

## SCANDAL ON RINCON HILL

### CHAPTER ONE

The nightmare began early on the morning of Sunday, December 4th.

Upon reflection, perhaps I ought to rephrase this statement. By nightmare, I do not refer to the frightening dreams each of us suffers upon occasion. Rather I am describing the horrific events which sent ripples of fear through the inhabitants of Rincon Hill – nay, through the entire city of San Francisco – shortly before Christmas, in the year of our Lord 1881. Unarguably, the murder which set the horror in motion that morning was a tragedy, yet none of us could have possibly foreseen the carnage which was yet to follow.

I had retired late the previous evening, and was in a deep sleep when I was abruptly awakened by an odd noise. Sitting bolt upright in my bed, it was several moments before my groggy mind comprehended the source of that sound; some fool was throwing rocks at my window!

Pushing back my bedcovers I arose and, without bothering to pull on slippers or robe, hurried across the room to the window facing the west side of the house. I was reaching for the edge of the drapes when another handful of pebbles bounced against the pane. By now thoroughly awake, and not a little irritated, I angrily pulled up the sash.

Below me, a pool of light emanated from a kerosene lantern held aloft by the dark figure of a man. Regarding him in some surprise, I realized he appeared to be wearing the dark blue frockcoat (appearing nearly black in the dim light) of the San Francisco police department. I should have known, I thought, expelling a sigh of relief. The man peering up at my window was George Lewis, my brother Samuel's good friend and a sergeant on the above mentioned force.

"George," I called down to him, "would you kindly explain why you are throwing rocks at my window? And in the middle of the night?"

"I apologize, Miss Sarah," he said in a loud whisper. "Your back fence prevented me from reaching Samuel's window. A body's been found in the Second Street Cut, and I knew he'd want to be the first reporter on the scene. Would you – could you please wake him?"

I thought for a moment I had misheard. "Did you say you found a body just two blocks from our house?"

"Yes, and I'm in something of a hurry. I have to return there as quickly as possible." His voice grew more urgent. "I hate to bother you, Miss Sarah, but would you please tell your brother?"

I made up my mind on the instant. "Yes, I'll fetch him right away!"

In my bare feet, and still not bothering with a robe, I left my room and padded quickly down the hall. The way was but dimly lit by several small sconce candles hung on the walls, requiring me to watch carefully where I stepped in order to avoid the squeakier floorboards. Samuel's bedroom was located at the rear of our house, which overlooked the back garden. The gnarled old oak tree that grew just outside his window had for years provided my brother with a convenient method for coming and going without our parents being any the wiser. Even now I knew he occasionally utilized the tree for this purpose, especially if he were pursuing a newsworthy story.

Unknown to my mother and father, or any other member of the family, for that matter, Samuel – who had completed his legal education some five years previous – had invented endless excuses to postpone taking his California Bar examinations. In those intervening years, he had become far more interested in the life of a crime journalist, for which he had unarguably been blessed with considerable talent.

The reason for this subterfuge was because our father, the Honorable Horace T. Woolson, Superior Court Judge for the County of San Francisco, nurtured a deep prejudice, not to mention mistrust, for anyone in the newspaper business. It was Samuel's profound hope that Papa would never discover the real reason why he continued to avoid taking that last step toward becoming an attorney. He had, you see, been busy forging a career in journalism under the name Ian Fearless, the noted San Francisco crime reporter much in demand by a variety of publications, ranging from the Police Gazette to the city's well-established daily newspapers. George Lewis was right. Samuel would undoubtedly do anything to scoop the town's other reporters when it came to a good murder.

Not stopping to knock, I boldly entered my brother's room and crossed to his bed. Samuel was an especially sound sleeper – it was a family joke that he'd even managed to sleep through several significant earthquakes – and I was forced to shake him by the shoulders before he could be roused from his slumber.

“What the hell?” he grumbled, pulling the bedcovers over his tousled head. “Go away and let me sleep.”

“Samuel, wake up,” I said, continuing to shake him. “George is waiting for you outside. They've found a body in the Cut. He thought you'd want to cover the story.”

At this, he sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “What time is it?”

By the faint glow of candlelight spilling through the open door to the hall, I could just make out the hands of his clock.

“It's a few minutes after two o'clock,” I told him. “Hurry up and get dressed if you want an exclusive story.”

Without waiting for him to agree, I scurried back to my own room. Hastily, I tore off my nightgown and pulled on the first dress that came to hand. Not bothering with petticoats or

stockings, I threw on a pair of old boots and tossed a long, hooded wrap over my shoulders. I gathered my thick mop of tangled hair into a bun as I raced down the stairs and, grabbing hold of one of the lanterns kept at the ready in a downstairs cupboard, flung open the front door. Leaving it slightly ajar behind me, I joined a startled-looking George Lewis who stood waiting on the street.

“Miss Sarah,” he protested, “You can’t mean to come with us. The victim is, that is it’s not a pleasant sight.”

“Never mind about that, George,” I said, straightening my cape so that it covered me more securely. “You should know by now that I am not faint at heart.”

Before George could find more reasons to object to my presence, my brother came flying out of the house, pulling on his topcoat with one hand, while attempting to balance a note pad and his own lantern in the other.

“I might have known you’d insist on coming along,” he said, spying me standing next to his friend.

“I tried to tell her she should stay here,” George said, regarding me unhappily. “Where I’m taking you is no fit place for a lady.”

Samuel gave a dry little laugh. “Save your breath, George. You have as much chance of stopping her as you’d have holding back a wild boar.” Striking a match, he lit both our lamps, then blew out the flame. “All right, my b’hoys, lead us to this body of yours.”

George flashed me one more uncertain look, then silently turned and set off at a brisk pace toward the Harrison Street Bridge. This structure, which the noted author Charles Warren Stoddard referred to as “a bridge celebrated as a triumph of architectural ungainliness,” had been erected to span Harrison Street across the gap caused by the infamous Second Street Cut. Many San Franciscans – my father and I included – considered the cut a greedy and ill-advised scheme which had signaled the beginning of the end to Rincon Hill, until then one of the city’s finest districts.

Tonight, the bridge loomed before us like a long, graceless serpent, barely distinguishable against the dark sky. A god-awful eyesore, Papa was fond of saying, and I must admit that I heartily agreed with this sentiment.

As we drew nearer, I spied a one-horse chaise parked to the right side of the road leading onto the bridge. A man I assumed to be the driver, moved out of the shadows and signaled to us with his lantern, then turned and directed us to yet another light burning on the dirt slope below the bridge. Stepping closer, I could make out the figures of three men standing some thirty feet beneath us. The man waving the lantern up and down was wearing a police uniform. Two more dark forms stood off to the side, silently watching our approach

“The men standing next to officer Kostler are the ones who discovered the body,” explained George. “They were crossing the bridge when they heard screams coming from below. They say they saw the figure of a man scrambling up the opposite embankment. When they investigated, they found the victim lying under the bridge with his head bashed in. They sent the driver to summon the police, then agreed to wait with the body while I fetched Samuel.” In the lantern light, I could make out a wry smile. “Kostler owes me a favor, so I trust him to keep his trap shut about my little side trip to your house.

Admonishing us to watch our step, George picked his way cautiously down the eastern embankment of the overpass, a precarious, hundred-foot side hill prone to mud slides during the rainy season, and sloping steeply to the bottom of the “cut” and the redirected Second Street below.

About a third of the way down, I spied a dark, unrecognizable shape sprawled in the dirt, partly hidden by one of the concrete bridge supports. As George held up his lantern, it was possible to make out the line of a leg, and just above it, a hand. Drawing closer and raising my own lantern, I could see that the victim was a man and that he lay face down, his arms stretched out as if attempting to ward off the blows to his head. His legs were flung out to either side of his trunk at awkward angles.

It shames me to admit to such squeamishness, but I confess that I recoiled at the sight of the man’s wounds. His dark hair was matted with blood, and the right side of his face had been battered in beyond recognition. As Samuel drew closer, the combined light of the three lamps revealed a three-foot section of two-by-four laying a half dozen feet above the body on the steep slope. From the blood-soaked look of it, I concluded that this must be the murder weapon. George obviously concurred, although he made no move to pick it up, or indeed to move it.

“He hasn’t been touched,” Officer Kostler told his superior. “And no one else has come along, or even crossed the bridge for that matter.”

One of the two men standing apart from the policeman regarded George in some distress. His round, full face appeared very pale in the spill of lantern light.

“It’s late and damn cold,” he said, his voice none too steady. “Can we be on our way now? We know nothing more about this horrible crime than we’ve already told you.”

“Just a minute,” said George. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a pencil and notebook. After jotting down their names and addresses, he informed the two men that they could leave. “But we may want to speak to you again at a future date, so please inform us if you plan to leave town.”

The men nodded gratefully, then scampered up the hillside as quickly as they dared, given the dim light and unsure footing.

When they were gone, Samuel moved closer and felt the man’s face. “He’s still warm, and this is a chilly evening. Most likely he was murdered within the past half hour.”

“Yes,” George agreed. “That skews with the witnesses’s account. Too bad they weren’t here a few minutes earlier. Might have scared off whoever did this and saved the bloke’s life.”

My brother peered down at the sad figure who, a short time earlier, had been as alive as any of us standing here now. “Who is he?” he asked his friend. “Have you gone through his pockets?”

George nodded. “That was the first thing I did when I realized the poor sod was beyond mortal help. Whoever did him in took his wallet, but left his gold pocket watch and the two gold rings he’s wearing. There were a few bills stuffed into one of his pockets. Of course it’s hard to tell if anything else is missing until we speak to his family.”

“So you think it was robbery then?” asked Samuel.

“Looks like it,” George replied. “Probably a case of the poor bugger being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But George, that makes no sense,” I said. “Why would a thief leave behind cash and valuable jewelry?”

“That’s easy enough to explain, Miss Sarah,” George said with a cheerless smile. “The knuck sees this fellow crossing the bridge and decides to take advantage of the opportunity. He takes the mark’s wallet, but before he can grab anything else he hears a carriage on the bridge and the sound of voices. He very sensibly skeddaddles off before anyone has time to see his face.”

“I don’t know,” I said, still not convinced. “Why kill the poor man? Surely the thief ran little risk of being identified on such a dark night. Why not just render his victim unconscious, rob him, then leave before he came to? Surely there was no need to batter the man’s head in, er—“ Out of my side vision I caught a glimpse of the victim’s battered upper torso and swallowed hard. “—like that.”

“Who knows, Miss Sarah?” said George. “Sad to say, we see this sort of thing all too often. These rounders care little enough about their victims. Just as soon kill them as not.”

I knew what he said was true, but I continued to be troubled by the excessively violent nature of the crime.

Before George could respond to these concerns, Samuel nudged my arm and nodded up the slope. Following his gaze, I spied a stout figure making his careful way down the hill with the aid of a kerosene lantern. The light swung back and forth in front of his face, and I was dismayed to recognize the newcomer as our father.

As Papa half-slid his way toward us, I saw that he was wearing the old topcoat he kept on the back porch, along with the gardening boots which were also stored there. I suspected that beneath his coat he might well be wearing nothing more than his nightshirt. His hair was mussed,

and he looked none too happy. I glanced quickly at Samuel, who shared my surprise at this unlikely addition to our group.

“Papa,” I called out. “What are you doing here?”

My father did not immediately respond, seemingly busy saving his breath for the arduous descent. Even when he finally reached us, he spent several moments taking in deep gulps of air before endeavoring to answer my question.

“I heard the two of you leave the house,” he said, once his breathing had steadied. “You made enough noise to wake the dead. Couldn’t imagine why in tarnation you were stomping hell bent down the stairs in the middle of the night. I managed to follow your lanterns, although there was no need for you to walk so blasted fast!”

His eyes fell on the crumpled body lying beneath one of the bridge supports, and he stopped short. “Who is this?” His voice was less strident as he regarded the unfortunate man.

George was the first to answer. “We don’t know his identity yet, sir. Whoever did this made off with his wallet.”

My father moved closer to the body. He appeared to be paying particular attention to the man’s clothing and shoes. For the first time, I realized the victim was wearing evening dress; he had evidently attended the theater, or a soiree of some kind that evening.

“May I turn his head?” Papa asked George. “I’ll try not to disturb anything else.”

George nodded, but seemed puzzled why my father should make such a request. We all watched silently as Papa pushed up his sleeves and gently moved the man’s head until he could more clearly see his face. Bringing his lantern closer, he studied the victim’s features for several long moments.

“I think I know this man,” he said at last, stepping almost reverently back from the body. “His condition makes it difficult to be certain, but I believe his name is Nigel Loran, no, wait, it was Logan, Nigel Logan. If I am not mistaken he is – was, rather – a botanist or biologist of some sort. My wife and I met him for the first time last night at a party we attended in honor of the Reverend Erasmus Mayfield’s twenty-fifth ordination anniversary. Mayfield is the rector at the Church of Our Savior.”

“Do you happen to know where Mr. Logan lives?” George asked Papa. “It can’t have been too far away for him to walk home so late at night, instead of taking a cab.”

My father thought for a moment before replying, “I believe I heard someone say that he had a room in a boarding house on Harrison Street, several blocks beyond the bridge. I seem to recall that he taught science at the University of San Francisco. You know, the college run by the Jesuits?”

Indeed I did know. This renowned institution had been established in 1855 by the Jesuit Fathers. Located on Market Street between Fourth and Fifth, it was now widely regarded as one of the city's foremost academies of higher education. If Mr. Logan had taught classes there, he must have been an accomplished scholar.

"Tell me more about the party you attended last night if you would, Judge Woolson," requested George. "I've sent for some of my men and a wagon to transport the body, but while we wait I'd like to hear about this Logan fellow."

"I can't say that I know much more than I've already told you," Papa said thoughtfully. "In fact, the only reason I remember the young man at all is because of the argument he had with Reverend Mayfield."

"And what argument was that, sir?" asked George, once again opening his notebook and moving closer to Samuel's lantern. Pencil poised, he regarded Papa with keen interest.

"It was just the usual folderol between the church and the scientific world, this time over Charles Darwin's theory of evolution." Papa harrumphed, displaying grave misgivings that the human race could possibly have developed from a lower form of animal species. "Logan began quoting from Darwin's latest epic, *Descent of Man*, and not surprisingly Reverend Mayfield took exception to this reference, as well he should. I'm sorry to say the two of them went at it hammer and tong for some little time before our host managed to break them up." He chuckled. "I thought for awhile the two might actually come to blows over the idiotic book."

"You said the Reverend Mayfield became upset?" inquired George, looking up from his pad.

"I'd say he was a damn sight more than upset," answered Papa, still smiling at the memory. Then, for the first time he regarded the younger man as if just now realizing where his questions were leading.

"Wait a minute, George," he went on. "It's true that both men were agitated, but if you're trying to imply that Reverend Mayfield was so angry he followed Logan and murdered him because he disagreed with his beliefs, you're barking up the wrong tree. I've known Erasmus Mayfield for fifteen years, and he's one of the few ministers of my acquaintance that I consider to be a man of God." He nodded toward the crumpled body. "I assure you, sir, that Reverend Mayfield is incapable of violence, much less the degree of brutality visited upon this unfortunate soul."

George raised a hand, obviously in an attempt to calm my father. "Please, Judge Woolson, I didn't mean to imply that I thought Mr., er, the Reverend Mayfield killed Mr. Logan. I'm just trying to collect information about the victim, particularly the time leading up to his murder. It occurred to me that maybe someone else, someone who overheard the argument say, might have been so het up about Nigel Logan's support of Mr. Darwin's book, that he thought to teach the young scientist a lesson. Maybe that lesson went too far and the man accidentally killed the fellow."

I considered this highly unlikely and said so. “Come now, George, churches have been railing against Darwin’s hypothesis for over twenty years. I can’t imagine anyone at the Tremaine’s party becoming so distraught over Logan’s argument with Reverend Mayfield, that he would bludgeon the man to death.”

Samuel nodded in agreement. “Sarah’s right. Excuse the pun, George, but the severity of those blows to Logan’s head strike me as overkill. This attack has the feel of a more personal crime, as if the killer bore an intense grudge against the fellow.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” commented George, unconvinced by this argument. “I see cases like this every day, more than I care to recall. And I’ve come across many a rough who’ll beat a man to death for the sheer love of the kill. Doesn’t seem to matter if he knows the bloke or not.”

Samuel seemed about to offer another objection, but was distracted by the sound of a police wagon clattering across the bridge. Papa, Samuel and I remained standing by the body, while George and Officer Kostler went to meet the men. A few minutes later, they returned with three uniformed policemen, two of them carrying a stretcher.

Before George would allow them to move the body, however, he asked one of the new arrivals to sketch the scene, paying particular attention to the position of the corpse in relationship to the bridge support, as well as its rough distance from the top of the dirt embankment.

“This isn’t exactly police procedure,” he commented, directing a self-conscious look at my father. “But Fuller here has a good eye and does a bang up job with a sketch pad. I find it helps me remember the condition of the body and where we found it. I’ve heard that some police departments Back East have actually started to take photographic pictures of crime scenes, but so far we haven’t been able to convince the commissioner that it’s worth the expense.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea, George,” I said, regarding him with newfound respect. Ever since he had made sergeant earlier that year, he seemed to be developing into a fine detective. “Imagine how helpful it would be to have a true representation of a murder site, one that could be examined at a later date for missed or overlooked evidence?”

Papa looked skeptical. “Considering all the time it takes for one of these photographer fellows to get a halfway decent likeness of their subject, I can’t see the process being of much use to the police for years to come, if ever.”

With this somewhat cynical pronouncement, my father turned and commenced the laborious climb back to the top of the embankment. Samuel and I waited where we were until Fuller completed his sketch (which was remarkably good considering how quickly it had been rendered), then watched as the remaining policemen loaded the victim’s body onto the stretcher. Given the steep grade leading up to the waiting police wagon, George and Samuel were forced to lend a hand in order to prevent the stretcher bearers from losing their precarious foothold and sliding down the hill, taking their heavy burden with them.



I followed this procession, steadying my lantern in an effort to see where I was placing my boots. Even then it became necessary for Samuel to take hold of my hand and pull me up the final half dozen feet or so. As he did, I was dismayed to see a taxi pull to an abrupt stop by the side of the bridge. I recognized the man who exited the carriage as Ozzie Foldger, a crime reporter who frequently competed with Samuel for stories.

“Who do you suppose tipped him off?” murmured my brother, eyeing the short, tubby little man who had a well-earned reputation for the ruthless tactics he all too often employed in his quest to scoop other reporters. “Sometimes I think that man has a telegraph machine installed inside his head.”

Foldger gave Samuel a mocking smile, nodded in some surprise to me, then blinked in astonishment when he recognized our father standing by the police van. The reporter acknowledged Papa’s presence with a polite tip of his cap, then pulled out his own notebook and pencil and set off to corner Sergeant Lewis. George shot a helpless look at my brother, then with unhappy resignation began to answer Ozzie’s rapid-fire questions.

With a muttered oath, Samuel kept a wary eye on his rival as the stretcher-bearers loaded the body into the police wagon. Seemingly using this as an excuse, George broke away from Foldger, bid my father and me a hasty good morning and joined Kostler and their fellow officers for the ride to the city morgue. With another sardonic smile, Ozzie Foldger pocketed his notebook and got back into his waiting cab.

As Papa, Samuel and I started for home, I was unnerved to see our father silently considering his youngest son, a perplexed look on his face. I could tell that Samuel, too, felt the tension which hung over our heads like a heavy swirl of morning fog. Indeed, the unspoken strain between my brother and father seemed to build with each step we took, until the short, two block walk home, felt closer to a mile.

It was a relief when we finally reached our house and were once again inside the quiet foyer. I headed immediately for the stairs, suddenly very weary and looking forward to the comfort of my bed. My brother followed closely upon my heels, eager, I was certain, to escape Papa’s probing gaze. We had gone only a few steps, however, when we were halted by our father’s voice.

“Wait a minute, the two of you,” he said, his tone pitched low enough not to awaken the rest of the family, but with a sharp bite of authority. He regarded us levelly from the hallway below. “You must think me remarkably naïve to accept without question how my two youngest children came to be standing beneath the Harrison Street Bridge in the middle of the night, examining a brutally murdered young man. I heard no police bells or other sounds of alarm, and even if I had, I would hardly expect the two of you to rise from your beds at that ungodly hour and chase after them.”

I glanced nervously at Samuel who stood a little below me on the stairs. His handsome face betrayed his agitation as he struggled to come up with some rational explanation for this admittedly irrational act.

Before he could manufacture an excuse however, Papa sighed and gestured dismissively with his hand. “Oh, never mind. I’m too tired to listen to what are sure to be a litany of woeful excuses.”

He used his thumb and forefinger to rub the bridge above his nose, a gesture he often performed when he was suffering a headache. “Your mother and I plan to spend the day with friends in the country. I’m going to try to get what rest I can before it’s time to depart.”

He lowered his hand and stared deliberately at each of us in turn. “But don’t either of you think for one moment that this marks the end of our discussion. I know you two are up to something, and I have every intention of finding out what it is.”