

Excerpts from

WHEN THE EARTH AND ALL ITS PEOPLE QUAKE

A sequel to the novel KIT AUSTEN'S JOURNEY

by Libby Sternberg

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PROLOGUE

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My mother thinks my heart has hardened. Every day she looks to soften it, but I must admit her efforts only seem to thicken the callous that grows on that unseen organ. Or at least it feels so to me, with her regular urging to “get out and visit friends” or “take a ride to Grandma’s” or “come with me to church this Sunday, won’t you, dear?” or, worst of all—“black makes you look jaundiced, you could at least try on that deep blue suit I had made for you.”

With every admonition, I feel myself recoiling ever further from the gentle rubbing against humanity that would, perhaps, tenderize my outlook. Was it ever so with mothers and daughters—why do we pull away from the one who cherished and led us before we knew the world?

I have been this way for two years now, ever since my fiancé, Miguel deTorquescero, was lost in a mud slide on the Big Sur, that cruel landscape that dares the Pacific to take it down. Well, the sea conspired with the skies that day, unleashing storms that blended both waters into a massive flood, the two claiming victory over the proud earth, bringing it low, teaching it not to be so boastful.

My beloved, returning to Carmel with six fine ponies for the new small ranch at which I was to be matriarch—assuming God blessed us with children some day—was lost along with the horses. It was by the grace of God, or so says Mother, that Father wasn’t lost as well. He’d witnessed the whole incident.

For a week after the catastrophe, I was stricken mute and ill, unable even to go to the memorial service, which, since his body had not been found, seemed a betrayal to me. How could they be so sure that Miguel had perished? Perhaps a thump to the head had dazed him and he wandered, lost in direction and mind, searching for a love he felt but could not name.

That comforted me for some time after. That is, until the remains washed on the rocks. A proper burial took place then. And I managed to stay upright at least, if not sociable. But, oh, what a struggle it was to hear the useless words of comfort, especially from the minister. I know the poor fellow was well-meaning, but how could a merciful God take Miguel away from me? Was I so small in His eyes that He deemed I did not deserve love? I ponder this daily.

Never an over-talkative woman, I became even more miserly with my speech after that, finding consoling communion with other mute animate beings—the yarrow that sparkles in the sun on the byways of the valley, the towering redwoods that pierce the sky, the gentle mewing lambs and bellowing cows on my parents’ wide spread.

My father seems to understand. He says little to me while I help him work the ranch, just a nod here or a hat tip there, sometimes a tiny smile that only I can read.

I am my father’s daughter, with raven dark hair and honey skin, the blood of the conquistadors running through my veins. My brother, Josephus, stole some of my mother’s fairer

traits. His hair, while curly, glints gold on clear days, and his skin, while not pale, looks sun-touched rather than blood-warmed. He is a rascal, prone to teasing, a year younger than I.

He fits in, while I always feel a bit apart, not quite belonging to either the world of my mother or my father. Miguel had grounded me. Now I am adrift again.

CHAPTER ONE

I returned to the ranch house dusty and sweaty. Before I pulled off my gloves, I knew something was different. I'd already noticed my grandparents' buckboard horses feeding in the corral closest to the barn. I'd seen their rig nearby. They didn't get out much these days—we go to them to visit—so my surprise turned to dread as my feet clomped up the two steps to the wide porch.

Before entering, I overheard something that made me pause. My mother's voice, clear and direct.

"It's not right to grieve so long. The Bible says—"

"That argument is hardly likely to persuade her," my father said. "She feels abandoned by her faith."

"It's not healthy, though," my mother remonstrated. "She's gotten thinner. Her hair is limp and dull. She wears nothing but black..."

"Throw away those clothes as soon as they wear out," my practical grandfather, Daniel Winchester, remarked. "Buy her new in every color under the sun."

I heard my grandmother, Kit, chuckle softly. "Unfortunately, Sarah is such a clever seamstress that Ruth's clothes are likely to last a dozen years before she'll need more."

"Thank you for the compliment," Mother replied. "But you see what I'm up against. She could go on like this for years."

"She needs a mission, something to do," Grandmother Kit went on. "She needs something to help her get past this. It has become the center of her world."

"She needs a change," my father interjected. "On that we can agree."

"She needs a new love," my mother murmured, "but that is out of our hands."

My face flamed at this. Of course my mother would seek to replace Miguel in my heart. She never had been fond of him, once even suggesting to me that he needed to be more careful with his money. But he'd used it to buy a spread for us, for me, so that we'd not be dependent on either of our families. He'd borrowed, yes, to stake the claim, but it had been a good investment—had he lived.

I was about to storm away, but a hand on my shoulder startled me. Turning, I saw my smiling brother, a finger to his lips, urging me to shush. Now a conspirator with him, my mood relaxed, and we both continued to eavesdrop.

"Maybe they'll say something about me," Joe whispered.

But they didn't—they kept talking about me, and it was a wonder to behold how they had mapped out my future without my consent. It seemed this meeting had been engineered so that I would go back to Grandmother and Grandfather's house with them—they'd contrived a suitable excuse for this necessity.

Being of advanced years, my grandparents needed "someone to help oversee" the running of their household since their housekeeper, Maria, had just left to be married. I guessed that they knew I'd see through this ruse without the presence of my grandparents to persuade me. Saying no to them would be far more difficult than putting off my mother had she suggested this scheme alone.

Squaring my shoulders, I prepared for battle, however. I would not let sentiment—or my great affection for my mother's parents—rule. After they've worked out the last detail of this grand plan, I entered the parlor, letting the door slam behind me, which caused Joe to shout in protest.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said with firm conviction. I bent to kiss my grandmother and did the same for Grandfather Daniel. "I can recommend new help for you, if you'd like. But I am quite content here. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some chores to finish."

I was about to head toward the back of the house and out to these unnamed tasks when my father's voice stopped me, strong and sure.

"Ruth Consuela Sanchez, you will come back here and show proper respect. Your grandparents traveled to visit with you, and you can at least spare a few moments to show your appreciation. You are young of body and spirit, and it troubles me that you would not see how leaving us to engage in make-work labor is both insult and offense."

A man of few words, he stopped me with this heart-slapping speech. I turned, but my expression remained grave.

"I'm sorry, Father...and Grandmother and Grandfather," I said, nodding toward them. "But I could not help but overhear you contriving to think of things for me to do. Surely it is no offense for me to be troubled by such talk and want to smooth my temper before it makes me worse company than my absence."

At this, Father did not balk. "That is pure nonsense. You will stay here and be amiable."

No one else spoke, so his command seemed to have created the exact opposite effect, creating nervous tension instead of calm.

"As for our plans, I have but one for you." Now he looked around at the rest of the assembled, even Joe, who'd managed to grab a lemon cookie from a tray near the chair where Grandmother sat.

"Papa, I know you want what's best for me—"

"No. I do not. Or at least, I do not know what is best for you any longer, my nina" he said with grim determination. "I do know, however, what is best for me and your mother. We need an agent to negotiate with the Southern Pacific managers in San Francisco who we believe are overcharging us for our feed shipments here and our beef shipments north. I was going to go, but I don't want to leave the ranch during foaling season. You will go in my stead."

My mouth dropped open. Mother's eyes widened. My grandmother and grandfather smiled. Joe frowned and nearly spat out his cookie.

"I could do that, Father!" he said.

"Yes, he could," I said in one of the few moments of agreement with my brother. "Better than I."

"No!" my father bellowed. "Josephus's strong hands are needed here. And you, Ruth, are quite capable of arguing with any man. You have a quick tongue when you choose to use it. If you can not let go of the wrath that colors your disposition, then at least use it in the family's service by flinging it upon the agents of the Southern Pacific. I will brook no argument."

And that was how I ended up, in the year 1906, planning to go to San Francisco, my black wardrobe thrown away, and my grief ripped from my heart as if a scab had been pulled from a festering wound.

CHAPTER TWO

A word about the wardrobe—after my father’s strategy of placing me in service of the family’s common good succeeded, my mother stole a page from his book. The week after Father’s pronouncement, she made multitudinous ones of her own. They included the following:

No daughter of hers would shame the family by wearing widow’s weeds shiny from overuse, especially when she wasn’t a widow but a bereaved fiancée.

No daughter of hers would stay in a hotel or public pension.

And...

No daughter of hers would travel alone to San Francisco.

The first declaration led to a flurry of fittings and fabric purchases, after which she and Grandmother set to sewing, along with the housekeeper and any other female who could wield a needle.

Mercifully, I have always been an indifferent seamstress, something I pointed out to Mother when she tried to enlist me in this labor, reminding her, oh, so gently, that “no daughter of hers should shame the family” wearing suits with crooked hems and puckered seams.

On the second two points, I must admit the accommodations were to my liking. Mother exchanged letters with Mary Barton Granville, a family friend who lived near Nob Hill. She would take me in, quite happily, for however long I needed to stay in the city. She had a daughter, Abigail, who, though ten years older than I, remained unmarried and would surely “enjoy company and a gentle influence.” I looked forward to discovering the hidden meaning of that phrase.

My grandmother had helped tend to Mrs. Granville as a girl when her family had come west to settle in California. Her parents were a faded memory to me, having passed some time ago, and Mary had moved to San Francisco when she married before I was born. Nonetheless, I had warm feelings for the family because of how my grandmother spoke of them when she’d told me stories of her dramatic trip across the country so many years before. I knew them in spirit and looked forward to seeing Mary in the flesh.

As to not traveling alone, well, here both Joe and I found pleasure in Mother’s edict in this regard, though, at first it had disturbed me, thinking Mother intended to be the traveling companion. But no, another, more amiable resolution prevailed.

Joe was sweet on a girl named Sally Tucker. Her family owned a spread in the southern part of the county, and Joe had let no opportunity pass to see her this past year, on the verge of actually keeping company with her. A kind, intelligent girl, Sally was planning on traveling north to visit her grandmother, who was ailing. The Tuckers were relieved not to have to hire a chaperone for their daughter. We’d have to mind to each other.

Even with agreement on the broad outlines of the plan, small items still caused me to stumble in those weeks leading up to my exodus, irritations over how I should conduct our business, how I should disagree with the Southern Pacific agent while retaining his respect, how

I shouldn't arrive at his office alone, if I could help it, and how to negotiate from a position of strength by not showing all my hand.

As my father tried to school me in these matters, I became snappish, frustrated that he did not appreciate my keen mind, once even stomping from his small study in anger.

In reality, I think I was really trying to prove I could accomplish his task without it lessening my sorrow over my beloved's death one bit. Strange how this became part of my goal—to demonstrate to him that I'd stay true to my deceased fiancé despite whatever distractions he'd devise for me—but I set my mind to it as diligently as I set about learning the intricacies of Father's shipping needs.

And that, I realized as departure day approached, ended in victory... for him. Until this plan began taking shape, I'd not had to consciously remember my downcast sentiments. They were as much a part of me as breathing, a daily soreness that made me sluggish and hurt.

But after my father assigned me this challenging task, I often had to wrestle them to the forefront of my thoughts, reminding myself that, yes, I'd been loved by a good man and lost him. And, ironically, this caused a different sadness, a new parting, and a sorrowful resentment of those who'd take this pain away from me. I kept these feelings to myself. Or thought I did.

When I was most aware of my struggle to keep my grief alive, a sort of grumpy vexation would afflict me, igniting a strong impulse to argue with whomever was unlucky enough to be in my presence. More often than not, this was Father, as he led me through the intricacies of accounting and the records he'd compiled over the past few years.

He was cruelly patient with me, however, and I came to understand that my escalating irritation only fed his calm in these encounters, until I realized, in wonder, that he was, in fact, training me like a pet to crave his warmth, as I began quieting my tempestuousness to regain his soft affection.

He'd broken many spirited horses. Why should he not do the same with me?

By the time I was sufficiently outfitted and instructed for the journey north, I was also tamed. No longer did I look upon my parents as my enemies in my internal rupture over Miguel.

A battle might still rage in my heart, to be sure, but the warriors were all of my own making, loyalty to Miguel across the field from youth's natural desire to...live. I could not be placing Mother and Father on the battleground as hired substitutes. It wasn't fair. I had to war it out on my own.

Sally was a good companion, not one of those girls who felt the need to fill every silent moment with conversation, but one who knew a certain amount of talk would put us at ease with one another, let each of us know our limitations and our skills.

She wasn't sure, she told me, that her grandmother was all that ill, but her parents seemed determined to get her away. She suspected it was because they feared she'd settle down too soon.

This bit of news, passed along to me with no guile or coy intent that I could see, set me to mulling its consequences for Joe.

“Not that I mind,” she said, smoothing her soft tan suede gloves as the train pulled north, rattling and humming along the tracks. “I’m happy to have the opportunity to travel. I’ve heard San Francisco has an opera house, and I’m quite fond of music. I’ve also heard that one can find some fine silks and embroidered goods in Chinatown—going there with a companion, of course. We shall exchange addresses and stay in touch while in the city. I know our parents would want that.”

I mused on this. She did seem eager to experience the big city. She didn’t give the impression her jaunt would cause her one pang of pining for Joe, who I knew was already missing the chance to see her.

So, from this bit of information, I surmised my brother was in for disappointment. Her parents obviously knew of his interest and had packed her away to keep her out of love’s reach. And she had not even been scraped by cupid’s arrow deeply enough to express any yearning for the boy she was leaving behind. Poor Joe.

“That’s a beautiful suit,” she said, admiring the dark blue serge high-collared jacket and plain skirt I wore, the one newish outfit I’d had before the frenzied sewing session began. Mother had insisted I wear it with a matching small straw hat that seemed precariously pinned to my equally precariously styled hair, the locks pinned in neat fulsome curls at the back of my head. It felt as if I had a pound of lead attached there—I’d better beware of any magnets—so many pins secured the coif. On the ranch, I wore my hair down, tied at my nape.

Sally was similarly starched and “arranged,” but she seemed more comfortable with it all. Her feathery golden hair stayed neat in a tight chignon, topped by a maroon felt hat matching her long jacket over a similar hued dress, the dark shades making her pale complexion milky white in contrast. I could see why Joe was taken with her. She was a beauty, and a vivacious one, alive with the desire to do things while she was young enough to enjoy them. I hoped he’d find another like her.

By the time we pulled into San Francisco, we both felt tired and worn. It made me wonder at the journey my grandmother had made more than a half century ago, by horse and foot across the country. Being conveyed by this massive engine created a weariness all its own, though, as one’s body still experienced the rigors of the long trip in some sped-up fashion, creating a series of aches that surprised you when you were least expecting such sensations.

Sally was immediately met at the station by a second cousin, Ralph, who shyly doffed his hat to us both, but whose gaze stayed true to Sally. While I could feel a curl or two of my hair straggling down my back, Sally managed to alight from the train as if she’d just had her toilette done by a lady’s maid. She offered her hand to nervous Ralph, who didn’t seem to know whether to kiss it or shake it. In the end, he gave it a cursory touch before making a show of looking for our bags.

When he found them, he again turned his attention to Sally. “Mother didn’t say you were bringing your maid,” he said, smiling. “But Grandmama has more than enough room to accommodate a whole passel of servants.”

Sally blushed. I stormed. Of course he'd assume I was a maid, being dark of skin and hair. Before I could set him right—which would not have been a pleasant experience for him, I assure you—Sally shook her head and gently said, “You are mistaken, cousin. Ruth Sanchez is my traveling companion, and, I dare say, a new friend. She is here to visit with family friends while she conducts some business on behalf of her father, a leading rancher in the Carmel Valley.”

Ralph, to his credit, apologized profusely, and offered immediately to take me to Mrs. Granville's address. I forgave him.

We left the bustling station to find his buggy, and I breathed in the sensation of being in a big city for the first time.

The closest I'd come to this experience had been a few visits to Monterey, but that is a sleepy little village with charm and the slow pace of the tides.

This city was big and busy. People everywhere. Buildings that cut into the sky. Noise. Scents—not all of them pleasant. A faster rhythm. And strange single railroad cars, pulled by cables, gliding up and down hills!

I was unprepared, having heard only my grandmother's stories of this town when it had been little more than a few rows of buildings crammed up against the harbor. My, how it had grown. I found myself trying to memorize every new thing in order to write her about it later.

Sally and Ralph conversed during the ride, and I politely added a few words when appropriate, but I hardly listened to their jabber about weather and family. I was drinking in a new sensation—of being small and inconsequential. It made me want to be consequential, to make these people notice that I lived. I laughed.

“What is it, Ruth?” Sally inquired.

“Nothing, really,” I said, waving the air in front of my face as the laughter came out again. “My father—I was thinking of how infuriating it is when he's right!”

At this, Sally laughed as well, knowing a bit of my own history that I'd shared on the train. Ralph smiled with no understanding.

I was soon delivered to Mary Granville's house, and Ralph deposited my bags for me at the door of what seemed to me a mansion of stone and brick, waiting with me until my ring was answered, making polite introductions of himself, and being on his way.

Mary Granville—what an impressive woman she was, tall, with dark hair streaked with gray, a long face that could look stern if her lips hadn't been impishly upturned at the corners, eyes that stared right through you, and a crisp, direct way of talking that delighted rather than offended.

“Come in, come in, my dear! I'm so glad you're here safe and sound. I'd never have guessed you as kin to Daniel and Kit Winchester! How exotic you are!” She hugged me so warmly that there was no question her comment held no sting. During the long embrace, I smelled her lavender perfume, a scent that took me back to Carmel and a lavender patch near the barn from which we'd pick blooms to dry for sachets. I felt at home.

She ushered me into her well-furnished parlor, where she'd already had a maid place a silver platter of small treats – iced cakes and fruit, as well as a pitcher of what looked like lemonade.

After asking if I'd like to freshen up – I assured her I was fine – we sat and she poured me a glass of the refreshing liquid. It soothed my travel-parched throat and revived me.

“I'm afraid Abigail is not here, but you will meet her this evening. We might also have a guest, I've been informed. Abigail often brings home people she meets through her work. I've learned to be resilient.” She smiled and urged some cakes on me.

As I took one and began eating, she led our conversation into gentle pathways, inquiring about how I'd conduct my business, if I needed help, and then letting me know, just as Sally Tucker had done on the trip, various pieces of history so I wouldn't be distracted by wondering.

“My Alfred always felt a bit out of sorts in this house,” she said, gesturing to the well-decorated room. It was crammed with ornate furniture, the walls hung with gilt-framed art and occasional family dagguerotypes. “He was a minister, you see, and we lived most of our life in more humble dwellings. But his parents bequeathed it to him, and we moved in rather than have his church pay for a parsonage. It was his intent to sell it and find modest accommodations, but he passed before that plan took shape. I will eventually put it up for sale, but I must admit I've grown comfortable here.”

It was clear she battled her conscience over this, and I rushed to reassure her. “You're honoring your husband's parents by maintaining the household,” I observed. “And you're providing employment for those who help you.”

She smiled and tilted her head. “You'll do well with the Southern Pacific agent, my dear. You have a persuasive tongue.” She laughed. “Your thoughts have been my own, but I wonder sometimes if I let comfort endorse my righteousness a little too much.”

After more amiable talk, she showed me to my room, a large, sunny space on the back of the house, outfitted with four-poster bed, writing desk, armoire and more, much more formal than my plain room at the ranch, but comfortable nonetheless.

Dinner would be at six, she said, if Abigail managed to “straggle in” with her guest by then.

“You must be pleased at her dedication to the church,” I said, naturally assuming she did charitable work at her late father's ministry.

Again, Mary laughed. “I have no doubt that Abigail is a strong believer, but her church-tending is sometimes lax. No, her work is at the newspaper. She's a reportress.”

A reportress? A job? A job that paid?

Left alone in the room, I pondered this, and with a shiver of excitement, I realized that I liked the idea of a woman working, not depending on a man for her sustenance and survival. Miguel, my beloved, was gone. I need not trouble my heart with finding a substitute. I could provide for myself, just as this Abigail Granville did. I looked forward to meeting her.

CHAPTER THREE

That evening proved to be a momentous one, filled with drama, some of which, I must shamefully admit, amused me, as if I were watching a first-rate performance.

In my defense, some of it *was* performance, as Abigail Granville seemed to take great pleasure in goading her mother into colorful annoyance for the benefit of those of us who watched.

The “us” in this case included me, of course, and Abigail’s guest—a handsome young man, recently arrived from the East—New York to be exact—who she’d encountered rummaging through old newspapers in the office “morgue” (which, Abigail explained to me, was the name they gave to the room that held old editions).

I’d planned on asking Abigail many questions about her job, in the hopes of gaining useful information about how one secured such a position, but that was not to be. She’d arrived barely in time for dinner, first of all, forestalling the possibility of polite conversation before the meal, and she’d made her entrance with such an extravagance of talk and activity that one hardly had the chance to get a word in edgewise. After our introductions – during which I just caught the gentleman’s name – we were called into the dining room by Mrs. Granville and instructed to sit and eat before the soup was cold.

Immediately after being seated, Mrs. Granville said a short grace. I noticed Abigail reverently bowed her head and uttered a soft and sincere “amen” at the end. She did seem to have a strong spiritual side to her, despite her worldliness. After the prayer, Mrs. Granville spoke.

And then, it began...

“Oh, dear, Abigail, I fear I rushed you. I apologize. I should have allowed you some time to freshen up.”

Abigail, spoon in midair, did not take offense. She raised her face and smiled charmingly and genuinely, deep dimples piercing her round cheeks. After slurping a sip off her spoon – which she did with a twinkle in her eye staring straight at her mother – she put her utensil down and found a stray lock of her abundant auburn hair, repinning it at the table, to her mother’s obvious chagrin. She also looked down at her tan jacket lapel and gave it a perfunctory brush with her knuckles, an action that did nothing to remove a faint stain there.

Abigail was definitely not a woman who seemed to care much for her appearance. Although she was handsome in a rugged, outdoorsy sort of way, one had the impression she dressed not with appearance but with necessity in mind.

While this introductory act progressed, the male guest – Theodore was his first name, that much I’d caught during the whirlwind conversation at his and Abigail’s arrival – looked from mother to daughter, his face a mask of growing concern as he obviously decided what his

appropriate reaction should be. Finally, chivalry won out over decorum, and he took Abigail's defense.

"Miss Granville is a pleasant sight to behold," he said with conviction. "I had not noticed anything amiss."

At this, both Mary Granville and her daughter paused, then laughed, which sent a blush raging over the poor man's face.

"I'm sorry, Theodore," Abigail said, "but that was so utterly sweet."

"Very charming," her mother concurred. They'd both seen through his small disingenuousness. "But you need not feel compelled to take up for Abby. She's quite capable of defending herself, even when guilty."

"I did not feel compelled," Theodore said with growing uncertainty as he looked from one woman to the other. "I spoke the truth. Miss Granville is a singular beauty."

Then his gaze caught mine. I couldn't help myself. I, too, smiled at the poor fellow's position, caught between battling mother and daughter. I wanted to tell him to run off the field, one on which I, too, had been a warrior – my experience had taught me that casualties abounded when these conflicts occurred.

He took my smile as something else, however, and immediately added, "I meant to say, of course, that all the women here are lovely—" he nodded at me, then looked straight into my eyes "—and I am a fortunate man to sit among such beauties."

Despite my amusement, my face warmed, touched by his sincerity. My "exotic" looks might have put off a lesser man who might have felt uncomfortable sitting at table with a *Californio*.

I looked down, suddenly embarrassed, as the conversation and the continued battle between mother and daughter, continued.

"Well, Ruth here is certainly a beauty," Abby said. "I've no illusions about my own looks."

"Do not be so casual with your self disrespect," Mrs. Granville retorted. "You insult your ancestors, from whom you inherited your looks. That inheritance, of course, requires minding."

Abby snorted. "Honesty is no insult. And I do mind to how I look. I don't gad about buck naked, after all." She dove back into eating, as if famished.

"Hush, daughter. You make our guests uncomfortable."

"Well, then, let's shift the talk away from me," Abby said cheerfully, and then turned her gaze toward me. "Mother tells me you are here on family business, Ruth."

I nodded, finishing my soup and touching the corners of my mouth with my napkin. "My father believes we are being overcharged by Southern Pacific. We ship fruits and vegetables, as well as sides of beef, north quite regularly."

"She lives on a ranch in Carmel Valley," Mary Granville interjected.

"Really?" Theodore sat up, interested. "Do you happen to know—"

Abby interrupted him, as if she didn't want him prying. "We shall have to help Ruth with strategy. The thieves at the railroad are quite powerful. What do you suggest, Ted, is the best approach?"

“Do you know what the other ranchers are charged?” he asked me, his dark eyes penetrating and sharp. His good looks were subtle— a square, strong jaw, brown hair that seemed as untamable as Abigail’s, a lean but muscular look about him.

“I’m afraid I don’t have specific information on that, only a few stories my father has gathered from those ranchers willing to share. From this he’s determined that perhaps the agents have been padding his bill.”

“What would be their motive?” Mrs. Granville asked, quickly adding, “I mean, other than making more money. Why would they single out your father?”

“He’s a good man,” I hastened to say, “and perhaps too trusting.”

Abigail’s eyes narrowed. “You take after your father, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“Sad to say, but many a man is influenced by what he sees,” Abigail said. “Seems our talk of looks is appropriate, after all, Mother. Men draw conclusions – often wrong ones – from appearances.”

“Abigail!”

“Mother, I am not blind. I have seen how people treat those who are different in looks from themselves. It is not heartening. The railroad agents probably treat her father unfairly because they think they can get away with bilking a man not of their own complexion.”

Theodore sat, stunned by Abby’s audacity. These were things that polite people did not discuss, especially among relative strangers. I, too, felt oddly disquieted, as if she’d revealed a deep family secret. Though I’d harbored the same thoughts – that the agents might be taking advantage of my father, assuming he was an unintelligent *Californio* or *Mestizo*, the word used to describe those of Mexican and Indian blood, I’d not confronted the idea outright. It was too...humiliating. My father’s family had been in the valley for a long time, well before California had become a state or before Americans discovered our rich land. He had as much right--if not more--to claim citizenship and pride in his work.

“You make our guests uncomfortable with such talk,” Mrs. Granville said.

Just then, the maid came in to clear the table and provide the next course, a fragrant roast with fresh vegetables and biscuits. Once she had left, Abigail continued.

“As I said before, honesty is no insult. Nor should it be uncomfortable among the righteous.” She smiled at Theodore and then at me. “And I always assume – until proven otherwise – that I am among the righteous.”

“You have presumed the railroad agents are not,” Mrs. Granville pointed out.

“But, Mother, have they not provided evidence against themselves – by overcharging Ruth’s father, among the other ranchers, whom they ostensibly treat fairly?” She pointed a fork at me.

“I think it is not helpful to fill Ruth’s head with resentment when no one yet knows what the true story might be.”

Theodore cleared his throat and spoke. “I have to agree with Miss Granville, I’m afraid. Her assumption is not unreasonable since evidence exists of wrongdoing.”

“Ted studied the law,” Abby said, as if this settled things.

As for me, I listened raptly, my mood changing throughout the talk from frozen embarrassment to resolute determination. Abby had articulated my darkest thoughts, thoughts I was sure my father shared but would never have passed along to me. It was better to face these notions and be done with them, one way or another.

“Let’s talk of happier things,” Mrs. Granville suggested. “Caruso, the Italian tenor of great repute, is visiting the city.”

“Opera always seemed like caterwauling to me, I’m afraid,” Abby said. “But it will certainly be good for the city to have such a prestigious visit.”

“Opera is quite moving,” Theodore said, in a voice that indicated he was glad to be on more neutral ground. “I have been quite often in New York. Have you ever been, Miss Sanchez?”

I shook my head. “No, but I’m fond of music generally.”

“Then perhaps we should all go,” Mrs. Granville suggested. “I will purchase the tickets as a treat.”

“That is too generous,” Theodore said. “I should be the one offering the treat.”

“Don’t be silly, Theodore. You’ve hardly an extra penny to spare. Mother can easily handle it.” Noticing his discomfort at her disclosure of his personal finances, she added, “The trip west was expensive, I’m sure. Until you get on your feet here, you should be thrifty.”

Mrs. Granville smiled and shook her head.

Abigail gave her a sharp look. “What have I done now?”

Before they could resume hostilities, I said, “I’ve heard so much about opera and about Mr. Caruso’s magnificent voice. It will be wonderful to hear him. I can hardly wait to write and tell my parents.”

The dinner proceeded thus, with eddies of polite conversation sometimes overtaken by waves of outspoken comments from Abby, followed by equally fierce waves of rebuke from her mother. Once I knew what to expect, I enjoyed myself. Except for a few more moments where Abby’s obsession with “honesty” flowed toward impudence, it was a pleasant dinner.

However, after we’d finished our coffee and retreated to the parlor, I could hardly keep my eyes open, something that both Granville women noticed. They insisted I would not offend should I want to retire, so I left them as they sat down to converse more with Theodore, who, I noted, seemed disappointed by my departure.

As I rounded the corner to the staircase, I heard the following exchange, which darkened Mrs. Granville’s voice and mood considerably, it seemed to me:

“I’m embarrassed to admit that I did not catch your full name,” Mrs. Granville said, and I paused to hear so I could learn it, as well.

“Theodore Crane Beaumont.”

“Crane?” Mrs. Granville repeated, uneasily. “Of course, that’s a common name.” This was more to herself than to her guests.

“His mother was a Crane,” Abby said. “That’s why he’s here. We might as well air the story. He wants to help his grandfather.”

“Not—”

“William Crane. You might have known him long ago as Billy.”

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