

# Chapter One

**DECEMBER 20, 1881**

There had been occasions in the past when Inez Stannert had looked a man—and even, once, a woman—straight in the eye and felt justified in pulling the trigger. And she suspected there might be times in the future when she would have to do so again.

But she would never harm a child.

Never.

However, there were times that sorely tried her soul.

This was one of them.

Face contorted in agony, twelve-year-old Antonia Gizzi clapped her hands to her ears and implored Inez. “I can’t stand it! Please! No more!”

Inez frowned at her young ward and tried to stem her growing irritation. At least Antonia had staged her protest in a whisper, loud though it was. And at least they were seated in a mezzanine box of the Grand Opera House, not in the balcony or orchestra where Antonia’s groans and grumbles would disturb others. Inez snapped her silk fan closed, set the silver guard sticks against Antonia’s arm, and pressed down. “This is the encore. The performance is almost over.”

Inez had intended the evening to be an early Christmas gift to

the girl—an elevating experience, but also a partial apology for sending her away from San Francisco for the upcoming holiday. However, Antonia seemed to view being subjected to the recital by a highly acclaimed prima donna as punishment heaped upon punishment, reacting as if knives were being plunged into her ears.

The beautiful strains of “*Dove sono i bei momenti*” soared through the air, touching the frescoes, flying off the light-blue drapery, stilling the scattered murmurs and shufflings of the two thousand or so viewers. The singer below shifted her stance, raising one languid arm as her voice climbed the scale. Her gloves and dress—a glittering affair of gold and silver—captured the illumination from the footlights, shimmering like her voice. The piano accompanist, a gentleman with dark, silver-streaked hair that had its own metallic sheen, leaned into the keyboard with intensity. A little too much intensity, Inez thought. In her estimation, he should have gone with a lighter touch so the instrument was not warring with the singer for dominance.

At a particularly fulsome trill, Antonia rolled her eyes skyward, looking for all the world as if she were about to have a fit and fall from her chair. Luckily, for Inez’s patience and Antonia’s ears, the aria ended and the audience erupted into applause and enthusiastic plebeian whistles, punctuated by “Brava!” or “Again!” depending on the admirer’s familiarity with opera and Romance languages. Antonia jumped up from her chair. “Now do we get to go backstage and see all the scenery and ropes and rigging and interesting stuff?”

As an additional treat, Inez had used her connections as co-owner of the D & S House of Music and Curiosities to persuade Mr. Thackery, the assistant manager of the opera house, to give them a peek behind the proscenium arch and a personal introduction to the visiting diva. At this point, Inez was tempted to quash the tour as retribution for Antonia’s boorish behavior during the recital. But looking down at the girl’s expectant face—her plaits of dark hair coming undone, even though she had done little

besides sit and squirm for the past three hours—Inez didn't have the heart to do so.

Besides, she was just as curious as her ward to see what lay beyond the footlights.

"We are to wait here for Mr. Thackery to arrive and escort us," said Inez.

No sooner had the words been said than the curtain to the box swept aside, revealing the assistant manager. A toothsome smile came out of hiding below his walrus mustache. That smile, the mustache, his slightly bulging blue eyes, and thinning reddish hair made Inez think of him as an over-eager squirrel—all he lacked was a mouthful of acorns. "Mrs. Stannert and little Antonia. I hope you both enjoyed the performance."

Antonia glowered. Inez, who suspected the girl was about to blurt out her real opinion of the singing, gave Antonia's arm a light pinch as a warning.

Thackery didn't seem to notice, possibly because Antonia's glare was muted underneath her bonnet. Or it could have been because his perpetually pop-eyed gaze was so firmly fixed on Inez.

The scowl disappeared from Antonia's face, replaced by a too-wide smile. "Oh, yes, Mr. Thackery," she piped up with what Inez knew was patently false earnestness. "The seats were excellent and the performances most exquisite."

"Glad to hear," he said.

"It was wonderful, and we are ever so grateful for your consideration," added Inez.

He beamed, then said, "This way, ladies, this way, if you please." He started to take Inez by the arm.

She avoided what she deemed a familiarity by deploying her fan with a twist of the wrist while turning to Antonia and saying, "Be on your best behavior, Antonia. It is a great honor to see behind the scenes of the Grand Opera House and to meet Mrs. Carrington Drake. She has come all the way from Philadelphia to sing here in San Francisco."

“That’s right,” enthused Thackery, who bowed them out of the box and led them to an elegant curved staircase. “The Golden Songbird has returned to the city where her voice first took flight and charmed the masses. Not here at the Grand, of course, as we only opened seven years ago, in seventy-four. I recall seeing her ten or more years ago, at the Melpomene Theater. The Melpomene was well known in its time, but it was never as grand as the Grand is now.”

A gentleman, who had been mounting the stairs against the tide of operagoers surging down, stopped before them. Blocking their path, he boomed, “Mr. Thackery!” He ripped the bowler hat from his head, but Inez doubted it was a gesture of respect.

Inez retreated a step, dragging Antonia with her. The man’s wild gaze was alarming, and Inez was glad it was not directed at them. All his attention focused on the assistant manager.

Thackery, to his credit, stayed put, and even bristled. “Mr. Teague. It is not necessary to raise your voice.”

Two burly ushers at the bottom of the staircase glanced up at the fracas. One started up the staircase, but the other stopped him. They stayed where they were, watching closely.

“Well, if it’s the only way I can get someone’s attention around here, then I guess it *is* necessary.” Teague ran an ink-stained hand over his longer-than-fashionable unruly hair, which was the same dark-red hue as the beard that threatened to engulf his bow tie.

He pointed at Thackery. “Where’s Graham Drake? He must be here. After all, his wife was your star attraction.”

“He is not available,” huffed Thackery. “If you wish to speak with Mr. Drake, you shall have to do so elsewhere.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried that? He’s avoiding me. Every place I track him, he’s been and gone. Or, he’s ‘not available.’ Thackery, I bought one of your high-priced tickets for tonight’s performance and I’m here on legitimate business.”

“You are not a theater critic, Mr. Teague. You came as a member of the audience.”

Thackery must have made some secret signal, because the two ushers were in motion, making their determined way upward.

Thackery continued, "The performance is over. It's time for you to leave."

The ushers grabbed Teague's arms and roughly hauled him backward. Stumbling, he was half dragged, half hauled down the stairs. In a voice that would have carried easily from the Grand's stage to the back seats, Teague shouted, "You tell Graham Drake he can't hide from me forever. I know who he is, and what he is, and I take it as my professional duty and honor as a member of the fourth estate to tell the world."

As he was thus escorted across the elegant lobby, the departing patrons paused, watching this unexpected epilogue to their evening's entertainment. The women pulled their long elegant skirts aside as if his passing might contaminate their new winter ensembles. The men murmured to each other and eyed Teague with calculation, as if weighing his words upon the scales of rumor and truth. Upon reaching the exit, the ushers unceremoniously thrust him outdoors, and his shouting ceased.

Thackery turned to Inez and Antonia on the steps above. "Well. That sort of excitement was common twenty, thirty years ago in the city, not so much these days."

Inez could see that Antonia was burning with questions. She took the girl's shoulder, a silent admonition, yet couldn't help but ask one question herself. "So, this Mr. Teague. Is he a local newspaperman?"

Thackery looked about, perhaps hoping the question was addressed to someone else. With no likely suspects nearby, he finally said, "Yes, yes, he is. Or perhaps, was? It seems I heard some story or other, but since I cannot say for certain, it is best I not say at all. I can assure you he is not a theater critic, nor a reporter of musical news nor high society. So, let's continue, shall we? To more pleasant things."

He guided them down the stairs to the entrance hall, bright

with crystal chandeliers, past the fountain in the center of the lobby. Inez inhaled the fragrance of lavender cologne water as it plashed softly from innumerable needle jets. Scent and sound died as Thackery guided them across the floor to a set of side doors.

They proceeded through a corridor, heading back in the direction of the stage, with Thackery chattering all the while. “We are honored, Mrs. Stannert, that you and Miss Antonia take such a strong interest in the arts, particularly the theater. The Grand, with her architecture and amenities, proudly surpasses any of the other theatrical venues the West has to offer.”

Inez murmured politely, distracted by his Adam’s apple—large, prominent, bobbling with excitement. It paired oddly with his enormous, drooping mustache, and she found herself wondering, not for the first time, why he hadn’t grown a beard to conceal his throat.

He continued, “We have an art gallery over the entrance hall. Perhaps you’d like to return and see it during the day when you can fully appreciate the skylight, which is a work of art in itself. There are numerous offices all along the gallery, designed as artists’ studios. We have corridors that connect to the theater, featuring paintings by local artists as well as select pieces by European masters. It is a most excellent area for promenading, and I shall be delighted to be your guide, next time you grace us with your presence.”

He stopped and bent down, bringing his face to Antonia’s level. “Ah, but I know what you came to see, little Miss.”

Antonia took a quick step back. Inez hoped Antonia’s small but deadly pocketknife was at home and not tucked in her coat pocket. The *salvavirgo*, sharp but innocuous in appearance when its blade was folded away, had belonged to Antonia’s deceased mother. The girl had a bad habit of carrying it everywhere and pulling it out whenever she felt threatened.

“The stage, eh?” He winked at her. “Would you like to stand on center stage? See what it’s like to look out over the auditorium?”

Antonia's posture relaxed. "Oh, yes, sir!"

Inez was glad to see she had remembered her manners enough to add the "sir."

Antonia added, "I'm wondering if it's like the Grand Central Theater in Leadville. Leadville's where we used to live."

A deep furrow joined his eyebrows in puzzlement. "Lead... what?"

Inez interrupted hastily, hoping Thackery was ignorant of the notoriety of that particular Grand theater, which stood hip-deep and proud in the red-light district of Colorado's premiere silver-mining boomtown. "This is a different class of theater, Antonia. This is a proper opera house. Famous actors and actresses and singers of the first order come from all over the world to perform here."

The girl tipped up her head to view Inez from under her bonnet brim. "But Mrs. S, they have actresses and singers at the Leadville Grand too."

Inez cleared her throat, thinking that the honky-tonk singers and so-called actresses of the Leadville Grand, who doubled as prostitutes to augment their pay, would probably go cross-eyed and mute should they be shoved onto the stage of the San Francisco Grand. She squeezed Antonia's shoulder lightly in warning before locking her gaze on the assistant manager. Summoning a smile with just a hint of demureness, she said, "Mr. Thackery, we would be most thrilled to see your stage and honored to stand upon it."

With the clucking eagerness of a hen herding its chicks, he led them through the backstage area, providing a nonstop commentary on the opera house's merits. He interrupted his own monologue to occasionally squawk warnings at the stagehands as they hauled on ropes, lifting scenery to the top of the building or lowering it through openings in the stage into the basement.

"The stage is eighty-seven feet deep and one hundred and six feet wide." He halted as an enormous canvas flat, painted to show

stately columns and a rolling countryside, was being hauled aloft with ropes by a clutch of stagehands. It was ascending in fits and starts at a dangerously crooked angle with much clattering and ratcheting.

Thackery strode forward and barked, “You there, you men with the backdrop. Carefully now.”

“Are they going to drop it?” Antonia whispered to Inez, almost as if she hoped they would.

Thackery waited while the men grumbled and tussled with the ropes. Once the backdrop righted, Thackery returned to Inez and Antonia and continued his verbal annotations in a normal tone. “The flats are twenty-four feet high, the highest of any in the world. They can be lifted to the top of the building or lowered into the basement until needed.”

They walked out onto the stage, their hard-soled tread upon the boards echoing into the upper reaches of the building and out into the vast space of the auditorium. Antonia, who had been gawking at the rigging and machinery, stepped to the edge of the stage and peered over the footlights powered, according to Thackery, by electricity.

“Electricity?” Inez exclaimed.

He preened. “The Grand is exceedingly modern and employs the latest in technology.”

Antonia commented, “There are sure a lot of chairs out there.”

“We can seat three thousand souls,” said Thackery. “Only two theaters in the United States have larger auditoriums.”

The stage itself was mostly empty, save for the grand piano, right of center. The ghostly notes from the arias recently played seemed to swirl around it, calling to Inez. Her fingers tingled in her gloves, longing to recreate what she had just heard. Unable to resist, she headed toward the piano.

“A magnificent instrument,” said Thackery, pacing her. “We are so grateful your music store had a Broadwood in stock. We usually use Steinway, but Mrs. Drake, she, ah...”

Inez spared a glance his way as his chatty stream of words dried up. He was visibly uncomfortable, seeming to be seeking a way forward. He finally finished with “Mrs. Drake preferred a Broadwood.”

“They are certainly well suited to such surroundings,” Inez replied, as much to ease his discomfort as to reassure him that Mrs. Drake’s preference was completely understandable. Inez smoothed a gloved hand over the curve of the open lid, marveling at the silky sheen. She had another Broadwood that took “center stage” in the music store, but here in the opera house, the instrument was in its element. Unconfined by pressing walls nor dulled by carpets on the floor, open to the vastness of the auditorium, it stood upon the stage as aristocratic as any diva.

More than anything, she wanted to touch the keys, hear the notes pour out from her fingers to the keys and hammers, out over the orchestra pit, and experience what it was like to send music over the now-empty seats. “Mr. Thackery, may I?”

The toothy smile broke through again. “Of course, Mrs. Stannert. It does have a lovely tone, as I’m certain you know.”

Inez settled onto the bench, taking care she wasn’t sitting on the tassels of the mauve satin sash decorating her overskirt and that the long, knife-pleat underskirt stayed untangled from her satin shoes. She removed her gloves, lifted the fallboard to reveal the keyboard, and set her fingertips upon the smooth, cool ivory keys. She pondered. What to play? What would be a proper offering for such a musically sacred setting?

A short reflection, and the choice was obvious. Simplicity, and a nod to the amazing purity of Mrs. Drake’s voice.

Inclining her head over the keyboard, Inez half closed her eyes, pulling up from memory “Ave Maria.”

The flowing melodic line wrapped around her. Antonia, Mr. Thackery, the stage, everything else disappeared, becoming mist to the music.

The last notes had not yet died when a touch on her shoulder startled her.

“Perfectly and impeccably exquisite.”

Inez twisted around at the euphonious female voice. The prima donna, Theia Carrington Drake, stood close behind her.