

THE LUMBER BARON'S DAUGHTERS :: THREE

A
MODEL
of
DEVOTION



MARY
CONNELY

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To Josie, Wendy, Shelly, and Katy

It was easy to imagine how smart,
well-educated women would think and act
because you grew up into brilliant women
in front of my eyes.



CHAPTER

ONE

MARCH 1873
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

JILLY STILES ALWAYS CAME BACK to the mansion on Nob Hill.

She was alone, and that never happened. Two sisters. A very attentive mama. Servants.

When had she ever been alone in her life?

Right now.

In the black hour before dawn, walking through the upstairs hallway with a burning candle, she approached the servants' stairway. Narrow and dark, winding tightly down to the kitchen just as fear wound tightly in her chest.

There were lanterns set in the wall sconces. At night, they were usually turned low, but now they were snuffed out. No lantern light, no bustling servants. No sisters, the mainstays of her life.

Only the circle of light from her flickering candle. She approached the top of the staircase in her white flannel nightgown. She shouldn't be out of her room dressed like this.

Where was her robe? Why hadn't she dressed before coming on this errand?

And what was her errand? She couldn't remember. Searching perhaps. Searching for Laura and Michelle.

They were lost. That was it. Her sisters were lost to her. Leaving her alone. Leaving her defenseless.

A shadow that shouldn't have been there cast itself on the wall ahead of her. She turned to look into the eyes of Edgar Beaumont, her stepfather.

He grabbed her and laughed as he dragged her into his bedroom. With a shriek of terror, she dropped the candle, and it rolled across the floor toward his bed. The lamps were slightly turned up in there, yet everything was murky, haunting. But not dim enough that she could fail to see the cruelty in Edgar's eyes. Feel the brutal grip of his hand.

The bedspread caught fire from the candle. Edgar ignored the growing flames.

He closed the door behind her with a loud slam and shoved her against it, pressing her to the door with the length of his body.

"You've flirted with me for the last time, Red." His voice dripped with something. She didn't quite recognize the tone, but it was a threat. She braced herself for something terrible to happen. The flames grew and crackled, she smelled smoke. She tried to shout a warning, but her voice wouldn't work.

"A woman who teases asks for this." Edgar laughed.

Jilly felt his hot breath blasting straight into her face. His breath was the fire, the smoke. She felt it burn her lungs. Turn her heart to ash.

"Your green eyes excite me. And everyone knows red hair

and green eyes hide a temptress. That's what you are, Jillian. A temptress."

Shaking her head, Jilly forced her throat to work. "No."

"Yes, beautiful tease." He grabbed her upper arms, shaking her violently. Her head whipped back and smacked into the hard oak door with a sharp thud. She felt the flames spreading around her, catching her nightgown on fire.

"You know this is what you've wanted." Edgar's fingers dug into her arms. She'd be bruised tomorrow. Bruised and burned.

The thud of her head continued until it was a knock at the door. The flames crept up her gown and spread to the door behind her. They caught on the bed, along the floor, spreading until the room burned all around.

In a house that was empty, except for her and Edgar, the thud penetrated her fear as if someone were really knocking.

Edgar's lips curved into a sadistic smile. "If you tell your precious mama this happened, I'll tell her you came to me. You are in *my* room in the night, after all. I'll tell her you threw yourself at me. She'll hate you for it. Moreover, if she doesn't hate you, if she takes your side . . ." Edgar leaned so close their lips could have touched. For a sickening moment, she was afraid he'd kiss her. Instead, he whispered, "I'll kill her and make you watch. Then I'll kill your sisters one after the other. And I'll do it right in front of your eyes."

The knocking grew louder.

"You know I'll do it, don't you, pretty tease? Keep your mouth shut." He tossed her aside.

She landed hard on the floor as he went out. The fire was

all around, crackling and snapping. Laughing at her as she realized she had no way to escape.

The knocking came again.

Jilly's eyes flickered wide when she saw the door swing open.

Laura poked her head in.

In an instant, Jilly realized the room was flooded with morning light.

No Edgar. No fire. No house on Nob Hill. Only her terror followed her into wakefulness. She was lying on the floor in her nightgown. Her heart was pounding, but she wasn't going to burn. Not today.

She was facing the door to her own room in the mountain mansion, not Edgar's room in the house on Nob Hill.

Edgar was gone. Long gone. Maybe forever, though she couldn't quite believe it.

"I heard you call out. I knocked, then there was a loud thud. You must've fallen out of bed." Laura rushed to her side and reached down for her. Jilly cringed away, then stopped herself.

But Laura saw, and the knowledge was in her eyes. "Bad dream again?"

Both of Jilly's sisters knew she was afraid. Knew she had nightmares. They had slept in the same room, after all. But they didn't know what caused them. They'd asked many times, but the words were frozen inside her. Keeping them there might be the difference between life and death for Mama. The difference for her sisters, too.

As Jilly got to her feet, the dream hung on, pressing out what was real.

Safety. Her sister. Bright daylight. Those were real.

Still, she was haunted by the dream. Always the dream. What had happened between her and Edgar hadn't been exactly like that. But the terror, the feeling that the world was burning down around her, the guilt for luring him away from his love for Mama. She carried it all.

Laura reached down a hand. Jilly, in control of herself this time, took Laura's hand and got to her feet.

Laura was the one Jilly had always protected. She'd probably pushed her around plenty, too, but she loved her little sister, and the big sister helping the little one was the natural order of things.

Now Laura was married to Parson Caleb Tillman and helping Jilly. Things were upside down.

"When are you going to tell me about your dreams?" Laura frowned, love in her gaze. "It might help to talk about it."

Jilly thought not. It would only make things worse.

Shaking off the remnants of the nightmare, Jilly checked the bedside clock and saw it was eight o'clock already. "Why'd you let me sleep so late?"

This was a big day, and she'd been waiting too long for it to arrive. She had a train track to build.

"There was no hurry to get up. When you sleep late, it usually means you've had a bad night."

"It was a fine night until I fell out of bed." Jilly's smile was meant to ease Laura's worry, but Laura's brow remained furrowed.

Jilly moved to her closet and pulled out clothes to get dressed for the day. She was wearing her usual white flannel nightgown, just like in the dream. Long sleeves, skirt brushing her bare

toes. Collar buttoned up to her throat. Nothing teasing or tempting about it.

She stepped into her changing room and shed her nightgown, then pulled on her clothes. She dressed for comfort, not style, and that was always much faster.

“I wish you would’ve gotten me sooner. You know we start construction of the trestle today.”

“The first load of lumber is heading for the gorge. It’s slow going even on the trail you built. You can get dressed, eat breakfast, saddle your horse, and be there before they get the logs unloaded. You’re not going to be one minute late. Nick’s been out with the men since sunrise working on the railroad bed. He just came in to tell us they’re finished with the stretch to the gorge and ready for iron railings.”

She’d purchased the timber from Stiles Lumber, and she had hired extra men with extensive railroad construction experience. Massive steel girders for the railroad tracks were on order from California Ironworks and should be here any day.

Today was lumber. Mule teams were hauling it to the bottom of the gorge, where they’d build the base for the trestle. She’d charted a course that ran the tracks as low as she could over the gorges and riverbanks. One low-slung stretch of the tracks needed a bridge with a section that turned for the big boats that passed down the river.

It was thrilling to create blueprints, order material, and hire men. She couldn’t control her excitement.

This was what she wanted for her life.

The nightmare faded, and the fear along with it.

She regretted every moment she’d slept past sunrise.

CHAPTER

TWO

NICK RYDER STRODE AWAY from the railbed he'd spent weeks working on. It wasn't the job he'd signed on for, but somehow he'd ended up in charge—not counting Jilly—of building a rail line down a mountain. A train track sturdy enough to haul tons of tree trunks.

He walked back to the Stiles mansion through towering trees, down a flat stretch of ground wide enough for a train to pass, as it someday would if they could get this thing built.

Working on the railbed was a huge undertaking. Woods cleared, land leveled, rocks blasted. Jilly poking her nose in all the time, laying out the route they forged. Talking with him and the men about the maps she'd drawn in detail. Referring to the beautiful model she'd built for the biggest venture: a railroad bridge.

Her urgency almost pulsed off her. Nick knew they needed this train track built in one lumber season. And there

was labor to be done every day of the summer to achieve that. The cost was staggering. Nick had seen the figures. The potential for profit was also huge, but they needed to start making that profit as soon as possible or Stiles Lumber, for all its impressive wealth, might not survive the expenditure.

Nick didn't mind Jilly being the boss. Every time she came near, the men sucked in their stomachs, stood a little straighter, flexed their arm muscles . . . usually with some effort to be subtle.

Because, as smart as she was—she was smart enough to humble a college professor—and hardworking as she was—she worked hard enough to humble a lumberjack—on top of all that, Jilly was beautiful.

Nick thought all the Stiles sisters were so pretty it wasn't really fair, as if God had been overly generous to this one family.

But redheaded, green-eyed Jilly topped them all. She made his heart want to speed up and stop at the same time. And that couldn't be good for him.

Her lively eyes could assess their progress, then she would use her surveying tools to change the route by inches, and order a finished section smoothed out or slanted at a slightly different degree. And she did all this without ruffling feathers. Not only would the men take it from her because she was the boss, the founder's daughter, and smarter than all of them combined, but also because she tended to smile at them when they eagerly agreed she was right.

And there wasn't much any man here wouldn't do to earn a smile from Jilly Stiles.

Nick cooperated completely, but he liked to think he had better control than the rest of the men. And to that end, he didn't follow her orders like an eager puppy. Oh, he followed her orders, because he knew she was smarter than him, too. But he kept the eager-puppy thing well under control.

Mostly.

For now, the railroad bed to the first gorge was hours away from being completed. He'd left a crew to finish up—save for the iron rails that had yet to arrive, nearly a week overdue.

They had cut a steep slope out of the heart of the dense forest to reach the bottom of the first valley. It was a wretched and difficult trail, but it was done at last, and today the trestle building would begin.

One wagon filled with steel bolts and cut wooden braces had already started down. Teams of mules hauled those heavy wagons down, then slowly, painstakingly, picked up logs that had been cut to clear the trail and dragged the timber to the place where Jilly planned to build a trestle.

This railroad track down a mountain was the biggest thing Nick had ever been involved in. In fact, building just the road to work alongside the railroad track was massive enough.

He, who'd worked at a bunch of jobs in his twenty-five years, was surprised how much he enjoyed this.

He ended each day eager for the next and eager for a well-earned deep sleep, unbroken by the bad dreams that had chased him through the years. Dreams of hungry children, an always round-bellied ma with another child on the way.

An angry pa.

A Model of Devotion

And being cast out when all he could feel was fear.
But those were old dreams. That time was long past.
Now he was a friend to a family full of lovely, brilliant
women. And keeping up with them as best he could was a
challenge he enjoyed every day.