

CHAPTER ONE

It was late afternoon when the little steamer from Mud Harbor reached the city, and the sun was sinking behind low, grey clouds. Maggie Fishbone was dizzy and seasick and so nervous she felt like she had swallowed an eel. She gripped her suitcase, stumbled off the gangplank and followed Sister Immaculata through the docks and out into the street.

The noise was deafening. Motor cars and trucks trundled past and trains clanked on iron bridges overhead. Clouds of steam hissed from gratings in the sidewalk. The air smelled of smoke, garbage, and a bunch of other things Maggie did not recognise. And there were people everywhere. A group of young men staggered by; one was playing a bugle and the others were singing in a foreign language. A woman bustled past with a huge purple cabbage in a basket. A man stood beside a baker's cart, yelling about hot pies and pretzels.



Back in the orphanage in Mud Harbor, Maggie had heard stories about the city. The fish heads for the orphans' supper came wrapped in newspapers, and the orphans read the newspapers and whispered about them at night in the dormitory. The city was stuffed full of wickedness, everyone knew that. Huge alligators lived in the sewers. Shadowy, hulking monsters lurched through the streets at night. Bakers stole children, chopped them up and made them into pies.

Maggie didn't believe the stories. Not really. But all the same, she frowned suspiciously at the pies on the baker's cart.

Sister Immaculata's black habit fluttered and her mouth was set in a determined line as she strode through the crowd. She checked the time and asked for directions, then they boarded a streetcar and found a seat. Maggie was uncomfortably squashed between the window and Sister Immaculata (who felt lumpy and bony, as if she were made out of potatoes and cutlery), and had to crane her neck to peer out as they rattled through the streets. They passed statues and steeples and buildings that reached so high into the sky that Maggie felt like they were travelling along the floor of a deep canyon. Advertising signs flashed and sparkled. Far above, she glimpsed an airship – a shadow against the clouds, as big as a whale. She caught her breath as it glided overhead.

Sister Immaculata cleared her throat and said, 'Well, Magdalena. You've got the devil of a temper, and you acted like a hooligan, time and again. Even as a baby you had a shriek like a banshee –'

Maggie scowled out the window and tried not to listen. She had heard the story a hundred times. How she'd been left on

the doorstep of the orphanage, wrapped in a scrap of sailcloth and tucked into a mackerel box. How the nuns had chosen the names Magdalena (after the saint, of course; the nuns were very keen on saints) and Fishbone, because her angry screams had sounded exactly like the seagulls in a gutter nearby, fighting over a herring bone.

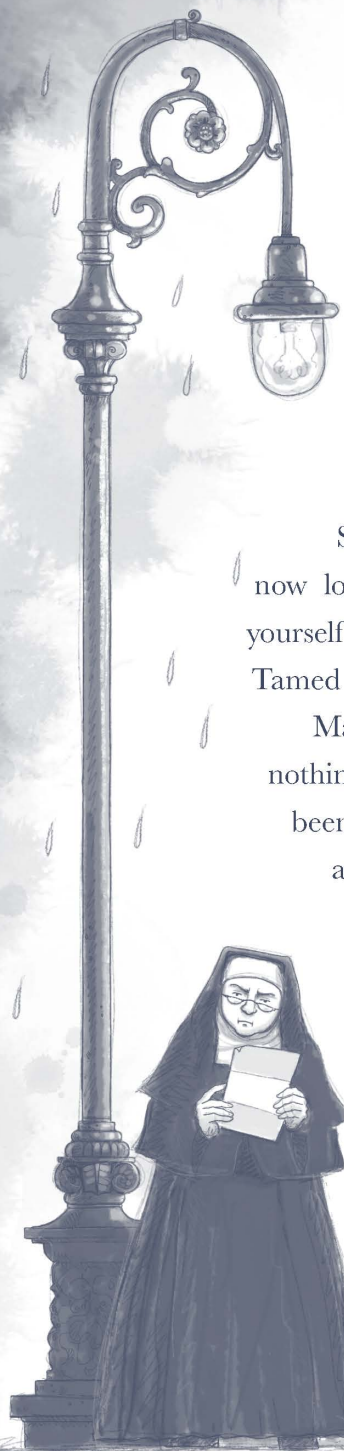
She sighed crossly.

Sister Immaculata was still talking. ‘... And now look where it’s landed you. You’ve only got yourself to blame. You’ll be tamed now, that’s certain. Tamed good and proper.’

Maggie shrugged, still scowling. There was nothing to say about that. Sister Immaculata had been saying similar, discouraging things all day, and Maggie was feeling sick with dread.

They clambered off the streetcar in a busy street lined with storefronts and apartment buildings. It had started to rain, and people were hurrying along, heads bent.

Sister Immaculata unfolded a letter and studied it in the light of a street lamp. She frowned. ‘This way,’ she said. ‘Hurry up, or we’ll be late.’



They followed the street for a few blocks, turned a corner and came to a high, dark building; a looming, spiky shape of gables and chimneys. Set in the wall was an archway, with words carved into the stone.



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Maggie felt her heart lurch. She took a breath and gripped her suitcase tightly. This was her last chance to escape. But before she could take a step, Sister Immaculata grabbed her by the wrist and snapped, ‘Oh no, you don’t.’ And she dragged Maggie up the stairs to the door and rang the bell.

They waited. Traffic rumbled past. A cat darted across the narrow street and disappeared behind a row of garbage cans. Two women walked by. As they passed, one of them said, ‘Another poor kid. They go in, but you never see them come out again, do you?’

Maggie swallowed and tried to stop herself from shaking.

At last, the door was opened by an enormous woman wearing an apron. She was around the same size and shape as the door, and she had a forbidding expression.

Maggie took a step backwards.

