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By Renee Ryan

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Claiming His Child

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Annabeth Silks can't bear to let a onetime outlaw take little Sarah. As the daughter of an infamous madam, she knows the hardship of an unstable home. But every glimpse of Hunter's reformed character dares Annabeth to look beyond his past...to the family and future she never thought to find.

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The Outlaw's Redemption (Charity House Book 6) By Renee Ryan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #336001 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-07-01
- Released on: 2013-07-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Renee Ryan grew up in a Florida beach town outside Jacksonville, FL. Armed with a degree in Economics and Religion from Florida State University, she explored various career opportunities, including stints at a Florida theme park and a modeling agency. She currently lives in Savannah, Georgia with her husband and a large, fluffy cat many have mistaken for a small bear. Renee can be contacted through her website at www.reneeryan.com

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Denver, Colorado, 1890

Hunter Mitchell was a free man. After two years of hard labor and endless nights of soul-searching, he'd paid his debt to society. His life was once again his own. Countless possibilities awaited him.

And yet, here he stood but a stone's throw away from where his downward spiral had first begun.

Long before the judge had sentenced him to prison, Hunter had vowed never to return to this house of sin owned by the notorious Mattie Silks. Two years ago he'd made an exception, to take another man's life.

So much regret. So much hurt.

Just when he thought the worst was behind him, and would stay that way, his past had caught up with him again.

Lips pressed into a hard, flat line, Hunter rolled his shoulders and considered his next move. The most obvious course of action would be to storm through those ridiculously ornate doors and demand what was his. *Take* what was his.

He had the right. No one would argue that. But Hunter had learned to be a cautious man.

Mattie could have lied to him in her letter. She'd done so before. For no other reason than to see how far she could push a man. What the surly madam didn't realize was that Hunter was no longer susceptible to her games. He knew Mattie's well-guarded secret, a secret he wouldn't hesitate to use against her if she tried to toy with him.

Red-hot determination coiled in his gut. Hunter would get the truth out of the woman tonight.

No mistakes.

No loss of control.

Calm. Cool. Careful.

Melting into the shadows, he blew into his cupped palms. The air had taken on a cold, nasty bite. Hunter

couldn't help but feel he was being watched, a remnant of his former life when he had to look over his shoulder wherever he went. But those days were over, the members of his former gang either dead or living in Mexico.

His breath formed a fine mist around his head, adding a sinister feel to what he'd come here to do.

And yet, *and yet*, he felt a sliver of hope building inside him. Hope for the future, hope that he could become the godly man he'd once been. And maybe capture some stability along the way.

He lowered his hands and stepped in the direction of the brothel's threshold. The physical act of moving brought the rest of the world into focus. Sights, sounds, the smells of stale liquor and wet horse flooded his senses.

Music drifted out of the brothel's open windows. The bawdy songs suited the raucous laughter and coarse shouts. Golden light called to Hunter, the soft glow promising warmth from the cold and a momentary respite from the constant loneliness that plagued him.

An illusion. Nothing but pain and regret followed a night with one of Mattie's girls.

And Hunter had stalled long enough.

With single-minded focus, he shoved away his dark thoughts, then took the steps two at a time. As he shouldered into the vine-covered building, a sickening dread crept through his stomach.

Nothing had changed. Not the hideous decor. Not the musky odor of cigar smoke mingled with cheap perfume. Not the seedy clientele. The brothel wasn't as bad as he remembered. It was much worse.

Mattie Silks was nothing if not obvious.

The gaudy red velvet furniture stood in stark contrast to the gold filigree wallpaper. Tasteless rugs with bold, floral prints covered the wood flooring. Vulgar paintings hung on the walls. Their vivid colors and shocking themes gave Hunter a new perspective on past sins.

Only recently back in the habit of praying, he lifted up a silent request.

Forgive me, Lord.

A simple prayer, born from a lifetime of bad choices and wrong living. Shaking free of the thought, Hunter stepped deeper into the brothel and caught sight of Mat-tie's right-hand man striding toward him, a scowl on his mean, ugly face.

"Jack." Hunter took in the big brute's broad shoulders, flat nose and bad attitude. "Still the ever faithful servant, I see."

Jack smiled in response, not a real smile, more a baring of teeth. "You were told to come by tomorrow."

"Yeah, well." Hunter stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I'm here now."

"Nevertheless." Jack crossed his arms over his massive chest. "Miss Silks isn't expecting you."

"I say we let Mattie decide if she'll see me tonight."

Eyes locked with his, the big man dug in his heels. "She won't like that you've come during business hours."

Of course she wouldn't like it. Neither did Hunter. But he wanted answers more than he wanted to appease a difficult woman like Mattie Silks. "Either you inform her I'm here, or I tell her myself."

Finished with the standoff, Hunter started forward.

Jack stepped into his path. "Wait here."

"Whatever you say."

Frowning, Jack disappeared into the crowd.

Left to cool his heels, Hunter shifted out of the main traffic area and looked around. Business was booming.

He heaved a heavy sigh. The curvy blondes, willowy brunettes and pouty redheads perpetuated the cycle of sin and degradation. All had similar expressions on their faces, blank, distant, slightly separated from the moment, as if they'd given up hope a long time ago.

Hunter understood such brokenness, such pain. Understood all too well.

A small commotion broke out near the back of the room, saving him from further reflection. Low, excited murmurs filled the air, followed by a quick straightening of female shoulders, a widening of male eyes. All heads turned. A beat passed. And then...

Mattie made her entrance.

Dressed in a blue silk dress with layers of cream-colored, frothy lace, the infamous madam sauntered through the main parlor of her brothel like a queen lording it over her realm. She ignored everyone but Hunter.

With a half smile on her lips, she took her time crossing the room, striking a pose every fifth or sixth step. She carried a flute of champagne in her hand. A prop, nothing more. Mattie never indulged in alcohol, especially not during peak business hours.

Her head was always the clearest in the room, and the reason she'd been able to run her business for the past thirty years with alarming success.

Hips swaying, her face overly painted, Mattie stopped her approach inches shy of running into Hunter, close enough for him to get a whiff of her cloying perfume.

"Hunter, darling." She struck a final, dramatic pose—one hand on her hip, glass poised at shoulder-level, eyes lowered to half-mast. "What a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope."

"Time will tell." She angled her head to the side. "Greet me properly, you rogue, and maybe I won't hold

your impertinence against you."

"But of course." He leaned down and touched his lips to the plumped, curved cheek she offered. "Hello, Mattie."

"Hunter." She pulled back and studied him with narrow-eyed precision. "Now. Let me look at you."

Having been through this routine before, he stood completely still, eyes cast forward. Her gaze traveled from the top of his head, down to his toes and back up again.

"The years have been kind to you," she decided, then reached up and ran her fingers along his jaw. "It's really unfair, you know, that you should look this handsome when you are so decidedly in need of a shave."

Without waiting for a response, she continued her scrutiny, seemingly oblivious to his tense shoulders and stiff smile. He worked to contain his need to speed things along. This was Mattie Silks, after all. The woman had her own set of rules. If he wanted answers, he had to play her game. For now.

"If memory serves," he said in a low, confidential tone, "you like your men a little scruffy."

"Oh, I do." She circled around to his other side and plucked at his sleeve. "I really, really, really do."

Hunter watched the madam out of the corner of his eye. "You're as pretty as ever, Mattie. I must say, you don't look a day over twenty-nine."

She laughed in delight, then leaned in closer, her hand clutching at his arm. "You always were a silver-tongued brute. Is it any wonder I like you better than that holier-than-thou brother of yours?"

Of course she liked Hunter better than Logan. Hunter had spent most of his adult years on the wrong side of the law. While his brother was a former U.S. marshal, a man bent on seeking justice by legal means only. Hunter had no such compunction, as evidenced by his two-year stint in prison. An eye for an eye, a life for a life.

"Tell me, Hunter, my dear boy—"

"Boy?" He gave a humorless laugh. He hadn't been a boy for a very long time.

Grinning at his reaction, Mattie walked her fingertips up his arm, squeezed his biceps. He swallowed his distaste. *All part of the ritual*, he reminded himself.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this fine evening? Dare I hope you've returned to your old ways?" She looked him over yet again, this time with obvious intent in her heavy-lidded gaze. "Shall I order you a bath, a shave, a friendly chat with one of my girls?"

Hunter stiffened. *Enough*. "You know why I've come."

"Yes, well." She dropped her hand and sighed in disappointment. "A girl can always hope a big, handsome man such as yourself hasn't turned completely good."

Games. The woman couldn't help playing her games. "Let's not forget you summoned me, with quite a

convoluted tale."

Her chin jutted out. "Not a tale. The truth."

"So you claim."

Breaking eye contact, Mattie tracked her gaze through the room. As if she'd only just become aware of the interested stares, her entire demeanor changed. The tiny lines of worry around her mouth were impossible to miss. Interesting.

"Perhaps we should continue our conversation in private."

Unexpected. And yet, he realized, greatly appreciated. "A sensible suggestion."

"Follow me."

Spine stiff, head high, she led him through the main parlor toward the back of the brothel. Hunter knew the way, for all the wrong reasons. He kept his eyes on Mattie and his senses trained on the activity around him. The air of forced revelry was palpable, depressing. Sounds and bodies moved past him in a whirl, sometimes brushing against him, sometimes steering clear. Some of the patrons knew him, a few too many feared him.

He'd once cultivated that reaction. Now he wondered if his past would ever be forgotten.

He sighed.

In uncharacteristic silence, Mattie bypassed the kitchen and directed Hunter down a darkened corridor that ran along the southern perimeter of the first floor. A few more twists and turns, then, at last, she stopped in front of a nondescript door and indicated he take the lead.

Reaching around her, he opened the door then stepped inside the room. He had to blink furiously to accustom his eyes to the burst of light. Memories of the last time he'd been in this room warred with his attempt to remain outwardly calm.

The decor was different in here, at complete odds with the rest of the brothel. Homier, full of plush, comfortable furniture and a pleasant, floral scent.

Mattie had redecorated in the past two years.

With leaden feet, Hunter made his way to the mantelpiece on his right. Despite his efforts to stay in the present, his vision tunneled down for an alarming moment where all he could see was the past.

Gritting his teeth, he dug his toe in a small groove along the edge of the stone hearth. Just over two years ago he'd faced off with Cole Kincaid on this very spot, at nearly this exact hour of the night. Cole had proved soulless and without mercy, even in that final showdown. Ultimately, Hunter had prevailed in the ensuing struggle.

At the cost of his freedom.

He had no remorse. Cole had deserved to die after he'd murdered Hunter's beloved Jane in cold blood. She'd

been so young, so full of God's goodness. Knowing her had made him a better man.

Losing her had nearly destroyed him.

An eye for an eye, a life for a life.

He couldn't change the past. But could he start anew? Could he become the man Jane had thought him to be, a man worthy of raising a child?

Not a child, he reminded himself. *His* child.

Maybe.

If Mattie was to be believed, Hunter had a nine-year-old daughter as a result of his brief first marriage to Maria Bradley. Their union had been a disastrous, impetuous mistake on both their parts. But where Hunter had been utterly captivated and painfully naive, barely two weeks off the ranch, Maria had been three years into her profession as a prostitute and had married him for the thrill of corrupting an innocent.

She'd succeeded beyond her wildest expectations.

He swallowed back a wave of bitterness. "Tell me about the child."

Mattie set down her glass and moved to the other side of the room. She dragged her fingertips across the top of a wingback chair. "Her name is Sarah."

Sarah. Pretty. Biblical. Had Maria named her, or someone else? "All right, then. Tell me about Sarah."

"As I said in my letter, she recently celebrated her ninth birthday."

For the hundredth time since discovering he had a daughter, Hunter did a mental calculation. The numbers added up. The timing was right. Sarah could very well be his child. That didn't mean she was. Maria had "officially" returned to her chosen profession less than a year after their wedding, but she hadn't been faithful for months prior to that. Any number of men could be Sarah's father.

But if the child was his, Hunter would.

What? What would he do with the knowledge?

One step at a time.

"...a pretty child." Apparently, Mattie had continued talking while Hunter had been lost in thought. "She has your unusual golden-amber eyes and her mother's dark, Mexican coloring."

Something passed in the madam's gaze as she spoke, something not altogether kind. Was she threatened by Sarah, a mere child?

That made no sense. Except...maybe it did.

Maybe this was as personal for Mattie as it was for Hunter, if in a far different way.

"You say the girl has my eyes. I want to see for myself." He strode across the room, stopped within inches of Mat-tie and used his superior size to make his point. "Get her."

Mattie blinked up at him. "She isn't here."

"Where is she?"

"Charity House."

Sudden, unexpected relief buckled his knees. He had to reach out to steady himself on a nearby chair. Hunter knew all about Charity House, the orphanage Marc and Laney Dupree had created for the abandoned boys and girls no other institution would touch. Because of the Duprees' noble efforts, children of prostitutes were welcomed into a loving, safe home without question. And given a solid, Christian upbringing.

Some of the bitterness Hunter had harbored toward his first wife released its brutal hold on his heart. Maria might have left Hunter for her former life and died less than a year later. She might have kept the knowledge of his child from him. But she'd had the sense to provide a good, Christian home for Sarah at Charity House.

He should be grateful.

And he was, on one level. But he was also confused. Why was Mattie Silks involving herself in the matter?

Surely not out of the goodness of her heart. Mattie had always hated Maria. That much Hunter remembered. As the illegitimate daughter of Mattie's bitter rival and the outlaw she'd once considered her man, Maria had been a physical reminder of Mattie's folly. Of the madam's mistaken belief she'd found a man to take her away from this life.

"What could you possibly hope to gain by telling me about the child?" he wondered aloud.

But deep down he knew. The situation just turned a lot more complicated.

"Now, Hunter, darling, I'm a traditional woman at heart."

"Of course you are."

"Don't be snide." She brushed aside his sarcasm with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I believe families should be together whenever possible."

"Except when it comes to your own."

Her gaze narrowed to two mean slits.

Hunter remained unmoved. "Don't forget, Mattie. I know your secret."

"You have no right to pass judgment on me."

No, he didn't. His list of past sins was a long one. "You're right." He inclined his head. "Forgive me."

"Yes, yes. Now, where were we?" Not quite meeting his gaze, she redirected the conversation back on its

original course. "Maria was wrong to keep your own child a secret from you. She should never have—"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Sweet:

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