



KATE QUINN
and
JANIE CHANG

"I'm in awe of this
impeccably researched,
magnificently rendered, and
breathlessly paced tale."
—JAMIE FORD,
New York Times bestselling
author of *The Many
Daughters of Afong Moy*

The
PHOENIX
CROWN

A Novel

Dedication

To Stephen and Geoffrey

Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Title Page](#)
3. [Dedication](#)
4. [Prologue](#)
5. [Act I](#)
 1. [Chapter 1](#)
 2. [Chapter 2](#)
 3. [Chapter 3](#)
 4. [Chapter 4](#)
 5. [Chapter 5](#)
 6. [Chapter 6](#)
 7. [Chapter 7](#)
 8. [Chapter 8](#)
 9. [Chapter 9](#)
 10. [Chapter 10](#)
 11. [Chapter 11](#)
 12. [Chapter 12](#)
 13. [Chapter 13](#)
 14. [Chapter 14](#)
 15. [Chapter 15](#)
 16. [Chapter 16](#)
 17. [Chapter 17](#)
 18. [Chapter 18](#)
 19. [Chapter 19](#)
 20. [Chapter 20](#)
 21. [Chapter 21](#)
 22. [Chapter 22](#)
 23. [Chapter 23](#)
 24. [Chapter 24](#)
 25. [Chapter 25](#)

6. [Entr'acte](#)
 1. [Chapter 26](#)
 2. [Chapter 27](#)
 3. [Chapter 28](#)

7. [Act II](#)
 1. [Chapter 29](#)
 2. [Chapter 30](#)
 3. [Chapter 31](#)
 4. [Chapter 32](#)
 5. [Chapter 33](#)
 6. [Chapter 34](#)

8. [Epilogue](#)
9. [Authors' Note](#)

10. [Acknowledgments](#)
11. [Teaser Announcement](#)
 1. [The Briar Club](#)
 2. [The Porcelain Moon](#)

12. [About the Authors](#)
13. [Praise for The Phoenix Crown](#)
14. [Also by Kate Quinn and Janie Chang](#)
15. [Copyright](#)
16. [About the Publisher](#)

Prologue

Summer 1911

London

“A rose by any other name,” someone quoted, and Alice Eastwood was hard-pressed not to roll her eyes. When it came to Shakespearean quotes about flowers, hang *Romeo and Juliet*. She preferred *Julius Caesar*: “Nature must obey necessity.”

Because Mother Nature was a carnivore: she ate what she wanted when hunger made it necessary. Alice had known that in her bones since that day five years ago, when the earth shrugged its shoulders and a city cracked in half.

“You’ve been on quite a pilgrimage of Europe’s gardens and conservatories, Miss Eastwood! Will you return to San Francisco soon?” The question came from the director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew as he trailed Alice toward the Palm House with its great glassed layers like a crystal wedding cake. “I understand you’ve been invited to resume your old position at the California Academy of Sciences—curator of botany?”

“Not yet.” But she knew it was coming, the invitation to help rebuild the lost herbarium. Whether she could bear to accept or not, she hadn’t yet decided, so Alice sped her footsteps to outpace both the question and her companion. She still had the vigor for the work, no question—perhaps she was fifty-two, but she certainly hadn’t calcified with her advancing years: whether heading up a California mountain to investigate a poppy field, hauling herself into a pack mule’s saddle for an expedition in the Rockies, or striding along raked gravel paths of formal gardens, Alice Eastwood was always first on the scene.

No, it wasn’t the vigor she lacked—it was the heart. Set foot on that treacherous San Francisco earth again, after what had happened there?

The director hurried after her, a little out of breath. “The Academy’s herbarium was destroyed during the ’06 earthquake, I believe? Such a loss to science.”

“Yes,” Alice said briefly, eyeing the Palm House as though it were a thorny sample she had to yank out of the ground without her field gloves. She had a little bit of a Thing about conservatories (she wasn’t going to call it a fear) ever since that particular day in ’06, but you couldn’t be a botanist and

have a Thing about conservatories, so she squashed it down firmly and strode inside. Ah—the smell of vegetation, warm air, fern fronds. Life. The sun twinkled through the glass panes overhead, paths wound under shading palms, and she thought she could smell the elusive scent of orchids. “You have a sample of *Encephalartos altensteinii* I was interested in seeing . . .”

“Yes, this way. Someday I’m hoping to lay hands on an *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, but—”

“A Queen of the Night?” Alice didn’t often veer away from proper scientific names—it felt mildly rude, like addressing a woman by her nickname when you hadn’t yet been formally introduced—but *Epiphyllum oxypetalum* was special.

“Yes!” The director of the Royal Botanic Gardens brightened, tugging on his whiskers. “I’ve never been lucky enough to lay eyes on one, much less in bloom. Difficult when it only flowers for one night, eh?”

“I’ve seen one bloom.” Alice could see it now: a white, exotic blossom opening slowly in a dark room, almost seeming to cast its own light, emitting a heady and indescribable fragrance. She remembered her fingers trembling as she touched one exquisite petal, remembered the look on the faces of the women around her. Four women who could not have been more different, united in vast, wondrous awe around the miracle of that flower. *Miracle* had not seemed too momentous a word, after what they had endured.

“Where did you see . . .”

“Oh, a long time ago.” Alice fiddled with the Zeiss lens hanging around her neck on the same chain as her spectacles, bringing it up to her eye to examine a spot on a palm leaf. “Let’s see that *Encephalartos altensteinii*.”

Later, having said her goodbyes, after being introduced to a dozen botanists and trading addresses for correspondence (“I know of your interest in the *Genista* genus, Miss Eastwood, and would be happy to send you some samples!”), Alice wandered the lawns outside the Palm House, clapping a hand to her flower-laden hat to keep it from blowing away in the summer breeze. The hat had come from Paris, made by a master embroideress at the Callot Soeurs atelier: the only remotely fashionable touch on a woman who would always rather carry a plant press than a velvet handbag. Her stride along the path was still brisk, but she hadn’t outpaced the question after all: *Will you go back to San Francisco?*

Alice found a bench nearby and sat, picking up a discarded newspaper and fanning herself. Later she thought how *random* that was: she never read

the society pages; and she shouldn't have seen that article at all. But the abandoned paper had been folded back on one of those gushy social columns, the sort that breathlessly reported which ball Lady So-and-So had attended in a gown of pale green liberty satin and an eight-strand pearl collar, or which earl's daughter had married in a cloud of mousseline and Valenciennes lace . . . Only it wasn't a description of a gown or a ball that caught Alice's eye on this bright summer morning.

—*phoenixes carved in rare blue-and-white jade—*
—*fifty-seven sapphires and four thousand pearls—*
—*butterflies fashioned out of kingfisher feathers—*
—*carved ivory Queen of the Night flowers—*

And she found herself reading, fingers clenched so tight the newsprint crumpled in her grip. Reading it once, twice, her hands shaking. Putting it down at last, staring blindly over the children bowling their hoops and the strolling women in their white summer muslins. Instead of banks of blowsy roses she saw a wall of flame, and instead of twittering birds she heard the crystalline shatter of glass.

She rose, not bothering to formulate a polite apology as she approached the first top-hatted gentleman hurrying past her bench. "Excuse me, sir, I don't know London at all well. Where would I go to send a telegram overseas?" The man stared at her uneasily before rattling off some directions, and Alice didn't blame him. She was drenched in icy sweat, white-faced and trembling—Alice Eastwood, who had not trembled as she climbed a railing six stories high over a shattered atrium in the old California Academy, who had laughed when she was nearly swept over a waterfall to her death at Cataract Gulch but struggled out of the river with a handful of wet plant samples instead.

Alice Eastwood, afraid?

Very, she thought as she hurried out of Kew Gardens, already parsing her words for that telegram. Three telegrams, actually. One to New York, one to Buenos Aires, one to Paris . . . but all beginning with the same four words.

The Phoenix Crown
Found

Act I

Chapter 1

April 4, 1906

Thirteen days, fourteen hours, fifty-two minutes before the San Francisco earthquake

The birdcage was starting to squawk and vibrate indignantly on the seat, so Gemma Garland lifted the cover a crack and spoke down into it. “Almost there, I promise.” The woman who had just settled into the seat opposite shot her a *look*, but Gemma had been traveling all the way from New York in a third-class compartment—she was travel-stained, weary, feeling every one of her thirty-two years, and certainly well beyond caring about censorious looks. Especially *looks* from hatchet-faced schoolmarms in navy bombazine and mouse-colored toques. Women like that had been giving Gemma *looks* since she was twelve years old.

“Chilly day,” the woman finally said. She’d been moving from compartment to compartment with a stack of pamphlets, and Gemma already had a wary feeling about where this conversation was headed. “Stopping in San Francisco, are you?”

Why, no, Gemma considered replying. *I’m just going to keep riding the train straight into the bay*. There wasn’t any farther west to *go* than San Francisco, was there? “Yes,” she answered, lacking the energy to be acerbic. The train was already racketing through the city outskirts; she wouldn’t have to endure this stuffy cigar-stinking compartment or its nosy occupant much longer. “Yes, San Francisco,” she murmured.

“It’s a godless place,” the woman tutted. “Rotten with sin and depravity. Full of painted harlots, heathen Chinees, and wicked millionaires.”

Just the town for us! Gemma imagined her oldest friend, Nellie, laughing. Nell’s first letter from San Francisco, in fact, had said much the same thing: *It’s a rollicking sort of place—San Francisco’s made its fortune, so now it’s mad to improve itself. Galleries, theaters, mansions . . . not to mention rich men lying around everywhere like lumps of gold, just waiting to be picked up!*

“I hope you won’t be staying long, dear,” the woman opposite continued. “The Cesspit of the West is doomed, you know. Prince Benjamin has foreseen it.”

“Mmm,” said Gemma, not asking who Prince Benjamin was, but that wasn’t going to save her, she could just tell.

“Patriarch of the Flying Rollers of the House of David,” the woman said. “In Benton Harbor, Michigan.”

“Benton Harbor, Michigan, is that so.” *Explains the mouse-colored toque*, Gemma thought.

“The patriarch himself sent me here. I am to warn the people of San Francisco to give up their ways of vice—” Clearly nothing was going to shut the woman up, so Gemma fell back on stagecraft: chin on hand as if fascinated, widening her big blue eyes until they nearly clicked in doll-like innocence. The same expression she always donned when singing Olympia in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, right before she launched into “The Doll Song,” and it always brought down the house. “—if they don’t renounce their vile sinning, God will bring fire and earthquakes down upon them,” the woman opposite finally finished up her rant. “Within the month.”

“Goodness, fire *and* earthquakes.” Still wide-eyed. “Wouldn’t one or the other be enough?”

“The ground shall break apart beneath their hell-bound feet by May, if they do not repent!”

“How lucky I’m only staying through the end of April,” Gemma murmured.

The Flying Roller looked her over, clearly approving of Gemma’s plain traveling suit in London smoke cloth and ebony braid. “Visiting family, dear? I do hope it’s not misfortune that brings you so far.”

“On the contrary, I’m making my debut.”

“Debut?” The Flying Roller blinked. “Into society?”

“Oh, no.” Gemma knew her peach-fair skin was still good, and her Nebraska-corn-blond hair didn’t need any tinting yet, but no one was ever going to mistake her for eighteen. “On the stage! I’m an opera singer.” The woman recoiled as if she’d been confronted with a viper, and Gemma threw out her biggest, most glittering smile. “I’m making my debut with the Metropolitan Opera traveling company in two weeks, on the boards of the Grand Opera House—in Bizet’s *Carmen*, in fact, opposite the great Caruso.”

Praise be, that finished off the Flying Roller, who slapped a tract down on the seat and moved on to the next compartment with a great deal of muttering.

Not quite true, though, is it? Gemma’s thoughts whispered, once she had the compartment to herself. *You aren’t exactly making your debut opposite Caruso.*

“Close enough,” Gemma said aloud, picking up the tract. She *was* making her debut; it *was* with the Metropolitan Opera traveling company; it *would* be in *Carmen*; and Caruso *would* be throwing that glorious golden tenor across the footlights at her . . . along with the rest of the chorus, because that’s where Gemma was making this great debut: in the chorus. Laced into some cigarette-factory-girl bodice, swishing some Spanish petticoats. Maybe she’d get a bit of stage business in the tavern scene, get to flutter a fan at the bullfighter.

It’s still the Met, Gemma thought. It’s still Caruso. But the chorus, oh dear. Not exactly where a girl wanted to be at thirty-two, when she wasn’t really a girl any longer. When she was headed into the absolute prime of her voice, her best singing years . . . By then you hoped you’d have made it out of the ranks of cigarette factory girls.

“By this time next year, you will be.” She said it aloud to the empty compartment, adopting the steely tone of the matron in Red Hook, Nebraska’s only orphanage. Gemma knew very well that *steeliness* did not come naturally to her—that was the trouble with having the sort of farm-raised childhood that involved cows and plains and white-steepled churches, not to mention parents who raised you with the belief that being kind and generous to everyone you met would ensure a good life. It wasn’t until age fourteen that the farm, the cows, and the parents had all gone, and Gemma landed at the orphanage and realized just how wrong those early lessons were. The plain fact was, the only person a woman could rely on was herself, and she’d better be hard-nosed about it because otherwise she’d end up alone, humiliated, and stony broke.

Gemma shut her eyes hard against that particular train of memory before it could progress too far down the last few horrible weeks in New York, and skimmed the Flying Roller’s tract with its lurid illustrations. (Thunderstorms, billows of hellfire; cracks in the earth opening up to swallow a crowd of shrieking San Franciscan sinners.) A new beginning, that was all she needed.

And a little bit of a holiday, too. Caruso and the rest of the company were on the road and wouldn’t be arriving in San Francisco for another fortnight. *I’m being sent to replace a chorus soprano who’s quitting after the Kansas City run to marry her beau,* Gemma had written Nellie several weeks ago. *I’ll join the company when they arrive in San Francisco, and start in Carmen. I hear we’re opening for the cream of San Francisco society (does San Francisco society have a cream, exactly? Surely they do, if they can afford*

Caruso's fees!). Anyway, why don't I come out early? I haven't seen you in nearly a year, and to be quite honest, I need a good dose of your unshakable optimism. I've had such a horrible time lately, Nell, you can't imagine. I don't just need your optimism, I really need you.

Darling Nellie was a patchy correspondent—her letters sometimes stopped coming for weeks or months, whenever she disappeared into some new passion or project—but she'd answered *that* letter at once. Of course she had, because Gemma's oldest friend might be scatterbrained and disorganized but she knew desperation when she heard it. *Hop the next train to San Francisco and come stay with me while you wait on Caruso, farm girl,* she'd written in her backhand scrawl. *I don't know what's gone wrong for you lately, but I promise we will fix everything. I've got a room on Taylor Street on Nob Hill; it'll be just like bunking together in the Bronx when we were wide-eyed greenhorns. Only with fewer roaches!*

Gemma smiled, thinking of that squalid cold-water apartment where they'd first met. Nellie had been a tall bony brunette of sixteen, brandishing an artist's sketchbook and a roll of brushes, throwing words like *cubism* and *perspective* around like jabs from her sharp elbows. Gemma had been plain Sally Gunderson, nineteen and a year out of the orphanage and terrified that the set of pipes in her throat wouldn't be good enough to make a splash in New York, even if they could nearly lift the steeple off the church in Red Hook—but even more terrified of being a hired girl with milkmaid calluses for the rest of her life, sleeping on a pallet in the cellar and getting the belt when she didn't work fast enough. She and Nellie had sized each other up as they stood in that roach-skittering Bronx apartment, both of them trying so hard to look like jaded professionals and not scared girls, and Nellie had been the one to burst out laughing.

“I don't have a *clue* what I'm doing,” she confessed with one of her big infectious grins. “And I don't think you do, either, farm girl. Except that we both need new names, because who's going to take us seriously in this city with handles like *Nellie Doyle* and *Sally Gunderson*?” And they'd picked out new names on the spot—though to each other, even now so many years later, it was still *Sally* and *Nell*.

Oh, Nell, Gemma thought. *What would I do without you?* She hadn't been able to write about all the unpleasantness that sent her fleeing from New York (the shouting and the contemptuous gazes and the shame, no, don't think about that, not right now), but she could *tell* Nellie about it once they

were face-to-face. Nellie would understand. She was the one person in the world who could be exempted from the general rule that everyone in the end would just let you down.

The train began slowing with a great screech of wheels. Gemma hastily folded up the Flying Roller's tract, cramming it through the bars of the birdcage. "Enjoy," she told Toscanini, lowering the cover again and reaching for her handbag. She had arrived.

Every city had a mood. As much as Gemma had traveled with one opera company and another over the years, she knew that for certain. New York was cynical, Chicago was energetic, Red Hook was sleepy . . . The mood she got from the great golden city of the West, as she stood on the railway platform flicking cigar butts off her skirt hem and inhaling San Francisco's smells of salt water, horse manure, and smoke, was *cheer*. Everyone in the crowd below seemed to be rushing somewhere, their voices noisy and exuberant. The clothes were a bright jumble: knot-buttoned tunics on the Chinese, loudly patterned kerchiefs around the necks of the sailors, tasseled shawls swirling around the shoulders of the prostitutes elbowing their way toward the docks. And music—Gemma's trained ear immediately found music. A sea shanty being bawled from a bar a few doors down . . . A lullaby in a minor key, hummed by a woman hurrying by with a baby carriage . . . "Kathleen Mavourneen" sung in surprisingly sweet harmony by a pair of laundrywomen sauntering by with their baskets.

"You looking for a drink and a meal, miss?" a hansom driver called, seeing Gemma crane her neck at the line of cabs. "I'll drive you to Sully's, best steam beer south of the slot."

"South of the slot?" Gemma echoed, puzzled.

"That means south of Market Street, ma'am, because it's got slots between the cable car rails. You hop in and I'll show you—"

"Never mind that. I'm going to Taylor Street." Gemma rattled off the address Nellie had written her and gasped at the price the driver promptly quoted. "I'm looking for Taylor Street by way of Nob Hill, not the North Pole!"

"Good luck hauling that trunk all the way up Nob Hill by yourself," he smirked, and Gemma took great pleasure in seeing his expression sour as she took her birdcage in one hand and the strap of her trunk in the other and

began hauling everything down the street.

She made it almost as far as Third and Mission, gritting her teeth as her trunk's end bounced on the cobbles behind her. In an opera, a gallant young tenor would have offered to carry it for her and they'd be singing a passionate duet by the top of Nob Hill, but life wasn't as accommodating as an opera. "Shut up," Gemma told Toscanini, protesting inside his birdcage. "I'm not asking *you* to hoist an end." The opera house must be nearby; she saw a brand-new poster tacked to the side of a saloon, with the name *CARUSO* in elaborately scrolled letters, and stopped to look at it with a flutter of cautious hope. There were billboards and ads everywhere, pasted on the sides of buildings, raised above scaffolded half-built constructions—everyone in San Francisco, it seemed, was selling something or building something. You could make your fortune in a town like this.

An elderly Chinese man trotted past with a two-wheeled pushcart, stumbling against Gemma as he tripped on an uneven paving stone. Gemma felt her trunk's strap slip from her hand and barely stopped everything from overturning. The slim Chinese boy running alongside the older man quickly stopped to right her trunk, tipping the unlikely-looking fedora on his head and bowing. "I'm sorry, madam," the boy said in surprisingly unaccented English. "Old Kow did not mean to get in your way. He begs forgiveness." A stream of Chinese from the older man, who had snatched the cap off his head and stood giving a tentative gap-toothed smile, as if hoping not to be shouted at.

"Oh, not at all. These streets—" Gemma broke off, looking at the pushcart. "I don't suppose I could hire you to take my trunk up to Taylor Street?"

Soon a price had been agreed upon (much more reasonable than the hansom cab driver's), the trunk and birdcage were perched on the cart, and the old man took up the handles and set off at a surprisingly nimble pace. Gemma fell in gratefully beside the boy, who had pushed his fedora back over a long shiny black plait. "You speak excellent English," Gemma couldn't help saying.

"I was born here, ma'am." The boy looked seventeen or eighteen, with a smooth delicate-featured face, a mouth in a firm line, dark eyes like wary twin shields.

"Perhaps you can tell me more about San Francisco, then." Gemma smiled. "That great marble dome showing over there, what is that?"

“City Hall, ma’am.” The old man laughed something in Chinese behind the pushcart; the boy seemed disinclined to translate until Gemma made an inquiring noise. “Old Kow says City Hall is worth more than the men in it, ma’am. He says they’re such a greedy lot, they would eat the paint off a house.”

Gemma laughed, stopping short as an automobile came barreling around a corner like a rattletrap nursery toy. “And *Nob Hill*, what exactly is that?”

“It’s where the finer people live, ma’am. In the big houses.” The boy didn’t exactly unbend as the blocks rolled past and the cobbled street began to rise and climb under their feet, but he readily identified everything Gemma pointed out. “That’s the entrance to Chinatown, ma’am . . . That’s the flag over the Palace Hotel . . .”

“I’ve heard it’s the biggest hotel in the West.” Caruso and the Met company would be staying at the Palace when they arrived, Gemma knew, but she wouldn’t have checked in there even if she *could* afford it. She’d seen far too many sopranos end up in debt and disgrace because they got a taste for the champagne life when all they had to work with was a steam-beer salary. No, she’d happily bunk down with Nellie, even if it meant a makeshift pallet on her friend’s sofa. “How far are we from Taylor Street?” The wooden houses of the poorer districts, leaning against each other like tipsy friends, were slowly giving way to stone-faced mansions crowned with gilded cupolas and fenced around in spiked brass. Less raucous cheer, more keep-off-the-grass.

“Not far, ma’am.” Soon the pushcart pulled up outside a tidy wooden four-story half sunk into the nearest rocky hillside—Nob Hill, but not the most luxurious side of it, Gemma surmised. She opened her handbag, trying not to pant at the steepness of the slope she’d just climbed, counting out coins to the Chinese boy. *Hard-nosed*, she reminded herself, looking at the thinness of her wallet, but found herself handing over a generous tip anyway. To be frugal was one thing, to be a cheap tipper was another entirely.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The Chinese boy bowed, giving a quick curved smile that turned that solemn face into something completely different. Gemma found herself wondering if what she’d assumed was a boy was in fact a girl . . . All those operatic stories where girls dressed up as boys had to come from *somewhere* after all. But her guide, whether boy or girl, was already turning with a soft ripple of Chinese for the old man, both of them disappearing down the hill with the pushcart, and Gemma supposed it wasn’t

any of her business.

Besides, she was here at last: the house on Taylor Street where Nellie had invited her to stay, had told her they would *fix everything*. Through the open window with its crisp fluttering curtain, Gemma could hear the sound of a gramophone: the “Flower Duet” from *Lakmé*, and a strong contralto voice singing along. No one answered Gemma’s first knock, but when she knocked again, both the singing and the gramophone stopped, and there was a rustle of footsteps.

“*Paeonia officinalis anemoniflora*,” said the woman who answered the door.

Gemma blinked, still holding her handbag and birdcage. “I beg your pardon?”

“On your hat.” The woman pointed at Gemma’s narrow-brimmed gray crin with its black silk flowers. “Peonies. The only genus in the *Paeoniaceae* family. Though more normally pink, purple, white, yellow, or red, at least when found in nature and not on a hat. Though who knows? Who’s to say there isn’t a black peony blooming somewhere? Science is all about the undiscovered, and we never know as much as we think we do.”

“I thought they were camellias,” Gemma heard herself say. “I always try to have camellias on my hats—for *La Traviata*, you know, since it comes from *La Dame aux Camélias*.”

“Oh dear, no, you could never mistake a *Paeonia officinalis anemoniflora* for a *Camellia japonica*.” The other woman looked perhaps forty-five, face smile-creased and sun-browed as if she usually forgot to clap her hat over that sensible knot of gray-streaked hair before venturing outside. Her skirt was short, not even brushing her shoe tops, and a sprig of fresh violets was pinned to her crisply ironed shirtwaist. “Alice Eastwood,” she said, offering her hand as forthrightly as a man. No wedding ring.

“Gemma Garland,” Gemma responded in kind. “Was that you singing along with the gramophone, Miss Eastwood?”

“Yes, it was. I’m no singer, but I do like belting out a chorus or two when I’m puzzling a conundrum.”

“What conundrum?” Gemma followed Miss Eastwood inside, rather enjoying this odd conversation.

“I found a new flower, and I’m not sure what it is.” Miss Eastwood led the way into a parlor crammed with china bric-a-brac, crocheted antimacassars, and an upright piano draped with a fringed Chinese shawl.

“Found some of these straggling at the edge of a vacant lot on my way to work.”

Gemma examined the little purple blooms, pressed and glued against a stiff sheet of paper on the nearest overcrowded occasional table. “Prairie phlox. I have no idea what the Latin name is, but it grew in sheets near my family’s farm in Nebraska.”

“Did it?” Miss Eastwood beamed down at the flower, bending to write the words *Prairie phlox* in a careful pencil script beneath the sprig. “I wonder if this came all the way from Nebraska. It’s amazing how far seeds can waft on the wind; they lodge in the most curious places. I wrote an article about the flora of Nob Hill, just on the plants I saw every day forcing themselves up between cobblestones. Sixty-four species, fifty-five of them not native to this state, all determined to thrive among the stones! Life is astounding.”

“Yes, it is,” Gemma agreed, looking around the parlor for some sign of Nellie. “Do you run this establishment, Miss Eastwood?”

“Gracious, no. I rent the garret on the top floor, since ’92. Our landlady’s longest-running boarder.” Pushing back a graying strand of hair, Miss Eastwood smiled. “I’m a botanist, Miss Garland. Curator of botany at the California Academy of Sciences.”

Gemma wasn’t sure she’d ever met a woman who was a botanist. On the other hand, most people hadn’t met a woman who was an opera singer, either—met one up close, rather than seeing one across the footlights like a creature in a zoo. “If you’ve been here so long, Miss Eastwood, I’m hoping you might know another local transplant who wafted here on the wind. Miss Nellie Doyle, though you may know her by another name.” Nellie changed her artistic handle nearly as often as she changed clothes, unlike Gemma, who had stuck with *Gemma Garland* since age nineteen. “She might be going by Donatella Disogno”—that had come after Nellie’s flirtation with Italian portraiture—“or by Thomasina Cray”—that had been her Hudson River landscape years—“or by Danielle LeMarq.” Her French impressionist phase.

“Miss LeMarq, yes. The one who looked like a California poppy? Fragile on the outside, tough little weed on the inside.” Miss Eastwood smiled, and for a moment Gemma thought Nellie was about to come sauntering into the room in those outrageous trousers she’d started wearing as soon as she read George Sand. But then the botanist shook her head. “Your friend left, oh, six weeks ago? Had the room below mine, but she cleared out for new pastures.”

Gemma felt the smile sliding off her face. “Did she leave an address?”

“No . . . She’d been spending less and less time here, the last six months or so. Working on a showing, hinting about big things to come. I think,” Miss Eastwood added delicately, “there may also have been a man involved.”

That sounded like Nellie. Maybe she’d moved, and her forwarding letter had gone astray? Gemma bit her lip, wondering what to do. Her trunk was still sitting on the front step, and she was starting to see the faint pulse around the room’s lamps and windows that meant a migraine might be coming—oh God, not *now*. She massaged her temples discreetly, but Miss Eastwood had been distracted by the birdcage, which was rattling again. “Is that a bird in there, or a small earthquake?”

Gemma lifted the cover off the cage. “That’s Toscanini.”

“You have a famous Italian conductor in your luggage?”

If I did, I wouldn’t still be in the chorus at thirty-two, Gemma thought. “No, just a budgie.”

Toscanini greeted the daylight with a screech, ruffling his green feathers, looking decidedly cross. He’d made mincemeat of the Flying Roller’s tract—shredded it to absolute ribbons under his perch. “Good boy,” Gemma approved, wedging a finger through the wire bars and inviting him to cuddle along her knuckle, but Toscanini only glared. “Oh dear, he doesn’t appreciate train travel. All those spittoons.”

“What *is* it about spittoons?” Miss Eastwood wondered. “And why can’t men seem to aim properly at them?” The two women watched Toscanini flutter around the cage, cracking a few seeds from his dish. “*Psittacidae* family? Fauna isn’t my specialty, but isn’t that the same as parrots? Does he talk?”

“No, but he imitates my vocal exercises. Annoyingly, he has an even better range than I do. I know an opera singer is supposed to travel with a yappy little dog, but . . .”

“An *opera* singer, Miss Garland?”

Gemma waited for the Look, like the one the Flying Roller had given her. The look that said *Harlot*. But the botanist’s gaze was admiring, and Gemma felt her bruised, New York–battered soul start to preen just a little bit. “Soprano,” she murmured, and couldn’t resist singing just a line or two from the “Flower Duet” Miss Eastwood had been singing along with on the gramophone. “*Sous le dôme épais, où le blanc jasmin . . .*” Her voice fell into the room like sunshine, warm and full—Gemma could *feel* it, and a lump rose

in her throat. She hadn't been able to sing in days, with the train journey and all the preparations beforehand. Go more than a day or two without practicing, and she always had the superstitious suspicion the voice would be gone the next time she tried to use it. Not the voice she spoke with, but the delicate contraption of skin and cords that gave her the ability to pour sunshine into a room when she sang.

Well, she still had it. Even after all the terrible things that had happened in New York, she still had it. And she was here, in a brand-new city, primed for a brand-new start.

(So where was Nellie, who had said she'd be here with open arms?)

"You sing beautifully," Alice Eastwood said, oblivious to the roiling going on inside Gemma. But Toscanini sidled along his perch and consented to rub his head along her finger, and Gemma swallowed that lump in her throat. She scratched her budgie's throat gently.

"I don't suppose my friend's old room is available for rent?"

Chapter 2

April 5, 1906

Twelve days, twenty-three hours, thirty-six minutes before the earthquake

Suling couldn't be seen entering the Palace of Endless Joy. If anyone told her uncle she'd been anywhere near the brothel, he'd lock her up until the day he married her off. It was a good thing she had ways of thwarting Third Uncle's wishes. She pulled on a plain unobtrusive tunic, dark green without a trace of embroidery, then loose-fitting black trousers. Pausing at the mirror on her bedroom door, she twisted her plaits into a loop at the nape of her neck. Just an ordinary Chinese girl, going out on errands. She wondered if the blond woman from yesterday would've recognized her as the laundryboy who had agreed to tote her luggage up the hill. Suling gave the woman a second thought only because she had been friendlier than most and the tip had been so generous. And because the Taylor Street address was familiar to her, a boardinghouse that used her family's laundry services.

Taking a deep breath, Suling opened the door and moved quietly across the floorboards toward the stairwell. The sickly sweet odor drifting out from Third Uncle's half-open door told her she needn't have bothered with discretion. Sunk in an opium-laced sleep, he was resting on the rattan daybed and wouldn't notice. He noticed very little these days, and the laundry business her parents had worked so hard to establish in San Francisco's Chinatown was slipping through his heedless hands. But she no longer cared. Now his lack of attention was to her advantage. When she was absent from the laundry, he assumed she was at one of her part-time sewing jobs. Like every other able-bodied adult in Chinatown, Suling worked an erratic hodgepodge of jobs to earn extra money. She did piecework above the Fung Tai Dry Goods store or sewed for Hing Chong Tailors; sometimes she taught embroidery at the Mission Home. It was all respectable work for a young woman, all close to home and inside Chinatown, which allowed her to come and go without arousing Third Uncle's curiosity.

It was still early as she set off along Washington Street to Hing Chong Tailors. At this hour shopkeepers were still busy setting up for the day. Produce vendors were arranging vegetables harvested from market gardens outside the city, and their sidewalk displays showed off boxes of spring vegetables: bright green bunches of scallions and asparagus, onions and peas,