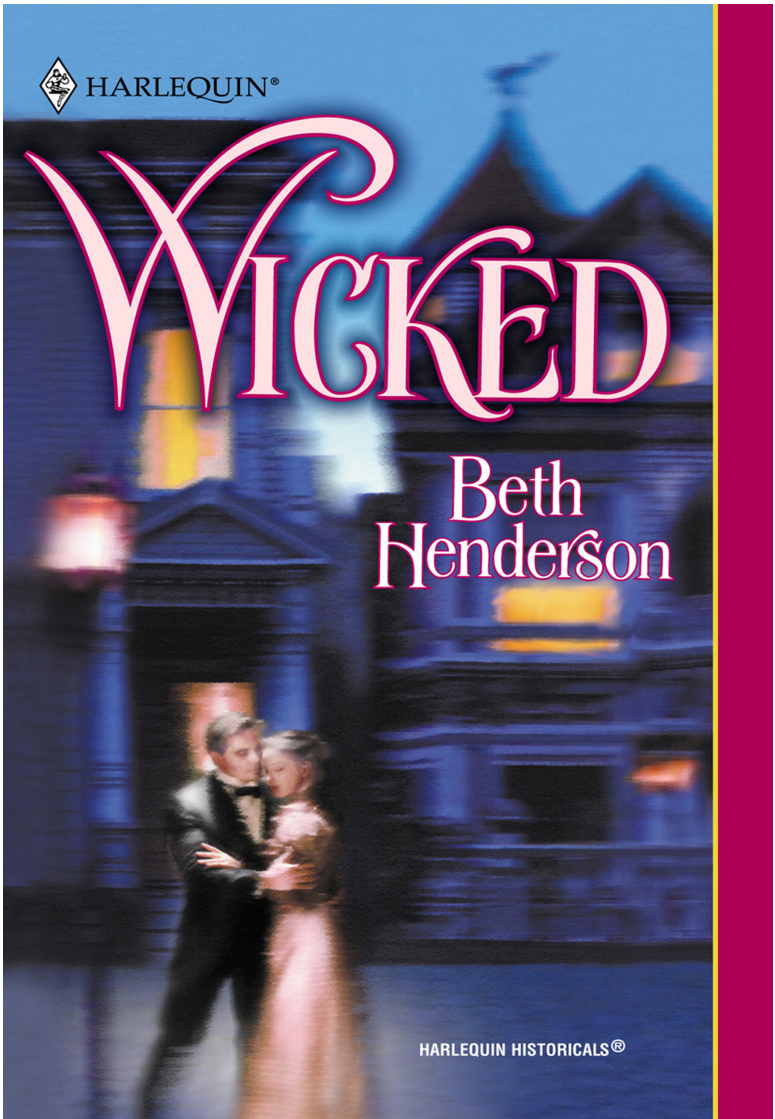
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Wicked
Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»

Аннотация

Working as an amateur photographer in San Francisco's sordid Barbary Coast, Lilly Renfrew stumbled upon the grisly stabbing of a prostitute. Fleeing the murder scene with the killer fast in pursuit, she crashed into a man as handsome as sin who vowed to protect her! As a former con artist, Deegan Galloway knew every back alley of the Barbary Coast, but as a newly accepted member of the upper classes, he was stifled by his boring, respectable life. When a beautiful damsel in distress begged his help in unearthing a murderer, he couldn't resist joining in the search. But he never imagined he'd be in danger of losing his heart….

Содержание

“First off, you are an extremely desirable woman….”	5
Praise for Beth Henderson’s earlier book	6
Wicked	7
MILLS & BOON	8
Available from Harlequin Historicals and	9
Contents	10
Prologue	11
Chapter One	16
Chapter Two	36
Chapter Three	51
Chapter Four	68
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	85

“First off, you are an extremely desirable woman….”

Lilly wanted to believe Deegan, wanted to very badly. Experience had convinced her otherwise. “I’m too tall.”

“Just right.”

“I’m not beautiful. In fact, only kind people would even term me a pretty woman.”

“Then they are not merely kind, they are blind,” Deegan assured her. “You have a beauty that transcends time.”

Lilly linked her arms around his neck. “I see you are one of the blind, then.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps I am. Blinded by your loveliness.”

“What is it they claim the Irish practice? Blarney?”

“It isn’t a religion, it’s a gift,” he corrected, “and I haven’t uttered a bit of blarney to you, my lass. If things were different, I would court you in earnest.”

If things were different. But they weren’t. She was still the strapping daughter of a city clerk and he was still a man in love with someone else….

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We miss you, ladies.

Contents

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty

Prologue

San Francisco, January 1880

The noise from the surrounding bars was muted from what it had been earlier in the evening. Outside, the fog had risen, inching its way up the streets from the bay, turning the byways into a netherworld where men disappeared easily, some with the help of a crimper, others out of natural orneriness or through the manipulations of a local devil's minion.

Wrapping a threadbare shawl around her shoulders, Belle Tauber leaned against the cool, clammy brickwork in the doorway of her crib, watching as her last john of the night stumbled away into the mist. It must be her lucky day, she thought ruefully. Not only had half the men Severn steered her way been quick to reach their pleasure and leave, but one had passed out before his trousers hit the floor, and another two had fallen into a stupor after a few halfhearted pokes, and been unceremoniously tossed out by one of Severn's flunkies. She'd managed to empty the pockets of each of the unconscious johns; Severn's men no doubt had relieved the conscious ones of their valuables as they stumbled home along the dark, dank alleyways.

Belle wasted few thoughts on the hapless victims. Any man who trod the streets of the Barbary Coast knew he would pay for the privilege, though whether with cash or his life depended upon the wheel of fortune that night. Belle only hoped that Severn

wouldn't divine that she had held back a few coins for herself from the evening's take. She shivered slightly, the chill along her spine owing nothing to the inclement weather. There was still time to replace the money and thus guarantee that when Severn's hand touched her it would be only with tenderness.

When dawn broke and the sun burned its way through the encroaching fog, she would greet the day a year older. Belle doubted that the women in the neighboring cribs would recall it was the anniversary of her birth, but Miss Lilly would remember. She had promised to deliver a special copy of a photograph she had taken of Belle the week before, a fitting gift to celebrate her twentieth year, Miss Lilly had said kindly. Belle knew her profession had stripped any semblance of youth from her face and form long ago. It was why she was reduced to working in a crib rather than the high-priced bordello where the madam had once sold Belle's innocence to the highest bidder. She had been pretty then. The photograph Miss Lilly had taken would show she was no longer.

She wouldn't hand over the extra coins to Severn, Belle decided. The small hoard was her grubstake, a start for a better life. The meager amount was not enough to outrun him, so she'd wait for Severn to run up against a man who bested him, for only then would she truly manage to escape.

A second chill shook her thin body. Belle pulled the shawl even tighter around her shoulders. She should go in. The grubby shift she wore was no protection against the evils of night air.

Severn would be furious with her if she became ill. A woman with the ague rarely made enough to please her man, much less enough to enable her to skim a coin or two for the future. Quietly, so as not to disturb those who already slept, Belle reentered the building.

In Severn's room down the hall a man laughed. Severn's familiar growl answered, although Belle didn't catch what was said. They were probably viewing Severn's large collection of erotic stereographs, three-dimensional pictures of plump, nude or nearly nude women posed in improbable positions. He occasionally used them to get a man's blood up, and thus increase the price he'd receive for the services of one of his stable of whores. If the man with him was yet another customer, Belle hoped it was one of the other doves he disturbed and not her. She was just about to shut the door to her narrow crib when her attention was caught by another sound—the ring of cascading coins.

The clatter went on far longer than she expected, causing gilded dreams to dance in her head. As if unable to resist the alluring music, Belle stole closer, her bare feet soundless on the unvarnished floorboards. Was Severn boasting of his wealth to his visitor? And if so, to whom? It was dangerous to flaunt a fortune hereabouts. Even those who claimed to be a friend would willingly stick a knife in a man's ribs to gain a single twenty-dollar gold piece, or less.

The door hadn't closed entirely behind Severn and his

companion. The aged flooring was warped, so that the panel near the portal sagged, leaving a gap just wide enough to show Belle a narrow glimpse of the gaslit room.

Severn sat at the table scraping the last of a glittering pile of coins into a rough cloth bag. When he finished he passed it to the man across from him and accepted a glass of whiskey in exchange. His long, lanky form was relaxed, the strength and power of his arms and hands disguised by the ease of his stance. As Belle watched, Severn raised his drink in a toast to his companion. “To yet another very successful night,” he said.

“You celebrate too soon, my friend,” the other man said.

While her line of vision allowed her to see only a shoulder and the back of his head, Belle was sure she knew the visitor’s voice, though she couldn’t put a name or face to him at the moment.

“And you celebrate far too infrequently,” Severn countered. “When are you going to start enjoying our good fortune?”

“When it becomes a much larger fortune,” the unknown man murmured. He got to his feet. “Unreasonable spending would tip the scales against me just now, Karl, and you know how much I would dislike that.”

“Leaving then, are you?” Severn asked.

“I must,” his visitor said, and turned slightly.

Belle held back a gasp as she recognized him. His name trembling on her lips, she barely had time to retrace her steps before the door to Severn’s room opened, the scrape of wood against wood preceding the thud of men’s footsteps.

Her heart pounding, Belle glanced back before slipping into the dark confines of her crib room. Beneath her foot, the ancient flooring groaned softly.

The secretive man at the far end of the hall turned hastily at the faint sound and caught a glimpse of a fluttering skirt a bare second before Belle closed her door and leaned thankfully against it.

She was unaware that he gestured ominously to Severn before going out into the fog-shrouded night.

Chapter One

Lillith Renfrew frowned as she handed the requested sum to the driver of the hack. It was far more than she'd paid in the past for the journey from her home on Franklin Street to her destination, but there was little she could do about the matter. She hadn't the time to haggle like a fishwife over the fare. As it was, her lapel watch showed that she was nearly late for her rendezvous with Belle Tauber.

The driver pocketed the coin without checking the denomination, obviously trusting her, although Lilly couldn't say she did the same where he was concerned.

"You'll return in an hour as I requested?" she asked, gathering her equipment. With the straps of her two satchels settled bandolier-style across her chest, one carrying plate holders, the other photographs to be delivered, she shouldered the heavy camera with its awkward tripod base.

"You bet," the driver called, and drove off never to be seen again, Lilly was sure. It wasn't the first time a cabby had left her stranded in the Barbary Coast. Which just went to show that such men thought nothing of leaving a proper young woman alone in the most disreputable neighborhood in San Francisco.

Well, perhaps she didn't look as helpless as other females. Or as proper, considering she was lugging photographic equipment. What other middle-class woman would have taken up the science

of the camera with the intention of making her living by it? None to her knowledge, for how many other of the gentler sex were strong enough to transport the weighty camera and equipment without help? Again, none of her acquaintance, nor of her sister's. Nor, as they so often reminded her, of their parents'.

At times it seemed as if the members of her family had but a single theme: her inability to be like the other women of her class, which, they felt, resulted in her sad lack of suitors.

It never crossed their minds that she was just as they had created her, her tall frame similar to that of her father and brother, her unfeminine strength the result of years of nursing duties, supporting and lifting her invalid mother. Lilly's dearth of suitors was quite a natural state of affairs, considering she had no social life outside of her parents' narrow circle. Pouring tea for her mother's visitors, all of whom were elderly women, or acting as hostess when her father entertained an old business associate at dinner, had yet to put her in the way of an eligible, single gentleman.

Granted, she didn't possess the golden haired beauty that had made her elder brother and sister much sought after. Not only had she been born a decade behind Edmund and nearly nine years after Vinia, Lilly had also been overlooked when physical assets were handed out. Rather than blond curls like her siblings, she had brown hair with nary a wave in it unless she used a crimping iron. Rather than eyes that rivaled the summer skies, as her brother's and sister's did, Lilly thought her

eyes an unremarkable, washed-out shade of blue. Kind matrons described her as handsome, for her nose was too long to be fashionable, her jawline too square and her cheekbones too high. To top things off, she had never outgrown the angularity of girlhood, being barely rounded compared to other young women her age, and inches taller than was considered desirable.

Lilly sighed deeply. She had just listed all the reasons why she was no doubt quite safe roaming the Barbary Coast unescorted. Plus her purse was rather thin. The cab driver's extortion made it impossible for her to treat herself to a cup of tea and a pastry before finding another cab or hopping on an omnibus to take her home. If Edmund hadn't offered to pay for her glass plates, chemicals, albumin papers and card stock, she would not have been able to supply her subjects with a cabinet card likeness of themselves at no charge.

Which reminded her of Belle Tauber, who was waiting to receive her photograph. Lilly hurried off, hoping that Belle would like the mounting she'd chosen for the picture and the double row of gold ruled lines she'd carefully added to the mat simply because it was the young woman's birthday today. Strange to think Belle was six years younger than she herself was. Lilly would have guessed her to be ten years older, Belle's features were so forlorn.

The young woman seated on the back stoop of her building, waiting patiently, looked so unlike the young prostitute she knew that Lilly had to blink. Belle still wore the same shabby gown,

the color faded with age to a nondescript shade neither brown nor gray. Her threadbare shawl did little to protect her from the wintry air, nor did her worn shoes warm her otherwise bare feet. The change wasn't due only to the fact that her fair hair looked freshly washed and carefully pinned up, but rather to the excitement that seemed to emanate from Belle's whole being. She leaped to her feet and hurried a few steps down the alleyway when she spotted Lilly, her eyes glittering unnaturally, her buoyant spirits briefly restoring the beauty that too many years in her profession had stripped away.

"Oh, Miss Lilly! I was afraid you wouldn't come," Belle cried.

For a moment Lilly wondered if her client would for once forget the difference in their situations and hug her, but Belle recalled herself before doing so. The fact that she did hurt. Beyond their circumstances, Lilly saw little difference between them, for she, like Belle, was not her own woman. She had come to consider the soiled dove a friend in the weeks since they had first met, but Belle always kept a careful distance between them that seemed to preclude friendship.

"I am sorry to be late," Lilly said, hastily setting the camera aside so she could rifle through her bag of photographs. "My sister knows very well how I treasure my one afternoon away from home, but when she comes to sit with our parents, she still insists on telling me in great detail about the most trivial things her youngest child has done, thus delaying me."

Belle smiled softly. "Mamas like to brag, Miss Lilly. I know I

woulda if my man had let me keep my babies."

Having learned more about Belle's past than she had cared to, Lilly knew there were no words to comfort the young woman for her loss. "Well, nevertheless, I thought it quite uncivil of her," she said, as her hand found the correct package. "Here you are. Happy birthday, Belle. I hope you like the photograph I chose."

"You sure took a passel of them," Belle said, eagerly accepting the cabinet card. "I was beginning to think I was so ugly your picture box was refusing to have anything to do with me."

She had taken a lot of photographs, Lilly agreed silently. Some showed Belle with unsightly bruises that even a heavy hand with powder could not conceal. In preparing the cabinet card as Belle's gift, Lilly had spent hours studying proof sheets until she found an image she felt Belle would cherish.

"Oh, Miss Lilly!" The words were a sigh of appreciation. When Belle glanced up from the carefully posed photograph, her eyes were swimming with unshed tears. "You made me look beautiful again," she whispered, as if she had doubted such a feat could be done.

"Nonsense," Lilly declared stoutly. "You know very well that while a painter can improve the looks of his subject, a photographer can only reproduce what nature has given a person."

"I'm gonna take this with me when I go, and treasure it all my years," Belle promised.

Lilly glanced up from buckling her satchel closed once more.

“You’re leaving the Coast? When?”

“Soon as I have a talk with a certain gent,” Belle announced brightly. “See, I know something about him that he don’t want known.”

“You’re planning to blackmail someone?” Lilly gasped. “But, Belle, you can’t do that. It’s wrong.”

Belle’s smile faded. “And what these men do to me every day ain’t?”

“I didn’t say that,” Lilly said. “It’s only that—”

“You and me’s from different worlds, Miss Lilly. You just visit in the Coast. I live here, and there ain’t no gettin’ out unless it’s with a handful of twenty-dollar gold pieces.” Belle carefully placed the cabinet card in the pocket of her skirt. “I aim to get me some of those and clear out while I got the chance.”

Lilly had been privy to conditions in the Coast long enough to know that leaving the neighborhood was the dream of nearly every woman there. A dream that would never come true for most of them. But Belle was gambling with fate and, as Lilly had learned in the weeks she’d spent there, in the Coast fate always won.

“Be careful, Belle,” she urged. “Whether it’s right or wrong, what you are planning to do is most definitely dangerous.”

The prostitute smiled wanly. “Don’t worry ’bout me, Miss Lilly. I’ve seen this man enough to know he values his reputation even more’n he loves money. I’ll be fine and I’ll be gone. There can’t be nothin’ better’n that.”

“You’ve talked to this man already then?” Lilly asked.

Belle shook her head. “Not yet. I know where to find him later tonight, though. Once he pays me, I’ll be on the first train out of town and startin’ my new life.”

And if he decided not to pay her? Lilly wondered if Belle had considered such an outcome. Despite her own feeling of foreboding, she realized reasoning with the determined woman would be difficult. Perhaps in Belle’s place she would have been just as reckless, just as willing to gamble with the future.

Taking the initiative, Lilly quickly hugged Belle and was pleased when, after a slight hesitation, the woman returned the gesture. “Then I hope your new life is everything you want it to be,” Lilly said.

“Thank you, Miss Lilly. I just know it will be.” Belle giggled nervously. “It can’t help but be better than this, can it?”

A truer statement Lilly had yet to hear, but it didn’t lessen the fact that Belle’s plan was fraught with danger. She wished briefly that she did not have other photographs to deliver, that she hadn’t promised a group of newsboys to take their pictures that day. Still, Belle had far more experience in dealing with men than she herself had, Lilly admitted. Or was likely to have. No doubt the young woman knew exactly what she was doing.

Lilly shouldered the camera once more. “I wish I could stay longer but…”

“I understand,” Belle assured. “Thank you so much for my photograph.”

“It was my pleasure. I hope the rest of your birthday is just as pleasurable,” Lilly said as she turned to retrace her steps down the alley.

“It will be, especially when I show my photograph to the other girls,” Belle called.

Lilly gave a quick wave, then rounded the corner onto the street, and Belle was lost to sight.

Belle’s plan continued to nag at Lilly. She’d barely taken a dozen steps, threading her way through the bustle on Pacific Street, when she decided nothing was more important than convincing Belle that blackmail was not the answer to her prayers. Despite the weight of the camera, she’d walk home, forgoing the luxury of an omnibus in order to spend her fare on tea and cakes for Belle. Somehow Lilly would find a way to convince the prostitute that there were other, less risky ways of leaving behind her life in the Coast and beginning anew without a grubstake gained through blackmail.

Her decision made, Lilly turned back quickly to catch Belle and issue her invitation. With a few strides she rounded the corner, her serviceable dark brown walking suit making her blend in with the shadows that cloaked the nearly deserted alleyway.

Belle hadn’t gone inside yet. Her head was bent as she admired the cabinet card Lilly had given her. She seemed unaware of the man who slipped from the building behind her.

He was a lanky fellow, although not overly tall. As he was

without a hat, Lilly saw that his dark hair thinned away from his brow, leaving a V-shaped section that he wore combed back and slicked with brilliantine. His clothing could well have been chosen for the setting, for while his trousers were a muddy gray-green shade that rivaled the alley floor, the coloration in his shirt nearly matched the brickwork of the surrounding buildings. He was cleanly shaved, and moved with a sureness of step associated with sobriety—something not often seen in the Barbary Coast.

Growing aware of his approach, Belle turned slightly, dropping the hand that held her likeness so that the cabinet card was hidden from him in the folds of her skirt. Because Belle showed no fear of the man, Lilly was totally unprepared when he moved swiftly, the hitherto concealed knife in his hand slashing across the young prostitute's throat.

Paralyzed with shock, Lilly stared at the tableau, the man cradling his victim almost tenderly as she sagged limply in his arms. The photograph dropped from Belle's hand and fluttered gently away into the shadows.

Deegan Galloway stood across the road from the undertaker's parlor at Number 16 O'Farrell Street and decided the funeral trappings were tasteful. Or as tasteful as the flamboyant citizens of San Francisco, rich from mine and railroad stocks, could make them. Ostentation was de rigueur, for it was the end of an era. Norton I, self-styled Emperor of the United States, was dead.

If the lines of mourners and the bountiful floral tributes were anything to go on, the old eccentric would be greatly missed.

For years he'd been living on the generosity of San Franciscans, consuming gratuitous meals in restaurants, having his portrait taken free of charge, his clothing supplied—all his needs seen to without the bother of earning a cent himself. A good number of times in the past, Deegan had envied Norton his delusions and the great care the people of San Francisco took to nurture them. That had been before he himself became the California-based business agent for his best friend, the wealthy English baron, Garrett Blackhawk, and gained the instant and quite comfortable bank account that went with the position. Fortunately, very little work or responsibility went with the job, which made it the perfect employment for a feckless fellow like himself. But then, after all the adventures they'd shared during the past two years, Deegan figured Garrett knew him too well to expect much of him when it came to honest labor.

The money and respectable-sounding business connection were rewards, pure and simple. Deegan wasn't sure Garrett was paying him off in appreciation for saving his life numerous times in Mexico, for steadfast loyalty under uncommon circumstances during their recent journey to England, or because Garrett had married Winona Abbot, the only woman with whom Deegan had ever considered himself in love. Deegan suspected it was the last reason rather than either of the former. Seeing his friend and his ravishingly lovely bride together and happy had certainly made Deegan only too aware of his own shortcomings where Wyn was concerned. Rather than continue to torture himself, he had not

lingered with the couple when their ship had docked in Boston, but had booked a berth on the first westbound train.

Since then he had kept sufficiently busy, setting up an office and hiring an eager young clerk to man it while he eased himself back into the upper echelon's social world. Wyn Blackhawk's family had smoothed over the ripples his last appearance among the Nob Hill set had caused—again a reward for the small part he'd played in saving her life. In fact, the welcome he received in the best homes now was so effusive Deegan frequently wondered if anyone in town recalled that he was the same cad who'd brazenly tampered with the affections of two of the city's young heiresses.

Deegan had become such a part of the upper crust's world that no one had questioned the origin of the generous contribution he had made to the emperor's funeral fund when the collection was taken up the day before at the Pacific Club.

Not bad for a boy who had once sung in saloons for his dinner, or lifted patrons' wallets if the coins thrown on stage hadn't added up to the amount he thought his performance deserved.

Of course, no one knew of his larcenous beginnings; they were a carefully guarded secret. Only one other person remembered those days, and she had too much to lose if the knowledge became known.

And yet, as much as Deegan had longed for the leisured life he now led, he wasn't satisfied with it. Despite the number of invitations he received regularly, despite his popularity with

both men and women among San Francisco's wealthy, something seemed to be missing in his life.

It had taken him awhile to identify what it was, and he had been stunned at the answer: he missed the danger of his old life. Damned if he'd ever thought to miss that! But after years of living on adrenaline, endeavoring to outwit the devil himself, Deegan was finding respectability extremely tedious.

Across the way the mourners continued to shuffle past Norton's coffin. There were so many wreaths and bouquets that the lid was nearly eclipsed in blossoms. San Franciscans had been viewing the emperor's remains since seven that morning, and still the line of visitors seemed unchanged. Thousands, it seemed, would miss the old man.

Rather than join the sedate crowd in paying his respects, Deegan remained where he was. Norton's funeral had dampened his normally high spirits, something very few things had managed to do in his thirty-one years. If he crossed the thoroughfare to the funeral parlor, his spirits would no doubt sink to such a level he would end the day trying to recover his savoir faire at the mercy of a local barkeeper's tap.

" 'Scuse me," a man mumbled as he sidestepped a fresh batch of mourners and brushed against Deegan.

Although he hadn't felt the lift, Deegan knew from experience that his wallet had been eased from his jacket. Surreptitiously he checked his vest pocket. Sure enough, his watch was missing as well.

The lifter was a small fellow who was dressed quietly, his dark suit and starched collar not so ill fitting as to make him noticeable, his bowler set straight rather than cocked over his thinning hair. Although Deegan hadn't seen Charlie Wooton in nearly fifteen years, he found the pickpocket little changed.

A reckless smile curved the corners of Deegan's mouth. It seemed that salvation, in the form of Wooton, had come to him. Rather than cry thief, Deegan eased into the crowd, doggedly following the pickpocket as the man maneuvered profitably through the mass of mourners.

Wooton put a number of city blocks between himself and his unknowing victims before entering a corner grocer's shop and, with a brief nod to the proprietor, slid among the shoppers to the curtained-off back room. Deegan closed the distance between them until he was nearly on his old friend's heels when the man brushed the curtain aside.

"I thought there was honor among thieves," he murmured, catching Wooton's arm, detaining him.

The pickpocket turned as if honestly puzzled to be so accosted. His stance was deceptive, his calm facade masking the fact that he was coiled for action, whether verbal or physical. "Beg yer pard—" he began, then broke off, a wide smile of recognition stretching his mobile face. "Damn! If it ain't Digger O'Rourke. What in blazes 'er you doin' in this neighborhood?"

Deegan didn't relax his hold on Wooton's arm or mention that he answered to a different name now. "Following you, my lad,"

he answered smoothly, his voice colored with the hint of an Irish brogue.

"Me?" The pickpocket's brow furrowed. "What the hell for?"

"The same reason anyone would follow you, Charlie. I want my wallet back. And my watch," Deegan added.

Wooton's face assumed an expression of innocence. "Lost 'em? Damn, Dig, that's too bad."

Rather than be offended by his old friend's act, Deegan grinned and brushed at the lapels of Wooton's suit jacket. "A real shame," he admitted, helping himself to the contents of the man's inner pocket. He flashed a particularly fat wallet before the thief's eyes. "Hmm. Quite a haul today."

Wooton tried to snatch the wallet from Deegan's hand.

Galloway held it just out of the smaller man's reach. "My goods, if you please, b'hoy," he said.

The pickpocket glanced quickly around the grocer's to see if they were being observed. "All right," he snarled, "but in private. Not out here where a copper might see."

Wooton pushed the curtain aside. Deegan gestured for him to enter first, using the wallet to give the direction. Once the curtain had swished back in place behind them, Wooton began emptying his pockets on the top of a rickety-looking table. Soon he had created a pile of wallets and watches.

"Help yourself," he urged as he slumped sullenly in a straight-backed chair.

Deegan tossed him the hefty wallet and reclaimed his own

possessions from the horde. “You know, if you’d look a mark in the face occasionally you wouldn’t make the mistake of lifting from an old friend.”

Wooton shook his head. “Hell, you know that makes ’em too aware of you, Dig. Trusty and me taught you that when you were nothin’ but a slick fingered kid. Damned if I would have recognized you with those side-whiskers if you hadn’t said something to me.”

It was a lie, but one Deegan was willing to overlook. Even with his lush, tawny sideburns and luxuriant mustache serving as camouflage, he was little changed from the boy he’d been. Taller and more hardened, but still cursed with features that were far too memorable for a man following Wooton’s profession. Which was part of the reason Deegan had given up lifting wallets for a living. At least it was the reason he’d given his old associates.

And speaking of old associates…

“Have you seen Hannah lately?” Deegan asked.

Busy emptying the contents of the various wallets into his own pockets, Wooton didn’t look up. “Not in a while. Did you know she got out of the mattress trade? Claims she managed to save up enough to retire, but there ain’t a whore alive can manage that unless it’s one of the madams. I think Hannah’s found some mark to keep her. But she ain’t moved outta the Coast.”

Which she could with the money he’d sent her, Deegan knew.

“Maybe old Trusty left her something,” Wooton said. “He was always sweet on her.”

Deegan's jaw stiffened. Trusty O'Rourke, the man who had been his mentor, the man who had passed as his "da." Deegan remembered only too well that Trusty had drunk away every dollar either Hannah or he had managed to make.

Wooton clicked open one particularly ornate pocket watch and grinned. "Would you look at this," he said with appreciation. "You never know what kind of trinkets you'll cull in a proper, God-fearing crowd." He reset the timepiece so that the tiny tin cutout couple went into randy mechanical action.

As Wooton gloated over the erotic toy, Deegan strolled over to the grimy window and flicked the faded gingham curtain aside to peer out, before glancing back at the pickpocket. "Is she still in the same rooms?" he asked.

"Who? Oh, Hannah? Sure." His peep show over, Wooton snapped the watch closed and slipped the timepiece into his vest pocket, obviously intending to keep this bit of booty for himself rather than turn it over to his fence. "Not many of the old gang around anymore," Wooton mused. "Those a bullet or the coppers ain't got, the crimpers swept up. Did a hitch to Honolulu meself when things got hot after Trusty kicked it. You weren't around then, were you, Dig?"

Deegan turned back to the window. "No." Although Wooton's tone clearly indicated he was curious about the intervening years, Deegan wasn't about to satisfy that curiosity.

"Hannah'd like to see you, I'll bet," Wooton said. "Looks like you did all right for yourself. She'd be proud."

Would she be? Deegan wondered. More likely she'd be angry with him for disappearing, for sending her money when he had it but never letting her know how he was or where he was. She'd be particularly furious to learn he had spent considerable time in San Francisco over the past year without bothering to contact her.

He doubted Hannah would understand just how much he wished to forget his early years and everyone connected with them. Everyone, that is, except her.

Perhaps running into Wooton when he was feeling particularly restless was fortuitous. "You still prop up the bar at the Albatross, Charlie?"

Wooton patted down his pockets, insuring that there were no telltale bulges, then resettled his bowler at a cockier angle. "Not since the proprietor slipped me one of his special cocktails and sold me to that skipper. Why? Thinkin' of visiting your old friends?"

"Perhaps," Deegan murmured noncommittally. Since Wooton had seen him in his Nob Hill finery, it wouldn't do to give prior notice of his return to the Barbary Coast. Although Charlie tried to hide it, there had been a gleam of avarice in the man's eye as he took in the elegant top hat, starched collar, silk cravat, tailor-made, dove-gray university jacket and charcoal trousers that proclaimed Deegan Galloway a gentleman rather than the rogue he knew himself still to be.

Rather than leave the grocer's first, Deegan delayed, pretending to linger over the rolling of a cigarette. Wooton was

barely out the door when he tossed the smoke away and trailed after the pickpocket, making sure that his former associate didn't follow him to either his seldom-visited office or his posh bachelor's quarters at the Palace Hotel. The fewer people who could connect Digger O'Rourke, boy songsmith and pickpocket, to Deegan Galloway, well-to-do society dandy, the better.

Seeing Wooton brought back memories of the old days. In particular, memories of Hannah McMillan and all Deegan owed her.

He would be risking his recently acquired respectability in visiting her; taking a chance that his former felonious associates would recognize him, or worse, that the more reckless of his newfound friends on the Hill would hail him as Galloway while looking for a dose of sin in the Coast. Digger O'Rourke might have been game for any adventure, but the Deegan Galloway he had become was a far steadier fellow.

Or so he hoped.

And yet an hour later Deegan stood in the heart of the Barbary Coast, admittedly prowling for trouble, the itch to encounter and best danger again too strong for him to ignore. He paused at the junction of Sansome and Jackson Streets to stare down the narrow gap between soot-stained buildings to the ill-kept house where Trusty O'Rourke, Hannah and he had kept rooms two decades earlier. The building where Hannah still lived.

Restlessness had brought him back to his roots, but now unease over how Hannah would greet him kept him cooling his

heels in the street, leery of taking the steps needed to enter the building and climb the stairs to Hannah's place. He had left without saying goodbye, simply stealing away one night, taking with him what cash Trusty hadn't drunk or gambled away. A week later, Deegan was still considering where to go when he heard Trusty had taken a knife in the ribs, his sudden death leaving Hannah alone and unprotected. Deegan had pinched a banker's weighty wallet and sent Hannah the funds the lift had provided. Then, rather than return to the Coast, he'd shaken the dust of San Francisco's streets from his clothes. He'd provided more than enough money for her to follow his example fifteen years ago and leave, but Hannah had remained.

How would she look? As beautifully shaped and cheerful as he remembered her? Or worn and haggard like so many of the women who had been forced to sell their bodies to live? At least he'd given her the chance at a different kind of life, even if she hadn't taken it.

Still hesitating, Deegan rocked back on his heels and nearly lost his balance as a whirlwind in brown wool rounded the corner and plowed into him.

The woman cast a frantic glance back over her shoulder, then turned, clutching at his forearm with one hand, her nails driving deep into the thick fabric of his sleeve. "Help me," she gasped. "A man…"

His arm closed naturally around her small waist, steadying her as he looked down into a pair of eyes as luminous and bright

as moon-washed waves. They searched his face, fearful and yet oddly trusting.

He'd probably regret this the rest of his life, Deegan decided, but he couldn't resist the plea in her voice. Or the promise of a brush with danger that he sensed in her plight.

His eyes glinting with excitement, Deegan tightened his grip around her. "Hush, darlin'," he cautioned, and swept her inside the narrow gap between the buildings.

Chapter Two

The image of Belle Tauber's murderer's face burned in Lilly's mind, blinding her to all else. He had looked up, seen her watching in the shadows, and then…

Everything she had done since that frightening moment was a blur. She had no idea where her panicked flight had led her, only that the strong arm now encircling her was warm and comforting, as was the calm, sensible tone of her unknown rescuer's voice.

She began questioning the wisdom of running trustingly into his care when he deftly tipped her off her feet, silencing her natural yelp of alarm by clasping his hand gently over her lips.

"Shh," he ordered, his tone light.

The lilt in his voice made him sound amused, a reaction so foreign to her own that Lilly found herself gawking at him.

"Good girl," he murmured, lowering her, and the awkward bulk of her camera, to the ground behind a rickety pile of shipping crates.

Fear alone kept her quiet. She knew Belle's assailant had seen her. If he hadn't been temporarily hobbled with the dead prostitute's body, he would have caught up with her. As it was, she had heard the quick staccato of his running footsteps following almost before she was out of the alley.

Mere seconds had passed since then, and here she was in yet another alley, prone, breathless and more frightened than she had

ever been before in her life. Only this man with the lilting voice stood between her and certain death.

Leaning casually back against the grimy brick building across from her refuge, the man ignored her presence and took the makings of a cigarette from the inner pocket of his coat.

A heartbeat later, Belle's murderer skidded to a halt in the mouth of the alleyway. It would take only the edge of her skirt, the toe of her shoe, the end of a tripod leg left in view to tip him off to her present location. There hadn't been enough time to guarantee that she was completely hidden. Peering between the packing crates, she had an excellent view of her stalker. Far too excellent. If she hadn't recalled each of his features in detail already, they were certainly imprinted on her mind now as harsh, lean and dangerous.

Lilly's rescuer barely glanced up at Belle's murderer before returning to his occupation, creasing a tobacco paper with finicky care.

"Hey," the killer called, turning away from Lilly's blind to face the loitering man. "You see a woman run this way?"

"A woman, is it?" her rescuer asked, his voice thickened with an Irish brogue. "And would she be a pretty one?"

The killer's eyebrows closed over the bridge of his nose in irritation. "Hell," he spat, and glanced both ways along the outer street before peering deep into the dimness of the alleyway.

Lilly resisted the inclination to shrink back, fearing any movement on her part would draw his attention. With his eyes

burning with fury, it was quite easy to believe him one of Satan's soldiers sent to claim her soul.

"She had on dark-colored clothing," he said, "and was probably carrying an unwieldy contraption of some kind. If she wasn't running, she'd be breathing heavily."

"Ah," the Irishman sighed appreciatively. "That's just the way I like a woman—breathing heavily." He tapped tobacco into the prepared paper. "But runnin' now—perhaps if you treated the sweet lass better she might stay put, b'hoy."

"Did you or didn't you see her, Paddy?" the lanky man snapped.

Unfazed by the other's impatience, Lilly's rescuer licked the edge of his cigarette paper to seal his smoke. "Sadly, no," he said.

The killer exhaled a word in frustration, the crudeness of it causing Lilly's cheeks to flush brightly. She breathed a sigh of relief a moment later when he stalked off.

"Careful," the Irishman cautioned as she stirred. He struck a match against the side of the building, then bent his head and cupped his hands around his cigarette as he lit it. "He's still on the street looking for you," he said between puffs, his voice low and stripped of the distinctive brogue. "I'll let you know when the coast is clear. For now why not stop holding your breath and breathe again, darlin'."

"Thank you," Lilly whispered.

"De nada," he said.

The softly spoken Spanish phrase was soothing, although he'd

tossed it off lightly. Relaxing slightly, Lilly studied him as he blew a set of perfect smoke rings. His stance, as well as the unconcerned expression he wore, made him appear as if he hadn't a care in the world. She envied him that.

As befit an angel of deliverance, he was an extremely good-looking man, his features masculine but with a cast that was more pleasant than rugged. Even in repose he looked like a man who smiled often. His hair was as tawny as a lion's coat and was cut neatly, which meant that, despite the rough look of his clothing, he was a newcomer to this part of the city. In the weeks she'd been visiting the Barbary Coast, Lilly had become quite accustomed to the unkempt appearance of the men she saw. Although she suspected there were those of the upper echelon who frequented the area, they were rarely seen during the afternoon hours when she was there. Outside of Reverend Isham, whom she had seen from a distance preaching on the street, the only well-groomed men were professional gamblers, and their neat clothing was frequently shiny with use.

This man was different. Not only were his clothes neatly mended, they looked too clean to have been in his possession long, the wrinkles acquired from careless folding rather than wearing. He had probably bought them in one of the many used clothing shops near the wharves.

His scuffed boots and battered felt hat were different, having the distinctive appearance of items worn by a single person over a period of time. Particularly the hat. There was personality in

the hand-shaped curve of the wide brim as it rode low over his eyes, shadowing his face from closer observation. Thick, dundreary whiskers and a mustache, a deeper shade than his fair hair, masked his lower face, allowing little but the quirky set of his mouth to be seen.

Although she couldn't tell the color of his eyes, Lilly thought them dark and ever alert. Despite the angle of his hat, she saw that his eyes followed the movements of Belle's killer as he combed the street for news of the runaway witness to his crime. The fact that the man's movements were under her rescuer's calm gaze was as comforting as a cup of sweet, hot tea. Lilly felt her racing heart settle to a more normal pace.

"Uncommonly fond lover you've got there, sweetheart," the Irishman murmured.

"Lover!" Lilly gasped.

"Shh. The bloke'll hear your dulcet tones for sure," he said.

"He's not my lover," Lilly whispered hotly. "He's a killer."

The man drew on his cigarette. "I don't doubt it." He didn't sound convinced, though.

"I saw him murder a girl," Lilly said.

"Indeed? Then you'd better shush or you won't be any luckier than she, darlin'. He's comin' back this way," the man cautioned.

Lilly froze for what felt like an eternity. The sounds of carts and horses mixed with the varied footfalls of passersby, the traffic making the earth beneath her cheek tremble slightly. Out of the sun, the January air was cooler, almost biting,

and definitely uncomfortable. Lilly wished she'd worn warmer clothing, or added her chesterfield rather than leave it behind. As time dragged on she discovered further discomforts—she was lying on her bulky satchel of plate holders and was clutching the box of her camera so tightly that one particularly sharp corner of it dug painfully into her ribs. Afraid to move, Lilly closed her eyes and prayed.

Deegan took a last drag on his cigarette and tossed the still-burning nub away. The unhappy looking fellow who'd chased the little wren into his arms had given up and retreated to a saloon to find surcease in a bottle or the arms of another woman. Although the man had a villainous enough face to be the killer the wren insisted he was, Deegan had his doubts. The gent had certainly put a scare in her.

Despite that, she was a game little bird. He hadn't heard a peep from her in the past ten minutes. Not an easy deed if her heart was pumping as fast as his was. But while hers was tripping along with fear, his was fueled by adrenaline—the very thing of which he'd come in search. Although the euphoria was fading now, his smile of elation was impossible to restrain.

Like a regular Saint George, he'd rescued a damsel from her dragon using nothing more than a bit of quick thinking and guile. So what if the adventure had been brief and harmless in nature? If the dally-man meant to find this little hen, he no doubt would later. She was a free agent at the moment, though, and Deegan realized he had no idea what she looked like. Or how appreciative

she might be for his timely rescue.

Since her pursuer had taken his search elsewhere, it was time to find out.

Deegan pushed away from the wall and silently covered the few yards to her hiding place. As far as he could see, she hadn't changed her position since he'd lowered her behind the crates. Granted, the area was narrow and even the smallest movement would have disturbed the packing cases, but he was still amazed that she could stay so still for so long, considering the spirit she'd displayed while hissing at him earlier. She'd certainly sounded affronted that he took her pursuer to be her lover. More likely the chump had been a relative using strong-arm methods in an attempt to tame her. It would be a pity when he succeeded.

It wasn't any of his business, Deegan decided. He'd done his part in delaying the inevitable. The women of the Barbary Coast broke sooner or later. He'd watched it happen with Hannah and others while growing up. If it wasn't through abuse by their men, it was through their love for those same undeserving fellows.

This was not the day the wren bowed to that reality.

Deegan plucked aside a couple of the empty crates and hunkered down next to her. She seemed frozen in place, the awkward bulk of a camera held tightly to her breast and her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her lashes creating neat chestnut crescents above her flushed cheeks. The hem of her brown skirt was flipped up, showing him a pair of sturdy laced boots and a glimpse of shapely, stockinged calf, the display a result of their

haste in hiding her earlier.

"He's gone," Deegan said softly.

Her eyes flew open, allowing him another glance of their alluring pastel-blue shading. "Truly?" she whispered.

"Truly," he assured her. One after another, Deegan pried her fingers free from the camera.

She didn't seem aware of his actions. She turned her head, letting her cheek press into the gravel again as she peered out at the street to verify the accuracy of his words. Seeing that he spoke the truth, she melted with relief, a sigh that was part sob escaping her lips. "Thank you."

"Not at all." Setting the camera on its stilt-like legs, Deegan offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. She was hasty in releasing him, the action that of a woman ill at ease around an unknown man. It wasn't a reaction he associated with females who frequented the streets of the Barbary Coast. Rather than lean on him, she wilted against the wall slightly as she got her bearings once more.

Deegan took the time to study her more fully. She most certainly wasn't the wren he'd first thought her, based on her coloring and her frightened plea for help. Her eyes were definitely her best feature, not only because of their unusual shade, but because they were framed by an upsweep of long, thick lashes. Her face was one of character rather than beauty, and she was tall, an aspect he liked in a woman. A smudge of dirt marred the soft curve of her cheek in a streak that led his

eyes to her lips. They were parted slightly and very kissable. Her whole manner bespoke a proper upbringing, one untarnished by life in a Coast pimp's harem. If he'd gotten a good look at her earlier, he never would have made the mistake of thinking she was running from her lover. It was a shame if she'd never had a lover, he thought as he quickly scanned the rest of her delightful form. A definite shame.

A frizzed bit of bang covered her brow, while the rest of her chestnut-brown hair was braided and bound in a coil on the crown of her head. She didn't seem aware that her close-fitting chip bonnet had been knocked awry. It hadn't survived the adventure unscathed, for the once proud ostrich plume drooped, the quill broken, and the ribbons trailed away over her breast instead of being tied neatly beneath her chin.

Her brown walking suit was plain, the draped apron of the skirt trimmed with a modest binding of black fringe, and the high collar conformed tightly to the lovely length of her throat. It was clearly the creation of an experienced dressmaker, the coffee-colored fabric alone too rich in texture to belong to any woman in the Barbary Coast. She wore no jewelry, not even earrings, and rather than carry a drawstring purse, she had two satchels strapped across her torso like saddlebags.

She was quite out of the ordinary, which was probably the reason he found her refreshingly attractive.

Taking out his handkerchief, Deegan handed it to her. "You might want to tidy up before you rejoin your friends," he said,

indicating the smudge on her cheek.

"My friends?" Her lovely eyes became clouded with confusion as she accepted the pristine square of cloth. She touched the less bulky of her twin satchels briefly. "Yes, of course, but first I need to speak to the police to tell them about Belle's murder." She paused a moment and her eyes grew wider. She reached out, clasping his arm with one gloved hand. "Oh, and you must come with me. Between us, we can most certainly identify that man. I know I shall never forget his face, and I'm sure you had an excellent look at him, too."

Despite the fact that he had associated closely with an operative of the Pinkerton Detective Agency a few months past, Deegan wasn't keen on dealing with any branch of law enforcement at present, particularly the policemen assigned to the Coast. There was always the chance that one of them had been around long enough to remember him as Digger O'Rourke.

A gust of wind whistled down the alleyway, giving him an excuse to delay any excursion to the precinct house as it swirled her skirts and nearly tore her hat free. His wren shivered and left off scrubbing her cheek clean with his handkerchief to thump a hand down on her chapeau, further mangling the broken ostrich plume.

"Think about the police later," Deegan urged. "For now, I think we need to get you out of the weather. Find somewhere that you can have something warm to drink."

"Tea would be incredibly nice," she agreed as she retied her

bonnet ribbons.

A neat whiskey suited him much better and was easier to come by in the Coast. It would warm her much more efficiently, too.

"Do you think there is a tea room near the police station?" she asked, stooping slightly to reclaim her camera.

Deegan had no intention of finding out. "Allow me," he said, taking the camera from her. She looked uncertain about giving it over into his keeping, but after a considering pause, relinquished it without an argument. He settled the box against his shoulder as she had done, surprised at how heavy the contraption was and how unruly the gangly tripod legs were.

"I don't think it would be smart for you to trail about the streets just yet," he remarked lightly, his attention seemingly on taming the tripod rather than on her. "Your determined friend may not have gone far."

A frown formed small furrows over the bridge of her nose. "You are quite right. I hadn't considered that. But I can't just wait when Belle's body is…is…" Her cheeks blanched suddenly and she wavered unsteadily on her feet.

Encumbered with the camera, Deegan could do little more than grip her elbow tightly to keep her upright.

"Oh, thank you," she murmured faintly. "Just the thought of—" She broke off, swaying again. "Perhaps I had best sit down," she suggested.

She looked as if she might slip to the ground in a swoon. Deegan glanced toward the street, then back down the alley, and

made a decision. Another one he figured he'd regret later.

"Listen, my name's Galloway. I was on my way to visit an old friend who lives in the next house. If you can make it to Hannah's rooms, you'll not only be able to sit down, you'll have that cup of tea." Hannah had been known to add a warming dollop or two of whiskey to the pot when the situation merited it, as this one certainly did, to his mind.

The wren gave him a weak smile. "It sounds delightful." Her chin lifted in a show of determination. "I believe I can make it that far."

"Good girl," Deegan approved, but he kept firm hold of her arm to support as well as guide her.

"Today was Belle's birthday," she said, as if driven to speak. "She was just twenty. I brought her a portrait I'd taken as a present. When he—" She broke off again, swallowing her fear before adding softly, "Belle dropped it."

Not knowing how to comment, Deegan kept his own council and tried to hurry her along.

"I'm sorry to be such a burden," she murmured.

"You're no such thing," he assured her. "My avocation is rescuing ladies in need."

The glib quip brought her smile back into play, if but fleetingly. "I wish you could have helped Belle, then."

"So do I," Deegan said, although he doubted a murder had been committed. No doubt his wren had witnessed one of the all too frequent acts of domestic violence that happened in the

district. Her inexperience in such matters would lead her to embroider the event in her mind, turning it into an act of murder.

"How are you holding up?" he asked as they reached the back entrance to Hannah's building. "My friend is on the second floor. Can you make it on your own?"

She gave the narrow staircase a dubious look. Deegan wasn't sure whether her concern was over its steepness or lack of cleanliness.

"Yes, I believe so," she said, laying a hand on the banister.

Deegan fell back two steps, hoping the flimsy railing was strong enough to hold her should she feel faint again. She weighed the equivalent of two feathers, or so he had imagined when he'd tipped her off her feet earlier, but he doubted upkeep on the building had improved since he'd lived there, even then it had been an excellent candidate for the city aldermen to condemn.

Nearly every step creaked in warning to the residents of their intrusion. The game little wren kept her narrow skirt lifted just above the dusty treads, forging on at a steady pace. Trailing behind her, Deegan sensed rather than saw eyes follow their progress and wondered how much it would cost him to make sure news of their visit to Hannah didn't reach the ears of the man in pursuit of the wren. Hannah had had enough grief in her life without him adding more to it at this stage. Deegan peered more closely into the shadows above them until he found the silent watcher—a boy of perhaps ten, lying flat on the third-floor landing, his nose pressed to the spindles of the stair rail as he

spied on them. A boy much as he'd once been, only filthier.

"Say, pardner," Deegan called up the stairwell to the child. "There's two bits in it if you'll tell Mrs. McMillan she's about to have visitors."

Unfazed over being discovered, the boy lifted his chin off the dirty floor. "Yer mean old Hannah?"

She was barely thirty-seven years old, six years older than Deegan, but the boy already considered her ancient. Had the Coast made Hannah a crone before her time? Deegan hoped not. His memory of her was of sweet, smiling green eyes beneath a glory of flaming red hair. Trusty had always called her the loveliest creature he'd ever seen. She was certainly the most even-tempered woman Deegan had ever met. Living with Trusty O'Rourke and him, she had had to be.

"If you don't hustle, we'll beat you to her door, pardner," Deegan warned. "Tell her Dig's come to visit."

The boy bounded to his feet, taking the rickety steps from the upper floor two at a time. He was in full throat by the time he reached the second floor landing. "Hey, Hannah. Yer's got company."

"I hope Mrs. McMillan doesn't mind the interruption," the wren said softly. She glanced down at Deegan two steps below her, her cheeks burning but not, he thought, with exertion. "I mean, if she's already occupied with a, er—"

"Hannah's retired," he snapped, and regretted it immediately when her cheeks brightened still more. It had been a logical

assumption for the wren to make, but Hannah hadn't been a doxy in a long time. At least he hoped she hadn't.

Judging from the sound alone, the boy hadn't waited until he got to the door of Trusty's old lodgings, but was banging the flat of his hand against the wall to alert Hannah. It took three thuds before Deegan heard a door open and her voice answer.

"Gracious, child!" Hannah admonished lightly. "You'll wake the dead with that racket."

"Ya got company, Hannah," the boy announced. "A woman and some fella says his name is Dig."

There was a feminine gasp of surprise followed by the rustle of skirts. Deegan scarcely managed to set the unwieldy camera aside before Hannah threw herself in his arms.

"My God!" she whispered hoarsely. "Is it really you, Digger lad?"

"It's me, darlin'," Deegan said, holding her close as he breathed in the remembered scent of her perfume. "Miss me, did you?"

"Silly question," Hannah said, and kissed him hard on the mouth to prove it.

Chapter Three

Lilly stood to one side, waiting until the moment when Hannah McMillan and Galloway parted. Although she had never actually witnessed such an event, she doubted that Hannah's greeting was that of a bird of paradise to a customer—even a favorite customer.

The woman didn't resemble the soiled doves Lilly had met during her visits to the Coast. Although flirtatious curls spilled free at the nape of Mrs. McMillan's neck and around her ears, she wore her copper hair swept up in a prim knot at the crown of her head. Her dress seemed as proper as Lilly's own, but was a deep emerald green trimmed with brocaded ribbon. Having grown accustomed to the paint that Belle and her friends wore, Lilly was pleasantly surprised to find that the only color in Hannah McMillan's cheeks was the result of her pleasure in seeing the handsome Mr. Galloway.

The kiss the two shared was over as quickly as it began. "There can be only one reason you finally came to see me, Dig," Hannah declared, turning an approving gaze on Lilly. "And I must say, if I'd chosen her myself, I couldn't have found a more perfect wife for you. I approve most heartily."

Lilly was sure her face turned as red as a ripened apple. "Oh, but—"

Galloway chuckled and put a fond arm around the older

woman's shoulders. "I might well agree with you if my acquaintance with this lady was longer than a few minutes," he said smoothly.

The compliment implied by his words made Lilly even more flustered, so she was relieved when he rolled right into a brief explanation of their meeting and subsequent arrival on Hannah McMillan's doorstep.

"Dear me!" Hannah murmured when he'd finished. "Please don't take offense. As fond as I am of this rogue, it was truly meant as a compliment. But from the adventure you've had, I'd say the sooner you have a comfy chair and a cup of tea, the better." She gestured to the filthy boy who stood observing them silently. "Run down to the baker's, Otis, and see if he has some nice little cakes. Tell him they are for me, then get something for yourself and your mother, too."

Although he looked anxious to depart on the errand, Otis didn't manage to get away immediately. Galloway's hand on the boy's thin shoulder held him firmly in place. "Before you go, I think you and I have some business to contract, pardner," he said, idly tossing a coin in the air.

The flash of silver kept Otis's feet still while his eyes followed the coin's arch.

Catching the coin while it was still out of the child's reach, Galloway bent nearer the boy. "Now then…" he murmured.

Lilly heard no more, for her hostess linked arms with her and led her down the narrow corridor away from the man and boy

on the landing.

Before guiding Lilly ahead of her into the apartment, Hannah glanced back. “Oh, and Otis?” she called. “Have our cakes wrapped separately, dear.” She turned to Lilly as she softly closed the door. “Otis is the dearest boy, but, as I’m sure you noticed, cleanliness is not one of his virtues.”

At a loss for words, Lilly let her unusual hostess settle her on a deep red upholstered settee.

“Now you just sit still,” Hannah ordered, patting Lilly’s hand in a comforting manner. “Dig will be with us as soon as he’s given Otis money for the cakes. We’ll wait for introductions until he’s here.”

The suggestion suited Lilly fine. She almost believed she was asleep, caught in a dream from which she hadn’t managed to awaken. The soil on the heel of her leather glove and the tingling on her cheek where she had rubbed too roughly with Galloway’s handkerchief argued for reality.

And yet she couldn’t dismiss the dreamlike quality of the afternoon. Not only had help arrived most opportunely, but the man who offered it was disturbingly handsome, as befitted a hero in a flight of fancy. Of course, it was merely her inexperience with men, not the man himself, that made her nearly forget the horror of Belle’s murder. A more worldly woman would be immune to his casual charm and to the seductive aura of being assisted by him in eluding the harsh-faced man.

Of course, there was probably no woman more worldly than

Mrs. Hannah McMillan, and that lady had leaped to such a surprising conclusion when she saw them together. The thought of marriage to a man like Mr. Galloway, while deliciously tempting to contemplate, was enough to recolor Lilly's cheeks in confusion.

To keep her thoughts away from him, and the terrifying memories she would soon have to relate when she visited the police, Lilly shrugged free of her twin satchels, folded her hands in her lap and looked around at her surroundings.

The condition of the building hadn't prepared her for the oasis Hannah McMillan had created in her crowded apartment. Rather than cracked and broken plaster, the walls were covered in a tasteful wallpaper featuring clinging red roses against a background of soft, sage green. Rose damask drapes were swagged back at the single, tall, narrow window. The sagging floor was covered by an Oriental rug, the yarns used by the weavers in creating a medallion design ranging from a lush green to a warm sand color. There was barely room for Hannah to move without brushing her skirt against a piece of furniture, yet she managed to maneuver through the maze with a grace Lilly knew her sister Vinia would envy.

The pieces Hannah had chosen were quite lovely, the carving on the breakfront and on the topmost dresser drawer depicting bunches of grapes, the vines trailing symmetrically away from the fruit. A small cookstove was situated so that heat from it warmed both the parlor and the bedroom beyond. As in Lilly's

own home, softly draped tea tables vied for space near the settee and before a grouping of two high ladder-back chairs and a comfortably upholstered wing chair.

Light from the window drew Lilly's gaze to the large portrait of a slimmer, younger Hannah reclining on a chaise, her image resplendent in a low cut gown of gold. Below it, she noted with pleasure, the dressertop was covered with dozens of framed photographs rather than trinkets. Before she could take a closer look, the click of the latch closing behind her drew Lilly's attention away from her surroundings and back to the enigmatic Mr. Galloway.

She felt unprepared for his entrance, since his approach down the hallway had been curiously silent. Lilly recalled only too well the sighs and creaks the boards had made beneath her own feet. Whatever the secret to his stealthlike passage was, he seemed unaware of having accomplished what to her was a remarkable feat.

"Ma'am," he said. Briefly, his gaze slid over her.

Lilly felt every inch of the quick appraisal. When his lips curved ever so slightly, she was sure he was amused to find her seated on the edge of the sofa, her back ramrod straight, looking like a cornered calico cat about to take flight.

Galloway set her camera aside carefully on its gangly tripod legs. "If Otis should encounter your curious friend while abroad, he has promised to become addle brained," he said, his voice, as well as the words, soothing Lilly.

Addle brained. It was certainly how she was feeling at the moment. And not entirely as a result of her unwelcome adventure. “You must tell me how much you paid Otis to forget,” Lilly insisted. “I will reimburse you and—”

He waved the offer aside as he removed his hat, tossing it over the spindle of a ladder-back chair. “A mere pittance. Think nothing of it. It was my pleasure to assist you.”

Knowing she shouldn’t accept, yet couldn’t afford to pay even a pittance, Lilly pondered how best to continue.

Galloway ran a hand through his tawny hair. If he meant to smooth it, the action was a failure. The thick, wavy locks tumbled in tousled elegance over his brow. Galloway seemed unaware of the strikingly romantic figure he cut as he leaned negligently against the door and gazed with pleasure on the cozy, middle-class comfort of the room. “This is nice, Hannah,” he said at length. “I was afraid you might have frittered away at a roulette table the money I sent.”

Already busy at the warmly glowing stove, Hannah barely glanced at him. “Is that how you made it?” she asked, filling a kettle with water and setting it on to boil.

“Does it matter?” he countered.

Hannah bustled about, taking delicate china cups and saucers from the breakfront. “No, of course not,” she said as she arranged things on a tray. “But this poor young lady probably thinks we have no manners, since you haven’t introduced us yet.”

“A shocking lack, what?” he murmured, his voice taking on

the stilted tone Lilly had once heard an upper-class English character in a melodrama use. She doubted real Englishmen spoke in such an exaggerated fashion. The fact that Galloway had assumed the mannerism so easily, just as he had that of an Irish immigrant earlier, led her to wonder if he was an actor by trade. He certainly had the face and form to please a female audience.

She herself was certainly mesmerized when he stepped away from the door. "Shall we mend our manners immediately?" he asked, and bowed deeply before her. "My dear wren, as you no doubt have fathomed, the charming lady of this household is not only an angel of mercy to those in need, she is my dearest friend, Mrs. Hannah McMillan."

Falling in with his theatrical manner, Hannah gestured grandly toward Galloway. "And this gentleman is not only my banker, he is as dear to me as a son," she said. "May I present Mr. Dig—"

"Deegan Galloway," Galloway interrupted smoothly.

Lilly thought she saw Hannah glance at him, her eyes widening a bit in surprise. The next minute, she was no longer sure the woman had been disconcerted at all. The warmth of the smile she bestowed on him belied the hesitation. "My dearest friend, Deegan Galloway," she said, her tone putting a slight emphasis on his name.

"And I am Miss Renfrew. Lillith Renfrew," Lilly said.

Hannah took a seat next to her on the couch. "Lillith. What a lovely name."

"Thank you," Lilly murmured. "I've often wished for one less

ancient."

"Nonsense. It suits you," Hannah insisted. "It's a name that requires character, and I can see quite clearly that you are such a lady. Perhaps you'll sit for Deegan now that he's taken up photography."

"Ah, but I haven't," Galloway said as he took a seat across from them. "The camera belongs to Miss Renfrew."

"It does?" Hannah grasped Lilly's hands excitedly. "Then you must be the famous Miss Lilly I've heard so much about on the streets."

Lilly couldn't stop the pleased flush of color that rushed to her cheeks. "I'd hardly call myself famous," she demurred. "But, yes, I have been taking photographs of the women and children of the neighborhood for a few weeks now."

"Absolutely wonderful pictures, you mean," Hannah corrected. She jumped to her feet and gathered a number of framed photographs from among her collection. "I know they are remarkable because I've become the caretaker of quite a few."

One by one, she passed the mounted photographs to Lilly. Familiar faces trooped by—women like Belle, their beauty faded or destroyed by the ravages of their profession; children like Otis, ill-nourished and wizened beyond their years by conditions in the Coast. Silently, Lilly put names to each face as Hannah related how each of the photographs had come to be in her care.

Lilly ran the pad of her finger around the rough, handmade frame that surrounded one of the likenesses. It showed a woman

in profile. They'd taken the shot that way so that her black eye was turned away from the camera. It was more difficult to tell the bruises from the dirt on the pair of little boys with gap-toothed grins, but the story Hannah told was one of true-life melodrama.

"They know I'll be here when they return," Hannah said quietly of the people in the photographs, "and that these precious pictures will be cared for while they are gone. Your generosity is wondrous, Miss Renfrew. In many cases, I believe your photographs are appreciated more than the bread and soup the missionaries offer."

If she hadn't been covertly watching Deegan Galloway's face, Lilly was sure she would have missed the slight hardening of his expression at mention of a missionary society. "Please don't beatify me, Mrs. McMillan," Lilly requested. "I take pictures for quite a selfish reason. I'm still learning my craft and—"

"Piffle," Hannah said. "You're a kind-hearted woman and a credit to your family. Now, while we wait for the pot to boil, why don't I let you straighten up a bit? There's a comb, fresh water, a cake of scented soap and a brush for your clothing in the other room."

Before Lilly could object, she found herself being swept into Hannah's bedroom and left to repair the ravages her flight and rescue had made on her person.

Hannah closed the door quietly behind herself and folded her hands at her waist. Deegan remembered the stance and wasn't surprised that her fond smile was temporarily stripped from both

her eyes and her lips. “Promise me you’ll return later and tell me all that’s happened to you, Digger,” she said sternly.

“That I will, lass,” he vowed quietly. “I’m sorry I stayed away so long.”

“You should be.” As the kettle began to steam, Hannah picked up a dish towel and lifted it off the stove. “Right now, seeing to Miss Lilly is more important than our catching up. I hate to think what would have happened to her if you hadn’t been at hand.”

“The bastard would have caught her,” Deegan said simply. “Do you think she actually saw this Belle killed?”

Busy pouring hot water into her teapot, Hannah kept her gaze turned away from him. “We’re in the Barbary Coast, Dig,” she answered. “Such things happen here. But, as to whether Miss Lilly witnessed a murder?” Hannah shrugged. “She certainly believes that is what she saw. I’m not as sure you believe it, though.”

Deegan stretched his legs out, digging his hands deep into his trouser pockets. “No,” he admitted, frowning. “I think she saw something atrocious happen to this Belle, but whether it was murder or not, I couldn’t say. Either way, I don’t like the idea of bringing the police in to investigate. You and I both know what they’ll do.”

Hannah nodded and put the now empty kettle aside. “Nothing,” she said, “although I can’t say that I blame them. They’re outsiders in the Coast.” She paused and fidgeted with the lace edge of the cloth covering her tray. “So are you, Digger.

You've been gone a long time."

Digger O'Rourke had been gone a good while, Deegan admitted. But that didn't mean he couldn't melt back into his old surroundings. Hadn't he, out of habit, avoided stepping on every weak floorboard in the hall? The years hadn't dulled his memory of what it was like to be part of the Coast, nor had time weakened the talents he had honed growing up there.

It was impossible to keep his lips from curving in a wicked grin. He hadn't felt this alive in months. "Know this Belle, do you?" he asked Hannah.

She continued to fuss with the arrangement of things on her tray. "There are lots of women calling themselves Belle in the Coast. But I think I heard one of Karl Severn's women say she was going to celebrate her birthday. Not many want to after a few years in the profession."

It wasn't only the prostitutes who tried to forget the day they'd been born. Once his mother died and he'd gone off with Trusty, Deegan had stopped remembering his own birthday.

"Severn?" he asked. "The name's not familiar. Who is he?"

"Someone I've made it my business to avoid," Hannah answered. "And so should you."

"If he's the same hound that was chasing our little wren, I totally agree with you," Deegan said, then got to his feet. "Watch over her for a bit, will you, lass? I want to back trail Lilly and see what I can find."

Hannah knew better than to try to dissuade him. "Be careful.

If Miss Lilly did witness a killing, even bribing Otis, as I'm sure you did, will not keep a man like Severn from finding out who she is."

"Then do me a favor, darlin', and see if you can't come up with a simple disguise for her to wear. I'll get a closed cab and see her directly to her doorstep before I return, but she'll still have to run the gauntlet from here to its cozy interior," Deegan said, leaning over to kiss Hannah's cheek. "I'll be back before you can miss me."

"Impossible," she whispered, cupping his face between her hands. "I miss you already. Watch your back, Digger. I couldn't bear to lose you twice in one lifetime."

Hannah was worrying needlessly. If there was one thing Deegan had learned over the years, it was how to sidestep the devil. He had no doubt hell would be his just reward one of these days, but he was just as sure that he would be taking that inevitable trip in the far distant future.

There was a lightness in Deegan's step as he took the stairs, and the memory of Miss Lillith Renfrew's lovely eyes in his thoughts. She was an enigma—both an easily embarrassed innocent and a determined woman of spirit. It was amusing that Hannah had mistaken the wren for his wife. Odd that she had approved of Lillith for the role at first glance. As alluring as her eyes were, as stalwart as her spirit seemed to be, Miss Renfrew wasn't exactly the type of female he fancied as a wife. He'd been pursuing wealth for so long that looking past a woman's prospects

to her virtues had never occurred to him.

Lilly was definitely a damsel worth rescuing simply for the thrill of the adventure, though. He had a suspicion that when she chose to award it, the brilliance of her smile would be a fitting reward for any man. She probably had a staid junior clerk saving his hard-earned coin in anticipation of a wedding day. She was that kind of woman, a proper little homebody.

Or was she?

What kind of woman left the safety of her obviously middle-class environment to tote a heavy, bulky camera and its plates into a neighborhood as notorious as the Barbary Coast?

Perhaps he would never know. He would find the unknown Belle, no doubt badly bruised but alive, and return to Hannah's with a report on the prostitute's welfare. After that, the memory of the adventure they had briefly shared would fade within a few days as they went about their daily routine.

He would be left with no reason to see her again.

Deegan wondered why that thought bothered him.

The breeze no longer felt as bracing when he left Hannah's building and retraced his steps down the alley to the street. He paused a moment, listening for the telltale commotion that always followed the discovery of a body, whether dead or unconscious. He heard only the clip-clop of horses' hooves in the street, the muted shouts of men in a nearby saloon, the clarion voice of Reverend Oliver Isham on the corner as he extolled the fire and brimstone that awaited unrepentant sinners.

Deegan would give the wren the benefit of the doubt. As Hannah had said, death by unnatural means occurred frequently in this neighborhood. Lilly had certainly been terrified when she'd nearly bowled him over earlier. He doubted she had traveled far in her flight. Chances were a soiled dove like this Belle would have stayed close to her crib rather than meet Lilly in the open. Deegan wished he'd thought to ask Otis if he knew the young prostitute's direction. No matter how many answered to the name Belle, if the boy was anything like he had been at the same age, Otis not only knew where to find specific doves, he knew which ones catered to men with jaded tastes.

Deegan had almost reached the end of the block when he caught sight of the lanky villain Lilly had branded a killer. Severn, if Hannah had guessed right. The man lounged in the entranceway of the saloon he'd entered earlier. He had a glass of whiskey in his hand, but didn't appear interested in drinking it. His gaze traveled the length of the street, lingering only a moment longer when he reached the corner where the street preacher harangued a small gathering of disinterested drunks. Deegan was relieved that Severn showed little interest in him.

Rather than move on, Deegan pretended an interest in the reverend's sermon, all the while watching Severn from the corner of his eye. It was only when the harsh-faced man shrugged away from the bar door and stepped back into the saloon that Deegan continued on his way.

He nearly walked past the next alleyway before recalling it

had once been a busy corridor for men in search of crib-heaven. The space between the buildings seemed narrower than it had in his youth, and the condition of the lane was such that Deegan doubted a woman of Lilly's caliber had the stomach to make it the thirty feet or so to the rear courtyard.

Calling it a courtyard was glorifying what was little more than an air well. Three disreputable buildings backed onto it, but it was the one with the back stoop that he remembered as the entrance used to reach many of the women's rooms.

Despite the fact that Lilly claimed to have seen a man murder Belle, then set out in pursuit of her, and that the fellow showed no sign of having left the saloon in the short time since Deegan had originally seen him enter it, there should have been a woman's body lying lifeless and forgotten in the courtyard. There wasn't one. Therefore, Belle had walked—or crawled—away from the scene.

If indeed this was the scene of the violent act. Deegan had no problem believing the culprit was Severn. The man sounded like the type to regularly beat the various whores in his stable.

"Hi, honey," a woman called, leaning from an open window two stories up. "You looking for a little lovin'?"

Deegan nudged the brim of his hat, tilting it to the back of his head. "Sure am, sugar," he shouted, his voice adopting the drawling tones of a Wyoming cowpuncher. "Yer name happen ta be Belle?"

"Is if ya want it ta be," she answered, proving, at least to his

mind, that she wasn't the woman in question. "That the name of yer girl back home?"

"Nope. Name o' the lovebird my brother can't stop talkin' about since he was in Frisco last," Deegan said. "He even wrote her a poem. I got it right here ta give ta her." He fished in his pockets as if looking for a scrap of paper. "Hell, I've got it here someplace. He says today is her birthday or something. A pretty girl named Belle. Ain't a lot, I know, but do ya know a gal that might be her?"

He got his answer when the woman's smile faded. "Don't know any dove by that name," she said flatly, before leaning back in and closing the sash.

This was definitely the right place. What had Lilly said of the alleged murder? Something about seeing Belle holding the cabinet card she'd just been given. Something about dropping it.

There were a number of puddles of standing water—not particularly untainted rainwater, either. If anything had been dropped, it had probably found its way into one of them.

Although he was quite sure Lilly had mistaken the crime, even without a body, he saw no evidence that a woman had been killed there recently, her throat slit. The ground was too muddy to show blatant signs of blood, and Lilly herself had said Belle didn't fight, an action that would surely have left its imprint in the muck.

Then again, perhaps this wasn't the site of the violence. Perhaps it hadn't been fear that had driven the customer-hungry prostitute back into her room at the mention of Belle's name.

The woman could have simply hated Lilly's Belle—or another woman called Belle—and wanted nothing to do with helping a john find a rival's crib.

If only he didn't hear the echo of Lilly's words in his mind: I brought her a portrait…she dropped it.

He was a fool. Logic told him there was nothing to find, and yet Deegan moved closer to search the stagnate water near the stoop. Refuse, most of it no longer recognizable, nearly filled the puddle. Deegan hunkered down, in no way eager to sort through the soaked mess. Portrait…dropped it.

Portrait…portrait…portrait.

He was about to give up when a damp bit of cardboard caught his eye. From the looks of it, the piece had skimmed over the puddle, nearly missing it before slipping into the shadow of a fallen, broken roofing tile. Carefully, Deegan lifted the cardboard free and turned it over.

The face of a once pretty young woman smiled up at him. There was no doubt in his mind.

He'd found Lilly's photograph of Belle.

Chapter Four

Lilly stared into the looking glass in Hannah's bedroom. In place of her conservative bonnet was an outlandish creation that seemed the epitome of a milliner's nightmare. There were not only graceful feathers, faded silk flowers and satin ribbons in abundance, there was a pair of nesting birds complete with their clutch of unhatched, blue-speckled eggs affixed to the chapeau. Or at least Lilly thought there was. The cloud of netting that floated before her face nearly obscured her sight and made it difficult to admire the creation's more imaginative flights of fancy.

As if the headdress wasn't fantastic enough, Hannah had borrowed a form-engulfing, moth-eaten, fur-trimmed woolen cape and matching, equally feasted upon muff to disguise Lilly for her escorted visit to the police and ultimate escape from the Barbary Coast. Even Hannah's assurances had not totally convinced Lilly that she would blend into her current surroundings better in such an ill-conceived ensemble.

No matter how odd her appearance, masking her identity appealed strongly to Lilly's secret love of melodrama. However, as the mysterious Deegan Galloway's plan called for him to simply take her by the elbow and sally forth to signal a cab as if nothing untoward had occurred, the ending to her adventure looked to be sadly flat. Not that she cared to run for her life as

she had done barely an hour ago. It was just that with a disguise involved, she felt a more dashing plan would be fitting.

That was the romantic in her speaking, though. The more time that elapsed, the more her memory of the terror faded, so that now she could not help but wonder if her imagination had altered the scene, painting it in more dramatic shades than the reality of it actually deserved.

She had been so sure that she had witnessed Belle's murder, yet she could be mistaken. She'd taken a single glance before fleeing. Had the violence, while brutal, not been of a fatal nature? With both Hannah and Deegan questioning exactly what she had seen, Lilly had begun to have doubts.

Her memory had not been aided by Deegan's gallant rescue. Rather, it had added further color to the episode, turning her afternoon as adventurous as that of a heroine in one of Colonel Ingraham's dime novels.

Her teachers and family had warned her that reading such low literature would have an adverse effect. She had not believed them. Now she would learn just how accurate their admonition had been. If Belle was found beaten but alive, Lilly promised in a bargainlike prayer, she would willingly renounce her weakness for Beadle and Adams's stories.

But if Belle were really dead…

Steadfastly crushing the thought, Lilly concentrated on adjusting her top-heavy hat. Common sense told her that the beating Hannah and Deegan had suggested Belle sustained was

far more likely than her murder. Lilly had read about crimes of murder, naturally, but witness the actual act? No. Impossible. People were only in the wrong place at the wrong time in the penny dreadfuls, and then they only acted recklessly when involved in such villainy because it was fiction.

Besides, she lacked every characteristic the yellow novels clearly showed were necessary traits in a heroine. She was neither of a pliable temperament, fashionably beautiful nor was she an orphan. She was a spinster past her majority, with family responsibilities. Even if it lacked excitement, doing as Deegan planned was the best course to pursue. The important thing was for her to reach the police and have them find Belle. And after that, to get home as quickly as possible.

Lilly lifted the widow's veiling from before her face and checked the time on her lapel watch. She needed to be on her way, with or without the casual attendance of Deegan Galloway during her getaway.

"I don't know how I can possibly thank you sufficiently for opening your home to me, Mrs. McMillan," Lilly said, turning away from the mirror. "The tea was delicious, the cakes delightful and this…" She waved the trailing tail of whatever animal had given its life to adorn the heavy cape. "This…"

Hannah grinned. "It is frightful, isn't it? But it is Mrs. Chandler's most prized possession."

"I'll take good care that it is returned to her unharmed," Lilly assured her.

“By which she means without incurring further bullet holes,” Deegan commented, appearing in the open doorway. One shoulder propped against the molding, he slouched there, managing to look like an upper-crust dilettante despite the rough quality of his clothing. “That poor critter has seen more than his fair share of buckshot.”

It was fortunate that her acquaintance with Deegan Galloway would be of a brief duration, for Lilly was quite sure she would never get used to the easygoing charm of his grin. He was such an attractive man, and an attractive man of the right age had never noticed her existence before. Having his smile turned her way made her feel flustered and all too aware of her many shortcomings.

It had begun to rain outside, and a slight sheen of misty dampness dusted the comforting breadth of his shoulders, and fresh, telltale marks of puddled water marked his boots. His tawny hair and luxuriant side-whiskers were dry, though, probably the result of being sheltered from the elements by the broad brimmed hat he had probably discarded upon entering the outer room.

He looked, Lilly felt, like a man without a care in the world. Like a man who doubted a load of buckshot would be loosed in their direction when they attempted to leave the Coast. Which meant that he had found Belle alive, and Lilly’s own brush with danger had been merely the result of an overactive imagination. She sat down abruptly, both relieved and a bit disappointed that

her adventure was over.

"You found her," she said softly. "Is she all right?"

Before he answered, his gaze skittered to Hannah, as if flashing a silent message to her. "I don't know. I didn't actually find her."

Her hope of discovering Belle alive already weakened by the secretive exchange, Lilly clenched her hands together tightly in her lap. "You mean her…" she swallowed convulsively before adding, "…body."

"No," he said. "I didn't."

"But if you didn't find her, Dig, that could mean Belle's all right," Hannah declared, offering a carrot of hope. "It could simply mean that she returned to her crib."

As much as she wished to believe it was true, Lilly knew it was a false hope. She shook her head slightly, making the weight of her borrowed hat shift so that she had to save it from toppling off with a judicious touch of her hand. The comfort of believing she might have been wrong slipped away quickly, leaving the horror of the lone alternative.

"Belle isn't in hiding somewhere," she said. "That man killed her. I saw him do it. If her body isn't there now it's because he had her moved." Lifting her chin, Lilly met Deegan's eyes determinedly. "I want him caught and punished for what he's done."

She expected Deegan to agree with her. To leap to take her to the nearest police station so that she could tell her story, describe

Belle's murderer and thus start the wheels of justice rolling to avenge the unhappy prostitute.

"It isn't that simple," he said.

Lilly got to her feet. "Of course it is. Once the crime is reported, the authorities can arrest that man and—"

"And what?" Deegan demanded. "Accuse him of a crime when there is no evidence that one has been committed?"

"But—"

He held a hand up, indicating that she should hear him out before arguing. "Consider the circumstances, Miss Renfrew. We are not, as you seem to believe, in God-fearing San Francisco. We are on streets even God himself thinks twice about treading. The police in this neighborhood frequently look the other way when their neighbors break the commandments. At least they do if they want to live a long and healthy life."

"I'm sure they do," Lilly said. "I have had to gird myself against the brutality of this area since the first time I stepped down from my hired cab with my camera."

"Full of crusading zeal, no doubt," Deegan muttered under his breath, apparently so that she wouldn't hear the comment.

But she did and as a result stiffened her backbone and climbed on her figurative soapbox. "I'll have you know, Mr. Galloway, that the photographs I take and the likenesses I give to the women and children who sit for me bring a smidgen of cheer to their sadly wretched lives."

"I apologize for wounding you, little wren. It's just that I've

rubbed shoulders with do-gooders before," he said, "and the experience didn't bring me a 'smidgen of cheer.' Perhaps I am jaded."

"Perhaps you are, sir," Lilly declared sharply, her chin raised unnaturally high to show him her disdain.

"And perhaps," Deegan added, "you have another use for the photographs, such as publishing them to enlighten others to these people's plight."

She had considered it. Her brother, Edmund, wrote such stories for the newspaper. Reading them had given her the idea in the first place.

"Do you think it would succeed, Mr. Galloway? It isn't only the scent of soot and sin breathed daily on these streets, in these buildings. It is hopelessness."

"Very true, my dear," Hannah said, crossing herself devotedly, as if completing a prayer.

A prayer she herself should be saying, for Belle in particular, Lilly thought sadly. Then she squared her shoulders. "The photographs I take have nothing to do with what happened to Belle Tauber," she said. "That man murdered her and—"

"Perhaps he did," Deegan agreed calmly, cutting off her diatribe. "But murder is as common as dirt in this place, Miss Renfrew. If such was Belle's fate, let her rest in peace. We may not know the truth of what happened to her, but I think we can all agree that if she is dead, she's in a kinder place now."

"No!" Lilly cried vehemently. "That's not true! She—" Lilly

caught herself and stopped short. She took a calming breath. “Belle’s death is monstrous, criminal. The man who did this to her must be found, caught and punished.”

“Perhaps that is how things happen in your world,” Hannah said quietly. “But not in mine.”

Appalled at the woman’s resigned acceptance, Lilly got to her feet quickly and faced Deegan. “Surely you don’t subscribe to such a philosophy, sir.”

He shrugged elegantly, the graceful, masculine beauty of the movement so out of keeping with his rough clothing that it appeared exotic. “How can either you or I say, Miss Renfrew?” he asked. “We are only visitors to the district, not residents. Who’s to say that Hannah isn’t right?”

Lilly drew herself up. “The law, sir. The law.”

“Written law, perhaps,” Deegan agreed. “Civilized law.” He took her elbow, steering her to the window, forcing her to look out over the depressing drabness of the area. “Can you, in all honesty, tell me this is civilization?” he asked.

Lilly looked past the buildings, past the narrow alleyways, seeing instead the children, the women she had met.

“This is the jungle, Miss Renfrew. Only the strong survive, and then only if fate favors them,” Deegan continued.

Perhaps it was, but wasn’t that part of the reason she had chosen to document conditions in the Coast? To help balance the scales of justice?

“The law is for everyone, Mr. Galloway,” she said.

“Is it?” he murmured. “Or is it merely that you want Belle avenged and know yourself ill-equipped to accomplish a personal vendetta? The law wields a dandy sword of vengeance, doesn’t it?”

The accusation stung. Lilly’s cheeks burned with color. In part, what he suggested was the truth, yet wasn’t that precisely the reason the judicial system had been created? Whether it was called vengeance or justice, when a sentence was delivered, the result was the same—evil was punished.

Even stronger than her desire for vindication was the mystery of how Deegan Galloway seemed capable of reading the secrets she kept locked in her heart. If only she could read him half as well. But she couldn’t. Not on this short acquaintance. Perhaps not even in a lifetime.

Afraid Deegan could in truth read her thoughts, Lilly hastened to push them aside. “Perhaps in my heart I am a vigilante,” she admitted. “I liked Belle. I felt sorry for her. I would have helped her leave if it was in my power. But I couldn’t and she’s gone. I know that punishing her murderer won’t bring Belle back. However, he shouldn’t be allowed to get away with such a heinous crime. If I do nothing and he kills another defenseless woman, I would feel her blood upon my hands.”

Deegan’s mouth curved slightly in an ironic smile. “Yes, I suppose you would,” he agreed. “All right. Although I doubt it will accomplish much, I’ll see that you reach the police with your story.”

Lilly noticed that he hadn't promised to escort her there himself. Despite the fact that he looked more and more out of place in these surroundings, she supposed he had good reason to be in the Coast. Somehow she doubted it was as honorable a reason as her own. Perhaps his insistence that the law held little sway in the area was based on a desire to believe that was true because he wished to avoid due process himself.

What crime could he have committed? Other than stealing a woman's heart, that is. She felt him very capable of that particular crime.

"And after I speak with the police, sir? What happens then?"

His smile widened. "Why, then, Miss Renfrew, you will have my full attention. You see, contrary to what you might believe based on my callous distrust of local law officials, if something unforeseen happened to you, I, too, would feel that I had blood on my hands. Your blood."

He was being theatrical again, echoing her own overly dramatic words. Yet even if the statement was nothing more than a glib twisting of her words, Lilly felt warmed at the idea, false as it might be, that he cared what became of her. "Thank you, Mr. Galloway," she murmured. "I appreciate your gentlemanly concern."

"Then you're sadly mistaken, darlin'," he said, the lilt of Ireland creeping back into his voice, "because there's not a lick of gentleman in my entire being."

She didn't believe him, Deegan knew. He could tell by the

way her pretty eyes glowed when she looked at him. She thought him heroic even though he'd tried to show her he had far more in common with villainy.

Well, perhaps he hadn't tried that hard. There was something about her that appealed to his sense of adventure. He'd been in dangerous situations frequently over the years—far too frequently—but never before had he had the opportunity to come to the rescue of a damsel in distress. As a result he hadn't thought ahead to the consequences of his actions. Now not only did he have Lilly Renfrew's admiring gaze to deal with, he had the necessity of keeping himself and Hannah out of the pot of trouble Lilly was set on brewing.

The photograph she'd taken of Belle Tauber was safely stowed in his inner vest pocket, the damp cardboard edges of the cabinet card feeling cold despite the thickness of his rough shirt. The sensation made it impossible for him to forget such evidence. At least to him it was evidence that Lilly's story was true. He doubted that the police—even the honest ones, of which there were damn few—would agree with him, though. But they hadn't seen the terror in her face when she'd barreled into him, hadn't seen the grim determination in the eyes of the man who hunted her. And because of who Deegan was and what he'd done in his checkered past, he couldn't tell the coppers, either.

Not that it would make a difference if he did. Impressions didn't count when it came to proving a crime had been committed.

Lilly had spirit now, but Deegan doubted anyone, man or woman, could continue to hold their head high when adversity continually knocked them flat in the muddy streets. He certainly hadn't been able to handle it. He'd lied, stolen and run to escape such a fate himself.

Or thought he'd escaped it. Some days, in spite of his good fortune in falling in with Garrett Blackhawk and subsequently gaining his current nondemanding, well-paid employment, Deegan doubted the shadow of the Coast had ever left him. He'd been born there, his father an unknown patron of his mother's open-for-business bed. Deegan's knack for mimicry might let him blend in with a better strata of society, but underneath it all he was still Bridget Murphy's bastard son.

It had been the Barbary Coast as much as his mother's occupation that had robbed him of his childhood. At four he stole his first watch. By eight he'd been a fairly accomplished pickpocket. It was in his blood to be a liar and a thief, not a gentleman.

Despite that, he had a full social schedule that allowed him to rub shoulders with the city's most prominent families. The goddess of fortune was indeed fickle.

Deegan checked his pocket watch. He had been foolish to give in to the temptation to tread these streets again. But if he hadn't been there today, what would have become of the wren?

He knew what would have become of her, and the thought alone chilled his blood.

"Mr. Galloway?"

He liked the prim quality of her voice. She was miffed at him and made no effort to hide her dissatisfaction.

"Are you or are you not going to guide me to the nearest police station now?" Lilly demanded.

"I would rather not," he said, allowing her one of his rare, truly honest moments.

"But you know that—"

"You haven't considered the situation sufficiently, Miss Renfrew," Deegan cautioned. "You are still a hunted woman. Where exactly do you think that b'hoy will expect you to head?"

"Oh," she said, her flare of indignation snuffed as quickly as a candle flame. "But I need to speak with the authorities."

"And you will one day soon," he countered.

She stared at him quietly for the space of a heartbeat, her lovely pastel eyes looking through him. Then Lilly's chin raised infinitesimally, an indication, he was sure, that she had decided to grab the bull by the horns. She was such an innocent. She had no idea how sharp those horns could be. Having been figuratively gored more times than he cared to recall, Deegan knew only too well the danger she was determined to flout.

And because his conscience would haunt him if he stood aside and let her, he would soon be dodging danger again himself.

Which was exactly what he had come to the Coast that day to do. Was that why he found her uncommonly attractive? Or was it something else that drew him, that had him so determined to

be her champion?

Lilly stood a bit straighter, as if determination alone could turn her into an Amazon equal to whatever was to come. Perhaps it could. The flame of righteousness fueled her, lit the soft blue of her eyes, turning them as mysteriously beautiful as Australian fire opals. She was magnificent. Even if he hadn't already resigned himself to helping her, he would now have followed her to hell and back just for the chance to know her better.

Hell was probably exactly where she'd lead him.

"Not one day, Mr. Galloway," she said quietly. "Today. Allowing Belle's murderer time to leave town would be an insult to her memory. To the friendship we shared."

Without a doubt, Lilly Renfrew was becoming a more dangerous woman to know by the minute. Fueled with misguided civic zeal, she was blind to personal harm.

And that appealed to him, too. Damn, but he had perverted tastes. Or at least deadly ones. If he hung around her very long, he'd no doubt end up turning up his toes. And that very real possibility didn't discourage him at all.

Deegan sighed in resignation before turning to Hannah. "I'm afraid carrying Miss Renfrew's camera will be a dead giveaway."

From the corner of his eye he noticed Lilly wilt slightly in relief. He hoped the role as her knight errant was worth his while. Hoped he could be happy with the reward of an appreciative smile. Considering the way her figure curved attractively within the drab-colored walking suit, he knew a smile wasn't going to

be nearly enough.

"Leave the contraption with me," Hannah offered. "I'll see that it doesn't come to any harm, Miss Lilly."

"And I'll see that it is returned to you intact," Deegan added. "Now, I believe it is time to get this ill-advised visit to the police over and done with."

Lilly's hands were knit tightly together, her eyes downcast, giving her a prayerful stance, but he didn't miss the rapid beat of her pulse above her high edged collar. "Yes, of course," she said, her voice little more than a sigh as she settled the ridiculous borrowed hat more firmly in place. At least she hadn't taken umbrage at his designation of the trip as ill-advised. To his thinking it was more than that. It bordered on suicidal, a fact that should have had him running for cover. It would have if he had a lick of sense, but when it came to women, that was something he had never had.

When Lilly reached for the heavy satchels of photographic paraphernalia, Deegan stayed her hand. Beneath his fingers, hers quivered. As if startled at the sensation of his warm flesh covering her softer, cooler hand, she raised her eyes, which were wide and swirling with myriad emotions, to his. Such pretty eyes they were. So expressive. He wondered if she knew her soul shone in them.

Or that they reflected a stirring of awareness for him as a man.

Deegan released her hand. "Obscurity, remember, Miss Renfrew? I'll return them along with the camera."

Her lashes swept down—long, curling lashes a richer shade of brown than her hair. “Of course,” she murmured, and turned away, moving to take Hannah’s hands as she expressed her gratitude for her hospitality.

With the concealing veil draped once more over Lilly’s features and the slightly ragged muff covering her quaking hands, Deegan guided his now subdued charge back down the stairs to the gauntlet of streets and alleyways that lay between Hannah’s building and the nearest cab stand.

As they left the shelter of the building, a resurgence of fear stiffened Lilly’s carriage and lent wings to her heels. He kept a firm hand on her elbow, murmuring reminders to her to slow her steps and bow her shoulders. She was masquerading as Hannah’s neighbor, Mrs. Chandler, a tall but slightly stooped widow whose reduced circumstances had forced her to reside in the disreputable Coast. Deegan only hoped that his own escort would not tip the scales against them, but when their progress along the street drew no undo attention, the euphoria of success buoyed his spirits once more.

Flagging down a cab for the short ride to the station house, Deegan quickly bundled Lilly inside.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to thank you, Mr. Galloway,” she said as she wrestled briefly with the enveloping folds of the cape and the unaccustomed weight of her fantastic chapeau.

“Your safety is all the reward needed,” he assured her

smoothly, settling next to her as the cab lurched forward.

But it wouldn't be enough. He already knew exactly what he was going to ask for. And a very pretty thank-you gift it was going to be.

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