

City of Secrets



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Also by Kelli Stanley

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MIRANDA CORBIE SERIES

City of Dragons

The Curse-Maker

Nox Dormienda

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City of Secrets



Kelli Stanley



Minotaur Books

A Thomas Dunne Book
New York



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*For my mother, Patricia Geniusz Stanley,
my best friend and the best person I know.
Thank you for your courage and your Polish tenacity
and your strength, Mom, and most of all, for your love.*

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Acknowledgements

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The only constant in life is change—a fact which makes me all the more grateful to be writing thank yous for my latest novel.

City of Secrets was a tough book to write emotionally, and without the unflinching and self-sacrificing support of family, and the cheer and friendship of extended family and colleagues in the crime fiction community, it would have been an even harder task.

My incomparable agent and dear friend Kimberley Cameron—my Rock of Gibraltar—helped keep me (relatively) sane as I chronicled Miranda’s journey through 1940 San Francisco and a part of Napa Valley few tourists ever know about.

The brilliant and supportive Marcia Markland—whom I am so lucky to call my editor—helped buoy me through the rocky “second book” syndrome.

I am very proud to be published by Thomas Dunne/Minotaur, and thank all the great people at Macmillan with whom it is such a pleasure to work: Peter Wolverton, Thomas Dunne, Andrew Martin, Sally Richardson, Matthew Shear, Talia Sherer, and Matthew Baldacci, as well as publicists extraordinaire Sarah Melnyk, Hector DeJean, and Bridget Hartzler. Extra special thanks to the invaluable and indefatigable Kat Brzozowski, who is an utter joy.

City of Secrets is blessed with a great artistic team: Olga Grlic’s stunning cover, Kathryn Parise on the sumptuous interior, Elizabeth Curione for peerless production, and Sona Vogel for copy edits both sensitive and thorough.

Deep and heartfelt thanks are due to all the readers, reviewers, bookstores, librarians, Facebook friends, Tweeters, and friends who championed *City of*

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Dragons—your support has made *City of Secrets* and the Miranda Corbie series possible.

Thanks, too, to the Mystery Guild, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Quality Paperback Book Club, Tantor Audio, Audible, and Thorndike Press for making *City of Dragons* available in multiple formats and through multiple venues. I'm enormously grateful, as always, to the bookstores that hosted me on tour, as well as Barnes and Noble, for their outstanding support of *City of Dragons*.

Extra special thanks to my home away from home, M is for Mystery, and my San Mateo family: Ed Kaufman, Pam Stirling, Jen Owen, Charlotte, Ann, and the rest of the stellar staff. Thanks to dear friends Fran Fuller and J. B. at the Seattle Mystery Bookstore, Whodunnit Books, Murder by the Book, Powell's, Barbara and Rob Peters and The Poisoned Pen Bookstore, Diane at the San Francisco Mystery Bookstore, Book Passage, Patrick at Mysterious Galaxy, Book 'Em, and the late, great Mystery Bookstore in Los Angeles—Bobby and Linda are family, and I, along with every other author in the crime fiction community, miss them and the store that brightened LA.

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Organizations are a big part of a writers's life—at least, this writer's life—and I'd like to add thanks to the Mystery Writers of America, the International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime—and particularly to Margery Flax, who helps make every MWA member's life a little easier!

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Finally, some thanks to my high school English teacher Shirley Foster, for her personal support and for helping instill me with confidence at an age when we need it the most. This book would not have been written without her long-ago help.

I love writing and I love being an author, but my family is the most important thing in my life. Whenever I'm ready to give up and throw in the towel,

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they stand by me, keeping me going. Tana—thanks for keeping me on the right track, even through Miranda’s darkest days. Mom and Dad—thanks for always believing in me.

I love you all more than I can say.

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Author's Note

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The plot of *City of Secrets* is fictional; the underlying tensions, motives, and many of the background details unfortunately are not.

German scientists were heavily influenced by the American eugenics movement. Anti-Semitism was relatively common in America, and Charles Coughlin, the Catholic priest-*cum*-radio broadcaster, remained popular throughout the country. Long before the term “right-wing militia” became a problem for Homeland Security—and before Timothy McVeigh became responsible for the second-deadliest act of terrorism in the United States—the “Christian Front boys” in New York were planning to blow up government buildings and fascistic groups physically harassed Jews on the streets of Manhattan.

I examined actual documents from the era—thanks to the American Jewish Committee online archives—and studied the many books of the period that were concerned with the potential for fifth columnists and American Fascism. The Musketeers were an actual group in San Francisco; lesser known than the Silver Shirts and the German-American Bund, they were representative of hundreds of hate organizations that sprouted up during the Depression, heartened and encouraged by Hitler’s march to power. Anti-Semitism remained a threat to a cohesive, civilized society throughout World War II and afterward: Hollywood didn’t specifically address the problem until *Gentleman’s Agreement* and *Crossfire*, both released in 1947.

At the same time, there were many people who fought an unheralded struggle for human rights during this period. The Reverend L. M. Birkhead,

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who founded Friends of Democracy; Rex Stout, the creator of Nero Wolf, who served as the chairman of the organization, are but two examples.

Miranda fights the war in her own way, but she was walking side by side with other soldiers, struggling against oppression and for the right of all men and women to live in dignity, individuals and yet part of a collective, not subjugated to violence, malice, or hatred because of who they were. Such heroism is unusual in every age but, fortunately for us, not anachronistic. It is to these unheralded champions that we owe the progress we still strive for, and the peace we hope we shall find.

I hope you enjoy *City of Secrets*, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading. You can find more about my books—including photos, historical documents, videos, and audio—at www.kellistanley.com, and I'm also on Facebook and Twitter. As always, I look forward to hearing from you!



Part One



The Fall

*Must the entire world go to war for 600,000 Jews in Germany
who are neither American, nor French, nor English citizens, but
citizens of Germany?*

—Charles Coughlin, *Detroit News*, January 30, 1939



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Pandora was still pretty. White skin, blond hair. Roots not faded back to black and brown. Stretched across the platform, breasts firm, nipples plump, pubic hair shaved. Head hung over the edge, upside down. Frozen, still, marble. Perfect artist's model, except for the blood dripping.

Drip-drop. Drip-drop.

Fred was standing in the stage shadows, hat in his hands. Tom skittered around Miranda, keeping up a monologue.

"I—I figure you know wh-what to do, Miss Corbie, bein' a detective an' all. You probably seen . . . She really is—dead?"

Fred choked, his large brown fedora crumpled with sweat from where he was squeezing it. He took a step toward Miranda.

"Ain't you better—ain't you better do somethin', Miss Corbie? Whoever did this to Pandora . . ."

She turned to face him. "Somebody threaten her? Try to get too close?"

He shook his head. "I can't say, Miss Corbie. Tom finds her like this—she ain't supposed to be here, she was always late, but you know, it don't take much time to take off your clothes, and she—she never had to wear much makeup. . . ."

He turned his back to her, faced the shadows again. A calliope started playing from the merry-go-round.

Miranda stood up from where she was crouched by the dead woman's face. "You touch anything?"

"I cain't—cain't remember, Miss Corbie. I saw her, might've shook her some." Tom's eyes came back to the dead girl, West Virginia accent thicker.

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Miranda took the pack of Chesterfields out of her purse. Said carefully: “You know how this got here?” She pointed to Pandora’s right breast, the one without a hole in it.

Under the swell, under the small, slow trickle crossing her chest and oozing from the stab wound. A word in blood.

Kike.

Bombs exploded from the Elephant Towers, rattling the wooden platform. Signal for opening time, second Golden Gate International Exposition, step right up, folks, and welcome to Treasure Island.

Miranda took a deep breath and lit a cigarette, staring at the dead girl.

May 25, 1940. Opening Day at the Fair to End All Fairs.

Closing day for Pandora Blake.

9:06 A.M. Miranda folded the newspaper over the B-western fence post outside Sally’s and flicked the Chesterfield in the dirt, waiting for the bulls to make an appearance, waiting for someone official to show up and tell her to go away.

Another explosion shook the Gayway, drowning out the Hawaiian and Spanish music from the turnstiles. Some genius in the PR department figured bombs were news in Europe, why not drop them on San Francisco?

Girls in line at the hot dog stand tittered. Whiff of fresh scones from Threlkeld’s, fog peeling off Ripley’s Odditorium.

Tom stepped out of Artists and Models across the midway strip, his long body jerking itself in different directions. She waited, quick inhale, dropped the Chesterfield, crushing it in the sawdust. His hand shook when he grasped her arm. A little taller than her, about five eight. Patched and stained dungarees, worn, covered in dirt, electrical wire hanging from his pocket. Blue eyes watery, wide, scared.

“They—they takin’ her away, Miss Corbie. Don’t know no family for her, but—God almighty, seems like she needs somebody.”

Trembling all over. Rubbed his face into his blue work shirt, mouth contorted, tears on weathered skin.

Miranda said slowly: “You sure you didn’t see anyone? They’ll ask you. They’ll try to break you. You know something, tell me.”

Head shake, hair sandy and lifeless. “I don’t see nothing. I’m settin’ up the lights for the opening, she’s the first act on the hour—we been practicin’ for the last week. I see her stretched out already, figured she was playin’ around.”

He plucked at his rough blue shirt, stained with oil and sweat, looking down, whispered voice. "I walk over, thinkin' maybe . . . maybe she . . . I don't know."

Miranda nodded, didn't say anything. He choked back a whimper. Wiped his face with his arm again. Met her eyes.

"So I get Fred, and he says to find you. Alls I did was—was touch her a little. I thought she was playin'. So help me Gawd, Miss Corbie—I thought she was playing."

The thin electrician held his face in his hands, shoulders convulsing with sobs.

9:27 A.M. Lost men in soiled pants sidling through early, looking for the sure bet, the certain thing, a grift at better odds than Tanforan. Couples, hand in hand, mouths open, blushing at buying a ticket for Sally Rand's, chubby brunette oohing over a cheap gold bracelet, boyfriend in glasses spending a buck for the engraving. "Nina," he says proudly, and she blushes.

Kids kick up the sawdust, dressed in faded pinafores and big brother's old knickers, clutching dimes for the roller coaster and the Roll-O-Plane and the lions in Captain Terrell Jacobs's African Jungle, buying cotton candy and popcorn, dropping peanuts down the Gayway.

Miranda waited and blew a smoke ring, missing Shorty and the rest of the Singer Midgets from last year.

Not the same Fair. Not the same world. Phony war over, a world war now, except we weren't a part of the world anymore.

We were Americans. Who needed the fucking world.

She shielded her eyes against the sun, checking attendance day numbers on the giant cash register. A shadow blocked her view. Grogan, smirk on his face.

"Time to talk, Corbie."

Herman sat and sweated, sad brown eyes following Grogan's cigar, crumpled derby on his lap. Looked back and forth between Grogan and Miranda.

He whined for the third or fourth time. "Lieutenant, it's Opening Day. Mr. Schwartz got a lot invested."

Grogan looked at the end of his cigar critically, stamped it out in the Firestone ashtray. "You think I like this any more than you do, Lukowski? We got fifty more men than usual today, whole goddamn city's been throwin' one

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hootenanny after another for the whole goddamn week. Fiesta Days, my ass. It's money, money for Schwartz, money for you. But there's a blond dame upstairs that got stabbed at your concession. And until the M.E. gets done with the crime scene, you can't get your girly peep show open again. So shut the fuck up."

Grogan glanced over at Miranda. "I'd apologize for my language if there was any ladies present."

Miranda blew the stream of smoke in his face. "How'd you manage to get promoted, Grogan? I figured you'd be headlining the Odditorium by now."

Grogan leaned back in his chair until it squeaked. "You're the freak, Corbie. First a whore, now a private dick. Get your picture in the fucking paper, and think you're Carole fucking Lombard."

She stabbed out the Chesterfield on his desk, rolling around the stub until the paper splintered and tobacco spilled out. "How long do I have to stay here? I can't wait long enough for you to find an idea. World doesn't have that much time left."

His lips stretched, eyes tight under the heavy bags. "Long enough to deal with Captain O'Meara."

Noise in the outer room. Sally's voice. O'Meara stuck his head in and scanned the room, not looking at anyone in particular.

Said: "My office, please." Grogan shoved his chair aside, gestured sarcastically for Miranda to go ahead of him. Herman sighed and shrank farther into the office wall.

Sally was already inside, draped in a brown fox stole and an air of irritation. Surrounded by men, and not the kind she liked. Too old, too fat, too lawyer.

Major Charles Kendrick, one of Dill's vice presidents, old man with a droopy white mustache and too much room in the seat of his pants. Francis Sandusky, director of concessions, Threlkeld's crumbs still clinging to his potbelly. Randell Larson, stiff in his young attorney starched Arrow shirt and unobjectionable navy tie.

The fucking Firing Squad. Sally smiled at Miranda, grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

O'Meara struck a newspaper pose behind his desk, gray black hair shiny with Wildroot Cream-Oil, star on his chest as polished as the black leather shoes. He cleared his throat, spoke to the Certificate of Merit on the wall.

"I'm sorry to bring you here under these circumstances. As you know, there's been a death on Opening Day. A young woman—"

“Was murdered, Captain. Or don’t we use that word during Fiesta Days?”

Larsen shook his head, soft white hands folded in his lap. O’Meara’s blue eyes narrowed, crawling over her.

She wouldn’t make it easy on the bastards.

“Miss Corbie, you’ve rendered service to the Exposition company on several occasions.”

“She’s the best protection my girls got on the Gayway. I’m not here much—you know me, I’ve got a finger in a lot of pies—but everyone at Sally Rand Enterprises can tell you Miranda Corbie is a valuable em-ploy-ee.” She enunciated carefully before blowing smoke out the corner of her mouth. “And a damn good broad. So what’s the beef? I’ve got a show to set up and a plane to catch.”

“Just a few questions, Miss Rand. Miss Corbie doesn’t work solely for you, does she?”

“Ask me the goddamn questions, O’Meara. I know who I work for.” Miranda leaned over his desk. “I work for myself. Worked for Leland Cutler, too, before he was cut loose. You might remember him. He was president of this circus before the moneymen replaced him with Dill.”

O’Meara pulled open the mahogany desk tray, shut it. Trying to time it just right.

“As I said, Miss Corbie—you’ve been helpful. But the nature of this incident—”

“Who’s the lawyer—you or Larson? Pandora Blake was stabbed and murdered. Somebody wrote ‘kike’ on her dead body, in her own blood. That sound like an ‘incident’ to you?”

The captain exhaled, color in his cheekbones. Larson shifted in the background, making a noise in his chest. Sandusky looked up from the floor, stomach quivering.

“Christ, you’re not exactly known for discretion. That Jap case a few months ago—you were asked not to investigate—”

“I was *told* not to investigate. A killing nobody gave a fuck about, except to hush it up.” Voice derisive, eyes sure and hard. “I’ll say it again. Pandora was murdered. Her body defaced. Because somebody doesn’t like Jews.”

Sandusky took a step backward. Gasp from Larson. Forbidden words. Fuck was fuck, but Jews were something more than profanity.

The major made a snorting sound, voice quavering. “She defiled herself. Appearing in a show like that.”

Sally’s voice slurred with the slight lisp she usually controlled. “Now wait a

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goddamn minute, sport. If you want to dress up in a powdered wig, maybe I'd better leave the room. My girls—all the girls—make money for this outfit. They're about the only ones who do." She dropped her cigarette to the floor and crushed it out.

The major retreated to San Juan Hill. Miranda set O'Meara's horse-head lighter back on the desk with a thump, quick inhale, second-to-last cigarette.

"You know damn well I'm a private detective, O'Meara. From now through September I work the Nude Ranch for Sally."

Never dodge, never run, no blindfold. Johnny taught her that.

"I'm sorry, but—not any more, Miss Corbie."

Sally's chair scraped the tile floor. "I hire who I want to hire. Who the hell are you to can my employee in front of me? Jesus, what are you people—Gestapo?"

Grim smile from O'Meara, no teeth in it. Hair back to gleaming, hands steady. Audition for *Mr. District Attorney*, champion of the fucking people. Just make sure you're the right people, honey. No Jews or nudes allowed.

"Management considers Miss Corbie a security risk. We understand your position, Miss Rand, but keep in mind that private security personnel need approval by the Fair management. That's why we asked you to be present."

"And here I thought it was my figure." Sally shook her head, disgust making her face look its age. "Well, honey . . . that's that. I can always use you at the Music Box. Hell, I could train you in the act—you got everything it takes."

Miranda dropped ash on the floor, eyes locking on Grogan and his smirk.

"Thanks, Sally. I've still got my license."

O'Meara nodded at Larson. The lawyer scurried forward with a typewritten document. O'Meara let it drop, the paper making a smooth, expensive sound against the dark brown wood.

"You will if you sign this. It says you promise to not give out any information about the homicide. Or contact the press. And that you won't initiate an investigation on your own or sign a contract with anyone who seeks to employ you in regards to it."

Sally made a guttural noise, left hand on her ample hip. "An hour ago I was carrying a midget and leading a parade of freaks down the Gayway. If you ask me, the only freaks in this whole goddamn fair are right here, right now, trying to find some balls to scratch and coming up empty." She motioned with her head to the door. "C'mon, honey. Let's drift."

“In a minute.”

Sally rearranged her fur, flounced out. Miller’s “Bugle Call Rag” and screams from the Roll-O-Plane filtered through the dusty window glass. Miranda rubbed out the stub on a corner of O’Meara’s desk. Picked up the document, checked the signatures. Folded it, wedged it behind the *Chadwick’s Street Guide* in her purse.

Sweat was beading up in O’Meara’s hairline. Larson opened his mouth to say something, shut it again. Sandusky and the major faded against the wall, mute chorus, packed jury.

She placed her hands on O’Meara’s desk, leaning forward. Felt his gaze draw downward, helpless. Spoke in soft tones, silky, like talking to an out-of-town Shriner at the Club Moderne.

“I know how many people depend on Treasure Island for their wages, Captain. Better than you do. But that’s not what this is about.”

She stepped back, staring down each man in turn. “You bastards want to look the other way, pretend it never happened.” Her fingers closed into fists. They shook, and she held them at her side.

“Heil Hitler.”

She was almost out the door when Grogan raised his voice.

“You gonna sign it, Corbie? Keep out of it?”

She threw it over her shoulder.

“There’s a war on, Grogan. No more fucking peace in our time.”

They were still standing in silence when the outside door to the station house slammed shut.

She stayed on the island for the rest of the day, saying her good-byes. Electricians and stage-hands and loud talk about a strike to get her back on the Gayway. Barkers with crumpled faces, voices hoarse, pat on the shoulder and free admission to anything she wanted to see. She talked to Sally’s bunch, but the girls were mostly new, didn’t know Pandora, didn’t know Miranda, didn’t know about how she started with the Fair or about Leland Cutler or Phil or the Incubator Babies case, except from hearsay.

She caught Sonny from the coroner’s office at the dock, gave him a fin to let her ride back in the morgue boat. The sun was setting behind the sky scrapers as Miranda stood in the stern, smoking a new pack of Chesterfields.

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Dead girl on the Bay, bier coming home. Blond and beautiful. *Willows whiten, aspens quiver*. Goddamn poetry, her fucking father the fucking professor and the fucking *Lady of Shalott*. He said, “*She has a lovely face . . .*”

Cigarette went out with a gust from the Bay Bridge, car lights crawling like ants on the top deck, Key System train shining, fast, modern, on the deck below. Took her Ronson Majorette three times to light the stick again.

Lovely face. Enough for big dreams. No family, not that anyone knew. Kept to herself, that one, always dreaming. Brushing her hair in the mirror. “*Tirra lirra,*” *by the river*. Then the mirror cracked, no Jews allowed in Shalott. Restricted community, don’t you know. Only Episcopalian knights allowed, and if you aren’t one of those, lady, you don’t sit at our table.

Sonny turned on a radio, Glenn Miller and Ray Eberle wishing on a star, goddamn Jiminy Cricket, and a little boy made of wood.

Geppetto’s Italy, not Mussolini’s.

The boat pulled up to Pier 5. The *Delta Queen* lay clean and quiet by Pier 1/1/2, overnight to Sacramento in style, but style was too old-fashioned for 1940. On September 29 the Fair would close for good, and so would the *Delta King* and *Queen*, faster world of train tracks and asphalt passing them by.

Red neon glowed on the Embarcadero, come to the Exposition, ferries every five minutes. Bored morgue attendants stood on the pier in white coats and threw a rope to Sonny. Two uniforms waited in a car. Last look back at Treasure Island.

The Gayway danced and drank and sparkled, salt spray exploding in green and blue. White Star Tuna sign the only star to guide by.

When you wish upon a star

She stepped off the boat, stood by when they took the body out.

Your dream comes true . . .