



## *The Widow's Secret*

By Sara Mitchell

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“I promise he won’t arrest you, or threaten you.”

“But you can’t promise that he’ll believe me.” Jocelyn glanced at the man seated beside her in the hansom cab, then uncomfortably shifted her attention to the street.

It was a dreary afternoon, the sky a dull smear of gray, the buildings stolid rows of brick and stone. Over the clatter of the wheels a train whistle tooted a warning; seconds later the hansom stopped, and a Pennsylvania Railroad locomotive pulling several passenger cars rumbled across Maryland Avenue on its way toward the depot. Moments later the driver flicked the whip and the hansom lurched into motion once more.

Beneath the layers of her blouse and walking suit Jocelyn’s heart fluttered like a captured rabbit. She still didn’t know quite how Operative MacKenzie had persuaded her to accompany him to the Treasury Building—except she’d been reluctant to thumb her nose at a summons from the head of the Secret Service.

As though he’d been reading her mind, after the sound of the train had faded in the distance Operative Mackenzie observed: “I can’t speak for Chief Hazen, but I might make the observation that I’m not sure *you* believe *me*.”

She jerked her head around, searching the shuttered face. The rocking motion of the cab made her queasy, and she fought the incipient panic. “It’s difficult, when I know I’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing! Yet you’ve frightened me, hounded me, and now you’ve bullied me into a situation I don’t want to be in. I returned your evidence, so I don’t understand what I can possibly say to your Chief that I haven’t already explained to you?”

An unexpected smile kindled in his eyes, crinkling the corners, then beneath his mustache a corner of his mouth tipped up. “If that’s how you perceive me I’m fortunate you’re here at all, Mrs. Tremayne. Ah...you’ve placed me in an awkward position, especially after hearing your interpretation of my actions. You see, once he meets you in person I don’t think Chief Hazen will have any lingering doubts about you.”

Instantly wary, Jocelyn stiffened. “And why is that? You believe someone who looks like me is far too...noticeable... to engage in criminal activities? I’m too easily picked out of a crowd? Oh, yes—I swoon when confronted by murder.”

“I could pick you out of a crowd of a hundred redheads,” Operative MacKenzie said, his voice deepening. “Besides which, the lovely young woman I met a decade ago still lives somewhere inside the woman sitting beside me now. Regardless of how much you may have changed in the intervening years, Mrs. Tremayne, I don’t believe you’d ever knowingly be part of anything illegal.” A soft pause as potent as the touch of his fingers seeped into Jocelyn. “And you didn’t swoon. You’ve terrible fear inside you, Mrs. Tremayne. But I also see a rare strength of character, not to mention a formidable temper.”

Hot color whooshed from her chin to her hairline. If she leaned a scant six inches their shoulders would touch, and she would feel again the strength of him, of muscles tensile and tough as her oak banister. An evocative scent of starch and something uniquely masculine flooded her senses. Instinctively her hand lifted to press against her throat in an effort to calm her galloping pulse. “I—you shouldn’t say such things to me. I don’t know how to interpret them. I wish I . . .” She bit her lip, tearing her gaze away from Micah MacKenzie.

With a jerk the hansom came to a halt. “Treasury Building,” the hack announced.

The imposing building loomed before her, its seventy-four granite columns reminding Jocelyn of massive bars on a stone prison cell. When a warm hand gently clasped her elbow, she jumped.

“It’s really not the lion’s den,” Operative MacKenzie murmured. “But if it were, even if I couldn’t close the mouths of the lions, I’d protect you with my life.” When her startled gaze lifted, she discovered that despite the light tone, his eyes probed hers with an intensity that stole her breath.

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