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LORI COPELAND



the **Maverick**



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The Maverick

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Designed by Catherine Bergstrom

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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CHAPTER 1

Six years later, Saint Louis, Missouri

Thunder cracked then rolled along the quiet residential street. A young woman hurried on her way, her hand placed strategically on top of her head to prevent the gusty wind from carrying off her plucky straw hat.

Susanne McCord didn't mind the inclement weather, but she did wish the rain could have held off for another thirty minutes. Fat drops peppered down on the cobblestoned streets, scenting the air with the smell of summer rain.

She smiled, thinking of the changes the past six years had brought. She'd arrived at her Aunt Estelle Merriweather's a spoiled, flighty, temperamental young woman yearning for fun and parties. Instead she had found a dedicated woman struggling to maintain a small orphanage in her home. Now her aunt was gone, and Susanne was in charge of the children.

Her shoes skipped gingerly over the gathering puddles, her eyes scanning the numbers printed on the towering houses. The

three-story frame dwellings nearly took her breath with their lovely stained-glass windows and hand-carved doorways.

When lightning flashed as bright as a noonday sun, she peered at the address scrawled on a scrap of paper that was fast becoming soggy in her hand.

Her feet flew purposefully up the walk as the heavens opened to deliver a torrential downpour. Pausing to catch her breath, Susanne stood for a moment under the shelter of the porch eaves, watching the rain pelt down. She noticed the old lamplighter, already soaked to the skin, hastily making his way down the street.

She called out, inviting him to take cover with her. He turned and scurried up the walk, his head bent low against the driving rain.

“Terrible, isn’t it?” Susanne commented as the white-haired gentleman removed his top hat and shook the rain off.

“’Tis for certain, little lass.” He grinned and his wizened face broke into a wreath of wrinkles. He set his lantern down and extended a friendly hand. “Thaddeus McDougal here.”

Susanne returned his greeting. “Susanne McCord. It looks like we’re in for a good one.” Susanne had never acknowledged her married name, nor did she ever plan to. Since their journey from Kansas to Saint Louis, she had not seen Cass Claxton again. They had parted on bad terms, with Susanne declaring she would see him again when hades froze over.

Thaddeus sighed. “Aye, it does at that, lass.”

“Well, we can always use the rain.”

“’Tis true, ’tis true.” Thaddeus glanced about the massive porch, mild curiosity on his face. “Wasn’t aware the old house had finally been sold.”

“Oh, I don’t think it has.” Susanne noticed that the house was not in the best of repair. The porch sagged, the paint was peeling, and several shutters flapped haphazardly in the blowing rain. It didn’t matter though—it looked beautiful to her. “I’m here to see about acquiring its use.”

“Eh? Well . . .” Thaddeus’s pale gaze roamed over the peeling porch ceiling. “Old Josiah would be upset if he could see his house now. Used to brim with love and laughter, it did.” His eyes grew misty with remembrance. “Josiah never had children of his own, you know, but he took in every stray he could find. Fine man, he was. The world lost a bit of sunshine when Josiah Thorton was laid to rest.”

“I never knew him,” Susanne admitted.

“Fine man.” Thaddeus sighed again. “Well now, little lass, why be you tryin’ to acquire such a big old barn of a house?”

“I’m looking for a place big enough to be a home for nine children.”

“Nine children!” Thaddeus took a step back, eyes wide. “Beg pardon, miss, but you don’t look old enough to have nine wee bairns.”

Susanne smiled at his obvious bewilderment. “I’m overseer of a small orphanage. The bank has been forced to sell the home we’re presently living in, and someone mentioned that this house was empty. I’ve looked unsuccessfully for weeks for somewhere to move the children, so when I heard about the house I hurried right over.” Her forehead creased with a frown. “I’m sorry to hear the owner’s passed on.”

Losing Aunt Estelle’s house had been a blow, but running an orphanage was not a profitable business venture, and Estelle had been forced to mortgage her home for operating expenses.

Now Susanne was desperate to find somewhere to shelter the children.

“Aye, Josiah died about a year ago.”

“Then his family will be disposing of the property?”

Thaddeus frowned. “Josiah didn’t have any family—least-ways, not that I know about. Rumor has it that he had a business associate, though. Could be he can tell you what’s to be done with the house.”

“And how might I contact this business associate?” Susanne hoped that wouldn’t prove to be another time-consuming delay. The orphanage had to be out of its present location by the end of the month.

“Well . . .” Thaddeus stepped over to the legal notice nailed to the porch railing and peered through his wire-rimmed spectacles. “It says here that anyone wanting information about his property should contact a Mr. Daniel Odolp, Attorney-at-Law.”

Susanne took a small pad from her purse and prepared to scribble down the address. “Does Mr. Odolp reside here in Saint Louis?”

“Aye, his office is close by.” Thaddeus read the address aloud for her.

“Oh, that’s not far.”

“Only a wee jaunt.”

“I wonder if Mr. Odolp would still be in his office.”

Thaddeus reached into his waistcoat and took out a large pocket watch. He flipped open the case and held the face of the watch toward the receding light. “Depends on how late he works. It’s nigh on six o’clock.”

Six o’clock. Susanne doubted Mr. Odolp would be working this late, but since she’d be passing by his office anyway, it

wouldn't hurt to check. "Thank you, Thaddeus." Susanne replaced the pencil and pad in her purse and reassessed the inclement weather. It wasn't raining hard—just a nice, steady drizzle. "I'll go by and see if Mr. Odolp is still in his office," she decided.

"But it's still raining."

Susanne shrugged and gave Thaddeus a bright smile. "I won't melt."

"Well now, you just might. You're an unusually pretty piece of fluff with that flaxen hair and those violet-colored eyes. If you had wings you'd look like an angel," he finished wistfully.

"A half-drowned angel, surely, but I appreciate the lovely compliment. It's been nice talking with you, Thaddeus." Susanne reached down and quickly removed her shoes and stockings, then her hat. It was senseless to ruin them. Her toes peeked out from under the hem of her skirt.

Thaddeus grinned. "A barefoot angel. Nice visiting with you, lass." He picked up his lantern. "I must be about my work. It'll be full dark soon."

Susanne watched the old lamplighter step off the porch. A chance meeting and now they would go their separate ways. One set out to light folks' pathways; the other to find a home for nine waifs and strays.

Aunt Estelle had been a devoted, God-fearing woman who had taken seriously the commandment to give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. No child had been turned away from her door. When Susanne had worried about unpaid bills, her aunt had quoted her favorite Scripture: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving

the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.’ Romans 12:10-13.”

Estelle Merriweather had lived those words. She had been patient when times were hard, diligent in prayer, rejoicing in hope and believing that God would provide.

Susanne dodged another puddle. Well, she had been as patient as possible, which she acknowledged wasn’t saying all that much, and the good Lord knew she spent a prodigious amount of time on her knees. But she felt the hope in her own heart was a feeble candle flame compared to the blazing torch of steadfast confidence that had filled her aunt’s every waking moment.

Still, she had learned to trust in God’s tender care. She sighed. Hope. It was all she had to cling to.

“Lord, I’m *hoping* you will help me get that house.”



Saint Louis, Missouri, had been the gateway to the West for adventurers, explorers, traders, missionaries, soldiers, and settlers of the trans-Mississippi. Founded in 1764 by Pierre Laclede Liguist, a French trader, it began as a settlement for the development of the fur trade. One hundred and ten years later the area had turned into a thriving waterfront town where cotton, lead, pelts, gold from California, and silver from New Mexico poured through shipping lanes along the busy Mississippi levee. It was said that Saint Louis was admired for her

hospitality, good manners, high society, virtue, and the sagacity of her women.

One such woman hurried through the night, intent upon her mission. Susanne could hardly believe her good fortune when she rounded the corner leading to the landing and saw the faint lantern glow spilling from a window of a second-story office.

Prominently displayed in bold black print across the window was DANIEL R. ODOLP, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW.

She covered the short distance to the building and climbed the steep stairs leading to the second floor. A few minutes later she tapped softly on Mr. Odolp's door.

"Yes?" boomed a deep voice that brought nervous flutters to Susanne's stomach. The man sounded like a giant.

"Mr. Odolp?"

"Yes!"

"I . . . I wonder if I might speak with you?"

Susanne heard a shuffling, then the sound of chair legs being scraped across a wooden floor. Heavy footsteps approached the doorway.

She swallowed, her throat gone dry. With only a small tallow candle splitting the shadows of the dark, narrow, forbidding hallway, she suddenly wished she'd decided to wait until morning to make her visit. Just as she was turning to leave, the door was abruptly flung open.

"Yes?"

The man standing in the doorway was indeed a giant, at least six feet five. Bushy dark brows nested over his beady black eyes. His face was pockmarked, and his jowls hung heavily on his neck. Sweat beaded profusely on his ruddy forehead.

Susanne thought he was the most unattractive and intimidating man she'd ever encountered.

"Mr. Odolp?" she asked meekly.

"I am Mr. Odolp!" he barked. "Good grief, woman, are you deaf?"

Susanne drew herself up stiffly, perturbed by his appalling lack of gentility. "No, sir, but I shall be if you continue to speak to me in that tone."

"You called my name," he boomed, "and I answered. You implied you wanted to speak to me, and when I opened the door, you asked *again* if I was Mr. Odolp. Naturally, one would assume you have a hearing problem."

Susanne jumped as he bellowed again.

"*Yes*, I am Mr. Odolp!"

"Well, you needn't keep shouting." She lifted her skirts and brushed past him.

He closed the door and stalked back to his desk, his eyes grimly surveying her bare feet. "Where are your shoes and stockings, young lady?"

Susanne glanced down and blushed. Her shoes were still in her hand, along with her hat and stockings. She must look as strange to him as he did to her. "I'm sorry . . . it was raining."

"What brings you to my door at this hour?" the attorney demanded, curtly dismissing her stammering explanations. He sat down and reached for a wooden box filled with cigars, selected one, bit off the end, and spat the fragment into the wastebasket. His chair creaked and moaned with the burden of his weight.

Susanne flinched at his lack of manners, but her demeanor remained calm. "I understand that you're handling Josiah Thorton's estate?"

“I am.” The lawyer held a burning match to the cigar and puffed, blowing billowing wisps of smoke into the air.

The humidity in the room was stifling. Susanne fanned smoke away from her face. “I was wondering if Josiah’s house is going to be sold.”

“Which one?”

“Does he have more than one?”

Mr. Odolp turned his face upward and hooted uproariously. “Does he have more than one? You’re not serious!”

“I’m afraid I didn’t know Mr. Thorton personally.”

“I’m afraid you didn’t either.” Mr. Odolp fanned out the match, propped his feet on top of his desk, and took a long draw on his cigar. “Exactly which house did you have in mind, honey?”

Susanne felt her hackles rise at his growing insolence. “The one on Elm Street. And my name is Miss McCord, sir.”

“Well, what do you want to know, Miss McCord?”

“Some details about the house. For instance, who will be disposing of the property?”

“The house was jointly owned.”

“By whom?”

“Josiah and his business partner.” Mr. Odolp brought his feet back to the floor and stood up. He lumbered to the files and rummaged for a few minutes before extracting a thick folder. “Since Josiah had no immediate family, we’re waiting to see if anyone steps up to claim his estate.” Mr. Odolp grinned as though he knew his next remark would certainly shock her.

“Josiah’s partner wants to be sure there aren’t any illegitimate Thortons waiting in the wings.”

Susanne was taken aback by his speculation and annoyed at

his continuing impudence in a lady's presence. "And if there aren't?"

"Then the Thorton estate reverts to Josiah's partner." Mr. Odolp sighed, and Susanne detected a note of envy. "A sizable fortune, I might add. The partner will then decide what he wants to do with the property."

"Exactly how long will it be before a decision is made?"

"Six months or longer."

Susanne walked to the window and looked down on the rain-slicked streets. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. The house was exactly what she was looking for. Undoubtedly there were others available in town, but none so well suited to her purpose.

She'd hoped to stay in the house longer, but six months would be sufficient. If she could persuade Josiah's partner to lease the house to her for six months, it would alleviate her immediate problem. At least she and the children would have a roof over their heads until she could make other arrangements. "Would it be possible for me to speak with Mr. Thorton's business associate?"

"I see no need to bother him. What is it you want?"

Susanne turned from the window, meeting his beady eyes. "I would prefer to speak to the partner in private, Mr. Odolp."

"And he would prefer you to speak to me."

"Then let me phrase it differently." Susanne let a hint of coolness creep into her manner. "I *insist* on speaking to Josiah Thorton's business partner."

"You can't."

Susanne arched one brow. "Does the name Silas Woodson ring a bell with you, Mr. Odolp?"

"The governor?"

“Yes, the governor of Missouri.” Susanne tapped her finger on her cheek thoughtfully. “You see, Uncle Silas would be quite distressed to learn of this conversation—”

Daniel Odolp’s eyes widened. “Now, now, let’s not jump to conclusions. I’ll help you if I can.” She could almost see him thinking that if the governor was the chit’s uncle, he’d better be a bit more cordial. His manner changed abruptly. “I don’t like to have my clients bothered . . . but in this particular case I’m sure I can bend my rules a bit.”

He reached hastily for a pen and paper. “Now, I’ll just jot down the name and address of Josiah’s partner. There’s no need to tell him where you got this information, of course—”

“None at all.”

Daniel slapped the piece of paper into her hand. “How is your uncle these days?”

“Oh, very busy.”

“I can imagine.”

Susanne nodded. “He and my dear mama are brother and sister, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Well, I must be off, Mr. Odolp.” She folded the paper carefully and slipped it into her bag. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Daniel rose and extended his hand, his manner noticeably more pleasant. “Always happy to oblige, Miss McCord. Must you be leaving so soon?”

Susanne smiled. “I do wish I had time to stay and chat.”

“Stop by anytime. Always happy to visit.”

“I will.”

Susanne clutched her shoes, stockings, and hat as she

walked to the door. She'd pulled it off! Aunt Estelle would have disapproved of her tactics, but under the circumstances even she would tolerate this one tiny deception.

"Good evening, Mr. Odolp."

"Good evenin', ma'am. You say hello to the governor for me."

"I will. He'll be ever so pleased to hear from you."

Once safely outside, Susanne hurried down the steep stairway and out onto the street, still grinning from her victory. She did have one qualm—mainly that God might not approve of her methods. "Lord, I'm sorry if I sort of edged outside of the bonds of truth, but You know I just have to have that house. There is no other answer."

Pausing to catch her breath under the streetlight, she reached into her purse and carefully unfolded the paper the attorney had given her. Her eyes widened, and she felt a hot flush creep up her neck when she read the name printed in bold black letters.

Cass Claxton

Cass Claxton! She had to force back a rush of hysteria.

Great day in the morning! Cass was Josiah Thorton's business partner?



Late-afternoon sun spilled across the Aubusson carpets in the elegant room. Golden rays bathed the fine furniture and the tasteful art hanging on pewter-colored walls. Dark mahogany bookcases contained the finest array of world literature. Cass

Claxton was a wealthy man in earthly ways, but when it came to keeping a woman happy he was poor as a widow's mite.

"It is getting late," the young woman observed.

"So it is." He shuffled through a stack of papers, finding that his heart wasn't in the upcoming social event. Shadows had lengthened and turned to a rosy hue when Laure Revuneau eased from the window and approached the desk.

"*Mon cheri*, you will make us late for the party," she reproached. "Can this work not wait until morning?"

Cass lazily grinned at her, stemming her hopes of serious reprimand. "Laure, my love, I can think of a hundred things I'd rather do with you than attend another one of your Saturday soirees."

She sighed. "*Cheri*, I do not understand you at times. They are not merely *soirees*. My father is the French consul. I have many responsibilities, not the least being to uphold Papa's image."

He reached out and caressed the curve of her cheek. Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her. Kissing always silenced a woman's complaints.

"*Mon pauvre cheri*," she whispered when their lips finally parted. She sympathetically traced the tip of her finger around the outline of his lips. "Do you truly hate my parties so?"

"With a passion. So why do you insist that I attend?"

"Because, it . . . it is something a man of your importance should do."

Cass threw back his head and laughed heartily at her simplistic reasoning.

Laure affected a pout. "Do not laugh at me, *mon cheri*. Someday we will be called upon to host many parties in our own home," she reminded.

He tensed at her thinly veiled reference to marriage—her hints were coming up with unnerving regularity these days. “I’m sure your social responsibilities must be burdensome, but may I say you handle it with elegance and charm that other women can only envy.”

“Oh, *merci, cheri*. I have wondered if you’d noticed.” She moved gracefully across the room to adjust a vase of fresh flowers.

Cass sat down behind the desk, his eyes going back to the documents in hand. “Would it honestly upset you if I failed to attend the party tonight?”

Laure looked distressed but not surprised by his inquiry. He’d never enjoyed social functions so it couldn’t have been a surprise to her. He watched as she carefully rearranged a large white magnolia. “You have pressing business?”

The sun’s sinking rays formed a halo around her hair, making it appear as rich as black velvet. Watching her domestic efforts, Cass smiled. She was lovely, rich, and God-fearing. And he wasn’t in love with her.

There had been many women in his life, and none could match Laure Revuneau’s beauty. But marriage—his marriage—was the last thing on his mind.

“Business could wait,” he admitted, returning to the subject. “I’m just not in the mood to socialize.”

She tilted her head coquettishly. “You are not in the mood for my company?”

“My dear, you are lovely to look at, but I’m not in the mood for a party.”

Laure finished the busywork, then turned and faced him. “I wish you would change your mind. Many of your business associates will be there.”

“I thought it was some sort of charity function,” Cass murmured absently.

“*Vraiment*, truly, but the guest list is quite impressive. I’ve invited everyone having the tiniest bit of social prominence—”

“And money,” he speculated.

She laughed softly. “*Oui*, most assuredly those who have *richesse*.”

Cass knew her angle. He was arguably considered to be the most eligible yet the most unobtainable bachelor in town—and the young Frenchwoman was not unaware that he was a highly successful entrepreneur with valuable connections to the wealthiest people.

Cass had contacts that Laure drew upon regularly. Because of his various holdings in shipping, cotton, lead, and even silver from Mexico, he could be a real asset for a man in her father’s position.

Laure’s candid admission of where her values lay annoyed Cass. The last thing he wanted was to mingle in a smoke-filled room with the idle rich. “Why don’t I make a donation to whatever it is you’re supporting and let it go at that?”

Laure arched a supercilious brow, her smile tantalizing. “I don’t want to press you for more than you can afford. I realize you have your own charities.”

He frowned at her. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

She smiled. “I met Reverend Dawson yesterday. He told me how grateful their church is for the new steeple you provided them.”

Cass shrugged. “They needed a steeple. I had the money. Nothing to make a fuss over.”

“And the new organ for the Methodist church? the wagonload of meat and vegetables for the Sheltered Souls Mission? Ah. I know your secrets.”

“Not all of them, surely.” He smiled at her. “That doesn’t mean I have to attend every charity benefit in town.”

Laure turned, and Cass noticed that her lower lip curled with displeasure. “Please, *mon cheri* . . . you must come . . . for me?”

Cass hated it when she—or any woman, for that matter—tried to pressure him. “Laure, I don’t want to argue about this.”

“But Papa will wonder where you are . . . and so will my friends!” She crossed the room and knelt beside the desk, grasping his hand. “Please! It will be the last party I will ask you to attend this week.” She stared up at him, eyes wide with expectation.

“This week?” Cass shook his head with amusement. It was Friday.

“Say you will come, *cheri*.” Laure lightly kissed the palm of his hand.

“Laure . . .”

“*S’il te plaît?*”

He sighed, realizing she was going to be stubborn about it. “All right, but I won’t promise to stay the evening.”

“*Merci beaucoup, mon cheri!*” Joyfully she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him breathlessly. “You will not regret it, *cheri* . . . I promise.”

He wasn’t optimistic, but it was difficult to refuse her when she looked at him with those wide turquoise eyes.

“I will instruct Sar to prepare your bath.” Laure rose and leaned over to kiss him fiercely. “Try to arrive before dinner. It will please Papa.”

Blowing one final kiss, she hurried from the room, leaving a faint trace of her expensive French perfume in the air. When the study door closed behind her, Cass rested his head against the

chair back. He didn't plan to hurry. He even toyed with the idea of going back on his promise to attend the party, but after mulling over the consequences such a reversal would bring, he concluded it wouldn't be worth all the tears and fury.

Afterward he would stop by the club for a visit. An hour or two of complete solitude. It had been a lucky day when his old friend, Josiah Thornton, had asked young, callow Cass Claxton to come to Saint Louis and be his business partner. Cass had worked hard and been instrumental in expanding their investments, and he'd prospered beyond anything he'd ever dreamed.

He leaned back in his chair, thinking that sometimes he longed for the old days on the farm with his brothers, Beau and Cole, and his mother, Lilly. In his drive for wealth, he'd neglected important things like family and nieces and nephews—and friends. It had been months since he'd corresponded with Trey McAllister, a man who had become like a brother in the days following the war. There were times when he felt the price for worldly pursuits had been too high. Cole and Beau were happily married, but love had escaped him. While he lived in an imposing house, its emptiness often mocked him.

Cass thought with dread of the evening ahead, but having convinced himself that his concession was the only way to keep peace, he got up from the desk and went in search of the waiting bath.



Shadows lengthened as the carriage carrying Susanne drew to a halt in front of an impressive rose red brick home. The railing of

the house's charming cupola matched the one that ran the length of its wide veranda. To the left, a beautiful rose garden captured her attention. She had debated whether to postpone her business until morning, but then decided that since she was in the vicinity, she would approach Cass on her way to the charity function she was about to attend. She swallowed. Meet the lion in his den, so to speak.

Lion? Stubborn mule was more like it.

Susanne sat for a moment staring at the lovely old two-story home, wondering when her estranged husband had become so prosperous. But then again maybe he'd always had money. She realized she knew nothing about Cass Claxton other than the bits of information she'd been able to extract when he'd escorted her to Saint Louis six years ago.

Six years. Was it possible that the days and months had passed so swiftly? She felt the familiar guilt, remembering the way she'd tricked Cass so mercilessly. She was deeply ashamed of what she'd done when she remembered the selfish lengths she'd gone to to get her way, but at the time she'd been desperate. She had been certain that she couldn't have stood another moment in Cherry Grove, Kansas, and since Papa wouldn't hear of letting her travel to Saint Louis alone, she'd thought her only alternative was to use Mr. Claxton as a pawn.

She winced when she recalled the pall of black silence that had hung between them during the endless journey. Justifiably, he'd been furious and had spoken only when absolutely necessary—to bark a warning or issue her a brusque ultimatum. Then, on her Aunt Estelle's front lawn, he had dumped her—and that was the most charitable way Susanne could describe it—and

tossed her the small pouch of money Leviticus McCord had given him following their shotgun ceremony.

He had issued one final, tight-lipped decree: *“Have this outrage annulled!”* A nagging twinge reminded Susanne that she had never gotten around to it. Not that she had taken her vows seriously—far from it—but she had never filed for the annulment. She’d assumed there was no hurry. Cass had returned to his home in River Run, and she’d felt certain that she’d never see him again.

A real marriage, a binding one, to Susanne’s way of thinking, began with a snow-white wedding gown, a church, flowers, and a host of well-wishers, not with an embarrassed minister, a sheriff carrying a loaded shotgun, and a bewildered groom—a stranger—pleading for mercy in the middle of a dusty road. But she supposed she should have kept her promise and followed through on the annulment. Well, she was certain of one thing: Cass Claxton had not pined away for her. Most likely, he’d filed for the annulment the moment he’d gotten home.

Stepping lightly from the carriage, she instructed the driver to wait, then turned and proceeded up the flagstone walk.

A lovely dark-haired beauty about her age was coming out the front door. As Susanne approached, the woman greeted her softly, *“Bon soir, madame.”*

Susanne returned her smile. “Good evening. Is Mr. Claxton in?”

“Oui.” The dark-haired woman’s eyes ran lightly over Susanne.

“Thank you . . . *merci.*”

The young woman distractedly responded, *“Pas de quoi. . . .”* Susanne stood before the brass door knocker, fashioned

in the shape of a lion's head, trying to bolster her courage. She peered closer at the fierce image, thinking the symbol apropos for Claxton. She knew that what she was about to do would not be pleasant. Cass would not be pleased to see her again, and she couldn't blame him. But the needs of nine homeless children were far more important to her than a bruised ego.

She turned slightly to watch the striking young French-woman step into the waiting hansom cab sitting at the side entrance. Who was she? Susanne mused. A maid? She seriously doubted it, considering the woman's appearance and the cut of her stylish gown and cloak. One of Cass's lady friends? Apparently her dear "husband" was managing to amuse himself in his wife's absence.

The philistine brute!

She drew a resigned breath and reached for the brass knocker. Cass Claxton didn't scare her. Whether he was pleased to see her or not, they had business to discuss.

And please, dear Lord, let him be civil. I know what I've done to him is awful, but I'm willing to make amends if You will open the door for me. Thank You, Father.



"Excuse me, sir, there's a young lady in the drawing room who wishes to see you." Sar's towering frame dominated the doorway to Cass's bedroom.

The black butler's height of six feet seven inches could be

disconcerting for all who were not acquainted with the man's genteel ways and impeccable manners. His hands were as large as ham hocks, his heavy features far from attractive. But anyone who knew Claxton's manservant could and would attest to his kindness and gentle heart.

For the past three years Sar had run Cass's household with a tenacious spirit and a firm hand. Cass commonly referred to Sar as his right arm, and no other man had so rightfully earned Cass's trust and respect.

"What young lady?" Cass kept his attention centered on the stubborn cravat he was trying to tie.

"She says her name is McCord, sir."

"McCord?" Cass sighed and irritably jerked the cravat loose. The name failed to register with him. "Can you do something with this thing?"

Sar stepped forward, and within a moment the task was effortlessly completed.

"I don't know how you do that," Cass reflected absently. "Would you hand me my jacket?"

"About the young lady, sir?" The servant retrieved the double-breasted topcoat and held it as Cass slipped it on.

Reaching for a hairbrush, Cass tried again to control the springy mass of dark hair still damp from his bath. "Tell the lady I'm indisposed. She'll have to make an appointment to see me on Monday."

"Are you feeling ill, sir?"

"I feel fine."

"The lady was quite insistent about speaking to you this evening."

Cass laid the brush down on the dressing table. "It's late; my

business for the day has been concluded. If the lady wants to see me, she'll have to come back Monday."

"I'll convey your message, sir."

"Oh, and have the carriage brought around." Cass reached for the black top hat lying at the foot of the bed. "I'm ready to leave."

"Yes, sir." Sar bowed politely. "Will you and your lady want a bite to eat when you return, sir?"

"No. Miss Revuneau won't be returning with me. I plan to stop by the club later." Cass glanced up and flashed Sar an insightful wink. "You and Sarah Rose can take that evening walk early, can't you?"

A smile brushed across the man's face. "Yes, sir, I'm sure we can."



Susanne looked up as the butler approached. "I'm sorry, madam. Mr. Claxton is not receiving guests at this time."

"Oh?" Susanne's brow lifted with surprise. "Did you tell Mr. Claxton that *Susanne McCord* wishes to speak to him?"

"Yes, madam, I informed Mr. Claxton of your wishes."

"And he refused to see me?"

"Mr. Claxton requests that you make an appointment to see him Monday morning."

"Oh, he does, does he." Susanne shot a reproachful glance up the stairway. Did she dare try to sidestep this giant and force her way into Cass's bedroom? He had every reason not to see

her, granted, but she'd come this far. If she left now she'd never find the nerve to come back.

She measured the manservant with a critical eye. He was twice—three times—her size. There was no way she'd be able to make it up the stairs without his stopping her.

“Then I suppose I have no other choice but to comply to Mr. Claxton’s request.” She nodded coolly. “Good evening.”

Sar opened the door. “Good evening, Miss McCord.”



Susanne was leaving by way of the front entrance when Cass left from the side entrance of the house. He paused momentarily to enjoy the early evening air. The temperature was beginning to cool; a bank of dark clouds hung in the west, hinting of rain before sunrise. Suddenly his attention was drawn to a young woman just entering a carriage at the front entrance. A flash of homespun cotton and the door to the carriage closed. Moments later the carriage disappeared in the gathering twilight.

McCord. Cass frowned as the name Sar had mentioned earlier popped unexpectedly into his mind.

McCord? Susanne McCord?

He quickly shook away the alarming thought. It couldn't be the same woman. God wouldn't do that to him.

Seconds later he stepped into his carriage, and the conveyance pulled away.