



The Dressmaker's Dowry

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Introduction

For readers of Lucinda Riley, Sarah Jio, or Susan Meissner, this gripping historical debut novel tells the story of two women: one, an immigrant seamstress who disappears from San Francisco's gritty streets in 1876, and the other, a young woman in present day who must delve into the secrets of her husband's wealthy family only to discover that she and the missing dressmaker might be connected in unexpected ways.

An exquisite ring, passed down through generations, connects two women who learn that love is a choice, and forgiveness is the key to freedom...

San Francisco: 1876

Immigrant dressmakers Hannelore Schaeffer and Margaret O'Brien struggle to provide food for their siblings, while mending delicate clothing for the city's most affluent ladies. When wealthy Lucas Havensworth enters the shop, Hanna's future is altered forever. With Margaret's encouragement and the power of a borrowed green dress, Hanna dares to see herself as worthy of him. Then Margaret disappears, and Hanna turns to Lucas. Braving the gritty streets of the Barbary Coast and daring to enter the mansions of Nob Hill, Hanna stumbles upon Margaret's fate, forcing her to make a devastating decision...one that will echo through the generations.

San Francisco: Present Day

In her elegant Marina apartment overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge, Sarah Havensworth struggles to complete the novel she quit her job for. Afraid to tell her husband of her writer's block, Sarah is also hiding a darker secret—one that has haunted her for 14 years. Then a news headline from 1876 sparks

inspiration: Missing Dressmakers Believed to be Murdered. Compelled to discover what happened to Hannelore and Margaret, Sarah returns to her roots as a journalist. Will her beautiful heirloom engagement ring uncover a connection to Hanna Schaeffer?

Questions for Discussion

1. The novel is set in 1876, years before the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Margaret says, “There’s enough sin in this city for it to burn someday.” Is there anything about this time period in San Francisco’s history that surprised you? Do you think it was more dangerous to be a working-class woman at that time than a woman of society?
 2. Hanna’s position as a seamstress allows her to provide an income for her family. What other jobs do you think were available to women in the 1870s? Did Hanna’s education help her?
 3. At the wharves, a street child expresses anti-Chinese sentiment to Hanna. She fears the gangs that are opposed to foreigners living in the city. Did immigrants have a more difficult time finding jobs and assimilating into American culture than natives? Can you trace the arrival of your own ancestors to the United States?
 4. Sarah is hiding a dark and painful secret from her husband. What was your reaction to finding out Sarah’s secret? Did she have a right to conceal the truth from Hunter? Did it change your opinion of her character?
 4. Lucas and Hanna’s relationship crosses a social divide, and is unconventional due to both class and cultural differences. What were your thoughts as their relationship developed?
 5. When Hanna discovers that Robert murdered Margaret, she makes the difficult decision to leave Lucas without ever telling him the truth. She believes someone else will hang for the crime—Kieran McClaren or Clive—and Robert will get away with it. Did you agree with Hanna’s heartbreaking choice? How was her decision influenced by her position in society and Lucas’s position?
 6. Sarah talks a lot about the wave of change taking over San Francisco: large tech companies moving in, rents rising, and the original residents, such as working-class families, being pushed out. Meanwhile, her husband is passionate about helping the city’s many homeless. How does the San Francisco of today compare to the San Francisco of 1876? Is there still a large gap between the wealthy and the poor?
 7. Hanna is steadfast in her devotion to finding Margaret. What did you like about their friendship? Were you surprised that Margaret kept her pregnancy a secret from Hanna? Why do you think she did?
 8. Sarah receives threatening e-mails and is blackmailed into keeping the truth about Margaret’s murder a secret. Why does Walter Havensworth want to hide Robert’s crime? Why do appearances matter to him?
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9. In the beginning of the novel, Sarah hides the scar on her forehead and takes medication for her anxiety. In the end, she pins her bangs back into her ponytail and is no longer on medication. What caused her character transformation? What does this symbolize?

10. In the epilogue, we learn that Hanna escaped San Francisco and made a new life for herself in Sutter's Creek under a new name. She remarries, and continues to paint. Do you believe she is happy? How is this life different from the one she would have had with Lucas?

11. In the Victorian era, postmortem photography was common. Do you find this practice creepy? Did it surprise you? Why do you think these photos were taken?
