

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • BOOK THREE

Hearts of Steel

RITA Award-Winning Author

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN

Hearts of Steel

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THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY

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A Desperate Hope

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • 3

Hearts of Steel

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN



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Prologue

NEW YORK CITY, 1890
LOWER EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN

Maggie Molinaro was five blocks from the safety of her uncle's garage when she noticed the gang of boys following her. Boys or young men? It was hard to tell, but they looked mangy and tough, and she shoved her ice cream pushcart faster on the crowded Manhattan sidewalk. The umbrella made wheeling the heavy cart awkward, and the boys were gaining on her.

"Hey, how about an ice cream, girlie?"

They wouldn't have called her girlie if her father were here. Maggie had been working this pushcart since leaving school last year when she was fifteen, but this was the first time she'd gone out alone. Normally she and her father worked as a team, but not today, and the last mile home went through a rough part of town. Dilapidated tenements towered over the buckled concrete walks, making it hard to move quickly.

Jeering from the boys got more aggressive, and she picked up her pace, desperate to reach her uncle's tenement. Uncle Dino sank all his money into his fledgling pushcart business, and he would scare those boys away.

She swallowed hard, regretting how she told Dino she'd be meeting her father at Washington Square, and it was okay to

take the pushcart out alone. It was a lie. Everyone knew that if her father missed one more shift, Dino would fire him, and nobody wanted that. Until last year they all had shared a crowded tenement room, but she and her father had to move out because her dad complained Dino had too many rules.

Maggie didn't mind Dino's rules. Dino never had to lie or cheat to make rent. Dino never had to beg for scraps at the soup kitchen because he spent all his money at the pub. Someday Maggie wanted to buy a pushcart of her own and follow in Uncle Dino's footsteps, yet everything would go sour if he had to fire her dad.

She tried to move faster, but other pushcarts crowding the walk blocked her progress. An arm landed around her neck as the stink of dirty wool hit her nose.

"I said, how about an ice cream, girlie?"

"I don't have any left." She mashed the palm of her hand against the top drawer to protect the cashbox. The loan on the pushcart was due tomorrow, and no matter what, she had to protect the cashbox.

The arm around her neck tightened. "Check it out, Jamie."

One of the other boys opened the cart's lid and reached a dirty hand into the cold compartment. "Lookee here," he said, grabbing a few bars of ice cream and tossing them to the others. Then he reached down again and grabbed a lump of melting ice.

"Catch," he said, lobbing it at her face. She gasped and batted it away. The ringleader lunged for the cash drawer, but she got there first and slammed it shut.

"You've got what you wanted, now leave me alone," she said, her hands beginning to shake.

"You think we got what we wanted? Think again."

An old man selling pretzels from a nearby cart stepped forward. "Leave her alone, lads."

They circled in closer, and her mouth went dry. She shouldn't have tried to do this without her dad, and now the boys had circled her cart, bracing it in place. The ringleader tried for the cash drawer again.

“Get your hands off my cart,” she ordered, trying to sound strong.

“Leave that girl alone,” a woman scolded, but she was wheeling a baby carriage and moved along quickly. Other pedestrians looked on with disapproval, though no one helped as the jackals swarmed her cart. She pressed both hands against the cash drawer, but it didn’t take them long to wrench her away. A gloating boy grabbed the cashbox, tucked it under his arm and sprinted away, but they weren’t done.

“Okay, stand aside,” the ringleader said and grabbed the handles of the cart. Understanding dawned.

“No!” she shouted, clutching a handlebar with both hands, holding on for dear life. The ringleader pounded on her hands. She didn’t care if he broke her fingers, she wasn’t letting go.

“Help! Somebody please help me!”

Nobody came forward, and the boys kept shoving the cart down the street. She hung on, trying to dig her heels into the pavement, but it didn’t work and she was dragged along with the cart.

“Send for the police,” the pretzel vendor called out, and the ringleader upped his game. He punched her in the jaw. While the pain made it hard to see, she held on. One of them kicked her legs, and the ringleader drew back to punch her again. She couldn’t let go of the cart to defend herself and the blow knocked her down. Her face smacked the metal rim of the cart before hitting the pavement.

“Help!” she screamed. Blood streamed into her eyes, blurring her vision. By the time she scrambled to her feet, the boys were a block away with the pushcart. She ran after them but stumbled on a crack in the walk and went down sprawling. They had everything. She was never going to catch them. The pretzel vendor put an arm around her.

“There, there, it’s going to be okay,” he said.

No, it wasn’t. Uncle Dino still owed two hundred dollars on that cart. The payment was due tomorrow, and he wouldn’t be able to pay.

Everything hurt as she struggled to her feet. Grit embedded in her palms itched, but her forehead hurt the worst, pulsating like a white-hot knife across her eyebrow. Blood stung as it dribbled into her eye. A lady from a nearby shop brought her a lump of ice wrapped in a rag to hold to her forehead.

“Oh dear, I’m afraid you’re going to have a scar from this,” she said. “Such a pretty face you had.”

Maggie didn’t care about a scar. All she cared about was how to tell Uncle Dino that she’d lost everything.

Pain throbbed with every step on the long trek home. The ice in the rag melted, the cut still bleeding after walking the five blocks to the garage in a back alley, where other street vendors locked up their carts overnight.

Dino was inside, wiping down his cart and happily singing a church hymn, his Italian accent still strong. He stopped singing when he saw her face. He dropped the rag and ran to her.

“Oh, *bambina*, what happened?” He led her to a bench, and her aunt rushed to her side. Maggie would give anything if she didn’t have to tell them. She couldn’t do it.

“I’m sorry” was all she could choke out.

“Somebody got the cashbox?” Dino asked gently. She nodded, and he cringed a little, probably thinking he’d only lost a day’s income when it was so much worse. Her stomach hurt at the thought of telling him. Her lungs seized up and she couldn’t speak.

“Where’s your father?” Aunt Julie asked. Maggie couldn’t look at either one of them, instead staring at the concrete floor.

“He was drunk,” she whispered, still not able to look up. Dino didn’t deserve this. Dino had worked hard all his life and done everything right, yet he needed to know.

“They got the cart,” she choked out, and Dino groaned as if he’d been shot. Then he hugged her. *He hugged her!*

“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Shhhh,” Dino soothed. “We’ll figure something out.”



The bank had little mercy, insisting that Dino was still responsible for the loan on the stolen cart. Her uncle asked for an extension on the loan, and the bank gave him two weeks to make up the shortfall or else their other cart would be repossessed.

Maggie and Dino worked their single pushcart all day, then moved it to Broadway to sell ice cream to theatergoers at night. They worked from sunrise until midnight each day, but with only a single cart, they couldn't make up the shortfall.

Dino sold his queen-sized bed and dining room table to make good on the loan. He and Julie had to sleep on the floor, but the sale of their furniture let them save the one remaining pushcart.

Maggie and Dino continued their fourteen-hour days to earn as much as possible from that last pushcart, and by the end of the summer they had paid off its loan.

A year later, they had saved enough to buy a second pushcart and paid for it in cash. Never again would they be at the mercy of the bank. But even with two pushcarts fully paid for, they did not ease up on their schedule. They hired a wiry, middle-aged man named Spider Mackenzie to help staff the carts. Though Spider had a terrible name, he was a tireless worker. With both pushcarts on the same fourteen-hour schedule, their fortunes began to turn, and soon they were ready to buy a third cart.

Every dime of profit was reinvested back into the business. Within five years they had a fleet of twelve pushcarts and twenty-five employees, selling ice cream all over Manhattan. They operated the carts from ten o'clock in the morning until midnight when the Theater District closed. They were earning money hand over fist, but through it all, Maggie never lost her fear of debt. She and Dino never bought anything unless they could pay for it in cash.

Their success did not come without setbacks. Her father continued to drink, even though it had been eight years since Maggie's mother died and it could no longer be used as an excuse for his drunkenness. He tried to sober up, but one night

he broke into Dino's locked desk drawer and stole everything inside to buy a ticket back to Italy. She hadn't heard from him since.

It had hurt, both financially and spiritually. Maggie had been born right here in New York and would never consider leaving, but the incident taught her to always have enough cash squirreled away for emergencies. The theft meant she and Dino had to dig into their savings to pay their employees at the end of the week, and it had been a costly lesson.

The work was exhausting, but as the years passed, the sweat, toil, and long hours became a strange sort of joy. Maybe that wasn't the right word. *Pride? Accomplishment?* Whatever the word, by the time Maggie turned twenty she had learned to love her job. It was a thrill each time she sold ice cream to a child giddy with delight. Balancing the accounting ledger at the end of the month felt like a triumph. Every time she banked a little more money, it fueled her ambition to cut costs, streamline the business, and earn more. Spider taught her how to disassemble the pushcarts down to their components to clean, oil, and repair them, and the satisfaction from keeping their equipment in flawless order was also a thrill.

From Dino she learned the importance of a positive attitude. She saw it every day when customers walked past other ice cream vendors to patronize Dino's cart because he greeted everyone with booming, buoyant good cheer. People were drawn to Dino because he loved everyone and everything. He danced to celebrate a sunny day, and he also danced to welcome the rain. It simply wasn't possible to stay in a gloomy mood when Dino Molinaro was nearby.

From Aunt Julie, Maggie learned how to dream. Julie could always see beyond the sooty streets and their dank little apartment to imagine what life could be like if they kept working hard. Like a master storyteller spinning daydreams, Julie spoke of someday opening an ice cream parlor, where they could sell to customers who came to them instead of pushing carts all over the city to chase down business. Julie dreamed of creating

a haven where people could relax in a spotlessly clean parlor that felt like home.

The opportunity to make it happen came when Maggie saw a storefront for lease on Gadsen Street. The four-story brick building had a bright, sunny retail space that could be turned into an ice cream parlor, but even more tempting was the dairy operation making butter and cheese in the back. If they leased the creamery, they could start making their own ice cream instead of buying it from a supplier.

Dino signed a one-year lease on the shop and the creamery. Aunt Julie began making ice cream from her own recipes in the creamery, and it was *good*. The best in the city! Julie's signature recipes made the Molinaro Ice Cream Parlor the most popular restaurant on Gadsen Street, with so many customers they bought tables for the sidewalk to accommodate the overflow.

Maggie and Spider built flower boxes to spiff up the outside of the shop, filling the planters with delphiniums, petunias, and trailing vines of ivy. The largest planter was reserved for Uncle Dino's olive tree, which he'd brought as a cutting from Tuscany, but it was as tall as Maggie now. Seeing this Tuscan olive tree flourishing among the towering buildings and worn cobblestones of Manhattan was a testament to the spirit of survival, and Maggie smiled at it each morning when she arrived for work.

The only weakness in their business was that they couldn't make ice cream fast enough to stock their fleet of pushcarts. Hand-churned ice cream was a labor-intensive product, and they didn't have the equipment to speed up operations. They still had to buy ice cream for the pushcarts from a supplier, and it ate into their profits. Maggie dreamed about what it might be like to someday own a real factory with modern equipment. While most women her age dreamed of marriage and family, Maggie fantasized about the day she could afford to buy an ice cream factory.

Dino was content with his life, but Maggie could never achieve the level of security she wanted by selling other people's

ice cream. Every time she paid the ice cream bill, she thought of how much more they could earn if they bought newfangled machinery to make ice cream faster and cheaper but every bit as good because they'd still be using Aunt Julie's recipes.

Then came the morning their landlord announced he was putting the building up for sale, and Maggie spotted her chance. If they owned the building, they could invest in expensive machinery that would eventually pay for itself and make them richer than ever before.

Dino wasn't interested in buying the building because it meant taking out a loan, and he refused to go into debt, but Maggie worried about Dino, especially after his back seized up while simply leaning over to lift a bucket of ice cream. How could they ever feel safe if a simple injury could land Dino flat on his back for a week? They both feared debt, yet the advantages of owning the building were huge.

"There's a nice apartment upstairs," she said. "We can move in and save on rent. We won't have to lease the ice cream shop because *we will own it*. Then we can buy real factory equipment and supply not just the pushcarts but expand the business to supply every hotel and restaurant within miles of this building. Dino . . . we could be rich!"

Though Dino was tempted, he still worried about the burden of a loan. "Buying the building would be hard enough, but we'd still need a second loan for the factory. We already have more than enough. Look around you . . . we're happy, aren't we?"

Were they? Sometimes Maggie snapped awake in the middle of the night, fearing the world they'd built could come crashing down. In the quiet of the night, she lay awake and wondered what it would be like to live without fear. Sliding back into poverty was always one injury or one theft away, and she redoubled her efforts to persuade Dino.

"I want us all to have a big nest egg so we can finally be safe," she said, but Dino's sigh was heavy.

"Oh, Maggie, will there ever be enough to soothe the worries you've got rolling around in your head?"

Maybe not, but she didn't mind working hard to earn more. She *liked* working! She spent weeks going over their finances and calculating the costs for the equipment and interest on the loan. Long after the ice cream parlor closed for the night, she and Dino sat at a table, the lantern casting a warm glow around them as they studied their account books and a map of the city.

"There are eight hotels in walking distance," Dino said. "If we can supply ice cream to half of them, it will earn as much as the pushcarts do." Maggie studied the restaurants, theaters, and cafés marked on the map. All of them might buy their ice cream, if only she could ramp up production, but first they needed to conquer their fear of debt and build a factory.

"It's always been you and me, Dino," she said, hope beginning to bloom. "I know we can make it work, but I don't want to do it without you."

His smile was equal parts fear, hope, and anticipation, and after a week of analyzing their accounts, he finally agreed to her plan.

On her twenty-sixth birthday, Maggie put on her finest suit and bought a brand-new straw boater hat with a matching hatband. She looked as spiffy as any other person of business as she strode into the bank with Dino beside her. He twisted his cap and looked anxious, but Maggie was resolved. She walked into the bank manager's office with her shoulders back, eyes confident.

"I want to build an ice cream factory," she announced.

It was the start of their new life, and there would be no turning back.

1



NEW YORK CITY
JUNE 1902

The prospect of apologizing to the only enemy Liam Blackstone had in the world was galling, but he'd do it to keep Fletcher's respect. Liam strode down the street alongside his mentor, listening to Fletcher's reasons he should apologize to Charles Morse, possibly the biggest scoundrel in the city.

"The point of yesterday's outing was to have a cordial afternoon sailing in the harbor so you and Charles could bury the hatchet, not to stir up new resentments," Fletcher said. "Throwing him off your yacht opened up a whole new front in the war between the two of you."

"He slapped a seventeen-year-old deckhand," Liam bit out.

"Yes, and that was regrettable, but there were better ways to handle it than letting your temper fly off the handle."

Yesterday's fight had been a doozy. The afternoon sailing excursion on Liam's private yacht had collapsed quickly after Morse struck the deckhand, a sweet kid named Caleb. While Caleb could be a little slow, once he understood a task, the kid carried it out doggedly and never tired. The problem was that Caleb couldn't adjust. Any change to his routine got Caleb

flustered, which was what happened when Morse started banging out orders yesterday.

They had been a mile out at sea when Morse slapped Caleb. Liam ordered Morse to be rowed ashore, and the incident cast a pall over the rest of the afternoon. Several of the other businessmen aboard the vessel privately commended Liam for the way he protected the deckhand, but no one approved of what he'd done in throwing Morse off the yacht.

Now Fletcher was dragging Liam to Morse's home like a disobedient child to apologize. The Morse estate squatted on a large plot on the richest part of Fifth Avenue. It was where robber barons flaunted their wealth in grandiose palaces towering five stories high with molded entablatures, spires, and turrets . . . so different from the slum where Liam grew up.

"I understand you are still new in the world of Wall Street," Fletcher said. "Everyone appreciates the fresh perspective you have brought to the board of directors. You are the only one among us who has actually worked at a steel mill or made anything with your own two hands. Against all odds you persuaded the board of directors to authorize a huge pay raise for the men in the steel mills—"

"Over Morse's objections."

"Yes! Charles Morse is the shrewdest man on Wall Street, and you got the better of him. Be proud of that. You won. Why can't you simply get along with him?"

Because Charles Morse was a bully. He showed it in his brusque manner in dealing with servants and how he cheated at cards if he couldn't win honestly. If the rumors were true, even Morse's own wife disliked him, and they were newlyweds.

Fletcher continued his litany. "You are the two youngest men on the board of directors, and I'm baffled as to why the pair of you can't get along. He is only forty-six, and you're what, thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-five," Liam corrected.

"Old enough to control your temper," Fletcher said. "I've

spent the past year playing peacekeeper between the two of you, and my patience is wearing thin. You are an asset to the board, but if push comes to shove, we need Morse more than we need you. As chairman of the board, it is my job to create a strong and productive group of people dedicated to maintaining U.S. Steel's prominence in the industry. If the two of you can't manage to be in the same room without coming to blows, it won't be Morse I ask to leave."

The pronouncement landed like a fist to Liam's gut. He was the only person on the board committed to putting the welfare of the workers ahead of profits. U.S. Steel employed 160,000 frontline workers in steel mills all over the nation. They were in Pittsburgh, Scranton, Cleveland, and Chicago. Those men earned a living with their hands, their backs, and their brawn. They didn't get ahead by scheming, cheating, or smacking servants. They depended on Liam to represent their interests on the company's board of directors, and if he had to swallow his pride and kiss Morse's ring to keep his seat, he'd do it.

They marched up the flight of marble steps to the cool shade beneath the stone-arched portico of the mansion.

"This is where I leave you," Fletcher said, offering a good-natured handshake.

Liam was flabbergasted. "You're not coming inside?" This would be a disaster without Fletcher to play the peacekeeper. Morse usually pretended to be friendly in front of the chairman of the board, but when no one was watching, Morse's true colors emerged.

"You need to manage Charles Morse on your own," Fletcher said as he retreated down the steps. "Take my advice and apologize for what happened yesterday. Get the incident behind you, and we can begin this afternoon's board meeting with a clean slate."

Fletcher sauntered toward the street as though the matter were already settled, while Liam braced himself for the confrontation ahead. Maybe it was for the best. He wasn't required to like Charles Morse, he merely needed to form a workable truce.

He drew a deep breath and rang the bell. Distant chimes tolled inside the mansion, sounding like gongs of doom. Everything about going down on bended knee before Charles Morse felt wrong, and yet it had to be done.

It was still early, which probably accounted for why the door was answered by a parlor maid instead of the butler. She looked about twenty, with freckled skin and a shock of red hair.

“Can I help you, sir?” she asked in a charming Irish lilt.

“I’d like to see Mr. Morse, please.”

“Do you have an . . . um, can I ask your name? I mean, who shall I say is calling?” She continued to stammer and blushed furiously, explaining that it was the butler’s morning off and apologizing that she didn’t recognize him.

“Relax, you’re doing a good job,” he assured the nervous maid. “Please let Mr. Morse know that Liam Blackstone is here. He’ll understand why.”

The maid led him to a parlor to wait while she delivered the message. The parlor was gussied up like the rest of the house, an opulent mess with patterned wallpaper, gilded hardware, and fussy doodads cluttering every surface. It even smelled like money with the lingering scent of expensive cigars and sandalwood oil.

He shoved a hand into a trouser pocket to toy with Darla’s empty pill case. Whenever he was nervous, he rolled it in his palm, popped the lid with his thumb, then snapped it shut. Roll, pop, snap. Roll, pop, snap.

It was no surprise that Morse made him wait. Ten minutes stretched into twenty as Liam paced, too anxious to sit as he scrutinized every object in the overly decorated room. Why did rich men feel so compelled to show off their fortune? He leaned over to scrutinize a gold mantel clock surrounded by dark red enamel. A chip marred the edge of the enamel, revealing a tin frame instead of silver. The clock was probably a cheap imitation. Rumors abounded that Morse was a skinflint beneath all the frippery, which explained the imitation clock.

An ugly lump of granite looked out of place among the fancy

knickknacks on the mantel. He tilted the rock to examine the flecks of green and orange.

“Copper,” Morse announced from the doorway, his voice chilly.

Liam turned, the rock still in his hand. Morse’s growing dominance in the copper industry was one of the reasons Fletcher wanted to keep him on the board. Now the rock made sense. It gave Morse an opportunity to brag about his vast copper mines out west. Liam set the rock back on the mantel and faced Morse, a good-looking man with a strong build and a full head of black hair that matched his neatly groomed mustache.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Liam said, striving for a polite tone.

Morse gave the slightest tip of his head but remained frosty. “Your ship’s rowboat is dreadful. It doesn’t have any ballast, and there were no cushions on the seats.”

That’s because it wasn’t meant for ferry service. If Morse had simply shown remorse over slapping Caleb, Liam wouldn’t have ordered him ashore.

“Charles, we are two men of business who only want the best for the company,” Liam began, but Morse interrupted.

“Do we? It seems you care more about the workers in the mills.”

As if those workers weren’t part of the company, Liam thought before continuing as though he hadn’t heard. “We don’t need to be the best of friends, but I am prepared to be cordial. You couldn’t have known that my deckhand struggles when he gets contradictory orders, and I shouldn’t have lost my temper. I’m sorry.”

He waited, hoping the older man might express remorse for striking Caleb. It didn’t happen. “Perhaps you should consider hiring a better quality of staff when entertaining guests,” Morse said.

Liam resisted the urge to defend Caleb. “Whatever the cause of the incident, again, I’m sorry I got angry.”

“Can’t you control your temper even when you’re in a business

gathering?” Morse asked. “Perhaps that’s how they handle things in the back alleys, but you are among men of high caliber now.”

Liam itched to point out that slapping a deckhand wasn’t a sterling example of gentility, but a ruckus in the hall distracted him. It sounded like two women squabbling. The Irish maid’s voice was easily recognizable, but there was another woman in the mix, sounding equally adamant about demanding an audience.

The frazzled maid rushed inside. “I’m sorry, sir, but she insists on seeing you.”

Could this be the newlywed Mrs. Morse, whose discontent was already stirring rumors?

Liam immediately discarded the idea when a pretty woman with glossy black hair pushed her way into the room. She was smartly dressed in a trim blue jacket and a straw boater hat, but this was a woman of the middle class, not a pampered millionaire’s wife. She was lovely in a fierce, strong sort of way. Even the scar splitting her left eyebrow didn’t detract from her appeal.

The woman held an envelope aloft. “This bill is four months overdue,” she stated. “I’ve sent invoice after invoice and you have ignored them all, so I have no choice but to collect in person.”

Morse flushed in outrage. “How dare you. If there has been a mix-up in the payment of a legitimate expense, you should submit the bill to my secretary, not interrupt a business meeting like a fishwife.”

He brushed her aside and stomped into the hallway, shouting for servants to remove the intruder, but the woman didn’t back down.

“I’ve been hectoring your secretary for months,” she said. “He’s refused payment, and I won’t tolerate it any longer. You owe me ninety-five dollars for the ice cream we delivered to your wedding reception at the Belmont Hotel, and it’s now four months overdue.”

“Then of course I refuse to pay,” he retorted. “Your complaint is with the Belmont Hotel, not with me. If you haven’t been paid, I suggest you take it up with the hotel.”

“The Belmont told me you stiffed them too,” the woman said. “Perhaps they’re willing to absorb the loss, but I won’t. You owe me seventy for the ice cream, a ten-dollar late fee plus three percent for interest.”

“That doesn’t add up to ninety-five,” Morse snapped.

“I added the court fee I just paid to file a lawsuit against you.”

After a momentary pause of surprise, Morse threw back his head and affected an exaggerated laugh. It had a fake ring to it, but still he carried on for several seconds before dropping the theatrics and looking at the woman with contempt. “You’re suing me over a ninety-five-dollar bill?”

The woman nodded. “I hate bullies. You have succeeded in bullying the hotel and the baker who provided the wedding cake, but I’ll sue you to kingdom come until I’ve been paid in full.”

A group of servants gathered in the hallway, watching the confrontation and looking to Morse for direction, but he waved them away. This likely wasn’t the sort of interaction he would be proud of. To Liam’s surprise, Morse agreed to pay.

“Very well,” he said tightly. “The cost of a nuisance lawsuit isn’t worth my time, and it’s little enough to pacify an annoying gnat.” He beckoned the woman to follow him into his private study.

Liam followed. He didn’t trust Morse alone with her and monitored the interaction from the open doorway of the elaborate book-lined study.

“Please address the check to Molinaro Ice Cream,” the woman said primly. Morse affected an indulgent grin as he opened a desk drawer and removed a leather book of checks. The smile didn’t reach his eyes as he wrote out the check, the pen scratching in the quiet of the heavily carpeted, silk-draped room.

Liam took the opportunity to study the woman. She was slim but strong. They had the same coloring, with olive complexions and dark hair. Her pretty gamine face was full of character, even with the faint white scar that bisected an eyebrow.

Odd. He had an identical scar splitting his left brow. She

must have felt his stare because her gaze flicked to him. Her eye landed on his scar, and a hint of surprise crossed her face. She noticed their matching scars too, and he flashed her a wink.

She flushed and looked back at the bank draft as Morse pulled it from the notebook, gently wafting the slip of paper to dry the ink. He rose and fanned himself with the check, drawing out the moment as he scrutinized the woman. Several seconds passed in silence. If Liam wasn't a witness, he suspected Morse would make her beg for the check.

"Give it to her," he said.

Morse continued fanning himself a few more times before flicking the check toward the woman with a twist of his fingers. "Don't spend it all in one place," he said with a smirk.

The woman snatched it from his hand, then whirled to leave the room.

"Thank you, sir," she whispered as she passed him, trailing the soft scent of vanilla as she hurried down the hall.

Morse resumed his seat and looked up at Liam. "This whole apology nonsense isn't going as swimmingly as Fletcher hoped, is it? But what a good little soldier you are to come across town and offer it."

Heat gathered beneath his collar, but he wouldn't let Morse goad him. At this very moment there were 160,000 men showing up to work in sweltering steel mills all across the nation. They had a grueling week of dangerous labor ahead of them, and Liam was their only voice. He wouldn't let Charles Morse run him off the board.

"Fletcher wants what's best for the company, and that means you and I need to get along," he said.

"Fletcher wants to make money," Morse corrected. "He needs me on the board because he knows I can make it happen. What I can't understand is why he needs *you*."

Liam raised his chin a notch. "He needs me because the unions trust me. I can keep peace in the mills."

"You were appointed to the board because of family connections," Morse said dismissively.

He tried not to wince, but the charge was true. If Liam weren't a Blackstone, he wouldn't have had the leverage to demand a position on the board. Everyone knew it, and Morse gloated.

"You have nothing but an eighth-grade education and a history of rabble-rousing from your days as a union boss," Morse continued. "I could go into any steel mill in America and find men who are more intelligent, more articulate, and better educated than you. You've still got calluses on your hands and a chip on your shoulder."

Liam shoved both hands in his pockets, not because he was embarrassed of his calluses but because clenching Darla's pill case helped stifle the impulse to beat the smirk off Morse's face. He longed to throw that punch but settled for skewering Morse with a look of contempt.

"I don't need your approval. Any man who would stiff a woman over a piddly bill for ice cream isn't someone whose good opinion I value."

"You'd better start valuing it," Morse said in a silky tone. "No one on the board likes you. Everyone wants you off, and I'm going to call for a vote of no confidence. I've wanted to call it since the day your family forced us to accept you on the board, and after your stunt yesterday, I've got enough men on my side to vote you off."

An ache began in the pit of his stomach. Liam knew since his first board meeting that he was in over his head. All those men had college educations and tight friendships. While his fellow board members grew up in New England boarding schools learning to play polo and speak foreign languages, Liam was in a Pittsburgh steel mill shoveling coal into furnaces.

"Hogwash," Liam said. "The only reason the unions didn't go on strike last year was because they knew I was on the board and looking out for them."

Morse shrugged. "None of those men get to vote. This afternoon the board will discuss how to recapitalize the sinking funds for our subsidiaries and whether we should renegotiate

the maturity dates. Each member will be expected to offer his opinion. And yours is?”

Silence stretched in the room. Liam rarely spoke at board meetings on anything other than labor issues because he lacked the qualifications for an informed opinion. Everyone knew it. He clenched his teeth, scrambling for a way to defend himself, when Morse offered a surprisingly kind concession.

“Come, Liam. You accomplished your mission in getting the steelworkers a considerable pay raise, but now it’s time for you to go back home and enjoy the fruits of your accomplishments. Your father would be proud of you.”

Liam stiffened at the mention of his father. Theodore Blackstone was the chink in his armor, a great man whose memory Liam would never be able to live up to.

“Did I ever tell you that I knew your father?” Morse asked. “What a rare combination of academic brilliance and compassion. He was always so even-tempered and gentle. He founded a college, correct?”

“He did.”

“You must be very proud to be descended from such a man,” Morse continued. “Theodore Blackstone was a man for the ages.”

Liam didn’t even like hearing his father’s name uttered in this gaudy house. “Look, shut up about my father, okay?”

“My apologies,” Morse said. “It must be intimidating to walk in Theodore Blackstone’s footsteps.”

It was the first entirely true statement Liam had ever heard Morse say. Yes, it was intimidating to be such a great man’s son, and Liam desperately wanted to be worthy of his father’s legacy. The only way he could ensure his father’s humanitarian interests would triumph over men like Charles Morse was to keep his seat on the board. Nothing and nobody was going to stop him. It didn’t matter that he lacked an education and didn’t have any friends on Wall Street; he had a seat on the board and would fight to keep it.

Everything else was secondary. He would force himself to get

along with Charles Morse. He could get used to being lonely. For a while he'd hoped that Darla Kingston might be the answer for his loneliness, but she had let him down in that department. When Liam finally found a woman to marry, she would be a woman of valor. A woman who wouldn't be afraid to stand in the breach with him and face down dragons.

He let go of Darla's pill case and faced Charles Morse.

"Any man with a beating heart would be honored to walk in Theodore Blackstone's footsteps." He smiled a little. "Brace yourself, Charles. I intend to ensure that my father's humanitarian sentiments are well represented on the board of U.S. Steel. You will *never* succeed in voting me out."

Liam turned on his heel and left Morse fuming in his office, but secretly he feared he wouldn't be able to live up to those bold words.