

Siren Publishing

Ménage Amour



EITHER ORE

Karen Mercury

Going for the Gold 2

Going for the Gold 2

Either Ore

They would form no brotherhood of virtue until driven to it by a brotherhood of vice.

1848 San Francisco. Lola Moreno has found a home at last, saved from destitution by businessman Gage Lassen. Gage is a withdrawn bachelor, and the most intimate subject he's discussed with Lola is his preference in tea. Adventurer Harrison Bancroft arrives, fresh from years on the Plains living with Indians. Gage can only admit affection for another man, and things heat up when Harrison paints his portrait.

Harrison and Lola can find no way to allow Gage to participate in their love until Harrison unlocks the pain from Gage's past, allowing him to emerge from his prison of cold restraint.

Corrupt enforcer Fowler threatens the trio with seeming knowledge of their private vices, harassing Harrison with his unwanted attentions, and a night of riots forces them to make a stand.

Three lovers, one destiny.

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

Length: 69,178 words

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EITHER ORE

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DEDICATION

For PKN

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
– Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

EITHER ORE

Going for the Gold 2

KAREN MERCURY

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*“The California fever is not likely to take off....There is neither
romance nor glory in digging for gold.”*

–Rutherford B. Hayes

Chapter One

November, 1848

San Francisco

“Lola. I need to see a menu for tonight’s dinner at once.”

Gage Lassen stood imperiously in the doorway of the printing office. Tall, commanding, surly as always. He looked down his beautifully formed aquiline nose at her as though he smelled a decomposing feral cat. “I instructed you last night. Why wasn’t there a menu on my desk this morning?”

Lola Moreno’s blackened fingers automatically moved away from the cool metal letters of the newspaper type she was placing. She was inserting two of the letter *U* instead of a *W*, as *W* was not used on their Spanish typesetting machine, for an article about “Celestials from the Flouuery Kingdom.” These argonauts from Hong Kong had been arriving in increasing numbers, mostly to labor in the gold mines, but some had stayed in their town, giving rise to passionate discussion.

“I have the menu written, Mr. Lassen,” Lola responded levelly, “but it’s here in my pocket, and I’m afraid my hands are a bit inky. Oxtail soup, venison with port wine sauce, rum omelettes.”

Lassen took a step into the acrid air of the *Alta California* newspaper office, then obviously thought twice about reaching into the pocket of his housemaid’s smudged apron. The editor Cleveland Wallingford leaped eagerly to their assistance, having no compunction about taking the menu from Lola’s apron and handing it to Lassen with a flourish and bow. In an office where hands were ink-stained more often than not, Lola and Cleveland were often forced to retrieve items from places even more intimate.

Scanning the menu, Lassen shot Lola a disenchanted look. His disapproval didn’t bother her anymore, as he disapproved of almost everything she did. It didn’t seem to make any difference how much effort she put into a task—he frowned upon everything she did, *carte blanche*. She thought him a strangely loathsome human being, strangely because he was admired throughout the town, and had a very hearty and friendly face for everyone other than her. Lola had abandoned the effort to discover why he hated her, although she had been given a few clues lately.

He managed to simultaneously frown at the menu as he stuffed it into his waistcoat pocket while addressing Cleveland in a brotherly manner. “The Council is meeting tonight for the first time since May, now that we have enough men to meet, that is. The main topic will be the increasingly high cost of labor. Henry Powell, myself, and others are attempting to build sidewalks right outside the office here and a few blocks down to Broadway Wharf. We intend to sink those hundreds of boxes of Virginia tobacco lying around down there with no buyers, to help grade the streets. It’s a scandal what these interlopers are attempting to charge for an honest day’s work. They’re demanding more than a private at Monterey makes in a year just to build some wooden forms.”

“Yes, yes!” Cleveland agreed earnestly. “I’m working on an article on just that subject. The few men who haven’t gone to the diggings are just lying about, roaming the streets in gangs. I’m sure you’ve seen them in your City Hotel, too lazy to even try their hand at the mines.”

Lassen pointed at the teenaged editor. “Indeed I have! I can hardly give those idlers and brawlers the boot, since they make up most of my tenancy. They’ve taken over that rancid saloon across the street—”

“The Shades!” Lola inserted.

Lassen’s enthusiasm for his topic abruptly waned. After sniffing down his nose at his housemaid, his face brightened again as he addressed Cleveland. “I need some pilings driven for the new wharf, but where am I to find a hardy son of the West? Sherman down at Monterey has barely enough soldiers left to man a wheelbarrow, much less send any men up here to assist.”

Cleveland crossed his arms before his chest and nodded angrily. “This gold fever, it’s a violence that threatens to dispopulate Oregon. Every ship that arrives instantly disgorges all able-bodied men directly to the Sierra. Well, I know your stance on the graveyard of masts clogging our harbor.”

“Indeed, that’s why my next project is a new wharf, a central wharf grander than Broadway, if you care to make mention of that in your paper. That way we can land goods directly onto shore instead of leaving these rotting hulks, nothing more than floating lodgings and stores. But labor be damned! Where am I to find a hale soul who isn’t corned on *aguardiente* and can lift a hammer?”

“If it’s any consolation,” said Cleveland, “men have already started returning from the mines for the winter. The rains have been worse than usual, so many are wintering over here.”

Lola had heard these grievances many a time while serving Lassen tea or the aforementioned odious *aguardiente*, but in her capacity as housemaid, of course, she wasn’t allowed to insert a peep of an opinion. At the moment, as a newspaperman, she had the gall to

speak. "Returning from the mines, yes, and weak as kittens from the horrifying work. Standing knee-deep in icy water, head bared to the blazing sun, it's been the ruination of more than one idealistic diamond-brooched gentleman from the East. Bilious fever has claimed one man out of four, and they are daily dying."

Again, her remark put a stop to all conversation. Cleveland had hired her after suspending his newspaper last June, when all of his reporters had run off after Cleveland himself had inspected the mines and proclaimed them to be "incredible reports invented by irresponsible scribblers." With Lola's help, he was able to put out an edition every two weeks. But Cleveland had not lost sight that Lola's first allegiance was to Gage Lassen, Treasurer of San Francisco. Now, Cleveland merely acknowledged her remark.

"Yes, Lassen, I can't say as they'll be much help to you. Busted flat and strapped after wasting their meager dust on whiskey, but hardly in any physical condition to drive pilings."

Thoughtfully, with hand on chin, Lassen addressed only Cleveland. "You're right, son."

"Son," *that's humorous*. Lola sighed and grabbed an E key from the type box. Well, she supposed Lassen could be Cleve's father. She'd seen correspondence to the effect that Lassen had been born in 1810. But she knew he only called Cleve "son" to remind the editor of his own highfalutin status.

"Well, keep your eyes skinned," Lassen now said by way of departure. "Any able-bodied man willing to work for less than a private's annual pay, send him my way."

Cleve saluted mawkishly. "Aye-aye!"

And Lassen strode down the stairs of the crumbling grist mill where they had their offices, tailcoats sashaying in a manner that the Lola Moreno of a hundred lives ago would have found enticing.

Lassen was allegedly a very handsome man, but his acerbic attitude made Lola blind to this ostensible fact, and it annoyed her when anyone would mention his gentle blue eyes, richly waving

chocolate hair, or as one councilman's wife would have it, his "perfectly erect form." *Bear's ass, perfectly erect*, Lola had thought, eavesdropping upon this worthy's assessment of her master. *You obviously aren't familiar with "perfectly erect."* The damning aspect to their relationship was that Gage Lassen was so beloved by every citizen, worshipped and adored in the extreme for his deeds, such as establishing the first public school on land that he'd donated. It used to give her fits of apoplexy that he treated everyone else with such high class and manners, yet sought only her out for disdain.

How Lola wanted to be liked by everybody! The whole of her existence until landing in San Francisco had revolved around being liked. "Lola Moreno, the Spanish Dancer" had been lauded in the courts of Europe. Now she sat on a stool, fingers permanently stained, feet muddy to her ankles, bereft of her Cuban cigars.

She said brightly to Cleve, "Have you heard the story about a bandit in Coloma tying together the pigtails of six Celestial miners before cutting their throats? Maybe we should add that to this article before I print it."

"I heard that, too," Cleve said, and Lola twitched to realize he'd been standing behind her ever since Lassen had left. "From Jake Muggins at The Shades, so I doubt it's reliable. Lola," he said, on an entirely different tack, "I'm very sorry Mr. Lassen treats you so deplorably. I can't say as I understand it. I vow to you, once this town realizes the prosperity that it's meant to have, I'll employ you fully as a reporter so you can leave his employ. I'll hire someone else to set type and print the papers and have someone other than Ollie distribute them. We're in the forefront of a modern nation!" He rattled a sample of their new masthead, which proclaimed the *Alta California* the "Mother of Newspapers."

Swiveling on her stool, Lola looked up at the idealistic young man who beamed at her with the harmony and good feeling of his pioneering spirit. "That is very thoughtful of you, Cleve. I do see

nothing but progress for this town and paper, although at the moment we're surrounded by ruffians, loafers, and the dying."

The downstairs door to the mill boomed hollowly once more, and the newspapermen heard heavy, clownish feet ascending the inner staircase, muted with shit and hay from the mule that turned the grindstone below.

"Cleve! Lola!" As though he'd been waiting in the wings for his cue, Oliver Denny burst into the printing office. Pivoting about, wild-eyed, with hands outstretched into claws, Ollie even resembled an actor in an Ethiopian serenade. Embalmed in his striped waistcoat and his outsized Mexican sombrero, he looked as though he should be strumming a banjo. He took a few steps to three corners of the room before he discovered them, immobile where they normally did their work. Lola and Cleve sighed simultaneously. Ollie worked for the *Alta California* in a nominal capacity and also clerked for Lassen in some vague manner. But in general, his impression was that of a gadabout.

"Cleve! Lola!" Ollie proclaimed again, as though surprised to discover them in their own offices. "The *Layla Wolf* has just entered the harbor!"

Lola rose from her stool. "With the company of Stevenson's Regiment men? They're not expected for another two weeks."

Ollie pointed at her with a bony finger. "That's the one! A whole platoon, or brigade, or whatever they call it, of lusty far-seeing travelers freshly mustered out of that noble army. New York Volunteers raw from fighting the good cause against the Mexicans, just rounded the Cape!"

Lola rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Ollie. They didn't even make it to the Far West in time to fight any Mexicans."

Cleve added, "And they only came from Los Angeles."

Ollie waved a dismissive hand at them. "What difference does it make? They're raw from fighting *something*! We should go at railroad speed to the embarcadero before all of those employment

agents spirit them away. And,” he added to an invisible bystander, “to see if they’re carrying any valuable cargo. Like pickaxes and shovels, crates of boots, casks of brandy. Or striped silk.”

“Or paper and ink,” Cleve mused.

A thought occurred to Lola. “Or Cuban cigars.”

She jumped instantly into action, wiping her hands carelessly on a rag, yanking her stockings up over her bare knees and whipping her woven rebozo scarf over her head. *Men with tales to tell!* Always glad for any excuse to roam about interviewing newcomers, she grabbed her notebook and was the last to stumble down the rickety stairs, nearly bowling over the other two men in her zeal as they bodily shoved aside the recalcitrant mule.

Chapter Two

Harrison Bancroft eagerly leaned over the bulwark of the boat that brought him and his meager possessions to the new town.

He was upon the age of gold! California's coast was hot with the stories of the gold-seekers who had already made their fortunes from the streams and arroyos of the Sierra Nevada. Gentlemen and the Indian working side by side as though rocked in the same cradle, Harrison had read in a newspaper. The blacksmith had dropped his hammer, the carpenter his plane, and the farmer his sickle in this fervor of gold, some making three hundred dollars a day.

Sam Fowler asked him, "Bancroft. Are you heading out prospecting first, or are you joining us in a bit of revelry?"

Harrison loathed Fowler, who styled himself a Lieutenant of Company E, due to several odd incidents that had Harrison questioning his entire perspective on many keys of life he had imagined previously were fact. Fowler was a miserable critter with a face like a sprouted potato, and Harrison doubted very much he'd go capering with him, but as the shoreline hove into focus, he became less certain about this town. The little scow maneuvered between fingers of freezing fog through a forest of masts, abandoned ships where people dumped buckets of slop into the bay. Business seemed to be conducted from these hulks, folks crawling in and out of smelly cabins, plucking chickens, playing cards. It was a veritable Venice here, built from pine, not marble. Harrison spit out a mouthful of rain and wiped his eyes. On the dilapidated wharf, men stood on boxes of apparently discarded wares—kegs of nails, casks of tobacco, even a cast-iron stove and what looked like a chamber pot. Why were these

goods crowding the only wharf in town? And why was everyone waving so frantically at their boat?

“What do they want?” Harrison asked his fellow soldiers. “Is our boat leaking?”

Fowler said, “Maybe they’re looking for able men to join them at their fancy gold diggings.”

The frantic townsmen even reached out hands to haul them onto the wharf. This was indeed odd, and Harrison was crushed between his uniformed brethren and smelly men who babbled in a mixture of lingos, mostly the French, Spanish, and German he’d grown accustomed to in his forays across the Great Plains. Tours of the Yellow Stone and Missouri that now seemed leisurely and artistic, genteel compared to this reeking press of uncivilized outpost humanity.

“What is it you fellows want?” Harrison pitched into a deranged man, bodily removing the fellow’s fingers from the breast of his blue coat.

“Gold mines?” Fowler enquired of each San Franciscan, as though they were daft.

“A plot needs surveying, *jah!*”

“I need a new couch made!”

“I need three houses built. Are any of you men a mason?”

“I give top dollar!”

The men of Stevenson’s Regiment looked quizzically at each other. Labor? Houses? A *couch*?

Fowler shoved one of the agents in the chest. “I ain’t here to build a god-blamed tenpin alley!” he roared and grabbed a few Regiment men to bully his way through the crowd.

Harrison followed in their wake, head hunched down into his collar, the rain now pouring off the brim of his French army cap. San Francisco appeared to be a town of canvas tents and wooden shanties built on sand hills, the streets of ankle-deep mud lined with crates of tinned oysters and tobacco bales. Harrison noted the miners he’d been

expecting, men with shovels and pickaxes slung over their shoulders, but the few who weren't snoozing in the sludge with mouths open to the rain were huddled under tiny makeshift tents pouring gold dust from bird quills, gambling it away at three-card monte. Well, maybe this was the winter season when men returned from the mines. Or maybe these were the dispirited prospectors who weren't made for the hard life, like the ruined fur trappers he'd seen lounging about the forts of the Plains.

Then he heard...a banjo? The cheerful twanging floated above the babble of different lingos, men begging for laborers, and one particularly strident auction for some sacks of potatoes, a desirable commodity, Harrison supposed, unlike all the other goods that blocked their way. A clear, high voice sang out:

*I came from Alabama with a banjo on my knee
I'm going to Louisiana, my true love for to see.
It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry
The sun so hot I froze to death, Susanna don't you cry.*

"Heh!" Fowler poked Harrison in the ribs. "This feller seems to know where to find a good shindig."

The company stopped as one unit, Indian file to make their way in the aisle of cabbage leaves, hay bales, and fish bones. The banjo player seemed a normal citizen with his merry pointed face and widow's peak sheltered by the umbrella another man held over his head. His striped waistcoat pointed him out as a restaurateur of some sort, and he stopped his jovial singing to call to them.

"Say, boys! You coming from Los Angeleez?"

Fowler chortled, and shouted back, "I know nothing!"

This response set the rest of the group to howling with brotherly laughter while Harrison sighed and looked to the heavens. They enjoyed styling themselves members of the "Know-Nothing" political party, but the only correlation Harrison could see was that they

despised all “immigrants.” Since the banjo player looked native enough, Fowler yelled, “Where can we go on a bust around here?”

The banjo fellow came forward then, out from under the umbrella so that the rain drenched his meager hair, and cried, “The Shades! It’s an excellent establishment over on Kearny—”

“No, the City Hotel! The Shades is a seedy den of vice!” the umbrella-holding chap interrupted, also coming forward and leaving their third companion to soak her—*her?*—head in the downpour.

As the first good-looking gal Harrison had said turkey to since leaving the Port of Los Angeles, he took a few steps toward her while the other men crowded in a knot in back-slapping jocosity, discussing the virtues of the City Hotel’s whiskey. The woman turned her face mildly up to view Harrison, too, and he fell like a thousand bricks.

Land’s sake. She was a caution with her gleaming curls the color of a spring bison dripping down the front of the woven scarf she clutched about her torso. Her small face peeked out from under the rebozo head scarf that tented over her forehead, sending a faucet of water into the crevice between her breasts. They jiggled as she shivered there, and Harrison wanted to remove his army coat and place it over her shoulders. But he didn’t know her, and his coat was one of the few items the army had left to him.

How brutish of her companions to leave her standing there! Her arrowhead-shaped garnet eyes peered levelly at him, and the tip of her tongue darted out and touched her lower lip briefly, instantly causing his prick to engorge down his inner thigh. That was mortifying enough, and luckily his Regiment coat covered any unseemly reaction at seeing her lick her lip. Surely she must be the wife of one of the San Franciscans, far too genteel to be standing bedraggled in such a rainstorm, but it would be untoward if he ripped the umbrella from that lout’s hand and held it over her head. Why, if this was his woman, he’d protect her till it rained tadpoles and pennywinkles!

“Ma’am,” he said, touching the brim of his cap, but suddenly his boots were sucked out of the mud as someone latched on to his arm,

and he was borne along with the buoyant crowd toward, he presumed, the City Hotel. Their new pals Ollie and Cleveland sloshed right alongside them, impossibly leaving the genteel woman standing bareheaded in the mud, horse shit, and eggshells!

Harrison Bancroft looked back to where she still stood, lightly as though on the balls of her slippered feet, craning to watch the company stomp inland toward a marshy footbridge, hefting their knapsacks. How forlorn her hands looked, blackened with soot. A finger of fog curled around her legs, and Harrison thought, *They say smoke follows pretty folks.*

* * * *

Lola remained transfixed to her mud hole for many long moments. She wasn't slighted at all to be abandoned so unceremoniously by Ollie and Cleve—she was accustomed to that. Women, even the rarity of a female newspaperman, were not readily accepted in crowds of unruly men such as the soldiers. It was one thing to accompany Ollie or Cleve for a cup of tea at the City Hotel, quite another to be seen in the presence of so many rowdy bad eggs, as they appeared to be after the long, boring voyage from Los Angeles. San Francisco, as yet an unorganized frontier town, still had its code of social conduct, and Gage Lassen had more than once had occasion to scold Lola for being seen in pursuit of newspaper excellence.

No, it was one soldier in particular that had her riveted like a statue in the muck. The one who had stepped forward to acknowledge her had unusually pale, pellucid skin, like china, so translucent it was almost as though one could see through it to muscle and blood. Conversely, he was obviously strong as a dick horse as he strode down the wharf with head held high, exquisitely sculpted nostrils flaring as he breathed the essence of the foggy rain. Sapphire eyes of twinkling acumen rapidly scanned the drenched scene, and the

shoulders of his regimental blue coat with scarlet trimming bulged under the tough strength of his muscles.

It was the manner in which he moved that astounded Lola so. He was obviously so self-assured, confident, and full of hope for the future, almost arrogant the way he strode with long arms dangling carelessly about his powerful thighs. He didn't seem to mind the fish bones and cabbage leaves squishing under his boot soles. He stood out from among the rabble of his fellow New York Volunteers by his admirable height. He could easily survey over the comical variety of their hats—the most notable were greasy black silk turbans or items that could pass for dead animals—perhaps why he had been the only one to notice her.

It had seemed as though his fellows bore him along in their enthusiasm for entertainment and bug juice. He was not among the most enthusiastic for debauchery, that was evident. So Lola pulled up anchor and struck for the footbridge that spanned a tidal inlet on Montgomery Street. This man would afford her an interview! He was cheerful enough to give color to a story about returning soldiers, hopeful of the morrow, with great faith in the future of San Francisco's economy. This was the sort of man who could help build the town if he didn't head at full chisel for the mines. Idlers and brawlers they had aplenty but not what Lassen had proclaimed he needed most, "a hardy son of the West"! This athletic buck certainly qualified, and Lola was soon scampering over the bridge's flagstones, her slippers emitting sucking noises at each step.

She gave twice the effort normally needed to pull each foot out of the sludge, and she stumbled forward like a lumbering monster in her efforts to catch up with the regiment. It was only two blocks till she could turn right on Clay. *An aptly named street*, she thought as she nearly lost one slipper in the sucking maelstrom of mud. Lola had to execute about ten additional steps of exertion to bypass a horse that had become engulfed up to its hindquarters. Though each step took her valuable seconds, she was careful to exercise caution, for one

false step would send her bowling into the slough on the side of the road, a muddy grave where one could find human skeletons come the spring dry season.

Only two men were half-heartedly attempting to haul the horse out of the bottomless pit, and in her distraction—I could write about this deplorable situation for the paper, she thought—she lost the trail of the merchant she had been following. Normally, this was a good tactic, to follow in the footsteps of someone recently gone before you. Lola didn't know where she'd taken a misstep, but at the corner of Clay, in front of the brick store of Mellus & Howard, she found herself flailing about in an ocean of mud up to her waist.

Her arms, one hand still clutching the notebook, floated on the surface of the wet dirt, mud so substantial she almost felt she could vault herself up and out of there as though from a foxhole, even using the notebook as a platform. But as the mud had threatened to wrench her foot from her leg before it would allow her to reclaim what was rightfully hers, it was similarly loathe to give up its half of her body. She could grunt and vault and attempt to jump until all was blue, but that suctioning quicksand would not set her free. Would she die here like the horse, left to expire from lack of water? As she struggled among the potato parings and onion tops, she laughed to herself bitterly. *I'm certain someone would at least give me a draught of water.*

But soon she was shouting out, "Help! Help!" She was not too proud to shout. It was common to see men mired up to their waists. At least she wasn't corned like so many who had failed to navigate the town's avenues during a downpour. But she knew it would be impossible to extricate herself without the help of someone, so she bellowed even louder. "Help! Fire!"

She had learned it caused a heightened clamor if one yelled out "Fire!" And she was right, because shortly a lasso was tossed over her head, and she had to release her notebook in order to secure the rope

under her arms, to be embarrassingly hauled out on her behind, as the horse no doubt wished it was at the moment.

Slithering across the mud, her ass finally found enough traction to enable her to stand, slowly uncurling her spine, testing out her foothold tentatively on ground that seemed solid enough. “Oh, Chelsea!” She swore at the filthy, dripping mess of her skirts. She could not even see her slippers, encased as they were in solid pillars of drenched clay like some kind of totemistic fertility sculpture. At this, she became even more annoyed, so swore, “Oh, holy father!” Lassen would raise the roof if he got wind of this before she cleaned up.

“Ma’am?” A chipper male voice came from behind her.

Lola froze with bulging eyes, as steadily driving rain painted white rivulets down her chest. *It’s the soldier from the* Layla Wolf. She instantly recognized that one word he uttered, and it stunned her to the core. She’d just been seeking him, and he was the one who found *her*!

“Are you all right? Land’s sake, I’ve never seen such human-sucking mud in my life.”

Lola swiveled slowly with stiff limbs like an automaton, climbing out of the lasso with dignity. The soldier stood affably with hips cocked, handing the lasso back to the men with the horse without taking his eyes off of her. Yes, the eyes definitely twinkled with merriment, and she couldn’t deny she must’ve looked a sight. He’d taken off his French cap, and rain drenched his glittering, spiky hair that she now saw was the color of apples, if they glowed ripe in a warm autumn sunset. He grinned with confidence as he held out an arm for her to take.

She saw no reason why not to take the arm. “This town is a perfect quagmire. Kind sir, may I enquire your name?”

“Captain Harrison Bancroft,” he replied, cheerful enough. “Though I suppose I’m Captain no longer, as we just mustered out.” Without asking, he bent nimbly at the waist and swept her filthy

notebook from the edge of the mud pit. Instead of handing it to her, he held it out so the rain could wash the cover. "I reckon I'm heading to the City Hotel. Are you heading that way?"

"Yes," she replied diffidently. "You may have seen me earlier, at the embarcadero? Well, I work with those fine gentlemen in the establishment of the *Alta California*, the Mother of Newspapers. You may not believe it, but I'm a newspaperman, although I do set type and deliver the papers as well. I was wondering if I could have a word with you, as a recently arrived soldier. You must have some ripping good yarns to tell."

Bancroft laughed, perhaps at the concept that he would have ripping good yarns, displaying fine, white teeth. How could he be so merry when the entirety of his remaining existence was so uncertain? The war was over, and there were no more enemies to fight. What were his intentions? "Well, I don't know about good yarns, but I can think of a worse way to pass the time than amusing you, ma'am. Don't you wish to wash up first?"

"Miss. Miss Lola Moreno. And I think we'd best get this interview done before I wash up." Lassen was probably already smoking when she hadn't immediately returned to prepare his oxtail soup. And Bancroft felt so solid under her hand. Lola imagined she could feel the sinews in his forearm flexing. This was a much preferable activity to returning "home." "Let us just walk very slowly, to give the rain a chance to wash me."

Chapter Three

It was invigorating to have a female's touch once again. The "newspaperman" clutched Harrison's arm, not lightly as society would dictate, but as though he were the only thing propping her up, preventing her from keeling into another mud hole. Although he fleetingly wished he had an umbrella to hold over her head, Miss Moreno wanted the rain to wash her off, and it was doing so in fine fashion. As they turned onto Kearny to reach the "seedy den of vice" known as The Shades, they bypassed the City Hotel, where inside Egbert Beatty of the regiment was shouting in promiscuous heaps, poking at the chests of some locals. In front of the hotel, a farsighted individual had installed a wooden sidewalk, and they paused there so the rain could wash Miss Moreno's slippers to a recognizable color.

Harrison was already keen on this town with its wood-framed "rag houses" covered with sail canvas, shanties dotting the sand hills. He could settle here for a bit before rushing off to the gold mines. Perhaps paint signs or carriages, although he'd yet to see a single carriage, just the rudimentary *carreta*, two-wheeled oxcarts. He gazed upon the bountiful journalist as channels of water ran down her chest, between her breasts that trembled with her heartbeat. Her refulgent face beamed up at him when he handed her the clean notebook, and even though her thickly waving hair was plastered to her skull like a cap, she didn't seem as forlorn as when he'd first viewed her on the wharf. She was well-fed, nourished beyond the skeleton of the prostitute or sickly emigrant, and instead of being interviewed himself, he wanted to put her upon her pins to relate her experiences.

“Ah, that’s just the quartermaster, Ed Crosby,” Harrison remarked when a body came bowling out the doors of the City Hotel, rolling to a stop against a barrel of pickled pork.

Miss Moreno sniffed, seemingly amused. “It doesn’t take long for them to break into a regular husking frolic, does it? My boss owns that establishment. He’s a bit of an upright bore and won’t take kindly to it being smashed to smithereens.”

Harrison raised his eyebrows. “Oh, your boss...who also owns the newspaper?”

“No, Cleveland, the young fellow, actually owns the newspaper now. Very enterprising for such a youth, don’t you agree? No, my boss is a high-minded man of business who has done great good for this town. In fact, I should like to talk to you about that.”

“We must go indoors to dry. Is that The Shades?”

Harrison took her arm in order to wade across the churning chocolate river of the street. She was bumped by a reeling fellow chock-full of caper juice, and Harrison wanted to knock him into the middle of next week. He was shocked to find himself suddenly so protective of the wraith he’d discovered on the wharf. He supposed it was to compensate for failing so many thousands of people on the Great Plains, and even, in a few cases, indirectly causing the deaths of a few. He had vowed to never again be in a position that made such a thing possible. The safest career was a life of solitary labor, which was why the gold mining or sign painting appealed to him. How could one possibly get into trouble painting a sign?

The Shades was indeed a seedy den, with oiled native-born Californios playing with a greasy three-card monte deck and a few dissipated Chilean hookers draping themselves about. Some lime-juicers clicked billiard balls on an oleaginous ripped green cloth, and the pins in the tenpin alley seemed to topple without regard to whether the ball hit them or not, the ball usually striking the legs of the poor boy hired to reset the pins.

“Two whiskeys, Patterson,” Miss Moreno called before taking up a rickety chair at a shiny table.

Harrison took a candle from another table and sat across from her. He stripped off his soppy jacket and slung it across the chair back. He was disappointed, though, when she opened her damp notebook and enquired brightly, “Please give me some stories, Captain Bancroft. The newspaper does love uplifting stories of men triumphing against the odds.”

“*Mister* Bancroft,” Harrison corrected her. “Or just call me Harrison. It’s not half as stiff.” He felt himself redden when he thought *half as stiff as my cock*, as the sight of the moist globes of her breasts had made his penis elongate and swell against his thigh. She was not young, perhaps just a few years shy of his own thirty and eight years, but her sun-browned skin had a glow of its own, and she was obviously very clever and well-read. He wanted to know how she came to be a newspaperman in San Francisco. His stories were either too dull or too mortifying, unless she wanted to hear about his Great Plains excursions prior to his joining Stevenson’s Regiment, and he doubted that. “There aren’t many regimental tales to tell. Just your average boring barracks stuff.” He thought. “There was a bit of excitement in Monterey a few weeks back.” He shrugged as though it had been a trivial event but barreled on. “We laid anchor in the offing, and Commodore Stockton asked if we’d give a twelve-gun salute to the Pacific Squadron. Stevenson replied naturally that he would.

“Well, a minister had christened a babe born aboard our ship some days earlier, an American child born to two passengers from St. Louis. To this day, I can’t figure who made the imprudent remarks, but the remarks were taken back to shore by a private that this child was more important to nationality than all of the daughters of Don Antonio Alvarado, who before the war was the lion of the day at the Monterey Presidio. Well, you never heard such an uproar in your life. Californios came out of their hovels—I’m sure you know they used to be grand ranchos, but after the Treaty signed in Guadalupe Hidalgo

they're reduced to ruins—and got into their little *barcos* and rowed out to begin firing their old muskets at us.”

Harrison admired the way Miss Moreno in her excitement leaned her bosom over the tabletop, propping up her breasts, as it were. Her garnet eyes gleamed richly in the candlelight, reflecting the golden amber of the cup of whiskey she held to her parted lips. She cried softly, “Why, that’s ridiculous! Imagine, those remarks could have started the war all over again!”

Harrison, too, leaned his elbows on the table and agreed heatedly, “Land’s sake, that damned irresponsible private, trying to stir up hatreds we just managed to put to rest at such an expense! Thankfully, the Californios went paddling off once we sent an eight-pounder in their direction, just narrowly avoiding a repeat of the entire Mexican War.”

“You think it was the private, then, who spread the rumor?”

Sitting back, Harrison reined in his passion. “Not entirely certain, but I have my suspicions.”

The journalist was still as enthusiastic, however. “And which private was this? This would make an excellent news story, especially if I could point out who this lout was.”

Harrison swallowed three gulps of whiskey, hard, loud. At length, he had to speak. “Couldn’t you just say ‘Private X’?”

She shrugged. “I suppose I could. But you know, this anti-foreigner sentiment seems in keeping with the ‘Know-Nothing’ jargon that beefy fellow was shouting at the wharf.”

Harrison was forced to admit, “That was Sam Fowler. He can get very...zealous about things. He enjoys styling himself a lieutenant, but he’s a private.”

The woman’s eyebrows arched in realization of what he implied. Harrison smiled slyly and took their cups to the bar to replenish them. So he didn’t need to be a yellow turncoat to make his meaning clear. Sam Fowler was an evildoing critter from the bottomless pit, and he

wanted to make that plain to the woman from the start. And now he was done talking about himself.

“Tell me, Miss Moreno,” he said before he even set the cups onto the table. She was rubbing her hair with her embroidered rebozo scarf, but the chipper look on her face vanished when he continued, “How did a lovely, accomplished woman like you wind up in such a wild frontier town?”

Her face froze, all rounded, soft features, as though her mind had suddenly gone blank.

What had he said wrong?

* * * *

What was amiss with her? She, a hardened frontier newspaperman, suddenly gone all to pudding watching the lovely spheres of a man’s ass as he stood at the bar ordering whiskeys! How upright and proud he strode, a potent soldier, a “hardy son of the West,” with, Lola hated to reflect, Lassen’s “perfectly erect form.” Lola was stricken with a sudden fear that some of her former courtesan ways were returning to the forefront again. This couldn’t be! She thought she had successfully expunged those ways and feelings two years ago. And now, as Harrison loomed over her holding the two cups so innocently, she stared blatantly at the swollen tightness of the lap of his army trousers. Was it possible he had an erection, or was his penis truly that long and thick in its natural state? He seemed not to notice or care, even cocking his hips forward in that arrogant way he had.

Lola grabbed for the whiskey cup, trying to recall his question. How had she arrived in San Francisco? Was that the question? “I, ah, I came here with someone two years ago...” she started out vaguely.

“‘Someone’?” Taking his own chair, Harrison grinned at her, lopsided.

“Someone, yes, ah, a former companion. He was an adventurer, and we came over on a whaling ship, thinking that would be the pinnacle of all adventures. But he, ah, he had to leave...” How this man flustered her! She had interviewed crooks, hoodlums, and toughs of all stripes! Why was this man rattling her so badly her hand trembled when she tried to drink? She thought perhaps it was because she didn’t want to discuss the baron. She had succeeded in putting him out of her mind for two years, success assisted by Lassen’s disgust with the entire sordid situation.

Harrison frowned with apparent concern. “‘Had to leave’? And he left you all alone in this desolate wilderness What a poor worm of the first degree.”

She had to smile at his styling of the French baron. “A poor worm, indeed! It would have been fortunate to have had a strong soldier such as yourself in those days to defend me...” *Chelsea*, what was she saying? Was she expressing a *fondness* for this soldier she’d just met, and met while wallowing in a pit of mud, at that? Straightening out the myriad emotions tearing uphill and downhill in her heart, she cut to the core of the matter. “Which brings me to another issue. I mentioned my boss. Gage Lassen is the Treasurer of San Francisco and a town councilor, among many other things, with interests in Hawaii, Oregon, and Russia. This is also apropos of the abominable state of our sidewalks—nonexistent sidewalks, I don’t need to add. Lassen wishes to build sidewalks, but this town is sadly bereft of suitable laborers at the moment, most able-bodied men having gone to the mines. Is there any chance you know of anyone, any men of your company, who could labor for him?”

“Did he say why?”

Lola shook her head in surprise. “Why what?”

Again with the lopsided half-smile. “Why he had to leave you all alone in San Francisco?”

Had he not just heard her proposition? It took Lola several seconds to backtrack to the Baron de Belin story. “Why...I suppose

he had to get on to future adventures and considered me a burden.” She uttered a laugh to make light of it. “You know how those adventurers can be. Only thinking of the next...adventure.” *I will never like the word “adventure” again in my life.* “Now, about my proposal. Can you think of any men suitable for this? Or are they all rushing to the mines? You know, they have no food up there. What good is gold when there is nothing to eat? The gilded fly of the angler in a troutless stream.”

“So he needs carpenters. I can’t speak for the other men, but I could probably help for a couple of weeks. I’ve done carpentry work, mostly driving piles, but I can hammer together forms right smart. If it’ll help you out, that is.”

“Excellent!” Lola clapped her hands together. “What with the shortage of men, laborers on the wharves can now get fifteen dollars a day, which is more than most men see in dust in the mines. Carpenters have been known to refuse twenty dollars a day. Why, I was just talking to a man down from Coloma. He said a miner paid him a twenty-pound gold nugget for a simple meal. Oh, thank you, Harrison. This will please Lassen, too, and Chelsea only knows, he needs pleasing.”

The man smiled, running his fingers through his red hair that stuck up every which way, shiny from the rain. “So if this Lassen is your employer, what is it you do for him?”

Lola exhaled, defeated. This soldier was simply determined to pry into her business! True, it was no big secret, but... “I’m his housemaid. Nothing more, if you intend to read something into it that isn’t there. Lord knows there *is* nothing more, since he seems to see me as barely one step up from a Digger Indian maiden.” She didn’t want to scare Harrison off from the job prospect, so she swiftly added, “He’ll have no problem with *you*, I am sure. He has no problem with other men and the majority of women. They say he’s pleasant, and I suppose I do owe him a debt of gratitude for hiring me as housemaid

when I was destitute.” As that sounded vaguely pathetic, she continued, “In Europe, I was ‘Lola Moreno, the Spanish Dancer’!”

Harrison appeared entranced by this, as most people were. He leaned forward across the slick table, forearms flat and hands loose, relaxed. Gazing levelly at her with those sapphire eyes, he said slowly, “Well, well. I thought there was something exotic about you. ‘Newspaperman’ just seems so prosaic. So there is an undercurrent of the creative spirit in you. Spanish? You have flawless olive skin. Were you born in Spain, then?”

Lola, too, leaned forward conspiratorially. She glanced from side to side as though these loafers and rowdies cared a whit about her past. Which, in fact, they probably did, at least the part she was about to tell a complete stranger. “Actually, the olive skin comes from India. My father was an officer in the British Indian Army.”

A slow smile spread over his face. “Land’s sake. So I’m sitting here with a famous gal.”

Sticking out her lower lip, Lola said stubbornly, “Notorious I have been, but never famous.”

His finger touched hers then, musingly, just tickling a couple of her knuckles. “So you’re an artistic traveler, too.”

Lola had no idea what he meant by “too”—or “artistic” for that matter—so she cautioned, “This is not a good thing to trumpet about around these parts. Before your Know-Nothings arrived, there was already a strong anti-foreigner sentiment. Of late, many Californios have been arriving from Los Angeles, heading for the diggings, many Chileans from Valparaiso, Kanakas from the Sandwich Islands, countries all fast parting with their inhabitants. Lassen knows I am half Indian, and he tolerates it, but my skin is fair, so...”

Harrison nodded. “Please don’t go trumpeting it.” Then he smiled. “The Californios are hardly ‘foreigners.’ They were here long before we were.”

Relief washed over her that this extremely fair-skinned soldier did not scorn her. “As well as the Digger Indians, but they’re the most reviled of all!”

A shaft of gray sunlight fell onto their table then as the doors of The Shades swung open, and a black silhouette skidded in, full of urgency.

“Lola! There you are!” Ollie cried, as though he’d been searching all four taverns of the town for her, starting with his lengthy soiree at the City Hotel. With banjo still slung across his back, he came forward intently, nearly grabbing her by the shoulders in his enthusiasm. “Lassen is looking everywhere for you! That councilman’s dinner tonight. He was blabbing about some oxtail omelettes you need to make.”

“Yes, the oxtail soup!” With regret, she snatched her hands away from Harrison, and stood with her notebook. She even extended a hand for Harrison to shake, businesslike. “I’m very glad I met you, Captain Bancroft. Will you be staying at the City Hotel? I’ll let you know when Lassen wants you to start on the sidewalks.”

Captain Bancroft couldn’t even get a word in sideways, as the second he opened his mouth, Ollie got in between them, exclaiming, “*Captain* Bancroft? You’re the leader of that pack of Hounds?”

“Not really, as we just disbanded—”

“I just spent a couple of highly entertaining hours with those fellows. Listen, I have casks of brandy available for your men. Crates of boots, pickaxes, shovels. Oliver Denny, just ask anyone. I live at the City Hotel, so I can show you around—”

Lola rattled the clown by the arm. “Ollie. Lassen is going to want you at his dinner, too. You know, to clerk and seat people, to be his attaché in general.”

He literally brushed her off then, as he took the Captain by the arm and steered him into the street. “Listen, I can show you the sights of this fair town. Sights for sore eyes, if you know what I mean! Don’t look at these Chileans as an example of what the better sex is

capable of around here. We have better examples at another establishment. San Francisco is a magical town, a town for the ages, an El Dorado of riches...”

In the street, Harrison looked back over his shoulder at Lola. “It was nice to meet you, Miss. Let me know what your employer says.”

Lola nodded and waved, turning to commence her slog up Kearny Street. The booming and crashing of the tenpin balls in the rickety gutters faded away. *Let me know what your employer says, indeed.* And he’d just been tickling her fingers! What sort of man was Harrison Bancroft? Why had he, of all people, succeeded in stirring emotions in her that no man had touched for over two years now? More than likely, he just wanted a clean ride with an upstanding woman and then would be on his way like all the others. It was best if she just introduced him to Lassen, and let them do business without her. Lassen was so odious he would probably poison Harrison’s mind against her, anyway.

“...and I, as a former traveling showman, know all of the tricks...”

Chapter Four

“Lola! Please come at once!”

Lola sighed, leaning back against the stairwell wall. She had made it halfway up the narrow staircase that went from the kitchen to her own chambers before Lassen had yelled out, obviously sitting in wait for her. Rolling her eyes, she laid her notebook onto the stairs and jogged back down.

She met Lassen in the dining room where he stood arrogantly with one hand on the cane-backed chair at the head of the immaculate dining table. “You’ve not been back since I saw you in the *Alta California* office,” he barked, and then took in the sight of his housemaid, skirts still brown with mud to her waist despite her efforts at rain-washing them. Predictably, he sniffed his long aristocratic nose. “And I see you’ve been gallivanting about in the mud like a nipper.”

She spread her hands out, palms down to the floorboards. “Please. Listen to me. Shortly after you left, the news came of the arrival of the *Layla Wolf*, which as you know contained Stevenson’s Regiment, late of Los Angeles.” Already he was rolling his eyes in disgust, so she hurried ahead. “Please! I have done you a favor! I heard you mention you needed laborers, so I determined to interview some of these recently released men to see if they would be willing to help.”

His expression softened a bit with interest, but he moved grandly behind the table, his coat skirts swishing about his knees. “And? Were you successful?”

“Yes! Well, one man, anyway, agreed to meet with you. A Captain Bancroft of their regiment, and I don’t think he’s in such a

hurry for the gold mines. I told him the pay here is greater and more assured, more certain than a strike in the mines, especially in this weather, so I have no doubt he'll convince some others to join him in working for you."

For once, Lassen nodded, satisfied, but he was swift to latch on to the next item he disapproved of. "And your...attire?"

Folding her hands before her lap, Lola looked at the tabletop. "I fell into a mud hole on Montgomery Street." Lola nearly laughed when she glanced up, and Lassen also appeared to be withholding a chuckle. "For want of sidewalks," she added, needlessly.

Some moments passed before Lassen could utter with enough sternness, "All right. Go then, get cleaned up. The butcher delivered the oxtails. I believe they're in the icebox."

Executing a small curtsy, Lola gratefully left the dining room.

But he shouted something more. "Wear that sky blue frock."

How she loathed that man! Would it give him apoplexy to ask her something with respect, instead of commanding her at every turn of the way? Still, he had never requested any particular frock before. That was odd, and the only conclusion Lola could reach was that he was encouraged by the arrival of Stevenson's Regiment. First nearly chuckling, then requesting the sky blue frock! What next? Sharing a personal anecdote? Lola did chuckle then as she reached her chambers and peeled off her blouse. *Personal anecdote, bear's ass.* Lassen loved regaling guests with stories and memoirs of his life in the West Indies, Denmark, New Orleans, and especially the early days of Yerba Buena, that was to become San Francisco, province of the United States. But the most personal thing he'd ever uttered to Lola was that he preferred his tea with milk. Strange behavior for two people who had lived under the same roof for two years.

Oliver Denny at last made an appearance as Lola was serving the rum omelettes. Ollie knew Lassen would never raise the roof at him—he expected so little of Ollie. He breezed in through the rear kitchen doorway as Lola slid a puffy egg dish onto a plate from her griddle.

She was too busy to notice until much later that he'd replaced the black and white striped waistcoat with a red and white striped waistcoat, and a cocked silk top hat completed the look, if one's goal was to resemble a circus master.

"Here," Lola said, shoving three plates at Ollie. "These are for Powell, Alcalde Leavenworth, and the Reverend Hunt."

Ollie accepted the plates, but stood shouldering the door that led first to the casual, then to the formal dining room. "Well, isn't *that* jim-dandy." With suspiciously squinting eyes, he hissed at Lola, "They're discussing temperance. The gall of them. As though imbibing less firewater would cause less people to fall into the ditches. As though it would cause less broken furniture in the saloons!"

Lola loaded up Ollie's remaining elbow with a mustard pot and dangled a bread grater from his extended forefinger. "As though drinking less alcohol would mean there were fewer boozers. Go, man, go!"

She knew the men were discussing what should be done for the "souls of the people." She'd been temporarily excited when she heard Powell suggest opening a theater, but this idea was deemed premature. When she brought three more rum omelettes into the dining room, they'd moved on to a deliberation on establishing a hospital for sick miners, and Ollie had taken a seat to write notes.

Lassen proclaimed, "They return from the mines weak as kittens due to standing knee-deep in icy water with bared heads. Bilious fever has claimed one man out of four, I have heard."

Lola stood stock-still, setting down a plate for Major Hardie of Stevenson's Regiment. Where had she heard those exact words before?

Today. In the Alta California offices. He had stolen her own words, her words he had scoffed at just a few hours ago!

The color red literally began seeping into the edges of Lola's vision as she rudely banged Lassen's plate down before him. To stall

so she could listen, Lola went to the sideboard and picked up a carafe of claret to refill the men's glasses.

"Yes, yes," the Reverend Hunt agreed heatedly. "I've seen miners collapsing of mountain fever due to lack of fruits and vegetables."

Ollie looked up from his notes and smiled ingratiatingly at the city fathers. "Why, just today in your City Hotel, Mr. Lassen, I saw a man swoon and fall to the ground from fever, no doubt due to a lack of fruits."

"One of my men?" Major Hardie enquired through a mouth full of eggs.

Ollie pointed at the major with his quill. "Yes, one of the New York Volunteers."

Hardie swallowed and frowned. "Odd. Because Private Nichols hasn't been to the gold mines, has been eating oranges we brought from Los Angeles, and had the imprint of a 'City Hotel' bottle opener on his forehead."

"Oh." Ollie sobered up. He brightened suddenly. "Right, then! He must've fallen to the ground after ol' Jacob Leese kicked a lung out of him. That's right. Leese *was* opening a bottle at the time." He seemed vastly cheered to have gotten to the bottom of this incident.

Lassen, of course, wasn't as effervescent about this turn of events. "I must apologize for the *enthusiasm* of some of the local men, Major Hardie. As you are familiar with, when men are cooped up for a long time without productive work to do, things can get a bit rowdy. This brings me to my next item—write this down, Mr. Denny. Labor. We've often discussed building new sidewalks up Montgomery, Clay, and continuing the sidewalk I started on Kearny. And we've often lamented the lack of labor. The few men remaining in San Francisco have been peculiarly reluctant to perform any sort of industry. I've been led to believe a Captain Bancroft would be willing to lend a hand, Major Hardie. Do you recommend him? He's not one of the men in the City Hotel who were...felled by malnutrition."

Ollie chortled, "Death by hanging...around a rum shop!"

Hardie chuckled with sparkling eyes, and Lola smiled down at the ruby wine she poured for the Reverend. “No, he hasn’t been affected by the sickness of the Hounds, that’s definite. He isn’t one of those rowdies, keeps to himself...a sort of solitary man, well-regarded. You’d do well to hire him, Mr. Lassen. I doubt any of those other Know-Nothings will lend a hand, though. You can try asking.”

Ollie stopped writing, dripping ink onto his ledger paper from the tip of his unused pen. “Yes, I met this Bancroft at The Shades earlier today. He’s some sort of Great Plains hero, isn’t he? Leastways, he mentioned red Indians and buffalo, and he showed me some sort of pipe—”

Hardie waved Ollie away. “Bancroft wasn’t in the Plains in any official capacity. He did travel up the Missouri for many years, and met up with some Sioux or other, but it was in some...*aesthetic* capacity. Something a dandy from the East would do, that’s the impression I get. But he’s mighty good with his hands, Lassen, a master carpenter I’d say. He can build you a whole town of sidewalks.”

Good with his hands. Lola had run out of glasses to fill and should finish the cheese and melon dessert, so she took the carafe to the kitchen. As she sliced the melon, she thought of Ollie’s words: *some sort of Great Plains hero*. What did that mean? If he wasn’t a soldier on the Great Plains, or an Indian agent, or a Texas Ranger, why was he traveling the Plains? *Perhaps he is a trader*. Lola took a few sips from her own claret glass. *But that is hardly “aesthetic.”*

Oh, why am I thinking of that arrogant man at all? After tomorrow, I shall have no reason to see him again.

San Francisco is a sprawling town. I doubt I’ll even catch sight of him.

And then he’ll be gone to the mines.

* * * *

It was devilish of him to make her draw him a bath when she hadn't even had her own yet, Gage could tell by the streaks of mud still on her forearm when she'd served them dinner. Her hands were always stained by ink from the printing press anyway, and she had nowhere in society she needed to go, as he did. He'd allowed her to work at the *Alta California* offices because as a lone bachelor he really didn't require someone waiting on him day and night, and it might give her a few extra pennies, perhaps to purchase a new frock.

He'd asked her to wear the sky blue frock because, simply put, it was the best one she owned. Not because it set off her warm brown eyes or her mane of rich chestnut hair. Ah, in peaceful moments such as this, when he unfurled his body in the steaming bath tub, Gage almost imagined there was something he could do to make his housemaid more presentable. She could even perhaps marry a minor landowner—someone like Spear, who owned the grist mill where the newspaper offices were, or Brown, who had owned his City Hotel before he had—oh, never mind. Brown had died at Sutter's Fort of mountain fever.

Well, it was of no concern to Gage, really, what that "courtesan"—as Oliver Denny had dubbed her once—did, as long as she brought no shame to him and she continued to be the "cordon bleu" chef of California. Fortunately, she had seemed impervious to being wooed. The gumps and rustic Reubens he'd seen hanging about the back kitchen door, waiting just to say hey to an old unmarried maid such as Lola Moreno, they were all doomed to disappointment. Gage nearly guffawed just thinking of how pathetic the row of them were, setting their behinds on his white wooden fence, just waiting for her few polite words as she fed the chickens or tended the garden—the only flower garden in town. However, he grudgingly admitted he admired the way she manipulated them into doing her favors—fetching water from Ellis' well, changing gold dust into the more valuable coin, bringing dirty laundry over to the Celestials who pounded them on rocks.

And, just as fortunately, Gage himself was impervious to the lure of the opposite sex. If he had not been so confident of this, he might have worried about getting an erection when the exotic “Spanish Dancer” leaned over to serve him tea, virtually shoving his face into the grand cushion of her bosom. Yes, it was a very fortunate test of his willpower that he had stood before in the doorway of her chambers casually, as she drew on stockings even, and his penis had not twitched one iota. They lived in the same house, in the name of God. They’d seen each other in all manner of undress and casual attire, through health and sickness. It was fortunate he did not take his housemaid for a ride, as so many did, only to end up having to pay for a spawn, or to send them out of town, and be forced to look for someone else who could cook adequately.

Still, Gage Lassen was not an impotent founding father, content with his ledgers, speeches, and account books. Since swearing off women five years ago—before he had come to this town, so no one here knew him to be a wooing man—his eye had been drawn to...Well, he could barely bring himself to think it, so he allowed his hand to clamp down over his stiff penis and slowly pump, drizzling lavender oil down the head to enhance the sensation.

Only then could Gage permit himself to formulate vague images in his mind. The shoulder blade of a shirtless Irishman, a jolly son of the Emerald Isle at the wharf, hefting a sack of flour. The way his shoulders had strained and shimmered as he lowered the sack to the wooden planks. Or the forearm of a Jamaican mulatto as he forged a horseshoe, gleaming darkly in the furnace flames. And yes, the delicious globes of a Kanaka’s ass. They were the best rowers the world had ever seen, esteemed as valuable sailors, and the upper-drawer condition of their muscles was a sight to behold. These were the images that had aroused Gage the past couple of years. Yet San Francisco was such a close-knit town, it would have brought him ruin to have acted upon any of these impulses.

Maybe he had always been an androphile, attracted to the bodies of other men, and marrying that woman had just been a mindless step in the ways of tradition. He'd been considering taking a journey to the gold mines to see what all the rumpus was about, where all the workers had run off to, and perhaps there he could jaunt anonymously with another man of the same propensities. Oh, to finally squeeze the bare globes of a man's muscular ass, filling the palms of his hands with such delectable meat! All firm and athletic, none of this pudding-like consistency of a traitorous woman's flesh...

But now, he was not even able to fulfill himself in his own hand because the damned bottle of lavender oil was empty! Since the bathwater was getting tepid and he knew Lola kept a larger bottle of oil in her chambers, Gage rose, towed off, and shrugged into his dressing gown. He ensured his penis sunk to less than half-mast by briefly imagining his most hated topic, men racing off to the gold fields, then padded down the hallway that connected his commodious front chambers to Lola's small rear apartment. Tomorrow he must go collect rent on his City Hotel and check in with a Sandwich Island clipper about purchasing two fifty-vara lots near Honolulu. Lumber was stacked up for sidewalks and a new livery stable, and oh yes, something about a dead body in the well over at Ellis' saloon.

He knocked lightly on Lola's bedroom door, but there was not a peep from within. Lamps still burned down in the kitchen, so assuming she was down there, he pushed the door open. He owned the house after all, and had every right to come take some oil he had paid for. He was in a bit of a rush to get that oil, and once he hefted his candle and spied it on her dressing table, he was about to snatch it, but a sudden splash of water and a tiny mew, like that of a kitten, made him freeze and look toward the bathroom.

Was she ill? Without thinking or even recalling that he disliked the housemaid, he took five large strides toward the room around the corner. Then he stopped.

No, not ill. She had filled her much smaller metal tub with water hot enough to steam the solitary window, and it was quite serene actually, with the rainwater running down the window glass outside. With her back to Gage, she was hunched in the small tub, her white knees lifted like double moons, luminescent in the soft light of the tallow candle. She rolled slightly back and forth as though drugged, and indeed, there was a glass of claret on the table with the candle.

Gage even took one more bold step into the enclosure, because she would never see him from her cramped, drugged position. He was interested, that was it. He had not seen a nude woman's body in five years, and if one was objective, or listened to the prattle of the rustics who sat on his fence, or even the more cultured compliments of his own cronies, Lola Moreno was still a comely woman, though probably past the age of thirty and more. Yes, with her abundant hair piled upon her head, pinned there by one hand while the other hand—

Good Lord! Gage didn't realize till much later that he gasped aloud to view her hand between her thighs, disappeared between the two pillows of her uplifted legs, vanished in the vortex of that odious female pussy! Not even his own wife had indulged in such blatant self-pleasuring, and in a sudden fearful shock, Gage soundlessly sprinted from Lola's chambers, leaving behind the bottle of oil in his haste.

Hiding behind the safety of his own door, Gage realized he must look as though he ran from a crazed beast. Waiting for his breathing to slow, he thought *self-pleasuring, why not?* He'd just been doing it. And she *was* a former courtesan, famous for something called a "Spider Dance," mistress of some Bavarian king and that French baron scum who had abandoned her in San Francisco. Well, they must have different ways in Europe and India. Why should he be shocked to see that his housemaid was human?

Perhaps because he'd always seen her as so sexless, so uninterested in the fellows about town. She had never even batted her

lashes at anyone that he'd noticed. She was sometimes even mannish, the few times he'd seen her smoking her Cuban cigars.

But Good Lord. If the sight of her vanished hand between her thighs and the uplifted mounds of her ample breasts hadn't managed to raise an erection against the silk of his dressing gown.

This must be stopped. He would think about business. Yes, the dead body in Ellis' well. There were a lot of worries to running this town. Gage padded down the "grand staircase" to his study, there to drink some of the good Scotch whiskey and go over O'Farrell's plans for the sidewalks.

It took quite some time for his pounding heart to return to normal.

Chapter Five

The sweet water lagoon was a refreshing heaven after the hand baths with dingy questionable water that Harrison was accustomed to. That Ollie Denny character could be a sight to scare the witches with his ridiculous costumes and posturings, but he did know the town in and out and was a helpful fellow. He had told him about this freshwater lake fed by a rivulet, where Digger Indians now plunged alongside Harrison. A *temescal*, or sweat lodge of some sort, was nearby. There the Indians who worked on the schooners would sweat out the “bad” properties lingering in their blood.

For now, the frigid clean water was a godsend—nothing could beat being able to thoroughly wash in intimate places, massage his balls, his asshole, the insides of his thighs. As he leaned against a rock and slathered his long cock with the bar of rough tallow soap, his mind wandered once again to the bountiful “newspaperman,” Lola Moreno. He had fallen like a thousand bricks for her and had wracked his brains for any ripping good yarns he could give her as an excuse to see her again. He had filled two volumes with his *Letters and Notes on the Manners of North American Indians*, but the lack of interest shown back East in the heathenish ways of the red man had caused him to angrily toss those manuscripts into a closet of his Philadelphia house before joining Stevenson’s Regiment, a resentful black cloud following him ever since.

Maybe if he befriended this Gage Lassen fellow, that’d be reason enough to be calling at their house, discussing lumber, or sign painting, or—

“Amigo!”

Ollie Denny's yelp woke Harrison from his reverie, and he opened his eyes to glance up mildly. The attaché, or clerk, whatever Ollie's profession, was scooting down the sandy bank on his ass, unconcerned with mussing his patent leather shoes. "I've been looking all over for you. I've got a proposition!"

Harrison dropped his cock, at half-mast with his imaginings of Lola's pouty raspberry mouth. Feigning interest, he waded to the edge of the lagoon, grabbed the towel he'd left there, and half-heartedly dried off his chest. "Is that so?"

"Listen, compadre. I was thinking. What with all these miners returning, the ol' City Hotel is getting downright crowded. Men are doubling, tripling up on rooms. You wouldn't believe the burping and farting I had to listen to last night in my own room. Why, I'm surprised you got a room to yourself! Why'd they stick me with two syphilitics from France? I work for Lassen, after all."

"Yep," Harrison agreed, clambering completely out of the clear water to dry off his thighs. "I saw Patterson this morning. He said last night men were sleeping on the tenpin lanes at The Shades."

"Right, right. Some rustic was sleeping on one of the pianos at the City Hotel. Well, I was talking with Sam Fowler, Curly Billy, and some of the other Hound boys. They're talking about just putting up a big tent next door to the City Hotel for a headquarters." Ollie chuckled in a brotherly manner. "They're even thinking of calling it Tammany Hall, after the New York political kingpins."

Harrison stepped back into his soldier's pantaloons. "With Fowler as 'boss,' naturally."

Land's sake, he'd been living in these trousers for months. It was time for a proper rig, maybe some of those vaquero leather leggings. He'd worn those fringed buckskins for years on the Plains. With a correct pair of moccasins, why, he could walk to the gold country. "Well, count me out. Live and let live is a good old motto, but any undertaking with Fowler as big dog of the tanyard has got the stink of the creek swamp to it."

“Well, that wasn’t exactly the proposition, amigo. I was thinking, once the Hounds move into Tammany Hall, that’ll take the crunch off the City Hotel, so why don’t you and I bunk together? You know, two hombres sharing a pipe, whiskey, and women?”

Harrison was struck clean to the heart at the idea of sharing a room with Ollie. That fellow would never stop flapping his gums. His bloviating would fill the entire hotel with gas. One more bellow of “There is whiskey in the jar, O tally O, there is whiskey in the jar” and Harrison would belt the buffoon. He’d already seen that a man who worked during the day roomed with a gambler, who was likely to be gone until the break of day, thus avoiding the eventuality of either fellow ever having to lay eyes on the other. And there were plenty of inveterate gamblers to choose from, what with new monte, roulette, and faro tables being built for the town’s groggeries.

“Why, we could even rise together and take breakfast—and by that I mean gin cocktails as an early morning restorative, of course.” Ollie elbowed Harrison in the ribs.

Harrison bent down to sweep his shirt from the sand. “Well, I’ll have to give some thought to this prop—” Straightening up, Harrison was well-nigh slapped in the face with the sight of Miss Lola Moreno standing not ten feet above them at the top of the dune, bouncing eagerly on the balls of her feet, as she had when he’d first laid eyes on her at the wharf. Almost shyly, she gave a little wave, and Harrison realized her hesitation might be because he was still shirtless.

Smiling as he slapped the shirt onto his torso, Harrison bounded up the dune to greet the journalist. “Ma’am.”

She swiftly corrected him, “Lola. I hope I’m not interrupting. This is a wonderful place to swim, if you can tolerate the frigid water. Have you been in the *temescal*?” She was even prettier today, if such a thing was possible, her gleaming ringlets springing about her shoulders, bare with the Californio blouse tugged down to reveal sun-browned skin, like nut butter.

“Not yet. I don’t rightly think it’s proper to go busting into a mighty solemn thing such as a sweat lodge without invitation.”

“Oh, they’ll readily invite you, once they become familiar with you.” Her voice lost its playfulness when she continued, “Mr. Gage Lassen would like to meet with you to discuss the sidewalks. Do you have a moment? He’s out looking at some well or other, but he said he’d return to the house to meet you.”

Harrison shouldered his knapsack as they started the short walk up the hill. Lola pointed out Lassen’s warehouse near the *temescal* where hide and tallow ships could come alongside and unload their goods. A butcher slaughtered cattle for sale as beefsteaks for the town, and when Lola stopped to talk to him about a future order, Harrison rocked back on his heels with hands in pockets, enjoying the crisp sunshine that had arrived after such a rain. Although early in the day, already gamblers were in full blast, or perhaps continuing their sprees from the night before. Negroes from southern states, Kanakas from the Sandwich Islands, Chileans, Spaniards, Germans, and Italians all milled between monte tents, thimble rigging with peas under shells, betting their pinch of gold dust with abandon.

“Six ounces, gentlemen, no one can tell where the little joker is!”

“Bet on the jack, the jack’s the winning card! Three ounces says no man can turn up the jack!”

“Here’s the place to get your money back!”

When Lola finished with the butcher, she took Harrison’s arm. The street was still so slick with mud being hardened by the sun, it was difficult to get a toehold, and in a few spots they wound up moving aimlessly, as though ice skating. Sidewalks would be a huge boon to this town.

“I was thinking,” Harrison said conversationally. “You might be interested in some Great Plains yarns I have to tell about the Indians, the Sioux, and in particular the Mandan, who were just wiped out completely.”

“Yes! Last night Major Hardie mentioned you had some ‘aesthetic’ exploits. Now, what could be aesthetic, I was wondering.”

Of course this subject would come up. After tossing his manuscripts into the closet, Harrison had vowed to pretend that his Great Plains years had never existed, and now he was offering to reopen that chapter to the eyes of the world? Perhaps his quest for fame had not utterly vanished. Or he wanted so badly to make love to Lola Moreno, the Spanish Dancer. If it came down to it, he could always burn her notebooks after he’d blabbed his life’s history to her. Or maybe it was finally time for public interest to turn in the direction of the red man. “I suppose you could term it aesthetic rather than mercenary,” he admitted. “As a boy in Kentucky, my mother would tell tales of being kidnapped by Indians, so I developed a wild imagination and hankering to see them up close. Once I got a right smart chance, I took it.” He shrugged casually. “So I kept detailed journals of everything I saw to record it for posterity, one might say.”

“How fascinating! So you were their historian, in a way?”

“I vowed nothing short of the loss of my life would prevent me from visiting their country,” Harrison allowed.

Lola asked a few more eager questions, but they were upon what must have been the grandest house in town. There stood a white gabled mansion with a verandah that apparently encircled the entire upper story. A haughty, commanding man in coattails paced on the front portico with hands behind his back, and instantly Harrison was struck by his presence. Now he understood why Lola seemed to think Mr. Lassen overbearing, as he now frowned at them as though they were late, although they could hardly have been late, since they came directly here. Maybe the business with the well had put him on his pins.

And Harrison did not like the way Lola gave a little curtsy when introducing them. Lassen’s handshake was hearty, and now his eyes sparkled when glancing up at Harrison—Harrison was an exceptionally tall man, so Lassen must be as well.

But land's sake, he was a devilishly handsome man. Creamy flawless skin suspiciously the color of café au lait, not blindingly white like Harrison himself. His thick, lustrous locks that spilled over his collar were so rich it made one hunger for chocolate cake. His lips were so full and cherubically arched it was a pleasure just to gaze upon him, and Harrison now saw that what he'd thought was a frown was just Lassen squinting into the rising sun. No, he was perfectly personable—what had Lola said? “He will definitely be pleasant toward *you*”—and such a gentleman that Harrison found himself following Lassen into the parlor, like a starving piglet ready to accept any crumbs, fascinated with the broad shoulders, the self-assured stride, and what was sure to be a well-developed ass beneath the tailcoats.

Such thoughts of male attraction served to remind him of the odious Fowler, who had erroneously tormented him on a couple of occasions, claiming he was a “nan-boy,” when, in fact, such claims only seemed to confirm it was Fowler himself who had those shameful proclivities. As for Harrison, he was merely admiring the slope of another man's shoulders as he followed Lassen across the highly polished redwood floors.

“Lola, bring us coffee.”

Harrison didn't like the impolite way Lassen addressed Lola, and it was definitely odd to be served coffee by her, but Harrison had no choice. They sat in two gilded chairs in front of a marble fireplace, and Lassen asked, or rather, told him, “I have heard you're a master carpenter. Major Hardie spoke highly of your skills.”

“Master carpenter? I don't know about that, but I've built many things for the regiment. Aboard ship I suppose I was considered the joiner, building all the hatches, benches, coamings, pretty well-nigh everything made of wood—hell, I even had to make the stockades for my fellows in Los Angeles. So yes, I'm confident I can construct simple sidewalks.”

Lassen smiled, leonine. He had such sooty, long lashes, and the way he tilted his head down and looked up through those lashes almost made Harrison...How could Lola abhor such a man? Further, how could she be blind to his overpowering physical allure?

Perhaps Lola was one of those insensate women—women who didn't like to be kissed or even ponder on any of that business for a fleeting second, maybe as a result of being abandoned by that heartless former beau, the adventurer.

He would have to find out as soon as possible.

* * * *

This man sitting before Gage was a stupendous son of the West. Tall, muscular, with an erect bearing as though he was of noble blood. With skin so white it bordered on the albino, his aristocratic nose and brilliant gemstone eyes marked him as perhaps a Welsh or Scotsman. The threadbare cloth of his regimental uniform, obviously beaten clean on rocks for many months, stretched so thinly across a sinewy chest, Gage imagined he could view erect nipples poking the fabric. And the jacket had shrunk—or the man had bulked with years of physical labor—so that when Harrison Bancroft shifted, lifting an arm to accept the cup from Lola, Gage flushed with heat to view an impressively packed crotch.

Here before him sat the exact man Gage had been visualizing for so long. Stroking his own meat until he ejaculated, envisioning the men on the wharves, the asses of the Kanakas who paddled the canoes and leaned with strapping torsos to retrieve fishing nets...Gage had once even admired the nude testicles of a Digger Indian as he squatted to open a clam. It was his boldest dream to touch another white man, to even do something as simple as brush his lips across the nape of his neck, or tweak a stiff nipple between thumb and forefinger. And sitting here before him discussing O'Farrell's survey of the town was

the perfect specimen, a man he longed to lick, taste, wrap his arms around.

This was a terrible state of affairs indeed.

“The greatest difficulty in building,” Gage said, “has been keeping the pit sawyers at work. Most of them are runaway sailors, and as soon as they get a few dollars they go on a spree. If you can convince anyone else you know to help, I’ll give you twenty dollars a day, and anyone else fifteen.” Actually, the greatest difficulty was sitting here, one ankle crossed atop the opposite knee, without opening his jacket button to reveal his pulsating erection. Gage would have O’Farrell make a copy of his survey drawings so Bancroft could view them without knocking on his door asking Gage every small question, because Gage knew he couldn’t be in proximity to this man without his impulses overrunning him. And that would be the ruination of his standing in this town, perhaps the entire state. Yet he would have to check in on him periodically, ensure he wasn’t building the sidewalks willy-nilly, and special attention had to be paid to Alcalde Leavenworth’s front stairs...

Bancroft nodded thoughtfully. “I think there are a couple of fellows I can convince to stick around town. Jensen, Sansing, Marsten...Yes, a few reliable fellows.”

“Maybe some of these high-spirited Hounds I’ve heard about,” Gage suggested.

Gage was surprised when Bancroft paused, a skeptical sheen clouding his bright eyes. “Those fellows are mostly just full of devilment,” he said cautiously. With more assurance, he added, “I was just told this morning they’re planning on putting up a big tent next to your City Hotel, to be styled Tammany Hall after the politicians of New York City.”

What? Gage half-rose out of his chair. “Excuse me? This is the first I’ve heard of this.”

Bancroft seemed to warm to his subject. “Yes, they’re made up of the riffraff of eastern cities. Some of them call themselves ‘The

Boys,' after the bowery where they used to sun themselves. They mostly just talk about annihilating Greasers, Diggers, or Celestials. Like bulls infuriated over red, they have their mad colors."

"Well. I do agree in some instances, there are some lawless elements that could use control. Perhaps I should meet with these Hounds. They'd need to speak to the town council, anyway, before erecting such a tent. Who would you reckon to be the main man I should talk to?"

Bancroft's entire countenance clouded further when he replied, "Sam Fowler would style himself the boss. He's staying at the City Hotel. I heard you have some men from Sydney, Australia who are of like mind and have already banded together with the Hounds, so they shouldn't be hard to find." Oddly, he stood then, apparently eager to end the conversation, extending a hand for Gage to shake. "Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Lassen. I'll go talk to Jensen and Sansing right now, and the sooner you can get me those drawings..."

Bancroft's handshake was firm, but not overly so. Gage stood just a few inches closer than normal propriety would dictate, simply in order to look up at the man and see if he could detect anything in his eyes. To see if he recoiled. He didn't. Bancroft merely glanced down at him, almost challenging.

Gage attempted to show Bancroft out the front door, but the Captain insisted on saying goodbye to his housemaid. Although highly unusual, Gage had no choice but to allow Bancroft to go through the kitchen where Lola seemed to be making a pie from dried Chilean peaches. It reminded him that he had forgotten to tell her he wished to dine on cranberry tarts tonight.

Gage was glad for the chance to walk behind the man, admiring his muscular haunches under the threadbare seat of his regimental trousers. But as he returned to his downstairs office to peruse O'Farrell's drawings, he had an unsettled feeling. That smile Lola had radiated the moment Bancroft had entered the kitchen, clad in her

festive holiday apron. And the way Bancroft had immediately stepped up to the housemaid, too close for society's comfort.

Realizing he'd been staring at the drawing of Portsmouth Square for several long minutes, Gage returned to the kitchen on the pretext he wanted some more coffee, but no one was there. Moving to the garden window, he was so stunned he forgot to breathe.

Under the spreading boughs of the oak tree, Lola scattered feed for the chickens. And Captain Bancroft sat on the low whitewashed wooden fence just like all the other corn-fed yokels who came before him. He had undone the top button of his jacket, and when he laughed, a full-throated, relaxed laugh, the sun caught a curl of bright chest hair. The sight moved Gage to a raging emotion he couldn't quite pinpoint, until he realized it was jealousy.

He wanted Bancroft. And he wanted Lola as well. He did not want them to court each other.

Chapter Six

The City Hotel loomed from the swirling fog like an unexpected coastal bluff suddenly broken through a storm. It was fascinating the way one wide swath of morning sunlight pierced the fog intermittently, revealing random spots of warmth on the adobe brick façade. Lola had gazed upon this imposing blocky edifice many a time from the little windows of the grist mill where she toiled, but never had she seen it from this vantage point, from Portsmouth Square. The rear of the building was where chefs tossed their lobster shells, fish tails, and eggshells—where a man collected sweepings from the barroom floor in a barrel, and when full he'd wash it to obtain gold dust carelessly flung from pockets. Here feral dogs congregated, carts delivered meat and casks of booze, and from the windowsills above, poisonous laundry of all manner was hung to air out.

"That's...beautiful," Lola breathed.

Harrison Bancroft jumped visibly, skittering a brushstroke he was applying to the roof's flagstaff.

She hadn't realized he didn't know she was standing behind him. Putting a hand to her mouth, Lola whispered, "Oh. I'm sorry."

But his aristocratic face softened when he saw her, and he replaced his brush on a messy wooden palette. "Lola. So good to see you. How'd you find me?"

"Oh, no, don't get up. I don't want to interfere with your painting. That's quite remarkable! How long have you been painting?"

Harrison rose anyway, setting the palette on a stool. Oh my, he'd rigged himself out in a new suit of clothes, and stood out more than

ever. Mountain man leggings fit him like a second skin, their hems dragging in the mud over suede moccasins. His fringed buckskin shirt was open at the collar, revealing a hint of flawless white pectoral. He shrugged modestly. “Oh, I started in Philadelphia, painting miniature portraits for people.”

“Yes! I can see the detail in the dog’s eyes. He looks very ferocious, fighting for that fish bone. And the marbling in the meat...It’s quite extraordinary.”

He fairly toed the mud in his humbleness. “It’s nothing, really. Just a way to pass the time while those Hound yokels set up their enormous tent. And my boozy roommate finally returned from the faro table. He must’ve drunk more than he bled, so I needed the fresh air.”

Lola would not be distracted. “Bear’s ass, it *is* something! Why, I’ll bet you could make more money painting portraits than you can carpentering or mining combined. There are enough dignitaries in this town willing to pay for likenesses—Lord only knows, they think highly enough of themselves. And I haven’t run across a single artist capable of this.”

Again, he shrugged. “Painting has, far as I’m concerned, not stood me in good stead. Has a few bad connotations, a few bad connections to my past. So where are you headed?”

“Oh, off to buy a cow.” Lola didn’t wish to discuss her mundane business. It was simply unacceptable that Harrison was capable of such artistry—this must have been what he meant by “aesthetic traveler”—yet seemed to yearn for the banal opportunity of hammering together boards! “Lassen said O’Farrell has completed your set of drawings, and he wondered where you were so he could bring them by. Now, how long ago did you start on this painting? Don’t tell me you started this morning!”

But Harrison was gazing at something over her shoulder, so Lola turned around. Across the plaza through the mist, the outline of a hulking man appeared like a lumbering modern Frankenstein.

Instinctively, Lola drew back upon Harrison, and he put a hand on her shoulder. The more distinct the monster became through the tendrils of fog, the more he now appeared as a Viking, a giant in a shaggy coat, and Lola expected him to throw barbaric tools at them.

“What’s *that*?” she hissed in horror.

Harrison was pressing her back toward the easel. The monster wore a smile, albeit how genuine was anyone’s guess.

“Fowler.” Harrison’s tone was flat.

“Bancroft, old partner!” Fowler bellowed. He seemed jolly enough, a colossal, husky man with coarse, rounded features that may have been handsome if a bit more chiseled. The sort who could be relied upon to build a log cabin with only an axe and to roast fresh meat on a fire created with no matches. But as for providing scintillating conversation... “This your latest pretty picture?” he demanded, shouldering past Harrison with all the delicacy of a bison. He pointed at the wet painting as though ready to smear the flagstaff even further, like taking icing off a cupcake.

Harrison blocked him bodily, fingering up the fringe of his buckskin shirt to reveal his own six-shooter. “You *erected* your tent yet, Fowler?”

Fowler sneered. “You painting the picture for this pretty lady here?”

As though they were nippers, sniping at each other! Lola wondered what the trouble was between the two former regiment men. For this must be Sam Fowler, the man Harrison implied had attempted to start the Mexican War all over again by claiming the American baby was more important than the indigenous Californio clans. If she could get Fowler’s side of the story, and indeed his views as leader of this new Hound group, it would make a more sensational article.

“Listen here, Fowler.” Harrison said in a threatening tone, but the tension was broken by the arrival of Gage Lassen. He also emerged

from the mist but in a much less looming manner, and for once, Lola was glad to see him.

But Lassen had eyes only for Harrison, as Lola had expected. He slapped a rolled-up set of drawings into Harrison's hand as cheerful as could be, practically walloping the portrait painter on the back in a brotherly manner.

"Bancroft! Did you get a chance to talk to your men yet about joining you?"

"Why, yes. Sansing and Jensen have both agreed to help, but unfortunately right now they are..."

"Took Hippocrates' grand elixir," Fowler inserted, suddenly as businesslike and professional as Lassen. He bowed his head obsequiously at Lassen, tipping an imaginary hat.

"Seeing the French King," Lola clarified.

Harrison agreed. "Seeing two moons."

Barely glancing at Fowler, Lassen continued to address Harrison. "So they've agreed? Excellent. Once you rouse them, look over the plans, and come to my house. Fact, why don't you walk with me now down to my hide warehouse where I'm storing the lumber. I'd like you to take a look at it. The quality is extraordinary—redwood from up north near Fort Ross."

"Certainly," said Harrison, bending to reach for his paint box. "Let me just put these away."

"Look at what Harrison is painting," Lola said, just as Lassen's eyes were drawn to the canvas.

His reaction was snappy. "Bancroft! This is incredible! I'd no idea you were such a talented artist! Why did you hide such an extraordinary talent from me? Why, this is a painting of the rear of my hotel!"

As Lassen raved on about the intricacies and subtle lighting of the painting, Lola remembered her place when in Lassen's presence. It had been frustrating enough to serve them coffee, not acknowledged by even a nod. She could never sit down and participate in the

conversation, or any conversation between the two men. She'd been happy enough when Harrison had entered her kitchen and sat on the fence while she fed the chickens, unafraid to go from a business meeting with the town treasurer to a bantering visit with his housemaid. Harrison certainly didn't put restrictions upon their "station" in society. It was Lassen who would never tolerate being in the same room with both of them on an even footing. And why? Because Lassen loathed women? It sometimes seemed that he did, although of course he treated the wives of dignitaries with a remote respect. Why else had he never sought the hand of the admittedly few eligible women in town? She had a vague knowledge of a former wife who had spurned him, but didn't most men carry on, remarry almost instantly?

Lola abhorred him.

Dropping her hold on Harrison's arm, Lola exhaled heavily and turned away in resignation. Fowler, obviously noticing this, came to her side.

"You were on the wharf with Cleve Wallingford," Fowler observed with hands deeply embedded in the pockets of his animal-fur coat—it looked like beaver, increasingly difficult to find these days.

"Yes." Lola was more than glad for a chance to talk with the Lieutenant of the Hounds. At least he didn't pretend she wasn't standing there! "We work together at the *Alta California*. In fact, I'd like to talk to you about that. I've heard you're the leader of this Hound group. From what little I've heard, the Hounds seem to be a very nativist group."

"Opposed to foreigners, yes," Fowler asserted. "We like to base our tenets upon the Know-Nothing Party."

"I don't know that you'll meet with much success here. There are just too many 'foreigners.' Many great men of this area—Captain Sutter, General Vallejo, even Lassen himself—aren't what you'd call

natives. Sutter is from Switzerland, and Vallejo is a great old Californio Don.”

Fowler cocked an eyebrow. “Lassen, really? Well, we’ve held meetings, prepared to offer our services to the town as protection. Sheriffs of a sort. You don’t even have a militia to protect against the roaming bands of Chileans overrunning The Hollow area. We took a visit out there, and what a cesspool of humanity! Their women are nothing but the lowest rung, and all are spreading disease.”

“True, we don’t have a militia, and I’ve heard many complaints. For instance, no one will follow runaway sailors into the bushes.”

“And all these Spaniards and Chileans living in tents between the hotel and Lassen’s house, contributing nothing to society? We’re the boys to do it.”

“Well,” Lola said skeptically. “The Chileans provide us with the best flour, and they have the most skillful arms in the world when it comes to making adobe bricks. You should talk to Lassen—”

“Yes, Lassen!” Harrison interrupted, gingerly taking Lassen’s coat sleeve between thumb and forefinger and leading him to Fowler. Apparently, Harrison did not wish to discuss his painting any longer, for he was eagerly introducing Lassen to Fowler and sharing conspiratorial glances with Lola. She grinned back at him.

“Mr. Fowler,” Lassen was saying. “I’m sure our town council would like to meet with you and examine the possibilities...”

Harrison was gathering up his wet canvas, and Lola eagerly took an armload of paint pots and brushes. Like greased lightning, they disassembled all of the painting equipment and spirited it away across the plaza toward the rear of the City Hotel, now ablaze in the full sunshine of the lifted fog.

“Lassen certainly has taken a shine to you,” said Lola. “But then I knew he would. He likes *all* men, and most women other than me.”

“He treats you as lower than a house servant,” Harrison observed.

As though on cue, Lassen shouted across the square, “Lola! Where are you going?”

Spinning with her armload of paints, Lola yelled back, “To help Mr. Bancroft return his paints, so he can go look at lumber with you! Then I shall go buy a cow!”

It was almost humorous, the consternation on Lassen’s face. “A cow?”

As they sped their gait, the pair pretended they were out of earshot now and chuckled slyly. By now, they fairly ran around the corner of the City Hotel with their precious loot, Lola breathlessly laughing like a tyke herself as she leaped onto the wooden sidewalk.

“A cow.” Harrison laughed down at her, enjoying their little prank. “Wait here. I’ll be back to get these things from you.”

“No. Let’s bring everything up at once.” Lola followed him into the lobby, where they clattered up the stairs. “I come here all the time. I even help out when one of the chefs is sick.”

“All right,” conceded Harrison as they started down the darkened, smelly corridor, accompanied by the sights and smells of men in their cups. It was predictable that Lola had to step over at least two snoring, glazed bodies, men who either couldn’t afford the “room,” or had not the navigational skills to make it to the room.

Lola knew these rooms to be only cells sectioned off by cloth walls, with horsehair mattresses where guests supplied their own bedding, and Harrison’s was no exception. However, the cockeyed roommate had apparently returned to the monte tables, and before Lola had a chance to admire the buffalo robe covering the bed where Harrison gingerly placed his painting, she found her chest pressed against his, his arms gently around her.

His smile gave her no alarm, even though it was the closest she’d been to a man in two years. His primeval scent washed over her, a combination of cool salt air, freshly tanned leather, and an odd rusty burned oxide she later learned came from mixing his own green paint. Taking her chin in his fingertips, he declared lightly, “A cow,” and kissed her.

Harrison was graceful, not brutish or maniacal like so many in the past. He touched her as though she would shatter, his lips soft and not chapped, slowly sucking her lower lip, and she gave in to him completely.

Holding on to his shoulders, she licked his mouth like a house cat testing out a treat. It was she who allowed her body to drape against his, reveling in the rigid strength of his chest against her rather mushy one. As she felt no threat at all coming from this man, even though they were alone in his chamber, her body relaxed, and her knees slowly parted. Soon she had slithered one slipper around the outer edge of his moccasin, pleasantly surprised to find she was hoisting herself up the length of his body as the slipper rose from the floor.

He slid a hand down her back as though to assist her, the entire front of her body plastered to his. He tasted so clean, his mouth was so pliant and loving as he licked her, unhurried. He gathered her backside in one strong, spread palm as he snorted hot breaths against her face. All of Lola's former courtesan skills, completely dusty the past couple of years, came instantly back to her as she lifted the foot and brought it round the back of his knee. Leaning her pelvis into him, she felt that if she climbed this giant robust man, he would be able to fuck her standing up like this, just holding her off the floor.

And just as she thought they might do that, just as she levered her moist quim against the most impressively beefy penis she had ever encountered, he broke the kiss with a gasp.

Harrison let her down lightly, but he swiftly turned to the sandy window. He flung it open as though he was about to vomit onto the street below.

Lola discovered she was panting so rapidly little clear bubbles swam before her eyes, and she had to sit down on a steamer chest. She saw Harrison, still bent at the waist, his hand down the front of his broadfall, rearranging his cock.

He came to her, smearing sweat off his forehead and into his hair, collapsing into a squatting position, hands on her knees. He looked up

at her, suddenly exhausted from the fire of the kiss, an utterly attractive hangdog expression. "I'm sorry, Lola. I didn't mean to act like such a brute."

Lola frowned. "You didn't act like a brute. What do you mean?"

Harrison smiled incredulously. "Kissing you so suddenly in...*this*?" He gestured around at the three cloth walls, the grimy window, the canvas of a Red Indian portrait propped up against...*a Red Indian portrait*? "Lola. You've just run all over me like fire in dry grass. I really must apologize for my sudden behavior. Being around you makes me feel like the lion of the day, but I should never dare kiss you in such a..." He looked about himself helplessly.

"'Frontier' atmosphere?" Lola enquired.

Harrison grinned. "Yep, that's it." Uncoiling his long body, he got to his feet, and reached a hand down for her. "*Meha*, if I'm to court you, I'd do better than to treat you like...well, one of those Chilean hookers Fowler is always going on about."

Lola shrugged, accepting his hand. "I'm only a housemaid, just one step above those poor women." It had never bothered her to be treated like a hooker, when for years essentially she *had* been one, trading favors for material luxuries, opportunities to dance in public. She had tired of even that in the past two years, though. She was getting too old for that quackery.

"You're a *journalist*, *meha*, and if I had my way, I'd find someone to replace you as Lassen's housemaid! Now let's get out of here, before Lassen drops me in my tracks."

Lola only had one more moment to look at the Red Indian portrait before Harrison hustled her out the flap. A full-figure three-quarter view of some apparent chief, this grand fellow wore horns on his head in addition to a floor-length bonnet of eagle feathers. Lola was perhaps beginning to get an inkling of why Harrison looked more at home in the leggings and shirt with porcupine quill fringes.

"What is *meha*?" she asked as he swept her down the corridor.

“*Meha?*” he said distractedly, as though he hadn’t just called her that twice. “Oh, ah, it’s Mandan for ‘woman.’”

Lola both smiled and frowned to herself. *A sort of solitary man, well-regarded.* That’s what Major Hardie had said.

Chapter Seven

“I’m here to paint Lassen’s portrait.”

It was amusing the way Lola was so drenched in an explosion of flour she appeared to have been engaging in a Mandan religious ceremony. Her face was powdered gently with the stuff, and her mouth formed a little O when she viewed Harrison standing on her front portico. Her hair, tied back appealingly in a bun from which tendrils escaped to dance about her throat, had been covered with a Californio rebozo which had fallen carelessly to her elbows. With the cap sleeves of her native blouse tugged down, her shoulders were bare to the noon sun aside from a white coating. How was it a man so sensual-seeming as Lassen had apparently never taken her to his bed?

“Lassen? He didn’t mention anything to me about that.”

Harrison shifted uncomfortably. Was she not pleased to see him? They hadn’t seen each other for several days since that strange encounter in his shabby quarters. He felt dishonorable to have attempted to clumsily neck with her in such surroundings. If he’d known Lassen wouldn’t be here, he would have brought her a bouquet or something more romantic than mauling her in a seedy hotel. The fact of the business was, Harrison wasn’t so accomplished in the arena of love. He’d spent most of his life studying, painting, and traveling. There had been Fanny in Philadelphia, he’d nigh about been engaged to her, but they had it up and down so often about his yearnings to travel, they decided to disengage. And after failing to sell his two-volume *Letters and Notes on the Manners of North American Indians*, well, he was not a slick proposition for a marriage candidate.

“Well, sketch him first, really. Isn’t he here? He told me to come at noon.”

At this, Lola’s face fell, and she sighed with resignation. “Well, that’s just typical. No. He left an hour ago for the assayer’s office.” Her face brightened when she gestured to the sunny floorboards behind her and said, “Would you like to wait inside? I’m making pies.”

He set his sketchbook and pencil case down in the crisp and clean foyer and followed Lola to the kitchen. It was a mighty solemn thing when she gave him an orange she said was from General Vallejo’s orchard and immediately set to rolling out her pie crust with a wooden pin.

“Did you buy your cow?”

“I have.” After Lola flung her rebozo onto the back of a chair, Harrison could admire the play of dappled sun across her bare shoulders as she worked the dough. Her voice, however, seemed resigned and flat when she said, “I can sell a pint of milk for a dollar to men who haven’t had any in one or two years. And these pies? I can sell fruit pies for a dollar apiece—mince pies for a dollar and a quarter.”

Harrison thought. He supposed it was wonderful that Lola was so enterprising, instead of sinking into the squalor that so many broken frontier women gave in to, but it was also pitiful that Lassen didn’t pay her enough—that a woman of such talents and background had to slave away stoking a fire and chopping apples when she should be...Well, the wife of a dignitary, or some other man of means, such as a lawyer.

However, pie and a glass of milk *did* sound good. Harrison knew a passel of men who would well-nigh whale into someone for a chance at pie and milk.

“And Lassen lets you keep the income, even though the cow’s on his land?”

“Surprisingly, yes. I use my own money for the ingredients and firewood, and I only make pies when I’ve done all the chores Lassen has set for me.” She suddenly stopped rolling out the dough. Her head sank down on a weak neck as though defeated in something, and Harrison stopped chewing the orange, taking a few steps toward her. When she inhaled a ragged breath, it all came out in a rush. “I get up, make coffee, then I make biscuits, fry potatoes, broil three pounds of steak and as much liver as I can. Then I sweep and set the table, ring the bell at eight, he is eating until nine, I don’t sit until he’s done. After breakfast, I bake six loaves of bread, then four pies or pudding, then it’s lunch, lamb for which I’ve paid nine dollars, beef, pork, turnips, beets, radishes, and that everlasting damned soup every day. For tea he has hash, cold meat, bread and butter, sauce, and some kind of cake. I make his bed every day and do all his washing and ironing, if I didn’t have the constitution of a horse I should have given it all up a long time ago, and *he doesn’t even say good day to me.*”

Harrison was shocked into silence by this sudden outbreak. He’d known she was disenchanted with Gage Lassen, but he thought she scorned Lassen and trivialized his cold treatment of her. Now it appeared that it upset her greatly. Accustomed to the fluid, warm ways of the Plains Indians, Harrison took Lola by the shoulders and turned her to face him. Yes, a tear dripped down each cheek, and she miserably looked aside at the floor.

“Lola. *Meha*. Dear heart. I don’t think it has much to do with you individually. Listen to me. He’d be the same cold way if it rained tadpoles and pennywinkles. That’s just Lassen’s way. I’m starting to suspect that it has something to do with that wife who threw him over.”

“I thought so!” she blubbered, finally meeting his gaze, although she shied away from his grip. “But he treats society women with deference.”

“That’s society women, wives of his friends, *meha!* Of course he has to bow to them on occasion. But have you noticed, as I have, that

he virtually ignores every single shopgirl, laundress, every woman who passes on the street? It's as though he can see right through them. It's not just you. Lassen is more...interested in the interests of other men."

The moment Harrison uttered those words, a shudder went up his spine. *The interests of other men*. Since meeting Gage Lassen, he'd been uncomfortable with the other's physical closeness, the way he stood just a tad too near, eyes just a tad too heartfelt. True, Harrison was fixated upon the man's physical presence in a jealous sort of way. He wished his own skin to be that creamy café au lait instead of the blinding white that burned so easily in the sun. And Lassen's features, so dusky, full, and sensual, not thin and austere as Harrison saw his own face. Yes, that was it. He was merely envious. That was why he tracked the man with his eyes, and felt an ardor spreading through him when they stood close together.

Lola must have perceived his thoughts just then, for she sniffled and asked childishly, "It *had* occurred to me that perhaps Lassen is...more comfortable around men." She swiftly added, "I'm merely distraught that if *you* intend to be his associate, you and I shall have to sneak in and out this kitchen door, and then I'll be forever serving you tea and being made to feel like a menial servant. Then you'll start playing faro with him at the City Hotel and attending New Year's balls at Monsieur Vioget's or worse, *here*, while I sit in my little turret at the *Alta California* or wait in the wings with your *aguardiente*, and—"

"*Meha, meha*," Harrison uttered foolishly. "I will tell him it's not allowed, that I *will* be seen in public with you—"

"—he'll never stand for it."

"—and if he won't stand for it, then I won't attend soirees with him, and I shall meet you at the kitchen door and squire you about town myself. Do you hear what I'm saying? I shall refuse to allow you to serve us tea—"

“Well, tea isn’t so bad. Wives serve tea.” Harrison almost detected a wry smile at the corners of her luscious raspberry mouth.

Encouraged, he inched closer to her, just shy of plastering his torso to hers. Releasing his talons from her shoulders, he took her chin in his fingers and smiled what he hoped was a comforting smile. “Yes, wives serve tea. And you’re not just a housemaid, don’t forget—you’re a journalist in one of the only two large towns on this immense coast, the forefront of the great rush for gold at the birth of this superior state of Calif—”

On a sudden, she was kissing him! It was not the soft, loving kiss they’d shared in his domicile. No, this was a lusty, hungry, sucking kiss, as though she wanted desperately to communicate something to him, and could not find the words for it. So up on her tiptoes she went, flinging her arms about his neck, inching her behind up the kitchen counter, nearly sitting on her rolled-out pie crust.

Although taken by surprise, Harrison responded ardently, swinging his pelvis to leverage her off the ground, lifting her with his thighs, sinking his fingers into the thick silkiness of her bun. He found pins that he flung to the pastry board, luxuriating in the stimulating feel of her curls gliding through his fingertips.

A very small part of the back of his mind was trying to tell him something...Oh, that Lassen was expected in any moment...But Harrison didn’t care a damn. The most bountiful woman he’d laid eyes on in years—if ever—was now tugging the cap sleeves of her Californio blouse down to reveal the jiggly crescents of her uplifted breasts, tugging so frantically that a nipple almost popped free, and Harrison’s cock was up like a bull’s pizzle.

He knew his cock to be rather large, as women had complained in the past, so he stayed his hips when he found himself humping her quim through her skirts. Land’s sake, what kind of poor worm was he, first degree? They were in a kitchen, and this was no better than his hovel! When he grabbed her backside, he squished a hand full of pie dough, and flour exploded in the shafts of sunlight flooding in the

windows. He was ripe for the devil to take this advantage. Still, she panted against the side of his face, licking the back sides of his teeth as though her life were at stake, ankles firmly entwined at the small of his back.

It was almost as though she *wanted* him to fuck her, right there in her own kitchen.

When Lola shoved him away, her mouth disengaging from him with a sucking sound, he stumbled back a foot or so and looked at her, dazed. She was more resplendent than ever with her hair all in disarray, her eyes all wobbly and almost wild as she perched there on the edge, breasts heaving, legs spread so widely Harrison could view the top hem of one stocking above her knee, Californio skirts not being terribly long.

He imagined she wished him to stop, and that was all right with him, although his cock throbbed so mightily he actually felt a few drops of semen discharging from the very tip, up against his hip where it would ensure the most uncomfortable experience of the day. He stood with hands at sides, blinking and panting, his deep breaths swirling the flour about in the sunlight.

“Harrison Bancroft,” she whispered between slack lips, scolding him salaciously.

He lifted one corner of his mouth into a grin, unsure what she wanted.

Again just as suddenly, she slammed her body into him, clutching at his shoulders, whispering, “I want to pleasure you,” into his ear, and then again, she vanished.

Onto her knees.

She expertly slithered apart the broadfall buttons at his crotch, and his cock instantly sprang free and was in her hand. Gasping, Harrison fell forward with his hands on the pastry board, fingers kneading the smashed dough. Before he knew what was happening, she had her pretty berry mouth around the head of his cock, and he was nearly ejaculating into the slick heat of it.

What was she doing? He had heard of such things of course, for women and even men to orally pleasure one other. The opportunity had just never presented itself. Plains Indians did things so differently. When he returned to the civilized world, Harrison had been at a loss how to go about courting women. This laid in the shade all previous performances he had ever witnessed, as Lola proceeded to suck nearly half the length of his prodigious cock into her small mouth.

He made a pretense at protest by feebly shoving her away by the shoulder. He whispered, "Lola!" But the tiny shove didn't register on the voracious woman as she continued her hungry suctioning. Harrison imagined the loud slurping sounds could be heard all the way to the embarcadero. He was so carried away on a wave of instant lust, the sheer lewdness of the act the journalist was performing on him, he came in a rather embarrassing, hurried manner.

Cradling the back of her skull to his crotch, he erupted ecstatic waves of semen into her ravenous mouth. It was mortifying at the same time that it was thrilling, his buckskins around his knees, grunting like a pig in clover. He seemed to come for many long minutes during which he was certain he'd choke her, spurting stream after stream into her mouth, and she eventually detached with several loud gulps.

He was instantly contrite, putting his hands beneath her arms to help her up. "*Meha, meha...*" he said soothingly, although he wasn't sure what he apologized for, since the entire act had been her idea. Yet he felt he'd committed some unnatural crime. "I didn't mean to..." he started off helplessly.

Lola wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and grinned impishly. "Mean to what?"

Then, to his astonishment, she kissed him, full on the mouth!

He instantly relaxed into the kiss, licking his own semen from her teeth. He pressed his long, half-erect cock against her lap and crushed her to him, and it was the most perverted delight to taste his own ejaculate on her warm tongue.

The front door banged shut, and they both jumped.

“Lordy!” whispered Lola, and they instantly set to arranging their clothing and brushing off flour, as the heavy footsteps sounded urgently against the floorboards of various rooms, obviously looking for them.

The kitchen door slammed open, but it was only Oliver Denny who eagerly stuck his handsome, sun-browned face into the room. Seeming to pay no mind that Harrison had white handprints on the broadfall of his buckskins, he cried, “You’ve got to come down to the City Hotel, *rápidamente!* Ho boy, you wouldn’t believe the scene down there. Come on, come on!”

Without questioning, Harrison and Lola followed Ollie toward the front of the house as he carried on. “This Sandwich Islands fellow—remember that fellow who set Moses’ hair on fire a couple nights ago?—just said he’d ride his horse right through the barroom window! Well, Red Davis told him it’d be a very dear ride, would cost him five hundred dollars. The fellow threw a bag of gold dust at Red and said ‘weigh out your five hundred and take out enough for a basket of wine,’ and sure as my rifle’s got hindsights, he rode right on through the window!”

Like giddy schoolchildren, Harrison and Lola skipped behind Ollie, holding hands. When Lola glanced sideways at him with a conspiratorial giggle, Harrison was struck clean to the heart. He thought he’d never been happier than at this moment in time, racing down the marshy avenue holding the hand of such an accomplished woman.

“Come on!” Ollie urged them. “We’ve got to get there before the free wine is gone!”

Chapter Eight

It was impossible, sketching this enormous erection.

Since Gage Lassen had taken a seat in a high-backed maroon upholstered chair, Harrison had been literally tracing around the subject of the giant erect cock. Lassen displayed it prominently as he lounged back casually, with parted thighs practically slung over the chair's arm, an insouciant almost glowering expression as he looked up at Harrison from under those long black lashes.

"Would you not rather button your topcoat?" Harrison suggested uneasily. The two were more friends than employer and employee, so he could suggest something like that.

But Lassen ignored him. "My housemaid mentioned you had painted some red Indians."

"Why, yes," said Harrison, in a higher voice than was normal. "That was one of the purposes of my many years in the Great Plains, to record in image and words the life of those great peoples before they are brutally wiped out." He paused grandly in his sketching. "Art may mourn when these people are swept from the earth."

"And did you complete your task? You returned, eventually."

Harrison shrugged and went back to penciling the shoulder. The erection was so distracting, Harrison had to erase and re-sketch Lassen's shoulder two or three times. It was so long, like a donkey's, and the enormous balls so blatantly displayed, Harrison had to assume Lassen knew what he was doing. And enjoyed doing it. Whatever he was doing. Was it some primal way of asserting his superiority over Harrison? Lassen scorned women, but did he also feel the need to lord it over other men as well? This was the case, from what Harrison had

seen of Lassen's arrogant and bullying business dealings. Lassen was a straightforward, strong, and blunt man. In some odd way, this brutishness aroused Harrison both mentally and physically, and he found his own prick elongating as he hid it with the sketchbook.

"I lived with the Sioux, Blackfoot, and Mandan for many years..."

"Is that why you look so good in buckskins?"

Harrison couldn't be sure he'd heard that. Looking up from his sketchbook, Lassen looked directly back at him, unblinking. "I did finish two volumes of notes and tried to gain interest in hundreds of paintings. Crowds came to my Indian Gallery in London, Brussels, and Paris. I lectured and toured throughout the East, but my attempts to sell my gallery to the government came to nothing. Charles Baudelaire said that I 'captured the proud, free character and noble expression of these splendid fellows in a masterly way.'"

"Where is your gallery now?"

"At my house in Philadelphia. My brother and his wife are there, tending to the place."

Lassen was silent for a few moments as Harrison drew his elbow. He was accustomed to working very fast, for on the Plains no one stood still for long, and one never knew when a rival tribe would attack or be otherwise forced to move at a moment's notice.

At length, Lassen said with determination, "I shall help you sell your gallery. I have government connections in Washington. You wanted to sell it for safekeeping?"

"Yes, hoping they'd be put into a museum of some sort, so people who would never see the Plains would come to appreciate the beauty of the tribes."

Lassen nodded. "That's very honorable of you."

"Not too honorable. My mother told me stories about them."

"But that *is* honorable."

Defeated, Harrison put his pencil down. He'd not had any success in ignoring the immense erection that seemed to throb with life in

Lassen's trousers. Maybe it was just the way he was sitting. Harrison hoped to see what happened if he altered the man's sitting position, so he pulled out from his "possible bag" a hand-hewn pipe. Standing, he displayed it to Lassen.

"See this? This is a stone I believe I discovered, or at least was the first white man to see, in Minnesota, a massive pipestone quarry. So I've dubbed this stone 'Bancroftite.'"

As hoped, the pipe distracted the town treasurer, and he put both feet flat on the floor to examine it. "It's very fine-grained," Lassen proclaimed, scratching it with a thumbnail. "And very red. How big did you say this quarry was?"

Harrison withdrew tobacco from his bag. "Oh, a mile long, easily." He gave the tobacco to Lassen to stuff into the bowl, and lit a spill from the log that burned in the fireplace. Did Lola have to stoke the fires also?

"We should have coffee with our smoke," Lassen declared after accepting a light from Harrison. Harrison jumped with the ardor of Lassen's bellow. "Lola!"

There was no response, and Harrison grew agitated. This was exactly what he'd been dreading—the uncomfortable juxtaposition between Lola's position as Lassen's housemaid and her position in Harrison's arms. He had decided he would take her to dinner, out on the town, as often as possible so perhaps Lassen would become accustomed to seeing them together. "We should have whiskey," Harrison offered helpfully, striding to the sideboard where the decanters were already filled. "It's getting toward sundown. Who wants coffee now?"

"*Lola!*" Lassen waited, then snorted with derision. "She's always out and about lately, 'interviewing' men for her newspaper articles." He spoke the word "interviewing" as though it were a turd.

"I'm sure it's all perfectly legitimate." Harrison sat on a couch then realized his mistake when Lassen came to sit next to him on the

pretext of sharing the pipe. “Although I don’t like her talking to that Sam Fowler. He’s a miserable old critter.”

Lassen’s smile was warm and genuine, displaying even, white teeth. He ran his arm along the back of the couch, fingertips so close they brushed the fringes of Harrison’s shirt. “I like your colorful way of speaking. Where do you hail from originally?”

“Kentucky,” Harrison admitted. “But I went to Philadelphia when quite young. And that Fowler is from the bottomless pit. Is he working for you?”

Lassen nodded, emitting a thin stream of smoke from between his teeth. “Fowler formed a company for the protection of captains of vessels, to catch runaway sailors. They’re of great service for both shipping and the city. Some men from Sydney have joined, and they’re very effective.”

“I’ll bet. If the image of Mercury, god of thieving, craft, and cunning, isn’t set up in their tent of Tammany, his spirit is still adored.”

Lassen frowned. “What makes you say that? You seem to have a grudge against the Lieutenant.”

Harrison looked levelly at Lassen, giving him a taste of his own medicine. “Well. If you want a house fired, a man beaten, or a murder done, the Hounds are always at hand to serve you. For a consideration.”

Lassen smiled again, and Harrison noticed the attractive cleft in his chin. His sensual face was displayed to great advantage by tying his hair at the nape of his neck, and Harrison focused instead on a mantel clock that ticked rather loudly. “Their motive is just a silly love of display rather than open violence. Have you seen them march on Sundays with their fife and drum?”

“Yes, they divide their time between their eating houses, saloons, and clothing stores!” Harrison was becoming riled, and he wasn’t afraid to let Lassen know it. “Their fundamental principle is that other people should feed and clothe them. Why, did you hear what they did

to poor Jules Rousson over at the United States restaurant? A dozen Hounds fed from his tables for hours, then sent the bill to Alcalde Leavenworth! He refused to pay, so I heard. All about town they rudely demand food or clothing and walk away without paying.”

“Well,” said Lassen, as though this was the first he’d heard of it. “I suppose they’re entitled to some recompense. They have also made fine witnesses on a few occasions—they are ever ready as jurors.”

Harrison snorted. “Yes. They faithfully testify for whoever pays them!” He had to look back at the handsome man to impress him with his conviction. “Lassen, I *know* these men, Fowler chief among them. They’ve been harassing the Chileans and Spaniards down in the Hollow because they have no one to defend them and can’t pay their share for keeping the town in good order. The Hounds come, demand money, then take what little worldly goods they have.”

If the truth was known, Harrison had a less humanitarian reason for loathing Fowler. He hadn’t been able to bear looking at that jackass since a certain incident a few months back at the Los Angeles garrison.

Harrison had been wondering why Fowler seemed supremely interested in him. He always felt the oaf’s eyes on him, and the fellow went out of his way to sit next to Harrison, talk to him, act like a back-slapping partner when the fact of the matter was, Harrison wanted nothing to do with Fowler. He was coarse, uneducated, interested only in going on the warpath with anyone he felt was inferior, which was well-nigh everyone.

One night, while on duty guarding the Fort the nefarious Californios were no doubt hell-bent on overrunning, Harrison had become a bit bored. The soldier in the next turret was about a hundred feet away, probably snoozing, so he’d taken out his cock to stroke it. Hell, who didn’t? Days and especially nights were deadly in Los Angeles, with infrequent chances to visit hookers in town. So there he was, stroking away...

Not a day had gone by Harrison hadn't thought about this. It gave him an odd mixture of revulsion and fascination to think on what happened next.

A gang of drunk men climbed the ladder, and Harrison was so lost in visions of faceless breasts and backsides that by the time they clambered into the turret, his cock was still in his hand, stiff as a ramrod and leaking jism as well. He must have looked like a doughhead, stumbling back against the railing like that, his rifle uselessly jammed behind his back. What a gump, to be taken by surprise so easily, and by such a pumpkinhead as Fowler. And Fowler made the most of it.

"Well, well." He leered with lopsided eyes. "Grab him, boys."

He was pinned against the railing by at least three men who breathed whiskey onto his person and giggled almost girlishly at his predicament. Wait, who was the enemy here? Why was *he* being restrained in such a humiliating manner? Weren't there some miscreant Californios to harass? Harrison was completely mystified. His confusion cleared a bit when Fowler strode back and forth before him, apparently unable to take his eyes off his prick, which still hung heavily from his trousers, refusing to become cowed and flaccid.

"So we have Bancroft, who is supposed to be on guard duty but instead chooses to handle his own meat. Boys, this means he's a poof, standing here displaying his big tool to all his fellow regiment men."

"Yes, yes, poof." The men giggled, one even going so far as to press his own erection against Harrison's hip.

"Kiss my ass, Fowler," Harrison growled, unable to move so much as a foot to boot these fatheads into submission.

But this only served to send everyone into a further fit of hilarity, Fowler so hilarious his eyes well-nigh disappeared into his cheeks. "Oh, is that what you wish, Bancroft? All right, I will satisfy your dandified request."

As he reached behind Harrison to slide his trousers even lower, baring his ass to the cool midnight air, an extremely perverted

realization hit Harrison: Fowler's erection was as rigid as his own, and he was so drunk he didn't hesitate to allow it to touch Harrison's naked cock!

To his further shock, Fowler actually did fall to his knees then and take a large bite from the globe of his ass. He tongued him warmly, stiffening Harrison's cock with refreshed vigor, but it was such a bite that it probably drew blood. Harrison didn't see any blood on Fowler's stupid mouth when he rose again to a standing position, although he seemed to breathe steamily through his nostrils.

Harrison had experience of these "faint hearts" or "old women" in the Great Plains—a chief had refused to allow him to paint one once, on the grounds it would belittle the portraits he'd done of important men. So he snarled out, "Who's the poof now, Fowler? I can see it makes you hot as monkeys to take a big bite out of my ass—"

Whap! What in the name of...Fowler had just slapped his erection with his stupid hammy hand! Fowler's eyes flashed with glazed rage, and Harrison could even feel the puffs of hot air emanating from Fowler's asinine nostrils as he slapped his cock again, and again. "Is that so, nan-boy? Who is the one whose cock gets harder the more I bite, the more I strike? Hey, boys, he's enjoying this! This unnatural fop is getting harder the harder I cuff him!"

To Harrison's utter mortification, this seemed to be true. The slaps were just vicious enough to bring a stinging rush of hot craving to his prick. What should logically have been pain was somehow translated into lust, especially when Fowler gripped his drooling prick in a fat fist and took to slapping his balls even more lightly, even going so far as to fondle them in his sweaty palm in between slaps.

"I'll show you who's the poof," Fowler growled with heavily lidded eyes that, in a normal situation, might easily be translated as aroused. "Look at this, boys. His big tool gets even bigger when I strike him."

In fact, Harrison was close to spending in that odious, loathsome hand. How could his body betray him like this? His mind grasped that

a despicable oaf was manhandling him, yet his amorous cock was urging Fowler on! The more Fowler handled him, the more Harrison lusted to come, even if it was in front of several regiment men, two of whom were now vigorously humping both of his hips while grunting, “Poof. Perverted poof.”

“Fowler,” Harrison managed to gasp, even as he realized he was angling his pelvis so Fowler’s fist could get a better grip on him. “You’re just proving it is *you* who is the nan-boy. Why do you care how hard my cock is? All men in this company stroke their own meat. Why are you so overly interested in me? You seem overly intrigued by my thick...long...cock...”

“Goddamned gobbleprick!” Now Fowler slapped his cock so hard he brought a spurt of semen bulging from its tip. “You’re the one constantly displaying it like some kind of debased Ganymede. I’ll bet that’s all you dream about when you’re here in the guard tower. You like this? Oh, I’ll just bet you like this. I’ll bet you’ve been dreaming about this for months.” He began pumping Harrison’s cock in earnest, even smearing a few drops of semen over the tip, and Harrison gasped with obvious weakness. He leaned back into one of the men whose packed crotch was pressed firmly against the crack in his ass, and he wanted nothing more than to spend, even if it was in the disgusting palm of a man he loathed.

Suddenly Fowler stopped, removing his tantalizing hand from Harrison’s cock. “No. I’m not going to give you the satisfaction. I know what you’d like even better.”

Was he...unbuttoning his trousers? Oh, land’s sake. Harrison didn’t dare look down, but he knew Fowler was taking his own idiotic cock out and was shoving a few men aside so he could step around Harrison’s backside. He heard the jackass spit into his own hand as he whispered salaciously in his ear, “*This* is what you want, isn’t it, my little nan-boy? To be fucked by a man? A *real* man, not these poofy nan-boys you’re used to. Why, I’ll fuck you so long and deep you’ll be screaming for more of it.”

“Do it, Fowler!” urged the others. “Fuck the little nan-boy.”

One fellow actually fell to his knees in front of Harrison, hefting his dribbling prick in his hand. He had his mouth open, a gaping maw that Harrison longed to thrust inside, and as he felt Fowler’s stupid prick nudge up against his asshole, it was the biggest stroke of fate that his relief guard stomped on the first rung of the ladder, shaking the rickety guard tower and alerting the men. Harrison realized once they moved away that only one man, by that point, had been pinning him down. Otherwise, he’d been free to fight his way clear.

Instantly, everyone dispersed, clearing their throats. Harrison of course stuffed his erection back into his pantaloons, and that was the end of it.

The end of the incident, anyway.

It sent Harrison into a quandary while he quested for the reason behind his reaction to Fowler’s manhandling. Fowler was the nan-boy, no doubt—who else would consider a good fucking a fitting punishment for being suspected of being a nan-boy?—but what of Harrison’s own ardent response to Fowler’s slaps and caresses? For they *were* caresses, no doubt of that, in particular his fondling of Harrison’s balls.

For months Harrison went over it in his mind. The immediacy had worn off with time, of course, but to this day, he hadn’t stopped wondering. Why had his prick reacted with such desire when it was a man, an odious man at that, who had been manipulating him? Did this mean that indeed, he had androphile leanings? He had tried imagining other men naked, and this did not produce the expected result. He finally concluded it was just the fact that *anyone* stroked him that had made him hot as monkeys. It could have been a feather, his hand, a chance rubbing against a buffalo robe.

Until now. When Gage Lassen sat next to him on the couch and his fingers started actually brushing against his arm, feeling the buckskin between thumb and forefinger, his warm, level eyes gazing almost lovingly at Harrison, his cock lengthened once more. Land’s

sake, now it was just some fingers on his *arm* that got him all randy? Now it was merely an *arm*?

“I don’t believe I’ve ever met a man with your singular looks,” Lassen now said seductively, and Harrison could not avoid the undertones of his meaning.

“Oh, yes,” Harrison said lightly, moving a fraction of an inch to pull away from the fingers. “You can blame that on my Welsh ancestors. I’d make a terrible sheriff or agent—with this red hair, everyone could see me a mile away. Now, about this Fowler—”

“I envy you your light skin,” Lassen persisted. “No one would mistake you for being a non-native, as they do to me.”

“But I’m *not* a native. Is anyone, other than Digger Indians and Californios? I’ve only been in California a year, yet I get treated better than anyone from those two groups. See, that’s what I’m getting at.” The fingers stroked the top of his hand now, his hand that lay on his thigh, and the only way Harrison could block his game was to stand. Yet he didn’t stand. And his cock became stiffer. “Fowler and his small-minded class of Know-Nothing persons have decided to purge this town of every foreigner, and where would we be without them? We can’t very well run a town composed of only, say, men from England and France.” He realized this was all a matter of fancy waistcoats, but he couldn’t stop chattering, seeing as how Lassen’s massaging hand was now moving up his thigh toward his distended penis. It twitched inside his buckskins as Lassen rubbed the sensitive skin of his inner thigh and scooted even closer, his gaze never wavering from Harrison’s innocent face. Lassen’s beautifully arched nostrils flared with fire, and Harrison knew he wouldn’t stop until satisfied, but he didn’t stand. He could have, he just didn’t. Was he so depraved he had to have two orgasms in one day, one from the housemaid and one from the boss?

Harrison yammered on, “And so you see, they’re pillaging the huts of foreign emigrants, sacking them on principle. Note how they

confine their attacks to friendless people who cannot defend themselves.”

“Terrible,” breathed Gage steamily. He probably wasn’t listening to a word.

“Don’t you agree that—*ah*.”

Gage’s thumb found the head of his prick, nestled against his hip, and rubbed erotically. The corners of Gage’s mouth curled in joy when Harrison’s eyelids fluttered, and he went dizzy from a sudden vapor attack. All the vitality in his blood rushed to his penis—he was limp everywhere else. He had no motivation to move or continue talking. He supposed he was interested in what Gage would do next.

It was so blatantly obscene what this man of power was doing that he was on the brink of orgasm the moment Gage rubbed the head of his penis. Now he clamped his palm over the entire length of it and squeezed, vaulting himself close so he could murmur in Harrison’s ear, “I yearn for your large, hot penis.”

Oh land’s sake, he was not going to stop this man. Turning his face to Gage, the tips of their noses touched. They could have butterfly kissed, their lashes were so close together and Gage’s shapely lips so close to his.

But a baffling thing happened then. The front door banged open, and what sounded like two pairs of boots entered the foyer. The two men leaped apart so they sat on opposite sides of the couch. Land’s sake, was it Lola? No, she wore soft slippers. Harrison leaned forward eagerly to see who dared bust in so unceremoniously. He was vastly disappointed, he realized, that he hadn’t been allowed to continue with Gage. His prick throbbed in his buckskins, and he longed to adjust it.

Of course, it was that attaché Ollie, along with the shorter young editor, Cleveland Wallingford.

“Boss!” Ollie cried urgently, striding right into the parlor. He stuttered a bit when he saw Harrison, but continued, “You have to get to the City Hotel right now. It’s...Lola.”

Both men sitting on the couch rose. “Lola?” both said at the same time.

“Yes. She, ah...”

Wallingford stepped forward, wringing his hat in his hands. “We’re not really sure what she’s doing—I think she’s attempting to act in disguise to somehow get information from that Sam Fowler fellow.”

“Fowler? Let me go, Lassen.”

Gage shrugged. “Be my guest. As long as you get her home in time to make our dinner.”

Chapter Nine

“I couldn’t agree more. Those Chileans in the Hollow are just running over everything like fire in dry grass.”

With a little shock, Lola realized she was using a term Harrison often used. She smiled to herself with that realization. Already using Harrison’s mode of speech. That was a surefire sign they were compatible.

“Yes, yes!” Fowler gestured at her with his whiskey glass. He resembled a grizzly bear in his fur coat, which was much too warm for the heat of the City Hotel barroom. About a hundred bodies packed in there like sardines made for a noxiously sweaty time. “I don’t know which is worse—the Chileans, Spaniards, or Peruvians. Hey, Red! Curly!”

Two dubious-looking fellows ambled over. Apparently they were not of as high standing as Fowler, for their fur only came in bits and pieces. Red sported what looked like a very squashed raccoon on his head, and Curly shouldered a little fox stole.

“Lieutenant,” slurred Red, having apparently been “seeing two moons.” The cockeyed effect was enhanced by his heavy Sydney accent. “We was just down on Montgomery Street salting the mines. Created quite the rumpus with all the newcomers off that schooner.”

“Fine, boys, fine,” said Fowler, apparently eager to change the subject.

But Curly insisted on continuing. “We got forty or fifty people gathered around. One feller got nearly two ounces of dust—out of the street, ha ha!—so they all tore off to buy pans.”

“From us,” Red added. “At two dollars apiece.”

“Why,” cried Lola, “those pans are only worth ten cents! Are you trying to trick those poor dull tools into staying in town because they think they can find gold in the streets?”

“Gentlemen,” Fowler boomed, half-standing from his stool. “I’d like to introduce you to Miss Lola—what was your name again? Lola, a writer for the *Alta California* paper.”

All expression fell from the dullard’s faces, and their jaws went slack.

“It’s all right,” Lola told Fowler, urging him to sit again. “People do that all the time around here. Salting the mines, I mean. Newcomers work hard all day and don’t find the color of gold, but once they hear that one person found dust...”

Curly blurted out, “Are you a foreigner?”

This time Fowler did shoot to his feet, and one strong, straight arm jammed against Curly’s chest had the man flying through the air, his fox stole squiggling a happy fandango before it landed on his face.

“Don’t talk to a lady like that!” Fowler roared, and the force of his lungs had everyone inching away from him.

He resumed his stool as calm as could be, even mustering what passed for a smile in his puffy potato face. Lola chose to act as though nothing had happened.

“Now, about your plans for the Chileans in the Hollow...”

Fowler frowned at his empty whiskey glass. He raised one eyebrow at Lola. “It’s true, though,” he stated. “Your skin is suspiciously dark.”

Lola squirmed on her stool. She had nothing to be ashamed of, yet she looked down at Fowler’s belt. “My father was a Duffadar-Major in the Indian Army, yes. A native cavalry Sergeant Major. My mother is from England. I was born in England,” she repeated.

Fowler snorted into the empty glass. “So you’re Eurasian.”

“Ah...Joe? More whiskey for us, please?” This conversation was not going in the direction Lola had intended. How had it suddenly become about her? She knew that Fowler had best never discover that

her mother's husband was actually an officer with the British East India Company. She'd had an indiscretion that had lasted quite long actually, for a few years, with a certain Sergeant Major Rangarajan, but her husband had allowed her to raise Lola as his own. Lola's "suspiciously dark" skin had caused murmurs. She had been a "queer, wayward Indian girl" who ran naked through the streets, and this was apparently all right with her mother, who could blame her skin tone on the sun. "I don't think it's expedient to throw out all the Chileans from the Hollow. For one thing—"

"You're a nautch girl, why didn't I see it before?" Fowler tossed back his fresh glass of whiskey. His beady eyes flashed, and she was really beginning to see why Harrison loathed this man so much. "Did you wear a sari?"

As though that was the only item of attire in India! "No, I dressed like any other little British girl. I was country-born to a British mother, so I dressed like anyone else. Now, Mr. Fowler, can we please get back to the topic—"

"A son of a gun." Fowler grinned slyly. "Or should I say the daughter of a gun?"

Perhaps it was the surfeit of whiskey, but Lola lost her composure then. "Listen here, Mr. Fowler. I was a well-known dancer in Europe. I was known as 'the premier Spanish ballerina' thanks to the 'suspicious' darkness of my skin. You will discover that the more upstanding members of society in San Francisco do tolerate a certain mixture of skin tones, because some of them are mixed themselves, often with regal Californio blood. Gage Lassen, for example—"

"Yes, do tell!" cried Fowler. "You were mentioning that General Vallejo is a great old Californio Don and that Lassen is a foreigner. In what way, pray tell?"

She shouldn't have said anything, but she was hot under the collar. In retrospect, she only gave this *goonda* more ammunition for his narrow-minded ways when she declared, "Lassen was born in St. Croix in the West Indies. His father was a ship's captain from

Denmark, but his mother was a slave. So you see, I doubt very much that Lassen and others will tolerate your—”

“I thought so!” Fowler crowed, pointing an accusing forefinger at Lola. “Listen up, Barney, Curly, Red. Miss—what’s your name again?—Miss Lola here has informed me that Gage Lassen’s mother was nothing more than a mere black *slave*!” They all chortled heartily at this news. “That explains why he hasn’t been so eager to hear about our exploits in the Hollow.”

“That explains his skin color,” one fellow astutely noted.

Lola was inflamed with rage, and even the bartender Joe put his hands flat on the bar and frowned.

“Look here, Fowler...” Joe said, but never got any further, for Lola slapped Fowler’s idiotic potato face.

It was a good clean slap with complete skin contact and a satisfyingly loud crack that resounded even in the loud, smoky saloon. Fowler’s stupid head turned to one side with the suddenness and violence of it, and for one brief blessed moment, he was silent, maybe shocked.

Lola smiled and rose to leave the room. Then Fowler struck her back.

His belt was much stronger than the one she’d dealt to him. As she rose, he backhanded her across the cheekbone, sending her flying to the barroom floor, spinning on her ass. Not one man stepped up to assist her at first. In fact they all stepped away to avoid her. All she saw was blackness with a hundred points of orange, and she felt warm ooze sliding down her upper lip.

“You goddamned slutty nautch girl!” Fowler bellowed. “How *dare* you strike me, a superior? Goddamned spawn of a kaffir boy!”

As she struggled to her feet and opened her eyes, a few hands did assist her then, Joe among them, and a few local gamblers.

“I think you ought to leave now, Fowler,” Joe said evenly. “Lassen’s not going to take kindly to roughing up his girl.”

But it was the click of a pistol hammer that finally silenced the *goonda*. In fact, the entire room silenced with that click. Men often drew guns in the City Hotel barroom, but Lola supposed the surprise was that anyone dared draw against Sam Fowler.

“Touch her again, Fowler, and you’ll be cold as a wagon tire.”

As Lola’s eyes cleared, she saw that Harrison Bancroft held his pistol to Fowler’s temple, and Fowler was still as could be, not even daring to breathe. Men around them backed slowly away, many silently exiting out the front door. Ollie and Cleve stood behind Harrison, hands on hips, Cleve snorting so irately he finally burst out, “Don’t you ever set foot in this City Hotel establishment ever again! Take your goddamned Hounds and beat it!”

At last breathing, Fowler looked sideways at the pistol barrel and said quietly, “Now, now, Bancroft. No need to get so upset over your girl. It was just a small tiff, is all.”

“Small tiff?” Lola cried. And that was where she made her mistake. “It was no small tiff, Harrison. He insulted my father, and when I slapped him, he belted me back so hard I landed on the floor.” She wiped her face with the back of her hand, and saw it was slimed with blood. “See?”

When Harrison took his eyes off Fowler to look at Lola, Fowler elbowed him so ferociously in the pit of his stomach he doubled over and nearly lost his pistol. The pistol wouldn’t have done any good by that point, for Fowler threw his considerable weight atop Harrison to tackle him to the floor. Harrison’s tall, slight frame was instantly pinned facedown beneath the *goonda*, his pistol out of sight, probably crushed beneath his stomach. Although Ollie remained cringing up against the bar, Cleve immediately set to booting the blockhead in the vitals, and Lola looked around for a weapon.

It was Joe who handed her the half-empty bottle of whiskey. When she twirled about brandishing it high above her head, the struggling couple on the floor looked very odd to her.

Was Fowler...*humping* Harrison?

He had him absolutely pinned with his beefy chest, one of Harrison's wrists in his grip, his brawny thighs ensuring Harrison couldn't even move his legs. And sure enough, as though he didn't even notice Cleve slamming his pointy-toed Californio boots between his legs, Fowler was obviously angling his hips into Harrison's attractive backside, humping him like a dog! He murmured things into Harrison's ear with a face almost lustful as though about to take a slurp from Harrison's neck, and Lola acted before she thought twice.

She smashed the bottle over Fowler's head. Lola was surprised that such a formidable bottle merely pasted him with a solid, dull thud. She had expected the bottle to break into a hundred smithereens. So for good measure, both she and Cleve kicked him from the same side to roll him off the poor, slender artist.

Leaping to his feet, Harrison swiftly regained control and aimed the pistol at the supine man. But one look at his slack jaw told them he was out cold, and Lola poked Harrison.

"Let's get out of here before there's more trouble!"

None of Fowler's fellow Hounds had stuck around to protect him.

The four ran like riggers out of there, stumbling over broken glass and sliding in pools of spit.

Chapter Ten

“What did Fowler say to you?”

Glasses of *aguardiente* in hand, Lola and Harrison padded up the back stairs to her rooms. Lassen wasn't home, so she had settled Ollie and Cleve in the parlor with their own bottle of *aguardiente*, and they sat in wing chairs discussing the rumpus in minute detail, as though they had been the saviors. She was proud that Harrison had held his pistol to Fowler's head in order to rescue her—no man had ever come to her salvation before like that. Most men chose to walk the opposite direction when faced with a melee, or at the very most, bribe their way out to save their own hide. Now, she reckoned, she was on the frontier, and men were more mannish, more liable to bring out the big guns when threatened.

“Are you sure it's all right for me to...?”

“Come to my apartment? Of course. Lassen could care less what I do.” As long as she fed him dinner. She had left some cold curlew and boiled eggs on the dining table for him along with some champagne and stewed prunes. “And I need you to look at my nose.”

She nearly giggled with the duplicity of her scheme. She could have easily looked at her nose alone. It was fairly obvious she didn't need Harrison for that. But once she gained her apartment, she peeled off the colorful Californio blouse, as it'd been soaked in blood, and dropped it to the floor of her bathroom. Lighting a tallow candle, she placed it before her mirror and looked. Oh, holy father. Her face was a sight to scare the witches, as Harrison would say. Blood that was already caking had flowed down her chin and neck, even made a

rivulet between her breasts. Her white camisole was also drenched in that burgundy red of drying blood, but she didn't dare remove it. Yet.

Harrison had found the water basin and had dipped a cloth into it. He stood behind her at the mirror with his hand hovering uncertainly near her ear.

Lola asked lightly, "So what did Fowler say to you when you were wrestling on the floor?"

Harrison made his move, pressing the wet cloth to her upper lip, perhaps to silence her. "Oh, just the usual things ignorant brutes say to someone they're pinning to the floor." He rubbed so that she could finally see her mouth, and he rinsed the cloth in the basin.

"Yes, that was entirely unfair. I'm sorry I distracted you by talking."

In the mirror, she saw Harrison grin impishly as he cleaned off her chin. "I would've been distracted even if you hadn't talked."

"It was unfair that he pinned you with the weight of his blubber. He is just so much larger than you."

"Well," Harrison said softly. "He should use whatever tools he has to his advantage, just as I would have. Now, I'm going to bed you."

Lola squirmed with delight. "Good."

Harrison clarified, "I mean I'm putting you to bed, to sleep."

Lola's face fell. "Oh." The heat of his compact body at her back brought gooseflesh to her skin, and she leaned slightly into him. Her bare shoulders against the warm, firm buckskin made her feel feminine and dainty, and she allowed her head to loll to one side so he could clean her neck. "If Fowler had as much brains as guts, what a clever fellow he would be. That old *goonda* should be banished from this town."

"What is a *goonda*?"

"In India, a *goonda* is a criminal hooligan, and that's just what Fowler is." Lola brought her hand round the back of Harrison's neck.

So strong. It was relaxing to stand next to a powerful man again, someone who could protect her from harm.

He brushed his mouth against her temple. His form was imbued with the fresh saltwater aroma that so attracted and melted her. When she had swallowed his prodigious penis down her throat with such gusto, his crotch had the same air of salty fog and leather, as though he bathed in the bay. He said, “Unfortunately we can’t banish him. But once enough people get wind of his corrupt intentions, I’m sure the tide will turn against him.”

Lola pouted. “It all started when he forced me to admit my father is from India. That doesn’t bother you, does it?”

Harrison rinsed the rag once more, and he brought it to her clavicle. Without pretense, Lola tugged down the neckline of her chemise so just a bare shadow of the areola of her nipples was bared, and she was pleased to feel his jutting penis twitch against her backside. “No. Why would it bother me?”

“If you were a Know-Nothing it would bother you. The things he was saying about Lassen would get you in a lather. I thought it was obvious Lassen isn’t ‘native.’”

Harrison’s voice became even softer when he dipped the rag into the cleft between her breasts. “Oh? I hadn’t noticed. I assumed he’d been in the sun a lot, like the rest of us.”

Holding him by the neck, she squiggled her backside against his erection. “Yes, but *you* don’t get any darker in the sun.” Covering his hand with her free one, she rubbed the rag furiously enough to bobble her tits erotically, pleased that his gaze was riveted to her image in the mirror, and he breathed hot breaths against the side of her face. It had been years since she had been able to put on a show for a man, and she was hell-bent to do so now.

“Unfortunately,” he breathed into her ear, “my skin stays white as snow.” He wiped the final smears of blood from between her breasts, and dropped the rag to the floor. He cupped one of her tits so that the nipple popped out from the chemise.

Lola approved of the sight in the mirror. She slid a finger under his head scarf, flinging that to the floor as well. His apple-red hair spiked in different directions and gleamed richly in the candlelight. Swiftly, she tugged down her flouncy rainbow-colored skirt so that she stood in her drawers, on tiptoes so as to best feel his enormous erection against her butt.

He slowly humped her through his buckskins. Lola wanted to ask him about that but couldn't find a delicate way to couch it. But it had been fascinating to watch. Even though she'd been about to paste Fowler with the whiskey bottle, it was a strange animalistic sight, the way Fowler asserted his dominance over Harrison with the odd decision to mimic fucking him, like a bull. Was that the nature of their relationship? For it was obvious Fowler wanted to assert his authority over, well, pretty much everyone.

"Take off your shirt," she commanded him.

The fringed shirt joined the other items on the floor, and it was heaven to feel his bare, hot skin against her back. It was true, his blindingly white skin glowed like a beacon in the candlelight, and he was muscular, firm, athletic from years of traveling the Plains, the pectorals so well-developed each sinew quivered when he ran his hands up to roll her hard nipples between thumb and forefinger. With the backs of her fingers she felt the velvety skin of his pectoral. It was truly like a bowl of cream, she thought with envy. If only her skin were that soft!

"*Meha*," Harrison whispered in her ear, juggling her tits for display in the mirror. "I wish to protect you." His eyes were of the clearest lightest blue, like the sapphire corundum Lola had seen for sale in India.

A dribble of moisture ran down her inner thigh, aroused at the exquisite mauling Harrison was giving her breasts. "I'll just avoid that *goonda* from now on. I don't need to write an article that badly."

"No," he said, rubbing the entire length of his massive erection against her ass. She had felt his penis, attempted to swallow his penis,

and she was so wide open now with lust she had no doubt of her abilities to accommodate it. “I don’t just mean Fowler. I want to protect you from everyone. Everything.”

She wasn’t sure what to think—indeed, didn’t *want* to think at the moment. So she removed his right hand from her breast and brought it down, indicating the slit in her drawers. He delved eagerly, three long tapered fingers petting the button of her clitoris. Gasping, she fell forward to balance with her fingertips against the commode. She rolled her hips in a clockwise motion to encourage him to be more daring and creative with his fingers—after all, he was an artist, and if he could paint the tiniest eyes onto a dog or the intricacies of beef marbling, he could certainly get inventive with her clitoris.

Yet he seemed hesitant. He merely moved the flats of his fingers up and down, and it occurred to Lola that perhaps he did not know *how*? Was that possible for a man of thirty and some years who had traveled so extensively, lived in so many towns? Perhaps Indian women did not enjoy being satisfied in this manner. Well, it was so old hat to Lola she could do it blindfolded, and she was on such a wild crest of arousal she did not envision tiptoeing around.

“Use your fingertips...like this,” she commanded, demonstrating how to flick her small erection by rapidly fingering the back of his hand.

“Ah,” he said, as if understanding.

“Ah!” she gasped loudly. His newfound skill was so accurate and dexterous, the men sipping *aguardiente* in the parlor could probably hear her. Her mouth fell open, her eyes rolled into her skull, and she lunged impatiently, her juices no doubt flowing over his wrist. He tickled her clitoris with such abandoned talent she was on the verge of climaxing, so she frantically reached behind her and fumbled with the buttons of his broadfall.

Now was the moment. She hadn’t been reamed properly in two years, if in fact those activities had even been proper. Most of her cohorts had been powdered, depraved members of society in Europe,

men who now seemed like rancid ghosts or skeletal dandies compared to this robust “hardy son of the West.” The Europeans were vastly educated and drank fine wines, and certainly had no reservations about performing some of the more unusual acts in the lexicon of sex, but at the moment she had in her hand—

Holy father. Harrison’s penis seemed even more enormous now. Earlier, she’d only been able to swallow about half of it without choking, and as he eased the giant mushroom head of it into her passage without a letup in his ministrations to her button, Lola had to arch her back and stand on the very balls of her feet to accommodate him. Ah, what an impassioned animal he looked like in the mirror, the sinews of his deltoid muscles shimmering, his head thrown back to reveal a strong, full throat. She only wished she could view his muscular flank as he slid slowly, salaciously, in and out of her, plunging so deeply she could feel the head of his penis in the vicinity of her navel.

Her head lolled on a rubbery neck. “Don’t. Stop.” How talented and coordinated he was, able to maintain a steady pace on her clitoris while fucking her with such artistry. The tension built in her pelvis, the full bursting sensation of all blood rushing to her pussy—but she never knew when she would explode until one second beforehand. She needed absolute concentration and the skill of a proficient man. “Don’t. Stop.”

“*Meha*. I want to feel you come around my prick. Come for me. Come. Come.”

His urgings sent Lola over the edge. She erupted against his fingers in a blazing ecstasy of violent, powerful contractions. Her pussy clamped down around his penis with such ferocity she felt about to faint. Holding her breath against the onslaught of rapturous waves that flooded her pelvis, only tiny little squeaks came from her open mouth, her thigh and belly muscles spasming so powerfully she was near about lifted off the floor. His instinctive talent must have guided him to continue his ministrations to her clitoris, and Lola felt

she would orgasm forever. Her contractions milked his bursting penis, and she felt him erupt, too, discharging jet after jet of warm sperm against her womb.

He also made strangled sounds and for a moment must have lost all sense of consciousness, too, for his fingers stilled, allowing her shattering nerve endings to calm a bit, so she could finally take a breath.

When he breathed again, he resumed petting her clitoris, but by then it was too much. She was too sensitive now, and she jumped and twitched with the mild stroking of his pulsing penis, gasping with the sudden twinges that radiated almost painfully from her inner core.

“Ah, stop,” she panted.

Harrison chuckled with exhaustion. “Too much?” he teased.

She lowered herself off his penis. “Too much,” she agreed.

“Yes, I agree.”

Both of the lovers stood stock-still, staring at their own images in the mirror. The invasion of an alien voice into their bathroom sanctuary shocked them into catatonia.

Gage Lassen entered the room. His shadowy, disapproving figure appeared over Harrison’s shoulder.

“Too much entirely. And now it *will* stop.”

Chapter Eleven

Gage had been watching them from the moment Harrison took off his fringed shirt.

When he'd returned from Secretary Powell's house, he'd found two doughheads in his parlor sipping his *aguardiente*. Cleve Wallingford insisted that Lola had suffered some grave insult at the hands of Fowler, and Ollie told a harrowing story of her being punched in the nose and saved by Harrison Bancroft. It had been easy enough to chase away the two, and Gage went up the back staircase to Lola's apartments to check on her. If she was injured, he'd have no dinner tonight, other than the cold things she'd left for him, and would be forced to eat the City Hotel's version of leg of mutton with caper sauce. That would be a more harrowing experience than what Lola had endured.

But what he'd viewed in her bathroom made him stop in his tracks. He stood off to one side so he couldn't be seen in the mirror as Harrison fondled his housemaid's ample tits. Lola was not a slender girl or the skeleton of some women who had undergone the torturous overland route from the East and never recovered, but her figure was the fine hourglass of, well, the dancing girl.

He knew well enough her skills at dancing. He'd hired her to dance at the City Hotel when she'd first arrived in town. She'd applied for work, and when he found out she was a dancer, he figured he'd make extra money and add an attraction to his hotel. But when she performed her Spider Dance, raising her skirts so high the audience could see she was nude underneath, a riot ensued. That's when Gage took her for his housemaid. She was a rough chef at first,

and her cleaning skills almost entirely absent, but she was eager to learn. Now she was able to cook complex meals from memory, his house was spotless, and he was very satisfied with the way things were. If only they would remain that way.

Such a benevolent act as saving her life was repaid with the scene before him. Gage boiled with suppressed jealousy and rage when he viewed *his* friend, Harrison Bancroft, bobbling the bounteous tits of his housemaid as he laid her forward onto the washstand. Hot air vented from Gage's nostrils when Harrison whispered that he had not noticed Gage's skin was a shade darker than most natives. All right, then. Harrison was well within his rights to manhandle Gage's property. Harrison evidently was a normal man with normal urges, and it had always been obvious that most normal men would choose to hump Lola Moreno if given half a chance. Gage himself had admired her in a remote sort of way—how the tendrils came loose from her bun and danced about her round face, how her behind swayed when she walked, the dimples that appeared in her cheeks when she smiled.

And he'd admired her when he spied on her masturbating in her bath.

He'd successfully ignored this lust, which amounted to a hill of beans contrasted to how hot the presence of Harrison Bancroft made him. He'd been instantly attracted to the tall, lean outdoorsman, and had spent many nights frigging himself, imagining his tongue on the milky muscle of his shoulder. Earlier this afternoon, sitting next to each other on the couch, he hadn't been able to contain his craving for the long, thick donkey's prick he could see when Harrison's buckskin shirt inched up—the prick that had stiffened noticeably when he'd posed on the chair, displaying his own erection so shamelessly. He'd never viewed such a stupendous prick, except perhaps in the Negro freemen he'd watched coming out of the Digger Indian *temescal*, their purple-black skin shiny with fresh sweat, their enormous cocks waggling between their mighty thighs. It had even occurred to him, he

could possibly pay one of these fellows to go into a secret location and let him taste his giant mammalian cock, but it wasn't worth the risk of being discovered. Gage had been so hot sitting close to Harrison, their mouths so close, he was convinced Harrison would have allowed him to kiss him if those potato-heads hadn't walked in with their annoying tales of Lola's asinine wanderings.

Oh, how beautiful it would have been, kissing a man. None of this rosewater, false sighing, or betrayal that came with womanhood. Gage supposed it had been fortuitous those two had interrupted his near-kiss with Harrison. Who knows what Harrison's offended response would have been? And Harrison *knew* Gage, knew where he lived, knew who his friends were. He could have easily brought Gage's entire empire crashing to the ground with just one insinuation.

But he'd seemed amenable, allowing Gage to scoot near, and his long, thick erection gave him away. His reddish-blond eyelashes were so close Gage imagined he could feel the breeze when Harrison lowered them modestly...to glance at his own hard cock.

So now, as he breathlessly watched the fair shimmering shoulder muscles working ardently as Harrison pawed the housemaid, conflicting emotions rose in Gage's heart. He wanted to reach out, snatch up the man by the neck, and wring it. He wanted to slap his chef into oblivion. At the same time, it would be so easy to drop to his knees—he imagined this when Lola undid the buttons of the leather pantaloons, and the impishly rounded globes of Harrison's admirable ass came into view—and press his face between those athletic thighs. Land's sake, as Harrison would say. His career and life really *would* be over then.

He was forced to stand, peeping from behind the doorjamb like some kind of twisted deviant, breathing so heavily it was a wonder they didn't hear him. Was forced to watch when Harrison's spectacular balls came into view, and he eased that bull's pizzle into the housemaid. He was riveted to the spot with wonder that she could

accommodate such an astonishing member, and it cast doubts upon her chastity since moving to this town.

The crowning height of insult was when he had to witness the ecstasy on Harrison's face as he plunged into the woman. His head rolled on a neck made languid with lechery, and his balls tightened and rose toward his body as he came close to ejaculation. Gage dared to slide a hand down his pants to squeeze his own prick, nearly gasping when he smeared about a drop of seed that had trickled from the tip. When Harrison went rigid with orgasm, a fine tremor running up the backs of his shapely legs, Gage nearly exploded, too, and he had to remove his hand from his pants.

He found himself stepping forward, though he'd not intended to.

"Too much entirely. And now it *will* stop."

His spontaneity was nearly worth it to see the horrified shock on their faces. They both stared into the mirror in surprise when he stepped into the bathroom. They had uncoupled, and when Harrison spun about to face him, Gage was nearly pasted with the weight of his elongated, half-erect penis. Harrison bent to grab his shirt and Lola's skirt, and when he stood tall again, he demanded, "What's the meaning of this, Lassen? How long have you been telling Lola how to conduct her private affairs?"

Gage stepped so close he could feel the heat from Harrison's exposed crotch. "Affairs, indeed! And how long have you been fornicating with my housemaid?"

Harrison appeared so enraged he whipped the shirt against the wall, and didn't seem to notice his prick was still drooling at half-mast. "I don't see what business that is of yours, Lassen. Just why are you so interested in what Lola and I do in private? How long have you been standing behind that damned door?"

Gage shouted, "I am *interested* because it's come to my attention that Miss Moreno has been dawdling about saloons behaving in a sluttish manner toward uncouth men! Such behavior doesn't reflect

well upon the upstanding nature of her employment with me, and as such, is of great interest to me.”

“‘Sluttish manner’?” Harrison took two steps toward Gage. They were already so close that his proximity forced Gage out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, precariously close to her unmade bed. Harrison now stuffed his prick back into the buckskins, but he only managed to do up one button, leaving his glorious, sinewy crotch exposed, the root of his penis still jutting angrily. He even tilted his hips arrogantly, long arms dangling at his sides, the nipples of his well-formed chest tantalizingly erect. “Tell me, what is so ‘sluttish’ about wanting to get information for a newspaper article? The *Alta California* is the Mother of Newspapers, only the second newspaper in California, and your so-called housemaid is a *journalist*, Lassen. She had a very legitimate reason to be sitting in that saloon talking to Fowler.”

Harrison’s impudence enraged Gage even further. Stepping up to the man, he poked him in his naked chest. “Women are not supposed to be sitting in saloons unless they are *hookers*, Bancroft. Now don’t tell me you *paid* my housemaid for intercourse.”

And Harrison had the nerve to poke him back in the chest! “Of *course* not. Some women *enjoy* having intercourse with men. Lola is hardly a hooker.”

Lola herself finally strode into the room, adjusting her blouse on her shoulders. “Boys, boys. I’m sorry, Mr. Lassen. I know I should have interviewed Fowler in a setting that wasn’t quite so suggestive. But I was able to obtain information regarding him and his Hounds that will interest you very much. He has no intention at all of ceasing his harassment of the Chileans, and I very much fear that the Hounds’ raids on dry goods stores and restaurants will only become more frequent and injurious to the merchants.”

How dare she stand there with her tits barely covered, having just allowed his *employee* to ride her like a bronco! Yanking her by one of her wrists, he flung her onto her bed and shouted, “Your dubious

information does me no good! I will judge the people I do business with on their own merits and what I see with my own eyes, not the secondhand worthless ‘information’ I receive from a sluttish housemaid!”

Gage tore the silk belt from a whorish dressing gown that hung from the bed frame. Falling down next to her, he furiously wove the belt around her wrists and through the scrollwork of the iron bed frame. He had purchased this bed for her! All the furniture in this room belonged to him, and he never heard so much as a peep of thanks!

“What are you doing, Gage?” she shrieked. “Have you gone mad?”

“I’m preventing you from leaving and doing any more damage to either of our reputations.” He had to admit to himself, he marveled at the way her nipples nearly poked out the blouse’s bodice when he violently tightened the belt to the iron frame. Her delectable bubbies jiggled with every yank on the belt.

Harrison came to his side. “Yes, have you gone *mad*, Lassen? What do you intend to do, keep her tied to her bed for days? How will you get your damned meals then? She’s not a *dog*!”

Gage stepped away from his handiwork, pleased. “You’re right, Harrison. She’s not a dog. She’s just a housemaid!”

Harrison grabbed his shoulder and spun him to face him. “You can’t just tie her up!”

Gage snorted angrily. “And why not? I’m her employer. I can do whatever I need to do to ensure she concentrates on her duties and doesn’t go whoring about town.”

Harrison stepped so close he was nearly standing on Gage’s boots. “Oh, so you would tie *me* up if you needed to ensure I completed the painting of you or finished the sidewalk on Clay Street?”

Gage’s cock twitched at the thought of Harrison bound with hands behind his back, especially if his broadfall was still unbuttoned, as it was now. “I would do whatever it took, yes,” he said ambiguously.

Harrison growled, “Don’t make me punch you, Lassen,” and shoved the councilman aside to jump onto Lola’s mattress and work the knot undone.

To be ignored while Harrison made light of his decisions brought Gage’s mania to the boiling point. Grasping Harrison by one of his naked shoulders, Gage flipped him onto his back, so that his torso lay flat on the mattress, his legs angled over the edge. Gage straddled him and loomed large, pinning both wrists above his head. Perhaps Harrison was so shocked he didn’t move, because he could have easily thrown Gage off. Gage sat stubbornly on the artist’s pelvis directly atop the firm cock, so that it was wedged pleurably against his asshole, and he was glad that his own stiff prick bulged over Harrison’s nude abdomen.

“Harrison. Do *not* question my judgments when it comes to business decisions. I can’t have employees tearing about causing gossip or questioning my decisions. If you continue to do so, I’ll be forced to discharge you from my employ, and you’d have no choice but to join up with Fowler’s Hounds anyway.”

He smiled at the way Harrison’s nostrils flared angrily at his threat. It was enjoyable to at last have a man’s body underneath him, even if they only wrestled for dominance in the matter.

“You’re just a mean-spirited tyrant,” Harrison snarled. “You’re not happy unless everyone is wordlessly doing your bidding, like automatons.”

Gage softened a bit. “I wouldn’t like if it *you* went about like an automaton. You’re an artist, you need to give your artistry—your passion—free rein.”

Harrison stilled a moment, his crystalline blue eyes seeking illumination from Gage’s poker face. Then he renewed his struggle. His thrashing of his hips from side to side only served to ream his stiff cock in the cleft of Gage’s ass, and Gage responded by rocking his own hips, grinning perhaps evilly. This must have disgusted Harrison, for he got one arm free from Gage’s grip and pushed back against his

shoulder to dislodge him. Gage only pressed his torso closer on top of the naked one.

Harrison dug his fingers into Gage's shoulder so viciously Gage later discovered bruises there. Gage whispered, "I think it would behoove you to accept the terms of my employment."

Harrison's arm trembled, and he did not push so stridently now. "I don't think I like your terms of employment."

Before he could change his mind, Gage kissed him. Oh lord, what heaven to suck on the alluring man's mouth! Their pricks rubbed together, and Harrison's hips definitely undulated in wantonness, not to buck Gage off. Harrison's lips parted to allow Gage to slip his tongue in between the teeth. He could have easily bitten him! Successfully resisted him! But he did not, instead slipping his own tongue inside Gage's mouth to lick the backs of his teeth.

They kissed like two women, sweetly and lovingly, the passion rising the more Harrison allowed Gage to dominate him. Soon Gage was humping the entire length of his erection against the other man's, grunting wild pig sounds as he fairly devoured the delicious mouth, one hand behind Harrison's powerful neck where the housemaid had formerly held him, lifting the delightful mouth closer to him, and Harrison even put his free hand on Gage's waist, to rub his thumb there with encouragement.

Harrison as well panted with arousal, ardently meeting Gage's voracious kisses and rocking his hips in rhythm. Gage slid a hand down the enflamed naked skin of Harrison's chest, pausing only to pinch one of those delicious nipples. His goal was to grasp that fat prick in his hand, to frig this hardy son of the West into a puddle of submission, but that's when Harrison put more clout into his shoves, and bowled Gage back so fiercely he rolled and banged his head on the footboard of the bed frame. The one he'd purchased for Lola.

Now it was Harrison's turn to kneel on the mattress and loom aggressively over him, his erection still distending the broadfall of his buckskins. "This simply won't do, tying Lola up. Now. You'll let me

untie her, won't you? Go downstairs, have some whiskey or champagne. I'll stake my affidavit that she'll be downstairs in ten minutes to rustle you some vittles. Right, Lola?"

"Oh, certainly," the voice came, sounding almost cheerful. "There is a beef I was corning, but that might take a couple of hours."

Gage was disappointed when Harrison crawled over to Lola and began untying her, but there was nothing he could do. He went downstairs with the idea to do some gymnastics to work off his excess vitality and stop his blood from boiling. He had a vaulting horse and some bars he lifted himself upon, after reading the works of a physical educator from Germany. When the mania came upon him and he looked upon too many tempting men with carnality, if he did his gymnastics he was eventually too exhausted to think.

Chapter Twelve

At eight in the morning, Tammany Hall was relatively quiet.

Most Hounds having lost their rudder on all-night binges, only a few hearty ones remained to navigate the intricacies of the tent flap. Harrison waited until he saw a likely candidate returning to the tent—Red Davis. He was clad in a cloak of such fancy origins it was apparently stolen from a French lieutenant. The raccoon on his head was extremely worse for the wear. With two eyes on one side of a squashed face, it looked as though it was trying to run far away from Red.

“Hey. Red.”

Red regarded Harrison blearily. “Captain.”

“I presume Sam Fowler’s in there. Can you hand this to him?” Harrison gave Red a carefully worded note he’d composed.

“Sure enough, Captain,” said Red, before he ran into the side of the tent, knocking the raccoon askew.

Now all Harrison had to do was wait.

He sat at a table in The Shades drinking sarsaparilla, with nothing to do other than think. Naturally, his thoughts turned to Lola and their lovemaking of the night before. That had been the most heartfelt experience of his entire life, spending inside of the woman as she simultaneously climaxed around his cock. She had taught him new tricks he was eager to learn, as he could think of nothing more satisfying than to gratify her. In some odd way, he felt more like *himself* when around Lola. Since leaving the Great Plains, he hadn’t felt like himself. It was as though he’d left part of his soul back there with the Mandan, and he’d just been wandering around aimlessly, a

shadow of his true self. With Lola, he didn't need to stand on ceremony. She was witty, intelligent, and bountiful. Of late, Harrison had even been entertaining ideas of taking her away from Gage's employ, to be his wife.

Wife! Harrison had never met a woman who elicited those ideas. Sure, he'd been engaged to Fanny in Philadelphia, but the way they fussed and tore uphill and downhill, he had never envisioned it actually happening. He'd been vastly relieved when she'd broken the engagement to marry a banker, only a month after Harrison had given up lawyering. He'd closed his thriving business to paint miniature portraits, and Fanny did not agree this was a smart choice. It was smart for Harrison. Lawyering at his father's behest had been so stultifying he felt parts of his brain were dying.

And then, last night, Gage. Harrison could not deny that he'd been aroused even after coming inside of the journalist, when it had become apparent Gage had been watching them. The thought that Gage had been standing there feasting his eyes on Harrison's bare back, ass, balls—even the thought that Gage had been admiring Lola's breasts swaying with each stroke of his cock—made Harrison randy as hell. Was he some kind of perverted deviant who enjoyed displaying himself for others? He was proud of his rigid, strapping body, to be sure. He didn't enjoy overeating and wasting food, as many tribes had taught him food could not be wasted. The vigorous out-of-doors life was the one for Harrison, another reason Fowler's bacon-fed figure made him nauseous.

When Gage had pinned him to the mattress, he could have easily tossed the treasurer aside. Though Harrison had seen some exercise bars in a room off the parlor, Gage was not accustomed to the robust life. The most strenuous thing he probably did was heft a pint of ale, or scrawl endless documents, although he probably had Ollie copy the papers for him. No. Harrison rapidly realized that he *wanted* Gage on top of him. Gage was the epitome of the aristocratic, commanding businessman Harrison had wished he could be in his lawyering days.

His luscious café au lait skin, arched nose, and flowing chocolate mane laced with streaks of cinnamon made Harrison's mouth water, and when he had kissed him...

Harrison did not protest. It had been a different kind of heaven entirely, a man on top of him, salaciously licking his tongue. There was an odd feeling of letting go, submitting to one more powerful, a feeling not usually achieved with a woman. To relinquish control and obey the desires of another man was a new sensation, one Harrison imagined delving into more deeply. He did not know what Lola's response was to witnessing him so eagerly necking with her boss, because once Gage had left the room and Harrison had untied her, she had gone like sixty to prepare his dinner.

Now that Gage had made it obvious to the two of them he had androphile leanings, what would happen? Lola had already expressed discontent that she be made to serve them food while they relaxed and enjoyed themselves. How would she react if she stumbled upon them sucking each other's penises? Hand them champagne cocktails? For that was what Harrison dreamed of lately, feeling the creamy head of Gage's prick at the back of his throat. He imagined the large swallows of sperm sliding down his gullet, and the idea of exploding into Gage's shapely mouth made his cock swell, even now in The Shades saloon. Harrison had to figure this out. With Gage's aversion to all things womanly, and the jealous way he'd reacted to watching them fuck, this was not going to be an easy row to hoe.

And, of course, Gage's implication that if Harrison denied him favors, Gage would discharge him from his employ.

"So, you're back for more abuse?"

It was Fowler, leaning impudently with his hand on a chair back, clad in that Viking costume. He looked as though he'd just come out of hibernation.

Harrison stood. "Yes," he said mildly. "Let's walk."

As they left the saloon, Fowler commented cheerfully, "You must enjoy abuse. You didn't struggle very hard when I had you secured to

the floor.” Fowler even allowed Harrison to exit the door first. “Like I told you when I was on top of you, nan-boy. I’m going to fuck you.”

“That’s fine, just fine, Puff Guts,” Harrison said, just as the implications sank into his brain. Twice in one day he’d been pinned by a man, but only once had he enjoyed it. “And now that you mention it. I believe that makes *you* the nan-boy if you’re so eager to fuck another man. What do you think your men imagined when they saw you humping me on the floor? Oh, that’s right. All of your men left the saloon at the first sign of trouble.”

As he led Fowler down a lane lined by ramshackle shanties, Fowler wasn’t so cheerful anymore, perhaps at the thought of his men leaving him in the lurch. “I don’t need anyone else to fight my battles for me,” Fowler insisted.

“Well, that’s good.” Harrison pulled a saber from its sheath and whipped Fowler a weeping stroke down the side of his face. The sword tip only cut about a quarter inch deep as was Harrison’s intention, just enough to maim him as he’d maimed Lola. Fowler was so shocked he just shrank back in horror, hands to his face. Harrison was satisfied to see the blood flow over Fowler’s fingers, and he instantly stepped up to Fowler and held the blade so firmly to Fowler’s neck that it, too, drew beads of blood.

“Listen here, you guts and garbage. If you ever touch or even talk to Miss Moreno ever again, you can expect this sword in your belly. I don’t need to shoot you from afar. I’ll just come leaping out from behind a building when you’re half seas over one fine afternoon, and everyone’s going to watch like you’re a monkey show. So get my message, Fowler. Stay away from Miss Moreno.”

Fowler said nothing, seemingly appalled that actual blood had been spilled, gazing at his hands with awe. So Harrison prodded, “Got it, Fowler? Am I making myself as clear as an unmuddied lake?”

He had to press the blade harder into Fowler’s ruddy neck to prompt the *goonda* to nod his head. But Harrison could not resist

wiping the blade against the neck, bringing forth more blood, before he stalked down the lane.

* * * *

When Lola went out the back door to change the water in the tub of oysters, there was a package on the stoop.

Setting down the oyster tub, she carried the package into the dining room where Gage took breakfast and lunch. It was simply addressed to "Gage Lassen," but it was her job to unwrap everything. Carefully tearing off the brown paper so as to save it for another task, Lola felt her eyes turn round when she spied a bodice of gray silk, high and tight to the shape, trimmed *en tablier* like an apron-front with cascades of quality black lace.

She almost didn't dare to lift the dress from the paper. The beautiful sleeves were not as tight as was formerly fashionable, but loose at the wrists with a horseshoe opening to reveal the undersleeve. And the skirt! It was so wide, how could the wearer fit through an ordinary doorway?

Under the dress wrapped in the paper was a cunning new silk rebozo, obviously not crafted by Californio women, but perhaps even by someone in France from the intricate lacework and how it matched the dress identically.

Clearing her head of her feminine designs, Lola loosely wrapped the dress back up. She would not bring it to Gage now, as he was in his study with Jasper O'Farrell going over some town plans. This dress was obviously meant for a woman who was perhaps secret, as Lola would be the first to know if Gage had a paramour. Perhaps his sister was visiting from St. Croix.

She went back to her oyster tub, hauling it to the water storage barrel in the yard. Gage with a paramour? All of her intuitions seemed to have been proven true when she had watched Gage restrain Harrison, straddle him so boldly, and kiss him. Apparently Gage had

no compunction about blatantly displaying his lust to both Lola and Harrison, for his erection bulged so prominently the tip distended the lower hem of his buttoned waistcoat.

It wasn't Lola he wanted. He could have easily mauled her once he'd bound her with the dressing gown belt. Hell's bells, he could easily maul her any minute of the week, and he had never even touched her kindly on the elbow! No, his inclination obviously lay in the direction of the male gender, and it had actually been very stimulating to watch Gage forcefully plaster such a sloppy, sucking kiss onto her beau—even more stimulating when Harrison seemingly responded in kind, even lifting a hand to place it on Gage's waist. Yes, watching two men kiss was...stimulating. Watching the stiff root of Harrison's penis throb between Gage's taut thighs made Lola want to slip off for a further bit of self-pleasuring.

Lola didn't view such dalliance as unfaithfulness on Harrison's part. Now, if it had been another *woman* who had leaped atop him with such ardor, Lola would have swiftly broken the feeble bonds of the dressing gown belt and whaled into her with vigor. If Lola so much as saw Harrison touch another woman's elbow, well, that woman would not be seen around San Francisco ever again. No. It was somehow different, and acceptable, for Harrison to slip his tongue into another man's mouth, even if that man were her odious boss. It was intensely erotic to watch the two men's jaws working together, the full throats swallowing, tasting each other.

But how would they work this out? Every time Harrison visited her in her apartments, would Gage come barging in, demanding another piece of her poor exhausted beau? Then stalk out like they were both so much trash, so many onion peels and carrot tops in the muddy streets? This was an odd conundrum, indeed.

"Hey. The buzz is your boyfriend just whipped your other boyfriend in the street."

Ollie Denny leaned against the whitewashed fence where so many of her previous suitors had planted themselves. Today he had a guitar dangling at his waist from a strap.

“What?” Fowler dared to whip Harrison again? After what he’d already done? For Lola was certain her nose was broken. The bones didn’t feel quite straight. “Who whipped who?”

Ollie didn’t offer to carry the oyster bucket back into the kitchen. “Bancroft took a sword to Fowler’s face! Yes sirree, Bancroft actually had the pluck to send a note to Fowler telling him to meet at The Shades, then he took him into some sordid alleyway and sliced him!”

“Well, good for Harrison, if that’s really what happened. Why do I get the feeling you’re more impressed with ‘Lieutenant’ Fowler and that whole Hounds business? I didn’t exactly see you booting Fowler in the City Hotel, as Cleve was doing. And it was *me* who had to smash that bottle over his *goonda* head.”

“Admire The Hounds? Why on earth would I admire such chowderheads? I only support them because they’re in Lassen’s employ, as am I. We’re all in this together! That’s why I’m here. I need to copy some records for Lassen.”

“Well, he’s got O’Farrell in there with him. And once Lassen discovers the Hounds detest him for having a slave mother from St. Croix, he might alter his tune.”

The sounds of manly goodbyes came from the foyer, so Lola went into the dining room and picked up the garment package. “Wait until I’m done with Lassen,” she instructed Ollie, although of course he poked and prodded the package until she had to wrench it from his fingertips.

She knocked lightly on the open study door. “Mr. Lassen? A package arrived for you.”

He looked up at her blankly, distractedly, from the page he was writing. “Oh? What is it? Please stoke the fire.”

If he was even slightly mortified by his actions of the night before, he certainly didn’t show it. “It’s a dress,” she said, setting it down on

his desk. "A very pretty dress." She walked off to shove some more logs into the fireplace.

"Oh, yes," he said, barely glancing at it. "Well, take it."

"Take it...where?"

He looked up at her briefly. "To your room? It's yours." Then back to his paper, clicking the pen into the inkwell.

Lola moved back to the dress. She opened the paper to display the gray silk to Gage, in case he was mistaken about exactly which dress it was. "This dress? Why would it be mine?"

Now he sounded irritated. "Because I ordered it for you. It's to be worn when serving guests at meals only, now. I don't want you ruining it by dragging the hem through the muddy streets. And don't get those Celestials to clean it for you. They're quite good for washing shirts, but they pound everything against rocks and render it threadbare. Wash it yourself, do you understand?"

"I...think so." Lola frowned in puzzlement. She had assumed her modest and plain Californio skirts and blouses were sufficient for his guests. Her garments were always clean. "Are you planning on a new dinner party?"

"Not that I know of." He looked up again at her with a very mild expression. "Just the usual friends for dinner. Although there's an election of the town council on January fifteenth, and that will be a big to-do. Oh." With a key at his waist, he unlocked a desk drawer, withdrawing a vial of gold dust. He looked around his desk for something to pour it into, and Lola handed him a small shell from the mantel. She often brought in shells or bird quills for just this purpose. Gold was so new in California no one had devised a reasonable way of transporting it yet.

He poured out what looked like at least three ounces, or nearly fifty dollars, and handed her the shell. "Use this only to purchase yourself new, prettier clothing." Was it her imagination that his eyes twinkled? "If you're to be seen with that Harrison Bancroft fellow,

well, he's my employee, and so are you, and we can't have anyone saying I'm miserly."

Lola was struck like a thousand bricks by Gage's sudden generosity, although of course it was only to prevent anyone thinking him a pinchpenny. Was he giving her implicit approval to be seen with Harrison? That's what it sounded like. She barely had time to squeak out a "thank you" before Oliver Denny was in the doorway, proclaiming loudly as though he'd just rushed from the gold country, "Boss! I have heard news that Sam Fowler and his Hounds are plotting against you, now they've discovered you're from the Western Indies!"

"*West* Indies," Gage corrected, at last tossing the pen into the inkwell and standing. "Yes, it's apparent they're anti-foreigner, and I assumed they would not approve of my parentage, but I *employ* them, don't forget, Denny."

Ollie wrung his hands. "Yes, but...the rumpus last night? When Fowler punched Lola here in the face? She was *defending* you righteously against the injustices she felt Fowler was about to do to you!"

"Well, *really*, Ollie, I was defending *myself*. Fowler forced me to admit my father is Indian, and he began calling me all manner of low names. Luckily Harrison came in then with his pistol, and—"

"Yes!" cried Ollie. "Yes, Mr. Lassen, that's the next part of the tale. Harrison Bancroft was just defending your honor in a sordid back alleyway by taking out a rapier and *slicing* it across that—that—"

"That squab?" Lola assisted.

Ollie pointed at her. "Yes, slicing that *squab's* face with his scimitar, and—"

Gage actually smiled then! "Calm down, Ollie. You're making this out to be a battle of the Three Musketeers. I hardly believe Harrison was lying in wait with a broadsword defending my honor

when in truth, it's more likely he was defending Miss Moreno's honor. But I do appreciate the loyalty."

"It's true, though, Mr. Lassen," Lola said. "When I confirmed that your mother is a Negro, Fowler became very agitated. I really don't think you can trust him. He may be very good at catching runaway sailors, but he's running roughshod over too many other townspeople. In fact, we're putting out a special edition tomorrow, I'd like to get over to the *Alta* office and finish my article, if you're quite satisfied for the next couple of hours."

Gage actually seemed to see *her* when he gazed at her face. And her face actually seemed to be forcing him to *think*, for once. "Yes," he said distantly. "Ollie, can you accompany Miss Moreno to the *Alta* offices? After this melee with Mr. Bancroft, I imagine Fowler and his men are a bit...irritated."

"Sure enough, boss. Then I'll return here to copy your papers."

"Gage?" Lola dared to enquire. "I am glad Harrison slashed Fowler." She glanced to Ollie. "If that really occurred."

"I'm glad, too," said Gage, and his smile seemed genuine. "Harrison is an admirable fellow. I can see where you'd be attracted to him."

Lola had to think about that last sentence for many hours.

Chapter Thirteen

“Lola! Lola!”

Cleve Wallingford waved his arm over the heads of a dozen dancers. The fandango in the Mission Dolores courtyard was in full swing, women in frilly dresses smoking *cigaritos*, guitarists and fiddlers madly strumming, drenched in showers of sweat. Harrison and Lola danced something called the *el jarabe* which seemingly involved Lola hammering her heeled feet precisely and harmoniously like the rattle of drumsticks. Harrison copied the Californio men and rancheros like General Vallejo and Captain Sutter, drumming away with the heels of his new boots, arms thrown carelessly behind his back when his sombrero didn’t threaten to fly off his head. For the occasion he even had a colorful serape to fling about dramatically.

“If Yankees come, the country’s lost, there’s no one to defend her,” bellowed a singer.

A damsel answered in a clear, high voice. “If Frenchmen come, the womenfolk will willingly surrender.”

It was a mad, wild time, and when Cleve called out to them, Harrison was about to place his sombrero upon Lola’s piled coiffure of curls. He didn’t know why, but everyone else was doing it.

“Cleve, what’s that?” Lola asked, tying the wide-brimmed hat tighter under her chin.

Cleve’s eyes shone with excitement. He shoved what looked like a newspaper of four or so pages into Lola’s hand. “A shipload of miners just came from ‘The States,’ and I finagled this *Herald* off one of them. Look, apparently Governor Mason’s gold report finally made it to Washington, and President Polk mentioned it in his Congressional

address. Everyone finally believes the gold stories, and everyone is going lunatic!”

“Oh, holy father!” cried Lola, as several fat raindrops fell on the paper. “It’s raining again. Let’s get inside.”

“Yes,” said Cleve. “Don’t let anyone see that paper, or we’ll never get a chance to read it.” Newspapers from The States were so few and far between, when one got one’s hands on a paper, it was best to hoard it in a private area until one had thoroughly absorbed every line of print.

They moved to an inner apartment of the adobe where there were long tables laden with endless gallons of wine, *aguardiente*, muscatel, and champagne. Harrison grabbed two champagne glasses, and they moved past a table that boasted turkeys, cheese, tortillas, sardines, peaches, and grapes, even jugs of milk from Lola’s cow. The fellow carving and serving the turkeys could scarcely keep up with the eager throng of people shoving their plates at him. Fandango goers, being a voracious crowd, had already rendered the condiments a miasma of colors and scents, some dancers so eager they wore pats of butter and bits of olive on their shirtfronts.

“Lola. We have to plan for a mass incursion of miners! We have to put out a special boom edition of the *Alta* pronto.” Cleve was so excited, he grabbed Lola’s gray silk sleeve and pulled her into a room that looked to be a library, so was unoccupied during these festivities. They stood near a glassless window as Cleve jabbed a finger at the newspaper. “And look what the *Herald* printed! It’s word for word what you wrote months ago in the *Alta*, although they attribute it to ‘a letter from a California correspondent.’”

“Read aloud,” Harrison commanded, squinting.

Lola read, “‘The gold mine discovered in January last, on the south branch of the American Fork in a low range of hills forming the base of the Sierra Nevada, distant thirty miles from New Helvetia, is only three feet below the surface, in a strata of soft sand rock...’” It was apparently a recounting of the discovery at Sutter’s Mill a year

earlier, news of which had failed to make an impact in *The States* until Polk had just verified it last month.

“And here’s part of Polk’s speech!” said Cleve, carefully grabbing the newspaper. “‘Accounts of abundance of gold in California are of such extraordinary character they scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by authentic reports.’ Authentic reports! That’s us!”

“And Governor Mason’s report,” Harrison mentioned. “Hey, Lem and Phil are arriving. You should show them that paper.” Lem and Phil had been helping Lola set type at the *Alta*, enabling them to put out new issues twice a week. “And show Gage, although perhaps I don’t want him contracting me to build twice as many sidewalks for all the miners that’ll be pouring into town.”

“Yes, let me go show Lem and Phil,” said Cleve. “Don’t worry, Lola...I’ll keep this for your perusal later.” And the editor sped out the low adobe doorway.

Lola sighed and leaned against the windowsill. She was radiant in that gray silk gown that Gage had mysteriously given her. The lowering sun behind the storm clouds cast a gauzy, filtered light on her serene face. She had told Harrison that Gage had given her the gown for wearing only while serving dinner guests, yet here she was at the fandango wearing it, and she had ridden with Gage in his carriage. Although Harrison had invited her, he didn’t have a carriage, and it was a good three miles from where they lived to the mission.

She said, “Back in the northern states, they’re realizing California might fall to slavery.”

Harrison didn’t want to discuss slavery—he knew all men were equal in the mines, working side by side, and California would never adopt slavery—so he asked rather abruptly, “Has Gage talked to you since that evening?”

She smiled slyly. “You mean the evening we fucked against my washstand?”

That had so far been the most important evening of his life. Harrison nodded. “Yes.”

“And I presume you don’t mean talked about weather or tea. Has he brought up how he passionately kissed you? No. He’s an odd one. I’m sure he wishes it never happened and that you never mention it to anyone else.”

Harrison was disappointed to think Gage wished he’d never kissed him. “Why do you think he did that?”

Lola shrugged. “I think he’s a fop. You know, a St. Louis dandy.”

Harrison chuckled. “If you mean overly concerned about his attire, I don’t think most of those beautiful fellows make it a habit to kiss other men.”

“Of course I’ve noticed for two years he’s never wooed a woman. I’m almost certain now he loathes women for what his wife did to him. Did you notice, he became so violent when he saw us fucking? It was from *jealousy*, Harrison. Not jealous that a man was laying a hand on his housemaid, as he tried to pretend. He was seething with jealousy that *you* were touching someone other than him. I’ve seen the way he looks at you—voracious, hungry, like his mouth is watering. I can’t blame him, Harrison. You...are...delicious.”

Just the way Lola said “delicious” was enough to set off Harrison, and he moved to wriggle a lock of her hair between his fingers. “I agree he’s an androphile and is too nervous to be known as one in society, but...Why would he risk allowing *you* to watch him kiss me?”

Again Lola shrugged, pressing her fingertips to the hollow of his throat. “He does seem very domineering. It was probably his way of telling me where my ‘place’ is. I thought it was very arousing, watching him straddle you, but I don’t think I wish it to happen again.”

“Why not?” Harrison asked, with too much urgency, he realized.

“I just don’t see how it can. Would he bind me up every time? What is he going to do, break down the door to my bedchamber every time I want you to myself?”

“But you thought it was arousing.” Merely thinking about Gage kissing him had caused Harrison’s cock to elongate painfully. He now associated Lola intimately with the town treasurer. Just kissing Lola conjured up memories of Gage Lassen’s mouth on his.

“Oh, my, yes. Now, a woman kissing you? I would have cooked her goose. For some strange reason I don’t see Gage as competition for my hand. Another man simply doesn’t offer the same things women offer, besides the obvious things, I mean! And Gage is an extremely dapper and attractive man.” Sticking out just the tip of her tongue, she stood on her toes to lick his lower lip. “Were you excited when Gage pinned you down and kissed you?”

Harrison’s heart sped up, thinking of admitting he’d been aroused by that act. It was far too shameful to admit, so he thought to silence Lola by kissing her. She allowed him to slip his tongue into her mouth and lick her, but she soon backed away and purred into his ear, “Your penis was erect. And you had just ejaculated inside of me. So you must have been *very* excited.”

Harrison tried a different tactic. He took big sucking bites from the delicate muscles of her throat, something that always brought gooseflesh rising to her skin. Bending, he spread her knees with his, and carried her to a leather-topped desk that perhaps was used by priests, as it held some manuscripts in a very undulating Spanish script. Seating her down on the desk’s edge, he whispered in her ear, “Let’s say I *was* excited by his kiss. Just because you were watching, and I knew you were sparked by it.”

“Yes, and the idea that he was watching us the entire time...admiring your muscular ass.” She slid her palms over his haunches, and he lunged his hips between her thighs, the tip of his prick nearly squirting when it rubbed against the silk of her lap. “Oh, this damned wide skirt!” she declared like a petulant child, trying to yank her skirts up over her knees.

“Yes, let me feel, *meha*, how stimulated you were, knowing Gage was watching us fuck...” As though lifting an intricately ruffled

French curtain, which Lola was essentially wearing, Harrison gathered the folds of silk in his grip. Licking the underside of her jaw, he whispered hoarsely, "If you didn't work for Gage anymore, he wouldn't treat you like a slave..."

"And I wouldn't have to serve you tea." Lola giggled.

"If all these miners are really coming from The States, your paper will grow at full chisel. Then maybe Cleve can pay you a salary to enable you to live without Gage. Oh, land's sake," Harrison moaned when he slipped his fingers into the slit in her drawers and felt her pussy slick and dripping. He diddled the side of her clitoris as she had taught him, causing her to gasp out.

"I'd like that...to not be Gage's slave anymore...*Oh!* Yes, that's perfect!" She took his heavy, drooling cock from his broadfall and smeared about the few drops of semen that welled there.

Harrison nudged his prick at her lubricious canal. As he sped up his toying of her slick button, she emitted tiny mewling pants. She groaned loudly when she lunged her hips forward and speared herself on his cock.

Harrison smiled with delight, sliding in to the hilt. "So this is how drenched you become when thinking of Gage kissing me?"

"I'm glad that you enjoyed it." The authoritative, smooth voice came from somewhere behind Harrison. Harrison froze in an extremely compromising position, Lola's dainty heeled slippers hooked behind his knees into the gathered folds of his buckskins. He became painfully aware that his ass was exposed to the chilly winter air, but his prick twitched with excitement at Gage's voice.

"Oh, very much so," Lola said lustily, continuing to ride Harrison's cock.

Now he was unsure if she realized Gage stood directly behind him, so close he could feel the heat of Gage's torso against his back. When he pulled back a few inches, he saw that her eyes were wide open and shining, and she must have been looking directly at Gage.

"I do wish you would do it again," she said in a playfully begging tone.

And Gage raised his hand to Harrison's bare neck, to rub the vertebrae with his thumb. "I'm more than pleased to perform for your view, my dear."

"My dear"! Since when had those two become so back-slapping? Sure, Gage had given her the dress, and they had arrived at the fandango together. But he'd called her "sluttish" when he'd tied her to the bed frame and had taunted Harrison with threats of terminating his employment if he did not behave as Gage commanded. So now it was "my dear"? What had changed? Harrison's brain went numb when Gage's hot, open mouth clamped down on the back of his neck, and a flood of seed surged up the underside of his prick. His lust sent him vaulting into Lola again, and she knotted her ankles at the small of his back to allow him better access, making herself intimately vulnerable to him.

Oh, well. Let Gage do whatever he deems appropriate. He plunged his prick into Lola's hot, steamy canal. The councilman's nibbles on the side of his neck brought gooseflesh to the slopes of his ass, and when Gage pressed an admirable erection into the cleft and humped him, Harrison nearly lost his load inside of the woman.

"No..." he panted. "Slower."

Lola slowed her lunges, but Gage must not have thought this command was meant for him.

"That's right, Harrison," Gage murmured in his ear. "Lola enjoys watching me kiss you, watching me pleasure you."

He slid his hands between the couple, under Harrison's fancy embroidered shirt, to grasp his chest lustily. Gage bit Harrison's earlobe as he almost viciously pinched his stiff nipples. *Land's sake. I want this glorious man to fuck me.* Though Harrison now barely moved inside Lola, he felt himself about to spurt a great flood of jism, and he gasped loudly when Gage's hands vanished from his chest, and the treasurer plastered his face to Harrison's backside.

Harrison stilled both his cock and fingers, and even pulled out of Lola a couple of inches, spreading his thighs to give Gage admittance to his ass. He peppered his haunches with sinful, rapid nibbles. It was a wicked heaven to be at the behest of such a dominant, overbearing big dog of the tanyard. Gage gripped his hips and slathered his mouth between the globes of his butt, snorting like a starving feral dog. When he stuck out a stiff tongue to tentatively probe there, Harrison arched his back, and he felt Lola reaching long arms down to finger Gage's locks of hair.

"Do you like that?" she whispered lewdly. "Him gnarling into your ass like a pig looking for truffles? You want him to take your big balls into his mouth?"

"Oh, *God*...yes," Harrison managed to utter. The exquisite rapture of being pressed between the two overwhelmed any mortification he may have felt at admitting this.

Lola licked the side of his mouth. "Oh, but I don't think he can." Louder, she called out, "Mr. Lassen. Can you open your mouth wide enough to taste Harrison's hefty balls?" *Mr. Lassen*. It sounded even more obscene when Gage's "sluttish housemaid" addressed him in that submissive way.

Gage's shoulders and hands lifted Harrison, and when Gage slurped one of his full, taut balls into his hot mouth, giving butterfly kisses to it with the pointed tip of his tongue, Harrison exploded.

His brain really did cease to operate when he spurted load after load of jism inside Lola's hungry pussy. Being assailed from both sides like that, every muscle in his body seized up like ivory. He stopped breathing, choking only on wordless sounds, as each convulsion squeezed yet another burst of semen from his prick.

Gage titillated him like a man possessed, giving his balls great cow licks and nibbling at the thin skin until it was almost painful. Lola's head wobbled like a toy on her velvety throat, her grin feline. She had never looked lovelier than at this moment, her hair in

disarray, her sex and mind so wide open that her locked ankles were now somewhere in the vicinity of his shoulder blades.

Harrison finally choked out a couple of mangled breaths. “Chelsea.” His head swam, his balls pulsated. Reaching one hand down, his fingers joined Lola’s in stroking Gage’s thick black and cinnamon locks, as Harrison eased his prick out of the woman.

At last they could pant together, almost giggling against each other’s mouths like a couple in the throes of puppy love. When Gage reluctantly released his balls with a final lingering lick, Harrison came somewhat to his senses.

“Are you still alive?” Lola laughed.

“*Meha...* I’m not sure.”

But Harrison gasped again when Gage’s roving mouth clamped around the sopping root of his prick, smacking his lips as he lapped up the remaining smears of seed, cleaning him, as it were, like a cat.

“Oh, ah,” Harrison sobbed, sliding a hand down his abdomen to gently push the questing mouth away. It was too much, he was too sensitive, and any touch was now agonizing.

He heard Gage get to his feet, and he feebly raised himself on his palms. Lola seemed content to lie like a puppet on those religious manuscripts as the happy fandango music drifted back to Harrison’s ears, as though the musicians had stopped during his lovemaking.

Harrison stood on wobbly legs, making a half-baked attempt to button his broadfall. He’d never felt his tool so long and beefy, like an unfeeling, numb appendage he stuffed into his pants. His sense of propriety slowly returning, he pulled Lola’s bodice up so Gage would not be forced to look at her nipples, and a twinge of jealousy hit him at the thought that Gage might *enjoy* the sight. Her lower legs swinging over the desk’s edge, Lola’s toes brushed the cold tiled floor, but she made no motion to pull her voluminous skirts back down. Harrison helped her, smiling shyly.

Smearing his damp hair back from his forehead, Harrison exhaled mightily and turned around. Gage leaned against a wall, nearly

glowering at Harrison from under a curtain of alluring hair that had come loose from his pigtail. A lit *cigarito* was in his hand, but he was immobile. His mood wasn't foul, however. Glowering was just Gage's smoldering, domineering way of doing things.

Harrison was relieved when Gage said something, for he certainly didn't know what to say.

"That was delicious. Harrison. Thank you for fulfilling my desire to taste...the beefiest tool in all of San Francisco." Harrison was certain he saw a grin starting on the luscious mouth.

Harrison was taken aback that the councilman would speak so plainly, especially in front of his housemaid. And the remark sounded as though Gage did not plan on repeating the act, which made Harrison feel decidedly anxious.

So he ran his arm up the wall and leaned alongside Gage, looking down upon the slightly shorter man. "I enjoyed it as well, but..."

Gage frowned. "But what?"

How to say it? Harrison raised his eyebrows and jerked his head in the direction of the library table.

"What? You're concerned that we were profane?"

Harrison had to chuckle at that. "No. I'm concerned about Lola. That we don't...*include* her in things."

"She was included. She was there the entire time...Right, Lola?"

Lola came forward, smoothing the lap of her dress down, perfectly sprightly for a woman who had just been properly fucked. "Mr. Lassen. I would not want to wear this dress for the wrong occasion. Does this qualify as 'serving guests'?"

Gage laughed outright then, and it was a gratifying sight. He was by far the most handsome man in town, surpassing even the most elegant caballero, with their giant spurs and showy horsemanship. "You look lovely, my dear. Yes, this qualifies as serving guests. You can wear the dress and the other clothes any time you wish, as long as you're in the presence of me..." He looked at Harrison ardently. "Or Harrison here."

A commotion from the main hall interrupted their friendly conversation. All three of them turned their heads to the closed door. It sounded like bodies crashing, thuds of large quantities of meat being flung to the tiles, glassware shattering.

And *goondas* shouting in indiscriminate heaps.

“Fowler,” Harrison whispered harshly.

Gage’s hand automatically went to his pistol in its holster. He shook his head with disgust. “That chowderhead,” he growled. “He’s starting to make my blood boil.”

Chapter Fourteen

Gage was smoking.

How *dare* those Hounds burst into the annual fandango? It was quite one thing to clamor into the store of Mellus & Howard and take clothing and dinnerware without paying. After all, the Hounds did a service for every merchant in their little metropolis, driving off squatters from lands owned by rightful citizens. Thieves would scatter the moment even a singular Hound emerged on the scene. But to come to a fandango and raise the roof...

One such Hound currently was flinging a Peruvian chef across his own banquet table, and Gage caught Alcalde Leavenworth by the sleeve. "What's happened?"

Sweat poured down the Alcalde's brow. "They have barged in, as usual demanding food, which of course would be given them since they are townspeople, and all are welcome here. But even when it was handed over, they still proceeded to smash crockery and wallop people in the face!"

"This is absurd!" Gage looked about to see who might help him confront the ruffians. It swiftly occurred to him that the Hounds were the people he might need to confront ruffians, so who would confront *them*? There was Harrison, of course, and perhaps his associates Sansing and Jensen who helped him build sidewalks. But four men were hardly a police force against twenty marauders, and Gage could understand if Harrison was reluctant to get involved after having last scarred Fowler's face.

Perhaps he could merely speak calmly to Fowler. After all, he paid Fowler a salary from the town's coffers.

He found Fowler cheerfully shoving a hapless Spaniard's face into a punch bowl. Little did Fowler know, the man was a valued majordomo of General Vallejo. Vallejo sputtered angrily and attempted to grab Fowler's shoulder. Fowler let the man blubber in the fruit bowl while he drew back a beefy arm to punch the grandest ranchero in California, so that's when Gage stepped in, insinuating himself between the two.

Fowler's unfocused eyes at first appeared not to see Gage. Gage tried to physically lower Fowler's fist, uttering what he hoped were soothing words as he backed the *goonda* toward a wall. "Fowler, Fowler. What gives? This is a town fandango, open to the public. What reason could you have for causing such a rumpus?"

"Lassen," Fowler slurred. "The Chileans and Spaniards will not pay their fair share for keeping the town in good order. We have to remind them of the consequences if they don't contribute."

"Yes, but these are servants and townspeople. Medina there, with a chair cracked over his head, he has a blacksmith shop on Jackson Street."

"Well then, he isn't paying enough for order!" Fowler roared suddenly, his piggish eyes nearly crisscrossing in his skull. "You can rest assured, we do not remind anyone who does not need a reminder!" He clapped a hand to his chest patriotically. "We are an association for mutual defense. We are guardians of the community against the encroachments of Spanish foreigners."

Gage put his hands on his hips. "Oh, yes? Then why do citizens fearful of brawls have to retire early to their dwellings? From my house alone you can hear your Hounds raiding the Spanish tents, tearing them down and robbing them of their contents. I cannot send my housemaid to my own hotel with messages after sundown."

Fowler's maw twisted into a leer. He lowered his patriotic paw and let his arms dangle loosely, like a monkey. "Yes, that housemaid...I'd think, Lassen, that if you don't give us a free lunch to create order as we see fit, you might find we have a problem with the

way you conduct things in your own home, too. Maybe that's the way they do things in the West Indies, but not here in America."

"What are you talking about? How dare you impugn there is anything untoward going on in my home!" But Gage was getting a creeping feeling.

"Oh, you think we haven't noticed? Why, only now we saw you emerge from that back room with dust on your knees, and you were followed by that damned albino carpenter who was practically still buttoning up his pantaloons! How many times have we seen him coming and going from your establishment? If you intend to keep things quiet about your nancy-boy doings, I think it's in your best interest to leave us to our business."

Oh, dear God... What exactly had this buffoon seen? People exiting a room, that was all. "Dear Sir! There are no 'nancy-boy doings' anywhere in this town! I was merely having a business conversation with Bancroft *and* my housemaid, in case you didn't see her coming out of the room as well. If it's any of your business," he added.

"Oh, ho!" Fowler chortled. "All *three* of you now, is it? Well, well. That makes it even more interesting, and an even bigger reason to leave us to our own doings." He leaned forward confidentially, although he hardly needed to whisper in the hubbub of the long dining room. "I'd watch out for that nan-boy Bancroft if I was you. He's a big tease, fresh and saucy. He's got a reputation for seducing whatever lad catches his fancy and then booting him, which is why we don't fraternize with him and don't allow him into our headquarters. So don't get your hopes up if you're hoping for a bit of lick-spigot."

With that, Fowler lurched off, leaving Gage to stand with a numb brain.

Dear God. What exactly was that *goonda* insinuating? Gage couldn't even turn and face the room full of people for fear they all had divinely bestowed hearing and knew every crass implication

Fowler had just uttered. So he stalked with as much dignity as he could into the courtyard to smoke another *cigarito*. On the way, he glanced to one side and saw his man Oliver Denny slapping the shoulder of one Curly Billy, laughing as though he could nearly die at some monkey business they were conducting.

Casually, Gage toured the courtyard, noting that the library window could not be seen from many vantage points here, and besides, it was dark in the library. He allowed the pattering rain to soak into the shoulders of his French topcoat and tried to bring back the ecstasy of earlier. Now things had devolved to such a point that *goonda* would not only interrupt his sensual sojourn with the strapping redheaded artist, but he would make insinuations that Gage...well, that Gage *hoped* were unfounded.

How was it possible Harrison was a “tease” with a “reputation for seducing lads”? Gage had assumed that, like himself, this was Harrison’s first experience with buggery—he had not leaped into Gage’s arms, and if he was so accustomed to “seduction,” why had he not devoured Gage’s prick the moment Gage posed for his pencil with his crotch bulging like a stuffed turkey? No, Harrison had seemed embarrassed, ill at ease, and Gage wondered if his proposed kiss would have even been completed had not Ollie and Cleve barged in.

What a pack of lies! Gage inhaled the smoke, imagining the luscious milky globes of Harrison’s ass as he kneaded them, then buried his face there. All his years of fantasy could not do justice to the reality of wrapping his tongue around the base of a stiff, pulsating penis. Licking the residue of fresh semen from such a hulking tool, feeling the throb of the vein tickle his tongue. Suctioning those hulking balls into his mouth—to have the seeming talent to make such an athletic man groan and squirm, to part his thighs in utter submission, it was such a powerful sensation! Gage enjoyed feeling powerful in daily business affairs, of course, but in the sensual realm it was a fresh, overbearing feeling to have such a man in his power. If

only he had had the guts to slurp that entire vigorous lobcock into his mouth—but that was a new sensation to be savored another day...

As for Lola. What had Harrison said to him? “We can’t leave her out of this” or some such? What could Gage *do*, however? He supposed he was satisfied enough allowing Harrison to mount that girl. Although, now that he thought about it, it would detract from the seed available for Gage himself to swallow...And wouldn’t she become miffed if Gage attempted to handle the artist himself in a room when she wasn’t present? And yes, part of the stimulation of the scene they’d just enacted had been admiring her buoyant breasts—he had specifically ordered that gown with the most fashionably revealing neckline. *Damn* women! Was it possible to be tempted by individuals of both genders? Perhaps he’d grown so perverse in his solitary years that he was now like a decadent Roman courtier.

And perhaps Lola did not resemble his old witchy wife in the tiniest possible way.

It looked like Harrison’s form coming to him through the falling rain. Gage had always admired the confident way Harrison held himself. He didn’t merely walk, he sauntered with long arms at his sides, as though accustomed to striding through vast battlefields without batting an eye. Not much seemed to rattle Harrison.

“Quite the rumpus, eh?” Harrison said casually, taking his “bancroftite” pipe from a pouch slung round his waist.

Gage sighed out a stream of *cigarito* smoke. He knew he must look as forlorn as he felt. “Yes. I’m starting to come around to your way of thinking, Harrison. Only now, he virtually threatened to jaw to the entire town that you and I are perhaps closer than we should be.”

Harrison stilled, the pipe at his lips. “Whatever gave him that idea?”

Gage shrugged. “Seeing us just now coming from the library. Apparently the knees of my pants were dusty.”

Harrison snorted. “I don’t see how he could extrapolate anything from that. Unless such activities were already on his brain.”

“Then he made some insinuations that it was you who was fond of seducing other men. That you were known to do that.”

“What?” Harrison exploded. “What a—what a finger-banging chicken diddler!”

Gage had to laugh at the description, although the subject was a somber one.

“Why,” Harrison sputtered, “it is *he* who is the one who...” He attempted to compose himself, walking around in little circles on the courtyard tiles. “Let us say he is perhaps overly excited by the bodies of other men, but only in his dreams or in perverse violent ways can he act on his wishes. I think that’s why he enjoys accusing others of so-called unnatural vices. We can block his game some way.”

Gage had to smile. The idea that this beautiful man would allow himself to be fondled by him was enough for him now. “With Fowler’s recent threat...I hate to ask this of you, but perhaps it would be better if you came and went through the back kitchen door, even when it’s obvious you’re at my house to paint my portrait.”

Harrison nodded. “That’s practical. And everyone knows I’m wooing Lola, so it makes sense.” Under the darkening evening sky, with only the lamplight from the dining hall to shine on his alabaster face, he quite resembled an impeccable Neptune. “And speaking of wooing Lola. I do hope she can be included in our...”

“Our, yes I know,” Gage said swiftly, in case anyone was within earshot. He sighed deeply, dropping the *cigarito* to the ground and stepping on it. “Harrison. You perhaps have gleaned the impression that I...am not a great lover of women. I used to be. I adored and worshiped women with the best lotharios. And then I married Anna, which put a stop to all of those fond affections. It was in New Orleans, where I migrated after being formally educated in Denmark. She was a wily, witchy woman, and of course for a young master of shipping vessels, such a woman was considered aristocratic, inscrutable, unreadable, mysterious.

“Well. I fell like a thousand bricks, as you would say.” Harrison grinned. “It was not until I returned from one of my journeys to St. Croix that I finally discovered what the entire town already knew. She was in bed...with my brother.”

Harrison’s eyes went round. “The ultimate betrayal,” he uttered.

“Yes, so I lost a wife and a brother both in one fell swoop. Worse, they’d been carrying on for years. And...” Gage could barely bring himself to give voice now. He doubted he had ever told anyone this part of the story. “And. That the son I thought was mine...wasn’t mine.”

“Oh, land’s sake!” Harrison burst out. “I take back what I said about the ultimate betrayal! *That* is the most horrific story I’ve heard! Gage, I can’t say as I blame you for thinking that women are bound for hell in the creek swamp!”

“By that token, I should detest all men, since my brother I suppose was categorized as a man, and he had a certain hand in it.”

“You should hate all brothers. So you booted her out?”

Gage didn’t want to ponder on it any longer, but he owed Harrison an ending to the story. “I thought I was quite generous, given the circumstances. I left her alone while I sailed to Brazil, to get her affairs in order and settle into a new life with my brother. He was obviously who she preferred to be with. When I returned, everything in the entire house had been cleaned out, and they’d disappeared. The three of them.”

“Miserable old critters. I can’t say as I blame you, Gage. Now it makes more sense why you haven’t been so quick to woo any of the belles around these parts. Much to their consternation. You’re the most seemingly bachelor in town.”

“Yes, but...It really does not excuse my treatment of Miss Lola Moreno. You’re right about that, Harrison. And I *have* been attempting to soften my stance toward her. I do find her a good-looking, comely, capable woman. She’s certainly very pleasant,

doesn't grate on one's nerves, and many men have attempted to win her hand as well, in case you didn't know that."

"I knew," Harrison said, the shy look very attractive on him.

Gage risked putting his hand on Harrison's forearm. "I am trying to become friendlier toward her. Less of a tyrant, more of a friendly mentor. I'll try to do it for you...Harrison."

"No. Do it for Lola."

Chapter Fifteen

“Where were you last night?”

Oliver Denny leaned against the counter and popped a strawberry into his mouth. “Last night? Why? What was going on?”

Lola grated nutmeg into the boiled potatoes. “The town council meeting here at the house. Of course, silly! Lassen was furious you weren’t here to take notes, and I had to.”

“Oh! Well, it’s not so difficult, really, is it? You just make sure you have enough sheets of paper, and enough ink, and—”

“I know. I mean, where were you?”

“Where? Why, I...I was at the new Parker House sampling their cuisine. Yes, indeed! Boy, that German chef can sure fry up a salmon.”

Lola frowned. The attaché often acted very nervous and giggly about things one didn’t need to be nervous about, such as sweating in the Digger *temescal*, or that time he put a dove into her icebox, not to eat but to use as a magic trick. “Reverend Hunt said he was at Parker House before the meeting and would have mentioned seeing you, since we were all discussing where you might be.”

Ollie chortled in his smoky showman’s voice. “Oh, what does Reverend Hunt know? He lies all the time! That’s the nature of his job. You don’t *really* think God created Earth in seven days, do you? It must’ve taken Him at least three days to build those giant temples in Egypt.”

Sometimes it was difficult to argue with Ollie’s logic. Lola added some milk and butter to the potatoes and grabbed her potato masher. “You don’t happen to know anything about the new wharf Lassen is

building, do you? I mean the pilings. Almost every morning when he goes to check up on it, someone has undermined the pilings, vandalized them, taken an axe to them.”

“Pilings? What do I know about pilings? I’m just a simple clerk, clerking my heart out all day. Oh, and performing as a clown for the amusement of children.”

“Ollie. Your clown ensemble is a sight to scare the witches. That last little boy ran away screaming so fast he nearly disappeared into that mud hole.”

Ollie did a little jig. “Artemus Felcher, the Dancing Clown!” He reached for a few apples to juggle.

“You might want to think up a new name for yourself.” Lola went to the parlor to check on Harrison’s painting progress.

Gage lolled back in his usual maroon chair, his languid eyes boring deeply into the back of Harrison’s easel. Gage had decided on a stuffed eagle as a prop, as miners used eagle’s quills to store their gold dust, so this bird clung precariously to the back of the chair and often toppled over. On an occasional table by his dangling fingers were set a glass vial of gold dust, a scale, and a giant ten-pound nugget a miner had traded to Gage for a week’s stay in his hotel.

Harrison painted away ardently, wearing only a tight-fitting undershirt, an apron Lola had loaned him, and his fringed buckskins. They had stoked the fire so hotly on this cold rainy day, Gage had even loosened his formal necktie, although Harrison would paint it properly. Harrison also did not paint the *aguardiente* glass that sat next to the scale and gold nugget. As for Gage’s long erection that he always displayed so proudly nestled in the crotch of his trousers, of course Harrison conveniently brush-stroked over that. He was a fast painter, and his portrait looked nearly done. That would be a shame when it was finished.

“Yes, I think I was the last black ship captain in New Orleans,” Gage was telling Harrison. She had heard this story before—in San Francisco, it wasn’t shameful to be known as having Negro blood.

That is, until the arrival of the Hounds. "They started enforcing those Negro Seamen Acts at the Port of New Orleans."

"I heard of that," commented Harrison. "Ridiculous. They forced all Negro seamen into lockup for the time they spent in port, for fear they'd cause an insurrection. I believe it all stemmed from the Denmark Vesey revolt in twenty-two in South Carolina."

Tiny frown lines appeared between Gage's eyes. She took the *aguardiente* decanter forward to refill his glass. "You always seem to know so much about the law."

Harrison was silent for quite a while. Lola knew he was pretending to concentrate on painting Gage's lapel. "I may have dabbled in the law at some point. Everyone does, pretty much, don't they?"

Gage actually gave Lola a tiny smile when she filled his glass. He had been doing that of late, saying thank you, even asking what she would like to prepare for dinner instead of dictating. "Not really, Harrison. You knew about the treaty with the New York Indians in thirty-eight. What did you say you did before you became a portrait painter?"

"Well, of course," Harrison said lightly, putting his brush into a jar of turpentine. "It had to do with *Indians*. I wanted to paint Indians, and write about their customs."

"He has a very fine portrait in his City Hotel room," Lola told Gage. "A grand chief with buffalo horns on his head."

To her surprise, Harrison seemed to wax sentimental then, perhaps to take attention away from his knowledge of the law. "Four Bears," he told them. "A great Mandan chief. I was there in thirty-seven, the year the pox came upriver on the fur company's steamer and wiped out their entire civilization."

Gage scowled. "*Entire* civilization?"

Harrison stared at the fireplace. "In the course of two months. They were surrounded by their enemies, the Sioux, and could not spread out upon the Plains and weaken the disease. Being enclosed

within the pickets of their village, some died within hours. Others destroyed themselves with their guns and knives, or dashed their brains out by leaping from a thirty-foot ledge.”

Lola shuddered, taking a seat on an ottoman near Harrison. “And you were not ill?”

He didn’t look at her. “Yes, I was, but I think there’s something in the constitution and habits of the Indian that makes them more susceptible, perhaps the exposed lives they lead. They ignorantly plunge into the coldest water while in a high fever and die before they have the power to get out. I also noted later that where the traders brought salt, fever came. Progress of the fever stopped at the outer limits where salt was used.”

“And they all died but you?”

At last his eyes flickered from that dull, dead stare. He blinked, staring at the hearth now. “Well, not before the Arikara took possession of the village. Then Sioux attacked us, and many Mandan prisoners ran onto the prairie, entreating the Sioux to kill them, saying they were Arikara dogs, their friends were all dead, and they did not wish to live. The remaining Mandan were cut to pieces.”

There was a silence, and at last Gage ventured, “So you got out alone?”

Harrison looked back to the fire. “I waited for Four Bears. I had become very attached to him on a previous visit.” He sighed deeply. “This fine fellow sat in his wigwam and watched every one of his family die about him, his wives and little children. He walked out, around the village, and wept over the final destruction of his tribe, braves and warriors, all laid low. Four Bears went to a hill and remained there for six days. I waited for him. He crept back home, and died on the ninth day, alongside the group of his family.

“Then I left.”

Lola did not know what to say. These people had been the closest to Harrison since he’d been a lad, with the father he evidently didn’t care much for. She knew he had broken an engagement with a woman

he evidently didn't care much for. He was not a man who fell "like a thousand bricks" for just anyone. Yet here he was, recounting this most intimate story to the town treasurer and his housemaid. It took Gage, the businessman, to ask sharply, "The fever arrived on the steamer, you said?"

Harrison's eyes flickered with something akin to annoyance. "Yes, but I am convinced the captain would not have let us off if he'd known." Breaking his gaze at the fireplace, Harrison looked back to his easel and tentatively raised his brush to hover over the canvas. "Course, you have to think. Which one of us white men decimated those friendly and hospitable people? I fell ill along with the rest, although the three other fur traders did as well."

"Holy father," Lola whispered.

Abruptly, the mood in the room lightened when Harrison declared happily, "I think we have only one more session to go, Gage, before your portrait is done."

Lola stoked the fire, as she wished the men to remain warm. It behooved her to watch them in various stages of undress. "It's a fine portrait, Gage. Have you looked at it? I noticed Harrison puts it in the corner when he's done for the day."

"Gage doesn't want to look." Harrison removed the apron smeared with Tyrian Purple and Haarlem Ash fingerprints. "Not until it's done."

Completely taking off his necktie now, Gage sat upright. "So, Harrison. You didn't answer me. What did you say you did before you painted miniature portraits?"

Harrison stretched, unfurling his long, lean body as he lifted his palms to the ceiling. "Ah!" He relaxed, but didn't look at Gage. "I didn't say." He lifted an arm to escort Lola into the informal dining room, but over her shoulder she saw Gage frowning as he got to his feet.

"That was somewhat rude," she whispered. "And now I am curious. Why won't you tell about your life before portrait painting?"

“There’s not much to tell.”

“And why do you know so much about lawyering—*oh!*”

Bending at the knees, Harrison had lifted Lola while plunking his bottom down into a dining chair. She now sat lewdly on his lap, her quim planted squarely over his half-erect penis. With Gage about to enter the room! Gage had seen them in infinitely more compromising positions before, to be sure. The fandango incident came to Lola’s mind as Harrison kissed her openmouthed, winding his fingers through her hair, which today she had done in long corkscrew ringlets, painstakingly using a hot iron. She had been taking more care of her toilet to impress the two men, although she drew the line at those lace caps that gave the wearer the look of a Quaker grandmother. She had been wearing the new ensembles purchased with the money Gage had given her, and she knew Gage was paying Harrison top dollar, judging from the blouses and slippers he’d given her, as well.

Drawing the pelerine down to reveal her bosom, Harrison caressed her gently about the throat and shoulders. He always somehow found the most sensitive parts of her body and instinctively knew how to make her shiver, breath quicken, gooseflesh spring to her skin. She now knew he smelled of salt from bathing in the bay, and she admired him even more, if such a thing was possible, for his stalwart ways. It was impossible to bring herself to bathe in the icy bay, especially now when snow cloaked the foothills to the east.

When he scooped a hand into her bodice to lift her breast, she feebly pushed him away. “Ollie...” she whispered against his mouth. “He was here. Let me make sure he’s gone.”

“And check to see if the ducks are done.” Gage stood in the doorway, and it was difficult to tell his mood, seeing his housemaid on the lap of his heart’s desire—Harrison.

Lola obediently got to her feet and went to the kitchen. Ollie had thankfully left, and the ducks weren’t nearly done, their red feet sticking out of the too-small pot. Lola idled about, stirring the mashed

potatoes. She didn't mind serving the men meals or liquors. As she'd told Harrison before, a wife would also do as much, and it was her job, no insult. But then, a wife would sit down at the table with them. Tonight was the first night she would serve the two men, and maybe she was a bit sore thinking she'd have to eat in the kitchen.

She had thought about the fandango every waking moment for the past couple of weeks. Opening herself up utterly to the thrusts of Harrison's long thick penis had given her a feeling of trust—he had not hurt her with that giant appendage. He had stroked her tenderly, and he had allowed Gage to lick his big meaty balls. Feeling Gage's slippery locks while she entwined her fingers with Harrison's, feeling Gage hungrily lap at the root of his penis, she was happy, secure. The protection of one man gave her a sense of security. Wouldn't the protection of two men feel doubly as safe?

She didn't mind if Gage didn't touch her. It was enough to burn under Harrison's intricate, talented caresses. She would probably explode if two men at once attempted it. And it steamed her well-nigh to boiling to watch Harrison and Gage touch each other. Lola merely yearned to be considered an equal on the same social footing. To sit at the same table, to discuss the same topics of business and politics, things she was familiar with, since she worked at the newspaper.

But for now, she chose the only option. She would serve them champagne and return to the kitchen to wait for the damned ducks to finish cooking.

Shouldering the swinging kitchen door open, Lola planned on heading to the dining room sideboard to grab two champagne glasses. But Gage was standing behind Harrison as he sat at the dining chair, stopping her in her tracks. Gage had slid his palms down Harrison's undershirt, fondling his pectorals. He pinched Harrison's nipples, stiffening them to bullets under the flimsy cotton shirt, and Lola forgot to breathe. Harrison's head was tossed back over the chair against Gage's abdomen, his muscular throat fully exposed, as Gage leaned down and kissed him sloppily on the mouth. They licked each

other's mouths with giant cow tongues, so voracious Lola heard their slurping from twelve feet away. They must have heard her intake of breath, but they didn't miss a beat in their loud smacking at each other's mouths. Harrison in particular was so lost in lechery he had wound a hand around Gage's neck, pulling him toward him, his other hand massaging his own crotch.

She supposed she should move toward the sideboard for the glasses, but Gage slowly stood upright and commanded with sluggish eyes, "Lola, put down that bottle."

She did so hypnotically, not even looking to see where she set it. Gage now came around the front of Harrison, straddled the chair, and stood with knees bent. Harrison seemed fascinated with Gage's enormous erection flaunted in his face, and he brought his hands around to clasp Gage's ass.

"I want you to esteem me, to admire me." Gage ran a hand down the front of his trousers, gripping and squeezing his long erection.

"I do admire you," Harrison said huskily, fingers reaching up to unbutton the trousers. Lola had to prop herself up against the wall as the scene unfolded, panting so heavily that little clear bubbles swam before her eyes.

Gage directed in a loving tone, "To display your admiration, you have to frig my cock."

As Harrison's agile fingers set to undoing the buttons, an idea popped into Lola's blank brain. Galvanized into action, she barged through the swinging kitchen doors and was up the back staircase.

She returned in such a flash with the bottle of lavender oil, Harrison had barely hefted his employer's penis in his hand. *Men must be experts at this.* Watching Harrison's long fingers wrap around the pulsating erection made her wonder. *Have I been doing it wrong all these years?* But no, apparently she'd been pretty accurate. Gage leaned his butt against the dining table as Harrison smeared a few drops of semen around the tip.

She had viewed Gage's cock before as he wandered the kitchen at three in the morning in search of bread or sardines. He had often sat askew at his desk in his dressing gown on Sunday mornings reviewing papers. They were so sexless together it hardly seemed to matter. She had often responded to his shouted requests to refill his bathtub with more hot water, and they barely glanced at each other during these and most other times.

But she had never seen his penis erect.

It seemed nearly as long as Harrison's, narrower, long and dusky, protruding proudly as Harrison frigged it until it was almost purple. Harrison's jaw hung open a bit, and he seemed to well-nigh drool, his gaze fixated on the hefty length in his hand. Gage wove his fingers together at the back of his own neck and looked to the ceiling, and that's when Lola remembered the bottle of oil in her hand. She stepped forward to dribble it on the prick, and she was almost certain Gage looked down at her with approval. She stood so close to Gage she could smell the lavender drifting up, mingled with his own scent of lye soap and ambergris. It was not a nauseating scent at all when wafting from Gage's person, and Lola dared to slide his waistcoat from his shoulders, although she made sure to place it carefully on the table.

"Oh, yes, frig me, my sweet boy," Gage whispered, intently watching Harrison's fancy handiwork as he sped up his ministrations.

The lubricant made great sucking sounds as Harrison milked the penis skillfully, wringing it with passionate, lunging jerks that rendered it shiny and taut, about to erupt. Gage's eyes were now scrunched closed in agonizing passion, so Lola acted swiftly to unbutton his cotton shirt. She had helped him undress often the week he had wrenched his elbow. It occurred to her now Gage would look stately and virile leaning back against the table shirtless. Without glancing at her, he allowed her to strip the garment from his torso.

Gripping Harrison's shoulders in the throes of carnality, the muscles of his chest were wonderfully developed due to his

gymnastics on the bars. His entire torso was that lovely café au lait shade with a sprinkling of silken hair across the pectorals, the dark nipples rigidly aroused. The shoulder muscles shimmered as he clutched Harrison convulsively, and Lola wanted nothing so more than to bend over and suck one of those nipples in her mouth. Of course she didn't dare, and now Gage was gasping, about to spend into Harrison's masterly clutch.

Without thinking, Lola reached out and stayed Harrison's hand.

"Ah!" Gage gasped loudly.

Harrison looked up at Lola inquisitively. Shoving Gage almost brutally aside, she grabbed Harrison's oily hand and yanked him to his feet.

"Why are you stopping me?" Harrison enquired.

"I'm not stopping you!" she cried urgently, now grabbing Gage by the bicep and shoving him butt down into the chair. He collapsed with an uncomplaining grunt, limbs flailing like the Mexican marionette she had once seen Ollie running about with. She took this opportunity to nibble on Harrison's earlobe before whispering, "Suck him," and pushed him to his knees between Gage's outspread thighs.

She fell to her knees behind Harrison. A drip of juice slid down her inner thigh when Harrison lewdly rubbed the entirety of Gage's pubic bone, gripping the dribbling penis in the other fist. Squeezing Harrison's meaty erection in her palm, she whispered over his shoulder, "Suck him. You want to suck his penis, don't you? How long and stiff it is, going down your throat. How bittersweet the flavor of his seed when you gulp it down."

Gage watched as Harrison drooled over his penis. "That's right, suck on my prick, my darling boy."

"You want it," Lola reminded him, but Harrison needed no more encouragement.

He swallowed that long appendage in one gulp, sinking it in to the hilt. He suctioned it from the tip, where he swept his flicking tongue over the slippery head, down to the base, so his mouth was plastered

against Gage's pubic bone. A wave of lust washed over Lola, watching her beau energetically suck the penis of their employer. One of her hands slid up to pinch his nipple, causing his hips to flinch, and he clasped one of Gage's calves between his powerful thighs, humping it like a feral dog.

Gage gripped Harrison's skull in his hands, groaning as if out of his head. Lola admired his robust chest, the sinewy forearms, the way he swayed his hips to meet Harrison's gobbling. Lola wanted to feel Harrison ejaculate in her hand at the same time Gage did, so she adeptly unbuttoned his broadfall with only one hand, pleased at her talent. His prodigious penis sprang forth, sweltering hot in her palm. She massaged the tool with oil, causing Harrison to hump against Gage's leg even more strenuously as he choked on Gage's penis.

This would end very swiftly if Lola didn't take control, so she commanded, "Slow. Slow down," as she jumped to grab something. She wasn't sure what object she wanted until she saw the mortar and pestle on the sideboard, which she used for grinding cinnamon and nutmeg for coffee. "Perfect," she whispered to herself, falling to her former position behind Harrison.

Harrison had obeyed her to a certain extent. He had slowed his guzzling on the towering penis, although Gage was humping his mouth so energetically it hardly seemed to delay anything.

"Suck me, suck me, that's a good boy," Gage exhorted. "Good *Lord*, you suck good."

Lola had to act fast. Drizzling oil onto the pestle, she nudged it up against Harrison's asshole while massaging the globe of his ass. She curved her torso over his back to whisper in his ear, "You like this, don't you?" Her face was now so close to Gage's crotch she could have easily stretched another inch and taken a bite from the cartilage at the juncture of his thigh, but she was still too shy for that. She knew he only wanted another man handling him. Prodding the rounded marble implement at Harrison's opening, she slurped up his earlobe

and muttered, “Don’t you want this up your ass? You want to be fucked, don’t you?”

Harrison could only groan with his mouth full, so she inserted the smaller end first, unsure how Harrison would react to having an inanimate object thrust up his backside. Some thought it too demeaning or asexual. She presumed by the way he squiggled his hips that he enjoyed it, so she slid another inch, and another inch, screwing him up the ass with the marble shaft. Her free hand twisted around his oily, rapacious tool, and when she gave the pestle the deepest thrust of all, he instantly spewed into her hand, splashing jets of seed against Gage’s leg.

Later, she could not quite recall what manner of dirty things she had urged him to, she was so swept away with lust. Something along the lines of “You like this big hard thing up your ass, don’t you? You want to be fucked by this long stiff thing.”

He set to gobbling Gage’s bursting prick, and when Gage let out a long, strangled cry and arched up into Harrison’s mouth to hold himself there, twitching, she knew Harrison was swallowing gulp after gulp of his boss’ hot semen.

She held the marble implement inside his ass, reaming him with little jerks.

His head fell forward, and Gage cradled it in his lap, both men panting hoarsely. Harrison licked his lips and held Gage’s hips to his face. When he collapsed to the floor, the pestle slid out, so Lola fell back onto her butt, too, halfway underneath the dining table. She was vastly overdressed in her wide voluminous skirts, and she batted at them, irritated.

“So...hot...” muttered Harrison, weakly attempting to pull his undershirt over his head. Lola moved to help him, but Gage cried out, “Smoke!”

She banged her head on the underside of the table. “Bear’s ass!” She *could* smell smoke! She had not noticed before. Was the parlor fireplace backing up? She did now hear a heavy rain falling outside

the dining room window. Sometimes when it rained hard, smoke poured into the house.

Crawling out from under the table, she saw that a still layer of smoke at about waist level undulated, and it was heavier by the kitchen. She jogged into the kitchen. The last and biggest log she'd thrown onto the fire had decided at last to catch flame, and since she had forgotten to add more wine to the duck pot, the birds were now frying black carcasses spitting charred skin in all directions. Quickly she doused them with a cup of water, but their spindly incinerated feet disintegrated into ash. Their dinner was ruined.

"What was it?" Harrison was at her side. "What caught on fire?"

"The ducks!" Gage noted with disapproval.

The two men stood there, hands at sides, not helping or coming up with a better plan. The potatoes could still be saved, but it was not much of a dinner. Cooking the corned beef she'd been saving would take hours. She could whip up some biscuits, but two doughy dishes of the same color didn't seem healthful. She knew she had some tough chard in the garden, so she grabbed her basket to go pick some in the dark rain.

Walking gingerly down the back stairs, she realized that she still felt excluded from the men's frolics. They had just had a scintillating time, and of course Gage had allowed her to stimulate his paramour to greater heights of excitement, simply so Gage could attain his own satisfaction. But Lola could never touch Gage, and Gage would never touch Lola, and Harrison would forever remain in the middle, and...

And she would always be the one picking tough chard in the dark rain.

She felt bitter, nearly reduced to tears as she flicked a small snail off a giant chard leaf.

The back door opened, illuminating her garden with a rectangle of lamplight. "Lola?" Harrison was coming down the stairs, opening a parasol. He held it over her head. "Don't get wet. It's raining tadpoles and pennywinkles. I wouldn't want you to go belly up on me."

Gage watched from the top of the stairs. He was probably only making sure Harrison didn't get wet.

Chapter Sixteen

“Heath Davis had six ‘London Docks’ before breakfast this morning,” said Phil, the typesetter.

“So?” countered Lemuel, his partner in placing the inky letters. “Six isn’t much, for these fellows. They’re normally two sheets to the wind before breakfast.”

“Well, apparently this was an insult to John Sansing’s capacity, for he declared he could drink twenty-three.”

Lemuel nodded in sympathy. “Sansing is a champion two-fisted drinker. Did he?”

“I had to leave and come here after he drank eleven of them,” Phil said. “So I don’t know the outcome.”

Lola set down the stack of letters she was sorting in the *Alta California* grist mill tower. The first Pacific mail steamer had arrived yesterday, but had run up alongside a battleship in Saucelito across the bay and taken all crew as prisoners, to avoid them running to the mines. From Saucelito, a boat had brought tons of mail that far overwhelmed the single post office set up in town, so Cleve Wallingford had offered his staff for mail sorting. The entire turret was full of the stuff, all of it addressed merely “San Francisco” or “Sutter’s Fort,” some smeared addresses apparently written in coal or lip rouge. “Wait a minute. Sansing is supposed to be working with Harrison Bancroft on the sidewalks. I heard he was a good worker.”

“Ooh, Harrison Bancroft,” cooed Phil. “Your sweetheart.”

Lola snorted defensively, but admitted, “Yes, my sweetheart. What of it?”

“Nothing!” protested Lem. “He’s quite a strapping fellow, well-respected by all the...well, all of the *respectable* people in town.”

“Yes,” Phil agreed. “The *respectable* people. And you know who we refer to.”

Lola sighed. “The Hounds.” She dropped a letter onto the floor that was addressed to KCIN REGNAD of STTR FROT. That illegible pile had grown too large to ignore. She hated disposing of United States mail, so maybe she’d just send the entire cartload to Sutter’s Fort and let them figure it out. “Mr. Lassen is starting to suspect the Hounds of undermining his new wharf. Almost every morning the new pilings have been hacked away. Now he’s starting to miss a lot of bricks.”

Lem nodded. “That sounds like the work of the Hounds.”

Phil became excited. “We should set up a spy operation. Lie in wait by the new wharf in the dead of night.”

“Become plants!”

Phil frowned. “You mean *hide* behind plants?”

“No, I mean *become* plants. Plants are police spies.”

“Boys, boys.” Lola interrupted. “It’s already done. Gage—Mr. Lassen—this morning was talking about that very subject. Tonight he plans on lying in wait to see who shows up to abuse his pilings.”

But Lem and Phil were engrossed in their subject. Phil was saying, “We could *be* plants by *hiding* behind plants.”

Lola rolled her eyes, jumping eagerly to her feet when Cleve stomped up the inner spiral staircase. She steered him by the elbow into his office before he could become enmeshed in the botanical discussion of his typesetters.

Perching on the edge of his cluttered desk as was her habit, Lola crossed her arms to indicate a serious topic. As was his habit, Cleve ignored her, searching through a two foot tall stack of papers for an important document.

“Cleve, we all know this paper is growing by leaps and bounds, along with the population of San Francisco. Why, lots that were worth

five hundred dollars last October are now worth three to five thousand.”

“Yes, Lola,” said Cleve, like an automaton.

“You’re not listening. In the month of March I counted emigrant ships from the Atlantic seaboard at twelve. Now two are arriving daily, and of course you’ve seen the long lines of Argonauts waiting for carts and mules to take them to the foothills. If we continue at this pace, the town population will grow from two thousand at the end of ’48 to near ten thousand by the end of this month. No one can keep up with the boom, not even this paper! Ever since President Polk’s speech—”

“Lola!” shouted Cleve, in an uncustomary show of irritation. He even took his notebook from his satchel and tossed it at her. “If this doesn’t have anything to do with the Negro who had his ear cut off last night in front of the Parker House, then I don’t want to hear it!”

“Negro?” Lola echoed. “The Hounds, am I correct?”

“Of course. Now there’s my article on it. Can you get it set in type for today’s edition?”

“Yes, if you want me to put aside mail sorting.”

“Yes, yes, of course. You’re my speediest typesetter, so don’t let Lem or Phil do it. They can continue sorting mail.”

Lola mulled this over. “Speediest typesetter...Then perhaps I could get a salary increase? If you want this article typeset in a speedy fashion, that is.” Lola glanced at Cleve’s notes. They were nearly as illegible as most of that mail from The States, but she was the only worker who could decipher his notes.

Cleve stopped his search for the document, and stared blankly at Lola. “Salary increase? But I can hardly rely on you. Half the time we need to get the paper out, Lassen wants you serving at a dinner.”

“I know. The goal I have in mind is to get out from underneath Lassen. Things have progressed to a point where it’s no longer viable for me to continue—”

Cleve waved her away. "Salary increase, certainly! The moment you tell Lassen you'll no longer cook his meals and wash his undergarments, I'll double your salary. As long as I can have you *all* of the time and rely upon you."

"Of course, Cleve. I'll set this article now."

As Lola returned to the printing turret, she thought about the Negro with his ear cut off. That would upset Gage, would make him turn more vehemently against the Hounds, but perhaps it was the impetus he needed to change his views on that soldierly brotherhood. *The normal condition of humanity is a state of well-being, else there is a speedy end to all.* That was a good sentence for a future Hound article, and Lola sat herself before the typesetting machine to record it in Cleve's journal. *Whatever good is, the tendency of everything is in that direction.* Cleve enjoyed her dramatic flair, so she would insert those sentences into the article about the ear. *Men who aim at respectability become so absorbed in their money-gettings as to be little better than machines. It needs an enemy threatening their pet passion to unite them. They would form no brotherhood of virtue unless driven to it by a brotherhood of vice.* Ah, very memorable. This would indeed be a popular article.

However, she had only set the first paragraph before Herb Ellis came into the tower. He had a house available for rent. Apparently, a few months ago, his tenant, a Russian sailor, had fallen headlong into the well by his saloon, poisoning the drinking water for many luminaries. Ellis was willing to sell the house to Lola, and perhaps Harrison, too, if he was tired of living in the City Hotel tenement.

They could perhaps even be closer friends with Gage, if Lola wasn't his housekeeper. Fowler would continue to harass them about "nancy-boy" doings the more Harrison was seen visiting, especially after he finished the portrait and the sidewalks, although Lola was confident Gage would continue to employ him. No, it was a good idea, having her own domicile, and the newspaper career had a much better future than washing Gage's undergarments, as Cleve termed it.

The town would only get bigger. There was only more and more work in her future.

But Lola had to finish the typesetting and sort the mail, and it wasn't until after dark that she was able to leave the grist mill and cross the footbridge to look inside Ellis' house. She had earlier left Gage a platter of smoked salmon, bread, and cheese. He didn't need dinner tonight, as he was going to spy on his new wharf and find out who was ruining it.

* * * *

"Do you suspect Oliver Denny of being in with this gang?"

The newspaperman Phillip Something-or-Other questioned Gage. Harrison enjoyed the reporting duo simply for their proximity to Lola. He had to like anyone who spent so many hours every day with her.

"I do have my suspicions," Gage admitted. "But do not write that in your notebook. If he is truly in cahoots, I want to take him unawares."

"Yes," Harrison said, cringing from the spray of a particularly powerful crashing wave. They were hunkered down on the shore of a rocky inlet near the new wharf. "The other day, he claimed he was at the Parker House sampling the cuisine, when several reliable witnesses reported he wasn't anywhere near the establishment."

"Which day was that?" Lem was huddled beneath a suspiciously expensive capote, while the other three men fought to keep a big oilskin from blowing away. "If it was Tuesday, I saw him over at the Vandelia saloon."

Harrison enquired, "What was he doing there?" Vandelia was frequented mostly by Chileans and Peruvians.

Lem said, "Well, it was odd. Some Spaniards were holding a small fandango, and Ollie stepped forward to belt out a couple of tunes."

Gage made a face. “He was *singing*? No doubt he was there as a spy, to gather information for Fowler.”

“He was quite good, actually,” Lemuel said.

“Yes,” agreed Phil. “He has this sublime soaring tenor that makes one feel as if one were trotting along a Mexican shore on a balmy—”

“Cheese it!” Gage hissed. “If Fowler’s men come from Ellis’ saloon, they could be standing right over us, listening to every word we say.”

“We should ask Ellis,” Harrison pointed out. “It’s the closest saloon to the new wharf, and it’d make sense if they stop there before or after taking a hatchet to your pilings.”

“It’s really scientifically absurd that they could hear us,” Phil pointed out. “The wind is going north-northeast, and the crashing of these waves would be enough to obliterate any human voice.”

“Yes,” agreed Lem, pleasant as always. “But sound drifts *up*, so if they were standing on this scarp above us, it’s possible. Only not with your reedy tone.”

Harrison yanked the oilskin away from Phil. He couldn’t remember why they had invited these two along. Something to do with them being journalists for the *Alta*, but if that was the case, why didn’t they invite Lola? “Listen here, boys. Why don’t you strike for Ellis’ saloon and keep your eyes skinned? You know who the Hounds are. Take note on who you see up there, try to eavesdrop.”

“Yes, yes,” Gage agreed, hugging the oilskin closer about his head. “Good idea. But don’t come back down here, for you might lead them to us.”

“That does make sense,” agreed Phil, so the duo set to scrambling up the scarp. “Make sure you don’t drink any ‘London Docks,’ Lem.”

“Yes, you told me what happened to John Sansing!” Lem said.

Harrison sighed as Gage scooted his butt closer, wrapping the oilskin so tightly they were able to sit on it, tenting it over their heads against the waves. Yes, Sansing had made it to work that morning but had immediately proceeded to sprawl into a particularly deadly mud

hole. It seemed to suck him in as though it had a life and hunger all its own, and Sansing had broken his leg.

“He had twenty-four ‘London Docks’!” Phil’s voice was already like an eerie banshee on a faraway moor, and Harrison shuddered with the shock of warm relief when Gage leaned the entirety of his torso against him, lolling his head a bit on Harrison’s shoulder. It was pleasant to be able to feel his body now that the two detectives were gone.

“Twenty-four ‘London Docks.’” Gage chuckled. “What a chowderhead.” Putting his arms round Harrison’s torso, he snuggled up, his breath making steam in the near-freezing night air. “Did you send away to Pittsburgh for your manuscripts?”

Gage referred to Harrison’s *Letters and Notes*. Gage had encouraged him to dust it off, convinced he could help Harrison find a publisher. “My brother is probably receiving my letter around about now. It seems to be taking three months to get mail from The States, judging from what Lola said about those letters she’s sorting.” Harrison instantly tensed with guilt at mentioning a “brother,” as Gage’s brother was not nearly as helpful as Harrison’s.

Gage slid a gloved hand under Harrison’s fringed shirt, his thumb rubbing the stomach muscles, causing his cock to swell with pleasure. Gage was really quite an affectionate great cat, with an uncanny ability to get Harrison where he lived. Harrison clasped Gage’s jaw in his clammy hand and kissed him.

They fell immediately into a lusty grope, Gage vaulting over him to straddle him, kissing him so voraciously that large, pointed boulders stabbed Harrison in the back. It was moist and steamy under the oilskin, but ocean spray splashed onto Gage’s back, soaking Harrison’s moccasins as he lifted his hips to meet Gage’s thrusts. Gage gorged on his mouth, wrapping a hand around his neck to hold him off the sharp rocks.

An image, a desire, flitted through Harrison’s mind, one that had been resting heavily on him since the incident in Gage’s dining room,

when he had actually taken a cock into his mouth and sucked it to orgasm. When Lola had slid that marble implement up his ass, she had tickled something inside him that made him explode. Sucking on Gage's lengthy, juicy prick had only heightened the sensation, and Harrison knew he wanted Gage to fuck him. He wanted that long delectable cock up inside him—wanted to show Gage his submission, that he trusted him, wanted to be dominated by this arrogant businessman. Indicating as much, however, was another subject entirely. Gage would wear him to a frazzle even in the comfiest of feather beds, and here in the dark rain, boulders jabbing into his back, waiting for some *goondas* to make their appearance...It was not a precipitous moment.

In fact, he was saved from making a jackleg decision by the sounds of axes thudding dully against wet wood.

Lost in a maelstrom of lust as they were, Harrison with his Plains instincts was the first to hear the axes, and reflexively he shoved Gage off of him, tossing aside the oilskin, leaping to his feet, and drawing his pistol.

"What in the name of—" Gage said, offended, but he soon got the picture and also jumped to his feet.

The moon was about half-full, although it flickered behind passing rainclouds. The moonlight gave them occasional glimpses of what looked like three silhouettes, hunched over, scampering about. Two men floundered in the surf, chopping away at the pilings, and one man crawled above on the loading platform where Gage's men had to keep rebuilding the planking. Harrison chuckled to imagine the two men below succeeding at severing the piling, the hapless doughhead above falling thirty feet to an embarrassing death.

"None look like Fowler," Gage observed. "I didn't expect he'd go himself."

"All henchmen," Harrison agreed. "None are as bearish and *goonda* as Fowler himself. That one looks like Red Davis. You can see his bouffant coiffure from here."

Gage snarled, "I'd recognize his stylings a mile away. Let's go."

"If we crouch down behind this sand hill here, they won't see us till we're nigh upon them."

They crept to the sand dune, then fell to their knees and crawled up it. When their heads popped over the crest, they were only ten yards from the culprits.

"Shall we just cock our pistols and take them?" asked Gage.

"They are pretty much caught red-handed." The other fellow standing in the surf with Red was proved to be Barney Ray, a criminal from Sydney, a-hewing and a-hacking at the pilings with a vengeance. Gage's plan was the obvious one, and Harrison nodded for them to move forward.

"All right, Red!" Harrison bellowed, surfing down the other side of the dune while leveling his pistol at Red's puffy head. "Put down that axe, or I'll plug you!"

Harrison and Gage advanced slowly as the two outlaws froze in place, waves eddying about their waists, hatchets in hand. The fellow above chose to run, his boots pounding down the ruined planking of the wharf. Gage pointed his pistol at the escapee, but Harrison's free hand stayed him. "Let him go," he said under his breath. "We got these two here."

Gage had found only one pair of bracelets in the entire town, and he now clapped them onto Red's wrists, shoving the axe into his pocket for evidence.

"Are you arresting us?" howled Barney. "There is no 'arresting' in this town, since there's no jail. Where are you going to put us?"

Harrison and Gage grinned at each other, as Harrison holstered his pistol in order to bind Barney's wrists behind his back with a short length of ship's cable. Their grins were wiped from their faces when, from nearby in the sand hills, came some shrieked oaths and, oddly enough, a muffled guitar twanging.

"What in Sam Hill?" uttered Harrison. "Gage, keep these two here."

As Gage signaled a waiting boatman with an expert, piercing captain's whistle, Harrison struggled up the sand dune as swiftly as he could. Three figures wrestled in a jumble on the ridge of the dune. It looked as though one figure wielded an oblong object and was beating someone who crouched. A woman shrieked and pounded the attacker on the back with fists.

"Stop!" Harrison bellowed. "I'll run you all in!"

The attacker stood straight, dropped the implement with a dissonant mangled sound, and fled. Harrison let a ball fly after him, and it looked as though he nicked him in the upper arm, but he couldn't be sure. He let loose with another ball just to make it look good, then holstered his weapon to discover the beaten man was none other than Ollie Denny.

Harrison and Lola helped the stricken man to his feet, and he clutched a battered guitar with three broken strings, moaning, "My guitar. My guitar. I can't believe he broke my guitar."

"We'll get you a new one, Ollie," Harrison assured him. "May I ask how you came to be standing out on this dune? And who was that fellow who ran?"

Lola took charge. "That was Curly Billy, of Fowler's gang."

Harrison brushed off the front of Ollie's elaborately embroidered waistcoat. "Curly? Weren't you back-slapping pals with him at the fandango? Why was he beating you with your own guitar?"

Again, Lola answered. "We were in Ellis' saloon when Phil and Lem came in and told us you were lying in wait down here. Suddenly Ollie"—and she shot him a distinctly suspicious glance—"took it into his head to come down here and see what was going on. *I* came because *I* am a journalist." She looked about to spit on the misbegotten clown, and Harrison now saw she clutched in her grip a ladylike pocket pistol. "I have no idea why it was so imperative for *him* to come. Did you find out who was taking an axe to the wharf?"

"Yes, Gage's down there, arrested Barney Ray and Red Davis. Leavenworth organized us into a police force, and we acted as

constables for the town. We're putting them in prison on board the United States ship *Euphemia*."

"You can do that?"

Harrison shrugged. "Certainly. Why not? Far as I'm concerned, we're more lawful than those three, although I did notice Fowler made sure to keep himself out of it. My, my, what do we have here?"

In patting Ollie's waistcoat, Harrison had discovered a bulky rectangular item, which was revealed to be a red brick. Harrison angled the brick in the moonlight to see the stamp. "A Chilean Espinoza brick, eh? Ollie. Maybe you can enlighten me to who has been stealing the bricks we need to build parts of the sidewalks."

But Ollie was only interested in saying, "Does this mean Lem and Phil are constables, too? Because if *they* are constables, I want to be a constable."

Lola cut in. "Ollie. What are you doing with that brick?"

"I—I—I just used it to hold down my sheet music! Otherwise the music would have blown away! I just picked it up off a street—Clay Street, where you were building sidewalks!"

Harrison rattled the fool by the sleeve. "I have half a mind to run you in for theft! I'll stake my affidavit that you're involved in this whole Hound business. Turning against your boss, and for what?" He shoved Ollie in the direction of Ellis' saloon. "Go, go! I'll inform Lassen about your frolics and show him this brick. Come round and see if you still have a position in the morning. Go back to Ellis' and play your asinine Artemus Felcher routine—I don't care a damn!"

Sobbing in earnest now, Ollie clutched his mutilated guitar to his chest and stumbled forlornly across the crest of the dune. His smoky voice wailed as though wrenched by a ton of woes. "Phil and Lem get to be constables...and I don't even have a guitar to play..."

Harrison saw that Lola was perhaps being taken in by this forlorn act, so he steered her by the arm down the sand dune, toward the bay. "What was he doing at Ellis', anyway? Waiting for his buddies to

hack apart the wharf? What were *you* doing at Ellis', now that I think on it?"

Lola clutched his forearm to her breast. "Ellis just showed me the house that was vacated by the Russian who fell into the well. Cleve agreed to double my salary, but only if I can give him full attention, and not have to run off to fix Gage any tea."

Harrison's chest swelled with pride, hope, and also a vague fear that he could pinpoint. While San Francisco was a casual town, not prone to standing on ceremony when it came to the various associations of the sexes under one roof, it would be much more acceptable if he were to wed Lola before setting up a household with her. He had not been engaged to wed since the disastrous Fanny affair, but he knew he should have forgotten about that long ago. Unlike Gage, he would not dwell on past failings and allow them to affect his present interactions. Gage was paying him a good salary, work appeared to be endless in this flourishing town, and the sooner he bought a house, the better, since prices were doubling weekly.

"What is the house like?" he asked mildly.

"Oh, it's small, but good enough for me. There are two bedrooms, and a front room separate from the dining room."

"Do you really want to get away from Gage that badly?"

Lola was silent for a few moments. "I need to, if I wish to work solely at the paper. And honestly, Harrison...I just don't see how I can fit in between you two. Gage has eyes only for you."

"Then I will give up Gage, too," Harrison said hotly, shocking himself by his sudden pronouncement. But giving utterance to it gave him courage, and he went on. "You are much more important to me than Gage." They stopped walking, out of earshot of the lighter where Gage now handed over the two criminals. Caressing her jaw in his hand, he said softly, "I love you, Lola. I have not run into a woman who has affected me as strongly as you have. You are intelligent, charming, hardworking, tough as nails. Oh, and did I say beautiful? *Meha*, I wish to share the rest of my years with you. Giving up Gage

means nothing to me, if it will allow me to stand by your side as your husband. Gage needs to find a wife, even if they sleep in separate bedrooms, for propriety demands it.”

Lola snuggled her head against his chest and spoke against his throat. “I don’t think Gage needs a wife. A housekeeper worked just fine for him for years. But you’re right. He will get in trouble if he persists in pawing other men. I just don’t want to split the two of you up. I think you love him as much as you love me.”

“I don’t...” Harrison muttered, but could not finish his sentence. He could not honestly say he did not love Gage as well, although in a different, manly way. He could easily sever ties with the businessman once the portrait was done, and there was only one sitting left. He could work on sidewalks, or the wharf, and have very minimal contact with Gage. That was not the problem. The problem was, he loved being with Gage. He adored the masculine power Gage held over him, the manly scent of him, the brutal touch. Harrison was just discovering this forbidden side to himself, and it was a joyful discovery.

Besides, he had caught Gage on several occasions glancing with that heavy-lidded lust at Lola. He felt the man was not irredeemable in the ways of women. Gage often appeared to be scrutinizing her backside with appreciation. Harrison just needed the opportunity for Gage to display this need...This need for a woman.

Lola nuzzled his neck. “I love you, Harrison Bancroft.”

Chapter Seventeen

Gage got roped into some long-winded yarn in the lobby of his own City Hotel. Leavenworth accosted Gage, along with William Landers. Leavenworth was frightened because he had not resigned or turned over town records to the new district government, and citizens threatened to storm his office.

Gage had handily been re-elected as Treasurer, so he didn't have much concern. Apparently his arrest of the two Hounds had created a need for a strict new sheriff, thus the earnestness of Landers and his demand for bricks to build a new calaboose. The prior jail, a schoolhouse in Portsmouth Square, was a squalid joint unworthy of housing even murderers, so Gage had had no choice but to remand the prisoners to the ship *Euphemia*.

"I entreat you, Mr. Lassen," said Leavenworth. "While it is a very good idea to arrest these men who are running wild over this town, we must address the serious need for a brand new calaboose, close to or on Portsmouth Square."

Gage said, "I've already lost a good portion of my bricks to those outlaws, but I'll see what I can do. Perhaps if you gave some of your sheriff fees toward purchasing these bricks. You do know that you would get five dollars a day per guard you hire and four dollars per day per prisoner?" The position of sheriff was extremely lucrative.

"Yes." Landers' eyes shone with avarice. "And fifty dollars for every criminal executed!"

"Well, then. As treasurer, I will see some of that portion redirected to bricks, the fee for the current two criminals in the *Euphemia*, for example. And Leavenworth...we should see about

erecting a Vigilance Committee, shall we not? Let's put that on the agenda for the next council meeting. Now, I have to go..."

But Leavenworth blathered on, and Gage was becoming restless. His eyes roved to every passerby, every patron eating at a table, every man drinking at the bar. He wasn't even listening to Leavenworth, and when he repeated, "I need to go...I have to check on a tenant," and started up the stairs, he felt the malice in the men.

"Oh, Harrison Bancroft." Leavenworth's voice fairly dripped with a sneer.

Gage took the stairs two at a time. He was so single-minded in his quest, he didn't have a care what Leavenworth was implying. He had never been upstairs to visit Harrison before, and it was a Sunday, a day when he would feasibly be looking for Harrison to discuss tomorrow's business.

And he surely wished to discuss business! They had their final portrait sitting, and now the painting was being framed. So there were no more languid, friendly sessions in the parlor, no more bantering about as Harrison swiftly brushed over his erection on the canvas. No more pulling Harrison down for a deep kiss. Running his mouth against the spiky red hair imbued with rust and burned leather. The odor of linseed oil now made Gage's cock stiffen, quite an unfortunate thing when pretending to admire a cohort's portrait of his grandmother.

He had not, in fact, been alone with Harrison for over two weeks, since they'd huddled together kissing under the oilskin while spying on Fowler's henchmen. He had invited Harrison for dinner on a few occasions, and always Harrison had something else to attend to. He had even seen Harrison and Lola emerging from Ellis' house near the lagoon, but when he started for them to ask why they were in Ellis' house, they turned and walked the other direction.

The less he saw of Harrison, the more he thought about him. It was a strong, passionate emotion that filled his chest, and it took many days of introspection for him to pinpoint the feeling as love. He

felt like a youth struck with puppy love, the way he pined after that man! There was lust, to be sure. Sam Fowler had accused him of looking for “a bit of lick-spigot,” and that assessment was eerily accurate. In his efforts to maintain domination over the man who clearly desired it, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to pleasure Harrison, to worship the meaty tool that he so desired, his mouth often watered. He simply could not allow Harrison to see him in a submissive posture such as that. And maybe by thinking only of his own pleasure, he had caused Harrison to shy away from him. To seek his own pleasure in the arms of one who was obviously adept at giving it to him.

Now Gage was almost enraged as he strode down the trash-strewn hallway. “Pick that up!” he yelled at a fellow who tossed a tin can from the canvas flap of his room. The dolt merely stared at him with his jaw agape, so Gage shouted, “Do you think I was jesting? Pick that up or I’ll thrash you!”

He had no intention of wasting time thrashing anyone, however. Pausing outside of Harrison’s flap, he heard Lola giggling inside. Now they were coming to this rat hole for their assignations, rather than risk that Gage might see them in his own home and want to join in! Truly, Gage’s own City Hotel was deplorable, unsuitable for his top worker. Harrison had mentioned he had to share this cell with two other broken-down miners. How could Gage kiss a man who had to sleep with cockroaches?

“Harrison...” Lola was saying quietly, so none of the glazed men beyond the canvas walls could hear her. “I would like to display this Indian chief on the walls of the new house.”

New house? What sort of odious plot was afoot here? Gage waited for Harrison’s response.

“Yes. I could have it framed at the place we’re framing Gage’s portrait.”

Yes? New house? Gage whipped open the canvas flap and stepped into the tiny enclosure. “Mr. Bancroft,” he said formally, as anger was eating away at his reason.

Harrison and Lola both lay on his narrow cot, she up against the adobe outer wall, cradling Harrison between her thighs casually. Her new dress from France was hiked up so as to reveal her garters. They even sipped from a bottle of *aguardiente* placed on a rickety table next to the bed. At one in the afternoon—on a Sunday! So *this* was how they chose to spend their leisure time! He could not show anger, however. That would drive Harrison even farther away.

Harrison crawled up Lola’s torso, his mouth open in shock. “Gage.”

Lola peeked out from behind Harrison’s head. “Was there something you needed me for?”

“Not you, Lola. Harrison. Here’s your pay.” Gage took an eagle’s quill of gold from his waistcoat pocket and handed it stiffly to the lounging man, drawing him forth off Lola’s lap to stretch his long legs down the length of the cot. “As the sidewalks will be finished once we recover all of our bricks, I would like you...to become boss of the wharf project.”

“Ooh,” said Lola with shining eyes, patting Harrison on the back with approbation.

When Harrison smiled, too, Gage relaxed enough to sit down on the cot. Placing a fatherly hand on Harrison’s knee, he added, “I’m sure you will excel at the position. You’re well-nigh the only reliable man in this town. Others respect you, and you proved invaluable at discovering who was ruining the wharf. No one has dared take an axe to it since.”

“I heard tell,” said Harrison, “that Fowler has started to build a new brick warehouse down on Pine Street. I was going over there, once I left here, to look at the bricks he’s stockpiled. So far, the only person we have any evidence to arrest is your attaché, Ollie.”

“And he had only one brick,” Lola pointed out.

"I've tried to push him to tell me what he's seen about the bricks," said Gage, "but he's oddly protecting those bastards. I'll press him again. Listen," he said, squeezing Harrison's thigh. He felt everything was falling apart around him, and he absolutely needed to know. "What's this about a new house? I'm sorry, I couldn't avoid overhearing."

Harrison leaned back on his hands and looked to Lola for assistance. Their mouths formed silent words as they entreated each other, perhaps wondering who should be the first to speak. Lola finally said boldly, "I have found a new house to live in. Harrison has agreed to move in with me. You have to admit," she said, swiftly now, "that this is not the ideal arrangement for him. He needs room to paint, to breathe, without some foul-smelling crooks raising a ruckus night and day."

"No!" Gage shouted. But he must contain his anger, so he said quietly to Harrison, "No. This is far from an ideal situation, I agree. And since you are not one of the thousands who intend on heading to the mines, you have a great future here in town. But..." Raising his hand to Harrison's face, he brushed the soft ivory skin with the backs of his fingers. "Why can you not take a room in my house? There is plenty of room. Upstairs there are two more bedrooms, unused."

Harrison touched Gage's hand as if to move it away, but clearly his heart wasn't in it. He merely wound up covering Gage's hand with his own. "Gage. You know as well as I, I can't move into your house. Already people are whispering. We wouldn't get a chance to say turkey to each other if I lived under the same roof. Think of the scandal."

Harrison was right, but Gage would not be dissuaded. If Harrison and Lola lived together in another house, he would *never* see Harrison. "It would be fine. I'm the town treasurer. Who dares make innuendoes against me?"

"Plenty of people."

Gage touched the tip of his nose to Harrison's. "Nobody," he whispered. "We get rid of Fowler and his *goondas*, there is no one else in town trying to cause trouble." With the tip of his tongue, he licked Harrison's delectable mouth.

"Don't kiss me," said Harrison, not very convincingly. He didn't move away, and he squeezed Gage's hand to his face.

Gage sucked on the full lower lip. "I will kiss you whenever I please."

"You are much too arrogant."

"I cannot help what I am. I am arrogant enough to believe you want me. And I don't want you to leave me."

"Gage, we can't—"

Gage silenced him by covering his mouth with his.

Harrison did not protest too stridently when Gage wrapped both hands behind his neck and lunged forward, pressing Harrison between Lola's thighs. Gage brought his knees up under Harrison's legs, urging them to part. Lola had never uttered a word of disapproval, for which Gage was grateful. In fact, her bubbies heaved with her rapid panting and looked quite buoyant in their silk casing. Gage could easily reach out a paw and touch a woman's breast for the first time in many years...But he was still much too fearful for that. "I have an evil-doing plan to trick Fowler out of town," he said before laying several more kisses onto Harrison's delicious mouth.

"You must...stop..." Harrison muttered. "Fowler will spread nancy-boy stories about us regardless of whether or not we really are."

Gage's fingers moved to Harrison's broadfall. His juicy, savory prick already strained to be released from the leather, and Gage obliged, sliding his hand down the steamy pubic bone to wrap around the root of his prick. Although Harrison protested, he swiveled his hips in a salacious manner. "Fowler won't be here long. He's making too many scenes, angering too many people."

“What is your evil-doing plan, Gage?” Lola asked innocently. She actually reached out and sank her fingers into Gage’s hair, sending tiny shivers down his neck and causing his cock to twitch.

“My dear.” That’s what Gage called Lola, but he spoke against Harrison’s mouth. “Salting the mines.” Lifting Harrison’s hefty cock into the air, Gage rubbed his thumb over the head, causing Harrison to gasp. Gage knew he had him—Harrison could never give him up. “My land grant on the American River.”

Harrison’s eyeballs rolled up into his skull as Gage slid his soft buckskins down below his knees. With arms lifted above his head, Harrison clutched at Lola’s shoulders as he exposed his athletic body to Gage’s desires. Gage fairly grunted like a pig to taste the velvety aroma of fog that imbued Harrison’s taut abdomen, and he had quite forgotten about his evil plan until Lola prompted him.

“The Natomas grant? You’re going to salt the river with some gold, and get Fowler to believe it’s a rich vein?”

Good Lord, this man was the picture of desirable manhood. His enormous prick actually throbbed in Gage’s fist, and Gage muttered “yes, salt the river” before spearing the meat down his throat.

Harrison gasped loudly, swiveling his hips to meet Gage’s hot mouth. Not in a mood for niceties, Gage sucked the tool eagerly. Having imagined such a treat for years now, the subtle tricks and devices Harrison had proved so adept at when sucking Gage’s prick all went out the window, and within moments Gage could feel the cock tightening, the crown pressing against the back of his throat. Now he knew why men made those hungry, strangled sounds with an erect penis in their mouth. Gage’s heart swelled with pride and rapture that he had finally taken this bold step.

But his housekeeper insisted on discussing Fowler. “That’s a nasty idea.” She praised him, while at the same time diddling the redheaded man’s nipples. “But he won’t believe you if *you* tell him about the new strike, since he knows you loathe him.”

Gage's tongue felt the throbbing on the underside of Harrison's prick, and he knew he had to stop. Reluctantly, he drew himself off the penis with a large smacking sound, and he raised his torso over Harrison's. The sweet man still clutched Lola, his head pillowed in her ample tits. "Ollie will tell him about the new strike," Gage said. When he petted Harrison's slick, spiky hair, the backs of his fingers brushed against the uplifted slope of Lola's breast, and it was not a repulsive sensation. It made him hot as monkeys to be working over her beau like this right in front of her very eyes, twisted in the most erotic sense of the word.

Purposefully this time, he tickled the rise of her breast. He had enjoyed pawing Anna in the few years before she...No. He would not think of Anna, would not relate Lola in any aspect to the woman who had soured him on females for all time. *Lola is different. Lola is new.* He tickled her some more, and she squirmed. *Lola is Lola.*

"Don't stop," said Harrison.

Gage had to smile at that. "I thought you wanted me to stop."

Harrison smiled back, inscrutable. He was completely vulnerable on his back like that, arms above his head, the perfect vision of male virility Gage had craved for so long.

"I want to make love to you."

Harrison merely gazed up at him with crystalline, trusting eyes.

Gage spat into his hand and smeared it on his cock head, but as much as Harrison spread his thighs, his sweet asshole would only admit just the tip. It took Lola to reach a long arm out and grab a bottle of something which she handed to Gage. Gage didn't even look at the label, but when he spread the lubricious stuff on his cock, the tantalizingly pungent odor of linseed oil wafted up to him. It instantly brought to mind the happy days in his parlor, Harrison brushing away at his canvas while Gage posed sensually, when they discussed aimless topics with a great sense of relaxation.

Now his prick slid inside Harrison effortlessly. The gliding was smoother than a woman's pussy, a long, narrow, hot ride. Gage

swiveled his hips into his beloved, touching the tip of his nose to Harrison's, awash in sensation and awe as the pupils of Harrison's eyes became dilated with trust and craving.

Shortly, he had to slow his humping for fear he would shoot. He'd spent so many years imagining exactly this scene. Now it might last only seconds because he was so hot he was gushing tiny orgasms up the slick channel. He found a certain spot that made Harrison's eyelids flutter like a man about to keel, and Gage concentrated there with short breathless jabs. He was so flooded with rapture he barely noticed when his hand, as if on its own volition, moved up to Lola's burgeoning breast, the fingers sliding under her bodice. It barely registered on the fringes of his awareness: *I am touching a woman's breast*. But the worst part was: *It feels nice*.

"Good lord," groaned Harrison, hitching his ankles up behind Gage's knees. "Take me, Gage. You miserable old critter, just fuck me."

That did it—that sent Gage over the edge. As he licked Harrison's mouth, he plunged his cock deeply, angling up into the sensitive spot he'd discovered. Harrison's eyes popped open with surprise, and his hand went to his own prick to pump it furiously, his gaze locked upon Gage's. Harrison's entire body heaved, the muscles of his shoulders and chest standing out in sharp, athletic relief. Gage wanted it to last forever, but his body betrayed him. Unexpectedly he shot his load into the slick asshole as Harrison spurted a healthy amount of jism onto his own belly, where it was mashed slickly between them.

Gage came for a long time, grunting like a spending animal as his ecstasy poured into the other man. They lay twined together, twitching and jumping, for endless moments before Gage realized he still cupped Lola's breast. This embarrassed him more than the fact that he'd just ejaculated inside of another man. That act seemed the most natural thing in the world, and he kissed Harrison deeply as they snorted hot breaths against each other's faces.

Finally it was Lola who sighed heavily and rose, easing Harrison off her lap. Gage's hand fell limply to the buffalo robe beneath them, and he rolled onto his back. The cot was so narrow the two men were squished like bedbugs.

As Gage lay there panting, Harrison also got to his feet and went to stand by the window, buttoning his broadfall. "This plan for Fowler..." he ventured, as though he'd not just been thoroughly fucked by another man. "Do you want me to tell Ollie to do it? I need to find the rest of those bricks, so I need Ollie anyway."

Gage slowly raised himself on an elbow. They had shared the most intimate moment possible, and here he was discussing bricks! While Gage agreed it was not mannerly to discuss momentous romantic events that had recently transpired, to talk about bricks was a bit too businesslike. What was wrong? Was Harrison merely offering himself up like a prostitute, perhaps to ensure he obtained Gage's wharf position? But Gage was a man of business, too, so he replied, "That's a good idea. Today have Ollie drop a few hints about the property, because I haven't gone up there to salt the area yet or chosen the spot. O'Farrell has a map of the area you can give Ollie."

"Besides," said Lola smoothly, "if we arrest Fowler for stealing the bricks, there won't be the necessity to trick Fowler."

Sitting on the edge of the cot, Gage smoothed his shirtfront. "Jailing for theft won't be a long sentence in this town. Half the town would be in the calaboose—the one we haven't even built yet. No, I want Fowler gone on a more permanent basis."

That did the trick. Harrison loathed Fowler more than Gage did. Their mutual hatred brought a fresh light to Harrison's eyes as he turned from the window. "Yes. That fellow is from the bottomless pit, I tell you, and I don't care a damn how we get rid of him."

Lola said, "Once he's up on the American River, he can establish a new Tammany Hall to be boss of. Those lawless men will worship him and his bullying ways. Or," she added wistfully, "perhaps kill

him. It needs an enemy threatening our pet passion to unite us. When we understand the nature of heat, then we can tell what cold is.”

Harrison looked sideways at Gage, and they shared small conspiratorial smiles.

Gage had to take his leave then, regretfully. He hated leaving Harrison’s side, but it would look odd if they all came downstairs together.

And a lucky thing that decision was, for who should be sitting at a stool in the City Hotel saloon but Sam Fowler. Gage glanced sideways at him, hoping no one would waylay him and make him stand there confabbing. For the evil, knowing, eyebrow-squiggling look Fowler cast him was enough to drop him in his tracks.

Chapter Eighteen

“And see, they even imported these cornices from Russia. Quite a bit of this woodwork came from Russia.”

Harrison appeared to find the little house to his liking. He raised his eyebrows, nodded pleasantly, and admired the marble fireplace hearth. The house was indeed small compared to Gage’s, but with two bedrooms. One could be used as a study for Harrison where he could paint and go over town plans.

“And,” continued Lola, “if you stand on the belvedere up by the cupola, you have a lovely view of the Isla de los Angeles and the offing with all the ship’s masts. You can look right past all the junk they’re throwing into the bay and pretend it isn’t there.”

“Yes,” Harrison agreed. “Land is so scarce already, they’re throwing every chamber pot and rusty stove into the landfill. Maybe we should elongate the new wharf, or ships won’t be able to run up to it soon. Listen, *meha*. You told me you put a thousand dollars down on this house. Allow me to reimburse you.”

“That’s not necessary. It’s all for the common good, isn’t it? If I was short on coin, you would help out.” They moved into the kitchen, about half the size of Gage’s, which was admittedly one of the grandest in town. But glass windows covered two of the walls and let in the diffuse foggy light common in this part of town, illuminating the kitchen without the help of lamps and giving it a homey feeling.

Harrison rubbed a fingertip against the stovetop that needed cleaning. The Russian bachelor had not had his own housekeeper. “You still haven’t told Gage you intend to leave his employ.”

Crossing her arms, Lola looked out one of the windows. Handily, there was a blacksmith's shop nearby, a bakery, and of course, Ellis' saloon. To the west were scattered a few old adobes where Californios still resided and a cemetery, but for now, they were on "the edge of town." Lola wondered if Gage would allow her to bring her cow here. He certainly wouldn't milk it himself. And the soil was much too sandy for planting vegetables, so maybe Harrison could fabricate some flower beds for her.

She didn't want to think about Gage, but Harrison had asked her a direct question. "I haven't said that in exactly those words, no. I believe he thinks I'll continue to come and cook for him, although I won't have time if I'm working solely for Cleve. We need to find him a new housekeeper."

"Yes, poor fellow. Lots of French and English have been arriving these past few weeks."

"But most of those men need their women. Our only hope is to find someone whose husband has passed or who was abandoned by a miner." A stab in her heart made Lola realize *she* was one of those women abandoned in San Francisco, so she quickly changed the subject. "I believe he will miss you more than he'll miss me." She turned to find Harrison grinning at her adorably.

"That's not true," he said. "He went years without a lover, but he can't go more than a day without a meal cooked for him."

Lola stood before Harrison, coquettishly fingering the fringes on his shirt. "But I don't believe he *wants* to go any longer without a lover. You saw how adamant he was in your room. We can't tell him we are both abandoning him. That's too much for him to bear. I do like Gage—he's been a good employer, he's never beaten me or done anything silly like dock my wages for breaking a dish. He enjoys eating most everything. He's not one of those children who turn their noses up at food. And *you* like him," she added, batting her lashes.

"What are you saying?" Harrison asked softly. "That you don't wish me to end my relations with Gage?"

Lola looked up and smiled, knowing it would show her dimples to their best advantage. “Well, yes. That is what I’m saying.” Swiftly she added, “You both get so much enjoyment from each other’s company! It’s just childish to stop.”

Harrison pulled away from her to pace the kitchen floor. “I’ll tell you why I should not continue, Lola! Because Gage doesn’t include you. How much longer can you sit there as a spectator, getting all hot under the collar—”

“—and other places.” She giggled.

“—watching two men pleasure each other? How is that satisfactory for you? And surely you wouldn’t be amused if you were to stumble upon us one day sucking on each other’s cock—penises, without having alerted you to the event beforehand? You’d feel ignored, that’s what.”

Lola shrugged. “Then don’t let that happen. Listen, Harrison! When Gage was...you know...”

“Fucking me?”

“Well, yes, fucking you. Did you not notice him touching my breast?”

“I wasn’t...in the frame of mind to notice.”

“Well, see? He needs to forget about that awful witchy woman, and we should never mention her again.”

“Wait, he touched your breast? That son of a bitch.”

“Isn’t that what you want? You said we can’t continue lovemaking with Gage if he won’t include me.”

“Well, sure, but...I didn’t mean him to be full of romancing and devilment!”

Lola rolled her eyes. It was sweet and thoughtful of Harrison to be jealous of Gage touching her, but it was certainly confusing. She needed to get back to the heart of the matter. “Just tell me. You do like touching him and being touched by him?” Slyly, she became coquettish again. “I couldn’t help notice. When you came, it was so explosive there was a blob on your chin.”

It was Harrison's turn to be sheepish, and he looked out the window. "A man can't help those things!"

She rested her chin on his shoulder, pressing her belly to the lovely slope of his back. "Not if he's hot as a barrel of monkeys, he can't. Come on, admit it. You like Gage touching you. And you like touching him."

Harrison shrugged. "I like it all right." He shrugged again. "I'm not a nancy-boy, if that's what you're getting at. But...I'll allow as he's a right handsome fellow." He paused. "He's a good buddy, helping me publish my manuscripts. Helping me at every turn, in fact."

"Okay, then!" Lola skipped across the kitchen. "Let me go find Gage. I shall tell him I'm leaving his employ, but only when we find a suitable replacement. Maybe the three of us can share dinner tonight. And you go find 'Artemus Felcher.' As Gage said, drop a few hints about his property, pretend you overheard Gage talking about it to some scissorbill, like Leavenworth or McDougal, or even General Vallejo. Ollie is such a loudmouthed hen, he'll be sure to pass the buzz on to Fowler."

* * * *

A boy had found Gage as he walked up Clay Street with Messrs. Howard and Townsend on the new plank sidewalk. The wee nipper had pounded down the planking with flailing arms, crying in his high tone, "It's Mayor Leavenworth! They have a drum and a fife!"

"Drum and fife?" declared Townsend. "Whatever can be wrong with a marching band?"

"I think he means the Hounds," muttered Gage, stomping uphill to reach the boy and grabbing him by the shoulders. "Boy! What are they doing to Leavenworth?"

"They're demanding documents, and they have a rope!"

The three men jogged up Clay to Portsmouth Square where Leavenworth maintained an Alcalde's office in the Custom House adobe. The nipper obviously referred to the book of deeds, and other town records Leavenworth had refused to turn over. Although the position of Alcalde had been abolished in the January elections, the military territorial government had told Leavenworth to stay put, that the elections had been illegal. So Leavenworth was just sticking to his guns, but the Hounds were advocating their own John Pulis for Sheriff.

This situation had been boiling over since January, and as Portsmouth Plaza hove into view, he could see this was the largest crowd yet, a posse in no uncertain terms. About a hundred citizens roared and milled, a few shaking ropes over their heads, demanding an instant necktie party.

"Cumon out, Leavenworth!"

"You miserable old worm! You think you're big dog of the tanyard!"

"Show us the books, you thieving son of a bitch!"

Already men in the crowd tussled among themselves, one hearty fellow tossing another against a Chilean tent. A few Chileans had dared to pitch their tents in Portsmouth Square, but they were cooks who served the needs of the citizens, townsmen who simply wanted to pick up a fast tortilla and beans. Even in the few moments that Gage watched, several Hounds took to kicking over cooking pots, and one hapless fellow from Valparaiso was bashed over the head with a flute.

Gage looked, of course, for Fowler, easily finding him as being one of the men brandishing the neckties. Gage shook him mercilessly by the sleeve.

"Fowler! Good Lord, man! What kind of lawlessness are you promoting?"

"The only kind!" roared Fowler, whipping the rope over his head like a lariat. "The justice of Judge Lynch and Company's Fast Line!"

"Let's just break down the door!" suggested Egbert Beatty.

“Break down the...?” Gage shouted. “Listen, Fowler. Let me go inside and talk some sense into Leavenworth. If you fellows want those damned records so badly, I’ll make him see reason. No point in breaking down the Alcalde’s door, now!”

Fowler even gripped Gage by the shoulder and shoved him in the direction of the door. “Go, then, go! We’ll see Sheriff Pulis in office, as he rightfully should have been during the elections!”

“Yes, well, you and your friends voted often and vigorously, enough votes for ten men apiece,” Gage attempted to point out, but hands were shoving him toward the front door, where he pounded furiously. “Leavenworth! It’s me, Gage Lassen! Let me in, and I’ll see that no harm comes to you!”

“Gage!” Suddenly Lola Moreno was squished at his side, jostled about by beefy arms.

“Lola! Get the hell out of here. These men aim to pitch a necktie party.”

“I know, that’s why I’m here. How else to report best? What are you trying to do? Will Leavenworth turn over the records?”

“That’s what I’m trying to—get the hell out! This is no place for a woma—”

When the door opened abruptly, the two fell forward into the room. They would have dropped face-first onto the floorboards, but hands lifted them, slamming and bolting the door behind them.

Leavenworth was alone in his office with his clerk, James Page, who gripped the papers with a face as white as a foresail. Gage convinced Leavenworth to hand over the records—“We can always get them back later, and you’ve made copies”—but the question was how to depart the Alcalde’s office without sustaining great bodily harm at the end of a lynching rope. There was no back door in these old adobes.

Lola had an idea. “Since I am the least loathed at present, the three of you being sort of government representatives, why don’t I hold all the documents? I’ll go out the door first while the three of you make a

run for it. Go to your City Hotel, Gage. It's right there, not fifty yards away. They'll grab the papers, of course, having more interest in them than in stringing you up."

"That's preposterous!" Gage protested. "I can't run like a woman"—a feminine shriek came from the Plaza as someone presumably flattened a Chilean woman's tent—"like a damned cowardly muttonhead while you put yourself in the gravest danger!"

"It's the only option!" Leavenworth cried, rattling Gage by his lapels. "Let us take your housemaid up on her offer."

"Yes!" said Lola. "I'll tell them I'll print their story if they'll simply calm down. They like most to talk about themselves, so it will distract them while you run to the City Hotel."

Gage was adamant. "Let us just toss the documents at them, then calmly walk away together." He glanced at Leavenworth. "While you and Mr. Page run to my hotel. You are the ones they want."

Lola looked at Gage. "I assume you have your pistol with you?"

"Of course, but—what, do you think I will have reason to use it? Lola, they want to string up Leavenworth, not me."

"But you are part of Leavenworth's town council. And those *goondas* are moon-eyed, trammelled, got the Indian vapors!"

It was decided that both Gage and Lola would give over the papers with one hand on their firearms while the other two skedaddled. Gage was pleasantly surprised to know that Lola always carried a ladylike pocket pistol with her.

"All right, here we go." Lola had one hand pressed against the doorway, Alcalde Leavenworth breathing down her neck. "Stand back!" she hissed at him. "Wait a few minutes for us to distract everyone. Then you run like sixty."

Gage had to hold a protective arm over his head to shield himself and Lola from the barrage of items being tossed at them. Apple cores, empty bottles, sardine cans, all came like a shower of hail. Men calmed when they saw the sheath of papers in Lola's hand, and

Fowler, of course, allowed the men behind him to crush him against the papers on Lola's breast.

"Here are all the documents you require," Gage shouted at the buffoon.

Fowler was beaned with an empty ale bottle. "Stow it!" he bellowed at the crowd.

They stowed it a bit, but when Leavenworth and Page started sneaking out the door behind Gage, a fresh wave of produce showered down on them, and several men grabbed the Alcalde's arm.

"Leave him be!" shouted Gage. "Fowler, tell them to back down. You've got your papers."

"Are the property deeds in here?" barked Fowler, eyes flitting from Gage to Lola. His glance heated up when he viewed the journalist, and a grin started at the corners of his mouth.

"Well, ah, the deeds...we couldn't find them," Gage admitted, although he suspected Leavenworth of having secreted them somewhere. "Tell them to unhand the mayor!"

"Boys, let them go!" Fowler instructed, but moved even closer to Lola, backing her into the open doorway. "Now, these missing deeds...Perhaps Miss Moreno could show me through the office and we can find them together."

"Not a chance, you *goonda*!" Gage roared, attempting to insinuate himself between them. But Fowler was a solid block of wood—a wharf piling, in fact. "Lola, don't move. Fowler, you've got your damned papers. We can sort out the deeds later."

Suddenly Fowler was dripping with propriety. He spoke in the utmost proper English, even as he lifted his free hand to Lola's breast. "I think this tasty morsel would do very well in assisting me to find the papers." He glanced sideways at Gage. "And you can happily continue your nan-boy activities without her."

Later on, when Gage reflected back on it, he didn't recall one moment when it became clear to him what he would do. There was no defining moment that said "punch that bastard." It was just as they

say. “The next thing he knew,” his fist had connected with the *goonda*’s jawbone, papers were flying everywhere, men skittering to gather them, and Gage grabbed Lola by the arm and dragged her off. The *goonda* staggered back into a wall of his men.

Everyone must have been racing for the scattered papers, for it was relatively easy to pull Lola through the knot of unruly men. They raced at full chisel for the City Hotel, and once inside the saloon, Gage ordered a few thugs of his own to stand out front while he barred the doors. Some men had ignored the Portsmouth Square revelry to stay behind and drink, but Gage booted them. One never knew these days who might be a Hound sympathizer.

Chapter Nineteen

“I am sorry you didn’t get much of a chance to interview those ruffians,” Gage said, pouring a couple of whiskeys with shaking hands. “But that mob was completely disorderly and lawless. I didn’t like the way Fowler was leering at you.”

Lola shrugged. “I’ve been in a lot worse situations. Though thank you for protecting me.” It was pleasantly surprising, too, that Gage had punched that idiot in the face and spirited her away from there. Gage Lassen was a man of business, not a rough-and-tumble mountain man. Athletic enough from all his gymnastics, she had never imagined him hauling off and walloping anyone. Now the whiskey warmed her innards and freed her tongue. “I wonder where Harrison got to? I didn’t see him or Ollie in the crowd.”

“Where did you last see him? Harrison, I mean.”

“About half an hour ago. We were at Ellis’, I mean our new house. He went off to find Ollie.”

Gage didn’t react to the phrase “our new house,” but he did shift uncomfortably, his pinched face full of worry. “Lola, tell me...” He leaned forward with his arms on the table, palms facing the ceiling in an open gesture. “Why is Harrison so standoffish with me lately? What have I done? When he was painting me, we were so close, or so I thought.”

How Lola wanted to take his hands in hers! But she didn’t dare. Sure, he had touched her breast, but that was in the heat of the moment. He probably thought he was touching Harrison. “You’ve done nothing! Rest assured, Gage. He is just a bit worried about your reputation, if we were to continue our, ah, our activities. But I’ve

convinced him not to shy away from you—you can thank me for that.”

Gage’s face had softened by now, and Lola enjoyed the way tiny lights danced in his bottomless amber eyes. Outside, dozens of men stomped up and down the wooden sidewalk, some trying the City Hotel’s doors, but the burly men outside shoved them away. “I do thank you, Lola. You obviously have a big sway over him, and I appreciate that. In fact, when your expected wedding arrives, sooner probably than later, you must allow me to finance a fancy shindig. Perhaps we could hire the Mission Dolores again. That place has good memories for us.”

Lola nearly choked on her swallow of whiskey. Gage had never referred to their “activities” in actual words before. She managed to get the rest of the fiery liquid down, in the hopes Gage would follow suit and loosen his tongue even further. “Well. The two of you are very passionate together. I think that would be a shame to squelch that, and I definitely have no qualms about ‘allowing’ you to be together, if there’s even a question of a fiancée ‘allowing’ any such thing. Men should be given certain freedoms, especially men of an artistic bent such as Harrison. There is nothing perverse or morally lacking when all present are agreeing to it.” She added, “If I even tried to squelch it, I fear the vexation would find an outlet in other, perhaps dangerous, ways.” Lowering her voice even further, she nearly whispered, “Harrison is very hot for you, Gage. He is not a ‘nan-boy’ tearing about mauling any man he sees, but he has a genuine love for you. Different than his love for me, but love all the same.”

Gage gestured Joe for the entire whiskey bottle. The smile truly could not be wiped from his face now. “So Harrison is willing to *continue* to see me? Even if you’re only agreeing in order to save his health.”

“Oh, yes. He adores being with you, Gage. We are simply worried. When I no longer live at your house, what excuse could we

give for coming and going? And if your new housekeeper is leaky like a faucet, we fear for the reputations of all of us.”

“Wait...‘New housekeeper’? What is this all about? I know it makes sense for you to want a house of your own, but I imagined you would continue to work for me.”

Lola had dreaded this part. She had rehearsed it in her mind many times, but had never come to an acceptable conclusion as to how to handle it. “I cannot afford to maintain my own home on your salary. Cleve has agreed to raise my salary, but only if I can work for him on a reliable basis.” When she saw frown lines furrowing his brow, she rushed ahead. “I will continue serving you until we find a suitable replacement. But you must not take fault with the women I send your way, Gage. You must agree with who I deem suitable. I will make sure she knows how to roast a sage hen and make flour slapjacks.”

“I have already doubled Harrison’s salary! You must be able to get by on that.” Gage protested. “He has a secure position with me, and I am certain we can find a publisher for his letters and notes. Besides, we already have a dozen citizens clamoring for their own portraits, and I’ve had to tell them no, since I need Harrison.” His fist pounded the table, jiggling the whiskey glasses. “I *need* Harrison!”

A twinge of irritation stabbed at Lola. She had just told Gage that she permitted him to continue his shenanigans with *her* fiancé, and now he was forbidding her to leave his employ? Yes, certainly Harrison’s salary was more than enough to “get them by,” but that was not the only topic at hand. “Gage. I truly would *enjoy* working for the newspaper around the clock. Even you have to admit, following a story is much more exciting than polishing floors. And with all these emigrants pouring in daily, our circulation has simply exploded. Why, Cleve doesn’t even wish me to set type anymore—he wishes me to do nothing but track down stories. And you of all people know how many stories there are to be had in San Francisco.”

But Gage was stuck on one track. “I *need* you, Lola. I don’t even know how to boil a pot of tea water. All I know how to do is open a liquor bottle.”

“The new girl will do that for you,” said Lola, and now she did dare to put one hand over Gage’s. “And then you can visit us in our new house. There’s nothing suspicious about you visiting your former housekeeper or your new foreman. We will find you a nice Parisian girl. I will check the guest roles daily on incoming vessels. You speak fluent French, correct?”

“*Naturellement*,” Gage said, drawing himself up with dignity.

Lola replied, “*Ensuite, nous trouverons une parisienne*.” Then we shall find you a Parisian girl.

“*Ce n'est pas assez bon, Lola. Je te desire*.” That is not good enough, Lola. I need you.

Lola was prevented from further practicing her languages when a fresh wave of riotous men came surging down Kearny Street. Lola shrank back in her chair at the sudden uproar pouring out of Portsmouth Square. About ten men crashed into the front doors of the hotel, and Lola could plainly see through the window that the three sentries Gage had posted out front were not nearly capable of suppressing the mob.

The sentries were armed, of course, but it was hardly intelligent for them to shoot into a gang of similarly armed men. “We should probably leave,” Lola suggested, aware a hint of terror seeped into her voice.

Gage slapped a hand around her forearm, his other hand at his holster. “Yes, that’s a wise decision. The back door.”

As they stood, something crashed through one of the front windows. Lola jumped back several feet—it was her instinct that it might be a bomb of some sort. But she saw it was a brick, and she stooped quickly to pick it up. “Espinoza,” she told Gage. One of his bricks.

“Let’s run,” Gage suggested.

The last thing Lola saw, oddly enough, was the visage of Phil, her fellow *Alta California* journalist. No doubt he had merely been investigating the riot, but now his thin frame was pressed against the glass so that his face was smashed up against it, eyes bulging in fright, like a fish with two eyes on one side of his head. His mouth was open in a silent scream, his fingers clawlike, scrabbling against the glass, and he entreated her to do something.

As they skedaddled down the hall past the dining room, Lola heard the gist of several shouted oaths.

“Hand over the deeds, Lassen!”

“You son of a whore, Lassen!”

“Show your poofy black face out here, or we’ll burn down the hotel!”

Dear Chelsea! Where were Gage’s supporters when they needed them? The Hounds could hardly constitute the majority of citizens, and Gage had won the election fair and square, although the same could not be said of some politicians the Hounds had backed.

“They only want the liquor,” Gage said uncertainly as they peeked out the back door.

“Hopefully.” To the right, there was a clear view of the milling of dozens of men, perhaps hundreds, in the Plaza. The only logical destination was to tear to the left down the muddy alley which had finally dried up after a week of spring sun. However, on Sacramento Street, some ruffians had rounded the corner, bypassing the City Hotel on their rampage.

“There he is!” shouted one, pointing.

“Get him!”

Electrified, the couple renewed their sprint up the hill toward Jacob Leese’s former home. Lola had not expended this amount of sudden energy since her dancing days, and she knew she would soon be devoid of stamina, although Gage with his calisthenics could probably run much further. She had not danced the Spider Dance since those first weeks in San Francisco, before Gage had saved her

from the embarrassment of an audience of twenty ogling, filthy men—the nadir of her entire dancing career.

She had no idea where they were running. Would they just keep running to the Mission until the other men tired? Her voluminous skirts slowed her down, and soon Gage was racing ahead by about fifty feet. She could surrender—these men didn't want her. That would give Gage a few extra seconds to take off and secret himself. Ahead, she saw him duck into a back street of some kind. She didn't often have reason to come up here, as it was near the Hollow where Spanish prostitutes plied their trade, and there were no groceries on offer, maybe some hemp for sale, that was all.

Lola turned and prepared to meet her attackers, only numbering about ten by now, all armed with heavy sticks and firearms. Another two fell by the wayside when they took to shoving each other.

“Let's get the girl!”

“I've got the girl!”

“No, I've got the girl!”

The leader of the herd was within a block of her when on a sudden she was literally lifted from at least one of her slippers.

Her head felt as though it was left back on the street, her body borne down the alley. It took several dizzying seconds for her to realize it was Ollie who hauled her bodily.

“Look,” he said, “this is the safest place. Stay in here until this whole thing boils over.”

She only caught one brief glimpse of Ollie's handsome, sun-browned face before he shoved her into a cellar, slamming a feeble door behind her.

She was on her butt in a room with a low ceiling. Gage's hands clutched at her and drew her close.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It appears to be an area for storing liquor.”

“Well, that's handy.” Once her eyes adjusted to the dim light, Lola could see several casks piled on their sides, cork plugs

beckoning. "It could be the Chilean's storage. What if they come to get some booze?"

"I doubt we'll be here that long. Oh, *Good Lord!*"

The eight remaining men had discovered their alleyway, and they now stormed past the storage shed. Their heavy feet actually shook the glass bottles Lola leaned up against, and without thinking, she scooted between Gage's thighs and clutched his chest. To make light of the situation, she whispered, "I wonder how Ollie knew this place was here."

"Yes. And happened to be standing right here when we needed him."

"Oh! More men are coming!"

"Be silent."

"They went down this way!" What sounded like ten additional men clamored up the alley, and the boots that had passed them returned. Lola pressed her ear to Gage's chest, and his hammering heart told her he was almost as terrified as her.

"I saw them heading north, toward the cemetery." That was Ollie's voice. So he *was* in cahoots with the angry horde!

"Why should we believe you, Denny? You work for the bastard."

"Let's just fire this entire block. Nothing but a bunch of Spaniards here anyway."

"Yeah! Who's got a match?"

"I don't."

"I don't."

"Someone has to have a match! I'm not going to stand here making a fire with a flint."

"Bob Capp's got a match. I just saw him around the corner."

The men thundered off.

Lola was fairly sitting in Gage's lap now, their heads up against a whiskey keg. She burrowed her face into his neck, the scent of ambergris and lye soap calming her in an odd way. He encircled her in his arms, squeezing her close. He did have such smooth skin, as

Harrison had often opined—so velvety it made one hungry. From the distant Portsmouth Square, men bellowed in promiscuous heaps, and it sounded as though the riot had bubbled over down there. Lola heard the cries and entreaties of various injured persons, but she was helpless in her little hovel.

“They’re coming back,” she whispered when the muffled sounds of marching boots returned. They shattered the few glass windows in the alley, and the distinct acrid smell of smoke crept into her nostrils. She pressed her lips to Gage’s ear. “They’re going to destroy this entire town.”

“Oh, Good Lord,” Gage groaned, and the next thing Lola knew, they were kissing.

Gage Lassen probably would have been a sweet and gentle kisser in normal times, but this was no normal time. The jitters and apprehension had them both shuddering with nerves, and they kissed more out of a sense of having nothing else constructive to do—to blow off steam, as it were. They could not run from their boozy grotto, but they did not wish to sit there like ducks waiting to be shot, so they kissed.

It eased the strain, Gage’s mouth urgently upon hers, biting and licking her mouth. His hands came up to hold her skull, and soon she was flat on her back in the dirt, whimpering like a pup. She didn’t utter a word, for anything she could say would be inappropriate. In logical, normal times, nothing would have been more inappropriate than spreading her thighs to wrap around Gage’s hips. Allowing her boss to mount her like a stag, while shacks all around them were burning! Thugs surrounded them, firing structures, probably with torches made of their burning sticks, and it made the utmost sense to be cradling the delicious globes of his ass to her crotch. Lola was even proud of the way her breasts popped from her bodice, bared to his nibbling incisors, as he attacked her hungrily.

Perhaps it was soothing to him, too, to noisily slather at her mouth, and now he moved down her bared throat, plastering great

sucking kisses to her clavicle and finally slurping one stiff, naked nipple into his mouth. His groaning against her vibrated down her belly and resonated in her quim—she could feel she was soaking wet, her pussy lips pulsating with wanting his long, dark penis.

Every time he nibbled at her breast, an explosion of magnetic tingling shot down her abdomen, bringing forth more juicy drips that ran between her buttocks. In the alley, men flailed away with sticks or rifle butts at nearby shoddy shacks. There were so many rioters now, it seemed as though ordinary citizens must have joined in the melee, just for the fun of taking part in a rumpus.

“Lola,” said Gage, his breath steamy against her breast. “You are so lovely. I know why Harrison loves you.”

She caressed his head to her breast, the locks so silky and warm, as though the henna-colored streaks gave off a heat of their own. She squirmed under his sultry body, a molten mass of rubbery limbs. He slid his hand between their bodies to fumble at his buttons, and she was so overwhelmed with need she heard herself muttering, “Yes...yes...yes...”

That long swarthy cock she had admired on so many occasions now slid into her quim. Gage’s stately face hovered over her, the heavily lidded eyes betraying no emotion either way as he pounded her expertly, as he had fucked Harrison with such verve. He flinched a shred whenever a fresh structure was struck or the wood cracked with a club. They clung to each other out of fear, but the effect was to soothe Lola. The rampaging men on the other side of the flimsy wooden door faded away, and her entire world became the man she held in her arms.

His motions slowed, and Lola relaxed into his easy, gentle fucking. Gage smeared the curtain of hair from her face, and planted soft loving kisses to her cheeks, his full lips subduing her terror. She held him as one would a beloved, nuzzling her head against him, almost purring in her relaxation. He came inside her in many fulfilling

bursts, muffling his cries against her temple, his lovely coffee and soap aroma imbuing her breast.

Chapter Twenty

The Great Brick and Deed Riot did not settle down until sunset, when most men probably ran out of gusto to even lift a bottle to their lips. In fact, the next day at sunrise, men were discovered strewn about Portsmouth Square and the streets with spent torches in their grips and twisted leers on their faces. It was a disgusting day in the annals of San Francisco.

Around sunset, Harrison found Ollie again, gleefully making Chinese shadows with his hands against an adobe wall, using a nearby bonfire as illumination. Harrison rattled Ollie's arm so stridently that his shadow of a racehorse and jockey was strewn to the four directions of the compass.

"Hey! You ruined his shadow," a slurring man complained.

"Harrison!" Ollie exclaimed. "Do you know how difficult it is to get that jockey looking like he actually wants to win the race? To get the proper enthusiastic attitude, the angle of his ass against the saddle..."

Harrison wasn't in the mood for puppetry, being covered in a fine film of soot from his back alley quests for Lola, Gage, or Fowler. "You jackass! Whose side are you on, anyway? Did you know these *goondas* are fixing to lynch Lassen? He's your employer, you miserable old critter! He had nothing to do with withholding the deeds, but because he's on the town council, they want him hanged!"

Ollie shrank against the adobe wall, hands fluttering from weak wrists. "I was just having a spot of fun."

"Fun? Listen, you half-baked toad-eater. When did you last see Lola or Lassen?"

Harrison had heard the couple had bolted from the Custom House, escaping by the skin of their teeth. Phil had seen them holed up in the City Hotel, right before a crowd of jacklegs had thrown bricks through the windows and torn the saloon to smithereens. Right before Phil had his face cut up by being trampled upon a pile of sardine tins. Harrison had been by the City Hotel, and his paintings were all right, but no Lola or Gage.

Ollie pressed his palms to Harrison's chest. "I found them a hiding spot! Cumon, I'll show you! I'm the one who saved their hides."

As Ollie led him through the streets strewn with a hodgepodge of rubbish, Harrison explained things to him. "The biggest outrages, from what I've heard, took place in the Hollow. They violently tore down Chilean tents, plundered them of money and valuables. In cold blood, they beat everyone with sticks and stones, kicking anyone who looked foreign. Then they fired among the injured people. Lord only knows how many are dead."

"Well, that's just a darned shame," was all Ollie would say. "The Hounds are now starting to call themselves Regulators."

"Well, we'll see who's regulating whom when we drag them to justice tomorrow. The blacksmith Medina is already hard at work fabricating bracelets for all the *goondas* we arrest. When did you last see Fowler?"

"Down by the anchorage about two hours ago."

That was odd. Harrison had checked on the new wharf, and it was undisturbed. Fowler could have been heading for a new marauding excursion to Contra Costa, the "opposite coast" across the bay, such as the one he and his "Regulators" had recently returned from. There were plenty of unoffending Californios still clinging to their ranchos over there.

"Here. I stowed Lola and Lassen down in this safe little wine cellar. Look. No one's destroyed it."

The “wine cellar” was a shallow basement of a store where looters had plundered furniture and religious items from Mexico. A few shops in the street had been burned, but the rioters had moved on, and Harrison squatted down and rapped on the hatch door. “Lola! Gage?”

There was some rumbling from within, but Harrison grew impatient and yanked open the hatch. The sun had set, so he could see virtually nothing aside from two clothed lumps, stirring and moving like a couple of Rip van Winkles. “Lola!”

“Harrison?” Lola’s voice came remote and fuzzy, and Harrison reached in to haul her body out from...*underneath* Gage’s?

“What’s going on?” he asked, falling onto the street on his butt and clasping her in his arms. Her skirts were up above her knees, and Harrison soon scented out the smell of sex, Gage’s coffee and lye aroma permeating her bodice and rising from her crotch. Harrison instantly knew that familiar and comforting smell. A stab of raging jealousy coupled with fear of something unknown knifed through his gut. He left them alone for a couple of hours, and they did *this*!

The anger, however, began to melt when Gage emerged from the cellar, covered in dust from the shaking of the floor above his hiding spot. They’d apparently been sleeping, unaware that the riot had moved on to more fertile, or drunken, grounds.

“Oh, we were merely hiding...” Lola said uncertainly.

“Was that not the perfect hiding spot?” Ollie queried.

“In many ways,” Gage agreed, hefting a porcelain cup he’d discovered and ducking back into the cellar to fill it from a cask. “Is my house all right?”

Harrison replied, “Yes, I think they wanted to go on a bender more than they wished to harm you personally. Although Sansing, Jensen, and I had to scare off a few doughheads trying to steal your cow. But quite a few Chileans were polished off down in the Hollow, and there is a public meeting in Portsmouth Square tomorrow morning.”

Gage settled into the social circle and handed Lola the dusty cup of wine. "Yes, this is beyond an outrage, especially for a supposedly civilized town as this. The first order of business tomorrow will be closing down that so-called Tammany Hall."

"And Fowler was last seen at the anchorage a couple of hours ago."

Gage asked Ollie, "Were you able to inform him about the 'gold strike' on my American River property?"

"Yes!" said Ollie brightly. "Earlier I told him about your strike at Natomas, and I gave him that map of your land."

"Ollie," Harrison said. "Why don't you see if you can't flush out that old zealot? Find out his plans, where he is, where he's going. If we're lucky we can just arrest him, but he may have already left town."

"Yes," agreed Gage. "You need to prove to us you're not in cahoots with them. He won't talk to any of us, of course, so go. Find out his plans then report back to us."

"We'll be at Gage's house," Lola added. "Go, Artemus Felcher. Go!"

They grabbed a few bottles of the Mexican wine before setting off downhill.

"How many Chileans would you say were polished off?" Gage asked Harrison.

"I'd estimate about ten. Outrage will be so intense, we have to try as many men as possible for the crimes."

"Fowler being the most important."

Clearly, Gage did not wish to discuss the fact that he'd been discovered in flagrante delicto with Harrison's fiancée. But Harrison wished to discuss nothing else. If Gage had finally broken through the barrier to touching another woman, Harrison wanted to know. They walked past the smoldering sheds and women wailing "*¿Dios mío, qué han hecho?*" as they tossed charred belongings to and fro. No "Regulators" seemed to be active in the neighborhood, merely the

detritus of their destruction. Layers of smoke curled around Harrison's legs, acrid odors of burned flesh, chickens, and wood imbuing his nostrils.

"Perhaps one of these widowed Chilean women would make a good replacement for me," Lola suggested, and Harrison knew she had finally broached the subject of leaving Gage's employ.

Gage wrinkled his nose. "They are all hookers."

"Well," Harrison inserted, "that may be true, but they can rustle up some decent chaw, and they do keep their tents clean as a whistle."

Lola said eagerly, "Not to mention. People may have styled me a hooker when I went about Europe as a courtesan. See? We are not all bad."

Harrison had never viewed it that way before. "Gage, it would be kind of you to help one of these widows."

Gage was silent for a long minute before answering. "We will see if any of them suit. I'll not give charity simply for the sake of giving charity and winding up with someone who can't roast a sage hen."

"That makes sense," said Lola. "I will go around and talk to them once all this uproar has died down."

Gage's front lawn was a miasma of broken bottles, rotting onion skins, and fish skeletons. Harrison kicked aside several piles of carrot tops and potato peelings as they walked up the front pathway. Some chickens had even gotten loose from their enclosure and were happily scoffing the delicacies, mostly splattered cans of cranberries and blueberries. Lola stooped to tuck two birds under her arms and went around the back of the house to stow them away.

The men took the bottles of Mexican wine into Gage's study.

"This stuff is usually pretty rank," Gage opined as he opened a bottle. "Some fairly excellent wine has been coming out of General Vallejo's grape vineyards up north, and Doctor Marsh's in the foothills."

"Yes," Harrison agreed blandly. "That horrible Boston wine will cease to be imported once California gets her own vineyards going."

Was Gage intent on overlooking the fact that Harrison had just uncovered him lying atop his fiancée? In a wine cellar, no less. Harrison was accustomed to being blunt in his dealings, having lived with Plains Indians for many years. They gave all the facts in connection with any topic and in very plain lingo. On the Plains, there was no time for niceties of language. A fellow might have his hair raised if he stopped to procrastinate about borrowing someone's quiver.

Harrison leaned casually against the wall, accepting but not sipping from the wineglass. "So. You were lavishing caresses upon my fiancée, down in that basement."

Gage stared at him, unblinking, for what seemed like an entire minute. Then his face fell, and he came toward Harrison with lowered head, obsequious. "Well, yes. We became intimate. For that, I must apologize to you." Sighing deeply, Gage became animated once more. "We were a bit, shall we say, nerves were high while those ruffians rampaged around us. I think we just clutched each other out of nerves."

Harrison guffawed to the ceiling. "There's no need to apologize, Gage! Land's sake! How long have I been wishing you would take a break and realize that women can't be beat?"

Gage guffawed. He seemed vastly relieved. "Yes, I know Lola struck you clean to the heart, and I can see why. I need to forget about that witchy wife of mine. She isn't representative of the majority of womenfolk."

Harrison raised his glass. "Here's another nail in your coffin," he said, and they drank. Harrison placed a calming hand on the shorter man's shoulder and drew him close. "Lola wishes to leave your employ, not leave *you*. She has a very passionate woman's sort of ardor for you. You frustrated her when you treated her like a servant, and once she's no longer your servant, there will be no reason to treat her like one."

“Yes.” Gage’s voice was sultry as he reached for Harrison’s waist. The walls of the studious room seemed to blur into a cocoon of warmth. Two whale oil lamps flickered, casting a sensual glow on Gage’s buttery skin, and Harrison stroked a thumb across his cheekbone. “Lola is no longer a servant. She hasn’t been for a long time. Can I admit to you that I was excited several months ago to watch her bathing? I believe she was pleasuring herself.”

Harrison chuckled. “That does sound like Lola. She’s very uninhibited. It must be her European upbringing.”

Harrison only had time to press a tender kiss to Gage’s full lips before Lola herself appeared like a spectral vision from the corner of his eye. She had divested herself of her blouse and now stood with lamp in hand, grinning broadly in her chemise, streaks of dirt decorating her arms and neck. Harrison imagined he saw a few of Gage’s fingerprints on Lola’s clavicle, and instinctively he leaped into action.

“Come,” he told Gage, grabbing his arm and leading him through the two dining rooms to the kitchen.

Lola gestured at a large pot on the stove. “I’ve boiled some water for our baths.” She looked brightly at the two men. She was absolutely entrancing, the sooty coils of her coiffure bouncing about her shoulders, gleaming with oil from Lord only knew how many cans of sardines that had been tossed at her. “I think we smell about as lovely as the chicken pen I just visited. Gage, I took the liberty of getting some of your lye soap from upstairs.”

Lola dipped a white rag into the pot of boiling water and dragged it across her upper arm, smearing the dirt into fascinating, dancing shapes. Harrison felt distinctly odd. Land’s sake, did the Mexicans put some hemp into their wine? Perhaps it was merely the idea that the three of them could be so vulnerable, so unburdened with one another, that made him feel off-kilter.

Gage abruptly lunged for a bar of soap Lola had set on her baking table. Harrison watched, as though a tourist from another land, as

Gage set to smoothing the rough soap over his fiancée's bicep. Her arm was revealed to be cleanly sun-browned, as she was accustomed to going about town in the short sleeves of the Californio women. Harrison wanted to join in the purging, but Gage clearly had it in hand, the way Lola leaned against the table and proffered her arm, as though extending it to be kissed. Gage gently wrenched her arm, the suds foaming up through his fingers, causing Harrison's cock to enlarge against his hip.

Drawing Lola close to him, Gage dipped the rag into the pot of hot water again, bringing it to her throat to wash off more grime. It was fascinating, watching the two people Harrison loved best engaged in the basest ceremony since time immemorial. Gage dipped the rag beneath the bodice of Lola's chemise, lifting one sooty breast from its casing. He spread the soapy bar over the entirety of her bouncing tit. Harrison felt a twinge of jealousy that they looked at each other, gazes locked like eagles, as Gage diddled her nipple between thumb and forefinger. Why didn't they look at *him*?

So Harrison fell to his knees, yanking the voluminous Californio skirt from Lola's waist. She gasped at the suddenness of it but eased her knees apart to allow him to pull the skirts to the floor and discard them in a corner of the room.

From his subservient viewpoint, kneeling on the floor, Harrison looked up in awe when Gage lifted his fiancée onto the kitchen table. Bodily, he lifted her as though she were no more than a mere chicken! Gage stripped Lola's drawers from her legs, flinging them into the same nether lands where Harrison had tossed the skirt. Lola lay back with a dazed smile, as though she also had drank the hemp wine, her feet twined around the legs of the table. When Gage boldly took a fresh rag of boiling water and pressed it to Lola's bare belly, Harrison realized: *Gage loves Lola, too.*

"Yes...yes!" Harrison cried with encouragement, standing tall. He did somewhat feel like a doctor, looking on as his closest friend massaged the warm rag across Lola's pubic bone.

“Lola,” said Gage in that commanding way Harrison had always admired about him. “Let me wash you. Let me cleanse all the dirt from your sweet body.”

Lola lay propped on the wooden table, looking down with admiration at Gage’s touch. “Yes, Gage. Do it. Wash me clean.”

Gage rinsed a fresh rag of hot water and gently applied it to Lola’s pussy. She tossed her head back in happiness as Gage slowly rubbed it, like a mother washing a babe. Harrison wasn’t sure what to expect next, so he stood straight like a tomfool nurse. He gasped in surprise to see Gage bent over, his head between Lola’s thighs.

Holy father, what was Gage doing? His head was buried in the cleft of her muff, lapping away like a pig in a trough. Harrison had never seen such a thing before, and he stumbled back in awe. What was going on?

His brain felt as though it was bleeding. Lola appeared in the throes of ecstasy, her hand wound around Gage’s neck, urging him into her quim. He had never seen any Plains Indian commit such a voluptuous sin, if one was inclined toward religious thought.

What *was* this? Gage lapped at Lola’s sex, and the stronger the swishes of his tongue, the more animated Lola’s reaction. She heaved and pulsed upon her elbows, her head thrown back like a hunted deer on a pole, and her cries became higher, swifter. Gage lapped away, his tongue sure and hard. How disgusting that a man should dive his face into a woman’s crotch. Yet, at the same time, how alluring. It was as though Gage replaced with his tongue the fingers Harrison had often used to bring Lola off. The technique certainly seemed valid.

Harrison stood at a strange angle, nearly toppling, the weight of his erection throwing him off balance. Propping one hand on the wall, he watched as Lola’s cries became more ardent. She cried like an angry coyote, plenty of music howling from her throat. Gage sped up his ministrations to her clitoris, and she was no better than a wild cat then, crying out stifled sobs of jubilation, wrenching Gage’s neck with her powerful thighs.

Gage seemed happy to be strangled by such muscular thighs. He uttered choking sounds as Lola lifted his entire torso off the floor, nearly onto the tabletop. This seemed to go on for whole minutes. Harrison stood like a limp shellfish, leaning against a wall that felt like a sodden block of clay. He was stunned by the activities of his friends.

When Gage dragged himself to an upright position, hauling on Lola's thighs as though they were the rocky outcroppings of an immense cliff, a wordless idea flashed into Harrison's brain. Without even spelling any actions out in thoughts, he found his feet springing his body to the stove, his hand snatching up a jar. His feet leaped like a long-distance somersaulter, and without even being aware of what he was doing, Harrison found himself positioned behind Gage, looking at the crock of lard he now banged onto the table.

Again, words spilled from his mouth without preparation, but they were the words of someone much more lewd than Harrison. "You're pretty good at washing my fiancée, Mr. Lassen. Let's see how you appreciate being washed by someone else." And almost viciously, Harrison unbuttoned and then yanked the filthy shirt from Gage's torso, so impatient the last couple of buttons arced through the air and pinged against the wall.

Lola's shining eyes showed that she enjoyed this display, leaning back on her elbows clad in nothing but her chemise, naked breasts bouncing over the soiled bodice of it. With one foot propped on the wooden table, he could view her clean-licked muff framed in moist tendrils, the clitoris so stimulated it protruded more than an inch from the curls like a tiny penis. It enflamed Harrison further to see he had such a bawdy fiancée, and he peeled the undershirt from Gage's chest and pressed him forward with a hand between the shoulder blades.

"You like cleaning her, and licking her, but you haven't kissed her." Harrison snarled against Gage's neck. "Kiss her, you arrogant tyrant. Kiss her!"

Gage allowed himself to be pressed. A feline smile snaked the corners of Lola's mouth, perhaps thinking she might kiss the town treasurer in full proximity of her fiancé. And kiss they did, a full-throated, hearty kiss with tongues lapping at each other, nostrils snorting, and Gage's steely erection pointing in a determined compass-like fashion directly at Lola's saturated sex.

Well! He'd fucked her once today, and he wanted it again? A conflicting amalgamation of jealousy and arousal washed over Harrison. He would make Gage pay for desiring Lola, but the payment would involve Harrison's own satisfaction. Grabbing the rag from the pot of hot water—the fire was dying down from absence of maintenance—Harrison plastered it to Gage's chest, rubbing harshly and socking it into the man's pungent armpits. Gage's usual ambergris aroma was now quickened with that of bad wine and burning shacks, and Harrison rinsed the rag again and again to wash his arms, the back of his neck where Lola braided the fingers of both hands, and, roughly, the plane of his abdomen.

Rivulets of fresh hot water rolled down the exquisitely steamy pubic bone, and when Harrison nimbly unbuttoned the broadfall with the fingers of his other hand, the velvety purplish penis sprang forth into his palm, urging him to murmur, "Now, Mr. Lassen. Now. You want to fuck that wet pussy, don't you? You want to slide it up inside that beautiful, wanton housemaid of yours. You've wanted it for years." It gave Harrison an odd power he'd never felt before, this "allowing" of their coupling.

"God, yes," Gage hissed against Lola's swollen mouth.

"She's beautiful, is she not? And she's not 'sluttish'—she's only meant for me and for you."

"Beautiful, beautiful," Gage mumbled as he licked the woman's mouth.

Harrison's fist throttled the pulsating, dark penis, his own cock up hard against Gage's shapely ass. "Lola," he commanded. "Do you want your boss' big prick inside you?"

Lola held Gage's face in her hands, and when she pulled away to cry earnestly, "Yes, yes, Gage, mount me like an animal. I'm wide open," that did it, that *I'm wide open*. Swiveling with a great lunge against Gage's bare ass, Harrison urged his friend, "Now, now, Gage! She's waiting for you. She's yearning for you. You don't want to let me down, do you? This is your chance, your chance to take the most delicious woman in town. Slide up her, Gage, slide up—"

Gage hardly needed any more persuasion, his penis well-nigh being sucked inside of her, Harrison's fingers jumping out of the way, it was so swift—there was no need to guide or incite this randy bastard. As Lola's head lolled to one side on a limp neck and she let loose a satisfied groan that Harrison *knew* she'd never uttered with him, jealousy again flared in his chest. He could only watch for a few moments, the fleshy, well-formed ass pumping away at his woman, the fascinating sinews of Gage's muscular back roiling like the eddies of a swollen river, Lola's toes curling to point at the ceiling, and Harrison had to get another rag of tepid water to furiously bathe those exquisitely broad shoulders.

He used the bar of soap this time and scrubbed savagely, rinsing again to splash more water over the undulating muscles, rapidly moving down the sublime slope of Gage's lower back to the rise of his ass, where he washed more assiduously, cupping the full balls in one palm. The men sloshed around in probably an inch of water on the floor, the childish shuffling of their feet in tandem with the suctioning slaps of the couple's fucking. Harrison fondled the balls tenderly with the rag, then tossed that aside to slide the bar of soap between the tempting globes of Gage's ass.

When Gage moaned and Harrison felt a fine tremor run up the backs of his friend's legs, he knew it wouldn't be long until he shot his load, so he lobbed the soap atop the rag and slid one, then two fingers up Gage's ass. The other hand he pressed to Gage's steamy pubic bone, just above the root of his slimy prick, to stay him, to slow him down. But his questing fingers had the opposite effect, as

Harrison recalled from being fucked so thoroughly on the dusty buffalo robe in the City Hotel. There was a certain spot up there, he thought of it as a sweet spot, where the tip of Gage's prick had just tickled, and that's when he'd spewed all over his own belly, embarrassingly. It was probable Gage had the same spot, and Harrison wasn't going to waste the sensation on his fingers, so he withdrew them.

"Whoa, whoa," he warned Gage, slapping him on the backside in a bullying manner. A grin burst onto his face as he heard himself scolding, "The terms of your employment mean you ream my woman perfectly, but *slowly*."

"You bastard," Gage snarled, but with a twinge to his voice that told Harrison he recalled his own previous "terms of employment" when he had pinned Harrison to the bed and forcibly kissed him. He did wind down his humping a bit, but this only caused Lola's eyes to roll even further back into her head, and she mewed,

"No. Not slow. Faster."

Harrison unsheathed his own penis and grabbed the jar of lard or whatever animal drippings Lola collected from her cooking. He smeared it scrupulously down the length of his penis, but when his thumb rubbed the greasy, delicious stuff over the glans, he nearly lost it. His entire body jerked in a small pre-orgasmic spasm, and he positioned the bulbous head at Gage's entrance.

"I'll show you how fast to go," he instructed, a bit less certain of his command now.

Gage paused in his fucking now. He must have been aware of Harrison's intentions, and he seemed to tense while Lola whimpered for more. Harrison understood. It had not been very pleasant at first when Gage had fucked him, being unaccustomed to being used in that manner. And his penis wasn't as narrow as Gage's. But with short stiff jabs, he slid past the initial tight ring, and he was in the glorious slick ass, as Gage huffed and puffed, releasing the tension.

“*This* fast,” Harrison said with more assurance as he gripped the sinewy hips. It was glorious to be in charge for once, to be the aggressor, with the arrogant domineering town treasurer speared on his prick like this. He grasped the ass muscles in his splayed palms as he drove into him, unsure at first if he was hurting Gage—Gage’s whimpers were now starting to sound indiscernible from Lola’s. But when Harrison flung one long arm around his chest, drawing his torso up to slap against Harrison’s own chest—sweat, soap, water, and bad wine all comingling into a *mélange* of liquids between their bodies—Harrison nibbled on his friend’s earlobe, and the sweet man laughed in an exhalation of tension and ecstasy.

“Lord, Harrison,” Gage panted. “You are really...something.”

“Come *on!*” Lola cried.

The tremors in Gage’s thighs told Harrison that he had nearly reached that sweet spot, so he slapped the torso back down until Gage hunched over Lola again. Gripping the slick shoulders, Harrison humped him with short quick little jabs. His own balls drew up, hard and full against his body. A great surge of rapture threatened to flood up his penis, but he wanted to feel his friend’s release, to tickle the fluttering of that sweet spot inside Gage. Bending at the knees, he swung one long arm down to slather his palm against Gage’s glugged testicles, and that’s when he felt it.

A wringing sucking at the tip of his penis like a hungry carnivorous flower milked the orgasm from him. He exploded in many long, intense spurts inside the slick, hot channel. He massaged the enormous throbbing artery under Gage’s testicles as Gage erupted in a long series of gasps and gulps. Tiny white stars swam before Harrison’s eyes, and when his palm, astonishingly, actually felt the ferocious flow of jism burbling down the length of his friend’s penis, he, too, was left breathless, choking on his own dry throat.

They held themselves there, shuddering, barely standing on their feet, just a few more spasms preventing them from collapsing in a pile of limbs in the pool that was now the kitchen floor. *Lola will be*

exhausted cleaning all this up, Harrison thought. No, she won't. Because she won't clean it. The new housemaid will.

“*Mon Dieu,*” Lola panted, limp hands draped across her stomach.
“You men are utter animals.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Artemus Felcher rattled the knob to the back kitchen door. “Boss,” he hissed directly into the doorjamb.

Gage froze in position, his former housemaid’s thighs spread lazily before him.

“Boss,” Ollie insisted once more in that spy-like tone.

Most of Gage’s brain knew he should get rid of the interloper, or at least hide from him. Then he remembered. Ollie had been on a mission to find Fowler. So he, too, went to the kitchen door and hissed back, needlessly furtive. “Ollie. Come to the front door.”

Leaving Harrison and Lola in the kitchen to arrange themselves, Gage bolted through the two dining rooms and into the foyer. Whipping open the door, he found Ollie lurking in the shadows, his coat collar turned up against possible recognition by enemies.

Grabbing him by the sleeve, Gage pulled him into the foyer and slammed the door. He pressed the hapless attaché against the wall and demanded, “So? Did you find him?”

Ollie clutched his own lapels together, cringing into the wall. “Yes, boss! I slyly pretended I wanted to find him to congratulate him on the melee and join him in his quest for gold at Natomas. As I so presciently predicted, he was at the embarcadero trying to steal a boat to get to Benicia.” Ollie rolled his eyes. “Him and five hundred other chowderheads! Oh, there are plenty of clippers and schooners no one wants, but here’s all the hair off your head if you can find a simple sloop to take you upriver!”

Gage knew that even if Fowler could find a vessel to take him to Benicia, it would be almost impossible to find donkeys or even a broken-down *carreta* to haul him to the gold country, so fierce was the competition for passage. Most fellows these days just wound up footing it to their fortunes, and the highway was encrusted with their gaping, pathetic skeletons. “Good work, Ollie. Wait for us, and we’ll go arrest him.”

The filthy motley group jogged down California Street to the bay—Gage allowed Lola to accompany them, as she had her journalist’s notebook and her lady’s pocket pistol, but she would have to stay safely in the background.

“He may be heading to the *Euphemia* to break his partners out of the brig,” Harrison pointed out as they ran.

“There’s Lem,” said Lola.

Gage made out the shadowy figure among a group of men gathered at the wharf. The men cheered with upraised fists at something over the water, and Gage noted Egbert Beatty, another notorious Hound, and John Pulis, the pretender to the sheriff’s post, among the most boisterous of the audience.

“Lola,” said Gage. “Go pull Lem out from the crowd and bring him here. I don’t want anyone seeing us.”

Lola brought Lem to them, and he told a harrowing tale. With skin so black it was nearly purple, Lem appeared as a pair of hovering, frightened eyeballs and chattering teeth as he clutched his scarf about his neck. “Fowler. He became so frustrated at not being able to obtain a boat, he finally shot that man Hood who was only trying to protect his scow from being stolen.”

“Did you witness the shooting yourself?” Harrison inquired.

“Why, yes.” Lem shuddered. “Hood fell over like a tree, and men trampled him in their enthusiasm to leave the anchorage. No one even stooped to see if he was still alive. Which I’m assuming he isn’t. At least not anymore.”

Gage continued, “So Fowler got away? How long ago?”

“Just moments ago...See?”

Gage did not see, as it was past midnight by now and the waning moon just a sliver above the cemetery. Harrison had intelligently grabbed a glass from Gage’s desk before they left the house, but even when Gage held it to his eye, he saw merely a blob on the water that could have been anyone’s skiff. He did not see anyone rowing, so perhaps Hood had concealed his oars somewhere else, as most citizens did, to avoid the boat being stolen.

Fumbling with the ring he always kept jangling about his waist, Gage wrenched a key from it and pressed it into Lola’s hand. “Hurry to my warehouse with Lem and Ollie. There I’ve let Cleve store back editions of the *Alta California*. Take absolutely as many copies as you can carry—and my oars. Meet Harrison and me at my skiff.”

The three forms scurried soundlessly up the waterfront using the alleyway Gage liked to call Lassen Street. He yanked Harrison by the sleeve, leaping down the wooden breakwater and into the sand.

“You have a skiff?”

“I use it to ferry hides from ships to my warehouse.” Cowhides had been nearly the only form of currency in California before the advent of gold.

Gage urged them onward to where he’d stowed the boat upside-down, around a projection of large boulders. After turning the boat upright and dragging it to the shoreline, the two men hunkered down to wait, occasionally keeping an eye on Fowler’s boat with the glass.

“Sure looks like he’s heading for the *Euphemia*,” Harrison commented.

Gage shivered. He’d only had a chance to wipe his face and arms clear of grime at home, but the layer of soot coating his body was evaporating from his skin with clammy results. Perhaps feeling Gage shiver, Harrison scooted close and tenderly wrapped an arm around him, even placing his chin on Gage’s shoulder.

“I don’t see how he expects to get aboard *Euphemia*, much less get past the men on guard duty,” Gage observed.

Harrison added, "Then bust his cronies out of the calaboose."

Gage felt safe in their little cove. Over the rocky promontory, the orange glow from the carousing men's torches imparted a festive atmosphere. His former navy training seeping into his bones gave him courage, and he asked Harrison, "Can you swim?"

Harrison shrugged. "About as well as any man. Can you?"

Gage looked down his nose at the top of his friend's head. "Born in the West Indies? My mother a Negro slave? You mean you didn't just *assume* I spent my childhood diving for pearls?"

Harrison chuckled then was silent for awhile. "Did you? Dive for pearls, I mean?"

Gage was about to laugh, but the silhouettes of his three assistants were now struggling over the slick boulders, and the two men stood to assist them. Quick work was made of stowing the newspapers in the skiff, tossing in the oars, and Gage appropriated Lem's scarf, tying his pistol into a bundle with it.

"Do I need to do the same?" Harrison enquired.

"You might want to. Take some strips of your fiancée's skirt." Gage turned to Lola. "It's for a good cause."

A heady, invigorating feeling actually coursed through Gage's blood as they shoved the skiff off the sand and into the water. He had not been on a mission this adventurous since the Navy.

"Here's luck," said Lola over the clamoring of the waves.

Each man swiftly grabbed an oar and pulled. Soon they were fairly shooting over the crests of the tidal waves in the little flat-bottomed boat. Gage had rowed this way often, from his hide warehouse to the ships in the roadstead, and he knew where he was going without even looking over his shoulder. After five or eight minutes of hard rowing, he motioned Harrison to pause and put the glass to his eye.

"He's vanished behind that Baltimore clipper," Gage told his companion. "It looked like he was using some sort of long rods to maneuver between the vessels. We can be there in two minutes."

Again rowing furiously, they nearly bumped up against the gunwale of a Dutch schooner that was swinging at cable length in the bay. Ships were crowded so closely out here, used as floating homes, stores, and brothels, that Gage's skiff only missed by a few inches being torpedoed by a bucket of slop tossed overboard.

They hugged the hull of the Dutch vessel. It was quieter in the roadstead with no waves breaking, and Gage felt powerful, his seafaring memories bolstering him as they bobbed on the frigid waters. He had not been engaged in this type of furtive enterprise in years. It invigorated him to row savagely between the tall ships, their freeboard looming like canyon walls. Men's heads peeked like mobile battlements over the posts of the stern rails, and Gage saw some of them were armed, perhaps against the expected reprisals and escapes after the Great Brick Riots. Someone requested him to speak his name and business, but Gage ignored him as they rounded the Dutch ship's prow.

"There they are," Harrison breathed.

The stolen scow was amidships the sloop of war *Euphemia*, and Fowler's furry silhouette stood tall, balancing himself in the rocking of the small boat.

"What's he got in his hand?" Harrison queried. "It's not a weapon."

Gage put the glass to his eye. "Oh, yes it is," he whispered.

To shout anything at the *goonda* would be to give away their position, so he instructed Harrison to assist him in rowing closer. "We're not taking him with just firearms, and I don't want you getting shot."

When they were ten yards away, Fowler took note of them. "Who's that?" Fowler barked to a henchman. Instantly a ball went whirring past Gage and Harrison, missing them wide by many feet and thudding into the hull of the Dutch ship.

That was all the inducement the partners needed to slide over the gunwales of their own boat as Gage reminded Harrison, "Take the towline."

Harrison took several long gulps of air before vanishing beneath the rolling surface of water. Draped over the gunwale with his legs dangling in the bay, Gage made short work of lighting the pile of newspapers with matches from his match safe, ensuring the pages of Lola's rag were fluffed and strewn about the deck. Harrison began towing the skiff before Gage had finished strewing the lit pages of the *Alta California* about the decks. When another ball hurtled past his head, this time missing by a mere foot, Gage decided his work was sufficient, and he stroked underwater, away from both boats.

It was uncertain who had a more dangerous job—Harrison in his towing of the fire ship, or Gage in exposing himself to be the pyrotechnician behind the scheme. He was relieved when, surfacing for air some yards off, Fowler and his stooges shot at his fire ship instead of him, foolishly shouting "Fire!" and bringing soldiers to the rails of the *Euphemia*. As predicted, Fowler's concern was more for the blazing vessel now lashed securely to his own and not the men responsible for this fiery coffin.

Gage gulped air and descended once more. When he surfaced again, he saw that Fowler had astutely tossed his grenade of black powder into Gage's fire ship, as though adding to the blaze would extinguish it. It must have been an instinctual thing for him to throw the very missile he intended to launch onto the *Euphemia*'s decks, as he had no other target to blame for the flaming boat.

Now Gage didn't bother diving underwater and merely treaded water, chuckling as saltwater streamed down his face. *Euphemia* men had swiftly formed a bucket brigade and were pouring them onto Gage's skiff, but not before Fowler's two henchmen jumped overboard, Fowler bellowing at them, "You sons of bitches!" He clutched a fresh grenade that looked to be a sardine tin of black powder with a fuse. He had probably intended on creating a diversion

for the *Euphemia* soldiers while he busted his friends out of the calaboose. Fowler shot at one of the soldiers descending the gunwale of the sloop of war—a hanging offense. The soldiers at the rail shot back at Fowler, apparently striking him somewhere in the torso, and his shaggy form finally went down behind a wall of flame. Gage could see him no more.

The Dutch vessel was lowering her longboat to assist with the bucket brigade, so Gage looked around for Harrison. The flickering lights of the flaming boats played out across the water's surface, and Gage treaded in a circle looking for his friend. With their heavy sodden clothes on, they should get ashore quickly. No one paid attention to his tiny head bobbing in the middle of the anchorage. Everyone was too concerned with the drama at the *Euphemia*.

He finally saw a black form clinging to the hull abaft the waist of the Baltimore clipper. He stroked over to the form, huzzahing aloud because it was so obviously Harrison, his luminous white face floating above the oily black water. Gage nearly flung himself on his friend, and they clutched one another, kissing joyfully. Harrison's prickly hair stuck out every which way, the salt crystals already gritty under Gage's fingertips. They laughed against each other's mouths, mindful not to swallow salt, legs tangled.

Harrison held Gage a few inches away. "What will the Navy do," he panted, "when they realize it was your skiff that made the fire ship?"

"Perhaps my name on the hull will have burned." Gage laughed, referring to the name *Shining Times* he had painted on his skiff. It was a Western, mountain man term that basically meant "happiness."

Euphemia men had tossed down lines to the men in the water. They had wrapped Fowler's burned, soggy frame into the lines and were hauling him on deck.

"I wonder if he'll make it?" Harrison's tone was somber now.

Gage shrugged. "We'll find out tomorrow. Let's get back to Lola."

They stroked back to shore, toward the torch-waving crowd on the pier that now gave off a definite carnival atmosphere.

Chapter Twenty-Two

August 1849

Lola Moreno bounced up and down on her soft hair mattress. In particular, the snowy blankets covering it made her happy. Gage had allowed her to take her old bed to her house, as he purchased his housekeeper Paloma a new one. Summer in San Francisco was odd—across the Bay in Benicia, Contra Costa, and Stockton the sun warmed everyone's bones, but here the fog would blow through to one's soul daily until about October. So Lola had made time to sew curtains and set down Persian rugs and other ladylike tasks that would cozy up the house.

They had two outdoor chairs on the front porch, but one had to swathe one's self in blankets to sit out there, so for now, the couple had whitewashed the entire interior and accepted a few items of furniture from Gage, furniture being one of the scarcest things in the frontier where new homesteads were being set up every minute. The stuffed maroon chair where Harrison had painted Gage sitting for his portrait now stood before their parlor fireplace. The portrait of the Indian chief with the floor-length eagle feather bonnet sat atop the mantel. And, being so proud of her status tending Gage's garden, Lola was assiduously at work planting the second garden. Gage insisted on keeping the cow, but Paloma seemed reliable enough to bring around the milk Gage had promised them, and now Lola didn't have to tend the animal.

Homely tasks were not alien to Lola, and she still found it pleasant to have a meal waiting for Harrison when he came home from the

anchorage in the evening. But Cleve Wallingford had kept his word, and then some, sending her out following virtually every story worthy of "The Mother of Newspapers." The big story of late, of course, aside from gold, was the trial of the Hounds. Lola was supposed to be down at Portsmouth Square right now, as one of the wounded Chileans who was "presumed in a dying state" was establishing the facts of the riots and assaults of the previous month.

However, she needed to be at home to receive her new oven being delivered from the wharf, and when her front door opened and men's boots entered her foyer, she jumped off the bed.

"Harrison!" What was he doing home in the middle of the day?

"*Meha*," said Harrison. He went directly to the parlor hearth, pitching several more logs onto the fire. He turned to Lola, his face refulgent with the thick outdoor mist. "Mrs. Bancroft," he proclaimed. "It looks like we shall be winning this court case, *cadit caestio*. The Chilean has identified Fowler as an actor in the riots, rampaging among their tents, Fowler personally shooting at least two of his friends. The Chilean identified them as two of the bodies that were discovered the next day."

"Oh, bother. I missed it." Lola nestled her face in Harrison's neck. "I should get down there, to give Cleve a fresh article on the affair."

Harrison stroked the back of her head, holding her close to him. "That would do no good. The Chilean is about to expire of his wounds and had to stop testifying. He had to be propped up by a doctor, and his testimony was so weak a translator needed to shout it to the room." He urged her down to the floor in front of the fireplace, where she had placed his buffalo robe.

"But the testimony will still stand scrutiny?"

Harrison stretched his tall frame next to her, one leg slung over hers. "Oh, yes. Fowler's flimsy alibi of being at Tammany Hall during the riots fell apart. The common view is that his cronies of course would lie for him—it's everyday knowledge they stuffed the ballot box last January, ten votes to a man for that odious John Pulis

for sheriff.” He kissed her lightly upon her lips. “Listen, my *meha*. We didn’t get a proper honeymoon what with all this Fowler mess. Gage has offered us to use his house on his Natomas land, and General Vallejo will loan us a team of oxen and one of his best *carretas* to get up there.”

Lola relaxed into his caresses. Harrison always enjoyed licking her clavicle, claiming it was “creamy.” His licks sent a river of tiny shudders down her middle, directly into her pussy, expanding the lips of her quim. She smiled now, thinking of a calming journey with Harrison, winding alongside the sloughs of the delta, collecting buckeye and acorns of the live oak. It would be pleasant, shooting elk for dinner, meandering over the winding foothills—pleasant, aside from those hillocks of calcified bones left by formerly hopeful miners. “I’ve never even been to Saucelito,” she said, referring to Whaler’s Harbor on the opposite peninsula.

“Well, you need to.” Harrison eased the shoulder of her Californio blouse down over her shoulder, nuzzling the exposed globe of her breast. “The man who has great vision must follow it, as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.”

Lola giggled, half with the tickling of his mouth against her breast and half with the loftiness of his statement. She supposed his sentiment was another of those Plains Indians maxims. “I would like to seek the deepest blue sky,” she agreed. “And also write some firsthand accounts of the gold mining. I can be Cleve’s ‘Woman in the Mines.’”

“Yes,” Harrison agreed, perhaps knowing she could never go more than a day without recording what she saw. His stiff penis rubbed insistently against her thigh, making Lola giggle again. Men could not go more than one day without fucking. “We shall dine on the *fructus naturales* of the foothills...but make sure to take along plenty of provisions of our own. I heard you can trade a pumpkin for a quill’s worth of gold dust.”

Lola squirmed beneath him. “My, you certainly are interested in your Latin phrases lately.” She had viewed him plenty of times in the courtroom, testifying as to Fowler’s acidic and tyrannical personality, the many threats Fowler had dealt to him, and the theft of the bricks, which were discovered under the canvas roofs of Tammany Hall. He had thrown about plenty of Latin phrases then. “*Suggestio falsi!*” he had proclaimed while pointing at the ceiling, parading before the handcuffed Fowler, insinuating that Fowler was telling a pack of lies. Perhaps it was a States thing. Perhaps they flung about Latin a bit in Pennsylvania.

Harrison hovered over her with his weight on his arms, his glittering sapphire eyes searching her face. He grinned in that lopsided manner, just one corner of his mouth lifting. “I like Latin,” he stated, and his eyes never left hers as he unsheathed his penis and rubbed it about her pussy’s outer lips. Her thighs relaxed, and she hooked both feet around the backs of his knees.

She had once known some Latin—of *course*, being the paramour of the Baron de Belin! But at the moment, the only phrase that came to her mind was, “*coram non judice.*” *Before one who is not a judge.* The Baron had often said that when he wished her to act freely, and Lola giggled again as she wondered if Harrison would interpret it the same way.

As he slid in and out of her, his eyes lost their focus, and at last he gave in completely, huffing against the side of her throat, creating steam. Lola lunged her hips to meet his, having finally after months become accustomed to his long, thick penis. But when the front door opened and boots entered the room, Lola froze. *The men delivering the stove!*

“Oh, bear’s ass!” she whispered, squiggling to detach herself from her husband.

Craning her neck, she looked upside-down at Gage Lassen, striding imperiously across the parlor.

“Good Lord,” he said in good humor. “Court recesses for five minutes and he rushes here to hump.”

Harrison pinned her, though, his eyes focusing on hers. “*Coram non judice*,” he agreed.

Gage dropped to his knees between Harrison’s thighs. “That Esteban Morales collapsed before he could finish testifying,” Gage said conversationally. “But the damage was done. Fowler is cold as a wagon tire. Morales can go happily now, knowing he defended his family and friends.”

Lola was about to ask a legal question, to fill in some blanks in her article, but over Harrison’s shoulder she saw Gage yank Harrison’s fringed pantaloons down to his ankles. Gage vanished as he flung himself chest down on the buffalo robe. Harrison gasped as Lola felt the heat from Gage’s breath against her pussy, and Gage snaked his sinuous tongue about the root of Harrison’s penis, causing him to twitch and jump deep inside of her.

Spreading his thighs even further to invite Gage’s tongue, Harrison moved very slowly inside of Lola. It was her turn to jump when the tantalizing tip of Gage’s tongue writhed about the steamy root of Harrison’s penis to lap at the bulging lips of her labia. *Holy father, if only he could get around top.* Lola deliriously inched her fingertips down the slopes of Harrison’s ass to touch Gage’s skull. She could reach only far enough to vaguely tickle his scalp, though, and certainly not impart any clairvoyant message about her intentions.

However, Harrison seemed to possess the farsighted ability to perceive her wishes. Bracing her by the hips, he raised himself on his knees, bowling Gage over backward. Her hips were now clean off the buffalo fur, and she balanced herself on palms and tiptoes. Gage, interpreting their directive, scooted around to dive his face into Harrison’s groin. In this way, by titillating the base of the penis buried inside her, Gage could also flutter the tip of his talented tongue back and forth across her congested clitoris, full to near bursting, sending lightning-like stabs of ecstasy shooting through her entire pelvis.

Lola could also thread her fingers through his rich chocolate hair, and Harrison studied Gage's head intently as he fucked her with a new furor. Gripping her by the hips, he pumped into her with long abandoned strokes as Gage lapped her into oblivion.

She could never tell until the very moment when she balanced on that crest when she would orgasm, and if Gage's tongue slipped or missed a beat in his rhythm, she would miss it altogether. But he hit just that right spot at the right time, and she caught her breath and held it as her pussy convulsed around Harrison's penis, choking him with her spasms.

She clutched Gage's head to her pelvis and didn't realize till much later she might have been smothering him. He persevered in his voracious onslaught to her clitoris, smacking his mouth loudly, bringing Harrison off with the lewd sight. Lola felt the load of semen erupting up the length of Harrison's penis, and by then she was shuddering so like a spastic she pressed Gage's head away from her button, urging him to lave the trunk of the admirable prick. Gage did so with gusto, sipping off the last drops of sperm when Lola fell onto her back on the robe.

It was a scintillating sight, Harrison on his knees, hands balled into the small of his back, head flung back so she could admire his full muscular throat. His penis waggled with its weight, and Gage had to grip it steady as he licked away. At last Harrison relaxed, reaching down to caress the underside of Gage's jaw, smiling with gratitude.

Lola clambered laboriously to her feet, tangled in her skirts. On the sideboard she still had some of the Mexican wine that reminded her of the day of the riots, huddling with Gage in the wine cellar, and waiting for Gage and Harrison to swim back from the *Euphemia*. When she turned back to the two men holding glasses of the stuff, she found them sprawled back on the sofa covered in red calico, taken from the City Hotel when Gage had replaced the furniture. The sofa was not too stained with imprints of mountain men and miners' backsides, but Lola had covered it with a quilt until she could obtain a

fresh sofa from an incoming ship. She giggled to see the men flopping there with limbs akimbo, but they arranged themselves in a semblance of civility when she handed them their glasses.

Gage gulped, and cleared his throat with portent. “Leavenworth wants you to be appointed associate counsel to the district attorney,” he said matter-of-factly.

Lola discovered her jaw was hanging open, slack. Perhaps she wanted a glass of wine as well.

“Is that so?” Harrison said casually. His wineglass swung between his forefinger and thumb. “Just for the trial?”

“For the entire town. Forever, as the case may be.”

Harrison was taking this invitation so indifferently. It was most peculiar. So Lola enquired, “Associate counsel to the district attorney—Horace Hawes?” Gage nodded, almost as cool as Harrison. “And *why* exactly would Hawes imagine that Harrison would make a splendid lawyer?”

Gage tilted his head, glancing sideways at Harrison, who was so casual he seemed about to burst into a whistle. “Because he *is* a lawyer?”

Lola gaped again. “Whaaaa...? *Harrison!* What is Gage implying?”

Harrison shrugged. “That I *am* a lawyer?”

Lola spread her hands wide. “Wait. How could you possibly be a lawyer, and I never knew about it? Is that why you know so much Latin?”

The men burst out laughing.

Gage pointed at Harrison. “So you admit it, finally? My suspicions were correct?”

Harrison now looked sheepish. “Well, yes. I studied law in Connecticut, the New Haven Law School.” Quickly, he added, “But I didn’t enjoy it. It was just a career my father steered me toward, and after practicing for a few years, I started painting portraits instead.”

Gage mentioned, “You certainly seemed to enjoy it, while appearing as counsel for the people in the affair of the Hounds. Many people have remarked on your proficiency.”

“Yes, well.” Harrison shrugged. “I have too many other more pleasant options. You have found a publisher for my *Notes*, and—Lola, Gage has just told me this—the Smithsonian Institution has expressed interest in my painting gallery. Besides.” He reached out a hand to indicate Lola should sit between them on the couch. She did so, numbly. “You both know it would cause me much more pleasure to open an art studio here in town, and travel to the mines to capture rural scenes.”

Lola said, “You can paint while I write articles...on our honeymoon.” For she had been feeling a bit guilty about writing articles on her honeymoon.

“Spiffy idea,” Gage approved. “You are much too accomplished, Harrison, to restrict your activities to a narrow field such as law.”

Lola placed a hand on Gage’s thigh as well. “And I would like it if you accompanied us to Natomas. It just wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Yes, Gage.” Harrison encouraged his friend. “We can all fit into Vallejo’s *carreta*, and I’m sure you’d like to inspect your property again. This is not just a marriage of two.”

“Well,” Gage said softly. “That is very kind of you.”

“And now,” said Lola. “I presume court has adjourned for the day. Let us repair to Parker House. Ollie told me he will be belting it out later today.”

Out front, Jensen and Sansing unloaded pallets of two-by-four lumber, placing it off to the side of Harrison’s study.

Lola waved at the tow-headed Jensen. “Leif. What’s all this wood about?”

“A surprise,” Leif called. “But you’re ruining it by standing there, so you’d best get off to the Parker House.”

Lola turned, propelled by Harrison's hand in the small of her back. It seemed that the men were guffawing under their breath. Mystified, Lola asked Gage, "What's that lumber for?"

"I suppose the cat's out of the bag. It's an addition to your house. It's much too small for all of us."

"We need another bedroom for Gage," Harrison clarified, needlessly.

The idea of a new room imbued Lola with happiness. Yet a thought nagged at her. "I hope you don't expect me to serve you tea in your new bedroom."

Gage laughed. "I think I've figured out how to make my own tea by now."

So they walked across the lagoon to the Parker House, where "Artemus Felcher" was already in full swing. Standing on a little stage wearing his red and white striped waistcoat, he picked away on a banjo that had only heretofore been used as an ornament around his neck.

"So he *does* sing," Gage marveled.

"Lola!" cried Lem, coming forward with a cup of whiskey. "Mr. Lassen! I'm so glad you decided to join us. Oliver Denny is really quite the warbler."

"Yes," agreed Phil, whose face still bore the glass cuts from the riots. "His voice soars from on high. You can just imagine a solitary miner treading his weary road, laden down with picks and axes, roasting in the unforgiving noonday sun..."

Lola narrowed her eyes at Ollie's smoky form. Little whale oil lamps with colored filters cast him in variegated lights of yellow and blue, giving his face an unfortunate shade of green. "But...he isn't singing 'Oh! Susanna,' is he?"

Harrison and Gage also squinted. Lola made out the words:

*I soon shall be in Frisco
And then I'll look around*

*And when I see the gold lumps there
I'll pick them off the ground.*

Lola squeezed Harrison's arm. "If Ollie can make a fool of himself, then so can I."

Harrison laughed. "It isn't so unusual for Ollie to be making a fool of himself."

"No, I mean it!"

So, without even drinking a single dram of whiskey for courage, Lola pushed through the gaggle of men and stepped onstage. Ollie saw her and nodded without missing a beat in his smiling tune. Perhaps he was afraid she might dance the Spider Dance, but she grabbed the pianist by the shoulder and yanked him off his bench. She jumped right into the tune with fervor.

No one knew she could play the piano! She had not played in years. Today was just full of surprises. And she was glad that only the yellow oil lamp shined on her.

"Gentlemen," bawled Artemus Felcher. "Mrs. Bancroft, the Spanish Dancer, on the piano! Bravo and *splendido*! Let's all give her a hand!"

*Oh Californi-o
That's the land for me!
I'm going to Sacramento
With my washbowl on my knee."*

When she looked out into the rowdy audience, Harrison and Gage were clapping and stomping to beat the band. Gage shouted something into Harrison's ear, and Harrison laughed like a donkey, slapping Gage on the back. Lem and Phil were so carried away, Lem even jumped onto a table and began "yee-hawing" as he showed off his fancy new vaquero boots with giant saucer spurs.

If I could just freeze this moment in time, I'd be happy forever.
But for once, there was so much else to look forward to.

End Note

The jury of twenty-four found the Hounds guilty of conspiracy, riot, robbery, and assault with intent to kill. If Sam Fowler had actually been caught in those very acts of violence, popular justice would have been executed upon him. As it was, Fowler was sentenced to ten years with hard labor.

The trials led to the formation of the famous “Vigilance Committee” in 1851, when “it became almost a life and death struggle for the honest citizen to preserve his property and inhabit the town in peace.” Some of the Hounds who had escaped punishment met it shortly afterwards at the mines. Several were hanged at an hour’s notice by enraged miners, upon whom they had “attempted to try the tricks they had so long played with impunity in San Francisco.”

Thus ended the affair of the Hounds.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen knew she wanted to be a writer when she was three. 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 twelve, she had a dream of being in a village on the coast of Kenya, so at twenty-three 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 precolonial 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.

Also by Karen Mercury

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