

THE RUSSIAN HILL MURDERS

CHAPTER ONE

It was not my idea to attend the charity dinner. True, it was a worthy cause, but the past weeks at the law firm I'd been so elated to join just months earlier had been mind-numbing. In truth, I was becoming more disillusioned with Shepard, Shepard, McNaughton and Hall with each passing day. Frankly I was in no mood to socialize.

My mother, Elizabeth Woolson, however, is nothing if not persistent. Eventually she wore down my resolve until I agreed to accompany my parents, my brother Charles and his wife, Celia, to the dinner. Mama also prevailed on the matter of my costume, insisting I wear the violet gown she'd had made for my brother Frederick's entrée into the world of politics – a gown I still considered too décolleté for my taste. Moreover, I couldn't look at the frock without remembering the murder that had occurred the night I'd worn it, a crime that had catapulted me into the grisly Nob Hill killings. Believe me, if I'd had any inkling that the occasion of its second wearing would have an equally chilling impact on my life, I would have burned the wretched thing on the spot!

On the matter of an escort I drew a firm line. Nothing could persuade me to accept the company of the latest bachelor to catch Mama's desperate eye. Her current project was a widowed dentist, the father of six children, five of whom still lived at home. I considered my life complicated enough without adding an elderly husband and a horde of motherless offspring to the mix.

In the end I found myself – blessedly unencumbered by the aforementioned dentist – in one of the most unusual houses on Russian Hill. I had never met our hosts, Caroline and Leonard Godfrey, but I knew them to be prominent members of San Francisco Society. Mrs. Godfrey was noted for her work on behalf of the city's poor and disadvantaged. Her husband, Leonard, was one of the city's most shrewd entrepreneurs. It was an open secret that he was the guiding, if often hidden, force behind many of the city's major corporations.

The Godfrey home was the subject of much gossip. Three years earlier, it had joined a small group of exclusive mansions gracing the top of the summit. Russian Hill – said to have been named after Russian sailors who had been buried there before the California gold rush – was slowly beginning to compete with Nob Hill, its pompous neighbor to the south. The Godfrey residence, with its sharp angles and numerous windows, was considered by many to be too avant-garde. Indeed, some people went so far as to brand it “Godfrey’s Folly.” But then my own architectural tastes are also viewed as unorthodox.

I had not circulated long among the glittering guests before I began to regret giving in to Mama’s pressure to attend tonight’s soiree. When I’d had all I could take of Paris fashions, society romances and social indiscretions, I sought refuge in an alcove featuring a large bay window. Peering through a strategically placed spyglass, I was able to make out much of the city below – including Portsmouth Square, the site of Joseph Shepard’s law firm. As one of the first female attorneys in California, I’d been accepted as a junior associate in this establishment with the greatest reluctance. Since then, the entire cadre of senior partners had banded together in an effort to drive me out of their firm, as well as their lives!

Not only had I obtained my job through what they termed “female subterfuge,” but I’d had the gall to “steal” (their word, not mine) one of the firm’s prized clients. Adding insult to injury, I’d solved a series of gruesome murders resulting in a glut of unwelcome publicity for my employers.

Ironically, it was this very newspaper exposure that made it impossible for the partners to come right and fire me. On the other hand, if I could be “persuaded” to leave of my own accord, they’d be spared public reproach. This misplaced strategy, of course, merely caused me to dig in my heels and fight to hold on to my position. Still, I’d begun to wonder how long I’d be able to put up with their childish machinations.

“It’s a beautiful city, isn’t it?”

I was startled out of my thoughts to find a man in his mid thirties standing behind me. He stood an inch or two over six feet, and despite my bleak mood, part of my brain registered that this was possibly the most handsome man I’d ever seen. He wore a perfectly tailored black tuxedo, which couldn’t conceal impressively broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His hair was thick and nearly shoulder length, an ebony mane that waved back from a tanned face.

As if amused by my frank appraisal, he smiled, and I was startled to feel my pulse leap. Good Lord, I thought, amazed he’d been able to elicit such an absurd reaction from me, an avowed

spinster. With effort, I composed my face into what I hoped was a disapproving frown, only to be rewarded with an even broader smile.

“I apologize for my poor manners, Miss Woolson,” he said in a voice that was deep and – forgive me for the romantic if fitting analogy – smooth as aged brandy. “I’m Pierce Godfrey. Leonard Godfrey is my brother.”

I accepted his proffered hand and was surprised to find the skin rougher than I’d expected. His careful appearance suggested he might be something of a dandy.

“You have me at a disadvantage, Mr. Godfrey,” I said more sharply than was civil. “How is it that you know my name?”

His eyes gleamed, but I couldn’t decide if it was amusement or mockery. My temper flared; I have no patience for flirting or playing silly games, even with a man as attractive as Pierce Godfrey.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I said pointedly.

To my annoyance, he laughed out loud. “You are a woman who speaks her mind, Sarah Woolson. I’ll be equally candid. I quizzed my sister-in-law when you arrived.” He regarded me speculatively. “She tells me you’re an attorney.”

“Yes, I am.” I studied him closely, on the lookout for sarcasm or veiled disdain for my vocation, a not uncommon reaction from men. I was surprised and, yes, I admit it, disconcerted when I could detect none. The man struck me as too smooth, too in control. I suppose I was searching for some imperfection to mar that faultless demeanor.

“I remember now,” he said. “I saw your name in the newspapers a few months back. Something to do with a murder? Actually, several murders, as I recall.”

“The press is prone to exaggeration, Mr. Godfrey. You mustn’t believe everything you read.”

“No.” He drew out the word in a velvet voice, a tone at odds with the dark blue eyes searching my face with rude curiosity. “Now that I’ve met you, though, I rather think there was more truth than fiction to the newspaper articles.”

I started to chastise him for this unwarranted assumption, when our hostess walked toward us. An attractive woman in her early forties, Caroline Godfrey had a full, sensuous mouth and smoky gray eyes that looked out upon the world with an unmistakable air of superiority.

The low-cut bodice and tightly cinched waist of her scarlet gown set off her striking figure to excellent advantage.

Perhaps it was because of her stunning beauty that I was taken aback by the look of raw hostility she directed at my companion. Focused solely on him, she hadn't yet seen me, so I quickly stepped out from behind his tall figure.

"Miss Woolson," she said, looking surprised and not altogether pleased by my sudden appearance. "I'm delighted you could come." After a perfunctory smile, she turned to her brother-in-law. "Leonard requires your assistance in the parlor, Pierce. Everyone is gathering there now.

He gave her a measured look, then offered me his arm. "Will you permit me to escort you, Miss Woolson?"

Mrs. Godfrey's smile turned sour as she watched me accept her brother-in-law's arm. I felt her eyes following us as he silently led me from the alcove.

When we reached the parlor, Pierce excused himself and went to stand with his brother. A moment later, Caroline Godfrey joined them, her smile cordial and welcoming now, as she looked out over her distinguished guests. She spoke for several minutes, describing the new Women and Children's Hospital we were here to support. When she announced with perfect calm that tonight's goal was to raise one hundred thousand dollars for the project, I felt certain she was joking. To my surprise, the rest of the company took this startling pronouncement in stride. It was as if Mrs. Godfrey had laid down a challenge to their largesse, or perhaps, I thought a bit cynically, to their egos.

Pledging began. One after the other, huge amounts of money were called out, each pledge more munificent than the one that preceded it. Everyone seemed swept up in the excitement, including Mama and Papa. I even found myself calling out a sum larger than I could comfortably afford. Still, when it was finally over and Mrs. Godfrey announced we were very near our goal, I was proud to have played my own small part in the effort.

As guests broke off into small groups and footmen circulated, offering champagne, I went in search of my parents. I found them talking with Papa's closest friend and fellow jurist, Judge Tobias Barlow, a slightly overweight, pleasant man ten years my father's junior. With Judge Barlow was his wife, Margaret – an attractive woman who worked with my mother on charitable projects – and Margaret's mother, Adelina French. I was startled by the remarkable resemblance between mother and daughter; both tall and slender with gold-brown hair and sparkling green eyes. Indeed, the two women might well have been sisters. I knew

Adelina had made her home with her daughter and son-in-law since the death of her husband, Nigel French, and was a keen worker for the new hospital.

Also with the group were two men I'd never met. Mrs. Barlow introduced the more striking of the two as the Reverend Nicholas Prescott, a friend visiting from back east. Prescott, who appeared to be in his early fifties, was tall and muscularly slender beneath his dark suit and starched clerical collar. His full head of dark brown hair was sprinkled with just the right amount of gray to appear distinguished. He possessed an easy, unassuming manner, and I noted a gleam of intelligence and good humor in his clear brown eyes. With a wide smile, Reverend Prescott shook my hand, his attention so riveted on me that I might have been the only person in the room.

Mrs. Barlow introduced the second stranger as Lucius Arlen, the accountant who had been hired by the board to handle the new hospital's finances. Arlen was a heavy-set, stolid man in his late fifties, with a fidgety manner and a disconcerting habit of not quite looking you in the eye when he spoke.

The accountant acknowledged me with a stiff bow. "How do you do, Miss Woolson?"

Before I could reply, Mrs. French said, "Mrs. Godfrey thinks tonight's pledges will be enough to make a final offer on the Battery Street warehouse."

"Do you really think that's possible, Mr. Arlen?" Margaret Barlow asked the accountant.

Lucius Arlen looked pleased to be consulted. He cleared his throat a bit self-importantly and said, "I agree it looks promising. We've already met our goal tonight, and additional pledges are coming in. That will provide us with enough money to complete our negotiations with the owners of the property, and—"

He was interrupted by a loud commotion in the foyer. Conversation abruptly ceased as everyone strained to hear the cause of the disturbance.

"But, sir, you cannot go in," the Godfrey's butler called out. "Sir, please!"

A thin man in his forties strode defiantly into the parlor. He was dressed entirely in black, from his wrinkled flannel trousers and morning coat to his slightly dented stovepipe hat. His fierce eyes were also black, as were the hair and beard that flew riotously about his grim face. People instinctively pressed away from him as he marched to the center of the room. My father started forward as if to intercept the man, but Mama took Papa's arm and pulled him back.

“Brothers and sisters,” the intruder boomed. “Ministering to the Jezebels of this city is an abomination!” He raised a worn leather Bible above his head. “Those who have sold their immortal souls to the devil do not deserve to be succored.”

“Mr. Halsey!” an authoritative voice interrupted. “I will thank you to leave this house at once.”

All eyes went to Caroline Godfrey, who stood framed in the doorway. Her gray eyes flashed with icy fury as she glared at the interloper.

“*Reverend* Josiah Halsey, if you please, madam,” the man corrected tipping his hat and making an ironic bow.”

“Nothing about your presence here pleases me,” Mrs. Godfrey snapped. “We intend to offer medical care to the impoverished women and children of this city. *Respectable* women, Mr. Halsey. If you are insinuating that we plan to care for women who have no one but themselves to blame for their unfortunate circumstances, you are mistaken.”

There was no need for Mrs. Godfrey to explain what she meant by a woman of “unfortunate circumstance.” Everyone knew the term referred to an unwed mother, a prejudice I found galling. It was unjust that the child’s father got off scot-free, while the poor mother was left to suffer the shame and consequences.

I looked across the room where my brother Charles and his wife, Celia, stood staring at the trespasser. Charles, a physician of unquestionable talent and limited income, was slated to lead the roster of physicians who had agreed to volunteer at the new hospital. From his sheepish expression, I realized this was exactly what he planned to do. Charles was far too kind-hearted to turn even a penniless patient away, much less a woman who would otherwise be forced to deliver her child on the street. Apparently, he had failed to mention this to Mrs. Godfrey. I met my father’s eyes and we both suppressed a smile.

“Lies! All lies!” Halsey ranted, his malevolent black eyes fixed on our hostess. “I warn you, until the Jezebels acknowledge their sins and prostrate themselves before their lord and savior, food and shelter will but support their debauchery.”

Mrs. Godfrey’s patrician face had turned red, and her voice shook with rage. “How dare you! Leave this house at once or I will notify the police.”

“You do so at your soul’s peril.” Again Halsey held up his Bible. “You may close your ears to the voice of truth, but be sure that in the end your sins will find you out!”

Mrs. Godfrey opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Clutching a hand to her breast, she gasped as if struggling for air. “Leonard,” she choked. “Leonard—“

She swayed and would have fallen if my brother Charles and Reverend Prescott hadn’t rushed forward and supported her to the nearest settee. Hurriedly, I reached for several cushions and placed them beneath the woman’s head.

“Someone get her husband,” I directed, and a frightened footman ran to do my bidding. At the same time, Mama handed me a damp cloth appropriated from one of the servants. I placed it across the woman’s head.

“Give her air,” Charles ordered, as people pressed around the stricken woman. He pointed at the intruder. “And for God’s sake, get that man out of here!”

There was a murmur of assent, and several men grabbed the black-clad Halsey. Despite his sputtered threats, they managed to physically eject him from the room.

My brother was taking Mrs. Godfrey’s pulse when Leonard Godfrey, closely followed by his brother, Pierce, entered the room.

“What happened?” Leonard demanded, kneeling down by Caroline, who lay with her eyes closed, her face ghastly white.

“She’s had an attack,” Charles told him quietly. “Tell me, does she have a heart condition?”

“She suffers from angina. Her physician has prescribed medicine—“ Leonard stopped as his head seemed to clear.

“Pierce,” he told his brother. “Get Caroline’s pills. They’re on the night table in her room. And hurry, man!”

Without a word, Pierce Godfrey sped from the parlor, leaving behind him a room so quiet you could have heard a feather drop. Mrs. Godfrey stirred and a low murmur swept through the assembled guests. She looked around with glazed eyes, then, becoming aware of her husband’s face, made an effort to sit up.

“Caroline, don’t move,” Leonard said, easing her back onto the cushions. “Pierce has gone for your pills.”

For the first time, Mrs. Godfrey seemed to notice the sea of worried faces surrounding the settee. “Don’t be ridiculous, Leonard.” Her voice was still weak, but she forced a smile. “Dinner will be—“

“Don’t try to talk,” her husband admonished.

“But I don’t—“She could go no further. Squeezing her husband’s hand, she closed her eyes and gulped for air. To my horror, I noticed her skin was turning blue.

“You’re a doctor, Woolson,” Leonard begged Charles. “For God’s sake, do something!”

“I’m doing all I can, Mr. Godfrey.” My brother’s kind eyes were reassuring. “The medicine should relieve the pain and ease her breathing.”

After what seemed an eternity, but was probably no more than a few moments, Pierce returned with a small apothecary box. Leonard extracted a tiny white pill and placed it beneath his wife’s tongue. We all watched in anxious silence as color gradually returned to her face and her breathing became less arduous. As the pain slowly receded, she again tried to sit up.

“Lie back, Caroline,” Leonard told her. “You must give the medicine time to work.”

“But dinner,” she protested.

I was close enough to hear her husband’s soft curse as he reluctantly turned to his guests. “Will you all please go into the dining room? I’ll join you in a moment.”

There was an awkward pause, as if, despite Godfrey’s admonition, no one was quite sure what to do. Clearing his throat, Reverend Prescott said, “We can best help Mrs. Godfrey by honoring her wishes.”

Taking Mrs. Adelina French’s arm, he left the parlor. With anxious glances at their hostess, guests began following the minister into the dining room. Charles and the two Godfrey brothers remained hovering by the stricken woman’s side.

“Who was that man waving his Bible at us? I asked my father as our party joined the general exodus.

“He’s some sort of religious fanatic,” Papa said grimly. “Evidently this isn’t the first time he’s badgered Mrs. Godfrey about the new hospital. He belongs to a Los Angeles sect that believes poverty and destitution are the result of God’s punishment, especially when it comes to unwed mothers.”

I was speechless. I trust I’m a faithful Christian, but I have no patience for those who use the Bible to promote their own bigoted ideology.

My indignation must have been obvious, because Reverend Prescott quickly said, “Let us pray that Mrs. Godfrey soon recovers Miss Woolson. At the moment that is our primary concern.”

“Amen,” Mama and Celia heartily agreed.

Papa and I seconded the prayer, although privately I felt nothing but contempt toward the hypocrite who had triggered the poor woman’s attack.

Most of the other guests had taken their seats by the time we entered the dining room, and I was shown to my place by one of the footmen. The long refectory table was easily large enough to accommodate the thirty or so diners and was laid with ornate china, wine glasses and heavily carved silver. Floral arrangements and dozens of flickering candles completed the elaborate setting. The soup course had already been served, and I sensed the butler’s growing distress as he watched it grow cold.

Those of us seated at the table were hardly less edgy than the servants. A sober-looking Lucius Arlen sat to my right. Next to him, my mother was talking to Judge Barlow. Catty-corner across the table, Margaret Barlow and her mother chatted with Reverend Prescott, who sat between them. There were two unoccupied seats at the table, presumably for my brother Charles and Pierce Godfrey, as well as our hosts’ places at either end of the table.

I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who felt like an unwilling witness to what surely should have been a family matter. I couldn’t understand why we hadn’t simply been sent home. Sitting here with our hostess lying ill only a few rooms away seemed tasteless in the extreme.

The footmen had begun pouring wine when conversation abruptly ceased, and I glanced up to see an unhappy Leonard Godfrey lead his wife into the dining room. Mrs. Godfrey looked drawn and pale, but overall she seemed much improved. She smiled gamely as her husband escorted her to the head of the table. But when he continued to hover behind her chair, she waved an impatient hand, indicating that he should take his own place.

“I want to apologize,” she said in a surprisingly steady voice. “Not only for that appalling man who forced his way into our home, but for my brief indisposition. As you can see, I am quite recovered.” As if to demonstrate this, she picked up her spoon and began eating her soup.

I watched my fellow diners react to her words with a mixture of relief and lingering concern. I doubt anyone was foolish enough to believe her attack hadn’t been a good deal more serious than she claimed. Yet we could do little else but follow her example and try to behave as if nothing stressful had occurred.

I had just taken a sip of wine when Charles and Pierce Godfrey slipped into their seats, the latter opposite me.

“How is she?” I asked him as quietly as I could over the hum of dinner conversation.

“Probably not as well as she’d have us believe. My brother urged her to rest in bed until she could be seen by her own doctor.” His expression grew grim. “But Caroline is a stubborn woman. She rarely allows anyone to tell her what to do.”

His tone made me wonder if this statement had something to do with the tension I’d sensed between Pierce and his sister-in-law in the alcove.

“Mr. Godfrey’s advice is sound,” I said, “but I can sympathize with his wife. She’s worked so hard for the new hospital, I’m sure she feels a responsibility to see the evening through.”

“It’s a poor reason to risk another, perhaps more serious, attack.” He glanced at Caroline, his handsome face set in lines I couldn’t read. Was it anger, frustration, incredulity? Or again part of that strange drama I’d witnessed before dinner? When he turned back to me, his face had softened into a smile. “I’m certain everything will be fine. Caroline has a way of coming out on top. Or perhaps she’s just blessed with incredibly good luck.”

Having no idea how to respond to this curious statement, I bent my head to my dinner. I’m sure the food was superb, but I tasted little of it.

“—I would be pleased if you would accept.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” I looked up to find Pierce Godfrey regarding me with an odd expression. Perhaps it was the way the candlelight cast his face into sharp contrasts of light

and shadow, but I had the bizarre impression of a buccaneer standing at the helm of his frigate.

“I asked if you would do me the honor of dining with me tomorrow evening,” he repeated.

I didn’t immediately reply to this unexpected invitation. Over the past few months I’d had to deal with far too many assertive men at the law firm to add yet another example of the species to my social life.

“I fear I’m busy tomorrow night,” I said, buttering a roll. “But thank you for asking.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Pierce’s dark blue eyes studied my face, leaving me with the irrational feeling that he easily read my lie. “Perhaps some other night, then?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll be busy all week.”

“Ah, I’d forgotten. Your work must be demanding. Perhaps you’re involved in another intriguing case?”

Inadvertently, he’d touched on a sensitive nerve and I stiffened. What I wouldn’t have given to be involved in *any* case right now, much less an intriguing one. Unfortunately, Joseph Shepard, the senior partner at the firm, considered women attorneys incapable of performing any task ore mentally stimulating than washing the dishes.

“I find all legal work interesting, Mr. Godfrey.” That part, at least, was true. This was hardly the time in which – and Pierce Godfrey was certainly not the person in whom – to confide the anger and frustration I felt toward my employer and his male cronies. “It takes up a great deal of my—“

I broke off as a chair suddenly crashed to the floor. All eyes flew to Mrs. Godfrey, who half-stood at the end of the table. Her face was flushed, and her fingers were pressed to her temples as if she was in terrible pain.

“My head!” she cried hoarsely.

Her husband and Charles rushed to her side, easing her back into the chair, which someone had righted. Leonard pulled the apothecary box from his pocket and spilled out pills. The poor woman was trembling so violently, it was several moments before he could place one beneath her tongue. Obviously in mortal distress, she clutched helplessly at her bodice as she struggled for air.

“Do something!” Leonard shouted at Charles.

My brother was already doing everything he could, aided by Reverend Prescott, who had rushed forward to help. In an effort to ease her breathing, they’d begun to loosen the tiny pearl buttons at the back of her gown. Before they’d managed more than one or two, she bent double and began to vomit. Someone grabbed a serviette to dab at her face, but the gesture only spread the mess down her gown.

“Caroline,” Leonard cried helplessly. “For God’s sake, help her!”

Caroline’s lips were moving, but no sound issued from her throat. The flush drained from her face as her body was struck by another spasm, and her skin once again turned a ghastly blue. Then, as she drew in a rattling breath, her irises rolled up into her head until they showed only white, and she sank limply onto the floor.

Charles knelt and cradled her head, at the same time attempting to place another pill beneath her tongue. It was no use; Caroline Godfrey was beyond help. Nicholas Prescott dropped down beside Charles, bowing his head in silent prayer.

Someone cried out behind me, and several women began to weep hysterically. Leonard stared at his wife, his face white with shock and disbelief. Charles raised the woman’s limp arm and felt her wrist for what seemed like an eon. Then, with a sigh, he gently closed her eyes.

“Is she—?” Leonard stammered. “That is, she can’t be—“

Charles gave the distraught husband a regretful nod. “I’m truly sorry, Mr. Godfrey, but I’m afraid your wife is dead.”

