

Fiora Quinn

Lisa Gaines

April 17, 1906. A spring day so rare a man could smell the earth growing. The day had dawned with only the slightest mist blown inland by a brisk breeze, chasing back the ominous black smoke, and laying bare the beauty of San Francisco for all to see.

Out on the bay, a clipper ship, great white winged sails at full spread, slipped gracefully amid a small flotilla of feluccas, setting the smaller fishing boats rocking, but not maddeningly so.

Waves tumbled and played against the rock-faced seawall, sending salt spray misting through the air. I approached the small lighthouse, the usual extent of my morning constitutional, and stood for a moment watching two gulls squabble over a piece of unidentifiable effluvia. I was so bound up in trying to ascertain exactly what manner of gore the gulls were tearing apart that I was totally oblivious of the young woman's approach.

"Hello, Arthur Bradley," said she in a voice as light as the morning breeze.

If taken only at first glance, the woman before me might be mistaken for a street hag. Clothes piled upon her body as though it were the dead of winter, even though the spring day was pleasantly warm. It was impossible to tell the true color of her hair, so tangled in mire were the locks. Grime pasted her face in streaks and a large bruise the color of tornado skies decorated her right cheekbone.

I gave a brisk nod and waited for my stampeding heart to calm. Canvas snapped in the breeze as an old-style crab boat sailed toward the breakwater. How this woman came to know my name, I had not the inkling of an idea. I would have continued along my way right then and there except for an odd reluctance to move my feet. My shoes seemed to be suddenly made of lead. The feeling spread up my legs, through my stomach, and finally came to rest in a solid lump around my heart.

Still I would have forced myself to move on, step by leaden step as I hold no tolerance for beggars; however, the longer I stood, the more intrigued I became by this waif of a girl.

Beneath that filthy facade, I detected a frailty and beauty that seemed not of this earth. A

hauntingly familiar beauty. Her form had a smoky quality, like that of a photograph not rightly developed. The air surrounding her – instead of being putrid and rank as one might expect given the appearance of her clothing – held a subtle fragrance, not unlike night jasmine, with just enough difference to cause a slight consternation.

I pride myself on my identification skills. Any inabilities in this direction must be a sign of growing age, something I am loath to admit to myself during the best of times.

“It seems you have me at a disadvantage,” said I after what seemed like an eternity had passed. I reached toward her, then pulled my hand back quickly before she mistook my movement for malicious intent. A memory niggled at the back of my head, an intense certainty that somehow, somewhere, I’d met this ephemeral vision once before.

Time has long been a fascination for me. Not the actual passage of time, but the way time appears to pass differently depending on the stakes at hand. In the overall scheme of things, I still felt like an undergrad trying to please any number of unappeasable professors, while in actuality many of those same professors had retired to permanent positions. Positions in which their lectures fell into echoing granite tombs instead of on students’ woolgathering heads.

It gave me an oddly unpleasant feeling to realize that I was now the professor lecturing to heedless daydreaming students and time kept flowing inexorably on.

I stared into the girl’s impossibly amber eyes and found myself wondering: How long before my words echoed soundlessly beneath humanity’s careless feet?

A shiver ran over me like a cloud passing over the sun, only the sky was crystalline blue with no trace of clouds in sight.

She turned away. Perhaps it was something in her movement that released the trapped memory. Perhaps my conscience had finally overridden my reason. I knew this woman, and that self-same knowledge sent ice cycles piercing deep into my soul.

Fiora Quinn.

We’d met in a dance hall during one of my weaker moments. It wasn’t that things weren’t going well, not at all. Life was, in fact, too good. The investments I’d made in the transportation industry were growing daily, my professorship had just been guaranteed, and my wife had just given birth to our third child. A daughter this time . . .

But Fiora Quinn was dead. Tomorrow marked the tenth anniversary of her death.

I watched the woman glide down the walk and across a small patch of sand grass. In her

wake, grass that only a moment ago had been flush with spring green shriveled into dead gray ash.

And then she was gone. No clap of thunder, no puff of smoke. The blink of an eyelash had swept her away as if she had never been.

“Of course there’s no one there,” said I to the wind as it teased the edge of my coat.

The gulls stared at me – each with its head cocked to the side – giving the impression they thought I’d gone mad. I gave the notion a moment’s consideration, then shook my head. My conscience was simply playing tricks, reminding me of a perfidy I’d tried to keep buried.

“Go on now. Get.” I shooed the idiotic birds away. Their indignant cries rose over the blustery wind and I felt a swift moment of relief at the normalcy of the sound. Nevertheless, the day had been torn asunder. No peace remained, only a rising apprehension. The sun no longer warmed my back. The gulls wailed overhead, the raucous noise rubbing on raw nerves like onion juice on a persistent sore.

I strode with rapid steps to the Powell-Hyde cable car line and leapt on board as the car started up the hill. I decided to stand, clutching the overhead bar like a drowning man clings to a floating log, and stared at the city I’d grown to love.

Warehouses gave way to shops, shops to shabby residences, shabby residences grew more elite the higher the cable car climbed. I’d hoped my ill feelings would settle as I gained foot in more secure territory. The mansions on Pine Street only served to increase my uneasiness, however. I found myself peering through gated yards and into shrubbery half expecting to see amber eyes staring back at me from the shadows or between iron bars.

All sorts of personages make their homes in San Francisco: high-collared ladies with their accompanying entourage, businessmen dressed to the nines in the broad of day, the Mexicans who cared for the wealthy, miners who hadn’t seen civilization in quite possibly years and hadn’t bathed since the last time they set foot in a town, ill-clothed natives brought in for entertainment, and the ever present harlots contaminating both street corner and window ledge of the local brothels.

It being a common occurrence to have one’s personage propositioned – in one manner or another – numerous times during a day’s outing, I found myself surprised at the amount of disturbance still lingering in my psyche. It was just that her resemblance to Fiora was so great.

Or had I really seen a ghost?

I thought back to that night so long ago. I'd started to celebrate in the sedate gentlemanly parlor house style, but somehow had let myself be coerced into further revelries. Eventually I found myself in a dance hall on the Barbary, in a haze of alcohol and smoke and unwashed bodies, sympathizing with this slip of a waitress girl. Her brown eyes, light with specks of amber and wide with fright, brought out a protective urge that – after too many glasses of whatever I was drinking – I felt compelled to follow. I paid for a goodly chunk of her time and took her upstairs where we spent the time in deep conversation. There I learned she'd come to San Francisco with her father who was determined to make his wealth and then he'd up and died, leaving her with nothing but the clothes on her back.

I swore to be her protector. After all, I reasoned in my naive inebriation, all affluent men had mistresses. It was my right.

She was, of course, properly grateful and gave of all her youthful charms with an innocence I found touching. In return, I ensured she had enough currency to find an apartment somewhere safe, and then departed, certain life was about to get even better. It didn't even occur to my well-soaked mind, that perhaps my wife would have a different opinion . . .

The cable car bell startled me from the disturbing memories and found I had gone further than I'd anticipated. Quickly I hopped off the car, strode several paces uphill, and caught the next car headed down toward the wharf. The scenery blurred as I stared without seeing. I glanced up as the car squealed to a stop at Market Street.

Footsteps and laughter filled the air as men and women went about their daily business. Fresh-baked sourdough bread – the delight of San Francisco – filled the air with its enticing aroma. If I ever were to leave this city, it would be necessary to figure out how to bottle that special scent, add in just the right touch of fish oil and tangy salt air – minus, of course, the prevalent coal smoke – for I would need to partake of the fragrance every day else happiness elude me.

I leapt off the cable car and entered the bakery, determined to flush the recent encounter out of my system, or failing that, have a good sniff to tide me over till my noon meal. Not only did I sniff, I sampled. Not only did I sample, I bought.

And still the uneasiness remained. Apprehension lingered in the back of my mind like a repeating nightmare, waiting only the fall of darkness to spring forth – with hideous intensity – into sleep's unguarded realm.

Out on the street, a dog barked, yipped, and went silent.

I left the bakery, suddenly nauseated by the heavy stench. Being a few minutes early for my appointment was preferable to loitering in doorways and buying unnecessary foodstuffs.

A growing cacophony filled the air as I drew nearer the wharf. Gulls circled high overhead. Canvas crackled, billowed and snapped. Wood groaned, fishermen shouted. Two fishermen worked their way through a tangled gill net along one side of the pier and the sour stench of dead fish stung my nose. A lumber wagon groaned to a stop, men scrambling in an effort to offload the timber before the next wagon rolled into place. In their haste a log rolled free, crushing one poor man's foot. His friends lifted the log free. The rising wind carried his moans to my ear and I shuddered. What manner of day was this to be filled with such luck?

I turned my collar against the warm breeze and headed to the Golden Whale. There was an electric feel to the air now, at any moment lightning could strike without a cloud in the sky.

Nonsense, I told myself. Pure nonsense. I'd let myself be overcome by guilt brought on by a slip of a girl who wanted nothing more than a few pennies for her breakfast.

Just off the wharf at the foot of Market Street, sits one of the finest establishments in San Francisco – The Golden Whale. Spectacular views of the bay, a handsomely paid imported French cook, and decor that swept me back to the days of my childhood in Boston. Any of those items would have been enticing enough on their own; the combination put all other restaurants to shame.

Not to mention the fact my brother was the Whale's proud owner. A very successful owner. Thomas Bradley's house on Nob Hill put my modest home on Rincon Hill to shame.

I paused on the front steps as a crow cawed, its raucous squawk somewhere close by. I glanced around with a scowl on my face, irritated the nasty bird should make such a horrid sound on such a lovely day, and there she was, Fiora Quinn, standing beside a white picket fence, hair hanging limp and motionless about her face, though the breeze played havoc with the tails of my coat.

My brother chose that opportune moment to present himself at the Golden Whale's entrance.

"Arthur, you're a bit early. Come on in. I've got a few things to attend to . . ."

I turned to Tom and pointed at the girl. "There. Do you see her? She's been following me, I swear."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," said Tom, "but if you keep on like this,

people will think you're stark raving mad."

I glanced back at the tree. There was no tree. No crow. No girl.

Ice crystals formed in my blood, racing through my body until my heart froze in a painful lump. I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Time – that inexorable cupid that marches us all toward death – stopped for a heartbeat. Then two.

"Are you all right, Arthur?" asked Tom.

An icy layer somewhere in my psyche cracked free. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the rest of the glacier encasing my body. "A bit too much fresh air, I'm afraid."

"Come on then," said Tom, but I held up my hand.

"Seem to have lost my appetite," said I. I took my leave and hailed a cab. The horse snorted and shied sideways at some invisible demon, causing me to misjudge the step. My hip caught the door as I all but fell onto the well-worn seat. The cab reeked of leather and cheap cologne.

I pulled out my pocket kerchief, wiped the damp from my brow, noticed the moisture on my palms. I scrubbed my hands dry, then scrubbed them some more before tucking the kerchief back into my pocket. The cab lurched forward with a groan over the cobblestone street before settling into a rumbling rhythm broken by the occasional missing stone. The scenery I generally admired passed by unnoticed while guilty memory came crowding back in . . .