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Chapter 1



San Francisco, October 1859

The blazing fire lit up the midnight sky as San Francisco's fire department and a hastily improvised bucket brigade worked furiously to keep the savage flames from reaching the surrounding buildings. Often portions of this teeming city would be set on fire, sometimes by recklessness, sometimes by arson. Whatever the reason, entire sections of the city burned to the ground before the fire department could get the inferno under control. Even with thousands of tons of water in the nearby ocean, it was not enough, for there was no way to get that water to the burning buildings.

The horses pulling the fire wagons shied as portions of the timber structure quickly caught fire and collapsed in upon itself. The firemen using the hand pumpers were fighting exhaustion, but they kept pumping wildly.

Amy Lattimer stood staring at the shimmering inferno, her notebook hanging by her side from lifeless fingers. How many years had it been since she had witnessed such a spectacle? Nine

years? Ten? She shivered at the long-suppressed terrifying memories trying to push forward through the forced barrier of her mind. Only by sheer willpower was she able to send those suddenly awakened recollections back to the dark abyss from whence they had stirred.

Though the October temperatures were well beyond freezing, the heat from the fire warmed the air around her considerably. Everywhere, men from San Francisco's volunteer fire department rushed around trying to get the blaze under control before it could do like so many times before and raze half the city.

A timber from the frame structure crashed to the ground, and several people in the crowd screamed, quickly moving away from the conflagration. Policemen and firemen both were trying to hold back members of the crowd who were trying to surge forward for a better look. Amy stood immobile, silent and morose, unable to take her eyes from the bright orange and yellow flames. She coughed as the smoke thickened around her.

"Miss?"

She jerked when a warm hand touched her own chilled arm. Dully, she lifted her gaze to confront a pair of worried brown eyes in a handsome though soot-streaked face. Although the man released her arm at once, his mesmerizing look held her firmly in place.

"Ma'am, you need to move away from the fire."

The scathing glance that raked over her told her more clearly than words that he believed her to be one of the gawking spectators hovering on the edges of the fire line. The badge on his chest added to the authority of his deep voice.

She blinked up at him for several seconds, trying to focus on what he was saying. Shaking her head slightly to clear her thoughts, she gave him a tight half smile. "It's not what you think, Officer. I'm here covering this story for the *Golden Gate Gazette*."

She had known from the beginning that it was a bad idea for Mr. Madison, the editor, to send her out on this assignment. Her normal duties were as society columnist with the paper, covering various fetes and functions around San Francisco. Her impulsive offer to cover the fire was foolish. She just didn't have it in her to be a reporter of this caliber. But with the newspaper strike practically crippling the newspaper industry in the city, Russell Madison had had to depend on those who were willing to cross angry picket lines. There hadn't been many.

The man's eyes darkened, his face seemingly etched in stone. Amy noted with fascination the tick working in his cheek and realized that he was exceedingly angry. The way he studied her made her feel as though she were some vile insect that had just crawled out from under a rock. She pushed suddenly nervous hands down the length of her blue wool hoop-skirt wishing that she were anywhere but here.

"I see," he responded, the two little words somehow imbued with a wealth of meaning. He noted the paper still clutched in her hand before his gaze came back to challenge hers.

He reached out to grip her arm in a gentle but uncompromising hold and pulled her farther from the burning building. "You still need to move," he told her, his voice hard. "You're much too close."

Amy noticed movement off to her side and saw three

disheveled women moving through the crowd toward them. Their looks barely skimmed over Amy before they surrounded the young officer.

One woman placed her hand on the man's sleeve. Huge, gold-brown eyes stared out from a white face, the paleness intensifying the freckles sprinkled across her nose. Her dark, coffee-colored hair was falling from its bun, and she brushed it away from her face impatiently.

"What are we going to do, Evan?" she asked of the man. "Everything we owned was in that apartment house."

Evan's face softened as he stared down at the petite brunette. He brushed a hand lightly across her cheek, pushing the straggling hair behind her ear. Evan wrapped his arms about the young woman, tugging her close. In the next instant he reached out with both arms and gathered the other girls close in a group embrace.

"It's okay, Penney," she heard him whisper. "There wasn't anything in that apartment that can't be replaced, unlike the three of you. God was good enough to spare all of you; I have no doubt He will continue to take care of you."

All three women smiled up at him, and one by one, he wiped the tears from their grimy faces.

"The most important thing is to find you girls a place to stay for the night."

The smallest of the three women lifted tear-drenched eyes to stare grimly at the crumbling building. Showers of sparks shot high into the cold night air, the ash raining down around them like tiny snowflakes. She shuddered, throwing her blond hair over her shoulders. "Even our purses were in there," she

told Evan. "We haven't any money for a hotel."

Evan looked slightly discomfited, but he shrugged good-naturedly, trying to look more composed than Amy suspected he actually felt. She knew she was eavesdropping, but for some reason she couldn't help herself. The little group held an inexorable fascination for her.

"That's okay, Jennie," Evan told the girl. "I think I have enough."

A loud voice called to Evan from the other side of the thickening crowd. Evan nodded his head at the caller before squeezing Penney's hand.

"Wait here," he said. "I have to see what O'Hannon wants."

Penney touched his face with gentle fingers, smiling wryly. "You go ahead, big brother. You have a job to do. We'll be fine."

The other two nodded their heads in agreement. Evan hesitated but, after gently patting Penney's cheek, he hurried off. All four women watched him as he moved away with obvious reluctance. Amy decided it was time to make her presence known.

"Excuse me," she called softly.

The one called Jennie stared at her curiously. "Yes?"

Amy felt the color warm her face more thoroughly than the fire had just moments earlier. She moved closer to the huddling group. "I couldn't help overhearing. This was your apartment house?"

They all nodded, their looks ranging from suspicious to openly friendly on the part of Evan's sister. She held out her hand. "My name is Penney Brice. I saw you talking to my

brother. Do you two know each other?”

Amy grew even more embarrassed, though she had to admit to a sense of relief at knowing the young woman standing before her was the officer’s sister and not his wife. Why she should feel that way when she barely knew the two was a mystery she would try to solve at some other time. “Actually, no. He was just warning me to get away from the fire.”

The third girl, who had yet to speak, lifted a dark supercilious brow. “You like watching fires in the middle of the night and in the freezing cold?”

“Helen!” Penney rebuked quietly.

Irritated at Helen’s obvious reference, Amy still couldn’t blame the young woman. It must seem odd to see a woman alone on the streets of San Francisco, especially in the middle of the night. Not far away was the notorious Sydney Town, and many women had been known to disappear from the streets in that area without so much as a trace. If her father ever found out, he would probably lock her in her room and throw away the key.

Suddenly realizing Penney was patiently continuing to offer her hand in greeting, Amy hurriedly gripped it. “My name is Amy Lattimer. I work for the *Golden Gate Gazette*.”

“A reporter?”

Amy smiled at Penney’s enthusiasm. “Not really. I’m normally the society columnist.”

The one called Jennie frowned and stepped forward. “How come you’re here then?”

Amy stared into the woman’s china blue eyes and read the suspicion lurking there. She wondered what had happened in

the girl's life to make her so suspicious of others.

"There's a newspaper strike," she answered quietly. "Everyone else in the office was busy, so my editor sent me."

Amy noticed Penney shivering against the biting cold. "What I wanted to say was that I know of a place where you can stay the night. It's not far from here, and I know the proprietor. I'm sure he'll be glad to take you in."

Jennie looked at her in relief. Before she could say anything, Evan joined them once again. His narrowed gaze focused on Amy then on the notebook still clutched in her hand.

Penney took her brother's arm. "Evan, this is Amy. She knows of a place where we can stay the night."

"Really?" he asked, the softness of his voice belied by the hardness of his eyes. "And where might that be?"

Amy thought that in those few short seconds Evan's looming presence grew even larger. His vastness seemed to increase right before her nervous eyes, his look intimidating in the extreme. Obviously he took his big-brother role very seriously. She had to swallow twice before she could answer him. She pointed down the street without taking her eyes from his.

"The. . .the Hamilton. It's a small hotel, not very fancy but clean and respectable."

Penney looked at Evan. "It sounds perfect, Evan. After all, beggars can't be choosers. If the Lord was kind enough to send us help just when we needed it, then far be it from me to turn Him down."

Evan's grim visage relaxed. "I know the Hamilton. It *is* a nice hotel."

Amy withstood his intense scrutiny with an outward composure she was far from feeling. What did the man think she was going to do anyway? Shanghai his sisters?

Those dark brown eyes were causing funny little butterflies to flutter around inside her stomach, and she wasn't certain if the feeling being generated was fear—or something else entirely. She had never been affected by a man this way, and it was unsettling to say the least. He finally turned his gaze and focused once again on his sister.

“The fire is pretty much under control. O'Hannon says that I can leave now and take care of getting you girls settled.”

His look went once more to Amy. “Since you obviously have work to do here, I'll see my sister and her friends to the Hamilton.”

Amy met his gaze unflinchingly. “Actually, I was finished. I'll be glad to go with you and introduce the ladies to Mr. Jenson, the proprietor. Sometimes he can be rather particular about whom he allows to stay in the hotel.”

One dark eyebrow flew upward. “You know him that well then?”

For a moment Amy was at a loss for words. She wondered how to explain without giving away too much information about herself. She smiled slightly.

“I've lived in this city most of my life, Mr. Brice. I happen to know a lot of people.”

She could tell that her explanation hadn't entirely satisfied him. The suspicion seemed to intensify in his dark eyes.

Penney tugged on his arm. “Come on, Evan. We can't stand around here all night, or we're going to freeze to death.”

Finally taking his sister by the arm and giving a slight nod to Amy, he told her, "Lead the way then, Miss Lattimer."

Amy led the way down the deserted street, thankful for the oil lights along the way that at least gave some vestige of light. When they reached the hotel, she preceded the others inside. If not for her presence, she knew Mr. Jenson would take one look at the ragtag group and tell them there was nothing available. Instead, his eyes met Amy's, his eyebrows lifted in question.

"Mr. Jenson," Amy told him, "these are friends of mine. Their apartment house just burned in a fire, and they need somewhere to stay."

Mr. Jenson's face settled into a look of congeniality. "I see." He smiled at the group. "I wondered what all the commotion was outside earlier. Of course we can put you up. The Hamilton is always willing to lend a helping hand. How many rooms will you be needing?"

Evan stepped forward. "Two will do, thank you."

The proprietor eyed him shrewdly before glancing Amy's way. She nodded imperceptibly.

"Two it is," Mr. Jenson replied, reaching behind him for the keys.

Evan laid some money on the counter, but the proprietor motioned him away. "We always settle up at the end of the stay." He rang the bell on the counter, and a young boy hurried up.

"Show these ladies and the gentleman to their rooms," Mr. Jenson told him, handing the boy the keys.

Amy noticed that Evan didn't bother to deny that he would be taking one of the rooms. She wondered again at his relationship with this small group.

———— THE GOLDEN GATE GAZETTE ————

Before they reached the stairs, Amy pulled Penney to a stop.

“If you come by the *Golden Gate Gazette* in the morning, I think I might be able to help you find a job.”

Evan’s resounding no startled them both.

Chapter 2



Evan listened to his sister's tirade for a full five minutes before he finally stepped forward and placed a hand over her mouth.

"All right, I admit I was a little testy."

"A little!" His sister's eyes, a replica of his own, flashed fire at him. Before she could start in on her harangue again, he held up a hand.

"If you'll just calm down, I'll go and find the woman and apologize."

That seemed to appease her somewhat. "I'd appreciate that. She was only trying to help. What's gotten into you, anyway? I've never seen you treat anyone that way and especially not a woman."

How could he answer that one? From the moment he had laid eyes on the woman, something seemed to have jumped into life inside of him. Never having experienced it before, he found it rather disquieting, if not downright alarming. Something about the woman set warning bells ringing in his mind.

"I said I was sorry, all right? Now let me get out of here and

find the woman before she gets too far away.”

He kissed his sister’s cheek, smiling into her pouting face. “I’ll explain later.”

He hurried out of the building. Taking the time to listen to his sister’s diatribe had given the woman a head start, and he would have to move quickly to catch up with her.

He stood on the deserted street, looking all around, but Amy had seemingly disappeared. Lambasting himself for his own foolishness, he picked a direction, sending up a swift prayer that it would be the right one.

The answer to the prayer came quickly, for Evan hadn’t gone far before he came upon Amy surrounded by several drunken miners. He didn’t think he had ever seen a living person with a face so white. She was huddled amid the group, her terror-filled eyes going from one man to the other. Although it was possible that they were harmless enough, merely wanting some female companionship after such a long time away from such society, Evan wasn’t about to take chances. He strode forward with determination.

The miners noticed his police uniform and began to back away, but Amy looked to him with relief mingled, he felt certain, with guilt. He had told the woman to wait for him and he would see her home. By now he was certain she was feeling just a little foolish for her show of independence.

“I think you fellas need to move along now, don’t you?” he asked, taking Amy by the arm and glaring from one man to another.

“Aw, we was just having some fun,” one man insisted. “Why else would a lady be out on the streets at night?”

The very question he was asking himself.

“The lady was going home,” Amy told them, her voice cold enough to match the surrounding temperature. With Evan’s presence, some of her bravado seemed to be returning, though the color had yet to return to her face.

Mumbling their complaints, the three men reluctantly departed, throwing longing glances over their shoulders as they went.

Evan turned to Amy, intent on rebuking her for her foolishness, but he never got the chance. If her small, shivering form hadn’t stopped him, the tears trickling down her cheeks were enough to dry up the words before Evan had a chance to utter them.

“Come along,” he told her gruffly. “I’ll see you home now.” He gave her a slight smile. “If you’ll be good enough to show me the way.”

He thought she was about to refuse his offer, but after several seconds’ pause, she finally heaved a sigh and turned to him. “I live on Rincon Hill.”

He couldn’t have been more surprised if she had told him she was from Sydney Town. Frankly, that was more the type of address he had been expecting to hear. Instead, here she was telling him that she was from San Francisco’s upper-crust society. At least that’s what he *thought* she was saying.

“You mean you work there?”

She gave him a look that would have shriveled a worm. “No, my name is Amy Lattimer, and my father is Cyril Lattimer.”

Evan stared at her in openmouthed amazement. He wasn’t quite sure what to say. The woman was the daughter of one of

the richest, most notorious men in San Francisco. Noticing the look on his face, she turned and began walking away.

He quickly caught up with her. “Does your father know that you are out roaming the streets at night?” He couldn’t quite suppress the anger in his voice.

She continued walking without even glancing his way. Smoke from the fire many blocks away hung heavy in the air even at such distance, giving an eerie, ghostly feel to the atmosphere.

“My father is out of town on business. He won’t be back for some time.”

That certainly explained a lot. He remembered the stories he had heard about Lattimer and his tight control over his little empire. Evan found it hard to believe that that control would be any less over his own daughter.

He took her by the arm and pulled her to a stop. “Well, you certainly can’t walk all the way to Rincon Hill tonight. Let’s go to the Plaza, and I’ll rent a hack to take us there.”

She peeled his fingers from her arm. “Mr. Brice, I’m perfectly capable of getting myself home on my own steam.”

Her slang reference to the steamboats that went from San Francisco to Sacramento brought a slight smile to his face. Remembering the drunken miners, the smile disappeared.

“Like you handled the situation earlier?”

When her face colored brightly, he lifted one eyebrow, tilting his head slightly. Although her cheeks were fiery from embarrassment, it was still good to finally see some color in them.

“Is there a particular reason you are being so stubborn,” he asked her, “or is it just in your nature?”

She stopped in her tracks, her eyes sparking with anger. “Is

that how you deal with your sisters to get your own way?"

"Sister."

"What?" Her brows wrinkled with confusion.

"Penney is my sister. Helen and Jennie are friends."

She seemed to be digesting that bit of information before once more lifting huge purple-colored eyes to meet his gaze. There was a curious mixture of hurt and resignation in those telling orbs.

"Regardless, I saw the way you looked at me just now when I mentioned my father."

Evan slid his hands into his pants pockets, studying her belligerent face. "I won't deny that your father has quite a reputation."

If anything, her eyes grew colder. "My father's reputation has nothing to do with me."

Evan decided it was about time to change the subject. The woman was about as prickly as a frightened hedgehog.

"Why do you work for the *Gazette*? Surely you don't *need* to work."

She drew herself up to her unusually tall five feet six inches, which left her still short of his equally unusual height of six feet. It was nice not to have to bend low to look into a woman's face, though he doubted whether Miss Lattimer appreciated her amazon size.

"Mr. Brice, are you *deliberately* trying to provoke me?"

He pulled his hands from his pockets, slapping them against his thighs and rolling his eyes heavenward.

"Confound it, woman, I was merely trying to start a conversation. Do you have to take everything I say so personally?"