

CHAPTER 1

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, 1908

Anna Blanc was the most beautiful woman ever to barrel down Long Beach Strand with the severed head of a Chinese man. The tin pail that contained the head banged painfully against her shins as she flew. The sand churned beneath her shoes, grinding the silk from her expensive Louis heels. The wind fought against her unwieldy ostrich plume hat, bending the feathers. Regrettably, she had not dressed for a hunt that morning.

She had not planned to be hunted.

Luckily, she was young. Anna jumped over a pile of seaweed, stirring a cloud of sandflies. She unpinned her hat with one hand and let it sail, gripping the heavy pail so tightly her knuckles whitened. The pail swung and bounced erratically, frustrating her strides. It stank like old fish, rotting pork, and things so vile she could not name them. She gagged, panted, and gagged again.

In the distance, a roller coaster roared.

She heard a shout behind her and looked back. A detective in a gray suit burst from the shadows of the pier at a dead run. Though heartless and incompetent, he ran like an Olympian. He was gaining quickly.

Anna ran harder, her waist cramping, her arms aching, her skirts thrashing about her legs like sea foam. She was beginning to think she had made a mistake stealing the severed head from the scene of a crime.

But without his head, Mr. Yau would never get justice.

She veered away from the water toward the bathhouse and the crowd at the Pike, aware of heavy, hostile panting close behind her.

Music exploded from a bandstand.

A hard shove to her back launched her forward and she fell, jarring her chin on the ground and biting her tongue. She tasted hot, rusty blood. The bucket's lid popped off and the head rolled across the sand like a bowling ball. Anna crawled after it, gasping for the breath that had been knocked clean out of her.

She felt the detective's brutal hands grab her boot and tug so hard she feared her hip would separate. With a distinctly unladylike hiss, she kicked. Her boot connected with his man parts, and he dropped to the sand, howling. Anna gracefully regained her feet, scooped the head up with the bucket, replaced the lid, and bolted for the crowd.

She heard him shout, "Stop!"

People were starting to look.

"Help, help!" Anna cried, hoping the crowd would think *he* was the villain, which, in her mind, he was. She gave a final grand effort, scrambling for her freedom, pushing herself as hard as her legs would carry her, leaving the detective behind. As the great orange sun kissed the horizon, the sea of people parted for Anna. Grim, scowling men formed a protective wall behind her, confronting the monster who was causing her distress. She flew past a peanut stand, a taffy concession, a fortuneteller, and barkers guessing people's weights. She ran through popcorn smells, skirting the line for the roller coaster, and straight onto a crowded Red Car that was departing for Los Angeles.

Her pleasure trip to the beach had not turned out as she'd planned, but stumbling upon crime scenes could not be planned. It was a horrible serendipity. Anna fixed her hair. She dabbed her face with a dainty handkerchief and slowed her breathing. A gentleman with a wooden leg offered her his seat. She took it and set the bucket down. It was as heavy as her heart. The other passengers held handkerchiefs to their noses. Luckily, Anna did not look like she smelled, even when mused. She leveled an accusatory stare at a nearby man who did.

And then she cried for Mr. Yau.