

NIGHT OF THE
CLOCKWORK
DRAGON

EXTENDED EDITION

THE
PECULIAR ADVENTURES
OF
MISS ABIGAIL CRUMB
#1

LOUISA SWANN

Eye of the Eagle Publishing

Would YOU say no to your mother? What if that same mother just happened to be the world's most powerful sorceress and a necromancer to boot?

At seventeen, Abigail Crumb wants no more than a normal life and a good cuppa tea, not that difficult to find in 1850 London. But when Abby receives Mother's *Summons*, she responds, even though it means sailing halfway around the world.

Surviving Mother Rule #1: Never say no to a sorceress.

After six months of murderous seas and women-hungry men, Abby finds herself mired in people-eating San Francisco mud with nowhere to go and no Mother in sight. This not-so-fragrant "New World" boasts hooligans and muck and not much else to Abby's way of thinking.

Until earthquakes, flying mini-demons, and a mechanized beast straight from the pages of Myrcoff's *Clockwork Beasts of Myth and Legend* strikes fear in the locals' hearts.

And everything changes.

Join Abby and her ensemble of quirky friends in this action/adventure fantasy with a dash of steampunk thrown in—set in the historic wild, wild west!

Find out more about Abby Crumb and her intrepid companions at www.louisaswann.com. Be sure and sign up for the newsletter to keep apprised of the latest Crumb news!

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Contents

[Start Reading](#)

[Special Preview!](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

To those who often feel abandoned and misunderstood. You are not alone.

WHEN I GOT my hands on the man who proclaimed California weather to be the utmost in propriety, I was going to throttle the truth out of him. I hadn't seen a ray of sun all day nor breathed a speck of air that wasn't laced with the stench of dead fish, stagnant marsh, and unwashed bodies.

“Welcome to San Francisco,” the captain of the steamship *Raven* had said the previous night. We had sailed uneventfully through the mouth of the bay—a wide stretch of water nicknamed the Golden Gate, though I didn't see anything golden about it—full moon high overhead, fog looming like a specter behind us.

Journey's end—or so I had thought.

For almost six months we had slogged through irascible seas on what turned out to be the steamship's final journey. Her decks had been loaded with supplies from the east, half of which washed overboard during a violent storm that almost ended the ship as she rounded the Horn.

Nine crewmen and a passenger were also lost during that storm.

A grand total of four women had made the perilous journey—myself and three other women. Those other women had seen the rougher side of life and had come to the conclusion that they could ply their wares more effectively in a place where laws had been cast aside, where men weren't under societal constraints, and where there was a definite lack of women.

I hadn't endured murderous seas and women-hungry men for any of those reasons. I wasn't even here for the gold that drew the ravenous male hordes.

I was here to find my mother.

Chapter One

THE SOUNDS OF clanking harnesses and clattering hooves mingled with the encouraging shouts of obviously frustrated drivers drifted down sandy banks, oddly muffled by the ever-thickening fog. The broad back end of a delivery wagon presented itself briefly before fading like an apparition, swallowed by dank San Francisco fog. The aroma of horse dung added its opulence to the stench of decaying fish. Off in the distance, a sea lion offered advice to his companions.

The sailor who had rowed me over from the ship unceremoniously hauled my luggage from his small boat, splashing through calf-deep water seemingly without concern. He dumped my leather Goyard trunk—purchased specifically for this voyage—and two valises in the sand, then waited—rather impatiently, it seemed—for me to extricate myself.

I remained in the rowboat and pretended to absorb the atmosphere, hiding the fact I was—in reality—struggling to regain my wits.

Our little rowboat had had no choice but to land *onshore* which seemed easy enough. Once the sailor—an enormous man with upper arms the size of tree trunks and a head the size of an apple—assessed the lack of docking space, he gave several mighty pulls on the oars, launching our boat across the distance of several ship lengths, seeming to barely skim the surface of the water. Before I had the chance to adapt to the change in speed, the boat's hull ground against sand, coming to a stop so abruptly I was nearly jarred from my seat.

Most of our little rowboat—all but the prow where I clung to the bench seat with all the ferocity of a stubborn leech—remained in the water, a fact that presented a challenge to my immediate disembarkation. Not only was I half a man's height above the sand, there appeared to be no alternative to scrambling over the side like a common hooligan.

Neither graceful or refined.

I inhaled as deeply as I dared in the odiferous fog—which wasn't all that deep, truth be

told—and forced my hands to relinquish their stranglehold on the bench seat, hoping all the while that the sailor would weary of waiting and offer his assistance.

The stubborn man folded his massive arms across his chest, evidently determined to wait me out.

With an exasperated sigh, I stood, gathered skirts and cloak in hand, clambered up on the rowboat's gunnel—assuring that I remained sufficiently far enough forward in the bow to avoid ending up ankle-deep in water—and attempted to vault over the side.

Neither vault nor landing went as planned. I ended up sitting on the hard sand, pain radiating up my spine into my skull.

Welcome to San Francisco, indeed.

Ignoring the pain in both bum and head, I scrambled to my feet and straightened my skirts in as dignified a manner as possible, turning my back on the sailor and studying the next stage of my journey. Unfortunately, the rugged banks before me did not offer a convenient way for a lady to ascend without adding more dirt to her skirts.

Thanks to the grumpy young sailor—the man could not have been much older than my seventeen years—my skirts had already been sullied, though the dark brown wool of both skirts and cloak hid the fact quite well.

Hauling the Goyard trunk up that bank was an entirely different proposition. I gnawed at my bottom lip, considered asking the sailor for further assistance, and abandoned that notion. I'd had quite enough of the man's dour attitude.

Somewhere in all this fog, clocks were ticking. Mother's internal clocks. At the ripe old age of six, I had learned that keeping Mother waiting was a very bad idea.

“Is there a delivery service I can hire or perhaps a porter? Someone who can—” I turned back to my companion, only to find both rowboat and sailor rowing rapidly back toward the ship.

I ground my teeth in frustration, resisting both the urge to stomp my foot—an action guaranteed to increase the pain ricocheting inside my skull like a demented fly—and pull out my hair, though the local gulls would more than likely appreciate the donation.

Clocks are ticking.

It was already past midafternoon. It had taken half the day to take leave of my shipmates—including several new friends I hoped to see again in the not-too-distant future—and beg the captain himself for my transport. The captain had granted me the services of a rowboat—

complete with a man to row the blasted thing.

The trip to shore had taken another unanticipated chunk out of the day as the sailor—evidently displeased with his new assignment—had moved the oars like a recalcitrant cat, maneuvering so slowly through the forest of ships carpeting the bay I had begun to wonder if the trip to shore would take longer than the trip around the Horn.

We had wandered between galleons and barks, clipper ships and schooners, ships with two-mast and three-masts and some, like the *Raven*, outfitted for both sail and steam. Some ships bustled with crew readying their ship for disembarking, but the majority of the vessels had apparently been deserted, leaving behind a virtual graveyard of motley ships.

After what felt like an eternity, I had realized the poor sailor was seeking a place to dock. He maneuvered toward one wharf, then another. After a long moment, the oars went still in the water.

I opened my mouth, intending to inquire as to his reasons for stopping, but a quick glance at our surroundings forestalled such a useless question.

The wharves—all two of them—stood off to our right and were both surrounded by ships of all sizes, which made them completely inappropriate as a means for getting me to shore. Apparently, the docking facilities in Valparaiso, Chile—a decidedly primitive port—were more convenient than in the so-called Port of San Francisco.

So the sailor had chosen to run the boat up on shore . . .

Then desert me.

A seagull's forlorn cry penetrated the fog. The sound, as heartrending as a baby's wail, sent chills rippling across my skin. I clenched my jaw, determined not to let feelings of abandonment cripple me to the point of inaction.

A conglomeration of buildings erupted from the shoreline to my left, seemingly straight out of the water. I blinked to clear my eyes, uncertain if the fog was playing tricks with my vision. At the far end of the largest building was a . . . ship! Grounded, of course. The access to both ship and building appeared to be a series of ladders dropping straight down to the water.

I scanned the bank directly before me. Shadows slipped in and out of the fog. Presumably, the shadows of men as they moved about their business, a presumption confirmed by the sound of men arguing further up the bank.

Not completely abandoned, then. I merely had to scramble up the bank and find someone

who could help.

The bank was soft and crumbly, the sand mixed with an enormous amount of mud, creating a concoction designed to streak a lady's skirts and muddy her hands—

“Beg pardon, ma'am. Looks like ya could use a hand.”

Startled, I glanced to my left. A dark-skinned boy stood there, hat in hand, looking at me with hope in his wide eyes, eyes the color of . . . sassafras, I decided.

The boy couldn't have been more than ten years old, though he was a bit tall for his age, with long legs that reminded me of a colt. When he realized he had caught my attention, he blinked, the hope replaced by what I could only interpret as a business-like attitude.

“What's your name?” I asked with a smile.

“Dillon, ma'am.” He worked the hat—an odd affair with a broad brim and flattened crown—in his hands, reminding me of a baker kneading his dough.

“Do you think you could manage my luggage?”

To his credit, the boy took a moment to study the Goyard trunk, a lovely yet sturdy camelback. The trunk was almost waist-high when I stood beside it. It came midway up the boy's chest.

Two valises—one large enough I could barely carry it, the other of more reasonable size—l lounged in the sand next to the trunk.

The boy finally nodded. “Yes'm. I gots a cart.”

I quickly retrieved a shilling from the reticule dangling from my wrist and tossed it to the boy. “You'd best get to it then. Before we lose more daylight.”

The boy settled the hat on his mat of close-cropped curls, turned, and raced up a ramp I hadn't noticed. Judging by the thuds accompanying his running, the ramp had been lined with wooden planks.

The sound was reassuring.

Before disembarking from the *Raven*, I had overheard one of the agents—said agents had the dire reputation of being a motley bunch of mountebanks and swindlers who spirited away prospective gold miners with the ease of illusionists shoving rabbits into their assorted hats and so I had *not* retained the man's services—talking about the “heavy winter rains” they had just experienced. The discussion left me more than slightly worried about the possibility of having to wind my way through muddy streets.

Looked like I could put that concern out of my mind. Wooden walkways rendered the mud issue obsolete.

The boy returned in good order, cart rattling behind him. The cart was an awkward-looking thing, with enormous spoked wheels as tall as the boy. The bed of the cart was a simple box with walls tall enough to keep most things from toppling off.

Dillon slipped from behind the handle—a thick wooden bar stretched between two bars attached to the front of the box, far enough forward the boy could stand between handle and box—and moved to the back of the cart. He quickly and efficiently tipped the bed so it was practically touching the ground and managed to topple my trunk onto the cart bed without spilling the whole lot. The valises fit neatly on either side of the trunk.

He reclaimed his position behind the handle and pulled the cart up the ramp, gesturing for me to follow. We paused at the top of the ramp and I moved up beside the cart, surreptitiously checking the latches on the smaller valise, assuring they were slightly loose. That valise was doing double duty, serving as both a bearer of my belongings as well as providing a mode of travel for one of my new companions.

“Where to?” Dillon asked.

The fog had thickened during my search for further aid and now obscured much of our environment beyond the immediate surroundings. We appeared to be on a street or perhaps in a loading area. It was difficult to tell. Men of all shapes, sizes, and mode of dress ghosted in and out of the fog, going about their various businesses. Except for Dillon, there were no children, at least none in sight. A testimony to the newness of the town?

With a sigh I reached into the silk reticule dangling from my wrist and tugged free a sheet of well-worn paper. For the umpteenth time I read my mother’s instructions.

“I’m to meet my . . .” Reluctant to let the world know I was off to meet my mother, I hesitated for a brief second before continuing. “. . . *friends* at The Niantic Hotel,” I said, folding the paper and tucking it back in my reticule.

The boy squinted as if about to question my decision, then decided better of it. Without another word, he took hold of the cart’s handle and pushed off into the fog.

With my left hand, I fingered the reassuring bulk of a diminutive firearm pressed against the underside of my right forearm. The derringer was fitted to a sliding mechanism that had been strapped to my forearm. In theory, the derringer would valiantly spring into my palm with a

simple flick of my wrist.

The mechanism was a product of an ongoing experiment that had been loaned to me by a friend. Unfortunately, every time I tried to use the contraption—barring the initial practice session with the mechanism’s creator—things had not gone well.

That did not mean the infernal contraption wouldn’t work the next time I tried it, however.

Hup, hup, chin up, Miss Beauregard—head mistress at my finishing school—would say.

Assured that I was as prepared as I could be, I followed after the boy, forcing confidence into my steps. Where my confidence was feigned, Dillon’s confidence seemed born of experience. The lanky boy worked his way through the press of unwashed bodies, creaking wagons, and sweating horses without hesitation—through fog so dense I lost all sense of direction as gray murk consumed the entire waterfront.

This was not my first encounter with fog. Far from it. London fog, however, had been more . . . sinuous. More fluid. Eerie and secretive, as fogs often are. But somehow—lighter.

The fog currently enveloping San Francisco and the entire bay weighed heavy in lungs and on skin. The moistness stank of dead fish and sea instead of coal fumes, though faint traces of burning coal trickled through the fog like drool down a drunken sailor’s chin. Underlying the odiferous miasma bubbled the hauntingly familiar aroma of horse dung.

“Watch yer step, ma’am,” Dillon warned as we reached the end of the wooden walkway.

Then the boy stepped off . . .

Into a river of seemingly endless mud.

Chapter Two

AFTER AN HOUR of studious slogging—there appeared to be more water in the so-called streets than beneath the ship I'd left behind earlier in the day, only the water now caressing my ankles was mixed with the most noxious mud I'd ever had the displeasure of encountering—we still hadn't reached the establishment where my mother expected to find me.

Where she *had* expected to find me, at least.

A month ago.

I wasn't going to dwell on my tardiness. Not now. Mother had made the plans, after all. I had simply followed them.

"How much further?" I asked.

"Should be 'bout there," Dillon mumbled.

So we slogged on.

The fog grew impossibly thick, hanging in the air like a phantasm seeking the grave. I'd assumed the stench would disappear as we put more distance between ourselves and the water. Unfortunately, that assumption was erroneous. Whatever held the fog encapsulated around the city kept every smell—be it fish carcass, week-old sock, or mule droppings—locked in with it.

Luckily, I had packed three vials of rose water and two of lavender, enough to keep my delicate senses appeased—for the time being.

I sniffed the rose-scented kerchief tucked into my left sleeve and sighed, trying to dismiss the tiny seed of anxiety sitting in my stomach. It was early spring, daylight was almost gone, and I still hadn't located my mother. Light bled from the fog-drenched sky, rapidly shifting from muted gray to gunmetal gray which would soon give way to gray-black. The once-busy streets seemed deserted.

Apparently, the denizens of this grand town were all at home, more than likely preparing for supper.

Except, of course, for those who indulged in activities prudently ignored by Proper Persons of Society. Judging by the ribald laughter, raucous music, and occasional scream that managed to penetrate the water-laden air, we were now such a section of town, an area no lady, especially a Lady of Society, wanted to spend the night in.

Was this a challenge, then? Was Mother testing me to see if I was—finally—worthy of her consideration?

Mother wouldn't be worried about my safety, of course. The woman could locate the tiniest worm in the middle of the jungle if she so desired. I had no doubt she knew I was safe—for the moment—despite my ship having arrived almost a month behind schedule.

Yes, Mother knew exactly where I was and how uncomfortable my current predicament was proving to be. Failing to meet me at the docks was her way of punishing me.

In Mother's eyes, I was late. No matter that she had made the arrangements or that I had no control over the weather. When Mother makes plans, she expects those plans to be followed to the letter—or someone will pay.

You see, Mother is a Necromancer and a Sorceress of the Highest Order. She does not belong to any alliances or leagues or guilds. Mother does as she pleases and expects everyone around her to hop like a cloud of grasshoppers when she speaks. One does *not* want to make her angry. Not if one values one's person.

In my experience—experience based on having survived Mother's company for over twelve years—there are three things that send the woman into a blinding rage. Being late is one of them.

Talking back is another. I learned *that* lesson at a very young age. All it took was one little "No" and suddenly I was watching my nose melt off my face. Of course, Mother put my nose back where it belonged, but not before my young mind—I was three at the time—had decided that a) no one could ever love a noseless child, and b) I would never have to smell Mother's cooking again. One realization broke my heart; the other gave me hope.

That hope was dashed when Mother restored my nose to its prominent position.

The experience solidified into Surviving Mother, Rule #1: Never say no to a sorceress.

I held the rose-scented kerchief to my nose and breathed deep, dismissing the memories and longing for brisk, clean ocean air and the sunshine promised by advertisements the world over. Sunshine that would, more than likely, never materialize. Every passing minute confirmed my growing suspicions that here in San Francisco—newly dubbed by me as the Land of Fog, Mud,

and Misery—dreary weather held rule.

Not so different from England, really, only London's fog was even more disgusting, being infused with coal smoke and the rank stench of rotting sewage. I had looked forward to getting away from all the dreary druffle that London called weather, looked forward to sun that actually shone long enough to dry things out.

If the state of goo sucking greedily at my boots was any indication, the sun had been absent from this not-so-fair city for months. Not so different from London, then.

At least London had cobblestone streets . . .

and cutthroats . . .

and plague . . .

Suddenly it felt like my collar was too tight. I reached up and ran a finger around the stiff lace, then let my hand linger in the hollow of my throat, feeling the reassuring presence of the pendant nestled beneath my woolen cape.

I'd had that pendant for as long as I could remember, a gift from Mother (who claimed she'd gotten it from *her* mother) with the admonition to always keep it safe. It reminded me of a metal cage, really. Protecting a thumb-sized vial containing an odd green liquid with something *mysterious* hidden inside. I loved to play with it when I was younger, imagining the pendant contained all sorts of strange creatures swimming around inside. As I grew older, it became a source of comfort, security.

I had promised my young self that someday I would figure out how to release those creatures from the pendant, and then, during my time of greatest need, they would sweep out to protect me—most likely from Mother.

The pendant was with me always, more of a talisman than a necklace to my way of thinking. I'd briefly considered leaving the pendant behind when Mother shipped me off to finishing school in London, locking the heirloom someplace safe, but the very thought had made my stomach turn into a twisted knot and so the pendant had gone to finished school with me.

It had come in handy whilst I was in London—the pendant, not the twisted-knot stomach—especially while I was struggling to figure out how to fit in with the other girls. Just touching the vial—feeling the familiarity, the warmth—helped calm my rattled nerves.

Finishing school was where I had learned how to deport myself with feminine propriety. Where I had become a Proper Lady of Society.

Where I'd learned how beneficial a rose-scented kerchief could be—

I stopped woolgathering, breathed courage and fresh air from the perfumed kerchief, and called to Dillon. The boy stood in front of the handcart, looking small beneath the pile of luggage. The handcart was slowly being swallowed by the muck in much the same manner as a snake swallowing its prey. I likely should have found someone with a bit more bulk to haul my worldly possessions through the city.

In spite of his dark skin, the boy looked almost as washed out as the fog. His chin drooped to his chest, leaving only the top of his hat rising behind the mound of luggage. The boy probably needed my coin, but I should have simply given him a proper donation and then hired a man used to hauling belongings through man-eating mud up and down these man-eating streets.

From within the mound of luggage, a pair of tiny black eyes twinkled beneath the lid of my valise. I shook my head and the eyes disappeared from sight. A dull *snick!* reached my ears as the valise closed, seemingly of its own accord.

I smiled to myself. No need to let Dillon know he had a passenger as well as the luggage, even if said passenger was small enough to fit inside the smallest piece of luggage in the pile.

No matter. Time was wasting, and I still had to find Mother.

Surviving Mother, Rule #2: Never keep a sorceress waiting.

A rule I had—through no fault of my own—definitely broken.

Before I could ask the oft-repeated question regarding our anticipated arrival time, an apparition materialized to one side of the cart without so much as a whisper. The illusion had me quite puzzled in spite of the fact I was well versed in matters of disappearance and illusion, having personally experienced both during Mother's regularly scheduled practice sessions.

“and over the Golden Pea,” the apparition demanded.

Golden pea? Did the man mean a peculiar member of the pea family? Or a pea made of real gold?

Startled speechless, I studied the apparition who had magically appeared. A whiff of the odor emanating from his person convinced me this was not an apparition, but a giant of a man at least six and a half feet tall with shoulders that looked like they belonged on an ox. He wore a coat that appeared more sack than apparel and a loose set of trousers tucked into knee-high boots.

It was obvious this man hadn't been to see a tailor in quite some time which gave me a good

idea of his worth.

Dillon, poor soul, took one look at the man standing before me and dropped the handcart's handle, squeaking one word, "Hounds!" before scuttling off through the mud as fast as he could unstick his feet. The fog rapidly swallowed the sound of his slurp, slurping up the street, leaving alone with the demanding apparition. I thought I heard the boy call out from somewhere up the street, but couldn't make out a word he was saying.

"I'm afraid I haven't a clue as to what you're on about," I said, not bothering to keep the exasperation from my voice.

"Come on, lady. 'and it over."

I tensed my right arm, reassured by the feel of metal against skin, and decided to wait until the last possible moment before once again putting the mechanism to the test. If I could puzzle out precisely *what* the man was looking for, I might be able to end this strange confrontation without further conflict.

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I glanced at the cart that had unceremoniously been left behind. Nowhere amidst the tumble of valise and trunk was there a golden pea. Unless I had a second—very tiny—stowaway.

The man reached out a hand. Even in the dimming light I could see the hand was as dirty as the rest of the man.

I forestalled his action by raising a hand of my own, bringing the hidden weapon into position. I held my breath, waiting to see if it would be necessary to deploy the derringer, but determined to make the infernal contraption work if it was needed.

Whether the man sensed the strength of my resolve or caught a whiff of lavender-scented cloth, I'll probably never know. He did, however, cease his attempt to soil my person with his less-than-spotless hands.

I took a breath and loosened the drawstring of the reticule dangling from my wrist, stuck my hand deep into the silken folds, and felt around.

There *had* been plenty of stowaways on board—from cockroaches to rats to several cats I'd conspired to hide from the captain, thinking the man would throw the felines overboard only to find the cats, when they were discovered, turned out to be more welcome than any of the passengers. They took care of the rats, you see. Or so went the current mode of thinking.

I'd made friends with all the cats, most of the rats, and a few of the cockroaches, though I

thought I'd left most of the cats, rats, and cockroaches behind on the ship—except for the rat in my valise who had been reluctant to part with my personables.

One of the cats and a very special friend had left the ship in the care of the other three women who had shared our voyage around the Horn. I had promised to look them all up after I had *reunited* with Mother.

During my time on board the *SS Raven* I had learned never to assume anything. Items disappeared from my person, then reappeared somewhere else. No magic involved. Just a lot of mischief, more than likely perpetrated by sailors with nothing better to do.

There *was* a chance something had snuck or had been snuck into my reticule without my knowledge, more than likely a cockroach or two.

The rat who refused to say his goodbyes and was currently taking up space in my valise was about the size of my hand—not counting his tail, of course. Needless to say, I was more than aware of his presence.

Said rat was unique in that he was black and white instead of all brown or all black. He could also talk—which had come as quite a surprise, surprise that had dwindled when he had confessed to being a kobold during one of our shipboard adventures. Kobold or rat, he was quite a bit larger than a pea as were all of his relatives.

And none of them had been golden.

I kept my facial expression serene while inwardly I cringed at the thought that one or more of the ship's cockroaches might have decided my reticule was the most appropriate method of getting themselves to land. If so, maybe the cockroaches had kidnapped this pea. I'd heard of stranger things.

Finally, I pulled my hand from the reticule and tightened the drawstring, relieved to find nothing more disturbing than an old lint ball that made my heart skip a beat when my fingers first encountered it. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, sir. There's not a pea—golden or otherwise—to be found on my person or in my luggage."

Another ruffian—looking like the first man's twin, only shorter and broader—stepped out of the fog, parting the heavy mist like an actor parted a curtain. "She givin' ya trouble, mate?"

And here I'd thought the fog blanketing this unruly city—if San Francisco could even be called a city—was a somewhat normal ground-hugging cloud, consisting of nothing more than tiny droplets of water suspended in the air like a horde of hungry mosquitoes.

I was coming to realize the fog was more of an airborne river, oozing down mud-lined streets and depositing hoodlums in its wake. A very real, very noxious living sludge that not only clogged a person's lungs, it played havoc with a lady's hair.

The second man smiled at me, a mirthless grimace that revealed teeth blacker than a coalman's stove. "Could be she's needin' a bit 'o convincin'."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." I turned to the handcart, intent on gathering my smallest valise and proceeding on my way, but the first hooligan, who had definitely NOT been schooled in the ways of a Proper Person of Society, stepped forward and grabbed my arm in a very unfriendly manner.

"Ya'll not be goin' anywhere until I gets me 'ands on that Pea."

I had had enough of these men and their pea.

"It's only fair to warn you that if I so much as twitch my wrist in a certain manner, a deadly derringer will catapult from its hiding spot under my sleeve directly into the palm of my hand."

My assailant raised an eyebrow. I gave a quick nod, satisfied I had impressed upon him the severity of his situation. Of course, the raised eyebrow could also be an indication that he believed me to be stark raving mad. Either way, he would have been close to the truth.

"I strongly suggest you release me before my hand decides to get nervous." I twisted my arm, the arm I needed to free in order to use the derringer. The more I thought about what I was attempting, the more I realized it took someone who had completely lost her mind to put her faith—and her life—in an infernal contraption without having practiced enough to assure at least a modicum of success.

On the other hand, the device *had* been impressive in the demonstration I'd witnessed during my stopover in New York. Just because it hadn't functioned in an appropriate manner whilst on board the *Raven* did not mean it wouldn't function now that both feet were planted safely on land.

"Sure, we'll be lettin' ya go. *After* ya cough up that little pea." His partner moved up on the other side as the not-so-gentle man yanked me closer and smiled. A charming smile reminiscent of a boar that had just caught scent of fresh slop headed his way and was in porcine heaven.

Time to extricate myself from what was rapidly becoming a very uncomfortable situation.

Feet slurping in the mud, I executed a neat pirouette, swinging my incarcerated arm down and out to the side, breaking my assailant's grip, and freeing the derringer's slide. Without

hesitation, I performed a reverse pirouette, dancing—or rather, slogging—out of arm’s reach of both men.

If Miss Beauregard, who had filled the shoes of dance instructor as well as head mistress, could only see me now. She had long been frustrated that I would never learn the steps to the various waltzes—the Viennese, the minuet, the quadrille in all its varied forms, even the gallop and the polka—she had taught them all. What she hadn’t understood was that I had learned the proper steps long ago. I just hadn’t appreciated how those useful those steps could be—until now.

Freed from the leech’s grasp, I snapped my wrist to release the derringer, keeping a cool smile on my face, expecting to feel the tiny gun slide into my hand, cold and slick as pond ice in winter.

It took only a second to realize that the pond ice had suffered an early melt, leaving me pointing my empty trigger finger at the men like a mother about to admonish her sons.

“Not sure what kinda games yer playin’, lady.” The surprised look that flashed momentarily across my opponent’s face was once again replaced by that boorish look of anticipation. I gave another not-so-subtle flick of my wrist. Still nothing.

Time to pursue my next option.

“I will give you the pea,” I said, gracefully wrapping my arm about my waist so I could unobtrusively fiddle with the release mechanism whilst keeping my opponent occupied with my sharp and witty verbal sparring. The reticule dangling from my left wrist bumped against my stomach as I tugged at the slide mysteriously trapped beneath my right sleeve. “However, you must do something for me in return.”

“Wat makes ya think yer gots anythin’ to bargain wit?” the second man said, though his accent was so heavy as to be nearly indecipherable. Uncertain how to reply, I chose instead to ignore the comment. I rubbed at my wrist as if it were sore, finally freeing the spring snagged on a thread and making the under-sleeve device functional once again. Triumphant, I pointed my hand at the closest hoodlum’s head and flicked my wrist.

A tiny *ping!* erupted from my sleeve, followed by a rather alarming ripping sound.

I glanced down at my arm and stared in horrified fascination at the gap in my sleeve. The derringer had stopped its journey halfway between my wrist and my hand and sat there as if awaiting further instructions.

Hoodlum Number One squinted as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

Good then. I had him right where I wanted him—as uncertain and frightened as a rabbit caught devouring a carrot in Her Majesty's Royal Garden.

“Now, why . . . don't you . . . go . . . on . . . your . . . way.” I tugged at the derringer, struggling to get the blasted thing into firing position. I glared at the reticule banging back and forth as I wiggled the tiny gun on its slide.

If all else failed, I could bludgeon the hoodlum into unconsciousness with my reticule, in which case it would behoove me to rename the accoutrement: the Reticule of Immobility.

Hoodlum Number One sought to take advantage of the situation by rushing me in a frontal assault, a move I adeptly averted by letting the hand attached to the infernal mechanism droop out of the way and using my rather awkward left hand to thumb back the hammer. Not a pretty maneuver, but the noise was enough to bring said hoodlum to a stop so I could continue fiddling, switching from poking and prodding to forcefully shoving the derringer forward with my left hand.

After an eternity or two, the reluctant beast popped free and slipped into position, but not before delivering a severe pinch to the sensitive tissue between the thumb and forefinger of my opposite hand, at which point Newton's Third Law—for every action there is an exact and opposite reaction—abruptly came into play, causing my trigger finger to contract at the same time a few choice epithets I had picked up from the crew of the *Raven* spewed from my lips.

Though the derringer was tiny, it produced a dramatic flash along with a rather loud *pop!* as the firing mechanism engaged, causing my ears to ring from the unexpected assault.

I'm not quite certain whether it was the shot careening through the fog—somehow managing to bounce off a bucket, a wheel hub, and what might have been a spittoon—until the bullet simply collapsed, exhausted, in the mud, or whether I had finally hit upon a language the hoodlums understood, but when I recovered my composure along with a portion of my dignity, both men had disappeared.

“All right, then.” I forced the derringer along its slide until the diminutive weapon was once again hidden beneath my sleeve. As luck would have it, the device was more cooperative in the retirement phase than it had been during the deployment phase, else I might have abandoned it then and there. Besides serving as a delivery mechanism, the slide kept the hot barrel from directly touching my skin.

I tugged at the edges of my torn sleeve. The derringer had not only sliced through the fabric, the device had managed to snag several strands of thread and drag them along with it, unraveling the sliced edges and leaving behind a nest of mangled fabric in its wake.

It was time to face reality—the device had been rendered utterly useless, as had my sleeve. Both had suffered a near-fatal catastrophe. More than likely device and sleeve were equally salvageable, but further repairs would have to wait until after I found Mother.

Most of the light had fled from the sky, turning the fog into a soggy darkness filled with hazy shapes, disconcerting textures, eerie sensations, and throat-clogging smells.

Another foray into my imposing Reticule of Immobility produced a hollow metal stick about the size of an average man's middle finger. I held one end of the stick and rapidly tapped the other end against my leg until the end of the stick itself began to softly glow. Another of my friend's "experiments" that had needed field testing.

This one most definitely worked. I had used it numerous times on board the *Raven*. I had even given the captain a demonstration, after which he requested that I only use the stick in cases of dire emergency, there being more than enough lighting strategically positioned about the ship.

The other three women on board had been delighted when I revealed the light stick, though the oldest one had looked at me wisely when I repeated the captain's words.

"Bad enough 'aving women on board, them being bad luck and all. But a woman who kin do somethin' what looks like magic's a witch for certain and a sure sign of impending doom."

I had assured the women that I was the furthest thing there was from a witch (being a sorceress's daughter didn't correlate with anything witchy, mind you) only to find they weren't worried in the least.

"We all gots our talents," the oldest had said, giving me a broad wink.

The stick *was* intriguing. There were no visible seams that would allow access to internal workings, which presented a bit of a conundrum. Fire needed to be fed wood to keep burning, candles and oil lanterns eventually burned themselves out if not refueled, but the stick never seemed to run out of whatever was making it glow. The glow would fade if the stick wasn't kept active by tapping it now and again, but the glow always brightened the next time it was tapped.

My one and only friend prior to finishing school had been one Owen Funk—a Dabblers in the Arts of Mechanical Convenience, as he called himself. I made a mental note to ask Owen, creator of both stick and derringer device, what kept the stick illuminated and lifted the now-

glowing stick to find myself once again surrounded . . . by creepy, gray fog.

At least I could see the mud sucking at my ankles.

I heaved an audible sigh and slurped toward the cart, almost tripping over the next specter who materialized before me, the muck having provided no audible warning of his approach. I quickly tucked the light stick into the folds of my skirt, unwilling to call the attention of a total stranger to the experimental device.

“Oh,” I said, feigning dismay. I stared forlornly at the mud. “That was my last match.”

It was the best explanation I could come up with on the spur of the moment—for the vanishing light, that is.

There was still enough illumination oozing through the fog that I could see the look of incredulity on the man’s face. He stopped beside the cart and eyed the luggage that had endured heavy seas and frigid storms only to end up perched in a handcart that was inexorably sinking into the mud.

The man’s wool topcoat sported clean lines and his bowler, though perched at a rakish angle, looked to be new. His face—what I could see of it—was clean-shaven, his hair neatly trimmed, and, more importantly, he smelled faintly of chrysanthemums and . . . hyacinths? . . . instead of manure and dead fish.

All in all, this new arrival appeared to have all the qualities of a Proper Person of Society.

I gave him a sharp nod. “If you will direct me to the Niantic Hotel, sir, I would greatly appreciate it.”

The man looked me over from head to toe, and again I was aware of the tightness of the collar around my neck.

Chapter Three

THANKFULLY, MY NEW guide proved to be a man with navigational skills and intimate knowledge of the morass that had the audacity to call itself a street.

“Watch your step, Mademoiselle,” the newcomer said with an accent that suggested the man *might* be French. “Ze road is ze worst I have ever seen it. Only last week, three entire wagons were swallowed by ze mud. You are lucky, there is now a layer of brush and branches filling in ze holes and giving ze peepke something to walk on. Unfortunately, some spots swallow up ze branches like ze snake swallows ze mouse. Turns ze slippery mud into ze death trap.”

A chill ran across my skin that had nothing to do with the fog.

Mother and I had spent six months in France before she had decided to send me to finishing school. If this man was French—a possibility intimated by his accent but not by his syntax—I was, as the saying went, a monkey’s aunt.

I did not, unfortunately, have the luxury of grilling the man.

“Thank you for the warning,” I said. I nodded at my disconsolate pile of baggage. One wheel of the handcart was sunk halfway to the hub, causing the entire pile to tilt. I noted, with more than a little despair, that my precious trunk was close to taking a nose dive. “I’m afraid my porter deserted me, though I can’t say I blame the poor boy. Do you know someone . . .”

“Your bags are safe for ze time being. Ze Niantic is only a short distance away. There are plenty of peepke who will be happy to lend ze hand. For ze price, *mais non?*”

Torn between not wanting to leave my larger bags unattended in this land forgotten by law and civilization alike and not wanting to be left behind myself, I surreptitiously tucked the light stick back into my reticule, securely fastened the latches on my small valise—the one that was also occupied—and took the valise in hand. I gave the handcart a frustrated—and very unladylike—kick, then scurried after my rapidly disappearing guide.

Or rather, I tried to scurry. Suffice to say I made progress, lifting my skirts as high as

possible with one hand while holding the valise in the other hand for balance and slurp, slurping in the general direction of the vanishing guide.

After what felt like an interminable distance but was more than likely a mere ten steps or so, I found a set of “stepping stones” I hadn’t noticed before.

The first “stone” squooshed instead of squished when I stepped on it and a foul smell twisted my stomach. Not a stone then. A sack of potatoes. Extremely rotten potatoes, judging by the stench.

A corner of the bag disappeared into the muck as I teetered in the center, trying to balance on a mound that should have been buried months ago. The valise in my hand refused to cooperate, shifting weight from one side to the other and causing the handle to twist in my hand.

“Hush.” I shifted the valise so I was holding it in both arms. “Unless you want me to dump you into the muck along with everything else.”

The valise immediately stopped scritchng. “Are you following him, then? Why are you following him? I hate it when I can’t see.”

Even though muffled, the voice managed to convey a sense of teenage vexation even though—to my rather-limited knowledge—the rat who belonged to the voice was long past his teenage years.

I stepped from the disappearing sack onto what appeared to be the top of a barrel. Now the challenge was not so much a matter of balancing on half-dead potatoes, but rather keeping my feet from sliding off the slippery wood.

Picturing myself back on the *Raven*, I drew upon my sailing experience. Balance was key to getting around on the slippery decks, striving to maintain flexibility in the knees and hips in order to absorb the ship’s movement. After accumulating a set of bruises more befitting someone engaged in the art of fisticuffs than a Proper Lady of Society, I had finally mastered the art of absorbing the movement of the ship rather than fighting it.

Ahoy had witnessed it all—without saying a word.

I had known Ahoy for months before he revealed his true nature—that he was a kobold in rat’s clothing. He could have chosen any form he wanted, but decided a rat suited his nature. He could also disappear and reappear at will.

I was quite certain he could do more, being a magical creature, but the little rat refused to demonstrate the rest of his abilities.

The barrel lid tipped as I stepped to the next “stone.” I let go of the valise with one hand, flailing to keep my balance with the other. After a moment spent beating the fog in what looked to be a vain attempt at avoiding a mud bath, I regained my balance and returned to a more dignified, upright position. I took a deep breath, adjusted my composure, then rapped on the valise.

“You’re the magical one,” I hissed. “Why don’t you just magic us out of this mess?”

He couldn’t, of course. We had already discussed this.

Mother was somewhere close by. She had to be. Any use of magic would draw her attention just as surely as the proverbial moth was drawn to a flame, only the moth in this case was a death’s head hawk-moth, the size of a raven, capable of devouring an entire beehive in one sitting while Ahoy was a single bee.

Yes, I was trying to find Mother. No, I did not want Mother to feast on my friends, rat or otherwise.

“You are more *magical* than I,” Ahoy said. “You just refuse to admit it.”

I jiggled the valise hard as if about to drop it, suddenly furious. I forced myself to remember that I had been the one to bring the subject up. Struggling to maintain my composure, I tamped down my fury and regained a semblance of mental equilibrium. Ahoy, rat that he was, had only capitalized on the opportunity I had presented him with. Or so I reasoned.

We had had the “you have magic” discussion only once during what I had dubbed The Eternal Voyage. Ahoy insisted that I possessed much the same abilities as my mother. I counter-insisted that it did not matter. I was *not* like my mother, nor would I ever be.

End of subject.

Discussions concerning magic of any kind tended to set my teeth on edge. Implication that I was in any way “magical” set me off like an unplanned fire in a fireworks factory. Throughout my rather *unusual* childhood, Mother had force-fed me various lessons, forcing me to witness events a child should never realize are even possible as she demonstrated her own form of power.

I had resisted the only way I knew how—by learning just enough to avoid losing body parts.

Out of all those lessons, there was one lesson I took to heart: magic—especially Mother’s kind of magic—corrupted a person, drawing them deeper into a darkness from which there was no return.

Just as it had done with Mother.

I was *not* going to follow in Mother's footsteps. End of discussion.

Something snapped beneath my feet. The mud gurgled and I experienced the odd sensation that the world was sinking. I glared down at the mud and sighed.

"Perhaps Mother *did* send someone to pick me up," I mumbled. "And that someone was swallowed alive by the muck."

"Pardon me?" said the valise. "I missed that last part."

It really was rather odd talking to a valise.

"Never mind," I said, resisting the urge to spring the lock and dump Ahoy into the muck. After all, he deserved to suffer as much as I did, did he not?

I stepped from the pile of muddy sticks onto what appeared to be a box of tobacco leaves and started when I spotted a figure in the darkness not far ahead.

"I thought California was supposed to be sunny and warm all the time," I said, raising my voice in order to be heard by my guide.

"Ze rains are a little heavy this year. We just broke one of ze longest dry spells in history with one of the wettest winters—according to the local tribes." He took another step, turned, and held out his hand, waiting for me to catch up. I moved from the box to another pile of sticks, then froze, gaping at the fur he was standing on. The shape bulged at the top, like maybe there was more to the package than met the eye. It had a peculiar shape, quite possibly because it had once been living.

"Is that a . . . a . . ." I swallowed. "Is it dead?"

"Oui," the man said. "It is definitely dead. It is my old . . . how you say? . . . rug."

"Smells like a dead bear," Ahoy said, his muffled voice suddenly clear.

"One more word and you'll be joining the bear," I growled through my teeth, then smiled at my guide who again looked perplexed.

"Just talking to myself," I said by way of explanation. "It's a family tradition."

The man shook his head and moved on, withdrawing the proffered assistance. I sighed. It would be rather difficult for him to take one of my hands, since one was filled with skirts while the other was holding the valise.

Relieved I wasn't treading upon the carcasses of half-swallowed mules and horses, I stepped onto the rug, mentally berating the person who had gotten me into this mess in the first place.

Mother.

The woman had sent a letter via a very elite messenger service, demanding my appearance and setting out all the details of my trip. *My dearest Abigail*, the letter had started.

That's when I knew the news was not going to be pleasant. I hate being called Abigail and Mother knows it.

Accompanying the letter was a ticket for a berth on the good ship *SS Raven*—a three-masted steamship that claimed to be able to navigate any type of weather, windy or calm, due to its combination of sails and paddlewheels, a vessel that looked, smelled, and lumbered through water like it had been around since the Roman Empire—along with strict instructions to proceed directly to the Niantic Hotel upon reaching San Francisco.

Granted, our ship was almost a month behind schedule, as I've mentioned, but Mother had ways of keeping tabs on me. As such, I was not worried that she would be worried. Although I was beginning to question her sanity.

Why would a woman who had the entire world at her beck and call choose to reside in this muddy slice of Hell?

Why hadn't she stayed someplace civil, like New York?

I froze as a thought occurred to me—was it possible that New York had an organization similar to London's famed League of Extraordinary Sorcerers, an organization that oversaw both sorcerers and sorceresses within the city's confines?

Mother had butted heads with the League one time—that I know of—and they hadn't been able to force her to abide by their regulations. The confrontation had taken a lot out of Mother, though, and she had stayed away from London from then on, virtually abandoning me there when she'd sent me away to school.

It was possible that New York had presented Mother with a similar predicament—

“Are we there?” the valise asked. “Is that why all the jouncing and jolting has stopped?”

I scowled and tried to focus.

My guide had faded from sight once again, leaving me wrapped in damp, odiferous fog with no idea which way to go. I shivered and hugged the valise to my chest. If the air grew any chillier, all this fog would become snow, I was quite certain of it.

Not only was I cold, but I could hardly see. Night had come on with a vengeance, extinguishing all natural light . . .

And then it grew impossibly dark.

The skin on the back of my neck tightened and the breath caught in my throat. I shoved the valise under my arm and fumbled for the light stick in my reticule, panic wrapped around my chest tighter than an ill-laced corset.

There was only one person who could obliterate light in such a manner.

“Mother?”

I had meant to sound challenging, determined. Instead, my voice was that of a small child, timid with scarcely any volume. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Mother!”

This time I managed to squeak instead of quake.

Squeak or quake—the night remained black as a sealed tomb.

Without air. Without life—

“Not sure why you stopped,” the valise said. “I could use a bit of a break, though. Open the lid. Let in some air. That sort of nonsense.”

I blinked. The fog was back in all its nightly glory, dark, but not impossibly so. A yellow halo glowed somewhere ahead. A light, then. Illuminating some form of establishment, preferably the Niantic Hotel.

“There you go again,” I said, pleased to hear my voice had also returned to normal. “Ruining the moment.”

“Moment? What moment? Were you having a *moment* without me?”

“Don’t be silly.” I said absently. “You were at my side during the entire momentous *event*.”

Whatever that event had been.

I returned the light stick to my reticule, releasing the stick from the death grip that left my fingers aching, and took stock of the situation.

Not Mother, then. Mother would surely have shown herself if only to prove whatever point she had been trying to make.

“Hello? *Monsieur*?”

The fog swallowed my words.

Mother or my all-too-vivid imagination, it didn’t matter. I couldn’t stand here in the mud and fog all night, hoping the Niantic Hotel would miraculously appear before me.

I tucked the valise snugly into the crook of my left arm, lifted my skirts as high as possible in my relatively free hand, and took an enormous step. With any luck, my foot would find

something other than mud to land on.

My foot complied with my wishes, and—fortunately—landed on another pile of branches. One more enormous step found us perched atop what appeared to be a wheel hub.

“Someone should give you lessons in valise carrying,” Ahoy said. “This certainly wins the award for the Most Erratic, Bumpy, Jostle-the-Teeth-Loose journey.”

I ignored the little rat.

“Are we there, then?” I called, managing to keep my voice somewhat mellow and serene, an illusion I maintained for several more steps. I squinted over my right shoulder, back the way I had come, wondering if perhaps I was headed in the wrong direction.

“*Mai oui*, mademoiselle. We have arrived.”

I almost melted into the mud at the sound of the now-familiar voice. I hopped from the last bit of flotsam I had been tottering on and found myself standing on the edge of a wooden platform. In the center of the platform stood our guide.

“Thank goodness,” I started, but all words—along with the immense sense of relief—fled like a fox being chased by hounds at the sight of an enormous dark shadow looming in the fog beyond the platform.

Our guide didn’t appear to notice. He gave a nod, turned on his heel, and mounted the wooden plank extending upward from the platform. Without a backward glance, he opened a door, flooding the fog with noise and light.

The light, though limited in scope, revealed the dark shadow wasn’t simply a shadow, but the prow of an enormous ship. I stared at the ship, feeling disoriented and dull-witted.

Had we circled back to the docks, then?

Before I could confirm we had, indeed, reached our intended destination, the guide slipped inside, closing the door and taking the light with him.

Had I been duped?

I had, after all, followed a complete stranger through the muddy streets of a strange city. Was it time to pay the price? Was I about to be shanghaied?

I yanked the light stick from my reticule, thumped it against my leg, and glanced around, half expecting a group of ruffians to appear out of the fog, truss me up like a pig for slaughter, and haul me off to China.

It took a moment of slow, steady breathing before sanity returned and with it, the realization

that we had not returned to the docks. Frame buildings, built on solid ground—as solid as ground could be in all this mud—squatted to either side of the ship. The light I had seen earlier seemed to be emanating from one of those buildings.

Perhaps I should seek refuge where the light was?

I lifted the light stick and noticed a sign painted high on the ship's hull, letters large enough I could make them out even in the foggy night.

Niantic Hotel. Rest for the Weary and Storage for Trunks

Storage for trunks?

The world had quite definitely gone mad.

I gathered what traces of fortitude I had left and lifted my chin. Time to see what mischief my mother had wrought.

“We’re here. Stay quiet now.” I gave the valise a rap with my knuckles to emphasize my words. “I’ll let you know when it’s safe to converse.”

I hefted the valise, tucked the light stick back into the reticule and verified that my reticule was securely attached to my wrist. Satisfied that all was in order, I raised my chin and stalked up the plank.

The door swung open before I had a chance to knock. I stepped inside and the stench of unwashed bodies drowned in sour wine assaulted my nose like a hungry shark.

Not only was the room more crowded than an overstuffed satchel, someone was attempting to play music and failing miserably. A bar stretched along the back wall, the details of which were hard to discern through the mass of humanity crowding the space just beyond the door. Men packed the room—short, tall, round, scrawny, young, old. Most were dressed in the same fashion as the ruffians who had accosted me, though a few were well-dressed with a scant handful barely dressed at all.

Some of the men sat at the large round tables scattered around the room. Those not sitting—a majority of the occupants—stood around the tables, transfixed by what appeared to be various card games. A cheer rose from one corner of the room while groans and grumbles rose from another.

In all that cacophony, I failed to catch sight of the man who had led me here.

Slowly I became aware that the noise had died to an almost nonexistent level. Every eye in the room was fastened on me. And every single one of those eyes was male.

Chapter Four

I ONCE WALKED through a horde of angry hornets. I didn't have a choice; it had been one of Mother's lessons. Not only had she angered the hornets just for me, she sent a very grumpy terrier after me as well.

Mother's relationship with the villagers back in England—no matter which village we were living in—was not ideal, at least not in the eyes of the villagers. I believe most of them felt sorry for me. If Mother wasn't around, I didn't lack for food or a shoulder to cry on when I managed to be clumsy enough to get hurt.

Mother was not as welcome. In fact, many of the villagers quietly worked to try and drive Mother away. They did not want her in their village.

It wasn't that everyone was *afraid* of Mother. Not then. She didn't *actively* cultivate terror in the villages where we lived. Then again, she didn't let the villagers' opinions deter her, especially when it came to my education.

On the day of this particular *lesson*, Mother had managed to irritate one of our neighbors, an old man who lived with his dog two cottages away from ours. Evidently, he didn't like watching me walk among angry hornets. Mother decided to show him just how impressive my skills had grown.

Staying calm and focused was the objective of the lesson. Without that focus—and the ever-present calm—the hornets would have destroyed me. Not only were they angry, they had been somehow modified by Mother. They were larger in both size and temper than ordinary hornets. Once they had been offended by someone, they stayed on that person's trail. The only thing that satisfied their need for vengeance was death.

Hundreds of hornets could die in the process of obtaining that vengeance, but they didn't seem to care about dying. I had seen them clustered around someone's door in the middle of the night, buzzing and moving about as though it was day. *That* sight will never leave me.

I can still remember the terror threatening to choke me as I walked into the horde. I had to constantly push that terror into hiding as hundreds of buzzing hornets landed on my skin—my cheeks, my nose, even in my hair—where they walked around as if searching for something, then took off when they realized what they sought wasn't there. The light sting of a wing against my cheek, the slight movement of air that lifted an errant strand of hair.

Yes, they had been angry, but I was not their target, so I could, in theory, walk through their midst unharmed.

So I did.

I *was* the terrier's target, however.

One minute I was walking calmly through the horde of raging hornets; the next minute something small with sharp teeth nipped at my heels.

A small gift from Mother, of that much I am certain, though she denies any involvement.

I managed to keep my calm—despite all the angry, buzzing hornets and the threatening stingers and the nipping dog—and walked out the other side of the swarm basically unharmed. The few scrapes on my ankles didn't really count.

Mother had seemed disappointed at first, an expression she rapidly covered up.

Had she been trying to get rid of me?

I had asked her about the lesson several times, trying to figure out just why she decided that particular skill needed practicing. I had exercised calm and focus during numerous situations, many of them more intense than angry hornets. Why create a new lesson? And why send me into such adverse conditions, conditions that could have deadly consequences?

The most I could get out of her was that someday I might have to face something even worse.

Was this the *something worse* Mother had envisioned?

Humans—most of them—could be reasoned with which made the men crowding the room a little less threatening. It was rather disconcerting, however, to be the focus of all those eyes.

At least I didn't have to beg their attention.

I cleared my throat. "I'm looking for a man who might have just passed through here. He was about this tall." I held up my free hand, approximating my defective savior's head height, reticule dangling like an unconscious rabbit from my wrist.

"How much 'e paying ya? I'll double it," a man—with a beard down to his waist!—said

from across the room. Immediately the room erupted in a flurry of bidding.

Not quite the response I had expected.

Once again, my finishing school training proved invaluable. Not only was I proficient in more than three forms of dance, I had a pair of deadly knitting needles hiding beneath Ahoy in the valise clutched to my chest.

Reaching those needles would take time, however. Too much time. Besides, I didn't want to risk losing Ahoy in the midst of all the chaos.

I had two more options in my finishing-school arsenal, the first of which was misdirection. I held up a hand.

Surprisingly enough, the room quieted down.

“Gentlemen. I do believe my escort is willing to share, provided he is well compensated—”

The bidding I had been privy to just a few moments ago had been polite bickering. What I faced now was all-out war.

In a room filled with this many men, my derringer wouldn't be much help. Even if both slide and weapon were to work perfectly, the little gun only had one shot left, the first having been lost in the mud.

That left The Option of Last Resort.

I casually set down the valise, put my foot on the closest chair, and raised my skirt.

It took a moment for the men to realize what was happening, but soon enough the bidding frenzy was replaced by blessed silence interrupted by gulps and the occasional sigh.

Working quickly, I slid the garter holding my right stocking in place down my leg and over my disgustingly muddy boot. I smashed the garter into as tight a ball as I could manage and hurled it high over the men's heads.

Time slowed to a snail's pace as every man in the room watched the garter sail through the air, gracefully unfolding along the way.

I gathered my skirts high in one hand, grabbed my valise in the other . . .

And dashed back out the door.

A BRIEF BACKWARD glance revealed the garter still at work, distracting most of the men. I yanked the door shut behind me and thumped down the ramp, recently freed stocking sliding down my leg. I stopped before plunging headfirst into the fog, breath freezing in my throat.

Why had that man, a man I had hoped was my savior, abandoned me in a pub filled with men?

And what was I going to do now?

I had gone to the Niantic Hotel as Mother directed—

I bit back a squeal as something brushed against my cheek. Clutching my valise in one hand, my reticule tight in the other, I swung around, prepared to do battle with whoever dared touch me. My makeshift weapons connected with . . . nothing.

A voice in my head, the more practical voice, whispered that the touch had come from my collar. Another voice, one that tended to be more hysterical, was certain the touch had come from Beyond.

I swallowed hard, quelling the fear threatening to turn me into a jabbering idiot. I peered around, squinting to see something, anything.

The fog was different now. Thicker. Oilier. Darker.

My throat tightened until I could scarcely breathe. This *oily* fog was different from the absolute dark I had experienced earlier. I had encountered this particular type of fog once before—during the first night of the cholera outbreak that had enveloped our tiny village of Hill's End almost seven years previous. The night my mother sent me sniffing after a corpse.

There had been magic afoot that night, dark magic.

Mother's magic.

I had been all of ten years old and had just decided to “practice” rebellion. *Mother* wanted me to practice my magic—by finding her a corpse. *I* wanted nothing more than a mug of hot milk and honey.

Mother won of course. Surviving Mother, Rule #1: Never say no, etcetera, etcetera.

So I had ventured forth into the night.

In search of a freshly dead corpse.

With one of Mother's caveats thrown in at the last moment: I could *not* use my eyes.

At the time, I had thought to throw water on the fire of her schemes by only using my oh-so-ordinary nose. But not only did I detest stumbling blindly about in the streets, I could *feel* dark magic lingering nearby, *sense* its intent. I kept telling myself it was my imagination as I sensed my way through the streets, working my way deeper into the poorer section of the village where bodies had been left to rot in doorways and alleys.

The kind of territory my mother preferred for its *recruitment* possibilities.

The deeper into the mews I roamed, the more heightened my senses became. I *heard* rats squeaking and roaches chittering. *Smelled* the stink of feces and old blood.

Felt a man die.

And I felt his return—not to life, to something *other* than life.

He had been dead for precisely fifteen minutes—according to the Emanuel Brothers pocket watch given me in secret by a sympathetic neighbor who had realized I was always late for supper—when he suddenly stumbled to his feet and ambled off through the fog. I had been furious, certain that Mother had followed me when she was supposed to be waiting where I'd left her.

But it hadn't been my mother prowling the streets that night.

It had been something worse . . .

The chill fog swirled again, touching my cheek, curling my hair, reminding me I was in San Francisco, not London. Spidery shivers rippled across my skin.

Had that *something* followed me across the Atlantic Ocean and around the Horn?

The feeling—whatever it had been—passed, leaving me trembling and feeling like an idiotic fool.

I let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding, dug the light stick from my reticule, and gave the stick enough taps to illuminate the fog around me.

No Once Dead bodies stumbling about like blind puppies. No Evil Incarnate.

No Mother.

And the fog appeared to be thinning, not thickening.

In fact, I could feel a light breeze picking up.

I couldn't tell what time it was. Mother had absconded with my pocket watch as soon as she discovered it had been a gift. It hadn't really mattered after I had been sent to finishing school—we always had access to clocks. Which is why I had never taken the time—pun intended—to replace the watch. (Another one of Miss Beauregard's favorite pastimes had been inventing puns, though I've always wondered—does one invent puns or create them?)

To my immense relief, the wooden platform in front of the Niantic was more than a mere platform. The light stick—and the shifting fog—revealed an entire walkway made of wooden planks. I couldn't bring myself to return the light stick to my reticule despite the thinning fog and

a light emerging some distance ahead. Instead, I held the device down by my side, partially hidden by my skirts, somewhat heartened by the ability to see. The firm surface thudding beneath my boots also helped to bolster my confidence.

With only minor trepidation, I made my way further up the street, moving rapidly toward the patch of glowing light.

Directly into the path of a man-sized blob that materialized out of the darkness, standing directly in my path less than a stone's throw ahead.

“Bother.”

No comment from the valise which had been surprisingly silent since that debacle in the Niantic.

I slid the light stick back into my reticule as unobtrusively as possible, chewed my bottom lip, and considered my options.

Returning to the Niantic was *not* one of those options.

Neither was using the infernal derringer that had already failed so miserably.

I gently released the latches on my valise, preparing to reach inside for my knitting needles, then hesitated as two other blobs—roughly the same shape, but varying in size—leapt upon the first, carrying him or her to the ground.

I squinted, trying to make heads or tails out of the goings-on.

The best sight is always hindsight as Miss Beauregard was fond of saying. In hindsight I would have been better served to stay aware of my entire surroundings. As I was trying to see through the fog, someone dropped a potato bag over my head, turning my bleary world stinky black.

Chapter Five

YOU MIGHT BE wondering just how a Proper Lady of Society could tell what kind of bag an assailant has dropped over her head.

I must confess—my sense of smell is rather acute despite the smallness of my nose. That sense has nothing to do with magic yet helps me maintain enough of a “magical” illusion to satisfy Mother.

Concerning the bag in which I currently found my head ensconced and my extraordinary sense of smell—for reasons unknown to myself or to Mother, I need be exposed to a particular scent but once and am thereafter able to identify that same scent, no matter the circumstances.

You might be interested to know that potato bags are not nearly as noxious to the olfactory senses as rotting bodies, but they are not pleasant to smell either. Especially when those bags had recently journeyed across the seas.

Judging by the level of putridity assaulting my olfactory senses—it would take several washings and a good dose of lavender mint to eliminate the stench from my hair—this bag had been at sea for close to six months. I recognized the smell from the last meal served on board the *Raven*. A meal I had gladly surrendered to the shipmate seated next to me.

Finding a smelly potato bag over my head was *not* a situation I had prepared for. I must admit I was stumped for the better part of a minute.

Miss Beauregard had taught us many things in finishing school—Newtonian theory, mathematics, how to knit a scarf in three days—but “What to Do When a Bag is Placed Over Your Head” had not been included in the curriculum.

Instead, she had drilled her students in one of the most important skills a Proper Lady of Society should acquire, namely “When to Faint and Why.”

Fainting was and still is (as far as I am aware) a much more ladylike activity than physically escaping from a potato bag. Coquetry, over-tightened corsets, and heat were among the most

prominent excuses that exploited the Fainting Phenomenon.

In my current predicament, coquetry was out of the question, my corset was far from being over-tightened, and San Francisco was definitely *not* experiencing a heat wave.

There was no reason, however, why I couldn't utilize the Fainting Phenomenon to wiggle my way out of what was proving to be a very uncomfortable situation.

For too many years, I have belabored my petite stature—I blame my lack of height on Mother's constant belittling during my formative years—whilst learning how to utilize both minimal body weight and short height to their fullest advantage.

I put that learning to use immediately.

Without warning, I let my knees collapse, dropping like a pebble to the walkway with the intention of pulling my assailant off balance, at the same time blindly seeking to finish unlatching my valise and gain access to my knitting needles.

Unfortunately, said assailant had a different plan.

The valise was wrenched from my grasp and I—rather inconveniently—found myself airborne before being carelessly tossed over what felt like a very broad shoulder.

Abruptly aborting the attempt to feint with a faint.

In less than a heartbeat, I went from standing on two feet to bouncing around like a proverbial sack of potatoes.

I must say, I gained a whole new respect for the Irish root and a sudden understanding of the reasoning behind the Society for the Prevention of an Unwholesome Diet's desire to eliminate the consummation of potatoes. Had Britons and their associates denied the potato its place in culinary history, my head would not be cocooned in odiferous burlap, leaving me unable to counteract the stench with the scented kerchief tucked up my sleeve.

Of course, the situation could be much worse.

Mulling my current circumstances over like a contented cow was not helping in the least, however. The time had come to take command of the situation.

“Put. Me. Down. This. Instant.” I utilized the most commanding growl in my repertoire. Unfortunately, the growl came out resembling a newborn kitten's mewling rather than an irate lion and did nothing to deter my assailant. He thumped up the walkway, then abruptly turned and began squishing through the mud

I briefly considered pummeling my way out of the situation, but the process of being thrown

over a shoulder had caused the potato bag—large enough to be made into a dress for someone of my stature—to tighten around my entire upper body, preventing further movement on my part. With my legs pinned beneath what I could only assume were massive arms, I was rendered quite motionless.

Not a particularly enjoyable situation.

My captor *had* made one fatal mistake—not all my body parts were rendered immobile.

I took as deep a breath as I could manage with squished lungs and performed a complicated maneuver I had learned from Ahoy during a brief spate of doldrums during our crossing.

I puckered my lips and attempted to whistle.

Yes, rats can whistle, although Ahoy always whistled through his teeth, a skill I could not seem to master. Instead, I whistled with my lips like a man, though, more often than not, my lips refused to cooperate.

After several attempts, a noise that sounded like a cross between a horse snort and a dog whimper spewed into the fog. I winced and tried again, this time managing an almost trumpet-like wail.

My assailant jerked his shoulder, forcing what little air I had left out of my lungs.

“Another peep outta ya and I’ll be having to smack ya upside the head to put ya outta yer—” The sentence broke off as my assailant yelped. “What the . . . ?”

The whistle had two purposes—to distract my assailant and to summon help. I had counted on the ruffian’s uncouth handling of my valise to finish jolting the latches free.

Freeing the contents within.

Apparently, the ruse had worked.

I smiled into the potato bag and waited for my assailant to come to his senses—

A jolt shocked through my midsection, sending air I hadn’t realized I still had exploding from my lungs. Stars sprinkled the darkness. My head spun as another shock jolted through my belly, then another and another and suddenly I realized the spinning in my head wasn’t due to the lack of oxygen, but to the fact that my assailant was leaping and cavorting like a dancer gone mad.

He yelped in my ear like a wounded dog. I stopped jouncing and jolting and hung suspended in midair for an entire—blissful—second before slamming down so hard the potato-bag darkness infiltrated my brain, snuffing out the light of consciousness.

THE NEXT THING I knew something was tickling my nose. I reached up to swipe whatever it was away and found my arms pinned to my sides, a fact that had conveniently slipped my mind.

It took a moment before I realized I was on the ground—back in the blasted mud. That much was evident by the icy cold penetrating the layers of my skirt, chilling my already cold backside.

Somehow, I had escaped my captor only to be left holding the bag.

Although, come to think of it, the bag was technically holding me.

Either way, it was not the most auspicious position.

Especially when something kept tickling my nose.

I listened intently, struggling to hear any sound that would indicate another human presence and failing.

Had the assailant left then? Abandoned me in the street where I would eventually be sucked beneath the seemingly bottomless muck?

Only the mud wasn't bottomless. That much I surmised by the fact I hadn't been completely devoured—yet.

Something brushed my cheek again and I turned my attention to more immediate matters—discovering just what was in the bag with me? Spiders? Cockroaches? Some unknown pest indigenous to San Francisco?

Frantic, I sat upright and rocked from side to side, shaking my head and hoping to dislodge the foul thing torturing my noodle. Mud squooshed as I rocked. Icy water saturated my skirts entirely, converting my backside from a merely cold state into a frozen one.

Finally, I managed to work the potato bag cocoon up my arms and off my shoulders. I shoved the thing unceremoniously from my head, scattering the anticipated spiders, cockroaches, and sundry creepy-crawlies halfway across the street.

Three things clarified themselves in that instant: 1) there were no spiders or cockroaches—I had been accosted by my own spidery locks; 2) the fog was definitely thinning—either that or the nearby light source was growing in intensity; and 3) I was indeed alone.

Relieved to be shed of both bag and assailant, I planted both fists in the mud, hoisted my bum, and struggled to my feet, calling out quietly to the one friend I had known—well, hoped—would never desert me. “Ahoy, you blasted piece of excrement. Good of you to finally bop in.”

Ahoy waddled through the mud, lifting his feet in disgust with each step. I reached down,

plucked the black-and-white rat from the muck before the goo could swallow him, and plopped him into the skirt pocket used only for emergencies. I vigorously scrubbed my hands on my skirts before slogging around in mud and fog, gathering up the contents of my valise and trying mightily not to get things any muddier.

By now the pea soup fog had thinned to the consistency of sour milk, revealing that there was, indeed, a light up ahead. I peered hard at the light, trying to decide precisely what I was looking at.

The object refused to allow itself to be identified.

No matter. It was a light of some sort. And where there was light, there had to be shelter and a place to get warm.

At least that's what my mud-and-assailant-addled brain tried to tell me.

I stepped forward—and halted mid-step.

Chapter Six

THERE IS NOTHING like a little fog and a lot of dark to make a body feel small and insignificant. Luckily, I had always felt rather small and insignificant, so I wasn't extremely daunted by my current situation or the sudden inability to move.

I took a moment to assess my dilemma—in the span of time needed to pick up my valise and reticule, road muck had congealed about my boot, effectively gluing my right foot in place.

Where *had* that blasted walkway gotten to?

I wiggled my foot first left, then right, eventually managing to pull free. The mud protested vociferously, gurgling and glopping like a living creature. I took a step, then worked my other foot free, wrinkling my nose at the freshened stench of rotting vegetation and dead . . . *things* . . . I had no desire to identify. The scented kerchief no longer proved of any use, having been drowned in the muck along with the rest of my person.

Progress was thus achieved in laborious, incremental steps that failed to bring the elusive light any closer. I stopped to catch my breath—

And the night once again took on an aspect of absolute darkness, this time in the form of an enormous shadow that passed with all the grace of a hurricane, stirring both fog and hair and making me fear for my sanity.

Shadow was my immediate impression. The darkness was at least the size of a locomotive engine, with a long neck and head, a snake-like tail, and . . . only a sense of wings, though I was a bit stymied about the wings. Of course, it had to have wings. The thing was *flying*, wasn't it? Though I hadn't *seen* any wings.

Of course, I hadn't really *seen* the thing at all. Just its shadow.

Which was an oddity in and of itself. I could discern no moon or other light at a sufficient altitude to create a shadow that size.

I pinched myself to confirm my state of lucidity, wondering if I was locked in a nightmare

instead of merely standing in mud. Judging by the severity of the self-inflicted pain, I was awake; therefore, I had to be hallucinating.

“Well, that was exciting,” Ahoy said from my pocket. He poked his head into the foggy light, his little rat nose twitching furiously.

“You saw it too?” I felt ridiculously relieved.

“Of course I saw the dragon. How could I miss something that big?”

Dragon?

“Don’t be daft. There is no such thing as dragons.” I lifted my chin, determined to put that notion to rest. “They exist only in dreams and stories.”

“The same way talking rats don’t exist?”

The little rat had a point.

Which I pointedly decided to ignore.

I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, keeping my eyes on the mud and refusing to even consider the possibility that dragons actually existed. An image flitted through my mind, traces of memory so buried in the past as to practically be obscure. *An abandoned garden. A lonely child terrified of losing her nose. Tiny creatures with scales and ridges and claws and . . . wings . . . Creatures that soothed the child’s jangled nerves, brought a smile to her tiny face . . .*

“No such thing as dragons.” Ahoy thumped against my leg with every step, his tiny body the only sensation of warmth in a world washed clean of anything resembling heat. “Right.”

Whatever had caused the shadow was gone. For now.

Numbed both physically and mentally, I suddenly felt more vulnerable, more helpless, than I had on that noseless day so long ago . . .

Rubbish. I was no more helpless or vulnerable now than I had been on the ship. What I needed to do was establish some priorities.

First, I needed to find a place that would put me up for the night.

Then I needed to get warm.

I would resume the search for Mother in the morning, a thought that made my stomach shrivel until it felt small as a blasted pea. Not a golden pea, however. I was pretty certain there was no such thing as a golden pea.

Unless Mother . . .

I swallowed hard and forced myself to complete the thought.

Unless Mother had *done* something, though what, I could only imagine. She was a sorceress, after all. She wasn't merely a necromancer. She had *talents* other than merely raising the dead, though she hadn't bothered sharing all of them with me. Her *forte*, as she called it, was necromancy.

I forced my tired body to keep moving, dragging one foot free of the muck, moving said foot forward as far as I could, then setting that same foot back in the muck and feeling it sink deep into the goo. My legs burned from the exertion, my arms ached from carrying the valise in such an awkward manner, and my mind . . . couldn't seem to stay away from Mother.

As I have already mentioned, Mother isn't merely a necromancer, she is a Sorceress of the Highest Order. Her specialty is raising people from the dead—for nefarious purposes. My mother is not a gentle soul. She considers such innocent endeavors as reanimating a son so a grieving mother can hold him one more time to be a waste of time, although she will raise anyone for any reason as long as her price is met and the conditions are right—waste of time or not. Proper conditions generally include the absence of tears and other manifestations of grief. Tears are a sign of weakness and immaturity as far as Mother is concerned and are definitely not to be tolerated.

I learned in finishing school that Proper People of Society around the world do not think well of someone who dabbles in the dark arts, a fact I found—and still find—amusing as those same Proper People of Society are often those who hire Mother to do her Darkest Deeds.

My mother has raised armies of Once Dead for leaders around the world, a fact not generally set down in the annals of history. Those armies are mindless idiots, shuffling around the streets, doing anything and everything asked of them by their master. Raising armies of Once Dead takes time, though, as Mother has to be present for the reanimation to take place. She also has to stay around until the Once Dead have finished their task—whatever it might be—or they'll go into a mindless frenzy, turning on anything that moves.

A plague generally provides a plethora of ubiquitous deaths, allowing Mother to create her army without raising any mortal alarms.

As do wars—

Which brought me back to the question I had been asking ever since boarding the *Raven* in New York—what in the world was Mother doing out here in the wild, wild west?

There weren't nearly enough people in the entire western region—living or dead—to raise

an army of any decent size.

Were there?

I contemplated the question as I kerplopped through the mud like a grounded fish. The glow I had spotted earlier resolved slowly into a lit window. Near the window I could see what appeared to be a—

My toe rammed against something solid and I tumbled forward. Both feet firmly ensconced in the unconscionable muck, I fell flat on my face, unable to stop my momentum. Pain shot through my abused shins and knees, then echoed in my chest, hands, chin, and nose—my poor, unfortunate nose—as I slammed against a hard surface, the valise rebelliously escaping my grasp, derringer contraption cutting into the tender underside of my forearm.

“Ahoy?” I squawked, struggling to catch my breath. I put out my hands and shoved myself backward, attaining an extremely awkward, upright position—if you call sitting on one’s feet and knees *upright*. “Are you all right?”

“Shaken and slightly squished, but intact,” Ahoy said from my shoulder just as I realized the surface beneath my hands was not only hard, it contained enough splinters to make a porcupine proud.

I squawked again, louder this time, though I wasn’t certain if my surprise was due to Ahoy’s sudden appearance on my shoulder or to discovering that I had rediscovered the wooden walkway. I peeled my hands off the wood plank walkway that had magically—or not so magically, depending on how I looked at it—put an end to my muddy wanderings. “How did you—?”

“Kobold, remember?”

If I had had the energy, I more than likely would have squished the little rat all over again. I was, however, learning a thing or two about kobolds. Not only could they change shape, disappear at will, and talk like people, the little rats were apparently squish-proof. (I am almost certain all rats are not kobolds, but are all kobolds little rats?)

I caught a glimpse of movement beyond the wavy panes of the window, and a moment later, a new shaft of light sliced through the fog. I squinted at the now-open doorway and forced myself to remain still—not a difficult task considering my body felt as limp and boneless as the jellyfish I had occasionally glimpsed during the *Raven*’s voyage to this muck-laden land.

A huge figure stepped into the light.

“Well now. What ’ave we ’ere?”

Chapter Seven

THE VOICE WAS . . . familiar.

“Emma?” I asked. I peered at the backlit silhouette, trying to determine if voice and silhouette belonged together.

“Good lord!” another voice said, this voice not familiar at all, but definitely female.

“What’re ya doing out there in the mud? Nathan, some help, please.”

“Move aside, Lettie. The sheriff ’n me’ll tend to her.” A man’s voice, round and solid and filled with . . . *concern?*

A lump rose in my throat at the sudden kindness. Two pairs of boots thumped toward me, causing the walkway to shudder violently. Strong hands grabbed me under both arms, lifting me in one not-so-smooth-motion onto the walkway.

I stood and shrugged the hands away, not because I was ungrateful, but I wanted . . . no, I *needed* . . . to wipe the mud dripping from my face.

Only what I felt on my face turned out to be blood, not mud.

Which is what happens when one’s nose is abruptly introduced to the local wooden planks, instead of plunging ignominiously into mere muck.

Considering the agony radiating from the center of my face outward, diving headlong into the relatively soft muck might have been preferable.

I blinked in a rather dazed fashion at the dark red smeared across my palms, then shifted my gaze to my mud-laden skirts. The pain in my face overrode the pain in my arm, but it only took a moment for *that* particular discomfort to make its presence known.

A bruise, I told myself. *Only a bruise*. If the derringer contraption had torn through something other than my sleeve, it would have left more than a bit of blood behind, wouldn’t it?

After what seemed an eternity but was likely just a few seconds, I shrugged, trying to appear casual, though the movement sent pain lancing through my shoulders and neck, joining my face

in its agony.

“I do believe thish skirt hash sheen better days,” I said by way of apology, my words already muffled by mucous and swelling and blood. No amount of apologizing could make up for such a bumbling entrance, however. My cheeks burned with embarrassment and for a brief moment, I considered retreating back into the obscurity of mud and fog.

Softer footsteps shuffled somewhere close by and a cloth pressed against my nose. Pain exploded through my face at the contact and I screeched like a lost bird. I tried to take a deep breath and found myself breathing through my mouth like a panting dog, a very unladylike accomplishment.

“Keep this tight until we ken get ya inside and cleaned up a bit,” the woman—Lettie?—said. “Then I’ll see if anythin’ is broken.”

“At leasht it ishn’t melted,” I mumbled. I quickly pressed my lips together before additional words leaked out. Wouldn’t do to confess all of Mother’s sins to people who were—at least some of them—strangers.

“Weather’s too cold to melt anythin’.”

Lettie squinted at me as if wondering if my skull had been cracked. At least she was practical. My vision blurred with tears and pain, distorting the face—mostly hidden by shadow—before me.

The solidly built woman reminded me of one of the villagers who had often given me tidbits when I had been growing up, saying someone had to feed me in a voice loud enough for Mother to overhear. Surprisingly enough, the woman hadn’t mysteriously disappeared or lost vital body parts or ended up as one of Mother’s Once Dead.

“Abby!” another voice—this one also familiar—chimed in. “What ’appened to ya?”

I squinted around, struggling to identify members of what appeared to be a rapidly growing audience.

“I’m . . . fine.” I hardly recognized my own voice,. “Jush a lil clumsy.”

“Ya look like a mud puppy,” said another familiar voice, this one soft and almost timid.

“’appy to shee you, too, Fanny,” I mumbled. “Emma. Mary.”

The doorway suddenly wavered. Rather rude of the blasted thing . . .

Someone caught my arm.

“Whoa there.” This voice, deep and sonorous, came from just behind me, causing my heart

to skitter like a startled rabbit. I twisted to glare at whoever had scared the stuffing out of me—

And ended up leaning against a very broad, very firm, very masculine chest. A chest that smelled of the outdoors and—

“Touch, Pappy,” a soft voice whispered somewhere close by. A child’s voice.

“No, Eclipse,” the man said, releasing my arm and moving away so quickly I found myself swaying into his recently vacated space. “You shouldn’t be out here in the cold. Let’s get back inside. Lettie will—”

“Touch,” whispered the young voice insistently. “Me touch.”

I finally managed to focus on the group. Six adults, men and women of various shapes and sizes, had gathered around me on the wooden walkway that was barely wide enough to allow five men to walk abreast.

The man who had been behind me—tall with broad shoulders and a careworn face—strode over to a child peeking out from behind Mary’s skirts. He wore a deep red vest mellowed with age over shirt and trousers as black as his hair. Moving with the easy grace of a fencer in spite of his height, the man squatted on his heels and lifted the child—a baby girl who looked barely old enough to walk—into his arms.

“Touch,” the child whispered again.

The man stood and turned toward the door.

The child promptly screamed.

Not a tantrum-type wail.

A full-on scream strident enough—to my ears, anyway—to shatter glass.

The man’s shoulders drooped for a moment. Then he turned and stared at me for a long moment, ignoring the screaming child.

After what seemed an eternity, he brought the child toward me.

The screaming stopped.

“If you don’t mind,” he started hesitantly.

“Hurt,” the child whispered, her voice so soft I wasn’t sure I had actually heard her. “Touch hurt.”

I stared into the child’s oddly colored eyes—one brown and one . . . green?—mesmerized by the look of compassion—of *wisdom*—within those eyes. I couldn’t say anything. Couldn’t move. Those eyes . . .

She reached out with a tiny hand.

And touched my nose.

I clenched my teeth, anticipating a jolt of searing pain, determined not to scream . . .

The pain faded.

It didn't disappear, not entirely. But the throbbing mass of agony that had been my face was now tolerable enough I could think and the burning pain in my forearm had died to a dull throb.

“Lordie,” Lettie said, a note of awe in her voice. “I done tole ya that child is the essence of Spirit.”

The man cleared his throat, as if preparing to speak. I waited for whatever illumination he might offer. He finally shrugged as if defeated.

The child pulled back her hand, studied me for a moment, then clapped in glee. She turned and buried her face in the big man's neck.

Tentatively, I reached up and gently explored my face with the tip of my fingers. My nose was still a bit swollen, but the bleeding appeared to have stopped. And my upper lip no longer felt like it belonged on a horse instead of my face.

Once again my face had been used—however innocently—as a tool, reminding me that things often happened that had no footing in the “normal” world.

I started to open my mouth, to ask how she had done what she had done. One look at the big man's troubled face and I swallowed any questions I had.

Standing beside me in the light, I could see now that he was of mixed blood, with gleaming dark hair and high cheekbones. He managed to look somewhat pale beneath swarthy skin that had seen too much sun, and his eyes—the color of obsidian—held a note of pleading. I swallowed again and gave him a nod of thanks, then turned to my audience and held out my hands.

“See, I told you I was fine. Just needed a moment to get the bleeding to stop.”

No one was fooled by my words. I could see it in their faces. But every single person standing on that walkway relaxed and nodded.

People like to believe what their minds tell them to believe, even if what they are seeing contradicts that belief.

I grew up in a world where strange things happened every day and sometimes every hour. Then life had changed. For the past five years I had lived a reasonably normal life at the

finishing school, where the strangest things that happened were generally mundane—a kitten surviving a fall down a well; Molly Brighton’s pink ribbon turning white; Old Man Foggerty’s sick horse making a miraculous recovery.

And everything, of course, had an explanation—the kitten had actually been put in the bucket and lowered into the well so the boys who “rescued” her had a great story to tell; Molly’s ribbon had accidentally ended up in a vat of lye and the servant girl responsible for washing Molly’s clothes tried to pass her ineptitude off as some sort of “magic”; and Old Man Foggerty’s horse had been going downhill ever since his canine companion had passed away. Foggerty brought a new puppy into the barn and voila! the horse was cured.

The folks standing around me on that wooden San Francisco walkway were used to the second kind—strange things that had explanations. With the exception, perhaps, of the stocky woman.

The man in front of me, the man holding the child, had definitely seen some of the world’s strangeness—events that went beyond explanation. But he also knew the trouble that could confront one having been involved with such things.

“Tha’ one ’n Binda be two kittens in the same skin,” Emma said.

Emma was as stocky as the woman who seemed to be in charge of this group. I had travelled around the Horn with Emma; Mary, a tall woman standing near the back of the group; and Fanny, a frail-looking woman who stood next to Emma like a shadow struggling to stay connected to a force that kept trying to shove it away.

It had taken me a moment to recognize Emma. While her voice had been indelibly etched on my ears, my eyes refused to recognize her. When my fuddled mind finally relented, I realized the woman was only wearing one gown. A clean one at that. During the entire voyage from New York, she had always worn the same outfit—three dresses, one atop the other, like a layered cake without any filling.

And it looked like she’d actually *bathed*.

While I had spent the afternoon slogging through muddy streets in search of my mother.

The woman in charge whispered something to the rotund man who had helped me stand. He nodded and headed inside.

I struggled to remember the man’s name as an itch started somewhere in the center of my back and radiated outward, becoming so intense that the urge to scratch overpowered the urge to

remain still so as not to aggravate my current accumulation of bruises and other assorted injuries.

:*Nathan. The man's name is Nathan.*:

I ignored the odd voice in my head, distracted as the itch intensified. I thought about reaching over my shoulder, raking my skin raw—

“Where’s that rat ’o yers?” Emma asked. “Me thinks Duffy’s missin’ ’im. Never woulda believed it, if’n ye’d told me that one day I’d be consolin’ a cat what wouldna eat ’cause his rat was gone missin’.”

My heart leapt like a colt in spring, only this leap wasn’t out of joy. Where *had* Ahoy gone?

“I’m sure he’ll turn up,” I said, trying to look unconcerned as the itching that had started in the center of my back wrapped around my ribs and up my chest.

“We don’t tolerate rats here,” the woman in charge said.

:*Lettie.*: the voice in my head whispered.

I nodded absently, silently repeating the name. Ahoy would keep himself hidden from the woman if need be, though it would be nice to know where the little rat had gotten off to. I wriggled as the itch sprouted another bloom, trying to keep the movement unobtrusive.

Had I picked up some sort of San Francisco lice? Or maybe California fleas?

“Ya didn’t find yer mum, then?” Emma asked. She had rescued my valise and held it—dripping with mud—in one hand, extended as if my poor valise were a poisonous snake.

I shook my head.

Mary’s face grew even longer than normal and Fanny sighed so loudly everyone looked at her.

I didn’t need the women’s sympathy, not now. I needed someone to scratch my back. I clenched my teeth so tightly they ached while the itch on my back, sides, and chest did everything it could not to be ignored.

Maybe I couldn’t simply ignore it, I decided. But I *could* refuse to scratch, especially while everyone was watching. A Proper Lady of Society always maintained a modicum of dignity.

Lettie clucked her tongue. “Come along inside, dear. Ya look like ya could do with a good meal and a hot bath.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Though not necessarily in that order.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the brooding night, silent and filled with uncertainties, half expecting to see Mother materialize in the fog.

Chapter Eight

BEFORE I COULD protest—my skirts were dripping with muck, after all, not a condition I would generally wear into anyone’s establishment—Lettie whisked me inside and hurried me upstairs so fast my surroundings slipped into nebulous blurs.

“This is where yer sleepin’,” Lettie said as she hustled me down a hall. She pointed at a door as we passed but didn’t stop.

She slowed her pace to the point I could finally get a look at my surroundings. The two-story boardinghouse was clean if a bit austere for my tastes. The decorative touches generally found in such places—paintings on the walls, vases filled with flowers—were missing. The entire place smelled of fresh-cut pine.

Until I swept the floor with my muddy skirts, defiling the freshly scented air with the pungent stench of dirt and rot. If my embarrassment had turned to fire just then, my entire face would have burned to ash.

:What would Miss Beauregard say?:

I scowled at the voice in my head. Miss Beauregard would not have said a thing. The look on her face would have been sufficient chastisement.

A door stood open at the very end of the hall. Beyond the door lay a room that felt slightly steamy. The air smelled of scented soap, though I could not identify the fragrance. A clawfoot tub perched beneath a window to the right while the left wall was lined with shelves. The wall at the head of the tub supported a giant contraption made of metal pipes and levers.

Lettie noticed my gaze.

“Nathan fixed that up.” A note of pride colored the woman’s voice. “Done it all by himself. Pumps hot water up from a barrel-size pot we keep behind the cookstove.”

She waved at the stacks of dry towels, then nodded at a pair of slippers and what looked to be a simple day gown, cleaned and pressed.

“Left behind by a previous boarder,” Lettie explained. “The clothes, that is. Towels are provided for all my boarders, free of charge.”

“You are more than gracious,” I started.

Lettie snorted, a sound that rivaled the snorts made by sailors deep in their cups. “Naught gracious about it. Just leave yer things in a pile and get yerself in that bath.”

A bath.

Overcome by weariness, I somehow managed to summon enough energy to nod.

“Come down when yer ready, dear. I’ll keep a plate warm fer ya.” Lettie stepped outside and pulled the door closed.

I gave my back and sides a good scratching once I’d shed my muddy garments. Much to my relief, I found no sign of insects—either small or large—tickling my skin. I climbed into the tub and heaved an enormous sigh as the water—hot enough to be relaxing, but not so hot as to scald—enveloped me in comfort.

WHEN I WAS clean and warm, I realized just how discombobulated I had been when I stumbled onto the place. Wallowing in all that mud had definitely clouded my sense of reality. There had been no oily fog, no flying dragon. They had been figments of my over-taxed imagination.

I could not deny the healing gift of a young child, however. I vowed to thank both her and her father at the earliest opportunity. My nose continued to improve and the cut on my arm had already drawn together, leaving behind a thin, pink line to show I had been bitten. By a derringer of all things.

All that remained to complete my return to sanity was a good night’s sleep.

Preceded by a meal of some fashion.

I towel-dried my hair as best I could and wove it into a loose braid, then tugged on the borrowed day gown—too tired to care about the ample display of cleavage—settled the pendant at my throat, burrowed my feet into the oversized slippers, and headed downstairs.

Three men rose when I attempted to glide—as befitted a Proper Lady of Society—into the dining room, though my legs protested the very act of *gliding*. The other women—four in all—stayed seated around the table as I settled in a chair across the table from Emma. My nose twitched at the tantalizing aroma wafting through the dining room, though I couldn’t identify

precisely what I was smelling.

“Biscuits ’n gravy,” Emma said, answering my question before I could ask.

I nodded sagely as if I dined on “biscuits ’n gravy” every day. In truth, I had no idea what she was talking about. Short, stocky Emma, with her round red cheeks and twinkling eyes.

Emma gave me a wink. “Ya know Mary now an’ our li’l Fanny. Duffy ’n Binda stayed upstairs.”

Mary, who was Emma’s opposite—tall and rather ungainly, with big hands and a sweet smile—sat to Emma’s left. Timid Fanny—who had been sick almost the entire voyage around the Horn and actually looked like she might live now she was back on land—huddled in a chair next to Mary.

The proprietors of the fine establishment I had literally stumbled upon seemed stalwart enough.

“This ’ere’s Nathan and Lettie Perry. They done lost their place ’o business in a fearsome blaze this past Christmas,” Emma announced in a strident voice that echoed off the very rafters themselves.

Except for the lack of decorative touches—a lack that was *not* reflected in the dining room décor—I would never have guessed at their misfortune.

Nathan Perry, a round man who reminded me of a roly-poly Father Christmas (who the Americans called Santa Claus), sat at the head of the table with Lettie to his left.

“None of this Mister this and Missus that nonsense,” Lettie said. “We’re just Nathan and Lettie to our boarders and our friends.”

Lettie’s grin was infectious and I found myself smiling back.

“That there’s Sheriff Connor O’Malley.” Emma waved at the tall man seated at the opposite end, the child who had tended my broken nose sitting in his lap. “And ya’ve met Eclipse.”

The baby girl clapped her hands without making a sound.

The third man in the room sat to Nathan Perry’s right.

“And that there’s—” Emma started.

“Timothy Vaughn,” the man said in a voice that sounded as if it was rarely used. The man was handsome enough despite brooding blue eyes and an angry scar decorating his chin.

Emma had evidently told everyone the story of how we had travelled to San Francisco on the same ship, a fact Mr. Vaughn, for some inexplicable reason, found suspicious.

The man fixed me with those brooding blue eyes. “Kinda coincidental you all would end up at the same place after leaving the ship.”

Lettie shook her head. “‘Course it ain’t and ya well know it. Only two boardinghouses in town and only one worth stayin’ in.”

Mr. Vaughn gave a curt nod and abruptly excused himself.

“I hope Mr. Vaughn didn’t leave on my account?” I raised a questioning eyebrow and glanced at Emma as Mr. Vaughn thudded up the stairs.

“Don’t mind that one,” Lettie said. She shrugged one shoulder. “He’s a bit odd.”

“Don’t really care fer company,” Nathan said.

My stomach chose that precise moment to make its emptiness known. I mentally chided my stomach and tried to ignore its grumbling.

Lettie, however, did no such thing.

“Lord, what was I thinkin’? Sit right there and I’ll bring ya a plate.” Lettie shoved to her feet and headed toward a pair of swinging bat-wing doors that I presumed let into the kitchen. She paused with her back against one of the doors and frowned at her husband. “Mr. Vaughn pays his board on time and don’t cause no trouble. Can’t ask much more.”

Nathan nodded amiably. “That he does.”

Having made her point, Lettie slipped through the doors and commenced banging pots and utensils as though practicing for a parade.

I took the opportunity to study my new surroundings. The dining room was simple enough with a long sideboard set beneath a pair of thick-paned windows in the front wall. The kitchen doors sat in the wall opposite the side board. The stairs to the boarding rooms on the second floor were barely visible through the archway on the left that let into the entry hall. The wall to my right was occupied by two nearly ceiling-height dish cabinets, the top halves revealing stacks of various-sized dishes behind wavy glass panes, drawers and cupboards in the bottom halves more than likely containing silver and other serving implements.

The center of the room had been commandeered by an oval dining table long enough to comfortably seat ten adults. Over the table hung a wrought-iron chandelier supporting a ring of lanterns that kept the room softly lit. Both dining table and sideboard appeared to be as raw and new as the rest of the building, pale wood gleaming with what was—judging by the smell that occasionally made itself known—some kind of fish oil that had been used to protect the surface.

Emma, ever the conversationalist, broke the silence blanketing our little group like sodden carpet. “Cleaned up nice, ain’t I?”

She leaned back, lifted her leg, and suddenly I found myself looking at the bottom of a rather large boot. “Miz Lettie ’ere even gave me a new pair ’o boots, seein’s mine got swallowed by the mud and all.”

Emma held her foot aloft for a long minute, admiring the boot before setting foot and boot beneath the table where they belonged. She raised an eyebrow. “’ow’d ya manage to keep yers on yer feet? That muck’d suck a cow dry if’n one got stuck in it.”

“Turns out Emma and me have a lot in common,” Lettie said, backing through the kitchen doors and setting a plate in front of me with a loud clunk. “Including foot size.”

She removed Mr. Vaughn’s dishes from the table and set them on the sideboard before returning to her seat.

I watched her absently, thinking about my own boots. The poor things had been left outside. I was quite certain I would find them crusted over with muck. It would be like sticking my feet into stone when it came time to don them once again. Leather plus mud equals stone boots.

Perhaps I would endeavor to find a new pair while I awaited Mother’s arrival.

Then again, considering the condition of the streets, maybe it would be best for all involved if I simply took a sledge to the leather. A bit of softening and I should be able to wear them again, without scraping my skin off in the process.

The conversation shifted to the more mundane aspects of life—Nathan’s relief at the drying weather, Emma, Mary, and Fanny curious to know about the availability of fabric and who the most reasonable dressmaker might be . . .

I picked up my fork and focused on the steaming plate before me.

The meal bore no resemblance to what I had always known as biscuits—or gravy, for that matter. In England, biscuits were sweet and hard, with the exception being the maggot-ridden sea biscuits we had endured whilst on board the *Raven*. *Those* biscuits had been hard and tasteless.

These biscuits were light and fluffy as eider down.

Lettie had split a biscuit the size of my hand in half, laid both halves upon a china plate rimmed in painted blue ribbons, and then smothered the lot in pallid gravy.

I gave the pallid mass a poke with my fork.

The biscuit split, spewing the sweet scent of buttery goodness into the air. The aroma sliced

through my preconceived prejudice, drawing an extremely unladylike growl from my stomach. I speared a piece of biscuit coated with the least amount of gravy and, determined to put on a good face, resolutely took a bite.

I had been raised to believe that *proper* gravy wasn't pallid or thick. Proper gravy was a dark brown color derived from beef stock and onions and hunks of tender roast and—if a chef deigned to experiment with the concept—would be *drizzled*, not dumped, across a single, small biscuit.

Nothing about this meal was proper, not in the British sense. Lettie's biscuits could have been the offspring of crumpets and cake, fluffy as a pillow and light as a down feather even though they were as large as my hand. And the gravy . . . *ahhhh* . . . the gravy contained seasoned meat of a sort and flavor I could not identify but was tantalizingly delicious.

All in all, I decided that biscuits 'n gravy was—

“Mana from 'eaven, ain't it,” Emma said with a broad grin. “I coulda eaten a whole bucketful.”

I stopped midchew. Was the woman reading my mind?

“'ard to believe somethin' that looks like what a puppy leaves behind after its et somethin' rotten could taste like food fer the angels.”

I nodded and took another bite. No matter the name or the impossibility of its warring ingredients—biscuits 'n gravy was a gastronomic treasure equal to anything produced by the royal kitchen. Whoever had originally come up with the idea of smothering fluffy *pastry* with thick *goo* had my everlasting gratitude, along with my stomach.

The meal was the finest I'd had in days. Weeks.

Come to think of it, I hadn't had a meal that fine in months. Of course, I *had* been sequestered on a ship that spent much of the past six months navigating violent seas.

The mere fact that I was famished had nothing to do with my judgment, of course.

I took lady-size bites, trying not to consume my meal as greedily as I had once seen a member of Mother's Once Dead consume its prey.

As I ate, I mentally made a note to ask Lettie for the recipe—even though my skills at cooking . . . never mind. We won't discuss my cooking. Mother had taken care of our meals until I had left home, then a chef had tended to the students' needs at finishing school.

Needless to say—if I was ever going to be on my own, I *needed* that recipe.

Or a cook.

Might be easier, and in the best interest of my health, to employ a cook—

“And dragons themselves aren’t superstition?” Sheriff O’Malley asked.

The fork stopped midway between the plate and my lips. What was it the sheriff had just said?

“Just a bunch a hogwash,” Lettie said with a snort. “There ain’t been no earthquake.”

“You know better than to dismiss such things outta hand.” Nathan shook his head. “Stranger thing’ve happened.”

I carefully set the fork—still laden with biscuit and dripping gravy—back on my plate and leaned forward, wondering just what I’d missed.

“Boys down at the dock been ’aving a good ol time wi’ the sheriff ’ere,” Emma said, noticing the shift in my attention. Her eyes twinkled. “Said a dragon flew through the bay last evenin’. Knocked ships left and right, they did. Snapped a mast in two. Gotta be them sailors is drinking too much. Dragons is pure superstition. Less’n a body’s in Scotland, a course. Ain’t nothin’ that’ll convince me otherwise.”

“There’s more’n likely a good explanation,” Sheriff O’Malley said, though he raised his eyebrow at Emma’s declaration. “Something other than creatures straight outta bedtime stories.”

Nathan shrugged. “Local legend has it that there’s a great beast that lives beneath the land.”

Lettie nodded so hard I felt a twinge of sympathy for the woman’s neck. “The Golden Gate is the doorway ta the beast’s lair, ya see. The beast slumbers for years. When it wakes, it has ta eat. The earth shakes when the beast passes through the doorway. That’s why San Francisco has so many earthquakes.”

The sheriff raised both eyebrows. “I’ve heard tales of the earthquakes, but not that particular tale.” He leaned back in his chair as Eclipse reached up and patted his cheeks, her hands looking tiny against his rough face. He kissed her forehead gently before continuing. “Didn’t hear a peep outta the captains or the boarding agents about flying monsters or snapping masts, so I’m thinking both those boys had more’n their fair share of whiskey and that’s that.”

I thought about the dark shadow that had nearly consumed us while Ahoy and I were deep in the fog and a shiver rippled over my skin. No reason to mention *that* to the sheriff, was there?

No such thing as dragons, I reminded myself.

“So,” I said, trying to shift the topic of conversation away from something that was, quite

literally, giving me a rank case of the horrors. “We don’t go out at night because we might get eaten by a legend?”

Chapter Nine

NATHAN LAUGHED AND Lettie snorted.

“We don’t go out at night ’cause it’s hard ta see,” Lettie said. “Fallin’ in the mud—as you rightly know—ain’t a fun way ta spend an evenin’.”

I smiled my agreement and to my relief, conversation returned to more normal affairs, leaving me to the remainder of my supper.

Just as I was about to scrape the last gravy-soaked morsel of heavenly delight from my plate, something scrambled up my leg.

“Too late, Ahoy,” I mumbled, then froze. The entire group was watching me with studious attention. *You’d think I was some kind of special exhibition.*

“Beg pardon,” I said, then sighed. I had broken another of Mother’s unwritten rules: Never speak with your mouth full, a rule with which Miss Beauregard would have heartily agreed.

My mouth wasn’t full. Not really. But Mother considered a single crumb to be a sign that the rest of the mouth was similarly occupied.

Granted, she had never melted my nose or inflicted any particularly harsh punishment for speaking with food in my mouth . . . which had led me to place such infringement into the Second Tier of Mother’s rules. When dealing with Mother, a person was much more likely to survive breaking a Second Tier rule—a rule that lacked some form of physical punishment—than a Primary Rule of Survival.

Nevertheless, among the ranks of Proper Persons of Society, especially those of a Proper Lady of Society, speaking with food in one’s mouth was simply not done.

In this instance, I must plead extenuating circumstances. Circumstances in which savage hunger and extreme exhaustion played major roles.

As the embarrassment of the moment eased, I realized that Ahoy hadn’t yet accosted my plate. I gazed at the one remaining morsel—forlorn as an abandoned soldier after the battle has

been lost and all his dead companions had been enlisted by Mother and led away to some other confrontation—stationed near my fork.

In all the time I had known Ahoy, he had never let food go to waste. Was the little rat feeling ill?

“Ahoy?”

Lettie and Nathan glanced at each other, apparently puzzled.

“Ahoy?” Lettie asked.

“Ahoy!” Nathan exclaimed at the same time. The man had evidently spent some time on a ship.

Or not.

I could feel the little rat’s warmth in my lap, sitting quietly . . . *quietly?* . . . as I pondered the situation.

Something was wrong. Ahoy was never quiet when food was around—

Something dark and sinuous and definitely *not* rat slipped from my lap onto the table, snatched the morsel from my plate . . .

And shoved the gravy-drenched morsel into my mouth.

Which had conveniently dropped open in the universal manner of astonished mouths everywhere, saving my chin and cheeks from having crumbly goo smeared all over them.

Blasted annoying at times, our mouths. Always dropping open or spewing words they shouldn’t be spewing at the most inappropriate moments. This time had worked for the better; other times, not so much.

I swallowed the morsel without chewing and unobtrusively wiped the gravy from my mouth with a finger. That’s when I realized the table had no napkins.

Holding the finger to one side as if it had been contaminated by a noxious substance, I glanced at the sideboard, seeking the means to remove the offending gravy. Not a napkin in sight. Smothering a sigh, I returned my attention to the creature perched on the edge of the table.

“How are you, Princess?” I asked, bowing my head to the creature.

Binda, princess that she was, returned my bow, lowering her head in an imperious, yet satisfied bob.

As I had known she would.

I stole a glance at the floor near my feet, wondering if Duffy the cat and Ahoy the rat would

show up to claim their spots at the table. I could offer my gravy-laden finger to Duffy—

Binda giggled and my heart melted as it always did around the little scamp, driving thoughts of my other two fury friends from my mind. Approximately the size of a large kitten, Binda was cheeky to the point of impossibility and twice as cute—in my humble opinion—as a fluffy ball of kitten-ness.

Her body resembled that of an otter pup . . . if otters had turtle shells adorning their backs. Her head was large in proportion to the rest of her body; her eyes enormous and round.

Her nose was more turtle than otter, however, and her forelimbs and hind limbs ended in feet that were also more turtle-like than otter, with long claws and webbing between her toes. A petal-shaped metal cap adorned the top of Binda's head.

The metal cap protected a bowl-shaped depression filled with water.

“The li'l 'un weren't 'appy ya was gone,” Emma said. She must've seen the startled look on my face. She waved a hand at the others seated at the table and grinned. “Stop yer worryin' now. I done swore 'em all ta secrecy.”

Binda slid back into my lap, then popped her head up to watch what was going on.

“She's had her cucumber, then?” I asked, stroking Binda's silken fur. Emma had evidently told the others that Binda's presence shouldn't be advertised to the world at large, particularly the fact that we had, essentially, kidnapped the little princess. Yes, she had already been kidnapped once, but removing something of value directly from the captain's cabin could be considered a capital crime, at least in the captain's eyes.

Lettie nodded. “Regular as clockwork. Fortunately for us, Madam Cully keeps a ready supply in that store 'o hers.”

“I seen to it,” Emma added with a satisfied nod. “Our princess is well cared for, she is. Better'n the rest of us, I'm thinkin'.”

Lettie sniffed. “She's royalty, ain't she?”

I nodded, feeling more than a bit of relief. Judging by the damage sweet little Binda had done to the captain's cabin while Ahoy and I were desperately trying to rescue her, I had no desire to see what happened when she *didn't* get her cucumbers.

According to Ahoy, Princess Binda came from a tribe of legendary creatures called kappa. He didn't know how she had wound up on the *Raven*—her kind are generally found in Japan and the far East. He had sensed her presence on the ship after a day or so at sea. At first, he'd thought

she was on board willingly. As the *Raven*'s luck went from bad to worse, however, Ahoy decided to do a bit more investigating.

That's when he had discovered that the captain had been paid a goodly sum of money to deliver little Binda to a buyer in San Francisco.

Kidnapped and sold into slavery. Such an act was *not* to be stood for.

We couldn't get Binda back to her home, not immediately, but we could free her from her captors.

So that's what we did.

Only to discover Princess Binda's main talent lay in creating chaos wherever she went.

She also insisted on feeding me when food was around.

I couldn't really complain, though. She had saved my life, after all.

During that momentous Rescue-at-Sea, I learned that Binda had other talents besides cabin wrecking, general chaos, and mayhem.

She could also, apparently, shape shift.

She also possessed the means to calm someone's mind.

"Just remember," Ahoy had said after we had finally freed the little princess. "She has to have her cucumbers. Otherwise, she turns into a real monster. Seriously. Her kind are rumored to eat human flesh—especially that of children—so keeping her on a diet of cucumbers is highly advisable."

Cucumbers it was, then.

I was fairly certain I did *not* want to see what Princess Binda turned into if she didn't get her cucumbers.

"Duffy ain't showed hisself since we put 'im in the room," Emma said with a shrug. "Could be 'e didn't want a bath."

Emma grinned and I tried not to wince. The woman was missing one of her front teeth, something that had happened since I'd parted from her earlier that morning.

How had she managed to lose a tooth in the span of a single day?

I squinted closely at Emma, looking for signs of a battle. No cuts, no bruises. She hadn't tussled with anyone then.

"Sweets," Emma said, her mouth stuffed with bread. Emma had once told me—during one of my grand *teaching* moments on board ship—that she couldn't give a fig about Miss

Beauregard or what befit a Proper Lady. “Bit into a piece ’o Lettie’s fudge and left me tooth behind. ’Twas worth it.”

She grinned again. “Ya best try that fudge afore its gone.”

That brought a smile to my face. Emma and her sweets. She’d been without sweets for nigh on six months and hadn’t let a day go by without making note of the fact to anyone who would listen.

As well as those who wouldn’t.

“Fudge gone,” whispered a tiny voice.

The child huddled in the sheriff’s lap looked even smaller than she had outside, but that was more illusion than fact. The sheriff made most everyone who stood—or sat—beside him appear diminutive.

She looked to be scarcely more than a year old, though she acted much older. Her black hair shimmered in the light cast by the ring of overhead lanterns. Rosy cheeks and pink lips against skin that was darker than porcelain, but lighter than her father’s lent an innocent, doll-like appearance to her face.

An innocence belied by the wisdom reflected in the girl’s oddly colored eyes.

Binda slipped from my lap, disappearing beneath the table. A moment later, the sheriff’s face acquired an almost comical expression as Binda popped up next to the child. To my surprise, the child tipped her head in a bow, triggering Binda’s response.

Then they both giggled.

“Seems the young ’uns have taken a liking to each other,” the sheriff said, his voice so deep I could swear I felt the vibrations rather than heard them. “Ever since the princess there came through the door, she and Eclipse have been closer ’n bread ’n butter.”

“Tole ya,” Emma said. “Two kittens in the same skin.”

One calmed while the other healed, I mused to myself.

Binda touched the girl’s cheeks with her paws and Eclipse nodded.

Then Binda slipped below the table again.

A moment later I felt claws in my skirts, then a warmth in my lap.

Binda was back.

Eclipse clapped her hands as if the action made her happy for some reason.

I was mildly surprised that Ahoy had decided to remain reclusive. While Duffy the cat had

always been a bit reclusive, Ahoy generally liked being in the thick of things.

On second thought, rats did have a rather unsavory reputation. As Lettie had already mentioned, he might not be welcomed with open arms in a boardinghouse environment—unless cleared the way . . .

“We have another friend,” I said, leaning back and stroking Binda’s silken fur. Binda trilled, a sound that resembled a cross between a singing bird and a purring cat. She clapped her paws and Eclipse laughed, the sound soft, yet gleeful.

“Ahoy,” Eclipse whispered. She glanced around as if expecting to see the little rat suddenly appear.

I frowned. “How did you know—”

:She has special talents, some of which you’ve already experienced.:

I tried not to jump. The familiar voice had come from . . . *inside* . . . my head, but it wasn’t any of the internal voices I normally “heard.” This voice belonged to—

“Ahoy?” I reflexively said out loud, then felt a blush creep up my neck. These people were going to think me mad. I pretended to look under the table. “You under there?”

That last comment achieved the effect I had hoped for. Everyone sitting around the table stopped what they were doing and attempted to look beneath the table.

“Where is that li’l rat?” Emma asked with an enormous smile. She dropped out of her chair onto her hands and knees, emitting a loud grunt in the process. Mary settled for merely peering after Emma.

:Don’t act like an addlepatet twit,: Ahoy said. *:I’m in your room. Didn’t want to interpret supper.:*

Interpret supper? How did one interpret one’s meal?

Ahoy had an interesting way of expressing himself. He constantly switched up his words, like using violation instead of volition. I hadn’t quite figured out if the little rat did it on purpose or if he was vocabulary challenged, though I suspected the former.

And now the little rat was talking in my head.

I sucked on my lower lip, which was better than biting my cheek or lower lip, a habit I had been struggling to correct since leaving England. Biting one’s cheeks and lips could have disastrous consequences, not the least of which was having to swallow one’s own blood. Mother was the one with odd tastes in our family. I was determined to remain normal.

As normal as possible, that is.

How one remained normal with a kobold rat and a kappa princess for friends was proving to be somewhat of a challenge.

I stopped sucking my lip and straightened in my chair. The rat was already out of the bag—
:*A rat by any other name would smell as sweet, as Shakespeare once said.*:

I sighed. It was extremely irritating to discover Ahoy could put his thoughts in my mind without my knowing *how* such communication occurred.

I put both hands on the table and stood. “It appears the *li’l rat* is upstairs.”

Emma leapt up from the floor so fast she bumped her head on the table, causing the china dishes to clatter. “Upstairs?”

I bit back a laugh as she stared at me over the table, eyes wide, hair tumbling around her face.

The sheriff let out a quiet oath as Eclipse crawled from beneath the table near my legs, pushed herself to her feet, and toddled toward the stairs.

At least, I expected her to toddle. She actually ran. Like a child four or five times her age.

A million-spiders-running-over-my-grave feeling raced up the back of my neck, then proceeded to march over my head and down my arms until it felt like every hair, from head to toe, was standing on end.

The sheriff slid his chair back and touched a hand to his forehead. “My apologies, ma’am. Eclipse can be a might . . . impulsive.”

He gave a slight smile, enough to lightly dimple cheeks desperately in need of a shave, then stood, calling to the child as he moved. “Hold up, now.”

The child stopped, one hand on the banister’s lowest post. The sheriff strode into the hall and crouched next to the girl, speaking in a low voice.

There was something odd about that child, something other than doing things she shouldn’t be able to do, like healing broken noses and running like the wind.

Shaking off what Ahoy called the “graveyard chills,” I turned my attention back to the matter at hand.

“Ahoy . . .” I started, then stopped again, unsure how to tell these people, people who had welcomed me into their establishment, that I had brought along one of the most dangerous pests known to mankind. Visions of plague and other rat-related disasters played through my mind.

“Ya say he’s upstairs?” Emma asked, rubbing her head. “Wha’re ya waitin’ fer? Let’s go see the li’l rascal.”

I blinked. She sounded pleased.

Lettie, unfortunately, did not.

“See here now,” Lettie said. The expression on her face reminded me of a thunderstorm rolling across the ocean. “People expect three things when they stay at Perry’s Boardinghouse—good food and plenty of it, hot baths, and a clean, pest-free, environment. Enough that they have ta deal with rats and fleas outside these walls. I let the cat and the princess slide through. Ain’t having no rats around, though. And that’s the end of it.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could say anything, Ahoy interrupted.

:Who’s she calling a pest?:

“He’s not a pest,” I said, holding my hands out as if pleading a case, then dropping them to my sides. “Not really.”

“If’n a rat ain’t a pest,” Emma said, “wha’ be he?”

“A kobold,” I said, searching for a good way to explain just what a kobold was.

Emma crowed. Just like a rooster. “Tol’ ya we had the luck ’o the kobold wi’ us on that ship!”

Her expression grew serious. She turned to Lettie. “Ya gets the milk out now. Leave a full glass along wi’ a few biscuits at night and ya won’t never have bad luck.”

:Will you please inform our dear friend that milk and cookies are for brownies, not kobolds. We prefer schnapps and schnitzel.:

“Brownies,” I relayed without thinking. I was still trying to figure out a way to explain Ahoy’s presence in a positive manner. “Milk and cookies are for brownies. Kobolds prefer—”

“Lettie bakes a mean brownie,” Nathan said. “Though I’m not sure why a body would need both brownies and cookies.”

The conversation froze as Nathan—shorter than the sheriff and twice as round—scooted back his chair and limped over to Lettie, who sat still as a statue in her chair, face like an angry thunderstorm. He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave me a benevolent smile. “I’m sure Miss Crumb has everyone’s best interests at heart.”

I blinked, trying to convince myself that I wasn’t looking at an out-of-costume Santa.

“Why don’t we all go upstairs,” I finally said. “I will introduce you to Ahoy. If meeting him

doesn't convince you that he is not your typical rat, we'll find somewhere else to stay. It's only proper—”

“She's sticky wi' properness, that one is,” Emma said. She waved her hand in what she more than likely believed was something a Proper Lady of Society expected during a formal introduction but was in actuality an odd imitation of what could only be interpreted as a sick bird waving goodbye. “Mister and Missus Nathaniel Perry, may I present Lady Abigail Crumb, Daughter 'o Darkness and Purveyor 'o Ill Fortune.”

I glared at Emma who gave me a mock curtsy accompanied by a wicked grin. The woman never could pass up an opportunity to denigrate what she called my “properness.” She didn't know anything about Mother—except that I was to meet her—so the “Daughter of Darkness” reference was merely Emma's way of reminding me that we were no longer in London and were, therefore, equal in status.

Emma was a solidly built woman, not quite as tall as Lettie, who could look her husband straight in the eyes. Both women appeared able to “wrestle pigs ta the table wi'out breakin' a sweat” to use Emma's own words—

:I suggest you come to your room.: Ahoy sounded rather . . . disconcerted. :Now.:

