

CHAPTER ONE

“Hellie, I think you killed him. Look at all that blood!” her brother said, kneeling over the body. “Great! Alls I need. Well, I ain’t taking the fall for you, Hellie.”

Hellie felt her knees weaken as though it was her own blood gushing forth. “How can he be dead?” she whispered, dropping her slingshot. She knelt down next to the man and touched his shoulder. “Mister? Mister, you all right? Harry, look there! He ain’t dead!”

She reached into her pant’s pocket and pulled out a white satin scarf, swiped from an off-guard dowager just minutes before. She dotted her victim’s bleeding forehead, then carefully bandaged the wound. “You’re okay, mister.” The man’s eyes flickered.

“Hellie, come on! You ain’t no nurse! He’s coming ‘round. Don’t let him spot you.”

“I got scared when he pulled a pistol on you, Harry.” She picked up her slingshot and added, “Guess I’m stronger now I’m growing some.”

Harry seized the slingshot. “Gimme that! I told you you’re too young to tote.”

“You tote a *gun* and you’re only sixteen!” she growled back.

“Well, sixteen’s three more than thirteen and you’re a girl to boot! Come on!”

Harry said, grabbing Hellie. She pulled away, snatched the man’s hand and started twisting a gold ring off his little finger. “*Now* what are you doing?”

“We ain’t et proper in two days,” she said, grunting as she pulled harder at the ring. The man, coming around, started to jerk his hand away.

“Cripes, Hellie! One minute you’re healing him, next minute you’re fleecing him!” Harry hollered from down the alley.

“Come on, mister! Give!” she said through gritting teeth. Then, she saw the glint of his gold watch fob peeping out from his vest pocket, dropped his finger and, with the swipe of a seasoned pickpocket, snatched the fob - chain, watch and all.

“Hellie!” Her name seemed to echo down the alley in harmony with the shrieks of the approaching police whistles.

The man opened his eyes to see the street urchin’s dark and dirty face looking down at him. The jaunty cap crooked atop the short, thick, matted hair, and the dirty face made the kid look more like his own corner newsboy, not the crying little waif who

lured him into the alley, set him up for a robbery, shot him in the head, and was now dangling his father's watch over his face.

"Thanks, mister."

His trembling hand went to his satin-wrapped forehead. "What happened?"

"You got a lesson and I got a watch." Her eyes landed on the pearl-handled pistol laying in the alley. "Oooo... and a gun. Double thanks!"

And she was off, pocketing his pistol and his watch, running after her brother where they disappeared into the darkness of the New York alley.

Their gang numbered six - two teams of three - a wire, a lure and a lookout. Pickpockets of the first degree. Not a one over the age of sixteen. They met at their current hangout exactly two hours after the alley mugging. The rules were clear - if something turns ugly, such as a mark pulling a gun and someone calling the cops, no one goes back to the hangout for two hours. Just in case.

"Dat damn little brudder of yours is gonna get one of us killed!" Archie, the oldest and self-proclaimed field-marshal, said to Harry. "Him and dat slingshot of his!"

"Yeah, yeah, you don't need to tell me about it," Harry said. There was a noise outside their hide out. "Shhs!" The five gang members stared at the door. One drew a knife. Harry drew his pistol.

"Got food, beer!" Hellie announced as she pushed the door open and unloaded a box full of food on the barrel top which served as a table. Her eyes landed on her brother and she said, grinning, "Got his clock and sling."

The boys pounced on the food like dogs and, also like dogs, the larger, older boys got the lions' shares. Knowing this unwritten law, Hellie leisurely ate her own lion's share on the streets after pawning the gold watch.

"What'd it cop for?" Willie, a beefy Italian asked, his mouth so full of cheese and bread that he could barely find room for the words.

"Three bucks," Hellie replied.

"Dis ain't three bucks' worth of food," C.K. said, drinking from the bucket of beer.

Hellie knew this law, too. Always, always bring some cash back for the gang. Otherwise it looked like you were holding out... being greedy, being stupid.

She dug into her pocket and deposited fifty-two cents on the barrel. When she felt the doubting eyes on her, she reached into her back pocket and pulled out another eleven cents.

“That all?” her brother demanded.

“What do you want for a three-buck thimble?”

She looked around, recalling the time these very same boys had beaten a seven-year old for hogging. She pulled out the gold watch chain and handed it over.

“That’s better,” Harry said. “And don’t you never shoot a mark over a stupid watch! Even with this toy!” He pulled her slingshot out from his pants and viciously hurled it at her.

Hellie caught it and said, “Slim ain’t no toy.”

“Da liddle wart’s even got a name for it,” Archie growled.

They ate and Hellie kept toward the back of their waterfront shack, knowing the safest place with this fleet was sitting out of sight and out of mind while the others ate their fill. She sat with knees up, hat down low, just the way Harry had taught her.

Finally, Harry got up, counted out twelve cents from the take and said, “Me and Hellie are thinking ‘bout moving on.”

“Moving on where?” Archie asked, tossing orange peels into a corner for the wharf rats to cart away.

Hellie watched her brother’s face, the sparse candlelight casting long shadows on it. They had only briefly talked about leaving the gang, going out on their own. “I don’t know. Thinking about moving west.”

“Chicago?” C.K. asked. “Gonna be tough starting over in Chicago. You’re better off here, where you know da streets.”

“Where da streets know you,” Willie quipped.

Then Archie said, “Tell you what. Ditch dat brudder of yours and maybe you and me can move up. I got a cousin what works a brace game uptown - nothing but rich saps uptown. Your looks, my connections - we’d made us a good con team. Ditch *all* dem rabbits.” He pointed to the younger gang members with the knife he used to slice his orange.

Hellie looked at her brother's hardened face, curious for his reaction to the idea of ditching her. He gave her a casual glance and said, "Well, I'm always on the wake to new opportunities."

Hellie stood up, took her twelve cent slice off the table and said, "Suit yourself. I don't need none of you punks. I brung food, beer and money and you losers just take and eat."

"Thanks, Hellie," Flip said, holding up an orange. Flip was fourteen, looked ten, and was the quick and agile gopher of the gang since he could ease in and out of small places. And, of the whole tribe, the only one besides her brother who she might trust.

"You all know where you can go," she said, cocking down her cap and keeping her voice low and hard. She left and, once outside, grabbed a crate and crashed it against the hideout door.

Inside, Archie said to Harry who was rising to follow Hellie, "Let da goonlet go. We're all bedder off widout him. 'Specially, you, Harry. Hellie's old enough to take care of hisself."

Harry opened the door to see Hellie disappear into the gray mist enveloping the wharf. "Yeah, I know," he said back to Archie. "Sometimes Hellie's more trouble than he's worth."

"Dump him," C.K. said. "He's got a short fuse and something about him ain't right." He tapped his forehead.

Harry knew it was only a matter of time before Archie and the rest would turn first on Hellie, then on him - like any pack that devours its weak. Sooner or later they'd figure out Hellie was a girl. Either he'd slip up or Hellie would. The last three gangs they'd hooked up with had been the same. Something had to be done about Hellie and soon.

C.K. stuck his knife into the barrel where it wanked back and forth. "Cut da apron strings, boyyo. You'll never amount to nothin' wid Hellie 'round your neck."

Harry looked at the sets of cool and hard eyes staring back at him. Even little Flip's jaw was set, abiding by majority rule.

Harry showed the change in his hand. "I got more'n this coming to me."

Archie knocked his hand and the money pinged into the dark recesses of the hideout. "Now you ain't even got dat!"

Harry pointed to Archie and said, "This ain't over!"

He could hear the hissing and crude laughter of the gang as he took off down the alley after his sister.