

Chapter One



We knew the value of water in Los Angeles. Back when our great city was still a tiny pueblo, water was scarce and our farms and ranchos were at the mercy of what the heavens produced. Back then we had to pay handsomely to have our fields and vineyards irrigated. Back then the Zanjero, or water overseer, was the most powerful man in the pueblo, which sadly meant he was often the most corrupt, as was Bertram Rivers. I had thought he was my friend.

The dawn was slowly lightening the surrounding hills as we gathered that Monday morning, March 28, in the Year of Our Lord, Eighteen Hundred and Seventy. It had been a fairly dry winter, but not disastrously so. We'd had a good rainy spell the week before, so the Porciuncula River was flowing and there was sufficient water in the Zanja Madre, the large dirt ditch dug that led from the river and fed all the smaller zanjias that watered our ranchos and farms.

"Where inarnation is that son of a b—?" Mr. Worthington snarled, then let loose a stream of tobacco juice.

The expectorant landed near my foot and from the look on my bosom friend Sarah Worthington's face, it appeared that her husband had aimed for me. I suppose a gentle reproof of his language and behavior would have been appropriate. However, it would not have been effective, so I simply stepped aside.

Sarah Worthington had come out with her husband to watch as Caleb Worthington and his men opened the sluice gate to my rancho. She was a tall, sturdy woman, with an elegant bearing and hair the color of freshly tilled earth. Mr. Worthington had been a miner before he and Sarah had come to Los Angeles and bought their lumber business. She was so dear to me, the first woman to befriend me when I'd been brought to this desolate place.

We were both anxious for the gate to be opened. I had been up all night and had yet to see my bed. Indeed, I was wearing my work dress, instead of a decent walking suit. Sarah had some matter troubling her deeply, probably Mr. Worthington. I suspected she wished to unburden herself to me, although I did hope that I could convince her to wait until later that day so I could spend at least a few hours in slumber first.

There were five of us gathered at the edge of the Zanja Madre. Besides myself and Mr. and Mrs. Worthington, there were Sebastiano and Enrique Ortiz, the men who ran my winery and vineyard. The only person who was missing was the Zanjero, Mr. Rivers. He was needed to verify that the receipt I had gotten the previous Saturday did, indeed, reflect the amount of time I had paid for that Friday and to approve the opening of the gate.

As Deputy Zanjero, Mr. Worthington already knew that I had paid for my allotment, but Mr. Rivers refused to let anyone else open a sluice gate without his presence. Mr. Rivers said it was to protect the good citizens of the pueblo. I thought it a fine sentiment, but at that moment, one that was quite inconvenient.

“Perhaps, Mr. Worthington, you shouldn’t wait,” Sarah said, after hiding a small yawn behind her hand. “Else Mrs. Wilcox might not get her full allotment.”

Mr. Worthington glared at her. He was as big and burly as one might expect of a former miner, with dark blonde hair and small, dark eyes. He was wearing his usual dusty black suit and black tie. He spat out another disgusting stream, this time landing close to Sarah’s foot.

“Hombres,” he said, with an accent that was truly dismal. “Um, viy-eenay casa Rivers and officina. Diga Señor Rivers, uh, we’re waiting.”

As it happened, both Sebastiano and Enrique spoke English better than most Americans. Nonetheless, the two brothers looked at each other, then Enrique nodded and turned to do Mr. Worthington’s bidding. However, they were saved by the appearance of Will Rivers, Mr. Rivers’ youngest son.

He was a lad of thirteen, a tow-head with bright blue eyes. The boy usually wore what his three older brothers cast off, never mind that his father could afford to buy him new clothes. Will was very slight and his pants were generally tied on and his shirts constantly billowing about him as a sail on a merchant ship. One wondered how soon it would be before the wind would catch the garments and blow the lad away with them.

Will was barefoot, as he generally was, and approached at a dead run from the road leading into the city proper.

“Where’s your pa?” Mr. Worthington demanded.

“I don’t know,” Will gasped. “He, uh, never came home last night.”

That statement would have elicited a great deal more concern, but the pueblo was a rough place, filled with many temptations for those men who were weak-minded enough not to resist. That a husband and father should stay out the night was, sadly, not that unusual. I wouldn’t have thought it of Mr. Rivers, but it didn’t surprise me, either.

Mr. Worthington cursed loudly.

“Ma said to tell you to go ahead and open the gates today,” Will said, trying to look braver than he was. “Pa will be madder than a wet hen if you miss your scheduled times.”

Mr. Worthington glanced over at me, then at Will. Mr. Rivers did prefer that things be done properly. However, there were other rancheros waiting for their water and Mr. Worthington had other duties to tend to, as well. The tolling of the bell from the Clocktower Courthouse softly floated over the Zanja Madre from the center of town. It was six in the morning and time to give me my water.

“Hombres,” Mr. Worthington finally yelled and gestured that they should open the gate.

It was a large panel of wood, painted over and pitched many times to keep the wood sound in the wet. Enrique scrambled down the dry part of the dirt zanja on my side of the gate and back up to the other side of the bank. Together, he and Sebastiano tried lifting the panel, but it was stuck solidly. Mr. Worthington took a long pole and began jabbing it around the bottom of the gate. The gate remained stuck. Enrique and Sebastiano jiggled the panel and Mr. Worthington jabbed and suddenly the gate pulled free, upsetting the men. Water poured quickly into my zanja, rushing and whispering as it went past.

Then through the froth and foam, a dark shape rose up. It was the body of a man, clad in a dark suit of clothes. Sarah screamed but stayed standing. With Mr. Worthington pushing it with his stick, Sebastiano and Enrique reached out and as the water rose, were finally able to pull the body out of the zanja.

The man had been tall and broad-shouldered with dark blonde hair. There was a good solid cut and bruise on the back of his head, just above where his hairline had receded. His suit was

torn in spots, presumably from the time in the water, as it otherwise looked to be of good quality. I looked over at Mr. Worthington, whose face had taken on a queer look. My stomach felt just as queer.

“Maddie, stay back,” Sarah whispered, holding my arm. “It’s too terrible.”

I shook her off as Mr. Worthington turned the body over and confirmed that we had found Bertram Rivers.

Sarah wailed in anguish.

I knelt down and opened the corpse’s mouth. There were no plants or other debris lodged in his throat that I could see. I was not able to discover more because Sarah had fainted dead away.

I waved my foreman over.

“Sebastiano,” I said softly, giving him my handkerchief. “Please get this good and wet so that I can revive Mrs. Worthington.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Sebastiano was an average-sized man with broad shoulders, a drooping black mustache, and usually laughing eyes. He was a good friend, though reluctant to show it in front of others in town for fear of hurting my reputation. “Do you want me to get the rig for the lady?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Sebastiano.”

He returned in seconds with the wet handkerchief. Laying Sarah’s head in my lap, I dribbled some water onto her wrists, then bathed her forehead. I would have to wait to loosen her corset strings.

Meanwhile, cursing and bellowing, Mr. Worthington had Enrique help him gather up Mr. Rivers’ body and load it onto his horse to take to the undertaker’s. I looked around for Will. It was a terrible way to find out one’s father was dead.

The boy had fled, I guessed, to his home. Sarah moaned softly.

“Gently now, dearest,” I crooned, almost under my breath. “You’ve fainted and it won’t do to get up too quickly only to faint again.”

I reached into my leather satchel. It was as big as a saddle bag with a single strap that I wore over one shoulder and across my torso. It wore my dresses dreadfully, but the tiny bags they made for ladies were far too small to carry all the things I needed. I was after my flask of angelica wine. It was our local version of sherry. I knew Sarah didn’t usually approve of spirits, but some are good for shock, and my angelica was quite delicate.

I fed her some and she coughed lightly, then struggled to sit upright in the dust. It wasn’t long after that when Sebastiano brought my rig around, hitched to my roan mare, Daisy. The both of us helped Sarah onto the seat since Mr. Worthington had already left to take Mr. Rivers’ body to the undertaker’s.

The Worthingtons had a house near the town center, between the city hall and market and the town square. It was a large, two-storied house with wood siding painted bright white, including the trim on the shutters and the cutouts decorating the eaves. We arrived in good time and after hitching the mare, Sebastiano helped me get Sarah, who was improving but still weak, inside and onto the sofa in her front parlor. I asked him to wait for me, he nodded and went outside.

Hannah, Sarah’s colored maid, came in and I sent her for some tea. I waited only long enough for Hannah, a short, stout woman with a round face and skin as dark as a night out on the desert, to return with the reviving beverage, accompanied by some freshly-baked biscuits and cactus pear jam. As soon as Hannah was gone, I poured the tea and heavily sugared it even

though Sarah generally drank hers without any, then insisted she drink it. She, in turn, insisted that I pour myself a cup and eat some biscuits, as well.

"I'm more concerned for you," I said, as I helped myself to a cup, added my usual teaspoon of sugar, and added jam to a biscuit.

Sarah shrugged. "I am almost recovered. Such a shock, though, to see a body in the zanja."

"It is hardly the first time a body has been found there," I pointed out. "Nor is it like you to faint dead away at anything. Have you tied your stays too tightly again?"

Fortunately, Sarah and I were on the sort of terms that allowed for such intimacy. Yet still, she blushed.

"I don't believe so. Actually, they could use a bit of tightening," she sighed. "My waist positively bulges."

Sarah yawned widely and excused herself.

"Were you out chasing after Mr. Worthington last night?" I asked more severely than I intended, possibly because I was trying to stifle a yawn of my own.

It was Sarah's habit to chase after her husband in the late hours of the night in the hopes of bringing him home before he came to grief. Given the violence of the rough men in our saloons and houses of ill-repute, and there were many of them, I often feared for Sarah's well-being.

"It is my wifely duty to see to it that my husband returns home safely," Sarah said a little defensively.

"Where did you find him?"

"I didn't," Sarah said with a sniff. "He came home of his own accord, though he was smelling of cheap perfume again." She blinked her eyes. "Is it such a terrible thing to hope for a husband who does not waste himself away at saloons and... and..."

"Houses of ill-repute," I finished for her.

"Oh, Maddie, he is such a trial to me. I could almost wish I were a merry widow like you," she said, starting to sob.

"I would not say that I'm all that merry," I replied, although I was, in fact, quite content with my bereft state. "And I do understand your anguish. My Albert spent easily as much time drinking and whoring as your Caleb."

Sarah gasped at my coarse language, then sniffed softly. "I remember it well. I even thought how lucky I was that Caleb did not do such things. I should have known he was simply better at hiding it. How could I, who grew up in a mining camp, have remained innocent of such knowledge?"

I shook my head. I had little regard for Caleb Worthington and had known of his frequent drunkenness well before Sarah did. If I had refrained from telling her, it was out of tender concern for the grief it would cause her since she had little recourse.

Sarah suddenly sighed deeply. "What a terrible thing, to be shot and dumped in the zanja."

"But he wasn't shot," I said. "At least, I don't think he was. There was a nasty cut and bump on the back of his head."

"Oh," said Sarah, sounding surprised. She thought this over. "I guess I must have simply assumed..."

I chuckled grimly. "It wasn't a bad assumption."

And, indeed, it wasn't. As I noted, the pueblo was a rough place at that time and shootings were all too common.

"Still," I continued, "It seems more likely that he met with some misadventure. He quite probably fell, hit his head, and rolled into the zanja and drowned."

I must admit that the thought did not sit well with me, although I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out why.

Sarah let out her breath and nodded. "What a terribly sad thing to have happen. I must plan a visit to Mrs. Rivers today." She yawned again. "But first, I think I should sleep a little. I didn't last night, even after Caleb came home."

I squeezed my eyes shut, reminded again that I had yet to see any rest, myself. Still, I also had my duty to Mrs. Rivers to perform. It was a sign of just how tired I was that I did not consider changing my work dress to something more suitable first. I got up.

"Then I shall see myself out and leave you to your rest," I told her.

Outside, I had Sebastiano drive me to the Rivers' home, even though it was only over on the next street, Calle Primavera. It was another clapboard house, two-stories, and obviously owned by someone of considerable status and wealth in the community. Mr. Rivers certainly had been such. He had built and owned the largest wool mill in the town and owned several houses that he rented out. The newly-widowed Mrs. Rivers would have ample means for her support, assuming she could get the local magistrate to grant her the half of her husband's property to which she was entitled by state law.

One of the oddities of California's property laws, actually a holdover from Mexican and Spanish rule, is that all property acquired during a marriage is held jointly by both the man and his wife. However, that didn't mean that judges always granted a widow her rights. Fortunately, I had insisted that my Albert write down his extravagant promise that I should have all his property should he die before me, saving half for any of our children. I had kept the letter because I had not believed him, and when he died without a will, that letter saved my life.

A black wreath already decorated the door of the house of mourning. It had been done with surprising dispatch, considering that we'd found Mr. Rivers less than two hours before. The wreath was why I fully expected to be told that Mrs. Rivers was not receiving by the Rivers maid, Susanna, a short, stout Negress with the same dark, dark skin and round face as Sarah's maid. But I was admitted to the front parlor, where Mrs. May Rivers was sitting, dressed in a black poplin day dress. There was a black veil laid across the back of an overstuffed chair on the other side of the fireplace. Like her four sons and her husband, she was quite fair, although her golden hair was obviously longer. Her eyes also differed in that they were a more faded blue than her sons'. She was an average sized woman, with the sort of pleasingly curved figure that other women in the pueblo envied.

"So good of you to come, Mrs. Wilcox," she said pleasantly, gesturing to the sofa. "Please sit."

"I am so sorry for your loss," I sat down wondering where her sons were.

"You're very kind," she said. "It is terribly sad, but we must manage."

Her eyes were red, as one might expect, and the skin below them was darkened as if she hadn't slept the night before, which I could well imagine, if Mr. Rivers had not made it home. Still, her eyes were dry and did not appear to be ready to overflow.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked. "Anyone I can write to? Perhaps send a telegram?"

She smiled softly. "No. The boys have taken all that on, thank heavens. Mr. Sutton has already assured me that he will make all the arrangements for the funeral. And Mrs. Miller has already sent over a stew for my luncheon today. Do you know Mrs. Miller?"

"I believe so, but not well."

"She's our minister's wife. A very dear woman. She sent a most gracious note as soon as she'd heard."

“News does appear to move swiftly,” I said. “Well, I shan’t trouble you further. But I am at your beck and call should need arise.”

She smiled as I got up and Susannah showed me out.

It was a very good thing I’d asked Sebastiano to drive me into town. I had not seen my bed since the morning before and it was all I could do to sit up straight in the rig for the short drive to my rancho and adobe house. Nonetheless, my mind was awlirl. I rather resented Sarah having fainted when she did. It had kept me from getting a better look at Bert Rivers’ body, although why it should worry me so, I could not understand. Perhaps it was due to my exhausted state.

Juanita Alvarez, my maid, helped me undress, scolding me for neglecting my rest as she did so. I slid between the sheets of my fat goose-down bed and instantly fell asleep. And by the time I awoke, I knew why I was so worried about Bert Rivers’ death. I couldn’t be absolutely certain. But I was fairly sure Rivers had been dead before he landed in the Zanja Madre. Which meant it was more than likely someone had helped him into the irrigation ditch. Which in turn meant that he’d mostly likely been murdered. And I had no idea what to do about it.