



## *Legacy of Secrets*

by Sara Mitchell

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A knock on the door echoed through the room with the resonance of a thunderclap.

Neala jumped, fumbled for the bedside lamp, then froze. If she turned on the lamp, whoever was out there would see the strip of light and expect her to open the door. If the room remained dark, they might go away.

On the other hand, if this was the murderer, he might conclude she was asleep, affording him the perfect opportunity to pick the lock and slay her in her bed.

Or it could be a frantic hotel clerk, alerting guests to a fire.

An urgent summons to Mrs. Wilkes—she was ill, injured. The guest across the hall needed immediate medical assistance. . .

Heart pounding in concussive thuds, Neala stood rooted to the floor. What to do, what to do—a weapon. She should be searching for a weapon, something with which she could defend herself.

The knock sounded again, this time louder, with an overtone of impatience. “Miss Shaw?” a man’s voice carried through the panel. “It’s Grayson Faulkner. I know you’re in there.” There was a pause, as though he were giving her time to absorb his words. “Open the door,” he finished, and it was not a request.

Lord? I know I told You I’d accept anyone, but did You have to send him as your chosen guardian angel?

She turned on the lamp, tightened the sash of her night robe with fingers that trembled, then marched across the room. “I certainly will not open the door,” she managed civilly enough for having to raise her voice to be heard through the thick panel. “It’s two o’clock in the morning. You scared the curls out of my hair, Mr. Faulkner. Go away and come back at a civilized hour.”

There was no reply. Frowning, Neala took a cautious step forward, thinking to lay her ear against the door to see if she could hear the sound of retreating footsteps. Instead came the sound of a key rattling the lock. Even as she leaped to grab the knob it turned in her hand. The door swung open, almost knocking her off her feet, and Miss Isabella’s outrageous nephew stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. In his hand he held an odd-shaped key that bore no resemblance to Neala’s room key, but before she could challenge him about it he’d tucked it away.

He scowled down at her, arms folded across his chest. “What in blazes were you thinking, standing in front of a lighted window? If the killer wanted to put a bullet through your heart instead of pushing a boulder over a cliff, you offered the perfect target.”

So he'd been outside somewhere on the grounds, spying on her? Again? "I had already reached that decision myself." She waved toward the darkened room. "See? No more lights. There was no need to frighten me half to death by pounding on my door." She clutched the lapels of her bed robe more closely. "Besides, I'm already frightened enough."

"Good," he snapped. "Perhaps you'll be more inclined to obey me when I tell you to do." His startling blue eyes wandered over Neala with an intensity that noodled her knees.

Annoyed, she stiffened the knees and ordered her spine to follow suit. "Why did you come, Mr. Faulkner? Surely you explained to your aunt that you, well, that you don't like me very much." Speaking the words aloud somehow gave them more power; instead of returning his glare Neala stared just beyond Mr. Faulkner's shoulder. Between fright and humiliation, she was inches away from howling like a toddler.

"I'm here," came the sardonic reply, "because my aunt believes I can protect you. She also believes I might have more success tracking down the unknown person or persons who apparently will go to extraordinary lengths to dispose of you."

Despite herself, Neala's lips trembled. "I believe there's only one, a man. Two nights ago he, ah, spoke to me," she managed, finally meeting his gaze. "I was sitting on a window sill at the Grand Ball, s-surrounded by other guests. He grabbed my arm, pulled me backward, and whispered in my ear that he—" she scrabbled for breath, finished levelly enough, "—that he was sorry, but it was m-my turn to die. By the time I was able to turn around to search for him. . ." her voice trailed away.

Sparks seemed to leap from Mr. Faulkner's eyes, sizzling into air that all of a sudden crackled. He took a step forward, stopped, pinched the bridge of his nose, and muttered something beneath his breath. Then, startling Neala so badly she flinched, he clasped both of her hands in his much larger ones and tugged her toward him. "All right," he murmured. "All right." Warm fingers gently stroked her taut knuckles. "I'm here now. I'll take care of you. Try to not be afraid."

Neala gaped at their clasped hands. "Mr. Faulkner, I don't understand you. I was expecting you to accuse me of making it up. Like you did the hunter. . . I don't understand."

He gave her hands a final squeeze, then released them with a short laugh. "Well, it's like this, Miss Shaw. I've come to realize you don't lie worth a—you don't lie well."

"Thank you so much. But—"

"Besides which every last soul at the school, not to mention Aunt Bella, praise you to the skies for your charming personality, your unassuming manner, and your 'laudable loyalty,' I believe was the way the school secretary—Miss Crabbe?—phrased it. And over the past couple of months I've—" He stopped, ran a hand over his beard-stubbed jaw, started to speak, grimaced. "I don't like being wrong, Miss Shaw," he finally admitted. "But I wish I'd searched the woods that day, instead of simply following you. You might not be in this predicament now if I'd done what I'm trained to do."

"If what I've come to believe is true, there's nothing you could have done." Neala fiddled with the crochet edging on the sleeves of her robe.

"Why do you say that? Go ahead, tell me whatever it is you need to tell me."

"What? I mean, how could you possibly—?"

"It's your eyes," he offered unhelpfully. "You've an easy face to read, Miss Shaw. So what is it you're debating whether or not to tell me?"

“Oh. Well. Um. . . I’ve been studying and thinking on things ever since I arrived here, back in June.” She gestured to the large steamer trunk in the corner of the room. “Gone through all our family papers, diaries, and letters countless times. I practically have them memorized. And. . .” She hesitated again.

“Tell me,” Mr. Faulkner repeated, still with extraordinary patience.

Patience? From Miss Isabella’s nephew? If he’d remained the churlish and disdainful man she remembered, Neala might have been able to stand her ground, insist that an interrogation wait until morning.

But she was exhausted, tired of the fear, tired of the sense of isolation. Weary of shouldering a burden crushing her beneath the weight of its sheer irrationality. “I think someone has been killing off everyone in my family,” she blurted, then steeled herself for the response.

He merely inclined his head. “Why?”

Now there was a question. “I don’t know.” Her voice wavered. Heat flooding into her cheeks, Neala abruptly swiveled and escaped to the other side of the room, where the massive trunk offered at least an illusion of protection. “I don’t know. . . .”

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