



*SEARCHING
FOR YOU*

JODY HEDLUND



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And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall
search for me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13

CHAPTER 1



NEW YORK CITY
SEPTEMBER 1859

Sophie Neumann nuzzled her nose against Danny's chest.

His arms tightened around her possessively. "You're my girl now. A Bowery Girl."

Bowery Girl. The coveted name should have sent shivers of delight through Sophie. Instead, the mention of it made her tremble with trepidation.

Danny lowered his head and pressed his mouth against her neck. His lips were slick and hot, especially in the September heat and humidity that lingered in the city air even though it was well past midnight. The dampness brought out the heavy scent of beer on his breath, as well as the acridness of bear grease in the pomade he used to slick back his hair.

She arched her neck to avoid the odor, telling herself she was only giving him more access. At the same time, she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to conjure pleasure at his touch. She'd enjoyed Danny's kisses and his caresses on previous nights. Tonight would be no different. She just needed to be patient and the affection would follow.

After all, he was Danny Sullivan, the head of the Dry Bones and one of the leaders of the Bowery Boys. He wore the usual gang attire—a long black frock, red shirt, dark trousers, polished boots, and a stovepipe hat. And he styled his hair similar to the other Bowery Boys, cut short in the back with ringlets of hair pasted down over his ears.

Although his clothing and hair blended in with the other gang members, he was easily the handsomest and strongest one in the Bowery neighborhood. She still marveled that of all the women who vied for Danny's attention, he'd decided he wanted her. He'd fought against two other Bowery Boys in bare-knuckle fistfights in order to claim her.

Of course, she hadn't really been interested in the other men. In fact, she hadn't been interested in getting involved with anyone—she never had. For the past two years, she'd always been on the move, running away from one asylum to the next, never having the time to invest in relationships other than taking care of Olivia and Nicholas.

But all that had changed a month ago when one of the mistresses at the Juvenile Asylum had informed Anna that she was too old to stay there any longer. Anna had been Sophie's only friend at the asylum. As Anna had packed her ragged bag of belongings, she'd pleaded with Sophie to leave too, assuring her that her sister Mollie would let them stay with her. After having a baby, Mollie had moved from the brothel where she'd been living and now had an apartment.

"We're old enough to get jobs," Anna had said. "We can be domestics in one of those fancy rich houses on Fifth Avenue."

"But we don't have any experience," Sophie argued.

"Then we can work in a factory or a sewing shop."

Sophie remembered all too vividly the sewing sweatshop her mother and sisters had worked in, one of many located in the crowded tenements on the East Side. Although Sophie hadn't

been old enough to work alongside her family, she still recalled her mother and sisters coming home after twelve-hour workdays hot and exhausted, their fingers blue from the dye that colored the precut material they'd sewn to form men's vests.

In all those months, Sophie had never learned how to sew, not even a button. Besides, even if she and Anna found work as seamstresses, the pay was abysmally low. How would they be able to afford to live on it even if they stayed with Anna's sister? More specifically, how would she be able to clothe, feed, and take care of Olivia and Nicholas?

In spite of her reservations, Sophie had agreed to take up residence with Anna's sister in a tiny tenement on Mulberry Bend. The two rooms they shared with Mollie, three other women, and their children weren't nearly big enough for all of them. Still, the place was safe.

Now that she was Danny Sullivan's Bowery Girl, he would take care of her and wouldn't let any harm come to her.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered huskily.

With her long blond hair and bright blue eyes, she'd always drawn attention from boys. But in the past she'd been petite and thin, able to pass for a much younger child. Over the previous six months, she'd grown and filled out so that she'd had a much harder time deceiving the orphanage workers into believing she was ten or twelve years old.

At the Juvenile Asylum, she'd told the staff she was fifteen, even though she was drawing nigh to eighteen. They'd believed her, yet she knew her days of being able to stay with Olivia and Nicholas in the asylums was fast coming to an end, that soon enough the workers would get wise to her lies about her age and they'd force her out just as they had Anna. That knowledge was another reason she'd decided to live with Anna and her sister.

Danny's lips traced a path to her collarbone, and his hand on her back crept lower—too low.

“Danny, stop.” She pushed at his chest, trying to keep her voice light and playful.

“You’re mine now,” he said breathlessly. “And I want you.”

I want you. The words reverberated in her head and made a warm trail to her heart. When was the last time someone had wanted her?

Sure, Olivia and Nicholas wanted and needed her. But at five and three years old, that was to be expected.

But want—really want her? She couldn’t remember a time in her life when anyone had valued her. She’d mostly just been a burden—to her overworked father after they’d emigrated from Germany, to her ailing mother before she’d died, and to her older sisters when they’d had no work and no place to live. Even during the past two years living in Boston and more recently in New York City, she’d always felt like a burden in the overcrowded and understaffed orphanages.

Having someone finally want her was a new experience.

She relaxed within Danny’s hold. Surely there was nothing wrong with letting him touch her more intimately tonight? After all, he’d made a public declaration that she was his girl and forbidden to anyone else.

She shoved aside the guilt that slithered through the cracks of her closed conscience. She’d become an expert at locking guilt away into a closet at the back of her mind. Even so, Danny’s too-personal touch embarrassed her. With the harsh yellow light spilling out of the Green Dragon, the other gang members who’d gathered in the narrow alleyway behind the dance hall would be able to see Danny’s fondling.

Just a short distance away, Anna was locked into the embrace of Mugs, and they were kissing passionately. There were other couples hiding in the shadows taking pleasure in one another. It was normal and natural here among this crowd, even expected.

Better out in the dark than inside the saloon with its cigar-smoke-blackened walls, sticky floors, and broken chairs, with the scent of salted pigs' knuckles making her gag. Even worse were the girls dancing on the stage, twirling and flipping up their skirts to reveal their silk petticoats, and more. She hadn't wanted any of the other men to assume she was a dancing girl. Even though she'd sat on Danny's lap while he drank and played cards, she'd gotten too many bawdy comments and looks.

Danny's breathing and kisses turned heavy.

Sophie's mind flashed with the image of Mollie and her infant and the other two women who lived in the tenement with their children. None of them were married. None of them had set out to be single mothers. And none of them had dreamed they'd become prostitutes. But that was what they were.

"Danny, no." Sophie wiggled against him.

He didn't relinquish his grip, but instead tightened his hold.

She squirmed harder. "I told you I want to wait until I'm married."

"You're just teasing me," he growled in her ear.

Irritation rose up to replace the tender feelings of belonging she'd had only moments ago. "I've always believed I'd save myself for marriage."

Even if her memories of her mother and father had begun to fade, their teachings were still deeply ingrained. And even if her faith had fled and gotten lost long ago, there was still a part of her that resisted giving up the search for it altogether.

As if finally sensing the seriousness of her resistance, Danny stopped groping and swore under his breath. He pulled back slightly, slackening his hold, but he didn't let go of her entirely.

For a second she waited for him to say more, to get angry or perhaps to belittle her for her stand. He was, after all, a Bowery Boy—tough and dangerous and determined. As a leader, he had a reputation to uphold, and he was accustomed to getting what

he wanted. She hadn't known him long, and yet she'd already witnessed his violence when provoked.

Instead of lashing out, however, he pressed his forehead against hers and was silent.

The off-tune plunking of a piano came from inside the dance hall. The music blended with the distant wail of a baby from a nearby open tenement window, along with the shouts of an escalating argument. Such noises were so commonplace that she almost didn't hear them anymore. And she almost didn't notice the stench of the overflowing garbage bins at the end of the alley. After being homeless too many times to count, it was easy to become immune to the realities of street life.

Danny dropped a kiss onto the tip of her nose. "Fine, angel. We'll wait."

"You're not too disappointed in me?" she asked.

"I knew you were as innocent as a babe from the first second I laid eyes on you." He drew her closer again. "Beautiful and innocent."

"I'm not that innocent." She wasn't sure why his statement irked her, except that as the youngest of her sisters, she'd always been viewed as the baby of the family. Everyone had tried to shelter her from the problems, had thought she was too young to understand what was going on, had ceased their worried whispers whenever she came into the room.

But she wasn't a baby anymore. Not in the least. She'd had to grow up or give up. She'd had to do things to survive that would disappoint her sisters, things she didn't like to think about, things that threatened to loosen her carefully concealed guilt.

Danny brushed a kiss against her cheek. "You're an angel. My beautiful angel. And if you want, we can do things proper-like. We'll get married."

Married? She pulled back enough that she could see his face. Was he serious?

A sliver of light from the saloon crossed his face, illuminating his lopsided grin. “What? Don’t you believe me?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” They’d only known each other for a couple of weeks, since the night Anna had dragged her out of the tenement to celebrate their freedom. At first, Sophie hadn’t wanted to leave Olivia and Nicholas alone. But Anna had assured her the children would be safe, that they’d sleep and wouldn’t even notice their absence. After all, Mollie and the other women left their children alone all night while they worked the corners and brothels all along the Bowery.

Was two weeks long enough to know if she wanted to marry Danny?

“My ma keeps telling me I need to find a nice girl and get married,” he continued. “She said I ain’t getting any younger.”

Marriage to him would certainly take care of her housing problems. Thankfully, Mollie was kind enough and hadn’t kicked her or Anna out for their inability to pay for their lodging. However, Sophie knew the kindness wouldn’t last forever. Mollie needed to survive just like the rest of them. Sooner or later the young prostitute would need to find someone who could contribute to the tenement rent, and when she did, Sophie would find herself homeless once again.

Unless she married Danny. Then she’d finally have a home of her own.

How long had it been since she’d lived in a place she could truly call home? She supposed the tiny apartment above Father’s bakery after they’d moved to Kleindeutschland from Germany had been a sort of home, although they hadn’t lived there long before Father’s heart attack and death.

“So, what do you say?” Danny asked. “Let’s get married.”

Sophie hesitated. What about Olivia and Nicholas? Would he be willing to take them in too? She doubted most men would. “It’s a really nice offer,” she started.

“Nice?” His voice rose with incredulity. The muscles in his jaw flexed, and his shoulders stiffened. He started to take a step away from her, clearly offended by what he assumed was her rejection, but she grabbed on to his arm.

“I have to take care of my little brother and sister,” she said quickly, trying to soothe his wounded pride. “I can’t abandon them.”

“I heard those kids ain’t even yours.”

She shoved Danny’s chest, willingly pushing him away, her temper flaring as it usually did whenever anyone insinuated that Olivia and Nicholas weren’t hers. “They’re mine. And if you want me, then you get them too.” She jutted her chin and gave him her fiercest glower.

He glared back. Then his lips began to curl into a grin. “You’re one sassy girl.”

She shrugged. She supposed she was.

Before she knew what he was doing, he grabbed her arm and jerked her against him almost painfully. He locked one arm around her and at the same moment brought his mouth down upon hers. The kiss—if it could even be called that—was bruising, almost punitive. And when he released her mouth, his grip on her arm remained taut. “I like some sass in a woman,” he whispered against her ear. “But don’t ever forget who’s in charge.”

She didn’t respond, didn’t like his attitude, didn’t like how he was hurting her. But she was smart enough to know when to keep her mouth shut.

He loosened his hold and then brushed a hand gently across her cheek. “Don’t you worry now, angel. Two little kids don’t matter to me so long as they stay out of my way.”

His fingers on her cheek were clammy. She wanted to bat his hand away but sensed she’d pushed him far enough for one night. When he lowered his mouth to hers again, this time his

kiss was gentle. She tried to make herself feel something for him, tried to ignore the warning clanging in her head, tried to tell herself she liked him and wanted to marry him. But the only emotion that seeped into her chest was hopelessness. It was a familiar visitor, yet unlike guilt, she couldn't lock it away. Whenever it came, it took up residence and was difficult to dislodge.

"What do you say we get married next week?" Danny whispered.

So soon? The words almost escaped, but she bit them back. The truth was, she needed him. Maybe he wasn't the perfect man. Maybe he wasn't the kind of man she'd dreamed of marrying, but he was good enough. After all, he cared about her, wanted her, and thought she was beautiful. He had a steady job as a butcher. He'd give her a home and had offered to shelter Olivia and Nicholas. What more did she need?

"All right," she said. "Let's do it. Let's get married next week."

He grinned and picked her up in a hug so that her feet no longer touched the ground. He'd started to swing her around when the ringing of a distant bell stopped him short.

It was a fire alarm, the call to all volunteer firefighters to hurry to action.

Danny's expression hardened. He set her down and jogged away, all thoughts of marriage clearly forgotten.

"Mugs and me'll guard the plug," he shouted to the Bowery Boys, who came out of the alley's shadows. "The rest of you get the fire engine and round up the gang."

The others rushed off to obey Danny's orders while Mugs helped him dump over a garbage barrel and empty the contents onto the street. Carrying the barrel between them, they raced out of the alley.

Sophie had observed Danny's brigade, the Dry Bones, put out a fire last weekend. The flames had engulfed an alley shack

containing the overflow of people too poor to afford a tenement home. The shack had been a flimsy structure patched together with loose boards and hunks of metal, and it hadn't been worth saving. But the volunteer firefighters had attempted to stop the spread to the tenements and businesses nearby.

"Let's go watch," Anna said excitedly, her dark hair and eyes gypsy-like compared to Sophie's fair coloring. She grabbed Sophie's hand and dragged her along after Danny and Mugs.

Sophie didn't resist. She'd been fascinated at the last fire, watching the group of men arrive carrying their fire engine. They'd quickly unraveled the leather hoses and hooked them up to a small device on the street called a hydrant that contained pressurized water. With crews of men manning the hoses, the fire was much easier to put out than with the buckets of water that were still used in some areas that didn't have the hydrants.

As Sophie and Anna ran down the Bowery trying to keep up with Danny and Mugs, the street grew noisier and more crowded the closer they drew to the fire. Sophie allowed Anna to guide her, weaving in and out of the onlookers, mostly hatless men and half-clad women who came out of the taverns and brothels to discover what was happening.

The bright light of the fire glowed above the rooftops, and when they turned a corner, Sophie recoiled at the sight of a two-story tavern with flames shooting out its lower level windows. Patrons stood outside a safe distance away, some gawking like spectators at a dogfight, others daring to go inside to rescue what they could.

Only a dozen paces from the corner was a hydrant, and Danny and Mugs were in the process of turning the empty garbage container upside down over the squat steel water source. When the barrel covered the hydrant, Danny hopped up onto the flat end and sat down.

Why was he blocking the hydrant instead of unplugging it

and getting it ready for the hoses that would soon arrive? If they didn't act soon, the fire would spread to the second floor of the building and perhaps to the other businesses connected to it. Every fire, no matter how big or small, had the potential to burn an entire city to the ground, especially since many old buildings were constructed of wood, not bricks.

From the opposite direction, a group of men wearing fire hats was fast approaching, hauling their engine.

"The Roach Guards!" Mugs shouted to Danny.

Danny nodded and squared his shoulders, his fingers closing around the bludgeon at his belt. Mugs had produced a lead pipe and held it poised to fight.

"I don't understand," Sophie said to Anna, who stood next to her. "What's going on?" Anyone who lived in the city for even a short time learned the names of the gangs. The Roach Guards was a powerful Irish gang and a huge rival of the Bowery Boys. That much Sophie understood.

In fact, she could still remember the riots of two years ago in 1857, now referred to as the Dead Rabbits Riot, when massive gang wars and wide-scale vandalizing and looting had taken place throughout Manhattan. She'd been staying at Miss Pendleton's Seventh Street Mission with her sisters the last summer they'd been together. While they'd remained safe inside the warehouse, the gangs had waged war until the National Guard and the Metropolitan Police started making arrests, finally bringing the rioting under control.

"The Dry Bones have staked their claim on the hydrant," Anna said, the flames casting a glow upon her features. Her lovely face was animated, and her luminous brown eyes were dancing. She was a few inches taller than Sophie and pretty in a wild, untamed sort of way. "They want the right to put out the fire and will fight off the other brigades until the rest of the Dry Bones show up."

“But the Roach Guards are already here. Does it really matter who puts out the fire as long as lives are saved?”

“It matters.”

The men of the Roach Guards moved rapidly in spite of the heavy load of their hose engine. Long fingers of firelight gyrated across the raised bludgeons, brickbats, clubs, axes, and other makeshift weapons they carried in addition to the firefighting equipment. At the sight of Danny and Mugs guarding the hydrant, several of the Roach Guards broke away from the rest and sprinted forward.

Sophie clutched Anna’s arm. “We need to get out of here.”

Anna nodded toward the corner they’d just turned. “Don’t worry. Our boys will be here soon enough to help with the fight.”

As the first two Roach Guards reached the hydrant and swung their clubs, Danny and Mugs beat them back.

Sophie sucked in a breath, her body tense, her mind urging her to move farther away. But her feet failed to cooperate.

The shouts of men from around the corner told Sophie the Dry Bones gang was fast approaching. But would they arrive in time to save Danny and Mugs? The rest of the Irish gang was almost upon the two and would easily overtake them. As if realizing the same, Danny withdrew his revolver, pointed it at the closest attacker, and pulled the trigger.

A shot rang out. The Roach Guard crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Only an instant later, Mugs aimed his revolver at the second attacker. Seeing what had happened to his companion, the other attacker started to retreat, lifted his arms to shield his head but was too late. Another shot exploded in the air. The Roach Guard’s legs buckled, and he fell to the ground.

Screams erupted, and onlookers scrambled to take cover, now more afraid of the gunshots than the raging fire.

Amidst the melee, Sophie couldn’t take her eyes off the gaping

hole in the head of a young man no older than sixteen. Now lifeless, his blood stained the street. She was hardly aware that the Dry Bones brigade had surged from the corner until one of the men knocked into her, nearly sending her to the ground.

Within seconds, the warring gangs converged upon each other, their weapons and fists swinging.

Danny stood on top of the barrel, surveying the fight like a king. He held his smoking revolver in one hand and a bludgeon in the other. On the street beneath him lay the two Roach Guards, both unmoving and trampled in the fighting.

Nausea swirled in Sophie's stomach. She knew Danny was a fighter. She'd witnessed him battering several men who'd provoked him. But take a life? She hadn't wanted to believe he'd go that far, had clung to the possibility that maybe the Dry Bones weren't as violent and deadly as was rumored. Yet how could she deny it any longer?

"Mugs!" Anna shouted and started toward Mugs, who'd been knocked to the ground near the barrel.

At the sound of Anna's voice, Mugs lifted his head. "I'm fine, baby," he called to her even though his nose was spouting blood.

More shouting and the distinctive snapping of police rattles echoed above the fighting.

"Get out of here!" Danny motioned toward Sophie and Anna.

He jumped from his perch and reached for Mugs, trying to help him to his feet.

Anna hesitated, watching the two men, the excitement from earlier replaced now with fear.

Danny glanced their way again, and seeing that they hadn't moved, he shouted again. "What are you waiting for? Run and don't let the leatherheads get you!"

The swell of people running from the scene pushed against Sophie. She stumbled but caught herself. The blaze from the leaping flames lit the street and the panic on the faces of those

around her—men and women, like her, who had no desire to be anywhere near the crime when the police arrived.

With the momentum of the crowd carrying her along, she started to run at the mention of policemen. In the past, an encounter with one could have resulted in a charge of vagrancy and a trip over to Randall’s Island, which was out in the East River.

From the outside, the tree-ringed island looked pretty, even pleasant. But everyone knew that the institutions on Randall’s Island were nothing more than deathtraps. There were whispers that three out of four children who went to the unsanitary and overcrowded asylums there ended up dead. Some even said that common domestic animals were more humanely provided for than the almshouse inmates.

Sophie glanced over her shoulder only to see that several policemen had converged upon Danny and Mugs. Their leather helmets set them apart, as did their oak-handled rattles, which served as noisemakers as well as weapons.

“Don’t look back,” Anna said breathlessly, grabbing Sophie’s arm and falling into place next to her.

“Shouldn’t we do something to help them?” Sophie asked.

“The best thing we can do to help them is to disappear.”

“Disappear? Why?” Someone jostled Sophie, and she tripped. Only Anna’s hold kept her from going down.

“So that the Roach Guards don’t find us.”

“Why would the Roach Guards want us? We didn’t do anything.”

Anna released a humorless laugh. “If they catch us, they’ll use us to get Danny and Mugs to admit to killing two of their men.”

Fear crawled up Sophie’s spine, and she picked up her feet and ran faster. She might not be good at much, but running away was something she’d learned to do well.