

DEATH OF  
A PROPER  
BOSTONIAN  
ANNE LOUISE BANNON



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# CHAPTER ONE



Home. We rhapsodize about it in song and words of gushing sentimentality. It is the goal of any peregrination, the object of our hearts' desire, there being no greater blessing than to return to the place of one's birth, as if we humans were little more than salmon rushing upstream to the place of our hatching.

For a great many years, my most ardent longing was to return home to Boston. To know once again the tender embrace of my family, to renew the cherished friendships I so greatly missed, to hear music played by musicians of some skill. There was real art in Boston, and congenial people with real manners. More to the point, there was no violence such as there was in Los Angeles, where I had lived since Eighteen-Sixty.

My gentle reader must smile, for in reality, the citizens of Boston were no less likely to succumb to the ravages of anger, greed, and drunkenness than the citizens of Los Angeles. Indeed, that there were significantly more people in Boston in the Year of Our Lord Eighteen-Seventy-Three than there were in Los Angeles meant that, in terms of sheer numbers, Boston saw far more killings and other mayhem. However, given that our tiny pueblo had fewer

than ten thousand people resident at that time, proportionately, Los Angeles saw a great deal more violence.

That my vocation had me mired in the aftermath of so much violence only made my desire to go home all the more keen, as did my fear that I would not be able to. Until it not only became possible for me to travel so far, but necessary, although fortunately in a happy way.

I felt no little joy as the train bearing myself and my ward, Elena Ortiz, pulled into the city of Boston. Alas, it was several hours late, and when we'd finally approached the station, it did so at a snail's pace. Nonetheless, as it did, my heart swelled and almost burst with anticipation.

The train continued its leaden pace to the station. Mr. Wiley, the manufacturer's agent to whom I entrusted the sale of my wines, had accompanied Elena and me, along with my lady's maid, Marisol Velasquez. Mr. Wiley and I were friends of long standing, in addition to our business association, which was one reason why I had asked him. I also knew that he frequently had business to transact in Boston and other cities in the East. Once the transcontinental railroad had opened up, he'd chosen to make the trips himself rather than send an assistant because he also had a sister and several cousins in Boston. Part of his business on that trip was a load of wines to sell from the winery I owned in Los Angeles with my partners Sebastiano Ortiz and his brother Enrique.

"You are happy to be home, Mrs. Wilcox?" he asked, his small smile almost hidden by his neatly trimmed, sandy-colored beard.

"Indeed." My eyes blinked with impending tears, and I coughed lightly, quickly grabbing my handkerchief. "Forgive me. I have forgotten how heavy the air can be here."

It was heavy, and clouds filled the skies. Shortly before the train stopped, the heavens let loose, and the rain poured down fast and hard.

“My goodness!” gasped Elena. “Are we having a hurricane?”

“No, Elaine,” I replied. “It’s simply a summer storm.”

Downpours of the sort that we were traveling through were rare in Los Angeles and mostly happened in the winter months, not late August, as it was that day.

I must also point out that, for the purposes of this narrative in these, my memoirs, Elena will be henceforth referred to as Elaine. Prejudices being what they were, and, alas, still are, we had changed her name to Elaine Orton. She faced enough difficulty being a female medical student.

Elaine was the eldest daughter of my winemaker and partner, Sebastiano Ortiz. He and Olivia, Elaine’s mother, had no objection to their daughter attending medical school (unlike my father). However, they were quite apprehensive about her traveling all the way across the continent to do so. Or to be more precise, they were fearful that their beloved daughter would succumb to the allure of the big city and never return to the pueblo. They only agreed to let her go to the New England Female Medical College in Boston on the condition that I accompany her there, then return to fetch her home when her studies were completed.

I had attended the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, and would have preferred that Elaine go there. But my dear friend, Amelia Eberle Nash, had taken a position at the New England school. My aunt, who had housed me while I was a student, passed away mere days

before I graduated, so there was no connection regarding a place for Elaine to live in Philadelphia. Finally, my sister Carrie still lived in Boston, and she and her husband were happy to take Elaine in. And so, the New England school would have to do.

I watched anxiously through the window as the train slid into the station. There were several people gathered along the track despite the pouring rain, presumably to meet the train we were on. I looked for a specific familiar face.

Would my father be there? I had been given to understand that he had repented of giving me the utterly unpalatable choice of marrying Albert Wilcox or living on the streets. I had chosen to marry, and as a consequence, had been ripped from the bosom of my family and taken to Los Angeles. That my husband had had the decency to shuffle off his mortal coil within months of our arrival in that benighted corner of the world had not initially ameliorated the situation with my father. But time can soften even the hardest of hearts, and my brother, Merriam, had assured me that Father most desperately wanted to bring me back into the family fold.

The rain slackened, and the several umbrellas on the siding shifted. My face fell as I realized neither Merriam nor Father was there. Elaine touched my arm.

“Maddie,” she said softly. “You seem sad. Are you not happy to be home?”

I patted her hand. “Immeasurably. But...” I smiled, and my eyes blinked a little. “However, it is possible that some people I had hoped to see are not here. And if they are not, it is entirely probable that they have been detained for reasons that are completely justified.”

At that moment, however, my heart froze. Elaine gasped, as well.

“That man,” she whispered, pointing to the tall fellow with a reddish brown beard, a tall, but portly figure, and the bearing of the insufferably proud. “He frightens me.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I whispered back. “He is the very image of my late husband. You were but a small child when he died.”

“He was very cruel Mama says.”

“He was, and that man must be one of his brothers. I wonder what ill fortune it was that arranged for him to be waiting for this train today of all days.” I shook my head. “Perhaps we can avoid him.”

Then my heart leaped. A woman with medium brown hair in a dark blue polonaise walking suit rushed onto the platform, holding the hands of two boys, the younger of whom was quite small. She carried no umbrella, and behind her, a man in a frock coat and top hat ran with his, failing utterly in his attempt to keep her and the boys shielded from the rain. A young girl of nine followed closely behind, all but dragging another very young boy along and trying to keep him under the inadequate shelter of her own umbrella.

My darling sister Carrie had arrived, clearly as eager to see me as I was to see her. Carrie was equally eager that her children should meet me, else she would have left them with their nurse and their tutor. Her husband, for the man behind Carrie could be no other, laughed as Carrie anxiously searched the windows of all of the cars.

The train ground to a halt with a great deal of hissing, whooshing, and groaning. I waved out of the window at Carrie, then gathered Elaine, and hurried to the car’s door.

“Shall I see to your luggage, Mrs. Wilcox?” Mr. Wiley called after me.

“Yes, please,” Elaine answered for me, as I was already at the door. “And please see to Miss Velasquez.”

A moment later, I was on the siding, and Carrie’s hands were tightly grasping mine. We both gazed on each other, our eyes filling. Even though our thirteen years’ separation had, at long last, come to an end, we saved our tears and our embrace for the privacy of our home. We were far too well-bred for such unseemly displays of affection in public.

“Oh, dearest sister,” Carrie gasped. “I am overjoyed to see you.”

“As am I,” I said, my voice wavering far more than I felt was appropriate.

Carrie kept my one hand in hers as we hurried out of the wet into the station house. Elaine and Carrie’s family followed closely.

“Children,” Carrie called, her gentle voice nonetheless rising over the patter of raindrops on the roof above us. “Come meet your Aunt Wilcox. Dearest Maddie, this is Edward.”

He was a solid young man of seven years with his mother’s brown hair who held himself erect and smiled a little shyly. Carrie pulled forward the smallest boy.

“This is Theodore.”

Her face grew pained as the tow-headed three-year-old drew back and hid his face in his mother’s skirts.

“Oh, dear!” Carrie gasped.

“It’s quite all right,” I said, smiling. “I’ve known many little ones who take fright at even the kindest of people. We will take our time and get to know each other slowly.”

I heard Elaine laugh softly behind me. Carrie gently pushed her daughter forward.

“This is Mary,” Carrie said.

Mary’s brown ringlets bobbed about her face most becomingly, and she curtsied.

“Welcome, Aunt Wilcox,” she said, obviously proud of being the oldest and most polite of the young ones.

“Thank you for your most kind greeting, young Mary,” I said, my smile growing.

“And this,” said Carrie, pushing forward the final boy. “Is Medford Reade, our dear sister Abby’s boy.”

Medford, a lad of only four years, blinked. His blond hair and round face reminded me of his mother, whom we had lost only the winter before. He started to put his thumb in his mouth, only to think better of it, but then had no idea of what to do with his hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Medford,” I said gently.

He turned and joined his cousin to hide in Carrie’s skirts. I laughed softly.

“I...” Carrie suddenly laughed, also. “Oh, dear. I have forgotten the most important of all. Darling Ambrose, this is my dear, dear sister! Maddie, this is my sweet husband.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stanton,” I said.

“The pleasure is all mine.” He was quite tall with a light brown beard, ready smile, and even a twinkle in his brown eyes. He bowed slightly. “But please. If you are willing, I am happy to be your Brother Ambrose.”

I couldn’t help but be charmed. “And I am happy to be your Sister Maddie.” I suddenly realized that I had neglected two others. “Carrie, Brother Ambrose, pray forgive me. I must present to you my dear friend and protege, Elaine Orton.”

Both Carrie and her husband greeted Elaine quite warmly, and she bobbed a neat curtsy. I looked around and found Mr. Wiley close by, with Marisol standing just behind him, and gestured that they should join us.

“This is my personal maid, Miss Velasquez.” I smiled as I presented her to my sister and brother-in-law, even as she curtsied, then faded back. “And this is Mr. Wiley, the kind friend who accompanied us here. Mr. Wiley, this is my sister and her husband, Mrs. and Mr. Stanton.”

Mr. Wiley tipped his hat, as did Ambrose.

“We are grateful to you for seeing to the safety of our dear sister and her ward,” Ambrose said.

I saw Mr. Wiley choke with amusement, but only very briefly.

“Mrs. Wilcox has been a most kind friend to me,” Mr. Wiley said quite soberly. “And I am happy to have been of service to her and Miss Orton.”

I smiled at Mr. Wiley. He had been quite a pleasant and perfectly circumspect companion. I had feared some trepidation regarding his potential response to Ambrose regarding mine and Elaine’s need for protection on the journey, which might have had to do with the hearty guffaw that had escaped Mr. Wiley when I first asked if he might be so disposed to act as companion for Elaine and me. Mr. Wiley well knew that Elaine and I were perfectly capable of protecting ourselves against all manner of rough men. Indeed, he’d suggested, supposedly in jest, that we could protect him.

Ambrose offered a second slight bow. “Then please accept our thanks and an invitation to call upon us at your earliest convenience. Mrs. Stanton?”

Carrie quickly dug into her fringed reticule and produced a calling card.

“Here, Mr. Wiley. Please feel free to call at any time, and do give us your address for here in town. We would love to extend an invitation to dinner.”

“Which I will be happy to accept as my business permits.”

“Then,” Ambrose said. “Perhaps we should get ourselves out of this foul weather and back to a warm hearth and dry clothes.”

Behind us, a man loudly cleared his throat. I swallowed, but kept my face neutral. He was, indeed, the brother of my ill-fated, but unlamented husband.

Five among the progeny of the late Mr. Henry Wilcox, Senior, had survived into adulthood. The two sisters, Adelaide and Emma, had married well into other families in Boston. Their younger brother Winston was, to the best of my knowledge, still in Boston but largely unregarded for some reason or another. My husband, Albert, had been the youngest of the siblings. The man who confronted me at the station had to be the eldest of the five, Mr. Henry Wilcox, formerly Junior while his father had still lived.

“How do you do, Mr. Wilcox?” I said, fighting to keep my voice nice and even.

“Mrs. Wilcox... Sister Maddie,” began the man. Then he paused. He must have seen that we were not entirely welcoming him, but he blustered on nonetheless. “I am so glad to be able to welcome you home.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Wilcox,” I replied, watching him carefully.

During Albert’s all too brief courtship of me, and even after the wedding, his eldest brother had paid me little

mind. When Albert had died, his mother and two sisters had sent condolence letters. But I did not receive even the shortest note from the younger Mrs. Henry Wilcox, let alone one from her husband. Therefore, that this same Mr. Wilcox suddenly showed me the courtesy of meeting my train, while not inappropriate, did make me question his intent.

He cleared his throat again, then looked at Carrie and her family, and smiled as he appeared to think of something.

“It would appear that your welcoming party is somewhat larger than your average carriage can accommodate,” Mr. Wilcox said. “Perhaps I can assist. Would you, Sister Maddie, would you do me the honor of letting me bring you to your father’s home?”

“How kind of you, Mr. Wilcox,” Ambrose interjected quickly with a gay chuckle. “However, I have already foreseen the very difficulty you have mentioned and taken steps.” Ambrose laughed. “My wife’s dear father has already seen to sending his carriage. The ladies will be able to manage quite nicely with the younger ones in our brougham. And I have engaged our usual carters for the luggage.”

Mr. Wilcox glared. “Oh. Of course. Nonetheless, I hope you will permit your sister some intercourse with me. She is all I have left of my youngest brother.”

“What a kind invitation, Mr. Wilcox.” Ambrose’s smile took on a decided strain. “If my sister chooses to accept it, I’m sure she’ll find a way to arrange it. Now, if you’ll excuse us, it’s been a long journey for them, and my wife and I wish to get them settled as quickly as possible.”

When Mr. Stanton began his courtship of my sister in Eighteen-Sixty-One, our sister Abby had written that she was unimpressed, and our father even less so. Mr. Stanton seemed far too jolly and lacking in gravity. But in her own inimitable fashion, Carrie had reassured the family that Mr. Stanton had no little wit and was certainly the most sensible of the many fellows vying for her hand. I, of course, took Carrie at her word, as she had always been sensible herself, and as the years played out, Ambrose had proven time and time again that the family worries were for naught.

So that afternoon, while Ambrose's deft handling of my former brother-in-law did not surprise me, it did leave me quite impressed with how utterly adroit he'd been in that handling.

Mr. Wilcox's eyes finally fell on Elaine. She was not pretty in any conventional way, as she had inherited her mother's solemn face. But her dark hair shone, as did her dark brown eyes. That day, she wore her rose bombazine traveling dress, with a matching hat and off-white gloves, and looked quite neat and well-turned out. Indeed, she looked far too fresh to have just gotten off a train on which she'd spent a full week traveling. That had been due to some considerable tutelage on my part on what would be expected of a lady, particularly one in the rarified society of Boston.

And yet, I could not possibly have thought of every possible eventuality. Thus, dear Elaine completely missed Mr. Wilcox's speculative look. Carrie and I did not. This is not to imply there was anything untoward about the look, merely that it was odd.

Nonetheless, I pushed the encounter aside. Mr. Wilcox excused himself, and I watched as Ambrose and Carrie sorted us all into our various conveyances. Ambrose took Marisol with him, along with young Mary and Edward. Carrie, myself, Elaine, and the two youngest boys rode in the brougham, which was quite comfortable. The rain had stopped almost as suddenly as it had begun, and as the sun broke through the clouds, the heat of the August afternoon intensified.

The streets were crowded with traffic, at which Elaine seemed a little taken aback. I must confess that I felt a little taken aback as well. The streets in Los Angeles were not nearly so filled with buggies, carriages, horses, and people walking. Steam rose from the cobbles as the sun dried the remnants of the storm, and there rose to my nose an odor so noxious that I gasped.

Elaine gasped as well and fumbled for her handkerchief. She looked at me, worry deepening the frown on her face.

“Is something wrong?” Carrie asked.

I cleared the tickle in my throat. “The streets seem especially fragrant today.”

“Do they?” Carrie said, then sniffed. “How odd. I thought they seemed considerably better than usual.” She reached over and patted Elaine’s hand. “Based on Maddie’s letters, I had no idea that the streets of Los Angeles were so sweet-smelling.”

“They aren’t,” I said, then coughed lightly. “But I had forgotten how much more crowded the streets are here.”

“Oh.” Carrie smiled. “That would certainly account for any olfactory discomfort.”

“Boston is still a lovely city,” Elaine said, her nod more earnest than happy.

"I'm glad you think so," said Carrie.

She smiled kindly, but I could tell she saw the truth of Elaine's feelings. Nonetheless, I was proud of Elaine. Even I, who had grown up in Boston, was finding it more overwhelming than I would have thought. I was still more discomfited when the brougham passed Mount Vernon Street.

"Maddie?" Carrie asked with a worried frown.

"It's nothing," I said with a weak smile. "I merely forgot that we no longer have the old house."

Elaine looked perplexed. I hadn't told her much about my life in Boston, instead focusing on the expectations of polite society.

"The house that my family owned when I was a young girl," I explained. "There was a terrible tragedy in the house next door to it."

Carrie nodded sadly. "It was the house where the Wilcox family lived. Mr. Henry Wilcox, Senior, who was the father of Maddie's husband, he was our father's dearest friend."

"Insofar as Father has friends," I grumbled, never mind how unkind, and perhaps unjust, the thought was.

"Now, now, Maddie." Carrie tried to put on a remonstrative frown on her face, which just barely served to cover her giggles.

Our father was the very antithesis of demonstrative and seemingly lacking in any kind of feeling, let alone the deep sympathy required of true friendship. To be fair, the rampant stoicism favored by those of our class meant that many of us, myself included, often wondered if there was something wrong with us when we seemed to lack the proper feelings. Or, in my case, kept my feelings of anger,

in particular, so closely bound up that I would explode at the most inconvenient and inappropriate of times.

“As for Mr. Wilcox, there was a fire in his house,” Carrie continued. “It was utterly hideous. There was a party, or so Father told me, and one of the young girls, Felicia Quincy, got too close to a fireplace and caught herself on fire. I was not present. Mr. Stanton and I were on a tour of Europe at the time. I do believe we were in Paris.”

“I believe you were,” I said. “I was somewhat shocked to see that Merriam had written the letter with the news of the senior Mr. Wilcox’s passing. He neglected to write of the cause.”

Carrie’s eyes rolled. Merriam was our elder brother and so resembled our noble progenitor that he was often mistaken for his sire.

“Nonetheless,” Carrie said. “Mr. Wilcox perished along with Miss Quincy. It was quite terrible. Indeed, when Mr. Stanton and I came home and saw the shell of the house, I must confess that I was quite affected by it. And our poor father most certainly was, for all we consider him quite beyond such fine feelings.”

“How could anybody—” Elaine began.

I laughed while Carrie blushed.

“Perhaps we have spoken out of turn,” Carrie said, biting her lip.

“Not at all,” I replied. “My darling sister, I have closely followed the wise counsel of our dearly departed mother, and have maintained such a state of familiarity with those who were formerly merely servants that they have become dear friends and even my partners. Miss Orton, whose father is one of those partners, is one of my most trusted confidants and partners in my medical practice.”

Elaine flushed and all but glowed with the praise.

“Of course,” Carrie said with an approving nod. “Darling Ambrose used to get quite put out with me over being too familiar, but even he has had to concede we have far less trouble with our servants than most. Poor Mrs. William Parsons had her nurse just leave the baby in the yard completely unattended last week. Can you imagine?”

“Last week?” I frowned, puzzled. “Given that her children are older than we are, I would not have thought she’d have a baby to care for, unless she is raising one of her grandchildren.”

“Not that Mrs. William Parsons,” Carrie said. “That one’s grandchildren have babes of their own. The younger Mrs. Parsons is married to one of the cousins of the elder lady. Or rather, the grandson of the first cousin of the elder Mrs. Parsons, so twice removed from her.”

“Darling Carrie, you were always so much better at remembering those sorts of ridiculous details.” I sighed.

“Darling Maddie, it is merely a matter of taking an interest in something besides dissections and bad air theory and whatever all you keep stuffed in that head of yours.” Carrie smiled as she shook her own head, then suddenly brightened as the brougham slowed to a stop. “Ah. We’re here.”