

The book cover features a romantic scene with a man and a woman embracing. The man has reddish-brown hair and is looking down at the woman. The woman has dark hair and is smiling. They are surrounded by large yellow flowers in the foreground. In the background, there is a large, light-colored building with a gabled roof. The title 'After the Plamo' is written in a large, elegant script font, and the author's name 'Barri Bryan' is written in a smaller script font above it.

*Barri
Bryan*

*After the
Plamo*

After the Alamo

by

Barri Bryan

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Chapter One

Marisa Perez huddled in the bed of the jolting wagon and swallowed over the fear that coagulated in her throat. Where were they now? Peering through a crack in the sideboards she saw only the darkness of night. With each turn of the wheels, she wondered, would they make it to the cellar and safety?

The darkness obscured the adobe jacales that lined the narrow street. Against the backdrop of an ebony sky the tiny structures were little more than shadowy outlines.

The jacales, like everything else in this quiet little village, wore battle scars. There was not a building in the little settlement that did not bear pockmarks where stray bullets or well-aimed cannon balls had found their target. One short year ago a bloody battle had raged through these narrow streets. The struggle had lasted for thirteen days and left in its wake the indelible souvenirs of a life and death struggle.

The wagon turned and Marisa spied the bell tower of the San Fernando Cathedral. She breathed a sigh of relief. They had reached Military Plaza and, hopefully, safety. Groping for her cousin Arturo's sweaty hand, she whispered, "Don't be afraid. We're on the Plaza. Soon we'll be safe."

Military Plaza, located in the heart of the settlement, was the only section of Bexar that had been planned before its construction. It had been laid off in 1716 by some long-departed forefather, who would turn in his grave if he could witness the laissez faire attitude of those who had come after him. Narrow roads wound off in all directions from the plaza, each one content to follow its own sinuous inclination.

- Arturo hunched his shoulders. "I'm not afraid. I will help Tio Hector protect you and Mamma, and Manuel." His voice quivered. "I am twelve years old, almost a man."

His brother, ten-year-old Manuel scoffed, "You're not a man. You're a boy, and you should be afraid. Mamma says we could all be killed this very night."

What a thoughtless thing to say to a frightened ten-year-old, but then Marisa's aunt was a thoughtless woman and a foolish one. "We will soon be to a safe hiding place." Marisa doubted that there was a safe place to hide from Felipe and Tito Gomez. She put a comforting arm around Manuel's shoulder. "Look, We're passing the church."

The old San Fernando Cathedral loomed before them like some immovable cyclops. A single lantern in its round bell tower glowed like a giant eye. The squat buildings surrounding the massive structure cowered in the shadows, offering silent obeisance.

The tall, middle-aged man in the driver's seat stopped the wagon directly in front of a battle scared building. The sign over the door read: PEREZ BROTHERS GENERAL STORE.

Hector Perez nodded to the woman on the seat beside him. "Get the children, Carmen, and get inside." He cast furtive glances into the darkness. "I'll put the wagon behind the store and come in the back door."

The small woman began to climb down from the high seat, complaining in Spanish as she went. "Madre de Dios, You want me to open the back door? How will I know it is you on the other side?" She peered over her shoulder into the black night. "Even now Felipe and Tito may be lurking in the shadows, waiting, watching. . ."

"Carmen, please." Impatience gave Hector's voice a sharp edge. "I must get the wagon and team out of sight. Take the children into the store, then lift the bar on the storeroom door for me."

"Would it not be better to seek and find the men who even now, search for you?" Carmen's mouth turned up in a sneer. "We have all heard many times over that you are a brave man."

Tension clipped Hector's reply. "I am not a fool. To face Tito and Felipe would mean certain death for me and something far worse for you and Marisa."

Manuel hung onto the sideboards. "I don't want to go down in that cel-lar."

"We have to go." Marisa moved toward the back of the wagon fighting the same fear t-hat troubled her young

cous-in. The cellar had been their hiding place through last year's siege of the Alamo. It brought back terrifying memories.

"If only Victor were here." Carmen hopped from the wagon wheel to the ground. "He would stand up to the Gomezes."

"If Victor had been more discrete we would not have to worry about the Gomezes now," Hector said. "Don't argue, just do as you are told."

The tiny woman swung to face him, her hands on her hips, her dark eyes flashing. "At least he was not a coward." She swore in Spanish as she motioned for the others to get out of the wagon.

Marisa wanted to tell her aunt to shut her foolish mouth. She didn't dare. Disre-spect was one thing her father would not tolera-te. An eighteen--year-old niece did not speak so to her thirty-year old aunt. Marisa bit her tongue. "Tia, please!"

Carmen chose to ignore her niece. "Come along. There is no time to waste." She herded the three youngsters toward the store's entrance.

Carmen slipped a key in the lock then shoved hard. The door opened. "My heart is heavy for what lies ahead." Standing aside, she motioned for the others to enter. "We may never see the light of day again. And for what purpose? The hope of finding some silver mine that may never have existed in the first place?" She kicked the door shut, and turned the key in the lock before lighting a lantern. "To the store room, now."

Marisa led. The others followed. "We'll be safe in the cellar."

"For tonight, perhaps," Carmen retorted, "But what about all those tomorrows that lie ahead? Who will defend us then? Not my brother-in-law. He's a cow-ard."

Marisa spun around to face her aunt. "My papa is not a coward. He is a brave man!" No one, not even her aunt, said such things about her f-ather in her presence and went unchallenged.

"That's why he's hiding like an animal in a dark pit in the ground instead of finding and facing his enemies."

"But he explained why we must hide." Marisa pushed the storeroom door open.

Carmen dismissed Marisa's argument with a wave of her hand. "That's an excuse. Your father is afraid of Tito and Felipe Gomez."

"But not for himself," Marisa argued, determined to have the last word.

Carmen crossed herself before she lifted the bar from the storeroom door. "You are the biggest fool of all if you believe that."

"Your husband was the fool," Marisa retorted fiercely. "That's why he's dead!" She was set to tell Carmen so much more when Hector stepped through the back door.

His sharp command sliced the humid air. "Enough, Marisa!"-

Marisa stopped her tirade. It would not be wise to argue with her papa tonight.

"Apologize to your aunt." Hector dropped the bar on the door. "Now!"

"But Papa . . ." Why should she be the one to apologize?

"Marisa!" His command cracked the tense air.

"I'm sorry." Marisa dropped her head, refusing to meet her father's eyes. She wasn't sorry, not at all.

Carmen made no reply, but her flashing eyes and grim countenance spoke of sup-pres-sed frustration and anger.

"This way." Hector moved toward the cellar. He pushed aside kegs and boxes then raked away straw before hoisting the concealed door.

Manuel retreated to a far corner of the room. "No. I can't. I can't go into that terrible hole in the ground!"

After a swift exchange of glances between Hector and Carmen, Hector swept Manuel into his arms and carried him, kicking and crying, down the rickety ladder and into the dark pit.

The others followed, hanging on to the sides of the ladder and feeling their way in the darkness.

Then Hector pulled the rope that shut the door. Blackness descended like a shroud. The smell of damp earth permeated the stale air. Hector took the ladder from its moorings and set it against the wall. "We must sleep now. Tomorrow will be a long day."

"How can I sleep," Carmen demanded, "when the very air I breathe smells of death and decay? Ah, Dios mio. Victor is gone. What do I care if I never see tomorrow?"-

"You still have two sons who need you." Hector sat on the damp floor and felt around for Marisa's hand. "Self pity is a useless, selfish emotion. Still your demon tongue. You are frightening your children out of their wits."

Carmen made an inarticulate noise then sighed. "Perhaps you can defend us from the rats that infest this place, or are you afraid of them too?"

The lantern flickered, emitted a puff of smoke, then went out, leaving the room in total darkness.

Arturo piped up, "Can we light a candle?"

"No." Hector's response was swift and terse.

Marisa curled up on her blanket --and thought she might never sleep again, but sleep she did. Her last con-scious thought was she would not leave her father's side until this danger had passed.

She was awakened by her father shaking her shoulder. "Get up, Child. It's time to go."

Her body ached from sleeping on the hard, damp ground. Marisa sat up and stretched. "Yes, Papa."

The five occupants prepared to leave the cellar. Hector set the ladder in place, climbed up and opened the door, then turned and motioned with his hand. "It's safe. Come up."

Marisa fol-lowed Arturo up the lad-der then stood and watched as Carmen and Manuel climbed up out of the pit and into the welcome light of a new day.

Hector pushed an impatient hand through his graying hair. "It's better," he told Carmen, "if you and the chil-dren return to the house. Chico will stay there during the day. Felipe and Tito want me. You will

be safer with Chico than you are here at the store."

"There is no safe place for us now." Carmen rubbed the back of her neck. "Felipe Gomez will not be satisfied until you are dead, and he has taken his savage revenge on me and your daughter."

Her ghastly prediction struck fear in Marisa's heart. She renewed her resolve. She wasn't going to leave her father's side. "I'm staying with you, Papa." Folding her arms across her chest, she stood ramrod straight, her small defiant figure silhouetted against the adobe wall.

"Marisa, please, not now. You know that it is not safe here." Hector's face sagged. "Go home and wait for me."

"It is not safe anywhere, Papa!" Marisa spoke with quiet but desperate firmness. "I won't leave you."

"Marisa, child, please, go home."

"I won't go." Tilting her chin upward, she met his anxious gaze. "I will not leave you. If you make me go, I'll come back." Danger lurked around every corner in the village of Bexar. Indians often swooped in and took unsuspecting citizens away in broad daylight. "I'd rather a Comanche captured me than be separated from you."

"Don't be foolish," Carmen snapped. "You are safer away from your father than you are with him."

Marisa stood her ground. "I will be safe here until you return. I'll hide."

Hector's bushy brows met in a deep frown. "Marisa, no!"

Marisa stamped her foot. "I won't go, Papa."

"We don't have all day to stand and argue." Carmen's eyes swept around the room. "Even now we are in grave danger." She shot Hector a hostile glance. "If you won't harness the mules, I will. I am taking my sons and going to a safer place."

Hector complained in Spanish. "Mujer bobo."

Ignoring his remark, Carmen began to move toward the door. "Manuel, Arturo, come along."

Hector's cry fractured the early morning air. "Be still, you foolish woman. I will see that you get home." He nodded toward Marisa. "Very well then, you may stay. You will be alone for the time it takes me to escort Carmen and the boys home and return, but you're safer here than you are with me in the wagon."

Hector disappeared into the general store and re-appeared carrying a Kentucky long rifle. "You will need to be armed, just in case." He took a horn from the shelf, and used a long rod to push wadding and powder into the gun barrel. "Keep my rifle by your side until I re-turn."

"I will, Papa." Marisa promised, staring at the rifle that seemed almost as tall as she was.

Hector turned the butt of the gun toward Marisa. "Hide, until I re-turn, and if some-one tries to harm you, shoot, and shoot to kill."

Grasping the butt of the rifle, Marisa slid her fingers

-down the long barrel. "I'll be all right, Papa. You're the one who must be careful."

Marisa bade Manuel and Arturo a tearful goodbye, then stepped back to avoid her aunt's embrace. From the store, she watched as the wagon pulled away with Carmen and her boys hidden under straw in the bed. Her gaze lingered until it disappeared in a cloud of dust around a bend in the road.-

Crouching --behind a stack of boxes, Marisa began the long wait for her father's return. Would he make it back? She had to believe that he would, even though he was a prime target for an ambush.

An orange sun had climbed into the misty morning sky.

Hector's admonition, as he pulled away, rang in Marisa's ears. "Stay out of sight. If someone tries to harm you, shoot to kill." -

The brightness of the dawning day couldn't shake a sense of foreboding. A creeping uneasiness lodged in the pit of Marisa's empty stomach. The storeroom, a lean-to across the back of the general store, was as silent as a tomb. End-less seconds stretched into eternal minutes that crawled toward a timeless half hour.

A sudden, jarring clamor sliced the silence, sending a shiver of terror vibrating down Marisa's spine. She peered around the boxes to see the long blade of a knife slip through the crack in the door and lift the bar from its resting place.

Marisa broke into a cold sweat. Her fingers locked around the stock of Hector's gun. Tito and Felipe Gomez must be just outside the door. They had come to kill her father.-

She hadn't thought they would be brave enough to come to his general store in the light of day, but they were here. Had they watched her father drive away? Was a part of their revenge to kill Marisa before they murdered her father? She was overwhelmed by a chilling sensation she refused to call by its name - panic.

It wasn't Felipe Gomez who came through the door. Instead, a tall stranger slipped inside, then paused and looked around the storeroom. His never resting hand hovered over the knife on his belt as he began to move through the maze of boxes and kegs that cluttered the storeroom.

Could this be someone Felipe and Tito had sent to murder her father? Marisa dismissed that idea almost before it formed in her fear-ridden brain. Felipe Gomez would come, in person, to settle his quarrel with Hector Perez.

The coiled knot of panic in Marisa's stomach twisted and intertwined with the inbred instinct toward self protection. She wrapped her sweaty palms around the rifle and began to tiptoe in the direction of the stranger's broad back.

"Stop!" Her command hung in the humid air. Ramming the gun into the small of the man's back, she ordered, "Stop, I said."

The stranger froze. "What the hell . . .?" Then turned to face the tiny girl brandishing the long rifle.

Marisa gazed point blank, into the handsomest male face she had ever seen. A slim silver scar ran along one side of the finely chiseled jaw. His magnificent eyes, green as emeralds and fringed with long dark lashes, registered only mild surprise. She had never before seen hair so curly or so red.

Using his long forefinger, the stranger -pushed the gun barrel to one side. "Little girl, you are asking for trouble. Put that gun away." The trace of an Irish brogue laced his speech.

Anger dampened her fear. "You're trespassing. If you move, I'll . . . I'll . . . shoot." Her finger tightened on

the trigger.

"Begorra, I believe you would do just that." The man pulled the gun from Marisa's shaking hands. "Where is Hector Perez?"

"Here I am!" Hector stepped through the back door of the storeroom, as if calling his name had con-

jured him back from his journey. Hurrying toward the tall stranger, he extended one hand. "Sean Flanagan? I didn't expect you for another week."

"I had to leave Victoria suddenly." The stranger shook Hector's hand as he nodded in Marisa's direction. "Who's the little girl with the big gun?"

"That's my daughter, Marisa." Hector reached for the rifle that stood against the wall. "She could have killed you."

"She had an excellent opportunity to shoot me in the back, and she didn't." The hostility in the stranger's voice was mixed with a mildly mocking amusement. "Who's she gunning for?"

Hector pulled the store's back door open. "You don't know? You haven't heard about Victor-?"

"Your brother?" Sean stepped through the door. "What happened?"

"My brother was murdered. The sheriff believes -" Hector began to explain.

Sean held up one hand. "Your brother's passing is none of my business. The last thing I need is some trigger-happy Texas lawman breathing down my neck because he thinks I know something about a murder."

Hector eased down into the chair behind his desk.-- "Victor was killed here in the store three days ago. The brothers of his murderer are now stalking us. Marisa thought you were one of them."

The stranger shrugged. "Maybe you don't want the load of merchandise I brought this time." He invested the word merchandise with sinister significance.

"I want the merchandise." A flicker of annoyance moved across Hector's face. "Is the price the same as last time?"

"The same." The red-haired stranger pushed his hat back with his thumb. "I'll pick up my wagon later. I want my dinero now." His mouth twisted with irritation. "Tell Chico there's an extra peso in it for him if he unloads before closing time."

"Chico won't be in today."

The stranger shrugged. "I don't care who unloads, just get your merchandise off my wagon."

"I can't take the chance of being spotted from a distance. You will have to unload your wagon yourself, or take your merchandise elsewhere."

"Damn," Sean swore under his breath. "I don't have another buyer in fifty miles of Bexar. I can't go back to Victoria until things cool down there."

Hector apologized, "I'm sorry, Señor."

"I'll unload the damn thing myself." The stranger jerked his thumb in Marisa's direction. "Maybe your little girl can help."

Marisa's indignant, "What?" collided in mid air with

Hector's, "Mande?"

Not at all disturbed that his words had struck a nerve in both father and daughter, Sean repeated his suggestion. "The little girl can carry some of the lighter stuff."

Hector stood to his feet and drew himself up to his full height. "Marisa is not a little girl. She is a young woman. Your suggestion is offensive, Señor Flanagan!"

The stranger surveyed Marisa as if he were seeing her for the first time. His bold eyes swept over her

oval face, then scanned her small figure, lingering suggestively over the swell of her hips. They came to rest on the fullness of her breasts. "I don't think she's a woman yet, but she has possibilities."

Those insolent words coupled with his assessing stare- set off a flare of indig-na-tion inside Marisa. "Pendejo," she hissed, between clenched teeth.

The handsome stranger threw back his head and laughed. "She talks like a buffalo hunter."

Marisa folded her arms across her chest and waited. Her father would not let such a- remark go unanswered. To her utter amazement, Hector spoke not a word.

Marisa's questioning eyes flew to her father's face. "Papa?"

The look her father sent her reduced her to silence. For some reason Marisa could not under-stand, her father had chosen to let the in-cident pass.

As Sean moved outside, Hector smiled a tired smile. "Thank you, Marisa, for holding your tongue. I know it wasn't easy."

"He was offensive!" Marisa hissed indignantly. "How, Papa, can you be friends with such a crude, arrogant man?"

"He's not a friend. He's a . . ." Hector cleared his throat. "business associate... And he is a pendejo, and a rude, arro-gant man. But I have my reasons for not taking issue with him over such a trivial matter."

"It was not trivial." Marisa's curiosity overrode her indignation. "What reasons, Papa?"

"He knows how to use his fists and a gun, and he's ruthless.-- Those attributes outweigh his crudeness and his arrogance. We need this man-."

Marisa peered out the back entrance. "He's an outlaw and a renegade. I don't think he can be trusted."

"That," Hector's shaggy brows met across the bridge of his nose, "is an under-state-ment. He proba-bly has a price on his head. But don't you see? All of this is to our advan-tage."

"How can that be?" Marisa watched as the tall man began to un-load- his wagon.

"It means he will do anything if the price is right."

More puzzled by the minute, Marisa questioned, "Papa, what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking God has answered my prayers by sending Sean Flana-gan to Bexar a week early." Hector crossed himself. "What can I offer him that he can't refuse?"

-- "Money seems to be the only thing he cares about. He was afraid you would be . . ." Marisa couldn't bring herself to say the word dead, "g-gone before he could collect his payment from you."

"I don't have that kind of money." Hector shook his head from side to side. The Irishman must be a very rich man. He's been running- contraband for years. That's a most profitable busi-ness."

"You could offer him a part of the mine." Maybe things weren't as hopeless as they seemed.--"He wouldn't turn down a fortune in sil-ver." Almost, Marisa dared to hope.-

"Never, Marisa, never!" Hector lashed out, then took a moment to bring his emotions under control. "We must never men-tion the mine to a living soul!"

Nothing, not even a mine filled with silver was worth her father's life. "Yes, Papa, we must. How else can we convince the Irish-man to help us?"

"There are other ways to persuade Señor Flana-gan to become a hired gun." A sly smile creased Hector's tired face. "I have a plan." He gave his daughter's arm an absent-minded pat. "Yes, yes, that

has to be the answer."

"What are you going to do, Papa?"

"I have an idea. It's a long shot. But I think . . . If
on-ly . . . "

Chapter Two

The Irishman unloaded the last barrel from his wagon, then sauntered back into the store. "Your merchandise is in your store-room."

"Would you like to sit for a few minutes?" Hector nodded toward a chair. "You must be weary."

Instantly wary, Sean replied, "I'm also in a hurry."

"I would like to speak with you. Hector's voice was smooth, but insistent. "What I have to say is well worth your time, and you look like you could use a rest."

"Just give me my money. I'll do my resting at McGuire's Pub."

"Señor Flanagan," Hector lifted a half-filled bottle of tequila from the shelf behind his desk. "Would you like a drink? I owe you something for the inconvenience of having to unload your own wagon."

"You owe me American money." Sean raised a skeptical eyebrow. "-Don't tell me you don't have it."

"Have I ever failed to pay you?" Hector used his teeth to pull the cork from the bottle.

"No, and you never offered me a drink before either." Sean's fingers moved to his knife. His eyes narrowed. "Maybe you'd better explain."

"If you will sit down, I will be happy to do that."

Sean pulled his chair to the side of the desk, then sat down. "I sit better with my back to the wall. Make it fast. I don't have all day."

Hector poured tequila into glasses then put the cork back in the bottle and set it on the shelf before he raised his glass in Sean's direction. "To your good health, Señor."

Wrapping his hand around his glass, Sean studied its contents. "Say what's on your mind, Perez."

Hector took a small sip from his glass. "I have a busi-ness propo-sition for you."

"Oh?" Sean took a sip of tequila. "Pay me first, Perez."

I listen better with a full purse."

Lines of fatigue etched themselves into Hector's face. Reaching into the top drawer of his desk, he took out a bag and pushed it across the desk. "Your money, Amigo."

"Friend?" Sean's fingers tightened around his glass. "If you don't have all my money, just say so. I am a week early."

"Your money is all there, in American dollars, just like every time before.-"

Sean poured the contents of the bag out on the ta-ble and counted it twice, then without uttering a sound, he slipped the money back into the bag and pulled the drawstring top closed with his teeth.

Relaxing a little, Hector leaned back in his chair. "Perhaps now you are convinced that I have no ulterior motive- Señor Flanagan, when I say that I wish to propose to you a most prof-it-able business venture."

Sean slid the money into his pocket. "Profitable business ven-ture?" He turned his glass in his hand. "Whose profit are you talking about?"

"What I am suggesting would benefit us both. Since my brother is no longer with us, I am in need of a

partner."

Sean lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "You want me to buy into this place?"

"Not exactly." Hector cleared his throat, then

swallowed a hasty gulp of tequila. "I'm not asking for money."

"Then what do you want?" Pushing his chair against the wall, Sean stood to his feet. "On second thought, I don't want to know."

"I am speaking of a long range, once-in-a-lifetime, most lucrative proposition."

Hector had said the right words, Sean dropped back into his chair. "What would I do with a place like this?" His eyes swept around the cluttered room. "I don't stay in one place long enough to run a business."

"Obviously you can't go back to Victoria for awhile, Señor."

"That doesn't mean I want to move into a place that's falling down around my head." Sean emphasized his words with a sweep of one hand.

Hector took another drink of tequila. "To a man who runs contraband the possibilities of a partnership in an old established business such as this one are endless."

Interest lit the green of Sean's eyes. "Go on."

Marisa had not realized, until now, how desperate her father was. Hector Perez would have chosen death for himself rather than bargain a part of his store away to a stranger. He was doing this for Marisa, and his dead brother's wife and children. Love for her father filled Marisa's heart, love and pride in Hector's abilities as a master manipulator. His words were subtly persuasive.

"You're an outsider, plagued by the suspicions of petty lawmen and harassed by minor political officials." Hector was pushing his advantage with gentle diplomacy. "I'm a native Texan. I fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto. My political ties make me virtually untouchable. No one in the Republic of Texas would dare question the integrity of Hector Perez."

"I know you're a hero, Perez." Despite his words, Sean seemed singularly unimpressed. "I've heard many times over what a brave hombre you are."

"And a poor one, alas. Last year when I heard of Santa Anna's advance, I piled all the merchandise from my store in the middle of Military Plaza and made a bonfire that could be seen halfway to the Rio Grande." Hector's act of defiance had made him a hero in the eyes of his fellow Texans. The bold gesture had enraged Santa Anna.

--- Softly, Sean reminded him, "Then you ran away."

Marisa was amazed when her father only smiled at that insulting observation.

"When I was sure Santa Anna could not confiscate my merchandise to supply his army, I went to join my Commander, General Sam Houston. I was in the Run Away Scrape, later I distinguished myself in combat at the Battle of San Jacinto." The statement was made without an ounce of bravado.

"I'm not interested in your war exploits." Sean leaned forward in his chair. "Tell me more about this partnership."

"I am willing to trade you 40 percent of my business for services rendered." Hector's eyes were riveted on Sean's face. "I would retain 60 percent of the business for myself."

"Not interested." Sean leaned back in his chair and waited for Hector's counter proposal. When none

was forth-coming, he add-ed, "I might be interested if you offered me 50 percent."

Reaching across his desk, Hector grasped Sean's hand. "I accept. Congratulations, amigo. You now own 50 percent of Perez Brothers General Store."

For the first time since the tall Irishman had entered the store, an emotion other than mocking cynicism played across his hand-some face. "What do you mean, you accept?" Hector's words had caught him completely off-guard.

"I mean," Hector cleared his throat, "We have a deal."

"Not yet," Sean countered, "Explain what you mean by serv-ices rendered?"

"In return for 50 percent of my business, I want protection for my family."

"What you want is a hired gun. You want me to kill some-body. Who?"

"I see you understand the deal." Hector expelled a long breath. "Felipe and Tito Gomez must be killed before they kill me and my family. They are the brothers of Juan Gomez. They will not be ap-peased by anyth-ing short of my death." Hector took a sip of tequila then swal-lowed slow-ly. "The only way to stop them is to kill them before they get to me."

Sean sat his glass on the table, leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the desk. "Tell me what hap-pene-d."

Hector poured a generous amount of tequila into Sean's half empty glass, pushed the cork back into the top of the bot-tle and began to speak.

"Until two weeks ago Juan Gomez was a friend and a neigh-bor to my brother Victor." A quick sip of tequila eased the catch in Hector's thro-at. "My father and Juan's father were good frien-ds. They were both killed by Indians in 1824."

"Get to the point, Perez," Sean drained the last of the tequila from his glass. "I need to be on my way."

Hector grimaced. "One night about two weeks ago, Victor came home and found Juan with Car-men." He spread his hand in a helpless little ges-ture. "Carmen is - was, Victor's wife. -Victor was in-sanely jealous. He warned Juan to say away from his woman." "Women always mean trouble." Sean let his feet fall to the floor with a thud. "What happened then?"

Hector sent Marisa a warning glance before going on with his story. "Then Victor told Carmen to stop seeing Juan behind his back or else."

"Or else what?" Sean's interest was piqued.

"Or else he would beat her."

"Was Juan Carmen's lover?" Sean asked.

"Who knows?" Hector's tone was critical. "You would have to know Carmen to know what a vexing woman she can be. Carmen could drive any man out of his mind."

Aggravation creased Sean's brow. "Was your sist-er-in-law granting Juan Gomez sexual favors?"

Hector's facade of indifference cracked. "Carmen says she wasn-'t. Victor thought she was. Who knows?"

Sean shrugged. "Carmen knows."

Hector ignored Sean's remark. "A few days later, V-ictor came home early and found -Juan with Carmen again. He threw Juan out of the house, then slap-ped Carmen around a lit-tle."

Nausea filled Marisa's throat. Small wonder Hector was sending her such menacing looks. Her brave, honorable father was lying! Carmen was vain and shallow, and at times a little stupid, but she had loved Tio Victor! She had never, in the thirteen years of their marriage, looked at another man...and her mild mannered Uncle Victor had never struck a woman in his life.

Juan and Victor had fought about the lost silver mine. The quarrel had been a continuation of the feud that had existed between the Perez-es and the Gomez-es since Marisa could remember.

Her father's lies were making her sick with shame. Even Carmen didn't deserve this kind of slander.

After another warning glance in Marisa's direction, Hector continued his fabrication. "The next morning Juan came to the store. He told Victor if he found another bruise on Carmen, Victor would answer to him. Then Victor realized where Juan was looking when he saw those bruises. Victor flew into a jealous rage. Juan and Victor fought. Juan pulled a gun and shot Victor. When he knelt down to make sure Victor was dead, Victor stabbed him through the heart with a knife he had in his boot. Juan died instantly. Victor lived until the next morning."

"That's it?" Sean's expression was unreadable.

"That's it." Hector sighed, "Except Juan has two brothers and a cousin who have taken this matter up where Victor and Juan left off. Felipe and Tito Gomez are bad hombres. I have no allies. There is not a man in Bexar who will go up against the Gomez brothers."

"What about the cousin?" Sean was completely engrossed in Hector's fine-spun tale.

Lacing his fingers behind his head, Hector took full advantage of that attention. "Baldomar Gomez is a clever opportunist. It is difficult to predict what he might do. One thing is for sure, he will act in his own self-interest."

"Doesn't everyone?" Sean paused, seemingly assessing the situation, before he asked, "Was Juan Gomez a married man?"

"His wife died three years ago."

Hector had managed to get one of his facts straight. Juan had been a widower. Marisa closed her eyes against the lies her father was spinning. "But Papa -"

Hector held up one hand. "Stay out of this Marisa."

The Irishman believed Papa's lies. "I'm your hired gun the second we sign legal partnership papers."

"I'll have the papers drawn up now." Hector rose from his chair. "Lawyer Simms has an office across the Plaza." Reaching for his sombrero, he pushed it down on his head. "We can go there now."

"Where are Carmen and your nephews?" Sean's eyes scanned Marisa's face. "Why isn't your little girl with them?"

"Chico is with them," Hector explained. "Marisa refused to leave me."

"Chico?" Sean jeered. "You left a woman and two helpless children that little half-wit? You must be out of your mind." --

"Alas, there is no one else. Chico is the only person who would stay." Hector shuddered at the chilling implications of that statement.

Marisa came quickly to Chico's defense. "Chico would die protecting Carmen and her children if it came to that. And he's not a half-wit."

"Marisa!" Hector's stern reprimand cut across Marisa's tirade. "Enough!"

"But Papa -" Her father had not only lied, he was not going to defend Chico against Señor Flanagan's slanderous words--, and he didn't want her to speak. She would speak, however. She must. "Chico is -"

"Marisa!" The word rose and cracked like a whip.

Gritting her teeth, Marisa offered an apology of sorts, "I'm sorry, Papa, but I can't let anyone say such things about Chico. He's not a half-wit."

"Of course he isn't." Hector seemed anxious to placate his daughter-. "Chico gets con-fused at times-." He directed his explana-tion toward Sean. "The poor boy was the only survivor of that Indian massacre in 'twenty-four. He's been a little strange ever since."-

Sean shrugged his indifference. "Whatever you say. Let's get on with our business."

Hector moved toward the door. "Please call me Hector and I will call you Sean. A first-name relationship will make it easier if you are going to be my . . . "

"Hired gun?"

"Partner." Hector looked up then down the narrow street--- before he stepped outside.

Marisa fol-lowed the two men into the bright sun-light. Her father's flagrant lies had left her shaken and unsure. She did know one thing. Hector Perez was a desperate man.

The transaction was over in less than an hour. Marisa watched as her father signed away half interest in the general store that had been in the Perez family for three generations.

She looked across the lawyer's office and into the granite face of the stranger who had sud-denly intruded into her life. Her gaze met his; soft brown staring into glittering green. For a fleeting moment she thought she saw in their emerald depths the hungry vulnerability of a small child. A melancholy thought took her. This hard man had once been a wistful little boy. What had happened to change him so completely?

He looked away and Marisa gave herself a mental shake. What Sean Flanagan had been didn't change what he was now -a tough, crude frontiersman who considered her to be nothing more than a silly little girl. Someone should tell him that in the wild, untamed frontier settle-ment of Bexar an eighteen-year-old unmarried woman was a solterona, an old maid. Fe-males who lived on this ragged fring-e of civiliza-tion grew up fast or they didn't grow up at all.

Hector turned to his newly acquired partner. "You must be with us at all times until Felipe Gomez makes his move."

"I'll stay close to you, Perez," the hard-faced strang-er promised.

"Not me," Hector was quick to say. "Marisa is the person you must protect. If Felipe Gomez ever got his hands on my daughter, he would . . . " The thought seemed too terrible to give utterance. "Protect Marisa at all costs. I can take care of myself."

The fierce countenance of Felipe Gomez rose up in Marisa's frigh-tened mind. Her heart quickened with fear. The terrify-ing implications of what her father was saying hit her like a hard fist to her mid section.

Sean nodded. "I get your message. What do we do now?"

"We go home."

The Perez house was, by Bexar standards, spacious. It con-sisted of two large rooms with the inevitable lean-to built across the back. The cooking was done in a small adobe building behind the house.

The little dwelling sat far back from the road near the river's edge in a grove of cotton-wood trees. Flowers grew in the yard. Honeysuckle and rose vines twined around the trellis that framed the small front stoop.

Some of the tension drained from Hector's body as he approached the house. He whistled, then gave a strange, animal-like call. "That's our signal. When Carmen hears, she will open the door."

On cue, the door opened, just a crack at first, then all the way. Carmen stood on the other side staring at Sean with a look of startled surprise on her pretty little face.

"Señor Flanagan, Sean," Hector spoke with elaborate protocol, "may I present my sister-in-law, Senora Carmen Perez?"

Carmen's eyes rounded in surprise as she --extended one dainty hand toward the tall Irishman. "Buenos Dias, Senor Flanagan."

"Mrs. Perez, what a pleasure." Sean took her hand and held onto it until a nudge from Hector made him step across the threshold.

"Has all gone well today?" Hector ushered Sean and Marisa into the parlor. He turned to scan the open space around the house before coming inside.

"How can anything go well?" Carmen couldn't pull her eyes from the tall Irishman. --"Señor Flanagan, welcome.-" She closed and barred the front door.

As she turned from her task, Manuel and Arturo burst into the room shouting a welcome to their uncle. The sight of the tall stranger was enough to quell their shouts and send them scurrying to stand behind their mother.

Again, Hector made introductions. "My nephews, Manuel and Arturo." He extended his hand in Sean's direction. "This is Señor Flanagan, my new business partner."

Sean nodded to the boys, but his eyes lingered on Carmen's face. "Thank you-, Mrs. Perez."

Hector scanned the small room, "Where's Chico? Has he prepared a noon meal?"

A confusing intermingling of Spanish and English filled the air as Manuel and Arturo began to explain.

Hector held up his hand. "Enough!" He turned to Carmen. "What happened?"

Carmen's puzzled stare still rested on Sean's face. "He wandered away early this morning."

"Where did he go?" When Carmen didn't answer, Hector demanded. "Why did Chico wander away?"

"Who can explain why Chico does anything?" Carmen's eyes were still on the tall Irishman.

Arturo piped from behind his mother, "Mama told Chico that the Indians were coming. Chico put his hands over his ears and ran toward the river."

"Why, Carmen," Hector demanded, "must you fight with Chico? Do you enjoy frightening the poor boy out of his wits?"

"You blame me for the ravings of an imbecile? How can you be so cruel? Haven't I suffered enough? Must you attack me too?"

"We will talk of this later," Hector wore the haggard expression of a man who had reached the end of his rope. "I must find Chico,"

"He's in the cook room," Arturo offered. "He came from the river when he saw Marisa coming home."

Hector inclined his head, indicating that Sean should follow. "I have to get him."

At the back door Hector paused. "Guard my back, Flanagan." He walked down the path toward the cook room, calling as he went, "Chico, where are you?"

From inside the cook house came a faint reply, "Chico's here."

The two voices drifted out into the quiet afternoon, a strange duet of fear and frustration echoing into the humid stillness.

"Chico, come out here," Hector called then waited before he added, "The Indians are gone, Chico."

Chico's high-pitched singsong answer coming from somewhere inside the cook room brought a look of relief to Hector's face. "Chico wants Marisa. Carmen said Marisa had gone away." Sobs floated out into the humid air. "Carmen said Indians were coming."

With gentle persuasion Hector coaxed the little man out into the yard. "Marisa is in the house. Come inside and see."

"Marisa is home?" Chico crept from the cook house.

Hector put his arm around the little man's shoulder and urged him toward the house. "Marisa is waiting in-side and I brought a friend home with me. Would you like to meet him?"

Sean's voice mingled with Hector's plea. "You're little girl is right, Perez. Chico's no nitwit, he's a madman."

Chapter Three

The Perez house could accommodate two residents well. Seven people in so small an area stretched space and tempers to the limit.

Marisa awoke after a fitful night and remembered that she was now sharing her room with Tia Carmen. Rolling over, she sat up as thoughts of yesterday's events floated into her waking mind.

From across the room Carmen's strident complaint interrupted her thoughts. "Get out of bed, Marisa. Your father and Chico have gone to the store, and I have no wish to be alone with that Irish outlaw." Carmen was twisting her long hair into a thick braid. "Hector has to be out of his mind to leave his family in the care of a man like Sean Flanagan."

Slipping into her dress, Marisa stood to her feet and tied her sash with a little flourish. "You should be pleased that you have someone to protect you. Papa paid dearly for Señor Flanagan's services. You could show a little gratitude."

"Gratitude indeed." Carmen wound her long braid around her head. "Your father hired that renegade out there," she nodded toward the parlor, "because he is afraid to face Felipe Gomez himself."

Marisa glared at her aunt. "Then why did Papa leave Señor Flanagan here and go to the store alone?"

"It is easier to hide when he is not encumbered." Carmen gave her braids a little pat.

It was going to be a hot day. Already the sod floor was warm beneath Marisa's bare feet. "Papa is using himself as a decoy. He's found someone to protect us and he's gone to face the Gomez brothers alone." That thought sent a shiver down Marisa's spine.

"And who," Carmen put both hands on her hips, "will protect us from Señor Flanagan?"

Beneath Sean Flanagan's rough exterior Marisa sensed there beat the heart of a wounded man. She had never once considered him to be a danger. Her eyes rounded in innocent surprise. "Why would we need protection from Sean?"

"So it's Sean now, is it?" Shaking her head slowly from side to side, Carmen said, "What a stupid little girl you are."

Sometimes her aunt was so condescending. Marisa bristled. "How can you say I'm a little girl? You were married and expecting a child by the time you were my age."

With a superior arch of her dark brows, Carmen replied, "I knew by the time I was twelve years old what you have not yet learned."

Marisa's indignation gave way to curiosity. "And what is that?"

"How to manipulate a man. You are still a stupid little girl. But experience will teach you what you need to know."

This was not the first time Carmen had alluded to Marisa's innocent state, and suggested that she should gain some firsthand knowledge. "What do you mean, experience?"

"I mean you are still a virgin." Carmen made that state seem less than desirable. She narrowed her gaze. "Aren't you?"

Marisa dropped her head. "Papa says a woman should be pure when she marries."

"Your papa knows nothing about women. Your mother's been dead for twelve years, and he still hasn't found another wife. Don't listen to your papa when he talks about women."

"Why don't you tell me what I should know?" Marisa tried not to sound too hopeful.-

"Because it would take too long. Come, we must get our chores done before it's too hot to work." Brushing past Marisa, Carmen hurried from the room.

"But, Tia," Marisa called after her aunt.

Carmen called over her shoulder, "Hurry, Marisa."

Stamping her bare foot on the sod floor, Marisa followed her aunt into the stuffy little parlor.

Carmen's warning held true. By noon the heat inside the little house was stifling. After a hasty midday meal, Sean herded his four charges into the parlor. "Sit, the lot of you," he ordered, "and stay put." Obviously riding herd on four people for an entire morning was having a telling effect.

Manuel and Arturo shot their mother a questioning look. When she nodded, they sat down. Marisa dropped onto the horsehair couch. Carmen perched on the rawhide chair. After a stretch of tense and telling silence, Carmen sighed, then took her mending from her sewing basket and began to make dainty stitches in a tiny swatch of material.

For a long time no one spoke, then Sean, who was sitting on the parlor floor, let his insolent eyes scan Carmen's small erect figure before asking boldly, "Was Juan Gomez your lover?"

- Carmen's sharp intake of breath was followed by an angry look in Sean's direction. With an obvious effort to control her outrage, she laid her sewing on the table beside her chair. "Ninos, it is siesta time. Off with you."

"It's too hot to sleep," Arturo argued in concert with Manuel's whining, "Mamma."

Carmen's stiletto stare was enough to send the two boys in the direction of the bedroom, grumbling and com-plaining as they went.

As she turned, Carmen's voice cracked the humid air. "Marisa, go with your cousins."

Marisa's backbone stiffened. "I'm more comfortable here, thank you, Tia." -

Carmen's dark eyes shot little sparks of pure fire. "Don't argue."

"I am not arguing." Marisa couldn't miss the amused smile that tilted the corners of Sean's lips. Was he enjoying the dissension he had created? When he felt the lash of Carmen's tongue, and that would be soon, he might not find the situation so amusing. "And I'm not leaving."

Much to Marisa's surprise, Carmen relented. "Very well, but your father won't like it."

After a few moments of charged silence, Carmen took a deep breath then expelled it slowly. "Senor Flanagan, how dare you ask me such a question? And in the pres-ence of my children!"

"I've been hired to protect you." Pulling one long leg up, Sean rested his chin on his knee. "I can do a better job if I know the facts."

"You were hired to act, not to think." Carmen said scornfully. "My private life is not your concern."

Sean scanned her angry face with bland indiffer-ence. "You're an attractive woman. Juan had no wife to keep him in line. I'm not blaming, I'm just asking. Was Juan your lover?"

Carmen folded her hands in her lap before declaring on a shrill note of anger, "Hector didn't hire you to insult me." She wasn't going to answer the question.

Sean's knowing smile said he guessed as much. "Hector says your husband was a very jealous man."

Surprise - or was it a dawning reality? - tempered Carmen's wrath. Raising one eyebrow, she asked,

"What else did Hector tell you?"

"Enough to make me suspect your husband had reason to be jealous. Are you telling me he didn't?"

"I'm telling you," Carmen said emphatically, "to mind your own business."

"This is my business. I've been hired to protect you. I need to know why Juan and your husband fought." Sean wasn't going to let go. "Why won't you tell me?"

Carmen wiped her hand across her moist brow. "The Gomezes and the Perezes have been feuding for decades."

Marisa's stomach tightened at the mention of that long-standing conflict. She tried to send Carmen little warning signals with her eyes, but to no avail. Carmen was too engrossed in her argument with Sean to pay attention to her niece. Then it hit Marisa like a blot from the blue. Sean was trying to make Carmen angry enough to forget caution.

Leaning forward, he asked, oh so softly, "Why are they feud-ing?"

Apparently, he'd succeeded. Carmen's words were riddled with disgust. "Juan and Victor fought over that lost silver mine. Hector must have told you."

"Silver mine?" Interest sparked in Sean's eyes. "Hector didn't mention a silver mine."

Too late, Carmen realized Sean didn't know. "It's nothing of great importance. Certainly it is not worth dying for.-"

Sean was persistent. "What silver mine?"

How could her aunt be so stupid? Marisa had to stop her before she told too much. Boldly, she inserted herself into the conversation. "Everyone knows that Juan was your lover." She was doing what she had been furious with her father for doing the day before, but she couldn't let Sean find out about the mine. "Why bother to deny it?"

Sean's puzzled stare moved from Carmen to Marisa, then back to Carmen. "Nice try, Mrs. Perez."

Marisa had told a blatant lie, and Sean had believed her. With -impudence calculated to make her lose complete control, he asked Carmen, "Wasn't one man enough for you?"

"You, Sir will keep a civil tongue in your head or get out of this house." Carmen's voice rose. "How dare you come into my brother-in-law's home and insult me?"

--Guilt made Marisa come to her aunt's defense. "You have no right to ask my aunt such questions."

Carmen sent Marisa a chilling look. "Don't defend me, Marisa, not when you have just sworn to your father's terrible lies." Folding her sewing, she laid it in her basket. "I must see to my children." After a scurrilous stare in Sean's direction, she hurried from the room.

This man certainly had a low opinion of women. Why else would he be so rude and tactless? As soon as Carmen was out of earshot, Marisa remarked, "That was a vile thing to say to my aunt."

Taking his knife from its scabbard, Sean began to clean his finger nails. "Something's not right here, and I can't quite put my finger on what it is."

"My father hired you to protect us, not to pry into my aunt's personal life." It sounded as if Marisa was admitting Carmen's guilt. Better that, she decided than letting a stranger find out about the silver mine.

Apparently, Sean had lost interest in Carmen's supposed affair. "Tell me about the silver mine."

"There is no silver mine." Marisa said a little too quickly. "Carmen made that up." She decided to leave before he tricked her into telling more. "I have to help Carmen." Excusing herself, she hurried away.

She would have to face Carmen sooner or later, it may as well be now. Marisa went to her room, where she found Arturo and Manuel stretched out across the bed. "Where is your mother?"

"She's in Tio Hector's room," Manuel answered. "She said not to bother her. Mamma has a headache and I think she's mad at Señor Flanagan."

That was an understatement. Carmen was furious, and not just at Sean. Marisa would feel the sharp lash of her aunt's tongue later. "Why don't we forget about Sean Flanagan?" Arturo's face screwed up in a frown. "But I want to know why was Señor Flanagan asking Mamma all those questions?"

"You heard?"

"We listened outside the door."

Manuel sent Arturo a condemning look.

How could Marisa explain something she didn't fully understand herself? She decided she couldn't. "He is a strange man, a foreigner. Pay no heed to him."

Arturo was not so easily appeased. "Was my mother in love with Señor Gomez?"

"Señor Flanagan was mistaken." Perspiration trickled between Marisa's breasts and ran down the back of her legs.

"Why don't we sit outside?"

"Señor Flanagan says we're not to go outside," Arturo pulled the back of his hand across his sweaty brow. "And Mama says so too."

"I don't care what they say." Manuel scooted to the side of the bed. "I want to go- swimming."

"We can't. It's too dangerous. If the Gomezes didn't find us, the Comanches might." Marisa thought how near the river was and how cool the water would feel against her perspiring skin. Almost she was persuaded to. . .

Manuel's voice cut across her renegade thoughts. "Then tell us about Mama and Señor Gomez." Putting his hand under his chin, he waited. "Why would Mama love Señor Gomez? She loved Papa."

Arturo was quick to defend his mother. "Mamma did nothing wrong!"

"It's not wrong to love someone," Manuel argued then turned to Marisa for reassurance. "Is it, Marisa?"

"Your brother is too young to understand." Marisa was not sure Arturo understood completely. "Forget what that foreign man said."

"Then explain to me, Marisa." Manuel's innocence tore at Marisa's heart. How brief was childhood's short span and how painful. The walls of the little room seemed to close in on her--.

Suddenly she was on her feet and moving toward the door. "Why don't we go swimming? We can take turns standing lookout." A brush with danger seemed preferable to sitting in this stuffy little room waiting for Carmen's wrath and Sean's questions to catch up to her.-- It wouldn't be the first time she and her cousins had slipped away to the river to swim.

The three conspirators crept out the back door and down the narrow, well-worn path that led from the house to the river.

Thirty minutes later, Manuel's warning cry sounded from his perch in a tall oak. "Someone is coming."

His alarm came too late. Marisa looked up from the cool waters of the river to see a disbelieving Sean Flanagan making swift strides in her direction.

"Get out," he ordered as he bounded down the narrow path. "Get out now!"

Relief flooded through Marisa-. Better to face an angry protector than a band of Comanches or the Gomez brothers. "We decided to take a swim," she explained, hoping to appease the anger of the Irish renegade who stood at the river's edge. Instinct warned it wouldn't be wise to antagonize him further. "I hope you didn't worry."

Through clenched teeth Sean hissed, "Out!" Folding his arms across his chest, he stood tall and intense, waiting to be obeyed.

Arturo crept, dripping, from the water, and came to stand on the grassy bank beside Manuel, who had climbed down from the tree, like a frightened little animal.

Slow anger began to build inside Marisa. Her world seemed to be pressing down on her. First there had been her father's lies to deal with, then her aunt's anger that refused to be assuaged, now this arrogant stranger stood above her demanding to be obeyed. "Vete pa'l carajo." With a defiant splash, she sat down in the shallow water near the river's edge.

The angry Irishman waded into the river, scooped Marisa into his arms and headed for the grassy bank.

"Put me down, you . . ." Marisa fought, trying to escape. It was useless. His arms were like bands of steel.

His grip tightened. "You told me to go to hell."

He understood Spanish!

"Somebody should teach you it's not polite to insult your elders." Setting Marisa on her feet he roared, "Go to the house, now."

This time Marisa obeyed. She hurried toward the house following Manuel and Arturo, and being followed by the angriest man that she had ever seen.

Carmen was standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips. "Marisa, how could you? It is not enough that you slander my good name. You have also put my sons in danger."

Marisa could imagine what Carmen would tell Papa. "I didn't think . . ."

"That, I can see." Carmen grabbed Manuel by the hand and pushed Arturo through the door.

"Someone should take a shillelagh to the three of them," Sean shouted in frustration.

"I will attend to these two." Carmen herded Manuel and Arturo toward the bedroom.

Marisa's every impulse told her to run. There was no place to run. She folded her arms across her breasts, remembering suddenly that she wore nothing but a thin pair of panty-lettes and a damp cotton petticoat. "It really is quite safe to swim. We've done it many times before."

"Safe?" Sean's shout bounced off the rafters.

Marisa cringed under his withering gaze. "Carmen is angry with Manuel and Arturo. She shouldn't be. It was all my fault."

"That's true."

He didn't have to agree with her. Marisa measured with her gaze the distance to the door. "I have to go now."

"Don't try it." He was not about to let her escape so easily. "Don't you realize you could have been killed? If Felipe and Tito Gomez had found you in the river, you'd be dead now, or worse. What if a stray band of Comanches had happened by? Do you know what Comanche braves do to little girls like

you?"

"I know." Perhaps she could appease him with an apology. "I am sorry."

"You're sorry?" Sean's voice was corrosive. "Do you think you can excuse what you did with a simple apology?" Suddenly, he was shouting again. "You will not go near that river again!"

She had suffered through the humiliation of saying she was sorry and he was still angry. That knowledge, coupled with Sean's arrogance, sent a wave of anger surging through Marisa. "Don't tell me what to do Señor Flan-agan! Papa never talks to me this way. Papa treats me with respect."

"You want to be treated with respect when you act like a stupid little girl?" He took a step in her direction. "What you need is someone to warm your backside." He smiled, as if he found the idea grimly amusing.

"You wouldn't dare!" She suspected that he might. "You're- supposed to protect me."

"That's what I'm trying to do, little -girl." He stood with his hands on his hips glar-ing at her.

"I'm not a little girl.-" Her bottom lip trembled. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She forgot, for a moment her anger and frus-tra-tion. "I'm a woman."

His anger seemed to melt into thin air as his eyes scanned her damp, scantily clad young figure. "So I can see."

She had done a foolish and dangerous thing. In retrospect she could see that. A tear slid down her cheek. This time her apology rang true. "I am sorry and I won't be that stupid again."

Sean ran his hand through his curls. "I thought when I knew you were missing that I'd lost you just when I was finding you." He took an uncertain step in her direction. "I'm responsible for your safety. I promised your father I'd look after you." ---

His gentleness was doing strange things to her nervous system. "You won't tell Papa, will you?" She took a step backward.

He shook his head in affirmation. "Yes." Then in negation. "No." Lifting his hands, he let them fall to his sides. "I don't know what I'm saying or what I'm doing." Once more he shook his head, this time as if to clear his mind. "How the hell did I get roped into this in the first place?"

Marisa couldn't believe she felt pity for this arrogant, crude man, but she did. "I'm not so bad when you get to know me. You might even learn to like me." -

His expression moved from puzzled to distraught, then rela-xed in lines of grim amusement--. "Don't you see? That's the one thing I don't want to happen."

Those words cut like a knife, and he was smiling. Did he find her overtures of friendship humorous? "You don't want to like me?" Another tear slid down her cheek. "Why not?"

"It would only interfere with my job. I'm here to protect you."

Marisa sidled toward the door. "I have to go now and apologize to Carmen." She was surprised and confused that words from a stranger could disturb her so deeply.

Sean stepped with her. "I can't let you go like this."

The arrogant stranger had been replaced by a gentle, caring man.-- "How can I make you understand? You're so young, so innocent."

Unbidden, tears began to stream down Marisa's face. --"Tell me what I can do to make you like me."

A groan escaped from deep in his throat as he pulled her into his arms.- "I do like you. Maybe too

much." He stroked her long damp hair with his hand as he uttered soothing words; exotic phrases that were foreign to her ear. The heat from his bare chest was like a torch against her moist body.

Taking her face between his hands, he lifted it to his own. Then very slowly he lowered his mouth onto hers and brushed her lips with a feather of a kiss. "God forgive me if just this once I..." He kissed her again, another brush of the lips that was intended as a message of comfort. It was like touching fire to dry grass.--

Marisa wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her wet body into his hardness. The kiss deepened as he eased his tongue into the soft dark-ness of her mouth, penetrating, examining, possessing.

The humid air in the room seemed to ignite and ex-plode as they locked together in a passionate embrace.

Manuel chose that moment to wander through the door. "Hi, Marisa-." He sniffled, wiping a stray tear from his cheek.

Sean dropped his hands and pushed Marisa from him. "My God!" He turned away, but not before she saw the evidence of his arousal, huge and throb- ing, dis-tort-ing the front of his buckskin britches. Her eyes dilated as a fright-ening array of conflict-ing emotions ran through her body.

Dropping into a chair, Sean put his elbows on the table and let his head fall into his hands. "Get out of here, Marisa before I do something I'd be sorry for later."

Marisa was trembling like a leaf in a windstorm.-- "You don't have to be sorry for treating me like a woman." She had never before experienced such intense emotion. "Because that's what I am."

He raised his head and scalded her with a scornful expression. "Leave it, and go, please."

Only moments before she had been set to run, now she felt an overpowering urge to stay, and explain. "Most of the women in Bexar are married by the time they're sixteen." What she had just experienced made her feel very adult, very frightened, and more than a little confused. "I'm old enough for you to like me as a woman."

The hard lines around his mouth pulled into a corrosive smile. "I do like you as a woman and it makes me like myself less as a man."

That seemed a strange thing to say. Marisa protested, "I like you as a man. I think you're. . ." Words failed her. "I like you a lot."

Caustically, he intoned, "That's just what I need. Will you go, please and apologize to Carmen for both of us?"

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Chapter Four

The Gomez brothers would come for Hector Perez. The question now, was when. After five days of waiting, the suspense became almost unbearable. The strain began to tell on the inhabitants of the little house beside the river. -Days were plagued with heat and ha-rassed by continuo-us arguments and occasional out-bursts of ex-plod-ing tempers.

The nights were even worse. Hector's endurance was being pushed to the limit. He became sar-castic and short tempe-red. Sharing his bed with Chico, who usually slept on a cot in the cook room, did nothing to improve his disposi-tion.

Chico, who was given to wandering around Bexar during the early hours of the morning, complained constantly. "Chico wants to walk." His flat little singsong voice rubbed against already frayed nerves.

"You will stay here if I have to tie you to the bed." Hector's threat caused Chico to complain even louder.

Heat and humidity made it impossible for Marisa to fall asleep until far into the night. Even when slumber came, nightmares often made it more of a chore than a restful pursuit.

On the morning of the sixth day, just before dawn, Marisa stirred in her bed and collided with her sleeping aunt.

Heat and fear had robbed her of another night's rest. Throwing aside the sheet, she sat on the side of the bed. Would this be the day the Gomez brothers would come? She stood and stretched, then walked to the narrow window at the end of the bedroom. In the predawn stillness trees cast eerie shadows across the yard. Soon another anxious day would arrive. Sudden-ly, ominously, one of the shad-ows detached itself and moved toward the house. Fear froze Marisa where she stood as anoth-er shifting shadow moved from the darkness and followed in close pursuit of the first.

In the dead quiet she heard the scrape of a knife being in-serted bet-ween the door and the casing. The bar that secured the back door was being lifted. Someone was breaking into the house.

Felipe and Tito Gomez! She had to warn her father!

Caution slowed her movements. One false step and all would be lost. She began to tiptoe toward the parlor. A sound from the bed caused her to pause and turn. Carmen rolled over and felt along Marisa's side of the bed. "Marisa?"

Marisa grabbed the door jamb and held her breath. Carmen turned again, pulling the sheet with her as she went, then mumbled before she settled -back into a restless repose.

The next instant Chico's high pitched, blood-curdling scream ripped the stillness asunder. "Indians! Run!"

Marisa peered into the darkness of the parlor. The earliest rays of light out-lined the sha-dowy figure of a tall man poised in the doorway of Hector's bedroom. A menacing premonition bathed Marisa in a cold sweat.

From the horse-hair couch at the other end of the par-lor, Sean raised himself to a sit-ting position, and locked his fingers around the hilt of his knife, then hurled the deadly missile. It whistled through the air before striking home with fatal accuracy. The shadowy figure let out one shuddering gasp, then fell to the floor with a lifeless thud.

The thud was answered by an ear-splitting burst of gunfire that shat-tered the grim silence. Its echo was an immediate and agonized cry.

In the space of a heartbeat, a second man sped from Hector's room and stumbled -over the body that lay sprawled across the door-way. He swore softly as he scrambled -to his feet and raced for the back door.

Jumping from the couch, Sean pushed his feet into -his boots, and bound-ed throu-gh the darkness, close on the heels of the flee-ing man.

Clad only in her cotton gown, and barefoot, Marisa ran after them, fear dogging her every step.

The figure ran toward the river, --oblivious of the tangled underbrush that pulled at his feet. He reached the bank of the river and slid into the murky water before Sean could catch up to him.

With a flying leap, Sean bounded over the edge of the bank. He landed astride the fleeing man's back, pulling them both down into the shallow waters along the bank.

Marisa leaned against a giant cottonwood and labored to pull air into her aching lungs as she watched with fascinated horror the life-and-death battle that was unfolding before her frightened eyes.

The two adversaries struggled and thrashed about as the water swirled around them. The dark invader was smaller than Sean, but he was agile and strong. Breaking the grip Sean had around his neck, he turned to face his attack-er. Locking his muscular arms around Sean's waist, he hung on with a tenacity that threate-ned to stran-gle the life from the Irishman's body. The dawning light confirmed what Marisa already knew in her heart. The man was Felipe Gomez!

Just when it seemed that both men would be pulled by the undertow into the deeper water, Sean brought his right hand up under Feli-pe's neck, and delivered a short, powerful blow. A sickening crunch said he had broken bone and severed sinew.

As his grip loosened, Felipe slid down into the muddy water. A burst of froth and bubbles surfaced where his dark head had gone down-.

Sean put his foot on Felipe's neck and kept it there until bubbles were no longer rising from the water and the froth had begun to swirl and disappear.

After what seemed a short eternity, he lifted his foot, then reaching down, took the man by his ankles and pulled him toward the middle of the river -where the current deep-ened. With a heavy sigh, Sean loosened his grip, stepped back, and waited for the swirling waters to sweep the man's lifel-ess form down stream and out of sight.

Retracing his footsteps, Sean waded ashore. Wet and winded, he leaned against a tree across from Marisa.

Marisa's eyes were dark pools of desperation. "He's dead, isn't he?" Her words snagged on the spur of fear that hung in her throat.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The cruel lines around Sean's mouth quirked. "Why aren't you with your father?"

"I wanted to see that Felipe paid for what he did." Marisa whispered. "He shot Papa, Sean." Her chin dropped as she closed her eyes against a sudden onrush of unbearable pain.

With two bounding strides, Sean covered the distance between them. Taking Marisa into his arms, he whispered softly, "You poor child. Did you see what happened?" He pressed her close to him, as if his strength and near-ness could absorb some of the pain and sorrow she was feeling.

"I heard the gun blast and I heard Papa's terrible scream."

Still holding her close, Sean guided their steps toward the house. "We have to find a doctor. Maybe your father will be all right."

He wasn't. Marisa knew that. From that knowledge, a new fear surfaced. Her fingers shook as she pressed them to her temples.- "When Sheriff Cameron asks about Felipe, we must say that he escaped in the river."

"Why?" Sean asked, surprise tilting his voice.

"Felipe was not in the house when you killed him. We have no proof he was ever there. The sheriff might say you took the law in your own hands." Marisa leaned heavily on Sean's arm. "It's better if he believes Felipe escaped.--"

"You don't know about self defense?" Sean spoke with a confidence that must have been gained through experience.

"I know - yes, and I know Sheriff Cameron, too. He thinks bringing criminals to justice is best left to him."

"Then why wasn't he out looking for Felipe and Tito?"

"The sheriff said he had to wait until Felipe and Tito did something illegal before he could arrest them."

- The first fingers of light were reaching across a murky sky. Sean pulled the back door open. "Your sheriff sounds like a coward."

"Don't underestimate the Sheriff of Bexar. That would be a big mistake." With a sense of impending doom, Marisa dragged her bare, recalcitrant feet across the threshold of the little house and pointed them in the direction of her father's bedroom.

Chapter Five

Always afterward, Marisa remembered that long day with a sense of irreplaceable loss and agonizing desolation. Facing the dreadful prospect of life without Hector overwhelmed her. During those first hours despair blotted out all other emotions. Her papa was gone and Marisa couldn't bear to think of life without him. Empty of all feeling, except deep and abiding grief, she gave herself over to mind-numbing anguish.

-With time came the stark realization that, with or without Hector Perez, life would go on. The morning after his funeral, Marisa forced her-self to sit down and assess her options. There were decisions to be made and she must make them alone. Her main concern now was how she would provide for herself and Chico. She was heir to half interest in a profitable business. Surely that would provide for their financial needs. How would Sean feel about having a woman for a partner? He would have to accept her, she decided, because he had no choice, but then, neither did she. One inescapable fact was her constant companion, nothing would ever be the same as it had been before.

Papa's will was to be read today. After that, Marisa should know exactly where she stood. Her mind was a turmoil as she dressed -for her trip to Lawyer Simms's office. "First hear the will," she -told herself, "then make plans."

The nagging fear that the cousin of Felipe and Tito Gomez would decide to avenge their deaths, lurked always in the back of Marisa's mind. By now Bal-domar Gomez knew of Tito's murder. How long would it be before he realized that Felipe was dead too and came looking for Sean Flanagan?

Marisa smoothed Chico's hair, and tied his tie. "We're going out, Chico."

"Where's Hector?" Chico's tiny face wrinkled in a deep frown.

Tears stung Marisa's eyes. How could she explain something as final and irrevocable as death to Chico?-"Papa is . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say dead. "Not coming home."

"Hector's not coming home?" Chico's beady eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Why?"

"We have to go now." Marisa led Chico toward the door. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Chico followed along, docile, but puzzled. "We'll talk tomorrow?"

A pall of sadness washed over Marisa. She had to be strong for Chico's sake. He was as helpless as a baby. She would find a way to provide for both of them. She had to! "We still have each other, Chico."

Chico held onto Marisa's hand as they walked -down the narrow path toward the barn. "We have each other? We have each other?" His high-pitched, singsong voice rode on the melancholy morning air.

Lawyer Simms met Marisa and Chico at the door of his office. "Come in, my children." His pudgy hand was clammy on Marisa's arm.

She looked around the little room. A lectern stood in front of several neat rows of chairs. Finding a seat on the front row, Marisa patted the chair next to her. "Sit here, Chico."

Chico had scarcely settled in his seat when Carmen swept through the door and perched on the chair next to him. She tossed her head and smiled, very aware of the appreciative glances she was receiving from every male in the room.

A sudden truth flashed across Marisa's mind. Carmen was looking for a husband. It would be easy for her to find one. There were three or four men for every woman in Bexar. Disgust left a foul taste in Marisa's mouth. Tio Victor had not been dead a month, and already Carmen was looking for a man to

take his place.

Sean shared the second row of seats with two Texas Range-rs, Slim Masters and Bob Beckett. Slim, a slender man of medium height, assessed the other occupants of the room with wary eyes. Bob Beckett, tall and distinguished, with an elegant manner and handsome features, seemed more bored than cautious.-

Sheriff Cameron sat alone in the back row. He had turned his chair around and was perched astride the seat with his arms resting on the high back. His tranquil gaze was directed toward the two Texas Rangers. No doubt he considered them intruders. Marcus Cameron had been the only law official in the little village of Bexar since Marisa could remember. -Slight of build and short of stature, Marcus Cameron was not a man who would stand out in a crowd. His manner was mild, almost complaisant.

Those who knew the sheriff were aware of how deceptive appearances can be. Even his closest friends addressed Marcus Cameron as Mr. Marcus or Sheriff Cameron. Behind his back he was referred to as El Diablo.---

Waldo Simms stood before the assembled group, his striped vest barely closing over his ample middle, a gaudy watch chain stretching across his sagging belly. His air and appearance rivaled that of a pious a priest pre-paring for Sunday morn-ing mass. Clearing his throat, he ran nervous fingers along his watch chain. "I'm going to read Hector Perez's will. I don't intend to put in all the there-fore's and whereas-'s. But I am going to tell you what the will says."

Waldo's eyes flicked over the sheriff's face. "Sheriff Cameron, do you want to say something before I start?"

"No." The sheriff spoke with a soft southern drawl. "I ain't got noth-ing to say, yet."

With a heavy sigh, Waldo began to read from the document that he had spread out on the lectern. "Hector leaves Ranger Cap-tain Slim Mas-ters, his good friend who fought by his side at the Battle of San Jacinto, his Kentucky long rifle." Waldo nodded in the Slim's direction. "Hector put great store by his friendship with you, Cap'n Masters."

Slim pulled his eyes away from staring at Carmen long enough to glance in Waldo's direction. "Yeah."

"He leaves to his friend Ranger Bob Be-ckett, who was also a part of that glorious group that whipped Santa Anna's ass . . . , " Waldo gulped. "Sorry Miz Perez." Grimacing, Waldo amended his sentence. "Butt at San Jacinto, his silver belt buckle."

Carmen lifted her eyes and smiled directly into the face of Ranger Masters.

He returned her smile as a blush of color crawled along his high cheekbones.

Waldo went on, "Hector leaves his good friend, one Mr. Marcus Cameron, the sheriff of Bexar, the case of tequila stashed behind his desk in his general store." Waldo nodded in the sheriff's direction.

"Hector leaves to his sister-in-law, the lovely Señora Carmen Perez, the sum of five hundred American dollars."

Rounding his eyes, Waldo grinned fatuously. He was feeling his importance and he intended to hold onto this moment as long as possible. It was not often that a shyster lawyer could upstage two Texas Rangers and the Sher-iff of Bexar. "The sum of which I am appointed to see that the dear lady re-ceives." Waldo's grin creased his fat face into a round maze of wrinkles.

"Hector leaves to his business partner, one Sean Flanag-an, one team of mules and his rawhide pouch containing business papers. Papers and bag which are now in the possession of Hector's daughter, Marisa."

Marisa turned to stare at the handsome man behind her. Why, she wondered, would Papa leave Sean his mules and papers? Papa hardly knew Sean Flanagan.

"Everything else Hector owned," Waldo invested his words with solemn significance. "His house, his half of the general store, all his personal belongings, and two hundred dollars in American money, he leaves to his little girl, Marisa."

Marisa's spirits lifted. There would be no argument about her ownership of Papa's half of the store now. She could provide for herself and Chico. Her elation faded as she remembered that the other half belonged to Sean. And for what? He hadn't saved Papa's life. It wasn't fair!

"End of will reading," Lawyer Simms announced with a wave of his pudgy arms. "Now Sheriff Cameron-, I believe you brought a bottle of the tequila Hector left you. Let's all have a drink, boys."

Marisa was outraged. These men claimed to be Papa's friends. He was not even cold in his grave, and they were calmly dividing his worldly possessions. How dare Sheriff Cameron go into her store, and take Papa's tequila!

Lawyer Simms's prating words impinged on Marisa's dismal thoughts. "Señora Perez, Would you like someone to see you home?"

Carmen nodded. "Gracias, Lawyer Simms, you are most kind." The lawyer took Carmen's arm, and began to escort her toward the door.

Marisa stared in open admiration as Sean stood to his feet. He -towered head and shoulders above every other man in the room. His buckskin shirt fit like a glove over his massive chest.-- He exuded a raw masculine charm that made her pulses pound. The muscles in his fore arms stood out beneath the sleeves of his shirt. What it would be like, she wondered, to be held in those arms. She pulled her eyes away as her thoughts brought a blush to her cheeks.

Marisa was not the only one who was staring. Carmen's dark eyes glowed as she extended one dainty hand. "Señor Flanagan, how nice to see you again."

Sean took Carmen's hand in his. "Señora Perez, how lovely you look today." His appreciative glance slid over Carmen's small, full figure.

Slim Masters pushed his way around Lawyer Simms to stand by Carmen's side. He tipped his hat, revealing a slightly balding head. "Mrs. Perez, may I see you home?"

Lawyer Simms opened his mouth to object. The look Slim sent him must have invited second thoughts. Turning on his heel, he scurried away.

Slim offered Carmen his arm. "My buggy is outside."

Hooking her hand through his arm, Carmen smiled up at him. "You are so kind."

Exasperation shot through Marisa. How dare her Tia flirt so shamelessly! And how dare every man present respond with such open pleasure! She grabbed Chico's hand. "Let's go home, Chico."

Sean caught up to them before they reached the door. "Hey, little girl. About the mules your father left me -" Catching her arm, he pulled her around to face him. "Do you need them? Do you want them? If you do, we can make arrangements for you to keep them."

"I don't. Your mules are in my barn." Marisa snatched her arm away. This man had a nerve offering her mules that had belonged to her father in the first place.- "I have another team and if I continue to feed your team, it will cost you."- Grabbing Chico's hand, once more she headed for the door.

"I'll pay you when I pick them up." Sean fell in step beside her. "The pouch and papers... I'd like to

look through them. When would it be convenient for me to come by?"

He certainly was persistent. Did he think she planned to abscond with his precious bag? "I'll give you the bag when you come for your mules."

"I'll be around in a day or two." He possessed such charm and self-assurance. Marisa was, at once, intrigued and repelled. Pausing just inside the door, she met his open gaze without flinch-ing. "We're partners now. We can discuss that too when you come for the mules."

"Are you sure you don't need the mules?" Sean asked.

"I'm sure." She couldn't understand why her father had left this outlaw a team of mules. She would ponder on that later. Right now other, more pressing problems confronted her. "I think we should reopen the store as soon as possible."

"We?" Sean lifted one eyebrow. "Running a store is not a woman's job. I can do that. Don't worry. I'll see that you receive half the profits."

There it was again, that arrogance that she detested. "I've forgotten more about that store than you will ever know," she told him through clenched teeth.

"If I need your advise or help, I'll ask for it. Don't worry. I'll take care of the store and you."

Did he think he could get rid of her that easily? He had better think again! "I don't need you to take care of me or run my store."

"That's what Hector hired me to do. That's what he expects."

"With a lift of her chin, Marisa reminded him. "My father is dead. You're dealing with me now."

"And you're going to be as stubborn as those mules he left me."

"Y tu eres un vero cabron," Pulling Chico along with her, Marisa marched through the back door with her head held high.

Lawyer Simms watched as she hurried away. "That little girl does have a mind of her own." He curled his lips around the butt of his cigar. -

Sean was frowning. "What did she say?"

"You and her are partners now. Ain't that something?"

- As Sheriff Cameron called his name, Waldo turned to go, saying over his shoulder as he went, "Your new partner just called you a bas-tard."

Sean's reply floated into Marisa's ears on the burr of that soft Irish brogue. "My partner will come around. All she needs is a little gentle persuasion"

Chapter Six

As the next two days dragged slowly by, Marisa pondered over her seemingly unsolvable dilemma. Thanks to her interfering aunt she had been placed in an impossible position. She had to do something to get out of this predicament. But what? After much consideration and long hours of deep soul searching, she finally hit upon a plan so daring that she wondered if she could find the courage to put it in motion.

Disregarding Marisa's feelings and wishes completely, Carmen had set about the day the will was read to find her niece a husband. "I don't want a husband," Marisa had protested, when Carmen told her what she planned to do.

"This is not a question of wanting a husband. Your father is dead." Carmen pulled her mouth into a determined line. "That means you must have a husband."

Marisa protested vehemently, "It does not!"

The words fell on deaf ears. Carmen remained doggedly determined. "I intend to see you safely married." Her dark eyes snapped with indignation. "Just be glad that you have someone to arrange a marriage for you. Your father is gone, Marisa. You must have some-one to look after you. I can't give you a home. I am fortunate to find a man who will accept my boys."

The reason for Carmen's concern was suddenly crystal clear. She didn't want to be saddled with Marisa, and that was what she thought would happen if she couldn't arrange a marriage for her niece. Marisa could soon set her straight on that issue. "I don't need anyone to look after me. I can take care of myself."

"And what will you do for money?" Carmen came directly to the point. "You have to have an income to live."

"I own half interest in a thriving business." Marisa lifted her chin defiantly. "Chico and I will manage quite well."

Carmen exploded, "You can't hope to keep Chico with you. What man in his right mind would put up with that idiot?"

Carmen had made up her mind and Marisa knew how stubborn and determined she could be. Her heart began to beat a little faster. "I can't desert Chico. He's all the family I have."

"Chico is not your family. I am your family, and I am telling you that you must forget about him." Carmen gave vent to her frustration in graphic Spanish. "Cono!"

Marisa was just as determined. "If I turned Chico out, what would happen to him?-"

"You can't be concerned about that. You have to think about yourself. And you can believe me when I tell you that no man will take in that pendejo! So don't even ask."

"I can't desert Chico." Marisa clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms. "He has no one but me." How could her aunt so casually assume that she would abandon Chico? "I can't turn him out."

"You have no choice," Her aunt answered coldly.

Marisa decided to try another approach. "I need Chico," she argued. "He does all the cooking and most of the housekeeping."

"Then you will just have to learn to do those things for yourself." It was obvious that Carmen didn't intend to give an inch.

"I will not desert Chico. I don't care what you say," Marisa asserted with more courage than she felt. "And I'm not going to let you chose my husband."

Carmen's dark eyes flashed. "You will!" She enunciated each word. --"Hear me, Marisa. I am going to marry Slim Masters. Do you know what that means?"

"It means he's a fool!" Marisa shouted. By now she was past caring if she angered her overbearing aunt.

A note of intimidation slipped into Carmen's quiet reply. "It means I can ask Slim to tell Sheriff Cameron to lock Chico in jail and throw away the key."

Marisa dropped her eyes, afraid Carmen would see the fear written there. -"He couldn't do that. Chico hasn't broken any law."

"Sheriff Cameron can do what he wants to do and he wants to please the Texas Rangers. Their organization is new, but is already very respected and very powerful."

"Señor Masters wouldn't stoop to such a despicable deed." Marisa was care-ful to keep the panic she felt from sounding in her voice. "That would be breaking the law. Papa says - said, that the Rang-ers are here to uphold the law, not break it."

"Once I get Slim into my bed, he will do any-thing I ask him to do." Carmen's smile was triumphant. "I think, Marisa, you will do as I say, also."

She knew she was beaten. Nevertheless, Marisa made one last -attempt to dissuade Carmen. "I can't marry the man who makes the best offer. It's like being auc-tioned off to the highe-st bidder. Give me some time. I'll find a husband by my-self."

On the heels of an indignant snort, Carmen hissed, "Nev-er! You know nothing about selecting a proper hus-band. You will marry the man I choose."

Marisa met her aunt's angry stare. "I will not!"

Carmen stared her down. "You have no choice."

Marisa looked away, trying to bolster her waning courage. "I don't need a husband. I have half interest in Papa's store. Chico and I can manage very nicely alone."

"You and Chico? Here alone? Don't be ridiculous! Young ladies do not live alone. Grow up, Marisa. Marriage is not a matter of choice. It's a necessity. You may as well accept my decision."

Her aunt was right. Arguing was futile, but Marisa was not going to be pushed into a hasty marriage. "It's too soon after Papa's death for me to be making such an important decision." --

"Then I will make it for you." Carmen placed a cool kiss on Marisa's cheek and hurried toward the door. "Slim is waiting for me. I must go."

Marisa stood in the doorway and watched Slim help Carmen into his buggy. "You haven't won, not yet," she said as the buggy rolled out of the yard in a cloud of dust. "I will not marry a stranger to please you. I will think of some other way."

She had

"I don't know if I can do this." Misgivings were returning once more to -trouble Marisa. "Even if he agrees, I don't know . . . " The stark alterna-tive rose to confront her: Chico alone and bereft in the world; Marisa married to the man Carmen chose. "I'll do it," she told herself with a firm nod of her head, then added in a frightened little voice, "I have to-." -

A knock on the door interrupted Marisa's thoughts. She opened it to see Sean standing on the stoop.

Surprise tilted her voice. "Come in, Señor Flanagan." She motioned for him to come inside.

It was a wary, cautious man who came through the door. "Are you alone?" His anxious eyes scanned the tiny parlor.

"Chico's in the cook room." Marisa pointed toward the horsehair couch. "Would you like to sit down?"

He chose instead a chair that gave him a full view of all three doors. "I feel safer with my back to the wall."

Marisa perched on one end of the couch, directly across from him. "I have your bag, Señor Flanagan." She folded her hands in her lap and laced her fingers together to still their shaking. "Your mules are in the barn."

Suspicion narrowed Sean's eyes. "You're being very cooperative."

"Partners should try to get along with each other." Marisa lifted the bag from beside the couch and held it out to him. "You will find the title to the store and several other important documents inside."

"Things will go much better between us if you let me take care of the business." Sean opened the bag and peered inside, then closed it, and sat it beside his chair. "If you're afraid I'm going to cheat you we can hire a bookkeeper that you trust."

"I keep the books at the store. I have for over a year. I don't need a bookkeeper or a guardian." Marisa clamped down on her anger. She couldn't afford to antagonize this man, not now.

"You'd be in the way ... always underfoot at the store and you might get hurt." He added, not unkindly. "Hector wouldn't like that. Neither would I."

Marisa bit her tongue to keep from letting go with a barrage of angry words. "I grew up in that store. I won't get hurt and I can be a lot of help."

"Not necessary." Sean shifted in his chair. "Where is Carmen?"

"She moved back to her own house. She feels safe there now that the Gomez brothers are no longer a threat." Marisa thought Sean was a little too concerned about Carmen.

"She left you here alone?" He let his eyes wander about the room. "I don't think Hector would approve of that either."

"I chose to stay here because Carmen refused to let Chico come to her house with me." Marisa thought that none of this was any of Sean's business, but she very carefully refrained from saying so.

"What about the other Gomez, the cousin?" Sean asked as his eyes once more swept around the tiny room.

"Baldomar?" Marisa thought of the sinister man with the strange name, then lied with appalling ease. "I'm not afraid of him. He and I are ... friends."

"What about Carmen, and her boys? How safe are they from this - what's his name?"

"His name is Baldomar, Baldomar Gomez." An emotion dangerously near jealousy arose in Marisa. "And you don't have to worry about Carmen and her boys."

"Carmen shouldn't be alone. It's not safe."

What was this? Sean showing concern for Carmen? That was enough to set Marisa's temper on edge all over again. "Carmen won't be alone for long." Spitefully, she added, "She is going to marry Slim Masters."

One of Sean's dark eyebrows climbed up his broad forehead. "Oh?" The news Marisa had hoped would

shock him seemingly left him unmoved. "Will you make your home with Carmen now? You can't stay here alone."

Marisa stared directly into those emerald eyes. "Tia Carmen has found a husband for me."

Now there was surprise and mild disbelief. "Who's the lucky man?" She could not miss the note of mockery that slipped into his voice.

"Bob Beckett." Marisa said, with a defiant lift of her chin.

"The Ranger who looks like a banker?" Sean's smile was derisive. "He should be quite a catch."

His ridiculing attitude infuriated her. "He was once a business man." After a deliberate pause, Marisa said, "Since we are business partners, maybe we should discuss my coming marriage."

"What does your coming marriage have to do with our business partnership?"

"Would you like to have a Texas Ranger for a business partner?" Marisa's voice as prim as a child's.

He flinched at her honeyed words. "You're my partner. Your father left half of the store to you, not Bob Beckett."

"You know very little about how things are done in Bexar," Marisa scoffed. "When I marry Bob, he will take over Papa's half of the business."

Sean tented his fingers together and looked over them, his expression unreadable. "Oh?"

"It's going to be difficult explaining to Bob that most of the merchandise in Papa's store has been smuggled into Texas." She watched Sean's face for some reaction to her words, and saw none. "I hope that Bob is broad minded enough to understand about Papa's illegal activities. -Papa is gone, but I'd hate to think . . ."

Did she detect a note of caution in Sean's carefully phrased question? "Have you told him?"

"No. Not yet."

"I see, and why not?"

"I have my reasons, all of them personal." This time she couldn't keep the snap out of her voice.

"You are either one smart little girl, or a total fool." Then he surprised her completely by saying, "Maybe I could buy your half of the store."

It was one eventuality she had not considered. She could think of no rebuttal. "Would you want to?"

"Maybe."

Why must he always do the unexpected? "You could, I suppose, but without the Perez name I doubt you could get away with selling stolen merchandise or keeping contraband in the store-room."

"So I need you to run the store?" He was cautious and suspicious again. "Do you have some idea of trying to buy my half of the store?"

She didn't, but she couldn't tell him that. "I might."

"I paid dearly for my half of that store. The price will be high."

He was shrewd enough to suspect she had some ulterior motive. Caution bit into Marisa's diminishing confidence. "How much would it take to buy your half?"

"Your father left you two hundred American dollars. That would go a long way toward buying me

out."

"I spent some of that money for Papa's funeral." Marisa brushed at an unwanted tear. "I need what's left to live on until . . ." She sat up in her chair. "the store is operating and showing a profit again.- To make that happen you're going to need help, and it has to be someone you can trust."

Sean's mouth curved contemptuously. "And who would that be?"

"You don't have much choice." There was an edge of frustration in Marisa's voice. "It's going to have to be me or Bob Beckett."

"Why shouldn't I trust Bob?" Sean's tone was derisive. "The man is, after all, a Texas Ranger."

Was he trying to make her angry? Of course he was and he knew so well how to do it. "Papa always said that an honest lawman was more dangerous than a dishonest one."

"I don't trust anybody," Sean informed her, "Not you, and most definitely not any lawman who ever lived."

"Sooner or later, you'll have to trust somebody. You can't do it all by yourself. Who will take care of the store when you go for loads of contraband?" Fighting a sense of growing panic, Marisa spread her hands-. "Chico and I could take care of the store while you're away."

"You and Chico?" An amused little chuckle punctuated Sean's words. "I doubt you and Chico can take care of yours-elves."

What an arrogant, insulting man he was! Marisa forced herself to hold on to her temper. "She-riff Cameron was one of Papa's dearest friends. They fought together at San Jacinto. He would never question what I sold in my store or what was in my storeroom." She paused to let her words sink in.

Sean leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Are you threatening me?"

"What do you mean?" She had not dreamed he would mis-take her argument for a threat.

"Are you saying if you weren't my partner, you'd tell Sheriff Cameron about the contraband in the store?" He was wary as a wild animal being pushed into a cage.

Marisa pasted a smile her lips. "Sheriff Cameron already knows. He was one of Papa's dearest friends. The sheriff -"

Sean completed her sentence for her. "Fought with your father at the Battle of San Jacinto." His arms dropped to his sides. "I get the message."

"The Texas Rangers are the problem. They haven't been in Bexar long, and God forbid, they're honest." Marisa looked for some sign that her argument was get-ting through and saw none.

"You keep saying the Rangers are honest. What makes you so sure?"

Marisa's mind was racing, trying to come up with a solid, logical argument. "What makes me so sure of what?"

Angry or frustrated, or maybe both, Sean snapped, "Who told you the Rangers are honest?"

"Papa, and Carmen, and . . . Oh who cares? It's beside the point."

"What is the point?" Sean asked with a cautious tilt of his head.

Marisa swallowed hard. "Slim Masters will soon be my uncle. Carmen can control him. Carmen says once he's in her bed, he will do anything she asks."

"That, I can believe," Sean intoned, dryly.

Marisa's argument was gaining momentum. "Bob may be a little hurt if I don't marry him, but he'll forget about all that if -" She stopped, and smiled directly into his eyes. "What do you think about my plan, so far?"

"I still don't know what your plan is." Alert and wary, Sean asked, "Bob will forget all about you not marrying him if you do what?"

Marisa couldn't decide if he was being sarcastic or sincere. "If I married you." She closed her eyes, and flinched as the words tumbled past her stiff lips. Then, cautiously opening one eye, she peered at the stranger she had just asked to be her husband. Maybe she should take it back. Remembering Chico made her shut her mouth, open her other eye and wait.

Sean's jaw went slack as his eyes rounded in utter disbelief. "What did you say?"

"I said -" She stopped, before blurting out, "you know what I said."

"I don't believe this." He looked like a man who had just been slugged in the gut.

"You asked. I told you. Now I want an answer." She couldn't afford to lose her temper, but Marisa couldn't stop the little wave of annoyance that fanned out inside her.

Sean's eyes danced with sardonic amusement. "Why the hell would I want to marry you? More to the point, why would you want to marry me?"

Marisa clamped down on the small explosion that ran through her. She would not let this arrogant Irish renegade goad her into anger. "It would be a business arrangement, that's all." That should remove any thought he had that she wanted a real marriage.

"Are you sure that's all you want from me? I think, little girl, you want much more than that." There was just enough mockery in his voice to make her stiffen.

"If all I wanted was some man to tell me what to do, I'd marry Bob! I don't want to - sleep with you."

The lines around his mouth quirked. "Little girl, I could make you beg for the privilege of being in my bed." With slow, easy grace, he stood, placed his hands under her armpits, and pulled her to her feet.

At his touch, she felt her pulse quicken. -Her mind told her to resist, while every fiber of her being ached -to give way to the fiery sensation that ran through her veins like quicksilver. On a trapped breath, she whispered, "Put me down!"

He tightened his grasp and brushed his mouth across hers in a teasing feathery, flicker of a kiss. "I could make you scream for me."

Turning her head to one side, Marisa pushed her hands against his muscular chest. "Stop it!"

He kissed her cheek, her chin, then his lips ignited little flames along a path down her neck to the soft hollow at the base of her throat. All the while his fingers were moving through the heavy softness of her dark hair.

Surprise and a scorching emotion she couldn't define, melted Marisa's resistance. She went limp in his arms as he continued to kiss her temple, her cheek, the tip of her nose. Then his lips descended on hers in a gentle, probing, mesmerizing kiss. It was a sweet sensual assault, a tender ravishment.

To her ultimate shame, she surrendered with shocking abandon.-- Her arms circled his neck as her body arched toward him. Little rivulets of fire flowed through her stomach and ran, like liquid flame, into her arms and legs. A moan died in her throat as a burst of passion purged reason.

Suddenly Sean dropped his arms, pushed her from him, and stepped back. -"Tell me now that all you want is a business arrangement." The smugness in his voice raised blisters on her pride.

Confused and embarrassed, Marisa traced her fingers across her lips then let her hand fall to her side. What kind of passion had this man unleashed inside her? She was afraid, not so much of him as of herself. "You'd better go." Was that her saying those faint, far away words?

He was laugh-ing at her. What had hap-pened be-tween them was a joke to him. He had set about to show her who was in control, to demonstrate that he could bring her to a fever pitch of desire, and he had succeeded.

When he spoke again an unevenness threaded his rough brogue. "Sometime soon I'll finish what we started here today. Be-cause that's what we both want, darlin'."

Marisa's face flushed with humilia-tion and anger. She had let him make a fool of her. "That's not what I want.--"

Sean was still wearing that mocking, superior grin. "You just said you want to marry me."

Marisa struggled to find some shred of dignity. "I suggested a business arrangement, nothing more."

A smile pulled at the lines around his mouth. "I'll think about your proposal and give you an answer soon." Backing toward the door, he threw her a kiss. "Good night, darlin'." The door shut softly and he was gone.

Damn him, she thought, as she watched him ride away. Damn that arrogant, conceded, outlaw! He thought he had won because she had surrendered to his sexual assault, just as he knew she would. He could have taken her, then and there, in her own house on her own horsehair couch and she wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop him. The intensi-ty of her own emotions sent a wave of panic through her. Aft-er several moments, she gained a measure of control. -

Let him have his little moment of tri-umph, Marisa decid-ed. After he had time to think about what she had told him, he would realize he could not run contraband from the general store with-out her help. He would come around. He had to! He was her last hope. Worse than that, he was her only hope.

Chapter Seven

Three days had come and gone. --Time was running out. Tia Carmen and Bob Beckett would call this afternoon to make final arrangements for Marisa's marriage to Bob. She shuddered at the thought of being tied to this cold, distant man.- He had made it clear to Carmen that Chico would not be welcome in his home.

Marisa had not seen Sean since the day she proposed to him. -When she had suggested to Carmen that she talk to Sean about an arranged marriage Tia Carmen had dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "Don't be foolish! Sean Flanagan wouldn't make a decent husband for any woman."

Chico wandered into the parlor and sat on the couch beside Marisa. He was so tiny, so vulnerable, so sad. Brushing a tear from his cheek, he lamented, "Chico misses Hector."

Marisa gave way to tears. "Marisa misses him, too." Pictures focused in her memory, images of her father's dear face. She remembered the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled and how he frowned when he was displeased with something she had done. She recalled the softness in his voice when he called her his little girl. The most terrifying realization washed over her. She would never see her papa again!

A knock at the door brought Marisa to her feet. Bob and Carmen had arrived. She patted Chico's hand and told him to go outside. Carmen's sharp tongue would only upset and confuse him even more.

He vanished through the back door, a sad, dejected little figure, lost and so alone. How could she bear to toss Chico out on the mercy of the world? She couldn't. She would beg Bob to let Chico live with them. A chilling premonition told her what the answer would be.

Why hadn't Sean given her an answer? A no would have been better than cold silence. She had been a fool to suggest such an outrageous alliance. Pulling the door open, she mentally girded herself for the coming confrontation.

Bob and Carmen stood on the other side of the opening. Carmen's look spoke to Marisa as no words could. "Behave," it said, "and don't argue."

With a sigh, Marisa asked them inside.

Bob and Carmen were scarcely seated when Chico appeared at the back door with Sean following close on his heels.

Smiling, Chico announced, "Chico found Sean outside."

His words brought a gasp of surprise from Marisa and a grunt of disapproval from Carmen.

Rising, Bob extended his hand toward Sean. "Mr. Flanagan." His cool gray eyes were questioning, but calm. There was an icy reserve about this man, a sense that he operated on cold logic and gave little thought to emotions and feelings. "This is a pleasant surprise."

Under her breath Carmen snorted, "Cono!"

"Sit down," Marisa invited. She welcomed any interruption that would postpone this conversation that was taking her nearer and nearer to becoming Bob Beckett's reluctant bride.

The sight of Carmen was enough to send Chico scooting back out the door.

Sean sank into a chair as Bob settled back on the couch and Carmen eased down beside him. Marisa tried to smile. She couldn't. A sense of gloom permeated the room.

Sean's mouth stretched into a mocking grin. "What is this, a wake?"

"Almost." Marisa met her aunt's warning gaze. "We're planning a wed-ding."

Her attempt at humor was lost on Carmen and Bob, but Sean's grin widened. "I wouldn't dream of interrupting. I'll come back later."

Before discretion could stay her tongue, Marisa blurted out, "This can wait. Tell me why you're here."

"You and I have unfinished business, remember?"

The only unfinished business she could remember was her marriage proposal. He would show up now just when she couldn't talk to him. "I can't discuss that now."

Sean brushed her objection aside. "There's nothing to discuss. I've decided to buy your half of the store. Name your price."

"Is that the business you wanted to discuss?" Marisa's

heart sank. This wasn't about her proposal after all. Sean wanted to buy her half of the store. She couldn't let him do that. "We'll have to talk about this later."

"It's now or never," Sean announced with cool arrogance. "I want this done before you sign a marriage contract."

What he wanted was to make his deal with Marisa before she became legally tied to Bob. If she didn't do something and do it fast Sean would buy her half of the store and she would be well on her way to becoming the unwilling bride of Bob Beckett. A wild plan began to form in Marisa's mind. Taking a deep breath, she said in a breathy little voice, "I didn't expect you today, darling."

"All things considered," Sean raised one eyebrow as Marisa's 'darling' registered. His eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you up to now?"

Marisa could see the future advancing toward her like an ominous shadow. She took another deep breath. "I was about to tell Bob and Carmen."

Sean leaned forward in his chair. "So tell them. Then we can find Lawyer Simms and make this deal legal and bind-ing."

Marisa's heart jumped to her throat. If she hesitated now all was lost. Inhaling deeply, she announced, "I have asked Sean to marry me."

Her words exploded like a rifle shot into the quiet of the little room, catching Sean completely unawares. His mouth fell open. His jaw sagged. "What did you say?"

Marisa was not about to be deterred now. "I pro-posed to Sean three days ago. If he agrees, we'll be married . . . " Her voice trailed away then rallied again, "Next week. So you see, Bob, I can't marry you."

There followed a deadly pall of silence. Carmen finally found her voice. "-Is this your idea of a joke?"

Bob's expression froze. "Mari-sa, you agreed to marry me. You can't refuse to follow through with your promise. I won't allow it."

The last thing Marisa had expected was an argument from Bob Beckett.- "I won't marry you. Can't we just leave it at that?"

"What the hell is going on here?" Sean looked like he might explode at any moment.

"Marisa is my intended, Mr. Flanagan," Bob asserted. "How can she consider marrying you if she has agreed to marry me?"

"Did you get this promise of marriage from the lady herself or from her aunt?" Sean's tone was velvet, but it was edged with steel.

"The pact was made with Señora Perez, but she has assured me it's binding." Bob's patronizing tone set Marisa's teeth on edge.

Sean's voice was whistling soft. "Don't push your luck, Mr. Beckett. If Marisa says she isn't going to marry you, she isn't going to marry you."

Relief flooded through Marisa's body along with a surge of joy. "I'm sorry if you misunderstood what Carmen promised, Bob, but Sean is the man I want to marry." The truth was she didn't want to marry anyone, but there seemed to be no other option.

Bob made an explosive little noise under his breath. "Marisa, I made a pledge to your aunt in good faith and now you tell me you won't honor your part of the bargain? This affair is far from settled. A contract has been made even though it's verbal and I insist that our marriage, yours and mine, be solemnized as quickly as possible."

Marisa had to convince Bob that she was not going to marry him. "But Bob . . ."

Carmen interrupted, her eyes blazing. "Señor Flanagan, I don't know what you've done to this child, but let me assure that she is going to marry Señor Beckett." Taking a long breath, she prepared to launch into yet another tirade.

How long, Marisa wondered, would Sean take her side in this stupid argument before he gave up and left her to the mercy of her overbearing aunt and cold-hearted Bob Beckett? What could she say that would dampen Bob's ardor? Like a bolt from the blue, it hit her! There was one way. She took a deep dramatic breath and laid her hand over her racing heart. "Sean and I are already married in the eyes of God." Over the ringing in her ears, Marisa heard Carmen's sharp intake of breath and Bob's muttered curses.

Astonishment shot across Sean's face, deepening his eyes to a shade of stormy green. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Madre de Dios!" Carmen whispered, "Explain yourself, child. What do you mean 'in the eyes of God'?"

Marisa stammered, "The marriage has already been . . . We have already . . . I don't know how to say what we did, not in words that would not be . . . -" She let her voice die away on the end of a little sigh.

Bob completed the sentence for her. "The word you are searching for is consummated. How utterly disgusting!"

"It just happened." Marisa looked away, trying to escape her aunt's penetrating stare.

Carmen's voice seethed with indignation. "Explain, Marisa, now!"

"Tia, we couldn't stop. We . . ." There was a breathless catch in Marisa's voice.

Carmen raised her hand. "Enough! I've changed my mind. I have no wish to hear the terrible details of what you and Sean did."

"Oh, but, Tia Carmen, I don't mind explaining, not at all. . . ."

"Shut up, Marisa," Carmen hissed. "Every word you speak is another reminder of how terribly I have failed Hector, and failed you."

Bob shook his head slowly from side to side. "Mr. Flanagan, you are thoroughly despicable."

Marisa decided that her lie had left Sean speechless. A white line circled itself around his taut mouth. Taking full advantage of his temporary inability to defend himself, Marisa smiled in his direction. "Tell them, Sean darling."

Sean found his voice. "Now just a damn minute. That wasn't the deal we discussed. I never agreed to marry your niece."

"Oh, I am quite sure of that." -Carmen stood to her feet. "But you are going to marry Marisa, Señor Flanagan." Her hands shook as she pulled her shawl around her shoulders. "Marisa is little more than a child. How could you stoop to seducing an innocent little girl?"

Sean shot to a standing position. "Your niece is lying!" He pointed an accusing finger in Marisa's direction. "Tell your aunt the truth, Marisa."

Almost, Marisa relented, then she remembered what was at stake. Putting on her most innocent face, she replied, "She doesn't want to hear it."

Carmen seethed with righteous indignation. "You, you, hijo de puta!" Turning on her heel, she marched grandly toward the door. "Aye Dios mio. Vámanos a la casa."

Bob followed along behind her, casting furtive glances over his shoulder, and swearing.

Over the bang of the slamming door, Sean shouted, "Do you know what you've done?"

Marisa shrank back. "I had to do something. I don't want to marry Bob Beckett. I had to make him not want me."

"Well, you damn sure did that," Sean roared. "You have also made me look like the biggest scoundrel in the Republic of Texas!"

"I don't expect you to marry me." Marisa was beginning to think she had pushed this angry man too far again. She remembered, vividly, how angry he had been the day he found her in the river. "I just wanted Bob to leave me alone."

"You've done a hell of a lot more than scare Bob Beckett away." His rage was frightening. "All of Bexar will be talking about our supposed escapade before the sun goes down today!" Striding toward her, he shouted, "How could you tell such a lie?"

"Don't yell at me!" Fear was crawling up Marisa's backbone.

Grabbing her, Sean let his fingers bite into the soft skin of her shoulders. "Did you see your aunt's face when you told her we were lovers?"

Marisa pulled free. Oh, yes, she had seen, and she had been suppressing the desire to giggle ever since that horrified expression had crawled across her aunt's pretty countenance. "I've never seen Carmen speechless before." Marisa collapsed on the couch in a fit of laughter.

A muscle twitched along Sean's jaw line. "How about the look on -Bob's face? He hasn't been that shocked in a long time." Sean's grin blossomed into a full-blown smile, but his humor was short lived. Sobering, he charged, "You just shot to hell any prospect I ever had of operating a business in Bexar. I guess you know that." His eyes narrowed. "You planned this, didn't you?"

"Planned what?" Marisa asked, thinking he was getting a little too near the truth.

"You want to hold onto your half of the general store and you don't care how you do it. You took a big chance." The gravity of his tone was more frightening than his words. "Did it ever occur to you that I might already have a wife?"

It hadn't, not ever. Marisa slid her hand over her mouth then let it fall away. "Do you?"

"No, but I almost wish I did.---" The scar along the side of his face bleached to a thin white line. He looked angry enough to spring at her. "I'm no longer interested in buying your half of the store."

Marisa moved from the couch to a chair. "Why not?"

"After what you just told your aunt do you think I could run a business in Bexar?" He began to pace the floor. "I'll be lucky if I don't get run out of town on a rail."

"I could buy you out." Marisa suggested, hoping her offer would temporarily appease his anger.

Her words had the opposite effect. "With what?" he roared. "Do you have any money?"

"I have almost a hundred American dollars."

Sean shouted. "That's not enough to pay for the load of merchandise I brought from Victoria. I'm not going to give you my half of the store!" After a few moments, he brought his temper under control. "I can't deal with you. You have absolutely no business sense."

His demeaning words made her forget her resolve to remain calm and collected. "Then I will marry Bob. You can deal with a businessman turned Texas Ranger."

Sean's hands fell to his sides. "That's some choice." For a long moment he seemed to be lost in thought. "If I do agree to marry you, don't expect anything more than a busi-ness arrange-ment."

He was being insolent and insulting. Marisa considered telling him she had changed her mind. If she did, Carmen would marry her off to Bob Beckett, or someone worse since Bob probably wouldn't have her now anyway. She tilted her chin upward. "That is exactly what I expect."

Sean reached for his hat. "We can talk about it later."

"Why can't we talk about it now?" Marisa was afraid if he left before she could assure him that she wouldn't make personal demands on him, he might change his mind.

"Because I have more pressing matters on my mind right now."

"But we will be married?" Marisa questioned. "I don't have to marry some stranger Tia Carmen finds for me?"

Sean's puzzled frown gave way to a caustic smile. "So, that's your big worry? No, you don't have to marry some stranger, and he should thank me for saving him, whoever he is."

That sounded like an insult, but Marisa let it pass. "When will we be married?"

He was almost out the door. "What do you want from me?"

"I'll tell Carmen that we will be married in five days." Marisa knew she was pushing her luck, but she couldn't let him get away without a definite commi-tment.

"Five days it is." Sean opened the door. "We will agree on details later." Over the slam of the door Marisa heard what had to be Irish imprecations.

Five days, that should appease her aunt. Marisa let out a long sigh of relief. For now, she was safe. She would worry about tomorrow when it got here.

Chapter Eight

The ceremony would take place in five days. Second thoughts began to trouble Marisa. ---She was about to marry Sean Flanagan, and all she knew about him for sure was he was a smuggler and a renegade. Maybe she should reconsider. If she didn't marry Sean, Carmen would force her into a marriage with a stranger. Then she would lose Chico and her half of the store.-

Grabbing her broom, Marisa began to sweep the sod floor. As she swung it around in slashing circles, her anger faded to be replaced by a spar-kle of humor. She had given the gossips of Bexar something to talk about. Her supposed liaison with the Irish rene-gade had spread through the gos-sipy little village like wild fire.

A knock on the front door stayed Marisa's flying broom and her wander-ing thoughts. She opened it to see Thad Gilli-an, Marcus Cameron's deputy, stand-ing on the other side.

"Hi, Miss Perez." Thad's thick face wore a knowing sneer. "I'm looking for Mr. Flanagan." His insolent eyes slid over Marisa's slender figure.

"He's here." Marisa lied with amazing ease. "Would you like to talk to him?"

Tobacco juice running from the sides of Thad's mouth made him slurp between words. "Just tell him Sheriff Cameron wants to see both of you -in his office." He spit a long stream of tobacco juice across the front stoop. "About ten tomorrow morn-ing."

Marisa leaned against her broom handle. "Per-haps you should tell Señor Flanagan yourself." Thad was a coward and a bully. He was not about to deliver that message to a man like Sean Flanagan if he could help it.

"You can tell him." Thad shoved his hat farther down on his head, and lumbered down the steps and toward his horse.

Marisa laughed to herself. But her laughter died in her throat as she realized she had no idea where Sean was. She hadn't seen him since the day he had agreed to marry her. She had to find him before he learned the sheriff was looking for him and did something foolish like leave town. Hurrying toward the back door, she untied her apron, calling to Chico, as she ran."Chico, where are you?"

Chico came from inside the cook house. "Chico's here."

"Come along," Marisa was racing for the barn. "we have an errand to run."

Marisa waited impatiently as Chico harnessed the mules, and hooked them to the wagon. Knowing the use-lessness of telling him to hurry, she vented her frustra-tion by tap-ping her foot and chewing on her bottom lip.

As Chico helped Marisa into the wagon he asked, "Where are Chico and Marisa going?"

Marisa settled into her seat. "We have to find Sean."

Chico whistled as he wrapped the reins around his wrists and urged the mules to move. "Where is Sean?"

That, Marisa didn't know. "We have to look until we find him." She had no idea where Sean might be, but he had once told Hector that he patronized McGuire's Pub. That was enough to tell her where to start her search.

The Southwest quadrant of the village of Bexar was known as Irish Flats. It was the home of a dozen or so immigrant Irish families. "Do you know the way to Irish Flats?"

Chico's little face creased into a smile. "Chico knows."

"Take me there," Marisa told him.

Chico obeyed. He had neither the forethought, nor the

intel-ligence to question such a reckless order. The wagon lurched as the mules ambled down the winding road.

Irish flats was the rowdiest neighborhood in the little settlement of Bexar. Marisa knew before she had driven half a block into the shanty lined area that she shouldn't have come here. Gritting her teeth, she hung onto the wagon seat, repenting that she had acted so hastily.

A bloody fight that erupted along the side of the road fueled her rising fears. She was set to tell Chico to turn the wagon around when she recognized Sean's horse. It was tied directly under a sign that read: MCGUIRE'S IRISH PUB.

What would Carmen say if she knew Marisa was in Irish Flats and about to go into a pub? Someone was sure to tell her. Marisa decided she had enough to worry about with Sean and Sheriff Cameron. She would deal with Tia Carmen later.

The collection of cutthroats and rowdies that stood outside the pub drinking, arguing, and being generally disorderly, caused Marisa to reconsider. Maybe she should go home. "I can't do that," she told no one in particular. "I have to go inside because I have to tell Sean the sheriff wants to see him before someone else does it for me."

Chico sat still and silent, waiting for Marisa to come to some decision.

She could send Chico to look for Sean. Marisa shuddered at the thought of being left alone outside. Chico wasn't much protection, but he was better than nothing at all.

Gritting her teeth, she decided to act quickly and decisively. Climbing down from the wagon seat, she motioned for Chico to follow her. "Come on, Chico," and headed for the pub's door.

Chico wrapped the reins around the brake handle and folded his arms across his chest. "No, Marisa. Chico won't."

What was this? Chico refusing to do as she said? He was usually as docile as a lamb. Marisa stopped and turned to stare up at him. "It's all right, Chico. Come on down. We have to find Sean."

"Chico can't." He seemed glued to the wagon seat.

"Come on down." Marisa coaxed. "We have to find Sean."

Chico refused to budge. "No, Marisa. No! No! No!"

Curious bystanders began to stare. A burly buffalo hunter who was leaning against the wall of the pub asked, "Need some help, honey?"

Marisa turned to stare at the man. His dirty disheveled appearance sent a shiver down her spine. "No, thank you very much."

Her polite reply brought loud laughs and crude comments from the hangers-on around the pub entrance.

Moving nearer the wagon, Marisa hissed, "Get down from there and come with me, now!"

Chico cowered in his seat. "That bad man hit Chico."

"Have you been in here before?" Marisa put both hands on her hips.

"That man threw Chico out the door." Pointing toward the bar, Chico added, "He said stay away."

At one time Chico must have wandered into this place. Marisa could only guess what had happened after that. The result must have been that Chico had been thrown out. Trying to get him inside would cause a scene that would draw even more attention to her presence here. "Stay here and wait for me." She headed for the door, stepping carefully to avoid the puddles of water that stood around the entrance. At the doorway she paused, straightened her shoulders, and lifted her chin.

From his high perch, Chico called out, "That man will throw Marisa out."

"He'd better not try it," Marisa declared as she pulled the bar door open, and struggled to bolster her flagging courage. "He'd better not try it."

The inside was dark and crowded. An odor of stale beer and smoke filled the air. Marisa scanned the dim room. At the far end of the bar, she spotted Sean perched on a high stool. A blond woman stood behind him with her arms draped around his neck. Sean broke into raucous laughter, she whispered in his ear. -

A spear of jealousy shafted through Marisa. Pushing through a group of rowdy men, she called out, "Sean! Sean Flanagan!"

Her voice was lost in the commotion caused by the motley group of men seated at tables scattered across the sod floor. Marisa moved a little nearer, stopped, then called again, "Sean Flanagan!"

The blond woman was nuzzling her face in Sean's neck. The torture of embarrassment added to Marisa's despair. This was the man she was going to marry and he was behaving in a despicable manner. Marisa shoved through the disorderly patrons until she stood directly behind the blond woman. "Sean Flanagan!" She shouted to be heard above the chaotic din.

The blond turned, almost colliding with Marisa. "Who are you?"

Sean swung around on his stool. A look of surprise shot across his face. "Marisa?" Standing, he took her arm. "This is no place for you." He began to propel her toward the door. "How did you get here?"

The blond stepped in front of Sean, halting him in his tracks. "Marisa?" Her eyebrows lifted. "So this is your little Mexican baggage."

Sean's eyes narrowed to slits. "Shut up, Megan, and get out of my way."

Megan didn't move. "Why don't the three of us sit down and have a drink? There are some things I'd like to say to-" Pausing, she turned her head to one side. "What's her name? Oh, yes, Marisa."

The squat little man behind the bar raised one hand in a futile attempt to silence Megan. "Saints preserve us little sister! Do you want a riot in here?"

The blonde put both hands on her voluptuous hips, and smiled scornfully. "I want a talk with the woman Sean Flanagan says he's going to marry."

Sean's brogue thickened. "Dennis, get your sister out of my way."

Marisa was petrified with fear. "Let me go," she whispered, "and I'll leave quietly."

Sean shook his head. "There is no way you can leave here quietly now." His grip on her arm tightened. "Don't move from my side." Turning his scurrilous gaze on Megan, he ordered, "Get out of the way."

Megan sneered and thrust out her chin. "Make me."

Dennis hopped over the bar and came to stand beside his sister. Wiping his hands down the sides of his soiled apron, he expelled a long breath. "If you'll be getting that little señorita out of here, I'll be seeing

to me little sister." He tugged at his sister's arm. "Move, darlin,"

Megan impaled him on a piercing stare. "Go to hell."

A cheer rose from the crowd as with a sigh of resignation, Dennis picked his sister up, tossed her over his shoulder and carried her, kicking and fighting from the room. As he neared the door, he called back. "Leave, Sean, me lad, now."

Marisa fought to keep the nervous tremor that ran through her body from slipping into her voice. "Let me go. I have to get out of this place."

Anger clipped Sean's words. "It's not going to be that easy."

Dennis reentered the room and hopped back behind the bar. "Will you be getting that little señorita out of here before Megan gets loose and comes back to cause more trouble?"

Sean slipped his arm around Marisa's waist. "Stay close to me and, for once in your life, keep your mouth shut."

As they began to make their way across the sod floor, a drunken voice called from the noisy -crowd: "Hey, little señorita, come over here and have a drink with me."- The words were greeted with a round of harsh laughter and a barrage of lewd remarks.

Sean stared straight ahead. From the side of his mouth, he ordered, "Walk slowly and pay no heed to anything anyone says or does."

The front entrance seemed a hundred miles away. Holding onto Sean, Marisa fastened her eyes on the door as she silently cursed the fate that had brought her to this terrible place. All around her were drunken, leering men calling out lewd suggestive remarks and making obscene gestures. Fear choked in her throat as she realized the danger that surrounded her was real and imminent.

The slow-moving duo had pushed their way into the middle of the room when a clammy hand reached out from the press around them, slapped Marisa on her backside, and made an obscene proposal in Spanish. Anger overrode her fear. Turning toward her tormentor, Marisa spat through clenched teeth, "Vete pa'l cajaro." -

Sean's fingers bit into the flesh around her middle. "Easy does it. Keep going, slow and easy."

Once again a hand snaked out from the crowd, this time to caress the cascade of hair that fell down Marisa's back. Fear turned her blood to ice. Pulling free of Sean's hold, she tried to shove her way through the noisy mob. "Move! Move! Let me through."

Sean pulled her back into the circle of his arm. Over the rabble of rising voices, he shouted, "For God's sake, Marisa, behave. One false move and this crowd will be out of control."

Marisa steadied herself by putting her arm around Sean's waist. The crowd parted slowly as they inched toward the door. As Marisa's fear began to subside, she remembered why she'd come here in the first place. --"I have to talk to you, it's important. Come home with me." The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she realized the implications they carried.

Two of the rowdy onlookers who had so far been held at bay by Sean's menacing glare and threatening looks from the stocky little bartender, could endure no more. They moved from being spectators to participants in the little drama that was being played out before them. "Go with her," a drunken cowboy shouted. Swinging his beer mug into the air, he leered at Marisa. "Dammed if you ain't a pretty little filly."

"Bad advice amigo," a tall peddler called from the back of the room. "Go back to Megan, Flanagan." He surveyed his listening audience with a sweeping glance, "She's quite a woman," then winked slyly.

"You can't get any bet-ter."

The crowd of men once more began to shout obscene comments and of-fer indecent suggestions. As their voices grew louder Marisa's fear escalated to near panic. "Get me out of here, please."

The crowd once more began to move restlessly and press nearer. Vulgar remarks filled the smoky air. A rawboned cowboy pushed to the front of the crowd and took a wad of bills from his pocket. Waving it over his head, he shouted. "There's a month's pay here, sweet thing. It's all yours if you'll come with me to one of Dennis's back rooms."

Marisa's panic was now laced with mortification. These uncouth men thought she was a woman of ill repute. She was outraged! Her cheeks flaming, she broke from Sean's grasp and raced for the door.-

She was almost to safety when a drunken cowboy came from behind and caught her around the waist. "Come have a drink with Ringo." Falling into a chair, he pulled Marisa down into his lap and called out to Sean, "I'll take the little señorita, Flanagan. You can have Megan-." His foul breath was hot on Marisa's neck. "What's your price, honey?"

Marisa was too angry to be afraid. Doubling her fist, she delivered a solid punch to Ringo's jaw. As she swung her arm, the front of her dress pulled open. With her other hand, she tried-- to pull her dress over the wide expanse of ex-posed breasts. "Take your hands off me!-"

"You're a regular spitfire!" Ringo gritted his teeth. "That's the way I like 'em, hot and wild."

"Let her go!" The voice, flat and cold, but with a timber so deadly it made Marisa's skin crawl, came from behind her.

A hushed silence settled over the dim room. The air crackled with tension as Sean walked toward Ringo, his hand resting feather light on the hilt of his knife.

Sensing a fight was brewing, the bar patrons spread out, leaving the middle of the floor clear. They begin to shout and exhort with anticipating glee.

Ringo stood and pushed Marisa behind him. "This one's mine." He caught the side of the table to steady himself. "You got more than you can handle with Megan." His soft drawl was edged with cold mockery. "Move along."

"Let her go." The command, quiet, cold, and deadly, fell out into sudden silence.

"Come and get her," Ringo invited as he leaned forward to leer at Sean.--

Clenching his right hand into a massive fist, Sean rammed it savagely into the other man's mouth.

Ringo reeled backward, grimacing in pain as he pressed his sleeve to his bloody mouth. "You bastard, I'll kill you."

"Try it," Sean promised with deadly calm, "and I'll take you apart, piece by piece."

Ringo backed toward the door, his sleeve still covering his mouth. "I'll get you for this."

As the bar door swung shut behind Ringo, a pall of silence fell over the room. Taking advantage of that temporary lull, Sean grabbed Marisa by the arm. "Get out of here before you get raped and I get arrested, or worse."

Sensing the excitement was over, the crowd separated and began to disperse as once more men moved back to the bar or wandered to sit at tables.

Marisa held onto Sean's arm with one hand and the front of her ripped dress with the other. Taking fast, quick steps, she all but ran to stay up with his long, angry strides.

Once outside, Sean tossed Marisa onto the wagon seat. "What ever possessed you to come to this place?"

As Chico untied the reins and released the brake, Marisa began to explain. "Sheriff Cameron wants to see us tomorrow. We'd better be there. Sheriff Cameron is not a man to cross."

Sean loosened his horse from the hitching rail. "This means more trouble."

Marisa watched his every move. "Are you leaving?"

Sean tied his horse to the back of the wagon. "I'm taking you home. Then I'm going to-" With a visible effort, he brought his anger under control and climbed up on the wagon seat. "In the back, Chico. I'll drive."

Chico handed Sean the reins then moved to the back of the wagon.

Sean settled on the seat, released the brake, and whacked the mules across their backs with the reins. They broke into a run.

Marisa hung onto the side of the wagon with one hand and the front of her torn dress with the other. "I have to tell you. . ." She was having problems staying upright in the seat. "what time we . . ." Her voice was swallowed up in the wagon's rumbl-e.

Sean gave the reins a flip before turning to shout at her, "Save it until we get home. I have some things to say to you too."-

Marisa breathed a sigh of relief as she held onto her dress with one hand and the wagon with the other. Sean was angry, but he hadn't run, not yet, anyway.

Chapter Nine

Marisa sat beside Sean on a bench in Sheriff Cameron's office. She was more frightened than she cared to admit, even to herself.

Marcus Cameron pulled at his hand-lebar mustache. "Glad y'all could make it.--"

"It was no problem." Marisa answered.

Sean didn't bother to reply.

"I've been putting off talking to the two of you until I could get Felipe Gomez in here too, but now it looks like he won't make it."

Marisa swallowed. "Why not?"

The sheriff answered cryptically. "Where he's gone, he ain't coming back from,"

"Why don't you tell us why you asked us to come here?" Sean's mouth thinned into a grim line.

The hair on the back of Marisa's neck rose. Sean's patience was already wearing thin, and the interview hadn't started. She knew how explosive he was, and what he could do when provoked. If he lost his temper and did to Sheriff Cameron what he had done to Ringo, they were both in deep trouble.

"Old Felipe has gone where all bad banditos go." Sheriff Cameron spoke in that infuriating drawl that masked a quick, devious mind. "Yes-terday two Mexican cowhands pulled a body out of the river about five miles downstream. It was what was left of Felipe Gomez-."

Why hadn't she realized that sooner or later someone would find Felipe's body? Putting on her most innocent face, Marisa asked, -"What killed him?"

With chilling calm, the sheriff announced, "I reckon it's more like who killed him. He drowned, but I suspect he had a little help."

Marisa breathed an inward sigh of relief. If Felipe had drowned, the sheriff couldn't prove a thing.

"Maybe he fell in the river when he ran away after he shot Papa." That, she hoped, should settle the business of Felipe Gomez.

"Or somebody pushed him." -Sheriff Cameron cleared his throat. "Your papa was my friend. I don't like having ugly suspicions about his little girl. Is there something else you want to tell me about the morning your papa was killed?" -

-Marisa hid her fear behind a puzzled frown. "I thought the matter of Papa's death was settled. Felipe shot Papa in cold blood, murdered him in his bed as he lay sleeping."

The sheriff let his gaze shift from Marisa to Sean, then back to Marisa again. "That's what you say, but your telling me that little bit of a story don't settle the matter."

Looking down at her folded hands resting in her lap, Marisa asked oh so cautiously, "What else do you want to know?"

The sheriff's apologetic tone sent a shiver up Marisa's backbone. "-The truth." -

The shiver froze into icy panic. "About what?"

"About what happened to Felipe Gomez." The sheriff's fingers stirred restlessly over the butt of his gun.

Realization and fear came together as a burst of dawning knowledge ignited inside Marisa's head.

Marcus Cameron was going to accuse Sean of murdering Felipe Gomez. But why would he want to punish Sean for defending Hector and his family?---

In the space of a few reasoning seconds the answer became crystal clear. -Marcus was acting for his dead friend. He intended to see that Sean was punished for seducing Marisa. Not being blood kin, he couldn't challenge Sean openly, but he could arrest him for murdering Felipe Gomez. Under the sheriff's close scrutiny Marisa was becoming increasingly uneasy. Biting her lip, she stammered, "W-What do you want to know?"

If she had not known him so well she would have thought that Marcus Cameron was genuinely apologetic.

"This new development in the case has made me rethink some of the things you told me the morning Hector was killed." -

On a caught breath, Marisa declared, "I told you everything."

"Did you now? Felipe ---could swim like a fish." The sheriff's confidential tone gave his statement the trappings of a friendly comment. "I keep thinking maybe somebody helped him fall in the river, then helped him drown."

Sean's brogue cut into the tense air. "Sheriff, I . . . "

Raising one hand, the sheriff glanced briefly in Sean's direction. "If you don't mind Mr. Flanagan, I want Marisa to answer these questions."

The scar along Sean's face stood out like a cord. He was making a visible effort to control his anger.

-A tight-lipped leer made the sheriff's mustache quiver. "I want you to tell me everything you remember about the morning your Papa was killed-."

"I already have," Marisa lowered her eyes. "told you everything."

"You were upset." Folding his arms across his chest, the sheriff eyed her speculatively. "Maybe you forgot something?"

Marisa's heart hammered against her ribs. "Every event of that day is stamped forever in my mind."

"Did you see Mr. Flanagan chase Felipe to the river bank?"

"Yes, I did." Marisa tried to untangle the fear that snarled inside her brain. "I followed Sean to the river."

"Then you saw with your own eyes when Felipe took off toward Bexar?" The sheriff leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"Yes, Sheriff, I saw Felipe outrun Sean and dash down the bank of the river, toward Bexar." A fist of fear was punching around in Marisa's stomach.

The sheriff dropped his head and slitted his beady eyes. "I've done a heap of calculating since you told me that story. I figure it would take a while after you heard that gun shot for you to get from your bedroom and into the parlor. By that time, Felipe would have been long gone."---

Totally confused, Marisa blurted out the truth. "I wasn't asleep. I wasn't even in my bed."

Sheriff Cameron's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Then, where were you?"

"I was in the parlor." -

"Uh huh." The sheriff scratched the side of his head. "Why would you be in the parlor when you should have been in bed?"

"A noise wakened me. I got out of bed . . . " Marisa's voice broke, then faded away.

"For God's sake, Cameron, leave her alone." Sean's deep brogue fanned out into the strained air. "Can't you see you're scaring -the poor child?"

Why didn't Sean shut up? Marisa had to find a way to stop him from saying or doing something that would make Sheriff Cameron angry enough to arrest him with-out going to the trouble of fabricating some story to substantiate his charges.

The sheriff shrugged. "Now don't go get-ting huffy, Flanagan. I'm just doing my job. All I want is for Marisa to answer my questions." His gaze shifted to Marisa's face. "You were saying?"

He wasn't about to believe anything she said-. -Marisa's confused mind searched for a way to give Sean an iron clad alibi.- "I was saying that I wasn't in my bedroom when Felipe and Tito broke into the house."

Seemingly exasperated, the sheriff demanded, "Then where the hell were you?" -

Marisa leaned forward and confid-ed, "I was in the parlor."

"What were you doing there?" For the first time since he began his interrogation, Marcus Cameron was not in com-mand of the situation.

"Do I have to tell you?" Marisa's glance slid from the sheriff to Sean. "It has nothing to do with Papa's murder." Her soft words car-ried an insin-u-ating impli-ca-tion. ---

The sheriff gasped, "God Damn!"

Encouraged by the effect her words were having on him-, Marisa added, "I was with Sean."

Sean's face froze. -"Marisa, for God's sake, shut up!"

He's furi-ous, Marisa thought. She felt strange-ly de-flat-ed. She was trying to keep him from swinging from the end of a rope, and he was yelling at her. He should be grate-ful.

The sheriff pulled at his moustache and repeated, "God damn!"

Sean vaulted to his feet. "Just a min-ute. That's not the way it happened!"

The sheriff held up one hand. "Sit down, Flanagan, and give me a chance to think."

Sean sat back down and glared at Marisa.

If looks could kill, Marisa thought, she would just have breathed her last breath.

"Who threw the knife that killed Tito? " The sheriff asked in exasperation.

"I can answer that," Sean began.

Sheriff Cameron shook his head from side to side. "I want Marisa to an-swer, Flanagan." Caustically, he added, "If you don't mind."

Marisa's reply rang out loud and clear, "Papa did. He bor-rowed the knife from Sean the night be-fore." Her expres-sion begged Sean not to dispute her blatant lie.

"Are you sure?" The sheriff's brows knitted together in a puzzled frown.-

Again, Sean jumped to his feet. "Just a damn min-ute! I keep trying to tell you, that is not what hap-pened!"

"But close enou-gh-, I think," the sheriff mouthed in disgust. He swore under his breath as he nodded toward the door. "You're free to go. The crime you're guilty of I can't prosecute you for."

Following Marisa out the door, Sean seized her shoulder and pulled her around to face him. "I want to talk to you, little girl! But not here." Grabbing her hand, he began to pull her in the direction of the general store."

Marisa was running to stay up with him. "That sheriff is one sly hombre. But every-thing's all right now. I gave you an air tight alibi." She felt a glow of pride in her accomplishment.

"Alibi?" Sean was shouting. "You just about got me locked up for good."

"I saved your neck." Marisa stopped and put both hands on her hips. "And at the expense of my own good name."

Passers-by had begun to stare. Sean's voice dropped to an angry rasp. "You don't intend to let me out of this deal, do you?"

"I was trying to give you an alibi."

"You were trying to make sure I have to marry you! Where the hell do you get off tell-ing the sheriff of Bexar you were in bed with me while some-one was breaking into your house and killing your father?"

Marisa hung her head. "That's not what I said, exactly."

"No, but you implied as much. Do you know what you've done?"

"Of course, I know what I have done. I've saved you from being arrested for murder." Marisa's anger began to cool. "The sheriff wouldn't believe the truth, so I made up a lie."

One corner of Sean's mouth lifted in a caustic --smile. "You didn't want to save me. You wanted to make sure I had to marry you."

Marisa's eyes filled with tears. "I wanted to save you, that's all."

"Don't cry." Sean's voice softened. "We can work this out."

They made their way across the plaza. Marisa thought that this was the most ungrateful man she had ever known. She had besmirched her good name to give him an alibi, and he didn't even appreciate the sacrifice she had made-

Sean's burley brogue floated out over the many street noises. "Maybe I should get out of Bexar while I still can."

"The sheriff would come after you." That should make him think twice about leaving. "And you have a business here."

"And more trouble than I can handle." He blew air through his mouth. "All right, I'll stay, but only if you stop with the lies."

"I will. I promise." He was so beautiful. "And we can be married soon?"

"Do I have a choice?" He reached once more to catch her hand in his. "I've already spoken to the priest."

She was going to be his wife. Once she was, Chico would be safe and Tia Carmen would stop trying to run her life. Those thoughts filled Marisa with quiet elation.

Chapter Ten

"I am not going to stand by and let you ruin your life, Marisa!" Carmen sat stiff and resolute on the horse-hair couch. "You have a bit of explaining to do, Mija."

"What do you mean, ruin my life?" Any-time Carmen addressed Marisa as Mija in that tone of voice, she was up to no good.

"Do you know what Señora Valadez told me today?" Carmen's lips curved in a disdainful sneer.

Marisa had a good idea. "You shouldn't listen to gossip."

"Gossip indeed!" Carmen's foot tapped the sod floor. "Why did you go to McGuire's Pub? That cantina has a terrible reputation. No self respecting woman would enter that place."

If her aunt only knew. Her brief visit to McGuire's Irish Pub was one of the most frightening experiences of Marisa's life. Now she was stuck with trying to explain. "I had to find Sean. Sheriff Cameron wanted to see him."

"So that wicked Irishman is the reason for your indiscretion. You must put a stop to this terrible gossip, Marisa. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"Not exactly." Marisa knew precisely what her aunt was saying, and why. Carmen intended to stop Marisa from marrying -Sean.

"I have heard the rumors about you and Sean. I have come to make you tell me the truth, then I can set about to stop this slanderous gossip, once and for all." -Carmen had a stubborn streak a yard wide. She wouldn't be easily deterred. -

"Papa always said it was best to ignore gossip."

"For your papa's sake, I cannot do that." Carmen's determination was reinforced by a look of long-suffering acceptance. "Marisa, I know you don't want to hear what I have come to say, but I must . . ."

Marisa interrupted. "I don't need your advice. I'm old enough now to make my own decisions."

"Marisa, child, you're not making decisions, you're letting Sean make decisions for you. You don't know this man. He's a stranger." Carmen was using the same inflexible tone she always used to deter Tio Vic-tor.

"I do know him," Marisa insisted.

"Do you know how he makes his living?" Carmen asked, sarcasm sharpening her voice.

Marisa tossed her hair across her shoulders in a gesture of defiance. "He is a trader, a peddler, of sorts."

"He is a runner of contraband and a smuggler, and you know it!"

"I don't care!" Marisa was determined to stand up to her aunt.

"Do you care that he has a mistress?" The smugness in Carmen's voice cut like a knife. "He does, you know."

"That's not true," Marisa's words lacked force, and Carmen took full advantage of that uncertainty.

"Her name is Megan McGuire. She is a bar maid in her brother's pub. She's beautiful, Marisa, I've seen her."

Marisa wanted to ask when and where. She didn't dare. "You're making this up." Her heart sank to the

pit of her stomach as she remembered the blonde woman she had seen in McGuire's Pub. "You're saying this to make me change my mind about marrying Sean."

With unwavering obstinacy, Carmen retorted, "I would not lie to you about such a thing, and you know it."

Marisa argued with tenacity, "You would tell a lie to stop me from marrying Sean."

"You are the one who has been telling lies." Exasperation replaced the spitefulness in Carmen's voice. "Why did you tell Sheriff Cameron you were with Sean the morning your father was killed?"

Panic sharpened Marisa's inquiry. "Who told you that?"

"Slim told me." Scorn laced Carmen's every word. "Sheriff Cameron told Slim all about the meeting he had with you and that terrible Irishman."

"Sheriff Cameron had no right to tell anyone else what we said to him."

Carmen showed no signs of relenting. "He had every right to tell Slim. They are both lawmen."

"And what gave Slim the right to tell you?" Marisa's heart gave an uncomfortable lurch. "You're sleeping with Slim, and you want to tell me how to behave?"

Carmen had the decency to look embarrassed. "Don't try to change the subject. Why did you tell that terrible lie?"

"I did not lie!" Marisa knew that this falsehood was one she must defend at all costs.

"I was here that terrible morning." Carmen's eyes flashed with condemnation. "I know you didn't tell Sheriff Cameron the truth. For your dead father's sake, the sheriff must be told what actually happened."

Marisa pushed down a rising sense of panic. "Did you tell Slim that I lied?"

"Of course not. He would tell Bob, and Bob still . . ." Carmen's voice faded, then revived. "Never mind about that now. You are going to go to Sheriff Cameron, and you are going to tell him the truth!"

Marisa had to protect Sean, whatever the cost. He was her only hope for escaping an arranged marriage and saving Chico from being locked up in jail forever. "You're the one who doesn't remember what happened that morning, Tia, I remember perfectly." A smile played around her lips. "Oh yes, I remember."

Carmen wavered. "Are you saying you told the truth?"

Marisa asked with barbed malice, "Was I in bed when you awoke?"

- Carmen's hand flew to rest over her heart. "Madre de Dios! You didn't!" After a long pause, "You did!" A startling array of emotions move across her face - remembrance, disbelief, then disillusionment.

"I wanted Sean from the first moment I saw him." That was by far the biggest lie she had told to date. -- It was the one her aunt chose to believe without question.

"What kind of woman have you grown to be?"

"And I was with him that morning." Marisa looked boldly into her aunt's eyes, daring Carmen to dispute her words.

--"Have you no shame, no pride?"

Marisa knew that Carmen had never been too fond of her, but now she saw disrespect and disgust-- in

her aunt's face. "He's so beautiful," she countered lamely.

"How could you? In your own father's home, and with him sleeping in the next room?"

Marisa hung her head. "I couldn't help myself."

"In less than two weeks this man has corrupted you completely. Tears stood in Carmen's eyes. "I am glad your father didn't live to see this day."

Marisa's insides were a mass of uncertainty. She was weaving a web of monstrous lies. With each untruth she told, she became a little more entangled in her own silken snare of falsehoods.

A note of pleading slipped into Carmen's voice. "Marisa, Bob still wants to marry you. -If he can forgive your shameful behavior with Sean, he must love you very much."

Marisa asked, "Will he let Chico live with us?"

"Honestly, Marisa!" Carmen's foot began to beat the floor again. "He's willing to forgive your terrible behavior, how can you ask for more?"

"Will he?" Marisa demanded.

"--Chico is an idiot. Why do you insist on treating him like a member of your family?" Carmen's words fell like sharp blows. "Forget Chico, forget Sean, and marry Bob."

Marisa was outraged. "Chico is a part of my family. He's like a brother to me. I will not desert him."

"Does that mean you are going to marry Sean Flanagan?" Carmen's hostility beat at Marisa.

"I am, and don't try to stop me!" Marisa wanted Carmen out of her house, and the sooner the better.

Carmen taunted, "He runs contraband. He is an outlaw, a renegade!"

"I know," Marisa answered defiantly, "and I don't care!"

She was lying again. It broke her heart to think Sean lived on the wrong side of the law. "He has a mistress." Carmen's words cut like a knife. "Are you willing to share him with another woman, maybe many other women? He will always have other women."

"You don't know that." --Carmen's words struck fear in Marisa's heart. Maybe she was making a terrible mistake.

"I do know! He's an adventurer and a womanizer. Women love him, he has but to crook his finger, and . . ."

"Please, Tia," Please, stop it!" Marisa put her hands over her ears.

Carmen relented. "Mija, I don't want to hurt you, but you must face the truth."

"Please, no more." Marisa raised her hands, as if to ward off Carmen's injuring words. "I can't bear it."

With a sigh of acceptance, Carmen changed the subject. "I have one other thing to discuss with you. I must say this. Then, I promise, no more."

"Please," Marisa's eyes were huge and pleading, "I don't want to hear bad things about Sean."

"No more about Sean, it's about your papa. I owe it to Hector to make you aware of the choices you have. Will you listen?"

Carmen knew where Marisa was the most vulnerable. "When you put it that way, what choice do I have?"

"Do you know who spoke to me only yesterday about your hand in marriage?" Not waiting for

Marisa to reply, Carmen exulted, "None other than Baldomar Gomez."

Fear slipped in to mix with Marisa's frustration. "He doesn't want me. He wants that silver mine."

"Nonsense," Carmen scoffed, "There is no silver mine. That silly story was made up to lure unsuspecting people to this terrible place."

"The mine exists." Marisa spoke with conviction. "My grandfather, along with Chico's father and Baldomar's great uncle, were killed in a massacre at the mine site. Papa believed a fortune in silver was buried there."

With a wave of her hand, Carmen dismissed the entire idea. "If there was silver buried there, someone would have gone for it long ago."

There was no longer any reason to keep her terrible secret. Marisa shrugged. "No one knows where the mine is. C-omanches killed everyone in the expedition. Everyone, that is, except Chico."

Carmen's interest was piqued. "How do you know that?"

"Papa told me." If Carmen knew why Baldomar had proposed marriage to Marisa, maybe she would ignore his request. "Chico was fourteen-years-old when he went on that expedition. Papa told me many times how one night he rode into our yard crying out that Indians were chasing him."

Carmen's face lit up with curiosity. "No one knows where the mine is?"

"Papa thought the Gomezes had a map. They were convinced that Papa had the title to the mine." -That mine, or to be more exact, the search for it, had given birth to a bloody vendetta that made enemies of friends and destroyed all it touched. That lingering dispute, and the greed for silver, had finally claimed her father's life. "It's over now, they are all dead."

"That explains why Hector lied to Sean about the reason for the fight between Juan and Victor." -

"It also explains why Baldomar asked for my hand in marriage." Marisa drove her point home. "He thinks I have the title to the silver mine."

"Do you," Carmen was caught up in the spell of hidden treasure. "have the title, Marisa?"

"No!" Marisa answered, "I do not!"

"You may be mistaken about Baldomar's reasons for wanting to marry you." Carmen offered hopefully.

"I will not marry Baldomar or Bob." Marisa declared, "I am going to marry Sean the day after tomorrow."

A look of defeat fell across Carmen's face. "That beautiful Irishman has you under his spell. Ay pobrecita. El te ropera tu corazon-! He will break your heart!"

Almost, Marisa confided in her aunt. "It's not going to be that way . . ." She stopped. If she told Carmen the truth about her arrangement with Sean, her web of lies would begin to unravel, and that would never do.

"The day will come when you will realize the truth of my words." Carmen wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. "Mark my words," She spoke, as she often did in times of deep emotion, in Spanish. "El te ropera tu corazon."

Long after Carmen had closed the door, her words rang in Marisa's ears, "He will break your heart, he will break your heart, he will break your heart . . ."

Chapter Eleven

Sean stood in the doorway, tall, arrogant, and incredibly handsome. Pushing his hat back with one hand, he declared, "I'm here to discuss our marriage."

Marisa had answered the door expecting to see Carmen on the other side. She had not thought that Sean would- return without some coercion on her part. "You want to talk about our wedding?" Hope sparked.

"I don't care about the wedding. -This is about the marriage." He leaned against the door frame and narrowed his eyes.-- "I want us to come to some understanding before we say our vows."

He was so devastatingly masculine and so sure of himself and his place in the world-. Marisa closed her eyes against a sudden onrush of tears. "What's so important that it had to be said now?" She was so lost in her own thoughts that she failed to invite him into the house before turning to walk away.

"Are you going to leave me out here?" His lips curled into a sardonic smile. "Or do I get asked inside?"

"I'm sorry." Retracing her steps, she pulled the door open and motioned for him to enter the house.

He sat on the couch and tossed his hat in the chair next to him. "We have to talk."

"Of course we do." Marisa had no idea what he wanted to talk about, but she was not about to admit that to the grim faced man across from her.

"I keep asking myself how I got roped into this." Sean stretched his legs out in front of him and studied the toes of his boots.

Marisa was suddenly shy and uncertain. "You weren't 'roped in'. This arrangement will help both of us."

Raising one dark eyebrow, Sean echoed, "Both of us?"

"Everyone in Bexar will think you are a business-man, instead of an outlaw. What the people of Bexar think is important." Marisa was confident she had made a significant point in her favor.

Sean gave her a long, searching look. "Is that right? Everyone in the settlement of Bexar thinks I seduced you."

"Oh." Marisa's face fell. There seemed to be no answer to that statement. She clamped her lips together and waited for Sean to tell her why he had come here.

"That makes me the seducer, the spoiler. Hector trusted me, took me into his home. I repaid him by seducing his daughter while his enemies took his life." His eyes accused her. "That's what everyone thinks."

"Things seem to have gotten a little out of hand."

He was angry, but from his point of view, he had every right to be. "I would say so, yes." He was studying her quiet little figure with a puzzled expression on his handsome face. "How much of this plot did you purposely hatch, and how much just happened by chance--?"

"I don't know." She hadn't set out to trap him, or had she?

"I keep wondering what you will do next."

"I don't know." This time the words came out in a raspy little whisper.

"Do you ever think before you act?" His tongue was heavy with sarcasm. "Or is everything you do dict-

ated by some im-pulse of the moment?"

"I . . ." An unwelcome blush stained her cheeks.

His lips twisted into a sneer. "Don't tell me you don't know!"

Marisa dropped her gaze to the pulse that beat at the base of his throat. Was he annoyed or amused? "I won't," she quipped, "but I don't."

"You do know we are going to be married in the morning." Sean stood to his feet and ran a restless hand through his red curls. "It seems you've left me no choice." He was being rude and a little brutal, but honest.

It was that honesty that made Marisa question the wisdom of such a cold-blooded alliance. "Maybe we should call the wedding off." She would have to think of some other way to save herself and Chico.-

"No. We can't. You've made sure of that."

Marisa was set to argue. Then she remembered Chico, and how helpless he was, and what was apt to happen to him if she let this man get away. "Then we will treat it like any other busi-ness ar-range-ment." She found the courage to lift her eyes and look into his face.

"I want more than some vague arrange-ment. I want you to understand that I am not a monk - "

Annoyance put a snap in Marisa's voice. -"I never thought you were." He was the least likely candidate for celibacy she had ever known.

"I don't want you to expect me to live like one just because you and I go through some sham of a ceremony." Pausing, he studied her with guarded interest.-

"I know what kind of man you are." She feigned indif-fer-ence with the shrug of one slim shoulder. "And I don't expect a wedding ceremony to change you."

Sean made long strid-es across the sod floor, then spun into the hard ground, and turned-. "I want you to understand that it's nothing personal. That's just the way I am."

Marisa was swamped with a sudden sense of defeat and de-spair. She had not expected him to be this open or this honest. Determined not to let him see she was hurt by that honesty, she asked flip-pantly, "Why don't you come to the point?"

"So you want me to spell it out for you," he said with sudden harshness, then his voice softened. "All right, here it is: Don't expect any kind of fidelity from me after we're married. I will be discreet. I'm not unfeeling or deceitful, regardless of what you may have heard to the contrary. I will keep my end of the bargain I made with your father. I'll take care of you and the business, but my private life will be my own."

He was marrying her because of a promise he had made to a dead man. She was angry with herself for letting that knowledge cut so deeply. She did have to give him credit for being man enough to keep his word to her father and honest enough to let her know what to expect. She should have let it go at that. Pride wouldn't let her. "I was afraid you were going to be unreason-able." Her brown eyes looked directly into his green ones. "Should we sign a pact or an agreement?"

"-You agree?" The scar along his jaw line stood out in stark relief against the smoothness of his cheek and neck. "You're not disturbed or upset with such an arrangement?"

She was, but she wasn't about to let him know that. "Why should I be?" Her prim tone so at variance with her knowing words made them sound all the more sincere. "And I agree too that we should be dis-cre-et."

"We?" One dark eyebrow climbed toward Sean's hairline. Marisa managed an amused little laugh. "Surely, you don't think I'm going to agree to let you sleep with any one who catches your fancy if you don't grant me the same privilege."

His incredulous look was a balm to her wounded pride. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I want to have the same privileges you have. That seems only fair, don't you think?" - She injected her words with a little fang of venom.

The dismay in his eyes, the disbelief in his voice, soothed her wounded spirit. "What the hell are you trying to tell me?"

"That I'm not a nun. I don't live a life of celibacy either." The look of abject dismay that distorted his handsome features caused Marisa to laugh aloud. "You look surprised. You shouldn't be."

"You little . . ." his eyes narrowed, then widened as surprise faded to an expression of puzzlement that, in turn, bent into an appearance of dawning knowledge. "Do you think I can't figure out what you are trying to do?"

He thought she was lying, but a look buried deep in the flashing green of his eyes told her that he wasn't quite sure. Echoing words she had once heard Carmen say, Marisa asserted, "Women have needs too, you know." Tilting her nose upward, she added, "I want," Sitting up, she squared her shoulders "No, I demand- equal privileges."

"Don't try it." Amusement was showing in his face now. "I know what a conniving little witch you are. In less than two weeks I have watched you manipulate your father unmercifully, infuriate Bob Beckett until he was a madman, drive your aunt to total distraction, start a riot in McGuire's bar, and confound a hard-nosed old bastard like Marcus Cameron." He smiled. The smile broke into a wide grin, the grin exploded into an uproarious belly laugh.

"What's so funny?" The last thing she had expected was that he would laugh at her.

"You are," he answered between loud guffaws. Struggling to control his laughter, he came to stand directly over her. "Somebody needs to teach you a lesson, little girl, and I am just the man who can do it."

He fell onto the couch and pulled her down beside him, then tilted her chin upward with his hand and grinned wickedly into her eyes. "Tell me, little girl, how many men have you slept with?"

Outrage and humiliation mixed inside her. She clamped down on the emotions that could be her defeat. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Damn you, Marisa-" Jumping to his feet, Sean strode restlessly across the room. "You're acting like some cheap slut."

"I thought you liked cheap sluts," she shot back, before caution could advise discretion.

Throwing both hands into the air, he shouted, "You are the most aggravating female it has ever been my misfortune to know."

"And you've known so many," She shot back vehemently. "But your private life is your affair. This is a business agreement, and I want you to know what you can expect from me. I want the same privileges you're demanding." His startled expression goaded her on. "I do believe I am upsetting you." -

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "I am not upset, surprised maybe, but not upset."

Folding her arms across her chest, she eyed him with disdain. "I'm waiting for an answer."

"All right, I'll play your little game. If it soothes your pride, equal privileges."

A terrible pain surged through Marisa making it difficult for her to breathe. "Good." It was the only word she could force through her aching throat.

Sean's face relaxed into a smile. "Now that we have that bit of business settled, show me where I can put my belongings. Since I am going to be living here, maybe we'd better mark off our territories. You can stay out of my hair, and I don't intend to bother you." He headed for the door.

She called after him, "I hope you won't be constantly underfoot. When I have a gentleman caller, I don't like to be disturbed."

Sean stopped and turned to face her. "You know exactly how to get under my skin, and that's one of your better qualities." He made an impatient little gesture with his hands. "I called your bluff. You can stop with the lies about your gentlemen callers."

A dark calm settled over Marisa. He was right, of course, she was bluffing. She didn't have one gentleman caller to her name, and she suspected Sean knew as much. "You can have Papa's room."

"I brought my saddle bags." His hand was on the door knob. "I'll put my horse in the barn."

"You're going to stay here tonight?" Her voice rose in surprise. "You can't do that. We're not married yet. What will people say?"

"My God, Marisa, you have everyone in Bexar thinking I have seduced you, ravished you, completely corrupted you. What possible difference could it make now if I sleep here to-night?"

Her eyes darkened from that old familiar swell of pain. Tia Carmen was right, this man would break her heart. She was a fool to think she could carry out her end of this absurd bargain. "I don't guess it will matter that much . . ." She swallowed her hurt. "The stain on the floor is Papa's blood. -Chico and I tried to scrub it out, but it refused to go away."

Sean's hand tightened on the door knob. "I'm sorry I was so blunt." His voice was almost tender.

Marisa huddled in the horsehair chair. "You were only being honest."

"Was I?"

"Weren't you?"

- "I don't know. I'm trying to be. Sometimes I think I'm lying to myself." As he stepped through the entrance way, he muttered under his breath, "Not again. Don't let it happen again."--

Marisa followed Sean onto the stoop and watched as he led his horse toward the barn. Leaning against a post, she savored the beauty of a late April sunset. Fingers of light splayed through a thin layer of clouds tinting them a rosy pink and rimming them with pure gold--.

Her interlude of peace was interrupted by the sound of hoof beats echoing across the countryside. Someone was riding down the river road. Marisa was suddenly glad Sean had decided to stay here tonight.

The hoof beats became louder, heralding the arrival of a tall, dark man astride a black stallion. As he rode into the clearing, - Marisa's heart jumped into her throat. The dark rider was Baldo-mar Gomez!

His silver spurs jangled as he dismounted. A pair of pistols hung from the silver studded belt that encircled his waist. -Walking as a man with a purpose, he began to stride toward the stoop.-

"Señor Gomez." A cold shiver danced down Marisa's back bone. "It has been some time since I have seen you."

"Marisa, my dear child, I hope I did not presume too much coming here." The slightest trace of a

Spanish accent charged his words with mysterious resolve.

He had assumed too much. He knew that. Custom and convention dictated that he shouldn't have come here at all without an invitation. That invitation should have come from Carmen, and he should have brought her with him. Maybe all the gossip about Sean and Marisa had led Baldomar to believe that he no longer had to follow the dictates of etiquette, or even common decency.

He took Marisa's hand in his and smiled. "We are friends, Mari-sa. Please, call me Bal-domar."

Marisa's blood turned to ice as she remembered the many times her father had called Baldomar a ruthless man. "This is a surprise. Why are you here?"

"I have just come from your aunt's home." His brooding eyes fastened themselves on Marisa's face. "She tells me you refused my offer of marriage."

Instinct, coupled with an innate knowledge of the male ego, told Marisa that she must be oh so cautious. "I had promised to marry Señor Flanagan before Tia Carmen told me of your gracious proposal." Her careful words should take the sting of rejection out of her refusal.

A frown slashed across Baldomar's face. "Promises are made to be broken. Don't you agree?"

"No. I don't."

"If you will invite me inside, we can discuss our differences."

What choice did she have? Marisa pushed the door open, then stood back. "Would you like to come inside?"

Nodding, Baldomar went inside, and Marisa followed him.

Shadows had overrun the small parlor. Extending her hand toward the rawhide chair, she asked, "Would you care to sit down?"

Baldomar removed his hat, then sank heavily into the old chair. "Gracias."

Perching on the edge of the horsehair couch, Marisa asked, "How is your mother?" Her eyes fastened on the back door. Where was Sean?

"She is well." Baldomar looked around the little room. "She sends her regards and her condolences."

A new fear grabbed Marisa. What if Sean had decided not to stay after all? Chico had already set out on his nocturnal wanderings. He wouldn't be back for hours. She could put Baldomar off just so long before he said what he had come to say, and Marisa knew, even before he spoke, she didn't want to hear it. "And your sisters?" What if Sean had decided to go to Irish flats for the night? "How are your sisters?"

"They are well, also. They send their sympathy."

An empty silence hung in the room. Marisa stared down at her hands folded in her lap and prayed for Sean to return.

Baldomar's smooth voice slipped out into the rigid quiet. "I have come to ask you to reconsider my proposal of marriage."

Fear gave a sharp edge to Marisa's reply. "I thought you understood . . ."

The creak of the back door was the most welcome sound Marisa had ever heard. She looked up to see Sean coming inside. His saddle bags were slung over his shoulder. He carried a lantern in his hand.

Stopping, he held the lantern above his head. Not the slightest hint of surprise showed in his stony face. Setting the lantern on a low table, he let his hand drop to the knife on his belt. "A gentleman cal-

ler, Marisa?"

Her words seemed to splinter in her throat. "This is Baldomar Gomez."

Sean's hand rested on the hilt of his knife. "Are you looking for me?" His tone, flat and uncompromising, brought to Marisa's mind the episode with Ringo in McGuire's bar. Baldomar was not Ringo, she hoped Sean realized that.

Baldomar stood to his feet and extended his hand. "Señor Flanagan, I believe. I have not had the pleasure of meeting you."

The hair on the back of Marisa's neck rose. "Papa and Baldomar were friends." She prayed she wouldn't be struck dead for telling such a shameless lie.

Sean pressed Baldomar's hand into the flesh of his bear-like paw. "Mr. Gomez."

White teeth flashing in an arrogant smile, Baldomar shook Sean's hand vigorously. "I came to call on Marisa. I wished to offer my condolences."

Her knees had turned to water. Marisa dropped onto the couch before her legs gave way under her weight.

Baldomar sat down beside her and let his long, slim fingers waltz up the length of her arm. "I have known Marisa since she was a child. She is very dear to me."

He was trying to make Sean angry. Marisa couldn't let that happen. Her cool gaze met Sean's smoldering eyes as she repeated inanely, "Baldomar was Papa's friend."

Sean's vulgar stare told her that he didn't believe a word she was saying. "So you told me, twice."

Tension rose and crackled in the tiny, darkening room. Marisa extended her hand toward the rawhide chair. "Would you like to sit down?"

Sean eased down into the chair. His hand was still on his knife. "Maybe I underestimated you, little girl." His piercing glance stabbed all the way to her rapidly beating heart.

Baldomar's smooth voice contrasted strangely with Sean's burly brogue, "I did not expect you would be here until tomorrow."

"I believe that." Sean leaned back in the rawhide chair and waited for words that neither Baldomar nor Marisa felt compelled to speak.

A spur of silence goaded the hushed, ominous tension that filled the room.

At last, Sean broke the stillness. "Does someone want to tell me what is going on here?"

Marisa moistened her lips and opened her mouth, but nothing came out, not a word, not a sound. She was literally scared speechless.

Baldomar laid his arm across the back of the couch, barely brushing Marisa's shoulder. "Hijita de mia corazon, the explanation should be mine to make."

Marisa shrugged one shoulder, trying to shake Baldomar's fingers away. She thought her face might break from the effort to smile.

"Taking advantage of your equal privileges, Marisa?" Sean's eyes flicked over Baldomar. "I'm waiting."

"I called to express my sympathy and condolences to Señorita Perez. Hector was a dear friend."

"So everybody keeps telling me." Sean's jaw tightened.

"But, now, I must go." Baldomar pushed his hat down on his head. "Buenos noches, amigos." A nervous twitch along his jaw line was the only be-traying sign of some inner turmoil.

The air in the room was fractured with un-spoken hos-tili-ty.

Marisa gave Sean a piercing sidelong glance as she fol-lowed Bal-domar toward the door. "Thank you for call-ing."

Baldomar's voice speaking fluent, flow-ing Span-ish, drifted out into the dimness of the little parlor.

"Adios pues hasta la vista. Mande comco gueste, y usted lo pase bein."

"Adios," Marisa instinctively answered Span-ish with Spanish.

Baldomar dropped a cold kiss on Marisa's cheek. "Y Marisa, no hay peor cuna que la del mismo palo."

Marisa watched until Baldomar's spirited stallion rounded a bend in the road and disappeared into the descend-ing night. Then she closed the door and stepped back into the hostile silence of the parlor.

Chapter Twelve

Marisa turned to face the tall man who slumped in the rawhide chair. "It's not wise to be rude to a man like Baldomar Gomez-. You can believe me when I tell you that he neither forgives nor forgets."

Sean turned his head to one side and studied her with a thoughtful expression on his face. "I want to believe you, I do. But experience has taught me that nothing is more seductive than thinking what we want to believe is true.-"

She had no idea what he was talking about. To cover her ignorance and appease her nagging conscience, she pretended contempt. "Who are you to question my honesty?"

"You've yet to tell me the truth about anything." Exasperation thickened his brogue. "What did your caller say to you in Spanish?"

Marisa tried to recall-. Her long stand-ing fear of Baldomar blanked out much of what he had said. "I don't remember.--"

Light from the flickering lantern cast eerie shadows across Sean's grim face. "Tell me what he said."

With a calm that belied the fear that still kicked in her stomach, Marisa replied, "It was nothing that concerns you. It was personal."-

"Marisa." That flat deadly tone slid through the humid air like a knife through soft butter.

Fear of another kind honed her memory to a fine point. At least she knew what to expect from Baldomar. All she knew about Sean Flanagan was that he was an outlaw and a renegade. She had no idea what he was capable of doing if she pushed him too far. "He said goodbye, until we meet again, and some-thing about I had been kind to him. Then he said, 'The worst enemy is he who was once a friend'." Those words left her cold. "It's an old Spanish proverb."

"Why would he say something like that?" Sean's hands gripped the arms of his chair. Obviously he was ex-ercising a massive amount of self control to keep his anger under control.

"How should I know?" Marisa shrugged one slim shoulder. "I can translate his words, but I can't read his mind."

Sean's hands relaxed on the chair arm-. "Tell me about Baldomar." An unspoken threat hung in his quiet request.

How could she explain a man like Baldomar Gomez? "Baldomar is a strange man, but he was not Papa's frien-d. They argued over the silver mine all the time. They weren't exactly enemies either." Marisa closed the door and dropped the bar into place.

"Are you afraid of Baldomar Gomez?" The casual note that infused itself into Sean's inquiry offered assurance and invited confidence. "You don't have to be. I can protect you."

Almost, she let her guard down and gave an honest answer. Almost - then a warning bell sounded inside her head. She couldn't afford to tell Sean something that would frighten him away, and knowing just how dangerous Baldomar Gomez was might do just that. "Why should I be afraid of Baldomar? He's. . ." Maybe she should warn Sean that he could be in some danger. "Ba-ldomar is a very determined man." Papa had often called him ruth-less."

Sean studied her with open distrust. "I think you had better tell me the real reason Baldomar came here to-nigh-t."

Marisa's brow- knit-ted into a frown. "He told you why he was here. He wanted to offer his

condolences. It was a social call."

"What kind of fool do you take me for? If this had been a social call he would have brought Carmen and come in the afternoon. No man calls on a single girl after dark and alone for social reasons."

"Woman," Marisa corrected, "and he told you his reason for being here."

In that flat, menacing monotone, Sean replied, "He lied."

"You said if I let you stay here you wouldn't bother my gentleman callers." Marisa looked him straight in the eye. "Maybe you are the one who is a liar."

His voice was soft and lethal. "Little girl, you are asking for trouble." That wicked scar stood out in vivid contrast against his flushed skin. "Nobody calls me a liar and goes unchallenged."

"Then let's just say that the subject of Baldomar Gomez is closed," Marisa declared with much more bravado than she felt.

Sean was looking at her with a strange and discerning gleam in his eyes. "Whatever made me think you were an innocent child?"

"Nor do I wish to discuss my innocence or lack of it. We made a pact. You stay out of my affairs, and I stay out of yours." That, Marisa decided, should settle this argument, once and for all.

"Are you trying to make me angry?" Sean's voice rose and filled the tiny room.

She was trying to make him jealous. She wasn't succeeding. Anger was better than unconcern. "I want you to keep your word."

"I always keep my word."

"Then prove it by staying the hell out of my business."

Sean's expression changed from puzzled to enlightened. "Saints preserve us! How could I have been so wrong about you?" Narrowing his eyes to mere slits, he demanded, "Is Baldomar Gomez your lover?"

Marisa waltzed gracefully across the room, her head held high, her bearing defiant. With her back to him, she looked over her shoulder, mockery dancing in her dark eyes. "What Baldomar Gomez is to me is not your concern." She was flirting with danger, and she knew it, but he had asked for this will all his talk of sham ceremonies and arranged marriages and how his personal life was his own.

Sean came across the small space between them, grabbed her shoulders, and swung her around to face him. "Answer me!" His grip tightened. "I have to know." Blunt fingers dug into the soft flesh of her shoulders. "Tell me the truth this time. Can't you see I'm trying to protect you?"

Her head snapped back as she tried to push away from him. "Protect me from what?"---

His grip loosened. "I promised Hector I wouldn't let a Gomez harm you. That includes Baldomar."

A new revelation dawned. Sean wouldn't leave so long as he believed Baldomar was a threat to Marisa. The lie slid from her lips with appalling ease. "He came here to make sure I wasn't going to succumb to your charms." Maybe Sean would be more amenable to marriage if he had a little competition. "He warned me, in Spanish, that if I did, he would kill us both."

Sean dropped his hands and whistled under his breath. "So he is your accomplice in this little scheme."

His harsh accusation hit on Marisa's sagging pride. Less than an hour ago he had thought she couldn't attract a man. He had been so sure of himself, talking about his exploits, - all the while assuming she was an innocent little child. "Baldomar is madly in love with me." She asserted in a tone that begged belief. "And I am attracted to him. We could never tell anyone because of the feud between our

families."

Sean paled under his ruddy complexion. "How long has this been going on?"

Marisa decided to give this arrogant Irish outlaw a dose of his own medicine. "Several months."

"I don't believe you."

Marisa flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Baldomar adores me." Once again she searched for words to bolster her claim, and once again word her aunt had once spoken came to her mind. "He can't keep his hands off me. Some-times his lust overrides his good sense." She stilled the words. She knew she mustn't over-state her claim.

"Did Hector know about this affair?"

Inside Marisa was a quivering mass anxiety--, but she projected an outward calm. "No. That's not the sort of thing I would ever have told Papa."

Shaking his head from side to side, he stared at her in disbelief. "You haven't answered my question. Why did Baldomar come here tonight?"

Marisa was caught up in her own fanta-sy. She envisi-on-ed Sean being jealous enough to promise he'd never leave her, not because of some vow he'd made her father, but because he wanted to be here, by her side, always.- It was such a lovely illu-sion. "He wanted to be with me tonight. And Baldo-mar wanted me to assure him that you had agreed that our mar-riage would be in name only. He's a very jeal-ous man."

Sean threw his head back and laughed, a nasty, belit-ting sound. "And to think I never once guessed-. Did Baldomar help you plan this little scheme to trick me into marrying you?" He so-bered suddenly. "Is this a plot to gain control of my half of the store, or does it have something to do with that lost silver mine?" Again that contemptuous laugh rippled from his lips. "Will I never learn?"

Marisa ---swal-lowed the apprehension that choked in her throat. She had told so many lies she knew she should stop this deceit, here and now, but her wounded pride wouldn't let her. "I have to make sure I hold onto my half of the store. Marry-ing you is the only way I can do that." She let a reminiscing smile play across her lips. "I assured Baldomar that he had nothing to fear. I told him that I found the idea of making love to you repul-sive."

That struck a nerve. Sean's sneer died in his throat. "There's nothing innocent or childlike about you." Raking his eyes over her in a scath-ing, in-solent stare, he sneered-, "I'm the one who needs protecting."

That knowing look spoke volumes. She had pushed this man to his limit. Was revenge worth the chance of shoving him over the brink? Good judgment battled with wounded pride. After no small contest, pride prevailed. "You have nothing to fear from me.-" Her honey-ed tone covered a rising uneasiness. "You and I have a business arrangement, nothing more."

"So all along you were using me." Such short, crude words! They cracked in the silent room like a whip.

Marisa's tone was scornful. "You're the one who said, 'Don't expect fidelity.'"

Fury etched itself into every line of his handsome face. Clenching his fist, he raised one arm.

For one terrible, terrifying moment, Marisa thought he might strike her. Stepping back, she- brought her hands up to cover her face.

A look of inordinate pain creased the lines in Sean's face as he pulled his arm back down to his side. -"I

thought you were an innocent little girl." His eyes were pools of green misery. "So I have been a fool, again."

Marisa was shaking inside, but outwardly she remained calm and collected. "You and I made a deal. You have to live up to your part of the bargain."

Sean's eyes slowly moved down her body, lingering for a long time on her breasts. "I thought no woman would ever make a fool of me again." The lines around his mouth twisted into a smirk. She had struck some primal, dormant chord in this man's soul. He was no longer angry; some other emotion had taken him. And she was no longer afraid, she felt almost triumphant. The sweet savor of revenge flowed through her like a heady wine--.

Once again, Sean declared, "After all these years, it's happened again." He could have been chiding him-self for some trif-ling over-sight.

Marisa placed her hand over her mouth and yawned. "I'm going to bed." She tried to step around him.

He stopped her by fastening a strong arm around her waist. "I believed every word you said." His hurt, disbelieving -tone was music to her ears. -"I almost let a woman make a fool of me again. I should have known the first time I saw you that you were no different from all the rest. But that little girl face and those sinfully innocent eyes fooled me." A seductive laugh rose from his throat. "You should be punished for what you've done."

A ripple of icy shivers scur-ried down Marisa's spine, but she held onto her control. "If you hurt me," She scoffed, "Baldomar will kill you!"

"Hurting you is the farthest thing from my mind." Pulling her nearer, Sean dropped a soft feathery kiss on her flushed cheek. "I'm making you an offer. Why settle for second best when you can have me?"

Such arrogance! Marisa was at once angry and intrigued. "No thank you." An enticing warmth moved in around her bruised heart.- She knew she should move from his embrace, she couldn't force her body to obey her mind's command. "I'm not interested." Her eyes were glued on the tiny pulse that beat- at the base of his throa-t. "Let me go, please."

Dropping his arms, Sean stepped back. "If that's what you want." That provocative smile still played around his lips.

Marisa swallowed, "It is." With a toss of her head, added, "You're not irresistible, you know, even though you think you are."

"But you are." His silken words flowed like honey. "Deceitfully, hopelessly, seductively, irresistible." His blunt fingers touching her lips sent her pulses racing. "I can pleasure you in ways your Mexican lover can't even imagine."

Those words struck fear and wonder in her heart as she realized this was what she wanted with every fiber of her being. "Will you? Can you?"

"Oh, yes." Sean tugged at the buttons adorning the neck of her dress. "I can and I will. We begin by ridding ourselves of so many clothes."

Overcome by some strange and mesmerizing emotion, Marisa closed her eyes. "Yes, please."

His soft command was more intimate than a caress. "Open your eyes, Marisa."

She obeyed as a languorous feeling of joy -oblit-erated her last token attempt to hold onto sanity-.

Dragging his lips across the soft whiteness of her throat, Sean whispered softly, "And to think I once believed you were an innocent child." He was still struggling with buttons. "I'm not a patient man."

Drawing his knife from his scabbard, he hooked it in the neck of her dress. "May I?"

-Marisa's throat constricted. -A strange little choking sound gur-gled up and lodged there. "Yes."

He began to slice slowly downward. She felt the cold steel of the blade brush erotically against her soft skin. It touched her throat, moved with dancing lightness to the valley between her breasts, feathered softly across her navel. A sudden thrust and the cool metal cut all the way to the hem of her dress.

Sean was still smiling that sensuous, seductive, smile as he sheathed the knife and turned his passion-laden green eyes on her face. "Take it off, Darlin'."

The humid quietness in the room erupted and crackled, then exploded with an electrified tension.

Tingling sensations raced along Marisa's spine and danced out into her arms and legs ending at her finger-tips, her toes. She was operating now on pure instinct and rising passion. She closed her eyes, causing her long lashes to fan out and sweep across her flushed cheeks. Somewhere from deep within her she found the strength to utter one word. "Yes!"

One step and his body was almost touching hers. Tangling his hand in the dark cloud of her hair, Sean gently pulled her head upward. "Open your eyes, darlin'. You have to see to learn."

He was inviting her to explore with him unknown regions of ecstasy. Reality faded until there was no world except that promised universe of erotic splendor. Her languid eyelids lifted.

Threading both hands through her long, luxuriant hair, Sean gazed into the depths of her passion-glazed eyes. "Take it off, Marisa." Releasing her, he stepped back and waited.

Her body shook with desire and anticipation. Lifting one shaking hand to the ripped neck of her dress, she slid the severed garment over her shoulder. It fell away, revealing one tawny, perfectly formed breast.

She slid her arms from the sleeves. The garment fell backward exposing the smooth ivory of her shoulder. Her eyes never left his face as she pushed the dress down, then gave her body a little twist.

Her breath was coming in short raspy gasps. Her breasts swayed erotically. The severed dress fell to the floor and pooled around her feet. -She stood before him, clad only in a pair of gauzy, raggedly ripped pantelletes.

Sean's eyes misted over as he stared at the vision of sensual loveliness that stood before him. "My God!" His breath rattled in his throat.

With one yank of his fingers, he pulled the pantelletes off. They slid away like cobwebs and twisted into nothingness in his hands.

His soft brogue laced with desire, penetrated through the foggy haze that clouded her mind. "For this I can be a fool twice over. But now I know what the price of such folly will be."

His bitter words jerked her back toward reality. "It's not - Please don't think. . . The words fragmented and fell apart in her mouth as fear threatened to cast out desire.

Sean was beyond hearing a word she said. "Once again I let down my guard. I should have known better."

"You don't understand!" Marisa's voice shimmered with the lingering remnants of passion.

Heedless of her protest, he went on. It impinged on Marisa's scrambled senses that he was talking to himself.

"It won't happen again,-" he whispered, oh so softly. "Never again." The scar along his jaw bleach-ed white and stood out against the flush that crawled along his strong cheek bones. "This time I do the taking."

"Have I done something wrong? Tell me please."

He laughed deep in his throat. "---No. Everything is perfect.-"

Chapter Thirteen

In the lantern's flickering light, Marisa's skin glowed like polished ivory. Her eyes, large and luminous, looked up from beneath long sooty lashes. She resembled an eroti-cally chaste child, at once wanton and pure.

Sean ran his knuckles along one side of her pale cheek. "The face of an angel. I almost believed. It's those love-ly, lying eyes. A man could drown in them."

"Ple-ase, that's not so." The plea was a bare whisper. Marisa was beyond pride now. She had to make him understand. "I can explain."

"That's not necessary." His fingers traced the outline of her lips, then moved to shape the contour of her face. "I've learned my lesson, now you can learn yours."

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"Hurt you?" He chuckled, as if he found that question amusing. "I would never do that. I'm not going to do anything that you don't want me to do, that you won't beg me to do."

His slow languid movements mesmerized her. She was so caught up in his dark en-chantment that she could neither move nor speak.

He shed his shirt and let it fall to the floor. "I can torture you in a most exquisite manner, and you will beg me to do it again and again." -His chest muscles rip-pled majesti-cally as he bent to remove his boots then slid his buckskin britches down over his hips. "Sweet ecstasy, Marisa, that is what I offer, and you won't be able to refuse. You will cry for me, beg me to take you."

Marisa's eyes trav-eled from his face to his massive chest, then dropped to his trim waist, and came to rest, at last, on the throbbing evidence of his arousal. Fear was washed away in a flood tide of desire. Her heart jolted, her pulse pounded in her ears.

"I can make you forget that your Mexican lover ever existed." He stood before her, naked and majestic. "I can touch you in places he has not yet found."

-She should hate what he was doing to her. He didn't want to make love to her, he wanted to shame her. This was his way of punish-ing her. Sanity was swept away on a recurring burst of passion.

Pulling her into his arms, he trailed soft, feathery kisses across her face and down her throat, all the while caressing her neck and shoul-ders with his knowing hands. The heat from his body per-meated every fiber of her being. She felt his hardness pressing against her, demand-ing, craving to possess.

His voice was a low, throbbing groan. "You're beauti-ful, Marisa," his breath an erotic gasp, "God, you are beauti-ful."

A soft, feral sound gurgled in her throat and died there. Tremors of desire jolted through her. Melting like warm butter into his em-brace, she surrendered to his passionate assault.

He moved his knowing, experienced hands down her back and cupped them under her small but-tocks, pushing her even nearer his hard body. His caresses were driv-ing her wild - mad, with desire. The sweet fire that ran rampant through her tor-tured body was consuming her.

Dropping his hands to his sides, Sean pushed her from him. "Tell me to stop and I will."

A last remnant of reason told her she should. He had done this with too many women too many times before. Marisa closed her eyes as heat fanned out across the ivory of her cheeks. "I don't want you to stop."

With a sigh he drew her back into his arms. His caresses were sweet and gentle. His brogue flowed like honey. "I want inside you, Marisa." Spinning words that were erotic, sensual, unrelenting. She was trapped in a web of tormenting desire. "I'm going to get so deep inside you that you will forget any other man ever existed."

"Please," she begged, not knowing what it was she was pleading for so desperately.

"Tell me that's what you want, Marisa. Tell me you want to feel me -inside you."

Every fiber of her being beat with throbbing sensuality. She was consumed by sweet, devouring fire. It burned away the last lingering remnant of resistance. A low moan slipped from her slack mouth.

"You're moaning for me now, little girl." His brogue brushed erotically against her raw passion as his mouth followed his hands in an amorous exploration.

Her knees buckled. Her body surrendered to his seductive onslaught. He led, she followed, into the secret, primal world of primitive passion.

Another low, helpless moan escaped through her open mouth.

He growled, "You're moaning for me, darling, but I want you to cry for me, scream for me, beg for me, and you will! You will!"

Slipping his hand under her chin, he forced her face upward, then brought his mouth down on hers with a savage expertise that left her breathless. He plundered her mouth with his tongue, shoving his way inside, to propel wave after wave of savage, seductive, thrusts through her lips. They hacked away, until mind was severed from body, and she was left clinging and helpless.

He swept her into his arms and strode toward her bedroom.

She laid her head on his shoulder as she succumbed completely to the age-old litany of elemental passion that chanted wildly through her blood.

With one swift swing of his mighty leg, he kicked the door. It flew from its hinges and fell to one side. Never breaking his stride, he laid her on the bed and eased himself down beside her.

"You are mine now, little girl. It will never be the same with anyone else again."

She rolled her head around on the pillow. "Please,

please . . . " She held up her arms in a seductive invitation as old as womankind.

His hands moved to her taut breasts. His fingers laced around her hard nipples.

A soft sob broke from her lips. "I'm dying."

Lowering his face to the ivory valley between her breasts, he traced burning kisses around her fullness. "It's only a little death." His tongue licked the full nipples.

A low cry was torn from her aching throat. "Help me."

He was exacting his revenge slowly and with practiced precision. It was a deliberate chastisement that stripped her of all will, all sanity, all reason, and pushed her searing passion past the limits of endurance.

Her body became one pulsating, aching firebrand of desire. She was a mindless entity with one aim, one goal, the need to find a release from the all-consuming frenzy that mounted with each tender touch, each jarring kiss, each burning caress. She arched her body toward him.

One skilled hand steadied her hips as the other found that velvet spot between her legs. His fingers began to massage gently.

Her shriek ripped the still night air. "I can't . . . I want . . . Oh, please!"

He spoke raw, erotic words that stroked her emotions as surely as his accomplished hands were stroking her tormented body. His words echoed her cries like a victory chant. "Ah, yes, scream for me little girl! Cry for me!"

Her body thrashed about as her mind abandoned her. She shrieked her tormented need into the still room. "I need . . . I want . . ."

"Cry for me, angel, go wild for me! Wild! Wild!" His guttural growl answered her abandoned cry.

Through a fiery haze of passion, Marisa watched as he knelt at the foot of the bed and pulled her body downward. Her spine grew rigid and tense. "Please! Please, Sean, please!" Help-less panic crowded into her voice.

Reaching out with that coarse, consoling brogue, he pulled her back into the wild undertow. "It's all right, angel, trust me. It's going to be all right."

Her body had no will of its own. Even his voice had the power to scorch her to the very core of her being. "I can't-!" Exquisite agony engulfed her.

Dropping feathery, tormenting little kisses along her inner t-highs, he moved his mouth slowly upward toward the eng-orged flesh between her legs.

She groaned in tormented ecstasy.

Carefully and with artistic perfection, he thrust his tongue into her body. The practiced rhythm of his move-ments sent bolts of liquid fire ripping through her. Her dissolute cries tore the calm spring air asund-er. Her aban-donment was complete!

He covered her body with his own, as his surly words ripped into her fuzzy con-sciousness. "Tell me what you want, Marisa. Beg Marisa, plead, Marisa." He dragged his lips over her open mouth as if he could pull the words he longed to hear from her.

Her humiliation was complete. "I want you, Sean. Pleas-e, make love to me, now!" The words tore from her throat in agonizing rasps.

He positioned himself over her and pushed, hard. A tight, membra-nous parti-tion halted his inva-sion-. He moved back as the muscles in his face sil-houet-ted in grim

disbe-lief. "Marisa? - My God!"

"No." The word was a low moan. Marisa wrapped her legs around his back and thrust her tortured body upward. "Don't leave me! Don't! I have to have you inside me!"

Until that moment she had respo-nded only to his surly com-mands, with no will of her own. Her sudden burst of ardor fed his pas-sion and rekindled his desire.

"Don't stop!" She cried, "Don't stop now!"

He pushed inside her, big and hard, as his iron control shattered. The tormentor became the tor-mented. He moved with smoot-h, even strokes that kept pace with her swiftly rising passion, his driving thrusts became deeper and more rapid as she arched her body toward him.

T-hey were caught up in a force that defied cont-rol and threa-tened reaso-n - a wild, sweet ecstasy, a rapturous es-calation that pushed toward sublime, ultimate consumma-tion. Her body jerked in quivering spasms as his rhythm broke into convulsive vibra-tions of bliss. The storm peaked. They fell over the edge of ecstasy into com-plete fulfillment.

Sanity returned slowly. Marisa felt Sean's heart hammering against her breast. After several minutes he moved away and easing himself onto the mat-tress beside her, expelled a sigh that was a sated rumble in his chest.

She buried her face in her pillow, thankful for the darkness that hid her shame. She had become another woman in the Irish renegade's long line of con-quests. Her muf-fled sobs filled the room.

A large hand caressed her back. "Don't cry, Marisa, please don't cry."

"I'm so ashamed." Tears choked her. "And so sor-ry."

"Marisa, Marisa, darling you have nothing to be sorry for." Sean pushed a dark tress from her forehead. "Why in the name of all that is holy didn't you tell me?"

The coarse hairs on his chest brush-ed against her face. He had called her darling. Did that mean he was no longer angry? She relaxed against his strong, warm body. Why should he be angry? He had done what he had set out to do. Even she, an untutored beginner, realized he was an expert in the art of love-making. He had used that expertise to shame her. That revelation brought a new spasm of remorse that, in turn, triggered a fresh burst of tears.

Cradling her in his arms, Sean asked, hoarsely, "Why, Marisa? Why didn't you tell me?"

She brushed her hand across her face. What did he want her to admit now? "Tell you what?"

"Why did let me believe that Baldomar was your lover?"

The softness of his voice stung her. He sounded curi-ous, but not caring. She pushed away from him. "W-hat makes you think he's not?"

"You let me think you were an experienced -woman when in reality you are just a scared little girl." Some-thing in his soft brogue sounded like a note of pity.

She didn't need nor want his sympathy! "You don't know that about me." How could he know? He didn't. He had guessed because she was so inept that she was a beginner. She was not about to admit it. "Baldomar is . . ." Her words trailed away. "Forget it."

"Are you so ignorant that you don't know how I know?" His brogue was threaded with laughter.

That mocking, play-ful tone stung her. "You don't know anything at all about me." He wanted to shame her even more. She didn't intend to let him. "Baldomar is . . ."

"Marisa, for God's sake, stop it!" The command cut across her words and sliced at her pride.

"Is it so hard to believe Baldomar cares for me?" She struggled to keep her voice even.

"Little girl," he whispered against her hair, "I can believe Baldomar, or any other man alive, could care for you to the point of madness, but that's not what I'm talking about. What idiot explained, or should I say neglected to explain, the facts of life to you?"

Now he was saying she was nothing more than an ig-norant savage. Did he think that because she had spent her short life on the rough edge of the frontier that she was without civilized knowl-edge? "Don't be insulting. I know how to read and write. I went to all my catechism classes. Papa always saw to that."

"What the hell does that have to do with your knowledge of sex?"

She knew he was smiling. She could feel his amusement. Damn him! How was she supposed to know what he meant?

"I'm not stupid-." She gave her head a little toss. "I know about sex."

"Oh, sure." He stifled a laugh.

A broad yawn overtook her. "I do . . . "

"I'm glad your father was so careful to see you receiv-ed the proper training."

"I'm not so sure yours did the same for you."

As he pulled her back into his embrace, she heard a rumbling deep inside his chest. "Are you laugh-ing at me?"

"No. Never. Go to sleep, little girl. Tomorrow is your wedding day."

"You still want to marry me?" Astonish-ment caused her to look up quickly.

"We made a deal, and I never go back on a deal."

"Are you sure?" She hardly dared to whisper the words.

"Yes, Marisa, I'm sure."

Sighing, she drifted into a con-tent-ed slum-ber.

Chapter Fourteen

The wagon rumbled into the yard. Sean pulled the mules to a halt and set the brake, then turned to Marisa who sat beside him on the high seat. "We're home, Marisa, or should I address you now as Mrs. Flanagan?"

The thought that he found this situation amusing infuriated Marisa. "A wedding ceremony is no joke." "And we did go through the ceremony."

She decided not to dignify that remark with an answer.

Chico jumped from the back of the wagon. "Chico's married! Chico's married." He began to hop around on one foot.

"No, Chico," Marisa explained, "Marisa and Sean are married. Chico's not married. It takes two people to have a wedding."

Chico stopped his hopping. A quizzical little frown creased his face. "Chico's not married?"

Sean lifted Marisa from the wagon and set her on the ground. "Let it go, Marisa. He can't understand."

"Yes, he can." Sean's hands around her waist sent Marisa's pulses racing.

Sean gave her backside a playful slap. "Mrs. Flanagan, get inside, you can help me unpack."

Chico began to chant in a high sing-song voice, "Mrs. Flanagan, Mrs. Flanagan."

Sean handed Chico the reins. "Take the wagon to the barn, Chico, and unharness the mules."

Climbing onto the wagon seat, Chico urged the mules toward the barn, chanting as he went, "Unharness the mules, unharness the mules."

-- Once inside, Sean fell onto the horsehair couch and tossed his hat on a chair. "I can't believe I did it!"

"Did what?" Before the words were out of her mouth, Marisa repented of having asked.

"Spoke solemn I do's and promised 'til death do us part. I stood before a man of the cloth and promised to love and honor." Sean sighed his regret.

Marisa's hurt flared to anger. --"Since you have neither scruples nor conscience, that shouldn't bother you." She fought the tears that stung her eyes.

"I'm not that immoral. I don't feel happy about promising lies before God." Yawning, Sean added with a kind of fatalistic acceptance, "But what's done, is done."

He had lied before God. He didn't love her and last night was proof of how little he respected her. Carm-en's taunting prophecy sounded in Marisa's ears. "El te ropera tu corazon." He will break your heart! He will break your heart. Maybe Sean was not the only one who had cause for regret.

"You can help me unpack." Sean stretched and yawned. "I need to get back- to my store."

That brash statement chased away Marisa's melancholy thoughts. "Your store?" She followed him into Hector's room. Sean dumped the contents of his saddle bags onto the bed. "We've been married less than an hour and already you're finding fault." Dirt and debris sifted out along with a sad array of wrinkled apparel.

"Be careful." Marisa reached to brush the dirt from the covers. "You're getting Papa's bed dirty."

"It's my bed now," Sean threw the saddle bags toward a chair. They missed and landed on the floor.

"My bed, and I have to lie in it!" Twist-ing his mouth into a cynical smile, he asked, "Why do I feel this overw-helm-ing desire to run like hell?"

"Because you're a coward," The words slipped out before Marisa could stop them. "Why don't you go? Isn't that what cowards always do, run?"

"I could get sick of your tongue in a very short time." Sean laid the rawhide bag Hector had left him on the bed. It bulged at the sides.

Picking it up, Marisa ran her hands down its ends, loving the feel of the fine leather. "Papa's father gave him this bag. He always took such good care of it, and look at it now, bulg-ing at the sides until you can't even fasten the top. Why did you jam it so full?"

"I didn't." Sean snatched the bag from her. "Megan packed it for me."

"Megan?" That name sent a bolt of jealousy ripping through Marisa. "What's in here?"

"I haven't had time to look inside." Seized by an apparent burst of anger, Sean turned the bag over and shook it vigor-ously. The con-tents spilled out and showe-red over the spra-wl-ing pile of clothes.

Marisa reached to retrieve the papers Hector had en-trust-ed to Sean's care. "These are impor-tant-. . ." Sean's words found latent lodging in her mind. "Megan packed your bags?" Her dark eyes flash-ed.

With aggravating nonchalance, Sean said, "She helped."

Marisa's heart grew heavy. "I see."

"No, you don't. I rented a room from her brother." Sean began to leaf through the papers that lay on the bed. "Not that I owe you any explanation."

Marisa snatched the bag from him. "This was my father's bag, and his father's before him. And you've loaded it with trash!" Holding the bag over her head, she shook away the last bit of debris. "How could you be so disrespectful?"

A long, yellow envelope slid from the bag, and fell to the floor. Fluttering as it went, like a leaf in a breeze. It came to rest over the dark stain of blood that had spilled from Hector Perez's body the morning his life had been so suddenly and swiftly snuffed out.

Sean stooped to retrieve the mysterious envelope that lay like some ominous prophecy of doom, on human blood. "Where did this come from?" He lifted the letter above his head, as Marisa reached to snatch it from him. "Don't grab."

-"That letter --belongs to my father." She stood on tiptoe. Sean held the letter high above his head.

As one arm held Marisa at a distance, Sean used the other to turn the letter toward the light. --"The bag belongs to me." He tried to read through the envelope. -"That means everything in it is mine too."-

Marisa knew when to retreat. She dropped her hands. "Are you going to open it?"

"In due time." Using his knife, Sean slit the top of the envelope.

"Be caref-ul." Marisa fought an overpowering impulse to snatch the letter and run.

Sean pulled a long sheet of paper from the age-yellow en-velope. "What is this?" Unfolding the paper, he smoothed it out on the bed. "This letter is very old. Gently, his fingers pressed the creases."

Marisa's heart picked up speed. "It looks official and important." Whatever it was she was sure it didn't con-cern Sean Flanagan. "What does it say?"

Sean scanned the page. "It's -writt-en in Spanish." Holding the wrinkled sheet out to Marisa, he asked, "This wasn't with the other papers Hector left me. He must have hidden it somewhere inside the bag."

Why?" -

"Maybe he didn't." Marisa's mind began to pursue a strange possibility. "The bag belonged to my grandfather first. He gave it to- Papa the night before he left on the expedition that ended in his death."

Sudden interest lit the green of Sean's eyes. "What expedition?"

Marisa lapsed into deep thought. "I don't know if it had a name." She was beginning to realize just how little she did know about that ill-fated journey.

"Tell me what you do know." The bed sagged as Sean sat on the side of it.

"I was five years old when it happened." Marisa sorted through shadowy, half-forgotten memories. "All I know is what Papa told me."

"And what was that?" Sean pushed a restless hand through his tangled curls.

"Papa said that his father, Chico's father, and the father of Tito and Felipe Gomez, along with several others set out to look for . . . " Why did remembering that accursed mine always bring a sense of dread?

"To look for what?" Sean prompted.

"I don't know. They went out into Comanche country. The Indians attacked them there, and they all died in a bloody massacre." Despite the intense heat and humidity, Marisa shivered. "Everyone that is, except Chico."

"That's all you know?" Sean's look said he was not at all convinced that she was telling him the truth.

What difference did it make now if she told? "Some-where out there they found a silver mine."

"This is what Hector told you?"

"He told me about the mine. Some of the details about what happened on the expedition, and after, I pieced together from what was said when he talked to Tio Victor, or argued with the Gomezes." Her father's dear face floated across her memory, bringing a tear to her eye and putting a catch in her voice. "Papa never liked to talk about the expedition or the mine. It was all very secret and mysterious."

Sean scanned the sheet of paper. "Maybe this has the answer."

"But you can't read it," Marisa's anguish sharpened her reply.

"And you can?" Sean asked caustically.

She considered lying, then repented and told the truth. "Yes."

"Tell me what it says," He held the paper out to her.

Putting both hands behind her, Marisa asked with a sneer, "Why should I?"

"Marisa!" That one word was enough to cause her to take the paper and scan it with anxious eyes. "It has something to do with the silver mine."

"Read it to me." Sean had come to stand directly behind her and was peering over her shoulder.

As she began to read, realization dawned, and with it a feeling of utter despair. ----"I never believed it existed."

"Believed what existed?" Sean's breath was hot on her neck.

"The lost silver mine." Marisa's words hung on a sharp intake of breath. "Papa had it all the time, and he never knew it!" The shock of that discovery sent shivers through Marisa. "All those years of fighting, and arguing, and killing, and Papa had it all the time in his little rawhide bag."

Pulling her around to face him, Sean demanded, "Papa had what all the time?"

The words were a rattling whisper. "This is the title to the silver mine."

Sean snatched the document from her hands and held it up to the light.

"What are you doing?" Marisa was more shaken than she cared to admit. Sinking down on the side of the bed, she pressed her fingers to her temples. "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking at the seal on this thing. It's authentic." After careful scrutiny, Sean folded the paper and slid it back into the yellow envelope.

Marisa was furious. He had taken possession of her property. "What do you think you're doing?"

Sean laughed with predictable arrogance. "I know what I'm doing. I'm putting this title back in its hiding place until I can decide what to do with it." Running his hand along the top edge of the bag, he whistled through his teeth. "There's a hidden compartment in here." His fingers slid into the tiny space and --extracted a small piece of folded paper. "What is this?" He began to unfold the note.

"That note belongs to me." Marisa grabbed for it. "Papa didn't know that was in the bag when he left it to you."

Sean held her wrists until she stopped struggling. "Be still."

Resigned that she could not best him physically, Marisa pulled her hands from his grasp and put them behind her. "That paper belongs to me."

Sean tapped the half-folded sheet against the side of his lips. "I don't think so. I paid dearly for -this bag. I killed two men, and ---I was tricked into marriage by a scheming female. This note is mine, and I will be the one who reads it!"

"Papa never intended for you to have the title to his silver mine. He certainly never intended for you to read his letter." Marisa reached again for the paper. "Let . . . me have . . . that!"

"Do you want to hear what this note says?" Sean subdued her with ease. "Or do you want me to throw you out of my room?"

Indignation caused her voice to rise. "You can't throw me out of my own house."

"Ah, but I can. And I will if you don't do as you are told. Now sit down and listen."

He meant it. Marisa scooted to the end of the bed. -She had learned through bitter experience how cruel he could be when he was pushed too far. A new realization jolted her. She was married to this renegade, tied to him for better or for worse, until death parted them. An involuntary shudder shook through her.

Sean began to unfold the paper, smoothing the furrowed lines carefully. It split as he pressed the last wrinkle. Holding the pieces together, he began to read:-

July 25, 1824

My Son,

Tomorrow Oscar and I set out on a dangerous expedition. I am leaving this title behind as insurance. Martin Gomez, the third partner in this venture, is not to be trusted. --

We have permission from the Spanish government to make this journey. They believe we are

searching for suitable farm lands to open for settlement. If they knew the truth we would face yet another danger. We have learned, through a sinister stroke of luck, that a rich vein of silver lies north of Bexar. -We do not know the exact location, but we will find it. Then we will se-cretly mine it and carry the silver away.

To obtain a land grant from the Spanish government, Oscar and I were forced to include Martin Gomez in our ven-ture. We have agreed that we must guard against Martin robbing us of our share of the treasure.

Martin be-lieves the mine holds only low grade ore. Oscar and I know that a vein of pure silver runs along side the sulphur and ore deposit. Sad will be our fate if Martin ever learns our secret.

Until we return, I remain,

Your loving father,

Alfred Perez

"My God," Sean's brogue --was ragged with the implications of what he had just read.

The magnitude of their discovery hit Marisa like a blow to the head. "The Gomezes always thought Papa had the title to the mine. Papa believed Felipe had a map showing the mine's location." ---

Sean rested his back against the pile of clothes and studied the letter.

Marisa sat, somewhat impatiently, waiting for him to speak.

When he did it was not what she had expected to hear. "Hector lied to me when he said Victor and Juan fought over Car-men. Then you swore to his falsehood. I'm beginning to understand why Carmen was so angry."

Marisa jumped to her father's defense. "Papa could hardly tell you about the mine."

Sean's thick lashes fell to veil his eyes. "Carmen said Victor and Juan fought about the silver mine. She knows about the mine?"

"Carmen wasn't supposed to tell. Your insult made her angry enough to forget her promise to keep her mouth shut."

Sean reasoned aloud. "So this is an old feud."

"It is, or to be more exact, it was." Remembered confrontations between Papa and Tio Victor and the Gomezes made Marisa sigh in pain. "The Perezes and the Gomezes looked for the title to the silver mine for years. They're all dead now. The feud is over."

With a calm that made her blood run cold, Sean ordered, "I think you had better start at the beginning and tell me the entire story."

Slowly, painfully, Marisa began. She told him of the massacre, the lost mine, the long search, the escalating animosity that grew through the years between the Gomezes and the Perezes. She ended with the true account of the battle to the death between Victor and Juan. "Their fight was over the mine. Something Juan said made Victor think Juan had a map to the mine."

Sean leaned forward. "What about Oscar Ozuna? Who was he, and how does he fit into this little mystery?"

Marisa wondered why he would ask about Oscar. Maybe it was only morbid curiosity. She began to explain: "Oscar Ozuna was Chico's father. When he died, Chico was the only Ozuna left. The Gomezes

and the Perezes all thought Chico was mad. Nobody ever bothered with him."

"But he is the sole survivor of that mas-sacre." Sean insisted. "How did he escape?"

"No one knows for sure." Marisa ached with the pain of remembering. "Papa told me many times how Chico came riding into Bexar one night screaming that the Indians were after him. He had no relatives, no one to care for him, so Papa took him in."

"Out of the goodness of his heart," Sean raised skeptical eyebrows. "your father took in a madman?"

"Chico is not mad, exactly, and my father cared about him."

Sean was seized with a sudden restlessness. Standing to his feet, he stared down at her. "I don't think that was his only reason. Chico knows where the mine is."

"Chico can't remember!" A new fear rose up to torment Marisa. "Chico panics at the mention of the mine or Indians." She would not let Sean or anyone else torture Chico by asking him about that lost silver mine. "Papa tried, at first, to get him to tell. Chico always went a little crazy. Papa finally gave up."

"That first night I came here," Sean mused, "that strange conversation between Hector and Chico made no sense then. It does now. Chico thought he was back at the mine, didn't he?"

"The words silver mine or Indians send Chico into a frenzy. Carmen must have taunted him that day. She's done it before." Racked with anger at the thought of Carmen's terrible treatment of Chico, Marisa added, "Carmen thinks Chico is an idiot, but he's not."

"I hope not." A strange light glowed in the depths of Sean's eyes. "I do hope not."

"He won't tell you anything about the mine." She had to convince Sean of that fact. "He can't remember anything that happened there."

"Then what did Chico mean that first night when he told Hector, 'Chico won't tell'?"

"The Gomezes sometimes tried to get Chico to talk about the mine. Maybe they'd been tormenting him that day." Marisa suppressed a sigh. "Chico gets confused sometimes and repeats words without knowing what they mean."

Sean slipped the note back into its hiding place. "How much of your story can I believe?"

Marisa was set to deny that she was a liar. She should-n't. She had told more lies in the past two weeks than she had told in her entire life before. "This time I did tell the truth."

Sean's skeptical look told his doubt. "Did Baldom-ar Gomez's visit last night have anything to do with the mine?"

"He didn't mention the mine." Should she tell Sean that Baldomar had asked for her hand in marriage? He would-n't believe her, and he would sneer at her again. "Baldomar said promises were made to be broken."

"Your skirting the issue, Marisa. God, how I hate a scheming female!" Sean strode across the room, then turned to glare at her. "What did Baldomar say to you in Spanish?"

"I told you what he said."

"Maybe you told me. Maybe you lied again." He slid his hands into his pockets.

"You're wearing a trail in the floor." Maybe if she talked about something else, he'd forget about the mine. "Why don't you sit down?"

He took a step in her direction, "Don't try to change the subject. If I catch you in another lie I'll punish

you, little girl."

Tears stung her eyes. She wanted him to respect her and trust her. He was threatening her and calling her a liar. A cold truth slipped in around her heart. He would never respect her. She didn't think he could ever respect any woman. "Don't you threa-ten me!"

His eyes gleamed wickedly. "It's not a threat."

"If you hurt me I'll tell Sheriff Cameron." Her lower lip stuck out in a defiant pout.

"What I would do to you wouldn't hurt." His growling voice stirred erotic memories.

She blushed as she recalled how he had 'punished' her the night before. "You would-n't do that again."

The soft silence that followed was more threatening than any words he could have spoken.

Desire warmed her fear. She half-hoped he would decide to 'punish' her. Shame quickly swept away all other emotions. "Don't, please."

"Then do as you're told." He sat beside her and let his thigh touch her leg.

She began to shake inside, that same uncontrollable shaking she felt each time he touched her.

"Tell me why Hector kept Chico around all those years. Did he think some day Chico would remember where the mine was?"

"You are as obsessed with that mine as Papa and the Gomezes were." The lust for silver, she decided, was like an infectious disease. "I won't tell you anything else about it, -so don't ask."

The cruel lines around Sean's mouth softened into a smug grin. "You're my wife. You'll do what I tell you to do."

Marisa hissed through clenched teeth, "I will not!"

"You will. I have ways of making you do exactly what I want you to do. And I want you to find out every-thing Chico knows about the silver mine." His lips brushed her cheek.

A delicious wave of desire surged through her. -"You are a rotten bastard."

"I need you, Marisa, I need your help."

His seductive smile melted her resistance. "I can ask, but he won't remember."

How sure he was of his power over her, and he had no qualms about using it to get what he wanted. Lacing his fingers through the dark curtain of her hair, he dropped a seductively sweet kiss on her pouting mouth. Every part of her body responded to his touch. Slowly, he released her. "Will you talk to Chico soon?"

"If that's what you want." She was outraged at her own weakness. "But he won't remember." Carmen was right! This man had her in his power.

"For you, I think he will."

"You're going to try to find the mine?"

"Better than that. I will find the mine and haul the treasure away."

"There are Indians out there, wild Comanches." She had to convince him this was a fool's errand.

"Better men than you have lost their lives trying to find that accursed mine."

"Better, maybe, but not more resolved." The glint of determination glowed in his eyes. "Somewhere out on the Comanch-ero there is a silver mine. I intend to find it. And you're going to help me, you and

Chico."

-An ache moved in around Marisa's heart. "You'll die if you go into Comanche country. The Indians will kill you."

"Chico survived," Sean reminded her. "He's still very much alive."

Sad memories moved in to swamp Marisa. "Chico was a boy when he went on that expedition. He escaped, but the mine exacted its price." Only the hope of sparing Sean made Marisa admit the truth. "The mine took Chico's sanity."

"I will find the silver." How positive he was. "When I have it I'll walk away just as I've always done, only this time I'll walk away a very rich man."

He was flirting with danger. Marisa sensed he loved the challenge. "Don't do it, please."

"Don't you want to be a rich woman?"

She thought for several seconds. "No."

"You're lying again. Marisa."

A shadow fell across her heart. He was a terrible man. Her answer was a tight-lipped frown. A throbbing sensation of defeat and emptiness over-whelmed her.

Chapter Fifteen

Marisa sat on the edge of the stoop, drew her legs up, and clasped her arms around her knees. Fireflies flashed through the purple twilight. A cool breeze blew from the river. From the branches of the cottonwoods, night birds had begun their serenade. All around her was peace and serenity. Inside she was a mass of turmoil and pain. --

Sean had been gone since early afternoon. Before he rode away, she questioned where he was going. His reply had been: "To the store, and a few other places." Pride had stopped her from asking him when he would return.

Marisa brushed her face across her knees to wipe the tears away. Her husband was a renegade and an outlaw. Had he met with foul play? There was always that possibility.

Turning her head to one side, she rested her cheek on her knees as a disturbing suspicion hit her. Had Sean gone to Irish Flats? Maybe even now he was with Megan McGuire. Quickly, she pushed that idea aside. She couldn't bear the thought of Sean with another woman.

As darkness nudged at twilight, memories of the night before crowded into Marisa's mind. Her heart contracted with pain as she recalled how she had fallen into Sean's arms and begged him to make love to her. The memory of her crying out, pleading for him to take her, brought her to a standing position, -as if rising- would still the anguish that churned inside her.

Some relief came as she reasoned that she was not entirely at fault. Sean had used his expertise as a lover to degrade and punish her. He had wanted to bring her to shame and open humiliation. A feeling of hopelessness washed over her.

Hoof beats from afar, echoing across the quiet country-side made Marisa squint into the gathering darkness. Someone was riding toward the little house beside the river. A nagging fear replaced the ache in her chest. Had Baldomar decided to return?

The horse galloped into the yard. Marisa sighed with relief as through the darkness she discerned that the rider was Sean. He called to her, his voice reverberating in the stillness. "Marisa?"

She didn't answer.

Again he called, "Marisa, where are you?"

"I'm here." Sitting back down on the stoop, she rested her head against a post.

Presently, Sean emerged from the shadows to stand directly in front of her. "Why didn't you answer when I called?"

She could hear the annoyance in his voice and in some strange way it comforted her. "Chico cooked supper," she said without looking up. "It's in the cook house. We eat there sometime."

Extending one hand, he invited, "Come with me. We can talk. I have some things to tell you."

She could imagine what those things might be. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she answered politely. "No, thank you."

He sat down beside her, so near that she could feel the heat from his body. "Have you eaten?"

"No." His nearness brought a tightening in the pit of her stomach and caused her pulses to race. Gripping the edge of the porch, she stared toward the whispering cottonwoods. She wanted him to go away before she succumbed, again, to his overwhelming sexual magnetism. "I'm not hungry, and I don't want to talk."

He laughed low in his throat. Placing his thumb under her chin, he turned her face toward his. "What would you like to do, Marisa?"-

She closed her eyes, but she could feel his sweet, seductive smile. She was sliding again into the undertow of desire. A delightful shiver of wanting ran through her body. She fought it with every ounce of resistance that she possessed. "What do you want to talk about?" The smell of whiskey mixed with the musky scent of leather made her suspect he had been to the pub in Irish Flats.

"Why do you always have to argue?" His hand dropped to his side.

"I am not arguing, I am talking, and waiting - for an answer." She was being obstinate, but she didn't care. She had to protect her self against the devastating power he held over her. "You've been drinking." Anger at her own weakness made her voice sharp. "Where have you been?" He would hurt her and shame her again if she let him. "Did you go to McGuire's Pub?"

He bent and kissed her. "Jealously doesn't become you, Marisa."

"Is that where you went?" She was jealous and that realization made her even more furious with herself, and in turn, with him.

Playfully, he asked, "What makes you think I would go there today of all days?"

She sounded, for all the world, like a nagging wife. "Did you go to that bar," her voice dropped to a whisper, "and that Megan McGuire?"

"I don't account to anyone for what I do." He dropped his bantering tone and asked, harshly, "Don't you know that by now?"

She felt rather than saw his body tense. Her teeth gripped her tongue, but she couldn't make herself let go. "Everybody knows she's your . . ." Nor could she bring herself to say mistress. "Everybody knows about the two of you. Carmen said Mrs. Valadez said . . ."

"More gossip?" Sean questioned. "Marisa? You of all people should know how wrong gossip can be." After a moment of dead silence, he asked, "What did Carmen tell you about Megan?"

Marisa shook her head from side to side. "I forgot."

Sean's good humor was swallowed up in a burst of anger that heated the night air. "Marisa!"

"Carmen didn't want me to marry you. She said Megan was your mistress." Oh, how she hoped Sean would deny that allegation.

"I should shake the dust of this gossipy little village from my shoes." -The smell of honeysuckle permeated the air with cloying sweetness. "And I will, but not until I find that silver mine."

A sickening surge of pain slipped in around Marisa's heart. Hadn't he warned her not to expect fidelity? There was a marriage of convenience, a way to protect a mutual business enterprise.

Standing to his feet, Sean pulled Marisa with him. "Forget Megan. Let's have supper."

"Megan is your mistress, isn't she?" Marisa knew she should stop her accusing tongue. She couldn't.

The amused smile on his face devastated her. "I do believe you are angry, Marisa." He found her concern amusing.

"Carmen says everyone in Bexar knows about you and Megan." How could he be so callous? "Carmen says . . ." Her voice trailed away on a little sob.

Sean pulled her into his arms. His lips brushed her cheek. "You are legally my wife. Let that be enough." Resting his chin on her head, he said, "Don't turn into a possessive female."

"I am not a possessive anything." She took a backward step as she pushed from him.

Her sudden movement caught him off-guard. As he reached to pull her back into his grasp, Marisa's anger exploded into white hot fury. She struck his cheek with her open hand. "You bastard! I won't have you coming from that . . . whore and trying to make love to me!"

For one frightening moment, she thought he was going to strike her. He raised his hand. Fear feathered across her skin.

Then he brought his fingers to his own face and rubbed his cheek with quick little strokes. "You little bitch." Turning on the heel of his boot, he strode off into the night.

Frantic now, she ran after him. "Come back, please come back." The words echoed into the silent darkness. "I didn't mean it!" Her answer was the sound of galloping hooves dying away, leaving only darkness, and a chilling quiet.

Marisa stumbled toward the house. A feeling of total defeat engulfed her. Sobs shook her slim frame. "What have I done?"

From the far corner of the house, Chico emerged. "What have I done?" He echoed Marisa's lament.

Marisa missed a step and went sprawling across the little stoop. She dissolved into helpless sobs. Her misery was a raw, physical pain that suspended her in agony. This was her wedding night, and she had driven her husband away. After several struggling minutes, Marisa pulled herself to her feet. She staggered into the dark parlor and fell onto the horsehair couch.

Chico followed close on her heels. "Is Marisa sad?" A puzzled frown creased his tiny face.

Marisa sat up and tried to smile. "I'm all right, Chico."

Chico was not so easily fooled. "Chico knows. Marisa's sad." Tears puddled in the corners of his eyes. He didn't comprehend matters of the mind, but matters of the heart Chico felt and understood.

"I am sad," Marisa patted the space beside her. "Come and sit down."

Chico obeyed. "Don't cry, Marisa."

It seemed only yesterday that Chico was comforting her because she had stubbed her toe or Papa had punished her for some misdeed. "I drove him away." She put her head in her hands and wept.

Chico patted Marisa's shoulder. "Don't cry, Marisa. Marisa, don't cry."

More for Chico than for herself, Marisa stopped her tears. "I'm all right, Chico." She brushed her face with her hand. "It's late. Why don't we go to bed?"

"Why don't we go to bed?" Chico echoed.

Marisa gave his arm an affectionate pat. "Good night, Chico." She doubted Chico would go to bed. He would spend the night wandering the streets of Bexar. But she wanted him to go and leave her alone with her misery.

Chico hopped toward the back door, repeating as he went, "Good night, Chico. Good night, Chico."

The moment he disappeared out the back door, Marisa gave vent to her sorrow. Burying her face in the stiff horsehair upholstery, she wept bitter tears until weariness, then sleep, overtook her.

She was brought to wakefulness by a persistent tap on her shoulder. Opening her eyes, she saw Chico standing over her. "Marisa's sad?" -He clutched in one hand, his lone possession in the entire world, a rawhide bag that was a replica of the bag her father had left to Sean. Everything Chico held dear was kept in that bag.

Lifting the clasp, he reached inside. "See, Marisa? Pretty."-

Marisa sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, Chico."

In the palm of his calloused hand lay the fragile oval of a bird's egg. "Pretty for Mari-sa."

Compassion and love welled up inside Marisa's tender heart. She took the tiny egg and held it between her thumb and forefinger. "It's beautiful, Chico. Thank you."

Through her confusion and pain a sobering thought impinged. This bag was a replica of the bag her father had left Sean. What if . . .? "Where did you get that bag, Chico?"

The corners of Chico's mouth turned down. "Papa's bag. Chico's bag now. It was Papa's bag."

"It's a nice bag, Chico." Marisa laid the egg on the table beside the couch. "Did it belong to your Papa?"

"Chico's Papa gave Chico the bag. Papa said ride home, Chico." Grasping the bag to his chest, Chico held it in a death grip. "Chico's scared. Chico has to ride." Fear escalated into stark terror. "Indians, No!"

Marisa put her arms around the terrified little man-child. "Don't think about it." She drew him into the circle of her embrace. "Don't try to remember."

After a few frightening seconds, Marisa's comforting embrace and consoling words began to calm Chico's fears. He rested his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

- As she spoke soothing words, Marisa's mind raced. Chico had brought this bag from the silver mine! Did it, too, have a secret compartment? Was it possible that the map could have been in Chico's possession all these years? "May I see your bag, Chico?" If there was a map in the bag, she would find it, tear it into a thousand pieces, and toss it to the four winds.

With a docile nod, Chico placed the bag in Marisa's extended hands.

A mixture of excitement and fear sang through her veins as she ran one hand along the top of the bag. The compartment was there! Her heart picked up an a rhythmic beat as her shaking fingers explored the secret space.-

Her pulses slowed as she realized the pocket was empty. Marisa closed the bag. "Go to bed, Chico." She handed him the bag.

Chico put the bag under his arm, and scampered in the direction of the cook room, repeating over and over as he went, "Go to bed, Chico. Go to bed, Chico."

Marisa lay down- and closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. She turned and faced the wall. Would morning ever be here? ----Somewhere between resignation and regret, she slipped into a troubled slumber.

When she awoke, the light of a new day was breaking across the eastern horizon. Birds in the trees outside were twittering. Marisa sat up and stretched. Her neck hurt and her head ached. Remembrance brought with it the --real-iza-tion that Sean had not yet re-turned home. What else could she expect? She had driven him away on their wedding night. Had he found solace in the arms of Megan McGuire?

Pressing her fingers to her aching temples, she massaged gently, --trying to blot out the events of the evening before. She stood to her feet, and decided, as she collected her scattered thoughts, to concentrate on the moment. She was alone now, and responsible not only for herself, but for Chico. No more worrying about what she had done, or what she could never undo.

The household chores were completed before the sun rose in the eastern sky. An arc of yellow was hanging on the eastern horizon when Marisa pushed the cook room door open, and went inside. Chico

was nowhere in sight.

She was preparing breakfast when he came creeping through the door. "Marisa?" His head turned to one side. "Marisa's here?"

"Come inside, Chico." Marisa motioned with her hand. "Where have you been?"

"Chico looked for Sean. All night, Chico looked for Sean." He made a wry little face. "Mari-sa's sad. Please, Maris-a, don't cry, Marisa."

What was she doing to this sweet little man, and to herself? "I'm not crying now. See my smile?" She was break-ing Chico's heart, and driv-ing herself in-sane. And for what? It didn't change a thing. "No more tears, I prom-ise."

Chico shaped his face in a grotesque mask. "See Chico's funny face?" It was the one way he could always make Marisa smile.

Her heart melted, as love for this sad, demented man-child over-flowed inside her. If she had done nothing else, she had found a way to keep Chico with her. "Sit down, we'll have breakfast, then do the out-side chore-s."

Chico obeyed. "Chico's hungry."-

When the chores were completed, they returned to the house, and sat in the parlor, Marisa lounging on the horse-hair couch, and Chico huddled in the big rawhide chair. The minutes passed, an hour went by. The sun became an orange ball in the heavens. It would soon be time to open the store, and Sean was still nowhere in sight. Marisa was forced to face a somber possibility, he might never return. She quick-ly pushed that thought from her. He would return. He was too anxious to find the silver mine to leave. "What am I going to do Chico?"

Inanely, Chico echoed, "What am I going to do, Chico?"

With sudden clarity, Marisa knew what she had to do! "Hitch the mules to the wagon, Chico. You and I are going to the store. Somebody has to attend to busi-ness."

Chapter Sixteen

Through the long morning --one nagging question refused to go away. What if Sean never came back? Marisa closed her eyes against the pain of that possibility. He would, if not to her, to Chi-co, and the chance of finding a fortune in silver. As the day wore on, even that hope began to fade.

The noon hour came and went. Mer-chants around the square began to close their doors for siesta. -Marisa sent Chico to nap in the store room. He must have been up all night, looking for Sean. For the thousandth time, she wondered where her wayward husband might be.

Standing in the store's open doorway, she stared across the square where two old men were playing checkers in the shade of a scrubby mesquite. From nowhere Carmen's taunting words came, like some wicked condemnation, to torment her. He will break your heart. He will break your heart. He will break your heart. She closed the door.

Marisa had scarcely settled behind her desk when a loud knock brought her to her feet. Had her erring husband returned at last? Racing to open the door, she flung it open wide.-

Bob Beckett stood across from her. "Good afternoon, Marisa."

Marisa's eyes widened in distress. "We're closed, come back later."--

Removing his hat, Bob took a step forward. "This is important. May I come in?"

"Is this an official visit?" Fear knotted Marisa's stomach. Her missing husband was an outlaw, and a Texas Ranger was standing at her door.

"No, Marisa," Bob assured her, "this is personal."

Relief made her weak - and suspicious. "Did my aunt ask you to come here?"

"I came of my own accord." He glanced over his shoulder before asking again, "May I come in?"

She stepped back. "It must be important to bring you out in this heat, and at siesta time."

"I have not yet fallen into the habit of sleeping in the afternoon." He followed her as she moved toward the back of the store.

"Nor have I." Marisa eased down into the chair behind her desk. "I catch up on my bookkeeping in the afternoon."

Bob stood with his feet wide apart, his nervous fingers dancing around the brim of his hat. "It must be difficult for you now that your father is gone."

"I'm managing." Marisa gestured toward a chair. "Would you like to sit down?"

Bob laid his hat on the desk, then pulled the chair very near. "I admire your courage."

"Thank you. His uncertainty was making Marisa nervous. "You wanted to see me?"

"I did; I do." He swallowed. "This is most awkward."

She wanted to put him at ease. How could she when her own nerves were tattered rags? "Why don't you just tell me why you came here?"

"I am not a man who is given to flowery speeches, Marisa, but you must know how I feel about you."

"How can you feel anyway about me? You hardly know me." Her aunt had sent him. What had she said to Bob that made him believe he could overstep the bounds of propriety? Should she remind him that she was a married woman? That might not be wise. "And I hardly know you."

"I know all I need to know. Doesn't the fact that I wanted to marry you, still wish I could have had you, tell you anything?"

It told her that she was treading on dangerous ground. She had thought Bob to be a cold man. The passion that shook his voice gave lie to that assumption. "Just tell me why you came here." She added a very gentle, "Please."

Again, he swallowed deeply. "I hope you won't hate the messenger who brings you bad tidings."

Marisa stared down at the open ledger before her. "Did Carmen send you here?" If this was not an official call, why was he so upset?

"No, I came here of my own volition. I spent the morning at Dennis McGuire's pub over in Irish Flats."

Marisa's heart sank to the pit of her stomach. He had confirmed her worse fear. "Sean?"

"Mari-sa, my dear, I don't know any easy way to say this."

She could feel his apprehension. "You look positively grim. Is Sean dead?"

"Nothing like that."

Relief eased the tight knot of tension in her stomach. "Then for God's sake, tell me!"

He fired his words like bullets. "Do you know where your husband of one day is now?"

Each little missile struck home. A flood of color washed over Marisa's cheeks. "I have no idea.-"

"I know this will hurt, Maris-a, but you have to be told." His own words were causing him an inordinate amount of pain. "You have every right to know that Mr. Flanagan spent last night in the company of Megan McGuire. He was still in her room at noon today."

A spear of anguish pierced Marisa's heart. "No. I don't believe you." Not even Sean would be that cruel. For one fleeting moment she almost wished Bob had brought news of Sean's death, It would have been easier to bear.

"My dear girl, would I tell you such a thing if I didn't know it was so?"

He wouldn't. It was the ultimate betrayal. Over the terrible lump in her throat, she rasped, "Tell me everything, please."

Bob's hand shot out in a dramatic little gesture. "Are you sure you are up to this?"

She wasn't. She would never be up to hearing the

de-tails of her husband's infidelity. "I think I need some time. It was kind of you to come." Her voice was ragged with pain. "You can go now."

Bob reached for his hat, then drew it back. "If you don't hear this from me, you'll hear it from someone else. But I'll go, if that's what you want."

He was right, sooner or later she would have to hear all the sordid details. Marisa braced herself. "Maybe you'd better tell me the entire story."

"I was called to Dennis McGuire's pub early this morning." With a sigh, he settled back in his chair. "My going there had nothing to do with your husband. I went to arrest a man the Rangers have been tracking for months."

At least Sean had not run afoul of the law. Marisa gritted her teeth. "Go on."

"The man I arrested was with a prostitute in one of the rooms behind the pub. When I came outside, I noticed a group of men and dance hall girls standing around in front of the next room. They were

laying odds on how much longer your husband would stay in Megan's room. I began to ask questions about what had hap-pened. From what I could gather, your husband was drunk and disorderly last night. He got into a fight that in turn became a brawl. Someone called Sheriff Cameron.

Marcus Cameron hated Sean. Marisa pressed her hand to her throat. "No!"

"By the time Sheriff Cameron got there, the fight was over and Mr. Flanagan was nowhere in sight. Dennis McGuire told the sheriff that your husband had passed out, and was sleep-ing it off in the back room of the bar. Sheriff Cameron went to look for him, but he wasn't there. That's when some of the bar patrons told the sheriff that Mr. Flanagan was in Meg-an's room."

A vise of pain tightened around Marisa's chest. "Did Sheriff Cameron arrest Sean?"

"How could he? There was no fight going on when he

ar-rived, no evidence of wrong doing." Bob grimaced. "Maybe Megan saved your husband's ornery hide."

Marisa knew Sheriff Cameron too well to believe that lack of evidence had kept him from arresting Sean. "That's never stopped him before."

"You don't have a very high opinion of our sheriff."

Marisa smiled through her tears. "Maybe I know him too well."

"Whatever Sheriff Cameron's reasons, he didn't arrest your husband." He dismissed the sheriff's action with a shrug. "I didn't come here to talk about Sheriff Cameron. I came here to save you embarrassment by breaking the news of your husband's adulterous activities to you as gently as possible. I thought it would be better for you to hear this from a friend than from some malicious gossip." His compassion was touching. -"I'm sorry, Marisa."

He was right. -"I know this has not been easy for you. Thank you for coming."

Bob gazed around the room. "Are you alone here?"

His concern was comforting. "Chico is in the store-room. Together we can manage." All she wanted now was to crawl into some quiet corner, and cry her heart out.

"Perhaps I should stay here with you."

She wanted to be alone. "That's not necessary. As you can see, I am fine."

"There will be gos-sip-. . . " Bob began.

Marisa tossed her head, feigning indifference. "There already has been."

"Let me take you home," Bob pleaded. I'm concerned about you. You don't look well."

She was sick, made ill by shame and hum-iliation. Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin. "I have a business to run. I'm not going anywhere."

Bob reached across the desk and laid his hand over hers. "If you need me . . . "

The front door flew open, displaced by a kick that sent the bar flying from its lodging. Sean bounded through the opening. The stubble of a brick-red beard shadowed his face. He was dirty, disheveled and furiously angry. -"She won't."

Pulling her hand back, Marisa stood to her feet. "Bob was . . . "

"Just leaving." -Sean's bloodshot eyes nar-rowed. "Good day, Mr. Beckett."

Bob set his hat on his head and gave it a little thump. "I had to come Marisa."

- "And now you're leaving." Sean pointed to the door. "Don't come here again."

Bob seemed in no hurry to leave. Ignoring Sean's scolding command, he held Marisa's eyes with his stare. "I meant what I said Marisa. If you need me for any reason, you know where to find me."

What began as thank you, came out of Marisa's mouth as a garble of meaningless syllables.

Without looking back, Bob walked through the open door, made a sharp turn, and disappeared down the narrow street.

Sean gave the sagging door a vicious kick. "What in the hell is going on here?"

Marisa met his condemning gaze. "-Bob came to offer his support." She could breathe again. Sean was safe. "You look terri-ble."

"I feel terrible." He scowled. "Maybe even worse than that."

Marisa -searched his hooded expres-sion for some sign of -remorse, and saw only cool bel-liger-ence. She suppressed an overpowering urge to give this arro-gant Irish outlaw the tongue lashing of his life.

Easing down into the chair Bob had so recently vacated, Sean leaned back, and put his feet on the desk. Defi-ance was etched in every inch of his body. "I asked you a question. Damn it, I want an answer."

----"Did you?" She stared at him with open scorn.

"Are you going to tell me what the hell Bob Beckett was doing here?" His scurrilous gaze locked into her eyes.

Even as she began to explain, she wondered why she bothered. "He came to tell me where you spent last night and this morning."

There was not one sign of repentance or guilt as Sean stud-ied her with what could only be called contempt.

"And . . . ?" He was sparing for a fight. Did he want her to lose her temper? She didn't intend to give him that satis-fac-tion. She kept her stare deliberate-ly blank. "And he thought since you weren't here, I might need his help."

"What kind of help did he offer? --What did he want to do for you?"

His vulgar insinuations chipped away at Marisa's self con-trol. She gritted her teeth. "He offered to help me around the store."

"And did you accept, little wife?"

Much more of this and she would explode in righteous wrath. Dropping into her chair, Marisa scooted nearer her desk, as she fought to hold onto her temper. Picking up her quill, she said with studied indifference, "Go help Chico. He's in the store room."

Sean's massive chest heaved as his bleary eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. You're not deaf." She strived for indifference. "Maybe you're stupid. I said," she enun-ciated each word, "Go help Chico in the store room."

Sean's face turned to stone, carving his scar in bold relief. "I don't take orders from any wom-an." Beads of perspi-ration formed along his upper lip. "Don't push your luck, little girl."

How well she had come to know that look, that tone. She should shut up. She could-n't. He was the trans-gre-ssor. She would not let him pass his guilt on to her. "Maybe I should have asked Bob to stay. He was willing to help with the work around here."-

- "Don't make the mistake of pushing me too far. I might decide to punish you again." He grinned, an odious grimace that sent sparks of desire shooting through her veins. "I don't like finding my wife with another man."

-Marisa was still struggling to hold onto her temper. "We don't have a marriage. We have an arrangement and you haven't lived up to the terms of that arrangement." She impaled him on an icy stare.

Neither the cold words nor the wintry stare seemed to phase him. "I warned you before you married me not to expect fidelity."

"I'm not talking about fidelity! I'm talking about discretion!" Marisa stood and pushed her chair back with her foot. "-Bob came here to tell me that you had stayed the night with Megan McGuire." -Anger had finally out run resolve, and she was shouting her outrage.

His lips twisted into a sneer. "You said everybody in Bexar knew Megan was my mistress." He shrugged his insolence. "So I thought, what the hell."

Until that moment, she had not realized how desperately she had wanted him to deny Bob's charges. "You are a bastard!" She wiped at the tears that gathered in her eyes. "I'm going home." Escape was the only thing that mattered now. -

Sean's shoulders slumped. "Sit down, Marisa." He pointed to an empty chair. "We need to talk. Maybe we can sort this out."

Talk? He wanted to talk? Did he think he could calmly explain away his infidelity? "Go to hell, Senor Flanagan."

"You have a wicked mouth, little girl. And you're not going anywhere until I say you can." He took a menacing step in her direction.

Marisa locked her hands around the top rung of her chair, and lifted it, like a shield. "-Don't you come near me."

Sean stopped in his tracks. His scowl was slowly replaced by a look of contempt. "You didn't keep your end of the bargain, either. I walk in, and find you holding hands with Bob Beckett."

Marisa's last bit of control vanished in the heat of his unfair accusation. "He held my hand, that's all! You were in bed with that Irish whore!"

"Indiscretion is discretion and you are as guilty as I am, so why are you so angry?"

"What makes you think-- I'm angry? I certainly have no reason to be angry!" She raised her hands in resignation. "I've known you less than three weeks. In that time you have taken half of my store, threatened my life, -seduced me, married me, then shamed me by sleeping with your mistress on our wedding night. You've turned my world upside down, and you have the nerve to ask, 'why are you angry?'" On the tail of a long breath, she added, "Me maravillo que todavia estoy vivo."

"Don't start with the Spanish." Sean gave his chair a vicious kick that sent it tumbling across the room. "You want me to crawl? Not on your life!" His fist struck the top of the desk with a savage blow. "Did you think I would beg you to forgive me?- I don't beg." After a long pause, "What did you say?"

Her eyes filled with useless tears. "I said, I'm going home."

"Damn it, Marisa, don't start with me. What did you say in Spanish?"

"I said, I'm amazed that I'm still alive. That's what I said in Spanish. Now listen to what I am telling you in English. "I'm going home. Adios." Backing out the door, she began to walk away from the

village, toward the river and home.

Over the din of a passing wagon, her aunt's words rang in her ears, over and over again. El te ropera tu corazon! He will break your heart! He will break your heart!

Chapter Seventeen

Marisa was on the outskirts of the settlement before she slowed her pace. Shading her eyes with her hand, she peered into the distance. It wasn't safe to walk these roads. Comanches frequently took captives --in the glaring light of day. Self pity and the agony of heartbreak had temporarily dulled her sense of danger. Now it sharpened anew. Dared she go on?

She couldn't go back and face Sean, not after all that had happened. A mirage shimmered along the trail ahead of her. "It's an illusion," she told herself, "out of reach, but not out of sight."

Marisa covered the few miles from the store to the house wrapped in a cocoon of misery. Chasing the fantasy of a marriage to Sean was like chasing a mirage. Her hopes could run forever and never catch up to her dreams.--

She rounded a bend in the road. The little house came into view. She ran down the winding path, and onto the stoop. Home meant safety, at least temporarily, from the ever-present threat of the danger that was an accepted part of her existence.

Once inside, she fell into the raw-hide chair, dropped her head into her hands, and wept. Her heart throbbed and her head ached, but she had reached a decision. She wanted no more of Sean Flanagan. The price was too high, the cost too dear.

In the next half hour, Marisa came to grips with a grim truth. She had been the one who had set this tangled web of lies and deceit in motion, and she alone had the power to make things right. First she must put an end to this farce of a marriage; --then she would offer to sell Sean her half of the store.

With that decision came a sense of peace, and a renewing of strength. Regardless of what happened now, or in the future, she would face it, and deal with it. For a long time she sat staring at the walls of the parlor, sobbing softly as she thought of how it could have been.

She could wallow in self pity just so long. Marisa grabbed her broom and began to chase particles of dust from corners of the parlor, only to see them resettle in the same spot, almost before they were dislodged from their resting place.

The sound of an approaching rider brought her up short. Expectation kindled a flicker of hope. Was Sean coming home to her? "Stop chasing mirages," she told herself, but she couldn't squelch the bubble of joy that rose up inside her.

Still holding her broom, she hurried to the door, then pulled it open. Baldomar Gomez stood on the other side, fist poised in mid air, ready to knock.

Marisa -----gripped the handle of the broom with both hands as fear began to hammer at her heart. "Buenos dias."

Baldomar lowered his fist, and doffed his hat. "Buenos dias. How lovely you look this morning." His warm voice contrasted strangely with the coldness of his eyes.

Marisa wanted to slam the door in his face. She didn't dare. Baldomar was not a man who took kindly to rebuff. -"Not at all, Señor Gomez."

One dark eyebrow crawled up his forehead. "Marisa, we are friends. When did I become Señor Gomez?"

She tried to smile. "If you prefer, I can call you Baldomar."

"Would you, please? Have I come at a bad time?" He peered past her, trying to see inside the house.

"You seem dist-raught."

She was more than distraught, she was frightened out of her wits.- "What makes you think I am . . ."
She swallowed, hard, "dis-traught?"

"I have just learn-ed of your hus-band's latest es-capade. Que lastima. The man is not worthy of you."

Marisa eased through the door, and stepped onto the porch. It would be wise to keep Bald-omar outside. "I'm cleaning house."

"That explains the broom." His discerning look told her that he knew what she was doing. But he accepted her con-trived expla-nation.

Propping the broom against a post, Marisa sat on the edge of the stoop. "And I could use a rest."

Without waiting for an invitation, Baldomar dropped down beside her. His piercing eyes scanned her face. "I can see you are a very unhappy child, Marisa."

Her chin dropped, trying to escape his searching gaze. "I'm no longer a child." How she resented his pat-ronizing, almost pompous attitude.

"That I can see." A slow, sinister smile pulled at his lips.

"How is your mother?" Anxiety honed Marisa's senses. "And how are your sisters?"

"They are well. My mother and I have just returned from visiting my father's mother in Goliad. We arrived home last night."

From the corner of her eye, Marisa studied Baldomar's granite profile. What did he want now? "And your grand-mother, is she well?"

"Oh, yes, quite well, considering her age-. Thank God, she is still alert men-tally. She and I had quite a conversation while I was visit-ing her." He leaned back against a post, and lifted his face to look at the honey-suckle vines that twined around the trellis over his head. "She was intrigued with the fact that Hector bequeathed to your hus-band a rawhide bag. It would seem that each of the trio of men who under-took that fateful journey out onto the Comanchero so long ago, pos-sessed such a bag. My grand-mother still had the bag that belonged to my Uncle Martin."

Marisa tried to cover her confusion. "How did you know Papa left Sean his bag?"

Baldomar studied her for a long time before he

an-swered. "Sheriff Cameron told me when he questioned me about the untimely death of my Cousin Felipe."

"The sheriff talked to you about Felipe?" For the first time, Marisa let herself look full into Baldomar's face.

"At length, but that is not what concerns me now. The murder of my cousin will be dealt with in due time."

Marisa wondered what could be more important to Baldomar than revenge. "It's not?"

"Now my concern is Oscar Ozuna's rawhide bag. Do you know where it might be?"

"Who is Oscar Ozuna?" Marisa asked, trying to collect her scattered thoughts.

Baldomar's veneer of patience was wearing thin. "Don't play games with me Marisa. I am speaking of Chico's father, your gr-andfather's dear friend. Do you know what became of his bag?"

"All that happened when I was very young." Marisa's thoughts were in turmoil. "I don't remember

Oscar Ozuna, or anything about his rawhide bag." She held his hard eyes in a steady gaze.

"Perhaps." Baldomar's hand moved up her arm and came to rest on her shoulder. "Perhaps not." His fingers moved from her shoulders and threaded themselves through the silken softness of her hair.

His touch was repulsive. She tried to move away. "I don't know anything about Oscar Ozuna's bag."

His fingers tightened. "How beautiful you are!"

Fear made her bold. She pushed his hand away. "You should go now."

Baldomar's head snapped back. "I'm sorry, What did you say?"

She felt as if she were wearing nothing at all. "You should go now." She struggled to keep the impatience she felt from finding its way into her voice.

The flame that warmed his eyes was more frightening than the coldness it had replaced. "Not yet, Marisa, not until I have said what I came here to say."

The way he said her name sent a shiver through her. "Then please say it, and go."

"It is time to put an end to the feud between our families?-" His cold fingers brushed her cheek, then touched her lips. "What better way than becoming allies? We have so much to offer each other."

His touch repelled her. She wanted nothing this man had to offer, and she boldly said so. "I want nothing from you, Baldomar, nothing more, than your friendship and good will."

"Friendship is a good place to start. As your friend, I must help you escape an impossible situation." Impatience slipped into his tone. "Marisa, my beautiful child, surely you don't intend to spend the rest of your life tied to this wayward Irishman you have so hastily married."

Fear, silken and uncertain, slid up Marisa's spine. Her lower lip quivered from his touch.

Like so many vain men, Baldomar read all the wrong meanings into that little quiver. "I can protect you. I am a dead shot, and the quickest man in The Republic with a gun." His words shocked her into stunned silence. She had no idea he entertained such ridiculous notions.

"Answer me, Marisa." Baldomar's harsh words intruded into her troubled thoughts. "Do you want to escape?"

Bringing her mind back to the problem at hand, Marisa searched for words that would send Baldomar on his way with his pride intact. "My husband has a roving eye. It's a matter of time until he leaves me."

"He won't leave his business, and you know it. The situation is impossible." His restless fingers stroked her face. "I can show you a way to escape this marriage, to escape Bexar. We could be very rich, you and I, and very happy, if we could find the silver mine."

"I don't know anything about that mine," Marisa said with conviction, "and I don't want to know."

"Don't you?" Greed shone in Baldomar's face. "Would you like a castle, Marisa, or a grand estate?"

Another chill shivered through her. "No," Her eyes grew black with fear.

And once more Baldomar misread her reaction. "What a divine little creature you are. How I would love to dress you in furs and jewels." A lascivious gleam lit his eyes. "And how I would love to undress you . . ."

"Please stop." Marisa searched for some way to stem his unwanted advances. "I'm a married woman."

"Oh, come now, Marisa. It is because you are a married woman that the thought of a man undressing

you should please, not frighten you." He smiled, conceit smooth-ing his voice. "I have been told that I am a splendid lover. I could make you very happy." As his fingers crept up her arm, another shudder of revul-sion shook her.

The thought of Baldomar as her lover intensified that revulsion into disgust. "My husband . . ."

Baldomar's mouth curved into a sadistic smile. His grip on her arm tightened. "Ah, yes, your hus-band. Some day soon I will do something about that husband of yours." His fin-gers stilled. "Does Señor Flana-gan know about the silver mine?"

"No!" Marisa answered, much too quickly, then willed her tongue to slow its pace. "Papa would never tell that Irish outlaw about the mine."

"Perhaps you told him?" Baldomar ventured.

"Why would I do that?"

"Gossip has it that you are smitten with him."

"After what he's done to me?" Marisa affected indig-na-tion. "You underestimate me." She hoped fervently that he did.

"A woman scorned?" He questioned pompously.

Marisa forced the words through her aching throat. "My husband knows nothing."

"Good." Baldomar rubbed his hands together. "We must keep it that way- until we can acquire the bag that your father left your husband. Do you know where it is?"

Now she knew why Baldomar had come here. He wanted that rawhide bag. He wouldn't stop searching until he'd had found it. What had Baldomar's grandmother had told him? Did he know of the secret compartments? "Sean has it at the store." She smiled -what she hoped was a wistful smile.

Baldomar's greedy eyes gleamed. "Tomorrow, you must go to the store and search for the bag. I will come for you later, and we can go away together."

The conceit of this man! He was assuming, without even bothering to ask, that she would betray her husband and go away with him. "What about my husband?"

"Ah, yes, the Irish bastard who chose to sleep with his puta on his wedding night. I will see that your husband gets exactly what he deserves."

Baldomar intended to kill Sean. All that stood in his way was finding the rawhide bag. How could she tell him she had no notion of doing what he asked? "I don't know how I can . . . " The sound of hoof beats echoing from far down the road, cut her sentence short. "Someone's coming." Marisa breathed a sigh of relief. "It may be my hus-band. He

should-n't find you here."

"Perhaps you are right." Baldomar's smooth brow creased into a frown.

Standing, Marisa extended her hand. "He would be suspicious if he found us together."

Clasping her hand, Baldomar swiftly- pulled her into a smothering embrace. "You in-toxicate me." Then brought his lips down on hers in a kiss was as degrading as it was repul-sive.

She was locked in Baldomar's arms when Sean rode into the yard and pulled his horse to a sudden stop.

Chapter Eighteen

Dismounting swiftly, Sean -walked toward the embracing couple. The evidence of his anger glittered in his eyes, carved the granite of his face. "Take your hands off my wife."

Baldomar released Marisa, and turned to face his accuser. "Señor Flanagan, we meet again."

Stopping a few feet from the couple, Sean growled, "You've been looking for me? You've found me."

Every nerve in Marisa's body tensed. She could smell danger, taste its salty tang on her tongue.

Baldomar taunted, "I see you have survived your long night with your Irish puta."

"Get on your horse and get out of here!" A thin line of perspiration beaded Sean's upper lip.

Baldomar lifted his hands until they hovered directly over the pistols he wore strapped around his waist. "Señor Flana-g-an, you are the man who murdered my cousins."

Without the whisper of a warning, Sean took a step forward and sent his right fist crashing into Baldomar's face. The blow exploded like a rifle shot, shattering the stillness of the after-noon.

The impact sent Baldomar staggering backward. His knees folded under him as he slid along the ground and came to rest under a gnarled oak. -Blood oozed from his nose and streamed from one side of his bat-tered mouth.

Sean's hand rested his knife. "Get up and get out of here. Gomez, while you still can."

Panic spiraled inside Marisa. Nothing short of Sean's death would appease Baldomar's wounded pride now. "Ay Dios mio!" She knelt beside Baldomar, and touched the sides of his bleeding mouth with her fingers--. Using her apron, she wiped blood from his mouth and nose. "Please be all right." She cradled his head in her lap. If Sean killed Baldomar, Sheriff Cameron would pursue him to the ends of the earth.

Baldomar's eyelids fluttered, then lifted. A muscle jumped along his jaw line as consciousness returned.

"Please go." Marisa struggled to pull air into her dry lungs. "You must do nothing until we find the bag."

Still dazed, Baldomar sat up. "You are right, of course." His eyes rolled around in their sockets, as he moved his head slowly from side to side.

Swallowing her revulsion, Marisa brushed her lips across his damp brow. He had to believe her concern was for him. The aura of danger that alerted her senses, and sharpened her wits, gave credibility to her whispered words. "For my sake, please go."

Baldomar frowned. "I understand." Steadying himself against Marisa, he struggled to his feet. Grimacing in pain, he scanned Sean's belligerent figure with ruthless calm. "You have made a mistake, -Fla-nag-an." He backed toward his horse. "We will meet again when the odds are not in your favor, and then Señor, I will kill you."

Baldomar raised himself into his saddle. "Señor Flanagan, I did not force Marisa. She was a most willing participant. We share what you could call a mutual attraction." A kick in the flanks sent his horse racing down the dusty road.

Marisa untied her bloody apron, then tossed it toward the stoop. "Do you know what you've done? Baldomar Gomez will kill you now."

"I'm not afraid of Baldomar Gomez." Pulling his eyes from the receding horse and rider, Sean turned his angry gaze on Marisa. "You have some ex-plaining to do, little girl."

"I have nothing to say to you." She grabbed her broom, and began to walk to-ward the cook house. "You'd better leave before Baldomar comes back."

"That cowardly bastard wouldn't dare come back here." In two long steps Sean was beside her. "Don't turn your back on me." He fell in step behind her.

-"Do you know what a dangerous enemy you've made?" Marisa quickened her pace. "Baldomar will kill you for what you have done to him."

"What was he doing here?" Sean demanded through clenched teeth.

"He came to offer his sympathy," Marisa -glanced over her shoulder at her pursuer. "Everybody in Bexar knows you spent last night with Megan McGuire."

He paled under his ruddy skin. "Megan is of no importance to me. Finding you here with Baldomar, is. What did you do, run to him the minute you were out of my sight?"-

"If you think that, you are a fool!" She spat the words at him.

"I'm a fool?" His tone slid from sinister to taunting. "You were fool enough to let the man take liberties." Reaching for her arm, he pulled her to a stop. "Do you think he will let you go now?"

She tried to pull her arm way.-"I'm not afraid of Baldomar." The quiver in her voice gave lie to her brave words.

"Well, you should be!" He pulled her around to face him. "Don't you know by now how he feels about you?"

Marisa put one hand on her hip-. Letting her voice fall, she mimicked his brogue to perfection. "-Saints preserve us, I do believe you're jealous." She began to make long stride in the direction of the cook house.

Sean followed in hot pursuit. "I'm not jealous, just protective of what's mine."

Marisa stopped in her tracks. "I don't belong to you."

"You are my wife". Exasperation was etched in every line of his hand-some face. "And I did promise Hector I'd protect you."

Once more Marisa made hasty steps toward the cook house. "I'm releasing you from that promise."

"I didn't make the promise to you." Sean was practically stepping on her heels. "And you do need protection because when you deal with a man like Baldomar Gomez, you're asking for trouble."

Pulling the door of the cook house open, Marisa squeezed through, then let it slam inches from Sean's face. "I al-ready have trouble. I have you for a husband!"

Yanking the door open, Sean followed her inside. "Will you put that broom down, and tell me what Baldomar Gomez was doing here?"

Marisa was too engrossed in her own misery to care that -Sean was frustrated and angry. Tossing the broom in the nearest corner, she faced him. "How long are you going to follow me around?"

"Until I get you to listen to what I have to say." Sean's anger was replaced by an emotion she couldn't define. He bowed his head and rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. "I know Baldomar is not your lover, -but I know he would like to be."

"That's none of your business. We agreed. Equal privileges, remember?"

"I'm only trying to protect you." Sean leaned against the door frame, and pulled his hand across his face. "For once in your life, Marisa, will you tell the truth?"

Marisa dropped down on Chico's cot. Considering what Sean had done to Baldomar, did she have any choice? "Maybe I should." She sighed her ambivalence. "All right, I will."

"That would be a welcome change."

Folding her hands in her lap, Marisa laced her fingers together. "Baldomar knows about the rawhide bag Papa left you. He thinks it might hold a clue to finding the silver mine." She studied his expression for some sign he believed what she was saying, and found none.

Cautiously, Sean asked, "Did you tell him we have the title to the mine?"

She brought her head up sharply. "I did not! I didn't tell Baldomar anything."

"Just what did you do with Baldomar?" His green eyes narrowed. "I will deal with Baldomar Gomez later, now tell me how much he knows about the mine."

"I don't know what Baldomar knows. I just know that he wants Papa's rawhide bag, and he intends to have it."

"My raw-hide bag," Sean corrected. "Does Gomez have any idea that the title to the mine was in that bag?" He leaned against the door frame, looking relaxed and at ease. She knew he was as tense and as wary as a cornered animal.

"All I know is, he wants me to help him find Papa's rawhide bag." She watched Sean's face set in flinty lines. "Maybe he suspects."

"What else did he want?"

Anger tightened her face. "That's none of your business."

"What were you supposed to get out of the deal?" His question rode on an insolent sneer.

"I don't understand what you mean," she countered, in a sugary tone that was calculated to infuriate him.

It did. "I mean what, exactly, did he offer you to get you to help him get his hands on my bag?" Suddenly, vehemently, he added, "Every female exacts her price. I know you wanted something. What did he offer you?"

His sudden attack caught her unawares. "What he thought I wanted most, I suppose." Stung by his insulting assessment of her entire gender, she added, "He offered me money, love, and himself."

"The truth, Marisa, remember, you promised to tell the truth?" The scar along Sean's jaw line twitched as if it had a life of its own.

He was not going to be put off. "Baldomar said we could go away together. He said he'd buy me a castle or an estate, if that was what I wanted." From the corner of her eye, she studied Sean's face. He could have been wearing a mask, for all his blank expression told her. Only his scar betrayed him.

"What else did he say?" Sliding his hands into his pockets, he leaned against the wall, and waited.

"He said he'd like to dress me in satin and silk." Remembering made her frown. "He said he'd like to undress me too. He said he'd . . ."

Sean interrupted with a ferocity that left her gasping. "What the hell do you mean he wants to undress you?"

"Baldomar told me that he was a splendid lover." Sean had asked for the truth. He would damn well get

it! "He said now that I was a married woman and that I should be excited about being undressed by a man, and he told me I was lovely, and beautiful and . . ."

"Shut up Marisa." She knew, almost instinctively, that he was fighting a primitive urge to strike her.

"You asked for the truth," she reminded him, "If you didn't want to hear what he said, why did you ask?"

His anger beat at her. "It may be true that Baldomar said those things, but I doubt that he meant it for the truth."

"He did mean it," A cold chill climbed up Marisa's back bone. "That's what scares me."

"Don't you have sense enough to know when a man is trying to seduce you?"

"I think I know by now. Even though his approach was quite different from yours." A fresh rigor of anger racked her. She was saying too much, but her desire to strike back conquered her common sense. "If I mistook sweet words for caring, it was an honest mistake."

"Are you trying to make me believe I'm the only man who ever had you?" Those jeering words cut across her heart like a sharp knife.

"I'm not trying to make you believe anything. I'm telling you what Baldomar said to me."

"And why would he take such liberties? Did you smile at him with those innocent little girl eyes and entice him with that lovely little body?" His hard gaze slid over her. "Maybe you are the instigator of this little plot. You do seem to know how to use your feminine charms to get what you want."

Her eyes rounded, in honest surprise. "There's no plot. And I didn't entice Baldomar."

"Do you expect me to believe that? You certainly weren't timid about using your sexual charms to entice me into marrying you."

Shame, and remembered humiliation brought a speedy denial. "That's not what I did."

"Don't lie, not again. You fell into my arms and begged me to make love to you. You rolled around under me and moaned and cried for me to take you. I couldn't resist what you so freely offered. I think you did the same thing to the gullible Mr. Gomez. He didn't have a prayer against the likes of you."

The sudden pain his words inflicted caused her to stand quickly. "You're right, I am a liar-." The pain inside her sharpened and grew. "I must have told you a hundred lies, and I tricked you into marrying me." That pain exploded and fragmented into a million little splinters of agony.

He smiled, a grizzly grimace that made his scar stand out in stark relief along his cheek bone. "Confession time, Marisa?"

"I'm trying to be honest."

"And you find that difficult?"

"No." She had promised him the truth. Her teeth gnawed at her bottom lip. "Yes."

"I'm listening."

"I'm releasing you from any agreement you have with me-." She tasted the dregs of utter humiliation. "You have no reason to feel obligated because of the deal you made with Papa either. He lied to you too, from the very beginning."

She reached for her broom. "You're free to go. I have work to do. I'm sure you will excuse me."

He was still leaning against the door and staring at her with a look of quizzical reproach on his face.

Dropping to her knees, Marisa slung her broom around under Chico's cot as if her life depended on it. "I'll sell you my half of the store." A long swipe sent Chico's rawhide bag, along with assorted bits of food and feathers, scooting across the floor.

"You're not about to part with your half of that store." Chico's bag striking the side of his boot caused Sean to pause and look down. "Where did this come from?"

Marisa stood, and leaned on her broom handle. "It be-longs to Chico. Put it down. It's his prize possession."

Sean turned the bag over in his hands. "This looks exact-ly like the bag your father left me."

"It is exactly like Papa's bag." Tossing the broom aside, she reached out. "There's noth-ing . . . " -Her hand halted in midair. He wouldn't believe anything she told him. "Grandpa and Uncle Oscar had them made a long time ago." She let her hand fall to her side.

Sean dropped down on Chico's cot, opened the bag and ran his fin-gers around the top of the inner lining. "It's there! That same little hidden slot we found in Hector's bag."

"I told you they were alike." Soon enough he would know, that a little slot was all he would find.

Sean searched the hidden pocket. -"Nothing, not a damn thing."

"What did you think you would find?" Marisa was enjoy-ing his dis-appointment.

"I wasn't sure. I thought maybe the map to the mine would be there." He laid the bag on the cot.

Marisa sat beside him and began to inspect the bag's contents. "I could have told you the secret pocket was empty."

"How did you know?"

"I looked for myself." A tiny bird, long dead, and mummi-fied, was stuck in a far corner of the bag.

"When?" Sean asked.

"Last night." Marisa turned the bag over and shook it. A -collec-tion of rocks, leaves, bits of rancid food, and feathers, fell onto the bed. The remains of the dead bird stuck fast to the bag's lining.

How disappointed Chico must have been when his little bird had died. Marisa pulled the remains from the bag. The lining ripped and dis-lodged.

To her dismay she spied a folded paper -caught be-tween the lining and the inside of the old bag. Slamming it shut, she fastened the clasp. "I'll put this back where Chico had it."

"Not so fast." Sean grabbed the bag, pulled the paper from inside, and gazed at it with a mix-ture of fascina-tion and disbelief.

Maris-a didn't have to ask what he held in his clenched hand, she knew. They had found the map to the silver mine.

Chapter Nineteen

A jagged bolt of lightening ripped across the horizon, followed by a low-pitched rumble of thunder. The spring storm that had threatened through the long, hot day, hit with sudden force. A rash, restless wind whistled around the eaves of the little cook house. Rain began to fall, slapping the dry ground, sending tiny splutters of moisture flying in all directions.

The magnitude of their discovery set off a storm of emotions inside Marisa. As suddenly as they had appeared, those emotions receded, leaving her empty and gripped by a cold dread. "Chico had it all the time."

Sean lifted the yellow sheet and smoothed its ancient creases. His hands shook as he pushed the lines into submission. "It's a map showing the way to the mine." His head moved from side to side, as if he could-n't believe his own words. "Look at this."

Marisa's breath caught in her throat. "Papa looked for this little sheet of paper all of his life."

Oblivious to anything Marisa was saying, Sean pointed to the neat line of figures inscribed down one side of the paper. "This is a tally of each day's take of ore from the mine." Computing rapidly, he used his fingers to keep count.

Marisa gasped. "What does it mean?"

"The members of the expedition must have worked the mine for weeks before the massacre took place. They not only mined the silver, they smelted it, and poured it into ingots." He whistled through his teeth. "Look at those figures! In less than thirty days they poured forty-two five-pound bars of pure silver. My God, there must be a king's ransom stashed at that mine!"

Leaping from the cot, he pulled Marisa up and into a bear hug. "Marisa, me darlin' do you now what this means? It means we're rich! Rich! Beyond our wildest dreams."

Marisa closed her eyes and hung onto Sean to steady herself. All these years, she had only half believed this place existed outside the minds of greedy men. It was the fairy tale, often told, and never believed; the impossible dream that faded into illusion with the dawning day; the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that nobody ever expected to find. Her knees buckled, as she sank back down onto the cot. "I can't believe it!"

"Believe it," Sean exulted, "It's real!"

"All those useless murders, and all the time Chico was carrying the map around in his little rawhide bag."

Sean eased down beside Marisa, and put his arm around her shoulder. "Marisa, we must be very careful. No one else must know about what we found here to-day."

"Surely, you don't plan to go looking for that mine." Marisa was appalled at such a thought. "That place is crawling with Comanches. You'd be dead and scalped before you'd gone ten miles across the Comanchero."

"I'm going," Sean declared. "I've been through that country before. I can make it."

"Don't be a fool. Do you want to face a band of

Comanche warriors just to look for a mine that might not even be there?"

He laughed, a sound that started deep in his throat, and escaped in little guffaws through his mouth and nose. "For that much silver I would brave the devils in the pits of hell."

"Then you will do it alone. I want no part of such a foolish venture." Marisa pushed his hand from her shoulder, and twisted to face him. "That mine is cursed. Even if you found it, you'd never make it out with the silver."

"Nonsense. I'm going, and I will come back, with the silver. Marisa, you have to trust me."

Marisa's jaw sagged. "Trust you? To do what? Go out on the Comanchero and get killed?"

"No, trust me that I can find the mine and bring the silver back."

"Back to where?" Marisa asked. Before the words were out of her mouth, she wondered why she had even bothered to inquire.

"Back to Bexar, where else? We have to find a safe place to hide those ingots, and that won't be an easy task." His hand returned to rest on her shoulder. "I can understand why the Gomezes and the Perezes were willing to kill for this information." His fingers dug into her soft flesh. "Two hundred and ten pounds of pure silver. That's a wagon load of rich-es."

"A wagon load?" Marisa had been thinking in terms of a bag or, at most, a chest.

"Yes, and we must find some safe place to stash it."

Did he think she was a complete fool? "Are you trying to make me believe you will come back to Bexar when you have all that silver in your possession?"

"Of course, I will, Darlin'." The words slid off his tongue with appalling ease.

"Darlin'?" A warning sounded inside Marisa's head. Only minutes before she had been a scheming liar. Why now, should she suddenly become his darling?

"Where else would I go?" Sean's hands moved to caress the back of her neck. "But home to my wife?"

"Your wife?" She echoed inanely.

Her words went unheeded. Sean was lost to everything but thoughts of silver. "As soon as I can arrange for the mules and supplies to make the trip, I'll go after that silver." His eyes glinted. "Marisa, do you realize what this means? We will be rich, rich! The world will be ours." He was echoing, almost word for word, what Baldomar has said to her earlier.

A sobering jolt of realization sent everything falling into place. Of course, he was calling her darling, and

promising her the world. He had to keep her from telling anyone about the mine until he could go for the silver. A flood tide of unbearable pain welled up inside her.

"I've been your wife for one day and one night, and you chose to spend that one night with another woman," she reminded him bitterly.

"Marisa," He managed to look contrite. "I'm sorry about that."

"Sorry?" she asked, her voice rising.

"You said I should apologize; I have." He smiled that incredibly disarming smile. "Now, can we get on with this more important business?"

Did he think an apology and a sweet smile could make her forget what he had done? She held tight to her anger because it was her only defense against this virile, forceful man. "I don't want an apology, and I don't want to be your wife any longer, either."

"Darlin', you don't mean that." He brushed his hand across the soft length of her hair, as his lips touched her cheek.

The feel of his mouth on her face made her weak. "Yes, I do." Her body, swaying toward him.

"Then I will have to change your mind." He had no qualms about using his sexual prowess to seduce her into going along with his plan. "We're partners, remember?" Sliding his arm around her waist, he whispered, "Let me show you how much you mean to me."

Her heart broke and shattered inside her. "Don't do this, Sean, please." She tried to pull away. "You're free to go. Walk away, and don't look back."

He dropped his hands to his sides. "I can't do that, Mari-sa. I thought I could, but I can't."

Standing, Marisa smoothed her dress with her hands. "I won't tell anyone what we found here today. That's a promise."

He reached for her, but she was too quick for him.

Stepping to one side, she begged, "Stop, please."

"Mari-sa, darlin'," He made no move to touch her, but she could feel his embrace, "give me a chance to explain."

Even knowing all that she did about this renegade, she was almost persuaded to believe him, for there was in his voice a heartfelt ring of sincerity. "I know what you're trying to do. I don't believe a word you're saying."

"You have no idea what I'm trying to do," The emerald brightness of his eyes clouded. "I'm not sure I know myself."

The rain beat an uneven rhythm against the sides of the house. "You're about to make a-- fool's journey that will lead to your death." Marisa ran a weary hand across her face. "A month from now those red curls will be hanging from some Comanche brave's belt, and your bones will be laying bare and bleached, somewhere out on the Comanchero."

Very softly, he asked, "Would you care, Marisa?"

Do you care, Marisa?"

She was inching backward, toward the door. "I wouldn't want to know anyone had met such a fate. Don't you know what Comanches do to captives before they kill them?"

"I know. I've seen, and I'm still going after that silver."

"And I'm going to the house before the rain gets worse." Marisa reached behind her for the door knob.

She had opened the door before he spoke again, "Stop-!" Slamming the door with one hand, he pulled her around to face him with the other. "You are going to listen to me!"

"You can't make me stay here." She tried to shake free of his hold on her shoulders.

"I think I can. Do you want me to prove it?" His lips brushed across hers with a soft, feathery kiss.

"No." Hot color stained her face.

He smiled as he touched her blushing cheek with the tips of his fingers. "I think yes."

She had lost the battle and it hadn't even begun. "What do you want to tell me?"

"Ah, that's better." A note of uncom-promising obstinacy threaded his command. "Sit down."

She sat, and folded her hands in her lap. "I won't help you go to your death looking for that mine. Why should I?" Lifting her eyes, she met his rigid gaze. "I know you don't trust me. I can't blame you. I've never given you any reason to, but you can believe this, I won't tell anyone about the mine."

"What I have to say has nothing to do with the mine." He gave her an oblique look, then grimaced, and turned away. "God . . . I can't believe . . ."

The impact of their discovery had overwhelmed him. "I can't believe it either." Marisa pointed to the map. "But here it is."

"This is not about the mine."

"What then?" she asked, not sure that she really wanted to know.

"It's about us . . . -you and me."

He was manipulating her again. But she waited, resigned to hearing whatever it was he felt he must tell her. Reminding her-self, even as he began to speak, that he was not to be trusted.

Tilting his head, he scanned the low ceiling. "Our past always shapes our future. Old dreams, old memories hold on long after they should have been laid to rest." Dropping his head, he let his eyes lock into hers with the force of a physical blow. "All your life the silver mine has been there, never quite real, yet refusing to let go. It made your father do things he would never have done under different circumstances."

She was amazed that he could understand so well how the search for the mine had colored every phase of her father's existence, and spilled over to alter and transform her own life. "That's true. How did you know?"

"I know what it's like to wrestle daily with an uncom-promising past."

"What happened to you?" Against her better judgment, almost against her will, she felt herself being pulled into the snare of his soft words. "Tell me about it."

He moved restlessly across the dirt floor. "It's not a pretty story. I was young and vulnerable, and I reacted in the worst way possible, not just once, but over and over again."

Marisa couldn't believe she felt sympathy for this silver tongued devil, but she did. She had to remind herself that he wanted her silence, -and he would go to any lengths to secure it. "What did you do over and over again?"

He smiled ruefully. "I can't count the times in the last nine years I have walked away from a woman without so much as a backward look."

Marisa was knifed by a sharp stab of jealousy. "Why are you telling me this?"

He stood with his feet far apart, and his hands on his hips. "I want you to understand why I did such terrible things, why It always gave me a shame-less sense of pleasure to end an affair, to break a heart."

Shadows were collecting in the corners of the little room. Sean dropped down on Chico's cot, and let his head fall into his hands. "Because something that happened in my past goaded me into seeking revenge." The coaxing timbre of his voice rang with an honesty that was difficult to disregard. Raising his face, he stared directly into her disbelieving eyes. "But it's over now, don't you see? You have set me free."

Confounded, she stepped back, and hung onto the door knob for support. "How? What have I done?"

"You have made me see how foolish it is to hang onto the past. What you and I must think of now, is the future."

She didn't know what he was talking about, and she wasn't sure he did. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm telling you, darlin' Marisa, that I want our marriage to be a true union. Your father once told me that everybody settles down sometime. Maybe it's time I did just that."

"You won't live long enough to settle down." She had almost been lured into the web of words he had so cleverly spun. "I will be your widow before I have a chance to be your wife."

"But you would be willing to settle down with me when I come back?"

"And you dared call me a liar?" She realized suddenly and with a jolt of fear that she would have traded years off her life for some assurance that he meant what he was saying. "Do you think I am fool enough to believe your lies?"

"I will find some way to make you believe me, even if it takes forever." His eyes held hers in a challenging stare. "You won't get away. There's not a woman alive I can't have, if I want her."

His words struck terror in her heart. He wanted her silence, not a commitment to their marriage. Grabbing for the door, she flung it open, dashed out into the stormy twilight, running as if the hounds of hell pursued her.

Sean picked up the map, folded it, and put it into his pocket. Then he followed Marisa out into the falling rain.

Chapter Twenty

An April chill settled in the dank corners of the little house. Marisa sat in the raw-hide chair, and pulled her shawl up under her chin. A dozen dis-sent-ing thoughts chased them-selves around in her head. She had told Sean that he could have the store, and his freedom, and he had re-fused both offers. Why? The truth left her raw with pain. He wasn't coming back to her, ever. Even if he found the sil-ver, and es-caped with his scalp intact, she would never see him again.

But she had to admit, he was clever. He knew exact-ly what to say to guarantee her silence. That was the kindest interpretation she could put on his enticing proposal.

"Why should this make her feel so wrenched?" She forced herself to admit the truth. Regardless of what he did, she loved him.

She wrapped her shawl, and her misery a little closer. She had never meant for it to happen. She didn't want to love a man who was com-pletely without scruples and utterly ruthless. His would do anything to find the silver mine. That in-cluded telling Marisa that he wanted her for his wife. She wiped her eyes with the corner of her shawl.

A thread of consolation ran through the fabric of her misery. -In a matter of days Sean would be gone forever. In the meantime, no more hoping for the impossible. She forced herself to rehearse the events of the past two weeks, as if remembering would shore up her sagging resolve. The man was a wander-er, a vagabond, and an outlaw. He had no roots, no ties, nor did he want any. Maybe there was reward for his capture. By his own admission, more than once he had run afoul of the law. He cer-tainly had no qualms about becoming a hired gun, or killing Tito and Felipe Gomez.

How her heart did argue with her head. She was almost to the point of forgiving him, when she remem-bered his admission that he enjoyed hurting women, sim-ply because they were women. That, in turn, trig-gered a remem-brance of his esc-apade of the night before. Had he slept with Megan to hurt her? Her heart con-vulsed at the thought of him making love to another woman. Carmen's taunting words ran through her brain like the refrain of an old melody. El te romperá tu corazón. He will break your heart. He will break your heart.

That prophecy had been fulfilled. He had broken her heart, and she realized now, with wisdom born of mis-ery, that he was capable of doing so much more. If she let him, he would destroy her.

There was no love in this savage man, not for her, not for any woman. Something in his past, something dark and demonic, had scared his soul as well as his face. Hadn't he made a mock-ery of the love she offered him? Burying her head in her hands, she wept bitter tears.

Shadows moved like apparitions across the walls of the parlor. Outside the rain came down in torrents. A howling wind blew through the cot-tonwood trees.-

"Tears Marisa?" The broguish voice fractured the heavy silence.

Looking up she saw Sean slouching- with careless grace, against the door frame. He --smiled and she felt her resolve slip-ping away. She clutched her shawl a little nearer. "I am not crying." She was lying again, but not without reason. He must never know that she had fallen in love with him.

"Are you cold?" His voice slid over her nerve ends like a lingering caress.

"No." She closed her eyes. -His face etched itself into her brain, and hovered there.

"Are you hungry?" It was not what he said, it was the way he said it. Why did the most tedious of words from him, in that intimate, suggestive brogue, send her into a lurch of de-sire? -She chased his

image from her mind, and hung onto her silence, wearing it like a shield.

"Talk to me Marisa."

-"Chico will cook supper, he always does." She turned from his bold stare.

"To hell with food, and Chico." Sean moved across the room, and folded his tall body onto the horse-hair couch. "Marisa, we have to talk about this."

She heard the concern in his voice. She could so easily have mis-taken it for tender-ness. "I won't tell anyone about the silver mine. I know you -have no reason to trust

me . . . "

A bolt of anger flashed through the stormy green of his eyes, then disappeared, as he tamped down the dark emotion that had sparked it. "Please-. . . do-n't. This is not about the mine. It's about us, about you and me."

"There is no us, Sean." Tenderness and a great swell of love surged through her. She couldn't bear the thought of hurting him, and he was looking hurt. She was a fool! "Sean, please . . . "

He raised his hand. "Will you give me a chance to tell you what I wanted to tell you in the cook room, before you ran away?" He added an- uncharacteris-tic, "Please?"

"I don't want any part of that mine. You can have it all." After a cautious silence, she added, "I know what you think . . . "

"Damn it Marisa," Shooting to his feet, Sean strode to the fireplace, leaned against the mantle, and gazed down into the fire. "You have no idea what I think."

Her sad, anxious eyes followed his every move.

He turned toward her, and smiled such a charming little boy smile, that the aching agony --inside her sharpened into exquisite pain.

"There could be an us, darlin'. We could have more than a partner-ship. We could have a marriage."

They couldn't, but she let herself revel in the fantasy of his sweet words. "Do you think so?"

"I know so, Marisa." He moved across the sod floor, and came down on the horsehair couch, directly in front of her. "Some day, we might even have children."

He was making it all sound like such a warm, wonderful possibility. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. "A child? A baby?"

"Would you like to bear my child, Marisa? Would you like to give me a son or a daughter?" He was smiling that devas-tating, seductive smile. "Maybe both?"

She had to stop him, before his smile and his words made her forget reality. Jumping to her feet, she cried,-"Stop it!" Some primitive instinct told her she must escape.-"Do you think I am a complete fool?"

He took a step toward her. "I think you're beautiful,

darl-in', beaut-iful, desirable . . . " He held out his arms. "Come to me. Let me show you how sweet our union can be. Let me love you."

If only he could love her. -She willed her-self to stand per-fect-ly still. She would not be seduced again. "I do understand. I know what you are trying to do."

He covered the distance between them in one bold step. Wrapping his arms around her, he buried his

face in the soft cloud of her dark hair.

Against every sane resolve, she felt her body

surrender. "No," she moaned, "No."

"Oh, yes, darlin'." His soft brogue stroked her raw, aching emotions.

The desire to surrender was overwhelming. She fought with every ounce of strength in her body.

-Placing her hands against the wall of his chest, she pushed away. "No."

"No? You know you want to, Marisa. Why do you refuse?" That husky brogue was pulling her into the erotic spell he wove so well. "Let me make you mine, for now and always." Two weeks, two days, even two hours ago, those words would have been cause for ecstatic surrender. "Let me go, Sean." She had to resist the lure of his enticing words.

He caught and held her close to him. "I want you, Marisa," he whispered, "and I know you want me."

His soft words, the smell of him, the feel of his skin beneath her fingers was bringing her to the brink of disaster. She was a hair's breadth from abandoning any pretext of resistance. How wonderful it would be to surrender to the seducing sweetness of his embrace.

She closed her eyes, and conjured up the image of

Car-men's taunting face. A cold shiver began at the base of her skull, and spread, like ice water, down her back bone. "El te ropera tu corazon."

Those words called to mind the bitter memory of the last time Sean had made love to her. He had used her then, just as he was trying to use her now. -Ducking under his arms, she took a step backward. "I won't, I can't."

He argued, "You will. I know you won't refuse the pleasure I can give you."

"Go away, Sean," she begged. "Go out on the Comanchero and look for your wagon load of silver. Go let the Comanches kill you. I don't care."

"I'm going, but I'll be back. You're my wife, Marisa. I expect you to be waiting here for me when I return."

"You don't want me. You don't even like me." A jewel of tears crusted her long lashes. "You don't trust me. I don't think you could ever trust any woman."

Sean leaned against the mantle, and crossed one booted foot over the other. "Is it that obvious?-"

Outside the rain had turned to a driving downpour.

Those magnificent mocking eyes slid over her. Pointing to the rawhide chair, he said, "Sit down."

She stepped back until her legs touched the chair, then let her body fall.

He sat across from her, and took her hand in his. "Once, many years ago, I fancied myself in love with what I thought to be a fine lady. She betrayed me, used me, drove me from my home and family."

A dozen dissenting emotions were churning around inside Marisa. They were whetted by a rabid curiosity. "When? Where did this happen?"

"Another time and another place, half a world away." He lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed the pulse that beat at her wrist. "She's gone now. You chased her memory from my mind and her image from my heart. Emily is forever

banished."

"Who is Emily?"

He smiled, a sad, resigned smile, that told her so much. Emily had broken his heart.

"Did you love her?"

"She taught me that there is no such thing as love."

"Do you hate her?" Marisa's heart was heavy with
com-pas-sion.

His sad smile was bringing her to the brink of tears again.

"I did, once."

"And now?" she asked on the end of a trembling sigh.

"It seems I have exorcised my last pursuing demon. Emily doesn't matter anymore."

More than anything in the world she wanted to believe him, and she knew that to do so would be sheer folly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you do matter, Marisa." Sighing, he added, "I want you to under-stand, and to forgive me."

He was breaking her heart! How desperately she longed to believe his seducing words. "I forgive you because . . ." She almost said because I love you. The declaration hung in her throat. "Because . . ." Her heart was ham-mering.

"Because why, Marisa?"

"Because that explains so many things. Now please, will you think about buying my half of the store? You can give me your answer tomorrow."

A green fire ignited in the depths of his flashing eyes. She had seen that look before. He was exercising an inordi-nate amount of self control to keep from venting his

frus-tration on her. Further talk was useless. She jumped to her feet. "I'm going to help Chi-co."

He stood, towering over her, tall and almost menacing. "There will be no more talk of selling me your half of the store, or dissolving our marriage. I won't leave, Marisa. I have been runn-ing for nine years, running from my past, running from Emily's clinging memory, running from any lasting commi-tment." A laugh punctuated his decla-ration. "I am through running. When I return, it will be to you, and our life together."

Marisa bolted for the door. She had to escape from the seductive snare of his words and the biting mockery of his laughter.

Chapter Twenty-One

Marisa helped Chico with the evening meal. Chico's presence, his endless chatter, his unfailing good humor, lifted her spirits. But Chico was not fooled. "Marisa's sad again."

"A little." Marisa put food on a tray.

Dropping to his knees, Chico began to feel around under his cot. "Chico has a surprise for Marisa." He reached a little farther under. "In his bag."

"A surprise? What is it?" Chico's surprise was long gone, swept away earlier by Marisa's -broom.

Chico lifted his bag onto the cot. "Chico's bag." He patted its side.

"Where did you get this bag, Chico?" Marisa was care-ful to keep her voice low and calm.

"Papa's bag," Chico answered as he stroked the fine leather.

"Did your papa give you this bag?" Marisa watched for any some sign of fear on Chico's face, and saw none. "When did your papa give you this bag?"

Chico's hands flew to catch the front of his shirt. "Papa said, 'Ride, Chico. Go home, Chico.' Chico was afraid. Chico rode fast." With each syllable, Chic-o's voice escalat-ed, as his eyes rounded with remembered fear. Jumping to his feet, he screamed, "Indians! Ride fast or, you will die."

Marisa hurried to put her arms around the frightened little man. "It's all right, Chico. You're safe. It's all right."

After a few minutes, Chico relaxed and leaned against Marisa. "Chico's safe?"

"Yes." Marisa vowed, to never again broach the subject of that accursed silver mine to Chico. But his brief outburst had confirmed what she already suspec-ted. Someone at that mine had sent Chico back to Bexar with the rawhide bag in his care. Chico must have escaped from the site while the battle with the Indians was still rag-ing. The memory of what hap-pened that terrible day had driven him mad.

Marisa patted his arm. "Let's take supper to the house. Sean is waiting for us."

They sat through a dismal meal. Chico, with his uncanny ability to sense Marisa's moods, chanted, "Marisa's sad." Sticking his thumbs in his mouth, and his fingers in his ears, he made a ludicrous face. "Smile Marisa, be happy Maris-a."

"Enough of that." Sean's glower-ing stare and sharp words intimidated Chico into straight-faced silen-ce.

Marisa snapped, "Leave him alone!" She would not let Sean mistreat Chico. "Chico may be simple minded, but he's also very sensi-tive."

Chico interrupted with an insipid, "Chico's sens . . . Chico's sens . . . Chico's what, Mari-sa?"

"Chico's funny." Marisa's defiant gaze dared Sean to dispute what she said. She smiled in Chi-co's direction. "Eat your supper, Chi-co."

Chico picked up his fork, then shot Sean an amazingly lucid I-told-you-so look before he began to shovel food into his mouth.

After a short wintry silence, Chico began, again, to

contort his face into misshapen little grimaces. "Chico's funny," he chortl-ed. "Chico has on a funny face."

Marisa patted his hand. "You're funny, Chico," she said without feeling.

The rain lessened. Chico, unable to elicit a smile from Marisa, or anything more than a grunt from Sean, crept from the room, and wandered off into the wet night.

Marisa pushed her chair back. "I'm very tired." She moved toward her bedroom, half expecting Sean to stop her. He didn't. She was almost to the door before he said, "Good night, darlin'."

"Good night." Marisa closed the door, and laid down on her bed. She must be out of her mind. She had wanted Sean to come after her, even as she willed him to keep his distance. The magnitude of her own self-deceit hit her suddenly, and with compelling force.

She was too tired to unravel his actions, or lack of them tonight. She would look for answers tomorrow. Slipping out of her clothing, she stretched out on the bed, and pulled her blanket up under her chin.

A scraping sound from the parlor brought her to her feet. She wrapped her blanket around her, tiptoed to the door, and pulled it open. Sean was standing on a chair, running his hands along the edges of the parlor windows. Surprised by his strange actions, she asked, "What are you doing?"

He gazed down at her from his lofty position. "Securing the windows. Go to bed Marisa."

"I can't sleep. You're making too much noise."

"I've completed my task." He hopped from the chair. "Try to get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day."

"Why are you securing the windows?" Marisa's concern was giving way to impatience.

"Because we could have a caller tonight, a most unwelcome caller."

"You think Baldomar will come here tonight?" That was an eventuality Marisa had not considered.

"Tonight, tomorrow, sometime soon. He wants that bag, and he wants you even more, I think."

She studied his set features. There was nothing to be read from the expression on his face. He might have been telling her that the rain would stop tomorrow. "Baldomar wouldn't come here. He knows what happened to Felipe and Tito."

"Desperate men often resort to desperate measures." Sean moved toward the room he now claimed as his own. "And make no mistake about it, Baldomar Gomez is a desperate man, desperate and angry, and more than a little possessive. He thinks I claim things that are rightfully his. He will come for them, and soon. When he does, I'll be waiting for him."

Marisa followed him, her bare feet making slap-ping sounds on the floor. "He's going to try to kill you."

Sean glanced over his shoulder. "I know."

Fear, and love for this strange man, wrung from Marisa a confession that otherwise could not have been dragged from her by torture. "Papa was afraid of Baldomar. I don't think he was ever afraid of anything or anyone else in his entire life, but he was afraid of Baldomar Gomez."

Sean began to pull the blankets from Hector's bed and wrap them around a lumpy pillow. "I know that, too."

"Papa always said that Baldomar was cunning and ruthless." Marisa leaned against the door frame.

Sean worked swiftly at arranging the blanket and pillow along the bed. With deft hands, he creased and folded them to look like a sleeping body. Then standing back, he admired his handiwork. "That

should do it."

"Do what?" His strange behavior mystified Marisa.

Sean picked up the remaining pillow and tucked a blanket under his arm. "I remember what happened to the last man when fell asleep in this bed." He moved toward the door, his tread soundless, his movements graceful. "Go to bed,

Marisa."

Recollection of that terrible morning ached through Marisa's memory. "I don't think I can sleep now."

Sardonic humor pulled Sean's mouth into a smile. "Is that an invitation?"

"Invitation to what?" she asked, then paled as the full impact of his words hit her. "No."

"Then go to bed."

"What will you do when Baldomar comes?"

"Kill him."

That cold declaration sent a shiver up Marisa's spine. "Why are you sleeping on the couch?" The threat of Baldomar breaking into the house had apparently chased any romantic thoughts from Sean's mind.

"I'm sleeping in front of your door." He pushed her inside her room. "It's not the place I would prefer to spend the night. But that's where I'll be, if you need me."

His protectiveness touched her. She could almost believe he cared for her. "Do you think Baldomar would harm me?"

"He wants revenge for what I did to his cousins."

"Then he would . . ." Marisa shivered with revulsion.

"Exactly." Sean dropped a kiss on her cheek. "Go to bed."

Marisa obeyed. Stretching out on the bed, she closed her eyes. Morning seemed eons away.

The sleep that she was sure would never come, must have overtaken her, for somewhere in the dark corridors of her unconscious mind, she heard the sound of many marching feet. An old nightmare returned to haunt her.

She hovered between the dark realm of sleep and the perceptive domain of wakefulness, terrified by the blackness of her half-awakened ordeal.

The sobs that had pulled her toward wakefulness, came from her own parched throat, but she couldn't stop the disembodied voice from crying out in tormented agony. Rolling her head about on the pillow, she struggled to escape the clutches of the pursuing nightmare. Suddenly strong arms pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Make them go away." She cried, "Make them go away!"

"Marisa, it's all right." Hands on her shoulders shook her to wakefulness. "It was only a bad dream. No one is going to hurt you."

Shaken to consciousness, she whispered, "Papa?" Her body relaxed, only to be pulled into a bow of renewed tension. It couldn't be Papa. Her papa was dead.

"It's all right, darlin'." Soothing words in that silky brogue - Sean! The residue of fear triggered by the night-

-ma-re, sent shivers through her body. She laid her face against his chest and sobbed her relief.

He held her as if she were a child, "It was only a bad dream." and brushed his lips along her temple and across her hair. "Don't cry, darlin'."

"I was so afraid! We were in the cellar again."

"What cellar?" Pulling back, he stared down at her.

"The cellar in the store-room." She buried her face in his neck. "I don't want to remember."

"Remember what?"

"The cellar. I thought . . . I dreamed . . ." Her voice tangled in a soft sob.

"Tell me about the cellar, Marisa." Sean's gaze

narrowed as a touch of ruthlessness crept into his voice.

"I can't." It was a conditioned response. The cellar, like the silver mine, couldn't be mentioned to a living soul.

"You can. I want to hear everything."

She recognized that implacable tone. His demand to know would not cease until she explained. She began to tell the nightmarish occurrence that she had pushed to the back of her memory until it had been all but forgotten. "When Santa Anna came to Bexar with his troops last year." She closed her eyes against the agony of remembering. "I can't."

"You can." He drew her nearer. "Go on."

After several minutes of silence, Once more, she began her story. "It was a nightmare for all of us. Papa had burned all the supplies in the store, and gone to find General Houston. When Santa Anna learned what he had done, he said Papa was a walking dead man."

Under his breath Sean whispered words foreign to

Marisa's ears, but she understood their meaning. She gave him a look of reproof, then went on.

"Santa Anna sent soldiers to bring Tio Victor to his headquarters. When Tio Victor came home, he said he had to hide me. He knew if Santa Anna found me, he would kill me for what Papa had done." Old terrors crowded into her mind. "I can't."

"You can. Go on," Sean's hands caressed her back.

"Tio Victor hid me in the cellar under the store room.

He hid Carmen and my cousins there too. The Mexican soldiers couldn't keep their eyes off Carmen. One colonel offered her money and a beautiful dress if she would come to his quarters. Victor was furious! You don't know how jealous Tio Victor was."

Sean replied, "Ah, but I think I can imagine."

Marisa thought it strange that Sean should feel sympathy for Victor. "Victor was not the one who suffered. He didn't spend days in a dark, cramped cellar. . ." She halted her narrative in mid-sentence. "I don't want to remember anymore."

"Go on." The words were, for all their softness, a command. "Tell me what happened."

"We stayed in the cellar for what seemed like years. Sometimes days went by between Tio Victor's visits. We were sure we would die in that hole in the ground."

"It must have been hell."

She nodded. "It was. Soldiers came often to the store room, looting, plundering, look-ing for sup-plies." Recalling caused her voice to quiver. "We could hear them walking around above us. It was like some-one was walking on our graves!"

Sean's lips brushed her hair. "It's all right now, darlin'. You're safe. I'll take care of you."

Slowly, her fears subsided. She was in her bed, and she wasn't alone. Sean was with her. He was holding her, kissing away her anxiety. She recalled, anew, those dark days and terrify-ing nights when she had feared there would be no tomorrow. Her face was pressed to the hollow of his throa-t. "Please don't leave me."

His body stiffened. "Marisa, do you mean . . .?"

Raising her tear stained face, she stared into his eyes, and knew that he could chase from the corne-rs of her mind the fear lurked there. "I want you."

His mouth brushed against hers in a brief kiss. His arms tight-en around her, He whispered, "Let me love you."

It was a game. She knew that, and accepted it. He was saying the things he knew she wanted to hear. And why

shoul-dn't he? She needed him and he wanted her. Closing her heart to any thought of to-morrow, she melted into his warm embrace. Hadn't past experiences taught her there may be no to-mor-row? And she needed him tonight.

He sought her mouth in a gentle, possessive kiss. This time there was no anger, no rage, no driving will to pun-ish, only a lingering ardor. The pleasu-re was almost unbear-able.

From deep within her loins a heat begin to build. It spread like fingers of fire through her entire being, light-ing flames of desire in hollows and crevic-es that she had not known ex-isted.

He moved his lips to the swell of her breasts. "You are so beautiful."

She let her fingers slide across the silver scar that marked his face, then fall -to his broad chest. "You are beautiful, too." There was an indescribable wonder in her words.

Laughing deep in his throat, he let his warm mouth cover her breast. "Men aren't beauti-ful. Only little girls with ivory skin and velvet eyes are beautiful."

Touching him sent an electrifying sensation ripping through her. She had never been so vitally alive, so aware of all the vivid sensations, and brilliant colors of

passion. With innocent abandon she offered herself to him. His mouth blazed a fiery trail down her mid-section, toward her abdomen.

Little sounds of pleasure escaped from her dry throat, as she arched her body toward him in an age-old, word-less appeal.

How skillfully, how patiently, he wooed her. The seek-ing, retreating, promising, teasing, brought her to the apex of shuddering ecstasy. The fire inside her blazed into an inferno as she felt the naked brush of his body on hers, the sublime sweet-ness of his penetration.

He possessed her totally. She followed his rhy-thmic, pulsat-ing move-ments, marveling at the wonder of his body in hers. He was luring her into some encha-nting world and she followed blindly, arching her hips to meet each rapturous thrust.

She clung to him with her mouth, her arms, her legs. Her body twisted and writhed in reply to his deepening demands. Her cries pierced the still night. Her need spiraled, climbed, soared, and became at last a wild, untamed, all consum-ing passion.

The shattering climax overwhelmed her. Wave after wave of intense pleasure washed over her. She convulsed in spasms that shook her body, as he drove home the thrust that plunged them into complete ecstasy, then left them gasping and spent.

He collapsed atop her. She could feel his heart thundering against her breast. With their bodies still joined, he turned, pulling her with him.

A strangle caught in her throat. As reality returned, a feeling of self contempt slowly nudged through her euphoria. She was shameless. He had used her, mocked her, slept with another woman on their wedding night, and she was still willing to beg him to make love to her. How could she be so sadly lacking in self respect?

Outside the rain fell in a steady relentless downpour. The wind moaned, as if in pain, through the branches of the tall cottonwoods.

Marisa tried to move away. Strong arms cap-tured and held her. "Stay. You belong to me now."

It was so easy to yield to his embrace, to pretend his reassuring words came from his heart. Relaxing in the warm circle of his arms, she drifted into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The steady downpour lasted through the night and into the morn-ing hours. Water ran in rivulets around the house, and the river rose several feet.

Slowly, Marisa's body began to shake free of the mantle of slum-ber. Her half-conscious mind savor-ed a sense of well being. The lovely illusion lasted until memo-ries pushed through the veil of sleep. Reality brought a swift stab of pain. She ran her hand along the other side of the bed. It was empty. Thank goodness. From nowhere, Sean's mocking words beat returned to around in her head. "Are you trying to tell me that I'm the only man who ever had you?" She pressed her hands down over her ears, but the taunting voice refused to go away. "You fell all over me and begged me to love you." Rolling over on her stomach, she jammed her pillow over her head. The voice persisted. "You're a liar, Marisa." "Stop it." Her tor-tured out-burst echoed across the room. She was angry with her-self for caring so much. "He will be gone soon." Voicing that possi-bility sent anoth-er shaft of misery jolt-ing through her.

She felt Sean's pres-ence. It was more than a premo-ni-tion. She knew, even before she raised her eyes and dropped her hand, that he was look-ing at her.-

He was leaning against the door frame, one leg crossed over the other, his hands in his pockets. His bold eyes raking over her naked body. "Good morning, darli-n'."

That warm brogue crawled up her spine. "I'm not your darlin'!"

He raised one dark eyebrow. "After last night I thought you were." The air was charged with a sharp current of animosi-ty. He took a step toward her.

Shame caused her to cry out, "Stay away from me! I don't want you to touch me again, ever!"

He stopped. "Marisa . . ." One hand rose to rake through his hair. "Get dressed." Then fell to his side. "You're going to the store with Chico and me today." Before she could answer, he turned on his heel, and was gone.

Marisa's heart was a dead weight in the bottom of her stom-ach. Her hands felt clammy against her own skin.

Breakfast was eaten in an atmosphere of sullen silence. The air so heavy with anxiety that Chico was subdued into a quenched, uneasy quiet.

The rain had slowed to a fine drizzle by the time

Sean crawled up on the wagon seat beside Marisa, and put Hector's raw-hide bag under the high seat. Then he untied the reins and whistled to the mules, urging them down the muddy road toward Bexar.

A dread, colder than the rain that drenched her, cramped into Marisa stomach. "Why are you taking Papa's bag?"

Sean's wet profile seemed etched in gran-ite. "I

would-n't want to disappoint Baldomar by not having my bag when he calls."

A fine mist of rain beat against Marisa's back, and slapped at her face as the inevita-bility of a deadly encoun-ter between Sean and Baldom-ar loomed before her, like some grim pro-nouncement of doom.

Once inside the store, Sean set the bag on a shelf behind the desk, in full view, for anyone who entered the store to see.

"Hide that thing," Marisa snapped. "Get it out of sight. Don't you know Baldomar will see it if he comes here?"

"When he comes here," Sean corrected. "And I do hope so."

She opened her mouth to protest, then snapped it shut, as she realized, Sean wanted Baldomar to come to the store, and to see the bag.

Sean ordered, "Get into the store room, both of you, and stay there."

Marisa wasn't going anywhere, and she told him so.

"You go, Chico," she nodded toward the wet, disheveled, little man who huddled in the corner of the store.

Chico took one look at Marisa's set face, and scurried to the store room.

"Damn it, Marisa!" Sean advanced toward her with the obvious intent of carrying her bodily into the store room.

He stopped as the front door burst open, admitting a gust of rain and a wet, bedraggled, little man. "'Tis a hard man to find you are, Sean Flanagan."

Marisa knew that face, recognized the heavy brogue. The man was Dennis McGuire. What did he want? It couldn't be anything good. The guarded look that slipped into Sean's stormy green eyes, made her even more uneasy.

Sean's hand rested on the hilt of his knife. "What do you want, McGuire?"

Dennis seemed to be searching for an acceptable answer. "'Tis a debt I'm repay-ing." He turned his leprechaun face toward Marisa. "I can't be forgettin' your husband once saved me life."

For all Dennis's good humor and kind words, Sean's hand never left his knife. "Speak your piece, and begone,

McGuire."

Dennis slipped out of his rain slicker, and gave it a shake. "I want to speak to you and your misses. It's important."

Something in Sean's cold stare caused Dennis to drop his rain coat, and hold his hands over his head. "I come in the name of friendship."

"Do you now?" Sean's hand still rested on the hilt of his knife "Then you will excuse my wife." He gave Marisa a look that should have sent her running to the store room.

She lifted her chin. "I prefer to stay here."

"Marisa!" The sound snapped through the air like a whip.

"There's no call for anger." Dennis's look of determination was mixed with caution. "What I have to say must be said to the Missus, too. I want to clear me conscious, pay me debt, and get meself home, and out of this miser-a-ble rain."

Sean's hand lingered near his knife. "I don't want to hurt you Dennis, but if you step out of line, I will."

Dennis looked directly into Marisa's eyes. "Me little sister was lyin' when she told the story about your man sleeping with her on your weddin' night."

Marisa's heart began to race. "But Bob said . . . I thought . . . Sean was in her room." Almost, she dared hope that Dennis was telling the truth.

"It's true, Sean was there, but me darlin' sister was not." Dennis's blue eyes locked into Marisa's brown ones. "Megan was in the company of a rowdy who spent the night in one of the spare rooms."

Happiness warmed through Marisa's veins. Sean had not be-trayed her! As swiftly as her elation appeared, it began to cool. Why, then had he let her believe he had slept with Megan?

Dennis's jaw tightened. "Your man was as drunk as a lord. Me bouncer was told to put him on the cot in the back room. Me little sister paid the braggart to tote Sean to her room. T'was trouble she was brewin'. She can be a nasty one, when she puts her mind to it."

Marisa's breath hung in her throat. "Oh?"

"Sean's a good man, and me friend, Missus Flanagan. I wouldn't want you to be believin' an untruth about him before you began your mar-riage."

Tears in Marisa's eyes distorted Dennis's face. She wiped them away with the back of her hand. "Thank you, Señor McGuire."

"You're more than welcome, Missus Flanagan."

Suddenly, impetuously, Marisa flew across the room, flung herself into Dennis's arms, and gave him a quick, impulsive hug.

Dennis raised his arms over his head. "It's not me that's gettin' out of line, me friend, it's your pretty little wife."

Marisa's ivory skin tinged with a blush of pink. "I didn't mean . . . "

Dennis gave her a sly wink. "I'm not complainin', -Missus Flanagan."

From across the room Sean's brogue sounded, deep and clear, "Get out of here, Den-nis, before I break your neck for waiting so long to speak."

Without another word, Dennis slipped through the door, pulled his rain slicker over his head, and ran down the muddy street, hopping puddles, and singing lewd lyrics as he went.

Marisa's heart ached with joy. Sean held out his arms and she bounded into them-.

A shudder shook through him as he wrapped her in his arms in an embrace that threatened to smother her.

She buried face in his chest. "Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me believe you made love to that . . . that whore?"

His voice was husky with emotion. "Were you jealous?"

"A little," she admitted, with a reluctance born of

re-lief. "If she ever comes near you again, I will probably kill her."

He held her from him, "Would you now, little girl?"

Silent laughter rumbled deep inside his chest. "She's bigger than you are." His teasing, tone and adoring look made her dizzy with happiness.

"I will still claw her eyes out."

The rumble erupted into loud joyous laughter. "I be-lieve you would try it." He pulled her back into his arms. "I honestly be-lieve you would try it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her adoring eyes caressed him, her fingers touched the scar on his face.-

"Ah, Marisa, I didn't know what I'd done. I couldn't remember anyth-ing past sitt-ing at the bar, and ordering drink after drink. The next morn-ing I woke up in Megan-'s bed. She was there, so I believed her when she said we'd spent the night together."

"But she'd been with another man." Revulsion rose in Marisa's throat. "How could she do such a thing, I mean sleep with just any man who asks her?"

"Most of them pay her, handsomely." Sean chuckled at Marisa's bewildered look.

The chuckle died on his lips when she asked, "Did you?" The evasive shake of his head told her that he didn't intend to answer that question. "Forget about Megan, we have more important things to talk about."

An all too familiar suspicion returned. "Like what?" She pulled from his embrace.

"Like now we have the perfect place to hide the silver. We can put it in the cellar under the storeroom. Nobody knows the cellar is there."

Marisa's happiness died a slow death. Sean may not have slept with Megan, but that didn't mean he cared about her. He was saying all these things because he needed a hiding place for his treasure. "I don't want any part of that silver mine."

"Don't be foolish Marisa. All we have to do is . . . " Sean's words died on his lips as the front door flew open, and Baldomar Gomez stepped boldly inside.

Sean pushed Marisa behind him. "Trouble."

Baldomar slammed the door with a vi-cious kick. "Señor Flana-gan, I promised you that we would meet again. As you see . . . " His pause was deliber-ate and calcu-lated. "I have come to claim what is mine!"

"Not-hing here belon-gs to you Gomez." A muscle along Sean's jaw line jerked-. "Get out."

The rage in Baldomar's face made words unnecessary. Spreading his feet apart, he dropped his hands until they were inches from the pis-tols he wore strapped around his waist. The air sizzled with taut expectation.

Sean's fingers danced rhyth-mi-cally around his knife. In a flat voice, empty of any emotion, he repeated his deadly warning. "Get out."

By now Marisa was numb with fear. She blinked her eyes to chase away the spots that gathered there.

With lightening speed, Baldomar whipped a pistol from its holster, and aimed it at Sean's head. "That bag is mine." He nodded toward the rawhide bag on the shelf. "Marisa is mine. I have come for them."

The set lines of Sean's face revealed not the slightest emotion. "Don't try it."

The quiet air hummed with danger! The adversaries gazed at each other, sizing up, assessing, each realizing his opponent was a man to be reckoned with and feared.

A fist of panic squeezed around Marisa's throat, threat-en-ing to close it completely. Then, from the depths of her paralyzing fright, came a detached calm. In an almost objec-tive man-ner, she began to assess the situa-tion. Baldomar Gomez was not a power-ful man, but he was shrewd and cunning, and he had a gun pointed at Sean's head.

Sean's voice was so soft, that the flesh on Mari-sa's neck crawled. "Try it, and I'll kill you."

A snarl tangled itself across the stiffness of

Baldom-ar's mouth. "I have come for that bag!"

"Come and get it," Sean invited. "Take off your guns, and face me in a fair fight. No guns, no knife, just bare hands."

"Do you think I am a fool?"

Sean taunted, "I think you're a coward, hiding behind a gun."

"I am not the fool you take me for, Flanagan." Baldomar swung his pistol around in a small, intimidating circle. "I do not intend to fight you for what is mine. You will give me the rawhide bag." His voice rose. "The one Hector left to you."

Wary as a predator watching his prey, Sean inched across the floor. "I'll get it." His eyes never left Baldomar's face.

"No." The word cracked the air. "Do not move Flanagan. Marisa will bring me the bag." The brandishing pistol added force to the warning.

Sean's arm shot out to grab Marisa. "No!"

Baldomar steadied his gun and drew a bead on Sean. "Bring me the bag, Marisa, if you do not want me to put a bullet through the Irish bastard's head."

Fear for Sean made Marisa forget her own danger. A loud humming in her ears was the only sound she heard as she walked across the room, lifted the bag from the shelf, and tucked it under her arm.

Over the drumming of blood in her ears, Sean's admonition rang out. "Toss the bag to him, Marisa."

Marisa's panic spiraled, as she heard the fury in Sean's voice. If he did something foolish now, Baldomar would kill him!

As she began to walk toward Baldomar, tension in the room rose and electrified. Marisa had but one mission now. She had to get Baldomar out of the store before Sean pushed him too far. "I'll bring you the bag, and I'll go with you, if you promise not to harm my husband."

"Does he really mean that much to you?" Menace weighted each word Baldomar spoke.

Fingers of fear waltzed down Marisa's spine, but her voice remained cool, almost detached. "I don't care about him. I care about you, Querdio. I don't want Marcus Cameron arresting you for killing my faithless husband. He's not worth it." Swinging her hips seductively, she walked toward Baldomar, holding the bag out to him.

Baldomar's face broke into a cruel grin. Raising the gun, he let his finger caress the trigger, "It would be better for us if I killed him."

Marisa's heart convulsed as she reached out and pushed the gun aside. "Let's go. You do want me, don't you?"

Baldomar's lustful leer slid from Marisa's smiling face to her swaying hips. She had distracted him for a fraction of a second. It was long enough! As Sean sprang toward

Baldomar, Marisa struck the gun with the rawhide bag, knocking it from his hand.

In the few seconds it took Sean to cross the room, Baldomar pulled Marisa out the door, and struck her a savage blow across the face, sending her sprawling across the muddy street. Pain exploded inside her head as her body slammed against the wheel of Baldomar's wagon. Bruised and bleeding, she crawled beneath the wagon just as Sean bounded through the door, and followed Baldomar out into the muddy street.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The two desperate men faced each other. Standing ankle-deep in mud with their hands out, their arms extended-, they eyed each other with deadly intent. This would be a life and death struggle. Only one man would walk away from this con-fronta-tion.

The rain stopped. Sunlight shafted through waning clouds. An assort-ment of store-keep-ers, trades-men, and -towns people began to gather in the muddy street. They surrounded the circling men, elbow-ing each other, and pointing as they sensed the unfolding of high drama.

Tension rose and sparked until the humid air crackled with explosive expectancy. This was not just another street brawl. -The hatred between the antag-onists rent the atmo-sphere with jagged bolts of white hot pas-sion.

Women and children came from jacales and back streets, swelling the grow-ing group of spectators. The old men stopped their checker game, and came to stand on the fringe of the gather-ing group.

One of Marcus Cameron's depu-ties shouted to the sheriff, who had come to stand beside Baldomar's wagon, "Mr. Cameron, sir, this is gonna be a hell of a fight." The deputy jerked his thumb in the direc-tion of two adversaries. "Maybe it's time you put a stop to it.-"

"Best time to break up a fight," The sheriff leaned against the wagon, "is just after some-body wins. Let 'em battle it out."

"That damn Gomez hit Hector's little girl."

The sheriff glanced down at Marisa, huddled under the wagon. "She don't look too hurt to me. Leave well enough alone." He swore under his breath. "Which ever one goes, it's good riddance."

One side of Marisa's mouth was bleed-ing. She pulled her-self into a sitting position, wrapped her arms around her knees, and watched the two battling men -with horrified fascination.

Baldomar landed the first blow. He swung at Sean, strik-ing him on his chin. Sean's head cracked backward. Marisa closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to watch.

Nor was she able to sustain the suspense of not seeing. She opened her eyes as Sean sent his fist crashing into

Baldoma-r's face.

A mighty blow from Baldomar struck Sean in his ribs. He staggered and fell backward, then raised him-self to a crouching position and drove his left fist out into a straig-ht line.

Baldomar ran head-long into it, and fell to his knees.

They fought now on their knees, as random blows pounded into faces, ribs, and muscular mid-sections.

The crowd began to move nearer. Bystanders shout-ed en-cour-agements and de-rid-ed tactics. The old men whistled and called out in Spanish.

The men battled on, rolling and churning in the mud that clung to their bodies and mixed with the blood that flowed from Baldoma-r's nose, and ran from Sean's lip.

For what seemed an eternity, they struggled. By now both fighters were breath-ing in short gasps. The punches car-ried less force.

Then suddenly, Sean stood, and planted his feet down into the mud, as he drove an iron fist into Bald-

omar's jaw. The blow shattered bones, and cracked the air.

Baldomar staggered.

Sean moved in and struck again and again, landing powerful rights and short jabbing left, until, bleeding and dazed, Baldomar sagged to the ground.

Jumping astride the fallen man, Sean locked his hands around Baldomar's throat, and pushed his fingers into the soft flesh around his adversary's windpipe.

Baldomar's expression changed from surprise, to rage, then frightened panic, and moved at last, to cold blankness. His eyes protruded grotesquely, as death etched itself into his face.

Wearied and winded, Sean sank down into the mud beside the dead man.

The crowd let out a mighty cheer. Money, wagered before the fight started, began to change hands. Two of the spectators moved near and helped Sean to his feet. He rose slowly, then stood dazed, looking in amazement at the cheering crowd.

In the space of a half hour the Irish renegade had become a hero. In time his feat on this day would grow to legendary proportions. He had challenged and defeated the last notorious Gomez. -

Wiping his muddy sleeve across his bloody mouth, Sean he scanned the faces in the crowd. "Where's my wife? Is she all right?"

The onlookers yelled and shouted, as they pointed toward Baldomar's wagon. In uneven unison, they declared, "She's under the wagon, Mr. F-lanagan."

The two men who had helped Sean to his feet stepped back, as Marisa crawled from under the wagon, and scrambled to a standing position.

The crowd moved closer, forming a tight circle around the besmirched, beleaguered couple.

Sheriff Marcus Cameron knew a political plus when he saw one. He had viewed the entire bloody episode from a vantage point of safety. Only after the battle was over, did he --insert himself into the ending. He would tell of this episode for years to come in campaign speeches that brought tears to listeners' eyes.

"Sean?" Marisa's words sounded strange coming from a mouth that was bruised and swollen.

"Darlin'?"

Marisa raised adoring eyes to her husband. He was bloody, muddy, and limping. He was also the most beautiful sight she had ever seen! Bolting into his arms, she pressed her mud caked body against his powerful frame.

He wiped the mud and blood from his face, then tenderly kissed the tremulous length of her battered mouth.

By now the crowd was taking on the aspects of a mob. A mighty cheer arose in the emotionally charged air, as the Irishman held his wife in a tight embrace, oblivious to the unruly crowd around him.

Muttering under his breath, Sheriff Cameron pulled his pistol from his belt and shot into the air.

A sudden pall fell over the gathering. "Everybody go on home, now," the sheriff instructed. "The fight's over, You folks go on back to your business. I'm gonna see that my friends get home."

The crowd slowly dispersed. Shopkeepers returned to their stores, shaking their heads and gossiping as they went. Women with children in tow, wandered back toward houses, remembering, romancing,

smiling. Some of the dance hall girls hooked onto the men who had collected money from bets and walked with them, toward the saloon.

The entire incident was over in less than an hour. It would be remembered and discussed for decades to come.

The sheriff put an affectionate arm around Marisa's shoulders, and patted Sean on the back. "Come on you two, I'll take you home."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Marisa had bathed the mud and grime from her hair and body. She sat now in the afternoon sun, combing her long black tresses. The waning sunlight caught and tangled in their silky waves.

Chico called from the parlor. "Come in, Marisa. Chico made a fire."

Once inside, Marisa found Chico huddled in the big rawhide chair, looking sad and lost.

She sat on the couch, feeling as lost and sad as Chico looked. She had not seen Sean since the sheriff had brought them back to the little house by the river. This time he was gone for good. And why not? He had the title to the mine and the map to lead him there. By now he could be half way to the Comanchero.

"Have you seen Sean?" she asked Chico. She wouldn't admit, even to herself, how afraid she was that neither of them would ever see him again.

She did have a few things to be thankful for - Baldomar was no longer a threat, and she still had her store.

"Sean went to the river," Chico chirped.

Marisa's inadequate, "That's nice," didn't fool Chico. "Sean's gone?" His eyes overflowed with tears.

Sean's deep voice booming from the doorway sent a wave of sheer happiness surging through Marisa.

"Sean's here."

She tamped down her sudden joy. What did he want now?

"Get out of here Chico," Sean held the door open and motioned with his hand. "I want to talk to Marisa."

Chico didn't move.

"Go on, get, pronto, hurry." That burley brogue held a warm note of affection.

As he stepped around Sean, Chico paused, and shot a knowing smile in Marisa's direction, then disappeared into the shadows of the coming night.

Sean closed the door, leaned against it, and smiled, a tender, warm smile that melted Marisa's heart.

"We have to talk."

He was going to tell her that he was leaving, and she could-n't bear to hear it. "I'm too tired to talk tonight. Can it wait until tomorrow?"

"Marisa." The word sent chills down her spine. "I will not be put off."

"Say what you have to say." It would have been better if he had quietly disappeared without benefit of explanation. She didn't think she could bear to let him go now. "I'm listening."

"With your heart, I hope, and not just your ears." He paused, then added, "I want answers, Marisa. Talk to me."

-Why did he want to put her through the torture of a lengthy goodbye? . "Do you think we can, talk I mean?" She didn't know how to deal with his gentleness.

He rested one arm on the mantl-e. "We have to. Just hones-ty, from both of us this time, no lies, no half-truths, and no fighting."

She swung her legs onto the floor. "All right, no lies, no half-truths, I promis-e."

"And no anger?" He raised one eyebrow.

"And no anger." Her voice trembled. "I promise that too."

"Tell me about your lovers, Marisa."

It was the last thing she had expected him to say. A little moment ticked by before she could find her voice.

"I don't have any lovers. I lied."

"What about Baldomar?"

Marisa gritted her teeth. She had promised to tell the truth. "I never made love to Baldomar, or any other man. except you." She met his gaze, daring him to doubt her. "And that's the truth."

She had expected him to argue. Instead, he began to laugh, a funny little amused laugh that start-ed in the pit of his stomach and floated upward. "At last! But of course, I knew that all along."

"You did?" Her eyes widened in surprise. "How?" He had said no lies. She struggled to accept that he was telling the truth. "You couldn't know that." Her voice hung on the catch in her throat. "Could you?"

"Marisa, my foolish, innocent little love, a man always knows if he's the first to be with a woman." The tenderness in his expression set her pulses pounding. "Think back, remem-ber. There was no way I could not have known."

She was embarrassed as she recalled that first night of lovemaking, and then, in turn, angry as the truth dawned. "Why did you say all those terrible things to me?" He had insulted her, calling her terrible names, all the while knowing she was not done any of the things he was accusing her of doing. "That was cruel."

"It was done in self defense, I assure you." His smile faded, to be replaced with a look of hopeless misery. "And it was not half so cruel as what you were doing to me. All that talk about gentlemen callers and Baldomar being your lover was driving me insane."

"It was all a lie." She dropped her lashes. "I was a little afraid of how you made me feel. I wanted to protect myself.-"

"You were a little afraid of me?" His green eyes caressed her.

"More than a little," she admitted, as she remembered her promise to tell the truth.

"And you scared the hell out of me." On the tail of a sigh, he admit-ted, "You still scare the hell out of me."

Her aching mouth fell open. "You are afraid of me?" Surprise caused her voice to rise, then fall.

"You're not afraid of anything."

"Ah, but I am, scared right out of my wits, to tell the truth." A crooked little grin tilted the corners of his

bat-tered mouth. "You're so very young, and inexperienced. I don't know if I've stirred you to love, or only awakened a primitive lust that first passion so often brings."

She blushed furiously. "I did behave badly.-" A tear slid down her cheek. "It's just that when you touch me, I forget . . . " She couldn't let him go away without apolo-gizing for her wanton behavior. "I forget everyt-hing, every-thing except how won-derful it is to be with you." She strug-gled to keep her voice even. She could-n't. It cracked, pitifully. New tears surfaced.-"I apolo-gize for being so . . . wicked."

"Dear God," he moaned. "Is that what you believe I

think?"

"Isn't it?"

"No! And if I gave you that impression, I am the one who should apologize. There is nothing wrong with anything you do when I make love to you"

Dismayed, she asked, "There's not?"

"Darlin'." He attempted a smile. "You have no idea how innocently perfect you are."

"Then you don't think I'm evil? You don't hate me?"

His voice deepened, the brogue thickened. "I love you, Maris-a. I don't know when it happened, but I know when I knew. Yesterday, in the cook room when you told me it was over, it hit me like a kick in the head. I couldn't let you go. I love you, Can you believe that?"

"I want to." More than anything in the world, she wanted to be-lieve he loved her. "I won't tell anyone about the silver."

He slid his hand into his pocket, and drew out the map and the title. "Do you really think that -damn mine is that important to me?" He studied the papers before crumpling them into two little wads.

"I don't know what to think . . . " She hated the quiver that ran through her voice. It told, more than any words she could speak, how much she cared.

Sean eased down in front of the fire, and gazed into the dying embers. "I love you, Marisa."

"You have the map and the title. I can understand if you go now. I won't blame you for anything that's hap-pened." She looked at him with all the love in her heart mirrored in her eyes.

He met her gaze. "You are the most important thing in my life." He threw the papers into the fire. "You always will be." They fell onto the coals. Little tongues of flame sprang to life and licked at their sides, then burned them to ashes.---

Sean rose, then turned, and paused a moment before he came to the couch where she sat. Kneeling before her, he took her hands into his. "I love you, Marisa." Tears glis-tened in the green of his eyes. "What else do I have to do to con-vince you?"

She believed him! And her heart was like a singing bird! This proud, arrogant, man had thrown away the title to a fortune to prove his love, and now he knelt before her with tears in his eyes. "I believe you, my darling, I believe you!"

He slid onto the couch and put his arms around her.

"Is-n't there some-th-ing you want to say to me? Or must I try, as battered as I am, as bruised as you are, to kiss those words from you. Will you please tell me that you love me?"

She locked her arms around his neck. "I love you, Sean. I love you, I love you, I love you! What can I do to convince you?"

He captured her lips in a loving kiss. It began so sweet-ly, a gentle coming to-gether that was achingly ten-der. -"I can think of one way." That lovely brogue brushed against her nerves like an intimate caress. Then his lips recaptured hers, in a kiss that was much more demanding. She forgot her bruises as she clung to him-.

He placed his finger under her chin and looked into her eyes. His lips brushed the bruise that covered her jaw. "The bastard, I should have killed him before he had a chance to lay a hand on you."

The sudden savagery in his voice startled her. "It doesn't matter now, Darling."

"How could you walk boldly up to a man with a gun and try to make a deal with him? -He could have killed you? If you ever do any-thing that foolish again . . . "

As she kissed his chin, his body relaxed, tension float-ing away with her touch. She was only now beginn-ing to under-stand the depths and the intensity of his feelings for her. The realization of the savagery and strength of his love left her weak and shaken. "No fighting, remember, and no anger. We both promise-d."

His frown gave way to a smile that was as seductive as it was inti-mate. "I'd like to carry you to the bedroom. I'll do well to get myself in there. Will you walk with me, my darlin'?"

It was an invitation to paradise. Nodding her head, she slipped her hand in his.

They walked across the parlor floor and into the

bedro-om.

They made love. His every touch, every caress, every move-ment said, 'I love you.' and she answered him with

in-finite love and unrestrained passion. She was lost in his whispered words of love. She reveled in the feeling of his weight upon her and his heart beating wildly against her own. Then he claimed her with a loving passion that soared beyond the mere physical to touch that rare spiritual plane that unites sacred essence with carnal joy. At last he lifted her with him to the splendor of rapturous fulfill-ment, and beyond.

Afterward, they lay in each others arms, their bodies still entan-gled, their hearts beating with the sweet afterglow of love. Neither of them could find words to say. -

The last rays of an April sun glared into the high win-dows. The rain had passed, the long, eventful day was

draw-ing to a close. Marisa broke the intimate silence. "I'm glad to be home." She snuggled into her husband's arms.

"Home!" Sean spoke the word as if it were a

benedic-tion. "I thought I could never go home again." Tightening his grip on her, he kissed her bruised cheek. "Home for me, Darlin', is in your arms."

They slept, the drugged, therapeutic, sleep of those who have experienc-ed complete consummation.

Marisa awoke slowly. When she opened her eyes, Sean was looking at her. She stifled a yawn. "What are you doing?"

His blunt fingers brushed the sides of her swollen face-. "Adoring you." He tried to smile through his split lips, and failed misera-bly.

She laid her arm across his chest. "I love you."

He raised himself to a sitting position, and propped a pillow behind him. "You know, Marisa, I've been thinking." He gave her a loving, sidel-ong look. "The general store could be a sound business, even if we decided to forget about selling contraband."

Marisa twisted her fingers in the hair on his chest. Right now, she didn't give a damn about the store, or anything else except the man beside her.

"I wouldn't want my children to have a father who is a renegade and a thief-." He shivered as she moved her hand to his naval and ran one finger inside and around.

"No. Never." Marisa's hand slid farther down his belly. "Marisa, honey, you're making it hard to carry on a con-versa-tion." His body grew taut.

Moving her hand even lower, she teased, "Do you want me to stop?"

"Oh, God, no!" He closed his eyes as a look of sheer rap-ture moved across his face.

She whispered again, "I love you."

He shivered with delight as she spread his own wetness across his stomach. "Marisa, darlin'."

"I love you."

Rolling her over, he pinned her to the bed. She felt the ecstasy of him entering her body. She saw the adoration in his eyes as he bent to capture her bruised mouth with his battered lips.

She closed her eyes.

Epilogue - April 1842

Marcus Cameron came out of his office and stood looking across the plaza toward the old San Fernando Cathedral. Wagon loads of worshipers were gathering for Sunday morning mass.

The sheriff sat on the bench in front of his office and joined the group of men who gathered there every Sunday morn-ing. For the most part, they were Bexar resi-dents. Occasionally an outsider joined the gossip group. Today there was such an outsider.

The stranger answered to the name Titus Bradshaw. He had succeeded, the night before, in taking almost every pot at the infamous Bexar Saturday night poker game.

Easing down beside the gambler, the sheriff smiled. "I hear you won big in the poker game last night. Now, that's what I call luck."

"It is not all luck. I know when to bet, who I'm betting against, and how to calculate the odds." Titus eyed the sheriff with ill-con-cealed con-tempt.

The other men in the group began to nudge each other and whisper behind the gambler's back, saying by their knowing glances and silent signals, that the sheriff had found another sucker.

The smiling sheriff studied Titus carefully. "It's a pity we ain't got something to bet on, you and me, I mean. I fancy myself a fair man at guessing odds."

"It is, indeed," the gambler answered.

"I guess we could bet on some of those people going to mass, if you're willing to bet on people."

"Gambling is the way I make my living. I will wager on anything or anybody, given the right odds." The gambler's words rode on a sneer.

"Wee-ll," The sheriff drawled, "I guess we should find who to bet on, then decide what to bet about." He shook his head. "Damn. From here all those people look the same."

As the sheriff spoke, a wagon carrying a tiny, dark haired woman and a tall red-haired man rumbled into the plaza. In the back of the wagon sat a small boy and a tiny little man.

"We could make some wager about the red-haired man," the sheriff suggested. "He certainly stands out in the crowd."

"He does, indeed." Titus agreed.

Leaning back, the sheriff hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "I'm wondering if I should bet with a man as shrewd as you are, Mr. Bradshaw."

"Oh, come now, Sheriff," Titus chided, "You're the one who suggested a wager in the first place."

The sheriff looked over his shoulder at the group of men behind around him. "Do you boys think I should bet with this shrewd gen-tle-man?"

Shouts of, "Hell yes, Go ahead," and, "Why not?"

rose from the crowd of on-lookers.

"Well, all right." The sheriff shrugged his shoulders. "What will we bet on?"

"Do you know the red-haired gentleman?" Titus

Bradshaw's beady eyes were bright with expectation.

"Yeah, I know him." The sheriff pointed toward the row of shops that lined one side of the plaza. "He owns the general store across the way."

"Is the pretty little Mexican woman his wife?" Titus squinted across the plaza, toward the church.

"Yip." The sheriff's studied indifference caused the spectators to send each other sidelong glances, and to smile in anticipation.

"How long have they been married?" Titus was showing an interest that delighted the crowd of onlookers.

"Five years." The sheriff drawled.

"Is the little boy their child?"

"He is. His name's Adam."

"What kind of wager do you propose?" Titus studied the sheriff's bland countenance.

"How about," The sheriff began, "I bet you that man will kiss his wife before they get inside the church door?"

"How much would you care to wager?"

"How does your ten dollar bill against my hundred-dollar gold piece strike you?" The sheriff asked.

"Sheriff, I think you are trying to con me. Those odds are outlandish. What's the catch?" For the first time since the conversation began, Titus looked doubtful.

"No catch, but if you don't want to bet, I can understand." The sheriff smiled, knowing his words had lured Titus into his trap.

"You won't renege, when I win, will you sheriff?" It appeared that Titus Bradshaw had bet with Texas lawmen before.

"You can hold the money."

Titus seemed to be giving the proposition studious thought. "What the hell?" He reached for the sheriff's gold piece. "You're on."

Every eye in the crowd fastened on the tall man with the flame red hair as he climbed down from the wagon, then lifted the woman from the high seat and stood her on the ground beside him.

The little man and the boy scooted out of the back of the wagon and stood beside the tail gate.

As the woman turned to walk toward the boy and the little man, one of the onlookers cried, "Hey, look, Mrs. Flanagan is going to have another baby."

All eyes moved from the man to the woman. A slight, bulge in her mid-section, gave mute testimony to her

pregnancy.

The tall man leaned against the wagon and watched, with patient indulgence, as the woman straightened the little man's tie and combed the squirming child's dark hair.

Taking the child by the hand, the little man began to walk toward the stately old church.

The tall man placed his hand under his wife's arm as the couple made their way up the cathedral steps. Pausing before the massive cathedral door, the tall man raised his face to the heavens, and closed his eyes. He seemed to be saying a prayer. Then lowering his eyes, he crossed himself, and smiled as he turned to face the tiny woman. Drawing her into his arms, he gently kissed her up-turned lips. Then he opened the door, and the two entered the sanctuary. Not one onlooker paid the slightest attention to the man's strange behavior.

Marcus Cameron pulled the ten-dollar bill from Titus's clenched fist, "I'll be having my gold piece back."

Titus dropped the coin into the sheriff's extended palm.

"Well, boys, I think I'll give Father Paul this ten dollar bill, the church can use it." So saying, Marcus ambled across the plaza.

Titus Bradshaw recognized, belatedly, that he'd been taken. "Son-of-a-bitch, That ornery sheriff knew all the time what that red-haired man was going to do." He turned to glare at the group of snickering onlookers.

"Sure he knew, Mr. Flanagan's been doing that same thing every Sunday morning now for five years." The man who spoke smiled at Titus.

"No call to feel bad, though, Mr. Bradshaw," another by-stander volunteered. "The sheriff has been making this bet with any stranger he could sucker into it every Sunday for nigh on to five years now."

A third bystander added his bit to the conversation. "The money the sheriff wins, he always gives to the church. So you see it goes for a good cause."

"That doesn't excuse cheating." Titus pushed through the tight little crowd. "The sorry bastard." His words were lost in the loud peal of the cathedral bells that rang out across the cloudless April morning, wild and sweet, and clear.

The End