

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • BOOK ONE

# Carved in Stone



*RITA Award–Winning Author*

ELIZABETH  
CAMDEN

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • 1

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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# 1



**APRIL 1900**  
**NEW YORK CITY**

*H*ow could a man buy a new suit with a dozen eggs? Patrick O'Neill sighed, protecting the basket of eggs as he navigated through the crowd of pedestrians to the tailor's shop on Mulberry Street. He should have earned a bit of cash from drawing up Mrs. Donovan's last will and testament, but the old woman paid him with eggs instead. She'd come to this country during the Irish Potato Famine, and Patrick had a soft spot for folks like her, so he settled for the eggs.

Life would be cheaper if he could buy ready-made suits like most people, but broad-shouldered men who stood six feet four inches tall rarely had that option. Everything Patrick wore had to be made to order, and it got expensive. Still, the tailor owed him for staving off an eviction last month.

A bell above the shop door dinged as Patrick entered, and the tailor greeted him warmly.

"There's the Lower East Side's most famous lawyer," Mr. Collins said. "I figured we'd be seeing you." The tailor continued stacking bolts of cloth on the cramped shelving over the only sewing machine in the overstuffed shop.

“What makes you say that?” Patrick asked, his Irish accent a little thicker than normal. He left Ireland when he was fourteen, but his natural brogue came back strong when he was among his own.

“Your ma was bragging about the big case you’ve got coming up,” Mr. Collins said. “What sort of man would battle the Blackstones in a rumpled old suit like the one you’re wearing?”

Patrick tried not to wince. “Let’s not go tossing that name around, okay? No one is supposed to know about this yet.”

Even the Blackstones didn’t know about it yet. They were the most powerful family in New York City, and they would come after him the instant they found out what was brewing. Surprise was one of the few advantages Patrick had, and he wanted to keep a lid on this case until the last possible moment.

“Fiona, come out here and take Mr. O’Neill’s measurements,” the tailor called toward the back of the shop.

Patrick braced himself. He’d hoped to escape this appointment without the tailor’s daughter waiting on him. Fiona was a pretty nineteen-year-old who looked at him with hot eyes and a hungry expression. She approached him with a tape measure, and Mr. Collins brought out a few bolts of cloth for Patrick to choose from.

“Those people are going to make mincemeat of you, boy-o,” Mr. Collins said in a worried tone. “They’ll send you running straight back to the seminary.”

“No!” Fiona tossed a measuring tape over Patrick’s shoulders and ran her hands across his back to straighten the tape. “Nobody wanted to see you become Father What-a-Waste. Turning away from the priesthood is the best thing you ever did.”

Last year Patrick had balked only two weeks shy of his vow to enter the priesthood, and guilt still plagued him. Father Doyle had paid for him to go to college and law school. They let him practice law the entire time he’d been in seminary because everyone assumed he would become a lawyer for the church. He owed them, but as his final vows loomed, so had his incessant, unquenchable longing for a family.

He wanted a wife. He wanted children of his own, not just the chance to minister to others. He wanted a huge, rollicking family with kids climbing all over him when he returned from work and a pretty wife waiting for him at home.

Patrick was thirty-four and still unmarried, which caused people in the neighborhood to hurl their daughters in his direction. At the moment, Fiona's hands were traveling in a dangerous direction as she measured the length of his inseam.

"Fi," he said, feeling his face flush, "a little decorum, please."

Mercifully, her father grabbed the tape measure and shoed Fiona to the other side of the shop.

Patrick nodded to the basket of eggs. "The eggs and my help with getting the landlord off your back last month will make us square for a new suit, won't it?"

Mr. Collins nodded as he continued taking measurements. "That it will. Now, tell me, boy, what germ of insanity prompted you to take on a seedy client like Mick Malone?"

Mick Malone was the most contemptible man Patrick had ever represented. Mick had escaped convictions for kidnapping and murder, but everyone knew he was guilty. Now he was hoping to cash in on his notoriety by penning a memoir, and the Blackstones' reaction was going to be savage.

"Mr. Malone is entitled to legal representation, same as any man," Patrick replied.

"You'd better take a bath after dealing with that one," Mr. Collins warned. "Your mother said Mick was drunk as a skunk when you met with him last week." The tailor spoke quietly, but news of Patrick's mother's gossiping was worrisome. They lived in the Five Points, a rowdy Irish slum where secrets spread like wildfire. Patrick needed to know exactly what his mother had blabbed all over the neighborhood.

"What else did Ma tell you?"

"Oh, you know, how proud she is of you. How she wishes you'd marry and start giving her grandbabies, now that the church won't get you. Don't blame your ma. She's bursting with pride whenever she talks about you, Patrick lad."

That might be, but she needed to stop running on about his clients. His typical cases battling evictions or bailing someone out of jail were as dull as watching paint dry. Not the Blackstone case. Defending Mick Malone against the Blackstones was the most important case of his career.

“Come for a fitting next week,” Mr. Collins said. “You’ll look as smart as any of those shifty Blackstone lawyers. You are Ireland’s and America’s finest!”

Patrick nodded, wishing he was half as confident as his tailor.



Patrick bought his mother a bouquet of daisies on the way home. The flowers would help soften her up before he read her the riot act over the way she was jabbering about his cases. Birdie O’Neill’s greatest hobby in life was bragging about her son, and it had become a problem.

When Patrick first began practicing law, he’d asked her not to discuss his cases. She’d pinched his cheek and promised to behave, but inevitably he’d hear about her nattering whenever he visited the barbershop or a pub. It was usually harmless, but this case was different.

It had all started when Father Doyle showed up at their apartment two months ago, pleading for Patrick’s help with the infamous Mick Malone case, and Birdie overheard everything. Patrick didn’t want the case, but how could he turn down his old benefactor?

He walked up to the fourth-floor apartment he shared with his mother and let himself in. Birdie lay sprawled on the sofa at a strange angle, watching the pigeons feed on the lump of suet she set on the windowsill for them.

“You okay, Ma?” he asked.

Birdie turned her face toward him and sent him a smile. “Daisies! How nice.”

She still made no move to rise. Patrick crossed to the other side of the room, where they kept a pitcher filled with water from the pump that served everyone in the building. On the way, he no-

ticed the cake his mother had brought home from the bakery. It looked like a basket. The bottom half used interlocking strands of chocolate frosting to look like wicker, and real strawberries were mounded atop the cake. If he didn't know better, he'd have mistaken it for a genuine basket of strawberries.

"Those cakes sold out before I even finished them," she said with pride.

Birdie O'Neill's cakes made the Gerald Bakery famous. Crowds of people came to the bakery window each day to admire her whimsical creations. Sometimes they were towering layer cakes built to resemble city landmarks like Grand Central Station or St. Patrick's Cathedral. Other times she imitated the natural world, like this strawberry basket cake. Once or twice a week, she brought a cake home to share with the neighbors. It made them one of the most popular renters in the building.

"Nice cake," he said, picking out a ripe strawberry and popping it in his mouth.

Birdie still hadn't gotten up from the sofa, and there was nothing on the stove for dinner. That was odd. She usually took great pride as a housekeeper. Her day started at four o'clock each morning when she headed to the bakery to start the ovens, and she finished by early afternoon, which left her plenty of time to prepare dinner. Their apartment usually smelled like heaven when he arrived home.

"What's wrong?" he asked, since she wasn't the sort to complain.

"I fell while lugging in a sack of flour from the wagon this morning," she said. "It was dark, and I slipped on a loose brick."

He closed the distance between them and hunkered down before her. "And you worked the rest of the day?"

"Don't worry, it was nothing," she teased while pinching his cheek. He didn't complain. He'd finally persuaded her to stop pinching his cheek in public, but he didn't have the heart to ask her to quit at home. "The pain went away for a while, but now it's bad again." She had a bandage on her forearm too.

“Did that happen when you fell?” he asked with a nod at the bandage.

“I scraped the wagon wheel on my way down. It’s nothing. Mr. Gerald patched it up as soon as I got inside.”

“Mr. Gerald ought to lug his own sacks of flour.”

“Don’t be taking that tone,” she said. “Mr. Gerald is a fine man who has always treated me well.”

Maybe, but Birdie was too old for lugging heavy sacks and tending hot ovens before the crack of dawn. No man should have to worry about his mother collapsing under the weight of a thirty-pound sack of flour.

“You can quit, Ma. I’m making decent money these days.”

“Please don’t make me point out that Mr. Gerald always pays in cash.”

Patrick looked away. When they’d first arrived from Ireland, they were so poor that Patrick had to beg on the streets. That sort of shame never fully went away, and depending on his mother for steady income was humiliating. He would start getting tougher with his clients. Some of them could afford to pay in cash, and he needed to start demanding it.

But first he needed to win the Mick Malone case.

“Ma, you’ve got to stop talking about my cases in public,” he said. “Keep quiet about the Mick Malone case. It’s important that his book gets published before the Blackstones find out about it.”

“They’ll get wind of it sooner or later,” she pointed out.

“Let it be later. The book will hit the shelves in September. The closer we get to that date without anyone knowing about it, the better our chances.”

No one in the city wanted to take on the Blackstones, but sometimes a man didn’t have much choice.

## 2



The Friday evening soirees at Gwen Blackstone Kellerman's home were famous. She originally started hosting them as a way for the professors at Blackstone College to relax and unwind after a week of classes, but over the years they had grown into much more. Artists and intellectuals from across the city vied for a chance to attend her soirees, which could last until dawn. The informal gatherings became a place where professors debated new ideas and artists mingled with academics. It was said that Mark Twain was inspired to write a short story based on a conversation he had with an aging English professor in the corner of Gwen's garden.

These weekly gatherings were Gwen's proudest accomplishment, since she would probably never become a botany professor like she'd once hoped. Dreams of a successful marriage and motherhood had also passed her by, but her soirees made Blackstone College a thriving intellectual community.

So far tonight she had consoled a professor whose latest experiment didn't pan out, listened to a musician play his new composition on her piano, and toasted the birth of a baby boy to a physics professor. It was a brilliant, moonlit summer evening . . . which was why the gloomy expression on the college president's face seemed so strange.

President Matthews had been appointed two years ago and

was still struggling to find his footing among this tight-knit community. He lived next door to Gwen on a tree-shaded street where most senior faculty lived. Not everyone on campus appreciated the new president, but Gwen understood the challenges he faced better than most and did her best to support him.

“Gwen, if it isn’t too much trouble, I’d like to go next door for a brief discussion,” he said.

She was in the middle of listening to a visiting professor from Japan discuss his research on undersea volcanic activity. “Can it wait a few minutes?” she asked, eager to hear more about how molten lava could occur underwater.

President Matthews shook his head. “It is a matter of some delicacy. I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important.”

Gwen nodded and headed across the crowded parlor toward the front door. There were sixty people here tonight. Most had spilled onto her terraced garden to enjoy the warm summer evening, but a group of the oldest professors had staked their claim to the upholstered furniture in her front room.

“Gwen, what is with this amazing tree?” a chemistry professor asked, holding up the dwarfed Himalayan cedar in its ceramic pot.

“It’s called a bonsai tree,” she said. “Professor Watanabe brought it to me as a hostess gift tonight. Isn’t it darling?”

Over the years, people had brought her flowering shrubs, herbs, and bulbs from across the world, making the two-acre garden behind her house a showpiece. It was a green-scented world where science and beauty converged. Her happiest hours were spent in the calm oasis of her garden, and she loved sharing it with the people of Blackstone College each Friday evening.

Two more people tried to intercept her before she made it outside. The gentle hum of crickets sounded in the distance as she and President Matthews walked across the lawn to his house next door. A light on the front porch glowed as he led her inside.

“You added new wallpaper,” Gwen said as she stepped into the foyer of the president’s house.

“It was my wife’s idea,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind the change.”

“Of course not. It’s your house now.”

President Matthews still seemed ill at ease whenever he invited her inside because this had once been her father’s home. Theodore Blackstone was the college’s founder and had served as its president for twenty-eight years. Gwen had been born in this house and lived here until she married Jasper and moved next door.

Or perhaps the new president’s deference to her was because of her maiden name. Everyone knew she was a Blackstone by birth, and the name tended to inspire awe, fear, and ghoulish curiosity.

“Tell me what I can do for you,” she prompted once they were seated in his study. The windows were open, making it easy to hear laughter and the faint sound of the piano from her house next door.

“I received bad news this afternoon,” President Matthews said. “Your uncle has made good on his threat to terminate funding for the college.”

Gwen bowed her head. Uncle Oscar had been threatening the college’s funding for years, but she hadn’t believed he would ever end it. Her mind reeled, unable to imagine a world without Blackstone College in it.

She glanced outside toward the people mingling in her garden. None of them knew how close the college teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.

President Matthews continued outlining their situation. “I hoped my negotiations with the senior members of the Blackstone family would be successful without appealing to you for help,” he said, his voice placating and cautious.

People on campus still treated her with kid gloves even though it had been two years since she lost both her father and her husband in the same week. She had fully recovered from both tragedies, but President Matthews still seemed worried about hurting her feelings.

“I’m afraid that without additional funding, I will be forced to close the physics department,” he said.

Her shoulders sagged. “That department was very dear to my father.”

“Other colleges in the city can take our students in physics should the worst occur. New York University has an excellent program in physics.”

“I don’t care about New York University,” she said with a sigh. “I only care about the colleges founded by Vanderbilt and Carnegie, and you know why.”

Cornelius Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie had both created colleges to enhance their reputations, and soon Blackstone College would be equally prestigious. If all went well, someday the name Blackstone would stand for scientific and medical progress rather than greed and exploitation.

“Yes, yes,” President Matthews said. “Unfortunately, the physics department hasn’t yet turned a profit. At least the biology and chemistry departments have patented some of their work, but overall, we have an atrocious record of—”

His sentence choked off, and Gwen smothered a laugh. “You can say it,” she teased. “I know my father was terrible at managing money.”

President Matthews looked grateful that she took his gaffe in stride. “Your father was a great man, but not the best steward of a budget. Gwen, I’m afraid the situation is dire. Eliminating departments is only a short-term solution. If your family does not reinstate their annual donations, the college will face bankruptcy within the next few years.”

It was inconceivable. This college was her entire world. She grew up here, went to college here, got married here. She intended to spend the rest of her life on these forty acres of ivy-covered buildings and intellectual progress. For eight years she’d been the wife of the college’s leading researcher, and she taught the introductory botany classes. She hosted faculty parties and cheered up students who sometimes flagged under the weight of demanding academic rigor. *This* sort of work was what she was born to do, not haggle over money or tangle with the bank.

“President Matthews, please understand that I have no influ-

ence over how my uncle and grandfather parcel out the Blackstone fortune.”

The only reason her father could pressure the bank was because everyone in the family felt sorry for him. The last bit of sympathy from her family’s banking empire had died with him, and now the college was gasping for breath. Tuition revenue could never keep their research-intensive programs afloat.

“The only thing that will prove the college’s worth to my family is if we develop some magnificent scientific discovery that will garner national attention and help blot out the . . . well, the other things my family has been associated with in the past.”

It was an elegant way of alluding to child labor, unsafe business practices, and union busting. Such ugly words. But those were things of the past, and the Blackstone Bank had come a long way since the tragedy that nearly destroyed her father.

It hurt to see the anguish on President Matthews’s face. He was still young, but the sprinkling of gray in his hair had increased in the past two years. He’d inherited a financial mess from her father, and it would take a while to repair.

“You’re doing a wonderful job,” she assured him. “You have my complete, unstinting support. Tell me how I can help.”

He gave her a reluctant smile. “I know you dislike leaving campus and dealing with your uncle, but if you could appeal to him to reverse his decision, it would be a godsend.”

Appealing to Uncle Oscar meant confronting the two things she disliked most in the world: lawyers and the snarl of downtown Manhattan. There was a reason she rarely left the college campus. This secluded haven in the Upper West Side was free of the congestion, noise, and skyscrapers that clogged downtown. Gwen would happily go through the rest of her life ignoring financial ledgers or the tedium of legal haggling if she could.

But if a woman loved something, she needed to fight for it.

“You can count on me,” she told President Matthews.

His whooshing sigh of relief underscored how important it was that she succeed.



Gwen left the safety of Blackstone College to confront her uncle and grandfather first thing on Monday morning. Tension coiled tighter with each mile as the carriage rolled farther into the heart of Manhattan, with its chaotic mix of carriages, trams, and automobiles all vying for dominance on the congested city streets. She never liked it here. The towering buildings blotted out too much of the sky, and it didn't feel natural.

The carriage finally arrived at her family's bank on the intersection of Wall Street and Devon. She rarely came here anymore and braced herself for meeting with her uncle.

"We're here," she said to the two bullnecked men sitting on the carriage bench opposite her. Anytime she came to the bank, she brought bodyguards. Zeke and Lorenzo had been with her since childhood, but after her father died, she reassigned them to other positions at the college. She no longer wanted to live in a protected bubble, but life could be challenging for anyone whose last name was Blackstone. Six years ago, an anarchist tried to assassinate her uncle as he left the bank. No Blackstone felt entirely safe entering or leaving the bank since.

Lorenzo helped her alight from the carriage while Zeke scanned both sides of the hectic street. She craned her neck to look up at the marble columns of the Blackstone Bank, which had occupied this block of coveted Manhattan real estate for over fifty years. The neoclassical building had six columns on the front portico to symbolize the strength of corporate America.

Lorenzo walked beside her as they approached the bank, and Zeke followed behind. A uniformed doorman held the steel-studded copper door open for Gwen and her bodyguards as they passed into the cool hall of America's leading investment bank.

Her heels clicked on the marble floor and echoed off the coffered ceiling. This wasn't the sort of bank that did business with individual customers, so there were no tellers stationed behind counters. All the important business took place up-

stairs, where analysts made recommendations for funding the nation's infrastructure. Over the decades, the Blackstones had financed ports, canals, and railroads that crisscrossed the nation. They floated bonds to support cities, states, and foreign governments. It was said that France would have fallen to the Germans in 1871 if her grandfather hadn't propped up their army with an emergency loan.

A clerk rushed forward to meet her. "Good morning, Mrs. Kellerman. Your grandfather and uncle are expecting you. Would you like tea or refreshments before heading up to the fifth floor?"

She turned to her bodyguards. "Why don't you both relax and have something to drink?" Once inside the well-guarded confines of the bank, she had no fear of kidnappers, bombs, or blackmail.

Zeke and Lorenzo headed toward the lounge, while the clerk escorted her to the elevator. A uniformed attendant closed the gate on the elevator and cranked the brass dial to begin the lift. Even the elevator was grand, its marble floor inlaid with turquoise and jade. Her grandfather did nothing halfway.

The word *grandfather* usually conveyed a warmly paternal man fading into old age while occupying a rocking chair. Nothing could be further from the truth concerning Frederick Blackstone, who so disliked the implications of the word *grandfather* that he had ordered her to call him Frederick once she became an adult.

She pasted a serene smile on her face as she entered Frederick's office. Velvet draperies framed floor-to-ceiling windows with a perfect view of the New York Stock Exchange only two blocks away. Frederick sat at his desk while Uncle Oscar stood by the window, his pearl-handled walking stick at his side as he glowered at her through his one good eye. A black patch covered the other eye, ruined by the assassin's bomb six years earlier.

"Gwen," her uncle greeted her tersely. "Still wearing your Rapunzel look, I see."

She touched the long braid of blond hair draped over her

shoulder. Most women in Manhattan pinned their hair up in fussy styles, but Gwen preferred a more natural look and usually wore it down. Instead of torturing herself with tight corsets, she favored the loose gowns that were coming into fashion among the artistic set. She was a free-thinking woman and loved the softer silhouettes of the Art Nouveau movement, but her uncle was far more traditional.

Still, she didn't want to get distracted from her mission. She lifted her chin a notch and met her uncle's single good eye. "I've come seeking a reinstatement of the college's annual funding. The new president is doing amazing work, but he needs more time before he can run the college without a deficit."

Uncle Oscar approached her, leaning heavily on the cane as he drew near. The bomb that ruined the tendons in Oscar's right leg had also killed two innocent bystanders. The doctors had feared Oscar would never walk again, but her uncle's indomitable will came to the fore, and he'd trained his body to adapt to its shortcomings. He could now walk as quickly as anyone, albeit with a distinctive lurch.

"We founded that college as a sop to keep your father happy," he said. "It was supposed to add luster to the Blackstone name, but it's never performed as hoped."

"Not true," she insisted. "Just last month *Harper's Magazine* featured us on their cover. Our biochemistry department expects to have a treatment for tetanus within the next few years."

"And I expected the college to be financially self-sufficient by the last decade," Oscar said.

Her grandfather nodded in agreement. "When your father was president of the college, he wasted far too much money on expensive professors and overly ambitious research."

Gwen looked away. Her husband had been a perfect example of one of those idealistic professors who was brilliant but profligate with his research budget. "We always knew the college would initially lose money—"

"It's been thirty years!" Uncle Oscar interrupted. "The entire idea was a foolish endeavor to pacify Theodore. He had no

business being a college president if he couldn't even balance a checkbook."

Gwen maintained her serene expression. "It wasn't to pacify my father, it was to turn around the reputation of a family name that had become synonymous with greed and avarice. We've spent decades improving our reputation, and now you want to throw it all away?"

Oscar lifted a book off the table and tossed it at her. Its pages splayed as it flew, but she caught it just before it hit the ground. She read the title on the cover and gasped.

*The Flamboyant Life and Adventures  
of Mick Malone: A Memoir*

Mick Malone, the man who haunted her childhood nightmares. She didn't even realize he was still alive.

"That book will be released in September," Oscar said. "One of those seedy journalists from the *New York Sun* got an advance copy and wanted my opinion. It's slated to become a bestseller. Your fancy college has done nothing to dampen the public's appetite for sordid gossip."

Gwen's mouth went dry as she read the summary of the book, which promised the details of Mick Malone's colorful life of crime, including special insight into the Blackstone scandal and the injustice he endured at the hands of the most powerful family in America.

The irony was that Mick Malone wasn't a victim, but a criminal who had perpetrated a profound crime against her family. Everyone knew he was guilty of kidnapping and killing her three-year-old brother shortly before Gwen was born. Her father paid the ransom, but her brother was never returned. Days went by, then weeks, then years, but young William Blackstone was never found.

Her father hired an army of private investigators to hunt for the kidnappers. Within a week, they caught Malone, along with undeniable proof of his guilt. His apartment contained

hundred-dollar bills with serial numbers matching those in the ransom payment and the typewriter with the flawed key that had typed the ransom note. Most chillingly, there was a single shoe belonging to little Willy Blackstone that was stained with blood.

Malone was put on trial for kidnapping and murder. It was a hanging offense, but a slippery defense attorney distracted the jury by putting the Blackstones' reputation on trial. At that time, the Blackstone name was synonymous with greed and exploitation. When the prosecutor objected, the defense attorney claimed the shameful details were essential to Mr. Malone's defense because the list of Blackstone enemies was endless. How could the laughing Irishman who loved his wife and went to church every Sunday be a villain who kidnapped children? Day after day, the defense attorney presented witnesses who testified to various Blackstone depredations and pointed to other suspects, such as union leaders, anarchists, and disgruntled businessmen who'd been driven into bankruptcy by the unforgiving policies of the Blackstone Bank. There were plenty of suspects who might have killed Willy Blackstone, and the jury wanted to send a message.

They found Mick Malone not guilty despite the overwhelming evidence against him.

*Not guilty.* The verdict practically killed her father but delighted the press. People hailed Mick Malone as a working-class hero, a man who challenged the hated Blackstones and lived to tell the tale. While everyone agreed it was a shame about the child, unsympathetic journalists touted the plight of other children who labored in Blackstone-financed coal mines and factories. Twelve men considered all the evidence and decided there wasn't enough proof to send Mick Malone to the gallows.

The verdict changed her father forever. Theodore suffered a nervous breakdown, and he began believing the hatred against his family was justified. In a desperate attempt to find meaning in his son's death, Theodore created Blackstone College, dedicated to education and curing the diseases of the poor. Her

grandfather never liked the expensive venture that had yet to turn a profit, but he agreed because Theodore asked it of him.

The college had helped the Blackstones slowly rehabilitate their image, but all that goodwill would suffer if this revolting memoir stirred up old animosity against them.

She placed a trembling hand over the book. “I didn’t even realize Mick Malone was still alive.”

“He’s a washed-up old drunk,” her grandfather said. “I won’t take this lying down. We’ve already filed paperwork with the court to halt publication. I’ll sue them for libel and defamation of character.”

Gwen instinctively recoiled from lawsuits, lawyers, and anything that smacked of conflict. Why couldn’t people simply behave like decent human beings? She and her father had created a paradise on earth in their forty-acre campus where people respected and supported each other. It was as close to the Garden of Eden as could exist in a fallen world, and this awful book on her lap awakened old demons she believed were safely consigned to the past.

“I don’t think so,” she said, scrambling for ways to mitigate this disaster. “Suing Mick Malone will roll back decades of goodwill we have garnered from the college. We need to handle this with finesse.”

“What do you recommend?” Oscar asked. In truth, her uncle wasn’t a horrible man. He was smart and had suffered more than most from the hatred aimed at her family. Perhaps she could work with him to defeat a common enemy.

“Mick Malone is obviously in need of funds,” she said. “I suggest we quietly pay him off. A thousand dollars ought to do it, and it will save us the headache of this memoir seeing the light of day.”

“Absolutely not,” Oscar snapped. “That man killed my nephew and destroyed my brother’s spirit. I won’t pay him a dime.”

“Then look the other way while I do it,” she said. It was galling, but her family’s peace of mind was worth it.

Uncle Oscar began pacing. “Malone will never settle for a thousand dollars. He knows the book will earn far more.”

“Agreed,” Gwen said. “That’s why we offer his lawyer the same deal to persuade him to settle.”

Uncle Oscar’s brow quirked in reluctant admiration, but he shouldn’t be surprised. It was impossible to grow up in the Blackstone family without a bit of their cunning rubbing off on her.

“The lawyer will know that we have unlimited funds to stop this book,” she continued. “We can drag this out, delay their profits, and cost Malone’s publisher a fortune in legal fees. Or we can pay Malone’s lawyer in hope that he will pressure Malone to come to terms.”

Uncle Oscar wanted to keep arguing, but Frederick lifted a hand to call an end to the discussion. “An excellent suggestion,” he said. “I’ll have one of our lawyers begin the process.”

“Let me do it,” Gwen said. “I’m less threatening than a lawyer, and I’ll get the job done quickly. And if I can scuttle Mick Malone’s memoir, will you sign a document restoring the college’s annual funding in perpetuity?”

Frederick’s eyes narrowed. “I’d never guarantee anything in perpetuity,” he said instantly. “Try again.”

“Five years,” she countered. “Continue the college’s annual funding for the next five years, at which time the college must show the ability to generate enough revenue to cover our operating budget.”

The corner of her grandfather’s mouth turned down as he considered her proposal. It didn’t take long for him to reach a decision.

“Our lawyers have already initiated a preliminary injunction to halt the publication of the book,” he said. “I don’t like calling attention to scandal better left in the past, so if you can prevent that public court case, I will authorize a five-year extension on the college’s funding. I will commission a profile of Mick Malone’s lawyer to discover his weaknesses and provide insight for your fight.”

Her grandfather's terms were nonnegotiable, and Gwen felt compelled to accept. It wasn't what she'd hoped. She now had to deliver on this unsavory deal or her grandfather would never reverse Uncle Oscar's decision to yank the college's funding.

But she was not without hope. In her experience, lawyers would do anything for a quick payoff, and she suspected any man who aligned himself with Mick Malone would be no different.