

Chapter 1

"Coldhearted bitch."

"You talkin'to me?"

Devin Montgomery swung away from the hotel window to face the middle-aged P.I. wearing a rumpled gray suit and sprawling his overweight body across the sofa as if he owned it. "No. Thinking out loud."

Walking to the coffee table, he picked up the financial report the private investigator had brought with him. He scanned it with a critical eye and asked, "Just how serious is her money bind?"

The P.I. lit his third cigarette in less than an hour and inhaled deeply, studying the man who'd hired him over a year ago—carte blanche. In his twenty-five years of snooping into the private lives of New Orleans's citizens, Joe Tate had never seen anyone display such cold, calculated hatred. Almost from day one he'd suspected Montgomery had a yen to taste Jennifer Tyson's blood, and wasn't about to settle for anything less.

"Serious," he finally said, when Devin flashed him a glare of barely restrained impatience. "In the last three weeks, she's made the rounds of every bank and loan office in town."

"And?"

"And nothing, zilch, the big goose egg. Her little business is going down the toilet, and no one's willing to pay for a life raft." He took a long drag on the cigarette and stamped it out in the glass ashtray on the table at his elbow.

With one last glance at the papers he held, Devin dropped them to the coffee table. "What kind of business?" He'd read the report over later, when he could concentrate. Right now, he wanted fast answers.

"A little shop called The House of Miniatures in the Pontalba Building on Jackson Square. Been in business about four years."

"Who owns the building?"

"The mortgage is in the hands of an estate. The old geezer died about three years ago. Family's been tryin' to unload it ever since. They live in Europe, and havin' property here is too much of a hassle for them."

"For sale, huh?"

The P.I. noted the flicker of excitement in Devin's expression.

"What does she sell?"

"Dollhouses, doll furniture, stuff like that. At one time the place kept its head above water, but when the economy went sour . . ." Tate indicated the direction the business had taken by inverting his thumb.

"Dollhouses," Devin mused. Taking a seat in the chair facing Tate, he drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the arm. "She have a supplier?"

Tate shook his head. "Carves the stuff herself. Seems her grandfather taught her. Buys very

little. Wood, sandpaper, decorations for the houses, that kind of thing. Has a couple working for her "He paused and patted the breast of his suit jacket. After making the rounds of all his pockets several times, he extracted a small, dog-eared notebook from his hip pocket. Grinning apologetically at Devin, he wet the tip of his finger with his tongue and shuffled through the pages.

Shifting in the chair, Devin fought to keep his cool. If this guy hadn't proved his effectiveness by locating Jenny when no one else could, he'd have doubted his ability to find his way home. Resigned to overlooking the P.I.'s shortcomings, he reminded himself that he still had questions about Jenny—and Tate, unfortunately, held all the answers.

"Ah, here it is," the unkempt man announced. "They're an elderly couple. Retired. Name's Mason—Belle and Harry Mason. The old man builds the dollhouses, wires them with electricity and does some of the finishing. The old lady does general work, cleans the houses, crochets bed coverings, curtains, tablecloths for the houses. Been with her about two years."

"What kind of relationship do they have with her?"

Tate flipped the notebook closed, stuffed it in his jacket pocket and raised two entwined fingers. "Close. Like one big happy family."

Too agitated to remain motionless, and needing to escape the smell of the cigarette Tate lit, Devin rose, shoved his hands in his pockets and walked back to the window. "Is she married?"

"Nope."

Exhaling a breath he hadn't been aware of holding, Devin glanced over his shoulder at Tate. "Boyfriends?"

Tate shook his head. "None. If she's not in her shop, she's upstairs in her apartment—alone. In the three weeks I been watchin' her, there hasn't been a man near her, except customers and the old geezer who works for her."

Fighting a smug grin of satisfaction, Devin absently followed the progress of the excursion steamboat *Natchez* far below as it fought the currents of the Mississippi to dock at the Toulouse Street Wharf. *How unpredictable and treacherous those waters were*, he thought distractedly.

Like a woman's heart.

Unbidden, a picture of Jenny rose up to taunt him, looking as she had the last time he saw her—fresh, young, vibrant, and only eighteen, or so she'd led him to believe until her father told him otherwise. Had her unripened, lovely body matured into the lush, sensuous one it had promised to become? Was she still as strikingly beautiful as his memory painted her? The stirring in his groin roused him from his fantasies.

"How can you be sure they're just customers and not boyfriends?" he asked, more to fill the silence and redirect his mind than because he doubted Tate's ability to recognize the difference.

"Trust me," the P.I. replied, throwing an arm over the back of the sofa. He crossed an ankle over his knee and smiled knowingly.

"Any family?"

"Negative. I've never seen a young broad live like she does. That shop seems to be her whole life." He nearly added he thought it was a waste that a looker like her didn't spread the

wealth around, but the expression on Devin's face rendered him mute.

Montgomery stared down at the river, some twenty stories below. From beneath his dark, arched eyebrows, his mossy green eyes glowed menacingly with a strange gratification. White teeth gleamed from behind a humorless smile; his fists worked spasmodically at his sides.

Tate looked away and squirmed in his seat, thanking providence that he wasn't this Jennifer Tyson. Something told him that whatever Montgomery had in mind for her, it would be very unpleasant.

"Popie! Popie!"

The door burst open, and a bundle of pink lace and flying black curls stumbled through it, making a beeline for Devin.

"Don't run, Scamp. You'll fall," Devin scolded gently as he turned and hoisted the little girl into his arms, exposing the metal brace on her leg.

Joe Tate stared in astonishment as an expression of loving tenderness warmed Devin's face, melting away the frozen hatred. It was like seeing a snowbank hit by a blast from a blowtorch.

"Popie, Mrs. Filbert bought me a be...be..." She glanced with questioning eyes toward the stiff-backed Scottish nurse who'd followed her in.

"*Beignet*," the woman said, coaching her.

"Yeah." The child grinned, turning back to Devin. "They're French doughnuts, but they're square, not like regular doughnuts. We ate them outside, and the wind blew sugar all over my face."

"Sugar?" Devin cried in mock horror. "What on earth do you need that for? I think you're sweet enough already. Let me have a taste." He buried his face in the child's neck and nuzzled her with his nose.

"Popie, you tickle," the girl cried, laughing and tilting her head to hide her neck.

Devin raised his face and frowned playfully at her. "Just as I thought. You've wasted my money. You're definitely sweet enough already."

"Mr. Montgomery," Mrs. Filbert interjected, "it's time for Amy's nap."

Seeing the objections ready to roll from Amy, Devin placed his finger over her lips. "I'm busy now, Scamp. You go along with Mrs. Filbert like a good girl. You and I will have a long chat about your adventures at supper."

Amy threw her arms around his neck as he hugged her close and placed her carefully on her feet. "Okay, Popie. See you later!" she called, taking the nurse's hand and limping from the room.

"Your kid?" Tate asked.

"Yes," Devin replied, following Amy's departure with loving eyes.

"Pretty little tyke." The investigator paused, frowning thoughtfully. "Looks a little like—" Devin's thunderous look stopped him from completing the statement.

Tate's observation upset Devin. If he saw the resemblance, would Jenny? Time would tell. He'd rather that didn't happen for a while, but if it did, he would handle it.

He returned to his contemplation of the river, weighing the information the P.I.'s keen

observations had produced. If Devin had planned it, he couldn't have done a better job. Without money, and with no real friends, no romantic ties and a strong attachment to a dying business and two dependent senior citizens, she would be at his mercy.

"I'll have my secretary mail you a check," he said, dismissing Tate. "I want a full copy of your report by tomorrow noon."

The middle-aged man stood and stared at Devin's back. "You'll have it, Mr. Montgomery. Always a pleasure doin' business with you. Want me to continue to keep an eye on your lady—?"

Devin rounded on him. "She's *not* my lady," he snarled. "I'll advise you when your services are no longer required."

Silently, Tate nodded and left the hotel room, breathing a sigh of relief when he was free of the fog of hatred that seemed to surround Devin Montgomery. He almost felt sorry for the Tyson dame. Quickly checking his thoughts, he attributed his temporary lapse to the softening effects of old age. Montgomery's fat check would put him on the right road, he thought, smiling and whistling as he strolled down the hall.

The door had barely closed when Devin picked up the financial report on Jennifer Tyson. He studied it with the same degree of intensity a scientist devotes to the inspection of a bug under a microscope.

Coming to a decision, he laid the sheaf of papers aside carefully and picked up the phone. After punching in a series of numbers, he waited, tapping the edge of the table with his finger.

"Jim? Devin Montgomery. Are you going to be in your office for a while today? Good. I want to talk to you about buying one of the buildings in the French Quarter. Yeah. On Jackson Square."

He hung up and sat back with a satisfied smile. Things were going better than he'd hoped. Once he bought the building that housed Jenny's little shop, he'd send his attorney around to advise her she was about to be put out on the street if she didn't pay up her back rent.

Then, in true knightly fashion, he would offer her an out that she would find impossible to turn down, putting her right where he wanted her—in his house, and under his thumb. And she would never know the extent of his hold over her until the time came for her to leave.

He would enjoy seeing her living on the fringes of the family she'd always said she wanted, never quite being a part of it, never quite able to taste and savor the closeness he delighted in with his daughter.

He considered the prospect of once again sharing a bed with Jenny. Although sleeping with her had never been a hardship, he didn't want to get caught in that trap again. He had yet to meet a woman who could equal her in that department. Even at the tender age of seventeen, she had been a fiery, active companion. Now that she'd matured and had more experience, he thought she should be beyond belief, but then he reminded himself that discretion was the better part of common sense.

The grin widened when he considered the two senior citizens she employed. What a bonus. If she balked, he would make sure Adams pointed out what a devastating effect it would have on them. Surely, she hadn't grown hard-hearted enough to stand by and watch them starve trying to

make ends meet.

Don't get too confident, his conscience warned. She didn't have any qualms about sticking your daughter in a children's home and walking away.

Bounding from the chair, he stalked to the bar in the corner of the luxurious suite and poured a liberal amount of Scotch into a glass. The liquor burned its way down his throat, helping to quiet the rage that grew in him every time he thought about Amy being raised as he had—another forgotten, unloved statistic in a cold building full of more statistics. Or shuffled from one foster home to another like a troublesome pet, never knowing the love and security of her own family. Jennifer Tyson had a very large debt to pay, and if things went well, she'd be making her first installment before the end of the week.

Jenny's hopes for a busy day in the shop faded with the weather. Outside her window, late-spring rain fell in torrents. Tourists were not apt to be walking the streets of the French Quarter today. This downpour would push them toward the museums or closet them in their hotel rooms, out of the elements. Those few who were brave enough to venture out would make little difference to her business.

Thankful that the Baroness Pontalba had seen fit to flout Creole custom and put indoor staircases in the building, she descended to her shop with lagging footsteps. She checked her watch and unlocked the front door. Out of force of habit, she then proceeded to the workroom, where she started the coffee she kept brewing all day as the *lagniappe* she offered her customers. The "something extra" cost her very little and promoted goodwill. Lately she could use all the goodwill she could lay her hands on.

As she dipped the last scoopful of the mixture of chicory and coffee into the brewing basket, the bell over the shop door tinkled, signaling the arrival of one of those brave souls she'd been thinking about. Since Belle wouldn't arrive for a while yet, and Harry was off to the doctor's for a checkup, she was in the shop alone.

"Be right there," she called over her shoulder, and deftly slid the basket in place over the coffeepot. Pushing the brew button, she paused long enough to hear the first gurgle, the signal the pot had begun its cycle. Satisfied the coffee would soon be ready, she picked up a towel to dry her wet hands and stepped through the curtain.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she said cheerfully, wiping the water from her hands and tossing the towel on a nearby display case. Turning to her first customer of the day, she froze when her gaze collided with a pair of painfully familiar pale green eyes.

"Hello, Jenny."

Even if she hadn't been facing him, she would have recognized that voice. The sound of it slid over her skin like warm, rich velvet, reminding her of its power to turn her knees to water. It hadn't lost one ounce of its potency, she thought, reaching for the edge of the display case for support.

She mouthed his name, but no sound left her lips. Shock rendered her incapable of more. She felt as though she'd hurtled through a time warp into the past. Wordlessly she stared at the

man she had once loved so deeply, the man who had turned his back on her when she needed him most. Slowly, without relinquishing her hold, she worked her way around the display case, putting it between them. Still she stared, unable to believe he was here—six years too late.

Standing just inside the door, the light dancing off his black hair, turning the strands to shimmering silk, Devin overpowered the tiny shop. A casual blue polo shirt clung tenaciously to the muscles of his broad chest, exposing a dark tuft of hair at the V in the neck. Sinewy biceps swelled against the material as he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his tight jeans, pulling them snug across his slim hips. He advanced into the shop, his well-toned thighs rippling beneath the washed-out denim.

Stopping on the opposite side of the counter, he pinned her with an appraising gaze from those strange silvery green eyes, close enough for her to see the thin band of amber outlining each iris. If she'd found him disturbing from across the room, at this distance he nearly annihilated her entirely.

His thirty-four years hadn't changed him. Except for the laugh lines creasing the skin on either side of his generous mouth, hinting at the wrinkles they would one day become, he looked much the same. After assessing his dark coloring, square jaw, high cheekbones and dark brows, one would never think of him as a successful folklore novelist. He'd always reminded her of an Apache warrior—except for those penetrating, icy eyes. She knew only too well that locked behind their glacial facade lurked the secrets that made up this complex man.

"What's this? Jennifer Tyson speechless?" Devin asked, his insolent gaze raking over her in turn.

What did he want? Why, after all this time, was he here? From the look on his face and the tone of his voice, it wasn't to exchange pleasantries, but that was fine with her. All she wanted was for him to state his business and leave as soon as possible.

"What do you want, Devin?" she asked, finding her voice.

"Now, Jenny, is that any way to greet me after . . . what's it been? Six years? After all, it's not like we're strangers. Or have you forgotten?"

His words jarred her memory. No, damn him, she hadn't forgotten. Apparitions nudged her, daring her to remember, taunting her, niggling at her. Apparitions she'd successfully kept at bay for a long time. With practiced determination, she pushed them away.

"Devin, spare me the for-old-time's-sake speeches. Why are you here?" Unable to remain still under his intense scrutiny, she flicked her hair behind her back and wet her nervous lips.

For a while, Devin couldn't answer. His gaze followed the sweep of her tongue across her full lips. Her beauty had all the impact of a fist slammed into his gut. His mind raced, filled with other times she'd used that very gesture to gain his attention.

Hot on the heels of the physical reminder came the resurgence of the pain she'd caused him and Amy. His stomach tightened into a knot.

Oh, no, he warned himself. It's not that easy anymore, Jenny. It'll take more than a swoosh of that mane of black silk and a coy gesture to derail my plans.

"My child," he finally stated flatly, eyeing her for a reaction.

Jenny's heart rose into her throat. Her fingers whitened as they maintained their death grip on the display case. Anything else! her mind screamed. She would talk to him about anything else, but not the child. Ever since the night Gramps had told her the baby had been born dead, she hadn't spoken of it to anyone. Time hadn't made verbalizing it any easier.

Slowly, Devin's voice penetrated the haze of panic surrounding her. "She has her heart set on you furnishing a dollhouse for her." He strolled around as he talked, inspecting the dollhouses on display.

Jenny gaped at his back. She *has* her heart set... She *has . . . has . . . has . . .* It slowly dawned on her that he was talking about another child, a living child. Breathing a sigh of relief, she tried to ignore the tug on her heart at the idea of him fathering a child with another woman. What difference did it make to her?

Wanting to be rid of him, but governed by a gloomy financial picture that didn't include turning business away—not even his—she let go of the counter and moved to a nearby shelf. "If you'll tell me the style," she offered, pivoting toward him, pleased that her quaking emotions didn't transmit themselves in her voice, "I'll help you pick the furniture from what I have in stock."

"Not for this dollhouse," he said, swinging to face her. "This is special, unique. It's a duplicate of our home, fashioned over a hundred and fifty years ago for the original owner's daughter. The furnishings have to be replicas of the ones in the house now." He advanced on her slowly.

Jenny compared his stride to that of a black panther she'd seen in the Audubon Zoo, sleek, graceful, predatory. Dragging her eyes from his, she picked up a small rocker. "You'll find that I've got some styles here to fit the era you're speaking of. However, custom-making all the furniture for a dollhouse is a very lengthy and expensive project just for a child's toy."

"This won't be the first time I've been accused of over-indulgence where Amy's concerned."

"Amy?"

"My daughter. The dollhouse is a gift for her sixth birthday next month."

Sixth? It didn't take a genius to add two and two and get the picture. The bastard! It hadn't taken him long to fill his empty bed. Her temples began to pound, drowning out his words. Her fingernails dug into the wood on the counter.

After six years of wondering, asking herself why he'd never answered her letters, why he'd turned his back on his own child, the answers were clear. Why hadn't the possibility of another woman occurred to her long ago?

Because you were so in awe of him, so much in love, so blinded by him, you couldn't have seen it in a mirror if it had been written across your forehead, the voice of reason whispered.

The shop's walls seemed to close in. Her hands tightened their death grip on the edge of the counter. Her mind cautioned her over and over, *Don't pass out. Hold on. Not now. Not in front of him. Don't let him know how much it matters.*

Her knees buckled. A strong arm caught her around the waist and lowered her to the stool she kept behind the cash register. She almost moaned aloud as feeling began to return to her

numbed body. She felt eviscerated.

The pain had been bad enough when she thought he'd just turned his back on his responsibilities, but to find there had been another woman— It went beyond bearing.

"Breathe. Take a deep breath," a voice said encouragingly.

She obeyed. The room swam back into focus just as she heard the soft tinkle of the bell over the door.

"Lord almighty," Belle exclaimed, going nearly as white as the woman Devin supported with an arm around her shoulders. "What's happened? Jenny, Jenny honey, are you all right?"

Weakly Jenny smiled at her employee and friend and nodded. "I'm fine," she said in a thready voice, grateful when Belle scooped her from beneath Devin's arm and nestled her against her ample bosom.

"What on earth happened?" Belle demanded of Devin.

"We were discussing some furniture for my daughter's dollhouse, and she suddenly went white and collapsed." Devin studied Jenny's face closely, waiting to see if she would refute his words, recalling exactly at what point her knees had crumpled.

"Well, it's no wonder," Belle scolded gently. "All this worrying you've been doing over money lately. It's a surprise to me you haven't folded under the pressure before this."

Jenny tried to summon the strength to silence Belle, but she was too late. Avoiding Devin's assessing eyes, she leaned into the secure haven of Belle's embrace.

"I think I'll go upstairs and lie down for a while."

Devin's gaze fixed on them as Belle assisted Jenny through the curtain. Awaiting Belle's return, he walked around the shop, his attention drawn by a castle near the door. On its highest spire hung a small white sign—Not for Sale. Odd, he thought. Even to his untrained eye, the workmanship showed the skill of a master craftsman. Why wouldn't she want to sell something she could make a bundle on?

Each stone had been hand-cut and put in place. The rooms were filled with period furniture. A small throne room boasted two gilded chairs upon which sat two dark-haired monarchs. Carefully he slipped the king from his perch. Looking down at the tiny figure, it occurred to him that the hair and eye coloring of the minute king matched his own. A bitter smile curved his lips as he slipped the figurine back into place.

"That's her pride and joy," Belle said, coming up behind him with a bag of pralines clutched in one hand. She held it out to Devin. "Care for some? They're my only weakness, aside from Harry, my husband." She grinned as Devin dug into the bag.

"Jenny built this?" Devin asked, gesturing toward the castle and taking a bite of the sweet candy.

"Yup. Said she started it about five years ago, before she even had a glimmer of an idea to open a shop." Belle studied Devin. "You two know each other?"

"Oh, yes. Jenny and I go back quite a few years," he said, being deliberately obscure about the time period. "At one time, we were very . . . close." If he played his cards right, Belle could be of use in his scheme to get Jenny to do the dollhouse—the first step in his plan.

"I couldn't help but overhear your comments about Jenny's money problems." Belle shook her head sadly and popped another piece of candy into her mouth. "It's this damned economy," she said. "When Harry and I first started working here, she wasn't hauling in a fortune, but she made a tidy living for herself. Now she's lucky if she can pay the rent." She stopped abruptly. Lord, she hardly knew this man, and she was blabbing Jenny's private business to him.

"I want Jenny to do custom-made furniture for my daughter's dollhouse—copies of the originals. I got the feeling she was going to turn me down. It would be a substantial sale for her." He watched with growing satisfaction as Belle's eyes lit with hope. "If she had to come to my home to do it, would you and your husband be able to take care of things here until she got back?"

"Sure. Harry and I know as much about this place as she does. But why would she have to go to your house?"

He'd never dreamed this would be so easy. "I have in my possession a diary, very old, very valuable, that tells all the specifics of the furniture that was in the house one hundred and fifty years ago. I'd hate to have anything happen to it, so I'm reluctant to have it out of my possession."

Belle snorted. "You wouldn't have to worry. Jenny'd take good care of it while it was here."

"That's just one of the problems," Devin explained. "Some of the custom-made pieces aren't mentioned in the diary, but I have them in the house. She'd have to come there to measure them."

"I still don't see why she couldn't do the work here," Belle said doubtfully.

Having expected every argument and prepared for it in advance, Devin explained quickly, "My home is quite a distance from here—north of Baton Rouge. It would be much more convenient for her to work there than to travel back and forth every time she needed a measurement or a fact about a piece." He placed a hand on Belle's chubby fingers. "Besides, if things have been so tense for her lately, I'd be pleased to offer her the opportunity for a nice rest in the country. Amy would love having her there, and so would I. It's the least I can do." Not far from the truth, he thought, praising himself silently.

"Just what are you willing to pay for this project?" Belle asked, feeling the strain of the past few weeks begin to ebb. Devin named a price.

Belle choked on her candy. "My God!" she squeaked. Reaching out, she clutched Devin's hand. "You can bet I'll talk to her about this," she said.

Feeling elated, Devin squeezed Belle's hand and left the shop.

Jenny watched in relief from an upstairs window as Devin crossed Jackson Square. She had no idea what he had up his sleeve, but she had a strong suspicion the dollhouse furniture made up just a small part of some larger picture, and she wanted nothing to do with it—or him.

Chapter 2

"I'm sorry, Miss Tyson. I have my orders. The gentleman who bought the building insists all leases be brought current. Anyone who does not comply will be evicted. You've missed the last three months, and he won't tolerate arrears. You must be paid up-to-date by week's end, or he'll begin eviction proceedings." The sour-faced little man snapped his briefcase shut with a decisive click. "Of course, whatever stock you have on hand will automatically revert to him to cover your arrears, should you default on the three rent payments."

"But you can't—" Jenny sputtered.

He held up a blue-veined hand. "I'm afraid it's all quite legal. His orders were quite specific. He insists your back rent be paid in full by the end of the week. Read your lease agreement, Miss Tyson. Paragraph four, line two. You'll find it there." He slid his briefcase from the counter. "I must be going. Have a nice day," he drawled as he exited the shop.

"I wonder if anyone's ever bothered to point out to the little twerp that he should revise his exit line," Belle grumbled in one of her typical stage whispers.

Jenny cursed the luck of having the building change hands right now. The old owners would have waited until she was better able to catch up. This new guy sounded like Simon Legree. *And I'm his Eliza*, she thought. She could almost feel the hot breath of the hounds of failure on her neck. But she had no one to blame but herself—certainly not that obnoxious little lawyer.

Jenny sighed. "Don't hold it against him. He's only doing his job."

"And enjoying every minute of it, too," Belle added, glaring in the direction the new landlord's attorney had tripped across the square.

Plopping down on the stool behind the counter, Jenny propped her elbows on the edge and rested her chin in her hands. "Well, it's not as if I wasn't expecting it. The DuBois family's agent has been more than generous, allowing me those three extensions. I can't expect everyone to be that understanding. And it's not like we didn't know the building was up for sale." She swallowed her own explanation. "I just wish it hadn't sold right now," she added under her breath.

Belle's warm arm slid around her boss's shoulders, enveloping her in a familiar cloud of lavender perfume. "Jenny . . ." she began.

"No, Belle. Please don't bring that up again," Jenny said, sitting up straight, knowing what was to come. In the past few days, she and Belle had sparred daily over her flat refusal to accept Devin's offer. Jenny wished she could tell Belle why. "I won't consider Devin's proposal. There has to be another way."

Even as she said the words, she knew how futile things looked. She'd exhausted her options long before Devin made his appearance. Her gaze drifted around the shop, avoiding the castle and the reminders it embodied. Could she give all this up?

It held so much of her. It *was* her, from the bright blue paint and puffy white clouds on the

walls to the grass green rug. It represented her world. She had expended a great deal of time and energy here, setting it up to look like a tiny town nestled inside the four walls, safe from outside influence. But she should have known the grime from outside would eventually seep through the cracks and tarnish her Shangri-La.

Automatically her gaze slid to her castle, the castle she'd constructed to keep her mind off her losses, the castle she'd kept in plain sight to remind her every day of the betrayal of the man she loved, the castle she'd then used to further remind her never to let another man get that close. The little sign on the highest tower glared at her—Not for Sale. Well, neither was she, no matter what price Devin dangled under her nose.

But could she give up everything she'd worked so hard to attain? With growing uneasiness, she knew that taking this job would mean making concessions that went far beyond the shop, far beyond moving into his house.

"What am I going to do, Belle?"

"The way I see it, you don't have a lot of choices. Either you give up, or you fight." Belle took a small folding camp stool from beneath the counter, along with a shoe box marked Cleaning Closet, and waddled over to one of the Victorian houses. Unfolding the stool, she settled her overflowing bulk on it and placed the box at her feet. "Somehow, I never saw you as a quitter."