

Midnight Rider

Colleen Shannon

Chapter 1

“This air is clear, yet it is full of shadows that with each breath strike inward to my heart, and haunt her chambers with disastered shades of nameless fears, presaging death and ruin . . .” *

Act I, DON JUAN TENORIO, Zorilla y Moral

The California sun heaved its dying gasps down on the two fencers, silhouetting their macabre dance on the canyon walls behind them. Cordovans shaded each face. Only the clang of steel kissing steel and the gritting of teeth were audible as the duelists engaged, their blades entangled, grinding together at the hand guards. The deadlock broke when the tall, red-jacketed fencer flexed his powerful arm and shoved his smaller opponent away.

The slim figure in the white shirt stumbled. Only the striated cliffs and one grim man bore witness as the large fencer lunged at his off-balance adversary. Red Jacket’s blade gleamed like polished camelian as it arrowed toward White Shirt’s chest. Instead of flailing for balance, the slim fencer obeyed gravity’s command and dove toward the ground in a controlled roll beneath the arcing rapier. Catlike,

White Shirt rebounded before Red Jacket recovered from his lunge. Red Jacket had to parry while still off- balance, but he rapidly regained his equilibrium.

With a circular motion of his forearm, Red Jacket feinted to his opponent's left, then quickly struck to the right. The tactic seemed successful as the right side of White Shirt's chest was briefly exposed. But when Red Jacket attempted the coup de grace on that vulnerable area, he found his blade enveloped with a supple, rotating motion and batted away.

The slight man who stood aside, watching narrowly, didn't appear surprised at the smaller fencer's adroitness. A satisfied smile curved his thin lips as he watched White Shirt take the initiative with an innovative series of feints and thrusts that forced Red Jacket to retreat.

Red Jacket did not seem concerned, however. Backing away, he jeered, "So fierce, *mi oponente*. Are you not tired? Such enthusiasm is wearing on the nerves and body. "

Ignoring the taunts, the slim challenger maintained the attack. Still, White Shirt was unprepared when Red Jacket sprang backward, then lunged viciously. White Shirt shook with the force of the blow and barely countered in time. As they disengaged, both fencers gasped with their exertions.

White Shirt stumbled with weariness. Red Jacket took advantage of the sagging blade and leaped forward with a powerful, straight-armed lunge that seemed impossible to deflect. He was shocked to find his weapon entangled in a dazzling counterattack made with such steady blade control he could not disengage in time to divert the steel that winged to his heart. He stumbled before the force of the blow and crumpled to the ground.

Gasping, the slim victor jerked off the cordovan. Jubilant features beamed down at the vanquished. Waist-length hair fell free to ripple as buoyantly as the deep but feminine voice that mocked, "So tired, *mi oponente*? Or merely disgusted by your defeat at the hands of a mere female?" She slipped the button off her rapier as she spoke and dropped it in the pocket of her tight pants.

The man on the ground opened one wry eye and mourned,

2

“I can never hold my head proudly again. What shall abuelo say when I tell him, Magdalena, *hermanal*”

Magdalena Inez Flanagan de Sarria glared at her brother. She nudged him in the ribs with her dusty boot. Arms akimbo, she scolded, “You are impossible, Carlos. Each bout we fence you taunt me with my weakness and clumsiness, yet the first time I emerge as victor you immediately cry coward and threaten me. Bah, men!”

With a disdainful flick of her hand at his nose, she turned away, but Carlos leaped to his feet and caught her around the waist to swing her high in the air. He shed his injured look, and his eyes twinkled up at her disgruntled face. “You should know I am but teasing, *pequena*. In truth, I am so proud of you I could burst. Who would have thought a woman could defeat the most skilled swordsman in California?”

Carlos set Magdalena down and turned to the dark man who had silently watched their argument. “Is she not as graceful and cunning as a lioness, Joaquin?”

Both men surveyed Magdalena from head to toe. In her flaring pants, boots and loose shirt, she could have passed for a boy from the neck down—until the wind flattened her blouse and exposed small, rounded breasts. To be sure, though, no one looking at her countenance could ever mistake her for a man. Triangular in shape, with a widow’s peak that gave her a naughty, sultry look, her face had the milky whiteness and fine texture of young ivory. Her nose was too long for her features to be perfect, but her full, stubborn mouth and direct gold eyes bespoke a character more arresting than perfection.

Indeed, when she narrowed her long-lashed eyes at Joaquin as she awaited his verdict, he was truly reminded of a lioness. Then he looked at her hair streaming in the wind and the illusion was dispelled. Not black, not brown, not red, it seemed the Creator had been uncertain which hair color to endow her with and had finally blessed Magdalena with the finest hues of each. Her sable brown locks

rippled with streaks of fire in defiance of the encroaching night. Joaquin delayed his answer to brood on the girl he'd helped raise and now loved as his own. She was, at seventeen, already a woman—a woman at war with herself who didn't even know it. Many a man would long to be enriched by her alchemy of iron will and feminine fire. One, he feared, in particular.

Her grandfather had good reason to worry. However, Ramon's clumsy attempts to protect Magdalena only incited her. Joaquin dreaded the imminent confrontation. It had been building between them for years. Magdalena's volatile blend of Irish hot-headedness and Latin passion was not calmed by Ramon's Spanish bromides.

Past tragedy further complicated the situation. Magdalena was truly her mother's daughter, Ramon had groaned to Joaquin recently; if she persisted in these wild roamings, she could well end as her mother had. Magdalena had defied the poor relation Ramon had summoned from Spain to guide the girl upon his daughter's death until, defeated, the poor woman had fled back to Madrid. Now, no one remained to teach her to be a proper lady but himself. And teach her he would, Ramon had warned Joaquin last night. With or without her cooperation. There was only one way to keep her safe. When he'd confided his decision to Joaquin, Joaquin had tried to dissuade him, to no avail. Ramon insisted: Magdalena was a woman; she must finally learn her proper role.

Looking at her now, Joaquin knew Ramon was only partly right. Though vulnerably magnetic as only a lovely woman can be, Magdalena was also deeper, stronger, than many men. She would never be happy with the hacienda as her only province. Magdalena's spirit knew no boundaries but the wind and the night, and she'd fight any man who tried to chain her to hearth and home. Ramon had no understanding of Magdalena's fierce self-determination. Unless he learned it, Joaquin feared great conflict awaited the household. Indeed, it had already begun. And when Magdalena lost her temper, she seldom considered the cost of her actions.

Despite his worries, Joaquin's face was calm when he finally grunted a dissent to Carlos's question. "A lioness? No. Playful as a lion cub, perhaps, but at least she doesn't have the arrogance of her brother, the strutting peacock." Stiff-backed, the little man walked toward the horses and saddled his mount.

Carlos cocked a rueful eye at his amused sister. “We are rising in his esteem, *hermana*. Soon we shall reach the level of dogs, no?” Laughing, the pair locked arms and joined their master. Though Joaquin was now the *caporal* of their grandfather’s ranch, he was a Spaniard who had once been one of Europe’s greatest fencing masters.

Many times Magdalena had wondered what tragedy made him sign on with a Spanish merchantman and desert Spain’s cultured adulation. Joaquin was evasive about the matter. When questioned, he would only admit that he stayed at the ranch to help raise his friend’s children as he would have wanted.

After their parents’ deaths, Magdalena and Carlos depended greatly on his calm good sense and love. He was a desperately needed contrast to their abuelo’s autocratic youth-rearing beliefs. However, Magdalena suspected Joaquin remained for other reasons as well.

The peaceful ride back to the hacienda became tense as they neared Rancho El Paraiso. Their hearts grew heavy with emotions that varied from disgust, to longing, to regret as they thought of the two men who awaited them.

“*Chica*,” Carlos asked suddenly, “has Roberto asked you to marry him yet?”

Joaquin started. He turned in his saddle to watch Magdalena’s reaction.

Magdalena’s slim hands jerked on the reins. Her mouth twisted as though she’d bitten into a lemon. “Yes, how did you know?”

When they topped the rise overlooking the hacienda, the three halted and surveyed the scene below. The brightness of the moon bathed the sprawling, adobe ranch house in a flattering light that silvered the graceful arches and red tile roof. One-storied, with thick, white-washed walls that kept the inhabitants cool in summer and warm in winter, the building seemed to slumber peacefully under the moon’s luminous blanket.

In the distance a bull lowed. As though it were daylight, Magdalena could see in her mind’s eye the rolling hills and lush valleys dotted with cattle for thousands of leagues.

Carlos stirred and flung a hand at the idyllic scene. “This,” he answered simply. “Cousin Roberto will stop at nothing to gain the

lands he covets. Now that he has blackened me in abuelo's eyes, his next task will naturally be to win you for his wife. And, I fear, our dear abuelo will make no objection."

Magdalena sighed at his bitterness, but she knew he was right. As *mayordomo*, Roberto had skillfully alienated Carlos from ranch affairs and then hinted to Ramon that Carlos was interested only in frivolous pursuits, such as fiestas, fencing and flirting. Since playful Carlos and his stem abuelo had never seen eye to eye, Ramon tended to believe the worst of his grandson. His pride hurt, Carlos further strained relations by escaping the hacienda as much as possible, thus appearing to confirm Ramon's suspicions.

And she herself stood little higher in her grandfather's esteem, Magdalena reflected wryly. Ramon Xavier de Sarria was a Californio to his toes, but he ruled his lands like a Spanish patriarch. He believed women were to be flattered, cared for, cherished and protected; in return they must never step out of their place as the natural consorts, comforters and companions of their men. Magdalena's refusal, like her mother's before her, to accept such a role both puzzled and infuriated him.

So she had to sneak in and out of the house during her escapades with Carlos. These blessed hours of freedom were the only times she felt happy and alive. Inez and Patrick, her parents, had never restricted her activities. To the contrary, they had encouraged her interest in such unfeminine pursuits as horse training, fencing and practice with the reata. Oh, for those days again, she thought, tears of longing in her eyes.

Joaquin cleared his throat. "Come, little ones, brooding accomplishes nothing. Let us return and fight for your heritage. Your cousin's influence is great, but he will betray himself in the end. Ramon is stubborn as a mule, but he is not stupid. He will discover Roberto's greed sooner or later, and the rancho will be yours, as your mother wished." Joaquin's voice softened with tenderness. "You love El Paraiso as you do each other, whether you admit it or not. Your mother went through much to save your heritage, and you must let no one take it away from you. Ramon loves you both deeply. Be patient with him, and he will show it." The trio spurred their horses down the slope. After caring for their stallions, they walked to the house. Carlos strode to the front and Magdalena slipped to the back,

intending to climb in her window. She tossed her sword into the room and levered one leg over the sill, but large, ungentle hands caught her waist and hauled her back down.

Angrily, she tried to shrug off her cousin Roberto's hands, her mouth already starting to form her angry words. But when she caught sight of the tall man with erect bearing and a gray goatee and moustache who stood behind him, she swallowed the abuse she longed to voice.

Roberto's dark eyes flared with a triumph she could see even in the moonlight as he trumpeted, "It's as I told you, *tio*. She has once more been fencing with Carlos. She needs a man to tame her spirit." Roberto caught her chin in his hand and turned her face from side to side, examining her features as he would a horse he contemplated buying.

Her dislike open, she glared at his austere handsome face with its high, broad cheekbones, thick-lashed eyes and thin lips. Her stare jabbed like an icicle when she ordered glacially, "Release me."

When he did so, she stood unwavering under her grandfather's condemnation. His dark eyes razored over her from head to foot. His mouth curled in distaste. Grasping her wrist, he dragged her behind him into the house. Their footsteps clicking on the red tile floors echoed in the silence.

The two maids setting the long table scurried out of the enormous living area at Ramon's command. He shoved Magdalena into a straight-backed chair and stood over her, trembling with emotion. She looked away from his fury, and only Roberto saw him drag a shaky hand over sagging features.

Magdalena stared at the room, tamping down her own anger. The oak, hickory and mahogany furnishings were plain and practical. The only colors in the monastic room glowed from a huge tapestry engulfing the wall behind the dining table. Rag rugs added rainbow hues to the somber ambience.

Inhaling deeply, Ramon leaned against the massive stone fireplace. When he was calm, he uttered with cold finality, "I have been

too lenient with you. No longer will you be allowed to help about the rancho. You will stay in the hacienda and learn your place.

Galloping around the countryside dressed as a man! You shame me and my name, Magdalena, and endanger yourself needlessly. Who will care for El Paraiso after I'm gone unless you do?" Ramon took several agitated strides across the room, then he turned and delivered his ultimatum.

"That is the last time you will display yourself so. You will marry Roberto at the end of the month, whether you wish it or not. When you have a proper husband and children, you will no longer want to behave so recklessly. You will thank me one day, *nieta*. I will not let you end as your mother did. Have you forgotten how she died?" Magdalena sat silent throughout his decree, but at his last comment she sprang to her feet and cried, "My mother would still be alive were it not for your cruelty. You did everything you could to drive my father away. You'd not have his Irish blood polluting your Castilian . . ." "Enough!" His voice stung like a whiplash. "Go to your room. Tomorrow, after the fiesta, you begin working with Sarita to learn the household. And, if you try to run away, I will have you locked in your room and guarded." Magdalena curled her fingers into fists to keep herself from hurling insults at his arrogant head. She straightened proudly and said through her teeth, "I will never marry Roberto, or any other man, against my will. He has had my final word and so have you." His face colored with rage.

She turned on her heel and exited, her commanding but graceful strides emphasizing her attributes.

Roberto's eyes flared with more than triumph as he watched the gentle sway of her hips. His lids lowered, hiding the gleam.

When she reached her room, however, Magdalena's precarious control toppled. She flung herself face down on the brightly covered bed, and clawed at the soft cotton. "*Madre de Dios*, Mama, Papa, I can stand no more. Why did you have to die?" The two beloved faces she wished desperately she could see again wavered before her eyes. For once, she let the stories and memories claim her . . .

Her mother, Inez, was a high-spirited woman of twenty-five when she met the dashing Irish sailor Patrick Flanagan. She was independent, stubborn and indescribably lovely—irresistible to Patrick, frustrating to Ramon, whose repeated attempts to marry her off

had been defied by his only child.

Her father believed she was too independent to give herself to a man, and Inez had come to believe it of herself—until she met the tall ship's surgeon. He was ashore on leave on his first voyage to California when he stumbled across Inez bathing in a frothy stream. When she rose from the water, she was as sensual as a fallen angel, raven hair plastered over pearly breasts.

Water curling about her ankles, Inez looked up and saw a red-headed, blue-eyed giant, standing as though carved in stone. She shrank in fear. Stammering an apology, he had handed over her clothes and turned his back, thus igniting the first spark of the love that would consume them. Before the day was out they were lovers, Inez's first, Patrick's last.

They spent a blissful two days together before Patrick had to sail away, but he returned as often as he could until the time of his service had expired. He wanted to marry her on his second visit, but Inez knew what her father's reaction would be, and she evaded him. On his next visit, Patrick insisted they confront Ramon. Ramon reacted exactly as Inez had feared: He forbade the match and ordered his daughter not to see the Irish *picaro* again. However, when Inez discovered she was pregnant, Ramon was forced to give grudging, bitter consent to the marriage.

Patrick did all he could to gain stature in Ramon's eyes, to no avail. His attempts to help with the rancho were not successful, for Patrick was a magnificent sailor, soldier and doctor, but a *ranchero* he would never be. For the first few years after Magdalena's birth, Patrick tried to stifle his restlessness for Inez's sake. As is the Spanish way, she loved and respected her father and would have felt a deserter had she left him alone. She also loved El Paraiso, and she wanted her children to inherit. To distract himself, Patrick became involved in California's chaotic politics.

In 1822 California came under Mexican rule, ending the long, lazy years of Spanish neglect. Unfortunately, Mexico took little more interest in the remotest part of its new republic except to send an endless series of mostly incompetent, arrogant governors who were often hounded out of office by the independent Californios. Patrick had left Ireland because of the political repression shown to Catholics

and did all he could to combat that ugliness in the new home he'd grown to love. His verve and determination supplied badly needed leadership in the fledgling land. Against Ramon's wishes, Patrick became a member of the territory's *diputacion*. At last, with the legislature as occupation he was happier, and Ramon's never-ending barbs ceased to bother him.

These happy years shone brightest in Magdalena's memory. Years of raillery and tenderness between her mother and father had filled the house with such gaiety that even Ramon's sour face could not stifle it. Years of roundups, rodeos, fandangos and horse races.

Even Roberto's arrival from Spain as a gangling orphan of twelve seemed cause for celebration in those days. His quick usurpation of her brother's rightful place in her grandfather's affections was a matter she barely noticed in the shadow of the adoration she felt for her father and her love for her high-spirited mother.

Then, four years ago, in 1831, came the man who would change all their lives . . .

Patrick had been appalled by the powerful Franciscans' treatment of the neophytes of California. The Indians' ceaseless work had made the church powerful and prosperous, but they were not allowed to share in the fruits of their labor. The good padres ruled their missions like despots. When one of their flock strayed from the path of work, obedience and prayer, the fathers often used such correctional methods as stocks, irons and whipping posts.

Patrick was helpless to combat the authoritarian power of the church, so he tried to change the Indians' lot by political means and had helped convince the former governor, Echeandia, to initiate plans for secularization of the missions. However, in 1831, Mexico summarily appointed a new governor of Alta California—Manuel Victoria. He soon became known as *El Gobemador Negro*, both because of his dark skin color and the blackness of his deeds.

Magdalena's hatred almost choked her as she reached this point in her thoughts, and her tears dried under its intensity. Deep in bitter memories, she didn't hear the door open or even notice Carlos until he startled her by sitting on the edge of the bed.

Comfortingly, he clasped her trembling shoulder. "*Her- manita*, what has happened? I go to dinner and see a fuming abuelo, a

triumphant Roberto and your empty chair. Was our fencing match discovered?"

Bolting upright, Magdalena yanked off her boots. Her voice was muffled when she replied, "Yes, our dear cousin alerted abuelo to our absence." She flung her boots across the room, one after the other, but the violence did not assuage her fury.

Carlos cursed under his breath. He turned her to face him. "*Nina*, I have been thinking it might be best if we left El Paraiso. It is not the only paradise on earth, and perhaps we can find another place that doesn't harbor such a large serpent. "

Magdalena shook her head before he finished. "I shall not leave. Our parents both died for love of us and this land. If they had left El Paraiso years ago, they would both still be alive."

"You don't know that, Magdalena. Papa would still have taken an interest in the political situation, even if we had lived elsewhere."

She answered stubbornly, "No. Papa would have opened an office or found some other occupation to keep him busy, and that *desgraciado* could never have murdered him." "Come, Magdalena, even I admit Victoria's soldier killed him accidentally. The political situation being what it was, it's no wonder the governor feared for his life." Carlos sighed. "If only Papa had not been so furious about the execution of his little Indio friend for theft, he would have seemed less threatening . . . "

But Magdalena hotly interrupted her brother's reasonable reiteration of the facts. "He was *murdered*! They just used fear he pulled a weapon instead of the petition for Victoria's resignation as an excuse." She flung up a silencing hand when Carlos would have replied. "You know the soldiers are scoundrels. Convicts, thieves, murderers, all. The *cholos* commit more crimes than they prevent, led, no doubt, by our illustrious *comandante*, Luis. Why doesn't abuelo use his influence to get rid of him?"

The frenetic hatred in her eyes troubled Carlos. His own bitterness toward Victoria had faded with the governor's ignominious departure, but Magdalena's grief had evolved into an ugly loathing that lay like a blight on her passionate soul. He was at a loss how to comfort her, so his response was slow.

"You know Luis and Roberto are friends and that abuelo won't involve himself in politics. Besides, the *comandante* wasn't even

present when Papa was killed. There is no reason to blame him.”

“Bah! He is Mexican, that is reason enough.”

Carlos was amused at that. “You are Mexican also, *amorcito*,” he teased.

Jumping to her feet, she stood poker-straight. “Never call me that again! I am Californian first, a Flanagan second and a woman last. If I had my way, we’d declare ourselves independent of the glorious Republic of Mexico.”

Carlos smiled, straight teeth gleaming under his rakish moustache. “I know a number of men who would differ with your priorities, *chiquita*. They would consider you a woman above all.”

Magdalena flushed and looked torn between pleasure and embarrassment, but she tossed her head and issued her favorite retort, “Bah! They are more interested in Angelina than I. She has curves where I have none and her smiles are always sweet.”

His best friend’s sister was indeed an armful, Carlos thought appreciatively. But, catching the note of envy behind Magdalena’s bravado, he moved to comfort her as he always did. He pulled her close to tease, “You have curves enough to fill any man’s hand, *muchachita*, and Angelina will go to fat as she gets older. Whereas you . . .” —he cocked his head to the side while he studied her—“will always be as slender, beautiful and true as one of our sequoia trees, and you will age just as gracefully.” Carlos’s loving smile succored Magdalena. Ah, what a brother he was. She still had him, at least. She loved him too much to argue any longer. She slumped against him, relinquishing her bitter memories to the dark corners of her mind.

The close family circle of children, mother and father had been shattered by tragedy. That broken circlet of love had reformed into a stronger chain of only two links: Magdalena and Carlos. Their opposite personalities—she, intense and brooding; he, friendly and gay—but made their devotion more fervent. Even as Carlos coaxed Magdalena out of her melancholy, Magdalena gave Carlos perceptions beyond the obvious and temporal. The love they felt for one another was the primary stability in their world. They were devoted to Joaquin and respectful of their grandfather, but their sibling loyalty was the center of their existence. Now, they huddled in a fierce

embrace, seeking reassurance that this last rudder that kept them from drifting uncharted seas would not also be forfeit. Without each other's guidance they would be lost, homeless, hopeless.

Since Magdalena had resolved to stay, Carlos made no **13**

more attempt to dissuade her. He respected her and her reasons too much. Yet he would never leave without her.

Eventually, Magdalena pulled away and brushed back her hair, nerving herself to tell Carlos the rest of the bad news. She yanked a bone brush through her snarled mane as she reluctantly opened her mouth to speak. However, before she could say a word, a harsh rap sounded at the door. Roberto strutted into the room.

She and Carlos both stiffened, but Roberto ignored their anger and lounged against the bedpost. "I've come for my goodnight kiss, *querida*," he taunted Magdalena.

Magdalena eyed him contemptuously. "I'd as soon kiss a *cerdo*, but I'll not wallow with you," she rejoined, her nose wrinkling as if he stank.

Roberto's eyes narrowed to slits. He grabbed her by the shoulders and sneered into her defiant face, "Those pretty lips will be speaking differently on a night one month hence, *corazon*." His eyes lowered to her full mouth. He purred, "But of course, you wish me to show my devotion, no?"

Ignoring Carlos's puzzled expression, Roberto swooped down on Magdalena like a ravenous vulture. Their lips barely grazed before Carlos jerked him away and hurled him across the room. Roberto fell onto Magdalena's dressing table, knocking over her looking glass. The little mirror teetered uncertainly on the edge of the dresser, then it fell to the floor and shattered into bits. Magdalena would remember the unimportant incident later as an omen of what her life would become, but at the time she felt only fury when Roberto deliberately ground the fragments under his heel.

Her eyes locked on her brother and glowed with pride as his trim, muscular figure braced with determination. Pulling her to his side,

Carlos ordered Roberto, "You are never to touch her again. You are not fit to look at her so. You may have abuelo fooled, but not me. You are slaving with greed and ambition. I will kill you before I let you wed her. "

Roberto tensed to attack, but an arctic voice blasted from the doorway and froze him in his tracks. "Hold!" Ramon walked into the room with his usual dignity. The look he shot at Carlos locked Magdalena's throat with dread, but Carlos met it calmly.

"How dare you threaten your own cousin with murder and set yourself up as my judge? He at least shows respect for me and my land. You have made your indifference obvious."

Carlos protested, "I am not indifferent, but you reject my ideas. The old ways are not necessarily the best ways." "You are not experienced enough to make suggestions. You are reckless, Carlos, dragging your sister into these dangerous escapades."

"She is not in danger. I would protect her with my life. I love her more than anything in the world. It is you who threaten her—and your relationship with her—by trying to keep her bound. She needs freedom like our mother!" "Need I remind you that were it not for your mother's rebellion she might well be alive today?" When Carlos would have argued further, his grandfather held up an imperative hand. "Enough! I am master here, and no longer will I tolerate your impudence. Only because you are of my blood will I give you one last chance . . . " But he spoke to empty air, for Carlos had brushed past him and left. Magdalena watched Ramon and Roberto with equal hostility as the sound of a horse galloping away shattered the night stillness.

Magdalena braced herself to challenge her grandfather, "Why must you always condemn him unheard? It is his right to defend me."

Ramon's erect bearing wilted, as, briefly, he bowed his head. Magdalena searched his face, trying to understand this man who should have been closest to them, but his features were expressionless.

Perhaps tragedy could have been averted had Ramon not believed it weak to show emotion. But he was a strong man, with an even stronger pride, and his voice was cool when he lifted his head and responded. "He has no right to keep you from your novio."

Magdalena spun around and walked to the window, **15**

seeking peace, but the serene hills and gentle wind made her own agitation more troubling. “Carlos will never allow me to marry Roberto, Grandfather, even if I agree. Which I won’t.”

“You will do as you are told. Seventeen and unwed! Do you want to be a spinster? No, my mind is made up. I’ll have no more arguments. As long as you live on my land, you will obey my rules. Understood?” Magdalena didn’t dignify his threat with a response.

Groaning with an equal mixture of worry, anger and frustration, Ramon stalked out.

When hard lips kissed the side of her neck, Magdalena started. She twirled away from Roberto, swiping at his reaching hands. “You don’t own me yet, cousin. Claim again rights that are not yours and I won’t wait for Carlos’s protection. I’ll deal with you myself.”

Roberto followed her stare across the room to where her sword lay under the window. He jeered, “If it’s swords you want, *amorcito*, I’ll be delighted to oblige. I’ve a weapon of my own that begs for sheathing.” His eyes dropped to her hips.

Magdalena whitened, lifting her hand to slap him, but he ducked, blew her a mocking kiss and exited. She jammed a fist against the wall, wishing it were Roberto’s face. She would never marry that venal *cerdo*, never! She’d leave El Paraiso first! Magdalena paced her small room, avoiding the glass on the floor.

Yes, she loved this land and, she admitted, she even loved the stubborn old man who ruled it. How could she and Carlos leave Ramon with no one to depend on but Roberto? That one cared for nothing but himself. Somehow they had to change Ramon’s mind about this marriage. She muttered a brief prayer for guidance, rubbing her aching temples.

Her fingers paused as her eyes narrowed. She rushed to the large trunk across from her bed, threw open the lid and shuffled through the layers of clothes and childhood mementos. She carefully pulled out a paper-wrapped dress. She held it against her, smiling as the old lace seemed to cling its approval.

Since Ramon wanted her to be more of a woman, he shouldn’t be disturbed if she used a woman’s weapons against him . . .

The love play of guitars and violins married with the flirty winds in perfect union. Lanterns flickered in the trees, illuminating the

lively dancers with harlequin shades of light and darkness. The men were dressed in traditional California attire: breeches fastened at the knee above deerskin boots, embroidered waistcoats open at the waist to show a red silk sash. Many of the young men wore their long hair queued, covered by a silk scarf and wide-brimmed black hat. The girls wore short-sleeved, embroidered blouses, full skirts and silken hose and rebozos. A few of the wealthiest young women wore expensive English dresses imported from Europe.

Lovely as the señoritas were, one girl stood out from them like an exotic tiger lily amid a rose bouquet: Magdalena. She whirled with Jose Rivas in time to the waltz, laughing into his face. Her ruby-red dress brought out the camelian highlights in her long hair, worn in a sweep of satin to her small waist. An exquisite ivory haircomb set with garnets swept her hair up on one side. Old, delicate lace, tiers upon tiers of it, hugged her slim curves as she glided in the dance.

“You do everything gracefully, Magdalena. Perhaps that’s why you fence so well. Carlos told me you defeated him fairly. Would that I could claim the same.” Magdalena lowered her eyes demurely, but her smile glinted with mischief. “Would you like me to give you lessons, then?”

Bending his head, Jose whispered, “Only if you’ll allow me to give you lessons in return.” They had always bantered so, to Ramon’s displeasure, but never had their flirting seemed more fun than tonight.

Magdalena pretended shock at his boldness. “Sir! If you speak so to me again, I’ll have to fetch my duenna.”

Jose rejoined dryly, “What duenna could keep up with you? You forget, I was here when you sent your last one away. She was too sore to follow you around the mountains for another two days.”

“Bloodless creature.” Magdalena sniffed.

Jose teased, “No one can say the same of you. Who is the real Magdalena—this sultry creature who stuns me with her femininity, or the little rogue who bested me several days ago with her reata?”

Looking up fondly at her brother’s best friend, Magdalena realized with surprise how handsome he was, with his regular features and

wide, luminous dark eyes. "They are one and the same, Jose. Because I like to ride, rope and fence, am I any less of a woman?"

Jose's smile faded. He pulled her a little closer. "Not to me, chiquita. But I fear your grandfather does not feel the same."

The music climaxed to a stop with his words. Magdalena searched the crowd for Ramon. When she spied him leaning against the hacienda wall talking to Jose's father, Tomas Rivas, she excused herself. Her glowing face gave no hint of her nervousness. Would her actions this night allow her the time she hoped for? Ramon could not claim she'd shamed him this time. She'd been partnered for every dance, complimented on her dress by even the strictest duennas. If she asked for time to pick her own novio, surely Ramon would grant it now?

Magdalena spared a concerned look at Carlos as she passed him. He was surrounded, as usual, by the prettiest girls, Angelina Rivas among them. And, as usual, he was laughing. But when he glanced at her, she caught the sadness in the depths of his dark eyes. He'd returned only as the dance began, so she'd not had time to tell him of Ramon's decree. She prayed now she'd have no need to tell him.

Her eyes dismissed Roberto where he stood talking to another ranchero. Even dressed in the elegant attire that showed his muscular form to advantage, he reminded Magdalena of nothing more than the snake in paradise Carlos had so aptly named him. Magdalena swung her head around and advanced on her grandfather with renewed determination.

She smiled at Ramon in what she hoped was a pretty, womanly manner. Such artifice was new to her, but she found her role surprisingly easy. In fact, it was rather pleasant to fight so subtly for what she wanted. She'd never before realized how powerful the weapons of a woman were.

"May I be so bold as to request this dance, abuelo?" she asked gayly.

Clicking his heels together, Ramon bowed and extended his arm. "I shall be delighted, senorita. Excuse us, please, Tomas."

He whirled her away. For a moment, as he looked down at her, Magdalena fancied she saw a tear, but he glanced away and cleared his throat. "Have I told you how much you remind me of your grandmother in that dress? I well remember the first time I saw her in it in

Madrid . . . ”

Magdalena’s heart lurched at the emotion in his voice. There would never be a better time than now. “You loved her deeply, didn’t you?”

“With all my heart. I will go to my grave missing her.”

“Then please, please, abuelo, allow me the same chance. Give me time to choose my own novio. I have enjoyed myself tonight. I promise I will try to be more of a lady. . . . ”

But Ramon was shaking his head. “No, Magdalena, it’s too late. I have given my word to Roberto. If I didn’t think it a good match, I never would have agreed. But you need a strong man, and Roberto will make you happy. You’ll see . . . ”

Shattered hopes goaded her to rashness. She jerked away, crying, “What do you know of me and my happiness? You, a man who puts a scoundrel above your own grandson . . . ”

“Enough! You only prove my decision right. I was going to wait, but perhaps if you’re forced to make a commitment, you will see I am right. El Paraiso must be kept safe, and since your brother shows no interest in it, it’s up to you.”

And he whirled, striding to the small platform that had been set up for the musicians.

The other dancers had slowed almost to a stop as they observed the confrontation. They watched agog as Ramon gestured for silence, for Ramon’s problems with his two spirited grandchildren were well known. Jose eyed Magdalena’s white face with a frown. Carlos pushed his way through the buzzing crowd to touch her shoulder.

“What is it, *hermanita*” he asked in concern.

Magdalena felt trapped in an obscene play of which she wanted no part. She opened her mouth to answer, but Ramon spoke first.

“It gives me great pleasure to make an announcement that is long overdue. This is not just a fiesta for friends. It is a celebration of a match that has been long in the making. Share with me, amigos, my delight in announcing the engagement of my nephew Roberto and

my granddaughter Magdalena. ”

There were surprised gasps, claps and murmurs of congratulations, but Magdalena heard none of them. She was aware only of Carlos’s shock as he stood rigid beside her. When Roberto pushed through to them and put a possessive hand on Magdalena’s shoulder, however, Carlos came to life.

He flung off Roberto’s encroaching touch. “You will never have her. I warned you of what would happen should you touch her again . . . ” Carlos’s hands doubled into powerful fists. Roberto put his hands on his hips, his very stance daring Carlos to carry through on his threat.

Magdalena put a staying hand on her brother’s arm. “No, not here, Carlos. You will anger abuelo,” she whispered frantically. If Carlos infuriated Ramon again, especially so publicly ...

Jose, too, tried to stop him, but Carlos shook them off. Roberto advanced to meet him, but a stem, coldly furious voice blasted them apart.

“Carlos! You will get a grip on yourself immediately or leave. This is no place for brawling!” Roberto’s fists dropped, but Carlos clenched his own tighter.

“You precipitated this, abuelo. Now watch the consequences of your own tyranny,” Carlos spat, for once goaded beyond his patience. He rounded on Roberto again, determined to settle the scores that had been increasing between them for years.

Roberto appraised Ramon’s ashen face. Magdalena saw him smile a fraction before Carlos’s fist smashed into his nose. Roberto made no attempt to protect himself. Groaning loudly, he stumbled backward and fell, cupping his nose.

Magdalena longed to scream in fury at his ploy—as usual, he had brilliantly vilified Carlos. And, as usual, Ramon seemed blind to his nephew’s craftiness.

Ramon’s face was apoplectic as he leaped down from the platform and clutched his grandson’s raised arm. The words he spoke then

silenced the whispering crowd; they formed Magdalena's worst nightmare.

"You've had your last chance," he said, his soft voice shaking but resolute. "You are shallow, vain and worthless, as your father was. As you've no love for me or my land, you will no longer enjoy its profits." Ramon stepped aside and flung his hand out toward the mountains. "Be gone. If you set foot on El Paraiso again, I will have you horsewhipped."

The anguish in Ramon's heart didn't show in his steady eyes, and he looked away from Carlos as if he couldn't bear the sight of him. Other faces, too, averted from a moment they should never have witnessed. More than one woman wiped her tears away, for Carlos was as well liked as Ramon was respected.

Carlos looked at Magdalena's tormented features and hesitated. Then, without a word, he moved toward the corral, not even bothering to pack his things. Suddenly he longed to escape the cloying dust of this land that had exacted such a dear price for its bounty. He would soon be back for the only thing of worth remaining on it.

Sluggishly Magdalena moved to follow, but Roberto caught her from behind. "No!" she screamed, clawing at Roberto's hands, but he would not release her.

Carlos paused halfway to the corral, turning to look at his *21*

sister. Magdalena returned his look pleadingly, her heart pounding a warning. He must not leave . . . She struggled for words to say it, but Roberto's cruel grip tightened until she could barely breathe, much less speak. All she could do was watch the moon bathe Carlos in golden light, making him precious, irreplaceable. Never had he been more dear to her, more representative of all that was good in her life.

"Fear not, *hermanita*, I will be back for you." He gave her a jerky little salute and a loving smile. Then he was gone. Hoofbeats faded into the night, leaving his image and voice burned indelibly into her mind and heart.

Magdalena struggled weakly to follow, but she could not break Roberto's iron grip. He crushed her about the waist until the breath left her laboring lungs. Her head whirled with despair. "Carlos, wait," she croaked. Then she slumped in Roberto's arms. The world

went black.

When Magdalena awoke, she was alone in her room. For a moment, she lay still, but when memory returned, she leaped to her feet and ran to the door. Julio, one of Roberto's favorite *vaqueros*, curled a mocking lip when she opened the door. He held one brawny arm over the lintel when she would have exited.

"No, *senorita*, you may not leave the room. Is there anything you wish?" The unctuous tone of his voice made her stomach churn. She slammed the door in his face.

She saw the dark outline of another man outside her window. Taking a deep breath, she went to the chest where she kept her sword. She had never killed a living thing before, but if that was the only way she could obtain her release, then so be it. She had not entered into this contest willingly, so surely Roberto and Ramon could not object if she followed their ruthless example.

Magdalena's hands trembled only slightly when she realized her sword was gone. She made a complete, methodic search of the room, but Roberto had been thorough. The rapier was not to be found. Her throat aching with the tears she refused to shed, Magdalena sat down on the bed, fingering her rosary as she tried to control her impulse to scream with helplessness and rage. The need built until her skull rang with the repressed sound. Unable to bear it, she threw her head back and emitted such a wail of despair and fury that Ramon shivered when he heard it. He paused in his pacing, back and forth, back and forth, but Roberto merely smiled.

Out in the chaparral-covered mountains, Carlos reined his tiring horse to a stop and whirled to face his three pursuers. They, too, halted. One by one, they pulled their swords. In other circumstances, Carlos would have accepted their challenge, but he was too frantic to get back to ease Magdalena's mind.

He'd pulled his purse and drawn back his arm to throw it at their feet when his eyes settled on the lead bandit. He'd seen that face before ... He shoved his purse back in his cloak, dismounted and pulled his own sword from the saddle scabbard.

"So, as in everything else, your masters know nothing of fair play. But three against one are odds I relish . . ." Keeping his eyes on

them, he wrapped his cloak over one arm. If he used the heavy velvet to help deflect their blades, in the old Spanish manner, he had little fear of being so outnumbered. But another fear ate at him. If he was hated so, what would be Magdalena's fate?

The men dismounted, two circling him warily, one standing to the side. The leader mocked, "Come, caballero, I'm a fighting man who will give you a fighting chance!" He made a lightning strike on the words. Carlos parried with insulting ease, whipping his cloak about the other man's wickedly jabbing blade. And so it went for five eternal minutes, Carlos holding both would-be murderers at bay with skill, strategy and strength.

When he slashed the leader's arm, the man's eyes lost their boldness and grew haunted. "So, the rumors are true," he gasped, his body quivering as his wounded arm took the impact of Carlos's thrust. "You are skillful indeed."

The other man stumbled under a savage blow, dropping his sword. Carlos moved in to deliver the death strike, but the leader screamed, "Now, Raul!"

Carlos's nerves prickled a warning at the movement behind him. He started to turn—and the knife buried to the hilt in his side rather than his back. His sword fell from his numbed hand. Raul drew the knife out and struck again, this time in the chest. Blood spurted warmly over Carlos's clutching hands as he fell to the ground. The star-studded sky whirled above him, pulling his soul upward. He struggled against its lure, one thought on his heart and mind. Coughing up blood, he labored to give it voice, for he knew it was the last time he would.

The three murderers stood over him a moment longer, then they left him, leading his confused horse away. Only the moon remained to grieve. It shed glistening tears, illuminating the wetness saturating Carlos's heavy, ornate jacket. His eyes fluttered and closed as the stars, took him and made him one of their own. Somehow, he found strength to whisper that last word before he died. The wind carried the sound away and dispersed it over the serene countryside like a blessing: Magdalena.

Magdalena dropped into a fitful doze as the sun appeared on the horizon. She was sleeping heavily some hours later, and she didn't

hear the knock on her door or see Ramon enter the room. He shut the door and slumped against it. When he realized she was asleep, he no longer tried to shield the agony and guilt he felt to his soul. His head bowed in grief for several minutes. If tears appeared in his dark eyes, no one saw them.

Stirring, Magdalena muttered in her sleep. With an effort, Ramon pulled his weary old bones erect and walked to the bed. He shook her softly awake, then sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. She was still half-asleep, but something in the unusual gentleness of her grandfather's manner alerted her. She jerked upright, her heart pounding.

His thin, beautifully molded mouth tremored for a bare instant, then he said gently, "*Hija mia*, it pains me greatly to have to tell you this but—Carlos is dead. Julio discovered him this morning when he went to collect some strays. A knife of the kind used by the Indian renegades was found in his chest and his horse was gone."

His voice got huskier as he spoke, and he grew alarmed by Magdalena's lack of response. She stared blankly at him as though he spoke a foreign language. She slowly shook her head.

"He is not dead. I won't allow it. This is a trick to break my spirit. "

Color returned to Ramon's cheeks, and his voice was strong again when he rebuked, "Whatever you think of me, I would not lie about such a matter. He is dead, my child. You must accept the fact. "

Magdalena clamped down on the panic that threatened to engulf her, shaking her head again. "I will never believe you unless I see for myself." *Dios*, make it a lie, she prayed.

The pity in Ramon's eyes brought nausea to her stomach and a frantic pounding to her heart, but she steadily followed his lead. He opened the door to Carlos's room. There, on the bed, lay the form that had once contained the vibrant life of her brother. His shiny black hair was dirty and his clothes were rumpled, but she noticed only the rusty red that stained his still form from neck to knee. The color filled her world until she saw nothing but blood bubbling before her eyes; she smelled nothing but its sickly sweet smell. She was sucked

down the maw of a red whirlpool, choking on the lifeblood of her brother. The sickness in her stomach boiled to her throat and she vomited.

Ramon supported her heaving body. Wiping her mouth, he half-led, half-dragged her from the room. He lowered her onto the hide settee next to the fireplace and rubbed her chilled fingers. There were several people in the room, but Magdalena saw nothing but the image of her brother as he had looked when he said; "I will be back for you."

Ramon had to pry open her jaw to get the brandy past her lips, but she refused to swallow, and it dribbled down her dress. He was further alarmed when she still stared straight ahead, as white as the wall behind her. When his urgent entreaties brought no response, he shook her gently, then harder when she still wouldn't move. Her unfocused eyes finally settled on him. Last night's agonized wail was a whisper compared to the cry that now rent the air. It raised the hair on the back of the neck of each listener, even Roberto.

Crazed by grief, her only response was a primal urge to strike out or go mad. And before her, his strong features suddenly old, was the man who had sent her brother away.

She leaped to her feet and turned on Ramon like a wild animal, guttural sounds spitting from her throat as she went for his eyes. He turned his head and her sharp nails grazed his cheeks, two glistening, red trails appearing on each side of his face.

Roberto and Luis, the comandante of the presidio of Santa Barbara, pulled her away. "Murderer!" she screeched. "It's your fault! You sent him away!" She struggled so wildly the two men lost their grips. She dove for the knife that had been drawn from Carlos and set on a table next to the settee.

Clutching it in her shaking hand, she sprang at Ramon's chest, but Roberto and Luis ripped her away. Biting, kicking, scratching, she struggled to retain her hold, but Luis wrenched the knife out of her hand. Vicious curses filled the room with her agony, and even Joaquin was unable to calm her when he tried to pull her into his arms. She shoved him away and tried to bolt, but Roberto grabbed her and held her in a chair while an Indian maid stepped forward and broke pungent herbs under her nose. The acrid scent filled her already

swimming head until merciful oblivion blotted out her agony.

The violence that erupted from her on that black day drained her spirit. For weeks afterward, Magdalena drifted about the house like a shadow, eating only when commanded to. She was haunted by guilt, both at her attack on her grandfather and at the knowledge that she, too, was partly responsible for Carlos's death. If she'd refused to wed Roberto instead of trying to fight it in that cowardly manner, perhaps her brother would still be alive. Never again would she let the woman rule her, she vowed in those dark days.

She refused to look at her grandfather, even when he tried to force a confrontation. When he raised her chin to make her look at him, she shut her eyes and ignored his words first of apology and sympathy and eventually of impatience and anger.

The only activity she would partake of was the training of her foal, Fuego, a beautiful animal of Spanish descent. Ramon had purchased his sire from a neighboring ranchero who had brought the stallion when he immigrated from the Andalusian plains of Spain. Fuego was as black as the grief filling her heart, but he had a white blaze on his forehead and three white anklets on his legs that relieved his darkness. Magdalena had no such solace in her stygian night.

Three weeks after Carlos's death, Joaquin watched her run beside the colt as she urged him over small jumps on a leading rein. Her unbound hair flowed behind her in the bright sunlight, sparkling with the vitality that seemed drained from her still face. She ran as fleetly as the horse, coaxing him over the jumps until Joaquin thought she must collapse from exhaustion. Worried, he jumped over the corral to force her to halt when she reined in the steaming animal and stood still, gasping for air.

He walked to her side and praised, "You make great progress. Soon he will be ready for the bit." She said nothing. He sighed and pulled her to the shade of a nearby willow.

She went obediently, lay back and stared up at the leaves drooping in somber sympathy. Joaquin nibbled on a leaf, then he folded his slim, muscular legs and braced his hands on them.

“You must put off this terrible grief, Magdalena. Carlos would not have wanted you to feel such desolation: Try to think of him as joyfully partaking of the nectar of heaven in the company of your mother and father. He is happier than we poor lonely souls here on earth, I am certain of that.”

Magdalena trembled at the mention of her parents, and her wooden mask cracked a little. Joaquin almost cried himself at the agony he saw in her face. He reached out a tender hand to stroke her hair. She buried her head in his lap and at last shook with sobs that racked every inch of her slim frame. Joaquin let her weep, stroking her back, shoulders and hair, offering the little comfort he could.

Almost half an hour later, she sat up. Her eyes were red, her features twisted with pain, but the lifelessness was gone. Heaving a relieved sigh, Joaquin smiled.

“Have I ever told you how much you remind me of your mother?” She shook her head, and the faraway look on his face ignited a half-forgotten curiosity. He glanced at her sidelong, continuing, “She was not as tall, or as stubborn, but she had your eyes and mouth and a serene loveliness that still makes me ache with longing when I remember it.” He had her full attention now, but he didn’t notice because he was deep in memories. “You have always suspected I stayed here for more than love of your father. You were right. I loved him like a brother, but I loved your mother more.” He didn’t hear her surprised gasp. “Oh, there was never anything between us, and I never approached her in any way, but I think she knew. She used to look at me with a gentle sympathy that touched me and made me love her more. There was no man in the world for her but your father. I knew that, but still I loved her.” Turning to Magdalena, he asked softly, “Do you remember the night she was brought back from the mountains?” Magdalena’s eyes darkened in rejection of a memory she still shrank from. “I will never forget. The only solace she could find for her grief after Papa died were her nightly rides. If only she hadn’t strayed so high in the mountains and come upon that band of trappers. For those filthy Americanos to use her as they did . . . but then to push her down the ravine and leave her for dead! How unfortunate for them she was not the poor girl they took her for. I am glad abuelo had each and every one of them tracked down and killed. I wish they were here so I could kill them myself!”

She clenched her hands. Her voice was low and piercing

28

as she finished, “Sometimes I don’t know who I hate most, Mexicans, Americans or abuelo.” But her voice shook on the mention of her grandfather. They both knew she didn’t mean that part of her declaration, at least.

Sighing, Joaquin shook his head. “I reminded you of that night only to tell you what her last words to me were. ‘Joaquin,’ she pleaded, ‘take care of my children. Don’t let *mi padre* stifle Magdalena’s spirit. Guide them, make them strong and above all, help them retain their heritage.’ Her voice faded away and I thought she was gone, then she whispered to herself, ‘I lost Patrick for my children’s sake, and they must inherit El Paraiso or he will have died in vain.’”

Joaquin wiped away the tears that trickled down Magdalena’s face. “That is why you must put aside your bitterness. Ramon spoke in the heat of the moment, and he would have invited Carlos back when his anger cooled. He loved the boy, just as he loves you, chiquita, as he loved your mother. He is just not a man to show it. He has been harsh with you out of worry. He doesn’t want you galloping about the country, as your mother did to escape her grief. Surely you can understand his fears?”

Magdalena hung her head and he waited, holding his breath. When she looked at him with a flicker of her old stubbornness, he slumped with relief.

“I’m not certain I can ever forgive abuelo, but I will try to put aside my bitterness. I love El Paraiso and I will not leave it. It is all I have, now.”

Joaquin helped her up and walked by her side back to the hacienda. The next days saw a melting of the ice that had encased her. She became warmer to Ramon, responding courteously to his conversation and accepting his touch. She was even polite to Roberto. When she asked to assist in running the rancho again, Roberto refused, but when her grandfather insisted, he had to agree. She threw herself into learning each detail of the rancho’s affairs until she earned Ramon’s respect by her hard work and even Roberto had to admit she made a

good *rancher a.*

Ramon made no more mention of marriage. Magdalena

29

was all he had now of his daughter. He would cherish her and try to understand her better. He must, or lose her, as he had lost Carlos. He no longer tried to force Magdalena into the feminine mold that fit his notions. He grieved night and day for the loss of his impetuous grandson. He had never even told him how he loved him! The mistakes he'd made with Carlos made him determined to be wiser with Magdalena.

Thus, when he found her fencing with Joaquin one day, he didn't protest. He stopped to watch, lowering his eyes to hide a gleam of pride when she made an athletic leap and scored off Joaquin's shoulder.

With Ramon's new understanding of her individuality came a greater acceptance. He finally saw that, like her mother before her, her devotion could not be forced. It could only be earned.

Slowly, Magdalena grew closer to her grandfather than ever before. Consequently, the final tragedy in her young life hit her harder than it would have had they never reconciled.

Several months after Carlos's death, Magdalena went into Ramon's study to investigate the strange noises she had heard as she prepared for bed. The room was quiet and dark save for the light glowing from a candle. She heard running steps retreating outside. She rushed to the window, but the night was dark and she could see nothing. She turned back and headed for the door. A strange smell wafted to her nostrils as she neared the desk.

Magdalena froze as that unmistakable odor filled her head. It was a scent she had not smelled since Carlos died. Her eyes made a frantic search of the room. "Abuelo?" she quavered.

A faint moan drifted from behind his desk. She ran around it, then stopped in horror. Her grandfather writhed weakly on the floor.

His shaking hands clasped the bloody hilt of the knife embedded in his chest—the same knife that had killed Carlos.

Her lips white with shock, Magdalena dropped to her knees beside him and tried to staunch the flooding wound with the hem of her nightgown. His eyes flickered, then opened.

His bloody hand covered hers and she had to bend to hear his tortured words. “Roberto . . . told him . . . changed will . . . all to you . . . not force you to wed.” He coughed. Bright red, bubbling blood trickled from his mouth.

Tears came to her eyes as she watched him force the words out. “He . . . and Luis . . . partners . . . gold . . . Luis’s men killed Carlos. Knew he would not . . . let you wed . . . Forgive . . .” He coughed again, harder, until blood overflowed their clasped hands. She had to bend closer to hear his wheeze, “Love you . . . always . . . forgive . . . will . . . in . . .

He tried to force the words out, but his eyes went blank. His breath stopped. His hand slackened and dropped.

Trembling with shock, grief and guilt that she had never truly forgiven him, Magdalena bowed her head. Painfully, inevitably, her blurred gaze fastened on the knife—the knife that had drained Carlos’s life away just so. Her eyes clouded with black fury. Hardly aware of what she was doing, she yanked the knife from Ramon’s chest.

She ignored the blood that spurted on her gown and turned to the door, her face murderous. When the door burst open she didn’t notice the comandante and his men, or see her grandfather’s friend, Tomas Rivas. She only saw the dark, detested visage of Roberto as she leaped for his heart. Without an instant’s hesitation, Luis rapped her jaw with the hilt of his sword. Hatred exploded in her head as she slumped, unconscious, to the floor.

Her arms and legs were tied to the bed when she came back to throbbing awareness. She heard voices raised in argument. She was wondering bitterly what lies Roberto was telling about her when a silent shadow slipped in her window

and slunk to the bed. She stiffened in alarm, but relaxed when she picked out Joaquin's features in the gloom.

He was boiling with a fury that almost matched her own. **31**

He mouthed a coarse oath that would have shocked her had she not been so beyond shock. He slashed her bonds, hissing, "Roberto has convinced everyone you murdered Ramon. If Tomas Rivas saw what he said he did, how could you have been so stupid? Especially when you had already tried to kill Ramon once with that knife?"

Rubbing her tingling wrists, she shook her head numbly.

"Roberto killed abuelo and Carlos. I knew only that he must die, so I took the knife from abuelo's chest. Did you expect me to let him get away with the murder of my only remaining family?"

Joaquin was packing a small bundle of necessities as he spoke. "I could beat you for your stupidity if there were time. You should have called for help immediately. Dress quickly. We must hurry. "

Magdalena jerked on black breeches, shirt and boots while Joaquin finished packing. He shoved her out the window, and she stumbled over the two unconscious men who had been on guard. They slipped to the corral farthest from the house, saddling two horses at random. Magdalena insisted on tying Fuego behind her mount, despite Joaquin's protests. They were galloping away when a thought struck her. She reined in.

“Joaquin, if you leave, you will be guilty too.”

He smiled grimly. “I am already guilty. The guards saw my face before I knocked them out. It is too late, Magdalena. I would never let you go alone, even though it’s improper for us to be unchaperoned. Survival must come first.”

With the wind at their back, they made good progress, and soon reached the rise overlooking El Paraiso. Magdalena drew to a halt, ignoring Joaquin’s urgings as she paused for one last look at her heritage. For a moment the moonlit scene glowed wetly, like the blood of her family. Then her vision cleared and she saw only the sumptuous valley. Roberto was to blame, not El Paraiso, and he would pay long and dearly for his treachery.

She was too deep in shock for full grief to engulf her.

That would come later. But hatred flooded her being with each throbbing heartbeat. Her teeth gritted with resolve.

Joaquin heard her words with a combination of dread and approval.

“You have won, but only for the moment, Roberto. My family’s blood shall be avenged. You will die slowly, screaming in agony for the death of each of my loved ones. May *Dios* have mercy on you, for I’ll have none. I will return when you least expect it and snuff your life as you have snuffed mine, or I will die in the attempt.”

With one last glittering look at the rancho, she spurred her mount into the darkness. Joaquin followed, and the hoofbeats slowly retreated until the only noise in the yawning blackness of the night was the sad sigh of the wind.

