



A Novel

THE
DRESSMAKER'S
DOWRY

MEREDITH JAEGER



P.S.

INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Chapter 1

Sarah Havensworth

Present Day

A doorman ushered me toward the historic garden court inside the Palace Hotel, the sequins on my gold shift dress catching the light. Men in suits mingled with women in cocktail gowns. Beneath the grand crystal chandeliers and arched glass ceiling, I felt like I'd stepped back in time to the turn of the twentieth century. Hunter stood against one of the marble columns under the elegant dome. I admired the cut of my husband's suit against his broad shoulders. His dark wavy hair was parted on the side.

"Champagne, miss?" a waiter asked.

"Yes, please."

I took a glass flute from the tray. When I sipped, the sweet bubbles tickled my tongue. With enough champagne, maybe I could relax tonight. My mother-in-law's charity events often made me feel like a fish out of water. For one, I didn't do well

with crowds, and I could already feel the heat of anxiety creeping up my neck.

A gust of wind from the open door blew my bangs upward. I quickly brushed them down to hide the thin white scar on my forehead. Had anyone seen it? I took a deep breath through my nose. *I was in a safe place.* No one was paying attention to my scar. Except for me, of course. I exhaled slowly.

After walking through the sea of people, I placed my hand on Hunter's arm, giving it a squeeze. He smiled, dimples on full display, an adorable grin crafted just for me. "Hey, Kiddo. So glad you made it. How's my favorite young lady tonight?"

I chuckled. Judging from the number of blue-hairs who'd come out to the arts benefit, *I was a young lady*—a nice change from feeling ancient around Jen and Nick, my friends and former colleagues at *Pulse of the City* magazine.

On my thirtieth birthday last month, I'd realized I liked my ten p.m. bedtime, along with waking up early on weekends to go to the farmer's market sans hangover. More and more I felt estranged from hip twentysomething girls. Mostly, I didn't understand Tinder, and had trouble convincing my younger friends that it *was* possible to get a headache after only two glasses of wine.

Gwyneth appeared, gliding toward Hunter with a smile. She wore a long, pale blue dress, and a diamond tennis bracelet dangled from her wrist. I tucked my hands behind me, wishing I'd painted my nails for the event. My mother-in-law's gel manicure was perfect as usual. She kissed Hunter on the cheek and then stepped forward to hug me.

“Hello, Sarah. You look lovely tonight. I’m so pleased you could make it.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling the soft warmth of her arms.

Hunter leaned down to whisper in my ear. “You do look gorgeous in that dress. I *might* be the luckiest guy in this place.”

My body warmed, pleasant shivers working their way down my neck where his breath had touched me.

“Sarah, you haven’t forgotten about the Canova by Moonlight gala?” Gwyneth asked. “I could use your help setting up the space before the big reveal.”

Oh no. She’d told me about this. “Of course I’ll help,” I said, even though I had only a few weeks left to finish my MFA thesis, and I’d intended to spend them solely on writing. A hard knot formed in my stomach as I thought about my novel, languishing on my computer—a painful reminder of my writer’s block.

“May thirtieth. Mark your calendar. The chair of the National Gallery of Ireland is flying in, and we’ll be hosting him.” She smiled proudly. “Walter is also on the board. The minister of arts appointed him for a five-year term. Walter and Colin attended the London School of Economics together many years ago. Old friends, you see.”

I nodded, my father-in-law’s accomplishments never ceasing to amaze me. As much as I tried to impress him, I’d never live up to his standards. But who could? He was the executive director of his own investment banking firm, Havensworth & Associates, Harvard educated, and the president of Havensworth Art Academy.

Hunter cleared his throat. “Mom, Sarah’s working on her master’s thesis. It’s due early next month. She’s pretty busy right now.”

“Oh, hush,” Gwyneth said, winking at me. “She can make a little time in her schedule. We’re going to be serving vintage rosé, and someone has to help me sample it before the big night. You will, won’t you, dear?”

I laughed. “You won’t have a problem there.”

“Remind me again of your thesis project?” Gwyneth asked, smoothing an imaginary flyaway into her sleek chignon. “A novel, right?”

I looked down at my hands guiltily. My square-cut emerald, set in rose gold, sparkled in the light next to my gold wedding band. Over three carats and wreathed in diamonds, the Havensworth family heirloom garnered compliments from strangers. But as much as I liked telling the story of how my engagement ring was over a hundred years old, the giant, valuable stone held an aura of mystery. No one in Hunter’s family could tell me whom it had once belonged to.

I twisted the heavy ring upright. Thanks to my husband’s financial support, I’d been able to focus one hundred percent on my writing. Yet somehow I’d managed to squander the opportunity. I forced a smile.

“Yes. It’s historical fiction set in San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, during the late nineteenth century. I’m writing about a widowed innkeeper and the quirky cast of characters who come to stay with her at the boardinghouse.”

In the pause that followed, my cheeks heated. It was a

stupid idea, and I knew it. In fact, I'd been staring at my blank computer screen for weeks, utterly lacking inspiration. My characters no longer spoke to me. I was nothing more than a fraud—a former journalist, wannabe novelist, wasting my time chasing a silly dream. I couldn't believe Hunter had let me quit my day job to pursue this.

I began to babble. "I've been reading newspaper articles from the 1870s as part of my research. It's unbelievable the amount of crime that happened back then. I mean, imagine how terrifying North Beach must have been when all of the policemen and politicians were corrupt. To think I bought my beautiful Vera Wang wedding dress in the same place where people got murdered in the street!"

"Our city certainly does have a colorful past," Gwyneth said, smiling brightly as she patted my hand. "I hate to interrupt you, dear, but the chair of the De Young Museum has just arrived, and I must go over and say hello." She waved at a woman with a bouffant hairdo, and walked away.

"I think it sounds cool," Hunter said, meeting my eyes with a reassuring gaze. "I know you, Sar. Any story you write will be a good one. You've got the talent, and you work harder than anyone I know. I hope you publish your novel someday, so I can tell the world that my wife's a famous author."

"Thanks, honey," I mumbled as he kissed my forehead. I didn't have the heart to tell Hunter that I wasn't a real author, and there would be no future book tours. Anything I typed, I deleted five minutes later. I'd spent my afternoons wandering around Jackson Square, the site of my former magazine office,

waiting for inspiration to strike. While looking up at the brick buildings that used to be dance halls, saloons, and bordellos in the last century, I'd never felt so lost.

I swallowed, realizing how many people had filled the garden court of the hotel. The walls seemed to close in. It was too hot in here. Why was everyone looking at me? I smoothed my bangs to make sure my scar was covered.

I could still hear the whispers that followed me down the streets of my hometown and through the halls of my high school. I felt the dark, accusatory looks, like daggers in my back. The room spun like I was drunk, even though I hadn't finished my champagne.

Don't think about it.

"Hey," I said, meeting Hunter's eyes, warm brown with specks of green. "I'm going to find the ladies' room. I'll just be a minute."

"Okay. I'll be right here."

I felt Hunter watching me as I tugged at the hem of my sequined dress, making my way quickly through the crowd. If I took deep breaths and looked at the floor, I wouldn't think about the screech of the brakes, or the jolt of the impact.

I stepped inside the ladies' lounge, appointed with plush velvet and rosewood couches. Crystal chandeliers with gold accents glinted off the shiny marble floors. Walking over to the sink, I turned on the tap to splash water on my cheeks.

My plain reflection stared back at me: a pale face with large brown eyes, dirty-blond hair, and a slightly too-big nose that sunburned easily. For Wisconsin, I was pretty enough, but I

certainly didn't exude the urban glamour of San Francisco women.

I'd grown up on peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and tuna casserole. On summer vacations, my parents and I camped in an old smelly tent, and "fancy" meant bringing along an air mattress. Hunter brought me into his world of yachts, summer homes, and country clubs. Sometimes Hunter asked me if I'd like to take him to Eagle River, so he could see the town where I'd spent my childhood.

My parents are dead, I told him. There's nothing left for me there.

Honestly, I ached to see the starry sky above the lakes, to spend the night with my husband in a rustic hunting cabin. But I could never go back. Hunter liked the person I was now, because he didn't know who I had been. I had kept myself from him.

When our two worlds had collided four years ago at the Best of San Francisco party hosted by my magazine, I'd been standing by the seafood bar, pretending I hadn't already eaten at least five raw oysters, and Hunter had come up beside me.

"Hey!" he said, grinning. "You're wearing my T-shirt."

"Excuse me?" I asked, my cheeks tingling. I cringed, bracing myself for some kind of terrible sexual joke that involved the removal of clothing.

He pointed at my gray V-neck. "That's from Have-Clothing, right?"

I rubbed the smooth fabric between my fingers. I'd bought the shirt online, knowing Have-Clothing donated the proceeds from each purchase to homeless organizations, and I'd liked

the fairly traded organic cotton. Because of its softness and beautiful feather design, it had become my favorite shirt.

“Um, yeah?” I said. “How did you know?”

“I cofounded the company,” Hunter said, an adorable dimple indenting his smile.

I laughed. “No way! That’s awesome. I love what you guys are doing.”

My body buzzed from oolong-tea-infused cocktails. Underneath the globe lights strung around the brick walls, his hazel eyes sparkled.

“So,” he asked. “What do you do?”

“I’m an associate editor at *Pulse of the City* magazine.” I couldn’t keep the excitement out of my voice, I was so proud of my new title.

He raised his glass. “Cheers! I really like your articles. What a cool job.”

I took in his fitted flannel shirt, tailored jeans, and nice leather shoes. He looked the part of the founder of an innovative start-up. But he was free of the arrogance so pervasive among rich young tech guys.

“You know, the best oysters aren’t actually harvested in San Francisco,” Hunter said, lowering his voice.

A wave of heat rippled through me. Of all the cute guys in the room, there was something special about Hunter. “Don’t say that here,” I whispered. “It’s sacrilege.”

He smiled again. “Ever been to Hog Island in Tomales Bay?”

I tilted another oyster down my throat, silky smooth flesh and sea brine. My mouth was full, so I shook my head.

“It’s a short drive from here, up the coast through Marin. You can shuck your own and eat them right there at picnic tables overlooking the water.” He paused and cleared his throat. “Want to go with me?”

“Absolutely,” I said, setting down my drink. “Why not?”

After Hunter took my number and went to circulate the party, my coworker Jen came up behind me. She grabbed my arm.

“Ow! What’s wrong with you?”

Jen’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know who that is?”

We both turned to look at Hunter. I grinned. “Cofounder of Have-Clothing, maker of the very T-shirt I’m wearing tonight. He’s cute, and cares about ending homelessness. What a seriously nice guy.”

Jen brought her palm to her forehead. “Sarah. That *nice guy* is Hunter Havensworth, as in Havensworth Art Academy and Havensworth & Associates investments. Of course he has his own start-up. He’s loaded! Starting to ring a bell?”

I’d passed the art academy buildings a few times on my jogs through the Financial District, but the name hadn’t registered. “Like, his family owns it?”

Jen ran her fingers through her shiny black hair. “Yes, they own it! Hello? Do you know how many campus buildings that art academy has? They own this entire city. He’s like San Francisco royalty.”

Hunter smiled at me from across the room.

“That’s not why I’m interested in him,” I said, feeling a knot in my stomach.

“Well, good luck with that. Every other straight girl in this city is trying to get her claws in him. Watch out, he might be a total player.”

A rich, handsome guy who didn't have to work for a living could be a red flag. But he *did* work for a living, helping those less fortunate. I didn't get the playboy vibe from him at all. Hunter seemed nice and normal.

And he was. On our first date at Hog Island in Tomales Bay, we shucked oysters and talked about everything from our childhood pets to our favorite books and sushi restaurants. Hunter was sweet, laughing when my oyster knife went flying into the water, and kissing the tip of my finger when I cut it on the rough shell. Being with him was easy and natural. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I could trust again.

Reemerging into the ballroom, I scanned the sea of suits and sequined dresses, looking for Hunter. I found him waiting right where I'd left him. He looked up and smiled, sending a warm wave of relief through me.

“Hey, Sweetie,” I said, touching Hunter's hand. “Would it hurt your mom's feelings if I left early?”

Hunter's fingers curled around mine. “You okay, Kiddo? You just got here.”

“I think I must've eaten something at lunch that didn't agree with me. I feel sick.”

My eyes locked on his, silently pleading for him to understand. Hunter knew I had panic attacks, but he didn't know their root cause. My scar was throbbing, and my stomach churned. I had my bottle of Klonopin in my purse, just in case

my anxiety started spiraling out of control. It was my fault. *My fault.*

Hunter's smile faded. "Can't you stay for an hour? I don't want to be here alone. C'mon, I'll get you some sparkling water to settle your stomach."

"No," I said, biting my lip. "I'm sorry. I really don't feel well."

Guilt surged through me, but I couldn't stand the feeling of all these eyes on me in this crowded room. I'd felt them before. There were support groups for people with alcohol and shopping addictions, groups for people strung out on heroin and cocaine. But there weren't any resources for people like me.

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked, pulling me closer. Hunter's grip felt like a lifeline, anchoring me to solid ground.

What if I just embraced him? Or told him the truth?

"No," I said, shaking my head. "You stay."

Hunter let his hand drop, and I saw the disappointment in his eyes. I was the problem here—the reason we were drifting apart.

"Tell your mom I'm sorry," I said. "I'll see you at home."

As I walked away, I wondered what kind of person I was, leaving my husband alone when he'd reached across the divide, promising me he'd take care of me, like he always did. My panic had already begun to dissipate, and I could easily turn around. But I wasn't going back inside. I'd already made my choice.



Back at our apartment in the Marina, I listened to the peaceful lap of the waves and held a mug of chamomile tea in my hands. We had a chrome Italian espresso machine sitting in the middle of our granite kitchen island, but I never drank caffeine after noon, even if I needed to work late. What had *San Francisco Style* called our apartment? Modern chic? It looked nothing like my childhood home, with its Formica countertops and patchy brown carpet.

Redford crept into my lap and settled in. I stroked his orange coat. He kneaded my thigh, purring like a tiny motor. His claws snagged the fabric of my favorite skinny jeans, but he looked too content for me to set him down. Fog hung heavy and thick outside my floor-to-ceiling windows while red lights on the peaks of the Golden Gate Bridge blinked through the mist. Across the bay, the hills of the Marin Headlands cut a sharp silhouette against the purple-gray sky.

A foghorn sounded long and low. Here in the quiet comfort of my home, I was able to breathe again. I opened up a Word document on my laptop, wincing as I looked at the blinking cursor. My thesis advisor at USF had asked to meet with me next week to discuss my “progress.” And all I had to show for myself were fifty lousy pages of a novel I no longer felt invested in. My main character, Mrs. McGeary, a widowed innkeeper in her forties, felt as flimsy as cardboard. Who was she, and what did she want?

I sighed as I opened my browser, preferring to lose myself in research instead. I’d always been drawn to the visual imagery of San Francisco in the nineteenth century—the beauty and

harshness of the Wild West. The journalist in me couldn't stop mining the digital archives of the *Daily Alta California* and the *Sacramento Daily Union*, San Francisco's oldest newspapers, for tidbits to include in my book.

I settled into my desk chair and looked at the large framed picture of Hunter and me on our wedding day, both of us grinning like idiots. A chill passed over my body. My husband knew only the details I provided him. I was an orphan. I entered UCLA on a merit scholarship. I didn't stay in touch with my high school friends because Eagle River held too many sad memories.

When I'd changed my name on our marriage license, a weight had lifted. I was no longer Sarah Schmidt, the girl followed by rampant whispers. I was Sarah Havensworth. Hunter waited for me at the end of the aisle, promising a new life. There was a time when I thought I'd tell him the truth. The risk of losing everything kept me silent.

I let out a deep breath and Googled "Barbary Coast" because looking at images of San Francisco during the late 1800s often helped me with my writing. The screen populated with links. The red-light district of old San Francisco was nine blocks bound by Montgomery Street, Washington Street, Stockton Street, and Broadway. Today's sleek skyscrapers bore no resemblance to the cobbled streets of the past.

I clicked link after link, rejecting generic sites designed to attract tourists, and hoping for inspiration to strike. I'd been toying with the idea of developing a romance between Mrs. McGeary and a German-Jewish merchant, Herr Blumberg, who owned the jewelry shop across the street from her

boardinghouse. I'd set the story against the backdrop of the Silver Rush, a time when businessmen earned fortunes from the silver found in the Comstock Lode mine in Nevada.

Much like the controversy surrounding San Francisco's current tech boom, the San Francisco of Victorian times was also a tale of two cities. The influx of wealth following the silver rush created a growing disparity between rich and poor. I intended to weave this theme throughout my narrative, focusing on the lives of the working class.

I chewed on my bottom lip, looking again at my wedding photo. I'd wanted to have a small, rustic wedding at a barn or a winery, but Gwyneth and Walter had insisted on the Flood Mansion, a magnificent Pacific Heights home once owned by James Clair Flood, one of the original "bonanza kings" and stock manipulators.

They had generously offered to pay for the wedding, and since my parents were no longer alive, I agreed. The opulent ceremony and reception with two hundred guests was beautiful, if not at all my style. My in-laws' Victorian mansion with its coveted Pacific Heights address nearly rivaled the Flood Mansion in size and opulence. Yet Gwyneth and Walter lived there alone, accompanied only by their housekeeper, Rosa.

I rubbed my temples and thought about the average people of the 1870s: the dockworkers, Chinese railroad workers, and immigrant families. Those were the people I was interested in. But somehow I had failed to bring my story to life. Perhaps I needed to introduce a new character to spark my imagination?

I clicked another link, "Events in the West, 1876," from

PBS.org. A few more clicks, and I'd found a few sourced San Francisco news stories.

June 8. Tom Williams drowned in the bay. A man named Jones dies suddenly in a saloon.

July 3. John Miller arrested as a counterfeiter.

August 7. Jim McGreevy, a tinsmith, fell from scaffolding and was killed.

September 15. A child of Mrs. Wilson had his foot cut off by the streetcars.

I sucked in my breath. How horrible.

October 10. The tobacco factories of Harris & Co., and Moore & Co., destroyed by fire, and a Chinese boy burned to death.

November 17. Large quantity of smuggled opium seized.

December 6. News received of a declaration of war by France against Prussia.

January 10. Missing dressmakers believed to be murdered.

My skin prickled. Working women in the Victorian era did not have an easy life. I clicked on the newspaper citation, January 10, 1876, *Daily Alta California*, to read more about the seamstresses. Hunter often teased me about my feminist values, but the plight of women in history would always interest me more than the countless men who'd felt it their right to rape and plunder, claiming the land of native peoples. Good. The *Daily Alta California* was part of the California Digital Newspaper Collection.

The scanned newspaper appeared on my screen as a grayed image. Zooming closer, I clicked each segment of text until I found the original article. I squinted, trying to decipher the old-fashioned font.

Missing Seamstresses Presumed Dead

It was rumored this morning that a fearful murder has been committed in the southern part of the city. The facts that can be ascertained are these: Miss Margaret O'Brien, an Irish girl, and Miss Hannelore Schaeffer, a German girl, were employed as dressmakers at Walton's Tailor Shop of 42 Montgomery Street. The young ladies introduced on this page did not turn up for their shift at eight o'clock yesterday forenoon.

Mrs. Jane Cunningham, proprietress of the shop, reports seeing from her window Miss O'Brien, accompanied by a man, walking in the direction

of the saloons on Kearny Street. Several atrocious murders of young ladies with handsome countenances have been recently committed in San Francisco County.

Four months past, a prostitute was found lying dead on the Northeast corner of Hinkley Alley and Dupont Street, before a house of ill repute that sits above the Tavern. Blood was oozing from her ears as if she had received a crushing blow to the head, and there were marks on her throat and mouth, which led to the supposition that she was murdered. Could these two seamstresses have met the same fate?

Hannelore Schaeffer is about 20 years of age, dark hair and light eyes, well formed, rather bold in appearance and speaks good English with a German accent. Margaret O'Brien is about 19 years of age, red hair and blue eyes, very handsome and well formed and speaks fluent English with an Irish accent.

Though the bodies of neither Schaeffer nor O'Brien have been discovered, residents fear hearing cries of "Murder, murder, help, for God's sake, help!" once again, should the killer at large not be stopped for these dreadful crimes.

Goose bumps rose on my arms. Two young dressmakers had disappeared while a killer was on the loose? The room seemed

to fade away as my screen took on a razor-sharp focus. I felt an electric energy I hadn't experienced since my days at the magazine—I knew in my gut I'd found an incredible story lead.

Closing the Word document that housed my novel, I opened a new one. Without thinking, my fingers flew across the keyboard. My novel could wait.

There was something about this story, a *true* story, that I couldn't ignore. Who were these women? What had happened to them? A shiver ran down my spine as I read the headline I'd written:

The Lost Dressmakers of the Barbary Coast

Chapter 2

Hannelore Schaeffer

San Francisco, January 1876

The sting of Father's palm spread across Hannelore's face like the burn of hot coals. He leaned in close, his sour breath reeking of whiskey. Blood trickled down Hanna's nose, the metallic taste reaching her tongue.

Raising his sinewy, soot-covered arm for another strike, Father resembled a roaring bear covered in grease. Hanna's heart pounded against her rib cage. Perhaps this time he would kill her, just as he had her mother.

Hanna shielded herself from the second blow, dropping the bowl of small boiled potatoes. It clattered to the ground, spilling its contents to the dirt floor. Hans and Katja covered beneath the table, whimpering. Father frightened them so.

"You dumb cow!"

He spat the insult in German. Years of working as a blacksmith had hardened his muscles, and Hanna hurled herself

away from his swinging arms. Martin ran from his hiding place and thrashed his fists against Father's burly chest, his twelve-year-old arms thin but strong. What a brave, stupid boy.

Father pushed Martin to the ground, where he landed with a heavy thud. Martin's chest heaved and his nostrils flared. "Stop it!" he yelled. "Don't hurt her."

Father laughed, resting his hands on his round belly. In addition to drinking too much ale, he ate his fill at the gambling houses, where men were served hot luncheon. Yet he gave nothing to his children, so that Hanna and her siblings had no means to quell their hunger. Father's laughter grew louder and louder.

"You sound like an American," he bellowed, wiping a tear from his ruddy face. The next one left a trail on his cheek before reaching his black beard.

Hanna's younger brother, Martin, had no trace of an accent, and a clouded memory of the boat that had carried them to this godforsaken place. Martin stood up, hands balled at his sides, his body shaking.

Looking at Hanna with bloodshot eyes, Father tilted his head back and cackled. She waited, holding her breath, until he stumbled backward and fell into his chair.

"Where is my money?" Father asked, pointing a thick finger at her. He was so drunk he couldn't hold it straight.

"We gave you all of our money," Martin said, stepping between them. "She doesn't have any. Tell him, Hanna. Tell him we don't have any."

"I have no money," Hanna answered, trembling as she

spoke. "I've given you every penny that I've earned, and you've spent it all!"

Father lunged for her, smacking Hanna hard across the jaw. She should have seen it coming. He would never take her accusations without a fight. Hanna held her ground. Father's eyelids drooped even as he glared. Once more, he slid into his chair. A moment later, a snore like a bear rumbled from his throat. He'd fallen asleep, drunk, his mouth open, his cruel hands hanging by his sides.

"Come now," Hanna whispered, gathering Katja and Hans into her arms. "You eat your potatoes."

She set the small spuds down on their crude wooden table, wiped the blood from her nose, and managed a smile. Katja, Hans, and Martin reached for the food with dirty fingers, and swallowed it down like wolves. Hanna's stomach growled. How she craved the fatty taste of meat. They never had bratwurst anymore.

Smoothing Katja's dark curls, Hanna kissed the toddler's damp forehead. "Eat up, little deer." Katja's soulful brown eyes darted toward their slumbering father.

"It's all right," Hanna whispered, hoping the child wasn't coming down with a fever. She'd once found her little sister curled up in the grass outside after one of Father's drunken rages, like a fawn in a meadow.

With her mother dead, and her father useless, Hanna found herself solely responsible for keeping her siblings clothed and fed. A portion of her wages from the tailor shop went to their elderly neighbor, Frau Kruger, who watched Katja and Hans

during the day. The widow fed them brown bread and eggs. Thank God, for they often had nothing more than scraps. Father spent every penny at the saloons.

He beat Hanna when he thought she was withholding her coins from him. And she had been. She'd managed to stash away nearly eight dollars in a jar, which she kept hidden. Soon it would be enough money to escape.

Hanna closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Mountain air. Wildflowers. In her memories, she could see the green fields surrounding her cottage in Mittenwald and Mother's wise hands, rolling dough for schnecken.

But when Hanna opened them, Mother was gone. An icy wind seeped through the cracks of the ramshackle house, and Hanna shivered. While the children were eating, she pried the board in the bedroom floor loose and added more coins to her savings jar. Next to it stood the delicate plate Mother had painted. Hanna wished to live in that idyllic scene amongst the weeping willows. Trailing her finger along Mother's brushstrokes, she imagined Mother watching over her from heaven.

Hanna sniffled, pulling her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. The damp air penetrated the threadbare fabric. Setting the wooden plank back into place, she ignored her rumbling belly and hoped the children had eaten their fill. Father groaned in his sleep, causing her to flinch. Mother had been foolish to fall in love. Such vulnerability was a sign of weakness. And Hanna could not be weak if she wanted to stay alive.

Father's greed had been the reason their family had left Bavaria and come to this vile and sinful place. No man would

decide her fate, not Father, not a husband, *no one*. From the doorway to their kitchen, Hanna looked at Martin, his face partially illuminated by the glow of their kerosene lamp. Her brother's lip quivered.

"Martin," she asked. "What are you feeling?"

When he turned to her, his eyes shone with tears. Hanna didn't need him to explain further. Their mother's absence ached like an open wound.

"Do you remember the ship?" Martin asked. "And the train from Hamburg, how we were loaded in like pigs?" He shook his head. "Mother was sick with pneumonia, and yet Father insisted we travel to America. We never should have come here."

Martin had been only a boy of seven when they had traveled in the belly of the steamer. It stank of feces and rot. Hanna hadn't expected him to remember Mother's rattling cough, or her ragged breaths. But perhaps it was the painful things in life that people remembered most.

"I know," Hanna said, her shoulders slumping. "Yet there is nothing we can do. San Francisco is our home now. Take the children. It is time for bed."

Father let out a grunt, and Hanna clenched her fists. She could purchase a packet of poison at one of the low groceries and slip it in his drink. But she wasn't capable of murder. Or perhaps Father could be drugged and clubbed over the head, put aboard a merchant ship to set sail for foreign lands. No one would miss him.

"Hanna, I'm still hungry," Hans said, tugging the hem of her dirndl. His blue eyes pleaded with hers. She knelt on the

dirt floor and hugged him tight. Katja cowered behind Hanna's skirt, watching Father twitch in his sleep. "Ana, I scared."

"Don't be frightened," Hanna said. "I will sing you a lullaby."

The little ones nodded.

Leading Hans and Katja by the hand, Hanna entered the small room they shared and tucked them into bed. Martin stood in the kitchen, staring out the window into the darkness. What dreams did he have, kept in those stars? Hanna wouldn't relinquish hers either. Father couldn't control her forever.

"Martin," Hanna whispered. "You come to bed now?"

"In a moment," he said. "Good night."

"Sleep well."

Hanna tucked Mother's quilt under Hans's heart-shaped face and patted the thick cotton fabric. The colors had faded, but the birds and flowers formed an intricate design. Every day, Hanna silently thanked Mother for sitting by her side and teaching her how to sew. As a child, Hanna had hated sewing. But now it was her most valuable skill.

Closing her eyes, Hanna remembered the sound of Mother's voice. A song crept past her lips. She stroked Katja's cheek as she sang.

Sleep, baby, sleep.

Across the heavens move the sheep.

Hanna blew out the kerosene lamp and set it next to the bed. Her jaw ached where Father had struck her. Sucking in her breath, Hanna let her cool fingertips settle on the sore spot.

Ship bells tinkled in the distance, and she curled up against Hans's and Katja's warm bodies. In the smoky darkness, her lids grew heavy and she sank into the lumpy straw and cotton mattress.



Pushing open the door of Walton's Tailor Shop, Hanna walked past the counter into the back room. Piles of silk and taffeta dresses awaited mending, their fabrics more rich and sumptuous than anything she could ever dream of wearing.

"Be careful with those grubby hands of yours," Mrs. Cunningham said, looking down at Hanna over half-moon spectacles. "The pearls that must be reattached to the collar of Miss Jameson's gown are worth more than you could understand."

"Yes, ma'am," Hanna said, picking at her cuticles, which had become red and raw from how hard she scrubbed them with soap.

The corners of Mrs. Cunningham's mouth turned downward, her eyes resting on Hanna's jawline. "Stay in the back room."

Hanna touched her face. The bruise must have come through.

"Yes, ma'am."

When Mrs. Cunningham had gone, Hanna laid a dress flat across the table. What had this woman done to tear the pleated hem of her striped silk gown? Perhaps she'd been dancing

at a private party for the fashionable set, something Hanna would never get to do. The black buttons along the bodice had become loose, as though the wearer had been careless unfastening them. Hanna threaded a needle and began to work on the large bustle, stitching a rip in the fabric.

A moment later, the bell at the shop door jingled.

“Sorry I’m late, ma’am,” Margaret said, scurrying inside, her cheeks flushed from the cold. Margaret looked at Mrs. Cunningham. “My sister has got a fever. She’s a wee thing, and I couldn’t leave until it had broken.”

“I don’t care for your personal business,” Mrs. Cunningham said. “There are plenty of other girls who’d be grateful to take your place.”

Margaret bit her lip. She walked briskly into the back room and took a seat beside Hanna, her pretty, pale face creased with worry.

“Is it Finna?” Hanna asked, reaching out.

Margaret clasped Hanna’s hand in hers. “Oh, Hanna, I’m worried sick.”

Hanna nodded. “I will work late. When Mrs. Cunningham goes home, you ought to go home too.”

Margaret shook her head, her deep red curls swaying against her shoulders. “You’re such a dear. But there’s too much work for one person.” She bit her lip. “Oh, love. Does it hurt?”

Hanna shrugged. “It is not so bad.”

Margaret threaded her needle. She picked up a yellow silk ball gown with short sleeves and large bows. “Drink is a curse, I tell you. And so is bloody gambling. Eight mouths to feed and

me da throws money at the roulette wheel like he's Mr. Rockefeller. I need every penny for Finna's medicine."

Margaret shared Hanna's troubles, with more siblings to care for than Hanna could count. Sometimes Margaret's pale face bore purple shadows beneath her eyes. Like the other Irish immigrants, Margaret's father worked a paddy wagon, digging up the earth to carve roads from the hillside. And, like Hanna's father, whiskey was his poison.

"How much will it cost?" Hanna asked.

Margaret frowned. "Twenty cents."

Hanna reached into her coin purse. "Here," she said, handing Margaret two silver dimes. "Take it."

Margaret's eyes widened. "Oh, Hanna. Thank you, truly."

Mrs. Cunningham appeared, the lace collar of her dress tight against her neck and fastened with a large opal brooch.

"Stop chattering and get to work or you'll both be out of a job."

Hanna worked deftly, reattaching buttons and sewing knife pleats until her fingers bled. How could a woman wear so many frills? The ribbed bustle cages, corsets, coats, skirts, and hats were as elaborate as costumes in an opera. Women in the street sometimes snickered at Hanna's dirndl. The cotton dress with its floral print was respectable in Hanna's farm town, but here in America, it was nothing but a rag.

Margaret's calico day dress had been tailored closer to the day's fashions, though made of modest cotton in a simple brown. The way Margaret looked longingly at the satin ribbons, pearls, brocade, jet buttons, and lace collars of these fine

gowns, Hanna knew Margaret also wished to wear something beautiful, just once.

The bell of the shop door jingled and two men stepped inside. From their top hats, gold watch chains, and fitted waistcoats, Hanna discerned they were men of importance. With silver flooding into the city from the Comstock Lode mine in Nevada, men like these became millionaires while immigrant families starved.

The elder man looked at Hanna, and ice ran through her veins. *Verdammt!* She'd forgotten to close the door to the back room. Though he had a handsome face, his green eyes sent a chill down to her bones. His long fingers, adorned with gold rings, wrapped around the head of his cane, radiated power—and the darkness beneath it.

"Hello, we've brought in a few suits for repair," the younger man said, handing the jackets and trousers to Mrs. Cunningham. His blue eyes sparkled in the light. As he removed his hat, his thick, golden curls defied the pomade he had slicked through them.

"This is women's work, Lucas," the elder said, knocking his cane against the floor. "Throw some money at the old crow, and let's be on our way."

"Have some respect, Robert," Lucas said.

In her haste to sit down, Margaret knocked the table leg with her knee, spilling a jar full of pearls onto its side. Hanna covered her mouth as they rolled to the floor. Gasping, Margaret looked at Hanna with wide eyes. "Oh, Christ! She'll can me."

Hanna darted forward, crouching to avoid the gaze of the men as she hastily picked up the pearl beads, one by one.

Mrs. Cunningham glared at Hanna, yet managed to main-

tain a pleasant tone. "Oh dear! I apologize, gentlemen. It appears I have quite a clumsy little fool in my shop."

"Forgive me," Hanna said. "It was my fault."

Soon Margaret appeared at Hanna's side, scouring the floor on hands and knees for the precious pearls. "Thank you," Margaret whispered.

"Here," Lucas said, bending on one knee and holding out a pearl to Hanna. "You've missed one."

Hanna looked into his eyes, blue as a summer sky. "Thank you." She opened her palm. When Lucas set the pearl inside, Hanna warmed from his touch.

The older man, Robert, who'd been standing impatiently by the door, turned and stared at Margaret as if she were a juicy piece of flank steak.

"Girl," Mrs. Cunningham snapped at Margaret. "Make yourself useful and take these suits while I write up a receipt."

Lucas smiled. "Thank you. I'm afraid I was dancing too vigorously at the Regatta Ball. The stitching on the shoulder is torn."

Margaret giggled. "You ought to see me dance a jig. It ain't easy not to rip a seam or two!"

Mrs. Cunningham shot her a look and Margaret scuttled away.

Mrs. Cunningham turned to Hanna. "What are you lollygagging for? Put those beads away before someone slips and breaks his neck."

"Yes, ma'am," Hanna said. Hurrying into the back room, Hanna turned the jar upright and opened her palm, pouring the pearls inside.

"I do apologize, gentlemen," Mrs. Cunningham said. "One of the girls will make you a cup of tea while you wait. It shall only be a moment."

Robert cleared his throat. "None for me. Thank you." He looked to Lucas. "Let's be out of here. We've a meeting at the Palace Hotel in fifteen minutes."

"Actually, I'd quite enjoy a warm cup of tea," Lucas said.

"*You*," Mrs. Cunningham hissed at Hanna, poking her head into the back room. "Make the gentleman a cup of tea at once!"

Hanna's hands trembled as she poured the steaming brew from a silver pot into a porcelain cup with a gold rim. Her stomach rumbled. How nice it would be to have hot tea on such a cold winter's day. But it was meant only for customers.

"Cream and sugar, sir?" Hanna asked.

"Yes, please," Lucas said.

Hanna felt Lucas's fingers brush hers as she handed him the saucer. Her cheeks tingled. "Here you are."

"Thank you," he said. "May I ask your name?"

Her throat felt dry. "Hannelore Schaeffer, sir."

"My, that is a mouthful," Lucas said, raising his eyebrows. He sipped his tea. "Do your friends call you Hannelore?"

She noticed the dimples that framed his smile. They gave him a pleasant, boyish appearance. "No. My friends call me Hanna. You may call me that too, if you like." Hanna's face grew hot. "Oh, sir, I am so sorry. I did not mean . . ."

Lucas laughed. "What, we can't be friends?"

Hanna smiled. "I suppose we could."

Robert snorted, and Lucas's smile began to fade. Straight-

ening himself, Lucas seemed to remember his position as a man of society. He cocked his head, eyeing Hanna quizzically. "You're not from here, are you? You have an accent."

"I am from Bavaria," Hanna answered. "Now I have lived here five years."

"Your English is quite good," Robert said, raising his eyebrow as if in accusation. "How peculiar."

Hanna stared at the floor. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"You wear your hair differently than most women," Robert said. "Like a farm girl. Perhaps you grew up in a barn amongst sheep and cattle?"

Hanna looked up again, touching the dark plaits she'd pinned atop her head. Heat burned her cheeks. She didn't have money for false hair, curls worn long and bouncy over the shoulder, nor a fanciful little hat. Truthfully, Hanna thought the hats worn by society women to be ridiculous, adorned with ruffles and feathers, flowers, foliage, and even faux fruits. What use would she have for such a thing?

"I don't have time for curls," Hanna said.

Suddenly, Lucas's smile reappeared, indenting his dimples. "You're very practical."

Hanna looked at Lucas, his expression so inviting. Unbidden, a smile began to creep across her face. But when Robert shot Lucas a scowl, Lucas's eyes lost their sparkle. Lucas cleared his throat, straightening his ascot.

"Thank you," he said, "for mending our suits. I'm sure they shall come back good as new. And please thank your friend as well."

“What is her name?” Robert asked, his eyes cold.

“Margaret O’Brien, sir,” Hanna said.

“Industrious creatures, aren’t they?” Robert murmured, polishing the head of his cane with a handkerchief. “A good deal of peasant blood runs in their veins.”

Hanna’s stomach clenched, but she did not speak out against Robert’s insult. Neither did Lucas, whose cheeks flushed pink.

Mrs. Cunningham reappeared with a paper receipt and Hanna busied herself, reaching for Lucas’s dish and teacup. “May I?”

He nodded, handing them to her, so their fingers brushed again. Hanna tingled at the contact, wondering if Lucas had intended it.

“Your suits shall be ready in three days,” Mrs. Cunningham said. “The total is four dollars.”

Hanna’s eyes widened upon hearing a sum so high. She and Margaret earned less than a dollar a day.

Robert knocked his cane against the floor. “Good. That’s sorted, then. Come, Lucas.”

Lucas placed his top hat upon his head. He tipped it toward Hanna. “Good-bye, Miss Schaeffer.”

Hanna nodded. “Good-bye.”

When Mrs. Cunningham turned away, Robert pushed open the door, letting in a gust of chilly air. Lucas followed, but paused when he reached the threshold.

“Just so you know,” he said quietly, without turning around, “I like your hair the way it is.”

Hanna’s stomach felt like birds had taken flight inside of it.

And without another word, Lucas followed Robert out of the shop and onto the cobbled street.

When Hanna met Margaret in the back room, Margaret's face brightened. "Did you speak with him?" Margaret asked.

Hanna smoothed a pink taffeta gown against the table. "Yes."

"What a fine lad," Margaret said, a naughty look in her eye. "And so handsome! Do you fancy him?"

"He was kind," Hanna said, picking up a needle as she felt her cheeks flush. Fabric slipped between her fingers as she stitched in neat rows. "But I'm not so foolish as to have eyes for a gentleman. I know what I am."

Margaret poked Hanna in the ribs. "A fine seamstress and a good friend. He would be *lucky* to have you."

Hanna smiled at Margaret. "Not true, you silly hen."

They stifled their giggles before Mrs. Cunningham could reprimand them again. Hanna bit her lip. Would Lucas ever be interested in a girl like her? *Leave the church in the village*, as the old German saying went.