

A Little Bit of Sass

By

Mariella Starr

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Prologue

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 1898

“Papa? May I come closer to speak to you in private?” Rebecca stood outside the doorway facing the wide expanse of her father’s bedchamber.

“No, child! I don’t want you catching the influenza. Lil’ Bit, please sign the papers, so Mr. Sutherland can witness them. Sign all the papers, and don’t give him any sass!”

Rebecca closed her eyes when she heard her father’s pet name for her. He only called her *Lil’ Bit* and or referred to her sassing him when he was trying to persuade her to do something or when she was in trouble. “Papa, please!”

Blackjack Smythe wheezed and began to cough. The nurse closed the door, leaving Rebecca in the hallway.

Mr. William Sutherland, Sr. followed Rebecca down the stairs and into her father’s office. Her father’s attorney placed several documents on the desk, deliberately covering the documents except for the last lines where she and he were to sign.

“Am I not allowed to see what I am signing?” Rebecca asked.

“It is your father’s wish, Mrs. Randolph. It is not an uncommon practice,” Mr. Sutherland stated as he dipped the nib pen into the inkwell and handed it to her. When Rebecca hesitated, he raised an eyebrow. “Women have no head for business.”

“How would we know? We are never given a chance to learn,” Rebecca said haughtily at the older gentleman. Nevertheless, she signed the documents. She knew the one person in the world she could trust was her father, Blackjack Smythe. She escorted the attorney to the front door and returned upstairs to try once more to speak with her father. According to his nurse, he was sleeping. Rebecca thought it more likely he was faking sleep because he had no desire to confront her.

William Sutherland, Jr. watched Rebecca Randolph from a distance. The black garb of mourning did not detract from her beauty in the least. She had always been lovely, even as a child, with the dark hair of her Irish father and the pale, ivory complexion of her English mother. She was thinner than the last time he had seen her. He realized with surprise that he had not seen her in several years.

He had been in the first years of his twenties and in medical college when Blackjack Smythe had created a scandal by moving in next door to the Sutherlands after winning the massive estate in a card game. A gambler living among the Philadelphia elite had set tongues wagging in disapproval until someone discovered Blackjack was a descendant of Irish nobility with a bloodline dating back to the Gaelic Kings. Blackjack had also married into English aristocracy, as his wife was the daughter of a duke who was forty-third in line to the monarchy. There was nothing like royal ties and titles to open the doors of society.

William Sutherland, Sr. had handled the Smythes’ business affairs for years. Rebecca’s father was a colorful character who made and lost fortunes at racetracks and gaming tables. He had also been a devoted father who pampered and spoiled his daughter.

William Jr. had been twelve years older than his brother, Jacob, and the little girl who lived next door. He was already a grown man when they were children playing together. Rebecca and Jacob had been as thick as the little thieves they were, stealing sweets from the kitchens and getting into mischief. William often chased after Jacob and young Rebecca, or Lil' Bit as her father and his younger brother called her, trying to keep them out of trouble.

William had moved on to create a career and a life separate from his father. Rebecca had grown up during his absence. After Rebecca married, William only had seen her occasionally on the periphery of his social sphere. He supposed he would be seeing more of her now, as he was moving from his smaller bachelor townhouse and back into his father's estate.

Rebecca Randolph carried an armful of fresh-cut flowers depositing several bouquets on each gravesite. She placed the largest bouquet on the tombstone engraved with Smythe. It was her father's last resting place.

"Excuse me."

She turned to find William Sutherland, Jr. standing at a respectful distance.

"William," Rebecca exclaimed in surprise before lowering her eyes. "I apologize for the familiarity, Mr. Sutherland."

"We have known each other since you were in pigtails, running around and climbing trees with my little brother," William responded easily. "I am fine with you calling me William as you did when we were younger. It's better than the nasty little rhymes you and Jacob used to recite and taunt me with."

"Only because you seemed to know only one word, which was no," Rebecca answered with a mischievous smile. "You were always so serious, but you got us out of trouble more often than you got us into trouble."

"Yes, I remember your little escapades. You and Jacob were the hellions of the neighborhood. I also spanked both your backsides when you carried your adventures too far by breaking windows and taking things not belonging to you." He regarded the graveyard solemnly gazing in the direction of his family plot. "We have lost a great many of our loved ones this winter. The newspapers are calling the influenza outbreak an epidemic."

"I am sorry, William. I paid my respects to your father here at the cemetery after the crowds had left," Rebecca consoled.

"I am sorry for your loss, too. The winter has been hard on the both of us," he said politely. "Fresh flowers?"

"I grow them in the atrium," she answered with a tender smile. "I know it's foolish to put fresh flowers on graves at this time of year since they will freeze and die in the cold, but my father loved them, so. He said fresh flowers were a reminder of my mother. It was why we had such large gardens and he built the atrium, so I could grow them in the winter months. He used to tell me stories about his mother's rose gardens in Ireland." Rebecca bent her head toward the empty basket and murmured. "Growing them keeps me busy."

William's demeanor changed suddenly. "I'm glad I ran into you, Mrs. Randolph. I was planning to send a messenger to your house this afternoon."

She looked up at him in puzzlement. "Why?"

"You have heard that Mr. David Randolph succumbed to influenza?"

"Of course I did," replied Rebecca her voice breaking. "I was also informed by Lenora Randolph not to attend the funeral!"

"She had no right," William declared.

“According to her, I would have been an embarrassment,” Rebecca admitted with a hurt trembling in her voice.

William was uncomfortable hearing her words. Rebecca’s life had been tainted by scandal several years earlier. Although he had not paid much heed to the gossip, a separation and divorce were shocking in their social circle.

He cleared his throat. “I have assumed the duties of my father’s clients. You are required to attend the reading of Mr. Randolph’s will. The reading is scheduled for eleven tomorrow at the Randolph house.”

Rebecca shook her head, her eyes suddenly snapping with anger. “I will never step foot in the Randolph house again unless there is a torch in my hand!”

William was taken aback by her threatening words, but he had a duty to perform. “If such is the case, I will reschedule the reading of the will and we can attend to the matter in my office. I will have my carriage arrive tomorrow morning at nine to pick you up if the arrangement is suitable. There are papers you must review before the Last Will is presented to Lenora Randolph.”

Rebecca gave him a scathing look, tilting up her head at his height. “Lenora has already sent a missive instructing me to vacate my home or be forcibly evicted by the constable. She is under the delusion that my father’s home belongs to her. Why she is under such an impression, I have no idea. Blackjack won it fair and square from David years ago. There was never any hard feeling between them; they were good friends until David believed the slander his children spread about me.”

“She is wrong and I will inform her of the mistake. The house on Chestnut Street is solely your property and has been since your father passed.”

“She claims otherwise,” Rebecca insisted. “Actually, I had planned to call on you about the matter, but I haven’t had much heart to handle anything lately. I do apologize as our business affairs have interfered with you paying respects to your family.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Randolph. I will see you in the morning.” William tipped his hat to her in respect, which had been sorely missing in her life for a while. She noticed he was wearing a black mourning band on his arm and a black mourning ribbon on his top hat. Thousands of men and women were wearing black this winter since the latest influenza outbreak was widespread and sweeping across the entire eastern seaboard.

“He left me everything?” Rebecca exclaimed in disbelief. “Everything?”

“Yes. His letter explains why,” William Sutherland confirmed in his capacity as her attorney.

“Atonement?”

“Exactly,” William agreed. “Many people will feel repentant when the truth is known.”

“I have been shamed and shunned for the past three years because my husband divorced me,” Rebecca snapped angrily. “Do you think I want anything to do with those horrible people again? David Randolph allowed his son and daughter to destroy our marriage!”

“The circumstances have changed.”

Rebecca made a derisive exclamation, which could have been a swear word, although William thought he must have heard her incorrectly. She was a lady after all.

“I know how it works, William. You discretely whisper the right words into certain ears, and I will suddenly become socially acceptable again. Well, I don’t give a damn about those hypocrites!”

“Rebecca! I mean Mrs. Randolph,” William admonished sternly, trying to maintain some semblance of professionalism. “There is no need to be crude.”

“Oh, blast and tarnation!” Rebecca complained, using her father’s favorite expression. “These people have been snubbing me and calling me a fallen woman or worse behind my back for years. Lenora Randolph has always led the parade of gossip against me and has been preening over her success at ruining my reputation!

“Oh, the men continued associating with Blackjack because they figured it wasn’t his fault he had raised a strumpet. It was also because they knew he could buy and sell them twice over and wouldn’t have given a tinker’s damn about destroying them! They would never dare to impugn Blackjack’s daughter in his presence. Even stupid men have some sense of survival!”

“Unfortunately, this may have been the case,” William admitted.

“May? May?” Rebecca questioned bitterly. “David sacrificed me to protect his idiot son.”

“Mr. Randolph explained in the letter,” William repeated.

Rebecca jumped from her chair in agitation and stalked to the window. “Stop being so damn formal with me! You have known me since I was eight years old!”

William sighed. “I’m only trying to maintain a professional decorum.”

“Balderdash! Hang it up somewhere useful,” Rebecca retorted, clearly aggravated.

William frowned at Rebecca’s lack of respect for him and his profession.

“I read the letter!” she exploded furiously. “It was all justifications and excuses. It doesn’t excuse what he did! He knew what Lenora and his son had done ever since Maynard made his bedside confession. Maynard died right after the scandal started! Yet David did nothing to clear my name or reputation!”

“I can’t begin to explain what was behind your husband’s reasoning, Mrs. Randolph. Perhaps he was ashamed or he was trying to protect the Randolph family reputation. To exonerate you, he would have had to implicate his children in wrongdoing.”

“David should have been protecting me! Those blasted vultures lied to discredit me and David accepted their lies as truth. He divorced me! My husband divorced me on the grounds of adultery, accepting the lies of his son and daughter over my protests of innocence. Except, now you tell me he never actually divorced me since he did not sign or file the final papers.”

“In his own way, he was protecting you,” William contended. “It would have been more difficult for him to make you his primary beneficiary had he actually divorced you.”

She turned to him. “William Sutherland, I fail to see any vestige of honor in my husband’s actions! David had no idea he would die early of influenza. Stop trying to paint a pretty picture because there is nothing pretty about it. It’s black and gray, and as ugly as the mourning frocks I wear.

“I cared for David. Oh, I know what people said when I married him. Even Blackjack was surprised to discover I cared for him. I know David was much older than I was, but my father thought he was contracting a good marriage for me since he and David had been friends for years. I went along with it because I trusted both of them. David was a gentleman and he was kind. Or, so I thought. Even the last shreds of dignity I had left in knowing I cared for him, have been shattered. He had me branded a fallen woman when the truth was, well, never mind the truth. What does the truth matter now?”

“Mrs. Randolph, you became wealthy upon inheriting your father’s estate. With the addition of the Randolph fortune, you are now an extremely wealthy heiress. You will never want for anything for the rest of your life.”

“Material goods and money do not make up for what that despicable family has done to me! Oh, yes, I can imagine it,” Rebecca exclaimed sarcastically. “I can afford a dozen more servants. I can go to New York or Paris for my clothing. I can have grand parties and invite the elite of Philadelphia society who would come and partake of everything I offered. I would also be cornered by husbands and sons delicately implying how they would like to have a tryst or want me as their mistress!”

“Rebecca, sit down,” William ordered sternly. He had heard enough of her scandalous language and words. He waited as Rebecca stubbornly refused his request for a few seconds before flouncing across the room and perching on the chair across from his desk. “I want you to calm yourself. Lenora will be here within the hour and it will undoubtedly be a very unpleasant encounter.”

“Stop calling me, Mrs. Randolph! I ceased using my married name when my husband cast me aside.”

“Legally, you are Mrs. Randolph. As I said, you need to prepare yourself. Lenora Randolph can be quite difficult?”

“A more accurate description would be vicious, spiteful, vindictive, and cruel! I am well aware of my stepdaughter’s ability to humiliate me,” Rebecca declared angrily. Then surprising, she smiled and gave William a look that he could only interpret as smug.

“This time, you will handle it, William. I will not be here to bear witness to Lenora’s foul temper. For the first time in my life, I am in control. You said I was, so I intend to use my power. Are you sure there is no way Lenora can reverse her father’s will?”

“None. My father was, and Mr. Maxwell still is an excellent lawyer. A man’s last will is nearly sacred. There is no way the terms of your late husband’s will can be broken or altered. The will was written with no ambiguity. David Randolph was your legal husband at the time of his death and you are the beneficiary of the entire Randolph estate. Lenora may try to appeal, but you own and control everything. Even the living allowance she has been awarded from the estate is subject to your approval.”

“May I alter the allowance?”

William frowned. “Would you leave her penniless?”

“She would have left me penniless and gleefully had me thrown into debtor’s prison!”

He sighed deeply. “I realize the last few years have been difficult for you, yet you have managed to retain your dignity through it all. Please don’t falter now and become like Lenora. The young girl I knew was not unkind or selfish.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore. I am a widow at barely twenty-three. Why is it selfish for me to want justice? Why is it unkind to treat someone as they have treated me?” Rebecca demanded. “I need time to think over everything you told me today, and I will not deal with Lenora. Will you ask your driver to take me home or shall I hail a taxi?”

“My driver will see you home. May I call on you this evening?”

“Not unless it is necessary. My circumstances have changed dramatically and I need time to contemplate my new situation. You may come by in the morning for brunch if you wish. You always loved Mrs. Polly’s pancakes. Ten o’clock would do.”

Rebecca looked through the small window in the rear of the Sutherland private carriage and saw her despised stepdaughter arriving. She would have loved to be a fly on the wall to hear Lenora’s reaction to David Randolph’s final Will. Rebecca almost regretted not staying behind, but she truly had no desire to be the target of Lenora’s visceral rage. She had suffered enough at the hands of her husband’s adult children.

Most marriages in their social set were arranged by the families and Rebecca's had been no different. It was not unusual for an older widower to marry a younger woman and begin a second family. In her naiveté, Rebecca had believed her young age of eighteen would not matter. When she married David, both his son and daughter had been older than her. She had been wrong, so very wrong.

Rebecca had not taken into account the instant hatred David's son, Maynard, and his daughter, Lenora, would show her. The brother and sister both viewed Rebecca with suspicion and considered her competition for their father's fortune. They were calculating and greedy siblings only concerned with the dispensation of their father's wealth.

The Randolph children had displayed very little feelings or respect for their father. In his presence, they deferred to his advice and guidance, but in his absence, they heartlessly spoke of what they would do with his money after he died. They did not intend to share David Randolph's wealth with Rebecca or anyone else. They had devised a plan to ruin her; and they followed through with the precision of a knife stabbing her in the heart.

Chapter One

Early April 1899.

Rebecca carefully placed another set of books into the crate. She stepped back to view the emptied shelves and neatly stacked crates in her father's study. Blackjack had been a reader of history. She was not, so she had decided to donate most of his book collections to the public library.

Miss Alice Griffith, Rebecca's general housemaid, new to the household and barely sixteen, curtsied as she came to the doorway announcing, "Mrs. Smythe." The young maid never finished, as Lenora Randolph barged in.

"I demand to speak to you!"

Rebecca wiped her dusty hands on her apron. "We have nothing to discuss."

"Get out!" Lenora Randolph snarled at Alice.

"Alice, please stay," Rebecca asked kindly of the young woman. The girl moved inside and stood beside the door timidly watching the two women as they squared off against each other.

"Go to the kitchen and have a tea tray brought in," Lenora demanded of the maid.

"Never mind, Alice," Rebecca said countering the order.

"Do you not offer your guests refreshments?" Lenora demanded.

"You are not a guest. You are an unwelcome intruder," Rebecca answered truthfully. "What do you want?"

"I want what is mine!" Lenora ordered, her chin tilting upward in an imperious attitude.

"I believe the crux of your problem is you no longer have anything to call your own. You now live on the largesse of others, primarily your father's second wife. Oh, yes! That would be me."

"How dare you treat me like this? You fired my staff! You may have fooled father and the others, but I know you for the low-class parvenu you are!"

"The truth does have a way of coming out, Lenora, which is why you have nothing!" Rebecca answered calmly. "You are a liar and a conniver, and now you are a pauper." She cast her eyes upward, although she was not looking to the heavens, but merely regarding the beautifully plastered, ornate ceiling. "Thank you, my hopefully heavenly bound husband," she said disrespectfully.

Rebecca turned her attention back to the furious woman in front of her. "You, Lenora Randolph, have been caught in your lies, and now you are paying the price for them. Your father, not me, delivered that justice. You can't afford to pay staff. You also can't afford to live in Randolph House, although I am willing to let you continue living there, for now."

"I will ruin you!"

"You have already tried and failed," Rebecca commented. She walked around the desk and raised a handful of envelopes. "It is amazing how much money matters in this city. It has only been a few months and yet I am already being welcomed back into the folds of society. How many invitations have you received since your circumstances changed?"

Lenora Randolph said nothing, but Rebecca could see the hatred in her eyes.

"Go home, Lenora," Rebecca advised. "Live in your father's mansion where you can pretend you are still a rich heiress, but tread gently with me. There are conditions to be met. You

will live within your means and meet those conditions, or you will find yourself treated as badly as you have treated me. Please remember, I have an excellent memory!”

Alice followed Lenora as she stormed down the hall. Rebecca rushed into the water closet trying to hold down the contents of her breakfast, but she was unsuccessful. In addition to her stomach upset, her hands were shaking. This attack was her fifth confrontation with Lenora in as many weeks. Dealing with her stepdaughter was as horrible now as it had been when they had lived under the same roof. Lenora was supposed to go to William with her problems and issues, but she insisted on barging into Rebecca’s sanctuary and upsetting her.

The woman was all sweetness and calm in front of both William Sutherland and Daniel Shreveport, the attorney Lenora had hired to contest the will. With no witnesses at Smythe House, Lenora’s claws were sharpened, as were her threats against Rebecca.

Alice returned with a streak of bright red across her cheek and tears in her eyes.

“What happened?” Rebecca demanded. “What did she do?”

“She slapped me, ma’am.”

“Oh, Alice, I’m so sorry! Go to the kitchen and put ice on it,” Rebecca exclaimed as the front doorbell rang.

Alice looked fearfully toward the door.

“Go,” Rebecca, insisted. She stormed down the hallway and jerked open the front door. “How dare you!”

A surprised William Sutherland stood on the threshold. “Excuse me?”

“Not you!” Rebecca snapped. “That horrible bitch!”

“Rebecca!” William exclaimed shocked by her language. She whirled around and raced back down the hallway. He was left standing in the formal foyer. William closed the door, hung his hat on the hall tree, and followed Rebecca to the kitchen to find out what was wrong. He was getting used to her impetuosity.

“Let me see,” Rebecca gently coaxed her young housemaid as her cook and housekeeper, Mrs. Polly Baxter, rushed to the icebox. “I’m so sorry, Alice.”

“I’m not hurt,” Alice replied. “It only stings a bit.”

Mrs. Polly chipped off a piece of ice and wrapped a cloth around it before handing it to Rebecca who tenderly put it against Alice’s cheek. “Take this to your room and lie down until you feel better.”

“I’m not hurt, ma’am. I can continue my work.”

“Please tend to yourself. Do it for me. Lenora’s anger was with me, but you took the brunt of it! She had no right, no right at all! Please forgive me. She will not be allowed in my home again, I promise you.”

Alice nodded and left the kitchen.

“Mrs. Baxter, please watch after her,” Rebecca asked. Her housekeeper nodded and followed the maid.

Rebecca collapsed in a chair covering her face with her hands. When she removed her hands, William was standing in front of her. “I would like you to send a letter to Lenora. She will not receive her allowance this month! I don’t care if she has to do without! I don’t care if she starves! Her verbal attacks and the uncalled for physical assault on Alice are the reasons why! I will take no more abuse from her! I want you to tell her if she comes to my home again, I will call the police and have her arrested for assault!”

“This will cause problems,” William responded with a sigh.

“Do I control her allowance?”

“Yes.”

“Then, do it,” Rebecca ordered angrily. “I am not cowering from that bitch any longer! Make it very clear to her, William. I will no longer tolerate her tantrums and abuse. Another incident and I will move her into the gardener's shed and sell the estate!”

Rebecca glanced around the kitchen, blushed, and tried to contain her temper. “I do apologize, William. I should not be entertaining you in a service area. Please, let us resume our discussion in Father's study. I assume you came to discuss something with me?”

“I did,” William agreed following her to the study where he noticed the wooden crates. “Are you planning on going somewhere?”

“Yes,” she replied taking a seat at a side table. “I have decided to close the house and take a trip. I do love Smythe house, but I expect to be gone for some time. I am packing my favorite books to take with me, and I'm clearing out most of my father's collection of books and donating them to the library. I will keep his favorites.”

William frowned. “Where are you going? If you are planning a trip to Europe, it would be most unwise to attempt a crossing of the Atlantic at this time of the year. There have been articles in the newspaper about two ships nearly sunk by icebergs.”

“I am not traveling to Europe. I have decided to go to California and not by ship, but by the continental railroad.”

“Why California?”

“Why not?” Rebecca asked. “I have read through my entire estate portfolio, several times in fact. My father left me a property in Coyoteville, California, which he had accepted as payment for a bad debt.” She glanced around her father's study. “Very much as he did with this house. The property consists of a house and five hundred acres of land. I need a change of scenery and there is nothing for me here.”

“Your life is here, Rebecca.”

She shook her head in disagreement. “What do I have to look forward to here, William? I am a widow with a tarnished reputation.”

“People will come around.”

Rebecca raised her chin bravely. “I don't want them to come around. I am no different now than I was before. I did nothing wrong, yet I was cast out by people who I thought were my friends. Mrs. Deveraux called on me several days ago.”

William smiled. “That's a good sign. She is the Matron of the Ladies Garden Club.”

“She came by to speak to me about rejoining society. She is concerned over my not responding to any of the recent invitations sent me for parties and events. She said she knew I was in mourning; however, I should avail myself of certain opportunities so I would be prepared to entertain the idea of remarrying when the time was suitable. She mentioned her son, Wilfred, four times during the conversation, touting his professional accomplishments. Everyone knows he works for his father's shipping firm because he failed miserably in finance and his parents had to bail him out of debt!”

William frowned at this information. He was not particularly fond of Wilfred Deveraux.

Rebecca ignored his displeasure and continued. “I know my renewed acceptance into society has more to do with my sudden wealth than with me as a person. I suspect my bank account interests quite a few men. If a man only wants me for my fortune, I want nothing to do with him.”

William's brow furrowed at the idea of her remarrying. “You will have to very careful, Rebecca, when choosing a husband. Please promise you will allow me to direct you through

these difficult times. You have faced adversity bravely, but you are not worldly. You will need guidance and management. You can trust me.”

Rebecca smiled as she stood and walked to a window. “I know I can trust you, William. You have already argued successfully against Lenora’s claims in court and you have given me no reason not to trust you. Nonetheless, I do not want to be managed. Men thus far have managed my entire life and, frankly, they have not done a very good job of it. I always thought my father was a good parent, but he made a mistake in considering David Randolph’s offer of marriage. My husband turned out to be a cowardly ass. Neither one of them did such a good job managing my life.”

William’s frown was deepening. He joined Rebecca at the window and before he even realized what he was doing he swatted her hard across her bottom.

“Ouch! William!” Rebecca exclaimed, backing away from him.

“Lil’ Bit, I have heard all the vulgar speech I intend to listen to from you today. I will not tolerate it any longer. You are a lady and you are to behave as one!”

Rebecca backed away from William and indignantly crossed the room to gaze through the rear window at her extensive flower gardens. Her eyes filled with tears. “Only Papa continued to call me Lil’ Bit after I grew up. I miss him so dreadfully.”

William walked up behind her and touched her tentatively on the shoulder. “We miss all of them: Jacob, my father, and yours. Jacob never called you anything except Lil’ Bit and the nickname always suited you. You had a quite a wild streak in you as a child. You were a sassy little girl. I know you are going through a trying time, Rebecca, but you must be strong and sensible.”

“Do you know what I see out there?” She regarded the high walls around her spring gardens and then glanced at him over her shoulder when William did not respond. “I see a prison. My father brought us here to get us away from the memories of our home in New York. There were too many memories there of my mother and Papa could not deal with them. My parents’ marriage was a love match. Both sets of my grandparents were against the union, but it worked because they loved each other, and because they immigrated to America.

“Papa insisted my bad marriage was his fault and gave me everything I wanted when I returned home. He gave me these gardens and had the atrium built for me. Smythe House had always been my sanctuary, but now it has become my prison. This house and my gardens aren’t enough for me anymore. Although I went into my marriage prepared to love and respect my husband, I know now it was a mistake. I liked David very much. He was an older man who had always treated me kindly, but I didn’t love him.

“Papa was concerned with the men who were coming to call on me. He didn’t like most of them. He called them pansy boys, most of them living off their parents’ wealth, and frittering away their time with social pursuits.

“He accepted David’s offer because he thought an older man would be good for me. As it turned out, David was not a strong man, and he expected me to endure the insults and mistreatment from his grown children. When I complained, his answer was always the same. ‘Give them time, have patience.’

“I have exhausted my patience and I do not intend to wait any longer. I am twenty-three-years old and I have never traveled more than fifty miles from Philadelphia since we moved here. If I do as Mrs. Deveraux suggests, what is in store for me? Parties and social events where men will consider the pros and cons of marrying me and decide my fortune is worth giving me their last name. I will not remarry simply because it is the only acceptable role for a woman. I

will not marry a man and be displayed again as a pretty, empty-headed doll. I do not want another marriage like that!”

“Surely you must want to remarry at some point. You are a beautiful young woman, Rebecca, and most women want children. A husband is a necessity, if you wish to have children.”

“Thank you. However, I refuse to be the well-bred, pious wife of a man who doesn’t deserve my loyalty and thinks more of my bank account than he does of me!”

“Rebecca, don’t be insulting. All men are not cut from the same cloth.”

“From my vantage point, I have no reason to believe otherwise. Eligible men’s appearances might be different, but they all act the same. If a man of David Randolph’s social standing and caliber turned out to be a deceitful coward, what hope is there? If I ever marry again, I want to marry for love and passion!”

Rebecca closed her mouth and bit down on her lower lip. She had no idea where these words had come from, but she instantly knew they were true. She was surprised she had the daring to voice them.

William said nothing, but his eyes widened at her words.

Rebecca was unsurprised at his reaction since William’s upbringing had been similar to hers. In their social sphere, everyone from the wealthy elite to the scullery maid had a place of hierarchy. Everyone was expected to maintain the decorum of their social position.

“What is so wrong with wanting a life away from here? People do have lives beyond Philadelphia, William. I want a life of my choosing, not predestined by social expectations. Good or bad, I want my life to be of my making, and not merely following some silly rules. Blackjack followed his rules, not what was expected of him, and I want to do the same. I am traveling to California where I have heard parts of the state never get cold. Flowers and trees never die because there is no winter. Can you imagine?”

“I want to go someplace where I may do as I please without someone always looking over my shoulder and judging me. I may open a little shop. I might grow vegetables and flowers in a garden. I might take up my drawing and painting again. I was quite good at it and I was told I could make money by selling my paintings. I may do nothing except twiddle my thumbs and read and daydream. Whatever I do, I will be far enough away to keep Lenora Randolph and women like Mrs. Deveraux out of my life!”

“Aren’t you getting carried away?”

“No! I am tired of doing what is expected. I want to have an adventure. I want to do something different! I don’t want to be somewhere that people are only accepting of me because I am suddenly wealthy! I was a good wife to David, as least as long as I was allowed to be, and yet he cast me aside based on lies told by his children.”

“He didn’t divorce you.”

“I didn’t know it!” Rebecca exclaimed loudly and angrily. “I didn’t know until you told me after his death! What kind of man tells a woman he has divorced her and then doesn’t bother to tell her he changed his mind? I was neither married nor divorced because David Randolph didn’t have the backbone to stand up to his selfish offspring! My husband was a coward, but I am expected to honor his memory! There was nothing honorable about what he did to me! I am sick and tired of pretending and doing what is expected of me. Aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were a doctor, William, an excellent doctor. Everyone thought highly of your skills. When your brother, Jacob died you gave up medicine to join your father’s law firm. Jacob was

training to become a lawyer, not you! It wasn't what you wanted to do with your life. You didn't attend medical school to become an attorney.

"You became a lawyer because your father expected one of his sons to carry on *his* business, *his* legacy. What about what you wanted, William? What about what I wanted? Why must we conform to how our parents want us to live? I don't say this to be cruel, but your brother and father are gone! Blackjack is gone! David is gone! I am no longer willing to allow other people to make decisions that should be mine to make!"

William Sutherland tapped on the glass door of Sutherland and Maxwell, and the workman stepped aside so he could leave the office. The workman was scraping off the names that had adorned the glass for the last twenty-seven years. The Sutherland name had, in succession, represented his father, his brother, and then himself.

The workman would repaint the glass to read simply, Maxwell, Attorney of Law.

William had retained only one client. The rest he had turned over to his father's former partner, Brewster Maxwell. He had also sold his client files and interests in the law firm to Brewster at a good profit.

His last five months as a lawyer had been busy and exasperating as Rebecca Smythe kept him on his toes. She had refused to resume her widowed name, and flaunting tradition, continued to carry her maiden name as she had since her sham divorce. She also abandoned her black garb of mourning. As she had explained to him rather bluntly, she was mourning her father, not her husband.

Blackjack Smythe had not been a sober man during his lifetime in either drink or attire. He preferred twenty-year-old scotch and suits of flamboyant plaids in blues and greens. He never wore black because he disliked it. Rebecca declared she would not wear black either, except to attend funerals, and thankfully, she'd had none to attend lately.

Her only show of mourning was little more than William's. Whereas he wore a black armband and hatband, she wore a black ribbon tied around her arm. It signified her mourning period was almost over even though her father had only passed away seven months ago.

The Randolph estate was settled. As hard as she had tried, neither Lenora nor her attorney, Daniel Shreveport, had managed to overturn David Randolph's last requests.

Lenora still lived in the Randolph home, albeit under unusual conditions. Her continued use of the mansion was dependent on her not leaving the estate for any extended period. She could not be absent from the property for more than forty-eight consecutive hours. Lenora's monthly allowance was tied to her remaining on the estate and any deviation from the agreement would set into motion the immediate sale of the property.

William had not initially understood the broader implications of this condition. Later, he realized there would be no more shopping trips or holidays for Lenora in Boston or New York City, no vacationing in Cape May, no trips to Europe. Lenora was a prisoner in the Randolph mansion, which had been the showplace of the family wealth.

He had been shocked by the severity of the condition and had tried to change Rebecca's mind, but she would not be persuaded. Although she gave him precious few details, William slowly began to understand exactly how miserable Rebecca had been during her time with the Randolph family, and how much anger she still harbored against the only remaining family member.

The single year of Rebecca's married life had been one not of happiness, but of extreme duress. She had been ill-treated by her husband's children as well as his staff. Imprisoning

Lenora and dismissing her staff was Rebecca's revenge. With the acceptance of her great fortune, Rebecca had become a willful young woman. Whether she wanted it or not, she needed protection and guidance due to the enormous size of the combined inheritances from her father and husband.

As her attorney, William had spoken with Rebecca nearly every day, spending much of his time trying to stem her enthusiasm over liquidating valuable assets. Blackjack Smythe's stables and kennels, racing horses and dogs were sold.

The trappings of wealth such as antiques and European furniture were sent to auction houses. She had stripped the Randolph mansion of its *priceless* art, silver, jewelry, and collectibles. Everything has a price, of course, and they fetched exorbitant bids at their assigned auction houses. Rebecca considered them ugly reminders of her past. Lenora Randolph and her remaining friends in their social circle were horrified by Rebecca's actions. Nonetheless, it did not deter the matrons of society from purchasing the items. Coveted items from the estate were reappearing in some of the cream of society homes.

William didn't always agree with Rebecca Smythe, but he did admire her spirit. Reluctantly, he also realized he was falling in love with the feisty, headstrong woman.

Rebecca's words of passion and love, spoken so fervently that day at her house, had haunted William. It bothered him how true her words rang for him, as well. He was not the man he had intended to be. He was the man his father intended him to be. It had taken many sleepless nights until William understood he would not gain Rebecca's respect unless he displayed the same courage to change his life as she was demonstrating in hers.

Rebecca was not ready for a declaration of love, certainly not from her solicitor. William also felt strongly that she was too inexperienced to venture far on her own without supervision. They discussed or argued nearly every day over some matter or another. In many decisions, she acquiesced to William's advice. On others, she was not so willing to surrender her opinion regardless of his logical arguments.

She would not concede her idea of moving to California despite the inconsistencies in the information William had gleaned from his investigations of the property. He had no idea what awaited her in California. Even so, Rebecca was determined to leave Philadelphia and put behind her all the hardships and scandal the city represented to her. She refused to entertain moving to any civilized city on the east coast due to her festering anger toward Lenora Randolph and the entire social register that had treated her so badly.

William did not think he was overstepping boundaries with his client, even though he did argue with her frequently. Their arguments on the subject of her moving often became loud and contentious. He was so frustrated sometimes that he was tempted to turn her over his knee. Of course, he would not. He wanted to, but he was a man of control who would resist the temptation.

He wanted to allow Rebecca the license to make good decisions on her own. The problem was that underneath the nicely developed body of a young woman, she was a sheltered, defiant little girl who wanted her way, and was having ridiculous temper tantrums.

After weeks of arguments, Rebecca suddenly changed her mind and told William she was no longer going to California. However, she was planning to travel to New York City for a short shopping excursion. She promised to stay in touch by telegram every day.

William knew she was lying. The following week, she was late for several appointments with him and disappeared for hours at a time. William became suspicious of her activities and followed Rebecca to a booking agent's office where he claimed to be her husband in order to

uncover her true plans. He was furious when he discovered she still intended to travel to California.

Rebecca Smythe was a woman of independent means, but William had hidden a secret regarding that independence. He was privy to information he had not disclosed to her hoping it would be unnecessary to reveal it. He would have preferred to continue dealing with it indirectly by convincing her he knew what was best. Now she was forcing his hand. When William learned of her newest plans, he decided it was time he step in and take control. Rebecca Smythe was going to learn to listen to him and behave herself whether she liked it or not.

Rebecca followed the train porter to her private Pullman railway car. Although the train was outfitted with the latest amenities including both a lounging and a dining car, her booking agent had suggested a private car. She could travel in luxury with her own spacious lounge, separate sleeping compartment, and private water closet. After all, the trip to California would take a minimum of fourteen days. Her private railcar came with an assigned porter to make the trip as pleasant as possible. He could even bring her meals so she did not have to leave the private car unless she wanted. Rebecca was looking forward to much reading and peace of mind.

She was putting on a brave face of confidence, but she was shaking inside. Once she had made her decision, though, there was no turning back. She knew her few loyal friends, the ones who had stood by her through the dark times, were shocked by her daring. They disapproved of her traveling alone to face an unknown future. Secretly, Rebecca was terrified, but she was unswerving in her determination to start a new life.

No matter how much the matrons of Philadelphia society pressured her to take her place in their social circles; Rebecca wanted no part of that life ever again. It did not help to have Lenora's friends spewing exaggerations about her stepdaughter's *impoverished* circumstances. Every conversation with those women included mild condemnation of Rebecca's treatment of *poor Lenora*. They seemed to believe Rebecca should turn the other cheek and forget the past.

Rebecca felt no sympathy or guilt. Lenora had made her life a living hell. It was Lenora who claimed she had caught Rebecca entertaining a man in her bedroom while her husband was away on a business trip. It was an outright lie, but Maynard had backed his sister on the claim, and Rebecca had been ostracized.

Now, their circumstances were reversed. Lenora had been put in her place if there was a place for liars and tormentors. If she wanted to continue living in the Randolph mansion, it would be under strict conditions and in reduced circumstances. David Randolph had written the original conditions as punishment for his daughter's interference in his second marriage. Rebecca had added the travel restriction.

For once in her life, Rebecca planned to do exactly what she wanted. She had the means and the opportunity. She was tired of defending, explaining, and apologizing for being who she was. She was the daughter of Blackjack Smythe who had lived life to the fullest and he never made excuses for it. Why should she?

She would miss little about Philadelphia except for a few loyal friends and perhaps William, who had come back into her life as her solicitor. He was a likable man, a little stuffy, but often their arguments had been quite entertaining. She enjoyed riling him because it was only then he lost the stiff composure he believed to be a professional bearing. When William loosened his rigid control, he could be quite funny. He was also a handsome man, albeit a bit too tall for her. She made him sit down while he lectured her at length about her financial affairs. It gave her a crick in the neck to look up at him.

William had refused to believe she wanted to create a new life. Rebecca had finally realized he would not change his mind, so she had to work around him. She arranged with her bank to have a sizable portion of her inheritance transferred to a bank in Nevada City. The rest of the Randolph investments were in the hands of companies that dealt with managing large estates. She trusted William to keep them secure.

She really would miss William Sutherland. He was her staunchest supporter and protector. Unfortunately, he also believed he needed to oversee every decision she made. Although he argued with her often, she usually got him to follow through with her plans. She had only failed in convincing him that leaving Philadelphia was the right decision for her. She had been forced to make arrangements without his approval, not that she needed his approval. And there lay the cause of disagreement between them. He thought she needed his permission. She thought otherwise.

“Excuse me,” William enquired when the porter stepped across the connecting railcars with a dinner tray.

“Yes, sir?”

“Is Miss Smythe all right? She has not left her car for three days.”

The porter rested the tray on the railing. “Do you know her, sir?”

“If I didn’t know her, I wouldn’t be concerned,” William replied. “What is your name?”

“Nathaniel, sir. Miss Smythe is doing poorly. She ain’t eating no more than would keep a bird alive and she’s been real sick to her stomach. I told her I would see if there was a doctor on board, but she won’t let me do it.”

“Leave her door ajar,” William ordered as he turned.

“Sir,” the porter stopped him. “Are you going to find a doctor?”

“I am a doctor, Nathaniel,” William declared for the first time in many years. “I have to get my medical bag.”

“I offered to find out if there was a doctor on board, sir. Miss Smythe told me she didn’t want to see no doctor.”

“I don’t care what Miss Smythe wants,” William said firmly. “I will do what I think is best for her.”

Rebecca staggered from her chair to go to her bedchamber. The smells rising from the food tray were making her feel worse. She held onto the edge of the table and closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness swept over her.

She gasped when the door of her railcar opened and William Sutherland strode in. She fumbled at the lapels of her robe to close it and she swayed precariously.

William dropped his medical bag halfway across the lounge and caught Rebecca before she fell to the floor. He carried her to the sleeping compartment where he settled her in the narrow bed. Retrieving his bag, he dove into what he had always considered his bag of miracles and removed his stethoscope. While Rebecca was in a state of woozy half-awareness, he gave her a thorough examination.

While Rebecca rested, William asked Nathaniel for a steady supply of hot water to be delivered to her private car and he instructed the porter to clean every surface. William lifted and held Rebecca in his arms as the porter changed the bed linens. He gently laid her on top of the clean bedding when the job was completed.

He made his way to the lounge car and asked a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Lucy White for help. He had met and conversed with her several times during the last few days. He asked if she would assist him in a matter of delicacy.

“Are you sure she isn’t contagious?” Mrs. Lucy White asked when she saw the sickly pale complexion of the young doctor’s patient.

“I don’t believe so, Mrs. White. She isn’t running a high temperature. I think the problem is the opposite. I believe she is suffering from travel sickness. She has been sick to her stomach and she is dehydrated. She needs fluids.”

“She is such a pretty girl,” Mrs. White exclaimed.

William nodded agreement. “She is my fiancée in addition to being my patient. It wouldn’t be proper for me to change her garments.”

“Scoot along, young man,” Mrs. White exclaimed, shocked by the mere idea. “I’ll take of her.”

Rebecca choked and coughed as she awakened to an older woman attempting to spoon a broth into her mouth.

“Hello, dearie,” the woman greeted Rebecca with a smile before turning and calling into the lounge area, “Dr. Sutherland, your fiancée is awake.”

William Sutherland came to Rebecca’s bedside and laid his hand on her forehead.

“Doctor? Fiancée?” Rebecca questioned weakly.

“Yes, darling,” William answered her with a smile. “Mrs. White, thank you so much for your assistance. I can take it from here.”

“Call me if you need me again for the sake of propriety,” Mrs. White reminded him. She patted Rebecca on the shoulder. “I hope you will be feeling better soon, dearie! Listen to your nice young man.”

Rebecca waited until the outer door closed before whispering, “William, what are you doing here?”

“Taking care of you,” he answered offering her a glass of water and two small white tablets. Once they were dispensed, he sat in the chair Mrs. White had vacated.

“You can’t be in my sleeping compartment!” Rebecca squeaked, surprised when her voice came out whispery and hoarse.

“I am and I have been here for the last two days. Close your eyes and go to sleep, Lil’ Bit, and don’t give me any sass,” William warned retrieving a huge medical tome from the floor and opening it. “I have a lot of reading to catch up on.”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m doing my job,” William declared sternly. “My job is to take care of you.”