



Vickie Britton

The
Devil's Gate

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by

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Dedication

~~To Loretta Jackson, a wonderful sister and great
writing partner~~

Chapter 1

Since making the forked turn from Bly, I'd counted two cars and seventeen rabbits. There were probably more rabbits crouched hidden in the tall sagebrush on either side of the narrow dirt road; tiny, long-eared shadows caught frozen by my headlights.

I veered sharply to the left as one of the living shadows darted toward the Mustang's spinning wheels, nearly landing myself in a ditch to avoid striking the quivering scrap of ragged gray fur headlong.

Highway hypnosis had been on the verge of sinking in. Wide awake, my now-alert eyes scanned darkness. I'd barely noticed how the traffic had thinned since I'd made my last stop for coffee at the all-night grill just outside of Bly. Even the tinny country music that had been my constant companion since I'd parted from the main road was deserting me. The radio continued to roar and squeal with mindless static as I drove along. Impatiently, I turned the knob, ridding myself of the intruding blare. The silence that followed was almost too much to bear. Such silence. A few semesters at the University of Reno had almost made me forget how remote and isolated the Devil's Gate ranch really was.

Brad, of course, had called me. Could it really have been only yesterday? He'd been upset. I could imagine him at the other end of the line, flecks of dark glittering in his

tawny-gold eyes as he barked at me over the telephone. "Anna, you must come home."

"Home? What are you talking about, Brad? The semester just started..."

"They need you, Anna. Alice needs you. Tavas is ill. Tavas is...he's..." Brad had never been one to stumble over words, but he was stumbling then.

"Dying?" I'd stepped back from the phone as if the electrical cord had been shooting out white-hot sparks. Tavas hadn't looked well several months ago, the last time I'd ventured home. Too pale, I'd thought at the time. And he'd been using the cane again, the one with the carved silver head.

Suddenly it all fell into place. The letters from Alice, the subtle questions about when I planned to come back for another visit. It seemed clear to me now, crystal clear, as it would've been long ago if I hadn't been immersed in my own private little world of registration cards and scheduling.

"I never thought..." Tears were brimming in my eyes. I couldn't finish the sentence, didn't really know what I'd planned to say.

"You'll come home, then?"

"Of course. You know Tavas has always been like a father to me. I'll be there as soon as possible."

"I told Alice to expect you Thursday."

"But...that's the day after tomorrow."

"I could come down after you myself." The determination in Brad's voice betrayed the seriousness of the situation.

"No, Brad. I'll manage."

Somehow, I had. It was now late Wednesday night and I'd accomplished the impossible. I had sublet my tiny

apartment, had arranged an indefinite leave of absence from my part-time job and school, had packed my meager belongings into the trunk of the old Mustang that had once been Brad's. And now here I was, half a day early, at the rutted, forked turn-off to the Devil's Gate.

Specters surrounded me, dark, windblown junipers etched sharply against a restless sky. I crossed the cattle guard and onto our property. I could see the broken fence now, rusty sign hanging at an angle in the wind. Beyond, the jagged twin rocks rose high and bare above the cracked earth. "Like the gates to hell", Tavas had always joked. The car moved upward on the trail, winding its way into the heart of the canyons where the faint lights of the ranch glimmered, still some distance away.

It had been a long time since I'd come home for more than a brief visit. Not since Brad told me Ivan had returned. A trapped butterfly fluttered inside of me at the thought of him, leaving me shaken by the overwhelming strength of my own emotions.

Only Brad had guessed the real reason why I'd stayed away so much lately, burying myself in my studies and my work in Reno. Brad and I had practically grown up together. I'd come to the ranch an orphan: the two of us had become as close as brother and sister. Brad knew my thoughts, my feelings, but it was Ivan who'd stolen my heart.

Ivan, with his wavy dark hair, lean Gypsy looks, and hot-blooded Basque temperament. The handsome fairy-tale prince whose short and erratic visits to the ranch during my growing-up years had filled my heart with so many foolish dreams. Deep inside, I think I must have known even then that nothing would ever come of them, that I was little more to Ivan than a pesky, rather incorrigible child.

Don't think about him, I scolded myself, but it hurt. His sudden marriage to that sultry, unstable beauty with her pouting lips and scornful eyes marked the brutal ending of my childhood fantasy.

I concentrated on my surroundings. On either side of the road barren rocks gave off a muted, purplish hue. I'd grown up here, yet something about dusk still made me uneasy. Maybe it was the night sounds. The whistle of the wind through hollow canyons, the sudden scream of a bobcat or the lonesome wail of a coyote brought a child's fears to mind, whispered tales told only in the well-lighted circle of the bunk-houses.

Few of the hired men had not claimed to have seen the *Sorquinak* flying high over the canyons in the darkness. Even Guillermo, our foreman and Tavas's closest friend, believed that the Cult of *Akerra* existed, found evidence of devil-worship in spots of dried blood and tallow; faint marks that might have been pentagrams etched on stone in secluded clearings. And hadn't Tavas himself spotted the horns of the black he-goat *Akerra* one night, just on the edge of the cliffs? Whether he was serious or not, I never could tell. One could never tell what went on in the mind of a Basque.

Goose bumps rose on my arms at the thought of enormous, shaggy *Akerra* stamping his hooves impatiently, watching me with wild and red-rimmed eyes from some obscure point high in the canyon. Nightwalkers with their skeletal bodies and huge, glowing eyes now seemed to stare at me from the sides of the road as I drove along. Dark shapes, hunched in between the boulders, crouched in waiting. Twisted trees became witches, pointing at me with wild arms, warning me to turn around and go back to Reno. *How foolish*. I was twenty-three now, hardly a wide-eyed, impressionable child. Yet as I drove the last half-mile,

my reluctance mounted. The demons of my childhood I could manage. It was reality that made me grip the steering wheel so tightly my fingers ached. How was I going to face Ivan—and his new wife?

The moment of weakness passed as quickly as it had come. I'd stayed away too long and the circumstances demanding my return were anything but pleasant. Yet I had a right to be here as much as they did.

I kept my eyes focused upon the dim light of the porch, a beacon of warmth for the traveler who was not only physically tired, but tired in spirit. A familiar catch lodged in my throat as I sighted the old white house nestled in between the jagged cliffs. A sweet voice within me chanted, *Home, you're finally going home.*

* * * *

I could see Brad standing in the doorway, peering anxiously through the sagging porch screen as I parked the car and began walking toward the house.

He ran out to greet me. "Anna." Then he was pulling me to him in an affectionate bear hug, ruffling my dark hair teasingly, as he'd done years ago when I was a child. Brad always had a way of making me feel safe, secure. For a moment I rested my head against his broad chest. Then we broke apart, suddenly self-conscious, aware we were no longer children.

"Alice has gone to bed," Brad told me as we stepped inside. He paused, then added, being careful to avoid my eyes, "Tavas is sleeping. Let's have some coffee."

"I want to see him, Brad," I insisted.

"Coffee first. There's plenty of time." A fresh pot was waiting on the stove as if made especially for me. I could smell its bitter, welcoming aroma as we moved into the kitchen. I stood for a moment at the doorway, suddenly

feeling a helplessness, a sense of loss. The old checkered tablecloth, almost a landmark of the Haspura kitchen, was gone. It looked like Ivan's new wife, Colleen, had done some remodeling.

"Strong and black with just a pinch of sugar," Brad said as he shoved my favorite chipped ironstone mug toward me. I stared down at its reassuring clover-leaf pattern, glad for something familiar.

"It's so good to have you back." A weary darkness drifted through his amber eyes. "For a while, I was afraid you wouldn't show up."

I swallowed a lump in my throat along with the first sip of burning, soothing coffee. "You should know me better than that, Brad."

He lowered his gaze. "I know how hard this must be for you, Anna. You and Tavas have always been so close."

I knew it wasn't Tavas who Brad was thinking about. Even if I hadn't confided in him, Brad would have suspected my absence had something to do with Ivan's return.

"Alice called me last week. She...so rarely uses the phone. I should have known something was wrong."

The brown in Brad's eyes flashed, dominating the yellow. "We've all been nearly out of our minds with worry." The strain of having more than half of the burden of the Devil's Gate suddenly dumped into his lap was clear in Brad's uneasy manner. He'd never been much of a manager. "And as if we didn't have enough to worry about, someone's been rustling our cattle."

"Brad! Are you sure?"

He ran a hand through his wheat-colored hair. "I should never have mentioned it tonight."

"Have many cattle turned up missing?"

Brad shrugged. "Not many."

"Then I'm glad Ivan's back. It must be a great help to you, having him here."

A shadow fell across Brad's face at the mention of Ivan's name. Ivan and Brad had always been so close. I wondered if something might have happened to cause hard feelings between them.

"Colleen doesn't fit in here at the ranch. And Ivan..." Again, the dejected shrug, as if nothing in the world really mattered. "Well, he's changed."

"Changed?"

"You'll see." With a sudden, swift gesture, Brad reached out and took my hand in his big, tanned one. "Tavas has been looking forward to your coming so much. You've always been his favorite, you know." He grinned suddenly. "Mine, too," he added.

I bit my lip, but still the tears surfaced.

"He's counting on you to cheer him up."

"Of course, Brad. I won't disappoint him."

"I know you won't." He rose and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "Alice has had the guest room made up for you for a week. Get a good night's sleep. You can see Tavas first thing in the morning." Glancing quickly away, he added, "No sense in waking either one of them tonight."

He took the keys from where I'd placed them on the table. "I'll drive your car around and bring in your luggage."

"Thank you."

I heard the screen door slam and then all was quiet except the chirping of the locusts and the wind blowing through the tall poplars Tavas had planted outside the window years ago.

Headlights shone in the purplish darkness—Brad driving the Mustang closer to the house. I heard the sound of a motor die.

Footsteps scraped upon the wooden porch. A blast of cool air filled the room as the outside door swung open. I turned toward it, expecting Brad. Instead, it was Ivan who now came toward me. The light from the porch threw its amber glow upon the rugged planes of his face, the high, sharp cheekbones, the sensitive mouth, the dark brows now arched in sudden surprise beneath stormy, mercurial eyes. "Anna! When did you get here?"

I caught my breath slowly, aware of that familiar, flighty sensation as my heart pounded crazily inside my chest. I'd been taken unaware, unprepared for the flood of emotion that seeing him always stirred up in me. For what seemed an eternity I stood facing him, unable to respond, frozen into torturous immobility.

As he stepped toward me, I noticed the change in him. Brad was right. He seemed different somehow. The carefree Gypsy of my daydreams had become somber and melancholy. There was no quick smile upon his lips, no easy laughter in those dark-lashed eyes as he stepped forward and embraced me lightly. The leather of his dark jacket was rough and unyielding against my skin. "Welcome home, Anna. We've missed you."

"At least some of us have." The voice behind Ivan's was sugar-sweet with mockery.

My heart sank as I forced myself to look at her. She stood leaning against the door frame, a half-smile on her full lips. Golden hair shimmered against her white fur coat as she moved until she stood between us, a green-eyed she-cat protecting her own. Malice shone in those glittery eyes. "So what brings the little schoolgirl home?" she demanded.

"I'm here because of Tavas." I straightened, ignoring her sarcasm. "Brad called to let me know that he was ill."

“And I’ll bet you just came running,” she replied. Her words were slightly slurred. I could smell the alcohol on her breath as she brought her face uncomfortably close to mine. “Dear, sweet Anna. Do you think he’ll remember you in his will?”

“Leena, please.” Ivan said.

The awkward silence that followed was relieved only by Brad coming in with my suitcase.

“Good...goodnight,” I murmured. As I followed Brad into the guest room, I risked one quick glance behind me. Ivan was still watching me. I’d sensed he was. His dark gaze now sought mine, imploring forgiveness. I was taken by how miserable he looked. He seemed but the ghost of the laughing young man I’d once hero-worshipped. He turned back to Colleen, his shoulders seeming suddenly much heavier, his eyes deep and shadowed, drained of all emotion.

Brad placed my suitcase near the bed. “Colleen didn’t say anything to upset you, did she? She’d been drinking. I could tell.”

“She doesn’t like me, Brad. She never has. She makes me feel...so unwelcome.”

“Don’t let her scare you away. This is your home, too. Tavas would want you to remember that.” He was scolding me in that gruff, big-brother tone of his that covered so much underlying tenderness.

“Oh, Brad, what would I do without you?”

“You’d be lost, of course,” he replied smugly. Then, with a last, encouraging wink, Brad whispered goodnight.

I glanced about the room—my old room. It was almost the same as I’d left it. The oak vanity with its big mirror still stood in the corner. Alice had turned down the patchwork comforters on the cozy brass bed to reveal clean,

white sheets. I looked up, my gaze automatically resting upon the bare space on the wall where my favorite picture, a mountain scene, had once hung. I'd taken it with me to Reno.

For a moment I stood wearily in the middle of the room, absorbed in thought. I couldn't rest without first seeing Tavas. Turning my back on the inviting bed, I stepped out into the hallway, then padded quietly up the empty staircase to Tavas's room at the top. No matter that Brad had suggested I wait until morning. I must see him tonight.

A dim light was glowing from Tavas's room but when I turned the knob quietly and stepped inside, I saw that he was asleep. For a while I sat by his bedside, but he didn't stir. Tavas, the strong, the invincible, seemed so vulnerable in sleep. *Since when has he grown so aged, so frail?*

Tenderness washed over me as I gazed down at him, resisting the urge to brush back the silvery hair from his temples. I had so much love and respect for the man I'd always called Uncle Tavas. Of course, he wasn't my real uncle. Tavas had never married, so he had no sons and daughters of his own, but he was always taking in strays.

Tavas had made the sprawling ranch a home for us all—his younger brother Lucas's widow, Alice, and their only son, Ivan. He'd taken in Brad, a more distant relative still, to help him with the ranching, and though I wasn't even really a part of the Haspura family, he'd sent for me after my step-father's death, and had raised me as his own. I'd only been four when my parents were killed in the car accident. The ranch was the only home I'd ever known.

Tavas stirred slightly in his sleep, and I felt a twinge of guilt. He wouldn't want me staring down at him like this, would scorn the pity in my eyes. I must return tomorrow

when we could talk. Slowly, heavy-hearted, I stepped away toward the door, sorry for once I hadn't taken Brad's advice.

Back in my room, I crawled into the brass bed and closed my eyes, willing myself to think about pleasant memories. About riding the horses in the canyon on a hot summer day, Brad and Ivan on either side of me. I thought about helping Alice bake gingerbread cookies in the warm, comfortable kitchen. I thought of Tavas singing the old Basque folk songs to me as he rocked me gently on his knee—but what kept coming back to mind was Tavas's face as it had been tonight...so unnaturally pale and tinged with gray.

I lay silent, struggling not to listen to the voices now wafting through the confines of my bedroom walls, floating, disembodied voices edged with anger.

"She has a right to be here." A man's voice, deep and familiar. Ivan's voice.

"I don't care. I don't want her in the same house..." I heard the creak of wooden beams and realized Ivan and Colleen must be in the top floor hallway, directly above me. Only fragmented sentences drifted down to me, but it was enough for me to realize that I was the topic of their conversation.

"You leave her alone. I mean it." Ivan's voice was dark with warning.

"Do you think you frighten me, you..." But Colleen's sharp reply was already drifting away. I thought I heard the slamming of a door somewhere up above. Then there was silence.

I tried to clear my mind as I listened to the crickets chirping in the night, the wind blowing through the poplars, the distant, peaceful lowing of cattle, but they were alien

sounds to me now, not the familiar drone of traffic down the busy streets near the University. When I closed my eyes, Ivan's face haunted me, and the hurt came back, the pain. I tossed and turned and couldn't get to sleep.

Finally I rose and, wrapping my robe about my shoulders, wandered over to the window. The voices were gone now, leaving an eerie, disturbing void. I pressed my forehead against the pane, staring out into the darkness. The wind was blowing in rain. Tiny beads of moisture gathered upon the glass, blurring my vision as my gaze roamed over the dark canyons and purple-edged cliffs.

Almost against my will, I found my gaze settling upon the dark spot between the two highest, most jagged peaks. The Black Canyon. The place where the witches met.

Suddenly a light, pale and ghostly blue, streaked through the canyon.

Lightning?

All was quiet. Even the crickets had stopped chirping. And yet I'd heard something. A sharp electricity vibrated in the air. Drawing in my breath, I stood tense, waiting. Something was about to happen.

Then it came again, only this time louder, more piercing—a shrill, terrifying cry ripping away the unnatural stillness. An agonized wail sending shivers of alarm racing up and down my spine.

I stood at the window, spellbound, listening. Once more, twisted trees became witches, dancing, their long hair tangled in the wind. Dark shapes hid behind boulders, eyes appeared from nowhere to peer out at me from the darkness. And perched upon the top of that steep, rocky ledge, I could almost see the shaggy black silhouette of *Akerra*, the black he-goat.

For a long time, I waited, but that disturbing sound, that intense, primeval scream that had shaken me to my very soul, didn't come again.

With a weary sigh, I turned away from the window. I'd been in the city too long. Surely, that disturbing sound had been only the howl of some angry bobcat.

A cry in the night. An omen? A sign of warning? The entire house stood under a foreboding shadow even the night creatures could sense.

Colleen didn't want me here. Did Alice...Ivan? I suddenly felt unwanted, an intruder in the only place I'd ever had to call home. I felt like a lost little girl again. What was I to do? I crept back into bed, pulling the comforters close about me and fell, still shivering, into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 2

I woke to the inviting smell of bacon and eggs drifting into my room from the kitchen. After pulling on jeans and a checkered flannel shirt, I wandered in to find Alice busy at the stove. She turned before I spoke, nervously, as if she'd already sensed my presence.

I watched as Alice brushed the biscuit flour from her fingers, then came forward to embrace me briefly, but warmly. I felt comforted. Her apron was one I remembered from way back and the inviting kitchen smells were the same ones that had greeted me all through my school years.

"Child—Brad told me you came in last night. He should have woke me up." Seeing the faint, tired hollows about her eyes, I was glad he hadn't.

Ivan's mother was an attractive woman, though the trials of nursing a sickly husband for many long years had put the inevitable streaks of gray into her thick, black hair and had added a few extra lines to her face, especially about the mouth and eyes. She'd buried her husband, Lucas, last year. Tavas's illness had come upon him so soon after his brother's death. Through it all, Alice had been a pillar of strength. I still remembered how she'd stood at her husband's graveside, solemn and dry-eyed beside Tavas, whose own faded blue eyes were misted with tears.

She held me at arm's length, searching my face as if for traces of change. "You look...different."

"My hair. I cut it," I furnished, hoping that was what she meant. There were other changes, but I hoped they weren't as apparent to others as they were to me every time I looked into a mirror. There were the good things. The face that had stared back at me from the vanity this morning had seemed more mature, more serene. I sensed a new independence about me, too, born of being out on my own. The two years in Reno had been good for me, but there was also a sadness that had never been there before. My face seemed as youthful as ever, but my eyes, somehow, had grown old.

"How's Tavas."

"Better." She looked quickly away.

"I'd like to see him."

"He's...had a rough morning," she confessed. "Why don't you have some breakfast first? Come, sit down and tell me all about your new life."

I told her all about my English classes and the part-time job at the college. Alice nodded politely in all the appropriate places, but I could tell she was barely listening. Her whole life had been spent on the ranch, first tending Lucas and now taking care of Tavas. I had the idea that the world outside the ranch bore little interest to her anymore.

I scraped the last bite of egg from my plate, washed it down with more coffee. I could almost hear myself swallow. "It's quiet here," I remarked. "Almost too quiet."

"The men are all outdoors." Then, almost as an afterthought, "Princess is still sleeping off her drunk. Won't be quiet when she gets up, I reckon. She was at the bars again last night. Ivan had to go find her and bring her home."

"Their marriage doesn't seem very happy. Do they fight a lot?"

Alice snorted. "Do birds fly?"

"I heard them last night," I said, recalling the raised voices, the slamming door. "Alice, did you rest well?"

"I always sleep light." Her brows puckered into a slight frown. "They keep you awake?"

"No...it was something else. I...thought I heard something later. Just before I dozed off. A cry." I paused a moment, trying to form the impression of that piteous, inhuman cry into words. It was impossible. "It was...an animal sound," I said finally. I shrugged. "Probably just a coyote."

"Well, there's plenty of them around." Alice's eyes had become dark and disturbed. She suddenly took my plate and moved over to the sink. Water ran into the dishpan. Her back to me, she began scouring the dishes.

I felt a sudden need to escape the claustrophobic warmth of the kitchen. "I believe I'll peek in on Tavas now," I said.

* * * *

When I came down from his room a few minutes later, the dishes were washed and Alice was busy wiping off the table. "The door was closed and I could hear him snoring," I explained.

Alice nodded.

"I think I'll take a walk," I said, feeling restless.

"Anna." Her voice called me back.

"That cry last night. I heard it, too," she confessed. "It wasn't like any coyote I've ever heard."

* * * *

The weather was warm for early October, a glorious morning to be even more cherished by the inevitable fact

that winter was just around the corner. Sweater-weather, Alice always called it, but I was grateful not to be burdened by the bulky white cardigan I'd left hanging on a peg by the kitchen door.

The cool mountain air shot icy tingles along the bare skin of my arms and face until I could feel my cheeks flush. Teasing fingers moved through my hair as I waded through knee-high, golden wheat-grass toward the canyon.

The path I was following, a well-used horse trail, looped its way gently around massive golden rock like coils of thick, sweat-stained rope. I could see the tips of the mountain range in the distance, burnished yellow with winter grass and pyrite, always hinting at the secret of gold ore that might lie hidden in undiscovered chasms far below. By daylight, the canyon lost its blackish hue. There was nothing to frighten me now. It was a prism of color and light, an artist's soft palate of golden and mellow green and sky blue. My nostrils quivered at the heady scent of sage. As I reached down to pluck one of the flowering golden pods bursting forth from the grayish-green bushes every autumn, I discovered the fresh, damp imprint of horses' hooves upon the soft ground.

I began to follow the hoof marks, wondering who I would find at the end of the trail. What were they doing so close to the canyon's edge? Surely, it must be one of the hired men in search of a stray.

Up ahead I spotted a flash of dun, and then the erect back of Guillermo astride the old stallion appeared, moving slowly along the trail just below me. I wondered if he knew I'd come back. I cupped my mouth with my hands and called out to him, anticipating his look of surprise, his deep-set eyes crinkling with the beginnings of a smile as he caught sight of me.

Guillermo had been with us so long that he was almost considered one of the family. Being Tavas's closest friend, he was much more than just a ranch hand. He had his own private quarters near the bunkhouse, and on Sundays he ate dinner at the house with us.

There would, no doubt, be an entirely new crop of hired hands this year. Tavas had the long-standing reputation among the Basque immigrants for being a fair man, a good employer. At the hotel in Bly, word spread quickly to the newcomers about the man from the Provinces who had built up the Devil's Gate, the largest and most prosperous cattle ranch for miles around.

They would come and go, these silent, dark-eyed men from the Provinces, to make their fortunes here in Nevada. They'd come up to the main house in ragged shirts and faded denims to ask in broken English for work. More often than not, Tavas would give them a chance. "You get a Basco, you've got a natural-born herder," Tavas was fond of boasting.

They would stay one season, maybe two, herding cattle, taking their meals in the bunkhouses, working long and hard until Saturday night.

The lucky ones, Tavas always said, stayed away from the bars in Bly. Eventually, they saved enough money to go back home to the Pyrenees where they had a woman waiting for them, and each man would settle down in that blissful, idyllic homeland of his to raise sheep by the sea.

But not Guillermo. Though others came and went, I could always count on Guillermo still being here, each season a little more sun-weathered, his hands and face tanned like old leather. Guillermo, like Tavas, doubtless had the money to make the trip back to the Basque provinces ten times over. And though the two of them

could kill half a day talking about how much they missed the Old Country, I realized that it was only a game with them. Rarely had either one of them set foot outside of Nevada—indeed, outside of the Devil's Gate Ranch—for the past twenty-odd years.

I caught another glimpse of Guillermo's worn Stetson as I came to the end of the slope. Again I called out, startled at how my voice carried down the canyon. He stood for a moment, cocking his head to one side, shading his eyes to look in my direction. Then he disappeared into the rocks and sagebrush.

As I turned the corner, a couple of horses came into view. They were grazing idly in the sparse grass near the base of the canyon, reins dangling freely from their mouths. I recognized among them the sturdy Appaloosa that was Brad's favorite mount.

Then I saw the men. They were gathered some distance away, clustered together in a rough semi-circle around some object not yet within my range of vision. My first thought was that one of the cattle must have wandered into the canyon and either had slipped and fallen, or perhaps was stuck in one of the many dangerous crevices. I watched Guillermo ride up to the rest of them, saw his horse suddenly rear back, wild-eyed and giddy, as if with the smell of blood.

For a moment, I was afraid the horse would buck him off, but he steadied the great creature with an expert hand, then dismounted to join the small group gathered about that curious dark heap in the middle of the crevice. There was no doubt in my mind now that it was a fallen bull or cow.

As I came closer, breathless from running down the steep trail, I began to catch snatches of conversation.

“Who in God’s name could have done such a thing?” Brad’s voice rose above the rest.

“Wasn’t for the meat, that’s for sure. If it *was* for the meat, I could maybe understand,” Guillermo’s soft voice, slightly accented, replied. The three men who gathered around him murmured their assent. The blond-haired man with the tattoos must have been hired on this summer. The other two I recognized...dark, stocky Manuel, and next to him, a slim, arrogant young man called Esteban.

Curious now, I stepped to the very edge of the trail to look downward into the rutted gully below, craning my neck to see what the commotion was all about. Through the gray nest of scraggly sage and twisted juniper I made out the dark spot. Patches of brown hide and what looked like a hoof. Loose rocks began to crumble around me. I moved a foot onto firmer ground to steady myself. Just at that moment, Esteban stepped back slightly and I caught full view of the carcass sprawled in the dusty gray gulch below.

The single, horrified cry that tore from my throat made all stares fly up to me. For a moment, I wobbled on the trail, struggling to keep from tumbling down the slope. My head was woozy and I felt like gagging. With a shiver of revulsion, I turned quickly away from the ghastly sight, but the vision lingered, haunting me. I’d discovered my cry in the night.

In the wide gap below me, half-concealed by the dense sage, was one of our prize bulls. A Hereford in its prime, worth thousands of dollars. Dead.

This had been no accident. I shivered, overcome with pity for what the poor, helpless creature must have endured before drawing its last breath. What kind of a monster was responsible? I’d turned my head away, but not before I saw the long, precise slit along the enormous belly, the slow

river of darkish blood staining the earth below. No meat had been taken; the carcass had been left to rot in the sun.

I felt a sickness, a hollowness rise to my throat from the pit of my stomach. Ritualistic mutilation. Sure, I'd heard rumor of this kind of thing happening in far-off places. But not *here*. Not on our own ranch.

"Anna!" Brad had taken off his suede hat, his brownish-gold hair catching sunlight as he climbed the trail to confront me. "What in hell are you doing here?" His voice softened. "I didn't want you to witness..." he made a helpless, sweeping gesture below, "...this."

"I...was walking. I saw Guillermo, followed him down here." I searched his eyes, hoping to find some answers there. "Brad, what does this mean?"

"It isn't the first time it's happened this summer," he said, his voice so low I could barely hear him.

"You said there was rustling—"

He looked up, into my eyes. "I wanted to spare you the grisly details."

"Brad...who could do a thing like this?" A gusty wind had begun to blow. The stench of death wafted up to us, nauseating, overwhelming.

Brad shook his head grimly. "I only wish I knew." The hands gripping the bands of his hat were tight with his helpless rage.

"It's devil worship." Guillermo had made so little sound coming up the trail that his sudden voice startled me. "I've seen it happen before. Long ago." He came up to join us. "Tavas and I were young men then. Working at the Lucky Seven just west of here." He turned and spat the juice from chewing tobacco upon the ground. "*Akerra*. Sounds like the Cult of *Akerra*."

His words sent cold shivers up my spine. I knew that some sort of covert activity thrived near the ranch. The muted glow of unexplained fires flickering late at night in the canyons, the tallow and pentagrams upon the rocks, the discovered bones of a small goat or chicken gave evidence that the Cult of *Akerra* was more than just a rumor. "Do you think some of our own men are responsible?"

"I don't know." The sharp, brown eyes beneath silvery brows were dark with secrets. If there were members of the Cult on our ranch, Guillermo could doubtless name them all, but he was suddenly the Guillermo I didn't know, the stranger who never let anyone get too close.

"Things have never gotten out of hand before. Why now?"

He shrugged.

"Guillermo, you will talk to the men for us, try to find out—"

A shadow passed over his eyes. "I'll do what I can."

Suddenly, Brad seized my arm. "Come on. Let's go down to the horses. You can ride with me back to the ranch."

Moments later, he climbed upon the Appaloosa, then helped me swing up behind him. I hadn't ridden for a long time. My arms clung tightly to his lean waist.

He slowed a moment to shout to Guillermo, "Drag that thing back to camp, but make sure Ivan's not around. Have Victor burn it."

Guillermo nodded and tipped his hat. Then we were off.

We passed the long, low barn with its sloping brown roof, the unsightly rubble of the old, abandoned bunkhouses, the carefully-fenced corral where our fat, pampered show cattle were penned. The house looked as

stark and weathered as the dry, sun-cracked land surrounding it. The harsh summer had peeled and blistered the white paint and the wind had blown several gray shingles into the yard. Yet there was a grandeur to the lofty, sprawling structure that made one barely notice the small, tell-tale signs of neglect that gradually begin to surround a home where illness has stricken.

"You seen Tavas yet?" Brad asked as he helped me down from the horse.

"No. He was sleeping last night and again this morning, but I'm going to see him now if Alice will let me."

"Don't mention this to him. Not a word." His gaze met mine, thoughtful but uncertain. "I don't want news of this leaking out. Not to Alice, not to Ivan, not to anyone. We'll tell them there was an accident, that the bull shattered a leg in the ravine and had to be shot."

"But, Brad? Shouldn't we tell them the truth?"

Brad shook his head with determination. "They're all so shook up over Tavas, why burden them even more? There's really nothing they can do. Guillermo will find out what he can from the men."

Guillermo and his slow-minded friend, Victor, posed no problem. I thought of the other three, besides Guillermo and Victor, who'd seen the carcass of the bull. "Do you think we can trust them to keep quiet?"

"I'm sure we can. They're all good men. Manuel's a faithful old hand, and Carl won't cause any trouble unless someone puts him up to it." He paused, frowning. "The only one who might give us problems is that Esteban..." Quickly, he added, "But don't worry about him. He can be bought. I'll raise his pay if I have to. You realize how important this is, don't you, Anna? My God, if news of

devil-worship gets around, it'll cause a panic. This place would be deserted by midnight."

"What are we going to do?"

"Maybe Guillermo will find something out." Hopefully, he added, "It might not happen again."

It was so like Brad to avoid the issue any way he could, to close his eyes and turn the other way, stubbornly hoping that the unpleasantness would disappear. With a sense of dread, I wondered how many cattle we'd already lost.

"Something *will* be done about this," he reassured me, as if reading my mind. A strange look crossed his face.

I knew he was thinking of Tavas and the others. When he turned to me, his eyes were filled with love and pain. "But not now, Anna." He brushed a hand wearily over his forehead. "Not now. For the sake of God, let Tavas have a little peace of mind before he dies."

Chapter 3

I paused a moment by the open door. Tavas's head was turned in such a way that I could see only his profile, the strong, straight nose, stubborn, narrowed chin, the iron-gray hair under its faded black beret. Cigar smoke stifled the sick-room smell of medicine, bottles and bottles of potions in disarray upon the dresser and chest of drawers.

I stood, hardly daring to believe my eyes. Tavas, wasting away from some mysterious lung disorder, was casually puffing a cigar.

"You shouldn't be smoking, you know." My voice sounded strange and wispy.

He waved away my cautions. "Alice, she tells me that ten times a day. Maybe twenty."

"And if I know you, you stubborn old man, it goes in one ear and out the other."

He turned toward me fully, a twinkle in those bright blue eyes, faded now against the background of sallow, parchment skin.

"I say it don't make a hell of a lot of difference." The twinkle was replaced by a look of gravity. Death had made an appointment. In the deep, searching gaze that met mine as I took his frail hand, I read that Tavas knew he was going to die soon.

"Tavas..." Though I'd promised myself I'd be cheery, I felt as if my heart was being pulled in two.

"No tears, *Cara Mia*, no tears."

His hands, rough and bronzed from so many years in the harsh Nevada sun, reached under my chin and tilted it gently until I was looking him straight in the eye.

"Listen to me, Anna. When I am gone...see that they break out the wine like they do in the Old Country. Have them dance and sing. No mourning for the death of an old man. Only rejoicing that he has gone on to a better place. Let Alice and Guillermo arrange things. They know best how it is to be done."

"Must we talk about...this?"

"The death of an old man brings you sorrow?" He smiled, pleased. "Nevertheless, we must talk." His tone grew serious. "A man's last days are filled with reflection, my dear Anna. I have a responsibility to the ones I leave behind. The future of the Devil's Gate must be secured before I can rest."

Almost as if talking to himself, he continued, "I must make a decision, and it isn't easy. I must choose who to make my heir." He drew in a deep breath. "Now, I have no children, but there is Ivan, my poor brother's son." He drew heavily upon the cigar, then exhaled slowly as if deep in thought. "Bah," he exclaimed suddenly. "He is nothing like his father."

Tavas spit out the butt of his cigar into the ashtray. "Ivan is a reckless, willful maverick, always looking for trouble."

His outraged accusation brought a smile to my lips for, as he spoke, I found myself recollecting some of the stories Tavas had told about his own youth. Tavas could just as well

have been describing himself as a young man instead of Ivan.

"I could have made him the wealthiest damned rancher this country's ever seen, but what does he do? Takes off, bumming around the country."

Tavas's voice had lost some of its fire. He looked weary. I knew that some of his anger toward Ivan stemmed from the fact Ivan refused to bend to his will. He remained the wild, untamed stallion not even Tavas could break.

Always, a clash of will had separated the two of them. Tavas and Ivan were like two angry bulls locking horns, circling, pitted against each other at every turn.

'He wants to move me around like some kind of pawn on a chessboard,' Ivan had told me once. Tavas had his future all mapped out for him, but Ivan wasn't one to be cast into anyone's mold. After one of their long and frequent arguments, despite Ivan's love for the Devil's Gate, he'd decided to break away. I was still in pigtails when Ivan left the first time.

He became a drifter, roaming about, taking odd jobs on ranches along the way as he satisfied his taste for adventure. Yet there was always a place for him at the Devil's Gate. His room always waited for one of his infrequent and unpredictable visits, and in the stables was a horse named Joshua that nobody else dared ride.

I awaited his erratic visits with rapturous anticipation, watching the road for signs of motion, impatient for the sight of him. Every year he seemed to grow bigger, stronger, and more handsome. To my worshipping eyes he was a sun-bronzed Adonis, his shoulders broad and muscular from hard labor in the sun, his legs long and lean. I adored everything about him, from the unruly black hair curling thick and wavy about his tanned face with its sharp

cheek-bones and rugged, hawk-like features, to that streak of fierce independence blazing in his fiery black eyes.

His arrival meant all rules were forsaken. Chores were neglected as Brad and I followed him like children at the hands of the Pied Piper. We would listen with wonder to his tales of new lands and wild horses, of battles with wolves and panthers. We would tag along as he bridled Joshua, our own sweating horses bringing up the rear as we followed him through the canyons.

He always brought back a surprise for me. As I thought of him, automatically, my hand reached about my neck, groping for the tiny silver star on its fine chain, the last of such cherished gifts. I'd always loved him, but to Ivan, I remained a little girl to tease with stories and delight with small presents.

"No, Ivan would be the ruin of the Devil's Gate."

I opened my mouth, intending to leap protectively to Ivan's defense, when Tavas impatiently interrupted. "Hear me out, Anna. I don't intend to argue with you. I want to let you know my true feelings. Enough about Ivan. Now, I want to talk about Brad."

He coughed slightly, his face turning ashen with the effort.

"Tavas, you're tiring yourself."

"Let me continue." The color began to return to his face as he straightened himself up from the bed.

Yes—Brad. So different from Ivan. Yet you could hardly think about one without thinking of the other. Light and shadow, morning and night. Brad, with his gentle, yet headstrong nature, his wheat-colored hair, his golden eyes so quick to reflect even the slightest emotion.

"Brad..." Tavas's voice softened with genuine affection. "The eternal diplomat. There's not a man on the place who

wouldn't swear by him, and God knows he's been more like a son to me than my own brother's child—but the men have always looked to Ivan or Guillermo for advice, not Brad." He looked me straight in the eye. "Frankly, I've always wondered if he has what it takes to manage the place."

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard nothing all summer but complaints about the haphazard way he's been running things."

"Brad's doing the best he can."

"We've lost cattle this summer, Anna. Too many cattle. Oh, he thinks he's keeping secrets, but word gets back to me."

I could feel the rapid flutter of my pulse. *Does he know, then, about the mutilated cattle despite Brad's efforts to keep it from him?*

"Why, just this morning another bull wandered off and was trapped in the ravine. Had to be shot." He shook his head in utter exasperation. "Sheer carelessness, that's what I call it."

What could I say? I knew that Tavas would feel quite differently if he knew the entire situation. He didn't know Brad had been working under a tremendous strain. He was actually doing a commendable job of keeping things running as smoothly as they were under the circumstances. I longed to explain to Tavas the real reason for Brad's odd behavior, but, remembering my promise to Brad, I held my tongue.

"You know how much I respect your opinion, Anna." A ghost of a smile flickered across Tavas's face. He coughed weakly. Our long discussion had tired him. Yet I knew he wouldn't rest until I'd spoken my mind.

My privileged status as Tavas's confidante had occurred gradually over the years. He became accustomed to using

me for his audience when I was but a child who dogged his every move and made a nuisance of myself by playing on the floor of his small, private study.

One day, while I sat near his feet by the comforting blaze of the fireplace, he began to talk, more to himself than to the distracted child who kept stealing jelly beans from his desk-top and playing with the silver-topped cane. It seemed to help him to discuss the burdens of his mind aloud.

“People would think I was crazy, talking to a mere slip of a girl about machinery and the price of beef,” he confessed. “But sometimes, Little One, I believe you are the only one around here who is capable of really listening. No use to talk to Brad. His mind is made up before he even knows the issue. And to discuss matters with Ivan is to provoke an argument.”

As I grew older, my relationship with Tavas gradually began to change. I no longer wandered about restlessly as he spoke, but began to take an interest in what he was saying. By the time I was in high school, I was already expressing a few opinions of my own and he was beginning to listen to them. The last few years, he had taken to seriously discussing matters with me, especially concerning the never-ending conflict between the ranch hands. Often, he called me to suggest a way to settle the perpetual disputes between the young, sometimes impertinent new men and the seasoned, experienced cowboys.

“You have a fairness about you, Anna. A rational, objective way of looking at life that is rare. You’ve always had more respect for our Basque traditions than either Ivan or Brad. I believe you truly understand the way that Alice, Guillermo and I feel about this place.”

Now, Tavas was asking my opinion about who should become heir to his beloved Devil's Gate. He sat, impatiently waiting for my reply.

Tavas had made it clear that he meant to leave the ranch to either Brad or Ivan. He was asking me to help him choose between them. I wasn't hurt that he hadn't considered me. His generosity through the years, his helping pay for my books and tuition, had been more than enough. I'd made it clear to him I preferred the city life. It was only fair that he leave the ranch to one of the others who wanted to stay—but how could I favor one over the other? Brad and Ivan were both so close to me.

"Why not divide the ranch between the two of them?"

Tavas shook his head wearily. "Do you believe I haven't already thought of that? There cannot be two bosses. Ha! Brad and Ivan! Already, they are at each other's throats. Once I'm no longer here to keep rein on them, their constant bickering will be the very downfall of the Devil's Gate."

I realized that there was some grain of truth in Tavas's words. I thought of Brad with his streak of childish jealousy toward Ivan, his headstrong way of refusing to share the burdens of the ranch with him now he'd returned. Then I thought of Ivan with his hot-blooded temper. They'd try to dominate each other, these two friends who were slowly becoming rivals. There would be no peace until one or the other had conquered.

Tavas waited patiently for my reply.

"I want to be fair, Tavas," I said finally, lowering my gaze. "I'm not sure that I can be."

"You love Ivan," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. I looked up, startled to hear the real reason for my hesitation so casually disclosed. I started to protest.

"Don't lie to me. You've always loved him," Tavas insisted.

His voice held no accusation, only a strange sadness.

"Then it's true," I retorted, suddenly defensive. "If you say so, Tavas, I suppose that makes it true."

Now he smiled softly. "Your very anger speaks the words you refuse to say." He continued with a shake of his head. "It is not good." With a sigh, he added, "Though perhaps if things had turned out differently..."

I never knew what the argument serving to drive the final wedge between Ivan and Tavas had been about. Shivering, I'd listened to the sound of angry voices coming from Tavas's study late at night. I'd pretended to be asleep when Ivan had slipped into my room and kissed me softly upon the cheek, not knowing whether the kiss was meant to be a promise of return or a farewell.

"Ivan was a fool to have married Colleen. I never meant for him to do something like that."

Does Tavas now regret having driven Ivan away?

I glanced over at Tavas, alarmed at how tired he looked. Our conversation had exhausted him. I rose quickly to my feet, murmuring my intentions to leave so that he could rest.

Tavas clutched at my arm, the grip of his iron will holding me back. "It is clear that the matter will have to be given more thought," he said—but the odd, confirmed set to his jaw, that strange, secret smile crossing his pale lips, hinted he'd already come up with the solution. I knew also, instinctively, that I was to be kept in suspense. Slowly, and with a curious look in his eyes, he nodded his head. "Yes, I will give the matter more thought," he repeated. Then he released me.

Chapter 4

Again, I felt an almost desperate need for solitude. Pausing at the kitchen door just long enough to pull on my sweater, I slipped outside. The air had grown unpleasantly chilly. I walked with my head down, shielding myself against the strong gusts of wind pulling at my hair and clothes.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold tingled up the back of my neck as I passed that twisted, sinuous trail leading into the canyons. For a moment, the bizarre image of that pitifully mutilated bull lying on its enormous side in the dust flashed inside of my mind, haunting me, convincing me more firmly than ever that the ghastly canyon was a place of forbidding evil.

I moved hastily in the opposite direction, toward the wintry haze of jagged, ice-blue mountains whose tall, cloud-veiled tips were already powdered with snow. My heart was aching, longing for solace. There was a peaceful spot not far away, buried in the rocky foothills of that distant range. It was a special place I'd visited often in my daydreams during the slow hours at work, through the tedious lectures of my professors.

A sense of anticipation warmed my steps as I passed the corrals, following the worn dirt road leading to the

bunkhouses with its deeply-rutted tire tracks. From there, a brisk jaunt up the winding, pine-dotted hillside would take me up to where my secret little meadow waited....my 'healing place'.

Ever since I could remember, the tranquil meadow had been my sanctuary. Whenever Ivan or Brad had teased me too much, or Alice had scolded, or through some mischievous prank of my own I'd fallen into Tavas's ill graces, I'd run up to the grassy meadow. There I'd climb upon one of those smooth gray boulders beneath the cool spread of pine and evergreen. I'd listen to the soothing music of the tiny stream flowing over the rugged masses of stone toward me. The meadow's peacefulness would always still the rapid pounding of my heart, soothe whatever small injury had brought me there.

I quickened my pace, eager to reach my destination. I wanted to toss a stone into the stream's shallow depths, to bury myself in the sheltering pines. I was going to entreat that enchanted place to work some of its magic on me once again, to ward away, at least for the present, the elusive sense of dread that kept closing in on me like some dense and shapeless fog.

I slowed to catch my breath as I reached the bunkhouses. The long, rough-hewn log building where the single hands lodged together was empty, as was the small, fenced cabin where Guillermo lived alone. The men were at work, but from the shabby duplexes where the families were housed, I saw signs of life.

A little, dark-eyed girl called out to me as she pedaled by on a dilapidated tricycle. She was part of the new family which had moved in last winter. Because there were so many children, they occupied both halves of the largest duplex. Only three of the boys were old enough to do

much work around the ranch, and they worked only off and on and at the simplest of jobs. Tavas, no doubt, had taken them in out of pity, knowing they had little money and nowhere else to live.

A face peered curiously out of the last house as I walked by. I saw Graciana, Esteban's wife, leaning against the sagging door frame. Beneath the faded blue dress her frail body was swollen with the child she carried.

I waved to her as I passed by. She returned my greeting with a quivering smile, tossing back the deep auburn hair hanging over her pale face to reveal sad, dark eyes. Poor girl. If the rumors I'd heard about him were true, hers couldn't be an easy life, being married to Esteban.

A vision of Esteban, handsome despite the bold manner and perpetual sneer, crossed my mind. Brad had told me he mistreated his wife, spent most of his wages in town on women and beer. I'd encountered Esteban once or twice on my brief visits back since he'd been hired on last summer. He was an arrogant, shiftless sort, though in all fairness I'd discovered nobody could break a horse quite as fast as he.

Like a silent apparition, Graciana withdrew inside the house. I resumed my walk. Behind the wooden fence, where a couple of milk goats watched me with placid eyes, the well-worn road broke off into a steep, rugged path, seldom used now except for an occasional run up into the distant mountains for firewood.

The trail forked off into two directions. The first led to an abandoned prospector's cabin high on the hillside, then snaked back toward the lip of Black Canyon. I'd never liked taking that trail. It seemed sinister, even in daylight. The sage was dense there, the blue-black juniper growing more twisted and spiny the closer one came to the canyon.

The way I'd chosen followed the sunny ledge of the gold-crested hillside for a time, then sloped gently into the heart of the cool, green meadow.

I'd not climbed far when an acrid smell invaded my nostrils. Mushroom clouds of smoke billowed up to me in the sporadic gusts of wind, stinging my eyes and burning my throat. I moved toward the edge of the rocks to peer over the ledge. In the barren fields directly below me, Victor was struggling with a restless fire. He was burning the carcass of the dead bull.

I strained my eyes against the afternoon sunlight. A sensation of uneasiness washed over me as the hulking, simple-minded giant of a man slowly turned his head up toward the ledge, as if some keen animal instinct warned him he was being observed. I wondered if he could see me well enough against the glare of sunlight to identify me. The uncomfortable feeling magnified as I imagined those vague, gray-black eyes of his watching me.

Guillermo's friend wasn't 'right'. Whenever there was a particularly unsavory job about the ranch, such as the disposing of carcasses, it usually fell to Victor. He didn't seem to mind. Though I'd never been afraid of him, I disliked the thought of him watching me so closely. I backed away from the ledge, feeling comfortable again only when I knew I was far from his range of vision.

As I continued upon the trail, my thought remained on Victor. The sudden sight of him had called to mind that uncanny tale Guillermo had revealed to me long ago...

* * * *

"I first met Victor when Tavas and I hired on to herd sheep for a big outfit near Winnemucca," Guillermo had begun that afternoon outside the barn.

"He was just a kid then. Big, clumsy, scared as a pup. Didn't know much English. Sort of latched himself on to me. Claimed my family knew his, though I never could place the name.

"Herding sheep's lonesome business," Guillermo had continued, his thin, brown hands busy with the braided rawhide rope he was mending. "You're given a band of sheep and it's your job to see that they stay out of trouble. They give you a dog to keep the sheep from wandering off and a gun to keep the coyotes away. Damned isolated work. Sometimes you don't see another soul for weeks upon end except for the supply wagon making the rounds or another herder wandering into your camp.

"Victor's path crossed mine the evening of the blizzard. I'd stopped to visit with him a spell." Guillermo's brow furrowed. His hands were suddenly still upon the broken *riata* in his lap. "We were eating supper when the storm blew in. Within minutes, it was so dark you couldn't see an inch in front of your face. Nothing we could do but wait it out.

"Snowed all that night and into the next day."

I'll never forget the strange look in Guillermo's eyes as he continued his tale, a look of mingled horror and pity. "Sheep were all dead. Frozen. We brought the dogs in with us. We were stranded up there on the mountains, cut off by the snowdrifts." His voice seemed to come from far away, as if he was reliving that dreadful experience, again seeing the sight of stiff, frozen sheep upon a white mountainside.

"We were half-dead ourselves, shivering inside that makeshift canvas tent." The sharp, brown eyes in that rugged, sun-weathered face clouded with disturbing memories. "Tried to make it back down the mountain, but the snow drove us back into that icy prison. Food was

running out. If I live to be a hundred, I'll still remember that bitter cold...

"I was shaking with chills, half out of my head with fever. Victor, he nursed me, spooning food into my mouth, giving me his own wraps to keep me alive."

Guillermo had stopped talking. Suddenly, he turned that keen, penetrating gaze of his upon me. "We'd almost given up hope when we heard the sounds of dogs and men. Tavas and the rancher had come looking for us." His steady gaze never faltered as he continued, "Know what that damned fool Victor did? Took up the old rifle and laid fire on them."

"But, why?" I asked in amazement.

Guillermo shrugged. "Mind had snapped. 'Sheeped', they call it. He'd gone sheeped. Driven mad by the loneliness, the cold, the isolation."

"Did...did he harm anyone?"

Guillermo shook his head. "Wrestled the gun away from him before he had a chance to do any damage, thank God. Sometimes in my sleep I can still see him crouched inside that tent, firing for all he was worth at our rescuers. That experience is something we'll both carry to our graves. It scarred us both for life, but in different ways."

"Is that why you look out for him?"

"I owe him my life," Guillermo said, looking down at his boots. "He's a good man. Only what happened up there broke his mind, made him simple. He doesn't cause any trouble. If some of the men don't understand him, at least they have the good sense to leave him be. Otherwise, they have me to account to."

* * * *

I'd been so lost in thought about Victor, it was with an element of surprise I realized I'd almost reached my

destination. Now, anticipation quickened my steps as I recognized the smooth gray stones marking the beginning of the stream. The meadow. My secret place.

As I stepped into the clearing, a sudden stab of loss shook me, an indeterminable pain making me think of the table back in the kitchen, bare of its traditional checkered cloth. I tried to choke down vast waves of emptiness, disappointment, as I looked about desperately, searching for a landmark to reassure me this was truly the place of my daydreams.

I'd remembered the scene in springtime, in the prime of its glory. Now, the encroaching winter had already made itself felt. The trees stood pale and ghostlike. Even the evergreens were browned at the tips from the cruel harshness of a first frost. Summer drought had dried the stream to a mere trickling. There hadn't yet been enough snow high on the mountains. Long, restless fingers of ice water groped blindly into the stony jaws of the rough boulders. Only after next spring's thaw had coaxed the snow down from the mountaintop would the creek flow freely again, giving life to the surrounding trees and bloom to the yucca. Everything seemed brittle and dried now, from the withered cactus to the bare-armed aspen rattling their bleached bones and whispering of death.

I sat on my boulder, shaken, deprived of my sanctuary. The place was the same but the experience so different from what I'd imagined. Huddled in my sweater against the miserable cold, face buried in my hands, I longed for things past. When would I ever learn that the process of life is a liquid thing? Seasons change, people change, nothing can endure forever.

"Anna?"

I started at the unexpected sound of my name in this secluded place, glanced up to where the restless black stallion and its rider waited.

Ivan. My gaze brushed over him, taking in tanned, split-leather boots, faded Levi's, the flash of the silver belt buckle at his lean hips. The open button of his plain work shirt casually exposed the bronze of his sturdy chest. He was hatless. I remembered that Ivan could never keep track of his hat, wondered briefly where he'd left it this time. Dark hair, damp and tousled from riding, fell in untamed waves about his forehead.

I was aware of the lean, hard-muscled strength of him as he leaped down from the saddle, dropping the reins to let Joshua wander by the stream. My heart hammered traitorously as he came toward me. We were so alone. Ever since my arrival last night I'd been in constant dread of such a meeting. Fearing his proximity, yet at the same time intoxicated by his nearness, I waited for him to approach.

Would I ever be able to look at him without pain? I compelled myself to meet those piercing, slightly tilted black eyes challenging me now.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, his look questioning, searching.

Quickly, I wiped at the tears with the back of my hand. Sagebrush crackled beneath his heavy boots as he stepped over to join me. He stood, looking away toward the stream, giving me a chance to compose myself.

"You remembered?"

He turned toward me, white teeth flashing against slightly olive skin. "Your hiding place?" For a moment the old Ivan was back, laughing, teasing me with a smile. "Brad and Tavas never wised up, but I always knew where to find you. Like when you broke Alice's precious Tiffany lamp—"

"You knew all along?"

He nodded wisely. "Even to the time you put that unsightly dent in Brad's new car."

I thought back to a time when the old blue Mustang Brad had relinquished to me last summer had been shiny and new. "It has plenty of scars on it now," I replied. "But I still tremble when I remember how furious Brad was that day. He must have looked everywhere for me. If he'd found me..." I turned to him, suddenly puzzled. "Why didn't you give me away?"

Lips that had been so quick to smile were drawn into a bitter line. The quivering trees threw windswept shadows across his face, outlining the harsh angle of his high cheekbones, delineating the aquiline nose, the well-formed mouth, throwing his quicksilver eyes into darkness. "I figure everyone's entitled to have some place where they feel safe. Some place...uninvaded." The somberness clouding his features crept into his voice as he added, "Lately, I've taken to coming here myself."

We'd been talking so easily it was almost as if the years had fallen away. Now, his dark and bitter words reminded me of how much had changed. He was a troubled man, a man in need of sanctuary.

"I'm afraid we didn't give you a proper welcome last night," he said. "My wife...can be difficult."

"It's all right."

I glanced at his drawn face, noticing the tightness beginning again at the corners of his mouth. The very mention of Colleen had forced a barrier between us. *What kind of a woman is she to have put that bitter look of disillusionment into his eyes?*

"I'm glad you decided to come home, Anna," he said softly. I was touched by the sincerity in his voice. "It means so much to all of us."

For a moment, we were both silent. "I saw Tavas this morning," I said finally.

"He hasn't long now," Ivan replied with a shake of his head. In a voice tinged with irony, he added, "Funny how I always thought of him as immortal. An ancient god who would never die..." Despite their many differences, I was reminded by his words of the strange bond of respect that had always existed between them.

"Today he could speak of nothing but the Devil's Gate," I said. "I believe the fate of the ranch is the only earthly matter that troubles him now. Even his own suffering is insignificant to his worry about what will happen once he's no longer here..."

Ivan stood gazing down at the valley below us, smoke-green with sagebrush, purpled with long afternoon shadows. His changeable eyes were glowing with sudden light as he turned to me.

"I'm suddenly seeing so many things the way Tavas must see them. I can understand his years of struggling, of hard work, of inspiration. Why, every part of this ranch is a part of him, an extension of his very soul."

I could see the conflict raging within him as he confessed.

"I've spent so damned much of my life fighting to escape, but something always lures me back here."

I could easily comprehend the meaning behind his words. I'd felt the same way so many times myself. It was as if the Devil's Gate was the only place in the world where I truly belonged.

“I believe Tavas discovered something here, Anna,” he continued. “A taste of that inner peace, that sense of accomplishment most of us are doomed to spend our entire lives seeking.”

Caught in the golden glow of early evening, his face was alight with a sudden desire, a yearning for some dream of his own left unfulfilled. Now his luminous black eyes focused upon me, lingering wistfully upon my hair, my eyes, my face, almost as if I should have played an important part in that dream.

A look of bleak despair returned to his face. Some dark thought had snuffed out that flicker of hope within him as swiftly as a careless finger brushes the light from a burning candle.

“It’s so damned easy, Anna,” he finished softly, “for a man to lose sight of his dreams.”

Chapter 5

Tavas had taken a turn for the worse. His final days were surely approaching. He no longer called anyone to his bedside, but spent the daytime as he did his nights, in a drugged-trance-like sleep. An aura of gloom, a sense of foreboding hung about the quiet house like a dense, shapeless shroud. Evenings after supper we'd taken to gathering together in what was the warmest, most cheery room of the big, drafty house. None of us wanted to be alone.

The family room was just off from the kitchen, close to the stairs. It was a huge room with an enormous stone fireplace and old but comfortable furniture made all the more homey by the fact that none of it made up a matching set. The faded, flowered couch had sat in the corner ever since I could remember. Near it was Tavas's favorite black recliner, left disturbingly empty now even when the room was crowded, as if none of us dared to take his place. Three deep-cushioned easy chairs of varying patterns and colors, hung with Alice's thick, white crocheting, were scattered lazily here and there at cozy angles about a blazing hearth.

The doctor had been called in again this evening. Though it was not his practice to make house calls, he always came. During each and every visit he made it a point

to explain that calls could no longer be made at the ranch. "It's just not done," he would insist in his most professional voice. "This is the last time I'll see you at the house." Tavas always listened to his tirade with the patience of a saint. Like many of the ranchers on Echegaray's list, he'd never been to the doctor's clinic. I doubted if he even knew where it was. Everyone in the area knew it took only a phone call to have gruff, kind-hearted old Dr. Echegaray materialize, no matter what time of day or night, battered black bag in hand.

Now, as I watched him climb the stairs, white head bowed, his aged and bent body moving slowly, I was filled with apprehension. Something in his manner tonight forewarned of bad news. He hadn't paused to chat with Brad and me, but continued steadily toward the stairs, his white brow creased, his heavy jaw set. The only other time I'd seen that look of defeat in his eyes was the night Lucas had died.

I heard the sound of tapping heels across the oak floor as Alice moved toward the stairway to join the doctor at the head of the stairs. Then they both disappeared from sight.

Brad drew his chair closer to mine. The murmur of our voices was low above the crackling of the rosy fire as we continued to fill up the time by talking about summers long ago. Whenever there was a lull in our conversation, the silence took over. The ticking of the Grandfather clock in the corner seemed to grow louder and louder as if monitoring the minutes, the hours, Tavas had left to live.

Colleen didn't join the rest of us in our nightly vigil. Most every evening she would drive into town in her red sports car. My gaze fell upon Ivan as he paced restlessly in front of the stone fireplace. He'd been silent and moody tonight, resisting any effort Brad and I'd made to include

him in our rambling, unfocused conversation. The crackling glow of the fire cast long shadows upon his dark face as he glanced up at the ponderous old clock, eyes suddenly narrowed, his lips tightening with growing annoyance. It was getting late. Colleen should have been home hours ago.

Someone was coming down the stairs. I turned at the sound of footsteps to find Alice, pale and wan from sleepless nights, singling me out with a beckoning finger. "He's conscious now," she said as I moved to join her on the staircase. "He's asking for you."

Quickly, I followed her up the stairs to his room. Now a dark and dreary chamber illuminated only by the weak glow of the small brass lamp near the bed, it seemed to have somehow grown smaller. *So small that the darkness threatens to swallow me up, to engulf me.* I moved toward Tavas's bedside.

Tavas lay gray-faced and still upon his pillows, but his eyes were bright and alert. This time, no cigar dangled defiantly from his lips. His black cap had been removed, revealing the silver of his thinning hair. The veins of his temples stood out, unusually large and blue against his mottled skin. His strong, sharp features were contorted with pain he could no longer mask.

"Leave us," he demanded of Alice and the doctor. Then, to me, "Anna, come sit down beside me." His voice was hoarse and rasping. It seemed to come from deep in his throat. "Here, by the bed."

Obediently, I pulled my chair up close to him, taking one of his hands in mine. The chill of his bony fingers alarmed me.

He spoke, and each word seemed to cost him great effort. "I'm glad...glad that you have come. There is something I want to tell you." The hand gripping my own

tightened as a spasm of pain wracked his frail body. "A secret. An old family secret." A dreadful smile played upon the pale lips. "Can I trust you with a secret?"

"You know you can always trust me."

"It's not a pleasant—" He stopped suddenly. I waited helplessly as he gasped, struggling to draw air into his tortured lungs. "...pleasant story." The color drained swiftly from his face. "One moment, my dear. I...seem to have trouble...catching my breath."

"Tavas." I half-rose, bending over him. Quickly, he turned away from me so that I wouldn't witness his suffering. I could hear the rasping sound of his ragged breathing as he clutched at his throat, fighting for air. When he turned to me, his face was ghastly.

"Please...leave now," he pleaded in a broken whisper. "We'll talk...later. I promise you..." His words broke off into a sudden, violent fit of coughing.

The doctor burst inside. With a look, he banished me from the room. I stood helplessly outside the door with Alice, waiting. I could hear Tavas, muttering incoherently between periods of silence. His voice followed me into the hallway. I could make out vague, disturbing phrases about death and secrets and betrayal. *What dark secret had he been about to reveal to me?*

Gradually, his voice quieted. Moments later, the old doctor stepped out. "I've given him something to ease the pain," he said. He reached out with a comforting hand to pat Alice's shoulder. I glanced over at her, alarmed by her paleness. She looked like she was on the verge of collapse. "He's resting peacefully now," Doctor Echegaray advised. "Please go back downstairs."

Ivan was gone when we returned to the family room. A draft chilled the air despite the warm glow of the fireplace,

as if someone had just recently opened the door, letting the cold seep in.

Brad had fallen asleep in his chair by the fire, long, denim-clad legs stretched out in front of him, his boyish cheeks ruddy from the steady heat. Stepping lightly so as not to disturb him, Alice and I took our places.

The click of Alice's crocheting needles joined the ticking of the clock as time slipped away. Beside me, Brad stirred, stretching his legs, stifling a yawn.

We all came to life at the sound of the car pulling somewhat recklessly into the driveway.

"Where the hell have you been?" Ivan's voice, just outside the door, was sharp-edged with anger.

"Oh, what do you care?" came the scornful reply. "Now, let me inside. I'm cold."

"You could at least keep decent hours. Out of respect for Tavas, if not for yourself."

"Old buzzard don't mean nuthin' to me." The door swung open suddenly and Colleen stepped inside, honey-blond hair swinging about the flushed face of a slightly drunken angel.

Ivan followed her inside, his handsome face set, eyes glowing with barely repressed anger.

"I suppose sitting around this dump farmhouse night after night is your idea of excitement, Darling," she scoffed, tossing her white fur jacket carelessly upon the nearest chair. I saw Alice's brow rise as she eyed the slinky, one-piece emerald outfit wrapped around Colleen's lush curves like a second skin. "Well, I'm fed up with it, I tell you. What good are you doing the old man, or yourself?" She shrugged. "He'll either leave the ranch to you or he won't." She paused to catch her breath and finished in an odd,

plaintive tone. "If he does, I'll make you sell out. You know I don't like it here."

She looked from one of us to the other, the corners of her pouting lips turned down contemptuously. She laughed, a dry, empty sound. "Oh, you all hate me, don't you?" She stood beside Alice. "Well, don't you?" she challenged, her voice ridiculing, malicious.

Alice, her mouth set into a grim line, refused to look up at her. Instead, she concentrated upon her crocheting, her hands moving swiftly, methodically as she moved the needle up and down.

Colleen started toward Brad, then she noticed me sitting in my usual spot near the hearth, and a slow, evil grin spread across her face. "Well, what have we here? Little Miss Muffet."

I also turned away, staring at the red-orange flames dancing within the black iron grate, as she taunted in her wicked, mocking voice. "Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet, waiting for Uncle to die."

It was all I could do to hold back the urge to slap her. Yet I knew I must control that dreadful tingling in my palm for the sake of the others. She'd come up close beside me, forcing her face close to mine. I could smell the tropical perfume of some sweet mixed drink upon her breath as she accused, green eyes glittering with malice. "Oh, I know your game, Lady. You don't care any more for that poor old fool up there than I do. You just want a cut of his money."

"That's enough." Ivan, eyes stormy, advanced toward her.

"Yes, come to her defense." She mocked him with her words, tossing back long hair shimmering with firelight. "Damsels in distress. Isn't that your specialty?"

"I said, 'That's enough'." Ivan's movements were carefully controlled as he crossed the room toward her, but his eyes were smoldering with an unsettling anger.

He took her arm roughly, forcing her around to face him. "What do you mean, coming in here and making a scene like this?" I heard him demand between clenched teeth. "Some day, Colleen, you're going to push me too far..."

He'd called her bluff. Though she still glared at him, eyes defiant, her lower lip had begun to quiver slightly. She was afraid of him.

She shook off his grasp. "Well, I know one thing," she said defensively. "This is no place for me. I'm going back to town." Unsteadily, she started toward the door. "I'm going to find myself some real company."

"You're not going anywhere."

I felt the sudden blast of cold as she pushed the door open, slipping outside. Ivan was only a step behind her. "I won't have you acting this way around Alice and the others," I heard him warn just before the door slammed shut.

She cursed him. A sharp sound broke the momentary stillness that followed, the stinging remark of flesh striking flesh. Had he struck Colleen or had she slapped him?

I shifted restlessly in my chair, wondering if I should try to come between them or if my involvement would only make matters worse. Brad rose suddenly and started for the door.

"Let them be, Brad." He was stopped by Alice's voice. "It's between a man and his wife."

"You know his temper," Brad protested.

"He'd never hurt her. No matter what she does to him." Alice turned, demanding of me, "Oh, why did he

have to marry her? She's brought disgrace upon our entire family."

* * * *

Much later, they came back inside. Colleen, subdued now, was clinging like a little girl to Ivan's arm. With her long hair tangled, her lipstick making a bright slash against the trembling paleness of her mouth, she gave the appearance of fragile vulnerability. I glanced over at Ivan. Upon his jaw, a dull, reddish mark was beginning to form.

It was a matter of moments before anyone noticed that the doctor had come out of Tavas's room and was standing at the head of the stairs. We all seemed to turn toward him at once. I felt a sinking sense of dread as he looked down at us, brushing a hand wearily across his heavy white brow.

"Tavas?" I heard Alice ask the question in a choked, frightened voice.

"I'm sorry," the doctor replied. "He's gone."

Chapter 6

The afternoon was bright and clear. Though the sun shone warmly, a bitter wind rustled the black skirts of mourning as we gathered on the hillside for Tavas's funeral. Father Bilbao mumbled in Latin, solemnly forming the sign of the cross with his hand... Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

The heady perfume of carnations and roses was getting to me. Tavas would never have approved. He'd never been one to care for flowers unless they were growing wild in their own natural surroundings.

Tears were shining in the old Father's eyes as the ceremony came to an end. I had to remind myself sharply that I'd promised Tavas I wouldn't cry as the coffin was lowered slowly into the damp earth.

Brad took my hand and squeezed it gently. I was grateful for the warm pressure, the reassurance of his comforting presence. He stood tall and broad-shouldered beside me, his eyes the color of the golden, sun-baked earth.

Raising my head, I searched the other faces of the small gathering. Colleen, feigning illness, had stayed in the house. Ivan was half-supporting Alice who, though dry-eyed, looked as if at any moment she might totally collapse into her son's strong arms.

On Alice's other side stood Guillermo, uncomfortable in a dark suit, wrinkled and several years out of style. The absence of the familiar Stetson made him seem a stranger. Thick hair, streaked by the sun and touched with silver at the temples, curled about his tanned, deeply-lined face. His shuttered eyes revealed little emotion, but a deep and inconsolable sorrow seemed to radiate from the inner core of his being. He and Tavas went back such a long way.

At the edge of the gathering, Esteban fidgeted restlessly. He was one of the few hired men who'd ridden out to the cemetery after the funeral. Having no suitable black raiment, he wore his Saturday night best of checkered flannel shirt tucked into denim Levis. His dark hair was slicked back and wetly shining. The strong scent of his potent after-shave mingled poisonously with the flowers.

Beside him Tavas's lawyer, Martin DeGarza, adjusted his black, double-breasted jacket about his ample stomach. The shiny material gave off a dull greenish glow where it touched sunlight as he moved to whisper something to Esteban. I wondered what the two of them were talking about.

I didn't trust DeGarza much more than I did the younger man. DeGarza wasn't the most respected lawyer in town. This, and the fact that he claimed to be Colleen's uncle, made me wonder why Tavas had chosen him to see to his will.

People began to scatter. DeGarza and Esteban began to edge restlessly toward the cars waiting to take us back to the ranch. Brad and I slowed to wait for Ivan and Alice, who were the last to leave the graveside. They made a striking picture as they came toward us. Ivan had his mother's raven hair, midnight eyes, and erect stature. I saw

Ivan's strong arm come about her shoulder tenderly as they moved away from Tavas's grave.

* * * *

In honor of Tavas's last wishes, Alice and Guillermo had planned the wake. A *gauela*, or wake, Basque style, is a rather unusual experience. I knew a stranger would have been shocked, perhaps a little appalled by the apparent absence of grief.

Music filled the air, lively tunes played upon the guitar and harmonica. Wine kegs waited. Beef sizzled on the enormous barbecue pit. A feast had been laid out upon makeshift wooden benches.

Inwardly, I knew that Tavas would have been pleased by the almost festive atmosphere. His voice seemed to come to me, a voice from the winds: *'Rejoice for me, Anna. Bah. Save your sorrow for the poor child whose misfortune it is to be coming into the world, not for the lucky man going out. For my grief, my pain, has almost ended, while the poor child's has only begun...'* This had always been Tavas's personal philosophy about life. I could almost see him, a twinkle in his bright eyes and laughter upon his lips. That was the way I remembered him best.

Plates were being filled. Spicy Basque dishes mingled side by side with potato salad, pork and beans, and Alice's famous apple pies. At the far end of the table, paper plates weighed down by coffee cans fluttered in the breeze. I could tell by the many flushed faces that the huge wine kegs had already been tapped.

"Better have some pie," a voice at my elbow suggested. Martin DeGarza took my arm and steered me toward the table. He dished up a slice for me, then paused to heap an extra piece upon his own plate. He sighed heavily. "It's been a long day."

We joined Brad and Ivan on one of the wooden benches. "Where's Alice?" Martin asked.

"I think she went back to the house," Brad replied.

The hired men and their women and children clustered around the barbecue, eager for food not usually a part of their daily fare. As I watched them passing wine cups and laughing, the thought occurred to me that I might be witnessing some late summer picnic. Every now and then I caught the strange, exotic lilt of the Basque tongue. Save for the highly Western bandannas, Stetsons, and other small alterations, I could have been observing some social gathering in the remote village of an enchanted, distant land. In the smoky haze of gathering dusk, the jagged, bare-face Nevada range was suddenly transformed into the cool, green-forested slopes of the Pyrenees. The few of us returning from the cemetery, uneasy, suddenly strangers in our own land.

At one table I spotted Guillermo's loyal companion, Victor.

Guillermo wasn't with him. Instead, Esteban sat at his side, making gestures with his hands as he spoke to him. Victor's eyes moved restlessly, as if he were searching for Guillermo to come to his rescue.

Across the table from them, Manuel, with his big, somber eyes and fringe of short hair, took in what Esteban was saying with the seriousness of a medieval priest. Carl's tattooed hand slowed in mid-air as he, too, paused to listen. What was he saying that made the others give him such rapt attention?

The group that had assembled, with the absence of Guillermo, included the same ones who knew about the discovery of the mutilated bull. I remembered Brad saying

that Esteban was the most likely of the group to cause trouble.

"Father Bilbao's service was the best he's ever given," Brad said.

"Good pie," DeGarza commented, almost as if in response.

Ivan and I picked at our food silently, without appetite, listening to Brad and Martin alternately discussing the funeral service and Alice's apple pie.

"When's the reading of the will?" Brad asked.

"Tomorrow," DeGarza said.

"So soon?"

"Better to get it all over with."

DeGarza was the nearest neighbor to the Devil's Gate. Maybe that was the reason Tavas had asked him to see to his will.

DeGarza was no stranger to the ranch. Since he operated a small place just a few miles down the road toward Secret Pass, he'd dropped in often to sample Alice's cooking and bring Tavas the latest gossip from town.

Shortly after Colleen and Ivan's marriage, DeGarza had discovered a family tie to Colleen. A widower with no children of his own, DeGarza was delighted by the connection. He seemed genuinely fond of Colleen and called her his 'turtle dove'. He claimed her as his niece, though the relation between them, if it truly existed, was probably more distant. The only family resemblance I saw between the two of them was their fondness for Scotch and water. As Alice wryly observed, they were both regular patrons of the 'Red Garter', a local tavern.

Alice was especially scornful of DeGarza, perhaps because he made it clear that his frequent trips to the

Devil's Gate were not only for Tavas and Colleen's benefit. For years he'd had his eye on Alice and her apple pies.

"Tavas didn't give a hint about what's in that will," Brad said. "I can't help being curious. His being so secretive about it makes me wonder if he didn't leave some of us out." His gaze drifted toward Ivan, who purposefully ignored him.

I stood. I wasn't going to sit and speculate on the contents of Tavas's will on the day of his funeral. Ivan's dark gaze stayed on me as I moved away from the table, and for a moment I thought he might follow me.

I wandered away from the wake. Holding back my tears through the long and trying afternoon had caused a painful throbbing in my head, intensified by the lively music and the rumble of voices.

The wind whipped my dark skirt about my legs like cords of stinging rope as I walked down by the corrals. Herefords grazed peacefully in the winter pastures, rusty, white-faced specks against the patches of brown earth and dry grass. I stepped into the shelter of the nearby barn, relieved to discover that the thick walls insulated with stacked hay blotted out all traces of the incessant music.

I leaned back against the hay bales, glad for this moment of solitude. Then, slowly, the voices began to penetrate my consciousness. I listened, hearing Joshua shuffling noisily in his stall. *Did I only imagine voices?*

"I'm afraid, Guillermo." Alice's voice came to me clearly now from the partially opened door of Guillermo's makeshift little office. I leaned forward, straining to listen as her voice dropped slightly. "I...I can't bear the thought that I might have to move away."

"Alice, listen to me. There's nothing to worry about. Tomorrow the ranch will belong to either you or Ivan."

“But what if you’re wrong? Or what if that conniving little tramp sweet-talks Ivan into selling to DeGarza? I’m not a young woman anymore, Guillermo. It...it would kill me to leave here.”

The idea that Colleen was already trying to persuade Ivan to sell the Devil’s Gate shouldn’t have surprised me. She hated the ranch, would be glad to be rid of its burden, but from what Ivan had told me, I didn’t believe he’d be interested in selling out.

My heart went out to Alice. The whole thing had really upset her. Even a strong woman like her sometimes needed a shoulder to lean on. Why should I be surprised she’d chosen to confide in Guillermo, our closest family friend?

“Hush,” I heard him whisper, his rough voice softening, taking on the strange, musical lilt of his native tongue as he murmured soothing words to her. “No matter what happens tomorrow, you’ll never be forced to leave.” I heard him make the promise as I slipped silently away.

Chapter 7

The wine kegs grew lighter. Laughter echoed in the cool night air, rising above music that had become merry and boisterous. Tavas's wake was rapidly becoming a brawl. The bonfire spread its hot-orange glow over the flushed faces of singers and dancers and old folks keeping time to the harmonica with tapping heels. It seemed that Tavas had been all but forgotten, yet I knew that his spirit remained deep inside the hearts of his men.

Guillermo had returned to the party, and was drinking with some of the other ranch hands, keeping up the pretense of joviality. For a moment, unnoticed by the others, he turned away. His shoulders were heavy, his rugged face dark and sad. I knew he was thinking about Tavas. Someone nudged his arm and, wearily, he raised his glass and smiled.

Esteban whirled a woman to the music. His black eyes glittered as he gazed upon his partner. She looked up at him seductively, ruby lips parted, green eyes shining as she brushed up against him. She was a mass of emerald lace and golden hair as she twisted and turned, greeting the rapid pulse of the music with boundless zeal. Whatever ailment had prevented Colleen from attending Tavas's burial this afternoon, I mused wryly, had undergone a miracle cure.

"Don't look so surprised," remarked a deep voice from behind. Then Ivan was there at my side, watching the two of them dance, his eyes guarded. "Music always seems to rejuvenate her. Or maybe it's the wine..." I could tell by the tension in his voice that anger smoldered beneath his calm exterior. Was he outraged by Colleen's unfitting behavior—or jealous of Esteban?

"Why haven't you joined in on the merriment?" His voice was brusque, filled with unfocused anguish. "Isn't this...farce what Tavas demanded of us?"

I lowered my gaze from his. "The idea of dancing so soon after his burial...sickens me."

"My wife obviously doesn't share your opinion." His voice softened as he added, "Though I must admit that dancing's the last thing on my mind tonight, too. Tavas would disown us, you know. He'd say that we've become...too Americanized."

"I don't care. Ivan, I need to...to get away from here."

As always, he seemed to understand. Taking my arm lightly, he guided me away. We walked together in silence until the music faded to nothing and the bonfire was a pale orange blur. We walked until the steep, sheer walls of the canyon gaped below us.

The wind blew furiously, whipping at our hair and clothing as we stood on the rocks, looking downward. It was as if suddenly we stood at the edge of the world, down on the very brink of Hell.

Gnarled trees beckoned up at us with grasping hands. The jagged rocks rose like the crooked spine of some prehistoric monster. I glanced over at Ivan, realizing that he, too, was caught up in the mystique of the canyon's weird, desolate beauty.

"You and Tavas used to tell me that those trees were witches frozen by some wicked spell," I accused, pointing down to where the three darkest trees wavered like figures in motion below us, halfway down the steep canyon.

"What was the rest of the legend? Oh, yes—I remember now. When the moon appeared, the trees were supposed to come to life to dance with their master until sunrise turned them back into wood."

"And their master was *Akerra*," Ivan acknowledged, his dark eyes glowing with deep brilliance as he turned to me. "The Devil's familiar."

"Tavas said he saw *Akerra* once. He was standing upon the rocks over there." The spiraling walls of the opposite side of the canyon were shrouded in misty darkness against white moonlight. One could almost imagine *Akerra*'s immense, black shape prancing upon that saw-toothed ledge, the he-goat, evil horns aglow, cloven hooves catching moonlight.

"Just another tale," Ivan confessed with a laugh, "to keep little girls from wandering too far from the house after dark."

"Like the Cult of *Akerra*?"

For a moment, he didn't reply. Then he answered carefully, "Just beyond those trees is a small clearing. In the middle of the clearing is an old stone carved with Basque inscriptions. I came across it when I was out riding one day. I saw ashes from an old fire, tallow upon the rocks, evidence that some sort of ritual had been practiced." The stare from his obsidian eyes met mine in the darkness. "I believe a secret gathering meets here in the canyons at night—but not the Cult of *Akerra*. The Cult always involves animal mutilation and bloody sacrifice. Sometimes even human sacrifice. Nothing like that's ever happened here."

I shivered, remembering the bull found in the nearby ravine. If Ivan knew about that grisly discovery... "Will you walk with me down there, Ivan? I want to see the stone."

He glanced over at me in surprise. "Tonight?"

"Why not?"

"It's getting late." He hesitated, glancing up at the sky. "I'm not sure I can even find it." He paced the canyon ledge, finding a place where the rocks parted, forming a rugged passage into the canyon, then motioned for me to follow.

Breathless, we reached the spot where the three old trees grew together, moving in the wind above us like withered spirits caught in some mystical spell. Tangled branches threw long shadows across Ivan's face as we passed below them.

We stepped further into the clearing. Yellow rocks surrounded us. Black sagebrush rustled beneath our feet.

"Anna. Look at this." As I caught up with him, I noticed the tell-tale signs. Rings of ashes from a recent fire. Strange drawings scraped into the dry earth. Drippings of tallow from many candles stained the mottled stones.

"Someone's been here," I whispered.

"Yes, and not long ago." He bent down to examine the cold ashes where the fire had once burned.

"There it is." Partially hidden by dense black sagebrush was the stone. Ivan moved forward. I sensed something was wrong as I came up behind him. He stood, staring down at the large, misshapen gray boulder tattooed with its seemingly meaningless symbols and odd inscriptions, a frightening look upon his face. He moved a finger curiously along the rough surface, tracing the dark streaks dried on the rocks. His voice was thick, puzzled. "Blood."

My heart pounded sickly in my chest as I thought of the mutilated bull found in the ravine not far from here.

"Sacrifice..." He turned toward me, his voice strange, questioning. "But how is this possible? Anna?"

He was watching me closely. I realized I'd been staring in trance-like horror at the terrible stone.

"You know something about this."

I glanced away from him. "Nothing."

He took my shoulders, forcing me around to face him, his dark eyes demanding answers. "You're keeping something from me. I can tell." Suspiciously, he added, "Why did you want to come down here?"

Anger made him look taller and darker, a stranger in the unrelieved gloom. "If you don't tell me now," he warned, "it'll be only a matter of time before I find out."

Remembering my promise to Brad, I hesitated. Yet, what harm could it do for him to know now? Tavas was buried. The news could no longer disturb him. Ivan would have to be told sooner or later. Taking a deep breath, I explained to him what I knew about the dead bull discovered in the canyons by Brad, Guillermo, Esteban and the others.

His eyes were black with fury. "Why in God's name did you keep it from me?"

"Brad made me promise. He said he didn't want to upset you. With Tavas so ill and all the rest, he thought that you and Alice had enough on your minds."

"Is that what he told you?" He laughed, the hollow sound echoing against the rocks. "Damn him," he cursed suddenly. "I've suspected something like this ever since I came back this summer. If only he'd leveled with me. Maybe I could have done something."

"Ivan, try to understand his reasons. Brad was only doing what he thought was best."

Obviously curbing his anger, he replied, "Well, it's too late to worry about that now. Brad's right about one point. If any rumor of Devil-worship leaks out, all hell will break loose. Do you have any idea of the situation we're up against?"

Wordlessly, I nodded.

"Who knows about this?"

"Besides Brad and Guillermo, there's Manuel, and the new hand, Carl. Victor, too—he burned the carcass. And Esteban—"

"Esteban." His lips tightened at the name. "Heaven help us."

"Brad's worried about him, too. I think he's had to bribe him to keep his mouth shut."

"I'll have a talk with Brad."

"Guillermo's trying to find out what he can."

Ivan nodded. "Good idea. We can trust Guillermo. We have to find out who the ringleader is behind this madness, but we don't want to start a panic." Something in his abrupt tone changed. "In the meantime, Anna, don't you ever come out here alone. I mean it now more than I ever meant it when you were a child. It's not safe to be out here after dark."

* * * *

"Are you going back to the wake?" Ivan asked as we reached the rim of the canyon. In the distance, the bonfire still flickered. Music carried on the wind toward us, slow and mournful now, like the crying of a lost spirit.

"No, to the house."

"I'll walk with you."

The barn and stables were filled with ghostly shadows, making me grateful for his companionship. The huge, misshapen cactus plants bordering Alice's garden assumed defensive positions in the darkness, like wild-armed scarecrows deftly guarding the withered tomato vines and scraggly fruit trees.

Ivan walked with me up to the white porch. Hand on the doorknob, I turned back to see him moving away through the garden. "Ivan—you're not going back there."

"Don't worry," he whispered back to me. "Please...go on inside." I hesitated at the half-opened door, watching him fade into the night.

"Who's there?" called an anxious voice from inside the family room.

"Just me, Alice," I replied.

"Well, come on in," she insisted. "You're letting in the cold air."

I stepped into the cozy room warmed by the crackling fire. Alice sat on the sofa, a book lying neglected beside her needlework. "Well, this is one day I'm glad is over," she said as I sank down on one of the chairs near the fire.

"It's been endless," I replied.

She sighed wearily. "I'm exhausted, but there's no use going to bed. I sit up like an owl half the night. Then the minute my head hits the pillow, I'm wide awake. I just toss and turn and lie there listening—"

"Listening?" I repeated, curious. "Listening for what, Alice?"

"I'm not sure," she replied with an alarmed look. "For Tavas to call out for his water or his medicine, I guess. Yes, that must be it." Almost as if to convince herself, she added, "I've stayed up nights for so long it's become a habit."

I stared at her. *Is it really habit that's keeping Alice awake? Or does she, too, lie awake listening for strange, unnatural sounds in the night? Does the whispering wind sound to her like the chant of elusive voices? Is she, too, waiting wide-eyed for another muted shriek to pierce the stillness?*

I looked down at the olive-colored book by the needlework.

"I've taken up reading until all hours," she confessed, following my gaze.

"What do you have there?"

"Just an old book from Tavas's collection. I...was just thumbing through it," she explained, almost defensively. "The subject doesn't interest me at all. In fact, I was going to put it back."

"Oh? What's it about?" I asked, curiosity aroused. The book looked vaguely familiar.

With seeming reluctance, she handed the book to me. A feeling of recognition grew as I weighed the feather-light volume in my hands. The book was part of Tavas's special collection, the few rare books he allowed no one to touch. Most were written in the Basque language, but a few, like this one, were English translations. Printed in the early 1800's, the book I held was a translation of an obscure Basque work dating back to the sixteenth century. The title, *A Historie of the Basque Sorcery*, made a chill sweep over me.

"Alice, did you say you were through with this? I'd like to take it with me to my room tonight."

"I wouldn't think you'd be interested in witchcraft and that sort of nonsense." She laughed uneasily as she spoke. I could see she watched me closely, black eyes shining in her gaunt, tired face.

"I'm not. I...I've been having trouble sleeping, too."

“That book’s apt to give you nightmares. Maybe you should find another one.”

She was looking at the book oddly, as if secretly reluctant to part with it. “If you aren’t finished...” I offered the book back to her.

“No,” she insisted with sudden spirit, as if I might refuse it. “You take it.”

“Well, it’s getting late,” I said, rising from my chair.

“The book’s just nonsense. Mind you, don’t believe a word of it.”

“I won’t, Alice,” I replied with a laugh. “Don’t worry.”

I was halfway across the room when something compelled me to look back at her. Alice sat staring into the dying glow of the fire. Her lips were moving silently, as if in prayer. I watched, mesmerized, as her hand moved upward, toward her chest. The firelight caught the sudden glint of gold from her simple wedding band as her thin, strong fingers deftly formed the sign of the cross.

Chapter 8

Back in my room, I hastily prepared for bed, glad to exchange the somber mourning clothes for my comfortable blue gown and robe. I settled in on the bed, the faded, olive-colored book in hand, and began to read:

"I, Michael Ignacio, have witnessed the evil work of witches and daemons in our small village and do fear. The Sorquinak among us have caused disease to fall upon our flocks and have made the fields barren. It is our duty to seek out from among us and punish those who are part of this evil."

I read on with mingled fascination and horror, realizing that the author of the narrative was a self-appointed witch-hunter. I knew that some of the most wicked witch-hunts of the Inquisition took place in the Basque Provinces whose isolated villages were a breeding ground for fear and superstition.

A black marker slipped from the place where Alice had been reading. The title of the marked passage caught my eye:

My witnessed account of a meeting of the Cult of Akerra.

I was returning to the village late one evening with a load of wood upon my back when I did stop, hearing a sound overhead like the flapping of bird's wings. The Sorguinak were flying to their meeting-place upon sticks and brooms. I followed them to a deserted place in the mountains high above the village, and there they did dance, men and women alike, and they did summon the Devil.

And, as I hid myself behind a big tree, I saw the Devil appear to them in the form of an enormous black He-goat. Before my frightened eyes he did transform himself into a male most handsome and magnificent, but with the mark upon him in the form of a horn upon his forehead and a sign of a frog's foot in the left eye.

As I did crouch in much horror, I saw the lesser daemons and witches kissing the feet of their Master, and there was more dancing and acts of unspeakable evil.

And as I stole away into the night, afeared for my life, I heard the screams of a woman. And I said my prayers, knowing that they had made sacrifice. God save us all from the power of Akerra, the Evil One.

I stared down at the passage, wondering if the marker had been left in that particular place by chance or on purpose. Alice's odd behavior tonight led me to believe that she'd wanted me to read the book—indeed, had *intended* for me to read it all along. Alice had pretended to scoff at the contents of the book, yet I knew she had a superstitious side to her nature. Alice was afraid...

I scanned more yellowed pages, sickened by the graphic account of a trial which followed where an old woman, accused of dancing and cavorting with the Devil,

was burned at the stake because, '*on her we found the mark of Satan*'.

I put the book aside, appalled. The narrator's genuine belief in witchcraft was disturbing. From his matter-of-fact account of the grossly unfair trial, I caught a taste of the fear and panic that had swept across the country like an epidemic, robbing rational men of their senses.

My eyes were growing blurry from lack of sleep and straining to read the fine print. My thoughts were becoming hazy and confused. Tomorrow, bright and early, Martin DeGarza would be over to read Tavas's will. I was certain that Tavas had left the ranch to Ivan. I'd wait long enough to see everything settled, then I would go back to Reno.

I crossed over to the window, staring out into the cold, dark night. *Could such a panic happen here? Of course not.* This was modern-day Nevada, not some remote village in the Pyrenees, at the height of the Inquisition. Still, I remembered several newspaper articles I'd read recently about devil-worship being practiced in other parts of the country. I thought about Ivan, still out there all alone, and shivered.

I turned off the lights and lay down upon the bed, pulling the comforters up around me—but all of my reading about the Cult of *Akerra* had made me restless. True to Alice's predictions, my dreams were twisted nightmares. A man kept coming toward me through a shroud of mist. As he moved closer, I saw that it was Ivan, but as he came nearer, a horn appeared upon his forehead and in his eye glittered a dark speck, a sign like the mark of a toad.

* * * *

Martin DeGarza made a grand spectacle of unrolling his papers and adjusting his reading glasses. He glanced about the family room once to make certain we were all present.

Then he cleared his throat. "Shall we begin the reading?" Alice looked reproachful as he settled back comfortably upon Tavas's black recliner.

Colleen, who sat at DeGarza's arm, leaned forward. Her greedy look as she eyed the papers in her uncle's hand betrayed her thoughts. Though contemptuous of the Devil's Gate, she wasn't opposed to the wealth that the operation brought in. It was obvious that she hoped today, through Ivan, to possess all she presumed to scorn.

My gaze drifted to Ivan, who stood just behind her. Outwardly, he displayed none of Colleen's anxiousness. I studied his handsome face, searching for some trace of the excitement that surely must be churning inside of him. As Tavas's closest blood relative, he knew that the Devil's Gate was certain to become his this afternoon. I knew how much the ranch meant to him. Yet, how easily he concealed his emotions. He stood calmly, arms folded across his chest, waiting. His dark-lashed eyes and the stony set of his rugged features revealed little of his inner feelings.

In the easy chair next to me, Brad shifted positions. He looked uncomfortable. He seemed as nervous as Ivan was composed. His hands wouldn't be still in his lap, but moved restlessly across the faint stubble of reddish-brown beard growing in lightly upon his chin.

"I, Tavas Haspura, being of sound frame of mind..." DeGarza began. My eyes moved from him to the doorway where Guillermo stood, hat pulled low over his forehead, jaws working his ever-present chewing tobacco.

DeGarza's voice droned on endlessly as small gratuities were doled out to Tavas's old friends and loyal employees of the Devil's Gate. Old Dr. Echegaray's clinic wasn't forgotten, nor was Father Bilbao's struggling church.

Then he was reading off Guillermo's name, then Alice's, and finally, Brad's. True to his nature, Tavas left them all well-provided for. Brad and Alice were each to have a generous annuity and to Guillermo he left a generous sum of money for his faithful service throughout the years.

I glanced over at the three of them, turning from Alice and Guillermo's impassivity to Brad's obvious disappointment. I knew he'd hoped to inherit at least a portion of the Devil's Gate for himself.

Only Ivan and I were left. DeGarza cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses again. "To Ivan Haspura, my nephew, I leave..." I sat upon the edge of my chair, listening, feeling the tension in the room stretch like a tight rubber band. I knew how important this moment must be to Ivan. "The holdings of my stocks," DeGarza finished the clause quickly, an almost apologetic look on his heavy-jawed face.

The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence. "That's all?" I heard Colleen exclaim. I stared at the floor, unable to look at Ivan as DeGarza continued slowly, "And to Anna Haspura. who has always been like a daughter to me, I leave the Devil's Gate Ranch."

I could hardly believe my own ears. Martin DeGarza continued to read the fine details while I sat in a state of shock. The Devil's Gate, with all of its troubles and all of its splendor, belonged to me.

Colleen was the first to react, flouncing from the room, ahead of a trail of black silk and French perfume. Her eyes, as they glared into mine, were clearly accusing. I found myself wondering if she wasn't the reason Tavas had decided to leave the ranch to me instead of the logical choice, Ivan.

Ivan. In my excitement, I'd momentarily forgotten him. Now, I turned to where he'd been standing, but he was gone. Unnoticed, he'd slipped out the door.

Then Martin DeGarza was calling me over to him, pushing out the chair next to his where Colleen had been sitting. In a daze, I listened as he explained the legal documents and papers that would eventually make the Devil's Gate my property. "Of course, this is just the beginning of the paperwork," DeGarza confided as I signed the last of the papers. "Now you remember, I'm here to help. If you ever have any questions about anything, you just call on me." He sounded sincere. Yet, there was something about him I didn't like. He was fawning and obsequious and I didn't trust him. Like his niece, Colleen, he had greedy eyes.

When DeGarza was finished, I turned to find Brad waiting for me. I was glad to find him there, grateful for his support. Still awed by the sudden turn of events, I needed someone familiar to lean on. I allowed him to take my arm and guide me into the kitchen where Alice was serving coffee.

Alice looked ill, I noticed. Her fingers were white and unsteady as she set a cup and saucer down in front of me. Still, she insisted upon serving the coffee alone, refusing my offer to help.

"Well, how does it feel to be an heiress?" Brad asked lightly, teasingly. Yet I detected a carefully-concealed note of hurt in his voice, an undercurrent of darkness in his amber eyes.

"I'm not sure. It's all so...sudden."

"Of course. You need time to get adjusted to the idea. Time to get used to being the boss-lady." He leaned toward me. "Tell you what. I'll take you bright and early tomorrow

and show you around. I'll introduce you to some of the new hired men, show you some of the changes..."

"Changes?" I looked up vaguely from my coffee cup. So many thoughts were whirling about in my mind that I was having trouble absorbing his conversation. I had been thinking about Tavas, about our last few talks together, picking out the ever-so-subtle hints that now seemed so clear to me. Why—looking back, it seemed Tavas had all but told me he intended to leave the Devil's Gate to me.

Why not Ivan? The thought kept coming back to haunt me. Was it because of their all-too-frequent clashes, the last angry argument between them? Or did it have something to do with Tavas's dislike of Colleen? Again, I wished that Ivan hadn't run off before I had a chance to talk to him. How hurt, how angry and disappointed he must be.

"I'm sorry. I'm rushing you," Brad said with a slightly wounded expression.

"I'm listening, Brad. There's just...a lot on my mind right now." As Brad continued to talk, I glanced around the table. Alice was coolly ignoring DeGarza's hopeful attempts at small talk. Guillermo was frowning into his empty cup as if he saw something of interest in the coarse, blackened grounds settled to the bottom. I could tell by his troubled expression that something was greatly bothering him. Did this old friend of Tavas's disapprove of his leaving the ranch to me?

"It's getting warm in here," Brad said suddenly. "Let's go outside for a breath of fresh air."

"Have you seen Ivan?" I asked when we were alone on the porch.

Brad lit a cigarette. "He took Joshua out for a run."

"I suppose he's pretty disappointed," I said.

Brad nodded. "No doubt he expected the Devil's Gate to fall into his hands this afternoon despite the way he always treated Tavas."

"The two of them never got along, but I know Tavas cared about him, Brad. I'm sure of that. That's why I can't figure out—"

"Why he left the place to you instead of Ivan or me? Don't you know he always favored you, Anna?"

"Brad, do you think Ivan will stay?"

He looked surprised. "Why, you don't expect him to settle for being a glorified hired hand, do you? On a place he had every reason to believe would become his?"

"I...was counting on his staying."

"Don't." His voice was gruff, almost angry. "You have to stop depending on Ivan. Things are different now," he reminded me sharply. A long silence followed. "But you know, Anna," he added softly, reaching out to cover my hand with his big, gentle one. "You know I'll always be here for you. I wouldn't ever let you down."

Chapter 9

DeGarza, for once, didn't stay for dinner. Colleen had ridden into town with him. I suspected they were heading for the 'Red Garter'. 'To drown their sorrows in a bottle', as Alice had so wryly commented. I knew that Colleen felt sorely cheated over the outcome of the will, despite the fact that the stocks Ivan had inherited from Tavas were worth quite a sum.

Even though she personally despised the place, she'd wanted Ivan to own the Devil's Gate. I knew she'd play up her discontentment for all it was worth, and that Uncle Martin would lend a very sympathetic ear.

Brad and Ivan were also missing from the dinner table, leaving Alice and me alone with a huge platter of fried chicken. I'd asked Brad to ride out and try to find Ivan. Reluctantly, he'd agreed to have a talk with him for me. I wanted him to persuade Ivan to stay on, at least for a few more months, until things got settled.

Though anxious for their return, I was glad to have a few moments alone with Alice. The stress of the last few trying days was beginning to take its toll. Though she fussed over me like a mother hen, she'd not touched her own meal. She was worrying herself sick.

I knew that Tavas's will had upset her as much as it had anyone, despite the generous annuity provided for her. I gathered from the conversation I'd accidentally overheard between her and Guillermo the night of the wake that she was heartsick about the possibility of having to leave the ranch and start a new life somewhere else. Though we'd never really discussed the matter, surely she knew that Tavas's death would change nothing, that she would always have a home here with me.

"Alice..." I began, not quite knowing how to bring up the subject. "You know I couldn't get along without you."

"Nonsense," she replied quickly, but I saw relief in her eyes. "What do I do but cook a few meals, wash a few dishes?"

"You're very much a part of this family, Alice. You'll always be welcome here. You'd be welcome if you never did anything at all."

"Oh, I'll earn my keep," she promised solemnly, and I didn't doubt her for a moment. A long silence followed. "You're good to me, Anna," she said sincerely. "You've been better to me than my own daughter-in-law. There's not a day that goes by that I don't wish Ivan had married you instead of her..."

"Let's not dwell on it, Alice," I said, looking away. Her words were like a knife twisting in my heart. "There's no way to change the way things are."

"Still," Alice persisted, "that doesn't keep me from wishing."

Shortly after Alice went upstairs, Brad returned. "I smell chicken," he said, stepping into the kitchen. He stripped off his jacket, which was still puffy with cold air, and threw it against the hall tree in the corner.

"There's some in the refrigerator," I told him. He loaded his plate with the leftover wings and a drumstick, his favorite part, which we always saved for him.

"Where's Ivan?" I asked as he came back around to sit beside me at the table. I'd expected them to return together.

"I left him in the barn with Guillermo. They were having a serious discussion about something." With a slightly irritated expression, he added, "They wouldn't let me in on it, whatever it was."

"Did you get a chance to talk to him?"

Brad nodded. "Briefly. He's agreed to stay on," he said. "At least for the time being."

"Good." I felt relieved by the knowledge that Ivan wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

"I *hope* it's good."

"What do you mean by that?" Something in Brad's tone disturbed me, the same sullenness I had noticed before, whenever we spoke of Ivan. Again, I wondered if something hadn't happened while I was away to come between their friendship, something I knew nothing about.

Brad put down his chicken. "Anna, I talked to him because I knew that was what you wanted. And, being short-handed, we need him now, but I don't think for a moment it's for the best."

"What are you saying?"

Flecks of darkness were stirring up in his yellow eyes, warning signs. "I just think it might be better if they left soon," he said evasively. "It's...an awkward situation. I'm afraid he and Colleen might cause trouble for you."

"I'm sure they won't, Brad."

"I know they won't," he replied, biting into his drumstick. "Because I won't let them."

I left Brad at the table so I could go up to Tavas's room. I had volunteered to help Alice sort through some of Tavas's things. The tedious and depressing chore could have been put off for a few days, even weeks, with little harm, but I knew it was useless to argue with Alice once her mind was set upon the task. I resigned myself to her brisk, nervous efficiency, understanding her need to get the chore over with as quickly as possible. After her husband Lucas's funeral, I'd listened to the sound of packing far into the night. The next morning, his room had been stripped as barren as a hotel room, his personal items having been whisked up into the attic, every thread and hair of his existence swept away swiftly and ruthlessly by Alice's relentless broom.

Tavas was more of a pack-rat than Lucas had ever been. Now, the first cold rays of moonlight found us in a room still cluttered with boxes, knee-deep in memories. Every small personal effect pulled from deep inside a drawer brought back some vivid aspect of Tavas. The bronze horses he'd won at rodeos in his younger days, his pipes, the collection of canes of which he was so proud. Treasured books were stacked carelessly here and there where he'd left them. I put the book Alice had loaned me on top of the box destined for the attic, glad to be rid of it. All of Tavas's personal items would go up to the attic where they would sit among broken furniture and Lucas's old suits until they could be properly sorted.

In the corner behind Tavas's desk were a metal strongbox, a filing cabinet, and a shelf of ledgers and papers. These would all have to be sorted through eventually, but not tonight.

"Shall we call it quits?"

Alice ran a hand through her disheveled hair. Her face was wan, ashen. "I wanted to get these boxes upstairs tonight, but I guess they can wait until morning."

The important items had been seen to. The rented hospital things lay ready by the door along with some clothes that would go to charity.

"Shall we have a nightcap? A hot toddy or some chocolate?" I suggested. Her eyes were heavy with weariness. She looked like she needed something to help her rest.

"You go on ahead. I'll just tidy up some of these boxes..."

I started downstairs to the kitchen, intending to surprise Alice by bringing her a cup of hot chocolate. I knew she often fixed a hot drink for herself late at night when she was having trouble sleeping. Much to my chagrin, I unexpectedly encountered Colleen at the foot of the stairs. She must have just returned from her outing with Martin DeGarza.

I felt my muscles tense as she came toward me, her green eyes glaring with unconcealed malice. The glow of the car lights from the window receded, plunging the stairway into semi-darkness. Without a word, Colleen started to brush by me.

"Just a minute, Colleen."

Much as I dreaded the idea, there were things that needed to be said between us if we were to continue living under the same roof, and now was as good a time as any to get them straightened out.

She turned toward me, eyes still narrowed like cat's slits in the darkness. I could tell she'd had a few drinks, but she seemed steady enough, and didn't appear to be drunk.

"I don't want you to feel that you are unwelcome here," I said shortly.

"Well, thanks a lot." Her words were harsh and sharp. "You know it's not fair. The ranch should belong to Ivan, not you. I don't know what you did to butter the old man up, but..."

I cut her off abruptly. "Like I said, Colleen, you're welcome to stay, but don't think for a minute that I'm willing to put up with your insolence."

Taken aback, she stammered as if trying to find the right words. I realized this was the first time I'd stood up to her goading remarks, her constant undermining of me. For a moment, she stood glaring at me, but she didn't say a word. Then, turning on her heels, she rushed off.

The family room was damp and dismal without the glow of the roaring fire. I crossed it quickly. My hands were shaking slightly as I stepped into the kitchen, drawing out the kettle for Alice's chocolate. Brad's warning had been right. As long as Colleen was under this roof, she'd cause me nothing but trouble.

* * * *

I carried Alice's chocolate carefully up the stairs. Gently, I swung the door to Tavas's room open. Alice was kneeling beside one of the opened boxes crowding the barren room. She was looking through the box anxiously, as if searching for something important.

"I brought you some cocoa," I said, crossing the room to set the steaming cup and saucer down upon Tavas's desk. She started at the sound of my voice, moving guiltily away from the box.

"Thank you."

I looked at the collection of Tavas's books, my gaze lingering on the olive-colored volume I'd brought up from

my room. "This book could be valuable," I commented. "Do you think we should put it aside?"

"Translations rarely are," Alice replied quickly. I saw a trace of fear in her eyes as she added, "Let's leave it with the rest."

"Alice," I asked in a strained voice that seemed hardly my own. "What do you know about the Cult of *Akerra*?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she kept packing the nearly finished boxes.

"Something strange is happening here, Alice," I persisted. "Something evil. You feel it too, don't you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about, child." She looked up at me, all traces of fear gone from her dark eyes. Suddenly she was the old Alice again, sensible, practical. Yet, I caught a slight quiver in her voice as she said, "I know, I shouldn't have let you read that book. It's put ideas into your head."

When the last box was ready to go up to the attic, I left Alice and wandered back down to the deserted kitchen. The house seemed empty and forlorn. I heated up the rest of the hot chocolate for myself, taking it out to the porch. There I settled on the old wooden swing, staring out into the darkness.

The night was solemn and still. Night-birds rustled in the shrubbery near the house. Rings of smoke rose from the bunkhouses, filling the air with a pleasant wood-smell. Cattle grazed silently on the slopes of the winter pastures, vague, dark patches against the corrals and buff-colored rocks.

The Devil's Gate was mine. Pride of ownership momentarily filled me.

A familiar voice burst indignantly from the heavy grove of trees in Alice's garden. "It's just not right. Surely, you'll

have to admit that, Guillermo. He might as well have cut Ivan and me off without a cent."

I stopped the creaking porch swing to listen, the steaming mug burning my fingers.

The voice, which I recognized as Brad's, continued, with growing resentment. "Never dreamed he'd pull a crazy stunt like this."

"He's put her in a hell of a position," Guillermo conceded.

"I've a notion just to take off and see her try to keep this miserable place running without my help. Give her a month or two and she'd crack like a China doll."

I sat motionless, the chocolate slowly growing cold in my cup.

He resents me. Brad, my sworn friend, my confidante. I'd expected such a reaction from Colleen, but not from him. I shivered slightly, but not from the cold. *Is everyone, then, suddenly turned against me?* I felt betrayed. And if Brad secretly felt this way toward me, I could only imagine how much more animosity Ivan must feel.

I don't know how long I sat there, gently rocking, staring out into the darkness. "Ohh..." The porch swing creaked suddenly as someone sat down heavily beside me. I looked over, surprised to find Guillermo next to me. Brad was nowhere in sight.

"You heard us talking," he commented softly.

I nodded. Hurt and surprise had rendered me speechless. After a long silence, he spoke. "Tavas had a tough decision to make and he made it. Sure, he stepped on some toes, ruffled some feathers, but that can't be helped now." Warmth filled Guillermo's voice as he said soothingly, "Even though Brad and Ivan should have known

by now that old Tavas was full of surprises, they can't help feeling hurt and left out, maybe even a little cheated."

"Just put yourself in their place. The ranch means every bit as much to them as it does to you." He gave my hand a little squeeze. "You give them time. They'll come around." I was suddenly reminded of a time long ago when I'd cut my knee on some glass in the yard. Guillermo had comforted me then on this same porch swing, his strange, soft voice soothing my pain away. "I wouldn't hold this against Brad," he advised me now. "Don't take words not even meant for your ears to heart."

Then he was gone.

Back inside the house, I washed the pot I'd used to heat the milk and put my cup upon the drain-board, still thinking about what Guillermo had said to me. Then I climbed the stairs back up to Tavas's room.

I was surprised to find a light still glowing through the doorway. Alice must have forgotten to turn it off. I stood for a moment outside the closed door, a sudden longing for Tavas, for his strength and guidance, overpowering me. The eerie feeling crossed my mind that if I opened the door, surely I'd discover him inside, sitting at his desk like he had so many evenings in the past. Ever so slowly, I turned the handle and gave the door a little shove.

I gasped, jumping back like a startled cat as Tavas's desk chair swiveled around. Alice's face, twisted with sheer horror, stared back at me from the chair. I realized that similar thoughts must have gone through her own mind as she saw the door handle turn. She looked almost as if she had expected Tavas's ghost to come walking through the door, swinging his silver cane.

"I...I didn't expect to find you still here," I stammered. I'd come to take a last look at Tavas's room, to be alone to

think. "I saw the light glowing..." A strange sensation swept over me as I realized she'd been sitting at Tavas's desk, crying.

It was so disturbing to see her cry. A heavy smudge of black mascara smeared her cheek as she brushed the dampness from her eyes. "Tavas would be ashamed of me, carrying on this way," she declared. Ah, but the Basque traditions were buried deep.

"It's only human to show your grief." How foolish my words sounded. What hollow consolation they gave. I began to back away, toward the door.

"Don't leave."

Ivan's mother. Her hair had fallen from its pins, tumbling thick about her face in dark, loose waves. I'd never seen her quite like this before. With awe, I realized she was almost beautiful.

"Nobody understood our relationship, Anna. After Lucas died and I stayed on at the ranch, there was gossip. None of it...was true. Tavas was my friend, Anna. My dear, dear friend..."

How Tavas's death had affected us all. I reached out to her, sharing her sorrow, comforting her as Guillermo had, in his own way, attempted to comfort me. I felt her shoulders tremble as I moved to embrace this aloof woman who'd always been part mother and part stranger to this frightened, orphaned child. It was a touching moment. In its strange, bitter warmth, I let my own scalding tears flow.

Chapter 10

Alice and I had just finished up the last of the breakfast dishes when Colleen sauntered through the kitchen, rounded hips swaying in skin-tight jeans. The keys to her sports car jingled noisily in her gloved hand. She didn't speak, but paused long enough to throw us a haughty, disdainful look over her shoulder before stepping outside.

"Don't expect any politeness out of her," Alice said. "She's been living here like a paid-up guest."

We could hear wheels spinning in the driveway as the little red car pulled recklessly away from the house. "Does she always drive like that?"

"Probably afraid she'll miss 'happy hour' somewhere," Alice replied scornfully. She made no attempt to hide her dislike for her daughter-in-law from me.

Alice wiped at the last dish and hung the towel back upon the rack. When she turned to me, her voice was lowered conspiratorially. "I think she meets some man in town."

"You mean—a lover?"

Alice nodded. "Don't look so shocked. You've seen the way she plays up to that Esteban—not to mention the other hired hands. Truth be known, I doubt she's been faithful to Ivan a day since they were married." Her face was set into

the customary scowl she assumed whenever she spoke of Colleen. "The girl's used to playing with dynamite, but I hope for her own sake she doesn't take my son for a fool. If my suspicions about her are true, then heaven help her if Ivan ever finds out."

Brad stuck his head into the kitchen from the doorway, ending our gossip about Colleen. "Ready, Anna? We'll go out to the corral first. Bring a jacket. The wind's chilly."

We walked, hands in our jacket pockets, toward the corral and barn. "Have you seen Ivan?" I asked.

"We talked this morning before he went out on the range," Brad replied. His amber eyes clouded as he added rather guiltily. "I think he suspects we're keeping something from him. He was asking me all kinds of questions about the Cult of *Akerra*."

"Oh?" I was surprised that Ivan hadn't confronted Brad with the knowledge of the mutilated bull directly. I'd expected him to demand outright why Brad had been keeping it a secret from him.

"Have you given much thought to what you're going to do now, Anna?" Brad asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, about school and all."

"I've written to the University and asked them to drop my classes for this semester. Too late to get a refund, but that doesn't really matter."

"What about your apartment, then. And your job. I know you left in quite a rush."

"As for my apartment, the girl who's sub-letting will gladly take over my lease. And to be completely honest with you, Brad, I despised my job."

"No kidding."

"Every minute of it."

"But your letters sounded so convincing."

"I...guess I wasn't nearly as happy in Reno as I let on, Brad. In fact, I felt separated from everything that had ever meant anything to me, if that makes any sense. I've never admitted this before, but there were so many times when I just wanted to hop into the car and come home."

It was natural to resume my easy friendship with Brad, so simple just to push aside the doubts that had been gathering like cobwebs in my mind since the outburst I'd so unintentionally overheard last night.

"Then you plan to stay."

"Does that disappoint you?" His biting words about how I'd only make a mess of things came back with sudden clearness. Had he spoken, as Guillermo had been so quick to assure me, in haste and disappointment? Or did his bitter words reveal his true feelings toward me now? Perhaps he even harbored vague hopes that I'd move back to Reno and leave him in charge.

"I was just wondering," he said, looking stung by the unexpected sharpness in my voice, "if you were considering selling out."

"Selling the Devil's Gate?" I echoed "Of course not. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, there's sure to be offers."

"I hadn't really thought about that."

"DeGarza has."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants the Devil's Gate, Anna. Tried to buy Tavas out several times. I know Colleen was going to persuade Ivan to sell out to him if he inherited the place. Talked her uncle into a sweet deal, from what I've heard. I wouldn't be surprised if he makes you an offer soon."

No wonder Colleen had been so disappointed over the outcome of the will. She already had a buyer lined up for the ranch. Her uncle. *She doesn't know her own husband very well if she believes for a minute that Ivan will give up the Devil's Gate.*

"I'm not interested in selling out, Brad. Especially not to Martin DeGarza."

"I'm glad we got that straightened out." Brad sounded relieved. The thought of Martin DeGarza owning the Devil's Gate obviously didn't appeal to him any more than it did to me.

One of the farm dogs came up to meet us, sniffing anxiously at our heels as we reached the corral where several of the men were busy with wire and posts. "We're going to string new fence all along the winter pasture." Brad's gaze met mine knowingly. "To tighten up security." He took a cigarette from the crumpled pack in his shirt pocket and lit it. Brad had taken up smoking lately. I wasn't used to this newly-acquired habit. It still seemed odd to me to see a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Good morning," he said, as we approached the three men working on the fence. "I guess you all know by now that we take our orders from Miss Anna here."

Carl extended a tattooed hand to me. "You told us we were getting a new boss, Brad, but you never mentioned what a pretty little filly she was," he said, giving my hand a little squeeze. He grinned, his slightly uneven teeth showing silver at the corners of his mouth.

"Best watch that Carl," drawled a voice from behind. The voice sounded menacing, like the rattle of a huge, coiled snake about to strike. "He'll give the little lady a hard time if she lets him."

Esteban moved toward us, soft mouth curved into that familiar, unbecoming smile. He regarded me casually, thumbs hooked into the pockets of his tight Levi's. "But you're right, man," he finished, his thick upper lip curling slightly. "She'll do." His disturbing eyes took silent liberties as his gaze brushed over me, pausing deliberately in all the wrong places, savoring my discomfort. "She'll do fine."

I felt sickened. His veiled impertinence was much harder to stomach than Carl's bold, good-natured remarks had been.

Manuel listened silently, but said nothing. The large, somber eyes and fringe of short hair gave him a kind, almost priestly air. He was a little older than the other two, about the same age as Guillermo.

"Manuel's a good man," Brad said as we moved away. "Hard-working and loyal. It's the other two that have been causing me trouble."

"Carl and Esteban? What kind of trouble?"

Brad shrugged. "Had to buy them off. It was the only way to keep their tongues from wagging."

"Has Guillermo found anything out about the Cult?"

Brad shook his head. "The men have been pretty closed-mouthed. Probably afraid to talk, if they know anything." He pointed to where, a short distance away, Victor worked, setting one of the heavy cedar posts for the new fence into a deep hole. "We should hire more men like him," Brad said. "Hear no evil, see no evil."

Victor was shirtless despite the chilly morning. The thick, sinewy cords of his back muscles rippled with each pull and tug of the heavy wood. He worked slowly and steadily, seemingly as oblivious to us as he was to the cold as Brad and I passed him by.

But I could feel him watching. I turned my head to glance back. He was standing there, knee-deep in the dirt, smiling stupidly. Those strange, glittering eyes of his were fastened dead upon me.

Some of the men would accept me with casual indifference as Manuel and Carl had done. Others, like Esteban, would challenge my authority. At least, I thought with mingled relief and exasperation as Victor continued to gape at me in unabashed admiration, I could be certain of one man's approval.

"He asked about you all the time," Brad commented with a wry grin. "I think the big lug really missed you."

"Why?" I asked, surprised. "We've barely spoken."

Brad shrugged. "Sometimes it's the little things that get remembered," he added thoughtfully. "You've probably been kind to him at one time or another. Just like you're kind to everyone."

"Many of the men are afraid of his peculiar ways. I'm not. Maybe he can sense the difference."

We'd reached the barn. Brad got a syringe out of the kit in the office and slowly measured the antibiotic.

"Old Boss got tangled up in that new barbed wire again." He sighed. "Don't think she'll ever learn. It's a nasty cut, but I think it'll heal easy." I could see Old Boss in one of the stalls ahead, where the sick or injured cattle were kept.

"Okay, I'm going to let you inject her. Sing to her, now. Funny how she responds to the sound of your voice. Don't worry. I'll hold her steady. Watch out for that hind leg, now. She's got a kick like a damn mule."

Brad had good reason to be apprehensive of Boss. That hind leg of hers had sent him sprawling on more than one occasion. Brad always seemed to forget the old adage that

horses kicked backward and cows kick forward. Boss had never once kicked me. The temperamental old girl must prefer my singing.

I approached her slowly, humming the bars to an old nursery tune. My hand trembled only ever so slightly as I plunged the needle in. Boss balked in protest, tail switching violently as she glared at Brad, but she didn't kick.

"Say, you haven't lost your touch, Nurse," Brad teased. With gentle hands he cleansed the wound on the old cow's rough, yellowed hide.

"It's not as if I haven't had practice. I used to pester Tavas relentlessly to let me help him with the newborn calves, remember?"

"Yes, but you were just a freckled-faced little twerp then. When you got to high school, Tavas complained that you never had time to help him anymore, if I remember right."

"That must have been the year I discovered disco dancing..."

"And boys..." he teased. "Ah, those were the good years. You haven't had much fun since your homecoming, have you?" Suddenly serious, he said, "You know, we're going to have to do something about that. I'm going to drive you into Bly tonight and take you out for the best, biggest steak you've ever eaten. Remember 'Al's Sirloin'?"

"Mmm...do I ever."

"Well, what do you say?"

It would be a blessed relief to get away from the isolation of the Devil's Gate for a while, and I was anxious for a chance to look over Bly again. "I'm suddenly starved," I replied.

We were just packing up the veterinarian supplies back into Brad's small doctoring kit when Guillermo came driving up in the old pickup.

"You get the tractor part?" Brad asked.

"Right here beside me on the seat, Old Pal," Guillermo replied, his smile revealing good, though tobacco-stained teeth. A friendship had grown between the two of them through the years. *The same easy relationship Brad seems to cultivate with everyone.*

"You about ready?" Guillermo was saying.

Brad glanced up at him, puzzled.

"What, I hurry my only trip into town in two weeks to get the truck back on time, and here you don't even remember?"

Brad snapped his fingers. "That's right." He turned to me, disappointed. "Martin has a sick horse on his hands. I told him I'd come by. We may have to take a rain check on that steak. By the time I drive out to the DeGarza place and back, it'll be nearly dark."

"I've got my car. Tell you what. I want to do some shopping anyway. What if I drive on in now and meet you at Al's—say, around six-thirty?"

"Better make it seven. That'll give me a chance to clean up." With a worried look, he added, "You sure you don't mind driving in alone, now?"

"Of course not. I still know this old road like the back of my hand."

"Then it's settled."

As I moved away, I heard him say to Guillermo, "You bring back any beer?"

"Some in the truck, still cold. Stopped in at the Red Garter on my way back." Their voices trailed away as I hurried back to the house, lured by the anticipation of a

nice, hot bath, a change of clothes, and an afternoon in town to be completed by one of Al's well-done, juicy steaks.

Chapter 11

I sat brushing out my damp hair, planning my excursion into town. I was nearly out of shampoo, and I could use some more hand lotion. If there was time, I'd browse the few shops in the mall for a pullover sweater and jeans, practical additions to my fall wardrobe. My sense of excitement at such a small thing as an unexpected trip to town made me realize how oppressive the last few days had been.

I slipped from my robe into a simple navy dress with a lacy neckline and chillingly short sleeves, then experienced a minor shock as I viewed my reflection in the bureau mirror. My cheeks were as pale as ivory, my eyes dark and shadowed—nothing, I decided, that a little carefully-applied blusher and mascara couldn't repair.

My drying hair, which was beginning to grow back from the butchering I'd received at My Lady's Salon in Reno, curved about my shoulders in stubborn, restless waves. I finished drying it quickly. A touch of the curling iron in just the right places tamed the difficult locks, dispatching the subtle differences in lengths, making it appear, as I looked into the mirror, to fall smoothly about my shoulders in soft chestnut tresses. I stepped back, satisfied. Lately, I realized, I'd grown to taking little pains

with my appearance. I so seldom wore anything but blue jeans that the silky hose and open-toed sandals made me feel almost self-conscious.

Deciding to stop and have a word with Guillermo before I left, I crossed the garden and driveway and entered the barn.

I could hear the sound of voices from within his small office as I approached.

"How much does Anna know about this?"

"I've told her nothing," I heard Guillermo reply.

"Good. That's the way I want it."

Ivan suddenly looked up and noticed me standing near the doorway. I saw a glint of surprise, what might have been a flash of guilt in his dark eyes as he said, "Anna. What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my way to town. I thought I'd stop by first and see if everything's all right." It was going to be difficult to talk to Guillermo with Ivan there.

This was the first time I'd seen Ivan since the reading of the will. He'd been avoiding the house, spending most of his time riding the desolate range alone. I'd been dreading an encounter with him, feared the bitterness and anger I might see in his eyes, clues that he might blame me for robbing him of the Devil's Gate.

"Have you found anything out, Guillermo?" I asked. I wondered if the two of them had been talking about the Cult of *Akerra* before I appeared. What were they planning to keep from me?

He shook his head. "Not a thing."

"You'll keep on trying?"

"I've been watching some of the men, their comings and goings, very closely."

"I guess that's all I wanted to know." I turned away from the door, realizing that Guillermo knew more than he was ever going to tell me. The idea of them deciding like a couple of conspirators what and what not to tell me made me wary, distrustful.

"Wait, Anna. I'll walk with you." Ivan followed me to the entrance of the barn. I stepped out into the sunlight, blinking the startling brightness from my eyes. I looked away from Ivan, toward the corrals, where Manual, Esteban, and some of the others were still working on the fence.

"We're not keeping secrets from you," Ivan said.

"I heard the two of you talking before I came in. What is it that you didn't want Guillermo to tell me?"

"Guillermo and I went back to the clearing the night of Tavas's wake."

I looked at him, wordlessly letting him know I needed more from him.

Reluctantly, he added, "Someone was down there. He ran away when he saw us coming."

"Did you get a look at him?"

Ivan shook his head. "Neither of us did. He wore a black cloak. And something over his face. A hood."

I shivered. More evidence that the Cult of *Akerra* was working within our own ranch. "Do you think he was one of the hired men?"

"The evidence points to someone...close to us. We decided not to tell you any more until we can find some proof to back up our suspicions. That's why I advised Guillermo not to tell you anything yet. We may be completely wrong."

"You'll let me know if you find anything out for certain?"

"I won't keep things from you," Ivan promised.

"Ivan, about the will. I'm sorry. I didn't know Tavas..."

Slowly, I forced myself to meet Ivan's gaze. With surprise, I saw none of the resentment and anger I'd been expecting. The corners of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. "I did know him. I'm not disappointed."

"Thank you for agreeing to stay on."

"I want to do what I can to help." He paused a moment, then asked, "When will you be back from town?"

"Not until late this evening. I'm having dinner with Brad."

A dark look filled Ivan's eyes. His gaze slipped from my blue dress down to the open-toed sandals.

"You could say 'have a nice time'." The words sounded bitter, and I instantly regretted them. I was glad that he didn't force a reply.

Ivan and I parted at the barn and I walked down the driveway to my car. As I got behind the wheel, I saw the house reflected in my rearview mirror. Then I caught sight of a dark spot to one side. A shadowy figure was slipping silently through the cactus garden toward the house.

At first I thought it might be Ivan, but a second glance made me recognize the careless, slouching gait, the dark hat pulled low over his eyes. It was Esteban.

What was he doing skulking around the house when he was supposed to be out by the corral working with the other men? Alice's gossip about Colleen turned suddenly in my mind. Had Esteban slipped back to the house to meet her? No, that wasn't possible. A quick glance at the driveway told me that Colleen's car was still missing. She hadn't returned from town.

Then what was Esteban doing here? Suddenly, I saw Alice emerge from the gaping doorway. She stood for a

moment, half in shadow, half in light, squinting at his approaching form. I saw her move back a little as he approached. I waited, wondering if he was welcome or if he was making a nuisance of himself. Then I saw her step back from the doorway and motion him inside. Well, as long as he had business with Alice... The two of them disappeared inside the house. I turned my attention back to the car.

The Mustang hadn't been driven for so long that I was surprised when it started on my first try. Soon, I was making my way down the winding, dusty road—twenty-six miles of it in all leading into Bly. Everything looked different in the solemn afternoon light than it had the evening of my arrival. Pearly gray clouds fluttered in a pale blue sky which blended with the perpetually snow-capped tips of the Adobe range, still far in the distance. The road, with its pot-holes and washes and sudden curves so tricky to maneuver by after dark now revealed its every defect with alarming clarity.

Soon, I reached twelve-mile point, where there was an intersecting road that led off toward Secret Pass. A few faded ranch-houses came into view, then disappeared just as quickly as if they'd been only a host of mirages in the relentless miles of tan, sage-sprinkled hills surrounding me.

When I'd been obliged to make the drive once or twice a week, I'd been annoyed by the sameness. Now, after being deprived of it for so long, I was aware of its lonesome beauty. It wasn't an overwhelming beauty, like the Grand Canyon or Zion Park, but the rolling hills, the rose-colored sand, the occasional cluster of sagebrush gave the impression of endlessness, of a kind of vast eternity.

The church steeple came into view first, for it stood on the top of the tallest hill just on the outskirts of town. I could see the tall cross glinting as I turned down Main

Street. There was the hospital, the school, the local cemetery...it was jestingly said that one could live his entire life, die, and be buried all within a few city blocks in Bly.

I passed the library and post office. The interstate cut into the old part of town, displaying signs of Bly's slow progress during the recent years. I followed the new road signs past the truck stops, restaurants, gambling houses and cheap hotels that had sprung up along the way. Several miles down the road, safely hidden from the single strip of nightclubs and casinos, was the tiny new shopping mall, which boasted of a new boutique and a Sears mail-order store. Just before I reached the turnoff for the mall, the 'Red Garter' came into view.

The 'Garter' was a dark, smoky barroom where the cowhands came to drink beer, dance, and shoot pool on Saturday nights. It featured a new live band every weekend and so was haunted by every high-school kid in town who could lay hands on a fake I.D.

I had been there once, with Ivan. He'd taken me reluctantly, after much badgering on my part, to celebrate my seventeenth birthday. With Ivan, tall and handsome upon my arm, I felt like Cinderella being swept away to her first ball. Once I got past the doorman, I fully expected to be led into some wonderfully mysterious land of romance and enchantment. I still remember the bitter taste of disappointment when I discovered there was nothing much inside the much-praised nightclub but a sawdust floor, a long bar crowded with leering drunks, and a band of musicians so drunk they could barely keep time to their own music. To add insult to injury, Ivan had flatly refused to buy me a beer. The doorman kept glancing at me suspiciously until finally, in exasperation, I demanded that we leave. Not even the hot fudge sundae he'd treated me to

later could make up for that amused, humiliating laughter in his dark eyes as he gallantly led me away.

The place looked as forlorn as ever. The paint was cracked and peeling, the neon sign dead in the glow of afternoon light. My gaze swept over the few cars parked out front. A flash of red suddenly caught my eye. It's hard to camouflage a red car. The little sports model parked discreetly in the alleyway between the bar and the neighboring motel was the one Colleen had driven into town.

'*She has a lover.*' Alice's words came back to me. Was Colleen at the bar with a man now, having a few drinks? Or were they at the motel? I stepped on the gas, resisting the temptation to stop inside the 'Red Garter' to see if Colleen was inside. It was really none of my business who Ivan's wife saw, I reproached myself. I remembered my suspicions about Esteban sneaking back to the house to meet Colleen, and smiled. *I jumped to the wrong conclusion once today.* The best thing I could do for myself was to mind my own business.

At the mall, I purchased lotion, makeup, and a big bottle of herb-scented shampoo, then I browsed through the new boutique where I discovered my pullover and tried on several pairs of slacks. With a sigh, I gave up on the jeans, paid for my new sweater, a creamy tan knit, and stepped from the little store into a still lazy, sun-washed afternoon. I still had plenty of time before I was to meet Brad, so I decided to drive out to the old Wells Fargo station, which was just a few miles down the road. It wasn't really much to see, and it wasn't as if I hadn't been there at least a hundred times before, but driving the three miles up and back would kill just enough time.

In the summertime, the old station was about the only attraction Bly had to offer the tourists on their way to California, but with vacationing season long over, I supposed I'd be the only one out there.

* * * *

True to my hunch, the old tourist stop was empty. My shoes made crunching noises on the dry earth as I walked up to the crumbling hulk of the stone building, stepping around rusted wagon wheels with weeds growing up tall inside them. The historical marker explaining how the station had been robbed twice in the 1800's was so faded the dates were unreadable.

I stepped inside. A mouse had made its nest on the old counter and a mob of summer vandals from Ohio had scratched their names and towns in the wood and stone above the main attraction, a rusted iron safe.

From outside, I could hear the crunch of gravel. I stiffened. I'd heard no car drive up, but it sounded as if someone was standing outside. For a moment, I got the sensation someone had followed me here from the mall. I shivered, stepping from the damp, cool building into the fading rays of sunlight, imagining some figure in hood and dark robe crouched waiting for me. I saw no one.

The place, wild and unkempt, abandoned by its summer caretaker, was making me uneasy. Glancing down at my watch, I was relieved to discover that it was nearly time to meet Brad.

As I drove back into town, I passed by the 'Red Garter' again, glancing curiously to see if the sports car had gone. It was still parked in the alley between the bar and the motel. Then something else caught my eye. Though I was on the opposite side of the highway and couldn't tell for certain, I thought that the faded yellow pickup truck parked close to

the bar looked a lot like the old farm truck Guillermo had driven back to the ranch earlier. Of course, I could have been mistaken. Most every rancher for miles around had at least one beat-up vehicle like the '58' Ford. Besides, it seemed unlikely that if Brad was driving the truck he would have stopped in for a beer so soon before our dinner date.

I'd secretly hoped Brad would be in the diner waiting, but he wasn't. I received a warm greeting from Al himself. "Brad just called," he informed me. "Said he'd be a few minutes late, but for you to wait for him. I've saved you two a nice table by the window and I'll get you started on a green salad while you wait." He wiped the table with a practiced swoop of his cloth. "Nice to have you back, Anna. You're looking good."

Big, jovial Al always had a way of making me feel at home. I'd waited tables for him one summer long ago after school had let out.

I was still toying with the last bite of my salad when Brad entered the room. He had changed into a fresh yellow shirt and tan Levis. His hat was gone and his hair had been washed and combed to one side, though stubborn, wiry locks kept slipping back to their natural place over his forehead. He'd shaved, and his boots had been shined until the leather was rich and glowing. I was suddenly glad I'd taken the time to curl my hair and put on a dress. As he stepped over to the table and pulled back his chair, I resisted the urge to ask him if he'd seen Colleen. Yet the question weighed heavily on my mind, as heavily as the faint scent of cigarettes and beer that clung to his clothing.

I focused my attention on him. I'd never really thought of him as an attractive man. In fact, I'd never really thought of him as a man at all, but as a boy, a companion, a playmate. Now, the envious glances of the two unescorted

young women by the salad bar made me wonder if I could ever see him through a stranger's eyes. Since I'd grown up accustomed to him, perhaps I took his strong, craggy features and kind smile for granted.

Al brought the steaks, still sizzling, from the grill. They smelled heavenly and were tender and cooked to perfection. I was suddenly very hungry. Besides steak, there was a heaping portion of mashed potatoes, homemade bread, buttered corn, and plenty of good coffee.

All during supper, my thoughts kept wandering back to Colleen. Still, I was surprised when Brad brought up her name. "What do you think of her, Anna?" he asked casually. "What do you think of Ivan's wife?"

"I don't know," I replied icily. "We've barely exchanged words since I arrived."

"I guess I can't really expect you to like her."

I made no reply.

"You know," he persisted, "she hasn't had it so easy."

"What do you mean?"

"We were all so dead set against the marriage. Alice has never made any bones about how she feels about Colleen. Tavas didn't, either. It's little wonder she couldn't work up too many tears when he died."

I remembered her rude, disrespectful behavior as Tavas lay on his deathbed and was still appalled.

Brad took a bite of his roll. "You loved him and I loved him, but Tavas could be a hard man." He paused to add more butter to the roll. "He said some things to her that..." He trailed off with a shake of his head.

"Brad, do you think she's the reason Tavas left the ranch to me instead of Ivan?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The way he and Ivan were always at each other's throats, there were probably plenty

of others. All I know is that she and Ivan are really having it out. There's been talk about divorce."

I'd seen so little of Ivan since the reading of the will. He'd kept to the range during the daytime and at night he was seldom home. It was as if he was purposefully avoiding me.

"I've been talking to Colleen a lot lately," Brad confessed, "She wants to change. She swears she's going to stop drinking."

I thought to myself that the 'Red Garter' was a fine place to start this resolution.

"Course we all know the road to hell is paved with good intentions," Brad added as if reading my thoughts. "But I'm going to help her any way I can. You know, I think she really cares for Ivan in her own way. I don't believe she's as eager for that divorce as she lets on. I'm going to try to keep them together if I can."

"That's sweet of you, Brad."

"No, it's not. It's selfish. Utterly and completely selfish." He looked down at his plate, seeming uncomfortable, embarrassed. "I guess I'm telling you all this because I know how you and Ivan...how you once felt about him. I guess I know deep inside that the only way I'll ever have a chance with you is to keep them together. Because I know that if Ivan was free..."

"Brad—"

"Maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but, damn it, Anna, I wish you'd stop brooding so much about Ivan and start thinking of the future. I mean, a future that you and I could have together."

I nearly choked on my bread. "This isn't...you're not..."

He grinned. "No, it's not exactly a proposal, but I do think we should start seeing each other. Get acquainted again. I've always been like a big brother to you. With Ivan around, it seemed I never got the chance to really court you. Now, well, I'm asking you if you'll give me that chance. The county fair starts day after tomorrow. Will you go with me?"

"I'd be glad to," I replied.

Both of us were strangely silent as Al brought our sherbet. The friendly, casual relationship we'd always shared was changing. For the first time I was seeing Brad as more than a 'big brother' and he was seeing me as a grown woman. The idea left us both rather shaken.

Could our relationship, as Brad was hoping, grow into something more? Into love? A part of me insisted I could care very deeply for this strong, protective man I'd known most of my life, but deep down in the core of my being I was already wondering if there could ever be anyone for me but Ivan.

Chapter 12

Brad and I strolled hand in hand along the lighted midway where the sparkle of carnival glitter seemed to do battle with the faint sprinkling of stars overhead. Friendly, persuading voices called out to us from the row of game booths stuffed with bright trinkets and teddy bears. Brad, finishing the cotton candy we'd been sharing, paused, lured by the tempting line of some carnival con-man who challenged him to 'shoot the bulls-eye and win a prize'.

"For your pretty, brown-haired lady," the gap-toothed little man persisted, realizing he'd captured Brad's attention. He watched us like a bird of prey, rubbing his hands together as Brad and I slowed down near his booth.

I sighed as Brad dug more change from his pocket, exchanging the money for six darts. I stood back, watching him throw. My feet ached, and I was getting hungry, but Brad, obsessed with the idea of winning something for me to keep as a remembrance of the fair, insisted on trying his luck with each new game we passed.

With a feeling of dread, I watched the last dart fall just short of its mark.

"Lady Luck's just not with you tonight, Brad," I remarked as he returned to my side, empty-handed.

"No, but you don't hear me complaining, do you?" he replied, undaunted. His arm casually encircled my shoulder. "After all, who needs Lady Luck when I've got you?"

The crowd bumped and elbowed us along. "Well, that was the last of my change. What shall we do now?" he asked amiably. "There's still an hour or so to kill before the dancing starts."

"Dancing?" I echoed, my tortured feet throbbing at the very thought. We'd been on the go since early in the afternoon. Brad, anxious to show me a good time, had hustled me through every attraction that the fair had to offer.

"The band starts at nine o'clock," he said. "So maybe we'd better grab a bite to eat."

"I see a place right over there." Before he could have a change of heart, I steered him away from the carnival games toward a quiet hamburger stand sponsored by the Latter Day Saints.

The canvas-topped restaurant offered some refuge from the bustling crowd outside. As Brad went up to order, I sat alone at one of the yellow-clothed tables. Here in the comparative quiet, I felt the gaiety of the carnival swiftly deserting me. My mind kept drifting away, back to Tavas's funeral, the dreadful reading of the will, Brad's angry voice through the clump of trees in the darkness...

"Here's our hamburgers."

I looked up to see Brad's tawny eyes gazing on me questioningly. "Something wrong, Anna?"

I forced a smile. "No, nothing. I was just thinking..."

"I want you to be happy tonight, Anna," he said earnestly, his warm hand brushing mine. "I want to make up for all the sadness..."

“You have, Brad.”

He grinned, reassured. The smile lit up his brownish-yellow eyes, making faint crinkles appear around the corners of his mouth. As we dug into our hamburgers and fries, we were like old friends again, and if there were lapses in our conversation, they were comfortable silences. Yet I couldn't rid myself of a certain sense of apprehension. I knew something was bound to happen to upset the light, carefree mood we'd both been working so hard to create tonight. Our perfect date was doomed to disaster from the start. Inevitably, somewhere during the long evening we'd run into Ivan and Colleen.

We'd just stepped back out into the crowded midway when I saw them coming toward us. I caught my breath, dreading an encounter with them. Yet I forced myself to call out a cheerful greeting. I held on tightly to Brad's hand, secretly hoping that seeing us together would give Ivan a taste of his own medicine. The look of pain that crossed Ivan's face wasn't worth the charade. He was already an unhappy man. I cursed the childishness in me that had made me want to drive the hurt home.

Colleen immediately turned her attention over to Brad. In her arms she carried a garish pink alligator with beady red eyes. She held the stuffed toy up for him to admire. “Look, Brad. See what Ivan won at darts? *I* chose him. Isn't he just the cutest thing?” She glanced over at my empty hands. “Why, Brad. Haven't you won anything for Anna?”

Brad replied with a shrug. I saw he was already digging into his pockets for the change left over from our supper. “How about a game of darts, Ivan?” he challenged.

Colleen and I watched as they tossed darts at the black and white target, shooting for the bull's-eye. More often

than not, Ivan's hit the mark, but Brad's aim was off, and every time he fell short. I saw the growing tenseness in Brad's face, saw the yellow-flecked eyes brighten with increasing frustration. Had the feeling of competitiveness between him and Ivan grown to such an extent that he found even chance failure at a simple dart game threatening? Surely I was mistaken, I thought as the disturbing expression that had flickered so briefly across his face disappeared.

Colleen was tugging at Ivan's arms. "I'm tired of this," she complained. "Why don't you take me on a ride?"

"Later," Ivan replied shortly, collecting the tokens he'd won.

"I want to go now," she demanded. "Honestly, I don't know why you bothered to come at all. You've just been a drag. I haven't had a bit of fun."

Plaintively, she turned to us. She glanced up at the nearby Ferris wheel, then back to Brad with sudden inspiration. "Why don't you take me?"

"Well...I—" Brad stammered, caught off guard.

"Anna won't mind. Will you, Anna?"

Before I could reply, she turned back to Brad, tugging at his arm. "Just one ride..."

Brad hesitated, looking uncertain. "You're sure you don't mind, Anna?"

"Of course she doesn't," Colleen answered for me. "What's a few minutes, anyway?" She tossed the ridiculous alligator to Ivan. "Here, hold this," she commanded with barely a glance in his direction. Then she and Brad slipped away.

For a moment I stood bewildered, looking after them. Then I turned back to Ivan. The hard look on his face turned my blood into ice water. He stood glaring after

Brad, his eyes dark and angry. Without a word, he tossed the stuffed toy aside and stalked off into the crowd.

"Ivan, wait," I called after him, but I knew it was no use. His pride had been wounded. In his eyes, she'd made a fool of him. Didn't she know better than to treat him like that? Did she really think he'd put up with it? I suddenly caught sight of the bedraggled stuffed animal lying face-down in the dirt and, not knowing what else to do, I recovered it and stood waiting for Brad and Colleen to return.

After what seemed an eternity, the Ferris wheel creaked to a stop. Brad looked sheepish as he came quickly back to my side. Colleen followed at his elbow, eyes bright, lips parted in a smile. She was in her element here, drawing life from the glittering, artificial atmosphere. The waves of tangled hair caught shimmers of neon light as she stepped toward us. "Where's Ivan?"

"He left."

"Well, where'd he go?" she demanded, looking around for him.

I made no reply.

The smile left her face; her green eyes suddenly narrowed as she assessed the situation. "You mean he's just left me stranded? Well, how do you like that? How the hell am I supposed to get home?" True to her character, her first thoughts were only for herself. Never mind the reason Ivan had left her. In fact, I doubted she was even aware she'd hurt his feelings. She still looked dazed as I handed her back the bedraggled, dusty alligator. Then her lower lip began to tremble, and, with surprise, I saw a tear glistening on her cheek.

Brad noticed it, too. "Don't worry, Colleen," he said after a long pause. "You know we'll see that you get back."

"But what will I do in the meantime?"

"You can walk around with us."

"I'll just be in the way..." she protested, but already her face was brightening.

"Nonsense," Brad continued with an apologetic look in my direction. "I'll have two lovely women on my arm instead of one." Brad attempted to smooth things over by making light of the situation. "Why, I'll be the envy of every man here."

"You really don't mind?" She wiped at her face with the back of a hand. Then she fluttered her lashes at Brad. No traces of the tears remained. An opportunist, she was intent upon making the most of this awkward situation. I glanced back at her, noticing for the first time the sly, satisfied grin that had slipped like a furtive shadow across her face. And suddenly, I found myself wondering if this wasn't what she'd planned all along.

Colleen tagged along with us as we wandered the fairgrounds one last time, gradually ignoring me, addressing more and more of her comments to Brad. At first he seemed to find her company amusing, then he began to look flustered. The more obviously she tried to cling to him, the more uneasy he became. I realized that trying to entertain us both was putting a strain on him. "Let's go find Alice," I suggested. "Let's see if she's won any ribbons."

Alice sat guarding her blue-ribbon pie in the main exhibit hall. "Where's Ivan?" she asked with a raised eyebrow as the three of us approached. She listened skeptically as Brad made up some evasive story to explain his absence. Her sharp eyes missed nothing, I noted, as she watched Colleen expertly jostle Brad away, cornering him alone by the art displays.

I lingered for a moment. Suddenly, Alice's hand snatched at my forearm, detaining me. "Watch her," she whispered as soon as they were out of earshot. Her sharp, black eyes regarded Colleen with the same contempt I'd seen in Ivan's eyes as he'd stalked away. "Three always means trouble," she said.

With Alice's warning still ringing in my ears, I stepped over to join Brad and Colleen near the exit. "I hear music," Brad was saying. "The dance must be starting. Come on, Anna." With obvious slight reluctance, he included Colleen. "Know what? I'll bet I can dance both of you lovely ladies right under the table."

A crowd was already milling around the entrance to the dance hall, which smelled of beer and smoke. From inside, I could hear a Western band tuning up guitars in the hazy darkness. As we drew nearer, more lights flooded the drab stone room with a burst of blinding whiteness. Then the band broke into a lively, familiar tune.

"Oh, that's my song." Colleen cried out. "Let's dance." She tugged at Brad's shirt sleeve, trying to pull him out onto the dance floor.

"Uh-uh," he said. Teasingly, but firmly, he planted her at one of the tables near the wall. "It's only fair I have the first and last dance with my girl," he explained, taking my arm possessively.

"Of course, you're right, Brad," she pouted prettily. "I'll just sit here all evening. I'm just a fifth wheel."

"You know that's not true," he replied rather sharply. I saw that his patience with her was beginning to wear thin. "The next dance is yours."

"I'm so sorry, Anna," Brad said as soon as we were far away from where Colleen sat alone, smoking a cigarette, glowering at us. "Here I was, going to take you away from

all this discord and now she's spoiled everything." His jaw tightened with resentment. "Well, she's not my responsibility. It's Ivan's fault for dumping her on us. He's always leaving me behind to clean up his messes..."

"Brad, please..."

He looked down into my eyes regretfully as the music stopped, knowing that our evening together was ruined. "I guess I'll have to baby her along a bit..." I saw his hard look soften as he glanced over to where she was waiting. "I'll make this up to you somehow, Anna. I promise."

Colleen took over dancing with Brad as soon as the first number was finished. She pressed up close against him, nuzzling her mouth against his ear in an altogether too familiar manner. He seemed even more disconcerted than before.

I knew that good-hearted Brad had gone out of his way to befriend poor Colleen. And if my hunch was right, this wasn't the first time she had played on his sympathy. No doubt, she had him running at her beck and call, thoroughly convinced that Ivan was some sort of monster. Well, she may have fooled Brad, but she didn't fool me.

I wanted to tell him to wake up, to warn him about the kind of game she was playing. Colleen was a dangerously attractive woman. The way she was coming on to him...well, surely a man could only take so much. Though I knew Brad's intentions toward Ivan's wife were honorable, he was only human. I hoped, for Brad's sake, he wasn't foolish enough to let things get out of control.

The dance seemed to go on forever. I watched the people around me laughing and joking and having a good time, trying to quell the stab of resentment toward Colleen that had been building up with the force of a volcano all

evening. As I sipped my Club soda, I suddenly felt strange, uneasy. I felt like someone was watching me.

Slowly, I raised my head and looked over toward the entrance of the stone building. With a jolt, I saw Ivan standing there in the cave-like hollow of the doorway. How long had he been there? His black eyes glittered in a way that sent shivers of fear over me. Apprehensively, I stole a glance at the two dancers, still unaware of his presence, but if the sight of his wife dancing so close to Brad just a few feet away bothered him, he gave no indication. He was looking at *me*.

My heart began to race crazily in my chest as he came toward the table. What was I going to say to him? Was he still angry? I looked away, glancing down at the still-full glass in front of me. His heels hammered against the hard cement floor. Then I heard the rasp of wood as the chair next to mine was pulled out. Slowly, I turned to face him.

The music stopped. Voices burst out all over the crowded room. Brad and Colleen were returning to the table. I saw Colleen's cheeks brighten. Then her face went pale in the ghastly glow of eerie white light.

Brad first broke the silence with a strained laugh. "Well, here's your wife, Ivan. Safe and sound." Seeming almost relieved to have unburdened himself of Colleen, he turned to me. "This last dance is for us," he exclaimed, drawing me away from the table. Gladly, I followed him.

The beat had slowed to a sensual heartthrob of a song. Brad held me tight against him as we slow-danced, so tight that I felt uncomfortable, restrained. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Ivan watching us.

"Alone at last," Brad whispered against my cheek. Then, without warning, his eager mouth sought mine. Before I could stop him, he was forcing my lips to part,

kissing me passionately right there in the middle of the dance floor. The poorly-timed display of affection took me totally by surprise; my reaction was one of alarm rather than pleasure. *What in the world's come over Brad?* I tried to turn my face away, but he kept his mouth clamped down like a steel trap over mine.

Finally, I managed to break free. My face burned as I saw many amused stares on us. A young couple giggled approvingly from a nearby table. "Way to go," the shaggy-haired boy called, raising his beer can in a mock salute.

Colleen, who was moving toward the exit, hadn't seen us, but Ivan had turned back. For a brief moment we stood facing each other across the crowded, smoky room. His jet black eyes blazed accusingly at mine, making my heart flutter and skip a beat. *What dark thoughts are going through his mind?* I couldn't read the expression on his face, couldn't tell whether it was hurt or anger. His face was a terrible mask, gaunt and sinister. All traces of the laughing man I'd once known were gone. In his place stood a dark and brutal stranger. Abruptly, I turned and walked away.

With a sick feeling, I was beginning to realize what was happening. Brad's kiss had been carefully planned and timed. I knew that now, as I stood watching Ivan go, unable to call out to him, helpless to bridge the ever-widening gap between us. Crushed, I turned back to Brad's wild look of triumph.

Chapter 13

The entire crew of the Devil's Gate was crowded into the barn. The smell of baled hay mingled with cigarette smoke. Nearby, horses shuffled in their stalls, echoing the restless sounds of the men who waited for the meeting to begin.

Brad gave me a sudden wink of encouragement as he rose to call the meeting to order. I looked out nervously at the sea of rugged, swarthy men now in my employ. I spotted Esteban near the back of the room, dark head tipped back, lazily puffing a brown, hand-rolled cigarette. Near him on the metal folding chairs sat Carl and several of the other men who seemed lately to have formed a close-knit group.

An arrogant, mocking smile crossed Esteban's lips as Brad spoke. "According to our beloved Tavas's last wishes, I present to you the new owner of the Devil's Gate, Miss Anna Haspura."

A round of spiritless applause followed my introduction. Was it my inexperience or the fact that I was a woman that made it so hard for them to accept me? The attitude of sullen resentment shown to me the last few days hadn't gone unnoticed. I wondered if it was not so much

dislike for me, but the simple fact that no one, male or female, could begin to take Tavas's place.

My gaze moved to where Manuel and Guillermo stood together near the hay bales, slightly apart from the rest of the crowd. Guillermo's rugged, weathered face was as sober as a judge's, and I knew it was what he'd appointed himself to be today. My judge and jury. Scrutinizing eyes would watch my every action from beneath those sun-whitened brows. In silence, he would weigh my every word.

I drew in a deep breath. My knees felt suddenly weak and trembling. How could I hope to get through to these men who had formed such an impenetrable barrier against me? Swiftly losing courage, I searched desperately for a friendly face. My mouth felt dry. I wasn't certain that I could continue what I'd begun.

My breath caught sharply as Ivan stepped into the barn. I hadn't really been expecting him to show up. He joined Guillermo and Manuel in the far corner, leaning casually against the stacked hay bales. Even from this unobtrusive position, his presence immediately seemed to dominate the entire room.

Does he resent me? Ivan should be the one up here, making this speech. By rights, Ivan, not me, should be the new owner of the Devil's Gate. I lifted my gaze to meet his, fearing to find some sign to give away the resentment he must surely feel for me.

As his stare caught mine, his black eyes suddenly warmed. An encouraging smile crossed his lips as he waited for me to begin. I felt as if a heavy weight had suddenly been lifted from my shoulders. In a voice that was strong and clear, I spoke.

"I know that Tavas Haspura was well-regarded among everyone here. He was a good man, just and kind and fair. Under the circumstances, it's only natural that you feel some anxiety about the changes that might take place on the Devil's Gate now he's gone. I'm here today to reassure you that I intend to follow in Tavas's footsteps as much as possible. Contrary to any rumors which might be going around, the Devil's Gate is not for sale. Your jobs are not at stake. I want to continue to run this ranch as Tavas himself would have run it. I know that I have much to learn. I only ask for your cooperation."

Impatient faces reflected boredom, an anxiousness for this impromptu meeting to come to a swift end. It was getting close to supper time. The smell of stew wafted from the bunkhouse along with the tantalizing aroma of freshly baked bread.

I turned my attention toward the Basques, who sat together. Upon many a head perched the traditional hat of the Basque, the beret. The older Basques refused to relinquish those rounded black hats, stubbornly insisting that they were superior to the Stetson in every way, whether for shelter from the wind and rain or cover from the harsh Nevada sun.

"Tavas always held a special place in his heart for those of you from his own country. He tried to make this ranch a place where the Basque people could maintain their language and develop their cultural heritage. I hope that the Devil's Gate will always be, as Tavas intended, a home away from home for the Basque people."

I finished by adding that Tavas had always put great faith in his men, and I truly hoped they would all help to make the Devil's Gate as pleasant a place to work and live as it had been in the past.

The men were beginning to leave. I could hear the buzzing of voices as they whispered among themselves, but whether or not they'd been impressed one way or another by my inspiring little speech I couldn't readily discern.

"Good Girl," Brad complimented, clapping me upon the back as we followed the men from the barn. The sharp, clean air was refreshing after the stillness of the barn with its trapped scents of tobacco and hay. Gently, wind fanned my slightly damp hair and cooled my face.

"I don't think there's been a spiel like that since the Gettysburg Address," Brad teased. "What do you think, Guillermo?"

Guillermo, who'd joined us at the barn entrance, replied, "You did fine, Anna." A frown temporarily darkened his tanned face, making the thick brows come together. "But don't expect too much too soon," he cautioned. "Some of them are still leery of accepting the idea of any new boss, and especially a woman."

"What do you mean?"

"It's going to take more than a couple of flowery speeches to win them over. It's going to take time."

With that, he moved away. I stood looking after him, disappointed.

I turned back to Brad, seeking reassurance, knowing he'd say something positive no matter how he really felt. Startled, I realized he was no longer by my side. Instead, Ivan was there.

"Guillermo's right, you know," Ivan ventured calmly. "You can't expect miracles overnight."

"I'm not asking for miracles," I retorted. His words were like a needle prickling some sore spot way inside of me. I could feel the angry heat rising to my face. "I just

want them to treat me with respect—the same respect that they would give any man in my position.”

“Then you’ll have to earn that respect, won’t you?” Black eyes challenged mine. With a hint of a smile he added, “Day by day, a little at a time. You’ll have to work at it harder than any man would. And I have every confidence that you can.”

“Do you?” I asked wryly, skeptical. Did he really support me, or was he, too, hoping I’d find the job too much, give up, and sell out? I began to move away.

“Anna.” His voice called me back. “It’s not going to be easy. I know that stubborn streak of yours is bound to get you into trouble somewhere along the line. Don’t try to do it all by yourself. Taking on an operation like this is a formidable task. There are too many decisions for one person alone to make. You’ll need someone to advise you, someone you can trust. If you need help in any way, don’t be too proud to come to me.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said shortly, inwardly seething at his bold, patronizing manner. *I know what he’s really saying. He doesn’t think I can handle it. Well, I’ll show him. And if I do need help, he’ll be the last one I’ll call...*

Brad came up to me just as Ivan was walking away. “What did he want?” he asked, falling into step beside me as I moved away from the barn.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied. “He was just giving me some...friendly advice.”

Brad’s yellow eyes darkened. That ugly, resentful look I noticed more and more often whenever Ivan was around had crept into his face. That feeling of rivalry between them was worsening all the time. “I hope you remember what I said about leaning too much on him,” he cautioned. “He’ll be leaving soon,” he reminded me.

"Maybe you're right, Brad," I said. My heart felt as if it would split in two as I admitted, "Maybe it would be for the best."

Brad and I split up at the corrals. He went back to the house and I continued down the rutted dirt road toward the bunkhouses, wanting to have some time alone to sort out my thoughts.

I have Brad now. I don't need Ivan's help. Then why does the thought of his leaving upset me so?

The air grew chilly as the sun began to slip behind the mountains. From the bunkhouses drifted the sweet, pungent aroma of simmering stew and sourdough bread, reminding me I'd missed supper. A small cluster of ranch hands gathered on the porch of the long, wooden building, smoking cigarettes and passing around a flask of homemade wine.

"Evening, Ma'am," called a voice as I passed by.

"Evening," I replied, guessing it was probably Guillermo who'd addressed me. But as I approached them I realized Guillermo was nowhere in sight. It was Esteban who'd spoken.

I was suddenly filled with apprehension. Of all the men, Esteban seemed to defy me the most. Now, his dark eyes, fringed with their thick, sooty lashes swept over me lazily, filling me with a vague sense of uneasiness. I found the cool appraisal in his gaze somehow insulting, though I was unsure of whether or not he intended it to be, for he seemed to eye everyone and everything with that same mocking boldness.

"So how's the boss-lady?" he scoffed. "Some wine?" He held the filthy goatskin flask out to me as if inviting me to some invisible challenge.

"No, thank you," I declined coolly, bringing a round of jeers and nudges from the others around him. I recognized Carl. The rest were unfamiliar, nameless faces in the gloom. Far apart from the others stood Manuel. Victor hunched upon the steps, drinking alone.

"The lady thinks she's too good to drink with the likes of us," Esteban remarked impudently. His very tone mocked my new authority.

The others began to murmur restlessly among themselves, some obviously amused, others cautious. "Leave her be, Esteban," I heard Carl warn as I started to move away.

"Sure is prettier than Tavas was," came a random comment, accentuated by a shrieking catcall.

"Nice legs."

"Better watch it, boy. Little lady signs your paycheck now."

This remark seemed to egg Esteban on. Made bold by the wine, he spoke out. "You really think a woman can do a man's job, Carl? Woman's only good for one thing in my books."

"Enough." A quiet, unruffled voice interrupted, yet it stopped the cajoling voices as quickly as a rifle shot.

Guillermo, who had appeared behind the others unnoticed, now moved casually toward them. With a sure, deft motion, he whisked the wine flask from Esteban's hand and upended it.

"Too much wine loosens a man's tongue, my friend," he remarked as the red liquid drained slowly into the dry earth. "Now, if you intend to stay in our employ, I suggest you apologize to Miss Anna."

Resentment shone in Esteban's wild eyes as he mumbled something barely audible to me. I remembered

Tavas telling me long ago about pride being the very lifeblood of a Basque man. It wasn't something to be relinquished easily. Esteban would be slow in forgetting his humiliation at being forced, before his peers, to apologize to me. I knew that by coming to my defense, Guillermo might have made himself a bitter enemy.

Guillermo, with one last reproachful glance toward the now quiet porch, escorted me out of ear range. "I'll have a talk with them tomorrow," he assured me. "But after tonight, I doubt they'll give you any more trouble. If they do, you let me know."

I was impressed with the authority he seemed to have over the others. Since Tavas's illness, Guillermo had more or less taken charge of the hired men. There was no question that his word pulled a lot of weight among them. I was certain that Esteban would have called another man out. Despite his youthful arrogance, something had made him back down. It was more than respect for a man several years his senior. It was fear.

"Do you wish to let Esteban go?"

For a moment it seemed odd that Guillermo was asking me such a question. Then I realized that he now took his orders directly from me, not from Brad or Ivan.

"I've heard he's a good roper, one of our best—but also that he's a troublemaker." I hesitated, waiting to take my cue from Guillermo, but he remained silent, waiting for my decision.

"We need good men," I said finally. "Let him stay—but keep an eye on him."

Guillermo regarded me for a moment with quiet appraisal. I wondered if he hadn't been expecting a different sort of reply. Then, suddenly, his leathered old

face beneath the battered hat broke into a slow smile. "Tavas would have been proud of you today," he said.

These rare words of acceptance, coming from him, made me glow with pleasure. The men were afraid of Guillermo. They respected him. I knew that, with this old friend of Tavas's, I had an important and powerful ally.

Chapter 14

I left Guillermo near the corrals. Darkness was settling in a haze. Long fingers of purple and dusky rose stained the rocks of the hillside. I stopped walking to watch the horses graze, catching my breath at the beauty of their shiny coats.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something glitter like a pale star on the dark hillside. I moved away from the corrals, looking curiously upward to where a stream of ghostly yellow filtered from the darkness toward me. The window of the old miner's cabin was glowing with light.

I climbed the rough path up the rocks until I could see the cabin clearly, its dark and splintered boards sticking out like broken bones from its skeletal frame. The light was still there.

Breathless, I climbed the rest of the way up to the cabin. Twigs snapped beneath my feet as I moved cautiously to peer through the cracked window. Age and dust formed a coating too thick to allow me to see more than a faint flicker of yellow within.

I brushed my hand across the pane. The light disappeared as swiftly as it had come, leaving me staring in at a darkness so intense that I could see my own startled

reflection in the dirty glass. Someone had been in that cabin. Someone was still in there now.

I heard the door creak open. Then footsteps were breaking the underbrush as someone came toward me. I could hear thick, heavy breathing in the night air.

"You!" I cried out as Victor suddenly materialized before me.

His jaw was slack, his face the color of the blanched rocks of the hillside. In one hand he held a flashlight.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, gathering my wits together. "You startled me."

He continued to stare at me with vague, opaque eyes, wondering, no doubt, if I'd appeared by magic. He looked at me as if I were a spirit, a phantom creature who might at any moment float away.

The eyes were focused now. They shone like cut crystal as he advanced toward me, his huge body moving with a rocking motion. "I wanted to see if the lovers were here," he explained carefully. His voice was soft for a big man, an eerie whisper in the darkness so thick between us.

"What are you talking about?"

"They meet here, you know." Then he confessed, "I've seen them. Seen them plenty of times." His face was alive with treasured secrets. "Guillermo don't think I know, but I do. Nuthin' that happens on the ranch escapes these eyes."

Animal eyes, wild and bright, stared into mine in the darkness. *What's he talking about? Am I hearing the ramblings of a madman, or is there some grain of truth hidden in his strange words?* "Tell me, Victor," I coaxed, trying to keep the anxiousness from my voice. "Who meets here?"

"I already said," he replied petulantly, reluctant to turn loose of his cherished secret. He moved close until his big

face was inches from my own, until I instinctively drew away. "Lovers—"

"Victor?"

He had turned from me, suddenly distracted.

"Victor, we were talking about the cabin."

He eyed me blankly. His mind had drifted away from the subject, was now sensing something down in the canyon.

He stood now, his big body tensed, ears cocked as if listening to some sound down the rocks far below. *Does he have the keen sense of an animal to hear sounds that I can't?*

He turned back to me, his broad face earnest. "You shouldn't be out here alone, Miss Anna. Don't you know it's almost time for the *Sorquinak* to meet? Down there. Look closely now, through the trees. Don't you see their fire burning?"

I looked to where he was pointing, but saw nothing but sharp rocks and brackish sagebrush. Now he confessed, like some naughty boy disobeying a parent, "Sometimes when Guillermo isn't around, I follow them. I hear their whispers to each other at work. They make sacrifice tonight."

"Who are they, Victor?"

"Oh, I can't say." A shiver shook his big, clumsy frame. "They'd kill me."

"If you could tell me the name of just one of them—"

He kept on as if I'd never spoken. "*Akerra* has horns like a goat," he said in that soft voice of his, too soft for such a gigantic stature. His eyes were enormous in the moonlight. "Did you know that, Miss Anna?" It was as if he offered the secrets of the universe to me. "Horns like a goat, but he is a man."

The sagebrush crackled as he moved away. "Victor. Where are you going?"

He paused at the point where the hillside broke away sharply into jagged rock. Then, with the agility of some huge mountain goat, he began to scramble down the steep sides of the trail leading into the heart of Black Canyon.

I watched Victor disappear into that ominous mass of broken stone, then glanced back the way I had come. The cabin stood behind me, a ghostly, hollow shell in the darkness. Down below I could barely make out the horses, the corrals. *I should climb down the way I had come*, warned a voice deep inside. *I should go back to the house.*

I could see Victor some distance below me now, a huge, dark speck like a giant spider inching his way down the trail. *Dare I follow him? All of his talk about witchcraft and sacrifice can be only the disconnected ramblings of a simple mind.* If I followed after him, surely I would discover the canyon to be as devoid of witches as the cabin behind me was of clandestine lovers.

But what if Victor *had* heard something from one of the men? The Cult of *Akerra* could be gathered down below at this very moment. This could be my opportunity to catch a glimpse of them. If I could identify even one of them...

I hesitated, realizing the risk of such a scheme. These men were dangerous. The mutilated livestock was proof of that. Yet, if I kept quiet and well out of sight...

"Victor, wait." I called, but my voice was lost in the wail of the wind whistling through the rocks. He was gone. He'd been swallowed up by the darkness below.

I climbed down until I could see the three twisted trees landmarking the entrance to the clearing where Ivan and I had been the night of Tavas's wake. I'd go as far as the trees, I decided. Then, if I saw no sign of Victor, I'd go back.

Moments later, I stood below the wavering branches of those haunted trees, their grotesque limbs entwined as if in some evil embrace. In the shadow of those trees, I noticed the first traces of footprints in the loose dirt. Many footprints.

Victor was right. Someone had been meeting here. I listened. Nothing but the howl of the wind. I took a few curious steps from the shelter of the trees. As I entered the dreadful clearing I saw signs that the devil-worshippers had come and gone.

The acrid scent of smoke still rose from the ashes of a dying fire. Tallow drippings, still moist, clung to the mottled gray boulders. The wind blew a sudden gust of ice over me. Shivering, I forced one foot ahead of the other. Just ahead was the stone with the odd inscriptions that Ivan had showed me, a stone veiled in mystery since the first Basque had set foot upon the Devil's Gate.

Did they really make sacrifice? My heart was in my throat as I inched my way toward that ghastly stone that must serve as some kind of primitive altar. There was a strange stillness in the air despite the wind, yet the night itself seemed to be alive, watching. I could imagine *Akerra* himself, the he-goat, peering down from some razor-sharp perch above me as I moved slowly forward.

I reached the stone, then recoiled, gasping. The surface was slick, wet and shining. It was drenched in blood.

"My God." My voice sounded strange and hoarse, a strangled whisper. Fearfully, I looked around for Victor. He was nowhere in sight. I was alone in the evil clearing.

Oh, why did I ever come down here? My heart pounded violently. My head was bursting with the night sounds suddenly all around me. From the darkness beyond the ghastly altar came the first, faint stirrings of movement. My

body tensed, prepared to run. *One of the devil-worshippers is still here!*

Then a cry pierced the night, a long, drawn-out braying sound that made the blood freeze in my veins. My legs turned to jelly. I stood momentarily rooted to the spot, hypnotized by that piteous sound. I'd heard creatures in pain before. I'd witnessed cows giving difficult birth, had seen the desperate struggle of coyotes caught in merciless traps, but never had I heard anything to compare with this primeval scream of agony. I was drawn toward whatever lay before me in the darkness like a magnet, my very soul responding to that agonized plea for help.

"Don't move." The voice, seemingly out of nowhere, cut through the darkness like the lash of a whip. I stood, frozen, as Ivan came toward me from the darkness beyond the altar—tall, menacing, flecked with shadow and light. His lips were drawn back, face white, eyes gleaming with anger. "I told you never to come here alone. Damn it, don't you ever listen?"

I made a move toward him. He stood blocking me, eyes glittering savagely, the whites of them darkening the obsidian of the pupils. "For God's sake, don't come any closer. It's not a pretty sight." I trembled, aware of his magnetic strength as his arms came around me, guiding me away, shielding me from whatever terror lay in the bushes beyond us.

Then he stepped back into the darkness where something still whimpered in mindless agony. The wind made dark wings of his hair as Ivan bent down, thick, black lashes casting long shadows upon his sharp cheekbones.

"One of the yearlings," he explained. He looked up at me, his expression revealing without words the hopelessness of the situation. I glanced over his shoulder,

wincing at the sight of a small animal shaking with spasms of pain. A thick, wet pool of blood was spreading rapidly over the dry earth beneath him.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" I cried, kneeling by the yearling's side.

He stood looking down at the pitiful creature, his jaws tightening with anger. "Nothing but put him out of his misery," he replied tersely. Then, he commanded, "Turn away."

I saw the sliver glint of the knife he pulled so quickly from his belt. Then I obeyed his orders and covered my face with my hands. There was a rasping sound, a death rattle. I shivered. The incoherent moaning, the cries for mercy had stopped. All around us was a heavy, ghastly silence.

I uncovered my eyes. Ivan was wiping the blade clean, sheathing his knife. "He was already more dead than alive."

His face was terrible as he turned to me, his jaw clenched with stormy rage. "I knew it would happen again. And it'll keep on happening until we do something to stop it. I've been watching, listening, hoping to find some clue, but the men are loyal to each other. They won't talk until they're pressured."

"Then what can we do?"

"The time for silence is over. As soon as it's light, we'll call a meeting with Guillermo, Manuel, that fool Esteban, and anyone else who might know the slightest thing about this Cult of *Akerra*. The roots must be discovered, trampled out, destroyed. And when I discover who is responsible for this madness..."

The harsh angles of his face softened as he glanced at me. "You're shivering," he said.

"Ivan...I'm frightened. Promise you won't leave..."

“Leave?” A dark brow rose above stormy eyes. “Who said anything about leaving?”

“Brad told me...”

“Forget what Brad said to you.” For a moment, he held me roughly in his arms, cradling me against his strong chest. “I’d never leave when you might be in danger. Oh, Anna, don’t you know me better than that? Now, let’s get out of here.”

His arm was gentle as it remained draped around my shoulder. Then he was leading me away, guiding me back to the rocky path leading out of the canyon. “Tomorrow, we’ll have our work cut out for us—but tonight,” he added with a dark smile, once again my protector, my knight in white armor, “I’m going to see you safely home.”

Chapter 15

As I hurried past the stables early the next morning, I saw Ivan's wild black horse Joshua, thundering down the steep path toward the canyon with a rider. I stared in bewilderment. *Where's Ivan going in such a hurry? Has he forgotten that we had asked Guillermo to call a meeting in the barn this morning? Brad, Esteban, and many of the others are probably already waiting for us.*

I found Brad leaning against the barn door, smoking a cigarette, staring off into the distant hills. "Ivan and the others are in Guillermo's office," he said as I approached him, gesturing toward the barn door. He finished the cigarette, tossed it down, ground out the stub with his boot heel. "I came out here for a breath of air. It sounds like hell's own fury in there."

"But...I thought I saw Ivan headed for the canyon." *Who else would dare to ride Joshua?*

Brad shook his head. "It was Colleen you saw. She loves to ride that crazy horse and Ivan won't let her. So she slips him out early in the mornings when Ivan's out making the rounds. She knows its safe then."

Voices, raised in anger, drifted toward us from the barn door.

"You know, news of that yearling Ivan discovered mutilated in the canyon last night's all over the ranch now." With worried eyes, Brad added, "Gossip's spreading like wildfire."

"It had to come out in the open sooner or later."

A frown still creased his forehead as he replied, "You're right, of course, but I'm afraid of what might happen now. The men are all riled up, the womenfolk terrified. We're going to have trouble keeping them in line."

We stepped inside the crowded office. My gaze swept the stuffy, smoke-clogged room, passing over Guillermo, who sat behind his desk, to Manuel, Carlos and Victor, who huddled about the smoky heat from the stove on the far side of the room. In the center of the room Esteban and Ivan glared at each other with open hostility.

"So some dead hide turns up in the canyon," Esteban said. "Happens all the time, don't it? Those rocks out there are crawling with predators."

"You know as well as I do that this wasn't the work of any animal." The stare from Ivan's steely eyes bored into Esteban. "We're talking about ritual mutilation. Sacrifice."

The corners of Esteban's mouth twitched despite his outward display of calmness. "What do you mean?"

"The Cult of *Akerra*." Silence filled the room at the sound of Ivan's words.

"*Akerra*." Esteban's lips drew back contemptuously. He laughed, his voice ringing with a strange hollowness. "Bah. Only a tale to frighten our children. Right, Manuel?"

Manuel, eyes huge and solemn, made no reply.

"There *is* no Cult of *Akerra*," Esteban responded for him.

Guillermo spoke up suddenly, cutting off Esteban's noisy protests. "We all know Ivan speaks the truth." His gaze moved over the men, lingering on Esteban, an accusation. "At least one man in this room knows full well the Cult exists."

"How do you know so much about witchcraft, Old Man?" Esteban lashed out suddenly. The burning resentment in his eyes reminded me of the incident when Guillermo had forced him to apologize to me. I knew he hadn't forgotten. The tension between the two of them was growing like a coiled rattler poised ready to strike. Guillermo had Esteban on the defensive, and Esteban was acting like a man with something to hide.

Ivan was speaking now. "Let's not deceive ourselves. We all know some sort of meetings have gone on in the canyon for years. Ignorant men practicing God knows what kind of magic, seeking cures for warts and rheumatism." Ivan began pacing the length of the floor. "What I want to know is why, out of the blue, has this harmless little gathering turned to bloodshed?"

"Maybe that poor yearling was planted there by someone," Esteban suggested. He turned to the others, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Someone who wants to cause trouble." He was looking straight at Guillermo now, triumphant, unflinching. "By someone who knows us poor Bascos will get the blame."

"Or just maybe," Guillermo replied, undaunted, "the harmless little gathering has gotten a new leader. He would have to be an evil, dangerous man to put them up to this." Then he added, with a cold undercurrent of warning, "Whoever he is, I'll find him." His stare never left Esteban's face. "And when I do..."

Esteban laughed scornfully. As he walked out the door, I heard him lean over and hiss in a voice meant only for Guillermo's ears. "You are no longer one of us, Guillermo."

His mocking gaze swept over Brad, Ivan, and me. "You are one of *them*!"

As Esteban turned away from him, an odd look of pain crossed Guillermo's face. *What does Esteban mean? Is he simply accusing Guillermo of associating too much with us, of becoming too 'Americanized'? Or does it go deeper than that?*

I realized what a vulnerable position Guillermo was in. Because of his authority over the men, the closer he became involved with management, the less he was accepted by them. And the dispute between him and Esteban the other day had done nothing to better the situation.

Esteban stepped outside. As the men followed in his wake, I found myself wondering which ones might be involved in the midnight rituals deep in the canyon. Carlos and Manuel slipped by with closed expressions. Victor, with a hang-dog glance at Guillermo, was the last to follow after Esteban.

The room was left to the four of us. "It appears to me that Esteban is setting himself up as some sort of leader," Ivan observed with a scowl. "See how he's banding some of the men together? I don't like it. I believe he's trying to stir up trouble." To me, he added, "Of course, the decision's up to you, but I'd advise you to get rid of him—the sooner the better. I've seen his kind at work before. He breeds dissatisfaction. He'll turn your own men against you if he feels it's to his advantage."

I looked over at Guillermo questioningly, expecting to hear his whole-hearted agreement, but he remained strangely silent, his rugged face set and brooding. Brad spoke up, rather hesitantly, "It may not be that easy, Ivan.

You see how much influence he has over the men already. If he goes now, there are many others who'll go with him. Can we afford to lose so many this close to fall roundup?"

"You should never have allowed the situation to go this far." Ivan reprimanded him sharply, his black eyes angry. "But now that it has, I don't see that we have much choice. Let him go, Anna. There's always help to be had for the right price."

He walked out.

"Well, we can't run this place single-handed," Brad commented heatedly once Ivan was out of earshot.

"Ivan thinks we can find more help if necessary," I repeated hopefully, "Maybe we should take his advice about Esteban."

"Ivan," Brad was quick to point out, "isn't always right."

"It may be too late," said Guillermo, his voice full of misgivings. "The rumor's out now. Probably already making its way down to the hotels. Though Ivan's hunch about Esteban is bound to be true, we'll never get new men now until this thing blows over." He paused to shake his head grimly. "Fact is, we'll be lucky to keep the men we've got."

"Guillermo's right," said Martin DeGarza, who suddenly appeared at the doorway wearing the same gaudy suit he had worn to Tavas's funeral. "I just came from town. You should hear the tongues wagging. They're talking about *witchcraft*, for cripe's sake. What's going on out here, anyway? How could you let rumors like that get out? My God, Guillermo, don't you remember what happened to the Lucky Seven?"

"That was years ago, Martin," Guillermo replied in a hushed tone.

“People don’t forget.”

I was horror-stricken. I remembered Tavas talking about the ill-fated Lucky Seven, not too far west from the Devil’s Gate. The trouble had all started with vague whispers about mutilated cattle. Eventually, the talk got completely out of hand. Stories of witchcraft and even little green men from outer space spread through the community like wildfire. Once word got out, not a soul for miles around would set foot upon that ranch. The few men who would have hired on were kept back by frightened wives and children. Emaciated cattle wandered the nearby canyons searching for food that winter. There were not enough men left to drive them into the winter pastures. The following spring the ranch was inhabited by ghosts. The owners had filed bankruptcy and moved back East.

Brad suddenly turned pale. “That couldn’t possibly happen here, could it, Martin?”

DeGarza looked uncomfortable. “Well, sure, it’s unlikely, but you should do something to stop this talk. Folks around here are superstitious. I don’t have to tell you that.” He paused, then asked with a wry laugh, “Why did old Tavas have to go and name this place the Devil’s Gate, anyway?”

“It has something to do with the mountains,” Brad said as we stepped outside. “See how those two steep ledges slope into the canyon? Sort of looks like a gate, doesn’t it? It’s so dry and barren out there that it *could* be the gateway to hell.”

Martin turned to me. “Well, maybe you ought to think about renaming the place,” he suggested, and I couldn’t tell whether he was jesting or dead serious.

“How about something like the ‘Blue Sky Ranch’?” Brad suggested. “Or better still, ‘Jackrabbit Paradise’?”

As we rounded the corner toward the stables, Victor came running out to meet us with great, loping strides. He was excited about something. Still breathing hard, he took Guillermo's arm, drawing him aside. All the while, he kept repeating in a scared, whimpering voice, "It wasn't my fault. I was going to do just like you said. I swear. Only, it was gone."

"What's the matter with him?" DeGarza asked.

"Oh, don't pay any attention," Brad said with a meaningful tap upon his brow. "He's not working with a full deck."

"Gone." I heard Victor moan again. "The carcass was gone."

I turned back, the full impact of his words hitting me.

Then, suddenly, a high-pitched, whinnying sound filled the air. It stopped everyone in their tracks. Frozen, we stood watching in horror as Joshua bolted out from the canyon path beyond the stables like a streak of black lightning, hooves stamping, mane flying high. His saddle was empty. One of the hands ran out and was lucky to catch his reins. The animal reared and snorted.

"Colleen!" Brad started to rush forward as one of the men grabbed Joshua's dangling reins. "She's been hurt."

"No! Listen." Guillermo restrained Brad. "She's not injured. Victor was trying to tell me what happened. Something spooked her horse..." But before we could piece the story together, the startled horse suddenly broke free again.

Now, Joshua was thundering toward us, nostrils flaring, a terrible look in his wild eyes. "Stay back," Guillermo warned. "He's out of control."

It all happened so quickly. There was no time to run, no time to even move out of the way. I saw Martin

DeGarza's eyes bulge with fear as the wild, frightened stallion bore down upon us, threatening to trample us with his sharp, angry hooves.

Then, suddenly, a lasso was thrown about the horse's thrashing neck. I held my breath as the terrified stallion turned, rearing back a second time. There was a savage bravery about him as Esteban held his ground. With a fearlessness that bordered upon cruelty, he brought the sharp end of his whip down fiercely between the stallion's eyes, stunning him. Then, amid admiring glances from his devoted followers, he rode off, leading the subdued, confused horse back to the stables.

"Colleen! Where is she?" In a shaky voice, DeGarza demanded an answer from Guillermo. "You're sure she's all right?"

He nodded. "Fortunately, she wasn't thrown. She slid from the horse's back and landed in the sagebrush. A little shook up, maybe, but not injured. Carl says Ivan took her inside the house."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"The horse was spooked," Guillermo explained. "It was that yearling. Victor was to have burned the carcass this morning, but when he went out to the clearing, it was gone." He stopped and scratched his head. "The way I see it, the dogs must have dragged it up on the trail. The smell of blood drove the horse wild."

The commotion of the runaway horse had drawn a crowd. A couple of children had come up from the housing to see what the excitement was all about. I saw curiosity gel rapidly into fear on the small faces as they gathered about something on the ground between the stables and the canyon path. Abruptly, I realized it was the mutilated carcass the dogs had brought up from the trail.

I was aware of many frightened faces as the carcass was quickly hauled away. Hearing about the mutilations was one thing but actually seeing evidence was another story. More rumors were certain to spread. Already, I heard several marveling that the dogs would have dragged such a heavy burden so far. Standing there, I made a silent vow that no matter what might happen, the Devil's Gate would never share the tragic fate of the Lucky Seven.

Chapter 16

Colleen, the minor scratches on her arms and legs washed and carefully bandaged, lounged on the sofa in a silky violet robe contrasting almost comically with the spots of iodine decorating her left arm and the white gauze upon both shapely knees.

“Feeling better, Turtle Dove?” DeGarza asked. He and Brad hovered over her, tending to her every whim, clucking over the dramatic tale of her adventure with the runaway horse. Even Alice had joined in, bringing her a cup of steaming tea from the kitchen.

As I stepped into the room I, too, felt an unaccustomed tug of sympathy toward her. It must have been quite an ordeal. Despite our frequent conflicts, I was relieved that she hadn’t been hurt badly.

As I took a step toward her, I saw her leaning her head back against the mound of pillows, carelessly allowing the robe to separate as she arched her back like a contented feline, totally self-indulgent, lazily soaking up all the fuss and attention Brad lavished upon her.

“Are you’re sure you’re comfortable?” Brad asked.

“My neck feels a little stiff,” she demurred. As he bent down to adjust her pillows, I saw his gaze slip to the robe which had fallen apart just a little more. I felt my pity for

her vanish like a puff of smoke. Kind words dying upon my lips, I hastily crossed the room and stepped outside.

The afternoon sun was bright and warm, the wind brisk and refreshing after the stuffiness of the tea and iodine-scented room. As I moved away from the house, I suddenly heard the quick, heavy crunch of gravel directly behind me. Martin DeGarza had stepped from the white porch and was hurrying to catch up with me.

"Anna, wait," he called. "I'll walk with you." Slightly red-faced, puffing with the exertion, he reached my side. For the few steps it took to reach his Buick, we walked in silence. Yet I knew something was on his mind.

For a while, he detained me, making small talk as he stood by the open door of his car. Then, with an insidious smile, he mentioned, "You know I've always been interested in the Devil's Gate."

"Oh?" I tried to sound surprised. As the gaze from his small, brown eyes rested eagerly upon me, I knew my suspicions were correct. He was about to make me an offer.

He continued, dropping his gaze so he didn't quite meet my eyes. "In fact, right before he died, Tavas was talking about selling the ranch out to me." Nervously, he cleared his throat. "We'd even settled on a price..."

I stared him down icily, knowing full well he was lying through his teeth. He squirmed a little, realizing I'd read through his ploy, disappointed I wasn't so easily duped.

He licked his lips, then decided to try another approach. "Right now, you may not be interested in talking business with me, but, let's face it—with all these rumors spreading around, the times ahead are going to be rough. You're a young and pretty gal. Chances are you'll want to leave here soon, finish school, find yourself a husband.

There may come a time when the ranch becomes a burden to you...”

And you'll be waiting like a greedy vulture ready to pounce!
Instead of hurling the angry words at him, I replied firmly. “If that time ever comes, I’ll give you a call.”

With a sigh, he slid beneath the wheel. Sticking his head out of the opened window, he urged persistently, “At least think about it. You won’t find another offer as good as the one I am prepared to make.”

The nerve of him. His perfidious insinuation that Tavas had intended to sell the Devil’s Gate to him roused my animosity. I would’ve felt better about him if he’d just laid his cards down on the table and made me an honest offer on the place instead of resorting to such trickery. Still fuming, I watched him back his huge Buick slowly and carefully out of the driveway.

* * * *

Later, I told Guillermo about DeGarza’s offer. He didn’t seem to share my surprise. “What did you expect from a two-bit lawyer like him?” he asked with a grin. “Don’t let him get to you.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have let him upset me like that, but the gall of that man. Frankly, I’ve lost a lot of respect for him.”

Guillermo’s grin broke into a laugh. “I never had any to begin with.”

“DeGarza wants the ranch pretty badly. Do you think he’d go so far as to set up these cattle mutilations? It could all be a scheme he and Colleen have cooked up to force me to sell out.”

Guillermo stroked his chin. “He lacks scruples, but I don’t think he’s low enough to stoop to treachery. If he was downright crooked, Tavas would never have trusted him to

see to his will. He might try to sweet-talk you into selling the ranch, might even try to cheat you on paper, but I don't think terrorizing people is his game."

"I'm still going to keep an eye on him and Colleen."

* * * *

As I reached the stables near the corral, a familiar and indignant voice from the other side of the wooden fence made me stop in my tracks, listening. "I'm going into town, Ivan. And don't try to stop me. I won't be held prisoner here by you."

I could hear his laughter in response, cold enough to freeze the blood. "Why, Colleen, I thought you were indisposed?" I could see their shadows now through the slatted fence, his tall and menacing as he advanced toward her. "Just what do you have planned for this evening, my Dear? A secret rendezvous?"

"What do you care, Ivan?" Colleen retorted defensively. "I thought you'd be delighted to be rid of me." Nastily, she continued, "Why, just think. With me gone, you could spend the rest of the evening playing up to your precious Anna."

"You leave Anna out of this." Ivan's voice was razor-sharp and threatening.

"Oh, Ivan. Don't you think I know what's going on? Don't you think I know the reason you've been pushing me for a divorce all of a sudden?"

I could see her through the fence, looking up at him, those full, red lips parted in a wicked smile.

"Can't wait to get me out of the picture, can you? You've already got her eating out of your hands. All you want to do is wrap your greedy paws around that inheritance of hers. And the only way you can think to do it now is to divorce me and marry her."

"You know that's not true."

"Then why have you had them trailing me again?" she accused. "By the way, who was that in the woods yesterday? Was it you or one of your hired flunkies?"

"Colleen, I don't know what you're talking about. I swear I don't have anyone watching you. You're imagining things—"

"It's all been for my benefit, hasn't it, Ivan?" Her voice had risen to a shrill pitch. She no longer seemed the cool, scheming woman who was always one step ahead of everyone else. She sounded frightened.

"Ever since you asked me for that divorce, someone's been following me. And now...now this dreadful cult business. I know that somehow you're behind it. You had someone dump that poor creature out there on the trail this morning where I'd be sure and see it when I went out for my ride."

"You shouldn't have been riding Joshua. I warned you he might throw you."

"He wouldn't have thrown me if he hadn't been spooked. Just how far will you go to drive me away?"

"Have you gone mad?"

She made a scornful sound. "Play the innocent if you like. All I'm going to say is what I've already told you. It's going to cost you plenty to get out of this marriage."

"I don't have anything to give you anymore."

"Then maybe I'll hold on to you just out of spite. Now, give me those car keys."

"As long as you insist upon being my wife," he replied coolly, "you're damned well going to act the part. I told you I won't have you making a fool of me."

I saw her struggle for the car keys which he purposefully held just out of her reach.

"Oh, Ivan, Darling, let's not fight." Her voice had become silky and inviting. I saw her reach out to him. Tears stinging my eyes, I watched him yield to her passionate kiss, responding with a savage fury.

Then, abruptly, he flung her away from him. "Don't play games with me, Colleen," he warned. "It won't work anymore."

She glared at him, lips parted, nostrils slightly flared. Sunlight illuminated the long hair shining down her back, making her a portrait of fiery beauty as she turned upon him. "You know you'll always want me."

He stared at her long and hard. "You've killed any feelings I might have had for you," he replied with a cruel twist to his lips.

"I hate you!" she shrieked in sudden outrage. Then, through unbecomingly clenched teeth, she added, "Very well, Ivan, Darling. There are others who find me attractive. You know I don't even have to leave this ranch to find company. I don't even have to leave here to get what I want."

Flinging this final remark over her shoulder, she moved away.

"Damn her to hell," Ivan's voice thundered. I stepped back into the shadow of one of the outbuildings. The crunch of gravel warned me he was coming in my direction. Before I could slip away unnoticed, Ivan stepped from the shadow of the long fence, spotting me.

"Anna." His eyes were still terrible. His face a mask of rage. "What are you doing here?"

My voice trembled slightly. "I...I just came from the house," I lied.

He studied me, that penetrating gaze of his staring into my very soul. "No, you've been here all along. You heard Colleen and me fighting."

I knew there was no use denying the truth. "I didn't want to interrupt. I waited here..."

He ran a hand through his black hair, a gesture betraying his uneasiness. "The rumors about Devil-worship have upset her. You've heard how someone dragged that carcass up close to the stables this morning. It's no wonder she's shaken. I hold Victor responsible," he added carefully. "I told him to dispose of it properly."

I nodded slightly. His very nearness made the blood race in my veins. I could feel the rapid beating of my heart beneath my wool sweater as his gaze met my own, searching for understanding.

"Leena's never been happy here. She blames me. Sometimes she lashes out in her unhappiness, makes absurd accusations." Suddenly he turned on me. "God, Anna, don't look at me that way. Surely, you can't believe her..."

He stood awaiting my answer, the dark knight, the gypsy, the restless, brooding spirit who invaded my every dream. My gaze brushed over his unruly dark hair, the stormy obsidian eyes, the relentless hardness of his craggy features.

"Of course not," I whispered, barely trusting my own voice.

The tautness in him relaxed slightly, releasing the rigid set of his jaw, softening the hard line of his mouth. Suddenly, his hand reached out, stroking my cheek gently. "Fair Annie," he said lightly, calling me the name of a ballad he used to sing to me long ago, about a woman who waited in vain for her lover to come home from the sea. "Fair

Annie,” he repeated softly. His voice was half-mocking, but his eyes were dark and serious. “Believe in me now.”

Chapter 17

Trying to hide the glass in her hand, Colleen jumped back guiltily as I stepped into the kitchen. I saw through the opened cupboard door that the bottle of whiskey Brad and Ivan kept on hand for rare occasions had been tapped. The strong scent of alcohol pervading the room warned me that this wasn't her first nip at the bottle.

"I...my nerves are about to go. The fall and everything," she explained. She turned around, now clutching the glass defiantly in her hand. She was still dressed for town in a bright, long-sleeved silk blouse that hid the scratches on her arms. Her lipstick left a heavy trace on the glass as she downed the shot in one quick gulp, then placed the glass back on the drain-board.

"You...won't tell Ivan," she pleaded, turning away. "He doesn't like me drinking." She really *did* look shaken. Now that the excitement and all of the attention had worn thin, she was probably feeling the effects of the accident with Joshua. That, combined with the ugly scene between her and Ivan I'd just witnessed, was enough to set anyone's nerves on edge.

"You don't have to worry." I stepped away.

"Anna."

Her voice, strained and uncertain, called me back. I looked at her.

"Do you believe in the Devil?"

"*What?*" I cried, caught off guard, now seriously wondering how much whiskey she'd consumed.

Her eyes were bright, feverish as she turned to me. "Because *I* do." Slowly, her voice slightly thick, she continued. "I saw him. Below my window last night."

Surely, it was just the whiskey talking. Nevertheless, I felt a slight tingling begin just at the base of my neck as I asked, "What did you see?"

"I don't expect you to believe me, but something was out there. A huge, dark shape. Oh, hell, it's nothing that I can describe. I heard laughter." She gave a little shiver, making the bracelets upon her arm clink against each other. "Such horrible laughter."

I regarded her skeptically, trying to decide whether she was really frightened or was trying to frighten me. The thought passed through my mind again that I was being set up, that this was all part of some crazy scheme between her and DeGarza to scare me into selling the ranch.

"It must have been your imagination," I said.

"That's what Ivan told me," she responded bitterly. "That's what everyone tells me." Suddenly accusing, she added, "Well then, how do you explain that...thing...in the canyon this morning? Was that my imagination, too?"

A genuine shiver passed through her, the terrified look that came into her eyes giving credibility to her emotions.

"Ugh. It was horrible." She gave a crazy laugh. "Do you know what I think? I think the Devil himself must be after me."

"Colleen, don't be absurd."

Her eyes narrowed. "Well, I don't believe for one minute that any dogs dragged that dead animal up on the horse trail. I think it was done on purpose. Someone knew I planned to go out riding—knew that Joshua might throw me. "Maybe," she finished with unsettling conviction, "the Devil's someone we both know very well."

With this, she moved away rather unsteadily, slipping out through the kitchen door. As soon as she was gone, I checked the bottle in the cupboard. True to my suspicions, it was nearly empty.

Though I tried to convince myself that Colleen had just had too much to drink and was letting her imagination get the better of her, nagging doubts whispered in my mind. What if there was some truth to her suspicions? What if someone *did* mean her harm? My thoughts flashed back to the heated argument between her and Ivan earlier. He'd accused her of seeing someone, and he had been so angry...

Colleen had made it clear she believed Ivan was behind these frightening occurrences, but I knew she was wrong. She *must* be wrong. If not Ivan, there must be someone else. A lover? Colleen was a woman who evoked powerful emotions in men. Was it possible she'd teased the wrong person once too often, pushed the wrong man too far? Could she have hurt and angered someone enough that they'd mean her bodily harm?

Outside the window, I could see her hanging around by the barn. As always, she was soon surrounded by men. Some of the ranch hands had gathered around her, lured by her seductive walk and brash flirtations. To the side, I saw Esteban watching her. When I passed by shortly afterward, both of them were gone.

* * * *

The cabin loomed ahead, splintered and forlorn in the dying sunlight. Surely, I'd been foolish in following my hunch by coming up here. Still breathless from my steep climb over the rocks, I moved closer. The air was cooler here at the top of the hill. The thickness of the evergreens muted the sun's warm glare.

The broken, rickety shack before me conveyed the impression one swift kick in the right place might make it cave in. The rotting walls and creaking wooden rafters appeared unsafe. I had to laugh at the idea of anyone, especially Colleen with her fancy clothes and flare for style, choosing this unlikely place for a midnight tryst with one of the ranch hands.

Yet Alice's hints that Colleen might be seeing Esteban or one of the other men on the sly, coupled with Colleen's own angry words to Ivan earlier today, had roused my suspicions. Then there was Victor's strange insistence that the cabin was a meeting place for lovers...

Well, Victor was obviously mistaken. Nobody in their right mind was likely to meet in this dump of a shack at any time, let alone the dead of night.

Seeing the place close up had satisfied my curiosity. Yet I paused by the closed door. Since I was already here, I decided, I might as well have a look inside.

Placing my hand firmly upon the rusty doorknob, I was prepared to do battle with the ancient, creaking hinges. The battered door surpassed me by swinging open easily to my first effortless shove. I stood, peering into the room beyond, gasping in sudden astonishment.

The tiny room was almost inviting. True, the linoleum was bare in places and the faded yellow wallpaper was cracked and peeling, but there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. The tattered sofa in the corner was draped with

an old quilted throw, and, as I ventured slowly into the room, I saw there were blankets on the old iron bed.

There was no doubt about it. The cabin was being used. I stood in the middle of the one-room shack, puzzled by my discovery. Had I really stumbled into someone's 'love nest'? Or was this just a place one of the men had rigged up to come and relax, to drink a few beers alone? The only other sign someone had been here recently was the empty beer can crumpled on the floor near the bed.

The cabin was charged with warmth, with the feeling of life. I felt suddenly nervous, watched, like an intruder in a private place.

A scraping sound rasped outside. The wind suddenly caught the door, slammed it against the splintered frame with shuddering force. Feeling trapped, I hurried to free myself.

Once outside, I took in air grown so much cooler that it burned my lungs. My senses were still tingling, my nerves taut from the unexpected, jarring sound of the slamming door. I was aware it had grown darker as well as cold. The sun had slipped behind the hills. Still haunted by the vague, uneasy feeling I wasn't alone, I started back down the trail.

With one last glance back at the cabin, I moved to the edge of the rocks. From where I was standing, the corrals and barn below were bathed in golden light, but the canyon on the other side of the trail was dark and sunless. The hoof prints left by cattle searching for the tender grass growing in the shade of the big boulders stopped a few feet away. The way to the canyon was steep and uninviting, covered with blue-black sagebrush and jagged stone. I could just barely make out the twisted, gnarled trees marking the clearing where the terrible altar stone lurked, concealed in darkness.

My footsteps quickened on the path as I tried to put as much distance between myself and the canyon as possible. A sudden stirring from behind made me spin around, startled. Was that faint sound only the wind whispering through the canyon walls, or was something out here with me? Gooseflesh prickled my arms as the clawing branches of the junipers a few feet above me on the trail parted. A dark figure whirled down the path toward me.

Colleen came out of the darkness, her green eyes glittering, her face livid with rage. The wind caught and tangled her long, wild hair as she turned upon me accusingly. "I was right about you. He sent you up here, didn't he? Sent you to spy on me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Her emerald eyes blazed into mine. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from here," she warned. Half-sobbing, she repeated, "Just stay away."

"Colleen—" But she vanished into the dark mass of juniper. From where I stood, I could now see her moving high above me on the trail. She was going into the cabin. She was waiting for someone.

Chapter 18

“Guillermo, I was hoping to find you here,” I said as I peered into his office. He’d pushed back the mountain of paperwork on his desk to concentrate upon the steaming bowl in his hands. Guillermo often took his meals out here alone when he was busy. A blackened pot bubbled on the wood-burning stove most of the day, sending the aroma of over-cooked carrots and lamb and potatoes to mingle with the wood smoke.

“Come in, Anna.”

He seemed genuinely glad to see me. Still upset by Colleen’s angry accusations, I stepped inside, grateful for his invitation. He gestured toward the tin folding chair beside the desk. “Sit down. Some stew?”

He produced an extra bowl and a plastic spoon from the desk drawer, then moved toward the stove where he ladled out a generous portion for me.

“Thanks. I missed supper again,” I confessed.

“You’re making that quite a habit, aren’t you?”

As Guillermo settled back at the desk, I was reminded suddenly of the many times when I’d kept Tavas company in this same little annex, visiting with him while he went over the accounts and payroll. It was a tedious job that Guillermo had voluntarily assumed. He resembled Tavas so

much sitting there, hat tilted back, forgotten cigar smoldering in the nearby ashtray, that for a moment a weary sense of comfort filled me. The atmosphere of the room struck a chord of familiarity deep inside of me, stirring up so many pleasant memories.

"What's on your mind, Anna?"

"I ran in to Colleen just a little while ago." Not wishing to reveal too much to Guillermo about our unpleasant encounter, I added carefully, "She was heading toward the canyon. I don't think she should be out there alone. It'll be dark soon. And...she was a little drunk."

"Ivan was in here not more than half an hour ago looking for her. I wouldn't waste your time worrying. Ivan will find her and bring her home."

I took another bite of my stew, which was cool now, and rather mushy. "There's something else I've been wanting to talk to you about," I said. "It's Esteban. He's going to do all he can to cause trouble for you and I feel it's partly my fault."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Because I called his bluff a time or two?"

Though Guillermo smiled, I noticed a tightening at the corners of his lips, a sudden hardness in his eyes. "I can hold my own with arrogant young colts like Esteban."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"No," he replied simply.

"Is there a reason?"

"Just...animal instinct."

A lingering silence fell as Guillermo finished his stew, then took up the half-burned cigar, puffing thoughtfully.

"Have you found out anything at all that might link him to the Cult of *Akerra*?"

Heavy lids came down over his eyes like a veil as he replied evasively, "The men have been pretty closed-mouthed about the whole thing. If Esteban is mixed up in this ugly business, you can be sure he's going to keep them silent."

Guillermo knew something. I was sure of it. I had the gut feeling he knew much more than he was willing to trust me with. I felt a grudging admiration for his loyalty toward the men.

"Guillermo, do you think he might be our man? You've seen how the others act toward him. They seem to follow his lead. Do you think Esteban might be the ringleader behind this Cult?"

Guillermo stubbed the remainder of his cigar into his dirty stew bowl, then looked up at me. "At one time, I was sure enough I would have taken the rope and hung him myself."

"Has something happened to make you change your mind?"

"I don't think Esteban is our man." With the look of a Judas betraying a close friend, he said, "I think it's Manuel."

"What?" A vision of somber Manuel with his short, fringed hair and huge, luminous eyes came into my mind. "But he's a friend of yours, and one of our most faithful hands—Guillermo, are you sure?"

He looked away. "I don't know anything for certain, but most of the fingers point to him. That's all I can say."

"Shall we do something about it?"

"Not yet. Not until I know for sure."

Darkness had settled in over the mountains as Guillermo and I sat talking. By the time I left the barn, the moon had come out, big and silvery, lighting my path as I crossed the stables toward the house.

Just outside the stables, I spotted Colleen. She, too, was moving through the shadows toward the house. Though relieved she'd come down from the canyon trail, I wasn't in the least bit anxious to have another encounter with her tonight. Running into her again so soon would only reinforce her irrational conviction that Ivan had me following her. I slipped behind the concealing wall of the nearest stable until she was well out of sight, then cut across Alice's garden to take a short-cut back to the house.

I stepped carefully around the twisted, dark shrubbery of the sandy garden, being careful not to brush up against the stinging cholla plants or the tall, spear-like yucca. I hadn't gone very far when I heard a slight rustling sound as something broke the branches nearby. I looked out into the dark sagebrush beyond the garden. Nothing. A rabbit, perhaps, or some other night creature, had been running through the underbrush.

The sound came again. Closer. I hurried toward the grove of poplars near the side of the house, aware now that someone or something was following me. A dark shape was moving through the poplars.

"Colleen?"

There was no answer. Nothing.

I took another step toward the house. Suddenly, a low, throaty sound broke the stillness. An evil, inhuman sound that made the blood freeze in my veins. Not quite animal, not quite human, but somewhere in between. The cry of a lunatic, the bleating of an angry goat or ram.

I turned, and for a moment I saw the immense, dark shape standing in the ghastly white moonlight. "My God," I heard myself whisper. Then it was gone.

But it had been there, all the same. For a brief moment I'd seen the dark figure of some enormous animal clearly

outlined against the brightness of the full moon, no face, only a hollow of darkness beneath a pair of sharply-pointed, three-pronged horns.

As I groped blindly for the kitchen door, I could hear laughter behind me. Diabolical, insane laughter—the laughter of the Devil himself.

Chapter 19

Breathless, I stumbled into the kitchen, closing the door behind me. For a moment I stood there in the darkness, trembling, trying to gain control over my emotions. Such wild, irrational fear had taken hold of me that my hands were still shaking as I reached for the nearest light switch.

I opened the door a crack, staring out into the darkness. The wavering poplars, the spiny cactus in Alice's garden, were indistinct blurs against the bluish sky. Had I only imagined that immense, dark shape? In my panic, had I allowed the bulging shrubbery to assume the form of some huge beast? Had the strangled, knotted tops of Alice's cactus transformed themselves into spiny horns? Perhaps, but the laughter... How could that evil, diabolical laughter be explained? No, something had been out there. Something had been stalking me.

I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Then Alice stepped into the kitchen in her flowered robe and matching slippers, a mountain of pink curlers caught up like fish-bobs in the silky net of her blue scarf. The face beneath that blue scarf went pale as death as she noticed me by the open door.

"Anna, what's wrong?"

"Colleen!" I cried out. "Alice, has she come back to the house?"

"Why, I don't know. I don't...think so. What are you talking about?"

"We have to find her." No sooner had I said the words than a scream, high-pitched and shattering, split the night into a million sharp-edged pieces.

"What was that?" Alice whispered behind me.

A rattling noise came from the door opening into the family room. We crossed the kitchen, and from the threshold, saw Colleen step inside. She looked dazed, shaken. Her hair fell in tangled disarray about her shoulders. Her chest was heaving. The silk blouse beneath the suede jacket was twisted and partially undone. Her lipstick-smudged mouth was sullen with anger, but it was fear that I read in her eyes, wild, mindless fear. A fear telling me that what I'd seen out there hadn't been my imagination. Colleen had seen it, too.

Alice and I watched her storm up the stairs toward her room as if the demons of hell pursued her. Soon, we could hear the slamming of the door, the sharp click of a latch. She'd locked herself in.

Alice turned to me, open-mouthed, but before she had a chance to speak, Ivan stepped inside the house. The whites of his eyes seemed very bright against the obsidian of his pupils. The faint glow from the kitchen threw ghostly shadows over his face, accentuating the slightly flared nostrils, the finely-chiseled lips drawn back in anger. Aghast, we watched as he took the stairs two at a time.

I could hear a sound now, the rattling of a doorknob. The sound became louder, as if he intended to shake the door loose from its hinges. From behind the closed door

came the slam of dresser drawers opening and closing, a tirade of curses.

"Leena, open this door." His voice was deathly. "I mean it." More curses followed. Then a sharp, cracking sound, the splintering of wood.

"Good Jesus, what's happening?" Alice whispered. She turned to me, a terrified look on her face.

He'd broken through the door. I felt a stab of sickness deep inside. He was so angry. I'd never seen him like this before. I brushed past Alice, who was frozen into position, and hurried toward the stairway. I must get up there. I must stop him from harming her...

I slowed at the bottom of the stairway, listening. I could hear her now, angry, cajoling.

"What a cheap trick, Ivan. Tracking me all over the place in that ridiculous get-up. Horns, even."

She laughed, the laughter wild and somehow terrifying. "You know what I think? I think you're crazy. I'm getting out of here while I still can. I'm getting out of here while I'm still able..." The voice became clearer as she came into view with her suitcase, to stand at the top of the stairs.

Ivan, too, appeared at the top of the stairway. "Don't be absurd," came his gentle, carefully-controlled voice, the voice he seemed to use so often with her. "Where can you go this time of night?"

She stood for a moment, apparently uncertain, suitcase still in hand. She was still visibly shaken. Her hair, which she'd done up hastily, was already beginning to escape from its shiny pins. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Anywhere. Just away from this cursed place, but don't worry, Ivan. You haven't heard the last of me. You...you'll be hearing from Martin. You'll be hearing from my lawyer."

Brushing past him, she hurried down the stairs. Her face was pale and determined as she slipped by me. The door slammed heavily, a final retort. Then she was gone. Moments later, I could hear the roaring of an engine as her car shrieked out of the driveway, throwing a shower of pebbles against the house.

"Ivan..." Desperately, I caught at his arm as he came past. "Listen to me. There *was* something out there."

"I know." For a brief moment, his eyes met mine, dark, searching. "I can't let her wander around alone. She's in no condition to drive."

Then he, too, disappeared into the night.

I stood looking out after him until the sound of footsteps made me glance up once again toward the stairs. Brad, wearing pajamas and a terry cloth bathrobe, his hair damp and tousled from the shower, looked down at us.

"What's all the commotion about?" he demanded, looking puzzled.

"It's Colleen," Alice explained. "She's run off again." Her words were interrupted by the sound of another vehicle pulling out of the driveway.

"Ivan?"

Alice nodded. "Gone chasing after her, of course."

Brad was coming down toward us. "Maybe I should help him find her."

"No need," Alice advised. "He'll find her soon enough. She went to DeGarza's, no doubt."

Alice shook her head, making the pink curlers bob under their net of blue. "So much trouble over the girl. She'll come back soon enough. Always does." She sighed deeply. "Yes, it's a bad penny that always returns."

Chapter 20

Alice poked at the Sunday roast beef on her plate, frowning. Turning to me, she asked, "Doesn't this taste just a bit 'off' to you? I wondered if it didn't have freezer burn when I took it out this morning."

Whatever appetite I'd been able to muster left me, though I knew there was nothing wrong with the beef. Whenever Alice was worried or apprehensive about something, she would suddenly become suspicious of all food, accusing it unjustly of being either spoiled or tainted. I could remember many cans of perfectly innocent tuna and countless other platters of meat that had been tossed to the dogs through the years because of Alice's peculiarity.

"Maybe I should fix something else." There was no reply. The sound of forks and spoons clicking mechanically upon the stoneware accentuated another lull in conversation. Since last night, we'd all been in a constant state of apprehension.

Guillermo, who always took his Sunday afternoon meals with us, spoke up reassuringly. "Tastes fine to me, Alice."

"Nothing wrong with this roast," Brad agreed, but I noticed he didn't ask for a second helping. He seemed to have lost some of the enormous appetite that Alice and I

were always kidding him about as, with a forced smile, he cleared off the last of his gravy. Ivan's plate, I noticed, was nearly untouched, the meat and potatoes growing cold.

"I tell you, this beef isn't good at all." No one protested when Alice packed it back into the kitchen.

Brad's voice broke the silence. "She's been gone so long. I'm getting worried."

"It isn't the first time she's taken off." Alice spoke from the refrigerator. "She'll be back soon enough."

"But last time was different," Brad protested.

"Oh? And what was different about it? Had everyone half sick with worry, every police car in the county out looking for her, and then she comes breezing in like nothing ever happened."

I stole a glance at Ivan. He looked so tired. He'd searched for Colleen all night and half of the morning. His clothes were rumpled, his hair still tousled from the wind. A four o'clock shadow darkened the rough line of his jaw. The silent, disturbed look in his eyes told me he didn't share Alice's confidence that Colleen would come home.

"I'm sure Alice is right," Guillermo said quietly. "No doubt she'll be turning up in that driveway any minute now."

A sudden sound from outside made sentences die in midair. Eyes turned hopefully toward the window. A burst of darkness rose and fell as another dust devil kicked up its heels and swirled about the yard, then disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"I don't like the looks of that," Ivan said. "There's a storm blowing in. Soon as DeGarza gets here, we'll start up again. We'll each take one of the men and a different vehicle. We'll split into different directions. I want to go over every one of those back roads."

"What about the police?" Brad asked.

"We don't want to involve them again unless it's absolutely necessary. We know the terrain better. We can search faster without them slowing us down."

"A lot of trouble for nothing," I heard Alice snort under her breath. "She'll be back. This is just what she likes—to worry us sick."

But Alice, too, was beginning to look anxious. She craned her neck to look out at the sound of a car pulling into the drive. It was only Martin DeGarza's fat green Buick, moving slowly over the rutted road.

Alice and I had just cleared off the kitchen table when he stepped inside. "Any news?" His gaze roamed toward the table, noticing with an obviously disappointed look that he'd missed dinner. Alice dished up a piece of the pie that had gone through the restless meal untouched.

"Thank you, Alice," DeGarza said, pulling up a chair to the table. "Haven't eaten since you called this morning. I've been much too upset."

Ivan got up and paced the room. "As soon as you're ready..."

Quickly, Martin took a bite of pie.

"Do you have any idea where she might have gone?" Ivan asked him.

DeGarza shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm as much in the dark as you are, Ivan. I'm just surprised she never showed up at my place like she usually does."

Ivan stepped outside. Brad and Guillermo followed him. DeGarza, hastily finishing his pie, hurried to catch up with them.

After the men had left, I helped Alice in the kitchen, grateful for something to do. I covered the rest of the mashed potatoes and the creamed corn with Saran Wrap.

Then I looked around for the platter of beef. I turned just in time to see Alice leave through the kitchen door, platter in hand, calling to the farm dogs.

She came in with an empty platter.

"I believe I'll go outside," I said, reaching for my jacket.

"Anna, listen to me." The urgency in her tone made me stop and turn toward her. "I know something about Colleen."

"What are you saying?"

"I think she's been meeting someone. One night, I caught her sneaking out of the house after everyone had gone to bed. She and Ivan sleep in separate rooms, you know. That's why he didn't hear her. I think she's seeing someone right here on this ranch."

"One of the hired men, you mean?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Do you have any idea of who he could be?"

She laughed dryly. "Plenty of good-lookin' men up there in that bunkhouse. And Colleen's got the weakness for men. There's that blonde fellow with the tattoos and all that muscle. I've seen her playing up to him plenty of times. Now, there's a likely guess."

I had a better one still. *Esteban*. I remembered the night of Tavas's wake when I'd seen the two of them dancing so close. "What about Esteban, Alice?"

She'd turned away toward the sink and was vigorously scrubbing the roasting pan. It was obvious the conversation had come to an end as far as she was concerned.

Esteban... I turned the idea over in my mind as I walked through the garden. In the clear, crisp daylight, it no longer seemed the evil, threatening place it had been last night. The underbrush was soft and heather-green. The cactus that

had reached out with angry, clutching hands no longer seemed to be pulsating with unnatural life.

Yet, something had been out here last night. Colleen thought Ivan had been following her, trying to frighten her away. I knew that wasn't true. Nevertheless, someone or something had been out here. Could someone, I wondered, have seen her coming toward the stables? In the darkness of the stables where our paths had crossed so briefly, could they have mistaken me for Colleen? Whoever or whatever had been stalking me in the garden, then, must have been after Colleen all along. I believed Ivan had already figured this out. He knew Colleen had been telling the truth last night about something following her in the dark.

I passed the faded barn, the stables, retracing the steps I'd taken last night. Colleen had been coming from the cabin on the hillside when I'd encountered her by the stables. I was sure of it. She could be hiding up there now.

A brisk walk up the hillside took me to the cabin. The place whispered of abandonment in the afternoon light, yet the same uncanny feeling I'd experienced yesterday overtook me as I slowly approached.

The brightness of the sun's glare wouldn't permit me to see into the dark windows. Turning away from the blinding starburst patterns falling across the cracked glass of the windowpane, I stepped toward the entrance.

The feeling of apprehension grew stronger as I tugged at the battered door. I sensed someone was in the cabin. Someone was lurking inside...

Cautiously, I opened the door. The room was dark and gloomy, filled with silence. Then the springs of the iron bunk in the corner creaked ominously. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I saw someone rising from the shadows.

"Colleen?" I whispered, but it wasn't Colleen who came toward me. It was a man.

"Well, well, if it isn't Miss Haspura." Esteban sauntered slowly toward me, hands in the pockets of his tight jeans. "What're you doing way up here, Miss?" he drawled. An odd half-smile spread across the soft lips that, for all their fullness, were somehow cruel. "Didn't you know that curiosity killed the cat?"

Gooseflesh prickled my skin like drops of cool water as he stepped closer. The gaze that brushed over me so boldly left me uneasy. I didn't like the way he was looking at me. I didn't like it at all. Slowly, I began to edge away from him, toward the door.

"What? Afraid of me?" He laughed, as if reading my thoughts. With relief, I watched as he moved away from me, crossing the room again to settle back upon the bunk, his heavy boots making fresh dust-marks on the blankets. "Don't let me stop you," he said. "Have a look around the place." His stare never leaving me, he commented, "Cozy, isn't it? There's a bedroll underneath the bunk. Go on," he urged. "Look around."

Cautiously, being careful not to turn my back to him, I came forward.

"Open that dresser drawer," he commanded.

Curiously, I slid the drawer open. A lacy gown, sweet-smelling perfume. I pushed it back shut.

"Regular lover's paradise out here," Esteban commented.

He pulled the top from a beer can and took a long swig. "Beer, too. And cigarettes."

"So it was you—"

"Hey." A dark brow rose cryptically. "Don't be laying anything on me. Cigarettes aren't *my* brand." With deathly

swiftness, he sprang upright on the bunk, catching me off guard. Before I could move away, he'd reached for me, catching me in a vice-like grip. I could smell beer on his breath as he sneered in a menacing voice, "Colleen never was my type. I like a woman with class. Like you."

Indignantly, I struggled to free myself from his hurting grasp. "Let me go!"

"Esteban!" A voice cracked like a whip from the doorway. Brad seemed to fill up the entire door frame, making the rest of the room shrink as he moved forward. Esteban gaped at him for a moment, startled, caught unaware. Then, quickly, his hands fell from my shoulders to drop down to his sides.

"Just teasin'" he said between his teeth. "No harm done, right, Miss Anna?"

"Get out of here," Brad growled.

Smoothly, he slipped past Brad and out of sight.

"That creep didn't touch you, did he?" Brad demanded, coming toward me. "Because if he did..."

"N-no. I...think he'd had a little too much beer."

"If we didn't need him so bad right now I'd tell him to hit the road."

"Brad, what do you know about Esteban?"

Brad shrugged. "Not much, really. Just another one of those down and outers Tavas was always trying to help. Heard gossip about him I don't much like, but hell, can't take much stock in rumors or we'd lose half the crew."

"I know what you mean." Then I added, curious, "How did you know I was up here?"

"I didn't." He gave a short laugh. "I was looking for Esteban. Good-for-nothing's supposed to be helping me look for Colleen. Instead, he sneaks off by himself to get blitzed." Brad glanced around the room, amber eyes taking

in the surroundings. "Looks like he's got the place fixed up here."

"I think he knows something about Colleen."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she's been meeting someone up here. In this shack."

Brad looked shocked. Flecks of yellow appeared in his eyes. "I don't believe it."

"Look around, Brad. There's evidence in that drawer. Women's things. And I saw her up here yesterday, just before she ran away."

I knew by the expression on Brad's face that he didn't believe a word I was saying. He wanted to think the best of Colleen. At times, he could be so naive.

"You must be mistaken," he said finally, pushing the sun-lightened hair from his forehead. "She doesn't even like Esteban. He tried to put the moves on her once. She slapped his face."

"Maybe it's not Esteban she's seeing." After all, if he was her lover, why had he gone out of his way to show me the evidence in the cabin? Surely, he would've tried to keep it a secret. "It could be Carl or one of the others, but I think Esteban knows more about it than he's telling."

The sudden, dark look in Brad's eyes contrasted with the pale frame of stubby lashes. "Come on, let's get out of here," he said with sudden impatience. "Guillermo and Ivan are probably waiting for me." He looked at me, frowning. "You won't come back up here alone? I don't want you running into Esteban again when he's half-soused. Remember, I won't be around—"

"But, Brad. There may be some clue here as to where Colleen has gone."

“I’ll come back later,” he said. “I want to search this place from top to bottom.” He tugged at my arm. “But now I have to get back to the house.” He reached into his pocket for a cigarette, lit it, tossed the empty, crumpled pack on to the floor. “I don’t want to keep Ivan waiting.”

Chapter 21

"Ivan's back," Brad said as we approached the house, indicating the four-wheel-drive parked beside DeGarza's Buick. "But I don't see Guillermo's pickup anywhere." We hurried up to the door, stepping into the warmth within.

"Any word?" Brad asked anxiously. Coats and jackets were piled on the sofa. The men gathered around the fireplace. I could tell by the way they were talking that Colleen's whereabouts were just as much a mystery as before.

"Not a trace of her," Martin explained, reaffirming my intuition. "Went over those back roads with a fine-toothed comb."

"We going out again?" asked one of the men. "It'll be dark soon. The way those clouds are gathering, it looks like we may be in for an early snow."

"We'll have to wait until Guillermo and Carl return," Martin replied. "Then we'll decide what to do."

I searched the room for Ivan, but he wasn't there with the others. Restlessly, I wandered into the kitchen where Alice was fixing hot coffee and sandwiches for the men.

"Anything I can do to help?"

"You can put more plates on the table. Helps to keep busy."

"I didn't see Ivan in there," I commented, reaching into the cupboard for the heavy white saucers.

"He went outside. Needed time alone, I suppose. Been quite a strain on him. He hasn't rested a minute."

"Alice, do you think she'll return?"

She nodded. "Of course. Though it'd be better for us all in the long run if she didn't. She never was right for my son. I think deep down inside she knows it."

"Then why doesn't she let him go?"

Alice shrugged. "Who knows? Money, perhaps. Even without the Devil's Gate, Tavas left Ivan well-set. Once a cat like her gets her claws into a man, she's not going to let him go easy."

"She seemed really upset last night. She made some frightening accusations."

"All foolishness."

"She seemed so terrified." The fear I'd experienced last night came back with sudden vividness. The horror I'd felt when I thought someone was following me through the garden, the terror rising inside of me at the sight of that immense, dark shape breaking through the shadowy trees.

In the light of day it could all be so easily explained. True, the dark shape could easily have been made by the distorted underbrush. The horns the spiny limbs of cactus, and the laughter I thought I'd heard just behind me—only the howl of the wind. Still, I wasn't thoroughly convinced.

For I could still taste that wild fear, that sudden surge of panic so unnatural to me. It was the same kind of mindless fear I'd seen reflected in Colleen's frightened eyes the minute she'd stepped in the door.

Yes, something had been out there, but I knew it would be hopeless to try to convince Alice. I reached into the silverware drawer to bring out more spoons. Suddenly,

from the kitchen window, a quick motion caught my eye. Ivan was walking in the garden just a few steps away.

His jacket collar was pulled up, his hair blowing in the icy wind as he moved away from the house. He looked cold and dejected and alone. So damned alone. I suddenly found myself fighting so many feelings, feelings I'd thought had been buried for good. Yet, even now, my heart was reaching out to him, longing to touch him, to give him comfort in any way I could. Quickly, I turned away from the window.

"Anything else I can do?" I asked, setting the spoons down on the table next to the sugar bowl.

She, too, was staring out of the window at the solitary figure of her son drifting slowly out of sight. Then, she turned back to me, and I knew she realized exactly how I was feeling.

"Go to him," she urged, sensing my conflict. "With the blessings of his mother. If he's ever needed you, Anna, I think he needs you now."

I slipped on one of the old coats hanging on the peg by the doorway. Then I, too, stepped outside.

My teeth chattered as the wind blew about my hair, tangling it around my shoulders. The coat I'd hastily grabbed was several sizes too big, a man's coat. I hugged it tighter about me, trying to close out the chill. "Ivan," I called—but he was too far ahead. The wind caught his name and threw it back to me.

"Ivannnn..." I called again, breaking into a run in an effort to bridge the widening gap between us. He slowed by the barn, turned and saw me. He waited, a tall, gray figure silhouetted against the damp, blustery sky.

“What are you doing out here?” he demanded brusquely as I reached him. Then he added, his tone softening. “You should be inside where it’s warm.”

“I thought maybe you could use some company.”

“No—you’d better go back in.”

Determinedly, I matched his quick stride until his protests faded into silent acceptance. We moved along in unison, our feet crunching on the brittle, frozen grass making the only sounds.

I didn’t have to ask where we were going. The air turned cooler as we climbed the mountain trail, the coldness burning my lungs like fire as we neared the stream. The snowstorm that was rapidly heading our way had broken somewhere far up in the mountains. The stream was flowing again. A thick jet of water, sluggish with ice, gurgled down the rocks toward the huge granite boulders below. I remembered the last time Ivan and I had been here together. It had been just before Tavas’s death.

Even then I’d known that Ivan was desperately unhappy. Funny that he, too, had chosen this lonely place to seek solace, this place I’d once thought to be exclusively mine.

Now we sat together in awkward silence, watching the water creep past our boulder. “You aren’t being very companionable,” he admonished. Yet I sensed he was glad I was there.

Suddenly, he began to talk. “If only I knew that she was safe. It’s the not knowing that makes it so hard to bear.”

“Alice says she’s taken off like this before.”

“This time’s different.” A dark look crossed his face, making his eyes fill up with pain. *How many times has she hurt him?* As he turned toward me, I could see the weariness

etched into his strong features. "She was afraid of me, Anna. I never meant to make her afraid."

"Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

A bitter laugh rumbled deep from his chest. "Let's just say she's never been true to me. From the day of our pitiful hoax of a marriage. Never faithful."

His eyes were the eyes of a caged beast. "Oh, *how* she mocked me. It was all a game with her, you see. Child one moment, she-devil the next. She taunted me with the knowledge of her lover, dared me to find out who he was."

His anguished words brought a vision of her to mind as she'd been the night of Tavas's death, laughing as she flung those hurting accusations at me, her hair catching the glow of the firelight like a golden flame, eyes shining with wicked pleasure. I remembered only how trapped I'd felt that night—how terrible, like a tortured mouse in the jaws of a playfully cruel feline, a beautiful, tawny creature waiting, licking her lips with satisfaction, savoring those last moments before the kill. *How long has she made Ivan feel that way? How long?*

"Why do you put up with it?" I burst out. "It's not like you. Why do you let her make your life a living hell?" The question I'd held back for so long surfaced in an explosion of anguish. "Why did you marry her instead of me?"

It was as if he didn't hear me. The black eyes beneath the wings of raven brows were stormy, opaque.

"No, don't answer," I finished softly. "I know. You love her—"

"*Love?*" he echoed scornfully, his face a mask of torment as he turned to me. "Do you want to know why I married her?"

He stood by the creek bed, dark hair whipping wildly about his face, jacket collar turned up against the cold.

Suddenly he laughed, the sound as mirthless and bitter as the howling wind. "I married her to try to forget about you."

Tears filled my eyes. "I don't understand."

"Do you remember that last time I came home? When Tavas and I got into that last...argument?"

Yes, and what a fight it had been. I'd never forget the way my stomach had tightened at the sound of thundering voices down in Tavas's study. There had been countless disputes between them before, but nothing like that night.

"He disowned me that night," Ivan said harshly. "He ordered me to never set foot on the Devil's Gate again."

"But why?" I cried out, astonished. Despite their frequent clashes, I couldn't believe Tavas would have gone so far as to disown Ivan without good reason. I shuddered in spite of myself. What horrible thing could Ivan have done, then, to have secured Tavas's wrath?

Ivan spun around to face me. "Do you think Tavas was blind to my feelings about you?"

"N—no, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"I asked Tavas to go into the study that day to talk about...us. I wanted to let him know my intentions toward you." His voice thickening, he finished, "I wanted to let him know that just as soon as I got settled, as soon as I had something to offer you, I was going to ask you to be my wife."

I felt stunned, as if someone had slapped me hard across the face. Was this the dark thing Ivan had been guilty of—loving me? "But...I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Ivan confessed bitterly. "I never expected his fierce reaction. He was like a wild man. He warned me to stay away from you. He told me that I was no good, a loser. He said that I had no right to even be living

under his roof...that I was not even his brother's son, that I was little better than a bastard.

"I guess nobody could hurt my pride like Tavas. It was a blow to me, knowing that I wasn't Lucas's son—not knowing who my father might be. I felt stripped of my identity."

He stopped talking for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "I remember driving into town, stopping at the nearest bar, getting so drunk I couldn't see straight. The future suddenly looked so empty. And the worst part was my fear that Tavas was right. I'd made a mess of my life so far. You were so much younger than me—so innocent. I decided that I should leave you alone, try to forget about my feelings for you.

"They kicked me out of the bar at closing time. I remember wandering up one street and down another. It began to rain. Somewhere during the night Colleen slowed down in her car and invited me inside." Wearily, he continued. "I guess I needed someone that night. Needed a woman to soothe my injured pride."

His voice was rough, raw with emotion. "I never intended to have anything more to do with Colleen. That one night with her made me realize that I could never stop loving you." His eyes hardened. "Only then Colleen came to me with the story that she was carrying my child. She put on that pitiful, helpless act of hers and I never once doubted that she was telling the truth. She must have known I'd feel remorseful for that night we spent together, guilty because I'd used her.

"I knew that I had to accept my responsibility toward Colleen despite my true feelings for her, and make a home for...the child." Bitterly, he finished, "We drove into Las Vegas one night, and were married.

“Shortly after, Tavas became ill, and surprisingly enough, he sent for me. I think he was beginning to regret the things he’d said to me that night. I know my marriage to Colleen shocked him as much as it shocked the rest of them. And then when you came back, when I saw you again...I realized what a terrible mistake I had made.”

Restlessly, he began to pace in front of the creek bed. “Of course, by then, I was beginning to suspect the truth. You see, there *was* no baby. There never had been. She made a fool of me about that, and in every other way. She made me appear little in Tavas’s eyes, turned Brad against me...

“About that time, her drinking started to grow worse. Day by day, I began to realize just how self-destructive she was becoming. She knows I don’t love her and she retaliates by trying to destroy both me and herself.” He ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. “I can’t even count the times she’s threatened suicide, swearing that if anything happens to her, her life will be on my conscience. She’s so unstable that I’m afraid of what she might do to herself if I leave her.

“While she’s still legally my wife, I feel responsible for her. But I can’t love her. Sometimes, God help me, I find myself hating her.

“Damn it, Anna,” he moaned, reaching for me like a drowning man, pulling me close, “Don’t you know it’s you I want? Don’t you know it’s always been you?” And his hot, searing mouth claimed mine.

Chapter 22

I knew from the moment we stepped inside that something had happened. Brad, who must have gone out to look for Guillermo and Carl, stood warming his hands near the fire. He'd not even taken off his coat. A circle had formed around Guillermo and Carl. The room was charged with electricity, animated by the buzz of voices asking endless questions.

Brad, noticing us, stepped forward. "We've found her car," he explained.

"Where?" The color had drained from Ivan's face. His hands were white, the knuckles clenched at his side. "My God, was it wrecked?"

Brad shook his head. "Abandoned." As he moved nearer to us, I could see that he was limping slightly. "Found it on one of the dirt roads between here and DeGarza's ranch. There was no sign of Colleen."

"You've called the police?"

He nodded. "Rescue party's on the way."

"Then let's get out there," Ivan said, turning toward the door. His eyes were weary. The faint, blue-black stubble on his chin made him appear gaunt and haggard. He was exhausted, but still determined. I knew he'd never give up until Colleen was found.

Guillermo stepped forward. "I'll show him the spot, Brad," he volunteered. "You'd best stay off that leg. Stay here with Anna and talk to the sheriff."

Brad started to protest. "It's nothing. Just a slight sprain. Stepped into a hole—"

"Stay, Brad," I urged, propelling him to the chair nearest the fire. "I think that ankle needs to be wrapped."

* * * *

"After you left the house, I took off alone to see if I could locate Guillermo and Carl," Brad explained as I worked on the injured leg. "They flagged me down at the mouth of that old dirt road by the Pass. The truck had slipped off the road and into the loose dirt and sand. When I stopped by to lend a hand, Guillermo told me they'd found Colleen's car hidden in the bushes further back. I went down to look."

"It was there, just like he said. Not stuck or anything, just sitting there. When I came back to help them get out of the mud I stepped into that damned pothole." He winced as I pulled the wrappings tighter across his swollen ankle.

"It just doesn't make sense," he said suddenly. "She must have been on her way to DeGarza's. So what the hell was her car doing way out on that back road? And why would she just abandon it like that? Her purse was still lying across the seat and her suitcase was in the back." As his gaze met mine I saw the worry, the fear in them, and I knew that he, too, wondered if Colleen would ever be found alive.

* * * *

The same deputy from Bly who had led the rescue party the night before was back in the morning. He was talking with Alice. Brad had already been interrogated again and I supposed that my turn would be coming up shortly.

The young deputy and his men had infiltrated the house, filling every room with the smell of coffee and cigarette smoke. I sat outside on the old porch swing, despite the cold. The light snow that had fallen during the night left its soggy traces on the barren hillside. I shivered in my warm wrap, imagining Colleen lost and alone somewhere out there in that mottled sea of gray and white.

Brad limped out to join me, sinking heavily into the swing, dangerously jostling the cup of hot chocolate in his hands. "Questions, questions, I'm so sick of questions. I believe Ivan was right. We're no closer to finding out where Colleen is with all this poking and prying than we were last night before this nosy sheriff's man came."

"Do you suppose that this could all be a hoax?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe Colleen only wants us to think she's missing."

"You mean she could have just abandoned the car and took off?"

I nodded.

"But her purse, her suitcase—"

"She could have left them there on purpose. To throw us off the track. All she would need is an accomplice. And that would be easy enough to find. Remember the cabin, Brad? The things we found in there? She was seeing someone, I know. She might have talked her lover into taking her into town..."

"It's possible. She'd love a game like this. But still..."

"I know it sounds pretty far-fetched, but I'm running out of ideas. Have you told them about the cabin yet, Brad?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't think we should." A strange look appeared in his eyes. "Not yet..."

"You don't think much of this sheriff's man, do you?"

He gave a soft laugh. "Wages are so lousy in Bly I guess they're having to rob the cradle."

No sooner had he said the words than the door behind us opened and a voice called out politely, "Miss Haspura?" The young, freckled-faced man poked his head out timidly. "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a few more words with you. Just a few routine questions."

I followed him into Tavas's small study. The young deputy, polite and eager as a boy playing dress-up in his baggy blue uniform, repeated the same barrage of questions I had answered earlier. There was little I could add to the story of Colleen's disappearance he hadn't already heard countless times by myself and the others. When he was finished, he said, "Inspector Tull will be here this afternoon around three. I've spoken to your foreman, Guillermo, about these men." He tore a list of names from his notebook and handed it to me.

I scanned the list, seeing many familiar names. They were primarily men Guillermo suspected of being involved with the Cult of *Akerra*. The deputy, of course, had been made aware of the cattle mutilations. Among the names were Carl, Manuel, and Esteban.

"Will you see that these men do not leave the premises until he has spoken with them? In fact, no one should leave unless it's important business."

"Very well."

He rose suddenly. "Then that will be all. Thank you for your cooperation."

I went back outside by way of the porch, hoping to resume my conversation with Brad. The swing creaked emptily in the wind. Though I'd ordered him to stay off of his ankle, he'd no doubt gone back to see what was happening with the search party.

The sky was cold and gray. Snow crunched beneath my feet as I walked toward Guillermo's office in the big barn to deliver the list of men Inspector Tull meant to interrogate. I found a sense of comfort in seeing that the men were resuming their ordinary work in shifts—several of them were out working on the fence again. They were taking turns alternately between the work that had to be done and the search. Reaching the barn, I tapped lightly upon the door to Guillermo's office.

I knocked again lightly. When there was no reply, I gently swung the door open and called his name. Guillermo, who was leaning back in his chair, feet propped up on the desk, hat pulled low over his eyes, started at my approach. I'd caught him sleeping on the job, but who could blame him? He'd served faithfully with the search party. Like the rest of us, he was nearing the point of exhaustion. This was probably the first good rest he'd taken since Colleen had disappeared.

"Any word?" he asked, straightening himself up and pulling the hat back over his ears with a slow, easy gesture.

"Nothing new." I dropped the list on the desk in front of him. "An inspector's coming by around three. The deputy says he talked to you earlier about these men. The Inspector wants to question them."

"I'll take care of it," Guillermo said, scanning the list. I knew he was searching for one name in particular. Esteban.

"Does the deputy think there may be some connection between the Cult and Colleen's disappearance?"

Guillermo nodded. "I told him I might be on to something. Some of the men have opened up to me. I may have evidence to tie Esteban in with that Cult, after all." With a frown, he added, "And I've discovered another

strange thing about Esteban. He wasn't home the night Colleen disappeared."

"How did you find that out?"

"Had a talk with his wife."

"Graciana told you?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not. Said he was home all evening, but she was lying. I could tell. I believe she's trying to protect him. I'm going to do a little more snooping around before the Inspector gets here. I'm going to try to find out why."

"I'll stop by their duplex, Guillermo. Maybe she'll talk to me."

"I wouldn't count on it. She's completely loyal to Esteban."

"Well, I can give it a try." I moved toward the door. "I'll see you later this afternoon."

As I left the office, I was deep in thought. I could tell by the way he was acting that Guillermo must have stumbled across some pretty strong hints to link Esteban to the Cult of *Akerra*, but could he find enough evidence to back up his hunch, something more than the rumors of a few frightened men?

"Anna."

Brad was just outside the barn. He came toward me, still favoring his swollen ankle. He was breathing hard. His hair was damp with sweat despite the cold.

"Brad, where have you been?"

He gestured behind him. "Up to the old cabin."

"You shouldn't have climbed way up there."

"Well, I did. And guess what? Everything's gone."

"Gone?"

"It's completely bare. Someone's taken everything away."

He reached down to rub at his ankle. His face was suddenly very pale.

"You'd better go back to the house and get off of that leg."

"I guess you're right. Coming with me?"

"No, I'll be in later."

I walked down the rutted road leading to the bunkhouses, not stopping until I reached the shabby duplex on the end. I rapped on the door. There was no reply. I knocked again, knowing full well that Graciana must be inside. "Graciana?" I called. A curtain moved, then fell back into place like a whisper. I waited. The door remained closed.

With a sigh of defeat, I turned and began to walk away. I passed the corrals and began to follow the path up the hillside. I wanted to see for myself the empty cabin.

I hadn't gone far when I heard the crunch of footsteps behind me in the light snow.

"Miss Anna?"

Without turning, I recognized Victor's voice. I could hear him almost directly behind me now, growing nearer and nearer. Knowing there was no way to avoid him, I spun around to face him.

"What is it, Victor?"

I hadn't expected him to be so close. He was within an arm's reach of me. I could hear his ragged breathing, smell the curious odor of earth-smells that came from his muddy clothing. His gaze was on me, his eyes filled with a disturbing brightness.

"What is it, Victor?" I demanded, edging away from his uncomfortable nearness.

A large hand, a bear's paw, reached out and caught my wrist in a crushing grasp, detaining me. Now, his dark eyes

glittered insanely above the slackness of his massive, animal-like jaw as he spoke rapidly.

"I saw them last night. The *Sorquinak*." He gestured into the darkness of the canyon below us. "They were down there again." His voice was filled with a chilling kind of excitement as he finished, "They made sacrifice. There was blood on the rocks this morning."

I felt sudden alarm race through me.

"Blood," he repeated. "Fresh blood." Then he was gone, disappearing into the darkness below.

Chapter 23

For a moment, I stood motionless, stunned by his words. Then I moved over to the edge of the rocks, peering down into the dark, sunless depths of the canyon below. Scraggly pinion and juniper, their limbs burdened with snow, cast twisted shadows over the blue-black stones, stones that looked as if they'd been thrown at random against that hazy carpet of snow and sagebrush by some angry giant.

Victor was nowhere in sight. I hesitated, wondering if I should go back to the house and get someone to come with me, but something drew me into the darkness below, into that yawning abyss. The air grew damper and cooler as I made my way downward, mud and snow clinging to my boots, down to where the huge boulders marked the entrance into the shadow netherworld of the Black Canyon.

Once I paused, thinking of turning back. The trail was becoming slick and hard to follow, but I was almost there. I'd reached the twisted trees marking the entrance into the clearing. Taking a deep breath, I moved straight ahead to where the altar-stone waited, hidden behind that last clump of black, unkempt juniper and sage.

The air had suddenly grown still. It seemed even the natural sounds of birds calling overhead and small creatures

rustling in the sagebrush had stopped. For a moment, frozen in space, I stared down at the altar, transfixed, unable to turn away. Shivering, I took in the grisly sight of the blood-washed stone with its veins of crimson darkening the muddy white snow.

If there was blood, then there must be sacrifice, but, where? Slowly, my frightened gaze moved from the altar to scan the clump of scraggly trees and bushes nearby. Then I caught sight of something poking out from beneath the dark brush. A shoe.

"No..." I whispered. "No..." I could feel the blood rushing dizzily to my head, making a clogging blackness fall over my vision. I was aware that my mouth had opened, yet no scream would come. It stayed buried deep inside of me. Only a mute, tiny choking sound disturbed the terrible stillness of the clearing. Gagging, I turned away from the sight of the partially nude body sprawled so stiffly, so grotesquely, like a discarded rag doll on the brittle carpet of sage and snow. I forced my stare away from the pale corpse, the jagged, ribbon-slashes of crimson, the sightless, staring eyes, the matted tangles of golden hair, turning away from the ghastly knowledge that Colleen would never be coming home.

I began to run blindly back up the steep trail, my breath surging in shallow, ragged gasps, groping my way up the rocks toward the lip of the canyon, barely aware of the scratches on my arms and legs as I struggled to get out of there any way I could. I seemed to be moving in slow motion. The unsettling haze that had fallen across my vision made everything tilt out of focus as I clutched my way to the top.

Finally I stood, wavering at the canyon's steep edge, tottering on the very brink of hell itself, and down below

lay Colleen, her lovely body so sickeningly mutilated, her sightless eyes staring blankly up at the morning sun.

Someone kept calling my name, calling my name. Then Ivan was there, holding me, bracing me with an iron grip. "What are you trying to do?" he demanded. I swayed, would have tumbled back down the rocks if his strong arms hadn't tightened about my waist, supporting me.

"Colleen—she's down there." My lips were dry, trembling. "She's dead."

"I know."

"You...*know*?" My thoughts were spinning, my head reeling. Horror filled me. His swarthy face with its rough, shadowed chin and penetrating eyes seemed suddenly evil, the face of Bluebeard with his murdered wives stuffed into closets, sprawled headless and limbless across the floor of the forbidden room. Again, I felt the pressure of his strong brown hands tightening and for a wild, absurd moment I feared he meant to toss me over into the waiting realm of darkness to join poor Colleen.

"You killed her!" I struggled violently against him, only vaguely aware that he was losing his hold on me, that I was in danger of falling.

"Anna! Listen to me. Victor brought me here. You don't know what you're saying. I had nothing to do with Colleen's death."

I was beyond hearing. "*Murderer!*" I heard myself burst out.

A strange look came into his eyes. Was it hurt or rage? Then a hardness fell across his features as he drew back his hand and struck me sharply across the face.

I sagged against him, sobbing, drained of the hysteria that discovering Colleen's body had caused. Now he held me tenderly, pressing my head against his strong chest.

The Devil's Gate

“Come now, my poor darling,” he soothed, stroking my hair, murmuring my name as he led me gently away from the canyon’s edge.

Chapter 24

A disgusted Brad stormed out of Tavas's small, downstairs study, which the Inspector had imposingly taken over as his own. With a weary sigh, he sank down upon the sofa, jarring it with his swift motion.

"Miss Haspura, the Inspector will see you now," said the timid young deputy before I could ask Brad how the questioning had gone.

Brad looked up at me with a pitying expression. "He'll make you feel like a damned criminal," he warned. "The old bullfrog," I heard him add ungenerously under his breath.

"Just a few more routine questions," the pleasant, sandy-haired deputy reassured me as he escorted me to the door of the den. "It shouldn't take long."

I glanced in to where the Inspector waited, then back to the deputy, wishing he'd enter the room with me—but he stepped aside, leaving me alone at the threshold.

I drew in a deep breath, summoning courage as I crossed over into the study. It seemed alien to me now, this comfortable little room with the big desk and cozy, private stone fireplace. The fire had died down to a dim blaze, yet the smell of acrid smoke was strong in my nostrils. A disgusting green cigar hung between the thick, downturned lips of the Inspector. 'Old Bullfrog', as Brad had so

correctly dubbed him, had frightened away all ghosts and memories of Tavas. The room was his now, from the great, heavy coat hanging on the moose-horn hall tree to the piles of envelopes and folders littering the floor.

He *did* look like an enormous toad, squeezed in there so tightly behind the desk. His cap was several sizes too small for his immense head, and the Adam's apple below his ample double chin bobbed every time he swallowed. His chin sprouted colorless moles and whisker-stubble, but for all of his unsightly outward appearance, sharp intelligence gleamed from those keen, blue-gray eyes that seemed to measure my every movement. He was large and imposing and I felt intimidated.

"Miss Anna Haspura."

I nodded slightly. "Good afternoon, Inspector Tull."

He gestured to the stiff, hard-backed seat to his left. Then he moved forward in his own chair, making the wooden legs screech as he scooted it around to face me. Chewing thoughtfully upon the sticky stub of his cigar, he looked me over. I waited, not knowing what to expect. "Well, let's hear your story," he said with sudden impatience.

"My story?" I echoed, confused.

He smiled a little, an ugly smile revealing the yellowed stumps of tobacco-stained teeth as he leaned even closer toward me. "I want to know everything about you, Miss Haspura. Every word you've spoken, every step you've taken since your arrival here at the Devil's Gate."

"Where should I start?"

His suspicious little eyes challenged me. Against my will, I began squirming in my seat. I was beginning to understand why Brad had disliked him so.

"Let's begin with this. Why did you come back here in the first place, Miss Haspura?"

I explained to him briefly about Tavas's illness and the circumstances prompting my return.

"And you were so concerned about this *adopted* uncle's health that you dropped everything and came running." The scoffing disbelief in his voice made me feel small, like a child being scolded by the school principal. He cleared his throat with a deep *harrumph*. "Honestly, Ma'am, you don't expect me to buy that."

"Tavas was like a father to me..." I began to explain.

"So he was. And it looks to me like he left his favorite little girl quite a sizable inheritance."

For a moment I was stunned into speechlessness by the unexpected insinuation. *Surely, I misunderstand him?*

"Just a minute, sir." My pulse fluttered with a blind stirring of anger. "I'll have you know that his leaving the ranch to me was just as much a surprise to me as it was to anyone."

He sneered. It was obvious he was prepared to think the worst of me—but why? It was all I could do to keep from jumping out of my chair and pounding upon his desk to better proclaim my innocence. "Ask Brad or Alice," I finally burst out, closer to tears than I wanted to admit.

He gave me a patronizing smile. "Oh, I have, my dear. I have." He exhaled a cloud of foul-smelling cigar smoke into the room. "Miss Haspura, what is your relationship to the deceased?"

"Colleen? No relationship. Why, I barely knew her."

Now the tiny eyes scrutinized me with the cunning of a fox which has just cornered his quarry. "And her husband?" He drew the question out slowly, savoring my discomfort. "Do you just 'barely know' him also?"

I rose indignantly from my chair, feeling the hot blood pounding against my temples. "I don't know what you're getting at, Inspector—"

He brushed away my protests with a wave of his huge hand. Tull then opened one of the desk drawers, shuffling through the papers to withdraw a letter opener. Toying with the sharp edge, he asked, "Do you know how the young lady died, Ma'am?"

My eyes remained locked on the object in his hand, fascinated by its unmistakable resemblance to a knife. It brought back a vision of Colleen's stiff body, of those ribbon-slashes so vivid against the pale skin. "She was stabbed. Many times. Brutally."

Still toying with the letter opener, he leaned toward me again, his eyes penetrating mine with their cold, unblinking gaze. The blade of the letter opener pointed accusingly at me. "Strangulation."

"What? But...the knife..."

He nodded his immense head slowly. "Someone has gone to great lengths to make us believe in a ritualistic slaying."

"Are you saying that you don't believe Colleen's murder was connected to the Cult of *Akerra*?"

"The crushed larynx and the bruises on her throat tell a different story."

"You mean—"

"She was dead long before she ever reached that altar."

I shivered. "The knife wounds?"

He shrugged. "Performed on a corpse." He took a puff on his cigar, exhaled cloudy breath slowly. "Some person or persons are trying to draw suspicion away from themselves by involving the Cult." As he spoke, his stare never left me. "It's what we call a 'red herring'."

"It would have to be someone with strong motive," he continued, his small eyes now narrowed accusingly. "Someone who, perhaps, had reason to hate this Colleen, to want her out of the way."

My horror, my fear, took the form of a deep and angry dislike for the grotesque, presumptuous man whose accusing gaze never left my face. "Someone who's in love with her husband?" I demanded angrily. "Is that what you're getting at?"

"Now, that's a thought, Miss Haspura," he said. "But, frankly, it's not you I'd be inclined to suspect. It's my concern that *you're* trying to protect someone."

"Ivan wouldn't..." I stammered. "He didn't kill his wife."

Too late, I realized the impact of my words. The smug, self-important smile on Inspector Tull's face told me I'd played right into his hands.

Chapter 25

"I can tell by your expression that our dear Inspector has just given you the third degree," Brad said as I joined him near the big fireplace in the family room. He took the poker and stabbed at the sluggish wood in the grate. "Police tactics. Don't let it get to you, Anna."

A curl of smoke filled the room, the welcoming crackle of fire spreading as the logs began to catch and burn. I leaned closer to the hearth, suddenly drained of all emotion. The heat of anger was replaced by a chilling coldness. He put the poker away and turned to me.

"So, what went on in there?"

"You're right, Brad. Third degree." I didn't want to tell Brad that Inspector Tull thought Ivan was guilty.

I was still angry at myself for falling into the Inspector's trap. Somehow, I had to do something to help prove Ivan's innocence. I was certain Colleen had been seeing a lover, and that she'd met him in the cabin on the hillside. If I could find out who her lover was, I'd be that much closer to discovering what had really happened to Colleen. I had to go back there and search for some clue to his identity that might have been left behind by whoever cleared the cabin out.

I moved away from the fireplace.

"Where are you going, Anna?"

"Just for a walk."

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked as I slipped on my jacket.

"No. I just need to be alone."

I left Brad staring moodily into the fire and began walking down the trail leading to the cabin. I didn't want him to know my destination.

* * * *

A short time later, I stood outside the rickety shack. The door creaked slightly on its hinges but gave easily as I pushed it open and stepped inside. I blinked in the sudden darkness of the room, trying to adjust my eyes to the change.

Again, uneasiness filled me. This was the last place Colleen had been seen before she'd come running into the house that night. She'd been so frightened. I still recalled that wild look, the terror in her eyes as she'd insisted that someone, or something, was after her. Had the Inspector told Ivan or anyone else besides me that Colleen had died of strangulation?

Who had she been meeting up here in the cabin? I stepped into the small room that still waited for lovers who'd never return.

I glanced at the old sofa in the corner. Torn fabric and white stuffing met my gaze. I turned to look down at the iron bed. Bare, twisted springs and rusted metal met my eyes. The blankets and bedroll were gone. Someone had removed every clue that the cabin had ever been used.

I stepped further into the room, moving to open the drawer where the nightgown and perfume had been. It, too, was empty.

"What did you hope to find in there?"

I jumped, startled, at the sound of Ivan's voice. He stood leaning against the door frame, watching me search. He crossed the room to stand directly behind me.

Nervously, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Following you. I saw you leave the house. Now, tell me what you expected to find."

I turned my gaze away from him. "I was up here one day last week," I explained. "I found some things."

"What kind of things?"

"A bedroll, perfume...a negligee," I replied softly.

He watched me, the intensity of his gaze unsettling. "I believe Colleen was meeting her lover out here in this cabin."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I guess I wanted to spare you."

"The pain?" He laughed harshly. "My wife's infidelity was no secret." He took a step toward the dresser, peering into the empty drawer.

"Someone's been up here since. They've taken it all away," I explained.

"Who?"

"I don't know." *Has Colleen's lover removed the evidence of their meeting? Is he afraid of being implicated in her death?*

There was only one other explanation. Someone had found out she was meeting a lover here. Someone had followed Colleen from the cabin back to the house that night. A jealous husband... When Colleen left the house a second time, he'd murdered her, then come back to destroy the evidence that she'd been cheating on him. Taking away the evidence of their meeting would hide his motive for the murder...

As if reading my thoughts, Ivan said, "It's no secret that I'm Tull's number one suspect."

I nodded. "He just spoke to me. He practically came right out and accused you of murdering Colleen. He...even hinted that Colleen's murder was some sort of conspiracy between the two of us."

Ivan cursed softly under his breath. "I didn't think he'd go so far as to involve you in his accusations." His eyes grew dark. "Someone's been talking, Anna, planting suspicions into his head. My God, someone must have seen us together by the stream that day I took you into my arms..."

Ivan moved closer to me, so close that we were almost touching. I could see every fine detail of his face, from the slightly-tilted eyes beneath thick lashes to the high, wide cheekbones, the straight nose, the tiny crinkles about his mouth and eyes, laugh lines that seemed so out of place on a man who never smiled. Shivering, I remembered how it had felt to be crushed in those strong arms, to have his warm lips seeking mine.

I could sense the battle raging within him as he came even closer. He made a move as if to pull me into his arms, then his hands dropped quickly down to his sides. He turned away, staring down at the ruined floor of the cabin. "I'm sorry, Anna. Sorry you had to be drawn into this ugly mess."

"I believe in you, Ivan. No matter what, I believe in you."

He moved toward the cabin door. "I'm going to leave first. Then you follow. It wouldn't do for us to be seen alone together again." Without another word, he slipped out the door.

After Ivan left, I wandered about the cabin. A paper, brown and crumpled, remained behind, half-hidden by a broken floorboard. I retrieved it from the floor. A cigarette wrapper.

I tried to tell myself that Brad wasn't the only one who smoked that particular brand. I'd seen Carl, Guillermo, several of the hired hands smoke Camels on occasion.

The cigarette wrapper, in itself, didn't mean anything. Brad could have dropped it here the day he'd saved me from Esteban, or later when he'd come back up to the cabin and discovered the bedroll and other items missing.

A strange feeling tightened the pit of my stomach as I crumpled the wrapper back up and tossed it away. Had Brad himself removed the evidence from the cabin that day he'd come back up here? Colleen's lover might not have been one of the hired men, after all. The man she'd been meeting in the cabin could have been Brad.

* * * *

On my way back to the house, I saw another patrol car parked in the driveway. Two uniformed policemen were talking to some of the men near the barn.

"What's going on, Ivan?" I asked, as he moved away from the group to meet me. "What's happened?"

"Guillermo found a big knife in Manuel's work locker—stained with blood."

"Where's Inspector Tull?"

"In the study with Manuel." We entered the house just as two deputies half-pushed Manuel from the study into the family room. He was handcuffed.

"I'm taking your man in for questioning," Inspector Tull said, moving across the room just behind them.

"Is he under arrest?" I asked.

"Right now, he's only a suspect."

Manuel remained calm, but his eyes were large and frightened as he was ushered out into the waiting patrol car.

"Just a reminder," Inspector Tull cautioned, lingering by the doorway. "Don't any of you try to leave the area."

His scrutinizing gaze swept from one of us to the other, lingering on me. I thought about the knowledge Inspector Tull and I shared—that Colleen had been strangled before a knife had ever pieced her skin. The knife must have been planted.

“Why, he acts like he doesn’t believe Manuel’s guilty at all,” Brad exclaimed in horror as soon as the Inspector was out of sight. With a sick feeling, I watched him nervously take a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He took one himself, then passed the pack of Camels over to Guillermo. Brad’s fingers were shaking as he struck a match. “He still thinks it’s one of us,” he said.

Chapter 26

Snow fell again the day of Colleen's funeral, a drizzly, wet snow that turned to rain before it reached the ground. As Father Bilbao mumbled a final rosary for Colleen, my gaze swept over the small, damp gathering. With the exception of Alice, who'd stayed home, the faces were those of the same people who'd turned out for Tavas's burial such a short time ago. Wearing raincoats and heavy wraps, we huddled miserably about the muddy grave site.

Brad and Ivan were each to one side of me. Brad's skin had lost its healthy, golden glow. His brown hair was plastered to his forehead, the pale streaks drowned by the rain. His amber eyes were downcast, the light, rather stubby lashes shining with tears.

I glanced from him to Esteban, who hung back a little, hands in the pockets of his Levi's. *Has one of them, either Brad or Esteban, been Colleen's lover?*

I focused my attention on Ivan, the wronged husband.

Rain-soaked hair plastered his forehead, accentuating the dark, tearless eyes and somber lips. He stood, a silent observer, a stranger at his wife's burial.

I turned away from him, focusing on the back of Martin DeGarza's green suit. He wore no coat. The big man was cold. Every so often a quiver shook his broad shoulders.

Suddenly, he covered his face in his hands and wept, apparently brokenhearted. In a strange way, I was relieved by his open display of grief. It proved that Colleen had at least one sincere mourner.

A sudden rustle of motion told me that the Father was finished. Few words, few consolations were exchanged as we moved away. Brad took my arm, his grip so tight that it ached as he walked with me to the big car waiting to drive us back to the ranch. Ivan followed a short distance behind us, walking alone.

* * * *

The ranch seemed nearly deserted. This time, there would be no feasting, no dancing as there'd been after Tavas's burial. The few men I saw went about their business with closed expressions and frightened eyes.

The house was cool and silent. Alice was nowhere in sight. I'd gone to my room to change into some dry, comfortable clothes, when I heard a knock on my door.

Brad's voice, through the door, sounded excited. "Anna, you have to come down to the barn. It's urgent."

"What's going on?" I asked, hastily tucking my shirttail into my jeans as I stepped out to meet him.

"Manuel's been released, and he's just showed up here. Turns out the blood on the knife wasn't human blood. They had no reason to hold him." His voice remained calm and steady, but the worry in his eyes gave him away. "We're going to have trouble keeping the help, Anna. Manuel's friends swear they'll leave if Manuel goes, the others say they'll walk out if he stays."

Ivan met us halfway to the barn. He'd changed into jeans and a dark shirt. He'd shaved, but his hair, which had grown longer the past few weeks, brushed past his shirt

collar. "It's Esteban that's causing all the trouble," Ivan said, falling into step with us. "He's getting them all riled up."

Brad was gloomy. "We can't afford to lose another man. We're so short of hands now that we can barely manage."

"Can we get replacements?" I asked.

Ivan shook his head. "Rumors have spread like wildfire. I doubt that you could get anyone to set foot out here now."

"There must be some solution."

Several of Manuel's faithful disciples were hanging around near the barn. Just outside the closed door to Guillermo's office, I turned back. Esteban's friends had formed another, larger group. Dark eyes, accusing and angry, glared at us as we moved past.

"Way it looks now, we'll have to pick and choose," Brad said. "We may have to let Manuel go." He pushed open the door to Guillermo's office. Inside, Guillermo and Esteban spoke in angry, raised voices.

"We don't want him back here." As he spoke, Esteban glared at Manuel, who stood quietly by the wood stove. His calm manner and huge, sad eyes impressed me. Dark clothing reinforced the image of a priest.

"He has as much a right to be here as you do. Maybe even more," Guillermo countered.

"What do you mean by that, Old Man?"

"I think you planted that knife in Manuel's locker," Guillermo accused. "I saw you hanging around out there that afternoon the police found it."

"Me?" Esteban made a scornful sound. "If anyone planted the knife, *you* did."

"If I'd planted the knife, it wouldn't have been in Manuel's locker. I'd have stuck it in your gut."

I'd never seen Guillermo so angry. His face was a mask of rage.

Esteban's eyes were wild, fierce. With the swiftness of a jungle cat, he jumped on Guillermo.

Stunned, I watched the two men struggle. Then Ivan stepped in the middle, separating them. He took hold of Esteban's shoulder, shoving him roughly away.

"Get your damned hands off me," Esteban growled. An angry tirade of Basque followed.

His eyes were narrowed, cat's eyes in that lean, angry face as his gaze swept scornfully over us, singling out Guillermo. "I'll get you back for this," he hissed as Ivan forced him outside.

"Please," I told Guillermo and Brad. "I'd like to have a word alone with Manuel."

"You sure?" Brad asked, lingering by the door.

I nodded.

Manuel stood waiting, as if for his executioner. "Are you going to let me go?" he asked, a look of defeat upon his face.

"Not if you tell me what I want to know."

His expression didn't change. "You want to know about the Cult of *Akerra*."

"Yes."

"Some of us meet in the canyon at night. We are only simple folk who gather in the cover of darkness to practice the old folk medicine. We meet in darkness to avoid mockery, ridicule of our beliefs. We do not worship the devil. I swear to you, Miss Haspura, we have nothing to do with those mutilations—or Colleen's death."

"The knife they found—was it yours?"

"Ours is a peaceful gathering. Guillermo knows that." With slight hesitation, he added, "He used to be one of us."

He can tell you that no blood has ever been shed on our altar.”

I studied the solemn-eyed, earnest man before me. I believed he was telling the truth. I knew from what Inspector Tull had told me that Colleen’s murder had been no ritual slaying. It had been an inside job, carefully planned and executed, probably down to the very first of the mutilated animals. The knife had been planted. The ‘Cult of *Akerra*’ had been framed.

“Your word?”

I saw a flash of pride in his dark eyes. “My word of honor.”

I opened the door to the crowd still gathered about the barn. “Manuel is to stay.” I heard the murmuring of disapproval begin.

I raised a hand to silence them. “Now hear me out. Manuel has not been found guilty of any crime. A man is considered innocent until proven guilty according to the law. He must be treated with the same fairness that any one of you would expect.”

I heard Esteban’s friends conferring with one another. They stole furtive glances at Esteban’s swollen lip, the slight shadow of a bruise beneath his eye.

“I need to know how many of you plan to leave. Let’s see a show of hands.”

More whispers. One man stepped forward, then another. “We need our jobs. We’re willing to work out a deal.”

“I’m listening.”

“We’ll stay, but on these conditions. We get extra pay. And anything else happens around here that we don’t like, we walk. After all, we’ve got our families to think about.”

“Guillermo will handle the details.”

Conflict momentarily resolved, the men began to scatter. I was wise enough to know the trouble was far from over, but for now, I'd convinced enough men to stay to keep the Devil's Gate in operation.

Manuel came up to me quietly. "Thank you," he said, so softly I could barely hear the words.

"That's probably the first 'Thank you' old Manuel's ever made in his life," Guillermo said and laughed. He walked away to join the others.

"I'm proud of the way you handled the situation," Ivan said, coming up beside me. Admiration glowed in his eyes, warming me. "I guess old Tavas knew what he was doing after all when he left you in charge."

"Do you really think I'm doing the right thing by letting him stay, Ivan?"

"I don't believe Manuel is capable of murder," Ivan replied.

"Neither do I."

"But someone on this ranch is," he added darkly.

Chapter 27

I was waiting for Brad outside the barn when Guillermo came riding in from the corrals. Enough cattle had been rounded up to start the head count and prepare for the fall ritual of branding. At the Devil's Gate, the branding was done in two different areas—the corrals near the house where Guillermo was working and a place closer to the mountain pasture called Bull Run. Today, Brad and I planned to drive down to bring supplies to the Rodriguez family who worked on the far side of the ranch. With the weather as unpredictable as it had been the last few days, I knew that we would now be having a busy day and night in order to get as much done as possible before the first heavy snowfall.

Guillermo looked weary despite the earliness of the day. Though it was only ten o'clock, I knew he'd already put in a good day's work. A fine powder of dust covered him from head to foot. His face, above the dark-colored bandanna at his throat, was streaked with grime and sweat.

"Well, I have good news and bad news this morning, Anna," he said, pulling the horse up beside me.

"Let me have the good news first."

"So far, the head count is way up over last fall despite the...losses."

"That's great. And the bad news?"

He paused a moment. "A couple more hands didn't show for work this morning. Family men. You understand..."

He pulled the hat back from his eyes, pushing at the sweat-dampened, silvery locks near his temples. "Ivan drove into town to find more help."

Suddenly apprehensive, I asked, "How short are we?"

"Oh, we'll manage." He hesitated a second before adding, "But it's always wise to have a few extras on hand."

"You mean, in case some of the others decide to walk."

He nodded. Changing the subject, he asked, "Are you and Brad still going up to Bull Run?"

"Yes, I'm waiting for him now."

"Well, I'd best get back to the corrals." He started to turn his horse around.

I called him back. "Guillermo? Keep an eye on Esteban while we're gone."

"He's been subdued lately. Maybe that scuffle with me knocked some of the pride out of him."

"Let me know if he starts any trouble."

"I will." As he turned back, I saw a deadly glint in his eyes. "You just leave him to me."

* * * *

A short time later, Brad rattled up in the old truck. "Sorry I'm late. I had to do a little repair work," he said. "Ready to go?"

I hopped in beside him. The truck made an ominous sound as we started out on our forty-mile trip up to the isolated, weather-beaten old house at Bull Run. I think we were both a little worried about what we might find up there. What if the Hispanic family, frightened by all the

trouble, had taken off without warning, leaving the place unmanned?

We divided potato chips and a thermos of coffee on the way. Neither of us took off our jackets, as the windows to the old pickup didn't close all the way, and it was cool even inside. I was glad to see that Brad had remembered to pile a couple of old blankets into the back with the supplies, just in case we got stranded somewhere.

We reached the little house around noon. At first, the place seemed deserted. Then, the door swung open. Jose's three older boys ran out to greet us enthusiastically. Visitors were a rare occasion on this isolated part of the ranch. The two smaller children followed, waiting expectantly for the candy we always brought with us, while the older boys began to unload the supplies.

"Leave the blankets," I heard Brad say as the boys carried off food, ranching equipment, and other goods piled high into the back of the pickup. We stopped for a while to talk to Jose and his wife, Maria. The conversation was rather stilted, as neither one spoke fluent English, but I gathered that everything was going smoothly. I was relieved there'd been no cattle lost from the place.

Brad and I did notice, however, that the household had grown in number by two silent young men who did their best to avoid us.

"Could be illegals," Brad whispered to me as we stepped outside. I'll have to have a little talk with Jose about them."

I followed Jose and Brad out to the crowded pens where the boys were starting the long and tedious branding and de-horning process. Brad, who knew enough Spanish to carry on a decent conversation, drew Jose aside...

* * * *

"I'm glad to see that things are running without a hitch," Brad remarked suddenly, and I knew he'd shared my worry that the terror had spread even to this faraway corner of the ranch. "Jose knows about the rumors, of course. The newcomers brought word from town." He explained, "Turns out the two are Jose's nephews from San Francisco, not across the border." We looked over the cattle, both pleased to see that this herd seemed healthy and that there were quite a number of new calves. "They've come up to this area to look for seasonal work."

"I worry about them being so isolated up here. There's not even a telephone."

"They've got three strong boys and I brought an extra rifle." He paused. "I told the nephews they could stay—at least for the time being."

Before we left, Brad and I made a head count to take back to Guillermo, and Brad left Jose some vitamins, cautioning him to make certain his boys didn't forget to inoculate for blackleg before driving the herd down.

The family waved to us as we pulled away. I stared out of the truck window as we drove across one of the prettiest parts of the ranch. Violet mountains streaked with white made razor-slashes against the troubled blue canvas of sky. Evergreens grew in abundance, their dark, hazy nettles adding a muted softness to the scene, like one of those paintings done on velvet.

The green mountains gave way to rolling hills and bald-faced, rocky ledges as we neared Secret Pass, then turned back toward the main road. Suddenly, the engine went silent. Brad pulled over at the crossroad, repeatedly trying the starter. "The engine," he said, "it died on me."

"Oh, no! Do you think you can get it started again?"

"I've got some tools in the back. Wait here." He jumped out. I waited for him to return with the tools. Instead, he came back grinning, carrying a covered basket under his arm. It must have been hidden under the blankets.

"What on earth are you doing?"

He laughed. "Getting out our picnic."

"A picnic? But there's snow on the ground."

"Since when did that stop us?" He tapped on my window. "Come on. Grab a blanket. There's a little shelter down below the rock ledge. It'll be warm there."

Reluctantly, I followed him. I knew we should be getting back. Judging from the clouds gathering overhead, I also knew we might be in for another storm.

The rocks were damp and cool near the base of the cliff, but, with the blankets spread out beneath us, I had to admit it was rather cozy. From the basket, Brad produced slightly soggy ham and cheese sandwiches which he'd kept on ice, a bag of cookies, and a bottle of wine.

"Whatever gave you this wild idea?" I asked, after we'd finished our sandwiches. I was beginning to feel comfortable despite the chilling wind. The sun peeked reassuringly through the openings in the rock wall; the storm clouds seemed no closer that they'd been half an hour ago.

Brad put the plastic cup of wine aside, then moved closer. I felt the light weight of his arm across my shoulder. "It's the only way I could think of to have you all to myself." His lips grazed my cheek. "Remember what we talked about that day at Al's? I've tried not to rush you, tried to give you time to think it over." He looked into my eyes, his expression hopeful. "So what do you think—about us?"

His mouth was warm and eager upon mine. I tried to respond to the longing in him, the persuasiveness of his ardent kisses, but I think we both knew that there was something missing. No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't think of Brad as anything other than my best friend.

Sensing my reaction, he pulled away. The hurt in his eyes was hard to bear. "What kind of a spell does he have over you, Anna?" he asked softly. Then, with a dry laugh, he added, "Or maybe I should be asking what it'll take to break that spell."

"I...I don't know."

"I could make you happy."

I looked up at him, studying the clear, yellow-brown eyes, the wayward locks of hair, the familiar face with its slightly wide nose and generous mouth. Something told me I could learn to love this man who'd always cared so much about me. "Don't give up on me yet, Brad," I said lightly. "We have fun together. We laugh. Those things are important. Let's not rush into anything. Maybe...I still need more time."

"There may not be time."

"What do you mean?"

"Just promise me one thing," he pleaded, and there was an unmistakable note of desperation in his voice. "Promise me you'll be careful around Ivan. I can't explain now, but I know something about him. Something that might change everything."

As we packed up the blankets, basket, and the remainder of our picnic lunch and threw it into the back of the truck, Brad seemed his lighthearted, carefree self again. It was as if the strange conversation about Ivan had never been. Now, he sat in the driver's seat, seeming suddenly

hesitant, uncertain, as if he wasn't quite sure what to do next. He shoved the keys into the ignition, then turned to me. "Anna," he confessed with a short laugh, before trying the engine. "I wasn't joking before. The truck really won't start."

"Surely you're kidding?" I cried.

"I wish I was." He lifted the hood and, for what seemed like hours, he fiddled with the engine

* * * *

The clouds were growing thicker and heavier by the minute. Brad worked on until the first rapid flurry of snowflakes drove him inside. "Can't see a thing out there," he said. "I'll have to wait until the sky clears."

I glanced up at the bulging gray clouds. "It may keep on like this until dark."

"We'll just have to wait." We both knew it was foolish to start out to walk in a blizzard. Though we really weren't far from the house, there was nothing we could do but sit and wait. As we huddled miserably in a truck growing colder by the minute, I wished Brad had told me about the truck when we'd stopped. If we hadn't spent time on that picnic...

Brad must have been reading my mind. "I'm sorry, Anna. I guess I messed things up again," he said with a sigh. I found it hard to stay angry with him.

Nearly an hour later, we still sat shivering, huddled in our coats and blankets, staring out at the bleak swirls of white coating the windshield. My only hope was in remembering that Ivan had gone into town just before we left for Bull Run. He'd have to pass by the truck on his way back to the ranch. He'd have to see us. Unless, of course, he'd already returned. I tried to block that unpleasant thought from my mind.

I'd almost given up hope when the rays of a pair of headlights broke through the mist of snow. Moments later, Ivan pulled up beside us.

"Come on, Brad. We can worry about the truck in the morning," I said, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

Reluctantly, he abandoned the truck for the warmth of Ivan's car. I knew Brad felt humiliated about Ivan having to come to our rescue. He sat in the far corner of the car by the door, glaring sullenly out into the night. The conflict between the two of them was worsening all the time. With a tinge of sadness I remembered all of the good times the three of us had once shared. At one time, we'd have all laughed together at the adventure of being caught in the snow, and Brad would have welcomed Ivan's intervention.

But things had changed. I saw Ivan's jaw clench tightly as Brad suddenly pulled me close to him, leaving his arm possessively about my shoulder. The same queasy feeling I'd experienced when Brad had kissed me in front of Ivan at the fair swept over me. Now, I found myself wondering if the desire Brad thought he felt for me was real. *Does Brad really love me, or am I just another tool in his personal rebellion against Ivan?*

Chapter 28

Brad slowed the Appaloosa down beside me as we reached the crest of the hill. As he stopped suddenly and dismounted I felt the same sense of apprehension I'd experienced earlier when he'd invited me to saddle Clover and join him on this early morning horseback ride. Though the early snow of the last few days was over, a strong wind tugged at my hair and jacket as I slipped from the saddle and followed him into the shelter of the big yellow boulders near the canyon ledge.

I leaned back against one of the rocks, watching Brad cup the palm of his hand against the wind, trying in vain to light a match for his cigarette. He hadn't seemed himself since the day we'd been caught by the blizzard. The edgy way he was acting warned me he had something on his mind.

"Why did you bring me up here, Brad?"

He turned to me. Flecks of yellow shone in his amber eyes. "We have to talk."

"What about?"

He moved toward me suddenly, taking me into his arms. The unexpected, awkward embrace startled me and I struggled to free myself, but he refused to let me go. Instead, he pulled me tighter to him, crushing me against

the rocks until I could feel a sharp stab of pain against the small of my back.

"You know how I feel about you, Anna. How I've always felt."

"What...what are you saying?"

"Marry me."

"Brad—"

"I mean it." He touched a finger to my lips to silence me. "Oh, I know that you still think you're in love with Ivan, but I'd be good to you, Anna. I'd take care of you the way he never could."

"I don't *want* anyone to take care of me, Brad. Don't you understand?"

Sudden anger sparked in his eyes. "The only thing I understand is that I'm damned tired of playing second fiddle to Ivan."

"Let me go."

As if coming to his senses, he released his painful grip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spring this on you so quickly. It's just that I want you so much. I have to protect you from him." There was urgency in his voice. "Promise me you won't trust him."

"Please, Brad, don't talk this way."

"There's something you don't know about Ivan. I'm afraid of what he's trying to do. Don't you see, Anna? Colleen's out of his way now. If he marries you, he'll have the ranch and everything he's ever wanted. Don't let him do it, Anna. Don't let him make a fool of you."

"Ivan hasn't asked me to marry him."

"He will. It's only a matter of time."

"I won't hear any more of this madness."

"You *will* listen," Brad hurried on desperately. "Anna, Ivan is Tavas's son."

A strange feeling took hold of me. "No, you're wrong, Brad. You must be wrong. I won't listen to any more of this." I turned and ran from him. Catching up Clover's reins, I swung into the saddle and rode angrily, digging my heels sharply into her sides.

Brad's voice followed after me. "Go ahead. Run. How long can you run away from the truth?"

The horse was sweating by the time I reached the meadow. I slid from the saddle, whispering soothing words as I led her to the stream to drink. Her nerves were jumpy from the sudden, unexpected gallop; her sensitive nostrils quivered at every sound in the small, peaceful clearing.

Is there any truth to Brad's words? I thought of Alice, tied for all those years to a poor, crippled husband. Alice was a comely woman still; as a young woman she must have been beautiful. Then why was it so hard to believe that my wealthy, unattached uncle could have fallen for her despite the fact that she was married to Lucas? Or that she might have turned to him for the love her frail and sickly husband was unable to give her?

I'd always looked on Tavas as perfect—a demigod, invulnerable to human weaknesses. Maybe that was why I found Brad's insistence that he and Alice had been lovers so hard to accept. Yet Tavas himself had told Ivan he was illegitimate, not Lucas's son.

If what Brad had told me was true, did Ivan suspect that Tavas was his father? The very thought made the blood freeze in my veins. For if he knew he was Tavas's son, he'd also know that the Devil's Gate should belong to him. I knew the ranch meant more to him than anything else in the world. Just how far would he go to possess it?

I shivered as visions of Colleen's body lying twisted in the new snow filled my mind. Brad's wild accusations

seemed to whisper in the wind: *'If he marries you, he'll have the ranch and everything he's ever wanted.'*

I sat on a flat boulder, listening to the silken sweep of pine branches moving in the gentle wind, trying to calm the shaky feeling inside of me. The change in Brad, the terrible accusations he'd made about Ivan unnerved me. I felt as skittish as Clover. Every unexpected rustle in the bushes made me start.

I tossed a smooth, flat stone into the stream, watching it skim over the surface of the icy water, stirring up memories. A hot summer day long ago. Brad and I had followed Ivan all the way to the top of the mountain where the stream flowed into an icy pool. There on the steep edges of its bank we'd played 'King of the Mountain'. Childhood memories. So far away from me now. It was a long way back to that hidden pool deep in the heart of the mountains; the special friendship the three of us had once shared was even further away.

Clover, relaxed now, was waiting patiently by the stream, water still dripping from her muzzle. I leaned forward, dipping my hands into the icy water, sprinkling it briskly over my face. Coldness seeped into every pore, shocking me into alertness, but there was something else. A feeling I wasn't alone. I was being watched.

Clover was acting strangely, too. She jerked her head up suddenly, stepped back as if shying away from something, a startled little whinny escaping her throat.

As I crouched motionless by the stream, listening, it came again, a sound from the thick, dense grove of trees just to the right of me. A snorting sound, a pawing of the earth as if some wild beast lurked in the dark brush. My first panicked thought was that one of the black bears had come down from the mountain to drink at the stream. I

rose slowly, willing myself to remain calm, and began to move toward Clover.

“Easy, now,” I whispered. Her eyes were wild, her nostrils dilated with fear. “Please, Clover. Wait,” I begged as I inched toward her. There was a frantic stamping of her hooves as they scraped against the rocks near the edge of the stream. Then she was galloping off through the woods, away from me.

Fearfully, I turned my eyes toward the bushes. The sound was gone now. Still, I knew something had been there. Why else had Clover bolted like that? *The best thing I can do is get away from here.* I turned and began to hurry down the path toward the ranch.

Either side of the path was dark and forbidding. I ran until my side ached, not daring to look right or left. Surely, whatever it had been was far behind me now? Chances are, if it had been a bear or some other woods animal that had spooked my horse, it was more frightened of me than I was of it. Gradually, I slowed down to a brisk walk, struggling to bring my ragged breathing back to normal.

Then I heard it again. A snuffling sound. A frantic pawing sounding for all the world like impatient hooves stamping the dry ground. My first thought was that Clover had stopped her running and was hiding in the copse of trees.

“Clover?” I ventured shakily. I turned just in time to see a huge, dark shape, a formless shadow slip into the concealing bushes. I knew only one thing—it wasn’t Clover. And it didn’t look like a bear, either. I broke into a dead run and this time I didn’t stop until I reached the welcoming sight of the ranch.

Chapter 29

“What’s gotten into Brad?” Alice asked later as I helped her with the evening dishes. Even she had noticed his sullen mood. He’d barely spoken during the evening meal. He paid careful attention to the ham and beans and cornbread, refusing, even for a moment, to meet my gaze.

“You know, he’s been acting strangely,” continued Alice.

“Well, I’m afraid it’s all my fault,” I confessed. I’d been bothered by his sulkiness all afternoon and felt the need to confide in someone. Who would lend a better ear to my troubles than Alice, who knew Brad almost as well as I? Feeling relieved of an enormous burden, I told her about his proposal.

Alice’s fine, dark brows lifted in genuine surprise. “Brad? Asked you to marry him?”

I nodded.

Alice’s face crumpled into a frown. “Maybe it’s none of my business, Anna, but I’d give this a lot of thought. Brad isn’t always as good-natured and uncomplicated as he seems.”

“What are you saying?”

She ran a hand across her face, brushing back a strand of black hair from her forehead. I was surprised at how

much Brad's proposal seemed to upset her. "Watch out for him."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a wealthy woman now, Anna."

"But—"

She continued, ignoring my interruption. "He's always had his eye on this ranch. No use beating around the bush about it."

She paused, as if trying to collect her thoughts, then added in a distinctly lowered voice, "I know he hasn't always been truthful in his dealings with Tavas. I heard Tavas complain several times about the way he manages money."

Her words reminded me of Brad's attempts to keep the cattle mutilations a secret. I never doubted his motive had been anything but to spare Tavas and the others unnecessary worry, but now, I had to wonder. Had there been other times when he'd kept knowledge from Tavas—had even been dishonest with him?

"A woman with money is an attractive item in any man's language. Don't let him push you into anything you might regret later. That's all I'm going to say."

Bewilderment took hold of me. *What's Colleen's murder doing to us? Brad suspicious of Ivan, Alice wary of Brad—it's slowly breaking down our closeness to each other, gradually wearing away at our trust.*

"I had no idea you felt this way about Brad."

"I never used to."

"Then what brought this on?"

Her face clouded. "I saw him do something," she said finally. "Something that I can't easily put out of my mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"Colleen," she replied quickly. Again, she brushed the hair nervously from her face. "Him and Colleen."

"Are you telling me that you think Brad and Colleen were...involved?"

"There were so many times I saw them together. Oh, I never thought anything of it at the time, but now, yes, I find myself wondering—"

"—If Brad wasn't carrying on with Ivan's wife. Oh, come *on*, Alice."

"You're right. Surely there was nothing to it." But I knew doubt remained in both of our minds.

She attempted a smile, but her voice was still anxious. "Well, tell me. Are you going to marry him?"

"No, I'm not. It isn't because I don't think he's a wonderful man. It's because I'm just not ready for that kind of commitment. Sometimes I wonder if I ever will be."

"What? Bitter about love at your age?" Her smile was grim, tinged with sadness. "My son has something to do with that, doesn't he?"

I didn't answer.

"He's the real reason, isn't he?" Her stubborn persistence tugged at a raw nerve. "The reason you turned Brad down cold?"

I knew it would do no good to lie. Feeling defenseless, I nodded.

"Remember that circumstances have changed," she reminded me gently. "Ivan's a free man now, Anna."

She was wrong. He wasn't free. Would he ever be free from the hold Colleen had over him, even from the grave?

* * * *

My mind was still on Brad's unexpected proposal as I followed the fence line, trying to sort out my tangled thoughts. The early snowstorm had dried without a trace.

The weather was once again warm and dry. I was glad for the change, for there was so much that still needed to be done before winter set in. Roundup was the busiest season for the ranch. The men had been working from dawn until dusk. The cattle driven down from the canyons and hills had to be vaccinated and given vitamin shots. Bulls would be cut from the herd for sale to the beef market. There were new calves to be branded.

Far in the distance a cloud of dust drifted from the open area where the men had been busy the last few days with the roping and branding. Though the sight of the red-hot iron and the frightened cries of the young animals was a distressing sight, I knew it was a necessary part of the ranching operation. Tavas always insisted the branding wasn't cruel, that the cattle with their tough, weathered hide were more frightened than hurt by the sudden sting of the branding iron.

I turned at the end of the grazing pasture, intending to stop by Guillermo's office once I reached the barn, even though I knew there was a good chance he was still out working alongside of the men. The door to his office was closed. I rapped lightly.

"Come in."

I stepped inside, surprised to discover him there, and Alice with him. She rose from her chair by the desk, looking almost guilty as I entered the room. She must have hurried to get down here before me, I thought. She must have taken the short-cut through the garden.

"I must get back to the house," I heard her whisper to Guillermo. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me."

Puzzled, I let her pass by me, wondering what had prompted her unexpected visit. She seldom took an interest

in the workings of the ranch, so I guessed a personal matter must have brought her out here to Guillermo.

"What did Alice want?" I asked as soon as she was out of sight.

I noticed that Guillermo was watching me closely from the desk. "She's concerned about you," he replied suddenly, taking me by surprise. "Frankly, Brad's proposal to you has upset her more than a little."

At first I felt slightly betrayed that she'd told Guillermo about Brad's offer of marriage. I'd forgotten how close she and Guillermo were. Now I realized I wasn't the only one who took my problems to him.

"She seems to think that Brad might have something up his sleeve," Guillermo said honestly.

I sat in the chair Alice had vacated. "I'm so confused. Ever since Tavas died, it seems everyone's been turning upon each other."

"It's the strain, I reckon," he replied, taking a pinch of chewing tobacco from his pouch. "Tavas's death, Colleen's murder—it's a wonder we're not all stark raving mad." He paused, studying me, serious now. "She thinks you may be in danger, Anna. She thinks you need someone to protect you."

"What?"

Guillermo carefully folded the tobacco pouch and put it back in his shirt pocket. Then he cleared his throat. "Fact is, you've grown into a pretty young woman, Anna. Alice is hoping you'll marry."

"But she objected so strongly to Brad's proposal..."

"She doesn't want you to marry Brad. You know she's always wanted to see you married to her son."

I gaped at him in amazement. "Why, she can't be thinking of Ivan when he's just lost his wife."

He nodded slowly, a wry grin upon his face.

"Surely you don't agree with her?"

He shrugged. "You could do worse than Ivan. Oh, I won't deny that he's a willful rascal in need of taming. He and I have had our fallings-out, just like he and Tavas did, but I think he's a good man."

I wrung my hands, confused, unhappy. "So much has changed. He's a stranger to me now. More than he's ever been."

His deep, understanding eyes seemed to read into my soul. All at once, they were Tavas's eyes.

I looked down at my hands, white from being clenched. "Anyway, I didn't come down here to discuss my marriage prospects. I came to find out how the work's going."

"Another day or so and we'll be done with the branding."

"Any more disturbances?"

"The men've been too busy to argue much, but wait till the roundup's over, and then watch them fight."

"Guillermo, you've been such a help to me," I exclaimed impulsively. "I don't know how I'd ever have gotten through these last few days without you."

He looked down at his boots, embarrassed. "Don't forget to hunt up that land lease agreement for me. DeGarza's coming over tomorrow to sign for another year's grazing rights."

"I haven't forgotten. I looked through Tavas's desk the other day, but the lease wasn't with the rest of the papers."

"I saw it...oh—not a week before he died."

"It must have gotten shuffled up to the attic by mistake. I'll go up there and look around." I rose from my chair. "Well, thanks. For listening."

"Anytime, my girl. And *you* think over what Alice and I were discussing," he added with a wink.

"I will, but I warn you not to go ringing any wedding bells. I'm enjoying my independence. In fact, I just might decide to stay an old maid."

"Now, wouldn't that be a shame?"

I spun around, startled to come face to face with Ivan. He leaned against the door frame, watching me. A smile played upon his lips; his sultry eyes mocked me. As I squeezed past him our shoulders accidentally brushed, making me suddenly very much aware of his masculine strength, his virility. He smelled like the outdoors, like open spaces. His boots and Levi's were dusty. The corduroy work shirt was rolled up at the sleeves, exposing the corded muscles of his tanned forearms, muscles developed by years of ranch work. I looked up into those deep black eyes, for a moment held captive by them. Then, quickly, I turned away and stepped outside.

Why does he always have such a disarming effect on me? I began to walk hastily toward the branding area, concentrating on the scene ahead of me. I could see the dust fly as one cowboy roped a young bull around the neck while another held him down. Guillermo was right. Men who'd been on the verge of fighting such a short time ago were now working side by side like lifelong friends—but it wouldn't last.

For a while, I stood watching the branding. Then I moved away. I wasn't ready to go back to the house to face Brad or listen to Alice's well-intentioned matchmaking. I wanted to have time alone to sort out my thoughts. I began walking toward the canyon. Near its dark edge, I sank down on one of the splintered boulders to think.

* * * *

Even before I turned, I could sense his presence. He must have been following me. Two quick steps brought Ivan to my side.

"I just had a very strange conversation with Guillermo." His eyes glinted with a hard, savage light. "He told me you and Brad... Why are you doing this...to spite me? You're not going to marry him!"

How word traveled. It seemed the entire ranch now knew Brad had asked me to be his wife. "Ivan...I don't know—"

He was beside me on the stone. His hand clasped mine strongly, warmly. "If only I could promise you some happiness...some kind of future—"

"Don't. You don't have to explain." How well I understood that Colleen still stood between us.

"I'm not losing you again." His eyes blazing, he drew me roughly into his strong arms. Imagined kisses became reality as his lips explored mine, gentle at first, caressing, then increasingly more urgent, demanding response. "Damn it, Anna. I love you."

Then he was gone. I sat alone on my rock, my lips still tingling from his unexpected kiss, my body warm from his embrace. I heard a sudden rustling in the bushes. "Ivan?"

The trees parted, but it wasn't Ivan who came to stand before me. It was Victor, laughing like some overgrown, twisted child.

"Lovers," he chortled. "The canyon attracts them like flies."

"Victor—"

"I always find out about lovers. Guillermo was so angry when I found out about 'them'. They used to meet out here by the rocks, too," he added with a vague smile.

“Who, Victor? Are you talking about Colleen? Please tell me.”

“Guillermo’d be angry if he knew...”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m talking about a long time ago. About a secret. About lovers,” he replied with that sly, maddening grin. Then he turned and slipped into the shadows. I sat silent, watching him disappear into the darkness.

Chapter 30

I was near the stream again. Something was pursuing me, some half-seen, frightening beast, snorting, making that high-pitched whinnying sound, pawing the earth. The same dream over and over. Time after time during the night I'd awakened, trembling, bathed in a cold sweat.

The room was heavy with darkness. Sitting up in bed, I decided that it must be close to midnight. The cloudy half-moon cast a purplish light over the sparse, heavy pieces of oak furniture, making the familiar seem oddly foreign. The antique dresser's high mirror was hazy in the gloom, its images blurred and distorted. The open door of the closet made a gaping mouth, an entrance into another world. I snuggled deeper into the feather comforter, drawing security from its enfolding warmth.

A sudden sound made me pull the covers from my head. Slowly, I turned toward the window, listening again for the faint, tapping sound, like tree branches brushing against wood.

I froze, my stiff fingers clutching the comforter in a death grip. An enormous black shadow filled up the window, blocking out the moon, throwing the room into a blinding, terrible darkness. The creature of my nightmare was out there.

The sound became more frantic, like fingernails clawing glass. Now a pair of enormous eyes with marble pupils glared at me from the window as the shape of an immense, dark head rose out of the darkness. *Akerra*.

Panic made my heart thump strongly against my chest. With a terrifying, bestial cry, the creature lurched forward, white horns glowing, ramming its head against the wood below my windowpane. He reared back again and this time I heard the rattling of the pane as he made contact. The glass quivered, threatening to shatter.

I held my breath, bracing myself for another angry attack—the inevitable crash of glass—but there was only my rapid, frightened breathing. Whatever had been out there was gone.

Slowly, I moved over to the window. Only the long, jagged marks below my window-pane gave evidence that the huge, menacing creature had been more than a terrifying dream.

My bare feet were cold against the tile of the hallway as I crossed through the empty family room toward the stairs, taking them two at a time. I reached Brad's room first. I pounded on his door, calling his name. No answer. Hesitating only a moment, I flung the door open and rushed inside. "Brad, I..." A quick, anxious glance at the rumpled, empty bed made me realize he wasn't there.

Calmer now, I sank down heavily on the chair near the cluttered bureau. I didn't want to go back to my room alone. Nor did I want to disturb Alice. And the idea of going to Ivan's room in the middle of the night was unthinkable. I'd wait. Surely, Brad would return any moment. I glanced at the door leading out into the hallway, expecting to hear his footsteps approaching. After all, where could he have gone this time of night except across

the hallway to the bathroom or perhaps downstairs for a drink of water?

What'll he think to discover me waiting here in his bedroom in the dead of night? I shivered again, realizing I wore no robe. It wasn't as if Brad hadn't seen me in my nightgown before. After all, we'd grown up together. Still, modesty made me aware the flimsy, nearly transparent silk gown barely covered me, and I suddenly wished for a wrap.

Besides, I was cold—Brad always slept with his windows wide open, even in the dead of winter. *Surely, under the circumstances, he won't mind if I borrowed a robe or a T-shirt from his closet...*

With this idea in mind, I stepped over to the huge oak closet and opened the door. Brad was never much of a housekeeper. Shirts and trousers hung crookedly from hangers and some of them had fallen into a heap on the closet floor where they'd undoubtedly become mingled with his dirty clothes before he even had a chance to wear them.

Dirty clothes—it seemed they were heaped to the ceiling. I rummaged through the mess, unable to locate a robe, so I took one of his heavy flannel work shirts and wrapped it gratefully around my bare shoulders.

I moved to shut the closet door, but something was jammed up against it. The leg of a pair of blue jeans had slipped from the top of the massive pile. I bent to retrieve them when something bundled in the far corner of the closet caught my eye.

Chilling fear numbed me as I reached for the strange, dark bundle. A cloak. A hooded black cloak like the members of the Cult of *Akerra* wore.

"My God." My voice was nothing more than a strangled whisper. Fear took over as I wondered where Brad had gone.

Before I could move, I heard his footsteps just outside the door. Then he stepped into the room, his mouth opening in startled surprise to see me standing there in my lacy gown and his shirt, the black, hooded cloak swirling before me like some grotesque masquerade costume.

"Anna..." he began, edging toward me. The cloak slipped from my hand. Slowly, it drifted to the floor, an ominous black stain on the sky-blue rug.

Without a word, I pushed past him and out into the hallway. I knew he was following me. He overtook me near the stairs, clutching painfully at my arm, desperate to detain me.

"It's not what you think. I found that cloak. In the cabin."

"I don't believe you!"

"You must." Forced to face him, to stare into those earnest, amber eyes, I found my conviction wavering. I could read Brad's expressions well enough to believe he was telling the truth.

"Where have you been?" I shivered, realizing his hands on my shoulders were as cold as ice.

"I just tied up one of the bulls. He was wandering around in the garden below my window."

My mind raced back to the immense, black creature ramming its head against my windowpane. "Brad...was he fierce?"

He shrugged. "No. He was docile as a lamb." He frowned. "Why? What's going on? What were you doing in my room?"

"Someone let that bull loose on purpose," I replied shakily. "Someone led him out there below my window and then made him angry enough to charge."

"*What?* If he'd broken the glass, you might have been hurt!" His face turned suddenly pale. "Surely you don't believe that *I* had anything to do with this madness?" He pinioned me against the wall near the top of the polished stairs, the pressure of his strong, callused hands tightening upon my shoulders. "You must believe me, Anna, Darling. I'd never do anything to harm you."

His face was inches from my own. I could see every feature clearly, from the clear, amber eyes to the broad nose and slightly wide lips.

"I want to protect you from the monster behind this insanity. Don't you know how much you mean to me?" His arms tightened into an embrace as he pulled me tightly against his chest. Then his lips were on mine...

"Well, isn't this cozy?" A cold, mocking voice from behind us made Brad release me, a guilty look on his face. Ivan stood in the shadowy hallway. He was fully dressed despite the lateness of the hour. I could see his hands clench and unclench at his sides.

The blind fury in the set of his muscles as he moved toward us put me in mind of the huge, enraged beast ramming its head against my windowpane in the darkness. When he spoke, his voice was harsh and commanding.

"I thought I warned you, Brad. Stay away from her."

"Now, Ivan..." His voice was pleading. "This isn't how it seems."

"How many times have you said that to me?"

I sensed an unspoken meaning to his words, something understood only between the two of them. I saw Brad's

lower lip quiver nervously as Ivan advanced toward him menacingly.

Again he tried to explain. "Ivan..."

"Leave us," Ivan snapped.

To my awe, Brad obeyed.

Then Ivan and I were alone together in the long, dark hallway. As he came toward me, I felt a shiver creep down my spine. I'd never seen him quite like this before. His wild, dark hair fell in tangled disarray about his face; his obsidian eyes glinted with a deadly light.

"Now, what's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

His voice was deceptively soft; the tone menacing. "I saw you coming out of his room." Cynical eyes brushed over Brad's flannel shirt which I'd so innocently thrown over my gown, and color rose to my cheeks as I realized what Ivan must be thinking, what any man would think. "Ivan, it's not—"

His handsome features were distorted with anger. He drew back his hand as if to strike me. Instinctively, I raised my arm to defend myself. This was the Ivan I didn't know, the side of him that frightened me. Sobbing, I covered my face with my hands.

"Anna."

I saw the look of horror on his dark face.

"What kind of a monster have I become?"

Gently, he pulled me to him, his hands caressing me softly, soothingly. Brad's borrowed shirt had fallen aside, exposing the frothy transparency of the revealing gown beneath. I heard him draw in his breath.

"So beautiful," he whispered, pulling me even closer against the hardness of his lean, muscular body. I could feel the fire that had always been smoldering between us burst into flame as he held me close. "God, how I want you."

I shivered with longing as his lips claimed my own, as his strong, dark fingers traced the tender hollow above my breasts, exposed by the wispy lace. "Ivan..." I moaned. I was prepared to give this stormy, tempestuous man my heart, my soul, my love.

Suddenly, he pushed me away from him. I saw naked hunger in his eyes, but when he spoke, his voice was filled with bleak despair.

"I thought you might be different, my love," he said, the tinge of irony in his voice revealing his dark thoughts. It was the voice of one who has trusted one last time, only to be deceived. For a moment he stood silently, staring into my eyes. Then, with a bitter, mocking smile, he released me. "Is there no woman born, Anna?" he demanded softly, "who can be true to one man?"

Chapter 31

I sat at the kitchen table, nursing a second cup of coffee, when Brad stepped into the room. He looked tired and washed out. His eyes had dark hollows beneath them, visible reminders of a restless night.

"Morning," he murmured, avoiding my eyes. Wandering over to the stove, he began frying eggs. Six of them, I counted silently as he broke them into the pan. Six eggs and half a pound of bacon. It was evident that the upsetting confrontation with Ivan last night hadn't affected his appetite.

He brought his plate over and sat down opposite me. For a long moment there was only the sound of his fork scraping against the plate. He'd have to break the awkward silence soon, I realized with wry amusement as he took another worried look at his empty coffee cup. He'd never get through breakfast without his coffee, but the pot lay far beyond his reach. Again, he eyed it wistfully.

"Any more of that stuff?" he asked finally.

I filled his cup, glad the embarrassed silence between us had finally been broken.

"It's probably pretty strong," I cautioned.

He shrugged, indicating it didn't matter. I knew it could taste like poison and he'd drink it. *I know him well. So*

well I could almost predict his every move. I know him so much better than I'll ever know Ivan.

Brad's hand grazed mine over the coffee cup and we were suddenly forced into eye contact. "I want to apologize for last night. I wasn't sure I should leave you alone with Ivan. I...didn't want to cause a scene."

"Let's just forget about it."

He took a long drink of his coffee. "About that...cloak. I *did* find it in the cabin. That day I went back to search—"

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't want to frighten you. I...thought maybe I could find out more about it. So...I hid it in my closet. Thought that would be a pretty safe spot," he added with the slight beginnings of a grin.

"I can see why," I conceded, glad for the touch of humor which meant we were on friendly terms again. "Don't you *ever* do your laundry?"

He shrugged. "Guess I need a woman to do it for me," he joked, but his eyes were serious.

I ignored the remark. "Well, I'm supposed to meet Guillermo in his office." I pulled back my chair.

Brad, pushing back his empty plate, also rose. "Let me walk with you. I'm going down to the corrals. We're branding the last of this herd today, but Martin thought he saw a few mavericks wandering around near the Pass. Said he thinks some of them might be ours. I'll probably take a couple of the men with me and go up there tomorrow."

We walked side by side. It promised to be another unseasonably warm day. Only the tall, white-capped peaks in the distance served as a reminder the snow had already come and gone. My sidelong glance at Brad caught a pensive look on his face.

“What happened between you and Ivan?” I asked suddenly. “What happened while I was away?”

He gave no reply, but the strange look in his yellow-flecked eyes spoke for him. Something had driven a sharp wedge between their friendship.

“Was it Colleen?”

I saw him flinch at the mention of her name. When he spoke, his voice was guilt-ridden. “She was so miserable, Anna. He was making her so unhappy. She came to me—I only wanted to help her...”

“Brad, listen.” I laid a hand on his arm, stopping him, not certain I wanted to hear any more. “Whatever happened between you and Colleen—well, it’s over now. Won’t you have a talk with Ivan?”

He shook his head wearily. “He’d never listen.” He fumbled into his pocket for a cigarette. “He’s so full of anger and hatred. Knowing that he’s Tavas’s son has changed him.”

“How did he find out? Did Alice tell him?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think so. Colleen’s the one who told *me*. It was just before the reading of the will. She said that Ivan finally knew the truth about himself. She said that he’d found out who his real father was.”

I remembered how strangely Ivan had acted just after Tavas’s death. He’d taken to the hills, avoiding us. *Was this, and not the reading of the will, on his mind?*

Brad had more to tell me. “He’s Tavas’s son, all right. That’s why he’s determined to have the Devil’s Gate for his own.” He stopped, turning to face me, fear shining in his eyes. “Ivan was out there last night, Anna. I saw him. He’s the one who turned that bull loose.”

"No!" But I was recalling the way he'd looked that night in the hallway. He'd been fully dressed, his hair wild and windblown.

"Don't you see? Those cattle mutilations started almost the day he came back to the ranch. He's the one behind the Cult of *Akerra*, not Manuel or Esteban. The cloak I found in the cabin's *his*."

"I don't believe you."

"First, he tried to divorce Colleen, but she wouldn't let him go. So he tried to frighten her away—"

"Please—"

"Even then he must have known you were going to inherit the ranch, not him. Now, Colleen's dead. You're the only one standing in his way. He'll ask you to marry him soon, mark my word. And if you say 'Yes', the ranch will be his—but if you refuse him..."

He didn't have to explain the rest. Martin DeGarza had explained it all very carefully after the reading of the will. In the event of my death, the Devil's Gate would go to Tavas's next of kin, Alice. And her son, Ivan.

"If you really believe all of this, then why didn't you go to the police? Why didn't you tell anyone about the cloak?"

He hesitated, avoiding my eyes. "Because I still have a little doubt in my mind..."

I knew he was lying. "Brad?" But he was abruptly walking away.

Realization came to me suddenly. His secrecy about the cattle mutilations, the hidden cloak—they were all efforts to cover Ivan's tracks. Despite his terrible suspicions, he'd kept silent. His perverse loyalty shook me to the core. The fact that he found it so necessary to protect Ivan proved how convinced he must actually be of his guilt.

I called out to him. "Brad!" He wouldn't look back. Was it guilt because of his involvement with Colleen that made him feel obligated to keep Ivan out of trouble, or some lingering sense of loyalty for their dying friendship? Surely, Brad couldn't really believe Ivan capable of the cold-blooded murder of Colleen, the sinister plotting to take over the Devil's Gate.

Yet it was clear he was warning me.

Disturbing thoughts tumbled through my mind as I stepped inside of the barn. The bull that had been so menacing last night was in the first stall, calmly munching hay. I approached him cautiously, not failing to notice the wild gleam in his eye.

Suddenly, Guillermo was standing beside me. "Suppose you heard about the excitement last night? Some rustlers tried to make off with this big fellow. Luckily, he must have broken loose. Brad found him wandering around in the garden." With a frown, Guillermo gestured toward me. "Take a look at this."

A shiver of horror gripped me as I saw the bull had been injured. There was a small sharp puncture wound on his massive flank. I drew in my breath sharply.

"Nothing serious," Guillermo said. "But he probably gave those rustlers a run for their money. Nothing more dangerous than a wounded bull. Especially one like this who still has his horns." He whistled. "They can stick those horns into a man so fast he'd never know what hit him."

Silently, I followed Guillermo into his office, the strange happenings of last night racing through my mind. Someone knew that under the cover of darkness that enormous beast appearing from nowhere would undoubtedly be mistaken for *Akerra*. Someone had led him purposefully just below my window. Then they'd hurt him

just enough to make him charge. I had an enemy intent on frightening me away, as they'd frightened Colleen in the past.

Or did it go further than that? My insatiable curiosity was no secret. I shivered as I thought of how close I'd come to stepping outside. *Is that what was planned? Did someone hope the enraged bull would gore me to death with those sharp, wicked horns?*

"Guillermo, who could be behind this madness? Have you been able to find out anything more about the Cult of Akerra?"

A worried look crossed his face. "Not a thing. And that's what's bothering me. Not one man will say a word about the Cult. It's like it doesn't even exist." He sighed. "Not long ago, I was so convinced that Esteban was our man I'd have tied a rope around his neck and hung him myself. Since then, I've been watching him, waiting, daring him to make just one slip..." He shook his head. "There's something I can't quite figure out," he confessed. "It's like a piece of a puzzle that don't quite fit. I believe someone close to us may be involved in this, Anna. That's all I can tell you right now. Be careful."

"Guillermo?"

He looked up at me, that perplexed expression still furrowing his tanned brow. His eyebrows rose interrogatively.

"Brad and I were talking about some old rumors. It's upset me."

"Rumors?"

"You know, about Alice and Tavas..." I paused, unable to go on.

A light of recognition came into his eyes. "Oh, that old story that they were in love with each other?"

To my surprise, Guillermo was smiling, the crinkles about his deep-set eyes widening. "Don't look so shocked. You know how folks like to gossip. I'll bet there's not a man on this ranch who hasn't wondered if Ivan wasn't Tavas's boy. Of course Tavas's death and the speculation on who'd inherit right before the will was read brought these old tales right back into the limelight." His dark eyes were bright and steady as they gazed into my own. "Myself, I don't take no stock in rumors. Why, the reading of that will proved once and for all that there wasn't a grain of truth to the story."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Tavas left the ranch to *you*. If there were any truth to those rumors, my dear girl, don't you think Tavas would have left the Devil's Gate to his own son?"

What Guillermo was telling me made sense. Yet, doubts remained in my mind, haunting me. There'd always been so much conflict between Ivan and Tavas. Much as I'd loved Tavas, I knew about his mean and stubborn streak. Many times Ivan had displeased him. And Tavas was a man who would seek revenge for his displeasure, even if it meant disowning his own son.

* * * *

I saddled Clover and rode down to the holding pens where the branding was still going on. Mothers bleated loudly for their calves as the men separated them with whips and loud calls.

The big, frightened calf which had been singled out scrambled wildly, kicking up a fine spray of dust as Ivan, who was on horseback, casually flicked his wrist, bringing a loop gracefully around the calf's white head. In the meantime, Brad swung the second rope, dropping it so it formed a loop under the calf's belly. The terrified calf

stepped into the rope and Brad quickly jerked it tight, trapping the calf's hind legs in the noose. They worked as a team, the two of them together, as they'd always done. I couldn't help noticing that even at the roping, Ivan was the more experienced, the more masterful of the two. Even at this, I knew Brad considered him a rival and Ivan, as usual, came out the champion.

I moved away, and set my horse into a gallop toward the hills. A few minutes later I realized Ivan was following me.

I dismounted and was standing near the huge gray boulders, waiting. Moments later the thunder of horse's hooves came crashing through the underbrush toward me. And then I saw him appear, and step down from the huge, dark horse. He was moving toward me. A wayward breeze ruffled his wild black hair, pulling it back from his face, accentuating the stony cut of his rugged features. He put me in mind of a restless black panther I'd seen in a cage, padding back and forth, searching for an escape while I watched him, knowing that there was none. I could sense Ivan's muscles were taut, his glowering eyes the eyes of that wary panther, filled with the same frustration, the same torment of wanting something just out of reach.

He faced me, his eyes dark as midnight. "I'm sorry, Anna. I had no right to speak to you the way I did last night." Eyes stormy, he continued, "Seeing you with Brad—you don't know what it did to me. All of the anger I've been carrying around inside of me just...exploded." The fine mouth tightened as if with pain. "You don't know what it was like. Watching my wife with other men...even him. Knowing all the while that she was untrue...just like—"

"Like Alice?" I suggested gently.

Ivan studied my face carefully. "Yes—like my mother. I didn't think you knew... Oh, what does it matter?"

"It matters to you."

"All those years Lucas must have known I wasn't his son. Yet he treated me as his own." His face hardened. "And Alice—"

"Don't judge her too harshly, Ivan. Perhaps there were reasons we don't understand."

He was an arm's breadth away from me. I felt my pulse quicken as he came closer, until we were almost touching. Suddenly, he reached out, pulling me toward him, bridging the gap between us with one quick motion. "I won't lose you again," he declared with frightening determination.

My head was resting upon his chest, his hand softly stroking my hair. Now he reached out and tilted my face toward him. "I lost you once. Tavas made me believe you were too young, that I wasn't good enough for you, but he was wrong. I can make you happy, Anna." His dark eyes blazed with desire. "I won't wait any longer. Marry me, Anna. I know there'll be talk so soon after Colleen's death, but we can't let that come between us. We've always belonged together, you and me. Let's make it right."

His lips met mine, gentle, persuasive. "Say you'll have me, Anna. Please. You know in your heart you've always been mine."

Yet even as I clung to him, even as I turned my face upward for his kiss, I was remembering Brad's warning. "He'll ask you to marry him..."

I saw the hurt in his eyes as I pushed him away. Tears were already blinding me as I heard myself whisper faintly, "I can't."

Chapter 32

As I braved the dark and rickety wooden stairs leading up to the family attic, I was just as uneasy about the thought of rats and spiders as I'd been as a child. My senses tingled at every creak of the stairs, and I found myself wishing for a flashlight. I knew there was a light socket with a bare bulb once I reached the top of the stairs. I hoped the bulb wasn't burned out.

I groped for the string, found it, and tugged gently. The light flickered, then came on, spreading a weak ray of brightness over the cluttered attic. I looked about me in surprise. Alice usually kept the attic as spotless as the rest of the house, but obviously someone, perhaps Brad or Ivan, had been up here recently, searching for some lost item. The boxes of Tavas's things we'd piled so neatly in the corner were scattered in hopeless disarray. Clothes were mixed in with papers and books, and over these were scattered medicine bottles and empty glass jars.

My old rocking-horse grinned at me from the corner as I rolled up my sleeves and began to sort through the mess. Did every old country attic have a rocking-horse? I glanced about me, noticing someone's old baby crib—a broken doll, a dusty rocking chair. I was surrounded by relics of the

past, small items making me painfully aware of the passing of time.

I found the box of legal papers I'd been searching for, buried under a pile of fruit jars. Carefully, I sorted through the documents, making a stack of the ones that seemed important enough for me to take downstairs to the files. The land lease agreement Guillermo had asked for was, of course, the last item in the box. With a sigh of relief, I threw it on top of the pile, rose gratefully from my cramped, cross-legged position, and stretched.

Now, to straighten up the mess I'd made and go back downstairs.

I was piling the old papers back in the box when something poking out from under the mountain of Tavas's book collection caught my eye. With a feeling of nostalgia, I recognized the flowered cover with the strange Basque words in front. I remembered how I used to sit on Tavas's desk, turning the yellowed pages as he talked about the odd pictures inside.

I sank back down on the cold wooden floor, album across my lap, and began turning pages at random.

* * * *

"Who were these people, Tavas?" I asked tracing the old-fashioned black and white images of a smiling man and woman standing outside of a white-washed, clean little farmhouse not so much different from our own, except for the background of heavy trees and gentle, rolling hills. The people wore strange clothing—the woman had on a long, flowered dress and an apron.

"Why, that's Ama and Aita," Tavas replied, stroking my pony tail affectionately. "My father and mother."

"*You* had a papa and a mama, too?" I asked with some surprise, and Tavas laughed, his gray eyes suddenly merry.

“And how do you think I got here, Little One? Did you think I was hatched from an egg?”

* * * *

I flipped through the yellowed pages of photographs, missing Tavas, longing for the only father I'd ever really known.

I closed the album quickly, adding it to the pile to take with me downstairs.

Carefully, for I was heavily burdened with papers and books, I switched off the dim light and groped my way to the stairs. Back in my room, I threw the books on the easy chair, brushing clouds of dust from my hands on to the back of my jeans.

* * * *

Later, after I'd bathed and washed the no-doubt mostly imaginary cobwebs from my face and hair, I settled back on the bed with the old album in hand. Like many of the antique ones, it had a binder nearly an inch thick. I surveyed the thick, upraised design of faded tapestry flowers with a critical eye. The material had worn thin in places, and a torn place ran along the front binder, jagged and uneven.

I opened the book, skimming past pictures of unknown aunts and uncles with their fixed smiles and odd haircuts. Loose pictures were tucked in here and there amongst the older ones, the present scattered carelessly over the past. Snapshots of our own family that Tavas had saved but never found the time to put into an album of their own. There was Lucas in his Army uniform—Brad's graduation picture. A dark-eyed boy stood proudly beside his first horse. A little girl riding a bicycle smiled into the camera.

Me.

I turned another page of the album and was immediately swept back into Basque country. More men

and women standing at the gates of stone farmhouses. Rolling hills and sheep and cattle.

On the next page was a picture of Tavas standing at the open entrance to a shepherd's tent. There was a smoldering fire, a dog chasing sheep against the hazy backdrop of mountains. Funny to think that my adopted uncle had started his life in America young and penniless, herding sheep. There was so much about Tavas I was just beginning to know.

Below that was a snapshot of another young man in a concealing leather hat and heavy jacket. The hat was pulled low over his face as if he were camera-shy. He stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing off at some distant point in the sky as if perhaps watching a band of wild geese. The man in the picture was, of course, Guillermo. He'd been with Tavas since the beginning, pitching his tent with him in the vast loneliness of that first isolated sheep camp high in the Sierra range.

On a page by itself was Lucas and Alice's wedding picture. How lovely she was. Thick, dark hair cascaded nearly to her waist, contrasting with the bone-white lace of her wedding veil. Her face was thinner, the sculptured cheekbones more prominent. Lucas, pale and sickly even then, stood proudly beside her in his pin-striped suit, his eyes and mouth solemn above a carefully-trimmed mustache.

The last picture in the album was one of Alice and Tavas. It must have been taken shortly after Lucas had left the Devil's Gate to serve his hitch in the Army. I knew that Alice, pregnant with Ivan, had returned to the ranch to live when Lucas discovered he was to be sent overseas. However, a sudden bout of rheumatic fever had instead forced his early discharge, leaving him with a permanently

damaged heart. So he, too, came back to the Devil's Gate to live.

In the picture, Alice and Tavas were riding. Alice, who I'd never seen astride a horse, rode a dappled mare. She was dressed in a man's trousers and shirt, her waist-length hair tied back from her oval face. Her graceful figure showed no sign of the child she must have been carrying. I was awed by her striking beauty. Tavas rode protectively, just behind her. Her head was turned slightly back toward him, lips parted, eyes radiant.

The eyes of a woman in love?

Shaking off the disturbing thought, I bent closer to study the picture. The unknown photographer had captured the blurred figure of a man in the background, waiting in the shadow of the stables. Though it was impossible to make out those hazy features, something in the familiar, aloof stance made me wonder if the blurred image wasn't Guillermo who stood in the distance, alone, awaiting their return.

I closed the album with a snap. For a moment, I sat lost in thought. Automatically, my fingers brushed the familiar roughness of the tapestry flowers. Again, I noticed the odd, jagged tear in the thick, heavy binder. I was sure it hadn't been there the last time I had noticed the album, when Alice and I had packed it away with Tavas's books. Frowning, I inspected it closer, wondering if it might have been torn on purpose. Curiously, I ran my finger along the slash. Suddenly, my nail brushed up against a tiny knob, releasing a hidden catch.

The thick binder made up a kind of hidden compartment. I slipped my finger inside the hollow gap between wood and tapestry. It was empty.

A vision of Alice going through Tavas's boxes so carefully the night we'd packed up his things stuck in my mind. Had she been looking for something in particular?

And now, the attic had been carelessly rearranged. Could whoever had gone through the attic so recklessly have been searching for the same thing as Alice? Had he found it here, in the torn, empty compartment of this photo album?

Later, when I went to deliver the land lease agreement to Guillermo, my mind was still on the empty compartment in Tavas's album. I could hear voices in his office. Someone was in there with him. A woman's voice.

Alice.

"I'm afraid of him, Guillermo," I heard her say. "I swear, he's dangerous."

"It's all right, Alice," I heard him reply. "Don't worry. I'll keep watch on him."

Who are they talking about? My heart pounded rapidly in my chest. Who's dangerous? Are they talking about Ivan?

As I slipped away back to the house, I heard Brad's voice calling out to me.

"Anna!"

I turned to find him coming quickly toward me.

"You know I'm leaving right after supper," he said, catching up to me with two quick strides. He was dressed in a red flannel shirt, worn jeans, and old boots. "I'm taking a couple of the men with me up to Secret Pass."

"How long will you be gone?"

"One night, maybe two." Suddenly, he took my arm and swept me into the shadows of one of the outbuildings.

"Brad, what—"

His eyes glimmered strangely in the shadows, the yellow sparks in them warning me something was wrong.

Moving closer to me, he said, "I'll be back as soon as I can, but—I want you to remember what I told you. Be careful, Anna."

"Please don't worry about me."

As we spoke, I saw Alice pass us, hurrying back toward the house.

He didn't care.

"I'm sorry. I just can't help it." His arms came around my shoulders. I could smell soap and the faint scent of men's cologne as he drew me close against his sturdy chest, holding me tightly for a moment as if he never wanted to let me go. Then his lips met mine. His mouth was teasing, caressing, but I could sense a strong undercurrent of emotion behind that almost platonic kiss. At that moment, I realized that though I'd given him very little encouragement, his feelings for me hadn't wavered. If I had ever doubted his caring for me, I didn't doubt it now.

"I love you, Anna," he whispered against my cheek. "And when I get back, I'm going to ask you to marry me again."

He said the words with unfaltering determination.

"In fact, I'm going to keep on asking until I get the answer I'm hoping to hear."

I started to reply, but he held a finger to my lips. "Don't answer now. Give it some thought. When I get back..."

With a sinking feeling in my chest, I watched him walk away.

I liked the thought of Brad being nearby. His protectiveness toward me made me feel secure; his sense of humor reassured me. Knowing he'd be out of reach the next two days made me feel vulnerable, lost. Alone.

I thought about Ivan—about the wild, sometimes frightening feelings stirred up in me whenever he held me in his arms. I remembered the taste of his lips burning mine, the dizzying sensation that left me feeling weak, trembling with a desire I didn't fully understand. Suddenly, I didn't want to feel that way, ever again. If that was love, then I wanted no part in that cruel emotion that was part pleasure and part pain. My heart pounding, I suddenly longed for the security of Brad's strong arms—but, Brad was gone.

I was alone....and I was afraid.

Chapter 33

Guillermo wasn't in his office after supper, nor could I find him outside near the corrals where a few of the men were still working. The ranch seemed nearly deserted. Brad had left a few minutes ago, taking Carlos and two others up with him to Secret Pass to search for strays.

Someone called my name. I turned, expecting to find Guillermo behind me. Instead, it was Victor. "Miss Haspura. Wait."

I suppressed a little shiver as he caught up with me. Those opaque eyes watched, huge and unblinking.

"Are you looking for Guillermo?" he asked.

"Yes." When he did not respond, I added with impatience, "Well, have you seen him?"

A slow grin spread across his face. "I know a secret," he said.

As I listened to his strange, eerie talk, I felt a stab of something akin to fear. "I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, and moved back a step, trying to edge away from him.

"The lovers."

His words brought me around again to face him, curious. Just how much did Victor understand about what

was going on around him? How much was truth, and how much imagination?

"I have something I could show you." His hand rose to his shirt pocket. He allowed me a glimpse of something that looked like a paper or letter he'd carefully tucked inside.

"What is it?"

He slipped the paper deep into his pocket, out of view, obviously unwilling to part so easily with his secret. He looked down at the ground, his enormous boots making scuff marks in the dirt. When he looked back up at me, I was surprised to see fear in those strange, glittering eyes.

"You have to promise not to tell. Guillermo'd be angry with me if he knew I had it."

"You don't have to worry..." I wanted to get a look at the note. It could be a note to Colleen from her lover. If so, it could be important in solving the mystery behind her murder.

A sudden sound startled him, made his hands drop to his side. He spun around, surprisingly lithe and graceful, his entire body tensed with the kind of alertness he must have learned during those years as a sheep herder, up in those mountains alone.

Guillermo was coming toward us. "What did I tell you about bothering her, Victor?" His voice was sharp and stern as he addressed his friend. It was strange to see the giant of a man cower before him. "I thought I told you to clean out the stables?"

Slowly, Victor nodded, his eyes darting here and there like a child in fear of another scolding. I knew that whatever he'd been about to tell me was, at least for the moment, lost.

"I hope he wasn't making a nuisance of himself," Guillermo said as Victor slipped away, shoulders slumped,

pouting like a huge, sulky puppy. "I saw him following you. What did he want, anyway?"

"I'm not sure." How could I tell Guillermo he'd interrupted something that could have proven to be very important? I could hardly scold him when he thought he'd been coming to my rescue. "He seemed to want to tell me something. Then he must have changed his mind," I said.

"Well, you know my friend's not quite right in the upper story," Guillermo remarked casually, tapping his forehead. "Poor, kid. A bright, promising lad before that blizzard trapped us up there in those mountains. Now there's no telling what goes through that mind of his."

Esteban stepped into view, out from the thick clump of juniper growing near the side of the driveway, an odd, smirking look upon his face. How long had he been standing there unnoticed, listening to our conversation?

Guillermo saw him. "Shall we go into my office?" he asked me, with a pointed look in Esteban's direction as he passed by.

Once inside the office, I gave Guillermo the land lease agreement for Martin DeGarza. Then I waited as he scanned the papers. With a nod of approval, he placed them back down upon the desk. He seemed preoccupied. A sharp frown deepened the lines between his eyebrows.

"Guillermo, is something wrong?"

"I was just thinking about that fool Esteban. You saw the way he was skulking around outside, listening to us. I've a feeling he's up to no good." He shook his head, clearly perplexed. "I'm positive he's mixed up with this devil-worship business, but what good are my gut feelings with no proof to back them up? Either he's a damned cunning rascal, or I've made a mistake in judgment. And it's not just me. Alice is scared to death of him."

So it was Esteban that he and Alice had been discussing earlier.

Guillermo leaned across the desk toward me, his eyes bright and piercing in his tanned, sun-furrowed face as he revealed in a low, confidential voice, "I was convinced he was to blame for Colleen's murder."

Slowly, he began to explain. "I thought Esteban was seeing Colleen on the sly. I thought maybe they got into an argument..." His voice trailed off. "But now I know I was wrong about that. If Colleen did have a man on the sly, it wasn't Esteban."

"How do you know, Guillermo? If not Esteban, then who was she seeing?"

Silence followed. "Like I said, there's something here that just doesn't fit together. A piece of the picture that just doesn't fit." He watched me intensely, his eyes filled with warning. "Someone close to us may be involved in this, Anna. That's all I know right now. I think...that you may be in danger."

"Guillermo—"

"You listen to me, Anna. We're back to square one again. You come to me if you need help." He reached out and touched my arm gently, the rare display of affection alarming me nearly as much as his next words. "You can't afford to trust anyone but me."

I left his office feeling even more confused and bewildered than before. Guillermo suspected someone who was close to us of Colleen's murder, but who had he meant to imply? Colleen's jealous lover or her angry husband?

There was one other person who knew something. I knew it was important that I find Victor again, that I discover what he'd been trying to tell me this afternoon

before Guillermo had interrupted us. I wanted to get my hands on that note.

He wasn't in the stables. I glanced up at the sky, already streaked with purple, as I wandered down to the bunkhouses. The sun would be setting soon, spreading darkness over the ranch. It was a Friday night. An emptiness hung about the place. Most of the men had taken off for town. The few who remained sat quietly on their porches, drinking beer and talking.

Outside the shabby duplexes, Graciana rocked her newborn son. I felt a twinge of pity for her. She was a ghost of a woman with her sad, dark eyes and thin, pale face. I slowed to greet her, but she turned her face away as I passed by.

On my way back to the house, I again stopped by the stables in hopes of finding Victor. It was dark and seemed deserted except for the restless livestock tramping in their stalls and the fluttering of the starlings roosting in the hollow timbers above me. My footsteps sounded magnified in the stillness.

I heard someone moving behind me. Suddenly, Victor stepped out from behind the shadow of one of the stalls and lumbered toward me, rake still in hand. "You lookin' for me, Miss Anna?"

"Remember what we were talking about earlier, Victor? Before Guillermo came and told you to clean out the stables?"

A vague look crossed his face. Then, suddenly, his eyes brightened. "You mean about the secret."

"Yes. Would you share your secret with me?"

"I have something." He reached into his pocket and took out a piece of paper, creased and worn. "I took it from Guillermo's things. Guillermo'd be mad if he found out.

It's real important. I know because sometimes he takes it out late at night and he reads it to himself. I...I don't read too good, Miss Anna." He handed me the letter.

Dismayed, I stared down at the envelope in my hands. I'd been expecting to discover a love letter from Colleen to either Brad or Esteban. And instead, I had this.

The paper was brittle and yellowed with age. The letter had been sent from an Army base back east. It was postmarked nearly thirty years ago from today. The envelope was addressed to Tavas Haspura.

"You can keep the letter," Victor said, turning back to his raking with sudden concentration. "I'm angry at Guillermo," he said childishly. "I don't want it anymore."

Chapter 34

I sat down on one of the hay bales just outside the stables and opened the envelope with shaking fingers. My gaze skimmed along the faded, ink-blotted print to the frail, spidery signature at the bottom. *Lucas*. Alice's husband.

The letter had been penned with a shaky hand. This, and the fact that darkness was slowly closing in, made the fine, blurry print difficult to read. The letter was written in broken English with Basque words interspersed at random. I concentrated, struggling to make sense of the contents. It went something like this:

Dear Brother:

Am writing from the Army hospital. Illness is worse and they think to discharge me soon. You will understand why I send Alice back on next train. Her health is delicate and weather here is very cold. Tavas, what I write must remain a secret between two brothers. This letter, for the sake of our family honor, must be destroyed. I know the child Alice carries cannot be mine. I have always known the truth. I love her, Tavas. The secret of her dishonor must die with us, for I would rather kill myself than let any harm or disgrace come to her. Take care of her, Tavas, as if she were your own.

Until I can join you,
Lucas

A cold wave of fear swept over me, making the yellowed paper tremble as I sat there, reading and re-reading the faded words. In my hands was undeniable proof that Ivan was Tavas's son.

Victor had taken the letter from Guillermo's things. Where had Guillermo gotten hold of the letter? Had he been the one who'd searched the attic? The letter must have come from the empty place in Tavas's old photo album.

Alice, too, had been searching for the letter. She must have told Guillermo about its existence. Again, I heard his warning words this afternoon in the barn, '*Someone close to us may be involved in this*'. I knew now that it was Ivan Guillermo suspected of Colleen's murder.

Hastily, I thrust the letter into my shirt pocket and hurried toward Guillermo's office. Fridays he often worked late on the payroll. He had to be there. I had to talk to him, to find out what this letter meant.

I'd nearly reached the barn when I heard a sound behind me. I glanced back over my shoulder, startled, wondering if Victor was following me, but nobody was behind me.

I approached the barn. My footsteps sounded magnified in the stillness as I crossed over to the office. The door swung open slowly. The room was empty. The dying coals in the small, pot-bellied stove gave evidence that Guillermo had been here a short time ago.

For a moment, I lingered. Then I began to hurry back outside, hoping I could catch him on his way to the bunkhouse. I'd gone halfway across the dark barn when I

heard a swift motion directly behind me. Turning, I caught a glimpse of some stealthy shadow moving in the darkness near the stalls. I paused, frozen, straining my ears in the silence, but there was only the sound of the restless horses pounding their hooves against the creaking wood floor of the barn.

Breaking into a dead run, I hurried toward the shaft of faded light glowing from the barn's entranceway. Glancing back, I cried in alarm at the sight of the huge, menacing shadow moving along the barn wall. Someone, or something, was directly behind me.

Before I could spin around and face the intruder, strong arms clamped about my throat, squeezing my windpipe, painfully bruising my flesh. I reached up, scratching and clawing, desperately trying to free myself from the steel trap of those crushing hands. Though I struggled violently, my feeble efforts against the brute strength of my attacker were as futile as a mouse's plight in the clutches of a hungry cat. I clawed the air, writhing in pain, fighting now only for precious gasps of air.

The ground came up to meet me in a sea of darkness as my assailant suddenly released me. The last thing I saw as I slipped limply to the dusty floor was a huge, shapeless shadow moving away through clouds of hazy darkness.

I woke to a desperate thirst. A dry, burning ache filled my throat. I sat up, the smell of hay invading my nostrils. How long had I been lying in the straw of the barn floor, unconscious? The thirst gave way to a crushed, bruised feeling as I wobbled unsteadily to my feet, smoothing the tangled hair away from my face, brushing dirt from my clothing. Fearfully, I searched the shadows, but my attacker was gone.

Slowly, I limped my way to the barn door, swinging it open to the welcoming glow of moonlight. Dizzily, I found my way from the garden path to the kitchen door and let myself inside.

"Is that you, Anna?" Alice's voice called nervously. "You've been gone so long we got worried. Ivan went out to look for you." She crossed the room and now stood in shocked surprise. "*Anna!*" Her voice was little more than a ragged whisper. "What's happened to you?"

"Someone...attacked me...in the barn."

"Here, now." She took my arm and led me into the adjoining room. Gently, she settled me back upon the couch near the fireside. "I'll get a cool cloth for that bruise. And tea. I'll make some tea."

I nodded weakly, leaning my head back against the soft cushions. Moments later, Alice returned with the cloth. "Did you see anything?" she asked anxiously, bathing my forehead and throat with the soothing washcloth. "Was Ivan out there? Did you see Ivan?"

Just then, the door flew open and he stepped inside. His hair was wild and unruly, his eyes as black as midnight. "Thank God you're safe, Anna," he said, coming toward me. "There was a prowler out near the barn. I almost had him, but he got away." As he came closer, my gaze fell upon the long, jagged scratch standing out across his pale cheekbone. He'd stopped talking, for the first time taking in my disheveled appearance. With an oath, he exclaimed, "Did you see him? Do you know who did this to you?"

I shook my head, feeling a sudden wave of dizziness. "It all happened so quickly." He bent over me, his fingers lightly brushing my throat, inspecting the bruises there. A sudden, violent chill racked my entire body. His touch brought back memories of those other hands, squeezing so

tightly, choking the air from me. The gaze from his dark eyes swept over me searchingly, as if trying to read the terrifying thoughts churning in my mind. He withdrew his hand. "Rest," he whispered softly. "I'll be back soon."

Then he was gone. The door closed as he slipped back into the night—but had he really gone out to find my attacker, or was this all a carefully-planned act put on for my benefit? Had there really been anyone in the barn tonight but the two of us?

The letter. I reached into my pocket where the letter should have been. It was gone.

Alice came back with the tea. "Alice," I cried. "The letter...it's gone!" Fruitlessly, I tried to explain, but my head kept spinning so that it was an effort to think straight. "The letter..."

"Here, drink this," she coaxed. The tea was warm, soothing. I was so very tired. I closed my eyes for a moment, drifting into a haze of nothingness. When I opened them again, I was aware of Alice bending over me. Her eyes were huge, dark and tormented in her ashen face. "You must get out of here," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You must leave now. Tonight. He doesn't mean to let you go."

"What?"

"He means to kill you," she said.

Chapter 35

“Who?” I demanded, bewildered and frightened. “You must tell me!”

“I can’t explain. Not now.”

I was alarmed by the horror I saw in her eyes. “Please trust me!” she cried. “I never meant for him to kill her. And now, *your* life’s in danger.”

Still dazed and unsteady from my injuries, I watched her reach for my jacket. She tugged at my arms to put it on, easing it over my shoulders. Then she was pressing something into my hand. The keys to my Mustang.

“You must go now. Head for town and don’t stop. There’s no time...” She pushed me out into the cold night air.

“Alice—”

“Go. Now—while you have the chance. He’ll be coming for you soon,” she hissed. “He’s mad, don’t you understand? Mad!” The door slammed shut in my face.

I rattled the doorknob, calling her name. I heard a click as she locked it from the inside.

I banged on the door. “Alice!” The air was bitterly cold. My throat ached, my voice was hoarse and dry. Each breath of night air I drew made the soreness throb. And I was locked outside with a madman who wanted to kill me.

For a moment I stood huddled by the door, shivering. Then I began to run blindly through the darkness toward the Mustang, parked at the far end of the drive.

I'd reached the edge of the driveway when I felt the presence of someone behind me. Tingles of fear brushed across my neck like icy fingers as I continued to race for the car. My knees were so weak they threatened to buckle under me. A shrill cry of terror escaped me as a hand suddenly snaked out of the blackness and wrapped about my forearm like a whip.

"Alice is right. You must leave." I whirled around to face—Guillermo!

I struggled to be free from him.

"Anna, listen to me." His grip on my arm tightened painfully. "Alice didn't know things would go so far. She only wanted to frighten Colleen away. She had no part in the killing—"

"Wh...why?"

"She wanted Ivan to inherit the Devil's Gate, but Tavas left it to you instead. She only meant to scare Colleen into signing those divorce papers so Ivan would be free."

"I know. To marry me." I could feel the blood rushing from my head. I swooned, would have fallen if not for Guillermo's strong, vice-like embrace. "You're in no shape to drive," he said, steering me toward the old truck. "I'll drive you into town and get you a room. You'll be safe there until morning."

He opened the heavy door of the old pickup and hoisted me up into the worn seat. The inside light came on as he moved around to the other side. He slipped the keys into the ignition, then turned to me again, a look of warning flashing briefly across his face. "We mustn't let anyone know about Alice's involvement in this." I heard a

strange catch in his voice. The way he said her name made me turn to face him, suddenly alarmed. "We must protect her at any cost."

I looked across from him, stunned. The faint yellow light from the dashboard played upon his rugged, tanned face, the rough-hewn features, the piercing eyes below the silvery hair and battered hat. For a moment, something flickered in my mind, making frightening thoughts gather. *Is there a resemblance, however so slight, between him and Ivan?*

Surely it was only my imagination. I looked again. The likeness wasn't marked—but then Ivan had always taken after his mother. Time and time again I'd searched for traces of Tavas or Lucas in his face and found none. And now, in the face of this man who was both friend and stranger, I was seeing something I didn't want to see, a resemblance I didn't want to recognize.

I caught my breath sharply. What if he loved Alice? What if he'd always loved her? Not Tavas, but *Guillermo*. My mind slipped back to the pictures in the old album. Pictures of Alice and Tavas, but always in the background, Guillermo. The close friend, the loyal hired man, watching, waiting...

Suddenly, I knew I'd misinterpreted the letter from Lucas. "Tavas wasn't Ivan's father, was he?" I demanded in a shaky voice, startled by my own revelation. "You are."

Ever so slightly, he nodded. "Ivan is my son."

"All these years..."

"Alice and I have kept our secret. We've waited, watching our boy grow into a strong, handsome man. Hoping someday he'd become heir to the Devil's Gate."

His eyes were as dark and unfathomable as the black night outside the dim glow of the truck's headlights. "You might as well hear it all," he said. In a quiet voice he

continued, "We never thought Tavas knew about us, but Alice began to suspect that he did. Something he said toward the end, when he was delirious...something about a letter from Lucas..."

"Does Ivan know?"

"Yes. Just before the reading of the will, Alice told him. We wanted him to be prepared in case we were wrong, in case Tavas *did* know the truth. We didn't want him to get his hopes up and then have them shattered.

"You see, it was a matter of revenge. Tavas loved Alice and me dearly, but he could never quite forgive us. It's just the way he was inside—stubborn, unyielding. He couldn't forget that we'd betrayed his poor, sickly brother, and that Ivan was the product of that betrayal. We were too close to him, so he took the anger out on our son. That's why he never let himself believe in Ivan. That's why he made certain that our son would never inherit.

"That night Alice went through Tavas's things, she was looking for the letter."

"Yes, but she couldn't find it. I discovered it much later, when I searched the attic myself."

"You know now," he added. "Ivan was never of Tavas's blood, but you are. Though you're a step-child, your mother's first husband was a distant cousin of Tavas's, which makes you his closest blood relative. The Devil's Gate has always rightfully been yours." The tone of his voice suddenly struck terror in me. I met his gaze in alarm, seeing resentment and bitterness stamped so clearly on a face that so seldom revealed emotion.

"Guillermo," I asked in a frightened voice, "why are you telling me all of this now?"

"I want you to understand how Alice got herself involved in this. She despised Colleen. She only intended to give her a good scare—"

"But he killed her instead," I finished for him weakly. "So that he could marry me. And now I've turned him down, he's coming after me." I covered my face with my hands.

"No, Anna," Guillermo said gently. "Not Ivan. Good Jesus, girl, is that what you've been thinking? Alice hired someone to do her dirty work. I'm not exactly sure who he is, but I have my guess. We'll find out tonight." He turned the key in the ignition. "I'll explain it all on the way to town."

Fear pulsed through me as the ugly truth sank home. Though I tried to remain calm, one chill after another shook me as I remembered Alice's words: "I never meant for him to kill her..." And Guillermo saying, almost apologetically: "Alice must be protected at any cost."

If I were to disappear, Ivan would inherit the ranch. And he would, of course, share it with his mother. And, if Guillermo became her husband...

"Are you all right, Anna?" Guillermo looked over at me, his eyes gleaming in the darkness. "Come, now. Don't be frightened. It'll soon be over."

His voice sounded evil, menacing. Suddenly I knew that Guillermo had no intention of driving me into town. It was he, not Ivan, that Alice had tried to warn me about. Guillermo had murdered Colleen. And now it was *my* turn to die.

Chapter 36

The motor roared into life. I sat stiffly on the seat, bracing myself. Then, as he pulled the truck into gear, I quickly swung the door open and tumbled out.

For a moment I lay on the hard ground, stunned by the sudden, jolting impact. I heard Guillermo calling my name, saw the door on his side fly open. He was coming after me. I had to get away.

Ignoring the sharp, crushing pain in my ribs, I scrambled past the open spaces, slipping into the dense thicket of sagebrush by the side of the road. There I crouched, barely daring to breathe as the crunch of his footsteps passed by.

Then he was returning to the truck. I remained hidden in the bushes like some small, frightened night creature as the blinding glare of his headlights passed slowly by. Then all was darkness. My bruised body sagged with relief. At least for the time being, I was safe—but he'd be back. And soon.

If only I could find Ivan, but where was he? I had to get out of here. Fast. I rose stiffly to my feet, brushing the dirt from my torn jeans and scraped knees. I felt bruised all over. Every step caused a sharp stab of pain in my chest as I

edged toward the Mustang, one hand resting reassuringly on the keys in my pocket.

I'd almost reached the car when a dark figure drifted toward me from out of the shadows, to stand between me and the Mustang, blocking my way. A figure in a loose, flowing black robe.

I stared, transfixed, at the ominous hooded man. "Ivan?"

He didn't answer. His eyes were hollows of darkness in the hooded face. Tears stung my eyes as I realized that he, too, was a part of this evil scheme. And why not? After all, everything that Alice and Guillermo had done was ultimately for him—their son.

A part of me still refused to believe that the man I loved could ever want to harm me. "Ivan—please. Help me—"

He threw back his head, filling the night air with evil, blood-curdling laughter. The dark figure stepped menacingly toward me. And then I saw the knife in his hand.

In terror, I backed away. Turning, I began to run as swiftly as my legs would carry me toward the lights of the ranch. Then, suddenly, I heard a sound to my left, then directly ahead of me. He was cutting me off from the house.

Forced to turn in the opposite direction, I stumbled along just ahead of him, wearily retracing my steps as he relentlessly pursued me. We reached the road. Deftly, he urged me into the darkness beyond. Stark terror filled me as I realized what he planned to do. Slowly but surely, he was herding me like some lost and helpless animal toward the canyon's sheer edge.

Stay calm. Think of a plan, I urged my fear-numbed brain as the merciless stalker forced me nearer and nearer to the gaping chasm.

The cabin! If only I could shake him off before we reached the canyon's edge, I could run to the old cabin and lock myself inside. This new hope, however faint, gave me a sudden burst of energy. I began to run, darting in and out of the rocks, intent on losing him.

Breathless, I slowed, clutching at my ribs, gasping for breath. I listened, but heard nothing. And then the bushes just behind me began to move. Once again, I caught sight of the loose, black robe. I heard that evil, demonic laughter.

Blindly, I ran through the darkness. I searched desperately for some familiar landmark, but I'd lost the trail. The pale rocks, the blue-black clusters of sagebrush, seemed to merge into one winding maze. And then, just up ahead, I saw the cabin.

Once more, I slowed and glanced fearfully behind me. This time, I saw no movement, heard no sound. This time I'd lost him.

Quickly, I hurried toward the cabin and pushed open the door—and gave a cry of horror. Inside, I caught a glimpse of dark robe, gleaming knife. He'd guessed what I was going to do. He was hiding in the cabin...waiting for me.

The hood slipped back a little, revealing the mass of dark hair, the gleam of white teeth, as he came toward me. I whirled and ran, slamming the door behind me. I could hear it creak open again as I ran back toward the house. He was gaining on me. I could hear his footsteps closer and closer behind me. A hand lunged at me, grasping my arm. I could feel the blade of the knife pressing against my back, forcing me toward the canyon.

He'd outwitted me. Spirit broken, like a prisoner on his way to the gallows, I walked numbly toward my fate. I no longer felt pain or fear. A sense of unreality dulled my senses.

We'd reached the canyon's edge. Suddenly, I was looking down into spanning, hazy darkness. Spasms of fear shook me from my trance as I imagined falling, my body being torn by those huge, jagged boulders far below.

I could see his hands move in the darkness, intent on shoving me to oblivion. Well, I was ready for him. I wouldn't go dumb and docile as a lamb to my fate. If he took me down the cliff, we'd go together.

As his hands reached out to push me over the edge, I sprang at him with all my might, knocking the knife from his hand. Panic made the blood pump violently through my veins, giving me strength I never knew I possessed as I fought him like a wildcat, tooth and nail.

I felt a strange, trembling sensation beneath my feet as the ledge we were standing on began to crumble. Then, I was stepping off into nothingness.

I could feel the sharp clawing of twigs and branches against my arms and face. Then there was a jolting pain as my head struck something sharp. One of the huge boulders had stopped my fall. I was hurt, but still very much alive.

Up above, I heard his cry of triumph. Through dazed eyes, I could see him, the black robe flapping in the wind. Evil, insane laughter carried on the winds, drifting down toward me. I struggled to pull myself up, but darkness was already closing in, blotting out everything except the sound of his footsteps as he leaped agilely down the rocks toward me.

Chapter 37

Something was tickling my nostrils. The heady scent of sage came to me thickly along with the first tingling sensations of pain and cold. I opened my eyes slowly. After a moment or two I realized I was lying in the brush near the altar, where he must have dragged me. *A nightmare. This has to be a nightmare.*

Then I caught sight of him, a formless shadow in the hood and dark, swirling robe. His back was toward me. I drew in my breath as, slowly, he began loosening the cowl from about his head, shaking free the dark hair beneath. I couldn't still the cry of astonishment that slipped from my lips. Swiftly, he turned to face me. Black eyes glittered; pale, ghostly moonlight caught the silver glint of the knife in his hand.

"Espanol!"

"Does that surprise you?" he demanded. I could feel the hatred in his burning eyes. Madness twisted his face, distorting the handsome features.

"But...why?"

"Alice wanted Colleen out of the way. So she hired me to do her dirty work." The smile I knew so well, that half-sneer, twisted his mouth. "I took pleasure in stalking the little whore, scaring the wits out of her." His eyes were

alight with evil rapture. "But the best part was having her blame Ivan."

"Alice never meant for you to murder her."

He gave a cold little laugh. "No—that was my surprise."

My God, he acts proud of what he's done. A shiver of disgust crept over me, momentarily dulling the fear.

"Colleen was up at the cabin that night," he explained. "She'd slipped off to see Brad, but he never showed. I was there instead. Waiting."

His eyes flashed with anger. "I was never good enough for her, the little slut. Always teasing me, leading me on, never intending to deliver. I shook her up good that night—a robe, horns, the whole bit. Of course, Ivan got the blame for my little masquerade."

He continued, his tone ugly, gloating. "Then, when she came running out of the house, all upset and excited, I was waiting for her. I forced her into the car and made her drive off. I was only going to take what she'd been promising all along, but she fought me..." I saw his hand squeeze and tighten on the knife. "I lost my temper."

I had to know more.

"The marks on her neck—you strangled her. And then you brought her body back here, to make it look like the work of the Cult of *Akerra*."

"Clever, wasn't it?" Darkness made mask-like hollows around his eyes. "I just hope it works a second time."

"You'll never get away with this madness, Esteban. Alice—"

He gave a snort of contempt. "She'll keep quiet. She's scared to death of me. Of course, Ivan will get the blame. With him in prison and you out of the way, I'll control Alice like a puppet on a string. I'll take over here. I'll rule

this place like a king.” He came toward me, a wicked smile upon his full, sensual lips. The black eyes glittered like jet. “The men are afraid of me, you know. They think I possess certain powers. It’s the fear that causes obedience. I’ll butcher a few more cattle here and there, scatter the bones in the canyon, and they’ll hail me as a god. An evil god. The ignorant sheep will hail me as the son of *Akerra*.”

He advanced toward me, the knife gleaming in his hand. “It’s too bad you know my secrets.” His voice had a soft, smooth quality, like the hiss of a snake. “You really did put up quite a fight.” He gazed down at me, slowly shaking his head. “But you know too much now. And you’re in the way of my plans.”

Suddenly, up above us on the cliffs, I saw the faint glimmer of headlights. Guillermo was still looking for me. All this time, he and Ivan had been trying to protect me, but I hadn’t understood. And now it was too late.

Or is it? If only I can stall him.... “Guillermo knows about you.”

The mention of his name enraged Esteban. Black anger shone in his eyes as the knife in his hand slashed the empty air. “I’ll take care of him,” he boasted. “I don’t know how yet, but I will.”

While his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of revenge, I broke away from him. “Help me!” I cried, my voice echoing back to me against the high canyon walls. “Guillermo. *Help!*” With a sinking feeling, I watched the headlights move slowly away, relinquishing the purplish cliffs to darkness.

In terror, I turned to face Esteban. Rough hands forced me back against the stone altar. I struggled helplessly as he shoved me down against cold stone. The knife was poised now, just above my chest. “A shame,” he whispered,

lowering the knife point teasingly, brushing it slowly along the hollow of my throat. I held my breath as the knife crept downward, tracing a path along my skin, circling my breasts through the filmy material of my torn blouse. "I really do like my women full of fire." He laughed, and said, "But I'm afraid there really isn't time for any fun and games."

"No." I shrank back as the wicked blade poised above me, aimed straight for my heart. A cry of terror ripped from my throat as the knife started to descend.

"Touch her and you're a dead man." A voice as cold as steel made the knife stop in midair. It remained poised above me, suspended in space as Esteban instinctively looked toward the intruder. Ivan stood behind him, a pistol shining deadly in his hand.

With a savage cry, Esteban sprang at him, knife slashing the air. As the blade drew dangerously close, Ivan tried to intercept it and lost control of his weapon. With horror, I saw Ivan's gun slip from his hand and roll away as the two of them tumbled to the ground.

Then Ivan had Esteban pinned down. Catching him by the forearm, he forced the blade from his clenched fist. Weaponless, they wrestled, fierce opponents locked in a death struggle. And then I saw Esteban reach for the gun.

"*Ivan, look out!*" It all happened so swiftly there was no time to even move. I could only move my lips in silent prayer. I closed my eyes tightly as the sound of a shot broke the stillness. When I dared open them again, Esteban was lying in a crumpled heap at Ivan's feet, the wind fluttering the flowing robes about his still body.

Ivan reached me swiftly, taking me into his arms. "Anna, my love. Are you all right?" He kissed my bruised

face, gently touching the swollen place where my head had struck the rocks.

"I...I think so."

"Thank God I got here on time."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I've been searching for you ever since you jumped out of Guillermo's truck. He told me what he suspected was happening. I went back to the house and got the truth out of Alice.

"Mother told me the whole story. About how she'd hired Esteban to chase Colleen away. And then there was the murder. At first, she was afraid to tell the police because of her part in it, though she'd intended no harm to come to Colleen. Later, when things got really out of hand, he threatened her life, but she couldn't let him harm you.

"I suspected he'd take you out here to the canyon. So I came out here to where we found Colleen. When you called out to Guillermo, I heard you."

I was ashamed and needed to make amends with him. I put a hand on his shoulder.

"When I saw that dark-haired figure in the hooded robe—I thought it was you. How can you ever forgive me for doubting you?"

"Shh..." He held a finger to my lips to silence me. "It's all over now. The forgiving and forgetting." He held me tightly against his strong chest, as if this time he never intended to let me go. "Let's make up for lost time."

Headlights illuminated the trail above us, where Guillermo slowly circled the cliffs, searching for me. Together, we climbed up to meet him.

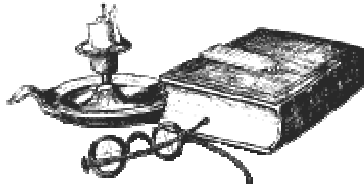
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