

San Francisco ~ April 17, 1906

## Chapter 1

**T**HE NIGHT, UNUSUALLY WARM FOR MID-APRIL, PROMISED A brilliant

spring day once the sun rose. However, the night itself gave Cornelius cause for an uneasy sense of foreboding.

The deep moan of a distant fog horn seemed out of place. The night sky, while laden with twinkling stars, did not stir his imagination. The darkness between each tiny distant light seemingly cold and impenetrable. The shadows around him seemed darker, deeper, and more troubling as foul insidious vapors drifted around his feet. The ground fog swirled no higher than his knees as it snaked out from the drains and grates that cover the cities sewers, and the darker secrets lost beneath its streets. He coughed, the fog affecting the taste of the night in an unsavory manner. It wasn't the eerie vapor that disturbed him. His nerves were on edge because his partner and best friend Sergeant Choice Pickens was down in the Shanghai tunnels. Cornelius knew that whatever was about to happen down there would, and there was nothing he can do to change it. All he could do now was wait and see how it turned out. Regardless, he couldn't shake the feeling that trouble was close, whether it is down with Choice or trouble was stalking him through the streets and alleys of the Barbary Coast, where trouble is a permanent resident. One thing Cornelius does know is that the Barbary does not reveal its secrets readily - to uncover her many ugly truths is his job. No sixth sense, no cop's intuition can prepare him for what is about to happen . . . that the world is about to be turned upside-down in ways he could never imagine.

San Francisco Police Inspector Cornelius McCann chomps down on the end of his cigar as he walks away from the edge of a darkened alley to stand beneath the faintly reassuring flickering glow of a gas street light. His eyes take in the street, every movement, shadow, window, and darkened doorway. He doesn't look up, because he senses that she is there

peering down at him from her second floor window. He first had caught a glance of her a week or so ago, during the day when the early morning light had been just right, and he had marveled, *What is a woman of her beauty, her gentility, doing living in this godforsaken neighborhood.* As he felt her looking down, he couldn't help but smile as the same question crossed his mind a second time.

Her window is open letting in a light breeze. Though it is a reasonably warm night, Lavinia Losekoor shivers as she feels a chill, a sudden unnatural deep winter hoarfrost touching her heart. The chill does not come from the night, but from somewhere beyond. Her breath catches with the certain realization that her life is about to change, her sanctuary is about to melt away as easily as the final stub of a bee's wax candle flickers out. Her father, a Dutch brewmaster, had brought her to America just a year prior, and they had taken an apartment close to the brewery where he had been hired. The apartment was too close to the saloons, whorehouses, and beer halls dependent on his product. Lavinia rarely ventured out onto the streets without her father close at hand. The rest of their family had been taken by influenza and their home had become too sad a place for her father to remain. She loved her father and came to America leaving everything and everyone she knew behind. Now she had become a recluse, at age twenty-six, almost an old maid. He had promised with a father's love that they would move into a real home in a respectable neighborhood as soon as he could save the money. She dreamed of that day, and it was that dream that gave her strength and solace. That dream was bitterly dashed away the night her father had not come home. The night he had disappeared. Now two months later, with little hope of ever seeing her father again, the money all but gone, without a friend to help her, she is waiting for the sun to rise on the morning when she is to be cast out into the wicked streets of San Francisco - homeless. It is not this terrifying future that chills her; it is something larger, more imminent, a dark massive storm just off the horizon.

Lavinia's fingers dig tight into the curtain as she watches Inspector Cornelius McCann from her window. She senses that it is this man, this stranger, who stands in the street light just below her window that has

somehow been sent to save her. She wants to open the window a little wider and cry out a warning, but she cannot find the words to describe what her heart knows to be true, that something wicked and ugly is waiting just this side of dawn's early morning light. She watches as he stands motionless in the night, listening to the sounds of the city, guarding her from harm. They have never met, but she knows who he is, his name and pictures often in the papers. Inspector Cornelius McCann is a police officer, her sentry, who many nights stands exactly where he stands now, seemingly fearless, always aware of the dark forces that shape the infamy of the Barbary Coast - where Old Scamp, the Prince of Darkness, has a vacation home in one of the most beautiful and eclectic cities in the world.

She sees Cornelius as a handsome man of medium height, with short cropped sandy-blond hair, a face perhaps too weathered for a man in his early thirties. He has intense eyes and she wonders what color they might be. He carries with him an air of honest character, authority, and threat, depending on which side of the law one might be on. He makes her feel warm and safe in a world where otherwise she does not. So far, she has been afraid to speak with him, or to be seen, because he might turn away, dashing her dreams forever. A girl can't lose too many dreams and survive.

For a brief moment, Cornelius thought he heard a woman's voice, an angel whispering just to him. He stops, slowly takes the cigar from his mouth, checks his coat pocket for a match as he turns. The street is empty. He slowly brings his eyes up towards her window, only to see the curtain slide closed. He listens, wondering if it had been her. While the curtain is drawn, the window is open. No, it could not have been her, it had to have been his imagination - or had it? "Yes, you are pleasing to me," he said in a low voice. "But . . . who the hell are you?" This time he catches himself chuckling as he wonders if she's married. He chuckled because he has always considered himself to not be the marrying kind.

The street appeared to be empty, unusual for this time of the night. The music and drunken noises from the saloons is white noise to his ears as a

distant fog horn's moan snakes its way through the night, a beautiful, if not haughty siren found in legends seemingly inviting him to a dance. The fog swirls low to the ground, afraid to venture any closer to the gas street light that flickers above. The whiskers of a rat probes its edge then scurries away as Cornelius glances one last time at her window and then moves on.