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ALSO BY CAITLYN WILLOWS

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BY

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CHAPTER 1

California, May 1849

Pilar Duran had always known what her duty was. Every woman in Alta California knew her place. That didn't mean she had to like it. And it certainly didn't mean she had to embrace it as her sister did. Oh, she'd do her duty to her family. It was, after all, the only true way to ensure their *rancho* remained theirs. But she definitely would not submit willingly.

She glanced at Florencia from the corner of her eye. Her older sister leaned so far over the railing of the ship one bump from behind might send her tumbling head first into the harbor water below. She'd already lost her lace *rebozo*. The onshore breeze had caught the scarf and sent it aloft. Florencia had been too absorbed in watching the bustle of men on the docks to catch it in time and merely laughed when it happened. In fact, she hadn't stopped laughing since they'd left Mexico.

Pilar didn't fault her for the excitement. Her sister had been in love with Luis Ortega since the cradle. They'd not seen each other for over two years. But the correspondence had flown between them as if delivered on the wind—enough to fill a chest with his letters. A chest Florencia had insisted must come with her on this, their final trip home.

Florencia had been inconsolable when their parents shipped the sisters off to Mexico once war broke out. Luis was just as devastated. But their safety and the perpetuation of the family lines was at stake. The women had to be safe in order to beget the hoards of grandchildren the Durans and Ortegas wanted.

At the time it was all Pilar could do to remain silent. One needed a man to beget those children. How was saving the women of any benefit if the men were to remain behind? She'd somehow managed to keep the retort to herself. After all, the last thing she wanted was to have Rafael Ortega come with her to Mexico. That would have meant marriage immediately. Pilar wanted to avoid it as long as possible.

She closed her eyes and inhaled the ocean air. At least they were finally on land. Pilar didn't travel so well onboard the ship. The rolling ship made her queasy more times than not, and her aunt's raucous snores made sleeping at night impossible.

But nothing bothered her sister. Love and anticipation had kept Florencia alert and well, just as dread and doom had conspired with the other maladies to bring Pilar down. She remembered Rafael as the boy who'd pull her hair or tease her. Their marriage had been planned since her birth. He never wasted a moment holding their future status over her head.

"You must do as I say, Pilar. I am to be your husband." Doing as he said might involve anything from climbing a dangerously high cottonwood tree, to not being allowed to dance with any other boy at *festivas*.

"I am older than you." As if two months' difference gave him extra

special status.

And the equally annoying, "Females cannot do as males can. Return to your woman's work." Of course, she always had to prove him wrong by doing exactly as he did, no matter how unladylike.

In hindsight, Pilar often wondered if his taunts weren't said for that express purpose—to get her to do what he really wished. How unfortunate she hadn't realized it at the time. As things were, she had to grudgingly—and secretly—thank him for her riding skills, not to mention shooting, roping, and fencing skills. Not that those had helped her so far, but a lady never knew what she might need for survival.

He'd dared to steal a kiss from her only once. Pilar thwarted his attempt with her fist to his chin. She didn't know who was more shocked—Rafael or herself. He'd merely stared down at her, then smiled and walked away...after he'd said the strangest thing. "Nicely done, *querida*."

She wanted to throw back that she was not his *querida*. But the words wouldn't move past her suddenly choked throat. The whole episode had rattled Pilar in ways she couldn't describe. It still gave her odd chills whenever she recalled how the endearment had rolled off his tongue. She and her sister had left for Mexico a week later, and she was glad of it.

Pilar rubbed the bridge of her nose against the sudden rush of tears. What was she to do? He wasn't even what one called attractive. He towered over her like a menacing giant—a skinny one at that. He'd always been wiry, with a mop of dark brown hair that refused to be tamed. As a child he was always dirty, whether that be from play or work. She'd never seen a more active person. She might have even respected that trait...if he hadn't been so annoying.

"They are here! They are here!" Florencia sounded like a seagull gone mad.

At least someone was getting a love match out of this. Her gleaming

dark hair bounced against her back with each little jump. She hoisted her blue satin skirts in one hand and made ready to dash for the gangplank.

"Hold, *mija*." Aunt Beatriz hoisted her bulk from the shaded bench against the ship's staterooms.

The look Florencia flashed at the woman screamed of betrayal. Still, she remained in place as their aunt waddled over.

"It is not good to let him see you so anxious." She wagged a scolding finger with her tsk.

Florencia's laughter drifted over the breeze. "Auntie, after all this time, I do not think my feelings are a mystery to the man."

Aunt Beatriz's massive bosom quivered with the breath she exhaled. "Go," she said, lifting her hand in dismissal.

Pilar's sister took off like a bullet shot from a rifle.

"And you?" her aunt asked.

Pilar retreated to the shade her aunt had vacated. "The meeting will come soon enough. Rafael knows where to find me should he wish to."

Again there was that tsk. "I cannot say who is more foolish— Florencia for wearing her heart on her sleeve, or you for denying yours."

Pilar plucked at her yellow skirt, smoothing the folds until the butternut colored inner panel was perfectly aligned. Then she adjusted the lace cuffs on her matching gloves—gloves she'd tatted herself. Now there was a skill Rafael could not boast of having. "There is nothing to deny. I have never cared for Rafael."

"And never made the effort to do so."

She pulled up her chin in a defiant stare. "There is no need to fear, auntie. I know my place and will do my duty...as would any good daughter."

"But you are not above creating a little misery for all those in the process either, I suspect. Remember, *mija*, marriage is forever. Forever

is a long time to be in misery."

Her parents should have thought of that before arranging the unions. All they cared about was—

"Oh...my!"

Aunt Beatriz's gasp pulled Pilar back to the rail. The gangplank rattled with Florencia's blind run. Sailors and dockhands turned to smile. But no smile was greater than that of the man weaving through the throng to reach her. Impossible as it seemed, Luis Ortega had become more handsome in the last two years. Black hair was the perfect complement to his brown skin. Broad shoulders filled out his short jacket of gray broadcloth. His smile was as bright as his eyes both were focused on Florencia. He reached her before her toes could officially touch land, swinging her into his arms in a tight hug while they laughed. The affection brought smiles from everyone around...and another tsk from Aunt Beatriz.

"It is good the wedding is so soon. Still, they will bear much watching until that time."

No one could argue that point. A pity no one had considered the possibility before their departure two years ago. As it was, Aunt Beatriz guarded a treasure long since plundered.

Hiding her smile, Pilar watched Luis set Florencia at arm's length. One hand remained at her waist; the other pointed in the direction from which he'd run. Pilar glanced that way. Wagons were lined along the cobbled street on which supplies from just-arrived vessels were being loaded. She spied their black leather trunks among them. A man with a sheaf of papers clutched in his hand directed the trunks to two of the wagons, then he moved on to the next stack of goods. He dwarfed the smaller man, hurrying to keep up with his strides, his muscled thighs flexing beneath his tan breeches.

By his height alone this could be no one else. But Pilar could hardly call Rafael Ortega wiry any longer. Years of work in the sun had

darkened his skin to a rich hue and added muscle to his once scrawny frame. No longer did his clothes hang loosely. Each inch of fabric was filled. Confidence poured from him as he directed the loading of goods. Men around deferred to him without hesitation.

Pilar passed a leisurely gaze down his body. His upper torso was a perfect V, punctuated by a round backside she found herself itching to cup. A flush of heat surged over her at the thought, stealing her breath away. Then, as if sensing her gaze upon him, Rafael glanced up. Pilar jolted from the impact.

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Her knees quaked, threatening to topple her to the deck. That troublesome spot between her thighs pulsed and moistened.

"The years have been generous to you. A beautiful woman has replaced the willful child."

Willful child? How dare he! If only she could think of an appropriate retort. If only her body would stop trying to lean toward him.

"As...as I recall, Rafael," she somehow managed to say, "you were a bit willful yourself."

His smile washed over her. "Indeed the years have matured me as well. I hope you can forgive the transgressions of a boy."

She inclined a nod his way and forced herself to take a small step away from his heat. Pulling in a deep breath, Rafael did the same. He turned to Aunt Beatriz.

"*Doña* Beatriz." As he had done with Pilar, Rafael lifted her aunt's gloved hand to his lips. This time the glove stayed in place. "You haven't changed, except perhaps to look younger." He followed up with a devilish smile that set her aunt to giggling.

"And I see you've learned the gentlemanly art of flattery since we last met." She gave him a playful shove. "Watch this one, Pilar. He might very well manage to steal your heart after all."

Rafael's gaze slid over Pilar. She swallowed past a throat gone dry. She'd been counting on hating him, on him being as reprehensible as she recalled. Her aunt could very well be right. This Rafael bore watching...as did her traitorous body.

CHAPTER 2

Rafael Ortega drew in a deep, but subtle whiff of his intended. She smelled of lilacs on a cool summer evening. The scent drifted into the recesses of his mind. From this point on he would always associate it with Pilar.

Her beauty had grown in the two years since he'd seen her. Her figure had molded into curves that would do any woman proud, curves that looked like they would fit his hands, his body, to perfection. Rafael had been looking forward to this day since she'd left.

He couldn't recall exactly when his feelings toward Pilar had changed. As a child she was a playmate to lord over, someone to pull into his mischief. As a youth, he resented their future status, determined to punish her for the commitment their families had made. He should have been allowed to choose his own bride, not have an urchin chosen for him. The rapid approach of that event had seen him taking pleasure where he could—from any available female. Rafael had been determined to ignore her.

Then he'd spied a beautiful young woman across the dance floor at one of the numerous *festivas*. He'd planned his strategy to win her over for a possible tryst, only to suddenly realize it was Pilar, the girl almost a woman—he'd been avoiding. From that point on, Rafael became territorial. No one was allowed near her. No one. He'd nearly come to fisticuffs a few times over his claim. But all the families near and far knew the match had been made at Pilar's birth. Begrudgingly, the other young men who fancied her backed away.

Rafael was then faced with the enormous task of righting all the wrongs he'd done since their childhood. Somehow he had to win her favor. Trying to kiss her under the courtyard portico in her family's home wasn't the answer. Pilar had been quick to put him in his place. He could still feel her fist against his jaw...and the feral possessiveness that rushed over him afterward. That's when he knew they were a match well made. That's when he knew he loved her.

He'd smiled down at her calmly, when all he wanted to do was sweep her in a crushing embrace and make her his forever. Instead he'd said, "Nicely done, *querida*," and walked away. Here was a woman unafraid to stand up to any man, even her future husband. Her strength of will, coupled with that newly discovered beauty, sent his heart tumbling.

Rafael made plans to woo her more aggressively. Sadly, the war between Mexico and the United States made that impossible. Before he could move forward, the Durans and Ortegas decided the women needed to be safe. Within days they'd been sent to live with Beatriz in Mexico.

Luis's despair at the news had mirrored Florencia's. They'd clung to each other until the last possible moment. Rafael had envied them. All he got from Pilar was distance, and it was no one's fault but his own. And now?

He smiled at her and inhaled again. Was there a hint of arousal among the lilac? Her brown eyes studied him curiously. Even when the breeze tugged the lace *rebozo* from her long, shining black hair, she didn't budge. Her regard sparked the beast in his breeches. It reared to life, demanding to be appeased. Instinct told Rafael that had the old animosity not existed between them, she'd be as wrapped around him as Florencia now was around Luis. He damned the foolishness of his youth.

"Ladies, all awaits our departure. The men are nearly finished loading the wagons and we must leave soon. I regret such rough accommodations, but with the need to bring supplies as well as our brides, there was little more we could do."

Doña Beatriz snapped open her parasol. "We are prepared. All we have is with us in our trunks." She held her hand out to Rafael, expecting him to loop it through his arm, which he did.

Beaming that smile at Pilar, he offered his free arm to her. She retrieved two parasols from the bench in the shade, then hesitantly slipped her arm through his. Her fingers quivered. More indication of her need for him? He prayed so and silently cursed his insensitive deeds of the past, as well as the social dictates that now kept him from claiming her right here.

"We have tried to make traveling as comfortable for you as possible," he said as they walked toward the gangplank, slowly to accommodate Beatriz's waddle. "The benches are padded with featherticked cushions. We have designed a canopy to shade you from the sun."

Pilar craned her neck for a look, then smiled when she saw the white canvas snap in the breeze. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." He flexed his arm with the words, nearly shouting with joy when Pilar curled her fingers around his bicep. If he wasn't mistaken, her breath caught just a little. "And there are feather mattresses in the back of each wagon for you to sleep on tonight."

Beatriz jerked to a stop. "Sleep? Tonight?"

He patted her fingers in an attempt to placate her. "It is a long way, *Doña* Beatriz. We cannot make it home starting out so late in the day. We'll be comfortable and safe. The men will sleep out. We have plenty of provisions."

Her bosom heaved with each panicked breath. "Can we not leave in the morning?"

"We could, but it would be at risk to the supplies we have purchased. There has been a thief about. We cannot risk staying in town. We have men with us, but it would be safer to be on our way."

"All your men are no match for one thief?" Pilar asked.

Rafael smiled, letting his gaze memorize the curve of her cheek, the line of her jaw. "He is a very clever thief. As you may recall, he has avoided capture for many years."

A tiny furrow grew between her finely arched eyebrows. "Then could he not attack us on the road?"

"In the open we would be much more aware of his approach and able to stop him before he attacks. We will be posting a guard, though I doubt he would been so foolish to try. He is very clever."

"A Dios." Beatriz clucked her tongue. "It is too much for this old one to bear." She stared at the couple onshore. Luis and Florencia clearly were hanging on each other's words. They were inches from kissing each other...again.

"You can ride with them. That should ensure their behavior," he said with a chuckle.

Beatriz shifted a sidelong gaze his way. "And who will ensure your behaviors?"

Pilar gave a light laugh. "Auntie, have no fear Rafael and I will behave like that." She pointed her parasol toward the amorous twosome.

The statement garnered her aunt's full attention. "Is that so?" She gave a pointed glance to the hand Pilar had wrapped around Rafael's bicep, the arm he pressed against her breast. "Perhaps soon, though." Smiling, she snapped her parasol over her head and, as she marched toward the gangplank, boards thundered beneath her tread.

Rafael felt Pilar's grip loosen and grasped her hand to gently hold her in place. "Please, do not...the pleasure, the heat of your touch..." He brought her gloved fingers to his lips, dropped a kiss there, then turned her hand over. Peeling back the cuff, he placed a lingering kiss to the underside of her wrist before curling her fingers back over his arm.

"Ready...querida?"

"S... sí." She squeezed his bicep, then quickly glanced away.

He watched her cheeks pinken, saw the catch in her breath, and even thought he could detect the quickening of her pulse through the sleeve of his wool jacket. Or was that the thud of his heart reaching out to her?

"I never realized Aunt Beatriz could move so quickly," she said.

Indeed the woman rumbled down the gangplank. The sound alone was enough to pull the other couple apart.

"She does rather resemble a hawk on the hunt," he said.

Pilar chuckled softly. "Or a hen gone mad with the need to protect her young. If she realized it was all for nau—" She clamped her lips tight.

Rafael covered her hand with his. "Naught?"

When she cast a suspicious gaze his way, he shrugged a shoulder. "Yes, they have had the benefit of the marriage bed without the marriage. A risky joining and they are lucky not to have been caught with a child. But they have loved each other forever. Knowing they were to be parted and might never see each other again was too much."

She glanced toward her sister. Their aunt roundly scolded the two.

Rafael doubted either heard a word she said. Their eyes were only for each other.

"She cried for days when we left. At some point she confessed what they had done. I could not fault them." She smiled. "Auntie will give them little peace until they are wed. Seeing them now..." It was her turn to shrug. "I feel sorry for them."

Rafael did, too. Even from this distance he could feel the sexual tension between them. "She cannot be with them all the time."

Pilar's eyes were bright with laughter. "I would not bet on that. Poor things."

"Do you feel sorry enough for them to give your aunt another target?"

The hand on his arm stiffened. "What do you mean?" she breathlessly asked.

He dared to lean closer. "She cannot watch both couples all the time. She thinks we are not at risk of succumbing to the passions our separation has wrought. If we give her cause to think otherwise..."

She faced him fully, her gaze locking with his. No shy, teasing flower here. He prayed he hadn't gone too far. She didn't know what she meant to him, and their past made it impossible to confess it to her now. He needed to show her in word and deed, to open her heart...and her arms to what he was offering.

"Are you trying to steal another kiss, Rafael?"

"Never." He forced a chuckle. "Or should I say 'never again?' You definitely put me in my place. I have never felt such pride in a woman...especially considering she was destined to be my bride." He took a big step away from her, breaking physical contact. "I was impetuous and foolhardy. All I can do is beg your forgiveness...for all the wrong done."

He bowed to her, then stepped back into her space as he rose. Pilar's eyes were wide, her mouth formed a small "o."

"I would never dare steal another." He took her shaking hand in both of his, holding it against his pounding heart.

"B...but you want another."

And so much more. "I would be lying if I said no, *querida*. I would be lying if I said it would only be to help ease the pressure on Luis and Florencia. It is you I want, Pilar. A taste of your lips freely given. If it helps our wayward siblings..."

He tested his way, bending toward her lips with such slowness he wondered if he moved at all. His body screamed success when he felt her breasts press against his chest. They were topped with hard little peaks—no imagining here—that matched the hardness of his cock now throbbing against her belly. Her eyelids fluttered closed. Her lips parted ever so slightly. Rafael splayed his fingers against her lower back, cradling her to him as he finally slipped his mouth over hers.

They drew in a sharp breath simultaneously as they froze in that lipto-lip moment. He'd never felt such softness before. Daring more, he traced his tongue over them, silently begging for entrance. With a soft sigh of surrender, Pilar accepted him. His hold tightened as he slipped past the portal. It took barely a glide before her tongue began to waltz with his.

Rafael deepened the kiss, kneading her lips with an increased urgency she returned. Her fingers gripped his shoulders, pulling them as close as circumstances and their clothing would allow. He dared to trace circles against her back with his thumb. Her soft moan was his reward.

He sealed the kiss, only to coax another from her...or did she coax it from him? All he knew, all he cared about, was that she was an equal participant. There was hope for him after all. If he could only win her heart.

A sharp whack over his shoulders yanked them apart.

"Dios mio." Beatriz had her closed parasol lifted to pummel him

again. "Por favor, niños. Behave. Them"—she jerked her thumb over her shoulder to the other couple who, in her absence, were cuddled once more—"and now you. These weddings cannot happen too soon for me."

"Or for them, Doña Beatriz." Rafael pointed to his brother.

Beatriz whirled around. "Ah!" She tossed up her hand and started after them. She'd barely gotten two steps when she spun around, grabbed Pilar by the hand, and dragged her along.

Pilar spared him a glance as she was hurried away. Was that a hint of fire in her eyes? He prayed so because the fire in his breeches, the burning in his heart, were hot enough to melt him if not alleviated soon.

CHAPTER 3

Pilar stumbled after her aunt in a half daze. What in the world had just happened here? Rafael had kissed her and not only was she a willing participant, but she'd actually enjoyed it! And wanted more!

So much more.

Her nipples ached for want of his lips suckling them. Her puss was soaked for want of that hard cock of his pressed into it. Her clitoris pulsed for relief, appeasement it had known by her hand only all these years. Now it wanted, demanded, his. And only minutes before she'd sworn...

Overcome by lust. Florencia had confessed that to Pilar shortly after their departure two years before. At the time Pilar counted her actions foolish. Not any longer. When coupled with love, how could a woman resist? It was overwhelming enough as it was.

Pilar dared a glance at Rafael. He was steps behind them. The trunk in his breeches was on full display. How *could* a woman resist?

He was a different Rafael than the one she'd known. It went beyond looks. He seemed calmer, more self-assured...kinder. Those characteristics had swirled about him, wrapping a spell around her. He wanted her, but would not take that which was not freely offered. So very different. So very alluring. But was it real, or a show for others?

"What am I to do with you, *niñas*?" her aunt fussed. "I do not know whether to curse that I have been overburdened by this duty, or be thankful that I will be around to help your mother keep you pure for your weddings."

Florencia's face reddened. She pressed her lips together in what looked like an effort to keep from laughing. If Aunt Beatriz knew the truth, she would swoon with heart palpitations and fan herself until her arm fell off. Then they'd all be locked into a confessional booth until they married.

"Come." She grabbed them each by an elbow and steered them toward the waiting wagons. "I do not intend to let either of you out of my sight until we reach the *rancho*. Then your mother can worry for a while."

"But *Doña* Beatriz, we have a problem," Luis called to her back.

The older woman swung around. "*Si*, we do. It is you!" She shook a scolding finger his way. "And you!" She focused on Rafael. Neither man looked threatened. If anything, they were amused and fighting not to be disrespectful.

Luis fanned his fingers against his chest, the picture of innocence. "Surely you cannot blame us. With such beauty—"

She snapped up her hand, effectively silencing him. "Do not think to sway me with sweet words."

"Indeed, *doña*." He gave her a slight bow as Rafael stepped to the forefront.

"The problem, if I may, is in our traveling accommodations. There are only so many places to sit. Luis must drive one wagon. I must drive

the other. The men with us will ride in the very back of the supplies. The seat in front will only seat three."

Aunt Beatriz lifted her nose. "And what of this sleeping place? Surely—"

"Not safe while traveling," Luis quickly replied. "If we were to suffer an accident, you could be crushed. This is the only way. You need only decide in which wagon you would like to ride—mine with Florencia or Rafael's with Pilar."

"Unless one of you can handle a team of horses," Rafael added.

To Pilar there was a simply solution—she could ride with Luis, while her sister rode with Rafael. But she kept that to herself. Luis and Florencia had been apart too long. She could not make them suffer any longer. Instead, she held her breath, praying her aunt did not figure it out for herself.

Aunt Beatriz glanced between the men, then the women, tapping her foot as she did so. Obviously, she was trying to determine who the bigger threat to purity was.

"You!" Her aunt snapped a finger at Luis, then at Florencia. "I sit with you."

"Very well." The look on Luis's face said otherwise. "Let us go. We have but a few hours left of daylight. I want to be as far away from town as possible before stopping for the night."

He motioned the ladies forward, but not after a very obvious wink to his intended that had Florencia almost dancing and Aunt Beatriz tsking.

"I actually feel sorry for them," Pilar whispered to Rafael as they followed.

He leaned close, hand barely touching her back—but it was enough to send spirals of heat through her. "Do not feel too sorry for them. It is better this way. We cannot have Luis distracted while driving a team of horses. And, as we have seen, being around a beautiful woman can be very distracting."

A giggle threatened to bubble from her. "Are we in danger, señor?"

He inhaled deeply. "Very much so, *querida*. But I will do my best to not succumb. As for the night..."

A quiver rattled Pilar deep in her bones. "Rafael, please," she said on a rush of breath.

They had reached his wagon. With no further word, he girdled her waist and swung her up into the seat. There was the slightest brush of his thumbs over her ribs before he stepped away to help hoist her aunt into the other wagon. Pilar used the moments alone to collect what remained of her senses.

"As for the night ... "

The words sent trills of excitement coursing through her. This went far beyond distracting her aunt from the other couple. Just thinking about the implications made her head swim with all sorts of wild ponderings. That Rafael would be the one to tug her passion to the forefront was a mystery in and of itself. His charm was difficult to fight. There remained only one question to be answered—why?

In the end, both brothers were forced to climb into the seat to pull her aunt up into it, while Florencia pushed from behind. Once up there the momentum almost sent the trio tumbling to the other side. Fortunately, they caught themselves in time. Huffing for breath, her aunt plopped down into the middle of the seat and mopped the sweat from her brow with her black lace hankie.

Luis hopped down and lifted Florencia up, then followed quickly. Two of the ranch hands jumped in behind the supplies. By the time Rafael was beside Pilar and had lifted the reins, Luis was already down the road. Rafael took the reins, released the foot brake, and clicked the four horses into movement.

Pilar rocked with the motion and had to curl her fingers over the small rest beside her to keep from falling into Rafael. The breeze

lessened as they moved away from town and the seashore. Heat replaced it. Pilar was grateful for the flour sack awning over their seat. With the sun behind them, the ride was tolerable. Come morning when they'd be facing sunrise that would not be the case. She hoped the higher elevation would give them some respite.

The wagon ahead kicked up dust. Rafael put as much distance as possible between it and them to keep the dirt from falling on them. Pilar appreciated his consideration, although she knew his decision wasn't strictly made for her comfort.

It didn't look like much had changed since she'd left—at least not to the land. The road still cut a dusty path through slow rolling hills that changed from green to gold to brown depending on the rainfall. Presently, it was green from the winter rains months before. Towering, dark gray mountains loomed in the distance. Trees dotted the landscape, growing denser around rivers and lakes. At least in this area the land wasn't scored with evidence of war.

"I suppose we are no longer calling it Alta California?" she asked.

"Just California now," Rafael replied. "Some are pushing for immediate statehood; others are fighting it."

And so a different war was now being fought. "How did our *ranchos* fair? Mama was not detailed in her letters. I often thought that was her attempt to shield us."

"The lands still remain our own. No battles were fought there. Many Indians have flocked to us for work. As the missions closed, they have not fared well. Our fathers have hired as many as they can, and have even allowed them to make homes on the fringes of our properties."

"It was their land at one point."

"True and part of the reason our fathers have no problem with sharing. It is the least they can do since the law would forbid them to return it to the Indians. Someone else would just come along and take it back."

"And the other part?"

He looked at her then. "Compassion, *querida*. All has been taken from them. Some are starving. Our fathers help as many as they can."

"But it isn't enough."

Rafael shook his head. "No. Sadly, other *rancheros* are not as caring. They hoard their wealth and would just as soon step over a sick and starving Indian than offer help."

"It is no surprise thievery abounds. Perhaps they feel it is the only way."

His warm smile washed over her, setting her heart to double-time. "It is said the mystery thief shares what he steals with those less fortunate. Perhaps he is an Indian."

"Or someone seeking justice the only way possible?"

His smile widened. "Perhaps. One will never know."

Pilar laughed. "Ah, yes, too clever to be caught. But considering he has been at this since we were children, he cannot be young. Age will catch up to him."

"Indeed." He curled one hand over her knee and gave it a gentle squeeze

Fire danced up her inner thighs and licked at her crotch. Pilar fought between opening her legs to give him better access or closing them to guard her virtue. But he moved away before she had to decide and returned his full attention to the reins. Silence fell between them while Pilar tried to gain control of her senses. Her skin was alive with sensation. She felt every brush of material against them, imagining it was his hands gently exploring. Her nipples and clitoris were hard beads demanding equal and immediate attention.

Pilar draped her *rebozo* over her breasts in an effort to hide their peaks. As for the problem between her thighs, there was little she could do. She pressed her thighs together and tried to let the rocking motion

of the wagon appease that ache. That, too, posed a problem. The more friction she obtained, the higher she rose toward fulfillment. But she needed release so desperately!

She glanced at Rafael from the corner of her eye. He was occupied with the team. It would not be the first time she had done such a thing with other ears nearby, but never with someone this close. Still, she had perfected a silent climax. Pilar was depending on that skill now.

Pulling in a deep breath, she leaned back against the step and squeezed her thighs tight once more. Immediately her clitoris fell into the rhythm of the ride. Her nether lips tugged it to and fro...to and fro. Slick dampness surrounded it, enhancing the feeling. Pilar forced her eyes to remain open and focused, while inside her body lifted higher and higher. She cupped her hands together against the urge to cry out, digging her nails into her palms as she did so. So close, so close, just a little more...

Pilar's breath caught as the moment washed over her in delicious waves of pleasure. As it subsided, she let out a soft sigh...and found Rafael staring right at her. She heated with embarrassment. He passed a leisurely gaze down her body, then back up before turning away. No words might have been spoken, but that look—and the smile now teasing his lips—spoke for him. He knew what she had done. Pilar silently dared him to say something, while she alternately prayed he would not. Then she discovered she was more bothered when he remained silent.

They sat there as the miles ticked away, neither saying a word. Finally, Pilar could stand it no longer. "You are not the Rafael I remember. You have changed. Why are you being nice to me?"

His gaze never left the road. The only initial sign she had that he'd heard her was in the rise and fall of his shoulders as he heaved a deep sigh.

"I have regretted my past actions over and over since we parted,

perhaps even before, although I was too foolish to admit it then. We are to be wed. The choice was made long ago and there is nothing we can do to change it. I once looked upon that as a death knell, but now I seek only joy and fulfillment from our union. And I have looked forward to that day more times than I can count. But there can truly be no joy for me if you do not have it as well. I cannot change what I have done in the past. All I can do is beg forgiveness for being a stupid boy and hopefully redeem myself in your eyes."

He swiveled his head her way, nailing her in place with the intensity of his deep brown eyes. "I realized my love for you too late, Pilar. A fire of want has burned in my belly since that time. Hopefully, I am wise enough now to know a man cannot and should not take that which is not freely offered. I seek to woo you as I should have from the start. But seeing you now..." He smiled. "My patience wars with my sense. Everything about you calls out to me. I ask that you forget the Rafael of old and see me as the man I've grown to be. When I call you *querida*, I mean it."

And then his focus shifted back to his task.

Querida, beloved. How could he manage to make love to her with one word? Pilar swallowed the emotion clogged in her throat. Rafael could have stripped her bare and she still could not have felt so... What? What did she feel besides this unrelenting want?

* * *

Rafael let the silence hang between them. At least he'd let her know exactly how he felt, put his heart and emotions out there for her to see. It all rested on Pilar now. If there had been any doubt lingering in his mind that she was the woman for him, Pilar had annihilated that doubt with what she had done this afternoon.

He knew women gratified themselves, but he had never known one to do it in so public a manner. Oh, she had been discreet. Had he not looked up and seen the pleasure of orgasm glaze her eyes in that

instant, Rafael never would have guessed she had made herself come. Knowing it made him brick hard. It took all the willpower he possessed to keep from taking her right then and there. Truly his resolve for patience was sorely being tested. As things stood...or rather his cock stood...he was tempted to pull the team to a stop and rush behind one of the distant trees to whank off against the trunk. It could not be healthy for a man to be constantly erect this way.

Rafael tried to think away the throbbing ache in his breeches. He ticked off the list of chores needing to be completed once they returned home. To all those depending on the Durans and Ortegas for their survival. To the weddings scheduled within days. That, of course, led to thoughts of his wedding night...pulling his predicament back to full staff. He was never going to last that long. How Luis and Florencia managed...

He laughed to himself. But they had not managed to wait. They had sealed their union years before. With Beatriz dogging their every move now, both were probably at their wits' end to be rid of her. He would be if their situations were reversed. Nothing would keep him from Pilar if they had already crossed that line.

He inhaled the scent of her. It was fully imprinted on him now. Rafael could find her in a crowd if need be. Now he wanted to taste her—every inch of her. To comb his fingers through the dark silk of her hair. Feel her naked body open and pressed to his in ecstasy. To hear her cry out as she came, not the restrained subtleness she exhibited earlier—though it was enticing in its own right. He wanted to be the one to make her lose control. To bring her so much pleasure it would permanently erase his past misdeeds from her mind.

Rafael didn't notice the shadows lengthening around them until he saw Luis pull off toward a copse of trees. It was a good location. The trees would provide some shelter from the elements and the sprawling fields give nice forage for the horses. Before they could come to a full

halt, the ranch hands jumped down. They would care for the horses, while Rafael and Luis set up camp for the night. But no sooner had they stopped than Luis came barreling their way. He hoisted himself up with one leap, then sat on the foot rest facing Rafael and Pilar.

"Please, I beg of you both. Do something, anything to distract Beatriz from us. She plans to sleep with Florencia tonight...tied to her!"

Pilar burst out with a laugh. "That would be one way to ensure a sound sleeper would be awakened. When Aunt Beatriz sleeps, no one else does. I believe the captain of our ship considered using her snores for a fog horn. But if we are not careful, she will wind up with both of us tied to her."

"There is not enough room for all three of you," Rafael quickly replied.

Luis grabbed Pilar's hand and looked ready to go down to one knee to plead his case...if there had been enough room. "Please, Pilar, you do not know the agony."

She placed her hand over his as she smiled. "I know how miserable Florencia has been. Do not worry. Rafael and I will take care of it. You will have only each other for company tonight."

He kissed both her hands. "Bless you. I will never forget this sacrifice." He jumped down and hurried back to his wagon.

"So...what did you have in mind, *querida?*" Rafael asked with a smile.

"I am sure you will think of something." She stood and adjusted the folds of her dress. "Help me down, please?"

He spied Beatriz lumbering from the forward wagon. "Now is the time."

With no further warning, he grabbed Pilar around the waist and pulled her to his lap. Rafael took advantage of her gasp to cover her lips with a kiss. She sagged into it with a little moan that aggravated his

already tenuous position. When she draped her arms around his neck, he dared a slow caress against her ribs, then upward to the side of her breast. Pilar sucked in a breath and drew closer as she deepened the kiss. Emboldened, he moved to the peak. Beatriz's screech froze them, but neither moved. Instead, he swooped his hand to the curve of Pilar's hip, rolling her against his erection as he kneaded her lips.

"I said stop!" Beatriz whacked her parasol against the closest target—Pilar's leg.

She jerked upright with a cry, grabbing for her calf. Rafael snatched the weapon and wrested from the older woman's hand. "I have the utmost respect for you, *Doña* Beatriz, but you are never to strike her again. Have I made myself clear?"

Wide, dark eyes glared at him, then darkened even more when Rafael cupped Pilar's leg. Beatriz had hit her hard enough to put a hole in the dark stocking.

"Are you all right?"

She gave a shaky nod and tugged her skirt over her leg. "Please, help me down," she asked, moving to the side opposite her aunt.

Rafael swung from the wagon, then caught her waist and lifted her down. Pilar slid her body along his, pausing when her feet touched ground to dust her gloved hand down his cheek.

"Harlots! Both of you!" Beatriz shouted.

His gaze shot fire her way. "These are our wives you speak of, *señora*. Have a care."

She wadded her dark green skirts in her hand and trounced off.

Pilar's sigh drew his attention back to her. "I fear it will be a long night."

He lifted her chin on the crook of his finger. "Perhaps I can find a way to ease it for all of us." After a kiss to her waiting lips, he stepped away to prepare camp...and find the case of whiskey among the supplies.

<u>CHAPTER 4</u>

Pilar stared into the flames of the campfire. Every so often she'd glance up to see Rafael watching her. Did he know what affect he'd had on her? Her body still burned where he had touched her, and that had been hours before. Had she not seen the hole in her stocking left by her aunt's parasol, Pilar would have sworn it was the remnant of the scorching heat from Rafael's hand. Silly, but...

She sipped the tin cup of coffee offered with the night's meal of jerked beef and tortillas. It was a repugnant beverage, but one took what one had. Obviously Aunt Beatriz had no problem with it—she was on her fourth cup. Each time she drained it quicker, then thrust it out for Luis or Rafael to refill. She sat between the two men, while she glared across the fire at her charges. Neither Pilar nor Florencia had said a word to her since the earlier incident.

The men had seen to their comfort as best they could out in the wild. Bedrolls tossed over two long logs eased the discomfort of sitting

on the hard, rough wood and helped keep their clothing clean. Although, after hours on the road in the dust churned up by the wagons, that was a futile effort. Rafael had dredged up four buckets of water from the river just beyond a line of cottonwoods a short distance away—the same river that divided the Ortega and Duran lands. He presented two for the ladies to drink or clean up a bit, whichever they wished. Pilar silently blessed his consideration. The old Rafael would have never...

She shoved that thought away. It didn't matter what he was in the past. Now and future were the important things. She would be doing well to remember that. They were to spend a lifetime together. At least he was attempting to make it a friendly, if not sensuous, experience for them.

Pilar hugged her knees to her chest, careful to keep her skirts over her feet, and glanced up at the tree overhead. Stars twinkled between leaves stirred by the night's breeze. A nearly full moon bathed them in silvery light. Horses nickered softly in the rope corral erected when they'd arrived. One by one the ranch hands slipped to the far edges of the small campfire and spread out their bedrolls. Soon soft snores filtered from them.

"Would it not be wise to have someone on the watch for your thief?" Aunt Beatriz followed the question with a loud hiccup. "*Dios mio.*" She pressed her fingers to her lips. "Forgive."

"Perhaps more coffee, Doña Beatriz?" Luis asked.

"One more, *por favor*. I never realized it could taste so good." When she held out her cup, Luis slipped it from her fingers and reached for one of the two pots perched on the rock circle around the fire.

Rafael leaned forward, elbows braced on knees. "Actually, *Doña* Beatriz"—he waited until she looked at him—"Luis and I will be taking the watch tonight. All will be well. After a few hours, two men will take over."

"Doña." Luis gently nudged her arm to take back the cup.

She accepted with a smile, took a sip, then drained the contents, obviously uncaring of the heat that had to scorch her throat. "We ladies should get out of your way then." She shoved to her feet and staggered there.

The men snapped up beside her to keep her from falling into the fire.

Aunt Beatriz waved them away. "Do not fawn over me, young men. I am merely exhausted from my day. Just point me to the wagon in which we will be sleeping."

Luis's arm shot out. "There...we have placed crates as stairs to make it easier for you to get in and out."

Aunt Beatriz's head wobbled with her nod. "Come, *niñas*. Time for bed." She took three steps beyond the fire before she collapsed.

Florencia rushed to her side. "Quick, Pilar! Get her smelling salts from her purse."

Rafael caught Pilar's arm before she could rush to do so. "That will not be necessary."

"What did you do?" Fists braced on hips, Florencia whirled around to the men.

Luis squatted next to the prone woman. "Just gave her a little something to help her sleep." He glanced up under his brow to his intended. "Surely you noticed the two coffee pots."

Rafael positioned himself on the other side of her aunt. "We laced one pot with whiskey. She will be out for the night."

"A sleeping draught would have worked better and more quickly."

Luis held out his arms, palms up. "But she would have tasted that."

She jerked her hand to her aunt's prone figure. "And she could not taste whiskey?"

He mirrored Florencia's position—fists on hips. "Apparently so and found it to her liking. You saw how much she drank. And now she is out for the night."

Pilar smiled. And of no bother to any of them. But first they had to get her to bed. "Well, we cannot let her lay there. Let's get her abed so we can enjoy the peace while it lasts."

It took all four of them to move her—Rafael and Luis at her arms, she and Florencia at her legs. It was still a burden. Her aunt's snores drowned out those of the men around her. Several shot them glares and moved further away.

By the grace of God, they somehow managed to get her up the makeshift steps and onto the feather mattress in the wagon. There they placed her in the center—she took up all the room—and covered her with a throw. No one attempted to remove her shoes. One by one they eased from the wagon...just in case. Once safely outside, they gave a collective sigh of relief. And that was all the time Luis and Florencia spared.

Luis snagged a bedroll from the back of the other wagon. Then arm in arm the couple walked away into the dark...and privacy.

Pilar dusted a nonexistent chill from her arms while she wondered how to cover the awkwardness that had fallen between her and Rafael. She did not trust herself alone with him, but she also was not ready to leave.

He held out his hand to her. "Come sit with me by the fire?"

That seemed safe enough. The light from the campfire would keep them honest and she could still be with him. Odd how things could change in less than a day. Only that morning she loathed the thought of spending more than a minute with Rafael Ortega. Now...well...he intrigued her, among other things.

"Yes, I would like that. I find sleep...elusive." She slipped her hand into his and walked with him back to the fire.

Using one of the logs as a back brace, they sat side by side staring into the flames dancing before them. The silence dragged out, yet she could find nothing to fill the void. She was too conscious of the heat rising from his body, so near yet not close enough.

"It...it is a beautiful night," she somehow managed to say.

"Yes. The weather has been kind to us. Almost as if blessing us." He shifted toward her, framing her body slightly with his.

Pilar willed herself to at least try to breathe normally. That was impossible. Every sense she possessed was on alert for the promise of his touch. There was a tickle against her cheek, his hot breath. It drifted to her ear, then the column of her neck just below.

Rafael inhaled deep and slow. "This must be what heaven smells like—fresh and clean with a touch of lavender."

"Sh...should you not be watchful of the thief?"

"He will not come tonight," he murmured into her hair.

"How can you be sure?"

"I just know."

She closed her eyes and arched into the lips he pressed against her skin. With each kiss he trailed down her neck to her shoulder, the heat he stoked melted Pilar a little more. At the curve he dared a nip that pulled a sharp gasp from her throat.

Hot fingers spanned her ribs, then slowly explored upward. Another gasp slipped out as he cupped her breast, weighing the circumference in his hand. Rafael's breath tickled her ear again. He traced the shell with his tongue, pausing at the lobe to flick it before he pulled it between his lips to gently suckle.

Pilar sighed with pleasure. Then his thumb brushed over her nipple. A tiny moan rumbled in her throat. She couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to. Cradling her in one arm, Rafael urged her down to the bedroll. His lips were on her jaw now, edging closer to her mouth. She parted hers in eager anticipation.

His kiss was slow and coaxing at first, beckoning her to join him. When she did, he deepened the caress, as if memorizing every surface

there he could. Each glide of his tongue with hers pulled Pilar further under. Her blood raced with her pounding heart. Her skin translated even the slightest touch into a sensual delight. His leg was wedged between hers, high against the cleft. She cursed the skirts and petticoats that kept her from truly feeling him rub her puss. His long, hard cock nudged her thigh, and she fought the urge to wiggle to one side and lay with him crotch to crotch.

Would it really be so wrong? They were to be wed in less than a week.

Just as she thought that, Pilar felt his fingers over her bare breast. Somehow he'd unbuttoned her dress...and she'd never realized it. He kneaded the flesh slowly, every so often tweaking her hard nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Lightning raced to her clitoris, alerting it to possibilities she'd never imagined before. With one jerk, she had him right where she needed—fully between her thighs. He responded with a low growl as he pushed his erection as close as he could.

Pilar damned the material that kept them apart. Fumbling for a handhold, she tried to clear the way. Rafael slid his lips from hers, down her neck...and over her breast. Clutching his head, she arched against him with a gasp, then whimpered in frustration when he shifted away. She tried to grasp him with her legs to pull him back. A hot hand against her inner thigh stilled her. Pilar debated for less than the space of a heartbeat before wantonly parting her thighs for him.

He drew her breast in with a deep suckle that pulled her hips from the ground, but it was the hand now cupped against her puss that kept her there.

Her mouth moved, but she couldn't get the words out to beg him to touch her more fully. The crotch of her drawers was soaked. Only the whisper of cotton kept her from him. She wanted his fingers where hers had always played. She craved the release she'd only known by her own hand. And, more than anything, she wanted to feel that hard cock deep inside her, throbbing there as it did right now against her hip.

"Rafael," she gasped out softly, "please..."

He pressed the heel of his hand against her clitoris and rubbed. "This, *querida*?"

No...yes! Oh, yes! She couldn't get the words out. It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but—oh—it felt so good! How would it be if they were truly one?

She lay there—wanton that she was—pivoting against his hand while he rubbed. He seized her breast once more—first one, then the other—suckling deep and hard while pinpricks of delight danced over her skin until all pleasure was centered at her clit. Her breath caught in tiny gasps as momentum built and swelled, then stopped entirely when the crest rushed upon her. Her body shuddered with the release that exploded through her. She collapsed in the aftermath, panting for breath as Rafael dusted fingers along her thighs and kisses to her lips.

"You are beautiful, querida."

Pilar sighed and draped one arm over his shoulder. "Bless you for this. I have never felt so..." How could she put it into words? "But what of you?" She brushed her free hand down his chest and to the flat of his stomach. "I...feel your need, too." How could she not as large and hard as it was throbbing against her stomach. "Do you not want...relief?" She dared to move her palm to his cock. Heat poured from it.

Rafael sucked in a sharp breath. "More than anything," he said in a raspy voice. "But I will not take your maidenhead until we are wed."

"But it is less than a week away." Pilar stroked his erection.

Stifling a groan, he caught her wrist to still her action. "I want to be with you more than I can say. But anything can happen in those days. I will not dishonor you by dying and possibly leaving you unmarried and carrying my child."

Emotion tugged at her heart. He meant it. Even if she questioned his words, she couldn't doubt the sincerity in his eyes. They were truly the windows to his soul. But he was so hard, it had to hurt.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" Though he still held her wrist captive, Pilar brushed her fingers over the base of his cock.

Rafael's eyes rolled back. "Pilar," he gasped out. "There would be several things you could do..." He hissed behind clenched teeth when she kneaded a gentle circle against the pulsing ridge. "But...but we would find most of them not as neat as when I please you."

She kissed the hollow of his throat. "Such as...using my hand?"

This time he gave a low groan when she dipped lower to cup the sac between his legs. His hold on her wrist was token. "Yes...your hand."

Freed to explore, Pilar breeched the waistband of his trousers. Rafael shoved them down to give her better access. She wrapped her fingers around silken steel, marveling that a man could be so hard, yet feel so soft at the same time. She stroked from the bottom to the top. Moisture greeted her at the tip. Using her thumb, she wiped it over the mushroom-shaped head.

Rafael clutched his hand around hers, forcing a stronger grip from her. When she'd mirrored what he silently asked, he showed her how he needed it. He lay on his side curled to her as Pilar caught the rhythm. Breaths quivered through him. He pumped into her willing fist, while he clenched his jaw against the sounds that rumbled in his chest.

"What other ways, Rafael?" she whispered, indulging in her need to flick her tongue over his neck.

"Your...mouth," he panted out.

"Really?" But when she tried to release him to explore that option, he forced her hand back to his cock.

"This for now. Please...the wait is ... torture."

Emboldened by the power she seemed to possess, Pilar stroked faster and harder. He flexed his fingers at his navel, clenching and

unclenching the closer he got to coming. She cupped his testicles, nearly cheering when he arched against the ground in pleasure. They were as hard as his cock and hugged his body. She kneaded them gently.

"My mouth, Rafael?" she asked softly.

On a strangled cry, he cupped his palm over his erection as the orgasm spewed from him. The warm liquid poured over her fist. Had his hand not been there to contain it, it might have shot to the stars.

"How can you devastate me with a single question?" He panted for breath. "Just the thought of your mouth around me..."

Pilar levered herself onto her elbow. "Really? I do not-"

"Come. We need to wash our hands." He tugged his breeches in place with his clean hand, then helped Pilar to her feet as he stood. "And then perhaps we can explore the wonders of each other's mouths."

"I am intrigued," she said with a light laugh.

The soft sounds of the other couple making love drifted to them as they neared one of the wagons—the one without Aunt Beatriz. The muted cries helped stir Pilar's lust, not hard to do with the promise of Rafael barely a hand's breadth away. She could certainly understand, and more than appreciate, Luis and Florencia's driving need to be together. Coupled with love, the act would be irresistible. She laughed to herself. It was pretty irresistible without love. At least she and Rafael would have that in their marriage. Maybe love would grow after all. If anything, they were certainly starting out their future together better than she'd expected.

He dipped a ladle of water from the bucket and poured a measure into her cupped hands to wash the sticky substance from them. After he'd done the same for himself, he dipped a second ladle and they shared a drink.

"Not wine, but-"

"Better than coffee," she added.

"I doubt you will convince your aunt of that." He laughed with her, then hooked the ladle back inside the bucket. "And now..." He girdled his hands around her waist and lifted her effortlessly into the wagon seat. "Relax...and enjoy, *querida*."

Somehow he managed to wedge himself in the small foot-space. There he ran his fingers up her legs, parting them as he went, lifting her skirts and petticoats as well. He edged up further, drawing circles over her thighs along the way. By the time he reached the waistband of her drawers, Pilar's heart was beating so hard she was certain everyone could hear it.

A flick of his wrist released the button at her waist. Hooking his fingers inside the band, he slowly pulled the drawers down her hips, her thighs, her knees, her calves, and finally her ankles where he lifted one foot and pulled her free. Folding her skirts as he went, Rafael dusted his fingers over her bared flesh, then followed with kisses and licks up...and up. She leaned back, scooting her hips to the edge of the seat, thighs wide. His breath tickled her puss hairs.

"Oh, Rafael, you cannot mean to—" He did! The words choked off on a strangled cry as his tongue twirled around her clitoris. Long fingers probed her vagina. Pilar rocked against them, wishing once more for full penetration. Instead, she had to content herself with the corkscrew motion.

She lay under his diligent mouth, mindless to everything but the wonder of his mouth exploring her. He'd flick her hooded maiden until she was writhing beneath him, close to completion, only to drift away before she could reach it and lave his tongue up and down her folds. As the peak subsided, he'd find her again, suckling this time.

Pilar raked her fingers through his hair, determined to keep his head, his wandering mouth in one place. But he thwarted her attempt by screwing his tongue into her cunt where his fingers had been. She whimpered in frustration and flopped back as far as the seat allowed.

"Please, Rafael...I need it," she whispered.

He answered with a grunt, slipped his fingers back where they'd been, then captured the fruit once more...this time between his teeth while he beat his tongue against it.

Pilar bit her fist to keep from crying out. Then he suckled it deep, yanking the orgasm right to its threshold. Stars burst from behind her closed lids. He stayed with her over the top, then slowly relinquished his prize as she slid down to the other side.

"Oh...my," she said, panting for breath.

He tucked her skirts down and dropped a kiss to her lips. Pilar inhaled the scent of herself on his mouth. It was an intimacy she'd never expected to feel, much less embrace.

"Is that what I do for you?" she asked.

"Only if you wish," he replied, brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheeks.

"I do, but... What do I do when you... You know." She felt her face heat at the thought of what she was trying to say.

He shrugged. "Some swallow it. Some spit it out."

She pulled back to look at his face. "You've done it before? With other women?"

Rafael froze. "Well...yes. But I swear there will be no others for me. Just you."

Jealousy flared up. "Good." If it came out harsh, she didn't care.

He eased away. "There is no need to do this."

Pilar grabbed his shoulder. "Yes, there is. I want to give to you what you have given to me." And to wipe the memory of any other woman permanently from his mind.

"All right. But I promise we will stop if you find it too much." He stood before her. His crotch was eye-level now. His fully erect penis cast a steep shadow in the moonlight. She traced her finger down the ridge, smiling when he shivered. One by one she released his fly buttons, but it was Rafael who fished his cock free and guided it toward her parted lips. Pilar shoved his hand away and looped her fingers around it. She studied the swollen head and the pearly bead at the tip. She flicked out her tongue to catch it.

Salty.

Rafael jerked from the contact.

She smiled up at him from under her eyebrows. "Could you really stop?"

"Yes, I—"

A low groan cut off the rest of his words as she sucked the top between her lips. His knees buckled with the twirl of her tongue.

Pilar pulled away. "Perhaps you should sit."

He nodded dumbly and they switched places. She wiggled herself between his knees. Starting at the base of his cock, she lashed her tongue up the under-ridge and back down. She nosed his clothing further aside and nipped at his sac until he whimpered, before working her way back up her target. More droplets crowned the tip. Pilar licked them off and slowly descended upon him. Inch by inch she sucked him deeper into her mouth, flicking her tongue around him as she went. When she reached the hilt, she wrapped her fist around the bottom, stroking as she sucked him.

Rafael cupped her head, thrusting with mindless abandon. His soft cries urged her on. He fucked her mouth as he had her fist. Pilar yanked his breeches and underclothes to his ankles. Then she opened her dress and nuzzled her breasts against his balls. His groan was feral and loud enough for all to hear. It filled her with pleasure rather than shame. She'd done this for him, no other.

"Tell me I am the only one," she demand around a mouthful of cock. "Swear it."

"I swear," he said through clenched teeth.

"Good." She sucked him deep on a hard stroke.

Rafael shuddered with the force of his release. Pilar took it all, sucking him until he was dry, panting, and his erection gone. As he had her, she dotted kisses to his thighs, helped him recover his clothing, then kissed his lips. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her against him on the seat. In a few minutes, his deep breathing signaled sleep.

Pilar nestled her cheek into his chest. Then, with a contented sigh, let sleep take her, too.

<u>CHAPTER 5</u>

Rafael couldn't get last night out of his head. The things they had done with each other! He'd hoped Pilar would enjoy the sexual act, but never in his wildest dreams had he ever thought she would be a woman of such...passion! Only earning her love would have surmounted that gift. And he hoped with time, her heart could be his. But this? This was a very nice start to their future. At least it gave them something to build on.

A shiver wiggled through him at the thought of her lips over his cock. He'd been fighting an erection since they woke at dawn in each other's arms. He would have loved her then if not for the rest of the camp stirring. Rafael had to content himself with memories and that seductive little smile she'd flash his way. Work had helped keep his erection in check. But now, when all he had to focus on were the four horses in front of him, it was back with a vengeance. At least they were almost to the Duran *rancho*. He'd soon have more than enough work to

keep his mind off his lovely bride-to-be.

"I know. Luis told me last night."

It was the first time Florencia had spoken to him since they'd left camp that morning. Beatriz had awoken with a pounding headache and sour stomach. Before she took to her bed for the remainder of the trip, she'd decreed the ladies would ride with each other's intended. No one cared for the idea, but they agreed without argument when Beatriz claimed that the possibility of being crushed in an accident was the least of her concerns. In hindsight, it was probably a wise idea after all. If Pilar had been by Rafael's side, he wouldn't have been able to keep his hands from her.

He turned at smile Florencia's way. "And what is it you know?"

"Do not be coy with me, Rafael," she calmly admonished. "I know."

They'd been careful too long for him to be drawn into suppositions. "I just could not keep my hands from her. I have wanted her too—"

She flicked his thigh hard. "That is not what I mean and you know it. Luis told me about the family's side business. I have never been more proud of four men in my life. How you have all managed to get away with it all these years..." She slowly shook her head.

So, apparently she did know. "That would be why, every so often, the thief strikes us as well."

"Yes, Luis told me you would be 'attacked' on the way to your home." She nodded. "It is a good plan. With only Arturo and José handling the wagon, it should be easy. Neither are quick to think. When I think of the people our fathers and now you two have helped..." She blinked rapidly against the tears that puddled in her eyes.

Yes, Rafael supposed they had helped a lot of people. It was a pity events had forced his family to steal in order to provide for those less fortunate. It wouldn't have been necessary at all if the other wealthy *rancheros* were more charitable. But all turned a blind eye and a cold

shoulder, completely unwilling to help those whose lands they now occupied.

He'd been a boy all those years ago when it first began. But Rafael would never forget the heated debate that had spawned the Ortegas' and Durans' secret venture. All the *rancheros* and their families had gathered at the Ortega *rancho* for yet another celebration of some kind. A disparaging remark had been made about the hoards of Indians begging and squatting on the *rancheros*' lands. When Rafael's father suggested extending a hand in Christian charity, dynamite couldn't have exploded louder. The reaction of their peers had so shocked the Ortegas and Durans, there seemed only one solution.

Rafael and Luis had hidden around the corner and listened to the plan develop. Under the cover of night Eduardo Ortega and Sebastian Duran would simply take what their so-called friends refused to provide. And their women supported their efforts. Pride had swelled in Rafael's chest, that and a determination to do the same when he became a man. Black attire—shirt, breeches, boots, hat, gloves, mask—helped them move through the shadows. Four outfits—one for each man. They traded off the duty, even stole from themselves, to keep suspicion from their door. So far their close calls had been few and far between. Still, they remained cautious.

"I have always wanted to have my children follow in their father's footsteps," Florencia was saying. "Now to have more evidence of the wonderful man he is..." She punctuated the sentence with a lovestruck sigh. "You will tell Pilar?" she asked.

He supposed he should. Rafael didn't like the idea of keeping secrets from his wife, especially since this was a family affair.

"Yes," he finally replied, though he wished someone else would relieve him of that responsibility.

"When?"

"Soon." As soon as he got his courage up. They'd just moved from

combatants to lovers, and he didn't want to take any back steps here. But surely she would be agreeable when she learned the extent of the operation and all the good they'd done...wouldn't she?

* * *

There it was—her family home. Pilar was surprised at the wealth of emotion seeing it again pulled up. A knot formed in her chest and throat. She was close to tears. And until this very moment, she didn't realize how much she'd missed it.

"Auntie," she called into the back of the wagon, "we are within sight of the house."

A mumbled response drifted back, followed by a groan. Obviously the adulterated coffee the night before had done more harm than good—at least to Aunt Beatriz. Cruel as it sounded, Pilar didn't regret it. She treasured the unchaperoned time spent with Rafael. Who would have thought it could be so wondrous? And they had yet to join! Pilar couldn't wait for their wedding night. That he was gallant enough to wait until then tugged at her heart.

She'd spent the morning's ride reliving every action of the night before. Her skin heated with the memories, setting her heart to doubletime, and her puss throbbing with dewy anticipation.

"It looks as though we have been spotted," Luis said.

Indeed they had. Both sets of parents now waited on the edge of the deep set porch. Each lifted their hands in a wave Pilar and Luis returned. The single-story adobe hadn't changed much in the last two years. Perhaps the fig trees hugging the whitewashed sides were taller. The wings of the rectangular structure did look extra shaded. The Duran house was a duplicate of the Ortega *rancho* beyond the hill in the next sprawling valley. A small river with cascading waterfalls, deep pools, towering trees, and boulders divided the properties and was a wonderfully peaceful haven. Each homestead had tried to duplicate that setting in their courtyards, with trees and vines weaving through the

open rafters and a bubbling fountain at the center.

Deep porches shaded all four sides of the house from the elements. Wooden shutters were there to cover the windows, although Pilar did notice glass was now in each one. Red tiles, handmade by Indian laborers, protected the pitched roof. Orchards spread out beyond the house. Beyond that cattle grazed.

Smaller outbuildings were identical to the main house. Even the storehouse and stables contained the porticoes. The Durans and Ortegas had taken advantage of the river water and built their homes close to it. Shallow wells supporting each household showed they'd selected well. The river and the house were the central points in a huge complex of land that spread beyond from each. The close proximity made visiting, and protecting, each other easier. A thirty-minute walk and they could be at each other's door. It was fortunate the families were so close. Fortunate, too, that the Ortega sons could link with the Duran daughters and continue to help hold all they'd worked so hard for.

"Has a decision been made which couple will live where?" she asked.

"Florencia and I will live with my parents. You and Rafael will stay here."

That made sense. Leonor Ortega had been integrating Florencia into her household before they'd left. The women were exceptionally close.

Aunt Beatriz popped up from the back. "But do not think either of you will spend the night under the same roof until you are wed. When your parents hear all I have had to deal with..." She grabbed their shoulders and shoved them aside as she tried to crawl into the seat.

One hand wrapped around the reins, Luis somehow managed to press her back into place. "Doña, you will fall. Patience, por favor. After all, this señorita is safe with me."

She settled back with a "hmph" and stuffed her arms over her amble bosom. The posturing didn't escape Pilar's mother's watchful eye.

Josefa Duran's sharp gaze shifted directly to her older sister as soon as Luis pulled to a stop in front of the house. To Pilar's immense pleasure, her mother ignored Aunt Beatriz. Instead, she opened her arms to her youngest daughter, wrapping Pilar in a tight hug the instant Luis set her on the ground.

"I cannot believe it is possible, but you are more beautiful than the day you left. Clearly a woman...no longer a child."

Pilar soaked in the praise, but words were impossible. Then she was in her father's arms as the parents traded daughters. "You do your grandmothers proud, *mija*," he said. "I see the ghost of both of them in you and your sister."

"Do not praise them!" Aunt Beatriz shrieked. "Both should be switched good and proper. And as for those two"—she wagged her finger at Rafael and Luis—"a good horsewhipping should cure their manners."

Pilar steeled herself for the reprimands sure to come. Instead, chuckles abounded. Her mother draped an arm around Aunt Beatriz's shoulder. "Come, sister. You could use a cool drink and a soft bed after all your travels. Surely you remember the hot blood of youth. We have anticipated their...impatience. Especially those two." She glanced at Luis and Florencia with a knowing smile. "They will all be wed day after tomorrow."

Florencia squealed and tossed herself into Luis's open arms. Their mothers peeled them apart, but not too quickly.

"Day after tomorrow," Leonor Ortega said with a laugh. "Until then, it would probably be best to sleep under separate roofs." Her humor faded. "Rafael? Are you all right?"

Pilar jerked around to find him pressing his fingers to his forehead. His mother swooped to his side.

"Another headache?" she asked, then glanced back at Pilar. "He gets them often. Blinding pain. The only cure is to spend the rest of the

day in a dark room with a cool compress over his eyes."

Her mother tsked. "All this traveling with a thief on the loose. The tension could not have helped nor has this bright sun. Come. Rest inside. The other men can handle the supplies."

"I will send the men ahead with our wagon, then help unload here and follow," Luis said.

Rafael opened his mouth as if to protest, then nodded. "That would be best. After all, I do not wish to be nursing a headache on our wedding day."

"Come," his mother said.

Bracketing him on both sides, the older women led Rafael inside. Pilar frowned. He was to be her husband. Shouldn't his care fall to her?

"I will take care of him," she said, taking a step forward to do just that.

Jaws dropped. Pilar resented it. Nothing was as it had been two years ago. She had changed...they had changed. If that change was going to grow into something more, she needed to make other efforts that proved her commitment out of the marriage bed. But when she reached for Rafael's arm, he pulled away.

"No, I..." He stared at her as if the devil had taken his tongue. "I do not wish for you to see me this way..*querida*."

She lifted her chin to hide her hurt. "I understand." She didn't. He'd used the endearment as an afterthought. He could have slapped her and done less damage. "Should you need anything, you will call?"

"Just rest, but thank you."

She tilted a nod his way, then hurried inside to the comfort of her old room before anyone could see the tears in her eyes.

* * *

Rafael cursed himself a thousand times over as he walked through the Duran house. He'd hurt her—the pain was clearly displayed in her eyes. But there was little he could do to rectify the situation. Everything

had been carefully orchestrated. He had to move now, while the opportunity existed. Only two men were with the wagon of supplies headed back to the Ortega *rancho*, and neither of them could be termed "bright." Luis and the older men would keep everyone occupied here while Rafael slipped off.

He ducked into the bedroom designated for him, then lifted the rag rug, and finally the hidden door beneath to the old root cellar. It would lead him from the house and deposit him behind the stables.

One of the many black horses owned between the families had been staged deep in the orchard. Coal dust obscured its brand. The clothing he needed was hidden in the saddlebags. They'd used the old ruse of him with a headache to make any outsiders think he was down for the rest of the day. It had always worked before. No one had counted on Pilar offering to help him heal.

And he'd hurt her. Come right out and refused. It was a horrible step back in what had looked like a promising start. And there was no time to mend the rift. If he was lucky, one of the others would confide in her during his absence. Right now, time was his enemy. He had to "steal" the food and medicine from the Ortega wagon, then hide it until he could safely make the exchange under the cover of darkness.

As for Pilar...

He shoved the thought away. If he didn't concentrate on the business at hand, they were all finished.

The horse waited patiently under the shade of orange trees. When it heard him approach, the gelding lifted his head with a snort, as if anticipating the action to come. Rafael rubbed his nose, then patted the sleek neck before pulling the clothing from the saddlebags. Everything was designed to go over his normal attire. It allowed for quick removal as well—a definite plus a time or two. He tied the black scarf-mask over his head and topped it with the broad-brimmed black hat. Gathering the reins, he swung into the saddle. It took barely a nudge to propel the horse forward.

Rafael hugged its neck to avoid low-hanging branches. They burst from the orchard just ahead of the wagon. He pulled back into the shade, letting the shadow disguise him. Once they neared, he moved the horse across their path and drew his sidearm.

Arturo sawed on the team's reins in an effort to halt them. Sweat trickled down his chubby, whiskered cheeks. His companion reached for something under the seat. Rafael muttered a curse. They weren't supposed to have access to a weapon. He swung his pistol in José's direction.

"I would not do that if I were you, *señor*," he said, deepening his voice in disguise.

Both men lifted their hands.

Rafael didn't smile. Something felt "off" about this. The sooner he could finish... "I want only two things from you. Neither are worth your lives." He tossed two large flour sacks to them as he neared. "Fill one with food and the other with medicine. And do so quickly."

Eyes so wide the whites bugged out, the men did as ordered, shaking the whole time. Rafael snagged the sacks the second Arturo handed them out. Looping the ties over the saddle horn, he gave them a salute with the barrel of his gun.

"Good day to you."

A kick spurred the horse to run. It wasn't quick enough. Rafael heard the hammer of the rifle click back the second his back was turned. Hugging the horse, he prayed the beast could put some distance between him and the men before the weapon was fired. The shot echoed off the grove of trees. Seconds later he felt a sting against his upper arm. Rafael sucked in a breath against the pain and kept going.

Mindful of the blood trail he might be leaving, he wove a wayward path to his objective—the cache near the cascade of waterfalls by the river. Whatever he did, he could not risk leading them back to the

Duran *rancho*. Once at the river, he could hide everything and tend to his wound. At least he hoped that's what he'd be able to do.

* * *

A flurry of activity around the house destroyed Pilar's hoped-for solitude. With all the unpacking and settling, there wasn't a moment's privacy to nurse her wounded heart. If she didn't do something soon, someone would notice the tears she fought against, and that simply wouldn't do. She didn't want anyone to know she'd been foolish enough to let Rafael into her heart. Let them all think she was ambivalent about the marriage...and him.

She stood just inside the front door watching everyone zip about. The men were occupied with unloading the wagon and storing the supplies. The women buzzed from room to room, overseeing the unpacking of the trunks while they chatted away. So far no one had noticed Pilar's silence and her subdued mood. But how much longer did she have before they did?

She pulled in a sigh and stared out into the courtyard at the center of the house. All inner doors led to the shaded oasis. Privacy might be hers there. Might. But it was a risk she didn't want to take. If she was going to let loose these damnable tears, she wanted one hundred percent solitude. And she knew just where to find it. With everyone occupied, the chances of her being seen leaving were zero.

After a glance around to ensure no one was watching her, Pilar ducked out the back door. She debated on whether to take a horse or walk. Realizing the horse would draw the attention she sought to avoid, she set out on foot. The river was only a mile away and the fifteenminute walk would do her good. Already the thought of the small, gentle falls against her skin lifted her spirits. A cool bath after the grueling trip would be welcome. She could even indulge in some of the deeper pools—there the water was warmer and she could sink all the way under if she wished. Afterward, she'd lie on the rocks and let the sun dry her off.

By the time she reached her destination, the need to cry had dissipated. The sound of the water trickling over the falls drew her to the edge, inviting her in. She picked her way across the natural stepping stones to the tumble of boulders on the other side. With nature as her shield, Pilar stripped away her clothes, then stepped into the river.

The water lapped at her ankles, then her shins as Pilar made her way to the larger of the falls. It was the perfect height for sitting under. The flat rocks at its base made a smooth chair. She eased under it, letting the water cascade over her back before leaning her head into it. Water raced over her shoulders, down her breasts, and landed hard between her thighs before continuing its race downstream.

Pilar closed her eyes against the sensations building. Her nipples hardened under the cooler water, poking their noses out from the veil. She let her imagination wander, believing it was Rafael's fingers elongating the buds, his lips suckling them until they plumped.

Parting her thighs, she leaned back. Water beat against her clitoris, swirling through the valleys of her puss, while it swelled the tiny knob to twice its size. In her mind it was Rafael's tongue that plundered those places with slow deliberation. His fingers tickling her thighs, worming their way inside her, beckoning the orgasm to release.

She parted her lips on a gasp as her climax neared. Braced on her elbows, Pilar lifted her crotch into the water, rocking from side to side as it made love to her. And when she came, she let Nature know how much she appreciated it with a long, unfettered moan. As the moment subsided, she lay half under the falls, pulling in deep pants to catch her breath. Once she recovered, Pilar lifted her hips, inviting the water to make her come again.

* * *

Rafael peeled his shirt away from his wound. He was lucky it was only a graze, luckier still he'd manage to elude capture...if his two

hapless ranch hands had decided to pursue him. The horse grazed on a patch of grass tucked away between the boulders. The stolen goods, as well as the clothing he'd worn, were tucked safely into separate clefts deep between the boulders. Smaller stones kept them safe from animals.

He studied the wound again as he walked toward the river. Blood caked his arm and shirt. They'd have to be cleaned before he dared make the short trek back to the ranch. Hopefully, the bleeding had stopped, although his arm still throbbed. He might need to use some of the medicine he'd stolen for the Indians.

A deep moan froze Rafael just shy of the water. He thought someone was hurt and wondered who it might be. Then he recognized the sound for what it was—a woman in the throes of orgasm. Curiosity edged him closer. There she was, sprawled beneath the larger waterfall, letting the water beat against her crotch. As the orgasm rolled through her, she sat up and combed back her long, dark hair. Rafael's jaw dropped at the sight of Pilar. An instant erection flared to life in his breeches, pushing aside the ache in his arm.

She was beauty personified. Skin the tone of ivory made her dark brown nipples more prominent. The water washed over her as if it worshipped her. She stretched like a cat, accentuating the roundness of her breasts and hips. Long, brown hair clung to her back like lengths of silk. Intrigued as he was, as much as his body demanded he join her, Rafael wasn't certain intruding on her privacy was such a good idea. He'd already hurt her, and he didn't want her to think he was spying.

He took a step back...right onto a fallen branch. The crack as it broke jerked her head up. Her eyes widened with her mouth when she saw him there. In one leap, she jumped into the nearest pool and covered herself up to her neck.

"What are you doing here?"

Only a fool would miss the anger in her voice. Rafael struggled for

a plausible excuse. "I saw you leave and worried for your safety." He dared a step forward. When she didn't move, he dared another, then another.

Her gaze drifted to his upper arm. "What happened?"

He shrugged it off as nothing important. "I wasn't paying attention and caught it on a low branch my horse went under."

"How unfortunate it did not whack you in the head." Lips tight, she glared up at him.

Rafael squatted down to her level. The crystal clear water hid nothing. "I know I hurt you and for that I am sorry. But..." He struggled for yet another lie. Somehow it felt better than trying to explain the truth right now. "I feigned the headache in the hope of catching you alone. If you took care of me, that would have made them more watchful. My way, they are less suspicious."

Doubt flickered in her dark eyes. "And now...here we are. How convenient for you."

He smiled. "Convenient, but not what I planned. My only concern was for your safety...and to apologize if I had the chance. Little did I realize I would find you..."

A deep flush covered her from the neck up. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel shamed.

"May I join you?" he asked, then added a smile. "To explore some of those other options I mentioned."

When she didn't respond, Rafael stood and stripped the remainder of his clothing away, never once letting his gaze stray from her face. She dusted her gaze over each expanse of skin uncovered, unconsciously licking her lips when his cock sprang free.

He slipped into the pool and circled behind her with barely a ripple. While she made no move to encourage him, she also offered no resistance. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he tugged her close. Pilar sighed as she leaned against his chest. One hand toyed with her nipple, while he wiggled the other to her crotch and her slick clitoris.

"I love to watch you pleasure yourself," he whispered against her ear.

She gasped with pleasure and rocked against him.

"Your natural passion. Few women would be so free. Show me. Let me hold you while you make yourself come."

He lifted her fingers to his lips, kissed them, then placed her hand against her hot pussy. Resting her head against his shoulder, she massaged her clitoris. Rafael rubbed his erection against her back. He alternately twirled and tweaked at her nipples, pulling at them until she was writhing against him. Away from prying ears, she was open with her cries of pleasure. Each one speared him like hot flame, hardening his penis all the more. She arched against him as the climax seized her.

Rafael gave her little time to recover. Turning her to face him, he lifted her slightly, tucking his cock as high as he could between her thighs. She closed them around him. He thrust into the tight portal with wild abandon as her unfettered moans urged him on, moans he countered with his own. Her nails gouged his shoulders. The points of her nipples pierced his own. All else about him faded. There was just this space, this time. Nothing else existed beyond them. Heat scored down his spine, pooling at his lower back, before it shot to his balls and straight to his cock as her thighs contracted around him. They came together on a long cry, then collapsed in each other's arms.

The sound of voices destroyed the bliss of after-love. Pilar scrambled for the bank. Instead, he clutched her against him to shield her from view as best he could.

"It is already too late, querida. They are here. Leave this to me."

Even as he said that, Arturo and José were coming through the trees. They'd already been spotted.

Arturo swooped his dirty gray hat off. "Señor Rafael, our apologies, but—"

"What are you doing here? Spying on us?" he demanded to know.

Pilar gripped his back. Beneath the water, he squeezed her hip to reassure her.

José waved his hands before him. "No, no. It is the thief. He stopped us on the road and demanded food and medicine."

Arturo clapped the other man on the shoulder. "But José got a shot off as he was leaving. We think he is hit. We found blood and trailed him."

"You left the wagon on foot to trail a man on horseback?"

He rolled his hat in his nervous hands. "But—"

"But what?" Rafael snapped. "Can you not see you are interrupting us?"

Neither man dared to glance at Pilar. Their gazes remained riveted on Rafael.

José swallowed. "The trail led us here."

"And it could well be a ruse. You left the wagon unguarded. For all you know, he could be stealing everything at this moment. Including the wagon and the team!"

"But...if he is here, you could be in danger."

"Then we had best be leaving. If you two would be so kind..." He waved his hand in the direction from which they'd come.

"You are hurt," Arturo said, pointing to the wound on Rafael's arm.

"Gouged on a tree branch my horse passed under."

"Just go!" Pilar spit out.

They finally had the decency to be embarrassed.

"You would be wise to go back to the Duran *rancho* and advise them of the theft," he told them. "But get the wagon first."

Giving Rafael a nod, they turned away.

"And, gentlemen?" he called to their backs and waited until they glanced his way. "There is no reason to tell the families of our indiscretion. We are, after all, going to be wed day after tomorrow."

"Sí," they said together, and continued on.

Rafael watched them until they were well out of sight. "I think we are safe now." He kissed Pilar's head. "We should leave."

She didn't argue.

Her hands shook as they dressed. Though she said nothing, her gaze never stopped scanning the area. Rafael wished he could find some words to ease her concerns. The truth would have been best, but, against his better judgment, he opted against that. Once they were in the safety and privacy of the house...

He caught her chin on the tips of his fingers and lifted it. "You wait here while I get the horse." He gave her a kiss and walked on. With any luck, they could both be back to the *rancho* before her absence was noticed or the family learned the thief had been shot.

<u>CHAPTER 6</u>

Pilar scanned the trees for lurkers. The thief could be watching them at that very moment. Who knew what a desperate, wounded man would do? He could kill them both and think nothing of it, or kidnap them. The more she stood here waiting for Rafael, the more scenarios built. She would not be a target. They were safer together.

Wadding her skirts in her fists, she hurried after Rafael. She found him in a niche of boulders and was ready to announce her presence when she spied him dabbing ointment on his wound. While that wasn't odd, it was strange that he put the jar back into a flour sack and stuffed it between two rocks. Then he moved to another area and rolled the rocks away. He pulled out black clothing, which he stuffed into the saddlebags. His last act was to pour canteen water over the horse's flank, revealing the Ortega-Duran brand—an "O" with an intersecting "D."

Pilar backed away, not liking where her thoughts were taking her,

yet not seeing any other solution. His appearance at the river. The wound on his arm. The hidden supplies and the clothes. Not to mention the brand. Rafael was the thief.

She returned to her designated waiting spot while she debated on what to do, reaching it just before Rafael came back with his horse.

"Ready?" he asked.

All she could do was nod. Words simply weren't possible. Rafael was a thief. What would he do to protect his secret? What would she do to reveal it?

He helped her into the saddle and then swung up behind her. The warmth of his body wrapped her in a comfort Pilar didn't want to feel. He was a thief, stealing without conscience from their neighbors, her family, even his own. And yet he had just made such sweet love to her. Or had that been a ruse to protect himself?

She puzzled over the facts as she knew them. She'd passed no one on her way to the river, nor had she heard the tread of his horse following. When she spied him at the bank, he'd seem as surprised at seeing her there as she did him. He'd already hidden his plunder and costume. His shirt was off.

Pilar swallowed against the image of his bronzed, sculpted chest. Dark hair dusted a path beneath his breeches, a trail she'd longed to explore. She yanked her thoughts back in place. Had he seen an opportunity to escape detection? The men never questioned that Pilar and Rafael had snuck away to the river for a rendezvous. And the wound on his arm? Again, no one thought otherwise. He'd used her.

Even as the thought humiliated Pilar, she still didn't want to believe it. While evidence might heavily point to Rafael as the culprit, hadn't the thief been around for many years? Since they were children? Was it possible he'd discovered the thief's hide-away and was already planning a capture? If so, why hadn't he told the two men that? But he had suggested they return to the *rancho* and report the theft. Was that

done in the hope of gathering a competent force to catch the thief? After all, Arturo and José were rather dimwitted. That they'd managed to shoot and hit the thief was a miracle.

"Where are we going?" They were headed deep into the orchard and away from the *rancho*.

Rafael patted her thigh. "We must try to get you to the house without anyone realizing you've...either of us have been gone. When they see us together and your hair wet..."

He had a point, but Pilar didn't see how they could get into the house from the orchard without detection.

"I must ask that you trust me, Pilar."

Those didn't sound like the words of an innocent man. Under the circumstances she had little choice but to trust him.

Rafael tied the horse to a tree. After helping her down, he tossed the saddlebags over his shoulders, took her by the hand, and led them toward the house at a quick march. He paused at the edge of the orchard and did a fast scan to ensure no one was around.

"We are headed to that small shed behind the stables—the one that leads to the old root cellar. Go directly into it and don't stop," he whispered.

All she could do was nod.

Running hand in hand, they made it into the shed without notice. Pilar lifted the hatch in the ground, trotted down the four stairs, and kept moving. As she reached the wall of shelves at the back, Rafael tugged at them. They'd been built over a door. A passage lay beyond. A single lantern just inside was lit to guide them. He shut the shelf-door with one hand, while he grabbed the lantern in the other. The saddlebags were left at the entrance. More puzzled than ever, Pilar followed him down the tunnel. Another set of steps led up to a trap door. Rafael set the lantern on a hook, then hoisted the door open. The sudden draught licked at the flame, but it was Rafael who extinguished it before he trotted up the steps and gave her a hand up.

Pilar's puzzlement tripled. They were in her family home...in the room Rafael used. Quick footsteps echoed on the wooden hallway floor, alerting them to the approach of another. He seated the trapdoor, tossed a rag rug over it, then hurried to the bed, where he laid down, apparently prostrate with pain.

"Pilar, please," he whispered harshly.

Whatever ruse he played, he wanted her to be a part of it. Struggling against the doubt that pounded her heart, she retrieved the cotton cloth from beside the bowl of water, prepared a wet compress for his forehead, and was just placing it there when the door burst open.

Luis stood with one hand on the doorknob, apparently dumbstruck, judging by his slack jaw.

Rafael levered himself to his elbows. "Yes?"

"A...word?"

"Of course. Pilar was just tending to my headache." Giving her a weak smile, Rafael lifted her fingers to his lips. "Thank you, *querida*. I appreciate your help more than I can say. Later, perhaps we can talk."

After a nod, she left, shutting the door behind her. Luis's words kept her from moving any further.

"Arturo and José said they had shot the thief. Are you all right?"

"A graze, nothing more. I managed to put a little salve on it. I will still be able to deliver the goods tonight."

"I will find an excuse to remain here the night. Then, if you should find yourself unable—"

"Thank you. The shirt will need to be repaired and cleaned. But it will be good enough for the night. I think it would be wise if you brought the horse in. I will walk tonight. It will be easier to escape detection should Arturo and José decide to set out in search of the thief again."

"Good idea."

She started to dart away when she heard Luis near the door.

"And Pilar...she knows?"

"No...not yet. It was pure coincidence that placed her at the river near me."

"She will need to be told."

"I cannot find the words."

Luis made what sounded like a snort. "You will need to find them soon."

"I know. Soon. When I know we will have the privacy—"

"I could call her back now."

"No." Rafael's refusal came quickly.

"What it is you fear, little brother?" Luis asked in a voice so soft Pilar had to strain to hear it. She held her breath, waiting for Rafael's response.

"Losing her, Luis. I could not bear to lose her. She is everything to me and more. I regret I did not realize it long before she left. These last two years have been agony for you, but they have been for me as well. At least you and Florencia had spoken of your love for each other and fully displayed it.

"Pilar and I...it was no one's fault but my own. I baited and taunted her for too many years. Then suddenly I realized the love I felt. Only it was too late. She was gone. It was not something to be told in letters. She would not have believed me. I have sworn to treasure her now, to win her heart. I will do nothing to jeopardize that now. When we are wed, I will tell her all."

"You mean when you are sure she will not be able to leave you, you will tell her." Luis's laughter held no humor. "I hope you know what you are doing."

"I hope I do, too."

Pilar hurried off to her room, careful of her tread to avoid detection. One puzzlement lead to another and another. How much more tangled were things going to become? Rafael truly loved her? He had for years? Conflicting emotions clogged her throat. She swung into her room and closed the door, leaning against it as if to keep the world away.

He loved her. He had for years.

Pilar let tears trickle down her cheeks. Hearing that should make her joyous. Hadn't Rafael made great effort since her arrival to prove his regard of her? Yet there was every reason to believe he was the thief. And, judging from the conversation she'd just heard, not only did Luis know it, he supported it and seemed to be just as active a participant. Were they both thieves?

She swiped the tears away with her palms. There had to be a reasonable explanation for all of this. She wouldn't reveal her suspicions without good and proper proof. Even then, she might be able to shift the men from this path they'd chosen.

Rafael mentioned a delivery tonight. That meant he'd have to retrieve his ill-gotten gains. And she had every intention of being there when he did so. Somehow she'd find a way to stop him.

* * *

Pilar peeked around the boulder. Rafael was just pulling out the flour sacks. She'd seen him as he left the root cellar, all dressed in his black garb again. He'd moved like a cat through the orchard to his goal. Her hooded black cape covered Pilar from head to toe and helped her hide in the shadows. Beneath it, all she had on was her white night dress and slippers. She'd had no choice but to change for bed. Not doing so might have aroused suspicion, something she couldn't afford.

Rafael had kept to his room for the rest of the day, accepting his evening meal on a tray delivered by Luis. But she'd been watchful, and that had paid off.

She should stop him now before he had the chance to pass the goods on. A movement from the periphery of her vision kept Pilar in place. Easing back into the shadows, she watched an elderly Indian man pick his way over the tangle of rocks and tree roots. Rafael hugged his boulder until the man stepped into the light of the full moon.

"You made it safely and without incident." His smile was bright in contrast to his dark attire.

"As did you, señor," the old man replied.

"I have two bags filled with enough food and medicine to help your people for a while." Rafael handed him the sacks.

"Bless your kindness." The old man's voice choked with suppressed emotion. "You and yours have done so much for our people for so long. My gods, blasphemous though your church may call them, bless you for all eternity."

"It is the least we can do. I wish it could be more." Rafael cupped the Indian's shoulder.

"It is enough." They clasped forearms and the old man left.

There was that newly familiar tug to Pilar's heart. Rafael wasn't stealing for his own gain. He was doing so to help those less fortunate. And he was afraid she wouldn't understand, that he might lose her if he told her the truth. Lose her? He'd have a larger fight on his hands trying to keep her from helping him.

She watched him head toward the trees. The truth would come out tonight—all of it. By morning he'd know her heart was his.

Pilar darted ahead to intercept his path. He jerked to a stop when she appeared before him. They stood there staring at one another for what felt like forever. Finally, she dropped her hood and closed the gap between them.

"You play a dangerous game, señorita. I am a thief."

"Yes...I know...because you have stolen my heart...Rafael." Grabbing his shirt, she hauled herself on tiptoe and plastered her lips against his.

His surprise faded with a deep groan. Nailing her against him with the band of his arm, Rafael deepened the kiss, looping his tongue with hers as kneaded her lips harder and harder.

Pilar pulled back on a gasp. "Love me, Rafael. Love me as a man loves his wife. I cannot wait until we are wed. It must be now. There will never be another man, another love for me but you."

He swung off his cape with one hand and draped it over the grass. Pilar followed with her own. Grabbing the hem of her night dress, she hauled it over her head as she toed off her slippers. His breath caught, rewarding her efforts.

She stretched out onto the makeshift bed, spreading her thighs so he could see the treasure she offered. "Undress for me, Rafael. I want to see you bathed in moonlight." She dusted the backs of her fingers over her thighs.

Rafael whipped off the hat and mask. "Play with yourself, *querida*. Make yourself ready for this." He clutched his crotch and gave it a shake.

Pilar bit her lower lip to stifle her moan. It came out anyway. Eyes locked onto his body, she twiddled his fingers over her nipples, making them hard for his mouth. His gloves were off now, followed by his shirt.

She longed to rake her nails through the dark smattering of hair until he quivered with need for her. On impulse she crawled to her knees in front of him. Curling her fingers around the waistband of his breeches, she tugged.

"You wear two layers of clothing?"

"Until tonight it was easier. Now..." He helped her shove the clothing the rest of the way down.

His heavy cock burst free, bouncing before her lips. Pilar wrapped her fist around the base. With the first touch of her lips to the head, Rafael's knees buckled, but he remained standing. She feathered her tongue over the slit, lapping up the salty drops that appeared.

"It feels like a thousand butterflies dancing on my cock." He

cradled her head and thrust into her mouth.

Pilar sucked him deep, twirling her tongue around and around his penis as she did so. Each breath contained a groan. His hand tightened on her head, but he didn't shove her face closer. She wiggled her fingers between his thighs and gently massaged his hard sac. Rafael tossed back a hard moan. She felt the twitch in the under-ridge of his cock, the contraction in his testicles. Tightening her fist she stroked as she sucked.

Orgasm jetted from him. His body quaked with the release. Pilar took all of it, sucking more and more gently as his erection subsided. Then she crawled back to the capes and opened herself to him once more.

"Love me, Rafael," she whispered.

"I already do," he hoarsely replied.

"I know." She reached for him then.

He stepped from his breeches and boots, a gloriously naked man awash in silver moonlight. A god among men. Her god. Her man.

He knelt before her. Starting at her feet, he alternated licks, kisses, nips, and sucks from one leg to the other as he worked his way upward. She spread herself wider, knowing his destination and more than anxious for it. The first touch of tongue to her puss sent lightning bolts through Pilar. She arched against the caress, lifting her hips higher. He caught them in his hands, kneading the flesh as he slowly traced up one valley and down the other. Never had her clitoris been so ripe for plucking, yet he continued to tease until she was whimpering with need, begging for him to take it in his mouth.

Then he whipped his tongue over it. Pilar reared up with a long moan. He lashed again, then around. She balled the silken capes in her fists and rocked against his mouth. One hand continued to knead her buttocks, while the other wandered between her thighs. He screwed two fingers slowly inside her, gently thrusting against her maidenhead, preparing her for what was to come. He caught her clitoris between his lips and suckled. Orgasm exploded to every part of her body. He stayed with her until she eased back to earth.

One hard thrust of his fingers took her virginity. Pilar's breath caught at the pain. His tongue over her clit dissipated it. He worked his way up her body, pausing to play in the well of her navel before moving up to suckle her breasts over and over.

She felt his erection nudge her opening. It was hard, hot, as ready for her as she was for it. Pilar draped her legs around Rafael's thighs and lifted her hips for him. He took her by slow degrees, spearing her inch by inch, until she felt wonderfully impaled. She was spread wide, so full her muscles rippled along the thick, throbbing length.

He pulled back, rasping her clitoris as he went.

"Oh...yes!" She nudged her heels into his buttocks.

"You are hell on a man's patience, *querida*," he said, through clenched teeth.

He cut off her giggle with a hard plunge that took her breath away.

"I am going to fuck you now, Pilar. Good and proper. That is what you want, is it not?"

"Oh, yes, Rafael," she gasped out. "Yes. Please."

She clutched his shoulders as he pivoted hard and deep into her body, raking her clitoris with every stroke. Sensation built, swelling the little button. Pilar caught the rhythm and rode with him, giving as good as she got. She felt the heat of his climax approaching. As impossible as it seemed, it hardened him all the more. He ground himself against her, his body demanding she come with him. Each press brought her closer, closer. She felt the rise...and then it hit.

Pilar arched into his final thrust as they came together. The pulse of his release flexed against her contracting walls. It seemed they hovered on that plane for hours before finally drifting down into the sweet kisses and caresses of after-love. "There is something you must know." He traced his thumb along her jawline. "About the thief..."

Still joined as one, Pilar listened as he told her of the pact their fathers had made all those years ago, and of his and Luis's decision to carry on the tradition. Of how their mothers quietly supported them all this time. Never had she felt more proud of them all, proud to have their blood in her veins, proud to soon be a part of the Ortegas. But there had to be safer ways to help those less fortunate. Times had changed since their fathers had tried to face down their selfish neighbors. Perhaps together a better solution would come to mind.

"I have never felt more proud, more honored," she said when he finished.

"Ah...my love. I never should have doubted you."

She kissed his forehead. "Or yourself," she said with a laugh.

"Our wedding cannot come soon enough," he said, dotting a row of kisses across her collarbones. "It is going to be hell staying away from you tomorrow."

"Mmm...maybe you will not have to. At midnight, under the full moon. I can think of a rendezvous place where no one will think to look for us."

A chuckled rumbled in his chest. "Are you not afraid of the thief?" Pilar laughed lightly. "No."

"Not even one who has stolen your heart?"

She felt his erection swell inside her. "How can he steal what I have freely given?"

He looked at her then, his gaze bonding with hers as he brushed his fingers over her cheek. "Love me, *querida*."

"I already do, *querido*." She wrapped her legs around his and kissed him.

EPILOGUE

May 1852

Rafael shook his head in wonder. Leave it to the women to truly make a difference.

Ladies' League of Benevolence

The sign looked good on its new home—a brand new, hotel-type building paid for by contributions from the community. Somehow the women had used guilt to do what their fathers had tried to so long ago—open the purse strings of the rich for those less fortunate. There was food, a work program, shelter for those who needed it. They'd accomplished a lot in the last five years, and saved the men's necks in the process. That Pilar and Florencia had managed to convert the parents so quickly was a miracle of its own. Rafael felt a tug on his pants and looked down to his young son's smiling face. "Yes, *mijo*."

"Mama needs you," he said, pointing to where Pilar stood with their three-year-old daughter on her hip.

He hoisted the boy to his shoulders and hurried that way, accompanied by the boy's giggles. As he set him to his feet, he ran off to play.

"Do not go too far," Pilar called. "We are going to be leaving soon." She turned the smile that Rafael loved more than ever his way. "That is, if you are ready."

She looked tired. With Florencia's latest pregnancy full blown, Pilar had taken on the bulk of the work for the organization.

"Of course. Whatever it takes to get you home and to myself."

Pilar giggled as he leaned close.

"The moon is full. Perhaps we will find our rendezvous spot waiting," he whispered.

Her laughter pulled heads around. Blushing, she brought her lips next to his ear. "But do not forget the mask this time."

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same quality from "Caitlyn" that they have come to expect from "Catherine," but the stories will be more over-the-top and more steamy. Sometimes the novels are written singularly, and sometimes they are a collaborative effort with award-winning author Paris Dixon. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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* * *

Don't miss A Little D. A. B., by Caitlyn Willows, Available soon from Amber Quill Press, LLC!

Wil Clark and Mattie Baker were best friends in high school until that disastrous prom night when everything went wrong. Now they are back at their high school reunion, hoping to heal the rift that pulled them apart. Nervous and unsure of just how much of their hearts and desires they should reveal to one another, Wil and Mattie agree they could use a little extra courage. Perhaps Madame Rue's D. A. B. will help them dazzle, allure, and bewitch each other. Just a little dab to help their dreams come true. But when an old nemesis drenches them in the whole bottle...

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