

Yakimali's Gift Excerpt

While the boys chattered with Papa about Captain Anza's sword, his fine horse, and his uniform, Fernanda nudged Aletta, and they drifted off among the other colonists. She imagined herself an experienced horsewoman such as New Spain had never seen. She'd jump Aletta over the crowd and gallop to California all on her own. To Monte Rey — King's Mountain — where surely not mere rocks but gold covered the hillsides, and people dressed in silk with intricate embroidery would greet her and ask her to join their feast of fresh meat, fruit, and chocolate.

A raucous laugh interrupted her daydream, and nearby a woman nodded left then right at two men who rode beside her.

"Assuredly," the woman said in a loud throaty voice, "it was a sight you wouldn't have believed."

Fernanda guessed her to be in her early twenties. Tied securely in her shawl and sleeping peacefully against her chest was an infant. A girl, perhaps four years old, sat in front of the woman, clutching the saddle horn.

"Now there's a rival to contend with. What a beauty!"

Fernanda's face grew hot when she realized the woman referred to her.

"Come, Potra Bonita," the señora said. "Tell us your name."

Fernanda grinned at the name the señora had called her: Pretty Filly. "I'm Fernanda. Fernanda Rosalia Marquina. I'm traveling with my father and five brothers."

"Oh ho! What you must endure with so many men in your household. My name is Feliciana Maria Arballo. Please call me Feliciana. I'm an expert on men, I'll have you know. And I'm at your service should you ever need my assistance."

Fernanda laughed. "Thank you, I'll remember that." She glanced at the men riding with Feliciana.

"No, neither of these fine gentlemen is my husband," Feliciana said. "I'm traveling with my two daughters." A look of sorrow seemed to cloud her eyes for a moment, and then, with affection and gentleness, she placed her hand on the little girl's head. "This is Tomása. Say hello, mi'ja."

"Hola, señorita," Tomása said with a quiet lisp.

"This is my new little one, Estaquia." Feliciana kissed the baby's head. Then she eyed Fernanda from head to toe. "What beautiful hair and pretty red ribbon. I see you're the practical sort not wearing your new clothes, unlike many of the women here."

Thinking of Ramona, Fernanda decided she quite liked this woman. "Yes, I'm saving them for California. They'll surely be ruined if I wear them now."

"Perhaps you might risk it at least once on the journey. There could be an occasion, possibly a fandango—" Feliciana raised her voice and winked at the travelers who moved in closer to hear,

"—where you might want to look your prettiest to dance with some handsome soldier."

"A fandango?" Fernanda repeated. "While we're traveling?"

Even though the idea sounded impossible, she imagined her new petticoat brushing against her calves as she twirled around Nicolas and the other dancers. "Perhaps. Now I must return to my family. I enjoyed talking with you."

"We'll talk again, Potra. Goodbye." Feliciana continued talking with the men who couldn't seem to take their eyes off her.

Fernanda made her way back to Papa, thinking what a brave woman Feliciana was to come on the journey with an infant and young daughter. Had something tragic happened to her husband?

Forcing her thoughts away from tragedies and sorrow, she sang Feliciana's nickname in her head, *Potra, Potra*. A filly is what I am. I'll dance and prance my way to California!

She noticed a young man and girl who'd been listening to Feliciana, the girl smiling, the man scowling. They rode beautiful horses with strong limbs, shiny coats, and silky manes and sat on skillfully tooled saddles. Then she realized they were the ones she'd seen riding past her home, and the memory of the young man's look rippled through her body.

Fernanda thought he might be eighteen or nineteen. Even though he was dressed casually, it was obvious his clothes were of the highest quality. The majority of men, in spite of the heat, wore either jackets or mantles, capes saved for formal occasions or traveling. This man's scarlet jacket was bundled and tucked into a saddlebag. The finely woven cotton of his blue shirt, free from grime and sweat, settled softly over the breadth of his shoulders and muscled biceps. The collar lay open, exposing small beads of sweat on his broad chest. The material of his breeches wasn't the thick, practical plush common in Tubac. Instead, though the fabric appeared durable, it was thinner and showed off the thick muscles of his thighs, the same way his stockings clung to his toned calves.

The girl, close to Luis's age, was also richly dressed. She wore a white silk rebozo, woven with red flowers and threads of gold and silver. Her skirt, the color of burnished silver, was also silk, and a red ribbon with the same gold and silver embroidery as her shawl decorated the end of her braid.

Why were they on this expedition? Certainly poverty hadn't prompted them to join. Their looks made it clear they were brother and sister. Where were their parents? As Fernanda passed them, the girl shyly waved to her. Both she and her brother had dark eyes, hers open and friendly, his hard and hostile. She remembered his eyes that had held such a mixture of emotion—surprise, sadness...desire?—she hadn't been able to look away. Now, they held only anger.