

Siren Publishing

*Ménage Amour*



# WORKING THE LODE

Karen Mercury

## Going for the Gold

# Working the Lode

***Going to California. It's three thousand miles nearer to hell.***

Mountain man Cormack Bowmaker meets up with Zelnora Sparks on the eve of California's great rush—the discovery of gold. Zelnora is fleeing from her mentor, the mighty businessman Brannagh. They are being shadowed by the most scandalous Spanish bandit in the frontier.

Joaquin Valenzuela wants to rob them of their gold, but soon discovers a desire for much more. Californians call for the pickled head of Valenzuela in a jar, but his passion for the two Americans overpowers his zeal for mayhem.

They band together in their quest for riches, love, and the good life. Bowmaker is a sharpshooter, his aim true. Valenzuela will slit the throat of anyone who wanders by. Zelnora knows where to find the gold. And Brannagh will do everything it takes to stop them.

***They are about to discover the frontier—within themselves.***

**Genre:** Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

**Length:** 61,972 words

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**Siren Publishing, Inc.  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

**WORKING THE LODGE**

Copyright © 2010 by Karen Mercury

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-083-3

First E-book Publication: December 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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**PUBLISHER**

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# **DEDICATION**

For DL

What a perfectly shining mountain man you make.  
“The happiest moments of my life have been spent in the wilderness  
of the Far West.”

# WORKING THE LODGE

*Going for the Gold*

**KAREN MERCURY**

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“Going to California. It is only three thousand miles nearer to hell.” -- Henry David Thoreau

## Chapter One

*November, 1847*

*American River, California*

“I’ve heard it told,” said Zelnora, perched atop her stool, “that Sam Kincaid often masturbates in front of his wife.”

In a fit of silent laughter, her friend Mercy nearly fell off her own stool. The two women enjoyed a brief respite from their employer and benefactor, Ward Brannagh, gone back to San Francisco to consult with some men about his flour mill and printing press there. Now far away from his industrious clutches, they sat behind the counter in Brannagh’s store two hundred miles upriver, having snuck drinks from a keg of whiskey—there being not many customers on this rainy day, they concluded.

“It’s true!” Zelnora pointed at Mercy with her tin cup of the beastly stuff. It nauseated her to drink it, but she had seen the relaxing effect it had on men, and it seemed somehow rebellious to share a cup with Mercy. She could barely speak, being consumed with giggles,



too. "If Nellie has the courses, or otherwise is repelled by him, why, he just yanks down his suspenders and pantaloons, and out it pops."

Mercy doubled her laughter, and Zelnora leaned an elbow onto the wobbly counter, holding her cup so loosely the whiskey nearly spilled onto the pine boards. She even sneezed, surrounded as they were by dusty boxes of sardines, cow hides, crackers, tobacco, and glass beads for the Indians. Brannagh's Fort store was a good idea, supplying the many ragtag of all creation, backwoodsmen who ventured over the Sierra to conglomerate at Sutter's Fort, the first civilized stop on the emigrant trail, servicing even the *gente de razón*, "people of reason," upper-drawer Spaniards. But on rainy days like this, their only customers were the smelliest men dressed in dead animals, with things looking like squirrels squatting on their heads.

"Oh, my," wheezed Mercy. "Did you hear the latest from San Francisco? Some whiskey-bloated Battalion man went to Brown's restaurant and shouted 'The Spaniards are in the brush!' and nearly started a riot! All night long, men were shooting at wine barrels and shrubbery."

The women laughed so heartily they nearly didn't hear the squishing of boots coming up the outer pathway. Yet Zelnora saw a shadow pass by the smoky window, and she gasped so loudly even Mercy came to her senses. "Ward!" Zelnora whispered, and both women instantly shoved their sloshing tin cups underneath the counter. Ward Brannagh wasn't due back until tomorrow! They gazed at each other with shocked faces as the front door slammed open against the wall. The poor little bell hanging from the door didn't tinkle, it squealed.

Brannagh stepped in boldly, legs spread wide, king of all the ramshackle items he surveyed.

A tall, imperious man, clean-shaven aside from well-trimmed side whiskers, even after the hard journey from San Francisco he wore a white shirt, black cravat, and short-skirted frock coat. Of late, he'd adopted the felt sombrero of the Californio vaquero, and the result

made him look even fiercer, if such a thing was possible. Thankfully, he had a wide smile today. “Ladies! Sisters!” he proclaimed, stepping forward without shutting the door. He threw his dripping sombrero onto a box of jerked beef. “I had a great venture in San Francisco, very profitable indeed. You will be glad to know I’ve brought back a quantity of cotton and chintz shawls, cock’s and foxtail feathers, Moroccan leather shoes, and washbasins, as well as picks and shovels, although I am sure you womenfolk don’t care much about tools.”

Zelnora swallowed hard, holding her hand to her chest. Mercy was busily stoking the fire in the corner stove, so it was up to her to speak. “Why, Elder Brannagh...It sounds as though you had a successful excursion. Have you brought any copies of your *California Star* newspaper? I should so love to read of any news.”

As Zelnora had feared, Brannagh made directly for her, leaning on the rickety counter and pounding his fist on it in a silent demand for whiskey. “Of course, Sister Sparks. They’re safely stowed away in the cart away from the rain.” He fairly wiggled his eyebrows in some sort of imaginary shared knowledge, while Zelnora swiftly found an unused tin cup to fetch him some whiskey. He gulped it in several healthy swallows, banged it on the counter, and leered again at her. It was certainly taking Mercy a long time to stoke the fire! Brannagh didn’t leer because he wanted more whiskey. “Come with me, Sister Sparks, and I shall give you a copy.”

Trying not to show her trepidation, Zelnora followed Brannagh into the back office where they both transacted business and took care of the ledgers. This time, Brannagh did shut the door behind him.

Zelnora knew there weren’t any newspapers in the office. He’d just told her they were in his cart. Instead, he backed her up against the desk covered in inkwells, surveying implements, and scales. He withdrew something wrapped in cigar packing paper from his coat pocket before flinging that garment onto the floor. Now he pressed her so closely into the desk she could smell his fresh out-of-doors sweat that only became unpleasant when one didn’t wash for many

days. But on Brannagh, the scent was always somehow repulsive. Zelnora based this knowledge upon the only other man she had kissed—her former husband, Barton Sparks. He had always smelled lovely, like cloves and pipe tobacco.

“A gift for you...Zelnora.”

“Why, Elder Brannagh...Ward,” Zelnora whispered, taking the little package. Within the seconds it took her to open the package, Brannagh had thrust his crotch fully into her lap, so that she wasn’t certain whether to open the thing or respond to his attentions.

He placed two hands on the desk on either side of her hips and breathed into her ear, “Open it, my trembling fawn.”

Two silver earrings of the finest, most intricate Spanish workmanship were revealed to her. “Oh, Ward!” she cooed, tossing the cigar paper to the floor and attempting to view the earrings, but his knees pressed hers apart. Instead of the usual round dress, she had taken to wearing the loose Californio skirts that reached only midway between knee and ankle, wearing no petticoats, and there was no excuse not to part her knees. Soon she was sitting perched on the edge of the desk, clearly feeling the outline of his ugly penis against her quim. Despite her feelings of revulsion, her quim responded in its usual ardent manner, engorging and becoming spongy as Brannagh humped her slowly, as though perhaps she might not notice, being preoccupied with the earrings. Perhaps he’d given her the earrings to distract her, as one might a child.

She knew Brannagh’s penis was ugly, as she compared it to Barton’s, which was long, proud, and straight, and she had taken great pleasure in it. Brannagh’s was thin and crooked, and he did not wash that area as assiduously as he washed the rest of his body—as though women had no sense of smell.

“See?” Brannagh whispered huskily into her neck. “There are stones of turquoise, like you showed me in San Francisco. Oh, Zelnora!” Suddenly swept away on a wave of lust, Brannagh tore the earrings from her fingers and slammed them onto the desktop. He

bent her over backward, kissing her squarely on the mouth with dry, chapped lips, thrusting his penis fully over her trembling quim. There was no friction between them, rather a sort of slimy movement of her drawers, as she was now quite thoroughly soaked. Her traitorous body responded to any touch! As though she was so starved for sex! Brannagh was an odorous beast who only utilized those who worked for him like so many slaves, Zelnora knew, yet her rebellious quim cried out for more. It was completely reprehensible of her, and she felt tremendous guilt, yet...she did want more. Barton had spoiled her, or perhaps “soiled” was a better word...

The frisson of his crooked penis worked her into such a lather that she even responded to what he thought passed for kisses, although it was difficult for him to moisten his lips enough to create a proper kiss. She even brought one slippered foot up to hook on to the back of his boot, opening herself up wider to his desperate clutching.

“Zelnora, my slutty fawn! Oh, how my balls have longed for you!”

With a metal compass of some sort sticking into the base of her spine, Brannagh yanked down the neckline of her *camisita* in one movement. Her left breast burst free, and Brannagh dove in, slurping and mauling like a starving feral dog at a carcass. Again, her hypocritical body responded, especially when he bit at her nipple and squeezed her breast as though to bring forth milk. “Ah, come to your master!” He growled. “Come and learn a lesson at the feet of your commander!”

He humped her as though set on spilling his seed inside his pantaloons, and indeed, by the way he grunted, it sounded as though he was about to. Zelnora clutched his head to her bosom, uttering tiny ladylike moans, though she could not bring herself to speak any of the untoward words the elder was voicing. “Oh, Ward, Ward,” was all she could think to say as he titillated her to greater heights. Indeed, the traction of his bent penis against her sopping quim was nearly enough to bring her to crisis.

But that smashed front door's bell tinkled then, the door shut politely, and Brannagh went still as a statue, silent aside from his panting, chapped breath. *A customer!*

Instantly, he stood upright, looking rapidly from side to side, hands stretched into claws, his crooked erection rapidly subsiding. Zelnora lay upon the compass—or perhaps it was a pen—with legs still outspread as Brannagh dashed off to the storefront.

She stood slowly, her lovely braided coiffure all in shambles, her embroidered rebozo headdress long ago having slid to the floor. She felt her lap to ensure there was no spot of moisture there, but she went out back to the necessary, where she had put up a mirror, to tidy herself up a bit.

*Brannagh.* Zelnora arranged the braids in their coiled position around her head as she thought about him. She knew he accosted many other women of their faith in the same manner, but no one dared complain for fear of excommunication.

Yet, did he give them earrings, earrings as beautiful as the ones she now affixed to her ears? He was thoughtful enough to recall she had pointed out the turquoise stones as perhaps being of value. The stones she had seen in San Francisco apparently came from the Rio Grande area, from what little Zelnora could discern from the Spaniard who sold them. Brannagh always being on the lookout for profitable new enterprises, he was quite intrigued by the minerals that might be found in the mountains of the Far West. Besides, if they struck a mining bonanza, as they called it out west, perhaps Brannagh would be generous enough to give her a fair share, and she might for once live independently of men.

Returning to the store, Zelnora discovered it empty aside from Mercy. The lovely redhead sat on her stool, her chin in hand, gazing dreamily at the blurry, smoky window. Perhaps she had gotten into the whiskey again. Taking her own stool, Zelnora casually asked, “Who was the customer?”

Sighing deeply, Mercy said, “A fine, upstanding, upright, handsome backwoodsman.” Again she sighed deeply.

Zelnora frowned. “Mercy!” Mercy was betrothed to a man of their faith. Jerusha was coming overland with three hundred others, and no one had heard from him in months. Zelnora, Mercy, and the other San Franciscans had arrived by sea from New York two years prior.

Mercy finally removed her chin from her fist and looked directly at Zelnora. “I know what you’re thinking, Zel. Jerusha. But oh, you should have seen this man!” Mercy looked heavenward as though for divine assistance. “Rugged, handsome, manly—A man must be very rugged to make it to this far outpost—the ones who survive, that is.” Looking at Zelnora again, Mercy continued, “Zel. He was not one of those reeking mountain men who smell like they sleep with animals, and wear animals, and trap animals—”

“—and wear animals on their heads.” Zelnora giggled.

“—no, Zel, he walked with an upright, manly bearing, and he wore fine, embroidered, beaded leggings, and he was clean-shaven and even smelled of pine, and when he smiled at me, he had fine, even, white teeth, and—”

“Where did he go?” Zelnora asked suddenly, surprising even herself.

Mercy sat up straighter, perhaps offended, but she answered, “Why, he went with Brannagh down to the fort. They had some business to conduct.”

Zelnora smiled slyly. “Do you suppose if I went down there, I might catch a glimpse of this man? You make him sound so intriguing I have to see him with my own eyes.”

Mercy clapped her hands together with the conspiracy of it all. “Yes, let us go!”

Zelnora was already to the front of the store, making sure her rebozo was arranged in an attractive manner. “Someone has to mind the store, Mercy!” Mercy pouted, so Zelnora said on her way out the

door, “We’ll take turns, all right? You already saw him. And you’re betrothed. I’ll be right back.”

## Chapter Two

“You’re some with the ladies, Erskine.”

The two mountain men shouldered their rifles and ambled down the hill from Brannagh’s store toward the fort, chewing on jerked beef Aaron Erskine had just purchased. Brannagh had rushed on ahead of them to find James Marshall, their boss at the mill upriver.

“Pshaw,” Erskine said modestly, nearly blushing in his prudishness, much to Cormack Bowmaker’s amusement. “You also, old hoss. I always say, ‘Keep your eyes skinned.’”

Cormack smiled to himself. Erskine didn’t “always” use those terms, being recently a California Battalion man from New York City, and only intermittently a mountain man such as himself. Erskine had not knocked about the mountains for a decade, as had Cormack, but he had old grit in him and the hair of the black bear. Imitating Cormack, Erskine carried his powder horn and bullet pouch strapped to his shoulder belt, along with the backwoodsman’s vital tools of deer horn-handled awl and bullet mold. And just this morning at the fort, Erskine had found himself a pair of buckskin pantaloons decorated with beads and porcupine quills, a costume that was some pumpkins. It was good to be back together with his former *compañero* from the East.

After losing his Cheyenne wife to some hair-raising whites, Cormack had made his temporary bed with more than a few Indians, there not being many white women in the mountains. “Maybe I should lay my sights on this redhead of yours,” he jested, referring to his own head of gingery hair, the likes of which he enjoyed calling



“flowing locks.” “This child’s getting old and feels like wanting a woman’s face about my lodge for the balance of my days.”

“Ho, boy! I’d lift your fiery hair if you did!” Erskine replied jovially.

But his imagination of the redheaded woman did stick in Cormack’s entrails. He had seen many beauteous Californio women of Spanish descent sashaying about the fort with their brightly colored shawls and tiny slippers, their glossy hair done up in all manner of coiffures. The only white women he’d viewed were pathetically downtrodden emigrants come over the plains and Sierra, women ill with dysentery or mountain fever, dark circles under their eyes, attempting to nurse squalling babies. Sutter’s Fort was the first civilized stop for them in many months, and being unaccustomed to mountain life, they were left nothing but lamentable shells of their former selves. Cormack reflected that he and Erskine should have a blowout down in San Francisco, but there was too much work to do at Marshall’s mill at Coloma, forty miles upriver.

Leaving one of the fort’s gates, where Indians lounged and Spaniards in side-buttoning *calzoneras* smoked *cigaritos*, Brannagh now came toward them accompanied by two men, one of them James Marshall. The other fellow presented a fine military figure in a double-breasted coat with gold buttons, shiny black leather shoes, and a saber at his waist. This man was introduced as Captain Sutter, builder and founder of the fort and all the agricultural lands around it farther than the eye could see.

“The way I see it,” Cormack explained to Marshall, since between him and Erskine, he was the more mechanical of the two, “the mill’s tailrace is causing quite a fix. It has to be forty or fifty rods long, so it needs gunpowder blasting and digging by hand to loosen up that red soil so we can take out those large rocks and boulders.”

Marshall nodded sagely. “Yes, I’ve taken note of those enormous rocks. I was worried this might happen.”

Cormack continued, "If you want this thing finished by early January, we'll need gunpowder. Brannagh, you got any gunpowder?"

Captain Sutter interrupted. "I've got some, my son. You can all have it free of charge as long as it'll help you complete the mill. Why, Brannagh here, General Vallejo in Sonoma, all of these emigrants, everyone will have need of that lumber once you get it running."

Marshall became excited. "Yes, yes, thank you for your consideration, Captain! I am sure you need many more stores for your operations, homes for the settlers, and—"

Cormack saw Marshall's beady eyes become round and the pupils dilate as he looked at some spot distant beyond Cormack's shoulder. Marshall's voice became hushed.

"—and shelter for these delicate beauties that must have come from San Francisco."

Naturally, Cormack and Erskine swiveled their torsos and craned their necks to view the "delicate beauties" from San Francisco. But there was only one beauty heading their way from Brannagh's store, and she was some pumpkins.

The biggest kind of pumpkin at that.

Instantly, Cormack became a thoughtless beaver kitten.

Wending her way down the hill, at first sight she appeared to be a Californio woman, dressed in their short skirts, wearing their delicate slippers and stockings, ensuring to hold her colorful rebozo over her coiffure, although she lacked most of their ornamentation.

But her white skin the color of borax marked her plain as beaver sign as an American. Her white *camisita* displayed the substantial charms of her bosom, although hers was not the shapeless, lumpy form of the undernourished emigrant women. In the mountains, American women were valued at low figures, being too refined and "foofaraw," too much like pictures. They couldn't make moccasins or dress skins. But he was not in the mountains any longer. And if she had somehow made it to this outpost looking this lovely and almost

deer-like, with a neck as graceful as a snow goose's, true and sound as a sapling, well, then, she must be capable of many things.

Cormack stared at Erskine. Erskine stared back at Cormack.

This woman was some pumpkins now, but she did not appear to have hair as blindingly ginger as Cormack's own. Had Erskine mistaken the color of her hair in the darkness of Brannagh's store? Oh, death or glory, more than likely she was Brannagh's own wife, so why had everyone suddenly gone beaver? What ailed them? Cormack had no relish for mush and molasses! Marshall should have been acquainted with Brannagh's wife. Unless this was Brannagh's mistress recently arrived...

Brannagh smiled widely at the sight of the woman—who was by no means one of the tender young things missionaries such as Brannagh often married, but appeared to be only a few years shy of Cormack's own thirty and eight. "My dear!" he boomed, opening his arms wide. "Come and meet the fine fellows of Sutter's Mill upriver."

The woman approached beatifically, glancing shyly at each man in turn, even shaking their hands. "This is my helpmate, Miss Zelnora Sparks."

He called her "Miss"! When she shook Cormack's hand and dipped a little curtsy, Cormack imagined that she gazed deeply into his eyes. He looked down at her with a rapture he hoped did not show, as he knew himself very capable of maintaining a strict poker face. Miss Zelnora Sparks! His rifle-lock would speak her name clearly when he cocked it! She had a straight nose turned up slightly at the tip, a small, petulant mouth the color of raspberries, her eyebrows silky and arching, and her eyes were the brown of sarsaparilla beer. Not the green or blue they should have been, if this was Erskine's girl.

"Miss Sparks has been assisting me at my store, so if you boys need anything, she's here to help. And say, Captain Sutter, did you know that Miss Sparks here used to work in the Georgia mines?" He turned heartily to Marshall and the two backwoodsmen. "So if you see anything, shall we say, lucrative in the ground up your way, be

sure and let us know. Miss Sparks has a great affinity for identifying any type of rare or valuable mineral. She can tell mica from fool's gold—in fact, she was just opining to me there might be turquoise around these parts, like the beautiful blue stones in her earrings.”

Cormack did not like the manner in which Brannagh reached out to actually touch Miss Sparks' earrings, and the woman seemed to cringe a bit as she protested, “Well, actually, no, I said there was turquoise out the Rio Grande—”

Cormack knew turquoise as clear as beaver sign, having traveled between the Platte and Arkansas, and trapped on the Gila River, raising the hair of more than one Apache, and he knew there was no turquoise in California.

“Bah!” Sutter suddenly exploded in a strange horn-tossing mood. “I tell you, Brannagh, and all the rest of you. If you do find any valuable mines on my lands, beware! There is one bandit who is feared throughout the entire state of California—Joaquin Valenzuela! Beware!” Was he being dramatic, in his blow hardy Swiss way?

It was Miss Sparks who dared ask, “And what should we beware of, Captain?”

The Captain's face actually turned red with rage as he sputtered, “Valenzuela and his band of confederates have left a bloody trail of evil-doing destruction throughout the Sierra Nevada for over a year now! They will plunder anyone who is said to have as much as a single milk cow! Now, I know my Indians are peaceful and for the most part do not steal, but Valenzuela's band? Bah! Just last month I heard they raped—err, took advantage of a woman down at poor John Ridge's cabin. It is insufferable that we have no police, no rangers to bring these men to justice.”

“Are they Mexicans, then?” Miss Sparks enquired.

Sutter became thoughtful, hand on chin. “Most of his confederates are Mexican, yes, from the Mexican state of Sonora. But some people become overly romantic and have been calling Valenzuela himself a *gente de razón*, a Spanish nobleman, and to that I say *bah!* There is

nothing noble about the evil they inflict upon innocent people. You must beware, if you do find anything of value, not to go spreading the word about.”

Miss Sparks curtsied then, briefly and prettily, saying, “Thank you for the warning, Captain Sutter. Now, Ward, I must go fetch Miss Narrimore. She, ah, she has a question for you.”

“Certainly, my dear. We’ll be here for awhile, discussing business.”

She curtsied to Marshall, then to Erskine, and lastly to Cormack himself. How he wanted to touch her hand again! And once again, it seemed that her eyes lingered the longest upon his face, this pumpkin who was the pinnacle of female virtue. Cormack’s cock, unbidden, elongated and stiffened. He was glad that his buckskin shirt covered his erection, although suddenly he was acutely aware that his belt was probably too tight.

Then she was gone up the hill, and all five men stood dumbly with hands at their sides, mute, like the giant boulders Cormack had to blow out of the water.

## Chapter Three

Zelnora's hands trembled as she trudged up the hill to the store. Who was that man? Mr. Cormack Bowmaker, that's all she knew. Was he Mercy's backwoodsman? But no, it was the other fellow who wore the buckskins with the porcupine quills. This flame-haired man of impossible beauty was taller than the other, stood erect with hips thrust forward and long arms dangling at his sides, as though he knew how to walk, to stalk, to fuck. His piercing, unblinking eyes, a celestine blue of a clarity she had never known, had seemed to look quizzically at her. His head was slightly cocked, as though wondering if he knew her from somewhere, or questioning the veracity of her soul, her past, as though he knew something about her, something that was perhaps shameful. Was there anything shameful about her?

*Oh, dear Lord*, he must know about her and Brannagh, about their fumbled couplings in the back room, about his groping of her in the San Francisco newspaper office, oh, dear Lord, but that was absurd. Brannagh had not touched her earring until after Mr. Bowmaker had looked at her that way. Perhaps he had somehow found out that she was a divorced woman?

Burning with this imagined shame, Zelnora burst into the store, glad there were no customers in there. Mercy, behind the counter, leapt to her feet, her face ablaze with anticipation and anguish.

"Zel! What happened? Did you see him?"

Dramatically flinging her back against the closed door, Zelnora panted, "If by 'him' you mean the redheaded, taller one without the fine beaded leggings, then yes, indeed, I saw him. And no animal on his head, just a scarf tied round it." Zelnora paced about the room and

fanned herself with her hand. “Mercy!” she breathed, realizing the double entendre of the word for the first time. “I have been struck by an angel. I had never thought this would happen.”

Mercy came around the side of the counter to confront her friend, grabbing her by the shoulders forcefully. “I saw no redheaded man, Zel. Tell me, then, about the shorter one, the dark-haired one.”

Zelnora felt faint. Although the autumn rain had just ceased outside, her face burned, and she longed to dive into the river. She looked her friend in the eye. “His name is Aaron Erskine, and that’s all I know, they work with Marshall up at Coloma building a mill, but you can’t go down there now because I... ” She closed her eyes, struggling to continue. “I have to go to the pantry shed for some, ah...some lemonade!”

She grabbed the padlock key and her tin cup from underneath the counter, whipping the rebozo from her hair and flinging it over a stool, and her last view was of Mercy, hands on hips, declaring, “That must be some rugged redheaded man to make you so featherheaded!”

“If Brannagh returns, tell him I’ve gone to bathe in the river!”

Her real goal was to sneak more whiskey from one of the kegs she knew were there, and gather herself. She fairly ran the fifty yards up the hill to the pantry shed, letting herself in with the key. It felt safe and secure inside here with the barrels of flour and pickled salmon, the comforting smell of tallow and cheese.

She sat on some bags of dried corn holding her whiskey cup with trembling hands, just soaking her lips in it and breathing, hoping the essence would bring her to her senses. With a shock, she realized she was contriving to somehow meet up with Mr. Bowmaker again. How dare she? How could she? Brannagh would never hear of it! Perhaps he had a wife cached away somewhere up in the mountains. Perhaps she even cooked for them at the mill. What did she know? Mr. Bowmaker would play the fiddle or some other mournful instrument at night as the exotic wife of Indian descent—a beautiful, lithe maiden no doubt—danced a fandango about the fire with upraised arms, and

then he'd fuck her ferociously, like an animal, with her on her knees, flattening her like a frog against the bearskin, as Barton used to do to her. Only Mr. Bowmaker wouldn't grunt like a barnyard animal. No, he wouldn't let his tremendous strength hurt her, he would use his strength in the adept, agile manner the mountain man used when he put his all into tracking, scenting, shooting, and skinning his prey. The stalk of his penis would be thick, like a proud, giant trunk, but he wouldn't hurt her in his brutality, the ecstasy would last longer than thirty seconds, and he would—

“Oh, excuse me. I didn't know anyone was in here.”

*Good Lord!* It was him! He poked his head and shoulders beyond the shed's doorframe, lit like a beatific angel by the filtered light of the one sooty glass window.

Zelnora was so lost in her reverie she jumped a foot in the air at the sound of his voice, embarrassingly sloshing the whiskey out of her cup as she put her free hand to her chest in shock. But she did note the tiniest of amused smiles at the edges of his mouth—oh, his beautiful mouth, with its bow-shaped cupid's upper lip. Gathering herself, she leaned forward in anticipation, perhaps knowing this position showed her bosom to its best advantage. “No, no, it's fine, I was just, ah...” Smiling, she held out the cup as though it explained everything. “Please come in. What can I do for you?”

More confidently now, he entered the room, and he had to stoop a bit to clear the doorframe. Oh, dear Lord in heaven, how tall he was, how masculine the way he stood, how large and experienced his hands as they hung at his thighs, powerful thighs tightly encased in buckskin...He looked directly at her with that unwavering gaze. “Brannagh said I could find a box of rifle ammunition in here. Is that true?”

Zelnora stood and set the offending tin cup onto a barrel. He gazed at her as though she were his prey, or an oracle capable of answering his innermost life questions. She returned the unblinking



gaze and the sly smile. “Is that true?” she said coquettishly. “Why, yes, I suppose it’s true.”

His smile widened—a soft, almost fond gaze, a woman could imagine, if such things were possible. He took one step closer to her. “Is it true, really? Maybe life is just a dream and we wake up when we die.”

Zelnora was startled to hear such a sentiment come from a mountain man. She had thought they just discussed rifles, pelts, and, well...ammunition. The smile melted from her face, and she felt the sting that signaled tears might fill her eyes at any moment. “Yes, but wouldn’t that be sad? Shouldn’t we live life to its grandest extent?”

“Do you, though?” he asked ironically. He had almost no accent at all. It was hard to pinpoint where he was from. Maybe a tinge of French, but it was just a flat, sandy...beautiful voice. “Working in Brannagh’s store, being his ‘helpmate’? Is that your grandest extent, Miss Sparks?”

How presumptuous of him! Yet how correct. She dropped her direct gaze to his throat, which was unfortunately covered with a black silk cravat. He stood so still, with hands at his sides immobile, taking her answers so solemnly. No one ever listened to her or requested her opinion on anything. “Well, no, of course not. My situation could be a lot worse, however. You’ve seen those poor emigrant women in the fort. I’m very fortunate to have Elder—Mr. Brannagh as my protector.” Defiantly, she looked back up into his eyes, only to discover he was no longer smiling in that deliciously impish manner. Now he was dead serious.

And took another step toward her, so there was only the distance of a foot between them. He looked her up and down, assessing. “Yes, I reckon you’re fortunate to have Brannagh as your ‘protector,’ as you call him. Many unlucky women have had to stoop to worse than him.”

*Oh, dear Lord, he knows...* “He is merely my protector!” She shrugged. “And he’s not that bad. Once you become acquainted with him.”

Tilting his head in that assessing way of his, Mr. Bowmaker actually reached out and took her chin in his fingers, his fingers so long and warm, capable of doing so many things, such as knapping flints, and skinning animals, and...Zelnora's mind became a complete blank. "A protector? And that makes it better? To cavort with a protector?"

*The nerve!* "Who said anything...about cavorting..." Her voice was becoming completely uncertain.

Now he stood so close she had to back up against a shelf of sardine tins. "I saw the way he touched your earring, and I know he gave them to you." He even bent the smallest bit at the knees, so as to look her more closely in the eye, but she didn't want to meet his gaze.

"That is none of your business, Mr. Bowmaker. I get by all right."

"Excepting he's a heartless bastard, and you're a lovely mountain flower just waiting to be plucked."

Did he say...plucked? Or fucked? Zelnora's head spun wildly with this sinewy man's proximity. What was his goal, to taunt her? Well, then, he was succeeding excellently. Recalling her recent ambition to track him down and pluck him, she gained the courage to look him in the eye again and say, in what she hoped was a careless tone, "Yes, he is rather heartless. I don't care much for him personally. And I do find you rather beautiful and wild and...animalistic."

Mr. Bowmaker ran one long arm up against the sardine shelf, nearly engulfing her in his wood smoke and pine scent that was scintillating rather than nauseating. She was melting utterly and completely, Zelnora knew, and would do whatever this potent man asked of her. Now, he fairly whispered down at her in a husky voice, "How would Brannagh feel...to know that you were alone with a wild mountain man in a shed full of ammunition and whiskey?"

"We're doing nothing wrong."

She realized he panted with lust, too, his lovely, almost aristocratic nostrils flaring slightly. "Yet."

He kissed her, and it was not what she expected. She expected to be thrown to the floor and fucked brutally, the butt of the rifle he still had slung over his shoulder tapping out a staccato beat for the entire fort to hear. She would have willingly done so, too. No, he was tender and respectful, his beautiful, full, moist lips moving slowly across hers, occasionally nipping a bit at her lower lip. None of that slurping and grunting and shoving of tongues. His free hand cradled the back of her skull in his hand, sinking his fingers deep into her braids. Oh, this was heaven. She had never been kissed like this before, snorting hot air against each other's faces, slowly licking each other's lips, sucking on each other. He was like a piece of chocolate one wished to melt gradually in one's mouth, not gulp down all at once.

She needed him closer as she ran her hands down the solid rock of his lower back and over the perfect globes of his ass and pulled his crotch into her. He came eagerly, with one great exhalation, angling his hips into her, so that he lifted her several inches into the air against the sardine shelf, sending some cans bumping to the floor. *Oh, good Lord, yes.* Even though two layers of leather separated them—his shirt and his pants—Zelnora's experience told her his penis was long, thick, straight, and so plump she could even feel the giant mushroom head against her dripping quim.

They pulled apart several inches so that he appeared blurry, his face was so close, the clarity of his aquamarine eyes obscured, but not the strength of his lust. And need, she saw suddenly. Need. There was something more here than just the need for a fast fuck. There was something more that he needed, and she aimed to find out what it was.

Her quim shivered with anticipatory delight as a drop rolled down her inner thigh. Her quim, that used to be so traitorous, was now on the same team as her brain—for once, they worked in tandem, both desiring the same thing, and it was a delicious sultry heaven.

Bringing both slippered feet off the floor, Zelnora attempted to hook her toes around the back of his calves into the tops of his...moccasins? He wore no boots! Under the covering of his

buckskins, the hems of which dragged the ground, his moccasins only reached his ankles, and she had nowhere to hitch her toes. He must have known her goal, for he reached one long arm down and gathered her Californio skirt in his nimble fingers, collecting it fold by fold like one would gather a curtain, bringing it slowly up her heated thigh. Oh, the unbearable agony as his fingers came closer and closer to the soaking lips of her sex.

But he only wished to grab her bare thigh in his burning-hot, able hand, to lift it higher off the floor, to get a better angle to swivel his hips into her. His eyes seemed to roll back into his head then, and he issued the deepest guttural groan she had ever heard, as though he imitated a bear, and Zelnora went loco then.

“Mr. Bowmaker!” she cried quietly, running her fingers underneath his head scarf so that it slid off, and she was able to finally feel the heat of his scalp, the fine silken strands of his thick ginger hair. She yanked her own bodice down in order to feel her nipples rub against the heated leather of his chest. She arched her back, and he licked a steamy trail from the pit of her throat downward. His tongue may as well have been licking her clitoris—not that she knew that forbidden feeling—for all the shivering and clutching her sex was doing.

*Oh yes please, please suck my nipples*, she thought fervently, head thrown back as though praying, something she was quite accustomed to, although not in this manner. Gathering a handful of his silken hair into her fist, she gave a gentle yank that may have been misinterpreted, for he suddenly brought his face back up to hers, panting heavily, and she realized he was sweating with passion. She wondered briefly, *Is he this passionate with every woman?*

“Miss Sparks...” he pleaded sincerely. “Gut-shot is this child.” He could barely speak, he breathed so heavily, and she felt a fine tremor go up the front of his thigh that was plastered to hers. “You’ve turned me into a thoughtless beaver kitten.” He placed his forehead against hers, shutting his eyes as though in pain. “You’re the biggest kind of

pumpkin, but I can't act such as this on the property of another man." He dropped her thigh slowly, her toes touching ground again, and disappointment washed over her.

Tenderly, she kissed the tip of his nose where a drop of sweat perched. "Mr. Bowmaker..." she whispered. "You are a refreshing bed of sweet delights, the most handsome, stimulating, sensuous man I've ever met. I absolutely revel in your masculine charms. I know we cannot act such as this—"

Mr. Bowmaker wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and blinked down at the floor, as though he'd forgotten where he was. "Lord. I need to get myself my own pantry shed."

There was a brief pause before Zelnora almost giggled, but suddenly, Brannagh's loud braying wafted up, coming from outside the store. It appeared he brayed at someone other than them, but they quickly separated by a few feet, smoothing down their clothing, clearing their throats, regaining their senses.

Mr. Bowmaker was just restoring his head scarf when Zelnora found herself grabbing a fistful of his leather shirtfront and yanking him toward her. "Listen to me, Mr. Bowmaker. My husband, Quartus Stringfellow—remember that name—will come to you at the mill and give you a message. He will tell you when and where to meet me. You...*would* like to meet again, wouldn't you?" Without waiting for a reply, she took several long strides to the boxes of ammunition he had requested and pointed stridently at them. "Here. Take whatever you want and head down the hill. I'll wait several more minutes."

Mr. Bowmaker seemed dazed. "Miss Sparks. I've got an erection fit to break a plate. Maybe it's best that you go first, and I'll wait."

The last thing in the world she wanted was to leave his alluring presence, but it was only a matter of time before Brannagh became suspicious, and if Mr. Bowmaker was this passionate, he would want to meet with her again.

She grabbed some of the sardine tins that had rolled onto the floor and, for good measure, filled her cup with lemonade. She dared not

kiss him again for that would lead to untoward frenzy, so she merely cast him a longing glance. How handsome he was, yet vulnerable in his lust. Still breathing heavily, those long arms hanging at his sides now meant something so different from two hours ago. She felt she was an entirely new person. He had made her feel that way.

Tearing herself away, she stepped out of the door.

She wanted to tell him she loved him, but that was ridiculous!

## Chapter Four

*January, 1848*

*Coloma*

The icy water numbed Cormack from the waist down. The currents of melted snow turned his nipples into painful points and shriveled his cock, but he was determined to bathe. After two weeks of working on the mill in the stinging, driving sheets of rain, he needed something refreshing. He rapidly slathered the soap—made by Gennie Wimmer, the only woman in Coloma—into his armpits and between his buttocks, letting the rushing of the waterfall wash the dirt away. Then quickly, he knelt on the rocky bottom of the river to soap his hair, the roaring of piercingly burning water surging over his head for only the briefest moment, and then he was out, scrambling onto the bank.

He'd taken this opportunity to bathe, as the sun had peeked out for an hour or so. Marshall had opened the mill's floodgates to full capacity to scour the tailrace, allowing it to run all night, so there was no work to do now. Panting, he leaned back on his elbows on his buffalo robe, warmed by the sun. He'd spent ten years bathing in the melted snows of the Yellowstone, Green, and Columbia rivers, so he rapidly recovered from his ordeal, like a lizard sunning itself on a rock. Yet he could still only hold his milky face to the sun for so long, even after a decade of peregrinations—damn his Scottish heritage. Lying flat on his back, he slapped his felt hat over his face and thought, as usual, of Miss Zelnora Sparks from Sutter's Fort.

That brief spree with her in the pantry shed had put him into a horn-tossing mood ever since. Not only did he feel queersome about having nearly fucked her among a stack of sardine tins, his blood on fire, but her parting statement that her “husband” would bring him a message made his brain dance before his eyes. Trying not to think about the husband, Cormack instead thought of her lush breasts, jiggly globes of womanhood being offered to his mouth, for his own gustatory delight. With these thoughts—and kissing her sweet raspberry mouth was probably the most sensual thing of all—his prick began to stiffen, and out of habit his hand went to it, just the palm stroking the underside as it lay pulsating against his belly. He fondled his balls, one bent leg with knee in the air, hips angled toward the sun, imagining for the thousandth time in vivid detail her bare velvety shoulders, the cinnamon smell of her braids, how lubricious her pussy when he humped his erection into her, the fishy sex smell of her drifting up into his face.

Now two hands, one cupping his balls, the other wrapped around what he knew to be his enormously proud cock, and Cormack could feel himself smile as he slowly began to frig himself. Ho, boy, what would it be like to have the bountiful Miss Sparks’ hand around his prick? Since his wife’s death, he had spread his bed with many a woman, of course, and he could speak the lingo of most of them and treated them with consideration, but it had been twelve years since he’d tussled with an American woman, and he’d become like one possessed.

The beaver were all trapped out. There was nothing left for Cormack in the mountains, and he couldn’t see going back to his former occupation. That was a lifetime ago. He was getting old and wanted a woman’s face about his lodge for the remainder of his days. This realization had him shaking in his moccasins, but there it was.

Voices made him pause and remove the hat from his face. Three of his fellow mill workers squatted on a rocky ledge above him with hands dangling between their knees, just watching him and muttering,



expressionless. Cormack replaced the hat and returned to massaging his own balls. Ah, well. Folks were half-froze for entertainment around there, men frigged themselves constantly, and Cormack could do worse than send them into a jealous frenzy at the sight of his meaty tool. Maybe they would no longer make him light all the damned gunpowder charges while they cowered behind rocks. If this is how they wanted to gratify their dry, it was fine with him.

As he stroked himself faster, the idea the men were watching excited Cormack. Their own pricks must be stiffer than plates by now. He felt like a muscular buck displaying his immense cock to the men's view. And what a view they must be having! He let his mouth go slack, and he rocked his hips as he pumped into his own fist. Were his fellow workers getting so randy they were clutching their own cocks? Cormack's free hand moved to massage his pubic bone as he humped the air with abandon in the direction of the men. He felt wild and lewd, proud to exhibit his virility, and thus his superiority. The men above fell silent, and he was on the verge of shooting his seed into his face when a shower of little rocks came from directly above his head, some landing on his buffalo robe and annoying him to no end.

Without releasing his cock, he removed his hat once more and squinted up the riverbed.

"Cormack!" Erskine bellowed, clad in a long capote as though he expected more rain. "I've got a heap of fat meat ready! This beaver feels like chawing!"

Sighing with regret—and the regretful men above retreated—Cormack let go of his cock and dressed in his buckskins, recently laundered by Gennie Wimmer. Hurrah for Gennie Wimmer, even if she was the evilest, most putrefied, no-account woman who had ever lived.

He joined Erskine in front of the log shanty they had built, rather than share the quarters built for the other workers, where the foulest smells and sounds were the order of the day. Erskine was well enough

with the flint and steel and was the gourmet of the mountains, so Cormack left most cooking up to him. They sat upon their square, flat rocks with rifles across their laps and heartily fell to a pan of deer meat.

After their usual silence of about ten minutes, Erskine licked his fingers, wiped his knife on the grass, and said, "So I've been wondering, old hoss. Exactly what you were doing with Miss Sparks in that shed."

Cormack, not done with his last bite of fat meat, stopped chewing and looked up quizzically at his *compañero*, as though he had no idea what he referred to.

Rolling his eyes, Erskine pressed on. "You know what I mean. Down at the fort. You and Brannagh's 'helpmate' were hard at it. I know the smell, and I know the flushed look that comes from being hard at it."

Finally swallowing, Cormack grinned widely down at his knife. "'Flushed look'? I have that look all the time. It's my Scottish ancestors."

Erskine looked to the sky for assistance. "Damn you and your Scottish—listen here, Cormack, I don't want any problems with Brannagh. He's got the only damned worthwhile store within a thousand miles of here. Where else will we get coffee, pickles, sugar, tongues...bottles of porter?"

Cormack also wiped his knife on the grass and returned it to its sheath. He looked Erskine in the eye. "All right. Yes. We were hard at it. I happen to think she's some pumpkins and..." He shrugged. "You know, I've often said I want a woman to share a lodge with. I'm doggone if I ain't."

Erskine nodded knowingly. "There's the gal, and there's the mountains."

"Right. Who's there to remember my old body otherwise?"

Then Erskine frowned. “Yes, but she belongs to Brannagh, you out-and-out dough-head! Do you think he’s going to take kindly to you taking what belongs to him?”

“You yourself were keeping your eyes skinned for that redhead. I’m sure she also belongs to him.”

Erskine seemed to capitulate then, looking with disgust into the pines. “Yes, well...Just promise me you don’t intend on seeing her again. Captain Sutter could get angry too, think about that. Then all stores are completely cut off to us. We could even be discharged from this mill.”

Thinking of Miss Sparks’ husband, the one who was supposed to come with a message, actually gave Cormack pause. It did appear there were now two spouses he would have to rub out to win her hand. Still, he found his mouth saying, “I can’t promise that, *compañero*. Miss Sparks is the pinnacle of feminine superiority. The whip-poor-will has sung it. Speaking of stores...” Half-rising from his rock, Cormack viewed an extremely slow cart wobbling up to the mill, a cart pulled by a thickset, stumpy mule. The arrival of a cart from the fort was always cause for a calamitous throwing down of tools, drink, and even food, and Cormack and Erskine jogged off down the hill.

But as the only thing the cart contained was another human, most of the other mill workers soon lost interest. The chap was extremely queersome, to say the least. Although not any older than Cormack himself, he had lost almost all of his hair, so that his head resembled a granite dome, and his thick-lensed spectacles were strapped on to his head with a leather thong. He struggled to get out of the cart quite giddily—he seemed extremely pleased to be arriving in such a conveyance. Cormack could see that, in form, he looked like a perfect pear. He wore a coarse checked shirt, and a pair of homespun pantaloons were tucked into boots that reached his knees. Cormack assisted by taking his arm, as the fellow giggled in a high-pitched

manner unsuited for a man. Cormack looked quizzically at Erskine, who shrugged.

“Oh, why, thank you so much!” trilled the fellow. “I’ve come so far today. It’s been such a long journey.” Both feet having touched earth, he looked about himself with excitement. “Is this the mill?”

Cormack admitted, “Yep. And who might you be?”

Putting a haughty hand to his chest, the chap stuck his nose in the air and declared, “I am Quartus Stringfellow, husband of Zelnora Sparks, here to see the esteemed Mr. Cormack Bowmaker, mountain man extraordinaire.” Losing the airs, Quartus giggled and slapped Cormack on the shoulder. “I’m here with a message from a girl. Zelnora.”

Cormack’s heart nearly stopped. This was Miss Sparks’ husband? And he was willingly coming to give Cormack a message about an assignation with his wife? Or perhaps the message was something else, something more along the lines of “I am here to lift your hair for touching my wife.” Somehow, Cormack didn’t get that impression from this dainty fellow.

“I’m Bowmaker, and this is my partner, Erskine. Why don’t you come up to our camp and set awhile?”

“Why, certainly! Just let me get my cartography tools from the cart here...I thought while I was up here, why not do some surveying? I’ll bet there has never been a map made of this area.”

“But there have been. Many maps,” Erskine mentioned.

They started up the hill.

“Oh, this is such an adventure! To go where no white man has trod before! So you are Mr. Bowmaker, my, my. Do you really make bows? I made my own drum once.” Quartus looked him up and down, assessing. “Yes...I can see why she was so taken by you. You look like you have muscles on top of muscles.” He looked about with gleaming eyes. “Thus my errand to this hearty place in the out-of-doors! And this is such a manly pursuit! The fresh air, the sawmill, the sky, the, ah, the rocks...”

Behind Quartus' back, Erskine whispered loudly, "Her *husband*?"

Cormack curtly nodded. "I'll explain later. Maybe."

Getting a devilish idea, Cormack fetched three horns and a bottle of whiskey from the shanty. Handing Quartus a horn as the fellow sat on a tree stump, he explained, "To gratify your dry."

"Oh, my." Quartus took one sip and nearly expectorated upon the ground, but he maintained his composure with watery eyes. "What sort of juice is this?"

Taking large "manly" swallows from his own horn, Erskine truly did laugh then. "Juice?"

"Bug juice, more like it," Cormack said politely into his own horn. Sitting on his square rock, he confronted the silly man respectfully. "Mr. Stringfellow, my old hoss." Quartus chortled at being called an old horse. "What is this message from Miss Sparks that you bring?"

Pleased at having something important to do, Quartus sobered. "The message is. You are to come immediately to the fort, and to meet Zelnora at her cabin." Turning to Erskine, he explained, "She shares a cabin with Sister Narrimore, another of our brethren from New York." He swiveled back to Cormack and continued, "Since Elder Brannagh is out of town and back in San Francisco for the next couple of weeks, Zelnora deems it appropriate that you visit her when Brannagh cannot..."

Cormack filled in. "Cannot rain his wrath down upon me?"

Quartus nodded stiffly. "Something like that, yes."

Cormack shared a glance with Erskine, angry and intrigued at the same time. "All right here, Stringfellow. Let me get this straight. I'm prepared to strike out at once for the fort, only I'd like a few questions answered. First of all, if you're her husband, then Brannagh can't possibly be her husband, am I correct?"

"Hard doings when it comes to that," Erskine commented helpfully.

Quartus nodded. "Correct. Brannagh is merely her benefactor who agreed to employ her when we reached the Far West."

Erskine harrumphed. "A slave."

Ignoring him, Cormack inquired, "Then there should be no reason Brannagh would lift any hair were some fellow to come courting Miss Sparks?"

Losing his professional decorum, Quartus burst into another round of giggles and slapped his knee. "'Lift hair'! Oh, I do love the colorful way you backwoodsmen speak!"

Cormack frowned in annoyance, swallowed the remainder of his horn, and pointed at Quartus with it. "Now you. Suddenly she has a brand-new husband I've never heard of, yet she wants an assignation with me? You can understand my puzzlement. This seems to be quite a fix. I mean, there's damp powder and no fire to dry it, you take my meaning?"

Apparently the "juice" was affecting poor Quartus, for he began to belt out a queer song. "'Down the center, hands across! You, Jake Herring, thump it! Now you all go right ahead, every one of you hump it'!"

"Stringfellow!" cried Cormack, gripping him by the shoulder and giving him a little shake. "You. Zelnora's husband. Why would she want an assignation with me if she's married to you?"

Quartus' eyes became large and round. "Oh. Why, that's ludicrous! Why wouldn't she want an assignation with you? You're handsome and muscular, and I'm frivolous and, well, smaller." He waved a limp hand at Cormack. "I'm not her real husband. I'm what they call a nominal husband, a husband in name only. Another sort of protector, like Brannagh, to ward off the undesirable suitors." Leaning in confidentially to Cormack, Quartus imparted, "We've never even slept in the same bed together!"

Cormack and Erskine both leaned back, exhaling with relief. So Cormack must be a desirable suitor! That explained why Quartus came on this distant adventure of forty miles to deliver that message!

Cormack nearly leapt to his feet to grab his possible bag and jump on his horse, but he remembered his *compañero*. “Quartus! Does this mean that Miss Mercy Narrimore is also—”

“Bowmaker! Bowmaker!” A fellow, name of Bigler, streaked it up the hill, cupping in his hand something very fragile like a tiny fish that he didn’t want to maim. “Look at this, will you? Tell me what you think!” Nearly bowling over the pathetically oiled Quartus, Bigler stepped between the three men, bending down to open his palm and reveal his treasure. Some gold bits gleamed warmly in the sun, floating in the crystal water of the American River. “Gold, right? I just found it in the tailrace when Marshall shut the floodgates.”

Cormack stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I can’t say for certain that ain’t fool’s gold, pyrite, do you take my meaning? But you might be on to something there. Those little chunks seem to shine more brightly than pyrite.”

“‘Every one of you, hump it’...” Quartus continued serenading himself. “Gold? I can find gold with my divining rod.”

Bigler glanced at Quartus and guffawed. “Anyway, Bowmaker, what do you make of this? Should I bring it down to Sutter and have him take a look?”

“No, no!” cried Erskine. “Remember, Cormack, what Sutter told us about the bandits? Bigler, don’t say a word about this to anyone. There’s got to be a way to find out if it’s really gold before we go spreading the word all about the camps. Bigler, do you think you can find some more without letting anyone know what you’re doing?”

“Why, sure, Erskine. Me and my boys’ll just—”

“No! No boys!”

Cormack asked, “Then how can we find out for sure we’re not just going over a sight of ground for no reason?”

Quartus cried, “Gold!” and all heads turned to him. “You think that might be gold?” Hugging himself proudly, he trilled, “I know who would know if that’s gold. Zelnora! She’s a mining expert. She

worked in the Georgia mines as a youth, before Barton Sparks came along and—”

“That’s right, Zelnora!” Erskine proclaimed. “Brannagh was talking about her expertise in the area of mining.”

This time, Cormack did race into the cabin for his possible bag.

Zelnora Sparks. Once again, the bountiful woman seemed the answer to his dreams.



## Chapter Five

Zelnora carried a basket of tortillas, bad Boston wine, and a bowl of frioles made by Californio women at the fort. She headed back up to Brannagh's store so she and Mercy could eat dinner. Sutter freely gave them the awful wine—awful because they'd wondered why, when the country abounded in grapes, they had to import such stuff at exorbitant rates—when he knew Brannagh was gone. Sutter had told them the Spanish government had discouraged the planting of grapevines as a protection against the monopoly of their own winemakers.

Zelnora nearly dropped the basket when the three horses came stomping down the muddy road from upriver, Quartus jiggling like a marionette astride the saddle horn of one rider's horse. Mr. Bowmaker! Quartus, true to his word, had brought the powerful mountain man back to her! How she would kiss and hug Quartus for the kindness of his heart—maybe even give him a new pocket compass. It had been so long since she had tussled with the delectable buckskinned man, she had almost thought the entire thing was a dream. Or that it had just been a temporary absence of sanity on his part and he had moved on to other, more attractive diversions. Frontiersmen, Zelnora knew, were accustomed to moving about the plains with impunity and abandon. On arriving in California, newcomers found themselves enlisted in the ranks of one or two classes, the hopeful or the despondent. Zelnora had been afraid Mr. Bowmaker might be among the despondent.

By the time she reached the store, the men had already tied up their animals and had dismounted. Mr. Bowmaker assisted Quartus,

who seemed to have lost all sensation in his limbs, as he nearly slithered into the woodsman's grasp. With arms uplifted, Bowmaker's shirt cleared his ass, and she viewed the round, muscular shape of it under the tight leather when he moved. Oh, better than a compass, she would give Quartus one of these Indian drums she had seen about the fort!

Shoving the basket of food at Mercy, Zelnora skipped to Mr. Bowmaker's horse. She should have greeted Quartus first, as he leaned, wobbly and red-faced, against the flank of the horse, but without thinking, she stepped right up to Mr. Bowmaker. He looked calmly down at her, unperturbed by what was obviously a strenuous and taxing ride, his clear tourmaline eyes flickering with some new kind of mischief. Reaching up, she tucked a loose lock of ginger hair back into his head scarf. His scalp steamed with sweat and exertion, yet he looked as unflappable as a member of Congress.

"Cormack," she said, presuming to call him by his Christian name, "Quartus gave you my message?"

His eyes roved over her face, a pleased grin lifting one corner of his mouth. "Zelnora. Yes. I was very happy to receive it."

She grabbed his bicep and tugged. "Then let us go to my cabin. He told you Brannagh was away in San Francisco for awhile?"

He allowed himself to be dragged toward her cabin, though Quartus was slowly sliding onto the ground in a puddle of boneless limbs, and Henry Bigler, a fellow missionary, was suddenly there, tugging at her other arm.

"Sister Sparks!" Bigler cried urgently. "We need your expertise for a matter of—"

"Yes. Can we talk later, Henry?"

The couple fairly jogged up the hill to her cabin, a small twelve-by-twelve canvas room, the sides hung with chintz. The toilet table was a trunk set upon two claret cases, and the women's looking glass was the sort that came in paper cases for doll's houses. The washstand was another trunk with a large dish for the bowl, but the two pine

beds with their straw mattresses were perfectly serviceable, and here Zelnora gently shoved the man back upon the cotton ticking.

He leaned against the rough boughs of the headboard, one arm slung above his head, the thumb of his other hand hooked under a much-worn belt. Zelnora plunked her rear end down next to him and leaned against his solid chest, toying with the shoulder fringes of his shirt.

“Cormack,” she nearly sobbed, her mouth slack and watering for the taste of him. He seemed perfectly content to wait all day and perhaps even drink some tea, so she moved one hand to his scarf and slid it from his head. “How I’ve missed you. I don’t know how in the short space of time we spent together, but I’ve got such a case on you, not a minute passes I don’t think about your bewitching eyes, sparkling so mischievously...” Placing her mouth against his face, she whispered, “What is it that you think of when you look so bewitching?” He did smell of sweat after his long hard ride from the mill, but he was imbued with his own individual scent of pine, wood smoke, and melted snow, as though the sweat itself had crystallized on his skin.

He chuckled a little as he removed his hand from his belt and brought it round her shoulders to hold her peacefully, as a lover would...if he was capable of love. Was he?

“I think about fucking you, Zelnora. This child is gut-shot. The first second I saw you by the fort, my prick got hard, and all I could think about was fucking you. Plunging my hands into these heavy braids—no, let me—then sliding my cock into you so deeply you’d think you’ve gone under. You’re some now, Miss Sparks, the biggest kind of pumpkin.”

He slithered his fingers between her plaits and unbound them as they panted into each other’s mouths. It was hardly realistic to hope for a proclamation of love from someone she’d only known a few hours, especially from a rough, aloof mountain man, so Zelnora decided to be happy with the proclamation of lust. She kissed him

then, his mouth slick and moist and delectable as she wondered what it would feel like to have that tongue elsewhere on her body. His hand glided to untangle her braids into voluptuous curls that bobbed about her shoulders and snaked against his face. She knew that a man of the lonely frontier could not resist a woman's freshly washed silken curls, especially when she rinsed it with attar of roses.

She leaned into him, slowly removing his cravat as she lifted a leg to straddle him. Now she could finally lick his throat and taste the essence of him, but he had fixed some very convoluted sailor's type of knot in the cravat. She struggled pleasantly with the black cloth while lazily riding his hips at a very slow canter, her quim squarely planted atop the massive bulk of his penis, purring as she lightly bit his mouth. Oh, dear Lord, he was built so impressively, would she be able to take him? Brannagh had never actually penetrated her, just groped her in back rooms and in the tower of his newspaper's printing press. More than likely afraid of making her with child, although Zelnora knew that to be impossible, Brannagh merely forced her to jerk his crooked prick up and down, or he would do it for her, and he particularly enjoyed releasing onto her breasts.

This tall, lean, virile man between her thighs was different in every aspect. They said he'd taken the bark off the Arapahoe and fought the Blackfoot, and "raised the hair" of more than one Apache, yet between her thighs, he was nothing more than a vulnerable "beaver kitten" as he called himself, allowing himself to be controlled by his lust for her, and—

He flipped her over onto her back! What was he doing? They were kissing, smacking on each other's mouths while she stimulated his penis with her riding abilities, when suddenly he gave a low, guttural grunt and flipped her, pinning her to the ticking with dexterous hips, engulfing her torso in his long arms, laying thick sucking kisses against the side of her throat. She was wide open as the sky above, feet hitched to the backs of his thighs.

“Cormack,” she whispered hoarsely, “please take me. Fuck me now.”

“Zelnora,” he rasped back, “the bullfrog has croaked it. I want your dewy pussy clamped down around my prick.”

As she waited for him to say “but,” suddenly the warmth of his torso against hers vanished, and in her dizzy desire, she had no idea where he’d gotten to—the canvas ceiling of her cabin was spinning wildly, and she gripped the edges of the straw mattress with claw-like hands. Then she felt him, down between her outspread thighs—how mortifying to be seen so promiscuous like that, her drawers on view for such a savage man! But he was no doubt accustomed to much worse—and he was slathering giant, lascivious kisses to the inside of her knee—her *knee!*

No one had ever paid attention to any part of her anatomy lower than her quim before, and it was oddly erotic the way Cormack licked such wanton sucking kisses up the inside of her thigh, nipping little beaver bites at her flesh, sending shivery waves directly into her clitoris. *Oh, hurry, please hurry*, Zelnora’s inner voice screamed, until she realized she had moaned it aloud.

The lips of her quim exposed to the air through the slit in her drawers, soon Zelnora felt the hot puffs he snorted against the very length of her clitoris. Oddly, it seemed to elongate and engorge with juice like a man’s penis. Mindlessly, she clutched the back of his skull when he bit the fatty part of her inner thigh—oh, when would he jump on top of her and just fuck her like the animal she knew he was?

Good Lord! He licked so close to her quim, he surely must smell that awful odor women emitted, no matter how clean, that made them smell like a fishwife! Yet the sensation was so erotic, the inner walls of her channel shivered and clenched, sending additional waves of agonizing ecstasy into her uterus. Now yanking a handful of his hair to bring him back to his proper place mounting her, the tip of his nose touched her clitoris, and she cried out, “*Cormack!* What are you doing?”

He dove in so heartily that Zelnora gasped loud enough to be heard down at the store. One, two, three tremendous strokes of his proficient tongue the entire length of her clitoris. He slurped unashamed like a cow in a lake, as though her quim were the most ambrosial trough of sauterne imaginable. Was this some strange Indian thing? It was unbelievably shameful yet arousing to have his beautiful pointed nose buried in her sex, lapping away like a mountain cat. It almost seemed as though he were attempting to give her pleasure, though how could that be possible? Women were for the pleasure of men; why would he be seemingly attempting to bring her to the climax she had only before given herself...and with his mouth? Was that even poss—

Rational thought evaporated from her brain as all sensation got sucked down into her clitoris. A rapturous groundswell squeezed her, traveling down her inner channel, centering on her clitoris, where he licked harder, yet slower. She crested again and again, her entire body convulsing like an epileptic, toes clenched inward, and then outward. She didn't realize until much later she must have been grasping fistfuls of his beautifully glossy hair, and disconcertingly, it felt as though she even gushed liquid against his face.

As Cormack slowed his slurping, minute after minute passed before the convulsions had almost completely ebbed away. The ecstasy was almost painful by then, and she languidly shoved him away from her. Her knees collapsed on top of each other as she rolled to one side, her rib cage heaving, her fingers scrabbling listlessly against the cotton ticking.

She may have fallen asleep, she wasn't certain. But when she finally dragged herself to a sitting position, Cormack was there at the foot of the bed, knees drawn up to support his wrists, leaning against the chintz siding. He had removed his moccasins, perhaps politely not wanting to dirty her worn cotton ticking. He looked down his nose at her, and if his smile could become any slyer, well...hard doings when it came to that, as mountain men were fond of saying.

Wiping the curls from her face, Zelnora blinked at him. He really had beautiful feet, too. Realization swept over her then...he'd had his face buried in her quim! And she only knew what his hands and feet looked like! She covered her face with her hand, but he said happily, "You sure do shine in the biggest kind of crowd, Miss Sparks. You taste like cinnamon, and you smell like roses. Are we recognized courtiers? Because I'd like to be recognized courtiers. Why are we hiding from Brannagh if he's only your employer?"

How many questions was that? And not one of them was "Why does your quim taste like dead bloated fish?" Well, Zelnora was glad that, to Cormack, slathering his face between a woman's legs was just another of life's daily chores. She finally dared to look him in the face. "I'd like to be your flame. I'm very sweet on you." *I love you*, she wanted to say. But it was apparent Cormack only wanted her for fucking. This was reasonable, as long as they didn't endanger the protection Brannagh offered.

The smile that lit up his face melted her, and she crawled over to put her head on his shoulder. Wrapping one hot hand around his foot, she continued, "And it's best not to rile Brannagh. I wouldn't want to lose my position. It's difficult—impossible—for me to say no to him."

His entire body stiffened like a rattlesnake about to strike. He pulled away from her. "And I'm supposed to sit still and take it like some damned corncracker? It's as plain as beaver sign what his intentions are. Lies tumble out of his mouth like entrails out of a buffalo's stomach! I have no respect for a man who tithes ten percent of everyone's income for work he never laid eyes on."

"Everything you say is very true. But you must understand...my position here at the store...this cabin might not seem like much to you, and I'm sure you have grander plans for yourself, but as for myself, why...a divorced woman..."

Cormack looked at her sharply. "Divorced?"

*Oh, my Lord.* Since he appeared to know so much about Brannagh, Zelnora assumed he knew she was a divorced woman. Her mouth opened and closed, much like yet another beached fish, and fortunately, Mercy came to the canvas door and stuck her head inside, after knocking briefly on a wooden pole.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she said in her feminine, soft voice. “But Henry Bigler is asking after you, Zel. He wants to know your opinion on the gold.”

*Gold?* “Tell him I’ll be right there.”

Mercy’s head vanished, and Zelnora, glad for an excuse to forget the subject of Brannagh, got up from the bed, smoothing down her skirts and searching for her rebozo to cover her mussed hair. “What’s this about gold? Is that really why you came down here? To ask me about gold?”

Cormack hadn’t budged from the bed. He glowered up at her, the clarity of his oceanic eyes suddenly clouded by storms. “You’re lucky I’m enlightened.”



## **Chapter Six**

Cormack swaggered down the hill with Zelnora on his arm.

He had nearly forced her to take his arm. He needed to prove there was no shame in their courtship. Knowing the gossip ways of the settlements, sooner or later someone would squawk like an old hen to Brannagh anyway. Folk were half-froze for entertainment on the frontier.

He knew he beamed with satisfaction, though his cock was still at half-mast, for he had succeeded in pleasuring the woman in the most intimate way possible. He cared not, really, for his own gratification—he had just told Zelnora he wanted to fuck to avoid the even more vexing truth that he was a lovesick booby. The way her dark brown curls slid over his face and neck when she straddled him and bucked against his prick, why, he was gone beaver. And ho, boy, how her pussy tasted when she gushed against his face, like a sweet porridge of cinnamon and apples—he had never seen a woman come that long or strenuously. He'd been almost afraid she would suffer a seizure the way she bucked and snorted and convulsed. Was it possible no man had ever licked her pussy before? Cormack shuddered when the briefest imagining of Brannagh doing that crossed his mind. That fellow was of “bad medicine” notoriety.

“I’m awful fond of you,” he said lamely, holding her forearm close to his chest.

“Fond?” was all Zelnora said.

Bigler came racing forward before they even reached the store, brandishing the eagle feather quill in his hand. “Sister Sparks! I do believe I’ve found gold at the mill!”

“Keep your hollering down,” Cormack reminded him.

He was proud of the calm way Zelnora took this news. “Well, Brother Bigler, we’ll just have to do some investigation then, won’t we?”

She released his arm when they entered the store. Erskine, Quartus, and the redhead Miss Mercy Narrimore canoodled by the counter, drinking whiskey from the looks of it, and paying no mind to the gold as Zelnora marched into a back room and came back with some items that she slapped onto the counter.

“The Indians I’ve spoken to here at the fort have known about gold in these parts for many generations,” Zelnora said, accepting the eagle quill from Bigler. “The gold is supposed to be guarded by evil spirits. There’s a lake not far from here with plenty of gold, but there is a fearful animal, a sort of dragon who likes human flesh.” She poured the little nuggets onto a tray which she carried to the only window, turning it this way and that with one eye closed. Next, she took out an eyepiece to examine the crystals more closely.

Cormack and Bigler exchanged greedy looks. “Can you find out where this lake is located?” Cormack asked Zelnora.

“I sure can try.”

Bringing the tray back to the counter, she said, “I spoke to one of Sutter’s workers not long ago. From Hermosillo in Mexico. He told me we can find pounds of gold in quartz veins in the Sierra. One would only need a *batea*, which as far as I can tell is just a simple wooden bowl for washing the gold. He just kept saying *batea, batea*.”

“Can you locate this fellow?” Bigler asked tremulously.

Zelnora, eyes still affixed to the gold nuggets, blindly reached for Cormack’s bowie knife on his belt. He assisted by handing it to her. “I sure can try,” she said quietly, vaguely, holding one of the tiny nuggets on the counter and scratching its surface with the knife blade.

Quartus came wobbling over now, curious. “I can find gold with my divining rod!” he again declared, bolstered by a healthy application of “bug juice.” Fortunately, he fell silent then, fascinated

by the doings of his wife. Her next step was to vigorously rub a nugget against the wooden countertop, then sniff it. The men became alarmed when she reached for a steel hammer and, with one bang, flattened a nugget on the tray.

Bigler cried, "What are you doing?"

A slow smile radiated across her face as she gradually stood to an upright position. Her eyes were fixed only on Cormack, however, when she said in a reverent tone, "This is gold."

Bigler let out a walloping *yee-haw* to the heavens above while Quartus leaped up and down clapping his hands, twirling around in little circles chanting, "Gold! Gold! Gold!" to the same tune as the earlier song about Jake Herring thumping it. Even Erskine and Mercy ceased their canoodling and swiveled their heads with interest toward all the commotion.

Without tearing her shining wide eyes from Cormack, Zelnora came round the counter and grabbed the front of his shirt in her fists. She fairly stood on tiptoes in her zeal. She resembled a lovely Madonna with her round brown eyes, her gleaming curls escaping from the mantle of her rebozo. "Cormack," she whispered. He could barely hear her under the ecclesiastical hollering of the two gold-crazed converts. Now even Erskine was clapping Bigler on the back as Mercy set out more tin cups for whiskey. "Gold. *Gold*. Do you know what this means? From the size and character of those specimens, that area seems to be much richer than the gold fields of Georgia! It must have washed down from the mountains during the recent torrents. Where descending waters meet an obstacle or projecting rock, in the riverbed and also the declivities, we can find pockets of gold. *Gold!*"

*Gold.* Cormack kissed Zelnora, sweetly and gently, loving her with his mouth. He kissed her again and again as she grasped his shirtfront, nearly melting into him. Ho, boy, was he a perverted old hard case to get an erection when they had just discovered gold? He should be more concerned about his future riches. *Gold, gold, gold...*

As Quartus was now performing some new movement of polka steps, Zelnora broke away and walloped her husband a backhand across the chest. “Cheese it, Quartus! Captain Sutter told us to keep quiet any news of a mineral strike—there are bandits roaming the countryside ready to stick knives in us like porcupines if they hear of this.”

At the mention of “bandits” Quartus stopped his dance. His round eyes behind the spectacles spoke of his romantic reverence for highwaymen. “Bandits? Bear’s ass!” And he stumbled off to get some more bug juice.

“Sister Sparks!” bellowed Bigler, holding his tin cup up on high. “You are absolutely certain of this, then?”

“Oh, yes, Henry! This gold is of the finest quality, perhaps twenty-three carats. Give me some of that whiskey!”

At that moment, the door’s bell tinkled, and a local corncracker and a Californio entered, beaming from ear to ear in puzzlement at the spontaneous spree in Brannagh’s store. “Miss Sparks!” the farmer called. “What’s all the hubbub? Did we get a new supply of Forty Rod?”

Ho, boy, Forty Rod. Just a whiff of that firewater would kill a man at that distance, even around a corner. To distract the farmer, Zelnora went into the back room with the tray of gold and brought forth a presumably good bottle of some liquor.

Shoving it at the farmer, Zelnora said, “This brandy is of the quality that the Duke of Orleans drinks, Mr. Leese. Try some. Mercy, give the men cups.” Returning to Cormack’s side, she whispered fiercely, “Cormack. We simply must go back to Coloma and see to what extent this gold pans out. If we discover it’s worth pursuing, we build what’s known as a rocker, a sort of cradle to facilitate the process. But we can’t let anyone see what we’re doing. How will you hide it from Marshall?”

Cormack tipped his head to one side. Marshall? Who gave a flying fuck about Marshall? It was easy enough to hide the gold signs

from him. "More to the point, Zelnora...What about Brannagh? If you come up to Coloma, what will you tell him?"

"He's away for yet another week and a half. That's plenty of time, right?"

Cormack thought, and nodded.

"*Viva Carlos Quinto!*" the Californio cried at the taste of the Duke of Orleans' brandy.

*Death or glory!*

## Chapter Seven

*Aquí está. Here it is.*

The religious people had found color. Color was what Joaquin Valenzuela wanted.

Although he was an accomplished miner himself from Hermosillo in the great Mexican state of Sonora, his *compañeros* weren't. Mostly a pack of idiots and imbeciles, men despoiled and burning for revenge on Americans. The imbeciles tended to receive passports to the other world at the hands of Judge Lynch, but there were always legions of others smoldering to pay off the wrongs done to them. In fact, Joaquin was now such a feared desperado there were more applicants for his gang than he could accept—being constantly on the move, the main band could only number twenty or so, to remain undetected, stealing horses and rustling cattle, although Joaquin had hundreds of men spread out across the state.

Joaquin's majordomo, known by Americans as Three-Fingered Jack due to losing two fingers in the recent Mexican war, was a responsible, levelheaded enough fellow, although arguably more cutthroat than Joaquin himself. At least Jack made sure his victim was an American before slashing his throat, a detail that sometimes escaped the rest of the band, who had accidentally robbed Californios and Spaniards in their zeal.

Lying on his stomach between two boulders, Joaquin peered through his glass at the blindingly white, chile-haired American. This one seemed to be the leader, and Joaquin had been following him for several days. Having been about Sutter's Mill, trading stolen beefsteaks for liquor, Joaquin under one of his many aliases had

moved about at will, behaving with back-slapping jocosity with the mill workers. Clad in his fanciest *calzoneras* that buttoned up the side of the leg, his jacket trimmed with gold braid and a red sash around his waist, no one thought to question his heritage or his steaks. This was how he'd heard from Peter Wimmer and his brash, loud wife Gennie that some fellows had found color at the mill and were now pretending to go on daily hunting trips with the real goal of discovering more. Several other parties of the religious amigos had also sallied forth on their own "hunting" trips since Gennie Wimmer had gossiped to the four winds about the initial strike made at the actual mill. She claimed that a Henry Bigler had given her some gold to make into a ring for herself. Someone had even sent gold speck samples down to San Francisco, so it was necessary to act fast.

"There is also that *estúpido* one with the spectacles." Three-Fingered Jack breathed from his perch atop Joaquin's back. Joaquin tried to shrug him off bodily as the majordomo continued, "I wonder what his role is? He seems to be a surveyor of some sort, with that rod in his hand."

"He is silly, but he can't be very *estúpido* if he's the surveyor," Joaquin opined. "Maybe he just acts like a headless donkey to trick us off the track."

"Yes, but he keeps spilling the rocker and tripping over the shovels."

"Maybe that means they know we're watching. Now, that fire-headed one, the *pelirrojo* one, he seems very strong and capable. I think he is the one to contend with. He is the one who constructed that scale out of wood, and built that rocker. They made twenty dollars yesterday by nightfall." Indeed, the *norteamericanos*, although merely digging in rock crevices with jackknives by the river's edge and picking gold out speck by speck, had made amazing progress.

"Why don't we just pretend to join up with them then kill them when we make our first big strike? Besides the fact that it sounds like too much work," Jack added.

“Yes, too much work,” Joaquin agreed. The blindingly white hombre worked assiduously in the river, sloshing shovel after shovel of gravelly sand into the rocker while another dark-haired hombre shook it, and the woman Joaquin had heard called Zelnora washed the sludge through the rocker with bucketfuls of fresh clear river water. The white fellow shoveled three times the rate the silly surveyor did. They were up to their waists in the melted snow of the river, but when it was sunny, it beat relentlessly on them, reflected off the water, and soon, the strong white man was more the pink of a pinto bean, though he wore the wide-brimmed felt hat of the brave and tough mountain man. Joaquin almost pitied him, investing so much physical labor when he could easily be doing what they did—taking whatever they wanted from whoever happened by, as long as he was an American. “It’s unusual they make a woman work for them. I wonder if she’s a slave of some kind. It also means they don’t have enough men.” Henry Bigler, who had originally found the first gold, worked downriver apiece with a wooden *batea*, but that was the extent of this crew.

“Yes, and if we joined up, who would get us meat?” Three-Fingered Jack finally slid off Joaquin’s back and sighed. “Speaking of meat, *jefe*. We need some more to trade for *aguardiente*.”

Sighing when the surveyor completely missed the rocker with his shovelful of gravel and dumped it into the dark-haired man’s lap, Joaquin put down his glass and rolled to face Jack. “All right. Send Garcia and most of the others out to that farm on the south fork of the Feather. You and I stay with these Americans, just leave Gonzalez here to cook for us.” They dared not rustle cattle in these parts, for that would give away their sign to Marshall and his men, so every night they had to travel far afield, the field becoming farther the more of the long-horned cattle they stole. Still, most of it seemed to be Sutter’s lands, so it was convenient to loathe Sutter, though the Swede had always treated them kindly as long as they appeared to be of noble Spanish ancestry.



Jack trotted off on his mission, and Joaquin observed the Americans again. The brunette woman shouted at the surveyor now, pointing a stiff and angry arm. She couldn't be a slave and behave in that manner. But the way she yelled at the bespectacled man made Joaquin believe she was his wife. She wore the skirts and rebozo of a Californio woman, but he marked her as an American. She was quite bountiful and had pleasing features, and Joaquin's regal penis engorged at the thought of what he could do with her if he didn't kill her, only captured her for himself. He just had to get rid of the dazzlingly white man first.

## Chapter Eight

*April 1848*

*Lion Island*

Brannagh grunted like a pig in clover—or was it akin to the giant worm Zelnora had seen once making its way laboriously across the cotton ticking that covered her bed, emitting actual wild animal sounds and rearing up on its hind legs? She sat in the office chair they shared to do the ledgers as he jerked his member to achieve satisfaction against her bared breasts. Fortunately, he still didn't dare to penetrate her, so there was none of that ugliness to contend with, but the more time she spent with the savagely graceful Cormack, even the slightest proximity of Brannagh was enough to turn her stomach.

All she could think of while Brannagh pulled at his crooked bone was *I've got to find a way out of this*. She was dead sweet on Cormack, with his lazily smiling eyes all alight as though hit by a fistful of stars. Just watching him walk, with his long arms swinging at his sides, was enough to dissolve her innards into a mushy pool of feminine longing. But was he such a thorough out-and-out mountain man that he could never behave as a proper civilized husband? He gave no indication of wanting that, other than something Aaron Erskine had told Mercy, who had told Zelnora, "He wants someone to share his lodge with the rest of his days." His lodge? That sounded a bit primitive and barbaric. It sounded as though his goal was to return to the mountains and find himself an Indian wife. Someone who didn't act up or speak her mind like Zelnora. In fact, that was probably the ideal wife for most of the men Zelnora had ever

known...A woman who rarely talked at all, and just took care of, well, the “lodge.”

For now, Zelnora knew that striking a rich gold vein was her only hope away from this disgusting mess that Brannagh had been creating. They had been making many little strikes of about twenty or thirty dollars a day up near the mill, and some fellow California Battalion members had snuck off to a place they called Dry Diggings. Marshall had lost so many men to the gold fever he had been forced to shut down mill operations, and Sutter was starting to complain of the same thing. A gambler named Lopez had already been attacked and robbed at the fort, presumably by the bandit everyone called Joaquin Valenzuela. Supposed to be the Robin Hood of all Spanish bandits, the story went that he gave some of what he stole back to his own people, wanting revenge for the Mexican loss of California lands, but Zelnora had seen no evidence of that. Valenzuela obviously had zest only for the rapine aspect of things, as his own wife had been raped and murdered by Americans some two years past while he was waiting to be hung alongside his brother, so Zelnora took to carrying her pocket pistol with her everywhere.

Grunting more forcefully now and with increasing agitation, Brannagh snarled, “Come to me...let me bless you with my seed!”

“Oh, yes,” Zelnora said flatly, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. “Cover me with your holy juices.”

He jerked against her bobbing breasts as she observed them, detached. Her breasts were very lush and full, were they not? Leastways, that’s what Cormack had said. Yet not good enough for him to fuck her? Cormack claimed he was holding off until she made some kind of break with Brannagh and stood up for herself, and she was as yet unable to do so. She had seen the poor love trembling and panting with desire, his cock proud, plump, and packing the crotch of his pants so stiffly it made an impression there, yet he was staying the course as a man of dignity would. And rightly so, she supposed...

Brannagh deposited a larger than usual pool of sperm onto the uplifted shelf of her breasts, while she pretended to moan in awe. After Brannagh coughed a few times and gave her his handkerchief, it was back to business, much to Zelnora's relief.

Fiddling with the lock to the strongbox, Brannagh said officiously, "I have heard you've come into a sum of gold."

Ah. Cormack and she had rehearsed just this eventuality. Shrugging carelessly as she wiped off her chest, she said, "Oh, a very tiny sum, if that. I just play about in the riverbed while Mercy minds the store, then I mind the store while she does other recreational things. We take turns."

"I've heard that you've been seen up by the mill with that corn-fed yokel, Bowmaker, 'playing about in the riverbed.' And that you've dragged Quartus into your gold-mining operations."

"'Gold-mining operations'?" Zelnora bristled at Brannagh's styling of her flame. Whatever Cormack's background, he had not always been a mountain man, one could tell that from a glance. Why, she had learned he was thirty and eight, and having only been "raising hair" in the mountains for ten years now, he had obviously done something sophisticated prior to that. Rising to her feet, she stood behind Brannagh as he opened the safe. "They are hardly 'operations' now, Ward. I do it just for the fun of it, to keep my mineralogy skills sharp. Mr. Bowmaker is helpful because he has the brawn and the stamina to keep filling the rocker all day long. I just stand there and point to where I think gold might be found. And you heard Captain Sutter. If we were to discover anything, we'd have to keep quiet about it."

Brannagh faced her, tossing some silver *reales* in his hand. He cocked one skeptical eyebrow. "Brawn and stamina, eh?"

Perhaps those were not the most fortunate choices of words.

"Well, if it produces gold, I'm all for it. But as you know, Zelnora, if you make a significant strike, you're to tell me first. Why, I'll want a cut of that!" He tried to smile in a brotherly manner, but

his effort soon vanished. "And I tithe ten percent of any income, so you'll have to report it to me anyway. I won't charge you for the gold you've found up to this point, but..." He pressed the *reales* into her hand. "Consider this an investment against future profits. Do you have the right tools?"

Glory be! Brannagh was fairly giving her carte blanche to go forth and make more placer strikes! Zelnora accepted the coins gladly. "Yes, we seem to have everything. In fact, I was planning to light out at once for a spot about halfway between here and Coloma, a spot no one has prospected as of yet. There is a sort of natural island created by the recent rains, and it seems logical it would bear the most auriferous minerals. If I'm right, it's the mother lode of all placers, and I plan to call it...Lion Island, after you!"

Of course, this pleased Brannagh immensely, being modeled after a lion and being told the secret of this future gold strike. He gave her several more *reales* upon hearing this news. "By all means, then go! But report back to me immediately, and I will send some of our own brethren to mine the gold. You're to stay away from that no-count Bowmaker hick, do you understand? You don't need him. Take Quartus with you, he's definitely got brawn and stamina."

"Well, yes, his stamina could be useful. He can't ride very well, so perhaps he can ride the packhorse. With the tools."

So with Brannagh's blessing, Zelnora soon struck out astride her strong square-built bay. With her *reales* and toilet articles in her possible bag, a packhorse was securely tied to the tail of her horse, bearing cotton duck for her shelter, picks and axes, mutton, graham flour, peas, coffee, Boston wine, whiskey, and brown sugar. Her Hawken rifle, newer and shinier than Cormack's, rested across the horn of her saddle. She had never fired it, and could barely lift it, but it was better protection against bandits than her pocket pistol, which could only injure a fellow if he was immediately on top of one.

A mile or so out from the fort, Zelnora shouted over her shoulder to Quartus. She could only canter moderately with the packhorse. It

would be sundown before they reached Lion Island, and they needed to “keep their eyes skinned,” as Cormack would say. “Dear Quartus, how are you doing? What was Brannagh saying to you before we left?”

“Oh!” Quartus giggled. “He told me to keep an eye on you, to make sure that nice Bowmaker fellow doesn’t come sniffing around your behind. What a silly way of phrasing things! As though Bowmaker is a dog. Ha ha, a dog! Imagine that!”

Fuming, Zelnora frowned and stared straight ahead. How dare he? Brannagh expected a share in something he put not one shard of effort into, and would allow Cormack to invest all the muscle and work, yet he would not tolerate Cormack “sniffing around”?

Quartus continued to chortle. “As though he would sniff your behind! I’ve seen him kiss you, but sniffing, bear’s ass, that’s another thing entirely—”

“Listen here, Quartus. Do as Brannagh instructed you. By all means, keep an eye on Mr. Bowmaker, but do not report any sniffing, do you understand? Just tell him that Bowmaker worked hard, and we had no contact with each other, do you hear me?”

“Yes, but...” Quartus whined. “That would be lying, Zel. We’re taught not to lie.”

“You’re also my husband, are you not? And spouses should do what the other desires, correct? Also, I have a nice, brand-new surprise for you if you do what your wife desires. Right here in my saddlebag, I’ve a brand-new drum, made especially for you by one of the fort’s Digger Indians.”

“A...drum?”

“Yes, and you can play it up at Lion Island. But you can only keep it if you promise not to report any sniffing, do you understand?”

Zelnora heard Quartus clap his hands together. “Oh, yes, that sounds like a very good plan indeed! A drum! It’s been so long since I’ve been able to drum on a real drum! Lion Island? Is that where we’re going?”

Zelnora sighed. She could only imagine the happiness of the mountain men when they heard Quartus drumming, but the bribe was worth it.

## Chapter Nine

### *Lion Island*

“Least you’ve got a gal,” Erskine said glumly, chawing on a piece of jerked beef.

Equally as glum, Cormack poked the fire with a stick. “She’s hardly a ‘gal,’ Erskine. I’ll stake you half my gold claim if she ever bucks off that slimy preacher.”

“She will if we strike it big enough,” Erskine pointed out. “She’s just sticking close to him because he’s her livelihood.”

Henry Bigler chimed in. “Oh, there’s plenty of families that could use a hale and lusty gal about their farm.” This news did not comfort Cormack, and he looked up at Bigler, expressionless. “Then there was that newspaper fellow in San Francisco. Sister Sparks worked with him when we first came here in forty-six, setting type and even gathering news for him to print.”

Cormack sat erect. “Newspaper fellow?”

“A-yep, this Ed Kemble fellow who runs Brannagh’s *Star* newspaper. A right smart young fellow, too. His father was a New York state senator. Fact, that’s who Isaac Eager went rushing off to see the other day, to show him the gold.”

Cormack angrily tossed his stick into the fire. “Ho, boy! There’s damp powder and no fire to dry it! Next thing you know every tomfool blockhead from California to Kashmir is going to be streaking it up here, jumping folks’ claims, creating a regular spree—”

Erskine jumped in. “—raising hair, drunk as a fiddler’s bitch—”



“—diamond-brooches gentlemen running all over the country, taking advantage of the Indians!” Cormack was so angry he got to his feet and paced in little circles in the sand. Wild Digger Indians knew nothing about the value of gold and wondered what palefaces wanted with it. All they knew was they could trade an ounce of gold for the same weight in silver, a thimble of glass beads, or a glass of grog. Pointing heatedly at Bigler, Cormack demanded, “So why didn’t she stick with the newspaper fellow?”

Bigler shrugged. “He’s maybe ten years younger than her. And Brannagh ordered her up here to the store. Besides, I think he may enjoy the company of men more than women, if you catch my meaning.” He chortled lewdly.

This bit of levity was enough to take their minds off the subject of the newspaperman, for all three men were now obliged to laugh at the concept. Cormack didn’t personally find it so far-fetched, as he’d seen all manner of Plains Indians who acted as women and sometimes, well, when the pickings were slim and folks were half-froze for any human warmth...He would not rub out anyone who gratified his dry in that manner. Heaps of beaver to them. But in front of Bigler, well, Cormack had best be conservative.

“A goddamned sodomite.” Bigler chuckled.

As their laughter died down, Cormack pricked up his ears. What sounded like four or even five horses galloped up the muddy road about half a mile distant. Such a herd could not be Zelnora making their rendezvous, so the three men grabbed their rifles and waited silently, lying close to the ground on their elbows, hoping the herd would pass. Their own sturdy Californio horses were picketed nearby, securely hobbled against horse thieves. But the riders drove their jingling spurs into the horses’ sides and reined in toward their campfire. The three gold miners got to their feet and leveled their weapons, and Cormack, who could nearly see in the dark, was the first to note it was Wimmer from the mill, along with other Battalion fellows such as Mowry, Sly, and Nutting.

They picketed their mounts and told how they wanted to join up and mine this fertile strip they had heard so much about. How had anyone heard? As far as Cormack knew, Marshall still thought they were deer hunting, although by now it was a foregone assumption no one was actually hunting. Cormack had been attempting to devise a method for legally staking a claim. As of yet, the rule of the mines was that each man got fifty feet along a streambed, but Cormack was waiting for Zelnora's arrival to advise him as to which fifty feet she deemed the richest. Up until the arrival of these dunces, he'd felt that he owned this entire length of river.

So the newcomers yammered, warming their hands by the fire and eating their jerky, while Cormack shouldered his rifle and set out toward the road. He splashed across the newly formed creek that had created the island on which they were encamped. He didn't care—he wore his new miner's boots that nearly reached his knee, stiff things he was unaccustomed to after years in moccasins, and he felt like a lumbering Frankenstein when he walked.

Claims should be marked out with stakes, he thought as he leaned against a tree, stakes decorated gaudily so it was obvious from afar that spot had been chosen. Up till now, men just left their tools along the river to indicate a claim. If this spot panned out, he'd go talk with Sutter about registering the claim. Although Sutter had no control over mineral rights, he was the closest thing to an alcalde, or mayor of the area.

He was wrenched from his reverie by ducks streaking it upstream from the fort. What brought ducks streaking it upstream if humans weren't behind them? He eagerly perked up and listened for Zelnora's horse, but the wind changed direction then, and something disturbed him. He sniffed smoke from a cook fire, but it was not his men, no, this came from the fort's direction, although of course the fort was too far away to smell sign, about twenty miles. Indian sign? They'd be some pretty smart Indians to get hold of a side of beef. For Cormack scented beef, only a sign of white men or Californios.

Well, why shouldn't a man have a cook fire between here and the fort? Cormack didn't own the river. Maybe some more of his *compañeros* were "hunting." So he kept his eyes skinned, and soon the beloved woman hove into sight, dragging that laughable husband of hers by her horse's tail.

She waved wildly. "Cormack!"

He jogged up to her, taking her reins and placing a hand under her arm to assist her to dismount. "Hush," he said quietly. "I smell white men sign about. Did you pass anyone on the trail?"

Her eyes widened as she slung her possible bag over her shoulder. "No, no one at all. That I could detect."

"Someone's grilling beef," he muttered, and went to help poor Quartus, who attempted as usual to slither off his horse like a jar of jellied prunes. He untied the packhorse from the tail of Zelnora's mount and took the reins. They placed Quartus between them as they stepped down the embankment.

"Where is...my drum..." Quartus mumbled.

"Why is he talking about a drum?" Cormack asked Zelnora in a hushed voice.

"Oh. I bought him a drum. Quartus, dear, I'll give it to you when we reach camp. He used to love drumming," she explained conversationally. "On the ship that brought us over here, he drummed constantly. Then the marines in San Francisco took his drum away. They claimed they needed it to help with their drilling, but I do suspect it was just driving everyone loco."

Cormack grinned as they dragged Quartus through the waist-high creek. Quartus was not a bad sort, really—he was certainly harmless, and he was strong enough to help them shovel gravel from the river, though he could not throw anything plumb center and he flung about rocks right smart. Because Quartus' legs refused to work and they each had a horse to lead, Quartus nearly wound up burbling creek water through his livery lips. The iciness seemed to wake him up, though, and by the time they reached the campfire, he was cheerfully

greeting the men he recognized from the mill with an effervescent “Howdy, brother!” Cormack picketed the two horses round the fire while Quartus took possession of his drum and fell to with a vengeance, madly drumming out his unexpended passion on the deerskin.

“There’s white man sign by the road from the fort,” Cormack told Erskine. “I scented beef grilling. Let’s leave a sentry to guard the horses tonight. I elect Sly.” He gestured at the only man not drinking whiskey.

Erskine frowned. “There’s sign about? You know the sign of Injuns slick, but Digger Indians would never be chawing beef. How could they afford it?”

Cormack looked off distantly, as though he could see the opposite hillside. “It’s not Diggers I’m thinking of.” He paused, trying to gain more white man sign, but then Zelnora was at his side, leaning into him. Putting a protective arm around her, he kissed her on the forehead, lingering for a long moment as the men about them babbled to be heard over the din of Quartus’ drumming.

“Let’s go to my tent,” he murmured in her ear, and by answer, she nuzzled his neck and bit him alongside his jugular vein, sending shivers down his spine that stiffened his cock.

“Well, that isn’t helping guard the horses!” Erskine called when they struck toward the canvas tent. Cormack spun around to see Erskine pointing at the flailing arms of Quartus, drumming so furiously he was a blur in the flickering campfire flames.

“Give him some bug juice!” Zelnora called.

Inside the tent, Cormack had fashioned a bed of soft pine branches covered with his buffalo robe. Today he had cut drains around the tent to prevent the wet reaching them, and over a large flat stone placed a Navajo blanket impervious to all rain. He divested himself of his pouch, powder horn, and boots, which he put near the bed with his rifle. He lit a tallow candle.

She kneeled on the buffalo robe, removing the shawl that had protected her from the chill that came suddenly when the sun set in those parts. How she loved to grip his shirtfront in her little fists! “Cormack,” she purred, her features also going all feline as she scrunched her shoulders and became a ladylike ball of sensual awareness, emanating attar of roses. She sucked his lower lip, bringing his prick to immediate attention against her lap as they kneeled together. “I want to pleasure you. You’re always pleasing me, I don’t know why. Those men cannot hear us with that racket going on. I want to suck on your delicious hefty cock till I swallow every drop of your semen.”

“I try to be gentle and tender with you.” *Gentle and tender, be dogged.* “You seem to be accustomed to being taken like an animal. But you’re a gorgeous, delicate mountain flower, and shouldn’t be bruised.” This luscious woman rotating her hips against his prick was nearly bringing him off, her breasts warm against his chest.

“Yes, I am unaccustomed to tenderness in a man,” she admitted petulantly, then yanked up the bottom hem of his fringed shirt. “But I’ll not break, you old hoss. Take this off. I want to feel your bare chest against me.”

“Is that why you bought Quartus the drum?” Cormack murmured as he allowed Zelnora to whip his buckskin and cotton shirts over his head in one swift motion.

“Yes, that’s why.” She nearly knocked the air from his lungs when she flung her arms around his torso and smashed the mounds of her breasts flat against him. She kissed him deeply, chewing on his lower lip, licking the backs of his teeth with her sweetly formed mouth. Cormack’s prick was up like a hammer against her lap, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to hold out this time. When she deftly undid the buttons of his buckskins and slid her hand down the plane of his belly, he nearly went out of his head.

She had never touched his cock, though she’d often proclaimed it to be thick, long, and straight. The first slight feel of her long fingers

playing an adagio on the underside of it had Cormack gasping for air—he wouldn't last long in an experienced grasp such as that. She loved the bursting head of it with her palm, using her thumb to rub the slime at the tip, rotating it around and around the bulbous head until he panted and gulped air. Tiny clear bubbles floated before his eyes as he pumped his hips into her, yanking down the broadfall of his pantaloons so his cock could swing freely.

"Oh, dear Lord," she muttered against his mouth, "you are the most well-hung stallion I've ever had the pleasure to hold in my hand."

Ho, boy, he was gut-shot. Grabbing her about the waist, he flung her back onto the buffalo robe and straddled her. Thick squiggles of her shiny hair spread onto the robe, her face a beatific white oval in a sea of curls and animal fur. She stroked his cock, which loomed immensely, throbbing with its own pulse, gleaming and purplish in his arousal.

"You'll not mind if I'm not so gentle from now on." Cormack slid her skirts up her thighs and hitched his fingertips under the hem of her stockings to draw them down—he'd never felt her bare legs wrapped around him before.

But she cried "No!" and lunged forward, arms enfolding his ass, and swallowed his prick.

She just gobbled it up like mad, as though it were a turkey leg!

"No," he groaned, one long-drawn-out sound from the pit of his stomach. He cradled the back of her skull, driving his prick down her throat. She wanted to pleasure him; that heap of fat meat would definitely shine in most normal sprees. But this wasn't a normal spree by any means, and as he felt her throat muscles contract around the tip of his cock, her puffs of hot air against his pubic bone coming strangled and frantic, he realized he was about to spill his load down her gullet, and he forced her away, pressing against her shoulders.

She detached with a great sound of suction, her surprised round eyes full of awe as her torso hit the buffalo robe. From the waist

down, she squirmed like a worm on a fishing hook, and Cormack panted, his cock elongated to such lengths as he'd never viewed it before, throbbing in the air over her bare, mounded breasts.

"Old hoss," she breathed in wonderment, gripping his cock in her fist. "Now I know why they call you a hoss." She looked to be grinning a bit when she said, "You're a tall, beautifully shaped roan stallion."

He hovered over her, balanced with elbows on either side of her head. Brushing her mouth with his, he murmured, "Ho, boy. And I'm in a horn-tossing mood, Zelnora, my mountain flower."

She gripped his cock and slid it into her burning hot pussy. She encircled his waist in her long legs as she pushed her stockings down to feel his bare skin against her calves. Zelnora wasn't recently accustomed to being used, that he could tell from the tight, slick pussy walls that gripped him like a constricting snake, but she was wide open as the starry sky above, her open mouth plastered to his. Cormack was glad she was truthful that Brannagh had not fucked her, and the thought that he was first sent a fresh wave of lust down his spine and into his balls. He humped her in such long, sweeping strokes that soon he was banging her tailbone up against the flat rock that served as a pillow, the rod of his erection pinning her to the Navajo blanket.

She allowed herself to be handled with ease, not one peg of resistance in any bone in her body. He hunched over her like a mad, famished barbarian while she threw her head back over the edge of the rock, exposing her throat to his feral slurping. She was so wide open that her toes dug into the small of his back in some acrobatic feat. All at once, he came, unable to hold back any longer, erupting giant spurts of ejaculate against the mouth of her womb.

All thought and awareness of the tent around him vanished. He knew he let out low strangled sounds like a foaming bison rutting as he speared her to the robe, semen overflowing her snug pussy and spilling onto the animal fur. Jerking uncontrollably, he dumped load

after load into her—as though he had not frigged himself daily since meeting her! He choked, nearly sobbing in disbelief that his body could react like such a lascivious beast, merely by fucking the woman he'd desired more than anyone in a decade.

Ho, boy, he'd best let her breathe. Cormack rolled off of her, collapsing on his back. His cock moved slowly against his hip like an enormous slug. With a distinct absence of vigor, he shoved it back inside his pantaloons. When they had caught their breaths, Zelnora flung herself on top of his chest, her ear to his heart as though listening to the pounding.

"I hope I didn't hurt you," he murmured.

He could feel her smile. "Not at all. I have never enjoyed such a vigorous fucking. You have...an immense amount of talent. You may be a hulking hoss, but I am a lusty brood mare. *Oh!*" Sitting up with hand to her bared breasts, she seemed taken aback. "I didn't mean for you to think..." In her shame, she covered her breasts with her Californio *camisita*, and her hand moved to tug her skirts back down. Smearing her palm over her face as though to wipe away her embarrassment, she finally whispered, "...to think that I was capable of...immediately becoming with child..."

Cormack languidly raised himself on one elbow and regarded her. 'Capable'? 'Immediately'? "What are you referring to, Zelnora? Pregnancy?"

She did not look him in the eye. "Fertility, yes. I believe I mentioned I was divorced. Well...Barton Sparks divorced me because after two years I was not able to give him a child." She chuckled at the horror. "I discovered he had abandoned me by reading his name on a passenger list, a ship sailing to Van Diemen's Land with another woman from our mission...A woman who already had one child. I tell you this because if you wish for wee nippers to run about—you're about the right age when a man starts wanting that—with me, that will not happen. It's only fair for me to tell you the facts now. However," she brightened then, leaning forward and caressing the side of his



face, “if you are of the sporting type who wants no fixed abode or a family to prevent his travels, then I am certainly ideal.”

Did she really mean she just wished to sport? More than likely, she would have sported with a man since that odious Barton, if indeed that newspaper fellow preferred to box the Jesuit with other mens’ cocks. Sitting upright, Cormack stayed her hand by grabbing her wrist. “Wait a minute, Zelnora. How do you know it wasn’t the fault of *his* sperm?”

She drew herself up, looking down her nose at him, shocked. “His...fault? How can that be?”

“It can be. This child knows that. There are many things you can do if you think it is the fault of your own ovaries, however, many teas you can drink, things you can eat.”

Zelnora regarded him with pity. “Oh, some mountain man Indian remedies? I do believe I have tried almost all of those herbal things.” She frowned. “Are you saying you wish me to become fertile?”

Cormack gathered her to him. “I’m saying...The happiest moments of my life have been in the wilderness of the Far West. I recall with pleasure my solitary camp with no closer, more faithful friend than my rifle...no *compañeros* more sociable than my good horses. I needed that solitude because I was...accustomed to it. I’ve trapped in heaven, in earth, and hell—I’ve seen a petrified forest, as sure as my rifle’s got hindsights. But that way of life has gone under, Zelnora, and hurrah for womanly doings. This child’s getting old. You’re some pumpkins, and I’ve never seen nothing as could beat you. The settlements are the only place for an old hard case such as I. A woman’s breast is the hardest kind of rock to me.”

He saw she was smiling, misty-eyed at his flowery monologue, so he supposed it was agreeable to her. He was sincere—he wanted her face about his lodge for the rest of his days, and together, with her know-how and his brawn, they could mine enough gold to retire for those days. However, his mouth had a different mind, and he soon heard it saying softly, “I love you, Zelnora Sparks.”

To cover up his shock at this utterance, he was about to kiss her when there came a loud affray from over by the campfire. Men screamed high-pitched like women, and bodies thumped against the sand. Leaping for his rifle, he upped it through the tent flap, but there were no raiders or coyotes, only a bunch of fellows kneeling over the prone body of Nutting from the mill.

“Stay here!” he commanded Zelnora, surprised to see she had her own pocket pistol in her hand.

## Chapter Ten

Zelnora didn't obey Cormack's command. She had never shot at anything more frightening than a duck, but she was fully prepared to rub out anyone who would dare attack her mining camp. Following Cormack, she streaked it down to the campfire to hear Erskine shouting, "He's choking on jerked beef! Do you have that tube thing you used to get McPherson to breathe?"

Zelnora couldn't see past the clot of men hovering over the supine body, but they parted when Cormack arrived. Nutting's face was red as an apple and he seemed unable to breathe, his arms flailing about. Cormack instantly flipped him on his stomach and punched two cupped fists into the pit of the man's stomach. One, two, three times he punched between his ribs.

He told Erskine, "I lost the cannula when those Apaches raided us on the Gila. Get out your knife!"

Flipping Nutting onto his back again and dropping him, Cormack whipped the knife from Erskine's hand. "Get my eagle's quill from my tent," he instructed his *compañero* with a sudden professional, level tone. Erskine took off like greased lightning to the tent while Cormack ferreted about with his fingers shoved down Nutting's throat.

"Can you get it? Can you get it?" Men breathed down his neck with alarm.

"Nothing," Cormack nearly whispered. "It must be lower than the forth tracheal ring," it sounded like he said. As Erskine barreled back down the hill and placed the eagle quill on Nutting's stomach, to

Zelnora's utter shock Cormack carefully placed the tip of the large knife at the base of Nutting's throat.

"Hold his arms," he instructed the men. With a smack of his palm against the hilt, the knife went through the throat muscle like cheese. What was he doing, some mountain man medicine? Did he intend to reach through a hole in his throat and remove the wad of stuck jerky?

The men looming over the body fell back in bewilderment, jaws slack. Blood that seemed darker than usual spurted through the hole, splashing Cormack's hands and forearms. Cormack tossed the knife to the sand and dumped out the gold from the eagle's quill. Almost more astoundingly than cutting his friend's throat, he now inserted the hollow quill into the incision...and the man breathed through it!

Zelnora leaned back on her heels, overcome with amazement. No one uttered the smallest sound. Satisfied with his handiwork, Cormack said to Erskine, "This is a perfect cannula. I found that the shorter straight things keep it from dropping into the trachea. Raise his shoulders—Quartus, hand over that drum."

"Bear's ass!" Quartus whispered in awe, numbly handing over the beloved drum.

Cormack rolled the drum sideways under Nutting's shoulders as the tomato shade of his face turned back into a shade more human, albeit sunburned. Cormack massaged as if to move the piece of meat down his throat, digging his fingers into the poor man's neck.

At length, Bigler blurted out, "What in blazes did you just do?"

Erskine replied proudly, "Something called a 'tracheotomy.' I've seen him do it twice, once on the Lewis Fork and once in New York. Lots of doct—folks are afraid to do it, so they wait too long and the poor fellow has gone under before they get desperate enough to try."

"Zelnora," Cormack interrupted. "Go get that white shirt I was wearing. Can you cut it into strips maybe an inch wide?"

Zelnora fetched the shirt and cut it. With each strip she handed Cormack, he wrapped the tube snugly into Nutting's trachea so it might stay without his holding it. She had seen several men choke to

death in her time, at least two in the mines of Georgia, but never did it occur to her one could poke a hole in a man's throat and have him breathe through it, bypassing his nose and mouth!

The millworker Sly finally asked Cormack, "Where in goddamn hell did you learn to do that? Something some Injuns taught you?"

"Yes," Cormack said vaguely, still sliding his fingertips down the muscles of Nutting's throat while Erskine poured whiskey on the bandages. "It's medicine of some kind."

"Medicine of some kind," *bear's ass!* Erskine had just told them he'd seen Cormack do it in New York, where they had presumably first met, prior to either one of them setting out for the Far West! This was no Injun medicine, and not something one picked up every day as an educated man of leisure in New York. Without thinking, Zelnora reached for the discarded bottle of whiskey and took several zealous swallows.

"There it goes!" Cormack reported cheerfully. Nutting gulped air through his mouth like upside-down whales Zelnora had seen dying on the beach, and Wimmer propped the mill worker's torso almost fully upright against his knees.

"Goddamn," said Nutting. "Did you really have to cut a hole in my neck, Bowmaker?"

"Ha ha!" cried Erskine joyfully. "*Viva Carlos Quinto!* You did it again, Cormack!"

Quartus sullenly took the whiskey bottle from Zelnora. "But now your gold is mixed back in with the sand."

\* \* \* \*

"This way, *jefe*. I saw *el pelirrojo* go down that creek bed." Three-Fingered Jack pointed with his revolver. Jack was chomping at the bit to go shoot at some oyster cans or animals of any kind, but Joaquin forbade the noise of any merrymaking now they were tracking the *norteamericanos*.

“Alone?”

“Alone.”

“Good.” Maybe now they’d find out where the doctor c  ched all his gold.

There were more than thirty men working the Lion Island gold diggings, and the doctor known as Bowmaker had not returned to Sutter’s Fort to trade in his gold or register his claim. Joaquin knew by questioning—but not robbing—other men heading back to the fort that men had been washing three hundred dollars a day using Indian blankets as sieves, as no one was clever enough to construct a rocker as Bowmaker had done. Sutter had been sending up oxcarts filled with mutton haunches, peas, flour, kegs of gunpowder, picks and spades, and more men, so miners could concentrate on their work and have no need to hunt. Still, it was obvious Bowmaker was the main *jefe* of the island, as he’d been the discoverer. He had staked out what was obviously the most desirable length of riverbed. It would be easy enough to capture him and torture him into telling them where he’d c  ched his gold, then merely kill him. Bowmaker may be a toughened mountain man, but no one could hold out against Joaquin’s particular brand of Spanish torture.

Taking with him Three-Fingered Jack, Garcia, and Feliz, the group started down the steep declivity that led to a creek that fed into the American River. Over a few small hillocks, Joaquin heard the burble of the creek itself. He knew the water’s rush would obscure any rustling Bowmaker made as he c  ched his gold, probably in the trunk of an old oak. Joaquin was surprised no other white men followed as well, but then they all seemed to be trusting men, leaving their tools lying about at night, their tents unguarded during the day.

Indicating the other three men should wait, Joaquin slipped down a slight rise, skating on muddy oak leaves. It was simple to catch a glimpse of the glaring white of the doctor’s back as he stood waist-deep in a spot where the creek formed a pool. Bowmaker bent forward, the dappled shadows of oak leaves playing in an artistic

chiaroscuro pattern across the sheer blankness of his back—no marks, freckles, or birthmarks whatever obscured the purity of his skin—well, perhaps a dusting of freckles across his shoulders. Joaquin was distracted by the strength of the sinews that undulated rhythmically under the skin of his flawless back. Did his own muscles move like that, like the flanks of a sturdy buck? Perhaps he himself was more slender than the doctor, who after all spent his days shoveling gravel and had probably walked for years across tall mountains, while the most strenuous thing Joaquin did was lift a pistol and order others about.

He did not often spy on naked white men who played in the sun, so he was riveted to a tree trunk, realizing the man was bathing. He had imagined Bowmaker had an underwater *câche*—that would be the clever sort of thing the surgeon would do—but no, he was rubbing his hands over his thighs under the water, and now his chest, socking his soapy hands into his underarms. Joaquin's nostrils flared with curiosity when the man turned to face him, bending backward like a graceful willow at the waist and knees, wetting his hair in the stillness of the pool. His chest was absolutely magnificent, Joaquin thought jealously. The pectorals were robustly developed, the abdomen ridged with the sort of hardworking muscles no one in his band possessed, and he could even see the solid shaft of his penis when Bowmaker bent backward again to rinse the soap from his hair. If Joaquin squinted his eyes, he imagined he could view through the clear water the full thick and fleshy length of it, and *mi dios* if the goddamned doctor didn't take the rough bar of soap, move up the ledge a few steps to bare himself to the speckled sun, and with two hands begin to lather up his enormous penis.

Joaquin was shamed to discover his breathing had quickened at the sight of the man's nude body, pleasuring himself so blatantly. Yes, he was right, the doctor's meaty tool was as magnificent as his body had promised, and Joaquin's own penis engorged obscenely inside his *calzoneras*. Oh, *madre de dios*, how contemptible and

disgusting to be aroused at the sight of a man slathering soap up and down the length of his admirable penis. There was obviously no gold *câche* here, so he should be leaving, but Joaquin couldn't shade his wicked eyes from the view of the man taking immense titillation in what was no doubt the velvety feel of his long penis as it slithered through his agile fingers. Bowmaker leaned his shapely buttocks back on a mud ledge, spread his thighs, and took thorough enjoyment in stroking his fist the full heavy length of his penis, squiggling his fingers over the shiny bulbous crown until his jaw went slack. The sight sent waves of lust down Joaquin's spine, stiffening his own cock until he had to pull his serape around himself and restore his pistol to its holster. He admired the way Bowmaker's muscular pectorals jerked and shimmered in the sunlight, and the stiffness of his nipples made Joaquin's mouth water.

Well, Joaquin was a wicked man, there was no question of that. What harm was there in perversely admiring the view of a long, donkey-like penis being stimulated to orgasm? He only wished his own penis was so long and beefy. He lustily desired to see the man ejaculate what certainly would be jets of delicious, hot semen—

What was he thinking? Turning to face the hillside, Joaquin squeezed his eyes shut, his heart pounding. What sort of filthy bastard was he, imagining things unacceptable to any decent Castilian? He needed to return to camp and say several—or several hundred—*ave marias*. What sort of penance would they demand from a murderous bastard who turned into pudding while spying on another man frigging himself?

*"Maria santa!"*

Oh dear Lord, it was Three-Fingered Jack, who couldn't bear to obey orders, and had followed him.

"Shut up!" Joaquin hissed.

But it was too late, Bowmaker had heard the idiot and, with wide deer's eyes, was already scrambling backwards up the muddy embankment like an agile spider, his stiff prick bobbing in the air.



“*Maria santa!*” Jack giggled again, and Joaquin gripped him by the arm to haul him back over the hillock. Of course they had been seen, Bowmaker knew someone was trailing him, and all because this moron couldn’t resist snickering at the sight of an erection!

Once safely over a couple of hillocks, Joaquin tossed the fool to the ground and, enraged, punched him several times until he felt the satisfying crunch of cheekbones under his knuckles.

“You idiotic mule!” he shouted quietly, as Bowmaker might have decided to chase down his stalkers, and a mountain man seldom pulled the trigger without sending the bullet to the mark.

Although his nose poured blood into his mouth, Three-Fingered Jack still giggled like a girl. “He was fondling his own prick!” he excitedly told the others, and they, too, fell to laughing like the imbeciles they were.

Joaquin snorted hotly through his nostrils. “He saw us! We’ve got to get out of here!”

They had left their horses over the next ridge, so they set to scrambling over the rise. Indeed, Bowmaker had dressed hurriedly, and Joaquin just saw the roots of his fiery hair pop over the rim of the hill before they skied down the side of another one. They were accustomed to fleeing, but Bowmaker was accustomed to chasing, more out of curiosity than murderousness, Joaquin concluded after many long minutes running.

He must face it—his thoughts had turned to subjects other than robbery and mayhem. For a brief moment, he had envisioned doing something to his quarry other than slicing off chunks of his chest or shooting his brains to hell on the ground. Joaquin became even more enraged, thinking how easily the white man had aroused him.

He hoped to wipe these thoughts clean. Punishing the perfectly formed specimen of manhood would be the answer.

## Chapter Eleven

*June 1848*

*Lion Island*

Zelnora and Mercy slept in each other's arms.

Brannagh had crossed the Sierra to meet Origin Pickett, the leader of the overland party that included Mercy's fiancé, Jerusha. There, Pickett sent a message to Brannagh that he had been told from above that the Colorado River was the place they were meant to stop, so he had stopped there and commenced to build a town.

This news angered Brannagh immeasurably. For once, Zelnora could somewhat sympathize with him. Pickett was supposed to bring his three hundred emigrants over the Sierra and join up with Brannagh. Now Brannagh would lose even more power when California folks inevitably wished to go to the Colorado River to join their relatives. He was falling away from the faith and becoming strictly a businessman now. Mercy was making plans to set off for the Colorado River in July along with about a hundred other folks, though she was not ecstatic about the plan.

"Do you ever feel...real love for Jerusha? I mean passionate love, romantic love, not just the duty sort of love."

Mercy was silent for awhile as she adjusted her chemise. "I...I don't know Jerusha that well. As you know, it was decided by my parents for me."

"So you feel no passionate love for him?"

Mercy shook her head. "No."

Zelnora crawled to her friend, as their narrow bedsteads of rough poles nearly touched each other in the small tent. “And what of Aaron Erskine? Cormack just told me Aaron has a financial background—he was a trader on Wall Street in New York.”

Mercy turned her delicately pale face to Zelnora. Zelnora herself had been browned nearly like an Indian from working in the sun. “Oh, Aaron’s just jim-dandy, Zel, you know I think that.”

“Why don’t you just stay a couple more months, and go to the Colorado River later? I will miss you so much! And Ward’s already irate with me for spending barely any time at the store.”

“Well, we don’t want what happened to the Donners to happen to us, which it will if we start out too late. Zel, you’ve got to make a break with Ward. Cormack is mining enough gold for the both of you, and you’re helping him. You said yourself the beaver are all trapped out, and he has no plans to return to the mountains. There just comes a time when you have to toss your faith to the wind and see where it falls.”

“Zelnora.” Cormack rapped on a tent pole. His tall early morning shadow threw an alluring shape onto her tent flap—the long arms, one at his side, the other holding, presumably, a piece of fruit that he chawed—hips thrust forward, his rifle at his shoulder, all the miner’s paraphernalia clanking from his belt. “I’m going down to the claim. Wanted to let you know, Brannagh just came a-streaking it in here.”

“What? Wait, don’t go.” Lying on her back, Zelnora wriggled into her skirts and stockings, making sure Mercy was decent before pulling open the tent flap.

Cormack looked down at her indulgently, as though she were a small child. “And that newspaper fellow, your old flame.”

“Ed Kemble? He’s no old flame. He’s a child! Where are they?”

“Bigler’s tent, last I saw. Kemble’s telling a powerful smart yarn about Brannagh in San Francisco. Here, I’ll walk you over.”

Already, in June, the country was parched. The hill on which Zelnora was camped was shaded by white and evergreen oaks. She

had chosen the lee side of the hill for her camp in order to block out the miners' noise—the yelling, splashing, and clanging of homemade rockers. Once they crested the hill, the village came into view: scattered suburbs of tents dotting the hillsides, a baggage wagon of eager miners coming from the fort road, the new store where one could purchase jerked beef, flour, and coffee, only the most rudimentary of supplies as of yet. The river wound around the rocky island, crawling like a giant anthill with men.

Men were digging and filling buckets with earth and gravel among tents made of calico shirts and pine boughs. Paths led to the various tenements, and one entire level might be dotted with mining excavations surrounded by immense piles of dirt and stones. Men carried buckskin bags and quart pickle jars packed with gold dust to the store, where they paid for whiskey with a pinch of gold. Cormack and Zelnora carefully picked their way up and down the pathways.

“A Digger Indian just gave me this,” Cormack said, pulling from his possible bag a large lump of gold encrusted with gravel as big as his fist. “He traded it to me for my scarlet sash.” He shrugged. “If they have no use for gold, hard doings if they prefer my sash.”

“Your sash is rarer to them.” Zelnora studied the gold lump, turning it this way and that in the sun. “Cormack. Just this piece here is enough to buy a fancy house in San Francisco. We simply must get to the fort and trade in all this gold, start an account. It's not doing anyone any good câching it where it is.” She smiled. “Then we can buy you a new sash.”

Brannagh was not at Bigler's tent, but Ed Kemble was drinking coffee round the fire with Bigler and several other men who desired news of San Francisco. Ed's face lit up when he saw Zelnora, and he put down his coffee cup to embrace her. They had met on the ship coming to San Francisco two years earlier and had become awfully fond of each other. Zelnora much preferred working inside the newspaper office or gathering gossip for stories to the work at the fort store, but she had to go where she was most needed.

“I was just about to tell you boys this story, and I think Miss Sparks will enjoy this, as well,” Ed orated loudly to the rapt group. “I was at the anchorage in San Francisco a few weeks ago when suddenly some tomfool fathead in a sombrero commences to rushing up and down Jackson and Montgomery Streets waving a quinine bottle of gold dust, shouting in a bull voice, ‘Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!’”

“No!” the men cried in unison. “Who was this tomfool blockhead?” the men asked Ed.

“I can guess,” Zelnora muttered.

Ed continued, “Within the fortnight, the population of San Francisco went from several hundred to a dozen or so! I’m probably gonna have to suspend my newspaper,” he told Zelnora sullenly.

“So who was this flatheaded jackass?” a miner demanded. “I’ll drop him in his tracks.”

“Brannagh of course!” Zelnora told the miners irritably. “Advancing his interests.”

To calm the miners’ outraged curses, Ed said, “Brannagh’s a good businessman, you’ve got to give him that. Before he went tearing around the streets shouting about gold, he bought up every pickaxe, shovel, and pan in the entire town.”

A miner slapped his thigh with his hat. “Goddamnit! No wonder that damned pan cost me ten dollars at Brannagh’s store! That pan was worth twenty cents a month ago!”

“Sam Coleridge just traded an ounce of gold for a box of Seidlitz powder at Brannagh’s store!”

There was a general hubbub of disconcerted miners. Mining hubbubs always made one uneasy. Zelnora, Cormack, Bigler, and Ed stepped toward Brannagh when they saw him sliding down a sandy hill in his tall boots, followed by Hudson and Willes, two of his partners who had built the Lion Island store.

“We’d best warn him, his outrageous practices are unsettling the miners,” said Bigler.

Cormack mentioned, “He’s perfectly free to charge whatever they’re willing to pay.”

Bigler raised an eyebrow. “Bowmaker? Defending Brannagh’s trickery? Well, well, here’s the high priest collecting tithes.”

Brannagh tipped his hat, first to Zelnora, then Bigler, then Ed. Lastly, he barely sniffed at Cormack. Brannagh got right down to business.

“Bigler.” Zelnora noted he did not call him “brother” any longer. “I am here to collect the tithes, as you know. Ten percent each for Hudson and Willis by right of discovery, and ten percent for my collection fee.”

“That’s thirty percent! Regular mission tithes are only ten percent. And I thought you had abandoned the mission,” Bigler pointed out cautiously.

Brannagh chuckled. “Whatever made you think that? Yes, these tithes will go to buy young cattle here and send them to Elder Pickett at the Colorado River. There is more gold here than all the people of California can take out in fifty years.”

Bigler stepped up to Brannagh, confrontational. “You expect me to believe that? That you’d even buy cattle, much less ship ‘em to the Colorado River? I’ve seen enough of your tricks—Pickett will never see any cattle brought to him by that channel. What business do you have to collect tithes here, anyway?”

Cormack beat Brannagh to it. “Bigler, he has a right to collect the tax if you are fool enough to pay it.”

Zelnora had seen Brannagh erupt like this many times—on the ship, in San Francisco, at his fort store—so it didn’t shake her a bit to see how instantly red his face flushed, like a radish, how he attempted to draw himself up and loom over Cormack, nearly bumping the taller man with his chest like a puffed-up rooster. “Bowmaker, I’ve just about had enough—”

Zelnora did not even see Cormack’s hand at his holster, but suddenly Brannagh was looking cross-eyed down the barrel of his

Colt's revolver. Taking a couple of steps back from the businessman, Cormack's hand was steady, and he narrowed his unblinking eyes at Brannagh. "And I've had just about enough from you, sir."

Unaware that his two partners were backing slowly off, crawling in horror up the sandy hill behind him, Brannagh gulped and regained some composure, though the barrel was three inches from his nose. He attempted a chuckle. "I see that stealing my helpmate is not enough for a man of such voracious appetites as you, Bowmaker. Now you must incite my followers to mutiny?" He stepped into his preacher's voice now. "Where will it all stop, Bowmaker, this clodhopping persecution you perpetrate on me? What is it about a pious man that sends you to such heights of uneducated irrationality? Oh, but I have heard you style yourself a doctor."

Cormack's growl was so murderous Zelnora could barely hear his words. "I don't style myself anything."

Brannagh blathered on with confidence. "What does the Bible say? 'Physician, heal thyself.' Oh, perhaps you'd know that if you could read."

Cormack cocked the hammer. Zelnora had never seen such rage in his beautiful clear eyes before. Yet he was calm, still, as though his temper propelled him to an even higher sense of peace. "Perhaps if you kept your Thomas in your pants, you wouldn't have driven Miss Sparks into my uneducated arms."

*Oh, dear Lord.* The childish tiffs men got into, as though she were a toy! Zelnora leaped to Cormack's side, putting a soothing hand on the arm that didn't hold the pistol. "It's all right, Cormack. Please holster your revolver." Slowly and seemingly reluctantly, Cormack did so, but he didn't remove his level, steely gaze upon Brannagh's sweaty face. "Ward. It is true. I shall have to tender my resignation from your employ. Quartus and I shall work with Mr. Bowmaker and Aaron Erskine from now on. While I do thank you most gratefully for the opportunities—" Cormack cast her a sharp look, and Zelnora

swallowed hard. "I need to separate myself from your influence, and I believe I can be most fruitful with Mr. Bowmaker."

With no pistol barrel in his face, Brannagh burst forth in oratorical splendor. "Ah, the frivolities of youth, when one imagines one's circumstances will change for the better by throwing caution to the breeze. You'll see. You'll see that this gold fever is but a flash in the pan, the gold mining pan such as it is, and the real money is to be made in the restaurant, hotel, the pick and axe trade. Why, I could make more money selling vegetables to these pickled spirits, these maggots of society, seeing as how I've never laid eyes on a single green comestible out here in the gold mines! And such choice and pickled spirits you've chosen to align yourself with, Miss Sparks!"

Brannagh revolted her. She said, "That's fine talk coming from one who is always corned himself, sir."

Brannagh opened his mouth to bray some more, but Cormack said calmly, "Go, Brannagh. Your collection services are no longer required at Lion Island."

Brannagh stomped downhill, shouting over his shoulder, "I'll just see what Wimmer, Sly, and Mowry have to say about this! And all of you are ejected from the mission!"

"Is that so?" Bigler bellowed. "I'd rather be ejected than to pray alongside a hypocrite such as you!"

Cormack put a protective arm around Zelnora as he led her back to the river.

"Will Quartus be upset to be ejected?" Cormack asked her.

She smiled. "Apparently his mother will be extremely upset." She was stupefied at how free she felt, having been cast into the same kettle as these "pickled spirits" who mined the gold camps of California. Far better the maggots of society than the hypocritical shylocks of the "civilized" settlements.

Cormack squinted at the sky. "Well, fortunately, it takes about four months for a letter to get overland, so he's got time to plan what to say to her."



“Yes, or six months round the Cape.” Zelnora agreed happily.

Cormack pointed at her. “He should send the letter that way.”

Zelnora laid her head upon his shoulder as they came within sight of their claim. Erskine and Quartus, a hundred yards downstream, waved as they worked Erskine’s rocker.

## Chapter Twelve

*July 4, 1848*

*Sutter's Fort*

Sutter threw a huge feast, inviting everyone in the fort's vicinity. In the old armory building, he set a long table loaded with beef, game, fowl, and all the luxuries which a frontier life could offer. The table was laden with bottles of sauterne and Madeira, and enough fiery *aguardiente* brandy to satisfy all who wished to "splice the main brace." There was also a fandango that Cormack itched to get on over to, as he was clad in his best dress, his shirt with long quill-wrapped fringes and red wool cuffs. Feeling the dandy, he'd slapped on a broad-brimmed Spanish hat with a new crimson scarf around the crown.

Aaron Erskine had taken a bookkeeping position with Sutter in order to be closer to Mercy, leaving their gold mining operations sadly bereft of one-third of their labor force, Bigler having also forged off on his own. So Cormack, Zelnora, and Quartus visited Erskine in his office adjacent to Sutter's dining room. Erskine was occupied weighing gold and changing money, serving a line of men that went out the door and into the courtyard, so the trio took seats alongside the wall.

"The irony must not escape you that they are allowing me to handle money again." Erskine grinned as he handed a nearly naked Indian a couple of *reales* for his gold. The exchange rate for Indians differed from the rate given whites. This Indian had made a prior deal

with a white man, one could tell from his state of nature, aside from a frock coat and socks.

Cormack laughed. "I noticed that sign. Sutter must be desperate for employees that haven't caught the gold fever and gone running off. But a lot of these claims are already getting worked out."

Erskine knowingly wriggled an eyebrow. "I talk to a lot of folks, as you can imagine. Folks are washing an average of five hundred dollars dust a day. But as you said, a lot of the claims are worked out already." Glancing surreptitiously from side to side and seeing only carefree Diggers and one chap with a bottle of bug juice, Erskine imparted, "I just heard tell yesterday of a big new strike on the Stanislaus, between Wood's Crossing and Sonoran Camp. That's the place to be, from all accounts."

"Sonoran Camp?" Cormack pondered. "I heard that's a lawless frontier chockfull of Spaniards playing monte and horse racing—damn it, Quartus, will you cheese that drum, please?"

Quartus gave Cormack sad eyes brimming with tears. "I'm warming up for the fandango!" he protested.

"You've been warming up for weeks," Zelnora pointed out calmly. "I've heard of those dry diggings. Men from Sonora in Mexico, expert miners, created that town. On account of its situation on slate rock with auriferous quartz veins just below a limestone belt, it seems to be exceedingly rich. Do you have any samples I could look at?"

"Certainly," Erskine said promptly, rising and going to a table at the back of the room.

"You know," Cormack told the Indian next in line. The fellow waited patiently wearing only a sombrero and a crimson sash that looked suspiciously like the one Cormack had traded for that enormous lump of gold. "You could get double the value in *reales* if you just had a white man trade in your gold for you." The Indian stared blankly at him.

"What is 'bull baiting'?" Quartus asked Cormack.

Cormack frowned. "Why do you ask that?"

"I heard in Sonoran Camp they have bull baiting. Do you tease a bull into charging then jump aside at the last minute?"

"Maybe it's something akin to a bull and bear fighting," Cormack mused. "The most cruel and senseless thing ever. Those Spaniards have gone beaver to be amused by such as that. Poor doings when a 'bear hunter' puts old Ephraim into a cage, then lets him out into a pen to be gored by the bull. They're both tied together," he told an awestruck Quartus.

"Neither one has fair play!" Erskine pointed at him indignantly, handing Zelnora the gold samples. He attempted to soothe Quartus by telling him, "The fight almost always ends without many coups on either side. Neither of the combatants really means to raise much hair, they just want peace."

Cormack said, "Erskine. Let me put this in your safe till you can credit it to my account." He would place most of their gold into the safe, keeping on him only what he needed for today's festivities and to purchase supplies for Lion Island. Cormack aimed to buy a lot in San Francisco where he'd heard an auction would soon be held—a few hundred dollars for beach and water lots. Brannagh always attended those auctions, flaunting his brethren's money, and hurrah for vengeful doings if Cormack could purchase a lot away from him. It was the settlements for him, once he earned his fortune! He'd not squander his gold earnings away on liquor and women like so many had already done.

While Erskine put their dust away, Zelnora told Cormack in a low voice, "This Sonoran Camp ore is of the highest quality, twenty-four carats even, almost ready to go to the mint. We should find some of these Sonoran Spaniards and find out more about it."

"Sounds like a pretty smart spree," Cormack agreed. Louder, he told Erskine, "Sounds like our *compañero* Brannagh is speechifying out there. We should pay our respects."

Cormack slapped his hat onto his head, and Zelnora took Quartus by the hand as they left the assaying office. Cormack was proud of Zelnora for raising Brannagh's hair that time in Lion Island, and she had seemed more confident as of late, walking more erect, smiling freely. Blooming, really, with the freedom of not being under any man's thumb.

"Cormack, why would Aaron not be allowed to handle money?" Zelnora inquired as they threaded their way through the fort's inner courtyard, past beef on smoldering charcoal fires, ragged men done up in brass-buttoned waistcoats toasting "here's all the hair off your head," and Californio women with braids woven in intricate architectural heaps. Plaintive airs on guitar and fiddle were sung with much pathos as they walked through clouds of *cigarito* smoke, the little *cigarita* also puffed freely by señoritas. "Wasn't he a broker on Wall Street?"

Cormack had feared that question. He had been surprised Erskine had mentioned it in front of Zelnora. So now he had a handy reply. "Yes, he was a trader, a speculator on Wall Street," he said, picking up two cups of *aguardiente* from a long table and handing one to Zelnora. To distract Quartus, he handed him one, as well. "A very good money man, from all accounts. I fear Sutter won't have much money to manage, though, if men keep deserting him as they've been doing, or plundering his land and cattle. Already Marshall is a ruined man, all the squatters overrunning his mill."

Zelnora would not be distracted, however, as they approached the clearing where Brannagh held forth. "Is that how you met him then, on Wall Street? Were you an investor?"

"Yes, we met nearby Wall Street. Erskine needed protection from some ruffians."

"Oh, someone was trying to stick him up? Extort money from him? Blackmail?"

Cormack grinned. "Something like that. More like they were trying to raise his topknot."

Clutching his arm, Zelnora leaned her bosom against him. “And you went and raised their hair to protect him?”

“Something like that. Hey. Don’t you want to hear your former employer bloviate? Look, Quartus—Brannagh is making a speech.”

Quartus commenced to drumming a rapid tattoo. “Speech! Speech!” he exhorted, though Brannagh was already bellowing welcome to their esteemed guests, Colonel Mason and Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman, up from Monterey to view the gold diggings for themselves and discover why they were left with only a few soldiers to guard their coastal fort, everyone else having deserted to the mines. As a private’s monthly pay was now worth about a pound of flour, it was no big surprise. Captain Sutter was already so in his cups, he was sliding down his chair and would soon be on the ground.

“These men are murderers, I say, as well as thieves. I know it, and I will die or see them hung by the neck.” Apparently, Brannagh referred to the Spanish brigands roaming California in bands. Recently Sly, Nutting, and a few other men had been attacked and robbed of their gold on the river road. “I’m opposed to any farce in this business.”

Cormack felt Zelnora shake with laughter against his arm. “That’s a good joke,” she muttered.

“We are the mayor and the recorder, the hangman and the law. Every morning, we read fresh accounts of murders and robberies. I want no technicalities. Such things are devised to shield the guilty!”

Odd that when Brannagh shouted earnestly about brigands, Cormack’s eye fell upon an intent Spaniard who had been staring at him. This Spaniard leaned back against the adobe wall of the blacksmith’s shop, clad colorfully in a steeple-crowned glazed sombrero and dandified velvet *calzoneras* fastened up the side with gold buttons, open to the knee. Being taller than most Spaniards marked him as a *gente de razón*, perhaps Castilian. His soft brown-black hair came nearly to his shoulders, and he sported one of those

thin moustaches Cormack had always associated with the brigand, although perhaps Brannagh's speech was coloring his vision. As was normal in these parts, his spurs were of enormous size, the shaft ten inches long, the roller bristling out into six points, which rattled with a quick, sharp sound. The man was handsome in a compelling, mysterious way, with a pointed, well-formed nose and high, dramatic cheekbones. He could have a bit of the Plains Indian in him...

But why was he staring so intently and levelly at Cormack? Maybe he coveted Zelnora as the most vivacious and intelligent woman at the entire fort. Or maybe he was a Spaniard who could tell them about the Sonoran Camp dry diggings. Like most white folks, Cormack assumed all Spaniards were acquainted with one another.

As Brannagh wound down his speech and Colonel Mason took up various toasts, Cormack told Zelnora, "Let's get to the fandango." He grabbed a chunk of cheese and a bottle of champagne on their way out the fort gate.

A mass of Americans and Californios threaded the mazes of a cotillion as a fiddle and concertina struck up "Old Uncle Ned." While Quartus joined the band and beat out that rhythm on the drum, Cormack donned his dress buckskin coat with beaver collar and cuffs. Taking Zelnora by the hand, they joined the dance with other couples and waltzed to the unhappy lyrics.

*His fingers were long like de cane in de brake,  
He had no eyes for to see;  
He had no teeth for to eat de corn cake,  
So he had to let de corn cake be.*

Cormack was invigorated to be dancing for the first time since the last rendezvous, when mountain men flush of cash went on their spree and were as open-handed as an Indian could wish the sale of whiskey. They joined hands in a circle with other dancers and sashayed out, sashayed in. Zelnora tossed her braided head and skipped with light

feet, laughing with the other emigrants she was acquainted with. Cormack realized that he wished to settle in a place with social activities, so he could see Zelnora this giddy and fresh-faced all of the time.

It was the meanest sort of action to haul a woman critter around a starving country—it was nigh on time to settle.

When “Old Uncle Ned” wound down and the other musicians convinced Quartus the song was ended, Zelnora turned to the stranger who had been holding her hand in the circle. He looked so familiar, yet she could not place him—probably some fellow who had been lounging about the fort.

“¿Cómo se llama?” she asked the Spaniard.

She was pleased that he replied in perfectly accented English, for even after being in California for two years, she was not very conversational in Spanish. Bowing at the waist grandly, he said, “May I present myself, Antonio Carillo.” He even kissed her hand. Zelnora had always greatly enjoyed these well-mannered Spaniards. Even the lowest of their cabal spoke the most royal English and dressed with such affect, sometimes it was difficult to tell a peasant from the *gente de razón*. “I am a caballero from Don Vallejo’s rancho in Sonoma.”

Señor Carillo looked steadily into her eyes, unblinking, much as Cormack often did in his level, probing way. This caballero unsettled her with his gaze that seemed to probe her for a different sort of information entirely. “Ah, perhaps that is where I saw you before. I visited General Vallejo with Mr. Ward Brannagh about a year ago. We much enjoyed the caballero’s demonstration of their mustang roping skills. I am Señorita Zelnora Sparks, from...Of Lion Island. Here is my, ah, my partner, Mr. Cormack Bowmaker.”

Grasping her hand, the caballero asked urgently, “May I have the next dance, Señorita?”

He whisked her away before Cormack could introduce himself. Zelnora was mortified to see the caballero throw his arms carelessly behind his back and pose immobile, dramatically. This meant a



fandango song in general, and the guitar player was already executing sonorous glissandos, Quartus jumping in with gusto to tap out some bubbling Caribbean rhythm on his deerskin.

“*¡Toca más rápido!*” Quartus trilled out happily. Languages were one of his many avocations.

And *rápido* they went, indeed. Zelnora held her hands gracefully disposed at her thighs, holding her Californio skirts that were already short enough to expose her ankles. Meanwhile, Señor Carillo rattled away, tapping his spurred boots with great dexterity, whipping his colorful serape around like the wings of a mad shorebird. He had not even set aside his sombrero. Under full head of locomotion, Quartus’ drum urged him to greater pinnacles of the fandango. People were cheering them! The blurry crowd of smiling faces clapped their hands in accompaniment, and the couple stomped their feet in ever faster staccato, until much to her relief another couple stepped in to give a hand to them, and they were allowed to fall into a more normal waltz step, barely moving.

“Ah, *eso fue encatador*,” the caballero said, smiling without baring his teeth.

“Yes, very lovely,” Zelnora agreed guardedly. This horseman, suave and handsome though he was, was overly kind to her, and she longed to be back at Cormack’s side. “That gentleman with the red hair is my fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” He raised one eyebrow as though he wasn’t familiar with the word. “And you are employed by Mr. Ward Brannagh?”

“I was. Used to be. I helped him run his store here, maybe that’s where we met before?”

“Why do you no longer work for him? He seems like a very good gentleman.”

“Oh, I am sure he is, to people who must do business with him. It is the...employees who have troubles with him.”

Señor Carillo moved with a genteel awareness, as though the entire crowd was watching him. “So what do you do in Lion Island with Señor Bowmaker?”

Zelnora tossed her head carelessly, attempting a light laugh. “Oh, the same thing most everyone else does these days.”

“Gold? Ah, a fool’s pursuit! You would do much better to be selling gold pans, axes, or better yet, cultivating vegetables, for none of these men have had so much as a bite of a tomato in years. Or fruit! On Vallejo’s land we have many fruit trees.”

“Oh, yes, my hus...my brother would very much enjoy some fruit juice,” Zelnora said passionately, carried off by the vision of an orange. She had heard Señor Carillo’s sentiment several times before. He was probably right.

“But you must be doing quite well in the mines, no?”

“Oh, yes, sometimes we dig about five hundred dollars’ worth a day—”

“*Buenos tardes.*” Although the musicians had not been able to wind Quartus down from his frenzied drumming and end the fandango, Cormack stood there, rudely interrupting the dance.

Zelnora was relieved to release her handhold on the caballero, and he stepped back politely, tipping his hat to Cormack. “Señor,” Carillo acknowledged.

Cormack took her arm rather roughly. “Thank you for watching out for her,” he told the Spaniard, not unkindly. “We must be going now, however.”

“I understand.” Carillo nodded and stepped back a few more paces, hand held to his stomach in a tiny bow.

Cormack sped her off past the trio of musicians.

“Where are we going?”

Under his breath, Cormack said, “To the river.”

Zelnora looked in excited shame at the ground as Cormack nearly dragged her over the dried brown grass. “You know, that Spanish

fellow is a caballero for Vallejo. He advised me to sow vegetable crops.”

“I wonder if he knows anything about that Sonoran Camp.”

“I doubt it. He’s very skeptical about any idea of gold.”

## Chapter Thirteen

The doctor cradled Zelnora's breasts in his hands as he kneeled before her, leaning her up against a large rock.

As he slurped from the tips of her nipples, she squirmed with delight. He humped her leg with his admirable penis that distended the crotch of his fancy buckskins until it seemed he may climax inside the leather. He was a thoroughly fierce grizzly bear, his dazzling white shoulder muscles shimmering as his shirt slid off his torso. He grasped Zelnora to him and sipped from her breasts, and then she flipped him around and shoved him back against the rock.

Dropping to her knees, it was her turn to suckle at his body. She smeared her face all about his jutting erection, eliciting deep rolling growls that Joaquin Valenzuela could hear from his hiding spot behind an oak.

"Let's do it," said Three-Fingered Jack, clinging to Joaquin's back as was his habit, cocking his pistol next to his *jefe*'s ear.

But Joaquin could not be moved to give the order, as Zelnora was now unbuttoning the leather broadfall, lifting Bowmaker's tantalizing, hefty cock in her hand, and smearing the glistening braids of her coiffure all over it. Bowmaker arched his pelvis to her and threw his head back, slack-jawed, the perfect vision of a virile buck in the throes of lust, his muscular throat swallowing his moans. His shirt slid farther onto his elbow, revealing an erect, delicious nipple. Joaquin's mouth watered, his breathing quickened, and he was glad his serape hid his own erection.

"*Mi dios, que grande.*" Jack giggled derisively. "How can she eat all of that?"

Irritated, Joaquin shoved the majordomo off his back, into the open where Bowmaker could have easily seen him, had he not been focused on pumping his cock into Zelnora's mouth. "We should get him when he's unaware..." he muttered. "Right before he climaxes."

Although he had been berating himself for his arousal when viewing the doctor masturbating in the creek, Joaquin had no intervening scruples about carrying out his plan. If anything, his stimulation at that sight, and his incessant reliving of the incident, spurred him on to greater peaks of revenge.

He forced himself to remember his innocent days when first coming to California, when he was a monte dealer in various raucous newborn towns. He'd borrowed a horse from his brother only to find out it was stolen. The ensuing mob had gone after both him and his brother, though his brother had paid for the stolen mount. Spaniards were held in low esteem, and the ensuing trial was a travesty where they were only allowed to bring forward their own testimony, no one else's. His brother was hung upon the nearest limb and Joaquin, tied to the trunk of the same tree, flogged nearly to death. He was released and told to leave, but he'd vowed revenge upon *norteamericanos* in general.

Many people just viewed him as a cruel, brutal cutthroat, without awareness of the incidents that had created the modern Joaquin Valenzuela. The abuse that Spaniards endured allowed him to easily gather his band of slovenly ill-tempered brigands that included Reyes Feliz, the brother of Joaquin's murdered wife.

He had rubbed out nearly all of those responsible, but it seemed his group of bandits had gathered such momentum that they could not stop this lucrative business now, and their fame was such that they had to continually enact bigger and more vicious acts in order to keep the fear of them alive, and their fortunes stocked.

Bowmaker appeared ready. The slick, shiny root of his cock strained, and his outspread thighs were vulnerably open to the woman's suckling.

“Let’s go,” Joaquin said, and the four men surged forward down the rocky riverbed, their colorful serapes flowing like a flock of tropical birds.

They were quiet as could be, having already cocked their pistols. The other three men wore black silk kerchiefs covering the lower part of their faces, but Joaquin didn’t bother, having just made the couple’s acquaintance at the fandango. It took nearly a minute for the orgasmic mountain man to note their arrival, and his eyes popped open with the alacrity of the peerless hunter. Instantly, Bowmaker grabbed Zelnora by the shoulders and shoved her behind himself. Maybe she was accustomed to this rough sort of play, for she didn’t utter a word of surprise or question his actions, merely cowered behind his thighs while his glorious, donkey-like penis slowly shriveled and returned to what must be its natural everyday state...much to Joaquin’s regret.

The bandits came within ten feet of the mountain man, leveling their pistols at his head. Joaquin did not plan upon Bowmaker drawing his own formidable Colt’s revolver, and he admired the furious rage that lit up the other man’s eyes.

“What is it you want?” Bowmaker barked, attempting to stuff his penis back into his buckskins with his free hand, without much success. He tugged his white shirt back over his satiny shoulder, but his alluring nipple, stiff with stimulation, was still exposed.

He must know he was outgunned. Even though Zelnora now brandished a laughably tiny pocket pistol, if they shot any one of his men, Joaquin’s men would shoot back, so there was nothing to be gained.

“Your gold, Bowmaker. Tell us where you’ve c  ched it and we’ll take you back to Lion Island. We’ll let you go once we’ve found it.”

It was amazing the way he held the heavy Colt’s absolutely steady, not shaking an iota unlike Joaquin’s fellow bandits, who apparently couldn’t lift anything heavier than an *aguardiente* bottle. “These doings won’t shine in this crowd...*Valenzuela*. I ain’t telling

you about any c che, just so you can whale upon every single other Lion Island miner.” He pressed down on Zelnora’s shoulder to urge her to stay her trigger finger.

Joaquin grinned, glad of the opportunity to challenge the white man. It would not have been any fun if he’d surrendered right away. “*Sin ventaja, no salen.*” *They never attack without odds.*

“If you don’t leave, you’ll be in a frightening fix,” Bowmaker said.

What “fix” exactly, Joaquin had no idea. Four pistols were aimed at one and a half, and the woman could easily be subdued. It would be scintillating to see how the mountain man reacted to such an event, so Joaquin ordered Garcia and Feliz to remove her from her hideaway behind his legs.

As Garcia yanked her round to Bowmaker’s side, to Joaquin’s surprise the mountain man brought a swift and deadly elbow into Feliz’s jawbone, cracking it audibly. Feliz fell away to the rounded rocks below, blood rushing from his mouth below his mask, along with, most likely, a renegade tooth, and as a natural reaction Garcia pressed his barrel directly onto the white man’s temple.

Alarmed, Joaquin shouted “No!” to his henchman. *Mi dios*, he should not have uttered that, for now Bowmaker knew he did not want him harmed. “Drop your pistol, Se or.”

Reluctantly, one finger at a time, Bowmaker let his Colt’s fall to the rocks. Joaquin tossed Feliz a lariat with which he tied Bowmaker’s hands behind his back. With his leather broadfall still unbuttoned, hanging from his thighs, Joaquin had a good view of his sinewy pubic region, outthrust in his anger, the root of his cock brilliant in its potent strength. He was relieved he was now able to lower his pistol, for it was getting rather heavy, Joaquin not being any more robust than his fellow bandits. He sat on a flat rock and gestured for Garcia to bring Zelnora to him after cutting another length of lariat to hitch around her wrists.

Garcia, not being a great lover of women, or anyone for that matter, tossed her with disgust onto Joaquin's lap. She wriggled in frustration, but it only served to bring Joaquin's cock to attention, expanding and burgeoning against her bottom. Garcia returned to guarding the mountain man. Bowmaker could hardly have been expected to do anything with his hands bound as they were, yet lickety-split he shot out one booted foot like greased lightning, bashing Garcia directly in the kneecap, bowling him backward about ten feet. Three-Fingered Jack again raised his pistol to Bowmaker's head, shouting at Joaquin, "Now, *jefe*? Now?"

"*Quedate quieto!*" Joaquin yelled back. *Stay still!* "*Si lo matamos, no vamos a saber donde está el oro.*" *If we kill him, we won't find out where the gold is.* So Jack satisfied himself with clouting Bowmaker on the cheekbone with his pistol grip. The man merely flinched a few inches, but swiftly returned himself to his upright stiffly angry position.

"Don't tell them a thing, Cormack," Zelnora wailed, her hair all in lovely disarray around her face. Bowmaker said nothing, but his eyes narrowed, as though formulating a plan.

Joaquin called out, "Do you like your woman's teats?" He yanked her chemise down below her breasts, and they popped out obligingly, bobbing buoyantly in the hot, still summer air. Joaquin cupped them aloft for all to admire, and to his right shoulder, Jack began to massage his own crotch, leering. "You are very lucky to have such a well-endowed woman."

Bowmaker only closed his eyes and leaned against the rock, seemingly defeated. The breasts of Spanish women were not usually as globular and heavy. Every time she squirmed, her bottom rubbed against his erection, directly up and down the length of it, almost purposefully. Joaquin began to wonder whether he could hold out until they extracted their information. It would be most grossly shameful if he ejaculated without even taking his cock out of his *calzoneras*. Such a thing had never happened before!



“Where is the gold c ched, pretty woman?” Joaquin said into her ear.

“I cannot tell; it is not my gold; I don’t know where it is,” she said over and over.

“Tell me where the gold is hidden, and I will let you and Bowmaker go right now.” Joaquin needed to maintain the pretext he had his sights on the gold still. It wouldn’t do to let Jack know he’d been run off the rails by the sight of the white woman’s firm tits.

“I tell you, I don’t know.” Her voice had softened, was not as harshly angry as a few minutes before. “If I knew, I would tell you. Why don’t you just rob Ward Brannagh? He’s the one with all the money.”

Joaquin chortled. “Very sly of you, *mi mujer bonita*. But you have already told me you loathe Se or Brannagh.” Although her idea was a good one, he had thought of it many times before. He just didn’t want his face to be known yet in these parts. He needed to be able to move freely into various communities before he struck.

And then he noticed. Bowmaker, leaning against his rock with hands tied behind his back. Bowmaker gazed at the couple with a disgusted, snarling upper lip and narrowed eyes, yet...His enviable penis had obviously lifted the crotch of his buckskins, engorging and filling the delectable leather with savory plumpness. He seemed to almost defiantly thrust his erection at Joaquin—perhaps daring him to manhandle him instead of the woman?

“It doesn’t matter that I loathe him. The fact remains he is the richest man around. If you let us go, I will tell you how to get into his safe.”

Joaquin could now clearly view the swollen head of Bowmaker’s cock under the tight leather. His cock was so stiff it stretched the leather as it elongated against his hip, exposing another couple of inches of the robust base where it jutted proudly. Had the mountain man been alone so long in the Rockies he had developed an entirely perverse set of morals and desires? Perhaps he had become

accustomed to fondling other men. The idea so aroused Joaquin that he jerked Zelnora off his lap and tossed her at Jack.

He was careful to tighten his serape about his torso as he sauntered over to the doctor. After all, it was more expedient to torment the man who knew where the *câche* was than waste time with his flame, who may be sincere in not knowing. Expressionless, he reached out and tweaked one of the deliciously hard nipples, hoping none of his men noticed his fingertips caressing the compact muscles of his shimmering pectoral. The man's hips seemed to twitch, and his nostrils flared with hatred. A wave of lust rolled down Joaquin's chest, stiffening his own penis so suddenly he could feel a drop of semen ooze from the tip. He had never touched another man in a non-violent manner. Yet an overpowering part of his brain screamed at him to bend his knees and suck that exquisite nipple into his mouth, to nibble till the man moaned with pleasure, until his prick dripped semen from its bulging tip as well.

His voice wavered a bit when he said, "Now we shall see how you take to having your debauched body mauled."

## Chapter Fourteen

Cormack was filled with disgust, yet his traitorous body rebelled against his mind.

Valenzuela tweaked his nipple in a way that was supposed to be painful, but it only sent a current of lust down his belly and into his cock. He knew his cock was already half-erect owing to some perverted enjoyment at seeing Zelnora's tits juggled so erotically by another man. She had the most exquisite bosom, and if Cormack was a judge of Spaniard sign, this infamous bandit was more harmless than the stories told. He would have killed them by now or at least maimed them if bloodthirstiness was truly his main trait.

This sign, and the way that the bandit stood so close to his hip, Cormack could feel the heat of his erection even under the serape, made the trail as plain as writing.

Was this the fellow who had been watching him frig himself in the creek? The serape looked similar, and the fellow was about the same height. That chap had been watching him stroke his own prick for at least five minutes. If so, Cormack might know a way to get out of here alive using only his wits.

Now Valenzuela fiddled with both nipples at once, standing so boldly in front of him their erections nearly touched. "It makes you randy to watch me fondle your woman, eh, Señor Mountain Man. You like to watch? I like to watch, too. I like to watch a man cry out and tell me where his gold is câched, so I do not have to move on to torturing him more intimately."

Cormack nearly spat in his face, but remembered his goal. Hating himself even more profoundly when his prick elongated inside his buckskins, he said evenly, "Go ahead. Hurt me." Nothing about gold.

A smile curled the edges of Valenzuela's handsome mouth, and he spun about suddenly, marching back to his flat rock and giving his men instructions. They hauled Cormack over to the bandit, the brigand Cormack had kicked limping, he noted with satisfaction. Tossing him face up onto Valenzuela's lap, he felt the hard ridge of the highwayman's erection against his ass. He leaned back with his bound hands against the sandy rocks, his torso supported by one of the henchmen who kneeled behind him.

Grinning casually as though at an afternoon tea, Valenzuela's brown paw slid down Cormack's stomach, massaging his taut muscles gently, it seemed. He lingered over his pubic bone, rubbing in a circular motion almost lovingly, his fingertips brushing against the root of Cormack's taut prick. Cormack was shamed when his prick twitched and jumped visibly underneath the buckskin. Like the time he had frigged himself while his fellow miners watched, he found it strangely erotic to be admired by another man. And now the other two murderers stood around, occupied with massaging their own crotches, and exhorting Valenzuela, "*Si, si*, take it out. Whip him, he'll tell you where the gold is then."

"Shut up!" Valenzuela snapped at the miscreants. A pleasant cast came over his face when he turned back to Cormack, slithering his long brown fingers around the base of his erection. "Oh, my, what do we have here? It seems this rough mountain man is stimulated by the feel of my penis against his muscular ass. The idea that my hand is touching his long, stiff penis. You like that, don't you, mountain man? A man has a much more rough touch than a woman, eh?"

Cormack merely narrowed his eyes at the ruffian and snorted through his nostrils as Valenzuela lifted the embarrassing heavy length of his cock from under the buckskin. It sprang into the hot summer air with readiness, mortifyingly shiny and purplish, ready to

spurt jets of semen into the odious fellow's face. His body was betraying him! Was he truly so eager and desperate for the most repulsive sort of release that he would take more than a pretense of enjoyment out of being handled by this brigand? Yet he'd already known that he loved to display his body for anyone's pleasure, he loved to be admired, and the way the men marveled at his enormously meaty tool throbbing in the sun, in a man's brown fist, was the apex of narcissism.

"I see you are well-hung like a bull," Valenzuela nearly purred, squeezing his cock with apparent relish. His hand swept down to caress Cormack's balls, hard and full to bursting with seed, as the henchman he had punted hobbled over to stand between his feet, forcing his thighs open. Cormack could see a wet stain on the front of the henchman's cotton pants, and he looked to his own prick where a few drops glistened at the tip.

"You can humiliate me all you wish, Valenzuela," Cormack fairly whispered.

Valenzuela grinned. "That is such an...inviting invitation."

Cormack wasn't so sure about his strategy when Valenzuela snapped his fingers, held out his palm, and the fourth accomplice handed him a tasseled length of rawhide lariat. Popping it against his other palm while Cormack's nude prick pulsated against his belly, Valenzuela said, "You shall be crying, telling me where the gold is, Cormack." And he spanked Cormack's erection with the rawhide! Again. And again.

Cormack squeezed his eyes shut, using an old Far East technique for rising above pain. Yet that was only in anticipation, for he swiftly realized he didn't need to close his eyes—the "pain" was quite exquisite. Every time the Spaniard spanked his cock, it bobbed in appreciation, turned even purpler, and raged to be allowed to spend. The slaps brought blood to his penis, stinging in an erotic rush of lust. Though the assassin might mean his slaps to be a form of torture,

soon Cormack thought he would climax just from the sweet salacious needling.

“Ah!” snarled Valenzuela. “I see this is not torment for a depraved hombre such as you—you take vast pleasure in having your cock swatted, don’t you? Don’t you?”

It seemed to Cormack that the Spaniard also took vast pleasure, as every time Cormack’s hips quivered, he rubbed his ass against Valenzuela’s long prick that throbbed tellingly.

Perhaps aware of that, too, Valenzuela turned the lariat about and commenced to slapping his erection and testicles with the tasseled end, as if that would pain him more. But it tingled more deliciously as the tassels swept across his balls almost lovingly, Valenzuela apparently not so eager to inflict pain as he was to observe the jutting mass of a male erection.

Locking his eyes onto Valenzuela’s, Cormack whispered through clenched teeth, “That’s right. Harder, you vile raider. You like watching my erection get stiffer, don’t you? Did you know I would enjoy being slapped by your filthy hand? Watching my giant cock excites you, doesn’t it? I can feel your hard penis against my ass. Are you imagining thrusting your prick into my ass? But you can’t do it, can you? Because your men are watching—”

As he spoke, Cormack noted the color rising in Valenzuela’s face. Indeed, he swatted his cock harder, but the more Cormack taunted him, the angrier Valenzuela got, until he tossed the quirt to the rocks and energetically turned Cormack onto his stomach. Now their erections were pressed directly together, Cormack’s thighs spread wide by the boots of the limping man. Cormack realized that Valenzuela could not admit he was stimulated by the feel of another man. Being of Spanish descent, this would debase him, and especially since his denigrating band of desperadoes were watching, he must pretend he was merely attempting to get the gold information from Cormack.

Now Valenzuela flagellated his upturned bare ass with the palm of his hand. Cormack felt the globes jiggling with each punishing swat, which in turn caused him to rock his hips and his rigid penis against the bandit's. "You think I would imagine such a low, vulgar thing?" Valenzuela hissed. He smacked his hot hand against Cormack's tailbone, his fingertips straying down to tickle his bursting balls. With his free hand, he pressed Cormack's chest down to keep him still. "You are the one so lewd you savor my tormenting attentions." Leaning down so that only Cormack would hear, he whispered, "If I allow you to ejaculate, then you will tell me where the gold is..."

"Oh, God, yes," Cormack lied. "Pleasure me, frig me, let me come against your cock..."

"Ah," Valenzuela moaned steamily, and Cormack could swear that he drooled on his neck.

His slaps slipped lower, traveling over his testicles to the thickened root of his prick. Cormack imagined the limping fellow's pants tented out obscenely at the sight of his meaty tool as Valenzuela released its confinement against his lap. He spanked the bobbing prick relentlessly, pausing briefly to smear the drops of semen at the tip around the burgeoning head, his fingers lithe and nimble, vastly experienced in frigging himself, no doubt. Well, then, men would be more proficient at—

Ho, boy, he now proceeded to frig him in earnest. Cormack gulped boiling hot air as the skillful fingers stroked the entire length of his penis with such gusto he nearly came immediately. He frigged him enthusiastically, alternating with smarting slaps, as though this were his ticket to an instant gold mine and he would die without the feel of hot semen coursing over his fingers.

"Do I humiliate you?" Valenzuela huffed into his ear. "Is that all you want, to have a man paddle your penis until you explode in ecstasy into his hand? There is nothing more humiliating than—"

Cormack could hardly reply, even in jest, as Valenzuela now uttered a strangled cry and leaped to his feet, dumping him onto the

sand. Cormack was flat on his back, seeing transparent stars against the insides of his eyelids.

“*¡Tu maldito desgraciado!*” Valenzuela spat at him in a rage. “You best keep your eyes skinned and look behind you. I am getting your gold and leaving your brains behind in its place.” Tearing Cormack’s bag of gold dust from his belt, he turned and dashed off up the rise, trailed by his men, who swarmed like cockroaches. The last thing Cormack could hear was Three-Fingered Jack shouting, “*Jefe!* Why are we leaving them there?” and the limping fellow yelling, “Now they know who you are—we cannot show our faces around here.”

What? *He* was the evil bastard? Who had just delighted in groping and squeezing his prick? What sort of lesson was that teaching Cormack? How in Sam Hill would that get him to tell Valenzuela where the gold was? No, the only thing that accomplished was to sate Valenzuela’s perverted thirst for a man’s cock, that much was evident. That was not torture that he’d performed on him—that was out-and-out lovemaking, albeit of a debauched nature.

And now here they were. Hands still bound behind their backs. Cormack could not face Zelnora—she may not believe it had all been an act on his part. He would be shamed into slinking away back into the barren mountains, alone, if she thought he lusted for the rough admiration of another man.

He heard her scuffle over to him and drop to her knees. “Cormack. If you sit up, my fingers are free. I can probably undo your knot.”

He was glad she did not mention what had just transpired. Raising his torso to an upright position, he said hoarsely, “I doubt it. From what I’ve seen, these knots are the best a sailor can make.”

“Let me try.” While she fiddled with the knot, their backs to each other, Zelnora said, “Are you going to kill Valenzuela?”

Kill him? Well, Cormack surmised he should at least make a pretense of that. Say he was looking for the bandit every once in



awhile. After today, anyway, Valenzuela would not be fool enough to reveal his face anywhere on the American River, leastways not at any social gatherings. "Why, of course I will, Zel. I can't let him manhandle you like that and get away."

"Oh," Zelnora said dismissively. "I never felt a big threat. After all that talk up and down the river about what a bloodthirsty murderer he is, I just felt he was playing. Like a sort of stunted boy arrested in his youth who never got a chance to play, and now has carte blanche. I never really thought he'd shoot us. In fact, we most certainly want to find him again, only not to rub him out."

"Not rub him out?"

"No. To get mining information about Sonoran Camp."

## Chapter Fifteen

Cormack would barely speak to Zelnora for the next couple of weeks.

She knew he felt disgraced that he'd been paddled by a well-known bandit, and had even become excited by the attention. How could one fake an erection? While Zelnora was not too educated on the anatomy of men, she was fairly certain that in frightening or repulsive situations, men's penises shriveled and shrank to the size of snails. If not aroused, they did not elongate and thicken and spurt shiny droplets of semen from the tip. If this was true, there was nothing to be ashamed of.

She had to admit, if only to herself, that it had been extremely scintillating to see the bandit working Cormack's penis. It was evident from the way Valenzuela had dumped her on the ground to grab Cormack that the debauchee favored men over women. That was fine. What woman would feel threatened when another man stroked and playfully swatted her man's colossal erection? There was nothing to be jealous of when there was no competition between her and another man—in this case, Valenzuela. How could one compare her to Valenzuela? One could not. It would not matter if Valenzuela's hair was silkier than hers, for example. Another woman, now, that was a different matter altogether. Zelnora would have blown the head off any other woman who dared put a fingertip on Cormack's arm. But another man slapping his balls until they jiggled about in their fullness, a few drips of discharge shining from the tip of his bulbous raw penis...Who could feel envious or competitive about that? There was no comparing a man and a woman.

Rather than jealousy, the memory of Valenzuela jerking Cormack's penis and swatting his fleshy rump stoked the passion in Zelnora. She wanted to view such a sight again...and again. Was it Cormack's submission that excited her so? No, because the fancy of the tables being turned and Cormack the one who pumped Valenzuela's cock so assiduously, or even, dare she think it, pinning the desperado to the ground and guzzling his member into his mouth...Well, Zelnora had to find a way to make this happen again.

And if it assisted Cormack to regain his former sunny *savoir faire*, and to call her a mountain flower once more, all the better.

So the three—Cormack, Zelnora, and Quartus—mined their claim, Zelnora taking over Erskine's duties of shaking the rocker while Cormack and Quartus sloshed buckets of fine earth and gravel. It came time for Mercy to leave for the Colorado River. Fellow pioneers and Battalion men had already been at work in the Sierra constructing a wagon road, seeking the pass where General Frémont and Kit Carson had blazed a trail in 1844, and now it was time for Mercy's party to join them.

Cormack armed himself so heavily he resembled a porcupine, and they all rode to Sutter's Fort to see Mercy off on her journey and to exchange their recent gold acquisitions. Sutter paid off all the men departing for the Colorado River, there to hand their fortunes over to Origin Pickett. To Zelnora, it was the same story all over again, and one just as heinous as giving one's estate to Ward Brannagh.

As the fort hove into view, Zelnora felt compelled to question Mercy again. They rode in the cart, as Cormack knew Zelnora wished to have a few last minutes with her best—only—woman friend.

"Oh, Zel," Mercy sighed, clasping Zelnora's arm to her bosom, "I don't know whatever I'll do without you."

Zelnora sighed, too. "I feel the same. Mercy...are you sure you're doing the right thing? What about Mr. Erskine? You know he took the job with Captain Sutter to be closer to you." Zelnora had only mentioned this about ten times, but it was worth bringing up again.

This time, Mercy's answer was a little different. She hugged Zelnora's arm tight to her bosom and laid her head on her shoulder. "I do feel a sense of doom about this journey." She had previously protested that it was her plan, and she should follow through with plans. "I had a horrible nightmare last night that Aaron was escorting me across the Sierra, but I became lost from him and wound up in the most frightening lightning storm."

"Perhaps that is warning you!" Zelnora said desperately.

But Mercy only sighed again, defeated. "I do adore Aaron. But Zel, I must follow my parents' plan. Perhaps you would understand if your parents—oh, I'm so sorry! Forgive me, I wasn't thinking—"

Zelnora patted her friend's hand. "It's all right. You forgot what my parents did." For her parents had disavowed her when her former husband Barton Sparks had vanished, assuming, maybe rightfully, that the fault lay with her.

"Your parents are not very kind," Quartus intoned soberly.

Mercy continued, "Oh, I would never imply that your parents—well, I suppose I *would* imply something about them, after what they did to you. Oh, my, what is that? Cormack!"

Quartus squealed and raised his feet off the floorboards of the cart when they heard a rustling in the bushes.

Cormack casually shouted over his shoulder, "Deer."

Quartus trilled with relief, "Oh! Just a deer!"

Mercy fanned her face with her hand. "Oh. My. I'm just so jumpy after what happened to poor Mr. Sackwell out of Dry Town."

"Why? What happened?"

Quartus joined in. "You didn't hear? It was those same bandits again, the desperate band of Joaquin Valenzuela, highwayman extraordinaire! This time, they were so bold as to attack him and his wife in their own home."

"Yes," Mercy agreed with wide eyes. "Valenzuela assaulted the poor wife while the rest looked on, and then, of course, they took all their money."

“Beat Sackwell senseless,” Quartus asserted.

“Money?” Zelnora frowned. “How much money can a seamstress have?” For everyone knew Mr. Sackwell was an inveterate rummy who sponged a living off of his wife. “Are you certain it was Valenzuela’s band? I’ve noticed he gets accused of everything under the sun, when he can hardly have been in two places at once.”

Replacing her head on Zelnora’s shoulder, Mercy smiled. “I’ve noticed that, too. I’ve heard there are at least four other bandits named Joaquin rampaging about California, but everyone seems to think Valenzuela is always responsible.”

“It’s because he’s the handsomest.” Quartus nodded with authority.

Zelnora sat up straight. “What? How do you know what he looks like?”

Quartus’ face was a blank. “Why, I saw him on the Fourth of July at the fort. We had a very nice discussion. After he danced with you, he walked right up to me and complimented my drumming.”

Mercy’s mouth was an O. “You danced with him?”

Quartus continued, “We discussed drumming, and...things...”

Zelnora slapped Quartus on the hand. “‘Things’? What sort of ‘things’?” As an aside, she told Mercy, “I didn’t know who he was. He introduced himself as Señor Carillo.”

Quartus looked perplexed. “Why...We discussed gold. He said he was looking for a nice strike. He was planning on heading down to Sonoran Camp—say, isn’t that the place you and Cormack have talked about going?”

“Yes, yes, did he introduce himself as Joaquin Valenzuela? He just walked right up and said, ‘Nice meeting you, I’m Joaquin Valenzuela’?”

“Why, yes, why not? I suppose he wasn’t ashamed of it.” Quartus’ eyes gleamed with idealism. “Why would he be ashamed? After all, he’s the most widely renowned bandit in California. It’s so dashing and romantic.”

“Romantic?” Mercy said, shocked. “What’s so romantic about shooting innocent people and stealing their hard-earned money?”

“It’s just so dashing,” Quartus repeated, looking glassy-eyed up at the oaks that formed a canopy over their heads.

“So he had nothing to do with General Vallejo’s *ranchero*?”

Quartus shook his head. “Not that I know of, unless he was robbing Vallejo.”

At the fort, Cormack went off to get new boot soles. Mercy was saying her goodbyes to Erskine in the assayer’s office, and Zelnora had some gold dust to trade for new Californio skirts and a chemise that wasn’t torn to tatters. Quartus, bosom *compañero* to the murderous brigand Joaquin Valenzuela, trotted along at her side. He pointed out various lethal weapons, holstered or not, about the persons of alleged cutthroats and mercenaries, all of whom Quartus was suddenly well-acquainted with.

“See that horse pistol Dan Carlton is wearing? You can take the head off a moose with that thing!”

Zelnora rolled her eyes. “Quartus. Dan Carlton is a farrier. He makes better money than most miners. He hardly needs to resort to shooting moose. Besides, the closest moose is two thous—”

“Ooh, there’s Reyes Feliz!” Quartus trilled, grabbing hold of Zelnora’s arm.

“And who is Reyes Feliz,” Zelnora said flatly.

“Who is Reyes Feliz? Why, he’s only one of Valenzuela’s main accomplices! I heard that Feliz was in jail in Calaveras County once, and Valenzuela pretended to be this fellow he’d just killed in San José. He walked right into the jail, presented the dead fellow’s papers, and sprang Feliz!”

“My, my,” Zelnora said. Yet the black silk kerchief tied in back of his head reminded her of one of the bandits who had accosted her and Cormack, and the ball-and-chain buttons that closed the sides of his *calzoneras* confirmed this. She had an idea.

“Quartus, we’re going to play a game with the bandits,” she whispered into his ear, then took him by the arm to saunter by where Feliz lounged against an adobe wall. Louder, she said, “My, Quartus. Can you believe we’re taking five hundred dollars a day out of our claim at Lion Island? But I heard the gold from around Sonoran Camp is even better.” She elbowed Quartus for his cue.

“Sonoran Camp? Why, yes, Zelnora, I have heard the same thing, also.” He spoke very woodenly, as though reading from a script. “There is some very pleasant gold around Sonoran Camp.”

They had caught Feliz’ attention. “I’ve heard of one fellow near Sonoran Camp mining a mass of twenty pounds, mixed with quartz. There must be a giant quartz vein around there.”

Quartus was warming to his topic. “Yes, we must make a plan to head down to Sonoran Camp.”

Zelnora continued loudly, “It is fortunate we are not going with those missionaries over the Sierra Nevada, for they live in poverty, and have absolutely no gold at all.” Feliz’ eyes were intent upon a spot about two feet beyond Zelnora’s shoes. He held himself still as a listening deer, not even breathing.

Quartus flung a dramatic arm. “My, yes! How destitute those ignorant missionaries are! What fools to start over the mountains in late July! Why, remember the Donner company, their bones discovered at their cheerless fires! Where oh where were the green and flowery plains of which they had dreamt?”

“Cheese it, Quartus,” Zelnora muttered from the corner of her mouth. Louder, she proclaimed, “All right, then, it’s decided. We leave for Sonoran Camp in four days. It is too unlucky we aren’t acquainted with anyone who can partner up with us, someone with valuable mining experience such as I have.”

Quartus was still orating about the Donner company’s fate. “They left their happy, happy homes with buoyant hopes and fond anticipations! So changed had the emigrants become, when the party

sent out arrived with food, some of them cast it aside, preferring putrid human flesh!”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard Sonoran Camp is also loaded to the muzzle with vagabonds,” Zelnora said, to distract him from his cannibalistic fervor. “Scoundrels from nowhere, rascals from Oregon—”

“Pickpockets from New York!”

“Yes, and accomplished gentlemen from Europe, interlopers from Lima and Chile, and assassins—”

Quartus pointed excitedly. “Assassins manufactured in hell to convert highways into theaters of blood!”

Zelnora smiled widely. “Yes, exactly!” Taking Quartus’ arm again, she felt she had gained sufficient attention from Feliz, so she strolled out of earshot. “We shall fit right in there, don’t you agree?”



## Chapter Sixteen

“You’ve been so quiet lately.”

Cormack shrugged as he handed an Indian his nightly bowl of roasted beef and pork beans. He’d been forced to employ several to help wash gold after Erskine’s departure to Sutter’s Fort. His only rules for them were to work a full day without running off and to utilize pants, or at least breechclouts. They could wear any silly manner of hat they desired. One fellow had fashioned a hat from a gold washing pan, the most valuable tool in the entire state.

“I know. It’s just...my feet wet all day, hot sun on my head.” Zelnora handed him a bowl of beef freshly grilled on a willow stick over coals. He dumped a spoon of beans into it and handed it to the last Indian. “Just making me cracked. The very air around here’s like an oven.” It was a flimsy enough excuse that every man at Lion Island could claim. To distract Zelnora, he asked, “Where’s Quartus?”

“At the blacksmith, sharpening our shovels and axes.”

Cormack meandered to his favorite flat rock where they often sat in front of Zelnora’s tent. Raising the whiskey bottle, he poured himself a goodly cupful and a smaller cupful for Zelnora. “Elias Fowler’s having a bit of a fandango later on, would you like to go?” Fandangos in an all-male mining camp were often riotous affairs. Men took turns affixing a scrap of white cloth to their shirts to designate themselves as women, and the dancing proceeded thus, usually making enough noise to keep the wolves awake.

Zelnora accepted her cup. “That would be pleasant. You know, we could take a prospecting journey down to Sonoran Camp area. It might be a positive force upon your health, and the health of

your...outlook. There is a Peruvian harvest of precious metal down there. I heard there were seventeen thousand dollars of flakes and nuggets taken out in one week. The prospect is most favorable.”

Cormack nodded. “These diggings are drying up, I’ve noticed over the past week.” Casually, he added, “I sent Erskine down to San Francisco to bid on a lot—there’s one I favor on Pacific Street.”

Zelnora set her cup down. “A lot? A lot for a house? I mean...what do you want to do with a lot?” She was trying to remain aloof, Cormack could tell, but her eyes shone with the idea of a permanent structure in the settlements.

He looked up at gnarled oak branches. “A house, sure, why not? Brannagh will bid fiercely against me even if he doesn’t have any particular plans for it, but...Erskine is to pretend the lot’s for Sutter, since his plantation has been abandoned by all workers and his creditors are calling for his loan.”

Zelnora didn’t appear to hear anything about Sutter as she scooted off her rock and came to sit on the ground between his thighs. “A house? What sort of house?”

Sticking out his lower lip, Cormack appeared to ponder, though he already knew his answer. “Haven’t really thought about it. I do admire Vallejo’s hacienda, with the three foot thick walls and that giant river rock fireplace. I’d like to give you windows with real glass, too.” This was his first specific mention of their future together, and as much as he knew it’d please Zelnora, it would dredge up even more fresh questions. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved at the question Zelnora chose to ask.

“You’ve been so reserved ever since...since Valenzuela robbed us.”

Cormack’s cock stiffened, maybe at her thumb rubbing his thigh, or embarrassingly enough, at the mention of Valenzuela.

He had not been able to get that memory out of his mind, Valenzuela tossing him across his knee like a recalcitrant child and slapping his rump so erotically. Valenzuela could have beaten him

much harder with the quirt, but he didn't. Cormack was now convinced the spanking was of a carnal nature, and Valenzuela had certainly succeeded if his goal was to make Cormack randy. Sure, Valenzuela was probably attempting to rile him into admitting where his gold *câche* was. Yet he had spent hours pondering—was it the spanking itself, or the fact that it was administered by a domineering, tyrannical male, that had firmed his prick and elongated it to unheard-of proportions?

And the stiff ridge of the bandit's own cock rubbing against his when his ass was upended to the cloudless sky above...One could not falsify an erection. But was it only the joy at having another human helpless in his clutches that had inflamed the lusty brigand? Did he truly not thirst for the taste of another man's cock in his mouth, as Cormack now had to confess he himself did? He felt he dishonored Zelnora and his wishes for a future with her when he envisioned sheathing a cock in his hand and frigging it till it spouted jets of semen.

"Yes..." Cormack admitted, leaning back onto his palms and spreading his thighs. "It did agitate me to have our gold absconded with. And to look like such a feeble beaver kitten in front of you, allowing those dolts to take the gold."

Zelnora chuckled hoarsely, her hand closing over his cock and squeezing. "Cormack...they took only the hundred dollars or so we had on us, the rest we'd already deposited with Aaron. I know it's not the value of the gold or the fact we were robbed that irritates you..." She looked casually down to where her thumb tantalized the plum-sized head of his prick under the deerskin. "There is no fault of our own we were overwhelmed by four armed men. If you resisted, one or both of us would've been shot." Her thumb swept the length of the underside of his cock, and Cormack's eyes started sliding shut. "I am wondering if you feel shamed due to the physical reaction you had at the coaxing he did to tell him where the gold is hidden."

Ho, boy, if she kept that up for another thirty seconds he would come inside his buckskins. He well nigh would admit to anything right now. "Yes..." he breathed. "I had a physical reaction. That no-account bastard was pretty near frigging me. It's shameful that you saw my tool so erect at the hands of a nefarious Spaniard such as that."

"Bear's ass, what's the shame?" Zelnora scoffed. "It was simply a physical reaction. Who wouldn't be stimulated under such circumstances?"

So Zelnora didn't think him a fragile poof to be aroused by the rugged touch of another man's hand. Encouraged by her approval, Cormack's fingers went to the broadfall of his buckskins. "Yes, I think that's it," he said offhandedly. "Other people admiring your body has a salutary effect." He released his cock for her enjoyment.

Brandishing his member in her hand, Zelnora whispered, "Yes, they were envious of your big plump penis...And who wouldn't admire you? The men fondled their own crotches, they were so lost in admiration of you."

This was the manner of talk he wanted to hear. When Zelnora bent her lovely swan's neck and lapped at his prick, Cormack gasped and yanked her to her feet. They stumbled into her tent where he dropped her on her back onto the bed of pine boughs. She gripped his cock in her little fist and circled the head with her lips as he rocked his hips into her, his balls already full to overflowing.

She had admitted she had never licked a man's penis before meeting him, but she had since been a ravenous student, taking him far into her throat as though she gobbled a bowl of ice cream. He humped her sweet face carefully, her fingertips pressing into the globes of his ass to encourage him. He fucked her mouth so thoroughly that within several minutes he felt about to erupt as he sank his fingers into her masses of shining hair that spilled over the cotton ticking, her locks glossy against his balls.

“*Dios maldiga a ese Español.*” Cormack groaned as he poised to explode into Zelnora’s eagerly suctioning mouth.

Just then, something foreign, cold, and wet pressed against the side of his throat. In his ecstasy, Cormack at first thought Zelnora crushed an item such as a necklace against him. When he realized both her hands gripped his ass, he thought perhaps Quartus bungled around with his phrenology tools, studying the shape of his neck.

Then he felt the warm pressure of a solid chest against his back.

And Valenzuela hissed into his ear, “Why do you curse this Spaniard?”

## Chapter Seventeen

The doctor flipped onto his back, his formidable cock bobbing in the air. His keen features frozen in swift response, in a flash he reached down to draw his Colt's from where he'd tossed his holster. But Joaquin had thrown the holster behind him, and Bowmaker would have to get past him to retrieve it.

"What is it this time...Valenzuela?" the doctor asked pointedly. It was admirable the way he shielded the woman with his body, although she didn't appear to need the shielding. Her disheveled head peeped out from over his shoulder. They both knew Bowmaker could easily disarm him, since Joaquin had brought only a knife with him. "Where are the rest of your men?"

Joaquin sat back on the pine boughs, dangling the knife carelessly from his knee. "I came alone. Your half-witted assistant is outside guarding the tent from intruders."

Zelnora gripped Bowmaker's bicep and said heatedly, "He is *not* half-witted! He is merely...jovial."

The doctor frowned. Unfortunately, he stuffed his exquisitely beefy prick back into his buckskins. Joaquin did not bother averting his eyes from the luscious sight of the sinewy belly as his hand slid down to pack it beyond sight. "You didn't arm him, did you?"

Joaquin smiled, an uncustomary motion that felt sincere, for once. "Of course not. He's just got his sharpened shovels and axes, but it makes him feel like a big gun. You must be more afraid for the squirrels, when he beats them over the head with his mining implements."

Bowmaker looked squarely at him, also leaning his forearms against his raised knees. “So you’ve come to take our gold with only a bowie knife and no men? With only my man guarding the tent?” Perhaps the doctor realized how feeble the threat of “his man” was, for he quickly added, “I have several Indians camped nearby.”

The white man was understandably suspicious of his motives. It was not Joaquin’s aim to put him on the defensive this time—nobody would achieve their goals that way. No, he had to soothe the Americans. “I have an intriguing proposition, more interesting than merely stealing your gold.”

Bowmaker sat up straight. “And you couldn’t have come to us when we were eating dinner? You sure do have a knack for busting in while I’m having my cock sucked.”

Smiling slyly, Joaquin replied, “It is perhaps a much more pleasing vista than watching filthy men washing gold, or slovenly men pouring beans into their mouths with trowels. I received the message from Miss Sparks.”

Joaquin had finally riled Bowmaker into rising to his knees and grabbing his shirtfront in his fist. “Message from Miss Sparks? How dare you insinuate that—”

Zelnora shook his arm. “Cormack, I did send him a message...in a way.”

Bowmaker released Joaquin. He asked Zelnora evenly, “And just how, and what message did you send to him?”

The woman looked down sheepishly. “I just let him know that we’d welcome any information on Sonoran Camp. That’s all.”

Before the surgeon could become vexed again, Joaquin explained, “She’s right. I did get that message. And I do control many men currently working the diggings near Sonoran Camp. I am constantly bringing more miners up from Hermosillo in Mexico. They’re very knowledgeable, but they would certainly welcome expert mineralogy experience from someone such as Miss Sparks.”

“All right,” Bowmaker conceded, calm despite the fact Joaquin had not sheathed his knife yet. “So you allow us to stake a claim, a choice claim I presume, in return for advice. But I’m not interested in being beholden to a tyrant such as Ward Brannagh—such a heap of fat meat isn’t going to shine in these parts. I’ll not pay a tithe or even a percentage to anyone who isn’t down in the mine with me working it. There’s some other reason you came into our tent and have been tracking us for weeks. The gold *câche*?”

Slowly and somewhat reluctantly, Joaquin shook his head. “No. Not the gold.” He paused. “You’re a doctor.”

Bowmaker paused also before responding. “What makes you think I’m a doctor?”

Joaquin grinned. He knew it would be difficult getting the doctor to admit he was a doctor. Why else would he be toiling as a miner, the most thankless and brutal job on earth? He had reasons for not wanting to admit he was a doctor. “Who hasn’t heard of your feat saving that man with a quill through his throat?”

Bowmaker was swift to respond this time. “I learned that in the mountains, on the Lewis Fork. Anyone can learn that.”

“Yes? And does just anyone go to Sing Sing for pretending to doctor people?”

This silence was much longer. Zelnora looked quizzically at Bowmaker, while Bowmaker stared unblinking into Joaquin’s eyes.

Finally, Zelnora whispered, “What is Sing Sing?”

This seemed to break the spell, for Bowmaker, without taking his eyes off Joaquin, commanded her from the corner of his mouth, “Go outside and see what Quartus is doing. Check for other bandits. Take my Colt’s that is lying behind this outlaw.”

In a rush of cinnamon and roses, she did as requested. Bowmaker said, “I’ll hunt you down and raise your hair if you so much as mention Sing Sing again.”



Joaquin grinned. "I thought that would break you, to mention that. Or shall I mention your *compañero* Erskine's imprisonment for questionable financial practices?"

"Talk about that, and I'll put my knife in your lights." Bowmaker nodded with confidence. He did still have his knife belt buckled around his hips. It would be a coin toss as to who would be quicker on the draw, the mountain man or the desperado. "You're going to break or go under, Valenzuela. So you want doctoring skills for...yourself? I'll see if I can muddle through it. Who can say? My phony doctoring has helped more people than not."

"No, it is not I who require it. It is someone who resides in Sonoran Camp and cannot move. If you take a journey there, I can give you the best claim and some men to assist you."

"What is wrong with this person?"

"We do not know. She seems to be consumed from inside. It is hard to explain. She coughs up blood, her skin is white, she is turning into a living skeleton before our very eyes." Joaquin did not like to think about it, but ignoring it had not made Antonia better.

Bowmaker nodded. "That could be many things. If it's something an American doctor could treat, we will need to send for the medicine. Or there are many Indian remedies that have proven useful."

"So then you will do it?" Joaquin held his breath waiting for the response. He had no other option. He could not take Antonia to a medical doctor in San Francisco or Stockton.

Bowmaker's response was a minute, tiny nod of his head. "If you give us the best, biggest claim. And Zelnora can tell if it's not the absolutely best right smart claim around."

Oh, joy in heaven! It had been two years since Antonia's future had held anything other than doom, and now there was a glimmering of hope. Joy was such a foreign concept to Joaquin that he wasn't certain what he was feeling at first. Since his only method of expressing any emotion was physical, he rose to his knees, tossed

down his knife, and clasped his arms about the white doctor, hugging him tight to his torso. "*Gracias, gracias.*" He held him so firmly about the shoulders it was immediately evident that his own prick, stiffening in his excitement, swelled up against the surgeon's compact pectoral, and the white man did nothing to push him away, allowing him to press the side of his face against Joaquin's belly.

*Mi dios*, this man was athletic, hard as a boulder of quartz, without doubt the most beautiful man Joaquin had ever beheld. Joaquin even dared rocking his hips just a fraction of an inch into the robust chest, displaying to Bowmaker the length of his erection, and the man sat still as a rock with his hands at his sides, perhaps planning to reach for his knife and gut him.

Joaquin was so washed away with gratitude he nearly didn't care about this possibility. Sweeping his hand down between them, he cupped the other man's chin in his hand and lifted his face. He could not decipher his expression, and he did not want to think too much, or his murderous rage might appear again. So he leaned down and kissed the doctor.

*Buen dios*, what a soft, pliant, lush mouth, tasting of whiskey and wood smoke. Bowmaker's full lips parted, his breath snorting hotly against Joaquin's face, his hands running up the backs of Joaquin's thighs and stopping to grip his ass to him. Joaquin tickled the tip of his tongue against the other man's upper lip, and suddenly, they were locked in a potent clutch, tongues lapping together. Bowmaker squeezed his ass in powerfully large hands, and the tip of his prick threatened to burst out the crotch of his *calzoneras*.

Bowmaker suckled him so fervently they made loud smacking sounds. Joaquin cupped the back of his skull as though he were a woman as he humped his strapping chest. He wanted nothing more than to lean the passionate *pelirrojo* man back onto the pine boughs, lock his thighs about his waist, and slide into his tight passage. What would it be like to nibble those erect nipples while the man threw his head back and exposed his powerful throat to Joaquin's bites?

Suddenly, he was tossed back, landing on his behind with a blinding jolt. Bowmaker had stood as straight as he could inside the low tent, and he was spitting into a handkerchief with what looked like disgust.

Bowmaker tossed the slimy kerchief in Joaquin's direction. He said thinly, "All right. We have a bargain," and disappeared out the tent flap.

What had he done wrong? If Bowmaker didn't enjoy kissing another man, he could have shoved him away before they expanded the kiss. Joaquin's history of kissing women told him one thing. Bowmaker had savored the embrace. He had returned the kiss with as much ardor as he'd ever kissed Zelnora.

If Joaquin's men knew what he had just done, clutching another man to his erection and pasting his open mouth to his, he would no longer be respected as their leader.

But he knew he did not want to stop. He could repress and ignore it as he'd done for the past couple of months since he'd first seen Bowmaker stroking himself in the creek. But trapping emotions inside of himself was not a feat that came easily to Joaquin. It was so much easier to act on them.

## Chapter Eighteen

*August 1848*

*Sonoran Camp, California*

“So what did you diagnose for Valenzuela’s...daughter, is it?”

Zelnora, Cormack, and Quartus wended their way down the main street of Sonoran Camp, weaving between the Spanish tents of canvas and upright interwoven pine boughs. The tents were decorated with gaudy pennants of silk flags, multicolored serapes, and expensive shawls, making for a blinding kaleidoscope that pained Zelnora’s eyes in the stifling heat. Yet the town gave a magical appearance. Gambling tables ranging the street, cool beverages hawked from wooden boxes, merry noise from guitars, fiddles, and most alarmingly, drums. The camp itself was nestled in a giant crater, embowered with redwood trees, festooned with cascades that fell from masses of black basaltic rocks. The scent of honeysuckle wafted on great waves through the air, choked with tortillas and stewed beef with chile seasonings.

Cormack dodged around a drove of mules staggering under barrels of liquor as big as themselves. “Yep, turns out after all it’s his daughter. Looks like she’s riddled with consumption. She’s about as petrified as a tree. Coughing blood, white as snow. Some other quack’s been bleeding her, and that only serves to drain the body of vital essences. Some nurses have abandoned her, since they’re thinking she’s affected by vampirism. Her red eyes and white skin. They think she nightly attends fairy meetings in the guise of a horse, and that’s why she’s so tired.”

Zelnora had seen Cormack's stethoscope, but she did not want to question him about the doctoring past he seemed to be ticklish about. She estimated him to be the same age as her, thirty and eight or thereabouts, and she knew he'd only been "going over a sight of ground in his peregrinations" about the mountains for ten years. What had he done before that? It evidently had something to do with this Sing Sing place that Valenzuela seemed to know about. It sounded Far Eastern. Maybe soon, one day, if Valenzuela maintained his affable attitude, she could ask him about Sing Sing.

"And what have you proposed to do for her? Is there any hope?"

Cormack didn't look very hopeful. "I quarantined her, since it's infectious."

"Infectious? Then why is it all right for you to tend to her?"

Cormack didn't answer that. "I've given her goldenrod tea, and some fellow is coming from Stockton with oranges."

"Oranges?" cried Quartus. "We can make juice!" Quartus had taken to swaggering around town wearing Plains Indian style leggings and a Scotch bonnet. He claimed it was the new frontier style.

Zelnora soothed him. "Yes, yes, juice. Now, Cormack. If Antonia dies, will Valenzuela rescind his agreement? He hasn't even shown us what he believes to be the best claim yet. Maybe he's waiting to see if you can cure her."

Cormack frowned. "That wasn't the agreement. That's why I say tomorrow, we strike out at once onto the Stanislaus and stake our own damned claim. These bandits, they're no account anyways you lay your sight."

"Ooh, ooh!" Quartus warbled. "Can I gamble?"

They had reached an open space where a Spaniard had spread out his serape, put lighted candles at each corner, and poured into the center his stock of gold.

"First you want juice, now you want to gamble," said Cormack. "These highfalutin duds are going to your head."

Quartus frowned. "Duds be dogged. I help you mine the gold, I should be allowed to gamble it."

"That's true, Cormack," Zelnora agreed. As Cormack poured some nuggets from a hollow deer horn into Quartus' palm, she continued, "When we passed by northwest of here, I noticed plenty of slate rock with auriferous quartz veins. It looked exceedingly rich."

Cormack crinkled his dazzling celestine eyes at her, and she knew everything would be all right. Valenzuela could not stop them from staking their own claim, as long as they didn't jump one belonging to his men. Or...could he? It was best to remain in his good books for now.

They leaned against a liquor barrel as Quartus gambled away his loot at three-card monte.

"Last night," Cormack told Zelnora, "a man named Cave bet with this gambler, Mason, that he could induce a lounging Digger to attempt to rob Mason."

Zelnora nodded. "Just to have an excuse to kill the Indian."

"Right. Cave pulled the native aside, told him Mason had a large sum of money hidden, told him where to find it, and if he'd rob Mason he could have half of it. He gave the Indian an unloaded pistol, so the native reluctantly entered Mason's house, coming out without touching a thing. Mason was watching for him and gut-shot him dead on sight. Crossed the great divide."

Zelnora grimaced. "There's talk, too, of taxing 'foreigners' such as Spaniards on their gold haul. Seems to me that'll drive away the only people who aren't out-and-out lunkheads about mining gold. *Oh!*"

"You're right that we aren't lunkheads."

An amused voice came directly behind Zelnora's shoulder, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Twirling about, she faced Valenzuela, or Joaquin, as she had caught herself terming him a few times. He smiled in that ingratiating manner where one could never tell if he was in a pleasant or foul mood. Cormack's smile, however,

was sincere when he clasped the brigand's hand and acknowledged, "Valenzuela."

Joaquin nodded back. "Bowmaker." The monte players on the ground had stilled their motions at the sight of Joaquin and were now, slow as mud so as not to be detected, gathering up their winnings or walking away from their losses before Joaquin could wave a revolver at them. Unlike other towns where he attended functions incognito, coming and going in disguise at will, in Sonoran Camp he was widely known.

"How is Antonia?"

Joaquin seemed relaxed, his handsome, well-boned face underneath the slouch hat open and cordial. "She appears better thanks to the tea. She sat up in bed this morning. When are those oranges arriving?"

Cormack said, "Day after tomorrow. Can we strike out now for the site and make it by sundown?"

"Not by sundown—we'll leave tomorrow at daybreak. But I just heard tell they've taken forty pounds in five days out of this particular mine."

Zelnora touched the bandit's bicep. "Joaquin. Aren't those some of your men?"

Joaquin turned slowly and looked over his shoulder. Three-Fingered Jack and Feliz loitered nearby, Feliz with a lady in black velvet under his arm. Zelnora knew her to be an Italian who sang and accompanied herself on the piano. For his part, Jack pointed his pistol toward a platform where Ethiopian serenaders were about to hand him their daily take.

Joaquin nodded, and Zelnora thought she detected a modicum of disgust as he marched to his men, his serape billowing.

Quartus wandered over, holding out his empty palms. "I lost ten dollars' worth of gold! I could have sworn I knew where the Queen of Hearts was."

Zelnora put her arm around him. "It's all right, dear. Tomorrow, Señor Valenzuela is going to show us where our new mine is."

Quartus frowned. "Why are they arguing? I'll bet you ten dollars they're arguing about that raid."

"What raid?"

Quartus puffed up with the importance of his information. "Well. I heard them earlier coming out of a grog shop. Those two fellows wanted to go on a raid tonight and murder and rob some people, but Joaquin said no."

Sure enough, Jack and Feliz were gesturing at Joaquin with revulsion as they stormed away, and Joaquin made an obscene hand motion as they exchanged farewells in Spanish. The only words Zelnora could make out were *bastardo* and *idiota*. Perhaps that was their affectionate manner of saying goodbye to one another. Joaquin marched back over.

"Why, *buenos tardes, hermano*," Quartus said tremulously, fairly bowing in his obeisance.

"Trouble?" Cormack asked, indicating with his chin the departing forms of Joaquin's *compañeros*.

Joaquin looked down at Cormack's boots. "No," he said slowly, and then tossed his head. "They wanted me to come with them on a small...how do you say it? Short journey?"

"Excursion!" Quartus said helpfully.

"Yes, a short excursion. I told them I cannot, as I will be journeying with you tomorrow." Looking to Zelnora, he continued, "I shall stop by your cabin tonight and give you more information."

Tipping his slouch hat to them, Joaquin sauntered back down the main street, bystanders and gamblers scattering as they saw him come.

Quartus sighed. "What a romantic life he must lead."

Cormack frowned down at him. "Quartus. 'Romantic' is hardly the word. Come, let's set our sights on some chickens for dinner."

And the trio struck off in the opposite direction.



“Daring and adventurous?”

“Ah, all right. I’ll give you that.”

“Courageous and bold? Ooh, ooh, look at that toreador!”

## Chapter Nineteen

“Valenzuela. You can assure us we’re not jumping any of your mens’ claims?” asked Cormack.

“Yes,” added Zelnora, leaning forward from her spot sitting between Cormack’s spread thighs. The cook fire still crackled, but no one wanted to sit too close to it. Even after sundown, the shimmering air was hot enough to bake one’s skin. “I fear it would be dangerous, crossing some of those men. They aren’t overly savory.”

“Besides that,” Cormack felt compelled to insert, “this child isn’t too comfortable claim-jumping another man’s property. It’s just not seemly.”

While Valenzuela had been showing signs of humanity since Cormack had doctored his daughter, Cormack was still convinced he’d not hesitate to betray or even murder the first henchman who gave him hell. Cormack had been a mountain man for a decade, and Valenzuela a bandit for only two years, both steeped in their traditions. Perhaps murder formed your current personality more decisively than skinning beavers. Cormack had already ceased to skin beavers and wrestle with grizzlies. But he’d not be surprised if Valenzuela shot the next tortilla seller who wandered their way.

Valenzuela reposed on the dried grass. He had even divested himself of his multihued serape and was clad in an expensive *gente de razón* white cotton shirt with gold buttons. “We’ll not replace anyone if we can avoid it, but the richest stretch of river so far is claimed by one of my men, a greaser from Hermosillo. He’s going to Stockton tomorrow for provisions,” the bandit said ambiguously.

“We’ll just prospect the neighborhood.” Zelnora ventured, “I’ve heard there are several other Joaquins in California, and you are blam—get credit for all of their actions.”

Valenzuela grinned, removing his slouch hat and running his fingers through his thick, lustrous hair. He wore many silver and gold rings of Spanish workmanship, stolen from corpses, no doubt. Not that Cormack was above all of that. He’d been known to loot a man missing his topknot. In the mountains, there was no excuse not to take what otherwise would’ve gone to waste. “There are a few other Joaquins,” he admitted. “I don’t mind taking credit for their actions. It adds to the...*glamor y mística*.”

“Glamour and mystique,” both Cormack and Zelnora echoed at once.

Quartus repeated with shining eyes, “Glamour and mystique!”

Zelnora stood, taking their tin plates to a nearby barrel for washing. “Quartus,” she called. “Can you be a dear and get more water from the creek?”

Bouncing to his feet, Quartus slung the bucket onto his arm and toddled off, his ankles collapsing every few steps under the weight of the enormous California spurs he’d taken to wearing. Past the creek and down the ridge, the Sonoran campfires were strung out along the road to Stockton, close enough to light the way for any traveler entering the camp.

Valenzuela lit his pipe and stood. “Don’t you think you should give him at least a small pistol?” he asked, also heading toward the creek bed. “How idiotic can he be, with a tiny peashooter that wouldn’t scare anyone?”

Cormack felt shamed, as he’d been considering obtaining a larger caliber revolver for Zelnora. Her pocket pistol, while ladylike, wasn’t of much assistance against robbers with Colts. “I still think it’s best to leave him unarmed,” he called after the departing desperado. “He’ll just wind up shooting the rocks, or the bottles of liquor off a bar.”

Once Valenzuela was out of sight, Cormack came up behind Zelnora as she stood under a giant aromatic redwood. The one-room canvas-roofed cabin Valenzuela had loaned them had been hewn from these trees. In this town of roughnecks and hard cases, a man and woman sharing a cabin didn't disconcert anyone, although by necessity Cormack had built Quartus his own little lean-to where he could watch the stars with his students' telescope.

Cupping her breasts in his hands as she rinsed a plate, Cormack nibbled on the side of her throat. Her eyes slid shut, and the plate dropped into the water barrel. "Once we've worked out this claim, we'll go back to our new house in San Francisco. Too many folks have been swarming these mountains. A child can't even turn around without some greaser or keskydee squatting on your territory. It'll be cold doings soon, snow on the ground, and everyone'll pile back to the settlements, so if we get there before them—"

Zelnora stood stock-still. "What house in San Francisco?"

Cormack smiled secretively. He whispered into her ear, "The lot Erskine bid on for me in San Francisco. I received a note from him that he won the auction."

"What about Brannagh? Did he not drive your price up with his outlandish bids?"

It was true, Brannagh had done so, although Erskine had been pretending to bid on the lot on behalf of Captain Sutter. To change the subject, Cormack yanked down her chemise and exposed her full, bouncing breasts to the warm evening air. He pinched her nipples, causing her to cradle her head back into the pit of his throat and nearly purr like a large cat. "I sent the house drawings down to Erskine with the messenger. Four bedrooms," he bragged. "The artisans should be able to throw it up in about a month."

The idea of the house with four bedrooms, the thick adobe walls, and the grand river-rock fireplace inspired Cormack. He'd specified a hand-hammered cast-iron chandelier for the dining room, such as

those crafted for the Spanish missions. The lot was large enough for many fruit trees, so Quartus could have his precious juice.

“That sounds...lovely.” Zelnora gasped, pleased to be displaying her ample breasts to the forest.

Clutching her thigh between both of his, Cormack rocked his erection against her ass. “Four bedrooms...” He seduced her with his vision of a stationary future. “One for us, one for Erskine, one for Quartus...”

As he said the name “Quartus,” that worthy was heard nearby returning from the creek, marveling, ostensibly to Valenzuela, how Cormack had killed a hundred pound salmon and found specks of gold at the bottom of the cooking pot.

“You should stop,” Zelnora said unconvincingly.

“It’s all right,” Cormack whispered, leaning harder into her so that she placed her palms against the shaggy redwood tree. Quartus became terminally appalled at the sight of anyone touching another, and now he heard Valenzuela say, “Why don’t you go back to the river and look for more salmon?”

Zelnora protested no more when Cormack inched her skirts up over her hip and unbuttoned his broadfall, allowing his pantaloons to fall to his knees. There was silence in the glade around them as he took his time unsheathing his cock, stroking it lovingly. The view of Zelnora’s strong, muscular shoulders as she arched her back and offered herself to him was enough to nearly bring him to ejaculate—but it might have been the possibility that Valenzuela was watching them that excited him. And since Zelnora didn’t utter a peep of dissent, he presumed she was also titillated by such an eventuality.

Zelnora reached behind her and scrabbled his buckskin shirt up to his shoulders, letting the silvery moonlight radiate from his pale skin. As much as he wanted the bandit to admire his athletic flank and the fat trunk of his penis, when he teased Zelnora’s engorged clitoris with his fingertips, she urged him to mount her. He slid into her hot succulent pussy, embedding himself to the hilt as he realized he also

wanted Valenzuela to admire Zelnora—how nimbly she arched her back like a cat on a fencepost, standing on the tips of her toes to admit his large tool.

Tossing his shirt to the dried grass at their feet, Cormack jounced her on his cock then set to long lunges of his hips as he rocked her. All the while he fingered the erection of her swollen clitoris—he'd learned the sucking clenches of her climax around his prick were enough to bring him off.

"Slow," he gasped, yanking her off the tree and clasping her shoulders to his bare chest.

She laughed, a low, salacious bubbling that came from deep in her chest. "I'm expected to slow down...when I'm speared on your magnificent penis?"

Cormack did not see the humor in the moment. "And you're being watched by a base, murderous ruffian?" He had slowed his thrusts till he was barely moving, his cock twitching inside of her.

Zelnora smiled like a snake, the corners of her mouth turning up. "I don't mind. I'm sure he's admiring your colossal testicles pounding against my ass."

Cormack's face became hot with shame, but his cock jumped even more eagerly at the thought Valenzuela had his sights on his gluttled balls. "Colossal? I'm not built that big."

"Larger than that Spanish debauchee."

"What makes you think that?" he whispered against her neck.

"When you came out of my tent, after he asked you to doctor his daughter."

"Yes." The mere memory had him gliding into her again. That ardent, sensual kiss between the two men had been more than a genteel show of gratitude. Cormack knew there were some odd countries where men kissed to show platonic love. In the mountains he'd seen men, presumably Europeans, do it. To get his mind off Valenzuela's supple mouth, he had been telling himself the desperado was from one of those countries. But the way he licked and sucked

Cormack's tongue went beyond a simple thanks. Cormack wished he had not shoved the Spaniard away so swiftly. It had just been a natural reaction, and it was unseemly to show affection to another when Zelnora was not present—as though he were stealing something he owed to her.

“His serape was fallen to one shoulder, and his erection stuck out like a lodge pole. Not as big as yours.”

Cormack almost protested, but this time he did hear the enormous Californio spurs jangling as Valenzuela approached him from behind. He felt the heat emanating from Valenzuela's shirtfront as he pressed gently against Cormack's hunched back.

“Not as big, my dear?” he chided in an uncharacteristic manner. He happily bantered, not the dead-serious assassin about to count a coup on them like so many buffalo. His fingertips played a glissando down Cormack's back muscles, causing gooseflesh to stand out on his arms and stiffening his nipples. “Perhaps you're right, my gorgeous gold-finder. This *pelirrojo* one is hung like a prize bull.” He walked his fingers round under Cormack's arm to pinch his taut nipples into painfully thrilled points.

Fact, Cormack felt the ridge of Valenzuela's cock pressed against his bare ass. Ho, boy, was he going to attempt to fuck him, squashing him like an arrow between two hump ribs? Cormack could never allow himself to be demeaned in such a way, in front of Zelnora.

*This child's no traveler, Cormack thought. I am a trapper, a mountain man. I've seen a petrified forest, as sure as my rifle's got hindsights.*

*Here's damp powder and no fire to dry it.*

Reaching one limber arm up to caress the back of Cormack's neck, Zelnora purred. “*Toro pelirrojo*, you're right about that, Joaquin. At first I was afraid I couldn't take him, his penis was so magnificent and—”

“—colossal,” Cormack reminded her, as Valenzuela dropped to his knees behind him, and Cormack felt the heat of his face brushing

his backside. Just the snort of Valenzuela's breath against his tight full balls was enough to send a rush of semen halfway up his cock, and he plunged into his sweetheart again. She grunted with gusto, arching her back even more energetically, and when Valenzuela tenderly bit the globe of his ass and sprinkled several more nibbles, Cormack had to still himself, gasping for air against Zelnora's shoulder.

"Wait, wait..." Zelnora now exhorted.

Funny she should be the one to still him.

So Cormack eased his prick out of the woman about halfway and stood poised, his leg muscles trembling with anticipation.

"Mmmm."

He felt as much as heard Joaquin utter this satisfied sound of appreciation. And then he was lapping, the tip of his tongue flickering like a butterfly against the hairs of Cormack's erupting balls.

Such a tender, dainty little mouth! Cormack heard ox-like grunts coming from somewhere in the redwood bower. Zelnora certainly could cut loose a spree! What a rambunctious, rollicking woman! She—ho, boy, it was *he* who sounded like rutting cattle, he who shivered the ground beneath his feet with his orgasmic trembling!

The Spaniard accelerated his lapping, opening his hot mouth to nip and slurp at Cormack's balls. Cormack arched his back to allow better access, and the greedy smacking sounded loudly in the enclosed redwood glen. The reverberation of Joaquin's groans shivered through his balls and up the underside of his distended prick.

He shot center into Zelnora's scalding, tight pussy.

Not until much later did he realize that his butt was pressed into the face of a wicked Spanish bandit, and when he eventually withdrew from Zel's flaming pussy, from behind Joaquin lathed his prick clean of jism, smacking his lips pruriently. He squiggled his nimble fingers up and down the length of Cormack's prick, milking the last drops, fervently supping his seed. Cormack wrapped his



fingers around Joaquin's skull, cradling him to his crotch as he shuddered into the blistering, talented mouth.

## Chapter Twenty

After hungrily bathing the sperm from the mountain man's prick, Joaquin fell back onto his ass and pondered. The two white men were shamefully silent, and no one looked anyone in the face. Joaquin propped his wrists on his knees and looked at Cormack's boots. He should get back to Sonoran Camp and find out what nefarious destruction his cohorts had wreaked for the evening.

His tongue darted out and licked the last smoky residue from his bottom lip. He dared to look up at Cormack's sinewy back, the delectable curve of his hip where it sloped down to his stupendous ass. What was wrong, really, in what they had done? Pleasure was a means to its own end—in the past two years he had advocated that. Didn't he pride himself on being wicked and depraved? If anyone discovered what he'd done, he would say it was a new form of depravity. Besides, who cared what those idiots thought? Lately it had been more fuss and bother than it was worth, keeping them in line. It seemed he'd been forbidding more and more of their fatheaded schemes. It was far more pleasant to kneel here licking the plump prick of a hale American, one with immaculate skin as white as calcite, no less. It was a delicious feeling of power, to make this impressive mountain man come with his mouth. And with the apparent blessing of his sweetheart.

But he should leave. He was about to get to his feet when other hands assisted by lifting his elbows. Cormack looked a bit sheepish and couldn't hold his gaze, but Zelnora's face shone with the effulgence of satisfaction, and she told him, "Come into the cabin. We have some claret you might enjoy."

Joaquin merely nodded, and the three strode through the still, hot moonlight. Joaquin had stayed in this cabin a couple of years ago when câching after his first few murders. He had felt so righteous then, avenging the deaths of his brother and wife, but it was getting a bit tiresome. And the more Americans that came to California, the more futile his revenge seemed. Fewer folks remembered the wrong done to him, so it just made him seem like a heartless killer with no lofty goal. That had been fine for awhile, too, but he was growing weary, sleeping in the open, often snow-packed ground, eating the same dull venison for every meal, or tinned oysters that tasted like rancid boot soles. It was time for the gentle touch of a woman again.

He was pleased with how Zelnora had tidied up the cabin. A twenty foot square of redwood logs, she had hung the sides with calico printed with every variety of rose. The fireplace, Joaquin recalled commanding someone to build from stones and mud, and Zelnora had fashioned a mantle nailed fast to the wall with strips from the ubiquitous oyster cans. Someone had even sawed a window and filled the opening with clear glass jars filled with clay. A handsome carpet was tossed before the hearth, and since there were only two rough rocking chairs, Joaquin perched on a stool while Zelnora handed him a cup of claret.

She sat on the edge of the rocking chair, cup between her fingertips. As if noting his admiration for her decorating skills, she said, "This new claim...Will we be able to easily return back to this cabin at night? I'm growing sore from sleeping on pine branches, although Cormack, of course, spreads a nice bed."

Cormack sat down in the rocking chair and gazed evenly at Joaquin. "Yes...it's a mighty shame for such a hardworking woman to have to toil all night on a bed of rocks after working in the same all day long."

"Yes," Joaquin agreed. "The spot I'm thinking is well within five miles from here. I can send some men around this cabin to build you a porch, add a cooking area, a pantry. I just saw a very fine stove you

can have.” Yes, Thaddeus Martin from down near Tuttletown had a fine stove—before they’d looted his cabin. Joaquin wondered if the stove was still there. It was awful heavy, and bandits didn’t have much call for stoves.

“Oh, that’s all right,” Zelnora said dismissively. “We don’t plan on staying here for long. If the mines are as rich as you say, we should be able to leave by first snowfall.”

Joaquin felt a momentary stab of panic at the thought his newfound friends would leave after they made their fortune. Well, of course. That was the nature of the frontier. But now he’d found such a virile, strapping companion and a ravishing woman who knew as much about mining as he did. He had to discover if he could induce them to stay. “Where will you go?”

Zelnora looked to Cormack, and he indicated it was all right for her to tell him. “Cormack bought a lot in San Francisco near the bay.”

“Course, I’m not much for the settlements,” the man added. “But I should build Zel a nice house.” He observed Zelnora with obvious love. “Maybe a weekend house. I was thinking of finding some grape vineyards up north, near General Vallejo’s place. Seems to me one could make a good living making wine. The wine the missions have made in California is just well nigh to puke water.”

While Zelnora looked surprised at the vineyard idea, Joaquin thought it a fine one. He pointed at Cormack with his claret cup. “You’re right. I’ve often thought about that myself. There are a few old-fashioned vineyards with wooden troughs making tolerable brandy, but the wine is undrinkable.”

Cormack was warming to the conversation. “Yes, Dr. Marsh near Mt. Diablo has made several casks of wine which are now fermenting. The fruit’s rind is very thin and dissolves in your mouth immediately. He gave me some *aguardiente*—if aged longer, it could equal the brandies of France.”

“I’m familiar with Dr. Marsh,” Joaquin allowed. His band had rustled several hundred cattle from Marsh’s land. Cormack smiled

forgivingly, perhaps aware of this. "If you'd like, I can send a few men to Vallejo's to see what's available, what he'd be willing to sell off, if it will be healthy for grapevines."

Clutching the claret bottle, Zelnora scooted on the floor between Joaquin's outspread thighs. "Have some more wine."

Cormack averted his eyes and spoke briskly. "That would be fine. Just don't let them rob anyone, all right?"

Joaquin nodded. Zelnora placed the bottle on the hearth and didn't return to her chair, merely draped her arms over his thighs and looked up almost adoringly at him, placing her palm lightly over his crotch. The warmth of her hand caused his cock to enlarge, and now he, too, couldn't look the mountain man in the eyes. He gulped some claret and added, "I'm looking for new boulevards of business to get involved in. Highway robbery is becoming too hazardous with the new anti-foreigner laws and militia mobs." His cock was now too ample to ignore, and Joaquin did nothing to close his thighs or shove Zelnora away. "An early death might be acceptable to my men, but I've decided it's not for me. I need to stay around for my daughter."

As Zelnora closed her hand over his pulsating prick, Cormack said, in the direction of the fireplace, "That's certainly something to consider. Send your men to Vallejo's and let's see what they report back."

"My fiancé is quite attracted to you," Zelnora murmured.

"*Zelnora!*" Cormack snapped, not unkindly.

Zelnora didn't cease. Circling the head of his prick with her thumb, she said salaciously, "He doesn't like to admit it. But I saw how aroused he became when you were slapping his big...stiff...penis."

Joaquin was dumbfounded and couldn't bring himself to reply. American women were so forward! A Spanish woman would never dream of imagining such a thing, much less giving voice to it.

The lewd woman continued, "And spanking his juicy ass. Would you like to do that again? Or perhaps he'd like his revenge and would like to spank you. I'd like that very much."

Cormack cried, "Mr. Valenzuela doesn't want to hear such talk!" For the first time, he looked at the couple crouched at the stool, Joaquin leaning back on his palms and thrusting his crotch at the mountaineer's sweetheart. Falling to his knees, Cormack grabbed Zelnora by the shoulder and yanked her away, much to Joaquin's chagrin. Yet his next motion excited the bandit even more, for he took Zelnora's place and kneeled between Joaquin's thighs, one hand above either knee. "Do you? Such talk is only suitable for highwaymen, the sort of man you don't want to be anymore..."

Ah, what exquisite, dazzling, aquamarine eyes. His athletic shoulder muscles undulated as he squeezed Joaquin's thighs, and his erect nipples demanded to be sucked. He made a slight shrug of his shoulders. "It doesn't trouble me," he allowed.

Cormack came closer on his knees, so that the enormous erection inside his buckskins was poised directly over Joaquin's. His voice and eyes softened when he said, "It makes you no difference to be pawed by a man?" and placed one hot palm on Joaquin's stomach, his thumb inching up the white cotton shirt.

Again, Joaquin shrugged minutely. "A man's touch is more powerful...more direct...straightforward."

Zelnora was on her knees behind Cormack, her gentler and subtler fingers unbuttoning his broadfall once more. She shimmied her hand down his flank so that his erection burst free, bobbing in the air above Joaquin's crotch, and his own cock twitched and jumped to view the meaty tool again in such proximity. Was the mountain man inviting him to grip that beautiful cock? Joaquin felt his own eyes grow misty with longing.

There was a sly grin at the corners of Cormack's mouth as he slithered his long fingers down Joaquin's bare, inflamed hip to undo the first silver button of his velvet *calzoneras*. "That's right,"

Cormack agreed flippantly. "A man is straight and strong as the barrel of a rifle."

"You want to touch and stroke his penis, don't you, Cormack?" Zelnora whispered over the man's bare shoulder, in between loud sucks to his shimmering bicep. Joaquin could see her hand squeezing the juicy globe of his bare ass, his buckskins crumpled at his knees. "I know you want to. Go ahead...I like to watch."

With her other hand, she tickled Cormack's rigid nipples with...a shaving brush? It certainly looked like one, with soft bristles, perhaps of badger hair, and a shiny, polished wooden handle. Cormack's eyes slid shut, fluttering, as he wrapped his fingers around the base of Joaquin's cock. His lips moved, but no sound came out. His cock jounced at every slight graze of the badger brush, and he squeezed Joaquin's taut prick as he lunged his hips toward him.

Joaquin could bear holding still no more at the sight of the *pelirrojo* man's broad hand wrapped around his prick, and he lifted one palm from the stool to draw him toward him, gripping the back of his neck almost fiercely and parting his snarling lips for a kiss.

The sweet softness of his lips! How succulent it was to nibble and sup at this muscular man's mouth, their chests pressing together. The woman's licentious instructions enticed Cormack to lustier pinnacles. He frigged Joaquin eagerly, shamelessly jerking the cock up and down, grunting like the wild bull that he was.

"That's good, Cormack..." she whispered over his shoulder. "You fondle his penis so impatiently. Is it because you like the feel of another man's penis in your fist? Do you like that, Joaquin? Is he as good as a woman? Better than a woman? You like his firm, eager fist, don't you? You enjoy the feeling of his long fat penis sliding against yours."

Breaking the kiss with an unrestrained slurp, Cormack panted against Joaquin's lips. "I want to feel this delicious raw cock explode in my hand."

"Do it," Joaquin growled.

And Cormack plastered his mouth to Joaquin's as he frigged the penis even more energetically, Joaquin sliding his own hand down Cormack's white ridged belly to nestle his burly balls in his palm, the testicles he had recently slapped to such great summits of arousal.

"Cormack..." Zelnora whispered against his neck. "Do you like this fat, hard thing plunging up your ass? You like being filled with something so stiff and hard, don't you?"

"Oh, God, Zel..." the mountain man muttered against Joaquin's mouth. "Don't stop. Fuck me with that big...hard...thing."

What was the woman doing? He had never known a woman of any nationality to act so immoral! Joaquin slipped a fingertip down the slick ridge behind Cormack's balls. Was she actually gliding the wooden handle of that brush into Cormack's tight ass? The thought that she was bugging him with that thick plug drove Joaquin to even greater summits. So many times he'd frigged himself while imagining lunging into that delicious ass, sometimes with Cormack subserviently on his stomach, thighs splayed like a frog while rubbing his firm pole against a buffalo robe, and sometimes, even more slavishly, on his back like a woman, bulging erection slapping against his own belly as Joaquin pumped into him.

Detaching his mouth from Cormack's, Joaquin craned to see over his shoulder. Zelnora cast him a devilish smile, her forearm thrusting into Cormack's arched backside while the man gyrated his hips to give Zelnora better access. Cormack groaned with such animal abandon that Joaquin instantly splashed a great load into his hand, the lubricious friction of the sperm between the two men's bellies creating a smacking sound.

Cormack slithered his thumb up the underside of Joaquin's cock to milk out the last spurts while he groaned against his throat. "Oh, god, yes...I'm going to lick your jism off your hard cock."

"Taste it, Cormack, taste it." Zelnora encouraged him.

Dropping to his knees, Cormack hefted the cock in his fist. He sucked, tentatively at first as though savoring a bonbon that might



melt. But when Joaquin grabbed the back of his head and thrust, gasping, all inhibition seemed to vanish. He furiously lapped the sperm from the crown, the underside, the entire length, and Joaquin urged the mountain man's face to slurp at his balls. He had dreamed of this for so long...

A frustrating interruption nearly had Joaquin reaching for his Colt's to rub out some folks, regardless who they were.

"Mr. Valenzuela! Your soldiers are here!"

It was that pumpkinheaded associate Quartus, thumping at the door as though the forest was on fire.

\* \* \* \*

Cormack slumped to the floor when Joaquin raced away, buttoning his *calzoneras* and tucking in his fancy shirt.

Ho, boy. Cormack wanted to c  che in a steep mountain ravine where only goats dared wander. He just wanted to go under, but he had to face Zelnora now. As casual as could be, his sweetheart opened a fresh claret bottle and removed a few clay jars from the window to let in cooler air—as though she had not just shoved the handle of a shaving brush up his ass!

Sitting in the rocking chair and handing him his refreshed claret cup, she said smoothly, "That was the most exciting thing I've ever viewed, Cormack. But you must know...Don't you dare attempt doing that with another woman!" Her tone was only halfway teasing.

Ah, good, talk of women, not men. Now he could turn to her and look into her face. Gently, he said, "I would never even dream of attempting that, my mountain flower. How could any woman compare to you? I have everything I want right here."

Zelnora smiled cunningly. "Except a dusky, rigid penis."

Cormack felt his face redden. He could no longer deny he'd been aroused for months at the thought of the desperado's long, dark penis erupting in his mouth, or pumping into his ass while pinning him

down, or perhaps...Perhaps one day Cormack would get his revenge for the spanking by restraining the other man, binding his hands so he was helpless.

He knew his attraction to the mysterious bandit brought back to mind his mountaineering years, the dangerous times he'd lifted hair from Arapahos and fought the Blackfoot. Cormack knew those shining times were over with the disappearance of the beaver. Some of his fellow mountain men had gone on to become guides for overland parties coming to California, but such an eventuality was a dim shadow of his former carefree ways, and this child was no traveler, he had been a trapper. He wanted a woman's face about his lodge. He wanted Zelnora.

He shrugged carelessly a few times, just as Joaquin had. He hoped that his knowing smile told Zelnora what she needed to know.

Quartus came to the open cabin door, his round spectacled eyes like beacons in his skull. He clutched the doorjamb with white knuckles. "Zel, Cormack. I believe Mr. Valenzuela and his guerillas are saying something about Elder Brannagh. All I could make out was '*Brannagh nos dijo entrar las montañas.*' Why would Brannagh be telling them to go into the mountains? I didn't even know they knew Brannagh, unless they recently robbed him."

Zelnora stood in the doorway, moonlight illuminating her figure as she squinted to see the group of bandits, Three-Fingered Jack and Feliz among them. "Maybe they did rob Brannagh."

Quartus pointed at the ground. "Their plans is plain as beaver sign!"

Cormack frowned. "Plain? What's plain?"

Quartus sank his fists into his pockets. "I don't know. I just like it when you say that. 'Their plans is plain as—'"

Cormack shoved the cartographer by the shoulder. "Go, stand by, and eavesdrop like you're just looking for—"

Quartus brightened. "Beaver sign?"

“Joaquin!” Zelnora called to the highwayman who now headed their way after seeing the others off. “What’s going on?”

Joaquin waved casually. “Nothing, Señorita. Just men acting like boys.” He jammed his slouch hat onto his head but appeared agitated, obviously in a rush to strike out after his boys. “I will be over tomorrow morning to take you to your claim, *si*?”

“*Si*,” Cormack agreed vaguely, watching Joaquin swagger off to his horse. His next question spilled from his mouth before he had time to think. “What were you discussing about Ward Brannagh?”

With his back to the Americans, Joaquin paused, stock-still. He turned tightly, and his smile was just as artificial. “We must have been saying *braña*. The summer pastures in the mountains where we like to make camp.”

Saluting in a military fashion, he mounted his richly caparisoned horse. He rode steadily off into the redwoods as the three Americans looked blankly at each other.

## Chapter Twenty-one

They were ambushed on their way to Sonora.

They had struck a rich lead at their new claim. Within the first week they were washing five hundred dollars in dust a day. The waters were low, and the bars were exposed. True to his word, Joaquin had sent six capable men from Hermosillo to assist them, and they worked like greased lightning, being accustomed to the boiling heat of midday. Why, just one day alone when Zelnora was going to use the necessary behind a boulder, she stubbed her toe on a large stone. It was a solid nugget weighing about thirty pounds. This was along the main path between Jamestown and Sonoran Camp, and hundreds of people had traveled through without seeing it!

Having to ensure the word didn't get out, as the entire population of Tuolumne County would be pouring in hoping to discover more giant nuggets, they decided to strike out to Sonoran Camp to find Eddie Tremaine, the assayer with the best rates. Zelnora knew the assayers would just toss it into the melting pot along with the common gold, and as much as she wanted to keep the giant nugget, it was more imperative to have her own money to furnish the San Francisco house. She had discovered that the lot her fiancé had purchased for six thousand dollars was now worth forty-five thousand, an astounding inflation rate. She wanted to return safely to San Francisco before her colossal nugget couldn't even furnish her with a dining table.

So they packed their gold in buckskin bags, leaving Quartus with Zel's "peashooter" to oversee the Sonorans. Cormack wanted two of the Sonorans to accompany them, but they made an excuse that they

were certain to make a big strike that day. So the couple rode across a table mountain covered with the debris of former volcanic eruptions, forced to dismount for a few miles when the ground reverberated beneath them as they passed over concealed craters. Boulders lay half buried in the earth like a field of pumpkins.

Zelnora was happier than she had ever been—happier, to be sure, than her first months wed to Barton Sparks. She'd imagined a glorious future with that handsome fellow who was such a shining star under the tutelage of Ward Brannagh. Then Barton had actually sailed away to be rid of her. What had appeared at first to be a fatal blow to a childless woman of more than thirty years was now evidently the beginning of her grand adventure in California. Browened by the sun, heartier and stronger than ever—mounted on her horse wearing men's leather pantaloons! A wide-brimmed sombrero clapped onto her head—Zelnora smiled and thought, *I like this wild and barbarous life. I will leave it with regret.*

It must have been her elation and the relative coolness of the morning air that caused her to dare ask, "Cormack. Don't you think when we return to San Francisco you'll want to go back to doctoring?"

His silence told her she had erred in mentioning the subject, and they plodded ahead wordlessly. They were descending into a mountain valley fringed with a belt of redwood timber, a bucolic open meadow where coveys of quail whirred and skittered through the dead grass. Zelnora risked a few glances at the side of Cormack's face, and he didn't look tense, only thoughtful.

So she stumbled on. "I heard that false men of medicine are everywhere. Fellows putting up posters as doctors are also selling oil and candles. One doctor I heard of in San Francisco is actually an Italian wigmaker."

"I've heard of those mountebanks," Cormack said hotly. "Even Dr. Marsh, as tasty as his *aguardiente* is, is an amateur physician without a license. He charges money for the simplest thing anyone

can read in a mothering handbook. He don't know fat cow from poor bull." He was quiet for a few more moments then said in a calmer tone, "I got a medical degree from the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, that's true. You may have wondered where a mountain man got such book learning."

He paused as if expecting a response, so Zelnora encouraged him. "You do often use big words. Not that a mountain man shouldn't," she quickly added.

Cormack actually grinned a little. "You couldn't get into Columbia without knowing a few big words. Well, I have no hankering to go back to that life. I like studying sign, and you can see where I'm proud of your metallurgy learning. It goes against my nature, some of the ethics that physicians are forced to uphold, or put on a face like they're upholding. Hippocratic Oath, bear's ass."

Zelnora smiled at the notion Cormack would use Quartus' most treasured curse. "What sort of ethics don't you agree with?"

Already he seemed more remote, his voice wandering thinly. "Well, if a fellow is well nigh to going under already, say with an arm or leg blown clean off...Hush." He reined up his horse, sitting erect as he gazed at a distant point in a sequoia grove. "Keep your eyes skinned." He reached for his long rifle.

"What is it?" Zelnora saw nothing. Not a puff of wind rustled the tiniest branch or needle.

"Something is breaking the leaves a-snapping like California shells," he whispered. "Have your rifle at the ready."

They cantered casually down the rise into the bowl of the valley, Cormack with his Colt's loosed in his belt and his scalp knife handy. Zelnora thought she knew where Cormack indicated danger was, as a covey of quail was streaking it the opposite direction. Sure enough, just as they had passed parallel to the spot, Cormack shouted "Yep!" to his skilled beast, wheeled it about, and raised his long rifle at about five mounted banditos that came exploding from the grove.

How had he known? Zelnora was not nearly as prepared, and as she'd never discharged the Hawken before, found how difficult it could be. Loud was the war shout as Cormack sent a ball flying at the vaqueros, and she could barely lift her weapon!

"There're five of them, let's fly and rub out as many as we can," Cormack instructed her, with his usual quick resolve in cases of peril. He sent a shot directly in the vaquero's faces, knocking one off his horse. The Mexicans had only pistols, so they let no shot fly as they came into the grassy bowl in a zigzag manner so as not to present a steady mark. This was well nigh to impossible, galloping with no reins and hefting a seven pound piece to your shoulder! But in her fear Zelnora succeeded, miraculously managing to hit a mark in the leg—it looked like she'd blown the lower leg clean off, and there was one more vaquero off his mount.

The three remaining Mexicans discharged a ringing pistol volley, bullets thudding into the timber and cutting branches near them. Cormack's revolver spoke the first word of reply just as a Mexican's ball smacked into his beast's hock. Cormack's shot went wild as the beast collapsed on its side, smashing the buckskin bags of gold that included Zelnora's giant nugget.

Cormack athletically dove from the saddle, rolling then leaping to his feet. The vaqueros rushed like little blurry demons, one dismounting to grab the bags of gold while the other two held Cormack off with their gaudily adorned, dancing beasts. Zelnora's own square-built bay, unaccustomed to gunfire, skittered so uncontrollably she could scarcely hit the side of a vaquero's horse, much less a man. And her brain, unaccustomed to keeping her eyes skinned so acutely, could not decide who or what to aim at next—the men thrusting their muzzles at Cormack, or the man now mounting again and galloping off with the gold.

Discharging her piece at one of the men threatening Cormack, she succeeded only in striking the stirrup strap, and perhaps a flank, sending up a spray of blood. The enraged rider twirled about, and the

muzzle of a pistol barrel gaped before her eyes. It seemed that Cormack sent a ball flying at the Mexican just as he shot her.

She felt no pain, merely a hot liquid spreading over her shoulder, and a faintness as though she'd just guzzled half a whiskey bottle at once. The corners of her vision dulled and darkened, so all she saw was the vaquero's face before her in a small illuminated sphere. Cormack's ball evidently passed through the bandit's lungs, and his throat began to swell as blue blood rose and turned his face livid.

The remaining horseman followed the one with the gold back into the sequoias as Cormack sent another shot flying after them. Zelnora toppled from her mount.



## Chapter Twenty-two

Gripping the injured woman to his chest—a tourniquet of buckskin stopped the bleeding after he'd dug the bullet out with his scalping knife—Cormack flew into Sonoran Camp on Zelnora's horse and carried her to the best bed in town. This "corral" consisted of a dozen enclosures with cloth ceilings next to a billiard room. He sent a few lounging merry Andrews and a toreador he was acquainted with to sound the alarm for Joaquin. There was no point in calling the town "doctor" to care for Zelnora while he scouted for Joaquin in the *pulquerias* and barrooms. "Doctor" Leblanc was actually a tightrope walker from France whose usual work was as auctioneer hawking pickles.

The ball had lodged in Zelnora's deltoid, luckily avoiding the bone and jugular or cephalic veins, so the only thing to do now was keep her still and disinfect the wound with the best whiskey he could find.

The assayer Eddie Tremaine closed his shop upon hearing they had been robbed and came to sit with Cormack. He admired the scalp Cormack had lifted from the desperado who had shot Zelnora. Cormack had tied it to the cinch ring of Zelnora's saddle out front where he'd picketed her horse, to warn and also to draw Joaquin to him. On the street, "Doctor" Leblanc bawled, "And I'm only bid one dollar for a dozen mixed pickles that cost five dollars in the States?"

"Doo!" shouted a Dutchman.

"Have I any advance on two dollars and a half?"

"*Dos y medio!*"

"*Trois!*"

Tremaine asked Cormack, “Did you recognize any of those pistoleros who assaulted you?”

Cormack shook his head dolefully. Zelnora breathed easy, and the volume of whiskey he had poured on her wound and down her gullet assured her relative comfort. Her fever did not appear to be high enough for alarm. “Not a sign. I can’t imagine Valenzuela taking kindly to others overrunning his territory. He might give those pistoleros free passage out of this world on the California ‘Lynch and Company Fast Line.’”

“Right! You are on good terms with Valenzuela and his men—”

“Valenzuela only,” Cormack corrected. “Three-Fingered Jack, Feliz, and the rest, why, they’re no account anyways you lay your sight. And even then, I’m not so sure about Valenzuela. Tremaine, who’s to say it wasn’t Valenzuela himself who sent those pistoleros to rob us? Look at it. He gets us to mine his river then sits back when we come here loaded down with heaps of gold.”

But like many in Sonoran Camp, Tremaine was loath to admit that their bandit hero Valenzuela had a black heart. “Don’t be absurd, Bowmaker. At the very most, you’ve been acting as Valenzuela’s agent. How does it behoove him to rob his own agents? And you’ve been doctoring poor Antonia. Why would he deprive his daughter’s doctor of fair pay for his work? What would he do if you had been killed this morning—go to that ass Leblanc? What would he do, give Antonia some Chinese sugar or bad brandy for her consumption?”

Tremaine made a good point. Cormack didn’t want to think that a man he had recently frigged, kissed—whose semen he had tasted—would cross him like that. Sure, if Joaquin had committed even half of the murderous acts attributed to him, he had been a pretty vile hoss. But his dealings with Cormack and Zelnora, as of late, had seemed on the level. Why would he expose to them his lurid leanings, his desire to lick another man’s prick, his hankering to gobble Cormack’s balls while Zelnora watched? If Cormack revealed those cravings to his band of pistoleros, well, Joaquin might as well say hard doings to his

topknot right now. They would never allow such a deviant to lead them.

“Doggone if he wouldn’t,” Cormack mumbled in assent. “Leblanc would bathe her in salt butter and set her out for the flies. Then act surprised when she went under.” He thought. “Some desperadoes have to go under for this day’s work.”

“Speaking of doctoring, old chap,” said Tremaine. “Can you take a look at this odd lump on my side...?”

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Joaquin rushed into Cormack’s room, swirling his serape about the tiny enclosure as he paced in agitation up and down Zelnora’s bedside. His enormous silver spurs the size of saucers jangled as he cursed at full chisel in Spanish. The basic gist of his rant involved “*pendejos*” and many remarks about donkey’s anuses, and he took off his gloves and slapped them against the flimsy wall as though challenging a foe to a duel. Cormack had to hand him several cups of whiskey before he calmed down enough to talk.

Joaquin tossed firewater down his throat and swallowed hard, his eyes flashing. “I think I know the men responsible, Cormack. I must apologize profusely that I was not aware of their intentions beforehand! Let us go into the next room so as not to wake your slumbering sweetheart.”

Leaving Tremaine there in case Zelnora awoke, they strode to the next tiny cell. A fellow’s possible bag and pickaxe lay there, so they continued to the next cell.

“I swear to you, Cormack, I had no warning of this plan!” Joaquin protested as they entered the enclosure, this one containing an actual fellow lying askew on the cot. “Of course I would have stopped these pistoleros from waylaying you if I had known!” He distractedly waved his pistol in the fellow’s face, and the fellow went like sixty out of the hotel, considerately leaving behind a half bottle of whiskey.

Joaquin sucked prodigiously from it, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, in his distress forgetting his impeccable Castilian manners. "This is unheard of, idiots racing about without my knowledge!"

Cormack accepted the grimy bottle. He didn't want to address Joaquin's protestations of innocence. "Eddie Tremaine is getting the word out to all assayers if they see a gold lump like that, to let us know straight off. We told no one about the strike."

Joaquin pointed at the ground. "No one? What about that simple hombre who likes to feel the heads of people?"

He referred to Quartus' phrenology hobby, and this irked Cormack. He had become very fond of Quartus. Quartus always eagerly pitched in with whatever was asked, and it was no fault of his own he couldn't ride a horse too well. "Old hoss! Don't you lay a hand on that child. He's half froze for brains, but we didn't tell him about the giant nugget. No, if anyone went crawling like a rattler along the bottom to raise the alarm about the nugget, it was one of the men you sent to work with us. How do we know we can trust them?"

"Did they see the nugget?"

"Not to my knowledge, but who knows where they cêched themselves, lying handsome on their stomachs behind a boulder?"

Joaquin furrowed his silken brows and took a step toward Cormack. "How dare you accuse me of sending duplicitous men!"

Cormack took an additional step toward Joaquin. "Well, it sure appears there are certain folks roaming about that you have no control over. You don't have the tiniest sign who these desperadoes are who nearly raised our topknots, leaving us lying there like wolf's meat."

"I will find them." And Joaquin turned on his boot heel and stalked out.

Cormack finally breathed. He was heading into the hallway to check on Zelnora when there was a report of a pistol out in the street. There were a few womanly shrieks, then a brief silence, and then the auctioneer started back in.

“Will anybody say twenty-five? Will anybody advance on thirty dollars?”

The Mexican funeral procession resumed its march, headed by a dismal brass band, and Joaquin returned to the hotel. He pressed Cormack into the empty cell, even shoving him back against the flimsy wall as he holstered his pistol.

He poked Cormack in the chest. “You see? You see how I get things done?”

“By shooting a man?”

Joaquin closed his eyes in frustration. “That man owed me a hundred dollars. And I only shot him in the leg. And someone said they heard him boasting as he swaggered about, talking about an enormous nugget recently found on the Stanislaus.”

It was becoming difficult to concentrate with the proximity of Joaquin. He must have been on his way to some soiree or other, as under his serape he wore a velvet jacket trimmed with gold braid, and his clean, glossy hair smelled of cigar smoke. His beautifully straight, aristocratic nose was just inches from Cormack’s. Yet the idea Joaquin had crossed him kept Cormack’s palms flat against the wall, while his traitorous cock swelled and elongated against his thigh. “There may have been other enormous nuggets, Joaquin. Or you could have shot that man to deflect blame from yourself.”

Joaquin shoved his face so close to Cormack’s he sprayed spittle. “How can you accuse me of such a thing? Why would I betray you? You are helping my daughter regain life—why would I deny you a good living?” He gazed lewdly with heavily-lidded eyes at Cormack’s mouth. “Why would I betray you when I admire you so much?”

And all at once, as though unable to restrain himself, Joaquin kissed him. Full sucking kisses with his soft, pliant lips, hungry and defiant as Joaquin laved Cormack’s tongue with his own. They snorted against each other’s faces, a sudden wave of arousal sweeping down Cormack’s chest, stiffening his nipples, making him weak in the knees. Gripping a handful of Joaquin’s luxurious hair in his fist,

Cormack snapped his neck back, exposing his vulnerable throat to him, and laid an openmouthed slurp on his Adam's apple.

"Why do you admire me?" he demanded.

As if to distract Cormack, Joaquin enfolded his prick in his hand and squeezed almost lovingly. A low purring sound rumbled in the pit of his throat when Cormack licked the velvety brown skin. "You are strong...*muy masculino*..."

"Those aren't good enough reasons. *Tu también eres muy varoni*. You are feared by everyone in California and Mexico."

Fairly giggling like a youth, with his thumb Joaquin tickled the underside of his burgeoning erection. "I am just a mysterious black devil who arrives, then disappears. I do not want my life to be meaningless, all for nothing. I can only gain...*estabilidad*...stability through loving another."

Loving? Ho, boy, who said anything about loving? Cormack kissed the bandit's chin, throat, and scrabbled the shirt collar aside to suck on his smooth trapezius. Loving was between men and women. Although he supposed one could love one's brother. Or trapping *compañero*...

Joaquin clasped Cormack's muscular thigh between his and humped him like a sly fox. "I would crawl on hands and knees to show my admiration for you. You must not see me as a murdering, robbing fiend."

Cormack flicked the tip of his tongue against Joaquin's lower lip. "But you *are* a murdering, robbing fiend." The murdering fiend's cock was so stiff against his thigh Cormack feared Joaquin would waste his seed inside his *calzoneras*.

"One who esteems you, and would never betray you," Joaquin panted into his mouth.

Cormack slid his palms down Joaquin's back and gripped the globes of his ass to him, briefly and brutally, causing the Spaniard to grunt. "Then prove it." Cormack nipped the man's lower lip. "First

time I saw you, you whipped my poor swollen prick and balls till I nearly came in your face.”

Joaquin grinned with conspiracy. “You wish to slap my penis?”

“No,” said Cormack, although that was an enticing idea. “I wish you to display your admiration, how much you value and take pleasure in me.”

Joaquin groaned as Cormack rolled his bulging erection against his hip. “I would like to display...I do not wish to rule you...Only to share mutual pleasure.”

“Good.” And Cormack shoved the desperado to his knees.

Tugging his buckskin shirt over his head and flinging it to the floorboards, Cormack assisted Joaquin in smoothly unbuttoning his broadfall. His erect meat nearly brained the bandit alongside his skull, and Joaquin eagerly gripped it in his hand, with his thumb anointing the bursting head with the drops of semen that had trickled out. Cormack gasped and dug his fingers into Joaquin’s shoulders.

“I wish to eat you,” it sounded as though Joaquin said. “I wish to take you inside me, make you a part of me.”

“Good god.” Cormack groaned when the desperado swallowed the length of his estimable prick down his throat. This wicked fellow could devour a man’s penis wholesale! His alluring, snakelike tongue squiggled up and down the underside as he suctioned voraciously, the grunting in the pit of his throat vibrating sensually through Cormack’s distended prick and into his belly.

Of course the Spaniard knew how to suck a penis—he knew how he liked his own to be sucked, that was logical. He nearly gushed forth into the hot mouth, so embarrassingly swift! The loud slurps, the stifling late summer waves of air against his taut nipples, the heat of the dusky fingers digging into his white ass—and the knowledge that it was a man who eagerly gorged himself on his long, thick meat! And a heartless, malicious outlaw at that!—everything conspired to bring him to a swift climax.

When Joaquin detached his mouth briefly in order to lubricate a finger with spittle, Cormack nearly clobbered him in frustrated and pent-up rage. But when he inhaled Cormack's purplish, angry cock to the hilt while sliding that titillating finger up his ass and tickling the backside of his prick, Cormack let go.

Surge after surge of jism down that hot, thirsty throat. Joaquin moaned in appreciation, gulping hungrily. The bandit ate every mouthful that Cormack spurted, his balls twitching and jumping as he quaked and thrust into the scorching mouth. Joaquin sucked ecstatically, like a hungry calf at the teat.

Joaquin milked his prick deliciously while still tickling the inner wall of his ass with his ringed finger. Cormack's thighs quivered, and he gave way, sliding down the feeble wall and detaching Joaquin's greedy mouth with a powerful slurp.

They sat on their asses, dovetailed, Joaquin's legs slung over Cormack's hips, leaning foreheads against each other, panting.

*What in god's name...* "I can only gain stability through loving another," Joaquin had said. Cormack had not even known he was capable of a romantic idea of love until he'd met Zelnora. He was convinced he had not "loved" his Cherokee wife, not in the typical flowery, heart-fluttering sense of the word. Their marriage was based on sense, practicality, what they could do for each other. Nothing wrong with that. It was a satisfactory arrangement that had lasted until her death. Every mountaineer needed a wife! But with Zelnora had come that heart-stopping, unbounded, sentimental outpouring of emotion he could only categorize as "love."

Now, so soon after beginning to acknowledge this new emotion, yet another person was referring to it? Maybe Joaquin referred to that brotherly love that comrades shared, that must be it. Maybe it was the only way Spaniards expressed strong emotion—though Cormack had never heard upstanding *gente de razón* speak this way. Maybe it was just an odd thing that he would strive to forget.



"I do not wish..." Joaquin huffed, a drip of sweat teetering at the tip of his nose, "...to continue this idiocy, this robbing of people. Before long, I will be caught and hung, and I wish to live. To be an old man, *si*? Let those other anuses have their heads shaved and their ears cut off. I wish to live in dignity, like General Vallejo."

They laughed, their slick foreheads bobbing together. Cormack leaned back against the wall and said, "I've seen a petrified forest, Joaquin, sure as my rifle's got hindsights and she shoots center. I've lived on my moccasins for six weeks, and poor doings that feeding is. Given my druthers, and my advancing age, I'd rather have a woman's face around my palatial abode for the balance of my days." He paused. "I'm just like you."

Joaquin, too, leaned back on his palms and smiled genuinely, the crotch of his *calzoneras* full to bursting. For the first time ever, Cormack saw him relaxed and at ease, his handsome face open and inviting. "Your winemaking idea is a good one. I have met thousands of people who loathe this bad, expensive Boston wine. Before long, the Spanish government will not be able to control whether Californians plant good vines or not."

Cormack had thought about this already. "It would be good to have a partner with a lot of capital to invest in the vines. Especially if Spain sends men to burn down the new vines. Someone like you'd have men to protect the property."

This idea seemed to make Joaquin hot. "Spain is losing influence—how dare they dictate what Californians do?"

The idea they were both now "Californians" stoked Cormack's zeal. "Shall I ask Zelnora if she accepts you as a partner in the vineyard?"

Joaquin smiled widely. "Yes. Señorita Sparks is a good, hardworking woman. But I shall also ask that you take in Antonia. She needs a good house, protection from the weather, and the stability of a family."

"Of course. Yes, Señorita Sparks is a good woman."

Tremaine popped his head behind the curtain that served as a doorway. "Zelnora is awake and asking for you."

The two men stood casually, arranging their clothing as though they had just had a gold claim parley.

## **Chapter Twenty-three**

When Zelnora awoke, Joaquin vowed to her to find their robbers and would-be murderers, to restore their giant nugget to them. Then he went out into the street to discover who had been flushed out by his shooting of Jake Muggins.

He had not told Cormack the shining truth about shooting that worthy in the leg. Lying was an old habit, but he now had a different motivation for doing so. He didn't want Cormack to know he'd intentionally shot the gambler's foot clean off in his zeal to find out who had robbed his friends. Joaquin was making a sincere effort to refrain from activities such as shooting off gamblers' feet, and he wanted to impress Cormack with his attempts to change his ways. So he had made light of the shooting, to Cormack's face.

The crippling of the gambler had flushed out Three-Fingered Jack and Feliz, storming at a gallop past the brilliant bazaars of the dusty thoroughfare. Joaquin had grown weary of these two formerly valuable henchmen. Whereas in the early days his band had chosen victims based upon their resemblance to the Americans who had wronged their families, Jack and Feliz lately just randomly lifted the hair of any passerby, particularly Indians for the sport of it, as it was as yet no crime to shoot Indians. Indians had never harmed Joaquin, and he considered them of the same repressed tribe as his own, so the other day when Three-Fingered Jack proudly displayed the head of an Indian whose only crime was walking by his campsite in possession of a few eagle feathers, Joaquin had publicly struck Jack upside the head. These Sonorans. They would steal the woolly colt out of Barnum's Museum.

Motioning the two bandits to a plot where a row of scurvy victims had been buried from the neck down, the two Sonorans dismounted with knitted brows.

“*Jefe*,” Jack acknowledged with a mystified nod. “What is going on? Some gamblers came sobbing and wailing that you shot off Muggins’ foot.”

“*Si*. Never draw your pistol unless you intend to use it,” Joaquin affirmed.

“But why? Muggins always has plenty of money for us to steal.”

“He actually *gives* us his money,” Feliz added.

Joaquin briefly described the robbing of Cormack and Zelnora—as though he had any need to. He carefully scrutinized his cronies’ faces for signs of conspiracy. They were very good liars, as good as himself, but he knew them so well he thought he detected a few shadows of guilt pass over their slimy countenances. “Bowmaker recognized none of the five men, though they wore no masks.” He paused. “And one of them mentioned the name ‘Brannagh,’” Joaquin lied.

That one word tipped the Sonorans’ hands. Disbelief smoothed their craggy faces, and Feliz ignorantly cried, “Why would they mention Brannagh? He is off in San Francisco organizing the Vigilance Committ—”

Three-Fingered Jack nearly elbowed Feliz to shut him up. “Yes, yes,” he interrupted. “He is busy with San Francisco’s town council. Or so I have heard. How could he travel up here and back to San Francisco again?”

Joaquin paced slowly, not taking his eyes from their devious mugs. “Perhaps because he loathes Bowmaker on principle, and Señorita Sparks for abandoning him.” He stood absolutely still, his gaze boring holes into Jack’s eye sockets. “Did I say anything about Brannagh personally robbing them? Wouldn’t it be just as simple for him to hire men to rob the people he loathes?”

Jack and Feliz looked as though that had not occurred to them. "Oh," said Jack. "Yes, I suppose he could hire someone to do it."

Joaquin added, "Brannagh paid you to rob that religious party going over the Sierra Nevada. And that was just because he didn't want them to reach the Colorado River. Why should he not pay you to rob two of the people he loathes the most in the world?"

Jack protested too stridently. He had already claimed that the band sent up the Sierra had not met with much success and had only robbed some parishioners of a few pounds of meat. "You know that was not a good raid! We already told you. There were just a few weak men struggling along building a road to nowhere. Rolling boulders up a hill."

"Si," agreed Feliz vehemently. "It took them all day just to build six feet of a road! And all we got was some jerked beef and some disgusting whiskey that tasted like urine."

"That was supposed to be wine," Three-Fingered Jack told him.

Feliz continued, "We ourselves had to spend the night hungry in Guano Hill. It was not successful at all!"

Joaquin waved them away with distaste. "Yes, and don't forget to find out about the colossal nugget. It will be hard to sell that without an entire town knowing about it."

"Of course, *jefe*!"

However, Joaquin trusted them as far as he could throw them. During the Fourth of July spree at Sutter's Fort, Ward Brannagh had approached him to rob and even kill Cormack, if such an eventuality were to come down the pike. Brannagh would not be overly grieved if Cormack were to die or lose a limb. Joaquin had at first hesitantly agreed but had quickly been stampeded by his emotional attachment to the couple. The next time Brannagh had propositioned him, Joaquin protested he was not a murderer for hire, and to hire the next fellow. The "next fellow" was apparently Three-Fingered Jack, as a week ago they'd gone on that binge in the Sierra at Brannagh's behest, and Joaquin had stayed behind at Cormack's cabin when

Cormack had frigged him so lovingly, and they could have spent a few more pleasant hours in each other's company were it not for Jack's interruption...

Brannagh clearly had it in for Cormack, who had done nothing more heinous than "steal" his paramour. Couldn't Brannagh have just paid Zelnora for her work at his store, as he had paid Mercy Narrimore? And to further defame Cormack's good, upstanding name, Brannagh had spread the Sing Sing story around, tried to get Joaquin to propagate it. Even if the story was true, what was wrong with doing a stretch for something so honorable?

No. Cormack was an honest man, a superior doctor, the most intelligent and hardest worker Joaquin had ever known. A man with the good sense to marry Señorita Sparks. He would find out who had robbed the good couple.

And it would be difficult not to retaliate in his old manner. By blowing their heads off.

\* \* \* \*

"We have a potential investor in our winemaking scheme," Cormack said.

True to his word, Joaquin had sent men to work about the cabin, repairing the horse corral, building a dry goods shed, putting real glass in the windows, and they had brought poor Thaddeus Martin's stove. A couple of the Sonorans, Zelnora suspected, were also told to stand guard against marauders. So during her rehabilitation from the bullet injury, there was not a terrible lot to do except prepare supper for Cormack and Quartus when they returned from the mines near sundown. Today she had even traded the laborers some gold dust for a few green squash vegetables, an infrequent delicacy indeed, and the trio dined on succulent stew in the clearing in front of the cabin.

"Oh, yes? And who is that?"

Zelnora could guess. Cormack was undeniably fond of Joaquin Valenzuela. She attributed it to Joaquin's tawny good looks, his angular high cheekbones and lanceolate eyes, and the adventurous danger he represented to Cormack, a reminder of his own daredevil, rustic existence in the mountains.

Cormack looked musingly at an owl on a branch. "Why, Joaquin, of all people." Quickly he explained, "He seems to want to settle down, not really in the settlements, yet not really anywhere as disorderly as Sonoran Camp, or Groundhog's Glory, or Nutcake Camp—"

Zelnora nodded. "Chucklehead Diggings."

"Gomorraah," Quartus added. "Or Rough and Ready! Last month over there, they interrupted a funeral because someone called out 'Gold!' Everyone raced off, dumped the casket right in a gulley. 'The congregation is dismissed!'"

Cormack chuckled. "I heard that story, too. Those Rough and Ready boys will use any excuse to get out of a church service."

Quartus said, "Or Hungry Camp. There's no food there."

Cormack seemed set on changing the subject, so Zelnora prodded, "Joaquin wishes to invest in winemaking?"

"Yep. Of course, we'll have to give him a percentage of any profits. That's only to be expected."

"Of course."

Quartus pointed a spoon at Cormack. "Will he be actually lending a hand in any of the work? I don't want anyone jumping in on my surveying, or stamping and monitoring the juice." For Quartus had already pledged to find the most fertile soil with his divining rod then hand-press the juice himself, as it had been ages since he'd drank grape juice.

"We didn't discuss that much detail," Cormack admitted. "He doesn't strike me as a particularly servile labor sort of fellow. But he may want to oversee, if Zel doesn't mind having a notorious desperado like him around."

“Mind?” Zelnora echoed. “I don’t see why I’d mind. I’m rather fond of Joaquin myself, if he would just give up that annoying robbing occupation of his. He may have to take on a pseudonym. You know—‘Valenzuela Vineyards’ might not conjure up the ideal image.” She smiled. Of course it would be called Bowmaker Vineyards. She could draw a label of an archer for the bottle.

“Nothing wrong with the name Valenzuela,” said Cormack, “Leastways, not over in General Vallejo’s neighborhood, where the best grapes stood to be grown. Vallejo and Joaquin are kin of sorts. They are both *gente de razón*, anyway.”

“He’d have to be a secret partner,” Quartus noted, and Cormack and Zelnora nodded in agreement, surprised Quartus had formulated that plan on his own. Stretching and uttering rutting animal sounds, Quartus declared he would go catch them some fish with a new pole he had fashioned while he was supposed to be shaking the gold rocker earlier that day. The couple rose and retired to the cabin.

\* \* \* \*

“A rider,” Cormack murmured into Zelnora’s ear.

They lay on the bed constructed from willow tree poles, Cormack leaning against the wall with the woman between his thighs. It was unacceptable doings to hear a mounted rider cantering up their path from the main road.

Zelnora shot to a sitting position. “How many riders?” she gasped.

Cormack had not realized she was still touchy about their run-in with the bandits. Of course she was. How often did a pious gal from the minefields of Georgia get plugged while being robbed of a thirty-pound nugget?

“Sounds like only one.” Cormack rose to peer out the window. He exhaled with relaxation when he saw it was Joaquin alone, alighting with ease with those ridiculously oversized Californio spurs not causing him a moment’s pause.



“Just Joaquin—you don’t need to cover up,” Cormack advised. “He’s in a rush. I hope he brings good news.”

Serape billowing, Joaquin strode to the front door. When Cormack opened it, he expected to embrace the former bandit and monte dealer. Yet after touching Cormack’s arm briefly and uttering “*Buenos noches*” with thin, serious lips, Joaquin continued on to the bed, flinging off his serape and setting himself atop the mattress.

While Cormack stood mutely in the open door, Joaquin stroked Zelnora’s hair. Dumbfounded, Cormack slowly shut the door and sat himself behind Joaquin.

“*Mi amor*,” Joaquin was muttering in loving tones. Zelnora, for her part, gazed adoringly at the highwayman’s pointed, penetrating face. “I must apologize for what happened to you. I feel responsible for it, as I am responsible for all carnage in this part of the state.”

Zelnora fairly purred, leaning into Joaquin’s hand as he stroked her behind the ear like a large cat. “Don’t feel responsible, dear Joaquin. How are you to know what occurs at every point in every road? It’s very possible it was just a group of random robbers who had no idea we had such a giant nugget.”

Joaquin tucked his legs up, his immense starry rowels raking the cotton ticking that covered the mattress. Inhaling deeply of the scent of tree sap that emanated from Joaquin’s gleaming hair, Cormack extended a long arm down to unbutton the boots and drop them to the floor. It felt warm and safe here, sheltering the smaller man in his arms as he soothed Cormack’s fiancée. His prick was already stiffening to imagine being intimate with them again. He was a tad jealous, he noted, when Joaquin eased down the shoulder of her chemise in order to inspect her bullet wound. Yet it was only fair that if he had congress with the exotic desperado, Zelnora should also be allowed.

“There are no ‘random robbers’ in this part of the state,” Joaquin said darkly, apparently approving of how Cormack had bound her

shoulder wound. "If there are, I need to know about them. I have commanded Jack and Feliz to discover who was behind it."

"Three-Fingered Jack and Feliz?" Cormack questioned mildly. He pressed his erection to Joaquin's ass, so succulent, so rounded, so firm. "Aren't those the chaps I whaled on at Sutter's Fort?"

Joaquin craned his neck to address Cormack, nestling against his throat. Cormack slithered his fingers through Joaquin's sleek hair and breathed hotly against his temple. "Feliz was the one you elbowed in the jaw," Joaquin admitted. "He still wants to raise your hair for knocking out his tooth. But Garcia was the one you crippled. He still can't get on his mount without assistance."

Cormack lowered the neckline of Zelnora's chemise so that one plump breast bounced free. She smiled leonine to indicate her approval as Cormack urged Joaquin's face toward her. "Effective methods, you would say?"

Joaquin licked between Zelnora's breasts slowly with a fat tongue. Watching another man lick his woman aroused Cormack, wondering what Zelnora must feel having a strange man accost her while her fiancé watched. She grinned lazily, gripping Joaquin's shoulders with her fingertips. Cormack slid one sure palm around the slope of Joaquin's luscious ass, running two fingers between his spread thighs to tickle the sensitive bulge between his balls and asshole.

Joaquin muttered, "You have very effective methods, *pelirrojo*," before diving down to slurp Zelnora's nipple into his mouth.

Ho, boy, Cormack wanted to feel that dark, hot pole in his fist again. He was no longer ashamed to enjoy the hard plumpness of another man's stimulated prick as it pulsated in his grip. But tonight he needed to please Zelnora. He wanted her to esteem Joaquin just as much as he did, and that would mean risking his own jealousy while watching the bandit pleasure his woman.

"It would distress me if you needed assistance mounting," Cormack murmured into Joaquin's ear.

Zelnora was inching up her skirts. He was slightly shocked to hear her salaciously say, "Joaquin needs no assistance mounting."

Cormack nibbled on the velvety side of Joaquin's neck. "Kiss her," he commanded.

It was odd, watching Joaquin clamp his lips over Zelnora's eager mouth. Cormack's instant reaction was to yank a handful of Joaquin's hair till his neck snapped and paste him in the nose. He stayed this overwhelming feeling by deepening the bites to Joaquin's neck and unbuttoning his *calzoneras* with long, nimble fingers.

He would direct Joaquin. If he was the one guiding their actions, he reckoned he would not feel this possessive envy whenever Joaquin laid a hand on Zelnora. So he squiggled his tongue up and down the side of Joaquin's strong neck while sliding a palm down his belly to unleash his cock. Fingering the long, dusky prick caused Joaquin to rock his hips, pressing his erection into Cormack's hand, deepening his wet kisses upon Zelnora. With his thumb, Cormack described unctuous wreaths about the crown of the prick, making Joaquin gasp against Zelnora's mouth and gooseflesh sprinkle the globes of his curvaceous butt.

Cormack revealed his own cock, desiring to rub drops of semen against that succulent ass. It was no different than rubbing against a woman's backside, after all, although Cormack could not fool himself that he did not handle a slick, hot penis. The sweaty meat pulsed as Joaquin humped his palm, Cormack rotating his pumping as though milking a cow, up, down, and over the tip of the erection. The bandit's pleased moaning incited Cormack to release his own ecstatic growls while he nibbled on his earlobe, daring to glide the entire length of his mammoth penis against that juicy ass. Joaquin grunted, whether with approval or not, Cormack only knew by the sudden pulsing of the cock in his hand. As Zelnora's thighs were spread and she panted invitingly, teats bouncing happily, Cormack urged the quivering prick toward her pussy.

Joaquin was pressed between the two lovers. Perhaps as it would have taken too much effort to complain or extricate himself, he allowed Cormack's massaging fingers to guide him to Zelnora's honeypot, and with a deep groan, he entered her to the hilt.

"Ah, *eres una mujer encantadora*," Joaquin uttered against Zelnora's mouth.

Cormack was surprised to hear Zelnora reply in Spanish also. "*Eres una hombre apuesto*," she sighed. *You are a beautiful man.*

Now that he had his friend pleasantly seated, to further stave off the jealousy that a foreign body lay atop his fiancée, Cormack thought it only equitable to pleasure himself against that delicious raw butt, uplifted for his taking. Plunging his hand between the outspread thighs, he cupped the pulsating testicles in his palm, abrading their fullness with loving squeezes and mushy caresses. Joaquin fucked Zelnora slowly, holding himself up on his elbows and gazing down into her face, eyes locked on to hers. Only occasionally did his pupils quiver and contract with ecstasy. Otherwise, he was the picture of concentration, as though he wished to remember every pore on his beloved's face.

Ho, boy, the buoyant succulence of Joaquin's ass as Cormack smeared his quivering cock over the trembling, meaty muscles. He could gratify himself against that ass—why not? It would be nearly the same as fucking Zelnora himself, to hump that delicious butt in tandem with Joaquin's thrusts. Arousing the bulging balls with his palm, Cormack positioned himself gently atop the desperado and lunged his hips, stroking his cock against the smooth flank.

"That's good, Cormack," Zelnora urged sweetly, without removing her gaze from Joaquin's. "Fuck his heavenly rump. Revenge yourself for how he shamed you."

Fuck another man? That thought had not occurred to Cormack—at least, not today, so far. Yet the idea filled him with such lust, he nearly climaxed against the resilient ass, and it seemed that Joaquin spread his thighs even wider to signal his acceptance. Yes, he would

revenge himself for that public cock-slapping he'd received, when several odious brigands had stood around with erect pricks enjoying the sight of Joaquin demeaning his pride, as well as his stiff and yearning penis.

Greasing up his pole with spittle, Cormack gently fingered the tight opening. Had Joaquin debased other men in this manner before? He was certain this snug passage had never accommodated another man's cock. When he slid a finger up the ass, shocked at the slick heat clutching him, Joaquin inhaled sharply, but did not alter the slow, languid fucking he was giving Zelnora.

Cormack growled against the other man's throat. "You like that, you debauched bandit? I'm doggone if you ain't dreamed of having a prick up this tight little ass. I'll fill you up," he gasped when he pressed the crown of his penis against the opening, "with a bucket of my hot seed, while I—"

"Fuck me like a man, Cormack."

Joaquin's imperious demand rang out in the little cabin, divine with elegant Castilian tones. It was a command Cormack could not ignore, and he humped his prick farther up the blistering asshole.

Joaquin seemed to lose his control then. His head slumped forward on a rubbery neck, and he choked on his moans. Not even Zelnora's nearly virginal pussy had been as hot and tight as this, and it was beyond ecstasy to feel against the underside of his prick the throbbing of Joaquin's bulging penis inside Zel. He would erupt soon if he did not still himself, but a few more jabs of his bursting prick and Joaquin was jetting spurt after spurt inside the woman.

He could feel it! How odd, the flow of semen up Joaquin's prick, the clutching at his own prick, the twitching and spasms urging and milking an orgasm from him.

"There. How's that." Cormack moaned in staccato sentences. "You want this. A man's jism inside. Your sweet ass. Go ahead. Spew that jism. You want it. You. Want. Me."

“Fuck me, Cormack.” Joaquin gasped, and that was when Cormack went off.

He ejaculated load after load, though he had dared to stuff only half the length of his meaty penis into that asshole. It was the *Cormack* that got to him, calling him by his given name so intimately, setting him off. Erupting inside the narrow channel, Cormack drifted in and out of consciousness while the rapture poured over his entire body. A sheen of sweat broke out along his back and thighs, cooling him, feathering against his swollen balls.

Who knew how long they lay like that, clammy and panting, half-awake and twitching with the ebb of orgasm. It was Zelnora who shoved the bandit off of her, squirming off the bedstead and padding off somewhere. Both men rolled onto their backs and eventually blinked up at the ceiling. Both simultaneously flung their limp hands onto their own bellies.

“Heaps of beaver,” Zelnora said.

Cormack raised himself on his elbows, swarms of transparent bubbles swimming before his eyes. Zelnora stood before the window glass, peering out into the darkening field.

“There’s a strange horse!” she declared before swinging out the door.

At last, Cormack and Joaquin looked at each other.

““Strange horse’?” they both said at once.

Just then, Joaquin’s horse whinnied. It sounded neighborly to Cormack, but all the same, the two men shot off the bedstead as they buttoned their pants.

At the window, Joaquin whispered, “Who is that?”

Cormack was stunned. “Erskine.”

It was then he realized. He had earlier heard the horse whinny, maybe ten minutes before. While he was sliding his prick up another man’s ass.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“It’s Aaron!” Zelnora was glad to see their old friend and mining partner. “He’s come to give us news, and—Quartus, go fetch the claret juice.”

“*Compañero!*” Cormack called, striding forward. “What brings you up here?”

Erskine beamed widely. “Old hoss!”

They clapped each other on the shoulders, then Cormack turned to gesture at Joaquin. “You might recall Valenzuela.”

Zelnora added, “Or at least met him around the fort in various guises.”

As she feared, Erskine’s eyes narrowed. His hand even inched toward his revolver. “Joaquin Valenzuela. What’s this old skunk doing here? Robbing you?”

Zelnora put calming hands on Erskine’s arm. “Now, now,” she said.

Erskine pointed an accusatory finger at the bandit. “They’re calling for your head down at the fort! ‘Bring me the head of Joaquin Valenzuela!’ is the cry.”

Joaquin stepped forward. “It’s all right. I understand your reaction. Bowmaker, I’ll be leaving now. I’ll report back with news about that incident.”

“What incident?” Erskine cried. “Could he be referring to the very incident I’ve come all this way about—the incident in the Sierra Nevada they’re calling Tragedy Springs because this bastard sent his men to rob and murder the pioneers going to the Colorado River!”

“What?” Zelnora gasped. “Joaquin! You sent your men to rob Mercy’s band?”

Even Cormack took a few steps toward Joaquin. “Explain, Valenzuela.”

Joaquin held his hands out, palms down. “Yes, I knew about it. That was before we became...*compañeros*, Bowmaker. But I did not authorize it.”

“You did nothing to stop it?” Erskine started for the bandit, this time actually drawing his pistol, but Cormack stepped between them. Erskine shouted around Cormack’s arm. “You knew that your men were planning on robbing—”

“Yes, and I did not participate. What is the big catastrophe? They told me they only robbed a few pious men of some jerked beef, then left.”

“Jerked beef?” Erskine said with slit eyes. “Jerked beef?” he repeated, more frenzied. “What are you talking about, jerked beef?”

Quartus stood lamely, eyes round, claret bottle in hand. “Jerked beef?” he echoed.

Erskine continued, “It was a hell of a lot more than jerked beef, you lunkhead! They killed three men and kidnapped Mercy Narrimore!”

A silent pall fell over the darkening glen. The only movement was Quartus’ hand slowly lowering the liquor bottle, and Erskine’s fingers tickling the pistol trigger, his eyes blazing hatred at Joaquin. Zelnora’s heart was falling. If this was true, Joaquin was an out-and-out liar, and Mercy...

Cormack broke the Mexican standoff. “Whoa, hold on, old hoss. Mercy? Kidnapped? What gave you this idea? Who told you?”

Erskine was so riled he even poked Cormack in the chest. “Some damned letter written by someone named Rogers, that’s who! He addressed it to Captain Sutter and buried it under a rock in the Sierra hoping Indians would find it, and find it they did! They brought it to



Sutter, wearing the dead mens' clothes, and I was one of the first to read it! Rogers said it was the work of Joaquin Valenzuela."

Joaquin stepped out from behind the protection of Cormack, and Zelnora tensed. If Joaquin was indeed the same foul, savage fiend of even a couple months ago, this encounter could turn deadly, and she did not have her pocket pistol with her. She knew Brother Rogers. He, too, had been eager to get to the Colorado River to meet the overland party of which Mercy's fiancé was a member.

"I tell the truth, Erskine." Joaquin's eyes brimmed with sincere empathy, but Zelnora was familiar with that false countenance in many men—Barton Sparks and Brannagh. "I take responsibility as far as those being my men, and I knew that Ward Brannagh was looking to hire men to stop the party from making it over the Sierra. Brannagh came to me first, and I told him I wouldn't do it, so he went to my men directly. The goal was merely to rob them, so that they had no provisions and had to turn back, and this is the first I've heard of any murder—"

"Brannagh?"

It was unclear who uttered that name first—Zelnora herself, Erskine, Cormack, or Quartus. But all four of them suddenly crowded around Joaquin, revolvers forgotten, clamoring, "Brannagh?"

Quartus wouldn't believe Joaquin that Brannagh would commit such a low-down crime. Zelnora sided with Cormack and Erskine when Erskine declared, "Damn—Brannagh! Doggone if he wouldn't! You wouldn't believe how many times I had to sit there with my mouth shut listening to him rail against the party who dared to leave the fold, while Sutter sat there drowning his sorrows, agreeing with everything he said! Everyone knew the only reason he cared about that party was the loss of the tithing and the workers to build his empire. That's not to mention the two of you—ho, boy, was that ever a bee in his bonnet. You've never heard such agony being piled on—to hear tell it, Cormack, you're as bad as this headless bandit here. Many were the times I wanted to draw the buckskin from my rifle, to

have to listen to how you were thrown into Sing Sing for murdering ailing people, how you were a convicted escapee, the whole time ignoring the fact that I sat there, your fellow escapee, so why on earth would I turn against you and spread these stories—”

“Wait!” Zelnora shouted, shaking Erskine by the shoulders. “Sing Sing? Thrown there for murdering ailing people? What’s all this about?”

The robust color drained from Erskine’s face. “I, uh, I.”

“Yes,” said Quartus weakly. “Yet more murder? What’s going on around here? Is everyone turning into assassins manufactured in hell to convert highways into theaters of blood? Oh, my...”

Joaquin gently pulled apart Zelnora and Erskine. This mutual vendetta against Brannagh seemed to turn Erskine and Joaquin into instant *compañeros*. “Everyone calm down. We can discuss Sing Sing later, that’s not important right now. Our first step is obvious. We need to get to Three-Fingered Jack’s camp and convince him to tell us what really happened. Then we need to find your sweetheart, Erskine.”

Erskine seemed relieved to change the subject. “That’s why I came here—to get a posse to go find Mercy.”

\* \* \* \*

Joaquin’s thoughts had been turning more and more to love and not perfidy. In fact, later that evening when he snuck into Three-Fingered Jack’s camp—his own camp, really, but less and less did he consider it his own—he was dreaming about love. A thought crossed his mind that perhaps he was done with revenge. Perhaps his wife had called “Enough!” from beyond the grave. Perhaps she tried to convince him that not all North Americans were raping, murdering fiends.

The camp was relatively quiet, with just two vaqueros posted on high points, all animals securely hobbled, and a horse guard posted

against theft by Digger Indians. Two men Joaquin identified as Garcia and Jack sat near the fire imbibing, but everyone else appeared to be flat on their backs farting and burping. Joaquin and Cormack had formulated what seemed like a good plan. After picketing their animals a safe distance away, Cormack and Erskine would accost and bind the two guards while Joaquin and Zelnora casually ambled to the campfire. Jack and Garcia would be taken by surprise and would never feel threatened by the appearance of a delectable woman. It was a bold move for Zelnora to make, but being short of men, they had to use their wits. It was a simple plan, one that he and Jack had used before on unsuspecting *compañeros* who trusted them.

“*Buenos noches*, Jack. Garcia.”

“*Jefe!*” Only Jack got unsteadily to his feet, Garcia being crippled.

Zelnora trailing him, Joaquin strolled around the campfire, having already spied Jack’s knapsack. Joaquin stooped to unlatch the leather knapsack. Jack made a motion to grab for it but withdrew when he saw the pistol in Joaquin’s hand.

“Ward Brannagh has sent us to search for something he lost,” Joaquin explained casually. “I will return Miss Sparks safely to him once we have found this important item.” The knapsack was heavy enough, that was obvious, and Joaquin rifled through a few filthy items of clothing.

Jack spoke tremulously, a sheen of sweat already broken out on his forehead. “But why would I have anything belonging to Brannagh? He paid us to rob those missionaries, and all we got was some jerked—”

“And this white woman’s bracelet?” Joaquin handed it to Zelnora for inspection. She nodded that yes, this belonged to Mercy Narrimore.

“Oh, that? I have had that for many months. I can’t even recall where I found—”

Joaquin shook out a rumpled garment the brown shade of snuff. “And this very attractive garment?”

Placing the bracelet down her chemise between her breasts, Zelnora reached to inspect the coat. It was an odd-looking thing not often—if ever—seen in these parts, with the waist beginning a hand’s span from the throat, about a yard above its proper position, and the skirts sweeping straight to the ankles. “Yes, this could be Brother Rogers’, or I have seen Ezra Allen wear something similar,” she affirmed.

“That was just one of the jerked beef hombres!” Jack protested. “Since they had nothing worth stealing, and we were cold, we merely—”

“And this?” Joaquin tossed the knapsack to the dirt, brandished the heavy, giant gold nugget, and cocked his hammer. Zelnora did the same with her Colt’s as Cormack and Erskine sauntered up behind the two bandits, leveling their own pieces, pistols ready to speak the first word should Jack or Garcia make any untoward move.

“And now,” said Joaquin with authority, “you are going to take us to where Brannagh is holding Miss Narrimore.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

Striking their spurs into their horses, rifles flung across the horns of their saddles, they headed across a few passes toward Tragedy Springs. As that was a new moniker for that deadly place, they had to rely on the dubious directions of Three-Fingered Jack and Garcia. They had taken Garcia along, as he was least likely to make a break down a valley and warn anyone about their nefarious plan. They had left the two vaquero guards bound in a ravine and forced Jack to tell Feliz they were going on a pleasant outing. Most of Joaquin's band were too pickled to question Jack's story, especially when they heard their *jefe* Joaquin repeating the story.

About noontime, they picked up the arduous pioneer road where men had labored rolling huge boulders, only building several feet a day according to Jack. Detritus such as pickle bottles, empty powder horns, and even pots and pans were dashed here and there on the road. Zelnora found a pair of shepherd's plaid trousers she declared had belonged to Henderson Cox, one of the three murdered men.

Cormack proceeded with unease, crying "Yep!" to his animal, thinking only of Mercy and the Sing Sing conversation Joaquin had postponed until later. Cormack wasn't sure which part of the story would cause Zelnora to loathe him more, but saving her closest friend from Brannagh's clutches would dispose her more kindly toward him, so they had best accomplish that first.

The three Americans rode abreast up the good road. Erskine sniffed casually, as though he smelled a skunk. "Rains'll start soon, this time of year."

“Yes,” agreed Zelnora. “It’s the loveliest time of year in San Francisco, but the rains start around the end of October.”

Cormack shifted nervously. He felt Zelnora looking at him sideways, wondering, *why Sing Sing?* He believed he already knew her most mortifying secret, that Barton Sparks had abandoned her for having the gall to be barren. This had not dissuaded him in his unwavering love that had consistently grown, and he knew he wanted to start the new wine venture with her. With Joaquin, Quartus, Erskine, and, god willing, Mercy, they hardly needed a new child to make a family complete.

But this Sing Sing business...how would he explain it? Dr. Damian Smith had graduated from the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr. Damian Smith had entered Sing Sing, but it was Cormack Bowmaker of mountain fame who had broke from that place with his *compañero*, the Wall Street trader in bogus stocks—though now reformed, to be sure—who had once been known as Levi...Levi Block, was it? Levi Fogel? Cormack frowned, as he could no longer recall Erskine’s former name.

He was merely Aaron Erskine now, and he was saying something, a topic almost as asinine as the weather. “Zelnora...About Sing Sing.”

Ho, boy! Heaps of beaver to Erskine for just diving into it like that!

“Erskine, I don’t think Zelnora wants to—”

“No, that’s fine, Cormack,” Zelnora said evenly. “It sounds very intriguing, and now I’ve deduced that Sing Sing is not a Far Eastern city.”

Erskine cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I’ll go ahead with the others. I just thought you could use my help, explaining to Zelnora the truth.”

“Yes,” Cormack said from the corner of his mouth. “Because selling stocks in companies that don’t exist makes you such a reliable source of information.” He was instantly sorry he’d uttered that, because Erskine was right. If she was to be his wife, Zelnora had

every right to know, and since Brannagh had already spread the Sing Sing story around California, it was best she hear it from them. “Wait, Erskine. Don’t go ahead. It’s no tremendous doings, after all.” Around this bend, he could see they were nearing the end of the pioneer trail. He would have to talk fast. “I was tossed into Sing Sing in ‘35 for assisting a morbidly ill patient to die.”

Erskine was quick to add, “With dignity, and to alleviate the massive amounts of pain he was in.”

Zelnora said nothing, so Cormack continued, “He was suffering, Zel, and begged me to assist him. He couldn’t walk, see or do any of the most basic things for himself. He would have only lasted another month at the outside, so I merely hastened it.”

At last Zelnora said, “Well. It’s still murder, right? What were you charged with?”

Cormack shrugged. “Murder.”

Erskine rapidly inserted, “The patient wrote a letter explaining to his relatives that Cormack just supplied the drugs and was sparing him weeks of agony. But they were so irate, so...”

“Grief-stricken,” said Cormack.

“Yes, grief-stricken, they charged him anyway. You know, Zelnora, when you see an injured bird whose wing is broken? And you know it will never fly again, and will just die, and become carrion, and the agony will be drawn out? Cormack put a merciful end to that suffering. What I did was far worse, bilking innocent investors. Cormack was just being a good, compassionate doctor. So we spent three years buried from the world, marching in lockstep...”

“At Sing Sing, the silent system was the rule,” said Cormack, glad of a chance to stop talking about the deceased patient. “Miniscule cells, three foot by seven. Slave labor. Erskine here cobbled shoes all day.”

“Cormack made wooden barrels and furniture.”

“Then how did you get to know one another, if you couldn’t speak?” Zelnora did not sound appalled by his crime, but Cormack

couldn't be sure. With her pious background, it could very well be she would see this differently, as did the jury at his trial.

Cormack even brought himself to smile a little, remembering. "They allowed us Bibles, and the warden decided it was no crime if I was allowed some Buddhist scriptures to read, since we were encouraged to meditate. So we'd write upon the margins—"

"With shoe polish," said Erskine.

"—and tar, or glue, and planned our escape."

"It was quite simple, really," Erskine said as small droplets of rain began to fall on their hands that held the reins. Joaquin and the two bandits waited at the top of the bluff where the pioneers had ceased building the trail. "We communicated mostly by facial expressions. I had no idea this old hoss had such an odd Scottish way of pronouncing things since I'd rarely, if ever, heard him speak."

Allowing Erskine to ride on ahead a bit, Cormack swiveled his torso to analyze Zelnora's attitude. Her head was held high on a proud neck, and she seemed strangely serene for such anxious circumstances.

"Zel," he said, suddenly acutely aware of his odd Scottish way of pronouncing things. "Hard doings? About Sing Sing, I mean."

She shook her head. "No hard doings. My father was morbidly ill also, and I do wish we would have known a physician such as you. My parents were so angry when my former husband vanished to Van Diemen's Land because with him also vanished the funds to pay for my father's ongoing care...Care that didn't help anything and only prolonged his suffering. When I had no more income, they had no use for me. Since I left on the ship for San Francisco, I've not sent them a dollar...So, no, having a man such as you around would have been mighty handy. I am sure the poor man has finally passed, but I was not allowed there to witness it...Well, it looks like the end of the trail, I wonder where to now?"

They spent the night half froze for warmth. Erskine had not slept in three nights since riding from Sutter's Fort, and rain was falling



steadily, so they agreed to stop. Cormack made a lean-to while their mules and horses snorted with funk as though they'd sensed evil white men sign. Cormack said that someone had crawled like a rattler along a riverbed, and Jack agreed that was the direction Brannagh and his men had struck out. So that was their plan for the morrow, while Zelnora and Erskine huddled in the leaking lean-to and Cormack and Joaquin took turns keeping their eyes skinned on the Sonorans in case they decided to light out and warn someone.

Under his buffalo robe, Erskine drooped against Zelnora's shoulder as she dozed in the solid black night, fat drops of rain plopping on her head and rolling down her arm. She thought about how Cormack and Erskine had spent ten years, wild-looking mountaineers in their animal skins, freezing numb fingers and toes, hunched in the tall wintry peaks of the Rockies. She recalled what Cormack had affirmed when she'd first told him she was barren. "The happiest moments of my life have been in the wilderness of the Far West. I recall with pleasure my solitary camp with no closer, more faithful friend than my rifle...no *compañeros* more sociable than my good horse." Yet he had added, "That way of life has gone under, Zelnora, and hurrah for womanly doings."

She knew she was doing the right thing, sticking with these strong men who had fought the Arapaho and Blackfoot and searching for her friend Mercy. She felt much more at home in this lovingly built nest of sticks than she ever had in Brannagh's damned cabin or in Barton Sparks' damned house with a cherrywood sideboard.

Putting out early the next morning, Cormack shot a deer, but there was no time to skin or cook it, so they traded half of it for smoked salmon to a few Digger Indians on broken-down horses. Joaquin knew a bit of the Digger lingo, having cêched in these mountains with them some two years, and he arranged for a guide. The Diggers said there were some white men a few valleys over holing up in an old emigrant shack, and they had seen a white woman with blazingly red

hair—a *pelirrojo* woman, like Cormack, doing chores around the place.

They set off, switching back and forth up a heavily timbered granite cliff.

“You’ll have to let Brannagh know we didn’t come of our own free will,” Jack whined, and Zelnora saw a look of complicity pass between Joaquin and Cormack. “I don’t want him taking us off the payroll.”

When they had topped the ridge and the Sonorans were out of earshot, she asked Cormack, “What’s the plan, old hoss?”

“Well,” said Cormack, looking steadily ahead with his steely eyes of acumen. He always seemed to see things she was completely blind to. “Them Diggers say there are four men in the cabin, and we’ve only got three, since I don’t want them to see you, and those bandits are no bargaining chip. If we go in a-blazing, they could rightly harm Mercy.”

Zelnora gave voice to what had been her main fear all along. “I’m sure that Brannagh would much rather have possession of me than Mercy. He holds no grudge against Mercy, other than her intention to leave for the Colorado River. I’m certain he’s using her as a bargaining chip.”

“Well,” Cormack said again. “This child isn’t letting him have you.”

There was a heavy silence as they entered the first of the park-like prairies the Diggers had mentioned.

At length, Erskine, who had been near enough to hear their conversation, added, “We can knock the hind-sights off them when it comes to shooting.”

“That’s right!” Cormack said, almost cheerful. “Many are the coups we’ve struck, and when’s the last time anyone saw Brannagh discharge a piece?”

That was true—Brannagh was a newspaperman, a wily businessman, a gambler, and a sporadic hunter at best, but not known

as a marksman. So Zelnora held her tongue until they crested the last ridge, holding their animals steady behind a row of pine. Joaquin raised his glass to his eye to view the shanty the Digger pointed out, but Cormack had the eagle's eye of a hard case and instantly spotted it. She sighed, bathing in the sight of his exquisitely handsome profile, the pointed aristocratic tip of his nose, the full cupid's lips, his strong white throat. She had experienced a lot of terrifying events—the disappearance of Barton Sparks, the disowning by her parents, rounding Cape Horn with hundreds of women and children colonists two years earlier—but nothing quite like the shoot-out that looked to be imminent. Her Colt's was loaded, her pocket pistol was shoved into the waistband of her skirt, but Cormack pointed to a stand of timber where she would wait in hiding with Joaquin. Erskine would wait with them, as it would do no good to let Brannagh know they had a romantic quest at heart, and even more at stake.

The shanty was about fifty yards from their hiding spot. The breakfast cook fire still smoldered with a scent of frijoles and lard.

Joaquin whispered, "My men said there were four of them, but there may be fewer in the cabin, some may be off hunting."

"I'm not betting on that," Cormack answered. "I'll just draw them out, see what's shining in Brannagh's tiny brain."

Not having much doings as an ambusher, Zelnora dared to insert an opinion. "They won't let Mercy go without a written agreement from Origin Pickett—or something more valuable."

Cormack bored his piercing celestine eyes into hers. "'Something more valuable' is staying put right here." To Joaquin and Erskine, he whispered, "If he lets Mercy out of his shot, put a ball into him."

"Shoot sharp's the word." Erskine nodded crisply. "Here's luck."

And Joaquin urged, "*Viva Carlos Quinto*. Death or glory."

Cormack did not look back at Zelnora. She told herself it was because he needed to concentrate on the goal at hand.

With the two bandits in tow at gunpoint, Garcia so hungry and lame he was nearly toppling out of his saddle, Cormack trotted into

the clearing before the shanty. Not a rustle came from the little ramshackle structure, and the trio hiding in the pines could clearly hear Cormack's forceful bellow.

"Brannagh! Get out here and show your devil's hide!"

The trio tensed, their weapons leveled at the ready. Erskine crouched beneath Zelnora using one pine tree as a shield, and Joaquin poked his pistol around the trunk of another. Brannagh could very well start blazing from a corner of the tiny window, and his mark would certainly be Cormack rather than the worthless highwaymen, whom most people wished were dead anyway.

But after a few seconds during which Zelnora could testify she saw a metallic glint in the window, the door opened, and Brannagh stepped out, two men shadowing him.

One of the men was Nutting, the colonist Cormack had saved from choking with the eagle's quill.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Cormack was pleased at first to see Nutting, the man whose life he'd saved. Yet there was a growling cast to Nutting's countenance that did not seem to soften with gratitude when Brannagh sauntered forth grinning impudently, hands on hips over the short-skirted frock coat that had always given the wearer the look of a preacher, although the two pistols at his hips were not the weapons of a missionary.

"Well, well!" Brannagh shouted heartily, as though greeting dinner guests. He even casually clapped his wide black sombrero onto his head, not wanting to pain his eyes with the overcast autumn sun. "Bowmaker, the murderer of poor folk on their deathbeds! Sorry to inform you, nobody is ill around here, so you may as well turn around and go home."

"You know I've come for Miss Mercy Narrimore. It's the meanest kind of action to hold a woman against her will."

"Is that so?" Brannagh bawled. "And so you've brought the two maggots who murdered three of our countrymen? Thanks for the hard work, Bowmaker. You can hand them over to the law now. I'll see that Judge Lynch takes proper care of them." He gestured impudently, as though requesting a whiskey refill.

Cormack shouted back, "These two men will witness that you paid them to ambush the train going over to the Colorado River."

"*Madre de dios!*" cried Three-Fingered Jack. "You promised you wouldn't—"

Perhaps at the news that Brannagh had committed such a heinous act, Mercy herself appeared in the cabin door, shoving aside Nutting and the other thug. As could be expected, she looked about to go

under, coiffure in whipped strands about her haggard face, paltry blouse torn and mussed. Affected by her formerly refulgent face that had now seen such deprivation, Cormack paced toward the cabin several yards. "*Cormack!*" she trilled. "What is this about Brannagh paying those bandits? I had heard he is holding out for Origin Pickett to make an agree—"

Brannagh yanked Mercy's arm so stridently that Cormack winced. Her head wobbled on a whipped neck, and her feet seemed to leave the ground for a fraction of a moment. At the same time, Brannagh's free hand tore the pistol from its holster and leveled the barrel to Mercy's breast. Brain calculating wildly, Cormack knew there was an even chance that one of his sharpshooters with their ever-ready weapons got to Brannagh before he raised Mercy's hair, but there was a chance Brannagh's fourth man was still c  ched inside the shanty. He had to remain calm, yet play what was nearly his last card.

"All right," he drawled. "I'll trade you for Miss Narrimore. Are you open to trade?"

He noted that Brannagh appeared thoughtful for a brief second then took a surly attitude again. "Trade for what? Those two worthless greasers? I'll gladly take the burden of those cussed devils off your hands, but it's not worth handing over Miss Narrimore! Not until I get a signed contract from the Colorado River delivered to me in person by this lady's fianc  , or Elder Pickett himself!"

Cormack had to reach into his saddlebag, and as expected, this caused the three brigands to stiffen and take fighting stances. However, when they saw that Cormack revealed not a weapon but a giant gold nugget, all three weakened a little in awe. Brannagh even lowered his pistol from Mercy's breast, and if Cormack could just distract him a tad more...

Cormack yelled, "This one item. These here gentlemen forgot to mention to you. During another raid, they obtained this thirty-pound gold nugget, twenty-two carats, barely any quartz." He hefted the large rock. It seemed to glow with a life all of its own, lighting up the

park where the men stood coiled up with bunched muscles like jaguars. Cormack saw he had gained Brannagh's acute attention, and he was now confident of success, even when Brannagh shouted, "How do I know that isn't a rock painted a gold color? Throw it over here."

Cormack sneered. "What kind of a blockhead do you take me for?" He waved the boulder at Three-Fingered Jack. "Jack! Is this real gold? Tell the man."

"Why, *si*," Jack stammered. "I was too afraid to have it assayed, but I've laid my eyes on many a—"

"No!"

All weapons were now leveled at a spot near the pine grove. Zelnora raced across the field at full chisel, like a blur in her sudden determination.

*Bear's ass!* Was she cracked? Now Brannagh would have them both, Mercy and Zelnora!

"Take me, Ward!" Zelnora was shouting, arms flailing bonelessly, no weapon in sight. "Cormack, don't give him the gold! Let Mercy go, Ward! Take me!"

Cormack could tickle Brannagh's hump ribs right slick, since he was scarcely looking his direction at the moment. Then one of the other lackeys would raise the hair of one of the women, and so on. Cormack had seen this happen before, like a deck of cards flying through the air, one toppling after the other. There would be no one left standing on the field after such a bloodbath.

And just as Zelnora requested, Brannagh shoved Mercy toward Cormack then wrapped a rapacious arm about Zelnora's torso. Cormack grabbed Mercy, and he knew Brannagh had not forgotten about the giant lump of gold for long. His entire body hummed with a surge of unspent energy, and he gripped Mercy with unnecessary force.

A pistol's report came from the pines. The nameless thug by the shanty door was thrown in his tracks, gone under almost comically

with flung arms and an odd scowl as though scorned in love. Brannagh didn't appear to notice, too enthralled with the lovely package he held in his arms—Cormack's woman, and Brannagh drooled upon her greedily.

\* \* \* \*

"You just killed Holterman!" Erskine hissed at Joaquin.

The alleged Holterman lay limply against the shack, his neck crunched at an impossible angle. Nutting, the dodo whose worthless life Cormack had once saved, turned yellow when he saw his fellow empire-builder fall and attempted to go like sixty back inside the shanty, but Brannagh stayed him by the arm.

Joaquin frowned. "Who cares? Your woman is safe with Cormack now, and that loco Brannagh would never harm Señorita Zelnora."

"How do you know that? I mean, what's his objective here? He wants to be King of California, right?"

Was Erskine waiting for an answer? What a time to banter politely! "Yes, yes, King of California!"

"Okay, then! Sure, Zelnora is pretty and intelligent, but what would he value more? He wants those Colorado River people back, or their money and cattle, at least! And that giant nugget, if he can get it! And leave all of us in the dust missing our topknots."

Joaquin cocked his hammer, one eye closed, the better to aim. "You're right," he breathed, and squeezed off a shot that nearly blew off that thankless Nutting's head.

The gore must have been a sight for poor Miss Zelnora, for she wrenched free from Brannagh. Smart enough not to go flailing across the meadow as an easy target for the businessman, she vanished into the darkness of the shanty. When Brannagh pivoted away from Cormack, the mountain man's Colt's spoke just as a report of what sounded like a small caliber pepperbox lit up the inside of the cabin. In what was probably an unusual occurrence, for a mountaineer



seldom pulled the trigger without sending the bullet to the mark, Brannagh was not rubbed out cold. A splash of crimson appeared on his shoulder before he, too, dove into the shanty.

“Zel shot whoever was inside that cabin,” Erskine noted, while Joaquin made an instant decision to step into the meadow and reveal himself.

“Brannagh!” he bawled, walking toward the cabin. “Trade me for the woman! I heard they are shouting for my head in a glass jar. ‘Bring me the head of Joaquin Valenzuela,’ they are clamoring. Think how praised you will be, bringing in my head! You will become alcalde of San Francisco. I just killed two more men, two more than the previous two hundred. Think how honored you will be to display my body at a necktie party!”

Behind him, Joaquin heard Erskine sprint through the knee-high dried grass, flashing across the meadow to reunite with his beloved—probably not wishing to be on the receiving end of a fresh volley of fire.

Cormack sent Erskine and Mercy galloping off on his mount, presumably with the enormous nugget in the saddlebag, and Joaquin’s two cowardly former comrades took this opportunity to do the same. The muzzle of Brannagh’s rifle poked through the tiny cabin window, but all was silent inside. The two remaining gunmen walked sideways, angling toward each other.

“Joaquin, don’t be a potatohead!” Cormack said. “We can get her back unharmed. You go round the back of the cabin while I distract him with some highfalutin jawing. Go, go!”

Zelnora had shot William Clyde Tuggle! Why, they had come around the Horn together from New York, and she had just shot him through the throat! No one had expected her to have a weapon, as she had concealed her little pocket pistol so well. Zelnora knew that Tuggle, as a henchman for Brannagh, would have done the same to her given a chance.

Brannagh ducked inside the cabin. He didn't appear to give a rat's ass about Tuggle, but he batted her pistol from her grip before grabbing Tuggle's rifle out of his crow-like fingers and scrabbling to the small window. The little pistol went sashaying harmlessly underneath, of all things, the disgusting chamber pot they had apparently provided Mercy with.

"You stay put, you heartless slut!" he yelled at her, now leveling two weapons out the front of the shanty. "I've had enough trouble out of you. You've been nothing but trouble since I agreed to let you onto that ship in the first place! Now I'm stuck with you, and I have no use for you. Origin Pickett doesn't care about some divorced slut—it's Mercy Narrimore they gave a hang about. Listen here. You're gonna walk to that door nice and easy and tell that fur-wearing brute that we're staying put here, I'm gonna be humping you every hour on the hour until he charges over those mountains and brings those pioneers back."

That was to be expected, and Zelnora said, "All right. That's fine, Ward. I'm certain they're already on their way, having heard that you took Mercy prisoner in the first place. Bowmaker can ride fast, and I'm certain he can catch them. What's all that shouting?"

Out front, Joaquin yammered away, shouting at the cabin. "Trade me for the woman!" he was saying.

*Oh, no! Not that!*

"Heh," cackled Brannagh. "How noble of that murderous bandit. I'll just pick him off from here, then I can bring in his head and be a hero. How does that sound, Sister Sparks?"

A bright flash and puff of smoke cracked from Brannagh's rifle, and Zelnora crawled to the door, able to see under the sulphurous, gray smoke cloud. Against the warmth of the tawny autumn field, Cormack had raced to Joaquin's side, propping up the limp torso to check his wound, then sending Brannagh the most lethal and hateful look she'd ever seen from those crystalline eyes. His nostrils only

flared like that when acutely excited, but she certainly did not expect his next step.

Rising slowly with hands above his head to display his revolver—the other hand held the giant nugget, which had been hidden in the grass!—Cormack shouted, “All right, Brannagh. You win, you’ve got the head of Joaquin Valenzuela. I just ask one thing. Trade me for Zelnora. I can tell you where I câched all my other gold. Think about it. Valenzuela’s head. A lump of solid gold big enough to build your entire empire. And my whole fortune of gold. I’ll even deed you that San Francisco lot. Just let Zelnora go. She’s useless to you. Just think. You’ll be a hero for bringing in Valenzuela’s head, and a rich hero to boot.”

Brannagh finally spoke, still not showing even the tip of his snout around the edge of the window. “Is Miss Sparks really worth all that, Bowmaker?”

Cormack shrugged lightly, making what she knew to be an attempt at a careless face. “You’re a businessman, Brannagh. You evaluate the deal. Miss Sparks for all of that. It should be obvious which the better deal is.”

Finally, Zelnora cried out. “No, Cormack, don’t. I’ll be fine here, Brannagh won’t hurt me, you just go get those pioneers.”

Evenly, as though purchasing eggs or a jar of pickles, Cormack grinned a bit and said, “You let me be the judge of that, Miss.”

“Shut up!” Brannagh hissed at her. He yelled out the window now, “All right. Just drop your piece before you come forward, and we got a deal.” He looked at Zelnora. “Did he drop it? Aw, hell’s bells, why should I trust you?”

“He dropped it,” she told Brannagh.

Cormack slowly allowed the revolver to slither from his fingers, and it fell into the grass with a dull thud. With hands held high, Cormack started cautiously walking toward the cabin. Only then did Brannagh dare to peek through the window, and saw that Zelnora told

the truth. Now he grabbed her, yanking her to her feet in the doorway, and pressed the pistol muzzle to her rib cage.

“All right, Bowmaker,” Brannagh growled. “Toss that nugget over here, just right through this door. Throw it at my head, and your girl’s a goner.”

She must have been so fatigued and nearly prostrate with terror, but it suddenly struck Zelnora as humorous—“a goner.” As though he were a sheriff confronting—well, confronting a terribly deadly outlaw, which he was. Yet Cormack could toss the nugget, and Brannagh could still hold her captive. She had absolutely cracked from the events of the past few days!

Without taking his eyes from Brannagh, Cormack rolled the nugget as though playing tenpins, and it zigzagged past Zelnora’s feet. Brannagh stepped forward with his prisoner, and she squirmed to test the extent of his slimy betrayal. Would he let her go? He was definitely distracted by the hunk of ore.

“Let her go,” Cormack suggested mildly, one eyebrow arched, stepping closer yet.

She felt Brannagh’s hesitation. He held all the cards, after all. He was the only one who had a pistol.

He shoved her so suddenly she stumbled forward a bit. Cormack did not catch her, and when she twirled around, she saw why. In a flash, everything happened at once. Cormack turned his back to Brannagh and stomped on the top of Brannagh’s boot at the same time he jammed a powerful elbow into the missionary’s Adam’s apple with an audible crack of neck bones. A nauseating oomph of air was expelled from the windpipe as Cormack wrenched the pistol from his hand and Zelnora swept down to grab the nugget. Cormack leaped back to allow the businessman to fall facedown in the grass, sombrero flying, and with a rage Zelnora had not known was present in her gut, she smashed the back of the skull with the huge rock.

She drew back and breathed, prepared to land another blow, but Cormack stayed her hand. His calm, steady fingers were reassuring

against her shaking arm—that nugget was suddenly unbelievably heavy—and they both stared unblinking as Cormack stuck out a boot and flipped Brannagh over. Blood trickled from his gaping mouth. He breathed no more.

Zelnora handed Cormack the nugget. Her arm was as weak and useless as a feather. “We have his blood on our fortune,” she nearly sobbed with relief.

“Literally.”

Cormack’s chuckle made her feel better. “Are you sure he’s dead?”

“Sure.” Cormack’s tone was light, as though he’d just wrung a squirrel’s neck with his bare hands. “Such a heap of fat meat won’t shine any longer.”

At last, Zelnora relaxed enough to exhale, and buried her face against Cormack’s chest. “But...Joaquin!”

Why was he leading her back to Joaquin’s body? Enough dead meat for one day! “Not to worry, my mountain flower.”

There was a weak, wavering voice coming from the grass. “Has he gone under?”

*Joaquin!*

Zelnora found the strength to run the next few steps. Joaquin sat up in the grass, peeling his shirt away from a shoulder wound that looked nearly identical to the one Zelnora had incurred a few weeks back—so she would know how to nurse it. She fell to her knees as Cormack assured Joaquin, “He went under, all right. No worries.”

“Cormack, let’s get this ball out of his shoulder. Joaquin! I thought you were dead!”

Joaquin grinned, his almond-shaped eyes glinting with amusement. “I was nigh giving you hell,” he said, taking on Cormack’s manner of speaking. “My pistol soared about ten yards off, so I thought it best to play dead while I crawled for it. But I see I didn’t need to.” He looked up at Cormack with open adoration,

although Cormack was unsheathing his formidable bowie knife, about to cut into his flesh.

“I’ll see if there’s fresh water in that awful cabin,” Zelnora offered.

When she stood, she saw Erskine and Mercy at the end of the timberline, trotting along on Cormack’s horse. Zelnora waved, and they waved back madly.

## Epilogue

*Sonoma, California*  
*August 1849*

“This day shines any way you fix it.” Cormack raised his champagne glass—a proper crystal one, at that—and clinked it against the uplifted glasses of Joaquin and Erskine. “Here’s luck!” he declared, the usual mountaineer’s pledge.

They were dressing in their best clothes in Cormack’s chambers. They needed to reckon with odd habiliments they were unaccustomed to: red silk sashes knotted at the hip, rust-colored leggings, stiff gold-trimmed velvet jackets. Joaquin claimed the sash should be knotted at the small of the back, but Erskine balked at this and pulled the ends of his out like a peacock’s tail feathers. General Vallejo had offered his tailor’s services, and he himself had even been in the chambers earlier to advise on waistcoats with buttons stamped with Mexican eagles. Cormack felt a deal too “foofaraw,” like a sappy picture, but it was for a thoroughly good cause—and well worth it, to laugh at how stiff and formal Erskine looked—and now Joaquin even became maudlin with the spirit of things, toasting:

*Batallas, tempestades, amoríos,*  
*por mar y tierra, lances, descripciones*  
*de campos y ciudades, desafíos*  
*y el desastre y furor de las pasiones,*  
*goces, dichas, aciertos, desvaríos,*  
*con algunas morales reflexiones*

*acerca de la vida y de la muerte,  
de mi propia cosecha, que es mi fuerte.*

Which, as far as Cormack could make out, went something like:

*Battles, tempests, love affairs,  
by sea and land, deeds, descriptions  
of countryside and cities, challenges  
and the disaster and furor of passions,  
enjoyments, happiness, successes, deliriums,  
with some moral reflections  
about life and death,  
of my own harvest, that is my strength.*

“‘Deliriums’?” Cormack questioned. He shrugged. “I guess that could mean a happy sort of delirium.”

“A rebellious and romantic poet from Spain wrote that,” Joaquin explained.

Erskine beamed widely from ear to ear. “That just about describes all of us. Rebellious and romantic! And tomorrow, for a fortnight at least, I’ll have my own palatial lodge in San Francisco with a wondrous view of the field of topmasts choking that pacific bay!”

Erskine referred to the hundreds of ships abandoned by frenzied gold-seekers. The windows of the front room in Cormack’s new house displayed a rowdy theater of comings and goings as longshoremen tossed unsalable items overboard before abandoning the town for the gold mines. As property was already at a premium, a new landfill was being created in the tidal flats, building lots created out of tossed cast-iron stoves, chamber pots, nail kegs, and sacks of flour. Fact, a sign near Casa Bowmaker declared of the thigh-deep mud, “This street is impassable, not even jackassable.” The place was a morass of reeking humanity, but Cormack’s manor shined in the muddiest kind of crowd.



Joaquin pointed at Erskine with a *cigarito* he kept clenched between his teeth, squinting against the smoke that drifted into his eyes. "At least this time, you'll have a roof over your head. And it's not the rainy season."

Holding his champagne aloft, Erskine agreed, "*Viva Carlos Quinto!*"

The other two men grinned like donkeys at Erskine's favorite new motto, but choked in mid-gulp when there came a pounding of bare feet down the adobe corridor outside Cormack's bedchamber.

"Señor Bowmaker!" Someone beat on the heavy oak door.

Cormack grimaced at the ticklish champagne rising in his nostrils, and the fact that he'd expressly instructed all of the hacienda's servants to approach his rooms with a quiet demeanor, if at all.

"Cormack! It's an emergency of the highest order!"

Joaquin raised one silken, handsome brow. "Shall I let him in?"

Cormack shrugged, adjusting his cravat in the gilt-framed looking glass. This hacienda had been loaned to him by General Vallejo until his winemaking business showed a profit, which it looked to do, given the hundreds of orders Erskine and Joaquin had collected from enthusiasts hard up for decent bug juice—old Californio families as well as the rush of thirsty *norteamericanos*. Of course, they had to make and age the wine first. And sometimes Cormack forgot whether he was supposed to be referring to Joaquin as "Antonio Carillo," depending on whether their new customer was a pickled pioneer Joaquin's band had robbed before.

Speaking of bug juice, Quartus Stringfellow burst into the cool adobe room with outstretched talon hands and eyes behind his thick spectacles bulging like a housefly. Oddly, his fancy embroidered *calzoneras* were rolled up to his knees, revealing bare feet stained purple-black up his white calves. He even tracked purple footprints onto the adobe tiles.

"The priest is here!" he shrieked. "The priest!"

“Quartus!” cried Cormack. “You’re ruining your best *calzoneras*!”

“I know!” Quartus replied, clutching the air with his talons. “My *calzoneras*! The priest!”

Erskine clapped a brotherly hand on his shoulder. “All right. Calm down, Quartus. So he just got here a little early. Did Captain Sutter come with him?”

“Yes! I was finishing stamping the grapes for the wedding wine, and I thought I had enough time, but bear’s ass, that—that—man of amateness and hoarding came too soon with the priest, and—”

“All right, Quartus,” Cormack said mildly. “Erskine, will you go greet Sutter and the padre?” As Erskine skedaddled from the room, Cormack attempted to explain. “Quartus. You can’t just stamp on the grapes one minute and have wine the next. It takes awhile to set.”

“Besides,” Joaquin pointed with his *cigarito*, “we bought that new mechanical winepress. You don’t need to stamp anymore.”

Quartus looked about to sob. “But I did it the other week.”

Cormack said soothingly, “Yes. Those were white grapes. They don’t take nearly as long to mature. Why don’t you go and get some of the white wine from the cave?”

Cheered at having a new juice errand to attend to, Quartus meandered off. The two men stood side by side adjusting their finery in the looking glass. Joaquin looked especially exotic with the new pointed beard he had recently grown, perhaps to throw potential customers off the track of his notorious past. One of the several other Joaquin bandits had been decapitated by militia near San José a few months back, and Joaquin Valenzuela was perfectly willing to let people think that had been him. Since Three-Fingered Jack and Feliz had been with this newfangled Joaquin at the San José necktie party and both sent immediately to Judge Lynch & Company’s Fast Line, most people believed Joaquin Valenzuela had gone under. The militia had exhibited the counterfeit Joaquin’s pickled head in a jar in San Francisco, and Joaquin, Cormack, and Zelnora had gone to visit it.

Fingering his cravat, Joaquin said, "Does Quartus really think Sutter is a man of 'amativeness and hoarding'? He's lost nearly his entire fortune since all his workers ran off, and gold squatters took over his land."

Cormack grinned. "It's hard to tell what he really believes. It's that phrenology business. Remember when he said your head told him of your 'blandness' and 'stability'?" Turning his friend to face him, Cormack caressed the smooth side of his face. It was always sheer pleasure just touching the velvety skin. "Maybe Quartus can see the future. You've certainly improved your stability, becoming my business partner."

Joaquin reached up, rubbing his thumb against Cormack's lower lip. "And 'hope for the future,' don't forget Quartus' premonition about that. Before I met you and Zelnora, I was just a hopeless bastard. Now, my daughter is healthy, and I don't have to rob anyone."

Although it might muss his shirtfront, Cormack couldn't resist kissing the former bandit. Although these days he preferred to think of him as a former monte dealer.

\* \* \* \*

Zelnora swept into her bedchamber, feeling resplendent in her turquoise satin gown. When she saw the two men holding each other gently and kissing each other with softly licking tongues, she closed the door behind her and waited. It was always pleasant to view a display of their affection. Although not an appropriate moment to become hot as monkeys, what with the padre and *gente de razón* of Sonoma waiting for them, Zelnora breathed heavily as Joaquin threaded his ringed fingers through Cormack's *pelirrojo* locks, fingering the beautifully strong nape of his neck.

This was a shining day, as Cormack would say. Tonight, Vallejo had arranged a plush banquet, though tomorrow they would have to

get back to the business of grape-growing. Zelnora could not resist joining her fingers with Joaquin's in stroking the heated back of Cormack's neck, rising on her toes to kiss him there.

"Come," she whispered as the men broke apart. "We have to get out to the chapel."

Cormack smiled down at her, tickling her under the chin. "You're ravishing, my mountain flower. Today is almost like last June at our wedding."

Smiling, Zelnora tugged Cormack toward the door. "Except our wedding took place in San Francisco before we put the roof on our house."

"Yes," Cormack agreed. "There's that difference. Today Erskine and Mercy have a roof over their wedding."

Buckling a sword around his waist, Joaquin said, "That was the first time I've ever seen it rain in California in June."

Cormack looked pensively up at the wood-beamed ceiling. "At least we sanded the water stains off the floorboards in time for the Erskines' honeymoon."

In their new San Francisco house, Joaquin had taken over the enormous upstairs bedroom next to theirs. As Zelnora did all of their housekeeping, there was no one to remark upon the connecting door they had built between the rooms. And Joaquin being Joaquin, even if known as Antonio Carillo, no one would have remarked upon it anyway, for fear of having their topknot raised. He had retained much of the wild ferocity of his outlaw days. Even when doing something as innocent as selling wine, through his persuasive skills he perhaps gained more customers than a mild fellow like Erskine did.

But the settlements had domesticated all of them in a way that suited them. Because outlying ranchos were few and far between, the men still traveled a lot, discussing wine with settlers, but when at home in San Francisco, they were the picture of civilized contentment. Thanks to the rough and tumble atmosphere of the booming town, all three were accepted into society. In the melee and

muddy confusion of such a frontier, many social mores were set aside or ignored completely. True, the wives of officials were constantly introducing potential fiancées to Joaquin, but he merely smiled dazzlingly and said, “My whole life is my daughter, and my wine.” And then managed to procure yet another large wine order.

The men allowed Zelnora to lead them into the corridor.

Joaquin said, “I just noticed last week. Because of the rain, the door to the basement got warped and won’t close.”

Cormack shrugged as he strode down the corridor. The sun through the olive tree leaves left happy, dappled shadows on his serene face. “I have no excuse for that. Just say the carpenter did it.”

Zelnora walked between the two regal men, lightly holding each of their forearms. The chapel stood at the other end of the garden, where Indian servants were setting up long banquet tables.

Zelnora paused briefly, horrified. “Oh, dear. Why are Quartus’ feet purple?”

Why did Cormack grin at this? He should have been as mortified as her. And Joaquin seemed to laugh under his breath, too. Cormack steered her on to the chapel. “Have no worries, my lovely.”

“But I want this day to be perfect for Mercy!”

“It will, it will...”

“But...he looks like a wild sow that waded through a swamp.”

Cormack patted her hand. “This is a shining day, my flower. And you sure do shine in the biggest kind of crowd.”

Zelnora tilted her head thoughtfully. “Maybe life is just a dream, and we wake up when we die.”

## THE END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen knew she wanted to be a writer when she was 3. She sat on her bed gazing at her book, *The Bee Man of Orn*, thinking “What power there is in creating imaginary worlds! The reader is automatically transported into a reality that you created. She hears your characters talking, sees the vistas you painted with words.” Then she realized she had better learn to read.

When Karen was 12, she had a dream of being in a village on the coast of Kenya, so at 23 she bought a one-way plane ticket to Nairobi to find the village. She climbed the Mountains of the Moon in Rwanda to see mountain gorillas, hitchhiked overland through Egypt, Uganda, Zaire, and Zambia, lived with the Turkana in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya, went down the Congo on a decrepit steamer, and sailed up the Nile on a leaky dhow.

Her first three novels were historical fiction involving pre-colonial African explorers. Since she was always either accused or praised (depending how you look at it) for writing overly steamy sex scenes, erotic romance was the natural next step. She is currently writing about the rough and tumble life of the California gold rush, and lives in Northern California with her Newfoundland dog.



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