



the
LAWYER
and the
LAUNDRESS

a novel

CHRISTINE HILL SUNTZ

Praise for Christine Hill Suntz

The Lawyer and the Laundress is a sweet and historically rich romance set against the unique backdrop of the Upper Canada Rebellion. Christine Hill Suntz skillfully conjures the era, while grounding her story with themes of faith, friendship, and the healing power of love. A beautiful read.

MIMI MATTHEWS, USA Today bestselling author of *The Muse of Maiden Lane*

Suntz weaves a rich tale of second chances, hope, and faith set during a unique and unsettled time in Canada's history. This story will surely capture your heart from start to finish.

J'NELL CIESIELSKI, bestselling author of *The Socialite*

I was completely swept away by this debut! The spunky laundress and her “upstairs/downstairs” courtship hooked me right away. Beautiful prose and lovable characters make this marriage-of-convenience story a can't-miss romance, set during a little-known time in Canadian history. Perfect for fans of Sarah Ladd, Laura Frantz, and Julie Klassen. Christine Hill Suntz is a stunning new voice in historical fiction!

ASHLEY CLARK, acclaimed author of the *Heirloom Secrets* series

Christine Suntz shines in her debut novel filled with beautiful prose and engaging characters, set in a little-known slice of history. *The Lawyer and the Laundress* is the perfect addition to the historical romance genre. Fans of Tamera Alexander and Tracie Peterson are sure to enjoy this delightful new offering.

SARAH MONZON, author of *An Overdue Match*

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Chapter 1

TORONTO, 1837

She hadn't thought a person could be so hungry that just the sound of cooking could make a mouth water. *Thump. Flip.* The cook was kneading bread. Sara O'Connor took a tentative step across the courtyard toward the broad clapboard building in front of her.

She closed her eyes, picturing the soft dough stretching and rising to fill the bread box. For a moment, she forgot about the uneven cobblestones poking through the worn soles of her shoes and the earthy smell of the stables behind her. If Mrs. Cooper took her on, she'd have fresh bread to eat.

At the sound of footsteps, Sara's eyes flew open. A woman, tall and raw-boned, emerged from the back of Cooper's Inn. She marched in Sara's direction, her full skirts a garish slash of color amid the drab gray and brown of the courtyard.

Mrs. Cooper herself. The woman's eyes swept over Sara, lingering on the frayed hem of her gown. She frowned.

There'd been a day when this would have bothered Sara. When she would have straightened her shoulders and put the woman in her place with a cool look and a few well-placed words. But not anymore.

Sara lowered her eyes and reminded herself to start with a curtsy. Above all, keep her words to a minimum. "Good morning, ma'am."

The woman ignored her greeting. "Awful young to be a washerwoman, aren't you?" She reached out and circled Sara's forearm with two meaty fingers. "Awful scrawny, too."

Forgetting her resolutions, Sara twisted her arm and shook off the older woman's touch. "I'm twenty-nine. I've taken in laundry for years."

Mrs. Cooper's eyes narrowed. "Don't you put on airs with me."

Sara bit her lip and dropped her gaze. Her voice always gave her away. "No, ma'am."

"Hmmm. What's your name?"

"Sara O'Connor." She willed herself to stay still under the woman's scrutiny.

"Well, beggars can't be choosers."

Their eyes met. Did this mean—?

"Start on that." Mrs. Cooper gestured to a heaping basket of linens next to a shed in the back of the courtyard. "You get all that hung out by the time dinner is over, and I'll consider taking you on."

Even the mountain of soiled laundry couldn't stem the rush of relief. Maybe tonight she'd have food to fill her stomach, and some left over to bring home for Granny. She wouldn't have

to avoid Granny's questions or see the worried frown the old woman tried to hide.

The thought gave her strength, and she strode to a wash kettle tipped on its side next to the remnants of a fire. A search of the shed yielded a tub of soap and a washboard, but not the chains that would hang her kettle from the tripod.

She glanced at the kitchen. The noon meal was well underway. Delicious wafts of something savory—beef stew, she was sure of it—drifted across the courtyard. What would Mrs. Cooper say if she returned, and Sara hadn't even started?

Returning to the shed, she scanned the barrels that lined the wall. She tugged at one, but it didn't budge. Maybe if she tilted it up and rolled it to the side—

“Reckon you won't find the chains there.”

Sara jumped, her face heating. The voice belonged to a boy, perhaps ten or eleven years old. He leaned in the doorway, a long stalk of hay between his teeth, dressed in a ragged shirt and a pair of trousers held up with rope. Sara winced at the hollow look on his face that spoke of hunger and wondered if she looked the same. She focused on his eyes, clear and sharp. Knowing.

“Where are the chains then?” she asked with studied disinterest. He nodded toward the stable, adjusting the stalk of hay between his teeth. Sara considered marching into the stable herself, but this boy could save precious minutes. If he told the truth. “Would you fetch them for me?”

“I might.”

Sara shrugged and looked around the courtyard as though his answer didn't matter to her. “I suppose I can ask the groom—”

“I’ll get ’em. If . . .” The boy took in her clothing, almost as worn as his own, and sent an uncertain glance to her pockets.

“If?”

“You make it worth my while.”

Sara held back a smile. Streetwise boys who’d grown old before their time were nothing new to her now. “I’ve got nothing to offer you, not even a scrap of bread.” His face fell. “But I could mend your trousers. Make them fit right, too.”

The boy tugged at the rope around his waist. “Nothing wrong with my trousers.” A dull red flush crept up his face.

“Of course not.” Sara kept any trace of pity out of her voice. “But you look like a sharp one. A boy who wants to move up in the world. How are you ever going to get a position as a groom in trousers like that?”

The boy assessed her. “You’d kit me out proper? Like a real groom?”

“I’d do my best. I can sew.” One of the few useful skills she’d learned as a girl.

The boy nodded and scampered off. Sara started the fire, crossing her fingers that he’d come back with the chains as promised. He did. Helped her hang the cauldron, too, and carry over buckets of water from the pump.

Sara opened her mouth to thank him when a bellow echoed across the courtyard.

“Henry, you good-for-nothing idler, get back here.”

Sara sent Henry an apprehensive glance.

“Not to worry, miss,” the boy said with a cheeky grin. “Ol’ Rawley’s bark is worse’n his bite. Mrs. Cooper, on the other hand . . .” He looked over his shoulders at the inn and grimaced. “Well, if I was you, I’d get the wash done right proper.”

He trotted back to the stable and Sara bent to her task, putting the linens in to soak. She searched for stains that demanded extra attention and soon lost herself in the methodical movement of fabric over the ridges of the washboard. Granny had taught her well and she'd come to enjoy the work. At the very least, it left her so tired at the end of the day that she had no time for worries . . . or regrets.

By the time Mrs. Cooper approached her corner of the courtyard, her arms ached, but she'd filled two lines with gleaming linens.

"Could be whiter." Sara peeked around the clothesline. Mrs. Cooper examined the linens, her mouth turned down in a frown. "Next time, boil them longer."

Sara nodded, pressing her palms together. *Next time.* She cleared her throat. "Does that mean—"

"There's more wash to be done. You'll collect the dirty linens after the guests eat."

Sara was too relieved to be daunted by the woman's words. She'd found work, all on her own. No longer would she be under Molly's thumb, doing the laundry in exchange for veiled insults and rations that couldn't possibly sustain her. In a few months, she might have enough saved to pay for better rooms for Granny and a hot meal once a day that would bring the color back to Granny's cheeks.

A young woman in a starched apron approached as Sara hung the last of the sheets. "Mrs. Cooper says you're to follow me. Servants eat in the kitchen." She turned back to the inn without another look in Sara's direction.

The maid's dismissal didn't bother her. Unlike other servants, the washerwoman worked on the fringes of the household with

no pretensions of moving up. Sara wouldn't join in the kitchen gossip nor walk to the lake or the park with the others on their half day off.

She'd be alone. Exactly where she wanted to be.



The coffee was cold. Never a good sign.

James Kinney set his cup on the table. Mrs. Hobbes governed his row house on Duke Street to the highest standards of efficiency. Cold coffee was no accident.

He rose and paced to the window. An early frost dusted the small square of grass that separated his house from the muddy road, empty but for a few servants bent on errands. A crisp breeze brought golden leaves tumbling from the maple tree and swept away the smoke and dust that usually hung in the air above the city streets.

James contemplated his escape. He could avoid whatever bee was in his housekeeper's bonnet, head to his chambers, and attack the mountain of work involved in his latest case. Taking on the Canada Land Company required delicate maneuvering. One misstep and he'd be branded a rebel and lose the standing he'd spent a decade building.

But he never left without saying goodbye to Evie.

Mrs. Hobbes returned with breakfast, her shoulders stiff with unsaid words. He recognized the signs. She wouldn't be put off.

"Was there something you needed, Mrs. Hobbes?"

The older woman faced him. "Me, Mr. Kinney?" Her eyebrows lifted.

She wanted him to pry it out of her. Well, he wasn't a bar-
rister for nothing. "The new maid isn't working out?"

"Betsy's able to handle things while I'm away." Mrs. Hobbes
drew up her formidable bosom and swept her hands down the
front of her black serge dress, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle.
"But now that you mention it, I've had my worries about Evie
lately. She seems . . . unhappy."

James straightened. Here was something new. "Unhappy?"

"I hardly see hide nor hair of your girl these days. Curled up
with a book or writing those stories of hers."

James thought of the composition she'd written the day
before, the stack of books she'd finished last month. "She's ready
for more challenging lessons." He took a bite of breakfast. "I'll
work on a new case for her tonight."

"Pardon me, Mr. Kinney, but it's not more lessons she needs.
She's lonely, sir, and that's the truth."

"Lonely." His stomach clenched at the word. James claimed
a long acquaintance with the state, but Evie? "What evidence
do you have?"

The older woman crossed her arms. "I won't submit to inter-
rogation like one of your criminals, Mr. Kinney, that I won't."
She sniffed. "But since you ask, the only other children she sees
are across the aisle at service. On Sunday she wouldn't even look
up when Charlotte Cooper's girls spoke to her."

Evie seemed fine to him. Last month she'd presented the
best argument against the Poor Law he'd heard yet. "Nonsense.
You should have heard her debating Andrew."

Her lips pressed together in a disapproving line. "A young
lady hasn't much need for debating."

Young lady? Since when had his little fairy become a young

lady? “She’s not even ten. She has plenty of time to learn about balls and fashions.”

“Mark my words, Mr. Kinney. You keep her here all alone and she won’t be fit for society.” Her voice was sharp, insistent. Unrelenting.

Fit for society. Fit for assemblies and gossip and a world of artifice that he’d come to despise. James’s hand clenched around the handle of his coffee cup as he lifted it to his lips. A drop of dark brown liquid sloshed over the edge, landing with a plop on the elegant carpet of twining roses Amelia had ordered all the way from France. He let out a long breath and lowered the cup. “I’m not going to send Evie away to school.”

Her chin quivered. “Mr. Kinney. To think I would make such a suggestion to a man in your position.” James suppressed a smile. He’d yet to see anything that would come between his redoubtable housekeeper and speaking her mind. “However, I’ve often said young ladies need someone to show them how to get on in company. Why, Charlotte Cooper’s engaged a governess for her daughters, one come all the way from England.” Mrs. Hobbes crossed her arms with a meaningful lift of her brows, and he resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Not everything that comes from England is all it—” He paused. “Charlotte Cooper’s hired a governess?” His fingers drummed a rhythm on the table. James hadn’t been inside Cooper’s Inn for a decade, not since Andrew had steered him away from the ramshackle lodgings at the wharf and introduced him to the comfortable, well-ordered respectability of Cooper’s Inn.

“I wonder if Evie could join in the lessons.” His words came faster as the idea took shape. “I could take her on my way to the

courts and fetch her on my way home.” The next few months promised to be eventful. Dangerous, even, if the rumors of rebellion were to be believed. Lessons would keep Evie too busy to ask questions. “Capital idea, Mrs. Hobbes.”

Mrs. Hobbes opened and closed her mouth without a sound. James grinned. He’d solved Evie’s boredom and silenced Mrs. Hobbes in one go. He rose, eager to put his plan into action. “I’ll speak to Mrs. Cooper today. With any luck, Evie can start by the end of the week.”

“No, Papa!”

James and Mrs. Hobbes turned to the figure in the doorway. Evie stood, her brown eyes huge in her pointed face, her hair sticking out in all directions, staring at him with a mixture of accusation and fear.

“I don’t want to have lessons with those girls. They don’t like me.” She crossed her skinny arms over her chest. “You can teach me everything I need to know.”

James’s stomach tightened, just as it did when an opponent brought forward an unexpected argument in the courtroom. Usually, the challenge put him on his mettle. He waited for his whirling mind to stop and the perfect counterargument to click into place. Nothing. Apparently, his analytical skills deserted him when it came to his daughter.

“Nonsense, Evangeline.” Mrs. Hobbes bustled over to Evie’s side and put an arm around her shoulders, smoothing down the flyaway strands of hair with her other hand. “Don’t you want to learn to be a fine lady?”

“I want to be a barrister, like Papa. I have a legal mind. Papa said so.”

Mrs. Hobbes sent James an accusing glance over his

daughter's head, and he quickly turned his attention to Evie. If he could face Allan MacNab across the courtroom, then he should be able to handle one little girl. "Wouldn't you like to play with the Cooper girls?"

"I'm fine here. I like helping Mrs. Hobbes."

"Fine, are we? Why don't we tell Papa what you were up to yesterday?"

Evie froze. Her eyes darted to Mrs. Hobbes with a look of entreaty.

"What happened?" James stepped closer, his heart sinking.

Mrs. Hobbes crossed her arms over her chest and gave Evie a hard stare. Evie took a breath and straightened her shoulders. She wasn't short on courage.

"I went to the livery to see the puppies."

The tension drained out of his shoulders. Little harm could come to her in this neighborhood where everyone knew her by sight.

"And?" prompted Mrs. Hobbes.

"And Sproule's."

"Sproule's?" James repeated, his heart pounding. The store was on the other side of town. "By yourself?"

Evie shrugged. "It wasn't hard to find. I remembered it from the last time we were there."

"You can't be running around Toronto on your own. It's not safe!" James knelt in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders. "What would possess you to go so far?"

"I thought they might have new books. I needed to find out what happened to Ivanhoe," she said in a small voice.

"Uncle Andrew said he'd bring you the next volume."

"It's been *weeks*. I think he forgot." Her wide brown eyes

sent a prickle of guilt through him. He'd been so busy, he hadn't even noticed how much time had passed. "I'm sorry, Papa."

James struggled against the pull of those eyes and the instinct to gather her close and assure her all was forgiven. But such deliberate disobedience required consequences. He cleared his throat. "*Ivanhoe* will stay on my shelf until I feel you can be trusted again." He met Mrs. Hobbes's eyes over the top of Evie's head. "And you'll start lessons this week."

"No! I won't go. You can't make me."

Her vehemence startled him. She'd never refused his bidding before. His eyes skittered over her head to land on the maple in the yard, its leaves a burst of bronze and gold in the morning sun. The tree was the reason Amelia had chosen this house. *Gives an air of stately elegance, don't you think, James?* He hadn't thought any such thing, but he'd bought whatever kept the sparkle in her eyes.

He looked at Evie, suddenly seeing her as Amelia might: arms akimbo, hair sticking up every which way, chin tilted at a defiant angle. His stomach clenched as he acknowledged the truth in Mrs. Hobbes's warning. He delighted in Evie's sharp mind, but a young lady as a barrister? She'd be a social pariah. Amelia would have been horrified.

"It's time you learned to be a young lady." He should have approached the idea gradually, planned his arguments and counterarguments, but it was too late for nuance. "It's what your mother would want." Although he didn't raise his voice, the words seemed to float in the air between them, echoing in the sudden stillness.

Evie slowly raised her eyes to his. "My mama?" There was a note of longing in her voice.

THE LAWYER AND THE LAUNDRESS

“Your mother was every inch a lady.” He forced the words out past the tightness in his throat. He’d tried to be father and mother to her, but he still felt so inadequate to the task. *Show me the path forward. Help me to do what’s right for her.*

Evie chewed her lip, a sure sign she had doubts. It was time to push his advantage. “It would’ve made her proud.”

Evie was silent for a long moment. “All right, Papa. I’ll go.”