

San Francisco, June 30, 1865

A girl's terrified scream jerked Margaret Foster's attention from the mathematics formula she'd been rehearsing in her mind. A chill shivered up her spine as she searched the wooden sidewalks and fog-shrouded buildings lining the cobblestone intersection. To her left, tidy store fronts bore crowded window displays and closed doors—not yet open for the day's business. To her right, a rough-looking haberdashery was flanked by windowless buildings with faded lettering. She squinted at the sign just beyond the men's clothing shop. *Melodeon?* She stepped away. Not another person in sight.

Who had screamed? The sound had been distant. Could she have mistaken a cat's cry for a scream?

The woman who owned the boarding house Margaret had checked into yesterday had said to turn south at the milliner's shop with a large, glass display window. No such building met her gaze. She kicked at a loose pebble and started back the way she'd come. *Knowing your lessons won't matter at all if you're late and—*

Another scream spun Margaret toward the windowless buildings. Through the haze, she spotted a small figure chased by a larger one. Her heart squeezed. That child was in danger. The pair disappeared into the mist beyond the melodeon.

Margaret dashed after them.

Human-like shadows flickered in and out of view as she ran through the gloom. Down alleys and up streets, she followed their echoing footsteps. A stitch formed in her side, but she pressed on. That child needed her help.

Then they vanished into the thickening clouds and did not reappear.

She stopped, hands on her waist, panting for breath. No footsteps echoed. Beyond the sound of her labored breathing, silence reigned. Where had they gone? Her chest tightened as she took in her surroundings. Where was she? The dark shadows of multistory buildings loomed in the fog. Here and there a ragged corner peeked through the gently trailing wisps of gray. Trash littered the street, piling along the edges. This was not a neighborhood she should be in.

What had she been thinking? She was lost and would be late for her appoint—

A child's yelp echoed from the dark mouth of a nearby alley.

The hairs on the back of Margaret's neck tingled. She ought to leave—run from this place. Margaret peered into the shadows. "Hello? Is someone there?"

Scuffling accompanied the movement of dark forms at the far end of the alley.

Frantic, feminine speech burst forth in a language she didn't recognize. Then was cut off. The words may have been foreign, but their tone was all too familiar—desperate, pleading.

Margaret fumbled for the weapon hidden within her skirt pocket.

A Chinese girl who looked no more than ten years old, burst from the shadows, tears streaming down her cheeks. She sprinted past Margaret.

A scowling, red-haired man charged after the child and caught her. He dragged her, flailing and sobbing, back toward the muddy alley.

Margaret gave up searching for her pocket's opening. "Stop!" She lunged forward and grabbed the girl's arm in both hands. "Let her go!"

The man released one hand from the child and back-handed Margaret across the face, breaking her hold on the girl. "Mind yer business, woman." He continued dragging the screaming child into the shadows.

*Please, Lord.* Margaret shoved her hand once more into her skirts and this time found the pocket's opening. She withdrew her brother Nash's pepperbox and aimed the gun squarely at the man's head. "I said, let her go."

He shoved the girl into the mud and raised his hands—one of which was missing a finger. His glossy, gray-blue eyes raged at Margaret with the fury of a hurricane at sea.

He lunged. One strong hand shoved the barrel up while the other seized her wrist.

He squeezed until she thought her bones would break. With a cry, she relinquished the weapon. This was it. Nash'd been right. She was going to die for her rash decisions.

But rather than turn the weapon on her, the man stuffed Nash's sidearm into the back of his trousers.

Margaret took a step back. He caught her arm. She jerked hard, but his grip was strong. He pulled her close and the stench of rot and alcohol washed over her face, into her mouth. She gagged. He dragged her toward the shadows. "Seeing's she's gone, thou'll take her place."

Margaret's gaze swung to where the child had fallen. The spot was as empty as the alley the brute was forcing her into. She dropped to the ground. The shoulder of the arm he held screamed as her free hand clawed for a grip on something, anything that would halt their progress into the darkness. It was no use. There was nothing to cling onto. In seconds they'd be out of sight.

She craned her neck toward the street. *There!* A tall figure emerged from the fog. She dug in her heels. "Help! Please, help me!"