

Chapter One

San Francisco, Mission Bay

Sunday, November 6, 1881

Not my hands!

Throat crushed, blood gurgled, words choked so they screamed only in the mind.

Sight dimmed—towering bales of hay faded into gray shapes under a near-full moon.

Touch heightened—sharp pieces of straw stabbed into shaking fingers scrabbling to gain purchase on the wharf's rough planks.

Smell overwhelmed—a cesspool, an open sewer, bubbled below the splintered planks of the wharf.

Vomit rose, nowhere to go, choking further.

How did this happen? Why?

The why was clear. The how? It had only been words at first. Hot words flung back and forth like weapons, hurled like stones. Then, all that had been uncovered slipped out. The lies, the larceny, the truth. The truth had shoved them past words, into the realm of no return. A hard shove. A shove back. A wild swing that connected, yielding a yelp and curse.

A returning blow, but not by a hand. Something heavy, crushing, landing on the throat.

Even now, with breath trapped behind blood and broken

cartilage, words clamored, shouted out to be set free, to be heard:

Not my hands!

Then a command, but was it from without or within? Spoken or thought?

On your knees!

Rolling over, pain flared. Palms pushed flat on boards, trying to pull the knees up to obey the order. Limbs rebelled, juddering on the planks, no longer servants of the brain.

Hearing remained—ever faithful. Nearby, the dull thuds and creaks of anchored ships. At a distance, muffled shouts too far away to help. Beyond the wharves, clamor wafted from the saloons, cheap restaurants, and bawdy houses squatting near the drawbridge that spanned malodorous Mission Creek.

Sounds grew closer, ragged breathing, rapid tempo, from high above the fingertips, stinging and raw, above the cheek resting on the planks, wet with blood. Finally, the voice spoke, crackling with anger, aflame with a rage as intense as the fire that engulfed a hay scow a fortnight ago, burning through its mooring and sending it adrift, flaming bright, on an ebb tide out into the night-dark bay.

“Did you think you would get away with this? Destroying me? Destroying us?”

Not my hands!

This time, the trapped words must have escaped, because the voice above came closer, answering. “Not your hands? Very well. That, I can grant you.”

The blow to the back of the head shattered the vision of warped wood boards into splinters. Those splinters flew up, whirling, changing into thin, stinging shards of pain. Another blow, and another. The pain spun into clamorous song piercing all thought, drowning all words, the music of life spilling out in red, red sound, before falling into darkness and silence.

Chapter Two

San Francisco Business District

Monday, November 7, 1881

The church bell cacophony began at six in the morning.

Just as it did every day.

And just as she did every day, Inez Stannert, startled awake by the clamor, rolled over and tugged her pillow over her head, damning the day she'd leapt at the chance to move into the rooms above the music store she managed.

Living quarters, gratis.

It had seemed such a good deal at the time, when the storeowner, celebrated violinist Nico Donato, had made the offer.

However, after she and her twelve-year-old ward, Antonia Gizzi, took up residence above the shop at the corner of San Francisco's Pine and Kearney streets, Inez realized that, surrounded as they were by churches of every possible denomination, the daily calls to prayer were nearly deafening. She considered it a sadistic trick of Fate—a particularly ironic variety of Hell, actually—that she should be constantly reminded of the heavy presence of Christian faith. Particularly given that her absent lover was a minister.

Pillow clutched to her ears, Inez allowed herself a moment to compare the competitive clanging of the nearby houses of

worship here to that in her previous life. In the high mountain town of Leadville, Colorado, the distant sound of church bells took wing, a seductive call to soul-lifting contemplation of Heaven and the promises of eternal life. Here in San Francisco, Inez suspected a more insidious intent. It was no secret that the density of churches in the “golden city” increased in proportion to their proximity to Chinatown and the Barbary Coast, in hopes of luring lost souls into the fold with promises of eternal salvation and dire threats of eternal damnation. The D & S House of Music and Curiosities was situated close to the two unsavory neighborhoods as well as near the city’s business district. Thus, Inez suffered the torments of the damned at regular hours throughout the day when the bells vied with each other.

Still, their discordant clanging served to rouse Inez and Antonia in good time on school days.

Inez had the coffee boiling on the small stove in what passed for their kitchen when Antonia finally dragged herself in, rubbing her eyes, her black hair an untamed mane. Inez brought over a mug of coffee, liberally laced with milk and sugar, set it on the table by the hairbrush, comb, and ribbons, and pointed wordlessly to the chair. Antonia sat and sipped, wincing as Inez attacked her hair with taming implements. With her locks finally plaited and beribboned, Antonia said, “I don’t see why I can’t cut it all off.”

Inez smiled grimly. *And with that, you’d be dressing as a boy and running loose through the city in trousers, just as you were in Leadville, when I first met you and your mother. May she rest in peace.* But all she said was, “You have beautiful hair. Hair like your mother’s.” She smoothed it with one hand. “Treasure it as a gift from her, just as you treasure your little knife and her fortune-telling cards.”

Antonia sighed and nibbled at the thick slice of bread slathered with butter. “It’d just be easier,” she mumbled. Then, apropos of nothing, “I don’t want to go to school anymore.”

Inez crossed her arms, silver-backed hairbrush in one hand.

“What brought this on?”

A stubborn silence was her only answer.

Inez set the hairbrush on the table. “Did you not finish your lessons this weekend? Is that the problem?”

Antonia pinched off a corner of her bread and rolled it into a tight little ball of dough, before finally replying, “The kids are hoity-toities. The teachers all high-and-mighty. The school is stodgified and I’m not learnin’ nothing. I can learn my numbers and letters fine helping you in the music store.”

Suspecting a deeper reason, Inez pressed. “Before we left Leadville, you were looking forward to school.” She let the statement hang there.

Antonia’s gaze flickered to the side.

“What happened?”

At Antonia’s silence, Inez said briskly, “Well then, I’ll accompany you to school today, talk to your teacher, and get to the bottom of this.”

Antonia’s eyes widened in alarm. “No!” She clenched her jaw, then said in a low voice, defiant, hardly above a whisper, “I cut a boy.”

Inez flashed on the small but deadly *salvavirgo* Antonia carried with her everywhere. At first glance, with its little blade folded away, it looked the most innocuous of weapons. Delicate little flowers were carved into the ivory at the top of the handle where the blade folded; a small inlaid figure of a fox gazed over its shoulder where a palm would naturally curl around the grip. But Inez was very aware of its sharpness and the speed with which Antonia could whip it out and open it.

“I didn’t hear about this. I would have thought the principal would send me a note.”

Antonia laughed, a short bark. “It was after school, last week. And d’you think that ninny’d tell anyone he was beat up by a *girl*?”

Inez briefly weighed whether a good whipping might be in order. It was exactly what her parents would have done, and *did* do, when she dared to be uppity and huffish.

One look at Antonia's face, which had something hurt and bruised about it, changed her mind.

"Why did you do it?"

Antonia looked up. Her straightforward bi-colored gaze—one eye blue, the other brown—met Inez's query without wavering. "He said only gypsies had eyes like mine and called me the bastard of a gypsy whore." The slight trembling of her mouth, which she tried hard to control, convinced Inez that she was telling the truth.

"You were not wearing your glasses?" Inez had bought a pair of tinted glasses for Antonia to keep her unusual eyes concealed.

Antonia looked down at the uneaten crust on her plate. "I was. I told him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't. He pulled my glasses off my face and threw them on the ground. At least they didn't break. He's always doing things like that to kids in the lower grades. Smashing their glasses, tossing their lunch tins into the streets, giving them a black eye."

"Well, it sounds like you taught him a lesson, then. Perhaps he will think twice before picking on someone smaller than he is. In any case, dropping school is not an option. The value of education is not simply in learning one's sums and the rules of grammar. School provides a place where one becomes familiar with the way things are done, how to negotiate one's way through life and society. Such lessons extend to how to deal with bullies without resorting to physical fights." Inez added pointedly, "Too, you know our situation here. We dare not cause any trouble for Mr. Donato, no hint of impropriety or unbecoming conduct from you or from me."

Antonia's hand curled into a fist around the compressed ball of dough.

Inez continued, "Next time, if there is any trouble at all, you will tell me right away. If I had known about this incident on Friday, I would have made sure that you were not bothered again." The steel in Inez's tone made it clear that these were not empty words, but a promise.

Inez faced the stove and poured herself a cup of coffee. “Run along now. Be sure to pick up your lunch at Mrs. Nolan’s, and be careful crossing Market.”

“I’m not a baby,” said Antonia.

Inez turned and crossed her arms. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Antonia muttered.

Bonnet tied under her chin, tinted glasses masking her eyes, empty lunch bucket in hand awaiting Mrs. Nolan’s sourdough sandwich and dill pickles, Antonia slung the book strap over her shoulder and headed to the stairs that would take her down and out to the street.

The door to the outside world slammed defiantly. Inez winced. She hated to be strict, but they both had to mind their Ps and Qs in San Francisco.

She carried her cup to the table, sat, cut herself a slice of bread, and buttered it, thinking. If they lived elsewhere, somewhere away from the store, it would provide them with more breathing room, less “walking on eggshells.” They were paying Mrs. Nolan for board, perhaps they should consider moving into her boardinghouse. Inez immediately rejected the notion.

Mrs. Nolan was in business precisely because Inez had provided a little added financial backing to her in return for a small percent of the profits. Inez preferred to keep her various business agreements at a distance. She had made an exception when taking lodgings above the store, where they had a modicum of privacy. Living cheek-by-jowl with Mrs. Nolan, who was a notorious gossip, they would not.

She shook her head. “Too close for comfort,” she said aloud. “Better to deal with the church bells here.”

She sifted through a small stack of paperwork she planned to take downstairs and address before the store opened at noon. Her hand hovered over a small envelope, different from the rest. It was addressed in an authoritative masculine hand to Nico’s sister Carmella, a charming young woman of twenty.

Inez knew the owner of that hand—pianist Jamie Monroe.

Jamie was one of the clique of young musicians, most of them new to town, who vied for Carmella's attention. When Carmella was not in the store, they sometimes approached Inez for advice about sheet music or where they might find a decent laundry that didn't over-starch collars. Of course, they also hung about waiting for Nico to appear and perhaps drop a casual comment about a certain theatre looking for a steam piano player, or a particular music hall in need of a flautist to fill in for a regular. If they were really lucky, the elegant violinist—so sought after, so successful—might offer a word of advice or encouragement, or even a referral. She knew they looked up to him thinking, "Someday, that could be me!"

Of all those young men, Inez suspected Carmella favored Jamie above the rest. She couldn't point to anything overt between them. Mostly, it was the subtle glances they exchanged, the way Carmella's smooth olive complexion "pinked" at the mention of his name. However, Nico kept a close eye on Carmella, especially where the young men were concerned. As far as Inez knew, none of the musicians had formally declared their interest in Carmella to her brother.

The note had been slipped under the door leading to the living quarters. Jamie knew better than to slide a missive addressed to Carmella under the shop's doors, front or back, in case Nico should spot it first.

Tapping the envelope on the table, Inez debated.

It would be unwise to become a go-between, a carrier of secret notes, even inadvertently. If Nico found out, there could be repercussions that would damage their business relationship. She could not afford that. Not now. Not after all the time and effort she had devoted to the store.

Signore Nico Donato was volatile where his sister was concerned, and well connected. His possible reactions to Antonia's playground transgressions would be nothing compared to what he might do to them if he found out Inez had encouraged an "unapproved" relationship between Monroe

and his sister. He could spread stories, damage their reputations, throw them out, and dissolve their business relationship. It was possible she and Antonia could manage on the investments Inez had made, in addition to her silent partnerships with some of the small women-run businesses in the city. But if those women suspected Inez of any improprieties or financial uncertainties...

Inez shook her head.

It was not worth the risk.

She slid the sealed note to one side on the table, determined to return it to young Mr. Monroe at the first opportunity. He would have to deliver it himself.

Young love needed to prevail without her help.

Love.

After a hesitation, Inez pulled out her silver pocket watch and set it by her coffee cup. The watch ticked, invariant, reassuring. She turned it over, opened the back, and twisted it around with one finger to view the portrait of the man wedged in the circular opening.

Reverend Sands, her paramour from Leadville, stared somberly back. Justice B. Sands, the man who won her heart, held it with infinite patience and passion throughout the long, difficult year of 1880.

The last time she had seen him was a year ago, as he was departing Leadville. He had wanted to stay, to stand by her during those difficult times, but Inez pushed him away with desperate pleas for him to leave, leave, *leave* so she could focus on wresting a divorce from her recalcitrant husband. The truth of the matter was, faithless though Mark Stannert was—and none who knew him would deny that was the case—if Inez's affair with the reverend had been brought into court, all her carefully laid plans to contrive a way out of the marriage would have ended in disaster.

So Reverend Justice Sands had moved on, first taking a temporary post in Wyoming, and then another, shorter stay in the Dakotas, and then most recently...

She tried to call up the cancellation stamp on his last letter, and failed.

Montana? Minnesota? Someplace far north and far away.

Inez touched the tiny image, which captured his serious mien, the hint of danger signaled by a tightness around the eyes, an alertness in the posture. She mused how the ticking watch that accompanied the photograph, marking time, was so like the man who sent it. Constant. Present. Dependable. Never wavering. All he required was a letter now and again, a small winding, to keep the mechanism alive and moving. If she stopped the winding, stopped writing, would his letters, like the watch, slow down, and eventually just become silent? *Is that what I want?*

She rested her forehead on one hand, still gazing at the photo.

The truth was, she didn't know.

Not any more.

She snapped the watch shut and prepared to go downstairs and start her day.



Settled in the store's back office with the sign on the front door still turned to CLOSED, Inez pored over a neat stack of invoices and receipts, making payments, placing entries in the ledger books. A small parlor stove provided modest heat against the coolness of the morning, and a warm trickle of pleasure ran through her as she totaled the profits from the previous month.

When she'd taken on managing the store half a year ago, the books had been a mess. Nonexistent. Nico Donato had no idea where the finances stood and, oddly enough, didn't seem to care overmuch. It was part and parcel of his *laissez-faire* attitude toward the business, an attitude that only worsened as Inez took on more responsibility and he focused his attention on command musical performances for the rich and famous. Or rich and infamous, as the case might be.

If things keep moving in this direction, I shall own half the store by this time next year. After that, who knows? I might be able to convince him to sell it outright to me, lock, stock, and barrel.

The metallic slide of a key in the back door interrupted her musings. Only two people had keys besides herself and Nico, who never showed his face before noon unless absolutely necessary, so Inez made a little wager with herself.

Would it be John Hee, the purveyor of many of Nico's Oriental "curiosities" and official physician for busted stringed instruments and damaged woodwinds? Or Carmella? She guessed Carmella, who often dropped by early in the day bearing some of the Italian pastries that Antonia had grown fond of.

Carmella burst through the back door, her hat with its effervescent purple feather slightly askew, face flushed and fresh from the outdoors. With great drama and without preamble, she announced "*Zeppole!*" and deposited a napkin-covered basket atop the stacks of papers on Inez's desk. The scent of hot fried dough, with the powdered sugar on top providing sweet undertones, was too seductive to ignore. Inez set her pencil down and lifted a corner of the napkin to examine the pastries snuggled inside.

"I made enough for you and Antonia, and any favored clients today. Antonia loves them so much, it would be a shame if I only baked them for Saint Joseph's Day."

Giving in to temptation, Inez reached for one of the pastries and, being careful not to scatter powdered sugar on her somber gray and black ensemble, took a tentative bite. A crunch through the fried exterior released the sweet dough inside. Melting in its warmth and lightness, the taste exploded in her mouth. "Carmella, you should open a bakery. These are irresistible."

Carmella beamed, then frowned. "You know what Nico would say to that. If it were up to him, I would stay at home, twittering like a bird in a cage, baking, baking, baking until I explode!"

“You are being a trifle overdramatic,” said Inez. “You are hardly a prisoner. You go out and about to lectures and the theater with other young women—as is only proper. You help with the store. In addition to being a baker of irresistible delectables, you have a natural talent for creating window displays and the advertisements we place in the newspapers. Your brother may seem a bit stern, but I know he is as appreciative of your efforts as I am.”

“Oh! That reminds me!” Carmella opened her large reticule and pulled out a neatly wrapped bundle. Untying the string, she spoke with words that flew as fast as her fingers. “I picked these up on the way here. They are new trade cards I designed and had printed at Madam Fleury’s, to help advertise the store. Nico and I, we arranged them as a little gift for you. A surprise. We hope you are pleased.”

She handed one to Inez. The large rectangle of heavy ivory-colored stock was the size of a cabinet card. One side sported a bluebird perched on an Oriental-style vase holding roses, ferns, and other greenery. A wave of notes emitted from the bird’s open beak, wrapping around into a scroll. The address was at the bottom, and at the top...

Inez raised her eyebrows. “It appears the store name has expanded somewhat.”

Rather than “D & S House of Music and Curiosities,” the printed store name began with “Donato & Stannert.” Inez flipped it over.

The reverse included the expanded name of the business, in bold, slightly Italianate script, followed by text that extolled the virtues and eclectic merchandise available in this “premiere house of musical instruments, sheet music, and merchandise, including curiosities and imports of an Oriental nature” and concluded with a reference to “repairs to a variety of instruments conducted promptly and on the premises. Satisfaction guaranteed.”

“Yes!” Carmella sounded like a teacher praising an astute

student. “It was Nico’s idea. You are as much a part of the business as he is. You have done so much for the store, he readily admits that. He wanted your name as clearly identified as his. In fact, he insisted. And he is even talking about changing the sign over the door.”

Carmella carried the cards and the basket of pastries to the round mahogany table in the center portion of the back room. The room, which ran the width of the building, was partitioned into thirds with the office at one end and a glassed-off area for music lessons at the other. To make room for her basket, Carmella pushed aside an overflow of invoices and a case holding a clarinet with bent keys that was awaiting repair. “You are like family to us, Inez. You and Antonia. I don’t know how we limped along before you came.”

Inez didn’t know whether to be flattered or concerned. The cards, slipped into orders and handed out individually, would enhance the visibility of the store and increase return business. But still, having her surname printed prominently in black and white, or rather in black and a robin’s egg blue, made her queasy.

She had not divulged much about her previous life to the Donatos or indeed anyone in San Francisco. No one knew she was part-owner of the Silver Queen Saloon along with her ex-husband, nor that she was a silent partner of a high-end parlor house, both in Leadville. And she had most certainly not divulged that she was personally responsible for a number of deaths, all well deserved, in her estimation. But others might not see it that way. Too, Stannert was an unusual surname. Spelling it out on the trade card made her feel conspicuous when all she desired was to remain unknown.

“Very nice, Carmella, I am overwhelmed and grateful for your brother’s vote of confidence—and yours too, of course,” said Inez, thinking a talk with Nico was in order.

She would have to tread carefully. On the one hand, be appreciative and acknowledge her part in making the business

thrive—after all, it would only buttress her position here as time went on—but also indicate, modestly and self-effacingly, that she preferred to stay in the background. It wouldn't be hard to convince him that he should continue to occupy center stage as the “public face” of the store. If nothing else, perhaps she could forestall a change in signage, at least until her half-ownership was official.

Carmella turned her attentions back to the pastries. “Eat, Mrs. Stannert! Have another! You are thin as a rail. I *should* cook more, and be plying you with *zeppole, svogliatella, cannoli, cornetti alla marmellata*. Men, they like women with a little more to them.”

Inez blinked, thinking how fast Carmella swung from being a naïve, relatively sheltered young woman to talking like she was Inez's formidable Aunt Agnes, always clucking, always plotting. And the inconsistencies! Railing against the tyranny of men one moment, then turning face-about faster than a merry-go-round to chide Inez for showing not the slightest interest in re-marrying.

Carmella persisted, “You can be so charming when selling pianos, an organette, music boxes, or even a box of woodwind reeds, Mrs. Stannert. If you put your mind to it, you could find another husband. Aren't you close to the end of your half-mourning? You have been in black, gray, and lavender since you arrived. It is time. You should be wearing vibrant colors now—green! Blue! Burgundy! Green especially would bring out the hazel in your eyes.”

Inez decided to put an end to the discussion. She brought the basket to the big table, saying, “Carmella, you sound as if I should go about turning over rocks in search of someone who can accompany me to the plays or musical arias. I am quite comfortable with my life as it is. Antonia, the store, the music lessons I provide, they fill my time and are all I need right now.”

There were also her side agreements with women like Mrs. Nolan, determined entrepreneurial women—laundresses, milliners, bakers, printers, dressmakers—who needed “a little

extra” to improve their businesses, and who found their way, by word of mouth, to Inez’s back door. But that was a part of her life she tried to keep separate from the Donatos, lest Nico think she was not giving “her all” to his store.

Inez continued, “I have no desire to, as you say, ‘find’ another husband.”

Carmella’s fine black brows swooped together, like bird wings. “Is there no one who agrees with you? Of all the men who come through here,” she added hastily. “Gentlemen of fine breeding and refined tastes, do you not see how much they admire you?”

Inez turned and stared at her, dumbfounded.

The only men who came to mind were Carmella’s admirers—Jamie; Jamie’s boarding-roommate, cornet player Otto Klein; woodwind virtuosos William and Walter Ash; a few others. All single, all young, all obviously enamored of Carmella. Well, there was also pianist Thomas Welles, about her age, in his thirties, but he was happily married with four children. Or, it would be happily, he intimated, if the money were more forthcoming and the work more steady. Rounding out that group was Roger Haskell, forty-ish, odd man out as the publisher of a small, vociferously pro-labor newspaper, who had a special affinity for the music scene. He and Inez shared a healthy respect for each other, but that was as far as it went. Besides, Haskell smoked the vilest cigars in existence. Aside from that, there were the clients Nico sent to the store. Husbands looking for a piano for wives or daughters, or the occasional manufacturing or agricultural magnate, ushered in personally by Nico, who were interested in his Oriental “curiosities.”

Inez must have looked as blank as she felt, because Carmella threw up her hands with a sigh. “Never mind. On Saturday, I noticed the flowers in the display area were wilting. I shall go clear them out.” She swept out of the back room, shaking her head, apparently dismayed by Inez’s obtuseness.

Inez started back to the desk and her accounts, only to jump as someone hammered on the back door with a heavy fist. Then, the shouting commenced. "Mrs. Stannert? Mr. Donato? Anyone in? Please, it's Otto. Otto Klein. It's urgent!"

Disconcerted, Inez hurried to the door. She barely unlocked it before it flew open. Otto Klein, square of face and body, stood outside, sweating in his good black suit, carrying his cornet case, and, Inez noted with alarm, wearing the black armband of a mourner.

"Mr. Klein, what is wrong?"

"Frau Stannert. It's terrible." He pulled out a black-hemmed handkerchief, removed his hat, and mopped his brow. Even though the morning was cool, his thin blond hair was plastered to his head and he was breathing hard, as though he had run some distance.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea where else to go. The others, I know not where they live." His voice cracked. "It's, it's Jamie Monroe. He's dead! Murdered!"