

From the Author of *If You Only Knew*

Laura E. Reagan

*If You
Only
Dare*



If You Only Dare

By

Laura E. Reagan



ArcheBooks Publishing

If You Only Dare

A Novel By

Laura E. Reagan

Copyright © 2006 by Laura E. Reagan

ISBN: 1-59507-145-8

eBook Edition

ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated

www.archebooks.com

9101 W. Sahara Ave.

Suite 105-112

Las Vegas, NV 89117

Poem by Rodger Kelley used by permission.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

To my sister, Beth, a real-life Annabelle.

To all my family and friends, The Posse

If You Only Dare

Bravery Beyond

*What I like about you
is your courage,
constant
but guarded,
like the last bag of gold
from the last mountain stream.
You've gone beyond
your duty of bravery.
It's time you let the common foot soldier
have a chance to prove his true worth
in the trenches.*

RODGER KELLEY

Chapter 1

Man and horse ate up the hard ground in a breakneck attempt to return to the small town of Sweetwater before disaster struck.

Neville Hilliard had never pushed a horse this hard in his life. He knew if Oscar put one hoof wrong on this dry terrain, all was lost. Those thoughts of certain death were tamped down as the sweet face of innocence swam before him in the night air. He was all that stood between her and a horrible fate.

He couldn't believe it. What the hell had he been thinking, hiring her?

In truth, he'd been more engrossed with his options of opening with an inside straight as he and Doc Peters had been enjoying a game of chance. His saloon, *The Globe*, had been

If You Only Dare

blissfully quiet when she had waltzed in through his batwings looking for work. He remembered everything about her, from the crown of her head to her pointed-toed ladies' boots. Her angelic face, so flawless and beautiful, was framed in dark springy hair the color of midnight—soft, shimmering night. Her eyes were the most startling color of turquoise, bright and radiant, like jewels.

Looking up at her, Neville could have chewed through his flask, glass lining and all. And her voice...oh, like that of an angel.

Yes, an angel, asking for work in a brothel. It was as if she had lit a candle in his soul and with those words had snuffed out the flame. He had mentally shaken himself before he had completely lost his temper, of all things. He had felt one of his eyes twitch spasmodically.

All afternoon, he had been replaying that scene in his mind's eye, trying desperately to conjure a reason for his anger. He was down two girls and in walked a vision of loveliness to rival any he had ever seen. A man in his profession could only dream that a woman possessing such beauty would come to him for a job.

He had swallowed more than his tongue when she had inquired if he had work available. Blinking back his astonishment, he'd almost blurted out his refusal to hire her. Then, as his sanity had slowly clawed its way back to the surface, he had heard himself reluctantly agreeing, through clenched teeth.

Each time he found himself recalling that moment, he found it impossible to picture her a working girl. Just the thought of her parlaying her body had almost broken his heart, a tall order for something he'd kept locked away for almost his entire life.

LAURA E. REAGAN

He had tried to put the whole ugly episode behind him, until Sheriff Dell Freemont had informed him that his new dove was no more than a sparrow without a nest.

"You're just sore that you haven't replaced Rosemary or Elsie yet," Dell had remarked. Rosemary had slipped away in the dead of night to elope with some cowboy. Elsie, the petite and friendly blonde, had captured the sheriff's heart and had waited most patiently for him to finally pop the question. "Go ahead, Neville. Admit it."

Neville had leveled a hard stare at Dell Freemont. The sheriff had never been known for his intellect and the word "obtuse" sprang to Neville's mind. In fact, he wondered if he had ever cracked the spine of a book, much less read one. Yet, here he was, in his big dumb way delving right to the heart of the matter.

He would never begrudge his big friend any happiness, but still it rankled him to no end for Dell to not only take Elsie away, but rub it in his face.

"For your information," Neville countered, his Southern accent most pronounced. "I have replaced Rosemary. Pity you're entering the eternal bonds of matrimony, for she is a most beautiful young thing."

"Wait a minute, are you by chance talking about that sweet little gal with the dog?"

"Is that what that thing is?"

"She told you she was a saloon gal?"

"What are you getting at?" Neville watched the sheriff's bushy blond mustache split in a grin.

"She told Martha at the restaurant she could cook and then she told Mrs. Fowler that she could sew. She ain't no saloon gal, Neville. She just needs a place to stay. That little gal is running from something. I'll stake my badge on it."

If You Only Dare

Those words had drained all the healthy color from Neville's complexion, his eyes nearly popping from his skull.

Not a saloon girl.

How was it that the sheriff had information that Neville had not been privy to? Neville prided himself on knowing all the comings and goings of just about everyone in Sweetwater. Of course, he had been a bit preoccupied as of late, what with a killer in their midst, his new beer taps, and his plans for installing a refrigeration system. He simply could not be expected to keep up with every little thing.

Not a saloon girl!

How was it that he had missed all the signs? Could her incredible beauty have blinded him? She was obviously a young woman of breeding and style. Hell, he even thought that black thing she toted had been a muff to keep her hands warm. That was a dog, apparently, according to the sheriff. Well, even a stopped clock was correct at least once a day, twice at the most.

He remembered the look on her face when he had agreed to let her work in his saloon. That had not been the triumphant gleam he was used to from Hazel and the other girls once they had gotten their way. Clearly, it had been relief that had eased her worried brow from its pained arch.

Oh, God. What had he done?

Urgently, he scanned the horizon for any signs of light, anything that would let him know he was closer to town. His gaze seared the landscape until he finally saw the glow from the night fires, lit along the main street.

His expensive hat had been lost miles back, and his hair, normally a deep burnished shade of brown, was gray with dust. The gritty film of dirt clung not only to his face, but had clawed its filthy way down inside his collar. His coat,

LAURA E. REAGAN

brocade vest, his trousers, even his expensive boots were covered. He was completely swathed in grime, yet he urged his mount even harder. Although he detested being dirty and normally would be pitching a fit, now was not the time.

He had a life to save.

A desperate feeling of hope rose within him as he neared the lights of the town and, with it, rose his temper. The little fool had no idea what kind of danger she was putting herself in. No idea what would be expected of her. A chill raked through him at the mere thought of any man's hands on her. He ought to wring her blasted, beautiful, slender neck.

Two men crossing the dusty street over to the saloon were shocked at the sudden thunder of hooves as horse and rider came bearing down on them. Yelping, they flung themselves out of harm's way just in time.

They barely recognized Neville Hilliard as the rider, yelling blue murder at the top of his lungs. Before the horse could slide to a stop at the risk of jumping the rail, Neville was off its back and bursting through the batwing saloon doors like a force from hell itself.

Hazel looked up and raised her plucked brows. Truly, he did not even remotely resemble the impeccably well-dressed man that had left earlier. This disheveled man was covered in dust and looked like the devil.

"Where is she?"

It was all the greeting he threw at her. The bawdyhouse matriarch, tending bar, cigarette dangling from her clamped teeth, inclined her yellow-trussed head towards the stairs.

As if on cue, a blood-curdling scream was heard from beyond the staircase. Taking the steps two at a time, Neville flung himself up the stairs and down the hallway.

Bursting through the door, he collided with a brick wall

If You Only Dare

of a man. Unfortunately, that brick wall had a hold of the creature that had invaded Neville's thoughts. Rather, the tobacco-drooling giant had a huge hand wrapped around her throat.

This would not do. Drawing back, Neville unleashed a fist born of fury, rounding its way from blinding anger and picking up steam until it landed, pushing cartilage of the man's nose back a good half-inch. The crack of bone against bare knuckles was sickeningly loud.

The brick wall went down. His grimy hold on the girl had been the only thing keeping her upright, and it seemed to Neville that she floated to the wood floor.

Hazel had entered behind him and had witnessed the entire scene.

Neville could not speak at first. His mouth hung open in abject pain as his hand throbbed, his knuckles burning and starting to bleed.

Hazel's gaze went from Neville to the burly man he had knocked senseless. She opened her mouth to make some remark as he shook his hand pitifully, but found she was speechless over what she had seen. Neville Hilliard, who rarely ever raised his voice in anger, had, as the fight promoters had touted years ago, 'unleashed the dogs of hell.'

"Damn, that felt good," Neville acknowledged, grinning through his pain. He turned back towards the girl on the floor, her eyes closed, a bluish mark appearing on her flawless cheek.

"Damn it!"

"Neville," Hazel interjected, as he was rounding on the downed man with the bloodied face. "We'd better get her out of here. We can take her to your room."

"What? Yes, yes, that is what we will do. We'll just..."

LAURA E. REAGAN

He lifted her gently. "Take her to my room," he finished, sweeping her up against his chest. Her skirts rustled and swam around his arms. He swept past Hazel and her emerald satin dress and instructed her to close and lock the door behind her. "We'll let the sheriff deal with that excrement when he returns."

Hazel started to close the door when the small mass of black fur scurried towards her in a frightened manner.

"Come on, fella," she cooed to the animal. "She'll be all right. Come on. I'd better carry you. Somebody down there might shoot you for a rat."

As she reached down for it, it flattened its black, hairy body to the wood floor in fear.

Chapter 2

All heads turned as Neville appeared on the stairs. He heard several of the men inquiring about the tempting bundle he carried, but he never answered. Winding his way quickly through the gambling and drinking tables, he beat a hasty retreat into his room, just off from the main salon. Kicking the door closed with his filthy boot, he moved to the big bed and placed the girl onto the quilt.

He moved his pillows under her head as gently as he could, and then folded the bed coverings over her.

“Oh, God. Not another one.”

He heard the familiar voice above the din of merriment from the gambling hall. Turning, he found Dorcas leaning against the doorframe in her petticoats, his door now wide open with plenty of onlookers peering over her shoulders.

LAURA E. REAGAN

“Dorcas, if you please?” Neville asked the brunette. “A little privacy?”

“I tried to tell her how to handle that big—”

“Dorcas!” Neville barked before she could finish the sentence, which would no doubt be laced liberally with her own brand of vulgarity.

“Fine, you need anything? Water? Whiskey? Preacher?”

“I do not need the clergy. Whiskey and water, however...”

“Beer ain’t selling,” she reported, even though he had not asked about his beloved new taps.

“Tomorrow. We will figure the taps out tomorrow,” he instructed. His mind was engaged at that moment with the vision before him.

Hazel picked that moment to deliver the small pooch.

“Dorcas,” she said. “We’re gonna need some ice and, from the looks of Neville’s hand, some whiskey.”

“Neville’s hand? What happened? Did he get it slammed in a door?”

“No,” Hazel returned, her eyes dancing wickedly. “He tore that big man’s face plumb apart.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dorcas muttered, grinning excitedly. “Well, this is a red-letter day.” She began to laugh as she turned to leave. “Neville’s got dirt on his face, he got in a fight, and he’s got a woman in his bed.”

“Hazel,” Neville sighed tiredly once Dorcas was out of hearing distance. “Remind me again?”

“She’s had a hard life, Neville. Harder and more ugly than we’ll ever know. We’re her only family. Why, when she was only fourteen, her own father—”

“Enough said. Do we know for certain that her father actually did that?”

If You Only Dare

“Sold her? Yes. I believe he did. Sorry, no-good bastard. Sell his own flesh and blood like she was an animal,” Hazel muttered the words angrily, then looked down at the parcel in her arms. “Oh, here.” She placed the small dog onto the bed and awaited the eruption that was sure to come.

“Is that the muff?” he asked as it cowed before him. “Brave little soldier, isn’t he?”

“It wants his mama,” Hazel crooned.

“Yes, well, I want my mama, too, but dogs do not belong on the bed.”

“Oh, Neville, look,” she whispered as the longhaired dog crawled up to rest under the girl’s chin. “Oh, that is the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Dorcas appeared again, laden down with a bowl of ice, linens, whiskey, and a pitcher of water, all balanced very proficiently in her slender arms. Neville threw an amused smile to Hazel as he allowed Florence Nightingale to wrap a cloth with ice around his swollen, bloodied knuckles. He almost chuckled as she concentrated on the bindings.

“There, how does that feel?” Dorcas asked, stepping back to her makeshift apothecary.

“Your ministrations will surely resuscitate me.”

“Fine, if you’re gonna be vulgar about it,” she retorted.

“Dorcas, darlin’, I was not being vulgar. I was weaving accolades, for your nursing skills are most appreciated. Truly.”

“Is that good?” she asked Hazel, who nodded. “So, what’s this one’s story?” She pointed to the lifeless girl.

“Well,” Neville started, brushing fingers through the girl’s dark hair, “Sheriff Freemont says she was merely looking for a place to live when she sashayed in here offering her services. She’s not really a...”

“No shit, Neville. Hell, I could’ve told you that.”

LAURA E. REAGAN

“How did you see it, and I did not?” He turned towards Dorcas, asking an honest question.

It still rankled him that he had missed all the signs. When all he had to do was look at her now and visualize those big and impressive Savannah houses with sheer draperies hung in the huge windows.

How he used to dream of living in one of those houses. How warm they looked from the streets. How he used to visualize himself a part of that warmth. As a young boy, he used to steal away from the orphanage and stroll through the richest part of town. A filthy street urchin, he used to pretend he belonged to one of those famously rich families. Standing there, with his grubby little fingers wrapped around the elaborate bars of the wrought-iron fences, he would stare up at the magnificent homes and dream that his real family lived there.

And when the sisters at Mercy would lead him in prayer, he secretly prayed that any day his family would realize he was missing and come to reclaim him. Then, he would go and live with them in one of those beautiful houses.

The girl in his bed belonged in one of those houses with one of those families, certainly not here.

His thoughts were interrupted as Dorcas nudged his shoulder with her offering of a liberal glass of whiskey. It was then he caught whiff of an odor so offensive, it caused his eyes to water.

“What is that smell?”

“Must be the dog,” Hazel supplied. “I noticed it, too. I’m surprised you did, with all that dust up your nose.”

“You are one dirty son of a bitch,” Dorcas echoed.

“Well, this small, but oh-so-offensive, nuisance will have to go. We have a whole storeroom he can whiff up.” Neville

If You Only Dare

spoke as if to a child, reaching for it. The thing peeled back its black lips, showing off sharp, white, and uneven teeth. Its growl was low, but deliberate.

“All right,” Neville relented, trying to allay the thing’s fears. “It can wait.”

“Well,” Hazel began, heading for the door, “you holler if you need anything. If not, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Something was not right.

“Hazel, where is the outcry?” Neville craned his neck to look over his shoulder at the older woman in feathers.

“What outcry?”

“Well, in case it has escaped you, there is a woman in my room, in my bed, and you are ready to just sashay along, leaving her in here with me.”

“Yeah?”

Hazel was not grasping the immoral connotation he was trying almost desperately to illustrate.

He tried again.

“She is in a weakened condition, and I am drinking whiskey,” he added, waiting. Finally, he spelled it out for her. “Aren’t you the least bit concerned about her virtue? Alone...with me? Whiskey?”

“Dog,” came her answer.

He grinned, until he overheard Dorcas mutter, “Like he’d even know what to do with a woman.”

Shaking his head at the absurdity of her statement, he turned back to the sleeping girl. His fingers ached to again touch the soft, black netting of her hair as it spilled across his white pillow. He watched as her pouty lips twitched slightly and he wondered what she dreamed of.



LAURA E. REAGAN

Annabelle did dream.

It was a beautiful May morning as she took a spin around the boulevard in the Garrett family carriage. Her new hat matched her favorite dress with its white layers and bold pink sash. She held her parasol in one hand and Mr. Britches in the other as they passed other carriages and spoke to the many other families out this morning.

What a lovely day.

She could see her best friend, Amelia Richardson, waving to her and pointing at something. Turning, Annabelle saw two men on horseback. How splendid they looked in their jackets and Devon boots as their mounts served a prancing walk towards her. Her appreciative smile faded as she realized it was none other than Gavin Leonard, and with him Geoffrey Mathers. How dreary.



Neville smiled as he watched her lips purse, forming a pouting frown. He had used his good hand to remove his jacket and clean some of the dust from his face. Now, he perched at her side, easing a cloth with ice to her bruise and marveling in her expressions. He wondered what had put the frown on her lovely mouth.

He allowed a finger to trail across the seam of her lips. He was struck by her reaction as his finger touched the point where her tulip-shaped lip curved downward to meet her bottom lip. It was as if the tip of his finger had elicited a shock, causing her to let go a tiny gasp.

“Precious,” he whispered, feeling his insides clench. “How utterly precious.”

If You Only Dare

“No,” she whispered, her eyes still closed to him. “No, don’t.”

He had not meant to cause her any distress. He stilled his movements and held his breath.

“No, don’t kiss me,” she admonished.

His body tightened at her words. The breath that had caught in his parched throat, he released in almost a moan.

“Surely it couldn’t hurt,” he whispered as he turned up his drink.

“No,” she moaned, stirring against his hip.

A delicious fire spread through him as she slid provocatively against him.

“Bad dog,” she whispered.

Neville shot the black mass a baleful look as it continued to nuzzle its wet nose against her cheek.

“You heard her. Stop that.”



A shudder of revulsion spread through her as her dream placed her in her own home and she heard her father announcing her impending wedding.

It was her twentieth birthday party. All of her father’s business partners, acquaintances, and their families were gathered. Everyone who was anyone was in attendance. She could hear the speech her father gave, “Agreed upon at Annabelle’s birth, a merger of two families...” and Gavin, looking on her as if he had just been handed a great prize.

Everyone witnessed her discomfort. Indeed, she felt as if the floor had suddenly dropped from underneath her.

Engaged to Gavin Leonard, the biggest popinjay in Boston. Many considered him a very handsome man, and with

LAURA E. REAGAN

his dark, hawkish features, Annabelle could not deny it, but he had a cruel streak that none of the good people present could possibly be aware of.

He had already informed her that no wife of his would ever go to the theatre, much less sing at one. It mattered not to him that she had spent years perfecting her voice for just that reason. Annabelle loved the theatre. She loved opera and her tutor seemed very pleased with the progress in her arias. She had hoped Gavin would come around once he had the chance to hear her sing. She had done so that very night, with everyone in attendance.

Had he been moved?

No, he had seemed disgusted. The other guests had clapped and she'd heard them shouting "Brava!" as she had stood by the piano. She could still feel the warmth spreading through her as they had smiled on her.

She had scanned the gloriously lit room, her gaze skidding to a halt at the reserved frown she found on Gavin's face.

He had looked embarrassed. She'd felt her hands moving into little fists. She had wanted to scratch his eyes out, but her father had come forward and she had simply left the room.

She heard the applause behind her as she stepped across the foyer and into her father's study.

She had wanted to be alone, but soon heard Gavin's voice just outside the sliding mahogany doors. Instead of hurling a decanter of brandy at his head, she had slipped into the shadows and behind the heavy curtains.

She had not meant to eavesdrop. It had been an accident, really. He'd decided to hold court in the study, her father's study, and as he spoke with long-time friend Geoffrey Mathers, he'd had no idea Annabelle was shrouded in the darkness. He'd perched his pompous backside on her father's

If You Only Dare

mahogany desk and had toasted his own good fortune.

From her hiding place, she could see his dark, beady eyes and long chin as he splashed her father's brandy into Mathers' snifter. Mathers' round, boyish face split into a grin and he actually slobbered as he laughed excitedly. He had an annoying habit of laughing through his nose and slobbering all at the same time, as if he had no control.

She had been shocked to hear herself being discussed as if she were one of Gavin's possessions. Surely, no gentleman would speak of his intended to another man, much less make up intimate lies about her or slander her! How dare he tell Mathers that she preferred to be kissed below her ear? He had never been anywhere near her ears.

Mathers made some insipid comment about her carting her pet down the matrimonial aisle.

"Ah," Gavin poured more brandy into his glass. "Yes, Mr. Britches, the foul beast. She seems inordinately fond of that mongrel."

"Were you able to replace the gloves it chewed?"

"Not as of yet. However, I have plans for Mr. Britches. Since he enjoys taking the tour of the lake so much, I have planned to give him a personal tour. One he'll never forget."

"You can't mean you're going to squire that disgusting thing around."

"No, you imbecile. I am going to drown it. No wife of mine will have a mongrel for a pet. I plan to buy her a little bird, and the two of them can sit perched in their cages and sing to their little hearts' content."

"But she has a beautiful voice, Gavin."

"No matter to me what she has. As Mrs. Gavin Leonard, she will act as the dictates of society demand. No, she will comport herself as I see and content herself as I say."

LAURA E. REAGAN

“What about G. R. Garrett as a father-in-law? Just the thought sends shivers down my spine.”

“That’s because you don’t possess a spine. No, my father-in-law and I are in complete agreement on this. He needs for me to take her off his hands. I need what marrying the silly chit will bring.”

“What about Madeline? Was she absolutely heart-broken? I missed my chance to see her reaction tonight when G. R. made the announcement.”

“Why should it bother Madeline? She’s known about this arrangement from the very beginning.”

“But you have been visiting her.”

“I have every intention in continuing to visit her. I plan to set her up so well she will never refuse me. Besides, what woman in her right mind would?”

From the shadows, Annabelle covered her outrage with her hand. Her father wanted Gavin to take her off of his hands? As if she were nothing more than a bother? She had always felt useless to her father, but to have it spelled out and in front of Mathers this way. And he already had Madeline?

Madeline Rendquist? It was the only Madeline she knew. Madeline and Gavin? That would explain a great many things. It would certainly explain that venomous glare she had suspected aimed at her from the girl on many occasions. Oh, how many times had she invited Madeline to her home, thinking she was a friend? And Mathers had known about them all along. It was painfully obvious to Annabelle that she possessed no friends at all.

“Will you allow Annabelle to take a lover?” Mathers’ words shook her from her wide-eyed stance, causing her to swallow the lump in her throat.

“Annabelle would not have the first notion about taking a

If You Only Dare

lover. No man will ever touch her heart.”

“She doesn’t love you, then?”

“She’s a child.”

“A child of twenty?”

“Gerald has neglected certain areas of Annabelle’s upbringing, leaving that to her mother,” he began to explain, drawing out the word “mother” as if she were some loathsome creature. “Annabelle’s fancies can be laid at her mother’s feet, all the voice lessons and talk of theatre and the like. Gerald may have married up, but it was so high, with the lack of oxygen and all, and now we have Annabelle.”

“Gavin, do you even like Annabelle?”

“I adore Annabelle,” he purred in a slick, slithering voice. “You of all people know how much. What’s the entire Garrett empire worth? Fifteen million? What’s not to like, Mathers, really? No, my grandfather stepped in when Gerald needed assistance and a bargain was struck between the families. I am merely fulfilling my end of the bargain. It has nothing whatsoever to do with how I feel. I am not obligated in any way to ensure happiness for Annabelle. In fact, I could care less. If I could drown her along with that intruding mass of fleas, I would. Maybe after the wedding, she can have an unfortunate accident. Can’t you see the headlines? *‘Mrs. Leonard Drowns in Attempt to Save Family Pet.’*”

Neville heard her moan from his bed and turned towards her quickly, using his discarded shirt to cover his broad and naked chest. He had been trying to clean up from the dust bath he’d had earlier and had feared she had witnessed his ablutions. He was relieved to find her eyes still closed. The small, black beast had moved to lay beside her, no doubt getting all sorts of vermin on his pristine cotton sheets and

LAURA E. REAGAN

quilt.

The girl's slender hand absently moved to the beast's head, and he found himself watching as her fingers slid through its hair. How something so innocent could stir him so completely and ruthlessly, he had no idea.

Her face appeared drawn and pale, and he did not care for the frown that creased her slim, sable brows and twisted her lips.

The sheriff had speculated that she was running from something. Or someone. Could he be correct? Was someone looking for her? Surely, her family would be. Runaway? Possibly. Of course, that would mean that the sheriff would have to be correct about something.

She could not be more than twenty years old, he surmised, sliding a new shirt on and tucking it quickly into his trousers. He tried to recall anything from their brief encounter hours ago that would have given her away. Anything, as she had stood before him in all of her radiant and haughty glory.

Yes, she had been haughty, he realized, smiling. She had practically dared him to hire her. What were her exact words? Oh yes, "*I believe I can meet your requirements for entertainment.*"

Then, she had surveyed her surroundings, her pink tongue peeking out to entice him even further. Hell, it was no wonder her words had not registered with him. He had been too absorbed in peeling his hammering heart from the walls of his chest.

He recalled his only response had been to stare stupidly at her, thinking if she'd had any idea of the thoughts he was entertaining, he would have been peeling his balls from the roof of his mouth.

Easing back onto his bed, he placed more ice on her cheek. He watched as her eyes fluttered open to reveal the turquoise

If You Only Dare

depths that had filled his mind. His breath caught sharply in his chest as he gazed down at her. The color of her eyes appeared even deeper in contrast to the paleness in her face. Her lips parted as her gaze landed on him.

“Well,” he began softly, bestowing upon her his most engaging smile.

He was met with the crack of her open palm against his face. Her eyes were sparkling now with heated animosity.

“You,” she breathed. “You monster!”

“What?” Neville found his voice. “I saved you!”

“Saved me? If it were not for you, I would not have been abused! You should have warned me!”

“I should have warned you?”

“You never said I would be in danger of...of...”

“Unbelievable.” He closed his eyes.

“Unspeakable...”

“Undeniably the most convoluted...”

“Repugnant...”

“Ridiculous. Utterly fantastic,” he finished, returning the ice to the bowl with a splash. Circling on her, he shook his head as she eyed him warily. For the first time in his life, finding the right words was difficult. Finally, he threw his hands in the air and let her have it. “How can you possibly blame me for any of this? You came to *me* for a job. Remember?”

She was glad he had moved away. She had been startled to find him so near and so handsome. He had been too close for her not to notice the scent of bay rum and tobacco that clung to him. She could not think when he was that close, smelling that wonderful. He was nothing like Gavin. This man’s masculinity fairly steamed from his well-cut clothing.

“I...” She tried not to look at him.

LAURA E. REAGAN

“Yes?” His honeyed voice reached her.

“You should have warned me what sort of job it was to be. I would have never—”

“And what do you suppose I should have said at such a moment? Where have you worked before? Seen any interesting ceilings lately?”

She had been prepared to give him a dressing down, until he said that.

He watched as the wind went completely out of her sails. Her stubborn jaw slackened as she turned a confused expression his way. She turned to the black fur piece, instead. “He’s a horrible man,” she spoke to the dog. “We’re leaving.”

“Wait a second.” Sitting back on his bed, he successfully cut off any escape route and held her still.

“Let go of me, or I will scream this place down!”

“You have no idea what I just said, do you?”

“Look, Mr...”

“Hilliard.”

“If you will kindly pay me for the day, I promise not to press any charges.”

“Pay you? I ought to thrash you, waltzing into a brothel and offering your services.”

Could her face have gone any paler?

“A brothel?”

“What did you think it was?”

“The sign said entertainment.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Where did you come from and how in the hell did you make it this far?”

“It is none of your business where I hail from.”

“Runaway,” he began, and then noted her face draining of all color. “I’ve run away with my thoughts. Excuse me.” He stood and went for his wallet. “And how much did I owe you

If You Only Dare

for the day?”

“You never...we never discussed wages. You had to leave suddenly.” She slid her legs over the side of his bed.

“Ah, yes,” Neville purred, almost grinning at her, his thin mustache twitching at the corner of his mouth. “I usually pay by the week. So, you can either work out the remainder of the week or work out some form of notice.”

“A week? I couldn't possibly.”

It amazed him how easily he could read her. She was as wet as a haddock.

“Why can't you? In a hurry?”

“I can't work here. I don't...” she faltered, the words 'know how' stuck in the back of her throat. Her distraught gaze found the floor in front of him, searching for words that would not make her appear any more self-conscious and ill-prepared for life than she already felt.

“Then, I can't very well pay you, can I?”

His teasing tone was simply lost on her, he realized as her eyes pooled with huge tears.

Chapter 3

She had run out of funds and wound up in this little place called Sweetwater. She simply had to come up with more money to get to San Francisco. If she could elude her father and Gavin and get to her aunt and uncle, everything would be wonderful. There were plenty of theatres in San Francisco and she would be sure to find a job as a singer.

However, she was here now, and had messed up every job opportunity this town had offered. Her latest blunder had her believing she would be singing here. She dragged her sleeve across her face as her nose started to run as well as her eyes.

“Please, don’t do that,” Neville urged, reaching for his handkerchief and retrieving his flask as well. “Here.” He handed her the huge linen cloth and kept the flask.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed into his handkerchief as her failure

If You Only Dare

welled up inside of her. “I am just so very tired,” she began as her tears came on stronger. “It isn’t my fault, you see. I was never taught how to do those things.”

The abject pain in her voice made him wince.

“I’m a failure at everything I’ve tried here. I have ruined every opportunity. First, there was the accident at the restaurant with the yeast,” she got out between ragged sobs. “And I don’t know how to cut on a bias, and now...well...I’m sorry, but, I don’t know the first thing about architecture!”

She practically wailed the last as she fled past him.

Neville could only stare after her, his mouth hanging open. He was not about to let her leave, not now. She was simply too fascinating. Oh, she was entertaining—too entertaining. He had to stop her. Moving faster than he thought possible, he planted his bandaged fist against the door and used the weight of his body to close it.

The door slammed shut, jerking the latch from her grasp and a gasp from her throat.

“Open this door!” she demanded, keeping her eyes on his arm, her breathing coming a bit harder as he moved even closer.

“I can’t let you go back out there. I have already suffered once for your actions. I doubt I could jump to your defense a second time. Now, just get a hold of yourself.” He spoke in a soothing voice. “I can’t help you if I don’t know how.”

“You cannot help me.”

“I certainly cannot if you do not allow me.”

She felt his breath coursing along her neck as he spoke.

“Here is what I propose,” he began again. “You come back over here and sit back down while we try to figure out what is to be done with you. At any rate, it is getting late, and I am very tired. I’m sure you are just as fatigued as I am. After all,

LAURA E. REAGAN

we both went up against that mountain of tobacco spittle.”

She could not think with him so close to her. She had never in her life felt this dizzy. Gavin had tried to get this close to her once, yet all she had felt was revulsion.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes,” she barely got the word out, swallowing as he continued to fan her hair with his warm breath.

“Will you come away from the door or would you rather I peel you from it?”

Before she could respond, his arm stole around her waist from behind. She practically jumped from her own body at his bold touch.

She never saw the laughter in his eyes as she tore away from his grasp.

“I don’t normally do this, but I am willing to let you stay in here for tonight,” he continued. “It would prove too dangerous for you to try to go back upstairs. Please do me the courtesy of keeping your little mongrel friend out of my bed. As charming as he is, I can see no reason for his smell. I am certain he must be a carrier of fleas, therefore...”

“Excuse me, but Mr. Britches does not have fleas.”

“Mr. Britches will not sleep in my bed, is that understood?” he spoke adamantly, turning from his dresser to offer her a glass of whiskey.

“No, thank you,” she returned just as adamantly.

“I insist,” he responded, hoping to loosen her tongue a bit. “I can’t abide drinking alone.”

“Then don’t drink.”

“Your name wouldn’t be Temperance, would it?” He grinned at her.

Without warning, that grin caused her insides to skitter nervously. She watched helplessly as his moustache jumped on

If You Only Dare

one side. A dimple peeked at her, then disappeared. She wondered what a dimple was doing in that rugged face.

She found herself taking the drink and sitting back on his bed. He grinned again, and leaning against the post at the bottom of the bed, he silently toasted her.

He watched her scoot back to the pillows and lift the drink. His eyes never left her as she sipped.

“So, you will sleep upstairs?” she countered.

“No, I will sleep right here.”

Before she could voice her alarm, he grinned again. “I should have clarified. I will sleep in yon chair. I can’t very well go out of here in this state of undress or the gossip would be all over town by morning.”

He waited for her to point out the obvious flaw in his reasoning, the fact being he could dress to the nines if he pleased. He could almost see the wheels turning.

“But, if you don’t leave your room at all, won’t they gossip anyway?”

She had hit on something, though not what he had counted on.

“As most of the people out there now have only just arrived, they will have no idea that you and I are in here together.”

Did he have to say it so intimately?

The whiskey slid a warm, provocative path from her throat to her toes. His next words almost made her swallow her drink, glass and all.

“Besides, we really do need to wait for the sheriff.”

As he spoke the words, he waited for her reaction, which was sure to be amusing.

He was right. She turned so pale, he wondered if she would pass out right in front of him.

LAURA E. REAGAN

"I have to leave," she squeaked suddenly.

"You can't leave now. Why, you wanted to press charges, remember?"

"I won't be pressing any charges." Again she tried to remove herself from his bed.

Again, his hands found her shoulders and he sat her back down with a force stronger than necessary. He was certainly stronger than she would have figured.

"I must leave," she implored, looking up into his blue gaze.

"But, you don't understand. Why, you've been drinking. If the sheriff finds out, why, you might even be arrested. We wouldn't want that. You had better stay put until he leaves."

"Why are you waiting for the sheriff?"

"To remove that mass of tobacco spittle upstairs, why do you think?"

"Oh."

"Did you think I was going to have you incarcerated?"

"I thought...never mind."

He believed her haughty tone belied her sudden fear.

"Temperance?"

"I thought maybe you might have me arrested for vagrancy."

"Nonsense. You work for me, remember?"

"Yes," she replied, seeming to breathe again, although she stumbled over her next words. "We never discussed wages."

"We won't, either," he mumbled under his breath as he poured another drink. This night was becoming more entertaining by the minute. "Ah, yes. Well, I suppose we should. We should decide where your talents lay...lie...are."

"My talents?"

"Well, yes." He watched her reflection in his stand mirror

If You Only Dare

on the dresser from where he stood. "This is a saloon. A brothel. A den of iniquity. A bawdy-house."

As the words left his mouth, he could make out the color returning to her face in the loveliest shade of crimson.

She should be embarrassed. It would serve her justly. He ought to scare her to pieces for her impetuous stunt. If this had been any other saloon in any other city, well, he did not want to think about it. He shook his head and turned back towards her. Moving closer, he watched as her eyes grew larger with each deliberate step. As if he never saw the shock on her lovely face, he traced a finger across her slender jaw. "You are certainly beautiful enough, but you know that already."

"Beautiful? Me?"

"Of course, or I never would have hired you. Now, suppose we get down to it, *hmm?*"

He was too close, and his face was getting even closer. His palms held her head still as he lowered his mouth close to hers.

"Get down to what?"

"Well, darlin', as proprietor, I get the first sample." His finger trekked down to her throat as he spoke.

"Sample?" She swallowed hard as he grinned at her. "Oh, don't do that," she squeaked as his finger trailed lower.

He knew he should tread lightly with her, but he was beginning to lose himself and the reason he was standing over her so intimately. He could see that she was responding to his drifting touch, the proof straining against the blouse she wore. He could not breathe.

"I can sing," she whispered desperately as her whole body jerked under his bold quest.

Neville swallowed hard as he tried to remember just what

LAURA E. REAGAN

lesson he was trying to teach her. He moved slowly away from her to retrieve his drink, one he needed. He watched as she blinked her wide eyes and tried to close her mouth.

“Well, that’s wonderful.” His voice sounded tight as he spoke. “Do you know ‘*Fancy, the Dutch Gal*’?” he asked.

She shook her head. He watched her rub her arm as if gooseflesh had jumped along her skin.

“No? How about, ‘*A-Gatherin’ Nuts*’?”

“I don’t know those,” she spoke primly, haughtily. “Besides, those aren’t real songs. You are just trying to embarrass me.”

“Well, they aren’t real nice songs,” he muttered as he pulled up his chair by the bed. “What songs can you sing?”

“I like opera.”

“I adore opera,” he surprised her. “Although I cannot say that my current clientele would care for operatic strains. Now, don’t look so forlorn. I’ll teach you some songs, if you like.”

She had come far enough to know that people had treated her kindly due to the fact she was spending money with them. It was all part and parcel of being Annabelle Garrett. It had always been that way. The slick smiles from the salesladies at the boutiques, it was always the same, and always made her feel the same. “*Yes, Miss Garrett, that hat looks wonderful on you. As if it was fashioned just for you.*” But this man was being nice and she had no money.

She *needed* money.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

He regarded her from his chair. “Being nice?” *Ah, she’s finally getting around to it.*

Once again, if this had been any other saloon and he were any other man, it would all be too little and too late. He shook his head, hiding a sardonic smile behind his drink glass.

If You Only Dare

Of course she would see his actions as benevolent. With his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, he decided on the best answer.

“Maybe it’s because I’m a gentleman.”

A soft tapping at his door halted any further discussion of his motives as he heard Hazel call out, “Knock. Knock. Neville, Dell is back.”

“I’ll be right there, Hazel,” he answered, rising from his chair. “Um, I’ll have Hazel round you up something to sleep in. Did you bring any belongings?”

Her acute embarrassment mounted, riding high on her cheeks as she related, “They are holding my things over at the stage, for payment.”

“They are? Payment for what?”

“They accused Mr. Britches of causing damage. I...” she could not go on. It was just too embarrassing.

His features grew dark, if only for a moment, before smoothing out to a relaxed facade. “Well, don’t you worry. I’ll take care of that.”

“You will?”

Had she never had a friend?

She was looking at him as if he were the first person to ever do anything kind for her.

“I most certainly will.” As he left the room, he began to fuss, his voice carrying back to her in his wake. “The very idea...certainly no way to treat a lady. Damned ruffians. Hell, it’s no wonder...”

Leaning against the pillows, Annabelle sipped at her whiskey. She was still unsure of her situation. Surely, he was a rake, the kind she’d been warned about by her mother.

Why anyone hadn’t seen fit to warn her about Gavin, she could not imagine.

LAURA E. REAGAN

However, rake or not, she could still feel the touch of the saloon owner's fingers moving along her cheek. Had he been serious about sampling her? What exactly had he meant?

She sat up suddenly as she watched the door slide open. The woman she had met earlier slipped inside quickly and closed the door behind her. Annabelle frowned at the thought of this woman with her yellow hair and cigarette giving the rake samples.

"How are you feeling, sugar?" the woman asked as she moved closer, her satin dress rustling loudly with each step.

"Confused and rather silly," Annabelle confided. "I had no idea, really."

"I know." She chuckled. "I tell you, I was never so glad to see Neville than I was tonight when he came flying through those doors. I was on my way to help you. He just beat me to it. Oh, here...you can sleep in this." She offered Annabelle a light shift for a nightgown. "We can hang your clothes over that chair."

"Then, where will..."

"Neville."

"Where will he sleep?"

"He can take the room he offered to you. The sheriff is helping him get rid of that horrible mess upstairs. He'd better not expect me to clean up any blood, either."

"Blood?"

"Oh, sugar, you missed it," Hazel related, refilling the glass as Annabelle changed into the borrowed nightgown. "Neville hit that man with a force that must have come all the way from Georgia. He used to be a boxer, and I had always heard he was a pretty good one, but after tonight, whoa, boy! I mean...I know poor old Homer thought he was entitled, but a man don't need to behave like that. I don't give a tinker's

If You Only Dare

damn how much he believes he's owed."

"How long have you known..."

"Neville? A long time. About six years now. I was his first hire."

"And...did he require you to provide...any samples?" Annabelle glanced at the woman from over her shoulder.

"Samples of what?"

"What...exactly is it that you do here?"

"Oh, I entertain mostly."

"Yes," she frowned, perplexed. "The sign out front does state that there is entertainment. How much does he pay you? Oh dear, forgive me. That is none of my business."

"That's all right. Actually, I pay him."

Her words brought Annabelle up short, almost as short as the shift she now wore.

"You pay him? I...that doesn't seem right." She tugged, trying to pull the garment down to cover her legs.

"Well," Hazel started, laying her clothes out for her at the foot of the bed. "Hop on up there and drink this. I'll see if I can't explain it."



Neville waited until the door to the jail cell shut with a loud clang. He took that opportunity to wipe his grimy hands on the sheriff's big back, making a face as he did so. He hated dirt.

"Thanks there, Neville." Sheriff Dell Freemont heaved a sigh, throwing an exasperated look at his friend. "Now, tell me, did you make it back in time to save that little gal?"

"Yes, I did. I want to thank you for enlightening me to her situation."

LAURA E. REAGAN

“You usually know everything about everybody. How did she slip past your notice?”

Oh, he'd noticed. He just hadn't had all the particulars.

“Well, I have been a bit preoccupied as of late,” Neville gave as an excuse. “We’ve had quite an exciting week here in our little hamlet.”

“Is she all right?” he asked, noting Neville’s torn knuckles.

“Who? Temperance? Oh yes, she’s snug as a bug.”

“Temperance. That her name?”

“She has yet to tell me her name.”

“I can find out for you.”

“I’m sure you can, my big friend. But I ask you, where is the sport in that?”

“Whiskey. You owe me a whiskey,” Dell concluded, heading towards the door.

“I don’t recall owing you anything.” Neville followed, looking forward to returning to the saloon. He hoped Dell wouldn’t stay too long. “As a matter of fact, I’m still waiting for you to hand over the reward money for my last derring-do. I’m never going to get my beer refrigeration system built if I don’t come up with that two thousand, and I believe you owe me at least three-fifty.”

“Beer refrigeration,” Dell scoffed.

“For your information, a self-contained beer refrigeration system could possibly put Sweetwater on the map.”

“We ain’t on the map?”

“Not the industrial frontier map. Clearly, we’re on some map, somewhere. I think. Don’t you want Sweetwater to become a city that people would actually want to spend time in? Not just stuck here waiting for the stage? And there’s another thing.”

If You Only Dare

“Oh, Lord.” Dell tried to hurry his big steps.

“No, we have a stage line that only runs one day out of the week,” said Neville.

“Saturday,” nodded Dell.

“We can’t even really count on that, can we?” said Neville.

“But that doesn’t happen all the time,” Dell countered. “Normal day is Saturday.”

“Greenfield has a coach scheduled three times a week,” said Neville. “Scheduled, mind you. You can set your watch by it. What does Greenfield have that we don’t?”

Dell thought for a second. “Cold beer?”

“No...well, yes...but they have entertainment,” explained Neville. “They have two saloons, an opera house, and two bathhouses.”

“You sayin’ our town is puny?”

“Puny? Dell, do you see hoards of people flocking here? The only people here, right now, that don’t live here are stuck here. What does that say about our little backwater?”

“You mean like that little gal with the dog?” asked Dell. “You know, I can find out whatever you need to know about her. All I gotta do is send a wire.”

“I am not talking about her.”

“The hell you say.”

“I will find out everything I need to all by myself.” Neville was sure about that.

If Dell answered, Neville never heard him. His thoughts went to Temperance. She was stuck here. She, too, would be gone as soon as she had enough money. Running. Whatever Temperance was hiding or hiding from, he didn’t particularly want any well-meaning help from the sheriff.

As they passed the livery, Neville ducked in to check on

his horse, Oscar. He found the big sorrel with the white blaze had been cooled down, wiped down, and was happily munching his hay. Neville also paid young Jamie extra for claiming the horse after Neville had ridden him so hard. Jamie was happy as a clam with his bounty. Oscar, however, was not talking to him.

Neville held a lot of respect for Jamie. The youngster had been a by-product of an unfortunate liaison. His mother, a painted lady from Albuquerque, had come to Sweetwater, apparently with the express purpose of dying, leaving the youngster an orphan in her wake. Neville had become very fond of the carrot-topped adolescent and had tried to spend as much time as he could with him.

However, being the owner of a saloon did not lend itself to quality parental guidance, as such. He had taught the boy math by teaching him to play twenty-one. As soon as the boy had become old enough, Neville had secured a position for him at the livery. It had seemed only natural, as the boy loved animals and had always proved to be a hard worker. Now, everyone in town trusted Jamie with their horses. Neville could not help feeling proud.

As they pushed through the batwings at The Globe Saloon, Neville watched as the sheriff searched the main room for his beloved Elsie, the petite blonde who had stolen the big man's heart. Grinning at the lovesick fool, Neville headed for his own room.

He knew he should knock, but reasoned quickly that if the sheriff saw him knocking on his own door there might be questions he would rather not answer. He did not want to alert Dell to the girl's presence in his room. He was already too curious about her, and he could not have Dell scaring the poor thing.

If You Only Dare

Silently, he slid his door open and stepped inside. His gaze sought her out immediately and he found her sitting on his bed with her legs hanging off the side. Her *bare* legs hanging off the side of his bed. The nightgown Hazel had given her was no more than a shift and he stared at her slender, bare legs, her little toes barely touching the floor.

Hazel.

He blinked as he found Hazel suddenly standing directly in front of him, blocking his line of sight and his breath-taking view.

“Welcome back. You forget how to knock?”

“Dell is right behind me. I couldn’t very well knock on my own door,” he gave back, peering over her feathered headdress to find that Temperance had covered herself.

“Well,” Hazel cooed, pulling out a handkerchief from her thick bodice. “I’ll stay with her until you can get rid of him.”

“Yes—” Neville started to speak, only to have her take the handkerchief to his upper lip. “What are you doing?”

“Just mopping up the perspiration, dear boy.” She smiled knowingly. As he was practically pushed from his own room, Neville screwed up his face and mouthed her words mockingly. He added, “Go easy on the fire water, Hazel. She’s as wet as a haddock.”

“Oh,” she purred, sounding almost evil. “We’re just havin’ a sample. She said you were thinking of sleeping in here.”

“And?”

“You can sleep upstairs.”

“Ah, the outcry,” he smirked, nodding.

“Ah, the sweat,” she returned, folding her arms in defiance.

“Ah, hell.”



Hazel watched the girl closely, deciding one more drink might loosen her tongue a bit more, if not wipe her out completely.

As the girl's mouth slid into a careless grin, Hazel tried once more. "So, I take it that you didn't stop here on purpose."

"No." Annabelle started to giggle. "I ran out of money. I need exactly twelve dollars to get to San Francisco. We should be safe there."

Annabelle had never drunk whiskey in her entire life. She much preferred champagne, but this amber liquid seemed to have a purpose as it burned a path down her throat. She felt warm and almost giddy.

"Safe from what?"

"Marriage," Annabelle grumbled, her face screwing into a look of disgust. "Mrs. Gavin Leonard." With her finger, she traced a pattern along the soft bed sheets.

"Never trust a man with two first names. So, you're married?"

"Oh, heavens no. I couldn't let that happen to Mr. Britches."

"Well, I'm confused as hell."

"Mr. Britches," she said again and Hazel watched as the black hairy tail wagged in acknowledgement of his name.

"Oh, Mr. Leonard not a dog lover?"

"He said he would drown Mr. Britches. And me." It was whispered to Hazel, as if a deep, dark secret.

"So you ran away?"

"I had to. I need twelve dollars to get us to San Francisco."

If You Only Dare

“I can’t imagine you in a place as wild as San Francisco.” Hazel laughed as she delivered her warning.

“My aunt is there.”

“Can she wire you the money?”

“I’m afraid to contact her.”

“Don’t she like you?”

“Oh, she does. She loves me. She and my uncle both love me very much. It’s just, I’m afraid if I were to wire her, that my father or Gavin will find out where I am and where I’m heading and force me to go back home.”

“I see.” Hazel had been right about the whiskey. This girl had told her everything in a matter of minutes. “Does Neville know?”

“No. He’s been so nice...I should tell him.”

“Oh, yeah. He’s been a real prince lately,” Hazel scoffed sourly.

Something about the woman’s tone made Annabelle giggle again. She looked up in time to see the man they had been discussing enter the room quietly. He was looking at her in a strange way. Or maybe it was the whiskey that made her toes tingle under his gaze.

Outside the door, Neville paused, his thoughts on the girl waiting inside. Hazel was right, of course. He would be the worst kind of scoundrel if he tried to stay in the same room with her. Damn it, Hazel was turning his brothel into a boarding school for wayward young women.

“Knock. Knock,” he called out, opening his door.

“Well, if it ain’t Prince Charming, come back to his keep,” Hazel cooed from the chair. The girl giggled. Neville could not believe his eyes. It was more horrible than he could have imagined. Hazel had gotten her socially lubricated and he had to sleep upstairs.

LAURA E. REAGAN

"I just sent Dell on upstairs to bed and thought I might need some clothes since I'm to sleep upstairs as well."

"Oh, no," the girl said, slinging back the covers, her legs exposed to his rakish gaze again. "I can't take your room."

"Oh, dear," Neville jumped to stop her and try to force the lump from his throat. "No, I insist."

"Well," Hazel said, standing and stretching. "I need to get upstairs myself. Neville, did you make sure the doors were fixed for Mrs. Bitters?"

"Yes, I did," Neville answered, checking his upper lip before he turned to face her. He bid her a good night and closed the door behind her rustling skirts.

Now. All he had to do was get some clothes and sneak his way upstairs. He turned to find Temperance leaning against the headboard of his four-poster, holding a glass of whiskey. She had a dreamy look on her face that made him feel dangerous. The fact that she hadn't covered herself made him even more aware that they were alone.

He felt suddenly protective. The bizarre part was he felt he needed to protect her against him. "Um, I believe Hazel must have lost count while pouring," he said, taking the glass from her. At her questioning look, he added, "You must get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day."

"It is?"

"Why, yes," he answered, pulling out a new set of clothes. "Your first day on the job."

"Second day," she corrected.

"Why, yes. How very shrewd of you," he said under his breath. "Did you and Hazel have a nice little chat?" He turned back towards her and took a seat in the chair.

"She's very nice. You're very nice."

"You're very correct," he teased, loving the way her lips

If You Only Dare

curled up into a smile. She or Hazel one had taken her hair down. It surrounded her face and fell about her shoulders in a shower of soft darkness. His fingers curled around the glass instead of where they longed to be. She was perfectly at ease with him and he found himself being pulled closer without moving.

“Thank you for saving me earlier.”

“It was my august pleasure,” he assured her, bowing from the chair.

“Hazel scolded me for being careless,” she started.

“As well she should,” Neville agreed. “The very idea.”

“She said I should be more careful once I get to...well, that I should be more careful with my virtue.”

Trust good ol' Hazel to bring up virtue.

“You said once you get somewhere. Where?”

“It’s a secret place.” She looked away from him.

“A secret, huh? I tell you what. If you will tell me your secret, I will tell you a secret about me.”

She looked back at him, as if weighing his offer. She did want to know about him, she realized. She wanted to know what he was thinking. His mouth slid up on one side, his smile taking on an almost sinister look.

She shook her head.

“Very well,” he said, draining the glass. He could tell he was going to get no information from her tonight. He hoped that Hazel had. He stood and walked over to her. She stared up into his face.

“You aren’t going to kiss me, are you?”

Her question rooted him. He would like nothing more in the world than to kiss her. But, what an odd question.

“Would you like for me to kiss you?”

“No, thank you,” she said rather decidedly.

LAURA E. REAGAN

“Very well,” he gave back, almost chuckling at her answer. “You’ve probably never been kissed,” he muttered, reaching down to turn the wick on the oil lamp.

“Oh, but I have,” she assured him, her voice sounding grave. She wondered why she felt she could tell him anything and wondered even more about the slight buzzing she was experiencing.

“Have you, indeed? Judging from your response, I would wager you had not.”

She shrugged, refusing to answer his expectant look.

“Very well,” he said. “Have it your way.”

“No, not my way. His way. He always has his way,” she muttered, tiredly.

Did she realize what she was saying?

“Who has had his way? Some boy? Beside a haystack, in the moonlight?” he asked, hoping to impress upon her that she had only been pecked on the cheek. Nowhere near the sort of kiss he wanted to bestow upon her.

“He’s not a boy.” She sounded utterly deflated.

“A man? Are you telling me that you have actually been kissed by a man?”

The memory of Gavin forcing her lips apart and sending waves of pain and revulsion through her must have been evident in her face.

By the determined and baleful look in her eyes, he knew she had indeed been kissed, and by a man. The thought made his blood boil. Before he could guess his next move, his body made it for him. Placing his knee on the bed, he took a hold of her chin, tilting her face up and just as quickly his lips fused over hers for a taste.

At first, he could tell she was shocked at his boldness. No one was as surprised as he was. He was determined to show

If You Only Dare

her that she indeed had not been kissed, not the way he could.

At the first touch, he feathered his lips across hers. Then he fused his mouth to hers. Her first reaction was to clamp her lips together. She winced, almost as if she expected a painful onslaught. She would not get that from him. He traced the tight seam of her lips lightly with the tip of his tongue. As he slid his tongue across her upper lip, she jerked, gasping quietly as she felt a little shock. As she gasped, he slipped past her teeth to play just for a second.

He had certainly given her something to think about.

LAURA E. REAGAN

If you enjoyed this sample, it can also be purchased in hardcover or the full eBook. Please visit www.archebooks.com for more information.

