

Chapter One

Sacramento, California
December 27, 1858

“It is not fair!”

Cora Fielding’s cry rang with the full-throated indignation for which her mother had long excoriated her as being unladylike.

Her twin brother Carl’s triumphant smirk only infuriated her further. She ignored him and crossed the room to where her father sat reading the newspaper, her freckled face red as a tomato, her fists clenched in disappointment.

“I am twice the student as Carl! I have memorized every medical book in the house despite having to spend hours each day attending to my position as tutor to the Isaacs children. When I am able to be present at the clinic, I anticipate what treatments you will prescribe before you speak a word to the patient. Why am I not as qualified to study medicine as any man?”

Richard Fielding sighed, his craggy face a mask of pity and frustration. “My dear child, you know very well you would be free to follow your heart’s desire in a world of my own choosing. Indeed, I believe one day young women such as you will have that freedom. God knows, you are amply qualified, as you rightly say. But we live in the present age, and despite the prodigious efforts of Professor Rowell...” For emphasis, he lifted the day’s edition of the *Sacramento Daily Union* from which he had just been reading aloud. “...the faculty has decided that people of your gender will not be admitted to the new school. And there is damn all any of us can do to change that fact.”

His use of profanity, normally so rare, told Cora as nothing else could the passion with which he held his convictions. It did little to quell her outrage.

Carl sniffed with smug superiority, saying, “Father is, as always, being kind. But everyone knows the female gender is not in the least suited for the rigors of medicine. Not to mention its necessary assault on a lady’s sensibilities over issues of physical delicacy.”

“Horse feathers! I am not the one who fainted dead away at the sight of butcher Harper’s nearly-severed hand dangling from his wrist by a mere tendon or two.”

His cheeks, even more freckled than her own, flamed. “Why must you always throw that one weakness up to me? You know I was tired and ill when it happened.”

“A few snuffles do not constitute an illness sufficient to cause such a humiliating debacle. You simply did not have the stomach for it!”

“Perhaps you should look to your own deficiencies before faulting others. Why do you suppose Herbert Roskam has stopped calling on you? You with your haughty airs and sharp tongue could not attract a proper gentleman if your life depended on it!”

“He stopped calling because I sent him packing. Who would want such a fool as that?”

“Please, children, do not bicker,” said their mother, her tone shimmering with weary forbearance. “We are but one day past Christmas, and I refuse to allow this unpleasantness to ruin the lingering spirit of that holy day.”

Cora felt an immediate stab of remorse. Maude Fielding sat bundled in a blanket in a rocking chair pulled close by the hearth, her diminished frame and pale complexion reflecting the close call she had recently had with pneumonia. They were lucky to have her still with them,

and for Cora to have caused her such distress was inexcusable. She shot her brother one last angry glare and retreated to the stuffed chintz chair where she had been sitting when her father roiled her day with his dream-shattering announcement.

How excited she had been to learn some months before that Dr. Elias Samuel Cooper had pulled together a Board of Trustees and Faculty of Medicine in order to establish the first medical school on the West Coast. Dr. Cooper was not a figure without controversy, having inserted himself with bold arrogance into the medical community soon after his arrival from the East in 1855. His widely advertised series of anatomical and surgical lectures and demonstrations had earned him a reputation for self-aggrandizement. This plus an infamous malpractice lawsuit had greatly diminished his reputation among local physicians. However, his success with the proposed school could not be denied, and many were enthralled with the prospect of students being able to pursue their medical studies here rather than traveling far to the east.

Richard Fielding had greeted this news with special satisfaction, for he had two prospective students in his own household. It had long been expected that his only son Carl would succeed him in medicine; Cora's similar aspiration had come as a surprise, dismissed at first, but given greater gravitas as her interest burgeoned during the years since their journey west when she was but a girl of sixteen.

For her part, Cora had prided herself on the perseverance that finally convinced her father of the seriousness of her ambitions, prompting him to serve as preceptor to her as well as to Carl so both could complete the required two years of study before they would be allowed admittance to a school of medicine. She had rested her hopes on the fact that the new faculty had not yet decided whether or not enrollment would be coeducational. One of the professors in particular, a Dr. Isaac Rowell, had been vocal in his belief that the school should be open to aspirants of both genders. However, his point of view had not held the day, as was just now verified in the *Union's* account of the school's third faculty meeting held six days before. Carl would be going off to pursue his studies in a few months' time while she stayed home in her dreary tutoring position, a fact all the more galling for her deep-seated belief that were he given a choice, her brother would not enter medicine at all.

Long before the family embarked on their difficult overland trek from Indiana in 1854, Carl's obsession with wood carving had born witness to the fact that he had a true artist's gift when it came to creating figures of lifelike proportion. That skill would surely give him entry into any number of trades. Instead, he would bow to their father's wishes and become a physician whose lack of passion would assure a career of but mediocre dimension.

She sighed, her mood contrary to the room's cozy ambiance. Their father had built the house with its attached medical office shortly after their arrival in Sacramento. The city had just been declared the capital of California and was still shedding its infancy, crude planks and adobe and canvas being slowly replaced by sawn lumber and brick and mortar. In the years since, the house had taken on an aura of settled permanency with its white-painted exterior, green shutters, and yard graced by young oak and apple trees and flowering camellia plants. Likewise, the gradual acquisition of furniture and fixtures had transformed the interior so that it now reflected the professional stature of its master.

At this time of year, the parlor in which the family was now gathered took on a special aura of cheery hominess. The fire crackled around a freshly-laid log, candlelight brightened the rainy winter day, and the pine tree standing in the far corner, decorated with popcorn chains, colored ribbons, and little candles with burnt wicks, still gave off a fresh tangy odor. Having co-opted this charming custom from their father's German patients, they had gone to the

surrounding hills to cut it just days before. It had been a true sight to see on Christmas morning when they lit the candles and stood around it to sing carols in honor of the day. This afternoon, however, the season no longer held any charm for Cora. Her inner person seethed with resentment even as she pondered the long path that had led her to this moment.

She had felt the scourge of her gender from earliest childhood, all the more poignant for the freedom her twin brother enjoyed simply by virtue of being male. While he was outdoors with his friends playing stickball or hunting for frogs in a nearby stream, she was kept indoors at her mother's knee learning how to crochet, knit, sew, and any other skill deemed suitable for a young lady. While her brother went off to her uncle's school for boys in nearby New Harmony, Indiana, she learned her ABC's from books whose drawings depicted the importance of the female's role in the home. She perfected her penmanship and writing skills and practiced on the pianoforte, all with the purpose of one day employing her feminine wiles to attract an advantageous husband. True, she had been allowed to enroll for two years, along with Carl, in The Sacramento Academy and Female Institute where her uncle taught on first arriving in Sacramento. However, the curriculum for the twins had been vastly different, again reflecting the cultural bias as to which subjects were suitable for girls and which for boys, the former being much less demanding than the latter.

In the face of this seemingly impenetrable wall of expectation, she had rebelled in whatever manner she could. She had developed the habit of speaking her mind in a bold, direct fashion, eschewing the demure feminine reserve she had been taught. She had read her father's discarded newspapers and listened intently to any discussion among his male friends and colleagues in order to form her own independent opinions about matters of governance and politics. She read the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which led her to become a champion of the oppressed, whether of her fellow females and their status as second-class citizens or the Negro race and its hateful misuse by supposedly enlightened society.

Her father had always looked upon her defiant views with forbearance, even admiration as they reflected much of his own thinking. Thus, when she persisted in her highest form of mutiny, her insatiable desire to become a physician, he was not only sympathetic but secretly delighted. Her mother, however, was more perplexed than judgmental. Nor had she given up hope for a more conventional path for her daughter, as evidenced by her ill-concealed pleasure when Carl's friend Herbert Roskam began calling on Cora.

He was a nice enough fellow, she thought as she brought his soft round countenance before her mind's eye. And his intent to succeed his father in the grocer's business assured him of an income sufficient to support a wife and family. His expectation of said wife's traditional role, however, had doomed his effort every bit as much as his lack of physical appeal. Cora had the same carnal appetite as any other young woman of twenty years, and she hoped one day to find a man who would trigger those feelings while at the same time valuing her for her independence and quest for self-determination. Alas, she feared her brother was right in his assessment that capturing such a man's fancy was highly unlikely. Her slight five-foot frame, flame-red hair, and freckled countenance hardly personified the day's standard of female pulchritude. Add in her willful, bombastic personality, and even she had to admit that her chances of romantic success were scant at best.

She pushed the thought from her mind. The only thing that mattered now was devising a way to achieve her tattered but still passionate dream. There had to be a way.

Chapter Two

San Francisco, California
Saturday, January 29, 1859

Before even opening her eyes, Cora's senses reminded her she was no longer at home. There, her mornings started with the sounds of a waking household and the tantalizing odors of coffee and baking bread. Now her nose detected only the faint essence of salt brine. She heard no sleepy grousing from the bed where her little sister Lilly slept. Instead, her ears met the dead silence of an empty chamber overlaid with a distant cacophony of shouts, curses and braying animals. She felt a gentle rocking motion foreign to one who lived on the land. The paddle wheels no longer splashed, the warning bell and scream of escaping steam no longer pierced her ears, but she soon oriented herself to the dim cabin she had occupied on the *SS Antelope* since boarding the previous afternoon.

It had been a crisp, sunny winter day when she stood on Sacramento's Embarcadero and bade her family goodbye. She felt a twinge of guilt over having deceived them. She had told them she was going to San Francisco to accept a position in a milliner's shop, an opportunity secured for her by her Aunt Lizzie, who was a friend of the shop's owner. She had also been invited to live in the Collins household for as long as she wished. This portion of the conspiracy was true. As she had known she would, her aunt had responded to Cora's early January letter by offering immediate and long-term sanctuary. She had also joined in the subterfuge by suggesting a position of employment with a friend who might or might not be real.

Her family had met the plan with skepticism, especially from Carl, who knew her as only one twin can know the other.

"I find it exceedingly strange," he had said, "that you would make such a drastic change so soon after learning you would not be going to San Francisco as a medical student. Indeed, you floated the idea of boarding with the Collinses months ago as you theorized about your possible enrollment in the proposed school. Why would you wish to go there now, knowing that you will never be a medical student?"

"Because that very fact makes it impossible for me to stay here as if nothing has happened. And now Lizzie—" She caught herself. Her aunt had been a friend long before she married Uncle Jonathan, and Cora frequently forgot, out of habit, to use the familial title she now deserved. "—Aunt Lizzie has found me a new position, so there is no reason why I should not accept it and be thankful."

"What of the position you already have?"

"I warned the Isaacs family that I might be leaving their employ months ago. Is it so difficult to understand why I need a change of scene?"

"No. But I would think you would be eager to put as much distance as possible between yourself and the site of your recent disappointment."

"What do you know of the sentiments surrounding disappointment?" she snapped. "You who is able to do whatever you wish by simple reason of your gender!"

He clicked his tongue. "When will you understand that bitter rejoinders such as that are what makes you so disagreeable to my fellow males? God did not intend for women to take up the same pursuits as men. You are fortunate to have the role of wife and mother in your future.

Providing you can squelch your tendency to make statements that drive away anyone who would otherwise find you pleasing.”

“I would not wish to please the type of man you describe, so your judgment means nothing to me.”

A shrug. “Well, if you think you are going to fulfill your strange passion for medicine by shadowing me and my fellow students in San Francisco, you are sadly mistaken.”

“Why would I wish to do that? I already know more about medicine than you will ever learn.”

She had stalked off before he could respond, and they had barely spoken since. Now, a new chapter of her life was about to begin, and she refused to soil the moment with reminders of her brother and his smug superiority.

She sat up, forgetting to duck and thus striking her head on the cabin ceiling. She had taken the upper bunk out of deference to her rather elderly cabinmate, who had apparently already risen, dressed and left for breakfast. Cora hopped down and looked out through the small window onto the boat’s guards, curious about the sort of day that awaited her. She saw only an impenetrable curtain of swirling gray fog. She turned and reached for her clothes, only to hear a light knocking on the interior door that led to the saloon.

She put on her wrapper and opened it to the ladies’ chambermaid, a light-skinned, middle-aged Negro woman who had the responsibility of looking after the female passengers. She gave a little curtsy and said,

“There’s a gentleman at the gangway askin’ after you. Says you’s expectin’ him.”

Cora saw that the saloon beyond was empty. She leaned out and looked forward. A few people still lingered at the breakfast tables, but it appeared that most of the passengers had already debarked.

“What time is it, please?” she asked.

“Gone ten past nine, ma’am.”

“Oh. Oh, my. Please tell the gentleman I shall be along directly. And thank you for bringing the message.”

“Yes’m.” Another curtsy, and she was gone.

Cora fumbled for the bodice of her dress and looked at the delicate little watch pinned there, a gift from her parents two years before on her eighteenth birthday. She held it up in the dim light and confirmed that it was, indeed, nearly nine-fifteen. She had slept poorly, not achieving deep sleep until well after the boat docked sometime around midnight. As a consequence, she had overslept. She had been told her uncle would pick her up at nine o’clock, which would give her plenty of time to dress and have breakfast in the forward saloon. Instead, she had kept him waiting.

She dressed quickly and coiled and pinned her nighttime braid into a bun at the back of her head. She put on her cloak, gathered up her overnight satchel, and stepped through the outer door onto the guards, following them around the stern to the gangplank.

Her uncle was an indistinct wraith through the fog on the dock below. She stepped onto the slippery boards and proceeded down with special care lest she lose her footing and end up in the brackish water that sloshed between the boat and the dock’s edge.

Jonathan stepped forward to meet her. He was a tall man whose long arms and legs gave him a somewhat gangly appearance. The excessive damp had plastered a shock of light-brown hair to his forehead and rendered his spectacles all but opaque. Despite having stood in these inclement circumstances for she knew not how long, he wore a welcoming smile that dimpled his

cheeks and softened his chiseled, sharp-featured face. He doffed his hat and kissed her cheek in greeting.

She hugged him and said, "I do so apologize for keeping you, uncle."

In a deep, warm voice, "No need. It being Saturday, I have the entire morning at leisure. And how better to spend it than in fetching my dear niece home? If you will show me which trunk is yours..."

The stack of luggage that had been offloaded much earlier was now diminished from what it had no doubt once been. Cora easily spotted her own dome-top trunk. Jonathan picked it up by its leather handles, took a moment to steady his balance, and staggered forward.

Fearful that he might injure himself with such a heavy load, she said, "Should we not ask one of the porters for help with that?"

"I do not...hire...someone...to do...what I am...perfectly...capable of...doing myself."

Cora scolded herself for not having arranged ahead of time for someone to deal with her trunk. She should have realized a teacher with a growing family had no spare resources for the type of help a physician such as her father might engage without thinking. She bit her tongue and scurried along beside him.

Fortunately, they had not far to go. Jonathan's dapple-gray horse Shadow, whom Cora remembered making the long trek with them five years before, was hitched to a buckboard buggy in front of a fish monger's stall on the opposite side of the wharf. He heaved the trunk into the vehicle's bed and helped her onto the front seat, taking his place beside her and turning the horse toward the wharf's end.

People and conveyances passed to and fro, appearing as indistinct shadows through the thick blanket of fog. The heavy air dulled the sounds of the busy wharf but not the pungent odor of rotting seaweed, ripe fish and animal offal. She could tell there were many shops and stalls and storehouses lining the long wharf, but their purposes remained hidden behind the impenetrable murk.

They reached the street beyond and continued forward along a plank road that she would later learn was Pacific Street. A short distance later they came to Front Street and turned south. Buildings loomed through the haze on either side, many several stories high and built of brick or granite. In the distance to the south and east, she could see the shadowy bulk of the many hills for which San Francisco was known. They shared the road with other buggies, carriages, and individual horsemen as well as delivery drays, carts and wagons carrying everything from water, bread, meat, milk and vegetables to parcels and supplies.

Uncle Jonathan made polite inquiries about Cora's family, not alluding to her purpose for being there but leaving that subject to be pursued later when they arrived at the family home. He entertained her with lively stories about the San Francisco area's colorful history, from its early beginnings as a possession of first Spain then Mexico through its settlement as Yerba Buena by American pioneers. Then came the Mexican-American War and independence, the Gold Rush of 1849, and finally the admission of California as a state within the Union. Her uncle was a scholar who loved acquiring any and all knowledge, whether of present-day affairs or of the writings of the philosophers of old. In what seemed the twinkling of an eye, they had arrived at Market Street, which angled southeast and was even more congested than Front Street.

The farther they went, the more the fog thinned, and Cora was able to identify the small white St. Patrick's Church beside a fine brick building housing the Catholic Orphan Asylum. Shortly thereafter, they turned south on Third Street to Harrison Street, then east to the short,

dead-end Elizabeth Street, a name Cora found fitting in that it mimicked the given name of her dear friend and aunt, Lizzie.

The house before which they stopped was large and rambling, clothed in white clapboard with black shutters at its windows and a wide deep front porch. Jonathan explained that they were leasing it from a wealthy industrialist who had built a much grander Greek-Revival house near the summit of Rincon Hill, which rose one hundred feet to the immediate west. The gentleman had taken a proprietary interest in Jonathan when he first arrived the year before to teach at the newly-reorganized San Francisco High School. Recognizing Jonathan's intellectual and teaching skills, he had encouraged him to organize private classes to further the classical education of the children of the city's elite, thus providing an additional income that allowed the Collins family to live in comfort and thrive.

Cora's feet had barely touched the ground when she saw her Aunt Lizzie flying down the front path toward her. She was still beautiful, her rich auburn hair framing lively green eyes and a creamy complexion, but there was no doubt she had put on weight even since Cora had last seen her the previous year. She recalled their first meeting five years before aboard the steamboat *Princess* on their journey up the Missouri River. Then Lizzie had been a haughty southern belle intent on keeping her beauty and former rank as shields against the disaster her life had become. Now she was a content, loving wife to a man who adored her, caring not a whit about the aging process that had already begun within her body.

They embraced. Then Lizzie held her at arm's length to survey her. In the soft drawl she had never quite been able to eradicate, "As lovely as ever, my dear Cora. You look the picture of health, tiny though you still are."

Ever disappointed that her short stature and slight build failed to match her carefully-constructed tough, no-nonsense interior, Cora pulled a wry face and said, "I suppose I must give up on my ambition to become a formidable Amazon. I am, after all, now twenty."

A delighted laugh. "What you lack in stature you more than surpass in fortitude, dear girl. As this incredible journey proves. Now come into the house. Missy and the other children are most anxious to see you."

They walked arm in arm to the narrow steps leading to the porch while Jonathan tended to Shadow and the buggy. Inside, Lizzie took Cora's cloak and hung it on a hook in the hallway. What seemed like a horde of children but was in fact only three with an infant crawling behind swarmed out from the parlor.

Ten-year-old Missy vaulted into Cora's arms. She was tall for her age, blonde with the delicate features of her mother, Jonathan's first wife Sarah. Right behind her came Caleb, four, and Eleanor, three, both tugging at Cora's skirts for attention. Caleb, who had barely survived the long westward pilgrimage after the death of his mother from childbed fever, was now a sturdy youngster who resembled his father to a great degree. Eleanor had come along barely ten months after Lizzie and Jonathan married. She was a pretty child with curly brown hair and her mother's green eyes. Chubby little Isaiah was too young at six months for her to assess which parent he favored, but he certainly had his mother's gritty tenacity as he scooted as fast as he could in order not to be left behind even though he had never met his Cousin Cora and had no notion of what the fuss was all about.

Cora laughed and picked him up to carry him with the others into the family parlor. Having determined that her niece had missed breakfast, Lizzie disappeared into the kitchen while Missy and the others regaled Cora with exuberant childish chatter. Jonathan lugged her trunk into the entry hall and up the stairway, returning just as Lizzie came in with a tray bearing slices

of fresh bread, a bowl of home-canned cherries, and a steaming mug of coffee. After Cora had eaten, Lizzie shoed the children to their playroom, and Jonathan excused himself to prepare for the afternoon session of his private classes.

Cora watched her aunt throw another log on the flagging fire, thinking as she often had about the difficult adjustment a person of her privileged background would need to make in order to run a growing household without the benefit of hired help. Yet she had never heard Lizzie complain, even during the hard-scrabble months of their cross-country odyssey. Indeed, she seemed perennially cheerful, often expressing her gratitude for the life she had found here in California with Jonathan.

At last Lizzie settled into a chair opposite Cora and said, "Now, then, tell me about this scheme of yours. I could glean nothing from your recent enigmatic letter. Only that you wished to start afresh in San Francisco and needed an invitation to live with us while you pursued some phantom employment, the details of which could be invented in any manner I chose as long as it was presented as legitimate in my answering letter."

Cora said, "I know how perplexing it must have been, and I apologize for my inability to be forthright. However, secrecy was of the utmost necessity. Even though I knew my parents would not pry into my private correspondence, I had no such assurance where my brother was concerned."

"My curiosity grows hotter by the moment. It is obvious there is more to this than a change of living arrangements, delighted though we are to have you."

With clasped hands and an earnest face, "You are right. I do have an ulterior goal, and you are my one and only hope of achieving it."

"Well, then, you had best tell me how I can help. After all—" Her eyes twinkled. "—this is not the first time you and I have conspired together to achieve an objective." She referred to her own bid for freedom at a time when she was in thrall to a corrupt, deceitful man, a bid that was planned and executed with Cora's invaluable help. She went on, "I have much to thank you for, dear Cora. If I can repay you in some small way, I am most happy to do so. So tell me, what are you planning?"

Chapter Three

Monday, January 31, 1859

Cora and Lizzie stepped down from the omnibus at the northeast corner of Portsmouth Square. Until the day before, Cora had never seen, much less ridden on such a conveyance, a horse-drawn, elongated coach seating more than a dozen people. Now she had enjoyed this new experience twice in as many days.

To celebrate her arrival and show her a bit of their city, the Collinses had taken her on a Sunday-afternoon outing to the Mission Dolores, a religious and farming community established many years before in order to educate and convert the native Indian population but now a popular resort getaway for the city's populace. They had boarded an omnibus on Folsom Street, a fine plank road a mere block and a half from their house. Beyond the close-in residential areas, they had passed between low sand hills and through the intervening valleys, each bringing its own interesting sights: lovely gardens and nurseries, a large sugar refinery with black smoke billowing from its chimney, several noxious-smelling hog ranches. Before long, they crossed the bridge over Mission Creek and continued on the new San Bruno Turnpike to the green, fertile valley where the mission lay nestled among the surrounding hills. Lizzie had packed a picnic lunch, and after they ate, the children frolicked in the fresh air of an unusually warm sunny day while Jonathan entertained the ladies with stories of the mission's history.

On this day, however, frivolity played no part in their excursion. Lizzie had hired a neighbor's teenaged daughter to watch the children while she took Cora to meet someone who might be able to help in her quest. Cora had tried to pay the girl's fee, but Lizzie had been adamant.

"We are not poor, Cora. Frugal, perhaps, but we always have resources to help the people we love. Which, of course, includes you."

And so, they stepped around the others who had disembarked the omnibus and turned back along the plaza's northern side.

Cora was impressed more than ever by the unusual size of this city, marveling at the horse and vehicular traffic on Washington Street as well as the size and number of buildings that lined the square, nearly all of brick or concrete construction and several stories high. There were hotels, stores, offices, the city hall, the post office, and a few remaining gambling halls. The square itself was a lovely verdant park enclosed by decorative iron railings with a lamppost at each corner. Even on a weekday, the place was being well used: people lounging, children playing, hawkers selling their wares from makeshift stalls.

They turned onto Kearny Street and proceeded one block north to Jackson Street, then veered west to a large boxy brick building five stories tall with a sign atop that read *International*. They entered the hotel's ornate lobby and proceeded past the dining room to the central staircase with its gilded iron railing. They climbed to the third floor and turned right along a gaslit corridor with rooms on either side. They followed the numbering on the doors around the corner and along another corridor until they came to the one marked 348. Lizzie raised her gloved hand and knocked.

A rustling came from within. Then the door opened to reveal a fashionably dressed black woman. She wore a mauve silk day dress with a wide, bell-shaped skirt, black piping down the

bodice and at the hem, and lace at the neckline and sleeve cuffs. She was no taller than Cora with the same wispy frame. Her hair was coiffed in the latest style, her nut-brown face blemish-free with elliptical brown eyes, prominent cheekbones and a small rounded nose.

Her mouth with its charming Cupid's-bow upper lip lifted in a smile. Lizzie stepped forward and enclosed her in an embrace, saying,

"My dear Rachel." She pulled back and reached out to Cora. "I am most eager to present my niece, Miss Fielding, who has come from Sacramento to live with us. Cora, this is the famed Black Nightingale and my dearest friend, Miss Rachel Barnes."

Cora already knew who this remarkable woman was. As a teenager, she had thrilled to Lizzie's stories of their time in Quincy, California when Rachel, a golden-voiced slave who had been freed upon her master's death, was re-captured and nearly returned to bondage. Lizzie's testimony alone had saved her, thus freeing Rachel to pursue a much-acclaimed career. Cora, who believed with a burning passion that slavery was an evil affront to mankind and must be resisted at every turn, could not suppress a shiver of awe as Rachel reached out to take her gloved hand, saying,

"I am most pleased to meet you, Miss Fielding. Lizzie has spoken of you so often I feel as if I already know you."

"And I you," said Cora. "My family and I have heard of your travails in Quincy in such detail that we might have been there ourselves. Thus, let us dispense with formalities. Please call me Cora."

"Then I shall be Rachel to you. Please come in."

The room was not large but airy with high ceilings and a long window that overlooked Kearny Street. It contained a bed, an armoire and chest of drawers, and a small table by the window equipped with three chairs. A tea set with cups and saucers and a plate of pastries beckoned them over.

Lizzie and Cora removed their bonnets, gloves and cloaks and sat down while Rachel poured out the tea. After she had offered cream and sugar and the pastries, she sat back and said, "Now tell me. How may I be of service?"

Cora took a deep breath and said, "I wish to transform myself into a man."

The singer's eyes widened in surprise.

Cora continued, "Since you are in the theater, if as a musical artist rather than a dramatic actor, Lizzie and I hoped you would have some ideas how I might accomplish this. The fact that you are in town to perform for the next few weeks seemed too propitious to ignore."

"I am certainly happy to advise you. But this? A rather difficult proposition, especially given your stature, which, as you may have noticed, is similar to mine. In the pursuit of my profession, I am often required to costume myself as someone other than myself, but never so drastic a change. May I ask why you wish to do this?"

"It is my dearest ambition to become a physician like my father. I have studied medicine on my own by reading his many clinical tomes. Then when he became a preceptor to my twin brother two years ago, he allowed me to study alongside him. I have learned all I can up to this point, but I will never be allowed to practice medicine unless I graduate from a medical college. A brand new school is opening here in San Francisco in a few months, and my brother has applied and been accepted as a student. I, however, am not allowed to apply because I am a female. Therefore, the only way I can continue my education is to disguise myself as a man."

Rachel considered. Then gave a slow nod. "I understand. When I was a slave, I was denied the freedom to pursue my own destiny due to the unfair customs and dictates of society. I

overcame those strictures with determination and the help of your aunt. Thus, I can only encourage you to fight in the manner you have suggested. But how is it to be done?"

She picked up her cup and sipped, concentration furrowing her brow. Cora and Lizzie drank their own tea and ate their pastries. Some moments later, Rachel said,

"It seems to me the biggest obstacle is the one to which I have already alluded. Your diminutive height will be impossible to disguise. However, even though few gentlemen are as short as you, some youths fail to reach full stature and physical maturity until they are well into their twenties. So we must present you as such a person, which would also explain your smooth facial skin. Beyond that, we must create diversions that will draw attention away from those traits and allay any suspicion that you are not who you claim to be."

Cora was mesmerized by the fact that this famous singer thought her charade had a chance of success. She had conceived of it out of anger and bitterness and a nearly unstoppable urge to prove to the world that she could not be defeated. However, if she were honest with herself, even as she schemed and planned, doubts had plagued her during every unguarded moment. Now they disappeared like fog before the morning sun, and a wellspring of confidence surged through her with such force she nearly swooned.

"Diversions," Lizzie repeated. "Such as...?"

Rachel pushed away from the table and said, "Come. I shall show you."

They all three donned their outerwear and left the hotel. They walked toward Montgomery Street, turned south for one block and rounded onto Washington, where they came to the Maguire's Opera House. It was a three-story concrete structure, its two upper stories fronted by iron grillwork and tall double windows. A row of six large glass globes hung in front of the arched entrance with a higher row of lamps in front of the second-story grillwork, and Cora could imagine how beautiful it would be of an evening with those bright lights beckoning theatergoers to the show. A free-standing easel advertised the performances of Rachel Barnes, the Black Nightingale, singing assorted arias from the operas of Giuseppe Verdi.

Rachel walked up to a narrow side door and knocked. Nothing. She knocked louder and longer. Eventually the door opened, and a wizened little man with a shock of unruly white hair and a broom in one hand peered out. His shaggy eyebrows shot up.

"Miss Barnes. I thought your rehearsal was later this afternoon."

"It is, Mr. Wedley. I have some costume issues and wish to see what the wardrobe department has to offer."

"Of course. But..." His eyes shifted to Cora and Lizzie.

"These are my advisers in the matter. May we come in?"

He hesitated only a moment before swinging the door wide and admitting them into the theater's lobby. Light from the glass entry doors revealed plush red wall coverings, a carpet of the same color, and a large, multi-tiered crystal chandelier, now unlit.

"Wait here," said Mr. Wedley.

He turned and disappeared through a nearby closed door. He returned moments later carrying a lit oil lantern, which he offered to Rachel.

"Lights're on in there..." He jerked his head toward the bank of doors leading to the building's interior. "... 'cause I'm sweepin', but you folks'll need this down in the hole."

The hole? Cora could not suppress a small shudder as she and Lizzie followed Rachel into the theater's main auditorium.

A glowing chandelier, even larger and more elaborate than the one in the lobby, revealed an expansive hall that must have seated hundreds. Two balcony tiers rose on either side, no doubt

seating hundreds more. Ahead, the stage rose behind a substantial orchestra pit. The curtain was down, its face painted to depict a scene from Venice, Italy with the city's domes and towers and palaces forming a backdrop for the barques and gondolas of a canal.

They made their way around the folding chairs Mr. Wedley had pushed asunder in order to clean the parquet floor. They climbed a short flight of steps to the stage and followed Rachel through a side door into the backstage area. The lantern cast unearthly shadows into the empty stage to their right, the ropes and rigging forming grotesque shapes high above. They took a dark narrow stairway down into the building's bowels, the sound of scurrying feet preceding the lantern's circle of light. Cora shrugged deeper into her cloak and put the images the sounds evoked out of her mind.

At the bottom, they turned into a murky corridor that gave off an unpleasant musty odor. Rachel stopped near the corridor's end and opened a door marked *Wardrobe*. She stepped in first, the lantern held high before her, and Cora caught sight of a rat's tail disappearing into the gloom. Rachel hung the lantern on a hook on the wall, its light revealing several long racks whose hooks held various items of clothing. Other accessories were piled on roughhewn tables or in storage boxes.

Rachel turned to Cora with a smile. "Now, let us see what we can find for you."