

Chapter One - "A Storm Hits Valparaiso"

Catalina Flores de la Peña's tongue got her in more trouble than any other part of her body, even though there were far more likely candidates. However, as soon as you brought these to her attention, you realised why most men preferred to admire her from the dusty corners of her father's tavern, rather than approach her directly. So legendary was her temper that the mayor had ordered her father to lock her in her room when any dignitaries came to visit the tavern, for fear of a repeat of the night she broke the magistrate's nose.

But her temper never affected business. In fact, on the nights when she was confined upstairs, customers tended not to stay as long, as there was no-one else who was as good at breaking the slow hours between the first *pisco* and the fall of night. Watching her glide between tables, flirting with one customer before berating another for looking down her dress - eyes flashing one moment, but soft and kind the next - was one of the more pleasant ways to avoid thinking about the weather on Valparaiso's long winter nights.

Her father, Don Flores, was a stern man. So stern, that no-one was quite sure of his first name. One group would swear they knew someone whose uncle went to church with him as a boy in Pucon, and that he was called Ignacio. However, a larger

number again said that someone's brother was once standing at the door of the confessional box, and heard old Father Guido call him Ricardo. Catalina's father never let on, happy to give the men something to talk about other than his daughter. And anyway, the majority of his patrons were content simply calling him Don Flores, the honorific in the title reflecting the distance he kept from his customers.

Don Flores' low opinion of his fellow man had resulted from years of only seeing them at their worst, for he slept when he wasn't working and worked when he wasn't sleeping. His daughter was spared this judgment, and he showered her with all the love and affection he withheld from the rest of the human race. As soon as Catalina was old enough, he insisted that she work at the bar, so that she would form the same useful opinion on humanity which protected and comforted him in equal measure.

Catalina could feel his eyes. Watching her. She tried to ignore him, but every time she looked, there he was. Staring. At least most of the men had the decency to look away when she caught them. But he just went on staring, with the faintest hint of a sneer at the corner of his lips.

Something about him kept her on edge. She tried to put him out of her mind; she had troubles enough tonight. The crew of the *Esmeralda* had descended on Valparaiso with no good in mind.

They were taking advantage of several days' unexpected shore leave, their ship had docked in heavy weather needing repairs before continuing to Lima, and it had been a long voyage from Spain. These sailors hadn't seen port during the journey across the Atlantic, down the barren coast of Patagonia, past the frozen wastelands of Tierra del Fuego, and around Cape Horn into the Pacific, so this was an opportunity to make the most of.

Towards midnight, the bawdy crowd began clearing out, following the musicians down the street, looking for *pisco* and whores and gambling tables, and maybe even a quiet ditch in which to spend the night.

An hour later only one table was left, Spanish sailors, drunk, shouting insults. Except him. He just watched. She tried to shake it off, hoping they would be gone soon. Instead, they called for another drink.

"Very well, señores," Don Flores said, as he poured the *piscos*, "three more and then we close".

Catalina walked over to the table, grateful that this night was nearly over, already thinking of bed. She placed the drinks down. As she turned to leave, the watcher grabbed her arm.

"I hope you are not going to throw us out on the street just yet, it's still early."

Catalina glared at him. "Let go of me, *puerco*, or you'll be out now."

He pulled her down onto his lap. "*Chica*, the night's only beginning..." He stopped short when he felt the cold metal blade pressed against his throat. His companions jumped up from their chairs, knocking their glasses. Catalina pulled the watcher's head back, exposing his sweaty neck. She pressed her dagger against his neck, drawing a small bead of blood.

"Stand back lads," said the watcher.

Catalina jerked her head towards the other two sailors.

"You two, leave."

They paused until a slight nod came from the watcher, the knife still firmly on his neck. They staggered for the door, eyes still on Catalina, and then left.

Her father came to her side, and eased the knife from her fingers, and from the watcher's throat. With his other hand, he twisted the watcher's arm up behind his back and marched him after his companions.

The watcher began to struggle. "You tell that bitch that this isn't finished. I'll be back for her."

Don Flores threw him through the door and out onto the street, then slammed the door and bolted it shut. He leaned back against the door and looked at his daughter. "Go to bed *mia hija*, it has been a long night. Tomorrow, we can clean."

Catalina nodded and went upstairs.

The next morning, Catalina drummed her fingers on the bar as she surveyed the damage. This day wasn't going to improve in a hurry, she thought, so she decided to begin the long process of cleaning up. Last night's crowd had been a rough one. Aside from the usual smashed bottles of *aguardiente* and *pisco*, the dirty glasses and the empty plates, she had broken chairs and blood to contend with this morning.

She hated when the sailors came. At least her regular patrons knew the rules, and occasionally respected them, but those animals, they had no respect for anything. She cursed as a glass slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor. She heard a groan coming from the doorway outside. Pedro, she thought as she shook her head, a smile sailing through the storm of her face.

Every night Pedro Villar fell asleep in the doorway of the bar and every night he had a flower in his hand, intending to profess his love to Catalina. Every night his courage would fail before he banged on the door, and he would slump in the doorway cursing his cowardice and mourning his solitude. Every morning Catalina would wake him and send him home to his mother, who would make him drink a strong cup of coffee with a raw egg as a punishment for his excesses of the night before. Catalina opened the door and shooed him away with the broom, completely unmindful of the heart she broke that little bit more every day.

"Pedro Villar?" asked her father, who had appeared as she was re-locking the door.

"Who else?" said Catalina, laughing.

"He has a bit too much interest in you for my liking," he said.

"Those drunks would chase a skirt nailed to the wall," she said.

"Catalina, my love, put down that broom; I want to talk to you."

"What is it Papa?"

"I'm sending you to Santiago for a few days. I don't want any argument. You can stay with your aunt. It's not safe for you here."

"But Papa, we can't let..."

"Sergeant Eduardo called last night after you went to bed. He is worried about these sailors. He believes these men are hot-headed enough and foolish enough to do something stupid. He can't protect us. None of his men can enter Valparaiso while there is a Spanish warship in the bay. His hands are tied. He feels it would be best if you visited some relatives until they leave town."

"Papa, this is my home..."

"I have made my decision Catalina, just for a few days, until these sailors leave." He raised both his hands as if to brook any further discussion. "My decision is final."

"Papa..."

"That's enough Catalina!"

Catalina continued cleaning in silence. She knew there was no point arguing further, her father's mind was made up. Catalina had no brothers or sisters to share the burden of his protectiveness, and no mother to soften his resolve. She was going to Santiago.