



*the*  
SWINDLER'S  
DAUGHTER



STEPHENIA H. MCGEE

Books by Stephenia H. McGee

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*The Secrets of Emberwild*

*The Swindler's Daughter*

*the*  
SWINDLER'S  
DAUGHTER



S T E P H E N I A   H .   M c G E E



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Dedicated to everyone who has ever  
struggled to understand their path,  
for God has great plans for you.

And to my book-loving friend Patty,  
whose faith and good humor inspire me.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

Psalm 32:8

# CHAPTER ONE



ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2, 1912

Her entire life was a sham. Somewhere deep inside, Lillian Doyle had always suspected there was more to the story she'd been fed since childhood. Yet in that moment, as Mother lifted her chin in defiance, Lillian longed to be wrong.

The solicitor's stuffy office smelled of stale tobacco and pomade, neither of which helped Lillian's roiling stomach. She and Mother sat in matching leather chairs across from Mr. Riley, who regarded her from behind round-rimmed spectacles.

"As you can see here . . ." He jabbed a bony finger at the paper on the gleaming desk between them.

Mother maintained her poise. "Yes, of course." Her honeyed tone dripped from lips used to forming deceptions. "And she is to inherit everything, you say?"

"As he had no wife or legitimate children, yes."

The words landed with a crushing weight, shattering the last bits of the veneer Mother had maintained for so long.

No wife.

No legitimate children.

Just Lillian.

Mother's glance warned her not to breathe a word. She couldn't speak if she'd wanted to. What did one say to finding out a dead man had died?

If that were not scandal enough, however, it would seem Mr. Floyd Jackson had bequeathed the sum of his earthly possessions to the sole care of his estranged daughter. Whom he'd never met.

A strange whooshing noise filled her ears. He'd been alive all this time.

"Did you hear me, Miss Doyle?"

Lillian's attention snapped back to the solicitor's pinched face. "Sorry, sir."

He tapped his finger on the desk again. "You have claim to Mr. Jackson's portion of the business as well as his house and furnishings. The solicitor in Dawson County will assist you further."

Mother sniffed as she rose from the small chair. "Thank you, Mr. Riley." She ushered Lillian from her seat and gestured to the door.

"Do you understand what I've told you, Miss Doyle?" Concern pulled Mr. Riley's bushy brows together.

"She understands." Mother grabbed Lillian's elbow and tugged her from the office. "Thank you for your time."

The paperwork. Had Mother taken that? Lillian turned to ask, but Mother closed the door firmly behind them and stalked past the reception desk. Lillian lingered in the hall. Should she knock, or . . . ?

The door opened, and Mr. Riley nearly ran into her as he stepped out. "Oh." He straightened his glasses. "You'll need this." He glanced behind her, clearly looking for her mother. He lowered his voice, though Mother had already headed for the front door. "Are you all right, Miss Doyle?"

"Um, yes, sir. It's a bit of a shock, is all." Lillian accepted the paper that announced her father's death from an apoplectic attack.

In prison.

A knowing look entered the man's blue eyes, followed swiftly by pity. "If you have any questions, please feel free to stop by again."

He scurried back into his office and shut the door before she could reply. Lillian stood there a moment longer before tucking the page inside her skirt pocket and hurrying to catch Mother. She stepped outside onto a street teeming with people, horses, and the occasional automobile with a purring engine. Situating her hat on her upswept hair, she practiced the conversation she'd have with Mother.

"Why didn't you tell me my father was still alive?" she would ask.

Mother would tilt her chin in her defiant way. "You didn't need to know. As far as you were concerned, the man was dead."

She would set her shoulders and keep Mother's gaze. "That's hardly true. It seems I have much to be concerned with, as he has left me a sum of money. Me, his illegitimate daughter."

Faced with the unveiling of the truth, Mother would apologize and explain that she had been protecting Lillian all this time.

Then Lillian would say . . .

She blinked, unable to think where the conversation would go next. So much depended on how Mother responded. What else had she lied about?

"How did he know where to find us?" The question darted from her lips before she could stop it.

"Not on the street." Mother had the uncanny ability to bark words under her breath while still maintaining a pleasant smile to passersby.

*Not on the street.* As though any of these strangers would know what they were talking about. Lillian pressed her lips together and let the matter drop. For now. But the moment they stepped inside the privacy of their town house, Mother would have to answer her questions.

Her father had been alive all these years. Meaning Mother was *not* the bereaved widow as she'd claimed. Nor had she been Floyd Jackson's wife.

*Were you ever planning to tell me I was born out of wedlock?*

Lillian watched her mother retreat down the busy walk. If she wasn't a widow, had they survived all this time because she was a kept mistress?

If not for her father's will, would Mother have kept the truth of Lillian's birth a secret forever? Probably.

If Mother had been able to go to Mr. Riley's office and collect the inheritance without her, would she have? Apparently. Lillian's presence had been required or Mother wouldn't have taken her to the solicitor's office with nary a word as to what the call was for.

Lillian stepped to the side to let a lady with a baby carriage pass on the sidewalk. Too many questions. Her head swam with how she'd ask Mother each one. How she would insist on an answer.

Then there were the technical issues to consider. They would need to travel to a rural town and find the solicitor there. Had Mr. Riley given her the solicitor's name? She couldn't remember. Then there would be paperwork, followed by some legal procedures. Then she would need to sell the assets, leaving her with a tidy sum.

Then what?

For the next four blocks, Lillian's mind created and discarded several possibilities. Would the money truly be hers alone? If so, what would that mean for her future? For Mother?

The cool May breeze lifted the edge of her wide-brimmed hat, causing her to take notice of the surroundings she'd not paid much heed to. Where was her mother? Lillian turned, finding her now trailing behind. Lillian must have been more lost in her thoughts than she'd realized.

When she paused, Mother breezed past her, the heels of her fashionable shoes clicking as she mounted the steps to their modest town house. Lillian didn't waste a moment. As soon as the door closed behind them, she launched into the conversation she'd practiced.

"Why didn't you tell me my father was still alive?"

Mother lifted her chin in exactly the way Lillian had anticipated. "To save us from scandal, of course."

Lillian gaped. That wasn't what she'd expected.

"Good riddance to the man."

Good riddance? How terrible a relationship had the two of them shared? "But he knew where to find us."

Mother unpinned her hat and tossed it on the rack by the door. "Sally!" She tugged the gloves from her fingers. "Of course he did. This is where he sent the money."

The young serving girl they couldn't truly afford scurried

down the steps and stumbled to a stop in the entryway. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Tea in the parlor. I am expecting Mrs. Montgomery any moment."

Mrs. Montgomery? Now? Today was hardly the day to deal with that pretentious woman.

"I'm not up to answering a bucketful of questions," Mother said as soon as Sally rushed off to prepare tea and refreshments. She pulled back her shoulders, stretching the too-tight fabric against a figure that had rounded considerably in the past year. "Mr. Jackson did not accept responsibility as a father, though his guilt saw to it that we were cared for." She gave a derisive sniff. "Until whatever schemes he was involved in failed, and then my monthly allowance disappeared. Now it seems he died in prison, leaving you whatever property remains. A good thing too, as we are on the verge of becoming destitute."

Lillian blinked, all her practiced poise flying away.

Mother seemed to take her silence as acceptance and bustled into the parlor. "Sally!" She poked her head back through the doorway. "Didn't I tell you to have the parlor spotless?"

Lillian followed her mother into the room, finding nothing out of place or lacking shine. The end tables gleamed, and the curtains had been opened to allow sunlight to splay over the furniture upholstery and create stripes across the rug.

"But, Mother, why didn't you ever tell me that . . ." The words "I was born out of wedlock" lodged in her throat at Mother's pointed glance.

"We'll discuss the specifics of collecting what's ours later." She fluffed a pillow that didn't need fluffing and replaced it on the settee.

A knock sounded in the entry. When the hem of Mother's gauzy gown disappeared through the parlor door, Lillian's breath left her in a rush.

That hadn't gone at all like she'd imagined. Though she shouldn't have expected anything different. Mother had always been tightly guarded, even with her own daughter. Lillian shouldn't have anticipated a little thing like her father's death to spark any heartfelt moments of connection.

Cheery voices twittered in the hall as though this morning's events hadn't entirely altered Lillian's world. How dare Mother pretend at a time like this?

But then, was not pretending the whole of life?

*"Smile, Lillian. You could at least appear glad to be here."*

*"Tell the grocer his payment was sent last Tuesday."*

*"Wear the gown for the station of life you want, and that is what people will see."*

Lies, all of them. And those only from this week.

Lillian pinched the bridge of her nose to ward off a headache. She was in no mood for Mrs. Montgomery, and given the change in circumstances, she didn't see why she had to entertain the woman at all.

Mother would expect her to feign a smile and pretend to be the lady worthy of a gentleman out of her reach. What would Mrs. Montgomery think if she knew the truth? Mother would likely no longer be invited to any gatherings. Neither would Lillian, for that matter.

Reginald Montgomery would most definitely be out of her social circle. The man was pleasant enough as far as austere gentlemen went, and Lillian had decided he'd likely be a safe, if somewhat stifling, choice for a husband. But he would most assuredly remove his interest in her if Mrs. Montgomery

discovered Lillian wasn't the perfect flower Mother tried to make her.

So much the better. She was an heiress now, after all. She didn't have to keep up any pretenses if she didn't want to. In fact, she would tell Mrs. Montgomery that she was no longer interested in further discussions about—

"Why, Miss Doyle, are you quite all right?" Mrs. Montgomery's airy voice snapped Lillian out of her thoughts. The woman's slim frame graced the doorway, concern etched on her delicate features.

Before Lillian could formulate any type of proper response, Mother patted Mrs. Montgomery's arm and leaned close, whispering something about "indisposed" and falling victim to "women's troubles."

Another lie. And today the very notion of playing along with another of her falsehoods made searing heat climb up Lillian's neck.

Mother pinned her with a warning glare. "Perhaps my dear daughter should lie down for a bit, hmm?" Her honeyed tone warred with the hard glint in her eyes.

Lillian stared at her.

"Oh my, yes." Mrs. Montgomery patted her perfectly coifed hair. Her assessing eyes slid over Lillian as though she wondered why Lillian didn't possess the fortitude to maintain herself even while experiencing a woman's discomforts. Such a girl wouldn't be worthy of her Reginald, certainly.

The woman had no idea.

The temptation to let the sordid truth take wing made her heart hammer. Instead, pitiful words she'd not meant to speak squeaked through her tight throat. "I do hope you will forgive me."

Mrs. Montgomery slowly tugged kid gloves from her fingertips. "Of course, my dear. You are such a delicate thing. Mrs. Doyle and I can handle these matters."

The name stabbed at Lillian. Mother had never been *Mrs.* anything.

"Certainly." Mother took Lillian's arm when she'd still not managed to move from the center of the room. "Mothers are supposed to help with such important decisions for the children."

She spoke as though Lillian and Reginald were both mere toddlers who needed every decision made for them. At the moment, however, Lillian had an escape, and she wouldn't let wounded pride steal it from her. They could plan whatever they liked.

Mother may intend for Lillian to marry Reginald Montgomery, but she would soon discover that Lillian would no longer concede.