



GHOST OF A  
CHANCE

LINDA ANDREWS

THE KNIGHTS OF THE LIVING FIVE

*A Knight's Wish*

*Dancing in the Kitchen*

*A Hint of Magic*

*The Christmas Village*

*Some Enchanted Autumn*

DAUGHTERS OF DESTINY

*Gillian* (2010)



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OF A  
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**LINDA ANDREWS**



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© 2003, 2010 by Linda Andrews

ISBN 978-1-936144-91-4

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Andrews, Linda, 1967-

Ghost of a chance / by Linda Andrews.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-936144-91-4 (trade paper : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-936144-43-3 (electronic : alk. paper)

1. Single mothers--Fiction. 2. Ghost stories. 3. New York (N.Y.)--History--1865-1898--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3601.N55267G48 2010

813'.6--dc22

2010011902

## DEDICATION

To Peggy Ustasiewski for her support and guiding hand, to Joseph Ustasiewski for his enthusiasm over little victories, to Kerrie Droban for her inspiration, to Elizabeth Burton for taking a chance, and to my husband Nick—you finally have your bragging rights.

# CHAPTER I

*New York, 1871*

***“Tis madness, this.”*** *Brighid Garvey squeezed her daughter’s* hand. Their footfalls drummed against the pavement, marking their progress through the early morning.

*::Madness? No, child. This be yer destiny.::* Gran’s face flashed in the amorphous fog drifting beside the woman and child.

“Destiny?” Dark wavy locks snaked across Brighid’s pale cheek before a gust of wind whipped the tresses off her face. “Such foolishness will cost me my freedom.”

*Freedom.* The word sweetened her tongue. Her feet danced five steps of an Irish jig before returning to the business of walking. Her tight shoes pinched the moisture from her sodden stockings. Water trickled out of the hole in her thin soles. The liquid joined the glistening pavement.

*::Ye’ve fixated on freedom these past months.::* Gran shot into the air, zipped across the building then drifted down to her granddaughter’s side.

“Fixated?” Two-week-old Fiona wiggled against Brighid’s belly. She glanced at the wiggling infant. Determination girded her bones like a steel beam. Her daughters would never know the sting of a master’s whip. “Tis easy fer one who has shed their mortal skin to mock those who remain locked in their flesh, at the mercy of men and their whims.”

*::I may be dead nigh on a score of years but 'tis not I who mock freedom, Biddy.::*

“Nor I, Gran.” Frigid air slipped between the threadbare patches of her cotton shawl. Fiona mewed, protesting nature’s abuse. Brighid’s stiff features melted as the babe’s downy cheek cushioned her finger. Fiona turned her head and suckled comfort from her mother’s thumb. Such a perfect child was proof that God had not forsaken her. Hope’s bright flame banished her dark thoughts.

Rusty laughter scraped Brighid’s throat. How long had it been since she laughed? Not the fake smiles or chuckles required of Morgan’s hostess but the mirth that freed souls and lightened burdens. Fiona smiled, showing her pink gums as she nuzzled further into the sling. Too long.

“Sleep now, sweet child. No harm will come to ye. I swear it.” Her vow soared, but hovering clouds blocked its entrance into heaven. A gull squawked overhead; Brighid’s skin tightened around her neck before reason smoothed it.

*::They be birds, Brighid, not the devil with emeral’ eyes come for ye.::*

Brighid glanced over her shoulder. If Morgan Harrington was not Satan himself then he was his most favored spawn. She crossed herself. She was safe here, safe amongst the invisible poor. Her neighbors were so steeped in misery they paid scant attention as another swelled the wretched masses.

*::Ye not be free, Biddy. Fear has enslaved ye.::*

“Me fear be well found, Gran. While many in the Five Points be wanted, only a few have their likeness lashed to every surface.”

Fear wrapped an icy hand around Brighid’s spine. Distrust shrouded her mind. The fifty-dollar reward for her return would go far to ease the pervasive suffering. Not that she resembled the picture flashed in the saloons. Life in the tenements had provided an unexpected disguise. Coal residue dulled the blue highlighting her black hair. The stench of kerosene drowned out the floral scent of Parisian perfumes. Her ripe figure withered as the extra flesh supplemented her diet of stale bread and strong tea. The silk gowns Morgan had foisted on her had gone up the spout at a pawnshop across from Central Park.

*::'Twas a time, not long past, when ye would stroll by the ocean from daylight to dusk.::*

“Be that our purpose this morn?” Threads popped as Brighid pulled the shawl tighter. She could not go back. Would not go back. Her in-

digo eyes scrutinized the shadows, separating filth from vermin and heaps of garbage from discarded humans. She must be careful. They were too close to freedom to risk capture now. “Ta remind me about me childhood?”

*::No, child.:: Gran sighed. ::There be another in need of yer help.::*

“Another?” Brighid glanced at her phantom companion. Was she serious or teasing? Serious, Brighid decided. Besides, Gran had led her to Gilly. The three-year-old skipped beside her new family. “Will she be going ta California with us?”

In forty-eight hours, she and her children would be safely aboard the train to California. Brighid closed her eyes, imagining the hiss of the steam engine, the roar of the furnace and the chatter of excited passengers.

*::’Tis a he, Biddy.::*

“He?” Thumps and groans echoed out of the alley to her right. Blood bubbled across her freshly punctured tongue. Sweet copper clashed with the bitter tang of fear.

“Move yer arse or else.” A child’s voice mitigated the threatening words drifting from the alley.

“Will a newsboy be joining our family?” A boy might not be such a bad thing. Brighid sighed. The small puff of air loosened her knotted shoulders. A ragged child of eight emerged from the dark side street; the slap of his bare feet marked his progress into the dawn. Mumbles, thuds and bumps rang out as his fellow guttersnipes abandoned their beds in empty boxes and crates.

*::Them lads take better care of their own than some parents living hereabouts.::*

“Then who?” Brighid turned the corner onto Water Street. She stopped so fast her feet skidded along the debris. Her fingers sank into years of filth clinging like barnacles to the warehouse wall. People. For five days, she had hidden in her dingy room, safe from those who could expose her. Leave it to Gran to lead her into a crowd less than forty-eight hours before she left.

*::He be near.::*

“Not one o’ the street arabs?”

Staccato German and frenzied Italian mixed with relaxed Irish brogues. Scarlet, emerald and canary fabrics swished against sober gray, dingy white and stark black clothes. Trepidation chased the heat from



her skin. They would be all right. Gran had seen her safely through worse things than a crowd of people.

Coarse hair tickled Brighid's palm. The funeral brooch pinned her shirt closed and provided her a tangible link with Gran.

*::Hurry, Brighid. Afore it be too late.::*

A shudder rippled through the crowd marking Gran's presence among them. Brighid flinched as the babble of voices swelled. Tempers flared as the street vendors haggled with sellers for the best prices. Half-rotten cabbages, tomatoes, potatoes, onions and turnips passed from cart to hand. Bunches of people peeled off the swarming mass to divvy up the produce into smaller carts and baskets.

Brighid skirted the crowds. Sweat, garlic and decay polluted the air. Bile burned the back of her throat. A quick cough flipped the bitterness onto her tongue. She swallowed the foul lump. Sweet Mary and Joseph. Air. She needed fresh air. A breeze answered her prayer. The salted gust washed the fetid stench from her lungs.

She tightened her hold on Gillian's hand as they drew abreast of the knot of people. She averted her face as a couple promenaded by, interested more in each other than the over-ripe apples in their basket. She held her breath as a family approached. Three strapping boys shoved and challenged each other. A wizened girl limped between her parents.

Her heart pounded against her ears, drowning out the chatter of dispersing grocers. She approached the fleabitten nags tethered to an empty wagon. They shook their heads and swished their tails. Harnesses jingled. The sound scratched her control. Gran shot into the air.

"No, Gran!"

Gran drifted to her side. *::'Tis just a bit o' sport, Brighid.::*

Hooves stamped the broken pavement.

"Yer torment of the beasts could betray me."

*::Ah, Biddy, a tug on their tail won't hurt ye.::*

"No, Gran. Asides, ye said we be in a hurry."

*::Aye, so I did.::*

Brighid leapt over potholes and ruts. Gilly skipped by her side. Adrenaline warmed her muscles. Gran was right—they needed to hurry. They needed to be safely back in their room before the sun cleared the horizon. Already the pink rays streaked past the harbor to bathe the buildings rising from the city.

"Which way?"

*::A bit further down.::*

Pain radiated up Brighid's shin, bunching her thigh. Her shoe was wedged between the streetcar rail and the pavement. She kicked. Freedom was purchased with her balance. She released Gilly and stumbled a few yards before righting herself.

"Mam?" Gillian scurried to Brighid's side.

"'Tis fine I am, Gilly. Yer ol' mam was careless, is all."

Gillian wrapped her chubby arms around her mother's legs. The horse blanket-cum-skirt flapped around the child, protecting her from the ocean's spray. Brighid curled her fingers around Gilly's silky tresses. The salted breeze cleansed her lungs.

'Twas a shame such breath did not reach into the tenements. She shook her head. The landlords would as like charge the huddled masses for it. Everything decent came at a dear price. Brighid tramped down her anger. She had chosen to live in Five Points. Chosen to hide amongst the forgotten refuse washed upon New York's shore.

Her gaze swept over the choppy ocean. Gran was correct—she missed the water. For a moment, she traveled again to the fields of famine-riddled Ireland, the stews of London and the warrens of Liverpool, all the places she had seen in her twenty-three years. Would she ever see any of it again?

*::Brighid Garvey, ye were the one fearing discovery yet ye stand there, gawking at the sea.::*

"Aye, Gran." Brighid turned and followed her transparent guide. Too many unhappy memories dwelled along the Atlantic. The coast of the Pacific Ocean offered hope for so many. Surely, she would be in that number.

"Bird. Bird." Gillian's voice carried Brighid back to New York, back to the beginning of a better life.

"Birds, yes. Seagulls, pigeons, ducks—all sorts of birds." Dawn gilded the gull's feathers as it screeched through the air. Its feathered brethren joined the high cry.

"Seagulls, widgeons, duds. Birds." Gillian's palms smacked together. Her tiny bones poked the gaunt flesh.

"Ye be a smart one, Gilly. Right smart."

White smudged the gray sky as birds darted among skeletal masts and dove through clanking rigging. Shadows skimmed the watery clouds before alighting on the stubby fingers of the steamer's stacks.

Wood and metal hulls scraped against their berths. Dock rats scurried crab-like over the decks, tossing loose cargo overboard. Lads of eight or ten swam after the floating treasure. A soft cry echoed as a ship crushed one unfortunate soul against the dock. Brighid rushed forward.

*::Where ye traipsing to now, Biddy?::*

“I’m sorry, Gran. We be too late.” Tears burned her eyes as the boy’s body slipped silently under the water. Outrage pinned her in place as his comrades scrambled to rescue his booty.

*::Too late?::* Gran hovered in front of Brighid. *::He be in a better place now, Brighid. Warm and well-fed. ’Tis the other what worries me.::*

“Other?”

*::Aye, the one ye need ta help.::*

Older men pressed against the bow of a ship, catching a trickle of liberated coffee beans in their hats. Metal flashed, illuminated by the distant lightning. A stealthy comrade slit another sack and more men swarmed over to fill their empty vessels.

“Which one?”

*::Not that lot. He be this way.::*

Brighid turned to go as the night watchman’s whistle rent the air. The human vultures vanished into the nooks and crannies created by the crumbling buildings. She nodded to the stout sailor and hurried past as he poked the flaccid bags with his billy club.

Gas lamps tossed fractured light through of their cracked globes. Flames sputtered atop their metal stalks. A pair of drunks staggered into the cone of jaundiced light created by an open door. Piano keys plinked, fiddles screeched, laughter and mumbles drifted out of the saloon offering stale beer. Brighid tightened her hold on Gillian’s hand as the sots tottered past. Anxiety pinched her insides. Had they recognized her? She glanced over her shoulder. The duo collapsed on a rotted step. Their wheezing rippled the air.

“Bad man coming.” Gillian released Brighid’s hand and clutched at the patched skirt fluttering before and behind her.

Morgan! Had he found her? Fear soured Brighid’s clothes. Gilly’s instincts always proved true.

“Bad man.”

“Shh, sweetings.” Tremors shook Brighid’s frame. She wiped her damp palms on her skirt. Morgan couldn’t have found her. Gran would have spotted him. “I’ll let no harm befall ye.”

She soothed her daughter's tumbled curls.

A wave crashed over the dock. Finding no home in her saturated shoes, the water drained into the basement lodging houses. Curses and grunts drifted out of the moldy broken panes. A gust of wind carried the sound inland.

"Bad man."

::*Aye, they be bad men. Hurry, Brigid. They almost be upon him.*::

"Where, Gran?" Brigid rushed around the corner and stopped.

There. A fight blocked their path. Three toughs circled another. The man in the middle weaved from side to side, clutching a duffel bag to his chest.

"That be a man!"

::*Aye, a man ye need ta rescue, Biddy.*::

"The ragman'll give us a bit o' money for his fancy duds." A lanky thief snapped his suspenders for emphasis.

"Oi'm thinking ta keep that vest for meself." The leader leapt forward and shoved the man from behind.

"Whot's in the bag?"

A portly robber caught the victim and sent him spinning with his meaty fist.

"Dinner and maybe a show or two." The thief's oversized gut jiggled in anticipation.

"Gentlemen, I can assure you that you would not be interested in the contents." The victim shook his head then danced out of the clutches of his nearest captor. The trio ringed him in.

"I says we are."

"No, you're not." Each consonant dissolved in the victim's overindulgence of liquor.

"No, you say?" The leader held up his hands and stepped backwards. The faint light shadowed his features but revealed two fingers missing from his left hand. *Three-Fingers McGuire.*

Brigid pushed Gillian behind her. She had encountered the tough who ruled this section of Water Street the night of her arrival. He had left her unmolested because of the blood flowing since Fiona's birth, but she knew he was just biding his time. Her time would be severely shortened if she did Gran's bidding.

"Wasn't asking. I be king o' this particular kingdom, and I want what's me due." The blade of Three Fingers' knife gleamed. He tossed it

from hand to hand before lunging at his victim. The man leapt out of reach.

He was fast, but drink made his movements clumsy. Brigid's brain commanded her body to leave. This wasn't her business. Her feet refused to obey.

"Saints preserve us, the man is touched in the head to risk his life for such a thing as that."

The three closed ranks. The man spun on his heel. He faced the leader briefly before pivoting and kicking his scrawny opponent in the gut. The hoodlum crumpled.

"Oi thought to let ye live, but none hurts Noodles and lives to tell the tale."

"Cut 'im first." Noodles gagged the words.

"Help man, Mam." Gillian tugged on Brigid's skirt. "Help man."

*::Ye must help him, Biddy,::* Gran whispered in Brigid's ear. *::For yer future, Biddy, yer future.::*

"Me future will be very short if I defy Three-Fingers." Grunts, thuds and crunching bone condemned her inaction. "Sure, and how am I supposed to help him anyway?"

Adrenaline shook her. Curse words lodged in her throat as her grandmother's silent condemnation buffeted her. Brigid's gaze flitted over the crumbling buildings to land on a broken slat.

"Stay here." She shoved Gillian into an unoccupied doorway and loped over to the board. Splinters bit into her flesh as she worked the plank from its original home. Flakes of masonry plopped into the puddles as the board groaned free.

She sprinted to the sidewalk and rapped three times. The sound thudded against the darkness. A policeman's answering whistle rent the night air. She banged the concrete once again. Another whistle trilled, closer this time.

Brigid counted to ten then slipped into the alley. The men had disappeared. Was she too late? Had they taken the body with them? She peered into the darkness. She had to find him before the policemen arrived. They wouldn't appreciate her using their call of assistance for her own purposes.

"Help man?" Gillian pointed to a lump huddled against the wall.

"Help man," Brigid agreed and rushed forward.



Everett Grey opened his eyes and beheld an angel. Her blue eyes reminded him of the ocean's tempestuous dance. The kind that tossed a ship and emptied a man's stomach. Brown freckles soiled her creamy skin and her person reeked of greasy coal dust. *Brimstone*. The word beat against the cage of his locked jaw. Had circumstance finally defeated instinct?

Muscles solidified against bone, refusing to move. Foul water swirled under his nose and sucked the air from his ear. The puddle leached the warmth from his body. No, not body—corpse. He was dead. His carcass hurtled into Hell at the ripe old age of twenty-eight for eternal torment. Bubbles of laughter escaped with his life's blood from his mouth. His father had predicted such an end. Would James Grey crow at his youngest son's funeral?

"Ye must rise."

The angel's low voice sparked sensations along his spine. Her touch warmed his skin. No! The denial ricocheted around his skull. He was still alive. Damned to live by the same skills that warranted his death and dishonor.

"Have they hurt ye that badly, then?"

Everett captured the calloused palms playing a siren's song of hope. The back of his angel's hand felt smooth under his thumb.

"No!"

The word roared from his throat on a cloud of whiskey. He shoved away her hands and clawed his way up the wall. No comfort. No hope. Men such as he were unworthy.

The buildings swirled, a strange sort of reel in a drunken man's dance. Everett closed his eyes. The sticky wall cooled his cheek. A drop of water slid down his face, hung from his nose then plopped into the puddle of its birth.

"Good, ye can stand."

Everett stared past the woman. Neptune's arms beckoned. He stumbled forward. A few more steps, and the sea god would carry away his burdens. Pain burned his side, fueling his clumsy steps. Over. It was almost over.

"Da."

Everett's knees buckled. The street rose to meet him. The duffel. He had forgotten the duffel. Anguish choked him. Stones cut his palms as he crawled to the bag. Cowards deserved their torment. This was his.

“We’ve not time for that.” The angel hooked her arm around his chest. When she tugged, his hand rose off the ground. He shook her off.

“No! I can’t die yet. I can’t.”

“Then on yer feet, or it’ll be the station house for ye.”

Her words sluiced over him. Station house? He couldn’t be arrested now. Everett reached the bag and loosened the drawstrings. Good. The cretins had not harmed it. Purpose filled him, driving out his self-pity. Perhaps this was not punishment at all. Perhaps this was his chance at redemption. Redemption? Were all fairy tales conceived in a pickled brain?

*I will live.* The statement surfaced in his skull. Everett’s stomach bucked. Whiskey soured his mouth. He swallowed. The searing pain in the back of his throat reminded him he was alive. Painfully alive. Fetid air filled his lungs like the sweetest roses. His hands curled into fists. His spine straightened. A stitch of pain hunched his back. I’ll prove my father wrong.

“I’ve not saved yer worthless carcass to let the police have ye. Rise, I say.”

The angel’s soft brogue wrapped around his battered body like cotton batting. Brogue. She was Irish, just like the thugs who had attacked him. One of her hands snaked out, reaching for the duffel. He flattened against the building. No wonder the woman was intent on helping him out of here before the police arrived. She wanted his baggage for herself.

He surveyed her thick frame, the shabby clothes and unkempt hair. Movement at her side caught his attention. Everett blinked in surprise. A child. She had a child with her? What kind of woman trained a toddler in larceny?

Men’s voices drifted to him. The police! He scanned his “rescuer.” She, too, had heard them.

“Hurry, else ye’ll lose yer precious baggage to the graspin’ policemen.” Her fists rested against her hips. Her soles slapped water out of the puddle onto his shoes. “I’m sure yer da will be right proud o’ his fine son when he visits ye on the Island.”

Everett winced. His father wouldn’t visit him in the city’s prison. In fact, James Grey would probably arrange to have his son incarcerated permanently. Everett inched up the wall. His fingers sank into the worn fabric of the duffel bag. Her sigh rippled the night air when he made no move to accept her offer of help.

“Grand. This not be me idea in the first place. Come, Gilly.” His angel turned to leave.

“Wait. I...I accept your offer of assistance.”

Mother and child considered each other before two sets of eyes regarded him.

“Can ye walk?”

“Only when I’m not running.” He shoved away from the wall and staggered into the middle of the road. Everett looked down at his legs, half-expecting to see two wooden stumps. Why wouldn’t they obey his commands? His brain ordered his legs forward. They carried him first left then right. Had that vile concoction turned him into a crab? A crab. He looked at his free hand, expecting to see a giant pincer. Laughter spilled from his cut lip.

“Saints preserve us, so that’s how the fancy walk? Ye must be trained as babes to scabble about in such a fashion.”

Everett swallowed his laughter and straightened. His angel was making fun of him. Pain shot up his side, and he bent double again. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. Several broke free from their perch to sting his eyes. A hand skimmed his back before latching onto his side. Her hip dug into his thigh. His fingers bumped over her shoulders.

Everett felt his brow wrinkle. How could she be so bony yet thick in the middle? Unless...

He licked his lip, using his blood to moisten his dry mouth. His rescuer was a pregnant woman. A spiritual man might interpret this as a sign. He snorted, disturbing the hair around her neck. He had stopped believing after the carnage at Gettysburg.

“Be ye hurt?” Her eyes widened as they inspected him.

“I’m in Hell, aren’t I?”

A smile vibrated her lips. What would she be like if she really smiled? Everett shook off his thought. Those temperance women were right—too much drink was definitely unhealthy.

His angel shrugged. “Some calls it such. Others find sanctuary in the Five Points.”

*Sanctuary.* The word quieted the confusion swirling inside Everett. Had he been seeking sanctuary in New York’s infamous slums and not death?

“If ye’d stow yer baggage hereabouts, we’ll be on our way.”



“No.” His earlier suspicions resurfaced. He couldn’t trust her. She was too fixated on his duffel.

“Then let Gilly—”

“Hey! You, there. Halt!”

The policeman’s words lanced Everett, pinning his feet in place. He might not trust her, but she was the lesser of the two evils. He couldn’t run, and he refused to go to jail. Besides, once her friends peeked at the bag’s contents they would leave him in peace.

Two uniformed officers shuffled down the alley. Everett winced as one shoved a lantern in his face.

“What’s going on here?”

Muscles straightened the bones in his angel’s body. Everett stepped back. Was she trying to hide behind him? The urge to protect her strolled out of the musky closet of his mind. He stepped forward. The policeman’s club thudded against his chest.

“Da?” Gilly’s sweet voice captured everyone’s attention. His angel stepped forward.

“My husband spent his wages on ale down at the White Whale.”

Husband? Drunk or not, he definitely would have remembered a wedding. Joints popped as Everett scrutinized his “wife.” Something seemed different about her.

She wavered in his vision. He blinked, hoping the movement would solidify the actors playing in the haze. His stomach clenched, protesting his earlier abuse. What kind of alcohol had he drunk?

“Collin wouldn’t let me in...”

Everett glared at his angel. Was making him a sot her revenge for his refusing her offer the first time? Surely, with a little effort, she could have concocted a better story. He wasn’t a worthless sot. He was...

A hiccup tossed his stomach against his mouth. He swallowed. Why was everyone swaying? Couldn’t they just stand still?

“Perhaps we should let the judge sort this out at the station house.”

Everett turned to glare at the bulldog-faced policeman.

“Oh, please, sir. He’s just secured the position of gentlemen’s gentleman.”

Everett rested his cheek against her head. The world stilled. His eyes fluttered shut. A servant *and* a married sot. Wouldn’t his father be

proud? Hell, James Grey would probably say the little actress was too good for his son.

“If you send him away then what would become of our children?”

Everett’s eyes flew open. What happened to her accent? His angel suddenly sounded more like a gentlewoman fallen on hard times than an Irish immigrant.

“Children?”

“Gilly and Fiona, sir. They’re both good girls.” His angel pulled back the moth-eaten fabric that passed as a shawl. Black curls swirled atop an ivory head. He pulled back. A baby. She had a baby. The thought was important, but the fog once more enshrouded his brain.

The butt of the officer’s club drilled Everett’s chest.

“Your good wife saved you this time, but if I see you again I’ll lock you up, understand?”

“Surprisingly so.” Everett nodded. If he could understand prison, why couldn’t he understand the importance of a baby?

“Thank you, sir. Thank you. He’ll be no trouble, I promise. He’s never done anything like this before. Now, with his job, things are bound to get better. We’ll have a fine house again.”

The policemen exchanged looks and grunted. They tipped their hats to his angel, speared him with one last look and swaggered away.

“Thank you for the deception. I...” His words of gratitude drowned as the contents of his stomach shot out of his mouth.

“Ere now, don’t fight it. Ye’ll be the better for it, and that’s for certain.”

The brogue colored her words again. Had he dreamed the whole encounter? He would worry about it later, after his stomach cramps eased and his jaw decided to remain hinged to his skull. Her words offered little comfort. He would be either better or dead. Either way he wouldn’t care much longer.

Her fingers held his long locks out of the way until the spasms passed.

“Thank you.” He straightened then hunched over. He fished a few coins out of his pocket and held them out to her. The gold gleamed in the dingy gas light. “Please accept this...this token for your trouble.”

“’Twouldn’t be right.”

Everett glanced at the coins. Was she holding out for the duffel? She’d be better off with the money.

“For the children, if not for yourself.”

Her chin lifted. “Thank you. No.”

Everett smiled. The lady was back, proud and regal despite her shabby appearance. He would find her location and send her food. Surely, she wouldn’t turn that away.

“If you’re certain.”

“I’m certain.”

He shrugged and pocketed the coins.

“Thank you again. If you ever find yourself in need of assistance, please allow me the honor of repaying your kindness.” He saw her jaw thrust forward. “Everett Grey. Fifth Avenue.”

He reached for his missing hat, settled for a self-conscience salute and turned to leave. Pain zipped up his side. He staggered towards the wall and managed to turn at the last minute. His teeth rattled as his shoulder absorbed the collision instead of the duffel.

“Sweet Jesus, ’tis a fool’s errand.” His angel stomped to his side. “Ye can’t toddle about like that. The street thugs would be on ye in a minute.”

She slipped her arm around his waist and helped him upright. They started down the street.

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”

## CHAPTER 2

***“Get undressed, Gilly, love.”***

Brigid struck a match. Sulfur stung her nose. The jaundiced light hissed over the sliver of wood. She touched the dancing flame to the wick of the kerosene lamp; the fiery offspring sputtered before catching.

She set the metal base near a shattered mirror. Light and shadow cavorted around the ten-foot-square room. She unraveled the knot of muscles binding her lower spine. Her right shoulder burned. Tingles pricked her arm.

“Sweet Jesus,” she muttered to herself, “if yer body didn’t adjust to hauling around a baby after nine months, what made ye think ye could lug a man as large as he be without protest?”

Brigid’s shoulder popped. The sound ricocheted in her eardrums. Tension escaped her body on puffs of air. What had possessed her?

*Fer yer future, Biddy. Yer future.*

Gran. Even in death, her grandmother had not abandoned her. The sweet Irish lilt comforted and guided her. Why had Gran demanded the sor’s rescue? What role would he play in her future? Brigid massaged the ache in the middle of her forehead. Why bother trying to sort through the confusion? Gran would reveal the reasons when it suited her.

“Not mine! Not mine!”

Brigid inspected the man sprawled at her feet. A lock of brown hair outlined his high cheekbone. Bushy black brows connected in a V over his thin nose. Blood trickled from his full lower lip and mixed with the stubble carpeting his chin.

The man released the duffel bag and rolled from his side onto his back. Straw clung to the mud coating his blunt fingers.

“Why can’t you believe...believe...” he mumbled.

“Sure, and I believe.” Brigid pinched her lip. She believed her actions tonight would cost her dear. Three-Fingers was bound to find out she had helped his mark escape. He’d seek her out and exact a steep price. Dread iced the skin coating her spine.

Flesh squirmed beneath her fingers. She should not have gone out tonight. She should not have listened to Gran. Guilt bowed her shoulders and shackled her feet to the floor. Was her freedom so precious she would exchange it for another’s life?

“Believe me.” The man’s deep voice dissolved into trembling snores as he fought with his inner demons.

“I believe ye had better be worth the trouble.”

Brigid shuffled toward the duffel. Her shoes scuffed the plank flooring. He was mighty possessive of the thing and suspicious of her. On the other hand, only a fool wouldn’t be wary of another, especially in the tenements. Should she look inside? How could she not? Would he attack if he awoke and spied her rifling the contents?

Brigid cleared her stomach from her throat. She had a right to know what could be so valuable that the man would risk his own life and hers. She waited a heartbeat then slowly slid the bag into the corner.

“Believe, Mam.”

“Shh.” The noise vibrated against the top of her mouth before slipping around her finger. “He best not be violent, Gran.”

No man would strike her children, drunk or otherwise.

*::He not be.::* Gran poked her head through the window and slipped the rest of the way in. *::Best ye get out o’ them clothes afore ye snoop where yer not invited.::*

“Aye, but I still say I have the right to know.” Brigid tugged at the frigid knot pressing against her throat. Once freed, the ends of her shawl peeled off her body. Her stiff fingers looped the damp wrap around a rusty exposed nail. Her sultry breath warmed her digits. Her bones rattled from the draft snaking into the room through the holes punched in the plaster.

*::’Tis better to be outside.::*

“Aye,” Brigid agreed.

These four walls pitted with misery seemed more prison than haven. She scratched hay off the floor and shoved it into the gaps. She had expected the hunger, but not the choice between a soft bed or a cold one. Another shiver twitched up her legs and out her head. Her hands moved over her arms. The friction couldn't alleviate the dampness. Her teeth chattered, ready to mince her tongue.

"Tea, Mam." Gilly dutifully slid the sodden fabric over her head and stripped off her wet drawers.

"Strong, hot tea, Gilly."

Brighid fished five pieces of coal from the scuttle and tossed them into the can that served as her stove. She stirred the ashes, mixing the fresh coal with the glowing embers. Next, she ladled stale water from the bucket into Mrs. Engells' battered teapot. Once that was heating, she unearthed her precious tin of tea from the hay bedding of Fiona's box and added a handful of leaves to the water.

"Cold, Mam. Cold." Baby teeth rattled. Gillian's clothes plopped into the washbasin. Tremors shook the strength from her naked body as she stumbled to her mother's side. Brighid wrapped a blanket around her daughter and hugged her close.

"Soon, Gilly, love, soon we'll have a fine house with real towels, a roaring fire and warm clothes."

She winced and glanced over her shoulder. Why was it so hard for her to stay in the Irish lilt? Sure, and she could fake the cultured American accent, even the brogue of Liverpool, England, but the musical voice of her youth eluded her.

*::Aye, till then the tea will warm yer toes.::* Gran spun in the steam rising from the pot.

Brighid rubbed the towel briskly over her daughter's skin, drying as well as warming. Gillian's hair changed from a dark strawberry to the brightness of a copper penny. Brighid yanked the woman's shirt off Gilly's pallet. Broken threads marched next to the seam holding the blouse closed. Gilly wiggled into her nightgown while Brighid fished a broken comb from the shelf above the bed. She pulled the teeth through the tangles then plaited the lengths and tied them off with a strip of lace that had once adorned someone's petticoat.

"One day, Gilly, ye'll have a proper bath. One in a grand copper tub." Brighid tested the comb in her own hair. The teeth scraped her scalp before stopping. She yanked. Pieces of the comb pinged against

the floor. Tears burned her eyes. She'd love a bath and clean hair. Once they were out of here, she'd buy a cake of castile. Mrs. Engells would inherit the bar of lye soap that chapped and cracked flesh.

Brighid looked at her guest. She wasn't the only one who would benefit from a bath. His charcoal coat was now black. His white collar was tinted gray and flecked with crimson. Water stained his leather boots while rotting refuse stuck to the smooth soles. The merino slacks showed their true gray color under his scarlet silk vest. Gold snaked across his belly.

::*Hide it. Now.*:: Gran's shadowy face appeared over Brighid's shoulder.

"What need 'ave I fer a watch? I have more than enough ta see us ta California."

::*'Tis not fer ye.*::

Before Brighid could respond, Gillian had crossed to the man's unconscious form. Skeletal fingers freed the fob and clip before slipping the gleaming watch into her pocket. The man mumbled. His flailing hand disturbed the wisps of red hair floating around Gilly's head. Brighid grabbed her daughter and pulled her out of harm's reach.

"Mam?"

"Ye be fine, Gilly, me girl." Gilly tottered across the room, climbed atop a three-legged stool and pulled Mrs. Engells' scissors off the nail above the sewing machine.

"Careful." The word slipped past Brighid's lips. The routine felt comfortable. Right. Gilly was a part of her family, just like Fiona. Brighid's heart pounded against her breast, ready to break free of her body and soar heavenward.

Brighid Garvey was a mother.

Gilly cut the buttons off her dress then carefully stacked them by Brighid's pallet. She'd stay up late tonight sewing the buttons on the girl's spare dress. Buttons. Funny how she had never paid them much mind. Of course, they had always been on her clothes when they returned after washing. Brighid vowed to buy cards of buttons, enough to fill a hatbox, as soon as they reached California.

The stench of wet horse assaulted her nose. Brighid plucked at her damp clothes. She would have to change; she couldn't afford to get sick. Gilly and Fiona needed her.

As if sensing her mother's thoughts, Fiona squirmed in her sling. One tiny fist thwacked Brighid's ribs.

"Ah, ye've a lusty appetite, fair Fiona." She laid the baby on the floor, pulled off the sodden diaper and tossed it into the washbasin. Fiona smiled. Her hand smacked her cheek before landing in her mouth. Slurping filled the air as she sucked on her hand, her chubby legs churning the air.

*::Ye had best change afore ye feed yer daughter::*

"Ye're a mind reader as well?" Brighid's heavy skirt splatted against the floor. Seconds later, her shirt plopped on top.

*::'Tis enough I be dead. Those with any sense would prefer dry ta wet::*

"Aye, but dry be a luxury fer those with children ta care fer." Sour skin and hard work assaulted Brighid's nose. She pinched her nostrils closed and breathed through her mouth. Her silk shift abraded her engorged breasts. The matching drawers hung off her hips.

*::Ye ever goin' ta change 'em?::*

"Aye. Once we're safe, I plan ta burn the foul things."

*::Them Amerikay dollars would be fine kindlin'::*

"Death has destroyed yer brain. Dollars are not fer kindlin'." Brighid tightened the drawstring and smoothed the dollars padding her hips. The ruby-and-emerald necklace dotted her hem red and green. Bags of coins bulged along her thighs. She eased one open and freed ten pennies and three quarters.

The floorboards creaked in the hall. Brighid lunged for her clothes. If anyone discovered what she wore under them...

She ignored the thought and freed a faded cotton skirt and blouse off the hook. She jerked on the clothes, using an apron to keep the shirt closed and the skirt around her waist. She glanced at the blue cotton dress hanging on a nail above Gilly's bed. Two dresses. Each. One nail housed a wardrobe that had once required a small room. Happiness buoyed her spirits. A wise trade.

Gilly patted Mr. Keegan's hammer then hopped back to her bed. The silence overwhelmed Brighid. Ten people usually slept on the floor. More in the rooms beyond. A drunk stumbled up the stairs; a woman demanded the remains of his paycheck. Brighid winced as she heard bone hit bone.

Payday. No wonder the cops had believed her story. If it was payday, then it must also be Friday.



One week had passed since her arrival, and already she knew the routine. Her landlady, Mrs. Engells, had explained the system last week. Every Friday, she collected the rent. She insisted on being paid first and had been known to stand outside the lodger's place of employment to get hers before the rest went to drink.

Mrs. Engells.

Brighid cleaned the dirt out from under her fingernails. She would owe her landlady more money for her guest's place on the floor. Gold coins flashed in her memory. She had saved his life; the least he could do was pay his own way.

A train whistle cut through the night. Six o'clock. Water wiggled down the windowpane. Probably later—the train was always late. Brighid glanced at the empty pallets. Where was Mrs. Engells? The chapel meeting would have let out an hour ago. She shrugged and turned back to her houseguest. Maybe the rotund German woman was chasing some errant tenant down in a grog shop.

Brighid poured steaming tea into two chipped mugs. She sprinkled sugar on the tops and stirred the brew with a bent, tarnished spoon.

"Hot, love."

Brighid set one cup next to Gilly's feet then pulled a loaf of bread off the shelf. She scraped the mold off the blackened crust and cut the remaining scrap in half. Rancid butter softened the stale piece.

"Dinner is served." She gave Gilly the bigger half before taking a bite. Grease coated her tongue before she swallowed the lump. Her empty stomach overrode the complaints of her taste buds.

The wall cushioned her back. Her saliva softened the hard crumbs. She closed her eyes. She would buy meat before they boarded the train. A few slices of roast beef, maybe some Cornish pasties. Perhaps some fruit, too. Apples, red shiny apples. Bread coated her throat. She washed it down with a gulp of tea. Two more days. The soothing mantra allowed her to finish her meal.

Fiona wiggled. Her toes brushed Brighid. She counted the baby's toes and fingers.

"Ye look better." A mother's critical gaze swept over Fiona. Her eyes didn't appear nearly as sunken as yesterday. Brighid scratched her head. In fact, a whole day had passed since Fiona had the diarrhea.

"Mayhap the pap didn't agree with ye." Brighid shuddered.

Fiona had choked on the first finger-full of the bread-and-tea mixture. Her tiny face had turned beet red until Brighid had scooped the goop out of her mouth.

“Never fear, little one, yer mam will not feed ye it again.”

Fiona huffed and puffed then let out a wail. Brighid’s breasts tightened and burned. Milk bubbled out of her nipples and dotted her shirt. She opened her blouse and Fiona latched on. The babe suckled for a moment before drifting off to sleep. Brighid stared at the blue veins marbling her breasts. Why couldn’t Fiona nurse more? Brighid settled her naked daughter in the makeshift crib and tucked scraps of fabric around her.

The mound of dirty fabric chastised her. Thunder rumbled to her defense. She would have to wash the laundry tomorrow. Perhaps Mrs. Engells would allow her to hang it inside the room to dry.

*::Biddy, I think ye should open that bag o’ his::*

“First ye accuse me of snooping now ye tell me ta open his bag. Have ye gotten a sign?”

*::More like a noise than a sign,::* Gran huffed and walked through the door.

A strange mewling noise scratched Brighid’s ears. She checked Gillian. Her daughter’s eyes were closed. Melted butter glistened on her fingers. Brighid crept across the floor. Was the man making the noise? She leaned over his chest and listened. The sound wasn’t coming from him. Movement caught her eye. Brighid glanced at the duffel bag. The side bubbled. Curious, she crawled over, loosened the string and peered inside. Eyes peered back.

“What manner of creature be this?” She dropped her hand and rocked back on her heels. The crying started again. It almost sounded like a baby. She pushed the sides down. A tiny baby girl lay atop a soiled blanket in a wicker basket. Her mother’s blood stained her cheeks.

Brighid lifted the child from her bed. She dipped the edge of the blanket into the pail of water and cleaned the squirming child.

“Ye be more beautiful than all the fields of Erin.” Her gaze slid to the man. No wonder he had been reluctant to give up the bag. “Ye be a brave man, Everett Grey.”

Brighid’s stomach danced a jig. She could almost forgive his drinking. “Poor man, he be half-crazed with grief.”

Brigid inspected the strong chin, the chiseled cheeks and crooked nose. Gran was right to save such a man. Though obviously pickled, he had protected his child. Her gaze returned to the blue eyes regarding her myopically.

“He chanced his life to save ye.” Such men were rare. *She* knew. “Where be yer mam, little one?”

She tugged the basket out of the duffel. Ten squares of snowy linen rested on the bottom. All were wet. She tossed them into the washtub. The baby opened her mouth in a noiseless cry. Brigid wrapped her apron around the child. She held the infant against her stomach, warming the chilled skin with her body’s heat. Next, she rubbed her nipple against the child’s cheek. She turned and after several tries managed to latch on. Brigid smiled as the greedy slurps filled the air.

*Bang!*

The wooden door slammed against the wall; the hinges squealed under the assault. Wood ripped as door and the hinges parted company. Three-Fingers McGuire strode into the room. His bushy carrot-colored mustache twitched like a rat smelling cheese. His beady blue eyes swept over the room before pinning her to the spot. They fell to her exposed breast. The black abyss of his pupils devoured the icy irises.

“Bad man.” Gillian whimpered. Brigid stuffed the little girl in the small space between her and the wall. She pulled the baby closer to her skin. The slight weight of her hand stilled Fiona’s agitation.

“Ye got something Oi wants, Brigid Garvey.” Three-Fingers pinched the brim of his battered hat while eyeing her breast. Fear dried her mouth. She swallowed it down. She’d seen such a look before. The feral dogs of London had had such a lust in their eyes before they attacked a stumbling drunk.

*::Gather yer wits about ye, girl.::* Gran’s soft gray form deepened to pitch. She dove into Three-Fingers’ stomach. The man rubbed his belly. *::Wretched dead limbs, be no good ta a body. Sorry, Biddy, ye must help yerself.::*

Brigid nodded in understanding. No one in the tenements would interfere. ’Twas the curse and the blessing of the place.

Purpose filled her, pushing the fear aside. She could do this. She had to do this.

“Mrs. Engells will not take kindly to yer brutish posturing. That door be coming out of her rent.”

“Mrs. Engells knows ’er place. ’Tis time and then since ye learned yers.” Noodles and Itchy Mike snickered and grabbed their crotches.

“Show ’er.”

Wooden planks quaked as Three-Fingers stomped towards her. His hand fiddled with the button holding his waistband together.

“Seems like ye ought to be thanking me.”

His hand stilled on the second button.

“Thanking ye, ye say. Ye’ll be thanking *me* afore Oi’m finished.”

Brigid held up her hand. “I passed the police on me walk. They be looking fer ye. Fair itching to find ye, that Sergeant O’Malley.”

She removed the sleeping child from her breast and settled her on her shoulder. She gently rubbed the baby’s back while adjusting the blouse to cover herself.

Three-Fingers’ boots touched her shoes. His arms crossed his chest. His head tilted.

“So ye say.”

“That O’Malley be right determined ta bring ye in. He crept ’round the corner sniffing like a dog on the trail of a butcher’s bone. He found ye, alright, and sure as Mrs. O’Brien eats potatoes he sent fer help to bring ye in.” She pushed the hair out of her eyes and locked gazes with him.

Three-Fingers squatted before her. His finger trailed along the tip of her shoe, down the sole. Brigid stiffened as she felt it penetrate the hole to rub the pad of her foot.

“Mayhap I *should* be thanking ye.” He finished fondling her shoe and circled her ankle with his hand before his fingers snaked over her shins to creep up her skirt.

Did he know about the money? The thought bucked along her spine. Her heart slammed into her throat. Bitterness exploded in her mouth. No one would ever again take her against her will.

::*Calm, girl. Ye must be calm.*::

Gran’s whisper had the needed effect. Air slipped in and out of her lungs. Calm. She had outwitted Morgan; she could outwit Three-Fingers.

Brigid squeezed her thighs together and slapped her skirt flat, pinning it over her knees.

“I’ve still me courses from the babe’s passage.” She squeezed the words through her teeth, knowing that mention of a woman’s cycle was

enough to put off most men. Three-Fingers removed his hand from her knee and wiped it on his pants. Coppery pain exploded in Brighid's mouth. She preferred to bite her cheek rather than laugh in his face.

"Such an excuse will not hold ye fer long."

He reached over and under guise of caressing the baby's head ran his fingers over her breast. Revulsion slipped under her skin. Brighid swallowed the bile but couldn't help scooting backwards. A grin twisted Three-Fingers' lips.

"Take 'im, fellas." He shot to his feet. A knife twirled in his hands.

"No!"

Brighid winced as her cry filled the room. He turned slowly to her. His muscles bunched, twisting his face into a mask of evil.

"Ye *did* bring him here fer me, didn't ye?"

"Ye cannot kill 'im." Brighid was torn. She had to protect her children. But Everett...

::*Ye must save the man, Biddy.*::

Brighid groaned. She was insane to challenge Three-Fingers, especially in front of his men. Even the promise of sexual favors wouldn't be sufficient to induce him to spare the man. His reputation was at stake.

"No?" His voice played like the breeze on the silken threads of a spider web.

Brighid hefted the baby higher and scrambled to her feet. "Well, ye could, but the police already be after ye. Ye toss his carved carcass into the water and more will be bound to come lookin'—everyone knows yer mark. Them preacher folk wants Water Street clean. Already got two missions, and there be talk of another. Some wants ter pull the whole place down."

She waited. Her stored breath shoved against her lungs.

"He be yer husband?" Blood oozed out of the puncture on Three-Fingers' thumb.

She swallowed. Everett's life depended on her answer. Her tongue stuck to her dry lips.

"I've no husband. We shared a wake afore I left Erin." She swallowed again as the mention of Ireland didn't sway McGuire's determination. "He be a cousin."

"A cousin? One that's come ta take ye away from the Five Points?" His thumb caressed her cheek. His blood marked her as his.

She shook her head. "No, he wants me to care fer his child."

She pulled back the hem of her apron and showed the naked infant.

“That be yer babe.”

“*That* be my babe.” Brighid pointed to Fiona nestled in the crate. “B–Brianna be his child. Her mam died bringing her forth.”

Three-Fingers stepped forward. He looked at the child in the crate and the one in her arms.

“Looks sickly. Best just farm ’em both.”

Anger burned Brighid’s cheeks. She’d never give any child of hers to those who starved infants to death so their selfish parents could continue to wallow in their misery.

“Ye’ll not—” She swallowed her rage. Three-Fingers would take both children from her if she were not careful. “I ask ye, with a mither’s heart, to spare the childer and this one’s da. He only fought to protect the babe.”

“Oi glimpsed no child.”

“She be stowed in the seaman’s baggage.”

Three-Fingers’ narrow-eyed gaze examined the duffel and the basket.

“Ye may keep the childer and the man. We keeps the rest.”

His men fell on the unconscious man like a pack of wild dogs. For every article they removed, he received a blow or two. Brighid winced and blinked back the tears. Let them take his belongings, so long as they left him alive. Gilly trembled behind her, her face buried in her mother’s shirt.

The three men stepped back and eyed their handiwork. Fist-sized blotches colored the man’s skin. Blood trickled from small cuts. Three-Fingers kicked him in the side. Bone crunched at the blow. Everett barely flinched.

“We fair beat him to a jelly, eh, Noodles.”

Noodles rolled Everett onto his back. Three-Fingers’ blade hovered over his victim’s genitals before scratching a TF onto Everett’s belly.

“If I sees him again, ye won’t see him. Ever.” Three-Fingers cleaned the knife off on his pants then shoved the blade into his boot. “Ye owe me, Brighid Garvey. Oi’ll be back in a fortnight ta collect.”

The men walked out of the room. Their laughter echoed up the stairwell. Brighid’s lips fluttered on the breeze of her sighs. She settled Brianna next to Fiona then walked to the door. The end gouged the floor when she tried to shut it. She lifted the door by the handle and

shoved it into the jamb. Maybe, if she were lucky, Mrs. Engells would believe someone else had broken it.

She dropped to her knees by Everett's side and ran her fingers over his battered frame. His chest rose and fell, evenly if not deeply. Firm muscles hugged his skeleton. Blood matted the brown hair to his broad chest. Her gaze slipped over his flat stomach, avoided his manhood and admired his muscular thighs.

She rocked back on her heels. He was a fine-looking man. His fondness for drink had yet to soften his body. Maybe grief had weaned him to the bottle.

Brigid lugged the bucket of water to Everett's side and cleaned him with her damp apron. Cuts crisscrossed his smooth palms. Calluses toughened the tips of his fingers. These were the hands neither of a working man nor of the pampered elite. She traced the bruise on his thumb. He was a mystery.

"Who are you, Everett Grey of Fifth Avenue?"

"Mam?"

"Ta bed with ye, Gilly." Brigid placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead.

"Story?"

"Sure, and a right grand story it'll be. Once upon a time, there lived a fair princess by the name of Gilly the Red..."

TITLE: *Ghost of a Chance*

AUTHOR: Linda Andrews

GENRE: Historical Romance/Paranormal

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

IMPRINT: Embraces

RELEASE DATE: March 2010

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-936144-91-4; ebook: 978-1-936144-43-3

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound; \$15.99; 282 pp.; 6x9;  
ebook, \$6.99

Available from independent booksellers and online at Amazon and coming soon to Barnes & Noble. Ebook: Fictionwise, eReader.com, and Nook. Available soon on Kindle.