

Leaden Skies

Excerpt

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." —Matthew 6:13

July 22, 1880

When the summer storm arrived late that afternoon, it was hailed as a blessing. Damp splots the size of half-eagle gold coins pocked hats and shawls, sent small dust explosions puffing up from dirt streets ground to dust beneath boots and wagon wheels, and tempted small children to stand with faces upturned, tongues thrust out to catch the drops.

Many who lined Leadville's overheated streets, hoping for a glimpse of Ulysses S. Grant arriving for his five-day visit, had been there since sunrise. They welcomed the rain, the cool wind that accompanied it. But after the thunder passed and the drenching continued, hour after hour, the thousands packing the avenues began to curse the clouds and their liquid gift.

Damp crawled up trouser pants and wicked up the hems of long skirts and petticoats. Drops trickled off hat brims to wilt celluloid and lace collars and chill the backs of necks. Streets, which had produced clouds of dust mere hours ago despite the best efforts of "squirt wagons," now flowed mud.

"He's coming. Just left Malta."

The whisper moved through the crowds like a gathering wind. Ears strained to hear the faintest of train whistles over the murmur of voices, the snort of horses, the shouted directions of those preparing the parade route from the point of disembarkment to the hotel where "Unconditional Surrender" Grant and his party would stay.

Still, not everyone's attention focused on the impending arrival. In the red-light district of Leadville's State Street, rain conferred anonymity while darkness stilled the voice of conscience. Behind the heavy damask curtains of a three-story brick fortress on the corner of State and Pine, another world beckoned.

Mapmaker Cecil Farnsworth tipped his head back to examine the front of the substantial building. Rain dripped off the brim of his hat, mingling with the drops that fell from the sky and slapped his face. With a long intake of breath, Cecil stepped up on the porch, out of the rain. He removed his hat and, clutching it over his heart like a shield, knocked on the door of the whorehouse.

Chapter Two

Cecil was sure that, by stepping foot inside the house of prostitution on State Street, he had consigned his soul to purgatory, or worse.

Forgiveness, he feared, would be very long in coming.

Right then, though, it didn't matter. He'd come back to see her, the woman with the dark eyes who reminded him of Rachel.

He wasn't going to do anything...sinful. He just wanted to talk to her. Hear her voice. See if she sounded like Rachel.

But the visit wasn't going the way he'd pictured it.

After surrendering his hat and heavily soaked overcoat to the silent doorman, he'd allowed himself to be escorted into the drawing room by the woman called Molly. She was all sharp angles—nose, chin, elbows, and wrists. Jutting collarbones created a topographical ridge above a flat, freckled expanse bordered by lace. Not to his taste.

There was no sign of Miss Flo, the woman who ran the place. Flo, as he remembered her, was pleasant, blond, soft, and warm. At least, she'd felt soft and warm, the last time he'd been around. At that preliminary visit, she'd greeted him as if he were an old friend, even before he'd introduced himself and his purpose. She hadn't turned him away as he'd feared she would, but had hugged his arm close to her side, said "Call me Miss Flo, honey," and shown him around the upper floors while keeping up a cheerful line of

chatter. He remembered that she'd worn a green dress of silky fabric with fancy trimmings on the back and a low neckline. A diamond necklace—at least, he thought they might be diamonds—had glittered in the light of coal oil lamps throwing back the shadows of the early summer evening.

Everything she wore looked expensive. And she'd been so kind. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had not treated him with the most neutral courtesy or, worse, with disdain.

Now, here he was, days later, sitting in the parlor room.

He'd refused the champagne, but been talked into buying a single, high-priced glass of wine. (Another sin he would never have the courage to confess. He'd not touched anything stronger than the weakest of beers in his entire forty-two years of life.) Cecil looked around at the room's appointments. Thick rugs, inlaid wood ceiling, crystal chandelier, silver candlesticks, rich velvet curtains, burnished piano. He wondered, briefly, how it was possible to make enough money at...well, this kind of business...to afford such things. Too, there were the dresses that most of the women wore, all sewn from luxurious materials that shimmered in the candlelight as they shifted and moved about. And he remembered Miss Flo's diamond necklace...maybe it was a gift from an admirer?

He would never have been able to buy that sort of thing for his Rachel on his salary from the Johnson Map Company. Even if events had proceeded to the point where such expensive items were a necessity.

With an inward cringe, he remembered his last walk with Rachel that spring day. Their last day together. How he'd felt as they walked along, side by side, Rachel chattering about her sister's upcoming nuptials. He'd felt young again—she always made him feel that way, his Rachel did—and that life, like the season, was full of possibilities and hope for the future. And then, when he'd asked her hand in marriage, granted, somewhat on impulse and without asking her father for his blessings first, how she had stopped in her tracks. Turned to him, strands of shining black hair escaped from her bonnet and lying along her cheekbones, blue eyes wide, beloved face slack-jawed. Not, it had finally dawned on him, with hoped-for happiness, but with an emotion that looked more like shock. A look, he thought in retrospect, which might have even been tinged with repulsion.

That afternoon now seemed so far away. Like Rachel. Half a year and hundreds of miles away from Leadville, Colorado.

Thinking of Rachel, he almost left the brothel right then.

Still, he remained seated in the parlor room, the only man there among—he counted quickly—six women. The horsehair in the sofa pricked through his trousers into the backs of his legs, much as the memory of Rachel's face had pricked his conscience as he'd hesitated on the boardwalk in the rain before summoning enough courage to knock on the door.

But this visit was definitely not proceeding as he'd hoped. The woman with hair and eyes like Rachel, the woman who, incongruously enough, glowed with purity and youth just like his Rachel, sat on the Turkish couch in the corner, twirling a strand of dark hair around one finger. She, like the rest, was dressed up fancy, not wearing the loose garment he'd glimpsed her in when Miss Flo had taken him around the upper stories and he'd made his notes and measurements.

She was watching him.

As were all the women in the room.

The girl with the gray teeth sat across from him. She stared hardest of all. Her face was not unpleasant, structurally speaking. But, she's so young, he thought. Younger than Rachel's almost eighteen years. Too young to be here. Full-bodied, she wore a purple, satiny sort of dressing gown dotted with what might be flowers and butterflies. He wasn't certain about this, as he was trying hard not to stare back at her. She looked as if she hadn't had time to dress properly before Molly brought him into the room. The top three closures of her gown—complicated corded oblong buttons of a vaguely Oriental nature—were undone. White skin teased him through the deep open V as she leaned forward to refill his glass.

The woman's dark, musky scent washed over him, as she remarked, "Another drink, another dollar, Mister Mapmaker. It's Angelica wine, all the way from California. My favorite too, 'cause it's so sweet."

He had to stop drinking so quickly, he hadn't realized he'd drained the first glass.

The red painted lips parted in a smile. He had an even better view of those teeth as she said, "Guess everyone else's off, hoping to catch a look-see at the first train t' town and Mister Grant.' Cept for you. Flo's still out there, drumming up business for us all. Did she send you here, Mister Mapmaker? What's your name, anyhow? We can't just keep calling you Mister Mapmaker."

He couldn't remember her name, although she'd told him when she'd handed him the wine glass a few minutes ago. After all, it wasn't her he wanted to talk to. But here she sat, simpering and smiling, the tip of her tongue darting out to touch her upper lip.

Her smile didn't reach her eyes. The way she stared at him made him feel like a rabbit trapped by a hungry cougar.

He cleared his throat and sat up straight, reminding himself that he was taller by a head and a half, much, much older, and had masculine strength on his side. There was nothing to fear. What could she, a mere slip of a girl, do to him, after all?

"I'm a surveyor, not a mapmaker, actually," said Cecil, gripping the wine stem tighter and wondering why he'd listened to the demon that had urged him to turn off the sidewalk to enter this house of ill repute. "I'm in town surveying buildings for the Johnson Map Company. Identifying features of interest to insurers. Type of frame, floor, roof. Pipes." He realized that he was babbling, but the words kept coming. "The number of stories. Placement of doors, windows, the size of the rooms."

He glanced at the Rachel-like girl to see if she was listening. Her wonderful eyes were half-closed, as if lulled by his voice. "It's important," he cleared his throat, "important for the insurers to have all the details. So as surveyors, or striders as we're sometimes called, we're tasked to make a thorough examination."

"That so." The slash of a smile widened. Those gray teeth seemed to take up her whole face. Her sly eyes, a muddy brown color, slid to the other women

lounging about the room, sending a message he couldn't interpret. "You want to examine this?"

She tugged the half-unbuttoned wrapper aside, exposing one breast.

A wave of tittering flooded the room. Heat rushed up, strangled his breathing, and mottled his face. He shrank back against the sofa. The breast seemed to stare at him. Eye of the Devil.

Her wicked grin broadened. She closed the robe, looped a single button, then set one slipper-shod foot on the ottoman between them. "With the proper coin, you can inspect all you want. Of course, if you're looking for a fire, I'm supposin' you'll be wanting to take a poke in the cellar."

She hiked her skirt hem above her knee, providing enough of a view for him to realize she wore nothing underneath. Nothing, that is, but garters holding up red-and-gold embroidered stockings.

The skirt dropped. "The peep show was free. You want to measure the cellar with your rod, mapmaker, it'll cost. How much depends on whether you're using the front door or the back."

She thinks I want to...

Cecil's hand twitched. Wine spilled on his lap in a cold amber splash. He jumped to his feet, setting down the half-empty wine glass with an unsteady hand. "You've misunderstood my intentions. I, I just wanted to talk."

The woman shrieked with laughter. Most of the others snickered or belatedly hid smiles behind ornate fans. All but the one with Rachel's eyes, who just watched, stone-faced, twirling her hair.

Cecil fled the parlor, pushed past the doorman, who made no attempt to stop him, and stumbled out, crashing full-on into a waterproof-swathed figure mounting the front stairs. The person's gloved hand shot out and clutched his arm.

"Watch where you're going!" The sharpness in the feminine voice softened in shocked recognition. "Mr. Farnsworth? Is that you?"

He looked up, aghast, at Miss Flo, her concerned face outlined inside the loose hood. The parlor house madam's rainslicked coat blew open in a gust of wind, revealing a sparkly ensemble of patriotic red, white, and blue.

He tore away and fled, the woman's shrieks reverberating in his mind, chasing him into the anonymous crowds of State Street.

* * *

Flo swept into the drawing room, tugging off her wet gloves, a frown hovering dangerously between her eyebrows. "I was almost knocked down by the mapmaker on the steps. What happened?" She looked around, her displeasure visibly deepening. "I've spent the last hour getting soaked, ruining my shoes, trying to round up business in this lousy weather..." Her gaze stopped on Molly.

"Has he been the only customer?"

Molly, gathering up empty glasses, nodded without looking at Flo.

"Our only customer, and you all scared him away?"

Dead silence. The women shifted in their chairs, smoothing fabric over their laps, licking their lips, examining their fingernails.

Lizzie snorted. "He was only looking, not buying. Said he came here to talk, f 'god's sake."

Flo focused on the woman in the wrapper. "Lizzie, is this your doing?"

Lizzie raised one shoulder in a shrug. The wrapper slid down, revealing a bare collarbone.

Flo slapped her gloves down on the end table. Wet silk met wood, sounding like a hand smacking skin. "Lizzie! I've had enough of your antics. He might've changed his mind if you'd given him more time and liquor."

Lizzie smirked. "Oh, we gave him plenty of liquor."

One of the other women in the room spoke up. "Miss Flo, he might come back later. While Lizzie was tartin' around, he was making eyes at Zelda." She jerked her head toward the young woman lounging on the corner sofa.

Flo raised one pencil-thin, calculating eyebrow, glanced at the young woman still curled on the couch, then turned her gaze back at Lizzie. "This is a high-class parlor house, Lizzie. Remember that."

Lizzie bared her teeth. "Yes, ma'am."

"No drinking. No drugs. No potions for female complaints. No laudanum. I have a reputation to uphold. The gentlemen expect quality, and quality is what we deliver. No sloppy whores, drunk and weeping, or worse. That's how we can charge more than any other place on State Street. That's what's going to allow us to charge even more when we move up-town."

"Flo's sold her soul to the Devil so's we could move up-town to screw all the qual-i-ty gentlemen," Lizzie said in a drunken sing-song.

All the women froze.

Flo swung around to her. "What did you say?"

Lizzie shrugged, a smirk curling her mouth.

Flo walked over to her, put two fingers under her chin and pressed upward, forcing the girl to meet her gaze. "Don't cross me, Lizzie. Remember who's in charge here." The words carried a soft, dangerous charge.

Lizzie yanked away. "Why don't you tell us, Flo. Who is in charge?"

A knocking on the front door interrupted further discourse. The squeak of hinges reached the parlor room, along with the low rush of men's voices. The women stirred, like aspen leaves fluttering in the high mountain breeze, their lassitude vanishing.

With a last glare at Lizzie, Flo snarled, "Why do I even bother with you! I shelter you. Feed you. Buy you the best, most up to date outfits....And what are you doing wearing my dressing gown? Go take it off and put on one of your own. Now!"

Flo hurried from the room, her voice shifting to a cheerful trill as she approached the entryway. "Gentlemen! Good evening! Has the train arrived yet? No? Coming in to escape this dreadful rain, then? Well, you've come to the right place. Let Danny take your coats and hats, and I'll escort you into the parlor where it's warm and pleasant and the girls are waiting. We'll get hot toddies set up all around, unless you'd prefer champagne or wine. We have the loveliest selection, shipped in from California. And the girls are just dying for some company."

Lizzie leaned forward and snatched up Cecil's abandoned glass. Then she sat back, wiggling her bottom into the plush velvet seat. She lazily crossed her feet on the ottoman before tipping the glass back and, with a defiant glance around the room at the other women, drained the last of the wine.

© *Ann Parker*