



GILLIAN

LINDA ANDREWS

Pain zipped up his shin as she mimicked his maneuvers and landed on the tip of his boot.

“The devil take it.”

“Really, sir, a sore toe is hardly a reason to blaspheme.”

Chuckles carried her husky notes. A five-dollar prostitute couldn't have sounded more tempting. Aidan jerked his boot out from under her foot. Muscles coiled and knotted as his hands settled on her shoulders, steadying her. If a lady could get a rise out of him, he needed to end his yearlong streak of celibacy. Maybe once he got Miss Grey settled...

First, though, he had to *find* the bloody woman before the train departed.

“I wouldn't have a sore foot or any other sin to confess if you had only stayed put, ma'am.”

Guilt lashed him as soon as he spoke the words. He knew better than to treat a lady that way. Before he could apologize, she tilted her head back. Clear green eyes twinkled at him from the shade of her ugly bonnet, and the afternoon sun glowed on her porcelain skin.

“If I had stayed put, as you so quaintly stated, I would be halfway to another territory by now.”

Humor lifted the corners of her Cupid's-bow mouth. Aidan felt an answering grin on his lips. He liked a woman with sass—too bad he lacked the time to get better acquainted.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE LIVING FIVE

A Knight's Wish

Dancing in the Kitchen

A Hint of Magic

The Christmas Village

Some Enchanted Autumn

Ghost of a Chance



Daughters of Destiny

GILLIAN



LINDA ANDREWS



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

GILLIAN

© 2010 by Linda Andrews

ISBN 978-1-934841-92-1

Cover art and design © Carol Webb

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

“Zumaya Embraces” and the dove colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX. Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com/embraces.php>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Andrews, Linda, 1967-

Gillian / Linda Andrews.

p. cm. — (Daughters of destiny)

ISBN 978-1-934841-92-1 (trade paper : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-934841-93-8 (electronic)

I. Title.

PS3601.N55267G56 2010

813'.6—dc22

2010012332

*For all those who came to America
in search of a better life*

To my family...

For their tremendous support.

CHAPTER I

Yuma, Arizona Territory
April 1891

“You expecting a shipment, Baird?” *The wrinkled station-*master shuffled closer to Aidan, shoving sand and broken bristles ahead of his broom. With a flourish, he swept the pile off the landing, where a gust caught the debris midair and sprinkled it back across the platform surrounding the Southern Pacific Hotel and Depot.

“Hurry!” A man’s shout drifted down from the balcony, while in the dining room behind Aidan plates scraped and glasses chinked. Workers and passengers trickled onto the platform. The Arizona sun and building heat distorted the images unprotected by shade.

“You could say that.” Aidan jerked a pouch from his vest and inhaled the pungent scent of a fresh plug of black tobacco. The cured leaves crunched under his fingers as he added several pinches to the paper. With economical movements, he finished rolling his cigarette, stuck it in his mouth and returned the paraphernalia to his pocket. He struck a match against the sole of his boot; his cupped hand protected the tiny flame against the wind teasing dust devils from the sandy desert floor across the river. Bitterness exploded on his tongue, and the smoky heat filled his lungs.

Yes, sir, Aidan Baird was expecting a shipment. A shipment of money, class and stubbornness, all bearing the sobriquet of Miss Gillian Grey. Paper crackled under his knuckles as he flicked ash from his vest.

Gillian Grey.

After escorting her on this little jaunt, he would be a man of property, a success, and he owed it all to Miss Grey's father. In this land of the free, when most employers posted "No Irish Need Apply" signs, Everett Grey had given Aidan a job peddling the wares of G&G Enterprises. While hawking the merchandise in the hottest corner of Hell, he'd managed to put aside some money toward buying his own spread. The gold he'd earn escorting the boss's daughter around the desert would cover the land, house and a little extra. Aidan spat sand and flakes of tobacco out of his mouth and ground the stub of his cigarette under his heel, ignoring the scorpion near his boot. Tugging his bowler lower, he strode to the corner of the platform away from the mushrooming crowd.

Several yards from the railroad depot lay the roiling Colorado River. Its red water sucked at the arrow weed clinging to the banks. Laughter floated off the deck of the steamboat moored near the station. Soldiers ambled aboard the boat, awaiting transport to forts and outposts up-river.

A column of soot belched from the stack as the approaching train reached the incline. When the giant black engine clattered onto the bridge, the crowd behind him stirred. Aidan tilted his head back and returned his thoughts to the impending task.

At first, he'd been confused why an heiress would want to search for wildflowers in the desert. The notion didn't agree with his firsthand knowledge of the Greys' position in society. Those women couldn't dress themselves, think for themselves or go anywhere without servants to fetch and carry. Then he'd found the article.

The paper crinkled under his fingertips when he reached inside his jacket. Not the soft whisper of rolling paper but the stiffness of newsprint. Aidan tugged the creased clipping from his pocket and unfolded it.

Wedding Postponed

The upcoming nuptials of heiress Gillian Grey to William Shelby III were postponed after the bride-to-be christened her

affiancé groom with the champagne punch served during Mr. and Mrs. Thorndike's annual spring ball. Miss Amelia S, the prospective groom's sister, said the baptism was completely unprovoked, and that Miss G. was simply showing her true colors. Colonel Upton, late of Her Majesty's Service, witnessed the debacle and said it was a sad waste of fine champagne.

Miss Grey, accompanied by her two sisters, was spotted fleeing the scene while guests attempted to revive the prostrate hostess.

Aidan refolded the clipping and returned it to his pocket. Miss Money had argued with her intended. Their discord must have driven her desire to sketch wildflowers in the desert.

Remembering Everett Grey's grilling about his proficiency with firearms, disquiet itched the skin between Aidan's shoulder blades. He shrugged off his unease. Gillian Grey was the man's oldest daughter—naturally, he'd want to make sure she'd be safe. Aidan owed the man that much. He'd also do his duty and see she was as comfortable as possible. Of course, where they were going, the comforts she'd consider commonplace would not be available.

He removed his watch from his vest pocket and cleaned it with a worn cotton handkerchief. Not that she'd have to suffer such privations for long. According to Mr. Grey's telegram, this little expedition would end before the real heat set in.

The stationmaster waddled up behind Aidan and fingered the brass buttons of his navy-colored vest. Gray sprinkled the bushy muttonchops protruding from his sagging jowls.

"You expecting any more of them fancy bits my wife's partial to?"

"There's always some fancy bits." And this time the fancy bit was a lady, the daughter of G&G Enterprises herself. Not that he'd tell the stationmaster—the old man gossiped more than a bitter spinster. Aidan cracked the knuckles on his right hand then his left. And what kind of

man purchased harmony in his own house with pricey frippery? *I'll never be such a man.*

The stationmaster rubbed his hands together. "Come by the house, first thing, let Eunice have a look at 'em."

"That'll keep her happy for a bit." Aidan stepped back as the train chugged across the bridge spanning the Colorado River.

"Yep. And everyone knows a happy wife means a sober husband." By way of thanks, the stationmaster thumped Aidan on the back.

Air coughed out of his lungs, and he staggered forward two steps right into a cloud of soot and coal dust. Ash fluttered from the stack, dusting everything near the shuddering engine with black snowflakes. The bell clanged, and sparks sprang from the grinding metal wheels as the engine came to a stop beyond the platform and a shrill whistle announced their arrival.

Aidan coughed the burn from his lungs and shuffled backward. A score of passengers disembarked while an equal number surged forward to take their place. The smell of sour sweat, dust and excitement filled the air. A woman with a baby jostled his elbow. He stepped aside and lifted his bowler then returned to his position. Propping his left shoulder against the upper balcony's support post, he crossed his left ankle over his right and hooked his thumb in his waistband. Nothing stirred in the private carriage *Freedom* tacked behind the Pullman sleepers. Had Miss Grey missed the train or decided against the expedition? His stomach knotted at the thought. Straightening his coat, he strode toward the private car.

As he neared the last sleeper, a bevy of soiled doves descended from the train. Scarlet, canary-yellow and emerald-green finery accented glimpses of shapely limbs. A black-haired beauty displayed a heavenly amount of breast, but the redhead...

Aidan envisioned the long legs on the woman. His body quickened as he pictured such a pair wrapped around his waist. The fallen woman caught his eye, wet her lips then winked at him. He winked back. He felt his body heat then cool as the saloonkeeper marched across the depot, exchanging his old crop of prostitutes for the new one. Good riddance.

Seething in silence, the departing group of five women headed toward the *Sunset Express*. Their suspicious eyes raked him and every

other man standing on the platform. Aidan fidgeted, tugged his hat off his head and thumped it against his leg. Clouds of white dust and black soot rose from his trousers with each beat. He crammed his bowler back on his head and stared back. Hell, just because one of their kind had wandered off and got eaten by wolves wasn't call to look at a man as if he were a killer.

The redhead in green separated from the arriving pack and sashayed over. When she stopped in front of him, Aidan touched the brim of his hat.

“Ma’am.”

“Care to buy a parched girl a drink, handsome?” The woman’s chipped fingernail snaked down his vest before perching on his waistband. The musky scent of sex stung his nostrils. His stomach clenched. Nothing like spoiled goods to dampen a man’s desire.

“Some other time, sweetheart.”

“I’ll be waiting, and I just bet you’re worth waiting for.” She flashed a smile at a couple other men before joining her sisters on their walk to Maiden Lane. Several men strolled off the platform, tracking the soiled doves from a discreet distance.

Aidan did a rapid survey of the depot. Except for the drably garbed woman talking to the gangly hotel porter, the platform had cleared of passengers. The two seemed in lively conversation as she pointed to her eight crates and his wheeled pallet. Ignoring them, Aidan stared at the private car. Water gurgled from the cistern across the tracks into the waiting train. Although the Greys were well-traveled, he knew society ladies didn’t leave their house without a proper escort. Adjusting his hat, he continued along the platform toward the private car.

Wheels creaked, pulleys and tackle clanked as crates swung from the railcar to the steamboat’s cargo bay. The stationmaster exchanged postal bags with the conductor. Accompanied by a belch of steam from the locomotive, soldiers hurried into a railcar and shoved boxes out.

Damn, he had to get Miss Grey off the train. He increased his pace and collided with a soft barrier smelling of lilacs and sunshine. His brain registered the shapely woman in his hands even as he steadied her on her feet.

“My apologies ma’am.”

He tried to move away, but a small hand on his arm stopped him.

“Excuse me.”

Aidan glanced down. His ghostly reflection wavered in the silk brim of the woman’s hat.

“Ma’am.” Aidan touched the edge of his bowler then shifted to the right. The woman and her ugly bonnet shadowed his movements. Couldn’t she tell he didn’t work for the Southern Pacific and didn’t want anything to do with her and her crates? He stepped left then jumped farther away. Pain zipped up his shin as she mimicked his maneuvers and landed on the tip of his boot.

“The devil take it.”

“Really, sir, a sore toe is hardly a reason to blaspheme.”

Chuckles carried her husky notes. A five-dollar prostitute couldn’t have sounded more tempting. Aidan jerked his boot out from under her foot. Muscles coiled and knotted as his hands settled on her shoulders, steadying her. If a lady could get a rise out of him, he needed to end his yearlong streak of celibacy. Maybe once he got Miss Grey settled...

First, though, he had to *find* the bloody woman before the train departed.

“I wouldn’t have a sore foot or any other sin to confess if you had only stayed put, ma’am.”

Guilt lashed him as soon as he spoke the words. He knew better than to treat a lady that way. Before he could apologize, she tilted her head back. Clear green eyes twinkled at him from the shade of her ugly bonnet, and the afternoon sun glowed on her porcelain skin.

“If I had stayed put, as you so quaintly stated, I would be halfway to another territory by now.”

Humor lifted the corners of her Cupid’s-bow mouth. Aidan felt an answering grin on his lips. He liked a woman with sass—too bad he lacked the time to get better acquainted.

He maneuvered the tempest to the side and dusted the feel of her from his hands. He had an heiress to coax off the train, but couldn’t resist the opportunity to flirt just a little.

“Lady, I’d think you’d get a lot further with a man if you batted those pretty eyes of yours instead of inflicting bodily injury on him.”

“Really, Mr. Baird.”

Baird. The woman knew his name. Dread trailed an icy finger down his spine; certainty cloaked his frame like too-tight skin. His gaze flew

to the rumpled and travel-stained clothing. Quality, but not this year's fashion. Miss Sass must be Miss Grey's chaperone. How could he have forgotten that ladies of fortune never traveled alone? Ah, hell. His wagon might accommodate one woman, but not two and their eight trunks.

"You are Mr. Aidan Baird, are you not?"

He sighed. He had a job to do and a plan to rethink now that he was responsible for an additional woman.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Aidan Baird." Dodging the edge of her bonnet, he stepped closer and offer her his arm. "We'd better get your mistress off that train."

She glanced at his crooked arm before tucking her hand through it. "Mr. Baird—"

Miss Sassy's seductive tone distracted from the steel girding her voice. "Frankly, ma'am, I expected to escort one woman around the Sonoran Desert, not two. Maybe if we put our heads together we can come up with a solution to make you and your mistress comfortable on our journey."

Aidan's gut clenched when he inhaled the clean scent of soap coming off her skin.

"I understand—"

"All aboard!" The conductor bellowed as steam hissed from the engine.

Aidan marched her closer to the private railcar. "The train won't keep forever."

"Mr. Baird!" She jerked her hand free from his arm, stepped one foot away from him, pivoted on her right foot then stepped closer. The brim of her bonnet grazed his jaw as she looked up. Irritation and amusement flared in her green eyes while pink stained her oval face. She raised the valise in her left hand as if to flatten him with it.

"Now, ma'am. We must..." Aidan cleared his throat, raised his hands and retreated a step. He stopped at the jagged edge of the platform.

"Mr. Baird." She set one hand on her hip and stared at him.

Pain racketed up his shin as her dropped valise landed on his foot, the same one she'd stepped on before. Awareness prickled between his shoulder blades. The woman had more than sass. Straight white teeth flashed behind pink lips. Aidan kicked free of her bag.

“Now, I know women don’t like to be rushed, but the train is leaving.”

“I simply wish to engage your undivided attention, Mr. Baird.”

Aidan rubbed his jaw. She wanted his attention? Now? From the set of her jaw, he didn’t think there’d be enough time to change her mind. Maybe, he should insist the companion stay behind.

“You have it.”

“Thank you.” Sassy tugged on the jacket hem of her traveling dress, brushed ineffectually at the dust coating the black material then cleared her throat. “I do not have a mistress, Mr. Baird. Neither do I travel with a companion.”

White showed on Aidan’s eyelids as his thumb and index finger dragged across them. Dread trickled down his back from the heat burning his neck.

“Miss Grey?”

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Baird.” The woman shoved her hand at him.

The wooden platform creaked under his feet. In all his thirty years, he’d never flirted with the boss’s daughter. At best he’d be fired, at worst...

Shaking the thoughts from his head, he accepted her hand, registered the warmth from her palm and lack of gloves. Her fingers were calloused and surprisingly strong.

“I apologize for my earlier behavior, Miss Grey. I thought...”

“Apology accepted.” She smiled at him before dropping her gaze to somewhere on his vest.

Could he really be forgiven that easily? Aidan blinked as the train whistle rent the air, and the black engine rumbled. The cars lurched forward one after the other, accompanied by the grind of metal against the tracks. After dipping to pick up her bag, she set her hand once again on the crook of his arm.

“Shall we?”

“Allow me.” The latent gentleman inside him emerged. Aidan faced her then, intent on relieving her of her valise, slipped his fingers under hers. The brim of her bonnet whacked him on the chin before scraping the sensitive flesh.

“That won’t be necessary.” She stepped away from him, attempting to take her luggage and his fingers with her. Unable to proceed further, she stopped, and her eyes widened. Shock and confusion shimmered in their depths.

Aidan kept his grip in place, despite sensing the battle brewing. The woman acted like men didn’t wait on her every day.

“I insist.”

“I am capable of carrying such a small bit of baggage, Mr. Baird.” A smile softened her lips, emphasizing the fatigue pinching the skin around her eyes. “I was told women were more independent in the Territories.”

“Please, allow me to do this for you.” He stepped closer.

She inhaled sharply. In her eyes, the green sharpened the gold flecks to fine points. A blush added color to her pale skin. “Th-Thank you.”

Holding the bag, Aidan stepped back and exhaled a shaky breath. Despite the drab attire, she was a fine-looking woman. And he was an idiot. The lady was not just out of his league, she had a champagne-soaked fiancé. He’d do well to remember that. The last thing he needed was to get involved in a rich lover’s spat.

“Shall I see to your trunks?”

“Mr. James has already attended to them.” She nodded toward the hotel porter wrestling with the eight trunks on the platform.

“I see.” Aidan cleared the irritation from his throat. Why was she so used to taking care of herself? Weren’t her kind cosseted and petted? He didn’t like the notion that she was different. Because if she wasn’t like the rest of the moneyocracy, then maybe a Mick like him...

He shut down the thought. Obviously, she was used to traveling, and the depot was familiar territory. Once they reached the hotel, she’d behave according to her station. He really needed her to behave in accordance with her station.

“If you would be so kind as to direct me to our lodgings, I wish to recover before we begin our adventure across the desert.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Aidan’s gaze slid down her oval face, over her slim neck and stopped on her slight shoulders. She was exactly as he’d pictured. His conscience slapped the lie from his brain. Well, maybe not as helpless...

“Tell me Mr. Baird—”

“Aidan.” He guided her across the nearly empty train platform, then steered her around the building’s corner. Glancing over his shoulder, he bit his tongue. Neither formality nor fancy ball gowns had a place in the territories. He’d have to ask her to pare down her wardrobe after she’d rested. For now, he’d enjoy her company and pretend millions of greenbacks didn’t separate them.

“Yes, um...” She paused at the edge of the sidewalk and wiped her free hand on her black dress.

“Aidan.” He lowered his voice and watched a blush creep up her neck. A surrey rattled past, raising a cloud of white dust in its wake while its gold fringe gleamed in the sunlight.

“I was curious, Aidan.” Her fingers spasmed along his forearm before she forced them to relax. “Are you quite certain a salesman can handle the extra duties?”

Five minutes. She had waited five bloody minutes before passing judgment. Was it his physique or his level of education she disapproved of? His lack of schooling he couldn’t do much about. Poor folk had to work, and even the children could contribute. As for his strength, he might not be as brawny as some, but he was strong enough, and he knew the ways of the desert. He glanced down Main Street, seeing neither the adobe buildings nor the bustling crowd. He needed this job, needed the money it would provide.

Her hideous hat filled his left peripheral vision. Black like her heart. Why had he allowed her spirit to fool him? He tossed his shoulders back. No spoiled, superior kind of female would deprive him of his chance to be his own man and free his sister from a lifetime of servitude.

“I’m certain.” He stomped forward, dragging her into the dusty street behind him. “Your father seemed quite content with my qualifications, ma’am.”

“I see.” Despite being almost a foot shorter than him, she kept up with his long strides. For some reason the notion didn’t set well with him. “Naturally, I presumed, given the nature of our...expedition and its location, that you would carry a firearm.”

Nature of their expedition? What was the woman prattling on about now? Sure, the flowers in the Territory might be a little more prickly than most, but they certainly wouldn’t require shooting.

Aidan's thoughts rebounded, diffusing some of his anger. Tenderfeet often had the same impression as Miss Grey. The Territories were slowly taking to civilization, but given her rank in society, the town must seem fairly barbaric. He wondered how she'd react to the barren desert. He'd find out soon enough.

"I don't know what you've read in them dime novels, but it isn't necessary to wear my Colt strapped to my leg, especially in town. In my experience, such a display only attracts trouble." Something Aidan never had any problem with.

She nodded. The ugly hat bobbed like a vulture's head over freshly discovered carrion. "Then when we set off..."

"My pistol and rifle are always within reach."

"You are quite proficient in their use?" Excitement rang clearly in her question as they finished crossing the street.

"Yes, ma'am."

Setting her bag down for a moment, he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her up a foot and a half onto the boardwalk. His fingers recognized the stiff boning of her corset and registered the flare of her hips. His trousers tightened. A man could appreciate such a delicate woman.

"Then you can teach me." Beaming in satisfaction, she picked up her bag and started walking along the boardwalk.

"What!" Aidan cleared his throat. Calm, man, remain calm. There were enough armed lunatics running around the Territory; he certainly wasn't planning to add to their number. "I promise, Miss Grey, you'll be perfectly safe without resorting to such extreme measures."

His voice remained soothing despite the frenzy of doubts writhing over his skeleton. Would he survive this job? He hadn't even gotten her to their hotel and his sanity was sloshing about inside his skull.

"Please believe I never meant to impugn your marksmanship, Aidan." Leaning closer to him as they passed the saloon, she squeezed his arm. "I simply wish to be taught the fine art of shooting." She glanced behind his back into the bar when they passed the open doors. Music and laughter drifted on the still air. "Certainly a man of your expertise can instruct me in its uses."

He could, but that didn't mean she wouldn't shoot him with his own gun. Perhaps there was another tack.

"What does your father have to say about this idea, Miss Grey?"

For a moment, her lips compressed into a thin line. “I imagine he thinks I shall not require such knowledge.”

Aidan breathed a sigh of relief. Could her father be unaware of her interest in becoming another Annie Oakley? Everett Grey’s steely eyes peered at Aidan from the safe distance of recent memory. He doubted anything got by the rich man.

“I promise to protect you, Miss Grey.”

“Regardless, I wish very much to learn.” She stopped in front of the hotel doors, pulled her arm free of his and faced him, entreaty in her green eyes.

Aidan’s determination wavered. The Territories were a dangerous place.

“Will you teach me or no, Mr. Baird?” Her foot tapped against the sidewalk planking. Her fingers drummed against her hip.

The formality snapped her silken spell. “No, ma’am, I will not.”

Her lip trembled for a moment before she raised her pointed chin and squared her shoulders. “I thought as much.”

“Perhaps, once you get home, your father will find someone to teach you.” Aidan opened the door to the hotel and motioned for her to precede him.

“By then it will be too late.” She snatched her skirt aside and stomped passed him into the dark interior.

Aidan hefted her bag on his shoulder and followed her inside the lobby. Meeting Gillian Grey had certainly complicated the job. He only hoped she didn’t have any more surprises up her sleeve.

CHAPTER 2

Gilly crossed the threshold of the hotel and paused, allowing her eyes time to adjust to the dim interior. The aromas of garlic, peppers and stewing beans weighted the darkness. Her heart raced under her wool traveling dress, and tingles emanated from where Aidan Baird's hand had rested against the small of her back. He was a puzzle. He'd almost seemed to flirt with her at first. And then he'd learned her true identity—that always changed everything.

She sighed, blinked once, then twice.

Shadows slowly separated from the darkness and coalesced into definite shapes. On the staircase on the right, a hunched figure swept a broom across the floor. A huge desk awaited in front of her.

“Ah, Mr. Baird.” The wizened clerk looked up from the papers under his gnarled hands. He flattened his black bow tie and adjusted the crisp white cuffs of his shirt sleeves. Blue veins bubbled against the cool parchment skin slipping like gloves over his proffered hand. “And this must be Miss Grey.”

“Oakes.” Aidan increased the pressure on her back, and Gilly crossed the tile floor.

“How do you do, Mr...?” Gilly felt her throat close. Even in Yuma, they knew who she was. Had they rehashed her sordid past when they pored over the details of her latest humiliation—jilting William?

“Oakes, ma'am. But I'd be right honored if you'd call me David.”

Her heart slowed to its normal pace as the man's smile freed his lips of wrinkles. A genuine smile. The first offered by a stranger in too many months. Except Aidan, but that was before he knew her name. She'd seen it in his pale blue eyes. He'd *expected* her to do something outrageous, like ask for shooting lessons. Gilly tightened her slippery grip on her valise and dried her other damp palm on her skirt.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, David." She accepted the proprietor's hand, noting that his bones felt like marbles under her touch. "Your hotel is lovely, and wonderfully cool."

Her glance traveled to the small panes of glass punched in the thick adobe walls. When she'd run her fingers over them outside, the mud bricks had felt rough but cool under her palm. Now if only she could have a cold drink, she would know she'd been delivered from her tribulation into heaven. Or, in her case, Purgatory.

At least, until she began her true mission. Her stomach cramped. Smoothing her skirts, she peeked at Aidan from the corner of her eye. He was strong and determined enough, but could he keep her safe?

David Oakes shuffled his sheets of paper into a neat pile then heaved a large book onto the oak counter. "My wife's touch. She made the place right homey."

Gilly's thoughts returned to the task at hand. One thing at a time. David slid the pewter inkwell toward her. Black liquid sloshed over the lip and dotted the polished wood. He blotted up the mess with a rag.

"Course, you probably recognize the decor. It's straight outta the G&G catalog. Your father's soaps are in all our rooms." David creaked forward. "She says they're the best there is."

"Thank you, sir." Cool air filled Gilly's lungs. Another satisfied customer. Her folks would be proud. She was proud, especially since she had helped illustrate the catalog. The pen settled into the callus on her finger seconds before she scrawled her name across the ledger. "If your good wife wishes to write an endorsement, I will see that it is published in our next catalog."

She handed the pen to Aidan. Her fingers tingled where they brushed his. Resisting the urge to fan herself, Gilly focused on the play of muscle under his jacket as he bent over the book and added his tight script to the line.

Wiry eyebrows rose on David Oakes's wrinkled brow. Aidan stabbed the pen back into the inkwell and glanced at her with a mixture of suspicion and surprise.

"You can do that?"

"Indeed." Gilly forced her lips into a serene smile. Which flabbergasted the gentlemen most—that a woman's endorsement was worth something beyond the town in which she dwelled or that Everett Grey's daughter had any say in his business? "Such praise from the proprietors of so fine an establishment is certainly worthy of print. Naturally, G&G enterprises will compensate you. Do you think five one-pound bars of soap would be acceptable?"

A gleam appeared in the owner's rheumy brown eyes. His thin fingers fluttered about before he tucked them into his vest pockets. "Five pounds?"

Gilly transferred the valise to her other hand. Although the bag was getting heavy, she refused to put it down. If she and Aidan warred over the bag again, the clasp could break open and reveal its contents.

"We prefer the personal endorsements of our customers over those submitted by the product's manufacturer. After all, people such as yourself actually use the items."

"Yes. Yes." David stroked his sagging jowls. "Your father is a very clever man to think of that."

"Indeed." Gilly eyed the key slots behind him. Men were the same everywhere. Even though Mam had thought of the idea, everyone complimented Da on his genius. Da. Her chest constricted. She missed her family. Missed the way Da accepted Mam. She rid her body of longing with a ragged sigh.

"I've saved you our best suite, Miss Grey." A brass key scraped against the counter. "Fortunately, we were spared the flood waters. Baird, your room is across the hall."

"Flood?" She repeated mindlessly as Aidan scooped both keys into his large hand. Gilly shivered at the sight. They had felt so competent and strong.

The proprietor patted her forearm. "Not to worry. That was some months back, and only one fellow perished, and him not even from the water. You're perfectly safe, Miss Grey. Someone is always at the desk, and Mr. Baird is within shouting distance."

Gilly grimaced. In her experience, men were always within shouting distance of her.

“I can assure you, David, that my safety was never a concern. I was simply marveling at how quickly your town has rebuilt after such devastation.”

The innkeeper’s cheeks flushed as his slight chest swelled with pride. “We pioneers are an industrious lot.”

“And a credit you are to our great nation.” She jumped as Aidan’s hand cupped her elbow.

“Shall we visit our rooms, Miss Grey?” He steered her toward the staircase tucked into the corner.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Thank you. It has been a long journey.”

Silence accompanied them up the creaking stairs. Her fingers skimmed the gleaming oak banister. *Stop reading too much into his attentions. Da is paying him to do a job.* She took a calming breath.

Aidan unlocked the door. It swung open on well-oiled hinges. She walked inside, glanced unseeing at her surroundings. He knew about her latest fiasco. She had seen it in his eyes at the depot. So, why hadn’t he mentioned it?

“I know it’s not up to your usual standards, but it is the nicest room Oakes has.” Aidan cocked his head, arching a black eyebrow.

Gilly blinked, and the room came into focus. Her gaze swept over the wrought iron bedstead, the marble-topped washstand, white pitcher and basin and the lace curtains. It was certainly nicer than she’d expected in the territories.

“Yes, it is very nice. It, too, is right out of the pages of a G-and-G Catalogue. Our Spring edition, I believe.”

“How much of the catalogue did your father let you illustrate?”

“Most of it, Mr. Baird.”

She wanted him to say something, anything to expose his preconceived notions and let her know where she stood with him.

Two fingers touched the brim of his dusty bowler. He dropped her key on the dresser.

“I’ll return at six this evening. We’ll discuss your flower-hunting expedition over dinner.”

Flower hunting? Gilly finger-pleated her long black skirt. Was that code to cover the true nature of their mission? Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Did he think someone would hear and object? The notion she might be in actual danger was both exhilarating and terrifying.

“Will we begin our hunt this evening?”

Confusion tightened the skin over the sharp angles of his face. “Tomorrow should be soon enough.”

She glanced out the window at the sun, still high on the horizon. Two weeks had passed since she first decided to do this. Surely, one more day wouldn't hurt. Yet, she chaffed at the delay.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, I'm sure your wildflowers can wait until then. Have a good rest, Miss Grey.” Hot air washed over her as he shut the door.

For a moment, she stared at the glossy wood surface. That was it, no discussion. She hated being dismissed. Shaking off her anger, she wrestled the woolen jacket from her shoulders and peeled the tight sleeves over her forearms.

Just what had he learned to form his opinion of her? Newspaper clippings, gossip from servants? Few people ever had nice things to say about her. Gilly tossed the jacket onto the floor. How could her sister have convinced her to wear such an outfit? Stiff fingers fumbled with the tapes of her skirt. Cool air seeped through her pantaloons as she slipped the clothing down her legs. The matching bell skirt added to the mound of wool and velvet before she kicked the offensive garments toward the wall.

Who cared how much fancy stitching adorned the latest Basque shirt, or how much gold braid trimmed the skirt's three flounces? Only her family had been at the station to see her off. Her heart thumped against her breast. What a fool she had been, searching for William's face amongst the throng of passengers. She never should have worn fashion's shackles, never should have hoped that she meant something to him other than a bank balance.

Her fingers fumbled with the ribbons on her bonnet. Tossing it onto the heap, she pulled the pins from her bright red hair and allowed the silky locks to cascade over her shoulders. The next time society laid eyes on her she'd be back in her usual uniform, back in the bloomers and men's shirts that afforded her the freedom she desired.

Ropes creaked as she flopped across the bed. Pieces of whalebone from her corset dug into her hips.

“I’m not keeping you, either.” She shoved off the feather tick, shucked off the corset and kicked it into a pile near the traveling dress. The hot air felt cool as it dried her damp flesh.

“What I wouldn’t give for a bath.” Clad only in her chemise and pantaloons, she got up and went to the washstand, and emptied the pitcher into the bowl. Ripples raced across the surface as she dipped her fingers into the tepid water. “Blast. I should have asked for a drink before disrobing.”

She eyed her valise then shuddered. She couldn’t get dressed now. Her body temperature was just returning to normal. She cupped her hand inside the half-full basin and raised the water to her lips. Bitterness exploded in her mouth from the alkali liquid. “Look on the bright side, Gilly. You didn’t have to get dressed to drink it.”

Another two handfuls rinsed the dust from her face. She glanced at the towel then ignored it. Wet skin made the heat bearable. She sauntered across the room and stretched across the cool sheets. Mosquitoes droned in her ear, harmonizing with the excitement humming in her veins. She was here. Finally. For the second time in twenty years, she was accountable only to herself. Her cheek bunched against the sheet as she frowned.

Well, not precisely.

Everyone knew who she was. Her actions would be duly noted, and somehow, word would get back to her parents. It would have made it so much easier to be herself if no one knew she was a Grey. Gilly blew the wisps of hair out of her face, rolled onto her back and stared at the muslin covering the ceiling.

A Grey, with a pedigree that stretched back to the Founding Fathers. The Greys were her family, but they weren’t her blood. Not that it mattered. Mam and Da were her parents in every way that mattered. She just wished...

Her fists sunk deeper into the feather tick. Wishing was useless. Gilly Grey would never fit the part of the lady, would never *be* a lady.

“Oh, Mam.” Her plea rang around the room, echoed in her ear. “How did you manage?” An illiterate immigrant in a sea of polished

natives. Her heart squeezed in her chest. Tears sprang from her eyes and trickled down her cheek. “Mam had Da.”

One simple nod shook off the sadness. Da had stood beside Mam when they couldn’t eschew the trappings of society.

She rolled to her left side and chewed on her cuticle. She had thought she had found such a man in William. Her snort bounced off the feather ticking and warmed her face. She had donned the hated corset for his sake, tinted her horribly red hair and pranced about in a dress, and what did she have to show for her efforts? Her thumb smoothed the skin at the base of her ring finger.

A phantom ring and a broken engagement.

Perhaps she was naive. After all, not many of the marriages in her class were for love. Most women at the ripe age of three-and-twenty would have joyfully participated in the ceremony. Except she wasn’t like most women. She had never felt comfortable in Da’s society. Never belonged, not even to William.

Mam had been right

The ache had lessened to a dull throb. Distance, both in time and miles, had provided an effective balm. She’d never truly loved William. She knew that now. She had been in love with the idea of being accepted as one of them—Mam’s famed Moneyocracy.

Her thumb found the groove of bone covering her heart. This ache wasn’t the remains of a broken heart but the sting of his betrayal. Bitterness sat on her tongue. She had been fond of William. The admission had been true at the time. But William...William had confessed his love for her.

Love.

A sob bounced past her locked jaws. Gilly turned her face into the sheet, blocking the escape of any more self-pity. Perhaps she wasn’t destined for love. At least, not the kind Mam and Da shared. Most men were put off by her quest for knowledge and need to assist those less fortunate than her. The others shied away because of her unnaturally red hair.

Unnatural.

The schoolgirl taunt had followed her into adulthood. And William had fed his sister the means to keep the name alive. William, who loved

her money but was contemptuous of her person. William, who wouldn't have associated with such an unnaturally spirited female if it hadn't been for Da's wealth. She flung her hand over her eyes. Nothing had changed with her broken engagement. Yet another man kept her company because of Da's money.

Aidan Baird.

His face flashed on her eyelids despite the short acquaintance. At the beginning, there seemed to be...

Gilly stopped the thought. Just because he wasn't what she'd expected didn't make him any different. True, he was more physical than most of the men of her class. With a lean grace usually reserved for the large cats, he stalked to his destination. Life had marked his hands, while experience and vocation had toughened the flesh to soft leather. His blue eyes were as unfathomable as a starless night. Despite the lack of a gun at his hip, he was intelligent, discerning and deadly. She could understand why Da had hired him.

But had Da lied to him?

Wildflowers? Was Aidan prevaricating to throw off the innkeeper? Not likely. She doubted he cared what others thought of him. To protect her reputation? A bark of laughter shot past her lips. That had been tarnished years ago.

So why the deceit?

Unless...

Unless he thought her quest was a fool's errand. Most good people ignored the Unfortunates working in the Red Light District, even denying them the protection of the law. Muscles melted under the casing of her skin. Her eyes drifted closed. Yumans weren't so different from San Franciscans. Would they shun her as Nob Hill society had?

The temperature in the room dropped, and goosebumps raced across the exposed flesh of her arm. Her ears strained, waiting for the sound of her dead friend's arrival. The curtains stirred before she heard the whisper of harness, the muffled thud of phantom hooves.

"I was wondering when you'd arrive." Gilly forced her gritty lids apart.

"Have me a passenger to claim, lass." Grimsree stopped his see-through horses halfway across the room and jumped off his perch. His kilt and sporan swayed to a rest against his muscular legs. A swath of

plaid fabric covered one broad shoulder, while silvery scars crisscrossed his chest.

She shook her head at the soundless landing. How could the soul collector appear as real as everyone else yet still be a ghost? She had puzzled over it since she'd first seen him. When he appeared again, her five-year-old self had considered the red-bearded man just another playmate.

Her best friend had died hundreds of years ago.

Unnatural.

Perhaps the label stung so because of its accuracy.

"Must be important if she's worthy of a coach." Propping herself up on her elbows, she patted the area on the tick next to her.

"Yep. Jezebel and Hiram were nae happy ta lug that cursed carriage." He stroked the steed's neck then drifted over to her side. His blue eyes burned bright in his ruddy cheeks.

"Do you have your passenger?" She strained to see inside the dark coach, knowing even if the dearly departed was aboard, she still wouldn't be able to see anyone. For some reason, Grimsree was the only dead person she could see.

"Nay, I havena collected the soul, lass. She willna be boarding till this evening." The dead Scotsman ran his fingers through his thick beard. "She be clinging like a barnacle to a bow. The woman's got pluck, but none can run faster than time." Grimsree consulted his watch and sank into the feather bedding. "Her daughter and son be at her side, trying ta convince her ta let go. Ye'd ken after three-and-ninety years she be ready to shuck the confines o' the flesh."

"I don't think dying would be easy at any age." Ice danced up her arm as he patted her hand.

"For most of the older folks it is. They be glad ta see their loved ones. Of course, the young 'uns dinna have much problem with it, either. Their world still be close to the fantastical."

"Is that why I could see you?"

"Aye. Nay. I dinna ken, lass." Grimsree scratched his head. The long red locks fell over his shoulders before he bound them back with a scrap of fabric. "O' course, I thought I had come for both o' ye that day."

That day. Gilly smoothed the coverlet on the bed. The events of that day were why she was here.

"I wasn't sick."

“Aye, that be true, but there was that horse what got away.” A smile lit his face. “The Infernal Thing saved ye. Only thing yer Gran’s done right in the after time.”

“You and Gran never did get along.” Gilly smiled. The spirit of Mam’s late grandmother was as much a part of their family as their living friends and relatives. She could no more think of a world without her as one without Grimsree.

“Dinna rightly ken anyone living or dead outside yer family that the Infernal Thing can abide. Unencumbered souls belong with their own kind, just like the living. Isna natural for her ta keep company with yer Mam.”

“At least you’ve given up trying to catch her.” Images of Grimsree chasing Gran with a net flashed inside her skull. Gilly choked on her chuckle and changed the subject. “Why can I see you, Grimsree?”

“Dinna ken the particulars, lass. It be true that most can only spy me when their time be near.” He rose from the bed and floated over to his horses. “What be ye thinking?”

“It’s not natural to see Death.”

“Not *natural*. Son of a mongrel whelp.” A red halo surrounded Grimsree as he spat. “That...That one put such notions in yer head. Ye be friends with all sorts of folks. Folks that popinjay wouldna acknowledge as human beings let alone talk to. Why, as I see it, God made ye special. Maybe even an angel made human.”

“Never an angel, Grimsree.” Gilly smiled at her champion. It was a shame he was dead. Grimsree would have been a perfect mate. “I find too much trouble for someone accustomed to wings and a halo.”

“There be others like ye. Met one nigh on a score back. Thought I was ta gather him with his folks, but when I checked his watch ta be certain, it be still ticking. Lost track o’ him after that.” Grimsree consulted his timepiece and rose from the bed.

“She about ready to go?”

“Another couple minutes. She sure fights like a middling.” He stroked the nose of Hiram.

Gilly kept asking questions, reluctant to be alone. “A middling?”

He offered the horse a carrot from the pouch at his waist. “Them what be in the middle of their life. Nae verra inclined ta leave their skins.”

Like people who'd been murdered. Gilly saw the pain on the soul collector's face and knew he'd borne witness to some grisly last moments.

"Is that why you haven't passed beyond the realm?"

"Nay." Grimsree ran his hands down Hiram's flank. "I like the horses. Aside, this soul collecting be happy times for most."

Most, but not all. That was why Gilly had made this jaunt to the desert. Grimsree needed her help. And she'd do anything to spare her only friend pain and sorrow.

"Have there been any more dead girls, Grimsree?"

"Nay, lass." Shadows cut deep into his ghostly face. "I collected the other one not far from the church. Well, most o' her, anyway."

Gilly's mouth went dry. He hadn't mentioned this before. "Most of her?"

"She be missing a few pieces. An abomination, lass. Not enough that he kills them, but he takes a piece as a remembrance. I've been around the world and seen things what would curl yer hair, but them be part of the Death rituals. This—this one gives the terrors to even the most veteran o' us soul collectors. First Whitechapel, now here. Seems a body canna die in peace."

"I'll start at the church."

"Ye be certain of yer course, lass." He turned up the flame in his lantern. "I canna protect ye from that monster, and I willna collect ye for yer final journey if ye run afoul of the demon spawn."

She clasped her hands behind her back and milked her fingers. Despite his talk, she knew they battled a flesh-and-blood man. She only hoped Aidan *was* good with his guns, and she never had to confront the monster with just her throwing knives.

"I'm sure. That's what friends are for, Grimsree. Of course, it might help if I knew what the man looked like."

"Black, like the patch of sky where the stars be missing. Aside from ye and the other, I dinna see the living anymore. Most folks be a color, usually white or gray seen from the corner of me eye. Course, they have a heat to them when we occupy the same spot. That one's a regular furnace. Like ta consume me."

Although she didn't have much information, she knew she'd find the murderer. "Guess you'll need a special carriage for him, then."

“No’ me.” Grimsree shuddered and climbed aboard his coach. “He isna traveling in the same direction, if ye ken.”

Gilly nodded, somewhat intrigued by the knowledge. “I understand. Thanks, Grimsree, for the help.”

“Be careful.” He snapped the reins, and the phantom coach shot across the room and out the wall.

She strolled to the window, sighing as the desert heat swept the chill from her bones. Tomorrow, they would begin their hunt.

How would Aidan take the news that they weren’t hunting wildflowers but a butcherer of women?