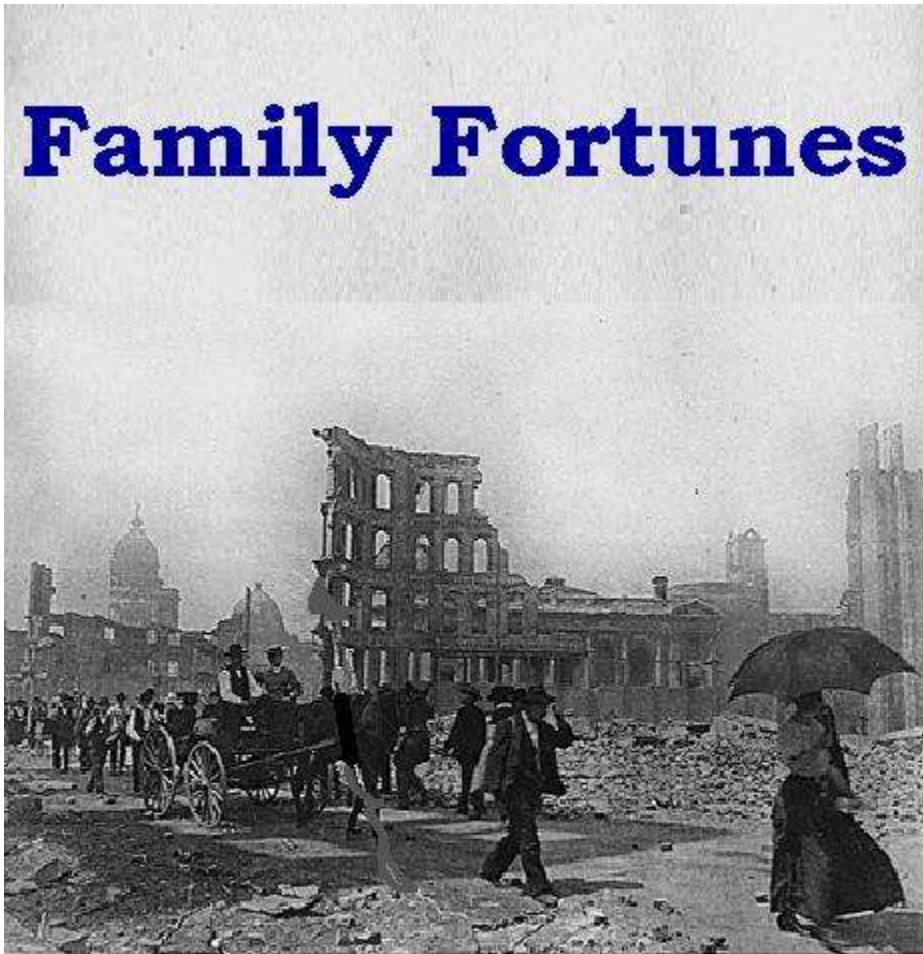


# Excerpt

## Family Fortunes



**Michelle Mairesse**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1905 San Francisco**

**At the turn of the twentieth century, San Francisco had grown from a gold-rush camp of mud and planked roads into a great metropolis. Ships from every nation docked in the magnificent natural harbor. Restaurants and theaters catered to a cosmopolitan public. Streetcars ran a block apart in both directions, and cable cars snaked up and down the steep hills that criss-crossed the city. By 1905 grand hotels, including the newly built Hotel St. Francis and the luxurious old Palace Hotel, were welcoming travelers from all corners of the earth. Real estate boomed, commerce flourished, and law firms proliferated on every avenue.**

**Allister and Allister, located on Montgomery Street near the bay, was among the most respected small law firms in San Francisco. One mild day in May, the senior partner, Colonel Andrew Allister, sent both the firm's secretary and a part-time law clerk home early because he wanted to have a private conference with his son. Something was troubling Will, something that had begun to affect his work.**

The colonel wondered how to approach the delicate topic. Decisions about food, hygiene, clothing, and education fell to his capable wife. His own province included finance, politics, and ethics, but if Will's problem belonged to another category, what could he do? The colonel assessed his son's situation: Smart as a whip and engaged to marry the prettiest, richest girl in San Francisco. May be a lovers' quarrel. Probably is. Nothing really important. If it's really important, he'll tell me sooner or later.

As he made his way down the hall, Colonel Allister paused and poked his head into his son's office. "Something worrying you, Will?"

Will Allister appeared to be nodding off, but he turned towards the door quickly and blinked his eyes several times. "Just resting my eyes, Father. When I've finished reading this brief, I'll lock up the office."

Colonel Allister resumed his stroll down the hall, mumbling something about finishing the brief tomorrow, but two hours later Will Allister was still slumped over his desk, drumming his fingers on the desktop, and brooding over anxieties utterly foreign to his father.

No, it was not enough to be well launched into a promising legal career and engaged to beautiful, rich Marjorie. Will weighed his unhappy situation. He had to admit that no one else was to blame.

**Gradually, unthinkingly, brushstroke by brushstroke, he had covered the floor with varnish and found himself standing in a tiny corner where only unvarnished truth remained.**

**Bound by the unvarnished truth, Will stood at the window gazing down at pedestrians beginning to shelter in doorways to avoid a sudden May shower.**

**He had been in this predicament three years, Will reflected. His father had warned against fraternizing with the staff. Those in power must never compromise their subordinates.**

**Despite the warning, Will had invited the office secretary to dinner--after all, she had stayed late to typewrite documents for him.**

**He and Vera Venturi had dined sumptuously at Pierre's. Afterwards, she thanked him for a memorable dinner and asked if he would like coffee and a liqueur in her apartment.**

**The wine had flowed abundantly at Pierre's, so they were light-headed and eager to prolong the celebration. In the cozy intimacy of Vera's apartment they talked, they laughed, and they gossiped about clients until Will took his leave two hours later. At the door, Vera leaned forward to kiss him goodnight.**

**It began at that moment, his first and only affair. As a law student, he once had joined drunken companions in an excursion to**

**a Barbary Coast brothel, but that brutal encounter had so disgusted him that he never returned.**

**With Vera, he discovered a dimension previously missing from his life, an erotic fondness that touched his deep core, that meant even more to him than the ecstasy he experienced in her arms. It had to end though.**

**Will prodded himself. No more excuses. The rain had ceased. He strode down the front entry steps and darted into the foot traffic that surged along the glistening asphalt sidewalk.**

**In the misty atmosphere, the street lamps cast a muted glow over the roadway. With his head down and his hands jammed into his pockets, Will slogged through puddles at crossings and dodged tarpaulin-covered cart horses and the talking, laughing night walkers who passed him.**

**He determined to go directly to the apartment, confront Vera, and put an end to their affair. He would tell her that he had always admired her, that he admired her still, but he was in love with someone else, the woman he planned to marry.**

**Will trudged along for five blocks, all unaware of his surroundings until he passed a saloon and saw a gesturing workman emerge backwards through the swinging doors and spinning into the street. Will heard someone inside shouting, "No use going home**

now. She's a real spitfire." The workman did an about-face and staggered back into the saloon, laughing heartily.

Was it the man's wife who was a spitfire, or his girlfriend? A spitfire. Vera was a spitfire, too, volatile and passionate. She would probably reproach him, and he would feel vile, for she really was a fine woman. She could be more considerate and responsive than anyone he had ever known.

But what if his secret life, his night life, pushed into the daylight? After all, Vera knew he was going to marry some day. They couldn't continue their affair as if nothing had happened. He pictured Vera's lovely, supple body and grunted.

Once Vera told him he had the features of Lord Byron, describing the poet's hollow temples, deep-set eyes, cleft chin, sensuous mouth. If it is really true, he thought, tonight I would willingly trade the resemblance for the gift of Byronic eloquence. How would Byron tell a woman that (1) he was grateful to her and (2) he was through with her?

His gait slowed as he approached North Beach, where Vera lived in a tiny apartment over a cutlery shop. As he reached the landing on the second floor, Will almost turned back, but he had come this far, so he might as well go through with it. Vera appeared

**in the darkened doorway, her glossy black hair still crackling with electricity. She held a hairbrush in her hand.**

**"Will!" She rushed forward to embrace him. "You should have told me you were coming." She tugged at his arm. "Come in, come in."**

**Will entered the tiny two-room apartment, with its bleak assemblage of furniture: deal table, two wooden kitchen chairs, squat iron stove for both cooking and heating, brass bedstead, scarred dresser.**

**"Have you had dinner yet? Because if you haven't, we can get some sand dabs at the pier."**

**"No, no thank you," Will murmured. He cleared his throat and bowed his head.**

**"Vera, I've come about something serious."**

**Vera's eyes widened. "What's wrong?"**

**Will fidgeted and adjusted his collar, unable to look Vera in the eye. The words choked him. It was like trying to talk with a bone in his throat. "I'm sorry for what I'm about to say."**

**Vera settled in the chair next to him and gathered up his hands so that she could comfort him after he announced whatever death or disaster had brought the pallor to his face, that tremor to his voice.**

**"I'm engaged to be married to Marjorie Huckfeldt."**

**Vera's dark eyes widened again. "I know, Will."**

**"I've never mentioned it to you before."**

**"Of course not. I read it in the newspapers. It's not a secret, after all."**

**"Do you realize what it means--to us?"**

**Vera laughed and threw her arms around him. "You must think I'm an idiot. Don't worry. I'll be discreet. So will you. If your wife ever says, 'Why doesn't your secretary wear spectacles and put her hair in a bun?' you'll say, 'Umm, doesn't she? I didn't notice.'" She nudged him and chuckled.**

**"I'd like to explain."**

**"You don't have to explain to me, dearest. I know what your family expects of you."**

**"No, Vera, I want you to understand. I'm going to marry Marjorie because--"**

**"You don't have to explain. We can be perfectly natural together, the way we've always been."**

**She sat on his lap, tousled his hair, aroused him, as she always could, and in no time at all, they rolled together on the bed with the brass headboard.**

**Two hours later, he left her. He was not ready to return home, so he started walking westward. Breathing hard, he descended to**

the dark, empty shore near the pier, where a freighter was being loaded. He stood looking up at the moon sliding in and out of the clouds and peering ahead at the red and green lantern lights that glowed on ferries approaching from the opposite shore. A faint breeze swept across the pier, carrying the ancient scent of the salt sea. Dark water sloshed among the pilings with a slow, regular rhythm. Everything breathed peace and tranquillity, like the peace he felt after making love to Vera, a sinking back into the rhythms of the world with a calm heart.

He would settle the Vera affair at a more convenient time. He had no right to dismiss Vera so abruptly. It would be better for all concerned to taper off, to gradually increase the distance between them. Or so he told himself.

After breakfast the following morning, the colonel consulted his large pocket watch, wound the stem, and departed as usual for his law office. Will, preferring not to give the office clerks the impression that he was under his father's thumb, often appeared at the law office an hour later than his father. He ignored the maid and scanned a newspaper while he drank his second cup of coffee.

**In an upstairs bedroom, Mrs. Allister and Jenny occupied themselves with the dressmaker, with the new fashions, and with the fit of Jenny's ball gown.**

**The Axminster rug was covered with a sheet that was littered with scraps of cloth, pins, and pattern paper. Jenny's mother, who was almost as thin and small-boned as her daughter, cocked her head to one side and addressed the seamstress. "A little too tight in the waist. "Raise your arms, Jenny. There, you see?"**

**The plump body kneeling next to Jenny and inserting straight pins in the skirt hem seemed suddenly to acquire a head, for a black bonnet appeared above the shoulders again. The seamstress, holding pins between her teeth, picked them out one by one and wove them into the bodice darts. Rid of the pins at last, she replied, "She'll not be able to wear a thicker corset than the one she has on, mind you, ma'am."**

**"Hmm, that's true," Mrs. Allister said as she sat down on the edge of Jenny's bed and critically appraised the pinned-together taffeta strips. "Don't you think it's a touch too décolleté? Jenny is only nineteen, you know."**

**The seamstress was accustomed to Mrs. Allister's mercurial directions after making frocks for this demanding lady for the past**

ten years. "It's the Paris mode this season, ma'am, but we can put a band of the satin trim on top if you like."

"Hmm, no. We wouldn't want her to be the only unfashionable girl at the ball, would we? Her brother wouldn't like that all."

Jenny exhaled and let her shoulders droop. "Oh, my brother. Will thinks nobody is good enough for Marjorie. I could be the queen of Siam and arrive on an elephant, and I still wouldn't be grand enough to suit my snooty brother."

"What's this? Do I hear rebellion?" Mrs. Allister rose and circled her daughter slowly, still scanning the taffeta for puckers.

"Oh, Mother," Jenny wailed. "Do I have to go there for the summer? I'd rather stay home. I could read and go to the zoo and work on my botanical collection."

"Someone seems to have forgotten that we settled all that. Someone can't see past the end of her nose. Do you really think you can be a child all your life? Listen to me carefully, young lady. This is your chance to enter the best circles. While you're bettering your acquaintance with the Huckfeldts, you'll be meeting some of the people who matter in San Francisco. It's time you entered society."

"Why can't I go to university instead?"

"What would be the point of it? You're not planning to teach or to join the nursing profession, are you? After all, you are not

**compelled to work for a living, like that poor Miss Venturi, sitting at her typewriting machine all day."**

**"What am I supposed to do, mope around until some man asks me to marry him?"**

**"No, decidedly not. You are not to mope. You are to acquire some graces, some manners, some charm, some conversation, some style."**

**Jenny's sense of dread extended to every aspect of the scheduled summer visit to the Huckfeldts. Marjorie Huckfeldt in particular made Jenny feel uneasy. Maybe if she stayed out of Marjorie's way, the visit would go more smoothly. "At least I'll be able to ride. Will says the Huckfeldts have beautiful mounts."**

**Mrs. Allister turned to the seamstress. "When she was eleven, she wanted to be a jockey. It was all we could do to get her to ride sidesaddle."**

**"Father said I didn't have to."**

**"Your father is usually right, but he is far too busy to follow the fashions." Mrs. Allister exchanged a quick conspirator's smile with the seamstress.**

**After sounding a tattoo on the door, Will entered, took in the scene, and addressed Mrs. Allister. "Thank you, Mother. I really**

appreciate everything you're doing. You may succeed in getting her civilized before summer."

Jenny dearly loved her brother but resented his assumption that his being seven years older made him twenty years wiser. Still, he was a nice brother.

Her mother's voice broke into Jenny's reverie. "What does that moony expression mean?"

Jenny quickly presented a pout. "I'm tired." She knew better than to confide her thoughts to her mother, who could turn anything to ridicule if you gave her an opening. She was suddenly reminded of the time Father took her and Will to a Japanese wrestling demonstration. After the two Sumo wrestlers circled each other several times, one of them saw his opportunity and flipped the other on his back like a tortoise. That was it. The match was over. And Mother could do that to you if you gave her an opening.

Mrs. Allister smiled warmly at her eldest child. "You're visiting Marjorie this morning, are you, Will?"

His mother's presence always had a bracing effect on Will. He shook off his lethargy and quickly assumed his more habitual pose of self-assurance.

"Yes, Mother. I'll send her your greetings if I may."

Jenny groaned and grimaced. "I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I'm making, all for your precious Marjorie. I'm not in the least looking forward to spending the summer with the Huckfeldts."

"That's quite enough of that," said Mrs. Allister. "Most girls would give their eye teeth to even meet the Huckfeldts."

"I think she'd rather meet the horses," said Will.

With a wry expression, Mrs. Allister replied, "Yes, we've already heard about the horses."

Will addressed Jenny over his shoulder, "Try not to disgrace us, will you?" Relenting a little, he turned around and said, "You'll look spiffy in that, Sis."

He sounded jauntier than he felt. Unable to sleep, early this morning he had anguished over the speech, the confession he was going to make to Marjorie. He risked her anger, but that was not serious--sometimes he found it exciting and even stimulating. Worse, he risked having her break their engagement, which would be unendurable. But if someone else told her about Vera, he could not predict what would happen. He dawdled again on the front doorstep.

In a torment of indecision, Will stood before the two-storey brick residence where he had been born and dwelt all his life.

**Cranking up his courage once more, he walked a block to the cable car line and set out for Nob Hill.**

**By the turn of the twentieth century in San Francisco, the railroad, sugar, shipping, and silver barons had lavished great fortunes on Nob Hill, erecting palaces, pleasure domes, and outright follies to impress their fellow citizens. The Huckfeldt mansion, less magnificent than some, looked like a gloomy Serbian castle on the outside and an auction house inside.**

**In the east-wing sitting room where Marjorie Huckfedt received Will, Afghan carpets covered most of the marble floor, and the furnishings included Louis Quinze chairs, tall Chinese urns crowded with peacock feathers, Roman deities brandishing torches aglow with a single electric bulb, Flemish tapestries, and Dutch seascapes in rococo frames.**

**As Will perched beside her on the loveseat, Marjorie made a sweeping gesture at their surroundings while criticizing her mother's style of interior decoration. She vowed to Will that when they were married their house and furniture would be perfection. First though, they would have a long honeymoon away from the world.**

**Will did not answer, nor did Marjorie expect him to. They often sat side-by-side in a languid kind of silence, both steeped in the bliss of being together.**

**On hearing the word "honeymoon," Will perked up, but soon his self-inflicted torment descended on him again and he lapsed deeper into silence.**

**Detecting the constraint in Will's silence, Marjorie pushed him. "If we were playing charades, would you be 'Silence is golden' today?"**

**"You are golden," he said fervently. And she was. Her golden hair, ivory skin, and topaz eyes had already earned her the nickname "Goldie" when she was a schoolgirl.**

**Marjorie laughed. "So that's what I mean to you--gold. Maybe Mummy is right about you." Seeing his stricken face, she said, "I'm only teasing, silly."**

**Will felt wretched. He had failed again. He shifted uneasily on the loveseat and withdrew deeper into himself. If he confessed now, Marjorie would be angry and tell her mother, and then her family would descend on him like a nest of hornets.**

**He was startled when Marjorie insisted, "I've never seen you this way before. There's really something wrong, isn't there?"**

**Red-faced with anxiety, Will blurted, "Let's elope. We'll run away together. This long engagement its-- it's dangerous. I'm afraid. I'm afraid something will happen. I know your mother doesn't like me."**

**Marjorie's quizzical expression reappeared, and she nudged his chin up until he met her eyes. "Don't worry, dearest. Mummy could never break us up."**

**Will was not reassured. He knew that Marjorie underestimated her mother. Although Mrs. Huckfeldt was undoubtedly a stupid woman, she had wealth and power. Like all stupid, powerful people, she could do more harm than even she herself intended.**

**In his law practice, Will had seen many of his clients making decisions that devastated the lives of their dependents. For that reason I must not act in haste, only to repent at leisure. I'm thinking it through, he consoled himself. I must be cautious. I know what harm can come of desperate moves. Like eloping? Yes, that would be a desperate move. But I am desperate. Desperate enough to tell Marjorie what she ought to know? No, not yet. There is too much at stake.**

**Watching the play of emotions on Will's face, Marjorie persisted, "You're not being honest with me, Will. Isn't there something you wish to tell me?"**

**He hesitated before responding, "Only that I love you more than ever." He knew he was deciding his fate at this instant but he could not see its shape.**