



*The Captive*  
HEART

DALE  
CRAMER

*Bestselling Author of* PARADISE VALLEY



## Chapter 1

**T**he mountain range known as the Sierra Madre Oriental ran the length of Mexico like a bony spine. Bold summits and limestone cliffs reached up among the passing rain clouds and diverted them and frustrated them and robbed them of their moisture so that by the time the clouds crawled out of the mountains, they had been reduced to wrung-out tatters with nothing left to give. In the wind shadow of these rugged mountains, the low-lying eastern coastal plain and Rio Grande valley had become parched red lands of scrub brush and cactus, while the upper reaches of the Sierras held cloud-shrouded pockets of tropical forest.

Nestled between the ridges at the eastern edge of the mountains lay a five-thousand-acre oval of rich pastureland known, in the 1920s, as Paradise Valley. The volcanic soil was black and fertile, the six-thousand-foot elevation guaranteed moderate temperatures year-round and a modest amount of rain fell throughout the growing season.

In the spring of 1922, in response to what he saw as religious persecution in Ohio, Caleb Bender brought his large family to Paradise Valley to pioneer a new Amish colony. Others would

follow. Caleb's wife, Martha, his two living sons, and seven of his eight daughters uprooted themselves from the only home his children had ever known, traveled a thousand miles and toiled ceaselessly for a year, forging a new homestead, bonding with new neighbors, adapting to a foreign culture and breaking new ground for crops. It was a monumental undertaking, made even more perilous by roaming bands of outlaws, but the family pulled together through tremendous hardship like a matched team of seasoned horses, and they thrived.

In February of 1923 the Shrocks and the Hershbergers arrived. The population of the Paradise Valley colony tripled overnight.

After dinner that Saturday evening Caleb strolled a little ways up the ridge behind his house and sat down on his private rock to be alone with his thoughts, and with *Gott*.

"Have I been foolish?" he whispered, burdened by his own responsibility for this mad venture, and racked with doubts. "*What have I done?*"

But his eyes roamed over fresh-plowed fields and fat cattle, the adobe house his sons and daughters had built from soil and sweat, the yellow lights of his two married daughters' houses where three new lives had come into the world—the first Amish children born in Paradise Valley—and now the campfires of two whole new families, come to do the same. He saw two of his teenage daughters standing together on the edge of the wheat field, watching the moonrise. Under the full moon he could make out Rachel's flame red hair peeking out of her white prayer *kapp*, and Miriam, the dark one, the serious one, arm in arm with her gregarious sister. The mere sight of his daughters, beautiful and whole and happy, filled him with light. Caleb Bender was not a prideful man, for he was Amish to the bone, but he was bursting with pride in his children.

When the chill of the evening began to seep into him Caleb buttoned his coat, snugged his wide-brimmed hat on his bald head and started down the ridge smiling, with a renewed sense of Gott's arms wrapped around his family and friends in Paradise Valley. Two beige cabin tents rested in his front yard, lit yellow from within by lanterns, a roaring campfire cracking and popping between them, flinging sparks into the night sky. John Hershberger and Ira Shrock, the two new men, stood warming in its glow.

Caleb joined them for a few minutes, showing his palms to the flame while they talked of old times, the weather and the coming spring.

"The soil here must be even better than back home," Hershberger said. An old friend of Caleb's, his long face bore his customary pleasant smile. "Your wheat is as thick as any I've ever seen."

Caleb turned his back to the fire and saw how the moon silvered the tops of his winter wheat and highlighted the white kapps of his two daughters, returning to the house arm in arm.

"*Jah*, it's rich," Caleb said, "and if we rotate crops like always, it'll only get better. We'll fight weeds for a year or two, but not too many rocks." Weeds and rocks weren't really what concerned him, but this was not the time for that discussion. "My girls are headed in. Time for evening prayers," he said, and with a good-night wave to John and Ira, headed for the house.

During prayer time he couldn't help noticing Miriam's downcast gaze. She looked like she'd been crying. Rachel's freckled face, usually bright and open, was drawn and tight, harboring some dark secret. Something was going on between them, but Caleb only chuckled to himself as he rose to go upstairs. At such times his daughters were a mystery to him. He silently thanked Gott for his wife, whose job it was to unravel the mysteries,

the endless parade of troubles and triumphs that came with a houseful of daughters.



Miriam let her dark hair down and dressed herself for bed. By the time she turned in and put out the lantern Rachel was already asleep, red hair splayed across the pillow and her breathing slow and steady. But Miriam was haunted, charged and quickened by thoughts of Domingo, of his pet name for her.

*Cualnezqui.*

She loved Domingo, she knew that now. Was it possible his little lie and his blank expression hid the same feelings for her? If so, an inconceivable choice awaited her somewhere in the future. She was a baptized member of the church, and Domingo was not Amish, but Miriam could not help how she felt. Suffering her private torture in the stillness of the night, sleep did not come for a long time. Finally she closed her eyes and uttered a simple prayer, asking for direction. She found a familiar and yet ever-surprising release in handing the problem over to Gott, and fell asleep with the prayer still on her lips.



In the cave-black hours before the first hint of dawn Miriam's mind swam up from sightless depths, random visions flitting past like bright silver fish as she fought toward the surface of a moonless sea, to the place of crystalline dreams. In an instant she was lifted, whisked through space and time into a startling midday light. Her dress and stark white prayer kapp vanished and she found herself wearing the coarse cotton pants and shirt of a peasant laborer. Dark, heavy hair fell loose about her shoulders, down her back, and windblown strands tickled her face.

Trapped in the timeless space between dream and memory, it seemed she owned no past or future.

She stood on the razor's edge of a sun-washed ridge. On one side the land fell away in a steep slope dotted with drought-stunted oak trees, twisted pines and clusters of prickly pear cactus. On the other side a sheer rocky cliff dropped straight into oblivion, where only a dry wind moaned through the crags.

She knew this place. The ridge overlooked their new home in Paradise Valley.

Mexico.

A great dark stallion appeared in the distance, rising suddenly at the highest point of the ridge. Head held proudly, mane flying like a flag, he surveyed the valley below as if he owned it.

The stallion's head turned and his eyes found Miriam. He took a half step back and tossed his head, a blink of recognition. She held his gaze. Sunlight glinted from steel muscles as he reared up on powerful hind legs and hurled himself toward her. He galloped flat out, tearing along the edge of the cliff, bounding over boulders and fallen trees, racing toward her with an urgency, an intensity she did not understand until she heard a different sound.

It was a small sound, a faint rustling of dry leaves from a thicket of scrub brush in the foreground, between her and the stallion. Staring hard, searching low in the tangled bracken, she spotted a pair of large round eyes—eyes of amber framed in black. The eyes of a predator, focused on her alone. A black jaguar crouched there, coiled and motionless, waiting.

Watching.

Their eyes locked. The great cat tensed, dropping a fraction deeper into his crouch, his decision made. He exploded from the brush as if he had been fired from a cannon, bunched muscles flinging him over rock and snag with astonishing speed, but the

stallion was almost upon him. Approaching hoofbeats spun the jaguar about, ears laid back, fangs exposed in an ear-splitting scream, coiling to spring at this new challenge.

Black and sleek and powerful, the jaguar launched himself at the charging horse, and the two beasts locked together. The stallion twisted, reared, bucked, but the big cat clung fast by claw and fang.

Paralyzed with terror, Miriam watched the deadly battle in agonizing slow motion. She saw the whites of the stallion's eyes, the desperation in his struggle. She saw the singular resolve of the savage cat, bent on destruction. She saw a hoof slip over the edge of the rock, pawing for a new grip and finding only empty space.

Slowly, like a felled tree, the stallion tilted and toppled. With his head thrown back and the jaguar still clamped to his neck, he plunged over the edge into the abyss, turning and tumbling, his hooves thrashing as he plummeted out of sight.

She ran screaming, scrambling over rocks, reaching for him as though she could somehow turn back the clock and prevent this from happening, but it was a futile gesture. Hopeless.

He was gone, leaving nothing behind but the moan of the wind in the rocks.

Miriam awoke sitting bolt upright in bed, gasping, damp with sweat despite the cold, memory flooding her mind. The dream burned brightly in that moment, and she understood it completely. She knew what it meant, who it was about. The magnificent free-spirited stallion her dream had conjured was no horse at all, but a man.

Domingo.

The vision burned itself into her consciousness and filled her with dread, for it had been etched in her mind almost from



birth that a man who lived by the sword would surely die by the sword. Domingo's own father had perished fighting in the Mexican Revolution, along with his sister's husband. This ringing premonition that Domingo would somehow follow in their footsteps shook her to the core.

She had witnessed a transformation only yesterday on Saltillo Road, the moment when Domingo the hired hand became Domingo the Warrior, his blade pressed against a bandit's throat, his body taut as a fence wire, his eyes cold and hard and merciless, piercing through tangles of long black hair. Domingo the fierce. Domingo the *protector*.

"He is gentle," his sister Kyra had said, "until someone he loves is threatened."

If Domingo's metamorphosis from farmhand to warrior was indeed triggered by the need to protect someone he loved, Miriam needed to know if she was that one. Before he'd left for home—*was it only last night?*—she had emboldened herself and given him every chance to declare his feelings for her, if he had any, but he said nothing. He became, if anything, more aloof than ever, leaving her to wrestle with her own doubts and insecurities. In the end she resigned herself to the belief that he wanted only friendship from her, that he granted her respect because she had taught him to read. He didn't even *see* the woman behind the teacher's veneer, let alone share her feelings.

But that name haunted her. Cualnezqui, he called her. A Nahuatl word, it had been Domingo's pet name for Miriam alone, from the day she and her family arrived. "*Friend*," he explained when she asked him what it meant, and for an entire year she believed him. But last night, as he was riding away, Rachel told her the truth, and the earth shifted.

Cualnezqui did not mean *friend* at all.

It meant *beautiful one*.



So why did he not speak when she gave him the chance? Had he been teasing her all this time? Was he treating her like a child? The questions consumed her.

Never before had she met such a man. She was smitten and she knew it, though she had always tried to hide it—partly because she was Amish, and partly because she was Miriam. Her dreams and desires were her own, jealously guarded lest they make the rounds of the gossips' tongues and come back in whispers to ridicule, or worse. The church would take a dim view of her feelings for a man who was not Amish. He was not even American, but a half-breed native Mexican.

And then, with a shock, she recalled the brief prayer she'd uttered before falling asleep, asking for a sign.

She had gone to sleep with a plea for help on her lips and awakened to a vivid, pointed dream. Now she was plagued by the nagging fear that perhaps the dream was the answer to the prayer. Could it have been a cryptic warning from Gott himself? Would it somehow be up to *her* to save Domingo?

Knowing she would not go back to sleep, Miriam slipped out of bed and dressed herself in the dark so as not to wake her four sisters sleeping in the same room. The house had grown cold in the night; she went downstairs to stoke the stove.



## Chapter 2

When the rooster crowed, Rachel awakened with such excitement that she barely noticed Miriam was already gone from the bed. She sprang from under the covers like a child on Christmas morning and rushed to the window again, just like yesterday, to make sure nothing had changed.

The wagons and buggies and hacks were still parked in a row by the lane. Tents glowed in the yard, their lanterns already lit, while down by the kitchen garden a flurry of sparks leaped from the red embers of a dying campfire as one of the men dropped a fresh log onto it.

Their new neighbors had been here since Friday night and she still hadn't gotten over the excitement, because *Jake* was with them.

She'd waited a whole year for Jake Weaver to come, the last two months without hope because she received word that his father had decided not to bring his family to Mexico. Rachel's own father was the cause of it. Caleb Bender, because it was his duty and it was the truth, had written his friends in Ohio and told them about the bandit troubles. His candid letters had changed Jake's father's mind about moving across the border into such turmoil.

The news that Jake would not be coming had driven a nail through Rachel's heart. Yes, she had barely reached courting age before her family pulled up stakes and moved to Paradise Valley. But she and Jake had known each other all their lives, and in the midst of the storm that the state of Ohio unleashed upon the Amish, the two of them discovered strengths in each other that they had never noticed before.

"*I would do a great many things for you,*" Jake had said, and it was as if a veil lifted and her future unfolded before her eyes with astonishing clarity. They both knew with a calm and unwavering certainty—suddenly, yes, but beyond any childish doubt—that they were meant for each other. That certainty, and their faith, had now been tested by a separation of a thousand miles for an entire year.

But now he was here. At the eleventh hour Jake's father had relented and allowed his son to leave the family farm and come to Paradise Valley as a hireling of John Hershberger.

The eastern sky had only begun to turn purple. A sharp snore came from simpleminded Ada, sleeping in the other bed with her two youngest sisters. Rachel woke them, then rushed to put on yesterday's dress and pin her long red hair under her covering. She wanted to finish her chores quickly and leave plenty of time to change into her Sunday clothes for *gma*. Today there would be church services in the Benders' barn.

And Jake would be there.

She hurried downstairs, past the living room, where her brothers were just beginning to stir from their blankets on the floor, through the kitchen, where Miriam and Mamm were already starting breakfast, and stopped by the back door to put on her coat. She lit a lantern, grabbed her bucket and stool from the back porch and headed for the barn.

Setting her bucket and stool down at the milking corner,

she put a little feed into the manger and went out to rouse the cows. As usual, she found them lying in the grass not far away, waiting. When the cows saw her lantern, they hauled their heavy bodies up and plodded toward the big door, long accustomed to the routine. Her bare feet were freezing from the dew, so she stood for a minute in the impression left by a cow, absorbing the warmth before she followed them inside.

As she went back through the door of the barn someone laid a hand on her shoulder. She gave a little shriek and nearly dropped the lantern as she spun around.

“Good morning,” Jake said, smiling sheepishly. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

She melted into his strong arms and warmth flooded through her. She said nothing. No words were necessary.

He gave her a too-brief hug and said, “I’ll help you with the milking. I’ll have to round up John’s cows and milk them too, so I’ll be needing the space.”

She nodded, stifling a giggle. “Miriam will be here in a minute. We wouldn’t want her to catch us like this.”

Milking was no longer a chore with Jake beside her. Nothing was the same. Her whole world had taken on new and vibrant colors.



That morning, for the first time since the Shrocks and Hershbergers arrived, the three Amish families gathered for church services in the Benders’ barn. Miriam sat on a backless bench alongside her sisters, but part of her was elsewhere. Despite the pure and palpable joy in the air that morning—for they had been reunited and were a community again—Miriam’s mind kept wandering, reliving an all too vivid dream.

They sang a few songs from the *Ausbund*, Hershberger said

a long prayer of thanks for traveling mercies and then her dat got up to speak. He fidgeted and shifted uneasily from foot to foot, for Caleb Bender was not sanctioned by the church as a preacher. It was one thing to speak in front of his family on Sunday morning, but a crowd of fifty was very different.

“I was thinking on it this morning at breakfast,” her father said, standing before the assembled families, the women seated on one side and the men on the other, all of them dressed in their Sunday best. “I was thinking about how in the beginning, every time Gott made something new He always said it was good. And it goes along like that until after He makes a man. But then comes the first time Gott says something is *not* good. He said it was not good that the man should be alone.”

Now he had Miriam’s full attention. *Alone*. The word struck a chord in her. It meant almost twenty and unmarried, with no prospects.

Her dat paused, biting his lip, choosing his words carefully.

“Gott meant for Adam to have a wife, a helpmeet,” he said slowly. “But I think mebbe there is more to it than that. I believe the thoughts of Gott are truth, whether He thinks them in a small way or a big way.”

There was great stillness then as everyone stared at him blankly, not sure what he meant by this. Miriam glanced at the faces of the boys sitting across the aisle. At the mention of a wife, Jake Weaver’s attention drifted subtly from Caleb’s face to Rachel’s. The faintest trace of a smile touched the corners of his eyes before he turned his attention back to her dat.

But then she saw Micah, the strapping big twenty-one-year-old son of Ira Shrock, sitting next to Jake. She couldn’t help noticing that he glanced at her too often for it to be accidental.

Micah had been there too, on the wagon with her on the way back from Arteaga when the bandits struck and tried to

take her. In her mind it was Domingo who had saved her, taking down the bandit whose pistol was aimed at Micah's back, but Micah had done his part, too. When the second bandit tried to climb over into the wagon to drag her away, it was Micah who stopped him. At the very least, Micah had helped save her life. She was indebted to him.

Caleb cleared his throat. "What I'm trying to say in my clumsy way is that if Gott says it is not good for *the man* to be alone, then it is probably not good too for *people* to be alone. We—my wife and children and me—have been alone in a strange land for a year now . . ."

His thoughts overwhelmed his voice for a moment and he paused to collect himself.

When he looked up again, his eyes found John Hershberger and he said quietly, "I think mebbe Gott meant for us to be with Him *and* with one another. I cannot tell you how full my heart is this morning when I look out and see that we are no longer alone. It is very, very good."

Miriam knew from personal experience that it was definitely not good to be alone. Keeping her eyes on her father, avoiding Micah's glances, she felt a pang of guilt. Domingo was not Amish. It was inevitable; any sort of relationship with him would surely bring the censure of the church, but she couldn't help herself. His voice echoed in her head.

"*Cualnezqui.*"

Beautiful one.







## Chapter 3

The youth held a singing at Caleb's that evening, boys and girls facing each other on benches in the barn. There was the usual jockeying for position as boys tried to sit across from a girl whose eye they wanted to catch.

Rachel paid attention. Jake was there with the Hershberger boys and their sister Lovina. As a teenager alone in a strange land, Jake would naturally be treated as one of the family by the Hershbergers. He would be paid, of course, but he wouldn't see a penny of it. John Hershberger would mail Jake's earnings home to his father, as was the custom. Until he was twenty, or married with a home of his own, everything Jake earned would go to his father.

Ira Shrock's children came to the singing, too—his four older sons and two of his daughters. Both of Rachel's brothers were there. Harvey Bender never missed a singing, but now even Aaron came and sat with the other boys, which was unusual. At twenty-two he didn't have to attend, since it was mainly a social function for older teens, and he hadn't been to a singing back home since his twin brother, Amos, died four years ago. But back in the fall his older sister Mary had delivered twins, a

boy and a girl, and named the boy Amos, after the lost brother. It was as if Aaron's twin had been reincarnated, and the dark cloud of loss that hung over him vanished like a morning mist. Awakening from his doldrums, Aaron smiled more often and began to mix with the other young men. He talked more and walked a little taller, held his shoulders a little straighter.

Jake Weaver took a seat right across from Rachel, as expected. Though it was something of a thrill for her, by now their courtship was old news to the rest of the girls and didn't cause much of a stir. What *did* pique Rachel's interest was when Micah Shrock shoved Aaron aside so he could sit directly across from Miriam.

At nearly twenty it was getting late for Rachel's older sister, and separated from the large Amish community in Ohio, Miriam's prospects were slim. Even now, with the arrival of two more families, the two older Shrocks were the only Amish boys in the entire country who might remotely be considered a match for her.

Rachel did everything she could, elbowing Miriam and nodding in Micah's direction, but her sister's face was drawn tight and she shook off all of Rachel's hints, steadfastly refusing to make eye contact with Micah. When the singing was over Miriam went straight into the house with the adults, giving him no chance to talk with her alone.

Later, when they were in bed and the rhythmic breathing from the other bed told Rachel the younger girls and Ada were already asleep, she touched Miriam's shoulder in the dark and broached the subject.

"What's wrong with Micah Shrock?" she whispered. No point beating around the bush.

Miriam drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Nothing. Micah's a nice enough boy. I just think he's a little immature."

"Boy? Miriam, he's six-foot-three, and he's the oldest unmarried boy in Paradise Valley."

Miriam didn't answer for a second. "That doesn't make him a man. He just seems so . . . I don't know."

"Seems so *what?* Amish?" She let the word hang for a moment before she went on. "I think you only have eyes for Domingo, Miriam. I know he's handsome, and I like him too, but he's not one of us. You're playing with fire."

Miriam's head turned toward her and she raised herself up on an elbow. "Domingo is not interested in me, Rachel. He has never said anything to make me think he sees me as anything but a friend."

"Cualnezqui," Rachel whispered. "Why would he call you *beautiful* if he didn't have feelings for you?"

Miriam hesitated for a long time. "Who knows? Maybe he was teasing, the way you tease a little girl, calling her pretty. Besides, it's a Nahuatl word and he thinks we don't know what it means. I bet after he finds out we're onto his little joke he won't say it anymore. So you can relax, Rachel. He's our friend, and that's probably all he's ever going to be."

"But you like him."

"Everybody likes him. Even Dat is crazy about him, so don't make it sound like it's just me."

"Dat doesn't look at him the way you do. I've seen it, Miriam. You should be careful what you want. Why, Kyra said he's not even a Christian. Kyra's mother raised her to be a good Catholic, but she said their father made a Nahua warrior out of Domingo. He doesn't even go to church."

"Domingo is a good man, and it's not our place to judge outsiders," Miriam whispered. "The condition of his soul is between him and Gott."

"But he *is* an outsider, Miriam. If you married him it would break our mother's heart."

Miriam's voice came across the darkness more like a hiss than

a whisper. “So now I’m going to *marry* him, Rachel? First of all it’s up to the *man* to choose, not the girl. I told you, Domingo has never once said he wanted to be anything more than a friend. I don’t know where you get these crazy ideas!”

Miriam punched her pillow twice and flopped back onto it with a sigh.

Rachel waited a minute to let her calm down and then whispered, “I only wanted to know what was wrong with Micah, that’s all. He’s a good worker. Strong. For a girl in your position, he seems like a good option.”

“A good worker,” Miriam echoed. “What you really mean is a good provider—a good *husband*. You might want to consider that I’m not just a girl in my *position*; I’m a human being with thoughts and desires of my own. I barely know Micah, so I don’t like to say anything bad about him, but he seems a little pushy if you want to know the truth. Besides, I don’t know what we would talk about. As a friend, I don’t have anything against him, but if I ever find the man I want to marry—if, I say—he’ll be a man I can talk to, a man who can think and carry on a conversation about something besides farming.”

Conceding defeat, for now, Rachel rolled over to face the other way.

“Good luck,” she whispered into her pillow.



Domingo showed up for work at dawn on Monday morning, and Caleb had him hitch up the surrey. After breakfast Domingo went along while Caleb took Ira and John on a tour of the valley so they could pick out their plots.

“That’s a fine-tempered mare,” Caleb said to Hershberger as he snapped the reins and his new buggy horse broke into a smooth pace. John Hershberger had brought him a two-year-old

standard-bred mare to replace the one taken by bandits last fall. "You chose well, John. You always did have an eye for a horse."

"They had another mare at the sale for a cheaper price," John said, "but it wasn't near as good as this one. All I did was pick the one you would have picked, Caleb. Anyways, it's a lot easier to spend somebody else's money."

Caleb chuckled at John's little joke. He had known John Hershberger all his life and trusted him like a brother.

Ira Shrock, sitting beside Domingo in the back seat, had remained silent up to now, his eyes nervously scanning the horizon as the surrey crossed the main road and headed into unbroken pasture on the other side of the valley. Now he leaned forward and revealed the reason for his nerves.

"Caleb, what are we going to do about those bandits?"

Caleb's eyes went wide and he scanned the horizon himself. "What bandits?"

"The ones who attacked you on the way back from Saltillo. Have you already forgotten?" There was a trace of indignation in his voice, and a fear that he had not shown in front of the women and children. "They threatened us—and they said they would be back. What do we do if they come back, Caleb?"

Domingo chuckled, answering Ira in High German. "Those two won't come back here."

Ira looked around at him in surprise. "Well, they *said* they would. What makes you think they won't?"

Domingo shrugged, glancing at Ira from under the flat brim of his hat. "It was in their eyes. They know I am here, and they are afraid of me now."

"Jah," Ira said, his red face growing redder, "but mebbe this time they bring more of their friends."

Domingo shook his head. "I don't think so, Herr Shrock. If you want to know what these men will do, you have to think

like a bandit. They were defeated and had their weapons taken away—by a couple of farmers and a girl. Herr Bender even took one of their horses. They were shamed, and they knew their compadres would have no mercy. Men like that will not go back to camp and tell the truth about what happened. They will make up a grand lie about how they were attacked by an army of fierce warriors, and they were lucky to escape with their lives.” Domingo cast a wry smile at Caleb and added, “The last part is true enough—they *are* lucky to be alive.”

But Ira was not persuaded. “I still think we have to do something, Caleb—for our wives and children. If men like that come with guns to Paradise Valley we will be at their mercy.”

Caleb pondered this for a moment. “Ira, I have lived here for a year already and I have seen many bandits, but most of the time they only want food and water. Those are the only two who ever tried to do us harm, and Domingo is right—they probably will not come back.”

The four men climbed down from the surrey in the shadow of the ridge on the opposite side of the valley and walked through the grass, smelling and tasting and seeing for themselves the quality of the soil and the lay of the land. Even in February the midday sun was warm enough, and a gentle breeze ruffled the prairie grasses. A gray hawk cruised high over their heads, riding the upward air current along the face of the ridge.

“This is a mighty fine parcel,” John Hershberger said, slinging his coat over his shoulder and gazing back across the valley at Caleb’s place. “If the weather truly holds like this, why, we can grow vegetables year-round, just like that salesman said.”

Caleb smiled. “Jah, I’m beginning to believe it myself. Winter is nearly over and we only had snow a couple times yet. I’m thinking I’ll start planting this week.”

“Well I guess we’ll find out then, won’t we?” Ira said. Eyeing a hummock a quarter mile to the west, he mused, “I like the look of that rise yonder. Good spot for a house and a banked barn, if it only had a tree or two on it. What do you think, neighbor?”

John Hershberger squinted at the place and nodded. “I think we should go and take a look, Ira. The good thing about being first is we get to choose, and we got plenty here to choose from. No need to be hasty.”

The sound of hoofbeats turned the three men around. A Mexican cantered across the open field toward them on a tall, heavy-boned black horse with a long mane and untrimmed hair obscuring large hooves.

Ira Shrock tensed, his brow furrowed. “Would that be a bandit, Caleb?”

“Neh,” Caleb said, a trace of a grin on his face. “Bandits don’t dress so good. I know this man. His name is Diego Fuentes, the overseer from Hacienda El Prado. A decent man—or at least he has been kind to us.”

Fuentes was dressed in corduroy pants, a hunting jacket with a leather shooting patch on the shoulder, riding boots and a narrow-brimmed city hat. He tipped his hat to the three Amishmen as he dismounted and walked over to them, leading his horse by the reins.

“Buenos días, Señor Bender! I see your new friends have arrived.” Fuentes’s English was quite good.

Caleb introduced Hershberger and Shrock, and they gave Diego Fuentes a strong, one-pump Amish handshake.

“That’s about as stout a horse as I ever seen,” Hershberger said. “Friesian?”

“Sí,” Fuentes answered, reaching up to rub the jaw of his black stallion affectionately. “They are rare in Mexico. He was a gift from the *hacendado*—smart and docile, and strong as a plow horse.”

The four of them walked over the land a little ways, Shrock



and Hershberger checking out potential home sites and talking to Fuentes.

“A question is in my mind yet,” Hershberger said. “We’re gonna need a lot of timber, and I wondered if mebbe we could take some from the ridge. I know the ridge doesn’t belong to us, but Caleb told us you let him cut a little for his roof last year.”

Fuentes winced. “That would not be such a good idea now. Two more farms and more to come soon—I am sorry, but I think perhaps it would be too much, señor. The trees on the ridges are not very big anyway, and they are a little sparse.”

“It is Señor Fuentes’s duty to keep watch over the timber here,” Caleb explained. “The local villagers would strip the ridges and use it all for cooking fires if he let them, so he has to set rules. They can take deadfall, but everyone knows the standing timber belongs to the hacienda.”

“Sí,” Fuentes said. “It is all I can do to keep the hacienda blacksmith supplied. If the local people see gringos cutting timber they’ll want to know why they can’t do it as well.”

Ira Shrock’s red face clouded over with concern. “What will we do, then? We can’t build houses and barns and fences without timber, and it would cost a lot of money to get it by train from Ohio.”

The Mexican’s face lit up with an idea. “The hacendado owns a big parcel of land twelve miles from here, up in the mountains to the west. It is very difficult to get to, and none of the local people have the horses to haul heavy loads over those roads, but your draft horses could do it. There is plenty of big timber there, señor. You can take what you need, only you must agree to pay one third of your logs to the hacienda.”

Ira and John considered this briefly, then nodded and shook hands with Fuentes.

“That’s a fair deal,” John said.



## Chapter 4

Caleb's boys were busy that week, plowing fields for spring planting while the Shrocks and Hershbergers picked out sites across the valley and started work on their homesteads. Domingo spent the entire week helping Caleb bring in the winter wheat. Miriam drove the wagon for them, watching Domingo work alongside her father, hoping for a chance to talk to him privately. She didn't know what she would say, or even if she would have the nerve to say what she was really thinking. In the end it didn't matter because she never had a moment alone with him.

Until Friday afternoon. The wheat was all in, and after lunch her father stood in the front yard picking his teeth and talking to Domingo about turning the stubble under. When Miriam walked by, he stopped her.

"Miriam, see if Mamm needs anything from the store. I want you and Rachel to take the buggy into town."

She had been so busy she forgot. Once a week Caleb sent a couple of his daughters into town to trade butter and cream for whatever they needed at the mercado in the hacienda village, and pick up the mail at the post office.

“Jah, Dat,” Miriam said. She had already turned back toward the barn when Domingo spoke up.

“Herr Bender,” he said, “I know it is only a few miles to town, but I don’t know if it is wise to send your daughters without someone to protect them.”

Caleb pondered this for a minute.

“Jah, mebbe you’re right,” he said. “It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Domingo took the reins, wearing a gun belt around his hips, and Miriam rode up front with him while Rachel sat in the back. It was a fine spring day, full of sunshine, the open fields dotted with clusters of some kind of little purple wildflower, the birds boasting and chasing one another on a cool breeze. Domingo spoke very little, keeping his eyes on the road as the buggy horse paced smoothly along toward the hacienda village. Miriam thought of a thousand ways she might open a dialogue with him, but she couldn’t say what she really wanted to say with Rachel right there in the back seat. She sat quietly with her hands in her lap, trying to hide her nerves. She was anxious, partly because she was naturally shy and introverted, and partly because of that gun. Guns always made her skittish, but a handgun was the worst because it was not a hunting weapon. A pistol was mostly for shooting at a man.

When they reached town Domingo jumped down from the surrey and tied the horse to the hitching rail in front of the mercado—the grocery store. Rachel and Miriam climbed down with a block of butter wrapped in paper and a jug of heavy cream that they planned to trade.

“You have Mamm’s list?” Miriam asked, checking to make sure her white prayer kapp was still in place after the ride.

“Jah,” Rachel said, “but I don’t need it, really. She only wants some salt and cloves.”

“Oh. Well then, since it’s not very much, why don’t you take care of the trading and I’ll walk down to the post office to get the mail?”

Rachel looked at her a little sideways. “Why don’t we just stay together? We’ve got all afternoon.”

Miriam glanced at Domingo, leaning casually against the hitching post, and Rachel’s eyes narrowed.

“I see,” Rachel muttered. “Well, it’s your life, sister.” She hooked a finger in the jug of cream and snatched it away from Miriam, then turned on her heel and stalked into the mercado without another word.

The street was crowded with Mexicans in rickety wagons, going and coming, buying and selling. Everyone seemed a little more animated than usual, and Miriam felt it, too. The first hints of spring brought an air of expectation and well-being. Walking beside Domingo, Miriam’s mind flitted through all the words she’d been practicing in her head, but none of them sounded good enough when the moment was actually upon her. His hand rested on the butt of the pistol at his hip, his elbow slightly extended, and she even thought once or twice of casually slipping her hand under his arm, but the thought made her blush and she knew she didn’t have the nerve. When he glanced at her he almost seemed to smile, but he said nothing. The man could be dreadfully stingy with words.

He waited outside as she went into the post office and collected a little clutch of letters from the man at the counter.

“Letters from home,” she said, flipping through them as she rejoined Domingo in the dusty street. “But none for me. They’re all for Mamm and Dat, from friends in Ohio.”

Domingo grabbed her arm and pulled her to the side as a horse-drawn wagon rumbled by a little too close for comfort.

“Thank you.” She smiled up at him while he still held her arm. “I’m glad you came with us today. I feel safe when I’m with you.”

He smiled back. “You are welcome, Cualnezqui.”

But then he let go of her arm and said nothing else, turning to head up the street. He went a few paces before he turned around and looked back.

Miriam had not moved. Another wagon trundled close by, loaded with hay, but she ignored it. Her frustration welled up, and she knew she was going to say something or burst.

“I know what that word means,” she said, in High German. “Cualnezqui.”

He turned about and came back to stand in front of her. He seemed to measure her then, looking deep into her eyes, but in his face she saw only compassion. It was not what she was looking for, longing for.

“Someone has told you,” he said.

“You told us it meant *friend*, but then we found out from Kyra that it really means *beautiful one*. And you saved it for me alone. Why would you do that?”

He looked away, and then his eyes went to his sandals. He shrugged and said quietly, “Because you are beautiful?”

She studied him for a few seconds, confused, unsure of what to say next. She took a half step closer so that he was forced to look down into her face.

“When a man calls a woman beautiful, it makes her think he is . . . *fond* of her.”

A small nod, but he said nothing.

“Domingo, why won’t you talk to me?”

He took a deep breath and raised his head, again looking elsewhere, as if he could not bear to look into her eyes.

“Respect,” he said softly, then turned away abruptly and started walking up the street, leaving her behind.

She rushed to catch up with him, and when she did she grabbed his elbow without thinking. They stopped again, their feet crunching in the cinders in front of the blacksmith shop as a hammer rang against an anvil in the background.

"Respect?" she said. "Is it respectful to make fun of me, calling me beautiful? Is it respectful to lie to me? There is no respect in words you don't mean."

"But I *did* mean it. You *are* beautiful, and I am very . . . *fond* of you." He shrugged. "But a man does not live only by his feelings. A man must respect another man's fences."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Look around you. There are beautiful women in the village, but they are married. Everywhere, there are fences. A man who does not respect another man's fences is not an honorable man."

"I am not married."

"No, but you are a *yanqui*, a white woman, and I am Nahua. Your family owns property and I am poor. Then there is your father, and your religion. Fences."

"What has my father to do with it?"

Domingo turned and started walking again, but she clung tightly to his arm and kept up. An old woman in front of the butcher shop stopped to stare at her prayer kapp. Miriam ignored her.

"I have worked on your farm for a year now," Domingo said, "and I have learned enough about the Amish to know that your father would not wish to see his daughter with a half-breed Mexican. I have great respect for your father and I will not betray his trust."

"Then you *are* fond of me, but you hold back because of my father?"

"Jah, and your religion."

"Because I am Amish?"

“Because you are Christian.”

“But, Domingo, your own mother is a Christian.”

“Jah, and it was never easy for them. Because my mother was a Christian, she saw the world in a different way.”

“All right, then tell me. How does a Christian see the world so differently from a Nahua?”

Two little boys chased each other down the street and dodged right between Miriam and Domingo, forcing them apart, but then he held out his arm for her to take it again as they walked.

“In ancient days,” he said, “the Nahua earned the favor of the gods by conquering other tribes and offering the lives of their prisoners—their *enemies*—as a sacrifice. Ours is a religion of the strong, and in Mexico it is good to be strong. But the Spaniards brought with them a new religion that tells us we should be kind to our enemies and sacrifice *ourselves*. Their priests tell us we should be content to be poor and enslaved, that we should turn the other cheek, that we should grovel in the dust and bear insult with meekness and gratitude—insult at the hands of the very Spaniards who brought us this religion.”

“But the Bible says—”

“*Your* bible. Not mine.”

She stared at him then, at the fire in his eyes.

“You are full of anger.”

“Three hundred years’ worth,” he answered.

The truth of this was in the set of his jaw. A history of conflict and oppression lay deep in his bones. He was too close to it. Only an outsider, a yanqui with the pacifist underpinnings of the Amish, could see the whole picture, and she had to try to make him see it. She squeezed his arm and spoke softly.

“Where will it end, Domingo? The Nahua conquer other tribes, the Spaniards conquer the Nahua, the revolutionaries conquer the Spaniards, and one day someone will conquer the



revolutionaries. Bloodshed begets only anger, and more bloodshed. Don't you see? Ours is a Gott of love. The only way for men to live in peace is to conquer anger itself, and the only way to do that is through forgiveness—through love. You will not find forgiveness with a gun in your hand. Sooner or later someone must say *enough*. When men find the courage to lay down their weapons and listen to each other, *then* they will find peace.”

His expression did not change. “Spoken like a Christian,” he said, and it did not have the ring of a compliment. “But this is Mexico. Here a man must fight or die. In the end, I think Mexico will tell us whose god is right, Cualnezqui. Your father would die for what he believes, and I admire him for that, even if I do not understand him. I admire you too, for you are not only beautiful, you are wise and good. But this is a very high fence, Cualnezqui, and you must understand that my feelings are not important. I will respect your father's fences, no matter what I feel.”

His reasons were sound and his words well chosen, but they still stung. Maybe it was the pain of rejection, or maybe it was because they were nearing the mercado where Rachel might see them, but Miriam let go of his arm. Warring emotions raged inside of her as she pulled away and withdrew behind the safety of a blank stare. Her lips tightened into a thin line and the words came out flat and colorless.

“Then please stop calling me Cualnezqui. My name is Miriam.”