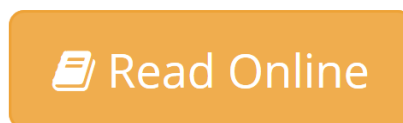




## Dirty Little Secrets (The Delancey Dynasty Book 8)

By Mallory Kane



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DECEPTION TURNS DEADLY IN MALLORY KANE'S *DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS*

New Orleans detective Ethan Delancey has a mission to solve a senator's murder. Putting Laney Montgomery—the sole witness, who now has a cold-blooded killer on her heels—under his protection? Pure instinct. Every hour pushes her deeper into danger. The only way to ensure her safety—and capture a criminal—is to keep her close.

Neither expects the flare of desire that pushes them over the line between professional and personal. Even as Laney's secrets start to unravel, Ethan is driven to watch over her despite the rules of his job and the threat against them. Together, they're on the verge of discovering every dirty detail of the truth...unless an unknown murderer finds them first.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Mallory Kane has 2 great reasons for loving to write. Her mother, a librarian, taught her to love and respect books. Her father could hold listeners spellbound for hours with his stories. His oral histories are chronicled in numerous places including the Library of Congress Veterans' History Project. He was always her biggest fan.

She has published 26 books for Harlequin Intrigue. She lives in Tennessee with her Renaissance husband and two very smart cats.

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Everything had been planned—from every lock that had to be picked, to every step through every corridor. The Louis Royale Hotel's popular restaurants had cleared out by midnight and most of the diners had moved on to more exciting places or gone home. The hotel's bar was popular for lunch and predinner cocktails, but most serious partiers ended up on Bourbon Street by late evening.

It had been simple to slip in with the last of the late diners. Simple to take the elevators up to the tenth floor. And it was a snap to pick the lock on the fire stairs door to the penthouse suite that took up the entire eleventh floor. The hotel still used the original ornate metal keys, although the guest rooms also had computerized security card locks.

The hotel was the perfect place to kill the senator. And tonight was the perfect night. His offices and the senate floor in Baton Rouge were too public and too secure. The locked gates of his home just outside of that city put the Louisiana State Legislature's security measures to shame. It was laughable that the man who'd erected a fortress worthy of a paranoid potentate was so lax about his safety in a hotel. But then, a lot of people assumed a hotel's penthouse suite was innately secure. Tonight, for Senator Darby Sills, that assumption would prove to be a fatal mistake.

Crouching in the fire stairs to wait for the perfect moment was also a snap. Boring, cramped, but simple. The layout of the penthouse suite was perfect. The elevator doors opened into the sitting room. On the left wall were the double doors to the master suite and on the right was the door to a second, smaller bedroom.

It was after midnight, one twenty-seven, to be specific. The senator and his staff were due to have breakfast with the local longshoremen's union at eight o'clock in the morning. He'd probably sent his staff off to their rooms by eleven, eleven-thirty at the latest. Sills insisted that his employees maintain a routine. He liked to say that any man or woman worth their salt should be in bed by eleven and up by seven. Not that Senator Sills abided by that rule. No one in public life could maintain a healthy, structured sleep schedule.

Although few people were aware of it, Sills was an insomniac. He rarely got four hours' sleep a night. At home, he'd sit in a rocking chair in his study, smoke his pipe, sip Dewar's scotch and read. It was widely rumored that his staff had the unenviable task of keeping the senator and his scotch separated when he was on the road.

The plan to kill Senator Sills allowed seven minutes for the job, start to finish. Best scenario, Sills would be in the sitting room, reading. A quick entrance through the service door, a muffled shot, right in the middle of Sills's chest, a rapid escape and down the fire stairs. If Sills had already retired to the bedroom, seven

minutes would be stretching it, but it could still be done.

Next, change to the clothes hidden in the fire stairs while descending to the first floor, then walk through the bar and out the door as if nothing was more important than heading left toward Bourbon Street. Seven minutes, one bullet, and the greedy bastard would be dead.

Laney Montgomery closed the connecting door between the penthouse suite sitting room and the adjoining bedroom with an exhausted sigh. She'd thought the senator would never stop editing his speech. He was pickier than usual tonight.

She kicked off her heels and collapsed on the king-size bed, too tired to lift her arm to check her watch. The last time she'd checked, it had been after two, and she had to get up at six to make any final changes to Louisiana State Senator Darby Sills's speech before his eight o'clock breakfast meeting with the local officers of the Longshoremen's Association.

But as much as she wanted to just turn over, grab a corner of the bedspread for warmth and drift off to sleep, she couldn't. She had to brush her teeth, take off her makeup and set her phone's alarm first. She felt around for her phone, then remembered that she'd left it on the printer cart in the sitting room.

With a weary sigh, she sat up. For a brief moment she fantasized about leaving the phone where it was and calling for a wakeup call, but she couldn't spend three hours—not even three hours while she was asleep—without her phone. As Senator Darby Sills's personal assistant, she'd be the one called if anything happened. Whether it was a change in the number of people attending the longshoremen's breakfast or a frantic text from the governor about some issue facing the legislature, it came to her phone.

She closed her eyes. Maybe nobody would call tonight. And surely she'd hear her phone through the door. Just as she began to sink into the soft bed, she heard a loud yet muffled pop through the connecting door, then a thud. Was that pop a bottle being uncorked? Had the senator smuggled in a bottle of scotch?

Ready with her "remember what the doctor said about your liver" speech, she vaulted up and knocked briskly. "Senator? I forgot my phone," she called, then opened the door and stepped through.

The desk chair where Senator Sills had been sitting just two minutes before was empty. Laney glanced toward the wet bar. The senator liked his Dewar's on the rocks. "Senator," she called. "Where did you get—?"

Then she saw the scarecrow-thin shadow looming in front of her.

Laney's hands shot up in an instinctive protective gesture. "What? Senator—?"

The shadow took on a vaguely human outline—a silhouette completely cloaked in black. It came toward her and she recoiled. "Who are you?" she cried. "Where's the senator?"

The person in black lifted its right arm and pointed at her.

Laney blinked and tried to clear her vision. Surely there was something wrong with her eyes. "Senator—" she started, but stopped when something in the person's hand caught the lamplight, gleaming like silver.

"No!" she cried, her subconscious mind recognizing the object before her brain had time to attach a name to

it. She dived, face-planting on the hardwood floor in front of her bedroom door. A muffled pop echoed through the room and her skull burned in white-hot pain. Her head was knocked back into the baseboard behind her. Her cry choked and died as her throat seized in fear.

What happened? What hurt so bad? Again, her brain was slow to catch up to her intuitive subconscious. Finally she understood. *I've been shot.* Whimpering involuntarily, she drew her shoulders up and pressed her forehead into the floorboards as hard as she could. She wrapped her arms around her head, grimacing in awful anticipation as she waited for the next bullet to slam into her.

And waited. There were no more pops. Instead, she heard footsteps coming toward her. They echoed hollowly on the hardwood floor.

*One step. Two.* She thought about moving. Pictured herself propelling backward through the door to her room and slamming it. But it didn't matter how brave she was inside her head. In reality, she couldn't make her frozen limbs move. All she could do was cower.

*Three steps.* He was coming to check and be sure she was dead. He was going to shoot her again, at point-blank range. She didn't want to die. "No—" she croaked. "Please—"

The elevator bell dinged.

The footsteps stopped. The man whispered a curse. Laney held her breath. Who was on the elevator? Who would have access to the penthouse? Had someone heard the shots?

The footsteps sounded again, but this time they were quicker and fading, as if the man were retreating. Laney opened her eyes to slits, bracing for the sharp, nauseating pain. She had to know where the man was—what he was doing.

When she raised her head, a moan escaped her lips. The shooter whirled and something silvery and bright caught the light again. He was holding the gun at shoulder height, pointed right at her. She gasped and tried to shrink into the floor. At that instant the distinctive sound of elevator doors opening filled the air.

The man turned as if to glance over his shoulder, then disappeared through the service door to the left of the elevators. His footsteps echoed, warring with the electronic sound of the doors.

With a massive effort, Laney lifted her head. Coming out of the elevator was a bellman carrying a bottle of Dewar's scotch. She pointed with a trembling finger toward the service door and cried out, "Help. He's getting away!" Only it wasn't a cry. It was nothing more than a choked whisper.

The bellman saw her then. He dropped the bottle, which thudded to the floor without breaking. "Oh, God!" he cried, running over to kneel beside her. "Oh, God. Are you all right? What happened? Where are you hurt?"

"Senator—" Laney forced herself to say. She pointed toward the desk. "The senator—"

The young man twisted to look in the direction she was pointing. "Oh, God," he said again.

"Help him," she whispered.

"I can't—" the bellman started. "The blood—"

Laney pushed herself to her knees. "Senator!" she cried out as she crawled toward the empty desk chair, hoping against hope that the gunman hadn't killed him. That somehow the shot had missed him and he had taken shelter under the desk, wounded maybe, but alive. As she crawled closer, she saw his back. He was lying next to the chair, crumpled into a fetal position. Blood made a glistening, widening stain on the Persian rug.

"Senator!" she cried again, shoving the chair out of the way. Twisting, she pinned the bellman with a glare that ratcheted up the throbbing pain in her head. "Call the police," she grated.

She put her hand on the senator's shoulder and carefully turned him onto his back—and saw his eyes, open and staring and beginning to film over.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "No, no, no." She shook him by the shoulder. His jacket fell open and she saw where the blood was coming from. A small, seeping wound in his chest. She cast about for something to stanch the bleeding, even though she knew it was too late. She looked back at his eyes and her heart sank with a dread certainty. There was no need to stop the bleeding. He was dead.

Behind her she heard the young man on the house telephone beside the elevator. "Hurry!" he said shakily. "There's blood everywhere."

Laney knew she ought to be the one on the phone, calling the police, taking care that no one but them knew what had happened. Senator Sills was dead and it was her responsibility to him and to the legislature to keep that information away from the press and the public. But her head hurt so badly and her vision was obscured by a red haze. Defeated by pain and sadness, she curled up on the floor next to the senator, one arm under her head.

Behind her, the bellman spoke into the phone. "No. I'm telling you, it's Senator Sills. I think he's dead."

New Orleans Police Detective Ethan Delancey stared down at the body of Senator Darby Sills, sprawled on the floor of the penthouse suite in the Louis Royale Hotel in the French Quarter. Blood stained the Persian rug beneath him. This was going to be ugly.

"This is going to be ugly," Detective Dixon Lloyd's voice came from behind him.

"Morning, partner," Ethan responded wryly. "Nice of you to show up." He'd gotten to the hotel fifteen minutes earlier. But then he didn't have a wife or a house in the lower Garden District like Dixon did. His apartment on Prytania Street was less than ten minutes from the French Quarter in rush hour, much less at four o'clock in the morning.

"Hey, give me a break," Dixon said. "Did you see how many reporters are already outside? Not to mention rubbernecks. I had to call the commander to round up more officers for crowd control."

"Everybody in New Orleans will know Senator Sills is dead before the sun comes up," Ethan said glumly.

"Probably already do. I hate politics."

"*You?*" Ethan countered. "Try being Con Delancey's grandson." Like his older brother Lucas and his twin

cousins, Ryker and Reilly, Ethan had become a cop, hoping to separate himself from the tarnished legacy of his infamous grandfather, Louisiana Senator Con Delancey. But like them, he'd quickly found out that the name Delancey was an occupational hazard in New Orleans, no matter what the job was. There was nowhere in the state of Louisiana—or maybe the world—that his surname didn't evoke a raised eyebrow and a range of reactions from an appreciative smile to unbridled hostility.

"I think I can relate," Dixon said, "since I'm in the family now."

"You two finished catching up on family gossip?" Police Officer Maria Farrantino interrupted. "I'm sure it's been a couple of hours since you've seen each other." She stood on the other side of the body, the toes of her polished boots avoiding the pool of blood by less than two inches.

Ethan sent her an irritated glare.

Unfazed, she continued. "I've got the second victim over here. The first officer on the scene took her statement. The EMTs are working on her now, and CSI hasn't gotten to her yet."

Ethan looked at the young woman who was sitting on a straight-backed chair with her head bowed and one hand holding back her dark, matted hair as an EMT applied a bandage to the side of her head. Draped over her knee was a wet cloth that was stained a deep pink, the same color as the large spot on her white shirt. According to the statement the first officer had given him, she was Senator Sills's personal assistant and had surprised the killer in the act. She'd told the officer that she'd dived to the floor when the killer had turned his gun on her, but hadn't been quick enough to escape injury.

Ethan's gaze slid downward to the short black skirt that had ridden up to reveal a pair of class A legs ending in bare feet.

"Yo, Delancey," Dixon said and waved a hand across his field of vision. Ethan blinked and turned his head.

"What?"

"Ah, you're back to earth," Dixon said. "Have you talked to the medical examiner yet?" Ethan shook his head.

"Your choice. The M.E. or the injured victim with the killer legs that go on forever?"

"Legs. No question," Ethan muttered.

Dixon winked at Ethan as he headed toward the man bending over the senator's body.

"What's her name?" Ethan asked Farrantino as he squinted at the scribbled words on the officer's statement. He was going to have to ask that the officers receive penmanship lessons.

"Let's see. Montgomery. Elaine," Farrantino answered.

*Montgomery.* His gaze snapped back to the witness just as the EMT finished with the bandage and she raised her head. He took in her features for the first time. Could her name be a coincidence? With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he thought about the late, infamous lobbyist Elliott Montgomery, comparing his memory of Montgomery's narrow features and dark blue eyes to Elaine Montgomery's face. It didn't take

much imagination to see the resemblance. The slender nose, full mouth and high cheekbones looked a lot better on her than they had on him, though.

So, Senator Darby Sills's personal assistant was the daughter of the ruthless lobbyist for the Port of New Orleans unions. Ethan frowned. Was this case about to get even uglier? "Looks like the EMTs are done with her. What about the crime scene techs?"

Farrantino glanced toward the two young men in CSI jackets. "It's probably going to be another five minutes or so before they can get to her."

"Fine," he said. "I'll see how far I can get." He stepped up to her with a small spiral notepad in his hand. "I'm Detective Ethan Delancey. I hope you feel up to talking for a bit, because I need to ask you a few questions. You are—?"

"I'm—Elaine Montgomery. Laney."

"Okay, Ms. Montgomery. Can you tell me what happened here? Briefly?"

She had closed her eyes and was touching the area around the bandage the EMTs had applied with her fingertips. "What?"

"What happened?" he repeated. "A man shot Senator Sills and when I walked in, he sh-shot me."

"Did you see the man shoot the senator?" Her face seemed to crumple a bit. "No."

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