

Chapter One

**SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
THURSDAY EVENING, MARCH 9, 1882**

Long vacant, the house smelled of dust and decay.

The light from an assembly of flickering lanterns sent shadows dancing over the peeling wallpaper in the kitchen, hiding and revealing the bulk of a neglected cast-iron stove, a rusted pie safe, and an oversized oak icebox. Still, for a house that had been sealed up for almost twenty years, it could have been worse.

Inez Stannert, standing apart from the handful of folks waiting in the kitchen with her, cast an appraising eye around the gloomy room. The clutch of souls gathered near the entry to the kitchen pantry seemed to shift about uneasily in the wavering illumination. The uncertain lighting only served to conceal the house's better qualities and increase the general atmosphere of abandonment. Inez knew from her earlier inspection that the building had "good bones." If it hadn't, she would never have agreed to buy it in concert with Moira Krause, the young widow who owned the adjoining boardinghouse.

But the dust. And that smell.

The place needed a good airing and a thorough cleaning, and soon. However, Moira had wanted to have a little ceremony first, to celebrate the purchase and commemorate the moment when her current boardinghouse and this, its common-wall twin, could be joined to form a single establishment.

Inez wondered what was taking Moira so long—after all, she only had to walk from the house next door. She had sent them all ahead, and now here they were, waiting. Impatience tightened like a hand around her throat. Or was it the dust that made it hard to breathe? She swore she could see her breath forming and disappearing in the dust motes hanging in the stagnant air.

“This place looks like a haunted house,” came a whisper at her elbow. Inez glanced down at her thirteen-year-old ward, Antonia Gizzi, who shifted from foot to foot while eyeing the room. Inez noted that, although she had checked and approved Antonia’s appearance earlier that evening, the girl’s chin now sported a smudge of dust, her bonnet was askew, corkscrew strands of dark curly hair had somehow escaped her braid, and her coat was buttoned crookedly. It was as if all of Inez’s efforts to impose order and harmony upon her ward succumbed to the forces of chaos as soon as Inez glanced away.

“Or maybe a pirate hideout,” Antonia continued. “Didn’t you say a sea captain lived here? Maybe he was captain of a pirate ship. Maybe he hid his treasure here.” She looked down at the floor, scuffing the linoleum with her dusty boot. “Maybe under the floors.”

Inez shushed her, then murmured, “The man who sold us this building is Bertram Taylor. His *father* was the captain. Mr. Taylor inherited this house when his father died recently. Mrs. Krause told me Mr. Taylor’s father was a Navy captain for the Union during the war and that he later worked for a large

steamship company. He was most definitely not a pirate, and there is no treasure here.”

This was not the first time that pirates and treasure had popped up in their conversations. Inez knew that Antonia was avidly reading installments of *Treasure Island, or, the Mutiny of the Hispaniola* in the weekly penny magazine *Young Folks*. The girl was now obsessed with the wharves, ships, and brigands. After school, Antonia sometimes took the long way around to pass by the city’s waterfront. On those occasions, upon arriving “home” at D & S House of Music and Oriental Curiosities, she would burst in through the door with the latest nautical news: “The SS *Australia* is at the wharf at Stewart and Folsom Streets!” she’d announce. “That’s the Oceanic Steamship Company! Picking up mail for Honolulu, I’ll bet.” She could rattle off the kind of ship, how it was rigged, its tonnage, and nauseam. Inez was alternately amused and exasperated. She disapproved of these forays but knew putting her foot down would only cause the girl to go behind her back.

Before Inez could say more, the scent of bay rum washed over her and a voice that sounded as if it had been made for shouting over the roar of the open ocean added, “Pirates, no, little Miss. Mrs. Stannert is right about that. However, many a good man has been shanghaied in this very city and forced into conscription on ships of a less-than-respectable nature.”

Antonia’s mismatched eyes—one brown, the other a blue-green hazel—widened. “D’you mean slavers, Captain Edward?”

“Of a sort,” said Edward with a sideways wink at Inez, then added, “And it’s not ‘Captain,’ little Miss. I was never a captain, only a master-at-arms.”

Inez turned toward the speaker. “Well, Master Edward, surely it has been a long time since such doings occurred in the city.”

Edward, a robust, craggy man, who Inez estimated was in his

late forties or early fifties, gave her a slight smile. During a meal shared at Mrs. Krause's boardinghouse table, he had explained to Inez how he had long since "retired" from plying the open waters to a job keeping order on San Francisco's docks. She had been struck at the time by his eyes—an unusual muddy blue-green, the color of the surf at San Francisco's Ocean Beach on a summer afternoon—his jovial spirit, and his impeccable manners.

Edward answered, "Not as long as you might think, ma'am. San Francisco may be more civilized away from the water, but it maintains much of its rougher history and nature near the wharves."

Inez frowned a little. She suspected that his remark, rather than serving as a warning to Antonia, would only fuel the girl's curiosity and boldness to explore the docks.

Apparently thinking she disbelieved his statement, Edward added, "I may not frequent the old Barbary Coast haunts anymore, having become overly fond of Mrs. Krause's cooking, but I can assure you 'tis true." He winked again. "These days, after dinner, I'm more inclined to nap or indulge in a game of cribbage than go out and about."

One of the other boarders muttered, "Where would Mrs. Krause be? I thought she was following us directly. My throat's gettin' dry, and I'm looking forward to wetting my whistle on some of that cider she promised."

A murmur of agreement circled the room. Moira had promised that all who elected to attend the ceremony would receive a slice of homemade apple pie and a dram of cider afterward. Inez thought the promise was the main reason why the few who had obediently gathered in the dank building remained, instead of disappearing to engage in other after-dinner activities.

The front door slammed, a faraway echo in the empty house.

A symphony of hurried footsteps followed—light tick-tock taps punctuated by heavier, slower thumps. As if summoned, Moira hastened into the kitchen, her glossy auburn hair in a neat braid coronet, her unbuttoned coat revealing a starched and embroidered apron. Her daughter, freckle-faced eight-year-old Charlotte, attired in a miniature version of her mother's apron, clutched her sleeve. The gloom of the kitchen seemed to flee in the face of Moira's single-minded determination.

Bustling in her wake was her friend, Mrs. Nolan, who ran the boardinghouse a few blocks distant, where Inez and Antonia took their meals. The gray-haired Mrs. Nolan puffed over to Inez and whispered, "Ooo, that took a little longer than I thought it would. Had to set out the pies, dessert plates, napkins, and silverware for the celebration afterward. She is a stickler for details, is our Moira. Likes everything proper and 'just so.'"

As Mrs. Nolan explained and excused, a man of short and rotund stature strutted into the kitchen as though he owned the place, travel writing desk under one arm.

Upton.

Inez wrinkled her nose in distaste. The lawyer was a necessary part of the evening, but that didn't mean she had to like the man. Mutton-chopped and top-hatted, Sherman Upton had acted on behalf of Bertram Taylor. Upton had made it clear he felt it was beneath him to negotiate with the two women, so Inez was all the more gratified that she and Moira had managed to wrangle a very reasonable price for the building, including all the goods and furnishings. It had helped immensely that Taylor was apparently more interested in having money in hand than in haggling. Neither woman had met nor seen hide nor hair of him.

Two familiar figures dressed in the caps and rough jackets of tradesmen, father and son locksmiths Joe and Paulie Harris, slid into the room behind Upton. Whereas Joe Harris had an

arthritic one-sided hobble and was no taller than the lawyer he dogged, Paulie was tall, lanky, and quiet, a shadow to the more pugnacious paterfamilias. They had stationed themselves by the front door this evening, barring entry to any curious passersby who might wonder about the excitement in the long-vacant residence.

Now that all were assembled, Inez was certain the locksmiths had secured the door before joining the others in the kitchen. Upton set up his portable desk atop the sturdy kitchen table. As he pulled out legal papers, ink bottles, pens, ink blotter, and his barrister's seal from the desk's various compartments, Moira looked around at the congregation.

"We are now all accounted for," she announced and clasped her hands over her apron. "Thank for your patience. This is a momentous occasion for me. Five years ago, when my dearly departed husband bought the residence on the other side of these walls, he had his eye set on buying this one as well. It was ever our intention to expand our ability to provide room-and-board in a proper Christian environment for working people such as yourselves. I am sure he is now watching and approving from Heaven."

She stopped, and a shadow of sorrow flitted across her face. With a resolute lift of her chin, she continued, "And there are many to thank among the living. First, Mrs. Nolan, who introduced me to Mrs. Stannert."

"Oh now," murmured Mrs. Nolan. Inez thought she saw the grandmotherly boardinghouse owner blush. "Just helping where I can."

Moira continued, "And Mr. Upton, who negotiated the sale." Upton peered disdainfully down his nose, which could not have been easy to do given his lack of height. Moira turned to the Harrises, who were standing by the kitchen entrance. "And

Mr. Harris, who faithfully performed his duty as locksmith and caretaker of the property for many years, at the behest of the former owner, Captain Taylor.”

Inez vividly recalled their first inspection of the property, with the faithful Joe Harris hovering at their heels as they examined the house, its fixtures, and its furnishings. Moira had explained that Bertram Taylor’s father had originally charged Joe Harris with keeping watch over the locked and empty property. The elder locksmith had taken this task very seriously, even refusing entry to Inez and Moira when they had wanted to inspect the building. He had only relented when they had contacted Upton, who had told Harris to let them in.

Moira addressed Upton. “Shall we sign the papers now?”

Upton said briskly as if he wished to be done and on his way, “Please. Both of you, Mrs. Krause and Mrs. Stannert, since you are listed as co-owners. Mr. Taylor has already done his part, as you’ll see.” Inez and Moira moved to opposite ends of the desk. Upton, in the middle, handed them pens and pushed a bottle of ink toward each, saying, “Multiple copies, so sign all of them.” He pointed, “Here, here, and here,” and stepped back. Inez dipped her pen and scrawled her signature in a manner that would probably have earned her a frown from her expensive private tutor back when she was a child of privilege in New York City.

Moira was forming the letters of her name carefully, slowly, in proper Spencerian fashion. Inez wanted to tap her foot to hurry Moira along but forbore. Much like Upton, Inez itched for the formalities and Moira’s little ceremony to be over and done with but for a different reason. Once she and Moira were legally the owners, the elder Harris would, perforce, have to give them the keys to the building’s intricately fashioned door locks—which he had personally designed and manufactured—something he had resisted doing.

When the papers were signed, Upton laid them out on the table to blot and to stamp with his official seal. Moira turned to Edward and said, “Master Edward, did you bring everything?”

The former seaman had brought a heavy sledgehammer and a knapsack with him. He nodded, opened the sack, and pulled out a horseshoe, hammer, and nails.

“Excellent!” Moira gave an imperious nod. “Please, mount it above the pantry door before we go any further.”

Inez stifled a sigh and an impulse to roll her eyes. Moira had many good qualities, including caution, determination, and an iron strength behind her soft voice, but Inez found her stubborn acceptance of supernatural causation annoying. Also, how Moira squared this belief with her equally strong faith in the tenets of Christianity was a mystery to Inez. Edward positioned a chair that looked as if it had not been sat on for decades underneath the entrance to the large pantry and climbed upon it. Horseshoe and nails in one hand, hammer in the other, he asked, “Points up or down, Mrs. Krause?” Inez had noticed how his tone changed, became gentler, when he spoke to Moira. That, combined with the way he glanced at her when she wasn’t looking, had Inez suspecting Master Edward was sweet on his landlady.

“Why, points up, of course, to hold the luck!”

He set the metal crescent tight above the entry with two well-placed blows.

Moira nodded her approval. “And now, for the wall.” She turned to the crowd. “How fortunate that the kitchen pantries of the two houses are opposite each other. Once we join them together, they shall provide a handy pass-through.”

While she spoke, Edward climbed off the chair, removed his jacket, and laid it neatly over the ladderback before retrieving the sledgehammer and returning to the pantry.

Moira picked up a lamp and beckoned to Inez. “Mrs. Stannert, would you care to bring another light forward and hold it high so Master Edward and the rest can see?”

Inez picked up the lamp from the kitchen table that had helped to illuminate the documents they had signed. She moved past the boarders, holding the long skirts of her petticoat, dress, and coat away from their shuffling feet. The smallish group had squeezed shoulder to shoulder into the wide entry of the pantry to gain a better view. Or perhaps they were simply maneuvering to see who would be the first to stampede through the opening to the kitchen on the other side, where the promised pie and cider awaited.

Antonia had advanced to the front of the pack and was now whispering something to little Charlotte, who stood by her side. Inez wagered Antonia had told Charlotte to keep an eye out for any treasure that might have been secreted behind the wall. Inez thought the most that the space behind the plaster and wood might reveal was a tangle of webs and maybe a nest of spiders.

Or maybe rats.

She shuddered and sincerely hoped not. Murderers, con men, lunatics, and thieves—she could and had faced many such without blinking. But sharp-toothed rodents were a different matter.

She took a post by Antonia and Charlotte to one side of the doorframe opposite Moira. Nudging the girls, she warned, “Not too close. You could be hit by the debris.”

Master Edward spat into his hands, rubbed them together, and picked up the sledgehammer. Inez turned the wick up to provide as much light to the bare interior as possible and held the lamp aloft. Moira did likewise. Edward took a couple practice swings. The thought flashed through Inez’s mind that the heavy tool would make a handy weapon for those who could

heft it and it would certainly be capable of smashing a rat flat, leaving no need for her to draw her pocket revolver, should one leap from behind the wall.

Edward planted a blow on a large faint gray stain on the ancient whitewash. Plaster exploded into dust and the lath strips beneath cracked, loud as a gunshot in the enclosure. He swung twice more. The dust in the pantry thickened into a fog and a long, jagged gap emerged in the wall. Inez retreated a step, hooking Antonia's coat collar and pulling her back when the girl crept forward for a better view. The retired master-at-arms stopped, set down the heavy tool, and wiped his face, whitened with powdered plaster, with a sleeve. He then picked up the hammer and swung again, widening the hole, which now stretched from floor to shoulder-height.

As he prepared to deliver another blow, he stopped. Inez saw his back stiffen. He lowered the sledgehammer to his side and muttered, "Son of a..."

Something, a pale shadow where they expected nothing but blackness, shifted in what should have been empty space between the walls.

Frowning, Inez lifted her lamp higher. Her light caught the glint of what looked like an eye. A chill skittered down her neck, cold as a breath of mountain winter.

Moira screamed. The light from her lamp dipped.

Edward backed out of the pantry, holding his sledgehammer up before him like a weapon. A skeleton, its single, impossible eye fixed upon the gaping observers, tilted out of the hole. Clothed in a mostly intact greatcoat, with color and details obscured by stains, time, and dust, it slumped out of the breach.

"Lord have mercy!" yelled Mrs. Nolan.

Inez sucked in a strangled lungful of plaster and damp.

The boarders' startled shouts and cries racketed around in the kitchen, intensified by the bare walls and tin ceiling.

The rest happened in a handful of seconds, although to Inez the actions seemed slow and deliberate, the sounds muffled but distinct, as if underwater. As the clothed bones hit the floor, a threadbare sack, apparently wedged high and behind the body, dislodged as well. The bag tumbled onto the shoulders of the coat with a *wump* and a symphony of metallic clinks. The tie holding it closed gave way, releasing a shower of gold coins. The impact jarred the skull, which, long freed from the confines of sinews and flesh, parted company from the spine with a jounce and rocked onto one cheekbone.

The eye Inez had seen in the lamplight popped out of the skull.

The white glass ball rolled across the pantry floor toward the retreating boarders, its painted blue iris and black pupil winking up at them, over and over, as it spun into and out of view. Charlotte had buried her face in her mother's apron, and Moira was backing away from the scene, clutching her daughter to her.

Belatedly, Inez turned to cover Antonia's gaze from the sight. Mouth agape, Antonia gawked at the scene in the pantry.

As Inez reached for her, Antonia whispered, "Pirates!"