as though they were in a high-stakes poker game with both their livelihoods on the line. "I'll wait while you draw up the document."

Hours of walking countless streets and alleyways in the wee hours of the morning had helped Marc's anger simmer to a low boil. He'd searched the length of The Row—Denver's notorious red-light district—but had not discovered Miss O'Connor's brothel or her alternate place of business.

The slippery woman had vanished completely and the suspicion that she was not what she seemed thrashed to life all over again.

*Where was she?* And more importantly, what could have possibly birthed that look of desperation in those beautiful, expressive eyes? Had she incurred a sizable debt that required quick payment?

A possibility, to be sure.

Perhaps that shifty banker Prescott would have some answers. Not long after moving to Denver, Marc had discovered the man's uncanny knack for asserting himself into almost every major financial transaction in the city. If Laney O'Connor owed money to someone in town, there was a high possibility Prescott would know the particulars. Or worse, had involved himself in the matter personally.

Marc wouldn't wish that cruelty on anyone, not even Miss O'Connor.

When he entered the bank, the clerk told him he would have to wait his turn to speak with Prescott. The owner was already conducting business with another customer.

None too happy, Marc thrust aside his impatience and sat in a chair facing the glass-encased office split into three sections by polished wooden planks. The elegant interior of the bank called to mind his youthful days in New Orleans, before the war had destroyed the opulence in which he'd been born. He knew it was a time that could never be regained. Yet the soothing memories of that simpler life flooded his mind, sending a sharp homesickness for family, and what might have been.

He'd lost so much, not just the only way of life he'd ever known, but far too many loved ones as well. Perhaps that explained why he'd been fooled into thinking he could reclaim some of his joy with Pearl by his side.

*Pearl.* What a debacle their marriage had been.

If only he'd caught up with her before she'd died in that train wreck, he wouldn't feel such regret, or such disgrace. But after three arduous years of searching, the last two conducted by an overpaid Pinkerton agent, Marc still didn't know where his wife had hidden the remaining portion of his fortune. All he knew was that she'd spent the bulk of the

money in Cripple Creek during the first few months after she'd left him.

Unwilling to allow the melancholy he'd banished years ago to return this morning, he diverted his attention back to Prescott's office. At the sight of the woman jerking her chin at the banker, Marc straightened in his chair.

He knew that particular gesture, *and* that defiant angle of delicate female shoulders. The familiar prickling on the back of his neck confirmed her identity more surely than if she'd turned around to face him. "Laney O'Connor."

Outfitted in a pale pink, really very homely dress, she still managed to catch his attention and hold it fast.

The moment she squared her tiny shoulders and jutted her nose in the air, Marc stood.

No wonder he hadn't located the woman on The Row. The little con had been conducting affairs of a very different nature this morning. Was she starting her own brothel? That would explain the odd, hushed-mouthed reticence of the madams he'd questioned throughout the night and early-morning hours.

How he wished it weren't true, but what else would explain the need for such a large sum of money, money she was using to conduct business with the shadiest banker in town? Marc could hardly bear the thread of disappointment braiding through him.

Surprisingly heavyhearted, he continued to watch Miss O'Connor deal with Prescott. She shrugged in response to something the man said, and then turned to look out the office windows. Her gaze roamed the bank in the same cool, calculating manner she'd used to survey Marc's hotel last night.

He took a step forward, ensuring she saw him when her gaze crossed in his direction. The instant those amber eyes met his, he nodded. Her wide-eyed flush prompted him to

add a bit of sarcasm to the moment. He delivered a two-finger salute.

She shifted her stance, shot him a frown and then purposely turned her back to him. Her slight tremble told the true story of her reaction to his presence in the bank. She should be worried.

The time had come to finish their conversation from last night, with Marc the ultimate victor. And he knew just how to orchestrate his triumph.



## Chapter Six



After a brief spasm of panic and several long seconds of contemplation, Laney came to the conclusion that she had no other choice than to face the tall, well-dressed bundle of trouble waiting outside Prescott's private office.

The wisest decision would be to confront Dupree alone, before the banker insinuated himself into the matter. Taking a quick, uneven pull of air, Laney sauntered into the main foyer with the most nonchalant gait she could muster.

For additional courage, she clutched the signed document Prescott had reluctantly drawn up, per her unwavering insistence. All Laney had to do now was come up with fifty dollars and Charity House would be hers.

*After* she faced Marc Dupree, of course.

Prepared for their upcoming encounter, she almost regretted the anticlimactic sensation upon discovering the man's absence in the bank lobby.

Capitalizing on her good fortune, Laney turned toward the back door, but thought better of her chosen route after only three steps. She'd seriously underestimated Dupree the night before. He most assuredly would expect her to exit by way of the empty alley again.

Or would he discount the obvious?

Front entrance? Back door?

Decisions. Decisions.

The apprehension she'd previously held at bay uncoiled, making each step a brand-new torture. Insisting her brain cooperate, Laney made her choice. After carefully folding her new loan agreement, she stuffed the document into the hidden pocket of her skirt and burst through the bank's entrance.

Squinting into the blinding sunlight, she breathed the fresh pine scent so much a part of the bustling city and took her first step toward home.

"Well, Miss O'Connor, isn't this a happy coincidence?"

She stopped cold. The shiver grazing along her spine had very little to do with the breeze riding on the air, and everything to do with the man standing directly behind her.

"Indeed, it is," she said through clenched teeth.

"I say, you do get around."

A choked gasp seemed the most appropriate response, and the only one she could force past her quivering lips.

"You know—" exasperating confidence resonated in the deep tone "—of all the ensembles I've seen you wear in our short acquaintance, this one is by far the ugliest."

Now that wasn't fair. Her dress might not be as elegant—or nearly as pretty—as the one she'd borrowed for last night's adventure, but the simple cotton garment was respectable.

Insulted to no end, she whipped around to face the confounding hotel owner. Failing to account for the difference in their heights, her gaze engaged nothing more than gold and black-threaded silk. As calmly as possible, she looked up. And up farther still.

Dupree was tall, to be sure, with very broad shoulders. The kind a woman could dump her troubles upon and know whatever problem plagued her would be handled with absolute skill.

Shocked at where her thoughts had led and unable to formulate a proper response, Laney scowled at the man.

Dupree's rumble of laughter locked her voice into further silence. He seemed happy enough to continue their one-sided conversation. "Imagine my surprise when I saw you conducting business with the shiftiest banker in Colorado."

Shiftest banker, indeed. Laney could hardly stomach the way Dupree made the scenario sound like two thieves cavorting with one another, as if she were made of the same unethical ingredients as Prescott. Her throat instantly unclogged.

"Rude, unconscionable, mean-spirited—"

"Now, now, Miss O'Connor, I wouldn't go that far. You do have a few redeemable qualities."

Sorely tired of the man's lack of control when it came to vocalizing his low opinion of her character, Laney tilted her head at a wry angle. "Slinking in the shadows again, Dupree? I wonder why that image continually rings true."

Seemingly amused, a slow smile spread across his lips.

Her traitorous heart skipped a beat, and then another. Why did she find it so hard to think clearly when he looked at her like...like...*that*?

Still smiling, he devoured the space between them with a single stride. Obviously unconcerned with propriety, he plucked an imaginary speck of dust off her shoulder, then brushed the cloth smooth. "I almost didn't recognize you in this rather boring dress. The woman I met last night had much better taste."

Standing so close, she couldn't help but inhale the masculine scent that wafted off him. Pure male elixir clogged her nose, her lungs, her every thought.

*Oh, my.*

"The other dress suited your figure to perfection."

Laney refused to react to his words. Yet the way he took his time assessing her, with that hooded gaze, made her in-

sides turn into nothing more substantial than biscuit dough. “To what do I owe this unfortunate visit? Not to mention your shockingly inappropriate commentary on my attire?”

“You might find it interesting to know I was out hunting this morning. For you, of course.”

*“Of course.”*

He reached down and tugged on the tendril of hair that had defied cooperation all morning. “Why would anyone hide this lovely hair under such an unremarkable hat?”

“You are offensive, Dupree.” She nudged his hand aside. “The epitome of bad taste.”

“All part of my appeal. But let’s not continue to argue over the inconsequential.”

“And here I thought we were getting along so well.”

“Enough.” Every bit of amusement fled from his gaze. “We have important business still to discuss.”

Of its own volition, her body strained toward him. She snapped her shoulders back. “Do we? I was under the impression we said everything we needed to say last night.”

“Not even close.” He reached for her again, but then dropped his hand and frowned. “You never explained why you chose to meet Judge Greene in my hotel. And why such a large sum of money changed hands between the two of you.”

Laney shivered at the intelligent glint in Dupree’s gaze, the one that told her he would immediately recognize a lie.

If this man found out about Charity House, and if he turned out to be no better than Thurston P. Prescott III...

No, she couldn’t let that happen. “You are becoming redundant, Dupree.”

“As are you. So that we understand one another from this point forward, let me make myself perfectly clear.” He leaned over her, his superior height effectively intimidating her into silence. “Under no circumstances will you entertain men in my hotel. You will not meet them in my lobby, nor

eat with them in my restaurant, nor stay with them in any of the private rooms.”

“And we’re back to that?” She silently demanded her mind to concentrate on the conversation and not her uncomfortable awareness of the handsome man glaring down on her. “How many times must I tell you? Last night was nothing more than two old friends catching up with one another after a long absence.”

There. That sounded perfectly misleading and cryptic, with just the right amount of impatience to indicate her frustration.

“What do you suppose, Miss O’Connor, Prescott would say if I told him where you got the money to pay off your loan?”

Everything in her froze. How much did this man know about her business at this bank? Did he know about Charity House, and the children?

He couldn’t know. She’d been careful last night, even more so this morning. That meant it was time to call Dupree’s bluff. “I never said anything about paying off a loan.”

“Then you were making a payment *on* a loan.”

“You can’t know that I—”

“Don’t bother denying it. Should I go searching for the document Prescott gave you before you left his office? I can only imagine where you’ve hidden it.” He leveled his gaze directly on the hidden pocket in her skirt.

The man was insufferable. “Let’s say I’ve taken out a loan with Prescott’s bank.”

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “You did.”

Shutting her eyes a moment, Laney prayed for guidance. *Please, Lord, please help me through this conversation.*

“If I did, what business is that of yours?”

“Actually...none.”

At the shockingly straightforward answer, Laney searched

Dupree's face, measuring, assessing. "Then why persist in uncovering my motives behind meeting Judge Greene?"

"Your motives are yours alone." He waved his hand in a casual manner, as if he was the embodiment of reason. "I only sought you out this morning to extract a promise, nothing more, nothing less."

"And what would that promise be?"

"I want you to agree, right here and now, that you will never enter my hotel, either alone or with another patron. I won't leave until I have your word."

Such an easy request to give. One tiny promise on her part and this whole, ugly affair would be over. Then she could return to Charity House and begin formulating her plan to raise the remaining fifty dollars on her loan.

Simple. Uncomplicated. The end of a sticky situation. Yet she found she couldn't walk away. Not without first asking, "Why is this so important to you? Why do you consider me such a threat?"

He looked slightly taken aback by her question. Good. He'd pushed her enough this morning. It was comforting to know she'd finally gained a portion of the upper hand.

"I've worked hard to earn the reputation of my hotel. I allow no drunkenness in the lobby, or other public areas. I do not tolerate gambling of any kind, not even in the private rooms. I insist there be no lewd behavior from my employees or patrons, behavior which includes..." He touched his finger to her nose. "Prostitution."

He thought she was a prostitute. A prostitute! If she wasn't so horribly offended she might be impressed by his dedication to keep his hotel above reproach.

As awful as his opinion was of her, or perhaps because of his terrible assumptions, Laney wanted Dupree to know who she really was. She wanted this man to know she agreed

with him, agreed that propriety mattered, and that she was a moral woman, down at her core.

But then she remembered why he thought so little of her. For the sake of Charity House she'd sent him on a merry chase through the most dangerous parts of Denver, with the express purpose of misleading him.

She wanted—no, needed—him to continue in his misconception. But, as much as she believed the Lord's opinion of her was all that mattered, the woman in her couldn't bear this man thinking ill of her. Not completely. "I'm not a prostitute."

"Then there is only one other alternative. You're a madam."

Now he was just being mean. The very idea that she would sell other women's favors—to men—for a large percentage of the price—made her sick to her stomach.

Hurt by Dupree assuming her capable of something so vile she raised her palm, with the notion of slapping his face. But reason returned and she lowered her hand.

*This is what you wanted, Laney. For the safety of the children, you wanted him to misunderstand who you are.*

"What? No denial this time?"

She curled her fingers into a fist. "You're so sure you have me all figured out."

"Enough to know that whatever you've gotten yourself into, it can't be legitimate, not with Prescott involved." He shook his head at her, and the sorrow in his eyes appeared genuine. "I find it disheartening that a woman with your brains and talent should waste her life on such a lowly profession."

There was simply no response to that. Other than the slap he so richly deserved.

No longer able to control her outrage, she raised her hand and swung. He caught her wrist in midair. "Stay out of my hotel, Miss O'Connor. I mean it."

“Or you’ll what? Have me arrested?”

“Well, well. You read my mind.” He pulled her a fraction closer to him, enough for her to feel his anger. “I’d like you to look across the street.”

She jerked on her hand. “What game are you playing now?”

“Do it.”

Laney raised her eyebrows. “Perhaps if you would release my wrist, I could oblige your request.”

“You’ll manage.”

Momentarily beaten, she pinned him with an insincere grin, then shifted to her left.

Unsure what he wanted her to see, she concentrated on the teeming streets of Denver. The mix of cowhands, women dressed in a variety of styles, merchants and even gunslingers made the city the perfect place for anonymity. Often Laney would walk along this very street, or stroll in front of the Wells Fargo office a block away, and never encounter the glint of disapproval she’d endured her entire childhood.

Here, in the richly populated part of Denver, she could almost accept the reality of God’s grace and unconditional acceptance. The Lord had given her a second chance in this city, with her mission at Charity House. She would do anything necessary to honor her God-given blessing.

“See that gentleman over there—” Dupree’s voice glided past her ear “—dressed in black?”

She focused on several possible candidates. “Would you like me to look at that tall, lanky one with the black trousers, black shirt and black coat standing to my right? Or that shorter one over there?” She jabbed her parasol toward the left side of the street. “The one with the black trousers and black shirt and, surprise, black coat? Or perhaps you mean the one with the black—” She turned back to face him. “Well, you get the idea.”



If she wasn't mistaken, she thought she caught Dupree's lips twitch before he said, "I meant the one with the matching six-shooters and U.S. marshal's badge pinned to his chest. And, would you look at that, he's watching us in return. Or rather, he's watching *you* in return."

Resigned, Laney centered her gaze on the man in question. The tall, imposing figure was indeed eyeing her from across the street. In fact, he made a grand show of tipping his hat at her. Even from this distance, she could tell his gaze was as sharp as a hawk's.

The man looked harder and more threatening than any Laney had ever met, and that included the one holding on to her wrist with the light but firm grip.

"So you know a U.S. marshal. Is that supposed to terrify me?" She didn't add that, of course, she was scared spitless. She had the requisite dry mouth and tongue stuck to the back of her teeth to prove it.

"Marshal Scott is very anxious to meet you."

"He is? Wh-why?"

"I told him all about how you broke into my safe last night. He was extremely interested in the particulars. Seems there's been a rash of robberies in the area over the last two weeks."

"How fortuitous for me," Laney muttered.

Dupree's chuckle sounded much more pleasant than the circumstances warranted. Just how well did he know this Marshal Scott? Would the lawman arrest her on Dupree's word alone?

"Now, we can either handle this between ourselves or I'll call the marshal over and you can contemplate the situation behind a row of bars."

She nearly choked on her gasp. "Are you threatening me? That sounds like a threat. I think you're threatening me."

"I am. And you're babbling."

Pressing her lips together, Laney buried her panic behind

a hard swallow. “Look, Dupree, I get it. You don’t want me to enter your hotel ever again. Well, I won’t. There, you have my promise. Now let me go.”

He immediately relinquished his grip. “I knew you’d see things my way, eventually.”

Yanking her arm back to her side, she refrained from rubbing her wrist where his fingers had been. She had some pride left, as tattered as it might be at the moment.

Now that their conversation was over, Laney really, *really* needed to get home. To sit down, alone, and figure out where she was going to come up with the money to pay off the interest on her loan. “Since we have nothing more to say to each other, I’ll bid you goodbye.”

Not waiting for his reply, she turned and started out.

“Not so fast.” With two ground-eating strides he walked around her and then widened his stance, just as he had the night before in his back alley. “Was your meeting last night with Judge Greene truly innocent, as you claim?”

“Yes.”

“Yet you won’t tell me why he gave you the money.”

“No.” She looked across the street. And directly into Marshal Scott’s hard, ruthless gaze. That was a very scary-looking man. One Laney had no desire to meet anytime soon.

“You have to believe me, Dupree, the money was rightfully mine.” Panic made her voice raise an entire octave. “I just can’t give you the specifics behind the why.”

“You can’t, or you won’t.”

She sighed. “Both. Either. Does it matter?”

It was his turn to sigh, in disappointment, at her. She’d let him down with her response, and that realization hurt far worse than his earlier insults.

Would Dupree hand her over to the U.S. marshal now, for breaking into his private safe and taking back what was hers?

Would he be that cruel?

His next words threw her completely off guard, as did his soft tone. “Are you still in need of money, Miss O’Connor?”

“Yes,” she admitted before she could stop the word from rushing out. Why, *why* did she find herself wanting to lean on this man, when she knew he was potentially dangerous to everything she held dear?

For a long moment, Dupree stared at her, those blue, blue eyes piercing straight through her, as though he could see inside every one of her secrets. “Then I have a proposition for you.”

A number of terrible possibilities came to mind. For the past twenty-four hours Laney had experienced nothing but fear and desperation. The feeling of falling into a pit with no way out had been dreadful, panic-inducing. Terrifying.

Was she about to fall deeper into that pit, thanks to this man and his...proposition?

No. She couldn’t lose hope. For the sake of the children she had to believe good would come out of this awful situation.

“What kind of proposition are you suggesting?”

“Come work for me at my hotel.”

## Chapter Seven



No matter what Miss O'Connor thought of him or his motives, Marc was serious about the job offer. He put women to work in his hotel all the time, with the hope of turning them from their former ways to a life of respectability.

No condemnation. No hidden agendas. Just an authentic chance at a new beginning.

Yet, to witness the skepticism in Miss O'Connor's gaze, a random passerby would suspect Marc had just made a vulgar suggestion.

He tried to harden his heart—what did he care if she trusted him or not?—but her obvious distress touched a part of him he'd thought long dead. For the second time in less than an hour, Marc recalled better days, when he'd been a godly man who saw only the best in people.

Now, years after his wife's betrayal, he didn't bother looking below the surface. He simply made a job offer, and left the rehabilitation to the individual.

"I assure you, Miss O'Connor, this isn't the first time I've asked a woman to come work for me."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Her words came out haughty, but he caught a twinge of hurt beneath the despair in her eyes.

How could the woman look so guileless, when Marc knew

she could crack a safe in a matter of minutes and climb out a window with accomplished ease? Such a woman could not be honest. Or trustworthy.

So why did Marc want to believe her when she said she'd taken Greene's money for a good reason? Why did he want to assure her he had no secret motive for hiring her, other than to offer her a second chance in life?

A spurt of guilt softened his tone, as well as his resolve. "I promise you, Miss O'Connor. Your position at my hotel will cause you no harm."

"So you claim."

He deserved her cynicism, he knew that.

Unable to stop himself, he touched her shoulder in a show of comfort. Her corresponding flinch cut straight through him.

Dropping his hand, Marc let out a slow hiss of air. Perhaps he'd gone a bit overboard with the intimidating scowls and threatening comments. He didn't want this woman to be afraid of him, just sufficiently wary. "Miss O'Connor, I—"

She raised her hand to stop him from continuing. "What duties would I have to perform at your hotel, and what would be my pay?"

Straight and to the point. He admired that particular quality in any person. "We can discuss the particulars on your first day of work."

"I prefer to discuss them now."

"With your speaking ability, and general comportment, you'll be best suited at the front desk. Registration," he clarified when she shook her head in confusion.

"And the pay?" she asked, persistent to the end.

Surprising even himself, Marc quoted an outrageous amount, three times the normal rate. He tried to convince himself he had a reason for offering such a large sum. If he wanted to prevent this woman from starting her own brothel

on The Row he had to pay her handsomely for the debatable honor.

But that hadn't been the only reason. He actually wanted to help her, despite everything he'd discovered about her in the last twenty-four hours.

Caught in her own thoughts, Miss O'Connor pressed a finger to her lips. After a moment, her eyes filled with... Was that relief he saw in her gaze?

"I suppose the salary is fair," she said at last.

"More than fair."

She acknowledged his words with a slight nod. "What would be my hours?"

"I will expect you to work the evening shift, from six at night to two in the morning. That's nonnegotiable." And the best way to keep her out of the red-light district during the busiest times.

When she didn't balk at the hours, Marc wondered if he'd misjudged her. Why did he continue to suspect there was more to her than she was letting him see?

"May I start tonight?"

"Of course."

"Very good." She presented him with a tremulous smile, one that made her look exceedingly grateful.

A trick of the morning light? Or was she that in need of money?

"Well then, Dupree, if there is nothing else to discuss I will see you this evening."

She turned toward the street and set out.

Marc followed one step behind. "I'll walk you home."

"That won't be necessary." The caged look she tossed him said more than her words.

What was she hiding from him now?

"After all we've been through I owe you the simple courtesy."

“Don’t worry, Dupree. I said I would take your job and I will. You’re going to have to take my word on this.”

Against his better judgment, he wanted to do just that, wanted to trust that she would return to his hotel tonight as she promised.

Or was there another reason he didn’t want to escort her home? Perhaps he didn’t want to find out she lived on The Row, and that he’d been right about her from the start.

For a tense moment he held her gaze, trying to understand the silent appeal in her eyes, and his own unwillingness to force the issue. “All right, Miss O’Connor. I’ll see you this evening.”

“Yes, *Mr.* Dupree, you will.” She set out once again. This time Marc let her go. She sidestepped her way through the morning traffic and crossed the busy street.

The moment she was out of earshot, Marshal Trey Scott, Marc’s childhood friend, joined him on the planked sidewalk.

“You know, Trey, I can’t help thinking things are not what they seem with that woman. She’s hiding something, something big, something that’s thrown her into a state of desperation.”

Trey grinned, looking like the boy he’d once been rather than the man who hunted outlaws with a vengeance. “You like her.”

Not the response Marc was expecting, nor the one he wanted to hear. “Not at all. The woman is frustrating, annoying and definitely more trouble than she’s worth.”

“Not only do you like her, you’re attracted to her.” Trey’s laugh belied his hard exterior. “Don’t bother denying it.”

“Yes, I find her attractive. But I wouldn’t read too much into it, if I were you. She’s a master at mesmerizing men. I only want to rehabilitate her before it’s too late.”

“Miss O’Connor is not in need of rehabilitation.”

“You didn’t see her in action last night.”

“I saw the truth this morning.” Trey looked across the street, smiled when the woman in question leaned over and scratched behind a stray dog’s ears. “And you would see it, too, if you’d look past that black fog in your brain.”

Marc bristled. “There is nothing coloring my judgment, not in Laney O’Connor’s case.”

“On the contrary, you see everything through jaded, cynical eyes. Miss O’Connor is not your wife. Pearl was a liar and a thief. That woman across the street is neither.”

“She’s in business with Prescott.”

Trey inclined his head. “Perhaps. But I got a real good look at her a moment ago. My take? She’s a decent, honorable woman in a lot of trouble.”

Pressing his lips tightly shut, Marc mulled over Trey’s words. His friend’s conclusion was too close to the one he’d struggled against ever since he’d first discovered Miss O’Connor in his hotel last night.

But Pearl had taught him well. His wife’s betrayal made it impossible for Marc to believe in any woman, especially one who outwardly showed herself to be concerned with earning a lot of money as quickly as possible. How could such a pursuit be deemed honorable?

“I take it she agreed to your job offer?”

Marc nodded, his gaze still fixed across the street. He couldn’t help noticing how men of all ages stopped to stare at her as she passed them by. She was remarkable, even in that ordinary pink dress.

“You paying her the usual rate?”

“Three times more,” Marc admitted.

The other man’s low whistle sent Marc’s gut tangling into a tight ball of unease.

“Don’t worry, Trey. I plan to make Miss O’Connor earn every penny of her exorbitant salary.”

As though hearing the remark, she wheeled around to face



him directly and then released an identical two-finger salute as the one Marc had given her in the bank.

Chuckling low in his throat, Trey ran a hand over the dark stubble on his chin. "She looks like a biddable employee already."

"Oh, she will be. Once I explain the rules."

"Right. Keep telling yourself that." Trey slapped him on the back. "Now that I've witnessed the two of you together, I wonder who's in more trouble. Miss O'Connor? Or you?"

Marc had a feeling it was him.

At five minutes to six, Laney watched the sun edge behind the western peaks, trailing golden pink fire in its wake. The dusky-hewed sky added to the gloom in her heart. If only she'd stuck to Charity House's original design a year ago, she wouldn't have needed the extra loan from Prescott. And she wouldn't be standing here now, facing her greatest threat yet. Marc Dupree.

Laney must never let him find out about Charity House. The risk was too great. If he wasn't the honorable man he portended to be, he could ruin all her plans. And then Prescott would win.

Before leaving the orphanage, she'd done some quick calculations. If she moved a few expenses around, cut more corners and Dupree actually paid her the salary he'd quoted her, Laney would raise the remaining fifty dollars in time.

Unfortunately, her ultimate success hinged on Marc Dupree's honor.

She could only pray he proved to be a man of his word. *Please, Lord, let it be so.*

Drumming nervous fingers against her thigh, she turned her gaze to the spectacular building in front of her. "The Hotel Dupree."

She spoke the name aloud, as though the gesture alone

would provide her with the much-needed courage to walk inside.

A ribbon of light streamed out of the hotel lobby, beckoning Laney deeper into the drama she had set into motion last evening. What had she been thinking? She should have met Judge Greene somewhere else, anywhere else. With a vigorous toss of her head, she flung aside her agitation.

This was not a time for second-guessing.

She'd made her choices, and now she would accept the consequences. Just as she taught the children to do every day.

Head high, shoulders back, she started forward. After a few steps, she swerved to her left and looked through the large plate glass window beside the entrance.

Activity was high inside the lobby and her apprehension grew. Once she walked through the revolving door, she would be at the mercy of Marc Dupree. Her gaze swerved through the hotel, hunting for the tall, overwhelming man who held the children's future in his hands—even if he didn't know it.

The longer she stood on the outside looking in, the more she realized she couldn't go through with this. She couldn't rely on a man, *any* man.

She would raise the money some other way.

Decision made, she turned to leave and stopped midstride as her eyes connected with Dupree's lazy scrutiny. How long had he been watching her scan the activity in his hotel? Long enough, she realized, and felt heat rush to her cheeks.

Hoping to gain a portion of the upper hand, she swallowed several times and returned his open perusal.

Similarly to the night before, the simple elegance of his clothing added a measure of sophistication to his chiseled features. He had the bad manners to look handsome, calm... *awake*.

Worse, with the sky a rainbow of color behind him, he looked every bit like her romantic notions of a dime-novel hero.

Cringing at the whimsical thought, she purposely filled her tone with artificial politeness. “Dupree, always a pleasure.”

He angled his head, peering at the window behind her. “Were you planning to clean those nose prints off the glass before you ran away?”

The temperature in her cheeks burned hotter. “I wasn’t running away.” The lie skidded past her lips in short, halting syllables.

“Certainly looked that way to me.”

A portion of the truth spilled out of her mouth. “If you must know, I was gathering the courage to walk inside.”

That earned her a dry chuckle. “You may be a lot of things, Miss O’Connor, but cowardly is not one of them.” He dropped his gaze. “I see you didn’t feel the need to change your clothes from this morning. Didn’t I already remark on what I thought of that dress?”

Welcoming the surge of irritation his question provoked, Laney scowled. “You did, in very unflattering terms.”

He leaned against the streetlamp behind him and produced a full, stomach-bumping grin. Smiling like that, he looked so...appealing. Approachable even. For a dangerous moment, Laney forgot why she distrusted the man.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You wore that pink concoction primarily to irritate me.”

And now she remembered why. “You do catch on quickly.”

His smile widened, shoving open the door to her heart by a mere crack. With a hard blink, she slammed the tiny slit shut. Hopefully for good.

“You ready to come inside now?”

She couldn’t tear her gaze away from his. Why this compulsion to catalog every line, every groove, every feature of his rugged, handsome face?

“Through with your inspection?”

*Beast.* “Almost.”

She forced her body to relax, her mind to clear, but nothing could stop her pulse from working itself into a frenzy. She had a sudden, shocking urge to reach out and cup his face, to stare into his eyes, to know this man on a deep, personal level.

Was it true then? Was she more like her mother than she realized, deep at her core? Was she flawed in her very character, like so many of the bad women of the Bible? Was she a Delilah, at heart? Or a Jezebel?

No, that couldn't be true. She made mistakes, yes, and bad decisions at times, but she wasn't wicked.

Mouth twisting at a sardonic angle, Dupree withdrew his watch from a pocket in his vest then made a grand show of releasing the clasp and looking at the time. “Ticktock, Miss O'Connor.”

His sarcasm hurled her into action. “Yes, yes. I'm ready now.”

“After you.”

Determined to maintain her dignity, she pirouetted quickly, driving her feet forward with sheer will alone. Once inside the hotel lobby, she nearly gained control over her foolish senses, but then Dupree closed in from behind.

“I'll meet you in my office. You do remember the way?”

His whispered words hovered too close to her ear. The tiny shove on her lower back sent a chill navigating down her spine.

She really, *really* needed to get a handle on her emotions. “Yes, of course I remember.”

“Excellent.” With catlike grace, he shifted around her and trekked toward the restaurant. Strangely beholden to watch him stride through the lobby, Laney stood stationary, blinking after him, her heart keeping time with his fast moving feet.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, stopped. “Move along, Miss O’Connor. Dole reluctance doesn’t suit you.”

Making a face, she trudged toward the back of the hotel, all the while searching for an ally. Any would do. She passed her gaze over several people, then linked eyes with Hank.

*Why not?*

Determined to make her time at the Hotel Dupree as pleasant as possible, she waved a happy greeting.

After a brief hesitation and a slight shake of his head, Hank grinned at her in return. Warmed by his response, Laney allowed a brief smile to linger between them. At his encouraging nod, she continued forward with renewed confidence.

Inside Dupree’s office, she scanned the perimeter of the room, registering every nuance of the immaculate interior. All that she’d upset the night before had been put to rights. Even the books she’d used to prop up her sarcastic note were back on the shelves in their proper order.

Or so she assumed.

Out of some perverse need to know what sort of books Dupree enjoyed reading, she tugged a chair to the bookshelf and hopped on top. She scanned the closest titles, making murmurs as she went.

*Oliver Twist*, one of her favorites, a compilation of Shakespeare’s tragedies, *not* a favorite. She liked the comedies. Two Bibles, one written in English and one—she checked the spine—was that...Latin? She’d have to ask Katherine what Vulgate meant. Both books were well-worn, an indication they had been read often.

By Dupree? Or someone else?

Just as Laney began perusing the rest of the titles, Dupree’s commanding voice boomed through the room. “What are you doing on that chair?”

Startled, she twirled around on one foot, then fought to find a spot for the other.

Blocking the doorway with his impossibly broad shoulders, the man had the nerve to scold her as though she were a child. "Get down, now, before you fall down."

"Oh, honestly, I'm in complete control." She jammed her hands on her hips to prove her point. And promptly lost her balance.

Teetering from one foot to another, she waved her arms back and forth, praying the momentum would help her regain her balance.

It didn't. She was going down hard.

Resigned, she thrust her hands out in front of her.

Dupree rushed forward, moving quickly enough to catch her around the waist. Thanks to his timely assistance, Laney's face careened to a halt mere inches from smacking into the floor.

"You, Miss O'Connor, are a menace."

Considering her current position, she couldn't exactly argue the point.

## Chapter Eight



Bent at the waist, her arms pinned in useless immobility, Laney remained perfectly still. One slip on Dupree's part, one pucker on her part, and she'd be kissing the fashionable Oriental rug beneath her nose.

*Not* the best of scenarios.

"Seems we have an interesting situation here." The grin in Dupree's voice stole any chance of Laney finding the desire to thank him for his prompt rescue.

With more than just her pride inches from the floor, she couldn't muster the poise to speak calmly. Or politely. "Help me up." She gritted her teeth to avoid moving a muscle. "I mean it. This isn't amusing anymore."

As if it had ever been.

"You know," he said, his tone full of easy camaraderie, as if they were enjoying a spot of tea, "after all we've been through, sort of seems appropriate to leave you...dangling."

To her shame, tears formed. But Laney refused to let them fall. She did, however, squirm. Just a bit. Enough to have Dupree's arms tighten around her waist.

"I find it necessary to advise you not to move like that. You just might find yourself with a face full of splinters."

He was admonishing her? Again? As though he'd caught

her with a toy that didn't belong to her? "Dupree, I'm warning you..."

"Considering our current positions—you down there and me, well, up here—I wouldn't be tossing out threats if I were you. Now," he adjusted his hold, "since I have you where I can keep an eye on you, shall we discuss the weather, that lovely sunset outside, or your upcoming duties in my hotel?"

Although her muscles screamed from her clenching them too tightly, Laney said in her firm, mother-of-the-house voice, "Let me up. This. Instant."

"Ask nicely."

A beat passed. And then another. "*Please.*"

He responded with a full-out, booming laugh.

"You've made your point." She tried to sound in control of the situation. Hard to do with her head growing lighter by the minute. Truly, the man was beyond rude. "I'm starting to get dizzy."

"Good, maybe it'll plop some sense into you."

"*Dupree...*"

"Right, right. Help you up." He twisted her in his arms, and then shifted her to an upright position. "There. How's that?"

"Unacceptable." Her toes barely touched the ground.

Grinning, he lowered her all the way down. "Better now?"

*No.* His hands still gripped her waist. He didn't seem to realize how much his touch bothered her. Or maybe he did. The rat.

"Yes." She forced out the word with extreme care. "I'm fine."

She expected him to release her then. But several seconds fled by. Then several more. And *still* his hands remained on her waist.

Tick, tick, tick, went the clock on the mantel.

Click, click, click, went her heart against her ribs.



With each intake of air, breathing became harder. Words eluded her. Common sense vanished.

Laney needed to step back, away from this man and his intense stare. She needed to put some distance between them. But a hidden part of her, a secret place she kept locked deep inside her soul, urged her to move a step closer.

What was wrong with her?

What was wrong with him? Why wasn't *he* stepping back?

As they continued staring at one another, a silent message passed between them, something new, something unsettling. Something...almost...pleasant.

Her vision blurred and her throat clogged.

If only she could get her voice to work properly.

"Are you all right, Miss O'Connor?"

She managed a nod.

"Truly?" He cocked his head at a concerned angle. "Your face is draining of color."

No doubt. Her head felt lighter now than when she'd been hanging upside down.

"Laney?"

She tensed at the use of her given name, instinctively holding back a sigh. Of contentment. *Oh, Lord, please, no. Don't let me start liking this man now.*

*Too late*, came the disturbing thought, *too, too late.*

Until this moment, Laney hadn't realized how safe she felt in Dupree's presence, as though he were a barrier between her and certain disaster.

And not just from the fall. But from all harm. For the first time in her life she wanted to rely on someone other than herself, someone who would take care of her and Katherine and the children.

What would it be like to be cared for by a man, by *this* man? To admit she needed help. To...simply...let...go?

Laney's mind reeled at the sense of longing that came with the question.

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust people.* Good, solid, Biblical advice. Yet the foolish longing in her heart remained.

Dupree's fingers flexed on her waist, squeezed gently, and then...

Intent filled his gaze and his head inched toward hers.

Was he going to kiss her?

Did she *want* him to kiss her?

Her pulse drummed a rapid staccato in her ears. She *really* must step back. Yes. Yes. She needed to step back.

She leaned forward instead.

The look in Dupree's eyes turned soft, affectionate, and his hold gentled. For several eternal seconds he stared into her eyes. He didn't utter a word—not, one, single, word—but Laney knew why he hesitated, knew why he didn't close the distance between them.

He was waiting for her permission to proceed.

This was her chance to push him away. But a pleasant, warm emotion spread through her, one she'd never experienced before. Trust.

This man, for all his faults, would never hurt her. Laney knew it as surely as she knew the dollar amount she still owed Prescott.

Was it any wonder she was the one to take the final step toward him?

Smiling softly, Dupree wrapped his arms around her, his hold firm yet protective. Laney had never felt precious in her life.

Yet, now, inside this man's embrace, she felt special, cherished even. She closed her eyes.

The smell of clean male mingled with tangy citrus filled

her senses, settled in her heart, creating a memory that would last her a lifetime.

At twenty-five, she was about to experience her very first kiss. With Marc Dupree.

In spite of the explosive nature of their relationship, one word slipped out of her mouth. "Yes."

"At last, we agree on something." He ducked his head toward hers.

As though sensing the gravity of the moment, his lips stilled a hairbreadth away from hers, touching and yet not quite touching.

Her heart stuttered to a halt, then began beating again, picking up speed with each quick, painful breath she took.

Why wasn't he pressing his lips fully to hers? "Marc?"

"Say my name again, Laney, without the question in your voice."

"Marc," she whispered.

"Very nice."

*Finally*, he sealed his mouth to hers, in such a gentle, careful manner that Laney found every preconceived notion she'd ever had about men vanishing. All her life she'd considered men the enemy. She'd seen firsthand what they wanted from women. Nothing good or kind, but shameful acts that had to be paid for in advance, then hidden inside shadows and locked behind closed doors.

She'd never suspected tenderness could exist between a man and a woman, never thought a kiss could be sweet and affectionate.

Her mind slowly let go of all thought. Then awakened so quickly physical pain hammered behind her eyes.

This was Marc Dupree kissing her. He didn't respect her. Or trust her. Or even like her. Was this some kind of ploy, a test to see how far she would go to earn money from him tonight?

Panicked at the thought, she pushed against his chest.

“Please, Marc.” She twisted to the right. And then to the left. “Please. Let me go.”

Palms up, blood rushing in his veins and pounding in his ears, Marc took a large step away from Laney. He’d never seen a woman react like that to a simple kiss, especially not a woman with Miss O’Connor’s vast array of life experiences and given...talents.

“Laney?” He used her given name on purpose. Despite her confounding reaction to their kiss, they’d gone far beyond the need for formality.

Doe-size eyes connected with his and Marc found himself fighting off a wave of guilt. Taking in her erratic breathing, large pupils and pale cheeks, he realized Laney was in a state of panic. No, not panic. Terror. She was terrified. Of him. Of what they’d just done.

Marc shook his head in bewilderment.

The gesture seemed to jolt her into action. Her hand flew to her throat and her eyes widened even more. “Why...why did you kiss me?”

Good question, one he wasn’t sure how to answer. But at the sound of her very real distress, and the genuine fear in her eyes—*fear!*—he decided to respond as truthfully as possible.

“Because I wanted to. And *you* wanted to kiss me in return. Regardless of this innocent routine of yours.” And, yes, her behavior had to be a calculated response.

If not...

He’d made a terrible mistake. And had kissed a woman who deserved better treatment than him pawing at her in his office.

Lifting shaky fingers to her lips, she blinked up at him. The look of shocked innocence appeared real.

Oh, she was good. Marc almost believed she was as

stunned as she looked. *Almost*, but not quite. He couldn't ignore the bits and pieces he'd already learned about her.

"Look, Laney, we both know you are no untouched maiden. So let's forgo the rest of this ridiculous act of yours."

"Act?" She fell back a step, looking as though he'd slapped her.

Marc had to admit, her performance was certainly first-rate, one of the best he'd ever seen.

Was he judging her unfairly?

Perhaps. Perhaps not.

"You, Marc Dupree, are ill-bred, rude and...and..." She tossed a loose strand of hair out of her face with a violent shake of her head. "Pigheaded."

"Pigheaded?" He released a laugh lacking all humor. "Is that the worst you got for me, sweetheart?"

"Who gave you the right to judge me? You don't even know me."

"Oh, I know you." Or did he?

*Miss O'Connor is not your wife.* Trey's words came back to him, making Marc wonder if his judgment was indeed colored by his past. Had his experience with Pearl turned him into a cynic? A man who expected women to lie and cheat because his wife had done so over and over again?

Did that make him jaded, as Trey had claimed?

No. It made him cautious, a wise man who relied on his own power of reasoning. Every instinct told him that Laney O'Connor was hiding something from him, something monumental. And if Pearl had taught him anything it had been that nothing good came from secrets.

So why, then, wasn't he demanding answers from Laney? *Why* was he experiencing this gut-wrenching guilt?

They stared at one another for five full seconds, or perhaps five eternities, Marc wasn't sure which. He raked a hand through his hair, his puzzlement growing by the minute.

Who *was* Laney O'Connor? Her kiss called to mind innocence. Yet, in a single day, she'd broken into a locked safe, scaled a wall, climbed out a window and conducted business with the shiftest banker in Colorado.

Was the woman a wolf in sheep's clothing or a sheep in wolf's clothing? Marc couldn't be sure. And until he was certain, he would treat her with the same suspicion and distrust as before.

"Much as I'm enjoying this fascinating stare down," he began. "We can't stand here all evening glaring at each other."

"No? Then what do you suggest we do?" Her eyes flashed amber fire, alerting Marc that her former spunk was well on the way to returning.

Just to be sure...

He leaned forward. She scooted back a step, hiding the move behind a quick toss of her chin. The gesture came a second too late. Marc had caught the fear underlying her actions. *Fear of him.*

Unable to explain why that troubled him so much, he scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry, Laney. I was out of line. I apologize for kissing you."

She took another step back.

"I won't try to kiss you again. I promise."

The relief that filled her eyes belied the tart words that came out of her mouth. "I plan to hold you to that."

"From you, I'd expect nothing less. Now." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should go over your job duties."

"That sounds like a good idea."

He picked up the dress he'd tossed to the floor when he'd seen her teetering on the verge of disaster. Grimacing, he shook out the layers of silk until the majority of wrinkles disappeared. "You will wear this while on duty at the front desk."

"You want me to wear...that?"

“Yes.”

“But it’s so...so...” She trailed off, apparently lost for words.

“Respectable?” he offered.

“*Black.*”

“That’s right. The color and design are simple but elegant, just like my hotel. All my female employees wear identical dresses to this one.” He lifted the garment to make his point. “And while we’re on the subject, let me reiterate one final time. I run a respectable hotel, Laney, my guests rely on me to provide a comfortable, memorable stay that surpasses their wildest expectations.”

“So you’ve said. More than once. Ten times at least.”

“Save your sarcasm. I’m not in the mood to engage in another verbal battle.”

She sighed. “Nor am I.”

“Good. Now, for the rules of your employment.”

“Rules? What rules?”

“You will live a clean, wholesome life while working inside the hotel and on your own time. Any unseemly behavior, whether here or anywhere else, will be grounds for immediate dismissal.”

For once, she didn’t argue with him. “I understand.”

“You will be held to the same standard of behavior as all the women in my employ. Break one of my rules and you’ll be fired on the spot.”

“My, that sounds ominous.”

“I mean what I say.”

“Yes, I get that.”

A pall of silence fell over them. They eyed one another with equal amounts of suspicion. And something else. Something Marc didn’t dare define.

“So, *Marc.*” She said his name in that soft, throaty voice of hers that left him blinking at her like a fool. “Am I to have

the rest of these rules spelled out for me, or am I to guess at them?"

"Right." He'd almost forgotten. "My requirements are simple and straightforward. No drinking, no cheating the customers, no lying, no stealing and, definitely, no—"

"Kissing the boss?" she asked with a deceptively innocent batting of her eyes.

"I was going to say..." He had to look away to hide his smile. "No breaking into any of my safes."

"Spoilsport."

He did smile at that, then instantly wiped his expression clean. He couldn't allow this woman to gain the upper hand in their highly irregular relationship. "Did I mention that Marshal Scott will be here later this evening?"

"You don't have to threaten me." She held up her hands in surrender, but ruined the picture of compliance by winking at him. "I promise to play nicely. As long as you do the same."

And he was holding off another smile. "I'll expect you to show up on time and work hard while you're here. In return, I'll pay you the salary I quoted this morning. Are these terms acceptable?"

"Yes, they are. Thank you."

Uncomfortable at the gratitude he heard in her voice, he turned to leave, then caught himself. He still held the black silk dress in his hand.

"Here you go." He tossed the uniform in her direction.

She caught the garment with a quick swipe of her hand. Marc didn't miss the fact that she'd moved with lightning speed. The woman certainly had a unique range of talents. And Marc was starting to become impressed by nearly every one of them.

Careful to keep his admiration out of his voice, he spoke with a bland, flat inflection. "Once you've changed into your uniform, join me out at the front desk."



“Gee, you make it sound so fascinating.” She pressed a hand to her heart and sighed dramatically. “I’m all aflutter. I can hardly hold back my excitement.”

Right then, right there, Marc gave up the fight and smiled directly into the woman’s beautiful, amber eyes. Catching her playful mood, he gave her a wry smile. “Try to contain yourself, Laney. For both our sakes, please, *try*.”

## Chapter Nine



With her mind in turmoil, Laney gaped at the door Marc had just shut behind him with a soft click. Just this morning, confronted with her worst nightmare, she'd prayed for guidance and a solution to her money problems.

The Lord had answered her dilemma through an unlikely source. Marc Dupree.

His job offer was a blessing. An answer to prayer.

But, truly, what had she gotten herself into, putting her future into his hands?

Sorting through the events of the last hour, she worked the black silk of her "uniform" through her fingers. The fact that Marc had felt the need to spell out the rules of her employment left Laney wondering about the type of women he employed. Women of ill repute, no doubt. But why did he bother?

To save them from their chosen profession?

Was he that humane, that kind?

What would Laney's childhood have been like had someone given her mother a job like the one Marc had given her?

Would Laney have been raised with love and a sense of belonging? If so, would she have felt the need to start Charity

House? After all, her chaotic, unpredictable childhood had led her to provide a safe home for the children in her care.

Tapping her finger against her chin, she sighed over another thought plaguing her. She hated Marc thinking she belonged in the same category as the other women he hired, women like her mother.

*Isn't that what you wanted?* In an attempt to protect Charity House and the children, Laney had sent the man on a merry chase down The Row, leading him to conclude she was a shady lady seeking money for shady purposes.

Oh, she'd done it for the right reasons, but what a mess she'd made for herself.

Laney squeezed her eyes closed, praying for clarity. Her mind blurred with the memory of Marc's tender kiss. She shivered in response. The moment their lips touched everything had changed between them. Their *relationship* had changed.

For the better? Or the worse?

Because of her "willingness" to partake in the kiss would Marc always believe she belonged on The Row?

Letting out a rush of air, Laney pounded a fist against her thigh.

The memory of the countless men who'd paid their money and then lain with Laney's mother, should be enough to quell any silly, romantic notions she might have about Marc Dupree and his kiss.

Dirty, nasty, filthy. That's what she knew of intimate relations between a man and a woman. But would it be different with the right man? Would it be special?

The thought brought shameful heat to her cheeks.

At least facing the man again wouldn't be a problem. Learning her new job duties would demand her complete concentration. She wouldn't even have to acknowledge him.

Unless he chose to instruct her himself, conveniently keeping watch over her.

“He wouldn’t dare,” she whispered to herself.

Oh, yes he would. Especially if she kept him waiting much longer. With grim determination Laney quickly stripped off the plain dress she’d worn to spite Dupree—just as he’d suspected—and stepped into the black gown.

Pulling the garment over her shoulders, her breath caught in her throat. The dress was a perfect fit. She sighed, releasing some of the built-up tension in her neck then spun toward the mirror standing next to the armoire. Taking a long look at herself, she studied the profound changes.

She barely recognized the stranger that stared back at her. Was it just the refinement of the black silk and the elegant cut of the dress, or did Dupree’s kiss have something to do with the alterations she now saw in her reflection?

What would the children think if they saw her in this dress?

*The children.*

Her heart sank at the memory of the sullen, terrified faces as she’d kissed each of them good-night. She’d been confident all would work out as she’d left them in Katherine’s capable care. Until one of them actually begged her not to go. That was when Laney had realized the magnitude of trouble in which she’d landed herself, and Charity House.

Johnny, Judge Greene’s boy, had been frantic when he’d seen her leaving the house as the sun was setting. He’d reacted as though he knew exactly where she was headed and what she planned to do.

He’d been wrong, of course. But at the age of twelve, he’d seen too much of the ugly side of life thanks to his prostitute mother whose money went to feeding her opium addiction instead of her son.

Only time and a lot of love would heal Johnny’s unseen

wounds. Laney prayed that one day he would accept that grace and mercy were real, that he was a deserving child of God. Worthy of love, not because of something he did, but because he believed.

At least tonight Laney would return home before dawn, as promised. Perhaps then Johnny would accept that she wasn't living the same life as his mother.

Letting out a sigh, she smoothed her hands down her skirt and forced back the last of her uneasiness.

It was silly to worry any further. She could manage whatever came her way. She always did. As such, she could certainly handle a certain arrogant, way-too-big-for-his-britches hotel owner.

After all, he was just a man.

With a penchant for suspicion and distrust.

*He deserves grace and mercy, too.*

Shoulders back, sighing one last time, Laney twisted the door handle and pushed into the hotel lobby.

The first thing she noticed was the noise. Laughter and countless conversations twined with one another to create a chaotic harmony of sound. People of all sizes, ages and genders milled about the main lobby.

Most wore fashionable clothing that matched the unmistakable opulence of the Hotel Dupree. Every piece of furniture had been plumped to comfortable roundness, each rug was spotless, every slice of marble flooring shined.

The obvious wealth and power emanating throughout the décor reminded Laney just what a man like Marc Dupree held dear. Status and money. Money and status.

She needed to keep that reality in mind.

As though drawn by some unseen force, Laney connected gazes with the hotel owner himself.

He made a twirling motion with his finger. Obliging, she turned in a slow circle, arms outstretched.

A lopsided smirk tugged his lips into a captivating angle, calling to mind their kiss. As though unable to support the weight of her thoughts her knees froze, then suddenly gave out. Thankfully, Laney had the presence of mind to reach out and steady herself on the edge of a nearby chair.

Well, then. Clearly, she'd fooled herself into thinking Marc was *just* another man. On the contrary, he was unlike any person she'd ever met, capable of making her feel the most frightening emotion of all. Hope.

What gave him the right to do this to her? Before tonight she'd been a woman who could handle any challenge thrown her way. Now, as she clutched white knuckles to the chair, she had a sick feeling that there would be no easy answer to the problem called Marc Dupree.

With far more attentiveness than he'd like, Marc had followed Laney's progress through the hotel lobby. He'd known the exact moment she'd exited his office, perhaps because he'd pasted his gaze to the door for the last fifteen minutes.

Ever since their kiss, he'd been unable to concentrate on anything or anyone but her.

After leaving her in his office to change dresses, he'd waved off Hank, ignored his customers and set out to find a quiet spot to think. As he'd silently considered all that had transpired, he'd almost convinced himself that what they'd shared had been merely a kiss. But he knew better. He and Laney had captured something profoundly deep. Maybe even life changing.

Now that was disheartening beyond measure. He was heading right down the same path as the night he'd committed the ill-conceived decision to marry Pearl LaRue and save her from herself.

What a fool he'd been all those years ago. As he'd stood in front of the preacher, reciting his vows, he hadn't consid-

ered that Pearl might have liked her role as temptress to every living, breathing male. That life on the stage hadn't been enough to fund her lifestyle as she'd claimed the night he met her. Aside from singing on the stage, Pearl had enjoyed taking money on the side in return for her "special" favors.

Was Laney O'Connor the same? Marc had learned that a man couldn't change a woman's heart, or her hidden dreams, no matter how hard he tried. Although, now that he allowed his mind free rein, Laney's display of panic after their kiss made him want to reconsider his opinion of her.

Watching her now, clutching at the chair beneath her hand, he wanted her to be exactly what she looked like. A brave young woman caught in a series of unfortunate mistakes, yet willing to see the consequences of her actions through to the end.

Needing to gain some perspective, Marc broke eye contact and surveyed the activity in the hotel. It didn't take him long to notice how the men stared at Laney with varied levels of masculine interest.

And why not?

There she stood, magnificent in that black dress. Glowing, radiant. She had the look of both frailty and strength. Innocence with a hint of mystery—a powerful combination a man couldn't ignore for long.

Even now, Marc wanted to wrap her in his embrace and protect her from the bad things in this world. His gut twisted tighter and in that moment, he knew he should have never hired her to work in his hotel.

Trouble. The woman had trouble written all over her.

Releasing a hiss, Marc set out. He looked down at the tight fist he'd formed with his hand. Relaxing his fingers, he strode across the lobby with a clipped stride.

He stopped next to Laney and looked into her amber eyes. Some unnamed emotion robbed him of his ability to speak.

Since she didn't try to talk, either, and instead raked her gaze across his face, Marc took a moment to study her attire up close.

The dress added a touch of refinement to her already graceful form. He took a deep breath of her unique, lilac fragrance that was hers alone.

Tenderness gripped his heart and he had to stifle the urge to brush his lips against her forehead. "The dress suits you."

Her gaze snapped to his. "Did you just give me a compliment?"

He enjoyed the shock flashing in her eyes, it added to the image of innocence that unfolded a little more each time they met. He finally accepted that he wanted, *needed*, her to be as innocent as she looked now. And that scared him far more than anything Pearl had dished out during their two years of marriage.

But not enough to stop him from adding, "Truly, Laney. You look lovely."

Clearly confused, she shook her head at him. "I simply don't know what to say."

He grinned down at her. "Thank you is the customary response."

She lowered her head, smoothed the skirt with shaking fingers then raised her gaze to his again. He liked the way she looked him directly in the eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He suddenly wanted to shock her again, replace that slight smile of delight quivering on her lips with another kiss. But he'd promised not to kiss her again. And he always kept his word.

"Let's get you started, shall we?"

With a line of worry creasing her brow, she nibbled on her lower lip. "Will you be instructing me on my duties tonight?"



“No. I’ll leave that task to Rose.” Marc pointed at the older woman watching them from behind the front desk.

Catching Laney’s eye, Rose waved at her.

Laney waved back. “She looks like a nice lady.”

“She is. She’ll teach you everything you’ll need to know to do your job well. She’s my best front desk clerk.” Which was true enough. Marc didn’t add that Rose had once been a notorious madam in Cripple Creek. “Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

He placed his hand at the small of Laney’s back and led her through the lobby. He couldn’t explain why the sudden feeling of protectiveness that whipped through him felt so good.

*Trouble.*

Yeah. Marc’s association with Laney O’Connor promised to be nothing but trouble.

## Chapter Ten



For the next few days, life at the Hotel Dupree fell into a routine. As he'd done every evening since taking full control, Marc surveyed the interaction between his employees and customers from a corner of the lobby. He drank in the finely honed rhythm and waited for the surge of pride that came with ownership. Unfortunately, this night the sights and sounds didn't bring their usual satisfaction.

Why wasn't he content?

And why couldn't he shake the notion that something was missing? The longer he beheld the workings of what had become his home, the more a strange sense of disquiet tugged at him. It was as though tonight, instead of seeing the fruits of his labor, he saw just another fancy hotel.

His gaze continued to rove, pausing at the front desk.

*Laney.* She smiled at an elderly couple she was helping register for the night, no doubt charming them with her poise and wit. A favorite of the guests already, she was fast becoming indispensable.

The now familiar jerk of Marc's pulse was just as unwelcome as the last time he'd experienced the sensation, and the time before that. The woman had spent far too much time in his head. He wasn't about to allow her to continue making

him crazy just because she smiled at every guest that came her way. That was, after all, her job.

Determined to concentrate on anything other than his growing awareness of Laney O'Connor, Marc shifted his gaze to the restaurant on his right. They had a nice crowd this evening. Yet, despite his best efforts to engage his mind on business, his gaze wandered back to Laney. His heart made one hard kick against his ribs.

What was it that drew him to her? She'd shown up for work every night since they'd come to their agreement, and he had yet to get used to her presence. If he were a wise man he'd discover her secret, the one that kept her silent whenever he questioned her as to why she'd needed Greene's money.

Perhaps if Marc knew the truth, she'd no longer have this power over him. In the hopes of finding out something, anything, he'd attempted to walk her home each night after her shift. But every time he offered she turned him down.

He knew he could have insisted, could have forced the issue, but he'd rather remain in ignorance than discover he'd been right about her all along. And since she always came to work punctual and ready to do her best, he didn't really need to know more.

At least, that's what he told himself.

The man standing next to him chuckled, and then pounded him on the back, gaining his full attention. "When you gonna quit gaping at that woman and offer me something to eat from your fine restaurant? My gut's practically pressing against my backbone."

Marc snapped his gaze to Trey and frowned. "I wasn't gaping at Laney."

"Right." Trey divided a look between Marc and the front desk. "But you knew exactly who I was talking about, didn't you?"

Deciding the question didn't deserve a response, Marc

focused on a more important matter. “You want the food or not?”

“I want.”

“Then stop trying to annoy me and come on.” A few moments later Marc stepped into the restaurant and waited while Trey placed his order with the maître d’hôtel. When he was through, Marc added, “Please have the food served in my office.”

“Very good, Mr. Dupree.”

Without waiting for Trey, Marc left the restaurant and made his way to his office.

A few seconds later, Trey entered behind him and shouldered the door shut. Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned back against the wood. “Can’t help but notice how Miss O’Connor has been the model of hard work these last three nights.”

“She’s shown up, that’s what matters.”

“The male guests certainly seem to enjoy her undivided attention. What do you think?”

Marc bristled at Trey’s goading tone. “I think subtlety never was one of your finer points.”

“So I’ve been told.” Trey tossed his hulking frame into an empty chair and set his boots on top of an expensive table.

“Have you no decency?” Marc hissed. “I had that piece of furniture imported straight from Paris last week.”

Pretending not to hear him, Trey leaned his head against the back of his chair. “You never did tell me what Miss O’Connor said about that outrageous salary you’re paying her.”

Marc lifted a shoulder. “I don’t remember what she said.” The lie slid easily through his lips. He remembered every moment of every encounter he had with the woman, including the kiss they’d shared. The one that came to mind far too often.

Trey chuckled. "She was pretty shocked, I take it?"

"No. She was...grateful." And that reaction warmed him clear through to his soul, reminding him of the man he used to be. A man who assisted people in need without attaching conditions to the offer. Laney O'Connor had slipped beneath his defenses and Marc wasn't altogether sorry for it. He felt the betraying smile on his lips just before he realized it was too late to hide it from his friend.

Trey's eyes narrowed. "You got something you want to tell me?"

"No."

"You sure about that? Don't want to share why you haven't bothered finding out more information about our little safe-cracker? Or why you won't let me do it, either?"

"No."

"Don't want to tell me why the poor little dear couldn't look you straight in the eye that first night of her employment, or why she keeps sliding glances toward you when you aren't gawking at her?"

"She doesn't glance, she scowls."

"You noticed that, too?"

Marc stifled the urge to kick Trey's feet off the table, and not only because his boot heels were chafing off the shine. "I'm warning you, Trey."

"I know. I know." Trey lifted his palm in the air. "Change the subject or get out."

"And here I thought you'd lost your gift of perception."

Trey leaned forward and picked up a glass off the table where his feet rested. He twirled it under the light and a rainbow of color shot through the air. "Lead crystal?"

"Imported from Ireland."

"You've certainly left nothing to chance."

No, Marc hadn't. "What's your point?"

Trey set the glass back on the table. “Who said there was a point?”

Answering the rhetorical question was beneath them both, so Marc waited for his friend to continue.

“Over the last five years I’ve traveled across most of the West.” He dropped his feet to the ground and leaned forward, his eyes glassy as he gathered his thoughts. “The Hotel Dupree has no rival, except maybe in San Francisco. But even there, I’m not so sure.”

“I planned it that way.”

“Why go to so much expense?” Trey asked.

“You know the answer.”

“*Pearl*.” Trey spat the word as a curse. “Is she the reason for all this opulence?”

Furious at his friend’s lack of understanding, Marc paced through the room in hopes of settling his anger. “This has nothing to do with Pearl.”

“No? Then tell me why all this.” He waved his hand in a wide arc.

Marc stopped pacing and swung around to glare at his friend. “You of all people should understand, especially after what we went through in Louisiana after the war.”

“You still riding that horse?” Trey cocked his head. “That was fourteen years ago.”

“Look, Trey—”

“No, you look, Marc. Look around you. Look real hard and tell me what you see.”

“I don’t have to look around to know that I like what I’ve created here.”

“What *you’ve* created? Do you hear yourself?” Trey rested his elbows on his knees, his eyes filled with genuine concern. “You’re talking blasphemy.”

“Blasphemy?” Marc drew in a tight breath. Quelling his

temper was becoming harder by the second. “You’re overstating matters.”

“Am I? You used to know where your blessings came from, Marc.”

“I still do. Hard work, focused discipline and ruthless drive.”

Trey snorted. “Go ahead and tell yourself that, but I know better. You’re worshipping the creation of your own hands instead of the Creator.”

The man might as well have gut-punched him, which had been Trey’s goal. Too late, Marc remembered why he hated these heart-to-heart talks with his friend. “This, from you? You haven’t stepped inside a church in five years.”

“No, I haven’t. But we aren’t talking about me, we’re talking about you and why you refuse to turn back to God.”

“Do I look like I care what you think about me or my relationship with the Lord?”

Trey went on as though he hadn’t spoken. “Everywhere I look I see shocking displays of wealth.”

Marc shrugged.

“But do you want to know what I really see? Things.”

Waiting for his friend to continue, Marc barely concealed his impatience. This wasn’t a new conversation between them, and he was getting sorely tired of Trey’s condemnation. But the marshal remained silent, as if there was nothing more to say on the matter.

Well, Marc wasn’t finished. “That’s right, Trey. I have things. *Nice* things that bring comfort and security, not only to me but my employees as well.” He paused for a moment, then dug deep into the bitterness rooted inside his soul. “As firstborn sons, our futures were secure. We were destined to be planters, like our fathers and their fathers and their fathers before them. Then the war came and we lost *everything*.”

Trey ran his fingertip across the lip of the glass, study-

ing the crystal as though it was a complicated puzzle waiting to be solved. "I'd say you're a long way from poverty, my friend."

"What do you know about it? You own a pair of six-shooters, a tin star and a horse."

"I...*know*."

The whispered response cut deep and Marc flinched at the realization of his insensitivity toward his friend's loss. At what they'd both lost with a single rifle shot. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Cutting him off, Trey raised his hand between them. "The people that come with your wealth aren't real. They only want what you can give them. What kind of future can be found here?"

"I'll never be poor again. *That's* my future."

"I find it necessary to point out that you said that once before. And then you met Pearl."

Marc's jaw clenched. With great effort he forced himself to relax. "Pearl might have run off with my first fortune, but no woman will ever steal from me again."

"You know, Marc, if you weren't so bent on comparing the two you'd see that Miss O'Connor is different from Pearl." Trey searched Marc's face with the shrewd skill of a lawyer. "But I'd say you already know about their differences."

"You've got it all figured out, don't you?"

"Maybe not all of it." Trey shook his head. "But I've noticed how you watch Miss O'Connor."

Marc hated that smug tone. "How do I watch her?"

"Like you can't stop thinking about her, can't stop wondering what it would be like to know her better." Trey laughed. "Like it or not, my friend, you look at Miss O'Connor as if she's the only person in the room."

"If I do look at her more than anyone else it's because I need to keep an eye on her. Laney O'Connor can't be trusted,"



Marc said. "Didn't she prove that the other night in my office?"

"She's definitely clever. And wily—"

"So we agree."

Trey frowned. "Not completely. She's also a woman of integrity."

"All of a sudden you know her so well?"

"I've watched her these last three nights, too."

Marc pretended the spasm of white-hot jealousy was just a trick of his imagination. "Have you now?"

"I'd stake my life on the fact that she took that money from Judge Greene for a good reason. Have you even asked her why she needed it?"

"I've asked, ten times at least."

"What'd she say?"

"She didn't say. She just stared at her toes or made a glib remark or pretended she didn't hear the question or...well, you get the idea."

"Ask her again."

Marc swallowed back a quick retort. Trey had no understanding of women like Laney since the only woman he'd truly known had been pure and sweet, made to share his life. Trey was comparing Laney to the wrong woman. "I don't need to ask her again. She took a large sum of money from a man in a clandestine manner. If she'd had a good reason to do so she'd have told me already."

"If you really thought that, she'd be out of your life by now," Trey pointed out. "Deep down, you know I'm right."

"I see you're determined to defend her." And there went that spasm in his gut again.

Trey started to open his mouth, seemingly rethought his words then started again. "Hasn't she shown up every night on time and worked to the end of her shift without complaint? That says a lot about her character."

“You’re putting more into her actions than her behavior warrants.”

“It’s my job to make quick judgments on a person’s character. As far as Laney O’Connor goes, I’d say she needs your protection, not your lack of trust.”

Marc didn’t like what Trey said, didn’t like that he desperately wanted to believe his friend was right about Laney. Before meeting the woman, he hadn’t realized how tired he’d become of meeting disreputable characters, tired of never finding that one person in the world he could trust. The part of him that wanted to believe in Laney warred with the part of him that needed to shun all she appeared to be.

Under the circumstances he did the only thing he could. He attacked Trey. “You have the gall to tell me Laney needs protection? What do you know about it? All you know is vengeance. Ever since Ike Hayes killed Laurette, you’ve lived for nothing else.”

Trey slammed a fist into his palm. “She was my *wife*.”

“And she was my sister.”

Shoulders slumped, Trey sank farther into his chair. “We’ve been through this too many times to start again.”

“I miss her, too, Trey.”

“Then leave it alone.”

Marc choked down his own pain. What he had to say was too important to hold back the words any longer. “I can’t. If she knew what you’d become, her heart would break. It’s been three years. Let go of the past.”

Bitterness filled the other man’s eyes. “Like you’ve done?”

Marc said nothing. Trey was right. He hadn’t let go of the past any more than his brother-in-law had. In this, they were the same.

Unable to find the words to soothe Trey’s grief, Marc watched helplessly as the man rose from his chair and went to the mantel. As though he didn’t realize what he was doing

Trey's touch gentled the moment his finger ran along the frame surrounding the photograph of Laurette. A shuddering sigh slipped out of him.

"We aren't talking about me anymore, or Laurette."

Trey pulled his hand to his side, clenching his fingers into a tight fist. After a moment he turned back to face Marc, all expression cleared from his eyes. This was familiar ground for them, both too filled with pain to continue discussing the woman they'd each loved too much and lost too soon.

"Listen, Marc. Take your own advice and move on. Stop letting money mean so much to you and start living your life as the godly man you were meant to be."

The need for honesty overruled any desire to defend himself. "My life isn't all about money."

"No? Then give Miss O'Connor however much she needs. No questions asked. Let her have the money free and clear, without making her work for it."

Marc thought hard about Trey's suggestion. Ever since he'd pulled Laney into his arms and discovered she held secrets in her lips that called to a part of him no woman had ever touched, he'd considered helping her out of whatever spot she'd gotten herself into.

But something in him, the part the war had pillaged and Pearl had helped destroy, couldn't let go of everything he'd come to believe. One earth-shattering kiss didn't mean Laney was worthy of his trust.

A knock interrupted his thoughts. Trey's dinner had arrived. Grateful for the distraction, Marc called out, "Enter."

The door cracked open and a very lovely head spilled through the tiny opening. "I need to talk to you."

Just for a moment, Marc allowed himself to enjoy the rush of pleasure elevating his body temperature at Laney's habit of looking him straight in the eye.

“Come in.” He barely managed to hold back his grin. “We were just discussing you.”

She wrinkled her nose. “We?”

Marc indicated Trey with a nod of his head.

She took a step forward then halted as her eyes focused on the U.S. Marshal badge clipped to Trey’s chest. “Oh. Um. I’ll just leave you two to finish your business. What I have to talk about can wait.”

She backed out of the room but Marc pressed forward and caught up with her. “I said come in, Laney. It’s long past time you officially met the esteemed marshal.”

Popping her head back into the room, her wary eyes filled with frustration. And a good dose of trepidation. “I’d rather not tonight.”

Marc reached out, clasped her arm and urged her back inside. “All the more reason for me to insist.”

She batted at his hand. “Perhaps another time?”

“Now works for me.”

The flash of alarm in her eyes made all the agony he’d suffered since he’d first met her much easier to swallow.

Time for a little fun.

## Chapter Eleven



The last thing Laney expected when she'd knocked on Marc's office door was to encounter Marshal Scott's very large person. Over the last three days her avoidance of the lawman had been nearly flawless, a work of artistry and manipulation that would appall Katherine but made Laney rather proud.

Even now, she might have thought of a way to continue avoiding this inevitable meeting but for Marc's disdainful behavior. When she considered his performance of only seconds before, ill-mannered was the word that came to mind.

With perhaps more frustration than sense, she pushed aside care and strode into his office with her best imitation of nobility.

Hands on hips, she stared down her upturned nose. "Look, Marc, I get what you're trying to do." She threw a scowl at the Marshal, then turned back around. "Let's forgo the charade. We both know if you wanted to send me to jail, for taking what was *mine*, you would have tried to do so by now."

The marshal laughed outright. "Well, now. Beautiful *and* smart."

Marc sneered at his friend but aimed his words at her. "If

you're so confident you know what I will or will not do, why bother coming back to work every night?"

Deciding to go with the truth, she lifted her chin higher. "I need the money."

"Hate to say it, Marc, but I told you that was the case."

Marc cut the marshal another hard glare. "Shut up, Trey."

Laney bit back her own suggestion as to what the marshal could do with his opinions. Staggering as the notion seemed, for once she and Marc were in complete agreement. The last thing she needed right now was an interfering U.S. marshal.

"So, what did you need?" Dupree asked her.

"Since the front desk has been slow all evening Rose suggested I head home. But I need your approval first. So here I am, asking. May I leave?"

Marc just stared at her, a grin twitching at the corner of his lips. When she realized he wasn't going to answer her request, Laney sighed. "Is that *yes* or *no*?"

Releasing a smug smile, he chuckled at her. "Pushy, aren't you?"

It was a shame that boyish grin on his oh-so-handsome face took the punch right out of her anger. "Fine. I'll take that as a yes."

"Not so fast. I'm still weighing my decision."

Well, of course he was. In the face of that all that masculine arrogance, Laney nearly gave into her frustration. Tired from a full day at the orphanage and an even fuller night at the hotel, she considered telling a certain hotel owner and his pesky U.S. marshal sidekick what she thought of them both.

All night, they'd watched her from their usual vantage point in the lobby. She'd tried not to notice them, but the two together were hard not to notice. If a girl were the romantic sort—which, praise God, Laney was not—she'd be hard-pressed to ignore such a pair. There was the dark and

brooding one, the marshal badge adding a hint of respectability to his roguish good looks.

And the other?

As she eyed Dupree now, she realized he was equally as handsome as his friend, but his refined elegance made him much more intimidating to her. And that frightened Laney more than she cared to admit. Never before had a man held so much authority over her emotions, especially one who made it clear what he thought of her character.

“Why not just give me your answer?” To her mortification, she couldn’t keep the shake out of her voice. “May I go or not?”

“You all square with Rose?”

“Didn’t I already say my leaving was her idea? Just say what you really want from me so we can end this ridiculous game.”

Eyes narrowed, Marc’s lips crushed into a hard, thin line. “What I want is an explanation as to why you’re in business with a banker like Prescott. I also want the exact location where you live and, finally, I want to know the reason you accepted money from Judge Greene.”

Holding his arrogant, forceful graze, Laney sniffed delicately. “Is that all?”

“No.” Visibly relaxing, his lips curled toward that thrilling smile again. “I could use a decent meal and a strong cup of coffee.”

She hated how she had to fight not to return his smile. Like a dog on point she made her request for a third time. “It’s real simple, Marc. Either I can go home now or I can’t. Make your decision or I’ll make it for you.”

She’d forgotten all about the other man in the room until a choked bark of laughter caught her attention. She swung a disapproving glare in his direction. “Something funny?”

“No, ma’am. Just enjoying the show.”

“Then keep out of this.”

He raised his hands in a show of surrender. “Whatever the lady says.”

At least one of the men in this room knew who was in charge.

Turning back to the more stubborn of the two, Laney tapped her foot on the carpet. “Well? What’s it to be?”

“Where are my manners?” His tone filled with mock politeness as he grabbed her hand and tugged her deeper into the room before shutting the door behind her. “You’ve never *officially* met my friend, U.S. Marshal Trey Scott.”

“Perhaps I don’t want to meet him.”

“Sure you do.”

She yanked on her hand, but Marc pulled her closer until they stood inches apart. His scent filled her head, making her think of the last time she’d been in this office.

With a lift of her hand, she could reach up and drag Marc’s head toward hers, finally discovering whether the kiss they’d shared the other night had been real or just a figment of her imagination. She didn’t do it, of course.

In an attempt to harden her defenses against him, she fired off insults at will. “You are the most fallible, self-deluded, bullheaded man I know.”

“There you go again, making me all aflutter with your fine words regarding my character.”

She poked a finger against his chest. “A swine, that’s what you are.”

“You’re too kind, really.” He leaned over her and dropped his voice to a mere whisper. “Watch out, Laney, you might turn my head.”

“I’m completely unimpressed with your clever responses, *Marc*.” This time when she pulled on her hand, he released her.

She spun to leave.



Unfortunately, two steps forward and she found herself eye to eye with a shiny tin star that had U.S. marshal branded in the metal.

Where was the fear? The trepidation?

Strange, even though this man towered over her, she wasn't at all scared of him. And she experienced *none* of the confusing emotions whenever Marc stood this close to her. She looked up, and up some more, before she finally noticed that the marshal was grinning at her. The gesture made him appear almost boyish.

Maybe her absence of fear was due to lack of sleep, or maybe it was that very likable smile. Or maybe it was simply because the man had shaved off the dark stubble that usually covered his jaw.

"I'm pleased to finally meet you, Miss O'Connor." His voice was a deep, soothing bass rumbling in his chest.

Unsure if he meant what he said or was playing a game with her, she stared at him for a long moment. But then he winked at her, and she finally released a returning smile. "You, too, Marshal Scott."

"Call me Trey."

"I think I'd like that."

From behind her Marc released a growl from deep in his throat. "You're done for the evening, Laney."

She spun around at his sudden acquiescence. Forgetting for a moment what she'd come into the office for in the first place, she scrunched her eyebrows together. "What?"

"You may go home."

"I... Wait just a minute. Why are you letting me go all of a sudden?"

"Why not?" His gaze didn't quite meet her eyes. "Like you said yourself, we aren't that busy this evening."

No, they weren't. But still, why was he capitulating?

"Well, now that Marc has made his decision at last," Mar-

shal Scott cleared his voice, “won’t you allow me to escort you home, Miss O’Connor?”

Laney turned back around. “You? No...” She quickly gained control of her spinning thoughts. “No, that won’t be necessary. I can manage on my own.”

The sudden heat at her back told her Marc had stepped forward, trapping her in from behind. “No, Trey. *I’ll* escort her.”

“You have a hotel to run. While I’m free for the rest of the evening.” The marshal dropped a grin on her. “It would be my pleasure to escort you home, Miss O’Connor. A real pleasure.”

Too much musky, hulking male surrounded her. Her insides started to tremble, alerting Laney to the fact that the man behind her was far too close and the one in front of her was far too unfamiliar for all this personal closeness.

Twisting slightly, she thrust out her palms, landing a hand on each of their chests. With a hard shove she pushed at both men.

Neither budged.

She tried again. This time, Marc placed a restraining hand over hers. “I said I’d do it, Trey. End of discussion.”

Laney looked from one man to the other. Neither acknowledged her in return. They were too busy glaring at one another.

“It’s really no problem,” Trey said, his words rumbling over her head as he spoke directly to Marc. “I was leaving anyway.”

“You haven’t had your supper yet.” Marc squeezed Laney’s hand softly, but he didn’t move his gaze away from his friend. “I insist you stay here and eat.”

“Oh, well.” Trey shrugged a very large shoulder. “If you insist.”

“I do.”

Trey shrugged again. “All right.”

“Then it’s settled.”

Not for Laney.

She couldn’t afford either man escorting her home. The children’s safety demanded she make her way back to Charity House like she had every night since taking this job, *alone*. Neither Marc nor Trey could find out about the orphanage, at least not until Laney owned the house free and clear. Only then would she rethink her options.

For a moment, she watched the two men, measuring, gauging, trying to determine what was really going on between them. The two stood glaring at one another, neither moving. This had to be some sort of male standoff. Laney had seen a similar scenario just this afternoon when two of the older boys had fought over a toy.

She didn’t much like the idea that they might consider her a *toy*. “As much as I appreciate all this chivalry, I can find my way home on my own.”

Arms up, palms out, she quickly backed away, but a knock had all three of their heads turning toward the sound.

“Enter,” Marc and Trey said simultaneously.

The door swung open and a waiter carrying a platter on his shoulder stepped into the office. The delicious scent of ham and potatoes filled the air.

Sniffing in appreciation, Trey moved toward the smell. “Well, if you’ll excuse me. I have a plate of food to devour.” He glanced at Marc before exiting. “I’ll be in the restaurant if you need me.”

Motioning for the waiter to follow him, he strode out of the room without a backward glance.

Laney stared after him, his departure barely registering until the door shut with a soft click.

Her stomach dropped at the sound.

She was with Marc. In his office. For the first time since

he'd kissed her three days prior. With no one to act in the role of buffer.

Trying to gain some semblance of control over her hammering pulse, Laney blew out a slow breath and faced the man head-on.

All thought vanished from her mind, except the fact that here she stood. Alone. With a man who was looking exceptionally handsome in a gray vest, crisp striped shirt and red tie.

Holding her stare, his expression slowly changed, turning into something both frightening and exciting in its intensity.

Oh, my. Laney knew that look, had seen it was once before on his face.

Marc Dupree planned to kiss her again.

And Laney—Lord, help her—planned on letting him.

## Chapter Twelve



Shoulders tense, gaze riveted, Laney braced herself for Marc's kiss, feeling as though she were about to go to war. But then his eyes darkened to a deep, stormy blue and the emptiness she'd battled all her life gave way, beckoning her to let go and allow this man inside her heart.

He moved a step closer.

Sighing, she breathed in his spicy scent. Suddenly her daily burden of raising a houseful of children became a thousand-pound weight atop her shoulders. If only she could find a moment's relief, just this once.

Perhaps kissing Marc wouldn't be so terrible. Perhaps kissing him would bring a respite.

A rush of contentment surged through her blood as he reached around her and spanned his fingers against the small of her back.

Holding her breath in anticipation, she waited for him to lower his head.

He simply stared at her.

Afraid she wouldn't be able to stop her heart from latching on to his, Laney prayed he wouldn't press his lips to hers. In the next breath her prayer tumbled into the hope that he would kiss her.

Adding to her agitation, he continued to hold her gaze with his. He captured a loose curl falling from its pins and roped it around his finger.

“You have beautiful hair, Laney.” His already turbulent gaze filled with a yearning her soul recognized. “One of the first things I noticed about you.”

His words fell across her cheek like a warm, welcoming caress.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” she whispered.

“Probably not.”

Letting the tendril bounce free, the storm clouds faded from his gaze. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her...*forehead*.

Shocked at the tenderness in the gesture, at her own hopeful reaction that they were on the verge of something more significant than a kiss, Laney wrestled between relief and disappointment. Before she could sift through which of the two emotions bothered her most, Marc gave her cheek a sweet, almost tender tap, tap with his finger.

“You look tired,” he said.

*Unfair*. Really unfair.

She knew how to defend against his arrogance, his condescension, even his masculine superiority. But how could she hold out against such sweet affection? He wasn’t supposed to like her, or worry about her. That would mean they could become friends. And then...maybe...something more.

Her eyes started watering. Big, fat tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. She blinked rapidly, desperately trying to gain control over her strange reaction to a simple gesture of concern.

Skimming his gaze across her face, his eyes narrowed. “You’re not getting emotional on me?”

And to think she’d almost allowed herself to believe they

could become friends. Swiping the back of her hand across her cheek, she flicked him a look. "I'll try to restrain myself."

"That's my girl." He touched her bottom lip with his fingertip, his eyes still dancing with soft emotion. "I knew I could count on you."

She couldn't manage to speak past the burst of sensations rushing through her. Hope, anticipation, faith. Such dangerous emotions when she knew how this ended between them. How this *had* to end between them, with her walking away once she'd earned the money to pay off her loan. And him never the wiser about Charity House or the children.

"How much sleep are you getting, Laney?"

"Enough." For one insane moment she wanted to share the strain of her schedule and the burden of her worries and, most of all, her fear of losing the orphanage. But the part of her that had survived too many years alone couldn't give into such a weak, selfish need.

This wasn't about her. It had never been about her.

Gentling his touch further, Marc traced his fingertip along the curve of her cheek then across the shadows below her eye. "Now why don't I believe you?"

Even though she heard the twinge of sarcasm in his voice, she couldn't muster her usual rancor. Mainly because she believed he was truly worried about her. And that scared her far more than Prescott's threats to foreclose on Charity House.

Laney had to remember why she didn't trust Marc Dupree, why she *couldn't* trust him. Or she would fall into his arms and beg for his help. In an attempt to prevent such a disaster, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Can I have tomorrow off?"

"No."

"How very kind of you to spend so much time considering my request."

"Always willing to oblige." His grin switched into the

smile that turned her legs into nothing more substantial than cooked gelatin.

She locked her knees to keep from dropping to the ground. “I thought you were concerned I wasn’t getting enough sleep?”

“Tell me why you really want the day off and maybe I’ll reconsider your request.”

“Never mind.” She pushed him away from her with a hard shove to his chest. Knowing she needed to remain calm, she kept her gaze pinned to the third button of his shirt.

Placing his finger under her chin Marc applied enough pressure to force her to look at him eye to eye. “You know, Laney, withholding the truth can lead to telling bigger lies.”

She wrenched her chin free from his grasp and swallowed several times. Each time the beating of her heart grew louder in her ears. “Well, that settles it then. I’ll see you tomorrow night at six o’clock sharp.”

“Laney—”

She elbowed around him then tossed him a mock salute as she swung open the door and stepped into the lobby. “I’ll be heading out now. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Wait a moment. I’ll escort you home, like we agreed.”

She looked over her shoulder and saw that he was closing in fast. “No. No.” She increased her pace. “That won’t be necessary.”

Two long strides and he drew alongside her. “Don’t be contrary. Bad things happen to women alone on the streets at this time of night.”

The genuine concern in his tone stopped her retreat. Placing her hands on her hips, she spun around to face him. “I can take care of myself.”

His lips smoothed into that smile she was growing to dread, mainly because she liked it so much. “You overestimate your own strength, sweetheart.”



He sounded as if her safety was his main concern. She knew better. "Watch out, Marc, your paranoia might be mistaken for caring."

He threw his head back and laughed. Really laughed. The gesture looked entirely too appealing on his handsome face.

"All right, you win. I won't see you home. *Tonight.*"

Wondering why he'd given in so quickly, she angled her head and studied his face. His expression gave nothing away.

"Have a nice evening." He took her arm and steered her toward the door.

Her feet began to move despite her shock, while her jaw opened, closed. Why couldn't she get any words out?

"Laney?" He touched her arm. "I've changed my mind. You can have tomorrow off."

No. No, no, no, no, no. He didn't get to be kind, or understanding, or play the bigger man. It simply wasn't fair. "I... thank you, Marc. But I'll be here as always."

"*Because...?*"

"I need the money."

"Right." He smiled. "I guess that settles it then. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Yes." More confused than ever, especially since his eyes still had that warm glow, she started out.

"Don't forget the rules of your position here."

"Wouldn't dream of it." She waved her hand over her head to punctuate her words.

Smiling at her retreating back, Marc watched Laney saunter through the lobby, saucy attitude in every step she took. Unable to take his eyes off her, and not caring who saw him staring, he waited until she walked out of the hotel before motioning for Hank to join him.

"Yeah, boss?"

"You know what to do."

Hank straightened. "You want me to follow her all the way home this time? Or only part of the way like last night?"

Just as he had every evening he'd given the order, Marc puzzled over his reluctance to send Hank on the errand at all. He wanted to know where Laney lived. But what if he found out he'd been right about her all along? What if she lived on The Row, after all?

Then again, what if Trey was right, and Marc had misjudged her? What if the woman needed his help, not his mistrust?

One way or another, the time had come to end the mystery that was Laney O'Connor. "Follow her the whole way."

A shadow rode in her wake. Out of the corner of her eye, Laney watched a hulking form dart in and then back out of the alley immediately to her left.

*Hank.* He'd heeled her ever since she'd first left the Hotel Dupree. She'd like to think Marc had sent his man to follow her for her protection. But from his parting shot, she figured the handsome hotel owner wanted to find out whether or not she was breaking any of his precious rules.

That brief moment of concern he'd displayed in his office must have been an illusion. Shaking off a sudden wave of melancholy at the thought, she considered her options. She could lose Hank easily enough. Sure, he was big and scary on first sight, but under all that gruffness and hard muscle was a gentle heart. With a little charm Laney might be able to get Hank to talk.

Perhaps she could find out why Marc had sent the man to follow her.

Heading down the next alley, she melted deep into the shadows. Hank entered a moment after her. Tentatively looking around, he leaned to his right and squinted into the inky

black. Shaking his head, he squinted harder and continued forward with a large show of hesitation.

Laney waited until he was directly next to her. “Looking for me?”

The sound of Hank’s responding high-pitched holler sent a swirl of guilt coursing through her.

“Hank, it’s me. Laney.” She reached out to touch his sleeve.

“That was *not* funny, Miss O’Connor.” With the petulance she’d witnessed in very young boys, Hank pushed her hand away. “Not funny at all.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“What are you doing slinking in the dark?” he asked, his gaze darting around the alley.

“Waiting for you.”

His audible gasp told its own story. “You knew I was following you?”

“You’re sort of hard to miss.” She touched his sleeve again. This time he didn’t push her hand away.

For the benefit of his dignity, she made a suggestion. “Let’s step back into the light. I can’t even see my own shadow.”

“Good idea.” He turned and started out, leading the way without bothering to see if she followed.

Once they were back in the full light of the street, Laney got straight to the point. “Why are you following me?”

“Just doing my job.”

“I figured that. But why?”

“As much as I like you, Miss O’Connor—” he gave her a sympathetic grimace “—I can’t tell you any more than I already have.”

“If it’s for my protection...?” She paused, waiting for him to affirm or deny the suggestion, but old tight-lipped Hank pretended grave interest in his right thumbnail.

His silence confirmed her suspicions. Marc wasn’t wor-

ried about her safety. The tenderness, the concern over her lack of sleep had been an illusion.

After another moment she softened her tone and dripped sugar into the air. "You really won't tell me why you're here?"

"I can't."

A little more sugar. "Not even a hint?"

Nothing.

"Hank, please?"

He sighed. "Miss O'Connor, I like you. Really, I do. Even when you did all that fancy safecracking and wall scaling the other night, I thought you were someone special. But I work for Mr. Dupree. And he doesn't trust you. That means I can't, either."

She couldn't keep the bitter taste of disappointment from filling her mouth. "Does your boss trust anyone?"

Hank looked down the street, as though checking to see if anyone was listening. "Sure. Just not..."

"Me."

"No, it's not you in particular. It's all women." He looked behind him again. "And believe me, he has a good reason not to trust your sort."

Laney tried to remind herself that she'd long since accepted that Marc considered her just another woman of questionable virtue. But she couldn't make herself believe it, not in the dark recesses of her mind. Saddened, she lowered her lashes to hide the hurt running through her.

Hank must have seen something of her pain. "Oh, no. I didn't mean it like that. I meant Mr. Dupree doesn't trust women, period."

"No?" A small portion of her sorrow lifted, replaced by a different sort of pain, one for a man who had material wealth and comfort yet little faith in mankind. Or rather, woman-kind. "Why doesn't he trust women?"

Hank slammed his mouth shut and shook his head.

Now that the subject had been broached, Laney couldn't let the matter drop. "If you must follow me home, can't you at least tell me the rest?"

"I already said too much."

"You know, I have my own reasons for not wanting Marc...I mean Mr. Dupree...to know where I live."

Hank blew out a puff of air. "I have to follow you anyway."

Time to change tactics. "I always show up for work, don't I?"

"Can't argue with that."

"And I work hard when I'm there."

"Of course you do."

"Seems silly that you follow me home." She lifted an eyebrow. "What difference could it possibly make where I live?"

"It's not that Mr. Dupree doesn't think you'll show for work, he just wants to know—" Hank cut his own words off, scowled and pointed a finger at her. "Oh, no you don't."

*Think, Laney. Think.* She hated manipulating this big, kind man, but she had to protect the children. "No one would have to know that you didn't follow me home."

"I would know. And that means Mr. Dupree would figure it out eventually. He's smart like that."

"What if you accidentally lost me?"

Hank rubbed his chin. "No. That could never happen."

Before he had time to consider the possibility further, Laney darted down the alley again. Fifty feet later, a wooden fence blocked her passage to the other side. With considerable reaching, a good toehold and a solid jump she scrambled over the barrier.

Hank's bark of shock and thudding pursuit motivated Laney to lift her feet faster off the ground. With no time to check behind her, she sped around the next corner then wove her way through two other streets. After a few more turns Laney gave in and looked over her shoulder.

Hank wasn't following her anymore. She slowed her pace and sighed with pleasure. But guilt reared quickly. She'd like to think she and Hank had become friends. Not that she could count on that, not with so much at stake.

For now, she had to operate on the assumption that both Hank and his boss were threats to Charity House. Perhaps she'd played a rotten trick on the big, kind man but, in the end, she'd managed to protect her children for another night.

## Chapter Thirteen



The next day after sending Laney home early, Marc went about his daily business. He still couldn't fathom how Hank had lost her the evening before. Although he knew the woman was crafty, something about Hank's story didn't make sense. Had Hank lost her intentionally?

That would mean the two had become...amicable. At the notion a quiet, shocking jolt of jealousy burned through Marc's soul. He wondered how long he could continue pretending he wasn't growing attached to the woman.

The answer was painfully obvious.

Not long enough.

The time had come to find out exactly who she was and where she lived. Marc would ask the one man who knew the truth—Thurston P. Prescott III. And if the banker wouldn't cooperate, Marc would introduce him to Trey. Amazing the plethora of information a tin star could get out of an otherwise reticent source.

Now that he'd decided to take action, Marc was anxious to solve the mystery of who Laney O'Connor really was beneath her pretty smile and evasive manner. Unfortunately, before he could question Prescott, he had to check in at Mattie's first.

All week long he'd had a bad feeling about one of the

restaurant's waitresses. Julia had left early three nights in a row, with the obvious lie of not feeling well. Marc hoped he didn't find the girl working for the infamous madam again. As much as he'd hate to do it, if Julia had broken the rules he would fire her. If for no other reason, he'd have to release her for the sake of the other women who wanted to make the change permanently.

His gut told him Julia had lapsed. And his gut was never wrong. Except once. Even now, he couldn't squelch the onslaught of painful memories over his wife's betrayal and subsequent self-destruction. Till the end of his days, Marc would never understand what made a woman like Pearl indulge in a lifestyle that she'd hated as much as she'd craved.

It was too late to save Pearl. He just hoped it wasn't too late to help Julia.

Clutching the gold dress in her arms, Laney made her way along the upstairs hallway of Mattie's brothel. She stopped at the end of the corridor, shifted the neatly folded garment to one arm and knocked on the closed door.

No answer.

She tried again. "Sally, it's me, Laney. I've come to return your dress."

While she waited again for an answer, Mattie Silks sauntered down the hallway toward her. "Laney, my dear girl, Sally's not up for visitors. She had a bad bout of coughing this morning and it's worn her out."

"Why didn't you tell me this when I first arrived?"

Concentrating on smoothing a nonexistent wrinkle from her sleeve, Mattie shrugged. "It's none of my concern, as long as that lunger does her job in the evenings, I don't care what she does during the day."

Choked with anger, Laney took a long, hard look at the petite madam. Pretty and plump, the blonde, coldhearted



woman had the audacity to wear a cross studded with diamonds around her neck.

Laney's anger boiled deeper as she realized the expensive piece of jewelry had been purchased with the commission Mattie earned off her girls. Girls who knew no better when the madam demanded an outrageous percentage of their evening wages.

"How could you not care?" She strained to keep every bit of emotion out of her voice. "Sally's been with you for years, since before my mother came to work for you. That lovely British accent of hers brings in the fancy men *and* their money."

"I run a business, not a charity house." Mattie giggled at her pun on words. "Oh, that's funny."

Jaw clenched tight, Laney focused on the dress in her hands, sickened at the sinful deeds that had been committed to pay for the expensive garment. Mattie drove all her girls hard, literally enslaving them with her demand that they work every evening in dresses imported from Paris and supplied with their own money.

Reaching out, Mattie's eyes turned shrewd as she touched Laney's shoulder. "You've got it all wrong. The life I provide my girls is really quite comfortable. Your mother certainly didn't mind it. You just have to look at it from the proper perspective."

"Proper perspective?" Laney practically choked on the words. "Don't forget who you're talking to. I know what this life does to women, how it steals their youth, their futures, often even their lives."

"Now, now, don't be so dramatic." Mattie pulled at a loose thread on her collar. "If you ever get tired of taking care of other women's mistakes, I could use a girl like you." Her gaze roved past Laney's hair, across her face, and slowly along her body. "You'd bring in the fancy money, too."

“My answer is the same as always.” Laney shuddered. “I’m not interested in working for you, Mattie.”

“If you change your mind...”

“I won’t.” Laney turned back to the closed door, knocking with more force than before. “Sally, open up.”

Coughing erupted in answer.

Hating to ask but not having much of a choice, Laney turned back to Mattie. “Would you unlock this door, please?”

Like a dog with a bone, Mattie continued the previous conversation. “Sally won’t be around much longer. You could take her place. She has the best room in the house.”

In an attempt to gather her patience, Laney squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “Just open the door.”

“Rude, that’s what you are.” Mattie shook her finger inches from Laney’s face. “I should kick you out of here.”

“But you won’t. Like it or not, you need me. I keep you in business.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I care for your *girls* when they get into trouble, and then I care for their children so they can come back to work for you. You’d be out of half your income if it weren’t for me.”

“I’d manage.” Mattie leaned against the opposite wall and flashed a false smile. “By the way, a man came around a few days ago asking about you.”

Laney’s hand froze on the door handle. “What man?”

Mattie plucked out a handkerchief from her sleeve, waved it in front of her face, sighed. “Handsome devil, that one.”

“You get his name?”

Smiling an I-got-you-now smile, the madam paused for several long beats. “It was that hotel owner, Marc Dupree.”

*No.* “What did you tell him?”

Instead of answering, Mattie fired off her own question in response. “What does he want with you?”

“It’s personal. And I’d rather you not tell him how you know me.”

Mattie rolled her eyes. “I’m not stupid, Laney. No one outside our circle knows what service you provide me. Or rather, what service you provide several of my girls.”

“Thank you.” With that settled, she turned her attention back to Sally’s door. “Since we understand one another, I’d like to check on Sally now.”

“You better watch out, girl.” Mattie pushed forward, unlocked Sally’s door and then moved aside. “Marc Dupree isn’t like most men.”

Laney didn’t need anyone telling her something she already knew, especially not a woman like Mattie Silks.

“If he wants to find you,” Mattie said, shaking her finger in Laney’s face again. “He’ll find you.”

Hearing the truth spoken so casually, with Mattie’s knowing grin on her face, Laney could only pray the madam was wrong.

Marc consulted the large double doors outside the fancy brothel, hoping once again that Julia hadn’t gone back to work for Denver’s notorious madam. True, Mattie ran the most elegant parlor house in town, but a brothel was still a brothel.

Pushing open the door, he stepped into the gaudy foyer and strode into the main parlor. Though nothing in particular assaulted his sensibilities, everything about the chosen décor was too much. Alone, each piece of furniture and various adornments could almost pass for tasteful. But together, the red velvet divans, the paintings, the gold fixtures and the bold wallpaper defined bad taste.

As with the décor, Mattie Silks overdid everything. She only served champagne while her girls dressed in the height of Parisian fashion. Marc surveyed the interior with a critical heart and a twinge of conscience got to him. Here he stood,

judging the woman for the very offense Trey had accused him of—the acquisition of nice *things*.

Was Marc turning his need for wealth and security into a modern-day form of idol worship? Was he putting more stock in what he could accomplish with his own hands instead of turning to the Lord for guidance?

Perhaps. But that didn't make him an idol worshipper, and it certainly didn't make him similar to Mattie Silks.

Concentrating on the task at hand, rather than dwell on his own uncomfortable thoughts, Marc nodded to Mattie's bouncer walking toward him. "Jack."

"Dupree."

"Mattie around?"

Jack smiled, the diamond in his tooth twinkling under the soft lantern light that glowed day and night. "She's not talking to you. Not since you stole Julia, Ruth *and* Lizzie right out from under her nose like that."

Shrugging, Marc pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Tell her it's important."

Jack grunted while quickly palming the money. "She won't like it."

"Just tell her I'm waiting."

Moments later Mattie sauntered toward him, taking her time and striking a pose every fifth or sixth step. Carrying a flute of champagne, she wore an immovable smile on her overly painted face. Marc decided she looked older than her reported twenty-nine years. At least twenty years older.

Stopping close enough for him to get a whiff of her cheap perfume, she offered her cheek. Out of politeness, Marc leaned down and touched his lips to the plump curve, the taste of grease and pungent roses slipped into his mouth.

In the next second, he found he couldn't prevent his mind from comparing Mattie's offensive smell to Laney's soft,

pleasing scent. Shaking his head, he stepped back and offered his usual greeting. "You're looking well."

"Don't you use those sweet words on me." Tapping him on the arm, she added, "I'm still mad at you, Marc Dupree."

"I know."

"You've stolen a total of five of my best girls. And for what?"

"An honest job and a second chance."

Mattie sidled to the nearest chair and hitched her hip against one of the arms. "Such righteousness I hear in your tone. My girls are entertainers, Marc, nothing more."

They both knew that wasn't the truth. At least not the full truth. "Ruth and Lizzie are happy working for me."

"Ha. You make them wear dreary black."

"They aren't complaining."

"Yet. But they will. And just like Gretchen and Patsy, they'll come back to work for me in the end."

Marc didn't bother commenting on the two he'd lost recently.

"So, what brings you here this morning?"

"You mean afternoon." Marc's lips twisted into a grimace. "The sun rose hours ago, Mattie."

"You will call me Madame Silks."

Marc inclined his head, trying not to laugh at the way she attempted to pronounce the word like the French but failed horribly. "It's pronounced *Madame*."

Mattie relaxed into a pose, her tone full of begrudging affection. "You are the most rude, impolite man I know."

He doubted that. "That's why you love me."

Without taking her eyes off him, she took a long, slow sip from her glass. "We should go into business, the two of us. With your brains and my looks, we'd make a fortune."

"I'm not looking to go into the...entertainment business. I'm looking to get women out of it."

With her free hand, she tossed a few curls off her face. “So they can work in your hotel for slave wages, compared to what they can make here?”

“It’s not about the money, Mattie. I give them a better living than what you give them, an honest one where they can look themselves in the mirror at the end of every shift. That’s why they leave you and come to me.”

He had to give it to her, though Mattie visibly stiffened at his words none of her outrage showed on her face. “I should throw you out of here right now.”

“Probably.” Marc edged toward her, glancing up at the staircase. “But you like me too much to send me away just yet.”

“You’re a rogue, Marc Dupree.” Fanning herself with her hand, she sighed. “Pity I like rogues so much. So, what can I do for you this morning?”

“I’m looking for a woman.”

“I have several.”

“Not that kind.”

She rode her gaze across his face and down to his toes. “Maybe I’ll break a rule or two and take care of you myself.”

“Not today.” *Not ever.*

“You are a man of phenomenal willpower.”

Tired of the game, Marc shifted his weight to a more intimidating stance. “Let’s get to the point. I’m looking for Julia. Is she here?”

Her eyes darted to the staircase then back to him. She couldn’t quite hide the satisfaction in her smile. “Did you say Julia?”

“She’s here, isn’t she? I see it in that smug smile of yours.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Let’s make this simple, I want to know if Julia is still one of my employees, or if she’s back to working for you.”

“You know, Marc, this is the second time in less than a

week you've come looking for a woman. Having a hard time keeping track of your girls?"

"I was looking for Laney O'Connor for a very different reason."

"*Personal* reasons?"

"You could say that."

Mattie locked eyes with his, interest fringing the edges of her gaze. "I knew you had a secret. But I never thought it was...*that*." A giggle danced from her lips.

"You know Miss O'Connor?"

After a final searching glance of his face, her expression cleared. "Now, I didn't say that I did and I didn't say that I didn't."

This was far too familiar territory. He'd gotten this exact behavior from every other madam on The Row. What he didn't understand was why the tight-lipped runaround? "So what you're saying is that you know her, but you won't tell me *how* you know her."

"My, you are a smart man."

"What is it about that woman that keeps all you madams on The Row so determined to remain discreet? Does she have something on you? Is she a blackmailer?"

"Laney? You must be joking."

"So you do know her. Is she a crib girl?"

"You mean to tell me, you really don't know what she does and why?"

Marc took another step toward Mattie, using the difference in their heights to make his point. "Are you planning to continue this game or are you going to solve this mystery for me here and now?"

Nonplused, Mattie took another sip of her champagne. "You're going to have to find this one out on your own, you arrogant brute." She tapped a finger on his chin. "It'll serve you right for stealing my Ruth and Lizzie with promises of

legitimacy. But, at least I have Jul..." Covering her mouth with two fingers, she fluttered her lashes. "Oops, it almost slipped."

"I knew it. Julia *is* here."

"Of course she is, silly man. You can't change a woman like her. I predict Ruth and Lizzie will be back as well."

"Don't count on it."

Marc swallowed his disappointment. He'd lost another woman to the allure of fine clothes, expensive champagne and the illusion of glamour Mattie offered. Three in one month.

Well, Julia was the last. As long as he owned a means to save these women from themselves, he'd fight to keep the rest straight. *Especially* Ruth and Lizzie.

"Oh, look. I've upset you." Mattie rose to her full height, pressed her palm against his chest and pushed him back a step. "But you're in luck. Since I'm feeling generous this afternoon I'll give you a little hint about your Laney."

Not trusting himself to speak, Marc held his tongue.

"You're looking in the wrong place. She doesn't live here on The Row."

His heart soared. Could Trey have been right about Laney? "You mean, she's not a—"

"Oh, you have the right idea. Sort of. Well, not really, at least not the *complete* right idea."

Marc felt the muscles in his jaw tighten, and his nerves bowed to near snapping. "Could you confuse me any more?"

"I could, but like I said, I'm feeling generous this morning."

"Afternoon, Mattie. It's early afternoon."

Jack came up from behind Mattie and whispered in her ear.

Eyes narrowing, she shook her head violently. "No, not



now.” She flicked a sideways glance at Marc. “Just keep her in her room until I’m through here.”

“Julia?”

Pretending confusion, Mattie cocked her head to the left. “Julia, Laney, which woman were you looking for again?”

“Either. Both.”

A crash shot out from a back room, followed by a feminine wail of anger. Mattie grasped Marc’s arm and directed him toward the door. “So good to see you. We’ll have to finish our discussion some other time.” At the sound of another crash, Mattie released Marc and nodded to her bouncer. “Jack, please show Mr. Dupree the way out.”

She was already hustling off in the direction of the commotion by the time Marc asked, “What’s the hurry?”

Knowing the question fell on deaf ears, he turned to go. But a familiar voice washed over him, and he spun back around.

“Mattie, Jack, where are you? I need some fresh water for Sally and—”

The words stopped abruptly.

Unable to stop himself, Marc steered his gaze toward the staircase. His eyes locked onto Laney O’Connor. He’d never experienced true torment before. Until this moment.

For days he’d hoped against hope. He’d put off finding concrete answers. But now he had to face the truth.

Laney was one of Mattie’s girls.

The reality of how close he’d come to losing his objectivity—again—over a woman—again—struck him to the core.

In one word he managed to convey all the anger, the pain and the disappointment he felt. “*You.*”

Wide-eyed, Laney continued to stare at him, unmoving, eyes blinking rapidly. “Marc, please, it’s not what you think.”

Refusing to accept that any of the emotions flitting across

the woman's face warranted consideration, he attacked. "I knew I couldn't trust you."

Just as she opened her mouth to respond, Jack took his arm and physically escorted Marc to the front door.

Too stunned to fight, Marc went willingly.

## Chapter Fourteen



Several hours after leaving Mattie's brothel, Laney stood outside the Hotel Dupree, shifting from foot to foot. The wind tugged bits of her hair free from its knot, while pure dread sliced through her.

How could she face Marc after this afternoon? How could she not? She had to explain herself, had to make him understand that her presence in Mattie's brothel wasn't as scandalous he thought.

Would he be willing to listen?

As if to mock her agitated mood, day inched slowly into night, dragging a ribbon of blues, pinks and purples behind it.

Needing a moment to gather her thoughts—and her courage—Laney turned toward the distant peaks. No comfort came from the mountains' snowcapped beauty. Only more apprehension. The memory of Marc's eyes when their gazes had connected, the condemnation and disappointment, made Laney's heart grow heavier, and more troubled than before.

All her lies, all her deceptions had caught up with her in a single moment of recognition.

*What did you expect?* a tiny voice chided. *You've intentionally misled him every day of your brief acquaintance.*

In her attempt to keep Marc away from Charity House she'd allowed him to think the worst of her.

Having spent the last three hours coming to terms with her unrequited feelings for Marc, she'd gained insight into the future that lay before her. Like a barren cloud blowing over a parched field, promising much but producing little, any chance of earning Marc's respect had disappeared.

That didn't mean she wouldn't try.

The soft glow of light and low murmurs flowing from the hotel lobby compelled Laney forward in a strange, mesmerizing summons. Answering the call, she entered through the revolving doors.

As if he'd been waiting for her arrival, Hank drew alongside her. "Mr. Dupree wants to see you in his office."

She smiled up at him. "Thank you for letting me know."

"Just doing my job." His accompanying scowl warned her he hadn't yet forgiven her for the trick she'd played on him in the alley.

In serious need of a friend, she grabbed his arm. "Hank, wait. I'm sorry about last night. I know you won't believe this, but I had to lose you."

A myriad of emotions waltzed across his features before his lips cracked into a tentative smile. "I understand."

"I'm glad. One day, I'll explain my actions fully."

"When you're ready."

Well, at least she'd healed one relationship. "Thank you for understanding."

His face reddened. "Go on," he urged. "Mr. Dupree won't bite."

"I wish I had your confidence."

He nudged her forward. "You're better off facing him sooner rather than later."

If only that were true. As the shut office door loomed ahead of her, several concerns grappled against one another.

What would she do if Marc fired her, before she'd earned enough money to pay off the interest on her loan?

What if he found out about Charity House, would he threaten to shut her down as Prescott was trying to do?

As nerve-racking as Laney found that unlikely possibility, another, more selfish, concern rose to the top of her fears. How could she face Marc, knowing the feelings she had for him were too strong to deny? And how could she keep from begging him to feel for her a tiny portion of what she felt for him?

With each step she sent up a silent prayer for courage, but she doubted God listened with a sympathetic ear. She'd done enough in the last few weeks to ensure that the Lord turned away from her. If not for good, at least for now.

Aware of how very alone she felt, Laney rolled her trembling fingers into a fist then knocked twice on Marc's office door.

"Enter."

A wave of white-hot terror slithered through her stomach, but somehow she managed to trek into the room.

With his attention riveted on one of the photographs on the mantel, Marc didn't turn around. "Shut the door."

She did as he commanded and waited for him to face her directly. When he finally turned and met her gaze, she wished he'd kept his back to her a little while longer. Although his expression held little emotion, his clenched jaw and muscle ticking in the side of his throat told of the battle that waged inside him.

"I see you wore the black dress." He spoke in a near whisper, but the underlying misery in his tone shouted at her to cross the space between them and beg him to listen to her side of the story.

She stayed rooted to the spot. "I've come to work my shift as usual."

He skimmed his gaze over her and the expression in his eyes changed, turning shattered, as though the world had let him down one too many times.

Heart hammering against her ribs, head whirling with sorrow, Laney could hardly keep from rushing forward and pulling him into her arms. She wanted to soothe away his agony and perhaps end a little of hers as well. Staring at him now, feeling his pain as though it were her own she could deny the truth no longer—she was falling in love with Marc Dupree. And like a dangerous reef that shipwrecked the mightiest of boats, she knew her feelings for this man could easily destroy her.

As his eyes held hers, silently communicating the full of his disappointment, her soul died a silent death—one she feared was the first of many more to come.

“Do you remember the rules of your employment?” His voice dripped inside the stiff tension between them.

She nodded. “I am to live a clean, wholesome life. No drinking, no cheating, no lying, and no stealing.” Surprised at how clear and strong the words came out of her mouth, she continued. “I’m to partake in no unseemly behavior, either here or outside this hotel.”

“And yet you’re standing in my office, after what happened this afternoon in Mattie’s brothel.”

“Yes. I have broken none of your rules.”

He searched her face, his eyebrows drawing together as though he puzzled over what to say next. Laney returned his stare, silently willing him to believe in her just this once.

“Ask me, Marc. Ask me what I was doing at Mattie’s.” Urgency raised her voice a full octave higher than usual. “Then ask me how I’m acquainted with the madam.”

“I don’t want to know why you were there. God help us both, I don’t want to know.” He moved quickly and wrapped

his fingers around her shoulders. With one great tug he pulled her in his arms. "Don't you understand? I *can't* know."

"But it's not—"

His mouth pressed against hers, cutting off the rest of her words.

For weeks she'd held back her anger, anger at his inability to see who she really was, deep at the core. She'd blamed herself for his misconception. But now her disappointment in him caught up with her anger at herself.

Couldn't he tell she was different from the women Mattie employed?

Apparently not.

This was not a pleasant kiss, nor was it purely physical. It held more intimacy than she'd ever imagined possible between a man and woman. Her very soul understood this man, better now than ever before. As deep as her anger went, she wanted to soothe the pain she felt in him.

Finally, he pulled his head back. He tried to draw away from her completely, but she wouldn't let him. Not yet. Not until she proved to him who she really was, not the woman he seemed determined to see.

Cupping his face, Laney put all her answers to his unspoken questions in her gaze. After a moment, she softened her hold and gently touched her lips to his temple then let him go.

Breathing hard, he stared at her. But he didn't back away.

*Progress.*

She held his gaze, watching, waiting, praying he understood her silent message declaring her innocence.

Raking a hand through his hair, he stepped back, turned and walked again to the mantel. He ran his finger along the frame of a single photograph, as though drawing strength from the image of the young woman who looked so much like him.

With his attention focused elsewhere, Laney let her eyes

rove over him. Her heart swelled with emotion, with something that felt like gratitude.

Despite their turbulent history, Marc Dupree had given her a precious gift these last few weeks. Before meeting him, she'd thought intimacy between a man and woman was dirty, sinful. But now she knew it could be different, maybe even beautiful.

His hand stilled over the frame. "Why were you at Mattie's?"

Laney took a deep breath, hoping the right words would tumble from her lips. "I had to return the dress I borrowed from one of her girls." When he didn't respond, she explained further. "You remember the gold dress I wore that first night we met? It wasn't mine."

He spun around and shot her a chilling look, clearly unwilling to believe her. "You weren't carrying a dress when I saw you this afternoon."

"No. I'd already returned it." His raised eyebrow was enough of a question. "Sally, the girl who loaned me the dress, has consumption. When you saw me on the stairs, she'd just had a terrible coughing fit. I'd gone in search of some water to help soothe her throat."

There. The truth was out.

Would he believe her now? Would he ask for answers to the rest of his questions?

Or would he send her away, with no further chance to explain herself?

*Oh, Lord, please, soften Marc's heart. Help him hear the truth in my words and the ones I can't say just yet.*

Marc's heart pitched in his chest. A twisted, ruthless spark of hope rode him hard. Laney had been nursing a sick woman? Could the explanation for her presence in Mattie's brothel be so simple?



“Do you work for Mattie?”

“No.”

He had to know the rest, had to stop dancing around the real issue and get to the truth at last. “Are you a...prostitute?”

She smiled at him. “No, I am not.”

“Were you ever?”

Her smile deepened, as if she'd been waiting to have her say for a very long time. “*Never.*”

“Then how do you know Mattie?”

A shadow darkened across her features, but in the next instant she threw her shoulders back and looked him directly in the eye. “Before she died, my mother worked for Mattie.”

“Your mother? Was she a—”

“Yes, she was.” Laney's voice hitched, but she maintained unrelenting eye contact with him. “I spent most of my childhood traveling from mining camp to mining camp, wherever men were willing to pay for my mother's time. Eventually she grew weary of traveling so she went to work for Mattie.”

“I'm sorry.” He reached out to touch her, to prove he meant every word.

She pushed away from him. “My mother was not a happy woman, nor did she trust anyone but me. You see, Marc, while you were kicking up your heels at fancy balls and parties I was keeping time and collecting money for my mother.”

Unable to bear the pain he saw in Laney's yes, Marc reached out to touch her again.

She shook her head and held up a hand to stop his pursuit. “Don't. We have to finish this now.”

As much as he wanted never to speak on this topic again, he knew she was right. Just because she wasn't a prostitute didn't mean she wasn't associated with the business on some level.

Although he had a strong suspicion that wasn't the case, Marc still had to ask the toughest question of all. “The

money you took from Judge Greene, was it to start your own brothel?"

She gave him a blank look. "Is that what you thought? That I needed money to open a...a...brothel?"

"Why else would you need that much money?"

As soon as the words left his mouth he finally understood their absurdity. From the start, he'd measured Laney against Pearl. Not because she was like his wife, but because he'd been afraid to see the truth. Laney had stepped into his hotel and stolen his breath the moment he'd laid eyes on her. He'd lost trust in his own objectivity years before. So, instead of sorting through his initial impressions of her, as well as his attraction, he'd assumed the worst.

Her next words stamped across his guilty conscience. "There are a lot of things money can buy besides a brothel."

She had every right to her anger, but he wasn't through. He had to know the rest. "Then why did you need the money?"

"Because Prescott—" She broke off, her brows drew together before her expression closed inside itself. "I can't tell you. There are others who could be hurt if you decided to stop me."

"Stop you from what?"

"I can't say."

"At least tell me who else is involved in your business venture, the one that required a large loan from Prescott's bank."

The shadows in her eyes turned into storm clouds, brewing for combat. "The loan is mine and no one else's."

Marc didn't understand her reluctance to tell him the entire truth. What could she possibly be hiding? "If the loan is yours alone, then how is this not your secret to tell?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then promptly shut it. "We made a deal, Marc. I've stuck to my end, you *must* stick to yours."

Her vehemence stunned him. Had others let her down so

badly that she couldn't trust *his* word? "Laney, secrets and deceptions are the same as lies. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"You don't understand."

"Trust me."

She released an unhappy laugh. "You want me trust you?"

"Would it be so hard?"

"Oh, let's see. Mere seconds ago you assumed I needed money to start my own brothel. You suppose something like that might hold me back from complete honesty?"

"I was wrong. And I'm sorry."

"I could also remind you of the countless little threats you've made in the last few weeks. For instance, the ones involving a certain U.S. marshal."

"You played your part in this deception as well. Correct me if I'm wrong, Laney, but you wanted me to think you lived on The Row."

She had the cheek to break eye contact with him. "All right, I'll give you that."

"So we start clean. A new beginning."

It was her turn to become the skeptic. "How do we do that? Even now, can you honestly tell me you believe I've had nothing but good intentions?"

"I'm no hypocrite. I won't pretend it hasn't crossed my mind that if you had nothing bad to hide, you'd tell me the truth now."

She threw her hands in the air. "And you want me to trust you?"

"I'm not the one keeping secrets."

"Is that a fact? You want to tell me why you don't trust women? Or why you so readily assumed I was a prostitute, without once asking me if it were true? You can't expect trust, Marc, unless you're willing to give it in return."

"All I know is that nothing good comes from decep-

tion.” He took a step closer. “What are you hiding from me, Laney?”

“Please, don’t keep asking me the same question and expecting a different answer.”

“Tell me.”

“Would you settle for a compromise?”

He tucked his hands inside his pants pockets. “A compromise?”

“You know, it’s when each person gives a little, and both get something back in return.”

“I know what the word means.” He gave a short laugh. “I’m just not overly fond of the concept.”

She grazed him with another penetrating look. Under the circumstances he supposed she had every right to be leery of him, but knowing it and accepting it were two different things.

“Here’s how it would work,” she began. “Once I pay off the rest of my loan, I’ll tell you everything.”

Looking at her as though seeing her for the first time, he realized that if Laney said she would tell him the truth eventually, she would.

From the beginning, he’d measured her against Pearl, all the while refusing to admit that Laney just might have a good reason for her behavior.

He remembered the silent desperation underlying her actions on that first night. Her despair had been real. Maybe he could help her with whatever had put the look of desperation in her eyes. Maybe by helping her he would find his own redemption.

*Maybe* this was his way back.

“All right, Laney. I won’t ask any more questions.” At her sigh of relief he added, “For now.”

Not in the least discouraged, she relaxed into her smile.

“So, you finally accept that I’m not a woman of questionable virtue?”

How could he believe anything else, when the evidence had been in front of him all along? “Yes.”

“And I’m not fired?”

“Not tonight.”

She touched his sleeve. “Thank you, Marc.”

He covered her hand with his. Overcome with the sudden urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her again, he blew out a painful rush of air and focused on the matter at hand.

“Ready to charm our guests?”

“It’s what I do best.”

## *Chapter Fifteen*



Over the course of the next week, Laney's days settled into a pleasant, if somewhat hectic routine. She worked at the orphanage all day, visited an increasingly ailing Sally in the late afternoon then worked her shift at the Hotel Dupree in the evening. Though on the verge of exhaustion, she'd never felt happier in her life. And she knew the source of her joy.

Marc Dupree.

No longer her enemy, she now saw him as a person, with worries and burdens and flaws just like her. Instead of finding fault with his imperfections, her admiration deepened.

She was in love. Or, if not, very close to getting there.

Smiling, she spread flour on the chopping board and pressed out more dough. The clock on the table told her she had two hours to finish with her morning chores before serving lunch to the children. No matter how hard she tried to concentrate on her long list of tasks, her mind kept wandering back to Marc.

She'd see him again soon. A rush of anticipation tingled along her scalp.

What had happened to her restraint, her need to guard her heart? A single thought of the handsome hotel owner and her stomach turned all shaky and quivery inside.

Sighing, she pressed a flour-tipped finger to her lips. Though he'd not kissed her again, there were times when Marc looked at her in a way that had her thinking of the future, of happy endings, of forever.

Laney looked forward to the day when there would be no more secrets between them. On countless occasions she'd opened her mouth to tell him the truth about Charity House, but each time something in her had halted her confession. Perhaps it was the habit of caution, or perhaps simple fear, but she could never quite find the words to tell him about the orphanage.

And Marc hadn't pressed.

If she told him the truth, would he finally trust her? A very selfish part of her wanted it to be that simple. But she'd learned her lesson well, thanks to Thurston P. Prescott III. The children needed her protection. Until she was certain of their safety, she had to maintain her silence.

Kneading the dough a bit harder than necessary, Laney sighed. Why couldn't she have met Marc under different circumstances? Despite her limited knowledge of relations between a man and a woman, she sensed her feelings for the man were special, different, *good*.

Laney wanted to throw caution to the wind. She wanted to trust in someone other than herself and a silent God who seemed too far away at the moment. She wanted to—

The back door burst open, jarring her out of her daydreams. "Miss Laney, come quick, Katherine just hit a home run."

Pure delight filled her. The very idea of prim and proper Katherine whacking a ball hard enough to cross over the backyard fence was quite a thought indeed. "Megan, are you certain of this?"

"Yes." She pointed to her left. "See for yourself."

Laney wiped her hands on her apron and glanced out the

window above the sink. Half the kids were jumping up and down, screaming and carrying on in childish enthusiasm. The other half looked positively bleak. They slapped leather gloves against their legs or scuffed toes in the grass. “Well, what do you know? She finally did it.”

Laney watched Katherine skip from one base to the next, taking her time, giggling all the way.

Megan tugged on Laney’s hand. “Hurry, Miss Laney. The Hawks need you, or else those awful Panthers will beat us again.”

Laney smiled to herself. Baseball. Who’d have thought one tiny suggestion to try out a new game she’d read about in the *Denver Chronicle* would end in such success? As a whole, they were a little fuzzy on the rules, but everyone had a good time anyway. And that’s what mattered most.

Megan tugged harder. “You can’t let us down when we need you to help us even the score.”

Laney wouldn’t dream of letting the children down. *Ever*. If that meant playing a game of baseball, or continuing her silence with Marc Dupree, then so be it.

“I’ll be right out. Just let me finish this pie and put it in the oven first.”

Megan looked out the window and gasped. “She’s almost all the way around the bases.” Hopping on one foot, the girl snorted in impatience. “Hurry up, will ya?”

Laney hurried.

Marc turned to Trey as they walked down Ogden Street, unsure what words to use to stop his friend from making a big mistake. He went for the direct approach. “You’ll send word if it turns out Ike and his gang are holed up in that shack outside Cripple Creek?”

Trey nodded, his gaze set on the mountains in the distance.



Drawing to a stop, Marc waited for his friend to halt as well. “You sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

Trey shook his head. “This is my quest.”

“I want justice served, too.”

“*Justice?*” Trey ground out his word. “After what Ike and his gang did to Laurette, I don’t want justice. I want vengeance.”

Sick of the same argument, Marc slammed his clenched fist into his palm. “It won’t bring her back.”

“Easy for you to say. You weren’t the one who got her killed.”

How could he convince his brother-in-law that Laurette’s death wasn’t his fault? “Trey, you couldn’t have known they would attack your ranch that day, that your foreman would turn out to be a coward, that Ike—”

“No, Marc. Don’t try to rewrite history. We both know I wasn’t there to protect my wife when she needed me.” He glared at an invisible point in the distance.

Marc didn’t like the unbending look he saw in his friend’s eyes. Trey was in his uncompromising mood. Someone was going to end up dead. And that someone could be Trey. “Maybe I should come with you, after all.”

“You’ll only get in the way.” Trey shook his head decisively, the gesture clearing his expression at last. “You have issues of your own to settle while I’m gone.”

“Nothing is as important as keeping you from getting yourself killed.”

“I’m not going to die. Ike, on the other hand...” He let his words trail off, the unspoken message clear. Trey planned to ensure the man who’d murdered his wife didn’t make it out of their skirmish alive.

Not liking what had become of his once peace-loving friend, Marc let out a slow breath. “Trey, you can’t let your anger rule your actions. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“I’ll be back in Denver once I’m through in Cripple Creek. I shouldn’t be gone more than a week. And when I return I want to hear how matters are progressing between you and Miss O’Connor.”

“Now isn’t the time to discuss Laney and me.”

“I disagree. It’s the exact time to talk about the two of you.” The bitterness in Trey’s eyes softened. “When this is over, I want a niece or nephew to spoil. You and that fiery lady of yours can give me that.”

Though his gut rippled in anticipation at his friend’s words, Marc knew Trey was trying to divert his attention from the more volatile subject. “Trey, you can’t win this fight, not with your current mind-set. Find peace in Laurette’s memory. Then go after Ike.”

“Oh, I’ll get my resolution. Once Ike is dead. Now that I know where he’s hiding, it’s time I settled the matter once and for all.”

A familiar wave of helplessness marched through Marc. “There’s nothing I can say to talk you out of this?”

“I’m leaving in an hour.” Trey’s gaze hardened again. “*Alone*. And you’re going to stay here and find out what Miss O’Connor is hiding. My guess, she’s going to surprise you, in a good way.”

Before Marc could respond, Trey clasped him on the shoulder. “Take care, my friend.”

Without another word he turned and charged down the street toward the jailhouse.

Knowing his words would fall on deaf ears, Marc didn’t bother calling after Trey. Perhaps his friend was right. Perhaps it was time for Trey to face Ike Hayes at last.

*Lord, keep him thinking clearly. Keep him safe.*

As far as prayers went, this one wasn’t very fancy. But Marc wasn’t used to talking to the Lord on a regular basis anymore. He should probably work on that.

For the first time in years the idea of relying on God seemed possible.

After a few moments of pausing over the thought, he continued on his own path toward the bank. He allowed his head to fill with the business that lay ahead of him. He liked taking care of his own financial affairs. Pearl had once convinced him to take on a manager, and he'd ended up broke.

Never again.

Marc joined in the crowd on the sidewalk, the hurried energy soothing away his frustration over Trey. He liked the personality of Denver at this time of day. The honest people milling about reminded him of better times, simpler times. Here, on Ogden Street, he saw real people with a penchant for hard work and honest living.

With the clean scent of pine riding along the breeze, Marc experienced pure contentment. He didn't particularly miss Louisiana or the South, but he missed his family and his life before poverty had stolen his youthful innocence. At heart, Marc was a man of strong family bonds, which was why Trey's destructive quest concerned him.

Was he any different from his brother-in-law? His need for wealth and drive for the material security had hardened his heart as sure as Trey's quest to avenge Laurette's death had hardened his.

They'd both turned away from God.

Marc couldn't say exactly when he'd lost a handle on his own perspective. Perhaps when he'd made the mistake of marrying Pearl. Her death had freed him legally, but he hadn't been the same since.

His frequent contacts with Laney O'Connor had begun to change him, though. And now he realized he wanted to change, wanted to become the man he was before poverty, before Pearl—before bitterness had spread through his soul. He wanted to turn back to God.

He prayed the road wouldn't be a long one.

So focused on his thoughts, he failed to watch his steps as well as he should. Swerving at the last moment, he barely avoided colliding into a small child slouching straight for him. Unfortunately, in his attempt to avoid crushing the boy, he ran into another, taller one.

The second kid tipped forward, fell hard into him then leaned back.

"Sorry, mister," he muttered, keeping his eyes cemented to Marc's waistcoat.

"My fault entirely." Marc locked his gaze on a bent head of black curls. A half-second later he felt the whisper of a touch against his vest.

"Sorry again, sir." The boy shrugged away. The quick flick of triumph in the kid's gaze was all it took for Marc to figure out what had just happened.

As the boy swaggered off, Marc reached out and grabbed him by the shirt collar. "Not so fast."

The kid pulled hard to free himself, but Marc had too firm a hold for an easy escape. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the smaller kid lingering just out of reach. He took a step closer, dragging his captive along with him.

Just as he was about to clutch the smaller kid, the bigger one yelled, "Run, Michael."

*Michael* dodged Marc's grasp and took off running toward the opposite end of the sidewalk. At least Marc had the presence of mind to keep his grip around the older of the two.

He waited a beat. When the kid simply blinked up at him, Marc broke the silence. "You have something of mine."

"No, sir. I...I don't have anything of yours." The boy's gaze darted across the street, searching, gauging.

Marc was in no mood to play games with a young thief a third his size. "Hand over my wallet."

"I don't know what you mean."

“Yes, you do.” Marc made sure the look on his face squelched any desire for the boy to continue denying his crime.

Shoulders slumped, he reluctantly pulled Marc’s wallet from his pocket. “I...I’m sorry, mister. I don’t ever do this sort of thing. Well, not anymore. It’s just, we need the money. And you looked like you have a lot, enough that you wouldn’t miss a few dollars.”

Although the kid’s gaze was never at rest, Marc caught a glimpse of the desperation in eyes.

Marc’s thoughts jumped immediately to Laney and the similar look she’d had in her eyes that first night in his hotel. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Johnny. Look, mister. We didn’t mean no harm.”

Marc followed Johnny’s glance across the street. “We? As in, you and Michael over there?”

“Yeah, so I took your wallet. I didn’t do it for myself. I did it for—” Johnny sighed “—oh, boy. I’m in big trouble now.” He gave Marc an imploring look. “Please let me go. I don’t want her to find out what I did.”

“Her? A woman told you to pick my pocket?”

“No. She didn’t tell me to steal, but she needs the money. For the orphanage. I heard her say so. She...”

Again, the kid stopped his explanations without giving a complete answer. Marc tried not to bark out his next question. “What orphanage?”

“Charity House. Where me and Michael live with the other kids.”

“So, the orphanage needs money?”

“Yeah, that’s what I just said.”

The swift bunching of muscles under his hand warned Marc what the kid planned. “I wouldn’t try it.”

Johnny tried it.

Marc tightened his grip, making it harder for the kid to move at all.

“You’re not going to let me go, are you?”

“Not until I get some answers.” He placed his free hand firmly on a bony shoulder. “Tell me more about this orphanage.”

Defeated, Johnny sighed in resignation. “A few weeks ago, I heard Miss Laney tell Katherine she had to get five hundred dollars or we’d lose Charity House.”

At the familiar name and the exact amount he’d counted in a certain woman’s reticule *a few weeks ago*, Marc’s gut twisted.

Everything else forgotten, he moved a step closer to the kid and pressed for more answers. “Did you just say... Laney?”

The kid kept talking, suddenly spewing words out as fast as they could come. “Yeah. She’s the reason me and Michael have a home now. She’s the nicest lady I know.” A dark sadness flicked in his gaze. “But she’s working too hard. Every night she goes somewhere and stays till real late. She’s promised me she’s not doing what Mama does for Miss Mattie, but I’m not so sure.”

Tears filled the boy’s eyes, but he kept them from spilling with a few hard blinks.

“This Laney you mentioned, she about so tall?” Marc placed his hand in the air near his chin. “Real pretty, with dark hair and light brown eyes?”

“You know her?”

An ugly thought rushed to the top of the others. “Did she teach you how to pick pockets?”

Johnny’s eyes got as big as billiard balls. “Oh, no. Hey, you’re not gonna tell her what I did? She’s going to be so disappointed in me.”

As she should be. Suddenly Marc’s head couldn’t quite

take in all the information Johnny had expelled fast enough. An orphanage. A large loan. A woman named Laney.

The facts aligned together, making perfect sense. And yet, no sense at all. If Laney needed money to help fund an orphanage why not just tell him that straight out? Why the secrets? Why the deception?

One sure way to find out. "Let's go."

"Where you taking me?"

"Home. It's time I saw this orphanage. And you're going to direct me there."

"I'm not taking you anywhere. Not till you promise not to tell Miss Laney what I did."

Marc wasn't about to bargain with a twelve-year-old pick-pocket scamp. When he caught sight of the other little boy peering around a building from across the street, he roped his fingers around Johnny's arm and started out. "We'll just follow your friend over there."

Johnny pulled back, dug in his heels using his full body weight for leverage. "You can't tell on Michael, either. He's already in trouble for running away last week."

That got Marc's attention. "Is it so bad at this orphanage that you have to run away?"

"Oh, no, he didn't mean to run away. Not really. He just kind of got lost, looking for his dad."

"Seems reasonable."

Johnny missed the sarcasm in Marc's tone. "Yeah, that's what I said. But Miss Laney made Michael promise not to ever come to this side of town again. She'll get all sad and gloomy if she finds out he came with me today. Then she'll give us both that 'I'm really disappointed in you' lecture."

"She will, huh?"

Johnny shuddered. "Oh, yeah."

Seemed like a pretty good punishment to Marc. After all, he'd known Laney long enough to understand how par-

ticularly moving her ‘I’m really disappointed in you’ speech could be. She’d given it to him twice in the past week.

“Please, mister, her lectures are the worst. I’d rather take a whipping. But she never whips me, says that wouldn’t teach me anything.”

Not quite sure why he did it, he started bargaining with the kid, after all. “Take me to the orphanage and I won’t tell on you or Michael.”

“Promise?”

“You have my word.” He’d let Johnny confess on his own.

As though sensing the direction of his thoughts, Johnny looked hard at him, searching his face with the shrewdness of a man twice his age. Marc held his glare, allowing the kid as much time as he needed. “All right, mister. You have a deal.”

Marc lifted his hand from Johnny’s shoulder, then thought better of it. “Before I completely release you, I must point out that I’m bigger and faster than you.”

A hint of disbelief whisked across Johnny’s features. “In other words, don’t try anything foolish?”

“Precisely.”

Marc let go of the boy. Prepared for a break, he caught Johnny in two strides.

Johnny slid him a sheepish grin. “Just checking.”

Marc slapped him on the back then looped his arm across his shoulders. “Wouldn’t have expected anything less.”

After a few blocks of silence, another question came to him, one he couldn’t hold back any longer. “This Laney you mentioned. What does she have to do with the orphanage?”

The boy’s grin widened. “She’s the owner.”



## Chapter Sixteen



After making a diving catch, Laney jumped to her feet with the ball securely in her glove. “Got it.”

The sound of her team’s happy cheers filled her ears as they changed sides for a new inning. She did a quick head count, coming up two short. “Anyone know where Michael and Johnny went?”

“I do.” Megan stepped forward. “They went to—”

One of the other kids elbowed her into silence, then finished the sentence for her. “We don’t know where they are.”

Megan’s scowl said otherwise.

Sighing, Laney let the matter drop. For now. If the boys didn’t show up soon she’d ask again, and again, until she received the proper answer. The truthful one.

Before she had time to worry any longer, Michael came screaming around the front of the house. When his gaze landed on Laney he skidded to a halt, and then walked more slowly, head hung low.

She waited until he stopped in front of her. “Want to tell me where you’ve been?”

Michael shook his head.

Laney knelt in front of him and ran a hand across his

forehead. "You might as well confess. I'll find out the truth eventually. I always do."

The boy shuddered. "I was with Johnny. We didn't mean to get into trouble."

"Oh, baby, what happened? Where's Johnny?" She looked over the child's head, peering toward the front gate. The *empty* front gate. "Isn't he with you?"

"I didn't want to leave him, honest. But he told me to run when he got caught."

"Caught?" *Oh, Lord, not again.* "Doing what?"

Michael clamped his lips shut and dug his foot in the grass.

Laney sighed. She'd get nothing more out of the boy.

The sound of voices in the distance had her glancing over Michael's head again. Her heart sank. "Oh, no."

Marc Dupree was striding straight toward her, tugging a very reluctant Johnny along with him.

Laney's first instinct was to pretend she knew neither man nor boy. But Marc's steady gaze told her the secrets between them had come to an end.

So be it.

Dreading the coming confrontation, she rose to her full height. "Go on, Michael, go play with the others."

She sent him off with a tiny shove on his back then waved her hand in a small circle, motioning for Katherine to continue the game without her.

Katherine looked at her with a questioning expression. Laney cocked her head in the direction of Marc and Johnny. Katherine's eyes widened but then she got straight down to business. "All right, everyone. Let's play ball."

Once the game began again, Laney trudged across the yard with leaden feet. The moment she opened the gate Johnny burst into a run and launched himself into her arms.

"Please don't be mad at me, Miss Laney. I was only trying to help." Tears trickled down his cheeks.

Her breath hitched at the sight of the boy's obvious despair. She couldn't remember Johnny ever crying, not even the night she'd rescued him from jail.

Putting Marc Dupree out of her mind for a moment, Laney concentrated on calming Johnny. She held him tightly against her and patted his back. "I've never seen you this upset. What's happened?"

A strangled sob was his only answer.

She pulled away and bent down, searching his face. "Are you hurt?"

A curt, masculine snort lowered over her. "He's not hurt."

Laney snapped her gaze up. "What did you do to him?"

"I'll let him tell you the story."

She reached behind her and pried the boy's hands from her waist. "Johnny?"

"I...I..." He wailed and threw himself back into her arms. "I stole this man's wallet."

Of all the scenarios she'd expected, this was the one she'd dreaded most. "Oh, Johnny. We talked about this."

"I know. Miss Laney, I'm sorry. Please, don't give me *the lecture*."

Her heart thumped in her chest, a deep sense of defeat magnifying all her other emotion. In the past months she'd tried to teach Johnny right from wrong, tried to help him understand that stealing was never the answer.

Clearly, she'd failed. "I don't understand why you did this."

She'd hoped to keep the hurt out of her voice, but at the sight of the boy's grimace she knew she hadn't.

"I did it for Charity House." His hiccupping sigh sent guilt rushing through her. "You told Katherine we were in trouble."

"You—" *oh, Lord, no, please no* "—heard us talking?"

"I couldn't sleep the other night so I went to the kitchen for a snack. You and Katherine were already there. I didn't mean to listen in but I couldn't help it."

“Oh, Johnny, I’m so sorry.” She’d never guessed one of the children would overhear her confessing her worries to Katherine.

“I heard you say we might lose Charity House.” The boy choked on a sob. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You needn’t fret over money. That’s my job.”

Johnny didn’t seem to hear her. “But you have to go to work every night, like mama.”

“I’m not working in a brothel. I promise.”

“Then why do you look so tired all the time?”

“Listen to me.” She pulled him back into her embrace and pressed a kiss on the top of his head. “You don’t have to worry about money or anything else while you’re living here at Charity House. It’s my job to bear the burden of responsibility, not yours.”

Johnny shook his head as though he didn’t understand what she was saying.

Laney tried to explain. “It’s really simple. All you have to do is be a kid, nothing else. Just a kid.”

When he still looked confused, Laney realized the boy didn’t know how to be *just a kid*. The realization broke her heart. Not knowing what else to say, she glanced up at Marc.

The look of encouragement in his gaze gave her the courage to add, “I’m going to get the money to save Charity House.” It was a promise she intended to keep. “In fact, I’m nearly there. Now, no more worrying for you. Go join the game and have fun. You can take my place on Megan’s team.”

Johnny stuck his bony chest out. “I’ll hit a home run.”

“I like that idea.”

With the resiliency of youth, the boy swiped a hand across his face and took off toward the backyard.

Heart in her throat, Laney watched Johnny run to a group of boys and slapped the closest one on the back in greeting.

“You going to keep pretending I’m not here?”

She kept her eyes on Johnny. "The idea occurred to me."

"You're not afraid to look at me, are you?"

"Not at all." She threw her shoulders back, but still didn't turn to face him. She'd told Johnny she'd handle matters. Now she had to make good on that promise.

But not here.

"It might be best if we went inside for our conversation." She drew in a calming breath. "I don't want the children to overhear us."

"No, we wouldn't want that. By all means, Laney, lead the way."

Marc didn't need to look into Laney's eyes to know she was worried. Why was she acting as if he was the one in the wrong? Marc hadn't lied and deceived and evaded throughout their short acquaintance. Nor had he tried to pick anyone's pocket.

"I'm curious to see the inside of your home," he said with a hint of irritation as he followed her across the large expanse of perfectly manicured lawn. "The one you took out a loan with Prescott to pay for."

She spun around then, a swathe of outrage turning her eyes a golden, liquid brown.

"Am I wrong?"

"No. The loan was for Charity House." Without explaining further, she turned back around and continued toward the row of stairs leading to the front door.

Glancing around, Marc noted the immaculate lawn, the flowers and shrubs planted in tidy rows. Everywhere he looked he saw order and charm, comfort and beauty. He hadn't seen this much concentration to detail in a long time, maybe never, except in his hotel, of course.

Apparently, he and Laney had a lot more in common than he'd originally thought.

Why didn't that make him feel better?

Crossing the house's threshold, the smells of home greeted him. The tangy odor of soot from the fireplace mingled with the lemon wax from the floors and furniture. The lingering aroma of fresh-baked pies transported him back in time to his childhood. For a brief moment, Marc experienced a peace that transcended all understanding.

The sensation unnerved him.

"This doesn't look like an orphanage to me."

"That's the general idea." Still not looking at him, she directed him into a parlor.

Again, he was met by a combination of luxury and warmth all around. "*Definitely* not a typical orphanage."

"Charity House isn't an orphanage. It's a place where prostitutes and women of questionable virtue can leave their precious children because they can't care for them in the brothels, saloons or wherever they choose to conduct their business."

She connected her gaze with his. The sadness in her eyes captured a part of him long dead. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her he wasn't here to hurt her or the children. No, he wouldn't harm her. He did, however, want answers.

In the silence hanging between them, Marc took his time studying her face, enjoying her beauty as he hadn't allowed himself to do since discovering her in Mattie's brothel. He'd been afraid to look at her like this, afraid he'd want her in his life, permanently, even knowing she'd deceived him on purpose.

Now he knew why. Except, he didn't. Why had she withheld the truth from him?

"Help me to understand why you kept your orphanage a secret from me."

She linked her gaze with his, holding him in place with the intensity of her stare. "The children who live here aren't

typical orphans. In fact, the majority aren't orphans at all. Most of their mothers live on The Row."

Marc took her hand in his, squeezed gently, let go. "Go on."

"There's not much more to tell. Here at Charity House we turn no child away. My goal is to offer boys and girls a chance to break the cycle of sin so rampant in their parents' lives. I try to give them a solid, Christian upbringing. No condemnation. No judgment. Just love and unconditional acceptance."

A noble pursuit, to be sure, but she was leaving something out, something important. "How do you fund this place?"

"The children's mothers pay a monthly boarding fee, when they can. Some of the fathers help out as well, but not many." She dropped her gaze to the floor and sighed. "Most men deny responsibility when a woman who isn't his wife finds herself in trouble."

As he silently studied Laney's bent head, Marc wondered about her father, no doubt a member of the group of men she'd mentioned. Marc saw the true beauty in her now. The kind that came from a heart that sacrificed everything for children no one else wanted, not even their own parents. Children like she had once been, scared and alone.

When she looked up again, he noticed the dark circles and lines of exhaustion dancing across her face. Her schedule had to be grueling, working here during the day and at his hotel at night.

Marc understood a lot about Laney now, and admired her all the more.

But she hadn't shared any of this information with him willingly. Had it not been for Johnny's fast fingers, Marc might never have found out about Charity House. He had to remember that, or else he might find himself doing something foolish. Like falling in love with Laney O'Connor.

A woman who hadn't trusted him enough to share the

most important part of her life with him—her home, and the children she cared for.

“I take it the loan you have with Prescott was for this place.”

“Renovations were needed.”

Marc looked around him, drank in the luxury. Moving through the area he touched a vase, a crystal ornament, a porcelain pitcher. “Don’t you think you overreached necessity a little?”

“Perhaps.” She looked around, sighed. “But most of this came with the house. Understand, Marc, this is the only home most of these children have ever known. I want to keep it intact, down to every trinket. I want to provide a sense of permanency that never changes, no matter what comes at us from the outside world.”

*That was her reasoning for the fancy furnishings?*

“What if you fail to raise the rest of the money for your loan with Prescott?” He couldn’t keep all the anger out of his voice. “What happens then?”

“I won’t fail.”

How could she possibly know that? “Laney, you aren’t thinking about the long-term consequences. So you pay off your loan, *this time*, what happens if you get strapped for money again? Sell the furniture, the trinkets?”

“If I have to, then yes.”

He looked around him again, gauged the value of the furniture and trinkets, found himself becoming the voice of reason. “A house this size, with so many mouths to feed, takes more money than these furnishings would bring in, a lot more.”

“You make it sound as if I’m fighting a losing battle.”

“Aren’t you?” She’d already admitted funds didn’t come in on a regular basis. “You still didn’t answer my question. What happens if your money runs out again?”



“Then I find another way to stay afloat.”

She wasn't thinking like a businesswoman. Marc had to make her see beyond the moment, beyond the now. “I don't doubt your resolve, or your abilities, but what if something happens to you, Laney? What then?”

Hands shaking, she smoothed a strand of hair off her face. “The children know how to survive on their own.”

“By picking pockets?”

Her shoulders flinched. “I didn't tell Johnny to go out and pick pockets.”

“Maybe not. But haven't you taught him that the end justifies the means? That as long as everything turns out all right, then do whatever it takes to survive?”

She threw her hands in the air and twirled to face him. “You're intentionally misunderstanding.”

“Like it or not, I have a stake in this orphanage now.”

“You have no say here, you are only my employer.”

That hurt, but not enough to let her push him away. She was scared, desperate. In that, at least, he could offer her some relief. “Let me pay off your loan with Prescott.”

“I... *No.*” Her expression closed. “I can't accept your money.”

“Why not?”

“I'm trying to teach the children the importance of facing the consequences of their actions, by doing so myself.”

“The pace is killing you.”

“I'm fine.” The fatigue in her eyes told a different story.

“No, you're not. Johnny saw your exhaustion, and it terrified him enough to go out and steal from a stranger. You're fortunate that stranger was me.”

The look she gave him said she wasn't so sure.

He tried a different approach. “You're pushing yourself too hard trying to prove you can take care of everything on your own.”

“It’s the only way I know how to live.”

“What if you aren’t alone anymore? What if I’m here now? Please, let me help you.”

“If I accept money from you, then all I’m teaching the children is how to take charity.” Tears welled in her eyes. “That’s not a lesson I want them to learn.”

Marc crossed the divide between them. He linked his fingers with hers and squeezed gently, as though he could will her to comprehend what he was trying to do for her, and maybe for himself, too.

“Taking my money could also teach the children how to accept a gift that’s freely given, with no hidden agenda, no expectations.”

“Nothing is free in this world.”

“God’s grace is free.”

She yanked her hand out of his. “That’s not the same thing.”

“It’s *exactly* the same.” And in that moment, Marc accepted the true meaning of grace, finally understood the need to give a gift to someone who hadn’t asked for anything in return.

“Let me pay off the rest of your loan.”

“I...can’t, Marc.”

Considering what to say next, what to *do* next, he paused. Maybe he should allow her to continue working for him to earn the money she needed. What better way to protect her from men like Prescott and to make sure she didn’t exhaust herself beyond reason?

Marc could always fiddle with the numbers. Maybe give Laney a bigger percentage of her earnings sooner than planned.

“All right. If you’re determined to do this on your own, I won’t stand in your way.”

Tired, dull brown eyes rose to meet his. "I have to finish what I started."

And now...so did he. "Answer me this, Laney, why didn't you tell me you needed Judge Greene's money for Charity House?"

In answer, she grabbed onto his sleeve, pulled him toward a window overlooking the yard where the children played. "Look at them."

He did. He saw youthful energy and happiness. The things this woman had never had as a child. She'd been too busy keeping time and collecting money for her mother.

Was it any wonder she didn't trust him, or any man for that matter?

Well, one day she *would* trust him. Marc would make sure of it.

He looked at her again, caught her smiling indulgently at the children outside. The puzzle pieces fell neatly into place. "You didn't tell me why Greene gave you the money because you were protecting the children, not him."

"Exactly." In a halting tone, she told him the full story behind her loan with Prescott, including the banker's attempt to shut the doors of Charity House by demanding the bulk of his money six months early.

"So you see," she said, taking an unsteady breath. "I had to take Judge Greene's money, money he owed for one of those children out there." She turned to face him. "The one you escorted home this morning. I'm trusting you to keep this secret for that boy's sake, not mine."

"I'm not like the other men you've come across in your life, Laney. I won't hurt you, or the children and certainly not Johnny."

She nodded. "I realize that now, but when we first met I couldn't take that chance. There was too much at stake."

"I understand." And he did.

Unable to stop himself, Marc pulled Laney to him. He brushed his lips along the slope of her cheek. But the sound of footsteps tripping down the hall kept him from touching his mouth to hers.

He let his hands drop to his side and stepped away from her. "I'll see you at the hotel later tonight."

"I'll be there."

## *Chapter Seventeen*



Marc stood on the fringes of the nightly activity of his hotel, watching Laney work the front desk with her usual poise and efficiency. In a few short weeks she'd become his best clerk, managing to charm his guests with a ready smile and willingness to address their every concern.

For two days now Marc had avoided her, speaking to her only when necessary. He'd needed the time to sort through his thoughts, to mull over the secrets he'd discovered about her orphanage.

Charity House. Had a nice ring to it.

Though he didn't fully approve, Marc understood why she'd gone to Prescott for a loan all those months ago. He hated that she wouldn't accept his help with her debt to the shifty banker. But he admired her determination to accept the consequences of her actions.

Narrowing his eyes, he gauged the visible signs of fatigue he could see even from this distance. Exhaustion was etched in her features, weariness circled her eyes. No longer able to deny the need to alleviate her suffering, he made his way to the front desk.

Although it wasn't yet nine in the evening, the night was long from over for Laney. A spasm of guilt hiked across his

conscience. Instead of worrying about his own need to understand her actions, he should have tried harder to get her to take his money, thereby giving her relief from the grueling schedule she forced upon herself.

Stepping behind her, he whispered into her ear. “When you get a moment come and talk to me. I’ll be waiting outside the restaurant.”

She nodded but kept her focus on the guest in front of her. Treading toward the restaurant, Marc made idle conversation along the way. When Laney eventually joined him, he knew what to say to her. “I have a gift for the children.”

“A...gift?” His words seemed to surprise her. “What are you up to now?”

“Who says I’m up to anything? Honestly, Laney, you’re so suspicious.”

“You’ve practically ignored me for two days and suddenly you’re generosity itself. Why the sudden change of heart?”

He liked the miffed look playing across her features, enough to quit bantering with her. “Nothing to upset yourself over. And you can feel free to say no, but one of our guests from South America wanted to show me his gratitude for his exceptional stay—his words, not mine—by giving me a bushel of fruit.”

“Fruit?”

At her confused expression he laughed softly, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. “That’s right. *Fresh* fruit, the kind we don’t usually find in Colorado. Oranges, grapefruits, tangerines.”

She considered him for a moment, tucked her arms around her waist and sighed. “The children would love that. Thank you, Marc.”

“You’re accepting my gift?” The significance was not lost on him. “No questions asked?”

“No questions asked.” Her smile nearly blinded him.

Although, this wasn't the same as her accepting his money, it was a start. And as he stared into her beautiful face he realized he'd do anything to see that smile of hers, directed at him, only him, always.

"Let me retrieve the fruit, and then I'll escort you home."

Her smile disappeared. "My shift is only half over."

"I'm releasing you early."

"I thought we talked about this already. I need to work, Marc. I need the money, I—"

"I'll still pay you for tonight."

"But—"

"Don't get too excited. I'll expect you to work your entire shift tomorrow. Now, come." Cutting off the rest of her arguments, he looped her arm in the crook of his. "You can wait in my office while I fetch the fruit."

That way she wouldn't get caught up helping another guest. *Brilliant, Dupree.*

Eventually, she nodded at him. "All right, Marc. I'm tired enough to let you send me home early."

"I like you in this accommodating mood."

"Don't get used to it." She tried to look fierce as she spoke, but he was on to her now. Laney O'Connor was a woman with a large heart, tender affection and deep convictions.

The kind that were running her into the ground.

Marc wanted to lighten her burden a little, by offering a moment of respite and a special treat for her children. It wasn't personal. He'd do the same for any employee.

*Right, Dupree, keep telling yourself that.*

Before Laney could protest, or change her mind, Marc steered her toward his office.

With a flick of his wrist he opened the door then stepped aside to let her pass.

The soothing comfort hit her like a punch. She breathed

in deeply and nearly stumbled over her own two feet. Too many sights washed into too many smells, making her fully aware of a man she already thought about more often than she should.

Holding back a sigh, she headed toward one of the wing-backed chairs facing his desk with the idea of resting her tired feet while he retrieved the fruit.

“Oh, no, not there.” Marc placed his palms the back of her shoulders and urged her toward the sofa instead of the chair. “Sit here, where you’ll have more room to stretch out.”

She stared longingly at the piece of furniture, tempted by the mounds of soft, plush fabric and fluffy throw pillows.

“Go on, Laney, stretch out your legs while I’m gone. I might be a while.”

She spun around to ask him what he meant by *a while* but he’d already slipped out of the room.

After a moment of staring at the closed door, exhaustion took hold. She sank onto the sofa. Bouncing a few times, she resisted the urge to fall back and sleep through the next eternity.

Promising her tired body rest—when she made it home and all the chores were complete—she hopped up and paced through the room. Eyeing the armoire, she smiled broadly, remembering the first time Marc had shut her in this room. They’d come so far since then. She no longer had any desire to escape, out the window or by any other means.

In the mood to reminisce, she thought about opening the large cabinet, to see if Marc still had his clothes neatly arranged by color and style, but the sofa beckoned. She drifted across the floor and plopped down again. With Marc’s masculine scent lingering in the air, she leaned her head back and sighed deeply.

Now, this was one seriously comfortable piece of furniture.



\* \* \*

Determined not to wake her just yet, Marc stood on the threshold of his office, watching Laney sleep. Cuddled on the sofa, her dress a mountain of fabric around her, she looked peaceful for the first time he'd known her.

*At last*, he thought. She was getting the rest she needed. Maybe he should let her sleep a bit longer. But he'd already been here and gone two other times and he knew her well enough to know she wouldn't appreciate being left to sleep too long.

The woman was many things, strong, resourceful, stubborn. But she was no lady of leisure. Pity that. Marc could get used to spoiling her.

Decision made, he entered the room. Turning, he clicked the door closed and pressed his forehead against the wood. "Just wake her up, Dupree, then quickly escort her home like you promised," he whispered to himself.

Fine advice, for a man of iron will. He stepped toward her sleeping form. Then stepped back. Maybe he should go get Rose and have her wake Laney.

At least she snored. Unfortunately, instead of annoying him, the delicate, feminine sound left him charmed beyond reason.

The woman slept with as much abandon as she went through her waking life. Laney O'Connor had the grit and determination of eight sailors fighting a hurricane in a two-man boat.

*She's just a woman*, he told himself. *One who put the lives of innocent children ahead of her own.*

Even before he'd known about the orphanage, Marc had already concluded that Laney was unlike anyone he'd ever known.

And now, he let the truth take hold.

He loved her humor, her courage, her willingness to accept her mistakes and see them through.

He loved...her.

He *loved* Laney O'Connor.

He wanted to spend his life with her, to stand by her side, through the good times and the bad, to protect her and keep the world from hurting her any further.

But he also wanted to laugh with her, fight with her, and let her smooth his cares away while he conquered hers.

He reached out and touched her cheek, wondering when he'd managed to cross the room.

She sighed contentedly.

"Laney, honey. It's time to wake up. We need to get you home." Before he did something they'd both regret.

Another sigh. A slow, secretive smile.

He swallowed. "Laney?"

"Mmm."

"Come on, honey." He rubbed his hand down her arm. "Wake up."

She snorted—she actually snorted—then mumbled something in response. It sounded like she said "sleepy," but he couldn't quite make out the word.

Right. That was one exhausted woman.

And Marc's heart was melting by the second. "You're not making this easy on me," he muttered through his very tight jaw. "*Laney.*"

Her lids slowly opened, fluttered shut, then snapped back open.

"Hello," he said, grinning at her like a besotted fool.

She rubbed a fist against her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Time to get you home."

As if only just realizing where she was, she shot off the sofa and looked frantically around her. "How...how long did I sleep?"

“Two hours.”

“Oh, I...” She glared at him. “Why didn’t you wake me earlier?”

“You looked so peaceful. I didn’t have the heart.”

Her hand went to her hair. “I must look a fright.”

Tenderness swept through him. “You look beautiful. Now, come.” He reached out his hand. “Let me walk you home.”

She hesitated, staring at his hand for an endless moment. After a quick intake of air, she placed her palm against his. “Thank you, yes, I’d like that.”

*Finally.* She was beginning to trust him.

The next morning, Laney struggled to keep her emotions even, but her growing feelings for Marc nearly overwhelmed her.

In a flurry of activity, she completed her share of the household chores earlier than usual and found herself with too much free time to think. Needing something to do with her hands—and her mind—she went to the kitchen and busied herself with making biscuits.

Once the preparations were complete, she grabbed a fistful of flour and flung it onto the dough waiting to be spread out. The air clouded with white powder, making her eyes water and setting her lungs coughing themselves clear.

She punched the dough with a fist. “Not only did I fall asleep in Marc’s office last night, now I’m going to choke myself to death,” she said with a groan.

Marc. Oh...Marc.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the way he’d looked at her when he’d said good-night to her at the front gate. Adoringly. Lovingly. Though there had been no actual declarations, no promises made, she knew he cared for her deeply. Perhaps even loved her. Her heart told her to trust him.

Trust. It always came back to that.

Could she let Marc into her heart, into the world she'd created for herself and the children? She'd have to battle a lifetime habit of relying only on herself. A habit that would be difficult to break, no matter how much she cared for the man.

So intent on ridding herself of her troubling thoughts, she didn't hear Katherine approach. "You're going to beat that dough to death."

Jumping, Laney wiped her forehead on her sleeve then started back to pounding. "The idea has merits."

Katherine poured a glass of water and offered it to her. Laney shook her head. "No, thank you."

"You want to talk about whatever's troubling you?"

Laney's hands stilled. "Who says there's anything troubling me?"

Pointing, Katherine indicated the mutilated dough. "Just a hunch. Here." She set down the glass of water and handed Laney a towel. "Wipe your hands and come sit with me on the porch."

"I have biscuits to make."

Fingers wrapped around her wrist, and squeezed gently. "Leave it for now."

Biting back a sigh, Laney snatched the towel with exasperation. "Oh, all right."

She followed Katherine on to the front porch. Settling herself in one of the rockers, she looked out at the Rocky Mountains, seeing them but not really seeing them. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Katherine perched on the edge of the railing and smiled down at her. "No?"

"Well, yes, I do. I just don't want it to be like this." She spread her palms across her skirt. "It's not supposed to be so complicated."

"It?"

Laney dashed a glance behind her, ensuring they were alone. "Falling in love."

"Ah. Does Mr. Dupree know how you feel?"

"Who says I'm talking about Marc?"

Katherine waved her hand in the air. "You've been in love with him since the first night you two met. So, have you told him?"

"No."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I...don't know." For the first time in her life, Laney couldn't handle a situation alone. And the only person who could help her, the person who could give her the answers she needed, was Marc, the very person who could cause her the most pain.

Closing her eyes, she fought off a wave of trepidation. "What am I going to do?"

A minor commotion at the gate had Katherine rising to her feet. "Looks like you get to find out."

The very object of their discussion called out a greeting as he released the latch and entered the front yard. Looking carefree and happy, Marc set a large wooden crate down by his feet. "Anybody want some fruit?"

Laney's eyes connected with his. All the emotion of the night before came rushing back. Right then, right there, she gave up the fight, gave up pretending this man wasn't important to her. That he didn't hold her heart in his hands.

"Laney? Are you all right?"

"I forgot about the fruit." Forcing a delighted smile on her face, she climbed hastily to her feet.

Marc started forward, a jaunty gleam in his eyes. "Guess you had too much on your mind last night. My wit and stellar conversational skills made you scattered. I do that to women."

She took to the game as though the banter could make

her forget the other, more dangerous emotions brewing just below the surface. “Oh, sure. As far as you know.”

He drew up next to her. “Good morning, Laney.”

“Good morning, Marc.”

His eyes swam with all the words she needed to hear but he had yet to say to her.

A crash came from somewhere inside the house.

They jumped apart in tandem. Marc was the first to recover. Amusement dancing in his eyes, he pointed to the crate at his feet. “Where should I put this?”

Peering inside the box, she let out a happy laugh. He’d really brought fresh fruit for the children. She couldn’t think of a better treat or, with money tight right now, a more thoughtful gift.

“Katherine, look what Marc Dupree brought us.”

## Chapter Eighteen



After introducing Marc to Mrs. Smythe, their sometimes housekeeper, Laney left the fruit in her care then directed Marc on to the porch.

She clasped her hand over his and looked into his eyes. “The children are in for a real treat tonight at supper. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He angled his head, studied her face a moment, then frowned. “You still look tired.”

“I am, a bit. But not as much as yesterday. My unexpected nap and early night helped.”

“I’m glad.”

Silence fell over them. As the moment turned into two, and then three, they continued to stare at one another. So much had been left unsaid between them last night. And yet, now that the time had come, Laney couldn’t find the words to start the conversation that would be the beginning of their future.

She wanted to be a part of Marc’s life, and he a part of hers, but she didn’t know what that meant. Or how her days would change with him in them.

She’d always been on her own. She only knew how to rely on herself and her limited resources. With sheer grit and de-

termination, she'd carved out a place for her and the children in a world that didn't want to make room for them.

Could she change so drastically? Could she open her heart and life to a man? To *this* man?

Did she dare take that leap of faith?

*Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

So easy to recite in her mind. So hard to put into practice.

As if understanding her worries, Marc's features turned compassionate, intense. "There's so much I want to say to you I don't know where to begin."

He'd spoken her thoughts aloud. Were they that connected? Yes. Yes, they were. "I know exactly what you mean."

He blew out a puff of air. "I'm not a man of pretty words."

"I don't need pretty words."

"Yes, you do. And I need to say them." In a single swoop he crushed her against his chest. "Maybe I should start with an apology."

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she rested her cheek on his shoulder. "You've already apologized."

"It's not enough. It'll never be enough. Not after the way I treated you the first time we met and the next and then the next."

He wasn't the only one with regrets. "I guess we both have some things to atone for."

Little worried lines appeared between his sharply arched brows. "Is it too late, then?"

"I don't know. But I'm willing to find out."

"Me, too." His mood turned even more serious. "Come back to the hotel with me. I want to be alone with you, to say the words you deserve to hear without anyone overhearing or misinterpreting."

"I'd like that. Just let me make sure everything is taken



care of here and retrieve my uniform for later.” She tossed him a smile over her shoulder. “I won’t be long.”

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Less than an hour later, Laney followed Marc into his office. Emotion clogged her ability to speak as he nudged her forward then struck the lock in place.

She turned to face him.

A slow smile eased onto his lips. “You look a little shaky.”

“I am.”

His eyes proclaimed his love as he opened his arms wide. “Come here.”

Without hesitation, she wrapped herself in his embrace. As she looked into his gaze, her stomach knotted. “Oh, Marc.”

He kissed her then. But after only a moment, he pulled back and put distance between them. “What you do to me, Laney.”

“I think it’s what we do to each other that could prove a problem.”

She saw the struggle in his gaze, wondered at it. “You look so serious.”

He grasped her shoulders and placed her at arm’s length. “I’m trying to tell you how I feel.”

She smiled. “Yes?”

“Stop looking at me like that.” He practically growled the words.

“Well, that’s a nice, snarly declaration.” She planted her hands on her hips. “You really weren’t kidding when you said you weren’t a man of pretty words. You’re far more likeable when you aren’t talking.”

His smile turned deliciously roguish. “Well then, no more talking.”

He stepped toward her.

She edged slightly out of reach.

“Now you’re just being difficult,” he said.

“Careful, you silver-tongued brute, my heart can’t take much more of this tender affection from you.”

He laughed, reached for her again but she shifted to the left this time.

He tried again. Missed again. Growled. “Would you let me catch you?”

She edged closer, then dodged to her right.

“Laney, Laney.” He threw his head back and laughed. “How I love you.”

The air hissed out of her lungs in a single whoosh. “What did you just say?”

“I. Love. You.” He crooked his finger. “If you come over here I’ll say it again, maybe put a little more feeling into it.”

She walked straight into his embrace and smiled up at him. “I love you, too. You big brute.”

The affectionate, lopsided grin on his face said more than words. She’d been right. He was far more likable when he wasn’t talking.

Hours later, her shift only half over, Laney peeked inside Marc’s office. “Hank told me you wanted to see me.”

He swiveled in his chair and smiled into her sparkling eyes, dazzled all over again. Would he ever get tired of looking at her? “You ready for me to take you home?”

She aimed a sleepy grin at him. “More than ready, but I still have another hour left on my shift.”

“I’d rather take you home now.”

“No, Marc. *No*. I still have a debt to pay, and time is running out.”

He’d like to wrap his hands around Prescott’s throat. In fact, the idea had such merit he decided to make a trip to the bank in the morning. In the meantime... “I could always give you an advance on your wages.”

“No.”

Why had he expected a different answer? “The independent woman to the end.”

She glided over to him. “You either take me as I am or not at all.”

Marc rose and pulled her into his arms. “Are those my only choices?”

“I wish I could think of something insulting to say to you, but I’m too happy to work up enough lather.”

“And here I was looking forward to that sharp tongue of yours.” He kissed her on the nose, then buried his face in her hair. “Did I ever tell you I love the smell of you?”

“No.”

“How about the sound of your voice?”

She laughed. “Not that either.”

He kissed her jaw.

She sighed. “Marc?”

He wrapped a piece of her hair around his finger. “Hmm?”

“I have to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you...do you think I’m like my mother?” she blurted out.

Marc stilled. Something in Laney’s tone alerted him that she was upset, worried. He shook his head, trying to remember what they’d been talking about, but he couldn’t. Giving up, he let go of her hair and stepped back. “What did you just ask me?”

“Do you think I’m like my mother?” With each clipped word, her jaw clenched tighter.

Confusion knit his eyebrows together. “Why would I think that? I never knew your mother.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Marc threaded his fingers through his hair. Slowly, understanding dawned. The fear laced inside her question came straight from her childhood.

How could he have been so thickheaded? So intent on kissing her, he'd completely forgotten where she came from, and the fears that accompanied a past such as hers.

He concentrated on alleviating her worries with the truth. "Laney, honey, I don't think you're like your mother."

She lowered her lashes, a tremble slicing through her calm. "But we've kissed. A lot."

"Yes, that's right. And there will be many more times to come, if I have my say."

Her gaze shot up, undisguised panic pouring into her eyes. "You, you don't think I plan to keep kissing you, that is, I don't think I can keep—not that I wouldn't want to—but... We, you, me. Oh, Lord, I'm really spoiling this, aren't I?"

Marc smiled, his heart filling with affection for her.

He took her hands in his, determined to pledge his life to her. "Ah, honey, stop worrying. I love you. Not your mother, or where you came from, but *you*."

She took a shaky breath. "You mean my pedigree, or lack thereof, doesn't matter to you?"

"Of course not." So that's what was bothering her. "Let me tell you a little story and then maybe you'll understand."

He tucked her into a chair and told her about his life in Louisiana after the war, the burning of his home, the scrimping for food, the poverty. Even the humiliation.

Her eyes widened with each portion of his tale. When he finished, she rushed to him, pulling him into her embrace.

"I didn't know, Marc. You've always seemed to leak wealth, straight out of your fancy, expensive clothes. You're so confident, so...*rich*." She shook her head, as though still unable to grasp the details of his story. "And all this time you were warring with those kinds of memories."

He rested in the circle of her arms, stroking her hair as she leaned her head against his shoulder. For a moment, he wasn't sure who was comforting whom.

"I've worked hard to regain the wealth that was taken from me." He let out a short laugh. "Funny, isn't it? You want nothing of the life you led as a child, and I want every bit of mine back."

"Marc," she paused, thought for a moment. "I'm not sure how to say this so I'm just going to say it. The pursuit of money and worldly things can be dangerous to your soul."

He didn't argue. He wasn't that much of a hypocrite. "Perhaps you're right, in some circumstances. But money can also serve the greater good, such as, oh say, starting orphanages or paying off loans called in too soon."

"I didn't say money wasn't important." She cupped her hands along his face. "But why accumulate wealth if all you plan to do with it is hoard it away, or use it only for yourself?"

"You sound like Trey."

Her lips spread into a self-deprecating grin. "I suddenly like that man."

"Laney, I told you the story of my past so you would understand. I'll never be poor again."

As he said the words he realized how shallow they sounded, how self-centered.

Needing a moment to think, he pulled out of her embrace and sat in his chair. He rubbed his palms against his thighs, and shuddered. His preconceived notions of who he was and what he wanted out life were tumbling around him at rapid speed.

All this time, he'd thought he'd be less of a man if he didn't have the wealth and success taken from him all those years ago. But this woman, as she stood calmly staring at him, gave him a glimpse of something deeper than wealth. Something stronger and longer lasting.

Something eternal.

"You're right."

"I know." She softened her words by smiling very patiently

at him, as if he were one of her children who'd just learned a very important lesson the hard way.

She was good for him, made him want to be a better man. Was it any wonder he loved her?

Smiling, he rose and went to her. But just as he pulled her into his arms a loud knock on the door jolted him back a step.

Without waiting for an answer, Hank shoved inside the office. The sound of chaos and high-pitched shrieking trailed behind him.

“Hank? What’s wrong?”

“Mr. Dupree, you need to come quick. We...*you*...have a problem.” Hank’s gaze darted to Laney, broke back to Marc just as quickly. “A real bad one.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Hurry, boss.”

Marc tossed Laney an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, honey. I have to take care of this.”

She touched his arm. “Go on.”

A jolt of foreboding had him clutching her to him. “Wait for me.”

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

The same words he’d said to her just this morning at her home. Holding her tightly against him a moment longer, Marc couldn’t shake the feeling of loss stealing his breath, as though he’d never again enjoy this easy, open affection with her after tonight.

He buried his face in her hair, breathed in deeply. “I’ll be right back.”

Striding into the hotel lobby, the heightened level of noise hit him like a physical blow. His hotel had never seen such chaos. And all from the ranting of a small, emaciated blonde woman throwing anything she could get her hands on.

With her back to him, Marc couldn’t see her face but her

shrieking was impossible to ignore. A part of him recognized the voice, another part refused to accept what he heard.

He shot Hank a swift glance. Even as the man's pinched expression warned Marc what he would see once the woman turned around, he denied the truth in his mind.

The slurred words of the small human hurricane spoke of too much drink or too much laudanum, or perhaps both.

"Where's my husband?" the woman demanded, picking up a handful of theater flyers and flinging them in her rage. "I know he's here."

Hank circled to the front of the woman while Marc moved in from behind, his gut churning with dread.

"Well? Where is he?"

Dear Lord, it couldn't be. God just couldn't be this cruel, not when Marc had found happiness at last.

"I know this is his hotel," the woman said, and a little more of Marc's world came crashing down around him.

She kicked over a chair, grabbed an empty glass off an end table. "I want to speak to Marc Dupree, now."

"I'm right behind you."

She swung around, the glass forgotten as it slipped through her fingers.

"Marc, darling." The purr in her tone sounded more like a croak. "Aren't you going to greet me properly?"

When he didn't move, she reached up and yanked him to her.

He stiffened, fighting the urge to fling her away from him.

The impossible had happened. Pearl LaRue had risen from the dead.

## Chapter Nineteen



As Marc stared at his wife, one thought swept through his mind. The years had been unkind to her. She looked harder, paler, more calculating and a little desperate. Though she'd changed much since he'd seen her last, one thing had remained the same. Pearl hadn't lost the use of her acid tongue.

Spewing out a litany of foul words, she reached up to slap him, lost her footing and tumbled to the floor. From a tangle of legs and skirts, she glared up at him. "You could have helped me up."

Right, and have her claw his hand to shreds. Pearl had never been a fair fighter, not even in their early days of marriage. "I could." He folded his arms across his chest. "But I know better."

Spitting more curses, she scrambled inelegantly to her feet. After inspecting him from head to toe with a sneer on her lips, she turned and surveyed the hotel. "Well, well. I see nothing can keep Marc Dupree down."

"That's right." He lowered his tone. "And it seems, dear wife, nothing can keep you dead."

"So you're upset." She lifted a shoulder, as though she didn't have a care in the world, but the simpering that crept



into her voice belied her calm. “I just knew you’d hold a grudge.”

Angrier than he’d ever been in his life, he swallowed back the urge to toss her out of his hotel. “Now that you’ve broached the subject, where’s my money?”

Ignoring him, she picked at her fingernails.

“Pearl, I’m talking to you.”

“What was the question again?”

“My money,” he ground out. “Where. Is. It?”

Eyes still lowered on her hand, she lifted a shoulder again. “All gone.”

“I don’t believe you.” He reached for her, intent on shaking the truth out of her, but he stopped his own pursuit in time. He was a man of control, not one ruled by base emotion.

*Never render evil for evil.*

Refusing to sink to Pearl’s low level, Marc took a slow, steadying breath. He circled his gaze around the hotel. All activity had stopped. The sudden hush—the stares, the questions, the unmistakable fascination—made him inwardly cringe. He needed to conduct this conversation where Pearl couldn’t wage more chaos.

“Go back to your business,” he said, connecting his gaze with the closest patrons, the ones unabashedly watching him in return. “There’s nothing to see here.”

When no one moved away, he wrapped his fingers loosely around Pearl’s arm, resisted the urge to tighten his hold and then lowered his voice for her ears only. “Come with me. We’ll finish this in my office.”

She brushed up against him. “Why not in your suite of rooms?”

His stomach rolled. “My office is private enough.”

“Private. I like the sound of that.” The smell of stale whiskey wafted out of her and his stomach heaved again. He held

his breath as she ran her finger along the top button of his vest. “We used to do our best talking in private. Remember?”

Revulsion continued moving through him. Though this woman was his wife, he didn’t love her—had never loved her. He knew that now, knew he’d married her for all the wrong reasons. In the hope of saving her from herself.

He’d been young and idealistic. Foolish. He’d told himself he could change her into a woman of integrity. But Pearl was no Laney O’Connor.

*Laney.* He was so stunned and twisted up in his anger, he’d nearly forgotten about her waiting for him in his office. He’d been on the verge of asking her to become his wife, to merge her future with his for all time.

An impossible dream now. He was already married.

He’d nearly turned the woman he loved into an adulterer.

The depth of his sin weighed heavily on his soul. He looked up and saw Laney standing near the edge of the crowd, her eyes round, her expression hurt, her bottom lip quivering.

In one word she managed to cast her remaining hope at his feet. “Marc?”

He wanted to reassure her, wanted to tell her everything would be all right. But he loved her too much to lie to her.

How could Pearl LaRue still be alive? And how could he ever make Laney believe he hadn’t betrayed her like this, hadn’t intentionally withheld information about his marriage?

The most he could hope for now was that he didn’t destroy the woman he loved completely.

“I’m sorry,” he said, willing her to believe him, to see his love for her in his eyes, even if he could never act on his feelings.

Her eyes clouded with warring emotions then went blank. “Who is this woman?”

Before he could answer, Pearl pushed around him and

wove through the crowd. Stopping inches away from Laney, she placed her hands on her hips and glared. "I'm his wife. Who are you? Another one of his projects?"

Fast on Pearl's heels, Marc stepped between her and Laney. Too late, the damage had been done. The pain shimmering in Laney's eyes, in her unshed tears, was real.

"She's your...wife?" The silent plea in her eyes begged him to deny the truth.

He reached out to her, needing to touch her, to assure himself she was real, that what they'd shared was real.

Stepping away from him, she lifted her chin. "You're married."

How could he hurt the only woman he'd ever wanted in his life, the only one he'd ever truly loved? *Because she deserves the truth.* "I thought she was dead."

Eyes blinking rapidly, Laney looked from him to Pearl and back again. "She doesn't look dead to me. And you don't look surprised to see her alive."

Maybe he wasn't. He'd truly believed Pearl was dead, but she'd always been like a cat with many lives. By now, she had to be well past the usual nine.

Laney's lips lifted into a tight smile. "Please excuse me, Mr. Dupree, I have to finish my shift."

This was the woman he'd met that first night. Desperate and closed off, hiding behind her bravado.

He'd done that to her. He'd betrayed her trust, after only just earning it.

"Laney, wait."

She kept walking, head high, chin jutting forward. Marc stifled the urge to beg her to stop, to listen to him. But after what he'd just done to her, he owed her this moment of dignity.

Pearl's snicker tore through him like a dirty, jagged blade.

“Your little girlfriend doesn’t seem too happy to meet me. I’m shocked at you, Marc. Did you forget to tell her about us?”

In a voice barely above a whisper, he snarled out his warning. “Don’t you ever speak to Laney again. Don’t even look at her. You got that?”

He must have communicated his threat well because Pearl closed her mouth.

“Let’s go.”

Rage threatened to explode as he steered his wife toward his office. Too many questions ran into one another in his head to make coherent speech possible.

But the words would come, and he *would* get his answers.

He shouldered into his office, waited for Pearl to join him before banging the door shut behind them. He didn’t see the need to waste time with pleasantries. “All right, Pearl, start explaining. I was told you died in that train wreck.”

She spun around and gave him a saucy grin. “As you can see, I’m very much alive.”

Her expression turned calculating. Reeking of smoke and stale liquor, she sidled up to him. “You’ve aged well, husband. I’d say you’re more handsome than ever.” She touched his cheek, ran her finger along his jaw. “That suppressed wildness in your eyes makes a woman want to tame you.”

He clutched her roving hand. Before releasing her, he added enough pressure to get her attention without hurting her.

She blessed him with the look that had once made him pity her, made him want to take care of her and ease her burdens. But that was before he’d learned to recognize the hardness, the hint of cruelty behind her smile.

Naive and far too trusting for his own good, he’d thought Pearl glamorous and worldly. Now he saw the cunning, the bitter heart, the self-absorption he’d missed before.

“You haven’t changed,” he said, realizing the truth as he spoke the words.

“Oh, but I have, my darling.” Her voice lowered to a husky drawl. “I could show you some of the new tricks I’ve learned. Just say the word.”

The sinful woman in her shone like a tarnished nickel in a handful of gold. He saw it now, the cold soul, the undisguised hardness of heart.

“You used to enjoy my company.” She moved forward, stopping inches from him. “Remember?”

He moved away. “Don’t start. We may be married, but I’m not going to be intimate with you. Not now, not ever again.”

She looked at him for a long moment, her eyes turning dark with hatred. “Always such a man of control. Just like that brother-in-law of yours, the one who’s now a U.S. marshal. The holier-than-thou duo, that’s what I used to call you behind your backs.”

He didn’t respond.

“Want to know how I made you believe I was dead?”

He knew she was goading him now, toying with his mind, but after years of wondering what she’d done with his money he needed to know the truth. “Yes, Pearl. Tell me how you faked your own death.”

Her eyes filled with artifice and obvious intent to hurt him.

Marc simply waited for her to give him her worst.

She sat on his desk, scooted back a bit then dangled her feet over the edge. The gesture revealed dirty, bare feet. Where were her shoes?

“Did you know the Pinkerton agent you hired actually found me that very first month of searching?”

“No.”

Laughing, she swung her feet back and forth. “He was very good at his job, among other things.”

Despite his raging emotions, Marc held perfectly still. "Go on."

"I had a lot of money back then." She tapped her finger against her chin and slid a glance at him from the corner of her eye. "It must have been several thousand dollars, if I recall."

"You took five thousand, nine hundred and eighty-three dollars of mine."

She threw her head back and cackled. "I figured you'd know the exact amount. The money meant more to you than I did."

"Let's not rewrite history, Pearl. You knew who I was, and what I wanted out of life. Now, you were telling me about the Pinkerton agent."

"Oh, yes. By the way, got anything to drink around here?" She hitched her dress above her ankles, opened the top desk drawer with her toes. "What? No whiskey?"

"No."

"You always were predictable and boring. I hated that the most about you."

He could tell her a few things about hatred. "Just finish your story."

"Well. That Pinkerton... Oh, what was his name?" She shrugged. "I can't remember. Anyway, he was very official at first. He even went so far as to cuff me." She grinned in an ugly manner. "But he wasn't expecting my special brand of persuasion. I wore him down quickly enough."

Marc couldn't believe what she was saying. It was too absurd to contemplate. "You seduced a Pinkerton agent."

"With my wiles and, of course, *your* money. We had three lovely months together. When he was called back to Chicago, I gave him twice the rate you were paying him to help fake my death."

"You bought off a Pinkerton agent?" It was unbelievable,

mind-boggling. Pinkertons were known for their honesty. That had been the reason he'd hired one in the first place.

"Everybody has a price, darling."

He thought of Laney, of her determination to forge her own way in the world for herself and the children of Charity House. "Not everyone."

"I'd wager even your pretty little girlfriend has a price."

Marc moved fast. Before she could stop him, he wrapped his hand around her arm. "I told you to leave her out of this."

Pearl didn't even have the good sense to look scared. "Let me go."

"Why should I? You're dead. And not just to me, but to the world. That's the trouble with faking your own death." He tightened his grip. "No one is looking for you or wondering where you are."

She snorted at him, her eyes full of contempt. "You never could bluff with me. Face it, Marc, you don't have it in you to hurt a woman. Not even me."

Two warring desires battled one another in his head. Get rid of Pearl or do his duty by her. He wanted to be free of the woman, for good, but not enough to go against everything he believed.

He was guilty of many sins, but he wouldn't sacrifice his integrity, not ever again. He released her arm with great care. "Where's the rest of my money?"

"Like I said, it's gone."

"You went through six thousand dollars in five years?"

"Four years, actually. I ran out a year ago."

"And you're just coming to me tonight? Why now?"

She picked at her dirty, ragged fingernails again, no longer able to meet his eyes. "I didn't need you before now. If you remember, I do have several rather enjoyable ways of earning money for myself."

Silence filled the moment as she measured him from

below her lowered lashes. "Give me a little more money and I'll be out of your life again."

She hopped off the desk and stumbled, before a coughing fit bent her over at the waist.

Marc moved to her side. "Are you sick, Pearl?"

"I'm..." She coughed again, harder and longer. "Fine."

No, she wasn't fine. Nor was she drunk, well, not completely. She was ill. Extremely ill. And highly medicated. He guessed with laudanum.

No matter the nature of their relationship, Marc wouldn't abandon her. He'd vowed to stay with her in sickness and in health, till death parted them.

He no longer wanted anything to do with Pearl, but they were married. He would never love her, not the way a man should love his wife, but he wouldn't let her suffer alone.

"Let's get you something to eat and then I'll set you up in your own room. We'll talk about money after you've rested."

"Now you're talking sense." She smirked up at him. "I knew you couldn't resist me for long."



## Chapter Twenty



Cracking open the registration book, Laney thanked God that helping guests and addressing their various problems required her complete concentration. Though outwardly calm, her heart ached. Numb from the pain, she couldn't even collect enough anger to hate Marc Dupree.

She couldn't comprehend why he'd given her a reason to hope for a future, with him, when all along he'd been *married*.

Agony stole her composure, making her hands shake. Or had she misunderstood? Had he planned to ask her to be his mistress instead of his wife? Had she been one request away from becoming just like her mother?

How could Laney have been so foolish to fall in love with a married man?

Focusing on the guest in front of her, an elderly gentleman in an elegant suit, she positioned a friendly smile on her face. "How may I help you, sir?"

"Can you tell me what time the restaurant closes this evening?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Lovely." He turned toward the open doors. "Thank you, miss."

“My pleasure.” She smiled after him, just as the hair on the back of her neck stood at attention.

Turning her head, she caught sight of Marc escorting his wife out of his office, his hand in a solicitous hold on her elbow.

With a gulp, Laney forced down the anguish choking her. The ache in her heart multiplied as Laney watched him steer the woman into the elevator. He was taking her to a room. To his room?

Again, she wished she could summon up at least some hatred but, *again*, she simply couldn't do it. The pain in her heart was real, and yet the love Laney felt for Marc wouldn't let go of her. Love didn't work that way, she realized. It didn't come and go on a whim, or even at the introduction of an unknown wife.

Laney willed Marc to look at her. As though hearing her silent plea, he turned his head in her direction. She'd already discovered she had few defenses against him, so she wasn't surprised when the expression on his face fractured the last of them.

The pure sorrow in his gaze joined with her answering despair. In that moment Laney knew that no matter what happened in the future, a part of her would always live inside Marc. She'd given him a piece of her soul. And he'd left a part of his with her.

His expression never altered, his silent pledge shouting over the divide between them. But he had a wife—a wife!—and that meant they could be nothing more than friends, perhaps not even that.

Determined to survive the loss with dignity, she turned away and focused on another patron's request. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the elevator door shut.

For a heartbeat, she considered fighting for Marc. But she

knew she wouldn't. Marriage was sacred. With God's help she would find the courage to live the rest of her life alone.

One step at a time.

For now, she focused on doing her job.

She even managed to answer several more questions without thinking about anything other than the individual guests in front of her. So focused on shutting out the world she didn't notice when Marc returned. "We need to talk."

She tried for calm, but her broken voice betrayed her despair. "I'm working."

"Rose will take over for you."

Without saying a word, the other woman moved into place, scooting Laney out of the way with a none-too-subtle shove of her hip.

Laney glared at the woman, but Rose just smiled at her with sympathy. "Go on, dear, Mr. Dupree will explain everything to you. Give him a chance."

Laney sighed, wanting to do anything but *give him a chance*. Putting her resolve in place, she faced the man who'd given her such lovely hope one moment and had shattered her heart in the next.

Marc reached out to take Laney's elbow but the look she shot him quelled that idea. Relenting, for now, he allowed her to walk ahead of him. He wished he knew what she was thinking, then thought maybe he didn't want to know, after all.

She moved inside his office, heading straight to the fireplace. The moment he shut the door, she broke the silence. "You don't have a photograph of your wife. You never spoke of her. Why?"

He wanted only truth between them. "I thought she was dead."

He raised his hand to touch her, but she jerked out of his reach as soon as he laid his fingers on her back. “Don’t.”

He knew she hurt, could feel her pain as sure as his own. He tried again, resting his hand lightly on the top of her shoulder. “Look at me, Laney.”

She shook her head, then dropped her chin to her chest. “I...I can’t.” Her words came out in halting, choked syllables. “If I look at you, I might be tempted to forgive you.”

“Would that be so terrible?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“I don’t want to keep talking to the back of your head. At least turn around and face me.”

She slowly did as he requested, but she kept her gaze firmly locked on the floor.

Marc exhaled. “I love you.”

Her gaze shot up. “Don’t say that.” The anger and suffering mingling together in her eyes hurt him more than if she’d kicked him in his gut. “Don’t lie to me, Marc, anything but that.”

“I’ve never lied to you.”

“What about your *wife*? I don’t recall you mentioning her. Not once.”

“I thought she was dead.” He repeated the words as if they would eventually make sense to them both.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.” He rifled through the top drawer of his desk, searching for the document he’d nearly forgotten he had. Finding it at last, he urged her to take it. “Look at this.”

“I don’t see the point—”

“Do what I ask, please.”

Laney tugged her bottom lip between her teeth then lowered her eyes to the piece of paper. She took the document from him and read the inscription aloud. “It’s a death cer-

tificate from the state of Colorado,” she gasped. “For Pearl LaRue Dupree.”

“I was given this three years ago by a Pinkerton agent I’d hired to find my wife.”

She handed the document back to him with shaking fingers. “I don’t understand.”

“No wonder. I hardly understand it myself.” Marc raked a hand through his hair. “Apparently, Pearl paid the man to help her fake her own death.”

“Why would anyone do such a thing?”

An excellent question. The magnitude of Pearl’s treachery was starting to sink in. She’d stolen from him and then faked her own death. All because she hadn’t been able to bear the life he’d tried to offer her. He’d wanted to care for her, to lighten her burdens. All she’d ever wanted was his money.

Trey had warned Marc that his pursuit of wealth would lure the ugliest of hearts. How right he’d been.

“Marc?”

“Oh, she had a reason. Actually, she had six thousand reasons.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

Laney gave him a forced smile. “Should I sit down for this?”

“I didn’t tell you I’d been married before because, well, it never came up.” She opened her mouth but he stopped her with a wave of his hand. “I know that’s not a good enough excuse. The other reason was that I didn’t want you to know what a fool I’d been.”

Laney angled her head. “You? I can’t imagine you doing anything you didn’t want to do.”

“I wish it was that simple.” Marc blew out a slow breath. “Do you remember I told you I grew up as part of the wealthy elite?”

“What does that have to do—”

“Let me finish,” he said, stopping her midsentence. “Please.”

She nodded. “All right.”

“We went from wealth to poverty in a matter of years. When my father died of malaria and my mother shortly after him, I was through being poor.”

“Oh, Marc. You don’t have to tell me this.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “After those hard, lean years I didn’t just want money, I *needed* it. I was obsessed. Gambling was the quickest route to reaching my goal. I moved out West, traveling from card game to card game. By the time I was twenty-five, I’d earned enough wealth to never see poverty again.”

She sighed.

“When I went to Cripple Creek I met Pearl LaRue. She was ten years older than me and the most exotic woman I’d ever met.” Laney flinched at his words. He laid his hand on her sleeve. “I’m sorry this is hurting you.”

“Go on. I want to hear this.”

“Having grown up in New Orleans I thought I’d seen every kind of woman there was to see. But Pearl was different, unique, exciting. I had to have her for my own.”

Laney’s heart leaped to her eyes. “You loved her.”

Marc smoothed his finger down her cheek. “No, my relationship with Pearl was never about love. At least, looking back now, I realize love hadn’t been the driving force. At the time I thought I’d die if I didn’t win her.”

“So you married her?”

“Not at first. When I met her she was a dancing girl and a prostitute. I wanted to rescue her from that life, so I offered to put her up in her own home with the promise I would take care of her.”

“Not much different from what you do for the women you hire here.”

Touched by the compassionate look in her eyes, he wanted to go to her and let her smooth away all his pains, like she did for children in her care. But Marc was no little boy. He was a grown man. One who had to answer for his sins.

“What I didn’t count on, was that Pearl liked her chosen lifestyle. She refused to quit seeing other men. She did, however, vow to change her mind if I made a more permanent commitment than just offering her a nice cottage and a little cash.”

“That’s when you married her.”

“I knew it was a mistake almost from the start. As soon as I was bound to her for life, the excitement disappeared.”

Her eyes widened with disappointment. “You don’t believe in marriage then?”

“Quite the opposite. Marriage is holy, a promise made before God, and should be honored as such. The two married couples I’d known intimately were my mother and father, and Trey and my sister. I wanted what they had but what I got with Pearl didn’t come close. I was looking for an ideal that didn’t exist.”

He’d been young and idealistic. Now he realized how much he’d lost by trying to do the right thing with Pearl.

“I’m assuming you tried to make your marriage work.”

“A losing battle. It didn’t take me long to realize that I couldn’t change a woman who didn’t want changing. But there wasn’t much I could do. I was married. And marriage means forever.”

“So what did you do?”

“I turned to my only solace. Accumulating wealth. Lots of it, as fast as I could. I continued gambling and didn’t dare allow myself to think about what Pearl was buying with my money or doing while I was playing cards all night.”

“Oh, Marc.”

“No. I can handle your scorn, your anger, but not your understanding. I was young and stupid and set on using one sin to erase another. I’d made my mistake so I lived with it as best I could.” He frowned. “I’ve since repented of that lifestyle. The Lord always offers mercy and forgiveness, but he doesn’t always take away the consequences of our sins.” As evidenced by Pearl’s appearance tonight.

Her expression still full of bafflement, Laney shook her head. “You mentioned you hired a Pinkerton agent to find Pearl. What happened? Did she run off with some of your money?”

He sniffed. “She stole all of it.”

“Oh, my. How?”

“At the time, I wanted my money as close to me as possible. I kept some of my money in the bank but the bulk of my savings I put in a safe much like that one.” He pointed to the small safe behind him. “Pearl learned the combination by watching my fingers.”

“Just like me.” Groaning, Laney buried her face in her hands. “No wonder you thought so poorly of me and believed I wasn’t trustworthy.”

“Don’t, Laney. Don’t compare yourself to Pearl. You aren’t like her. You only took money that belonged to you.” Everything in him softened as the truth hit him. “Deep down, I always knew you weren’t the kind of woman who stole and conned your way through life. Perhaps that’s why I let you get away so easily that first night.”

“And that makes my kicking you in the chest all right?”

“No.” He rubbed the spot where she’d landed the blow. “But it makes your actions understandable. I didn’t give you a chance to explain yourself.”

“I didn’t try very hard to make you hear me. In fact, I



intentionally led you to believe I was just like...like...your wife.”

This was the first time they'd ever really talked about the night they'd met. It felt good to clear the air, to get it all out in the open. But nothing was solved.

“So, now you know,” he said. “I was as shocked as you to see Pearl standing in my hotel tonight. Maybe more so.”

“She wasn't exactly standing.”

“No. She wasn't.” A strange sort of pity spread through him. “Although Pearl's timing wasn't perfect, perhaps it was best she showed up when she did. You realize I was just about to ask you to marry me?”

Tears formed in her eyes. “Oh, Marc, we might have married not knowing, then what would we have done?” He reached for her but she shook her head. “We can't.”

No, they couldn't.

“You should know, Pearl isn't the same woman who ran away all those years ago. She's ill. And as much as I know this hurts you to hear, I have to take care of her. She's my wife. I can't abandon her.”

“I wouldn't expect any different from you.”

“I love *you*, Laney. But I'm married to Pearl.”

Her unshed tears wiggled to the edges of her lashes. “Because you're married, you realize I can't be anything more than your employee.”

For a moment, he thought about asking her to run away with him. But too many people depended on them both. And neither of them was selfish enough to think only of their own pleasure.

Marc placed a tender kiss on her temple. As he pulled back, he put a silent pledge in his eyes, praying she under-

stood what he couldn't say. "You are a part of my heart. But we can't be together."

"I know. Oh, Marc, I realized that the minute I heard you had a wife."

## *Chapter Twenty-One*



Determined to survive one day at a time, Laney turned to routine for solace the next morning. Unfortunately thoughts of Marc, and what they might have had together, never left her mind for long.

It helped to focus most of her energy on getting the children ready to start the school year. She spent the morning rushing around, amazed at the amount of effort it took to get so many girls and boys fed and out of the house on time.

At two minutes past eight, Laney collapsed in a chair and shut her eyes. Pleasantly exhausted, she took a moment to collect herself before facing the rest of the day's chores.

A smile curled on her lips. As of today, her children were no longer just the sons and daughters of prostitutes. They were normal schoolchildren.

She couldn't wait to hear about their day, but that would be hours from now. In the meantime she would fill every moment with activity.

The hardest challenge would come later, when she went to work at the hotel. She would see Marc and pretend the tentative friendship they'd forged was enough. But with that lie came unspeakable pain. She nearly had the money to pay off her loan with Prescott, two more nights at most, and then

she'd be out of debt. There would be no more need to work at the hotel. No more reason to see Marc again.

That thought brought even more sorrow.

Katherine's sympathetic voice skidded across her thoughts. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Laney slowly opened her eyes. "What is there to say?"

"I don't know. But in my experience talking seems to help. Remember when I came back from Miss Lindsay's?"

"You were so hurt, so confused." Laney swallowed her anguish in a sigh.

"You listened when I needed to talk." She wedged a chair close to Laney's. "Let me do the same for you."

Touched, Laney swiped at a tear escaping down her cheek. "Oh, Katherine, I'm trying not to wallow in self-pity. But it seems God is punishing me for all the mistakes I've made lately."

Katherine shook her head sadly. "Laney, God doesn't punish us for our mistakes. He just allows us to make them."

"And then leaves us to suffer the consequences? Like falling in love with a man I can never have?" She clutched the chair. "Why did I have to meet Judge Greene in Marc's hotel that night? There were so many other places I could have chosen."

She paused as her words sank in. What was she saying? If she hadn't gone to the Hotel Dupree she'd have never met Marc. She would have gone through the rest of her life never knowing the man, never knowing the beauty of loving him.

No, she couldn't be sorry for that.

There were other regrets, though. "Maybe if I hadn't taken out that final loan, I wouldn't have needed the money, and then I wouldn't have needed to force the judge's hand."

"I suppose you could look at it that way. But I like to think we find out who we are when we make our choices and then live with them."

When had Katherine become so wise? “It just seems I’ve been given a much harder road than others.”

Katherine’s expression shifted into sympathy. “No, Laney. You’re where you are now because of choices you’ve made. Pure and simple.”

Laney didn’t deny it. “What other choices could I have made?”

Stitching an age-old wisdom into her words, Katherine touched her hand. “Only you can answer that.”

For a moment, Laney thought hard about what else she could have done. She could have tried another bank, one run by a more honest man. She could have bought a smaller home. In reality, she could have made any number of other decisions.

But she hadn’t. And, in the end, every choice had led her to Marc Dupree and the anguish she suffered now. Even knowing this, she still couldn’t regret meeting him.

She was saved from further reflection when Megan burst into the house, tears streaming down her face.

Her own worries forgotten, Laney jumped from her chair and rushed to the girl. “Megan, what’s the matter?”

“We...” She choked over a hiccup. “We were sent away.”

“Sent away from school? But why?”

Entering the house a few steps behind her, Johnny said, “It was awful, Miss Laney.”

One by one the rest of the children scuttled through the front door.

Surveying the downtrodden faces, Laney’s heart sank. Only a few had tears falling, while the others were red-faced with anger. What concerned her most were the various hues of shame in each of their gazes.

Laney couldn’t make words come out of her mouth. Thankfully, Katherine spoke for her. “Tell us what happened?”

“They laughed at us, called us names.”

Laney instantly found her voice. “The other schoolchildren called you names?”

“Yeah, and then this man came and told us we had to go home.”

Megan added, “He said we could never come back again.”

A sick feeling tumbled in Laney’s chest. “What did this man look like?”

“It was my—” Michael’s lips trembled on a sob. “My daddy.”

*Prescott.*

“He said he wouldn’t tolerate brats like us mingling with the children of the good folks of Denver.”

Katherine gasped. “Oh, no.”

Laney raised her eyes to the ceiling, praying for an answer or, at the very least, wisdom to know what to do.

*Think*, she ordered herself. After a moment, an idea formulated in her mind and she felt a surge of excitement. If she and Katherine could pull it off...

“Mrs. Smythe made cookies and candy.” She pointed behind her, urging everyone to look in that direction. “Johnny, take everyone to the kitchen and tell her to serve the treats now.”

He stared at her as though she’d turned into a fish trying to swim up the middle of downtown Denver. “But what are we going to do about school?”

“You leave that to me.” Laney gave him her most confident grin. “I have an idea.”

At the groan coming from Katherine, Laney spun to face her friend. “Well, I do.”

“Yes.” Katherine gave her a soft, understanding smile. “I know.”

“It’s a good one, too.”

“It always is.”

Laney tried not to sigh. "Go on, everyone." She ushered the bulk of the children toward the kitchen. "Either I or Katherine will join you in just a minute to tell you what we have planned."

Michael pulled on Laney's skirt, the look of sorrow wiping away his usual youthful enthusiasm. "We won't have to go back to that awful school again, will we?"

"Never again, I promise."

"Laney," Katherine warned, "Let's not be hasty with our promises. No good can come from—"

"You don't even know what I have planned." Laney poked a finger in the air between them. "So calm your worries right now."

"Why don't you calm them for me, by explaining what you have in mind?"

Laney waited until all the children were out of earshot, then explained, "It's really very simple. *You* will teach them."

"Me?" Gasping, Katherine covered her heart with a shaky hand. "Have you gone mad?"

"Of course not. It's a brilliant idea."

Katherine shook her head. "You're not thinking clearly, that's it."

"I'm thinking very clearly."

"Oh, really? What about supplies? Desks? Chalkboards? Books?"

"Minor details, the kind we'll work out as we go. Just like we always do." Excitement swelled, making Laney dizzy with all the possibilities running through her mind.

"We'll need to purchase a building, at some point, but not now." She held up a hand to stave off Katherine's objection. "In a few years, perhaps, once we've saved enough money."

There would be no more loans. Laney had learned her lesson on that score.

"Laney, you're getting drunk on excitement." Katherine

grasped her by the shoulders and shook. "Sober up. There are more than a few details involved with starting a school."

Laney looked pointedly at Katherine's hands still gripping her.

She immediately released her hold, but didn't let go of her argument. "Where are we going to get the money to buy all the supplies and books? Books are expensive."

"I'll keep my job at the hotel for as long as necessary. And if that doesn't bring in enough money..." Laney looked around her, at the luxurious furnishings Marc had pointed out "...then we'll sell off some of the best pieces in the house."

Though that last idea wasn't her favorite solution, it might be the only way they could raise the necessary funds.

The grim twist of Katherine's lips did not bode well for her agreement to Laney's scheme. "Might I remind you, this is the kind of thinking that got us into trouble *all* the other times?"

Eyes narrowed, Laney tilted her head to look Katherine straight in the face. "Don't you want to teach the children?"

Katherine took a contemplative pause. "Well, yes. Yes, I do."

"Then leave the details to me."

"Perhaps you should discuss this with someone else, maybe get a man's perspective? Mr. Dupree's, perhaps?"

For a moment, Laney considered Katherine's suggestion. Marc had told her she wasn't alone anymore. She'd nearly believed him. But that was before his wife had shown up. "He has too much to worry about on his own to bother him with our problems."

"He'll want to help us with this. You should give him that chance."

"I have to do this alone." Like always. "And the first thing I'm going to do is go down to the school and tell that teacher



just what I think of her. How dare she refuse them admittance? Doesn't she know what damage she's done?"

Katherine raised her eyes to the heavens. "Laney, I can't help but think it would be a mistake to go over there right now. You should calm down first. With the mood you're in, you'll only make matters worse."

"Nothing could be worse."

Laney marched along Market Street angrier than before she'd entered the schoolhouse, now that she knew the full story. The schoolteacher hadn't wanted to send the children away. She'd only been carrying out Prescott's orders. And since the shifty banker owned the school's building and paid the bulk of the teacher's salary, the woman hadn't had much choice in the matter.

Well, he wouldn't get away with this.

Before she lost hold of the outrage propelling her forward, Laney smoothed her palms down her skirt then stepped inside the bank. No matter what happened, she wouldn't leave until Prescott had made restitution for this unforgivable offense.

Her steps slowed as she reminded herself to pay off the interest on her loan *before* tearing into the banker. She had the bulk of the money on her, had thought to plan ahead despite her blinding anger when she'd left Charity House this morning.

*The children, she reminded herself. Remember their faces when they'd arrived home from the school.*

The reminder was enough to give her the courage she needed to confront Prescott.

The children deserved an education, without the banker's nasty interference.

She gave the clerk her name and waited. Like all the other times she'd come to this bank, Prescott didn't keep her wres-

ting in her anticipation for long. She might have thought that odd, if she didn't have so much else on her mind.

"Miss O'Connor, what a surprise." The lie slid smoothly from smirking lips.

Hiding her dislike behind her own smile, she allowed him to lead the way to his office. As she watched him jut out his chest, Laney was reminded of that crazy rooster in the Montana mining camp that used to swagger around the streets, crowing all day long. A train had hit the stupid bird. She wondered if there would be a train passing through the bank anytime soon.

Once inside the office, Prescott wasted no time getting to the point. Without offering her a seat, he asked, "What can I do for you this fine morning?"

Squaring her shoulders, she held his gaze. "You know why I'm here."

His expression drew into a blank. "I can think of several reasons."

Forgetting all about her resolution to pay off her loan first, she laid into him. "Let's not continue the pretense, Prescott. You had my children banished from the local school."

"Come to beg for their readmittance?"

"No."

"Ah." He scratched his beard. "Then you must be here to talk about your loan. But you're a few days too late, aren't you? Your *benefactor* already paid your outstanding balance."

"My benefactor?" What was Prescott talking about?

"Marc Dupree. He paid off the remaining interest on your loan days ago."

She stared at him, her heart pounding in her ears. Had she just heard him correctly? "When, exactly, did he come to you?"

"Tuesday morning."

The day after Pearl had shown up at his hotel. Marc was

trying to make restitution for the pain he'd inflicted on her in the only way he know how. With his money. A kind gesture, if completely misguided.

"You had no right to take Marc's money for my loan without my authorization."

"*Marc*, is it?"

Her hand itched to slap that smug grin off Prescott's face. "Don't read too much into my use of his given name. I'm nothing special to the man. I'm simply his employee."

"No, Miss O'Connor, you are much more than his employee." He leaned forward. "People talk, you know."

"People gossip."

"Call it what you will. But word's out you're his mistress."

Outrage had her gaping at him. "That's a lie."

Flattening his hands on the desk, he leaned forward. "Tell that to his wife."

One sentence and Prescott made her relationship with Marc sound disgusting and sinful. Perhaps it was, on a certain level. Didn't she love a married man? Didn't he just pay off her loan as though she was his mistress?

She would deal with Marc later. For now, she had another, more pressing problem standing in front of her. "I want to discuss what happened at the school this morning."

"Certainly. But first, this is for you." He pulled out an official-looking document from the bottom drawer of his desk. "*Marc* insisted I give you this when next you came to see me."

Snatching up the document, she looked down and gasped. "The deed to Charity House." In *her* name.

"You win, Miss O'Connor. You officially own the house free and clear."

A surge of excitement whipped through her. How she wished she could just walk away now, never to return. But she couldn't. Not yet. She had to have her say, had to stand up for the children.

Prescott's smirk warned her how he would respond. Because of people like him and their dirty accusations, the children had to deal with more than their share of shame.

It was so unfair, so infuriating.

"All right, Prescott. Now that our business is complete, I want your word that you will leave my orphanage and the children who live there alone."

"You know, Miss O'Connor, you can't keep calling that place you run an orphanage. Very few of those children are truly orphans."

Laney bristled. She could accept the slurs about herself, but she would not listen to any more about the children. "Your word, Prescott. I want you to promise this is the end of our battle."

A hint of respect flashed in his eyes. "You've really learned your lesson."

"I have. Now that our association is over I will never step inside this bank again, and I ask you never attempt to undermine my efforts to create a home for the children at Charity House."

For a long, tense moment, he watched her through his beady eyes. The respect she'd seen earlier disappeared, only to be replaced with something that looked like pure loathing. "So this is goodbye."

"Yes."

"Then I suggest you leave at once." With his big beefy paw he shoved her toward the exit.

She went willingly.

Never again would she have to face Thurston P. Prescott III. Instead of feeling triumphant, instead of experiencing a wave of relief, a sense of foreboding filled her.

*Lord, why am I not more pleased?*

She knew the answer, of course. She might have the deed to Charity House tucked in her reticule. She might have

learned a valuable lesson about living within her means, but she'd lost something precious in the process. She'd lost the man she loved with all her heart.

She'd lost Marc Dupree.

## Chapter Twenty-Two



Settled in his private office at the Hotel Dupree, Marc worked on his accounts. Unfortunately, the numbers ran together in his mind, one big blur of black ink and incomprehensible marks. All he could think about was Laney and the fact that she would arrive for her shift in a matter of hours.

Although Marc wouldn't seek her out, or try to talk to her unless absolutely necessary, at least he would know she was near, in his hotel, earning wages she no longer needed to save her orphanage.

A smile of satisfaction spread across his lips. With a handful of dollars Marc had put an end to Prescott's hold over Charity House. No doubt, Laney would have something to say about his interference. Marc would let her lecture him, silently smiling while she did so, because nothing could change the fact that the orphanage legally belonged to her. Her future was secure, as was the children's.

As though his thoughts could summon the woman's very presence, Laney's fresh lilac fragrance filled the air.

Marc looked up from his ledger and connected gazes with the woman he loved.

Standing in the doorway, watching him with a closed expression, Laney looked both fragile and beautiful. So deli-

cate and yet so strong. He wanted to beg her to run away with him all over again.

He would never dishonor her like that. Nor would he trample on the vows he'd said in front of a preacher five years ago. Still, his heart picked up speed at the sight of Laney hovering on the edge of his private domain. "Hello."

"Hello, Marc." When she didn't move deeper into the room, he narrowed his eyes and studied her more closely for clues to her mood.

Her casual stance gave nothing away. They could be strangers for the lack of emotion in her gaze. This new distance between them was yet another consequence of Pearl's unexpected return.

Marc hated that he couldn't tell Laney how precious she was to him. But if he did something that foolish, he'd profess his love to her in the next breath, and then he'd no longer be able to survive apart from her.

But survive he would. For the sake of a vow he'd made five years ago and the honor of the woman who stood before him now.

After another painful moment of silence, Laney jammed her hands on her hips. "I understand you recently made a bank transaction on my behalf."

Ah. So she'd been to the bank this afternoon. Marc should have known by the lack of warmth in her gaze. "I won't apologize for paying off your loan." He held up his hand to keep her from interrupting him. "And before you say anything more, I did it for the children, not you."

"Talk around town says otherwise."

He set down his quill very slowly, very deliberately. "What *talk* around town?"

"The gossips are saying I'm your mistress." She pressed her fingertips to her temples and rubbed. "Paying off my loan has only added proof to their assumptions."

That hadn't been his intention.

"It never occurred to me that my actions would put you at the center of the gossip mill."

"Don't get the wrong idea. I don't care what people say about me." She flicked her wrist in the air as if to make her point. "I've heard far worse in the past."

Angry on her behalf, he rose quickly and crossed to her. "Nevertheless, I'm sorry." He pulled her deeper into his office and shut the door behind them. "I wanted to help alleviate your burdens, not add to them."

Remaining just out of his reach, she drew in a shuddering breath. "Oh, Marc, I know you meant well. And I truly appreciate the gesture. So...thank you."

"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

"I said thank you."

The significance of those two little words spoken so boldly made his heart soar. "You're welcome, Laney."

He took a step toward her, but she warded off his approach with a shake of her head. "I have more to say."

"All right."

"Although I certainly appreciate what you've done for Charity House and the children, you can't continue giving us money, not even indirectly."

"Why not?"

"Because..." She blew out a slow, careful breath, as if she were formulating her argument very methodically in her mind. "The gossip could turn toward the children. They already suffer enough. I don't want to add more strain to their lives."

A valid point, to be sure, but a bit shortsighted. "They would suffer far worse than a little gossip if you lose the orphanage. No, Laney, I can't promise not to assist you if you get into trouble again."



“Marc, please.” Her head turned away from him. “I need you to—”

She broke off midsentence, her gaze connecting with the cot he’d set up next to his desk. “Is that where you’re sleeping at night?”

“The hotel is at full occupancy,” he said, as though that was enough explanation.

He should have known better. Laney was too smart for that. “But you have your own permanent suite of rooms.”

“Pearl is living there for now. Alone. Under the circumstances, I find this an acceptable arrangement.”

“Acceptable, maybe.” She turned to face him again, her eyes softening. “But surely not comfortable.”

“Are you worried about me, Laney?” He rather liked the idea.

“Of course I’m worried about you.” The longing in her eyes cut him to the core, made him wonder what his life would have been like with this woman by his side, a woman who cared enough about him to worry about something as minor as his comfort.

He stared at her for a long while, wishing he could reach out and smooth his finger down her cheek, maybe touch her hair. Both very bad ideas, as was spending any more time with her alone in his office.

“Let me walk you home and you can tell me how your conversation with Prescott went. And I’m warning you now, I want every detail, no matter how small.”

She stiffened at his request.

“Did something happen while you were in Prescott’s office? Did he threaten you? Hurt you in any way?”

“Nothing I haven’t endured from him before.” Her bright smile was clearly forced.

“Tell me what happened.”

As he waited for her to explain, he linked his hands be-

hind his back, to prevent himself from pulling her into his arms and smoothing away that look of sadness on her face. In the ensuing silence, he thought of the woman who stood between them.

*Pearl.* Her addictions were worse than he first thought. Since her return, he couldn't remember a moment when his wife had been fully lucid.

He wanted to share his worries with Laney, ask her how it had been with her mother, but he could see she had her own concerns. For an instant, he broke his first and only rule—never touch Laney—and bent down to take her hands in his. “I want to help you. But I can't if you don't tell me what's occurred.”

“Oh, Marc, it's the children,” she said. “They were banned from school today. They were so upset. I went straight down to that school to tell the teacher just what I thought of her banning innocent children from the classroom.”

Noble, to be sure. But he'd seen Laney when she was all worked up. She could have easily made matters worse if she'd gone over to the school in a furious state of mind. “You think that was a good idea, charging over there like that?”

“Maybe not. But I was so furious.” She threw her hands in the air and stomped through the room in big, angry strides. “How dare she, I thought. What gave her the right to judge my precious children?”

“Slow down.” Marc reached out and grasped her arm. “You're making me dizzy.”

She pushed away from him and went back to pacing, or rather stomping. “It wasn't even her fault and I'm still angry just thinking about this morning.”

“I see that.”

“Did I tell you Prescott was behind their banishment?”

That was new information, the kind that had Marc's tem-

per rising right along with Laney's. "You saw him at the school?"

She shook her head. "No, but it turns out he's the main patron of the school. How dare he misuse his authority like that?" She spun in a circle. "The man is an awful, horrible human being."

Marc couldn't agree more. So he focused on soothing Laney's outrage. Something about her behavior made him sense this was more than a fight about a school refusing the children. This was also Laney's personal battle against all the humiliation she'd endured as the daughter of a prostitute.

For the first time Marc caught a glimpse of what Laney must have braved as a child. She'd spent her life as an outcast. And now the children of Charity House suffered a similar stigma because of the same unfortunate circumstances of their birth.

"I can help you find another school for them to attend."

"I can't ask the children to go through that humiliation again."

"Then tell me what I can do. Say the word and I'll make it happen."

"I don't have any concrete answers yet." She buried her fingers in the fabric of her skirt. "I have some ideas, but I need to do some more thinking before I commit to any of them."

Willing his hands to stay by his side, Marc stared hard at her, scrutinizing every feature on her face, trying to decipher the words she wasn't saying. "You aren't planning to do anything drastic are you?"

She shifted a vacant stare to a spot just over his shoulder. "Of course not."

A loud knock came from the other side of the door. Marc ignored it. "I want you to come to me before you make any firm decisions about the children's schooling."

“I—” The knocking came again, louder and more incessant. “Don’t you think you should answer that?”

“Not until you agree to let me be a part of the solution to this problem of yours.”

A slurred, high-pitched voice accompanied the next round of knocks. “Marc, are you in there?”

*Pearl.* Laney jumped back, shame and guilt evident in her features.

“Don’t, Laney. Don’t look like that. We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Marc Allen Dupree. I know you’re in there. I can hear you talking to someone. Who’s in there with you?”

The door flew open and Pearl stumbled forward, heading face first for the floor. Moving quickly, Marc caught her before she fell all the way.

He barely had time to catch his balance before Laney rushed passed him and out of his office. With his arms full of an incoherent, spitting-mad wife, he had no other choice than to let her go.

The rest of the evening brought a new form of torture. Sitting in a chair facing the bed in his room, Marc dragged a wet cloth across Pearl’s feverish forehead, wondering why she did this to herself. This was the second time in so many days that she’d taken too much laudanum.

When he’d realized she had a problem that first night of her return, he’d tried to talk to her about it. But he’d only received oaths and curses in response, so he’d begun throwing out the bottles as fast as she could buy them. He still wasn’t sure where she was getting the money to fund her habit. Not from him, not directly. She could be stealing from the restaurant, or unsuspecting customers or...any number of places. He made a note to find out where.

Pearl awakened with a cough, her eyes peeling slowly open. In a shaky voice, she made a request for water.

Marc moved out of the chair, cradled her head and eased a glass to her lips. He could no longer see the woman he'd married in this pale, rail-thin creature. She looked more apparition than person, her dull sallow skin carrying the permanent stench of her illness. Her once vibrant eyes had sunken into their sockets, small and unremarkable now.

It hurt to look at her. He'd seen enough death in his life to recognize he was staring at its ruthless cousin now.

As Pearl choked down a sip of water, Marc wondered how much longer she could do this to herself. A day, a week, maybe a year?

"I need more laudanum," she croaked. "There's some in my red dress."

He'd not thought to search there. Where else was she hiding the elixir? "Pearl, I beg you to stop this madness."

She collapsed against the pillow. Pain swam in her eyes as her unfocused gaze hastened around the room. "Not now, Marc."

Despite her hostility and the pounding headache behind his eyes, Marc refused to let the matter drop. "Look at what you're doing to yourself."

Her lip curled. "Holier-than-thou, that's what you are."

He thought about how he was failing Pearl and how much he'd hurt Laney recently. "There's nothing holy about me."

Pearl snorted. "Just give me the medicine. I'll feel better after a little taste."

"A temporary cure, at best. Let me help you, Pearl." He'd uttered those same words a lot lately, with the same fruitless results.

"You want to help me? Give me money when I ask," Pearl said, her voice thick with the coarseness of dehydration.

“That won’t solve anything.” Money could only buy *things*. Nothing more. Certainly not Pearl’s health.

Marc couldn’t pinpoint precisely when it had happened, but in the last few weeks, Marc had begun to feel trapped in his chosen lifestyle. He no longer experienced pleasure from the luxury he once found so comforting. He should sell his hotel and start over, but now wasn’t the time to think about such things.

Now was the time to alleviate this pitiful woman’s pain as best he could. But he wouldn’t do so by feeding her the drug that was causing as much harm as it was helping.

Pearl curled her legs up against her chest and rolled onto her side. She whimpered. The sound reminded Marc of a wounded animal caught in a trap. “Give me my medicine.”

“I can’t. Not in good conscience.”

“I don’t want to hear about your conscience.” She found enough strength to pick up one of the glasses off the bedside table and throw it at him. “Just give me my medicine.”

“No.”

She bared her teeth. “I get it. You want me dead so you can marry your latest project. I’m not stupid, *husband*. I see how you look at her. Well, I don’t think I’ll oblige you by dying tonight. In fact,” she sucked in her breath and tossed her head against the pillow, “I plan to live for a very long time.”

Marc blew out a hiss, a very real sense of loss clutching at his heart. Such a waste.

“I don’t want you to die, Pearl.” He meant it. As much as he loved Laney and wanted her in his life, he could never wish his wife dead in order for that to happen.

Although he harbored much anger toward Pearl, he still wanted to see her return to the vivacious woman he’d met all those years ago in Cripple Creek. “I want you to get healthy again, to find joy in life like you once had. It’s not too late.”

A haunted look passed in her gaze. He'd never seen her look so vulnerable, so scared—like a lost, lonely child.

“I want that, too,” she admitted in a small voice.

“Good.” He rose, decision made. “I’ll go fetch the doctor.”

“I don’t want no stinkin’ doctor anywhere near this room.” Terror stole into her gaze. “He’ll butcher me, sure as I lay here.”

“Not this doctor.”

“No. Marc, please don’t do this to me.”

Not sure where her fear was coming from, Marc decided to change her mind with the most obvious strategy. “Shane’s young and handsome.”

She gave a snort of laughter. “You think I care about that right now?”

Marc didn’t feel the need to answer that question, when they both knew the truth. “I’ll be back shortly.”

He opened the armoire and searched the pockets of Pearl’s red dress. The new dress *his* money had purchased. Where was his anger?

Strange how his perspective had changed in a matter of weeks. Money was just a means to an end, not the goal. But not too long ago he’d come close to losing his soul in the pursuit of gathering more and more wealth. He’d nearly turned money into his god.

*Forgive me, Lord.*

Marc wrapped his fingers around cold glass. Frowning, he tucked the bottle into his palm.

“That’s mine,” Pearl screeched, apparently more aware of her surroundings than she’d let on.

Marc turned to face her. “It’s mine now.”

“Don’t you dare take that away from me.” She tried to push to a sitting position but the effort appeared to be too much for her and she fell back on the bed.

Nearly relenting at the pathetic picture she made, Marc

shored up his resolve and strode toward the foyer of his suite. "I'll return with the doctor shortly."

With the sound of her cursing in his ears, he clicked the door shut behind him, praying he hadn't left the fox in charge of the henhouse. He'd found three other bottles of laudanum earlier tonight, all in unusual hiding places. He hoped there weren't any more. For Pearl's sake.



## *Chapter Twenty-Three*



Marc paced outside his room while the doctor examined Pearl in privacy. Every so often, he glanced at the shut door.

Sorrow twisted in his gut. He'd made many mistakes in his life, a direct result of his own selfish need to acquire massive amounts of wealth. Now he had more money than he could ever spend. Yet he couldn't buy back his wife's health.

The door to his suite swung open, slamming Marc back to the matter at hand.

Dr. Shane Bartlett stepped into the hallway, his eyes world-weary and wise beyond his years, as if he'd seen more than his share of tragedy in his life. His dark, ruffled hair had a wild look, as though he'd run his fingers through it too many times. Whatever the doctor had to say, Marc knew it wouldn't be good.

"How is she?" he asked, not sure he wanted to hear the truth.

Shane shook his head. The previously alert eyes of just an hour before now had a red rim of fatigue ringing them. "She's uncomfortable, but resting at last."

"Give it to me straight." Marc exhaled slowly. "Is she dying?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I can't give you a definitive answer."

Shane speared his fingers through his hair. "It seems the more I learn about the human body, the less I know."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"For all the scientific breakthroughs of this century, there are still too many mysteries yet to be solved." A line of deep concentration drew Shane's brows together. "The body's potential for self-healing is surprising at times."

"Are you saying Pearl's going to be all right?"

"For now."

Marc's relief was staggering. But then he noted the caution in his friend's manner. "What are you not telling me, Shane? Out with it."

"Your wife could live to grow a full head of gray hair. *If* you can convince her to sober up, and..." he broke off, his gaze darting around. "I don't know quite how to say this, it's a delicate situation."

At this point, nothing Shane could say would shock Marc. "You may be candid with me."

"She must stay away from the liquor, the laudanum and the...men."

The good doctor was clearly embarrassed by the situation, but Marc had long since given up pretending propriety mattered, at least not when it came to Pearl and her sinful life choices. "And if she doesn't make the changes you suggest?"

"Hard to tell. She could continue this lifestyle for an indefinite amount of time."

"Indefinitely?" Marc's gut twisted into a tight knot. "How could anyone sustain that sort of lifestyle for any length of time?"

"Look, Marc. I honestly can't predict what will happen to your wife. I wish I could, but I don't know her history and she wasn't very forthright with me when I asked. The truth of the matter is, she could last a month, a year, maybe even ten."

"Ten years?"

“It’s unusual, but not unheard of.”

Marc repeated the doctor’s words aloud, more to anchor his spinning thoughts than for any other reason. “Ten years of drunkenness and addiction.”

How would he bear to watch Pearl destroy herself for that long?

“Of course,” Shane said, “all this guesswork is pointless if she ends up overdosing. You must do everything you can to get her sober and keep her away from the laudanum.”

Marc shoved his hands in his pockets, trying not to feel as though the weight of the world had just landed on his shoulders. “I’ve tried.”

“Then keep trying.”

“What do you suggest I do, short of locking her in that room behind you?”

“You could speak to the apothecary, make it clear he’s not to sell her any more laudanum.”

“I’ve done that already. She finds someone else to buy the drug for her.”

“Then don’t give her any money.”

Marc’s gut coiled in helpless defeat. “She has ways of earning it herself.”

“Right.” Shane sighed. “Could you have someone follow her, maybe step in before she goes too far?”

“I’ve tried that, too.” In fact, Marc had tried everything the doctor suggested, with varying degrees of failure and not an ounce of success. “Pearl can be stealthy when she wants to be.”

*Alarmingly so.*

“There is one more thing you can do.”

At this point Marc was willing to try anything. “I’m listening.”

“Pray.”

\* \* \*

In her position behind the front desk, Laney was thankful for the intricacies involved in addressing various requests from the hotel guests. Unfortunately, her concentration kept wandering upward, to the suite of rooms on the top floor. Moments after her shift had started Laney had watched Marc escorting Dr. Shane Bartlett to the elevators, their heads bent in conversation.

Retrieving the young doctor could mean only one thing—Pearl was in real trouble this time.

Laney had watched Pearl slowly destroying herself over the past week. The thought of the woman's unhappiness sparked memories of the last days of Laney's own mother's life.

Before Pearl, Laney had thought her mother had been happy in her chosen profession, or at least content. She'd assumed the whiskey and laudanum just another part of the lifestyle her mother had chosen for herself.

But as Laney witnessed Pearl's mindless self-destruction, she realized her mother had been enduring one day at a time, medicating away her shame in the most expedient manner possible.

Out of the corner of her eye, Laney caught sight of Marc accompanying the doctor back through the lobby. Both looked beaten and Laney's heart constricted.

After speaking with the doctor on the outside sidewalk, Marc strode back inside the hotel. He stopped for a brief moment at the front desk. Although he didn't owe Laney any explanation, he gave her a brief sketch of Pearl's condition. He ended with a solemn vow. "I have to try to get her sober."

"Of course you do." Offering her support, Laney covered his hand with her own, squeezed, then let go. Tears edged to the tips of her lashes. Blinking them away, she stared into

the haunted eyes of the man she loved, and her heart ached even more. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

"You can come see me before you go home tonight."

"You don't want to talk now?"

"No," he said, not quite meeting her eyes, looking as though his mind was still upstairs with his wife. "I need to be alone to think."

"I understand."

She worked the rest of the evening with half her mind linked to Marc's problems, while the other half considered the situation at Charity House. The task of educating so many children at one time was turning out to be more complicated than she'd expected.

She could ask Marc for his advice and maybe even request his assistance in coming up with a solution, but she knew she wouldn't. Marc's obligations were to his wife right now, not Laney or the children or Charity House. She would handle her problems on her own. Like always. And thereby avoid complicating Marc's life any further.

With that thought in mind, she made a decision. Tonight would be her last night in Marc's employ.

The thought depressed her. But it was the only way to ensure they both honored their individual commitments.

Sighing, she handed over the registration book to Rose then went off in search of Marc. She knocked on his office door. Seconds ticked by before she heard a muffled, "Enter."

Stepping only partly into the room, she looked at Marc's bent head. "I need to speak with you."

His head rose from his paperwork, but he didn't speak right away.

Laney fiddled with the doorknob, then decided to say what was on her mind as quickly as possible. She shut the door and turned back to face him. "I've come to give my notice. Tonight will be my last night in your employ."

He looked affronted at first, blinked several times, then nodded slowly. "I suppose it's for the best."

"I wish things had turned out differently between us, but you're married and I can't—"

Before she could finish he came around his desk and caught her against his chest. "I'm going to miss you, Laney."

"I'll miss you, too." She pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "So very much."

With slow, seemingly reluctant movements, he set her away from him. Far enough for propriety sake but close enough she could still smell his clean, masculine scent.

"Will you keep me updated on the children and the orphanage?" he asked. "Let me know if you need something from me, anything at all?"

Braiding her fingers together at her waist, she carefully considered his offer, wondering what his involvement would look like and where they would draw the line. "How would that work, exactly?"

"I'll send Hank out to Charity House on a regular basis. He'll report back to me, let me know if you need anything, see to carrying out any specific action. Laney, I might not be a part of your day-to-day life anymore, but I won't walk away from you and the children completely."

"I—"

He pressed his hand over her lips. "Say yes. Say you'll let me do this for you and the children."

Touched, she worked the idea around in her head. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have Hank come out every so often and check up on us."

"You won't regret agreeing to this." He dropped his hand, but didn't move immediately away from her.

She stared into his eyes and a silent promise flowed between them, one that went beyond words. So caught up in the

moment she didn't hear the door swing open, until it banged against the wall.

"Get away from my husband, you little tramp."

For a moment, Laney couldn't make her mind grasp what was happening.

Marc reached up as though he was going to touch her, but then he pulled his hand back. "Let me handle this."

Still unable to comprehend why the pain in her heart was suffocating her ability to speak, she nodded. But then a slurred, overloud oath hissed in her ear and a jab on her shoulder spun her around. "Leave him alone. He's mine."

Laney's head cleared. "Oh, Pearl, I know that. I was just telling him goodbye."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

Before either Laney or Pearl could say anything else, Marc moved between them.

"You're drunk, Pearl." He grasped her shoulder and turned her around to face him. "You need to follow the doctor's orders and rest."

Pearl shrugged off Marc's hand. "You can't send me off like this." The venom in her tone ripped a gasp out of Laney. "I won't let you."

"I'm not sending you away. I'm sending you upstairs to rest." He caught her under her arms. "You can hardly stand on your own."

Staggering in his grasp, Pearl shifted her blurry eyes to Laney. "*You.*" She stabbed a finger in the air between them. "I've done some checking. I know all about your mother and what she was."

Laney shuddered at the memories Pearl's words conjured up in her mind. The endless fear, waiting and wondering when her mother would be through for the evening. The humiliation of keeping time, thirty minutes a customer.

“You know what they say, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. You might act all innocent and pure, but you’re the same as me.”

“I’m not.”

Pearl dug deeper into the open wound. “Perhaps you don’t sell your body nightly, but you take money from men all the time.”

Marc’s distraught voice meshed into her thoughts. “Don’t listen to her. She’s not in her right mind.”

Laney’s heart broke a little more. “She’s correct, though. I do take money from men. I allowed you to pay off my loan. What does that make me if not the same as my mother?”

“It makes you my friend.”

Pearl snickered with disdain. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

“I didn’t buy your services, Laney.” His voice turned pleading. “I paid off your loan because you’re my friend. And friends help each other in times of need. I would have done the same for Trey.”

She wanted to believe him, *needed* to believe him, but Pearl had done her damage. She’d put an ugly spin on Marc’s act of kindness, tainting it forever in Laney’s mind.

She had to get away, before she broke down in front of him, in front of Pearl.

As if sensing her desperation to escape, Marc reached out to her, but Laney shoved past him. “Goodbye, Marc.”

She strode purposely through the lobby, not once looking back, not even after she’d pushed through the revolving doors and turned on the sidewalk in the direction of Charity House.

This wasn’t how she’d wanted matters to end between them. Nevertheless, she was better off without Marc Dupree in her life. *Right, Lord?*

*Right?*



\* \* \*

With Pearl's voice screeching in his ears, Marc set out after Laney. Hank stopped him at the threshold of his office. "Haven't you hurt her enough already? Can't you leave her with some dignity?"

The scorn in Hank's voice stopped Marc cold. The other man was correct, of course. Marc had to let Laney go. That didn't mean he had to ignore her safety. "Will you see she gets home without incident?"

"Sure, boss. I'll watch over her." Hank's gaze filled with a mixture with accusation, sympathy, and pity. "I always do."

"Holier-than-thou Marc Dupree." Pearl snorted her disgust from behind him. "Always trying to protect his woman of the moment."

Marc gathered his temper with two hard swallows then turned to face Pearl. For the first time since she'd plowed into his office he looked directly into her gaze. Her eyes swam in their sockets, her skin ashen and bloodless. Pearl had gotten ahold of another bottle of laudanum since Shane had left the hotel.

"Where'd you hide the bottle?"

"Does it matter?" She swayed but caught her balance by clawing at his arm. "Now, about your precious little Laney."

"Not another word out of you, Pearl. I mean it."

Her balance wavering, she clutched his arm harder. "Oh, I'm just getting started."

"I'm warning you, now is not the time to push me. I'll take care of you, provide food, clothing and shelter, but I won't stand here and listen to you speak ill of Laney."

A bitter, sinister snarl slipped out of Pearl. The look on her face wasn't human. "Is that threat supposed to scare me? You may be a lot of things, but like I said once before, you don't have it in you to hurt a woman."

Yet he *had* hurt a woman. He'd hurt Laney.

“Perhaps I’ve changed,” he said, his voice low, menace riding under the surface, toying with the last shreds of his control.

“You haven’t changed one bit since I first met you.” She reached up to pat his cheek, her clammy fingers leaving traces of sweat on his skin. “Such a good man. You might have tried to save my wretched soul, but you never even came close. That makes me your greatest failure.”

She buckled over, a violent cough racking her frail body.

Pity running deep, Marc held on to her while she struggled to gain back her control. When she raised her face to his again, the look of utter despair beneath her bravado splintered his anger and gave him hope that he could perhaps save her yet.

“Enough, Pearl. Time for you to get back in bed.” He grasped her by the shoulders and with very little effort herded her to the elevators.

She wheezed through another cough. “You’re coming with me?”

“I’ll get you settled, yes.”

They took the first step out of his office side by side. He supported her full weight by the second. On the third, her knees gave out. He scooped her into his arms. “Get Dr. Bartlett,” he yelled to Rose.

“It’s too late,” Pearl whispered.

Marc remembered the countless ugly thoughts he’d had about this woman since she’d run off with his money, all the times he’d rejoiced over her absence from his life.

Yet now that she was back, he didn’t want her to die like this. He wanted her to live, to fight for another day. And then another. “Don’t give up on me now, Pearl.”

Gulping for air, a spasm contorted her face. “I’m sorry, Marc.”

A lump formed in his throat. “I’m sorry, too.”

“You were too good for the likes of me, Marc Dupree, always too good.”

“We’ve both made our share of mistakes.”

Her eyes fell shut, right before she uttered the two words that set him free at last. “Forgive me.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*



Three mornings later, Laney dragged herself reluctantly awake. Gray, depressing light filtered through the curtains, declaring the start of a new day. As it had every morning since rushing out of the Hotel Dupree, dawn showed up far too soon.

A memory tugged at her tired brain, but Laney brutally shoved it back into a dark corner of her mind and slammed her eyes firmly shut. Her sanity demanded she remain inside her blissfully muddled state a little while longer.

A pounding drummed in her head—rap, rap, rap—growing louder and more forceful with each bang. Still groggy, Laney cracked open her eyes and peered around the room. She tried to focus on anything solid in the shadows, but only watery images danced in front of her.

At least, she slowly realized, the banging had finally stopped.

“Praise the Lord.”

She buried her head back into the pillow’s softness and tried to relax a few more moments before her day began in earnest. Unfortunately, the sound of the door creaking on its hinges intruded into the silence.

“Laney?” Katherine slipped inside the room. “Are you awake?”

“No,” she mumbled into her pillow.

A low chuckle met her response. “Yes, you are.”

“Go away, Katherine.” Laney tugged the blanket over her head. “It’s too early to talk.”

“Perhaps with me, but surely you’ll speak to Mr. Dupree. He’s downstairs, waiting for you on the front porch.”

At the mention of Marc’s name, all the dreadful memories of three nights ago came crashing through her mind. The scene in his office, the accusations in Pearl’s words, the reminder of who Laney’s mother was, the apology in Marc’s eyes. *No*. She couldn’t face him again.

“Tell him to come back later.”

Katherine walked to the window and threw open the curtains. A thin thread of light spilled across Laney’s bed. “Laney O’Connor, this cowardice isn’t like you. You should listen to what Mr. Dupree has come to say to you.”

“I can’t speak with him. Not now.”

*Not ever*. She was too ashamed, too humiliated over how close she’d come to forging a real friendship with him, one that could have grown into something solid and lasting. For all she knew, she might have become dangerously reliant on him, perhaps even turning to him for help and advice on a regular basis.

What had she been thinking? Even through his proxy, Hank, Laney couldn’t continue a relationship with Marc. He was married. Married, married, married. It was imperative she keep reminding herself of that important detail.

Katherine moved to her bedside and sat next to her. “He looks devastated, like he needs a friend.”

Unable to bear knowing that he was hurting, Laney nearly relented. “I still can’t face him.” But, oh, how she wanted to

go to him, to ease his pain, to offer him the compassion he must surely need. "It would be wrong."

"You've done nothing but fall in love with a man who obviously loves you very deeply in return."

Laney covered her eyes inside the crook of her arm. "He's married."

Katherine tapped on her raised elbow. "I'm not saying run away with him, I'm saying go talk to him."

Lowering her arm, Laney lashed out at her friend. "Are you defending him, me? *Us*?"

"Do you need defending?"

No. Not yet. But she loved Marc, knowing he was married to another woman. What did that say about her, about her character? "Why did I have to fall in love with him at all?"

"We don't get to choose who we love." Katherine nudged her shoulder. "Go on, Laney. Go talk to him. Maybe it's time you found out what you're made of."

"What if I'm made of the same stuff as my mother?"

Regarding her with blank, patient eyes, Katherine held her gaze. "Loving a man doesn't make you a woman of questionable virtue. Even loving the *wrong* man doesn't make you one."

"Stop being so wise, it's irritating."

"Good. That means I'm getting through to you. Now, get out of that bed." Katherine tugged her to her feet. "And be the woman of faith and honor I know you are."

Laney sighed, wondering if she really was the woman Katherine thought she was, one who could walk away from the man she loved because it was the right thing to do.

Or was she a woman willing to do anything, no matter how wrong or inappropriate, for the love of her man? The only way to find out was to face Marc again. "Tell him I'll be down shortly."

Katherine pulled her into a tight hug. "I'm proud of you."

“You might want to hold off on that opinion until after I talk to him.”

“I know what I know. I’ll go keep him company while you change.”

After her friend left the room Laney didn’t waste time waffling over what to wear. A simple dress and hairstyle would have to do. After dressing as quickly as possible, she hurried down the stairs. At the bottom, she stopped and drew in a shaky breath. This was her moment of truth.

She could hear voices coming from the front porch. Katherine was speaking softly with Marc. Laney couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but she thought she heard the word school and house and maybe...books? Was Katherine discussing what they’d come up with so far for the children’s education?

Would Marc have some ideas? Would he guide them? Would he—

Enough stalling. This eavesdropping was beneath her.

Stepping onto the porch, Laney’s gaze sought and found the only man she would ever love. As he stared back, unmoving, she took in his disheveled clothing, the fatigue and pain etching across his features. Katherine had been right. The man was indeed distraught.

And his eyes held the yearning that lived in her own soul.

Even after Katherine returned inside the house, Laney still hesitated, trapped in her moment of indecision. She wanted nothing more than to rush to Marc, to soothe away his sorrow, to give whatever he needed from her.

But he was a married man. And although she’d made many mistakes in her life, becoming Marc’s mistress would not be one of them. “I’m sorry,” she said, lowering her head. “I can’t do this. I thought I could, but I can’t.”

Spinning around, she dashed back into the house.

“Laney. Wait.” He caught her by the arm before she could

climb the staircase to her room. “Stop for a moment and listen to me. I need to tell you—”

“No. I won’t sneak around meeting you behind your wife’s back, rationalizing my actions because I love you.”

His gaze gentled and, for a moment, a portion of his pain seemed to lessen. “I love you, too.”

Her stomach dipped. “You’re not playing fair.”

“I suppose I’m not.” He moved closer, touched her arm. “Laney, Pearl is—”

“Your *wife*,” she finished for him.

Before he could say another word she rushed to the back of the house. Afraid he might follow her, perhaps wear her down with one of his compelling arguments, she looked frantically around her. The washroom would have to do. She hurried inside, shut the door behind her and pressed her forehead to the hard wood.

*Oh, Lord, why? Why are You putting us through this temptation, this trial?*

When the expected knock came a few seconds later, she sighed. “Go away, Marc.”

“Let me in, Laney.”

“Go...a...way.”

“I’m not leaving until you hear what I’ve come to say.”

She flattened her palm against the door and thought she felt his warmth, as though he were pressing his hand to the other side in the same spot.

“You’re going to have to trust me long enough to listen to what I’ve come to tell you. But I won’t do it through a locked door.”

“Don’t you understand?” she asked. “I can’t keep drawing close to you, knowing how wrong it is.”

In a low, firm voice he made one simple appeal. “Trust me.”

Trust him. They were back to that, coming full circle, with



Laney no closer to surrendering than she had been weeks ago. If only she believed all would turn out well, that the Lord had everything worked out for their good. “I don’t know how to trust you, Marc.”

“No, I guess you don’t.”

She’d failed him. She heard the truth of it in his voice. Yet she couldn’t make herself take the final leap of faith, couldn’t let go of her own self-reliance long enough to give Marc a chance to have his say.

*Lord, how do I give Marc what he needs without crossing a line? How do I show him support without losing my honor in the process?*

After a long, excruciating moment of silence, Laney dared to whisper his name. “Marc?”

No answer.

Her heart stopped then started again, beating too fast, too erratic. “Marc? Are you still out there?”

Silence.

Hands trembling, she slowly opened the door and peered into the hallway. The *empty* hallway.

Marc had given up on her.

Three days passed without Laney hearing from Marc again. With the children fed and getting ready for bedtime, she lay on her bed, alone, staring up at the ceiling for a moment of respite before saying evening prayers with each of them. If she was honest with herself she’d admit that Marc’s silence hurt.

Of course, she hadn’t sought him out, either, hadn’t once tried to find out how Pearl’s health was holding up. She should have at least done that. First thing in the morning Laney would seek out Hank—not Marc, *Hank*—and ask him about Pearl. Perhaps there was something she could do to

ease the woman's suffering, especially after living through a similar scenario with her own mother.

Flipping onto her stomach, Laney cradled her chin on her hands and sighed. She hated seeing Pearl suffer, hated watching Marc suffer with her.

Several days of hard thinking had brought her to a few conclusions about herself, none of them pleasant. Laney had not tried very hard to make Marc's life easier. She certainly hadn't been gracious when he'd offered her gifts.

Instead of acknowledging his generosity she'd pushed him away at every turn. She'd been afraid to rely on him, even in small matters. Now he was nursing a sick wife while Laney had thought only of herself, and how Marc's situation affected her. She'd always been willing to take chances for others, but never for herself.

The Laney O'Connor that had walked into the Hotel Dupree a month ago hadn't needed help from anyone. She'd been determined to fix her own problems. She hadn't even tried to rely on God, through prayer and patience.

Now she had to ask herself why?

Had she craved the heady satisfaction of facing and beating the odds on her own? Wasn't that the definition of pride?

And wasn't pride the root of most sin?

Laney knew what she had to do.

Her foray into the land of self-pity and misery was at an end. She had to return to work and do whatever she could to help the man she loved, even if all she could offer was a smooth-running front desk.

Taking action was what Laney O'Connor did best. Now was the time to gather her courage and face Marc again, proving to him—and to herself—that their friendship mattered to her, more than her prideful need to rely only on herself.

Decision made, she jumped off her bed and went in search of Katherine. Once she knew what Laney had planned, her

friend was only too happy to take over and settle the children in bed for the night.

Upon entering the Hotel Dupree less than an hour later, Laney wasn't prepared for the shock that stole the air right out of her lungs. Her first impression was that she'd somehow walked into the wrong hotel. But after checking the sign over the entryway two more times, she knew she had the right place.

Taking in the changes, she circled her gaze around the lobby. She was snarling by the time she finished her inspection. Confusion and astonishment made her faint with worry. And anger.

It wasn't just the rancid smoke filling the air, or the layer of grime that had already begun to form on the once shiny fixtures. It was the *feel* of the place. The Hotel Dupree felt more like a saloon than an upscale hotel.

What was Marc thinking?

The clientele mingling in the lobby was not up to his standards. Armed with a temper, Laney headed toward the back of the lobby, stopping short as she came eye to eye with Thurston P. Prescott III.

A sense of foreboding rooted deep inside her soul. "What are *you* doing here?"

Instead of answering her question, his gaze traveled past her face, stopping several inches lower. Under different circumstances Laney would have given into the urge to slap that look off his face. But she needed answers, and from the self-satisfied look on the banker's face, she knew he was the man to ask.

"The question, Miss O'Connor, is what are you doing here?"

She didn't like the hint of triumph in his tone. "I've come to work my shift at the front desk."

"I have all the clerks I need at the moment."

Her stomach rolled. “I don’t understand. Where’s Mar— Mr. Dupree?”

With an amused, predatory smile, Prescott poked a lit cigar to his lips and grinned around the tattered end. “He’s no longer a part of this establishment.”

“What does that mean?”

Prescott’s smile never wavered. “He sold the hotel to me.”

*Sold the hotel?* The sickening churn in her stomach kicked harder, making it difficult to speak clearly. “But Marc would never sell the Hotel Dupree.”

“I can assure you, I speak the truth. We finalized the transaction two days ago.”

“But it can’t be true. He’s worked too hard to make this the most respectable hotel in the West.” She spun around, soaking in the changes, understanding them now. Placing her hand against her heart, she took a calming breath. “You’ve ruined this hotel. What have you done with all the fine crystal and the imported furniture?” She glanced up at the ceiling. “And the exquisite chandelier?”

“Unnecessary extravagances, all of them.” He took a long drag from his cigar and blew the smoke in her face. “I sold the most expensive pieces immediately—at a hefty profit, I might add.”

Prescott placed a solicitous hand on her arm but she shrugged him loose. “You’re nothing but an outlaw.”

“Miss O’Connor, I’m in the business of making money. Now come with me.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Come with you where?”

He offered his hand with such charm she almost took it, before she noticed the malice behind the gesture. “We’ll discuss the terms of my agreement with Mr. Dupree in my office.”

His office? Oh. *Oh*. Prescott really was the new owner of

the hotel. "What could your arrangement with Marc possibly have to do with me?"

"You'll have to wait and see." He headed to the back of the hotel, not bothering to see if she followed.

Laney dashed after him, the sinking feeling in the pit of stomach churning into waves of despair.

Entering the office behind him, she watched as he went directly to his desk and rummaged through the top drawer. While she waited, Laney surveyed the changes here, too.

Where there had once been order now stood chaos. Papers were strewn everywhere. The pictures on the mantel—gone. The armoire—gone. The grand pieces of furniture carefully selected and placed in perfect harmony with one another—replaced with a serviceable desk and three hardback chairs.

Angry righteousness replaced her confusion. "How dare you do this to him?"

"It would appear, Miss O'Connor, that you don't know your lover so well, after all."

She cringed at both the accusation and the ugly summation of her relationship with Marc.

"Do you want to know why he sold me the hotel?"

"Yes."

"It was for this." Prescott shoved a paper at her.

She took the document, but didn't look down, choosing to keep her gaze planted on his. "What is this?"

"The deed to the house next door to your orphanage, listed in your name."

"What?" She couldn't have possibly heard him right.

Impatience replaced Prescott's previous self-satisfaction. "Try to keep up, Miss O'Connor. Marc Dupree sold this hotel and then purchased the house next door to your orphanage. He mentioned something about turning it into a school for those brats of yours."

Marc had bought them a house to turn into a school? But

that couldn't be true. He wouldn't sacrifice this hotel, not even for the children.

Would he?

He'd paid off her loan, yes. And he'd given her a crate of fruit. But the Hotel Dupree was his security, his future. He'd put his heart into this place.

"I can't believe this," she whispered. But she could believe it. Marc Dupree was the best man she knew, the most generous. Purchasing a house to turn into a school was exactly the sort of thing he would do.

"When did you say Marc sold the hotel to you?"

"Two days ago, he came to my office, offering to sell this hotel for a price I couldn't refuse." He smiled in wicked satisfaction, as if he'd duped Marc somehow. Laney doubted that.

"Once we settled on terms," Prescott continued, "I worked out the details for him to purchase the house next to yours."

At last, she looked down at the document in her hand, read the name on the deed to the house. Her name.

*Oh, Marc, you kind man. What have you done?*

"Tell me he had money left over after buying this house."

"How would I know that? Once our business was complete he asked that I give you the deed when next I saw you. He must have known you would come here looking for him."

He'd trusted that she would come to him eventually. He'd known her better than she'd known herself. Suddenly there was too much information for her brain to take in. "I...thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank him. To be honest, Miss O'Connor, I can't fathom why the man did this, especially when he'd only just laid his wife to rest. Or perhaps," he gave her a patronizing grin, "I can fathom why he did it, after all."

Her thoughts snapped to attention. "What did you say?"

"I'm not in the habit of repeating myself." He wrapped

his fingers around her arm and began ushering her out of his office. "Now, it's time for you to leave."

Laney dug in her heels. "Wait. What did you say about his wife?"

"Tragic, really. She died about three or four days ago. An overdose of laudanum, I heard. But you already know that, don't you?"

"Pearl's dead?" She'd known the woman was on a path of self-destruction. But...dead?

Oh, Lord, no. Laney didn't want Marc. Not like this.

It must have happened just after Marc had come to Charity House, pleading with her to listen to him. She'd been so tangled inside her own despair she hadn't realized he'd needed her compassion.

Thinking back, she recalled his glassy eyes, the sorrow lying just below the surface of his appeals.

He'd come for comfort, and she'd banished him without honoring his request. *Oh, Marc, what you must have gone through.*

"Miss O'Connor." Prescott shoved her forward again, impatience meshing into his words. "I insist you leave my hotel."

Too deep inside her confusion, Laney allowed the man to escort her through the hotel lobby. At the revolving doors, she wrenched her arm free and walked outside on her own steam.

Her mind tried to work through all she'd just learned, but one thought kept rising above the others. She'd refused Marc's assistance every time he'd offered it. Yet he continued to provide for her and the children, with the final sacrifice of his hotel.

Urgency had her increasing her pace. She had to find him, had to tell him she understood. And beg him to forgive her.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

What if Marc had left town? What if that was the reason he'd given the deed to Prescott?

The clip-clop of horses' hooves and the creaking of wagon wheels streamed together with the chaotic noises in her mind. She glanced around her, looking at everything and yet seeing nothing. The longer she stood rooted to the spot, the more she grieved for Marc, for Pearl, for what might have been had Laney been a kinder person.

She had to find him, had to tell him how sorry she was for his loss, and then she would thank him for his extraordinary gift. As she marched through the streets of Denver, Laney could only think of one person who would know where Marc was staying.

Marshal Trey Scott.

Turning in the direction of the jailhouse, Laney prayed she wasn't too late. She prayed, with all her heart, that Marc hadn't left town.



## Chapter Twenty-Five



As it turned out, Marshal Scott had left Denver abruptly, not Marc. Trey's newly appointed deputy, Logan Mitchell, had revealed where Marc was staying, after a little wheedling on Laney's part.

Now that she knew where to find Marc, all she had to do was prepare for the most important conversation of her life. She started with prayer.

*Lord, I pray You give me the words that will bring forgiveness and healing, not add more pain, I...* She took a deep breath, braced herself, and finally, simply, let go. *I surrender my future into Your hands.*

Peace filled her, the kind she'd never experienced until this moment. Trusting the Lord was so much easier than she'd expected. A hard lesson learned, one she vowed to remember the rest of her life.

Thankful she'd accepted Sally's gold dress as a gift, Laney studied her reflection in the full-length mirror with a critical eye. Tonight, every detail had to be addressed purposely—nothing could be left to chance.

After making a few more adjustments from different angles she focused once more on her reflection. Perfect. She looked just as she had that first night she'd entered the Hotel

Dupree. The dress hugged her figure as though it had been made for her, setting off her coloring and adding an air of contentment that hadn't been there the last time.

She took special care with the finishing touch. Twisting her hair on top of her head, she pulled a few tendrils loose and smiled at the result.

"You'll do." She picked up her reticule and secured the strings around her wrist.

She was ready.

Or so she thought. The moment she crossed the room a wave of nervousness shot through her stomach, making her knees buckle. She reached out and steadied herself on the doorjamb. The next hour could very well decide the rest of her life.

No. Anxiety had no place here. She had to surrender her need for control. And just...believe.

Head high, she pushed away from the door and marched briskly down the stairs to the front parlor.

"Well?" She spun in a slow circle. "How do I look?"

Katherine smiled. "Exactly like the first time you went to the Hotel Dupree."

Laney plucked at an invisible thread on her skirt then smoothed the material with surprisingly shaky fingers. "Do you think he'll understand why I'm wearing this dress?"

"Mr. Dupree is a smart man." Katherine leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "He'll know what you're up to."

"Is my timing off?" Laney's heart tumbled to her stomach then bounced back up to her throat. "I don't want Marc to think I'm only coming to him now that Pearl is dead."

"Then tell him that." Always the voice of reason, Katherine squeezed her arm. "Explain how sorry you are for his loss."

Laney considered her friend for a moment. "You're very wise. I'm glad I have you in my life."

“I’m glad, too.”

Casting a quick glance around the parlor, Laney pulled one giant gulp of air into her lungs and then stretched out her hand. “Gloves, please.”

Smiling, Katherine slapped them into her palm. “I’ll be right here waiting for you. I’ll want all the details.”

“And so you shall have them.”

For all her bravado, for all her conviction to trust the Lord, Laney still found herself hesitating on the front porch. She took a slow, calming breath. The gesture did little to dispel her nerves. She was, after all, about to tell the man she loved she wanted him in her life, even if he only wanted her friendship for now.

A wave of doubt crested. *Rely on God’s will*, she reminded herself, *not your own*.

With a hard swallow, she shoved the unwanted emotion into submission. This was no time for uncertainty. Yet her feet felt as though they’d accumulated ten pounds of lead, making every step across the porch agonizingly slow.

What happened to all her spunk and fortitude? Where was the Laney O’Connor that only a month ago had defied an arrogant hotel owner, a shady banker and a stern-looking U.S. marshal?

This reluctance was just plain absurd. Pulling herself together, she stepped to the edge of the porch and studied the evening sky. Stars twinkled overhead like white diamonds secured against black fabric. And although the sun had set hours ago, modern gaslights bathed the neighborhood streets in a golden, welcoming glow, as if lighting her path.

Would she find her happy ending tonight?

She had to believe that she would.

But try as she might to think only of what she would say once she found Marc, thoughts of Pearl intruded. Tears

pushed at the back of her eyelids, a reminder of the poor woman's struggles, the same Laney's mother had suffered.

No matter how it might seem to outsiders, Laney had never wanted her own happiness at the expense of Pearl's. But she had to remember that she hadn't brought on the woman's agony. Marc's wife had already been on a path of destruction long before she'd come in search of him at his hotel.

Regardless of how she died, Laney had to make sure Marc understood how sad she was for him, how much she loved him and was willing to wait for him to grieve for his wife, no matter how long that might take.

*What if he doesn't want me anymore?*

No. She couldn't give into doubt now.

At the bottom of the steps she felt her attention pulled to the other side of the fence. Lifting her chin, she connected her gaze with a compelling pair of steel-blue eyes.

Her breathing hitched in her throat. For one, insane moment, every rational thought receded from her mind. But then, the chaos in her head cleared. And she thought, *well, of course he'd come looking for me at the same moment I was heading to find him.*

Riveted into immobility, she continued staring at the handsome man on the other side of the fence. He stared back. Boldly, insistently. *That look*, she thought, that soft, loving gaze sent a shiver tripping along her spine.

His lips curved around a fixed smile.

Oh, my.

*You love him*, she told herself. *With all your heart.*

The reminder helped her recover the necessary courage to open the gate and motion Marc forward.

He stopped within feet of her and ran his gaze over her from her head to toe and back again. "I must say, you look especially lovely this evening."

"You're looking quite handsome yourself." As though by

some sort of silent understanding, he too wore the exact clothing he'd donned the first night they'd met.

Rather than taking away from his severe good looks, the crisp white shirt, red silk vest and matching tie added to the classic elegance and dignity that defined him.

Her feet itched to cross the short divide between them, to throw herself into his arms, but she forced her feet to remain where they were. This was her one chance to show him how much she'd changed since last he'd been here.

He'd given her many gifts during their short acquaintance. She hoped to give him one in return. The one that mattered most. Her trust.

"I have something important to say to you," she began. "But first, I want you to know how sorry I am for your loss. You must know I never wished Pearl dead."

"Nor did I." His eyes clouded over with sadness.

She wanted to reach out to him, to comfort him, but she could see he still had more to say.

"I thought I could change Pearl, save her from the life she'd chosen." Threading fingers through his hair, his eyes darkened to a turbulent blue. "But she didn't want my help. I guess she never did. Her life was a tragedy begun long before I ever met her."

He was probably right. But Laney could see how Pearl's determination to destroy herself hurt him. Although Prescott had told Laney about Pearl's overdose, she wasn't sure she could trust the man to have told her the truth. "How did she die?"

"She took an overdose of laudanum shortly after she railed at you in my office."

Laney's heart sank. "I hate to think our confrontation in your office pushed her over the edge."

"Neither of us killed her. That much I know. Pearl made her choices. She consumed an entire bottle of laudanum after

she'd already had too much whiskey in her system. Shane said she might have survived had she stuck to one or the other, but together..." His words died off, the rest of his explanation unnecessary.

Laney sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you when you came to me the other day. I never stopped to think that Pearl might have died and you needed my comfort."

"These weeks have been hard on us all."

"Forgive me," she said.

"It's I who needs forgiveness." He folded his arms across his chest, as though needing to keep his distance still. "When I first met you, I had a hard heart. I was consumed with taking back what I thought others had stolen from me. But knowing you and loving you changed me. I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish and it all seemed meaningless. Like I was chasing the wind."

"Oh, Marc, I wasn't much better, intentionally misleading you to believe I was untrustworthy. Can you ever forgive me for my foolish pride? For thinking I could face the world alone, without your help?"

"It's never been about me forgiving you. It's always been about you forgiving yourself."

He was right. So, so right. "I know that now. Most of my mistakes were rooted in my pride. I pushed your help away because I wanted to cling to the very independence that in the end provided me with only loneliness and misery. I want you in my life. However you'll have me."

At last, he closed the distance between them and pulled her into his embrace. Burying his face in her hair, he breathed in deeply. "Laney, honey, it was your willingness to fight the odds on the behalf of the children that showed me the meaning of love. I want to live like that, to love like that, to make sacrifices for the people in my life."

Laney's heart constricted, knowing he'd already done so,

by selling his hotel. "I know you sold your hotel and bought the house next door for us to start a school. I... That is... Thank you." She tightened her arms around him. "*Thank you* for sacrificing your future for Charity House."

He lifted his head, and gave her the smile she loved so much. "I'm still a very wealthy man. Even if I'd given the hotel away for free I would have had plenty of money to keep our orphanage afloat for a very long time."

It wasn't the revelation of his wealth that took her by surprise, but the way he referred to Charity House as *our orphanage* that told her everything would work out for them.

But just to be sure...

"Are you saying you want to be a part of all this?" Laney waved her hand in the general direction of the house behind her.

"I'm all yours. However *you'll* have me."

She nestled deeper into his arms. "Does that mean you're going to make me an honest woman someday, once you're finished grieving for Pearl?"

"Laney O'Connor, is that your subtle way of asking me to marry you?"

"Only if your answer is yes."

He crushed his mouth to hers for a long, slow, sweet kiss. "That's a yes, in case I didn't make my intentions clear."

Oh, how she loved this man. "Well, then, to avoid any further confusion..."

She sealed her lips to his, the gesture silently promising them both a lifetime of trust in one another, faith in the Lord, and love.

Lots and lots of love.

## *Epilogue*



Six months from the day she'd first walked into the Hotel Dupree, Laney waited for the preacher to give her the cue to enter the main parlor of her home. She couldn't think of a more fitting place to marry the man she loved than right here at Charity House in front of all the children.

Marc had eased into his new role at the orphanage with the same focus and integrity he'd displayed in all other aspects of his life. For a man who had no children of his own, he'd quickly become a much-needed father figure around the house.

After the wedding, he would officially become a permanent member of their family. And Laney couldn't be more pleased.

So far, her wedding day was turning out far better than she'd hoped. The snow had held off another day, despite spitting out a warning the evening before. The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun a bright orange ball of fire, the air crisp and dry.

The children were on their best behavior. Even more surprising, the preacher had arrived on time, a minor phenomenon since he was a traveling man of God who spent most of his time ministering in mining camps, brothels and saloons.



They'd been fortunate Pastor Beau had been able to make the trip to Denver this week.

Everything about Laney's wedding day was turning out perfect, except for one minor detail. Katherine. Or rather, Katherine's unusual behavior.

The young woman stood beside Laney, shifting from foot to foot, wringing her hands in a way women twice her age were known to do.

"Katherine, what's the matter?" Laney had never seen her friend so ill at ease. "Anyone looking at you would think you weren't happy about this wedding."

"Oh, Laney, I'm happy for you and Mr. Dupree. So very, very happy." She released a heartfelt sigh. "Truly, I am. Your future husband is the best thing that ever happened to you, to us, to Charity House."

Katherine sounded sincere, yet the tight seam of her mouth and the lines of worry around her eyes spoke of a tension that belied her words. "Then why the sudden nerves? Are you concerned about Marc moving into the house? Is that what's put you in this odd mood?"

"No, of course not. The children need a father and Mr. Dupree is such a good influence. It's..." she leaned backward on her heels and tossed a quick glance into the parlor "...his friend."

"Hank?" But that couldn't be right. Hank wasn't even here. He'd left for San Francisco days ago, having secured a job as a manager at a brand-new hotel.

"No. I'm talking about Marshal Scott. It's...he's...I'm..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm not comfortable around him."

"Are you afraid of Trey?" Laney couldn't blame Katherine if she was. Marc's brother-in-law could be rather intimidating. Until he smiled. Then he looked like a big kid in a grown man's body.

Laney would have to make sure Trey smiled at Katherine more often. That gesture alone would help put her friend at ease. Above all else, Laney wanted Katherine comfortable around the lawman, as comfortable as she herself had become despite their initial rocky start. Not only was Trey Marc's family, but he was surprisingly good with the children. In fact, they liked him almost as much as they liked Marc.

Shuddering slightly, Katherine glanced in the parlor once again. "I'm not afraid of Marshal Scott, precisely. It's just, he's so big and he scowls a lot and..." Katherine shook her head "...I'm not being truthful, am I? All right, yes, I find the man a bit daunting. Maybe if he wouldn't frown so much or if he'd try to speak in full sentences around me, maybe then I would find him less...overwhelming."

Overwhelming? Katherine found Trey *overwhelming*? Now wasn't that an interesting word choice? Laney would definitely have to make sure the man smiled at her friend more often. That might actually do both of them some good.

"But today isn't about me, or my silly anxieties." Katherine yanked Laney into a hug and held on tight. "Today is about you and Mr. Dupree and your happily-ever-after. Now." She stepped back and gave Laney a genuine smile. "Are you ready to marry the man of your dreams?"

The question sent Laney's heart kicking hard against her ribs. "Yes, please."

"Well, then, stop stalling and get a move on." Katherine's eyes twinkled with affection as she spun on her heel. "All you have to do is follow me. I know the way."

Smiling after her friend—and relieved Katherine had returned to being, well, Katherine—Laney counted slowly to ten. When she was satisfied she'd waited long enough, she entered the parlor.

Gasps filled the air, as well as a few raucous hoots from the older boys. Everyone she cared about was in this room

waiting to witness her wedding. Yet all Laney could concentrate on was the man smiling at her from the other end of the room. Marc. The love her life. The most handsome, kind, honorable man she'd ever known. In a matter of minutes he would become her husband.

But not if she stayed rooted to the spot, staring at him like a lovesick cow. At least he had a smitten expression on his face as well.

Laughing at herself, at him, at them both, she picked up her feet and trekked through the room. Toward her future.

When she stopped in front of Marc he broke with tradition by pulling her into his arms and planting a kiss on her lips. When he finally pulled his head away, he looked very pleased with himself.

Laney was rather pleased with him, too.

“Ready to become my wife?”

“More than ready.” She leaned in for another kiss but a masculine clearing of a throat stopped her mid-pursuit.

“Perhaps we should proceed as quickly as possible.”

Laney dutifully took her place because, just as Pastor Beau had suggested, she wanted to become Marc's wife *as quickly as possible*.

Instead of reprimanding them for their untraditional behavior, Pastor Beau gave both the bride and groom an indulgent smile.

Most of the girls at Charity House were a little dazzled by the young rebel preacher. No wonder. Not only was he on fire for the Lord, but he had tawny hair, classically handsome features and mesmerizing eyes. He could have easily found success on the American stage as he had as a traveling preacher. In fact, it was rumored he came from a famous Shakespearean acting family that toured all over the world.

As if to prove Laney's point, a few female sighs filled the air, and then a few more.

Unaware of the attention he was drawing, Pastor Beau opened his Bible and began. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

With happy tears welling in her eyes, Laney listened intently to every word of the ceremony. When it was her turn to promise to love, honor and cherish Marc, in sickness and in health, for as long as they both shall live, she did so in a bold, strong voice.

She stared lovingly into Marc's eyes as he did the same, silently thanking the Lord for turning their sorrow into joy and their weeping into laughter. Over the last six months, prayer and a shared faith in the Lord had healed the pain of their individual pasts.

Although the wait had seemed interminable, Laney knew they'd been right to hold off getting married until all remnants of the past were truly behind them.

The ceremony came to a close all too quickly. "...I now pronounce you husband and wife."

When Marc pulled her into his arms a second time, he sealed their union with a long, lingering kiss that had the children cheering, Katherine no doubt blushing and Trey laughing as loudly as Pastor Beau.

With her family and friends in the room, with the sound of their happiness ringing in the air, Laney couldn't think of a better way to start her life as Marc's wife. God had protected them through several trials already. And Laney knew that as long as she and Marc continued to allow the Lord to guide them they would be able to face any challenge that came their way.

They had a wild adventure ahead of them and she was

ready for every twist and turn to come. Because she knew  
Marc would never leave her side.

And she would never leave his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing CHARITY HOUSE COURTSHIP. I hope you enjoyed following Laney's bumpy ride to happily-ever-after with the incomparable Marc Dupree. Although this is the fifth book published in the Charity House series, this particular story actually came first. Or as I like to say: Where it all began.

I'm often asked where I get my ideas. I never know how to answer that question. Mainly because each new story unfolds in a different manner than the last, thereby making the process difficult to explain once I reach the end. However, in this particular case, I can remember the precise moment when the idea for Charity House came to me.

I was at a writer's conference, still unpublished and waiting for my big break. I didn't know what I was going to write next, but I knew I wanted it to be special. For our luncheon entertainment the conference committee brought in a group who reenacted life in the Old West. When the ladies came around to the concept of birth control for prostitutes, or rather the lack thereof, I sat up a little taller. When they mentioned what happened to the babies when these shady ladies found themselves in trouble, I knew I had my idea.

Charity House is based on the baby farms in the Old West. Along the same vein as those unique orphanages, Charity House is a place where prostitutes leave their children so they can continue in their chosen profession, with one very real difference. Laney has turned her orphanage into a home filled with unconditional love, grace and mercy for the boys and girls society has scorned. Now that's what I call a happy ending!

I always love hearing from readers. Please contact me at my website [www.reneeryan.com](http://www.reneeryan.com).

In the meantime, happy reading!  
Renee Ryan

## Questions for Discussion

1. What led Laney to the Hotel Dupree in the opening? Why must she conduct her business that night? What will she lose if she fails? Have you ever been in a situation that left you desperate to find an immediate solution, even if it's not the best solution? What did you do and what was the result?
2. When Marc first sees Laney in his hotel, what conclusion does he draw about her character? What leads him to think the worst? Have you ever jumped to an immediate conclusion about someone only to learn later you were wrong? Explain.
3. What does Marc do when he confronts Laney in the lobby? How does her behavior lead him to believe he's correct about her character? In terms of diffusing the situation, what could either of them have done differently?
4. How does Laney eventually get away from Marc's trap? In your opinion, is she justified in her action? Did Marc's appearance in the alley surprise you? Why or why not?
5. What do you think about Charity House and Laney's mission to provide a solid Christian home for the children? Had you ever heard of "baby farms" before reading this book? Did this information change how you thought of the Old West? How?
6. Where does Laney go the next morning? What happens at the bank to make matters worse for her and her or-



phanage? What do you think is behind Prescott's stipulation that Laney pay interest on her loan?

7. What offer does Marc make Laney outside the bank? What leads him to make this offer? Why does Laney accept? What does she have to lose if Marc confronts Joshua Greene?
8. What does Trey think about the lifestyle Marc has chosen for himself? What advice does he give Marc? Have you ever had an accountability partner who called you out like that? What happened?
9. What does Trey think about Laney and how does he characterize her to Marc? On what basis does he make this assumption? How does Marc respond? Have you ever been quick to judge someone's character, only to discover you were wrong? What did you do?
10. How does Marc find out about Charity House? What warning does he give Laney when he discovers the risks she's taken to provide a home for the children? How does Laney justify her actions?
11. Why does Laney refuse Marc's offer of financial assistance? What in her past has led her to believe she can't rely on anyone but herself? How does Marc react when she turns him down? Have you ever tried to help someone for all the right reasons, only to have them still mistrust your motives? Explain.
12. What gift does Marc give Laney and the children? How does Laney react at first? What changes her mind?

13. What mistake from Marc's past shows up in the hotel? How does Laney react?
14. What happens at the local school when the Charity House children show up on the first day? What does Laney do in their defense? What solution does she ultimately come up with?
15. What does Marc decide to do about Pearl? Why does he make this decision? How does this decision affect Laney? What other, if any, options could Marc have pursued, given his moral character and Pearl's condition?
16. What sacrifice does Marc make for Laney and the children? How does this prove how far he's come since their first meeting? Does Laney's acceptance of his gift show her growth as well? How?