

COMPROMISE WITH SIN

A Novel

By Leanna Englert

They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin.

—Helen Keller

(quoting James Russell Lowell)

Dedicated to all who make the journey

in spite of the dark

PART 1 CHAPTER 1 December 1894

Slumped on the toilet after her nausea subsided, Louise Morrissey pressed a wet handkerchief against her forehead and made no effort to stop its cool rivulets trickling down her wrist. She could hold her breath only so long, then the foul smell of the public comfort station above Anderson's Seed and Feed assaulted her, and she reached for the atomizer of lavender water.

As Louise sprayed the sweet fragrance about the cramped room, she longed to be back in her own pristine water closet with its sanitary tile floor. Home. What was it she needed to tell Frank? Then she remembered. As she was leaving Riverview Inn, the hotel they owned and called home, a guest had stopped her to complain that his room was as cold and drafty as an old castle. Frank could be so exasperating. He had promised weeks before to seal the room's ill-fitting storm window, but he frittered away hours in his workshop with their friend Yonder LaFontaine, tinkering—she stopped mid-thought and set down the atomizer. What did she care about the Inn, the thankless job of the innkeeper's wife? Her future was with Doc.

In a matter of minutes she would hear the words that would launch her new life. Benjamin Dewitt Foster, M.D., expected to be named to the faculty of Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. As his wife, she would accompany him, her arm in his, to the theater and charity balls, indulge her love of classical studies, and champion worthy causes. And bear his children.

Feeling stronger, she stood and studied her face in the crazed mirror that hung askew from a rusty nail. In the miserly light from a bare overhead bulb she looked all of her thirty-one years. With a trembling hand she dabbed powder to conceal dark circles under her eyes and blotted perspiration that made flaxen curls cling to her forehead.

The sound of the doorknob turning startled her. The doorknob turned again, accompanied by

insistent knocking.

"One moment, please." She composed herself with a deep breath that she exhaled slowly, picked up her handbag and hat, and unlocked the door.

A farmer in ragged overalls looked down at his boots. "Pardon, missus."

Louise stepped out into the empty hallway. Few people would have reason to come to the second floor today as the professionals who had offices there took Wednesday afternoons off, and the Riverbend Ladies Lending Library, which Louise had founded and now operated with the help of other volunteers, was closed.

She strode down the hall past the lawyer's office and, without pausing, as though the space were nothing out of the ordinary, past Doc's surgery. When she reached the library, she picked up three books from the wicker table that sat in the hall for the after-hours convenience of patrons. She unlocked the door and made a mental note to post a fresh sign to replace the tattered one that read, "Open Monday and Thursday all day, and Saturday morning. Adult Literacy Class, Tuesday night."

On Wednesday afternoons the library belonged to her. She went there alone to order materials, keep financial records, shelve returned items, and, in recent months, to meet her lover.

She set her hat and handbag on a shelf in the library workroom. She was shivering in spite of her coat but lacked the strength to get a fire going just yet. Instead she reclined on the green sofa in the social corner. The nausea had subsided, but her swelling breasts and expanding midsection pushed against her shirtwaist. Should she have told Doc earlier? No, she decided, she had done the right thing in not forcing his hand.

With one finger she traced the upholstery pattern of raised ivy vines. Her thoughts drifted to the forbidden pleasures she had known here. Doc's words that she had recalled so many times thrilled her anew: "Wild horses could not keep us apart." She smiled and forgave him the cliché.

She watched as dust moved from shadow to become illuminated in shafts of sunlight streaming through the windows. Her finger traveled along the upholstery pattern and idled on its misaligned seam where leaves and vines failed to connect. A glimpse of her emerald-and-pearl ring broke her reverie. Frank had presented it to her for their tenth anniversary two years ago in a sudden and gushing display of affection so sentimental it made Louise squirm. What possessed him to disturb the superficial calm which they both had accommodated? If he had intended it to be a pivotal moment, an attempt to rekindle what they had lost, it failed. They were estranged within the confines of a marriage, and that was that. If he had intended the ring to be a public show of his modest wealth—but no, in all fairness that was not his nature. Now the ring fit snugly on her swollen finger. Her throat tightened. She had become the thing Pa had called her.

As the moments dragged by, her eyes went often to the Regulator wall clock, an ornately carved cherrywood timepiece left to the library from a grateful patron's estate. Louise wanted to speed up its swaying pendulum and silence its incessant ticking. Marking time until the moment of truth. What if Doc didn't come? What if he didn't get the faculty position? What if he had a change of heart? In spite of still feeling weak and nauseous, she could sit no longer. Her restless mind and nervous energy forced her to get up. She moved the loaded shelving cart a safe distance from the wood stove and gathered small logs and kindling from the wood box.

The stove being cold, it was reluctant to support a fire. After a considerable passage of time, Louise succeeded in coaxing a log to flare and was prodding it with the poker when she heard the sound of the door opening and the words: "Allow me."

In Doc's full, baritone voice Louise heard everything that her husband was not. A man in charge, a refined and serious man who admired her abilities and ambitions, a man who awakened her passion when she had assumed that part of her life was over. She had loved Frank once. Gentle, charming, a good provider. An engaging crooked grin. He had taught her to laugh. But

he was a dreamer. She resented having to be the responsible one, ever reminding him to look after business. Six years after their marriage vows he became impotent. And with his impotence came thinly veiled resentment of her ambition and achievements, little jabs that taken singularly amounted to nothing but collectively could open old wounds if she let them. Instead she kept her dreams and accomplishments to herself, found safety in silence or in words that passed for communication, but just barely: *I saw a flock of geese flying south today, do you think we'll have an early winter? . . . Gunter and Alice finally got a telephone. . . . Anderson's delivered your order today.*

Louise turned toward Doc's voice. Usually when he walked through the door, his professional look and bearing softened as soon as he saw her. Not today. He seemed aloof, or perhaps she was looking too hard for signs that their future together was assured.

He reached for the poker. She straightened and caught the familiar, maple syrup scent of pipe smoke that clung to his jacket. The fragrance, which she loved, belonged singularly to him. But today it made her queasy.

He kneeled to tend the fire, and Louise noticed the spot where his thick raven hair was thinning. As he prodded the wood, flames sprang from the flickering fire.

"That will do," Louise said. "It will get going of its own accord."

But he continued to jab the wood with the poker until flames swelled to fill the stove's belly.

How can he dilly dally? Her sense of urgency heightened her exasperation, made her wonder if his behavior was a delaying tactic. And she felt growing annoyance that he had ignored her, that he didn't trust her to build a fire.

The stove door squealed shut.

He stood. "Where is your oilcan?"

"It's—I don't know. I shall tend to it later."

He replaced the poker in its stand. Then his dark brown eyes took on the same admiring look that months earlier had set her moral compass spinning, had defined the moment she knew herself vulnerable—not just vulnerable—but *destined*.

"Now." He softly exhaled the word.

Louise braced for the words she could scarcely wait to hear.

His gaze steady, he reached out and took both her hands. Then he leaned down and let his tongue tease around her lips before parting them, exciting her in all the wrong places. His hand slipped inside her coat and gently but deliberately glided over her breast as he felt for a button on her shirtwaist. She pulled away.

He reacted with a quizzical look. "You look peaked. Have you taken ill?"

"No, not exactly. Please tell me you bring good news."

He frowned.

"About the faculty position. You said you expected confirmation this week."

"You are mistaken, my dear."

No. For weeks his exact words had been her last thought before falling asleep and the first upon awakening. Now addled by his condescension, she questioned her own memory. "If not this week, when?"

"I expected to learn *if* I'd been confirmed. I was not." His voice was matter-of-fact, as though he were reporting the greengrocer was out of apples.

Louise gasped. She strained to believe that even without the faculty position Doc would take her away and make her his wife. *His cool manner is a man's way of expressing disappointment. He needs comforting.* "I'm so sorry. I know it's a cruel blow after you were promised the position."

"So I had been led to believe."

"We'll go somewhere else, perhaps the mountains of Colorado. You said you loved it there, and I suppose I could adapt to the lack of cultural opportunities. I could start another library."

He shook his head. "It would be impractical to give up a good practice here to start over again." His words seemed to be coming from a distance. "Only a first-rate faculty position could lure me away."

Louise pressed a hand to her chest, as though to stop the expanding void inside. What had been vaguely unsettling was becoming crystal clear. The void was where her future had resided, a future slipping away. *Such a fool*. Respectable, rational Louise Morrissey had toyed with temptation like a giddy shop girl. She had fallen in love, and now she faced ruin. "What about us? You said yourself your wife would be better off without you, and you all but begged me to divorce Frank and go away with you. Surely you're not thinking we'll divorce and remain in Riverbend . . . "

"This is difficult for me as well, my dear. If I could follow my heart, I would take you away this minute. We shall continue to have our afternoons—"

"Our afternoons? No. I refuse to continue like this." The shrill audacity in her voice surprised her. "You vowed that you loved me, that you couldn't wait to end your wretched marriage."

"All true, my dear. But leaving is financially out of the question. Besides why would you want to leave Riverbend? Life is comfortable, you have your friends, and one day you will be its most prominent civic leader."

Her voice quivered. "I would go anywhere to be with you, to become your wife and bear your children."

"Perhaps another opportunity will arise. Meanwhile—" He reached for her.

She sidestepped to avoid his hand and walked to the shelving cart. "Your pledge to me

meant nothing. Listen to yourself. How can you be so cavalier . . ."

A sound like a muffled gunshot gave her a start. She gripped the handle of the shelving cart.

"Just a log popping," Doc said. "You're certainly jumpy today."

"My world has been turned upside down, and you, our future . . ."

"I am as disappointed as you, my dear. You say I am cavalier, but you are mistaken. I am not a demonstrative man, one to wear disappointment on my sleeve. I am a realist, and it would be foolish for us to go away together at this time. Be patient."

"Patient? I'll show you *patient*." With a fury she had felt only once in her life, she plucked a book from the cart and hurled it across the room, and before it hit the floor she launched a second book. As she reached for a third, Doc's hand stopped her.

"You're getting hysterical! Pull yourself together."

She glared at him. "I'm not hysterical." Her breaths came hard. *How can I say it? My next words will either win him over or drive him off.* "I'm in the family way."

He backed away. "You cannot mean it."

"I am certain of it."

"Just because your monthly is late . . ."

She felt the heat of a blush creeping up her neck and looked away. "I waited to be absolutely certain before telling you."

She went to him and placed his hand on her belly. "This could be the son who will carry on your name."

He withdrew his hand. "Is this a trap?"

His accusing eyes and curled lip made her cringe. A side of Doc that Louise had never seen. She wanted to damn him with angry words, but her trembling voice, barely more than a whisper, betrayed her. "How . . . dare . . . you?"

"What makes you so sure it's mine?"

Shallow, ragged breaths frustrated her efforts to appear calm. "I told you that Frank had lost his ability to perform."

Doc reacted with a bemused expression. "Married to a Jezebel such as yourself? Highly doubtful."

"Jezebel? Is that all I am to you?" Now she was shouting.

Doc's look and voice sobered. "Or have you been consorting with that halfbreed?"

With Yonder? Light-headed and wobbly, Louise steadied herself on the shelving cart. "How could you—"

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the door. "We'll fix this. No one will know."

"Stop! What are you—? No!" She kicked at his ankle, striking his boot.

He turned and released her wrist, and she struck a backhanded blow to his chin. She clutched her throbbing knuckles.

Blood trickled from his chin, scratched by her ring.

"Damn you," his guttural words came out almost as a growl.

"Get out!"

His face relaxed into a self-satisfied expression as he dabbed at his chin with a handkerchief. "This will heal in a few days. But that . . ." He pointed at her belly.

Fear seized Louise with a sensation that her skin was shrinking. She was about to slam the door behind Doc when a fresh stack of books on the wicker table outside the door caught her attention. *Had someone overheard?* The book on top was not one belonging to the library. She knew every book in the library's holdings without having to look for its Dewey Decimal number on the binding, or the library stamp or check-out slip on the inside cover. Frantic, she examined the remaining three books. None belonged to the library. Someone donating books had been

standing within earshot.

She should go home. In her mind, home had become a temporary place to wait, just until Doc was ready to take her away. Now the prospect of home took on a different meaning, one she was not prepared to face. She collapsed on the sofa, her hand over her eyes as though she could shield herself from the thoughts that assaulted her. What would make Doc change his mind? Threaten to tell his wife? She couldn't. Withdrawing her affection might work, not that she even wanted his affection any longer. But a baby needed a father. God pity the bastard child. And her reputation was at stake.

A thought she hadn't dared to consider presented itself. Maybe she would lose this baby, like the others. Minutes ago the idea would have brought her to tears, but now . . .

The sound of her own racking sobs assailed her ears, alien sounds that seemed to belong to someone else, and when the tears were spent, the darkest self-loathing followed. "Daughter of the devil." Betraying a husband who had been more than just a good provider. Frank awakening her in the night to go outside and see the magical northern lights. Sitting at her sickbed and telling stories to cheer her. He had never raised a hand to her except on one occasion when he was drunk. And when he learned the next day that her bruises had been caused by his hand, he was genuinely remorseful. No marriage was perfect. Could he forgive her? Would he let her bear another man's child and raise it as his own? What if he threw her out? The home for unwed mothers in Omaha—she could go there to have the baby. But they would make her give it up. No, better to go somewhere and pretend to be a widow. Her rainy day fund would provide support for the duration of her confinement but not much longer. Such thoughts had presented themselves before, but she banished them before they could take hold. Now their gravity held her in its gray stillness long after the fire sputtered its last.

It was getting dark. Frank would worry if she did not arrive home soon. She stood and shook

off pins and needles in limbs that had gone to sleep.

She collected her hat and handbag and began buttoning her coat, one she had worn against her better judgment. The red, fitted coat, her favorite, had a curly black lamb collar and cuffs, and solid brass buttons. One of the buttons loosened when she tugged it to meet the buttonhole over her bosom. *I waited too long to tell Doc.*

It was futile to dwell on what might have been. She directed her thoughts to the practical matter of the button. It would need reinforcing before she wore the coat again. But then it occurred to her that, given her expanding figure and the necessity of going into her confinement, she would have to put the coat away until next year. Next year? Would she actually have a baby? Would she be with Doc? Or with Frank? Alone?

She was out in the hall and locking the door when she heard Doc approach.

His voice was velvet, the tone that had always signaled the preamble to lovemaking.

"Louise, my dear, I am so sorry."

He placed his hand over hers and unlocked the door. With a hand on the small of her back, he guided her into the library.

Did she dare to hope he had changed his mind? She saw the scratch on his chin.

He frowned. "How long has the fire been out? You must be chilled to the bone."

His concern touched and confounded her. It was so like him to soften her in this way. "Why did you come back?"

"I lashed out in anger, said some things I wish I could take back. Please, my dear, may we sit down?"

Louise presumed he meant the sofa, but instead he guided her to the large reading table, seated her, and took the chair across from her.

"Have you considered what you will do?" he asked.

He sat less than an arm's length away, yet she felt stranded alone with the baby—*their* baby. The table dividing them might as well have been a chasm. *Does he care if I fall . . . and the baby?*

"I'm at a loss," she said. "What I believed turned out to be a myth." She fingered the loose button on her coat. "You're not the man I thought I knew." She paused, knowing what she was about to say was false, but she was grasping for an accusation, some way to strike back. Her breathing grew shallow. "I question if there even was a faculty position. Perhaps it was just a ploy to keep me from ending our affair."

He took her hand. "Of course it was real. I had every intention of taking the position, getting a divorce, and having you with me as my wife."

Louise heard a plea in his voice. Had he not said those words—"my wife"—she might have been able to hold back tears. She retrieved her handbag and fumbled for her handkerchief, forgetting until her hand touched it that it was wet. She slammed her handbag on the reading table. The loose button fell to the floor.

Doc seemed not to notice. He stood. "I found you irresistible because you were a strong, rational woman, my dear, not like most of your sex. Face the facts. You are in a predicament, and . . ." he paused, seemingly reluctant to go on.

You are in a predicament. Now it flashed before her, all the object lessons of women in life and literature who had fallen prey to a man's charms only to be left on their own with their "predicament."

"Louise, there's a risk, a strong possibility of a risk, of a medical complication. There's no good way out. Come, we shall dispose of this burden—"

She stood. "So now, it's a 'medical complication,' is it? This 'burden' you speak of is a child. Do you know how I've longed to have a child?"

"One you cannot explain to an impotent husband? Possibly one that's impaired? Summon your wits, woman."

"Impaired? Now you're sounding desperate."

"Have it your way." Doc picked up the button and gave it to her, letting his hand linger so that for a moment they held it together. He said nothing, but Louise felt his eyes said it all: *time was running out*.

He gestured toward the stove as he spoke his parting words: "Oil those hinges."