

MURDER ON NOB HILL

CHAPTER ONE

Despite claims to the contrary -- some, I fear, voiced by members of my own family -- I pride myself on being an honest woman. As a matter of principle, I hold dissimulation of any kind in contempt. That said, I probably should add that I also subscribe to the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves", even if this self-help sometimes entails being economical with the truth.

If this last statement seems contradictory, I apologize. What I'm trying to explain is how I found myself poised on the brink of the most extraordinary adventure of my, to date, twenty-seven years. Despite being essentially an ethical person, you see, I had told a lie. More to the point, I had deliberately misled a group of narrow-minded men into assuming something I knew to be untrue. Furthermore, I do not regret my actions. Faced with the same circumstances, I would not hesitate to resort to this ruse again.

Those individuals who continue to hold -- in this year of our Lord 1880 -- that females belong in the home and should be denied educational opportunities beyond those required to secure a good marriage, will undoubtedly blame my dear father for such 'unwomanly moral turpitude' (their words, not mine). While I take full responsibility for my actions, I have to admit that this criticism is not without a grain of truth. Were it not for Papa -- the Honorable Horace T. Woolson, Superior Court Judge for the County of San Francisco -- I doubt I would have been standing on the corner of Clay and Kearny Streets, staring up at the law offices occupied by Shepard, Shepard, McNaughton and Hall.

The morning fog which had billowed in that morning through San Francisco's Golden Gate had begun to dissipate, taking with it the heavy, moisture-laden air which, even in late summer, can seep through one's clothing. While I'm not particularly affected by the cold, I did consider the emergence of the sun to be a good omen. Or perhaps I was looking for any sign, no matter how fanciful, to bolster my resolve. I realize I am considered by many -- including the before-mentioned members of my family -- to be willful and outspoken, unfeminine and certainly foolhardy in my determination to follow my own path in this world. What would these self-same critics say, I thought in some irony, if they could see the unladylike beads of perspiration

forming on my brow, or the cowardly pounding of my heart as I studied those unwelcoming windows?

But I was prevaricating, putting off the mission I had worked so long and so hard to achieve. Straightening my dress -- I had chosen a two-piece pewter-gray suit with as little bustle as I could get away with since the re-emergence of the over-stuffed derrière -- I checked the lapel watch pinned to my shirt waist. Five minutes to the hour. Time to put my plan to the test!

Purposefully, I crossed Kearny Street and entered the building. A directory in the lobby revealed that Shepard, Shepard, McNaughton and Hall held offices on the sixth floor, a level which I speedily, if somewhat jerkily, reached by means of one of Elisha Otis' new hydraulic elevators, or 'rising rooms' as they were popularly called. The office I sought was guarded by a solid oak door upon which the firm's name had been discreetly embossed.

I entered a room furnished with half a dozen desks, behind which sat as many clerks. The one seated nearest the door rose and, adjusting his spectacles, inquired of my business.

"My name is Sarah Woolson," I said with what I hoped was a confident smile. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Shepard."

I'm tall for a woman -- a full five feet eight inches in my stocking feet -- and I towered over the clerk, forcing him to look up at me at an angle which, I've noticed, makes some men uneasy.

"Miss Woolson? I don't seem to recall--" He checked an appointment book. "Ah, yes, I see we were expecting Mr. Samuel Woolson." He looked at me hopefully. "Your husband, perhaps?"

"Samuel is my brother," I said, forcing another smile. "I believe you were expecting S. L. Woolson. That is I."

The clerk's bony brow creased with uncertainty. "Oh, dear. Well, ah, yes. Perhaps I had better fetch Mr. Shepard."

"Thank you," I said, forbearing to remind him that was what I'd requested in the first place. The clerk scurried down a hallway and as I waited for his return I took stock of my surroundings.

The room was larger than I had originally thought; the wood paneling, as well as the crowded way the clerks' desks were wedged in one upon another, made it appear dim and cramped. Against the back wall were four doors, the top half of each paneled with glass. Inside these cubicles -- for they were hardly bigger than large closets -- sat what I presumed to be legal associates. At that moment one of them looked up and our eyes met. He seemed surprised, then

annoyed, as if my chance glance had invaded his privacy. He glowered at me rudely, then with a scowl returned to his papers.

I won't attempt to deceive you. For a moment I forgot my manners and stared openly at the man. He was a remarkable looking creature: long, clean-shaven, craggy face, topped by a thatch of unruly red hair, skin burned to a golden bronze, tie askew beneath a slightly rumpled white shirt. Even seated I could tell that he was very tall, and his shoulders were broad, as if he were no stranger to manual labor. Indeed, my overriding impression was one of amazement that such a man was inside an office at all, especially one of such limited dimensions.

As if sensing my eyes upon him the man looked up at me again, this time with a glare so fierce I was taken aback. With a withering look of my own, I turned away in time to see the clerk returning, followed by a portly gentleman in his sixties. I recognized the man as Joseph Shepard Sr., founder and senior partner of the firm. He had occasionally visited our home during my childhood, and I had always been fascinated by his thick shock of white hair and by the trumpeting sound he made at the back of his nose whenever he was annoyed, or when someone took exception to his views. It was obvious from the senior partner's distracted stare that he could not as easily place me.

"My clerk informs me there has been a misunderstanding, Miss Woolson." He placed his pince-nez atop a bulbous nose and subjected me to a squinting appraisal. "Mr. Samuel Woolson, whom my clerk informs me is your brother, has applied to our firm for the position of associate attorney. Naturally, I assumed I would be meeting with him this morning."

"I regret the confusion, Mr. Shepard, but it was I who applied for the position. The qualifications listed are mine, as are the initials, S. L., which stand for Sarah Lorraine."

"They are also your brother's initials," he stated in annoyance. "It's common knowledge that Judge Woolson's youngest son has been preparing for a career in law. What were we to think when we received your letter?"

"I hoped you would think that S. L. Woolson was eminently qualified to be taken on as an associate attorney in your firm."

"But you're a woman!"

"As is Clara Shortridge Foltz," I replied, determined not to be intimidated. "And that good lady has been practicing California law for four years. In this very city."

"I meant, Miss Woolson, that such a situation is impossible in this firm. Everyone knows that the sphere of women, vitally important as that is, belongs in the home."

This feeble, but popularly held argument, never failed to raise my hackles. "I know that is where men have placed us and where they would prefer us to remain. However, I see no reason why misguided reasoning should interfere with rational behavior."

There was a shocked stillness in the room. Mr. Shepard's face suffused with blood and for a moment I was afraid he might be suffering some sort of seizure. Then he started that dreadful sound at the back of his nose and I realized my rash, if honest, words had brought on a fit of pique. Since there was little I could do to retract them now -- even if I'd been so inclined -- I decided to press on with my qualifications.

"As I stated in my letter, I passed my bar examinations last year and continue to read law with my father, Judge Horace Woolson, whom I believe you know and respect. At the risk of appearing immodest, I am confident I possess the intelligence and character necessary to practice law in your firm."

During most of this recitation the senior partner had sputtered incoherently. "That is patently ridiculous!" he exclaimed when I had finished. "It is a well founded fact that women lack the nerve or strength of body for such a rigorous profession."

Another statement so ludicrous I couldn't stop myself from blurting, "I find it strange that practicing law in a comfortable, well-heated office is considered too demanding an occupation for women, yet laboring from dawn's first light in crowded, drafty, ill-lit sweatshops is not."

Joseph Shepard seemed incapable of speech. Belatedly, he realized that everyone in the room was watching us. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the red-haired man standing outside his cubicle, his mouth pulled into an ironic smile. I felt my face flush and turned away, aware that I would require all my wits to penetrate the formidable barrier of Mr. Shepard's prejudice.

"Miss Woolson," said the attorney, his several chins quivering with suppressed anger. "Out of deference to your father, I will ignore the underhanded means by which you gained entry into this office. However, the feminine hysterics you just displayed proves why women will never be able to practice law. I advise you to return home and--"

Whatever I was supposed to return home and do was lost as the door opened and a woman, perhaps a year or two younger than myself and fashionably attired in widow's black, stepped in. She had fair hair and a porcelain complexion, which contrasted starkly with her dark gown and hat. Normally, her azure eyes must have been her best feature. Today, they were red-rimmed

and accentuated by dark circles, causing me to wonder who she had lost to cause such pain.

Mr. Shepard's face instantly brightened and he hurried over to take the woman's hand. "Mrs. Hanaford," he gushed. "If you had sent word I would have called upon you at your home."

"My business couldn't wait, Mr. Shepard," she said, her voice soft but determined. "Mr. Wylde seems incapable of grasping the severity of my situation."

"My dear," replied the solicitor in soothing tones, "Mr. Wylde is doing everything possible to expedite this unfortunate affair. As I've endeavored to explain, your late husband's will must be admitted to probate. These things take time."

"But I have expenses to meet," she protested.

"I understand," the lawyer told her, although it seemed clear from his patronizing tone that he understood very little. "I wish I could help you, my dear, but I'm afraid Mr. Wylde must approve any advances on the estate. In the meantime, I'm sure a few simple economies will see you through." He gave her hand a perfunctory pat, then pulled out his pocket watch. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have a pressing appointment."

The stricken look on the young widow's face was more than I could bear. The desire to do whatever I could to ensure that the scales of justice weighed evenly for women as well as for men had, after all, been one of the reasons I'd chosen to become an attorney. True, I knew little about the case, but I felt compelled to at least make an effort to ease her misery. In light of subsequent events, I assure you this was my sole motive for approaching Mrs. Hanaford and boldly introducing myself.

"My name is Sarah Woolson and I am also an attorney. Perhaps if I understood your problem I might be of some assistance."

The woman's expression went from surprise to guarded hope. "Oh, Miss Woolson, if you only could!"

Joseph Shepard registered shock at my temerity, but before he could erupt in another fit of pique, I boldly took Mrs. Hanaford's arm and led her toward the nearest office. It wasn't until we were inside that I realized it was the cubicle belonging to the red-haired giant. Sure enough, its outraged owner came charging after us as I attempted to close the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" the man demanded, his voice flavored with a strong Scottish burr. Intense, blue-green eyes bore into mine. "This is my office."

"We require privacy," I said, as calmly as possible under the circumstances. Shepard had finally marshaled his indignation and was following like Old Ironsides in our wake. As I again tried to close the door, the man held it open with arms the size of small tree trunks. "Please, sir, let go! I must confer with my client."

"Your client?"

"Miss Woolson!" The senior partner had reached the door, but the oversized junior attorney blocked his way. "Come out of there at once!" he ordered from behind his subordinate.

I thought I saw a muscle twitch in the younger man's face, and unexpectedly the door slammed shut in my face. I hastily gathered my wits and threw the lock before we could be ejected.

Turning my back to the door -- and studiously ignoring the senior partner's howls of rage -- I gave Mrs. Hanaford what I hoped was a professional smile and motioned her into the room's only chair. She hesitated, then took the seat.

"I take it you are recently widowed," I began. "And that there is a delay in settling your late husband's estate."

The woman lowered her eyes, perhaps to collect her thoughts, perhaps to avoid looking at Joseph Shepard who was now railing at the owner of the pirated cubicle.

"My name is Annjenett Hanaford," she said in a voice hardly above a whisper. "My husband, Cornelius, died three weeks ago. He—" She looked up at me, her blue eyes huge. "He was murdered."

"Murdered!" In my surprise I forgot dignity and sank onto the corner of the desk, causing several books to tumble onto the floor. Neither of us took any notice. "How did it happen?"

"He was stabbed. In his study. I was there when it happened. Not in the room, of course, but upstairs in my boudoir."

"Have the police arrested anyone?"

A shadow crossed her lovely face. "Several items were stolen. They -- the police seem certain it must have been an intruder. As yet no one has been arrested."

I studied the woman. Something was troubling her and I suspected it was more than the natural grief and shock one would expect after losing a spouse. She seemed frightened. But of what?

Behind me, Shepard's pounding on the door became louder. Tempted as I was to probe further into her story, I decided to press on while there was still time.

"How long were you married, Mrs. Hanaford?"

"Seven years. I was nineteen when I -- agreed to Mr. Hanaford's proposal."

"Did you bring any property or moneys into the marriage?"

She looked up, startled by my question. "Why, yes, I did. My father provided a generous dowry. Later, when my mother passed on, I received a substantial inheritance. Naturally, my husband managed these funds in my behalf."

"Naturally," I agreed dryly. This was neither the time nor the place to express my opinions concerning women's coverture, or civil death, upon marriage, whereby the law merged the identity of wife and husband and severely limited her rights to inherit or to own property. "The reason I ask is that the married women's property act entitles a wife to the separate property she brought to the marriage. I don't suppose you obtained your husband's ante-nuptial consent to retain control of your separate property?"

This notion was obviously foreign to her. Then she seemed to remember something. "Just before Cornelius commenced construction on our home he had me sign something. As I recall it listed my dowry, as well as my mother's bequest."

I felt a rush of excitement. To the best of my knowledge, the plan I contemplated was unprecedented in legal annals, at least those established on the West Coast. But I needed documentation.

"Do you have copies of these papers?" I asked intently.

"I don't know. My husband has a safe at home, of course, but I believe he kept most of his documents at the bank."

"Then that's an excellent place to begin." I rose from my perch on the desk in time to see Mr. Shepard insert a key in the lock. Our time alone was clearly at an end. "If it's agreeable, I will accompany you to your husband's bank to look for the papers."

She nodded hopefully as the door flew open and a red-faced Joseph Shepard burst in, sputtering charges of unethical behavior. Deciding that a rapid departure would not be amiss, I took Mrs. Hanaford's arm and swept past the senior partner.

The last face I saw before leaving the room was that of the muscular Scot. This time there was no mistaking the laughter in his eyes and I felt heat suffuse my face. The idea that this odious man found humor in the situation infuriated me far more than Joseph Shepard's tirade. Fixing him with the most disdainful look I could muster, I turned and pulled the heavy oak door shut behind us.

* * *

Since I had arrived that morning by horsecar, and Annjenett Hanaford's open-topped little Victoria was waiting on the Square, we agreed the most sensible plan would be to travel to the bank in her carriage. After assisting us inside, the liveried coachman took his place in the elevated front seat and clicked the handsome bay into a steady stream of traffic.

It turned out that Hanaford was the founder of San Francisco Savings and Trust, a three-story brick building on California Street. Inside, I followed the widow past half a dozen teller cages until she stopped in front of a glass partition and tapped on the window. She said a few words to the man seated there, and he instantly rose and hurried toward a door to the rear of the room.

"He's fetching the manager, Eban Potter," she explained. "Actually, Mr. Potter is an old friend and one of the kindest men I know. He and my husband went to school together. Fortunately, he's familiar with Cornelius' business affairs. I don't know what I would have done without him these past few weeks."

Just then a pencil-thin man in his late forties strode in our direction. He wore a conservative frock coat and dark trousers. His brown hair was receding and his face was pale with a deep groove etched between his eyes, as if he carried the weight of the world on his narrow shoulders. The moment he saw my companion, however, his expression lightened and he smiled.

"Mrs. Hanaford, what an unexpected pleasure." His voice was high and reed-thin as the man himself. From the way he took her hand, it was easy to see he held the young widow in fond regard.

"Mr. Potter -- Eban -- this is my attorney, Miss Sarah Woolson."

"Attorney?" Eban Potter was so taken aback by this announcement he stared openly at me. "But I thought Mr. Wylde--"

"I'm assisting Mrs. Hanaford in a private matter," I broke in. "We're hoping to find some personal papers belonging to her late husband. We believe he may have kept them here at the bank."

Belatedly, the manager recalled his manners. "I apologize, Miss Woolson. Naturally, I would like to help, but I believe Mr. Hanaford kept few personal possessions in his office."

"Nevertheless, we would like to see for our--"

"Mrs. Hanaford?"

The widow and I turned to find a tall man approaching us. He was impeccably dressed in a navy blue, single-breasted frock coat and crisp gray trousers. His hair was very dark and worn longer than was the style. But it was his eyes that held me; wide-set and nearly black, they bore straight into mine, giving the disconcerting impression they could read my most secret thoughts. From Mrs. Hanaford's flushed cheeks, I realized she was similarly affected by the man's penetrating gaze.

"Mr. Wylde, I didn't think -- that is, I did not expect to find you here," she said, as he brushed the back of her hand with his lips.

"Nor did I expect to find you here, my dear," he said with no discernable trace of a welcoming smile.

His voice was well modulated and precise, as if he expected, no demanding, that attention be paid to his every word. I must admit that my first impression of the attorney was not favorable. His manner was too arrogant, too much in control, for my tastes. In a commanding, self-important way, he wasn't unattractive, although his features were too unique and angular to be termed conventionally handsome. Here was a man, I decided, who might inspire confidence, but never ease.

"Miss Woolson," said Annjenett in a thin voice, "I would like to introduce Mr. Benjamin Wylde, executor of my husband's estate. Mr. Wylde, this is Miss Sarah Woolson -- an attorney. Miss Woolson has kindly offered to represent my interests."

Other than a slight narrowing of his eyes, Wylde showed no reaction to what must have been a startling piece of news.

"My pleasure, Miss Woolson," he said, reaching out a hand.

I proffered my own hand and was annoyed at the presumptuous way his eyes raked slowly over my suit, all the way down to my boots.

"How do you do, Mr. Wylde," I said, making little effort to hide my disapproval of such rudeness.

For the first time, the hint of a smile played at the corners of that hard-etched mouth and I instantly regretted allowing my irritation to show. The sooner we attended to our business and took our leave of the bank, I decided, the better.

"I'm sure we're keeping Mr. Potter from his work," I told Annjenett. "Perhaps we should see to our errand."

"And what errand is that?" The attorney addressed this remark to me, and this time there was no mistaking the mocking tone.

I started to reply that it was none of his business, then thought better of it. Tempting as it was to put this arrogant man in his place, making an enemy of the executor of my client's estate might not be in her best interests.

"We're trying to locate some personal papers belonging to Mr. Hanaford," I told him, keeping my face, and my voice, civil.

The lawyer's eyes narrowed. "Miss Woolson, I'm sure you must be aware of Mrs. Hanaford's recent bereavement. It is both callous and insensitive to enlist her on this fool's errand. Her affairs are being competently handled."

"I don't doubt that for a moment, Mr. Wylde," I said, biting back another stinging retort. "However, as I said, our business is of a personal nature. There is no need to take up more of your valuable time." I heard his slight intake of breath as I turned back to the manager. "Mr. Potter, shall we proceed?"

I had placed Eban Potter in a difficult position. Clearly, he was in awe of the attorney, yet to object to our request would seem unreasonable and churlish. At his hesitation, I sensed Annjenett wavering in her resolve and thought it best to press on.

"I assume that's the door leading to Mr. Hanaford's office?" Without waiting for a reply, I started toward the rear of the bank. Before the widow could follow, the attorney took hold of her hand.

I have since questioned whether the look I caught on Benjamin Wylde's face at that moment was as malevolent as it seemed, especially since it was so quickly gone. Certainly his voice was calm enough as he told Annjenett, "I'm traveling to Sacramento this evening, but I will call on you upon my return." I don't think I imagined my client's relief when he released her hand and turned to me. "Miss Woolson, I trust you will find what you are seeking."

It was a tribute to the power of the man that we all stood rooted in our places while Benjamin Wylde made his way with long strides though the anti-chamber and out of the bank.

"Well, then," I said, breaking the spell. "Shall we proceed?"

In the end, we were disappointed. Mr. Hanaford kept no personal papers in his work safe. Annjenett looked crestfallen.

"The bank was a place to start," I told her optimistically. "Hopefully, we'll meet with better success at your house."

Annjenett's home was located on Taylor and California Streets, atop Nob Hill. A block away on Mason stood the turreted monstrosity built by Mark Hopkins, one of the so-called Big Four associated with the Central Pacific Railroad. Next door was the equally ornate, barn-like mansion of Leland Stanford, former governor of California and one of Hopkins' railroad associates. Compared with these fortresses, Hanaford's house could almost be deemed tasteful.

Declining the widow's offer of refreshments, I asked to see her late husband's safe, and without comment she led me to his study, located to the right of the foyer. It was a spacious, masculine room, done mostly in browns and deep greens. The heavy drapes were closed in mourning, but through the gloom I could detect a number of books and a large mahogany desk centered in front of a cloaked window. Annjenett paused at the doorway, looking uneasy.

"Cornelius -- that is, my husband -- was murdered in this room. Stabbed -- as he sat at his desk." She indicated an imposing, brown leather chair which backed against the drapes. "I've left everything as it was. The police, of course, spent some time examining the room."

"You heard nothing that night? No one at the door, perhaps? Or your husband crying out?"

"No, nothing. I retired to my room directly after dinner. I wasn't -- feeling well."

It was only a slight hesitation, but it was enough to cause me to question this statement. The obvious anguish on her face, however, made me reluctant to pursue it further -- at least for now.

"What time did you go upstairs?" I asked instead.

"About a quarter to nine." She faltered. "It was the last time I saw my husband alive."

"What about the servants? I'm sure they've been questioned?"

"Yes. So often I live in fear they'll give notice. It has been a most unsettling experience."

"I can imagine." My sympathy was sincere, but I sensed her anxiety was caused by more than just a problem retaining domestic help. "You're sure your husband expected no visitors that night?"

"If he did, he didn't tell me. Beecher, our butler, denies letting anyone in." Her voice took on an hysterical note. "But someone did come in. They had to, didn't they?"

Unless Hanaford was killed by someone already inside the house, I thought. It was a disturbing idea, but one which couldn't be ignored. It also occurred to me that since the study was in such close proximity to the front door, Hanaford might have let a visitor in himself, without disturbing the rest of the household. Surely the police must have considered these possibilities. Without sharing my thoughts, I entered the study and pulled open the drapes so that I might better examine the murder scene.

"You said your husband's safe is in this room?"

She blinked against the sudden light, then crossed the room to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Reaching inside a panel, she tripped a hidden mechanism and a section of shelves slid open, revealing a concealed wall safe.

"Cornelius insisted I learn the combination, although I rarely used it, and always under his direction." With deliberate care she manipulated the knob and opened the door. "The police searched the safe, but I have no idea what they found."

I stepped forward and peered into the compartment, which was divided into five sections. The first cubicle contained deeds and other business papers, two more held letters, another a thin ledger, and the last a small stack of cash. Pushing up my sleeve, I reached inside and pulled out the currency which, I was happy to note, amounted to several hundred dollars.

"If nothing else, this should see you through the next few months," I said, handing the money over to the widow.

Annjenett took the bills with delight. "I had no idea Cornelius kept cash in the safe. He led me to believe there was only his will and a few personal letters."

"Yes, well let's see what else he kept in here," I said, placing the contents of the first compartment on the desk.

Annjenett watched while I read through deeds for various town properties, as well as one in Belmont where San Francisco society had recently begun to construct country homes. The last paper was a copy of Hanaford's will. Although pleased to see that he'd left the bulk of his considerable estate to his widow, I was disappointed not to find the document I sought. Placing the first set of papers back in their cubicle, I took out the second set and returned to the desk. It took only a moment to find what I was looking for. With a triumphant cry, I waved a paper at the widow.

"Here it is! Just as I hoped."

Annjenett flew to the desk. "What is it? What have you found?"

"A separate property list. I suspected that was what your husband was up to when he had you sign papers before starting construction on your home."

"But what does it mean?"

"Several years ago a civil code was passed enabling a wife to hold property and assets separate from her husband. These were to remain under her management and could not be taken by her husband's creditors. By listing your dowry and inheritance as separate properties, your husband protected them from being attached in the event he fell into debt. Of course he secretly retained control, which I suspect a great many men do who avail themselves of this code. In this case, however, the ploy works to our advantage."

I saw hope rise in Annjenett's blue eyes. "Miss Woolson," she asked intently. "How much money will be at my disposal?"

"I can't be sure until I've studied the papers, but I think it would be safe to hazard a guess of some ten thousand dollars."

"Oh, my!" She sank into a chair and looked alarmingly pale.

"Mrs. Hanaford, are you all right?" I began fanning her with the papers, regretting that it wasn't my practice to carry smelling salts in my reticule.

"Yes," she replied in a faint voice. "Actually, I'm very well now that you've happened into my life." She took a deep breath and smiled. "How do you suggest we proceed?"

"Tomorrow you may inform Mr. Shepard of our discovery and request that the properties and assets listed in this document be turned over to you forthwith."

Annjenett clapped her hands in delight. "Miss Woolson—Sarah— you've worked a miracle. How can I thank you?"

I felt my face flush at this praise and endeavored to keep my expression professional. Inside, however, I could hardly contain my excitement. Despite being summarily rejected by Shepard's firm, I had not only obtained my first client, but had actually been able to secure her financial independence. It was a heady feeling.

"It's a simple matter that could easily have been discovered had Mr. Wylde, or any of Mr. Shepard's attorneys, taken the time to investigate." I told her truthfully enough as I closed the safe door and ensured that the lock was set. Annjenett triggered the hidden mechanism and the bookshelf swung smoothly closed.

"Yes, but they didn't." She looked at me, embarrassed. "I'm ashamed to admit that prior to meeting you, Sarah, I was prejudiced against women in the legal profession. Now I see that it presents decided advantages. Being a woman you were instantly able to appreciate my predicament, something I have been quite unable to convey to either Mr. Shepard or Mr. Wylde. Please," she went on earnestly. "Say that you'll go with me tomorrow."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure," I told her, delighted I would be there to see Joseph Shepard's face when he was presented with the separate property agreement. "Shall we say ten o'clock?"

"Yes. That will do nicely." She handed me the documents. "Here, take these with you. Study them until you are very certain of our position."

I agreed, but before I could leave she took both my hands in hers. "You'll allow my man to drive you home, Sarah. No, I insist. It is the least I can do."

"That's kind of you," I said, gratefully accepting her offer. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning."

Annjenett Hanaford was still standing in the doorway as her coachman clicked the stately bay down Taylor Street toward Rincon Hill.